The Playful Air of Light(ness) in Irish Literature and Culture

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

THE ELEMENTAL COMPOSITION OF PLAYFULNESS AND LIGHT(NESS)

KATARZYNA POLOCZEK AND MARTA GOSZCZYŃSKA

> Before the morning is flooded with light, before noonday life is set on fire, the whole is held together in a tender embrace, not yet open to allow anything to be seized in its presence. Departure, the severing of the one from the whole has not yet happened, an appeal for its return home to a surrounding proximity is not needed. (Irigaray, *Elemental* 64-65)

This book has its source in a combination of two ideas. The first is the concept of openness as articulated in Irigaray's *Elemental Passions* and *The Forgetting of Air*. The second is our conviction that such a spirit permeates Irish literature and culture despite the country's troubled past and all the complexities that shape its present. Articulating the "before presence" air of openness, Irigaray writes: "Openness is not reflected, not mimed, not reproduced. Not even produced. Openness: a clearing, without surrounding walls" (Irigaray, *Elemental* 63). In our view, Irish literature and culture are perfect grounds to observe such an openness at work.

Another philosophical text that this volume is indebted to, one which establishes a direct link between openness and playfulness by using the former as a key term in defining the latter, is the seminal 1987 essay by María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." In it, Lugones does what few other philosophers would dare, attempting to redefine "playfulness" not just according to its postmodern aura of the game, but in a broader, almost ethical, vein. She clearly objects to what she defines as "an agonistic sense of playfulness" (15) associated with a centralisation of one's own proficiency and prominence, and with the idea of playing by a narrow set of rules in order to win. Such an approach, she argues, invites not respect but enmity. More, it also encourages modes of thought where

> the attitude of *playfulness is conceived as secondary to or derivative from play*. Since play is agon, then the only conceivable playful attitude is an agonistic one (the attitude does not turn an activity into play, but rather presupposes an activity that is play. (Lugones 15; original emphasis)

Against this tendentious approach, Lugones champions a spirit of "loving playfulness," whose openness, rather than insolence, issues in a joy (16-17). She argues that

> . . . playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise*. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction.* We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, *there are no rules that are to us sacred* . . . While playful we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular "world." We *are there creatively*. We are not passive. (16-17; original emphases)

In their readings of the concept of playfulness, most of the texts in this collection are closer in spirit to Lugones's essay, written over twenty years ago, than to recent postmodern criticism. Here, playfulness is not a self-referential game with empty conventions but a living field, open to and crisscrossed by other social, cultural, psychological and "metaphysical" realities. This should come as no surprise: while postmodernism, like several of its cousins, seems to have exhausted itself, the spirit of playfulness thrives, and proliferates in numerous shapes and forms. This comes through in the following essays on the many faces of playfulness, seeing it, for example, as a self-forming and dialogic phenomenon (Padilla and Kruczkowska), a spiritual craving (Mills), a sensuous and gender-grounded manifestation (Schrage-Früh), a political and satirical tool (Fordoński and Szmigiero), a specific type of linguistic humour (Dynel), and even a force shaded with psychotherapeutic qualities (Krzyżaniak). Despite their variety, all these essays are at ease with the uncertainty and tricks of play, their authors happy to move and see in a way that Lugones characterises thus:

> Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight.

> So, positively, the playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the "worlds" we inhabit playfully. (Lugones 17)

This volume's second focal concept—that of lightness—has been borrowed from the critical thought of Italo Calvino as expressed in his *Six Memos For the New Millennium*. The concept may be directly applied, as in Tomasz Dobrogoszcz's text on the lightness of narrative technique in Banville's *The Sea*, or only suggested by the chapter's content, as in David Malcolm's analysis of McGahern's short stories; but whichever, the authors of these chapters echo Calvino's sentiment that "everything we choose and value for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight" (7). For Calvino, lightness is not only "a way of looking at the world," but "also something arising from the writing itself, from the . . . linguistic power" (10). He elaborates on this idea as follows:

> . . . there is a lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency. (16)

We find this language-orientated approach in Malcolm's discussion of McGahern's "sour" epiphanies, in Lachman's exploration of the musical dimension of Ciaran Carson's *Last Night's Fun*, in Senktas's analysis of the obsessively reiterated refrain in MacNeice's "Autobiography," and in Bruś's reading of the communal and entertaining face of what she describes as "personal essays" by MacNeice and Yeats. All in all, playfulness and light(ness) provide constant points of reference for the texts that comprise this book.

