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Queer Phenomenology and the Things Themselves in Eavan Boland's In a Time of Violence

Fenomenologia queer e as coisas em si em In a Time of Violence*, de Eavan Boland*

Aubry Haines

Abstract: *Situating Eavan Boland's In a Time of Violence in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's* Queer Phenomenology, *this article contends that Boland's ekphrastic portrayals of physical things queers both traditional phenomenological conceptions of being-in-the-world as well as numerous conventions in Irish poetry. Eavan Boland's concern for objects throughout the volume undermines widespread literary depictions of Irish women as essentialized, mythologized, or emblematized figures. Her preoccupation with physical things allows her to reject acts of reductive, discursive violence so often perpetrated by past male Irish authors and poets. Boland chooses to focalize upon quotidian, pedestrian, and overlooked objects, thus naturally aligning her poetry with Sara Ahmed's* Queer Phenomenology. *Both Boland and Ahmed rescue marginalized perspectives from the darkened corners of existence. Boland's poetry demonstrates an acute awareness that returning to "the things themselves" (Husserl 18) provides avenues for reclamation, multiplicity, and autonomy in the face of hegemonic, anonymizing narratives of Irish femininity.*

Keywords: *Eavan Boland; Poetry; Queer Phenomenology; Sara Ahmed; Ekphrasis.*

Resumo: *Situando* In a Time of Violence *de Eavan Boland, em diálogo com* Queer Phenomenology *de Sara Ahmed, este artigo afirma que retratos ekphrásticos feitos por Boland de coisas físicas queerizam tanto concepções fenomenológicas tradicionais sobre estar-no-mundo, bem como numerosas convenções da poesia irlandesa. A preocupação de Eavan Boland com objetos em todo o volume mina representações literárias de mulheres irlandesas difundidas como figuras essencializadas, mitificadas ou emblemáticas. Sua preocupação com coisas físicas permite a rejeição de atos de violência redutiva e discursiva tão frequentemente perpetrados por homens irlandeses – autores e poetas – do passado. Boland opta por focalizar objetos do cotidiano, corriqueiros e esquecidos, alinhando assim naturalmente sua poesia com* Queer Phenomenology, *de Sara*

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Ahmed. Tanto Boland quanto Ahmed resgatam perspectivas marginalizadas dos cantos escuros da existência. A poesia de Boland demonstra uma consciência aguda de que o retorno "às coisas em si" (Husserl 18) fornece caminhos de recuperação, multiplicidade e autonomia diante de narrativas hegemônicas e de anonimato sobre a feminilidade irlandesa.

Palavras-chave: *Eavan Boland; Poesia; Fenomenologia Queer; Sara Ahmed; Ekphrasis.*

In her 1996 essay, "Outside History," Boland demonstrates her acute awareness of the Irish literary canon's predominately male perspective—one which tends to essentialize and mythologize femininity, thus robbing female Irish subjects of their sovereignty, individuality, and agency:

> the majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. They moved easily, deftly, as if by right among images of women in which I did not believe and of which I could not approve. The women in their poems were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status. This was especially true where the woman and the idea of the nation were mixed: where the nation became a woman and the woman took on a national posture. (134–35)

As Irish scholar Jeanette Riley aptly notes, Boland's verse "hopes to diffuse the impact of nationalism upon women's identities" (24), unveiling the subjugation concomitant to emblematization. However, as Boland's verse attempts to dismantle harmful representations of femininity, thereby granting female Irish subjects vocality and autonomy, several critics levy stark criticisms against her work. Put briefly, some critics portray her work as a constraining, essentializing space for explorations of Irish femininity. Thus, I focus on Eavan Boland's *In a Time of Violence* (1994) to argue two main points: firstly, that Boland's poetry destabilizes such criticism; and secondly, that the volume establishes a language of representation that renders women active subjects and agents in poems rather than mere adornments, objects, or emblems, all the while.

