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Affecting Pastoral Dialogues: An Ecocritical Reading of Seamus Heaney's Eclogues in "Electric Light" (2001)

Pastoral serves as a keyword when understanding Seamus Heaney's literary production, both in terms of stylistic features and imagery. Although critical attention has focused on the connection between his pastoral works and contemporary Irish politics, the growth of ecocritical scholarship in the last few decades has made evident the importance of broadening such an analytical scope to relationships between humans and the environment while studying this genre. In this alignment, the present essay offers an ecocritical reading of some selected pastoral poems by Heaney, with a specific focus on his revival of the eclogue through the collection "Electric Light" (2001). Precisely, the poems "Virgil: Eclogue IX," "Bann Valley Eclogue," and "Glanmore Eclogue" will be read through the innovative perspective offered by the recent engagement of affect theory with ecocriticism: by doing so, I argue that Heaney's poems can be understood as valuable nature narratives that stress the connectedness between the human and the nonhuman, while resonating with the urgencies posed by the current environmental crisis to re-think more ethical forms of relationships between them. Furthermore, through the lens of econarratology, attention will be paid to the ecological potentials expressed by the formal features of the eclogue: this observation considers, on the one hand, the notion of 'relationality' within the practice of the shepherds' dialogue/singing and, on the other hand, how this literary form stresses the attachment between the human and the environment, both in the real world and in the storyworld. Hence, when exceeding a strictly politically oriented critical analysis of his work, Heaney's eclogues become visible as compelling ecocritical accounts that favor investigating the role of (pastoral) literature in fostering critical discussions about human/nonhuman ethics as a way to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, eclogue, ecocriticism, affect, pastoral, Electric Light, econarratology

> Hast any philosophy in thee, Shepherd?
> (Shakespeare, "As You Like It," Act III, Scene II)

Among the late twentieth-century poets who contributed to refashioning the forms and functions of pastoral poetry, Seamus Heaney represents a pivotal case: not only is he one of the most prominent voices in contemporary literature due to the critical and commercial success of his works but his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 has consecrated his ability to create "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past."[1]

As a poet of the modernist tradition,[2] Heaney's relationship with the classics has been crucial since the release of his first collection, titled "Death of a Naturalist" (1966), in which traditional pastoral features were already visible. A sense of devotion toward agricultural subjects, the Irish rural tradition and the activities of his peasant ancestors – to whom the poet famously vowed to paid tribute by "digging with the pen"[3] – runs throughout Heaney's works until the publication of "Electric Light" (2001). This first proper post-Nobel collection,[4] which was also saluted as his return to bucolic tropes and stylistic features, represents a useful case study for investigating pastoral poetry in contemporary literature, specifically in reference to the form of the eclogue, of which this collection contains three examples. Critics have primarily approached Heaney's eclogues – and his pastoral poems, in general – through a political lens,[5] by drawing parallels between the historical context of contemporary Ireland and that of Ancient Rome, which references the Latin poet Virgil, a model for Heaney's literary compositions.[6] Yet, despite this critical trend, the recent dedication of ecocritical scholarship to the study of pastoral poetry makes evident how eclogues can be approached through a wider analytical scope. The focus on natural subjects and on rural landscapes that this poetic form presents, as Heaney's works demonstrate, suggests considering it through a critical perspective that better acknowledges the relationship between humans and the environment, the core interest of ecocriticism.

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[1] Swedish Academy (1995).

[2] O'Donoghue (2009: 106).

[3] See the following excerpt from the poem "Digging": "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rest. / I'll dig with it." Heaney (2009 [1966]: 1).

[4] Twiddy (2012: 125).

[5] Tyler (2005: 96).

[6] Ibid., 103.

In relation to these aspects, the research question of this paper is simple: how can Heaney's eclogues be observed in light of present-day environmental issues? By adopting an ecocritical lens, this essay aims to disclose unexplored narratives in Heaney's poems and to put them in dialogue with scholarly debates about current environmental concerns. Particular attention will be dedicated to the call, both in and out academia, for new forms of ethical relationality between the human and the nonhuman in order to respond to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Although the ecocritical potentialities in Heaney's pastoral poems appear evident, critics have engaged with this approach limitedly. In response to this gap, this essay proposes an analysis of Heaney's poems, "Virgil: Eclogue IX," "Bann Valley Eclogue," and "Glanmore Eclogue," taking distance from the well-established assumption that perceives them primarily as "politically inflected eclogue translations and imitations."[7]

Furthermore, the emerging field of the environmental humanities has highlighted the necessity of investigating environmental-cultural issues by focusing on "the complexities of material networks that cross through local and global cultures, economic and social practices, and political discourse."[8] In line with this theoretical angle, I wish to give credit to such *complexities* by basing my analysis on the recent engagement between affect theory and ecocriticism in order to explore the emotional entanglement between the human and the nonhuman in Heaney's eclogues. As Bladow and Ladino observe:

> Affect theory disrupts both discrete notions of embodied selfhood and static notions of environment, encouraging us to trace the trajectories of transcorporeal encounters that are intricate and dynamic.[9]

Consequently, exploring patterns of human and nonhuman affect in Heaney's eclogues allows for disclosing their capacity to enrich current ecocritical debates on human/nonhuman connectedness. This aspect is particularly relevant in light of Alexa Weik von Mossner's observation that "environmental narratives invite us to care for human and nonhuman others who are put at risk,"[10] considering their capacity to affect the readers on a sensory and emotional level.

