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Relational Difference in Sinéad Morrissey's Poetry: An Ecocritical Approach¹

Abstract: The poet from Northern Ireland Sinéad Morrissey has among her concerns that about our conflicting relationship with nature – be it the human body, the environment or the animal world. This paper aims to analyse Morrissey's ecopoetics: her denunciation of environmental degradation, the rendering of nature as a speaking subject and the exploration of relational difference to construe nature as a necessary Other.

Keywords: Sinéad Morrissey, ecocriticism, poetry, otherness, Ireland.

Résumé: La poétesse d'Irlande du Nord Sinéad Morrissey a parmi ses préoccupations celle de notre relation conflictuelle avec la nature – que ce soit le corps humain, l'environnement ou le monde animal. Cet article vise à analyser l'écopoétique de Morrissey: sa dénonciation de la dégradation de l'environnement, le rendu de la nature en tant que sujet parlant et l'exploration de la différence relationnelle pour concevoir la nature comme un Autre nécessaire.

Mots clés: Sinéad Morrissey, écocritique, poésie, alterité, Irlande.

Sinéad Morrissey, a poet from Northern Ireland (Portadown, 1972), is not usually labelled as a nature poet, although ecology features as a conspicuous concern in her poetry. Author of six poetry collections to date – *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), *Between Here and There* (2002), *The State of the Prisons* (2005), *Through the Square Window* (2009), *Parallax* (2013) and *On Balance* (2017), all of them published by Carcanet in Manchester (UK) –, her books have been praised for their formal and conceptual achievement, as well as for the rigour of their political, historical, ecological, intellectual and personal inquiries². In an interview with Declan Meade in 2002 after the publication of her second collection, Morrissey commented, for instance, on her heartache on seeing the fields disappear in Japan – the country where she lived for two years – and her distress at the contradiction between the Japanese veneration for the cherry blossom and the escalating environmental degradation: "I thought I could see the mountain becoming smaller and

1. This article is part of the research projects "Eco-fictions" and "The Animal Trope" (MCIU, AEI, ERDF, EU: FEM2015-66937-P and PGC2018-093545-B-I00) as well as the competitive reference group and network EDC431C 2019/01 and ED431D 2017/17, funded by Xunta de Galicia.

2. Such are the accomplishments highlighted on the back cover of Sinéad Morrissey's poetry collection *On Balance*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2017.

smaller”³. Both as a public figure and as a writer, Morrissey struggles to enhance environmental consciousness.

In this article, I intend to identify and analyse the main ecological concerns in Morrissey’s poetry not only because of their important role in her poetic project, but also because of their relevance to understand and engage with environmental degradation, one of the most formidable challenges we are facing today. For my analysis, I will turn to ecocriticism and ecofeminism, two relatively recent critical approaches with an auspicious application to the analysis of Irish literature due to the preponderant display of natural motifs in its various genres and texts. Although ecofeminism as a social movement can be traced back to the 1970s and ecocriticism began to yield important results in mostly US literary criticism in the 1990s, the application of ecocritical concepts to Irish literature is only recent and deserves a thorough and comprehensive examination. I will make a selection of the most pertinent proposals in Morrissey’s poetry concerning the tensions in the relationship between humans and nature – nature understood here as an interconnected web that comprises environment, animals and human body –, between their kinship and separateness, by focusing on the notion of relational difference and on concomitant concepts of otherness, vulnerability, interdependence and the interrogation of anthropocentrism. For the discussion of the former concepts, I am indebted to a number of foundational debates in this field, such as Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenological analysis of the human-animal continuum⁴, Patrick D. Murphy’s ecocritical approach to the notion of relational difference⁵, Julia Kristeva’s inquiry into external and internal alterity⁶, Judith Butler’s questioning of the sovereign subject and her appeal for vulnerability as an ethical force⁷, and Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman feminism and de-centring of the human subject⁸.

