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Ecofeminist Tropes of the Ocean in Contemporary Irish and Galician Poetry*

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Abstract:

The present study examines the oceanic tropes of ecofeminist relevance featured in the recent poetic production of two Atlantic communities with comparable cultural and environmental features: Ireland and Galicia. The focus will be on current renderings of an endangered ocean and the role that female authorship and configurations of femininity play in them. Among its aims, this article will assess whether there have appeared new poetic tropes that may convey the altered ecological conditions of the seas and whether current ecofeminist ocean tropes succeed in drawing attention to the common materiality and destiny of human and more-than-human nature. The poems under analysis are taken from anthologies and individual poetry collections from the last two decades.

Keywords: Atlantic Ocean, Ecofeminism, Galician Poetry, Irish Poetry, Oceanic Tropes

1. Introduction

Ireland and Galicia – an autonomous region in northwestern Spain – have found in the Atlantic Ocean both a daunting barrier and an auspicious gateway. Through history, this ocean has put many lives at risk, those of fishermen and other seafarers, but has also been the path taken by expectant emigrants to the American continent. Besides these socioeconomic factors, there has been an increasing ecological awareness about the health of oceans in the twenty-first century that has opened new avenues of

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inquiry into the impact of human activity on the oceans' ecological balance. Initiatives as varied as the environmental activism of The Ocean Movement, and debates in academic disciplines such as ocean studies and ecocriticism, all converge to highlight the urgent need to reconsider our relationship, both material and symbolic, with the ocean (Pujolràs-Noguer, Hand 2023).

This article is concerned with the role played by women in present-day poetic configurations of the ocean. It will be primarily informed by current ecofeminist debates and their scrutiny of the interrelations of human, in particular female, and more-than-human nature, alongside their social and ecological implications (Estévez-Saá and Lorenzo-Modia 2018). The ocean is an especially pertinent frame of reference for a comparative study of Irish and Galician poetry because of its flexible boundaries that foster in-betweenness and transnational bonds, thereby potentially interrogating the idea of national affiliation and stimulating, as Pujolràs-Noguer and Hand advocate in their research on Indian Ocean literature, communal, porous and self-questioning identities rather than fixed or stagnated ones (2023, 134). Proof of such communal identity is, among others, the fact that Ireland and Galicia share the foundational myth of the Sons of Míl as their foreign, navigating forebears (McKevitt 2006). This article, however, is shifting the focus to current renderings of an endangered ocean and to the role that female authorship and configurations of femininity play in them. Ecopoetry is a singularly apt genre for this subject-matter since, as Payne, Shaughnessy and Veiga have argued in their collection of Irish and Galician ecopoetry, it "reflects a growing awareness of the fragility of the ecosystems we inhabit" (2021a, 11).

The 1980s witnessed the progressive incorporation of women poets into the, until then, highly patriarchal Irish and Galician literary fields (Nogueira Pereira 1997, 82-83; Cannon 2021, 93) to the point that the poetic generation of the 1990s was characterized, both in Ireland and Galicia, by a conspicuous rise in the number of women poets (Dacosta 1997, 18; Guinness 2004, 21-23). The patriarchal backbone of these two Catholic and rural-based communities may partly explain the relatively late impact of Western feminism on their respective literary fields. Since this breakthrough of women poets, there has been a parallel upsurge of tropes that relate women's renewed personal and social aspirations to the domain of sea navigation (González Fernández 2005; Palacios 2009). In renowned Galician writer Xohana Torres's poem "Penelope" ([1992] 2004, 251) the female speaker stated her determination to navigate through her words "Eu tamén navegar"¹, which later became the rallying cry of Galician feminism. The woman's empowering stance in Torres's poem was similarly expressed in Luisa Castro's collection *Baleas e baleas* (Whales and Whales), although the latter occasionally added the poetic persona's ecological concern with plundering fishing practices: "Nunca máis darei creto a meu avó / roubando peixe espada nas costas irlandesas" ([1988] 1992, 52)². The environmentally aware approach became more evident with the sinking of the Prestige oil-tanker off Galicia's Atlantic coastline in 2002, as has been well studied by María Xesús Nogueira Pereira (2022; also in Acuña Trabazo, Nogueira Pereira 2022). The contemporary Irish literary field, meanwhile, has experienced, since the 1990s, an analogous development that began with the presentation of empowered female navigators, as in Mary O'Malley's "The Grannuaile Poems" in her collection *Where the Rocks Float* about the namesake pirate queen: "I am Gráinne, Queen of men, / mistress of a thousand ships" (1993, 69). Likewise, Celia de Fréine's *imram-odyssey*, voices the speaker's precarious albeit determined wanderlust: "At last I discover a small boat to store hope in, one / that welcomes me on board and steers me on my journey" (2010, 15). Progressively, Irish poetry has been

¹ I to sail too (unless otherwise stated, all translations from Galician into English are mine).

