

Lyric Ethics: Ecocriticism, Material Metaphoricity, and the Poetics of Don McKay and Jan Zwicky

by Adam Dickinson

Sunlight doesn't know what it does
And, as such, doesn't goof up, and is
ordinary and good.

—Eirin Moure, *Sheep's Virgil by a
Feruent Person*

"In the beginning is the relation."

—Martin Burber, *I and Thou*.

In a discussion about environmental damage to the oceans recorded by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in May 2004, the natural historian and marine artist Richard Ellis commented that he preferred to express his respect for fish by painting their portraits rather than catching them and mounting them on walls. Ellis is perhaps best known for his 1976 work *The Book of Sharks* (republished and reprinted numerous times), which is filled with his own realist depictions of these marine predators. In a prefatory section to the book entitled "Confessions of a Shark Painter," Ellis discusses his developing interest in sharks as being primarily representational; shape, form, and the complexity of silhouettes were his original fascinations (16, 17). He admits that his aim as a painter is to show sharks in their "*modus vivendi*," in their real, deep sea settings devoid of background details that would suggest any complicity with popular sensational, fictional representations of the creatures (19). The reality of a featureless background, however, meant that Ellis constantly encountered the problem of scale in depicting such a wide variety of sharks. He tried everything, he writes, "but the only object that everyone knows the size of is a human being." Coral, boats, other fishes—all these are variables, and there is no way of guaranteeing that the viewer will know their size" (19). His solution was occasionally to

insert an imagined diver to contrast with the size of the shark. This solution, however, is somewhat at odds with Ellis's stated intention to avoid emphasizing popular fears of sharks—his divers often look vulnerable and frightened in the face of a menacing giant. These [Page 34] imagined divers serve to infuse drama into the scene, to evoke a potentially lyrical back story (what is the diver doing there anyway?) that both is and is not part of the reality of the shark. That is to say, the diver and shark may well encounter each other in such a way, but this is by no means the usual, pelagic reality of a shark's environment. In order to represent the realistic dimension of size, Ellis is forced to court imagined and mythic associations.

Ellis's dilemma is instructive for two reasons. First, it reinforces the difficulty of making the environment fully present in a realist depiction. It is not enough simply to present the image of the shark in its natural setting; the imagined diver, as a kind of figural intervention, conveys the sense of scale that is lost in the reality of the featureless background. Second, because, as he states in his interview, Ellis considers his portraits to be a form of respect, his paintings are an example of an artistic response to the environment self-consciously seen as an ethical relation. However, given that certain imaginative adjustments are required to render reality in the painting, to what degree does the faithfulness of literal representation reflect an ethical response to the other reality of the nonhuman? To what degree are realism, reference, and assumptions about the nature of materiality (or the materiality of nature) dependent on imaginative, lyrical, metaphorical interventions?

The burgeoning field of ecocriticism often privileges representations that offer direct reference to environmental crisis, or, more generally, writing with a readily identifiable activist dimension. That is to say, poets who foreground explicit environmental concerns, such as A.R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, W.S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder, are frequently (and quite appropriately) the objects of ecocritical inquiries. This referential attention to the pressing reality of the environmental crisis is even written into definitions of ecocriticism (which is to be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis," according to Lawrence Buell) and "ecopoetry" or the "ecological poem" (which presuppose activist attention to the looming fragility of the environment, according to Leonard Scigaj and David W. Gilcrest).¹ More oblique approaches to environmental issues in works that attempt to call language and reference into question are often charged (especially by Scigaj) with being overly-theoretical or anthropocentrically self-indulgent. Among prominent ecocritics, particularly Lawrence Buell, the emphasis on a

realist aesthetic is, I argue, a view of poetry that is opposed to interests in metaphor as expressed in the works of Canadian poets Jan Zwicky and Don McKay. Indeed, it is also a view that threatens to marginalize lyrical approaches to the natural world that provide [Page 35] an alternative way of thinking ethics, a way that points to a potential political activism, but not in the terms of any systematic methodology.

I will begin by describing what I think are the problems with the ecocritical investment in realism. I will go on to suggest that the terms of engagement with the world that ecocriticism calls for, be it artistic or pragmatic, are far more ethically rendered in a lyrical, or more specifically, metaphorical approach to matter. My understanding of lyric is informed by Jan Zwicky's writings in *Lyric Philosophy*, but I use the term in a more specific way. When I talk about "lyric," I do not mean, as Zwicky understands it, the pure desire for wordlessness, rather I mean lyric art, and specifically metaphoricity, which reveals itself as an articulation (that is, a breaking and a joining—a hinge) between presence and absence, or language and non-language, or logic and illogic.² It is metaphoricity that is the operative, relational dynamic within figurative language. It 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. In the last part of my discussion I will engage the poetry of both writers in order to demonstrate how their lyrical treatments of materiality put forward a metaphorical or "lyric ethics" through their apprehension of what I call "material metaphoricity." Ecocritical readings have been criticized for offering impressionistic takes on the symbolism of nature. I am interested in McKay's and Zwicky's poems not for their linguistic pictures, but for the potential relations with the world and with language that they enact in their formal metaphoric properties. I see their poems as "exemplary" in the way that Giorgio Agamben theorizes the example: an example is always beside itself; an individual called to exemplify an entire class is always insufficient, its reality is adjacent to its exemplarity (9-10). Similarly, metaphors, I argue, are examples; in proposing literal nonsense they stand beside logic. By filling in gaps in language metaphors are expressions of forms of thought that occur beside the systems of linguistic, or language-dependent, thinking. Lyric ethics, emerging as it does from a metaphorical poetic, proposes a materiality that is beside itself, that emphasizes a relational ethic of pure potential. I use the term material metaphoricity to describe this relational apprehension of matter.

