ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 23, n. 2, 2021, pp. 17-34.

Objects Matter: An Object-Oriented Reading of Eavan Boland's Object Lessons

Objetos importam: Uma leitura orientada pelos objetos de Object Lessons, *de Eavan Boland*

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Abstract: *This article argues that although Eavan Boland's* Object Lessons *has reached considerable achievements in terms of the visibility of women poets in the Irish literary landscape, her project expressed and reinforced the Mary Robinson moment of the early Celtic Tiger. The present ecologically endangered era calls for a critical reappraisal and a questioning of the subject-object dichotomy that lies at the heart of its argument. Many, if not most of the difficulties pointed out by Boland's readers and the criticisms levelled at her work have as their point of departure the constitution of a feminine poetic subjectivity and the subsequently problematic nature of objects and nature created by the very gesture. While attributing subjectivity, and therefore agency, to women in poetry was certainly an indispensable breaking away from various forms of political and religious authority, new conceptual frameworks such as the new materialisms and object-oriented ontology have emerged since, that de-correlate agency from subjectivity, thus re-thinking altogether the status of objects. Drawing mostly from Timothy Morton's application of object-oriented ontology to environmental matters, I show how reading* Object Lessons *without the subject-object distinction addresses some of the criticisms directed at Boland and highlights the ecological value of her poetic and prose work.*

Keywords: *Eavan Boland;* Object Lessons*; ecocriticism; object-oriented ontology; Timothy Morton.*

Resumo: *Este artigo argumenta que, embora o livro* Object Lessons *de Eavan Boland tenha alcançado grandes conquistas em termos da visibilidade das poetas no cenário literário irlandês, seu projeto expressou e reforçou o momento Mary*

ISSN1518-0581 | eISSN2595-8127 | DOI 10.37389/abei.v23i2.197750
Received: 21/09/2021 | Accepted: 14/12/2021

Robinson do início do Tigre Celta. A presente era, ecologicamente ameaçada, é um chamado para a reavaliação crítica e o questionamento da dicotomia sujeito-objeto que está no cerne de sua argumentação. Muitas, senão a maioria das dificuldades apontadas pelos leitores de Boland e das críticas dirigidas à sua obra têm como ponto de partida a constituição de uma subjetividade poética feminina e, posteriormente, a natureza problemática dos objetos e da natureza criada pelo próprio gesto. Enquanto a atribuição da subjetividade e, portanto, agência, às mulheres na poesia foi um rompimento indispensável de diversas formas de política e autoridade religiosa, novas estruturas conceituais, como os novos materialismos e ontologia surgiram desde então, que descorrelacionam a agência da subjetividade, repensando completamente o status dos objetos. Apoiada principalmente na aplicação da ontologia orientada a objetos de Timothy Morton para questões ambientais, eu mostro como a leitura de Object Lessons *sem a distinção sujeito-objeto aborda algumas das críticas dirigidas a Boland e destaca o valor ecológico de sua prosa e obra poética.*

Palavras-chave: *Eavan Boland;* Objective Lessons*; ecocrítica; ontologia orientada a objetos; Timothy Morton.*

Eavan Boland's 1995 collection of essays offers a deconstruction of the subject-object relationship within the Irish poetic tradition that constitutes the expression of a particular moment in the history of Irish society and culture. Building her own literary subjectivity through the practice of poetry and essay writing enabled Boland to realize that she could not hear the voice of her gendered self in her poetic forebears, who had nonetheless contributed to her vocation and style. Making Irish poetry a hospitable place for women past and present has become Boland's main project, achieving notably the recognition of the political role of women poets in Ireland and a powerful critique of nationalist iconography. It gave a literary expression to the Mary Robinson moment in Irish history, when the rigidities of the immediate post-colonial identity, based on the necessities of nation-building, began to dissolve.

However, many changes have intervened since Boland wrote *Object Lessons*, or rather, many seismic shifts that were only at their inception point on the cusp of the Celtic Tiger have become fully apparent. These include the Tiger itself and its subsequent demise, the peace process and devolution in the North, economic and environmental crisis, a decline in the power of Catholic institutions following the revelation of physical and sexual abuse and leading to a rapid ideological change in attitudes towards women's bodies and motherhood. Societal evolution since 1995 has tended to increase a postmodern sense of defiance towards authority, leading as Boland had called for to more agency for women and

better control over their bodies and their lives. However, the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger have also highlighted a number of issues with the economic and political orders in Ireland that had largely fallen under Boland's radar in *Object Lessons* but have become impossible to ignore. While Ireland's participation in global capital could go unquestioned while it brought material progress to the vast majority, its social and environmental consequences now define the lines of the Irish landscape. Incidentally, but crucially for the understanding of *Object Lessons* in an ecologically endangered era, an awareness of the entanglement of humans with the rest of the living and non-living world has come with a more fluid, performative understanding of gender, as various youth movements today show.

