

Nature as the Other:  
The Ethical Dimension in Don McKay's Ecopoetry

الطبيعة كالآخر:  
الجانب الأخلاقي في شعر "دون مكاي" البيئي

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## Abstract

Recently, environmental crises, often caused by human hands, have become very common. Accordingly, poets and critics begin to look for new ways of relating with nature. Their writings offer a call for a change in the way we view the natural world and the complex web of relationships that shape it. Throughout his poetry, McKay offers a detailed analysis of how humans may relate better to the environment. For him, the core of ecopoetry lies in the idea that all human and non-human beings are interrelated in a great web that grasps the whole universe. This interconnection promotes our sense of living with the non-human other in a unified community. Therefore, we start to adopt a feeling of humility in our recognition of the non-human nature. Once we feel humble towards the natural world, we become aware of the present environmental crisis that threatens both the human and the non-human. Regarding the non-human nature as the other, McKay writes ecopoems which astonishingly turn the familiar into unfamiliar making it worthy of note and respect. He believes in considering and valuing things for their complete being, not just for their use. The ethical address in his ecopoetry is not confined to birds, animals or plants. He argues that the nature poet can expand his ethical concern to include other things like tools and technology for instance. So, he writes beautiful odes to cars, musical instruments, baseball gloves, knives, forks and spoons. In brief, the ecopoetry written by McKay presents a profound respect for the otherness of nature dealing with the non-human other in a highly ethical way. Outstandingly, his work reveals a consideration of the other, a shift away from anthropocentrism, a balance between the human and the non-human, and a promotion of sustainability of our shared environment. Standing for all these views in addition to its adoption of the principle of responsibility in our relationship with the non-human nature, McKay's ecopoetry can be said to have an ethical orientation.

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the last decade of the twentieth century, a decade in which I was determined to come to grips with the practice of nature poetry in a time of environmental crisis.

(Don McKay, *Vis à Vis* 9)

In recent years, human consciousness has been at odds with nature. As this condition reaches a crisis, poets and critics begin to look for new ways of relating with our planet and other species. Their writings suggest a change in the way we view the natural world and the complex web of relationships that shape it. Ecopoetry raises these and other ethical issues exploring new insights that can refashion human dwelling on earth. The need for this reconciliation with nature seems especially pressing when environmental crises, often caused by human intervention, have become very common. "Today it is questionable," Leonard Scigaj points out, "to create poetry that purifies the ordinary natural world by transforming it into a superior aesthetic museum of art...when that natural world is so stressed, so endangered by human hands" (2). The concern of this paper, accordingly, is to reveal this ethical depth in the ecopoetry written by the contemporary Canadian poet Don McKay.

McKay writes poetry that interacts with nature as the other, offering a detailed analysis of how we may better relate to the environment, our habitat which "we share with several million other species" (Skinner 5). As an ecopoet, McKay stands against all approaches and ideas that call for a relationship with nature based on immoral bases. In his essay, "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home, and Nature Poetry," McKay recounts how--while he was out birdwatching along the St. John River in the early nineties--he discovered

a dead raven shot through the back and hung from one leg at the entrance of a country lane. He writes:

Shooting the raven was one thing: we know, each of us, that sinister delight in casual brutality and long-distance death. Displaying it was another – controlling its death, as well as taking its life. Displaying it declares that the appropriation is total. A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements. This one is required to function as a sign, a human category – a sign which simply says 'we can do this'. (18-19)

Obviously, McKay is very disturbed by that human behaviour which not only resulted in killing the innocent bird but also led to dominating its death and 'taking its life', preventing 'a dead body' from being able to 'rejoin the elements'. Such an incident stands as a call for human beings to interact with nature according to a moral relationship based on recognizing and respecting the non-human other.

In his interesting collection of essays and poems titled *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*, McKay expresses his own personal attempt to "come to grips with the practice of nature poetry in a time of environmental crisis" (9). The poet indicates that the process of his coming to grips is only possible through a more comprehensive process which he identifies as 'poetic attention'. For McKay, attention is the core of a poetics and the base of an ethics in which otherness is respected and valued. The kind of poetic attention revealed in McKay's ecopoetry offers a means of rapprochement and reparation to the earth. As defined by McKay, 'poetic attention' is

a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about...It is a form of knowing that counters primordial grasp of home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause. (*Vis à Vis* 26)

Thus, poetic attention is 'a form of knowing' which has the capacity to transform and amend both the poet's and the readers' exile from the natural world. More importantly, it 'celebrates the wilderness of the other'.

