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"Radiant Imperfection": The Interconnected Writing Lives of Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky

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Graduate Program in English
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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“RADIANT IMPERFECTION”:
THE INTERCONNECTED WRITING LIVES OF ROBERT BRINGHURST,
DENNIS LEE, TIM LILBURN, DON MCKAY, AND JAN ZWICKY

by

Kostantina Northrup

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In 2002, Cormorant Books of Toronto published an essay collection entitled *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*. Edited and introduced by Tim Lilburn, the book gathers a series of meditations by five writers whom this dissertation considers as a group: Lilburn himself, Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky. Over the course of the past two decades, the five poets have come to be known as a coterie of ecological writers and ethicists, and this dissertation examines their interconnected writing lives in light of their significant influence in the establishment of ecocritical cultures in Canada. All five poets have inhabited the Canadian university at various points throughout their careers, and by discussing their ecopoetics as they relate to their commentary on academic epistemologies and contemporary education in the humanities, these readings observe how the poets' respective approaches to aesthetics, philosophy, and pedagogy are intimately intertwined.

Throughout their writing lives, the *Thinking and Singing* poets have been vocal opponents of postmodernism – a term they use broadly, but generally mean to comprehend the theoretical spectrum associated with the late twentieth-century “linguistic turn” in the humanities. By contextualizing the group's ecopoetics in light of their academic interventions, I argue that the poets' public reputations as ecological artists and educators have been established as they have worked to define the borders of their own poetry and poetics within and against the territories of the broader academic and literary traditions they inhabit. In this regard, I explore two of the major epistemological

traditions that the poets set in contrast to the reading practices of postmodernism – phenomenology, and the *via negativa* (negative way) – and argue that engaging with the *Thinking and Singing* poets' works means continuously renegotiating the age-old question concerning poetry's capacity to teach as well as delight.

Keywords

Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, ecology, poetics, ethics, criticism, university, humanities, phenomenology, apophasis, lyric, polyphony

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction: The Interconnected Writing Lives of the <i>Thinking and Singing</i> Poets	1
Writing Home / Singing in the Dark	14
Considering “Coterie,” and Further Notes on Method	31
Notes	39
1 <i>Thinking and Singing</i> Education, Ecology, and Pedagogy	47
The “Programmatic Polemics” of Dennis Lee and Robert Bringhurst	49
Reading <i>Thinking and Singing</i> Poetics with Pedagogy in Mind	66
Notes	82
2 Phenomenologies of the <i>Thinking and Singing</i> Poets	91
Dennis Lee’s “Consciousness Knowing the World”	106
Don McKay’s <i>Apparatus</i> and the Phenomenology of the Unfamiliar	114
Jan Zwicky and the “Ethics” of Reading Phenomenologically	120
Returning to the “Community of Things”: Phenomenology and <i>Apokatastasis</i> in Tim Lilburn’s Poetics	129
Notes	151

3	<i>Thinking and Singing</i> Aesthetics of the Sublime	161
	Dreadful Sublimity in Dennis Lee's <i>Civil Elegies</i>	168
	Don McKay's <i>Strike/Slip</i> and <i>Paradoxides</i> : The Sublimity of Deep Time	184
	Notes	208
4	Musical Form and Ekphrasis: <i>Thinking and Singing</i> the World	217
	Bakhtin and Canadian Literary Polyphonies in the Late Twentieth Century	218
	Robert Bringhurst's Poetics of Polyphony	226
	Poetry and the Resonant World: Polyphony and Harmony	
	in Jan Zwicky's "Lyric"	243
	Coda	267
	Notes	269
	Works Cited	275
	Vita	295

Introduction

The Interconnected Writing Lives of the *Thinking and Singing* Poets

Watch it: it thinks but, no, you cannot quite watch it
 thinking. Listen to it singing: no, you can't quite
 hear it singing. Smell it: linseed and lampblack: no,
 no you can't quite smell it, touch it, taste it. Take it
 intravenously and see if it does not have
 some effect.

— Robert Bringhurst, “Notes to the Reader”¹

Well, to hell with it, only – as I sd before – the poet is the
 only pedagogue left, to be trusted.

— Charles Olson, “The Gate and the Center”²

In 2002, Cormorant Books of Toronto published an essay collection entitled *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*. Edited and introduced by Tim Lilburn, the book gathers a series of meditations by five writers whom this dissertation considers as a group: Lilburn himself, Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky. Together, the five form a quincunx of variously occupied autodidacts, contemplatives, critics, essayists, professors, poets, students, scholars, translators, one

children's author (Lee), one professional philosopher (Zwicky), and one typographer (Bringhurst). They constitute a collective, having dedicated individual poems and full poetry collections to one another, listed one another's names in their acknowledgments pages, assisted one another's book launches and performance pieces, and written essays on the topic of one another's writing. Working across the thresholds of academic and literary cultures in Canada, in the past twenty years, they have come to be known above all as a coterie of eco-poets. Having been linked by camaraderie and long-term personal and professional relationships, they have enjoyed bonds of intellectual kinship that have inspired them to praise and honour one another, as Bringhurst has honoured Lee by calling him both "senior colleague and elder brother" ("At Home" 57). In their admiration for one another, moreover, the five poets have also revealed their own aesthetic and philosophical investments. The scholar Mark Dickinson, whose forthcoming study "Canadian Primal" will be the first monograph published on their collective works, has initiated an appellation for the five. He calls them the *Thinking and Singing* group ("Canadian Primal" n. pag.).

Emphasizing the gerunds "thinking" and "singing" in relation to the poetics of Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky suggests much about the aesthetic and philosophical perspectives underlying their work. The word "thought" may call to mind concepts such as "wisdom," "reason," "rationality," "logic," or "theory"; "song," on the other hand, may suggest the adjectives "orphanic," "lyric," or "ecstatic," and perhaps even notions of poetic "praxis," "participation," and "process." It is tempting to associate the *Thinking and Singing* poets' "thinking" with the artistic mode that Nietzsche called the

Apolline, and their “singing” with his Dionysiac. Like Nietzsche, the five poets share the conviction that music, more than any other art, is attuned to realities that are inaccessible to language, and, like him, they long for modes of artistic expression that would affirm human beings’ unity with one another and the world. However, whereas Nietzsche celebrates the Dionysiac as a deliciously “monstrous” enjoyment of pleasure in vitality, health, excess, and plenitude, the *Thinking and Singing* poets are more temperate in their attempts to make their art aspire not only to the condition of music, as Pater said poetry should, but also to communion with the world. Their poetry and poetics maintain that a fundamental correspondence exists between the well-ordered mind and the expressive, sensual body – and, correspondingly, between well-expressed thought and *eros* for the “real.” When thought and poetry “sing,” their writings suggest, they can participate ecstatically in “the polyphonic structure of meaning itself” (Bringhurst, *The Tree* 43).

Each of the *Thinking and Singing* poets locates the sources of both wisdom and poetry outside human language and reason – two categories that will be implied, along with art, by my use of the word *technê* throughout this dissertation. Instead they find those sources, as many ancient philosophers and poets did, in visions of resonant relations between human and non-human cultures, and between the world itself and the larger celestial motions in which the planet Earth takes part. As Zwicky writes in the poem “Prelude,” in her most recent poetry collection, *Forge* (2012):

There is, said Pythagoras, a sound
the planet makes: a kind of music
just outside our hearing, the proportion

and the resonance of things – not
 the clang of theory or the wuthering
 of human speech, not even
 the bright song of sex or hunger, but
 the unrung ringing that
 supports them all. (24)

“Prelude” begins a suite of poems entitled “Practicing Bach,” whose themes cover much of the ground that Zwicky explores in her more overtly philosophical writings. These themes include music’s capacity to express what linguistic logic and argumentation cannot, the cosmic harmony evinced by phenomenological attention to things in the world, ascetic desire for the ineffable “real,” the view that metaphor allows language to gesture towards that which cannot be said, and the sense that Being itself sings. Unlike the ancient Egyptian and Greek philosophers from whom she has learned much, Zwicky is not a religious thinker; her use of the phrase “unrung ringing” in “Prelude,” for instance, both alludes to and undermines Aristotle’s concept of the Unmoved Mover. Rather than implying the necessity of an uncreated Creator from whom all life and motion springs, “Prelude” – as with Zwicky’s writings more generally – supports a vision in which human existence takes part in an impersonal structure of cosmic resonance. “Prelude” also suggests the difficulties that Zwicky has faced in her attempts to reconcile human speech and reason with “the proportion / and the resonance of things.” “Speech,” in the poem, seems to be little more than a noisily blowing wind, and “theory” is assigned a cacophonous, “clanging” character – a gesture that is characteristic of her work more

generally, and, to varying degrees, that of the other four *Thinking and Singing* poets also.

From all that has been said thus far, it would be fair to deduce that the *Thinking and Singing* poets are contemporary Romantics. Their shared desire to attune themselves to the “resonances” of the world/universe seems to share much in common with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mode that McKay has called “aeolian harpism”: the Romantic poet’s wish “to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language (or slide show) without a palpable break” (*Vis* 27). As his dismissive tone suggests, however, McKay does not identify with this model of poetic attunement. Instead, he argues that, while “aeolian harpism” promises “a coherent reality,” and the possibility of connection to the natural world, “[i]t also, not incidentally, converts natural energy into imaginative power, so that Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself” (27-28). His own work, he implies, has learned at least enough from structuralist, deconstructive, and poststructuralist theory for him to be suspicious of his ability to express the world linguistically, “without a palpable break” – and, furthermore, for him to be wary of sublimating otherness in a self-aggrandizing vision of the poet’s perfect attunement to a perfectly coherent world.

As will be seen in the chapters to come, all five of the *Thinking and Singing* poets have struggled to articulate the failings of the nature poetry tradition that they speak of as “Romanticism,” and, correspondingly, to demonstrate the strength of their own ecological perspectives in contradistinction to it. Their views in this regard provide a window onto one of the most productive conflicts at the heart of their shared convictions: together, they

occupy a middle ground that finds eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics on the one side, and “postmodern” theories of language on the other. As they have worked to define the borders of their own poetry and poetics within and against the territories of the broader academic and literary traditions they inhabit, their prominence as major ecological poets and thinkers in contemporary Canada has developed concurrently. Surveying the wide expanse of their works, readers will discover a number of epistemological traditions that the poets set in contrast to the reading practices of both Romanticism and postmodernism. This dissertation will focus on just two: phenomenology, and the *via negativa* (negative way). By way of an assortment of idiosyncratic approaches to these traditions, the *Thinking and Singing* poets affirm the ecological and ethical potential of Keats’s notion of “negative capability”: a person’s capacity to rest “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1351). Even phenomenological analysis – which Husserl looked upon as the guarantor of philosophy’s ability to orient itself scientifically – becomes, in their work, a practice of respectful, “unknowing” engagement with things in the world. Of course, one of the legacies of postmodernism is that there are some who would argue that ecological adaptations of “negative” thought ultimately fail environmental politics just as Romanticism is said to have failed – namely by erecting the “eco” (*oikos*, “home”) as a transcendental ideal in order to glorify the melancholy pleasure of knowing oneself to be alienated from it (or, as is traditional when speaking of Nature, from Her). One of the dilemmas that this dissertation considers is the extent to which the *Thinking and Singing* poets negotiate their oppositions to postmodernism (and technological modernity more

generally) by selectively recuperating the ideals of a tradition that they and their critics tend otherwise to foreswear.

This dissertation also endeavours to demonstrate some of the ways in which the aesthetic and philosophical questions informing the *Thinking and Singing* poets' works have had bearing upon their professional relationships with academic institutions in Canada. Correspondingly, it argues that there are a number of ways in which their poetry and poetics can be parsed with the theme of pedagogy in mind, and suggests that engaging with their respective ecopoetics means continuously renegotiating the age-old question of poetry's capacity to teach as well as delight.³ My discussion of the five poets' writing lives in light of their commentary on academic epistemologies and contemporary education in the humanities represents the primary contribution that this project makes to the broader critical conversations surrounding their works; however, I also bring recent scholarship on the concept of "dark ecology" to bear upon their ecopoetics in an attempt to reorient critical thinking on the poets' respective relations to "theory." To varying degrees, the poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group demonstrate clear distrust for the *technê* that enable them. They hold human language in suspicion along with certain socially legitimated forms of knowledge *vis-à-vis* the non-human world, and this suspicion shapes not only their relationships to works of art, but also to certain academic methodologies that became popular in the mid-to-late twentieth century – structuralist linguistics, deconstruction, poststructuralism, and analytic philosophy in particular. Although existing criticism and scholarship on their works has not ignored their academic training and employment, neither has it interrogated the aesthetic and epistemological

stakes of their engagements with institutional discourses in Canada, nor inquired as to how those discourses have impacted the ecological ethics that their writings evince.

My discussion of the *Thinking and Singing* poets' works attempts to contextualize the conflicts that inform those works, rather than seeking to resolve them; however, I argue that some of the most controversial aspects of their ecopoetics are perfect grounds for considering the ways in which postmodern reading practices might supplement their thought productively. In this regard, I proceed with a conviction similar to that which Timothy Morton expresses in *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), where he notes his approval of "the way in which deconstruction searches out, with ruthless and brilliant intensity, points of contradiction and deep hesitation in systems of meaning" (6). Morton also suggests that, despite the fact that ecocriticism "is in the habit of attacking, ignoring, or vilifying" deconstruction, if the two fields had "a more open and honest engagement," ecological criticism "would find a friend rather than an enemy" (6).

The *Thinking and Singing* poets' reservations regarding "theory" issue in large part from a point in time when Derrida's books, and those of his Yale School counterparts, seemed poised to effect a total abandonment of attention and fidelity to the "real" world. At least, such is the impression one gets when reviewing literature from the period of the late twentieth-century "linguistic turn" in studies in the humanities. As one scholar, Michael H. Keefer, wrote in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in 1985: "another empire is striving to reassert control over the fringes of its domain, using means (such as the financing of death squads and the systematic terrorizing of civilian

populations) which should inspire from its own citizens a horrified resistance – while its literary scholars, bemused by the technicalities of another Gnosis, spin verbal webs in comfortable solipsistic isolation” (88-89). He continues: “the deconstructionist enterprise in North America, however brave its nihilistic posturings, does not strike me as being a courageous endeavour” (89). It is worth noting, then, that although Morton’s “dark ecology” offers an attractive blending of ecocritical and deconstructive thought, his thesis would have seemed abnormal thirty years ago. Correspondingly, although I suggest at various points throughout this dissertation that the *Thinking and Singing* group’s ecological positions could be strengthened in certain ways by more open engagement with the lessons of “theory,” I would like to acknowledge at the outset that my ability to do so owes much to the fact that my own academic training has occurred in a time very different from their own.

Postcolonial scholars such as Terry Goldie and Len Findlay have demonstrated that deconstructive reading practices can help to disclose the ideologies that contribute to what Goldie has called “the semiotic field of the indigene” (14). A recurring problem in “nature” writing (both creative and critical) from the eighteenth century to the present day is the tendency of ecologically-minded writers to use Indigenous peoples as abstract counterpoints to modernity’s ills, often suggesting, in so doing, that Indigenous peoples are innately closer, or more authentically “chthonic,” to the land/earth. For Goldie, the fact that poststructuralism suggests “that the distance between signifier and signified is an alterity never to be surmounted” does not imply that poststructuralism has “nihilist tendencies,” but rather that it can be “a means of understanding various limitations” (4-

5). Most importantly for him, poststructuralism offers a way of interrogating how invader-settler cultures' "image of the indigene" have provided "a constant source for semiotic reproduction in which each textual image refers back to those offered before" – and not, it bears reiterating, to Indigenous peoples and cultures as they really exist (6). Findlay harnesses deconstructive theory differently in his more recent injunction to scholars in the humanities to "Always Indigenize!" – by which he means that all scholars should constantly and critically be evaluating how their scholarship and pedagogy stand in relation to the broader social forces of colonialism and empire. Specifically, he draws on Derridean thinking in order to deliver "a strategically indeterminate provocation to thought and action on the grounds that there is no *hors-Indigène*, no geopolitical or psychic setting, no real or imagined *terra nullius* free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous (pre)occupation" (309).

As will be seen in the chapters that follow, Bringhurst's, Lee's, Lilburn's, and McKay's writings have all occasioned some commentary on the poets' respective engagements with First Nations and Métis cultures and peoples, and/or issues related to colonialism and "settler" subjectivity more generally. Each of their cases is unique, and I will not attempt to make broad generalizations here. The topic is taken up with regard to Bringhurst's work in Chapter 1, and to Lilburn's work in Chapter 2. For now, I will gesture just briefly to how it emerges in the writings of Lee and McKay.

In 1978, Bringhurst's Kanchenjunga Press published a chapbook version of Lee's long poem "The Gods," which was published again the following year by McClelland and Stewart in Lee's book-length collection of the same name (*The Gods* [1979]). The

later version of the poem underwent considerable revisions, which Bringhurst comments upon in a 1982 essay on Lee's work. In that essay, Bringhurst records that in the chapbook version of the poem, "the gods" stride "powerfully out of the landscape, seething," with "their strokes and carnal voltage, as / *pineforce / potence-of-bearswipe / voicing-the-thunder*" ("At Home" 66). These lines are omitted from the 1979 version of the poem – a difference that Tom Middlebro' also remarks upon by stating that the words of the original "look as if they were copied from a book of Indian legends" (29). Significantly, he goes on to associate Lee's treatment of "the theme of the numinous" with the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott (29). The comparison reflects badly on Lee, as it is now difficult (or, one might hope, impossible) to read Scott's "Indian poems" without considering the catastrophic long-term effects of his legislation of First Nations communities in Canada over the course of his career in Indian Affairs. Although Lee's writing is unrelated to that history, the 1978 version of "The Gods" caricatures First Nations cultures as it eulogizes the imagined, pre-modern mode of "being in the world" whose loss the poem mourns.

Although Lee has not repeated the explicit "indigenizing" practices of the 1978 version of "The Gods," the theme of Canada's "colonization" by American culture has recurred in his work throughout his writing life. In a 1995 article entitled "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Settler' Subject," Alan Lawson reflects on early "postcolonial" writings in Canada, and conducts an investigation of the subject position that he refers to as "the settler site." "Settler status," he argues, is culturally determined; the discourses and material repercussions of imperialism create both settler and colonial subjects, and settler

cultures exist, therefore, as “liminal sites at the point of negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native” (24). Lee’s 1973 essay “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space” figures significantly in the opening passages of Lawson’s argument, where he inscribes it within a “quite old” tradition of “literary-critical arguments about the relation of the processes of colonization to language” (23). Using “Cadence, Country, Silence” as a primary example, Lawson goes on to demonstrate how “[t]he settler subject position is both postimperial and postcolonial; it has colonized and been colonized; it must speak of and against both its own oppressiveness and its own oppression” (28). Significantly, he argues: “[i]n speaking back against the imperium in the interests of its own identity politics, the settler site of enunciation will always tend to reappropriate the position of all of those others with and against whom it has mediated that imperial power” (28).

McKay’s early long poem *Lependu* (1979), whose publication was contemporaneous with *The Gods*, is an imaginative hunt for the story behind the execution (by hanging) of Cornelius A Burley, a resident of nineteenth-century London, Ontario. In the sole scholarly article published on the poem, Laurie Kruk suggests that McKay makes Burley “the medium through which to comment on London’s – and by extension, Western civilization’s – alienation from its spiritual ancestry” (41). Published in 1989, Kruk’s article associates *Lependu* with both the poetics of postmodernism (41) and the theoretical praxes of deconstruction (46), and it suggests, moreover, that McKay’s treatment of Burley as a “shaman” participates in a broader postmodern crisis of origins, or a “crisis of cultural authority,” as she puts it (45). Kruk explores how *Lependu*

“unearth[s] and re-invent[s] a past civilization – the Attiwandaron,” the Iroquoian nation who once inhabited the land that eventually came to be known as Southwestern Ontario (45). Associating McKay’s methods throughout the poem with other modern and existentialist searches for “in-the-world-ness,” Kruk argues that McKay’s use of pictographic imagery in *Lependu* sets up “a sharp contrast between these and our sign-system, the English language, and [shows] the Attiwandaron’s greater rapport with things-in-themselves rather than with things-as-symbols” (58). In this regard, Kruk’s analysis both reveals the postmodern romanticization of Indigeneity that underlies *Lependu*, and also participates in it by accepting uncritically the ontological distinctions that the poem makes between “our sign-system” and that of the Attiwandaron. Although *Lependu* is something of an anomaly in McKay’s larger body of work, he has continued to invoke the problematic figures of the “shaman” and “trickster” in more recent poems and essays.

Although it does not necessarily take deconstructive or poststructuralist analysis to reveal the problems of representation in cases such as these, analyses such as Goldie’s help to articulate how representations of Indigenous peoples as signs of the “natural,” the “mystical,” the “prehistoric,” and the “chthonic” have been commodified, exchanged, and normalized in invader-settler cultures. Deconstruction also reveals the extent to which cultural assumptions about the ontological characteristics of language (or suppositions about the lack thereof) can result in the kinds of troubling distinctions that Kruk observes in *Lependu*.

As any survey of the critical discourses surrounding the works of the *Thinking*

and Singing group should make perfectly clear, there are innumerable readers, students, and fellow writers who look to Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky as educators, mentors, and public intellectuals. As my own notes on method in the final paragraphs of this Introduction will attest, I count myself among such readers as well. For this reason, one of the crucial convictions underlying this dissertation is this: that in order to pay due diligence to the considerable influence of the *Thinking and Singing* poets within literary and scholarly cultures in Canada today, their ecopoetics must be read with an eye to their problematic, polemical, and outright controversial characteristics as much as to the more celebrated aspects of their work. Commentators who criticize alternative forms of either pedagogy or poetry sometimes join in a common refrain – that the unwitting masses will inevitably be duped by the kind of tomfoolery that passes for art and education these days. What such criticisms usually fail to countenance is the critical agency exercised by those who choose to learn from an institution or mentor, or to immerse themselves in unfamiliar modes of reading. As I hope will be clear from what follows, this dissertation assumes that apprenticeship and serious critique are not mutually exclusive.

I. Writing Home / Singing in the Dark

In an essay published in *The Fiddlehead* in 2006, Lilburn writes:

I am a poet and an essayist: I also have a scholarly interest in Plato, but because the world seems full, or full enough, of Plato scholars, I've drifted a little and turned, as well, to Christian Platonists of late antiquity, Origen, Evagrius, John

Cassian and the like. Perhaps it seems strange for a poet to have interests like these, but in this country it is not all that uncommon. I think of Jan Zwicky reading Wittgenstein, the pre-Socratics and Plato; Erín Mouré, the French theorists and Augustine; Anne Carson, all the Greeks; Dennis Lee, Martin Heidegger; Don McKay, Emmanuel Levinas; Robert Bringhurst, Dogan, Heraclitus and others. (“Thinking” 156)

Lilburn might have added the poets Adam Dickinson, Sue Sinclair, and Warren Heiti, all of whom are among a younger generation of poet-scholars whose writings have been influenced at least in part by those of the *Thinking and Singing* group. He might also have included Dionne Brand and Marx; Nicole Brossard and Cixous, Kristeva, and Wittgenstein; Frank Davey and Merleau-Ponty; Robert Kroetsch and Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault, and Heidegger; or Steve McCaffery and Lacan, Levinas, and Saussure. The omission of Kroetsch and McCaffery is particularly suggestive of the significant absences in Lilburn’s list, which – despite including Carson and Mouré – gives the overall impression of having excluded poets and philosophers who are typically associated with postmodernism in Canada.

As many postmodern artists and thinkers have also done, Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky have attempted to reform Western epistemological discourses by drawing attention to their histories of exclusion and oppression, particularly insofar as those traditions have marginalized so-called subjective modes of knowing in favour of the supposedly objective methods of science and reason. In this regard, the five poets share an adversary in common with much postmodern thought: certainly, Lyotard’s

canonical study *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) draws attention to similar issues, interrogating the means by which scientific “knowledges” have historically been legitimated through the use of politically-suspect master narratives. Despite the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ agreement with certain aspects of postmodern theory and practice, however, it remains the case that they have poor opinions of postmodernism on the whole. Bringhurst, McKay, and Zwicky tend to represent academic and literary postmodernisms as teetering on the brink of nihilism. Zwicky’s onomatopoeic phrase “the clang of theory” in “Prelude” is a good example in this regard: given the pride of place accorded to harmony and resonance in her philosophy, anything that she describes as being obstreperous should be recognized as being noticeably out of tune. McKay’s poetry tends to be more playful, and rarely wears its author’s scholarly views so much on its sleeve; nevertheless, his critical writings make his opinions very clear. As he puts it in a short series of remarks published while he was still teaching in the English Department at the University of Western Ontario, he believes that the “big-bullying theories of the schoolyard” sometimes ruin the “affable iffiness” of just poking around (whether creatively or intellectually), whereas “poetic attention” is able to provide “a different form of knowing from the commodity sold in schools” (“Some Remarks” 207). Bringhurst, for his part, has spoken forcefully of “the acid of postmodernism: the thesis that nothing has meaning because everything is language,” and suggests that, “[w]hen you take the world away from a human being, something less than a human being is left. That is the inverse of education” (*The Tree* 62). Lilburn does not usually target postmodern thinking in his epistemological critiques, but frequently argues that

modern ways of knowing lack the wisdom of the ancients. His major preoccupations along these lines are evident in the essay collections *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (1999) and *Going Home* (2008), and also in his latest volume of poetry, *Assiniboia: Two Choral Performances and a Masque* (2012). In these volumes, he argues that Western culture has for too long occluded the erotic elements of its ancient traditions, and suggests, furthermore, that only by breaking the seal of that occlusion can the West begin to heal the wounds of its colonial past and present. Lee's poetry, by contrast, shares more stylistic similarities with postmodern aesthetics than that of any of the other four *Thinking and Singing* poets. His work characteristically uses erratic indentations and line breaks, a broad range of movement along the page, and multiple lyric "selves" who interrupt and sometimes cajole one another. In the past decade, his poetry has seemed to become even more recognizably "postmodern": in collections such as *Un* (2003) and *Yesno* (2007), for instance, his formerly grandiose style is replaced by short, linguistically frazzled poems that come across like clenched fists of wordplay and semiotic bewilderment. Like Lilburn, however, Lee is at heart a devotional poet. No matter how fragmented his poems become, they never unhinge completely from the ineffable, musical centre to which the jazzy meditative feels himself to be attuned.

Since roughly the mid-1990s, "ecological" readings of literary texts have steadily been gaining institutional acceptance in Canadian academic spheres.⁴ Some scholars have even suggested that Canadian criticism has experienced an "ethical turn," of which ecocriticism and the so-called "death" of postmodernism are part (Goldman 809). This is not to say that "ethics" has replaced "theory" in contemporary literary criticism and

scholarship, nor indeed to imply that the latter is devoid of the former. Smaro Kamboureli, for instance, has significantly refused to reject the late twentieth century's linguistic turn as being either anti- or un-ethical. Observing that "all hell breaks loose" whenever someone suggests that poststructuralism is an ethical praxis, Kamboureli nonetheless contends that theory has also been "immensely enabling" for many thinkers, and argues that, "at least when viewed in certain ways," it itself marks "a critical turn towards ethics" ("The Limits" 937-38). Similarly, Herb Wyile argues that the ethical turn has been shaped at least in part by poststructuralism (821-22). In contradistinction to those who suggest that late twentieth-century literary theory marks a departure from ethical considerations, he argues that "what many theorists have turned away from is not so much ethical considerations as it is the faith in a transcendental truth on which moral principles can be founded" (821-22). As Lyotard and this dissertation also maintain, Wyile considers "poststructuralist skepticism towards metanarratives" to be a defining factor in contemporary considerations of ethics (821). Indeed, he argues that "one of the salutary aspects of the ethical turn in theory and criticism is that, after poststructuralism, critics are much less likely to view literature as simply a container for moral precepts or as Arnold's 'best that is known and thought in the world'" (824). Of course, assuming an "ethical" position does not guarantee that one's position is correct, nor that it will do good. Observing that the ethical turn seems to have arisen from "the imperative to legitimate the other, as well as confront how we relate to different communities, without necessarily fully reshaping the dominant order," Kamboureli warns against its becoming merely another academic "fashion trend" ("The Limits" 940-41).

This concern regarding academic modishness is itself something of an academic commonplace, as is evident from some of the speculations that accompanied the beginnings of ecocriticism in Canada in the 1990s. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's landmark anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) was the first collection to bind together divergent ecological perspectives under the banner of ecocriticism, and it drew primarily American contributors. Shortly after its publication, its dearth of Canadian representation led one Canadian scholar to muse: "is it the case that American critics are not aware of relevant Canadian ecocritical texts, or do those texts simply not exist? And if they do not exist, why do they not exist? Is it that the Americans are at the cutting edge of literary criticism and we just have not arrived there yet?" (O'Brien 18). Related observations were made in an editorial to a 1991 issue of *Canadian Literature*, where Laurie Ricou remarked on the "cutting edge" ecocritics of the US, and commented that Canadian critics seem to "lag behind" their American counterparts in combining environmental and literary criticisms (3). He speculates further: "[p]erhaps Canadians are naturally wary of another U.S. academic fashion. Perhaps Canadians' writing of the land as adversary inhibits eco-criticism" (3). Later, he asks: "[c]an the infinite deferrals of a post-structuralist view of language engage the infinite interdependencies of an ecological system? Or is a philosophy of language as a referential system essential to eco-criticism?" (5).⁵ Ricou's suggestion that critical wariness towards "another U.S. academic fashion" might impede Canadian ecocriticism could mean almost anything; however, his remark was broadly contemporaneous with the late twentieth-century linguistic turn, and also the culture wars. Indeed, just two years

prior, in *The Second Macmillan Anthology of Canadian Writing* (1989), McKay had published this rather unflattering portrait of the intellectual world he inhabited:

I'm not wild about the taste of paper or the narcissism of the 'signifier,' however free or ideologically correct the play may seem in those salons of the spirit where it is pursued. I don't believe that 'reference' is a consequence of imperialism, late capitalism, or the patriarchy. Freeing words from the necessity to refer is equivalent to freeing Tundra swans from the necessity to migrate, or, getting down to it, freeing any creature from its longing for another. (207-08)

Evidently, McKay sensed no small amount of tension between the politicization of the humanities and his own ecologically-motivated desire to retain the "real" as an object of reference. The ground that was rapidly being gained by postcolonial, marxist, and feminist scholarship, he implies, might come at the expense of human relations with the earth itself.

Such harsh lines in the sand do not seem so necessary today (and, indeed, they may not have been altogether necessary then). As was suggested a few moments ago, Morton's "dark ecology," which is informed by deconstruction and other "postmodern" forms of analysis, is a useful counterpoint to the ecopoetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group. One way of making its usefulness clear is to look briefly at a very different kind of ecological criticism, one that is slightly older than Morton's, and more closely aligned with the positions that the *Thinking and Singing* poets tend to assume. In his ecocritical study *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Bate argues that works of art, and poems in particular, can "create for the mind the same kind of re-creational space that a park

creates for the body” (63). Bate defines his critical project as an attempt “to see what happens when we regard poems as imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated” (63-64). Ultimately, his book concludes with the following claim: “[i]f mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth” (283).

Bate’s indebtedness to Heidegger is evident throughout *The Song of Earth*, most noticeably in his discussion of the role that poetry can play in fabricating “dwelling” for human beings:

Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place – the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos*, “the home or place of dwelling.” According to this definition, poetry will not necessarily be synonymous with verse: the poeming of the dwelling is not inherently dependent on metrical form. However, the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a peculiar force to the *poiesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language’s most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself – a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat – is an answering to nature’s own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself. (75-76)

Bate’s phrasing in this passage comes directly from Heidegger, but his *oikos*-centred ecopoetics also shares much with Nietzsche, who argues in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that the ancient Greeks’ celebrations of the Dionysiac spirit affirmed the people’s bonds

to one another and the natural world (18). As he asserts: “hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart [. . .]. Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community” (18). Of course, both Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s philosophies end by promoting mankind to a privileged position in their visions of “reunification” with, or “unconcealment” of the world: Nietzsche’s Dionysiac man is like a god himself, and Heidegger’s poet is like a visionary prophet of old.

Although Bate is obviously smitten with the thought that poetry “is language’s most direct path of return to the *oikos*,” he also notes the political dangers that attend any idealization of the concept of “home.” Remarking upon the recurring literary and philosophical theme of “nostalgia for an historical era when, we suppose, humans were less alienated from nature,” he suggests that “the danger lies in what we do with the nostalgia” (36). Here, Bate’s discomfort with his own reliance upon Heidegger’s thinking becomes clear:

Begin by reflecting upon Heidegger’s Black Forest peasant. What words might we hear in that reflection? Perhaps: blood, soil, *Volk*, belonging, fatherland, Germany, Reich. Crudely we may say: it’s all very well for the Black Forest peasant dwelling in his farmhouse, but if proper living means dwelling, means remaining in one’s own native region, what do we do with aliens, with those who migrate, who have no home, no fatherland? What, we might ask, Dr. Heidegger, Nazi-approved Rector of Freiburg University, would you have done with, say,

gypsies and Jews? (267)

This rhetorical question to “Dr. Heidegger” will be recalled more than once throughout this dissertation, for just as Heidegger’s thought is evident throughout *The Song of the Earth*, and yet does not sit entirely comfortably within it, so too have the five *Thinking and Singing* poets been deeply influenced by the Black Forest philosopher’s writings, although unable to reconcile them easily with their own aesthetic and philosophical positions. Bate deals too simply with the ethical questions evoked by Heidegger’s life and work. He argues that ecopoetics must be kept separate from ecopolitics, and, suggesting that ecopoetics cannot provide historical, social, and logical analyses of political and cultural issues, he claims: “[a]ll such analyses are enframings. Ecopoetics renounces the mastery of enframing knowledge and listens instead to the voice of art” (269). As Bate would have it, to read ecopoetically is to ensure that a poem does not become “a cog in the wheel of an historical or theoretical system”; it is “to find ‘clearings’ or ‘unconcealments’” in the work itself, and in one’s experience of it (268). “In the activity of *poiesis*,” he writes, “things disclose or unconceal themselves” (268). This is clearly a Heideggerian position – so much so that one wonders how Bate could possibly consider it to be a sufficient counterpoint to the political questions raised by Heidegger’s system. Bate’s solution also evades the question of whether or not it is even possible to listen to “the voice of art” without hearing that voice through the myriad of cultural contexts that contribute to the creation and production of artworks. Arguing that ecopoetics “seeks not to enframe literary texts, but to meditate upon them, to thank them, to listen to them, albeit to ask questions of them” (268), he presents his readers with an “ecological” model

of phenomenological reading and criticism – one whose apolitical outlook is deeply problematic.

In order for Bate to argue that works of art can be experienced in the way he describes, he must uphold a vision of the artwork as a kind of transcendent entity set apart from the mundane machinations of the world. Although this is an attractive vision in some respects, it does not deal adequately with the fact that romanticizing either *poiesis* or the *oikos* too freely can mean forgetting the violences that have historically accompanied human beings' desire to make themselves at home in this world. Bate's position is a good example of why deconstruction makes such a useful ally to ecological thinking, for Derrida's work has done much to insist that Western philosophy and theology should avoid yearning for imagined origins, or any "lost native country of thought" (*Margins* 27). Insofar as Morton's "dark ecology" argues the same, it offers a more satisfying refutation of Heidegger's pride of place in contemporary ecological discourses.

In his short study *The Ecological Thought* (2010) – the belated prequel to *Ecology Without Nature* – Morton begins with the simple insight that "everything is interconnected" (1). To this extent, his perspective accords well with those of the *Thinking and Singing* poets; however, whereas Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky tend to view interconnectedness holistically, Morton takes a different approach. He argues:

Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between 'over here' and 'over there,' and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow

boundaries between inside and outside. Thinking interdependence involves thinking difference. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. In a language, a word means what it means because of its difference with other words. There is nothing intrinsic to the word that makes it mean what it means. [. . .] The mesh is also made of negative difference, which means it doesn't contain positive, really existing (independent, solid) things" (39).

Morton's argument is obviously informed by both Saussurian linguistics and Derridean deconstruction, and it is important to keep in mind that, by noting the absence of "positive, really existing" things, he is not being nihilistic. He is speaking from a biologist's perspective, one aware that all biological creatures are inhabited by "aliens" (such as viruses and bacteria) whose presence should force us to acknowledge the indeterminacy of the very limits between "self" and "other" (36-39). Rather than holism, he advances a deconstructive position of interwoven disconnection, a concept that he illustrates through the image of the "mesh," the state of interconnectedness in which all entities (animate and non-animate) exist, and in which they all appear "strange" to one another (15). Obviously informed by Derrida's position that "*différance* is itself enmeshed" (*Margins* 26-27), Morton argues that, in the mesh, "[n]othing exists by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself'" (*Ecological Thought* 15). His emphasis on the strangeness of things also echoes Derrida's concept of *l'arrivant*, "the ultimate arrival to whom one must extend ultimate hospitality" (15, see also 140). In a manner reminiscent of Levinas, one of the twentieth-century's foremost philosophers of ethics, Morton understands the

relationship between the self and *l'arrivant* as an ethical one. His “ecological thought,” he states, “doesn’t just occur ‘in the mind.’ It’s a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral” (7). As might be expected, Morton appreciates art for reasons very different from Bate’s: rather than romanticizing poetry or attempting to see it “unconcealed” or “un-enframed,” he finds value in art’s dealings with “intensity, shame, abjection, and loss” (10). Similarly, his ecopoetics rejects “sublime aesthetics of the awesome” (15) and humanist conceptions of universal harmony (35). Morton’s “dark ecology” is a vision that precludes notions of wholeness and substance, and that refutes holistic, gestalt perceptions of the world as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Instead, he suggests, things are always less substantial, and less familiar, than they seem (35).

In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton describes six aesthetic devices that may contribute to an “ambient poetics” – a phrase he uses in lieu of “environmental” or “eco-” poetics in order to avoid romanticizing the concept of Nature. Ambient poetics, he writes, attempt “to evoke the here and now of writing” (32). Like many postmodern aesthetics, they self-consciously exhibit themselves as participants in pre-determined systems of meaning. The six devices that Morton lists are gleaned from a variety of fields: the first, “rendering,” refers to “what visual- and sonic-effects artists do to generate a more or less consistent sense of atmosphere or world” (35). “Rendering” practices ask the viewer (or the reader) to suspend her awareness of the aesthetic framework enabling the work of art; they present “a compelling illusion rather than a simple copy” (54). Morton is understandably hesitant about the usefulness of “rendering” practices for “ambient

poetics”: they may contribute to an “illusion of immediacy” that he would prefer to see disrupted. The second device he describes is the “medial”: a concept he borrows from the linguistic theories of Jakobson, who uses it to refer to the ways in which spoken and written statements foreground their communicative nature. “Medial” statements “point out the atmosphere in which the message is transmitted” (such as this striking Times New Roman font). As will be seen, “medial” statements abound in the works of the *Thinking and Singing* poets, which consistently reflect tensions between speech, writing, and the world. By using the “medial function,” Morton suggests, “contact” between text and world, text and reader, and/or reader and world becomes “content” (37).

Morton’s third device is the “timbral”: a mode that “is about sound in its physicality, rather than about its symbolic meaning” (*Ecology* 39). Although Morton adopts this term from music theory, he emphasizes its philosophical significance as a concept that interrogates the distinction between outside and inside (40). “Timbre derives from the Greek *tympanon*,” he writes: “[t]he taut skin of the drum, even of the eardrum, separates the inside from the outside like a margin, and gives rise to resonant sound when struck” (40). “The timbral voice is vivid with the resonance of the lungs, throat, saliva, teeth, and skull,” and, he notes, “[w]hat is closest to home is also the strangest – the look and sound of our own throat” (40). Musical form and experience are crucial to the eco-poetics of all five *Thinking and Singing* poets, and Lee’s poetry in particular is informed by something very much like Morton’s concept of the “timbral.” Lee calls it the “kintuition” of “cadence” (“Sprawl, Twiddle” 124): a kinaesthetic intuition of the “luminous tumble” and “taut cascade” to which the poet must attune himself if he wishes

to speak of the world with some honesty (*Body* 3). The fourth device that Morton lists is related to one that the Romantic poets knew well: the “Aeolian.” As Morton describes it, this function “ensures that ambient poetics establishes a sense of processes continuing without a subject or an author”; it provides a disembodied, utopian voice – a voice “from nowhere” – or, in poetry, the appearance of images that seem to “arise without or despite the narrator’s control” (41-42). A multi-layered (or multi-vocal) poem may create an effect in which the reader will find it “impossible to determine which layer has priority,” because “[e]ach layer minimizes the input of a conscious subject” (42). This is something that Bringhurst’s polyphonic poetry achieves particularly well, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate. Although Morton’s “Aeolian” is not Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, the concepts have much in common, namely the view that undermining the authority of a singular authorial consciousness is a good thing. Morton’s fifth device is “tone,” by which he means “the quality of vibration” of a piece, or its being in “place” (43). Morton equates this concept roughly with the German sense of “mood” (*Stimmung*), and suggests that it is “a matter of quantity, whether of rhythm or imagery: strictly speaking, the amplitude of vibrations” (45). It could be said that the *angst*-ridden “tone” of Lee’s *Civil Elegies* (1968, 1972) is created by the steady accumulation of images revealing the speaker’s simultaneous blindness and vision, despair and enlightenment.

Morton’s sixth and final device is the “re-mark”: a term he borrows from Derrida, who uses it to describe “a special mark (or a series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks” (48). Morton gives the example of the speech-effect of the bird Woodstock in Charlie Brown cartoons, suggesting that “we don’t know

what he is saying, but we know *that he is speaking*, because the little squiggles above his head are placed in a speech bubble” (49). That speech bubble is the “re-mark,” and in the realm of literary art, the “re-mark” might be the very binding that alerts the reader to the fact that the conglomeration of pulp and ink in her hand is in fact a book. To call attention to the “re-mark” is to call attention to the very systems that produce meaning. A pertinent example in this regard is McKay’s short monograph *The Muskwa Assemblage*, published in 2008 by Gaspereau Press. The thick blue paper used for the book jacket was not only the first homemade paper prepared for sale by the press’ founders, Andrew Steeves and Gary Dunfield, but was also made in part from an old pair of McKay’s blue jeans, which he donated for the task (Steeves, “Printshop Review” n. pag.). The material shape of *The Muskwa Assemblage* highlights the semiotic quality of the form of the book: the artistic “content” of the object does not merely reside in the essay and poem printed inside, because the artistry of the book extends into the paper itself.⁶ The reader’s attention to the form and production of the work may even be inspired to stretch further in order to reflect on the textile industries and human labour that ushered McKay’s jeans into being before the staff at Gaspereau Press transformed their fibres again. “The more extreme the play” with the “re-mark,” Morton suggests, “the more art collapses into non-art. Hence the infamous stories of janitors clearing away installations, thinking they were just random piles of paintbrushes and pots of paint” (51). Although none of the *Thinking and Singing* poets go so far as to make their books seem less than “books” (as poets such as George Bowering, bp nichol, and Carson have done), their aesthetic attention to “form” as “art” produces a similar effect.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, the eco-poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group share similarities with both Bate's and Morton's positions. Like Bate, they return repeatedly to themes of nostalgia and longing for "home," but, like Morton, they also explore the darker concepts of infinity, negation, and "void." As was implied earlier, the influence of negative theology over the works of the *Thinking and Singing* group seems to accord with Morton's "dark ecology": the *via negativa*, after all, embraces darkness, unknowing, and unfamiliarity. It advocates awe for the unassimilable – for greatness or otherness beyond comprehension or imagination – and in so doing, contradicts any notion that human beings have some part to play in the unconcealment of truth. It could be said that the *Thinking and Singing* poets' interest in the *via negativa* helps to counteract the potential dangers of their ecological yearning for the *oikos*, for the negative way is one that advocates acceptance of alienation, as well as radical humility in the face of the unknown. Ultimately, however, this reading is untenable. To a certain extent, all five poets speak of "home" metaphysically, and valorize nostalgia (*nostos*, homeward return + *-algia*, pain) as one of the primary erotic sources from which their eco-poetics spring. Unlike *différance*, the *via negativa* promises that if you follow it far enough through the darkness, you will eventually emerge into light. Ascetic contemplatives do not rest content with their alienation from God, but endure it because it has a foreseeable end, even if only in their unification with Him in death. "Apophatic knowledge," Lilburn has said, "is not quietism, an emptying of mind. It is a naming of things beyond names, a naming which continuously overwhelms itself in a headlong appetite for the object, a desire-filled inquiry rushing past its momentary certainties into

wonder” (“Contemplation” 91). Morton has no faith in the applicability of such thought to ecopoetics because he, like Derrida and Lyotard, believes that to cultivate either nostalgia or *eros* for an idealized object will always be both theoretically and politically pernicious. The degree to which the *Thinking and Singing* poets turn to the *via negativa* as an ecopoetic mode is, then, the greatest point of conflict between their work and Morton’s “dark ecology.”⁷ Rather than exploring how language and identity differ and defer, they choose instead to pay *deference* to a “real” which they may never fully know.

II. Considering “Coterie,” and Further Notes on Method

Lilburn’s essay collection *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy* is the companion volume of an earlier collection, also edited by him, entitled *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews* (1995). While both books include essays by Bringhurst, Lee, McKay, Zwicky, and Lilburn himself, *Poetry and Knowing* also includes pieces by Roo Borson, Patrick Friesen, Kim Maltman, Anne Michaels, Andy Patton, and John Steffler, as well as an Introduction by Stan Dragland. There, Dragland remarks that, far from the “closed-circle taint” occasionally produced by close-knit groups of artists and intellectuals, as far as the writers gathered within *Poetry and Knowing* are concerned, the word “coterie” has positive connotations (15). “The fact is that now in Canada one’s partner or neighbor might be herself a world and an education,” he writes (15). “Here, as elsewhere, coterie is one way of focusing creative energies on the cutting edge” (15).

Dragland’s commentary on the productive potential of “coterie” serves not only to draw partners and neighbours together in a mesh of interconnected learning and teaching

practices, but also to inscribe the collection's writers amongst the avant-garde by associating them with "the cutting edge." As Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy have observed, the notion of avant-garde or cutting-edge artists/intellectuals implies "both a social position – ahead of the mainstream," and "a subject position – that of adventurous, forward-looking individuals" (*Writing in Our Time* 17). Lee, the eldest of the *Thinking and Singing* group (both by age and by the birth of his publishing career), published *Kingdom of Absence*, his first book of poetry, in 1967. Lilburn, the group's "youngest" to publish, released *Names of God*, his first book of poetry, in 1986. All five writers are still producing new work, and indeed, all but Bringhurst published at least one book in 2012. Considered together, they have been producing criticism, scholarship, and poetry for nearly half a century, and, as might be expected, the critical discourses surrounding their works are indicative of the waxing and waning of academic preoccupations over the long arc of those years. Early critical responses to Lee's writings, for instance, tend to represent him as a young nationalist, and to align him with mid-century contemporaries such as Margaret Atwood, Dave Godfrey, and his intellectual mentor, George Grant. As will be seen in Chapter 3, more recent scholarship on his works has been reconsidering the "nationalist" writing of those early years through a more obviously ecocritical lens. Early criticism on McKay's writings, to give a different example, inscribes him within the postmodernist tradition (Dragland 1978, Elmslie, Kruk), connects him to literary coteries such as *Tish* (Bentley 1990, Davey), and compares him to poets such as Robert Kroetsch (Dragland 1978, Jones). Thanks, undoubtedly, in large part to McKay's outspoken commentary on postmodern theory and practice, such connections are rarely

drawn anymore.⁸ What these brief surveys of critical history suggest is that assignments such as “avant-garde” or “forward-looking” are often determined retrospectively, and have much to do with the ways in which individual artists and larger collectives tell the stories of their own coming to be.

