Seamus Heaney's *Elemental* Ecopoetics: Earth, Water, Air and Fire

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to prove the centrality of the ecoweb formed by earth, water, air and fire in the verse of the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The bridge between Nature (rural ancestry) and culture (literary consciousness), the intimate relationship between *locus* and language, or the outstanding sense of movement and balance between earthy root and airy imagination are just some of the ideas to be discussed in Heaney's ecopoetics. Together with this, the outstanding role of the four elements among Heaney critics will be emphasized, in order to show that we can certainly talk about some kind of ecocritical framework emerging from within the discourse about Heaney's literary evolution: the four elements, especially earth and air, are explicitly or implicitly used by a large number of critics in order to differentiate between a first stage (or *earthy phase*), characterized by its rootedness in Northern Irish people, history and culture, and a second stage (or *airy phase*) in which the poet allegedly liberates himself from earthy bounds to accomplish visionary poetic freedom. It is contended here that, for several reasons, reading Heaney's poetry in binary terms—earth *versus* air—is not precisely a satisfactory enough critical response. In our opinion, a more adequate and clarifying reading is encapsulated in the complementary terms—earth *and* air. It is the outstanding nuance of tension and permanent search for balance that keeps both symbols in a fruitful encounter. From a much more conscious ecocritical point of view, this may well embody the search for a possible site of reconciliation between Nature and Culture.

In the article "The four elements and the recovery of referentiality: ecocriticism as a pivotal localist theory" (2002), Patrick D. Murphy states that "the four elements can be understood as both an ancient and a very *contemporary way* of thinking about the material world" (our emphasis) (71). In his attempt at reinstating the elements and environmental concerns at the centre of the activity carried out by the literary critic, he even asserts that all human theorizing "depends on a particular temporary confluence of earth, air, water, and fire in the formation of each individual" (Patrick Murphy 73). This paper precisely endeavours to prove the *modernity* and centrality of the ecoweb formed by earth, water, air and fire in the verse of the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Brought up in a rural background in Co. Derry, Heaney's poetry constantly harks back to childhood reminiscences in the familiar farm *Mossbawn*, permeating the

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landscape and natural environment of his homeland. This is a major source of inspiration in his works, his *personal helicon*. A twofold approach will be adopted in this respect: Nature as text, or the poetic verbalization of elemental reality; and text as Nature, i.e. the adoption of *elemental* symbology as a resource for the characterization of the poetic word. On the other hand, this paper also undertakes the revision and reassessment of the ecocritical framework at stake in the discourse about Heaney's literary evolution, as the four elements indeed play an outstanding role in such a critical debate. The alternative reading proposed here will emphasize the interplay of the four elements in Heaney's oeuvre, with a view to opening up a possible site of reconciliation between *earthy* Nature (rural ancestry) and *airy* culture (literary consciousness), between the material world and the poetic word. This is the ecocritical appraisal through which the present article will endeavour to cast some new light on Heaney's elemental poetry.

Nature as text, and more precisely *earthy* nature as text, is a recurrent theme in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, especially at the beginning of his literary career. Critics have emphasized since the publication of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), the link between the author and his homeland through an outstanding earthy imagery. The bog, though, i.e. the mixture of earth and water, is Heaney's amphibious proto-matter. "In much of the early work," writes John Wilson Foster, "the archetypal locale was the bog—half-water, half-land" (17-18). Seamus Deane also states that Heaney's first volumes contain "a remarkably large vocabulary for earth, especially earth in a state of deliquescence, earth mixed with water" ("Powers" 275). This watery ground, continues Deane ("Powers" 275), *speaks* itself with human voice in Heaney's poetic formula, as Harold Bloom also emphasizes with the recognition of the central trope of *the vowel of the earth* (137). As an attentive "recorder of an 'earth writing'" (Kerrigan 149), in the poem 'Gifts of Rain', to give just an example, Heaney embodies rain with the vocalic reverberation of the familiar river *Moyola*:

> The tawny guttural water
>
> spells itself: Moyola
>
> is its own score and consort,
>
>
> bedding the locale
>
> in the utterance,
>
> reed music, an old chanter
>
>
> breathing its mists
>
> through vowels and history.
>
> (*Wintering Out* 15, IV, vv. 1-8)

The eco-link between earth, water and language is self-explanatory in these lines. The space of nature intermingles with the space of text in a single poem which gives voice to Northern Irish landscape. Heaney's lines on the Moyola spelling itself, writes

