

## Listening at the Edge: Homage and Ohmage in Don McKay and Ken Babstock

Travis V. Mason

Volume 33, Number 1, 2008

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc133\\_1art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc133_1art04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

Mason, T. V. (2008). Listening at the Edge.: Homage and Ohmage in Don McKay and Ken Babstock. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(1), 77–96.

# Listening at the Edge: Homage and Ohmage in Don McKay and Ken Babstock

TRAVIS V. MASON

## Listening to Public Readings

Listen, slow one  
let me be your fool  
— Don McKay, “Song of the Saxifrage to the Rock”

WHEN I ATTENDED the Eden Mills Writers’ Festival on Sunday, 12 September 1999, Don McKay and Ken Babstock read during the same session. On a rickety, wooden stage overhanging a winding river, McKay read poems from his forthcoming collection *Another Gravity*. As he read his narrative poem about Icarus’s plunge into the Icarian sea, a couple drifted by in a canoe. A relative newcomer, Babstock introduced a field of listeners to his particular brand of east-coast vernacular, reading from his first collection in rhythms strangely relevant to the outdoor setting. At the time, I was unaware that McKay had edited Babstock’s *Mean*. (I might have found out sooner had I the means to purchase a copy during the festival. An undergraduate at the time, the best I could manage was a promise to Babstock after the reading that I would buy the book as soon as I got home.) Further, I had not yet read McKay’s afterword to *The Fiddlehead*’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue, published four years earlier, in which he alludes to the ongoing editorial project of listening and attention that translates, via publishing, into audience. He credits “the editorial attention, the listening, and the feedback provided by *The Fiddlehead* editors” for the journal’s lasting presence in and influence among a community of writers (“Common Sense” 233). As one of the journal’s former editors himself, McKay’s assessment seems not only valid but central in the way it continues to inform his role as editor for Brick Books and House of Anansi, and as mentor to numerous Canadian poets.

In his discussion of *The Fiddlehead's* community of writers and readers, McKay echoes Anansi co-founder Dennis Lee's focus in *Civil Elegies* on civil, urban existence, which Nicholas Bradley claims "provides an extraordinary representation of the city as part of the natural world and demonstrates a profound concern for the environmental health of both the city and the wilderness beyond it" (15). In much the same way Lee's poem "demands that urban spaces and damaged ecosystems be included in any study of representations of nature in Canadian writing" (Bradley 15), McKay's observant lyric and prose writings invite ecological readings, and his editorial role incites public awareness of a thriving poetry, a sort of verse ecology interested in public listening. His ideas about poetics — figured by prose writing about metaphor, aurality, poetic attention — and public life — figured by a post-publication listening audience — resonate generally with an environmental awareness and more particularly with a poetry that enacts what it scribes. If, as Bruno Latour argues in *The Politics of Nature*, there is "little point in differentiating between those groups of people who want to understand ecosystems, defend the environment, or protect nature, and those who want to revive public life" (8), then McKay enacts connections in his poetry between understanding ecosystems and reviving public life that parallel the connections he helps create between himself and the poets whose work he edits on the way to publication.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I turn an ear to these connections by focusing on how McKay develops both visual and aural linguistic tropes that record poetic responses to the non-human world, how he emphasizes the importance of a listening (public) audience and, by looking closely at Ken Babstock's first collection of poetry, how he extends his editorial influence to other poets. The eco-poetical content of the poems under scrutiny here, in other words, combines with certain linguistic tropes along with other poets' formal and topical attempts to construct a community, if not an ecology, of listening that has potential to inflect the way readers hear and think about contemporary poetry interested in humans' relations to the non-human world.

McKay recognizes in the editorial and publication process "a quality of attention that is the nerves and sinews of community," and wants to connect that attention to public life, wants to "call it *audience*" ("Common Sense" 235; original emphasis). His emphasis on the word "audience" resonates with his emphasis on a poem's sound and on how it enacts a listening that readers can identify and to which they can

attend. Poetry, McKay argues, is “written with the ear. If you don’t hear something, it’s not working” (“Appropriate” 47). And if it is not working — aurally, lyrically, ecologically — it ceases to be of any real use in a public context and fails “to make a place for nature within public life” (Latour 2): that is, in the relations between the world, the text, and the audience.

One of McKay’s projects as poet and editor concerns actively engaging with the tensions between language (i.e., poetry) and matter (i.e., poetic subjects). More specifically, McKay’s interests, at least as they play out in his own writing, lie in attempting to portray a humble relation between word and world that calls into question the colonial impulse of the (human) writer while simultaneously paying homage to the (non-human) others about which he writes. The measure of this relation, the distance between word and world that manifests itself in homage, occurs in a style of word play endemic to McKay’s oeuvre: metaplasms. Equal parts anagram, palindrome, and pun, metaplasms, according to cultural anthropologist Donna Haraway, refers to “a change in a word . . . by adding, omitting, inverting, or transposing its letters, syllables, or sounds” (20). In *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Haraway co-opts the term metaplasms to articulate a linguistic mode of rethinking humans’ relation to the non-human world and to refer to what she calls, in her own metaplastic moment, “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (20). Haraway’s attention to linguistic tropes in a book ostensibly about dog training implies a relation between metaplasms and listening toward which McKay gestures in his writing.