Ecocriticism has gone through a number of stages in its development that have resulted from its more or less theoretical or activist orientations. Debates on the tensions between nature on the one hand and, on the other, culture, science, human perception and subjectivity, gender, race, class, and other identity factors have often turned around notions of sameness and difference regarding the relationship between nature and humankind. However, a number of environmental philosophers have urged us to overcome dualistic thinking and have proposed the idea of an expanded relational self⁹. Among these thinkers, Freya Mathews has

3. “Sinéad Morrissey: Interview with Declan Meade. Part One: Becoming a Poet”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, first published in *The Stingling Fly*, vol. 14, no. 1, Winter 2002-2003.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La nature* [1968], Dominique Ségald (ed.), Paris, Seuil, 1995.

5. Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995.

6. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991.

7. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2005.

8. Rosi Braidotti, “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism”, in *Anthropocene Feminism*, Richard Grusin (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 21-48.

9. Margarita Estévez-Saá and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia have provided an enlightening survey of these various positions in “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Eco-Caring: Contemporary Debates on EcoFeminism(s)”, *Women’s Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2018, p. 123-146.

also warned against understanding otherness as exclusion and conceiving kinship as sameness or assimilation. She has also denounced the utilitarian conception that nature is there to be mastered and exploited, and the hierarchical relation that puts humankind in a dominant position over nature. Furthermore, Mathews draws attention to the phenomenon of “backgrounding”, which I find especially illuminating for literary analysis, by which nature is merely part of a background, a setting or location in an ancillary function to human action and protagonism¹⁰.

The human-animal expanded relational self

For my analysis of those poems by Morrissey that explore bonds of continuity and empathy between humans and animals, I will turn to her first poetry collection *There Was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), a book of contrasts between home and abroad, childhood and adulthood, godlessness and spirituality. Through this collection, written before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, resounds a plea for reconciliation. The poem “Monteverdi Vespers” aptly compares human singing voices with the cry of seagulls, though their respective realms are divided by a wall. There is a clear pattern of opposites: inside-outside, human-animal, earthly-spiritual city, but the poem ends with the accommodation of the Other in the self: “The cry of gulls accompanies you with knowledge”¹¹. The poem consists of three quatrains with end-of-line sound patterns that come close to rhyme, all of which reinforces the formal equilibrium and produces a kind of musicality that suits the context of Monteverdi’s music: “wall / stalled”, “outside / cry”, “how / cower”, “worm / stern”, “wreckage / damage / knowledge”. However, most of these end-of-line words actually refer to the gulls’ actions, thereby making the birds the true protagonists of the poem and the agents of transformation in the poetic persona’s frame of mind. The lyric subject is attentive and receptive to the animals’ message, which is conveyed through their body language: “cower / Nowhere, fought shell to be here, stern”¹². Morrissey rarely holds a serene or pastoral view of nature and, in poems such as this one, she acknowledges the animals’ fierce struggle for survival: “I know the knacks of gulls: after the rain how / They stamp the lawns to fool the worms”¹³. The disruptive presence of the animals is paralleled in the fragmentation of the lines, with their numerous caesurae, and line breaks that underscore division and destruction: “wall”, “Outside”, “wreckage”, “damage”.

The poem “Monteverdi Vespers” discerningly illustrates one of the most challenging aspects in ecocriticism to date: the problematic tension between

10. Freya Mathews, “The Dilemma of Dualism”, in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, Sheryllyn MacGregor (ed.), London, Routledge, 2017, p. 54-70.

11. Sinéad Morrissey, “Monteverdi Vespers”, in *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1996, p. 57.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