The chapters in Part I draw attention to the presence of classical Greek influences in Irish literature, identifying many references to Greek philosophy and literature in the works of Irish writers whilst remaining critically alive to a characteristically Irish setting. Irigaray talks of "a dawning as powerful as that of the Greeks. Giving birth to a veiled landscape" (*Elemental* 95), words that nicely catch the spirit of Part I, if we take that landscape as Ireland.

In "Janus-Faced Heaney: From Earth to Air?" Juan Ráez Padilla's argument is structured by elemental concepts of Greek origin, which he defines as *humus* (earth and water, graphically rendered by the author as arrows pointing down) and *ether* (air and fire—arrows pointing up). Padilla uses these concepts to challenge a prevailing belief that Heaney's poetic output is sharply divided into two discrete stages: his immersion in

Northern Irish politics and history, which many see as the compost for his literary growth, and the later phase of "airy ascendance" towards personal autonomy. Engaged polemically with critical studies that, in his view, overemphasise this division, Padilla offers a compelling reading of Heaney based on analysis of a (self-)constructive aspect of poetic playfulness. For Padilla, what others see as a resolved once-and-for-all switch into a new phase of poetic development is in fact an open, ongoing and constructively playful process of incorporation. Drawing on Greek philosophy, Padilla reads the metamorphosis in Heaney's poetry as bound up in an aspiration towards "being in the world creatively" (Lugones 17). The result is a delicate equilibrium where various elements are not reduced to antagonistic and irreconcilable forces but overlap and coexist in a playful harmony.

The second text in Part I is Joanna Kruczkowska's "Openness and Light in the Dialogue between the North and the South: Selected Poems by Contemporary Irish and Greek Poets." Kruczkowska looks at the dialogic and open nature of playfulness in poems by Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon and in passages from Michael Longley, picking out certain literary, cultural and political parallels between Greece and Ireland. Two poems examined by Kruczkowska—Heaney's "To George Seferis in the Underworld" and Mahon's "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford"— are explicit about their debt to Seferis, Heaney referring to "On Aspalathoi," Mahon drawing on *Mythistorema*. A deep understanding of the linguistic and historical complexities of both cultures allows Kruczkowska to uncover a dialogic dimension of playfulness, its dynamic of light and darkness, openness and closure, water and land, person and nation. She suggests that Irish poets gravitate towards Seferis because they feel the parallels between the political situation of Ireland and of Greece, a country troubled by centuries of Turkish occupation, then by its home-grown dictatorship of the junta, the latter event temporally overlapping with the Troubles in the North. At the same time, Kruczkowska stresses that Heaney and Mahon aspire to much more than analogy: they aim at light (epiphany) as a wisdom granting deeper insight into the situation of the poet in a war-torn and tormented community. But before they can see the light, they must first plunge into darkness.

Part I culminates with Richard Mills's analysis of Greek philosophical, mythological and theological influences in the work of Forrest Reid. In "'A Strange Sense of Dreaming': Forrest Reid and the Northern Irish Landscape," Mills looks at two Reid novels, *The Kingdom of Twilight* (1904) and *The Bracknels* (1911), and his biography *Apostate* (1926), tracing in them the presence of Greek-inspired motifs and themes. Well

versed in Greek philosophy, poetry and art, and influenced by the aestheticism of Walter Pater, Reid may have accused the Irish Literary Revival of politicisation but nonetheless shared with it a passion for myth, mysticism and the supernatural. Whilst exploring the complex playfulness of Reid's idiosyncratic visionary images, Mills also notes that he invariably set his novels in Northern Ireland, its landscape an arena for the themes of nature, childhood innocence and spirituality. Arguing that Reid's artistic credo finds its most adequate manifestation in "a close observation of the natural world and a rejection of industrialism and materialism" (37), Mills believes that the novelist's glorification of the spiritual dimension of nature has its source in "a Greek pantheist, mystical relationship with the Northern Irish landscape" (33), apprehending the natural world as an emanation of divine presence, artistic perfection and classical sublimity.

