

Chapter 19

Elemental Poetics

Material Agency in Contemporary German Poetry

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In the mid-1990s the ancient theory of the basic elements was rediscovered in German cultural studies by the brothers Gernot and Hartmut Böhme who compiled a “Cultural History of the Elements” (cf. Böhme and Böhme 1996). Simultaneously, recent works of German and Austrian poetry show an increasing interest in the elements and even systematically incorporate element theories from various cultures. Two of the most renowned contemporary poets, Franz Josef Czernin (born in Vienna in 1952) and Ulrike Draesner (born in Munich in 1962), actually composed entire cycles following the elemental model. In the following analysis I will show why Czernin and Draesner chose a model that science has long considered an outdated matrix and how they fuse this model with their poetry. Special attention will be given to the relationship between the creation of worlds and the composition of texts. Furthermore, I will highlight the common ground between these elemental poetics and basic ideas of material agency that have recently been (re-)conceptualized under the label of “new materialism” or “material ecocriticism,” especially Jane Bennett’s thoughts on “vibrant matter.”¹ Some preliminary reflections concerning the affinity between poetry and element theory will be followed by a brief review of principal traits of elemental cosmogonies and a comparative discussion of Czernin’s and Draesner’s elemental poetry.²

ELEMENT THEORY AND POETRY—ELEMENTAL POETRY

It is a long-standing tradition in the Western world to regard the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) as creative principles; not only do they form the primordial matter from which, as has long been assumed, everything else

emerges, but they also serve to construct an imaginary totality that can be disassembled into four concrete components. Hypothesizing a finite cosmos with countable constituents, Empedocles devised the elemental tetrad; since the world view of his epoch was characterized by analogies, this model gave rise to further tetrads, like the four temperaments for example, before it was abandoned by science. However, some of these quaternities, such as the four seasons, the four cardinal points, or the four wind directions, still shape the way we perceive the world today (cf. Berner 1996). The elemental model can be considered global for two reasons: it symbolizes a global totality and is known worldwide, forming the basis of creation myths in numerous Eastern and Western cultures. The Greek model is not the only one that favors the tetrad. At roughly the same time, a similar concept emerged in Indian philosophy, while Chinese philosophy developed a model comprising five elements (water, fire, earth, metal, and wood). The eventual persistence of the tetrad in Western culture can be explained by its multiple symmetries, which are a precondition for a clearly arranged and yet complex pattern.

The elements are not only treated in ancient philosophical texts or early modern astrological and esoteric writing, in which they are associated with character traits, elemental spirits, and deities. They also appear in literary texts, such as ancient cosmogonies and medieval mystery plays, and have found their way into poetry since the Renaissance. This chapter shows that they can still be found in twenty-first-century narrative prose. What makes them an attractive literary subject is the fact that humans have an ambivalent attitude toward them. While we depend on these life-giving forces, we remain aware of their inherent danger; this is reflected, for example, in descriptions of natural disasters. Our relation with nature reveals itself in our depictions of the elements, which, in turn, enable a representation of nature in its totality. Earth, water, air, and fire are predisposed to poetic aestheticization because, unlike metaphysical categories, they allow for various types of sensual perception due to their different states and forms of appearance.

Significantly, there is also a terminological connection between the elements and poetry. The Greek term *stoicheíon* does not only refer to an element as a basic component of the universe, but also to the (spoken) letter of the alphabet. Likewise, the Latin noun *elementum* refers to an element, an atom, and an alphabetic character. In *De rerum natura*, Lucretius makes an explicit analogy between the elements and alphabetic characters, and therefore between his own text and the cosmos.³ The composition of the text and the creation of the world are thus intertwined in literary cosmogonies. The primary, chaotic, and prelingual state is transformed into an orderly cosmos, which is subdivided into the realms of the different elements and forms a *textum*—a process that is illustrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an amalgamation of myth and natural philosophy (cf. Schuh 2010).