There are two main problems with the turn to realism in ecocriticism. First, as an aesthetic approach to nature realism threatens to objectify a properly referential natural world. This problem emerges

in part from the unquestioned association between realism and materialism. Despite his claims to the opposite, the celebration of classical realism in Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* reinforces the link between language [Page 36] and world, between reference and the material object, between the environmental crisis and a properly literal approach. I focus on Buell here because he is the most outspoken proponent of realism in environmental writing; however, as I demonstrate below, I think the ecocritical work of others such as Leonard Scigaj and David W. Gilcrest also implicitly endorses the realist imperative to properly, and hence in a systematically linguistic way, render the referential world. The second problem with the turn to realism in ecocriticism, which I will take up momentarily, is that what ecocritics like Buell claim on behalf of realism, through their various qualifications of the term, is actually better understood in the context of metaphor and metaphorical thinking. What is asked of realism, I contend, is less problematically asked of metaphorical thinking.

A significant problem with realism in ecocriticism is that it presumes an unquestioned association with materialism. The materiality of the referential world is literally assumed in the reality of the "ecopoem" (indeed, it is asserted as the proper focus of our attention, according to ecocritics). Literary theory, as Buell and others imply, has lost the proper object of its criticism. According to Buell, if we attend to what theory suppresses—the setting, the environmental circumstances of the poem—then we are, consequently, attending to the "factual reality" of nature (86). Daniel Tiffany writes in *Toy Medium* about the problems with historical materialist approaches to literature that assume an equation between materialism and realism. He notes that contemporary materialism does not ask the question of what constitutes material substance. Indeed, Tiffany goes on to argue that scientific materialism has always depended on images and tropes to depict the unobservable "reality" of matter. He suggests that lyric poetry provides an alternate engagement with materiality precisely because of its concern with images and allegories.³

What is important about this for my purposes is that matter cannot be easily reconciled with a realist aesthetic concerned with its fealty to rendering the world in language. Materialism, with its unquestioned assumptions about substantiality, is a species of linguistic or language-dependent thinking; it assumes the systematic logic of literal representation. Linguistic thinking, or language-dependent thought, presupposes divisions between things as a consequence of syntax and symbolism—as a consequence, we might say, of being systematically meaningful. Materialism is a form of linguistic thinking because it

imposes a systematic approach to objects in the world that is dependent on discrete distinctions within a context of assumed substantiality. The reality of matter is a linguistic phenomenon inasmuch as it is hypostasized in the realist text. Even the very [Page 37] attempt to separate matter from language through recourse to realism, through the attempt to distinguish between the mediated world of relativism and the referential world of things, becomes a way of thinking the identity of matter linguistically. The claim that the realist text is able to point outside of language and that its primary concern is this outside assumes and reinforces the material link between reference and object within language itself—it makes of non-language, or the extra-linguistic, a knowable and presentable object in literal language. Lyrical approaches to materiality, however, in their very dependence on figures and metaphoricity, emphasize the insufficiency of language to present matter fully, or to discretely distinguish a Wittgensteinian "language game" (a specific context of linguistic interaction) that escapes language. Metaphor does not make the thing literally present, but it gives us a way to stand in relation to a substantiality that is not measurably accessible.

While acknowledging the limitations of classical realism, Lawrence Buell chooses to focus on and celebrate realism precisely because it "points up what contemporary representation theory most vigorously suppresses" (92). What is suppressed, he tells, is the empirical environment in favour of discursivity, in favour of the mediation of linguistic thinking. I think Buell is right to be concerned with this. However, I would suggest that the realism he explores endorses rather than undermines linguistic thinking; moreover, it endorses a view of materiality dependent on the systems of literal language. The faithfulness to the object that Buell lauds in the writings of John Ruskin and John Burroughs, for example, depends on an analytic of material proof. Indeed, the "rigor of realist aesthetics" championed by Ruskin emphasizes a "true" approach to the natural world that is capable of analytic distinctions among observable phenomena (91). Moreover, Burroughs' interest in authentic representations of the natural world becomes at times, by Buell's own admission, "ludicrously literal-minded" (89). In short, the realism of Ruskin and Burroughs offers itself as an argument, as a systematically accurate representation of the world in language. Inasmuch as this kind of realism looks to the world, it does so only to confirm the analytical accuracy of its linguistic representations. I know that this is not entirely the brand of realism that Buell has in mind, but to suggest that it is a test case for subverting the linguistic interests of literary theory I think is clearly false.