I use the term metaplasms in two ways: first, in the tropic sense Haraway acknowledges (from the Greek, *meta*, denoting change, and *plasmus*, to mould or form), to refer to what I recognize as particularly McKavian<sup>2</sup> movements between, for example, homage and ohmage, grave and gravel, loop and pool, thrush and thresh(hold), material and *matériel*; and second, in the biological sense Haraway neglects to acknowledge (which botanist J. von Hanstein developed into the German *metaplasma*), which refers to the granular, dead portion of cytoplasm within a cell.<sup>3</sup> This dual sense of metaplasms makes space for both the linguistic and the scientific in McKay’s poetry; but, more importantly, both McKay and Babstock insinuate the speakers of the

poems under discussion into the spaces between each sense of metaplasm, effectively positioning readers between the two meanings and inviting consideration of an active correspondence between the metaphorical and ecological aspects of their poetry.

More than simply isolating instances of McKay's and Babstock's linguistic manipulation to extra linguistic ends, I want to demonstrate how metaplasm operates at the level of poetics by emphasizing each poet's practice of both homage to an other and ohmage, a measuring of the language/music/rhythm of poetic attention. Where *homage* is a form of respectful remembrance of and address to another, *ohmage* is a form of measurement — literally of electrical resistance and metaphorically of another's resistance, conscious or not, to being made into metaphor. In other words, both homage and ohmage position poet and reader in relation to someone, or something, else: while the former acknowledges the fact of the relation, the latter attempts to measure the relation, to articulate linguistically a non-linguistic phenomenal relationality.

Integral to this eco-poetical project of measuring the distance between, for example, poet and bushtit is the production both of poetry and of a listening audience. Much as a reader scans a line of verse, or an electrician measures resistance in a circuit, to position herself in relation to the potential wisdom of the poet or the kinetic power of the current, respectively, McKay cultivates a humble listening (necessary to enact both homage and ohmage) by carefully mentoring other poets whose work will eventually reach a public audience. McKay cultivates the humility necessary to enact both homage and ohmage by carefully mentoring other poets in private as they revise poems that will eventually reach a public audience. McKay's relation to other poets' work, such as Dennis Lee's critical work on poetry and cadence and Babstock's poetry, are prime examples of how poetic lives are informed by and shaped within public culture, particularly that of book publishing and public readings. I am interested in following a trail of linguistic and scientific referents in McKay's writing toward something like an ecological poetics and in measuring the degree of editorial influence in Babstock's first collection of poetry. To this end, I borrow from Bruno Latour a desire to slow things down a bit: "not to save time, to speed up, to synthesize masses of data, to solve urgent problems in a hurry," but rather to spend time, to *slow down*, to *analyze* data, to pose urgent *questions* (6). Such an approach resonates nicely with poet and critic Brian

Bartlett's recent argument that McKay's poems "show what it means to be at once attentive and energetic, provoking and exhilarating. *Festina lente*. [Hurry slowly]" (129). Fittingly, whereas I began this discussion by acknowledging an act of public listening, I begin my close reading of McKay's poetry by looking paratextually at public (i.e., published) acknowledgement of private listening.

### Listening to Private Readings

the wise one,  
the one who will teach me to desire  
only whatever happens

— Don McKay, "Philosopher's Stone"

In *Camber: Selected Poems, 1983-2003*, McKay acknowledges that he has had "excellent readers" attend to his work over the years and thanks them "for this long-term listening" (205). This is not a passive listening, not listening without its attendant thinking and response, but listening in a way that McKay enacts it on the page, as if ear were itself a verb, on the edge between sound and the brain's interpretation of it. Four of the readers he thanks are part of an ongoing conversation with each other and with him about poetry and thinking in a Canadian context. Listeners all, each of McKay's readers sets before himself or herself different tasks: Tim Lilburn of listening to the animal, the land, and the world; Robert Bringhurst of listening to poetry and story in human and non-human language; Dennis Lee of listening to the cadences of civil disarray and of "body music," which he clarifies (in characteristically obtuse fashion) as the way a poem "tries to recreate the cadence of how things are, through the nitty-gritty of craft" (197); and Jan Zwicky of listening to classical music and the wisdom of "lyric philosophy," a philosophy that depends upon an understanding of lyric "as a fundamentally integrative mode of thought" and thus, "at root, a flight from the condition of language" (Zwicky n.pag.). This is, admittedly, an incomplete and simplified litany of what these poets listen to in their poetry; nevertheless, each poet informs McKay's task of listening to what philosopher and anthropologist David Abram calls the more-than-human world, a listening that avoids the proselytizing often associated with a poetics or a criticism connected to environmental concerns (e.g., statements that ecocritics *should* enact interdisciplinarity, or that literary criticism in general *should* pay more attention to place). Wary of such

proselytizing tendencies, I offer not a *modal* reading, then, but a *model* of reading that combines listening with metaplasms, a word about words that retains traces of both the biological (think “neoplasm” or “cytoplasm”) and the poetic (following the etymology of *plasm*).