The quarter of a century that has elapsed since the publication of *Object Lessons* enables us to define the significance and participation of the book in its particular historical moment but also to continue (not necessarily in a straight way) the lines that it has traced in order to make its central concern with objects relevant to post-Tiger, post-Catholic Ireland. This is not so much an exercise in prediction, as it gives very different results from Boland's own later collection of essays *A Journey with Two Maps*, as a thought experiment: what if the concept of objects, and women as objects in relation to poetry, were examined with more recent conceptual tools, adequate to the crises of the present? Key to this project is a critique of the subject-object relationship as Boland sees it, which entails a number of limitations to her political vision, notably regarding ecological issues. What I propose to do is to substitute a "flat", object-oriented ontology, notably in its application to ecological issues by Timothy Morton, to the subject-object dichotomy as constructed by Boland in *Object Lessons*. The overall aim is to reassess the contribution and relevance of Boland's art to ecological living now, that is, the consciousness of being related to and penetrated by all kinds of non-human influences, beyond and despite the subject/object distinction, whose historical moment is passing in the current era of generalized crisis.

1.

The central argument made by Eavan Boland in *Object Lessons* is well-known, and has become an indispensable realization of Irish cultural studies: within a patriarchal, bardic poetic tradition, women feature only as objects, motifs or symbols in poems that in so doing establish the male poet as the sole subject of the act of representation and contribute to deprive women of agency both in the text and in the world. Given the importance of poetry and the figure of the poet in Irish culture, this has had far-reaching consequences for Irish society, both before and after the creation of the Free State: Irish nationalism,

using feminine symbols such as the Shan Van Vocht or Cathleen Ni Houlihan for the projected nation, has tended to maintain women in passive, subaltern positions. *Object Lessons* describes how Boland gradually became conscious of her identity as both Irish and a woman, and the contradictions between the two terms that hampered her self-realization as a poet of national and international stature. Her method in this enterprise is autobiographical, but also imaginative as she uses the silences of the incomplete historical data at her disposal to create a chain of solidarity with both real and imaginary Irish women.

This mode of investigation leads to the second of Boland's important intuitions, an idea that structures much of her poetry and prose, namely that the past and history are radically different things. As she explained later in an interview given to Pilar Villar, "history is an official version of events . . . a constructed narrative", while "the past . . . is a place of silences and losses and disappearance" (Villar 53). This is the place where women, but also other forms of the subaltern, are banished by the dominant narrative —in *Object Lessons*, Boland establishes clearly that Patrick Kavanagh, as a member of the rural working-class, shares much the same fate as she does, being extracted from a group considered as emblematic of the nation, and therefore deprived of subjectivity (*OL* 197). The loss generated by Boland's exclusion and objectification as a woman within the poetic tradition that had inspired her vocation provides her with the creative impetus to make this place inhabitable for Irish women in her poetry. A central component of this project is to "alter, for [herself], the powerful relations between subject and object which were established [in the Irish poem]" (*OL* 184).

This critique of the objectification of women within the Irish poetic tradition came at a very particular moment in the history of Irish society and culture, which it contributed in turn to define and to push further, notably thanks to the warm friendship between Boland and Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland. Boland was aware that by the time she was writing the book, the situation had evolved so far, including in the literary field, that "the woman poet [had become] an emblematic figure in poetry . . . because . . . she internalizes the stresses and truths of poetry at a particular moment" (*OL* 235). Indeed, beginning in the 1970s, a number of societal changes had altered the condition of many women for the better. However, the nature, or the mode, of these changes and the issues on which debate focused – divorce, abortion, contraception – contributed to keep the definition of femininity firmly stuck in patriarchal grooves, with the feminine linked to the body, family and reproduction. This led an exasperated Mary Cummins to exclaim in *The Irish Times* that to some foreign journalists "Irish women equals the X case, condoms, abortions, the Kerry babies, Granard and Mary Robinson. Not all Irish women

spend their weekends having abortions or burying their babies" (qtd. in Ferriter 724), a declaration that ironically objectifies Robinson as the figurehead of the public visibility given to a certain kind of women's issues.