Realism that assumes the logic of faithful representation runs the risk of objectifying matter. We can see the dangers of this in the insistence among some ecocritics of a "proper" subject matter for environmental literature. Leonard Scigaj, for example, in his book *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, [Page 38] sees the American lyric poets Jorie Graham and Robert Hass as fleeing from the natural world whenever they raise questions about the authority or certainty of perception and reference. He goes so far as to suggest that "[a] steady reading diet of such poetry will massage our youth into a perilous self-indulgence that will also render them oblivious to the needs of nature" (58). Scigaj's desire to see literature as a pragmatic engagement with nature has led to his view that "ecopoetry" should make, as a kind of realist imperative, the patterns and processes of nature available in the text. Similarly, David W. Gilcrest, in his book *Greening the Lyre*, insists that "No other attribute better distinguishes ecological poetry than its presumption of environmental fragility and looming disintegration" (21). These perspectives are important; however, to suggest that attention to the environmental crisis must be the focused subject matter of an ecologically concerned poem threatens to reduce this poetry to an exercise dependent on the systems of literal linguistic thought. If a properly environmental poem is always a poem that literally addresses a polluted stream, or other readily identifiable environmental crises, for example, then I would suggest that this presupposes a systematic understanding of responsible reference. In fact, this view of poetry seems bound up in precisely the kind of linguistic thinking it proposes to criticize. As Dana Phillips reminds us, "Realism is idiomatic." It works only when interlocutors share similar assumptions about what is perfectly ordinary and its proper description" (597). Realism in these terms involves us in a precise Wittgensteinian language game. In *Wisdom and Metaphor* Jan Zwicky demonstrates that language games function as the rules behind systems of reference. I want to suggest that it is because metaphor draws connections between contexts, between language games and their systems of understanding, that it subverts the totality of a realist perspective that argues for a proper linguistic representation of matter.

The debate among ecocritics between the ostensibly extra-textual interests of realism and the linguistically mediated concerns of literary theory is simply an extension of the philosophical debate between empiricists (or realists) and idealists (or relativists). In her discussion of the distinctions between empiricism and idealism, Jan Zwicky points out that empirical approaches to the world must dispense with the urge to prove the existence of that world in analytic arguments. She suggests that idealism (and by extension relativism, and social

construction-ism), with its belief in the mediation of the world by thinking, by discourse, is able to offer systematically convincing proof for the non-existence of a world not already shaped by our ideas of that world. Empiricism, on the other hand, can offer no analytic [Page 39] proof, but has much in the way of extra-logical sensorial apprehensions of the world outside of language. The fact that empiricism cannot provide proof of this world in language is, as Zwicky puts it so memorably, "a problem with arguments, not a problem with the world" ("Once" 195). I would suggest that Buell's interest in classical realism and Scigaj's and Gilcrest's interest in the proper presentation of the reality of the environmental crisis reinforce the linguistic logic that each purports to criticize in literary theory; they reinforce the mediation of objects by the analytic of linguistic proof. In asking us to think of environmental representation as "akin to the novel of manners," Buell, despite his intentions and exhortations that we learn to read the environment in an informed way, risks promoting conformity to the codes and categories of the language-dependent thinking he is attempting to escape (107).

I do not want to cast realism in overly reductive terms. Buell rightfully notes that the reputation of realism has suffered at the hands of modernists and postmodernists. However, notwithstanding my claims that Buell's employment of realism reinforces the discursive thinking he professes to avoid, it is not clear to me why Buell would want to argue for realism in the first place. The approach to the world in literature that he claims he is after is more easily explained, I would argue, by invoking the relational dynamics of metaphoricity. He notes, for example, that his project of rendering the "object-world" in the text is "sometimes best achieved through what would seem to be outright fiction or distortion" (103). Here Buell is ultimately admitting the centrality of a figurative, imaginative relation (through "improper" distortion) to any potential rendering of the world. Moreover, he points out that literature should not take the systematic approach to the world that science takes; rather, it is the role of literature "to present theory as narrative or descriptive exposition rather than as argument. A certain lyricism is thus also encouraged..." (94). Indeed, his desire to see environmental writing as a relational structure poised between the inner and outer worlds, between, we might say, the claims of the empiricist and the idealist, between different language games of logic, all but raises the spectre of metaphoricity: "Representational projects that aspire to render the object-world need not be monologic, may indeed be founded on self-division about the possibilities of such a project, may even make these self-divisions explicit to the reader, and are as likely to dislocate the reader as to placate her" (99). What Buell is after is a discursive relation that gives shape in language to what is

not ultimately reducible to referentiality. His celebration of realism is not consistent with the work he asks of this term. He wants writing that utilizes its referential dimension while doing so in a [Page 40] way that acknowledges the incapacity of words to equal things, and that in turn acknowledges the irreducible world outside of language. This sounds less like the realism he celebrates and more like the relational dynamic of metaphoricity.

