

# **Ecofeminist Insights into Contemporary Poetry by Irish and Galician Women Writers<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1960s, there has been a growing ecological awareness which has had its impact on the production and analysis of literature. Ecofeminism, in particular, denounces the androcentric exploitation and subordination of both nature and women. This rise of ecofeminism has coincided in time with the emergence of an unprecedented number of women poets in the Irish and Galician literary traditions. In this essay, I would like to consider the possible ways in which gender becomes a relevant notion in the relationship of human and non-human nature and to find out whether contemporary poetry by Irish and Galician women writers has an ecofeminist import. Central to this discussion are the issues of the mediation of language and the recourse to tropes of nature to interrogate social prejudices, traditional politics of desire and to vindicate new spaces for women.

Since the 1960s, there has been a growing ecological awareness with an accompanying visibility of social organizations and political parties with a green agenda. This increasing concern with the deterioration of the environment due to a perverse human intervention in the natural milieu has had its impact on the production and analysis of literature, so, at the turn of the century, we have witnessed the rise of ecocritical perspectives which have focused their attention on the ways

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literature re-presents and re-invents the relationship between human and non-human nature.<sup>2</sup> One particular orientation in the ecology movement which has had its concomitant manifestation in literature and in literary analysis is ecofeminism, which denounces the androcentric exploitation and subordination of both nature and women.<sup>3</sup> However, ecofeminism is not a monolithic ideology, and the bond between nature and women is promoted by some and interrogated by others. The former consider that the ideological construction of woman as nature and nature as woman has a biological basis and is beneficial for both, as it constitutes a site of resistance and a necessary alternative to patriarchal modes of exploitation, whereas the latter believe that the equation of woman as nature is in itself a patriarchal ruse to dominate them both and keep them away from social sites of power.<sup>4</sup> In between these two poles of thought, there is a range of positions which attempt to establish a relationship of continuity between human and non-human nature, putting an end to traditional views of alienation which perpetuate the breach between humans and their natural environment. Nevertheless, continuity does not mean identification and I adhere to those discourses which call for the necessary respect towards the relative difference of nature since, though it deserves the same rights as humans, it has its own logic, needs and transformations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The environmental movement became particularly visible throughout the 1970s and 1980s, though its impact on literary studies was not felt until the 1990s. It is commonly believed that one of the first books to launch ecocriticism was Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne has been widely credited with first writing the term *écoféminisme* in the 1970s. Her work was disseminated in the Anglo-American world through the inclusion of an excerpt of her writings, "Feminism or Death", in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's *New French Feminisms* ([1980] 1981: 64–67).

<sup>4</sup> The first position is, for instance, maintained by ecofeminists like Starhawk, whose views are based on a goddess tradition, nature theology, indigenous spirituality and immanence (1990). Starhawk's work can be included in the spiritual wing of ecofeminism. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the radical and social wings of ecofeminism, which avoid essentialist claims regarding women's closeness to nature. Ynestra King, to mention one, warns that it is precisely the patriarchal equation of woman and nature that has been instrumental in the oppression of both (1983).

<sup>5</sup> The ecocritic Patrick D. Murphy draws on the Bakhtinian dialogical method to prevent his criticism from becoming a monological political dogma. Besides, Bakhtin's proposals are useful for his consideration of nature (the other) as a speaking subject (1995: 8–14).

The rise of ecological awareness and ecocriticism has coincided in time with the emergence of an unprecedented number of women poets in the Irish and Galician literary traditions. Since the seventies, Ireland and Galicia have had their respective literary systems shaken by the accession of these new voices to the public sphere of literature. Alongside these fresh voices, a whole range of unexplored topics — some of them formerly taboos, as for instance the physical, non-idealized representation of the female body— and poetic forms have made their way into the Western literary tradition.<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I would like to consider whether gender is a relevant notion in the relationship of human and non-human nature. To do so, I need to see what type of nature is constructed in this new poetry and whether there is an instrumental or a disinterested vision of it. What are the situations that favour the contact of the poetic voice with nature? Does nature trigger in the poetic voice a sense of belonging or of alienation? Is nature a blank space where we inscribe our beliefs or are we ready to listen to it and learn from it? In those cases where we identify the poetic voice or the observer as a woman, what type of woman is she? Are certain natural spaces favourable or hostile to a woman's participation in them? Is there a parallel interrogation both of stereotypical femininity and of anachronic configurations of nature? Finally, has contemporary poetry by Irish and Galician women writers an ecofeminist import? The above questions will be the guidelines of the following analysis, even though the Irish and Galician poets under discussion constitute a rather heterogeneous group and one cannot expect to find a single answer that will apply equally to all of these women writers.

