

Introduction: Our Home and Linguistic Land: Ecocriticism and Contemporary Canadian Poetry

by Deborah C. Bowen

"Every language and its literature form an intellectual bioregion, an ecosystem of ideas and perceptions, a watershed of thought."

(Robert Bringhurst)

Can recent Canadian poetry be in any useful sense described as ‘nature poetry’? How might we use this term in contemporary contexts, considering not only capital-N Nature in the wild but also urban nature, nature damaged by human intervention, and the contested term ‘nature’ itself? At the May 2004 ACCUTE conference in Winnipeg I organized two sessions on this topic. There was sufficient interest in the papers and sufficient congruity between their concerns that it seemed appropriate to consider making them more generally and permanently available. I approached David Bentley to see if he might be interested in considering them for a Special Issue of *Canadian Poetry*. And this volume is the result.

I

Questions of Nature are of course coterminous in the discourses of western society with questions of Culture, and there is a host of Romantic and expressive precursors to contemporary ecocritical concerns. The word ‘nature’ itself has a complex and wide-ranging etymological pedigree. In *Studies in Words*, a wittily scholarly book from the Britain of the mid-sixties, C.S. Lewis had a whole learned chapter on the history of the word ‘nature,’ tracing its web of meanings—everything from ‘quality’ and ‘kind,’ to ‘the real character of a thing’ and ‘what is typical,’ to ‘fittingness’ and ‘appropriateness,’ to ‘all that is not man-made,’ and even to ‘what is not touched by divine grace.’ Within this fabric of significations, ‘humana natura’

comes to mean "the character common to all men [sic]" (25), and what is 'natural' comes to indicate "the raw (or unspoiled)" as contrasted with "the improved (or sophisticated)" (62). Thus in the discourses [Page 5] of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry, 'Nature' meant country as opposed to town, though it might also include rustic (human) life. This binary was not untroubled, but any significant public consciousness of the ethics and politics of human intervention was a long time coming.

In Lewis's mid-twentieth-century commentary, he observes wryly, "That the landscape in most civilised countries is through and through modified by human skill and toil, or that the effect of most 'townscapes' is enormously indebted to atmospheric conditions, is overlooked" (73). There is already here, then, an awareness of human complicity in land development, if not in land depletion, and of human dependence on natural resources; by the end of the twentieth century the environment had perforce become a major political concern. Lynton Keith Caldwell, discussing environmental policy in 1996, suggested that, "[m]odest as its results so far have been, the growth of the felt need for a planetary environmental policy that does not conceive earth's resources to be 'created for man's exclusive benefit' amounts, as a leading historian of international environmental regulation puts it, almost to 'a second Copernican revolution'" (Caldwell 3). In this revolutionary reading, place becomes part of "a politics of resistance, [seeking] to reinscribe a place-based territorial identity in opposition to the spatial colonizations of capitalist modernity" (Oakes 509). Places themselves then come to be reconfigured, seen as "not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks of social relations" (Massey 121). In literary terms, this reconfiguration manifests itself in ecocriticism, "the omnibus term by which the new polyform literature and environmental studies movement has come to be labeled, especially in the United States" (Buell 3).

But what are the particularities of the Canadian scene? In his chapter on "Nature-writing" in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* (2004), Christopher Irmscher laments that:

In spite of their differences, critical models of Canadian identity—from Northrop Frye's 'garrison mentality' to Margaret Atwood's 'survival' to Robert Kroetsch's 'disunity as unity' to Frank Davey's definition of Canada as a 'site of social contestation'—have remained stubbornly anthropocentric rather than ecocentric, focused not on the environment, that is, but on its human inhabitants. (95)