In light of the problems with realism and ecocriticism, how, then, does "lyric ethics" allow us to think differently about materiality? I turn to metaphor as a way of thinking about matter that is responsible to the complexity of a materiality that at the same time "is" and "is not," that is infused with the indefinite movement of difference. Etymologically, the word metaphor itself comes from Greek expressions of travel and transport: to carry over, to ferry across (Zwicky, *Lyric* R62). Any relationship that metaphor, conceived here as a structural potential, has with "reality" comes from the relational movement within metaphor's own ontological grounding. Paul Ricoeur concludes that "The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'" (7). It is this articulation, this ontological ambivalence, this relational movement *between* that I want to emphasize as metaphoricity, as the structural, ethical potential of metaphor.⁴ To consider matter in terms of this ontological ambivalence, this articulatory, relational dynamic is to attend to material metaphoricity; it is to apprehend materiality as a consequence of extra-logical, non-systematic connections between and beside the language games of reference where material presence is assumed.

Jan Zwicky's take on metaphor in her book *Wisdom and Metaphor* is important to me for two main reasons: first, she offers implicit support for my claims that metaphor undermines realist interests in the language of material distinction by reminding us that metaphor "is an explicit refusal of the idea that the distinctness of things is their most fundamental ontological characteristic" (L59). Their distinctness is only *one* of their characteristics, whereas interpenetration and connectedness are the others. Moreover, she argues that "Reductionism says connectedness is sameness..." (L105). In metaphor, I would argue, connectedness is difference, it posits the "is" and the "is not." Realism can be seen in these terms as a species of reductionism, as an attempt to see connectedness as sameness, the material world literally present in the text.

Second, and more significantly, Jan Zwicky's view of materiality, as explored in her concept of "*thisness*," is significant for my purposes because it is an example of material metaphoricity, of matter perceived

metaphorically (in terms of how we look at it and also how we think of its constitution). When we pay "ontological attention," as Zwicky calls it, we are responding to the particularity of things: this laundry basket, this birch [Page 41] tree, etc. (L52). Ontological attention does not view things as resources, but rather allows us to perceive *thisness*. In the terms that Zwicky describes, the structural character of the ontology of *thisness* resembles the structure of metaphor in that it asserts something is, and is not, something else. She notes succinctly that "*Thisness* is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it." (L55). By "resonant structure" Zwicky means that the world is a polydimensional form where integrated components may be sympathetically attuned—think of resonance in the musical sense of harmonics and overtones (I see the articulatory dynamic of metaphoricity as an example of resonance). She acknowledges that, while *thisness* may appear to be a relational, metaphorical structure, our phenomenal experience of it is focused; the uniqueness of things strikes us as utterly distinct. This may on the surface appear to re-inscribe the realist assumptions about material presence that I am critiquing in ecocriticism; it may appear to renew the claims of a discretely accessible thing. However, as Zwicky points out, we cannot give a linguistic account of our experience of *thisness* that is not clumsy and inadequate (L53). It is not simply accessible through referential language. Metaphor, however, points to *thisness* by seeing it in the larger resonant context of the world. Thus, in my understanding of material metaphoricity, metaphor points to a materiality that is resonantly structured in the terms of metaphoricity and it enacts metaphoricity as a means of being open to that resonance.

This is how I want to think of "lyric ethics." The distinctness of things has gravity only through a recognition of interconnectedness, of openness. Things cannot be captured in idiomatic realist language games. This notion of materiality is not unlike that expressed at the level of the subject in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, where I would argue that the openness of the self to the other is a relation of metaphoricity, it is articulation, a whole that is at once not a totality.⁵

The very materiality of the self involves the other. As Levinas reminds us, material existence is being encumbered with oneself (56). Thus, lyric ethics is an attention to the material metaphoricity of bodies or things. Judith Butler points out, in the context of reductive arguments that pit the body as discursive construction against the body as objective corporality, that "Although the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture" (257). So does the materiality of nature. Thus, if our attention is to be ethical, if it is to stand in relation without objectification, if it is to approach the world of matter in materiality's own resonant terms,

Jan Zwicky and Don McKay are part of a group of Canadian poets who are involved in an extended "conversation" about issues pertaining to ethics, the environment, and the intersection between poetry and philosophy. In books such as *Poetry and Knowing* and *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, Zwicky and McKay, along with other poets (especially Robert Bringham, Dennis Lee, and Tim Lilburn), have explored in essay form the scission, as Giorgio Agamben calls it, "between the poetic word and the word of thought" (*Stanzas* xvi). These concerns manifest themselves in the poetry of both writers as an interest in metaphor and in the materiality of the world. The meaningfulness of things is frequently explored in their works as a consequence of being at home, existing among the desire and humility we have for the physical world that crosses into and out of our understanding of domesticity. I want to look at the poetry of Jan Zwicky and Don McKay in order to demonstrate how their treatments of materiality are examples of lyric ethics.

