

FROM GALICIA TO IRELAND: ECO-WITCHES AND GREEN UTOPIAN NARRATIVES IN ÁLVARO CUNQUEIRO AND W.B. YEATS

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative ecocritical and ecofeminist reading of W.B. Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (2008) [1888] and Álvaro Cunqueiro's *Tertulia de boticas prodigiosas y escuela de curanderos* (1976). It explores the literary witch as a symbolic mediator between humans and nature, bearer of botanical and spiritual knowledge in Irish and Galician traditions. Drawing on the poetics of breathing, the Symbiocene, and cultural studies, the article argues that these texts preserve ancestral wisdom while imagining alternative, symbiotic models of coexistence. The *meiga* and the *fairy doctor* emerge as agents of ecological resilience. In contrast to dystopian imaginaries, these green utopias offer ethical tools to reconnect with Gaia and envision regenerative futures.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Green Utopia, Witches, Álvaro Cunqueiro, William Butler Yeats.

DE GALICIA A IRLANDA: ECOBRUJAS Y NARRATIVAS UTOPICAS VERDES
EN ÁLVARO CUNQUEIRO Y W.B. YEATS

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza comparativamente las narrativas regenerativas en *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (2008) de W.B. Yeats y *Tertulia de boticas prodigiosas y escuela de curanderos* (1976) de Álvaro Cunqueiro desde una perspectiva ecocrítica y ecofeminista. Se examina la figura de la bruja como mediadora simbiótica entre el ser humano y la naturaleza, portadora de saberes botánicos y espirituales en los contextos folclóricos de Irlanda y Galicia. A través de la poética de la respiración, el Simbioceno y los estudios culturales, se propone que estas utopías verdes permiten imaginar modelos de vida armónica y resiliencia ecológica frente al imaginario distópico contemporáneo. Las figuras de la *meiga* y la *fairy doctor* ofrecen herramientas simbólicas para restablecer la conexión con Gaia e impulsar futuros regenerativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ecocrítica, Ecofeminismo, utopías verdes, brujas, Álvaro Cunqueiro, William Butler Yeats.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The minds of the Utopians, when fenced with a love for learning, are very ingenious in discovering all such arts as are necessary to carry it to perfection” (More 2000, 72). In a global context marked by the climate crisis and social, political, and economic turmoil, imagination is crucial for conceiving sustainable futures. Many contemporary narratives unfold in dystopian settings that depict worlds of collapse, violence, and despair. While these stories may serve as warnings, their proliferation also limits the ability to envision hopeful and viable alternatives. Thinkers such as Francisco Martorell Campos warn that the surplus of dystopias and the deficit of utopias in today’s culture foster a paralyzing fatalism that undermines the capacity to imagine humanity’s future in constructive terms (2021). For this reason, the construction of new ecological utopias offers a transformative horizon that not only challenges the status quo but also promotes collective creativity and action in pursuit of sustainable societies. As Melinda Harvey (2019, 2) states:

Our reckless pursuit of infinite economic growth on a finite planet could even take us towards a global dystopia. As an unprecedented frenzy of change grips the world, the case for utopia is stronger than ever. An effective change plan requires a bold, imaginative vision, practical goals and clarity around the psychological values necessary to bring about a transformation.

In the face of the risks of the Anthropocene –from climate change to extreme inequality– the need to articulate a bold and imaginative utopian vision that inspires transformative change is becoming increasingly urgent. Unlike the pessimism and alarmism of apocalyptic imagination, utopian narratives can cultivate hope and mobilize society toward regenerative action. This article explores the possibility of reimagining the future from a “green utopian” perspective that prioritizes harmonious coexistence between human beings and Nature. It proposes that such utopias should not be seen as mere unattainable fantasies, but rather as critical tools for social and ecological innovation. In contrast to the prevailing collective imaginary, saturated with dystopian scenarios, delving into positive visions is essential to awaken a proactive human attitude that enables the construction of conscious, sustainable futures and an ethics of care. A relationship with a greener future entail shifting the focus from domination and exploitation of nature to care, interdependence, and mutual responsibility (Gilligan 2013).

This study focuses on two literary corpora that offer regenerative visions rooted in the cultural traditions of Ireland and Galicia¹: *Fairy and Folk Tales of the*

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¹ The 88-year gap between the original publication of Yeats’s anthology (1888) and Cunqueiro’s book (1976) allows for a diachronic reading of how folkloric and magical figures evolve

*Irish Peasantry*² (2008) by W.B. Yeats and *Tertulia de boticas prodigiosas y escuela de curanderos* (1976) by Álvaro Cunqueiro. Both works, rooted in their respective folk traditions, share an innovative perspective of returning to the roots, to traditional knowledge, and to communion with the natural world³. This comparative analysis focuses on the figure of the witch, portrayed as a wise woman who understands the natural environment, lives in harmony with it, and applies her botanical and spiritual knowledge in everyday life –always guided by respect and mutual cooperation. This ancestral figure exemplifies the symbiosis between the human being and the natural space, embodies values of ecological care, and challenges anthropocentric norms.

From an ecocritical and ecofeminist perspective, this study examines how the narratives of Álvaro Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats counter the dystopia and prevailing pessimism in contemporary literature and invite us to imagine hopeful futures and to build viable ‘green utopias’ that contribute to the social creation of a collective ecological consciousness. To this end, this work poses the following questions: Can new green utopias and narratives be constructed using as a starting point 20th-century Galician literature by Álvaro Cunqueiro and late 19th- and early 20th-century Irish literature by W.B. Yeats? Is the figure of the witch a key element in revealing the connection that human beings can establish with nature and the living beings that inhabit it? Can sustainable and respectful methods be learned from these regenerative narratives to build a green future in which humans live in symbiosis with the natural environment and with other forms of life? Is it possible to restore the spiritual and bodily connection our ancestors shared with Mother Earth (Gaia) through the implicit lessons in these literary works?

across time and space. While Yeats writes within the cultural momentum of the Celtic Revival in a pre-independence Ireland, Cunqueiro’s narratives respond to the context of postwar Galicia under Francoist Spain. Despite their different historical and political frameworks, both authors act as literary ethnographers and mythopoetic architects, recovering, reimagining, and dignifying the oral traditions of their nations. Their engagement with local folklore is not merely archival but creative and ideological: through their fantastical narratives, they celebrate the cultural specificity, symbolic richness, and ecological sensibility of marginalised territories. As such, both Yeats and Cunqueiro can be read as visionaries who harnessed the regenerative potential of ancestral knowledge and myth to construct alternative models of cultural identity and human-nature relations.