Moreover, by stressing the peculiar stylistic features of the eclogue, this paper also aims to explore the ecological implication of Heaney's works in a more formal sense. This objective is inspired by the recent development of 'econarratology,' which

> […] maintains an interest in studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment, but does so with sensitivity to the literary structures and

[7] Corcoran (2016: 120).

[8] Oppermann / Iovino (2017: 1).

[9] Bladow / Ladino (2018: 8).

[10] Weik von Mossner (2017: 4).

> devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives.[11]

In alignment with such a perspective, I wish to strengthen the ecological implication of Heaney's eclogues by addressing their dialogical structure, which will be regarded through the concept of *relationality*, both in terms of the affective entanglement among the human and the nonhuman *entities* populating the poems' storyworlds, and through the capacity of 'pastoral' narrative to enhance empathy in the reader toward the environment. This perspective finds evidence in the fact that, far from being considered as mere replicas of the past literary tradition, Heaney's eclogues may be of value in current debates about the role of literature as an "ecological force" in facing the current environmental crisis.[12]

Relying on these critical trajectories, the first part of this work will focus on the relationship between Heaney and the pastoral poetry tradition, while stressing how his eclogues embed issues of human/nonhuman connectedness beyond merely political references to recent Irish history. After discussing the growing critical attention to ecologically oriented readings of pastoral literature in the last few decades, the second part of this essay provides an ecocritical analysis of the three eclogues in "Electric Light" through the lens of affect theory. In this way, I intend to establish how Heaney's pastoral poetry may be regarded as a contribution in the search for new models of human/nonhuman relationality as a reaction to the current environmental crisis.

1. Heaney's Exploration of the Pastoral

Heaney holds a special place among contemporary modernist Irish poets due to his extended investigation of pastoral themes. The fact that critics have acknowledged his first collection, "Death of a Naturalist," as having "the authority of an *ars poetica*"[13] in regard to his career is enough to demonstrate the relevance of this subject in the poet's writing.

Despite the many available critical stances through which scholars could examine his literary works, Heaney's pastoral poems have been predominantly read as addressing the Irish political situation occurring at the time of their composition. Scholars have often discussed the historical contexts of Virgil in reference to Heaney's times: in the second half of the first century BC, Virgil witnessed the Roman civil war; starting from the late 1960s, Northern Ireland faced a violent period of ethnic-nationalist conflicts known as *The Troubles*. The many allusions to this challenging moment(s) in Heaney's production have not only

[11] James (2015: 23).

[12] Zapf (2016: 121).

[13] Lloyd (1993: 21).

turned his poetry into a symbol of Irish nationalistic spirit[14] but they have also favored the adoption of a politically oriented perspective when reading his work, including his pastoral poems. O'Donoghue, for instance, notices that "it is increasingly characteristic of Heaney's use of the pastoral to show it to be as devastated by violence and pity as tragedy,"[15] while Twiddy discusses how Heaney's pastoral poems represent an attempt to "wash away injustices as much as [they] driv[e] forward to establishing justice and mutual healing" in light of the historical occurrences in Northern Ireland.[16]

Notwithstanding the dominant political reading of Heaney's work, adopting a broader investigative scope becomes useful for *digging up* other (unexplored) narratives and for establishing new ways of regarding his effort of linking revamped traditional literary forms to the pressures of the contemporary world. One scholar who supports this position is O'Brien, who understands Heaney's attachment to the imagery of the land as a way for the poet to reflect on himself, his society, and his unconscious.[17] This observation discloses wider ecological implications in the case of Heaney's rural imagery while exceeding a solely nationalistically oriented scope in the reading of his poems. A similar consideration becomes visible in Twiddy's remark that Heaney's pastoral poetry represents a "consolation for the loss of an ancestral mode of existence."[18] Moreover, on the basis of Twiddy's idea that Heaney shows how "a specific type of natural interaction has gone,"[19] it becomes evident that his pastoral works do, in fact, echo the ethical human/environment issues advocated by ecocriticism.

In addition, a useful comment on how Heaney figures pastoral poetry appears in his review of "The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse" (1974). Contrarily the famous declaration of its editors, Barrell and Bull, that the genre had died after Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas, because the separation of the country from the city could no longer be experienced in England,[20] Heaney argued that pastoral poetry continues to be a useful expressive form in the twentieth century, as Bernard O'Donoghue points out.[21] Heaney presented further clarifications of his understanding of 'pastoral' by discussing this term in relation to the notion of 'rural.' Contrary to the custom of considering them as synonyms, he asserted:

> I have occasionally talked of the countryside where we live in Wicklow as being pastoral rather than rural, trying to impose notions of a beautiful landscape on the

[14] Buckley (1983: 260).

[15] O'Donoghue (2009: 107).

[16] Twiddy (2006: 63).

[17] O'Brien (2016: 5).

[18] Twiddy (2012: 125).

[19] Ibid.

[20] Barrell / Bull (1982 [1974]: 432).

[21] O'Donoghue (2009: 109).

> word [pastoral], in order to keep 'rural' for the unselfconscious face of raggle-taggle farmland.[22]

This observation presents affinity between the poet and Raymond Williams's Marxist critical perspective. In his seminal work "The Country and The City" (1973), Williams discussed how the pastoralization of rural labor and economics produced by literature had prolonged this "myth functioning as memory,"[23] which was eventually used as propaganda for the landed gentry and concealed the exploitation of rural workers.

