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“Single Out the Devalued”: The Figure of the Nonhuman Animal in Eavan Boland’s Poetry

“Ressalte o desvalorizado”: A figura do animal não humano na poesia de Eavan Boland

Maureen O’Connor

Abstract: *Boland has argued that “good nature poets are always subversive” and, though she did not identify as a nature poet, she compares her praxis to theirs: “their lexicon is the overlooked and the disregarded. . . . They single out the devalued and make a deep, metaphorical relation between it and some devalued parts of perception.” Boland’s engagement with the “natural” rarely provides a focus for analyses of her work, which predominantly attend to the poet’s own frequently identified preoccupations: her relationship to history, especially Irish history, and her role as an Irish woman writing within and against a largely male-dominated tradition. However, both of these issues of ambivalent and insecure identification and situatedness are implicitly connected to cultural constructions of the “natural.” This essay traces Boland’s negotiation with a legacy of Irish women’s silence by considering the appearance of the nonhuman animal in her verse, which evolves from traditional metaphor to a figure that challenges representational norms and expectations, thereby transvaluing the signifying power of silence and questioning the status of language itself, particularly as a uniquely human construct.*

Keywords: *Irish women’s writing; Irish poetry; ecofeminism; new materialism; animal studies.*

Resumo: *Boland argumentou que “poetas de boa índole são sempre subversivos” e, embora não se identifique como poeta da natureza, ela compara sua práxis a deles: “seu léxico é o esquecido e o desconsiderado. . . . Eles ressaltam o desvalorizado e estabelecem uma relação metafórica profunda entre ela e algumas partes desvalorizadas da percepção”. O envolvimento de Boland com o “natural” raramente fornece foco para análises de sua obra, que estão voltadas a preocupações frequentemente identificadas como sendo da própria poeta: sua relação com a história, especialmente a irlandesa, e seu papel de mulher irlandesa escrevendo*

de dentro e contra uma tradição dominada por homens. Contudo, ambas as questões de identificação insegura e ambivalente, bem como de localização, estão implicitamente conectadas às construções culturais do “natural”. Este ensaio traça a negociação de Boland com um legado de silêncio das mulheres irlandesas ao considerar o surgimento do animal não humano em sua poesia, que evolui da metáfora tradicional para uma figura que desafia expectativas e normas representativas, transvalorando, assim, o poder de significação do silêncio e questionando o próprio estatuto da linguagem, particularmente como construção exclusivamente humana.

Palavras-chave: *Escrita de mulheres irlandesas; Poesia irlandesa; Ecofeminismo; Novo materialismo; Estudos sobre animais.*

In “How We Made a New Art on Old Ground”, a poem from Eavan Boland’s 2001 collection, *Code*, the speaker claims never to have perceived nature’s connection to the history of human violence (the “famous battle” that “happened in this valley”), or to have “understood the nature poem. / Till now.” The revelation emerges after following “this / silence to its edge” where “you will hear / the history of air,” written by “the crispness of a fern / or the upward cut and turn around of / a fieldfare or a thrush” (*New Selected* 189). While central to this poem and many others, Boland’s engagement with the “natural” rarely provides a focus for analyses of her work, which predominantly attend to the poet’s own frequently identified preoccupations: her relationship to history, especially Irish history, and her role as an Irish woman writing within and against a largely male-dominated tradition. However, both of these issues of ambivalent and insecure identification and situatedness are implicitly connected to cultural constructions of the “natural.” In a 1996 interview with the American poet Linda Pastan, Eavan Boland rejects the label of nature poet, as such, but admits to having become “a sort of by default indoor nature poet.” She situates the “natural” firmly within “cultural” constructs—particularly history, politics, and trade—when she claims to come from “a country where there has not been nature poetry . . . for complicated historic reasons.” The reason Boland offers for the relationship Irish poetry has had to nature, which she suggests is atypical of poetic praxis in the western tradition, is “the fact that the land was a powerful and sort of rather broken-hearted place.” The broken-heartedness to which Boland refers here is the trauma of Ireland’s experience of empire and occupation, another recurring theme in her work. As Karen Kilcup observes, “many marginalised writers write about nature as part of a matrix of struggle, against colonialism war or racism, for example, and, hence, may be silenced by normative expectations about nature writing” (61). This essay will trace Boland’s negotiation, as an

Irish woman poet, with a legacy of silence by considering the appearance of the animal in her verse, which evolves from traditional metaphor to a figure that challenges representational norms and expectations.