² Trans.: Never again will I give credence to my grandfather / plundering swordfish off the Irish coast.

accommodating more ecologically sensitive stances such as those in Mary O'Malley's *Valparaíso* (2012) and *Playing the Octopus* (2016), which will be the object of analysis in this article.

The present study aims to examine the oceanic tropes of ecofeminist relevance featured in the recent poetic production of these two Atlantic communities, Galicia and Ireland. Some of the questions that will guide this inquiry are the following: which are the present-day dominant tropes of the ocean? And, more pressingly, have there appeared any new tropes that convey the altered ecological conditions of the seas? Have gender-marked figurations intervened in the production of these new tropes? Do the common vulnerability and exploitation experienced by women and nature continue to inspire ecofeminist readings of nature poetry? The ecocritical question arises as to the potential impact of poetic female ocean figurations on the empirical conditions of female and oceanic existence. Furthermore, following Astrida Neimanis' focus on transcorporeality (2017), this article wants to assess whether female nature, and more specifically female ocean, tropes succeed in drawing attention to our common materiality and, hereby, to the common destiny of human and more-than-human nature. Finally, along the lines of Søren Frank's differentiation between "historical time" and "broad present" (2022), one question to pose is: are current configurations of the ocean primarily nostalgic of a former, less damaged environment, or is there a penchant for the representation of a dystopic future?

The corpus of poems to be analysed has been selected from recent anthologies of ecopoetry such as, in the Irish case, *Empty House. Poetry and Prose on the Climate Crisis* (Kinsella, O'Mahony 2021) as well as from individual poetry collections like Mary O'Malley's *Valparaíso* (2012) and Nessa O'Mahony's *The Hollow Woman on the Island* (2019). The chosen time frame, 2012-2021, is meant to outline recent developments in ecological awareness in Ireland as rendered by the already consolidated presence of women poets in this country. Similarly, the Galician corpus will have recourse to anthologies such as *No seu despregar* (Otero, Tembrás 2016a; As they unfurl), *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* (Nogueira Pereira 2017a; 13. Anthology of proximate Galician poetry) and *Aquén do mar. Cantos de serea na luz da fin da terra* (Nerium 2023; This side of the sea. Sirens' songs in the light of the earth's end), with the aim to identify those tropes of ecofeminist relevance that have been ideated since the Prestige-oil-spillage motivated poetry in 2002 and 2003, with a special focus on writers born in the 1980s and after.

2. Irish Poetry: The Self-Questioning Stance

Mary O'Malley has been a longstanding activist in Irish environmental education. One of her collections of poetry, *Valparaíso* (2012), is partly concerned with her experience as a writer in residence aboard a research vessel, the RV *Celtic Explorer*, run by the Irish Marine Institute with the mission of examining marine life. That an Irish woman writer may have had access to this experience and to the publication of poetry about it is already an aspect of feminist relevance, given the impediments posed to women writers by a long-standing patriarchal bias in the Irish literary field (Ní Dhuibhne 2021). O'Malley's book is of special relevance to the present article because of its parallel inquiry into the ecological predicament of the ocean and the various female figurations fostered by the maritime setting. One central ecocritical question that haunts this collection of poems is that concerning the compatibility, or lack of it, of human aspirations to know the ocean, or to render it in artistic form, with the ocean's welfare. In this respect, O'Malley often makes use of a self-questioning mode that resembles the "interrogative mode" proposed by the ecofeminist critic Lee Quinby: "[...] ecofeminism is most formidable in its opposition to power when it challenges its own assumptions" (1990, 124). Along this

line, the Irish poet not only questions capitalist plundering practices but also the well-intended methods of human scientific and artistic inquiry. The poem "At Jardin des Plantes" (2012, 13-14) is a good example of this introspective approach, as it sets "story" against "mid-ocean" and the alliterative /b/ in "begin" against that in "broken": "The sea begins where the story has broken / and it is richer than heaven / especially in mid-ocean" (ll. 1-3). Similarly, the early male explorers of sea-depths who failed to see the minute ocean creatures unknowingly saved the latter from human depredation:

