Document generated on 10/12/2024 3:13 a.m.

Newfoundland Studies

Natural's Not in It:
Postcolonial Wilderness in Steffler's *The Grey Islands*

Adam Beardsworth

Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2010

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25_1art05

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)
1715-1430 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Beardsworth, A. (2010). Natural's Not in It:: Postcolonial Wilderness in Steffler's *The Grey Islands*. *Newfoundland Studies*, *25*(1), 91–114.

All rights reserved © Memorial University, 2010

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Natural's Not in It: Postcolonial Wilderness in Steffler's *The Grey Islands*

ADAM BEARDSWORTH

SINCE ITS INITIAL publication in 1985, John Steffler's collection of poems, *The Grey Islands,* has earned a reputation as a classic work of wilderness writing, one that should sit, as its dust jacket proclaims, "beside the works of Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and Aldo Leopold." While reading *The Grey Islands* as a work of wilderness writing aligns it with a distinctive, ecologically-minded tradition, it also brings, perhaps unfairly, the attendant theoretical stigma occasionally associated with that tradition to bear on Steffler's work. Positing him as a wilderness writer emphasizes the primacy of ecological concerns in the book, but it also risks reiterating the anthropocentric notion of nature as the *a priori* source of individual human redemption. In such a reading, nature becomes the unmediated origin from which the liberal humanist subject affirms his or her integrity, and upon which he or she asserts authority. Reading Steffler in this manner risks not only asserting a logic of domination that exalts the primacy of human rationality above ecological passivity, it also posits Steffler as a poet invested in maintaining the illusion of a stable lyric self at a time when such claims to subjective integrity were being routinely subverted by postmodern critical concerns.

This paper proposes a reading of *The Grey Islands* that bridges its ecocritical concerns with postcolonial theory. Conventionally, postcolonial theory and ecocriticism have represented distinct, and in some cases incompatible, critical approaches. While postcolonial theory has proven itself potent by exposing and often deconstructing the provisionality of imperialist rhetoric in colonial and neocolonial discourses, ecocriticism has often sought firmer ontological ground by examining the ways in which human affairs are regulated by their relation to a stable natural environment. *The Grey Islands*, by attending simultaneously to issues of postcolonial identity and ecological awareness, affirms a space in which

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR STUDIES, 25, 1 (2010)
1719-1726

postcolonial and ecocritical approaches are both coextensive and mutually beneficial. Steffler accomplishes this critical merger by ironically deconstructing his narrator's desire to locate a stable identity within both a rural culture and a pastoral environment. In postcolonial terms, Steffler's narrator naively views the rural locale with the gaze of the dominant culture, seeking ways in which he can profit personally from its harsh beauty while responding to its populace with a mixture of ignorance and condescension. The naiveté of his perspective, which is interrupted and challenged at several junctures by the regular dialogical intervention of local voices, emphasizes the discursive nature of the narrator's colonial mindset and foregrounds its rhetorical provisionality. While this postcolonial perspective represents an important, if not wholly unique, contribution to Newfoundland literature, the manner in which Steffler merges the provisionality of colonial discourse with ecological concerns signifies a distinct approach to ecocriticism. After the narrator's monologic authority as a liberal humanist subject is decentred by his dialogic postcolonial encounters with local voices and customs, it is then further destabilized by his encounters with a natural world that is inherently chaotic, unforgiving, and unconcerned with the private ruminations of his narrator's Romantic inclinations. Pitted against harsh environmental conditions, the boundary between the narrator's now fragile rational ego and the natural Other that he is confronted with becomes increasingly blurred. This happens as he recognizes that the ontological purity he sought in the wilderness is not only absent, but is in fact a discursive construct, just as his colonial notions about local identity proved to be. As various boundaries between self and other collapse in relation to both the local culture and to the wilderness, the narrator is forced to recognize the contingency of his own position as a liberal humanist subject, a contingency that shatters the integrity of his selfhood and drives him to the brink of madness. By evoking both postcolonial and ecocritical concerns in order to decentre the authority of Western liberal subjectivity, Steffler's *The Grey Islands* functions as more than a paean to the sanctity of the wilderness. It posits nature as an experience of disruption and dispersion, rather than as the source of wholeness or synthesis; and, in so, doing it identifies the ecological as an important locus of contestation in discussions of Newfoundland cultural identity.

Natural's not in it: Pastoral Discourse

The appeal to nature as a source of inspiration, redemption, and transcendence is a familiar poetic trope. In the North American tradition, the trope's popularity is most easily attributed to the work of American transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For each, the natural world signifies the locus of both material and spiritual authenticity. At a time when burgeoning capitalist demands were calling into question the sanctity of religious and political value systems, these

writers looked to the natural world as the foundation of aesthetic, ethical, and economic principles. Emerson, for example, defined the atavistic appeal of the natural world in his famous 1836 essay "Nature":

> All natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood. (1074)

For Emerson, nature must not be used as a "toy," or solely for human exploitative gain; rather, it ought to be considered a mirror of both inspiration and aspiration, one that "reflects" the pinnacle of human wisdom. A similar appeal to nature as the source of authentic expression is visible in the work of Thoreau, who claims that giving proper expression to nature demands a poet who "could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the forest has heaved ... whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring ... in sympathy with surrounding Nature (23-24). For Thoreau, the truest form of linguistic expression was that which spoke the language of nature. The difficulty for the poet was not finding inspiration, but putting nature to his service, using its elements to "speak for him." Like his friend Emerson, Thoreau turned to nature as a source of knowledge and linguistic inspiration, from which language could be forged as confidently as "farmers drive down stakes." Thoreau's desire for poetry which speaks the language of nature not only demonstrates his profound interest in and concern for the ecological in an era of increased exploitation of natural resources, it also demonstrates his belief in nature as the source of human experience. Rather than depending on the conventional tropes of organized religion, or of democratic American political ideologies; for Thoreau, as for Emerson and other American Transcendentalists, it is the natural which organizes the processes of daily existence. The writer who can press it into service will achieve a more pure and authentic form of linguistic expression.