Throughout the period of almost exactly two thousand years between Ovid and our contemporaries, Czernin and Draesner, the four elements have been rediscovered again and again. They have served as a poetic subject for poets such as Gaspara Stampa, Spenser, Shakespeare, Luis de Góngora, or Conde de Villamediana in Early Modern times, they appear in the works of Goethe and Droste-Hülshoff, and also found their way into modernism through the writings of T.S. Eliot and García Lorca. Most works focus on single elements which, in their different states, were discovered as metaphors and symbols for poetic creation. Examples include the source of poetry, the spark or breath of divine inspiration, and the fertile field where new poetry grows.⁴ Some elemental phenomena even triggered poetic subgenres such as “cloud poetry”, which was most popular among the romantics (e.g., Shelley, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Eichendorff) and their contemporaries (e.g., Uhland and C.F. Meyer) but has been refined by many successors (Whitman, Hesse, and Milosz).⁵ It was revived at the beginning of the third millennium by one of the most prominent German poets, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his cycle *Die Geschichte der Wolken* (“The History/Story of the Clouds,” 2003). The elements’ potential to generate both worlds and texts in the tetradic constellation, however, is only fully exploited by Czernin. Before discussing his collection *elemente. sonette* (2002), it is necessary to recall some aspects of the element theories relevant to both Czernin and Draesner.⁶

ELEMENTAL COSMOGONIES: MYTHS AND METAPHYSICS

Before Empedocles established the tetradic model in 450 BC, pre-Socratic philosophers selected just one single element as the primary matter; while Thales of Milet asserted that water was the basic element, Anaximenes and Heraclitus claimed the same for air and fire, respectively (cf. Kranz 1964, vol. 1: A12, 76–77; A4–7, 91–92; B30, 157–158). Empedocles added earth (which had already been prioritized in Hesiod’s *Theogony*) to these three elements and referred to them as roots (*rhizómata*, cf. Kranz 1964: B6, 311–312) in accordance with Pythagoreanism, which considered the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 as the roots of all other numbers. In his didactic poem *On Nature* (*Peri phýseôs*), Empedocles mythifies this idea by attributing the names of deities to the four elements and imagining them as contrastive characters that unite and disunite for the sake of generation and corruption. Despite constant shifts in the hierarchy of the elements, they ultimately remain in balance and form a well-ordered, self-sufficient whole—a cosmos (cf. Kranz 1964: B17, 315–318).

In the cosmology Plato develops in his dialogue *Tímaios* (360 BC), the four elements, here called the “letters” (*stoicheía*) of the universe, serve to enable

a sensual perception of the world (cf. Platon 1990: 1–209, 48b). This model comprises the five Platonic solids—tetrahedron, hexahedron, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron—that is, convex, regular solids composed of elemental triangles and squares. While four of these correspond to the four elements, the fifth symbolizes the universe in its totality; they form a system into which the four-element model is integrated (cf. Platon 1990: 53c–56c).⁷ According to the mythical component of the model, the four elements were separated from one another through vibration and emerged from the infinite, amorphous *chôra* (the “nurse of becoming,” cf. Platon 1990: 49a). Once they had transformed into solid bodies, they were robust enough for the generation of matter; nevertheless, they can transform into one another due to their geometrical affinities. Their capacity for transformation was also maintained by Aristotle who, much like modern chemists, defined them as small bodies which make up bigger ones (cf. Aristoteles 2009: 302a, 91–92). He considered each element to be a combination of two of the four perceptible qualities of being (hot, cold, wet, and dry); for instance, fire was classified as hot and dry, water as cold and wet (cf. Aristoteles 2010: 19–79, 58–59). Their transformation is achieved by changing one of their qualities—for example, water will turn into air under the influence of heat, and air can transform into fire when it gets dry. I mention Aristotle because of the combinatorial principles of his elemental model, which distinguish it from that of Plato. Both, however, endorse the idea that the main function of the elements is to enable a sensual perception of the world.