difference and sameness, the recognition of the animals' alterity on the one hand and the acknowledgement of a continuum between the human and the non-human animal on the other. In her discussion of Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology, Louise Westling has drawn attention to his emphasis on the embodied nature of perception and experience and on the concurrent kinship and separateness of humans and animals. Westling points out Merleau-Ponty's endorsement of a common evolutionary history for humans and animals without erasing the distinctions between the two¹⁴. I find Westling's reading of Merleau-Ponty's theses especially relevant to Morrissey's "Monteverdi Vespers", because the poet highlights the lyric subject's simultaneous sensorial perception of both human voices and animal cries: "The voices sing to me [...]. I hear them cry"¹⁵, and concludes the poem by referring to knowledge that derives from attentive listening to the birds: "The cry of gulls accompanies you with knowledge"¹⁶. Morrissey also identifies the embodied logos of animals and understands the gulls' needs, fears and determination through their body language: "I know they fly to chimneys to be warm"¹⁷. Although it is difficult to ascertain the precise content of the final epiphany, the allusion to Jerusalem – most likely from the psalm *Lauda Jerusalem* in Monteverdi's 1610 *Vespers* – suggests a common destiny to humans and animals in a hostile environment: "*Jerusalem, / The voices sing. City compacted in faith and damage*"¹⁸. The earthly city – although there is no explicit reference to Belfast, the phrase "City compacted in faith and damage" sounds like a suitable description – shares the predicament of the spiritual city, while humans and animals share experiences and knowledge.

Another poem of interest for the analysis of the human-animal expanded relational self in *There Was Fire in Vancouver* is "Restoration", which closes the book and consists of two sections with a six-year time gap, "Achill, 1985" and "Juist, 1991". Both parts are set on islands – an Irish and a German one respectively – and the temporal and spatial divide between these sections evince a substantial change in the poetic persona's outlook on life. The first part, "Achill, 1985", is a compact stanza of twelve lines of irregular length and no rhyming pattern which tells us of the poetic persona's memory of an encounter with a beached dolphin that was rotting on the shore. This experience reminds us of other contemporary Irish poems about stranded cetaceans, such as "Baleen" by Doireann Ní Ghríofa and "Beached Whale" by Victoria Kennefick¹⁹. The lyric subject feels a special attraction

14. Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals and Language*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2014, p. 41-43.

15. Sinéad Morrissey, "Monteverdi Vespers", p. 57.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, "Baleen", *The Level Crossing*, no. 1, 2016, p. 33; Victoria Kennefick, "Beached Whale", in *White Whale*, Cork, Southword Editions, 2015, p. 17. For an in-depth analysis of the motif and trope of the whale in contemporary Irish poetry, see Manuela Palacios, "Inside the Whale: Configurations of An-other Female Subjectivity", *Women's Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2018, p. 160-172.

towards the dolphin's decomposing body: "I remember how its body / Opened in the sun, / Caught me"²⁰. I would like to suggest that this compelling two-syllable expression "caught me" – the shortest line in the poem –, rather than merely imply "caught my attention" actually suggests the metaphorical *incorporation* of the observer's human body into the open animal body. In a poem where the dolphin's body is rendered in passive verb forms – "washed up", "abandoned", "opened" – and as the object of other agents' actions – the wind rips it, the gull and the poetic persona watch it, the latter remembers it – the active verb form "caught me" is the dolphin's only action, which, albeit symbolical, becomes all the more striking. In her analysis of this poem, Katarzyna Poloczec has commented on its elegiac tone, reinforced by the use of passive verbs, and by its iambic rhythm evocative of a heartbeat. Poloczec relates the motif of the rotting dolphin to common cultural processes of animal erasure that empty animals of life and meaning. However, she pinpoints in this poem a double strategy of denunciation of the assault on life-giving nature – reminding us of the Greek origin of the word dolphin, *delphys*, "the womb" – and, concurrently, identifies the observer's compassion and act of keeping, of witnessing and keeping company with the dead²¹.

We see that Morrissey shares Ní Ghríofa's and Kennefick's expression of female attraction to, – whether of the female authors or of the more or less explicit female personae in their poems²² – and empathy for, the decaying cetacean. "Achill, 1985" weaves a bond of human-animal vulnerability and explores the possibility of physical contiguity of human and animal bodies. However, contrary to Ní Ghríofa's configuration of the stranded whale's hospitable belly where "dozens of ladies [...] stood together"²³, the stinking, washed up dolphin of Morrissey's poem primarily conveys a nihilistic desire for personal dissolution in the pitiless course of nature: "And I remember how the sea / Looked wide and emptied of love"²⁴. The stinking corpse of the dolphin may be interpreted as a kind of message conveyed through body language, which the poetic persona registers attentively. This odour of decay brings about an epiphany about the merciless conditions of existence.