Violence has been dissected from numerous angles—post-colonial, feminist, and politico-historical—and critics generally agree that the collection continues Boland's oft-noted endeavour of subverting the male-dominated tradition of Irish poetry by redressing historical depictions of women as either idealized muses or Mother Ireland figures (Cory 960). See, for example, Collins (2015) for female Irish identity in Boland or Walter (2013) for the femininity as allegory for the nation. While those who laud Boland's poetry

typically point to and celebrate her diverse and rich representations of Irish femininity, her more reproving critics claim she naively replicates the very oppressive, stereotyping structures she critiques. Irish scholar Stef Craps notes that, according to Boland's detractors, "rather than truthfully [represent] the previously excluded, she appropriates and falsifies their experience in much the same way as her male predecessors did" (166). While individual poems throughout *Violence* may corroborate charges of regressive essentialism or a prejudicial penchant for objects over human experiences, consideration of the volume as a whole resists any such rigid readings. What these critics fail to take into account are Boland's queering of the traditional poetic subject, the commentary she offers on female essentialism through the overall trajectory of the collection, as well as the significant role physical objects play in both of these artistic ventures. Indeed, it is this last element of objects' status in the volume that brings me to the assertion that Boland's *Violence* demonstrates a natural affinity with Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

Just as Boland's writing undermines male-centric poetic configurations of Irish femininity, Ahmed, a scholar of phenomenology, queers a historically male-dominated philosophy and interpretive methodology. Phenomenology famously concerns itself with the status of physical things—Edmund Husserl defines phenomenology as "a return to the things themselves" (18)—interrogating the manner in which subjects orient their consciousness towards objects, thus revealing the subjective perceiver's biases and presuppositions concerning said object's purpose and meaning. Ahmed queers this traditional methodology by focusing on things—or even individuals—often relegated to the margins of perceptive acts. Rather than orient consciousness towards objects in the perceiver's purview, Ahmed encourages subjects to consider peripheral phenomena. She asks what operations occurring in the background allow a subject—in particular, subjects who have historically held privileged positions—to perceive the objects in front of them in the first place? Boland and Ahmed shift our focus to these nooks and crannies, urging readers to consider how the shadowy, neglected corners of existence contribute to lived experience. *Violence* assiduously concerns itself with the status of such physical objects and provides particularly fertile ground for a queer phenomenological reading. Considering *Violence* in conjunction with *Queer Phenomenology* highlights how Boland speaks *to* Irish femininity without speaking *for* it, as well as how the simple, unornamented constitution of things throughout Boland's verse is to be reconciled with their prodigious importance. By shifting focus from essentialized or mythologized female figures to discarded objects and overwritten histories, *Violence* infers a deeper philosophical project, one that queers traditional Irish structures, whether they be gendered, political, representational, or

poetic. Boland's ekphrastic absorption with physical things thus not only functions as the basis for phenomenological being-in-the-world, but also serves a crucial poetic and political function: her predilection for physical objects upends historical configurations of essentialized femininity without falling prey to the same trap of mythologization. Things espouses multiplicity rather than totalization.

The Prison of Essentialism

Boland addresses the pervasive issue of harmful essentialism in "Outside History," writing, "Once the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified. She can no longer have complex feelings and aspirations. She becomes the passive projection of a national idea" (Boland, *OL* 135). Literary representations of women that rely upon essentialized or mythologized configurations of femininity inevitably become prisons. Riley affirms as much, contending that "traditionally, women are only acted upon in Irish literature; they never act themselves. Irish women are never portrayed as being able or as having the opportunity to determine their own identities, to reach full subjectivity in a poem or novel" (25). *Violence*'s "What Language Did" beautifully illustrates this dilemma, apprising readers of the rhetorical violence immanent within depictions which exalt—or rather, adulterate—femininity as an emblem or a myth. The speaker of "What Language Did" immediately situates herself in the realm of the quotidian, telling readers, "The evening was the same as any other. / I came out and stood on the step." (Boland, *Violence* 63). The abrupt, static nature of these first two clauses establishes the poem's general sense of mundanity, further cultivated by the following lines: "The suburb was closed in the weather / of an early spring" and "the shallow tips / and washed-out yellows of narcissi / resisted dusk" (63). Suburbs, gardens, and spring weather evoke the tedium associated with ordinary life. These details lead to the speaker's ruminations upon the inescapability of old age, for she experiences the "melancholy / of growing older in such a season" where "whatever else might flower before the fruit, / and be renewed, I would not" (63). In the midst of these thoughts, though, she is overcome by "a presence" (63).

