

A Strange Geometry

Moira Egan is an award-winning poet from Baltimore, Maryland. After earning her BA from Bryn Mawr College, she went on to complete an MA from John Hopkins University and an MFA from Columbia University, where her graduate manuscript was selected by James Merrill for the David Craig Austin Prize. Egan's first collection of poems, *Cleave*, appeared in 2004. Since then, Egan has published *Bar Napkin Sonnets* (2009), winner of the 2008 Ledge Poetry Chapbook Competition, *Spin* (2010), *Hot Flash Sonnets* (2013), and, most recently, *Synæsthesium* (2017), which earned her The New Criterion Poetry Prize. Egan is also the editor, along with Clarinda Harriss, of *Hot Sonnets*, an anthology that attests to her lifelong dedication to poetic form. Before moving to Italy in 2007, Egan lived in the United States and Greece. Now, she resides in Rome with her husband and co-translator, Damiano Abeni, and their cat Isis. Egan and Abeni's collaborative work is well-known; together, they have translated over a dozen volumes of poetry by authors such as Mark Strand, John Ashbery, and Charles Simic. In addition, the couple has published three bilingual collections of Egan's poetry: *La Seta della Cravata / The Silk of the Tie* (2009), *Botanica Arcana / Strange Botany* (2014), and *Olfactorium* (2018). In the past, Egan has had residencies at the James Merrill House, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, among others. Currently, she teaches Creative Writing at St. Stephen's School.

Thriving in the tension between reverence and irreverence to tradition, Egan's work infuses new life into poetic forms that contemporary poetry has tended to regard as antiquated—proving that forms like the sonnet are not only alive and well but might also be the perfect conduit to express the tension of modernity.

* * *

We could then begin by saying that Moira Egan's is a poetry of tension. Sensual, but also formal tension. Or perhaps it is precisely the boundary between these two that her poems constantly call into question. "I'm on a limbic-driven quest for god," she writes in "Love Stinks," "He / lives, post-coital, sweaty, in the body" (*Spin* 54). The body, that is, as flesh and text. But what does it mean for the body, in its sensual and emotional reality, to be inscribed—contained—in

language? In the *tongue*? If the sensual and spontaneous, namely, the Dionysian, works eccentrically and is by nature unbridled, then language could be said to work concentrically, at least in its tendency to constrain, and is therefore Apollonian. And while this tension is at work in any kind of linguistic production, poetic forms perceived as rigid would seem to illustrate it especially well. Egan stands out from among many of her contemporaries in her recognition of the potentialities of form to rein in the heterogeneous and otherwise ungraspable mass of emotions and impulses governing our lives. More specifically, it is in the sonnet that she most dexterously actuates these potentialities, imbuing the form with a modernity that serves to rehabilitate it. Take, for instance, “Ars Poetica: Etiology of Pearl”:

Observe the salt-sweet tissue of this pith,
its tenderness so aphrodisiac
that penetration could be dangerous.
It wraps itself in layers of rough shellac.

But even such strong armor has its chinks
through which might enter, minuscule, a grain
of sand or sad that’s sharper than one thinks.
Then nacre’s slow embrace encloses pain.

To test a pearl, rub gently on your teeth.
The real ones aren’t smooth, they’re slightly rough
and gritty, like adultery or truth.
Wear them every day: the oils and stuff
secreted by your skin will make them shine.

And you know what they say about the swine. (*Spin* 30)

The poem opens on an iambic imperative, immediately drawing to our attention a particular manifestation of the formal and sensual tension mentioned above (and a phenomenon at the center of Egan’s latest collection of poems): synesthesia. How, we ask, can we *observe* the taste of a tissue? The cognitive dissonance is easy to overlook, yet we’d do well to pause and try to understand what might get lost in this sensory (mis)translation.

Or found. At a reading I attended in Rome, Egan and Abeni spoke of what is “found in translation.” In other words, what is the effect of this synesthetic opening and how does it nourish our reading of the sonnet? A form of strangeness, possibly, tasked with shocking our senses (physical and poetic) into awareness, an iteration of the

ostraneniya cherished by Russian Formalists, and the first of many ways in which we are confronted with something as familiar as the sonnet that is nevertheless made unfamiliar. The poem begins by dramatizing a tension between the invitation—the imperative—to observe, ostensibly placing us in the privileged cognitive position of the speaker, and the distancing effect of this mistranslation. A strange geometry, indeed, which haunts Egan’s poetry in general and is rendered especially glaring in this poem. The geometry of the sonnet, rigidly schematized by its iambic pace and line length, rendered strange by a refusal to make us completely at home. Egan, we could say, is on an *iambic*-driven quest for a strange god.

