

Facing the Environmental Crisis with Contemplative Attention: The Ecopoetics of Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Russell Thornton

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Abstract

Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Russell Thornton are three Canadian eco-poets whose works offer a means of rapprochement and reparation to the earth through what Lilburn calls “contemplative attention” and McKay calls “poetic attention.” Held in the field of the poem, this kind of poetic participation makes possible the reclamation of language as a means of communion with the earth. The kind of contemplative attention embodied in the nature poetry these poets offer has the capacity to transform and amend both the poet’s and their readers’ exile from the natural world. While McKay and Lilburn resist what they see as the ills of Romantic humanism in addressing the breach, Thornton brings forward a new Romanticism that is not merely anthropomorphic but includes human consciousness as an expression of the ever-evolving self-awareness of the earth. Contemplative attention for these writers is nothing like the hoarding gaze of colonialism, but its antidote.

Though humans have evolved as creatures of language, filtering the world through a human lens of consciousness based on concepts and words has too often frustrated our desire for union with the other-than-human world. Canadian poet P K Page’s frequently-anthologized poem “Cook’s Mountains” explores the Enlightenment’s colonization of wilderness and the shadow side of humans’ gift of language in a way that foreshadows the concerns of more recent Canadian writers. Page’s deft ironies about the human “glazing gaze,” which substitutes sign for reality, suggest that words can act as both barricades and conduits to the natural world. Here Page writes of Captain James Cook’s naming of the Glass House Mountains:

By naming them he made them.
They were there before he came
but they were not the same.
It was his gaze
that glazed each one. . . .

And instantly they altered to become
the sum of shape and name. . . .

This issue of how our epistemological-linguistic positioning has made our species what cultural anthropologist Thomas Berry calls “autistic” in relation to the natural world has been addressed more recently by three contemporary Canadian poets who have written profoundly about the human relationship to the land: Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and

Russell Thornton.¹ These poets' works offer a means of rapprochement and reparation to the earth through what Lilburn calls "contemplative attention" and McKay calls "poetic attention." Held in the field of the poem, this kind of poetic participation makes possible the reclamation of language as a means of communion with the earth. The kind of contemplative attention embodied in the nature poetry these poets offer has the capacity to transform and amend both the poet's and their readers' exile from the natural world. If individual transformation can be a vital tipping point towards collective transformation, then this kind of poetic attention matters. While McKay and Lilburn resist what they see as the ills of Romantic humanism in addressing the breach, Thornton brings forward a new Romanticism that is not merely anthropomorphic but includes human consciousness as an expression of the ever-evolving self-awareness of the earth.

All three of these poets identify "nature" not simply as the environment or physical world which surrounds us, but as that which rises up as the central "dream of the earth," to borrow a phrase from writer-ecologist Thomas Berry, of which humans are finite expressions. They challenge a merely anthropocentric worldview and move to shift the exploitive, patriarchal gaze into what McKay calls the non-grasping, non-controlling "geopoetic" or earth-centered imagination.

Rather than asking how we imagine the earth, geopoetics turns to ask how the earth might imagine us. Their work needs to be located within a broader conversation about "deep ecology," a term derived from Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess in the 1960s to describe the intuition that every being and life form has intrinsic worth as part of an organic, interconnected whole. They write in the wake of earlier North American nature writers such as John Muir, Thomas Berry, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard; their work is complemented by the more overtly political writings of fellow Canadians Di Brandt, Dionne Brand, and others who lament and rage against an adversarial human posture responsible to a large extent for our ongoing global environmental crisis.²

Contemplative attention for these writers is nothing like the hoarding gaze of colonialism, but its antidote. According to Lilburn, such attention is the essential core of poetry, a self-emptying and "permeability before astonishing otherness."³ It is a seeing that entails a

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 208 (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988): "In relation to the earth, we have been autistic for centuries. Only now have we begun to listen with some attention and with a willingness to respond to the earth's demand that we cease our industrial assault, that we abandon our inner rage against the conditions of our earthly existence, that we renew our human participation in the grand liturgy of the universe."

² Di Brandt's *Now You Care* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2003) and Dionne Brand's *Inventory* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006) contain more overtly engaged political poems addressing global environmental issues.

³ "Poetry's Practice of Philosophy," *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and Practice of Philosophy*, ed. Tim Lilburn (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002).

relinquishment of appropriative knowing and involves instead an ontological “unknowing,” or simple being with nature without desire to own, manipulate, or possess. Such a sense of awe before the mystery of nature becomes an initiatory experience compelling interior journeying, a descent, tears, divine drunkenness, and a breaking up of language and the socially-constructed self as we have known it.

McKay and Thornton have written extensively about the BC landscape, while Lilburn, who moved to the West Coast more recently, has up until now focused primarily on the prairies of his native Saskatchewan. His latest volume, *Orphic Politics*, uses disease as a metaphor for an out-of-kilter relation with the body, the body politic, and the body of the world, summoning ancient Hermetic theurgy (magical healing practices) to alchemize destructive modes of seeing and knowing. Though none of these poets is of a single region, all, including Page herself, celebrate the minutiae of place. McKay and Lilburn, along with Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky, form a “school” of sorts, since much of their work has issued from an ongoing conversation about, in Lilburn’s words, “How to be here,” how to be at home in the earth from which history and culture have alienated us. Thornton’s more Romantic and visionary approach serves as a counterbalance and complement to the work of this more rigorously philosophical group with their close academic, interpersonal and literary associations.