² This article refers to the 2008 edition of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, originally edited and published by W.B. Yeats in 1888. The collection sought to preserve Irish folklore and oral traditions during the Celtic Revival –a cultural movement spanning the late 19th to early 20th centuries that aimed to reclaim Irish mythology, language, and national identity in response to British colonial rule. Yeats was one of its leading figures and a key force behind its literary expression.

³ W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) played a central role in the Irish Literary Revival, intertwining folklore, mysticism, and nationalism. His literary and political trajectory –from early romantic nationalism to more esoteric and conservative positions– deeply influenced the symbolic content of his folklore collections (Howes 1998). Álvaro Cunqueiro (1911–1981), a Galician writer active under Franco’s regime, embraced myth, fantasy, and regional folklore as forms of cultural resistance and imaginative survival. His literary legacy and biographical background are well documented and readily accessible online (Garbett 2023).

The narratives of Álvaro Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats enable the construction of new ‘green utopias’, as their fantastic and folkloric elements offer alternative visions in which humanity may rediscover balance with nature. The witch, as a literary figure, constitutes a key element of connection between humans and the natural world: far from being a malignant stereotype, the witch embodies traditional ecological wisdom and exemplifies ways of life that are harmonious with the environment and with the non-human beings that inhabit it. Consequently, the tales of Yeats and Cunqueiro provide sustainable knowledge and values –such as the respectful use of medicinal plants, conscious collaboration with other species, and reverence for natural cycles– that invite ecological practices in the daily life of contemporary society. The stories of Galician and Irish witches and healers suggest that humanity can rekindle its bond with the natural world and understand nature not as an inert resource, but as a community of living beings endowed with agency and reciprocity. In this way, it becomes possible to restore a spiritual and bodily connection with the Earth through the sensitivity and ancestral knowledge embedded in these narratives.

This research compares the literary representations of the witch and the healer in the work of Álvaro Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats, identifying their similarities and differences; it analyzes, from an ecocritical perspective, how these narratives highlight the symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature, and how they oppose the dystopian visions currently prevailing; it examines the role of the Galician and Irish witch as a mediator between the human community and the natural world, evaluating her importance as a model of ecological knowledge and spiritual connection with the environment; and it reflects on the teachings or values that may be drawn from these regenerative narratives.

Likewise, this study aims to contribute to a ‘green philology’ and follows the principles of a “poetics of breathing,” which establishes a connection between the rhythms and harmonies of nature and those of literature: literature as an ecological phenomenon that breathes in unison with its environment and enters into dialogue with it; poetry that shares rhythm and harmony with natural cycles; an ethics that makes literature responsible for reestablishing the human bond with the nature of which it is a part; and the reinterpretation of literary texts from an environmentally committed perspective that attends to the ecological, ethical, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions of literary language (Marrero Henríquez 2021). This approach involves reading literary texts not only for their formal value, but also for their capacity to “dar a los lectores la posibilidad de hacerlos respirar junto con el planeta Tierra y de favorecer el ritmo acompasado de ambos⁴” (426). It is about emotionally reconnecting human beings with the rhythms of the natural world, so that traditional fantastic literature may contribute to the regenerative narratives of the present.

⁴ “Give readers the possibility of breathing along with planet Earth and of fostering a shared, synchronized rhythm between them” (author’s own translation).

2. GREEN UTOPIAS AND SYMBIOTIC NARRATIVES

Rethinking our bond with the natural environment is not only an intellectual task, but also an emotional one. Drawing on concepts such as ‘the Ghedeist,’ the symbiotic relationships among all living beings on the planet –human and non-human– must be prioritized in order to put an end to the destructive tendencies of the Anthropocene. As Glenn Albrecht (2019) explains, the concept of the Symbiocene offers a hopeful framework, promotes healing, and encourages the creation of new possible futures. In this context, he introduces the neologism ghedeist to describe a secular, positive feeling for the unity of life and the interconnectedness of all beings. As he states:

The neologism “ghedeist” was thus created by me to account for a secular positive feeling for the unity of life, and the intuition, now backed up by science, that all things are interconnected by the sharing of a life force. My definition of the “ghedeist” is the awareness of the spirit or force that holds things together, a secular feeling of interconnectedness in life between the self and other beings (human and nonhuman) and their gathering together to live within shared Earth places and spaces, including our own bodies. It is a feeling of intense affinity and sense of empathy for other beings that all share a joint life. It is a feeling of deep association with the grand project we call life. (151)

From the perspective of environmental literary studies, the “poetics of breathing” considers literature a privileged space for rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature in the time of the Anthropocene. The current ecological crisis demands new theories and new imaginaries to counteract the cultural inertia toward destruction. Various authors agree on the urgency of reclaiming utopian capacity as a driving force for change. Harvey (2019) argues that, in the face of rapid planetary degradation, “the Anthropocene crisis is made up of dangers and opportunities. In fact, the carrot and the stick have never been bigger” (24) and only a transformative vision can prevent a catastrophic outcome. In his transdisciplinary analysis, he proposes that an effective plan for change must combine practical goals with a bold vision and psychosocial values aligned with sustainability. This idea aligns with the position of thinkers such as Francisco Martorell Campos (2021), who observes that the rise of dystopias in the 21st century has overshadowed our utopian imagination, something profoundly detrimental if we aspire to “que el futuro contenga civilizaciones prósperas, pacíficas y modernas no capitalistas brotadas de la acción social⁵” (40). Lisa Garforth (2018) challenges traditional notions of utopia and proposes adapting new green and regenerative narratives to present realities through hybrid and sustainable systems that contribute to the development of contemporary ecological thought. In other words, by imagining and rethinking

⁵ “A future that may contain prosperous, peaceful, and modern non-capitalist civilizations emerging from collective social action” (author’s own translation).



