

Earth, Water, Air, and Fire: Towards an Elemental Reading of Tim Winton

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Abstract

Tim Winton is one of the most prolific writers from Western Australia. This article will look at the influences of the four perennial elements in Tim Winton's fiction, aiming to draw a connection between Gaston Bachelard's elemental poetics and Winton's poetic natural space, where the material world and imagination coexist, and emphasize the unity between elemental essence and the essence of the everyday lifeworld. It finds that Winton integrates the natural elements of earth, water, fire, and air into the narrative space of the text. Referring to Gaston Bachelard's scholarship of elemental works, this paper is an attempt to read Tim Winton's works through elemental reading that recognizes a world of reciprocity and homology. I find that Winton's novels treat nature as a world of reciprocity and homology and caution us that the nature of the four elements is a dynamic and vibrant entity in contrast to being an inert thing.

Keywords: Tim Winton, Four Elements, Elemental Poetics, Natural Space, Fire, Earth, Water, Air

Introduction

In the article "The Four Elements and the Recovery of Referentiality: ecocriticism as a pivotal localist theory" (Murphy, 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" (Murphy, 2002, p. 71). In this way, natural elements, as fundamental elements of nature, are irreplaceable for contemporary Australian writer Tim Winton. He often puts the characters in space woven by four elements earth, fire, water, and air. In an interview, he acknowledges, "The protagonists in my novels are completely immersed in the impact of nature and natural forces on their lives in a very direct way. I am very interested in the connection of such natural forces" (Liu, 2013a, p. 61). In this regard, Tim Winton considers the elements of natural forces as the eternal basis of life, which is in line with the material

origin theory of the four elements of ancient Greek Presocratic philosophers, as well as Gaston Bachelard's elemental poetics.

Thus, this essay aims to prove the centrality of the eco web weaved by four natural elements in the works of Tim Winton. Human has done a lot of damage to nature in the age of Anthropocene, where human beings are considered primary and central to the cognition of the world, this article will look at the roles of the four elements in his fiction, aiming to analyze how nature has been treated in Tim Winton's novels. Through drawing a connection between Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) elemental poetics and Winton's poetic natural space, where the material world and imagination coexist, and emphasize the unity between elemental essence and the essence of life. It finds that Winton integrates the natural elements of earth, water, fire, and air into the narrative space of the text. All four elements come together in different combinations to form the activity space of the characteristics, from mountains to rivers, wheatfields to beaches, the sun, moon, and stars to candlelit homes. By making connections between Gaston Bachelard's four elements' theories and Tim Winton's poetics of natural space, this paper is an attempt to read Tim Winton's works through elemental reading to find the way of treating nature in Tim Winton's novels. Through this reading, I find that Winton's novels treat nature as a world of reciprocity and homology and caution us that treat nature of four elements as a dynamic and vibrant entity in contrast to being an inert thing.

I am not sure whether or to what extent Gaston Bachelard's four elements' theories influenced Tim Winton, but in Winton's writing, especially from some critics' articles, we can sense his affinity with Gaston Bachelard. For example, Bill Ashcroft (2014) points out the importance of "water" in Winton's novels, and the pneumatic materialism of "air" in Winton's work was first theorized by Arthur Rose (2020). Another major discussion of Winton's elemental imagery, by Chinese scholar Hou Fei (2014), examines "air" and breathing from the perspective of extreme sports and cultural hegemony. And Kylie Crane (2016) discusses the "earth" in the article name of "The Beat of the Land: Place and Music in Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*". Winton's affective description of human connection to the earth makes his works widely discussed from the perspective of land, place, and belonging. However, despite the rich existing scholarship on Winton, few critics attempted a systematic examination of all four elements. The research to date tends to focus on one single element rather than the four together systematically. Also, there is rarely research from the perspective of Gaston Bachelard's elemental theories. Throughout Winton's works, the four elements are indispensable images, which contain various life forms, as well as the power of creating or destroying everything. Four classic elements unit together to form the splendid natural space that human and non-human communities live together. And the perennial elements continue to exercise profound influences upon our daily lives in new and challenging ways.

Theory of the four elements of Gaston Bachelard

The theory of four elements has been underscored very early by Greek philosophers in Western thought. In the 20th century, Gaston Bachelard was influenced in the course of his research by alchemical culture and psychoanalytic theory and began to turn his attention to the field of poetics, trying to use the traditional Western "four elements theory" as the center of his research on the laws of human reverie. Adhering to the thoughts of ancient Greek thinkers in the pre-Socratic period and Bachelard's materialist imagination, this article focuses on Tim Winton's treating the four classical elements as archetypes connected to specific features of the natural world, such as the land, sea, fire, and sky. Through this essay's analysis,

we will find Tim Winton has similar thinking about the four elements with Gaston Bachelard, who emphasizes elements with vibrant reverie, which can remind us to show respect to nature.

Bachelard praises the four elements in his six works, one on water, one on air, two on fire, and two on earth. As he indicates, in the world of the imagination “it is possible to establish... a law of the four elements classifying various kinds of material imagination by their connections with fire, air, water, or earth” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 3). The four elements proposed by Bachelard are closely linked to the creation of nature and are related to the essence of life. As “fundamental material elements,” the four elements are “suited for showing the relationship among poetic souls” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 3). In this sense, nature in Winton’s works is composed of these four elements, each of which has its own cluster of concrete images: earth corresponds to wasteland, cave, mountain, and wheat field; Fire corresponds to candle fire, cooking fire, forest fire, the light of the sun, moon, stars and celestial bodies, and the fire of life; Water is connected with rivers, streams, the ocean, and rain; Air is related to wind, sound, flying and breathing. If “art is grafted nature” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 10), then it is precisely this poetic nature that Tim Winton constructs.