While there is little question that the importance of nature in Thoreau and Emerson, along with other nineteenth-century American writers such as Walt Whitman,[1] profoundly influenced subsequent poets, critics, and ecologists, their reverence for nature as a source of truth and organic wholeness constitutes its own form of ideological discourse. The very language used by Thoreau, that it is up to the poet to "impress the winds and streams into his service" implies a logic of domination. This term is borrowed from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for whom such logic is embedded in the foundational narratives of Western Reason. In the progress of rationality:

> Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his own ends. In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.... (Adorno and Horkheimer 77)

Adorno and Horkheimer identify in this logic of domination the emergence of a bourgeois, or Western liberal humanist, perspective that envisions the natural as the object of human endeavour. As they rightly recognize, the paradox of this scenario is that as more human activity seeks to dominate the natural, its relation to nature becomes more alienated and unnatural. While the appeal to nature evident in American Transcendentalist writing hardly qualifies as the form of barbaric domination alluded to by Adorno and Horkheimer, it nevertheless bears the traces of such a bourgeois perspective. Nature, in such a reading, is the "substratum of domination" which is "revealed as always the same" and constitutes a sense of unity and integrity. In other words, writing about nature as a source of unity that belies otherwise destructive practice is itself a discourse that participates in a more general logic of domination. Even in literary terms, the freedom of the autonomous subject in relation to nature means the "unfreedom" and objectification of nature itself. Nature becomes the source of the writer's transcendence; it is used, in metaphorical terms, as the vehicle for overcoming the bonds of common existence. As Adorno argues elsewhere, "Art is not nature, a belief that idealism hoped to inculcate, but art does want to keep nature's promise; by taking it back into itself.... Art stands in for nature through its abolition in effigy; all naturalistic art is only deceptively close to nature because, analogous to industry, it relegates nature to raw material" ("Nature" 82). In other words, the artist in relation to nature has an anthropocentric role; even while aiming to mirror the plight of the environmental, he or she does so in terms that privilege the human subject in its relation to the ecological Other. The natural functions as a resource for the creation of a human aesthetic product. Such a process of reification absorbs the primordial and translates it into knowable human terms; in short, it appoints a discursive function to nature, one that figures it as a backdrop for human aesthetic exploration.

This is not to argue against the value of writers who are motivated by ecological concerns. It is to demonstrate the tangible presence of a liberal humanist bias in art that posits itself in relation to nature. This bias, as Marjorie Perloff has shown, is not one that appears only in works deemed "wilderness writing." It is one that can be traced in a clear way through the poetics of modernism in the works of writers typically regarded more for disrupting the integrity of conventional values than for placing faith in stable systems. Ezra Pound's conviction, for example, that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol" (qtd. in Perloff 29) betrays a

faith in nature as a source of mimetic realism capable of ordering aesthetic claims in the literary realm. Pound's sentiments are echoed by T.S. Eliot in "The Music of Poetry," where he asserts "There is one law of nature more powerful than any [other] ... the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear. Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose contact with the changing face of common intercourse" (qtd. in Perloff 29). In this passage Eliot, who is conjuring Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," invokes his belief in a poetry grounded in the rhythms of the natural, as "the simulation of natural speech" (Perloff 29). As Perloff argues, "The fear that the word will no longer adhere to the object haunts the poets of modernism" (31). Recognizing a fissure between language and the "natural" object of representation is problematic for such modern writers because it opens space for distrusting the integrity of the natural itself. As Perloff argues, "the declared enemy of modernism was said to be *artifice*, specifically the artifice of separating the *word* from the "natural object" (30); allowing artifice to enter unencumbered into the poetics of modernism questions the "natural" as a limit experience. If the logic of domination that assumes the unity of nature as the substratum of art, or if the logic that conceives of the natural as the *a priori* resource of poetic experience is disrupted, then poetry risks falling into provisionality, or into a *jouissance* that not only defers the experience of singularity gained through communion with nature, but that calls into question the authenticity of that experience.

However, reading Steffler's *The Grey Islands* as the inheritor of this longing for the regenerative powers of the natural world is perhaps, in the wake of postmodern interrogations of foundational ideas such as nature, somewhat shortsighted. This is particularly so when one considers Steffler's dependence upon postmodern theories of historiography in his novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. Given that the idea of nature as a stable, inscrutable term has been challenged by both postmodern theory and by a wide range of twentieth-century poets and poetic schools,[2] it seems surprising that Steffler's work has been positioned primarily as wilderness poetry. Doing so not only ignores the text's rhetorical challenges to the wilderness idiom, it also aligns the work with a fundamental strain of ecological criticism that seeks to uphold the sanctity of Nature as a source of authenticity. The fact that *The Grey Islands* has been positioned within the Canadian literary marketplace as a work of wilderness writing is evident from the dust jacket of Brick's 2000 re-issue of the collection:

> Since its first publication in 1985, *The Grey Islands* has become a classic of Canadian wilderness writing to set beside the works of Thoreau, Annie Dillard and Aldo Leopold. Using a broad range of forms and styles — lyric, anecdote, field notes, documents and pseudo-documents, ghost story, tall tale — Steffler relates the story of one man's pilgrimage to a remote island off Newfoundland's northern peninsula. Often comic, and always deeply passionate and sensuous, *The Grey Islands* tells of the sharpening of perceptions whetted by solitude, mind and rock, and of the pilgrim's

> people — living and dead — who have striven to exist under its harsh regime.... Steffler's writing delivers the bite of raw experience and embraces existence at the edge in all its terror and beauty.

This rhetoric evokes a particularly Romantic strain of environmental writing. Not only does it drop names of other major (and arguably disparate) figures in the tradition in order to situate Steffler within their lineage, it also clearly presents his narrator as an individual on a "pilgrimage," a term with both Romantic and religious connotations, whose perceptions are sharpened, in the true fashion of Romantic poetry, by a solitude that allows him to linguistically render "the bite of raw experience" and "existence at the edge in all its terror and beauty." Further, it alludes to Newfoundlanders in the possessive, as the passive pilgrims who stand to benefit from the insight and authority of their Upper Canadian visitor.