Two chapters in Part II offer complex, paradoxical readings of light(ness) by analysing how it interplays with its antithesis, darkness. David Malcolm's "Soured Epiphanies? John McGahern's *High Ground*," explores the fiction of McGahern, his third collection of short stories in particular. Malcolm's chapter raises the vital question of whether (and, if so, where) in the dense textual world of McGahern's fiction one may find a comforting light. In the first two sections of his chapter, Malcolm demonstrates how the theme of light(ness) has evolved and been rendered in McGahern's six novels—*The Barracks* (1963), *The Dark* (1964), *The Leavetaking* (1974/1984), *The Pornographer* (1979), *Amongst Women* (1990) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002)—in his controversial 1991 play, *The Power of Darkness*, and in his earlier collections of short stories, *Nightlines* (1970) and *Getting Through* (1978). In line with Declan Kiberd, Malcolm emphasises the more affirmative motifs in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, especially its depiction of an individual no longer painfully alienated from society and nature. But Malcolm's analysis has little to do with any commonplace understanding of lightness; for him, McGahern's grim discursive realities, permeated by anguish, grief, trauma, emotional and physical deprivation, offer little space for light. The third section of the chapter, however, devoted entirely to McGahern's *High Ground* (1985), encourages us to reconsider other meanings of light(ness), and, to quote Calvino again, to envisage a "search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living" (26). As if elaborating on this thought, Malcolm suggests that in *High Ground* darkness and light(ness) exist side by side, a number of stories in the collection celebrating rural and urban charm and allowing moments of hope, epiphany and "emotional and moral light" (50). Nonetheless, the chapter's conclusion is less optimistic, more

tentative, Malcolm arguing that, despite these occasional glimmers of light, McGahern's world remains predominantly bleak and gloomy, the only consistent source of light found in the craftsmanship of the text itself, a quality which—in Malcolm's view—is the most visible sign of playfulness in McGahern's stories, "a technical lightness, a *légèreté* that contrasts with their thematic dark" (53).

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz's "The Eerie Re-Visioning of Airy Past in John Banville's *The Sea*" draws on Lacan, and on Italo Calvino's phenomenology of lightness, to examine Banville's 2005 Booker Prize-winning novel. Dobrogoszcz refers, as does Calvino, to the myth of Perseus. Calvino emphasises the fact that Perseus emerges unscathed from his confrontation with Medusa because he refuses to look directly, resorting to "an indirect vision" (4). Dobrogoszcz shows how the narrator of *The Sea* does likewise to come to terms with the painful circumstances of his life. This happens twice: in his youth when he constructs for himself a new identity based on how he is perceived by his future wife, and in his mature adulthood, when, after his wife's death, he attempts to shield himself from the prospect of losing this identity. Since this identity is based not on his self-image but on how he is defined by what Lacan famously dubbed "the gaze of the other," Banville's novel enacts Calvino's ideas about the importance of approaching life indirectly, treating it lightly, availing oneself of the "image caught in the mirror" (4).

The Irish writers scrutinised in Part III adopt a playful stance in their treatment of Ireland's historical and contemporary afflictions. Here we have debates on freedom of speech and politics, the role of institutionalised religion, racial and ethnic prejudice, and women's position in the Irish society of the past and today. Given the weight of these topics, it is understandable that playfulness, as discussed in this section, manifests itself in discursive strategies and techniques rather than on the thematic level of analysed texts.