Contrarily, "Juist, 1991", the second part of "Restoration", presents a landscape that is infused with God's presence and words, although here, God is a figurative simile – "It is as though God said" – and nature is the true and insistent source of wonder: "*Meeresleuchten*, lights of the sea // One touch and the water explodes /

20. Sinéad Morrissey, "Restoration", in *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, p. 59.

21. Katarzyna Poloczec, "Their disembodied voices cry': Marine Animals and their Songs of Absence in the Poetry of Sinéad Morrissey, Caitriona O'Reilly, and Mary O'Donoghue", in *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture*, Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Borbála Faragó (eds.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 78-79.

22. Although Sinéad Morrissey clearly said, in her interview with Declan Meade in 2002, that she does not like "the straight confessional", she admitted in the same interview that her first book *There Was Fire in Vancouver* is mainly concerned with her personal experience ("Sinéad Morrissey: Interview with Declan Meade...").

23. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, "Baleen".

24. Sinéad Morrissey, "Restoration", p. 59.

in phosphorescence”²⁵. The poem refers to the phenomenon of bioluminescence of organisms in surface layers of the sea and, although this light is presented as having no origin and no purpose, there is expressed an overt desire to infuse the world with this light that traverses and erases physical and poetic line boundaries: “Let there be light in this world / Of nothing let it come from / Nothing let it speak nothing / Let it go everywhere”²⁶. The biblical overtone and the God-like simile point towards the poetic persona’s psychical and spiritual transformation from a position of hopelessness and extinction in part one of “Restoration”, to one of beatitude and expansion in part two. Both stances deeply intertwine the mind and the bodily senses, as well as human and non-human nature, thereby interrogating dualistic thinking and emphasizing the possibility of an expanded relational self. From the witnessing, remembering *I* of “Achill, 1985”, the poem “Restoration” leads us on to a second *I*-less section, “Juist, 1995”, in which the real protagonist is the light. Although Morrissey pays no attention to the organisms that produce the light, it is the sea phosphorescence that fills the poetic voice with wonder. We perceive in the poem a postanthropocentric, or even posthuman, progression that, as in Rosi Braidotti’s proposal in “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism”, celebrates *Zoe* and de-centres the human subject: “The decentering of *Anthropos* challenges also the separation of *bios*, as exclusively human life, from *zoe*, the life of animals and nonhuman entities. What comes to the fore instead is a human-nonhuman continuum”²⁷.

Nature as a speaking subject

The next poem under analysis, “Pilots”, portrays endangered nature and adumbrates a necessary rectification in human interaction with the natural world. This poem belongs to Morrissey’s third collection *The State of the Prisons* (2005), which is largely concerned with historical change and intercultural negotiations, as well as with the care, discipline and punishment of the human body. Catherine Conan, in her analysis of persisting ideological schemes of the Troubles in Sinéad Morrissey’s and Ciaran Carson’s poetry, has identified in their writing the following themes and motifs, many of which deal with notions of alterity of ecocritical relevance: division and fragmentation of the territory, strangeness of home and family, exile, tension between here and elsewhere, silence, and violence against the body²⁸. Indeed, *The State of the Prisons* pays attention to human nature as it manifests itself in the human body in poems such as “The Yellow Emperor’s Classic”, “The Second Lesson

25. Sinéad Morrissey, “Restoration”, p. 59.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

27. Rosi Braidotti, “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism”, p. 26.

28. Catherine Conan, “Quelle poésie de la sortie de guerre en Irlande du Nord? L’exemple de *Breaking News* de Ciaran Carson (2003) et *The State of the Prisons* (2005) de Sinéad Morrissey”, *Études irlandaises*, no. 34-1, 2009, p. 4.

