

Tradition and the Ornithological Talent

Travis Mason, *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013. xix + 286 pp.

Although he tries to do more, Travis Mason has written a fine study of the poetry of Don McKay. *Ornithologies of Desire* collects his previous work and adds new material, providing a full account of McKay's long career with exemplary readings of specific poems. Book-length studies of individual Canadian poets are rare things, and Mason's is even more unusual: in addition to its ecocritical approach, it offers four quasi-autobiographical interludes ("ecotones") written in the persona of "BC" ("birder-critic"), and a nine-page "Bird Concordance" supplying the common and scientific names for McKay's birds. The "ecotones" too often repeat points made elsewhere, either in this book or in McKay's inimitable work, but the ecocritical approach and the "Bird Concordance" are of great value. Ultimately Mason hopes to send his readers out of their specialized disciplines and into the outdoors. Taking a more pedestrian stance, I begin by noting that he fulfills two of his ambitions: he certainly "attends to 'the biological and ecological specificity evident in McKay's writing'" (xi) and makes "a case for the value of critical attention across disciplinary lines" (xi), and these are not small matters. But I cannot agree that he positions "McKay within a Canadian as well as an international (mostly European and American) tradition of eco- and avian poetry / poetics" (ix). His understanding of tradition in general is suspect, and his attention to earlier Canadian literature is at best perfunctory. He is at his best when he reads McKay in the context of contemporary issues.

After noting that "McKay's poetry and poetics operate in contradistinction to" Northrop Frye's and Margaret Atwood's influential "anthropocentric" generalizations about Canadian nature (xii), Mason begins with incisive readings of poems from *Birding, or desire* (1983), McKay's "breakthrough book" (3). Combining fine critical skills and extensive learning, he argues that "most poets who write about birds are less interested in birds and more interested in the types of people they represent" (10). Like McKay, Mason is interested in birds in their own right, and he recognizes that John Clare provides a precedent: "At a time when his contemporaries were attempting to articulate the grandiloquent terror of the

sublime landscape, Clare was intensely interested in recording how many eggs magpies lay...and in what they use to line their nests..." (12). The odd reference to the "terror" of a singular "sublime landscape" sounds more like Frye than Clare's contemporaries, but Mason's initial flights are otherwise so smooth that I am receptive to his idea that "birds are responsible for the first poem and the first poet, for human's successful attempts at flying..., for human music, and also for what is widely considered to be the first work of environmental writing in North America (Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*)" (12). After conceding that the "impulse to get out of the office and into the field" was anticipated in Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" (17), Mason discusses contemporary ecocritical debates about the problems of mimetic realism, anthropocentrism, and language in general. His several returns to these debates reveal anxieties shared with McKay, who states that "Admitting that you are a nature poet, nowadays, may make you seem something of a fool, as though you'd owned up to being a Sunday painter at, say, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design" ("Baler" 25). Mason agrees with McKay that a contemporary nature poet "acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both" ("Baler" 26; Mason 77 and 149), and that "nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully" ("Baler" 29; Mason 46). Never sounding like my bald summary of "Baler Twine," Mason carries with ease a heavy burden of scientific concepts in his brilliant discussions of many poems from the last three decades. Three examples give an idea of his strengths. One, he reads "Lift" and "Drag" as "companion poems" that "complement and complicate each other," while the collection in which they appear, *Another Gravity* (2000), "requires opposing forces—in the guise of poems—in order to achieve metaphoric flight and articulate an accurate discussion of the physics of flight" (65). Two, he discusses "Close-up on a Sharp-shinned Hawk" and "Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure" as "un-sonnets" (72-74 and 217-18) that move from avian poetics to the geopoetical concerns of McKay's most recent work (see Mason's essay in Soper and Bradley 475-509). Three, he writes that McKay's "Swallowings" and Howard Nemerov's "The Blue Swallows" "can be checked against ornithological literature while drawing attention to poetic conventions traditionally used to elevate the poet-speaker over the heavily symbolized bird" (71). Throughout he carefully responds to other critics, agreeing with most, but disagreeing respectfully with Susan Elmslie (182-84), and sharply with Richard Greene (156). If it is odd to begin with McKay's breakthrough and then deal with the earlier work later, it is also effective, and the same could be

said of the late acknowledgment of McKay's formal criticism, an underused resource. Discussing "Song for the Songs of the Common Raven" (from *Strike / Slip*, 2006) in his conclusion, Mason finds that McKay understands both the raven and Dylan Thomas as tricksters (225). Mason may believe in interdisciplinarity, but he has mastered the pertinent disciplinary skills.