According to modern ecocritics, wilderness is an idea related to place, an 'aesthetic' with an 'ethical' dimension. For example, Paul Shepard defines it as something which "has been valued as the place we test our civilized...selfhood against raw nature, as a landscape aesthetic, as an ethical enclave of biodiversity, or as that refuge in which we hope to have a spiritual experience" (218). On the other hand, postmodern ecocritics adopt a new concept of wilderness exceeding its narrow definition as a place but, at the same time, asserting its ethical aspect. Jonathan Bordo, for instance, sees wilderness as a 'condition', or a 'consequence' of an intellectual process, a 'shifting' set of concepts that are the outcome of social, economic, political and ecological factors in ongoing negotiation with one another (229). As for McKay, wilderness is "not just a set of endangered spaces", he writes,

but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations...there is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism...In such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being. (21)

Simply, wilderness--according to McKay--is all that cannot be ordered and controlled by the rational mind, a 'condition', to use Bordo's word, of being hidden in all things, even things we use every day. Furthermore, McKay claims that wilderness is strongly connected to poetry. He is highly fascinated by the central relationship between the

two sides which comes at the heart of his poetics. He sees that poetry works to

introduce otherness, or wilderness, into consciousness without insisting that it be turned wholly into knowledge, into what we know, what we own. Within poetic attention, we might say, what we behold is always 'alien and previous,' whether it's an exceptional fossil or an 'ordinary' rock or chickadee. In poetry there is no 'been there, done that'; everything is wilderness. ("Ediacaran and Anthropocene" 11)

A careful reading of McKay's ecopoetry shows that he admires the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a leading French thinker whose work is based on the ethics of the other. According to Levinas, "ethics is first philosophy where ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other..." (Critchley 6). It is Levinas's concept of ethics as 'first philosophy' which gives McKay the motivation for responsibility. Instead of letting others be as some critics suggest, Levinas insists on the act of address. He states, "The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged... Addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other" (*Entre Nous* 6). Thus, Levinas believes that ethics is not a system of rules but a response to the other.

Like Levinas, McKay believes that the self is constructed by the other, rather than constructing the other. McKay argues that while 'letting others be' seems like an attractive philosophy, we--humans--have to realize our inevitable and necessary interaction. Levinas gives a very expressive example to argue why we cannot just let the non-human other be:

Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I  
have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor, and  
dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did

a thousand and one things I hadn't willed to do. The act was not pure; I left traces. Wiping away these traces, I left others. (*Entre Nous* 3).

In this way, addressing the other seems to be a must, a necessity for the move from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. This is what Terry Gifford affirms when he states that a "positioning of the self toward nature leads inevitably to a humbling that is a necessary requirement of the shift from the anthropocentric position of the pastoral to the ecocentric view of the post-pastoral" (152). Thus, we begin to realize our role towards the environment putting into our consideration that "with consciousness comes conscience" (Gifford 163) and that "the gesture of address acknowledges responsibility" (McKay, *Vis à Vis* 97).

In his Introduction to *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, Scot Bryson identifies three main characteristics of ecopoetry:

The first is an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world, such a perspective leads to a devotion of specific places and to the land itself...This interconnection is part of what Black Elk called 'the sacred hoop' that pulls all things into relationship and it can be found throughout ecopoetry...what Levertov calls 'the 'great web'...This awareness of the world as a community tends to produce the second attribute of ecopoetry: an imperative towards humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature...Related to this humility is the third attribute of ecopoetry: an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an over-technologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe. (5-6)

As the above extract indicates, the core of ecopoetry lies in the idea that all human and non-human beings are interrelated in a 'great web' that grasps the whole universe. This 'interconnection' promotes our sense of living with the non-human other in a unified community: a community with a new life style and strong ties between the human and non-human beings. Accordingly, we start to adopt a feeling of humbleness in our recognition of the non-human nature.