The feminist movement of the 1970s was part of a larger postmodern intellectual framework that questioned received ideas about power and authority, whose influence was felt in academic Irish studies and to which *Object Lessons* contributed. From the late 1980s, nationalist interpretations of Irish literature were complicated by the adjunction of postmodern tropes, notably hybridity, and Patricia Coughlan notes "some reciprocal influence" between "this perspective and the Robinson version of Irishness" (Coughlan 180). Nationalist critics adapted a postcolonial theoretical framework to the study of Irish texts, which gave rise to a rich body of critical work, notably through *Field Day*, to which Boland's insights on the object status of women contributed a dissonant note. What is especially valuable is Boland's warning that the colonizer/colonized dichotomy should not be superimposed on the gender divide, the colonizer equated with the male principle and the colony feminized. The colonial relationship is thus liable to be refracted within the colony by nationalism itself: "at the end of the colonial nineteenth century, the national tradition operated as a powerful colonizer" (*OL* 197). Even though for some revisionist critics such as Edna Longley Boland does not go far enough in destabilizing the nation (Longley 173, 187–188), she offers a powerful corrective to postcolonial visions of Irish modernity and can be credited with creating a central position within Irish culture from which Irish women poets could express themselves.

However, this re-centring of women as the subjects of their own discourse in the postmodern Irish nation carried with it a number of difficulties, contradictions and logical flaws that have been identified by critics as diverse as Clair Wills, Gerardine Meaney, Denis Donoghue and others (Wheatley 104). Though the criticism levelled at Boland can take issue with her work for very different, sometimes contradictory reasons (Kilcoyne 93), its root cause is always the hiatus between women represented as silent, repressed victims of history, and the very existence of Boland's text, whose effect is to claim the opposite. Different ways of conceptually bridging this gap between woman-as-object and woman-as-subject within the poetic text have been offered, with Kilcoyne propounding "strategic memory" (Kilcoyne 89) and Wheatley highlighting the crucial role of the "figure of the poet" (Wheatley 105). In a way, these critics, by focusing on auctorial intentionality, are still working within the subject-object distinction. They demand a form of control and consistency on the part of the artist that limits the effect of the work of art as autonomous from the artist's intention. My reading of *Object Lessons* will steer closer to Daniel Train's

and explore further his concluding remark that "the best of [Boland's] poems and the objects she attends to in them always exceed, rather than simply elude, her audience's comprehension, including her own" (Train 133). Before detailing the conceptual framework that explains how an object always "exceeds" our "comprehension", and how this forms the basis of the aesthetic experience, I will go through some of the difficulties raised by maintaining the subject-object distinction, both in Boland's text and in most of its critical analyses.

2.

The first difficulty has to do with the definition of gender identity and gender roles. Even though *Object Lessons* is explicitly about the woman poet, the understanding of what exactly constitutes a woman remains implicit and forms the object of a unexamined consensus between author and reader, thus reinforcing conventional, or even conservative visions of gender identities. Autobiographical elements in *Object Lessons* impressionistically record how Boland's sense of her femininity was awakened and therefore by implication her definition of the woman on behalf of whom she speaks. One of the two images she retains of her life in Dublin before she left for London at the age of five is of boys diving into the canal (*OL* 36). The memory is so cherished that she makes the scene a central component of her recreation of the Irish childhood that she never had (*OL* 56). The overwhelming impression is of a sharp distinction between the feminine and the masculine, with the former as passive spectator and the latter as actively caught in a pleasurable engagement with the world. The consequence of this gender gap is the awakening of heterosexual desire, another key element of Boland's discovery of her femininity. This comes with an objectification of the male body as the young Boland "looked with increased interest at the faces and shapes of boys" (*OL* 67). Given Boland's achieved status as emblematic of the woman poet, her use of the first-person pronoun has a strongly prescriptive value and the risk is of generating a sense of exclusion in physically active, not to mention lesbian or trans women. Boland locates the feminine within the objectified body and the universally human (but colonized by the male perspective) in the mind (*OL* 26), thus repeating the patriarchal superposition of the male/female divide onto the mind/body dualism.

Isabel Karremann reminds us that Boland's poems show a keen awareness of the constructed nature of gender in poems such as "Making Up", "Mimic Muse", "Mastectomy" or "Anorexic". Indeed, *Object Lessons* records how Boland's sense of her feminine identity revealed itself in the desire for consumer objects marketed for women, namely skirts and