of Anatomists” and “Migraine”. Additionally, this collection explores other types of relationships between humans and non-human nature, as in the case of “Pilots”, a poem about the arrival of a group of whales into Belfast Lough, their endangerment, the spectacularization of their behaviour and, of particular relevance to this article, about human failure to understand the message the animals are attempting to convey. Conan has commented on Morrissey’s frequent use of regular stanzas with clear structures and grammatical clarity²⁹, and such is the case in “Pilots” too, where formally harmonious six-line stanzas share an additional line with the following stanza, thus adding to the narrative continuity of the poem. However, this apparent formal equilibrium clearly contrasts with the unsettling theme, setting and plot of the poem. The spatial setting of “Pilots” is described in terms of dystopia and pollution: “It was black as the slick-stunned coast of Kuwait / over Belfast Lough”³⁰. Fifty pilot whales – identified in the poem as cetaceans of the species *Globicephala melaena* – have strayed into the Lough, an intertidal sea inlet by the city and port of Belfast. Various narratives are produced to try to explain this unexpected arrival of the animals or to relate it to previous encounters with whales – among them, the economic exploitation of whale products: “as though a hill had opened onto fairytale measures / of blubber and baleen, and this was the money – / god’s recompense”³¹. The admission of failure to understand why Newfoundland whales are so far from their habitat – “Nothing would fit”³² – combines with the critique of the spectacularization of the whales: “Children sighed when they dived, then clapped as they rose / again, Christ-like and shining, from the sea, though they could have been / dying out there”³³. Morrissey usually ends the stanzas of this poem with half-lines of high conceptual and emotional value: “on their globular foreheads”, “god’s recompense”, “with all the foresight we lack”, “dying out there”. These phrases convey several of the most important ideas in the poem: the animal body’s vulnerability, the allegedly divinely-condoned economic exploitation that has led to the extinction of some species, and humans’ inability to grasp the dimension of the environmental problem. In her analysis of this poem, Katarzyna Poloczek compares the sacrificial image of the “Christ-like” whale with the albatross in Samuel Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, the killing of which is a reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ. Poloczek warns of the risk of mythical narratives like this one that make of the real animal and its circumstances an “absent referent”³⁴.

In sum, the poem “Pilots” denounces the degradation of the environment, the endangered situation of cetaceans, human rapacious exploitation of this species, the radical otherness of animals whose behaviour leaves humans in puzzlement,

29. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

30. Sinéad Morrissey, “Pilots”, in *The State of the Prisons*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2005, p. 14.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

34. Katarzyna Poloczek, ““Their disembodied voices cry’...”, p. 81.

and the spectacularization of animal life regardless of its needs and rights. The human-animal relationship that is staged in this poem is one of human insensitive greed and animal vulnerability. However, Morrissey also invests the whales with the capacity to convey a message that could help to save the planet, and makes humans responsible for their lack of discernment: “some dismal chorus of want and wistfulness/resounding around the planet, alarmed and prophetic,/with all the foresight we lack”³⁵. The alliteration and assonance in “resounding around” reinforce the idea of humankind’s responsibility and their heedlessness. Ecocriticism can assist us in the analysis of this instance of human inattention considering, in particular, its proposition that we conceive nature as a speaking subject whose message humans should take heed of. In his book *Literature, Nature, and Other* (1995), the ecocritic Patrick D. Murphy advocates literature that renders nature as a speaking subject, even if nature does not use our sign system or has conscious volition (just like the human unconscious, Murphy notes³⁶). Murphy also makes the distinction between speaking for nature and “render[ing] the signification presented us by other elements of nature”, since he is highly critical of writers’ use of “nature as an object for the self-constitution of the poet”³⁷, as in some romantic nature writing. Murphy clarifies this dilemma with an example that is relevant to Morrissey’s poem:

When our system of overcultivation poisons ground water is this a sign that we can read, and by integrating this sign into our texts, are we letting that land speak through us or are we only speaking for it³⁸?

The critic’s answer is that we may find two simultaneous voices in the literary text: “The nonhuman speaking subject and the rendering human author”³⁹.

