

Materialism Meets Mysticism: Don McKay's Geopoetical Investigations

Jonathan Butler, *Soochow University*

Don McKay, *The Shell of the Tortoise* (Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2012), 160 pp.

The Shell of the Tortoise is one of the more unique ecocritical contributions to a growing body of literature expanding far too quickly for the multifarious academic labels springing up around it to keep pace. *The Shell of the Tortoise*, however, stymies readers from the outset by resisting placement within even the most familiar traditional genres—never mind for the moment the myriad subfields within the ecocritical domain. Neither “critical study” nor “work or poetry” sufficiently describes the four essays and “an assemblage” which comprise the 2012 collection published by Gaspereau Press in Nova Scotia, Canada. McKay is a winner of one of the most prestigious poetry awards on the planet, the Griffin Poetry Prize (2007), so although he is also an accomplished critic and long-time academic (since retired), his poetic sensibilities seep deeply into his critical labors; and yet the critic within him, far from grappling with such artistic interference in defiant refusal, instead welcomes the poet with open arms into the work of investigation in a meeting of “materialism and mysticism” that promises to yield much in the way of insights into the geopoetic imagination.

The introductory essay in the collection, “Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a reader of Deep Time” sets up the binary opposition underpinning McKay’s agenda, an opposition between anthropocentrism and that other “ism” McKay points toward that exists beyond our naming of things: the unsayable quality of being for which (for heuristic purposes) he borrows the term “mysticism” to map out his terrain. In this opening essay, which is the most conventional of the lot, McKay proposes to resurrect the term geopoetry, first coined by geologist Harry Hess in the 1960s to introduce his readership to the (at the time) novel idea of plate tectonics. Hess felt he needed to induce in his readers an imaginative capacity science alone could not provide; how else, in the absence of hard data, to persuade people to accept a theory of the sea floor continuously spreading, driven by magma rising from the mantle of the earth? Now that enough evidence has been turned in, and the theory of plate tectonics is widely accepted, one might be tempted—from a geological point of view—to allow the term to lapse, McKay observes. And yet, this is precisely what McKay protests. Having served such a valuable purpose, might we—scientist and poet alike—not want to continue the project of geopoetry, to see what other places, what other gleanings it might yield up?

I think Harry Hess, like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, or any other creative scientist, enters a mental space where conjecture and imaginative play are needful and legitimate, and that this is a mental space shared with poets. But even more than this poetic license, I would say, the practice of geopoetry promotes astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame. Geopoetry makes it legitimate for the natural historian or scientist to speculate and gawk, and equally

legitimate for the poet to benefit from close observation and the amazing things which science turns up. It provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. Geopoetry, I am tempted to say, is the place where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other, then go out for a drink. This may not lead to marriage or even cohabitation, but I'm guessing it does lead to a series of dates, trysts, rendezvous, and other encounters whose mood is erotic rather than simply disputatious. (10-11)

The mention of the word “erotic” tips off the careful reader—or a reader steeped in Canadian ecopoetics, at least—to another series of rendezvous and encounters, ongoing over the last decade or so, and yielding up a number of significant texts, most of them under the authorship of critic and poet Tim Lilburn, whose collection of essays *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, is essentially a conversation between and among five critics, poets, and philosophers, who have been trading ideas for decades. Lilburn’s work on poetry as epistemology is intricately involved in the idea of the erotic as a grounding frame of worldly investigation, and McKay certainly riffs on it here (and elsewhere—as erotic echoes resound in his 2010 collection of poems, *Foglio a Foglia / Leaf to Leaf*). One would be remiss in attempting to appreciate the full range of McKay’s poetic innuendos (and deep suspicion of nomenclature’s proprietary claims) without a prior knowledge of his indebtedness to Lilburn’s work—although the indebtedness is without doubt mutual. There is also in *The Shell of the Tortoise* (one cannot help but observe) a deep, *deep* indebtedness to the work of Loren Eiseley, an indebtedness that might profitably be explored in a critical study.

In any event, *The Shell of the Tortoise* is a work infused with an emotional attitude, even as it seriously challenges the boundaries prescribed (and proscribed—as in “you can’t go there”) by conventional scientific discourse. McKay is after nothing less than a paradigm shift here, a means of taking us to another dimension altogether. His work in the impossible-to-label section “The Muskwa Assemblage” is a testament to this ambitiously naïve (and for that very reason, in an age of scientific arrogance, *applaudable*) approach to the possibilities inherent within the geopoetic enterprise. Not one to accuse his contemporaries—or, in Christian terms, to go looking for beams in the eyes of his peers—McKay first turns the approach on himself, questioning his own right to “write,” to label anything at all:

Write it down, cross it out. The struggle of language with itself, its sojourn in the wilderness, its fast. Write down this caribou, a young buck crossing the Gataga on soft snowshoe hooves, write shaggy elegance, write those improbable parentheses it carries on its head like a waiter carrying a tray of silence into the other world. (83)

If we are to really move closer to an appropriate manner of being here, McKay seems to be saying, it is time perhaps not so much to renounce language—for what other tool do we have?—as to see it for what it is: an anthropocentric re-centering and re-appropriation of a world that exists far, far outside our words, a world that commands, in its “ungraspability” (to coin a useful term here), utter humility in the face of its radical otherness. Such an imperative is both epistemologically and ethically grounded for

McKay, as it is for his friend and eco-interlocutor Lilburn. One last excerpt from “The Muskwa Assemblage” underscores this point:

Nameless mountains, nameless creeks: language abhors such vacuums. Once we’d climbed the mountains, and were camped with the pack horses beside the tarn, I could feel the impulse to supply names become active, as though language were suffering a housekeeping crisis. I thought of early explorers and scientists leaving their names—or those of their heroes, friends, wives, mistresses, or pets—attached to the species and landforms they encountered, how it seems to satisfy some primal urge in a hyperlinguistic species like ours. I suspect that language harbours a desire to be the map in the Borges story that is coextensive with the world. Once inducted—baptized—into language, the mountain or creek seems to join us in the tissues of discourse that make up so much of human life. It yields a portion of its otherness; it agrees (or so we like to think) to live along with us inside that web of reference which, some would argue, constitutes the real. (97)

McKay is at his best here in insinuating (with a wink) what we think we have a handle on, what we believe we have constrained within the terminological boundaries of our discourse. “Go on,” he seems to taunt us, “you keep believing that.” (And be so much more the fool!) *The Shell of the Tortoise* is a confession, an act of humility, an enjoinder to let the geopoetic imagination take us beyond the limits of what we say and know. It beckons us to follow the caribou antlers glimpsed in the wilderness, those “improbable parentheses it carries on its head like a waiter carrying a tray of silence into the other world.”