Once we feel humble towards the natural world, we become aware of the present environmental crisis that threatens both the human and the non-human in 'an over-technologized modern world'. This is what McKay strongly believes in and clearly reflects in his ecopoetry. For example, in *Long Sault*, a series of interesting poems, he draws attention towards the once majestic river which is now dammed and transformed from being a river with raging 'rapids' to becoming a mere 'lake' and source of electricity. The sequence opens up with the poem 'See' which begins the story:

**See**  
the new islands  
submerged highways  
man-made cut  
parkway  
control dam  
Eisenhower lock  
Barnhart Island park site  
Saunders Moses Power Dam  
dikes. (*Long Sault* 127)

Ironically, the poet invites us to 'see' how man violates nature and turns its elements into mere 'man-made' things. Remarkably, the language of the poem is very powerful and effective as if it is "backed," to quote Stan Dragland, "by the bulldozing power of western belief in progress" (14). This can be noted in the poet's use of words such as 'cut',

control' and 'lock'; each of these words contains the plosive /k/ which is a harsh sound'. Furthermore, the use of the verb 'see' in the imperative form suggests that the speaker is so sarcastic that he likes the human beings themselves to watch the consequences of their mishandling of the natural world. The river's dammed utility is sarcastically evoked in the last two lines of the poem: "Ride over the once famous Long Sault Rapids. / Boat Leaving every two hours – 9 AM to 7 AM." (127). This voice is significantly in the present. The river's rapids are now covered over with and calmed by this utility. The speaker's sarcastic voice, while it undercuts the notion of modern progress on the one hand, acknowledges, on the other, the underlying wilderness of the swollen river, "its rawness, its *duende*," to quote McKay (*Vis à Vis* 21).

A similar sense of this environmental destruction is evoked in the next poem, 'Dam'. McKay tells us that the Long Sault is

Not coiled, curled.

The new lake does not strain or brim  
behind the dam.

It sleeps.

It nuzzles the muddy shore as a vacuum cleaner  
purrs across the carpet. (*Long Sault* 127)

Unable to resist the human exploitation, the river is neither 'coiled' nor 'curled' as if it is surrendering itself to man who has spoiled it. It is easily noted that the lake is the new shape that the river and the rapids have finally taken. The use of 'the vacuum cleaner', which is a human construction mainly used to clean and make a space sterile, is very expressive. It shows how the river is savagely conquered by human hands. 'It sleeps' suggests that underneath the lake, the river waits to break free from its sterile position of utility reminding us of its residual wilderness. As McKay argues, "Tools exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design" (*Vis à Vis* 57). In these two poems, McKay reveals our short sighted outlook

that overlooks the ethical bond between the human and the non-human. The once wild river has been harnessed by modern technology and become, essentially, a commodity. Listening to such a dialogue between McKay and environment, we begin to realize our interconnectedness to the natural world which then provides a sense of ethical responsibility to examine our own behaviour toward nature and its ecological complexity.

In fact, McKay is so interested in nature that one of his critics, namely Sophia Forster, calls him "Mr. Nature-poet" (107). Forster shows how the ecopoetry written by McKay can vividly display a profound knowledge of the natural world and a correspondingly deep concern for the natural environment. Indeed, if ethics is 'first philosophy' for Levinas, otherness is first aesthetics for McKay whose poetry ethically and aesthetically reveals a highly valued relationship with the non-human other.

Seeking an ethical connection with the non-human nature, McKay writes ecopoems which turn the familiar into unfamiliar making it worthy of note and respect. 'By Any Other Name' is a poem which reveals this meaning. The poet here invites us to see how the domesticated hothouse roses which have been brought home from a supermarket

spike into the air  
exploding into softness,  
walking the kitchen to its myths – the table  
sinks into the grain, the forks imagine claws,  
the plastic shopping bags embrace eternal  
returnability. (qtd in Sinclair 108)

Skillfully, McKay uses personification to show how the beautiful roses are full of life and energy. The roses are personified to be happy and excited; they 'spike into the air' spreading their 'softness' everywhere in the kitchen which soon responds, in all its elements, to this cheerful atmosphere evoked by the merry roses. Outstandingly, McKay highlights the wilderness of both the roses and the kitchen with its various tools.

Things we use every day--the table, the forks, the plastic shopping bags--'embrace eternal returnability' remembering for a moment what Sue Sinclair calls "the possibility of wilderness". (109). Things which are common for us have suddenly become unfamiliar and surprisingly come to attract our attention. Certainly, this is what McKay describes as "the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise" which creates one of "the sharpened moments" when our minds come to "glimpse something's autonomy [or] its alien being" (*Vis à Vis* 21). In such a situation, we cannot do anything but to acknowledge--with admiration and respect--the otherness of these things.

In his famous book, *Pastoral*, Terry Grifford presents six criteria that are necessary for ecological writing. He tells us about a positioning of the self "in attention to the natural world", an understanding of the "cycles" of nature, a recognition that "our human inner nature can be understood in relation to external nature,", an awareness of "both nature as culture and of culture as nature,", an understanding that "it is our consciousness which gives us conscience, our ability to take responsibility for our behavior towards the other..," and finally a realization--from an ecofeminist point of view--that "the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities" (151-164).