lipstick with "blue tones in a certain shade of it" (*OL* 106). Karremann argues that Boland's poems "anticipate the rhetorics of Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto'" (Karremann 114), characterized by "a transgression of boundaries such as human/non-human, natural/artificial, male/female" (Karremann 115) and undermines "the certainty of what counts as nature" (Haraway, qtd. in Karremann 115). However, merely recognizing "the construct character of all social identity" (Karremann 117) as the speaker of "The Mimic Muse" does, falls short of cybernetics and misses an essential component of cyborg identity according to Haraway, namely the constitutive entanglement of the human with the non-human. Without this essential continuity and interpenetration between human and non-human, there is no deconstruction of binaries because there is always a transcendent subject that identifies herself as an a priori woman doing the deconstructing. There is always-already, to use a Heideggerian phrase, a woman-as-subject who exerts control over the skirts or lipstick shades that she chooses in order to construct her social self. Of course the woman is overrating her free will in the matter as these choices are guided by the consumer order and the advertising industry. The consequence is that the "ordinary", in this case the definition of the feminine, not only "is a category of debate . . . [whose] truth-value is taken for granted by Boland and above all conceptual probing" as Wheatley notes (114) but it appears as the symptom of a strongly prescriptive bourgeois social order. Thus rigidly contained by a number of practices that define her identity as a (middle-class) woman within Irish society, Boland as reader actively resists the "troubling androgyny" (*OL* 65) needed to incorporate the "male" experience of the world. She looks in vain for a female figure to identify with as the gender divide appears impossible to bridge, and her teenage dreams leak out repressed desire and guilt: "The fact is that teenage dreams of action and heroism are filled with exciting and impossible transpositions of sexuality. In those dreams I would wear the green tailcoat or crop my head or carry a revolver." (*OL* 65)

The constitution of the woman as subject involves a powerful repression of contacts with and influences of the other (i.e. the masculine, but also the non-human other, the tailcoat and revolver, and the strangeness of her own body as conveyed by the feeling of a cropped head) and the inhibition of ways of interacting with the world that, though pleasurable in themselves, are deemed inappropriate. Constituting the woman as subject in this case demands a powerful refusal of empathy and hybridity, which the woman represses because she considers them as an erasure of her self: "for those empathies, those androgynies to exist, I had to make myself available for reconstruction" (*OL* 65). In other words, there is a degree of violence and (paradoxically) self-denial needed to constitute a subject: "subjects are created when they force themselves to think that they are not made of

abject stuff" (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 133). The creation of a subject, which simultaneously generates an objectified "nature", is according to Timothy Morton incompatible with ecological living, which demands an awareness of the essentially symbiotic nature of the real (Morton, *Humankind* 14).

The "ordinariness" that Boland posits as a central element of her poetic discourse is given the spatial embodiment of the suburb. This ordinariness, and what she perceives as her exclusion from Irish political life, is expressed in the paratactic "I was married; I lived in a suburb; I had small children" (*OL* 190). Moreover, the suburb shares with women, and motherhood, the fate of being "a devalued subject matter": "It has given me an insight into the flawed permissions which surround the inherited Irish poem, in which you could have a political murder, but not a baby, and a line of hills, but not the suburbs under them." (*OL* 204)

The effect of this is to render ideologically neutral, or even necessary, a relationship to the land that is historically recent as well as environmentally disastrous. Yet Boland is a perceptive observer of the suburb and of her own causal entanglement within the phenomenon ("before our eyes, and because of them, a village was turning into a suburb" 157). She describes how cars as *a fait social* organize life in the suburbs: the line of headlights on the road leaving in the morning and coming back at night (OL 192), the streets deserted except for the annual *garage* sale. The suburb as it developed in the 1950s and 60s in Europe is highly dependent on car ownership as it is disconnected from both work and leisure places. On a global scale, cars can be understood as what Morton calls a hyperobject, "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1). Jane Bennet, after Deleuze, refers to such phenomena as assemblages (Bennet 23–24) of concrete and abstract elements, all endowed with a form of agency. In this case, the assemblage includes oil drills and pumps, assembly lines, roads and parking lots, but also political decisions and state subsidies, or ideas about how long it should take to go from A to B. Rather than being a convenient tool, a car is best considered as the extended phenotype (Dawkins 1982) of many modern humans, an expression in the environment of the human genetic capacity for technological invention that influences in return the physical abilities of human bodies and their perception of the world. It is her journey by car from her home to Clonmel workhouse on the steps of her great-grandfather that encourages Boland's statement that "there is a duality to place" (*OL* 154): the car has erased everything in between and the abject idea of in-betweenness, which encouraged dichotomies such as subject and object.

