Zapf, Hubert. "Matter and Mind." *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 177–188. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474274685.ch-016>>.

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Matter and Mind

Cultural ecology and elemental poetics

As has been seen in the preceding analyses, literary creativity frequently emerges from metaphorical translations between the domains of nature and culture, body and text, matter and mind in mutually conditioning interactions between order and chaos, destructuring and restructuring forces. This process can be illuminated from another productive angle when we look at typical, frequently recurring sources of such metaphors, one of which are the classical four elements. The theory and poetics of the four elements constitute one of the significant linkages of modern thought, language, and literature to the ancient world. As Macauley demonstrates in his comprehensive survey *Elemental Philosophy*, the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water have substantially shaped the history of culture and philosophy and, while they receded almost into oblivion in later modernity, nevertheless have continued to influence language, philosophy, art, and literature in subliminal ways. In ancient Egypt and Arabia, in Greek philosophy, in medieval alchemy and medicine, these four elements were considered to constitute the material and spiritual substance of the world. The number of four elements would, of course, have to be modified in view of different cultural traditions. In Hindu mythology, Japanese Buddhism, or Chinese philosophy, for example, five elements are assumed to exist. But in the Hindu and Japanese traditions, the four classical elements nevertheless remain essential, with an added fifth element containing and transcending the others—the ether respectively the void in Hindu and Japanese philosophy. This fifth element, by the way, somewhat resembles the *quint[essence]*, the fifth element in Aristotle's philosophy, which he postulated as a constant, time-transcending synthesis between the other, unstable, and

transitory elements. Three of the four classical elements, namely earth, fire, and water, are also part of the Chinese tradition, which additionally includes metal and wood as elemental manifestations of matter and organic life.

Such differences would of course have to be taken into account in a comprehensive analysis, but it is nevertheless remarkable to what extent the four elements have a cross-cultural significance, which makes them an exemplary field of exploring the relationship between mind and matter in texts. They belong to the domain of “buried knowledge” that, to Bateson, art and literature make symbolically accessible (Charlton, 107), recuperating it as part of an earth-centered memory of the human species that enriches the complexity of ecological thought and imagination. They are part of a deep cultural memory of the primary embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman world of material nature, which can productively feed into an ecological epistemology and into the imaginative explorations of art and literature. They provide a source of continuity through historical periods and across languages and cultures, a sustainable matrix of cognitive and creative productivity within the discursive fields of culture-nature relations. An elemental philosophy and poetics represents a particularly interesting case for a cultural ecology of literature, since it helps to link the innovational drive of imaginative texts, as experimental spaces of cultural self-renewal, to their recursive feedback relations with an archive of ecossemiotic models that can be recycled in ever new ways. According to Macauley, “we are well advised to listen to this ancient wisdom although it may speak to us through a foreign language, another era, or a different set of concerns” (339). Macauley largely concentrates on philosophy, even though he includes “interstices” between his chapters in which the significance of his observations for culture, literature, art, and everyday experience is hinted at. Stone, wood, ice and snow, cloud, heat and cold, light and shadow, night, as well as space are the foci of these interstices, which prove to be present in multifarious ways as perceptual, cognitive, aesthetic, or experiential forms, structuring and energizing human thought and artifacts. Their generative potential lies in their combination of both material concreteness and a high degree of indeterminacy. William Desmond speaks of the “elemental indeterminacies of earth, fire, air, and water,” which shape our “primal aesthetic being there in the world.” “[W]e stand in the thickened middle of a sensuous flux, at the juncture not only of materiality and

imagination but at the conjuncture of an undomesticated primordial ‘plasma’ of the four elements” (Macauley 340 paraphrasing Desmond).