Inside the diving bell a man
who might have saved or loved them
saw nothing. His blindness became wisdom

and they were left alone for years [...] (ll. 10-13)

However, more perseverant explorers eventually identified these "twilight creatures" and investigated and turned them into exhibits, which leads the poetic persona to wonder about humans' deadly gaze: "[...] what we manage not to notice / until it is presented tagged and dead / a story on a glued vase, in jaggged pieces" (ll. 34-36).

A poem such as "Crew" (2012, 72), however, vindicates the attention that poetry may pay, and has actually paid in epic accounts of the Argonauts' adventures, to ordinary sailors, the present-day equivalent of whom are the blue-collar workers, essential for the research vessel to function, but without any protagonism in the resulting scientific publications: "[...] Science will publish / but the poet put them higher, young, wild / as the fine cliff flowers, the sea-promised" (ll. 6-8).

O'Malley, a woman poet, is here advocating the poet's faculty for acknowledging the manual workers' contribution to the expedition and, although seemingly tongue in cheek, recalls the canon of epic poetry: "It would be spurious to make comparisons / with the Argonauts but [...]" (ll. 1-2). The author is setting poetry against science, "the poet put them higher" (l. 1), while other poems like "Jardin des Plantes" are more critical with both arts and science in their renderings of the material world. However, there is an empowering claim in "Crew" about the poet's responsibility in her choices that is especially fitting for a woman poet writing in a literary tradition which often excluded female writers. Thereby, the interrogation of power structures, even of the relative power that a poet may flaunt, needs to be understood within the patriarchal context in which a woman's claim to power is a daring act of rebellion.

A similar destabilization of patriarchal power is that achieved through the reference to Penelope in O'Malley's "Thalassa" (2012, 73): "The captain is Penelope. Sirens beware" (l. 8). Not unlike the character of Penelope in the aforementioned namesake poem by the Galician writer Xohana Torres, O'Malley intervenes in the classical account of *The Odyssey* to transform the patiently waiting Penelope into a daring seafarer. Another feminist response to maritime epic poetry is that found in O'Malley's "The Lusiads" (2012, 69), in which a shipwrecked Luís de Camoê's is reduced to the humiliating position of a drowning man who begs for the female poetic persona's help: "[...] *Signora, throw me a rope or jump in / but for the love of God stop gaping and do something*" (ll. 7-8).

The presence of the "feminine" in O'Malley's *Valparaíso* is often rendered in subtle, non-obtrusive ways by using the pronoun "she" to refer to the ship and the ocean, as well as by portraying the sea through female-related imagery and by presenting the daily routines on the research vessel in terms of domestic life. However, in a collection that abounds in references to deteriorating ecosystems, there stands out a poem which performs a feminist and ecological

re-reading of the classical myth of Leda and the Swan and of W.B. Yeats's poetic version of this myth ([1923] 1990, 241). Thus, "Whom the Gods Love" (2012, 33) presents, through five three-line stanzas, Leda as a female ecologist who removes the tar from the swan's feathers as a consequence, the reader infers, of an oil spill. With O'Malley's characteristic wit and humour, the poem is not about the classical tale of the rape of Leda by Zeus, but about the all too human female ecologist's efforts to wash "the oil, black on black, off his feathers" (l. 4). This Leda, however, is not a victorious ecofeminist heroine, since the poem maintains, with bitter irony, the abandonment by Zeus of his human prey: "Left, she takes off her gloves. / There is tar on her wrist. It's like that, the end" (ll. 14-15). Rather than the divine semen that will bring about a genealogy of war and destruction, and rather than the knowledge and power that she is expected to have been impregnated with as implied in Yeats's poem, this ecologist Leda is simply marked by the remaining stain of tar.