Though Thornton is an independent, not having emerged from any particular school, all these poets are philosophical in the deepest sense of the word — “lovers of wisdom.” Collectively, their bodies of work access a field of integral being that includes but transcends mere cognitive knowing. Each approaches the natural world through a variety of traditions and perspectives, including the shamanic, mythic, Platonic, Medieval, scientific, Romantic, and postmodernist.

McKay’s Geopoetics

Don McKay is a field naturalist with a contemplative loving gaze, a long-looking and longing look that seeks out the sacred in-between of our subjectivity and the arresting real of what we call the natural world. His poems, deeply respectful of the specificity of things in their individual variations, honour both the interiority of the perceiver and the specificity or unrepeatable “thusness” of nature in process. He brings a field naturalist’s exactness of observation to his poems, getting the plumage and movements of the birds right and not lifting off too quickly into his own emotional responses. For instance, in “Close-up On a Sharp-Skinned Hawk,” he urges: “Concentrate upon her attributes: the accipiter’s short/rounded wings, streaked breast, talons fine/and slender as the x-ray of a baby’s hand.”⁴

⁴ *Camber* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004), 4. An accipiter is “a hawk of the genus *Accipiter*, characterized by short wings and a long tail.” Answers.com. <http://www.answers.com/topic/accipiter>

McKay, moving from this desire to attend to the specificities of the planet in his recent essay “Ediacaran and Anthropocene: poetry as a reader of deep time,” borrows the term “geopoetics” from geologist Harry Hess and applies it to the sort of poetry he writes. Hess was a creative scientist who coined the term to describe his imaginative speculations about plate tectonics before his theory became accepted by other scientists in the 1960s.⁵ McKay’s effort is to reunite science and poetry by placing human presence and language back within the order of wild things, the vastness and immensity of the geological ages:

On the one hand, we lose our special status as Master Species; on the other, we become members of deep time, along with trilobites and Ediacaran period organisms. We gain the gift of de-familiarization, becoming other to ourselves, one expression of the ever-evolving planet. Inhabiting deep time imaginatively, we give up mastery and gain mutuality.⁶

His work challenges the notion that “man is the measure of all things” by setting our humanistic endeavors within the context of “deep time,” the memory of the earth. Therefore, he turns to science in its older sense as another kind of “deep knowing” before it was separated from mystical awareness and the felt sense of humans as late-coming expressions of a much larger mystery.

An Expanded Definition of Wilderness

McKay’s poems and prose not only locate the human within the context of an ages-long process of evolution, but also greatly expand the usual definition of wilderness. In *Vis a Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness*, he writes: “By wilderness I want to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations.”⁷ Humans, as well as what we normally think of as “inanimate” material things, embody wildness at their core. Therefore, metaphor (language that makes “wild” interconnections between ourselves and the world) can become a way back into the wild. Poetry works, McKay notes, to

Introduce otherness, or wilderness, into consciousness without insisting that it be turned wholly into knowledge, into what we know, what we own. Within poetic attention, we might say, what we behold is always “alien and previous,”

⁵ “Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as Reader of Deep Time,” *Prairie Fire* 29: 4 (Winter 2008–09), 4. A newly-discovered geological age that produced soft-bodied creatures from between 575 and 542 million years ago whose fossil remains can be found in South Australia and Newfoundland.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home & Nature Poetry,” *Vis a Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press), 21.

whether it's an exceptional fossil or an "ordinary" rock or chickadee. In poetry there is no "been there, done that"; everything is wilderness.⁸

So, for McKay, poetic attention makes all things wild and new.

McKay as Apophatic Poet

McKay, along with Lilburn, is what Lilburn calls an "apophatic" poet. Lilburn draws this Greek term from mystical theology of the early Christian centuries that follows the *via negativa* or path of negation of names or "unknowing" as it complements and forms a base for the *via activa* or way of affirmation of images and ideas for the divine. That is, these poets are intensely aware of the limits of language to contain the divine, and by extension, the numinosity of nature within the ciphers of language. In a recent preface to the anthology *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems*, McKay borrows the term "inappellable" from earlier Canadian poet F R Scott to talk about how language hovers around the peripheries of the ineffable. To use words without labeling or fixing is, in McKay's words, "a deliberate chastening of noetic hubris," that tendency of language to grow too big for its boots and consume what it signifies. . . .The inappellable "comes on its own and is not to be 'called' to human use. . . ." ⁹ Contemplative nature poetry for McKay, then, is apophatic because it

Uses our foremost technological tool, the ur-tool that is language, against itself, against its tendency to be the supreme analytic and organizing instrument. In poetry, language is always a singer as well as a thinker; a lover as well as an engineer. It discovers and delights in its own physical being, as though it were an otter or a raven rather than simply the vice president in charge of making sense.¹⁰

This recognition forces the human urge to peer into nature back on the poetic resources of metaphor, symbol, oxymoron, and paradox, since these connect, suggest, and point rather than merely describe.

Responsive Singing

In light of McKay's sense of the limits of language, what remains for the poet to do being so small, insignificant and temporally bound? One answer that runs as a thread through his work is "praise." His lyrics about "the songs for the songs of" various birds and

⁸ "Ediacaran and Anthropocene," 11.

⁹ "Great Flint Singing," Introduction to *Open a Wide Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2009,) 3.