As McKay has benefited from readers attending to his work over the years, so have others benefited from his listening. In his foreword to *Don McKay: Essays on his Works*, Brian Bartlett compiles a list — “far from complete” — of twenty-seven poets who thank McKay in the acknowledgements section of their books, including Ken Babstock, Roo Borson, George Elliot Clarke, Barry Dempster, Sue Goyette, A.F. Moritz, Sue Sinclair, John Steffler, and Anne Simpson (9-10). Looking forward to a time when McKay’s “role not only as poet, but also as editor, mentor, and friend” will inform an “appreciation of McKay’s place in Canadian poetry,” Bartlett suggests that McKay “may be the most valued poetry-editor in Canada” (9-10). Of all the thanks to McKay I have read, Babstock’s acknowledgement at the end of *Mean* offers perhaps the richest way in to a consideration of editorial presence: “My editor, Don McKay (“UncleLear”), deserves all the credit for transforming a bunch of almost-poems into a book” (83). Babstock signals at least three things about McKay’s editorial relation to *Mean* when he names his editor “UncleLear.” First, I read this as Babstock’s marking the obvious age difference between McKay (b. 1942) and him (b. 1970) combined with the Shakespearean connotations of King Lear as tragic hero, as madman, as blind poet<sup>4</sup> — as someone, in short, who occupies a place of dubious, because human, wisdom gleaned from decades of reading and experience. Second, and this is perhaps a more fittingly aural signal, I read Babstock acknowledging McKay’s keen editorial *ear*; he is Uncle Ear, the one who actively listens. Third, I read, or rather I hear, something that requires a trick of metaplasms, the dropping of two letters, the slurring of a tri-syllabic term into a bisyllabic one so that UncleLear becomes, paradoxically, Unclear. That Babstock’s naming communicates all three is germane to my metaplastic argument: by simply removing the en-space between Uncle and Lear, Babstock simultaneously pays homage to his editor and performs an act of homage, effectively measuring the impact — influential and paradoxical — McKay’s listening had on his first collection.

An editor’s active listening can be both attentive *and* unclear; the

contradiction, the lack of clarity reminiscent of metaplasms in biological terms, functions to help negotiate the tensions between listening with the ear and on the page, between the clarity of editorial attention and the opacity of linguistic gesture. Haraway has something similar in mind when she uses metaplasms to express an attention to the more-than-human world that resists conventional assumptions about human/non-human relations. By extension, metaplasms, in both the tropic and biological senses of the word, enables McKay's notion of *matériel* to develop as a working — as distinct from fixed — component of his ecological poetics.

First articulated in McKay's 1997 collection *Apparatus, matériel* reappears in 2001's *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*. In editing and republishing his own work, McKay proffers, metonymically, a series of metaplastic transpositions, a cumulative set of ideas, images, and words whose meanings might otherwise have remained at the bottom of the metaphorical pot. Instead, McKay's editorial hand has recontextualized and reconstituted them, a wooden spoon breaking through the film covering day-old stew to stir up the contents. *Birding, or desire*, for example, which was nominated for the Governor General's Award and awarded the Canadian Authors' Association award in 1983, reprints poems from all four of McKay's previous collections, none of which were nominated for such prestigious national prizes. Similarly, in *Vis à Vis*, McKay reprints "Stretto," the final section of the poem sequence "Matériel," with no changes to the words or line breaks, though he alters its layout significantly: while the earlier version is on three pages, the later takes up five, one for each subsection. (Subsequent reprintings in *Camber: Selected Poems, 1983-2000* and *15 Canadian Poets X 3* (edited by Gary Geddes) retain the more condensed layout of the earlier version.) *Matériel*, defined as the material portion of art and as a term for the collective machinery and supplies for the army, becomes for McKay an extreme version of death: "Unmortality Incorporated" (*Vis à Vis* 48). Thus, the site of the first hydrogen-bomb test, the Pacific atoll Elugelab, is decimated and has "No shadow. All day / it is noon it is no one. All day" (48). The metaplastic play between "noon" and "no one" here recognizes *matériel* as a severe form of biological metaplasms: not simply the dead, granular material that takes on meaning based on its negative relation to life, to protoplasmic transparency, but the human "rage for immortality" that results in the "denial of death altogether, as in the



case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition” (*Vis à Vis* 20). This active denial is the supreme marker of Western civilization’s arrogance; it is anti-ecological and anti-poetic in the way it prevents organic beings from participating in a vital process of de- and recomposition via which, as poet Anne Wilkinson writes in “Nature Be Damned” (121-23), the “feaster is reborn / The feast, and feasted on.” In “Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet” (*Deactivated* 33-73), McKay extends his thinking about *matériel* to consider the distinction Simone Weil makes between destruction (“to make something created pass into nothingness”) and decreation (“to make something created pass into the uncreated”). A fuller examination of this recent shift in McKay’s poetics unfortunately falls beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Reflecting a progression toward a decreative linguistic moment, “Stretto” ends with an appropriately incomprehensible elegy that articulates the inarticulable by mangling “the English tradition and language” (*Vis à Vis* 49). McKay deploys metaplasm to reduce the words of Wordsworth (“wandering lonely as a clod”) and Keats (“gnash this: beautiful tooth, tooth beautiful”) to revisionary, elegiac gobbledegook alongside such harsh indictments as “die nacht ist die nacht. How many fucking times do I have to Fucking tell you,” and “We bombs it back to square one, o babes in arms, we bombs square one” (49). He articulates in “Stretto” an ecology that asks for awareness of artificial processes at work — toolmaking, language — without condemning them outright, and laments the utter loss of things into the barren realm of *matériel* where, he repeats in conclusion, “*Die Nacht ist die Nacht*,” an allusion to Paul Celan’s “Die Jahre von Dir zu Mir” (26-27).<sup>5</sup> The night, McKay seems to suggest in the atrocity-filled “Stretto,” is *always* the night; the German *Die*, furthermore, visually echoes the English *die*, which is precisely what “energy-driven multi-nationals like ‘Unmortality Incorporated’” (Sinclair 107) prevent from occurring.