Australia is a land with endless deserts, dense and deep jungles, and a tortuous coastline. Winton grew up “in a world of rocky islands, boats, and obscuring bush”, and “at first blush Australia connotes something non-human”, therefore, it is well-reasoned to analyze these “non-human” elements (Winton, 2017, p. 16). This affectively rich treatment of natural forces has a unique significance in the context of today’s eco-collapse. This essay will depict Tim Winton’s ten fictions and take the material imagination of “Elemental Poetics” constructed by Gaston Bachelard, with an aim to explore the eco web interweaving by four basic elements. It argues that this detailed analysis of the four elements will immerse “ourselves more deeply into the seas of our surroundings” composed of the four elements and “behave more humanely in a more-than-human world” (Wang, 2022, p. 3). In the following work, I will list the appearance of the elements in Winton’s works individually, to emphasize the importance of the four elements in Tim Winton’s several novels, like *Shallows*, *Dirt Music*, *The Shepherd’s Huts*, and so on. The first one is the earth, the most basic one.

Research Objective

This article will look at the influences of the four perennial elements in Tim Winton’s fiction, aiming to draw a connection between Bachelard’s element theories and Winton’s poetic natural space, where the material world and imagination coexist, and emphasize the unity between elemental essence and the essence of the everyday lifeworld.

Earth: Root of life

Earth is the root and source of life. The respect for and worship of the land in people’s hearts is reflected in the notion of the earth as a mother. Winton has said in an interview, “Personally, I’m more content to become dust. Because we are all carbon-based life, originated from stars, and will also be classified as dust” (Liu, 2013a, p. 61). Such a scenario is no coincidence, and at least Bachelard has given us a partial explanation with his theory of the material imagination. Tim Winton himself once claimed that “land is a genetic connection” and it is “the gold standard.” (Winton, 2015, p. 23). As Lyn McCredden (2017) puts it, Winton is a literary author with “a keen sense of earth and ecology” (p. 63). Earth is complex, in a vast variety of ways, such as soil, dirt, cave, wilderness, stone, and sand, to name but a few.

Soil is one of the images of the earth appearing frequently in Winton's novels. The importance of soil to the subject in the novel is reflected in that it "has a compensatory function for other lacks—predominantly an emotional lack, but also the related social and psychological lacks" (Crane, 2006, p. 23). This function becomes clear in many of his novels. For example, when Fox sleeps with his face against the soil many times in *Dirt Music*. Even the novel's title includes an image of the earth with the word "dirt". When he falls to the ground, "then there's dirt in his mouth. The sky gone completely" (Winton, 2003, p. 116). Later, on his way back to the farm after abandoning his boat on the ocean, he swims to the shore and scrambles through the foreshore, enduring hyperventilation, dehydration, the cutting open of his legs on the spinifex, and exhaustion—until his strength is restored by lying down in the dunes. The image painted here sees him tied down to the supporting soil. He "retreats to the shade of the riverbank whose open veins are ropy with shadow. Feels bound to the earth by them. They pull his cheek to the soil" (p. 153). The images of earth and soil highlight the regenerative properties "dirt" has for Lu, his rootedness in this area, and its role in his identity (Crane, 2006, p. 24). Also, Fox enjoys taking walks by the melon field. The music played by him is called "dirt music." When he arrives at Broome, he tends to write a letter to Georgie Jutland, but he "can't make a sense of his feelings," so he doesn't know where to start with a pencil and paper in hand. In the envelope sent to George is only a teaspoonful of red earth (p. 171). All thoughts, guilt, plans, and strategies become only "a little mound of dirt" (p. 171). This pinch of pink dirt implies his closeness to the soil, and metaphors implying that "soil" is his root. He tries to burn his identity documents in an attempt to disappear without leaving, in order to ensure his connection with the earth representing his "identity" (Crane, 2006, p. 24). Fox explains to Georgie the meaning of dirt music: it is "in soil" representing "Land. Home. Country" (Winton, 2003, p. 81). Moreover, the aboriginal Axle likes to walk barefoot on the land. He does not need a map like other Aboriginals who are indigenous to the land. They just walk on the earth with bare feet and feel the tenderness and cruelty of the wasteland directly.

In addition to the image of soil, the most typical images of the element of earth are wilderness and desert. Winton notes in an interview, "The huge desert and barren scenery make us involuntarily think of the smallness of human beings" (Liu, 2013b, p. 155). Barren means bleak and lifeless. Wilderness, in contrast, is a great source of life. It not only produces humans but also flows through other forms of life. That is, the wilderness of the great earth gave birth to creatures. The barrenly boundless land in the novel represents decaying reality. During the protagonists' tumbling into unknown territory, wilderness becomes not only a symbol of great hope in their misery but also of the unyielding power of the subjects' souls. For example, the wilderness in *Dirt Music* is especially prominent. As Fox's niece Bird sings, "I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains" (p. 116). Fox comes from a "low, dry, austere country, limestone and sand and grasstrees" (p. 183). He just wants to escape to a "completely alone" place. No roads, towns, farms—no bloody civilians... A place to be truly alone in—wilderness (p. 243).

Similarly, in *The Shepherd's Hut*, Jaxie always displays a sense of closeness to the soil in the wilderness. On his fleeing way, he looks up at the skyful stars and lies "in the powdery dirt under the kurrajong tree listening to that faraway hum, thinking about bees" (p. 163). In order to avoid Fintan's eyes, he buries his face in the soil when he arrives at Fintan's hut. Soil is the image of land; it can always give shelter to people at critical times. The characters in *Dirt Music* always have a natural sense of dependence on the soil. The barren inland in *The Shepherd's Hut* is a wilderness abandoned after mining. Jaxie runs across the wilderness in the search of

freedom regardless of life and death, starting a spiritual journey of “looking for self”; *An Open Swimmer* tells a story of how the protagonist gets rid of the growing-pain in the wilderness; In *Shallows*, after more than 180 days of rain-free weather, the house on Wirrup Hill has therefore become a veritable wilderness. Thoreau (1817-1862) firmly believes that man, as a universal member of the community of life, needs the combination of both cultural and earthy states in order to reach perfection. This is particularly evident in his philosophy of the relationship between civilization and wilderness. He believes that the wilderness is actually a more advanced civilizational vehicle than our civilization. Therefore, he left behind the famous saying “In wildness is the preservation of the world” (Thoreau, 2004).

