

*Longing for Wilderness: The human and the other – vis à vis –
in the poetry and poetics of Don McKay*

Based on a paper presented by

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NOTE:

This paper draws from two books of poetry by Don McKay:

Apparatus (1997) cited as AP

Another Gravity (2000) cited as AG

And from his book on poetics:

Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness (2001) cited as VV

Unless otherwise indicated, poem quotes are from Another Gravity.

Definitions are from Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary.

*When you can't look up at it, you can
look it up: **

another

1. : different or distinct from the one first considered
<the same scene viewed from ~ angle>
2. : some other
3. : being one more in addition to one or more of the same kind: NEW

gravity

1. : dignity or sobriety of being
: importance, significance, esp. seriousness
: a serious situation or problem
2. : the quality of having weight
3. : a gravitational attraction of the mass of the earth

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: number of times, in Another Gravity, Don McKay uses the word "air"
< includes one use each of "airspace" and "airy">

**from New Moon (38)*

I'm thinking of us up there
shingling the boathouse roof...

sloped upward like a take-off ramp
waiting for Evel Knievel, pointing to open sky. Beyond it
twenty feet or so of concrete wharf before
the blue-black water of the lake. Danny said
that he could make it, easy. We said
never. He said case of beer, put up
or shut up. We said
asshole.

... And then, amid the squat,
hammer, heft, no one saw him go. Suddenly he
wasn't there, just his boots
with his hammer stuck inside like a heavy-headed
flower.

*Sometimes a Voice (I), the first
poem in Another Gravity (3-4)*

Here we are, right off the mark, gaping at bootless Danny, just self-catapulted from the boathouse roof, freeze-framed mid-flight in a landscape of air, serving (rather sweetly) as a gutsy, klutzy endorsement for "another gravity," where numerous configurations of meaning apply.

Assuming that Danny is not sincerely suicidal, let us acknowledge that although his leap might seem "cool" – as the poem goes on to say – and might "make sense" philosophically, it is also very dumb. Whether he lives or dies (we don't know for sure), it's dumb.

From the springboard of this first wildly, naïvely hopeful poem, McKay cannonballs into the role of poetry's Air Jordan – flocks of birds as escorts – looking for the freedom of metaphorical human flight, of "wilderness," determined to find it, though clearly dogged from the beginning by his own heavy human condition.

McKay knows what he's doing. He knows, from square one, *it ain't ever gonna happen*. This is not a blind, immature poetic pursuit dreaming the impossible dream. It is, in fact, a *grave* pursuit.

In *Another Gravity*, this “nature poet” (VV 25-31) – for whom “other” is other than individuals of the human species – sparingly lends words about people, or relationships between people. And when he does, they most often cast a stark light on our foibles. So, without deep reading, one might conclude McKay is hopelessly dismayed about his own kind (including himself). He clearly has concerns. However, in speaking directly to us, or, rather, in *translating for us* the exhilaration and heartbreak (VV 73) of our condition, McKay extends the generous hand. He offers a gift to the reader through his particular “apparatus” of language (VV 65). He says, as poet/narrator: See? I’m one of you – as enthusiastic and desperate and hopeful and dumb as Danny – and I’m going to let you watch me bumble while I paste on my wax wings and taunt the sun.

It is a tangled, frustrating web McKay weaves and sticks us to – wind (ahh, the wind) constantly shaking the air, wondering if we can hang on and gulp down its empty, nourishing gusts.

McKay shows us that a huge part of the problem with the human condition lies in memory – in its thick claws, which drag us (minds, hearts, psyches) relentlessly back into our plodding selves. In fact, it is in the poem, *Drag* (6), that McKay first addresses this:

unlike Horned Larks, who are imagination,
I was mostly memory, which...

is notoriously
heavier than air.