In his Preface to *Poetry and Knowing*, Lilburn describes the book as a “conversation at a distance,” one that its readers are invited to “overhear” (7-8).⁹ In his Preface to *Thinking and Singing*, he gives a further account of his inspiration for both collections, which is worth quoting at length:

I wrote to ten poets a few years ago, asking them to think about two questions – what does poetry know and how does it know – and to write about what these questions suggested to them. Their essays were published in *Poetry and Knowing* in 1995, but the questions themselves carried on; it didn’t occur to me to stop asking them. They first appeared in conversations I had been having with Don McKay and Jan Zwicky that began late in the 1980s when I was living with them while I was writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario; these talks took place over kitchen tables first at Coldstream, in that winter of 1989, then at Batchawana Bay, later in the Moosewood Sandhills, Fredericton, Saskatoon, Mayerthorpe, Edmonton, Victoria: they would begin at breakfast and often carry through until lunch. In the early days, I was reading Dennis Lee and Robert Bringhurst for the first time; Jan Zwicky was in correspondence with Bringhurst. It seemed to me that I was engaged in a five-pointed conversation, even though some of the participants spoke chiefly from the page; it kept turning up new

things and pushing them along in a rough direction. (1)

Lilburn's evocative description of this "five-pointed conversation" between himself, Bringhurst, Lee, McKay, and Zwicky recasts the index to *Poetry and Knowing* as a list, not of ten poets asked to think about two questions regarding poetry and epistemology, but rather of a number of writers invited to join a discussion in which five were already taking part. As such, it illustrates the artistry of Lilburn's account, which imaginatively narrates the growth of an intellectual community. Not incidentally, McKay has recently engaged in a similar kind of storytelling: in his Introduction to Nancy Holmes's poetry anthology *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (2009), he deftly writes the other four *Thinking and Singing* poets into a brief history of Canadian nature poetry.

As some of my earlier comments have already suggested, this dissertation is interested in the ways in which many critics and scholars who study the works of the *Thinking and Singing* group have learned *from* them while working to elucidate them. Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky are poets and thinkers whose works often seem to inspire their readers with the desire to apprentice themselves to those who made them. Their pedagogical charisma is evident in the critical discourses surrounding their work, and Mark Dickinson's forthcoming "Canadian Primal" is an important example in this regard. In its early stages as a doctoral dissertation on the poetics of Bringhurst, Lee, and McKay, Dickinson's research methods involved corresponding with the poets, and attending and reporting on their public readings. As his 2009 essay "Canadian Primal: Five Poet Thinkers Re-Define Our Relationship to Nature" attests, Dickinson's ongoing methods have expanded to include visiting the poets, interviewing them, and, in some

cases, hiking with them. As is not uncommon in Canada's academic and literary cultures, much of the best scholarship that exists on the works of the group has been written by fellow poets, academic colleagues, and former students. This does not merely raise interesting questions regarding the productive potential of "coterie," but also suggests that there is much to be gained from considering what it might mean to figure "the poet" as "teacher."

This dissertation's title draws from two sources: the first, Bringhurst's 1982 essay on Lee's poetics, in which he observes that Lee's multitudinous drafts of poems "are temporal incarnations attending upon and dancing *around* an unrealizable, and perhaps itself indeterminate, perfect form" ("At Home" 60). Bringhurst continues by suggesting that, because Lee's poetry consciously evokes his inability to achieve perfection in language, and because its admission of this failure makes the poems no less a pleasure to read, Lee's writing bears the quality of "radiant imperfection" (60-61). Understood in this way, Bringhurst's phrase applies equally well to his own poetry, and also to that of Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky. Although their respective poetics engage differently with questions of ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, phenomenology, and theology, the *Thinking and Singing* poets share a deep conviction that poetry proceeds from, and ought to point back towards, something beyond that which can be said. Zwicky summarizes this ethos most eloquently in her first philosophical treatise, *Lyric Philosophy* (1992, 2012), where she writes that poetry, more than any other art form, is indelibly marked by its incapacity to comprehend the world. In contradistinction to the position held by Heidegger, she argues: "rather than being the most privileged of arts,"

poetry “is the most peculiar, the most fraught with its own defeasibility” (L106).¹⁰

The other source informing this dissertation’s title is a short essay published by McKay in 1995, as the editorial Afterword to a special issue commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of *The Fiddlehead*. There, remarking on the literary longevity of the writers included in the issue, McKay chooses the phrase “writing lives” rather than the word “careers” to describe the extent of those writers’ contributions to literary culture. The word “careers,” he observes, “seems too public and progressivist and never conveys enough of the terrible, wonderful, higgledy piggledy involved” (“Common Sense” 233). McKay’s distinction marks a crucial theme running throughout the works of the *Thinking and Singing* poets: that of the rift – or, at best, the irresolute integrity – between the concepts of profession and vocation.

Broadly speaking, this dissertation conducts two kinds of critical analyses. The first involves the work of reframing the *Thinking and Singing* group’s ecopoetics within discourses surrounding academic cultures and theory in late twentieth-century Canada. Chapter 1 asks and endeavours to answer the following questions: how have the poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group influenced their academic and pedagogic investments, and vice versa, and to what extent are pedagogic strategies and connotations evident in their writings? Chapter 2 explores the poetics of Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky in relation to twentieth-century conversations about phenomenology and reader engagement. Arguing that the reading methods advocated by Lilburn and Zwicky align particularly well with earlier twentieth-century models of phenomenological literary experience, the chapter explores the ecological benefits, and potential perils, of “loving”

reading.

The second kind of analysis informing this dissertation is thematic. Chapter 3 explores how Lee's and McKay's poetics employ contemporary aesthetics of the sublime in order to question the relations between artistic creation, ethical action, and scientific discovery. Chapter 4 focuses on the nature of literary polyphony and musical ekphrasis in the works of Bringham and Zwicky, drawing attention to the formal and philosophical differences that distinguish their respective models of literary musicality from one another. The scholar Russell Morton Brown has recently argued that, despite the Canadian critical tradition of polemicizing against thematic criticism, such readings remain useful. Literature's "thematic elements," he suggests,

could be defined as those units of meaning felt by readers to have a significant distinction from plot or character. Theme thought of in this way arises from a reader's synthesizing of the work's semantic dimensions, which have previously existed dispersed by and through its formal elements. The making of thematic statements is a reading act that follows from observing the existence of patterns that seem to have significance or to delineate a range of significance. (673)

Seen in this light, responding to the works of the *Thinking and Singing* poets with thematic analyses mirrors their own ecopoetic investment in patterns of structure and coherence. It also foregrounds the subjectivity of this dissertation's critical responses, because it recognizes from the outset that thematic patterns are produced by the reader's engagement as much as by the works themselves. Thematic criticism, in other words, is a useful companion to the mode of "sympathetic" reading that has, to a large extent,

informed this dissertation. Rather than seeking unequivocally, as Bate suggests readers should, to listen to the voices of art (or artists) without “enframing” them, this dissertation attempts to understand and elucidate the *Thinking and Singing* poets on their own terms, but also to comment, as Morton encourages ecocritics to do, on the “points of contradiction and deep hesitation” that arise in their work.

Notes

¹ From *Bergschrund* (1975) (100).

² In *Collected Prose* (1997) (170).

³ Each of the *Thinking and Singing* poets has inhabited the academic world at some point in his or her career, and beyond pursuing their own postsecondary and graduate degrees, all have been counted among the Canadian professoriate at one time or another. Bringhurst has worked as an instructor of creative writing at the University of British Columbia, and of typography at Simon Fraser University. He has been employed as an adjunct professor at Trent University, and has also lectured widely across North and South America. The two volumes in which a number of his lectures are gathered – *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks* (2006), and *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (2007) – attest to the variety of institutional and epistemological conversations to which he has added his voice. Lee taught courses in the English department at Victoria College for three years after completing his MA in English literature at the University of Toronto, and in 1967 he became a founding member of Rochdale College, Toronto’s most infamous experiment in “radical” education. Lilburn has been a professor of both literature and philosophy at St. Peter’s College in Muenster, Saskatchewan, and is currently a faculty member in the Department of Writing at the University of Victoria. McKay taught in the English Department at the University of Western Ontario for nearly two decades before moving in 1991 to the University of New Brunswick, where he became Director of

Creative Writing and the editor of *The Fiddlehead*. Zwicky has taught creative writing, interdisciplinary studies, and philosophy (the field in which she earned her MA and PhD) at a number of universities across Canada, Europe, and the US, including Princeton University, and the universities of Alberta, New Brunswick, Victoria, Waterloo, and Western Ontario.

- ⁴ The mid-1990s publication of *Poetry and Knowing* coincided with burgeoning academic interest in ecocriticism in Canada and the US. Moreover, it was largely in studies produced after that book appeared that Canadian literary critics and scholars began to refer to Bringham, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky as “nature,” “environmental,” and/or “eco”-poets. (Some examples of earlier ecological categorization occur in D.M.R. Bentley’s “‘Along the Line of Smoky Hills’: Further Steps Towards an Ecological Poetics” [1990], and Gabrielle Helms’s “Contemporary Canadian Poetry from the Edge: An Exploration of Literary Eco-criticism” [1995] – two early pieces that suggest McKay’s poetry as a subject for ecocritical interpretation.) Nearly two decades after *Poetry and Knowing* was published, it is now commonplace for critics and scholars to speak of the five poets in this way, and, ever since Lilburn reassembled the group in *Thinking and Singing*, it has also become usual to speak as though their writings demonstrate similar *kinds* of ecological engagement (Bowen, Cook, Dickinson, Holmes). It may be an indication of the remarkable capaciousness of the vocabulary of Canadian ecocriticism that, although the words “nature,” “environmental,” and “ecological” each carry a number of competing

connotations, all are being used to refer to the work of the poets at hand.

The word “ecocriticism” was probably coined by William Rueckert in 1978, but, as Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) makes clear, it was not until the early 1990s that the word took on the institutional relevance and circulation that it now has (xvii-xx). Other similar terms have been tested as well, with less popular acceptance: among them, the prefixes “green-” and “bio-.” Many critics currently prefer to attach the “eco-” prefix to criticism, philosophy, and poetry rather than the prefixes “environmental-” or “nature-” because, as Glotfelty puts it, “eco-” implies “interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts,” whereas “enviro-” has been considered by some to be “anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment” (xx). The “nature-” prefix, correspondingly, seems to offer scholars slim chance of escape from the word’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century connotations, whether they be those of the humanistic nature/culture divide, or the various Romantic conceptions of Nature as nurse, guide, therapeutic retreat, or raw matter for creative inspiration and craft.

⁵ This last intuition is supported by the writings of the *Thinking and Singing* group, and it provides an important insight into how their statuses as nature-, environmental-, and eco-poets have been solidified over the past twenty years. The determining factor is not that their writings contain “nature” content, such as Bringham’s oceans, trees, and rivers, Lee’s polluted Toronto, Lilburn’s deer, McKay’s birds, or Zwicky’s Alberta, but

rather that their writings assume the existence of an empirical reality outside the text – the ultimate referent to which language must always refer. As Zwicky suggests, “[t]he nature poet is not *simply* someone whose subject matter lies out of doors” (“Lyric Realism” 85). He or she is, “first and foremost, someone who does not doubt the world is real – or, more precisely, someone who would resist the suggestion that the world is a human construct, a thing that depends on human speaking or knowing to exist” (85).

- ⁶ Indeed, Deborah C. Bowen has suggested that Gaspereau’s “beautifully crafted books themselves embody all that is aesthetically best about the ecological turn” (8).
- ⁷ Derridian deconstruction mounts a serious challenge against negative theology. In the essay “Différance,” Derrida argues that although the “detours, locutions, and syntax” of *différance* “resemble those of negative theology,” only *différance* recognizes that the object of ascetic desire “is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach,” but “the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names” (*Margins* 26-27). For Derrida, there is no “superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being” to which *différance* points through its denials of presence. Rather, *différance* reveals an infinite play of difference and deferral. Absence is its perpetual revelation. This is the crucial point upon which the *Thinking and Singing* poets differ from all postmodern, deconstructive, and poststructuralist theory, whatever similarities they do share. For the five poets, ineffable Being exists. It may not be a god of any kind, nor Nature as the Romantics

knew it, but it is some *thing* existing beyond language, and beyond the “nominal effects” that Derrida’s work reveals.

Informed by Derrida’s thought, Morton’s “dark ecology” argues that, “[c]laiming that valid ecological art falls short of a nature that necessarily cannot be included within it makes a success of failure – a Romantic solution that makes the earth as impenetrably real, and as distant and intangible, as the modern forces against which it is raging” (*Ecology* 160). While it is not entirely fair to say that the poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group make “a success of failure,” as Morton suggests some ecopoetics do, it is true that they often seem to romanticize their *eros* for “distant and intangible” reality. However, it is worth observing that neither Derrida’s nor Morton’s critiques of negative theology deal adequately with the issue of faith. That is to say, their arguments too readily assume that no modern person could believe in the existence of a “hyperessential” or transcendental being, such as God or the “real.” One cannot refute a believer simply by pointing out his or her belief.

Finally, it is also worth noting that Derridean deconstruction has been attacked with precisely the same terms that Derrida and Morton use to indicate their opposition to negative theology, which is to say that Derridean deconstruction has also been called a “gnosis,” and indeed, a form of negative theology itself. For further discussion of this topic, see Michael H. Keefer’s “Deconstruction and the Gnostics” (1985).

⁸ Two important exceptions in this regard are Alanna Bondar’s essay “Attending Guilt-free Birdspeak and Treetalk: An Ecofeminist Reading of the ‘Geopsyche’ in the Poetry

of Don McKay” (2004), and Sophia Forster’s “Don McKay’s Comic Anthropocentrism: Ecocriticism Meets ‘Mr. Nature Poet’” (2002).

The critical tradition surrounding McKay’s writings provides an especially good example of how the *Thinking and Singing* poets have actively shaped their public receptions. In a 1978 review of McKay’s *Long Sault* (1975), Stan Dragland aligns McKay’s poetics with the deconstructive methods of Robert Kroetsch. He observes that Kroetsch’s practice of “deconstructing or unnam[ing] this country” entails “stripping away what is false and derivative in the process of making our own myths and creating our own identity,” and goes on to suggest that “McKay’s contribution to un-nam[ing] in *Long Sault* is to write about his own ways of getting in touch with authentic Canada” (“long sault primer” 29). Although McKay has admired Kroetsch’s work publicly on more than one occasion (“At Work”), their theoretical stances are not remarkably similar. In fact, McKay has used Kroetsch’s postmodern celebrity as a foil for his own ecological perspective.

In the essay “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry” (1993), McKay playfully adopts the voice of a postmodern/poststructuralist interlocutor who antagonizes the author’s views on nature poetry. In a section entitled “Objection and Response,” McKay ventriloquizes: “[w]ell, this is all very well, Mr. Nature Poet, standing by the roadside, outfitted no doubt by L.L. Bean [. . .], but it’s a fact that you’re going to crash into language in about .05 seconds, and that your perception is already saturated with it” (135). In 1993, when “Baler Twine” was first

published in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, McKay would surely have known that Hutcheon's critical study *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) had dubbed Kroetsch "Mr Canadian Postmodern" (160, 183). In McKay's not-altogether-unserious interpellation of himself as "Mr. Nature Poet," it is possible to hear an allusion (and perhaps a resistance) to Kroetsch's iconic stature, and, more generally, to the contemporary glorification of male poet-theorists. Due in large part to McKay's own influence, rather than aligning his work with postmodern poetics, critics today are much more likely to speak of McKay's "resistance to poststructuralist orthodoxy" (Mason 85-86), or to interrogate, as Alanna Bondar does, the ways in which McKay's poetics abject postmodern and poststructuralist theory in the interest of ecological and sociological ethics ("Attending" 67).

It is also worth noting that the 1993 version of "Baler Twine" is different from those that later appeared in Lilburn's *Poetry and Knowing*, and McKay's *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness* (2001). Perhaps counter-intuitively, the *Studies in Canadian Literature* version of the piece is even more colloquial than those printed in less strictly academic settings. McKay makes more parenthetical and qualifying comments in which the narrative "I" of the piece clarifies his rhetoric, and the actions he is describing, for the reader, and he also gestures toward possible readings of his essay as an attempt to "indigenize." Describing his developing taste for "taking drives and walks with raven watching as an agenda," he writes: "I mean, this is an itch, an intuition, not a sacred quest or totem animal rite" (129). Here, he also says of the

concept of “home”: “[o]ne way to set it, a little, at a distance, is to come at it from the vantage point of the phenomenology of the other” (132).

- ⁹ This may be an allusion to John Stuart Mill’s dictum, in “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” (1833), that “eloquence is *heard*,” while “poetry is *overheard*” (8). “Eloquence supposes an audience,” Mill goes on to attest, whereas “[t]he peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (8). Hearing Mill’s voice echoed in Lilburn’s Preface would suggest that the essays included in *Poetry and Knowing* have something of both rhetoric and soliloquy about them – that they straddle the spheres of private feeling, intimate conversation, and public address.
- ¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references to *Lyric Philosophy* refer to the 1992 edition of the book. Both *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* are composed as a series of duons: left- and right-hand pages intended to be read together, as complementary facets of one idea. The “L” and “R” that appear in the parenthetical references to these books indicate, accordingly, the left- and right-hand sides of each numbered duon.

Chapter 1

Thinking and Singing Education, Ecology, and Pedagogy

The academic teaching undertaken by the *Thinking and Singing* poets over the course of their careers has occurred, for the most part, in fields in the humanities. Departments of English, Philosophy, and Writing have been their institutional homes, and, in navigating the “university in ruins,” as Bill Readings has called it, Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky have worked to demonstrate not only the contemporary relevance of education in the humanities, but also the value of ecologically-inflected humanisms for ethical relations between human beings and the non-human world.

Although the university has exerted a very real influence in each of the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ lives, it also occupies symbolic territory in their writings, providing a useful fulcrum against which the poets – and also their readers – can leverage their own epistemological and pedagogic ideals. As I noted in the Introduction, this chapter explores two primary questions: how have the poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* group influenced their academic and pedagogic investments, and vice versa, and to what extent are pedagogic strategies and connotations evident in their ecological ethics and creative pursuits? Straddling the thresholds between the worlds of academic and independent learning and teaching, the poets occupy paradoxically marginal and privileged positions in relation to the university – marginal insofar as their multivarious successes have not necessarily resulted in academic job security, and privileged insofar as they have been able to challenge academic structures and strictures from both within and beyond the university’s walls. As their respective reputations attest, they have been able, as poets, to

“teach and delight,” and, as public intellectuals, to instruct and inspire.

I have also suggested already that by avoiding the critical methodologies of deconstruction and poststructuralism, and by subsuming them under the general heading of “postmodernism,” the *Thinking and Singing* poets tend to foster what Lyotard has called the “nostalgia of the whole and the one”: a sense of intellectual homesickness occasioned by the twentieth century’s increased awareness of the role played by language games in the creation of meaning and truth (*Postmodern Condition* 81-82). Such nostalgia forms the bases of their respective ecopoetics, all of which explore, to varying degrees, what it means to be “at home” in a world made uncanny (*unheimlich*, un-homey) through existential alienation, the secularization and technological expansion of modernity, and, most basically, the phenomenological distinction between the “self” and its environment. Lilburn’s writings refer to the concept of *apokatastasis* to indicate homeward longing; for him, the word suggests “the achievement of an accord – amounting to an identity – among all things, a ‘remembering’ of a community beyond imagination, yet within the scope of desire” (*Living in the World* 99). This “community beyond imagination” is a kind of prelapsarian paradise that may never have existed, but that nonetheless serves enormous value as an imagined ideal (Lilburn, “Horse Hitting” 18). As Section I of this chapter suggests, it is possible to understand the university itself as having figured, for the *Thinking and Singing* group, as both an un-homey place and a reflection, however diminished, of an ideal community of thought. Two examples – Lee’s mid-century reflections on the moral failure of academic education, and Bringham’s later exhortations to the university on behalf of First Nations cultures and art – are my focus in this regard.

Although McKay's and Zwicky's respective relations to the university could also be framed similarly, Section II of this chapter explores their works in a different context, as I consider three ways of reading the *Thinking and Singing* group's poetry and ecopoetics with pedagogy in mind. Beginning with Bringhurst, I explore the poem as "signpost" – pointing the reader towards outside "realities" referenced in the text. Turning to McKay, I examine the poem as "gadfly" – defamiliarizing goad on the path to unlearning. Finally, concluding with Zwicky, I study the poem as "dynamite" – potential instigator of the "flash" of lyric insight. It may well be asked why Lee's and Lilburn's poetry and poetics do not also figure here. In the case of Lilburn's writings, the omission is practical; his theologically-inflected reflections on poetry and learning are taken up in more detail in Chapter 2, where I explore the relations between exegesis, anagogic reading, and phenomenology in his work. As for Lee's, I would suggest that the epistemological and pedagogic themes that run throughout his writing for adults reveal more about his personal exertions as a student of the *via negativa* than they suggest ways of reading his own work "pedagogically." This is a topic to which I return in Chapter 3.

I. The "Programmatic Polemics" of Dennis Lee and Robert Bringhurst

In *Working in English: History, Institution, Resources* (1996), Heather Murray suggests that there exists in Canada "a distinct if minor genre" in academic and literary cultures: "the visionary or revisionary programmatic polemic" (68). As "an early example" of the mode, Murray points to the Confederation poet Charles G.D. Roberts's essay "The Teaching of English" (1888). Published during his employment as a professor at King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia, Roberts's essay reflects what Murray calls "the bizarre

but then common allocation of his teaching duties,” which at the time included instruction in English, French, political economy, and logic (68). “The Teaching of English” seems to be a manifesto more than a polemic: its purpose is to demonstrate the inherent value of humanistic studies (and literary studies in English in particular) in an age that was becoming increasingly enamoured of scientific research and education. Roberts aligns himself with Arnoldian humanism against the more “modern” and scientifically-oriented stance of T.H. Huxley, who believed that “for the purpose of attaining real culture, an exclusively scientific education is at least as effectual as an exclusively literary education” (Readings 34, 74). Roberts argues, for example, that “culture and enlightened citizenship” are among the objects of studies in English, as is the capacity to recognize “the essential unity existing between beauty and rightness” (n. pag.). Literature, he says, “treats of the wisest and most beautiful things said and done by the wisest men” (n. pag.) – a statement that is practically equivalent to the spirit of Arnold’s argument, in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864), that literature manifests the “best” ideas, “current at the time” (260), while criticism should be “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world” (282). As many scholars and critics have since made clear, however, propagating the so-called “best that is known and thought” is anything but a disinterested endeavour. Murray’s use of the word “polemic” highlights the often adversarial nature of the inner workings of educational institutions, and of culturally-sanctioned epistemologies more generally. From the Greek *polemos* (war), the word generally connotes hostility, dispute, and controversy. Her notion of a “visionary or revisionary programmatic polemic” suggests, however – and productively so – that even the most

articulate and seemingly lucid programs for university reform can function as orders to troops on the front-lines of pedagogical politics.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto in the late 1960s, Lee witnessed a climate of international tumult within and beyond the academic world. The effects of the student revolutions in France in 1968 were felt in Canada, as were the waves of student protests in the US denouncing the war in Vietnam (Readings 135-37). In *The University in Ruins* (1996), Bill Readings suggests that the events of the 1960s “broke with a certain narrative of the University education as the individual experience of emancipation in the passage of a virtual student from ignorance to knowledge, from dependence to autonomy and competence” (144-45). By this he means that students refused to accept any longer the German vision of academic study as “both a single moment and an eternity: the single moment of the awakening of consciousness and the eternity of absolute knowledge” (144-45).

In May 1968 the students sought in the pedagogic relation the grounds for a new social orientation. Socrates knew that pedagogy took place under the sign of *eros* rather than of *logos* [. . .] The students refused a logocentric pedagogy, refused to reduce their activity of learning to either a matter of the transmission of information (a process of training for bureaucratic roles within the state) or a timeless and apolitical activity. And at the same time, they refused to become intellectuals who claim to incarnate the *logos*, to speak for others because they have understood them fully in a way that those others have not understood themselves. (146-47)¹

Broadly speaking, this is the cultural moment in which Lee inhabited the university, and

although he soon moved away from academic spheres, he left a distinct impression when he went.

The philosopher George Grant once remarked of Lee – his young editor, publisher, mentee, and friend – that “of all the academics who were rightly moved by the searchlight” of the war in Vietnam, he “was the one who saw that at the heart of those events was an affirmation about ‘being’” (“Dennis Lee” 230):

Along with many others he saw that Canada was part of an empire which was trying to impose its will by ferocious means right around the other side of the globe. He saw with many others that Canada was complicit in the acts of that empire and that that complicity was expressed in the politics of Lester Pearson. He saw with some others that the technological multiversity was not outside that complicity but central to it. This was true not only in the obviously technological parts of the university, but had taken hold in the very way that the liberal arts were practiced. (230).

Lee’s attempts to intercede in university programming are best represented by his involvement with Rochdale College, Toronto’s infamous experiment in alternative education in the late 1960s and early ’70s. Having emerged from undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Toronto, and a stint as a lecturer at Victoria College, Lee imagined Rochdale as the kind of hub where learning could be pursued and exchanged freely between willing participants without being impeded by the powers of either bureaucracy or political corruption.² The saga of that experimental school has been chronicled by David Sharpe in *Rochdale: The Runaway College* (1987), where he charts Rochdale’s hopeful beginnings through to its ignominious conclusion, and paints a vivid

portrait of what Lee has referred to as the school's "surreal mix of battle zone and garden of earthly delights" (*Body* 113). Sharpe describes Rochdale as "a twin tower of raw concrete and straight lines," and explains that in 1970, it was "the largest co-operative student residence in North America, the largest of more than 300 free universities in North America, and soon to be known across the country as the largest drug supermarket in North America" (*Runaway College* 11). For Lee, the inception of Rochdale College was the result of his "getting radicalized" (77), but, as Sharpe's research recounts, Lee was apparently not radical enough for Rochdale. As one of the original "resource people" at the college, he was soon pushed out by those who were less interested than he was in "educational ideal[ism]" (20, 40-41). As Lee himself describes it, the atmosphere at the school eventually made him "shell-shocked" (*Body* 114). "One month into the building's life," he writes, "and I'd become history – a nerdy troglodyte from the far-off, risible days of university reform" (114).

Lee's published writings on the Rochdale experiment are few in number: his 1968 essay "Getting to Rochdale" depicts his excitement and hope for the project, whereas the commemorative essay "Judy Merrill Meets Rochdale College" (1992) cannot fully disguise his frustration with the school's eventual demise. One of the most fascinating qualities of "Getting to Rochdale" is the extent to which the essay foreshadows the later arguments of Lee's manifesto "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space" (1973). It is there, in "Cadence, Country, Silence," that Lee first defines his idiosyncratic use of the word "cadence": the "churning" that he can sense, as he says, "[i]f I withdraw from immediate contact with things around me" (*Body* 3). But the essay is about more than the phenomenological energy to which Lee has attuned both his body and his poetry

throughout his writing life; it is also about nationalistic and existential alienation, for “cadence” has a “local nature,” Lee writes, and “if we live in space which is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking problematic” (9-10). Reflecting on a formative experience of artistic and civic stagnation, Lee describes himself as having been “an intellectual sellout” in his youth (13), and as he proceeds through a number of soul-searching reflections, he eventually reaches the conclusion that “[t]he impasse of writing that is problematic to itself is transcended only when the impasse becomes its own subject, when writing accepts and enters and names its own condition as it names the world” (21). As Lee’s writings on mid-twentieth-century education attest, these attitudes are transferable to learning as well. Just as, in Lee’s view, writing must name “its own condition as it names the world,” so too does “authentic” education require phenomenological attunement, contemplation, and self-reflexivity.

As it appears in the essay collection *The University Game* (1968), co-edited by Lee and his Rochdale colleague Howard Adelman, “Getting to Rochdale” begins with the following passage:

I remember sitting in a seminar, upstairs in the cloisters of University College, one overcast day in the autumn of my M.A. year. We were about six weeks into the term. The room was crowded with graduate students, and we were listening to two professors of English who were speaking about the movements of twentieth-century literature. The subject fascinated me; Yeats, I think it was. They were very knowledgeable men, and they spoke well, and I can recall my sense of utter estrangement as I wound my way through the realization that what they were saying had no purchase on me, that the experience of being in that seminar was

without meaning for me, that doing graduate work had not become real, and that my entire undergraduate and high school education had been mainly a sham. (69)

In this passage, the Sartrean and Heideggerian themes that occupy so many of Lee's later writings are distinctly audible, although here they apply to his conflicted experience as a student rather than as a poet and citizen. His declared "sense of utter estrangement," the words that have "no purchase," his sense of finding himself in a place "without meaning," the fact that his graduate work "had not become real," his palpable feeling of inauthenticity – all of these descriptions could well be lifted from either Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) or Heidegger's *Existence and Being* (1949), and the same *angsty* mood recurs, in more or less the same form, in both "Cadence, Country, Silence" and *Civil Elegies* (1968, 1972).³ Significantly, Lee's narration also gestures towards the epiphanic mode, as he concludes: "I can still feel the grain of the wood in the table under my hand as I sat waiting, and the sense of a kind of impersonal process by which the people, the words, the situation re-aligned themselves in a different perspective" (69). Lee's tactile memory of the wood's grain commingles with his vision of people and words becoming "re-aligned" in order to produce a dually phenomenological and apophatic epiphany – one that mediates between visionary abstraction and sensory overload, and ends finally with the revelation of unknowing rather than knowing.

"Getting to Rochdale" distinguishes between the "real academy" and what Lee refers to as the mere "surface of education" (70). Not surprisingly, he equates his time at the University of Toronto with the latter, and aligns autodidactic learning – pursued outside of classes and away from the "superficial rules" of academic institutions – with the former:

What I came to in that English seminar, in the fall of '63, was the simple recognition that this class, with its shallow, irrelevant busywork, *was* the University. The surface of education, the inessentials of education, the travesty of education was what the university was about. I could get on with what I really cared about, or not get on with it; that was my business. But what the university cared about, and insisted on, and gave marks for, was everything that got in the way. (70)

Lee goes on to describe the university as a “fraud,” and sets it against the “real education” that he claims self-motivated students are better able to achieve on their own (71-72), implying (as the sophists said of Socrates) that the university is a false teacher. When he writes of his own employment as a lecturer at Victoria College, moreover, he uses the politically-fraught term “collaboration,” and speaks of his “abiding sense of the grossness of our hypocrisy” (71-72). All of this anticipates the polemical, dissatisfied voice presented in “Cadence, Country, Silence” and *Civil Elegies* – a tone that is characteristic of most of Lee’s writing from those years. Later in the essay, he writes:

We are talking about the sellout of the universities, their conversion from places where liberal education was possible though difficult to places where liberal education is discouraged by the temper and method of the university itself. And to acquiesce in that as inevitable when the stakes are so high – I mean, to shrug and give up – can become the coziest way of bartering your remaining self-respect. (72-73)

Correspondingly, the “lyric self” of Lee’s *Civil Elegies* proclaims himself to be fed up with Canada, a “nation of / losers and quislings” (44),⁴ whose citizens seem to him to be

blissfully unaware of their complicity in America's imperial violence, and in the accelerating assimilation of their culture by the American market and media. Although he eventually resigns himself (rather sardonically) to honouring his "country's failures of nerve and its / sellouts" (55), the poem's speaker also condemns Canada's citizens for their acquiescence in their nation's demise. Comparing the events of the war in Vietnam to those of the Holocaust, he makes a scathing reference at one point to "the tired professors of Freiburg, Berlin" (48). The allusion not only points "vaguely" to Heidegger, as D.M.R. Bentley has noted ("Empty Expanse" 6), but specifically pinpoints Heidegger's "sellout" as a teacher, rather than simply as a philosopher or scholar. Connecting Heidegger's association with the Nazi party to the failure of German education, and of Western democracy's so-called leaders more generally, *Civil Elegies* implies that the same relationship exists between the moral failure of higher education in North America and the extension of the war in Vietnam.

In "Getting to Rochdale," Lee's ascetic investment in silence also surfaces as he speaks of a responsibility borne by students and scholars alike. "If there cannot be honest regrets there should at least be silence," he writes (73). "That is what there should have been in that English seminar in the U.C. Cloisters – silence, while we M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s and professors contemplated our appalling unfamiliarity with education" (73). For Lee, the "liberal" in "liberal education" should signify the encouragement of "the contemplation of energizing form in what a student comes to know" (74), and it should also provide the student with "the first-hand apprehension of his discipline's coherence and beauty" (75). His stated desire in the essay is to be able to participate in a "broad or deep community of the mind" (76) – a community that he believes to be impossible

within the walls of the twentieth-century university. His dissatisfaction with his “sham” education – well-suited to Grant’s sense of the technological multiversity’s complicity in imperial greed – anticipates the positions of many proponents of critical theory who would soon begin to revolutionize literary studies by politicizing them (and who would do so, moreover, precisely by exposing the shortcomings and disfigurements of their disciplines rather than their “coherence and beauty”). Lee’s conviction that the “real academy” could only be built outside the university leaves little room for the possibility that students and scholars might be able to alter the institution from within. For him, the literary world seems to have been better equipped to provide the homey “community of mind” that he sought.

By urging the university to reform itself, rather than giving up on the institution entirely, Bringhurst’s “programmatic polemicizing” has taken a different approach. “The Polyhistorical Mind,” one of the many lectures that he gave in university settings throughout the 1990s and 2000s, is particularly illustrative of the tensions between “academic” epistemologies and the learning that Bringhurst has pursued outside the university’s walls. Bringhurst delivered the “The Polyhistorical Mind” as the Third Ashley Lecture at Trent University in 1994, and its essay version opens his 2006 essay collection *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*. The essay begins with an anecdote, as Bringhurst recounts a visit to England years earlier, and a disturbing conversation between himself and the “recently retired head of a prestigious girls’ school” (15). Their conversation touches on language, “as postmodern conversations often do,” and Bringhurst eventually realizes that the woman with whom he is conversing – who has “been what is called an educator all her adult life” – is entirely ignorant of the fact that

Native American languages exist (15). “The Polyhistorical Mind” is an extended, passionate call to those who inhabit the university to make it more inclusive of First Nations peoples, cultures, arts, and epistemologies. “We’ve inherited an education system with many defects and limitations,” Bringhurst argues, “but it too is a culture and can reach beyond itself” (28).

Bringhurst’s idea of the university draws from his broader view that “[e]very culture, like a language, is an endless set of possibilities that works with finite means” (28). Moreover, his repeated emphasis on “culture” throughout the “The Polyhistorical Mind” serves to highlight a crucial distinction that he makes early on in the piece:

We often speak of being related by blood and of knowing things in the bone. These are, or they can be, beautiful metaphors. And in my line of work, the metaphor is an essential and serious tool, not a decorative device. But every metaphor has its bounds. [. . .] If I tell myself that my Haida and Navajo teachers have inborn knowledge that other people lack, I had better know that I’m speaking in metaphor. Otherwise, I am committing the same intellectual error as a colonist in the Transvaal who tells himself that Europeans possess inherent abilities that black Africans lack. That mistake can get much uglier yet – as when the Serb militiaman rapes a Muslim woman and tells her that the child she bears will be a Serb. We do not have the same *crime* in these three cases, but we do have the same intellectual error: that is, the confusion of nature and culture. We have real human beings trapped in demented metaphors. (23)

By making this distinction between nature and culture, Bringhurst is evidently acknowledging the longstanding invader-settler habit of romanticizing Indigenous

peoples as having “inborn knowledge” of (or “natural affinity” with) the land/earth. He is also defining his own ecological humanism in contradistinction to that tradition. Thus it is that when he speaks of the ecological lessons evinced by “classical” Haida culture and art, he affirms that “[t]hey are the legacy, after all, of peoples who knew how to live in this land for thousands of years without wrecking it,” and adds: “I do not see a superabundance of such knowledge and intelligence around me now” (26). Uninterested in appropriating mythic or mystical elements (real or imagined) of First Nations cultures, Bringhurst focuses on the learning practices that he recognizes in First Nations histories, perceiving a “difference between, on the one hand, families of hunters learning their way through the landscape step by step, and on the other hand, boatload after boatload of refugees uprooted from a sedentary life in one land, crossing the great ocean to another they know nothing whatever about” (20). He writes:

The first kind of movement encourages learning, alertness, adaptation, and it generally allows the kind of *time* this adaptation requires. The second kind of movement is abrupt. It involves the imposition of remembered patterns, or idealized versions of remembered patterns, even where they will not fit. Often it involves the building of large-scale artificial realities. [. . .] Europeans arriving in North America routinely tried to remake the place in the altered image of home. The maps are still replete with names like Nouvelle France, New England, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, New York. That habitual refusal to accept the actual world continues to this day. It is responsible for Disneyworld, the West Edmonton Mall, and for the bridge that will soon reduce Prince Edward Island to one more faceless piece of the mainland. (20)

This is an extraordinarily intriguing passage, as its logic turns on an occluded gesture towards the writings of Jean Baudrillard, who in *Simulacra & Simulation* (1981) describes full-scale abstractions in the modern world. “The territory no longer precedes the map,” he states; rather, it is “the map that precedes the territory” (1). Disneyland, he adds later, “exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that *is* Disneyland [. . .] Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (12). In “The Polyhistorical Mind,” Bringhurst juxtaposes the “large-scale artificial realities” that invader-settler cultures have created in the “New World” with the earlier map-making practices of ancient Alexandria and Baghdad, and, implicitly, with the unrecorded mental maps of lands traversed by nomadic peoples. The map of Canada as it exists today, he asserts, is a “fiction” (21). This argument is noteworthy on several counts, not least of which is the fact that Bringhurst deftly employs rhetoric shared by a postmodernist thinker in order to challenge the postmodern university on its own grounds. Later in the essay, he returns to his conceit of the “map,” and states:

A literary map of this country would be first of all a map of languages, several layers deep. On the base layers, there would be no sign at all of English and French. At least sixty-five, perhaps as many as eighty, different languages, of at least ten different major families, were spoken in this country when Jacques Cartier arrived. Each and every one of them had a history and a literature. It is with them, or what remains of them, that the study of Canadian literature must start. (24)

In an earlier version of this essay that appeared in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* shortly after the lecture was delivered, Bringhurst also asks:

doesn't our literature, and our literary history, have to begin with the voices that spoke from this place first? If that is the truth, the university must find room for it. Indeed, the university must centre itself around it – no matter how inconvenient it may be for a teacher of literature, full of postmodernist theory, to go back to school and learn to construe a basic Ojibwa or Haida or Chipewyan sentence. (“Point-Counterpoint” 172)⁵

“The Polyhistorical Mind” presents an image of the university as, ideally, a place of universal learning. Bringhurst writes that he once imagined it to be “a place where everything that existed was a bona fide subject of study, and where perspectives could range freely between the global and the microscopic” (*The Tree* 27). Ultimately, Bringhurst’s goal in addresses such as “The Polyhistorical Mind” is “visionary and revisionary”: he wishes to inspire change, and to persuade the university to be something more than simply the state-driven machine that both Grant and Lee believed it to be.

The lecture’s delivery and first publication both coincided with the period in which Bringhurst was working on the translations that he would eventually publish as the controversial trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Myhtellers*. The first volume of that trilogy, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Myhtellers and Their World* (1999), provides a hefty introduction to the two volumes that followed: *Nine Visits to the Mythworld: Ghandl of the Qayahll Laanas* (2002), and *Being in Being: The Collected Works of a Master Haida Myhteller* (2001). *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, which was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize, translates a series of myths that were dictated to the ethnographer John Swanton in 1900 by Ghandl of the Qayahll Laanas, whom Bringhurst describes as one of “two of the finest oral poets I know of, in any

language, on any continent” (“Point-Counterpoint” 166). *Being in Being* translates myth cycles that were dictated to Swanton by the other oral poet whom Bringham prais in “The Polyhistorical Mind”: Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay.

Bringham’s publication of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* was followed shortly by a nomination for a Governor General’s Award, and the book also engendered a heated public debate concerning the nature of intellectual and cultural property, copyright law, and cultural appropriation in Canada. As Nicholas Bradley has noted, the Haida myth cycles that Bringham translated had been “paid for, transcribed, entered into the ethnographic record, and made accessible in libraries and archives to the scholarly community” well before Bringham translated them, and they had also “passed out of copyright into the public domain” (“Remembering Offence” 894). However, their status in the “public domain” was determined by Canadian and US copyright law rather than the standards of Haida property rights, and they “were made without the official consultation of, or sanctioning from, Haida elders or the Council of the Haida Nation” (894). In June 1999, Vince Collison, who was then the deputy chief councillor for the Old Masset Village council, was quoted in the *Times-Colonist* as stating that “the council viewed Bringham’s work as cultural appropriation” (Bradley, “We Who Have Traded” 141). Later that year, the *Globe and Mail* published an article by Adele Weder, who reported “that some Haida asserted that Bringham did not know the language or the people,” and “also noted that some Haida claimed intellectual ownership of the stories” (141). Bringham responded to Weder’s piece with an article entitled “Since When Has Culture Been About Genetics?” (1999), which the *Globe and Mail* published the following week. In it, as Bradley notes, “he acknowledges the sensitive nature of the stories and the means

by which they were recorded, but he insists that the texts were not stolen by John Swanton” (141).⁶

Later, Bringhurst also justified his translations of the Haida myth cycles by appealing to the shared humanity of all authorial voices involved. In an interview with Thérèse Rigaud that is included as a “supplement” to a boxed set of the *Masterworks* published by Douglas & McIntyre in 2002, he states that Indigenous literatures are “parts of the human heritage, parts of the old-growth forest of the human mind” (10). He goes on to note that the Haida myth cycles he translated are “great human achievements,” and attests: “[m]y loyalty as an artist is to individual humans and to the species as a whole, but not to much of anything in between” (11). He later remarks: “[t]he Haida nation has my admiration and respect, and my prayers for a fine future, but I am not for hire as its spokesman, nor as anybody’s spokesman. I owe allegiance to something else, which has no president, no mayor, no royal house. My tribe is my species, with which I already have quarrels enough” (14).

The image of the “forest of the human mind” that Bringhurst uses in his interview with Rigaud echoes similar metaphors that appear in “The Polyhistorical Mind,” where he speaks of “the big, discontinuous brain to which we all in our way contribute, and on which we all depend,” and of “the global forest of language” – which, as he notes, has been steadily depleted “over the past three centuries” (*The Tree* 31). “Both literature and language are human universals,” he argues, “as natural to us as feathers are to birds. We extend them and elaborate them, yes – but as Aristotle knew, poetics is rightly a branch of biology” (33). Bringhurst’s essay proposes a vision of a universal, but aggregated, human mind – a whole system that, like a forest (as he says), is “more than the sum of its parts”

(28). As the title “The Polyhistorical Mind” attests, this universal mind might be imagined as being densely layered like the linguistic “map” of Canada that Bringhurst describes elsewhere in the lecture – voluminous with historical and cultural multiplicity. It is an attractive vision in many respects, but it should also give readers pause.

In the context of “The Polyhistorical Mind,” Bringhurst’s humanism is deployed in order to advocate for the active inclusion of First Nations languages and cultures throughout all levels of university education. In the context of his interview with Rigaud, however, it is used as a defence against accusations of cultural appropriation and “offence.” In the first instance, Bringhurst is acting as an ally, attempting to “Indigenize!” the university just as Len Findlay suggests scholars should (see Introduction). In the second, however, the same humanistic logic appears to work solely to Bringhurst’s advantage. Whereas invader-settler cultures have historically justified cultural apartheid by representing Indigenous peoples as less than “human,” Bringhurst’s universal vision of the species as a whole uses *shared* humanity to his benefit instead, allowing him to counter objections to the *Masterworks* by suggesting that as human cultural products, the Haida myth cycles dictated by Ghandl and Skaay “belong” to some degree to all of humanity. Although Bringhurst’s arguments in “The Polyhistorical Mind” (and, indeed, in the *Masterworks* themselves) are highly attentive to the imperial violences that have shaped relations between First Nations and invader-settler cultures, in his interview with Rigaud, he does not seem willing to countenance the fact that distinctions between the “human” and the “non-human” have not, historically, been agreed upon by all, but have tended to be enforced by those in power. Within the context of the *Masterworks* controversy, Bringhurst’s humanism seems neither visionary nor revisionary, but simply

polemical. As with Lee's, his writings attest to the tensions existing between the university as it might be imagined as an ideal, and the academic world as it exists in reality – as an inherently fraught space in which cultural values and political assumptions must be re-negotiated continuously.⁷

II. Reading *Thinking and Singing* Poetics with Pedagogy in Mind

In a 2008 essay entitled “Lyric Realism: Nature Poetry, Silence, and Ontology,” Zwicky suggests that the nature poem is “a kind of ontological signpost” (88). Writing that nature poets are “a species, a large species, of a genus we might call ‘lyric thinkers,’” she explains:

A lyric thinker is someone whose understanding is driven by intuitions of coherence. Her experience, in this respect, can only be gestured towards, not captured, in a medium like language – whose use insists on distinctions that are absent in lyric awareness. A nature poem, in this sense, is, then, never more than a finger pointing at the moon: its words do not ‘contain’ reality, but merely tell us in what direction we should look. (88)

“Nature poetry’s business is not actually words,” she adds, “it is the practice, the discipline, of wholeness, a coming-home to the unselfed world” (88).⁸ In what follows, I adopt Zwicky’s description of the nature poem as “signpost” in order to suggest that Bringham’s poetry and poetics can be considered “pedagogically” if the reader willingly undertakes to treat his poems as referential signs of this kind.

In a 1992 dialogue with Bringham, Laurie Ricou indicates that the poet has seemed to align himself with Wallace Stevens in contradistinction to Pound. Stevens’s

poetry explicates “a central core of thought,” Ricou suggests, while Pound’s poems are “systems of references, pointing excitedly to persons, places, things, and texts outside themselves, which the reader really is asked to investigate” (95).⁹ Despite Bringhurst’s apparent perception that his work is most like Stevens’s, Ricou confesses that he associates Bringhurst’s poetry with Pound’s instead. “I can’t just *listen* to your poems and be satisfied,” he writes (95). “I need to find out, because your poems [. . .] often contain their own evidence that *you* needed to find out about persons, places, and things, and that finding out made the poem” (95). As the rest of the dialogue illustrates, Ricou has gone to literal measures to fulfill his personal need to learn about the “persons, places, and things” that Bringhurst’s poetry names. Having encountered the textual traces of a pelican, a saxifrage, and “two kinds of pines” in the poem “Sunday Morning” (which is a somewhat unconventional epithalamium for McKay and Zwicky), Ricou relays a number of pieces of information that he has gathered about the migration paths of pelicans and the reproductive processes of bristlecone pines. Towards the conclusion of the dialogue, he observes to Bringhurst: “what I actually like best about your poems is that they are as likely to send me to a botanical garden as to the *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*” (99).

As Ricou’s testimony confirms, one way of engaging with Bringhurst’s poetry is to treat it as though it is literally directing the reader to seek out the “granular, fecund detail which the poet is curious about” (to use Bringhurst’s phrase) (96). In this light, a poem such as “Sunday Morning” takes on a didactic quality insofar as it might inspire its readers to practice the same kind of ecological apprenticeship that its author appears to have pursued. Having encountered the following lines –

The mind is not-yet gathered beads of water
 in the teeth of certain leaves -
Saxifrage punctata, close by the stream
 under the ridge leading south to Mount Hozameen,
 for example – (*Selected* 169)

– Ricou pursues the poem’s unspoken directions, reaching out to other sources of instruction in the world beyond the text. “I called Judy Newton, at the UBC Botanical Garden, and she told me to come to read the books on saxifrages,” he notes (99). “When I got there, Judy said she might have a sample, and sure enough, there it was – gathered in 1971. Would I like a photocopy? I didn’t know you could photocopy saxifrage, but when I saw Judy with tiny tweezers lift the dried *saxifraga punctata* from the folder and place it reverently on the glass, I thought I understood something about your poem and the connections it establishes with places” (99).