Jan Zwicky's poem, "The Geology of Norway," is about the discovery of material metaphoricity through "lyric thinking." The poem takes place in time between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and his *Philosophical Investigations*, and begins by looking back to the *Tractatus* and its interest in defined parameters and orderly relationships. The entire text of the *Tractatus* is set up in numbered arguments extending from each of its seven central propositions. It is an integrated form, a virtual crystallography in its geometric design. As Zwicky notes in her preface to the poem (the preface accompanied the poem's first publication in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*), we pick up on the imagined voice of Ludwig Wittgenstein in Norway amidst a reassessment of his work in logic and amidst the early drafts of his later publications. This later work, as Zwicky acknowledges, is generally held by critics to be discontinuous with the *Tractatus*.

Bertrand Russell remarks in the Introduction to the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein "is concerned with the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language" (ix). This concern with logic is emphasized at the beginning of the poem where we are presented with the compression of the world into facts, into an objectified, totalized matter: "a geologic epoch / rendered to a slice of rock you hold between / your finger and your thumb. / That is a fact." Matter here is circumscribable, delineable, and logical. The poem proceeds in a way that is not simply critical of this earlier, logic-centred thinking; rather, the narrator enacts his own self-reflexive

"seeing-as," his own attempt at understanding by way of articulation between the different logical contexts of language games (in the following [Page 43]case, the world of facts and the world of light).⁶ "That's what I wanted," he decides among different ways to see facts, "words made of that: language / that could bend light." Moreover, it is not simply *what* things mean but *that* they mean and do so elusively that provokes such wonder in the speaker: "This is the mystery: meaning. / Not that these folds of rock exist / but that their beauty, here, / now, nails us to the sky." The "*thisness*" of things inspires an awareness of meaningful resonant relation.

This wonder, this "bewilderment / by beauty," that distracts the speaker from the logical work he had sought, that makes him stand beside his own system of thinking, becomes the central issue of the poem. The speaker recognizes the interruption of his materialist thinking: "I wanted to become rock myself. I thought / if I could find, and say, / the perfect word, I'd nail / mind to world, and find / release." However, what we encounter in the last part of the poem is the mystery of meaning "seen as" the mystery of material origin. The last three stanzas of the poem are taken up with a description of the geological origins of Norway, the plate tectonics that have shaped it over the ages.⁷ There was a time, the speaker notes, when "you could hike from Norway / down through Greenland to the peaks / of Appalachia." Things move, they are dynamic, their relationships are not discrete totalities. The speaker admits that he cannot reduce the materiality of the world systematically; rather at the end of the poem he is engaged in a lyrical relationship to the landscape, a metaphorical relationship with the end of the world, the stillness therein that cannot be the product of a linear time.

So I was wrong.
This doesn't mean
that meaning is a bluff.
History, that's what
confuses us. Time
is not linear, but it's real.
The rock beneath us drifts,
and will, until the slow cacophony of
magma
cools and locks the continents in place.
Then weather, light,
and gravity
will be the only things that move.

And will they understand?

Will they have a name for us?—Those
perfect changeless plains,
those deserts,
the beach that was this mountain, [Page
44]
and the tide that rolls for miles across
its vacant slope.

The end of things cannot be locked into the expectations of time the way the meaning of matter cannot be locked into language, into facts; yet it is the "*thisness*" of the mountain, its geology, that inspires this resonant thinking, this question which is itself a response to an implied address from the geography. This is an example of how coming to think lyrically, metaphorically, about matter allows one to stand in relation to difference. It is precisely this relationship with difference, with error, that is given an ethical inflection at the end of the poem: "So I was wrong," the speaker exclaims, "This doesn't mean / that meaning is a bluff. / ...the rock beneath us drifts." Meaning is not a fake and neither is it a precipice (depending on one's metaphorical take). It is the ecology of one's relationships with the world. This poem, hinged between the geometrics of the *Tractatus* and the wonder of the *Investigations*, is itself a relation of metaphoricity between the two. It enacts in its formal structure the metaphoricity of its lyric apprehension of materiality.

For Don McKay metaphor is inextricably bound up with ethically "facing" the natural world. McKay re-figures Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the alterity of the other by thinking of it as "wilderness." "Wilderness," he points out, is "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" ("Baler" 21). Metaphor, by employing language's totalizing capacity against itself, exposes the wilderness in meaning, in the systematic assumptions of linguistic knowing. McKay is keenly aware of the potential negative consequences of anthropomorphizing the natural world; however, he sees "thoughtfully enacted" metaphorical approaches to the nonhuman other as enacting the possibility of humility, of giving "a gift to the other from the dwelling you will never build there" (27). Thus, the nonhuman is approached through anthropomorphism as a kind of material metaphoricity, as a thing that is contingently cast in the structures of a logic that is always insufficient. Attending to the wilderness, to the material that escapes the mind's appropriations is to be engaged in an ethical domesticity inasmuch as the self is itself, is at home with itself, to the degree that it is open to the other, to wilderness: "We might try to sum up the paradox of home-making by saying that inner life *takes place*: it both *claims* place and acts to *become* a place among others. It

turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness" (22). The self is here metaphorically materialized and in so being it is articulated to its environment.