Whether through their engagement with *The Odyssey*, the myths of the Argonauts, the rape of Leda by Zeus or with *The Lusiads*, the poems by O'Malley analysed here share the determination to re-read the poetic tradition from a standpoint that combines a feminist and ecological commitment. With her characteristic inquisitiveness, O'Malley interrogates the effect of human endeavours, even those of apparently benign sea-life research and poetry, on natural habitats, and if ever tempted to privilege poetry over science, she does so to subvert the patriarchal literary tradition by vindicating her role as a woman and feminist poet. Her noteworthy configuration of Leda as an ecologist who cleans the tar from Zeus's swan feathers does not merely bring the Greek myth to the present but, with its depiction of a recurrent image of pollution in current news reports, also puts forward a critique of the alarming ongoing contamination of aquatic ecosystems.

A remarkable figuration of subaquatic womanhood is featured in Nessa O'Mahony's collection of poems *The Hollow Woman on the Island* (2019). Divided into three parts, the central section of the book includes the poem that gives the title to the collection (31). The trope of the hollow woman has as its source the poet's experience with ovarian cancer, an existential threat that prompts reflections on the common materiality of human and more-than-human nature that recall Astrida Neimanis' elaboration on Stacy Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality (2017, 33, 77). O'Mahony's hollow woman submerges in the sea water and her body, "rounded off / by the water's oscillation" (ll. 12-13), turns into a stone that may eventually be picked up by a beachcomber and taken home as a memento or placed as a grave top. The blending of woman and water, together with the eroding effect of the sea on the human body, render death as a natural process that affects all living creatures. Furthermore, non-organic entities, such as the stone, are also presented as undergoing continuous transformations.

The stone actually becomes the protagonist of the following poem "The Hollow Woman at Bohea" (32), which constitutes an apt post-humanist rendition of nature as an observing participant and agent of knowledge, as opposed to anthropocentric conceptions of "the human being as a distinct, distanced observer of the world" (Karhio 2022, 103). Like Mary O'Malley's imaginative poems of speaking animals – e.g. "Cetorhinus maximus" (2012, 77), "The Rat" (2016, 41) – censuring humans' hubris and interested appropriations, O'Mahony has the stone speak and guide the human, urging the latter to be affected by nature and not, as is most often the case, affecting it: "[The stone] tells you to listen; / the fork in the unmarked road / is the very place / the cuckoo calls" (ll. 8-11). Another concern shared by O'Malley and O'Mahony is that of the hammered rivalry between scientific knowledge and the humanities. O'Mahony's poem "From a Beachcomber's Manual" (2019, 17) adds, after the title, the piece of news that inspired the poem: "On reading that Irish students are asked to abandon arts for 'stem' subjects", STEM being the acronym of Science,

Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. O'Mahony chooses a marine trope to underline the role of language and imagery in our perception of the natural world. Grammar and naming may seem deficient encodings for the multifarious optical effects of nacre but, despite their limitations, they are necessary tools that frame the human definition of the natural world:

Nacre is the noun
for the iridescent inner lining
of bivalves and molluscs;
nacreous, the adjective. (ll. 1-4)

Imagery, however, is the tool employed by dreamers, poets and artists; it may be inexact and misleading, which is the reason why John Locke deprecated its use in his chapter "The Abuse of Words" from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where he maintained that: "[...] all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions" ([1690] 1959, 146). O'Mahony, nevertheless, displays her ironic skills and comments:

Dreamers gave us mother of pearl
and you know what trouble
dreams got us into.
Stick to the facts,
google if unsure. (ll. 12-16)

O'Malley's and O'Mahony's poems are of relevance to the ecocritical and post-humanist debate in that they evince these poets' awareness of the constrictions of language in its rendering of nature, thereby also signalling the limits of a post-humanist and post-anthropocentric approach. However, both writers celebrate the poet's imagination and its capacity to put the human in the place of the Other, rendering the point of view of more-than-human nature. As women poets, they both assume the responsibility of interrogating human overpowering centrality and bring to the fore nature's role as an agent of knowledge.

This analysis of Irish poetry will end with a brief discussion of the poem "Untitled" by Saoi O'Connor included in the anthology *Empty House. Poetry and Prose on the Climate Crisis*, edited by the poets Alice Kinsella and Nessa O'Mahony (2021) and published by Doire Press in collaboration with the grassroots environmental network "Friends of the Earth". In her introduction to the book, Alice Kinsella refers to eco-anxiety about climate change as the main motivation for putting together the texts – prose and poetry – of this collection, which is her modest contribution to environmental activism. Kinsella refers to the first definition of eco-anxiety provided, in 2017, by The American Psychological Association: "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (2021, 17) and argues that fear, however, should not be paralyzing, because: "it's only by acknowledging the very real threats that we have any hope of preventing them" (19). *Empty House* is, therefore, a call to action to take care of our *oikos*, the Greek word for home.