Significantly, Ricou begins his “investigation” by turning to the university rather than the forest, and the real-world specimen of saxifrage he encounters is no longer a living creature, but a desiccated sample kept stored in a folder and filed for study and reference. In this sense, the “real” *saxifraga punctata* is not very different from the one found in Bringhurst’s poem, nor do the informative descriptions that Ricou provides elsewhere in the essay suggest that he has done anything more than look up pelicans, saxifrages, and pines in reference texts. Indeed, the Works Cited that accompanies the dialogue lists *The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding* (1988), by Jack Connor, *Pines: Drawings and Descriptions of the Genus Pinus* (1984), by Farjon Aljos, *Words for Birds: A Lexicon of North American Birds with Biographical Notes* (1972), by Edward S.

Gruson, and a number of other encyclopaedia and books of such kind (100). Although Ricou's testimony attests to the referential possibilities of a poem like "Sunday Morning," ultimately, his investigative methods do not take him far beyond the world of semiotic representation. Ironically, Ricou's description of the botanist placing the dried sample of saxifrage "reverently on the glass" of the photocopy machine – and his concomitant suggestion that this moment sparks new insight into the "connections" that Bringhurst's poem "establishes with places" – is highly ironic. As the sly Socrates of Book 10 of the *Republic* would surely note, Ricou seems to be trailing copies of copies, not "granular, fecund detail."

One thing is clear from Ricou's readerly/critical engagement with "Sunday Morning," and that is that in order to conceive of a poem as a "signpost" that tells its readers "where to look" in order to discover "being," "coherence," or the "world" (Zwicky, "Lyric Realism" 88), readers must approach the poem with certain assumptions about its author's own ecological praxes and intent. As Ricou notes, the inspiration that provoked him "to find out" followed directly from his interpretation of Bringhurst's poems – and of Bringhurst himself – as having done that legwork too (95). Evidently, the personality and public persona of the poet is a crucial forerunner to any reading that suggests that a poem has somewhere specific to point, or something specific to teach.

McKay is a fine example of the kind of public regard that draws readers to initiate novice relations with nature poets and poems. In one of the essays collected in *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (2001), McKay adapts Levinasian ethics enough to suggest that readers should cultivate the habit of addressing natural phenomena in person – a practice that would draw from the literary tradition of apostrophe (O Moon, O

Carburetor), but would endeavour to be more colloquial and literal-minded. Most importantly, he argues, it would offer up language as a gift to the other whilst simultaneously foregrounding its inability to circumscribe it. This would be particularly effective, McKay suggests, in bringing to light the cultural assumptions that inhere in the very act of naming. “Suppose we read the trail guide *to* the creature we are regarding,” he writes, “as though putting on a performance of our native arts for a distinguished visitor to language” (*Vis* 65). “This would have the virtue of being both formal and absurd, and so bring the solace of ritual enactment to the great ache of our inevitable separation” (65). McKay’s poem “Twinflower” exemplifies the species of interaction he has in mind:

[. . .] Hold the book open,
 leaf to leaf. Listen now,
Linnaea Borealis, while I read of how
 you have been loved –
 with keys and adjectives and numbers, all the teeth
 the mind can muster. How your namer,
 Carolus Linnaeus, gave you his
 to live by in the system he devised. (*Apparatus* 5)

This gesture of address implicitly assigns a Levinasian Face to the twinflower, and in so doing highlights the potential ethical content of the lyrical apostrophe. Importantly, it is not merely a rhetorical gesture: as McKay affirms in a 2006 interview with Ken Babstock, he has made such an address literally, out in the woods, trail guide in hand (“Appropriate” 178). It is an impressive testament to the enthusiasm with which McKay’s readers follow his lead that Clare Goulet has also put this gesture into practice, making

the poet's oratorical address to the other a practical component of her university teaching. In a paper presented to the Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase in 2006, Goulet asks: "What if we share our joke with the subject rather than at its expense, or take up Don McKay's suggestion that we read the field guide *to* the creature?" (217). "At Dalhousie and Mount Saint Vincent," she continues, "I've seen the latter approach foster deep and long-term appreciation by the student for any subject—an appreciation where none, prior to the exercise, existed—from laboratory technician Drisdelle's formal address to a parasitic worm to a four-woman interpretative dance of *Alice's Adventures* to 25 students crammed in a campus bathroom as Dominique read her poem *to* the toilet-paper dispenser" (217).

Turning now from the kinds of author-reader-world relationships that are suggested by examples such as these, I would now like to consider a more definitively formal way of reading an ecological poem with pedagogy in mind. Stan Dragland has remarked pithily that "McKay's poetry is be-wildering. It engineers controlled breakdowns," and "writes language against itself" ("Be-wildering" 884). As Dragland also observes, McKay's characteristic way of getting his poetry to do this is through his use of metaphor, which, as McKay explains, can "use language's totalizing tendency against itself, making a claim for sameness that is clearly, according to common linguistic sense, false" (*Vis* 68). Characteristically, McKay's poetry and poetics celebrate art's ability to occasion defamiliarization, and, in so doing, to honour the "wilderness" of things. In the essay "Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry" (1993), McKay defines "wilderness" as "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis* 21). Although he suggests that such wilderness seems to be noticed

most often “in the negative,” “as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet” (or, in other words, as what Heidegger has referred to as the “brokenness” of tools), McKay is far more interested in how wilderness can be made visible by “the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism” (21). His sense that a well-turned metaphor can help to bring about such moments of surprise and altered perception is the closet that his ecopoetics comes to suggesting that poetry participates in the Heideggerian “clearing” or “unconcealment” of truth.

Warren Heiti has said of Socrates that he was like a “stingray,” “shocking” his interlocutors and listeners into *aporia* – “a state of unknowing” (Heiti, “Ethics” 120). The simile is refreshing and apt, but here I will use the traditional image of the “gadfly,” which, in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates uses when he describes himself as having been attached to Athens “as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly” (30e). McKay’s work uses metaphor in just the way that Heiti describes, attempting to inspire moments of radical defamiliarization on the part of the reader. Although engineering “be-wilderment” or defamiliarization may not seem like an obviously pedagogic tactic, if the figure of Socrates is kept in mind, it is possible to imagine McKay’s use of metaphor as the first step in a process of radical instruction – one that begins, as Plato’s dialogues so frequently do, by upsetting the reader’s assurance of the rightness of her perceptions and opinions.¹⁰ Take, for instance, “– deer,” from McKay’s 1975 long poem *Long Sault*:¹¹

and came that morning down the dusty road
into the deer’s

the reader, that failure draws attention to the disparity between the creature itself and the language (and other technological associations) attempting to comprehend it.

It is interesting to consider that Nietzsche thought that Socrates was a faux intellectual and sophistical sham, and believed that his legacy was the evacuation of true (that is, ecstatic) knowing from the Greek way of thinking. For Nietzsche, Socrates represents the epitome of the “dialectics, smugness, and cheerfulness of theoretical man” (4). By doggedly informing the ancient Athenians that they did not actually know what they thought they knew, as Nietzsche suggests, Socrates both foreshadowed and helped to bring about modernity’s intellectual and artistic failure – its “decline,” “exhaustion,” and “sickness” (4). Significantly, Nietzsche’s portrait of Socrates is not at all like those that may be found in the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ works. Indeed, Zwicky’s philosophical and pedagogic commentary is deeply informed by the methods of the Athenian gadfly. In *Lyric Philosophy* (1992, 2012) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), and also in the book-length essay *Plato as Artist* (2009), Zwicky presents an alternative to the logical structures of analytic philosophy, deconstruction, and poststructuralism by advocating a philosophical position that is supported by her idiosyncratic definitions of two words: “lyric” and “domesticity.” In Zwicky’s philosophy and poetics, “lyric” thinking embraces the meaningful resonance of diverse utterances and ideas. Lyric philosophy, she argues, is driven by “[t]he intuition of coherence,” and is embodied in “expression that enacts and acknowledges a web of emotional, perceptual, and intellectual comprehension” (*Lyric* L65). In philosophy as well as in art, she argues, lyric is the “attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture” (L73). Apart from its manifestations as thinking, art, or philosophy, it is also an instinctual desire akin to Freudian *thanatos* (the death drive).

Lyric, as Zwicky views it, is an *eros* for integrity, the wish to be one with the ineffable whole, or “real.”

Because the consummation of such desire precludes the phenomenological sense of self (one cannot be integrated with the “whole” and yet remain an individual), Zwicky suggests that lyric is tempered by “domesticity,” the mode that mediates between lyric *eros* and the facts of human life. In *Lyric Philosophy*, she argues: “[w]hat lyric desires is fusion with the world; what it achieves is an integrated speech” (L133). This fusion means “the lifting of the screen of ‘self’ that separates us from the world”; it is “the complete fulfilment of the intuition of coherence, the limiting case of integration” (L133). Although Zwicky suggests that this may be possible for some people (she points to “the subjective phenomenological component of some forms of mystical experience” [L133]), she concludes that it necessarily involves a forfeiture of selfhood. “Lyric speech enacts an integration sustained by a desire whose fulfilment is impossible,” she writes (L134). Paraphrasing Herakleitos, she also adds an analogical image: “the archer who strains to make the ends of the bow touch – even though this can happen only if the bow breaks” (L134). Unlike lyric, domesticity accepts the use of *technê* – although, in Zwicky’s view, it asks that art, language, and reason be used with reverence for the ineffable experiences from which they are cleft.

Both *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* are comprised of hundreds of original aphorisms, quotations from other artists and philosophers, citations from etymological dictionaries, musical scores, and geometrical images. As one early reviewer noted of *Lyric Philosophy*, the shape of both texts has much in common with that of the commonplace book (Verene 126-27).¹³ This structure, which strategically undermines the

notion of the author's intellectual authority, positions "Zwicky's" voice as but one among many, and also solicits "lyric" engagement from the reader. The aphorisms, quotations, scores, and fragments that Zwicky juxtaposes do not always make her arguments immediately clear, and so the reader is asked to consider the relation of the books' parts to one another in the same way that he might envision the correspondence between the juxtaposed terms of a metaphor or simile.

In *Lyric Philosophy*, Zwicky describes lyric comprehension as having "the phenomenological quality of occurring in a flash" (L235), and in *Wisdom & Metaphor* she suggests that "[l]yric thought is a kind of ontological seismic exploration and metaphors are charges set by the seismic crew" (L44). "A good metaphor," she continues, "lets us see more deeply than a weak one" (L44). As I argued a few moments ago, McKay's poetry and poetics suggest that weak metaphors can be very productive; however, the form of insight that concerns Zwicky in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* is different from the crucial realization (crucial for the *Thinking and Singing* group, that is) that language cannot adequately comprehend the world. Although Zwicky believes this to be the case, her philosophy and poetics also suggest that human beings are capable of experiencing "flashes" of lyric comprehension that allow them to see beyond the circumscriptions of language. In her view, a poem's ability to act as "a kind of ontological signpost" is fundamentally akin to its ability to act as a kind of "dynamite," as I am calling it here – an explosive agent connected to the "charges" set by Zwicky's "seismic crew," and a potential instigator of lyric comprehension.

In Zwicky's thinking, reading the ecological poem as a "signpost" means reading it as though the poet is attempting to gesture back towards her own experience of lyric

insight. As I am suggesting, experiencing the poem as “dynamite” means that the experience of lyric comprehension happens for the reader.¹⁴ The poem facilitates the moment, rather than simply appearing as the traces of one. This experience would be subjective, of course, and there would no way of guaranteeing, or mobilizing, its success. As Anne Simpson has noted (paraphrasing a conversation with Sue Sinclair), in the context of modern knowledge and action, “the analytical, systematic approach is preferred in social or political contexts because we need to come to collective understanding. The metaphorical or lyric approach, proceeding as it does by leaps and bounds, depends on the individual getting it. So it is quite possible that some people will come to a gestalt moment and some will not; we can’t depend solely on the metaphorical approach to accomplish projects” (“Conversation” 84).

Both *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* are sympathetic to the Socratic model of maieutic pedagogy, which in turn derives from Plato’s metaphysical doctrine of recollection. In the dialogue *Meno*, which Zwicky interprets at length in *Plato as Artist*, Socrates endeavours to prove to his interlocutor, Meno, that human beings have latent knowledge that they have not learned on earth – that certain forms of knowledge, in other words, are not acquired, but remembered. As Socrates explains, human souls bear the traces of knowledge that they gained during their incorporeal lives dwelling close to the gods in the heavenly spheres – knowledge that is all but forgotten as soon as the soul inhabits the body. In the English tradition, Wordsworth’s “Intimations” Ode eloquently articulates this doctrine. In *Meno*, Socrates proves his point by guiding one of Meno’s slaves to “recollect” a geometrical proof that, having never been formally educated, he could not have learned from any human teacher. Through Socrates’ questions, the boy is

prompted to “remember” that the four sides of a square that is double in size to another square are each equal in length to the imaginary diagonal of the smaller square (see *Meno* 82b-86b, *Plato as Artist* 14-15). Socrates demonstrates to Meno that even “[t]he man who does not know has within himself true opinions about the things that he does not know,” and suggests, furthermore, that “he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself” (*Meno* 85c-d). Zwicky suggests that this mode of pedagogy is integral to Socrates’ character as a teacher on the whole, and to Plato’s dialogues more generally. Socrates traffics in clues, she argues, “hoping we’ll stumble over them” (*Plato as Artist* 22). His goal, like Plato’s, is to demonstrate the difference between “*imparting information*” and “*assisting someone towards understanding*” (46).

Zwicky does not share Plato’s metaphysical beliefs, but *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* suggest that she admires his pedagogic style. After spending the first half of *Lyric Philosophy* introducing her methods and the forms of analysis they contravene, she states: “[i]f there is someone who truly has no idea what I mean by ‘analytic style’ or ‘resonance,’ then these remarks will have no meaning for that person” (L176). This comment suggests that certain kinds of understanding cannot come from explanation or instruction, but must be achieved either through *apriori* cognizance, or through wilful sympathy – i.e., the cultivation of readerly attention and receptiveness. “Lyric springs from love,” Zwicky writes in *Lyric Philosophy*, “love that attends to the most minute details of difference; and in this attention experiences connection rather than isolation” (L69). In *Wisdom & Metaphor*, she echoes this position, stating: “[o]ntological attention is a form of love”: “[w]hen we love a thing, we can experience our

responsibility toward it as limitless (the size of the world). Responsibility is the trace, in us, of the pressure of the world that is focussed in a *this*. That is *how much* it is possible to attend; that is how large complete attention would be” (L57). Zwicky’s phenomenological emphasis on love for “things” (*thisness*) is also informed by Plato’s work: in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Socrates affirms that the soul’s latent memories are a form of erotic knowledge – for, during its time in the celestial realm, the soul learns what is good, true, and beautiful by following the course of the beloved divine.

Heiti has argued that *Wisdom & Metaphor* distills the erotic elements of Zwicky’s earlier works – a fact that he draws out in his essay “Ethics and Domesticity” (2010), where he observes that, for Zwicky, ethics is “a domestic practice,” “an exercise in moderating responsibility; ‘an integrity of response and co-response’” (131). Zwicky’s ethics, he suggests, “consists in eros for the other, and in conditioning that eros with awareness of the fair order of the world. Learning virtue, then, should be learning how to love” (131). Not incidentally, “Ethics and Domesticity” is also a fine example of the ways in which the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ methods have been taken up by admiring apprentices, and is thus an appropriate text with which to draw this chapter to a close. The essay, which appears in the collection *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky* (2010), adopts an amended version of the left- and right-hand page divisions of *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*. Whereas in Zwicky’s texts the left-hand pages record her own aphoristic arguments while the right-hand pages transcribe a range of excerpts from the works of other philosophers, poets, musicians, visual artists, critics, and advertising agencies, in “Ethics and Domesticity,” Heiti transcribes a number of excerpts from Zwicky’s writing (not to mention the works of Aristotle, Plato,

Wittgenstein, and Weil), and sets them at the left-hand side of each of the essay's pages. His own aphoristic arguments are set off from the multi-authored excerpts by being indented towards the centre of the page. Like Zwicky, Heiti also employs the rhetorical device of a doubting interlocutor, who interjects his arguments with questions and contradictions, adding yet another voice to the heteroglossia that forms the basis of the essay's structure.

Like Zwicky, Heiti advocates for "a discipline of listening" (114). He also quotes a substantial passage from one of Plato's purported letters, suggesting, of ethics, that "this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself" (123). Dialogue, in other words, is necessary for the teaching of ethics (or virtue). It is clear that Heiti understands Zwicky's writings, particularly insofar as they are represented by *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor*, as attempting to establish a similar relationship between the multi-vocal text and the reader. "[E]thics cannot be taught," he argues (as Plato, Wittgenstein, and Zwicky herself have argued), "[b]ut it can be modelled, and desired" (127). "It consists in eros for the other, and in conditioning that eros with awareness of the fair order of the world" (131). Heiti also notes that Wittgenstein understood that a correspondence exists between "the work of the philosopher," which "consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose," and Socrates' maieutic mode (127). He suggests that both Socrates and Wittgenstein, and, by implication, Zwicky, "perform the insight that education is less like filling an empty vessel than it is like drawing forth a latent flame" (128).

As I have attempted to show throughout this chapter, for the *Thinking and Singing* poets, the university exists as both a Platonic ideal and a worldly institution, provoking both serious critique and the desire to make it better. Concomitantly, the public personae that the poets have developed for themselves by speaking out against the institution, and promoting alternative epistemologies and forms of education in their works have helped to create a critical atmosphere in which readers approach their poetry and poetics as if they have something to teach. This is not to suggest that the *Thinking and Singing* poets' poems impart factual information about the creatures and things they name (although in some cases they do), but rather that the poets' respective reputations as ecological thinkers, activists, and educators have encouraged readers to approach their works as points of entry into broader spheres of dialogue and thought.

Notes

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- ¹ Although it would not be rigorous to derive too much about the state of Canadian universities in the 1960s and '70s from the events described above – a point that Shirley Neuman has also made in response to *The University in Ruins* (669-70) – Readings's comparison is not arbitrary. Desmond Morton has suggested that Readings's understanding of the Canadian university is largely a literary understanding (meaning that he interprets *The University in Ruins* as an illustrative fiction), but all the same, he confirms the validity of Readings's sense that in 1968, "Canadian universities were almost at the apogee of their claims for power, influence, and public funding," and after that time, the university could not be said to be exercising the same cultural power it once had (594).
- ² Other illustrative examples of Lee's views on higher education at the time are two articles that he published in 1967 in the magazine *Toronto Life*, under the general heading "Crisis in Liberal Education." The articles represent Lee's response to the 1967 Macpherson Report, a public document requisitioned by the University of Toronto in order to evaluate undergraduate instruction in the Faculty of Arts and Science. The first of Lee's articles, which *Toronto Life* chose to give the subtitle "U of T: Full of Competent Mediocrity," features a photograph of the young author standing on the University of Toronto campus, holding a copy of Quentin Lauer's *Phenomenology: Its Genesis and Prospect* (1958). The article's tagline reads: "[l]ecturer Dennis Lee, an admitted radical malcontent, charges academic myopia will stifle reform movements at the University of Toronto" (40). Lee's own comments bear out this summary of his attitude. He writes that "[t]he university has become an

instrument of educational fraud,” and suggests that “[a]nyone who achieves a liberal education in a large humanities course does so in spite of the university as much as because of it” (41). In the follow-up article, which is subtitled “The Unreformed University,” Lee plays with the formal structure of his argument by delivering it in the voices of two interlocutors, whom he refers to as “Author” and “Myself.” Again, Lee’s tone is polemical. “Author” states, for instance, that those “who have washed their hands of the academy and now can see nothing but its time-serving hypocrisy” demonstrate an admirable “direction of the will: the refusal to collaborate” (52).

³ Indeed, Peggy Roffey has suggested that *Civil Elegies* is to some extent “a text-book lesson on the *via negativa* and Heideggerian ‘letting be’” (*Dennis Lee* 243).

⁴ *Civil Elegies* was first published in 1968, and a much-revised and expanded edition appeared four years later in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1972). A third version, with only slight emendations, was printed in Lee’s collection *Nightwatch: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1996* (1996), and a new edition of the 1972 version was published in 2012. All parenthetical references to page number refer to the 1972 edition of the poem.

⁵ In the version of the lecture that appears in *The Tree of Meaning*, Bringhurst’s reference to those teachers of literature “full of postmodernist theory” is omitted.

⁶ For further discussion of the copyright issues surrounding the controversy, see Bradley’s “Remembering Offence: Robert Bringhurst and the Ethical Challenge of Cultural Appropriation” (2007). It is worth noting that Bringhurst did consult with members of the Haida nation while working on the trilogy. In a 2002 interview with Thérèse Rigaud, he explains: “Haida people also read my drafts, or listen to me read

them. If there were less paranoia in the air, and less racial tension, this could be done openly. As it is, to my regret, we have to do it under cover” (15). It is also worth noting that positive reactions to *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* were also voiced by First Nations readers. After publishing a largely positive review of the book, *Books in Canada* subsequently printed a letter to the editor that had been composed by C.W. Hodgson, a Cree Elder who wrote to affirm that she considered *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* to be “a gift to First Nations peoples across this land, as well as to those others who are interested in our languages and literatures” (4). Stating that Bringhurst’s scholarship provides “a careful, respectful interpretation which uses all the nuances possible to accurately translate the prose of the Haida poets,” Hodgson goes on to note that Bringhurst is well aware “of the limits of the work he undertakes, yet because of him, we can now read the stories of Haida poets Ghandl and Skaay which otherwise may never have seen the light of day” (4).

⁷ It is interesting to consider how the influence of Bringhurst’s *Masterworks* may be felt in North American universities in coming years. As Bradley notes in “Remembering Offence,” “the print record [. . .] develops quickly” (899). Pointing to Sean Kane’s article “Skaay on the Cosmos,” which appeared in *Canadian Literature* in 2006, Bradley notes: “Kane’s right to analyse Skaay’s text is assumed by the journal and by Kane himself. The poetry, that is, has already been absorbed into the Canadian literary-critical enterprise” (899).

⁸ In contradistinction to her descriptions of the nature poem as a “signpost,” or “finger pointing at the moon,” Zwicky also speaks of “sympathetic resonance” as an imagistic mode that is firmly *not* “to point, to grasp, to refer” (*Lyric* L219). Norah Bowman has

noted this distinction in an essay on the politics of representation in Zwicky's writing, suggesting that an integral tenet in Zwicky's poetics is that the act of pointing or gesturing is never adequate, although it is the best a poem can do. "Lyric metaphor is less a bullhorn of victory and more an echo of desire," writes Bowman; "the idea of resonance, in which sound fits a space, is meant to be neither reductionist nor fragmentary as a model of representation" (135).

- ⁹ Ricou is echoing comments that Bringhurst himself had made elsewhere (100).
- ¹⁰ A number of critics have expressed doubts regarding McKay's stature as Canada's nature poet *par excellence* (Starnino, Owen, Wells), and Carmine Starnino has recently suggested that, while "the idea of a poetry that promises to lift away the false categorizations of nature to allow readers to wordlessly confront its underlying reality – or 'wilderness' – is deeply attractive," "[i]t is baffling to be told, unvaryingly and insistently, that McKay intends his poems to resensitize our stance toward the 'otherness' of nature, when his tendency is to quite obviously write *over* nature, to soap it so respectfully in 'poetic attention' that its earthy quiddity is washed away" (*Lazy* 139). "McKay's eye depends on having a big idea to see through," writes Starnino, who also suggests that McKay's philosophy, and his tutoring in the ways of poetic attention, get in the way of the world. "His poems don't really arise from a lived-in sense of place," he states, "but from an intellectual reaction to it" (139-40). Referring in particular to McKay's *Strike/Slip* (2006), Starnino suggests that the poems collected within it are too "heavily invested in the aesthetics of imprecision" (141). Although he seems fully aware that the "imprecision" of language is precisely what McKay wants to demonstrate, Starnino is unwilling to accept McKay's philosophical

interests as being the stuff of genuine poetry. This is Catherine Owen's chief criticism of McKay as well. In her essay "Dark Ecologies," she argues that although "Tim Lilburn, Don Domanski, and Don McKay, for instance, are read as environmentally engaged poets [. . .] their poems often utilize nature as a means to a transcendent or rhetorical end" (57-58).

- ¹¹ *Long Sault* was written to commemorate the disappearance of the Long Sault Rapids in the wake of the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the late 1950s. As McKay notes in *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979), "[w]hen the hydroelectric dam was constructed at Cornwall, Ontario during the late fifties, the St. Lawrence River flooded upstream as far as Iroquois, submerging a length of shoreline rich in history and tradition. Villages like Wales, Mille Roches, Moulinette, Dickinson's Landing were 'relocated,' and – focal point of this poem – the Long Sault Rapids was drowned" (321).
- ¹² Here I am proposing, as Zwicky does in *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), that the distinction between a metaphor and a simile is not crucial (L5). She asserts: "[s]imiles and analogies, too, are metaphorical in the sense I am concerned with. The 'like' in such figures is merely a nod in the direction of the strict metaphor's implicit 'is not'. / What is important for understanding the ontology of metaphor is not that the 'is not' be fully implicit, nor that it be strictly implied, but that it be there" (L5).
- ¹³ Zwicky intended *Lyrical Philosophy* to make a serious intervention against analytic philosophy, whose methods had determined the shape of her own academic education and training. The 1992 edition of the book was published by the University of Toronto Press, in its "Studies in Philosophy" series; however, it received only a handful of

reviews by scholars in the field (Angel, Neill, Verene). In the twenty years since its first publication, it has been much more widely appreciated by poets and creative writers than by professional philosophers (Lahey, Northrup).

Zwicky has said of her intention for the book (and its ensuing complement, *Wisdom & Metaphor*):

I wanted to develop an alternative way of thinking that would have undeniable argumentative force, and which would also have scope adequate to my concerns for the nonhuman and extralinguistic world. The project – from start to finish, including *Wisdom & Metaphor*, various essays, and many poems – has always been philosophical. I have hoped philosophers would read my work and begin to re-imagine the discipline, making it both more vital and more humane; I have hoped environmental philosophers especially would read it and see an opportunity; and I have hoped lyric poets would read it and feel both encouraged and challenged – that they would understand the epistemological and ultimately the moral importance of their calling, and sense responsibilities of their own in relation to it. (“Letter” n. pag.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most serious critiques levelled against *Lyric Philosophy* by its early reviewers pertain to the breadth of the project. Angel suggests, for instance, that Zwicky’s antagonists are straw men:

If the notes are penetrating, they are penetrating straw nodes. From Plato to Spinoza, from Nicolas of Cusa to Hegel, from Hume to the *Tractatus*, from Berkeley to Bertrand Russell, there has been an aspiration to philosophical clarity via *both* system-building analysis *and* lyric nexus which is insufficiently

appreciated by Zwicky. The insensitivity to the lyric modalities of the Western classics shown by Zwicky is unfortunate for her development of her case for lyric philosophy. (271-72)

Donald Phillip Verene makes the same evaluation when he argues that “Zwicky’s attempt is marred by a very limited reading of what exists in the full history of philosophy” (127). Stating that Zwicky “ignores the original relationship philosophy has to myth in its origin among the ancients, and the views of wisdom and language that are present in the Latin and humanist traditions,” he suggests that she has had “to create her conception of lyric philosophy largely out of her own introspection, and attempt to ground it in various modern and contemporary sources” (127). He also states that she has ignored “the origin of philosophy itself in *mythos*, *logos*, and *eros*” (128).

Ultimately, Verene concludes that Zwicky’s desire to inspire *insight* above all (the maieutic goal that inspires the book’s aphoristic structure) prevents her from pursuing philosophy’s age-old interest in *eloquentia* (eloquence):

If the goal is the comprehension of the whole in a single gesture, why not have the *topos* and the rhetorical enthymeme take the place of the aphorism and the quotation? By employing its topical and tropical powers, philosophy aims at the development of its lyric insights eloquently, that is, with a speech of the whole. This is not a return to the notion of system, but a call for philosophy to speak its mind fully about what there is, and to appear once again in the *agora*. (130)

Zwicky would of course argue that *Lyric Philosophy*’s aphoristic structure is indeed necessary – a point she illustrates most eloquently in *Wisdom & Metaphor*, where she

compares the elaboration of an argument to the translation of a poem from the original:

An English poem cannot capture *how* a Japanese poem means.

And yet we can – even if we speak no Japanese – get a sense of how the Japanese poem means: a rendering in *romaji*, plus a unit-by-unit translation into English, plus an account of basic conventions of Japanese poetry and its rôle in Japanese culture can give an English-speaking reader a much clearer sense of the poem than any polished translation of the poem on its own. [. . .]

Philosophy, pursued as an unbroken series of arguments, as the elaboration of a system, is to the world what an English translation of a Japanese poem is to the Japanese original. The meditation, the constellation of aphorisms — philosophy that in its form demands of the reader the work of seeing-as — is to the world what the *romaji* worksheet is to the Japanese original. (L103)

This is to say that, in Zwicky's view, faith in eloquence assumes that the world (or "the whole") can be comprehended in speech, and this is a position that she does not accept. As the above comments suggest, Zwicky's decision to orient *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* along the lines of maieutic pedagogy was as risky as Socrates' own pedagogic practices were. Universities in contemporary Canada do not frequently indict faculty for corrupting the nation's youth, but academic communities can administer effective death sentences for scholars' careers by ignoring their work, or by not ranking it highly enough to count towards promotion and tenure.

¹⁴ Ross Leckie has pushed back against Zwicky's descriptions of metaphorical insight as occurring "in a flash," stating: "[m]etaphor exists across associative fields that overlap but can never be brought into perfect alignment. Metaphors are dendritic, and so I'm not sure that we can just 'get' a metaphor at one glance" (87). Observing that understanding a metaphor often takes time, he also asks: "is there a clear separation between the seeing-as and the analytic?" (87).

Chapter 2

Phenomenologies of the *Thinking and Singing* Poets

One way of bringing the ethical, philosophical, and theoretical investments of Bringham's, Lee's, Lilburn's, McKay's, and Zwicky's poetics into focus is to examine how those investments relate to phenomenological theory and practice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To this end, this chapter surveys four phenomenological perspectives that inform the *Thinking and Singing* poets' works. The first of these is found in Lee's early critical writing, where he suggests that poems display a phenomenological stance when they represent the action of human consciousness interacting with the world. The second is that of McKay, whose poetry and poetics focus less on representations of human consciousness, and instead emphasize the ethical representation of non-human creatures and "things" in the world. The third can be gleaned from Zwicky's philosophy of "loving" reading and reviewing, which she advances in part in her treatises *Lyric Philosophy* (1992, 2012) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), but most succinctly in the 2003 essay, "The Ethics of the Negative Review." The fourth perspective is that of Lilburn, whose phenomenological erotics forms the basis of this chapter's final, and most extended, discussion. Lilburn's writings foreground the political implications of desire for the *oikos*, asking what it would mean to live in the world "as if it were home." Recalling Heidegger's existentialist interest in human being-in-the-world (*Dasein*, being-there), Lilburn's writings evince a tension between contentment with the negative way, in which the devotee knows himself to be alienated from the object of his desire, and the exigencies of living ecologically in the modern world – a commitment that, by its very nature, seems to demand a certain kind of home-

making, and “settling”-in.

Before turning to the issue of phenomenological perspectives in the works of Lee, a few words on the multiplicity of twentieth- and twenty-first-century phenomenologies in Canada and abroad are in order. The phenomenological tradition in philosophy is commonly thought to have begun with Kant, who first insisted upon distinguishing between the phenomenon, “the appearance of reality in consciousness,” and the noumenon, the “being of reality in itself” (Lauer 2). Kant’s thought was taken up most famously by Husserl, who, in the early twentieth century, outlined a methodology for phenomenological inquiry that went far beyond the initial distinction that Kant had made. Husserl’s mantra, “to the things themselves!” became a rallying cry whose echoes reverberated far beyond the realm of philosophy, finding the ears of literary artists, critics, and scholars as well – particularly when Heidegger’s radical revisioning of Husserl’s approach suggested that the poet plays a special role in bringing the things of the world to light.

Timothy Morton has observed pithily that one of the great appeals of Husserl’s phenomenological revolution was that it “made good” on what the Romantics had discovered with such flair: the fundamental role that consciousness plays in human perception of worldly things (“Lecture” n. pag.). Husserlian phenomenology emphasizes that consciousness is the only means by which percipients perceive the “things” they do. As Quentin Lauer, one of Husserl’s first North American exegetes, explains: the Husserlian method constitutes a return to things, “as opposed to illusions, verbalisms, or mental constructions, precisely because a ‘thing’ *is* the direct object of consciousness, in its purified form” (9). For Husserl, “to know an act of consciousness adequately, which is

to say essentially, is to know its object. What is more, it is to know the object absolutely, in a state of isolation from the contingent conditions of its existence, which is always at best subject to doubt” (17). In other words, Husserlian phenomenology maintains that, “[t]o understand the operation of consciousness is to understand its object” (4). Perhaps the best-known of Husserl’s revolutionary methods is the phenomenological reduction – or, more correctly, the series of reductions through which the philosopher is meant to clarify her knowledge of conscious perception. This series begins with the phenomenological *epochē*, frequently called the phenomenological “bracketing” of reality. Husserl’s position is not that reality has no existence apart from human consciousness, but rather that, for humans, reality exists only as consciousness knows it. The phenomenological reduction, Lauer suggests, is “a radical and universal elimination of any *position* of factual existence” (49, emphasis added). Husserl simply puts aside the very question of the existence of noumena. “[T]o doubt reality,” writes Lauer, “be it only methodically, is to take a position with regard to reality, and this Husserl will not do; reality simply does not enter into the question of *what* things are” (49).

Heidegger was an avid student of Husserl’s writings, but believed that his precursor had neglected to ask the most fundamental question concerning phenomena – the question of “being.” Heidegger’s phenomenology, therefore, is also an ontology and an existentialism: his concern to discover the ontic character of “things” is equal to his desire to determine the nature of human *Dasein*. In the 1949 essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger expands upon his characteristic understanding of *alethia* (truth) as unconcealment, which in his philosophy requires the activity of *Dasein* in order to take place. For Heidegger, entities in the world exist in a state of either

presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) or readiness-at-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) – the latter suggesting that instrumental entities in the world come into their essence as human beings make use of them. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” however, he remarks a crucial difference between the mode of “concern” that characterizes readiness-at-hand in *Being in Time* (1926), and the “regulating and securing” that characterizes technological development. “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by,” he writes, “to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. The word expresses here something more, and something more essential, than mere ‘stock’” (*Philosophical* 288):

As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather, exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself. (296).

More will be said about this in a few moments, when McKay’s phenomenological project in the poetry collection *Apparatus* (1997) is taken up. For now, it is enough to note that Heidegger’s phenomenology, like Husserl’s, does not make humanity the centre of existence in every respect, although there are, to be sure, a number of points in the works

of both Husserl and Heidegger to which ecological humanist and post-humanist scholars have taken exception. As was suggested in the Introduction, Heidegger's relation to ecological theory and praxis has been a particularly conflicted one. Although his writings on technology, tool-use, and the poetics of presence were embraced by many activists and thinkers of the deep ecology movement – a perusal of Bill Devall and George Sessions's *Deep Ecology* (1985) makes this all too clear, as does Morton's characterization of Heidegger as “deep ecology's favourite philosopher” (*Ecological Thought* 7) – Heidegger's association with the Nazi party in the mid-1930s, and the extent to which many of his “ecological” writings affirm the Aryan nationalist values of “blood and soil,” present serious problems for any thinker wishing to adopt his writings for an ecological ethics.¹ A somewhat less contentious matter, but one that is no less crucial, concerns the question of Heidegger's prioritization of human language (and poetry) for the “unconcealment” of entities in the world – an issue that will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 3, where the influence of Heideggerian thought in Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1968, 1972) is discussed.

An important influence on Morton's recent adaptations of Heidegger's thought has been the work of Graham Harman, whose groundbreaking study *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) argues that Heidegger's analysis of instrumentality in *Being and Time* (and elsewhere) “gives birth to an ontology of *objects themselves*” (1). “Tool-being,” Harman argues, “does not describe objects insofar as they are handy implements used for human purposes,” but rather suggests that there “is an absolute gulf between the things and *any* interaction we might have with them” – and, indeed, that they might have with each other (1-2). Harman does not ascribe

consciousness to so-called inanimate objects, but he suggests that all encounters between entities – “the sheer causal interaction between rocks or raindrops,” for example – are freighted with metaphysical, ontological, and phenomenological significance (2). *Tool-Being* presents the reader with a vision of “a ghostly cosmos in which humans, dogs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, comets, ice cubes, magnets, and atoms” (2). Although Harman’s project is not explicitly ecological, it is easy to see why Morton finds it useful; Harman’s concept of “tool-being” rids *Dasein* of its ontological priority, rendering human “being” no different from that of a hammer or iguana – particularly in terms of the ways in which entities interact, and encounter each other relationally within the world. Emphatically, Harman’s point is not that all things in the world are tools, nor simply that “everything can be ‘used’ in some way.” Rather, his argument turns on a radical interpretation of Heidegger’s distinction between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand.

For Heidegger, to be present-at-hand means simply to be an entity in the world, whereas readiness-to-hand suggests a special relation between objects and *Dasein*. In *Being in Time*, Heidegger represents readiness-to-hand as that which allows human beings to encounter equipment, and to help bring it forth further in its “equipmentality” (98). In other words, readiness-to-hand allows for a kind of ontological praxis:

where something is put to use, our concern subordinates itself to the “in-order-to” which is constitutive for the equipment we are employing at the time; the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly it is encountered as that which it is – as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the

specific “manipulability” [“Handlichkeit”] of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses – in which it manifests itself in its own right – we call “readiness-to-hand” [Zuhandenheit]. Only because equipment has *this* “Being-in-itself” and does not merely occur, is it manipulable in the broadest sense and at our disposal. [. . .] If we look at Things just “theoretically,” we can get along without understanding readiness-to-hand. But when we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character. (98)

In short, Heidegger’s conception of readiness-to-hand implies that human interaction with objects is integral to the phenomenological and existential discovery of truth (unconcealment). By using a hammer, a person helps to bring that hammer forth in its essential “hammer-ness” more fully. At the same time, Harman argues, the “being-in-itself” of the hammer also recedes from view: that is, the encounter with the object reveals that there is some aspect of the object that cannot be grasped by the one who holds it in hand – instruments have a way of being that precedes and enables human interactions with them. Harman’s break from Heidegger’s thinking (or, as he describes it, his discovery of the latent implications of Heidegger’s thought) lies in his decision to read *all* entities as tools – which is to say, as “being” in the mode of readiness-at-hand. “When things withdraw from presence into their dark subterranean reality,” Harman argues, “they distance themselves not only from human beings, but *from each other as well*”; “contrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*” (2).²

In the mid-to-late twentieth century in Canada, a number of phenomenological models of literary reception and response became prominent, and lent form to the emerging field of scholarly studies in Canadian literature. In 1987, in an essay derived from a paper presented at the “Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature” symposium at the University of Ottawa in 1986, Barbara Godard presented one version of “a historical narrative about a contemporary phenomenon”: the then-apparent prevalence of poststructuralist discourses in Canadian literary studies (25). Godard’s paper, entitled “Structuralism/Poststructuralism: Language, Reality, and Canadian Literature,” attempts to trace the narrative of poststructuralism’s beginnings in Canada without assigning a strict beginning or end. Clothing herself in the rhetorical garb of the continuously deferring storyteller Scheherazade, Godard moves between discussions of New Criticism, thematic criticism, Frygian structuralism, feminism, phenomenology, deconstruction, and poststructuralism. Above all, her analysis highlights the difficulty of separating critical, philosophical, and theoretical strands from one another amidst the tangled, interconnected histories of their developments.

One tangle that Godard dwells upon is that which connects phenomenological and deconstructive analysis, arguing that “the leap from phenomenology to deconstruction has been made by a number of poets as part of a North American phenomenon” (41).³ Noting that phenomenological criticism’s emphasis on a “hermeneutic circle of writing-active reading-writing,” and on reading and writing as “process,” accord well with Derridean deconstruction (41), Godard observes that for critics and scholars of Canadian literature, the analytical methods of deconstruction have provided tools for critiquing the “first principles” of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy (44). As she demonstrates

how deconstructionist views of difference, deferral, and networks of signification have been applied by writers in different spheres of Canadian literary and scholarly cultures, Godard's own "narrative" emphasizes the social and political value of deconstructive reading. At no point does she appear to be worried that deconstructive or poststructuralist perspectives could undermine or disqualify the practical humanistic value of phenomenological criticism, and indeed, those values are emphasized particularly strongly when she compares phenomenological to structuralist criticism, arguing that Canadian versions of the latter are distinguishable from their European and American counterparts because "Canadian critics have resisted a politics that is blind to the experience of the human subject" (34). "Structuralism's scientific claims to identify elements and the law-like relations between them," she continues, "have been modified by attention to the particular, the local" (34). Whereas structuralism's interest in universals and synchronic analysis suggests "an intellectual construction," "someone standing outside, presuming objectivity," Godard suggests that phenomenologists choose "a diachronic approach which rests on the lived experience of the speaker, participant in a community" (32). She implies, moreover, in the remainder of her reading, that deconstruction and poststructuralism, as practiced by scholars and critics of Canadian literature, have retained phenomenology's counter-objective, social stance.

In the 1930s, the so-called New Geneva critics focused their literary inquiries on the active relations between the author, reader, and text, "abandoning the empirical self and finding a faculty for identification and participation" (Godard 38). Their pursuit of sympathetic identification was known as *la critique interne*, the goal of which was "to penetrate the inner space of an author's consciousness" (39). Godard suggests that, of

those thinkers now associated with the Geneva school, the writings of George Poulet were particularly influential for mid-century critics in Canada. In particular, they influenced the poet and critic Eli Mandel, as well as the *Tish* poet and scholar Frank Davey, and other contributors to Davey's theoretically-investigative journal, *Open Letter*.⁴ Poulet understood literature "as the history of human consciousness," Godard observes; he read texts closely in order to "discover the experiential patterns of the author's life-world, to empathize with the author's creative impulse," and to join together "the author and reader in dialogue" (38).

In his 1969 essay "Phenomenology of Reading," for instance, Poulet sketches with broad strokes the personalities of his contemporary phenomenological critics, whose methods are various (and largely unsatisfactory to him), but which, he says, have "as guiding principle the relation between subject and object" (1332). In his own critical practice, Poulet treats individual literary texts as if they have distinct consciousnesses – consciousnesses with which the reader may empathize, yet from which he should also feel himself to be separate. Poulet admits that he is tempted by the possibility of identifying the text's consciousness with that of the text's author, thereby understanding the comprehension of the work as letting "the individual who wrote it reveal himself to us *in us*" (1324-25). He resists this illusion of identification, however, and argues:

The subject who is revealed to me through my reading of it [the text] is not the author, either in the disordered totality of his outer experiences, or in the aggregate, better organized and concentrated totality, which is the one of his writings. [. . .] Nothing external to the work could possibly share the extraordinary claim which the work now exerts on me. It is there within me,

not to send me back, outside myself, to the author, nor to his other writings, but on the contrary to keep my attention riveted on itself. It is the work which traces in me the very boundaries within which this consciousness will define itself.

(1324-25)

Poulet's essay concludes with a stirring mantra for phenomenological criticism, in which he writes that in the literary work of art, there is:

a mental activity profoundly engaged in objective forms: and there is, at another level, forsaking all forms, a subject which reveals itself to itself (and to me) in its transcendence over all which is reflected in it. At this point, no object can any longer express it, no structure can any longer define it; it is exposed in its ineffability and in its fundamental indeterminacy. Such is this transcendence of the mind. It seems then that criticism, in order to accommodate the mind in this effort of detachment from itself, needs to annihilate, or at least momentarily to forget, the objective elements of the work, and to elevate itself to the apprehension of a subjectivity without objectivity. (1333)

It is worth noting in passing that Poulet's fascination with phenomenological empathy celebrates, as Heidegger's philosophy also does, the simultaneous concealment and revelation of the subject to which the "reader" applies herself. The eroticism of this gaze is evident, as the subject's exposure "in its ineffability and in its fundamental indeterminacy" seems to suggest that the percipient is enjoying some kind of psychological/ontological striptease.

Mandel's preferred mode of phenomenological literary criticism avoided the erotically-charged elements of Poulet's empathetic, psychologically penetrative mode.

According to Godard, it was Mandel who formulated the “mode of participatory reading to accompany the poetics of openness to the surrounding field and kinetic poetry as process, which the Tish generation adapted from Olson” (29). His “formula,” she observes, posits a binary distinction between “the civilized man” and “the savage” – figures that Mandel insists “are not historical or psychological observation, but literary ones” (70), but are extremely problematic nonetheless. In the lecture collection *Criticism: The Silent Speaking Words* (1966), a series of broadcasts that aired on CBC’s *Ideas* in the spring of 1966, Mandel aligns “the savage” with other literary figures that have traditionally been subversive to the dominant order, such as clowns, fools, and satyrs – figures that classical theorists would have identified as the Dionysiac elements in drama or literature, that psychoanalytic critics would later refer to as representing the Id, and that Bakhtin and other postmodern thinkers would conceive of as elements of the carnivalesque. Mandel argues that the “savage” “appears as the image of all that is irrational in the human being: revelry and misrule, gluttony and mischief, folly and trickery, cunning and simple-mindedness” (70). What he hopes to discover is a corresponding form of literary criticism, one “which is irrational, which moves amid perceptions, which does not attempt to impose on individual works or on art itself a structure of reason or indeed a pattern of any kind except that of perception” (70). In this and similar statements may be heard an implicit refutation of structuralist forms of literary criticism, such as Frye’s theory of archetypes. “The critic as savage,” Mandel writes, “is not merely the irrationalist, though, of course, he puts himself against rationalism and its methods in criticism. He is not concerned with interpretation, or with explanation, or with evaluation. He does not want to judge but to participate in, to

become one with the work of literature” (71). (Readers might think back to Jonathan Bate’s reluctance to “enframe” the artwork.) Mandel’s view is that criticism in the mid twentieth century must risk, of necessity, “the excesses of subjectivity and sentimentality if it is going to become human once more and if it is going to bring us closer to the unsolved mystery at the heart of all our best perceptions” (72). “The choice,” he states polemically, “would seem to be between a universe of death opened out to us by the mind and intellect of man, and a living world into which, through our perceptions, we might finally enter” (72).

Anticipating possible objections to his position, Mandel remarks that the work of the “savage” critic will likely be called “mere subjectivity and therefore anarchic” by those embroiled in structuralism; satirically, he continues by noting that it will be thought of as removing “the one possibility of agreed-on critical procedures,” thereby making “Ph.D. examinations almost impossible to set and certainly impossible to grade” (71-72). This apparently off-the-cuff statement of phenomenological criticism’s incompatibility with academic training and pedagogy is worth pausing over. It may be simply another dig against Frygian thought, but it also suggests something akin to what Lee would later argue in “Getting to Rochdale” (1968): that the university only is interested in the “surface of education, the inessentials of education,” and “the travesty of education” rather than what education is “really about” (70). Mandel’s observations in this regard are part of a larger trend that Godard identifies in “Structuralism/Poststructuralism,” where she notes that in Canadian literary criticism and scholarship in the mid-twentieth century, “structuralism remained the domain of ‘academic’ critics interested in narratology, while critic-practitioners of poetry [such as Mandel] opted for phenomenology” (33).