A suburb, which is the spatial consequence of widespread car ownership, can be understood as "ordinary" only if one refuses to take the long view historically, geographically or technologically and this short view is encouraged by the suburb itself. Suburbs promote a form of engagement with the world that is inherently correlationist and dualistic. Correlationism is defined by Morton as "the Kantian (and post-Kantian) idea that a thing isn't real until it has been formatted by the Subject" (Morton *Being Ecological* 156), who is therefore both at a remove from and more real than the world that he or she (a transcendental subject being necessarily human) realizes. "It treats things . . . like blank sheets or screens" (Morton *Being Ecologica*l 156). The inhabitants of the suburb are divided from each other by hedges, fences and roads or shut off within the insulated bubble of their cars: according to Rebecca Solnit, "the history of suburbia is the history of fragmentation" (Solnit 250). This encourages the subject/object division as suburbians become spectators and the world a show that they view from their window, gate or windscreen. Suburbs generate a false sense of security by hiding the reality of ecological involvement beyond the hedge of individual property, so that the realization of environmental damage always comes too late. Jody Allen Randolph identifies an environmental turn in Boland in *Domestic Violence* (2007) and describes "a local community witnessing the power of local corporations to deterritorialize place, to weaken the ties between a culture, its place and its history" (Allen Randolph 60) with the creation of the Dundrum shopping centre that is denounced by the speaker of "In Our Own Country". The irony is that the real environmental catastrophe had already happened several decades earlier with the creation of the suburb, which is already an offshoot of consumerism: in *Object Lessons*, Boland remembers that when she arrived "the farriers at the corner of the village had been gone some twenty years" and "a shopping centre was in the process of replacing [a mink farm]" (*OL* 157). A suburb is not so much ordinary as *unheimlich*, familiar and strange at the same time, "incomplete and improbable" (*OL* 156), as Boland discovers when she moves into her unfinished estate. This uncanniness has to do with the way in which the suburb is a historically contingent phenomenon that profoundly modifies the link between human bodies and space. This feeling is echoed by Rebecca Solnit when she claims that because of suburbanisation, "something very odd has happened to the very state of embodiment, of being corporeal, in recent decades" (Solnit 256).

The final difficulty for the newly-constituted woman as subject of her poetry lies in the simultaneous objectification of the world around her: once she has become a subject, what can the object of her poetry be, and how is she going to create an ethical relationship with it? Boland is aware of her responsibility to "reinscribe certain powerful

and customary relations between object and subject" (*OL* 234–235) but she has been criticized for failing to do so and objectifying, silencing women in her turn, notably in her ekphrases of Chardin and Degas (Wheatley 108) or in "The Achill Woman" (Wheatley 113, Kilcoyne 93, Longley 178). Ethically failing the object of her poetry means effectively cutting access to it for the reader and using the objectified other as a means not an end for a speaking I who is really speaking about herself. The subject/object dichotomy makes it very difficult to go beyond self-referentiality and access the world in its uncanniness, which is a condition of both the aesthetic experience and ecological being according to Morton (*Being Ecological* 41). Objectified things, that is, the world minus the speaking subject, can never be seen as and for themselves, but they have to be included within a symbolic system, as stand-ins for abstract concepts in the mind of the transcendental subject. This is particularly evident of Boland's reading of her own poem "The War Horse". The poem's starting point is the transgression of the borders of suburban private property by a horse, probably a traveller's horse. Her initial reflex is to make the non-human into a symbol "of nature – the horse – menacing the decorous reductions of nature which were the gardens" (*OL* 176). The horse cannot be just a horse, and must be appropriated as a symbol by the speaker's subjectivity, and this is a feature of Boland wanting to constitute her poetic self as subject. The case is very different in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose", where the large herbivorous mammal who barges into the human group "resists the idea that it stands for something. Rather, it is something. . . . It is hardly a metaphor at all. (Or a symbol, for that matter.)" (Tóibín 22). However, with hindsight, Boland understands that the publicly sanctioned form of the political poem that she has adopted for "The War Horse" not only silences the object, making the subject "all-powerful" (*OL* 178) but that she herself also exists at some level as a symbol in the poem: "What I had not realized was that I myself was a politic within the Irish poem" (*OL* 179). She has more in common with the horse than she initially realized.

3.

Constituting the woman poet as a subject comes at a conceptual and environmental price that has become hardly sustainable. Deriving enjoyment and meaning from Boland's poetry in a time of averred environmental crisis means reading her from the perspective of a different, non-dualistic ontology. I believe that a flat ontology "that initially treats all objects in the same way, rather than assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies" (Harman 54) is best suited to the task. This