In Saoi O'Connor's "Untitled" (2021, 167-168), the poetic persona must come to terms with the paradox of both loving and fearing the ocean. The speaker recalls that the attachment to this coastal landscape, which goes back to childhood years, "taught me how to love being fluid" (l. 13). The symbiosis of human and more-than-human nature, this "fluid" identity, reminds us that over 50% of the human body is made of water. This proves the common materiality and transcorporeality between human life and the ocean. Fear, however, is caused by the awareness that "we will be the last / when our children are born / these rocks will be underwater" (ll. 33-35). Even if the battle against the rising levels of the sea might be lost – "there is no saving these

rocks / the sea will take them back” (ll. 38-39) – the speaker nevertheless learns a lesson from the ocean, “her unyieldingness” (l. 19), which becomes the inspiration to continue the environmental struggle in spite of the daunting obstacles: “[...] / to march with 10,000 people at your back / the rocks are unconquerable but we are endless / we go on and on and on” (ll. 22-24).

3. Galician Poetry: Transcorporeal Figurations

What kind of environmental approach can Galician poetry have at present and what role can the “feminine” play in it, considering the prominence of the medieval *Cantigas de amigo* (Songs for the beloved) in which a female voice on the seashore yearns for the return of the male seafarer? The figuration of a woman navigator, such as Xohana Torres’ determined and outspoken Penelope, had to wait until the 1990s, a decade with a conspicuous and stimulating incorporation of women writers to the Galician literary field. More-than-human figurations comparable to the navigating Penelope were, at the time, those of whales and other cetaceans (Palacios 2018; Fernández Naval 2023). The literary presence of environmental concerns, which until then had been largely ancillary to other worries, such as the socioeconomic transformation of the territory and its landscape, had its turning point in 2002 and 2003, after the sinking of the Prestige oil tanker off Galician shores with its devastating pollution of the coastline of Portugal, Spain and France, as mentioned above.

Anthologies constitute an apt repository to take the pulse of environmental concerns thanks to their overview of a particular period of time and its related subject matter. In this respect, the anthology *No seu despregar* (Otero, Tembrás 2016a; As they unfurl) brings together a selection of poems by Galician-language writers born between 1985 and 1997. Although many began writing already in their adolescence, most of their literary production became public after the shock of the Prestige crisis in 2002, a traumatic object lesson in environmental education. Since this anthology brings together young writers who are expected to advance new poetic insights, its Introduction cannot bypass the far from easy definition of poetic “novelty” and, to this purpose, quotes César Vallejo’s words on what is wrongly considered as “new poetry”. In fact, Vallejo’s observations are of relevance to other cultural demarcations such as that of “environmental poetry”. Vallejo criticises those understandings of “new poetry” that simply consider the introduction of lexicon about state-of-the art technology and fresh cultural or social formations. Instead, he claims, the focus should be on the way new circumstances and instruments elicit: “novos temperos nerviosos, fondas perspicacias sentimentais, amplificando profecías e comprensións e dosando o amor” (Otero, Tembrás 2016b, 10)³. In a similar fashion, it seems reasonable to claim that environmental poetry is not that which merely contains environmentally-related lexicon, but poetry that gives expression to a new sensibility towards and expands prefigurations of the relation between human and more-than-human nature. Such is also the aim of the collections of ecologically-centred poetry *22 ecopoemas contra o cambio climático* (Concello de Santiago 2023; 22 ecopoems against climate change) and *A Different Eden. Ecopoetry from Ireland and Galicia / Un Edén diferente. Ecopoesía de Irlanda e Galicia* (Payne, Shaughnessy, Veiga 2021b).