In his influential 1974 essay “Surviving the Paraphrase,” Davey claims (as Mandel had claimed before him) that the literary critic’s job is not to engage in poor sociology. Rebuking Canadian critics and scholars for having been too long “reluctant to focus on the literary work,” Davey suggests that thematic criticism is especially guilty of failing to “illuminate the work on its own terms” (*Surviving* 1). Condemning the analytical tradition that branched from Frye into the writings of Margaret Atwood, D.G. Jones, and John Moss (among others), he offers four alternatives to thematic criticism: “analytic, archetypal, historical, and phenomenological” (7). He also proposes that the historical preponderance of thematic criticism in Canada, which he considers to be a sign of most critics’ lack of interest in “writing as writing,” explains the emergence of so many writer-critics throughout the country. Davey assigns the blame for Canada’s literary climate to the vestiges of Arnoldian humanism that permeate scholarly culture in Canada. In “a tradition in which both the critic and the artist have a major responsibility to culture,” he writes, “the artist speaks, unconsciously or consciously, for the group,” and so the job of the critic becomes, “not to attend to language, form, or even to individual works of literature,” but to “our imaginative life,” “national being,” and “cultural history” (2). Davey’s phenomenological criticism is set in contradistinction to this “bad sociology,” and is intended to foreground the importance of the unique artistic consciousness that creates any given work. In this regard, Davey differs markedly from Poulet, who chooses not to seek the author in the work, but looks instead for the unique consciousness of the work itself. In “Surviving the Paraphrase,” Davey suggests that critics should be able to “participate in the consciousness of the artist as it is betrayed by his syntax, imagery, and diction,” and that “ultimately the critic could give the reader a

portrait of each writer's psychological world" (10).⁵

In "Structuralism/Poststructuralism," Godard nominates Davey as "the rallying point in the critical debate" in the mid-1970s over "the state of literary theory in Canada and Quebec" (27-28). She also emphasizes his prioritization of process over system, which he shares with Mandel. In Godard's evaluation, Davey's critical philosophy characterizes "system" (and also humanism) as "conservatism, crystallization, objectivity, [and] stability," whereas "process" is represented as "a chaos of contingency, accidental encounters, [and] subjectivity" (28). Like Mandel's, Davey's distinction between phenomenological and structuralist approaches to literary criticism and scholarship rests on a vision of opposition between Arnoldian "civilization" and those who prefer to enjoy its discontents. Moreover, although Mandel and Davey present their positions as being counter-systemic, their claims regarding the cleavage between conservatism and chaos – the "savage" and the "civilized" – are ultimately as narrowly humanistic as the systems they oppose.

As I turn now to the respective phenomenological stances of Lee, McKay, Zwicky, and Lilburn, it is worth keeping in mind that it is not enough to simply ask how the university might be said to have failed the "living world" of perception, as Mandel puts it, or whether Canada's scholarly and critical cultures have gone too far in imposing "system" upon "process," as Davey might once have said. It is also necessary to consider how various literary phenomenologies in twentieth-century Canada have made use of troubling cultural constructs that the university should reject unreservedly.

I. Dennis Lee's "Consciousness Knowing the World"

In his Introduction to the 1985 poetry anthology *The New Canadian Poets, 1970-1985*, Lee suggests that there are four ways to map the poetic "terrain" that the book represents. Delineating these maps according to issues of content, voice, image, and "phenomenological stance" (xliii), he observes that, in order to understand his use of the term "phenomenological," the reader need not "know the history of that contentious philosophical term," but must simply understand it to mean "an [authorial] impulse to make the poem recreate a two-way process, in which the world is known by consciousness and consciousness knows the world" (xliii). This somewhat broad definition is clarified later in the Introduction when Lee adds that phenomenological poets attempt to "give us both the world and consciousness knowing the world" (xiv). In their work, he suggests, the world's existence is not predicated on human consciousness, but neither do the poems pretend to know the world through means other than the experiential (xiv). "Consciousness adheres as faithfully as it can to the specificity of the world," Lee writes; phenomenological poems, in this regard, "enact the phenomenological texture of conscious experience," and are invested with "the intricate cross-pressure of observer and observed – a consort which apparently wants to be celebrated as an imperfect marriage, a willing yet perpetually incomplete union" (xlvi).

Remarking that he does not believe that the variety of phenomenological poetics present in twentieth-century Canada can be called "a self-conscious movement," Lee suggests that their closest analogues are postmodern poetics, and asserts that the postmodern poem, like the phenomenological poem, is "aware of itself *as* a poem and reflects on the process of its own making in various jumps and asides" (lii). The

difference, for Lee, between a postmodern and a phenomenological poetic stance is that the speaker of a phenomenological poem can be “understood to be reflecting from the midst of a literal situation,” whereas, in the postmodern poem, self-reflexivity serves only to illuminate the poem’s composition by a poet figure – not the “inner processes” of an individual human being in a human situation (liii).

Lee’s most extended exercise in phenomenological reading, his monograph *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* (1977), was met with a considerable amount of confusion by critics and scholars (Bilan, Bradshaw, Godfrey, Scobie). Although Lee states early on in the book that it is not primarily a work of literary criticism (11), after it had been in print for some time and had received a number of reviews, he found it necessary to reiterate publicly that its subject is not literature, but “a new paradigm of order” (“Reading *Savage Fields*” 161). In an essay published in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* in 1979, Lee responded to early reactions to *Savage Fields* by noting, firstly, that it seems to be “much easier” to read the text “as five or six books which it is not, than as the book it’s trying to be,” and by remarking further that its project is “more ambitious, and less familiar” than the merely literary (161). *Savage Fields*, he writes “attempts to re-conceive the character of rational coherence – to imagine a different *logos*” (161).

The vision of the modern world’s “rational coherence” (or lack thereof) that Lee puts forward in *Savage Fields* is heavily indebted to Heidegger’s existentialist phenomenology, and Lee’s interpretive methods throughout the book are phenomenological, in his sense of the term. Indeed, Dave Godfrey has suggested that *Savage Fields* is a non-fiction narrative as much as it is an analysis; the text, he says, tells

the story of “what happened to me, Dennis Lee, reading and re-reading this pair of books” (156). The “pair of books” to which Godfrey refers is Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* (1970). As Lee demonstrates how Cohen and Ondaatje present readers with representations of “consciousness knowing the world,” *Savage Fields* also reveals the distinctive ways in which Lee’s critical consciousness engages with his chosen texts.

Savage Fields is predominantly comprised of Lee’s analyses of *Beautiful Losers* and *Billy the Kid*, although it also includes a substantial “Interlude” in which Lee relates contemporary developments in neurobiology to his vision of the “savage fields,” whose interaction underlies human existence in technological modernity. The book adopts Heidegger’s much-debated distinction between “world” and earth,” but Lee diverges sharply from Heidegger’s use of those terms by describing their relationship to each other as being much more violent than Heidegger implies.⁶ Importantly, “world” and “earth” are not correlatives of “civilization” and “nature.” In Heidegger’s terms, “world” implies that which is readily apparent and usable in things, whereas “earth” suggests that which remains essentially concealed (and therefore unavailable for use or exploitation). In his 1960 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger writes that “[t]he world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world” (47). In *Savage Fields*, Lee describes the same state of affairs much more violently and sexually, writing that “earth is being penetrated by world, being made part of its purposes” (6). This sexualization of the violence of “world” and “earth” occurs throughout *Savage Fields*, most noticeably in Lee’s reading of *Billy the Kid*, where he identifies forms of “earth assault” and “world assault.” In “earth assault,” he argues, “human consciousness is pummelled and nearly

demolished by instinctual energy” (16). Billy’s sunstroke is identified as “assault” in these terms, “an hallucinatory rape by the sun, which penetrates him through the top of his head” (22). Although Lee also attempts to suggest that worldly creatures might benefit from being forced to confront the presence of earth in themselves, he ultimately concludes that, in this case, “[b]eing fucked by the sun does not put an end to strife; it becomes merely another case of earth assault” (23).

Lee’s repeated associations of sexual violence with the “savagery” of the interactions between “world” and “earth” suggests that his vision of phenomenological engagement is as deeply fraught with suspect cultural constructions as is Mandel’s. When Heidegger describes “earth” as “jutting” through world, he takes care to note that while “[t]he opposition of world and earth is a striving [. . .] we would surely all too easily falsify its nature if we were to confound striving with discord and dispute, and thus see it only as disorder and destruction” (47). *Savage Fields* is premised on precisely this confusion of “striving” with “strife,” and in Lee’s more tenebrous cynicism, the reader may discern the influence of George Grant’s political writings, particularly his *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965) and *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (1969).⁷ In *Savage Fields*, Lee defines “world” as “the ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by consciousness for its own purposes,” and he suggests, moreover, that the “purpose” of “world” “is to dominate earth,” “by reducing earth to modes of existence which it controls: first and foremost, to the status of being neutral or value-free” (4). Correspondingly, Grant argues in *Lament for a Nation* that,

As liberals become more and more aware of the implications of their own

doctrine, they recognize that no appeal to human good, now or in the future, must be allowed to limit their freedom to make the world as they choose. Social order is a man-made convenience, and its only purpose is to increase freedom. What matters is that men shall be able to do what they want, when they want. The logic of this liberalism makes the distinction between judgements of fact and judgements of value. “Value judgements” are subjective. In other words, man in his freedom creates the valuable. The human good is what we choose for our good. (57)

Grant’s sense of the threat that modern liberalism poses to society is echoed in *Savage Fields* as an aspect of the threat that “world” poses to “earth” – a correspondence that the book’s Interlude makes clear by suggesting that modern impulses towards scientific and technological advance, especially in the field of neurobiology, risk evacuating humanity’s belief in a coherent phenomenological self. “As the nervous system is decoded,” Lee writes, “then, the ‘subject’ we naively associated with it will dissolve into the austere and featureless calm of its own probability functions – there to become one with the rest of the objective universe, which has been similarly composed for some time” (53). “From within the liberal cosmology,” he continues, “there is only one conclusion open to consciousness: consciousness is dead” (53).

In *Savage Fields*, Lee argues that “earth” “sets itself against world by tantalizing or humiliating world,” and suggests that “it accomplishes this by the fact of existing, which obliges world to recognize that it too is earth – material, alive, and powered by instinct” (5). Aside from being an essay in literature and cosmology, *Savage Fields* is also an ecological text. Digressing momentarily from his reading of *Billy the Kid*, for instance,

Lee writes:

As we hurtle further and further into the technological era, everything is changed – from the physical condition of the planet we call “earth” to the subtlest recesses of family space or of private feeling. It is hard to assimilate that fact, beyond the large musings of doomsday rhetoric. But the planet we inhabit, with all the finely-interstressed ecology of matter, life and consciousness which developed over millennia, has been made into a different thing by the advent of men’s ability to master it technologically, and by the world-stance which produced that ability.

(36)

These words echo both Heidegger and Grant (himself a student of Heidegger’s works), and, as with much of *Savage Fields*, they serve as a reminder that, for Lee, great social and political stakes are attached to the phenomenological project of reading. That this is so is also clear from Lee’s Introduction to *The New Canadian Poets*, where he expresses his admiration of phenomenological poetry over postmodern poetics because the former appears to him to be less intellectually onanistic. Whereas modern liberalism teaches people to devalue consciousness, as Lee argues in *Savage Fields*, phenomenological poems give consciousness valuable priority.

Lee’s interpretive methods for recognizing phenomenological stances in poems involve seeking out the “idiosyncratic innovations” of process “in order to catch the minute local disturbances that arise when world and consciousness interact” (xlili). His Introduction to *The New Canadian Poets* gives a number of examples of such innovations, including McKay’s popular “I Scream You Scream,” from the 1983 collection, *Birding, or Desire*. The poem begins:

Waking JESUS sudden riding a scream like a
 train braking metal on metal on
 metal teeth receiving signals from a dying star sparking
 off involuntarily in terror in all directions in the
 abstract incognito in my
 maidenform bra in an expanding universe in a where's
 my syntax thrashing loose like a grab that like a
 look out like a
 live wire in a hurricane [. . .] (50)

The poem depicts the bewilderment of a sleeper who has just been awoken (although not fully) in the middle of the night by some incomprehensible, unidentified sound – a sound that he or she finally recognizes as a pig scream from the neighbouring farm. As the waking sleeper's thoughts jostle one another, the poem's series of associative similes and interrupted syntax creates a jumble of images that range from the industrial to the cosmic to the domestic to the atmospheric, depicting a human consciousness struggling to understand the sound it has heard in the night. In these lines, Lee hears the "churning" of the speaker's consciousness "as it passes from deep sleep to wide awake in half a second, rifling through a series of preposterous associations in an attempt to place the sound" (xlv). For him, the poem's phenomenological project brings "consciousness and the world [. . .] into sync" (xlv).

Lee's reading of the first half of "I Scream You Scream" is illuminating, and demonstrates a number of useful methods for approaching the poem from a phenomenological perspective. It should be noted, though, that the poem occurs in two

distinct movements. The first depicts the speaker's confusion upon waking; the second traces the speaker's thoughts upon settling down to sleep again. It is not phenomenological in Lee's sense of the term. Rhetorically, the poem's second half turns on an analogy between sleep and death. The speaker registers the pig's scream as being "perhaps / a preview of the pig's last noise" (50), and he or she connects this "preview" to the sensation of his or her own body being overtaken by unconsciousness. This portion of the poem has a slightly sinister, nightmarish quality; in it, McKay creates a filmic time-lapse effect as the speaker imagines the pig's cthonic emergence from the earth, and then reverses it:

[. . .] earth

heals all flesh back beginning with her pig,
 filling his throat with silt and sending
 subtle fingers for him like the meshing fibres in a wound
 like roots
 like grass growing on a grave like a snooze
 in the sun like furlined boots that seize
 the feet like his *nostalgie de la boue* like
 having another glass of booze like a necktie like a
 velvet noose like a nurse
 like sleep. (50-51)

This is no longer a phenomenological consciousness scrambling to evaluate a perception; it is an existential consciousness using both pig and perception metaphorically to refract

its own fears of mortality. The pig's rhetorical death is anthropomorphized through similes that connect it to "grass growing on a grave," boots, booze, and a variety of other human rituals. Its ultimate purpose is not to eulogize the life of the pig itself, but rather to represent the speaker's sense of sleep's analogous correspondence to death. The poem's attention is no longer focused on the meeting of consciousness and the "thing itself"; here, the "thing" has become a deferential sign.

Above all, Lee is a poet concerned with voice. By "voice," he comprehends rhythm, and also "the feints and twiddles and full-tilt crescendos you get when the *level* of diction keeps dancing around. The vocal register, you could call it [. . .] an on-your-toes-readiness to encounter the world in sundry dimensions at once" ("Sprawl, Twiddle" 133). Lee's understanding of phenomenological poetry also evinces this "kinaesthetic" interest quite clearly. In order for a poem (or novel) to be phenomenological, in his terms, Lee must be able to hear the unique personality of a human consciousness attempting to understand the world. While this approach shares much with the versions of phenomenological criticism and poetics that were championed by writers such as Poulet, Olson, and Davey, it is not adequately equipped to deal with poems whose phenomenological methods do not foreground the presence of active human consciousnesses or personalities engaging with things in the world.

II. Don McKay's *Apparatus* and the Phenomenology of the Unfamiliar

Despite the accordance of the first half of McKay's "I Scream You Scream" with Lee's theory of phenomenological poetry, McKay's poems frequently disclose a very different sort of phenomenological stance. Rather than foregrounding interactions between human

consciousness and things in the world, many of McKay's poems focus instead on the "beings" of "things themselves." While human personality is not completely excluded from his phenomenological poetic investigations, its importance is diminished. Often, attention is only drawn to the presence of "the human" through McKay's use of anthropomorphic metaphors or comparisons, and of what Morton has called the "medial" function – gestures that call attention to the poem as it exists in language.

McKay's poetry collection *Apparatus*, which was nominated for a Governor General's Award, contains a number of what McKay himself has called "thing" poems: pieces that are meant to inspire moments of defamiliarization for the reader, and that "perceive the wilderness of a thing" ("Apparati" 18). As was noted earlier, by "wilderness," McKay means "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis* 21) – a description that predates Harman's "object-oriented ontology" by nearly a decade, but that lends a certain ecological flair both to Heidegger's concept of readiness-at-hand and Levinas's concept of the Face of the other. That Face, as McKay summarizes, represents "the other encountered in a relationship of address and discovered to be quite untranslatable into systems of sameness and linguistic organization: it is foreign-ness that remains foreign, always exceeding our categories of knowing" (97).

McKay's phenomenological series "Setting the Table" is a short suite of poems in *Apparatus* that conducts a still-life study of three table settings – knife, fork, and spoon – and is among McKay's best-known "thing" pieces. In "Fork," the reader finds:

a touch of kestrel,
of Chopin, your hand with its fork

hovers above the plate, or punctuates
 a proposition. This is the devil's favourite
 instrument, the fourfold
 family of prongs: Hard Place,
 Rock, Something You Should Know,
 and For Your Own Good. (73)

As is readily apparent, this kind of phenomenological poem does not foreground the speaker's consciousness, but focuses explicitly on "the thing itself," and on its relation to the reader/person for whom it is ready-to-hand. It also makes ready use of anthropomorphic representation, as well as "kestrelpomorphic" representation, as Morton would say (i.e., the fork is "morphized" through its metaphoric contact with the kestrel as much as through its contact with the human). For McKay, defamiliarization, or "phenomenal surprise," occurs in moments when objects appear to take on uncannily animate qualities: "[t]he coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched" (*Vis* 21). The percipient's experience of a thing is suddenly altered by a "momentary circumvention of the mind's categories" (21). In "Fork," this is accomplished most brilliantly by the poem's concluding lines:

[. . .] 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. (73)

An important facet of McKay's phenomenological poetics is that his "thing" poems do not attempt to divulge the essential nature of the object; rather, they are content to view things relationally, as they appear from a number of perspectives. Thus it is that, in the lines just quoted, the fork has an entirely different character when it rests face up than the one it has when it rests face down: the attention that McKay has paid to the thing has not resulted in his knowing it as Husserl believed any serious phenomenologist should – that is, "absolutely, in a state of isolation from the contingent conditions of its existence" (Lauer 17). Like Heidegger, McKay approaches a thing as though some aspect of it – its "rawness, its *duende*, its alien being" (*Vis* 21) – is ready and waiting to intrude upon the poet's/reader's experience of it. This method also bears some resemblance to Morton's adaptation, in *The Ecological Thought*, of Derrida's concept of *l'arrivant*, which Morton translates as the "strange stranger" – "the unexpected arrival, the being about whom we know less than we presume" (60).

The essays collected in McKay's *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (2001) are useful complements to the poetic project of *Apparatus*, and indeed, the essay collection reprints an important section of *Apparatus*: a suite of four poems entitled "Matériel." The first poem in the suite is a reflection on the Old Testament story of Cain; the second considers the Homeric Achilles' violent exhibition of Hector's corpse after killing him outside the walls of Troy; the third is a series of musings on a hike taken through a disused military base; the fourth is a lyric that slowly descends into stream-of-consciousness babble as it considers the state of the ruined, clearcut, bombed-out world (*Vis* 37-49). McKay discusses his reason for collectively entitling the four poems "Matériel" in a 1998 interview with Karl Jirgens, where he notes that his adoption of the

military term “matériel” is meant to refer to a category of appropriation in which “we not only take the life of something, such as the life of a tool which you might use for a whole lifetime, but we also own it in death” (16). In another essay, he describes this process as having “used up” that life, as Heidegger would say – a reference that reveals the extent to which his thinking in this regard is indebted to “The Question Concerning Technology,” and especially to Heidegger’s theory of the “standing reserve” (*Vis* 19-20). As a military term, the word “matériel” refers to whatever is not personnel:

The military divides everything into personnel and matériel, and military ownership is absolute. We’ve all heard those stories about army personnel who go out and get sunburnt and get penalized because they’ve damaged army property. [. . .] That idea of ownership in its manic phase, right down to the body. You don’t just own the guy’s life, but after death, and your [*sic*] going to mill his bones, or you’re going to hang them on a cross, or you’re going to make an example of them where they’re going to be part of some semiotic system they can never ever leave. They are contained within a cultural context forever. (19)

McKay’s best-known piece of writing on this topic is the 1993 essay “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry,” in which he describes having come across a stark example of “matériel” while driving along a rural highway in New Brunswick – a dead raven, “hung up by the roadside at the entrance to a lane, a piece of baler twine around one leg, wings spread” (*Vis* 18). What disturbs McKay most about the scene is that the raven’s death has been put on display, just as Hector’s body is put on display by Achilles in *The Iliad*. “A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements,” writes McKay, “this one is required to function as a sign, a human category – a sign which

simply says ‘we can do this’” (19). As McKay’s implicit association of the “standing reserve” with semiotic systems makes clear, his concern for the ways in which human beings appropriate the lives and deaths of others is inextricably related to his views on language-use. Correspondingly, his phenomenological preoccupations serve to provide yet another point of difference between his ecological ethics and the linguistic theories of “postmodernism.” In his interview with Jirgens, he observes: “I know that language is powerful and that in some ways the mind is controlled by it or inhabited by it. I realize that, but in some ways it is healthy for us to remember that it is a tool. To think of it that way, give language back its humility, especially in the current times, when everything threatens to become language. You know, the whole post-structural thing” (16). Similar to his discomfort that a dead body might be forced into “a semiotic system” that it “can never ever leave” is McKay’s concern that poststructuralist theories of language will turn the creatures of the world into “dead” semiotic signs. Levinas’s insistence that the Face of the other is “quite untranslatable,” as McKay puts it, is crucial to his poetics/ethics for this very reason. With this in mind, his habit of anthropomorphizing things might be productively considered as one aspect of his desire to “make us aware *in* language, of the limits of language” (17). The fork in “Setting the Table” is shown from a variety of different – and recognizably “human” – perspectives precisely so that the poem cannot claim to have captured the object’s essence, or come to know it fully.

McKay has said of his approach to poetry that it is characterized by the attempt to “use language in such as [*sic*] way, that we feel that it is gesturing outside of itself, acknowledging that there is a world outside” (“Apparati” 17). His sense that a fundamental rift exists between human cognition and “things themselves,” and his

attendant method of foregrounding defamiliarization and awe as ethical (and, as I argued earlier, pedagogic) responses to those things, is one of the characteristics of his poetry and poetics that reveals his indebtedness to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics of the sublime. I will return to this topic in Chapter 3.

III. Jan Zwicky and the “Ethics” of Reading Phenomenologically

McKay’s and Zwicky’s phenomenological poetics have a number of striking similarities, particularly in their respective modes of describing “attention” to the world. In “Baler Twine,” McKay outlines a mode of attending that he calls “poetic attention”: “a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess” (*Vis* 26). He states, furthermore, that one of his “reasons for failing to postmodernize” is precisely this “state of mind” (26). Poetic attention “gives ontological applause,” he writes: it is a “kind of knowing” that “remains in touch with perception,” and with “the grain of the experience, the particular angle of expression in a face” (27). It is, in other words, the basis of McKay’s phenomenological approach, encapsulating his desire to give due value to the wilderness – and to the Levinasian Faces – of the world’s multiform things.

As I argued in Chapter 1, although Zwicky’s philosophic treatise *Lyric Philosophy* states explicitly that “applied lyricism” is “a contradiction in terms” (L287), the book is in many ways a pedagogic guide to learning how to recognize and read “lyric” art and philosophy. Zwicky argues, for instance, that “[i]t is central to the philosophical reading of a lyric text that we remain alive to its gestures of integration” (L155), and she also observes that “[t]he ability to read lyric must be acquired just like any other skill” (L186). Zwicky’s arguments in *Lyric Philosophy*, like those in her doctoral dissertation *A Theory*

of Ineffability (1981), are indebted to psychoanalytic theory; however, the book is a sustained attempt to push psychoanalytic thinking to the point where it could accommodate “lyric” as she understands it.⁸ This is a recurring theme throughout her critical and philosophical writings, a point that Adam Dickinson explores in some detail in the essay “Surreal Ecology: Freud, Zwicky, and the Lyric Unconscious” (2010). Zwicky’s philosophy is founded upon the tenet that the “neurophysiological conditions that must be present for language-use incidentally give rise to a phenomenological sense of self, a sense of being distinct from one’s environment” (“Lyric Realism” 89). Her works suggests, in other words, that language use, and, by extension, one’s phenomenological perspective, is predicated on a fundamental rift between the percipient and the world – a world that would otherwise be sensed as an integrative, coherent whole rather than as a medley of things distinct from one’s own person.

For Zwicky, Husserl’s phenomenological method is not enough to constitute knowing. “Lyric” suggests that human beings are capable of consciously experiencing the world apart from their phenomenological senses of self; her caveat, however, is that that experience will remain ineffable – alienated from language as fundamentally as it is alienated from ego. With this in view, Zwicky’s philosophy suggests that phenomenological inquiry is most productive when it accepts the limits of its abilities rather than seeking transcendental consciousness. “What is needed is not words that pretend they are doing justice,” she asserts in *Lyric Philosophy*, “but words that convey an awareness of their own inadequacy, their inevitable conditioning by grammar and culture” (L108). It would not be unfair to suggest that, for Zwicky, the same applies for poetry.

In an article discussing the ecopoetic and ecocritical relevance of “metaphoricity” – a mode that is much like Morton’s “medial” insofar as it allows language to “[reveal] itself as an articulation” – Dickinson has demonstrated the extent to which Zwicky’s poetics (and also McKay’s) depends on a lyrically motivated use of metaphor (36). Dickinson defines metaphoricity as “the operative, relational dynamic within figurative language,” and suggests that “[i]t is metaphoricity, as a relative potential, that allows us to think of an environmental ethic at work in lyric apprehensions of materiality in the poetry of Zwicky and McKay,” even when their poems do not seem to refer literally to environmental subjects, or to the “natural” world (36). In addition to being an intervention against ecocriticism’s preference for realist texts, Dickinson’s article is also a defence of metaphor’s ecological potential. “Etymologically, the word metaphor itself comes from Greek expressions of travel and transport: to carry over, to ferry across,” he writes; “[i]t is in this articulation, this ontological ambivalence, this relational movement *between* that I want to emphasize as metaphoricity, as the structural, ethical potential of metaphor” (41). Dickinson skirts the issue of phenomenological inquiry, discussing Zwicky’s writings on quiddity (or *thisness*, as she puts it in *Wisdom & Metaphor* [L55]) by relating *thisness* to his own concept of “material metaphoricity” rather than phenomenological conversations concerning the natures of noumena and phenomena. However, his reading articulates an important connection between Zwicky’s and McKay’s habitual use of metaphor, and their poetics’ correspondence to Levinasian ethics. “The distinctness of things has gravity only through a recognition of interconnectedness, of openness” (42), he argues; “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” (42).

“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” (49). Implicitly, Dickinson’s discussion of “material metaphoricity” in Zwicky’s and McKay’s writings is a reading of poetry’s capacity for phenomenological attention.

Zwicky’s philosophy and poetics demonstrate a number of approaches towards phenomenological inquiry and attention, and, more so than any of the other four *Thinking and Singing* poets, her writings reflect on what it might mean to conduct literary criticism phenomenologically. Her controversial essay “The Ethics of the Negative Review” is an important example in this regard. The piece was first published in a special issue of the *Malahat Review* in 2003, in a gathering of essays and reflections by Canadian writers on the topic of literary reviewing in Canada. In 2012, it was published again on the website of the newly founded organization Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA). The essay met with adversarial response each time it was published: in the first instance, in a polemical review published in *Books in Canada* by the poet and critic Zach Wells; in the second, in a similarly incendiary review published in the *National Post* by the journal’s regular poetry reviewer, Michael Lista.⁹

In “The Ethics of the Negative Review,” Zwicky argues that rather than publishing “negative” reviews of “books we think are bad,” critical silence is the preferable response (60). She asks, “why sharpen the hatchets when a deathly critical silence will do all the *public* work that needs doing?” (54), and suggests, ultimately, that “in public, we keep our mouths shut” (60). Zwicky describes her ideal reviewer as someone who is willing “[t]o take a second look; or a third,” and suggests:

The reviewer who understands their task in these terms, then, would be one who

has taken the trouble to listen again, to listen with care, curiosity, and respect, in an attempt to give genuine attention to what is being said. And who can help the rest begin to listen attentively, too. This is a portrait of the reviewer as a kind of literary naturalist, someone with sharp ears and a good memory, who's willing to tarry alongside both us and the literary world, for whom any item is of potential interest (some less, some more, to be sure), and who sees not an award culture's hierarchy of achievement but hears a living chorus of voices, talking, murmuring, singing to themselves and to others. (61)¹⁰

The ecological tenor of this passage, particularly in the portrait of the reviewer as a "naturalist," and the latter portion describing "a living chorus of voices," is readily apparent. In *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Zwicky speaks of giving "ontological attention" to the world, a form of attention that in her philosophy is an explicit "form of love" (L57). "When we love a thing," she writes, "we can experience our responsibility towards it as limitless (the size of the world). Responsibility is the trace, in us, of the pressure of the world that is focussed in a *this*" (L57). This phenomeno-ontological relationship of "love" not only chimes well with McKay's Levinasian "poetic attention," but also with the philosophy of Levinas himself, who writes in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) that, "[i]t is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other" (80).

It is worth asking why Zwicky draws such an elaborate "portrait of the reviewer as a kind of literary naturalist." Although she admits that during her tenure as the Reviews Editor for *The Fiddlehead* in the 1990s she requested that reviewers only write if they were "genuinely enthusiastic about the book," she does not suggest that other editors should actively discourage negative reviews. Rather, her argument is intended to

persuade readers and reviewers to choose, of their own accord, to review books they believe are worth reading rather than books they prefer to trash. Admittedly, the lines between self-censorship and editorial censorship can sometimes be blurry; however, Zwicky's point is ultimately that Canada's literary cultures would be improved if more people conversed about books they actually like rather than those they disdain. Which is to say, she does not suggest that reviewers should write hypocritically positive reviews of books they do not admire, but rather that they should instead spend their energies introducing the public to little-known books they would like to commend. She also leaves some wiggle room for "negative" critique in this scheme. She acknowledges, for instance (maintaining the conceit of the reviewer as naturalist), that "a reviewer may also be called to speak out against depredations that are deforming an ecosystem or threatening the health of certain species" (61). Although she does not say so explicitly, this seems to suggest that negative reviews are valuable when they draw attention to matters of social concern. (Again, this logic is not impervious to serious opposition: opinions about what constitutes a "threat" to "the health of certain species" are not objective, and it is no easier to reach a consensus on such matters as it is to claim once and for all what constitutes "good" art.)

Zwicky's own writings seem to require the kind of reader response for which she advocates in "The Ethics of the Negative Review." As one early reviewer of *Lyric Philosophy* puts it: "Zwicky's gift to art, and especially to writing, is to legitimize the instinctive vision" (Smith n. pag.). She "acknowledges a resonating web of emotional, perceptual and intellectual comprehension beyond the limits of logical analysis," and "[t]o receive the gift requires that the reader be caught up in this web" (n. pag.). As was

suggested in Chapter 1, Warren Heiti's "Ethics and Domesticity" bears out this insight, and also suggests the extent to which Zwicky's thoughts on "loving" engagement are similar to her thoughts on pedagogy. Indeed, the two are intimately connected.

The real emphasis of "The Ethics of the Negative Review" is not its devaluation of negative reviews, although Zwicky mounts a number of arguments to make her case in that regard. Instead, the essay's focus is its defense of what might be called "appreciative," "sympathetic," or "loving" reviewing. Zwicky argues that appreciative reviewing is "among the great unsung arts of our culture," and suggests that this is so because "it is not actually a species of *speaking*, but a species of *listening*" (62). That is, Zwicky's position is that the best response to a work of literature is to "listen" to it as attentively as possible, and, furthermore, to allow one's response to it to be a record of that committed attention. This involves letting "the ego go," she suggests – an argument that recalls her position in *A Theory of Ineffability* and *Lyric Philosophy* that "lyric" experience of the world requires a diminished sense of self. As with Zwicky's argument in *Wisdom & Metaphor* that "ontological attention" (concern for the beings of things themselves) is a form of love, "The Ethics of the Negative Review" concludes by affirming that "in art, as in friendship, the ear of love discerns more, and more truly, than the eye of judgement" (63).

There are a number of similarities between this position and those of ecological/phenomenological critics such as Bate and Mandel. As I argued in the Introduction, Bate's desire to renounce "the mastery of enframing knowledge and [listen] instead to the voice of art" (269) is politically problematic, given the extent to which his vision of ecopoetic engagement adheres to Heidegger's faith in poetry as a place of

“authentic” dwelling. Mandel’s description of the “critic as savage” as one who desires to “participate in, to become one with the world of literature” (71), demonstrates a similarly willing blindness to the fact that participation and identification are no less political than “evaluating” and “enframing.” Zwicky’s observation that reviewers “may also be called to speak out against depredations” seems to be an implicit acknowledgment of the fact that “appreciative”/“loving” modes of readerly engagement have their darker sides as well.

Carmin Starnino was on the editorial staff of *Books in Canada* when the journal published Wells’s vociferous critique of “The Ethics of the Negative Review.” Although he himself has never reviewed Zwicky’s writing (save for briefly mentioning her name in an essay on another poet’s work),¹¹ one criticism that he has made of McKay’s status as a “mentor” in contemporary Canadian writing picks up on another aspect of the “dark side” of sympathy to which I am attempting to draw attention here. In *Lazy Bastardism: Essays & Reviews on Contemporary Poetry* (2012), Starnino notes justly that the critical culture surrounding McKay’s poetry is a “criticism of veneration” (134). Although he goes on to suggest more contentiously that such a culture is “one of the perks of having a cultic reputation,” Starnino also observes that it is also connected to “the assumption that you are read best by those who like to read you most” (134). As I suggested in Chapter 1, Starnino’s commentary on McKay’s work implies that his poetry gives its readers the dubious satisfaction of feeling that they have been led to contemplate “big ideas.” This criticism is common amongst a certain set of Canadian critics and reviewers, and has also been levelled against Anne Carson, Lorna Crozier, and Zwicky herself (Northrup 208-10). The common thread in cases such as these is the assumption that Canada’s literary

culture is doing itself a disservice by promoting its philosophically- or theoretically-inclined poets to the rank of “teacher” or “guide.” To do so, as critics such as Starnino and Wells imply, is to risk being “taken in.” Or, to paraphrase Russell E. Smith, whose review of *Lyric Philosophy* is quoted above, it is to risk being “caught in a web” that is not of one’s choosing.

Although reservations such as Starnino’s are useful in the abstract because they encourage readers to think critically about the texts from which (and teachers from whom) they choose to learn, their corresponding insinuation that readers may be the victims of a widespread obfuscation of what good poetry and thinking *really* look like constitutes a troubling denial of readers’ agency. A productive counterpoint to such complaints may be found in an early review of *Lyric Philosophy* by Leonard Angel, who parodies the book by structuring his essay in fifteen parts that are numbered in sections and subsections according to the style of *Lyric Philosophy*. Angel begins the review by jesting, “[l]et us be receptive (Let us pray). Let us raise our heads reflectively (let us bow our heads)” (268).¹² His suggestion that a correspondence exists between Zwicky’s lyric injunctions and the performances of Christian piety implies that he finds *Lyric Philosophy*’s views on phenomenological and sympathetic receptivity rather quaint. “Dear reader,” he quips, “you are being presented with a collage review. If you are stimulated by it, you are likely to be stimulated by Zwicky’s efforts to pioneer collage philosophy” (269). Somewhat surprisingly, the review ends on a positive note, as Angel writes that *Lyric Philosophy* “is not a book to be carped at,” but “to be mulled, tasted, savoured, and, above all, to be lived” (273). Given the fact that this comment comes at the end of roughly two thousand words’ worth of carping, and of demonstrating,

moreover, just how easily “living” the book can be made to seem ridiculous, it is difficult to take his flattery seriously.

Criticism such as Starnino’s tends to imply that it is much easier to get sucked into sympathetic, “loving,” or venerational reading than it is to keep one’s wits when confronted by a charismatic author or text. While there may be some truth to this, Zwicky’s writings proceed from the assumption that solipsism, rather than selflessness, seems to be the default setting of human beings, and, correspondingly, that allowing oneself to be drawn in by another person, text, or idea is much harder than it seems. Not incidentally, Lilburn’s poetics is grounded upon this same idea. Deeply informed by the writings of early Christian ascetics, and by a broad range of other theological and philosophical conversations, Lilburn insists, like Zwicky, that it is admirable – indeed, desirable – to feel oneself fundamentally reconstituted through reading. It is to his thoughts on anagogic reading and ethical home-making that I now wish to turn.

III. Returning to the “Community of Things”: Phenomenology and *Apokatastasis* in Tim Lilburn’s Poetics

In a reflective essay on the sixth-century monastic treatise the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Lilburn suggests that “the interior practice which poetry calls for, the formation of which is a certain sort of philosophy, is the same as the interiority of an enlightened politics” (“Thinking” 157). He notes, moreover, that the *Rule*, which he suggests calls for the same reading practices as poetry, “is a psychagogic device aimed at interiority: consider the instructions the work contains and let them alter your fundamental disposition to things” (156-57). Lilburn indicates that this kind of reading practice is unusual from the

standpoint of modernity:

there is a way of knowing in contemplation as it's been traditionally understood that resembles the way of knowing in poetry. Poetry, too, is an epistemic practice now discounted: metaphysics, poetry and contemplative idleness – three currently laughable or perhaps culpable enthusiasms. They might not get you arrested, but they could get you fired or at least excluded from the conversation. (157).

The *Rule* outlines a practice of humble listening, one that Lilburn describes as “a light, mobile transfixity” – “a description of the homeless, protean cunning of desire itself in its upper ranges” (158). Describing a number of theological reading practices, such as *opus Dei*, which is “intended not to gather information or to bring comprehension, but to be a slow engine of transformation,” Lilburn suggests that, in anagogic reading, “[u]nderstanding is change” (159).

Lilburn writes that contemplation and poetry are not the same – they “do not share an identical *telos*” – “but that what both want strikes each the same – as quintessentially compelling and as unutterable” (162):

Neither is accumulative, that is, neither gathers a store of facts, categories, certitudes, but both are marked by divestment: the deeper into the practice you travel, the emptier you become; you lose your bearings; the outlines of the self become less bold. I am not speaking of sentimental vacuity or an occult intuitionism or a poetic inspirationalism, those pseudo-wisdoms, pseudo-poetries, but of real loss: the loss of the sense of language as a tool, the loss of thinking as an explanatory power, the loss of the image of oneself as a knower to whom the world is presented. Contemplation and poetry are forms of knowing

where the knower and her powers are first shaved by the world and then are swallowed by the world. (162)

Although Lilburn does not specify this explicitly, his vision of poetry as an epistemic practice seems to refer to the poet's experience of poetry rather than the reader's. That being said, his comments do suggest that certain forms of poetry (he points to the writings of Bringhurst, Lee, McKay, and Zwicky, as well as others) seem to accommodate, and indeed to request, anagoric response – which is to say that, reading them, the reader too might experience an “interior alteration” (163). When poetry has “the exploratory reach of a certain sort of philosophical inquiry,” he suggests, “it permits an anagoric reading usually associated with the sort of philosophy I have in mind” (156). Thus, he configures reading as “erotic passivity” (158), and as expectant of the internal changes that love and spiritual desire engender.

After “The Ethics of the Negative Review” was published on CWILA's website in the summer of 2012, Zwicky's essay sparked a heated online debate that dovetailed intriguingly with an early critical response to Lilburn's *Assiniboia: Two Choral Performances and a Masque*. “Assiniboia” is the name of both the state and the provisional government that Louis Riel and other revolutionaries of the Red River Resistance erected at Fort Garry in 1869-70, and again at Batoche in 1885. The poems collected in Lilburn's *Assiniboia* are set in a visionary landscape that encompasses the Red River terrain in Saskatchewan and also the coastal landscapes of British Columbia, imbuing its geography with mythic and philosophic resonance. The collection derives its structure from European musical forms – liturgical, in the case of the “choral performances,” and courtly, in the case of the “masque” – and its stated purpose is to help

prepare the way for healthy dialogue between First Nations and Western cosmologies by drawing out the “occluded” elements of the Western tradition that seem to Lilburn to have been all but lost in the West’s pursuit of empire and colonial wealth. In other words, *Assiniboia* does not simply re-imagine Riel’s dream for an inclusive, well-governed state, but is also a fantasy of what first contact between Indigenous and invader-settler cultures on this continent could have been.

In April 2012, Lista reviewed *Assiniboia* in the *National Post*, treating it derisively. Three months later, he wrote a similarly polemical article regarding CWILA’s online endorsement of “The Ethics of the Negative Review,” this time prompting a flurry of comments from readers, as well as two short articles on Canadian critical culture by Zwicky herself, which were also published in the *National Post*. Among those who added their voices to the discussion was Ross Leckie, who affirmed his agreement with Lista that literary reviewing exists “to begin a conversation, not to end it,” but ended by questioning whether Lista’s reviewing practices meet that standard (“Further Thoughts” n. pag.). Lista’s review of *Assiniboia*, Leckie implies, had not encouraged conversation about Lilburn’s book, but obstructed it.

Although Lista’s review of *Assiniboia* indulges in spleen to such a degree that its critical value is suspect, the piece does draw attention to a contentious aspect of the book’s political project. The review demonstrates, as *Assiniboia* also does, that matters of culture are not trivial. Wars have literally been fought in order to assert the value of seeing the world in one way rather than another. In this light, Lista’s review is an apt addition to the “mythopoeic wars” that *Assiniboia* takes up as its subject matter. Furthermore, Lista raises at least two serious objections to *Assiniboia* that require critical

attention: first, that it may be “a bit rich to prescribe as the balm for our colonial wound a kind of nebulous Catholic mysticism, whose eschatological esurience played no small part in colonialism,” and second, that the European musical forms that structure *Assiniboia* are not appropriate framing devices for the cultural contact that Lilburn attempts to engineer (“Review” n. pag.).

Assiniboia begins with “An Argument,” in which the book’s overtly political project is introduced, and ends with an “Antiphon,” the literary equivalent of a choral device in which voices sing in response to others, either for the purpose of elucidation or conversation. Between the Argument and Antiphon are the choral performances “Exegesis” and “Songs of Clarity in Final Procession,” and in the direct centre of the book is the masque “Assiniboia.” Collectively, *Assiniboia*’s numerous sections feature an extensive *dramatis personae* that includes Riel, his sister Sara (a Grey Nun), Honoré Jaxon (Riel’s last secretary), anthropomorphized Saskatchewan landmarks such as the Bull’s Forehead Hill and the Cabri Man, the Sufi philosopher Suhrawardi, and a number of figures from the Graeco-Roman tradition: among them, Odysseus, Calypso, Dionysus, Hermes, and Hermocrates. Socrates also appears, although he has no speaking role, and the influence of Plato’s dialogues can be sensed throughout.

In the Argument that begins the book, Lilburn describes the historical Assiniboia as “an imaginal state, polyglot (Cree, French, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, English, Michif), local, mixed-race, [and] Catholic-mystical,” and offers an explanation of *Assiniboia*’s poetic and political purpose:

It is surprising how many of the old imperial gestures remain still vigorous among us. One way to move against them, from the settler side, is to bring forward, in a

certain insistent way, the occluded mystical imagination, chthonic, convivial, in the Western cultural tradition itself, and fix it to this continent by first allowing it to wander freely. The army that wins, indeed, is a mystical one. The poems gathered here are its armourer. (ix)

Lilburn's diction assigns an explicitly martial role to *Assiniboia*'s poems – an association that he repeats later, in the Prologue to the masque itself, when he suggests that “colonial wars are long mythopoeic wars,” and implies again that *Assiniboia* is ready to enter the fray. Both passages indicate that *Assiniboia* is a self-conscious attempt to consider the visionary (and revisionary) capacity of polemic (*polemos*, war), and to explore the ways in which myth and imagination are culpable in imperial and colonial violence. Lilburn also counter-balances his depiction of poetry as an “armourer” with a metaphor situating *Assiniboia*'s masque as a balm or antiseptic, writing: “[l]et this recital be applied to the wound” (27). Together, these representations of poetry's martial and medicinal purposes suggest the seriousness of the project that Lilburn sets out for himself in *Assiniboia*, which is to create a work of art in which the “chthonic,” “occluded mystical imagination” of the West is everywhere to be felt – a work that might also help those with “settler” subjectivities to retrieve the lost *oikos* of Western philosophy, and to explore whatever similarities it might share with the cultural traditions that are properly “chthonic” to this continent.

Almost needless to say, this is a deeply perilous undertaking. It risks romanticizing First Nations and Métis peoples as reliquaries of ancient mystical wisdom, and also threatens to be no different from the multitude of other settler attempts to “indigenize” European cultural forms in order to “fix” them to the New World. As will be

seen, Lilburn's broader body of writing includes stark examples of precisely such rhetoric. *Assiniboia* itself is not entirely innocent of these "old imperial gestures"; however, I would argue that its political project should not be dismissed too quickly. Approaching *Assiniboia* with Zwicky's ethics of readerly attention in mind creates a productive atmosphere in which the book's ecopoetics may be examined and critiqued. Ultimately, there are no easy answers where *Assiniboia* is concerned. Regarding Lista's objection to the book's engagement with Christian mysticism, for instance, both Louis and Sara Riel were Catholic, and the inhabitants of Batoche were predominantly Catholic as well. Lilburn, a trained Jesuit who holds a PhD in religious studies, has a number of points of entry into the religious discourses that shaped the historical Assiniboia. It would be unconscionable to devalue the reality of the faith that the Riels shared, and that informs Lilburn's work so deeply. It would also be unscrupulous, however, to celebrate the Catholicism of the Riels and other Métis and First Nations revolutionaries without also taking into account the historical complicity of Catholic education and discipline in the imperial projects of colonization, assimilation, and genocide. *Assiniboia* addresses this history only obliquely: Lilburn's concern is focused more intently on the project of drawing out the mystical aspects of the Western philosophical tradition in order to provide a counterpoint to those that imperialism has used so well.

One of the ways in which Lilburn goes about this is by emphasizing the erotic aspects of the Western tradition's Graeco-Roman roots. Whereas Heidegger considered ontology to be first philosophy, and Levinas ethics, Lilburn has suggested that another contender for the honour of being the "originary thinking" is "erotics, mystical theology" ("Poetry's Practice" 38). In Chapter 1, I noted that the term *apokatastasis* designates an

important current of thought in Lilburn's work. As he explains in the endnotes to his essay collection *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (1999), the word has an astronomical/astrological context in the writings of Plato and Cicero, signifying "the return of the stars to their initial position" (99). In Aristotle, it means "the restoration of a being to its first state," and in the writings of Origen, as in Lilburn's own, it "designates both a therapy, drawing an individual back to a condition of nature, and the achievement of an accord – amounting to an identity – among all things, a 'remembering' of a community beyond imagination, yet within the scope of desire" (99). It is possible, and indeed productive, to understand the object of Lilburn's erotics as precisely this "remembrance" of "a community beyond imagination," which Lilburn has elsewhere spoken of as a "community of things" ("The Poem Walks" 10). Importantly, this memory is suspect: the philosopher, poet, or theologian knows that the *apokatastatic* object of desire – the *oikos par excellence* – may have only ever existed in the realm of the imagination. "What the heart wants," writes Lilburn, "wants back, is a residence it remembers but never had" ("Walking Out" 46).