That this synesthetic tension serves to communicate another sensory tension—that between the salt-sweet tissue—should come as no surprise; “*Ars Poetica*” is a poem that traffics in contradiction. The first stanza juxtaposes the tenderness of a pith to the roughness of shellac, a relationship haunted by the threat of penetration. This first stanza conveys Egan’s particular vision of poetic form and its attributes, for if the sonnet at large is able to constrain the Dionysian in its “scanty plot of ground,” then in these poems we find a declension of this dynamic, namely, an emphasis on the latent fragility of this process—the precarious ground on which the Apollonian end product rests. In other words, in Egan’s poetry, form not only contains; it also keeps at bay. These are two sides of the same coin, of course; the sonnet keeps in place that which threatens to spill over (not coincidentally, liquids abound in these poems), but it also seeks to provide a protective shell(ac) in the service of keeping the speaker’s core intact. This is not merely a figurative process; as this stanza makes clear, the fear—which in many of these poems masquerades as want, and vice versa—is as emotional as it is sexual.

The poem continues to elaborate on the dangers of penetration, stating that “even such strong armor has its chinks.” Egan’s command of language is demonstrated by the largely monosyllabic and mostly Germanic lexicon of the second stanza. That the enjambed lines flow unimpeded, their progress rendered even more pleasant by assonance, contributes to the poem’s overall stress on the vulnerability beneath smooth surfaces. After all, the assonance present in “chinks” and “thinks” is countered by the sharp consonance of the very same words, suggesting that the body’s seeming perfection has become, in fact, compromised. By extension, the sonnet’s smooth surface also becomes compromised, and it is one of Egan’s biggest achievements to be able to reveal the form’s precariousness with such efficacy and delicacy. Just as the pith

“wraps itself in layers of rough shellac,” this vulnerability operates too on different layers of interpretation. Formally, if we consider that the sonnet’s “completeness” has been severed into four stanzas, but also sexually—the erotic component indissociable from Egan’s poetry—through the fear of penetration, reminiscent of Thom Gunn’s poetry of AIDS. Though the poem’s speaker never makes herself explicitly present (somewhat of an exception in Egan’s poetry, typically written in the first person), this presence, though perhaps not visible, is certainly traceable, especially in the vulnerability that the speaker shares with the form of the poem. In placing the sensual and the textual bodies on the same plane, “Ars Poetica” goes as far as to suggest that the speaker is not operating under the common conceit of a speaking mind, but actually writing, the figurative language of protective shells a means to communicate the palliative function of poetic creation. Here, of course, we see echoes of Bishop’s “One Art.” That is, the speaker writes so that the “minuscule” grains “of sand or sad that’s sharper than one thinks” (notice, of course, the “minuscule” words) will not bring disaster.

The reference to “One Art” is not gratuitous. Much as the speaker of Bishop’s poem dispenses advice to her readers (and herself), advice that comes from the knowledge obtained through loss, so does Egan’s speaker instruct us, this time not on how to front loss, but on how to identify “real” pearls, ostensibly because experience has granted her this wisdom. Real pearls, she tells us, are “slightly rough / and gritty, like adultery or truth.” Unlike the previous stanza, which as we said flowed unimpeded, with the exception of “minuscule,” every line but the last in this stanza is interrupted by a caesura, a device that accentuates the “roughness” underlying the poem. Egan proves herself a mistress of the slant rhyme—“teeth” / “truth” and retrospectively “pith” / “dangerous”—establishing it as the most effective formal device to convey imperfection and placing it at the service of a more general vindication of a poetry of imperfection and tension. “I’ve never trusted people who believe,” she writes in “Love Stinks,” “that cleanliness is next to godliness” (*Spin* 54). And if it is the “oils and stuff” (notice the diction: gritty and vernacular) that make real pearls shine, then it is of course the blemishes that render life beautiful. Here, we see an Egan that is closer to the Gerard Manley Hopkins of “Pied Beauty.”

The poem’s closing apostrophic note raises the question of whether the speaker is addressing an impersonal “you,” her readers, or if she is speaking to herself, the way Bishop’s speaker does in order

to dispense retrospective advice. “And you know what they say about the swine” works superbly as an ending because, if read literally, it evokes the men likely to hurt the speaker and penetrate her protective core. But the line is naturally meant to be read idiomatically as well, forcing us to ask if the pearls of advice that the speaker dispenses will, in fact, be wasted on her. Yet another tension that pervades Egan’s poems, whose speakers are guided in their actions by subterranean impulses beyond their conscious understanding. In one of her most poignant poems, “Bar Napkin Sonnet #11,” she writes:

His buddy asked me if it was the worm
inside that makes me do the things I do.
I wasn’t sure which worm he meant, the one
I ate? The one that eats at me alone? (11)

We will return to this. At the moment, I’d like to point out how “Ars Poetica” invokes the biblical idiom and estranges it, for have we not been stating that it is in the imperfect, the impure, that Egan’s poetry makes itself at home? In other words, that the godly/impure duality conveyed by the biblical allusion must necessarily be deconstructed here and reflective of Egan’s hatred of “those theologians’ dualities, / the head v. heart, or spirit *versus* flesh,” as she writes in “Love Stinks” (*Spin*, 54)? This corrective tendency can be interpreted as a patent refusal to sanitize the poetic body, a celebration of all things gritty and imperfect, and it is manifested in the countless cultural figures that Egan recuperates in her poems.

Take, for instance, “Circe Offers Comfort,” a poem that reworks the theme of adultery hinted at in “Ars Poetica” (and a story in which swine happen to also play a central role). Egan distances herself from the heroic perspective of the Odysseus figure while simultaneously refusing to adopt the alternative, more predictable, role of Penelope. This, I think, is not only thematically significant, but also formally. In “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Ursula K. Le Guin elaborates on the importance of the container story as a necessary corrective to the story of the armed hero on which our civilization is founded. The latter, she claims, is a story of conflict and violence, whereas the container story speaks to our humanity. “I now propose the bottle as hero,” Le Guin writes, “not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else” (166). Le Guin calls this revisionary process a “stringent reevaluation,” and it is precisely with these words that we could describe the exercise that Egan carries out in “Circe Offers Comfort.” Even if Le Guin’s argument is founded on

anthropological research, her point is ultimately narrative; it seeks to reflect on the stories we inherit and pass on as well as the human impulse to shape things, give them a form, *contain* them. This, as I have been trying to communicate, is one of the central dynamics at play in Egan's poetry: her dexterous use of poetic forms a testament to the human necessity to place things in literal and metaphorical containers.

But as I said, this is also a matter of tradition. Egan is conscious of the tradition she is inserting herself into when she writes a sonnet (or a sestina or a villanelle...). It is evident to readers that she has reflected on the stories she receives and those she chooses to communicate. "It is the story that makes the difference," Le Guin continues; "it is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about the bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story" (168). In light of this, the distance that Egan takes from the heroic Odysseus or the faithful Penelope is not coincidental, but rather works toward establishing a more intimate, less "perfect," portrait of the poetic. In "Circe Offers Comfort," the speaker finds a way to incorporate the archetypical into the specificity of her own life:

The cyclicality of history
 has traced this circle, strange geometry,
 in which Odysseus forsakes his bed
 and wanders back to Circe's isle instead.
 I am the Circe, then, whose father left
 the little girl behind, mother bereft.
 I saw my parents' bed uprooted long
 before that other woman came along.
 My family called her "whore" or sometimes "bitch."
 Meanwhile I learned my trade: a little witch
 who grew into this woman whom you love,
 whose incantations you're enamored of.

(That preposition never suited me.
 I never wanted *of*; I liked *between*.)

Now I'm the whore or bitch of whom they'll speak.
 We know the truth; I'll turn my other cheek
 and try to love you, best I can. It's chance
 that brought us here, and all the potions, chants
 a witch can summon up can only calm
 a little while. Smoothed into you like balm,
 I'll feed you food and watch you sleep. The dreams

A STRANGE GEOMETRY

will fade, although I know for now it seems
her name will haunt you like a childhood verse.
To walk away's both blessing and a curse. (*Spin*, 22)

The “cyclicalness of history” works here on multiple levels. It is at once the return of the archetypal figures and their attributes, of Odysseus's *nostos* and Penelope's devotion; it is, too, the cyclicalness of poetic form. Egan is, after all, writing in heroic couplets. Yet this initial invocation of the heroic geometry is almost immediately done away with; it is *estranged* by the occasional metrical irregularity but, more importantly, through the speaker's identification with Circe. A repetition with variation, we could say, whereby Circe is not only stripped of her secondary and flat role, but also cast, strangely, as the daughter herself of an Odysseus figure, a Circe-cum-Telemachus: “I am the Circe, then, whose father left / the little girl behind, mother bereft.” This readjustment lends new power to the poem's last line: “To walk away's both blessing and a curse” speaks, on the narrative level, to the fact that Circe is both cause and effect; she the cause of abandonment—leaving Circe the mistress constitutes a nod to fidelity—but also suffering the effects of it—leaving Circe the child as the root of future infidelity. Once again, we encounter the tension of contradiction.