This "presence" reveals itself in the form of "a shepherdess, her smile cracked, / her arm injured from the mantelpieces / and pastorals where she posed with her crook" (63). The emergence of the phantasmal shepherdess within a poem replete with dull and commonplace imagery signals the interruption of the mythic—of the emblematic. Accompanying the shepherdess is "Cassiopeia trapped" in the "spaces / of the night sky

constellations" and "a mermaid with invented tresses, / her breasts printed with the salt of it and all / the desolation of the North Sea in her face" (64). Figures normally associated with mythology or nobility are instead portrayed as decrepit, imprisoned, and tormented. These folkloric beings address the speaker, telling her that they *"languish in a grammar of sighs, / in the high-minded search for euphony, / in the midnight rhetoric of poesie*" (64, italics in original). For these feminine figures, literature is not a space of self-actualization, but rather a prison. Language functions as an instantiation of epistemic violence, capturing them "in time and space, wounding and silencing them. These women, preserved as they are by the 'rhetoric of poesie', are not allowed to live . . . they are an 'element of design' rather than subjective, active individuals" (Riley 29). The poem's rigid structure further emphasizes this, for the strict three-line stanzas that make up the entirety of the poem effectively trap the women within verse. Through the plight of these female *objects*, for this is what writing and mythologization render them, Boland's abhorrence for the ornamentation of femininity is evident.

"What Language Did" deftly illustrates the perniciousness of female essentialism, as the shepherdess, Cassiopeia, and the mermaid never attain true subjectivity or authority in the poem. They entreat the speaker to "*Help [them] escape youth and beauty*" for within poetry their "*skin is icy*" and their "*wombs are empty*" (65, italics in original); the women repeatedly lament their unfulfilled desires, indicating that they are inarguably and inexorably incapable of autonomous activity. Their status as literary emblems prohibits expression or action, for they can only be *acted upon*. The domain from which each figure hails also signals totalization's considerably oppressive reach, as "The shepherdess represents land, Cassiopeia the sky, and the mermaid the sea. The objectification of women as emblems, ornaments and icons pervasively covers all three planes of existence" (Riley 29). Boland's verse ultimately contends that univocality, homogeneity, and a lack of autonomy are ineluctable consequences of the emblematization of femininity—consequences which possess only one possible remedy: "*Write us out of the poem. Make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in*" (65, italics in original). This last line gains further significance when considered in conjunction with the title, for the past tense of "What Language Did" indicates that despite the historical misuse of language on the part of male authors—a misuse that imprisoned women—language need not perpetuate this brand of adulteration; language can function as abolition and liberation when utilized properly, illustrated by the emblematized women's pleas to be written "out of the poem" (65). "What Language Did" thus reveals that the mundane existence of the speaker, the reality that she will eventually "grow old and die" (65), is

preferable to the mythologized status of feminine icons; Boland offers readers a stark denunciation of female essentialism. However, a condemnation of this representational violence does not necessarily translate to actual *speech* or *action* on the part of Irish women.

Despite the immured women's pleas, Boland's poem ends on an inconclusive note. While their despondent invocations draw attention to the intrinsic violence of mythologized femininity, "What Language Did" ends before the speaker can write the women "*out of the poem*" (65); the emblematized figures do not attain true subjectivity or vocality. However, this restraint is intentional. Boland resists speaking *for* the women, since this would effectively replicate and perpetuate the very issue she seeks to address in her work. Thus, as articulated by Irish poetry scholar Stef Craps, Boland "does not so much perform an act of ventriloquism . . . as interrogate [silence] and bear witness to an experience that remains fundamentally irrecoverable" (165). Boland acts as a careful surveyor and inquisitor, for "it is important that [she] be sensitive to the opposite extreme and steer clear of presenting a kind of monumentalized 'women's experience', avoiding the pitfall of essentializing female identity" (Cory 962–63). Rather than oversimplify Irish femininity through the use of monolithic terms, Boland's verse searches, instead, for a language of "self-determination" (Riley 25). She seeks to establish multiplicity in place of univocality and totalization.

This venture, while admirable and valuable, still leaves Boland with a difficult task: how is she to speak *to* Irish femininity without speaking *for* it? How does she avoid committing the very act of discursive violence she condemns? In *Violence*, Boland successfully articulates these disparate and diverse experiences of Irish women through meticulous and intentional consideration of physical objects. She, in Raschke's words, "rescues the physical world from the dung heap . . . to revise notions of what sustains" (135)—she uses "the concrete to create spiritual sustenance" (136). A number of critics agree, highlighting the manifold ways Boland addresses and challenges notions of Irish feminine identity by examining tangible things. Textiles, fabrics, material objects, and physical places proliferate throughout *Violence*, effectively answering Gayatri Spivak's notorious question, "can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 21). Boland does not create a language of expression *for* subaltern Irish women, but rather invents "a mode of writing that bears witness to its own incapacity of recovering what lies outside history" (Craps 165). She voices the multiplicity associated with Irish female experience without committing the same sullying act of unification or "hegemonic ordering" perpetrated by male writers (Riley 24).