Apokatastatic nostalgia inheres in Lilburn's erotics, and it is this yearning that determines his phenomenological perspective as well. In Lilburn's poetics, hunger – both carnal and spiritual – is one of the primary means through which the world is explored. Tellingly, *Living in the World As If It Were Home* begins with an epigraph from Weil that muses on biblical analogies between spiritual nourishment and bread, and connects that hunger to the "efficacy" of desire "in the realm of spiritual goodness" (n. pag.). In *Assiniboia*, hunger is sometimes portrayed synaesthetically, as in "Turtle Mountain," the collection's first poem. "Turtle Mountain" is spoken by the character "Stranger," who is

later revealed to be Dionysos. He begins:

I came through here, Blackfoot country,
 And took it up, the bad-angled company of dead people,
 My ear slipped in and took the teat
 In the bedroom of glaciers [. . .] (3)

Through the startling image of an ear taking “the teat,” the reader encounters a synaesthesia of sense impressions and bodily needs. Here – as in Zwicky’s philosophy, poetry, and poetics – to listen is to be nourished. The lines also recall Cohen’s graphic description, in *Beautiful Losers*, of the Telephone Dance, in which Edith’s nipples in F.’s ears promise “the mystery explained [. . .] signals, warnings, conceits” (34).

Psychoanalysis has long held the position that the pleasure of feeding at the breast is the first erotic sensation that humans experience, and in Lilburn’s poetry, this maxim holds true – particularly when the “food” being offered by the world feeds the spirit and mind as well as the body.¹³

A subtler example of *Assiniboia*’s sustained harmony of erotic and ecological thinking is found in the poem “House,” which is spoken by Sara Riel:

You could turn a corner in an old house, believe me,
 Which is your plumage, your liver, your song,
 Potato field visible from the southeast window, the sudden, abdominal well
 Axing upward, that old house, and there someone, or perhaps some trees
 Or a slope perhaps,
 Has laid out a long meal down a narrow pine table
 With ends in separate rooms,

A meal that changes you as you eat it

Lifting its antlers in. (13)

Keeping in mind the spiritually erotic significance of hunger in Lilburn's poetics, this "meal that changes you as you eat it / Lifting its antlers in" is extremely poignant. To imagine such a meal is to imagine the feeding body as a radically open space – vulnerable to being altered, perhaps irrevocably, by that which enters it. Gamey though the meat might be, Lilburn's words conjure the image of ritualistic communion, particularly that which in the Catholic church involves the transubstantiation of Christ's body in the bread.

The most significant gesture that Lilburn makes to the concept of *apokatastasis* in *Assiniboia* is in the Antiphon, which begins with an epigraph from Plato's *Timaeus*.¹⁴ In *Timaeus*, Socrates gathers with three interlocutors, Critias, Hermocrates (who also appears in Lilburn's Antiphon), and Timaeus himself. The reader is informed that on the previous day, Socrates had delivered a speech detailing the form of the ideal city, and now wishes his interlocutors to treat him to similar "hospitality gifts," as he calls them – that is, a series of speeches that will bring that ideal city to life. "I'd love to listen to someone give a speech depicting our city in a contest with other cities, competing for those prizes that cities typically compete for," says Socrates: "I'd love to see our city distinguish itself in the way it goes to war and in the way it pursues the war: that it deals with the cities, one after another, in ways that reflect positively on its own education and training, both in word and deed – that is, both in how it behaves toward them and how it negotiates with them" (19b-d). The correspondence that Lilburn is drawing implicitly between Riel's Assiniboia and the ideal Athens that Plato describes in both *Timaeus* and the *Republic* is clear. The city-states are not equated due to similarities in their conception

or structure (of which there are few), but because they are “imaginal.” Lilburn himself is joining Riel and Plato in a long tradition of dreamers who have imagined what shape a truly beautiful city might take – an exercise in longing for a home that has not yet come to be.

Why should Lilburn choose *Timaeus* as an intertext for *Assiniboia*'s Antiphon rather than the *Republic*, where Plato's ideal city is described in more detail? The answer to this question lies in *Timaeus*' narrative framing. Before Socrates' companions begin their speeches, Critias is exhorted to relate a story that he learned as a child from the sage Solon, who claimed to have been told it by an Egyptian priest. Solon's story recounts how he had his naivety revealed to him in Egypt, where, having spoken to an assembled group about the creation of human beings, a priest intervened, saying: “Solon, Solon, you Greeks are ever children. There isn't an old man among you”:

Your souls are devoid of beliefs about antiquity handed down by ancient tradition. Your souls lack any learning made hoary by time. The reason for that is this: There have been, and there will continue to be, numerous disasters that have destroyed human life in many kinds of ways. [. . .] [N]o sooner have you achieved literacy and all the other resources that cities require, than there again, after the usual number of years, comes the heavenly flood. It sweeps upon you like a plague, and leaves only your illiterate and uncultured people behind. You become infants all over again, as it were, completely unfamiliar with anything there was in ancient times, whether here or in your own region. (22b-23b)

The Egyptian priest not only reveals that Solon's knowledge is like a child's, and that his sense of history is little more than fable, he also describes Athens as it used to be, before

the wisdom and learning of its people were swept away by series of natural disasters (23d). The Athens he describes, as Critias recounts this tale third-hand, sounds an awful lot like the ideal city that Socrates has only recently imagined for his interlocutors. *Timaeus*, then, unlike the *Republic*, begins with the premise that Socrates' beautiful city was once real, although all cultural memory of it has been lost.

It is easy to see why Plato's narrative appeals to Lilburn, and to observe how its lessons resonate within his own poetry and poetics. Compare *Timaeus*' narrative framing, for instance, with the following passage from Lilburn's 2007 essay "Walking Out of Silence":

I suspect a conversation will take place at some point in Western Canada between Crees and other tribes who have lifted themselves out of the wreckage of the last two hundred years and a small band of white people who have gone down the steep stairs of their own tradition and brought out what is truly worthy. One group will say *these are our stories* and the other will say *these are our songs, these, the paths our people took up the mountain*. Both will be listening, ready to bolt. The Crees and others are talking among themselves now, building, and we, at the moment, have no one ready; there's still too much work to be done. (48)

In Lilburn's work, the Egyptian priest's revelation to Solon that his people have forgotten (many times over) the wisdom that they once had is brought to bear upon contemporary North Americans of European descent, whom Lilburn enjoins to go "down the steep stairs of their own tradition." As is typical of Lilburn's writing, knowledge is figured as depth – to find it, one must descend ever downwards, as though searching for the source of a well.¹⁵ Significantly, Lilburn is not suggesting that invader-settler cultures should

appropriate First Nations epistemologies in order to bolster their own sense of belonging; rather, as in *Assiniboia*, he is advocating a re-discovery of what the Western tradition may have lost.

Origen and Weil are important precursors in this regard, for both were Christian thinkers who eagerly sought wisdom (which they looked upon as evidence of divine revelation) in pre-Christian and contemporary non-Christian cultures. For both, this also involved a regrettable devaluation of Hebrew culture and religion: a characteristic of their writings that Lilburn's do not repeat. Weil believed that the Hebrews had learned the best parts of their religious knowledge from the "pagan" Chaldeans, Egyptians, Greeks, and Persians (*Letter 5*); she affirmed an affinity between the Eleusinian, Orphic, and Pythagorean mysteries and the Catholic faith (6, 8, 29), and also "between bread and Demeter, wine and Dionysus" (8). In fact, she believed that by having begun "his public life by changing the water into wine," Christ himself "marked his affinity to Dionysus" (10). In a letter written in 1942, she suggests that it is "becoming a matter of urgency to remedy the divorce which has existed for twenty centuries and goes on getting worse and worse between profane civilization and spirituality in Christian countries" (9); "Europe has been spiritually uprooted, cut off from that antiquity in which all the elements of our civilization have their origin; and she has gone about uprooting the other continents from the sixteenth century onwards" (17). Such sentiments are echoed almost directly in *Assiniboia*, as is, implicitly, Weil's unusual understanding of the New Testament injunction for believers to evangelize. "When Christ said: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, and bring them the glad tidings'," she writes, "he commanded his apostles to bring glad tidings, not a theology" (16). "He never said: 'Compel them to renounce all

that their ancestors have looked upon as sacred, and to adopt as a holy book the history of a small nation unknown to them” (17-18). Weil’s relationship to Catholic doctrine is the kind of theological relationship that *Assiniboia* embraces and advocates in turn – one that condemns the faith’s historical association with the colonial projects of disenfranchisement and assimilation, but that is also committed to holding on to “what is truly worthy,” so that real dialogue might be possible.

In the tradition of Donne, Lilburn’s *apokatastatic* poetics is also a poetics of ravishment. In a 2002 lecture entitled “The Poem Walks Toward You: Listening, Negative Theology, Place,” Lilburn further aligns his poetics with those of Bringham, Lee, and Zwicky when he asserts that poems are heard rather than written: “your work grows, curves further inward, not through minute attention to craft, not by the ministrations of a luminous editor, but by you being broken, being ravished, turned against yourself” (5). In a recent interview with the poet Shane Rhodes, Lilburn has explicitly connected this sense of ravishment to *Assiniboia*’s stated project of poetic decolonization:

There was something deficient in the culture of Europeans when they first came in contact with the land in North America and the original inhabitants of that land: European culture had long ago lost touch with its contemplative root, its own wisdom lineage. This meant that it had little capacity over all to take in and be ravished and shaped by the new place, because it was essentially far from the rapt, persistent attention its own contemplative heritage could have shaped in it.

(“Poetics of Decolonization” 122)

Elsewhere, discussing this issue in concert with the themes of reading and writing more specifically, Lilburn has written that, “[i]n the world of eros, profound desire,

philosophical desire – [. . .] not just fleshiness, but an appetite for *everything* – there is both passivity and activity. It seems to me that in writing a book of poems there’s a great deal of erotic passivity: you are acted upon; you are grabbed by the neck by something that is unenfranchised” (“Writing as Ghostly” 9). He also suggests that to “read with erotic passivity” is to allow oneself “to be theurgically sculpted by musical force” (“Walking Out” 47). In this regard, his theories of reading and writing share much with Zwicky’s. *Eros*, he insists, “shaves the ego” (“Writing as Ghostly” 9), and poetry is “a religious undertaking” – “an attempt to listen inside things, an attempt to ‘hear’ the interiority, the deeps, of crows and mountains of basaltic rock” (“Walking Out” 47). This attempt is also “a bewildering, somewhat destabilizing, yet vivifying exile from oneself,” Lilburn writes (47). Poets perform an act of “homesteading in otherness,” and “if one of us travels into the cut off world of stones, rivers, then all of us do through the sort of reading which is anagogy” (47).

From all of this it should be clear that Lilburn’s erotics is also a kind of phenomenology. Like Zwicky, he advocates “an attempt to listen inside things,” and his work suggests that writing is an “availability, listening’s stripped place, in which the hidden lives of things, pumpkins, poplar groves, might be transcribed” (“Walking Out” 42). He subscribes to a contemplative belief in “the optic power of the heart,” and writes that “cthoniac citizenship” is a deep “enfolding into the land” (57). Such “enfolding,” he suggests, “is assisted by long term residency,” but “it requires something more, a particular form of interior or epistemological practice, a certain sort of looking” (“Faith and Land” 57). In true *apokatastatic* style, he affirms: “[t]he object of poetry, finally, isn’t to write poems, it’s to come home, to return to the community of things. We let the ear

grow large, and what is in the world comes near; we're less apart, then, less rogue, dangerous; the old union wobbles back" ("The Poem Walks" 10). This perspective learns much from John Duns Scotus's notion of *haecceitas* (thisness), which Lilburn describes "not as a trait which a particular chair or tree possesses, a ghostly antler of me-ness, but the capacity of a thing, likely simply its plumage of variety, to awaken awe in human beings" ("Walking Out" 44). In this definition, the reader can discern a certain correspondence with McKay's phenomenological definition of "wilderness," and may also be led to muse again on the spiritual meal that Lilburn depicts in "House," which lifts "its antlers in" to whomever partakes of it. Rather than the "ghostly" antlers of "me-ness," those antlers that "House" describes are the visual manifestation of the meal's capacity to kindle awe.

Despite Lilburn's avowed anti-colonialist stance in *Assiniboia*, the book's visionary practices risk romanticizing Lilburn's ecological and *apokatastatic* nostalgia for "home," even when that home is explicitly coded as an origin that may never have existed in reality. In this regard, Lilburn's larger body of writing sets a bad precedent, as the following passage from his essay collection *Going Home* (2008) attests:

I'd always had an affection for the Regina Public Library, a trim, modernist building across from Victoria Park downtown; with its tall windows and rows of books, it had been a refuge for me as I grew up. Late one hot afternoon, as I was leaving the library, a thunderstorm was threatening in the southeast, gigantic black clouds bulking over the Saskatchewan Power building. People were filing out of offices, getting into cars or catching buses; some Aboriginal men were gathered in the park.

I suddenly stopped on the steps, struck – immobilized – by the sense, the sure, sharp realization, that everything around me – the looming Power building, Victoria Park and its cenotaph, the beautiful First Baptist Church – were not *here* but seemed slightly dislodged and hovering, leaning elsewhere, their loyalties elsewhere, caught in a momentum of nostalgia for, obeisance to, distant centres of settler power, Winnipeg minimally, but more truly Toronto and the east, New York, London, the Europe to which the older buildings earnestly paid homage. The Aboriginal men, still moving and talking in the park, certainly were autochthonic; they rose effortlessly from the ground. But I did not, nor did the culture I came from, and I felt keenly this deprivation. (4)¹⁶

In this passage, Lilburn draws a sharp distinction between the architectural signifiers of colonial power – the library, the power building, the church, and the park named after an English queen – and the “autochthonic” men who are described as rising “effortlessly from the ground.” To say that this commits a hugely reductive romanticization of the First Nations men in the park – a portrait drawn in the style of Rousseau – is to say the very least. Here it seems appropriate to reiterate Bringhurst’s conviction that invader-settler cultures can usefully learn from the ecological practices of First Nations cultures without propagating the racist assumption that First Nations peoples are themselves innately “natural” (see Chapter 1). Although *Assiniboia* participates by and large in the first endeavour – that is, the self-reflexive activity of cross-cultural collaboration and learning – moments such as the above passage from *Going Home* are party to the second.

In his conversation with Rhodes about *Assiniboia*, Lilburn asks: “[w]hy isn’t there more of this, a move toward land awareness in writing and deeper versions of cultural

exchange?” (“Poetics of Decolonization” 124). Although he muses on a number of possible reasons for the apparent absence of dialogue, Lilburn does not address the most basic contention that might be raised against *Assiniboia*’s political project, or his ecological poetics more generally – namely that the project of home-making in which he is engaged is itself a suspect activity. Whereas Lilburn’s writings are perpetually engaged with wondering how to live in the world “as if it were home,” there are many who would argue that it might be more ethical to resign oneself to futility of that desire. To some extent, McKay’s poetics is a useful counterpoint to Lilburn’s in this regard. For instance, in his 2005 essay “Five Ways To Lose Your Way,” McKay asks whether or not a person can dwell in lostness, “somewhere outside the ubiquity of plans” (92). McKay’s characteristic emphasis on the value (both creative and ethical) of defamiliarization can often be found in Lilburn’s work as well, and where the *via negativa* wins out over Lilburn’s “homesteading” activities, his poetics seems more attuned to the contradictions of his cultural politics.

The device that Lilburn employs most frequently to express a “negative,” or apophatic, approach to poetic subjects has been noted by Starnino, who observes insightfully that Lilburn’s affinity for the *via negativa* is evinced in his poetry through “a more euphoric version of its theology,” the “superlative way, or the way of excess” (149-50). Starnino describes this mode as being demonstrated within Lilburn’s “word-prosperous poetry whose accumulations are driven by unrequited renunciations; and enrichment that, skeletally, is also a reduction” (150). By hyperbolically repeating the act of naming, in other words, Lilburn builds poems whose descriptions are as unstable as a Jenga tower, thus celebrating the unknowable, the ineffable, and the unassimilable by

another: the raspberry flowers are bees, they emit pneuma (breath, spiritual fire), they are phallic, they are “excreta,” they are “picnics,” they are “embroidery,” they are “the purity of France.” One way of understanding Lilburn’s poetic apophysis is to assume that the pluralism of his images is not meant to synthesize into a cohesive and coherent whole; rather, the poem’s apophatic/ecological significance lies in the very fact of those images’ diversity, insofar as they fail to reveal one perfect way of rendering the raspberry flower in words.

Lilburn takes a similar approach in the poem “Exegesis,” which is spoken by “The Stranger”:

In milkweed a pole of liturgically clothed cats, then
 behind this, the palace with breasted pillars,
 where everyone is heard.
 The *ta’wil* of milkweed,
 that machinery, is caress and proffering ambassadorial gifts.
 The milkweed holds still, holds still
 for the eschatologically optimistic hermeneutic of milkweed,
 milkweed, in the mind of Joseph, sitting beside milkweed
 near the path, dream-taxonomist, sizzling
 eye-balcony in the electron microscope theatre
 – milkweed is the campaigns of Alexander into India. (18)

As in “Hey,” Lilburn takes anything but a hesychastic approach in “Exegesis,” and the concatenation of images heaped together lends itself particularly well to the expression of the plural, polyglot state that Lilburn wishes to represent in *Assiniboia*. The poem is also

an exercise in reading that enacts the “hermeneutic of milkweed” by making reference to a variety of modes of interpretation – scriptural exegesis, and *ta’wil* (Quranic interpretation and explanation) most obviously. Lilburn also gestures to the religions of ancient Egypt and Sumer, which are signalled by the images of “liturgically clothed cats” and “the palace with breasted pillars” respectively. Furthermore, the “reading” practices of the ancient world are invoked again when Lilburn alludes to Joseph, “dream-taxonomist.” As Genesis 41 recounts, Joseph’s slavery in Egypt results in a memorable meeting between the Hebraic and Egyptian religions when Joseph is able to interpret Pharaoh’s dream and warn him of seven years of coming famine.

In poems such as “Hey” and “Exegesis,” it is impossible to find a centre of meaning, or to locate a primary voice or figure within the text. “The world is its names, plus their cancellations,” Lilburn writes in *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (5), and the multiplicity of metaphoric names that his poems invoke serves to create richly textured, and intentionally unsatisfactory descriptions of the world. In this regard, Lilburn’s “way of excess” seems practically Derridean, although it is ultimately different at heart.¹⁷ “Exegesis” is an appropriate poem with which to conclude this chapter’s reflections on phenomenological perspectives in the works of the *Thinking and Singing* poets, for it gestures not only to Origen (whose theological career was spent in exegetical and hermeneutical work), but also to the phenomenological modes of readerly engagement and attention that Lee’s, McKay’s, Zwicky’s, and Lilburn’s writings illustrate. What the phenomenological perspectives of Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky make clear is that these modes are rife with competing tensions, possibilities, and dangers. Encounters with things, neighbours, and uncanny landscapes are never trivial

nor innocuous, nor are the ways in which readers choose to reflect on the relations between their selves and the world.

Notes

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- ¹ Anna Bramwell's 1989 study *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* suggests the extent to which many "green" and ecological movements in Europe and North America have had ties to Fascist ideology and policy.
- ² In addition to being an extension of Heidegger's phenomenological thinking, Harman's analysis is in some ways an extension of Levinasian ethics as well. Whereas Levinas argues that the Face of the other confronts the self as that alone which cannot be assimilated, or synthesized into Hegelian totality – thereby confronting the self with the necessity of the ethical relation – Harman's analysis represents all things in the world as existing in a complex of unassimilable relations.
- ³ Her position both precedes and corroborates Tilottama Rajan's evaluation of deconstruction's theoretical debts to phenomenology in *Deconstruction and the Reminders of Phenomenology: Sartre, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard* (2002).
- ⁴ *Tish: A Poetry Newsletter* was a literary journal run by students at the University of British Columbia from 1961-69. George Bowering, Daphne Buckle (Marlatt), Frank Davey, Jamie Reid, and Fred Wah are among the writers most commonly associated with its inception.
- ⁵ It is worth noting that although Poulet states in the essay "Phenomenology of Reading" that phenomenological criticism should not seek the artist behind the work, his four-volume magnum opus *Études sur le temps humain (Studies in Human Time)* (1949, 1952, 1964, 1968) includes numerous instances of his attempts to apprehend the author's mind at work in the text. As the scholar Werner Brock has noted, Heidegger's philosophical methods share something of this method as well.

Heidegger, he argues, was “convinced that only he who is steeped in the philosophic tradition, understanding the thought of the great thinker of the past as if it were his own, philosophizing with him, as it were, in dialogue and only then criticizing constructively, would eventually develop problems in an original manner” (“Introduction” 7).

- ⁶ Although an extended reading of “world” and “earth” is not crucial to this discussion of *Savage Fields*, it is worth noting that Harman’s analysis in *Tool-Being* takes great pains to emphasize the fact that, for Heidegger, the world is tetravalent, not bivalent (191). In a lengthy interpretation of Heidegger’s 1954 essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Harman suggests that Heidegger’s distinction between “world” and “earth” is not as crucial to his thinking as the fourfold of “earth,” “sky,” “mortals,” and “gods” that is presented in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” In Harman’s view, the fourfold (*das Geviert*) is Heidegger’s primary contribution to a phenomenological attack on philosophy’s habit of approaching the “thing” as “something produced or represented or defined” (195). Whereas “earth,” in this context, still corresponds (as it does in Lee’s reading) to “the dark potencies and withdrawn being of things” (Harman 195), for Harman, its importance lies in the fact that it corresponds to Heidegger’s concept of the tool – that which is ready-at-hand. Between “earth,” “gods,” “mortals,” and “sky,” in Harman’s reading, Heidegger lays out a theory of fourfold relation in which the fundamental difference between *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* is played out doubly – along the axis of existence as the being of “something at all,” and the axis of existents as “specific somethings” (203).

- ⁷ In her PhD dissertation on Lee’s engagement with Grant’s work and thought, Peggy

Roffey suggests that *Savage Fields* “is a curious effort, on Lee’s part,” to grapple with the concept of nature’s “beneficence” (28) – a concept that Lee “pressured” Grant to eliminate from his 1969 essay “The University Curriculum,” which Lee worked with in his capacity as the editor of *Technology and Empire* (30). Bringhurst also suggests that *Technology and Empire* lies “deep behind” the argument of *Savage Fields* (“At Home” 79).

- ⁸ Like *Lyric Philosophy*, which it informs, Zwicky’s doctoral dissertation, *A Theory of Ineffability* (1981), is an interventionist text. Trained in an academic atmosphere in which the methods of analytic philosophy took precedence over other forms of logic, Zwicky chose to advocate the philosophical viability of experience that falls outside the realm of language – particularly such ineffable experiences as have been described by religious mystics and creative writers. The project “takes as its aim the development of a theory of mind which allows the explanation and justification of ineffability claims in the context of mystical experience” (iii). In order to accomplish this, Zwicky approaches the issue neurologically, using Freud’s early, abandoned, and unpublished study, the “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” which she supplements with the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget.

A Theory of Ineffability argues that many descriptions of mystical and creative experience suggest “mental activity” that is specifically conscious, but that “may, at times, be of a non-standard type – one characterized by a non-logical organization of thought, an absence of a sense of self, and ineffability” (iii). She connects these characteristics to the qualities of the mental activity that Freud called primary processes, which, in his thinking, belong most properly to *unconscious* mental activity.

The dissertation's purpose is to demonstrate that the ineffable experiences of mystics and artists represent their consciousness of mental activity that is usually unconscious. Essentially, Zwicky's argument is that secondary processes (conscious mental activity) require syntactical language use, while primary processes rest content with linguistic imagism (as Freud's descriptions of dream rebuses also demonstrate). The connections she will later draw in *Lyric Philosophy* between the psychoanalytic ego, the phenomenological sense of self, and the maieutic *eros* of "lyric" knowledge are anticipated throughout *A Theory of Ineffability*, as is her desire to pinpoint the roles played by language and psychoanalytic selfhood in creative expression. "One possible explanation of the actual structure of creative thought," she suggests, "is that its organization is primarily associative; that is, in creative thought, the inhibitory restrictions of the ego are decreased or absent, with the result that ideas are connected in a manner which is novel from the deductive standpoint of secondary process" (308).

The dissertation is structured in three parts, the first of which reviews psychological and philosophical theories regarding ineffability claims, and finds the prevailing traditions wanting. The second explores the insights and omissions of Freud's "Project," and the third attempts to supplement that project with Piaget's work. Zwicky's first, "avowedly tentative" (193) hypothesis, which she reaches at roughly the midpoint of the dissertation, is that "ineffability results from a dissolution of the ego and the attendant cessation of secondary process activity, allowing primary process activity to proceed relatively unhindered" (157-58). This position deliberately rejects psychoanalytic explanations of mystical experience as a "regression to infancy, specifically fantasies of union with the breast" (11; 158), and instead "postulates a

structural shift in the nature of experience and perception which is ontogenetically ahistorical” (158). Zwicky argues that “the shift to primary process from secondary process in an adult should not be construed as a return to infancy, in the sense of reliving infantile experiences,” and suggests, moreover, that “it is an ongoing experience of the world, but from an unusual perspective” (158). Her final conclusion, “simply stated, is that the domain of the (cognitively) ineffable is conscious primary process,” and that “the significance of this claim lies in the possibility that not all human experience is even in principle within the grasp of language” (352).

- ⁹ For further discussion of this issue, see my “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy: Jan Zwicky and Anne Carson” (2012).
- ¹⁰ Parenthetical references to the pagination of this essay refer to the 2003 edition in the *Malahat Review*.
- ¹¹ In a review essay on the works of Karen Solie, whom he calls “The Anti-’Oooo’ Poet,” Starnino implies that women writers such as Margaret Atwood, Lorna Crozier, and Zwicky are outdated poets who go “Oooo.” Of Solie, he remarks, one might say that she “is giving a post-Atwood, post-Crozier, post-Zwicky finger to the room” (78).
- ¹² Angel’s review begins with the blatantly sexist phrase: “[t]here is a nightingale warbling amidst the branches of the great oak of philosophy, and her name is Jan Zwicky” (268). Later, critiquing a point made in *Lyric Philosophy* with which he does not agree, Angel states that “it rings thin, high pitched notes” (271). Although it might be said that he is simply carrying on with Zwicky’s use of musical metaphors throughout *Lyric Philosophy*, Angel’s comment quite obviously implies a correspondence between “high-pitched” (i.e., “womanly, “effeminate”) whining and

the intellectual validity of Zwicky's argument.

- ¹³ Alison Calder has argued that Lilburn's poetry recognizes the impossibility of home, suggesting that, in his work, "[t]here is no comfortable oneness with the world; the poet is not at home in the land" (xi). Yet her analysis of Lilburn's poetics also gestures to the erotics of this sense of deprivation, as she adds that "nature seems to be withholding herself from him" (xi). In this equation, nature is feminized, and correspondingly, the poet's desire for home implies desire for the woman's body – perhaps the mother's body, as a psychoanalytic reading might suggest.
- ¹⁴ Another significant clue can be found in Lilburn's Prologue to the masque "Assiniboia," which he describes as having been influenced in part by the East-German poet Johannes Bobrowski's *Sarmatian Times* (1961) and *Shadowland Rivers* (1962, 1963). Lilburn describes Bobrowski's poems as elegiac (*Assiniboia* 27), but criticism and scholarship on Bobrowski's works demonstrate that the subject of his elegiac tone is difficult to determine, as the layers of affect that constitute his poetry include "German guilt" (Goodbody, Scrase), grief over violence and the loss of childhood landscapes and cultures (Goodbody 162-63), and "the Rousseau-esque glorification of the primitive, folk, pagan" (Scrase 11).

Bobrowski was born in 1917 in the eastern German town of Tilsit, which, after the Second World War, was among the territories ceded to Russia (Scrase 1). He also lived briefly during his childhood in the German town of Graudenz, which is now Grudziadz in Poland (1). Scholars of Bobrowski's work frequently note the theme of loss, particularly the loss of homeland. Bobrowski was in his early twenties, and nearing the end of his required period of national service, when Germany invaded

Poland in 1939. Throughout the war, he served in a communications unit whose role was to follow in the wake of mobile killing units (38), and it would be difficult to overestimate the degree of destruction that he witnessed. Bobrowski was stationed in Poland, East Prussia, and the Soviet Union, and, in 1945 – on the day of the German capitulation to the Allied forces – he became a prisoner of war in Latvia (3). In 1949, after four years spent as a POW in various locations, Bobrowski was able to return home to his family in Berlin (3).

In an ecocritical reading of the correspondences between Bobrowski's poetics and that of Heidegger, the scholar Axel Goodbody notes that Bobrowski's "Sarmatia" – the eponymous landscape of *Sarmatian Times* – is a cultural, geographic, and imaginal creation: "Sarmatia" was the name that was "used in the ancient world to designate a geographically remote and little-known area bounded by the Polish river Vistula in the West and the Russian Volga in the East, the Baltic in the North and the Caspian and Black Seas in the South" (160). Goodbody observes further that it is "a historical concept avoiding the implications of terms from more recent political geography, stretching back through the centuries into prehistoric times," and is also "a mythical entity," whose name parallels, phonetically, that of Ovid's Arcadia (161). The resonances between Bobrowski's Sarmatia and Lilburn's Assiniboia are numerous, although Lilburn, unlike Bobrowski, does not hesitate to map *Assiniboia* with the place names and territorial distinctions of recent "political geography" in Canada. The scholar David Scrase describes Bobrowski's childhood home in eastern Germany as an area "in which peoples of diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds found themselves over a period of hundreds of years governed and administered by German,

Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian regimes” (6), and notes that certain poems in *Sarmatian Times* and *Shadowland Rivers* were conceived of as being part of a larger project, entitled *Sarmatian Collection*, that Bobrowski had at one time hoped to complete. As Bobrowski conceived it, *Sarmatian Collection* would “deal with all the diverse peoples of Sarmatia, the Russians, Poles, ancient Prussians, Courlanders, Lithuanians, Jews, Gypsies, and Germans,” describing “the landscape, ways of life, songs, fairy tales, sagas, myths, and history of these peoples; the major figures in art, literature, music would be invoked, and he would, above all, describe the role played by his people, the Germans, in the larger history. The recent war and the actions of the Nazis would be central, but so would similar episodes (such as the rampages of the Teutonic Knights)” (9-10).

Goodbody’s ecocritical analysis of Bobrowski’s poetics argues that the poet “shared Heidegger’s understanding of a mystic link between word and thing in the authentic language of nature to which poetry constantly aspires,” and “sought to develop an alternative way of speaking of nature to the language of instrumental reason, articulating a relationship different from the anthropocentrism of the technologically enhanced but phenomenologically impoverished scientific gaze” (139). This is a quality of Lilburn’s poetics that critics and scholars have noted as well (Butler, Starnino).

¹⁵ In *Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally* (2010), Jenny Kerber also notes the importance of going “down” into knowledge in Lilburn’s poetry and poetics. Her analysis of his work attempts to read Lilburn’s attempts to “indigenize” in a positive light, arguing that:

Calls to “re-indigenize” or to “become native” to place have become increasingly common in North America in recent decades, and such movements similarly speak to some of ecocriticism’s central concerns. While most of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal thinkers who have discussed this topic agree that pockets of indigeneity across the country and continent must continue to be fostered and protected, a broader form of “re-indigenization” based on new alliances between settler and Aboriginal groups might also constitute an ethic by which all North American residents can commit to living on this continent in ways that are responsive to the rhythms of the land and its creatures. To “re-indigenize” should not be construed as a naive return to the land, however, in which settler culture plays out fantasies of ecological primitivism. (15-16)

Kerber goes on to suggest, moreover, that “to re-indigenize” “also calls us to reflect more intently on the extent to which our stories and practices respectfully acknowledge and enable the continuance of the life forces that underlie our dwelling in prairie places” (16), and indeed, one might add, in any place. Offering a reading of Lilburn’s Governor-General’s Award-winning poetry collection *Kill-site* (2003), Kerber notes that Lilburn’s poetry frequently explores “the possibility of digging into the prairie as both a literal and a metaphoric practice by which invader-settler culture might become, in his words, ‘autochthonous’ to the prairies of North America” (120). She also observes that, “[a]lthough the term ‘autochton’ can refer to an indigenous person, the sense in which Lilburn uses the term might also appeal more broadly to its geological definition, which refers to glacial deposits that originate *in situ* and that consist of, or are formed by, indigenous material” (151). Although Lilburn’s poetics

does not foreclose the reading that Kerber offers, I would argue that this interpretation of the “cthonic” does not deal adequately with the romanticizations of Indigeneity that appear in his work.

¹⁶ Lilburn voices a similar sentiment in an earlier essay, published in 2007, where he describes returning to live in Saskatchewan in the late 1980s after a long absence, and feeling unrooted there: “everything that European settlement had erected in that place – churches, museums, and so forth – seemed temporary, floating. None of it appeared to live from the heart of the place; none of it seemed to know there was such a thing as a telluric heart. Cree people were autochthonic, no doubt about this, but I certainly wasn’t, nor, I felt, was any of the complex culture my people, with incredible effort, had built as they settled the plains” (“Walking” 45).

¹⁷ In “Différance,” as readers may remember, Derrida argues that deconstruction resembles negative theology insofar as it maintains that “*différance is not*, does not exist, is not a present being” – that it is, rather, “the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names, the chains of substitutions of names in which, for example, the nominal effect *différance* is itself *enmeshed*, carried off, reinscribed” (26-27). There is “no unique name,” Derrida argues, insisting, furthermore, that “we must think this without *nostalgia*, that is, outside of the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought” (27).

Chapter 3

Thinking and Singing Aesthetics of the Sublime

In his “programmatic polemic” “The Teaching of English” (1888), Charles G.D. Roberts states:

To a crude perception the sublime story of the sequence of geologic ages, of the speed and journeyings of light, and of the spaces of the heavens, are wonders of about the same imaginative and ethical significance as were to our forefathers the tales of mermaid and of shrieking mandrake. But observe how the great discoveries of modern science lift and stimulate the imagination which literature has made ready for them; how they educate, in its true sense, the mind that is capable of regarding them as something more than a series of remarkable bits of information. (n. pag.)

The philosophical position underlying Roberts’s argument distinctly echoes Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry,” in which the young Romantic poet argues:

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and œconomical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. [. . .] We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. (502)

Like Shelley before him, Roberts argues that an intimate, personal acquaintance with literature cultivates a faculty of essential comprehension – one that is able to synthesize

the “remarkable bits of information,” as Roberts puts it, or “the accumulation of facts and calculating processes,” in Shelley’s words, that would otherwise remain piecemeal in the mind. By fostering the imagination, Roberts suggests, the study of literature ensures fertile ground for the facts of reason.¹

“The Teaching of English” makes no mention of Kant, but Roberts’s suggestion that great scientific discoveries “lift and stimulate the imagination,” and his use of the adjective “sublime” in describing “the sequence of geologic ages” and “the speed and journeyings of light,” gesture implicitly towards Kant’s notion of the mathematical sublime. From its classical origins (as in Longinus) as a rhetorical mode that orators were encouraged to use to move their listeners (Monk 11), over the course of hundreds of years, the aesthetic of the sublime underwent a conceptual shift, becoming less a rhetorical method than a complex psychological experience. Kant’s writings on the sublime, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), have been said to constitute “a synthesis, a reinterpretation, and a deepening of the kaleidoscopic aesthetic of the eighteenth century” (Monk 5). In the *Critique of Judgment* in particular, Kant suggests that the root of sublime experience should be understood not as “an enormous or powerful object,” but rather as the feeling arising from “the subject’s conflict of faculties in perceiving such an object” (Crockett 30).

The *Critique of Judgment* argues that the experience of the mathematical sublime is made possible by the weakness of the human imagination. Unlike the dynamic sublime, which Kant understands as being occasioned by might, the mathematical sublime is occasioned by magnitude (*Critique* 99). It is defined by “a feeling of pain

arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination and the estimation of the same formed by reason” (96). In this scheme, imagination and reason demonstrate the “purposiveness” of human “mental powers” “by means of their conflict” (97), which is to say that Kant’s conception of the mathematical sublime suggests that there are some concepts so overwhelmingly complex or huge that only reason can take them in. Confronted, for instance, by the geological knowledge that the planet Earth is over four-and-a-half billion years old, the imagination can only boggle. According to Kant, it simply does not have the means to comprehend a number that seems practically infinite (95). Ultimately, the pleasure of the mathematical sublime is the pleasure of feeling one’s imagination fail spectacularly – a point that Kant illustrates with an analogy connecting the experience of the sublime to a tourist’s experience in Rome:

The same thing may sufficiently explain the bewilderment or, as it were, perplexity which it is said seizes the spectator on his first entrance into St. Peter’s at Rome. For there is here a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced. (91)

In this regard, it might be said that the aesthetic of the sublime makes anyone who experiences it feel like a tourist rather than a person “at-home” in the world. Uncanny and profoundly destabilizing, confrontations with the sublime make it difficult to imagine “Nature” as a safe and familiar space. As I will argue throughout this chapter, this is one of the implications of sublime experience as it appears in the poetry of Dennis Lee and

Don McKay, particularly in Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1968, 1972), and McKay's *Strike/Slip* (2006) and *Paradoxides* (2012). As such, the two poets' aesthetics of the sublime work to counteract the appropriative gestures of trying to make oneself "at home" in the world, and suggest, by contrast, that there is something to be gained from feeling the world to be an uncanny place.

This chapter explores how Lee and McKay have employed contemporary aesthetics of the sublime in order to offer alternative epistemologies to those proposed by post-Enlightenment modernity, and, to some extent, postmodernism. In *Civil Elegies*, Lee's "lyric self" is deeply unsettled: desiring to feel himself authentically at home in Canada, he finds that he cannot, and the experiences of "void" and existentialist dread that have occasioned so much commentary by scholars (Bentley 2008, Bringhurst 1982, Dragland 1982, Kane 1982) are indelibly marked by a thematic, Christian-ascetic vocabulary of the sublime. In *Strike/Slip* and *Paradoxides*, McKay's poetic attention to the mysteries of deep time proves to be fertile ground for new developments in his long-held interest in Levinasian ethics. Embracing the inadequacy of the human imagination, McKay depicts an ethically-charged aesthetic of the sublime in which human beings' responsibility towards the non-human world is made manifest in the very infinitude of that "world." As may be apparent from the connections drawn so far, my framing of the poets throughout this chapter is also intended to suggest that a current ecocritical tendency of forswearing Romantic influences in their writings puts unnecessary restraints on scholarly discussions of their work. As one scholar of contemporary aesthetics of the sublime puts it succinctly, "[a]ny appropriation of the sublime carried out today will be bound to a Romanticism of one kind or another" (Slade 19). Although

Lee and McKay have both been vocal about their desire to avoid being classified as Romantics, their poetics are practically inconceivable outside of the Romantic tradition. This is not to say that they are uniformly united with all aspects of Romantic thought and practice, but rather that the term “Romanticism” stands for a tradition so various, overdetermined, and diversely formative for twentieth-century thinking that to treat it as a homogenous entity, and to deny its influence utterly, is practically nonsensical.²

The same could be also said for the influence of “postmodern” theory in the poets’ works, and/or the usefulness of postmodern, deconstructive, and poststructuralist analyses when engaging with them. As a number of scholars commenting on the nature of metaphor in McKay’s poetry and poetics have shown, poststructuralist lessons in linguistics can usefully elucidate the ecopoet’s work (Bondar 2004, Bushell, Leckie 2006). Of particular note is Ross Leckie’s suggestion that “metaphor in its collision of objects always creates a superfluity of meaning that hints at relationships beyond the control of language,” and “captures something of wilderness because it suggests a superfluity in ontology itself, which would be a motive of the sublime” (142). Leckie’s commentary on McKay’s poetry is not convinced that linguistic windows into infinity need inspire skepticism; instead, he focuses on the ways in which McKay’s semiotic eruptions of sublimity strengthen his ecological ethics, rather than calling their very premises into question.

Returning now to Kant’s notion of the mathematical sublime, it is easy to see how it might at first seem to be a relatively humble humanistic perspective. Cognizant of the inevitable failure of the human being’s “most important faculty of sense” (*Critique* 96), Kant appears to have something in common with contemporary ecopoets and other

ecological thinkers who loudly challenge the world's decreed domination by mankind. Kant's point is actually very different, however, and it makes a fundamental assumption that has influenced phenomenological thinking over the course of the past three centuries. Human consciousness, for the Königsberg professor, is the summit of what human beings can know in this world. As Eve Walsh Stoddard explains,

for Kant the sublime is a means to a great end, insight into the soul's supersensible allegiance. The sublime is a process in which the mind is forced back on itself by a shocking or failed perception of external might or magnitude. While seemingly defeated, the mind is actually exalted in the discovery that the ideas of infinity, absolute power, and so forth, cannot be perceived; nature cannot supply the experience of them. No ocean is infinitely large, no thunderstorm absolutely powerful. Such objects inspire ideas of infinity and vastness in the mind and therefore reveal reason's capacity for independence from sensory knowledge. (34)

Quite differently from Jan Zwicky's arguments in *Lyric Philosophy* (1992, 2012) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), and from McKay's Levinasian poetics as well, Kant's philosophy sublimates the failure of the imagination by making it an indication of reason's ultimate strength.

In Kant's day, experience of the sublime was understood as requiring culture, education, and moral feeling. As he puts it in the *Critique of Judgment*, "without development of moral ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime presents itself to the uneducated man as merely terrible" (105). This pedagogic perspective is also evident in Roberts's "The Teaching of English," but Kant and Roberts differ on the matter

of reason's hierarchical superiority over the imagination. Roberts clearly trusts in the imagination's capacity to enable comprehensive understanding, and this is a trust that McKay shares too. Indeed, McKay inserts himself snugly into the tradition of Shelley and Roberts when he suggests, in a recent essay entitled "From Here to Infinity (or so)" (2021), that one of the tasks of (nature) poetry is "to reopen facts to their resonance, to recover their lung space, opening their alveoli so that they can breathe again, rather than lying inert in consciousness like the accumulated landfill upon which theories are constructed" (*The Shell* 122). Lee, on the other hand, is not so confident a poet as Shelley, Roberts, or McKay: over the course of his writing life, his artistic perspective has been fraught with anxiety and ambivalence as to the purpose and ultimate value of artistic creation.

Heidegger writes in *Existence and Being* (1949) that "hard by essential dread, in the terror of the abyss, there dwells awe" (355). For Kant, as for Edmund Burke, and for McKay as well, awe is an essential component of any person's experience of the sublime. For Heidegger, it also "clears and enfolds that region of human being within which man endures, as at home, in the enduring" (355). Apophatic conceptions of human existence in the world, and historical aesthetics of the sublime both suggest the importance of *unheimlich* (uncanny, un-homey) feeling. As Andrew Slade has characterized the sublime, it "opens us to what is out of joint, disruptive, dissonant. It shows what in our time belongs not to a nostalgic center of consciousness we have lost, but to that way of presenting we do not yet even have, but for which we seek" (31). The sublime comes about in the absence of harmony, and in the absence of home, and the apophatic tradition begins with an equally negative certainty: "the unknowability of God" (Wolters 15).

Those in the Christian tradition who follow the *via negativa* understand their God to be “wholly other” and “qualitatively different from his creatures” (15). He is like the Levinasian other whose Face confronts the interlocutor with her absolute inability to comprehend him. He also exists beyond the reach of language (15) – an aspect of negative theology with which Zwicky’s philosophy resonates deeply. The apophatic conception of the fundamental inadequacy of human mental power to fully know God thus bears a striking resemblance to the characteristics by which sublime experience is recognized. Moreover, its intellectual premises are the same as those with which phenomenological thought begins. In this regard, apophatic understanding corresponds with McKay’s poetic practice as well as with Lee’s. Although neither of their poetics are explicitly Christian, both approach their subject matter with a humility that is akin to much Christian thought. Contemplatives such as St. John of the Cross and the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c.1370) are not satisfied to think that because knowledge of God is impossible, knowledge of human consciousness should be the height of philosophical endeavour (as Kant, and later Husserl, maintained). Whatever their personal beliefs, Lee’s and McKay’s writings practice secular apophaticism, whereby worldly noumena occupy the position of the honoured “unknowable.”

I. Dreadful Sublimity in Dennis Lee’s *Civil Elegies*

In the essay “Poetry and Unknowing,” which appears in *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews* (1995), Lee lists a number of thinkers whose thought “tugs” him in the apophatic tradition: the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Pseudo-Dionysus, Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross (34). He also

lists a number of more modern thinkers and artists, such as Weil, Hölderlin, Eliot, Celan, Beckett, Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau, and others. Of Heidegger, also included among these influences, Lee notes: “Heidegger – Heidegger is so problematic. Believe me, this is not a list of the people I find most cuddly. Half the moderns are either crazy or bastards” (34).³

In the essay *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, translated into English as “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1971), Heidegger asks: “[w]hat is pre-given to the poet, and how is it given, so that it can then be re-given in the poem?” (*Poetry, Language* 36). Poets occupy a place of honour in Heidegger’s philosophy, although he believes that the moderns – with the exception of Rainer Maria Rilke, perhaps – lack the deeper ontological affinities that their precursors had. Unlike “ordinary speakers and writers,” poets are able to use words without also using them up; through the poet, “the word only now becomes and remains truly a word” (46). For Heidegger, poets’ language-use assumes neither technical nor technological mastery; for them, words are not tools, but are rather like nuclei around which gather an “all-governing expanse” of relations. Issued from poets – true poets – words work like works of art. They are like the Greek temple that Heidegger describes as gathering “around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being” (41).

Although he has admitted to having “learned to see a lot of intellectual history” through Heidegger’s eyes, Lee has claimed not to “trust those eyes” (“Interview” 47), and his poetics implicitly rejects Heidegger’s admiration for the ontologically privileged roles of poetry, poets, and language. Where these are accorded ontological privilege by the

philosopher, Lee finds them deeply suspicious. *Civil Elegies* was first published in 1968, and in 1972 it appeared again in a considerably revised and expanded form in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, which won the Governor General's Award for poetry later that year. A reprinted edition of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, newly introduced by Nick Mount, was released by Anansi Press in the spring of 2012. Set predominantly in Nathan Phillips Square in downtown Toronto, the poem features a speaker bitterly dismayed by the state of his Canada: "a nation of losers and quislings" (44)⁴ who are complicit in the American war in Vietnam, slothful in their civic duty, and ignorant of their unlived potential. During the forty-odd years of its circulation in its various incarnations, critical responses to *Civil Elegies* have been as changeable as the poem itself. Strikingly, its print and critical histories have positioned it singularly within the Canadian poetry canon: like no other poem of its time, through its repeated publications it bookends those years that saw the installation and eventual decline of the postmodernist movement in Canadian literary culture. Initially a signature text of the frequently anti-American and fervently nationalistic Centennial mood, the increased activity of ecologically conscious critics in contemporary literary culture has inspired recent efforts to recuperate the poem for the current ecological moment, and to read it as a deeply ecological text (Bradley 2004, McKay 2006).⁵

Images revealing the sun's awesome power to effect both sublimity and sedation recur throughout *Civil Elegies*. "Often I sit in the sun and brooding over the city, always / in airborne shapes among the pollution I see them, the ancestors – / I mean our unlived lives." So begins the first elegy of the 1968 version, whose speaker sits before Toronto's City Hall in the noonday sun, watching his compatriots eat lunch in the place he

uncomfortably calls home. “The light rides easy on people dozing at noon in Toronto,” begins the poem’s second elegy: “Day after day the light rides easy.” By the third elegy, however, this light takes a sinister turn:

In Germany, the civic square in many little towns is
 hallowed for people. Laid out just so, with
 flowers and fountains, and during the war you could come and
 relax for an hour, catch a parade or just
 get away from the interminable racket of the trains clattering through the
 outskirts, with their lousy expendable cargo.
 Little cafes often, fronting the square. Beer and a chance to relax.
 And except for the children it’s peaceful here
 too, under the sun’s warm sedation.