The four elements thus connect us to an experiential immediacy of being while simultaneously offering a rich semiotic potential for language, dreams, the unconscious, cognition, the imagination, narrative, and art. This has been demonstrated by the brothers Böhme from an eco-phenomenological and cultural-historical approach (G. and H. Böhme 1996), in which they analyse the various ways in which language, thought, and aesthetic discourse are transfused by elemental signifiers that can help to reconnect the modern rational individual to a body-centered “aesthetics of nature” (G. Böhme 1989). It has also been elaborated more speculatively in Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of the four elements, which, according to Bachelard, are not simply “concrete, realistic, and substantial aesthetic material” (Hans-Erik Larsen quoted in Macauley 341) but resemble “Jungian archetypes” in that they “exhibit unconscious and subjective dimensions” as well (Macauley 295). Bachelard tries to think science and poetry together, which he regards as “complementary” modes of elemental cognition, whereby poetry continually recuperates “the force of metaphors” which science “tries to eliminate or bypass ... [but] which persists nevertheless” (Macauley 295). Bachelard traces the use of elemental metaphors in a broad spectrum of texts, extensively discussing examples of all four elements in poets that he individually associates with one of these elements respectively and classifies into different types. The German poets Novalis, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Hölderlin, for example, are poets of fire, whereas Nietzsche is the archetypal poet and philosopher of air, “a figure of heights, mountains and ascensions,” as distinct from the limiting earth, the “servile” water, and the erratically inconstant fire (Macauley 298). Bachelard has many important things to say about an elemental poetics, and as Macauley observes, “Bachelard’s elemental explorations are germane, then, to a broad form of cultural ecology that unites the material and figurative realms” (299). But Bachelard’s urge to classify and typify is sometimes excessive and exclusionary, undermining his attempts to clarify the relevance of the four elements for a cultural ecology of literature. Rather than assigning monosemic anthropomorphic meanings to the elements and their symbolic representations, it seems more appropriate for the description of eco-aesthetic processes to assume polysemic, shifting, fundamentally indeterminate meanings that unfold in texts and artifacts

precisely because of the pre-conceptual and hetero-discursive character of the forces that the elements are taken to represent. Indeed, the use of the four elements in literature can illustrate especially well one of the main points of interest for a cultural ecology of literature, because they exemplify how the forms of literary creativity are typically derived from the reflexive interactivity between mind and matter, ecocultural and biosemiotic processes.

Earth, fire, air, and water as ecopoetic energy fields

Some of the most ancient metaphors of creative inspiration and energy, which have been countless recycled in later literary history, are related to the four elements. Above all, the earth itself has been an almost omnipresent metaphor and source of creativity in literature: in the myth of the Magna Mater, in its flora and fauna, its seascapes and landscapes, its forests and deserts, its plains and mountains, its cycles of fertility, of growth and decay, death and rebirth, day and night, of the seasons and the weather—all of them representing generative sites of the literary imagination throughout western and non-western literatures alike. Plants and vegetation in their multiple shapes and forms are signifiers of poetic productivity, such as flowers in classical and romantic literature as in Wordsworth's daffodils or the blue flower of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which represent iconic figurations of the poetic imagination in British and German romanticism respectively. In American literature, notable examples range from the spears of grass that translate into "so many uttering tongues" in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (26); to the "leaping tongue of bloom" in Frost's "Tuft of Flowers" (l. 23); to the unfolding curls of spring buds as signifiers of natural-poetic emergence in William Carlos Williams' "On the Road to the Contagious Hospital"; up to the soot-stained sunflower as an alter ego of the human speaker in Allen Ginsberg's poem "Sunflower Sutra," which, in its black external shabbiness but beautiful yellow inside, conveys the shared creative potential of human and nonhuman life in the midst of an industrial wasteland. The poet is sitting with Jack Kerouac in a desolate industrial site and discovers the black sunflower, which becomes a dialogic mirror of his innermost self. Just like the sunflower, which is externally deformed by the waste of civilizational progress, the poet is scarred by the alienation, traumas,

and depressions of society, but like Jack Kerouac and all humans, he shares with the disfigured sunflower a hidden potential of beauty and vitality, which he expresses in the process of poetic meditation in a jazz-like psychedelic rhythm and sound (Ginsberg):

... So I grabbed up the skeleton thick sunflower and stuck it at my side like a
 scepter,
 and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack's soul too, and anyone who'll
 listen,
 — We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless
 locomotive, we're all beautiful golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our
 own seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad
 black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the
 shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan
 evening sitdown vision.