The section begins with Krzysztof Fordoński's "A Sip from Myles na gCopaleen's Cruiskeen Lawn: The Other Face of Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien)," a text that discloses a less-known, playful, literary mask of Brian O'Nolan (O Nuallain). Fordoński familiarises readers with Cruiskeen Lawn, an *Irish Times* column written by O'Nolan under the pen-name of Myles na gCopaleen between 1940 and 1963, revealing the writer's "openness to self-construction or reconstruction," an attitude advocated in Lugones's manifesto on play (17). Fordoński outlines the personal, artistic and political forces that encouraged O'Nolan to develop his playful persona and thus brought Myles na gCopaleen into the Irish political arena. He also reveals the historical background against which the

author wrote the column, the context that spurred his critique of the de Valera government's policy, his disapproval of censorship, his suspicion of the practices of Irish courts and his mockery of the literary tastes of affluent Irish citizens. The column was not limited to political issues; it also commented on social, cultural and linguistic matters, and O'Nolan used the press to promote his distinct views on the issue of Irish Gaelic. As Fordoński observes, he attempted to restore the language by proving that it could be a modern, witty medium of expression, not some fossilised national symbol propped up by the government. Fordoński describes some of the playful characters who regularly featured in the column, such as the Brother, the Plain People of Ireland and the English Romantic poet Keats, often depicted in surreal debates and contexts. He also records the changing tenor of playfulness in O'Nolan's writings, noting "his gradual transformation from a playful defender of the native tongue to a bitter critic of Irish political and cultural life" (79). In this way, Fordoński examines the potential and limits of "inhabiting the world playfully" (Lugones 17) in a specifically defined period of Irish history.

Moving within a similar historical framework, Katarzyna Szmigiero's text focuses on the work of Eimar O'Duffy, a writer who remains a relatively obscure figure (even to a contemporary academic readership), despite the fact that he was the first Irish author to combine myth, allegory, fantasy and satire. Szmigiero concentrates on O'Duffy's trilogy—*King Goshawk and the Birds* (1926), *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street* (1928) and *Asses in Clover* (1933)—paying special attention to the playful literary devices whereby O'Duffy realises his satirical aims. Szmigiero examines the structural and linguistic dimension of playfulness in the trilogy, emphasising the writer's innovative and subversive use of fantasy and otherwordly elements to provide a caustic commentary on the political and social situation in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. Among the objects of O'Duffy's satire, Szmigiero enumerates censorship, the influence of the Catholic Church on the emerging Free State, excessive government attempts to regulate the private life of citizens, and the miring of Irish politics in aggression, slander and petty parliamentary dispute. Szmigiero explains how O'Duffy achieves his goals from a formal viewpoint, observing his placement of mythical Irish heroes in a futuristic setting, his tendency to reverse an accepted order of things, and his strategy of establishing hyperbolic analogies and antitheses between "the earth" and "elsewhere." Turning to the Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and polyphony, and his description of the Menippean satire, Szmigiero argues that O'Duffy's thematical daring and playful formal

experimentation with narrative structures make him a worthy predecessor of Flann O'Brien.

In "'The Danger of Biscuit-Coloured Silk': Dress, Playfulness and Sensuality in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Paula Meehan," Michaela Schrage-Früh looks at gender-grounded playfulness, examining various representations of costume, jewellery, make-up and hairstyle in the poetry of two contemporary Irish women, McGuckian and Meehan. Examining the style in which both poets present female clothes, Schrage-Früh touches on the question of treating dress as a cultural and social instrument on which one may play, as it were, with what is manifested outwardly and what is hidden. In McGuckian's poems, the critic argues,

> . . . playfulness . . . often manifests itself in the most literal sense of the term: her speakers continuously masquerade in varying costumes, playing different roles on the inward stage of her "dream theatre." (102)

Schrage-Früh skilfully decodes women's apparel as a means of personal self-expression, an element of performance or—as in Meehan's poetry—a menacing "battledress," a way of covering the vulnerable body and soul, and of reconnecting the past with the present. Schrage-Früh's text focuses on a sensuous dimension of playfulness, best visible in the critic's in-depth readings of McGuckian's poems where playfulness is not merely related or described; it is experienced with all senses through descriptions "that convey the colour, feel, smell and sound of the fabrics and materials evoked" (Schrage-Früh 98). On another level, Schrage-Früh also comments on the precarious aspect of women's costume, its connection with stereotypical social and gender roles, and with an exploitive sexualisation of images of the female body. Dress can challenge, she argues, but it can also perpetuate a prejudice towards women, locking them in position as the Other.