If Grifford calls for the necessity of positioning the self 'in attention to the natural world', McKay magnificently composes poetry which translates this theoretical principle into a symphony of interaction between the human and the non-human. For example, 'Chickadee Encounter' is a poem in which the speaker positions himself--'in attention'--towards nature, specifically towards some chickadees:

ok ok ok ok  
here they come, the tidbits, the uppers,  
animating the bramble,  
whetting details. Hi,

I always say, I may be glum or dozy, still  
hi, how's it going, every time they zip –  
drawing that crisp invisible lilt from point to point — up  
to check me out: ok: it's practically pauseless,  
but as though some big machine –  
domestication maybe — hiccuped,

    a glitch through which the oceanic  
thirsts of poetry pour... (*Apparatus* 10)

At the very beginning of the poem, the speaker excitedly imitates the sound of the chickadees and happily announces their coming. The poem reveals the poet's interest in birds. Famous for being an avid birdwatcher, McKay writes poems which Méira Cook describes in her introduction to *Field Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay* as "alive, bright, with the presence of birds"(ix). Cook goes on showing that

    Birding—implying the act of watching birds and the  
    act of being a bird—hints at a presumptive metamorphosis  
    from which McKay's persona swiftly disassociates himself.  
    For this humble watcher, birding (like reading, like writing  
    poetry) is an act of attentiveness, a working poetic in which  
    the attendee 'discovers' but never appropriates the  
    wilderness world. (x)

The first line of 'Chickadee Encounter', 'ok ok ok ok', gives us an example of onomatopoeia, a technical device in which the word imitates the sound. The same technical device is also used in the eighth line, '...ok: it's practically pauseless'. The use of this technique reflects the speaker's excitement and admiration for the singing birds. The speaker immediately turns his attention to the chickadees whose presence makes him get, at once, into what Méira Cook calls 'an act of attentiveness' that directly makes him take part in a wonderful process of communication and interaction with the chickadees. As the poem reveals, McKay's speaker enjoys watching birds and the chickadees are described as

observing him. This shows that there is a strong connection between the human and the non human: The speaker makes the effort to address the chickadees no matter how he is feeling, sad or tired; 'I may be glum or dozy', he tells us. He is so excited that his mind enthusiastically leaps up from observation to observation, from idea to idea; this process is paralleled to the attempts of the birds to 'check' him 'out'. Both processes are 'practically pauseless', highlighting how the appreciation of another species can go both ways, and therefore a reciprocal relationship can be created.

The final part of the poem seems as a prayer for the birds and their song:

zippers, quicklings,  
may you inherit earth, may you  
perch at the edge of the shipwreck of state,  
on the scragged uneconomical alders,  
and chat. (*Apparatus* 10)

The speaker hopes that the chickadees may 'inherit earth' foreseeing that the whole world may be destroyed, perhaps by man's overuse of technology and materialistic civilization referred to by the poet in the ninth line of the poem as the 'big machine'. The birds, the speaker wishes, may not only survive the ruined world, but they may also 'chat' and sing telling the story of their triumph. Significantly, the phrase 'inherit earth' carries a biblical implication as McKay quotes it from a Bible verse that reads as follows: "For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth" (King James Version, Ps. 37. 9). In this sense, the poet compares the birds to those who trust God and rely on Him; consequently, they will finally be rewarded for their worthy behaviour with taking possession of the earth. In 'Chickadee Encounter', McKay conveys an important message to his readers; he implies that despite man's ill-treatment of the environment which is radically altering the ecosystem and threatening all creatures,

nature may survive and its species may finally dominate the planet. Obviously, the poet shifts away from an anthropocentric position that regards man as the master of the universe to an ecocentric view that recognizes a nature-centered system of values, and extends the inherent worth to all living things regardless of their usefulness to humans (MacKinnon 336). This consideration of the other means that the poet acknowledges, values and respects the non-human other. Undoubtedly, this acknowledgement carries an ethical message.