This parallel may suggest, at first glance, that scholars should consider the adoption of a similar critical lens to approach Heaney's pastoral work. However, despite this affinity, the intensive and ever-renewing dynamics of this genre – its capacity to adapt and to embrace new cultural concerns throughout history – should encourage critics to regard Heaney's poems through (ever) novel critical standpoints: ecocriticism emerges as the privileged perspective in this sense when considering both the extensive attention of this scholarship to the pastoral over the last few decades and the urgency of the present-day world. When discussing the environmental potentials of Heaney's pastoral works, Gifford underlines how his popularity is "testimony to the continuing need for a pastoral poetry that returns to speak to contemporary concerns" and that "Heaney makes a direct address to his readers with a full awareness of the cultural context in which his work is being read."[24] It thus appears clear that Heaney's eclogues possess the capacity to create a dialogue with the environmental discourse characteristic of contemporary readers, especially considering the emphasis that his poems place on the human/non-human affective relationship, as the following analysis will demonstrate.

Among the (few) critics who have illustrated interactions between Heaney and the late twentieth century developments in environmental thought, Susanna Lindström argues for the importance of his self-awareness when rethinking human-earth relations by challenging the stories – and poems – we recount about the surrounding world. Specifically, by offering an ecocritical reading of Heaney's collection "North" (1975) and by focusing on "what they [the poems] say about the natural as well as the political environment,"[25] Lindström identifies Heaney's postmodern view of nature as mirroring the achievement of current environmental scholarship in the humanities. Similarly, by examining the "ecoweb formed by earth, water, air and fire"[26] in Heaney's verses, Juan Ráez Padilla has determined that Heaney's ecocritical stance emerges from a

> […] suggestive in-betweenness: in this our age of environmental apocalypse, Heaney's poetry readily shows that there may just as well exist a space for inter-

[22] Heaney (1980: 173).

[23] Williams (1973: 43).

[24] Gifford (1999: 98).

[25] Lindström (2015: 7).

[26] Padilla (2009: 21).

> action between Nature (earth) and Culture (air), *tense* and temporarily comforting though this may only get.[27]

Hence, Heaney's works demonstrate compelling ecocritical potentials, as we will see in more detail.

2. Eco-logical Implications of Dia-logical Pastoral Poems

In the last few decades, increasing scholarly attention has been dedicated to environmentally oriented understandings of pastoral literature. At the beginning of the 1990s, pioneering ecocritic Glen A. Love underlined the necessity to "redefine pastoral in terms of the new and more complex understanding of nature."[28] A few years later, in 1995, Lawrence Buell's call for a "mature environmental aesthetics"[29] in the study of this phenomenon rejuvenated scholarly interest in pastoral poetry through an ecocritical lens. Terry Gifford's concept of 'post-pastoral' – that is, a "discourse that can both celebrate *and* take responsibility for nature without false consciousness"[30] – is perhaps one of the most straightforward responses to Buell's challenge. Overall, this renewed critical attention to the pastoral has developed according to the need to move beyond the dualistic understanding that characterizes the traditional figuration of this topic: by approaching more critically the idea that pastoral encompasses "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban,"[31] more extensive – and ecological – readings of this phenomenon have been developed, along with a new set of pastoral-related neologisms: an example can be seen in the case of the "dark pastoral," which aims to "break down the human versus nonhuman dualism of pastoral idealism."[32] Among the most recent critical approaches aiming to overcome the idea of pastoral primarily as an idealized world separated from reality, the engagement of ecocriticism with affect theory is crucial: this combination has breathed new life into the scholarly investigation of the interconnection between the human and the nonhuman – which serves as the basis of the ecocritical movement[33] – through the analysis of affectivity and emotions.

The possible dialogue(s) between ecocriticism and affect theory have been discussed along two main strands: on the one hand, they converge around the consideration that "affective attachments and exchanges infuse a lively material

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[27] Ibid., 27.

[28] Love (1990: 207).

[29] Buell (1995: 32).

[30] Gifford (1999: 148). Original emphasis.

[31] Ibid., 2.

[32] Schneider (2016: xi).

[33] Glotfelty (1996: xx).

world in which we are deeply embedded alongside other beings,"[34] thus emphasizing the engagement between humans and the environment by echoing the achievement of disciplines such as new materialism.[35] On the other hand, through a more literary angle, these two disciplines have merged to investigate the ways in which nature narratives influence readers' connection to the environment. Weik von Mossner, in particular, has turned to the cognitive sciences to investigate the mechanism by which storytelling determines an emotional resonance in audiences: by connecting aesthetic to ethics, Weik von Mossner also suggests that environmental narratives enhance forms of ethical rationality between the human and the nonhuman through the empathy activated by their affective capacity.[36]

'Relationality' and 'connectedness' thus become central concepts for the critical observation offered by this essay: adopting them for the analysis of Heaney's poems represents a way of exceeding sole attention to issues of *separateness* traditionally referred to in pastoral – including binaries such as idealized/real, human/nonhuman, and country/city – while disclosing new narratives that can more effectively address current environmental scholarship and its efforts to face related concerns. Specifically, issues of 'connectedness' can be discussed in regard to eclogues in at least two ways. In the first case, on the basis of the idea that "stories about the environment significantly influence experiences of that environment,"[37] Heaney's eclogues debate the human/nonhuman entanglement, insisting on the emotional attachment of living beings inhabiting the *locus amœnus*. In this regard, Tyler has already discussed the idea that Heaney "draws upon not only the salutary or healing aims of pastoral. He also uses the genre because it represents the capacity to travel and bridge great distances between people with a common understanding."[38] Through these words, Tyler contributes to the interpretation that both the emotionally pleasing capacity ("healing") of Heaney's eclogues and the emotion-scape that they offer can extend and affect a wide readership.