“How We Made Art on New Ground,” is an example of the late work, a poem of expressive, creative silences, which suggests it is not only the silenced woman or worker of history whose stories have gone unheard—stories Boland worked to retrieve over the course of her career—but also the unacknowledged “wounds” and “torments” endured by the supposedly static, ahistorical natural world. The elements of the environment considered to be “animate,” ferns and birds, as well as the abiotic features of the natural world, in this case, air, have their own histories, written in languages all but opaque to us, even if we often play a part in those histories. The speaker is immersed in an ongoing aesthetic production that erases distinctions between “nature” and “culture,” and comes to “know that the nature poem /is not the action nor its end ,” but “in / its own modest way, an art of peace” (190). The attempt to impose language onto the scene only creates a spreading silence, and toward the conclusion, the speaker concedes that “what we see / is what the poem says: / evening coming – cattle, cattle-shadows –” (190). The poem is a collaborative act in which every inscribed word is “unwritten,” the space of language filled with a dynamic natural beauty as day becomes night. The birds writing history in the bright air early in the poem make way for the cattle and their lengthening shadows that provide the poem’s closing image.

The poem offers an ostensible counter to the assertion made by the title of an earlier Boland poem, “We Are Human History. We Are Not Natural History” (1990); however, “a swarm of wild bees” opens and closes the 1990 text, appearing as implicit co-creators of the work of art: like the poet, they are “making use of” history, that is, “the stashed-up debris of old seasons” (*New Selected* 102). The poem is one of the examples Stephanie Boeninger uses to demonstrate the ways “Boland levers seasonal rhythms against the human desire for historical particularity” (45). The body of the poem rebuts its own title, itself a ventriloquizing of the kind of binarized thinking that insists on seeing “nature” and “culture” as separate, an always implicitly gendered opposition. “We Are Human History” appears in the collection *Outside History*, a collection Boeninger argues which demonstrates “Boland’s awareness of the historical tendency to equate women with nature and men with culture” (46). Boeninger argues that this poem in particular insists on the inseparability of human and nonhuman history: “There is a kind of history, the poem suggests, that the poet cannot and perhaps should not try to escape, the memory of the ways in which human beings have interacted with nature” (48). Many of the poems

in *Outside History* point to an ongoing evolution in how Boland deploys the figure of the nonhuman animal, a process that reflects Mark Fisher's contention that "an enquiry into the nature of what the world is like is also inevitably an unravelling of what human beings had taken themselves to be" (83), a humbling lesson in the "modest way" of the "nature poem" as Boland came to understand the form.