¹⁰ "Ediacaran and Anthropocene," 9–10.

creatures punctuate his collections with lyricism and provide a contrapuntal music rather than facile analysis or imitation.¹¹ He writes:

A mystic who is not a poet can answer the inappellable with silence, but a poet is in the paradoxical, unenviable position of simultaneously recognizing that it can't be said and saying something. . . . [L]anguage is not finally adequate to experience and yet is the medium which we — the linguistic animals — must use. What to do? The poem's own soundplay holds the clue: "we must answer *in chime*, a term suggesting both rhymed resonance and one that harmonizes compatibly with the appeal."¹²

McKay's answer is to answer music with music in an act of responsive singing. In addition, his ironical flights and wry wit ground the quirky and playful human music within the context of the tumultuous tablature of earth-sound.

McKay as Anti-Romantic?

McKay insists that geopoetry, poetry that places itself with the dizzying spirals of the geological ages of a four and a half billion-year-old planet, must avoid at all costs "Romantic humanism."¹³ He defines Romantic humanism as a tendency to "translate the immediate perception into an emotional condition, which is then admired or fetishized in preference to the original phenomenon — fossil, bird, lichen or landform."¹⁴ Though he does acknowledge a more nuanced Romanticism even in Wordsworth that confronts the darker and more terrifying and unnameable aspects of nature, he more often equates the Romantic poet, especially Wordsworth, with the tourist: "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."¹⁵ He rejects the Romantic notion of the poet as "Aeolian harp" or "larynx of natural phenomena."¹⁶ Though McKay's work avoids the prettifying of nature or using it as an occasion for human reverie or channeling, his work may be Romantic in a much deeper sense through its questioning of the gains of technology and its erotic longing to participate in nature as in a "geophany" or divine mystery.

¹¹ Examples of this type of poem are "Song for the Song of the Varied Thrush," *Apparatus* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997) and "Song for the Songs of the Common Raven," *Strike/Slip* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

¹² "Great Flint Singing," 4.

¹³ "Ediacaran and Anthropocene," 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ "Baler Twine," 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Deactivated West 100

McKay's *Deactivated West 100* (Gaspereau Press, 2005) is a series of linked essays where the poet conducts a geopoetic exploration of the coastal bioregion of the Pacific Northwest on Vancouver Island. His experience of following a fault line from end to end on southern Vancouver Island along a line of "geologic scrimmage where earlier landmasses collided" became the inspiration for this book. The essays ponder the record of a mind-shattering "tectonic catastrophe" where the fault line itself becomes a metaphor for the colliding of old and new, human and natural — the "gap" in human comprehension. This evocative collection inverts the question, "What am I to the land?" to "What is the land to me?" In the essay "Otherwise than Place" the speaker opines, "What is needed is. . . a small dose of this eros of oblivion, the capacity to think backward or forward from place to its mothering wilderness."¹⁷

The wilderness in this volume reveals both its gentler and more cataclysmic aspects, the beginnings and the endings of natural cycles. The title *Deactivated West* springs from McKay's observations about a deactivated logging road; yet it also echoes an important distinction he makes in the collection between destruction and "decreation." McKay writes that "to 'deactivate' in the sense of to end or destroy is to make something created pass into nothingness, but to decreate is to allow it to pass back into the uncreated from which it came."¹⁸ The logging road had been deactivated because it no longer served the purposes of the human desire to exploit. In contrast, it is the business of the poet both to create as well as "decreate." In many mysticisms, like that of Meister Eckhart, the "uncreated" is the term for the ground of all being and knowing, the unnameable silence beyond all dualities of created/uncreated, time/eternity, matter/spirit etc. So when poetry re-enacts this process of movement from the created back to the uncreated, or "decreated," it (in McKay's words) "calls for attention to release its grip on fixed principles, to risk radical not-knowing without succumbing to the seductive currents which go by the name of nihilism."¹⁹ McKay's brand of apophatic poetry (the poetry of "unnaming") then, affirms that humans, too, are part of a larger process into which our mortality is constantly being gathered. Therefore, McKay's form of natural contemplation, even in the face of the collision of tectonic plates as big as Iceland, does not end in nihilism or despair, where human consciousness comes to seem meaningless, but in an acceptance of our place in the unfolding of mysterious powers within both us and in nature.

¹⁷ (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2005), 26.

¹⁸ "Decreation," *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

McKay's "Quartz Crystal"

McKay's prose-poem "Quartz Crystal" illustrates the "geopoetic" imagination and is itself an act of contemplative attention. This poem was first published in *Varves* in 2003 and reappeared in *Strike/Slip* in 2006.²⁰ It contains images of crystalline structures similar to those described in an essay from *Deactivation West 100* entitled "Crystal" where he writes:

But when matter — dumb, brute, supposedly soulless rock — reveals that it too has ontological secrets, that it too is subject to such spiritual seizure, we may well be cast into a condition of empty, systematic wonder, as though we had discovered that all the walls in our houses were in fact windows.²¹

