

# A Study of Natural Elements in French Ecological Writer Jean Giono's Works

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## *Abstract*

The French writer Jean Giono is an ecological writer in the Provence region of France. He uses the natural environment of Provence and his life experience as the basis of his work, linking the four basic natural elements—earth, air, water and fire—with specific natural images such as mountain, wind, river and sun, and constructing a poetic natural space where substance and imagination sit side by side. By combining subjectivity and objectivity in natural space, his works demonstrate how natural elements and the essence of life help reveal each other and come to a harmonious unity.

*Keywords: Jean Giono, natural elements, Bachelard, space*

## **1. Introduction**

Jean Giono (1895-1970) was a famous French writer of ecological literature. He spent his life away from the city, living in isolation in the highlands of Provence. The magnificent natural scenery of south France, as “the architecture of space” (Romestaing, 1998, p. 141), deeply captivated Giono. During the more than four decades of his writing career, Giono mostly placed the natural space of the literary scene at the center of his works, featuring the shaping and expression of space that earned him the title “the man of space” (Lu, 2014, p. 117). His portrayal of natural space is both realistic and fictionalized. The mountains and plains, the rivers and seas, as well as the rain and thunder of south France are the concrete manifestations

of the four material elements of earth, air, water, and fire in the phenomenal world. Blending the four elements, he captures their interactions, such as union, struggle and transformation, thus providing a broad stage for the human-nature interrelationship. Thus, the space constructed by these natural elements serves as not only the picturesque landscape, but also the space of the characters' life activities, a place that stimulates and enriches their psychological activities.

Gaston Bachelard is a famous contemporary French philosopher and literary critic. One of his masterpieces is *La Poétique de l'espace* [*The Poetics of space*], in which Bachelard emphasizes the role of imagination and dreams numerous times. With poetics of imagination, Bachelard initially endows imagination with materiality and poetically imagines the four material elements of fire, water, air and earth; then, through "the poetics of space" and phenomenological methods, Bachelard succeeds in making the poetic imagination independent of the material, developing the "the poetics of imagination" into the stage of the integration of subject and object.

This paper takes Giono's novels as the main object of study, refers to the critical theory of object imagery by Gaston Bachelard, and "introduces the elements in the field of natural science into literary criticism" (Jean-Yves, 2009, p. 87). It intends to deconstruct Giono's works, so as to explore how the author constructs natural imagery through his imagination of the four basic elements. As the following sections show, the study of literary symbols will lend instructive insights into the deep structure of Giono's construction of space.

## **2. Earth: Nourishing and Nurturing Life**

In ancient Western civilization, people had intuitive knowledge of the change of seasons and held a belief that the chaotic universe is made up of four elements: earth, fire, air and water (Peterman, 1999, p. 412). The ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles is regarded as the first to put up the theory of four ultimate elements that underlie all the structures in the world (Wallace, 1911, pp. 344-345). Aristotle also points out in the *Meteorologica* that the four substances that constitute the essence of the motion of objects are "fire, air, water, and earth" (Aristotle, 1999, pp. 28-29). Among these four elements, the earth element acts as the cradle of life in feeding all natural things, and is therefore considered the original home of mankind. In France, the view on the earth element goes back to the 18th century, the Romantic period. The historian Michelet

thinks that the earth is alive and can transform other natural matter (Michelet, 2011, p. 68). Even for contemporary ecologists, “earth” represents an element of the world and is considered, to a large extent, as a factor in determining the characteristics of our planet (Lemaire, 2009, p. 20). The earth underfoot thus consists in the fundamental element of human life (Lemaire, 2009, p. 20). This coincides with the views of Giono: “Notre élément, c’est la terre” [“Our elements, is the land”] (Giono, 1972, p. 148).

It has to be pointed out that the preoccupation with land elements is intimately related to Giono’s own life. Growing up in the countryside in south France, he often roamed the highlands of Provence and listened to shepherds telling ancient legends. It might be the truth that since he almost never left Manosque, a small town located on the edge of the Lure Mountain, the earth elements in his writing are mostly demonstrated in the image of “mountains”—the unique crystallization of earth elements bringing humans closer to the sky. On the one hand, “mountain” is a compressed land, tight and heavy; on the other hand, it soars into the clouds, as if closer to God and the non-earthly world (Lemaire, 2009, p. 21). The depiction and expression of “mountain” then becomes one of the characteristics of Giono’s works; he believes that a mountain exists not only with its height and hugeness, but also with its weight, smell, motion, charm, language, and feelings (Giono, 1982, p. 1).