Medieval cosmograms, based on geometrical shapes, serve the same purpose by associating the elements with circles and squares. The latter shape features most prominently in these models, because of its analogy with the four wind directions and the four seasons;⁸ they also often integrate the four elements with their respective perceptible qualities. Being abstractions, cosmograms mirrored the underlying structure of a world that seemed confusingly complex but that was nevertheless understood as a coherent whole. These medieval cosmograms refer to Empedocles’s model of the four elements, Plato’s geometrical cosmos and the Pythagorean theory of numbers, which endows the four with special symbolic meaning (cf. Gormans 2011: 99). As a geometric correlate of the number four, the square is an effective visual symbol of the world in the cosmogram. In the following discussion, I will show how these structural principles become manifest in poetry.

FRANZ JOSEF CZERNIN’S *ELEMENTE*. SONETTE (2002)

Like the elemental models mentioned above, Czernin’s collection *elemente. sonette* oscillates between the abstract and the concrete, between natural

philosophy and myth. The poet himself states: “The fact that the elements share certain qualities with both metaphysical and mythical categories might explain why they are so well suited as poetic keys for all phenomena” (Czernin 2002: 149).⁹ His collection of 129 sonnets refers to ancient ideas about the elements and also touches on alchemy, but these concepts are amalgamated in an eclectic manner with components of the medieval Christian worldview as represented in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, to which Czernin also often alludes. However, the main point of reference is the elemental model since the collection consists of four cycles, each dedicated to a different element. The title of the first cycle is “erde. sonette” (“earth. sonnets”) and the remaining three sections are titled accordingly, focusing on water, fire, and air. For an impression of Czernin’s style, see this example of a sonnet from the section “earth”:¹⁰

aus grauem, masse wälzt es sich, uns rührt, wild dreht,
ja, schleudert ding aus sich, hier mich heraus fest greifend,
dass heiss der brei hervor gebracht hat uns, gesät
als korn längst, wahr dran, doch jetzt auf den teig versteifend

sich dergestalt; so macht ich uns aus staub, der sich gerät,
feucht ausser sich, in all den namen gliedernd, reifend,
dass es, in solcher fassung, sich bewahrt, da steht,
geformt, bezeugt durch uns, selbst schale so einsteifend

als kern wie sachlich: was das heisst, da wir durchdringen
uns leibhaft, dass es sauer, süss aufgeht, dies maß
gebend, so ein wie aus, gleich voll: was uns schon stets besaß,

schürft lebhaft, tief hier? steine, brote, die verschlingen
einander uns, am wort, das hält, sich isst gelingen
auf ganz: ob jeder krümel davon in sich las? (Czernin 2002: 30)

It is impossible to trace any kind of linear narrative in the individual poems, cycles, or the collection as a whole; rather, the poems allude to numerous elemental events. Even the internal structure of the collection is cyclical, since the elements transform into each other by changing their states. Each of the four elements is polysemic and therefore judged ambivalently, depending on the respective phenomenon and state described by the sonnet in question. For example, water may be gushing from a spring in a clear rivulet and have cleansing and refreshing qualities in one sonnet, while in another poem it appears as a steaming, malodorous, and toxic brew. Likewise, air may be depicted as a soft breeze but also appears in the form of a destructive storm. Notably, the elements are usually not mentioned by name, but rather evoked through words which are etymologically, morphologically, or phonetically

related to their semantic field (cf. Kiefer 2002: 135). Instead of “earth,” the poems mention dirt, dust, stone, gold, crops, seeds, sprouts, plants, fruits, and blossoms; instead of “air” we read about fog, mist and breath, light and shadow, feathers and wings. The elements are embodied in all sorts of natural phenomena as well as in their names. Czernin explains: “In each sound and letter—in each dust particle of the poem, so to speak—the element earth can be embodied, so that not just the particular, but other earthy things and the element itself are recognizable” (158).¹¹ Furthermore, the elements also appear in states of mind and manners of speech: for instance, in fiery or fluent speech, in the rare air of abstractions, and in heavy thoughts (cf. 152–153). Given all these possibilities, the poems vary considerably in terms of style.