In "Quartz Crystal," the speaker is cast into such a condition of "empty, systematic wonder" as he picks up a piece of clear quartz that had been sitting alongside other stones on his desk. This piece of quartz is about to reveal to him some of its "ontological secrets." He describes it with his usual precision, yet soon locates it not just in time, but as a messenger from "another dimension," a living thing "posed to take off and return to its native aether." The solid rock begins to seem a winged thing and a symbol of transcendence (or perhaps "in-scendence"). His allusion to it as a "bit of locked Pythagorean air" associates the crystal with music, mathematics, and philosophy. It is a piece of star music fallen into time hinting at our ideals of perfection: "simple, naked, perilously perfect." Though it embodies sacred qualities it is also mundane, quotidian; the speaker can pick it up and hold it in his finger like a pencil. He then reflects on the ridiculousness of his concept of ownership, the notion that anyone could appropriate a form "reaching back to the Proterozoic." Before the irony of his own grasp, the poet "unnames" the quartz as unimaginable and indescribable, the "Zen before all Zen," emptiness, transparency. In the face of the embarrassment of even the speaker's personified books (symbols of human learning) over his futile efforts to find words commensurate to the integrity of the stone, he is forced to renounce one by one the accoutrements of the human: first his fingers and thumbs whose prehensile grasp has been used to distinguish us as toolmakers from the beasts; then baseball, minuet, cribbage, fugue, dialectic, and finally, last but not least, his poems:

And you,
My little poems, don't imagine I can't hear you
plotting under your covers, hoping to avoid
your imminent depublication.

The quartz crystal's perfection is "perilous" to the speaker because it reminds him of his mortality and even the mortality of the literary legacy he might leave. The stone requires

²⁰ Varves are alternating layers of coarse and fine sediment as seen along a fault line.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

that one return everything we think we own to the source of all temporal things, even our works of art. The crystal “floats like a lotus on my palm, bending the light from a dying star to dance upon my coffee cup this fine bright Cenozoic morning.” Through these final lines, the reader is suddenly transported through the exotic eastern lotus of the crystal into deep time through an act of “pure attention.” The diminution of self before that which is anterior is ironically also an act of celebration. The ritual renunciations (“I give up, I foreswear”), like Inanna’s descent into the underworld, bring us closer home to a state of acceptance in the present on “this fine Cenozoic morning.” This is a poem of surrender to the infinite that cups stars and coffee cups in a single consciousness.

Lilburn and Apophasis

Like McKay, Tim Lilburn unites deep thinking with deep feeling in both his poetry and prose. Lilburn is an erudite, eremitic poet who moves back and forth between Hopkinesque verbal explosions to the contemplative reaches of sheer silence. Silence is his home ground for linguistic eruption. Rather than seeking spiritual mentors and practices through non-western spiritual traditions, Lilburn, whose spiritual formation was Jesuit, delves into the desert fathers and mothers of the first two centuries, Medieval mystical theology, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Hermeticism, to reconstruct a lost western contemplative tradition to which the contemplative practice of poetry for him is analogous: “Poetry gestures to contemplation and contemplation feeds the poetry, modifying language by letting awe undermine it, pare it back, lending the poems a thinness, compunction.”²² For Lilburn, contemplation and poetry are not identical in purpose, since contemplatives generally open themselves to wordless union with the divine, while poets are creatures of language; yet poets and contemplatives know equally that “all that is” cannot be expressed completely in words: “My hunch. . . is that contemplation and poetry do not share an identical telos, but that what both want strikes each the same — as quintessentially compelling and as unutterable.”²³

For Lilburn, as for McKay, poetic attention begins in awe. Lilburn defines this state as “what happens to you when you are knocked to the ground by some astonishment: You go very still at some point in yourself and become entirely eye.”²⁴ The “eye” in this case is not the arrogant, appropriative eye, but the eye of the optic heart, the eye of contemplation, or being beside things as in a sacred space. This eye longs for the integral and seeks to unify disciplines western thought has compartmentalized. Lilburn notes how in the poetry of Homer and the Haida poets Ghandl and Skaay “poetry, philosophy, religion come from and return to the same place in the psyche: contemplative

²² “How to Be Here?” *Living in the World As If It Were Home*, (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 1999), 11.

²³ “Thinking the Rule of Benedict Within Modernity,” *Fiddlehead* 228 (Summer 2006), 162.

²⁴ “Poetry’s Practice of Philosophy.”

attention.”²⁵ The dense references and allusions that some readers perceive as merely cerebral in Lilburn come out of an integral thinking that is also a singing as suggested by the title of a collection of essays he edited, *Thinking and Singing: Poetry & the Practice of Philosophy* (2002). In other words, the deep lyricism of poetry issues from much more than a concern with “making” or mere poetic technique, but from contemplative longing. It’s urge is in Lilburn’s words “autochthonous,” that is, desirous of belonging or becoming rooted once more in the earth.²⁶

He, like McKay, is apophatic, a poet of unknowing. His reading of Plato interprets the ladder of ascent from becoming to essential being as an erotic of self-transformation through descent, the shamanic journey into a direct experience of that which resists names. He enters the mystery of what one anonymous fourteenth-century mystic called “the cloud of unknowing.” His primary project, then, is not transcendence of the world, the earth, but transcendence of our controlling modes of knowing. His poetry and poetics as developed in his various collections of essays form a seamless whole, as both consist of a flinging out and affirming, then canceling of names for natural things: “The world is its names plus their cancellations.”²⁷ This oxymoronic gesture of what I would call “erotic non-attachment” parallels the way his mystical theologian mentor, Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite of the sixth century, names and unnames in a single breath the multiple names for the Godhead or Unnamable One. What Lilburn has done in the body of his work is to transform the ancient language of the contemplative journey or ascent to God into “a dark night of the soul,” a descent into absence and loss with reverberations of return, thus forging an earth-erotics for our time. Lilburn uses the term “erotics” and “erotic longing” not to talk simply about sexuality or the appetites of the body (though these are included in his poetic), but to love as a cosmological yearning in all things for the larger unity that eludes cognitive knowing: “Eros has nowhere to go but to become sorrow. . . . It hurts to look at deer, / deer under their name.”²⁸ Penthos or sorrow, “the tearfulness of things,” emerges and we sit with our grief for a while.