### Thresholds, Thrushes

The thrush’s song contained harmonically unrelated notes that overlapped in time.  
— Don Stap, *Birdsong*

The utter incomprehensibility of *matériel* makes McKay’s more straightforward nature poetry — the lyrics, eclogues, and songs — seem less incommensurate with the world he presents on the page in language,

despite the paradox he is at pains to acknowledge in his prose. In *Vis à Vis*, he argues that “A poem, or poem-in-waiting, contemplates what language can’t do: then it does something with language — in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise” (87). McKay’s “Songs” in homage to some of the more-than-human creatures that inhabit his poetry — “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush,” “Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush” (*Apparatus* 26, 27); “Song for the Song of the Coyote,” “Song for the Song of the White-throated Sparrow” (*Another Gravity* 9, 33); “Song for the Song of the Chipping Sparrow,” “Song for the Songs of the Common Raven,” “Song for the Song of the Fallen Leaves” (*Strike/Slip* 25, 27, 61) — reveal a reverence for the song and its singer, and they attempt to respond with an appropriate poetic gesture. But each song is also inevitably an appropriation, albeit one “with the current reversed” (*Vis à Vis* 99); the poet, aware of the perils of appropriation, pays attention to the coyote or the wood thrush and enacts a listening on the page, reversing the popular ideological current regarding the environment by bringing readers closer to a particular species and inviting them to know that species beyond (perhaps even prior to) a conventional symbolic entity. He accomplishes this by combining his acute metaphoric acumen with an attention to biological detail that gestures toward natural history.

One of McKay’s early poems, “Listen at the Edge” (*Birding* 123), succinctly posits listening on a threshold between human language and the more-than-human song the poet can only gesture towards onomatopoeically. Both poet and reader stand “At the edge of firelight” where

every word is shadowed by its animal, our ears

are empty auditoria for  
scritch scritch scritch rr-ronk the  
shh uh shh of greater

anonymities the little  
brouhahas that won’t lie still for type  
and die

Despite all the words humans have for birds and mammals, despite “the information [in] our voices,” plenty of space remains in our imaginations for the actual beings and the songs they sing, those “little / brouhahas that won’t lie still for type / and die” (123). In this poem, I identify a strategy to begin measuring a McKavian resistance to the poststructur-

alist orthodoxy “to doubt — at least in the seminar room — that there is a world which precedes or exists outside the text” (*Vis à Vis* 62). If McKay and Zwicky and Lilburn are listening at all, they are listening to what language represents: “no language is thinkable that bears no relation to the world” (Wittgenstein qtd. in Zwicky 29). Elsewhere, Zwicky extols the role of imagination in seeing what is there, in “seeing-as”; however, “From this,” she argues, “it does not follow . . . that the world ‘exists’ only in our collective cultural mind” (25). The world exists without human language or understanding. We did not construct that yellow poplar or that barn swallow. We named them, and by having so named, we have measured their existence in relation to us.

“Listen at the Edge” ends with a short line describing bird and animal songs as “ohms of speech” (*Birding* 123). If poetic attention is “a recognition and a valuing of the other’s wilderness,” if it enacts a form of homage vis-à-vis the other, the metaplasmic shift from homage to ohmage enables poetry to gesture — without fear of failure — toward the eros of measurement, the desire to know, and so to name, the other (*Vis à Vis* 28). But because ohmage originates in this context with non-humans, the current in the human/non-human relation is seemingly reversed. However, McKay’s poetics is not as evolutionary or revolutionary as Michael Pollan’s argument, in *The Botany of Desire*, that “it makes as much sense to think of agriculture as something grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees” (xxi). McKay’s poetics reflects, more accurately, a mode of engagement put forth by J.M. Coetzee’s alter ego Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, a poetics that “does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of engagement with him” (51). McKay’s record of engagement with non-humans, for all his respectful observation and homage, is also a record of the poet’s active listening, as distinct from his passive hearing.

In “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush,” the poet listens to “the single note” and observes “its / / un-inflected but electric” line (*Apparatus* 26); the poet, in turn, renders his song as a single sentence broken into single-line stanzas to show not only what he hears but how he listens. The spaces between each line represent the pauses which follow each of the thrush’s single notes and work with the lines themselves to create a ruled look on the page:

once more on a lower or a higher pitch and  
 in this newly minted  
 interval you realize the wilderness  
 between one breath  
 and another. (26)

In this homage to the varied thrush, the electric energy of the thrush's breathing is itself a form of homage, a way of measuring the thrush's song and its imprint on the poet's listening. The addressee (the "you") is both an implied listener and the varied thrush himself. In the first instance, the listener learns to appreciate the capacity of the thrush's song to, as Sue Sinclair suggests, "escape the steamroller of domestication" (108) and retain its wilderness, by which McKay means "not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis à Vis* 21). In the second instance, the thrush, simply by singing his song, makes "the wilderness / between" breathe *real*, makes it matter, makes it mean the way barbed wire in another McKay poem makes "the meadow meadow" by creating boundaries between cultivated and uncultivated land.<sup>6</sup>