The essays in Part IV focus on musical lightness, on harmonies and rhythms that can undergird certain literary modes and affect us as something strange yet familiar. It begins with Michał Lachman's analysis of the sonorous quality of Ciaran Carson's *Last Night's Fun*, moves on to Renata Senktas's decoding of the obsessively reiterating refrain in Louis MacNeice's "Autobiography," and ends with Teresa Bruś's essay on MacNeice and W. B. Yeats, which pulls us away from a semantic and into a musical appreciation of their work.

Lachman's "Playing It Out: Music Narratives in Ciaran Carson's *Last Night's Fun*" argues that for Carson (and thus for many other Irish writers), music and the musical qualities of a literary text—sound, rhythm, general composition—are indispensable for the process of generating

meaning. Drawing on Werner Wolf's notion of "verbal music," Lachman shows how Carson's poetry is orchestrated like a musical score, in carefully controlled tunes and tones, assonances and dissonances, rhythms and echoes, accents and pauses. He also describes what Carson himself defines as "ornamentation" of polyphonic compositions, a process that allows players, and writers, to leave their individual imprint on a piece of music, or text, and also to draw "our attention from common qualities of objects to their personalised individuality" (Lachman 122-23). In *Last Night's Fun* (1996), Lachman identifies different elements that combine to form Carson's own unique style of writing: euphonious lists of people and objects, melodic strings of phrases and expressions, rhythmically arranged catalogues of generic names. He argues that this strategy of collecting samples of reality enables Carson to present life in all its richness, capturing fleeting instances of human experience, "playing it out" by including the greatest possible number of its variations and modifications. Lachman also demonstrates that, through open structure, by allowing space for improvisation, both music and literature serve an important creative and communal role, functioning as repositories of human experience but leaving room for new performances in the future. That is why music, not only in Carson's work but in Irish culture in general, can be seen as "a way of thinking, a mode of perception, a position from which the entire world assumes protean forms and shapes" (Lachman 117).

In "Come Back Early, If Only in the Refrain: Louis MacNeice's 'Autobiography' and the Poetics of Recovery," Renata Senktas follows the same line of "musical" investigation. Drawing on less-known facts about MacNeice's life, Senktas probes the meaning of the recurrent refrain "come back early or never come" in his "Autobiography." Senktas construes the poem as MacNeice's attempt to revisit his troubled childhood past. Suspended between "nostalgia and anxiety," this revisiting is launched from an equally uneasy present, marked by distress and apprehension on the one hand and wistful remembrance on the other. These conflicting emotions are encapsulated in the poem's ambiguous one-line refrain, which may be read as an address to the dead mother, thus turning the poem into an elegiac expression of bereavement. It is for this reason, the critic maintains, that the disturbingly repeated refrain reverberates with past memories, whose haunting presence brings out a trance-like cadence of loss and recovery, remorse and relief. Senktas argues that the line she examines "transforms the moment of past longing . . . into the present moment of writing (and reading)" (136). It creates the impression that the events it evokes are as yet unresolved and consequently invests the poet with the (illusory) power to shape their course. Through regular re-

playing of the melodious form MacNeice captures some much-desired lightness. This, argues Senktas, may not lead to a truly positive resolution, but at the very least it brings temporary comfort.

In "Louis MacNeice and W. B. Yeats Autobiographically," Teresa Bruś, like Senktas, uses a musical and autobiographical key for the interpretation of what she describes as personal essays, a term by which she refers to MacNeice's *Modern Poetry* and Yeats's *Autobiographies.* For Bruś, MacNeice is an author with the gift to entertain, capable, through his rhetorical skills and his rootedness in everyday life, of establishing a close relationship with his audience. Quoting MacNeice's words about "*impure* poetry . . . conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him" (qtd. in Bruś 147), Bruś captures the essence of his poetic credo, presenting him as a communicative and a communitarian artist, rawly alert to life around him. She finds a close weave between the autobiographical, the personal and the playful in the works she analyses, and believes this texture ensnared their readers, too, establishing an affinity and transforming a performative act into a shared experience. So here we have a relational aspect of playfulness, if each poet exhibits it in a different way. Bruś explains this disparity, arguing that MacNeice meant to address the reading public in a broader sense, whereas Yeats cast his work to a small circle of intimates with whom he wished to enter into a dialogue. But in both cases, the autobiographical becomes a harmonising element; in Bruś's words, "operating between image and music, mentioning, blending and fusing" (146) snippets of experience.