In addition, the earth also appears in the form of stones and mountains: the two flat granite stones in *Shallows* look like two men standing together overlooking the sea (p. 81). In *The Shepherd's Hut*, Fintan, who spends eight years in solitary confinement, considers the humanoid stones in Salt Lake as “company,” even “deliverance” (p. 119). These stones in *Dirt Music* are full of mystery, either comforting people and providing shelter on the cliff or serving as the object of confession. When Fox arrives at the Pilbara in *Dirt Music*, Winton depicts the mountain “Everything looks big and Technicolor. Ahead the stupendous iron ranges. There are trees again. This land looks dreamt, willed, potent” (p. 182). The stone, like the land, is a resistant object. According to Bachelard, “All resistant objects possess an innate ambivalence, representing both aid and obstacle. They are things to be overcome. They call into being our mastery, our energy” (Bachelard, 2002, p. 14). The stubbornness, seriousness, hardness, and oppression of the huge granite rocks reflect the formidable “adversarial will” (Bachelard, 2002, p. 16) of the earth elements in Bachelard’s works.

Then, the earth is vast, benevolent, generous, and tolerant. It silently contributes to and nourishes everything. However, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. As Bachelard puts it, “Mother Earth not only births us but also buries us” (Bachelard, 2002, p. xii). Soil is the ultimate abode of human beings. After Fintan dies in *The Shepherd's Hut*, he was buried by Jaxie into the salt lake, while others are buried in the mining area (p. 210). Born from the dust and dying on the earth, life has the earth as both its starting point and its ending.

The earth possesses its own independent spirit, it endows the land’s owner with not only shelter and sanctuary but also an independent spirit. It becalms us and provides a promise of security. In *Dirt Music*, Fox, who has self-exiled to an isolated island, recalls the fun of picking eggs in his family’s melon fields of his childhood and recollects the farming life with his mother in the melon field. Walking along the beach, his warm memory of pastoral experiences past helps heal the mental and psychological trauma caused by family car accidents and natural wind disasters. He picks up the boat and fishhook being discarded and accepts reality, psychologically and emotionally. He eventually ends his self-exile and completes a journey of redemption by returning home to the farmland in the sense that White Point is his home. In *The Winter's Dark*, the young Ronnie grows up into a confident mother by owning a farmland. At the end of the novel, Ronnie realizes that “She was a mother. Nothing could stop her from being a mother. She had the house, the land, she could grow things” (p. 102). With a house and land, Ronnie possesses a sense of independence and boosts the qualities that a mother should possess. The land empowers her with magical power, she is displaced by a person with a mature mind and stable financial status.

Another important image of soil is the rock cave, a place deep in the earth or a secluded place where one can hide. It is hidden, moist, and safe, like a mother’s womb where one can curl up. Winton’s characters are always thinking of fleeing and hiding, and the cave becomes their most desired place. Bachelard metaphorizes the root of matter through his imagination

of caves. The caves in Winton's novels, together with Plato's "cave allegory" and Kafka's "underground cave" fables, refer to a type of secret and safe place, giving protagonists a feeling of homely contentment. All of them to some extent reflects people's desire to return to an original space. In *Shallows*, Nathaniel and Daniel Cooper often secretly hide in caves and light bonfires inside. Fox in *Dirt Music* escapes from White Point town by fleeing to a cave on a deserted island, this cave sanctuary was perfectly integrated with fringing figs, weaved pandanus leaves, and vine tendrils (p. 288). In this shelter, he obtains peace. He "feels safe in a way he hasn't felt since early childhood" (p. 289). In *Island Home*, the memoir, Winton swims into the cave at high tide, this cave is his "secret place, the private space" he is seeking (p. 41). As all of the examination of the earth element in the above novels have shown, Winton aims to illustrate that love and respect for the land is the basic attitude of human beings towards nature, readers can experience the concern Winton feels towards the earth. The major theme of Winton's writings is to meditate upon the role of mankind in establishing a harmonious relationship between man and earth, and the premise for rebuilding a melodious relationship between humans and the more capacious world. The earth has a nurturing effect on the inhabitants living on it, this notion is the main creative idea that Winton has always held. Moreover, the desire for connection with earth are constant deployment of earth imagery. This behavior reflects his admiration of and gratitude for his homeland of Western Australia, which is why he is called uses "the beat of land" to praise the earth (Crane, 2006).

In addition to the picturesque description of the earth, Winton is also a poet with "earthliness." He feels sympathetic toward low-level workers. In the face of the vastness of the earth, he is compassionate, grateful, and humble to nature. In his poetic productions, we see his homeland, his reflection on how to protect nature, and his thought about how to live on this land poetically. As a strong proponent of the need to protect the environment, he writes about the resistance power coming from the earth. In 1999, he even published a documentary novel *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes* to express the importance of earth. In Bachelard's view, earth is related to will. The element of the earth itself has a will, and the earth transmits the will to mankind, giving people comfort and reliance. In this sense, the earth element lays a solid foundation for Winton's entire natural space. It seems that Winton's characters have gained a more sustainable recognition of utter dependence on and necessary interdependence with the solid earth beneath. Except for earth, fire also provides a companion and powerful psychological role.

Fire: Enlightenment and Renewal of Life

In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard describes the essence and spirit of fire:

"Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth, yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad."
(Bachelard, 1987, p. 7)

These lines involve not only the psychological feature but also the practical application of daily life. For quite some time, fire has stimulated our imagination, through which it has in turn produced a large number of metaphors and symbols related to fire. The rising flame evokes the vitality of life. The burning flame represents death and purification, and often reminds people of hell, fostering both respect and fear.