Furthermore, Egan's clever take on the classical story is conveyed by her diction. “I saw my parents' bed uprooted long / before that other woman came along.” In this case, the geometry of the cyclical becomes estranged through the image of a marital bed that can, in fact, be uprooted. Unlike Odysseus and Penelope's bed, carved around an olive tree and thus unmovable (a symbol of the couple's steadfast marriage), the speaker presents us with an image of conjugal discord. This is no heroic marriage, and Egan's are no heroic couplets. Hers is not even a heroization of the Circean figure (as has been the case with many modern representations of Penelope); instead, in line with the poetics of grittiness we have been outlining, Egan delivers an unapologetically sensual and pathetic Circe. The mostly strict rhymes of the poem's 24 lines are incantatory, evocative of Circe's powers of seduction. The parenthetical second stanza is important, and, like “*Ars Poetica*,” it enters us into self-reflexive territory: “(That preposition never suited me. / I never wanted *of*; I liked *between*).” Perhaps we could speak here of a prepositionality at work in Egan's *oeuvre*. By this I do not simply intend to signal to Egan's clearly conscious manipulation of language, but also to the relational quality exhibited in her poems, in which the “I” is never isolated but always in a continuous conversation or relation with the

other. This prepositionality takes on a clear sexual valence in “Circe Offers Comfort,” hinting at what we might call the grammaticalization of the body, a process in which the issue of desire becomes paramount.

“Insomnia Sonnet 4” is especially illustrative of the dynamics of desire behind Egan’s poetry:

Before he left, he asked what “indigo”
 looked like exactly. There was none to find.
 So, lying here at 5 a.m., alone,
 I look out at the sliver of the sky
 where sunrise has begun to have its way:
 the perfect shade, but he’s not here to show.
 One small advantage: I’ve turned on the light
 to read a book on sonnets. Yes, I know
 the root of *want* is *lack* (same root as *wane*),
 and though I like the way in which this author
 describes *desire* as an intransitive state,
 it’s taken me some years, but I think otherwise.
 Outside, a cat in heat meows and moans.
 This afternoon, I’ll book my ticket home. (*Hot Flash Sonnets* 57)

The sonnet is reminiscent of Edna St. Vincent Millay (whom Egan has explicitly referenced in her poetry over the years), in particular of these lines: “I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex / Go forth at nightfall crying like a cat” (688). And while Egan inherits Millay’s disarming sensitivity, she goes farther in her staunch determination not just to portray desire, but to name it, to understand how it can be at once unquenchable—and thus intransitive, in the Lacanian sense—but also transitive, deeply rooted in the what, or rather, the *whom* (another form of relationality). Even if the speaker asserts her belief in the transitivity of desire, a tinge of doubt remains. A tinge of tension, that is. Like “Circe Offers Comfort,” this poem suggests that we desire what we do not have, an idea that Egan has revisited in many of her poems: “it’s / your nature to want what’s not yours,” she writes, in “Seven” (*Spin* 21). Yet “Insomnia Sonnet 4” goes beyond in its intimation of the role that poetic form plays in the process of scrutinizing the workings of desire. It is no coincidence that desire comes about in the poem after the speaker has begun reading a book of sonnets, the form which Egan has chosen to represent the intricacies and contradictions of desire—its structure a means to contain desire in an effort to tame and name it.

Unsurprisingly, these tensions remain unresolved, and we are left with a sort of in-betweenness. A precarity, both of desire and of

A STRANGE GEOMETRY

the textual body, the in-betweenness of punctuation and prepositions. Much as the prepositional stanza of “Circe Offers Comfort” is suspended between past and present, Egan’s speakers are caught in the tension between, on the one hand, the experiences and emotions that have formed them and shaped their desires, and, on the other, their perception of the world as dictated by these desires. At play is also a manifest generic in-betweenness—tradition invoked only to be estranged. And then there is the tension dictating the poetic production itself: the tension of a poetry written in English yet originating in Italian soil; a poetry that dramatizes the play between the centrifugal forces of emotion and the centripetal power of form; a poetry produced by a mind deeply versed in diverse linguistic traditions, and, as such, capable of distancing itself from the English language; a poetry, finally, created with the expectation of translation. It is these tensions that make Egan’s poetry utterly contemporary and allow it to speak to the “uprootedness” of our modern selves, at home nowhere, yet everywhere.

Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

WORKS CITED

- Bishop, Elizabeth. “One Art.” *Geographies III*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, pp. 40–41.
- Egan, Moira. *Bar Napkin Sonnets*. The Ledge Press, 2009.
- . *Hot Flash Sonnets*. Passager Books, 2013.
- . *Spin*. Entasis Press, 2010.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.” *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, Grove Press, 1989, pp. 165–70.
- Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Norma Millay, Harper Perennial, 2011.