In his earth-descent, Lilburn is an ascetic, not in the sense of seeking to control the flesh or repress pleasure, but in the older sense of *acesis* (Gk. “askesis”) or a pruning back of the false self to afford greater freedom and more holistic way of being. His favourite word “eros” indicates not simply a celebration of personal erotic love, but, as in Plato, Eros the greater as the cosmological power that holds together and empowers all creation, the manifest world. He writes: “The eros for the world, I believe, unfolds in the same way as dialectic and the eros for God have been understood to unfold.”²⁹ Eros-longing, then, has to be cultivated, for it is our one way back to unity with the earth from which we have

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Going Home* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2008), 1.

²⁷ “How to Be Here,” *Living in the World As If It Were Home* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002), 5.

²⁸ “Learning a Deeper Courtesy of the Eye,” *Moosewood Sandhills* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994), 36–37.

²⁹ “Preface,” *Living in the World As If It Were Home*, xv.

separated ourselves, like lovers from an elusive Beloved. And, in this context, poetry becomes a form of wooing: “We are lonely for where we are. Poetry helps us cope. Poetry is where we go when we want to know the world as lover.”³⁰

Yet approaching the natural world as lover requires mastering the degrees of humility. Humility, in the sense of returning to our origins in the “humus” or soil, the earth itself, along with what Lilburn calls a “slendering” of the self, is the prerequisite to reconnection. Lilburn’s asceticism, then, is not a diminution of desire but its intensification: “Humility grows from ravishment, and is the simplification and intensification of desire.”³¹ Such a kenosis or self-emptying becomes a sharpening of sense and feeling without grasping or holding.

As much as the speaker in Lilburn’s meditative poems pants for union with nature, what he settles for more often is a “lying alongside”: “But if you come to be innocent, the old desert stories imply, if you set aside confidence in your capacity, if you release your weight into the graceful engine of something other than your will, you may find yourself coming alongside things.”³² He argues that because we are part of a culture that has separated itself from our primordial origins we have to work our way home slowly, with “compunction” and deference. His poems trace this process of chastening, mourning, and reparation. These stages of courtship constitute a colloquy of erotic postures before a recalcitrant beloved. The process of return is not linear but an intuitive emergence through desire. It is also a discipline modulated through the discipline of poetry.

Lilburn’s path homeward to nature is analogous to the path to union with God in the older theologies, like that of John of the Cross or the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Lilburn is a contemporary nature mystic because his aim is nothing less than ecstatic union. Generally the term “mysticism” has come to be associated in our culture with mystification, angelism (a desire to prematurely transcend the conditions of our earthly existence), or obfuscation, but in Lilburn it is the exact opposite of escape into subjectivity or naval gazing but has wider ramifications. It requires the hard work of disengaging from exploitive postures and deliberately coming to surrender before the particularities of natural things.

Simply abiding in humility alongside the wilderness our cultures have assaulted can be the ground for sacred activism. Intentional non-engagement and direct engagement can be seen as conjoined polarities. Lilburn writes: “Practice an activism of forgetting the royalty of one’s name, of yielding, of stepping aside. This will be like breathing through the whole body, the new, larger body of a place that might take us in.”³³ Lilburn’s contemplative offerings require a shift in perception that creates momentum toward a global reinventing of what it means to be human. Contemplation, as the major mystical

³⁰ “How to Be Here?” *Living*, 17.

³¹ *Going Home*, 153.

³² “There Is No Presence,” *Living*, 73.

³³ “Going Home,” *Thinking and Singing*, 184.

traditions concur, is the complementary side of action, not its opposition — the base in silence for effective action. Lilburn believes contemplative attention is a form of hidden engagement that has political ramifications for both writer and reader: “Poetry, as a transformative, political instrument, cuts two ways, into the author as much as or more than the reader.”³⁴

For Lilburn, one fruit of apophatic encounter with nature is the public expression of the poem, not a polished artefact but a process in the field of which contemplative attention emerges. The poem is not a record of an experience but an enactment of something like an electromagnetic field. Enter the field of the poem and be changed. In a typical Lilburn poem, the speaker sees that which she calls “deer” or other-than-human life form. The poet tries to capture deer in the net of language and gloriously fails: “Poetry is the rearing in language of a desire whose end lies beyond language.”³⁵ Yet the poet’s desire for oneness with the deer never ceases, as names and images are offered and withdrawn. Discursive and even poetic language collides with the otherness or “oddness” of deer. Weeping happens; the tearfulness of things in the larger order pours through the alienated poet. The poem or field of word-woven perception becomes alert with unknowing. The poet finally resigns and agrees to curl into mere humanness alongside “deerness.” With luck, the poem falls into deer’s otherness. In this process, the poem becomes an act of adoration, a song to the ineluctable essence of the deer. It is possible that longing proceeds from a remembering of “deerness” within ourselves, that part of the deer which has been carried forward into our bodies/consciousness which we’ve forgotten and therefore grieve.

