“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 earthly 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 earthly 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 earthly 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 these 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.

Keywords

Seamus Heaney; Ireland; ecopoetics; landscape; elements

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