Part V is a logical extension of the volume's theme, turning to the performative aspect of playfulness. Both essays in this section analyse the subversive and provocative on-stage forms of playfulness before a live auditorium audience, Marta Dynel's subject the stand-up comedy of Dylan Moran, Dagmara Krzyżaniak's, a play by Martin McDonagh.

In "Like, Totally . . . an Unleashed Monster? Dylan Moran's Performance in *Monster* and *Like, Totally . . .* ," Marta Dynel notes the Irish comedian's "linguistic playfulness and great imaginativeness" (154), while remaining sceptical about his potential to transgress socially or politically. She argues that Moran's humour is contextually grounded—content- and form-dependent (155)—providing a detailed insight into his various manifestations of playfulness, and outlining the numerous linguistic and semantic strategies that he draws on in his work. These fall into the categories of vivid language, gesture, absurdity, black humour, satire, parody, sarcasm, jab lines, punchlines and one-liners. Dynel argues that the Irish comic line derives more from sophisticated linguistic means than from strategies of political incorrectness, and believes that this is a specific, idiosyncratic

aspect of Irish playfulness, inviting the audience to participate in a subtle, open linguistic game instead of just attempting to "correct" an unsatisfying social reality.

The unique quality of Irish performative playfulness is also examined by Dagmara Krzyżaniak in "The Power of Laughter: Irish (Dark) Comedy and Its Psychotherapeutic Properties." She takes a cognitive-behavioural dialectical approach to Martin McDonagh's 2003 play, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, assessing its psychotherapeutic potential to reduce anxiety and fear, and to highlight the absurdity of violence and its effects. Drawing on Esslin and Meredith, Krzyżaniak credits playfulness realised by means of onstage laughter with a "collective" and a "thoughtful" dimension. And she perceives such playfulness as both part of the Irish cultural heritage and an inseparable component of any performative, staged experience. In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, playfulness is realised on verbal, situational, structural, performative, psychotherapeutic and surreal levels, as well as through elements that would ordinarily seem far removed from any playfulness. What she means here is *in-yer-face* intentional brutality that, for her, constitutes a well-designed performative "attack on the audience's sensibility" (169). In McDonagh's play, the methods referred to above cut deeper by instilling consternation, abhorrence and shock. Incongruities are laid bare, and the welter of negative emotion outmanoeuvres the audience's coolness and detachment, leading them to a kind of catharsis. In her analysis of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Krzyżaniak examines specific psychotherapeutic techniques that McDonagh applies in his drama, "paradoxical intention," for example, or "devil's advocate," which rely on hyperbolic overdramatisation to provoke the audience to perceive the surreal and laughable aspects of the problem presented.

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PART I:

ELEMENTS OF IRELAND:
IRISH AND GREEK INTERPLAY

CHAPTER ONE

JANUS-FACED HEANEY: FROM EARTH TO AIR?

JUAN RÁEZ PADILLA

In an early poem by Seamus Heaney dating back to 1966, the Greek god Antaeus warns:

> Let each new hero come
> Seeking the golden apples and Atlas.
> He must wrestle with me before he pass
> Into that realm of fame
>
> Among sky-born and royal:
> He may well throw me and renew my birth
> But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,
> My elevation, my fall.
> ("Antaeus," *North* 3)

Antaeus' invincible strength depended on his permanent contact with his mother, the Earth, whereas Hercules, the "new hero" (Heaney, *North* 3) menacing his telluric rule, was Zeus' son and, therefore, 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 springs the airy symbolism of liberation from earthy bounds represented by Hercules in Heaney's poetry and the adoption of this trope by critics advocating an *airy phase* in the poet's later collections. As Deane writes,

> The act of poetry is a Herculean effort to lift off from the old Antaeus-like hugging of the holy and violent ground into the realm of air and fire, the zone of vision, not merely the dry air of rational enlightenment. Heaney's later poetry is full of subtle slicings that confirm this distinction. ("Powers" 275)