Similarly, the earth's fauna has supplied a recurrent source domain of creativity metaphors in texts. Birds especially are frequent dialogic others of poets and incarnate the transformative power of poetic discourse, such as the classical nightingale in Keats, the mockingbird and spotted hawk in Whitman, the raven in Poe, the white heron in Sarah Orne Jewett, the oven bird in Robert Frost, the vulture in Robinson Jeffers, or the eagle in Joy Harjo or Simon Ortiz. Huge and sublime animals like Melville's white whale, Faulkner's old bear Ben in "The Bear," or Hemingway's giant marlin in *The Old Man and the Sea* but also small and insignificant creatures like Dickinson's snake, fly, or crickets, or Marianne Moore's snail, toad, or paper nautilus, constitute sources of poetological inspiration which inhabit and shape the shared creative cosmos of texts. These polymorphic presences in imaginative texts exemplify what Elisabeth A. Lawrence has termed "cognitive biophilia" (Lawrence) and what Louise Westling calls the "human animal dance" as a creative matrix of literary narratives from antiquity to modernity (1993). Obviously, the examples are too numerous to be discussed here in any representative way. But what all of them show in their different ways is that elementary poetics constitutes one of the most potent sites and sources of literary production and creativity, which actualizes the ecological unconscious of texts as a powerful potential of human self-exploration from the biosemiotic memory of deep-time nature-culture coevolution.

The element of fire is an inspirational force that is both destructive and creative, a sign of radical discontinuity yet also of new beginnings, of liberation and rebirth. It is connected with heat, light, intensity, and with productive yet also self-consuming creative energy, as personified in archaic mythological figures such as Phoenix, the mythical firebird who dies in the fire and is reborn from the ashes, or Prometheus, the bringer of fire and creator of humans. An example of this radical translation between elemental energies of nature and creative human energies is the famous poem by Nietzsche from *Ecce Homo* (255):

Flamme bin ich

Ja, ich weiß, woher ich stamme:
 Ungesättigt gleich der Flamme
 glühe und verzehr ich mich.
 Licht wird alles, was ich fasse,
 Kohle, alles, was ich lasse
 —Flamme bin ich sicherlich.

Yes, I know from where I came!
 Ever hungry like a flame,
 I consume myself and glow.
 Light grows all that I conceive,
 Ashes everything I leave:
 Flame I am assuredly. (Corngold 53)

Note that the poem is about a “wild” source of the human self in the element of fire, which energizes the subject and its environment as an all-consuming force of intensity and chaotic transfiguration but that its form nevertheless follows a rhythmic order provided by the regular four-syllable trochaic verse and the two symmetrical parts marked off by the period between lines 1–3 and lines 4–6. Both of these parts start in a parallel way with a pair rhyme in the first two and in the fourth and fifth lines and end in a single verse in lines 3 and 6, which link the two parts in a tail rhyme that emphasizes both reflective difference and empathic identification of the human self toward the elemental force of fire that it evokes for its own creative power. Here again, inspiration and composition, chaos and order, deconstruction and reconstruction are the characteristic poles between which the literary transformation of ecopoetic energy fields into textual poesis is performed.