There is enough evidence to maintain that, at the beginning of this new millennium, nature continues to fascinate writers and still proves to be a source of ecstatic joy. A prose-poem like "Naturists", by the Irish poet Mary O'Donnell can illustrate this assertion (2006: 165). However, instead of perpetuating the illusion of a direct, non-mediated communion between the poetic voice and the environment, O'Donnell shows an overt self-consciousness about the way language mediates our perception of nature: "Left to our own resources, we pass the time

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<sup>6</sup> Two influential studies which provide a detailed record of the contemporary women poets' emergence in Ireland and Galicia are, respectively, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh (1996) and Helena González Fernández (2005).

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watching nuthatches, thrushes, *analysing the etymology of utterance*, we embrace trunks of trees, clothed or sky-clad, press our lips against furrowed bark, smell our way into *the syntax of a thousand insects* beneath the surface” (emphasis mine). The linguistic imagery employed here is, in my opinion, no mere application of a human intellectual scheme to natural elements, but the manifest awareness that, alongside sensorial perception (watching, touching, smelling), language is a necessary tool—and not inevitably a mischievous one—in our communication with nature. To acknowledge this mediation of language is especially important in a poet, who after all uses language to convey her understanding of the natural world and who inscribes her work in a literary tradition. This acknowledgement of the role of language marks the possibility of a certain continuity between the human and the non-human realms: a continuity with imperfections and shortcomings, as we shall see, but nevertheless an attempt to bridge the gap.

Certainly, O'Donnell also notices the limitations of language, which she seems to relate to the human ambition to master nature through knowledge: “If we speak about a bright weed or spilt cerulean drowning the sky, it’s *on a need-to-know basis*. Otherwise, we consent to splitting words with stranger and friend alike, *hoarding what we know*” (emphasis mine). For ecocriticism, it is important to make clear the difference between nature as a source of knowledge, i.e. a space from which humans have much to learn, and nature as object of knowledge, i.e. a space to be mastered by means of human ingenuity.<sup>7</sup> O'Donnell's choice of words, “need-to-know basis”, “hoarding what we know”, suggests a critique of the miserly accumulation of knowledge about nature if this learning is not accompanied by an amorous fusion of the observer with the environment: “the hairs on our arms rising to greet the whisper of droplets, feeling water dribble along our shoulders, between the cleft of the breast, down to the lake of the bellybutton, slipping to the thatch of the groin, deep to the pink souterrain”. The eroticism in the description of this symbiosis of the female body and the rain illustrates one conspicuous characteristic of both Irish and

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<sup>7</sup> Josephine Donovan maintains that women writers like Dorothy Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf, Sarah Orne Jewett, Clarice Lispector and Iris Murdoch articulate their desire for a nondominative relationship with nature in clear contrast with patriarchal discourses which take over nature, expunge its agency and cast it in the passive form as a signified (1998).

Galician contemporary poets, that is, the explicit representation of the female body and of her sexual desire, not as it was traditionally constructed by men and for men, but voiced by a woman who gives free expression to her pleasure. O' Donnell's prose-poem, however, is not about heterosexual intercourse between a man and a woman, but about an orgasmic encounter of human and non-human nature, in which the body is "electrified by nature" and experiences a "passion that is human and fleshly". Our body, shaped though it has been by cultural patterns, continues to retain that otherness of nature which we often fail to accept or understand, while our mind arrogantly claims to know and control it.<sup>8</sup> In fact, "Naturists" suggests that the amorous encounter with nature helps to liberate the mind: "Invisible things, to unburden the mind: the rhythms of seasons".

Another poem which delves into the poetic persona's erotic embrace with nature is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "Oileán" [Island] (1990: 40–43), where the reader may remain in doubt as to which is the literal and which is the figurative term: the body or the island. The first line might induce us to believe that it is the beloved's body that is the object of attention: "Oileán is ea do chorp" [You nude body is an island],<sup>9</sup> but it is really in the elaborate description of the geographical features of the island that the poem is engaged: the ocean, the spring wells, the mountain lakes, etc. The poetic persona's desire is expressed in a detailed enumeration of physical attributes which might, at first sight, resemble the traditional lists of synecdoches which represent the female body, but Ní Dhomhnaill is careful to avoid gender marks that may identify either the poetic voice or the beloved as male or female. This indeterminacy about gender results in an interrogation of old stereotypes which have constructed woman as a land to be mapped and conquered by the adventurous male.<sup>10</sup> Neither is the ocean any longer the privileged space for the male navigator nor is the island the passive space to be colonised any more. Ní Dhomhnaill's use of gender indeterminacy challenges both clichés about masculinity and femininity

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<sup>8</sup> N. Catherine Hayles employs the notion of "constrained constructivism" to refer to the limits our bodies impose on our epistemological efforts (1995).