Fire firstly represents violence and destruction. In *Shallows*, the big bushfire in 1956 devoured everything made of wood—lintels, roof beams, doors, cabin shutters—and left the stones to topple (p. 80). The haunting horror of an old dream is repeatedly described in *The Winter's Dark* (1988): "I dreamt I ran downhill full of holes in the creeping blindness of night, aflame and screaming. I lit up the valley like a torch..." (p. 20). Fire sometimes boosts the smell of death. For example, at the end of *An Open Swimmer*, "Jerra lit a match, smelling the dead breath of its smoke, dropped it into the fuel tank and ran" (p. 193). The violence of fire in turn is protective. In *Shallows*, Queenie also "put a match to look after this town" (p. 243) and vowed to protect Angelus. The shimmer of a match is enough to illuminate the whole world.

Secondly, fire is warm and a company. In Bachelard's formulation, "If the primitive man is convinced that the bonfire, the originating fire, has all kinds of virtues and that it gives both power and health, it is because he experiences the well-being, the inner and almost invincible strength of the man who is living that decisive moment when the fire is about to shine forth and his desires to be fulfilled" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 33). This bonfire fire plays a significant narrative role in Winton's poetic productions. As "originating fires, the burning campfire, bonfire and cookfire are the most distinctive images in his novels of the element of fire, which "has all kinds of virtues and... gives both power and health" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 33). Fire provides heat for cooking and comfort. For example, in *Cloudstreet*, women cook food around cooking fires, children toy with matches, and the same children play a game of "The knife never lies" (p. 53). The calm of a cookfire lifts the opaqueness of the dark. The warmth and incandescent light of a domesticated flame replace the bone-chilling cold. As Bachelard notes, "It is always like that, through a kind of extra pleasure—like dessert—that fire shows itself as a friend of man" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 15). In *Dirt Music*, Fox lights a bonfire on a desert island, sometimes just for something to watch (p. 299); He lights a candle for the comfort of light (p. 303). In *The Shepherd's Hut*, Jackie fed a bonfire, not because it was cold, but because the fire was company (p. 49). This bonfire in the wilderness is warm, "giving us comfort" and accompanying us like friends and family (Bachelard, 1987, p. 14).

Furthermore, the fire burning in Winton's works does not only come from the ground but can also from the sky. Fire is a symbol of enlightenment, meanwhile, flameless fire also exercises an enormous impact in Winton's works, representing spiritual "redemption, and apocalypse" (Bachelard, 1987, p. viii). Bachelard believes that "a material element such as fire could be linked to the type of reverie that controls the beliefs, the passions, the ideals, the philosophy of an entire life" (Bachelard, 1999, p. 5). The sun, moon, and stars in nature are the eternal light of nature, the "flameless" fire. Each time they appear, they are full of profound meaning. In *Cloudstreet*, when Quick guards the wheat field, the light of the Southern Cross hanging above breaks through the stagnation directly to the depths of Quick's soul, expelling the haze in his heart and finding a place to return to. At the end of the novel, Quick and Rose take Fish and their son Harry on a trip. They light a bonfire at night and lie on the dry earth. Above them, "the black sky looked crisp with its stars and configurations. Dots as worlds, and milky smears as worlds of worlds" (p. 370). The Southern Cross and other stars in the marbled sky integrate into the huge space system. Winton even names the last chapter of the novel "Moon, sun, stars", which demonstrates his emphasis on this fire form. In *The Shepherd's Hut*, the gentle and cold moonlight becomes the most poetic embodiment of fire. It shines on the wandering people, and "the great white eye" peers down to illuminate the heart, guide the soul, calm the heart, and empower people, which makes Fintan feel "transparent" (p. 170). In *Dirt Music*, the moonlight on the island guides Fox to a sense of belonging during diaspora: "The moon comes to earth in his camp. The midden and the beach

and the boabs are pearlescent. His hands, his feet, are lunar. He's washed in cold light. Transparent". When dawn comes, Fox realizes, he does not want to live like this. "He is not a nomad, he can't even imagine such a life, here will neither settle nor belong" (p. 338). Moreover, the ubiquitous mast lights, streetlights, floodlights, camera flashlights, neon lights, signal lights, TV lights, reflection lights, chandeliers, and flashlights described in *Shallows* are the manifestations of the hustle and bustle of city-specific noise and crowding in the modern world. These cold industrialized products only can reflect people's inner loneliness.

In addition to being a symbol of enlightenment, fire also has divine brilliance, which can expel loneliness and symbolize purification and rebirth. Bachelard observed, "Light is not only a symbol but an agent of purity" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 107). "Fire burns love and hate, this kind of destruction is more than a change, it is a renewal" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 16). And in the combustion, people are like the Phoenix in the fire, "reborn from its ashes" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 39). "Love, death, and fire are united at the same moment" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 17). Therefore, fire has the connotation of purification, and a key representative of that facet of fire is the candle. It is known that volcanic eruptions, lightning strikes, and forest fires are the original state of fire. These are insurmountable difficulties. In contrast, candlelight or a match-sized shimmer, though small, can penetrate people's skin and live in people's hearts like elves, so that lonely people can experience passion within, save themselves and others, and obtain spiritual freedom. For example, Quick's mother Oriel always lights a candle at midnight. Her pious actions show that Oriel has been deeply involved in the pain of the Fish incident, and her soul has been constantly roasted by her heart, hoping to be redeemed from pain and to be reborn through the baptism of fire. The candle fire in her tent also easily arouses the warmth of the fire described by Bachelard. "This candle fire rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 7). As Bachelard puts it, "Love is but a fire that is to be transmitted. Fire is but a love whose secret is to be detected" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 24). Candle fire symbolizes home, sanctuary, redemption, and the baptism of protagonists. In experiencing the loneliness and warmth of the fire, she has sought meaning and made her travail into a crucial identity. Also, in *Blueback*, the mother lights a candle at the fork of the mint tree in the orchard in memory of Abe's father. In *Shallows*, Daniel Cooper repeatedly lights bonfires in a cave, and, as the saying goes, "A single spark can start a prairie fire." Moreover, the three candles carried by Scully in *The Riders* always provide him with faith. The glimmer of fire helps the hero resist the erosion of external space and rekindles his hope. Fire is "less monotonous and less abstract than flowing water, even more quick to grow and to change than the young bird we watch every day in its nest in the bushes, fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 16).