While these critics perceptively and effectually draw attention to Boland's focalization upon physical things, they side-step the greater philosophical project inferred

by this preoccupation. Things in *Violence* are not mere vehicles for figurative meaning or abstract investigations. They are not pure metaphor, allegory, nor prosopoeia that, through circuitous means, grant speech and authority to subaltern Irish women. Boland's objects undoubtedly *enable* and *facilitate* this latter eventuality, but their significance extends further. As Boland rummages in and around Irish rooms, corners, and lives—exhuming, inspecting, and prospecting for gubbins that divulge particular female experiences—things become more than clever rhetorical devices. Things are not mere implements; they are integral to her ethical and representational concerns—they are the foundation of her inquiry. And yet, things in *Violence* truly are just things. So, readers may ask, how might the simple, unornamented constitution of things be reconciled with their prodigious importance? One answer lies in the tenets of phenomenological inquiry and practice.

Edmund Husserl famously argued that the perception of "things" comprises the basis of consciousness, cognition, ontology, and epistemology in all possible collocations of the terms: "Judging rationally or scientifically about matters...means orienting oneself to the things themselves, or, more precisely, it means returning from talk and opinions to the things themselves, questioning them as they are themselves given, and setting aside all prejudices" (Husserl 34–35). In his contemporary overview of phenomenology, Walter Hopp states that "Scratched car hoods, numbers, meanings, sensations, and mental acts are all 'things themselves' with which we can and do come into contact" (305), indicating that "things" are not solely physical objects, but rather *anything* that contributes to the construction of consciousness—to one's "being-in-the-world" (238). Despite this inclusive definition of "things," phenomenologists tend to ground their investigations in the analysis of concrete, tangible sensations and objects' overt corporeality, since physical things constitute the basis of experiential reality (Kearney & Semonovitch 15). So, for example, when the speaker of "Story" tells readers their tale is "set in that nowhere which is anywhere" (Boland 61), their description still relies upon particulars to establish the universality of this story's setting. Thus, they tell readers, "the wood is full of sycamore and elder" (61), substantiating phenomenological assertions that the bedrock of both perception and cognition is one's concrete environment. When subjects perceive "sycamore and elder," however, these *things* are not ascertained as hermetic, non-associative entities. Subjects *always* interpret objects as existing *for* something. Kearney and Semonovitch summarize this dynamic rather eloquently in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger*, stating,

> phenomenology appreciates the interpretive nature of 'knowing'—for every intuition (or direct awareness) of a given object there is already a framework

> of prereflective intentions shaping the disclosure of that object. This does not mean that the 'meaning' of the coffee mug, for example, is intrinsically adrift in a sea of subjective prejudices, but rather that the mug is perceived as a coffee mug on the basis of its cooperation with the transcendental structure of cognition. (273)

Thus, when I read that "the wood is full of sycamore and elder" in Boland's "Story" (61), my background in Irish literature tells me sycamore and elder are symbols—that they evoke the island of Ireland literarily due to their cultural and historical significance. In this instance, as with all acts of perception, meaning is culturally and habitually derived from a pre-existing referential web, for "Mental acts such as judgments and beliefs color the way things appear for us" (Kearney & Semonovitch 273). What phenomenology allows subjects to do is to question *why* and *how* this particular meaning or experiential modality—this iteration of the object's "*givenness*" (121)—comes into existence. When a subject becomes aware of the existing web of meanings colouring their interpretations of discreet phenomena, they can then question why this particular meaning is at the forefront of their cognition and whether they ought to re-evaluate the subjective value they assign to it. As stated earlier, I read *Violence* as a "web of meanings" and argue that the poems in the collection, taken together, offer the most robust understanding of Boland's feminism and poetic phenomenological vision.

Things, Intentionality, and the Collapse of Meaning

Eavan Boland's "The Parcel" serves as a paradigmatic example of intentionality's vital importance within phenomenological inquiry. Before the poem's initial line, readers already form impressions concerning the *givenness* of a parcel. For one subject engaging in the act of perception, a parcel could prompt reflection upon the role of the local government, while yet another may connote parcels with livelihood (these are two examples, but innumerable others exist). These disparate intentionalities inevitably occur, for "sensible qualities are experienced in different ways corresponding to the changing situations of environments and perceivers" (Murata 171), thus rendering "their ontological status relative, unstable, and subjective" (171). Intentionality—the meaning subjects attribute to any given phenomenon—is essentially the story individuals tell themselves concerning a thing's significance. The speaker, therefore, possesses her own impression of a parcel's ontological worth—an impression revealed in her remark, "There are dying arts and / one of them is / the way my mother used to make up a parcel" (Boland 44). For the speaker, a

parcel is not only an art-form, but it is also intrinsically linked to memories of her mother and notions of domesticity.