Another anthology that collects poetry of the same generation of writers as that in *No seu despregar* is *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* (Nogueira Pereira 2017a), which provides an informative survey of the poetry written by authors born through the 1980s and 1990s, with their first books of poetry published after the Prestige crisis. As millennials, they grew up

³ Trans.: new temperaments, profound emotional insights, thereby expanding prefigurations and understandings, and appraising love.

in a period that witnessed the continuing expansion of gender equality in Galicia, an aspect that, at least in what concerns ecological concerns, has reduced the gender gap in comparison with previous generations. In her introduction, the editor (Nogueira Pereira 2017b) identifies a number of features shared by the poets brought together in this collection, in spite of their heterogeneity. One is the condition of precarity, mainly caused by the financial crisis of 2007 and its long-lasting impact on the job market. As a consequence, many of these young writers have had to leave their community and look for opportunities elsewhere. Their poetry abounds in notions of loss, displacement and estrangement, especially with regard to the landscapes, coastal or rural, of their childhood and adolescence, as showcased by Jesús Castro Yáñez's poem "Baltar, 1:00 AM, Agosto" (Baltar, 1:00 AM, August) where the poetic persona declares "Calamos coma quen camiña / sonámbulo á desaparición dun lugar" (2017a, 212)⁴. The geographical references of these poets, thereby, extend beyond the local and bring together localities that share, rather than a historical connection, a symbolical one of common vulnerability, as in the reference to the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in Samuel Solleiro's "Cabalos Przewalski" (Przewalski Horses): "im-axinaos, galopando no céspede azul eléctrico, bébedos sempre de radioactividade para ti" (162)⁵.

Some of the writers in *13. Antoloxía da poesía galega próxima* have been actively involved in cultural projects around ecological degradation, such as the one caused by mining, monoculture forests and forest fires: *Versus cianuro. Poemas contra a mina de ouro de Corcoesto* (Caldeirón 2013; Versus cyanide. Poems against the Corcoesto gold mine), *Versos no Olimpo. O monte Pindo na poesía galega* (Fernández Naval, Villar 2013; Verse on Mount Olympus. Mount Pindo in Galician poetry). The repertoires of images in *13* render a bleak perception of the environmental present and pending future, as illustrated in the poetry by Oriana Méndez: "[...] como tamén comezou a alterarse a temperatura / mansamente na dirección do xeo" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 112)⁶. Another feature that Nogueira identifies as common to this group of writers is their questioning of the capacity of language to depict reality (2017b, 15), a sign of self-interrogation that was also identified in the Irish writers discussed above. Likewise, there abound in both literary fields sarcastic allusions to the literary tradition and its picturesque rendering of nature, an apt example of which is Samuel Solleiro's "OM": "Os sapos cantan oh estanque dos pexegueiros floridos. / Escribo poesía convencional" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 164)⁷.

Of special relevance for this article is the marine imaginary deployed by the young writers in these anthologies, as in the case of Helena Salgueiro's choice of a wild coastal landscape that her poetic persona refuses to leave: "todo o meu corpo arrecende a sal e a terra mollada [...] / que é o que busco senón / o non marchar, o non fuxir? Eu son de aquí" (Otero, Tembrás 2016a, 79)⁸. Lara Dopazo Ruibal's persona equates boundless spaces with a desperate need for vitality: "tragarei todo un deserto se fai falla / todo o mar / para sentir que estou viva" (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 86)⁹. It should be mentioned that one signal of the reduction in the gender gap of this generation is the male poets' attention to women's sea-related tasks. Thus, Ismael Ramos refers to the domestic task of fish evisceration to convey a disenchanted sense of life: "Túa nai ensinoute a manexar o coitelo. Limpar as tripas do silencio" (184)¹⁰. In consonance with the

⁴ Trans.: We remain silent like someone / sleepwalking towards the disappearance of a place.

⁵ Trans.: imagine them, galloping on the electric blue lawn, always drunk in radioactivity for you.

⁶ Trans.: [...] much like the temperature has also begun to change / gently towards the ice.

⁷ Trans.: Toads sing oh pond of the blooming peach trees. / I write conventional poetry.

⁸ Trans.: my whole body smells of salt and wet earth [...] / what is my pursuit but / not to leave, not to flee? I am from here.

⁹ Trans.: I will swallow the whole desert if necessary / the whole sea / so as to feel alive.

¹⁰ Trans.: Your mother taught you how to handle the knife. To remove the innards of silence.

above, shipwreck and drowning are frequent tropes among both male and female poets. Noelia Gómez provides a good illustration of transcorporeality that reveals the common destiny of human and more-than-human animals: “No fondo hai cristais / imaxes do naufraxio / pegadas dunhas mans de muller. / O corpo dun paxaro” (Otero, Tembrás 2016a, 117)¹¹.