Here, the sun lulls its willing victims into drowsy, condemnable apathy. The trains carrying Jewish people to concentration camps are only worthy of concern because they are noisy. As with much anti-war literature of its time, *Civil Elegies* frequently relates the genocides of Nazi Germany to America’s presence, and Canada’s complicity, in the war in Vietnam. As its fourth and fifth elegies turn from the civic square to domestic scenes, the sun’s potency in the poem diminishes, but it is reinstated in the sixth elegy, where Lee’s lyric self recounts how he comes,

to the square each time there is nothing and once, made calm again
 by the spare vertical glory of right proportions,
 watching the wind cut loose as it riffled the clouds on the sky, framing the
 towers at sundown,

catching the newshawk's raucous cry of race in the streets and the war and
 Confederation going,

seeing the sun fall clean and decisive on children, chevies, hippies, shop-
 pers, old men dozing alone by the pool and waiting

.....

it came to me that we are to live among the calamitous division of the world
 with singleness of eye

The speaker of *Civil Elegies* spends a remarkable amount of time in the square, watching the sun rise and fall: he is there in the crepuscular hours when the clouds surround the towers of City Hall "at sundown," and also in the morning and afternoon when the sun falls "clean and decisive" on the people beneath. The injunction to live "among the calamitous division of the world / with singleness of eye" (and perhaps, in doing so, to live "rightly proportioned," as the towers do) stands in sharp contrast to the sheer multiplicity of perspectives – temporal, spatial, and vocal – that proliferate throughout the poem.

By the poem's seventh and final elegy, the sun seems to have set entirely, and the speaker embraces the existentialist/ascetic "void" instead, which is

redemptive in that the movement of spirit by which we

face unwilling into darkness, letting it

break over us, permitting it to

utterly unmake us—that movement

brings us through a purgation of unmeaning to

a source within ourselves

As Stan Dragland has noted, the significance of “void” in *Civil Elegies* varies throughout the poem (“On *Civil Elegies*” 175-81). At times it seems to have positive connotations, at others, negative. R.D. MacDonald attributes the poem’s preoccupation with void to a mood such as “the dark pessimism of the Old Testament, an Ecclesiastes-like vision of a world where nothing holds or is secure” (21). Although the lines cited above do align void with darkness, its conceptual proximity to the poem’s promise of “purgation” suggests that more hopeful spiritual metaphors are implicit here as well.

Kevin Bushell has argued that the experience of dread – that which existential philosophy knows as *angst* – is “that uncanny feeling in which our known and familiar world suddenly loses significance” (67). In an essay detailing the “enormous influence” of Heidegger’s *Existence and Being* (1949) on *Civil Elegies*, D.M.R. Bentley has shown just how closely the speaker’s experience corresponds to Heidegger’s writings on dread and *Dasein* (being-there) (“Rummagings” 6, 9-10, 12-13). As Bentley suggests, *Civil Elegies* represents Canada as having “specialized” in “not-being-at-home” (8). In “What Is Metaphysics?,” one of the four essays collected in *Existence and Being*, Heidegger speaks of dread as the “key-mood” “through which we are brought face to face with Nothing itself” (335), and suggests that it occasions a feeling of the uncanny because, in it,

All things, and we with them, sink into a sort of indifference. But not in the sense that everything simply disappears; rather, in the very act of drawing away from us everything turns toward us. This withdrawal of what-is-in-totality, which then crowds round us in dread, this is what oppresses us. There is nothing to hold on to. The only thing that remains and overwhelms us whilst what-is slips away, is

this “nothing.” (336)

Dread “makes what-is-in-totality slip away from us,” Heidegger writes; it “strikes us dumb,” and yet, “[o]nly in the clear night of dread’s Nothingness is what-is as such revealed in all its original overtness” (336-39). Heidegger remarks that “[t]he dread felt by the courageous cannot be contrasted with the joy or even the comfortable enjoyment of a peaceable life. It stands – on the hither side of all such contrasts – in secret union with the serenity and gentleness of creative longing” (343). This is a confidence that Lee’s poetry and poetics lacks. It is also a confidence that lends itself to a neo-Hegelianism that Levinas’s philosophy opposes fundamentally. For Heidegger, the “projection into Nothing” that dread occasions “is the overcoming of what-is-in-totality: Transcendence” (344). Whereas Levinas insists upon the retention of difference and the humility of the self in face of the other, Heidegger conceives of metaphysics not only as “the ground-phenomenon of *Da-sein*” (and indeed, as “*Da-sein* itself”) (348), but also as “an enquiry over and above what-is, with a view to winning it back again as such and in totality for our understanding” (344). This is a facet of Heidegger’s philosophy that McKay’s poetics, on the side of Levinas, sets itself over and against explicitly. Lee’s opposition to it is more implicit, but may be seen in his irresolution regarding the poet’s ability to derive understanding from the void.

Civil Elegies invokes the sixteenth-century Christian mystic St. John of the Cross as the poem’s “patron of void,” and Lee’s indebtedness to St. John’s spiritual treatise *Dark Night of the Soul* (c. 1582-88) suggests that despite the seeming blankness of void, light imagery is obliquely at work in void’s “purgation.” St. John describes the Dark Night as “an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and

imperfections” (94). Its darkness is caused by the soul’s inability, in its own imperfection and impurity, to perceive divine light and wisdom as anything other than painful, blinding, and dark (94). Operative here is the Old Testament metaphor (and lately, the Protestant hymn) of God as a metaphysical refiner’s fire, a divine heat source who will refine His people “as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried” (Zechariah 14:9). Divine wisdom “transcends the talent of the soul,” writes St. John: “the clearer and more manifest are Divine things in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are to the soul naturally; just as, the clearer is the light, the more it blinds and darkens the pupil of the owl, and, the more directly we look at the sun, the greater is the darkness which it causes in our visual faculty, overcoming and overwhelming it through its own weakness” (95). This perspective is one that is shared by the unknown author *The Cloud of Unknowing* as well:

For I tell you truly that I would much rather be nowhere physically, wrestling with that obscure nothing, than I would be some great potentate [. . .] One can feel this nothing more easily than see it, for it is completely dark and hidden to those who have only just begun to look at it. Yet, to speak more accurately, it is overwhelming spiritual light that blinds the soul that is experiencing it, rather than actual darkness or the absence of physical light. Who is it then who is calling it “nothing”? Our outer self, to be sure, not our inner. Our inner self calls it “All,” for through it he is learning the secret of all things, physical and spiritual alike [. . .]. (134-35)

In *Civil Elegies*, Lee’s lyric self experiences the purgation of void as the discovery of “a source within” himself, and so his modicum of revelation is existential, not metaphysical

or theological. As he is tempted by the various forms of void put forth throughout the poem – void as oblivion, as fallen world, as purgative force – the poem’s sun symbolizes its own death as a source of illumination. Ultimately, it sedates more than it inspires or refines. As Bentley has noted, “the sense that life and poetry have been emptied of value and purpose yields a bleakly Eliotic analysis of the sights and sounds of Nathan Phillips Square at ‘noon,’ a time traditionally associated with clarity of vision and intense spiritual as well as physical enlightenment” (“Rummagings” 11). As a poet and prophet for his nation, Lee’s lyric self cannot approximate the imaginative grandeur and internal confidence of a poet such as Blake, whose “A Vision of The Last Judgment” has this to say about essential perception:

What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire
 somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly
 host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty I question not my
 Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window
 concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it. (565-66).

The revised version of *Civil Elegies* that appears in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* charts a similar trajectory in its speaker’s relation to the noonday sun, but in the poem’s later version, light is slightly more threatening – it “overbalances” the scene (41), and the civic square is more violently “stunned by noon” (46). The towers of City Hall, which in the 1968 version of the poem are framed at sundown by windswept clouds, are here seen at noon instead (52). In the poem’s third elegy, moreover (which corresponds to the second elegy of the 1968 *Civil Elegies*), Lee’s lyric self makes a significant addition to his catalogue of solar experiences:

once at noon I felt my body's pulse contract and
 balk in the space of the square, it puckered and jammed till nothing
 worked, and casting back and forth
 the only resonance that held was in the Archer. (39)⁶

As Bentley has noted, this passage is heavily inflected with the vocabulary of existentialist *angst* (“Rummagings” 11-12). In both versions of *Civil Elegies*, the poem’s speaker finds himself grappling with aesthetic, philosophical, and religious conventions of sublime experience, and these exist above and beyond what Lee has spoken of elsewhere as *mysterium tremendum*, “the encounter with holy otherness, most commonly approached here through encounter with the land – to which an appropriate response is awe and terror” (“Rejoinder” 33). In *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* especially, the “encounter with holy otherness” is not occasioned by encounters with “the land,” but rather by encounters with artworks (such as “The Archer”), and skewed *perceptions* of nature that are anxiously inflected with aesthetic and religious allusions.

The most striking example of this can be seen in the poem’s treatment of Tom Thomson, the legendary inspiration for many members of the Group of Seven, who appears in both the 1968 and 1972 versions of the poem as an illustration of the wonder of the northern Shield (in contrast to the industrial mastery and civic apathy of Toronto). The passage is one of the most complex depictions of artistic power that Lee has ever produced, and not only merits distinction as such, but also belongs in any discussion of Lee’s personal poetics. It occurs in the second elegy of the 1968 version of the poem, and the third elegy of the version published in 1972. Save for the occasional amendment to punctuation, and one significant alteration noted below, the two passages are nearly

identical. The 1968 version proceeds:

Take Tom Thomson, painter; he

did his work in the Shield.

Could smell a bear downwind.⁷ Was part of the bush. Often when night

came down in a subtle rush and the scorched shrub still

ached for miles from the fires, he paddled direct through

the palpable dark, hearing only the push and

drip of the blade for hours and then very suddenly the radiance of the

renewed land broke over his canvas. So. It was his

job. But no two moments land with the same sideswipe

and Thomson, for all his savvy, is very damp and

trundled by submarine currents, pecked by the fish out

somewhere cold in the Shield and the far loons percolate

high in November and he is not painting their cry.

Although McKay suggests that these lines represent Lee's rejection of "the Romantic paradigm," and subvert a "conventional Romantic vision" in favour of the negative way ("Great Flint" 19), his own anti-Romantic disposition obscures a number of significant forces at work in the passage. "The gesture by which [Lee] chooses the phenomenological *via negativa* over the conventional Romantic vision," McKay writes, "is made by invoking, then releasing, the potent image of Tom Thomson as a kind of shamanic conduit for wilderness" (19). In contradistinction to this reading, I would argue that Thomson is figured as a creative artist, not a conduit, in *Civil Elegies* – his ability to transgress the mimetic limitations of artistic media (Lee indicates that he could "paint"

the sound of the loon's cry) suggests that his is an imaginative and *technical* power to be reckoned with. The poetic framing that encompasses him, moreover, is forcefully elegiac, and richly allusive. Although the speaker of *Civil Elegies* is certainly envious of Thomson's ability to be "part of the bush," the painter is no "shaman," but rather personifies human creativity's relation to an aestheticized world.

Lee's depiction of night coming "down in a subtle rush," followed as it is by the swathes of "scorched shrub" that ache anthropomorphically "for miles from the fires," subtly merges two biblical representations of divine presence. The "scorched shrub" has obvious realist referents in the wildfires that rage yearly in northern Ontario forests and elsewhere along the woods of the Shield, but Lee's wording also calls to mind the burning bush of Exodus 3:1-22, the vehicle by which God informs Moses of his imperative to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, into the promised land. Given *Civil Elegies'* nationalistic bent, the reader may note the correspondence between Canadian writers' mid-century habit of depicting America as a latter-day Roman Empire, and the forces of oppression represented by the Egyptian and Roman states in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The additional correspondence between the Israelites' "promised land" and Lee's desire for "home" is also noteworthy.

MacDonald is clearly right to suggest that there is something of the Old-Testament prophet in *Civil Elegies'* speaker. The "subtle rush" by which "night / came down" in the poem echoes the "sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" that the Apostle Luke describes in Acts 2:2 as the Holy Spirit's appearance to the apostles on the day of Pentecost (an appearance which, moreover, manifests as well in "cloven tongues like as of fire," that sit "upon each of them" [Acts 2:3]). Canoeing through the Shield,

Thomson is not on a water-bound excursion into a wilderness that “elude[s] the mind’s appropriations” (McKay, *Vis* 21); rather, he is in the presence of nature inscribed in the terms of the Christian divine, which Lee also represents as having the characteristics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of the sublime. The “subtle rush” by which night descends, and the “palpable dark” through which Thomson paddles suggest another invocation of St. John’s Dark Night; Thomson, however, does not remain in this darkness for long, but participates in its dissipation as “radiance” breaks “over his canvas.” Thomson progresses through the Dark Night in a way that the speaker of *Civil Elegies* never does, and Lee’s attempt to depict the iconic painter as a natural part of the bush is thus rapidly disrupted by the significance of Thomson’s artistic capabilities.

Thomson has Romantic vision: darkness falls away when his creativity takes over, and he transfigures the spiritually-inflected landscape into a material production of human artistic power.⁸

Civil Elegies’ depiction of Thomson calls to mind another passage from “Poetry and Unknowing,” in which Lee describes his “hunger for spiritual practice” as “a subsonic tug” (39). “It draws me to hush, to awe,” he writes: “I can feel it stirring at one remove, so to speak, when I’m outdoors in the Shield, or when I’m listening to music, or making love” (39). The “hush” and “awe” that accompany Lee’s “hunger” are subtle indications of this poet’s envisioning of sublime experience, and “hush” nods especially to the silence that has been a major part of Lee’s contemplative life. Elsewhere, he has described silence as a deliberate, ethical response to the non-human world: “[w]hen I get together with an empty piece of paper, the main message I get as far as poetry by Dennis Lee is concerned is Don’t Bother. I have lots of private experiences and opinions, of

course, but why clutter up the airwaves with more of that stuff?” (“When to Write” 243). For Lee, the apophatic tradition feels like “native home,” and, for this reason, his writing life has been marked by an anxiety concerning the value of the poet. The spiritual experience described by St. John in *Dark Night of the Soul* leaves one with little capacity for artistic production (whilst one is in the midst of it, that is). Arguing that too much art after 1800 reflects only “the absurd courageous existential activity of *creating* meaning in art, not believing in the meanings themselves,” Lee has endeavoured to distance himself from those who make art as “a compensation for having lost belief in a meaningful cosmos *and* in a higher realm of value” (245). Noticeably, his comments reflect Heidegger’s sense that most poets of modernity are distanced from the deeper ontological calling of their art; however, it is not enough to say that Lee’s position, or the self-conscious artistic anxiety that characterizes his art, is merely a symptom of modern malaise.

Whereas for Heidegger each work of art is, ideally, a unique event that gathers relational meaning around it as though it had gravitational pull, for Lee, poems at their best are products of the artist’s attunement to the vaster energy surrounding him. What follows is that when the poet’s surroundings exist in disunity, the poet himself will be in disarray: he has very little power to draw the world together when it has come apart. “What does cadence feel like?” he asks in “Cadence, Country, Silence” (*Body* 6). “Imagine you’re sitting indoors. Down in the basement, a group with a heavily amplified bass is rehearsing. Nothing is audible, but the pulsating of the bass starts to make the girders and beams vibrate. And eventually the vibration makes its way into your body. You feel yourself being flexed by a tremor which you’re bound to acknowledge, whether

or not you know what it is” (6). For Lee, this experience breaks down the division between subjectivity and objectivity: “[y]ou don’t perceive a vibration: *you vibrate*. Your muscular system has become both the recording instrument and the thing recorded. And the pulse you feel is neither subjective nor objective. Rather, it is your immediate portion of the kinaesthetic space in which you exist” (8). Cadence is not an experience in the abstract, but, like Timothy Morton’s “timbral,” it suggests the potential dissolution of the borders between inside and outside (see Introduction).

“Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being,” writes Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), and “[i]t is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word ‘well,’ through the word ‘woods,’ even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language. (129). Lee’s theory of poetry does not accommodate this understanding of Being, and his concept of “cadence” is ontologically distinct from Heidegger’s view of the gathering work of art. Isaiás Naranjo has argued that Heidegger’s longing “for some sort of originary language or more elementary words” (*Urwörter*) is “essential” for understanding Lee’s work, suggesting that “Lee also thinks that a poetic language, a language that authentically reunites us with Being-there, can be born out of [the] encounter with death, with absence” (870-71). Naranjo goes on to cite a portion of lines from the concluding section of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*:

And though we have seen our most precious words
 withdraw, like smudges of wind from a widening water-calm,
 though they will not be charged with presence again in our lifetime that is

well, for now we have access to new nouns –
 as water, copout, tower, body, land. (57)⁹

In this regard, Naranjo's reading of the poem's conclusion is similar to those set forth by a number of other critics who argue that *Civil Elegies* ends with linguistic and ontological recuperation – Lee's lyric self accepting the "access to new nouns" of which he speaks (Bentley 2008, Dragland 1982, Kruk, Roffey 1996, Uppal). While it is clear that the poem's speaker resolves to inhabit "void" as productively as he can, these lines do not necessarily evince the hope that Naranjo hears, nor do they demonstrate convincingly that an "authentic" language has been borne out of the poet-speaker's encounter with nothingness. Given the overall context of the poem, the "new nouns" to which the poet and his readers have access are tinged with bitterness, and they do not work as poets' words should work, according to Heidegger's ideal. They are mimetic, and not creative: the poem suggests that access to them depends on the state of the world itself, and not on Lee's poetic power. Naranjo accepts that "it is only in words and through language that things come into being and exist," and, as such, that "language, though it may seem like an empty framework, has the enormous potentiality of inaugurating reality" (870). By superimposing this perspective on Lee, however, he makes a mistake in casting this particular poet as a Heideggerian "Shepherd of Being" (871). Lee wants to be the world's tuning fork, not its creator: he wants to resonate with authenticity, not call it into being through language.

It is this quality of Lee's poetics that allows Zwicky, in *Lyric Philosophy*, to admire Lee's theory of poetry while at the same time rejecting Heidegger's theory of language. "Possession of language on the whole *pre-empts* lyric awareness of what is,"

she writes (L198). “Poetry, rather than being the most privileged of arts (as it is in Heidegger), is the most peculiar, the most fraught with its own defeasibility” (L198). “Lee’s notion of presence,” she continues, “whatever debts it owes to Heidegger’s, does not appear to share the same conceptual dependencies” (*Lyric* L198). For Lee, whose writing life has been marked by profound anxiety regarding the value of poets, poetry, and language, Heidegger’s poetics cannot quite ring true. His own poetry and poetics are concerned fundamentally with artistic justice, not creation or ontological “unconcealment.” The poet in his world may be tuned-in finely to truth, but he does not help to bring it about. The best he can do is be gathered up with it, and use words that do not drown it out.

II. Don McKay’s *Strike/Slip* and *Paradoxides*: The Sublimity of Deep Time

It is possible that some readers of McKay’s earliest poetry collections – *Air Occupies Space* (1973), *Long Sault* (1975), *Lependu* (1978), and *Lightning Ball Bait* (1980) – might have admired his work without fully realizing his avian fixation. After the publication of *Birding, or Desire* (1983), and its nomination for a Governor General’s Award for poetry, this would have been more difficult. After *Another Gravity* (2000) was published, and subsequently awarded a Governor General’s Award and shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize, it would have been next to impossible. Indeed, McKay is generally known today as a bird poet *par excellence*, and his characteristic infatuation with creatures that zip, lilt, plunge, and soar throughout the air provides a stark contrast to the decidedly earthbound direction of his most recent poetry collections, the Griffin Poetry Prize-winning *Strike/Slip*, and *Paradoxides*. In these books – and in the essay collections

Deactivated West 100 (2005) and *The Shell of the Tortoise* (2012), which complement them thematically – McKay explores the far reaches of geological history in order to articulate yet another facet of his phenomenological/ecological ethics. Whereas Bringhurst, Lee, and Lilburn tend to write in pursuit of “authentic” dwelling, McKay’s forays into deep time – imaginatively founded on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of the sublime – suggest that the disorientation of the poet and reader, and the defamiliarization of the world, may be more ethically productive than the comfort of feeling oneself to be “at home.”

“The presence of the Other,” Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), “is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world” (75-76). In contradistinction to the Hegelian philosophy of sublimation, Levinas’s ethics asserts not only that all forms of assimilation, unification, and totality conjoining self and other are unethical, but also that “[i]t is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other” (80). McKay’s interest in Levinasian ethics has become one of the ways by which he distinguishes his poetics from Romanticism. For more than anyone else in the *Thinking and Singing* group, the term “nature poet” as it applies to McKay has been fraught with critical anxiety about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions it almost inevitably connotes. Thus it is that, after situating Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky within “the recent coalescence of a community of Canadian poets concerned with relationships among poetry, philosophy, and the environment,” Dragland adds that McKay “is no romantic” (“Be-wildering” 881-85). Méira Cook attributes McKay’s poetic inheritance to the writings of “that ecstatic, austere poet-priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins” rather than Wordsworth’s “tradition of rapturous, non-specific,

pantheistic nature poetry” (“Song” x-xx), and, in a similar vein, Susan Fisher states bluntly that McKay’s writing defends nature poetry against the accusation that it “appropriates other forms of life” (54-56). Less appreciative comments on McKay’s writings have taken also considered their relation to Romanticism. Zach Wells has implied that McKay might not have what it takes to “write with Wordsworthian confidence of the synthesizing genius of the human mind” (n. pag.), and Catherine Owen has challenged McKay’s status as an “environmentally engaged” poet by arguing that “[t]rue environmental poems do not use nature simply as a source for lyrical imagery or as a kind of philosophical sketching pad” (57).

Although McKay has admitted his indebtedness to the Romantic poets, claiming to have once been able to “recite whole swatches” of Wordsworth’s autobiographical epic *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850), he has also suggested that he felt a sense of unease with “the Aeolian harp idea” grow stronger as he “became a sort of crude phenomenologist” and “quasi-naturalist” (“Appropriate” 170-71). As I noted in the Introduction, McKay has also distinguished his poetry and poetics from Romanticism by objecting to the way in which the “romantic poet (or tourist, for that matter) desires to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language (or slide show) without a palpable break” (*Vis* 24-25). In the more recent essay “Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time” he voices a deliberately anti-Hegelian perspective when he argues that Romanticism “preserves the other not by respecting its otherness, but by welcoming it into the same” (*The Shell* 21). That is to say, he suggests that Romanticism carries out precisely the form of self-aggrandizing sublimation that Levinasian ethics opposes.

McKay’s suggestion in “Baler Twine” that there is an explicit correspondence

between Romantic aesthetics and “tourism” should give readers pause, for it implicitly aligns his own, “non-Romantic,” ecopoetics with the “home-seeking” poetics of the others in the *Thinking and Singing* group. The deprecation of tourism is a common theme in McKay’s writings: in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, he laments having once acted like a tourist himself in his “misspent” youth, having canoed “through this amazing country in a spirit akin to tourists who do the Louvre in an afternoon” (148). In a similar vein, in an early review of McKay’s *Birding, or Desire* (1983), Bringhurst neatly opposes McKay’s poetics to Wordsworth’s, noting that a “Wordsworthian vision of nature is still very much with us,” and suggesting that, “because it runs on generalized rapture instead of granular, fecund detail, its appeal is strongest among those writers, readers, and tourists who are content with a state of perpetual adolescence” (“Unrapping” 31). By opposing tourism to “granular, fecund detail” (and here, his comments in his 1992 dialogue with Ricou may be recalled) Bringhurst implies that the tourist is one who is unable to see beyond surface appearances – the poorest sort of phenomenologist, in other words.

Such equations of Romanticism and tourism call to mind Aldo Leopold’s descriptions, in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949), of the modern leisure industry’s correspondence with the nineteenth century’s vision of nature as a therapeutic retreat from modernity’s ills. McKay has long been a great admirer of Leopold’s, and indeed, his ethics of poetic attention shares much with Leopold’s influential “land ethic” – a broadening of the community of creatures to whom one owes respect and responsible action, so that this circle might include the non-human world as well as other people. In *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, Leopold writes that “[i]t is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature”

(165), but he also suggests that such goodness may mask attendant evils:

Like ions shot from the sun, the week-enders radiate from every town, generating heat and friction as they go. A tourist industry purveys bed and board to bait more ions, faster, further. Advertisements on rock and rill confide to all and sundry the whereabouts of new retreats, landscapes, hunting-grounds, and fishing lakes just beyond those recently overrun. Bureaus build roads into new hinterlands, then buy more hinterlands to absorb the exodus accelerated by the roads. A gadget industry pads the bumps against nature-in-the-raw; woodcraft becomes the art of using gadgets. (165-66)

Somewhat ironically, Leopold's concern for a beloved environment being overrun by exploitative tourists demonstrates an important affinity that he shares with Wordsworth, and gives the reader at least one reason to reconsider McKay's rejection of the latter as an eco-poetic precursor. As Wordsworth's bestselling tract *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in The North of England with a Description of the Scenery &c. for the Use of Tourists and Residents* (1835) makes clear, even though the poet's affection for the English landscape was heavily mediated by contemporary notions of aesthetic taste, he was no less interested in "granular, fecund detail" than Bringham, Leopold, and McKay would prove themselves to be a century later. Wordsworth is sensitive to the ways in which the presence of human beings in the land has altered it, and indeed, his stated hope was that the *Guide* would "become generally serviceable, by leading to habits of more exact and considerate observation than, as far as the writer knows, have hitherto been applied to local scenery" (2).¹⁰

In the poem "Loss Creek," which appears in *Strike/Slip* and also in *The Shell of*

the Tortoise, McKay reflects upon moving to the west coast and growing accustomed to the nature of the British Columbian landscape (see *The Shell* 118-23). He explores the area in order “to have it exact”:

The broken prose of the bush roads.
 The piles of half-burnt slash. Stumps
 high on the valley wall like sconces
 on a medieval ruin. To have it tangible.
 To carry it as load rather than as mood
 or mist. (*Strike/Slip* 7)

This desire for exactitude is part of McKay’s phenomenological manifesto. Here, the onus is on the poet to visit, observe, record, and otherwise pay attention. Significantly, this attention rests on what has heretofore been unfamiliar. What the geologically-minded poems of *Strike/Slip* suggest, in fact, is that the poet’s sense of disorientation when encountering landscapes that are millions of years older than himself results in a sense of appreciation that can only be as limited, and overwhelmed, as the perspective of a tourist in an unfamiliar place.¹¹

In many ways, McKay’s fascination with geological history is a logical development in his long-time interest in night, a setting that in his poetry often corresponds to Burke’s conception of the sublime as that which is dark or obscure, and therefore incomprehensible. “To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary,” Burke writes in *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) (57). “[D]arkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light” (73). Joanna Dawson has argued that in McKay’s writings, daylight

contributes to “the phenomenological insight that the perceiver is inextricably part of the perceived,” whereas nighttime scenes demonstrate a transcendental phenomenological experience by depicting “[t]he mind’s ability to reach escape velocity and enter direct experience without the clutter of its categorical thinking” (66-69). Dawson’s confidence that one’s entrance into direct experience is possible to represent in language seems misplaced, given the context of McKay’s overall poetics; however, her sense of the rhetorical purpose of night in McKay’s poetry is astute, and it approaches thematically what a number of other critics have approached semiotically regarding the work of metaphor in McKay’s writings (Bushell, Dickinson 2004, Leckie 2006). For example, Bushell has argued that the “essence of metaphor as a rhetorical device is its ability to generate meaning that transcends language and thought” – it is “an attempt to break free from language and thought, to enter a realm of meaning that is extra-linguistic and extra-conceptual” (59-60). In McKay’s poetry, Bushell suggests, metaphor attempts to “stretch” language in order that it might approach that which McKay calls “wilderness” – “the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations” (*Vis* 21). Phenomenological transcendence, he observes, “does not imply transportation to an alternate, alien realm, but rather to new, *hidden* meaning that exists within our immediate world” (71). By moving beyond “the view of ‘reality’ as a concrete, objectified entity,” one can “understand that metaphor such as McKay’s uncovers, or, more accurately, *discovers* the world and leads the reader into new areas of experience and knowing” (71). As McKay himself puts it in *Vis à Vis*, “[o]ne metaphor for the excitement of metaphors is to say that they are entry points where wilderness re-invades language, the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting

the world” (85). More than Lee, McKay is comfortable with being *uncomfortable* in the world: the *unheimlich*, defamiliarizing quality of poetry is, for him, its most laudable characteristic. In McKay’s writings, uncanny feeling – whether brought about through metaphor, nighttime scenes, or the poet’s confrontation with the abyssal recesses of deep time – is the mode through which respectful relations with the world are maintained. Through it, the poet can confront and accept his inability to access the noumenal world, or to feel authentically at home in it.

The Shell of the Tortoise includes the essay “From Here to Infinity (or so),” and although Kant’s name is not spoken in it, his understanding of the mathematical sublime runs as an undercurrent throughout the text. McKay suggests:

it seems that a mild, or homeopathic, dose of the infinite is the crucial element in the aesthetic experience known as the sublime, an experience prized by such diverse movements as Romantic poetry and Tourism. In such cases – contemplating the night sky, standing on a summit, or even thinking about the grains of sand on a beach – we can feel our sense of reality shift and refocus, or try to. Our location in place alters, as though our familiar road map had been ripped from our hands and replaced by some window into the inappellable: a crystal ball, say, or a koan. Our temporal location also shifts, from the reliable orientation of a clock and calendar to the wooziness of deep time. (116)

This contemporary version of the mathematical sublime (which is not without its own Romantic allusions, as the reader may hear Blake’s “infinity in a grain of sand” being echoed) is also the version of sublime experience that is brought to bear in “Ediacaran and Anthropocene.” However, elsewhere in *The Shell of the Tortoise* (and in *Strike/Slip*

and *Paradoxides*), McKay also gestures towards another version of the aesthetic. In “Great Flint Singing,” McKay presents a short reading of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, focusing in particular on the “stolen boat” episode of the poem (40). In it, the young Wordsworth, on a break from school, steals a skiff and rows out onto an evening lake. The boat goes “heaving through the water, like a Swan,”

When from behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As with voluntary power instinct,
Uprear’d its head. (1.405-08)

The experience that follows terrifies the young man: the cliff seems to follow him when he turns and high-tails it back to shore, and the poem indicates that it affects his mood and thoughts for days afterwards. McKay’s comments on this passage indicate that for him, the scene represents “an assault on the very domesticating function of the mind” (42), which is to say that whereas Wordsworth is more usually in the habit of speaking of nature as his nurse or his guide, in this moment, for McKay, “the power of the vision exceeds language” (43). In contradistinction to an experience of the mathematical sublime, *The Prelude*’s “stolen boat” episode may be considered as an instance of either Kant’s dynamic sublime or Burke’s simpler idea of the sublime as that which inspires terror and awe by its very formlessness, obscurity, or shroud of darkness. McKay’s reading of the poem suggests that Wordsworth is “handling” raw wilderness, administering “carefully controlled doses” of it in order to produce “the experience of the sublime, with its delicious call note of terror” (43). This evaluation indicates that he has Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*, and not Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, in mind. Burke is

much more given to notions of sublimity that accord well with the tropes of gothic literature, and the “delicious call note of terror” of which McKay speaks is decidedly gothic. Ultimately, because *The Shell of the Tortoise* traffics in both Burkean and Kantian notions of sublimity, and because McKay is plainly uneasy about the humanistic uses to which these may be put, his own statements on his poetics tend to obscure the degree to which he has come to rely on Kant’s thought.¹²

McKay’s writings tend to disassociate the feelings of awe and terror that are so frequently associated with each other in Burkean conceptions of the sublime, and, leaving terror by the wayside, he focuses on awe and its correlatives – astonishment, wonder, and “gawking.”¹³ These affects play large roles in both Burke’s and Kant’s treatises on sublimity: for Burke, astonishment is “the effect of the sublime in its highest degree” (53), and the *Critique of Judgment* suggests that “[t]he mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished” (47). *Strike/Slip* opens with a poetic diptych comprised of the poems “Astonished” and “Petrified.” “Astonished” begins as follows:

astounded, astonied, astunned, stopped short
and turned toward stone, the moment
filling with its slow
stratified time. Standing there, your face
cratered by its gawk,
you might be the symbol signifying eon. (3)

This poem begins in the throes of sublime experience, utterly *in medias res*. Whereas Kant speaks of a man who is undergoing sublime feeling as being “sometimes rigid and

astonished,” McKay melds a-“stone”-ishment and rigidity into one sensation through the metaphor of petrification. The subject of the poem is “astoried” and “turned toward stone,” slack-jawed and “gawk”ing as he contemplates the significance of the earth’s more-than-ancient geological age.

Somewhere

sediments accumulate on seabeds, seabeds

rear up into mountains, ammonites

fossilize into gems. (3)

“Someone / inside you,” the poem concludes, “steps from the forest and across the beach / toward the nameless all-dissolving ocean” (3). As in Kant’s thinking, this version of sublimity relies upon hard scientific data: the lyric subject’s awareness of deep time equips him with the mind-boggling numbers that occasion Kant’s mathematical sublime, and he feels himself to be temporally displaced through his cognizance of what a small and impermanent life-form he really is. Reason can list the numbers and epochs by which the stratified layers of deep time are known, but the imagination boggles at them.

In *Deactivated West 100*, McKay suggests that poetry “is the pause where we turn toward stone, the breathless room where, by stratagems of language and mind, the quick and the infinite meet” (58). In the essay “Ediacaran and Anthropocene,” he writes of the scientist Harry Hess, whose geological speculations in the 1960s contributed to the current understanding of plate tectonics (*The Shell* 10). Hess also coined the term *geopoetry*, and, as McKay relates, attempted “to induce his readers (mostly other geologists) to suspend their disbelief long enough for his observations about seafloor spreading, driven by magma rising from the mantle, to catch on. He needed his audience,

in the absence of much hard data, to speculate imaginatively, as if reading poetry” (10). For McKay, “the practice of geopoetry promotes astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame,” making it

legitimate for the natural historian or scientist to speculate and gawk, and equally legitimate for the poet to benefit from close observation and the amazing things which science turns up. It provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. (10-11)

Just as Leopold’s particular combination of conservation activism and literary rhetoric suggests his modern-day affinities with Wordsworth’s ecological sensibilities, McKay’s enthusiasm for geopoetry as a “bridge” between poetry and science suggests another point in common with Wordsworth. As M.H. Abrams demonstrates in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), although certain philosophers of the Romantic period avidly opposed the purpose of poetry to those of philosophy and science, and, although poets and essayists such as Keats and Charles Lamb did the same from the side of the artists, this distinction was not made by all (300-12). Indeed, Wordsworth himself contradicted it. In Abrams’ portrait of him, Wordsworth is “a poet who had a Renaissance responsiveness to the grandeur of man’s intellectual exploration of the universe, and who was also aware of the contributions of the ‘nature-study’ fostered by science to the power of exact description which he held to be a necessary, if not sufficient condition for poetry” (309). In other words, Wordsworth’s opinion of the relation between poetry, philosophy, and science is almost exactly what McKay’s is today.

In the journal version of “Ediacaran and Anthropocene,” McKay speaks of what it feels like to consider the lives of creatures who lived millions of years ago, and who are now known to us only through their fossil records (14-15). “[O]ne can’t help feeling one’s thinking stretch as it takes on these remote possibilities,” he asserts, adding: “[w]ithin a purely rational or analytic context, such theories crave closure, desire to resolve into fact. 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” (14-15). As it appears in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, this essay concludes with the following manifesto: “[i]nhabiting deep time imaginatively, we give up mastery and gain mutuality, at least for that brief – but let us hope, expandable – period of astonishment” (24). This sentence captures one piece of McKay’s philosophical project very well: from within an intellectual tradition that is utterly fascinated by the dialectical interplay of human imagination and reason, McKay throws his lot in with what Kant and Wordsworth understood to be the failing – albeit productively failing – side.

Consider the first and last sections of the poem “Devonian,” which appears in *Strike/Slip* and is also reprinted in *The Shell of the Tortoise*. This stream-of-consciousness lyric, which Lee would almost certainly classify as being a phenomenological poem, deftly illustrates Kant’s sense of the imagination’s absolute inadequacy when faced with something too huge to be taken in whole:

Then someone says “four hundred million years” and the words
tap dance with their canes and boaters through
the spotlight right across the stage unspooling out the

stage door down the alley through the dark
 depopulated avenues (for everyone is at the theatre) toward
 the outskirts where our backyards bleed off into
 motel
 rentall
 stripmall
 U-haul past willowscruff, past ancient
 rusting mercuries along the lover's lanes [. . .]

.....

– four

hundred *million* years, yes, that's a long
 long time ago. (14)

In the long middle section of the poem omitted here, language significantly breaks down as the poem's syntax becomes less and less able to distinguish phrases and ideas from one another. A confused stream of consciousness takes over as the confounded mind grapples with the enormity of the history that it faces, and McKay relies significantly on metaphors – which, in postmodernist fashion, Leckie has called “contemporary moments of the sublime” (“Twinflower” 142). The poem ends utterly anti-climatically, with its imagination simply giving up. Four hundred million years *is* a “long / long time ago,” and the poem ends, tellingly, with something like a kindergartener's sense of deep time. Similarly, in the prose-poem “Quartz Crystal,” which also appears in *Strike/Slip*, the lyric speaker contemplates an eponymous piece of quartz sitting among other collected rocks and stones on his desk, and calls it a “specimen of earth's own artifice, this form before

mind or math, its axes reaching back to the Proterozoic, its transparence the Zen before all Zen” (16). Here, the subject is struck by the insufficiency of his approach to the crystal, this “first of symmetries,” and he undertakes a poetic excursion along a secular *via negativa*:

I give up baseball, with its derivative threes
and dreams of diamond.

I forswear the elegant pairs and numbered runs
of minuet and cribbage.

I renounce the fugue. Dialectic,

I bid you adieu. And you,

my little poems, don't imagine I can't hear you
plotting under your covers, hoping to avoid
your imminent depublication. (16)

This passage bears the marks of the gently self-deprecating humour that has made McKay's poetry so well-known, and it also carries a slight echo of Purdy's similarly tongue-in-cheek attitude towards artistic creation in “On Realizing He Has Written Some Bad Poems” (*Moths* 25). McKay's “Quartz Crystal” raises a question that has been asked elsewhere by Lee and Zwicky: what, if anything, is valuable in poetry when one is confronted by that which confounds the imagination utterly? “Quartz Crystal” does not attempt to answer this question, and rests content in the negative way. Unlike Wordsworth and Kant, McKay mobilizes the weakness of human perception rather than trusting that reason will lead poets, philosophers, or anyone else to cultivate a sense of responsibility to the non-human world.

The sublime encounters with deep time that McKay performs throughout *Strike/Slip* and *Paradoxides* share much with Levinas's notion of infinity. As Sylvia Benso notes in *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (2000), Levinas is unwilling to theorize "respect for the other only as another form of respect for the self," and instead considers the other through "Descartes's notion of the Infinite as that which escapes and overflows the power of conceptualization of subjective rationality" (xxviii). For Levinas, the Face of the other reveals "the transcendence of the Infinite" (xxviii), and it is possible, in this light, to conceive of McKay's efforts to celebrate sublimity in wilderness as part and parcel of his attempt to practice phenomenological ethics by giving a Levinasian Face to non-human creatures and inanimate objects. In "From Here to Infinity (or so)," McKay argues, like Leckie, that metaphor, "by its very nature," "bears the germ of infinitosis" (129). Levinas, he continues, "regards infinity as the thought that 'overflows itself,'" and metaphor works against what Levinas would call a "totalizing" tendency "to keep place open to the infinite" (130). Here, as elsewhere, McKay insists that the sense of feeling oneself "at home" can be dangerous: "place can become very set in its ways, smug and substantial; it can shade into property, something to be possessed and defended. It can become real estate; it can become a gated community with walls to keep out wilderness and undesirables" (130). Levinas's ethics is meaningful for McKay because it promises feelings of stability and security to no one; in fact, it does precisely the opposite by celebrating the other's absolute resistance to sublimation rather than the homogenization of Hegelian totality. "In every area," writes McKay, "the idea of infinity works as an antidote to human hubris" (131).

McKay also mobilizes litotes in this project of sublime defamiliarization. In the

poem “Precambrian Shield” (in *Strike/Slip*), he describes the iconic North American land formation as a “bone of the planet that was just / last week laid bare by the blunt / sculpting of the ice” (8). This rhetorical framework, in which the ice age is said to have ended “just / last week,” hammers home the brevity of the human species’ existence on the planet Earth. In “Ediacaran and Anthropocene,” McKay makes this point in prose, remarking that the creatures of the recently-discovered Ediacaran period “seem to have survived a mere 50 million years, an eye-blink in deep time, and only something like 49 and three-quarters million years longer than our own distinguished genus” (*The Shell* 12). Similarly, in the prose-poem “Gneiss,” also in *Strike/Slip*, the speaker regards a circle of Scottish standing stones, and muses, “It was not so long before this, not one whole afternoon as measured in the life-times of those upright slabs, that our ancestors had themselves achieved the perpendicular” (38). Drastic and obvious understatements such as these turn human measurements of time and scale against themselves, allowing them to show up the hubris of believing that the human race, a relative newcomer to the planet, could really be its master species.

Paradoxides is McKay’s latest collection of poems, and although its thematic preoccupations are similar to those of *Strike/Slip*, its particular aesthetic of the sublime adds a personal note to the idea of infinity – one that *Strike/Slip* only begins to gesture towards. *Paradoxides* reads somewhat like the poet’s letter of resignation from the work of poetry, and from mortal life. “Descent,” the collection’s final poem, gestures toward Orpheus’ journey into the underworld in search of Eurydice, but here, there is little hope of return; the poet moves into the dark, rocky depths of the underground as though for the last time:

In the end
 he leaves the difficult lyre
 behind and clammers down, handhold
 by outcrop by ledge,
 shedding talent, fame
 fading like a tan. Angel,
 artist. His head
 humbled by its skull.
 Apprentice. Among such
 gravities to find himself again
 ungainly. Thrawn. [. . .]

 [. . .] Once his song
 made rocks move and the gods
 relent.
 Such was the boast.
 Now the rocks
 rub raw the bone. Gravel,
 scree. Who will name
 the dark's own instrument? Riprap,
 slag. Music
 tearing itself apart. (77)

These are sombre lines with which to end a collection of poems. McKay's use of the

adjective “thrown” to describe the poet newly defamiliarized to his own body is particularly fitting for the philosophical position that he discloses in *Paradoxides*: the word – which the *OED* records as a version of the English “thrown” belonging to Scottish dialect, and signifying adjectives such as “twisted” and “crooked” – is also suggestive of Heidegger’s sense of *Dasein* as a state of having been “thrown” into the world. In accordance with the themes developed in *Strike/Slip*, McKay’s use of “thrown” in *Paradoxides* suggests the poet’s desire to feel himself *unheimlich* in space. More than one poem in this collection suggests that McKay is drawing together multiple perspectives on mortality: in “Eddy Out,” for instance, the speaker asks, “How many winters more / before I seamlessly shift, a snowshoe hare’s fur / passing into white?” (26). Jesse Patrick Ferguson has noted that *Strike/Slip* “invokes death but takes solace in the endurance of wilderness and in our return to it” (183). *Paradoxides*, I would argue, also invokes death, but rather than taking solace in the biological fact of the body’s decomposition and return to the elements, it poignantly parallels the poet’s mortality with his reflections on infinity, deep time, and the sublime. Orpheus’ descent into the underworld becomes an allegory for the geologist’s imaginative descent into the furthest reaches of history, and the poet’s contemplation of his own inevitable death.

On the level of technique, *Paradoxides* uses a number of methods employed in *Strike/Slip*: McKay casts into deep time metaphorically when he suggests that sandhill cranes “call from” a place and time where “hominids haven’t yet / happened” (7). In the poem “Deep Time Encounters,” “Ordinary stone / turns to the time it’s made of, / each empty *O* a lens” (35). In “Mistaken Point,” McKay takes the reader on an excursion to a rich Newfoundland landmark, where the people who populate the poem learn how,

Underfoot, petrified deep time rises in welts
 to prod our soles, here and there
 breaking into sudden bas-relief:
 a fernlike creature, a creature
 like a picket fence, a shrub, a miniature
 Christmas tree, a pizza disk – preserved,
 like Pompeii, under the cushion of volcanic ash
 that killed them. (38)¹⁴

Throughout the poems of *Paradoxides*, McKay works to strike a balance between the perception of creatures and things in their specificity, and the poet's imaginative perception of them – a perception that inevitably meets the things it sees through the lenses of their literary, musical, and philosophical selves. The connection made through simile in “Mistaken Point,” in which fossilized Precambrian creatures are likened to picket fences and Christmas trees, is but one example of this method. Elsewhere in the collection, a junco sets its “Hopkins-self aside / to sip-sip-sip so / generically” (6); the song of the sandhill crane “eschews the ear, / with its toolshed, its lab, its Centre for Advanced / Studies in Hermeneutics and Gossip” (7); ravens are “[i]ntro- / aggroverts of small-b being,” jamming “until the air is pregnant with polyphony” (11); the song of the purple finch suggests that “what-is is / perched on the precipice where chat / breaks into song” (14), and the sound of a river is “the voice of what-is as it / seizes the theme, pours its empty opera, / pumps out its bass line of sea-suck and blues” (23).

What is arguably the finest moment in *Paradoxides*' continued explorations of aesthetics of the sublime is, ironically enough, a poem that does not draw on Kant's

mathematical sublime at all, but rather on the concept of the dynamic sublime – that which affects the subject by might rather than magnitude. “Batter–” is a fitting poem with which to conclude this chapter: its intertextual and ideological allusions are rich, and the subtle workings of *eros* that run as an undercurrent throughout it draw McKay’s wilderness poetics closer than ever before to the more obviously theological traditions that inform Lee’s writings. “Batter–” begins as follows:

that’s the name, I’m thinking,
 for the huff-and-buffet
 rhetoric that fulminates against me, me
 and every other smart-arsed upstart
 lover-of-the-vertical who ventures
 up on the tolt it scours
 and sculpts. Across Conception Bay it gathers wrath
 and hurls it, a tirade so pauseless,
 so pressure-hosed that listening’s impossible
 and mandatory, the poor mind veering King
 Learily into synch, unbonneted,
 banging back and forth like bad hockey.
 Already, in deference, I’ve doffed
 and packed away my hat and glasses, now
 it wants me bare and walking stickless (24)

The initial and most forceful allusion that “Batter–” makes is that which its very title suggests. Gesturing toward John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14, which famously begins with

the phrase “Batter my heart,” the poem transplants Donne’s spiritually erotic stance into McKay’s inquisitive desire to climb to the top of a Newfoundland tolt (a “low, rounded hill,” or “hilly promontory,” according to the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*).

McKay’s real-life birdwatching, trail-hiking, and fossil-hunting hobbies suggest that a fairly literal interpretation of this climb would not be out of place: the speaker might be climbing the hill to gain a better vantage point from which to use his binoculars, or to examine the flora, or to search for rocks with ancient impressions embedded upon them. Of course, the significance of a man ascending a mountain, however small, belongs to the Judeo-Christian and Romantic traditions as well: McKay may not be Moses clambering up Mount Sinai, or Caspar David Friedrich’s Wanderer looking out over the fog, but the poem conjures up such iconic images nonetheless. Like Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14, “Batter—” entertains the possibility of feeling one’s defences being stripped away. The *eros* that inflects the poem does not need to be directed toward the Christian God whom Donne loved in order to bear meaning here: McKay’s speaker can direct his desire otherwise, as a “lover-of-the-vertical” who defers to the power of natural elements. The poem offers yet another suggestion of human mortality as well, making an explicit connection between the tolt that has been “scoured” and “sculpted” over eons by wind and rain, and the speaker who climbs it. As this pilgrim’s hat and glasses are removed (presumably so that they will not be blown away) and his walking stick abandoned (perhaps he needs both hands to help him scramble to the top), he is steadily divested of the accoutrements that distinguish him from the land itself. Moreover, as he sheds these human tools, his mind is also being worked upon by the weather: the tropes invoking King Lear’s madness on the heath and the jerkiness of “bad hockey” suggest a mind

coming undone.