involves changing the way in which objects are considered, or to take *objects* seriously, just like Daniel Train wants to take lessons seriously (Train 116) and refraining from thinking that "the worst possible fate of a human subject [is] being turned into an object" (Morton, *Being Ecological* 133). Instead, "OOO [Object-Oriented Ontology]'s use of *object* is a mirror in which you see reflected your own prejudices about what objects are" (Morton, *Being Ecological* 149). OOO does not distinguish a priori between human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient objects. What they all have in common is that they are both present and withdrawn at the same time: they can be perceived (accessed) but no perception is going to exhaust what they are: the real object always exceeds the sensual object. In a sense OOO goes one step further in the direction taken by Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of excess (what he calls "saturated phenomena") that Train uses in his reading of *Object Lessons* and is also quoted by Morton in *Dark Ecology*. What Marion and Morton have in common is the idea that the world is given, it is not constructed by the perception of the subject. However, while Marion de-centres the subject to create a dialectical relationship between object and viewer (Train 123–124), OOO does away with the subject/object dualism altogether. All objects may access other objects according to their own modes of "interpretation". As I type this sentence on my computer, I access the computer but the computer also accesses me, determining the movement of my eyes and fingers and influencing the flow and structure of my ideas. Perception is not restricted to a certain kind of "subject" (human, or male, English, white, straight, etc.) who has a privileged access to reality and gets to decide what it is made up of. No mode of access is inherently superior to another, and in this it is easy to perceive the value of OOO for environmental studies, but also for feminism, post- and decolonial studies, queer studies, etc. In addition, it solves quite a number of difficult philosophical and political problems: "The result of living as though you believe in subject-object dualism, which is our usual mode of thinking about the world, . . . is that it becomes hard to accept what is in fact more logical and easier on the mind in the end." (Morton, *Being Ecological* 73).

A clear illustration of this is the dilemma of the modern Irish woman as described by Patricia Coughlan. She argues that Irish women, and "those just gaining a tentative agency" cannot afford to join in the "joyful abandonment of subjectivity [...] so relished by the soi-disant floating selves of the mandarin postmodernists" (Coughlan 179), which becomes a perverse sign of their political superiority. "On the other hand", Coughlan continues, "must such emerging subjects be denied, or deny themselves, the pleasures of such play and the enabling aspects of the indeterminate?" If you accept that you do not need to be a subject to have agency, which is what new materialists such as Karen Barad or

Jane Bennet do, and if you strip the "mandarin postmodernists" of their a priori subjectivity and superior mode of access to everything else, the problem disappears. Women as (OOO) objects can enjoy accessing and being accessed by other objects, in an ethical relationship that does not preclude political action, which consists precisely in taking down self-proclaimed subjects from their pedestals.

Another difficult question of immediate relevance to Boland's work that is made considerably simpler by a flat ontology is that of representation, the very act that constitutes the subject and the object. However, representation simultaneously entails considerable shape shifting between subject and object. Judith Butler, as part of her critique of representationalism, has noted for example how "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted [i.e. represented] by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (qtd. in Barad 47). Boland appears uneasy with the concept: according to Molly O'Hagan Hardy, "Boland's relationship to [Mary] Robinson demonstrates that she possesses a keen understanding of the power of representation" (O'Hagan Hardy 52). In her 2006 interview with Pilar Villar, she comes back several times to the idea of representation, to underline its difficulty or elusiveness (Villar 58) and finally concludes that "[I have] no interest in representation" (Villar 61). This ambiguity may be due to the fact that she has been, in the words of Sarah Fulford, "trapped within the logic of representation. Once the moment of a woman's experience is inscribed within the aesthetic space of the poem it risks becoming a frozen trope rather than living and breathing." (qtd. in O'Hagan Hardy 55) But this risk is only present if an ontological difference is made between a "living and breathing" subject and the "frozen" (image of the) object.

OOO, as well as recent works in the fields of anthropology and animal behaviour, have suggested a radical enlargement of the ideas of representation and interpretation. For Eduardo Kohn's anthropology "beyond the human", "[w]e are not the only ones who interpret signs. That other kinds of beings use signs is one example of the ways in which representation exists in the world beyond human minds and human systems of meaning" (Kohn 31).

Kohn, mobilizing Peircean semiotics, gives the example of the evolution of anteaters, whose snouts are signs interpreted by future generations as being about the shape of ant tunnels, which they represent (Kohn 74). Morton concurs by viewing evolution as "design without a designer" but while Kohn draws a line between living and non-living objects, Morton, recognizing that science makes them ever harder to distinguish properly, extends this view of intentionality, interpretation and representation to all objects (Morton *BE*

162). Representation happens whenever an object is affected by another, it goes both ways and is not necessarily a conscious process. Defamiliarizing the anthropocentric concept of representation (Kohn 2) by viewing it as a form of encounter opens new possibilities of understanding aesthetic representation as experience (Morton *Being Ecological* 143).