All the phenomena mentioned above are hard to grasp in the text itself, because they do not only undergo constant metamorphosis, but also aesthetic estrangement. These poems are hermetic in both senses of the word: their language is condensed as well as esoteric. On the one hand, this is caused by constant transformations of the “speaker” whose position is at times usurped by the elements from which more-than-human voices emerge. In Czernin’s poems the human being is disassembled into elemental components and reassembled on the basis of the same elements. This reminds us of Aristotle’s concept of man as an elemental being: in *On Generation and Corruption* (*peri genéseôs kai phthorás*), he imagines that all beings go through a periodical process of maturation; they evolve from elemental potencies, ripen, and decay. On the other hand, the aesthetic estrangement occurs on the level of language itself. A central feature of Czernin’s sonnets is that collocations and idiomatic expressions are separated and recombined differently—just like the elements. This poetic strategy, which he describes as “*Entstellung*” and “*Übertragung*” (“deformation” and “transfer”), exposes the semiotic material in detail and results in remarkable acoustic and semantic effects. By creating linguistic innovations, the poet tries to reactivate the power of words to create worlds (cf. Kiefer 2002: 132–133).

Like nature, understood as *natura naturans* which generates and continuously regenerates itself, the poems seem to evolve through the fusion of human being and element in a more-than-human voice. Again and again, the origin of the elemental beings is reenacted and staged as auto-poiesis, for instance in one of the water-sonnets: “wie wir uns jetzt entspringen,/ überströmen,/ [. . .] an all dies licht uns bringen!” (52); “speist welche quelle uns, dass wir uns selbst entspringen?” (58) (“As we arise from ourselves now/ and flow over [. . .] bringing ourselves to all this light!”; “which source feeds us to make us spring from ourselves?”) The first line of one of the fire sonnets, which contain variations on the theme of autoignition, reads likewise: “ein funke nur, auf sich allein selbst überspringend” (106) (“just one spark,

inflaming itself all alone”). The poems include images pointing to alchemy, for example, when the process of amalgamation inside the alchemist’s kettle is described from the perspective of the merging elements. In the final stanza of one of the sonnets, we read that the explosive mixture “is pouring its own vessel” (20/96) (“sich selbst giesst sein gefäss”), which can only be understood as a meta-comment on the poetic form of the sonnet. Untamed fire and rigorous form are frequently contrasted.

Czernin makes a highly strategic choice of genre. Firstly, the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet provides a shaping, taming frame for each of the elements. Secondly, this form has been used since the early modern period as a means to convey world knowledge (cf. Nickel 2008). Thirdly, Czernin’s method of staging the elements both in abstraction and concretion indeed demands the sonnet form, which has often been characterized by its dialectic between high and low styles.¹² Apart from this, Czernin certainly has chosen this genre because of its structure, proportions, and numeric qualities that are ideally congruous with the model of the four elements.

It was August Wilhelm Schlegel who traced the Italian form used by Czernin—that is, four stanzas comprising two quatrains and two tercets—back to numeric relations and geometrical principles and correlated the quatrains and tercets with the square and the triangle (cf. Schlegel 2007: 159–168). Significantly, these are exactly the same shapes that constitute the Platonic solids. Schlegel bases his definition of the sonnet’s tectonics on symmetry and characterizes the genre by a coalescence of symmetry and antithesis. Since Schlegel compares the sonnet’s rhyme scheme to the opposing principles of attraction and repulsion, which are of major importance in element theory, he considers the numeric proportions of the sonnet to be universal. In Czernin’s elemental cycle, the number four owes its central importance to the inventive fusion of the tetradic element model with the form of the Italian sonnet.