He argues that "[t]his is a striking limitation, given the rather marginal presence of humans" in a land where "[o]nly 10 percent of the present Canadian territory is permanently settled" (95-6). But in the face of environmental [Page 6] dis-ease, a wider ecological interest is finally also taking hold in contemporary Canadian culture. "Ironically," writes Stan Dragland, "non-Native peoples are coming around to the view of those suppressed First Nations, that the earth and its creatures are family, that the earth is our only home and its resources are exhaustible" ("Be-wildering" 881). It is perhaps significant that in his lament over anthropocentric Canadian critical models, Irmscher does not talk about poetry. Dragland points out that, in fact, "[f]or a number of contemporary Canadian poets, wilderness is anything but wasteland in need of stamping with the human imprint"; instead, they are trying to recover traditions of thinking "that do not set culture and nature, mind and body, thought and emotion, at odds" (881-82). And Kevin McNeilly argues that there emerged in a number of poets in the last decade of the twentieth century an "anti-colonial poetics challenging the egocentricity of the lyric voice" which has been described not only as "one of the most significant movements to appear in recent Canadian poetry" but also, more broadly, as "one of the most rigorous and provocative engagements with the state of poetry in English" (McNeilly online). McNeilly and Dragland are referring specifically to a community of Canadian poets at whose core are Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky—writers "linked by their search for responsible ways of being in the world," which lead them into an ethically-charged ecopoetics.

Criticism too has engaged actively with the new poetics of the environment. For instance, in the movement against modernity's conceptualization of nature as "alien, insensible, despiritualized: fodder for subjugation and commodification," D.M.R. Bentley conceives of Canadian critical participation as "an ecological poetics." This poetics

elaborates on two key ecological assumptions—the assumption that man and nature are a 'community of interdependent parts'¹ and the assumption that 'diversity' in the human and natural world must be safeguarded and fostered—to generate a method of reading which diminishes the gaps among people, their world, and their feelings while also emphasizing the uniqueness of all things, be they people or plants or poems, in face of the forces that would grind them down into a denatured uniformity. (*Gay*]Grey Moose 274)

A key concern of the papers in the present volume is this interdependence of city and country, Nature and Culture, even or perhaps especially in their least aesthetically or geosocially pleasing aspects. In this, they are in tune with Lawrence Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), where he declares that one of his own book's main purposes is "to put 'green' and 'brown' landscapes, the landscapes of exurbia and industrialization, in [Page 7] conversation with one another" (7). He argues that the "environmental" must include both the "natural" and the "human-built," since "human transformations of physical nature have made the two realms increasingly indistinguishable.... Indeed, the nature-culture distinction itself is an anthropogenic product" (3).

Later in the same book, Buell writes, "Among all possible acts of imaginative environmental restoration, few are so potentially important as retrieval of loved places that have been neglected, abused, feared, or despised" (78). My own interest in ecopoetry and ecocriticism stems in part from such love of the neglected. It has been sparked in Canada most recently by the natural history of John Terpstra, and by the wilderness-outside-language of Don McKay. Each of these poets has produced a kind of lyric criticism alongside his own poetry; each is published by Gaspereau Press, whose beautifully crafted books themselves embody all that is aesthetically best about the ecological turn. Terpstra's love-story for the damaged ecosystems of Hamilton harbour is called *Falling Into Place* (2002). Here he writes about "a piece of geography whose brokenness mirrors my own," and whose wounds are his wounds too: "*we're made of this stuff, this earth, this shale, this mud and suffering clay.*" Terpstra's focus is on both the land as body and the body as land: not merely a shameless anthropomorphism, but also a startling geomorphism. McKay is more conscious of his difference from the natural world, its intrinsic otherness. In *Vis à Vis* (2001) he suggests that "wilderness" is a moral category that judges human response to itself. Wilderness is to be found not only in what is 'obviously' natural, but also hidden in tools, in decay, in every interruption of human intention—and particularly in metaphor, "the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of representing the world" (85). Both Terpstra's confession of sameness and McKay's awareness of difference, the admission of shared wounds and the recognition of different languages, speak to the inevitable connections between the notions of home, land, and language. The contributors in this volume return constantly to these themes.