Art features prominently in OOO, because the nature of objects in general is particularly apparent in the art object (for instance, the fact that it is not exhausted by its author's intentionality, or by any interpretation of it) but also for the truth-value of the aesthetic experience. The viewer of a painting or the reader of a poem realizes in a very vivid way how much she is affected by and related to a non-human, non-sentient object, which paves the way for a more ecological way of living: "the experience of relating to art . . . makes it difficult—sometimes impossible—to sustain the valley across which we see other entities as 'other'" (Morton *Being Ecological* 178). The autonomy and inexhaustibility of the artwork, as well as its power to affect readers independently of the author's intentions, is very rarely explicitly present in *Object Lessons*, where Boland seems to be trying to maintain absolute control over her poetry as the practice whereby her subjectivity is constituted. There is only one mention of the reader of a poem, whose reception remains dependent on "the authority of the speaker" (*OL* 186), and who therefore seems to be denied a role in the constitution of meaning within the work of art considered as a network of inter-object relations.

One possible explanation for this reluctance on Boland's part to acknowledge the inaccessibility, autonomy and thereby inalienable freedom of artworks and readers could be a powerful urge to repress desires that are unacceptable because they are deemed incompatible with the subject that is being constituted, and therefore induce a strong feeling of guilt. Kilcoyne and Wheatley, as well as Longley before them, have both recognized the central importance of guilt in Boland's poetry (Longley 178, Wheatley 113, Kilcoyne 93), and its source can be traced in her formative experiences as a reader, which are recounted in *Object Lessons*. The first "resonant" (in the sense explored by Hartmut Rosa 2019) encounter between Boland and a poem happens upon her reading of "The Fool" by Patrick Pearse, which she felt "included her" (*OL* 53). Because her teenage self is still trapped in the representational logic of trying to locate an accurate image of herself in the work of art, the outcome is disillusionment at seeing herself and her newly found nation misrepresented:

> And so the continuum between poet and patriot, between language and action was not what I had thought. . . . [It] was a soft and flawed connection, where

> words undid actions and actions could never be free of their consequences in language. (*OL* 61)

"Words" and "actions" are (OOO) objects that while irremediably entangled, can never totally exhaust each other: in this sense, no representation is ever accurate. It nonetheless remains that the emotion felt by the teenage Boland is authentic: she was truly moved by the poem, which entered and affected her. How is she to avoid the guilt caused by the realisation that she has been somehow cheated upon by the poem? The situation is similar in the case of poems that according to the 1990s Boland objectify women by turning them into erotic objects subjected to the poet's sexualized gaze. She thus recalls in *Object Lessons* how she had initially been "charmed and troubled" by "Upon Julia's Clothes" by Cavalier poet Robert Herrick, before analysing its "appropriation of the erotic by the sexual" where "the erotic object—those silks turning to water and light—is fixed in relation to the more volatile parts of the poem" (*OL* 214) She cannot avoid the frustrating feeling that as a woman reader she had been taken in by a poem that objectified her both as reader and motif by its "eloquent and forceful" "seamless music". However, intellectually framing this trouble does nothing to alleviate the guilt, on the contrary, because it "does no justice to the way [she] first read a poem such as this", and therefore she senses that she is creating an inauthentic, unethical relationship with her younger self. This guilt is an inescapable consequence of the creation of a subject-object dichotomy: "Guilt is intimately connected to reification. You have a rigid, crystallized thought about yourself. You try to banish it. This never works" (Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 132).

It offers a means of accounting for the troubling, or queering feeling generated by the work of art that preserves, even treasures it, and abolishes the necessity for guilt-ridden self-examination. Graham Harman argues that metaphor enables the reader to encounter the work of art by supplying the absent qualities of the vehicle. Drawing upon José Ortega's discussion of Lopez Pico's likening of a cypress to a flame, Harman establishes that metaphor gives us access to one aspect of the real object, the thing-in-itself (here, the cypress) by associating it with unexpected qualities (the flame). Not only does metaphor reveal the divided nature of the object, it involves the reader's kinaesthetic perceptions in order to do so:

> For if the real cypress is just as absent from the metaphor as it is from thought and perception, there is nonetheless one real object that is never absent from our experience of art: namely, *we ourselves*. Yes, it is we ourselves who stand in for the absent cypress and support its freshly-anointed flame qualities. (Harman 82–83)

Thus a new compound cypress-flame object is born and incorporated by the reader, who is kinaesthetically affected by it. Returning to Boland's reading of Herrick's poem, his metaphor "the liquefaction of her clothes", whereby silk is likened to a liquid, requires in order to be understood that the reader supply the liquid quality, from her own sensory vocabulary, to her understanding of what silk really is. She must incorporate, "act out" (Harman 74 emphasizes the theatricality of metaphor) a new silk-as-liquid object. The feeling is intensely pleasurable, and powerfully repressed if one considers, as Boland does, that the object is "fixed", at a remove from both poet and reader, by the metaphor. Objects in poetry, by means of metaphor, are much more powerful than Boland here allows them to be. A woman who, having read Herrick's poem, has interiorized silk-as-liquid is sensorially richer, happier, and possibly stronger, and may use this new energy as her intellect directs her, including against patriarchy.

