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The Shell of the Tortoise: Four Essays & an Assemblage by Don McKay

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***The Shell of the Tortoise: Four Essays & an Assemblage* by DON MCKAY**
Gaspereau, 2011 \$25.95

Reviewed by **TONIA L. PAYNE**

In his more than forty years of writing, Don McKay has been the winner of the Griffin Prize for Poetry (twice) and of the Governor General's Award for poetry. Among his books of poetry are *Night Field* (1991), *Another Gravity* (2000), and *Strike/Slip* (2006). His book of essays *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (2002) was short-listed for the Governor General's Award for nonfiction. Additionally (for what it's worth), his name appears on numerous "famous Canadian poets" lists. *Shell of the Tortoise* joins McKay's other works in demonstrating his importance as a writer devoted to exploring the human relationship with the planet.

Shell of the Tortoise is a collection of essays and an "assemblage"—a lovely mix of prose and poem—and the volume comprises his gatherings from (as the jacket blurb puts it) "another geopoetic field season." Most of the pieces arise from McKay's encounters with specific Canadian landscapes: Mistaken Point, Newfoundland; the Loss Creek-Leech River Fault on Vancouver Island; the Muskwa-Kechika wilderness, British Columbia. The one exception explores the situatedness of other Canadian nature poets. Each moves the reader into a deeper sense of our world and a richer understanding of the ways in which language inflects how we see where we are.

Although the essay topics range from the intersection of poetry and science to an exploration of language as both tool and art, several lines of thought run throughout the volume. Finding and

refinding these lines creates resonances, not merely among the writings but among the ideas, one branching into the next, crossed lines leading to new avenues of thought.

One of those lines of thought is the idea of deep time, specifically how an awareness of deep time leads us to recognize that we are not the center of the universe, not the center of time. As McKay notes in "Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time," when we see the Anthropocene, the "Era of Humankind," as a rung of the ladder that includes the Holocene, Pleistocene, and so on, we also begin to see "the present [as] a temporal unit among other epochs, periods and eras." In the process of acquiring that view of our time as part of geologic history, "On the one hand, we lose our special status as Master Species; on the other, we become members of deep time, along with trilobites and Ediacaran organisms." The idea arises again, notably in "From Here to Infinity (or So)," in which McKay writes, "In every area, the idea of infinity (or its slightly less perilous cousin, deep time), works as an antidote to human hubris; it says, as against Alexander Pope, that man is not the measure of all things." For ecocritics, the problem of decentering humans in our own thought processes is ongoing: human hubris, as McKay puts it, clearly underlies the negative impacts the human species (especially Western culture) has had on the planet. The reframing McKay points to—a reframing though language—can be seen as counteracting our species' self-centeredness.

Indeed, the use of language, and specifically the function of poetry, is another rich vein running through *The Shell of the Tortoise*. The essay "Great Flint Singing: Reflections on Canadian Nature

Poets,” for example, contrasts the ways in which early Euro-Canadian poets grappled with the overwhelming fact of the bush with the approaches of poets of “the Can Lit renaissance.” In a close read of Duncan Campbell Scott’s “The Height of Land,” McKay states, “I think Scott fingers a version of a recognition at the heart of wilderness poetry: a recognition that language is not finally adequate to experience and yet is the medium which we—the linguistic animals—must use.” A similar idea arises in “The Muskwa Assemblage”—which includes prose, prose poem, and poem as well as “typographic assemblages”: artistic iterations of the word “assemblage.” Contemplating the connection between land and language, McKay describes a map of the largely unnamed wilderness he was to encounter and states that “the lines began to move . . . as though, without words to hold them in the present, they suffered the infusion of old earth energy.” Again, in “The Shell of the Tortoise,” McKay notes that all tools contain an “urge to connect with the world in a way that lets primal otherness loose inside culture.” Thus, because language is the ur-tool of our species, “[it], too, nurtures that secret animal dream, a dream often expressed in the negative as doubt about its own organizing and manipulating activities.”

That doubt about language’s ability to organize and manipulate is, for McKay, a benefit. Indeed, in “Ediacaran and Anthropocene,” he states that the nonrational aspect of language—which, in artistic expression, becomes poetry—is precisely why poetry is important, perhaps crucial, to science. When scientists think poetically, the loosening of rational restraints allows for insights and unique approaches to scientific problems: as

McKay notes, “the poetic frame permits the possible . . . to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry, finding wider resonances, leading us to contemplate further implications for ourselves.” However, as McKay points out, the benefit does not flow only one way: when poetry and science speak to each other, while poetry works against a reduction of natural phenomena into data, science counteracts the tendency in poetry “to translate the immediate perception into an emotional condition, which is then admired or fetishized in preference to the original phenomenon.”

Many of these ideas may be familiar, yet when they are presented by a wordsmith of the highest order, we are given another tool to use in attempting to understand and counteract the human tendency to live in conflict with our world. There is more to praise in McKay’s slim volume than this review can accommodate: for all its modest size, *Shell of the Tortoise* delves deep.

TONIA L. PAYNE is a tenured associate professor in the English department at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York. Among her scholarly publications are “‘We Are Dirt: We Are Earth’: Ursula Le Guin and the Problem of Extra-Terrestrialism” and “How Do We See Green? Ursula K. Le Guin’s SF/Fantasy and the Environmental Paradigm Shift.” She has contributed book reviews to *ISLE* and *Ecozon@*. Presently, her critical focus is on the interplay between literature and the environmental ethics of Western culture. Her poem “Prairie” was published in *California Quarterly*.