Approaching Steffler's poetry from such a Romantic perspective commits the fallacy of associating the work with the pre-established discourses of nature writing that envision nature as the locus of human redemption. In simpler terms, it considers Steffler's work as part of an ecological master narrative, one that asserts an anthropocentric logic in terms of the literary representation both of ecology and of local communities. It demands we accept the integrity of Steffler's subjective ego and the rationality of his search for wholeness within a welcoming ecological landscape. Such a perspective not only ignores the complexity of Steffler's approach to the lyric subject, it illustrates misconceptions about the goal of ecocritical studies at large. It reinforces the stigma that ecocriticism, as Scott Slovic explains, represents "merely a nostalgic, millenialist fad, a yearning to resurrect and re-explain a limited tradition of hackneyed pastoral or wilderness texts" (160). Steffler's work takes a more critical and mannered approach to ecocriticism, one that questions fundamentalist strains in ecological theory by seeking to merge contemporary theoretical perspectives with his own vision of Newfoundland ecology.

In *The Grey Islands*, this critical perspective is accomplished through a merger of ecocritical concerns with postmodern, and in particular postcolonial, theory. As Dominic Head argues:

> The process stems from the procedures of post-structuralist thinking, and supplies the ethical content of a variety of postmodernist expressions (post-colonial literature and theory are exemplary in this connection). The process itself is characterized by a paradoxical combination of decentring and recentring: traditional given hierarchies are overturned — the assumptions on which they are based decentred — and a new provisional platform of judgment is installed in a qualified recentring. A particular construction of ecological thinking can be shown to be based on this same paradoxical combination. This is important because it is easy to assume that a new ecological grand theory — the planet as limit — must provoke the postmodernist's incredulity.... Moreover, prescriptions for the best action, from an ecological perspective, are neces-

> sarily provisional, continually transformed as the scientific ideas on which they are based are contested and transformed. (28)

Steffler's subtle yet distinct emphasis on a postmodern, provisional approach to the ecological makes the collection more than a conventional work of wilderness writing invested in reiterating a grand ecological theory of planetary unity or organic wholeness. Rather, Steffler's text embraces the notion that before an enlightened approach to the ecological can be fully broached, the implicit logic of domination that upholds the authority of Western liberal subjectivity must first be interrogated and decentred, even if it is done in a qualified and provisional manner.

Conventionally, literature classified as postcolonial accomplishes this deprivileging of the liberal subject by creating scenarios in which the discourse of the colonizer is challenged, rhetorically, ironically, satirically, or otherwise, by the discourse of the colonized, or the repressed Other. This process is more complicated in ecological terms since the repressed Other, the land itself, has no subjectivity of its own. It cannot speak for itself and therefore can offer no direct rhetorical challenge to the discourse of the colonizer. Steffler overcomes this problem by incorprating postcolonial elements into the text in order to help awaken his narrator to his own ignorance and arrogance in relation to the local, "colonized" culture in which he has immersed himself. For a text that has been recognized as a work of wilderness literature, a large portion of its content actually takes place within a Newfoundland outport. The first of the book's four sections is devoted to the narrator's subtle immersion in the community that marks his point of embarkation for the island. More than a simple stopover point, this section chronicles a shift in the narrator's perception. His journey begins with idealized visions of the "streams, the little graveyards fenced with sticks, and high on a gravel beach a man spreading nets, his single boat perched on a spruce pole ramp" (Cow Head" 25). Initially, the narrator sees this idealized vista as a metaphorical starting point for his excursion into the wild, or what he refers to as "the spot it starts, rock, sea opening to whatever they really hold" (25). However, the more time he spends in the rural locale, the more his ideological perspective is challenged by the authority of its inhabitants. Steffler conveys this challenge by making his narrator the subject of a suspicious gaze, rather than the object of a colonizing one, as when he solicits a local fisherman for a ride to the island:

> he shakes my hand, cautious,
> feeling what kind of man.
> traveller, landsman.
> (salesman? missionary? taxman? crook?)
> I want to get to the island I tell him,
> hear he takes people out.

> he spits. goes back to filing.
> it spiles a day, he warns.
>
> then flings out what it'll cost.
> *if* we can go on the water.
>
> I wait.
>
> am I with the government?
> no no! (what'll I call myself?)
> I just want to spend some time out there
> fish for trout.
>
> he cuts his price in half. (37-38)

The fisherman's cautious gaze unsettles the narrator. He becomes aware that the fisherman, rather than regarding him as an enthusiast with good intentions, immediately groups him with a list of other foreign visitors to the region, each of whom has sought, in one form or another, to either exploit or impose upon the rural culture. The fact that the fisherman claims taking the narrator to the island "spiles a day" and is at any rate subject to the water and weather conditions further places the narrator at the authority of the local. No longer can his identification with the natural landscape take place purely on his own terms; rather, it must first pass through the authority of rural culture. In this regard, the narrator is forced to relinquish his own sense of privilege, a process that recurs at several points in the text, including the sporadic interjection of the "Nels" poems which function as dialogic interventions written from the first-person perspective of a local resident. As confidence in his own subjective authority diminishes, he is forced into a reappraisal of his identity, one that leads him to relinquish his belief in the primacy of his bourgeois subjectivity. While this relinquishment leads to a demarginalization of the colonized Other within his discursive practices, it also opens him to a less deterministic approach to the ecological. Through his relation to a colonized Other, he is forced to recognize the logic of domination implicit in his own discourse and is then able to expand his understanding of that flawed logic to his relationship with the pastoral world he set out to find himself in. This allows him to change his recognition of the environment from seeing it as an objective locus for the fulfillment of human needs, to a locus predicated on a profound and fundamental estrangement. The more that his narrator attempts to locate a sense of the atavistic within the natural world, the more he recognizes that desire is a fundamentally discursive construct. On a material level, the idealism of the narrator's vision of wilderness is dispelled by the hostile conditions he experiences on the island. He has moved himself to a "place that is wet all the time ... always sopping with recent rain" (119), where there is "bad food. little food. fever in bed" (129), where things "flower / in death" (158), where "cold.