Finally, "fire is life; life is a fire" (Gaston, 1987, p. 46). Bachelard believes that "Fire is thus a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything... Fire is the ultra-living element" (Bachelard, 1987, p. 7). Fire and life are closely linked, and the generation and extinction of fire indicate the beginning and disappearance of life. "Fire is a fierce element, which is considered to be the symbol of vitality and the symbol of action (*tätigkeit*)" (Goethe, 2014, p. 130). In *Cloudstreet*, Winton describes this fire of life emitted by Quick's body. Quick and Rose meet each other, just like "two points of light sparking up the dark" (p. 278). These life fires make the hovering and hanging shades around them stop and tremble (278). When they meet, it is like finding a new "dwelling-place" for each other (p. 278). Moreover, Quick sees himself in the collimator while taking care of the wheat field for a living. After that moment, he is seriously ill. His whole body radiates light. The next day, Quick glows like "a sixty-watt

globe” (p. 192). The “fluorescence [does not] ease off” until evening, and “Quick’s long, bony” is still glowing in the night (p. 192). Fire is Bachelard’s primary research object and the source of his “Elemental Poetics.” Likewise, Winton links fire with life, death, and destruction in his works, which in certain ways extend Bachelard’s fire imagination. Like fire, water is also linked intimately with life, death, and destruction in the physical, psychological, and philosophical connections.

Water: Origin of life and a path home

Water, like earth, figures prominently, too. Water is the source of all things. It is “an element more feminine and more uniform than fire” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 5). Water arises as “the most receptive of the elements” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 5). As Carmody puts it, “in Tim Winton’s fiction, characters often retreat to the coast, and to deeper water, in a search for wholeness, to confront the darkness in their past, or a darkness within” (Carmody, 2016, p. 269). And Elizabeth Guy (1996) also claims that the river, water, and sea, flow like an undercurrent beneath all of Winton’s fiction, suggesting the powerful undertows of life/death, heaven/hell, silence/roar, love/violence, abuse/care and so forth (p. 96).

In nature, water is the only element that appears in various forms, such as steam, dew, snow, springs, wells, rain, the sea and ice. This feature also provides its aesthetic effects: transparency, fluidity, calmness, reflectivity, volatility, and penetrability. These characteristics make it “penetrable”, reflecting its infinite inclusiveness and providing it with deep symbolic meaning. Water is everywhere in Winton’s fiction. People sail on the water, dive into the water, and live on the edge of the water.

Water is associated with purification and conversion. “Water has an inner power that it can purify the inner being, that it can give back to the sinful soul the whiteness of snow. He who has been sprinkled physically is cleansed morally” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 142). The characters in *Cloudstreet* have a deep feeling for water, which plays an important narrative role in the novel. Oriel is baptized in the water and harvests love by the waterside. Water also brings her grief. In *Margaret River*, the lights went out, and Fish fell into the water and became mentally disabled. Therefore, water serves as a destructive force in addition to a creative catalyst. Water flows freely, so that “wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live... so everything will live where the river goes” (p. 155). Water itself represents freedom and is a medium of escape and freedom (Ashcroft, 2014, p. 46). Quick has an unusual intimacy with water. When he was a child, he often took Fish boating with him. When he grows up, he goes fishing in the sea. He is comfortable out on the water, rather like Huck Finn. Every important thing that has happened to him, it seems, had to do with a river (p. 264). Quick thinks of it as the land’s blood: it roils with life and living (p. 264). Bachelard also believes that water is “the blood of the Earth. It is the life of the Earth” (Bachelard, , 1999, p. 61).

Water also brings hope for the prosperity of all things. Without water, there is no life, let alone hope. Water and fire both have good and bad, but water precedes fire. In *Genesis*, “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis, 2010, p. 2), and water existed before God created everything (Genesis, 2010, p. 2). In ancient Greece, the natural philosopher Thales believed that everything was made of water (Russell, 2005, p. 33).

Obviously, the sea and river are important aspects of Winton’s personal experience. Water appears very frequently in both his fiction and his life story; it often serves as the primary background of his narratives, and it is sometimes even the subject itself. Winton uses water to connect reality and unreality, mirroring childhood, scenery, and dreams in his

memory. In his works, various forms of water appear repeatedly: seawater, well water, spring, rainstorms, waterfalls, tidal pools, small streams, and rivers. The multifarious forms of water emerge as maternal, therapeutic, and feminine. Water is the “essential, ontological metamorphosis,” as Bachelard avers, “between fire and earth.” It is, he insists, “the maternal voice” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 116). Queenie in *Shallows* fascinates water. In the sea, she swims like a fish, feels the flexibility of the water, and seeks peace of mind in solitude. No rains on Wirrup Hill for more than 180 days, and the characters fantasize about the spring flowing in the depths of the ancient river. During swimming, Queenie feels the purity, strength, and beauty of water. Like her grandmother, she is a good swimmer, as she was born to a sea’s daughter. When she is in trouble, she knows that “swimming is the only way” out (p. 209). Water invites thoughts in *The Shepherd’s Hut* too. “Looking for water” and “surviving” are the driving forces of Jackie’s journey. And people in *Shallows* yearn for water. When she was composing *The Sea Around Us* in 1950, Rachel Carson once assumed that the ocean is the “ultimate sanctuary”. Echoing these ideas (or maybe simply reimagining them), the British postmodern author John Fowles (1998) refers to the sea as “our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the element in which we too were once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into the light and air” (p. 282).