viable green utopias that can be adapted to and integrated into the near future, as suggested in the following passage:

In order to develop greener worlds, we will need to unsettle capitalist models of value and create alternative ways of understanding how we produce and consume nature. We will have to challenge binary epistemologies and come up with new ways of grasping the hybridity of life, human and nonhuman. (32)

Utopias serve primarily to reframe self/other relationships –in this case, between the human being and Nature. Utopias should not be understood as perfect and idealized alternative futures, but rather as transformative spaces that invite change. What is compelling about them is the capacity to imagine alternative worlds or green utopias that function as tools for social and ecological change in the contemporary world. Utopias are understood as spaces of experimentation and critique, where dominant epistemologies are challenged and possibilities for transformation are cultivated. As Sargisson (2000) points out, utopias are spaces in which we can begin to think differently and from which we can engage with the world through a more ethical and conscious perspective:

They are spaces in which we can begin to think differently, play with alternatives, explore ideas to their limits –and from which, perhaps, we can approach the world with a fresh viewpoint. Utopias permit us radically to change the way that we think. Once that process has begun, we can –perhaps– begin to act in ways that are sustainably different. I call this ‘transgressive utopianism’ because transgression is a key part of its operation. (140)

Sargisson refers to this approach as “transgressive utopianism,” in which the transgression of established norms is key to the transformative function of utopia. In other words, transgressive utopia breaks with confining intellectual and social traditions and enables radically different thinking that can translate into innovative and sustainable forms of action. This notion is particularly relevant for analyzing the narratives of Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats, insofar as both recover marginal traditions (Celtic folklore, rural knowledge) to subvert the modern and anthropocentric worldview. By presenting witches and fairies –figures traditionally relegated to superstition– in a positive light, these texts transgress the dualisms of Western culture (civilization vs. barbarism, human vs. animal, reason vs. magic) and open fissures through which more symbiotic relationships with the environment can be imagined.

Albrecht’s concept of the “Symbiocene” as a future era characterized by the harmonious reintegration of human beings with the Earth “begins when recognition by humans of the vital interconnectedness of life becomes the material foundation for all subsequent thought, policy, and action” (2019, 104). This vision offers a hopeful framework that promotes healing and the creation of new possible futures in which the human species has overcome anthropocentric individualism to embrace an existence of interdependence with the natural world and the living beings that inhabit it. Therefore, if we apply Albrecht’s vision to the narratives of Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats, we can observe how the figure of the witches, with their deep bond with



nature, are precursors of the concept of ‘the Ghedeist’ and embody that unifying spirit of life.

Environmental humanities conceive of literature as a space for rethinking the relationship between human beings and nature, not only through reason but also through empathy and emotion (Weik von Mossner 2017). Narratives with ecological awareness aim to involve the reader in experiences that dissolve the subject/object boundary, inviting them to ‘feel with’ the natural world. Through these narratives, readers empathize with nature and the non-human, experiencing their sensations, thoughts, and feelings. “Such narratives use our capacity for empathy strategically in order to encourage readers to feel moral allegiance with the victims of environmental injustice” (79). In this way, Weik von Mossner argues that a trans-species empathy is possible, through which readers or viewers can ‘feel with’ animals or other non-human natural entities. Therefore, generating empathy is a key aspect of ‘symbiotic narratives.’ Likewise, another fundamental element in ‘ecofictions’ is the polyphony of voices –that is, giving voice to the non-human and allowing nature, which possesses its own agency, to speak for itself. By incorporating multiple voices –those of animals, trees, plants, or rivers– the narrative places the reader in a position of encounter with other forms of life (Manwaring 2024).

3. THE WITCH AS A MEDIATOR WITH NATURE

The ecofeminist perspective reveals how the ecological crisis is intertwined with structures of gender oppression and with the domination of nature associated with patriarchy. In the context of fantastic literature, Cecilia Salmerón Tellechea (2023) observes that the representation of the vegetal and the non-human has served to deconstruct the hierarchical and anthropocentric view of nature and to question human superiority over other forms of life. As she explains:

La representación de lo vegetal en códigos fantásticos ha contribuido a deconstruir la concepción jerárquica de los seres de la biosfera, así como las visiones antropocéntricas y esencialistas de la naturaleza. (...) Ha puesto sobre el tapete advertencias y reflexiones sobre la contaminación y la catástrofe ambiental (...) y ha visibilizado las violencias estructurales del patriarcado. Asimismo, ha enriquecido las modalidades de lo fantástico explorando la otredad mediante ricas variantes de lo monstruoso.⁶ (17-8)

Following the theoretical framework of Salmerón Tellechea, the figure of the witch is situated at the intersection of ecology and gender, since historically, the

⁶ “The representation of the vegetal within fantastic codes has contributed to deconstructing hierarchical conceptions of beings within the biosphere, as well as anthropocentric and essentialist views of nature. (...) It has brought to the forefront warnings and reflections on pollution and environmental catastrophe (...) and has exposed the structural violence of patriarchy. Furthermore, it has enriched the modes of the fantastic by exploring otherness through rich variations of the monstrous” (author’s own translation).

witch was a wise woman –often a healer or midwife– whose connection with herbs, animals, and traditional knowledge made her suspect in the eyes of the Church and male authorities. The image of the evil witch –the demonic old woman who flies on a broomstick and casts curses– was constructed and exaggerated during the Inquisition in order to discredit these independent women and delegitimize their knowledge. In the words of Guy Bechtel (2001):

La bruja ha sido un personaje esencial en la historia de Occidente. Y la historia de la brujería fue, en gran parte, la historia del martirio de las mujeres. (...) Fue víctima de una maquinaria que funcionaba a tres niveles: un retrato fabricado por la Iglesia, el de la bruja endemoniada; el odio de sus vecinos que la llevó a entregarse voluntariamente a la investigación que terminaría condenándola; por último, una justicia *civil* –conviene subrayarlo, si bien la violencia con la que actuó se debía al retrato difundido por los religiosos– que le dio la muerte.⁷ (139-141)

In contrast, the contemporary recovery of the witch as a symbol often presents her as an archetype of an empowered woman in symbiosis with nature. This ecofeminist reclamation of the witch emphasizes that what defined these women was their defiance of patriarchal norms –their intellectual, bodily, and spiritual autonomy– rather than a simplistic dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ witches. Applying this idea to the Galician and Irish witches in the works of Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats, they represent a counter-hegemonic alternative to both the dominant anthropocentric model and the patriarchal gender order. These are liminal figures who live on the margins of the forest or the village, hold knowledge of plants, and escape cultural domestication. In doing so, they embody a sustainable and communal way of life that contrasts sharply with the capitalist view of nature as an exploitable resource. The relationship these witches maintain with nature “no sigue la ontológica moderna, dual, patriarcal y capitalista; por el contrario, las plantas, los animales, los minerales, entes y divinidades configuran su cotidianidad, sus re-existencias y resistencias⁸” (Parra-Valencia, Páez & Fernandes 2024, 2).