Kerrigan, "remain conceits, but their self-conscious linking of graphing and locale reworks, and so reactivates at great depth, a recognition that marks made in place are where writing (even electronically) starts from" (Kerrigan 153). On many occasions, in fact, *locus* equals language in Heaney's early poetry (Kermode 7), so that places seem to shrink to their orthographic and phonetic existence: "*Anahorish*, soft gradient/of consonant, vowel-meadow" (*Wintering Out* 6, ll. 7-8). Reductive as this metaphor may appear, it purposely provides the poet with the possibility of topographical possession through language, so that in a poem like 'Broagh'—in the tradition of the Celtic *dinnseanchas*, i.e. poems "which relate the original meanings of place-names and constitute a form of mythological etymology" (*Preoccupations* 131)—the correct pronunciation of the word becomes the token of topographical belonging: "like that last/*gh* the strangers found/difficult to manage" (*Wintering Out* 17, ll. 14-16). Needless to say this also pursues, especially in his early verse, Irish national assertion through the unearthing of native Irish lexicon. It is worth noting, on the other hand, that this link between verse and place is frequent not only in Heaney's poetry, but also in Northern Irish poetry in general (Kerrigan 144).[1]

This strong sense of belonging to Irish earth is deeply rooted in Heaney's poetics. It is a very early emotional certitude at the base of the process of writing. Seamus Heaney himself includes in his autobiographical essay "Mossbawn" an interesting anecdote in this respect, in which the young pre-poet experiments a rite of passage in the direct contact with the feminized Irish soil, the controversial *Mother Earth* who inspires much of his early mythology of regenerative anthropophagy and sacrifice in the so-called *bog poems* within *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975):[2]

> To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or a train, possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated. (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 19)

Heaney's personal and poetic identity can be probed within the deliquescence of the Northern Irish ground. His poetic penetration underneath layers of earth and language, his *archaeo-poetry*, as we have termed elsewhere, represents a committed attempt at finding his own roots and poetic muse, on the one hand, as well as at coming to terms, on the other hand, with the recent history of internecine violence in Northern Ireland through the promise of natural regeneration and revival learnt in the eternal cycle of Nature. Contradiction and division, nonetheless, run parallel in Heaney's landscape and mindscape, hence his early *death of a naturalist* (title, as has been noted, of his first collection of poems). In the aforementioned autobiographical essay, for example, the poet juxtaposes sectarianism with the human parcelling of the earth: "For if this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division. Like the rabbit pads that loop across grazing, and tunnel the soft growths under ripening corn, the lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land" (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 20). Again another example of the natural *wording* for a text, this time the ominous text for a whole community in conflict.

Nature, therefore, is the physical and psychological environment from which Heaney's verse springs, unconsciously from the very beginning, consciously from the very moment earth and literary education, Nature and Culture, meet each other: "I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading," the poet has confessed (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 37). In this inspiringly reciprocal encounter, therefore, it will not be unusual to articulate verse in the opposite direction, i.e. *text as Nature*, poetry as akin to the natural world. The very first poem of his very first collection, 'Digging', is a representative example. In this poem the poet identifies himself with his father, who—note the literary diction of the expression—stoops "in rhythm through potato drills/Where he was digging" (Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* 1, ll. 8-9). With his grandfather as well, who "cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog" (*Death of a Naturalist* 1, ll. 17-18). Heaney's own poetic enterprise, he suggests, is not that different from the rural activity of his ancestors. His word aspires to give off "the cold smell of potato mould," to utter "the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat" (*Death of a Naturalist* 2, ll. 25-26). His poetic wording mirrors the ineffable echo of the spade, though the poet no longer has one. But still, "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it" (*Death of a Naturalist* 2, ll. 29-31). In a much later poem with the same rural imagery, 'Poet's Chair' 3, the poetic word, again, is *like* the earth. Heaney goes back to his childhood days at the familiar farm *Mossbawn*, spectator of the ploughing labour by his father. Sitting at centre field, the poet describes that experience as a foreknowledge "Of the poem as a ploughshare that turns time/Up and over" (*The Spirit Level* 47, ll. 6-7). Especially revealing for this analogy is an appreciation Heaney makes in his critical prose about an etymological coincidence which binds together poetry and plough, poet and ploughman. The word *verse*, writes Heaney, comes from the Latin *versus*, which could mean a line of poetry—as the term is used today—"but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another" (*Preoccupations* 65). This is in fact the original sense of the word: whereas the line in *prose*[3] *proceeds* in a continuously linear way, the poem—with a less regular linear design—resembles a field of furrows which meander, change of direction. Bearing in mind this early linguistic epiphany for the writer, the distance between the work of his father and his own work becomes smaller. Much more intimate the connection between that rural remembrance from childhood and the labour of verse as an adult.