Boland recalls her own early apprenticeship in Irish poetry as a time when "as a teenager" she was "writing moody poems about swans and bridges" (qtd. in Randolph, "Interview" 105), in other words, modelling her praxis on a romantic, Yeatsian version of Irish versifying. In a 1974 *Irish Times* article, "The Weasel's Tooth," the mature poet regrets being led to believe in "arid rhetoric" by Yeats, the writer she has "admired and loved most in my life" (88). Of the poetry produced in her eighteenth year, Boland says she believed the way to fulfil a "poet's vocation" was "to develop some precocious maleness which would carry me towards it" ("In Search of a Language" 57, 59). When she was "young and studying poetry at university," she says, "I had a very orthodox, nineteenth-century view of the nature poem" ("Poets' Q & A" 134). Yeats's evocative nature imagery tends toward the emblematic, functioning primarily, if not exclusively, as projection and reflection of the poet self, especially in contemplations of diminishing powers, such as the "dolphin-torn" sea of Byzantium, "the nine-and-fifty swans" of "The Wild Swans at Coole," or the creatures symbolizing the poet's literary creations in "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In Boland's first significant collection, *New Territory* (1967), the nonhuman world, including animals, also functions allegorically or furnishes ornamental detail in the retelling of myths, such as the birds and fish in "Athene's Song" in which the goddess plays a "pipe of bone / Robbed and whittled from a stag" (*Collected* 3). Retellings of Irish myth use the nonhuman animal as texture, contributing to the authenticity of a setting for the more "important", arresting human action, such as the opening stanza of "After the Irish of Aodghan O'Rathaille": "Without flocks or cattle or the curved horns / Of cattle, in a drenching night without sleep / . . . I cry for boyhood, long before / Winkle and dogfish had defiled my lips" (*Collected* 5). The speaker in "The Pilgrim" compares the plight of ever-journeying birds to the female pilgrim who "shares their fate" (*Collected* 10), a parallel even more structurally important to the poem "Migration," which names various birds, swallows, swifts, the "cuckoo and operatic nightingale," as well as "sandpiper, finch, and wren." Here, birds appear as symbols of the anonymous hordes of human travellers over the seas and centuries, driven by hope and necessity, lost to history. "Huddled together without name and burial," history's human wanderers are likened to birds dying at sea "without sanctity" (*Collected* 11). Birds, specifically swans, are also central in the collection's

“Three Songs for a Legend” sequence, in which the metamorphosis of the children of Lír represents the merging of the human and nonhuman as tragedy.

Animal metamorphosis will move from the mythological to the contemporary over the course of Boland’s oeuvre, though still often connected to classic poetic tropes and reminiscent of Yeats’s late work, which represents the humiliations and disappointments of old age as a descent into loathsome animality. In Yeats, the body—traditionally associated in Western culture with mortality, nature, and the feminine—becomes a terrifying prison threatening to undermine hopes of immortality to be achieved through the creation of undying art. In Boland’s work, poems addressed to the “muse,” in particular, make recourse to negative images of female aging that represent the process as one of increasing animalization, implicitly and explicitly revolting and diminishing, similar to the experience of feared irrelevancy and impotence in Yeats. One of the mythical retellings in the early collection *New Territory*, “The Winning of Etain,” anticipates this pattern. For Etain, transforming into an animal, in this case a dragonfly, is a process not just of change but of “quick and violent decay” (*Collected* 16). When the dragonfly, having fallen into “the bright wine of another queen” is swallowed, she magically impregnates the queen, and the child born of this transformation “grew to hate the forest” (*Collected* 19), without understanding the source of her dread of the wilderness. Knowledge and memory are not carried forward into her reincarnated form; all that links the newly born Etain to her former self is physical beauty.

Issues of female embodiment, including cultural expectations of youthful desirability with which “Etain” engages—the re-born Etain is wooed by the much older Aengus, her lover before her first metamorphosis—provide the central themes of the 1980 collection, *In Her Own Image*. The opening poem, “Tirade for the Mimic Muse,” addresses the muse as a “ruthless bitch,” a “fat trout” whose advanced age is evident in “the lizarding of eyelids” and “the whiskering of nipples” (*Collected* 55), in other words, the animalization of those elements of the body prominent in erotic representations of the female body. In a later poem, “Tirade for the Lyric Muse” (1987), the muse undergoes plastic surgery to combat the abhorrent signs of aging: “They’ve patched your wrinkles / and replaced your youth.” Again, the figure is animalized, with “mongrel features” (recalling “mimic Muse’s” “bitch”) and a “snout” (*Collected* 130). In the western tradition, the muse is a goddess who inspires the always-male artist, in later eras a beautiful human woman who silently, unobtrusively enables male genius, a woman reliably nurturing, inspiring, and self-effacing. The gendering of this artistic relationship to the forces of inspiration presents challenges to the woman artist, who has had to bear the burden of traditional