The problem of memory surfaces again in *Moonlight Becomes You* (18), where (airy? empty? intangible?) moonlight

...reads you
backward, turning the pages softly but coldly, this one
which is heavy with names and this one
sticky with praise and this one which is the pane
you see through to unbind the book.

In this particular passage, heavy itself with layered meaning, McKay turns moonlight into a tough-love parent (soft but cold, gentle but firm) who sits her child down on the sofa and doesn’t *tell*, but *shows* him the error of his ways, page by weighty page. The tender use of “pane” as a kind of auditory homonym is unmistakable.

Just when we think McKay has spelled out a clear but difficult lesson (pry open the claws of memory and lift off might just be possible) we arrive at *Glide* (35-36). It's a tease of a poem. First there's an echo...

the most important
lesson of grade four
is the blank but pointed

page...

... and then one of McKay's many ostensible contradictions. It turns out that memory, like history (or history, like memory?) is an unavoidable element of human existence. In *Glide*, we move from the innocent schoolyard, the jungle gym, the look-both-ways street crossing, to this:

...gazing
at us from its prehistoric perch, a small
but enterprising lizard
is about to launch itself
into the warm arms of the Mesozoic afternoon.

Hatched in the Mesozoic, this same old lizard (an interesting choice of symbols) still stares into our helpless, human Cenozoic eyes – saying, it seems, *Hey kids, welcome to reality*.

Which poses another sticky question: What, exactly, is McKay's take on reality? The short answer: It's unclear – in every way. That is, for McKay, the nature of reality is unclear, and his explanation of reality's lack of clarity is unclear. And herein lies one of the points of genius in his work.

As noted above in McKay's take on memory, just when you're thinking your mitt's in exactly the right place, he throws a surprise curve ball – which whizzes past your ear into the backstop. Over and over, McKay pitches against the sign, driving home the lesson that, like snagging a trick pitch, grasping reality – among other pithy notions – isn't easy.

Twice, in Another Gravity, McKay hints, perplexingly, that reality is suspect, that too much of it is a bad thing and might even be (is this possible?) deadly. In both cases he uses drug as metaphor. First, in the opening lines of *Dark of the Moon* (7):

Once past the streetlights, I miss it...

the way it gathered longing into moths
and kept reality from overdosing on its own sane
self.

And then in *Northern Lights* (63):

I thought of moonlight,
doling out illusion like a medicine
month after month...

So here we have Dr. Moon, a kind of lunar Timothy Leary, meandering through these poems with his elixir bottle and spoon, making sure our feet are not planted too firmly on the ground. And wouldn't you know it? This moon medicine works like a charm in *Nocturnal Migrants* (29):

Another gravity. I am on my way
to the bathroom, the dream in my head still
struggling not to die into the air, when my bare feet step
into a pool of moonlight on the kitchen floor and turn,
effortlessly, into fish....

now they swim off,
up, singing old bone river...

It's only a hunch, but is McKay fooling around here with the difference between humdrum reality (the up-in-the-night-to pee-variety) and the ultimate reality of mysticism? Is this the poem of a seeker looking for direct communion with neither God, nor gods, but with that which must be sought and is beyond seeking?

In Apparatus - McKay's collection of poems immediately preceding Another Gravity - we get hint of his take on things spiritual. *Twinflower* (4), the book's second poem, begins:

What do you call
the muscle we long with? Spirit?
I don't think so. Spirit is a far cry. This
is a casting outward which
unwinds inside the chest. A hole
which complements the heart.
The ghost of a chance.

And then, in *Alibi* (19), this:

...we knew
the gods we loved were charismatic fictions...