In the volumes appearing after *North* (1975), in fact, critics began to perceive an important change in Heaney's poetry. In John Wilson Foster's words,

> To telegraph the shift, 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 the first stage of Heaney's poetry (*earthy phase*), characterised by its rootedness in Northern Irish people, history and culture, as well as by political commitment to the Irish Catholic community, and the second stage (*airy phase*), in which the poet allegedly liberates himself from earthy bounds to accomplish a poetic freedom. This allows him to ascend to "the order of the transcendent"—the only possible *physical* correlate of *imperceptible* air, according to Irigaray (*Forgetting* 11), as well as to neutralise the encumbering yoke of social pressures (audience, politics and literary criticism). That is to say, earth, water and downward movement give 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 of criticism and academia, much more intense during the Troubles, these are just some of the possible reasons.

Doubt and guilt, nevertheless, prevail in Heaney's alleged *etherealisation*. 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). The muddy trace of the Antaeus of Ulster, on the other hand, seems to be indelible throughout his prolific career. "Blessed be down-to-earth!" writes Heaney in a later collection (*Seeing Things* 14). In his Nobel Prize speech in 1995 he also refers to a "moral down-to-earthness to which I responded deeply and always will" (*Crediting Poetry* 12). A few years later, in *Beowulf: A New Translation* (1999), he again advocates this

earthy philosophy and notes that "the elevation of Beowulf is always, paradoxically, buoyantly down-to-earth" (xxi). This later Heaney, playfully moving in between earth and air, descending in order to ascend (or vice versa), negotiating between Irish root and English word (note, for example, that *Beowulf* is the greatest epic Anglo-Saxon poem) may after all not be that far from the early Heaney who, also warily interconnecting Antaean Irishness and Herculean Englishness, writes: "My elevation, my fall" (*North* 3). Examples such as these have motivated the revision of the aforementioned *airy phase*.

As a matter of fact, there exists a noteworthy lack of consensus among Heaney critics as to which is the book of poems inaugurating this alleged symbolic shift. Except for 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 another candidate should be added, his book of critical essays from 1988.[1] 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 another two anthologies:[2] *Field Work* (1979), *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *The Government of the*

[1] The different books and critics are *Wintering Out* (1972): Andrew Murphy (3-4); *North* (1975): Frank Kermode (7), Bernard O'Donoghue (15); *Field Work* (1979): Elmer Andrews (142), Henry Hart (5-6), Seamus Deane (*Short History* 241, "Seamus Heaney" 66), Brian Hughes (29), Harold Bloom (138); *Sweeney Astray* (1983): Nicholas Jenkins (11); *Station Island* (1984): Nicholas Jenkins (11), John Constable (148), Paul Breslin (340), Louis Simpson (Miller 109), Matthew Campbell (40), Desmond Fennell (34), Blake Morrison (1192), Bernard O'Donoghue (108), Gerald Dawe (24); *The Haw Lantern* (1987): Gerald Dawe (24), David Wheatley (25), Helen Vendler (Wheatley 25), James Wood (6), Michael Parker (209-10); *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988): John Wilson Foster (44); *Seeing Things* (1991): Elmer Andrews (142), Michael Hoffman (Constable 53), John Carey (Constable 53), Rui Carvalho Homem (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 an implicit manifestation of poetic etherealisation in the hypotheses of Breslin, Simpson and Fennel above with regard to the volume *Station Island* (1984).

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

Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings (1988) and *Seeing Things* (1991). This fact bears out the 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 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), while for a long time she *thought* that Heaney had taken off to air from *Station Island* (1984) onwards (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.[3] In my opinion, though, Heaney does not come back to earth, as he never abandoned it. There are two articles with interesting titles in this respect: Sean Dunne's "Unphased Heaney: A Poet Who Remains True to His Roots" and Frank Kermode's "The Man Who Returned to Earth." If I were to choose one of these two titles in order to characterise Seamus Heaney's poetic evolution, I would definitely choose the first one.