It is worth noting that the ethical address in McKay's ecopoetry is not confined to what "grows naturally in the wild", to quote Méira Cook (xvi). McKay argues that the nature poet can expand his ethical concern to include other things like tools and technology for instance. In this sense, the poet "may be focused on the wilderness in a car, a coat hanger, or even language itself," he states showing that the landscape of the nature poet stretches all the way from "front lawn to back country" (*Vis à Vis* 26). So, in McKay's body of ecopoetry, we find beautiful odes to cars, musical instruments, baseball gloves, knives, forks and spoons. In such poems, he "focuses attention on various apparatus", writes Sue Sinclair, "by coming to them from unusual directions" (105). In 'Ode to My Car', for instance, the car is no longer that vehicle which merely takes us from one place to another. Unexpectedly, the poet speaks of something totally different attracting our attention to

the humming bird who hums in the accelerator, in the cylinders  
the six brave heart attacks are singing and the clutch  
performs the sigh with which the lovers shift into  
more comfortable  
positions:  
there. (*Camber* 147)

Expressively, the poet depicts the parts of the car as presenting a wonderful symphony of interaction. We are told that there is a bird whining in 'the accelerator' while the components of 'the cylinders' are

happily 'singing'. On the other hand, 'the clutch' sighs giving a sort of relief to the two lovers who are making love in the car. In this sense, the car turns into something unusual. The poem takes us out of habitual perception and makes us pay attention to what we might otherwise fail to notice.

Another poem is 'Setting the Table' in which McKay cleverly decorates his lines with highly expressive metaphors. The poem, with its three sections of 'Knife', 'Fork', and 'Spoon' reflects McKay's broadening understanding of the quality of wilderness, which according to him, can be found in all things. Here, McKay pivots into the concealed wilderness beneath the familiar. For example, in the section titled 'Fork', the speaker shows that the fork is blessed by both 'a touch of kestrel' and a little 'of Chopin'. Metaphorically, the fork does many things. It 'punctuates a preposition'. In addition, it

...is the devil's favourite  
instrument, the fourfold  
family of prongs: Hard place,  
Rock, Something You Should Know,  
and For Your Own Good. At rest,  
face up, it says,  
*please*, its tines  
pathetic as an old man's fingers on a bed.  
Face down it says  
*anything that moves. (Field Marks 40)*

It seems that the fork is polite; 'face up,' it always says 'please its tines / pathetic as an old man's fingers on a bed'. 'However, 'face down,' the fork is a killer, destroying 'anything that moves'. Thus, this section ends with a note of surprise. The homely intensification that followed 'face up, it says' is suddenly and surprisingly condensed after 'Face down it says' into an unexpected challenge of 'anything that moves'--after which nothing moves. Méira Cook argues in the introduction to *Field*

*Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay* that the wilderness the poet discovers in these tools "bespeak a lyrical encounter with otherness, with what is non-human or alien as well as the resulting disproportion, incongruity, and incomprehensibility of these encounters" (xvii). While such confrontations may be disordered or even chaotic, they are always marked with humility and respect. Again, McKay maintains that what we encounter here is "the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy – its rawness, - its *duende*, its alien being" (*Vis à Vis* 21).

The ethical aspect features heavily in McKay's ecopoetry which outstandingly reveals a consideration of the other, a shift away from anthropocentrism, a balance between the human and the non-human, and a promotion of sustainability of our shared environment. Standing for all these views in addition to its adoption of the principle of responsibility in our relationship with the non-human nature, McKay's ecopoetry can said to have an ethical orientation.

In "Why Ecopoetics?," a critical article published in the journal *Ecopoetics*, the poet and critic Jonathan Skinner argues that "any writer who wants to engage poetry with more-than-human life, has no choice but to resist simply, and instrumentally, stepping over language (105). McKay, one argues, has brilliantly achieved this far-reaching goal. Not only has he been capable of 'stepping over language' pointing to an actual physical world, but he has also been able to 'engage' the poems he writes with 'more-than-human life', calling for an ethical relationship that connects both the human and the non- human.

To conclude, McKay's work reveals a profound respect for the otherness of nature. McKay shares Galway Kinnell's "deepest desire" that we--humans--become "one with all creation" (259), agrees with Pattiann Rogers that "Earth and human together / form a unique being" (54), and has the sense of "profound unity" which David Abrams finds in "the very depths of the experienced world itself, in the unfolding web of

interdependent relations that ceaselessly draws the apparently disparate presences of the sensuous cosmos, ourselves included, into subtle communion with one another" (163). Indeed, McKay's ecopoetry outstandingly provides us with

a searching, morally responsible understanding of the role of nature poet in this age, a thoughtful vision of how we might ethically position ourselves vis à vis the wilderness that surrounds us that is deeply rooted in an ongoing sense of reverence and integrity, brimming with beauty and hope. (Wheaton)

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