Lilburn’s relatively early volume *Moosewood Sandhills* (1994) is a good place to go for an illustration of the origins of his practice of contemplative attention. These poems are an astonishing sequence of monk-like meditative lyrics that laid the ground for his later, longer meditations in *To the River* and *Kill-site*.³⁶ They suggest clearly how each person can be a “lay monk” of the everyday by following our innate longing to lay ourselves open to the beauty and strangeness of nature. Here the speaker’s act of digging down into the earth and living in a root cellar becomes a shamanic descent into a chthonic or deep underworld where the interiority of nature has the capacity to touch and heal the interiority of the human: “There is a form of belonging to land that is deeper than having a local address. It would be called chthonic citizenship, earth-Belonging.”³⁷

³⁴ “Faith and Land,” *Prairie Fire*, 59.

³⁵ “How to Be Here?” *Living*, 9.

³⁶ *To the River* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999); *Kill-site* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003).

³⁷ “Faith and Land,” 56–57.

Lilburn's "Contemplation is Mourning"

"Contemplation Is Mourning" from *Mosewood Sandhills* encapsulates Lilburn's poetics of acesis as a procession of loss, tears, compunction, grief, and lament for the earth. He remains with the grief rather than trying to move beyond it prematurely. The title can be read in two ways: the contemplative path is one where mourning occurs and contemplation herself is always mourning. In the mystical traditions in which Lilburn is steeped, such as the Jewish Song of Songs, separation from the beloved entails grief and the desire for reunion never leaves.

This poem, like many in this collection, uses the second person "you" to include the reader as participant — in this case, one is invited to "lie down in the deer's bed." The poet sleeps in the depressions made in the grass by the deer's bodies as a way of entering their world. The long, loping lines, repeat the elongation of the animals' "length of sleep." As in so many Lilburn lyrics, a stanza of sensuous description of aspen leaves, snowberries and fescue finishes with a more philosophical statement: "This is the edge of the known world and the beginning of philosophy."

The opening six-line stanza is followed by a set of four couplets that explore the dynamics of looking from within a world of silence. The first one warns: "Looking takes you so far on a leash of delight, then removes it and says / the price of admission to further is your name." The relinquishing of one's social identity and of the entire business of naming must be suspended as the "price of admission" to paradise. In the fourth couplet, the wisdom voice whispers of the mystery of what the deer is in herself, her pure being or "is-ness": "The deer cannot be known. She is the Atlantic, she is Egypt. . ." The inability to penetrate her exoticism is to "feel severed, sick, darkened, ashamed." Yet this darkening of human knowing, this sickness, is not unto death, but the beginning of wisdom through terror: "Her body is a border crossing, a wall and a perfume and past this/ she is infinite. And it is terrible to enter this." The final seven-line stanza restores us to the deer's bed, "the green martyrion, the place where / language buries itself." The place of poetic martyrdom is a place where language is temporarily sacrificed, the self "shaved and narrowed." The poem finishes with the "smell of last year's melted snow," suggesting spring may lie hidden in a long winter of absence. For now, the waiting is all — the doing, and poetic activity, a non-doing.

Thornton as Neo-Romantic

Russell Thornton, in contrast to Lilburn and McKay, is an unabashed neo-Romantic whose work can be located in the tradition of Blake, Keats, John Clare and others. In his work, the Romantic trajectory is corrected and recovered. Though he does not call himself a Blakean, Blakean ideas and images beginning in *The Fifth Window* recur

throughout his work.³⁸ He is also an elegiac poet who celebrates the temporal and fleeting. His poems, often set in North Vancouver nestled beside the Coast Mountains, break down any sense of ultimate division between wilderness and cityscape, and sing their interpenetrations. In “Lonsdale Quay” from *House Built of Rain*, a Blakean child from the world of innocence observing feeding seagulls becomes an emblem of the fusion of the natural and the human:

Perhaps he [the child] will fall down and down, an exquisite morsel for the open mouths of dreams waiting to dream him. The seagulls swoop down together, thrust out their wings, all bright white, awkward-looking manoeuvring angels.³⁹

As we have seen, McKay and Lilburn call the legacy of Romanticism to account as a form of anthropocentric humanism that uses nature as an occasion for subjective reverie. Such a false Romanticism prettifies and tames wilderness so the overriding ego can feel “at home” in an inauthentic sense. McKay warns against Wordsworthian rhapsodies, yet also acknowledges a deeper side to Wordsworth in a recent essay where he cites the famous passage from *The Prelude* where the young speaker of *The Prelude* is terrified on the lake by looming cliffs experienced as “unknown modes of being.”⁴⁰ Lilburn generally critiques Romanticism and seeks out an older theology and mysticism as means of return to nature. However, the Romantics, in their assessment of the impact of the Industrial Revolution, their exploration of the sublime (a vastness in nature incommensurate with ideologies) and their ability to revision old mythologies, can be seen as forerunners of deep ecology.⁴¹ For example, my own reading of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” is that it displays the cataclysmic powers of a seemingly chaotic nature shattering the artificial paradise of human constructs, such as “the dome of pleasure” built by the conqueror Kubla. The “caverns measureless to man” with “huge fragments vaulting like rebounding hail” have the same impact on human consciousness as McKay’s colliding tectonic plates.