In our corpus of core texts from American literature, *The Scarlet Letter* is an example in which the element of fire serves to embody the creative force underlying and pervading the novel. Already in the metafictional frame narrative of "The Custom-House," the red-colored sign of cloth forming the letter A, which the narrator finds in the upper storey of the Custom-House, is connected with a fiery energy emanating from this material signifier. Lifting it to his breast, the narrator lets it drop to the floor because of its "burning heat ... as if the letter were not of red cloth, but of red-hot iron" (62). The sign assumes a demonic force associated with fire in the perception of Hester by the townspeople: "They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing all alight, whenever Hester Prynne walked about in the night-time" (112). This demonic fire becomes an even more sinister force in Chillingworth's mephistophelian scientific mind: "...the fire in his laboratory had been brought from the lower regions, and was fed with infernal fuel" (149), while Pearl's "ever-creative spirit" (118) as a hybrid being on the boundary of culture and nature, an embodiment of wildness and yet an incarnation of the scarlet letter, personifies the playful version of dancing fire: "There was fire in her and throughout her ... and made her the very brightest little jet of flame that ever danced upon the earth" (124). And in Dimmesdale, this inspirational force of fire finds expression in his exceptional power of speech, his "tongue of flame," in which the underlying tensions and unresolved conflicts of self and society are brought to cultural articulation in a shared intensity of inspiration through which he is able to address "the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language" (162).

Air and wind, as the sound and energy of moving atmospheric forces, equally have been signifiers translating natural into cultural creativity, as in the myth of the Aeolian harp whose sounds are produced not by human hands but by the air itself. Well-known examples include Shakespeare's Ariel in *The Tempest*, who represents the merging of water, wind, music, and art in the transformative "sea-change" of the play or Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," which addresses the wind as "Destroyer and Preserver" (l. 14) that renews the creative imagination of the poetic self. In fact, all the four elements are invoked in Shelley's poem to enforce this effect—the earth in the cycle of the seasons from the dry leaves of autumn to the "sweet buds" of spring (l. 11); water in the

imagery of turbulent waves and stormy clouds; fire in the convolutions of “rain and lightning” (l. 18) and of “black rain, and fire, and hail” (l. 28). All of them are related to the wind as a force of radical change and yet continual recurrence, a force between death and rebirth, paralysis and regeneration, which the poet tries, almost desperately, to conjure as a source of personal, poetic, and cultural self-renewal: “Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is . . . And, by the incantation of this verse, / Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!/ Be through my lips to unawakened Earth/ The trumpet of a prophecy!” (Shelley l. 57, l. 65–69). Once more, the poem’s process results from the attempt to translate elemental natural into radical cultural creativity. The power of the wind as a metonymic signifier of nature’s creativity is self-reflexively staged as a vital medium for the renewal of the poetic imagination, which at the same time remains unavailable to full poetic representation as a fundamental life force that both inspires and transcends the poetic process.

Again, these elemental metaphors of literary ecology are both culture-specific and transcultural. They find different expressions in different periods and cultures, but they also provide an ecosemiotic code of literary productivity that extends across the boundaries of cultures and links them in the awareness of their shared existence as part of a larger connectivity of all life on the planet. Among the many examples of literary uses of the wind as a medium of creative inspiration in Native American Literature, for instance, Simon Ortiz’ poetry is an instructive case in point. In *Spreading Wings on Wind*, he relates the shape-shifting forms of poetic identity to the wind in ways that empower the poet not only to imaginatively join in the flight of the eagle but to “think like a mountain” (Barry Lopez) as well, because the wind here signifies a more general force and rhythm of being, a “breath” of life of which the poet becomes a mediator (Ortiz):

I must remember
that I am only one part
among many parts,
not a singular eagle
or one mountain. I am
a transparent breathing.

In a more material form the wind, as a thermodynamic phenomenon of moving matter, appears in Ortiz’ *Wind and Glacier Voices*, where Ortiz

conflates the invisible energy streams of solar winds with the sounds of pre-historic glaciers into a poem of deep time, in which personal and cultural life is interpreted in geo-historical dimensions. On a larger scale, in Linda Hogan's novel *Solar Storms*, this geo-cosmological contextualization of human within planetary life becomes the basis of an ecofeminist narrative of both capitalist-technological exploitation and biophilic regeneration.