wet. silver. / grey." are "not qualities but / the only things here" (162). The difficulty of representing this condition aesthetically is mirrored by the pastiche style of the narrative, which blends lyric poems, journal entries, and other discursive incursions, including census data and a pamphlet on proper lifestyle habits (121). This pastiche further deconstructs the narrator's authority as a singular, subjective voice and foregrounds the implicit difficulty of rendering an authentic account of his wilderness experience. In such a formation, elements of the natural repressed by Romantic discourse begin to return in the form of a traumatic, and impossible event, one that defies simple representation and that evokes what Jacques Lacan refers to as the "Real" in his order of psychic symbolization.[3] The narrator's true task, then, becomes not one of finding personal redemption within the wilderness, but one of coming to terms with the Real trauma of ecological crisis, an activity that alerts him to his own provisionality, rather than integrity, as a subject.

Postcolonial Meets Ecological

While the possibility of a fruitful relationship between environmental criticism and postcolonial criticism appears to exist, to date it has remained largely undeveloped.[4] Rob Nixon identifies four primary schisms between postcolonialism and ecocriticism:

> First, postcolonialists have tended to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation. Ecocritics, on the other hand, have historically been drawn more to discourses of purity: virgin wilderness and the preservation of "uncorrupted" last great places. Second, postcolonial writing and criticism largely concern themselves with displacement, while environmental literary studies has tended to give priority to the literature of place. Third, and relatedly, postcolonial studies has tended to favor the cosmopolitan and the transnational. Postcolonialists are typically critical of nationalism, whereas the canons of environmental literature and criticism have developed within a national (and often nationalistic) American framework. Fourth, postcolonialism has devoted considerable attention to excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory. By contrast, within much environmental literature and criticism, something different happens to history. It is often repressed or subordinated to the pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature. (235)

It is precisely these schisms that Steffler addresses in *The Grey Islands*. By combining postcolonial elements with an ecological perspective, he attempts to overcome the claim that the desire of wilderness writers to colonize empty space in search of solitude risks "burying the very histories that [postcolonial critics] have sought to unearth" (Nixon 235). By emphasizing the gradual displacement of his narrator in postcolonial terms, as he does consistently in the first section of the text

during his exchanges with local culture, Steffler demonstrates the subject's vulnerability, rather than his integrity, within a provisional environmental history. Setting the text in rural Newfoundland, an environmental region notorious not only for its harsh weather, but for the difficult socioeconomic sanctions it imposes upon a populace dependent upon its fishery, helps temporalize Steffler's environmental narrative rather than remove it from discourses of history. History, therefore, remains present, rather than repressed. His ecological exploration forces the narrator to rethink his initial impulse to achieve a solitary communion with nature.

Steffler inaugurates the subtle decentring of the narrator's subject position by first setting him up as a Romantic figure longing to escape an unsatisfying existence as a town planner. The arc of the narrative functions as a sort of negative bildungsroman, one in which the narrator sets out in search of himself only to relinquish the desire for singular identity in favour of provisionality and estrangement. In the first poem of Section One, for example, he conveys his sense of loneliness as he drives up Newfoundland's largely barren Northern Peninsula, towards the outport community that will eventually provide him with passage to the Grey Islands:

> Driving all day. mist and rain. the highway
> deserted. miles of bunchbacked spruce. grey sea
> butting the rock.
>
> along the mud road to Roddickton. dark backwoods
> feeling. bush on all sides. gravel pits. Old
> machines along the way.
>
> hardly a soul. (21)

Filled with images of a journey into isolation, the early poem conforms to the clichés of Romantic enterprise. The narrator is forced to journey into the wilderness alone, "driving all day" through a pathetic fallacy of "mist and rain" into a harsh locale where the "grey sea" is "butting the rock." While the broken, imagistic lines indicate an indebtedness to modernist style, signs that he is leaving an oppressive, modern technological world and entering something much more primitive are indicated by the "mud road," "gravel pits," and "old machines" that litter the roadside. The movement away from the modern signifies a desire to return to a stark natural space, free from the burdens of modern technology. The pathos of the poem's punning final line "hardly a soul" indicates an idealization of isolation within a harsh, soulless landscape. Ironically, however, this idealization takes place from within the insular shelter of the narrator's vehicle, which traverses not back in time but along the regional axis that takes him into more impoverished territory. His sheltered perspective helps to maintain the boundaries between interior and exterior, between self and Other, that allow the integrity of both his

liberal subjectivity, and the idealistic natural discourse that sustains it, to remain intact.

This boundary between self and Other is emphasized further in subsequent poems in the book's first section. For example, after hearing rumours that "*A mad man is living alone*" on the island, he wonders "What will he do when I step into his thoughts" (22), implying concern that the boundaries that define his selfhood, posited as rational against the madness of the islander, could be compromised. While this poem foreshadows his later fascination with the island's madman, at this early juncture it betrays his own concern with maintaining a comfortable and complacent sense of identity when confronted by alterior paradigms. Later, he describes his own journey as one of self-deprivation that requires a relinquishment of comfort and a calculated level of self-discipline:

> Karen gone. Peter and Anna gone. House closed up. The fact hitting me more and more real. I won't be seeing them all summer long. And I feel stupid all by myself, want to turn back, recall, revise everything. But the road's too narrow to turn around and the few side trails go by so fast I miss every one of them. (24)

His commitment to an ascetic, self-abnegating search for a central, core subjectivity means rejecting family, responsibility, and other incursions upon what he perceives to be the true integrity of his soul, a fact that forces him to become reconciled with "The brutal mechanics of a wish come true" (25). His understanding of these "brutal mechanics" signifies a growing understanding of the distance between his ideal vision of a solitary wilderness sojourn as one that will lead to a sense of self-discovery and composure, and the actual physical and psychological difficulties that he encounters once alone.