<sup>9</sup> I provide John Montague's translation in Ní Dhomhnaill's *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990).

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Prendergast's drawings in her *Body Map Series* (1983) depict a landscape which is explored, described, altered and controlled, and which is actually a woman's body. Feminist interpretations of these drawings relate them to the political control over the Irish woman's sexuality and reproductive functions (Nash, 1994).

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and their traditional association with natural spaces. Her poem is then innovative both because it opens the possibility of having a woman voicing her erotic desire and because the object of this desire is no longer the traditional one in heterosexual love. As the title of the poem and the exuberant imagery show, the object of amorous desire here is the island itself.

Galician poetry has a longstanding tradition of female voices that endearingly address the sea and ask it for news about the beloved. This lore goes back to the Middle Ages—with a climax in the thirteenth century—when Galician-Portuguese poetry enjoyed its highest reputation and Galician was the literary language throughout the Iberian peninsula. In the *Cantigas de Amigo*, the woman is the protagonist and most often the speaker, but not the author. However, it is with the unprecedented emergence of numerous women poets in the last quarter of the twentieth century that women can give expression to their relationship with the sea and other natural spaces. In her poem “Penélope”, Xohana Torres refuses to accept the domestic, passive and expectant role given to women by the Western literary tradition and daringly claims for the unknown seas as the appropriate space into which women must venture from now onwards (2004: 251): “Así falou Penélope: / ‘Existe a maxia e pode ser de todos. / ¿A que tanto nobelo e tanta historia? / EU TAMÉN NAVEGAR”’ (the poet’s emphasis) [Penelope spoke thus: / Magic exists and we can all have a share / What is this hank and all this fuss for? / ME SAIL TOO].<sup>11</sup> Penelope’s last cry gains force and memorability precisely due to its agrammatical construction. This determined expression of the desire to take to sea has been interpreted as a feminist re-reading of the Homeric myth in the *Odyssey* and as a signal of contemporary women’s resolution to assume historical and literary agency.<sup>12</sup> The sea, traditionally a space where only male fishermen, sailors, explorers and pirates dared to venture, and which women could only languidly contemplate from the shore, becomes now a privileged trope for women’s participation in the public sphere.

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<sup>11</sup> All translations from Galician into English are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Torres’s line “Eu tamén navegar” [Me sail too] became one of the most popular vindicative cries of Galician feminists in the 1980s. The poet also resorted to it for the title of her speech of admission to the Galician Royal Academy in 2001.

The recourse to nature as a trope for the act of writing may seem to some an excessively anthropocentric concern, with nature placed in an ancillary position to serve human expressive needs. There may be some truth in this indictment and a genuine ecofeminist approach might be one which highlights a non-instrumental perception of the environment. However, I believe that we should not underestimate the importance of the poets' choice of nature to elaborate on their creative process. The trope of nature inscribes various significant processes at this stage of history. The woman poet may appropriate it to signal the incursion into so far forbidding spaces, as we saw in Torres's "Penélope". Besides, the trope reveals that nature continues to nurture the human imaginary and that the emotional bond between human and non-human nature has not been irrevocably broken yet. Finally, the trope, which is itself a product of the imagination and subverts the strict logic of reason, suits well the "otherness" of nature and may constitute an alternative discourse to empiricist approaches to the environment.

I began this essay by posing some questions which have guided my discussion. No single answer can apply to all contemporary women poets either in Ireland or in Galicia, but some tentative conclusions may already be drawn from the examples I have analysed. We have seen that some of these poets show an explicit awareness of the way language mediates their perception of nature, so theirs is not a naïve approach by which subject and object have a direct, non-mediated communication. Alongside their self-consciousness about the role of discourses in the experience of nature, these poets also employ tropes of nature to refer to their writing experience and their relationship, either of belonging or of alienation, to the literary tradition. I have discussed the risks of these tropes in the sense that they may construct as natural what is actually the result of social forces. However, I have found evidence that a large part of these tropes of nature actually engages in an interrogation of social prejudices with regard to the construction of gender and to women's participation in the public sphere. Other tropes challenge the traditional politics of desire and suggest alternative options to that of heterosexual love. As for the question about the spaces which are either hostile or favourable to the participation of women, we have seen that some of these poets

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vindicate the ocean as the new figurative space into which women must, from now onwards, venture.

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