Galicia suffered recently from the widespread pollution of its Atlantic waters due to a shipment of plastic nurdles that fell out of the charter vessel Toconao in early December 2023. Will the recurrent accidents of plastic pollution of the sea mobilize artists and writers, as well as environmentalists and society at large, the way the Prestige oil spill did in 2002 and 2003? Marine plastic pollution is not a new phenomenon and Galician poetry has already denounced it in explicit verse, as in Daniel Asorey’s collection *Transmatria*: “O mar é de plástico, / as xardas saboroso poliuretano, / propilenos as maragotas, / polímeros felices as bocas dos golfinhos” (2019, 19)¹².

Regarding marine female tropes with an environmental scope, Galician poetry may not display at present one distinct and influential figuration like that of the whale in the late 1980s and 1990s, as was the case in Luisa Castro’s collection *Baleas e baleas* (1988), and in Ana Roman’s *Arden* (1998) and in her later collection *Estremas* (2010). The trope of the whale in this poetry had an important anthropocentric focus in its expression of women’s self-affirmation. In her inaugural speech on joining the Galician Royal Academy for instance, Xohana Torres claimed that “[u]nha muller pode converterse en balea polo simple feito de querer cambiar de forma” (2001, 24)¹³. These writers’ figurations of the whale, however, also posed important questions about the porous liminality between human and nonhuman mammals, between women and animality, and also introduced, to varying degree, concerns of ecocritical value as they pondered the evolution of the species.

Nevertheless, it is not rare to find now a recurrent presence of transcorporeal bodies that conflate woman and fish, often in the context of a human romantic relationship either, to celebrate its joys or to lament its agonies. Although this figuration might risk being tagged as an anthropocentric appropriation of sea-life for the expression of human emotions, it nonetheless gives expression to an ecocritical awareness of the intimate bonds between human and more-than-human nature, as well as to the revaluation of the often-denigrated association – also among some feminist scholars – of woman and animal (Puleo 2017, 10). Lara Dopazo Ruibal’s imaginary around the “illa peixe”¹⁴ shows the strong attraction of the female speaker to the fish that awaits her daily: “na beira da auga agarda por min / – como cada día – / o gran peixe” (Nogueira Pereira 2017a, 88)¹⁵. Similarly, the poet renders the intense emotional struggle of writing through the comparison of human skin with fish scales: “a pel queimada que / escama coma un peixe” (94)¹⁶. The woman’s scaled skin also appears in a poem by Andrea Nunes Brións in a context of bitter disappointment with love: “e cáenme as escamas do meu peito / polas veces en que escollín sentar na lareira dos teus ollos / (agora vermellos, coléricos) (60)¹⁷. Less striking is the poet’s association of sexual desire with the sea tides: “e reprímome ó dicir que devezó

¹¹ Trans.: At the sea bottom there are glass pieces / images of the shipwreck / prints of female hands. / A bird’s body.

¹² Trans.: the sea is plastic, / sarda fish tasty polyurethane, / wrasses propylene / joyful polymer the mouths of dolphins. I would like to thank María Xesús Nogueira Pereira for drawing my attention to this poem.

¹³ Trans.: a woman can turn into a whale for the mere sake of wanting to change her shape.

¹⁴ Trans.: fish island.

¹⁵ Trans.: on the water’s edge is waiting for me / – like any other day – / the big fish.

¹⁶ Trans.: the burnt skin that / gets scaled like a fish.

¹⁷ Trans.: and the scales fall from my bosom / for the times I chose to sit by the hearth of your eyes / (now red, choleric).

/ por abrimme en mil mareas” (66)¹⁸. Sexuality is similarly rendered in sea-life terms by Alicia Fernández: “e dou coa forma de orixinar pérolas / soamente ao humedecer no teu colo” (44)¹⁹.

One additional anthology with a broad repertoire of exclusively women-authored poems on Galicia’s coastal landscape is that coordinated by Alexandre Nerium, the pen-name of Francisco Manuel López Martínez, a poet and sailor who currently works as a guide at the Fishing Museum in the Galician coastal town of Finisterre. The selection of women poets, most of them Galician but also of other nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, is justified by Nerium when he states that *Aquén do mar. Cantos de serea na luz da fin da terra* (2023) aims to pay homage to women – both female writers and women working for the local fisheries – whose labour has often been silenced (7)²⁰. A recurrent female figuration in the collection, as the title makes explicit, is that of the siren/mermaid, which constitutes an inspiring blending of the human and more-than-human animal and would require an independent study of its own given the prominence of this trope in Galician, but even more so in Irish folk-inspired literature.²¹