Additionally, the element model and the sonnet form share a combinatory aspect;¹³ Czernin blends the Aristotelian view of the elements as combinations of four qualities with the combinatory potential every sonnet has thanks to its overall structure and rhyme scheme. On the one hand, he creates extraordinary rhyme schemes by combining traditional schemes in various ways.¹⁴ On the other hand, he correlates the elements with the smallest units of language (lexemes and phonemes), and lets them form numerous constellations. In his combinatory experiments that test the capacity of linguistic elements for attraction or repulsion, Czernin seems to merge the tasks of the poet and the alchemist. Czernin enjoys this technique that might seem materialistic and analytical, because it often turns into “cabbalistic magic” (“kabbalistische Magie,” 145). Thus, it oscillates between “rational text construction” (“nüchterner Textkonstruktion”) and poetry that relies on

the “magic effects of sounds and letters” (“laut- oder buchstabenmagischer Dichtung,” 146). Despite a playful aspect, the result is not nonsense poetry as one might think at first glance; rather, the linguistic elements serve the poetic creation of worlds.

ULRIKE DRAESNER'S ELEMENTAL POETRY

Shortly before Czernin, Ulrike Draesner presents two new volumes of texts that can also be read as elemental poetry. While *anis-o-trop* (1997) is a sonnet cycle which displays both differences to and similarities with Czernin's work, *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* (“cells hired for the night,” 2001) is a collection of poems that are completely heterogeneous in terms of form.¹⁵ These poems are grouped into six sections which (despite individual titles in parentheses) each focus on one element: in this case fire, metal, water, air, earth, and wood. Draesner's choice of six elements is due to a combination of different elemental models: the occidental tetrad and the Chinese model of five elements, which serves as a Daoist theory to describe nature. In contrast to these explicit references, the sonnet cycle *anis-o-trop* contains no paratextual hints at the elements, but they are present throughout the entire cycle in the description of an ongoing conflict between the forces of nature and the signs of culture, an antagonism of central importance to this collection.

The first texts of *anis-o-trop* depict a world where the existence of humans is completely marginalized and nature reconquers the space formerly occupied by men. Gradually, the elements corrode the remaining cultural signifiers, such as the ruin of a hotel and abandoned greenhouses. Signs of a former attempt to cultivate nature are decomposed by foul water, due to the effect of fungi, mold, and lichens that overgrow them. On both the levels of content and language, these poems stage a contest between form and the amorphous. It is quite significant that Draesner chooses the sonnet as her battlefield, the sonnet being a poetic genre she uses only in this volume as opposed to her usual style of free verse with ragged margins. What makes her sonnets so attractive is the tension between their rigid form and amorphous content, their artificial order and entropy. In the choice of the title *anis-o-trop* Draesner draws on botany, mineralogy, and zoology, using the term to refer to unlimited, aimless growth and chaotic procreation of the linguistic material caused by continuing acts of recombination. For an impression of Draesner's style, see the first sonnet of *anis-o-trop*:

orte gibt es, brüter. schwappendes. hallendes. gang im
 berg verworfene schienen, kabel, aus stütz-kriech-wand
 hängende schalter unbenutzt seit jahren jahrzehnten
 sanftes rotten von wasser durch stein: gibt es, solche

orte, wo keller eines verlassnen hotels, einfach verfallen
 gelassen, kaskade der kanten, mörtel bröckelnder schleim so
 grau die zu böden zerschlagenen fenster, geborsten, rost die
 rohre der heizung, rattendurchsetztes sickergeschoß.

verkröschung. armeng die unbetretenen flure, reste
 hallender fluchten vor dem erstarrten lift, messing,
 dinett, stumpf auf schorfigen rädern, vergessen dahinter

kesselraum aus beton roh bis unter die decke,
 schimmelgefüllt, nur am schlüsselloch (kleiner gelring)
 richtung licht noch pilzähnliche formen, ihr drängen, zum leck.