So nix any enchantment with western spirituality, gods or religions. In *Vis à Vis*, we find other hints – one of which clearly echoes the *Twinflower* quote. McKay points out “that for the ancient Chinese, the heart is the organ of thought” (103). Then he goes on to quote Chuang-tzu – Taoist sage and follower of Lao-tzu:

Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear,
listen with the heart. Rather than listen with the heart,
listen with the energies. Listening stops at the ear, the
heart at what tallies the thought. As for energy
[Chi] it is the tenuous which waits to be roused by
other things. Only the Way accumulates the tenuous.
The attenuating is the fasting of the heart. (103)

Attenuate, become less, empty, “mix the mysticism with ash and live / next door to nothing” (AG 16). And we find this in *Sometimes a Voice* (2) (59-60):

...Or the moment
when you know it’s over and the nothing which you
have to say is falling all around you, lavishly,
pouring its heart out.

Now, enter Icarus, a pivotal symbol in *Another Gravity*. Enter the guy who is humorously/seriously (always the McKay duality) idolized – the guy who tries, tries, tries to fly, who is doomed to fail, who is revered, nonetheless, for his attempt. The human condition personified. And though clearly destined for ash, the Mystical, Mythical Danny for whom:

This is his practice
and his prayer: to be translated into air...

Icarus (43)

One could pass an evening counting the number of times McKay uses the word “moon” in *Another Gravity*, but that would be too obvious. Finding the word “air” on twenty-four occasions is much more illuminating.

McKay seems obsessed with the concept of air. Air is what we want to become (be *translated into*) yet always fail to become. It is something we want to be “helpful to” (AG 5). McKay uses air, relentlessly and effectively, in his metaphor for wilderness – “the placeless place beyond the mind’s appropriations” (VV 87). Air is the site of this deepest paradox – the infinite space between two dualities that butt up against one another, as close as skin to water when the hand’s plunged into the sea. Air is host to wilderness, that ever-elusive terminus of an interminable, imperative, frightening journey:

Little Tim
called this adventure.
I was afraid of it and so

I had to go.

Running Away (21-22)

Air is everywhere, empty, infinite. And wilderness? Wilderness is this side of where we aren’t. It is the other side of where we are. And it drives us nuts.

Over and over, intentionally, McKay attempts to define this indefinable place. He *must* try. Like the loving parent, his job is to show us the impossibility of grasping wilderness, not simply to tell us. The seeds of this orchestrated flailing are found in Apparatus:

...you realize the wilderness
between one breath
and another.

Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush (26)

There’s a place
between desire and memory, some back porch
we can neither wish for nor recall.

Song for the Song of the Wooded Thrush (27)

And in these maddening phrases pulled from *The Book of Moonlight* (64) in Another Gravity:

Arriviste, you are the reader
who has come too early, or too late,
and lingers in the spill of light
which might be aftermath, might be
anticipation....

In the scene you've missed, or are
about to witness, desire
and departure rendezvous. No hero happens,
unless it is you, the creature of the cusp of change,
the avid unabashed *voyeur*.

So here we are – ambitious, gaga, and badly in need of a chiropractor – pivoting back and forth around the cusp, the central (non)point of wilderness – which McKay actually, once, tantalizingly, and possibly just for the hell of it, defines as “five unnumbered seconds” (AG 33).

At this juncture, a fair question is: What's the point of this ostensibly convoluted pursuit?

Of the several available responses, here are two: McKay's intense search revolves, in part, around his self-adopted (and self-mocking?) role as “nature poet” and the way in which he chooses to write as one. And McKay's poetry and essays are conduits for sharing these philosophical contemplations, which he clearly hopes will have some effect on how *we* (i.e. humans) will regard and treat and interact with the *other* (i.e. that which is not human).

Wilderness, again according to McKay, is “not just a set of endangered species, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations” (VV 21). Underscore all things. In other words, McKay believes that a tin cup as much as a tiger, a toothpick as much a tree, deserves this same relief from metaphorical human ownership.

Which is directly related to “poetic attention” (VV 26). For McKay, poetic attention is “a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without desire to possess...” (VV 26). In other words, poetic attention is a *longing for wilderness* (VV 64). It “is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness; it leads to work which is not a *vestige* of the other [as in Romanticism], but a *translation* of it” (VV 28, emphasis in original).