Similarly, Sullivan (2024) analyzes the representation of plants in fairy tales, which –like witches– are portrayed as dangerous and heavily sexualized, thereby reinforcing the prejudice that the vegetal realm is inferior or irrational. Sullivan ironically refers to this phenomenon as “*bad plants*,” thus denouncing an

⁷ “The witch has been an essential figure in the history of the West. And the history of witchcraft was, to a large extent, the history of the martyrdom of women. (...) She was the victim of a machinery that operated on three levels: a portrait fabricated by the Church –the demonic witch; the hatred of her neighbors, which led her to voluntarily submit to an inquiry that would end in her condemnation; and finally, a civil justice system –which should be emphasized, although the violence with which it acted stemmed from the image promoted by the clergy– that sentenced her to death” (author’s own translation).

⁸ “Does not follow the modern, dualistic, patriarchal, and capitalist ontology; on the contrary, plants, animals, minerals, entities, and divinities shape her everyday life, her modes of re-existence and resistance” (author’s own translation).

anthropocentric cultural model that instrumentalizes nature. The author proposes a queer rereading of the vegetal world, one that recognizes its agency, its alterity, and breaks with modern binarism: “Indeed, our vegetal enablers should not be taken lightly, nor should they be seen as merely magnanimous beings existing solely for our benefit or manipulations. Plant life, the vast green force spread across the Earth enabling most large living creatures” (16).

The dominant imaginary that separates culture from nature is a product of anthropocentric thought that has generated the ecological crisis. Marrero Henríquez (2025) proposes a critical practice he calls “poetics of breathing,” which reads texts through the recognition of the vital interdependence of all beings, always keeping in view “la ecología [para] subsanar la alienación del especialista en general y del filólogo en particular”⁹, and to restore a new sense to literary analysis in times of planetary crisis (6). Both Marrero Henríquez and Sullivan advocate for a reconfiguration of literary and critical sensibility and call for the recovery of alternative narrative forms that reconnect the human with the vegetal. Tuan (1977) emphasizes that the rational understanding of the world must be surrounded by affective, symbolic, and poetic frameworks, and that mythical geography –as found in fairy tales or peasant legends– provides these frameworks: spaces where the non-human possesses its own agency. From this perspective, mythical spatial thinking is profoundly ecological, as the environment is not organized according to its utility or instrumental value, but according to its resonance with the other elements that inhabit that shared space, whether plants, fungi, animals, witches, or other fantastic beings.

4. BAD AND GOOD WITCHES: DUALITY AND DECONSTRUCTION

In Galician culture, the figure of the witch is traditionally divided into a duality: on one side, the “bruxa” (associated with black magic and dark practices), and on the other, the “meiga” (associated with white magic –a healer and benevolent sorceress with deep knowledge of the rural environment). Galician anthropology and cultural history document that “meigas” worked with medicinal herbs, fungi, trees, and local animals, assisting the community or village with their ailments, in contrast to the “bruxas,” who disrupted social harmony (Lisón Tolosana 2004). Otero Pedrayo (2020) describes Celtic and Galician women as “de razas fuertes, en las que las mujeres están más cerca del alma ancestral y eterna”¹⁰ (98), and it is these Galician women who are the guardians of the primal culture, as suggested in the following passage:

⁹ “Ecology [as a means] to heal the alienation of the specialist in general, and of the philologist in particular” (author’s own translation).

¹⁰ “Of strong races, in which women are closer to the ancestral and eternal soul” (author’s own translation).

Y a la sabia también, y a la bruja y brujo-meiga, quienes, en simbiosis con la tradición, el medio y la imaginación popular local han ideado –y aceptado– una visión cósmica suprema que rehúsa y supera el hecho sensible y a la presencia concreta. Esa culminación o cosmovisión, con su correspondiente significación, que va más allá y por encima del hombre, crea una impresión de trascendencia: la presencia de lo inefable e indefinible que las mujeres de Aldán expresan con pausas y silencio.¹¹ (Lisón Tolosana 2004, 436)¹²

As in Galicia, in Ireland the figure of the witch is also divided: “fairy doctors” (witches who practiced white magic and had been instructed by the fairies) and “witches” (those who practiced black magic and disrupted the social harmony of the village). Like the meigas, the fairy doctors possessed knowledge of the natural environment and carried out botanical practices to heal the ailments of the people and to counteract the curses cast by the witches (Yeats 2008).

Witches and fairy doctors receive their power from opposite dynasties; the witch from evil spirits and her own malignant will; the fairy doctor from the fairies, and a something –a temperament– that is born with him or her. The first is always feared and hated. The second is gone to for advice and is never worse than mischievous. The most celebrated fairy doctors are sometimes people the fairies loved and carried away and kept with them for seven years. (184)

It is worth noting that in Galicia, unlike in Ireland, the term “meiga” has historically carried a more ambiguous usage: although the positive meaning (wise woman or good sorceress) tends to predominate, in certain regions it is also applied to any witch in general. However, whether they are meigas or bruxas, fairy doctors or witches, the practices of all of them imply a recognition of the agency of nature and of its non-human elements (plants, animals, and even spiritual entities of the landscape), as well as a commitment to maintaining local ecological balance. In short, when stripped of the traditional good/evil duality, witches become symbols of the human-nature symbiosis and live in harmony with their ecosystems, applying a principle of mutual care that challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal hierarchies. This idea of the witch as an ecological mediator provides a key theoretical foundation

¹¹ And also, the wise woman, the witch, and the male or female ‘meiga’ who, in symbiosis with tradition, the environment, and the local popular imagination, have conceived –and embraced– a supreme cosmic vision that refuses and transcends the sensible world and concrete presence. This culmination or worldview, along with its corresponding meaning that rises above and beyond the human, creates an impression of transcendence: the presence of the ineffable and the undefinable, which the women of Aldán express through pauses and silence (author’s own translation).