The speaker's instantiation of this particular givenness leads to an ontological and epistemological dilemma for Boland's readers: how are subjects meant to reconcile disparate intentionalities or grasp why discordant impressions form to begin with? Here, readers must consider phenomenology's crucial qualifier when returning to the things themselves: subjects must "question things as they are themselves given, and *set aside all prejudices*" (Husserl 35, emphasis added). In order to encounter the world with as few constraining influences as possible, individuals must set aside their presuppositions and attempt to encounter things anew; rather than defamiliarize reality, as Viktor Shklovsky would have artists do, phenomenologists ask that subjects to *re*-familiarize themselves with the world. Husserl terms this process a suspension of "the natural attitude" where "The social and familiar character of objects is bracketed" (45). This must occur in phenomenological analysis, for "The natural attitude does not 'see the world', as it takes for granted what appears; what appears quickly disappears under the blanket of the familiar" (Kearney & Semonovitch 44). Ultimately, subjects must rekindle a wonder for the world and its manifold phenomena.

Boland's "The Parcel" thus requires that readers suspend their understanding of a parcel's givenness and attempt, instead, to experience it as *pure phenomenon*, for this instantiates novel modes of orienting oneself towards the things themselves. Phenomenologists admit that experiencing a thing in its *original* givenness is impossible, yet simply engaging in the exercise lets perceiving subjects expand their epistemological and ontological horizons. Bracketing the familiar allows readers to ascertain "a parcel" in the same manner as the poem's speaker, widening capacities for empathy and understanding. Thus, the ekphrasis of Boland's poetry is not merely description in service of imagery, tone, or symbolism, but rather a strategic *return to the things themselves*, an effectuation of the phenomenological reduction, and a revitalized experience of worldly phenomena.

Near the beginning of "The Parcel," material details are clear, concise, and meticulously documented. The speaker relays how the paper is "Mid-brown and coarse-grain as wood" (Boland 44), while the scissors used to cut it are "the colour of the rained- / on steps a man with a grindstone climbed up / in the season of lilac and snapdragon (44). She recounts how "The ball of twine was coarsely braided / and only a shade less yellow than / the flame she held" (44), and that her mother uses "Crayon and fountain pen" for the "Names and places" with the "town underlined once. The country twice" (44). These ekphratic passages help readers encounter parcels as the speaker does: by returning

to the things themselves, parcel-making's artful nature becomes apparent, demonstrating the fundamentally pluralistic, inassimilable, and multiperspectival nature of phenomena. Perception of the things themselves intrinsically and infallibly resists totalization. The existential implications of "The Parcel" do not cease with the mere assertion of objects' multiplicity, though. Boland's meditation upon things becomes more fascinating and edifying when the thing in question—the parcel—is shuffled from view. This relegation of the poetic object to a state of obscurity—its disappearance "into the burlap sack for collection" (44)—is also similar to Sara Ahmed's queering of the phenomenological concept of "bracketing" which will be discussed in further detail later on (40).

As the poem nears its end, the speaker of "The Parcel" remarks that the art of parcel making died out "among doomed steamships and outdated trains, / the tracks for them disappearing before our eyes, / next to station names we can't remember on a continent we no longer / recognize" (45). Boland's absorption with physical things and phenomenological subjectivity allows her to fruitfully analogize the demise of this "dying art" with transience and incognizance, evincing experiences of dispossession or disappearance suffered by many, particularly female, Irish subjects (44). The near rhyming of "died," "eyes," and "recognize" in this section also produces a sense of congruity associated with the careful and intentional consideration of physical phenomena, yet this peace is tenuous. Harmony accompanies an experiential modality grounded in the things themselves, but this harmony collapses as the poem's object of inquiry, the parcel, fades from view. Following the parcel's disappearance into the "burlap sack for collection" and the speaker's ruminations upon its obsolescence as an expressionistic activity (45), the poem closes with three stunted, fragmentary clauses: "The sealing wax cracking. / The twine unraveling. The destination illegible." (45). The earlier harmony of "The Parcel" devolves into arrant dissonance, disillusionment, and disorientation. The disintegration of mellifluence, perspective, and clarity in Boland's poem speaks to the irrecoverable nature of particular experiences of Irish femininity, as the actions and behaviours of the speaker's mother are lost to society and history, effectively marginalizing, displacing, and erasing the mother as a subject.