What would be then, in my view, 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 schematisation that fails to portray Heaney's most representative features: tension, and a permanent search for balance between opposites. In this search for equilibrium the Northern Irish poet represents dialectics, rather than a fight between opposites. Consequently, I understand that reading Heaney's poetry in binary terms—earth *versus* air—is not precisely a satisfactory enough critical response. In my opinion, a more adequate and clarifying reading is encapsulated in 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 my 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

[3] See, for example, Breslin (341) and Corcoran (193).

the simplistic value of that attempt. This is what I understand as *balance in movement*. Guthrie makes the following remark about the elements in ancient Greece, a remark that one could literally transfer 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. (88; my translation)

Likewise, the French feminist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray notes the attraction of the elements in the Empedoclean theory, in which "they [the four elements] pass through each other one by one, dominating in turn within the mixture" (*Forgetting* 77). The French philosopher 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" (*La tierra* 91; my translation). This is in fact one of the defining features of Heaney's poetry: inertia towards contrariness, identity built upon otherness as well as non-conformism (even guilt, when it happens) with the hegemony of earth, water, air or fire, the entente of *balance in movement*.

Using a dramatic allegory, I would claim that *Humus*—earth, water—and *Ether*—air, fire—are two of the protagonists of a single lifelong Heaneyan tragicomedy. Sometimes they are irreconcilable in ominous poetic revelation; sometimes rooted or suspended in hopeful proximity. This *elemental* interaction can be traced back to his very first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966):

> And launched right off the *earth* by force of *fire*,
> We hang, miraculous, above the *water*,
> Dependent on the invisible *air*
> To keep us *air*borne and to bring us further.
> . . . . . .
> Air-pockets jolt our fears and down we go.
> Travellers, at this point, can only trust.
> ("Honeymoon Flight," *Death* 38; my emphases)

Notice in the first stanza the outstanding balance between the four elements—earth, water, air and fire—formally reinforced, interestingly enough, by their occurrence in a four line stanza. The resulting sense of union and harmony, inherent to the symbology of the four elements since classical Greece, runs parallel to the nuptial theme of the poem (honeymoon flight by newlyweds Seamus Heaney and Marie Devlin).

Notice also the aforementioned twofold symbology of movement. After the couple is launched up in the air, a symbol of the turning point experienced in marriage, the final stanza, nonetheless, points towards earthy, downward movement: "Air-pockets jolt our fears and down we go." Earthy and airy imageries are thus intertwined in a poem which relies, more than on one or the other element, on the movement which links them together: "Travellers, at this point, can only trust." It could not be otherwise within the work of a writer constantly stepping back and forth at the crossroads of farm and academia, Ireland/Great Britain/USA, poetry and critical prose. Heaney does not reject his departure platform when he reaches a new destination, just as, on the other hand, he does not shut his eyes to the new territories at which he arrives. Just as Northern Ireland remains with Heaney in his constant trips to the USA in the 1980s, just as academia does not obliterate the living memory of the familiar farm *Mossbawn*, earth and water continue to exert a powerful gravitational force on the ethereal realm of his poetry. However, the vigour and rootedness of Humus in Heaney's poetics is no obstacle to the exploration of new poetic territories, such as air and "the glinting play of light" (Irigaray, *Marine Lover* 46). Neglecting the inspirational call from Ether would have been as unreasonable as closing the door which opened for the Irish poet in North America, or as having remained anchored to the rural world when society showed him the way to education and literature. The price which Heaney has to pay for becoming a devout follower of the Roman god Janus—one face looking down, to earth and water; the other face looking up, to dazzling Ether—is the constant tension which permeates his lines. Apart from the *elemental* reading of such a fact, this poetic dialectics represents, in my opinion, an invaluable poetic example which tilts the balance towards "a new beginning" (Heaney, *Spirit Level* 69) in the problematic socio-political context of Northern Ireland.

That Heaney's elemental symbology and interaction is far from being monodirectional and unequivocal is clear from many other later poems which will be offered here as examples supporting my initial hypothesis against a homogeneous *airy phase*. The watery music transpiring from "The Rain Stick" (*Spirit Level* 1), for example, 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 [↑]" (1). Music is possible thanks to movement. If the object lies motionless, it will remain mute. Turn it upside down and the miracle of music, like that of poetry, is reborn, "undiminished for having happened once, / Twice, ten, a thousand times before" (1). The rain stick reminds us,