¹² Lisón Tolosana refers to the parish of Aldán, located in the municipality of Cangas de Morrazo (Pontevedra), renowned for the figure of the Galician fisherwoman and landowner María Soliña (1551-1617), who was tried for witchcraft in 1621 by the Spanish Inquisition in Santiago de Compostela. Remembered in the collective memory of the Galician people, María Soliña died shortly after being tortured (Santiago, 2014).

for analyzing the literary works of Cunqueiro and Yeats, where folk healers and sorceresses represent that deep-rooted bond with the living Earth.

Galician authors have always looked to Irish and Celtic culture as a reference point in shaping their mythology, folklore, and national identity (De Toro Santos 2007). As Castro (1927) remarks, the new generations of Galician writers should approach the culture of the British Isles:

Á parte das razóns expostas é preciso advertir que case toda a moderna literatura irlandesa, escocesa e galesa está escrita en inglés. ¿Como imos penetrar no ambiente espiritual desas nacións sen ler a Yeats, Synge, George, Macdonald ou Barrie. Sería como excluír a Valle Inclán da literatura galega. (...) Galicia debe mirar cara ás terras brumosas do Norte, terras de Ossian, de Fingal, de Deidre das tristuras. E o lazo entre Galicia e eses países ten que selo Inglaterra, a cultura inglesa, a única no mundo saturada do espírito celta. (...) Propúxenme tan só contribuír modestamente á mellor comprensión desa terra de románticos, de humoristas, de poesía máxica e melancólica, cuxo coñecemento considero tan necesario para o desenvolvemento cultural de Galicia.¹³ (2)

In Ireland, Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats collect Irish folklore and mythology, while in Galicia, Álvaro Cunqueiro¹⁴ incorporates and reinterprets Galician folklore and mythology.¹⁵ Indeed, “Cunqueiro evoca las tierras soñadas de Irlanda, recupera sus leyendas y mitos y los incorpora al espacio gallego, dándole una proyección más amplia a las tradiciones orales y mágicas de Galicia y dando forma a su identidad nacional¹⁶” (De Toro Santos 2007, 58). In *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (2008[1888]), W.B. Yeats emphasizes how the witches and the fairy doctors possess

¹³ “In addition to the reasons already mentioned, it must be noted that almost all modern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh literature is written in English. How can we hope to penetrate the spiritual atmosphere of those nations without reading Yeats, Synge, George, Macdonald, or Barrie? It would be like excluding Valle-Inclán from Galician literature. (...) Galicia must look toward the misty lands of the North, lands of Ossian, of Fingal, of Deirdre of the sorrows. And the link between Galicia and those countries must be England, English culture –the only one in the world saturated with the Celtic spirit. (...) I have merely aimed to contribute modestly to a better understanding of that land of romantics, of humorists, of magical and melancholic poetry, whose knowledge I consider essential for the cultural development of Galicia” (author’s own translation).

¹⁴ Álvaro Cunqueiro revitalized Galician folklore and mythology through his literature, but when it comes to rigorous collectors of Galician folklore, we must turn to authors such as Vicente Risco in *Etnografía: Cultura espiritual* (1972), or Xesús Taboada Chivite in *Ritos y creencias gallegas* (1980), who undertook the task of cataloguing and analyzing popular traditions.

¹⁵ Yeats’s folklore work, although literary in tone, must be read in the context of his engagement with Irish identity politics and occult traditions, where the *fairy doctor* figure can be linked to a nationalist and spiritual renewal of Irishness (Brown 1999; Foster 1997). Cunqueiro’s use of witches and healers is less overtly political but reflects a subtext of Galician distinctiveness and cultural continuity within the constraints of Spanish centralism (PérezBustamante Mourier 2008).

¹⁶ “Cunqueiro evokes the dreamed lands of Ireland, recovers its legends and myths, and incorporates them into the Galician landscape, giving broader projection to Galicia’s oral and magical traditions and helping to shape its national identity” (author’s own translation).



extensive natural knowledge, regardless of how they later apply this ancestral wisdom. That is, both witches and fairy doctors exist in constant symbiosis with the natural world: “great is their knowledge of herbs and spells” (184), and there are several tales in which both fairy doctors and witches feature prominently. In the case of W.B. Yeats, there are only eight tales that reference witches: “Bewitched Butter (Donegal),” about a fairy doctor who helps restore milk to the Hanlon family’s cow; “A Queen’s County Witch,” about a witch who uses her neighbour’s milk to sell more butter; “The Witch Hare,” about a witch who transforms into a hare; “Bewitched Butter (Queen’s County),” about a fairy doctor who lifts a curse from a cow; “The Horned Women,” about twelve witches who enter a house and force the owner to follow their orders, but she manages to expel them with the help of a fairy doctor; “The Witches’ Excursion,” about thirteen witches who fly from Ireland to England; “The Confessions of Tom Bourke,” about a fairy doctor who healed the physical ailments of county dwellers; and “The Pudding Bewitched,” about a bewitched pudding resolved by a fairy doctor.