McKay's poet is not always comfortable with his poetry, however, because he is aware of the problematics of reference once linguistic composition begins, "that problematic interface between language and the world" ("Appropriate" 46). And yet part of McKay's ecological project attempts to return poet and reader alike to the trail, "to the grain of the experience," prior to its realization as text (*Vis à Vis* 27). McKay articulates this paradoxical position perhaps no more clearly and concisely than in "Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush," when he writes that "Poetry / clatters" (*Apparatus* 27). Positioned as it is on the page facing "Varied Thrush," "Wood Thrush" certainly *looks* more clattery than the former poem with its full stops ("Varied Thrush" unfolds as one full sentence) and its condensed spacing on the page. Moreover, "the old contraption pumping / iambs" in the poet's chest "is going to take a break / and sing a little something" instead of relying on the strictures of conventional metre (27). The poet's iambs here beat as a heart beats and exceed the limits of measurement, as if elastic, plastic, clattery. "The Wood Thrush can sing a duet by itself, using two separate voices" (Greenewalt qtd. in Gill 240), so instead of hearing a *single* note, the

poet acknowledges the avian polyphony and his “ear / inhales the evening.” Subsequently, in the face of such acoustic accomplishments, “only the offhand is acceptable” as a human response (McKay, *Apparatus* 27). Reviewing *Apparatus* in *Books in Canada*, Richard Greene claims that “To declare one’s offhandedness in a self-conscious manner is an obvious contradiction, and a pretentious one” (27). Greene, it seems to me, is not paying attention in the McKavian sense. If he were to step outside language for a moment and listen, he might realize that the declaration of Poetry’s offhandedness in this particular context is not pretentious at all. Compared to the wood thrush’s vocal abilities, after all, mere poetry clatters *at best*. Consequently, McKay sets the offhand — the impromptu and distinctively *unpretentious* — against Poetry, capitalized here not incidentally, as a way to represent and value the more-than-human world with a measure of humility. Far from being idealized by McKay as the *best* way to represent non-humans, Poetry is clearly, in its orderly, structured manner, *unacceptable*, perhaps even *unmortal*. Instead, McKay’s verse, seemingly free yet inflected and infected with traces of pentameter — “The old contraption pumping” — pays homage to the wood thrush’s articulation of a “place / between desire and memory,” a place humans “can neither wish for nor recall” (27). It is beyond human language, and hence beyond such formalized modes of address as iambic pentameter and *Books in Canada* reviews.

### Measuring Movement

A poem thinks by the way it moves.

— Dennis Lee, *Body Music*

Like McKay, Ken Babstock is capable of enacting a form of listening on the page. In “Measures,” the final section of *Mean*, Babstock writes a version of Lee’s body music by performing both homage and homage. Though less interested than McKay in writing songs for the songs of birds or coyotes, Babstock does attend to more-than-human others in ways that are mindful both of the other’s autonomy and what McKay, in *Vis à Vis*, calls the “abject thinness of language” (64). Babstock’s poems embody a McKavian poetic attention unique to nature poets who, instead of “avoiding anthropocentrism [,] . . . enact it, thoughtfully” (*Vis à Vis* 29).

“Measures” begins with “Wolf,” the opening lines of which clearly establish a difference between speaker and wolf, while introducing a

thematic energy each character seems to share: “Tearing at us flat out, ears pinned back / shoulders like pistons punctuating air” (53). The wolf that Babstock’s speaker and companion witness is working hard, “sprinting mid-road toward town,” a corporeal, electric engine (53). Wolf, here, thinks by the way he moves, the way a poem thinks (Lee 197); his “head bob[s] up, mid-run, to catch / a glimpse of barbed fence over the flags / of ditch cabbage” (Babstock 53). Again it is instructive to turn to Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* for Elizabeth Costello’s reading of Ted Hughes’s jaguar poems (“The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar”). Readers come to know the jaguar, according to Costello, “not from the way he seems but from the way he moves” (Coetzee 51), much the way Babstock’s speaker knows the wolf running along the highway. Both “poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body,” and in so doing to pay homage to beings to whom we are other (Coetzee 51). So, although Babstock uses human language to write poems about, or in the voice of, wolves and lichen, the attention he pays in the act of writing is not centered egotistically on himself, on the poet. Rather, he traces the kinetic movements of more-than-human beings in order to better understand the world both he and they inhabit.