The poetry in *Aquén do mar* does not evince a distinct concern with the present-day vulnerable state of the Atlantic Ocean, and mainly focuses on the historical, social, cultural and emotional dimension of the celebrated lighthouse at Finisterre. Nevertheless, the ecological interest of this poetry arises from its rendering of the multifarious engagements of human pursuit in the sea. Nerium himself refers to ancient practices in which women, by shouting from the rocks, guided the fishermen through the fog, and adds information about his own mother’s work as a woman involved in the fisheries: “Miña nai saía cada mañá, descalza, á cabeza un paxe cheo de maragotas, pintos ou fanecas, e tiña que andar polas aldeas 20 ou 30 quilómetros para vender o peixe e logo regresaba pola noite con patacas e o necesario” (qtd. in Veiga 2023, 203)²². In her afterword to the collection “Espellos de luz” (Mirrors of Light), the poet Eva Veiga refers to a twofold significance of the ocean that includes the eternal feminine: “Augas oceánicas que nos remiten ao indeterminado, á disolución, á nada substantial, mais tamén á súa condición proteica e de seo adventicio, maternal” (204-205)²³. Veiga singles out the attention that these poems pay to the female body, a characteristic feature of women-authored writing, which searches for a reappropriation of the body to free it from patriarchal constraints (206). Situated on the Costa da Morte (Coast of Death) with its countless shipwrecks, Finisterre is the dwelling of both the living and the dead, thereby highlighting human and more-than-human common materiality as well as the natural cycles of transformation. Its peripheral location fosters alternative thought to dominant models, Veiga claims, and challenges the globalizing homogenization of the subject (207).

¹⁸ Trans.: and I repress myself on saying I yearn / to unfurl into a thousand tides.

¹⁹ Trans.: and I find the way to form pearls / on just getting wet in your arms.

²⁰ Trans.: This side of the sea. Sirens’ songs in the light of the earth’s end.

²¹ Although the sirens in *The Odyssey* were winged monster women, later traditional figurations have imagined the siren as a hybrid woman-fish creature. *Aquén do mar* may be pointing to both renderings through the respective illustrations of woman-bird by Isabel Pintado (Nerium 2023, 79) and woman-fish by Luisa Valdés (117).

²² Trans.: my mother left every morning, barefoot, with a basket full of either wrasses or pouting, and had to walk from one village to another, twenty or thirty kilometres, to sell the fish, and then returned at night with potatoes and other necessary things.

²³ Trans.: Oceanic waters that invoke indeterminacy, dissolution, a substantial void, but also their protean condition, the adventitious, maternal bosom.

4. Conclusion

Ireland and the autonomous community of Galicia in northwestern Spain have comparable environmental and cultural features. A significant factor, from the geographical point of view, is their situation on the Atlantic coast of western Europe, which has of late been facing all kinds of environmental challenges such as plastic pollution and oil spilling. From the sociocultural point of view, there stands out the upsurge of women writers due to the impact of, among other societal circumstances, the feminist mobilizations of the 1970s. The parallel rise of women writers and ecological awareness in the late twentieth century in both communities raises questions about the possibility of conceiving new literary configurations of the ocean that may be conditioned by considerations of gender. This article began by posing a number of specific questions regarding recent figurations of the ocean with an ecofeminist import, and the subsequent discussion of a selection of poems by Irish and Galician writers from the last two decades has engaged with those questions.

Among the new figurations that render the current ecological vulnerability of the earth's waters, that of Leda-turned-ecological-activist, proposed by Mary O'Malley, brings together the attention to female agency and environmental concern. On the other hand, woman-fish identifications, common in today's Galician poetry, put the focus on transcorporeality and the common materiality and destiny of human and more-than-human nature. Thus, the perceived vulnerability of woman and nature, that was identified as the cornerstone of ecofeminism in the 1990s, continues to be an essential force in contemporary women-authored poetry in Ireland and Galicia. On the other hand, dystopia is not a futuristic literary mode but a pressing one ushered in by plastic pollution and rising sea levels, as both Irish and Galician poetry expose. As for the impact of this poetry on the empirical conditions of existence of human and more-than-human nature, the collaboration of writers in both communities with grassroots ecological movements in festivals, publications, and public interventions highlights the need to join forces to effect any kind of possible change.

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