expectations of femininity as well as excessive critical scrutiny and scepticism regarding her right to claim artistic credibility. As noted by the Irish novelist Edna O'Brien, Boland's contemporary, these two sources of pressure and assessment conspire to undermine the woman creator, as the personal and the professional collide: "If you happen to have your hair done, well then you can't be a serious writer" (qtd. in Carlson 73).

In other poems from *In Her Own Image*, "Anorexic" and "Mastectomy," the desexualized female body is fragmented and examined like a medical specimen, or a nonhuman animal subject of experimentation. The anorectic speaker of "Anorexic" disassociates from her own body, a "witch" whose "curves and paps" the speaker will burn in self-denial until the "bitch" of her own body is "curveless." This "bitch" will be subdued, finally "caged" (*Collected* 58-59). Randolph characterizes the poem as a "rejection of female selfhood altogether," in which "female sexuality is described as a fall from (the) grace of the male body" ("Écriture" 52-53). The minimizing of the female form is conducted externally in "Mastectomy," in which the speaker's body is ransacked, "looted," like a vivisected specimen, reduced to "a brute site" (*Collected* 61). "Exhibitionist" and "Making Up" reverse this trajectory of minimization, but, as they close the collection, acts of augmentation are just as compromised as those of violent reduction. The "Exhibitionist" is a practitioner of "dark" arts, a sculptor who "subverts" the old mode. The speaker undresses in a paradoxical act of stripping that is the same time a shaping of the self to inspire desire: "I dimple clay, / I flesh, / I rump stone" (*Collected* 68). These images, as well as the language of "curves" and "paps" found throughout the collection, will recur in Boland's next collection, *Night Feed* in the poem "The Woman Turns Herself Into a Fish," discussed below.

One of the themes that Boland is credited with bringing into mainstream Irish poetry is the experience of female embodiment, specifically as an often painful, unmediated ordeal, rather than Irish womanhood represented as earthy, narrowly maternal, or idealized. As the work becomes increasingly personal and bodily, a revised connection to the natural also emerges, a change Boland has often attributed to becoming a mother, which repositioned her from outside to inside, from "romantic-poet" observer to "a participant in the whole world of change and renewal" (qtd. in "Poets' Q & A" 134). In a 1993 interview, Boland objects to the by-then familiar characterization of her work as "domestic," arguing that she has always had a "subversive relation to what was nominated—by tradition, by superstition, by criticism—as being a proper subject for poetry." She goes on to note that "good nature poets are always subversive" and compares her praxis to theirs: "their lexicon is the overlooked and the disregarded. . . . They single out the devalued and make a deep, metaphorical relation between it and some devalued parts of perception" (qtd. in Randolph,

“Interview” 108). By the early 1990s, the work has moved away from deploying the animal as Yeatsian emblem, as in “The War Horse” from the 1975 collection of the same name, in which horse and hills function as “private emblems” (Boland, “Subject Matters” 81), or from the self-lacerating performance of the material female body as derogated through its association with the nonhuman animal, as in “The Woman Turns Herself Into a Fish” from the 1982 collection, *Night Feed*. In poems like “Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark” and “The New Pastoral,” this collection gestures to classic sources and newly complicated gendered representations. Daphne’s metamorphosis offers an ironic lament, advising sexual surrender, while in “The Woman Turns Herself Into a Fish,” the changes wrought by menopause are experienced as a series of desexualizing animal transformations. The harsh monosyllabic language of female embodiment found in earlier poems, like “rump” and “flank,” words that evoke cuts of butchered meat, or “pap,” a word usually referring to an animal’s teat, recur here to be echoed by terse descriptors and verbs eliciting repulsion and unease, including “scaled,” “chill,” “slack,” and “slap” (*Collected* 83-84).