The sea is another typical differentiation of water. As a boy, Winton grew up on the beach. Looking at the sea from afar, the sea facilitates and hones his meditation and introspection skills. Sea offers a generative and generous source of inspiration. Therefore, almost all of Winton’s characters maintain a special connection with the sea, and the sea occupies a prominent position in his early work. The subjects express their love and longing for the sea without disguise. All kinds of desires in life, sex, love, and death are expressed in the deep ocean, which can be said to be the source of dreams. For example, the sea in *An Open Swimmer* and *Shallows* is the main place of activity and refuge. Queenie likes to listen to the sound of the sea in seashells, and Daniel Cooper longs for “the freedom of the farm, the hill, the sea, the intricacies of dried watercourses, the deep occasional shadows of whales moving offshore” (90). In addition to symbolizing dreams and freedom, the sea also has its dark and terrifying side. The events of sailors drowning in shipwrecks in *Shallows* and the huge waves during the final whaling event are exemplary. The sea in Winton’s later novels becomes generally calm and clear, however. In *Dirt Music*, Georgie notes, “tomorrow will be hot as buggery, the sea flat, the water clear” (p. 42). Bachelard believes that water “serves to make our image more natural, to give a little innocence and naturalness to the pride we have in our private contemplation” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 21). In *Dirt Music*, Georgie imprisoned in the sea view room is keen on surfing and swimming. In her eyes, the sea represents freedom and refuge from her miserable life. In *An Open Swimmer*, Jerry and Sean both long for the sea. Only when they are at sea can they calmly face their confusion and fear and find their own sense of being. Abel in *Blueback* leaves his hometown to school inland and always misses the ocean of his hometown, which makes him feel safe and calm (p. 25), later he falls in love with Stella, a girl who grows up in the desert but yearns for the sea. The sea is mysterious and profound. It has always been Abel’s dream to understand the language of the sea. Eventually, he becomes a marine biologist and returns to his hometown.

In addition to the vast ocean, rivers are also spiritual creatures with flowing charm. The mother rivers that give birth to human beings have become an important image around which Winton constructs his texts. Bachelard believes “Water is the only one that can rock. It is the rocking element. This is one more feature of its feminine make-up: it rocks like a mother” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 130). The connections between water and life, death, and motherhood

reveal Winton's mediating about human survival. Margaret River in *Cloudstreet*, together with Hacker River and Sander River in *Shallows* are sometimes calm and deep, sometimes cheerful, and capered as Bachelard proclaims that psychoanalytically water is a form of joyful nourishment. These rivers endow their denizens with deep and unrestrained love, as well as nourishment to human life with the soul. For Winton, "the rivers and coast of Western Australia around Perth are both evocative of place, and markers of vision and rebirth conveying central tenets of Christian faith" (Murray, 2003, p. 84). The water's image of being "profoundly maternal" (Bachelard, 1999, p. 14) is accompanied by the growth of subjects. Winton's characters survive their rite of passage through a mix of avoidance and endurance and returning, it was like floating on the river or on the sea. Even the house "Cloudstreet floats soundlessly from the gloom to join the day" (p. 222). The water surface is shaking with miniature versions of home in the form of boats. Such "boats [are] floating space" (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 27); they are miniature worlds floating on the water as if they were reborn in the mother's womb so that their inhabitants can know their bodies and identities and re-establish a connection with the world. Bachelard pointed out that compared with soil and dust, fire, and smoke, the melting of water is more complete, and water seems to contribute to a complete death, a permanent return. To contemplate water is to slip away, dissolve, and die (p. 47). When interpreting the metaphor of water in Winton's works, Bill Ashcroft (2014) argues that water is a symbol of home, a place that can be associated with birth, renewal, and redemption, with a promise of *heimat* (p. 27). He writes, "Water, death, and renewal are tightly bound in Winton's novels. Whether launching off the water's edge, surfacing from the dream or from the freedom of water, or emerging from the flirtation with death in free diving, water is the medium of rebirth" (p. 2). Similarly, Bachelard claims that water undergoes "something like a loss of impetus, a loss of life; it becomes a sort of plastic mediator between life and death" (Gaston, 1999, p. 12). Dora, Abel's mother who cannot live without the sea in *Blueback*, says to Abel when she is on the verges of death, "we come from water, we belong to it" (p. 81). She longs for the sea to bring her to the other side of happiness and freedom. It seems that "the dead person is given back to his mother to be born again" (Bachelard, 1999, p. 73). Water, after all, "is the most receptive of the elements, thus its strongly feminine characteristics. Water is the spring of being, motherhood" (Bachelard, 1999, p. IX). Death in water is maternal. It is the water element that "remembers the dead" (Bachelard, 1999, p. 56). Water—bound up as it is with life, freedom, and death—constitutes an important theme in Winton's novels. If mentioning life and death, it is inevitable to discuss the element of air.

Air: Pursuit of the soul's freedom

Air is related to breathing, and breath is related to life. Air is advanced as the most basic and originative element. Over the course of our lives, we will take in on average 650 million breaths (Sherman, 2007, p. 3). Air symbolizes life and cannot be stopped for a moment. Air is critical to the maintenance of life, by which by which we support ourselves physically in daily rhythms. In order to emphasize the significance of air, Winton entitles one of his works as *Breath*. All extreme sports such as surfing and skiing in this work are closely related to breathing. Eva, the heroine, loses her breath and her life while playing the game of self-suffocation; Parker's artificial respiration for patients implies the importance of calm breathing to life. In *Cloudstreet*, meanwhile, Fish drowns and loses his breath, resulting in a lack of oxygen to the brain, and becomes intellectually disabled. Even the big house in *Cloudstreet* breathes "its first painless breath in half a century" (p. 343).

Air, the symbol of spirituality and freedom, appears in the form of invisible and shapeless wind, but sometimes it brings the doom of death. The wind is full of wildness, sometimes fierce and untamed, but sometimes light and gentle. For example, Georgie felt its roughness at the sea in *Dirt Music*, Quick experiences its strongness in the wheat field in *Cloudstreet*; winds are as natural and primitive as the sunlight, starlight, and moonlight.