In both Yeats’s and Cunqueiro’s narratives, fairy doctors or witches, as well as meigas or bruxas, may be either women or men, although the female figure predominates. In *Tertulia de boticas prodigiosas y escuela de curanderos* (1976), Cunqueiro presents a parade of rural healers –curanderas or curanderos– and endows them with an intimate connection to nature and a spirit of service to their community. A representative example is the tale of Cerviño de Moldes, who travels through Galician villages offering cures without asking for anything in return:

Iba en un caballete del país, de aquí para allí, recogía hierbas, y se acercaba sigiloso a las casas de los vecinos; golpeaba con los nudillos en la puerta y al que salía a abrir le decía que era el profesor Cerviño y que sin prisas, y con conversación distraída, curaba algunas cosas. Y que no cobraba. Comenzó a curar catarros infantiles con una hierba que trajera de Cuba, la llamada hierba monda, que era pardo rojiza. Además de la hierba, sugería paseos a caballo: Cerviño iba en su jaco, y tras él iba en otro el enfermito con su madrina.¹⁷ (111-2)

This passage presents an itinerant healer who embodies several key qualities of the meiga/fairy doctor: extensive botanical knowledge (of both local and exotic herbs), the practice of folk medicine (treating children’s colds, likely combining herbal remedies with advice such as outdoor walks, as the text later suggests), and an altruistic ethic (providing healing without charge, aside perhaps from receiving the patient’s hospitality). The figure of Cerviño is stripped of any spectacular magical

¹⁷ “He rode a local saddle horse, going from place to place, collecting herbs, and approaching neighbors’ homes quietly. He would knock on the door with his knuckles, and to whoever came out, he would say he was Professor Cerviño, and that –without haste and with casual conversation– he could cure certain ailments. And he didn’t charge. He began treating children’s colds with an herb he had brought from Cuba, called *hierba monda*, which was reddish-brown. In addition to the herb, he prescribed horseback rides: Cerviño rode on his mount, and behind him came the little patient with his godmother, riding another” (author’s own translation).

connotations –he does not fly on a broomstick, nor chant Latin spells. His magic resides in his extraordinary imagination and in the traditional wisdom he carries.

Cunqueiro subtly blends reality and fantasy: on one hand, he legitimizes this ancestral knowledge by presenting it with costumbrista naturalness; on the other, he hints at fantastical elements (the mysterious air with which Cerviño arrives, the herbs brought from distant lands, etc.). Taken as a whole, Cunqueiro's curanderos and Yeats's fairy doctors represent the luminous counterpart to the witch archetype: women and men who, guided by a profound understanding of Nature, dedicate their lives to healing imbalances –whether those be illness, curses, or disharmony between humans and their environment: “Not many months since he recovered a young woman (the sister of a tradesman living near him), who had been struck speechless after returning from a funeral, and had continued so for several days. He steadfastly refused receiving any compensation” (Yeats 2008[1888], 217).

It is important to highlight that both Yeats and Cunqueiro demystify and deconstruct the traditional Western image of the witch. Rather than perpetuating a Manichaean view (good witch versus evil witch), they complicate those categories. Yeats, for instance, collects stories in which the boundaries between witch and fairy doctor are blurred. A single character may at times wield powers that appear dark, yet with good intentions –and vice versa, a fairy doctor might engage in questionable mischief. For example, in the tale “The Pudding Bewitched,” Harry Connolly –a fairy doctor– opposed the marriage between Moll Roe, a young Catholic woman, and Gusto Gillespie, a young Protestant man; thus, he decided to bewitch the wedding banquet's pudding: “(...) but never mind that, I tell you you'll have a merrier weddin' than you think, that's all;’ and havin' said this, he put on his hat and left the house” (Yeats 2008[1888], 231).

This suggests that, in popular practice, the morality of witchcraft was not determined so much by labels as using power. Similarly, Cunqueiro, in his work, does not feel the need to explicitly label his healers as “good”; he simply portrays them as integrated within their communities, normalizing their role. The good/evil witch dichotomy is ultimately a product of fairy tale literature and simplified folklore. In fact, this rigid duality has been a didactic and inquisitorial construction –on the one hand, to demonize rebellious wise women, and on the other, to offer an acceptable substitute (“the tamed good witch”). This analysis understands that Yeats and Cunqueiro, each in their own way, reclaim the human complexity of their witches, where the boundary between good and bad actions is often blurred. These are not angels or demons, but individuals (mostly women) with extraordinary knowledge who operate outside official medicine or religion. The deconstruction of the concept and figure of the witch is essential, since –regardless of the name– the semantic associations linked to the term “witch” have no real basis and are marked by an inquisitorial past.



5. RECONNECTION WITH GAIA: ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND REGENERATIVE PRACTICES

A central trait of witches in Galician and Irish traditions is their intimate knowledge of nature and the use of ancestral wisdom. These witches/healers act as guardians of traditional ecological knowledge, as communities in earlier times depended on a deep understanding of plants, seasonal cycles, and animal behavior for survival. The figures of the *meiga* and the fairy doctor embody precisely that body of knowledge passed down orally from generation to generation. In the Irish tales collected by Yeats, it is emphasized that fairy doctors often acquired their wisdom through a special relationship with the fairies. It was believed that “the most celebrated fairy doctors are sometimes people the fairies loved and carried away and kept with them for seven years” (2008, 184). Upon returning to the human world, these individuals came back “touched” by the faerie realm: they became introspective, enjoyed wandering alone through natural landscapes, and acquired extraordinary creative or healing gifts. Symbolically speaking, their knowledge does not stem solely from empirical study, but from a deep communion with nature, personified in the fairies. In the Celtic worldview, fairies represent the spirits of the earth, which means that these individuals were instructed by Mother Nature herself. Each piece of knowledge involved understanding both the physical dimension (which herb, which specific act) and the spiritual dimension of the problem (what invisible force is at work). In short, Irish narrative presents fairy doctors as herbalists, healers, and ritual advisors. In the Galician case, the *meigas* and healers that populate the pages of *Cunqueiro* likewise display a wide repertoire of sustainable practices and regenerative knowledge. As he emphasizes:

El autor de este texto tuvo ocios bastantes en la oficina de farmacia paterna para, desde párvulo, deletrear en los botes los nombres sorprendentes, desde el opio y la mirra a la menta y la glicerina, y más tarde, ayudar a hacer píldoras y sellos, y escudriñar el misterio del ojo del boticario, y sumergir una mano en los cajones de las plantas medicinales, la genciana, las hojas de sen, la salvia, la manzanilla..., y darle al molino de la mostaza, cerca del cual estaba la redoma de las sanguijuelas. Mi padre preparaba la tintura de yodo, un vino aperitivo, o las limonadas purgantes para la gula del obispo de Solís.¹⁸ (*Cunqueiro* 1976, 7)