“The New Pastoral” has inspired some ecocritical readings, such as Oona Frawley’s contention that, Boland’s fraught relationship to “nature” and the nature poem must be positioned within an Irish “tradition that saw nature as the site of exclusion from culture, a sign of marginal existence” (150). The suburbs, in this analysis, comprise a middle ground between these polarized constructions of “culture” and “nature.” Donna Potts reads the poem as confronting that binary directly in an ecofeminist gesture, drawing “parallels between the exploitation of earth and women” (16). The pastoral names a particular relationship to the landscape and domesticated animals, traditionally being set in a fantasy of controlled and sanitized “nature.” Potts notes, however, in contrast to the expected idyll of a pastoral, in the lines, “‘Can I make whole/ this lamb’s knuckle, butchered from its last crooked suckling?’”, the speaker encounters “the lamb only after it has been butchered and thus has no other choice but to be conscious of death, of deterioration, of loss, of chaos. Boland’s ‘new pastoral’ is thus also post-pastoral in its attentiveness to nature’s cycles of birth and decay, life and death” (108), a specifically materialist relationship to the creativity inherent in destruction. The poem is one of many in Boland’s oeuvre that stages a struggle with poetic form, voice, history, and authority.

As noted, Boland considered disrupting received ideas about the “proper” subject of poetry to be her responsibility as a woman poet, and it is significant that she presents the totemic animal of a venerable literary mode, the pastoral, as dead and dismembered, bringing to discomfiting awareness the exploitation and death of a tender young “suckling” creature, a reality of the brutality of our casual mistreatment of the nonhuman, a reality

usually occluded. The connection between exploitation of the animals foregrounded in a poem like “The New Pastoral,” and violence against women is echoed in the later poem, “Violence Against Women” (2007), which refers to “shepherdesses in the English pastoral” who are instrumentalised by the male poet who writes of them “gathering their unreal sheep / into real verse for whom no one will weep” (*New Selected* 219, 220). Why this parallel signifies specifically in an Irish context is suggested by Val Plumwood’s observations about the “hegemonic accounts of agency can be seen most clearly in the context of colonising relationships.” The function of “hyperseparation” she locates in “Eurocentric and anthropocentric erasures of agency” is “to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment through a radical exclusion the colonisers may exaggerate differences, and deny relationship, conceiving the subordinated party as less than human, the colonised may be described as ‘stone-age’ ‘primitive’ ‘beast’” (128). While the simianization of the Irish is a well-documented historic phenomenon, Marian Scholtmeijer contends that for women writers this bestialization of the othered can provide oppositional strategies: “animals offer an ideational model for ontological defiance. The radical alienation of animals from culture is not just ideationally but politically advantageous to feminism” (234, 236). As Boland’s confidence and success in establishing an alternative, independent tradition for Irish women’s poetry grows, the nonhuman animal in her work gains independence from the traditional snares of metaphor. This move away from a “representationalist” mode of figuring the animal is connected, in feminist new materialism, with a rejection of the kind of foundational hyperseparation Plumwood describes. As Karen Barad argues:

If we no longer believe the world is teeming with inherent resemblances whose signatures are inscribed on the face of the world, things already emblazoned with signs, . . . but rather that the knowing subject is enmeshed in a thick web of representations such that the mind cannot see its way to objects that are now forever out of reach and all that is visible is the sticky problem of humanity’s own captivity within language. (*Meeting* 137)

In a later poem like “An Elegy for my Mother in Which She Scarcely Appears” (2007), which privileges nonhuman animals that have died and “inanimate” objects over human subjects, this almost entirely invisible enmeshment gestures to possibilities of expression beyond the representational.