The Lure Mountain in Giono’s hometown recurs in his works, which not only shows the geographical landscape of the Alps in south France, but also represents the mysterious and tremendous natural forces. For the author, this majestic mountain that accompanied him since childhood looms large in his mind and transforms itself into a natural space in his literary works. This mountain, which runs through the *Trilogie de Pan* [*Trilogy of Pan*], is ubiquitous as a backdrop for the story and an emotional comfort for the locals. As in real life, whenever Giono gazes at the distant mountains from his home in Manosk, it provides him with “a sovereign remedy to escape from reality” (Giono, 2012, p. 39). In a similar vein, the narrator in *Trilogie de Pan* describes that the mountain has an “indifferent” and “huge body”, which succeeds in rendering the nature solitude and silence. At the same time, the rhetoric of personification reflects the disgust at the city scene of those villagers in south France, who obstinately believe that “ce qui vient de la ville est mauvais” [“nothing good comes from the city”] and who like “le vent qui vient du désert de Lure” [“the wind from the desolate Lure Mountain”] rather than the “le vent du sud” [“south wind”] from the city (Giono, 1994, p. 28).

Whether in the early work *Trilogie de Pan* or in the later one *Le Hussard sur le toit* [*The Horseman on the roof*] (1951), the mountains have always been a favorite place of Giono, particularly as a special embodiment and noble expression of the earth element. Giono's inner space is filled with "true highland mysticism" because he believes that "les montagnes seules font accéder à un ordre de pureté que la plaine ignore" ["the highlands can establish an order of purity that the plains never have"] (Giono, 2012, p. 39). In a letter to the French writer Jean Guéhenno in 1928, he wrote: "Si je vais vers la montagne, parce qu'au fond, ce que j'aime, c'est la solitude vierge de ma terre et que là-haut je la retrouve" ["The reason why I go only to the mountains is that, in the end, what I love is the initial stillness of my land, and in the mountains I find this stillness"] (Giono, 2012, p. 7). In Giono's view, the plains and seashores of Provence, which are lower in elevation than the highlands, are "c'est le règne de la médiocrité, du vice, et de toutes les lâchetés" ["full of mediocrity, evil and all kinds of vileness"], and he goes on to argue that "la mer remue dans ses ports la lie de l'humanité, tandis que la montagne éprouve les cœurs purs" ["the sea beats the dregs of humanity in the harbours, while the mountains test the pure heart"] (Giono, 2012, p. 39). Thus, the earth element plays a vital role in the development of personality both of the author himself and of the characters in his works.

As Amédée, the narrator in *Un de Baumugnes* [*One of Baumugnes*] (1929), puts it: "en tout cas, c'est cette terre qui m'a fait, moi, ma façon de penser" ["In the final analysis, it was the land that nourished me, it was the land that nurtured my way of thinking"] (Giono, 1994, p. 172). The earth has a nurturing effect on the inhabitants living on it, the main idea that Giono has always maintained, which reflects his respect and gratitude for the Provence homeland. He is therefore acclaimed as "the great land lyricist" (Gramain, 2010, p. 173). Life cannot be totally independent of the earth, and only with the support of the earth element can we characterize the practical activities and recognize the power and the creation nature of human beings. In a sense, the earth element has laid a solid foundation for the construction of Giono's entire natural space.

### 3. Air: Refreshing and Renewing Life

According to Bachelard, "air" is one of the four elements of nature, whose motion is the "most fundamental" among all imageries (Bachelard, 1943, p. 17). The air element

is invisible, colorless and tasteless, but without the transmission and circulation of air, there would be no life activity. The air element gives living beings breath, is the most essential for life, and hovers between sky and land, sustaining these two worlds (Mennig, 2005, p. 15).