II

The collection opens with a paper that addresses the issue of

"imaginative environmental restoration" head-on. This paper looks at the *Civil Elegies* (1968-72) of Dennis Lee, until very recently the Poet Laureate of urban [Page 8] Toronto. Anticipating the need to comment on his reading of Lee as a "nature poet," Nicholas Bradley explains:

it is precisely because of the apparent incongruity between setting and theme that I want to discuss *Civil Elegies* in ecocritical terms. Written by a resolutely urban poet and located in a city seemingly divorced from nature, Lee's poem nonetheless provides an extraordinary representation of the city as part of the natural world and demonstrates a profound concern for the environmental health of both the city and the wilderness beyond it. As a result, *Civil Elegies* necessitates a reconsideration of the scope and character of Canadian nature poetry. The poem demands that urban spaces and damaged ecosystems be included in any study of representations of nature in Canadian writing.

The *Elegies* lament both the Americanization and the environmental degradation of Canada, in face of an unthinking citizenry: "the country is both culturally and environmentally unwell," says Bradley—"the urban landscape mirrors the country's psyche." But he goes on to argue that Lee's poem also holds out hope for "reinhabitation," to use Buell's term, because "*Civil Elegies* enacts the speaker's efforts to love and inhabit...the place in which he resides." Bradley writes, "I want to suggest that it is in its investigation of the meaning—and the possibility—of *home* that the poem's ecological vision lies." In the second half of his paper, Bradley argues that Lee's attention to the meaning of 'home' clearly anticipates the concerns of other Canadian poets who have written about the natural world. For instance, Bradley sees in Don McKay and Jan Zwicky as well as in Lee that "paying close attention to the non-human properties of a particular place...is a necessity for making a home in that place." "To be at home in the world" means responding to the non-human aspects of it "without assuming human superiority," and for these poets, suggests Bradley, "such an approach to nature tends toward a form of spiritual vision." This note will be sounded in other papers too.

The notion of home is also one of Adam Dickinson's central concerns, considering particularly the metaphorical implications of this "most resonant of material environments." How might home constitute a formal relationship of interconnectedness and difference, a resting place hinged between different contexts of meaning, a materiality where objects are not simply objects? Warning against any naïve assumption of realist categories in ecocritical work, Dickinson

proposes instead a model of metaphor which recognizes "the insufficiency of language to present matter fully." "The burgeoning field of ecocriticism," he writes, "often privileges representations that offer direct reference to environmental crisis, or, more generally, [Page 9] writing with a readily identifiable activist dimension." He wants to show that this kind of emphasis on a realist aesthetic "threatens to objectify a properly referential natural world," because it "assumes the systematic logic of literal representation." Instead he places the whole notion of representation under erasure and explores, with McKay and Zwicky, the paradoxical power of metaphor. Dickinson advocates metaphorical thinking, "the lyrical approaches to the natural world that provide an alternative way of thinking ethics" by recognizing metaphor as a hinge between language and non-language: "[m]etaphor undermines realist interests in the language of material distinction." Dickinson goes on to argue that "[i]t is metaphoricity, as a relational potential, that allows us to think of an environmental ethic at work in lyric apprehensions of materiality in the poetry of Zwicky and McKay," since their notion of ethical attention means "approach [ing] the world of matter in materiality's own resonant terms" and not reducing it to realist reference. What Dickinson thus calls 'lyric ethics' "subverts a view of matter as an objective resource and proposes a view of materiality based on articulation and interconnectedness." This 'lyric ethics' is "a form of listening...that might serve to hear the imperative of the other, human and nonhuman."