I would like to contend that Morrissey’s “Pilots” endorses Murphy’s double-voiced approach by making use of, on the one hand, a collective, human “we” – that includes the insightful poetic persona and the baffled spectators – and, on the other, an implicitly speaking “they”: the “alarmed and prophetic” “chorus” of the whales and the sign of their anomalous arrival. We may say that we find here the non-human speaking subject and the rendering poetic persona, as the latter is letting the whales speak through her. However, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has warned, speaking does not entail being heard: “So, ‘the subaltern cannot speak,’ means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act”⁴⁰. Such is

35. Sinéad Morrissey, “Pilots”, p. 14.

36. Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other...*, p. 9, 11.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Donna Landry, Gerald MacLean, “Subaltern Talk. Interview with the Editors”, in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Donna Landry, Gerald MacLean (eds.), New York – London, Routledge, 1996, p. 292. Although Spivak refers here to women as the subaltern, the correlation between women and non-human nature has long been argued by ecofeminism in

the case in the poem itself, where there is an explicit comment on humans' failure to listen due to their inappropriate attitude and location: "Though not one of us / heard it from where we stood on the beaches and car-parks / and cycle-tracks skirting the water"⁴¹. As readers, we are also implicitly interpellated, and it is our responsibility to decide whether we will listen and respond adequately. The challenge of an equitable dialogue between humans and nature requires both that human beings recognize non-human nature as a speaking subject and that they foster a disposition to listen.

The body's relational difference: vulnerability and empowerment

This article has, up to here, been concerned mainly with animal bodies: their vulnerability – the rotting dolphin in "Achill, 1985", the strayed whales in "Pilots" –, their struggle for survival – the gulls' strategies to get food and keep warm in "Monteverdi Vespers" –, the messages that animals convey to humans through their behaviour and body language – the epiphanies at the end of "Monteverdi Vespers" and "Achill, 1985", the failed reception of the message in "Pilots" – and the interaction of human with animal bodies – the human singing voices and gulls' cries in "Monteverdi Vespers", the human observer "caught" by the opened, decomposing body of the dolphin in "Achill, 1985". "Juist, 1991" seems to be concerned with a different manifestation of a body in that the focus of the poem is not the sea organism itself – bacteria, crustaceans, jellyfish, etc. – but the phosphorescence it produces. The aspects just mentioned – vulnerability, struggle for survival, communicative power and human-animal interaction through their bodies – hardly apply to this poem which, on account of its *I*-lessness, looks rather like a suggestive illustration of the postanthropocentric and posthuman stance defended, among others, by Rosi Braidotti⁴².

I would like to turn now to the human body, a shift that can be justified by the way philosophical, religious and scientific discourses have construed it as the animal, abject and natural component of our identity, an Other that must be, if not possibly transcended, at least controlled and opposed to the rational, cultural and spiritual yearnings of the mind⁴³. Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology also helps us in the transition from the animal to the human body and in our questioning of the mind-body dualism when he highlights the shared evolutionary history of

its analysis of the interconnection of forms of oppression, as Ynestra King has done in "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature / Culture Dualism", in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Irene Diamond, Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds.), San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1990, p. 106-121.

41. Sinéad Morrissey, "Pilots", p. 15.

42. Rosi Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism".

43. Lynda Birke, *Feminism, Animals and Science: The Naming of the Shrew*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994, p. 5; Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

humans and animals, as well as the way our bodies determine what we perceive to the extent of considering language as an extension of embodied activities⁴⁴. The body is therefore crucial to understand our relationship with alterity, not just with an external Other like the animal, but also with the Other inside us. This is why Grzegorz Czemiel, in his analysis of Sinéad Morrissey's post-mortem poems, includes the human body, alongside the category of the foreigner, in his study of alterity following Julia Kristeva's and Paul Ricœur's theories⁴⁵.