The butchered animal as an indicator of feminist defiance and transgression appears again in “Domestic Violence” (2007). The first stanza sets a wintry scene that includes this detail: “*Pleased to meet you meat to please you* / said the butcher’s sign in the window in the village” (*New Selected* 199). Jody Allen Randolph describes the collection

Domestic Violence as “opening a large set of questions as to whether the nature poem itself is not an escape into a historical pastoral which has proved infirm” (“Ecocritical” 58). Other contemporary Irish women poets similarly challenge the traditional masculinist “nature” poem. For example, in Mary O’Malley’s “The Poet’s Fancy” (2001), the male poet’s instrumentalist approach to nature is rendered as physical violence. The animals warn each other of the poet’s approach, afraid “they’ll end up – / in a trap, at the end of a hook / or dead on some godforsaken road.” The making of poetry out of nonhuman animal resources is a form of butchery: “They could even lose their pelts, / skins, feathers” (52). In the collection *Domestic Violence*, as much as Boland problematizes the nature poem “by suggesting at least some of its premises were false,” according to Randolph, the form is nevertheless recognized as one with political and societal significance, “the locus of an almost continuing crisis since the nineteenth century” (“Ecocritical” 59), that is, environmental degradation in the name of economic progress and capitalist accumulation.

The pastoral’s connection with death and destruction also appears in “Object Lessons,” from *Outside History*. The speaker is unnerved by her husband’s coffee mug, specifically the “cruel theatre” of the hunting scene that decorates it. The poem reads in the painted scene the history of an equivalence assumed between the hunted animal and the domesticated woman, between the “captured” wife and the exploited landscape: “A lady smiling as the huntsman kissed her: / the way land looks before disaster.” The disaster hinted at in the coffee mug’s decoration and in the poem’s domestic setting is presaged by the mug, which shatters:

the details of
this pastoral were merely
veiled warnings

of the shiver
of presentiment with which
we found the broken pieces of
the sparrow hawk and the kisses of
the huntsman. (*Collected* 139)

The sentimental rendering of “cruel theatre” as kitchen-ware embellishment ironically telescopes the perceived historical distance between a model of heterosexual marriage in which the woman is herself is quarry, an ornamental prize, and the modern companionate marriage, revealing potential cracks beneath the decorous surface. As Potts suggests, Boland “relies on the pastoral tradition to explore personal history and to accommodate women’s history . . . to imaginatively restore women’s real presence in landscape” (16). Boland’s

“domestic” poetry brings into focus “the overlooked and disregarded,” as she observes all effective nature poetry does. “The project of a nature poem is a revised way of seeing” (qtd. in Randolph, “An Interview” 108), according to Boland. Her “indoor nature poetry” brings to our attention the usually unnoticed blurring of the distinctions between “nature” and “culture” in the typical suburban kitchen. As she says of “Domestic Violence”, “I wanted the cut flowers on the table to show the wound of their break with the natural” (“I Only Escaped” 86). Deracinated flowers provide visual pleasure at an unacknowledged price. Plumwood’s observation that “Nature can be used to hide human contribution especially those of non-privileged groups” (131) makes clear the implications for women’s history of contributing to culture in a tradition that relegates the female to the “natural” as well as to the hidden, irrelevant domestic.