In her paper, Marilyn Rose reads Lorna Crozier's poetry through Zwicky's notion that lyric can embody a response to the universe characterized by "attentiveness to that which is outside ourselves." A recognition of the interdependence of human and 'natural' worlds leads not to an attempt to 'own' nature so much as to affirm connectivity in an ecosystem. Moreover, Rose sees the connections of body and spirit in Crozier's poetry as centrally important. Rather than accepting Crozier as merely popularist and "saucy," Rose argues that she is primarily a mythologically revisionist poet who is particularly interested in expressing the dynamic relationship between nature and human through a reappropriation of the genre of lyric for more than its traditionally subjective purposes. Recognizing the centrality of light as sentient First Principle in Crozier's cosmology, Rose makes the link to Zwicky's comment that "[i]n lyric's idea of the world, language would be light." In fact, Rose argues that "it is quite impossible to separate the natural world and human consciousness in Crozier's nature poetry," and concludes that Crozier's "mindfulness, her courtesy, her egalitarian acknowledgement of the equal status of other parts of the natural world to which we belong, her capacity for listening and for resonance in reaction to other forms of life" mark her as "a lyric poet

Alanna Bondar has a slightly different take on the notion of poetic attention because she comes to the poetry out of her primary commitment to ecofeminism. In particular, here she is interested in the way in which Don McKay "resists following the conventional American ecological writers' tendency toward defining nature as feminine in a masculine-encoded system." Instead, his "exploration of 'poetic attention' fits into the ecocritical category of 'geopsyche'," as he tries "respectfully to reflect a human-nature paradigm without reducing it to literary tropes, idealized pastorals, or self-defining anthropomorphism." Bondar favours what Patrick Murphy has called "relational inhabitation," an "interanimation" that shows "the ways in which humans and other entities develop, change and learn through mutually influencing each other day to day." She recognizes McKay's foregrounding of "his own marked physical presence in biotic community" as a sign of the poet "able and willing to reinvent the Cartesian man, not praised solely for thinking, but for being responsible for earth-care." In McKay's poetry the primal man gets dirty; this is centrally important because in ecofeminist theory "the body is microcosm to the greater macrocosm of the fragile planet Earth." Thus McKay gives a "particularly magnanimous voice to the inarticulate human-wilderness connection," and "[b]y personifying wood and reversing it to blend human form with the tree, McKay begins to undo ideological constructions that falsely divide the mind from the body and spirit."

Jenny Kerber's paper on Tim Lilburn takes up these concerns with ideology and spirituality as well as with home. She recognizes "the task of becoming 'at home' in a particular social and ecological place" as one that dominates Lilburn's work, and her focus is Lilburn's use of the vocabulary of desire to explore this task. She asks, "How might a preoccupation with desire become a gateway to exploring the environmental politics of nature?" Her answer is that Lilburn, a Jesuit by training, "constructs the relationship between desire and the natural world through the deployment of two theological concepts": panentheism—the mutual indwelling of supernatural and material, and apophaticism—the articulation of a phenomenon through negation. Kerber argues that Lilburn's use of these concepts "affirms, but also complicates, an 'environmental' reading of his work." Panentheism affirms that "one encounters the infinite not by ascetically denying materiality, but rather by succumbing to the pull of particular earthly places and things"; at the same time, "seeing" the world clearly is "a form of environmental practice," a non-appropriative desire understood as "environmental courtesy." Apophaticism provides a

means for Lilburn to "wrestle with limits" as it "uses language to address...what is [Page 11] beyond the reach of language." However, because it privileges a form of personal revelatory knowledge over other kinds of possible ecocritical knowledge, apophaticism also runs the risk of essentializing Nature's 'voice' into something beyond political, discursive debate. In the end, Kerber sees Lilburn's "metaphoric verbosity" as his most successful tool for "cultivat[ing] a desire for nature as a kind of engaged environmental practice" at the same time as encouraging "discussions about what constitutes 'nature' itself."