The limitations of his own perspective as a unique sensibility in search of identity within this foreign environment are first exposed when he admits, while ruminating over the time he's spent in Newfoundland, "Four years and I'm still like a tourist here. / I haven't even left the motel" (26). The narrator's touristic sensibility indicates his lack of experience within the natural world. For him it is a virgin territory, one he has come to idealize from a comfortably bourgeois position. His idealistic vision of that landscape cannot be the product of experience since he figuratively hasn't "even left the motel" during his four years in Newfoundland. Rather, the notion of an ideal landscape into which he can venture for subjective redemption is the product of his own discursive imagination. It speaks less to a desire to find organic integrity within the ecological than it does to a desire for escape from an overwhelming sense of personal dissatisfaction — with family, with career, and with self — in short, with his own provisional and inexorable place in history.

The idea that the narrator is more interested in satisfying personal shortcomings than understanding ecological crisis becomes clear in a journal-type prose entry that details his unhappiness with his career in Newfoundland:

> The first job they gave me, this new town planner straight from U of T, when they'd driven me round the place, thriving Milliken Harbour, and we sat in the 'conference room,' myself and the councilmen — two contractors, the fish-plant manager, and the man with the liquor commission franchise — and I asked were there any areas that needed immediate attention, and they all agreed the bears was a headache this time o' year, tearin the hell outa the town dump.... They wanted to talk about cheap fencing and scarecrows and machines that go bang every thirty seconds. I got them a grant and had an incinerator put in, and that's still the most popular thing I've done. Four years ago. And the rest has been mostly road signs and litter barrels and organizing the odd parade. (27)

The personal dissatisfaction conveyed in this passage is expressed through the lens of a colonizing gaze. The narrator, during his first months in Newfoundland, feels that his University of Toronto education and ambition is being wasted on the parochial concerns of a rural culture that would rather spend town money on ridding the dump of bears than on making more visible and substantial civic improvements. The condescending manner in which the narrator views his colleagues as rural "Others" with less education and even intellect than his own, is highlighted by his imitation of Newfoundland dialect: "the bears was a / headache this time o' year, tearin the hell outa the town dump." By pitting his own grammatically superior, Queen's English against a local dialect, he creates a distancing effect that posits local identity as other than what he conceives to be the standard, intellectual norm. This impatience with Newfoundland rural attitudes becomes the focal point of his resolve to change his life as the poem progresses. Feeling ashamed by the fact that he is working a job that he believes fails to nurture his ambition and gifts, he slowly mixes that shame with self-contempt for his own lack of personal motivation:

> Town planner. Town joe-boy is what I've been. But whose fault is that? I'd find lots to do if this place meant anything to me. Or if the people wanted to change a thing. And I'm dying bit by bit, shrinking, drying up along with my dreams of the New Jerusalem, the four-gated golden city with market squares and green belts and pedestrian streets and old buildings restored and tourist money pouring in. I laugh at that now, an old pain I screw myself with, and every once in awhile (like every day) it hits me I've got to get out of here to save what's left of me.... (27)

While the narrator here recognizes that he is partly responsible for his own feelings of dissatisfaction, he still blames his inability to integrate into a new culture, one where people are reluctant to adapt to what he believes is his more progressive

and modern vision, as the primary problem. While he now scoffs at his early idealistic designs as town planner, he views their malfunction as a result of attempting to impose modern plans and designs on a rural culture, a mindset that betrays his colonial perspective. Rather than searching for means of better understanding his predicament and of finding proactive ways of integrating cultural perspectives, he perceives his failure in the community as both a threat to the preservation of his own bourgeois subjectivity, and as an inability to impose that sensibility upon his adopted culture. As such, he begins to recognize his position as a sort of unsuccessful imperialist. He responds to this threat by deciding that to preserve the integrity of that selfhood, he must leave before he is too thoroughly disenfranchised.

However, as the narrator awaits his journey to the island, his confidence not only in the authority of his own liberal subjectivity, but also in the sanctity of the wilderness that lies ahead of him, is subtly challenged by the Newfoundlanders that he encounters. It is in these challenges that a postcolonial element begins to emerge. This turn towards an ironic self-deconstruction is perhaps first visible in a pastiche poem comprised of a song (complete with musical notation) that he encounters as he searches for a place to stay while awaiting passage to the island. The pastiche poem signals the deprivileging of his subjectivity on a number of levels. First, it functions as an example of abrogation, or of "seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft *et al* 37). The song wrenches discourse out of the narrator's mouth and signals his entry into a space in which his cultural and linguistic authority is deprivileged. This deprivileging of his subjectivity is furthered by the poem's pastiche style. The incursion of the song into the poem interrupts the conventional "lyric" format, a style most often associated with evincing the emotive characteristics of the poem's lyric voice. The narrator's lyric self is further denied in the poem's second half, which is composed of the welcoming monologue of his host:

> Of course there's room!
> There's always room.
> Albert's in Walter's room and Lonz's comin back,
> but Jewelleen's in Roddickton.
> You can have her bed for a night. (39)

On one level, this monologue introduces the narrator to the uncompromising hospitality of the Newfoundland community in which he finds himself. More importantly, however, the emphasis that Steffler here places on the voice of the local culture indicates that the narrator, in his search for the elusive autonomy and integrity of his own self, is increasingly surrounded by, and dependent upon, the

authority of Newfoundland culture, the very culture that, earlier, he felt impinged upon his personal satisfaction and growth.