The syntax of the poem's closing lines also cleverly illustrates that as subjects lose their connection to the things themselves, reality unravels in much the same way as the parcel's twine. The three final clauses of "The Parcel," "The sealing wax cracking. / The twine unraveling. The destination illegible." (45), all omit their lexical verbs, effectively rendering them incomplete sentences. However, the pretermitted verb in question merits further examination. The lexical verb implied by these three lines is "*is*": "The sealing wax

[*is*] cracking, The twine [*is*] unraveling, and The destination [*is*] illegible" (45). Thus, since *is* is the present participle of the verb to be, readers can intuit that as the parcel is removed from sight—as subjects abandon experiential reality founded upon tangible objects and sensations—*beingness* and being-in-the-world shatter in the same manner as Boland's verse. When individuals and collectives ground meaning in abstractions or platitudes, meaning inevitably collapses, resulting in the erasure of certain experiences—in this case, diverse experiences of Irish femininity. To combat this brand of discordant disorientation, subjects must intentionally and steadfastly return to the things themselves.

Eavan Boland's ekphrastic absorption with things in *Violence* undoubtedly operates as an ingenious rhetorical device in service of literary, political, and feminist aims, but it also functions as the basis for subjects' being-in-the-world. Readers must not consider Boland's focalization upon physical objects a mere feature of her poetry, but rather an ontological and epistemological directive. If subjects can change the way themselves and others perceive phenomena, they can effectively change the world—they can stop Irish femininity from being relegated to the margins, thus subverting hegemony, totalization, and univocality. Boland's "language of expression" that refrains from "emblematization" is therefore a language of phenomenology (Riley 27)—a language that draws attention to the plight of marginalized or wholly ignored voices by self-reflexively reconsidering one's relationship to things. Her poetry urges subjects to question what forms of givenness are shunted to the side when individuals do not interrogate their own intentionality: what perspectives and voices do we violently erase or assimilate by perceiving things in the manner we do? Boland's *Violence* is thus an exemplum of Sara Ahmed's "queer phenomenology" (Ahmed 36).

Queering Boland's Ireland

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed affirms the conceptual framework adopted by prior phenomenologists, stating that "Perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object. So it is not just that consciousness is directed toward objects, but also that I take different directions toward objects" (39). When a subject orients their consciousness towards an object, in much the same way that readers orient their consciousness toward things in Boland's poetry, Ahmed writes, "[they] might like them, admire them, hate them, and so on. In perceiving them in this way or that, [individuals] also take a position upon them, which in turns gives [them] a position" (39). This position is both literal and figurative, for "Orientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we

do and how we inhabit space" (39), thus moulding the significance we attribute to said objects, as well as the meaning we produce within any given space. This state of affairs is evident in the poems discussed thus far, and the suspension of the natural attitude is what allows readers to ascertain why a poem's speaker may ascribe unanticipated meaning to a particular phenomenon. In contrast with existing phenomenological methodologies, however, Ahmed muses that "A queer phenomenology might be one that faces the back, which looks 'behind' phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher's back" (40). With reference to Husserl's earlier assertion that phenomenology "[brackets] the social and familiar character of objects," Ahmed's queer phenomenology asks, what exactly is bracketed in this process? What relocation to the margins—what discursive diaspora—must occur for the philosopher, the perceiving subject, or the individual in power to carry out the operations they so wish? A queer phenomenology, much like jazz music, concerns itself with the notes that are not played: it involves a further suspension of the existing suspension of the natural attitude—it is a fundamentally self-reflexive phenomenology. Ahmed contends that "a queer phenomenology is involved in the project of 'turning the tables' on phenomenology by turning toward other kinds of tables" (63). By turning toward objects that have long been sequestered to the margins of philosophical and literary interest, queer phenomenology allows us to return, "a loving return we might even say" (63), to disparaged voices, experiences, and histories.

Nowhere is this inversive—and, by extension, subversive—orientation more evident than in Eavan Boland's "In a Bad Light." Midway through the poem, the speaker remarks how upper-class —namely those who benefit from colonial practices (Cory 974)— reside in "oil-lit parlours" while Irish seamstresses, with whom the speaker identifies, toil away in "the gas-lit backrooms" (Boland 12). Much like Husserl's "relegation of unseen portions and rooms to the background" (Ahmed 43), "the leisured lifestyle of one group" in the poem "rests upon the labor of the other" (Cory 976). Queer phenomenology thus encourages the perceiving subject to reverse their field of vision, for when a subject orients themselves toward the "oil-lit parlours," toward spaces suffused with status and privilege, they violently omit or subjugate others. When considered through Ahmed's analytical framework, "In a Bad Light" consequently draws attention to concealed or erased experiences of subaltern Irish women. Yet Boland once again refrains from speaking *for* these Irish seamstresses who operate behind the scenes; awareness of this orientational violence results from careful attention to material things, such as various fabrics which "communicate the complexities of different women's circumstances while allowing the poet to avoid essentializing all women's experiences as similar" (Cory 966).