Many more things could said about the dialectics arising from *natural word* and *wordy nature* than, obviously, our paper can realistically cover in a few pages. So let us now concentrate on Heaney's poetic evolution from an *elemental* perspective, *the* perspective, it must be noted, generally adopted by criticism to describe the progression of the author's prolific career. In the volumes appearing after *North* (1975), critics began to perceive an important change in Heaney's poetry. "To telegraph the shift," in John Wilson Foster's words, "poetry's proper element is no longer seen as earth (or sea) but as air. Poetry is no longer a door into the dark but a door into the light; it must climb to its proper light, no longer descend to its proper dark" (44). The four elements, then, especially earth and air, are explicitly or implicitly used by a large number of critics in order to differentiate between a first stage (*earthy phase*), characterized by its rootedness in Northern Irish people, history and culture, as well as by political compromise with the Irish Catholic community, and a second stage (*airy phase*) in which the poet allegedly liberates himself from earthy bounds to accomplish a poetic freedom that may allow him to ascend to the realm of the transcendental, as well as to neutralize the encumbering yoke of social pressures (audience, politics and literary criticism). That is to say, earth, water and downward movement yield way in this new poetic phase to air, light (fire) and upward movement. Several reasons may have motivated this alleged shift of symbologies. The strong pressure to become the bard for

the Catholic nationalists, the great pressure also exerted by the mass media, the death of his parents (which may have contributed to the adoption of air and light as the appropriate vehicle for a new spirituality and metaphysics), his constant trips to the universities of California and Harvard in the 1980s (bringing a new *airiness* to his poetry in the travel from Europe to the USA), or the constant examination on the part of criticism and the academia, much more intense during *The Troubles*, are just some of the possible reasons. Doubt and guilt, nevertheless, prevail in Heaney's alleged *etherealization*. No sooner has the poet set out on his poetic flight than, all of a sudden, earthy gravity counteracts the initial airy impulse. In 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher', for example, the poet reminds his two sons, while they hold a kite in their hands, to "feel/the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief" before it finally "plunges down into the wood" (*Station Island* 44, ll. 19-20, 17). Examples such as this have motivated our revision of the aforementioned *airy phase*.

As a matter of fact, our research registers a noteworthy lack of consensus among Heaney critics as to which is the book of poems inaugurating this alleged symbolic shift. Except the first two volumes by Seamus Heaney—*Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969)—all the others up to *Seeing Things* (1991) have been considered by different critics as the initial point of a new poetic phase, which in the vast majority of cases—from *Field Work* (1979) onwards—has been explicitly or implicitly linked to a new symbology of light and air. To them we should add another candidate, his book of critical essays from 1988.[4] Curiously enough, six are then the possible *airy* candidates, among which there is a temporal difference of more than a decade, and the publication of other two anthologies:[5] *Field Work* (1979), *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988) and *Seeing Things* (1991). This fact bears out our claim that such an *airy phase* is not a satisfactory enough critical coinage, both from a formal and conceptual point of view, basically for two reasons: firstly, because of this critical disagreement; and secondly, because of the fact that earth is a leitmotif all throughout Heaney's poetic career. A remark by Pura López Colomé, a Mexican poet who has translated some of Heaney's latest collections into Spanish, is illuminating in this respect. She argues that water is a central symbol in *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996), when for a long time she *thought* that Heaney had taken off to air from *Station Island* (1984) onwards (López Colomé 14). As for the *Spirit Level* (1996), it has been argued, in fact, that it represents a vigorous return to the earthy imagery of his first collections.[6] In our opinion, though, Heaney does not come back to earth, as he never abandoned it. There are two interesting article titles in this respect by Sean Dunne—"Unphased Heaney, a Poet Who Remains True to His Roots" (8)—and Frank Kermode—"The Man Who returned to Earth" (7). If we were to choose one of these two titles in order to characterize Seamus Heaney's poetic evolution, we would definitely choose the first one.