The intervention of this local voice exemplifies a trend towards dialogics that emerges in the text. The more integrated the narrator becomes within the local community, the more his voice — both within single poems and within the collection itself — gives way to the voices of others. For example, Steffler sporadically employs a series of "Nels" poems. Generally conveyed in a prose style, the poems work to demonstrate how local dialect interrupts and challenges the authority of the narrator's colonial mindset. In several of the "Nels" poems, the effect is one that de-Romanticizes the ideal vision of the Newfoundland landscape by emphasizing the harsh reality of life within its conditions, as in the poem about Aaron Shale:

> The year his boy Clement died, the fish was some thick.
> They was bringin in three, four skiff-loads a day. And Aaron
> Wouldn't take the time to put his son in the ground. He
> Ordered the others to salt the boy, just like a fish, and he
> Kept him like that out on his stage till the end of the season.
> Then they buried him. When the fish was done. (83)

This story, which contributes to a sense of history and local lore, also subverts the narrator's sentimentality by introducing an element of the macabre and grotesque into his Romantic paradigm. Aaron Shale's unwillingness to bury his son signifies his unwillingness to confront trauma; by salting the boy, he retains him a little longer within the known world before finally relinquishing him to the land, and to the finality of death which stands beyond the possibility of symbolization. Within the scheme of the text itself, however, the poem's content is perhaps not as important as its presence as a voice of dialogic interference, as an element that interrupts the narrator's monologic gaze. As Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the introduction of heteroglossia into a text, particularly of the sort that includes elements of the Rabelaisian grotesque, works to interrupt and challenge the fluidity of ideological discourse. According to Bakhtin, "The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance" (272). The "dialogized heteroglossia" that filters its way into the text through the "Nels" poems, and through the frequent incursion of local voices, destabilizes and decentres the authority of the narrator's monologic discourse. As such, it foregrounds the provisionality of his discursive perspective and highlights the Romantic nature of his wilderness project in the midst of an established community that is dealing with its own strained relation to the natural world.

However, the longer he spends immersed within that local culture, the more his idealized vision is challenged, as when he sits to eat squid with his boarding family:

> 'Does ya mind the tails?' she calls. I stop, mouth full, look at my plate. Tiny dirigibles. Noses sewn shut. Tail fins in place at the back.
>
> 'No,' I say, stab, bite another, 'tail meat's the same as the rest.' All the kids giggle, writhe, choke, go red in the face.
>
> 'Oh, *I* can't eat 'em,' she says. 'I doesn't know why, just never could fancy 'em.' She purses her lips, arches her pinkies, plucks the flukes off another squid. (41)

In this exchange, the narrator's small error of eating a portion of the squid normally considered undesirable betrays the fact that he is unfamiliar with local customs. This decentres his authority in the face of his visitors and positions him as the Other, forced to endure the gazes of those around him, signified here by the giggling girls. His lack of authority within the household calls into question the integrity of his subject position and marks the transition from a colonizing to a colonized status. The gaze and laughter of those around him demonstrates a dialectical tension between his own monologic perspective, and the dialogue of those around him. His idealized vision of the landscape exists in dynamic tension with the very different vision of the place evoked by those who live within it. This dialectical struggle evokes what Bakhtin calls a centripetal/centrifugal tension which, as Patrick D. Murphy argues, "provides a means of countering totalization, so that any totality is continuously recognized as an already relativized, temporal centripetal entity in need of centrifugal destabilizing. While human forces are always at work centralizing, quantifying, and coding phenomena, other human forces are always challenging and breaking up such reductions and constructions in order to sustain themselves" (194). It is this challenge to the centrality, or centripetal pull of the narrator's Romantic monologue, that the dialogue of the local culture consistently presents. By demonstrating his unfamiliarity with local customs, the validity of his idealized quest into the wilderness also comes under suspicion: it demonstrates a rift between his own vision of the wilderness and the material reality he encounters there. The narrator here undergoes a type of decentring familiar to postcolonial texts, one "Where the colonizer and his discourses are decentred in relation to the colonized (now no longer marginalized)" (Head 28).

This process is extended during further encounters with the local population. For example, when he later convinces Nels to allow him to join on a squid boat, he recognizes that "They do me the favour of letting me try to help" (44). This emergent sense of humility is furthered in a separate squid poem where he contemplates

the disparity between the way the squid function under water, and the very different reality of encountering them once caught:

> dark in the water long forms shoot criss cross
> like limbs of a sunken forest. Strange.
> not the same things we're pulling in,
> stringy legs, flabby pouches.
>
> coming up they ink wildly, puff like
> parachutes. trying to put on the brakes.
>
> dying they make small sunsets
> with their bodies. glow blood-orange, freckle
> like trout, huff, sigh. drain iridescent
> green. lemon. White
>
> 'Dry 'em on a line,' Nels says. 'Wintertime,
> put 'em in a toaster same as a slice a bread.
> *Sure*! Better 'n potato chips!' (47)

In this poem a connection between the postcolonial and the ecocritical becomes visible. After spending a few days in the local community, and now fishing on the squid boat, the narrator has experienced the reversal of the colonizing gaze that he first brought to the island. Recognizing the failure of the idealistic discourse that he initially imposed on local culture, he now begins to understand it as both inflected with mass hegemony, and built on technical and experiential knowledge of working within harsh environmental and economic realities. In postcolonial terms, learning these lessons has deprivileged his authority as a Western liberal subject and estranged him from the ideal of a pastoral community that he initially brought with him. Metaphorically, he is like the squid in the poem, removed from the vision of natural beauty that he desires and placed in a strange, uncomfortable reality. On the ecocritical level, however, this poem emphasizes Nature itself as both a source of estrangement and a locus of exploitation. Gazing into the water, he recognizes a fundamental gap between the natural world and his idealistic symbolization of it. Nature, like the local community before it, presents itself as both alterior, and as indifferent to the Romantic discursive projections he places upon it.

However, the ecocritical and postcolonial also merge on a different level in this poem. The manner in which the fishermen quickly appropriate the squid for their own purposes suggests a logic of domination familiar to that of the colonizer and colonized, one in which the natural world itself becomes exploited and colonized. For Steffler's narrator, having his own authority and integrity challenged from a postcolonial perspective awakens him both to the limitations of his identity in relation to local culture, and to the limitations of his attitude toward nature. He has

begun to understand his provisional place as a liberal subject who initially regarded the local culture through a colonizing lens. Now, he is forced to see how local culture applies a similar logic of domination to the natural world that the narrator views as a source of purity and redemption. The squid that, in their natural habitat, create forms of effortless beauty as they "shoot criss cross / like limbs of a sunken forest" are drained of their "iridescent / green, lemon, white" as they die in "small sunsets" before being consumed toasted "as a slice of bread." In this poem, the physical manifestations of the squid, as symbols of the resources of the natural world, are transformed into consumable commodities. The fishing excursion forces the narrator to recognize that the human relationship with the natural world is not one invested purely in a bourgeois desire for reconciliation with a lost space of redemption; rather it is one based on violence, exploitation, and the cruel realities of harvesting. This realization leads him to refigure his relationship to the natural world; as he ventures towards the island, he begins to see it as a space of resistance — a postcolonial space — rather than a vast and empty space of solitude and redemption.