Arthur Rose believes that in Winton's work breath is a theologico-scientific *pneuma*, which can refer either to the physical function of breath or to the Holy Spirit itself. It is an account that moves between the physical and the spiritual; something "remains" that transcends death but that is not yet configured as life. Arthur Rose (2020) argues that Winton incorporates spiritual thinking by using breathing "as a physiological process (respiration) to inaugurate moments of spiritual expression (*pneuma*) to develop" (p. 643). Air is transparent, but the blue sky, clouds, birds and wind are all related to air. These words are all related to freedom, representing the wandering soul's longing for autonomy. Sometimes air is linked with smell, sometimes with sound, and it is often the messenger of information. Winton's characters love the wind because it brings them a sense of freedom. In *Cloudstreet*, Fish likes wind. Most of the time, he is quiet. He likes to stand in the yard and watches the way birds move in the wind. He will greet the air excitedly, "Hello, wind!" (60). In *Shallows*, Queenie likes to climb on the windmill, wait for information about the whale, and lies "amongst the fronds, hearing the wind-shivers" (p. 24). In *Dirt Music*, Georgie enjoys the sea breeze on the terrace of the sea view room, and the gentle south wind blows, taking away the depression and annoyance of the subject's heart. Georgie says, "Here on the Midwest coast the wind might not be your friend but it was sure as hell your constant neighbor" (p. 9). Wind is the spirit of freedom. The south wind blows away the sultry heat and brings cool. "The southerly," the narrator says, "shivered the leaves and hoary bark" (p. 84).

Sometimes the wind shows its violence, which recalls Bachelard's "violent air, that is, wrathful winds" (Bachelard, 1988, p. 16). On the island, Fox faces the storm and is forced to shrink into his cave. Sometimes the wind can represent "big" things (p. 203) such as death. Bessie, an old woman Fox met on the road, pursues "big music, big weather, big fish, big distance" at the last moments of her life, amid whirlwinds, sunsets, mountains, and the two-mile-wide red river. Fox recollects his mother's death while playing dirt music. At that moment, the northerly gale becomes the God of Death, and the strong wind is the omen of death. The gum tree is broken by the gale, and the sheared point of the bough impales her chest, killing her (p. 294). Subsequently, Fox recollects her death by way of the wind: "Every flurry beneath the rock feels like the breeze of her passing. It buffets him all night; he knows it too well" (p. 294).

The wind is fluid, it is regarded as the messenger of information, through which we smell and listen. It has distinct flows and movements; it brings sound and taste. Like fire and water, the air is both good and bad. It represents life's freedom, and also takes away life itself. In *Breath*, surfing sound, like music, is difficult to express with words, but the sound of huge waves pouring out of the reef, and the sound of the ocean "clicking" convey meaning and a sense of boundlessness. In *Dirt Music*, the paddock is full of all kinds of sounds: cicadas, crickets, birds flapping their wings, and frogs croaking. These voices always remind Fox of the voices in his mother's egg basket of the good old days. When Georgie goes to examine the small tea tin Fox has secretly hidden, he "listens to the hum of insects and the endless note of wind through the fronds of the grasstrees" (p. 276). Fox's native music played with a nylon thread makes the sounds of B-flat, D-major, E-major, and chords, together with the sound of the banjo, fiddle, piano, cello, and even bells, Alvo –a death music. Some voices in memory,

like the wind, dissipate pain and boredom. The voice of the old woman Bess, nattering about animal instinct, is even a sound “just outside nature but not dissimilar to it” (p. 299). Like Rousseau’s praise of nature, Winton also endows nature with the ability to speak in his novels. Rousseau praised the language of nature and believed that “The first language of man, the most universal and most energetic of all languages, in short, the only language he had occasion for before there was a necessity of persuading assembled multitudes, was the cry of nature” (Rousseau, 2017, p. 82). Fox’s music with a nylon thread on two branches is similar to Thoreau’s “lyre,” that is, the “a vibration of the universal lyre,” which is a certain vibratory hum or a natural melody made by the wind over the forest poking every leaf and needle of the wood in Walden Lake (Thoreau, 2004, p. 123). China’s *Tao Te Ching* also says that the wind is the music blown out of nature’s orifices. In *Shallows*, for Queenie lying in the ferns and listening to the sound of nature can make her intoxicated for hours, and the wind brings the sound of whales and the message of God. Queenie seems a nature’s child. She can talk with dolphins and hear the voice of God from the seashell. The natural sounds brought by the wind and the cries of whales soothe her soul. In nature, everything in the universe is an echo and imitates natural sounds (Bachelard, 1999, p. 194). The vivid physical world has become “a site of narrativity” with a natural narrative ability (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 83). The display of its internal vitality is a tribute to the power of natural life. The voice promotes the presentation of the novel with its own narrative power. As Lyn McCredden and Nathaniel O’Reilly (2014) write, “The transformative power of the natural world drives so much of Winton’s writing” (p. 13).

Therefore, in many traditional musical instruments, guitar, mandolin, violin, or banjo is regarded as an imitation of natural sound. The “buzz” emitted by dirt music is not only a sensory relief but also a spiritual home, tearing open the barrier established between existence, survival, and emotion. The nylon fishing line issues, “boom boom boom!” That one note “represents a command, a God, a wish, a law... You are not a person, you resonate with everything, you are a group, you are the stone on Georgie’s back, you are the olive oil shaking into the dust under her feet; in those warm and sweet nights, you are a strand of hair behind her arm” (p. 301). At this time, Fox echoes Rousseau’s desire and inaction by floating on the water in his reverie, as well as the realm of “the unity of heaven and man” of Laozi and Zhuangzi in China. In such moments, the heart has no desire, no trouble, no self: “Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun, —a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal.” (Muir, 1911, p. 21) The complete integration of self into nature conveys the ecological proposition that everything is consistent with nature and that human beings and nature are homologous.