Boland contrasts Herrick's description of her mistress with that of Carol Ann Duffy in "Warming her Pearls", a poem that she sees as an evocation of "power and desire between women". Once more, she is so focused on the speaker's subjectivity at the expense of the autonomy of the object that she misses the strong suggestion in the poem that the true object of desire does not actually exist, or is hopelessly out of reach. "Warming her Pearls" is spoken by a maid who is given the task of warming her mistress's pearl necklace before she wears them for dinner. The two women never meet in the flesh in the course of the poem, much less have any form of intercourse, and the maid fantasizes about her employer as she goes about her daily tasks. There are clear hints in the poem that the object of desire is not so much the body of the other woman as her social status: as she looks at herself in her mistress's looking-glass, the speaker sees the real object of her fantasies, who is less the actual employer than the woman who resides "in [her] head" and who is herself. This is not so much a homoerotic poem (although it is that also, of course, on the superficial or manifest level) as an example of René Girard's mimetic desire (Girard 217): both women desire the same thing, social status materialized by the pearl necklace, but the desire is so unacceptable on the part of the maid that in order to prevent the tragic violence and social chaos that would procure it for her, she displaces it onto her rival. The truly unspeakable, scandalous feeling is not lesbian desire, quite explicit here and so acceptable that it becomes the mask of a darker desire for wealth, whose cause and sign is the exploitation of other living beings, whether humans or oysters.

The fact that the desire for social status is expressed in (homo)erotic terms confers a strongly subversive value to Duffy's poem, which was published during the Thatcher era. Boland edits the class dimension out of her reading, speaking only of individual power

relations between the women, thus repressing her social superiority as daughter of a first-rank ambassador and friend of the President, as appears on several occasions in *Object Lessons*. (For instance, she remembers being taunted at school for her Irish roots, but does not consider the privilege that enabled her to attend St Mary's convent in Hampstead in the first place). Like Bishop's moose, Duffy's pearl necklace is first and foremost just that: the external tissue cells of a bivalve mollusc reacting to an irritant from its environment, which have been excised from its body. It is potentially more subversive, and certainly more ecological, to see it as such, as an object connecting humans to non-humans and revealing desires beyond, or beneath, human subjectivity.

* * *

Of course Boland's spoken I in *Object Lessons* is also, within an OOO framework, itself an object that remains out of the reach of any critic, and that no interpretation will ever exhaust. It is a textual construct that takes shape as it encounters a reader's sensibility. What this analysis has sought to encourage is a re-reading of Boland's poems that considers the objects in them not as signs or symbols but as and for themselves. Artworks according to Morton are subscendent: they are less than the sum of their parts, i.e. the objects that they contain. They are infinitely bigger on the inside than on the outside as each object within them possesses a "world". There is nothing in Heidegger, according to Morton, that warrants his reduction of the concept of world to humans (Morton, *Being Ecological* 84–85). Thus the black lace fan or the war horse have a life and a power of their own: endowed with sensual qualities, they affect readers and may hopefully promote a more caring, ethical, ecological attitude to the non-human of which humans are made.

Forgoing the all-too-human distinction between subject and object also makes it possible to reclaim and transcend guilt. Kilcoyne claims that Boland's guilt is caused by the inaccessibility of the other's subjectivity, especially the under-privileged other, and alleviated by creative memory, which "frees her from the restrictions of her privilege" (Kilcoyne 100). Middle-class guilt is a very common feeling in the present ecologically endangered era. For Morton, while it is valuable as the first step of ecological awareness because it comes from realizing that one's actions may have an adverse effect on others, it is still too tied in with the notion of individual subjectivity (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 131-132). Realizing how enmeshed we are with other humans, but also with the non-human world, is the beginning of a journey that leads from guilt through anxiety, melancholy and horror to joy, and the aesthetic experience is a key factor in bringing about this realisation. Read

for themselves, the objects in Boland's poems, the poems-as-objects, and the object that is Boland's subjectivity as constructed in her body of work all make this possible: therein lies their ecological value in post-Tiger Ireland.

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