Steffler therefore figures the ecological crisis as a crisis of representation. Just as postcolonial literature has addressed a crisis of representation by creating discursive space for repressed literatures, Steffler attempts to open up a discursive ecological space by allowing the environment to challenge his narrator's subjective authority. As such, he posits the ecological crisis as a repressed discourse, one that threatens the integrity of the liberal subject. The problem becomes one of finding a way to allow the ecological to speak for itself, to occupy a subject position that can contribute its own centrifugal dialogic force, rather than remain the repressed object of an anthropocentric logic of domination. Rather than animating Nature as a fantastic speaking subject, Steffler gives it a voice in negation, emphasizing its refusal to submit to discourses of human symbolization.

Real Nature and the Return of the Ecological Repressed

Coming to terms with ecological demands means that the narrator must learn to engage them beyond the discursive level of idealism. Such an engagement indicates the possibility of an ecological approach capable of reflecting not only a less anthropocentric consideration of the environment, but also a firmer understanding of how to approach contemporary ecological crisis. As Slavoj Zizek argues:

> The radical character of the ecological crisis is not to be underestimated. The crisis is radical not only because of its effective danger, i.e., it is not just that what is at stake is the very survival of humankind. What is at stake is the most unquestionable presuppositions, the very horizon of our meaning, our everyday understanding of 'nature' as a regular, rhythmic process.... Hence our unwillingness to take the

> ecological crisis completely seriously; hence the fact that variation on the famous disavowal, 'I know very well (that things are deadly serious ...), but just the same ... (I don't really believe it, I'm not really prepared to integrate it into my symbolic universe, and that is why I continue to act as if ecology is of no lasting consequences for my everyday life).' (qtd. in Kerridge 2)

In other words, ecological crisis challenges and threatens to unravel the very concept of nature. No longer a locus of pastoral beauty, verdant freshness, or organic wholeness, nature demands to be re-considered in more threatening terms. In short, it needs to be approached as a demonstration of the Lacanian Real, or that which exists at the core of experience, beyond representation. Accepting the Real as an unsettling and traumatic presence at the core of natural experience, as that which is not contained by, and which disrupts, conventional representation, presents a direct challenge to discourses of the natural that appeal to organic integrity and wholeness. In *The Grey Islands*, viewing the natural as a manifestation of the Real demands that the relationship between nature and the narrator be reconceived as essentially unsettling and irreducible to a notion of unity and integrity. However, it also demands that the trauma of nature be understood as an integral part of its reality, not as a danger that can be avoided, or as a flaw that can be subsumed either in terms of technological domination or aesthetic representation. As Zizek argues:

> If we grasp the ecological crisis as a traumatic kernel to be kept at a distance by obsessive activity, or as the bearer of a message, a call to find new roots in nature, we blind ourselves in both cases to the irreducible gap separating the real from its modes of symbolization. The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap … without endeavoring to suspend it through fetishistic disavowal, to keep it concealed through obsessive activity, or to reduce the gap between the real and the symbolic by projecting a (symbolic) message into the real. (qtd. in Kerridge 3)

We see this movement, this desire to assume the gap rather than to symbolize nature, in the third section of *The Grey Islands*. Already unsure of his own authority as a subject after his time in the local community, the narrator finds himself incapable of representing the landscape in idealistic, pastoral terms after moving into the natural world. In this section, traces of the earlier idealization of the natural world are replaced with a vision of Nature predicated upon the acceptance of absence or loss:

> not only the beach-rock road
> (a hedge of alders now snaking
> the salt flats, skirting the shore),
> not only the faint village trails
> are paths leading to your feet, guiding
> your eyes to reconstruct the hill

> walls, the sea-windows and doors
> that housed these people's lives,
> the graves too are paths,
> the fallen church is a path,
> the tangled gardens, wind-hollow
> houses are paths you can't help
> following. (103)

In this poem, Steffler invokes a metaphor of walking down paths to convey a desire for coming to terms with an intangible Real. The first stanza indicates a movement from literal nature into a figurative reconstruction of "doors / that housed these people's lives." Such a movement begins to figure nature not as a source of redemption, but as a source of estrangement. It is one responsible for human fracture rather than integration, as signified by the dilapidated state of the island's structures. This movement towards disfiguration is furthered in the images of "graves," "fallen-churches," "tangled gardens," and "wind-hollow / houses." Each image evokes the failure of a human endeavour in the midst of hostile environmental circumstances. The sanctity of the church has been compromised, the gardens overgrown, and the domestic destroyed. Metaphorically, the failure of each human endeavour signifies a loss of anthropocentric authority. As the narrator follows the paths through these fallen monuments he undergoes a further loss of subjective authority; nevertheless, he "can't help following" as he's drawn closer to nature as a source of the Real that simultaneously attracts and repels. His walk through these paths signifies a walk away from a conceptualization of nature that posits it as a source for human mastery. Here, nature reveals its hostility in the face of that logic of domination. As it overwhelms the abandoned human structures, it distinguishes itself as that which cannot be easily contained by either human intervention, or aesthetic symbolization. The narrator's willingness to follow these paths suggests not the fulfillment of his pastoral quest through self-objectivization; rather, it awakens him to the limitations of his own subject position. No longer is the ecological the subject of his dominant gaze; here, an ironic reversal has taken place, one that challenges the narrator's self-presence. The indifference of the ecological to his presence functions as a blemish on his ideological vision of the environment and forges an irreducible split between his subjectivity and the ecological element with which he desires to integrate.