On the other hand, issues of relationality emerge when displaying a more formally oriented observation of Heaney's eclogues, particularly when adopting the analytical lens of 'econarratology.' In recent years, new critical approaches have developed in the attempt to better explore the relationship between literature and the physical world, considering how "understandings of narrative change as the environment changes."[39] Through the concept of 'econarratology,' James expresses her interest in "studying relation[s] between literature and the physical

[34] Bladow / Ladino (2018: 8).

[35] For a further discussion on new materialism see Barad (2007).

[36] Weik von Mossner (2017: 133).

[37] James / Morel (2020: 1).

[38] Tyler (2013: 40).

[39] James and Morel (2020: 1).

environment," but doing so "with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives."[40]

As the "Oxford English Dictionary" suggests, the word 'eclogue' derives from the Greek verb *eklegein* (to pick out), and it is adopted mostly to refer to pastoral literary dialogues,[41] similarly to what is presented in Virgil's "Eclogues." The notion of 'dialogue' (from the Greek *dialegesthai*, that is, 'converse with') is particularly useful for highlighting possible ecological implications of the eclogue: its dialogical form reflects, once again, the notion of relationality between the two subjects involved in the poetic conversation. In the case of Heaney's eclogues, this dialogue's affective capacity emerges from the shepherds' awareness of the consolatory purpose of the (pastoral) nature narrative offered by their singing, almost as a metaliterary commentary. Moreover, according to the aforementioned study by Weik von Mossner, it is possible to understand how the affective capacity of the shepherds' singing works both for the characters within the fictional world and for the readers approaching the text in the real world, who are, in fact, 'exposed' to the same pastoral singing while reading the poems. Considering the ecological implications offered by this formally oriented discussion on 'relationality,' the eclogue can thus be described as an *eco-dia-logical literary* form: this notion is useful for better reflecting on the affective potentials of rural imagery involved in the poem *per se*, but also on the contribution of the dialogue (both in regard to the shepherds and between the text and the reader) in enhancing affective entanglements between the human and the nonhuman realms.

Heaney's reliance on the notion of relationality can be seen as one of the features characterizing his re-elaboration of traditional literary forms, in alignment with the tendencies in Modern Irish poetry to "borro[w] from traditions outside of the specifically Irish to make sense of their own mixed heritages."[42] After all, as Heaney himself affirmed in a public lecture, titled "Eclogues In Extremis: on the Staying Power of Pastoral" (2002), "the form of the eclogue, though a self-consciously literary one, has stayed alive through its ability to meet the challenges of new and sometimes tragic historical circumstances" and "the literariness of the pastoral mode allows the poet to shed new or clearer light on truth and reality."[43] Through these words, the poet seems to reassess the inextricable relationship between pastoral poetry and a wide array of cultural discourses characterizing the present-day world, of which the ecological one appears as one of the most relevant in current literary criticism.

[40] James (2015: 23).

[41] Hanks / Pearsall / Stevenson (2010: 557).

[42] Tyler (2013: 46).

[43] O'Donoghue (2019:147).

By reflecting on the 'eco-dia-logical' stance of Heaney's eclogues, the following analysis will illustrate: a) some ecological narratives in Heaney's dialogue that stress the idea of the connection between the environment and the human; b) the capacity of these poems to inspire ethical modes of the human/nonhuman relationship both in the fictional and the real worlds.

3. "Virgil: Eclogue XI"[44]

"Virgil: Eclogue XI" represents Heaney's translation of Virgil's original. It introduces a dialogue between two shepherds after their accidental encounter: while leading some goats to their new landlord, Moeris happens to meet Lycidas and then informs him of having lost his land. Lycidas, aggrieved by his friend's account, tries to console him by singing pastoral songs describing pleasant natural imagery. Critics have generally privileged the political and biographical reading of Virgil's poem by linking the shepherd's case of land dispossession to similar occurrences in the case of his property in Mantua.[45] Similarly, when considering Heaney's version, scholars have extended this parallel to the threat of the Anglo-Protestant dominance in Ulster, from an Irish nationalistic perspective, during the conflict in Northern Ireland, for which the poem has been described as "a song of lament for a place, and that place can serve as the emblem of a land carved up by civil war."[46]

Nonetheless, through the ecocritical lens presented in the foregoing paragraphs, Heaney's translation unveils other narratives, particularly when considering the stress of the poem on the idea of 'consolation.' Lycidas's expression of empathy toward his friend Moeris is suggested by the poem's awareness of the healing property of pastoral singing: as the eclogue reveals, the features of the *locus amœnus* – that is, the idyllic landscape, which typically contains "trees and shade, a grassy meadow, running water, song-bird, and cool breezes"[47] – seem capable of helping Moeris overcome his sorrows. This consideration can be observed by comparing the shift in the shepherd's mood from the opening of the poem ("The last thing / You could've imagined happening has happened. / An outsider lands and says he has the rights / To our bit of ground") to its end ("Singing shortens the road, so we'll walk and sing. / Walk then, Moeris, and sing").

Moreover, beyond reflecting on the *locus amœnus* only as "an idealized landscape with three fundamental ingredients: trees, grass and water"[48] or as a refuge

[44] For all the references to this poem, see Heaney (2010 [2001]: 28-31).