As an important element for sustaining life, air cannot stop flowing for a moment. It is essential for living beings since it refreshes and renews life. In *Le Chant du monde* [*The Song of the Word*] (1934), the country doctor Toussaint examines an old and frail man in his clinic. Despite the fact that the old man looks skinny and almost dying, Toussaint is shocked at the intense breathing in his body when listening to his heart: “À quoi servent ces grandes gorgées d’air ? Qu’est-ce qui régit cette respiration ? L’air est inspiré et expiré, aussi turbulent qu’un tourbillon dans une rivière qui coule. Qu’est-ce qui nécessite une telle quantité d’air pour maintenir la vie humaine ? ” [“What is the use of these big gulps of air? What governs this breathing? The air is breathed in and out, as turbulent as a whirlpool in a rushing river. What needs such a large amount of air to sustain human life?”] (Giono, 1982, p. 199) This dying old man is unexpectedly able to breathe strongly, showing how closely life is related to “air”. Although he can no longer speak, the flow of breath within his body clearly expresses his longing for life. After a short time, Toussaint’s hand “tremble soudainement” [“suddenly shakes”] and the old man’s breath comes to a halt, “je ne sens plus rien” [“I can’t feel anything anymore”]. This detail indicates that, as a life-sustaining force, air is also related to the last stage of life that is death. Thus, as “air” fades in the body, Toussaint feels the “la mort qui se cache dans le vieil homme” [“death that lurks in the old man”] (Giono, 1982, p. 199).

In Giono’s novels, “wind” is described to be a special manifestation of “air”. The characters in his novels love the wind because the wind often brings them happiness and joy. In *Un de Baumugnes*, it is the gentle breeze that leads the beautiful and modest Assure to the handsome peasant Panturle. The wind also conveys the sound of the harmonica played by Albin under the window of Angèle, the girl he admires; by the wind at night, the harmonica sound made by the villager from Baumugnes “arrive directement à ses oreilles” [“directly comes to her ears”] (Giono, 1994, p. 229). In these scenarios, the wind possesses a strange power, and it rests in the “coin de l’âme” [“corner of the soul”] and “guérit tous ceux qui appartiennent à la terre” [“heals all who belong to the land”] (Giono, 1994, pp. 225-226), soothing the emotions as well as the soul.

The smell that accompanies the wind is another manifestation of the air element. Different smells hover around the sky and land, closely linking the scent of nature to humans' senses; they pass on the untouchable fragrance of nature, allowing people to embrace nature with an open mind. In *Un de Baumugnes*, as the main character wanders through the idyllic landscape, the narrative of scents illustrates an embodied experience of this natural beauty: "L'air est doux comme une soupe—une soupe qui sent les arbres—les feuilles sont mouillées par la rosée de la nuit et l'herbe verte et luxuriante dégage un arôme" ["The air is as sweet as soup—a soup that smells of trees—the leaves are wet with the night dew and the lush green grass gives off an aroma"] (Giono, 1994, p. 251). When the characters stroll through such a natural space, the scenery greets them and the smells infiltrate them. Not only is the ubiquity of scent the demonstration of nature's overwhelming dominance, but it also represents a grace for all things. The silence and beauty implied by the quiet flowing of smell make this walk in the countryside an excellent experience for humans to be close to nature. Thus, the intimate connection between man and nature is established, and this attempt to merge oneself into an uncultivated nature implies that natural space is the ideal place for humans to lead an idyllic life.

In Giono's works, although the air element is prevalent in daily life, it is impossible to grasp it. "Air" is not only an indispensable internal element of human life, but also an external element that connects man and nature, a vivid and dynamic literary representation of natural space.

#### **4. Water: The Inexhaustible Source of Life**

The ancient Greek philosopher Thales believes that water is the origin of things, because "water" is soft in form, sweet in taste, nourishing human life, and closely related to all natural things. Bachelard also asserts the nurturing value of water to nature: "Water is used to nourish the land and the air, and thus water nurtures the origin of life" (Bachelard, 2005, p. 15). Although Giono lived in the mountainous region in Provence, the image of "water" still pervades each of his works. Claude Bouygues, a French scholar, has calculated the frequency of each main element in Giono's representative works and concluded that the water element plays a pivotal role, appearing more frequently than other elements like earth, air and fire (Bouygues, 1973, pp. 25-34). *Colline* [*The Hill*] (1929), the novel by which Giono made his name,