Unlike Hughes’s jaguars, which are strategically placed behind bars in a zoo, Babstock’s wolf has “Split / from the pack” and must adapt, must negotiate ditch cabbage *and* barbed fence, recognize the smell of gasoline mixed with the “plush, casual / smell of plowed land” while “scanning / the roadsides for a way / out of the valley” (53). The line break between “a way” and “out of the valley” sends the reader’s attention in two directions. Syntactically, the line suggests the wolf is looking for a way out of the valley “to aged / slopes”; looking, perhaps as we tend to imagine all animals look, merely for a way of surviving. But the line break also suggests an end in itself; if that is the case, the reader’s eye glances back to the previous line for context and sees the wolf is simply “scanning / the roadsides for a way.” While this reading might equally lead one to imagine the wolf attempting to survive, the verb “scan” adds a poetic resonance to the wolf’s activity, as though he were scanning the world the way you or I might scan a line of poetry. Movement is as essential for eyes to see as it is for wolves to survive; stasis means a sort of death for both, a stasis that will lead, inexorably, to annihilation of the world or of the self. Clinical tests have shown that “The human eye likes

to dart about, requiring frequent changes to maintain its flow of information” (Otis 1). Certain of the eye’s cells respond only to movement — horizontal, vertical, diagonal — “but there are no cells that respond to a uniformly” static image “with no movement, no edge, no borders” (Otis 1). In other words, “To create meaning . . . the eye needs borders,” and so does Babstock’s wolf — to escape to higher ground after having been hemmed in, to escape to a place where “shreds of winter slide / slow from the tips / of the earth” (53). The tension in the poem between movement and stasis is reconciled by a contemplative stillness Tim Lilburn refers to as “the slight drag of discernment” (“Walking” 41). If movement is necessary for understanding (for *seeing*) the wolf, it can occur in a moment of stillness that inheres in a McKavian act of attending to the world beyond language.

Make no mistake, “Wolf” is a poem written by a human “we” *about* an animal “other”; but it also enacts an attention *to* the “other” — in this case a wolf — a listening that pays homage to the “other’s” Being. For McKay, “this listening involves hearkening both with and beyond language, in somewhat the same way a paddle attends to the river and conveys its energy to your wrist, even as it helps you across” (*Vis à Vis* 66). If the paddle in McKay’s analogy is the tool by which a body moves across a threshold — whether a river or a roadside, a doorway or a stanzaic break — it “steer[s] by” its “kinaesthetic ear” (Lee 202). In “Wolf,” Babstock’s poet-speaker simply observes the wolf, scanning the world as he does. In “Wolf Tells,” though, wolf is the speaker: “High meadow mind, I am / scree-slope, dreaming. I pulse / / and the hidden population of rodents sleeps to this rhythm (54). The choice of verbs positions the wolf as a conscious hunter and the rodents as unconscious prey; he dreams while they merely sleep. He is as shifty as a mass of loose rocks at a cliff’s base and, in search of some “note” of “flesh opened,” embodies a pulsing cadence not unlike the notes of McKay’s thrushes (54). In “Wolf Tells,” wolf *is* movement. He has come to the meadow “to pulse through / this new, dead stillness and take / it down” (54). Babstock gives poetic voice to the wolf in these poems. Ohmage and homage merge as the “other’s” strategy for scanning the world — for measuring the distance between living energy and “dead stillness” — is performed in the poet’s respectful attention to him.

Continuing to enact a particular listening, Babstock reveals an attention to subtle, slow movement in “To Lichen” (56). Again an observer,

the poet describes lichen as “Something’s remains refused / by death, learning to spread” (56). Lichen’s movement is indicative of the way Lee wants to read free-verse poetry; not as a linear movement but as a dissemination in all directions, a stretching across space and time that also enacts a listening, as in these lines that further describe lichen as “Scrapings off rock’s / inner ear that’s heard epochs / in sound wave striating a sheer / face —” (56). The parallel streaks — i.e., striations — of epochal time that lichen articulates while spreading out parallel Lee’s “forward/lateral action” which “occurs when one energy propels the poem down the page — and gets . . . transected, deformed by a series of lateral gusts. . . . The effect is to make us experience two or more energies at once” (216). Outside language, energies are rarely experienced singularly. The “sound wave striating a sheer / face,” furthermore, echoes the wolf’s identification of himself as “scree-slope,” effectively drawing an analogy between wolf and sound wave. Wolf’s howl, as it resonates across the meadow toward the town’s “Storm of sound” (54), echoes “out of the valley” to mingle with “lichen-hooded / granite” (53). Paradoxically, the poet requires language to reveal his attention to what lies beyond language. This paradox further enacts an ecology of listening that incorporates the poem’s auralty, nurtured at least nominally by McKay’s editorial ear, with the poem’s eventual public/published existence.

### Measuring Moon

Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world’s ability to manage and understand itself. It is the language of the world: something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention.

— Robert Bringhurst, “Poetry and Thinking”

Continuing his attentive listening in *Another Gravity*, McKay offers “Song for the Song of the White-Throated Sparrow” and “Song for the Song of the Coyote” (33, 9). In “White-Throated Sparrow,” McKay again attends to an interstitial space, but the articulation of the threshold is at once more overtly musical and more conceptually concrete. The poet calls the white-throated sparrow’s “high, pure whistle *sooo seeeeeee dididi dididi dididi*” (Sibley 494) “the obvious arpeggio,” a musical chord whose notes are performed in rapid upward succession (*Another* 33). Just as the song of the wood thrush realizes a threshold in the form



of “some back porch,” the white-throated sparrow’s song articulates a version of sky, “a way to pitch a little tent in space and sleep / for five unnumbered seconds” (33). The five seconds resonate with the poet’s earlier distrust of iambic pentameter in “Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush,” while the little tent pitched in midair is a doorway with room for the poet’s imagination, “a nook of reverie,” a listening post (*Vis à Vis* 72).