Textiles such as "crepe sleeves," "a satin apron," "suede," and "silk," proliferate throughout "In a Bad Light" (Boland 12), firmly situating readers within the things themselves. However, in order to articulate the multiplicity of experiences intrinsic to Irish femininity, "In a Bad Light" requests that readers not focus upon the amalgamated whole of these things—that they move beyond the "woman on a steamboat / parading in sunshine in a dress" who "laughs off rumours of war" (13). Instead, Boland's verse asks that readers turn away from the proverbial writing table to the "feminine space behind our backs dedicated to the work of care, cleaning, and reproduction" (Ahmed 42). As readers turn toward this feminine space, toward the Irish seamstresses buried in labour-intensive work, the speaker tells them,

> . . . We are bent over
> in a bad light. We are sewing a last
> sight of shore. We are sewing coffin ships.
> And the salt of exile. And our own
> death in it. For history's abandonment
> we are doing this. (Boland 13)

Perceiving the poem's various fabrics without presuppositions elucidates the dispossession, marginalization, and obnubilation experienced by countless Irish women—women who, despite "surviving the 'coffin ships' of post-Famine emigration to the United States" (Cory 976), are resigned to death and erasure, for the Irish literary canon solely concerns itself with women as emblems, icons, or themes (Kidd 37). In response to this degrading essentialism, the Irish seamstresses can only express their "fury" (Boland 13), emphasized by recurring "f" sounds in "frost," "follows," and "fern" (13). Having long been lost to history, the labourers themselves are powerless, and all that remains are the fabrics—the *things*—which only offer tattered threads of expression and recognition.

Despite its despairing tone, though, "In a Bad Light" possesses slivers of hope. In addition to the obvious phenomenological injunction which instructs subjects to orient their vision to that which exists behind them—to essentially adopt a Janus-faced perception—Boland's verse also extolls, if unintentionally, the merits of phenomenological practice. She writes, "See how you perceive it" (13), referencing the speaker's earlier statements that "this is a button hole. / This is a stitch" (13). While this could serve as a rhetorical question or a mere aside, it convincingly functions as an ontological directive: subjects must understand *how* and *why* they perceive things as they do. Thus, when the poem concludes with the comment that the upper-class woman's dress "traps light on the

skirt" and "is, for that moment, beautiful" (13), Boland's verse implores readers to ask why. Is the skirt beautiful due to its aesthetic value? Is it only beautiful because of its ability to trap light? Or, is its beauty merely the result of social norms and classist values? The poem offers no clear answer here, but each of these questions suspends the natural attitude and helps establish a phenomenological reading practice. Returning to the things themselves, refusing to essentialize Irish women, and concerning ourselves with what is "bracketed" by traditional philosophy may not recover the female experiences Boland mourns throughout *Violence*, but these gestures undoubtedly contribute to the subversion of a pattern of hegemonic oppression.

Boland's poetry persistently demands that readers re-experience their concrete surroundings, examine their presuppositions, and self-reflexively interrogate why they ascribe meaning to the world in the way that they do. She does this to upend a firmly rooted representational paradigm which stalwartly denies women agency and subjectivity—to bridge the "terrible gap in Ireland between rhetoric and reality" (Villar-Argáiz 474). Villar-Argàiz argues that "in this sense, Boland's language of representation is defined by what has always been unheard rather than by what has been heard" (489); Boland's poetry thus exemplifies Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, for it fundamentally concerns itself with the margins. *Violence* demonstrates that what is often "bracketed" in Irish literature is femininity itself: Irish women are rendered subordinate—mere adornments in service of some greater artistic goal. Boland deftly illustrates this destructive reality in "A Woman Painted on a Leaf."