can be interpreted as a fiction of the water element (Mennig, 2005, p. 25). The story takes place in Chateau Blanc in south France. In this isolated village, both humans and beasts naturally gather around the spring. The spring is the source of life for all things, the lifeblood of all things, and the convener of all things; it brings together other beings wherever it flows, infusing the place with vigorous life. At the same time, the spring, as a central theme and a narrative drive, plays a sustaining role in both symbolic and realistic way, guaranteeing a rigorous and consistent internal structure of the text while demonstrating the ubiquitous and active power of nature.

Giono composes a hymn to nature by the water element that is also an integral part of his natural space. Antonio dances with pompano in the river in *Que ma joie demeure* [*Joy of Man's Desiring*] (1934), and Gagu dances ecstatically in the pool in *Colline*; those characters reenact the evolution of mankind, thrashing like fish in the water, and the flowing water becomes the source for the flourishing of life. According to Bachelard, liquids are “almost always feminine” (Bachelard, 2005, p. 15) in the sense that it can be instantly converted into an inexhaustible supply of breast milk. In *Colline*, the author depicts Gagu swooping on the pool, “grasping the edge of the overflowing pool, pressing his mouth to a gap in the pool, drinking and humming happily, like a baby sucking milk” (Giono, 1994, p. 79). Here, the author's expression of the literary imagery of “water” compels “the water of nature ... to accept the appearance of milky white, the metaphor of milk”, which intends to show “all water is milk” (Bachelard, 2005, p. 129), reflecting “the profound maternal nature of water” (Bachelard, 2005, p. 15). From the “water” metaphor comes the gentle imagination of “the maternal nature of water”. When Albin walks in the Lure mountain in *Un de Baumugnes*, “il semble avoir vu ma mère arriver. Elle a apporté toutes les sources de la montagne à Baumugnes et les déverse sur ma tête. Comme c'est rafraîchissant et confortable, avec beaucoup de fleurs de montagne au printemps. C'est la caresse d'une mère, le baiser d'une source de montagne” [“seemed to see my mother coming. She has brought all the mountain springs in Baumugnes and is pouring them on my head. How refreshing and comfortable, with many mountain flowers in the spring. It is the caress of a mother, the kiss of a mountain spring”] (Giono, 1994, p. 164). In short, “water”, a natural element in Giono's works, acts as both an indicator, depicting the scene and creating an atmosphere, and as a narrative element, becoming a narrative unit necessary to understand the whole narrative (Bouygues, 1973, p. 30).

The element of water in Giono's works is often presented in the form of “spring”,

“stream”, “river”, “pond”, etc. These are the concrete images of water and the important components of natural space. Water feeds all life in the world and fills the natural space with poetry.

## 5. Fire: Joy and Misery in Life

In *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard specifies the nature and spirit of “fire”: “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, 1977, p. 7). In Bachelard’s view, “fire”, just like the coin, has two sides. It could elicit the noble and ignoble minds, constructing the opposing values of good and evil, which kind of provides the key to probe the fire imagery in Giono’s works. On the one hand, “fire” can bring light, such as in *Le Hussard sur le toit*, the fire made by Angelo lights the way for the marching soldiers in the dark to the hopeful destination (Giono, 1998, p. 45); “fire” can also cook food, as shown in *Un de Baumugnes* where the stove fire in Panturle’s home hisses and cooks the thick soup, transmitting warmth to people of the house (Giono, 1994, p. 399). On the other hand, “fire” can be used for revenge. For instance, in *Chant du monde*, Antonio and Besson set fire to the cattle shed and the house of the landowner Mandru. Likewise, “fire” decomposes matters, and it is in itself a matter full of passion: the fire “bondit et rugit de joie” [“leaps and roars with joy”] and can even “bondit comme une eau en colère” [“roar like waves”] (Giono, 1994, pp. 115-118).