(Draesner 1997: I)

The fifteen sonnets of the cycle are connected on a semantic and a formal level. By repeating linguistic material from the final line of one sonnet in the first line of the following one, the poems are concatenated to form a corona. The final sonnet consists of all the initial lines of the previous fourteen sonnets. In accordance with the cyclical structure, the texts depict cyclical natural processes, which are independent of man in their eternal repetition. However, there are moments of disruption; the exuberantly growing nature contrasts with images of an autonomous and aimless mechanization. Apparently, the fusion of matter and the waste of civilization produce hybrid agents, mixtures of creature, matter, machine, and medium. While in Czernin's poems, humans are only connected to nature, in Draesner's poems they also merge with technology, although everything still remains "inseparably connected to vegetation" ("unlösbar verbunden der vegetation," X).

It is impossible to comprehend the content of the poems because their subject is deconstructed and decontextualized beyond recognition. The poems lack a perceiving subject, an identifiable and reliable speaker. There is no "I," but we find an indefinite "you" which, in several apostrophes, is called "eine warze aus schwachheit und schleim" (XII, XIII), "ins kristallgitter der dinge gestreut, ein knoten aus sprache" (XV) ("a wart of weakness and mucus," "sprinkled into the crystal grid of things, a knot of words"). The final sonnet also ends with these self-reflexive words. Instead of answering questions concerning the hybrid nature of its speaker, the sonnet points to its own materiality and thereby questions the poem's reference to an extratextual world.

The poems of the volume *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* ("cells hired for the night"), grouped according to the respective element to which they refer, are almost equally hermetic. Regarding this volume, criticism has identified Draesner's interest in biotechnology and genetics, but the reference to different element theories has not been noticed so far. This seems surprising, since the collection's title promises a microscopic perspective on cells as

the smallest components of the human body—analogous to the elements as minimal components of the cosmos. The collection amalgamates poetry with natural philosophy and science, notably with twenty-first-century biotechnology. This is apparent, for instance, in *post dolly*, one of Draesner's best-known poems, because its title alludes to the famous cloned sheep. The fact that the poem is part of the section associated with the element wood only becomes plausible when considering that its central image is a tree, whose branches resemble the DNA double helix and the human body as a whole.

More obvious is the association with one of the elements in the poem *oxygen*:

oxygen

rot, rispig, wiegend: eilig im sand.
er geht, ich komme nicht mit. pflanzensaft!
tunnelbeleuchtung, tief da, im sand.
höhlen im bauch, weißschnell, aderblau,
rotscheinende wände—saust er, der
sich wiegt, aus dem baum,
in ihn zurück, chlorophyll, transformiert,
schmelztiegel er: reiner stoff.

zwischen zelle und zelle, unsichtbare rispe der luft,
ihr kobold, stock des bewußtseins, selbst auf asphalt—sinkt,
stiebt auf, wirft sich ins grüne bett, das blatt, steigt
blauer dunst, in der ferne, wie es
wirbelt und trägt, sein zeichen, das O,
schaufelnder sand. meerperle, durch tunnel
gerollt. potzderblitz, der nirgends bleibt,
bohrt sich ins huhn, die alge, schmetterling,
mücke und kopf. gitter, falle, du schaufel
im moos. flügelschlaufe im unsichtbaren: du,
schweiß des baums!

wie du herumhängst, plierst, in den regen fällst,
schnaubst! nase, kehle, luftröhre, ohr. welche form
ergibt sich im schnittpunkt davon? scharf, eilig,
gewaltig, porös! gesiebt, wie von unten her,
aus dem baum: gestoben wird. pirol, pistoletto, storch!

grüner kuß, koller, du. schwindel im
kopf. flutternd, hinterher, am ende—
ein summen, aus dem bauch
—hinterher, taumelnd,
dann ich? atmend, atmend
ein aus.