According to Randolph, Boland’s admiration of the work of Sylvia Plath was significant in the younger poet’s evolving conviction over the course of the 1990s regarding the unsuspected radical possibilities in a poetics that attended to both the domestic and the natural. In Randolph’s account, Boland was inspired by Plath’s “courage in writing about children” and by “her use of the nature poem to do so,” a mode for representing “a new alignment with the natural world” generated by the experience of motherhood (Eavan Boland 72). Randolph characterizes this development as a reaction against an Irish tradition of nature writing in which the land functions almost exclusively as a source of national identity. As Plumwood has noted, “Landscape so framed draws on a colonial as well as an androcentric model which frames land as passive, visually captured, something to distance from, survey, subdue” (123). In contrast to this alienated, objectifying representation of the natural, the intimacies of the domestic nature poem, in which a sleeping or stalking pet cat, for example, as in the 1996 poem, “Ode to Suburbia,” paradoxically grants the work a global, timeless reach. “[T]his creature drowsing now in every house” is “The same lion who tore stripes / Once off zebras” (*New Collected* 66). In “Prisoners” (1989) a similarly multiple, mobile feline appears, seen first “lost in the lion cages/ Of the zoo,” later glimpsed “at the hearth,” as well as “in a school annual tamed in type, / In a screen safari.” The speaker does not expect the irony of finding this fabulous shape-shifting creature “alive and well in our suburban / World,” even as in the Leo constellation overhead, he is captured in “his stars” (*Selected* 23). While the poem suggests parallels between the humans and nonhumans who appear in the work, the cat is not functioning as a metaphor; he is presented as an independent being with a rich history and lineage, retaining connections and iterations that not only span the globe but even reach into the cosmos. In the poem’s concluding upward gaze, it appears to answer affirmatively the question posed by Anna

Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Might it be possible to attend to nature’s collaborative origins without losing the advantages of its global reach?” (95). As when Boland places bees at the opening and closing of “We Are Human History,” the cats in these poems embody an instance of “acknowledge[ing] the creativity of earth others” (Plumwood 117). Boland has argued, the “good nature poet ... becomes the agent in the poem for a different way of seeing” (qtd. in Randolph, “An Interview” 108), a core perceptual difference in this case being a revised understanding of nonhuman agency, its active contribution to the making of what we call “culture.”

Liam Young has argued for a trajectory similar to the one I see in Boland’s work, a movement away from unproblematic confidence in cultural mastery over the natural in Yeats’s late verse when faced with death, a “softening” of the poet’s “symbolist stance on the author’s ability to wield his theme” (158). In Young’s account this “rethinking of the author” is a disturbing experience for the poet rather than the kind of revelatory, even comforting, disruption of delimiting “certainties” that emerges in Boland’s work; however, the ways in which Young analyses the role of the nonhuman animal in this disruption for Yeats is useful for thinking of the animal’s appearance in Boland’s work. While Young concedes that in the early work nonhuman animals serve entirely human-centred functions—the “poet wields control over the outer world” (158)—Yeats later deploys the “silent” animal as a figure for the “problem of indeterminacy of linguistic structure,” a problem potentially undermining of “authorial agency and human subjectivity” (151). The dissolution of the self, attendant on the discovery that the poet has been “caught up in a semiotic system that is seemingly [as] indifferent to [his] intentions” as it is to those of nonhuman animals (159), that Young observes in Yeats’s late textual encounters with nonhuman animals, as in “The Cat and the Moon,” entails a foundational challenge to male poetic authority. Yeats experiences what Barad calls the “sticky problem of humanity’s own captivity within language.” Never having enjoyed the same claim to such authority, the Irish woman poet’s encounter with the silent animal figure is distinctive. While “the presence of animals in literature always poses dangers to the symbolic order, potentially refuses legibility . . . the self-conscious deployment of the animal in [Irish women’s] texts, . . . as a figure for the productive ‘failures’ and fragile silences of women’s writing, engages with the limits of representation and language, the inherent violence of metaphor” (O’Connor 947).

The “silence” attributed to the nonhuman is a self-congratulatory illusion. Barad questions the power we have granted what is understood as “language” when she argues, “Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of

possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity” (*Meeting* 146-147). In “Anna Liffey,” from *A Time of Violence*, the historical figure for whom the river Liffey was named, concludes the poem by reminding us that “In the end / It will not matter / That I was a woman” and that “the body is a source. Nothing more,” of no more significance than a river. She also acknowledges the ocean’s iterative capacities:

When language cannot do it for us,
Cannot make us know love will not diminish us,
There are the phrases of the ocean
To console us.
Particular and unafraid of their completion.
In the end
Everything that burdened and distinguished me
Will be lost in this:
I was a voice. (*New Selected* 145)

The human voice here is just one among many, in Barad’s words, part of “a dynamic and contingent multiplicity.”