One of the methods McKay advocates (and uses prolifically in his writing) for honouring wilderness is thoughtful anthropomorphizing – a gesture which shakes up

imposed human order (appropriation) and throws it off kilter. Anthropomorphizing defamiliarizes. It turns upside down the so-called logic of names and releases those things burdened by them (see VV 31-32). Here are two of dozens of examples from Another Gravity:

The owls have struck a deal with drag, their wide wings
fringed like petticoats, the underneath
covered by a sort of nap as though
wearing frillies on the outside.

Hush Factor (53)

I was thinking of the house we'd left
huddled darkly round its
turned-down furnace, one missing tooth
in the block's electric smile.

Winter Solstice Moon: an eclogue (65)

It is very important to note that McKay does not refer to poetic attention as looking for wilderness, or respecting wilderness, or being in wilderness. He says it is *longing* for wilderness. Webster's Ninth says *to long is to wish with one's whole heart*. McKay's definition of longing might not be an exact fit with the dictionary's; nonetheless, here we do begin to see the intricate connection between his passionate, strenuous philosophy and his poetry. To repeat, from *Twinflower* (AP 4):

...This
is a casting outward which
unwinds inside the chest. A hole
which complements the heart.
The ghost of a chance.

That we can successfully abandon our illusion of control, our distorted sense of entitlement; that we can give it up for the other; that we can give up, period, there is the ghost of a chance.

This is a complicated business for the poet since, for him, giving up must somehow be married with *words* – huge culprits of appropriation themselves (VV 64). Said another way, this translation of the other requires a voice. McKay's solution? Add this to air's job description. *Moving air, that is. Wind.*

In the metaphor of wind, we find one of McKay's deepest commitments to honouring "wilderness," all of which are steeped in humility and respect. This commitment surfaces in Apparatus:

... your whole life,
like a posse, may catch up with you and tumble
headlong into the moment.
You may wish to say something to it, but your tongue
seems to be turning to an alder twig
and you must wait for wind.

To Speak of Paths (AP 7-8)

We'd turn phrases then,
turn them over to see what was crawling
underneath, we'd throw our voices to the winds
from whom we'd borrow them.

On Foot to the Bypass Esso Outlet (AP 55)

Three years later, in the first stanza of the first poem of Another Gravity, McKay reprises – almost paraphrases – his take on the dependence of voice on wind:

Sometimes a voice – have you heard this? –
wants not to be a voice any longer, wants something
whispering between the words, some
rumour of its former life. Sometimes, even
in the midst of making sense or conversation, it will
hearken back to breath, or even farther,
to the wind, and recognize itself
as troubled air, a flight path still
waiting for its bird.

Sometimes a Voice (1) (3)

For McKay, this is unequivocal: the poet has no ownership of voice. At best, he can rent, under stiff conditions. The poet, emptied of himself, may speak only the words offered him by wind – by the other – moving through the infinite point of wilderness. Dissolved into the very air that blows through him, the poet can, perhaps, become "helpful" to it (AG 5). This is, indeed, a tenancy grave and intimate.

And intimacy moves out of air and into a somewhat more concrete form when McKay discusses “Face” – which is, in part, the literal looking at the other. Though he recognizes it as a “vertebratocentricism” (VV 98), McKay says in *Vis à Vis*: “[Face is] an address to the other with an acknowledgement of our human-centredness built in, a salutary and humbling reminder.... Homage is, perhaps, simply appropriation with the current reversed...” (99). He goes on to explain:

A face is a face is
a face; it is not primarily a linguistic being whose chief virtue
is ease of manipulation. And when a lake or a pine marten
looks back, when we are – however momentarily – *vis à vis*,
the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such
meetings, that envisaging flows both ways? (VV 101)

The answer – unfortunately, for an affirmative response might assuage the “great ache of our inevitable separation” – is *no* (VV 65). We are right to “imagine” (VV 16, 18), or pretend, or fantasize that the envisaging is reciprocated, as long as this imagining is done with eyes wide open and we recognize *ourselves* as the electrical power source. And why not? McKay aptly points out that “as language users with brains and organs of perception which dictate that we see and describe the world in human ways,... a human perspective is impossible to escape”(VV 98).