In addition to generating sound, air is to provide a medium for odor. The most strongly substantivized qualities of air are odors. For Shelley, the air is an immense flower, the floral essence of the whole earth. Nietzsche, meanwhile, notes the tonicity of air: its coldness and its emptiness (Bachelard, 1988, p. 136). Nature uses the odors brought by the wind to warn people, and to bring people sweetness and happiness. In Winton’s novels, smell frequently elicits feelings in specific characters. The damp and musty smell of the kitchen in the pasture on Wirrup Hill in *Shallows*, the smell and swampiness of livestock in the paddock, and the stinking smell of the cannery on Angelus Street are all the odors of life and deserted homes. Queenie experiences more beautiful scents, such as the familiar fragrance on clothes in the wardrobe and the fragrance of apples and capsicums in Fleurier’s kitchen (p. 48). Queenie’s daydream is likewise full of the smell of capsicums, tomatoes, and the combustion stove (p.

133). Couper also inhales sweetness from the wet earth (p. 89). In modern cities, the free wind is blocked by tall buildings; there is only the sound of noise and motors, like a hurricane that makes people dizzy, together with lonely and isolated feeling. There is a stench that fills the air with the smell of stale material. In this light, through air state, we moderns can reasonably identify the status of nature and exhibit concern for the environment.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the elements arise with frequency in Tim Winton's works. These primitive elements do not exist in isolation, but blend, permeate, and relate with one another. They are tied to the broader environment and construct a poetic three-dimensional natural space. Additionally, we find that the elements not only help to provide the frame and axis of our perceptual order but also construct themselves in part through playing their social practices. As throughout this work, we can reasonably view Tim Winton as a kind of shaman-naturalist who is keenly aware of and empathetic with the workings of the physical world, and he is strictly an "ancient environmentalist." "For a poet with genius," writes Bachelard, "calls on metaphors belonging to all of the elements" (Bachelard, 1988, p. 133). This confluence of circumstances is exemplified at the end of *Cloudstreet*, as characters discuss the Southern Cross. "Fish said, 'there is water in the sky, all water'". "The moonlight shone on Fish's face, which beamed even though there is no moon. Fish shined in the shelter of the tarp when he fell asleep" (p. 370). In this moment, water, and fire dance together. Fire is water, and water is fire; they blend. The characters lean against the earth and are surrounded by wheat fields. Water and the sky are set off against each other and converge on the horizon. Currently, land, sound, breath, taste, and various elements are mixed together to look forward to a "regeneration" (Crane, 2006, p. 29). Another example of what is meant by multi-element existence appears in *Dirt Music* when, "All around him, in a mist, the piping breaths of the dead; they surge and swirl and fin beneath, roundabout, alongside him. It smells of soil, their breath, of soil and creekmud and melons" (p. 159). Here, the ghosts of Fox's family surround him and are associated with the image of soil, and melons growing from the soil. This is also exemplified in the last chapter of *That Eye, The Sky* when Ott's old house is filled with a layer of shiny mist: "it's like a cloud but it's light... the cloudy white light is coming in—I breathe it in; it's warm and it tastes good" (p. 168). In addition, in *The Shepherd's Hut*, Jackie explains, "I went to sleep like someone disappearing from the earth, like rain sopped into dust, like immersing myself in the soil with water" (p. 178), becoming a molecule in this scene of nature. In the process of praising these four elements, the author does not eulogize nature as loudly as Goethe does when he exclaims, "Hail to Air and its soft breezes! Hail to Earth's mysterious depths! To your four, o Elements, here we offer solemn praise!" (p. 336), but it seems that we do witness how the call of "things and me coexist, heaven and man are one". As Winton concludes, "We need to fully understand the interdependence between human beings and the natural environment. Although we are only a species in nature, the fates of all species are intertwined with each other" (Liu, 2013a, p. 61). These words imply the need for finding our own element and place within such an encompassing and abiding manifold. Bachelard constructs a poetic, harmonious, and primitive natural space through the overall poetic interpretation of natural elements such as fire, air, earth, and water, indicating that man and nature are one. Winton's works continue this hybrid spiritual-natural space, indicating that human beings and non-human beings are equal. Winton's attention to nature and the ecological environment is an expression of ecological holism that regards the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value. In his work, the natural elements are primary

entities full of life force; moreover, the four primary elements are intertwined with one another, which points to the unity of all beings through the medium of four elements. This tendency showcases the writer's non-anthropocentric conception of the equality of all beings and is in sharp contrast to logocentrism. As *Dirt Music* admonishes, we are implored to "see the world as holy, joined, commingling" (p. 204). This summons speaks of Winton's ecological care, which echoes the ecological protection consciousness rising in Australia in the 1970s. As an environmentalist, Winton is an artist marked frequently by a sensitivity to the subtleties of environmental changes, openness to nonhuman otherness, as well as an ontologically egalitarian orientation. He seeks to "green" ecology. It is hoped that in the process we will gain a greater understanding of the lay of the elemental environment and perhaps even begin to develop a more original relation to the world around us.

The study is significant because, through the holistic poetic interpretation of natural elements such as fire, air, earth, and water in Winton's oeuvre, it proves that Winton's expression strategy has the same strain as Bachelard's four-element theories, realizing the emphasis on the expressive ability of nature discourse, so as to convey the ecological proposition of equality between all things and human beings and criticize the selfish behavior of human beings' ignorance towards nature environment. Moreover, Winton's works continue Bachelard spiritual natural space, showing that humans and non-humans are equal. Winton's overall ecological concern echoes the awareness of ecological protection that emerged in Australia in the 1970s, as an environmentalist, writer, and artist, he writes about Australia's landscapes and precious flora and fauna, respecting and praising nature and building a relationship with the land, establishing a bond with the land, and playing the prelude to the green literature of "poetic dwelling".

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