Jane Bennett maintains that we need to cultivate “the idea that human agency has some echo in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). The nonhuman in Bennett’s discussion does not comprise solely “animate” beings, like animals, but also those elements of creation that are considered “inanimate,” a category coming under pressure in the recent work of feminist new materialists, like Bennett and Barad, who explain that

[A]gency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, ‘non-humans’ as well as ‘humans’. . . . Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements” (Interview 54, 55).

Boland has always demonstrated tenderness towards and heightened sensitivity to the particularities of beloved objects, but in the poems around the time of and after her mother’s death in 2002, a loss addressed both obliquely and directly in the 2007 collection *In a Time of Violence*, the nonhuman, both animate and inanimate, occupies an intensified vibrancy in a constellation of signification. In these poems we find some of the most potent suggestions of not only the possibilities of poetry re-imagining and even reconfiguring our understanding of human agency—its limits as well as its expansive potentialities—but also

the artist's responsibilities to both the living and the dead, who trouble distinctions and distances between the animate and inanimate.

"Elegy for My Mother in Which She Scarcely Appears" offers an especially vivid example of the poem as comprising multiple agencies and unattended voices. It opens with an acknowledgement of our "strange human duty," that is, "to grieve for the animals / . . . weep for them, pity them." The speaker suddenly turns to contemplate the silenced, disregarded domestic objects, "dumb implements," which "have / no eyes to plead with us like theirs, / no claim to make on us like theirs." This disregard resists the potentially endearing ways that the objects are figured in animal terms: the "singing kettle" with its bird-like "rising shriek in winter"; the "brass firedogs which lay out / all evening on the grate"; "a wooden clothes horse, absolutely steady / without sinews, with no mane and no meadows / to canter in" (*New Selected* 209). Every nonhuman element of the domestic scene where the speaker places her mother's memory is eulogized, including the lively, fragile, independent "beast," language. In trying to recreate a memory of her mother, the poet is left "with nothing to assist me but the last / and most fabulous of beasts—language, language—." Language is aware of its own mortality; it "knows as I do, that it's too late / to record the loss of these things but does so anyway, / and anxiously, in case it shares their fate" (*New Selected* 210). As Fisher observes, "the subject who speaks" is "composed out of the undead, disincorporate stuff of language" (109), an observation that suggests language itself necessarily challenges the oppositional binaries of material and immaterial, organic and inorganic, past and present, life and death.

Boland has maintained that the experience of maternity inaugurated a new relationship to the natural world. The loss of Boland's mother inspired poems that once again revise the subject's experience of the body—that which connects us all to the disavowed nonhuman—representing it as a more disperse and corporate entanglement. In another poem about her mother's death, "And Soul," rushing to her dying mother's bedside, the poet recalls hearing "once that the body is, or is / said to be, almost all / water." This leads her to suspect that "coast canal ocean river stream and now / mother / ... could be shades of each other, / the way the body is" (*New Selected* 211). Similarly, in "Amber," the speaker holds a piece of amber given to her by her late, "absent" mother, noting that according to "Reason ... / the dead cannot see the living. / The living will never see the dead again" (*New Selected* 210). However, the elements captured in the resin "seem as alive as / they ever were" (*New Selected* 211). According to Fisher, a "certain darkness hangs over the possibility of life, it surrounds the difference between the organic and the inorganic" (52), a darkness that Boland's poetry can enlighten. "Amber" holds out the possibility that the

past and the present can occupy the same space, “memory itself / a Baltic honey” (211). The poem, like a drop of amber enclosing seeds and feathers “inside a flawed translucence” can illuminate for us the possibilities of “just how much can be kept safe” (211), when we embrace our “strange human duty” to understand ourselves as one animal element in a much greater enmeshed whole.

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