In his paper on the poetry of Jeff Derksen and Peter Culley, two poets from Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing, Jason Wiens has a consistently ideological focus. He proposes that, in their view of Vancouver's lower mainland, these poets de-naturalize the landscape of nature: when they look at the landscape, "these poets...see ideology and history." Their work, argues Wiens, "engages with and attempts to rearticulate the dominant or prevailing ideology of nature and landscape in their historical moment," which is to say, in the ideology of development. As Kerber pointed out the dangers of formulating a 'Nature' beyond discursivity, so, here, Derksen's "fundamental target...is the idea that 'nature' somehow lies outside of ideology." Thus in his poetry there is a "collision of the language of modernist poetics and the discourses of resource extraction"; nowadays "the landscape and its 'beauty' have been always already mediated by the discourses of commercial development." Similarly, in Peter Culley's writing about Nanaimo, "the jarring collision of various registers mirrors the impact on the landscape of industrial development, resource extraction and urban sprawl." And, like Derksen, Culley writes ironic "urban pastoral" in which "a bathetic collision of the urban and the pastoral" stands alongside "a self-conscious awareness of the mediating role of language." Wiens suggests that, in their investigation of the "grammars of ideology," these poets take a step towards transforming that ideology.

By a pleasant serendipity, one of the plenary addresses at the 2004 ACCUTE conference in Winnipeg was given by W.H. New, speaking about Rocky Mountain poetry and "the resonance of the Great Divide." Given the congruence of concerns here, New has graciously agreed to our including a somewhat shortened version of his address for this issue of *Canadian Poetry*. For substantive reasons, the paper both opens and closes in personal memoir. In between:

it reflects on mountain realities and the literary metaphors to which the realities give rise. It considers ways in which mountain images variously signify order, division,

ownership, and the existence of an alternative, and ways in [Page 12] which they constitute the site of a different kind of working environment, an ecology of exchange and a challenge to accept a social responsibility.

The mountain metaphor, New proposes, conventionally "suggests alternatives, it promises possibilities, it charts a division, it invites a claim." But the Great Divide may also mark, in its fragile ecology of lake and lichen at the summit, "a persistence of process,...a system in place that opens to alternative visions of custom and nature." New looks at the curious persistence of the notion that "all rivers run south" as an example of "political presumptions involving the precedence of self and the irrelevance of other." His "reflections on the cultural function of metaphor" lead to a consideration of various poetry and prose by Sid Marty, Peter Christensen, and Jon Whyte, "each of whom has made a career, both literary and vocational, in the Rocky Mountains." New demonstrates how often the mountains are "metaphors for life, and even those people who plan their lives ahead of time are going to be faced with real fissures they have not anticipated." Particularly fascinating is Whyte's depiction of the Great Divide as process, "a manifestation of time"; his ebullient linguistic play demonstrates how "systems of inheritance and overlap work everywhere." Even in the self. Asking, "When we contemplate mountains, where is it that we stand?" New illustrates through a Maori *mihi*, or traditional greeting, that "home place" is an archaeology of contexts showing how "each of us is who we are because of the contexts through which we acquire identity."

Finally New suggests that the mountaintop view is important less for itself than for "the ecosystem that functions there, the system of interdependence and renewal that starts rivers off in glaciers and small tarns, then sends them in all directions to the oceans—rivers that keep each one of us alive, together." This notion asks to be set alongside Buell's comment that "[e]verywhere is either upstream or downstream (or both) from somewhere else. From a watershed perspective it is impossible to forget that country is destined to flow into city by gravitational laws more inexorable than the historic urbanization process itself; city is destined to remain integral with the half-forgotten hinterland it thinks it has displaced" (Buell 264). Thus, watershed can function as a potent environmental(ist) metaphor for the tales we tell about our lives and our surroundings. Julian Steward writes provocatively, "No more exempt from this dialectic [between people and surroundings] than, say, agricultural tools or architectural structures are imaginative constructs—the stories, the myths, the poems— whereby men and women make themselves at home in their

surroundings." In the present watershed of environmental reimagining, it is our hope that the publication of this Special Issue will contribute to a recognition of the [Page 13] hinterland wilderness, together with the city, as the home we must inhabit with care.

Notes

1. See Aldo Leopold, 203. [\[back\]](#)

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[Page 14]