[45] O'Hogan (2018: 406).

[46] Twiddy (2012: 127).

[47] Spawforth / Eidinow / Hornblower (2012: 854).

[48] Ruff (2015: 92).

in accordance with traditional pastoral criticism,[49] the poem seems to associate this trope with issues of affect, specifically considering the stress on the emotional connection between the human and the nonhuman that pastoral songs/poems reveal. At the moment of their encounter, Moeris complains to Lycidas that, since the arrival of the new landlord, "All's changed." Moeris's discouragement leads him to affirm that "[pastoral] songs and tunes / Can no more hold out against brute force." Lycidas reverses his friend's perspective not only by asserting the usefulness of shepherds' songs in bringing joy and in solving problems ("The story I heard was about Menalcas, / How your song-man's singing saved the place"), but also by performing pastoral songs in his turn, almost as a litmus test of their effects over Moeris's sorrow. Moreover, in Lycidas's words, the regenerative power of singing is presented both in relation to the human and to the nonhuman realms: on the one hand, on a material level, his song seems to be capable of instilling life into the natural entities composing the pastoral landscape: "[…] Who hymn the earth / To grow wild flowers and grass, and shade the wells / With overhanging green? […]." On the other hand, as Weik von Mossner also suggests, the nature narratives embedded in the practice of singing become useful for positively affecting the unhappy shepherd and changing his mood.

As already anticipated, ecocriticism has offered increasing attention to how the real or imagined landscape in the storyworld(s) cue emotional responses in the reader, and how, through an empathic engagement with environmental narratives, it "has implications for our moral and ethical thinking about social and environmental justice."[50] The stress of Lycidas's account on the relationship between the nonhuman and emotions, both through their symbolic value ("flowers and grass") and direct references ("the ridge keeps sloping *gently* to the water"[51]) gives credit to the affective potentials of the landscape narrated in this eclogue. Even though the use of a human-related emotional vocabulary when determining attributes of nonhuman entities may appear as the result of anthropocentric and anthropomorphizing perspectives – as it is often discussed, for instance, in regard to the issues of the pathetic fallacy[52] – through the lens of affect theory and ecocriticism, further considerations can be disclosed. Specifically, the word "gently" in reference to the ridge can be interpreted as the effort of a human character (the shepherd) to understand and represent his natural surroundings through the scope of the pleasing feelings prompted by the features of the *locus amœnus* by relying on his human-specific emotional palette. In this sense, the intermingling of human and nonhuman-related terminology with attributive value to natural elements can be regarded as a further emphasis on the (affective)

[49] Carroll (2011: 71).

[50] Weik von Mossner (2017: 73).

[51] Emphasis: S.R.

[52] Burwick (2015: 218).

enmeshment between the human and nonhuman realms discussed in the poem, which, in this case, mirror each other on a linguistic level.

As a result of the successful emotional involvement of Lycidas's song, Moeris joins the pastoral dialogue, reciting, in his turn, some excerpts taken from another shepherd's lyric ("I'm *quiet* because I'm trying to piece together / As best I can a song I think you'd know"[53]). Similar to Lycidas's focus on the lively blaze of the natural world, Moeris's remembrance of Menalcas's song reinforces the positive connotation of the poem's environmental narratives, underlying the dynamic features of the nonhuman realm:

> Here earth breaks out in wildflowers, she rills and rolls
> The streams in waterweed, here poplars bend
> Where the bank is undermined and vines in thickets
> Are meshing shade with light.

These lines center on the processes of regeneration and transformation that the natural world undergoes, just like the changes occurring to Moeris's mood. By drawing a parallel between the *pleasant* atmosphere of this excerpt and the possible effects of this account on its listener, the (pastoral) singing becomes visible as a way of restoring one's mood while overcoming sadness. This aspect is strengthened by the concluding remark of the poem, "singing shortens the road," through which Lycidas continues counseling Moeris, while observing how this practice can become (another) companion in the march to the new landlord.

In this sense, and in alignment with what has been observed by Weik von Mossner, "Virgil: Eclogue XI" also illustrates the emotional power of pastoral singing by discussing how it can inspire caring actions toward the nonhuman world. An example appears in the section of the poem presenting Menalcas's song, which is dedicated to his beloved shepherdess, Amaryllis. Focusing on human attentiveness towards animals, the song states:

> O herd my goats for me,
> Tityrus, till I come back. I won't be long.
> Graze them and then water them, and watch
> The boy with the horns doesn't go for you.

These lines, echoing the didactic mode of Virgil's "Georgics," instruct and inspire its listener, Tityrus, to pursue an ethical human/animal bond. Similarly, one can argue, the very listener outside the storyworld is guided towards a similar outcome, thanks to the empathy elicited by the narrative. Issues of ethics in regard to Lycidas's argument are also visible in the emphasis that the poem places on his wisdom. A validation of the efficiency of his effort derives from Lycidas's statement that: "people in the country call [him] bard." Additionally, his virtue as a sage storyteller is corroborated by the humbleness that Lycidas shows when affirming that he does not deserve praise and that, in comparison with other, more talented shepherds, he is "a squawking goose among sweet-throated swans."

[53] Emphasis: S.R.