Arguing that the birds in Romanticism "typically occupy decidedly symbolic realms, as distinct from ecological ones," Mason resolves to contrast "the absence of ecological detail among canonical English-language poets" with McKay's work (127). He is right to contrast McKay with his key predecessors, but he hits turbulence when he claims that "Chaucer, and by extension, the British Romantics represent a trajectory of thought that has contributed to Western instrumentalism..." (xvi). He has enough on his hands with McKay's response to Wordsworth, which includes a sense of "a wisdom to Wordsworth's handling of raw wilderness" ("Great" 43). Romanticism involves additional complications, since it is far from monolithic, as the example of Clare shows, and as recent critical emphases on class, race, and nationality confirm. And one of the key differences among the Romantics involves the complex reception of Wordsworth. If Keats' account of Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" is as severely critical as Mason assumes (224), then Keats both anticipates him and establishes the counter-voice of "the camelion Poet" ("To Woodhouse" 157) within Romanticism. Like other critics, Mason is influenced by the passage on "aeolian harpism" in McKay's influential "Baler Twine." For McKay, the poet who claims to be inspired by nature "converts natural energy into imaginative power, so that Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself" ("Baler" 27-28). It is a forceful point, but McKay complicates it immediately: "No wonder it is so compelling, whether we find it in Wordsworth, Neruda, or Levertov; it speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity" (28). Careful to include himself and his era in the temptation that he wants to avoid, McKay elsewhere describes himself as "probably still a mildly reconstructed Romantic" (Babstock 187), but Mason will not stay for a qualification. He wants to distinguish McKay's humility from Wordsworth's "self-serving lyric posturism" (123), but the contrast is dubious. McKay certainly has a sense of what Wordsworth called the "sad incompetence of human speech" (*The Prelude* 6.593, 1850 version), but his poetry usually involves what Mason calls "a strategic humility on the part of the speaker" (186), and that's a different thing. A really humble poet would be unlike to publish his work. Because he is

“characteristically self-deprecating,” as Mason notes (186), he is both the self doing the deprecating and the self being deprecated, as in Al Purdy’s work (to name an influence that Mason notes too briefly—257-58 n4). McKay describes that process of self-division with typical humour in “Five Ways to Lose Your Way”: “At the first sick urge of lostness the interrogative gets to work dividing self from self, finding a *you* to interrogate among the glum bureaucracies of *I*, then isolating this incompetent idiot in the dessicating ways of incredulity” (87). Out of such quarrels with himself, McKay makes poetry.

Mason’s limited understanding of Romanticism betrays a progressivism that sits oddly with an ecocritical commitment. It is neither humble nor accurate to describe Romanticism as “a vision of Man passively observing, describing, and ultimately constructing Nature” (201). Wordsworth insists in “Tintern Abbey” that we “half create” the world as we perceive it (105), and he calls the eye the “most despotic of our senses” in *The Prelude* (12.129, 1850 version). It is even less acceptable to write that Leonard Lutwack “effectively dampens the dream of the speaker in Keats’ [“Ode to a Nightingale”] by referring to Daedalus and Icarus, who have proven, ostensibly, ‘that the exercise of the imagination is not free like the flight of a bird, but uncertain and full of perils’” (Mason 82, quoting Lutwack 53). Like many of McKay’s poems, Keats’ ode involves the impossible desire for flight, and it ends with the recognition that “the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf” (73-74). There is no dampening needed. My point is that McKay is more sceptical and less anti-Romantic than Mason. I think of the passage in “Adagio for a Fallen Sparrow” in which “Keats and Shelley and *The Birds of Canada*” sit on one shelf (55). The frantic speaker of that comic poem is a long way from McKay, but they read the same books.