In “Song for the Song of the Coyote,” the poet “listen[s] in the tent, [his] ear / to the ground” as the coyotes sing to the “thin / used-up light” of the land: “Riverless. Treeless” (9). The coyotes’ song “articulate[s] the buttes and coulees and dissolve[s] / into the darkness which is always listening” and which “Echoes” tremulously in reply (9). The description of the land, according to the coyotes’ song and its echo, is more moonscape than landscape, an otherworldly place “that can only wear its scars, every crater etched”; indeed, the poem opens with an address to the coyotes as “Moondogs, moondogs” (9). As one of the central thematic figures of *Another Gravity*, the moon represents a McKavian mode of scanning the world that belies the notion of language as a purely human construct. Acknowledging the limits of language while working *with* language, McKay traces the etymology of “moon,” revealing how humans have developed a syntax of measurement, how something outside the text informs the text. In “New Moon,” (38), he provides a partial etymology: “*mene* (Gk.) whence menses, month, the first long / measure” so that finally “metre, as measure / enters the sentence” (38). The measurement initiated by the word moon is a measurement informed by cyclical phases of the moon, a measurement of time, the “slow pulse” of which recalls the breathing electric energy of birds, or the pulsing rhythm of a wolf sprinting down the middle of a road, to whom McKay’s and Babstock’s poems pay homage.

This measurement of the distance “between thought and things, or words and world” (Critchley 185) — what I have been calling ohmage — represents phenomenological poetic experience; it functions both as symbolic gesture (metaphor, homage) and as realistic gesture (humility, haecceity). For McKay and Babstock, as for Wallace Stevens, “the poet must not lead us away from the real” (Critchley 186) even as we — readers, poets, critics — are acutely aware of “the real” as enigma. The paradox is neither debilitating nor simplistic, but rather creative and complex: ecocritics with an eye to both the phenomenal world in itself

and the way in which humans perceive phenomena linguistically are learning to sing, as the wood thrush does, two songs at once when writing about such poetry. When I write of an ecology of listening, I want to invite readers along a trail of referents that include Barry Commoner's first law of ecology — "Everything is connected to everything else" (29) — as well as some version of the standard scientific definition (i.e., the study of the relationships between living organisms and their biotic and abiotic environment). So, the canoe — it could have been a goose, it could have been an old tire — that floated by while McKay was reading "Icarus" at Eden Mills in 1999 connects as much to a reading of Babstock's "Measures" and Lee's *Civil Elegies* as it does to a reading of the behaviour and ecology of the tundra swan or kingfisher McKay writes into the poem.

More and more poets and scholars are listening to "the language of the world" (Bringhurst 162) and making connections between poetry and science, between nature and culture.<sup>7</sup> One way to continue this work is to slow down and pay attention to the myriad connectivities we might not be compelled to notice. Otherwise we risk ending up like the speaker in "Wolf" who has to "turn in [his] seat to watch / the blur of hind legs" disappear into the poet's imagination, a missed opportunity for seeing the wolf as a wolf, for a change (53). As Latour argues, "In order to force ourselves to slow down, we will have to deal *simultaneously* with the sciences, with natures, and with politics, in the plural" (3). The simultaneity and the plurality of Latour's argument point to a problematics that McKay's poetry is equipped to negotiate. That Latour neglects to include poetry, or the arts for that matter, in his project of bringing the sciences into democracy, speaks volumes of the continuing need for sharing ecological consciousness in social spheres that are plural: both public and private, both literary and scientific, both linguistic and kinetic. It seems to me that McKay, through his listening and his writing, through his editorial and his metaplasmic relations, enacts such a plurality while slowing his readers down and offering various trailheads waiting to be explored.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank the following readers for their helpful comments and support at various stages: Nicholas Bradley, Keven McNeilly, Maryann Martin, Laurie Ricou, and Duffy Roberts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Both “public” and “publication” share an etymological link with the Latin *publicus*: to make public, of the people.

<sup>2</sup> I have coined this form of the adjective (as opposed to McKagian, for example) to refer to a poetics or aesthetics that is particular to McKay. I like the echo of “avian” in McKavian—its musical and topical resonance with McKay’s poetic interests.

<sup>3</sup> In biological terms, that is, metaplastm refers to the contents of a cell other than the protoplasm, to the dead rather than the living material, to the unclear rather than the clear.

<sup>4</sup> David Quammen identifies Jim Harrison and Robert Penn Warren as writers whose poetic vision paradoxically emanates from their partial blindness: “leave a man with one good eye,” writes Quammen, “and he is liable to raise it skyward, squint it, focus it into the middle distance. . . . He is liable to write about birds” (181). The McKavian version of this intercessor is closer to Quammen’s “half-blinded poets” than, say, the “privileged visionaries” (Walling 7) who read augurs in French fiction — he is the birder-poet, unrepentingly amateur, a “slightly stumbling, stooped and wandering, peripatetic birdwatcher” (Cook x). Another blind poet worth mentioning in this context is Milton, almost half of whose animal imagery, according to Leonard Lutwack in *Birds in Literature*, “has to do with birds” (xii).