Cunqueiro, a deep connoisseur of Galician oral tradition, incorporates into his texts local plant names, home remedies, and recipes that blend natural ingredients with ritual practices: “Te lavas bien el cuerpo durante toda una semana, y comes

¹⁸ “The author of this text had ample leisure in his father’s pharmacy to, from early childhood, spell out the astonishing names on the jars –from opium and myrrh to mint and glycerin– and later, to help make pills and wafers, to peer into the mystery of the apothecary’s eye, to sink a hand into the drawers of medicinal plants –gentian, senna leaves, sage, chamomile...– and to crank the mustard mill, near which stood the vial of leeches. My father would prepare iodine tincture, a tonic wine, or purgative lemonades for the bishop of Solís’s gluttony” (author’s own translation).

papas de centeno cuatro veces al día. El veintidós es creciente, y he de sangrarte. (...) Curaba con sangrías, con papas de avena o de centeno, baños calientes y muchas horas de sueño¹⁹ (101). The Galician writer offers in his work a tribute not only to traditional pharmacopoeia –based on plants, minerals, and psychologically effective rituals– but also to fantastical pharmacopoeia, blending real remedies with imaginary ones. As indicated in the passage below:

Se trata aquí del polvo del cuerno del unicornio, obligatorio en las farmacias inglesas todavía en el XVIII, de la piedra bezoar, de la mandrágora, de los kutbub al mawázín gabirianos, de las corrientes de agua que curan la melancolía, de las plantas secretas de la farmacia de los reyes de Portugal, de somníferos, de las medicinas para fabricar niños prodigio, de la botica del arcángel Rafael, etc. Todo ello compone un mundo a la vez cierto y fantástico, por el que pasa el hombre buscando la salud y la larga vida, o dando la muerte.²⁰ (Cunqueiro 1976, 7-8)

In both Irish and Galician stories, there is a constant: when the fairy doctor or meiga intervenes, the goal is to restore natural order and collective well-being (to break the enchantment, heal the ailment, protect livestock or people). This dialectic allows us to read these narratives as ecological allegories: insofar as we seek more respectful ways to coexist with the Earth today, inspiration can be found in these literary figures. For example, the importance of medicinal plants highlights the value of biodiversity and traditional botanical knowledge in the search for present-day solutions (herbal medicines, regenerative agriculture, etc.). The practice of not harming faerie beings or of respecting certain places points to the need to recognize the rights and sacred spaces of other species. Even a fairy doctor's refusal to consume meat or drink alcohol may be seen as a precursor to a sustainable and mindful lifestyle: "He never touched beer, spirits, or meat in all his life, but has lived entirely on bread, fruit, and vegetables" (Yeats 2008[1888], 184).

The witch and healer narratives of W.B. Yeats and Cunqueiro can be read in a contemporary key as pedagogical metaphors –covert lessons on how to coexist harmoniously with the environment. In the words of Salmerón Tellechea (2023), vegetal fantastic fiction has been a pioneer in "afirmar grados de intencionalidad, voluntad e inteligencia en las plantas, la agencia vegetal: categoría a partir de la cual

¹⁹ "You wash your body thoroughly for an entire week and eat rye potatoes four times a day. The twenty-second is a waxing moon, and I must bleed you. (...) He treated with bloodletting, with oat or rye poultices, hot baths, and many hours of sleep" (author's own translation).

²⁰ "This concerns the powder of unicorn horn –still required in English pharmacies as late as the eighteenth century– the bezoar stone, mandrake, the *kutbub* and *Gabirian mawázín*, the currents of water that cure melancholy, the secret plants of the pharmacy of the kings of Portugal, sleeping draughts, medicines to produce prodigy children, the apothecary of the Archangel Raphael, etc. All of this constitutes a world both real and fantastic, through which man passes in search of health and long life –or to bring death" (author's own translation).



se ha cuestionado y revisado la noción de conciencia²¹ (17). Applying this idea to literary witches, these stories anthropomorphize Nature through fairies, spirits, or the magical properties of plants, which –within the traditional cultural context– implies recognizing the agency of the natural world. By accepting the literary game –imagining that the forest has a voice, that animals understand, or that herbs choose their healers– the non-human shifts from a passive object to an active subject. In short, the practices and knowledge of witches in Yeats and Cunqueiro form a catalogue of regenerative strategies (social, medicinal, and spiritual) that, when reread today, can inspire sustainable methods for inhabiting the planet and, consequently, green utopias.

In both Cunqueiro's and Yeats's work, witches mediate between two worlds: the human world and the natural world. This implies recognizing that the landscape is animated by non-human presences. Every river, mountain, plant, or tree is alive and inhabited by other mysterious beings. These types of beliefs and stories foster a sense of reverential respect for natural spaces within the community. The narratives of both authors show how a form of pagan religiosity persists in both Galicia and Ireland, and how witches, fairy doctors, or meigas act as priests of nature, protecting it and cooperating with it. In these traditional cultures, there exists a non-institutional popular religion that sacralizes the Earth, in which the witch is the custodian of rural spirituality –she knows special prayers, communicates with plants and animals, and performs natural rituals, among other things. Her powers derive not only from technical knowledge, but from a spiritual alignment with the forces of nature. For instance, the boundary between the natural and the supernatural is blurred, and Cunqueiro integrates the idea that healing is not only physical, but also emotional. The stories reveal that the patient's faith and imagination are part of the remedy. A theme that emerges in both Yeats and Cunqueiro is that of alliance with non-human beings.

The fairy doctors and Galician meigas ally themselves with fairies and with the nature spirits present in rivers, trees, hills, mountains, and so on. This literary representation suggests a path for the current era: instead of seeking to conquer nature, it is necessary to ally with it, learn from other species, and recognize the agency of the Earth. This is precisely the ethic of Albrecht's *Symbiocene* (2019), "protection of symbiotic bonds between and within species at all scales; and reestablishment of symbiotic bonds where they have been severed in the Anthropocene" (104). Literary witches exemplify the protection of those symbiotic bonds. When they undo harm, they are restoring a broken connection –between the cow and its milk, between the child and their health, between the community and the fairies. It can be said that they act as agents of the *Symbiocene*. The idea of Gaia as a living organism (Lovelock 1983) emphasizes the need for an almost reverential relationship with planet Earth

²¹ "Affirming degrees of intentionality, will, and intelligence in plants –the notion of vegetal agency: a category through which the concept of consciousness has been questioned and reexamined" (author's own translation).

to halt its destruction. In this sense, the narratives of Yeats and Cunqueiro offer a regenerative imagination: they invite us to see the world as filled with invisible life, to believe that each tree may harbor a friendly or hostile spirit, and that every human action resonates on a spiritual plane.