(Draesner 2001: 76–77)

As a poetic imitation of the most important natural biochemical process, namely photosynthesis, the poem stands in sharp contrast to numerous other poems sketching technical processes invented by mankind to interfere with nature, as, for example, in reproductive medicine. In *oxygen*, the anatomical focus on the human body, which is typical of many of Draesner's texts, shifts to plants and concentrates on the vascular system of trees while admiringly retracing its production of oxygen. The colorless chemical element is made visible and traced along its way through the entire ecosystem, before being inhaled by the speaker—whose breath is mirrored by the typography of the final line—leading to a coalescence of breathing and writing. While in the cloud poetry of the romantic tradition, air is a merely visual phenomenon, it is actually inhaled in Draesner's text. Thus, her poem depicts a fusion of the element and the human being, and it thereby underlines humankind's dependence on nature. This especially affects the poet who yearns for inspiration, that is, literally the inhaling of a poetic spirit.

The collection *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* aims at a deliberate deconstruction of anthropocentric perspectives, which consider humans to be autonomous subjects and objectify nature. The poems thwart any euphemistic image of technology and reflect on man's emergence from and return to nature, as many texts associated with "earth" demonstrate. There are no expressions of fear about humanity's complete dissolving into nature; on the contrary, sometimes the speaker even longs for a redeeming fusion with the natural environment and indulges in that fantasy. For instance, in the poem *endschwammessen* the speaker muses about merging with mud: "wenn es mir schlecht geht, denke ich an den/ schlamm [. . .] die eigenschaften des schlamm ergreifen von mir/ besitz [. . .] ich lade mich/ selbst/ in diese form [. . .] der schlamm ist aus fleisch." (106–107) ("whenever I feel bad I think of the/ mud [. . .] the features of the mud take/possession of me [. . .] I load/myself/ into this form [. . .] the mud is of flesh").

Despite the comfortable symbiosis expressed by these lines, the same speaker notes that "stinking aerial figures invade him/her" ("stinkende luftgestalten dringen in mich/ ein," 106). Another poem, which ends with the laconic statement "we are earth" ("wir sind erde," 78–80), alludes to the nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl. Its title "26th April 1986" is an encrypted hint at the fact that the soil is actually contaminated. Draesner's poems contain numerous allusions to anthropogenic environmental pollution. While hiking in the Alps, the speaker of one poem in the collection *gedächtnisschleifen* (1995) notices an "assembly of poison" in the "reserve of the last flowers" ("im letzblumenreservat eine hohe/ giftversammlung," 31)¹⁶ and ironically mentions the "chemical blessing" spilled on landscapes ("*ausgegossene[n] Chemie-Segen*," 18). By comparing the artificial fertilizers to a divine blessing, she creates a cynical metaphor for human interference with nature. In

her collection *berührte orte* (2008), namely in the poem “toxikographie,” the description of nature even becomes “toxic writing” (cf. Buell 1998: 639–665). These accounts of environmental pollution demonstrate the fundamental difference between Draesner’s and Czernin’s reference to the elements; unlike Czernin, Draesner uses them as media for her cultural critique.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of the elemental poems by Czernin and Draesner reveals both similarities and differences. It is tempting to read both authors’ works as reactions to the contemporary theoretical strand of New Materialism, which aims at reconceptualizing matter as a “vibrant matter” that interacts with humans. In the poems discussed above, the borders between man and his environment are open to a healthy, natural exchange, as imagined by Czernin, as well as to contaminations, as described in Draesner’s work, where humans poison their environment and thereby themselves.

In contemporary elemental poetry, the dichotomy of mind and matter, and of nature and culture respectively, is deconstructed in acts of communication, in which the human subject is replaced by autonomous and indifferent elements—a poetic strategy that both Czernin and Draesner employ and thus simulate an autopoiesis. Both poets try to abandon the anthropocentric perspective in a performative way in their sonnet cycles, while Draesner’s *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* also offers discursive cultural critique.