For Thornton, the best of Romanticism isn’t all sentimental posturing or appropriation of nature for human ends. In fact, he argues that to view nature through the lens of human consciousness is inevitable and inescapable. Language may act as a barrier to the world, but it also has what he calls “magical properties”:

Language is both a key and a lock when it comes to the poet and the natural world. Language came out of the natural world (out of the human organism) and although intricate systems of words helped produce self-consciousness in humans and divided humans from the natural world, words also, for my money,

³⁸ Saskatoon, SK: Thistledown, 2000.

³⁹ (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 2003), 37.

⁴⁰ “Great Flint Singing,” *Open a Wide Wilderness*, 10.

⁴¹ Canadian scholar Kevin Hutchings makes a case for the environmental and ecological concerns of the Romantics in *Imagining Nature: Blake’s Environmental Poetics* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

have magical properties, one of which is that they can help humans hypnotize themselves back into communion with the natural world. I'd even say that the magical depths of words can open out into the sounds of the natural world; more — that these sounds *are* the natural world and all of matter itself. The natural world can hypnotize us with our own words. It can “raid” our psychic “inarticulate”-ness, so to speak. Of course, language is also a “crime” in that it walls us off from nature (and the division helps us to think we can commit atrocities against it).

I don't see the point in intellectually struggling to escape language-bound-up human consciousness in language. It's like trying to chew off your own teeth. Why not revel in the marvellous contraption of human consciousness and whatever opportunities it offers? You're never going to come into a relationship with nature any other way. It's part and parcel of the terms of human life (the gift of life, period).

You're only going to see yourself when you look at nature — of course! (but what worlds that “self” might be or become or “hold” is an interesting question). Of course consciousness is a mirror. The material world, for me, is consciousness, and so nature is a mirror. A mirror that's always looking at us.⁴²

Thornton's meditative lyrics illustrate this sense of nature as a living mirror of human consciousness but a mirror with its own will and intentions. We are therefore not trapped within language but language can become a point of access to communion with an open cosmological order.

“The Ocean at Long Beach” from *The Human Shore*, for example, presents a vaulting, lacerating wave on the Pacific coast as a natural process that suddenly “turns” to become a human psychodrama containing the image of a mythic man and woman (Orpheus looking back at Eurydice). Here nature simultaneously proffers a non-human and human aspect in a single gesture:

And what is not human turns, and is also human; it turns [the giant wave], and as out of the throats of the presences, lets loose calls; they echo in the wild driftwood, the wind-spiralled trees, the sky.⁴³

In a commentary on these lines, Thornton explains:

That single wave turns around. . . .and the speaker “knows” suddenly that the unknowable, the “not human” is at every instant ushering itself into human consciousness. It's an intuition: the universe is human. I mean this to be a radical statement of a kind — a radical romanticism. I don't mean to say that

⁴² from an unpublished exchange with Susan McCaslin, June 2009.

⁴³ *The Human Shore* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing), 12.

man is the centre of the universe or that man can rationally figure out the secrets of the universe — not at all. I do mean to say that the universe will, with infinite subtlety, embrace human consciousness and “play” human for us if we love it enough (no matter how ugly, terrifying, and non-benevolent in terms of the human ego it can be). The non-human puts on human masks for us — “presences” such as those we might refer to as Orpheus and Eurydice call to us; those calls echo through the creation — and are in fact the creation.⁴⁴

Lilburn and McKay rightly warn against the dangers of a self-absorbed humanism. While acknowledging the inscrutability of the unnameable wild, Thornton affirms its creative and transforming powers when juxtaposed to those of the human. In an interview he explains:

I’d say that nature can be called “pure” in the ruthlessness, the grave ruthlessness and relentlessness of its creativity. I feel that the only thing that matters to nature is birth. This is how nature might be seen to be a healing force. Nature may be indifferent to us, but it will work on us. . .by virtue of its being indifferent to us. And if our eyes and ears are significant only insofar as they serve as the eyes and ears of the natural world, then, strangely, all of nature is human. It may be indifferent to us, yet it’s human! For me, this is an intoxicating paradox.⁴⁵

His paradoxical perspective here is like that of Blake when he envisions the cosmos as a gigantic primordial person (Jerusalem/Albion/Adam Kadmon). This is not the sort of reductive humanism against which the others warn, but a mapping of the liminal spaces between the human and the infinite, an in-between where the universe sometimes, quite surprisingly, stoops to meet our finitude. Since we are local expressions, an emergence of consciousness of this larger whole, nature can mirror back a human countenance, though it might equally mirror a deer face to a deer. While Lilburn and McKay highlight the otherness of wilderness, Thornton emphasizes identity, locating the wildly creative within the human like a microcosm lodged in its corresponding macrocosm. In his poems, consciousness mirrors the natural world and vice versa. It is the universe becoming conscious of itself in and through the human. To write out of this dynamic of joint mirroring or what Blake calls “Fourfold Vision” is not anthropomorphic but cosmological thinking. As critic Malcolm Woodland puts it,

Russell Thornton, like McKay, is a Romantic, but a Romantic of a very different stripe. As the title of his latest collection, *The Human Shore*, suggests, Thornton works at the border between the human and the nonhuman, between knowledge and reality. But if McKay’s work makes me feel as though I am

⁴⁴ *Lit Futura* (Winter 2004). www.Litfutura.com/Thorntonpoem.html

⁴⁵ Catherine MacLennan, “Interview with Russell Thornton,” *The Lamp*, a monthly online magazine (2007). <http://www.thelamp.ca/books/index.php?id=21>

staring into the abyss, Thornton's makes me feel as though the abyss is staring back at me."⁴⁶

In other words, Thornton reopens the possibility of rapturous union with the natural world experienced as personal presence, as is evident in "Fifteenth and Lonsdale" where the ubiquitous Coast Mountains in North Vancouver, Thornton's home, actively play with the human:

I look up again — suddenly I know nothing except that the mountain sits there secretly transparent as rain. That it sees us. That it flirts with us. That it is a person containing all the experience we can ever have. That it is a pure signal. And whatever the two alongside me are saying quietly to each other, they were made to say it.