The rereading of Yeats and Cunqueiro can be understood as a cultural strategy for rebuilding the emotional and ethical connection with the biosphere, as we need a “poetics of breathing” that synchronizes culture with the vital rhythm of nature (Marrero Henríquez 2021). The witches in their stories –breathing in unison with forests and rivers, dancing under the full moon, whispering ancient words to their medicinal plants– metaphorically embody that poetics. They are a reminder of ancestral wisdom. Through their witches, Yeats and Cunqueiro narrate green utopias: communities in which human beings live in symbiosis with other forms of life, supported by figures of ancestral knowledge who safeguard natural and spiritual balance. Their tales teach us that it is indeed possible to imagine and build a different future, where the line between the human and the non-human is blurred in an enriching collaboration. They are literary invitations to reconsider the place of the human in the world –from masters, consumers, and exploiters to caretakers and companions in the web of life. “El arte, la creatividad, la imaginación de un mundo alternativo, más sostenible, más poshumanista, capaz de visionar una salida al apocalipsis del cambio climático, esa parece ser la pieza que faltaba del código y en la que alberga la esperanza de encontrar una solución”²² (Sotelo 2023, 29).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Considering this study, the narratives of Álvaro Cunqueiro and W.B. Yeats offer fertile ground for the construction of new green utopias and narratives. In response to the first research question –can new green utopias and narratives be constructed using as a starting point 20th-century Galician literature by Álvaro Cunqueiro and late 19th- to early 20th-century Irish literature by W.B. Yeats?– the works analyzed demonstrate that folkloric literary traditions can indeed serve as a foundation for imagining sustainable alternative futures. Yeats and Cunqueiro recover a mythical heritage in which human beings are not detached from nature, but constantly interact with it, whether through fairy doctors, witches, meigas, or bruxas. When reread from a contemporary perspective, their stories function as critical utopias that challenge the modern view of a dystopian and disenchanting world and offer alternative visions of harmonious coexistence at a time when utopian imagination seems to have withered in the face of the ecological crisis.

²² “Art, creativity, and the imagination of an alternative world –more sustainable, more posthumanist, capable of envisioning a way out of the climate change apocalypse– seem to be the missing piece of the code, and the one that holds the hope of finding a solution” (author’s own translation).



Regarding the second question –is the figure of the witch a key element in revealing the connection that human beings can establish with nature and the living beings that inhabit it? This study confirms that the figure of the witch is indeed essential for demonstrating and emphasizing the connection that humans can forge with nature and the living beings that dwell within it. The witch personifies an intimate union with the Earth: she possesses deep knowledge of plants, understands the symbolic language of her environment, and respects both creatures and invisible forces. In the works studied, these witches serve as bridges between the human, the non-human, and the natural. Their very presence within the community testifies to the fact that human beings belong to the web of life and are not above it. Ultimately, the literary witches of Cunqueiro and Yeats reveal that the culture/nature dichotomy is false, and that they inhabit a cultural realm that is at once profoundly natural. For this reason, reclaiming these figures in a positive light helps to reimagine the human not as a dominator, but as an ally to all other living beings.

Regarding the third Question –can we learn from these regenerative narratives sustainable and respectful methods for building a green future in which humans live in symbiosis with the natural environment and with other forms of life? The answer is yes: we can indeed learn sustainable and respectful methods from these regenerative narratives to build a green future. The goal is not to replicate the solutions offered in these stories literally, but to translate their spirit into actionable models for creating a healthier relationship with the natural world and its living beings. For example, the interspecies collaboration symbolized by a fairy doctor can inspire ecological restoration initiatives in which humans work with nature (such as forest restoration projects that incorporate Indigenous knowledge, or permaculture designs that mimic ecosystems). Thus, it is possible to extract sustainable methods in an ethical and conceptual sense and to promote an attitude of humility, attentiveness, and respect for the Earth's rhythms. Rather than advocating for unrestrained exploitation, these narratives propose care and reciprocity –principles that constitute the indispensable foundation of any sustainable future society.

Finally, regarding the fourth question –is it possible to restore the spiritual and bodily connection that our ancestors shared with Mother Earth (Gaia) through the implicit lessons in these literary works? The answer is yes: it is indeed possible to restore the spiritual and bodily connection that our ancestors shared with Gaia. The witches and related figures in Yeats and Cunqueiro inhabit a universe where the material and the spiritual are interwoven: every plant possesses virtue, every forest holds a mystery, and body and soul are healed together. By engaging with texts such as those studied here, readers are invited to relearn this sensibility, as these narratives portray human beings breathing in harmony with natural cycles through an awareness of interdependence and empathy toward all forms of existence. That is the powerful contribution of *green narratives*: to rekindle communion with Nature.

In conclusion, the comparison between *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, and *Tertulia de boticas prodigiosas y escuela de curanderos* has made it possible to affirmatively address all the research questions, weaving together the utopian, ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions involved. It is confirmed that Celtic folkloric literature –with its witches and faerie beings– not only entertains



and preserves cultural heritage but also inspires reflections of great relevance amid the current crisis of the Anthropocene. By bringing to light models of symbiotic coexistence, female empowerment in harmony with nature, practices of care for life, and an earthly spirituality, these nineteenth- and mid-twentieth century works become surprisingly contemporary. We are facing global ecological emergencies, but we also possess imaginative tools passed down from our ancestors to confront them. The witches of Yeats and Cunqueiro whisper that another way of being is possible. Reimagining a green future through literature means reclaiming the best of the past –its knowledge and sensibilities– and creatively integrating them with new solutions. The narratives explored here function as laboratories of ecological utopias, offering a hopeful perspective.

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