In more ecocritical terms, the healing properties of these pastoral accounts resonate with current debates in environmental studies: beyond the idea that Virgil's ninth eclogue primarily "concerns the difficulty of healing the wounds inflicted by civil war […and] concentrates on the use of the eclogue as the site of political complaint, and reflects the tradition of pastoral lament in Ireland,"[54] the poem also seems to give prominence to the capacity of (pastoral) poetry to underline human and nonhuman connectedness due to the emotional potentials of the *locus amœnus*. The fact that Heaney presents a translation of this specific poem is useful for guiding similar considerations in relation to the other eclogues presented in the collection, as we shall see below.

4. "Bann Valley Eclogue"[55]

Several themes presented in Heaney's translation of "Eclogue IX" appear in his "Bann Valley Eclogue." This work, which also contains evident parallels with Virgil's "Eclogue IV," introduces a dialogue between two characters, Virgil and the Poet, about the effect of the imminent birth of a child. In "Eclogue IV," Virgil celebrated the enterprises of Octavian Augustus by announcing the return of the Golden Age after the birth of a child, which the Christian tradition has famously read as a prophecy of the coming of Christ.[56] Heaney's poem has been regarded as pertaining to similar implications but through a mainly politically oriented lens: as Twiddy affirms, with this eclogue, Heaney "offers the female child as a symbol of hope against, or as successor to, a period of national and international conflict or collapse."[57]

The relevance of the natural imagery in determining the beginning of a new epoch suggests the poem's compelling ecocritical potential. Similar to Virgil's reliance on the trope of the Golden Age to present a forthcoming time free from trauma and recrimination,[58] Heaney's adoption of similar imagery – which stands for "an idyllic, often imaginary past time of peace, prosperity, and happiness"[59] – establishes its effects in determining an emotional outcome connected to the idea of peace and quietness. This aspect can be observed in the following lines:

> Big dog daisies will get fanked up in the spokes.
> She'll lie on summer evenings listening to
> A chug and slug going on in the milking parlour.
> Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions.

[54] Twiddy (2006: 52).

[55] For all the references to this poem, see Heaney (2010 [2001]: 9-11).

[56] O'Donoghue (2009: 113).

[57] Twiddy (2006: 56).

[58] Tyler (2013: 216).

[59] Hanks / Pearsall / Stevenson (2010: 751).

In alignment with what has already been discussed about the affective role of nature narratives, this poem presents the theme of human/nonhuman connectedness as a key feature of the upcoming new era. Heaney describes the birth of the child as an event corroborating the sense of fusion between the human and the nonhuman, particularly on a material level: by establishing that "Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourself," the poem recalls the connection between the materiality of the natural world and that of the human body. This idea is highlighted by expressions such as "Earth mark, birth mark," which illustrates the link between the human body ("birth mark") and the natural world ("Earth mark"), echoing the principle that what affects the environment also has consequences for humans. This consideration discloses evident ecocritical implications in reference to concepts such as the 'Anthropocene': the neologism introduced by Crutzen and Stoermer,[60] in fact, illustrates the anthropogenic causes of the major biospherical alterations on planet Earth but also underlines the consequences of such phenomena on human lives. Hence, what the birth of the child determines, as the poems seems to suggest, is not only a period of prosperity but also the beginning of a new period in which the awareness of human/nonhuman connectedness is fostered. This subject is strengthened in the conclusion of the poem through a series of images conflating these two realms:

> Dew-scales shook off the leaves. Tear-ducts asperging.
> Child on the way, it won't be long until
> You land among us. Your mother's showing signs,
> Out of her sunset walk among big round bales
> Planet earth like a teething ring suspended
> Hangs by its world-chain. Your pram waits in the corner.
> Cows are let out. They're sluicing the milk-house floor.

In the new post-natal era, through a series of similes and parallels, "dew-scales" can become human "tears," "Planet earth" is likened to the child's "teething ring," and the animal referred to by the line "sluicing the milk-house floor" echoes human breast-feeding. As with the *coming* of the baby girl, the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are depicted as less certain; also considering these premonitory "signs", the poem can be observed as reinforcing the entanglement between humans and the environment.

Similar to what has already been said about "Virgil: Eclogue IX," the "Bann Valley Eclogue" reveals ecological implications through a metaliterary reflection on the practice of pastoral singing/storytelling. This subject emerges in the very beginning of the poem: by citing the line "Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus" from Virgil's "Eclogue IV" (which David Ferry has translated as "Sicilian Muses, sing a nobler music"[61]) Heaney invokes the power of the Muses to sing a song that may inspire him to compose "a song worth singing" in view

[60] For a further discussion about the notion of 'Anthropocene', see Crutzen / Stoermer (2000: 17-18).

[61] Virgil (1999: 29).

of the "child that's due." The emphasis on the Muses' singing as a source of inspiration (and thus, of affect) can be read as a further underscoring of the affective capacity of narratives on their listener/reader, according to what has already been observed in Weik von Mossner's study. The Poet's request that the Muses give him "a song *worth* singing"[62] suggests, again, the importance of pastoral songs in enhancing the enmeshment of humans and nonhumans. In ecocritical terms, this topic is worth singing about during the present-day ecological crisis since it may inspire new models of relationships while helping people reflect on alternatives to anthropocentric behaviors toward the natural world, which have led to the Anthropocene. This stress on the notion of human/nonhuman connectedness also helps scholars consider further implications in regard to the trope of the Golden Age / *locus amœnus*: beyond referring to a mere anthropocentric celebratory intent of the natural world, as is often considered, these landscapes entail more complex implications by stressing the material and affective continuum of human beings and the surrounding environment.