Sinéad Morrissey's poem "The Yellow Emperor's Classic", from *The State of the Prisons*, is a poem inspired by the homonymous treatise of traditional Chinese medicine that "enquires about the nature of health, disease, and treatment"⁴⁶. Besides its focus on the human body, the poem is of interest to ecocriticism for its emphasis on the interdependence of the various parts of a complex body system and the necessary balance of opposites. In its plea for an active sexual life between men and women, the poem admonishes that repressing sexual activity would be: "Like trying to survive / without our opposite / inside us / when opposites equal life"⁴⁷. As usual, Morrissey deftly uses lineation for emphasis both by means of expressive line-breaks and by playing with line-length. Furthermore, the repetition of "opposite" stresses the idea that the Other is not just of vital importance for our wellbeing but must also be *incorporated* and recognised as a constitutive part of our selves. This inclusive logic recalls Julia Kristeva's reflection on the frequent occurrence of foreignness among the very founders of nations, which leads her to affirm "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us"⁴⁸ and to suggest that the external Other helps us to reconcile ourselves with the alterity within us. This consideration of the constitutive and relational role of the Other is also of relevance to ecocriticism and, in particular, to Patrick D. Murphy's notion of "otherness":

What if instead of alienation we posited *relation* as the primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity and other specificities? What if we worked from a concept of relational difference and *otherness* rather than Otherness⁴⁹?

Apart from its plea for the inclusion of the Other, the poem "The Yellow Emperor's Classic" exhibits a candid representation of the body, its functions and fluids: "We muster control / of our orifices"⁵⁰, "There is a highway / of sexual

44. Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World*..., p. 4-7.

45. Grzegorz Czemiel, "'When China meets China': Sinéad Morrissey's Figurations of the Orient, or the Function of Alterity in Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricœur", *Text Matters*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2014, p. 117-131.

46. James Curran, "Medical Classics: *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 336, no. 7647, 2008, p. 777.

47. Sinéad Morrissey, "The Yellow Emperor's Classic", in *The State of the Prisons*, p. 47.

48. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 1.

49. Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other*..., p. 34-35.

50. Sinéad Morrissey, "The Yellow Emperor's Classic", p. 46.

awakening, / a road rather than a river / in spite of water"⁵¹, "slashes with his sword the blood – / silk ribbon and cries 'Open!'"⁵². This forthright account of bodily functions – the poem is after all inspired by a medical treatise – actually contradicts Western constructions of the body as abject and may have been the reason for Morrissey's good-humoured take on this topic – laughter is a way of placing and displacing abjection, Kristeva says⁵³.

Ecocriticism considers the body to be a locus of knowledge and condemns those discourses that have presented the body as inferior to the mind and an obstacle to the progress of culture⁵⁴. The human body is a liminal space where culture and nature meet and, concomitantly, an arena where contradictory discourses about them struggle. The body, therefore, is a privileged site to identify social constructions of what is human, what is natural and what is cultural, that is, for a critique of the duality culture-nature. Morrissey's poem "The Yellow Emperor's Classic" depicts a body that is honoured and not debased, a body that can be the source of pleasure and must be taken care after. A reservation, however, that modern ecocriticism could have with respect to the treatise of traditional Chinese medicine as rendered by the poet is its representation of hierarchical rather than heterarchical relations within the body: "The heart is its Emperor. / All other organs are the Emperor's courtiers"⁵⁵. "Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy", claims the ecofeminist Ynestra King⁵⁶. Heterarchy acts in fact as a synonym of interdependence. The apparent contradiction between empowerment and vulnerability undergoes an interesting revision in Morrissey's poem, as the body is empowered not, I would say, because it is an imperial system but as a result of the thorough and positive attention it receives. Concurrently, its vulnerability and need for care is made evident by the medical nature of the inspiring treatise.

Health and the ethics of care question the dualism empowerment-vulnerability also in Sinéad Morrissey's poem "Display" from the collection *Parallax* (2013). The book begins with a definition of the word parallax, which refers to the apparent displacement of an object caused by the observer's change of position. It is, therefore, a collection of poems fascinated with the role of perspective and representation. "Display" refers to the gathering of fifteen thousand women who performed a public display of gymnastics in Hyde Park in 1936, an event organized by the Women's League of Health and Beauty (1930-1939). The poem begins with the

51. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, p. 15.