However, the element of fire that burns in Giono’s works comes not only from the ground, but also from the sky. In *Mort du blé* [*Death of wheat*] (1932), the reapers battle with the blazing sun with the result that Bobi is eventually killed by the sun flames. Such a setting is profoundly meaningful: without “les flammes du ciel” [“the flames from heaven”], the protagonist cannot die and be free from the troubles of this world. The sun (sunlight) is one of the main images of the fire element in Giono’s works. Yet sunlight as the manifestation of “fire” does not bring splendor and happiness, but rather monotony and violence. As Giono once said in an interview about his feelings about the sun, “Je n’aime pas tellement le soleil et je ne supporte pas la chaleur. Il n’y a rien de plus monotone que le ciel de Haute-Provence. C’est un



couvercle de marmite qui va d'un bout de l'horizon à l'autre et qui est toujours bleu" ["I don't like the sun very much, and I can't stand the heat. There is nothing more monotonous than the sky in Provence. The sky, covered by a pot lid, is always blue from side to side"] (Sabiani, 1988, p. 116).

In order to show the pathos and absurdity of human nature, Giono, in *Le Hussard sur le toit*, his masterpiece in the later period, describes the sun in Provence as a violent perpetrator, emphasizing the role of the sun as a catalyst for violence—in his words, “la lumière grise du soleil rend fades les couleurs et les formes de toute chose” [“the grey sunlight makes the colors and shapes of everything bland”] (Giono, 1998, p. 275). The sunny day often turns out to be the site of all calamities, as does the scorching sun that shines with joy but witnesses miseries. It is commonly held that “les gens associent le soleil au plaisir et à la santé” [“people will associate the sun with pleasure and health”] (Giono, 1998, p. 362). But at this time the sun in Provence is shining not on the land of pleasure and health, but on the land ravaged by cholera; its golden sunlight shines on the quarantine stations and on dead flesh, so that people “aient une nouvelle vision de l'or agréable que le soleil donne à tous” [“have a new view of the pleasing gold that the sun gives to all”] (Giono, 1998, p. 362): the sun is ugly, it shines on death. Similarly, in *Un de Baumugnes*, “le moment où le soleil se lève des Alpes et déverse sa lumière dorée et bouillante sur les collines de la plaine, la catastrophe commence à descendre sur Duroval” [“the moment when the sun rises out of the Alps and spills its boiling golden sunlight on the hills in the plains, the disaster begins to descend on Duroval”] (Giono, 1994, p. 261).

Giono employs words such as “desolation”, “loneliness”, “disaster” and “death” to describe the dying world caused by the natural image, sunlight, and the sun also changes from warm gold sunlight to terrible “lumière blanche du crétaçé” [“white cretaceous light”] (Giono, 1998, p. 124) and “se brise complètement en poudre, comme pour souiller la terre d'un air épais” [“completely breaks itself into powder, as if to smear the earth with thick air”] (Giono, 1998, p. 3). The pale sun is transformed into a tragic element in southern space and its recurrence intensifies the tragic atmosphere. Such a tragic sentiment may be partly due to the author's experience of being unjustly imprisoned during World War II. Although later acquitted, Giono was once blacklisted by the French Writers' Association, so he had to stay in his house in Provence every day, facing the sun “le soleil déforme tout” [“that deforms everything”] (Giono, 1998, p. 15) while feeling abandoned by all his friends: “Je vous déteste tous, mes vieux amis,

et il s'ensuit un sentiment de mépris" ["I get to hate all of you, my old friends, then there follows a sense of contempt"] (Giono, 1995, p. 426).

It can be seen that Giono was tasting loneliness from breaking up with his friends during this period, which led to his intense inner conflict, incomprehension and pain. From this bitter experience, he glimpsed the multiple layers of human violence and its subsequent tragedy. This could explain why he portrays the sun, the symbol of the fire element, as the instigator of violence through unbridled depiction: it creates a vortex in the natural space, reflecting the evolution and mutation of human nature in plight. The Provence under the rays of the sun has nothing in common with the elegant and relaxing resort it is often associated with; there is no longer Virgil's tenderness and warmth in Provence, and the cruelty of the sun is metaphorically that of human nature. Therefore, in his later novel *Le Hussard sur le toit*, the Provence under the Mediterranean sun has become a place of calamity, a platform to test human morality (Lu, 2014, p. 117).