What would be then the most appropriate description of Seamus Heaney's poetic evolution as regards the four elements? Some critics have used earth and air imagery to create a rigid binary schematization that fails to portray Heaney's most representative features: tension, permanent search for balance between opposites. In this search for equilibrium, the Northern Irish poet represents dialects, rather than a fight between opposites. Consequently, reading Heaney's poetry in binary terms—earth *versus* air—is not precisely a satisfactory enough critical response. In our opinion, a more adequate and clarifying reading is encapsulated in the complementary terms—earth *and* air. It is the outstanding nuance of tension and permanent search for balance that keeps both symbols in a fruitful encounter. Indeed, this is one of the most

important hallmarks of Seamus Heaney's poetry. These two symbols do not represent two different poetic stages, but two opposites that in their attraction and repulsion enact a lifelong poetics of dialectics: Ireland/England, Catholic/Protestant, feminine/masculine, vowel/consonant, Celtic/Anglo-Saxon, Nature/Culture… It is not our intention to point out a perfect harmony between the elements in that search for balance. Much as Heaney endeavours to achieve it, the connections among the four elements in his poetry are much more complex and fragmentary, as the poet is aware both of the utopian dimension of a perfect symbiosis and of the simplistic value of that attempt. This is what could be understood as *balance in movement*. Guthrie makes the following remark about the elements in ancient Greece, a remark that could literally be transferred to the role of the four elements in the poetry of Seamus Heaney: "In the world considered as a whole, none of the contrary forces […] obtains a complete and final victory: balance between them always restores or maintains itself. If one gains a local advantage, the other withdraws to another place" (our translation) (Guthrie 88). Gaston Bachelard writes in similar terms about the dialectics of the elements from the point of view of symbolism: "The material ambivalence can only take place by alternatively giving victory to both elements" (our translation) (*La tierra* 91). From an ecocritical point of view, moreover, it could be argued that this tension may well embody the search for a possible site of reconciliation between Nature and Culture. In between spade and books, farm and Academia, Heaney's poetry is frequently at the crossroads of man and Nature, Antaean root and Herculean reason.[7] This is precisely the case in 'Terminus', Roman god of boundaries and landmarks. In this poem "an acorn" juxtaposes with "a rusted bolt"—when the young pre-poet rooted about on the soil—, "a factory chimney" with "a dormant mountain"—when he lifted his eyes—, the noise of a train engine with the sound of a "trotting horse" (*The Haw Lantern* 4, I, ll. 1-6). The finishing lines are Heaney in a nutshell: "Two buckets were easier carried than one./I grew up in between" (*The Haw Lantern* 4, III, ll. 1-2). All these are defining features of Heaney's poetry: inertia towards contrariness—identity built upon otherness as well—, nonconformism (even guilt, when it happens) with the hegemony of earth, water, air or fire, the entente of *balance in movement*.

This movement between the elements, between earthy root and airy imagination, is both upwards and downwards. The watery music transpiring from 'The Rain Stick' (*The Spirit Level* 1) is only possible by upending an object full of grit (note the combination of earth and water symbolism). Who cares, writes Heaney, if that music "Is the fall [↓] of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?/You are like a rich man entering heaven [↑]" (*The Spirit Level* 1, ll. 16-17). The craftsmanship of pottery is the result of combining earth and fire in contrastive and complementary directions: "And if glazes, as you say, bring down the sun [↓],/Your potter's wheel is bringing up the earth [↑]" (*The Spirit Level* 3). The ship stuck in the air in 'Lightenings' viii, whose crewman, helped by the monks of Clonmacnoise below in the oratory, frees the ship and climbs aboard "Out of the marvellous as he had known it" (*Seeing Things* 62). A blind musician, by listening to the poet, confesses in 'At the Wellhead': "I can see the sky [↑] at the bottom of it [↓] now" (*The Spirit Level* 66), a poetic miracle reminiscent of the "trapped sky" [↑] the young poet loved within wells [↓] in 'Personal Helicon' (*Death of a Naturalist* 46). All these are but a few examples of the mentioned interaction among the elements. They also illustrate how often the poet descends in order to ascend. He goes backwards to move forwards. Or vice versa. Thus demonstrating that poetic evolution, defeat of cul-de-sac and impasse, *movement* in its more ample sense—personal and collective—necessarily entails gathering contraries. The conclusion to 'The First Words' is almost an ecopoetic creed:

> My only drink is meaning from the deep brain,

What the birds and the grass and the stones drink.

Let everything flow

Up to the four elements,

Up to water and earth and fire and air.