54. Greta Gaard, Patrick D. Murphy, "Introduction", in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, Greta Gaard, Patrick D. Murphy (eds.), Urbana – Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1998, p. 9.

55. Sinéad Morrissey, "The Yellow Emperor's Classic", p. 46. Grzegorz Czemiel refers to these images as "feudal body politics" ("When China meets China'...", p. 130).

56. Ynestra King, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology", in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, Judith Plant (ed.), Philadelphia, New Society Publishers, 1989, p. 19.

slogan “movement is life”⁵⁷ and thereby equates physical exercise and life. Morrissey, however, goes beyond the wholesome effect of gymnastics and implies that women’s repossession of their own bodies will bring about decisive changes in their lives and in society at large: “to them belongs the future! – while the ghost of Mary Bagot Stack, / whose dream this is, smiles back”⁵⁸. These women’s bodies are no longer obstacles to the progress of culture, as in the traditional discourses denounced by Gaard and Murphy⁵⁹, but quite the contrary: the free movement of women’s bodies is the key to social progress. Michel Maffesoli has rightly reminded us of the etymological correlation between existence and mobility – Latin *ex(s)istere*: to stand out – when he claimed “*Exister, c’est sortir de soi*”⁶⁰. However, the capacity to move is not universal and gender has been a determining factor in people’s mobility, as Barbara Ehrenreich has shown on exposing a series of Western constructions of masculinity as motion and femininity as stasis⁶¹. For this reason, Morrissey’s poem adroitly identifies a crucial moment of social change that connects women’s mobility to their struggle for freedom. “Display” is a truly agonistic poem in that it represents struggle and resistance, female gymnastics and the spectators’ gaze that attempts to fix and return the women to their traditional role of objects of male desire and, interestingly enough, to the animal condition: “like eyeing up the horses at a racecourse, but with much more choice”⁶². This animalization of women’s bodies recalls the previously discussed poem “Pilots”, as in both texts the process of spectacularization threatens the communication of the message and the possibility of change, although the women in “Display” have a much higher degree of agency than the whales in “Pilots”. We find the antithesis of these women’s athletic bodies in the corpses of the abused Scandinavian women of the poem “The Evil Key”: “where corpses // have been left: plastered into a crevice in a flat / in an affluent suburb or strung amongst the cables // of a lift-shaft in a disused meat-packing plant”⁶³. The use of the passive voice, the past participles, and the motif of animal exploitation and meat consumption emphasize the inanimate and immobile nature of these women’s corpses.

Conclusion

An ecocritical approach to the analysis of Sinéad Morrissey’s poetry brings to light the many tensions in the relation between self and Other and unfolds the poet’s sundry explorations of other possible relations between humans and nature.

57. Sinéad Morrissey, “Display”, in *Parallax*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2013, p. 21.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Greta Gaard, Patrick D. Murphy, “Introduction”, in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism...*, p. 9.

60. Michel Maffesoli, *Du nomadisme: vagabondages initiatiques*, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1997, p. 28.

61. Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Decline of Patriarchy”, in *Constructing Masculinity*, Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, Simon Watson (eds.), New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 284-290.

62. Sinéad Morrissey, “Display”, p. 21.

63. Sinéad Morrissey, “The Evil Key”, in *Parallax*, p. 48.

A number of pernicious practices in our relationship with nature are identified, such as the exploitation, degradation, spectacularization and repression of natural beings and forces. Morrissey also scrutinizes the problematical bond between woman and nature, especially through the motif of the body, its empowerment and vulnerability, its potential liberation or further constraint. Among Morrissey's proposals, we may single out her inquiry into the human-animal continuum, her advocacy of nature as a speaking subject and her de-centring of the human subject in favour of Zoe, an expanded, relational figuration that may integrate human and non-human life.

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