In McKay's poem "Three Eclogues" materiality is explored in light of this articulation as the "beside" of things. That is, in each poem there is a [Page 45] dominant depiction of materialist interest, a river sectioned by private property, a highway and railway with their commercial transport; however, the "*thisness*" of things emerges in the unobserved margins (in the ditches, between the rails) and stands in resonant relation with the world. Each section of the poem involves a kind of accidental encounter with the nonhuman world that emphasizes the distinctness of the materiality of the nonhuman as a consequence of its resonant involvement in the world of the speaker, which is a world that is more than the speaker, a world not contained in a single language game.

The first section muses upon the composition of a "book of beasts," a "bestiary of extinctions," in which "a place for ownership made absolute" is required and contrasted, in its "simple grid," with the looping limbs and reaching hands of the plant life on the river bank. This is the book that records our translations of the world, our employment of matter. Consequently, it raises the question of the role of linguistic thinking in determining material relations. How should the huge cedars, oaks, and pines, "(now beams and floors in Williamstown)," be represented, the speaker asks? "And let the fly leaf read / This Book Shall Be My Trees," McKay writes at the end of the first section. Here the current of textual production is reversed; language, as pulp and paper, moves back into wood. The book, its lyricism, is the materiality of trees. Matter is encountered as metaphoricity, as things that "are" themselves only inasmuch as they "are not" circumscribable as objects in the language of distinction. Things are meaningful through connections and resonances between different phenomenal contexts and their provisional, lyrical expression.

In the second section of "Three Eclogues," the speaker is on his way to the post office to do the very material, public work of lyric: send out poems and hope for publication. He walks to the post office along the highway where various examples of materiality hurtle past and lie strewn in the ditches. There are the trucks that represent one view of matter: "They've been everywhere / and boxed it." There is the Trans-Canada Highway itself as a "provider of dead meat." There are even the tourist signs advertising the scenery of the St. John River valley in a kind of systematic, postcard/ greeting-card manner: "The River Valley Trail, which calls Come Home / to tourists, leading the eye into the middle distance / where the hills fold into one another: Mom."

It is when the speaker encounters a raven, however, that we get an antidote to the closed view of materiality that has so far concerned this section of the poem. The raven is seen as "utter raucous introverted music"; to think of the raven is to go "tumbling out of / thought"; it is to go "where [Page 46] language goes to fray back into air." The lyrical drama established here involves the speaker imagining a conversation with the raven where language gets turned over, unearthed, emptied of any closed materialist pretensions. Indeed, the voices of both speaker and raven use air that is simply borrowed from the wind; thus, the matter of language is at once a lyrical "air" (of the atmosphere) and a provisional gift, a partial but intimate habitation. This is the lyric ethics of the poem's apprehension of matter: the metaphoricity of the speaker's relationship with the raven is an articulation among the two bodies and also with the larger, un-appropriable elemental.

The final section of "Three Eclogues" is a reminiscence in which the speaker recalls time spent in his youth walking the railway tracks. The materiality of the poem is formally resonant. The birds, the dog, the butterflies, the people, even the train, are all small atoms of concern; the yellow warbler with its "pointillist attention," Luke the dog with his mind on the train, the Monarch butterflies with their minds on that one valley in Mexico to which they migrate, the train with its commerce, its thundering interest in direction. The poem presents an epiphany by way of the speaker's boyhood reconciliation of the fact that the dog, after being hit by the train, returns again to chase it with unaffected zeal. The dog

Back from the vet, stitched,
still groggy from the drugs, he sensed the
old throb
troubling the air and struggled growling
to his feet
ready for round two. Talk about dumb. It
was funny
and appalling, and we knew, wincing at
each other,
that it wasn't just our true intrepid friend
we were appalled by. When the Monarchs
hatch
they'll feed and flit and pollinate their
hosts,
by accident, and after an infinitude of flits
wind up precisely in one Mexican valley.
Some thoughts

live in the mind as larvae, some as the
milk they feed on,
some as the wanderings which are the
way. Heal-all,
Yarrow. Everything the tracks
have had no use for's happening
between them.

The imperative of the butterflies to return to Mexico, the dog's interest in the train, and the recollections of the speaker are all forms of desire for movement, for travel, be it the genetic travel of reproduction, the physical travel of play, or the nostalgic travel of memory. However, they are most of all approaches to matter whose very materiality is movement, that is to say elusive as an object in thought. The dog is a cautionary example of a [Page 47] world harrowingly resonant through the *thisness* of the thing. It is an example, perhaps, of resonance in a feedback loop. The dog's response to the imperative of the train has no systematic explanation: it is the epitome of the focused experience of the object. The necessary explanations of such behaviour are systems that live in the mind, teleologies that by consequence divide the world into things. The speaker recognizes at the end that these ways of thinking are as potentially destructive as they are seemingly illustrative of the functions of life. However, like the plants that grow among and beside the uncompromising direction of the train tracks, the materiality of the world emerges beside, and in spite of our systems of explanation. Matter here is apprehended in terms of metaphoricity inasmuch as it is perceived outside of the logic of objectification; things are in resonant relation with an accidental "infinite of flits," where the materiality of that valley in Mexico is explainable only in the context of the world, in the context of the continuation of the lives of butterflies.