But *to sense* – to become conscious of – a two-way flow of envisaging moves this experience perilously close to a realm that McKay, himself, questions – that of Romanticism, which “speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity” (VV 28). McKay’s argument for the virtue of “anthropomorphic play” is persuasive, convincing even (VV 31). But in this single, wishful wondering, he slips away from that argument’s solid ground into the dreamy longing which he shows us, in Another Gravity, cannot – because of our humanness – be fully satisfied.

Vis à vis, translated from the French, does most often mean “face to face.” It also means “opposite,” or “in the presence of.” Even if we stick with the most common usage and McKay’s intent, we see that in the first “*vis*” McKay virtually always refers to *us* – the human face – and, in the second “*vis*,” to the *other*. So, in *sensing* that that envisioning flows both ways, we arrive at the doorstep of Romanticism and the desire for the phrase to work in reverse: “[the desire] to be spoken *to*...” (VV 27, emphasis in original).

To illustrate this point, here are a few sentences from the last page of *Vis à Vis*:

to see lichens that practice agriculture is to see them in the same
light we conceive our own passage, as human beings, from the raw
to the cooked, to confer on them some of the value and acclaim we
usually reserve for things human. And while we’re paused there,

mildly agog at the prospect of domestication occurring in the natural world... (106)

Acknowledging that lichens' arrival on the planet preceded that of humans, let's conduct an experiment in reciprocation:

to see humans that practice agriculture is to see them in the same light we conceive our own passage, as lichens, from the raw to the cooked, to confer on them some of the value and acclaim we usually reserve for things lichen. And while we're paused there, mildly agog at the prospect of naturalization occurring in the domestic world...

Lichens, of course, don't give a damn – look 'em right in the eye or no. But instead of ruining McKay's argument, this blip in his theory reinforces the difficulty in coming *vis à vis* with our own condition. McKay becomes sweet Danny again and, whether onto concrete or into water, he plummets – with “the quick existence of a fist” – as we all do when we try to fly (AG 56).

Danny. He kicks things off yeehawing into the dream of flight. Then, throughout Another Gravity, McKay sends us up to join Danny midair, nose-dives us back to earth, says get your wax wings back on, kids, and try again. He tells us we must enter the placeless place of wilderness, then says we'll never get there – cloaked in our heavy, human “philosophy of feathers” (AG 16). He shows us gently, fiercely, crankily, humorously, who we are and, most acutely, what we are not.

By the end of the book, Danny's dream, if not dead, is seriously tempered. Danny has grown up. Illusion's bottle of medicine is empty. Longing will go on, striving even, but an acceptance and maturation is reached. In two final and profoundly tender poems – rich with maturity, acceptance, responsibility – McKay echoes the many lessons woven into Another Gravity and shows us the deepest truths of our inescapable human condition. First, from *Winter Solstice Moon: An Eclogue* (67):

The sun says *here*, the moon says
nowhere, the nameless moon
that sheds the blunt domesticating myths
the way a mirror utterly forgets you
when you leave the bathroom, the empty room
soliciting our ghosts, calling on them to leave home
that guilded cage, that theme park of the human.

Then, as if spoken in a wall-less cathedral to a beloved congregation weeping in wonder at the enormity of its own insignificance, these last words – wind's gift – resonate like a benediction:

A time for this,
a time for that, a time to let them both escape into
whateverness, a time to cast
away stones, to stop
building and remembering and building artful
monuments upon the memories

To leave.

To step off into darker darkness,
that no moon we call new.

On Leaving (69-70)

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