<sup>5</sup> Much more remains to be said regarding McKay’s relation to Paul Celan, a task which unfortunately falls beyond the confines of the present argument. Suffice it to say that McKay’s allusion to Celan extends beyond the final lines of “Die Jahre von Dir zu Mir”: “die Nacht is die Nacht, sie beginnt mit dem Morgen, / sie legt mich zu dir,” which Michael Hamburger translates as “the night is the night, it begins with the morning, / beside you it lays me down” (26-27). Celan — who changed his name metaplastmically/anagrammatically from Antschel to Ancel to Celan — also wrote a long poem called “Engführung,” which, though translated by Hamburger as “The Straitening,” is, according to Hamburger in the “Introduction” to *Poems of Paul Celan*, “a technical term for a device employed in the composition of fugues. Its counterpart in English usage would have been the Italian word *stretto*” (xxv).

<sup>6</sup> See “A Barbed Wire Fence Meditates Upon the Goldfinch” (*Birding* 95), which McKay writes in the “voice” of barbed wire and begins by addressing an ambiguous listener:

More than the shortest distance  
between points, we are  
the Stradivarius of work.  
We make the meadow meadow, make it  
mean, make it yours.

<sup>7</sup> Scholarly examples include Scottish poet Robert Crawford’s *Contemporary Poetry and*

*Contemporary Science*, American ecocritic Glen Love's *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, and Canadian ecocritic Laurie Ricou's *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*; poetic examples in Canada include Adam Dickinson's *Kingdom, Phylum*, Don McKay's *Strike/Slip*, and angela rawlings' *wide slumber for lepidopterists*.

## WORKS CITED

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Random, 1997.
- Babstock, Ken. *Mean*. Toronto: Anansi, 1999.
- Bartlett, Brian. "A Dog's Nose of Receptiveness: A Calvinoesque Reading of Don McKay." *The Antigonish Review* 139 (2005): 123-36.
- . ed. *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*. Toronto: Guernica, 2006.
- . "The Small Matter-of-fact Miracle of Ears." Foreword. Bartlett, ed. 7-10.
- Bradley, Nicholas. "'Green of the Earth and Civil Grey': Nature and the City in Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies*." *Canadian Poetry* 55 (2004): 15-33.
- Bringhurst, Robert. "Poetry and Thinking." *Thinking and Singing: Poetry & the Practice of Philosophy*. Ed. Tim Lilburn. Toronto: Cormorant, 2002. 155-72.
- Celan, Paul. *Poems of Paul Celan: Revised and Expanded*. 1972. Trans. Michael Hamburger. New York: Persea, 2002.
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. New York: Knopf, 1971.
- Cook, Méira. "Song for the Song of the Dogged Birdwatcher." Introduction. *Field Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay*. By Don McKay. Ed. Méira Cook. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2006. ix-xxv.
- Critchley, Simon. "Poetry as Philosophy – On Wallace Stevens." *European Journal of American Culture* 24.3 (2005): 179-90.
- Gill, Frank B. *Ornithology*. 2nd ed. New York: W.H. Freeman, 1995.
- Greene, Richard. Rev. of *Apparatus*, by Don McKay. *Books in Canada* 27.2 (March 1998): 27.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004.
- Lee, Dennis. *Body Music: Essays*. Toronto: Anansi, 1998.
- Lutwack, Leonard. *Birds in Literature*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994.
- Lilburn, Tim. "Walking Out of Silence." Afterword. *Desire Never Leaves: The Poetry of Tim Lilburn*. By Lilburn. Ed. Alison Calder. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 41-48.
- McKay, Don. *Another Gravity*. Toronto: McClelland, 2000.
- . *Apparatus*. Toronto: McClelland, 1997.
- . "The Appropriate Gesture, Or Regular Dumb-Ass Guy Looks at Bird." *Where the Words Come From: Canadian Poets in Conversation*. Interview with Ken Babstock. Ed. Tim Bowling. Roberts Creek: Nightwood, 2002. 44-61.
- . *Birding, or desire*. 1983. Toronto: McClelland, 1993.
- . *Camber: Selected Poems, 1983-2003*. Toronto: McClelland, 2004.

- . “Common Sense and Magic.” *Fiddlehead Gold: 50 Years of The Fiddlehead Magazine*. Afterword. Ed. Sabine Campbell, Roger Ploude, and Demetres Tryphonopoulos. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995. 223-38.
- . *Deactivated West 100*. Kentville: Gaspereau, 2005.
- . *Strike/Slip*. Toronto: McClelland, 2006.
- . *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*. Wolfville: Gaspereau, 2001.
- Otis, Laura. *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.
- Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World*. New York: Random, 2001.
- Quammen, David. *The Boilerplate Rhino: Nature in the Eye of the Beholder*. 2000. New York: Touchstone-Simon, 2001.
- Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. National Audubon Society. Toronto: Knopf, 2000.
- Sinclair, Sue. “The Animal Inside the Instrument.” Bartlett, ed. 104-10.
- Stap, Don. *Birdsong: A Natural History*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Walling, James. *Portrayal of Birds in Selected Nineteenth and Twentieth Century French Fiction*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002.
- Wilkinson, Anne. *Heresies: The Complete Poems of Anne Wilkinson, 1924-1961*. Ed. Dean Irvine. Montreal: Signal-Véhicule, 2003.
- Zwicky, Jan. *Wisdom & Metaphor*. Kentville: Gaspereau, 2003.