The mountain sits, dressed in trees, and endlessly clear — endlessly clear, and endlessly dressed in trees. It never ceases turning our gazes back to us — it has no prophecy other than this. . . .⁴⁷

Thornton depicts the mountain as "seeing," "flirting," "dressed in trees" not to reduce it to human tropes but to convey its Protean diversity. The poem reveals how the misty mountain world interpenetrates and cups the human: "The street mist / dribbles out of his [a man's] pockets, becoming numberless names."

Thornton's "Heron"

Thornton's "Heron" traces the movements of the "sensitive-still slender, / blue-grey mystery" bird in and out of an urban landscape — exalting in its illusive, unclaimable presence.⁴⁸ The bird lives at the meeting place of the human and the natural worlds, the wild and the tame. The observing "I" catches in its peripheral field a beauty it cannot control or fathom.

The poem moves from morning to morning: seeing begins in "the hour before dawn" and comes full circle to "the beginning, morning bird." The first stanza describes the heron as "a grey lopsided bundle / a tent suddenly assembling itself, and in a split-instant / collapsing and assembling itself again in mid-air," creating and "decreating" itself in a single motion. The imagery is as precise as McKay's in depicting the movements of wings, legs and neck:

⁴⁶ "Poetry," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77: 1 (Winter 2008), 54–56.

⁴⁷ *The Human Shore*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Open a Wide Wilderness*, 415. An earlier version of this poem appeared in *House Built of Rain* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2003), 38.

There it is, opening its near-creek-spanning wings,
trailing its long thin legs, carrying its neck
in an S-shape, head held back. . . .

The second long stanza throws the witnessing I (eye) back into memory, so the tense changes from present to past: “Is it the same heron/I saw once before. . . .?” What the speaker remembers, what is “re-membered,” is the inter-flow of heron and creek as a unified piece: “The entire creek unbroken/ could be the heron’s home. . . .” The third stanza, or musical movement returns to the present where “The heron / alights somewhere, disappears, and lifts again.” By interweaving present and past, the poem enacts the interplay of presence and absence. The repetition of the phrase “I see it” works against the sense of constant loss as the heron evades the speaker’s eye. The consummation of the action occurs when the heron finds a fish which “swims quick into the poised long bill.” Significantly, heron, stream, ravine, and urban environment of “houses, people, streets and cares” cohere in contemplative attention, the heron remaining both itself and “living sign”:

The heron lifts, the dark tasting itself, the ravine
flying through the ravine—living sign,
secret heron of the beginning, morning bird.

Conclusion

Out of such earthy mysteries as quartz, deer, or heron, these three contemporary Canadian nature poets resurrect a new-old earth mysticism rooted in poetic-contemplative practice. In Page’s “Cook’s Mountains” with which this essay began, the speaker beholds “two strangenesses” of “shape and name” in the mountains named by Cook. In the last stanza, the “being-ness” or “is-ness” of the mountains forms “in diamond panes behind the tree ferns of/the dark imagination.” As all these poets suggest, when imagination “darkens” to become less assured in its certainties, expected vistas open. These poets assume a posture of “unknowing” in relation to the natural world — an active receptivity or receptive activity. Language as a tool for interrogating, channelling or describing nature is curbed, but as a responsive singing to the universal song, it remains effectual. They respond in distinctive ways to the subject-object split that separated us from our primal origins in the earth. Like the work of elder poet P K Page, theirs locates itself within visionary and mystical traditions, moving beyond modernist analytical rationalism. As contributors to Canadian nature poetry, they provide an evolutionary poetics of the earth. Whether through earth-cosmology, mysticism, contemplative tradition, or neo-Romanticism, these poets walk lightly with language, but remain language-tenders. In the mystical theologies of the past, the pilgrim passes through various stages including what medieval mystics called purgation, illumination, and union. McKay, Lilburn, and Thornton suggest we have to get busy on relinquishing our aggressive hold on the earth before asserting reunion with nature. Yet despite our species’ outrages against the planet, they hint that what we most deeply desire is mystical union with the earth from which we have estranged ourselves. Poetry is deep listening to the

core earth-music as well as responsive song. It offers the possibility of homecoming through erotic longing rather than discursive and linear modes of knowing. However, as Lilburn hints in the context of discussing the *Cloud of Unknowing*: “God is incomprehensible to knowing, but not to loving, where he [she] appears as “sweetness,” the feel of the cognition of paradise.⁴⁹ The same insight applies to nature: what mere knowledge cannot attain, love may well be able to access, especially through poets who are willing to let their specialization in language serve the larger whole that cups us all.

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⁴⁹ *Going Home*, 150.