Moreover, by reading the poem through an econarratological lens, it is possible to see how the dialogical dynamics of the eclogue also disclose ecocritical potentials: as Tyler noticed, while Virgil sings *alone* in the original "Eclogue IV," in "Bann Valley Eclogue" an exchange takes place between *two* characters, since a single voice becomes *plural*.[63] In this regard, the notion of 'relationality' expressed by the affective potentials of the pastoral landscape – both through the tropes of the Golden Age and the *locus amœnus* – is, once again, fostered by the formal features of the eclogue: the dialogical relationship between two shepherds, in its consolatory power, "suggests that past problems can be overcome, past griefs can be assuaged by the uniting stream, and consolation concentrated in the natural figure, the child."[64]

Finally, as Tyler illustrates about Heaney's "Bann Valley Eclogue": "[w]hat he [Heaney] looks forward to is the promise of the future to make things 'better,' not perfect."[65] This observation is beneficial for further underlining how, exceeding the traditional functions attributed to the Golden Age, the poem presents a more complex elaboration of the trope by disclosing its ethical implications when envisioning a future era in which the connectedness between humans and the environment can be ultimately achieved.

[62] Emphasis: S.R.

[63] Tyler (2013: 98).

[64] Twiddy (2012: 130).

[65] Tyler (2013: 101).

5. "Glanmore Eclogue"[66]

The "Glanmore Eclogue" presents another original poetic dialogue between two characters. In this poem, Myles and the Poet converse about a wide array of pastoral topics, from personal experiences and feelings, to the power of poetry and literature, passing through questions related to land possession and to the celebration of the small pleasures offered by the natural word.

In parallel with Moeris's complaining about his land dispossession in "Virgil: Eclogue IX," in the "Glanmore Eclogue," the shepherd Myles informs the Poet that "Outsiders own / The countries nowadays" and expresses his resentment toward these "foreigners" who now control his land. By echoing the country/city dualism typical of the pastoral tradition, which stresses "the representation of the country in contrast to the urban,"[67] Myles criticizes the increase of capitalistic practices in the new field management system, observing how "money [started] coming in" and how "Land Commissions ma[de] tenant owners," thus subverting the conventional escapist spirit associated with the countryside. The nostalgic tone of this poem is also fostered by its emphasis on the temporal distance between the "then" ("Those were days") and the "now" in discussing life in the country, where the present moment is depicted in negative terms, for instance, due to the fact that small farmers are "priced out of the market." Through a consolatory tone, which, again, mirrors Lycidas's attitude in "Virgil: Eclogue IX," the Poet welcomes Myles's complaints and expresses sympathy toward him by comforting his friend through pastoral songs dedicated to the beauty of the simple life in the county.

Similarly to what emerged in "Virgil: Eclogue IX," in the "Glanmore Eclogue," the poem presents the affective power of natural/pastoral narratives by elaborating the description of the *locus amœnus* according to the lively properties of the nonhuman world: not only does an array of verbs connected to movement and energy intersperse the eclogue (e.g. "breath," "skips," "startle," "gills," "runs," "jumps") but also a number of animals ("cuckoo," "deer," "raven," "fish," "lark") and plants ("heather," "bog," "whin") highlights the vibrant qualities of the nonhuman realm and the cheerful tone of the eclogue in contrast to the spirit of the sorrowful shepherd. The emphasis on the features of a summery landscape also fosters the positive connotation of this pastoral emotional atmosphere, especially due to the description of birdsong, occasionally corroborated by acoustic effects ("cuckoo cuckoos"; "A little nippy chirpy fellow / Hits the highest note"; "The lark sings on his clear tidings").

In alignment with what has already been discussed in reference to the use of vocabulary expressing human emotions in the case of nonhuman entities in

[66] For all the references to this poem, see Heaney (2010 [2001]: 32-34).

[67] Gifford (1999: 2).

"Virgil: Eclogue IX," the representation of animals as engaging in human-like actions (e.g., "run," "jumps," etc.) should not be (solely) interpreted as the effect of anthropocentric and anthropomorphizing standpoints. Oppositely, through the lens of affect theory, this lexical choice appears as a further emphasis on the sense of connectedness between the human and the nonhuman characterizing Heaney's eclogues: just as we observed in the case of the "Bann Valley Eclogue," where words primarily pertaining to the description of the human body are employed for referring to the materiality of the natural world, the fact that, in this poem, humans and nonhumans share the same linguistic register can appear as further evidence of the entanglement of these two realms.

The final line of the poem epitomizes the affective capacity of this pastoral setting by defining it in relation to what the shepherds describe as "perfect days." The Poet anticipates the celebration of the summer landscape in his song saying:

> A woman changed my life. Call her Augusta.
> Because we arrived in August, and from now on
> This month's baled hay and blackberries and combines
> Will spell Augusta's bounty.

In this sense, August and its lively vibrancy emerges in its power to instill an affective involvement in the listener, who, consequently, is transported by the emotions conveyed by this account. It is then evident how this eclogue can be observed as the Poet's response to Myles's concerns about his land dispossession: the shepherd's positive outcome following his words proves that his consolatory effort is successful.

In alignment with what was discussed about the previous poems, a formally oriented and metaliterary reflection on the affective potentials of pastoral poetry also appears in the "Glanmore Eclogue." This aspect is visible in the opening stanza, where Myles poses a rhetorical question to the Poet dedicated to the act of writing:

> A house and ground. And your own bay tree as well
> And time to yourself. You've landed on your feet.
> If you can't write now, when you will ever write?