(*The Spirit Level* 38, ll. 5-9)

"A poet of genius," writes Bachelard, "invokes metaphors of all the elements" (our translation) (*El aire* 166). As this paper has endeavoured to briefly portray, Heaney's verse indeed shapes an elemental ecoweb whose dynamic interconnections (including those between Nature and language) allow him to come to terms with the tension arising from the different dualities at the core of his poetry, mainly that between earthy belonging and airy aspiration. Hence his—in our view—ecocritically suggestive in-betweenness: in this our age of environmental apocalypse, Heaney's poetry readily shows that there may just as well exist a space for interaction between Nature (earth) and Culture (air), *tense* and temporarily comforting though this may only get. That tension, on the other hand, may prove the utopian operation of such a link. These are interesting implications in Heaney's work which could trace new paths for further discussion in ecopoetic studies.

Endnotes

[1] Claire Connolly, for example, points out a connection between poetry and cartographic practices in contemporary Irish culture: "The iconography of the map takes on new meanings, as seen in contemporary cultural production in Ireland. No longer simply systems of representation, maps have become cultural objects, and Irish literary and visual culture is currently distinguished by a number of active negotiations with cartographic practises" (260-261).

[2] According to Goodby and Phillips, the *bog poems* have "open[ed] a can of worms that (in Irish critical circles, at least) has never really been closed" (24). A book by P. V. Glob, *The Bog People* (1969), was decisive in Heaney's early mythology of anthropophagy and sacrifice: in that book Glob writes about the unearthed bodies of men and women who were preserved in the bogs of Jutland and who date back to the Iron Age. According to this author, some of these men and women (such as 'The Tollund Man' in Heaney's *Wintering Out*, 1972) were offered in sacrifice to the Mother Earth, who in turn guaranteed the eternal cycle of life. This mythic pattern offered to Heaney a consoling parallel to the internecine violence in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s (the so-called *The Troubles*), a parallel which, nonetheless, met with disapproval by some critics who understood such mythology as a dangerous aestheticization and legitimization of violence. See, for example, Carson (1975), Coughlan (1997), Cullingford (1990) and Lloyd (1997).

[3] From the Latin expression *prosa oratio*, i.e. linear discourse.

[4] The different books and critics are *Wintering Out* (1972): Andrew Murphy (2000: 3-4); *North* (1975): Frank Kermode (1998: 7), Bernard O'Donoghue (1994: 15); *Field Work* (1979): Elmer Andrews (1998: 142), Henry Hart (1992: 5-6), Seamus Deane (1986: 241, 1997: 66), Brian Hughes (1996: 29), Harold Bloom (1980: 138); *Sweeney Astray* (1983): Nicholas Jenkins (1996: 11); *Station Island* (1984): Nicholas Jenkins (1996: 11), John Constable (1999: 148), Paul Breslin (1996: 340), Louis Simpson (Miller, 2000: 109), Matthew Campbell

(1997: 40), Desmond Fennell (1991: 34), Blake Morrison (1984: 1192), Bernard O'Donoghue (1994: 108), Gerald Dawe (1990: 24); *The Haw Lantern* (1987): Gerald Dawe (1990: 24), David Wheatley (1998: 25), Helen Vendler (Wheatley, 1998: 25), James Wood (1996: 6), Michael Parker (1993: 209-210); *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988): John Wilson Foster (1995: 44); *Seeing Things* (1991): Elmer Andrews (1998: 142), Michael Hoffman (Constable, 1999: 53), John Carey (Constable, 1999: 53), Rui Carvalho Homem (2001: 24). The inclusion of *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) does not respond to the explicit or implicit introduction of airy imagery, but to the introduction of political compromise in Heaney's poetry. The abandonment of political compromise in poetry has been considered as an implicit manifestation of poetic etherealization in the hypotheses by Breslin, Simpson and Fennel above as for the volume *Station Island* (1984).

[5] *Selected Poems 1965-1975* (1980) and *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (1990).

[6] See, for example, Breslin (1996: 341) and Corcoran (1998: 193).

[7] The Greek gods Antaeus and Hercules are another well-known mythological couple who embody the everlasting struggle between earthy Nature (Antaeus) and airy imagination (Hercules) in Heaney's verse. Antaeus' invincible strength depended on his permanent contact with the Earth—his mother—, whereas Hercules, Zeus' son, was of celestial origin. In classical mythology Hercules succeeded in defeating Antaeus by firmly holding him up in the air and thus cutting off the energy which he constantly received from the Earth. Hence the airy symbolism of liberation from earthy bounds represented by Hercules in Heaney's poetry and the adoption of this trope by critics advocating the aforementioned *airy phase*. Nonetheless, we do agree with Seamus Deane that in Heaney's poetic evolution "the work gets more and more Herculean, but the Antaean root does not snap" ("Powers" 276).

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