Water, too, has represented a source domain for metaphors of literary creativity in many different forms and cultures. As Hans-Erik Larsen has demonstrated in relation to painting and literature, "the ebb and flow of hydrological processes" (quoted in Macauley 339) has pervaded the artistic imagination not only as a theme but as a medium of their aesthetic processes. Water and light have been the inspiring elements of impressionism and of *fin de siècle* literature, with the figure of the "wave" not merely as an object of aesthetic exploration but as a model of artistic form. More or less explicitly, however, water in its various manifestations has been present in art and literature throughout history and beyond specific periods (Cf. Goodbody and Wanning). Brooks, rivers, clouds, lakes, or the sea have served as poetological media. Springs and fountains, as symbolic sites of origins, are frequent analogs of poetical creativity, for example, in a gothic-romantic conception, in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", whose "stately pleasure-dome" (l. 4) is built on a "savage place" (l. 14) from whose "chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,/ As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,/ A mighty fountain momentarily was forced" (l. 17–19). Rivers, too, are recurrent sites of literary inspiration, as in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, where the narrative flow of the text is modeled on the flow of the Mississippi river; in Robert Frost's "West-Running Brook," where the brook is a dialogic medium of life both separating and connecting the two speakers: "It flows between us to separate us for a panic moment. It flows between us, over us and *with us*" (Frost 165); in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," where the swampy river both reflects the narrator's war trauma and helps to overcome it; in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, where the presence of the motif ranges from the water of the creek in which the Compson children gained their first intimate experience of nature, to the suicide of Quentin in water as a desperate act of reconnecting with this lost past; in Gary Snyder's cycle of poems *Regarding Wave*, which captures the motion of waves as energy flows in images relating not only to water but

to animals, the human body, the mind, and language itself, bringing together Zen Buddhist and Western ways of thinking and writing about water as a life force and at the same time a source of the cultural and literary imagination; or in Linda Hogan's poem *To Light*, already discussed above, in which the all-pervading element of water becomes a medium of traumatic memory as well as of the flow of its poetic transformation and articulation. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ghost of Beloved, who returns from the dead as an irresistible force of "rememory" pervading the text, emerges from a river: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (168). In this scene, which self-reflexively stages the emergence of the central narrative energy of the novel, images from nature and culture are blended in a symbolic rising from the dead that initiates a polyphonic process of storytelling and remembering a traumatizing past.

This catalytic and transformative use of water seems to be more generally relevant for African American literature. As Anissa Janine Wardi points out in her book *Water and African American Memory*, water has been an important element in the whole corpus of recent African American literature as a semiotic medium of cultural criticism and self-exploration between historical memory, trauma, and imaginative regeneration. This is of course especially true of the sea and the Atlantic Ocean as the site of the Middle Passage, which has become a prominent topic of African American studies under the umbrella term of the Black Atlantic. In this perspective, as Wardi and others point out, water and the sea are culturally heavily coded in terms of their contamination by the exploitative practices of colonialism. Thus the sea in Morrison's *Beloved*, for example, becomes an imaginary space of powerful scenes of rememory of the Middle Passage in the form of multiple stream-of-consciousness techniques. A cultural ecology of literature would agree that this culture-specific coding of water—and of other elemental images—is a central part of Morrison's aesthetic but would also point to a dimension of the text which indicates a more general potential that the elements provide as an ecosemiotic matrix for the literary imagination in structuring and communicating such specifically coded historical-cultural experiences.

The use of the elements in literature involves not only physical, material but also internal, psychocultural realities. A cultural-ecological approach looks at these mutual translations between external and internal ecosystems with special attention, because they provide a preferred medium in which

imaginative texts operate and which enables them to address key issues of human culture and history from both a culture-specific and a transcultural perspective. In the subsequent chapters, I specify this potential further by considering the spectrum of interaction between material and psychocultural aspects in two complementary frameworks: liminal spaces of culture/nature interaction in the example of the beach, in which a material phenomenon of nature becomes a site of psychocultural self-exploration; and literary trauma narratives, in which psychocultural forms of trauma are contextualized within material-natural processes.