The (pastoral) ideal of simplicity and quietness introduced by the picturesque, domestic setting in the first two lines expresses, once again, a typical pastoral *locus*, which is also presented as a privileged context for poetry writing due to its inspirational power. A similar emphasis is expressed a few lines later when the Poet underlines that Meliboeus's simple and humble – and thus pastoral – life enhances positive feelings:

> Back to the wall and empty pockets: Meliboeus
> Was never happier than when He was on the road
> With people on their uppers.

A life lived in simplicity, the Poet seems to suggest, does not prevent someone from being enriched by beneficial emotions, which, considering the emphasis on Meliboeus's popular singing skills, appear essential for composing pastoral lyrics. Furthermore, Meliboeus guides both the Poet and Myles to discover the

values "hidden" behind the natural world, as his spirit "lives […] in things like that." In this regard, far from appearing a mere citation of the Virgilian pastoral universe, Meliboeus allows one to reflect on the importance of pastoral singing / poetry, which he masters fruitfully, in accessing the affective potentials entailed in the nonhuman realm.

References to pastoral poetry also emerge from Myles's stress on how "book-learning is the thing" in regard to the Poet's formative experience of writing pastoral songs. Myles, in fact, affirms that the Poet is a "lucky man" for not having to face the difficulties of the physical activities of farming and agriculture ("No stock to feed, no milking times, no tillage / Nor blisters on your hand nor weather-worries") but for having devoted himself to the practice of song composition: an observation that underscores the values of pastoral narratives even further. Finally, the emphasis that Myles places on the education of poets accentuates the relevance of pastoral poetry in presenting an (emotional) response to the troubles of life. Differently from the shepherds of the pastoral tradition, who seem to be able to perform pastoral songs as an innate talent, the Poet can rely on the pastoral literary heritage to unleash, through singing, pastoral emotions able to console, while depicting a setting emphasizing issues of human/nonhuman connectedness.

5. Conclusion

Bladow and Ladino have observed that a more *affective* approach to the study of the relationship between the human and the environment may produce more *effective* ecocriticism.[68] This thought particularly resonates with Seamus Heaney's eclogues, which, when viewed through an ecocritical lens, can be described as narratives that stress the affective connection between humans and nonhumans, while also engaging with urgent issues posed by the current environmental crisis. Drawing parallels between the two main theoretical perspectives in the recent entanglement between affect theory and ecocriticism, Heaney's eclogues elaborate such topics in at least two ways: first, they underline a material human/nonhuman sense of connectedness; second, they highlight the affective capacity of (pastoral) narratives on human emotions and inspire forms of ethical relationality toward the environment.

As the analysis of the poems has revealed, the features of the *locus amœnus* play an important role in the achievement of this awareness. Exceeding traditional understandings of this trope primarily as a celebration of the natural world's beauty, Heaney's poems allow for readers to reflect on how this *locus* fosters the idea of an (affective) connection between the human and the nonhuman: the 'pleasant feelings' associated with this motif – a nature narrative –

[68] Bladow / Ladino (2018: 3).

result in their capacity to console and to develop a positive outcome in the listener while depicting the inextricable entanglement between the human and the natural world. This aspect is expressed in both a literary and an extra-literary sense. The former regards the characters *inside* the pastoral storyworld and the consoling songs performed by a shepherd for his fellow sorrowful friend(s); on an extra-literary level, the affective capacity of the eclogue refers to the reader *outside* the literary world, who, similarly to the shepherds, not only assists in the fictional pastoral account, but, one can argue, attains a similar emotional reaction in line with what Weik von Mossner observes in her study on the influence of nature narrative on emotions.

Current environmental awareness and growing consciousness about the connectedness between the human and the nonhuman, expressed by the popular scholarship of ecocriticism, thus becomes relevant for determining the ecocritical potential of Heaney's eclogues: the centrality of this subject in his eclogues helps readers consider them as tools for critically approaching the discussion on anthropocentrism that has dominated the human/environment relationship in the last few decades, leading to the major environmental changes of our time. Opposing the idea of an ontological separation between these two realms and restoring a sense of connectedness, as Heaney's eclogues suggest, becomes a counter-narrative that can inspire a closer bond between the human and the nonhuman, both in the fictional world and the real world.

Heaney's works also become useful for observing how the eclogue may be regarded as a literary form pertaining to eco(-dia)logical themes: on the one hand, an eclogue engages with issues of human/nonhuman connectedness by proposing imagery that generally conveys the affective relationship between the two realms; on the other hand, the dialogical structure – which already presents a form of *relation* between the shepherds involved in the pastoral singing – determines the positive emotional outcome of natural narratives on its listener(s), while stressing the purpose of healing and consolation inside and outside the storyworld.

Hence, in a time when planet Earth is facing critical environmental issues, Heaney's revival of the eclogue becomes a way for readers to reflect on the opportunities that literary forms offer in order to tackle such concerns. By exceeding the limit of a politically oriented interpretative lens, and by adopting an ecocritical angle, Heaney's eclogues reveal ecological narratives that are useful for re-thinking the entanglement between humans and the environment according to a renewed ethical consciousness. And in the search for new models of relationality, the longstanding format of the pastoral dialogue still appears as an inspiring resource. This aspect not only broadens the scope of Heaney's role in establishing a dialogue with past literary forms and present-day issues but also attests, once again, to how (pastoral) literature is pivotal in tackling the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

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