These poems by Zwicky and McKay are, like metaphoricity itself, exemplary. Giorgio Agamben discusses the "example" in his book *The Coming Community* as a linguistic being that radically calls its own linguistic identity into question. As I mentioned earlier, the place of the example, Agamben says, "is always beside itself, in the empty space in which its undefinable and unforgettable life unfolds" (10). Metaphor, as Zwicky reminds us, is a resonant connection that transgresses the systematic parameters of language games. That is to say that metaphor, metaphoricity, the operative dynamic of metaphor, is an articulation between, or beside, the being-called of linguistic thinking. The example as such, beside itself, is not tied to any common property or identity. Agamben calls this the place of "whatever" singularity; it is a space of potentiality, a space resistant to attempts at

defining the material. This is not to say that there is no real world, but that the "*thisness*" of things, as Zwicky terms it in *Wisdom and Metaphor*, requires a metaphorical understanding; it is not given in the language of definitions and names.

In his posthumously published book *Aesthetic Ideology* Paul de Man examines Immanuel Kant's entreaty that we must "see...as poets do" when we regard the sublimity of the ocean or the sky (126). For de Man this represents an approach to materiality that has not adequately been considered by those who have studied Kant. This "material vision" or "material sublime" comes to stand for a materiality that is ultimately impossible to name in more than a provisional sense (Warminksi 8). De Man notes that in looking at the sky or the ocean "[t]he dynamics of the sublime mark the moment when the infinite is frozen into the materiality of stone...it is, [Page 48] indeed,...the complete loss of the symbolic" (127). More recently critics have approached de Man's concern with this issue as a way to think materiality without matter (Cohen xii). To some degree lyric ethics asks us to think of a materiality without matter, inasmuch as it subverts a view of matter as an objective resource and proposes a view of materiality based on articulation and interconnectedness. However, there are some important differences. De Man claims that

The language of the poets therefore in no way partakes of mimesis, reflection, or even perception, in the sense which would allow a link between sense experience and understanding, between perception and apperception. Realism postulates a phenomenalism of experience which is here being denied or ignored. Kant's looking at the world just as one sees it ("wei man ihn sieht") is an absolute, radical formalism that entertains no notion of reference or semiosis. (128)

While I am drawn to de Man's repudiation of a realist approach to materiality and find interesting the idea of a formal approach to the world that could be considered in the terms of metaphoricity, I do not see metaphor as completely ignoring the referential world. It makes use of that world as much as it undermines the totalities of its referential assumptions. The ethical import of material metaphoricity is precisely its hinge between the worlds of totality and infinity, between the desire to address, or be addressed, by the *thisness* of things and the inability to materialize that expression in language. If poets offer any take on a "material sublime" it is precisely because the hinged ontology of metaphoricity, between the "is" and the "is not," is an attention where perception constantly returns to the question of its own attention, to the resonant ways in which matter is meaningful.

In closing I would like to add what may seem like an infuriating caveat. Lyric ethics is not an applied ethics. It cannot be a set of rules for approaching the natural world, or the question of the environment. Lyric ethics, like Zwicky's notion of "lyric philosophy," stands outside of practicality like the "whatever" being stands beside the example in Agamben's thinking. However, rather than admitting this as political irrelevance, I would propose, like Agamben, that this space outside of application is in fact highly political as a space of categorical resistance. It is a space of pure potential, of articulatory relations, of material events that have no objective materiality in linguistic thinking. Perhaps we can think of it as activism that encourages a kind of attention that is not reducible to linguistic code or [Page 49] description, a form of listening, perhaps, that might serve to hear the imperative of the other, human and nonhuman.

Notes

1. Buell 430; Scigaj 11-13; Gilcrest 21. [\[back\]](#)
2. Certainly Zwicky's notion of lyric as the desire for wordlessness underlies my understanding of "lyric." However, it is my aim here to focus on the shape lyrical thinking takes in language (which is necessarily imperfect)—that is, lyric art, or poetry in this case, or even more specifically, metaphor. My notion of metaphor as articulation, however, is indebted to her discussion of metaphor as "domestic understanding" in *Wisdom and Metaphor*. [\[back\]](#)
3. See Tiffany 3, 71, 160, 268. [\[back\]](#)
4. How can the structural dynamics of a rhetorical device come to describe a social relation? There already exists a tradition of conceiving of figures as descriptive of social structures. For example, the emphasis on the importance of discursivity in the "post-Marxist" writings of Ernesto Laclau (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* [with Chantal Mouffe] and his essay "The Politics of Rhetoric") offers an illustration of how metaphor and metonymy can be considered forms of social relation. While Laclau regards hegemony as a fundamentally metonymic relation rather than a metaphorical one, the example of thinking figures socially nonetheless exists. Metaphor is viewed negatively by Laclau and others, including Paul de Man, who see it associated with an impulse to totalize, to mythologize in a closed sense (*Allegories* 259). I would suggest that not only is this a limited view of metaphor, but it fails to acknowledge the metaphoricity that gives all figures their rhetorical force, that interrupts the

categories of systematic linguistic thinking. [\[back\]](#)