Despite occasional conflicts, harmony between speaker and element or between humans and nature is maintained in Czernin’s sonnets, whereas Draesner’s fantasies of fusion are always on the verge of falling apart. Accordingly, Czernin’s poetic world vision aims at totality, while Draesner offers mere fragments. Czernin imagines the cosmos as finite, but poetic creation as infinite since it allows for endless variation and piles up unlimited masses of linguistic material. Draesner is equally interested in the materiality of language, but only in *anis-o-trop* does she opt for lines abounding with linguistic material. Usually, she maintains an aesthetics of selection, prefers ellipses to an unfettered flow of words, and stages interruptions and the fading out of language. These differences can be explained by the fact that Czernin’s texts form a self-sufficient and predominantly autoreferential system—they constitute an “oikos” or household. Conversely, Draesner’s poetry is a highly sensitive sensorium that responds to extratextual occurrences.

While Czernin’s poetic world is ahistorical and universal, Draesner’s poetry actively engages with its cultural context—even her strategies of aesthetic alienation display a strong influence by contemporary cultural phenomena like the omnipresence of technology and the media. For Czernin, the elements

serve as media to convey rather general and abstract ideas about nature. Draesner, by contrast, uses them as indices for the remainders of nature within the cultural sphere and as indicators for processes of ecological transformation. In both poets' works, nature is not isolated from and untouched by human agency. However, while in Czernin's sonnets, nature is only modified by the poet, Draesner's poems give an account of anthropogenic transformations of nature outside the literary realm. Hence, the two poets seem to advocate two contrasting positions: Czernin implies the calm certainty that man will be outlived by nature anyway, whereas Draesner alerts us to man's influence on the elements. From another point of view, it can be concluded that Czernin reflects on the act of creating poetry as such, as well as on the possibilities of depicting nature as a whole, while Draesner reflects on the new conditions for creating poetry on nature in the face of ecological crisis.

I owe thanks to Anna Rauscher (University of Freiburg) for her support in the translation of this chapter from German to English.

NOTES

1. For an introduction to material ecocriticism see Iovino and Oppermann 2014; for an exemplary study on a German classic see Sullivan 2012. The term "vibrant matter" was coined by Bennet 2010.

2. I have previously analyzed Czernin's elemental poetics in Zemanek ("Die generativen Vier Elemente") 2014, and discussed Draesner's perception of nature in Zemanek ("die Natur heißt es übersetzen erfinden.") 2014. Only the comparison of both poets' works offered in this chapter reveals the recent trend to return to element theory and at the same time the two opposing approaches resulting in fundamentally different elemental poetics.

3. Lucretius provides several examples for this analogy, cf., for instance, Lukrez 1993, I, 196–198; I, 823–829; II, 688–694.

4. Cf. the lexicon entries for fire/flare (Feuer/Flamme), spring (Quelle), river (Fluss), cloud (Wolke), breath/breeze (Atem/Lufthauch), wind (Wind), soil/mud/field (Erde/Lehm/Acker) in: Butzer and Jacob 2008.

5. See the anthology of cloud poetry ed. by Wüstner 2008.

6. The following synopsis of the elemental models of Empedocles, Plato, and Aristotle is based on the detailed information in Böhme and Böhme 2004, 94–120.

7. See also Ziegler 2008.

8. For illustrations and explanations of cosmograms see Gormans 2011, 83–109.

9. In the following I quote from the sonnets and the chapter in this book providing the page number.

10. Since these poems are grammatically complicated (not just complex, but intentionally complicated), they do not convey any sense in a linear reading; they are based

on linguistic combinatorics and on associations of sounds, there is no use in trying to translate them.

11. My translation.

12. Cf. an interview with Czernin in Kiefer 2002, 138–140.

13. For the sonnet's combinatory aspect cf. Greber 2002, 554–701.

14. The patterns abab abab and abba abba alternate in the quatrains and are combined with various different patterns in the tercets, for example, cdc dcd, cdc ddc, cde dec.

15. When I quote from the unpaginated book *anis-o-trop*, I provide the sonnet's number; quoting from Draesner's *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* I provide page numbers.

16. Quoting from Draesner's *gedächtnisschleifen* I provide page numbers.

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