The speaker of the poem tells readers she found a "woman painted on a leaf" among "curios and silver" in "the pureness of wintry light" (Boland 69). This initial verbiage instills within the poem a sense of regality and splendour, invoking archetypical language associated with the Irish literary tradition (Gonzales 146). The parallels drawn between "A Woman Painted on a Leaf" and the Irish literary canon is further substantiated by numerous references to nature, such as "a leaf falls in a garden. / The moon cools its aftermath of sap. / The pith of summer dries out in starlight" (Boland 69). The woman "inscribed there" on the leaf serves as a metaphor for the tendencies, habits, and traditions associated with Irish literature. However, this analogy brings with it the same trap of essentialism Boland discusses in each poem thus far, for the speaker says of the woman painted on a leaf, "This is not death. It is the terrible / Suspension of life" (69). The woman is trapped within tradition, trapped within verse, and trapped within mythologized or emblematized notions of feminine nature.

In recognition of this violent and tortuous imprisonment, the speaker confesses to readers, "I want a poem / I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in" (69). In this instance, Boland's verse levies an uncompromising criticism against Irish literary history: rather than elevate Irish femininity to iconic status, write poems about women that constitute an accurate lived experience—a brand of subversive Irish lyric that Boland achieves by returning to the things themselves. When contemplating the essentialized woman's plight, the speaker of "A Woman Painted on a Leaf" remarks that she desires to return the woman to her rightful domain just as one "[takes] a starling from behind iron" and returns it "to its element of air, of ending—" (69). The speaker wishes the woman's features could be "a crisp tinder underfoot" (70), for only then can the woman die (70). Essentially, Boland longs to return the mythologized woman to the realm of tangible objects—to the world of concrete things. She cannot save the women who have already been brutalized by literature and history, but *returning to things* in her poetry forces readers to reconsider how they conceive of Irish femininity. Queer phenomenology, therefore, is not sequestered to the domain of the theoretical, but rather possesses a worldly end: once subjects shift the meaning they ascribe to things, thus altering their relationship to the physical world and the abstractions which ensue from this situated existence, hegemonic totalization of Irish femininity becomes impossible.

Things in *Violence* are more than a circuitous route to meaning. Boland's subversive, gender-affirming poetics are grounded in physical objects because concrete existence constitutes the basis of perception, and thus the foundation of the world itself; the material reality which moulds identities, opinions, and worldviews is necessarily constructed by things. Thus, if one can shift the manner in which subjects encounter, perceive, and engage with things, one can effectively change the world. This shift is the epistemological and ontological objective of Boland's poetry. She seeks a language of representation that resists totalization and emblematization, but she also wants subjects to interrogate their presuppositions—to ask why Irish femininity has been bracketed throughout literary history. Boland's poetry thus parallels and validates Sara Ahmed's subversion of traditional metaphysics in *Queer Phenomenology*; her verse demonstrates that shifting focus from centre to the margins is not only productive, but necessary—a trend that must continue in both continental philosophy and Irish studies. Boland's *Violence* and Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* challenge readers to suspend their natural attitude and experience things anew—to pay attention to things as they are rather than as subjects believe them to be. *Violence*, therefore, is nothing short of a dare: *I dare you to change the world*.

Notes

1. Hereafter, In a Time of Violence will be referred to as Violence.
2. Gerardine Meaney (1993) and Edna Longley (1994), in particular, exemplify this latter brand of criticism.
3. Aside from a thesis by Tawny Leboueff, very little work has been done to put Eavan Boland's poetry in dialogue with phenomenological criticism.
   In her 1988 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," Spivak contends that "ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" (287), assuring that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" than her male counterparts (287). In the first iteration of this essay, Spivak concludes with the bold assertion that "The subaltern cannot speak" (308). This polemic, as articulated by Craps, insists that despite the benevolent impulse of critics and artists who seek "to represent and speak for disempowered or subaltern groups" (173), these same writers risk "[appropriating] the voice of the subaltern...thereby [silencing] them" (173). Boland, however, does not silence subaltern women by expropriating their voices. "Being-in-the-world" is a phrase coined by Martin Heidegger in Being and Time (Heidegger 49). Heidegger writes that "The compound expression 'being-in-the-world' indicates...a unified phenomenon" (49). This refers to the complex reality that consciousness both exists in the world and constitutes reality for the subject at the same time. Existential identity and subjectivity are inexorably intertwined with the materiality of the world and its varied phenomena.
4. Givenness refers to the manner in which an object is constituted in cognition—how things are given to consciousness. It is essentially the iteration or version of a particular object that depends upon the presuppositions (or lack thereof) of the individual engaging in orientation and perception (Husserl 26).
5. In the field of phenomenology, "intentionality" refers to the condition of consciousness whereby consciousness is oriented or directed towards something (Merleau-Ponty 159-60). However, a subject's presuppositions, experiences, and personal biases inform the nature of this orientation (intentionality), thus influencing the manner in which we engage with the diverse phenomena of existence.

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