Unlike the poem “I Scream, You Scream” – which, as I noted in Chapter 2, Lee admires for its deft representation of the “churning of the speaker’s consciousness,” and its “rifling through a series of preposterous associations” (*The New* xliv) – “Batter–” does not devolve into stream-of-consciousness style. The poem’s syntax, however, skillfully depicts the buffeting being undergone by the lyric speaker: its opening seven lines are filled with the breathy sounds of fricatives and voiceless fricatives, and the arhythmic spurts and spatters of its opening trochees, second-line anapest, and occasional iambs consistently give the impression of stressed syllables being knocked about by the wind – in no way the measured motion of a predominantly iambic march up the hillside.

“Batter—” presents a speaker feeling his mind being discombobulated by a force of nature mightier than himself – one from which he eventually takes shelter in “a patch of tuckamore” (small evergreens) (24). This is Kant’s dynamic sublime at work: a version of sublime experience that accords well with Burke’s, and with young Wordsworth’s out on that lake.

Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that the sublime is that form of representation in which “the terrible is tamed by artistic means” (40). As the writings of Lee and McKay demonstrate, aesthetics of the sublime can also be modes in which the terrible – or the wild, the unassimilable, the uncanny, the dreadful, and the unrepresentable – can make incursions into works of art, and, potentially, into the consciousnesses of authors and readers as well. McKay’s quarrel with Romantic aesthetics of the sublime is that they seem to align too closely with the sense of the term

as Nietzsche understands it. Correspondingly, his own poetics strives against such “taming” at all costs, choosing, rather, as Zwicky’s and Lilburn’s “loving”/“anagogic” reading strategies choose, to let the “self” be altered by the “other,” rather than the other way around.

In *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Timothy Morton suggests that “[s]omething about modern life has prevented us from thinking ‘totality’ as big as we could. Now we can’t help but think it. Totality looms like a giant skyscraper into the flimsiest thought about, say, today’s weather. We may need to think bigger than totality itself, if totality means something closed, something we can be sure of, something that remains the same” (4-5). “You want religious language?” he asks later, “[l]ook at the Milky Way. [. . .] Our slogan should be dislocation, dislocation, dislocation” (27-28). Although Morton rejects conventional aesthetics of the sublime because he, like McKay, understands them to fall too easily into the trap of tempering the discombobulation of magnitude with the mere *frisson* of terror, his writings clearly demonstrate that concepts of “sublimity” can be useful for contemporary ecopoets and ecological thinkers. Indeed, he suggests, as McKay and Levinas do, that ethical encounters with the “other” have something of the sublime about them. “When I encounter the strange stranger,” he writes, “I gaze into the depths of space, far more vast and profound than physical space that can be measured with instruments” (78). As the apophatic tendencies of the poetics of Lee and McKay demonstrate, if contemporary aesthetics of the sublime can help those who cultivate them recognize the “great” or the “awesome” as disquieting and unsettling rather than self-aggrandizing and pleasurable, there is much to be gained from exploring whatever the infinitely strange has to offer.

Notes

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- ¹ Significantly, Lyotard implies something very similar about historic conceptions of both philosophy and the university when, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), he suggests that in Humboldt's view, "the University is speculative, that is to say, philosophical. Philosophy must restore unity to learning, which has been scattered into separate sciences in laboratories and in pre-university education; it can only achieve this in a language game that links the sciences together as moments in the becoming of spirit, in other words, which links them in a rational narration, or rather metanarration" (33). These are largely the views of German idealism, and Lyotard goes on to implicate Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (1817-27) in "this project of totalization" (33-34).
- ² To take critical discourses on Lee's writings as an example: Tom Middlebro' has classed Lee as part of a tradition that Louis Dudek once called the "Toronto transcendental" – "a variety within the postwar Romantic movement which arose to release the springs of feelings in an emotionally numbed population" (Middlebro' 5). Jonathan Kertzer has called Lee both "a lapsed romantic" and "a relapsed romantic" (*Worrying* 91; 113), and notes with regard to *Civil Elegies*, moreover, that Romantic theories "tinge virtually all accounts of nationhood" (7). His reading of *Civil Elegies'* nationalistic Romanticism implicitly links the poem's lament for its nation to the speaker's adoption of a prophet-like role; Lee's lyric self, he suggests, is "an anxious Isaiah, warning the city of its iniquity" (91). Hearing a different correspondence, Robert Lecker has noted that *Civil Elegies* echoes Roberts's greater Romantic lyric, "Tantramar Revisited," a poem that is itself deeply indebted to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (*The Cadence* 77). More than Roberts, I would argue, Archibald Lampman is

Lee's closest Romantic precursor in the Canadian tradition. Although Lampman is often considered to be a conventional Romantic nature poet, the literary scholar Richard Arnold has argued persuasively that in the space of Lampman's three volumes of poetry – *Among the Millet, and Other Poems* (1888), *Lyrics of Earth* (1895), and *Alcyone* (1899) – Lampman follows a trajectory that initially draws him toward Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of transcendental unification, although he does not embrace it wholeheartedly. Lampman's poetry, Arnold suggests, progressively gives way more and more to a "frightening, direct vision of nature and human nature" (33), and "his mind, his sensibility, is too alive to the complexities of nature; he is only too conscious that nature is not an Emersonian meadowland but is rather a place of beauty *and* ugliness, benevolence *and* malevolence, life *and* death, darkness *and* light" (45). Lampman's interest in "darkness *and* light," and the issue of his and Lee's shared heliocentrism – a characteristic that in Lampman's case has been called "heliotherapeutic" (Bentley, *The Confederation Group* 187) – bears a striking similarity to the apophatic sublime that can be discerned in Lee's poetics.

Three scholars are significant exceptions to the rule when it comes to McKay's (and his admirers') forswearing of Romanticism. Bushell has argued, against the grain of much McKay scholarship, that the "strength of the nature poetry aesthetic is that it incorporates aspects of both Poststructuralist and Romantic thought" (78). Similarly, Leckie has qualified his comments on McKay's relation to Romanticism by noting that "certain kinds" of Romanticism, not all, make McKay uneasy, and by arguing, furthermore, that in some of McKay's work, "these ideas are not so much repealed or repudiated, as revised" ("Twinflower" 127-28). Mark Dickinson has also echoed

Leckie's reading of McKay's poetics as a revision, rather than a repudiation, of Romanticism, arguing that "[p]erhaps the most important Romantic ideal McKay recovers is the emphasis on perception" (*Notes* 177). My own reading of McKay's poetry and poetics is fully in agreement with these views.

- ³ In her PhD dissertation on Lee, Peggy Roffey notes that, "[e]arly in his friendship with Grant, Lee seems not to have shared Grant's reservations about Heidegger" (30-31). Pointing to the same passage in "Poetry and Unknowing" that I have quoted above, she suggests that it demonstrates the degree to which Grant's thinking had prompted Lee to change his mind.
- ⁴ Because the 1968 version of *Civil Elegies* is not paginated, passages quoted from it in this essay are not cited parenthetically. All passages accompanied by a parenthetical citation refer to the 1972 version of the poem.
- ⁵ McKay is among those who have recently returned to *Civil Elegies* in order to bring the reading strategies of ecocriticism to bear upon it. In the essay "Great Flint Singing," which first appeared as the Introduction to the poetry anthology *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (2009), McKay effectively writes Lee into the tradition of Canadian nature poetry by stating that *Civil Elegies*' representation of "the figure of Dennis Lee sitting in Nathan Phillips Square" is "one of Canadian nature poetry's iconic images" (*The Shell* 54-55). Aside from praising *Civil Elegies* for its contemporary ecological relevance, McKay also admires Lee's more recent work – the apocalyptic, linguistically-garbled poetry collections *Un* and *Yesno* (2007) – which he has described as "torqued contorted technospeak," the ecopoetic equivalent of "the familiar practice at AA meetings of identifying yourself as an alcoholic when you rise

to speak” (*The Shell* 22-23). *Un* and *Yesno* approach a postmodern aesthetic more closely than any other writing produced either by Lee or anyone else among the *Thinking and Singing* coterie. The volumes attempt to speak to the world’s contemporary ecological crisis with a philosophical vocabulary that Lee has employed throughout his long career; however, their syntax is remarkably different from the style of Lee’s earlier work. Take, for instance, this poem from *Un*:

flin-
 tinlyexcaliburlockjut.

Tectonic aubade. (36)

This is “excalibur” in its entirety: three brief lines that have very little of the commanding vocal presence and philosophical richness of *Civil Elegies*. Whereas Lee once tackled the issue of technological modernity with sprawling, bombastic free verse, the artistic, ontological, and religious disputes that proliferate throughout *Civil Elegies* seem in *Un* and *Yesno* to be relegated to the level of syntactical vehemence. If this were the only level at which these poems were operating, Lee’s characteristic poignancy would be much diminished: whereas in *Civil Elegies* the reader encounters a speaker constantly on the verge of being overwhelmed by the world he inhabits, “excalibur” seems at first glance to suggest that the world’s complexity exists in language alone. However, it may be more productive to read the poem as if it were representing Lee’s fundamental sense that the poet can only write what the world has given him. Since humans have wrecked the world, their language, “[i]n wreck, in dearth, in necksong” (*Un* 3), will show it.

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- ⁶ Henry Moore’s bronze free-form sculpture, “Three-Way Piece No.2,” which stands in the courtyard of City Hall in downtown Toronto, is commonly referred to by Torontonians as “The Archer.” Bentley has persuasively demonstrated that the Archer figures in *Civil Elegies* as the Heideggerian ideal of the work of art: its presence occasions “a bodily experience akin to the awakening of *Dasein* by dread ‘in the midst of what-is’” (“Rummagings” 12-13). I would also add that the sculpture figures meta-artistically as a foil to the work of the poem itself, which is deeply self-conscious about its ability to be, like the Archer, a “resonance” that holds. Significantly, “The Archer” also lends a practical aspect to the entangled relations of “void” and presence/light in *Civil Elegies*: in the vocabulary of art criticism, sculptures exist according to both positive and negative space – that out of which they are made, and that “emptiness” which surrounds and interrupts their material form. My thanks to Amelia Lubowitz for suggesting this to me.
- ⁷ “Could smell a bear downwind” is replaced, in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, with “[c]ould guide with a blindfold on” (40). An important difference, given the significance of blindness in the apophatic tradition.
- ⁸ Lee’s depiction of Thomson’s death by drowning also calls to mind other Christian literary precedents, such as John Milton’s *Lycidas* (1637), whose speaker bemoans in an apostrophe to his drowned friend that “The willows, and the hazel copses green, / Shall now no more be seen, / Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays” (*Complete Poems* 42-44). Just as *Lycidas*’s musical artistry will never again participate in the motions of nature, Thomson’s brush lies still: “the far loons percolate / high in November and he is not painting their cry.” Significantly, critics have sensed the

presence of Milton elsewhere in *Civil Elegies* as well: in a feminist reading of the poem, Tanis MacDonald suggests that the furies who torment the poem's speaker are terrible analogues to the muses who, in *Lycidas*, "loudly sweep the string" (31), and Bentley suggests that the "brooding" of *Civil Elegies*' speaker echoes the Dove/Holy Spirit in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* (1667) ("Rummagings" 16).

- ⁹ Roffey has suggested that the poem's "acceptance of the muting of the language of the good and this implied acceptance of the absence of the good suggest the pattern of experience described in Heidegger's essay 'The Turning'" (*Dennis Lee* 236). "If the 'good' has absconded," she argues, "is silenced, vanished, inaccessible to our love, then the speaker makes his choice to love his broken and traduced 'own' – those desacralized icons of absence: 'city, tower, hunger, body, land'" (238).
- ¹⁰ As Bill Readings observes in *The University in Ruins* (1996), however, Wordsworth had to fight "the building of a Lakeland railway whose market he was largely responsible for creating" (96). In other words, although it was intended to teach tourists responsible appreciation of the Lake District, the *Guide to the Lakes* in fact created a tourist market in the area. It would be a fascinating study, although not one that is within the purview of this dissertation, to determine whether McKay's topographically specific poetry, particularly his Newfoundland poems, has resulted in an influx of curious readers eager to hike the same trails, and see the same fossils.

More than Wordsworth, Leopold understood the tourist industry to be a betrayal of the possibility for intimate relations with the land. Whereas Wordsworth believed that visitors could be taught to appreciate what they were about to see, Leopold describes the tourist industry as a distasteful market in which secrets are traded

between “all and sundry” (165-66) – a mode of exchange that he refers to as “organized promiscuities” (182-83). The centrifugal “radiation” of the week-enders whose paths expand like “ions shot from the sun” suggests the imperialistic impetus of westward expansion, and hearkens back even further to the Enlightenment narratives that enabled capitalistic colonial ventures to be propagandized as the radiation of European light and learning into the “darker” nations of the earth. *Strike/Slip* and *Paradoxides* respond to such narratives of progress by suggesting that no matter how well science and technology are able to elucidate the inner workings of the planet, without the capacity for astonishment and wonder, and without the retention of mystery, human beings’ attempts to know the world will be destructive.

“Astonishment,” McKay writes, “humbling our pride in technique, impedes its progress into exploitation and appropriation. In the astonished condition, the other remains other, wilderness remains wild” (*The Shell* 17).

- ¹¹ In her insightful MA dissertation on the poetry of McKay and Claude Beausoleil, Susan Elmslie argues that “the creative self is defined by its capacity to perceive from, and articulate, an *unheimlich* (‘uncanny’) perspective” (iii). She also rejects the view that tourism is ecologically irresponsible, and suggests:

Excursion, in all its forms, represents flexible and playful attitudes towards being in the world. Literary excursion originates in the writer’s desire to locate and dwell awhile by the locus of energy that each object, each word has. It involves displacing the self-in-the-world and being open to the otherness that lies, always, at the edges of perception. Displacement, in the form of travel or psychical dislocation awakens one’s perception of familiar things as *unheimlich*. In such

moments the self is overtaken by surprise” (107).

- ¹² It is worth noting that of the two major treatises on sublimity that influenced his day, Wordsworth was certainly familiar with Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*. He claimed late in life, however, that he had never read any of the German philosophers, and so it is possible that he was unaware of Kant’s thinking in the *Critique of Judgment* (Stoddard 32). Nonetheless, literary scholarship has shown that a significant correspondence exists between Kant’s conception of sublimity and Wordsworth’s treatment of it, particularly in *The Prelude*. As noted above, Kant’s understanding of the mathematical sublime corresponds to his understanding of phenomenological knowledge; that is, he believes that human consciousness is the height of what human beings are able to know. His sense that sublime experience grants “insight into the soul’s supersensible allegiance” (Stoddard 34) is shared by Wordsworth, even though there seems to be no direct line of influence from the philosopher to the poet.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of the sublime believed that sublime experience required culture, education, and moral feeling. As Kant puts it, “without development of moral ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime presents itself to the uneducated man merely as terrible” (105). Wordsworth’s terrifying childhood experience out on the lake is a child’s experience – one being reflected upon by an adult who is eager to demonstrate the degree to which his aesthetic, and moral, education has now taken hold. The presence of sublime experience in *The Prelude* opens a window into a deep conversation about humanist education, and the strategic deployment of human imaginative power for moral purposes. As Stoddard argues, for Wordsworth and for Kant, the fact that “[t]he mind’s

reaction to powerful or fearful stimuli reveals its own power and strength, greater than any natural object's" suggests to them that "man can be free and therefore moral in his actions" (35). For Wordsworth, the dialectical interplay of imaginative weakness, and reason's ability to conceive of infinitude, is worth celebrating because it allows him to believe in "the spirit's independence of natural law and determinism" (36), and with this independence comes the capacity for moral action and maturity.

- ¹³ McKay first associates astonishment with the terms "gawk" and "wonder" in 1978, in a short proto-phenomenological essay on the Huron County Pioneer Museum in Goderich, Ontario ("The Impulse" 31). Since then, depictions of gawking and wondering have appeared frequently in his poetry and criticism, and indeed, McKay's predilection for the word "gawk" has become a noticeable feature of his vocabulary.
- ¹⁴ In "Ediacaran and Anthropocene," McKay explains that Mistaken Point is the Newfoundland site of "some of the world's best examples" of fossils dating back to the Ediacaran period (*The Shell* 11). He wryly remarks, moreover, that it is a shame that the geological period was not named after the site: "Mistaken Pointean," he suggests, "would carry an implicit awareness of its own instability, a fine thing in a name" (12).

Chapter 4

Musical Form and Ekphrasis: *Thinking and Singing the World*

Having spent the larger part of this dissertation exploring the poetics and poetry of Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky through the poets' commentary on knowledge, education, and theory in the modern world, it seems fitting to conclude by considering how the poets "think" singing – that is, how musical form and ekphrasis reveal their shared conviction that music participates in the "real" in ways that are less open to the singularities of voice that often mark human speech and the written word.

Aesthetic criticism has been fascinated for centuries by a supposed sororal affiliation between poetry and music, and speculations about their close ties with each other have been contested far less severely than attempts to classify other forms of art as being analogous. Thus it is that when Lessing argues in *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) that poetry is not, in fact, like painting, his argument places poetry and music together on one end of an artistic spectrum, with plastic and visual arts far on the other side. For Bringhurst and Zwicky, whose writings are this chapter's foci, admired musical forms often help to determine the shape of individual poems, and/or to suggest models for ekphrastic interpretation and response. Moreover, musical form assumes symbolic significance in their works, providing abstract models for concrete engagement with the world. Bringhurst's *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* (2003, 2009) suggests that polyphonic structures in music and literature can reflect, honour, and further the continuance of cross-cultural and polyglot relationships amongst the earth's communities (both human and non-human). Zwicky's

Lyric Philosophy (1992, 2012), *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003), and *Forge* (2012) suggest that despite postmodern arguments to the contrary, harmonic resonance can form the basis of ethical praxes.

By way of introduction to Bringhurst's *Ursa Major*, this chapter begins by contextualizing Bringhurst's thoughts on literary polyphony in light of key critical discourses that surrounded the topic during the latter half of the twentieth century in Canada. Although Bringhurst's knowledge of polyphonic traditions in both music and literature is broad and deep, he has provided a simple definition of the form: polyphony, he writes, is "singing more than one song, playing more than one tune, telling more than one story, at once. It is music that insists on multiplicity – instead of uniformity on the one side or chaos on the other" (*Everywhere Being* 33-34). In his view, polyphony is a natural product of the non-human world, and does not require the intervention of human *technê* in order to exist. As with Lee's views on "cadence," Bringhurst's writings suggest that the poet's goal should not be to create polyphony, but to learn to hear it properly.

I. Bakhtin and Canadian Literary Polyphonies in the Late Twentieth Century

The writings of Mikhail Bakhtin helped to define scholarly perspectives on literary polyphony and heteroglossia throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.¹ His theory of polyphony is inextricably linked to his theory of novelization, which is presented in his writings as an historical account of the development of the novel form, reflecting powerful shifts in human conceptions of "being" in the world. According to Bakhtin, novelistic discourse does not believe in the direct word. The ancient forms of parody that, in his account, "prepared the ground for the novel" and "liberated the object

from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net,” “freed consciousness from the power of the direct word,” and gave rise to a newly-perceived distance between language and noumenal reality (*Dialogic Imagination* 60). The power of polyglossia – a correlative to literary polyphony in Bakhtin’s understanding of these terms – is that it “fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language” (61). Wherever there is pluralism, Bakhtin suggests, wherever multiple cultures and languages interact, “[t]wo myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified” (68).

For Bakhtin, novelistic language is polyglot and discursive, and these are the very characteristics that mark it as being radically opposed to poetic language as *poiesis* has traditionally been conceived. As Bakhtin puts it, “language in a poetic work realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something all-encompassing. Everything that the poet sees, understands and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language” (*Dialogic Imagination* 286). In this scheme, the world of poetic language “is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed” (286). The novel, however, “is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language – that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world” (366). In Bakhtin’s conception of traditional poetics, the poet himself “is a poet insofar as he accepts the idea of a unitary and singular language and a unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance” (296). For him,

poetry desires to be the language of the gods; novelistic discourse, on the other hand, is not only content to be, but rejoices in being, human (331).

Bringhurst has taken issue with Bakhtin's comments on poetry, and his quarrel lies in part with Bakhtin's sense of the form as it has just been described. Paraphrasing Bakhtin as believing that "only the novel can be truly polyphonic," Bringhurst writes: "[i]t is hard to understand, reading statements such as this, how Bakhtin has remained so long the darling of contemporary criticism. It is true that he had little opportunity to read the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and none at all to read the poetry of Dennis Lee. That does not entirely absolve him of his arrogance in claiming no such poetry could exist" (*Everywhere Being* 45). More than genre is at stake in this contention, but it is clear that Bakhtin and Bringhurst have two very different understandings of what qualifies as poetry. Bringhurst's interpretation of Bakhtin's meaning is not unusual, and the objection he raises is not unfounded, but, nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that throughout his writings, Bakhtin distinguishes "poetry" from that which is "poetic in the narrow sense." In this distinction, the reader may glimpse a difference that is crucial for Bakhtin, between poetry as it might be conceived of metaphysically – as direct or perfect speech, representing "the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality" (*Dialogic Imagination* 264) – and poetry as it might be conceived of as having been created in the mode of novelistic discourse.²

Attention to laughter and carnival is one of the characteristics of Bakhtin's thinking that inspired many postmodern writers in the 1970s and '80s to appropriate his writings enthusiastically, and it is possible that part of Bringhurst's discomfort with Bakhtin's theories of polyphony stems from this appropriation, and from Bringhurst's

distaste for the critical atmosphere of which it was part. Perhaps the most important examples of Canadian adaptations of Bakhtin's thinking are the critical writings of Robert Kroetsch. For Kroetsch, a novel's dialogic structure effects a rhetorical move "in which the possibility of a single or privileged voice announcing the *right* version of the narrative is talked away. The unity is created by the very debate that seems to threaten the unity" (*Lovely Treachery* 25). Kroetsch's admiration for Bakhtinian heteroglossia goes hand in hand with his postmodern admiration for the carnivalesque, with its capacity for irreverence, and its particular fittedness for poststructuralist conceptions of linguistic and ontological play. Kroetsch's poetics understands the carnivalesque to be promoting "renewal by destruction" (104), a description that explicitly connects the carnivalesque and deconstruction in his thinking. Moreover, he also understands deconstruction to be implying, "for all its attraction to disorder, a recovery of order, control; not so much for the moment as the moment after" (109) – a description that clearly hearkens back to Bakhtin's writings on the carnivalesque.³

Two academic/literary conferences held in Canada in the late twentieth century are particularly noteworthy for the critical narrative I wish to develop here. The first is the "Long-liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem," which was held at York University in 1984. There, Lee delivered a "partially extemporaneous" talk on the subject of polyphony in the poetry of Pound (and, by extension, in his own poetics) ("For and Against" 212). The content of this talk later became the essay "For and Against Pound: Polyphony and Ekstatic Form" (1985), in which Lee suggests that Pound "created the only serious polyphonic tradition of the twentieth century (191). The second conference that occupies a crucial place in this narrative was organized by the scholar Sean Kane,

and was held at Trent University in 1996. It was entitled “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony,” and Lee himself, as well as Bringham, McKay, and Zwicky, were in attendance.

In “For and Against Pound,” Lee states that he admires Pound’s achievement in establishing a polyphonic tradition for the twentieth century, but he also makes it clear that he distrusts Pound’s motivations and methods. Ultimately, he condemns his precursor for having instituted “one more phase of privileged Western decadence among the intelligentsia, an airless, masturbatory relativism which finally celebrates nothing but its own sophomoric smartness” (211). Referring to Pound’s *Cantos*, and insisting that “the world does not exist solely for a poet to cut up into little pieces, and stitch back together in rhyming patterns which demonstrate his genius” (211), Lee argues that Pound “appears to accept only one way of moving from voice to voice: that is, abruptly and discontinuously” (191). Although it might be tempting to hear an implicit criticism of deconstruction in Lee’s description of poetry that cuts up the world, his paper does not indicate that he has Derrida, or anyone else of that tradition, in mind. Not surprisingly, however, comments such as this one would later lend themselves to the poetic stand against postmodernism that would occur at the “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony” symposium. Ultimately, in “For and Against Pound” Lee understands his purpose to be to press “for a sense of moral and artistic coherence in what-is that will be other than the modern, though one whose contours I do not know” (212).

Lee’s reading of Pound is grounded in his characteristic position that modernity’s liberal cosmology – the notion that human beings exist in “an ‘objective’ material world, which is factual, positive, value-free” (“For and Against” 193) – fundamentally altered

modern developments in poetic form. Locating the beginnings of this cosmology at roughly the cusp of the nineteenth century, Lee argues that it quickly established itself to such an extent that,

Despite all the Romantic tours-de-force of inwardness, nobody could put the sacramental universe back together again. The external world remained a neutral field of non-meaning – though punctuated, if you went in for that sort of thing, by random flashes of subjective intensity. By “epiphanies,” as they came to be known. The epiphany was self-certifying, for as long as it lasted, by virtue of its intensity, but it never lasted for long. (193)

Lee understands these epiphanic moments as having been embraced by poets as proofs – however brief and ephemeral – of the world’s value. “For the duration of that ecstatic moment,” he writes, “the poet doesn’t have to ask where value comes from, nor what validates it; he is ravished by it, knows it to be real” (194). Lee is unsatisfied by this mode, however, and turns instead to Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” in order to explicate a cosmological perspective that he can get behind. Noting the conventional belief, present in Lessing’s philosophy, that literature is a “sequential form” that “unfolds in time,” Lee argues that this is the “native logic” of literature, while a “secondary logic” also exists – one that “invites us to consider the work as if spread out in space before us, as though it could be apprehended at a glance, in a single moment” (198). In Lee’s reading of “In a Station of the Metro,” the poem’s most revolutionary achievement is that it demands that the reader read “both logics at once” (202). In doing so, the reader experiences an “aesthetic epiphany,” according to Lee, and, in this interaction between reader and poem, the epiphanic experience enjoyed by the Romantic poet is given to the

reader instead. It is “no longer present as content; it is both condition and effect, within the imagination of the reader, of the poem being realized as a poem at all” (202).⁴

Bringhurst has classed Lee’s writings on polyphony and “cadence” as being “among the masterpieces of reverential explication” (“At Home” 63), and has credited Lee with having been the first person to discuss polyphony in Canadian literature “before the end of the 1970s” (*Everywhere Being* 45). He has also appreciated the fact that, to his eyes, Lee “doesn’t stake out and defend a theoretical position,” but rather “accounts as best he can, as a working poet, for his own gut-level and deeper decisions” (46). “The result,” Bringhurst writes, “is more a spiritual confession than a literary manifesto, and is all the more valuable for that” (46). Bringhurst’s comments echo the spirit with which Kane organized the “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony” symposium at Trent University in 1996 – a correspondence that should not be surprising, given that the essay from which these comments come began as a paper presented at the Trent symposium. In an invitation to the symposium that was circulated by Kane prior to the event, Kane suggests that Bringhurst’s and Lee’s polyphonies “reach to musical polyphony and around that to an as yet unsketched theory of voice as the embodiment of what Bringhurst calls ‘Being within Being’” (“Letter, 8 Aug.” n. pag). He indicates, moreover, that those conceiving of the symposium (himself and Lee among them) were “trying to differentiate a practice, and the account of a practice, from the polyvocal subject-positions of the postmodernist carnivalesque” (n. pag.). In a separate update to participants, Kane describes the symposium as:

[an] opportunity we have to declare an alternative to a practice which since the early modernist period has organized poetry according to the image. And an

alternative to the extension of modernist practices into Deconstructionist irony and postmodernism. However carnivalesque, polyvocal, full of shifting “subject positions” and human body; however mocking of the essentialist self and its structures of permanence, this poetry, to me, is tail-chasing Cartesianism trying to escape from its own impasses. (“Letter, 7 Aug.” n. pag.)

The influence of Lee’s thinking is evident here, and, indeed, Kane’s letter suggests that he is reiterating some comments that Lee had made to him at an earlier date. In an unpublished letter to Kane dated 22 February, 1996, Lee gestures toward many of the same themes, commenting on the organizers’ decision to limit the number of symposium participants and attendees in the interest of creating a space in which thinkers of similar minds could discourse together:

You demurred at the notion of inviting a grab-bag of academics, who might not be in tune with what you [. . .] (and the other known-quantity participants) have in mind. And I do see what you mean. I heard about encounters at the *Poetry and Knowing* session where people who had no feel for the subject simply trotted out their pre-fab challenges [. . .] Most thinking about Canadian writing is puerile. Partly because there are so many mediocre minds/spirits engaged in it. But also because the enterprise is mired in the current critical orthodoxy (whether it calls itself post-structuralist, or some other variant). There are a few critics and theorists who are innately at home in this school, and (I presume) are doing bracing work. But for the most part, it’s a Canadian imitation of a [*sic*] American imitation of the French original. Double colonialism [. . .] The new orthodoxy renders invisible, inaudible, whole reaches & stretches of good writing; and when

it does manage to pick up something worthwhile in its scanning devices (something beyond the 1000th re-take on “Robert Kroetsch’s Deferral of Closure”), it screens out most of what *is* of interest therein. This is a very bossy, foreclosing orthodoxy. (n. pag.)

Elsewhere in this letter, Lee also speaks warmly of the possibility that the symposium might be “a gathering of the clan – a clan which has only begun to recognize itself *as* a ‘clan’” (n. pag.). Three of the other poets who were invited to speak at the symposium were those whose thoughts had been brought together in *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews* (2005) not long before: Roo Borson, Stan Dragland (who moderated), and Kim Maltman (Bringhurst, “Singing” 114). Bringhurst, McKay, Zwicky, and Clare Goulet also presented or performed (114). The group’s recognition of kinship, Lee suggests, was occurring “[i]n the face of an elaborately irrelevant and inimical critical climate” (“Letter, 22 Feb.” n. pag.). What Kane’s and Lee’s pre-symposium letters make certain is that the “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony” event was understood by those who helped to plan it, if not by everyone who attended, as being explicitly opposed to postmodern, deconstructive, and poststructuralist theories of language, “being,” and polyphony.⁵

II. Robert Bringhurst’s Poetics of Polyphony

“I have been listening to the world for barely half a century,” Bringhurst writes in “The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World” (1996); “I do not have the wisdom even of a young tree of an ordinary kind. Nevertheless, I have been listening – with eyes, ears, mind, feet, fingertips – and what I hear is poetry. What does this poetry

say? It says that what-is *is*: that the real is real, and that it is alive. It speaks the grammar of being. It sings the polyphonic structure of meaning itself” (*The Tree* 43). Bringhurst and Lee share the perspective that no authentic poet can “say anything more than the world has told him” (44). Poetry, for Bringhurst, is “the language of the world, something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention, and something that the world will teach us to speak, if we allow the world to do so” (145). For him, as for Lee, polyphony is not merely “a literary or musical technique,” but, on the contrary, “a complex property of reality which any work of art can emphasize or minimize, emulate or answer, acknowledge or ignore” (*Everywhere Being* 57). Bringhurst’s views on polyphonic poetry, moreover, are partially indebted to Lee’s thinking in “Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation.” In his 1997 essay “Singing with the Frogs” (the published version of the paper he presented at the “Dennis Lee and Canadian Literary Polyphony” symposium), he writes that a polyphonic poem is “a poem that (to borrow two good verbs from Dennis Lee) *enacts* and *embodies* plurality and space as well as (or instead of) timelessness and unity. A poem in which what-is cannot forget its multiplicity. A poem in which no one – not the poet, not the reader, not the leader, and not God – holds homophonic sway” (16).

Whereas for Bakhtin the novel is Galilean rather than Ptolemaic, for Bringhurst polyphonic art is both non-Newtonian and non-Aristotelian. Through it, he suggests, “two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time without ceasing to be two. Two melodies, or three, or eight, can live their separate lives, with equal pay for equal work, and still eat at the same table and sleep in the same bed” (*Everywhere Being* 38). This description’s provocative echo of women’s movements’ advocacy for “equal pay for equal work” packs polyphony with a distinctly political relevance, one that Bringhurst’s

first formally polyphonic poem, “The Blue Roofs of Japan,” performs explicitly. “The Blue Roofs of Japan” was first performed live at the University of Montana, Missoula, in 1985. Later that year, it was broadcast on CBC Radio, and was published in print soon afterwards in Bringhurst’s *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Inspired by a trip to Japan that Bringhurst shared with the novelist Audrey Thomas, “The Blue Roofs of Japan” is “a score for jazz duet” (*Pieces of Map* 81). The poem has two distinctly gendered voices – one male, and one female – that are meant to be heard together, not in sequence. Bringhurst has explained that the piece was initiated by a comment that Thomas made as they travelled through Honshu by train: “Audrey, looking out the window at the blue-tiled roofs, said, ‘If you lived in a house with such a blue roof, you’d wake up happy every morning’” (*Everywhere Being* 201). “Over the next few days,” Bringhurst writes, “in the back of my head, these became the opening words of a poem. But the poem appeared to have a problem. It was jumping back and forth between Audrey’s voice, in which it had begun, and mine, in which I thought it might continue” (201).

“The Blue Roofs of Japan” begins with the female voice, but the male voice enters the poem quickly. The female voice speaks Thomas’s real-life words, “*In a house with such a blue roof / you’d wake up cheerful / every morning*” (83), while the male voices muses on the things to which a person might wake up:

To the talking mirror
of water. To the broken panes
of water laid in the earth like leaded glass.

To the empty cup containing
 everything,
 to warm it with the tea.

To hold in the hands like a cup of tea,
 always full and always empty,
 the earthy asymmetry of the world. (82)

In the context of the poem (and Bringhurst is careful to state that this “is not a paradigm”), the male voice is “more verbose,” whereas the female voice “cuts lyrically across” (81). In addition, the female voice sometimes speaks the male’s words in unison, and sometimes continues to repeat them once the male voice has moved on to something new:

to the talking mirror
of water,
to the talking mirror
of water,

to the
cup containing
everything, the hands

always empty, always full (83)

The distinct personalities of the voices are most pronounced in the third of the poem’s

five sections, where the male voice reflects on the agricultural origins of writing (and of calligraphic writing in particular):

Writing derives
 from the domestication of water.
 Rain and the sea
 are the mothers of letters.
 The mind of the scribe
 moves like a rice-farmer, steps like a crane.

When you next see the hunters,
 say to the hunters:
 O say can you see
 how the earth is rewritten
 under our hands
 until it says nothing? (88)

Here, the consciousness of the male voice is, noticeably, either American or deeply impressed by American culture. The poem's "O say can you see" obviously gestures to the US national anthem, and it would be difficult not to hear the echo of Muhammad Ali's famous phrase "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" in this speaker's articulation of "moves like a rice-farmer, steps like a crane." One of the themes of these allusions is distinctly ecological: the poem's gesturing to the US national anthem, and its corresponding chastisement of those who "rewrite" the earth "until it says nothing" explicitly connects human language as *technê* to agricultural and industrial control

exerted over the land. The echoes also reiterate that the male voice reflects a tourist's consciousness: listening to it, the reader receives an impression of the Japanese landscape filtered through a North American mind. The poem's female voice, significantly, does not speak these lines, but instead emphasizes a different aspect of the poem's reflections on writing and landscape:

Is a woman's body
the garden? Writing descends
Rain and the sea,
rain and the sea
are the mothers of letters.

Rain and the sea are the mothers of letters. (89)

Not only is this voice less distinctly North American, but it is also less agricultural. Whereas the male voice expresses concern over contemporary North American industrial practice, the female voice gestures toward the earth's natural water cycles, and inserts itself into this ecology. Rain and the sea, each becoming the other in succession as water descends and re-ascends through the processes of condensation and evaporation, are "the mothers of letters." Longstanding traditions in which women's bodies are connected to the sea, through the effects that lunar cycles have on them both, are at work here as well. Whereas the male speaker asks "can you see / how the earth is rewritten / under our hands," the female speaker says, simply: "Can you see? / Can you see how the earth is re-written?" (89). In a rather conservatively gendered way, this poem's male voice takes it upon himself to speak out against technological modernity, whereas the female voice

asserts that human beings (and women in particular) ought to remember their inherent biological affinity with the world.

Bringhurst has stated that it is “plainly not the case that every piece of homophonic music is politically unhealthy, nor that polyphonic music will put an end to war, religious bigotry, or sexual oppression” (*Everywhere Being* 38). Nevertheless, it is clear that he believes that a number of political gains can be made by circumventing the power of lyric poetry’s singular ego. As his own statements on the nature of polyphony suggest, the multiple voices contributing to a polyphonic composition must be able to express themselves distinctly without being overwhelmed and subsumed (or sublimated) within a single dominant melody, tone, or mind. In this regard, Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* is a striking example of conversation and collaboration on multiple counts. *Ursa Major* began as a script that was commissioned by Robin Poitras, the co-founder and current artistic director of Regina’s New Dance Horizons, who wished to supplement a performance that she had been inspired to develop after encountering an art installation (also entitled “Ursa Major”) by the Regina sculptor John Noestheden (Cleniuk 370). The collaborative piece that Poitras and Bringhurst developed was realized in March 2002 as part of a larger exhibition entitled *invisible ceremonies* – an event self-styling itself as being “rooted in a physical world comprised of choreographies, actions and acts,” and exploring “relationships and resonances between the worlds of art, science and nature” (*Season* n. pag.).

Noestheden’s “Ursa Major” installation consisted of “a collection of highly polished, multi-faceted aluminium objects, arranged in the shape of the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear, on a wall at the MacKenzie Art Gallery” in Regina (Cleniuk 370).

The *invisible ceremonies* performance of “Ursa Major” was performed twice in Regina, and was realized by nine performers, six of whom had speaking parts, with the others dancing, perambulating, and posing silently. Poitras was among the silent dancers, and Bringhurst assumed a speaking (and singing) role.⁶ The set made extensive use of Noestheden’s art installation, and the production was accompanied by a musical score composed by Chiyoko Szlavnic. Set pieces included long metal ladders that were pushed around or walked upon by the performers, an octagonal podium/pool, electronic speakers hanging from the ceiling, polyhedral objects gleaming on the floor, and Noestheden’s climbing wall of bright metal handholds shining like stars in the sky.

The first published version of Bringhurst’s script, revised slightly from that which had been performed in 2002, was published by Gaspereau Press in 2003, in a handsome oversize edition accompanied by an Afterword by Peter Sanger. In 2009, Gaspereau Press released a second, more compact edition of the script, which omits Sanger’s Afterword.⁷ In both its performance and printed forms, *Ursa Major* is divided into five scenes: three of which (Scenes 1, 3, and 5) portray Ovid’s account, in Book 2 of the *Metamorphoses*, of how the Great Bear constellation came to be. Ovid tells of how the young and childishly foolish Phaëton, a mortal son of Phoebus (Apollo) blights the heavens and the earth with scorching fire while attempting, and failing spectacularly, to drive his father’s solar chariot along its diurnal course. Jove (Zeus) has been forced to strike him down, and now makes his way over the earth to survey the damage, beginning with Arcadia. There, he espies Callisto, one of the acolytes of the virgin goddess Diana (Artemis). Jove disguises himself as Diana in order to approach Callisto, and, embracing her and reverting rapidly to his male form, rapes and impregnates her. Diana eventually discovers

the pregnancy and casts Callisto out of her train. Alone, Callisto brings the pregnancy to term. When she gives birth to a son, Jove's ever-wronged wife Juno (Hera) furiously transmogrifies Callisto into a bear. Now terrified among both humans and beasts, Callisto secludes herself in the forest, and her son is raised by her father. Years later, whether by chance or fate, the mother and child come upon each other in the forest while the young man is out hunting. The son's spear is just beginning to enter his mother's ursine chest when Jove intervenes, preventing the matricide by lifting both Callisto and her son, Arcturus, into the sky. Callisto becomes Ursa Major, and Arcturus, Ursa Minor.

Scenes 2 and 4 of *Ursa Major* tell a story that was dictated in 1925 to the ethnographer Leonard Bloomingfield, who transcribed it from the words of Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw, a Cree man whose name Bloomingfield anglicizes as "Coming Day." Bloomingfield gave Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's story the title "The Bear Woman," and published it in a collection entitled *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* – Bulletin No. 60 of the National Museum of Canada (1930).⁸ For *Ursa Major*'s printed script, Bringhurst uses Bloomingfield's Cree transcription of "The Bear Woman," but performs his own translation of the Cree text into English.⁹ "The Bear Woman" story tells of a man living alone on the prairies, each day setting out from his camp to hunt, and returning with only a small portion of meat from the buffalo he kills: "*Pêyak otêyiniy otinam, / He just took the tongue*"; "*êkwah pêyak opêminak, / and just a haunch*"; "*êh-kîwet, ê-takohtêt wîkihk, / and headed back to where he lived*" (*Ursa Major* 16). Returning to his camp one evening, the hunter discovers signs that someone has been there during his absence: "a big stack of firewood" has been laid out, the inside of his camp has been swept, and a pair of moccasins have been left inside (17-18). Excited by the possibility

that a woman has been in his home, the hunter thinks that maybe he will see her the next day. He leaves at dawn to hunt, and from the buffalo he kills, he takes “the tongue, the ribs, the kidneys and a haunch” (19) – or “a thigh-bone,” as Bloomingfield translates (59) – effectively doubling the size of his meal in anticipation. When he nears his camp, he sees smoke rising from a fire, “and a big, very big, pile of firewood” (*Ursa Major* 19). Another pair of moccasins has been left inside, but no one else is there. When he kills a buffalo the following day, he brings home only the ribs and kidneys. This time, he finds the woman there waiting for him, “sitting in his own seat” (22) – “his settee,” writes Bloomingfield (60). She changes his moccasins, washes his hands and face, gives him food, and, together, they share a meal. She asks, however, why he has brought “so little meat” from the hunt (*Ursa Major* 23). Scene 2 of *Ursa Major* tells Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s story up to this point, and its second half is completed in Scene 4. There, readers who are not already familiar with the tale learn that the hunter’s wife enlists his help to feed her “father and his people” (Bloomingfield 60). Together, they prepare huge stores of provisions that the woman moves capably from campsite to campsite with supernatural power. When they reach their destination, the woman’s father, mother, and younger sister “rejoice” (61), and the man lives contentedly with his newfound relations. Then, in the spring, it dawns on him that “she, the woman, as it seemed to him, whom he had to wife, was a bear, and that also the old man and the old woman were bears. And he was sorry that he could not always be with them” (61). Or, as Bringhurst translates, “he was sorry he could stay with them no longer” (*Ursa Major* 39-42).

In his Afterword to *Ursa Major*, Sanger emphasizes the gifts and lessons that the hunter receives from the bears, observing that “[b]y transforming themselves into human

beings they are giving the hunter care, honour, love; and by expecting him to trust and follow his wife's instructions, they teach him to know the stricken nature of his former, aimless, egocentric solitude" (87). The affliction of the hunter's earlier life is visibly worse than lonesomeness; it is also wasteful excess. Although smaller game would surely be enough to sustain his physical needs each day, readers/auditors learn that he kills three buffalo in the span of so many days, and take only tiny portions of each – a practice that might resonate sharply for the generations who witnessed the reality of the near extinction of the prairie buffalo. The short-lived gift of an extended family embeds the hunter in a network of communal relations in which it is clear that *his* life alone is no longer his chief responsibility. Nor, indeed, had it ever been. Moreover, it seems particularly significant that this change is brought about, as Sanger suggests, through the hunter's willingness to be guided by his wife. Her pivotal role as an educator stands in stark contrast to that of Callisto, whom both Ovid and Bringhurst portray as a victim of the carnal knowledge forced upon her. Set in conjunction, the two stories present a kind of mythopoeic polyphony that draws the theme of "women and knowledge" to the fore.

Ursa Major's Graeco-Roman and Cree stories are set apart structurally by the masque's divisions between scenes, but their characters populate one another's worlds and exist in complex relations with one another. The stories are performed by six speakers and three silent dancers. The Ovidian story is spoken primarily by the character Ovid's Daughter, who speaks in Latin, and the Cree story is spoken by the character Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son, who speaks in Cree. The remaining four speakers are Hera, the Translator, and the Celestial Janitor (all of whom speak both Greek and English), and Arcturus, Callisto's son (who speaks English alone). The Celestial Janitor corresponds

roughly to the Genius of the Wood in Milton's *Arcades* (c. 1629-33) or the Attendant Spirit in Milton's *Comus* (1634), and is, in other words, a kind of local spirit entrusted with the stewardship of a particular landscape – in this case, the vast cosmological universe that all of *Ursa Major*'s characters inhabit. Arcturus is also particularly noteworthy: he delivers his lines in sustained polyphony with Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son, and it is through him more than any other character that moral judgments are pronounced on the characters and events colliding in the masque. In addition to hearing Callisto's story (in fragmented form) through Ovid's Daughter, the reader/auditor also hears it from Arcturus. In Scene 2, he begins:

Perfectly simple. One of the ones in the sky
 wanted one of the ones on the ground.
 And got what he wanted, as usual. Then
 couldn't keep it. If they can't, who can?
 What a way to find yourself a mother.
 But what other way is better?
 You can have what you want but you can't have it for long.
 That's the rule. (23)

In this passage, Arcturus' reflections on his mother's violent treatment by Jove are extraordinarily ambivalent. His judgment is less veiled, however, in the lines that follow:

Now the one on the ground –
 that is, the one who found herself a mother –
 was already in the service from another from the sky –
 a woman from the sky who lived most of the year

on the ground. And that one chased her out
 and damn near killed her, because she was impure.
 Being a mother, you see, is impure. In some people's
 thinking. Love is pure but loving isn't. Even thinking
 about loving isn't pure, in some people's thinking. (23-24)

Here, Arcturus speaks of love, lust, puritanism, and vengefulness, and the reader/auditor may hear a sharp tone of disapproval in his evaluation of "some people's thinking." That being the case, Arcturus also confuses sexual intercourse ("loving") with "love" – a rhetorical conflation that, given his mother's rape, stands as yet another sign of his ambivalence and immaturity. Although it is difficult to determine Arcturus' precise views on the events he recounts, his version of Callisto's story raises questions that are not brought up elsewhere in *Ursa Major*. As such, the bear-child functions as a meta-character within the masque. He reflects on his own origins with little real insight or sympathy, and so demonstrates a thick-headedness that could be read as a good example of the West's blindness to its own traditions, such as that which Lilburn describes in *Assiniboia: Two Choral Performances and a Masque* (2012).

Ursa Major includes many elements that are conventional to masques, but it also omits a number of components that an audience familiar with the tradition might expect to find. In the seventeenth century, masques typically combined the elements of opera and dance. Unlike opera, however, not all of their parts were meant to be sung, and, also unlike opera, they invited audience participation (Milton 88). Such masques were usually commissioned by noble families or personages to commemorate events or honour individuals on special occasions, and, although they frequently made use of characters

and landscapes from the Graeco-Roman mythical canon and the later pastoral tradition, their meanings would have been expected to have contemporary relevance. Traditionally, they ended with dances in which the whole audience took part (Milton 88). As Peter Mendes suggests, seventeenth-century masques typically depict an antagonistic relationship between forms of music and dance that are able to represent, on the one hand, the higher order of the celestial realm (or the Platonic “harmony of the spheres”), and, on the other, the discordant cacophony of baser human and animal existence. Both of these representations are given stage-time within the masque itself. Whereas the audience’s participation in the highly-structured final dance is meant, as Mendes says, to “represent the earthly order under the king” and to mirror “the cosmic order of the universe” (Milton 89), the so-called anti-masque allows chaotic elements to be briefly given rein. The anti-masque, in other words, represents an incursion of the carnivalesque into the ordered harmony of the whole.