In Giono's works, the ignition and extinction of fire indicate the beginning and ending of life. Therefore, the fire element is two-sided: it brings the joy of birth as well as the pathos of death. The fire element reflects human nature; it is the external driving force of human life and the internal reflection of human warmth, filling the natural space with light and heat.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Giono's natural spaces are filled not only with flowers, trees, birds and animals, but also with traditionally inanimate elements like earth, air, water and fire. If flowers, plants, trees, and birds and animals are the vivid expression of natural space, then earth, air, water, and fire constitute the original material of the natural world. Giono, with rich imagination, embeds various natural elements in the fictional literary world. In his view, not only plants and animals are alive, but also the material elements that may seem inanimate and neglected by others. These elements are constantly involved in the evolution of nature: the sky is "un marrais où l'eau Claire luit par places entre les flaques de vase" ["like a swamp, with clear water shining between puddles of sludge"] (Giono, 1994, p. 41); the fire is "bondit comme une eau en colère" ["like a wave of raging waves"] (Giono, 1994, p. 118); the air currents are "comme l'eau des rivières qui siffle dans les maisons vides" ["like river water whistling in empty

houses”] (Giono, 1994, p. 78); the land is “éclaboussée de vie” [“splashing with life”] and the mountains have “des poutres ondulantes comme un joug de vache” [“undulating beams like a cow’s yoke”] (Giono, 1994, p. 120). Various natural elements represented by earth, air, water and fire are mixed in this “grande saumure de la vie totale” [“huge brine of complete life”] (Giono, 1962, p. 20), which is blended with rich imagination into a fickle natural space, allowing readers to fully appreciate the passion of natural life.

Ancient Western thinkers once regarded the four elements as the “foundation of everything”, indicating a simple elemental view of natural space. Bachelard then introduces the elemental perception of nature into literary criticism, analyzing how simple elements are mobilized into profound literary imagery (Jean-Yves, 2009, p. 89). The natural elements in Giono’s works are “elevations of archetypes” rather than “repetitions of reality”, which can be traced back to the origins of language and figurative thinking, and at the same time they point to the emotional world condensed within things. His unique living experience helps generate an unprecedented presence of nature in French literature, a natural space where “the sky, the land, the night, the wind, the stars, the grass and the people, all merge into the vortex of cosmos” (Giono, 2014, postscript).

After perusing all Giono’s works, we may find that the characters in his works often have to face the four elements of nature: earth, water, air and fire: the earth that devours the flesh in *Le Grand Troupeau* [*To the Slaughterhouse*] (1931), the mud in *Batailles dans la montagne* [*Battles in the mountain*] (1937), the heavy snow in *Un roi sans divertissement* [*A king without entertainment*] (1947), the water in *Fragments d’un paradis* [*Fragments of a paradise*] (1948), the storm in *Le Chant du monde and Deux Cavaliers de l’orage* [*Two Riders of the storm*] (1965), the fire in *Colline* and the scorching sun in *Le Hussard sur le toit*. All these elements play a positive role in these novels: they appear with personhoods or shape characters’ surroundings, guiding or inspiring their actions in various ways.

It seems that in Giono’s novels, there always exists a hidden connection and echo among the characters and their surroundings. The spatial environment constructed by these natural elements will have an immeasurable impact on the characters who inhabit it, triggering their sensitive inner activities, so that the inner spiritual space will echo with the outer natural space, leading to the harmony between the animate and the inanimate and confusing the boundary between human and the non-human

world. Although Giono doesn't explicitly propose the concept of "space" in his works, he constructs a natural space that includes fire, water, air and earth through his literary description of these natural elements. This is exactly what Le Clézio said about the natural elements in Giono's works: "Reconnaitre chaque pierre, chaque colline, chaque rivière, pour essayer d'en arracher le secret de vie" ["To look at every stone, to look at every mountain, to look at every river, is to obtain from it the mystery of life"] (Bourneuf, 1977, p. 176). In this sense, the spatial construction in Giono's works is the process of the literary creation of space. It artistically highlights the relationship between man and nature while simultaneously revealing humans' living condition. By depicting natural elements, Giono has constructed a poetic space where the subjective intertwines with the objective and the imagination co-exists with the reality.

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