5. I would argue that in his attempt to think the phenomenology of the non-phenomenon (i.e. the face of the other) Levinas metaphorically constitutes a relational subject. It is important to note that Levinas insists in his work that the face is not a metaphor; indeed, in places he goes out of his way to uphold old stereotypes about poetry's scandalous relationship with reality. However, I think what is behind Levinas's thinking is a very metaphorical engagement with the limits of referential language and systematic thinking. For Levinas the encounter with the other, for example, is a meeting that occurs outside of representation, outside of formal logic. Consequently, the encounter is resistant to conventional linguistic expression, which, as Zwicky tells us, is the initial "wordlessness" from which lyrical thinking emerges. Moreover, the result of the face to face is to make subjectivity relational: the other becomes involved with who I am. This, it seems to me, is a perfect example of a metaphorical dynamic where the distinctness of terms, in this case the irreducible positions of self and other, are at once upheld and interrupted by their own interconnection. By entering my life, the other interrupts my own materiality as an atomistic, totalized existence.

[\[back\]](#)

6. In *Wisdom and Metaphor* Zwicky not only connects the Wittgensteinian concept of "seeing-as" to its obvious metaphorical implications, but suggests that understanding itself has the form of seeing-as: "The experience of understanding something is always the experience of a gestalt—the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or re-perception of a whole" (*WM* L2). For Zwicky, thinking that aims at understanding (in its activity of "seeing-as") is a form of resistance to the linguistic **[Page 50]** orthodoxy of reference (*WM* L46). [\[back\]](#)

7. In her introduction to the poem's first publication in the *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Zwicky acknowledges that the voice of the poem "is apparently familiar with both poststructuralist narratology and plate tectonics, neither of which was really on the scene when Wittgenstein died in 1951" (30). She adds that she hopes, nonetheless, that the poem's trajectory is "Wittgensteinian." Why does Zwicky play with time in this way? Without getting into too much detail here, it is my contention that Zwicky's employment of archives (as evidenced most clearly in her two books *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom and Metaphor*) is an example of the material metaphoricity I have been talking about; that is to say, the archive is explored in her work as a metaphorically resonant structure, temporally and materially.

[\[back\]](#)

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- . *The Coming Community*, Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. 1970. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: A Touchstone Book Published by Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap P of Harvard U, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine." *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Eds. Tom Cohen, et al. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 254-273.
- Cohen, Tom, et al. *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- de Man, Paul. *Aesthetic Ideology*. Ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- . *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979.
- Ellis, Richard. *The Book of Sharks: a Complete Illustrated Natural History of the Sharks of the World*. 1976. San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich P, 1983.
- . *The Sunday Edition*. With Michael Enright. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Toronto. 2 May 2004.
- Gilcrest, David W. *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics*. Reno, Nevada, and Los Vegas, Nevada: U of Nevada P, 2002.

- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London and New York: Verso, 1985.
- Laclau, Ernesto. "The Politics of Rhetoric." *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Eds. Tom Cohen, et al. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 229-253. [Page 51]
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Time and the Other." *Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987. 39-94.
- McKay, Don. "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home, and Nature Poetry." *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays & Interviews*. Ed. Tim Lilburn. Kingston, Canada: Quarry P, 1995. 17-28.
- . "Three Eclogues." *Apparatus*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997. 51-58.
- Moure, Eirin. *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person: a Translation of Alberto Caeiro / Fernando Pessoa's O Guardador de Rebanhos*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2001.
- Phillips, Dana. "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology." *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 577-602.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language [La Metaphore Vive]*. 1975. Trans. Robert Czerny. Toronto, Buffalo, London: U of Toronto P, 1977.
- Russell, Bertrand. Introduction. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. By Ludwig Wittgenstein. Trans. D.F Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 1974. ix-xxii.
- Scigaj, Leonard M. *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*. Lexington, Kentucky: U of Kentucky P, 1999.
- Tiffany, Daniel. *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 2000.
- Warminski, Andrzej. "'As the Poets Do it': On the Material Sublime." *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Eds. Tom Cohen, et al. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2001. 3-31.

Zwicky, Jan. *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: U of Toronto P, 1992.

———. "Once Upon a Time in the West: Heidegger and the Poets." *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*. Ed. Tim Lilburn. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002. 187-199.

———. "The Geology of Norway." *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1998. 32-36.

———. "The Geology of Norway: Poem with Introduction by Jan Zwicky." *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 7 (1999): 29-34.

———. *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau, 2003. [Page 52]