In his Afterword to *Ursa Major*, Sanger writes that seventeenth-century anti-masques might have included “dancers dressed, for example, as zanies, green men, wild men, lunatics or theriomorphic figures, [taking] over the stage as a form of comic relief and as a defining antithesis to the dignity and beauty of the masque’s principle characters” (“Late” 83). Francis Bacon suggests that the performance might feature “fools, satyrs, baboons, wild men, antics [monsters or clowns], beasts, sprites, witches, Ethiops, pigmies, Turquets, nymphs, rustics, Cupids, statues moving, and the like” (qtd. in Milton 167). The racist implications of the form are clear: by way of establishing stark contrast, the anti-masque implies that ordered civility and humanistic harmony belong properly to European nobles, whereas discord and dissonance abound in animals,

uncanny figures, and human beings perceived to be animalistic. It is significant, then, that in *Ursa Major*, Bringham omits the anti-masque entirely. As a performance that includes Cree speakers as well as Romans and Greeks, and as a text that wants to react ethically to Canada's disastrous colonial history, *Ursa Major* must at all costs avoid any hint of the suggestion that its Indigenous figures represent anti-masque elements. Instead, its intermingling of Graeco-Roman, European, and Cree voices and stories attempts (as Lilburn's *Assiniboia* would later do) to imagine how those cultures might come together in dialogue without reinscribing ideological forms of invader-settler violence against First Nations peoples and cultures.

Sanger also suggests that an intertextual anti-masque to *Ursa Major* may be found in a seventeenth-century French piece entitled *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* (1606). As both Sanger and Jerry Wasserman, the most recent editor of that masque, have noted, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* was composed by Marc Lescarbot, a French lawyer stationed for a time at France's Port Royal colony (on the shore of the Bay of Fundy), who produced the masque to mark the return of Jean de Biencourt, the colony's commander, after a short journey down the coast (Sanger 82-83, Wasserman 13-23). It was performed in boats on the waters of the bay, and, as *Ursa Major* would do four centuries later, it incorporated mythological characters from the Graeco-Roman tradition (Neptune and some Tritons) as well as Native characters (French actors dressed as emissaries from the Mi'kmaq nation) (Wasserman 13). In contradistinction to *Ursa Major*'s explicitly anti-colonialist perspective, *Le Théâtre de Neptune* glorifies France's colonial venture in the New World. Neptune, all his Tritons, and the masque's Mi'kmaq characters pay homage to Jean de Biencourt, blessing his command in the colony, and

validating his control over the surrounding territories. By opposing *Ursa Major* to *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, Sanger suggests that *Ursa Major* is a more ethical text than its seventeenth-century precursor.

Aside from evaluating *Ursa Major*'s ecological and/or ethical value according to its omission of imperial gestures such as those found in *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, readers/auditors must also ask whether the masque's polyphony actively challenges imperial violence. As I implied a few moments ago, although the polyphonic structure of "The Blue Roofs of Japan" suggests equality between the male and female voices, their unique speeches tend to reinscribe conventional (and problematic) representations of "man" as technological aggressor, and "woman" as more passively and biologically in sync with nature. If the polyphonic interactions of the Cree and Graeco-Roman stories in *Ursa Major* did something similar – that is to say, if they represented First Nations persons as existing in innate harmonic relations with the earth, in contradistinction to the discord and dissonance of the "West" – the masque would be no less offensive than its seventeenth-century "anti-masque."

Thankfully, *Ursa Major* does not reinscribe such stereotypes. Bringhurst's use of Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's "Bear Woman" story rather than any of the other possible options (see Sanger 81) highlights the fact that sustainable, community-driven engagement is a learned practice. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's hunter has no inherent knowledge that prevents wasteful habits, but develops an ethical praxis through the caring instruction of his wife. Arcturus could grow in this way too, the masque implies, if he could learn to listen more closely.

Bringhurst notes in his Preface to *Ursa Major* that although its polylingual

structure may seem imposing (he quips that “theatre-goers and readers equally fluent in English, Latin, Greek and Cree appear to be in short supply”), ultimately the piece is “a masque, not an exam” (n. pag.). “What it asks of its audience,” he continues, “either in text or performance, is merely a willingness to watch and think and listen” (n. pag.). Both Bringhurst’s Preface and Sanger’s Afterword suggest that the written text is an insufficient transcription of the original performances, and both gesture to what has been lost in the translation from live production to printed text.¹⁰ Interestingly, they do not also ask whether anything has been added to *Ursa Major* in its printed form. Their comments prioritize the value of speech over writing, and this obscures the significance of yet another layer of linguistic “polyphony” in the text. The print versions of the masque transcribe its Cree lines in both West Cree Syllabics and the Roman alphabet, and the added visual presence of the syllabics adds much to the masque’s polyglot character. Whereas the audience at the *invisible ceremonies* performances would simply have heard Cree as it is spoken today, when the text’s readers see the language printed in two very different scripts on the page, they may be prompted to reflect on the complex political histories that have determined its written forms. The syllabics script that Bringhurst uses is a variation of a script invented by the Methodist missionary James Evans in the mid-nineteenth century, and that script was, as Bringhurst puts it elsewhere, “an agent of social change” (*Solid Form* 35). Its use in *Ursa Major* allows for a visual incursion of a history of contact between First Nations and European peoples, and this incursion, it is worth reiterating, can only occur when the words are perceived on the page rather than in the ear.¹¹

In his Preface to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst

presents a hopeful image of polyphonic poetry's ideal reader:

There is not much doubt that writing in multiple voices causes extra work for readers. Whether it yields anything useful in turn, each reader must decide [. . .] I hope, of course, that these polyphonic poems, like the others, will be freed from the prison of silence now and again. Poems live in the voice, not in the eye – with whatever intonations, emendations, repetitions, or deletions are chosen by the one who sets them free. But for poems with several voices, friends are also indispensable. One reader or speaker is not enough. (12)¹²

Although this passage provides yet another example of Bringhurst's characteristic prioritization of speech over writing, it is also an ethical injunction to readers, and is meant to bring Bringhurst's imagined audience into the sphere of his own ecological ethics by encouraging readers to create communities of oral attention amongst themselves. As *Ursa Major* and his other polyphonic poems suggest, knowledge and ethical engagement are not based on mastery, but should be founded upon the willingness, and, indeed, the desire, to listen.

III. Poetry and the Resonant World: Polyphony and Harmony in Jan Zwicky's "Lyric"

In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Socrates recounts to his interlocutor, Glaucon, the tale of a man named Er, who, after having been slain in battle, awakens twelve days later on his funeral pyre to inform the astonished gathering of what his soul had experienced as it travelled in "the world beyond" (614b-618b). Among the many sights Er saw, the most sublime was his view of the column of light that "binds the heavens like the cables girding a trireme and holds its entire revolution together," and from which hangs "the

spindle of Necessity, by means of which all the revolutions are turned” (616c). The whorl of that spindle is particularly noteworthy: its form is like a Matryoshka doll’s, with eight whorls in total “lying inside one another, with their rims appearing as circles from above” (616d). Er sees, in other words, the shape of this solar system (as it was then conceived), and he notices, furthermore, that “up above on each of the rims of the circles stood a Siren, who accompanied its revolution, uttering a single sound, one single note. And the concord of the eight notes produced a single harmony” (617b).

Plato’s description of the shape and sound of the universe would come to be known by Renaissance humanists as the “music of the spheres.” The trope figures heavily in Milton’s *Arcades*, whose primary singer, Arcadia’s Genius of the Wood, tells of how, “in deep of night when drowsiness / Hath locked up mortal sense,” he listens “[t]o the celestial sirens’ harmony” (*Major Works* ll. 60-63). The world is drawn “in measured motion” by their tune, he says, “which none can hear / Of human mould with gross unpurgèd ear” (ll. 71-73). As I observed in the Introduction, Zwicky’s philosophy, poetry, and poetics are deeply informed by this classical conceit. The poem “Prelude,” in which she speaks of the sound “the planet makes: a kind of music / just outside our hearing, the proportion / and the resonance of things” (*Forge* 24), is an excellent example in this regard. Unlike Lee and Bringhurst, whose forays into musical ekphrasis tend to suggest that attuning one’s ear to the polyphony of the world is one way to cultivate ethical responses to it, Zwicky does not treat harmony as though it signals solipsism or a threatening “homophonic sway.” This is not to imply that she is uninterested in exploring literary polyphony, but rather that, in her writings, striving for a “lyric,” harmonic “resonance” between perception, speech, and “the whole” is fundamentally more

important than the polyphonic interactions of individual voices. Her ecological and phenomenological perspectives are deeply informed by this position; as she states in *Lyric Philosophy*, “[a] true image moves in sympathetic resonance with a line of force in the deep structure of the world. [. . .] Lyric speech is an echo of the image of integration” (L219). Or, as she puts it in *Wisdom & Metaphor*: “[t]he world has patterns, of which our thinking is a part. It makes us feel good to experience these patterns: it is one way of coming home” (L114).

Zwicky writes in *Lyric Philosophy* that music “is the redemption of the human capacity for technology” (L266). In her philosophy, poetry, and poetics – which are inextricably intertwined – music and lyric poetry are analogous because both forms of composition recognize the inadequacy of language to comprehend the noumenal world. “Music is the pre-meaning of speech,” she writes; it helps to foreground human beings’ necessary role as “auditors” of the world (*Lyric* L265). She sets this view in contradistinction to the modern technological assumption that the world is “constituted of usable objects,” and that it is itself a “voiceless” object (L265). While the reader may hear an echo of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” here, Zwicky’s thoughts on the relation between music and modernity are not Heideggerian so much as they are classical. Although her arguments are not equivalent to Plato’s belief in the harmony of the spheres, nor to the Renaissance belief that music and dance should mirror the Christian God’s divine ordering of the heavens, Zwicky’s philosophy is essentially founded on humanistic conceptions of human beings’ participation in a larger order. She voids these conceptions of their metaphysical and religious content, however, and in this regard her thoughts on music’s relation to human ontology and morality are similar to

Bringhurst's.

Zwicky is a trained violinist and an erstwhile member of a string quartet, and so it is scarcely surprising that the music that influences her philosophy and poetry tends to be classical, and composed for string or wind instruments. Very rarely does Zwicky's musical ekphrasis take its cue from more modern or experimental forms, or the "wuthering" sounds of brass. A significant exception to this characteristic of her musical taste is her admiration for blues and jazz. In collaboration with Brad Cran, the onetime poet laureate of Vancouver, Zwicky has edited a poetry anthology entitled *Why I Sing the Blues: Lyrics and Poems* (2001), which gathers together a number of blues-inspired pieces by poets such as Adam Dickinson, Stan Dragland, Ross Leckie, Sue Sinclair, McKay, and Zwicky herself. *Why I Sing the Blues* was produced with an accompanying CD on which thirteen of the collection's poems are performed as songs, and on which Zwicky's own "Broke Fiddle Blues" is performed by the Bill Johnson Blues Band. The track features an opening harmonica melody accompanied by strong bass and guitar lines, and the eponymous broken fiddle of the lyric does not emerge until midway through the song – an entrance that puts aural focus squarely on the fact that its notes are played just slightly out of tune. In this case, the dissonances and arhythmic qualities that blues and jazz make room for offer Zwicky a way of exploring the relationship of "lyric" to ecological (and, characteristically, epistemological) collapse:

Got up this mornin,
 rain pissin down like some monsoon,
 Yeah, warm rain in January,
 just like that old monsoon.

They say the climate's changin,
 Babe, all my fiddle strings they're outta tune.

.....

Went down to the seashore,
 couldn't hear no rhythm in the waves,
 Mmmm down at the seashore,
 wasn't no rhythm in the waves.

Smart folk say meanin's dead,

They're happy shoppin on its grave. (*Robinson's Crossing* 21)¹³

The New Room (1989) is the first volume of Zwicky's poetry that includes an obvious foray into poetry structured as musical form. It also includes her only poem that approximates the shape of Bringhurst's polyphonic poetry – which is to say that it is scored for two or more voices, and is typeset as such. “Mourning Song” is one piece of a longer suite entitled “Seven Elegies,” which is dedicated to the memory of Zwicky's late father.¹⁴ An earlier, unnamed poem in “Seven Elegies” describes the hospital scene at the moment of the father's death, where the speaker and her mother sit together, the mother “speaking softly, gazing / at the armrest” when the moment of death slips by, almost unobserved (70). The shared grief of the mother and daughter in this scene suggests that “Mourning Song,” which is scored for two voices, may have been written with this pairing in mind. On the other hand, the poem itself gives no indication that this is the case; neither of its two voices suggests any definitive personality traits, and so both could

be spoken by anyone with some personal knowledge of grief. Indeed, this may well be Zwicky's point. In contrast to the intimately personal poems that precede it, "Mourning Song" represents a broadening out of grief. Rather than the confined space of the hospital room, its setting is the ocean – an age-old metaphor for birth, death, and infinitude.

The two voices of "Mourning Song" are printed separately on the first page of the poem, and are then printed again in proceeding pages, set typographically as they would be spaced when spoken together. Voice I begins with an invocation to the ocean, connecting it imagistically and metaphorically to the human body's saline currents of blood, and to the various species of creatures whose lives it shapes:

Great water, steel
 of the heart, heart's anvil,
 tangent to gull flight, the air-taut
 arc, shaper

of loons, and wood, the webbed
 black of a loon's foot,
 of trees, dead, the corpse
 we gather for the fire (72)

This voice concludes with an apostrophe to the ocean, tinged with both fear and a sense of belonging:

[. . .] Great water,

I am a stone. I am made

of water. My hands are blind with weight.

The tracks I follow

are the tracks of the moon. (72)

Like the female speaker in Bringham's "The Blue Roofs of Japan," Voice I of Zwicky's "Mourning Song" makes an explicit connection between the human body and a vast body of water – a connection that is both biological and metaphoric. Because the "great water" of the poem also represents death, the speaker's sense that she or he is both "stone" and "made / of water" poignantly articulates both the fear of death – the inevitability that a stone will sink in water – and the sense that one's death is always carried around as part of one's life (a sensation that Heidegger describes as the state of "being-towards-death"). Voice II of "Mourning Song" is a more reticent speaker, far more oracular and aphoristic than Voice I. Its lines begin:

Stone. Water. The blue mist

into which the dead walk, leaving us.

Not even the moon can embrace

the dark

drum of the wind. (72)

Whereas the lines spoken by Voice I chant repeated invocations to the "great water," the consciousness that shapes Voice II is darker, and more pessimistic:

To mourn is to be made

of water and stone, not to know

the path back to the self. We say

rocks rise from water: but see
 their hardened longing.
 They pour and pour down through
 the waves
 and do not move. (72)

It is possible to hear echoes of Virginia Woolf's lyrical prose in these lines – not just because the phrase “the waves” has been set apart in a line of its own, echoing the title of Woolf's multi-consciousness novel *The Waves* (1931), but also because of the sparseness of this voice, and its melancholy. When the lines spoken by Voice I and Voice II are subsequently put together, the effect is even more slowly-paced and echoic:

stone

Great water, steel

water

of the heart, heart's anvil,

the blue mist into which

tangent to gull flight, the air taut

the dead walk

arc, shaper (73)

“Mourning Song” attempts to capture a sense of human inclination towards ritual as part of the process of coming to terms with death. The presence of two voices not only

extends the work of mourning past the closed, intimate consciousness of the singular lyric ego in order to suggest a universal theme, but may also be understood as an attempt to counteract the overwhelming loneliness of being alone with one's grief.

Besides "Mourning Song," *The New Room* contains a number of the ekphrastic poems that characterize Zwicky's literary approach to musical form more precisely. Although the term "ekphrasis," when applied to poetry, more usually refers to poems that are inspired by plastic and visual arts, the definition serves equally well for poems that interpret (literally, that speak "from" or "out of") musical compositions. Musical ekphrasis is Zwicky's definitive poetic form, as in "Scola Gregoriana" – a poem shaped on the Gregorian school of chant, using both concrete and imagistic methods of response to the medieval style:

virga climacus
 clef flowers on the staff
 Swiss high invention this was
 the eye's first draught of song
 a jolt of inspiration at the well
 the freezing water tumbled
 hands seized
 voice (25)

The poem's opening lines both reflect and reflect on the visual appearance of notation written on a page, and although they are not meant to be spoken by multiple voices, their arrangement is reminiscent of musical notes drawn synchronically on a staff. Not incidentally, Zwicky has argued that "[w]hat allows *anything* to be genuinely

polyphonic” is “the conversion of time to space; to the extent that the conversion is successful, the piece *exists as* a synchronic unity, even though it perforce elapses in time as it comes to be” (“Being, Polyphony” 181). This emphasis on synchronicity is foundational in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* as well. In the latter, for instance, she writes that a crucial distinction between metaphor and quiddity exists in their respective relations to time. Whereas “[t]he phenomenological power of both metaphor and *thisness* derives from an awareness of an extreme tension between being and time,” she argues, “[t]*hisness* is the lyric comprehension of this tension; an instant of time opens to embrace the resonance of all that is; time is present, but suspended — held in the balance” (*Wisdom* L67).

Zwicky’s philosophy tends to collapse the workings of temporal and spatial aspects in the experience of metaphor because, for her, the multiple terms that contribute to a metaphor’s meaning strike the mind in the same way that multiple notes on a staff combine to create a resonant chord. In *Lyric Philosophy*, she speaks of an atemporality that is “characteristic of lyric thought” (L192), illustrating her point by reflecting on the structure of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1922), in which, she argues, the philosopher’s thought “does build, of course; but more in the way a walk through a house builds an impression of its inhabitant’s character — one could start in any room, proceed in any direction” (L192). She also attests that polydimensional form is “a prerequisite of integrity,” and that such forms represent bodies “capable of complex resonance,” indicating that lyric form is a response to lyric perception (L6). “Image limns the contours of lyric thought, says how things stand if the thought is true,” she writes (L238). “Music is the gesture of response to their so standing. It shows what is said”

(L238).

As in musically polyphonic compositions, not all of the individual voices gathered in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* agree with one another. Although many of the works to which Zwicky gestures are intended to augment the persuasiveness of her arguments, many others are meant to illustrate the traditions with which she disagrees, and at which her interventions take aim. It is unlikely that Zwicky herself would refer to *Lyric Philosophy* or *Wisdom & Metaphor* as polyphonic texts. Her comments elsewhere on the nature of polyphony indicate that she makes a crucial distinction between fragmented or abstracted voices, which do not lend themselves to polyphonic work, and “self-conscious lines or voices,” which do (“Being, Polyphony” 183). Although she does not refer explicitly to Eliot’s poetry and criticism, *The Waste Land* (1922) seems to be an occluded point of reference in her distinction between polyphony and fragmentation. From the tenor of her work, it is clear that the Modern poet’s “heap of broken images” (51) and fragments “shored against my ruins” (67) do not meet her standards for polyphonic composition. Keeping this distinction between assemblages of fragments and “self-conscious lines or voices” in mind, it is still possible to think of *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* as finely-orchestrated polyphonic compositions. The fragments assembled in these books do not exist solely as scattered pieces on the page, but are lines leading out to the texts and traditions from which they come. The books create intertextual polyphonies, the varying melodies of which extend beyond each collection’s covers (their individual *hors-textes*, as Derrida would say). For instance, where Zwicky transcribes a significant portion of Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966) in *Lyric Philosophy*, readers may “hear” the opening bars

of what would soon become the multitudinous symphony (Zwicky would say cacophony) of late twentieth-century traditions in deconstruction and poststructuralism. Much of Zwicky's work, particularly that which decries poststructuralism, relies on the reader's intertextual familiarity in this way. At no point in any of Zwicky's critical writings does she deliver a detailed account of her contentions with specific deconstructive or poststructuralist thinkers; instead, she uses iconic slogans, such as Derrida's "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," as metonymic stand-ins for much broader (and diverse) intellectual traditions. The quotations and illustrations that she assembles in *Lyric Philosophy* and *Wisdom & Metaphor* are not fragments that have been collected in order to demonstrate fragmentation itself; they are signposts, pointing the reader to wider discussions in which the books themselves take part.

Lyric Philosophy quotes from a number of Lee's writings on polyphony, as well as from his polyphonic poems.¹⁵ Zwicky uses a significant portion of Lee's "Polyphony," for example, to illustrate her argument that philosophy "assume[s] lyric form" when it is "driven by profound intuitions of coherence," and makes "an attempt to arrive at an integrated perception, a picture or understanding of how something might affect us as beings with bodies and emotions as well as the ability to think logically" (L68). As Lee puts it: "you can feel the heft of the cells in your arms, your neck, your sexual centre – you feel your hopes and forebears straining to reach those articulate gestures of being" (*Lyric* R68). Not surprisingly, Lee has written of *Lyric Philosophy* in turn. In doing so, he uses distinctly musical terminology to describe the book's structure. Although he does not use the word polyphony, it is likely that he has something of the sort in mind, for he refers to the book's incorporation of point and counterpoint, and theme and variations,

and admits to being curious about the possible directions the book's "lead voice" could take ("Music of Thinking" 35). While he sees the authorial left-hand voice of *Lyric Philosophy* as being "primarily discursive," and that of *Wisdom & Metaphor* as being "more aphoristic/oracular," Lee wonders: "what if the voice on the left swivelled around much more – becoming at time anecdotal, splenetic, statistical, hymnic?" (35). This is to say, Lee is interested in hearing what the authoritative left-hand voice of *Lyric Philosophy* would sound like if it were to explore the kinds of tonal and vocal modulations that inflect his own polyphonic poetry. He goes on to ask what might happen if Zwicky attempted to portray structures of disharmony as well as resonance. "She has thought long and hard about the jangled nature of the world," he observes, and then wonders: "are there structural innovations that flow from that? A music that mimes discord? partial resonance? incomplete or busted gestalts?" (35-36).

Aside from her anomalous forays into blues and jazz, Zwicky's poetry emphasizes harmony and resonance more than dissonance, and this emphasis on harmony can be understood as part and parcel of her efforts to emphasize classical forms of knowing the world in contradistinction to postmodern forms of epistemology and practice. In this regard, her thoughts on harmony are also laden with nostalgic connotations. In an essay on the poem "Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 155," Leckie has drawn out some of the ways in which Zwicky's ekphrasis works to recuperate nostalgia as a politically viable form of response to the world. The poem begins:

That we shall not forget to honour
brown, its reedy clarities.

And, though the earth is dying
 and the names of its diseases
 spread from the fencelines, Latinate:
 a bright field
 ribboned with swath. (13)

Unlike “Scola Gregoriana,” this poem does not attempt to mirror the notational structure of Brahms’ composition; rather, its ekphrastic methods are imagistic and syntactical. As such, its methods accord well with those of the symbolists – who, as Keith Alldritt notes, often derived their poetics from musical structures because they believed that music “supplies a metaphor of a way in which the gulf between human language and supra-human reality may be bridged” (23). Leckie’s essay on “Brahms’ Clarinet Quintet” highlights the fact that the poem is composed primarily of sentence fragments and dependent clauses (73). It makes almost no direct statements, he notes, but instead employs a grammar that draws attention to the syntactical pieces missing from the page. Leckie suggests that a great deal of the poem’s evocative power lies in its grammatical uncertainty, and he explores the subtlety with which it evokes the sound and nature of the clarinet. Its “verbal associations include ‘brown’ with the wood of the clarinet, ‘reedy’ with its reed, and ‘clarities’ resonates with the name of the clarinet itself,” he writes, while “‘reedy’ places us in marshland, and so we can associate brown with earth, as the common ground of soil that provides sustenance” (73). It is worth adding that the poem’s multiple “layering moments,” as Leckie calls them, may also be an attempt to respond to one of Wittgenstein’s pithy examples of the importance of ineffable knowledge. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), he suggests:

Compare *knowing* and *saying*:

how many feet high Mont Blanc is –

how the word “game” is used –

how a clarinet sounds.

If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third. (§78).¹⁶

Leckie’s reading of “Brahms’ Clarinet Quintet” suggests that in spite of deconstructive and historicist theorizations of nostalgia as “the mistaken desire for a metaphysical presence or a universal human nature,” and as “a form of escapism, a refusal to acknowledge the ways in which language and identity are culturally determined within the brutal dynamics of power,” the poem contains “the possibility of political engagement” (“Clarinet Quintet” 71-72). “Nostalgia has a form of truth,” he argues, “[i]t has a crucial resource, which is to open emotional life to the experience of loss, in this case the loss of the natural world” (72). That is, his reading suggests that the poem itself is an argument for the political viability of nostalgia in a world increasingly threatened by ecological collapse: “[i]t is by registering nostalgia, regret, and a sense of loss that we will be motivated to act and to believe in political action” (72).

In 2009, Zwicky published the chapbook *Art of Fugue*, whose title echoes that of Bach’s *Die Kunst der Fuge*. As is noted in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, the etymological roots of the word “fugue” suggest “flight,” and, in musical terms, “the word refers to a composition in which three or more voices enter composition one after the other, each giving chase to the previous voice which ‘flies’ before it” (Arnold 731). *Art of Fugue* consists of a suite of ten lyrics that should be read as component parts of one

polyphonic composition that operates, as in a musical fugue, on the basis of themes organized according to point and counterpoint. The suite not only explores a variety of ways in which individual selves are splintered and composed of multiple voices, it also speaks against postmodern and poststructuralist impressions of selfhood. As with *A Theory of Ineffability* (1981), *Lyric Philosophy*, and *Wisdom & Metaphor* – and, indeed, her entire critical oeuvre – Zwicky's *Art of Fugue* is persuasive in intent, and lyrical in form. Its argument, like those found elsewhere in the works of the *Thinking and Singing* group, is for a renewal of ways of knowing that its author perceives as having been occluded by modern and postmodern epistemologies.

The poems comprising *Art of Fugue* are frequently imagistic, as is characteristic of Zwicky's musically ekphrastic poetry. The first may be quoted in full:

A room, a table, and four chairs.
 The chairs are made of wood,
 the floor is wood,
 the walls are bare. But windowed.
 West light, east light. And a scent
 like cedar in the air. Here, the self
 will sit down with the self.
 Now it will say
 what it has to say. It looks
 into its own eyes. Listens. (3)

Setting aside for a moment the significance of the specific images that Zwicky chooses in this poem, one thematic element that is easily discernible is that of the splintered subject.

Reflecting on the subjectivities that flit throughout Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), Alldritt has observed that Eliot was "a poet of many voices, one who was sensitively aware of the fact of his several verbal roles and identities. To concede the authenticity of these verbal fragmentations of the self and at the same time to encompass them at the last in a unity was a necessary enterprise for which the quartet form could serve better than any other as model" (33). *Art of Fugue* demonstrates a similar enterprise at the heart of Zwicky's writing. "The self" can "sit down with the self" because "the self" is not a coherent whole – as in the structure of the musical quartet that informs both *Four Quartets* and *Art of Fugue*, the "self" is aware of its inherent multiplicity. As Zwicky writes in the suite's third poem: "[t]he self. They've told you / that there's no such thing. A truth. / But one of many" (5). Not incidentally, the third poem is also the place where the suite's most explicit engagement with poststructuralist thought surfaces. "Come," it continues,

from the other side, from underneath
 erasure, chew your way through light toward
 different intelligence: you find
 that something, even in the task of letting go,
 goes on, has been [. . .] (5)

Alluding distinctly to the mode of writing *sous-rature* that began with Heidegger and later gained significant prominence through Derrida's writings, this poem suggests that the coherent self that twentieth-century philosophy put "under erasure" as an untenable concept (albeit one that is, nevertheless, necessary) might be able to climb back up and out from under the line that struck it out. Its emphasis on "different intelligence" also harkens back to Zwicky's longstanding efforts to legitimize "subjective" knowledges in

the face of so-called “objective” forms of logic and analysis.

Returning to the chapbook’s first poem, it is evident from the beginning of the suite that *Art of Fugue* conducts an imagistic exploration of a human “home” and the human heart. In doing so, it subtly echoes Zwicky’s description, in *Lyric Philosophy*, of the way in which Wittgenstein’s thought builds like “a walk through a house builds an impression of its inhabitant’s character” (L192). The room with which the poem begins suggests both the poetic understanding of stanzas as “little rooms” and the biological configuration of the heart as a four-chambered muscle. Moreover, the compass-like symmetry of the space (the room’s windows face east and west) lends symbolic resonance to the scene. The four chairs may be arranged according to the points of the compass, and are probably positioned around the table itself – a figure that suggests the anticipation of conversation, or the domestic pleasure of sharing a meal with family or friends. The possibility of hospitable intimacy that they connote also gestures towards the historical beginnings of the musical quartet as a composition intended for performances in the home (Alldritt 31-32). Indeed, the four chairs may be waiting to be filled with the four players of a string quartet. Finally, light enters the room by the east and west, which indicates that the space is oriented towards the rising and setting of the sun – towards “the compass of / your death and birth,” as the poem’s final section suggests (12).

The suite’s second poem begins, “A table, four chairs, east light, west. This is your self” (4), and the fourth elaborates further: “West light, east light, a wooden table / and four chairs: multiple multiple multiple / are the voices of the inmost heart” (6). In the proceeding poems, Zwicky begins to stretch the image of the room/heart beyond its individualistic connotations, gesturing towards familial relations, human and otherwise:

Sister, brother, husband, wife.
 Father, mother, daughter, son.
 The compass points of human being
 and the being of red alder and
 the black-tailed deer. (6)

Two of the poems in *Art of Fugue* repeat the phrase “[t]he patterns in your life / repeat themselves” (7-8), echoing the repetitive patterns of a musical fugue. And, in keeping with the suite’s emphasis on recurrence, light resurfaces in the image of death at the close of the final poem:

The floorboards
 have been swept, the room
 is bare, square to the compass of
 your death and birth. You fold
 your hands, look up – it’s
 nothing: light
 ahead of you – (12)

Rather than the light of some heaven or great beyond, this seems to be the light of another sunrise, another turning of the wheel – a conclusion anticipated by the suite’s repeated returns to the room’s east- and west-facing windows.

As a composite piece, *Art of Fugue* undergoes new contextualization as a section of Zwicky’s *Forge* (2012), whose back copy alerts the reader to the fact that the book is “a set of variations that employs a restricted, echoic vocabulary” (n. pag.). The semantic implications of this vocabulary are intriguing, for, like a fugue, whose melodic lines

repeat each other with differences rather than developing wholly different phrases and voices, *Forge*'s echoic vocabulary is used to explore the ways in which minute details can be brought to light by foregrounding small differences within larger similarities. More so than any other one of Zwicky's poetry collections, *Forge* is informed by the kinds of erotic gestures that are evident in Lilburn's work – and that share, as previous chapters have indicated, close ties with the *Thinking and Singing* poets' respective approaches to ecological thinking and phenomenological attention more generally. *Forge* begins with an unnamed poem by Zwicky, whose speaker seems at first to be a lover declaring her or his unending love in the long tradition of hyperbolic fidelity (as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 116). The poem begins:

Take me to the place where I can climb no further.
 Leave me barefoot in the snow and mapless:
 I will come to you. Marry someone else, raise children:
 I will sleep each night, my shoulder
 to the weather-stripping of your basement door.
 Join the Foreign Legion, sell the farm,
 change your name and work the night shift at the HoJo:
 I'll remember. Throw it away:
 I'll find it. Throw it away and I will carry it [. . .] (5)

Given the philosophical focus developed throughout the ensuing poems in *Forge*, it is most productive to read this poem (and almost all of the other “love” poems in the collection) as having less to do with the romantic relationships of human speakers than with the philosopher's erotic desire – whether it be for truth, beauty, harmony, integration

with the world, or any of the longed-for goals that the poetics of the *Thinking and Singing* poets express. Indeed, the second half of the epigraph suggests this reading more clearly:

[. . .] In your greatest joy,

I will be the light before you. In your grief,

the air demanding entrance to your lungs.

Die, and I will be the fire you live in.

I will be the fire you made because you loved. (5)

The speaker of the poem seems in fact to be the personification of the “forge” named in the collection’s title: an inner flame of erotic desire kindled by the experience of love – even mundane, earthly love, which, as Socrates says in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, serves to remind the soul of the beautiful god it once followed in the heavens.¹⁷

Although it would demean *Forge*’s echoic endeavour if I were to chart and categorize the exact repetitions of its most preeminent words, it is possible to list some that surface frequently, such as: hope, absence, silence, music, wisdom, memory, sound, light, blindness, winter, autumn, spring, summer, breath, voice, earth, sky, water, flame, air, grief, shadow, heart, laughter, ringing, and gold. In short, *Forge*’s readers are confronted with scores of words that other contemporary poets might avoid for fear of their having been made too cliché or meaningless from overuse. Not only do the collection’s spare, repetitive invocations of familiar themes attempt to achieve a kind of harmonic effect, then, but they also attempt to draw the reader into the overall project, asking him to set aside whatever feelings he might have about the modern indeterminacy of words such as “love” and “beauty,” and to read sympathetically instead.

Notably, *Forge* also works to draw readers into Zwicky’s broader philosophical

project: her use of the words “lyric” and “domesticity” in the collection presumes that readers will either be familiar with her idiosyncratic use of those terms, or be willing to enter into her larger body of work in order to learn more about them. Take, for example, this passage from the poetic essay “Practicing Bach” (the suite of prose-poems and lyrics in which “Prelude” appears): “[w]hy is Bach’s music more like speech than any other? Because of its wisdom, I think. Which means its tempering of lyric passion by domesticity, its grounding of the flash of lyric insight in domestic earth, the turf of dailiness” (26).¹⁸ As in the poetics of Bringhurst and Pound, which Laurie Ricou describes as “systems of references, pointing excitedly to persons, places, things, and texts outside themselves, which the reader really is asked to investigate” (“Sunday Morning” 95), many of *Forge*’s poems act as “signposts.” Rather than pointing directly back to the “granular, fecund” world that Bringhurst describes in dialogue with Ricou, however (96), these poems direct readers towards Zwicky’s philosophical project, and – through its mediation – to the “world itself” as she conceives of it as a harmonic, resonant whole.

As I noted in the Introduction, Morton’s dark ecology rejects humanist conceptions of universal harmony, just as soundly as it rejects “sublime aesthetics of the awesome” (*Ecological Thought* 15, 35). Rather than seeking to recuperate visions of wholeness and substance, Morton suggests that ecological artists and thinkers should consider the productive potential of the fact that the world is less substantial, and less resonant, than it seems (35). Although he explores the relations between “ambient poetics” and music/sound, he emphasizes his interest in “sound in its physicality,” not “its symbolic meaning” (*Ecology* 39). His concept of the “timbral” interrogates how

ecological thinkers might consider the bodily distinctions between self and the world; the eardrum, he suggests, “separates the inside from the outside like a margin, and gives rise to resonant sound when struck” (40). Although Lee’s theory of “cadence” accords well with Morton’s “timbral,” the theories and praxes of musical form and ekphrasis that shape Bringhurst’s and Zwicky’s poetics do not. For both of them, the effect of “sound in its physicality” upon the individual human body is less important than the ways in which that body participates in extended communities of aural, vocal, and intellectual co-participation. For Bringhurst, polyphonic poems both reflect the structures of the “polyphonic” world, and encourage their readers to engage in that world more attentively. In Zwicky’s view, musical manifestations of “Romantic” nostalgia and harmony may help to encourage the “loving” attention that founds her entire philosophy, pedagogy, and poetics.

One thing that Morton, Bringhurst, and Zwicky do share is their conviction that the sounds made by non-human things in the world – whether the songs of bird and frogs, the harmonic vibrations of a tuning-fork, or the cacophonies of a lumber mill, construction site, or computer modem – are matters of integral concern for ecological (or “ambient”) poetics. This is a conviction that may be found in the works of Lee, Lilburn, and McKay as well. All five members of the *Thinking and Singing* group represent poetry as a fundamentally mimetic practice – one that must reflect and respond to the world’s crucial realities even as it attempts to imagine how those realities might be improved. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the epistemological, pedagogic, and aesthetic investments informing the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ works suggest that thinking, learning, teaching, reading, attending, and singing are communal

and *erotic* activities, collectively driven by the desire to know the “real.”

Coda

In *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Morton states bluntly that “[r]eading poetry won’t save the planet. Sound science and progressive social policies will do that” (60). In direct contravention of the words of Jonathan Bate, who, in *Song of the Earth* (2000), claims that “if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth” (283), Morton’s dark ecology suggests that the true ecological value of art is not that it helps human beings to make themselves at home in this world, but rather that it helps the world to appear uncannily unfamiliar, and therefore encourages its denizens to take ethical stances towards it – as though each of us were being confronted by a strange and unexpected other whom we never fully knew and could never fully know.

As the multivarious and many-faceted writings of Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky demonstrate, the *Thinking and Singing* poets attest that poetry can prompt both the poet and the reader along the path to defamiliarization, exploring the wild, the polyphonic, and the indescribable – but, they also affirm their conviction that value remains in holism, beauty, and imaginal homes as well. Although I have attempted to draw attention to some of the negative aspects of the *Thinking and Singing* poets’ “*oikos*”-poetics throughout this dissertation, I would like to conclude by asserting that, despite those moments in which politically pernicious aspects of humanistic and Romantic approaches to “home,” “other,” and “unity” prick in their writings like the nerves of a phantom limb, the poets have wished to foster humility rather than ascendancy in their poetic praxes.

One of the shortcomings of my decision to write of Bringhurst, Lee, Lilburn, McKay, and Zwicky as a quincunxial coterie is that considering five poets as a group inevitably pushes the work of other similarly-minded writers and scholars to the periphery. There are others whose works share many similarities with those of the *Thinking and Singing* group, and many of their names have appeared only briefly, if at all, within these pages. One could name Roo Borson, Brian Bartlett, Christopher Dewdney, Stan Dragland, Ross Leckie, Anne Simpson, and John Terpstra, and still this would be only a few. There is also a younger generation of poets and scholars who are beginning to take up the mantle of the *Thinking and Singing* group's ecopoetics, chief among whom are Warren Heiti and Sue Sinclair, who are among the poets' finest students and exegetes as well as being scholars and poets themselves. As critics and scholars continue to explore the works of the *Thinking and Singing* group, and those of the other poets, contemplatives, critics, professors, students, and ecological thinkers who populate Canada's academic and literary climes today, my hope is that we will not hesitate to examine the aesthetic and critical traditions that have at times seemed anathema to contemporary ecocritical work, but will tackle them head on, deepening our conversations about them by refusing to use terms such as "academic," "Romantic" or "postmodern" as shorthand for "ecologically impaired."

What can poetry do for a world in crisis? Along with the *Thinking and Singing* poets, I would suggest that, at the most basic and perhaps the most imperative level, it can help readers to cultivate attentive practices – whether they be directed towards the natural world, to one's "strange" neighbour, or to the linguistic media in which human beings communicate with one another daily. My own experience of the world to date

suggests that, for many, it is becoming increasingly easy to tune out whatever seems unappealing or unprofitable in the world at large. Distractions are easy to find, and reliable knowledge harder to attain. Poetry may not be able to save the earth, or the university, “or a goddamn thing,” as Al Purdy might say, but when readers step through works of art into symposia of thought and conversation, something important can, and should, begin.

Notes

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- ¹ McKay has suggested that Bakhtin's model of polyphony is on par with Levinas's model of ethics as first philosophy ("Raw thoughts" 3).
- ² When Bakhtin speaks of the direct word, he comprehends any number of traditions – linguistic, metaphysical, and religious – that understand human languages to be metaphysically connected to reality. Although he does not speak of Heidegger's theories regarding genuine poetry, his distinction between poetic and novelistic language speaks to Heidegger's conception of the poet's ancient linguistic power. As was noted earlier, in Heidegger's philosophy, poets are honoured with the ability to call what-is into sight; they bring about *alethia* through poetic language. For him, true poetry is neither a product of the imagination, nor a product of language, although "the linguistic work, the poem in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts" (*Poetry, Language* 70-71). In his philosophy, "language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time" (71). Heidegger's notion of *poiesis* is the sort of understanding that Bakhtin has in mind when he speaks of poetic language as "a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed" (*Dialogic Imagination* 286). This is why Bakhtin speaks dually of "poetry" and of what is "poetic in the narrow sense"; for him, these are two different concepts. Correspondingly, the concept of the "novel" signifies, for Bakhtin, much more than a sizable chunk of prose in which realistic characters lead realistic lives. In his writings, the novelistic genre is a genre radically in process. It is "plasticity itself" (39), the only genre truly alive, and the one that, by the force of its energy, affects all other genres with which it comes into contact. "In an

era when the novel reigns supreme,” writes Bakhtin, “almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized’”; drama, epic, and lyric poetry all take on its aspect, and whatever stubbornly preserves its old nature “begins to feel like a stylization,” one “taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic intent of its author” (5-6). From Bakhtin’s perspective, contemporary poetry is not really “poetry” in the metaphysical sense in which he uses the term. He would suggest that, having come into contact with novelistic discourse, most poets today would be better described as novelists of the highest Bakhtinian order.

- ³ As was suggested in the Introduction and Chapter 1, only a reductive representation of postmodern, deconstructive, and poststructuralist theories of language and ontology can argue that scepticism was the only result of the linguistic turn in the late twentieth century. Although they may certainly accommodate scepticism, these theories do not do so necessarily. For many thinkers, they facilitated new ways of conceiving ethical intellectual engagement, and just social action. Similarly, although Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque has lent itself to certain forms of artistic and theoretical playfulness, it has also been a means of exploring freedom from ideological constraint. In *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel’shtam, and Celan* (2000), Michael Eskin argues (as McKay also does) that Bakhtin and Levinas are comparably interested in matters concerning “human interaction, responsibility, alterity, and the social significance of language” (66). In Eskin’s interpretation, Bakhtin and Levinas are implicitly united in their respective challenges to Heidegger’s notion of ontology as first philosophy. As he understands their work, both Bakhtin and Levinas foreground ethics of dialogue and interaction rather than *Dasein*’s “originary

concern with itself” (71-72).

- ⁴ To some extent, my own reading of the “pedagogic” poem as “dynamite” in Chapter 1 is influenced by Lee’s formulation here.
- ⁵ Soon after the symposium was over, a critical “conversation” between Bringhurst, Kane, and Zwicky was published in the pages of *Canadian Literature*. First, the journal published Bringhurst’s essay “Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Canadian Literary Polyphony” (1997). Then, in a subsequent issue, it published responses to Bringhurst’s essay by Kane and Zwicky. Collectively, these three essays represent some of the most fruitful dialogue on the topic of literary polyphony that has been published in Canada since Lee’s own essays on the subject appeared in the 1970s and ’80s.
- ⁶ Bringhurst played the role of the Celestial Janitor, a guiding presence akin to Renaissance genii of the woods. As Mark Dickinson notes, he wore “a bright gold jacket, delivering his lines while pushing grapefruit-sized polyhedral crystals along the floor with a giant broom made out of an aluminium ladder” (*Notes* 138).
- ⁷ All parenthetical citations for *Ursa Major* refer to the 2003 edition of the script.
- ⁸ Bloomingfield relates very little about Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw, except to say that he was “a blind old man” who was said by his community to know “more traditional stories than any other member of the band” (1). Petulantly, he also adds that Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw, though “easily trained to dictate,” “could not be rid of certain faults”: for instance, his habit of “[simplifying] his stories or [omitting] portions of them,” and his refusal to dictate those portions despite telling Bloomingfield that he had omitted them (1). Bloomingfield appears not to have considered that Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw might

have thought of those portions as none of his (Bloomingfield's) business.

- ⁹ In the *invisible ceremonies* performances of "Ursa Major," Floyd Favel Starr read from Bloomingfield's translation of the story (Bringhurst, "Letter").
- ¹⁰ This sentiment was also expressed by an early review of the 2003 edition of the script, in which Iain Higgins observes that, although "there is no little pleasure to be got pouring over its complex text with its several alphabets," "it is almost impossible to know how such a polyglot polyphony might sound, and this beautiful book is limited by the lack of a CD recording of a performance" (42). "Here is a renaissance man resurrecting an aristocratic form," writes Higgins, "and drawing on some of its traditional features and values, yet also hybridising an already much-mixed thing. Such a feat ought to prompt lively discussion and debate, but how can it if no one can hear and see it alive, even if only in the ghostly traces of recorded form?" (42).
- ¹¹ Characteristic of work produced by either Bringhurst or Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press, the typographical decisions represented in *Ursa Major's* print forms are also noteworthy. An "epic" notes on type included in the final pages of both editions provide an indication of the thought that went into selecting the types for the various alphabets, and it also provides additional layers of typographic history corresponding to each choice. Bringhurst speaks elsewhere of typography's ability to represent polyphonic language, and the words he uses to describe Leonhard Fuch's *De Historia Stirpium* (1542) apply to *Ursa Major* equally well: "[m]any voices speak from the page at once. Each speaks a separate part, but they are graphically in tune. The effect is vigorous, harmonious, pluralistic, not chaotic" (*Solid Form* 45).
- ¹² I have not spoken "The Blue Roofs of Japan" or "New World Suite № 3" out loud in

the company of anyone other than myself, but I have three friends who were kind enough to spend an evening reading through *Ursa Major*'s parts with me, and that, as another fine poet might say, has made all the difference. For their willingness to help me hear the poem out loud, my thanks to Phil Glennie, Jenna Hunnef, and Stephanie Oliver.

- ¹³ In a review of *Why I Sing the Blues*, Kevin McNeilly notes that “[p]roblems with cultural difference, poetic idiom, and historical and racial identity emerge almost as a matter of course in work such as this, which derives its formal and thematic trajectories from the African-American folk blues” (185). He qualifies his own sense of unease with some of the vocal inflections present throughout the book’s poems, however, by noting that they “face up to an inevitable sense of not quite coming in from the outside, a sense of their own want” (185). Although “Broke Fiddle Blues” “uncomfortably parodies a rural Mississippi style (dropping g’s and copula verbs) that sounds more contrived than assimilated,” the poem, he argues, also refuses “intellectual imposture,” and “aspires to ground its language in a mix of spiritually rooted lyricism and deep ecology” (185-86). “Despite their problematics of race, history, culture, idiom,” he observes, “these poems, in Zwicky’s reading, have no choice but to seek out, from compromised and difficult positions, the dissipated authenticity of a blues of their own” (186).

McNeilly has also written of McKay’s poetry in relation to jazz, suggesting that “McKay is an improviser: not that his poems, despite their often brilliant and idiosyncratic immediacy, are merely unruly one-offs, but because his focus in these open-form lyrics is on the extemporaneous, on the complex torsions between the

verbal and the temporal” (“Word Jazz 4” 97).

- ¹⁴ Zwicky affirms in an interview with Anne Simpson that her “polyphonic” approach in “Mourning Song” was influenced at least in part by her long-time correspondence with Bringhurst. She indicates, moreover, that she is unconvinced that polyphonic musical structures can be translated into poetic form as Bringhurst would like, and suggests that “Mourning Song” was an “attempt to experiment with double voicing in a way that demanded less literally simultaneous semantic overlay” (“No Place” 118). In this regard, she calls the poem “a compromise with homophony” (118).
- ¹⁵ See sections R125, R189, R213, R341, R345, R383, R435, and R511.
- ¹⁶ Warren Heiti draws attention to the significance of this passage for Zwicky’s work in his essay “Ethics and Domesticity” (120).
- ¹⁷ A number of other examples in *Forge* support this reading of the philosophical role played by *eros* in the book – as, for example, “Diotima to Hölderlin: A Remonstrance,” in which Zwicky assumes the persona of Socrates’ visionary mentor in order to inveigh against masculinist modern cynicism:
- All of you, your pricks in the air,
wishing you were dead.
.....
[. . .] if you crucify desire,
you build inside yourself the wall
from which you’ll hang the body of the world. (45)
- ¹⁸ For further discussion of this issue, see my “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy: Jan Zwicky and Anne Carson.”

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