The problems in Mason’s understanding of Canadian poetry start with his reference to a singular “tradition” (ix), as if Pauline Johnson, E.J. Pratt, P.K. Page, and McKay had more in common than their citizenship. There is a revealing passage in “Ecotone Three” in which “BC” decides “to look for birds in Donna Bennett and Russell Brown’s Canadian-literature anthology” (165). Before reading Johnson’s “The Flight of the Crows” appreciatively, his attention “had begun to flag after reading the excerpt from Sara Jeanette Duncan’s *The Imperialist*” (166). His hour of browsing over, he soon returns to reading Linda Hutcheon, Laurie Ricou, Robert Kroetsch, John Pass, and Robert Bringhurst (167-71). Here and elsewhere, there is little distance between Mason and his persona, since both are at ease only with contemporary writers. Mason’s attention to earlier Cana-

dian poets is limited to one Lampman lyric, one Roberts sonnet, Avison's "The Butterfly" (the revisions of which are well discussed), several references to Dennis Lee, and three poems from P.K. Page (one a response to McKay). I will focus on Mason's remarks on the Confederation poets. In his most extensive commentary, Mason contrasts Lampman's "In November" with McKay's essay "Approaching the Clearing" (in *Deactivated West*). He argues that Lampman's speaker is "so idle...that he is incapable of paying attention to his surroundings, especially of listening to the sounds that surely would have animated the 'silent sober place' (Lampman 53) in which he stands" (142). It is hard to be critical of the silence in this poem if, as even Mason admits, sound "has yet to be extensively theorized in literary criticism" (141), but he is locked into his target: "For Lampman, as for Romantic poets more generally, the moment in the clearing represents a transcendent revelation of concealed truth" (141). By contrast, McKay emphasizes the "acoustic and imaginative aspects" of his clearing, allowing "for both lyric insight and experiential knowing" (141). In the poem that concludes McKay's essay (later called "Après Chainsaw"), "the dying stumps are explicit reminders of human violence," yet the "clearing is a soundscape that includes traces of human-made sound and a northern flicker's 'ghost laugh'" (143; quoting McKay, "Approaching" 110). Mason concludes that "McKay insinuates his work into a tradition, albeit a problematic one in Canadian history, of nature poetry" (143-44), but what is most problematic is Mason's understanding of tradition. He is even less interested in Roberts, whose sonnet "The Waking Earth" reveals a "godlike" arrogance (91). That move is evasive in two ways: first, even Mason concedes that ecocritical interest in Roberts should include his animal stories, but he buries the concession in a note (249, n8); second, Roberts wrote about a clearing in a sonnet that McKay regards as an example of "Roberts' keenness as a fine natural historian.... 'The Clearing' is notable as a poem which considers altered wilderness rather than farmland, as well as for a close rendering of a slash-and-burn clear-cut." Roberts describes the "holy transport" of the hermit thrush, and McKay maintains that "One utterance of that delicate four-stage set of musical wisps could, at a stroke, turn an entire taxi full of hyper-sceptical young urban poets into momentary mystics" ("Great" 49). Too thoughtful to force the poets of two centuries into a singular national tradition, McKay refers to "Canadian nature poetries" in the plural, and argues against the idea of a canon: "like the technological mindset which misjudges the complexity of ecosystems, it tends, at best, to oversimplify the situation among the poetries actually practised, and to divide them into the equivalent of flowers and weeds. At

worst, it renders the environment toxic” (“Great” 73). More generous than most of his admirers in his understanding of earlier Canadian poetry, McKay is also more sceptical of language and poetry in general, demonstrating a profound humility that challenges any facile progressivism:

It’s not as though poetry, passing through Modernism, and shedding Victorian conventions, had suddenly become congruent with the landscape; in large measure it turned away from the natural world to cultivate urban concerns, replacing Romantic sentiment with urbane irony. The root of the inadequacy lies not with stanzas and regular metre, but with language itself and the ontological assumptions embedded within it. (“Great” 35)

One impulse from that splendid passage can teach you more of Canadian poetry than all the sages can. Mason lacks McKay’s range, but *Ornithologies of Desire* is essential reading for anyone working on McKay.

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