The truth of nature therefore becomes signifiable only in negative terms, as a presence that lacks a physical manifestation, and that resides in this split between his subjective vision of the ecological and its own objective presence. As Adorno puts it:

> Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity. As long as this spell prevails, the nonidentical has no positive existence. Therefore natural beauty remains as dispersed and uncertain as what it promises, that

> which surpasses all human immanence. The pain in the face of beauty, nowhere more visceral than in the experience of nature, is as much longing for what beauty promises but never unveils as it is suffering at the inadequacy of the appearance, which fails beauty while wanting to make itself like it. (82)

For Steffler's narrator this "pain in the face of beauty" that he encounters in his "experience of nature" demonstrates the split between his discursive symbolization of nature, one which he has inherited from literary and cultural history, and his inability to adequately symbolize the nonidentical, the Real Nature he actually encounters. This inability to come to terms with the natural presents a direct affront to his subjective autonomy. While the book begins with the narrator setting out to find "some blunt place I / can't go beyond" (13), he is now forced to confront "the sadness of things stalled in the earth" (105) and "the background pull / an aching magnet inside you" (134). In other words, he moves from a logic of domination in which he desired to assert himself onto the landscape, to a state of anxiety as his familiar modes of symbolization break down. It is in this challenge to his autonomy that Steffler most fully integrates an ecocritical perspective with a postcolonial one. The ecological, by refusing disclosure of the Real, will not submit to the discursive logic of the narrator's Romantic quest for self and solitude: in short, it refuses to grant freedom to the subject by functioning as "Other" to the narrator's discursive authority. Instead, it presents a challenge to the very idea of subjective identity that ultimately blurs boundaries between madness and reality.

The Madness of Nature, the Madness of the Real

The breakdown of the narrator's integrity as a subject once he is confronted by the Real of nature forces him to confront difficult psychological scenarios. As Zizek explains, "The process of psychotic breakdown corresponds precisely to the breakdown of the boundary separating reality from the Real ("Undergrowth" 22). While Steffler's narrator, outside of organized moments of angst, fear, and loneliness, does not slip completely into madness, he comes to identify with the spectral figure of Carm Denny, the island's last tenant who "Got pretty strange and the RCMP took him off late last fall. / He's in St. John's now. / In the mental" (43). The identification with Carm, whose presence on the island he initially perceived as a threat to his own solitude, begins as the narrator surveys what remains of the small hut that Carm inhabited. After commenting on the orderly arrangement of the domicile, he ruminates over Carm's madness and removal from the island:

> and where is he now? shot full
> of sedative in some bed or chair.
> nothing at all in his head or hands.

> his life, his whole work broken off
> smashed by our superior tidiness
> as though it's a favour to him to have
> stopped him from meeting once and for all
>
> whatever was haunting him
> or on some blue winter day
> letting the ringing hills be
> the very last bit of what he know. (110)

From the narrator's perspective as the sole inhabitant of the island, he identifies with Carm rather than regard him as a "mad" Other. Further, he perceives Carm's forced removal from the island as an injustice, one based on not only a misunderstanding of Carm's state of mind, but on a misreading of his relation to the island. Carm's proximity to the Real, his ability to survive once the symbolic barriers between his own subjectivity and the violent exterior world have been broken down, is perceived as a threat by those observing him. For instance, as the narrator at one points sits huddled in his own cabin while "the wind sea and rain stomp the / earth and cabin walls to another crescendo" (111), he considers how Carm also negotiated, both literally and figuratively, the thin precipice between cogent interior reality and a more violent, exterior Real:

> Carm Denny
> who loved his island
> and lived alone with its grinding voices
> must have expected the same,
> guarding his house with charms
> blacking his windows at night
> to hide himself
>
> what else could such cold crags
> such heaving water intend? (111)

In this poem the physical structure that protects Carm from the elements signifies the thin but tangible barrier that separates him from a direct encounter with the Lacanian Real as manifested in the violence of Nature. As Zizek claims, "the barrier separating the Real from reality is therefore the very condition of a minimum of 'normality'; madness — psychosis — sets in when this barrier falls down and the Real either overflows into reality (as in autistic breakdown) or is itself included in reality (as in paranoia, where it assumes the form of the 'Other of the Other')" ("Undergrowth" 23). Carm has neither lost the barrier between madness and reality nor has he mistaken, in paranoid fashion, madness for reality. Rather, he sits in proximity to an encounter with the Real while "blacking his windows at night / to

hide himself" from a direct encounter. In this regard, Carm assumes the gap between the symbolization of Nature, and the trauma of the Real.

As the narrator further identifies with Carm, he also begins to assume the gap between the Real and his modes of symbolization. Steffler evokes an allegiance between Carm's state of mind and that ultimately experienced by the narrator by having him take up residence in Carm's cabin:

> I decided to move into Carm's cabin yesterday. His place is closer to good fishing and has a roof without leaks and a better stove. Devoted the day to carrying things here and tidying up — though surprisingly little of that to do: some bean tins and candle ends left by visitors. I already feel completely at home. The building and location make more sense, the windows take in all the shore and bay.
>
> It's like standing inside the head of someone who knows the place. (146)

While the narrator's move into Carm's cabin makes sense on a utilitarian level, it also has symbolic significance. He now feels "completely at home" in a place that "makes more sense." Both of these indicators suggest that psychologically, he is coming to terms with the reality of the place. In order to do so, he must "stand inside the head" of someone who is perceived as mad by others. The Real of the environment, his recognition of its status as the nonidentical, or that which cannot be fully subsumed into his symbolic universe, forces him to recognize the discursive nature of his earlier ideal. It therefore functions in terms similar to those of the postcolonial "Other": the environmental Real, by refusing to submit to the discursive authority of the narrator's Western liberal perspective, disrupts its hegemonic determinations.

What Steffler's narrator is left with is not merely a postmodern recognition of nature as an entirely discursive commodity. While his narrative does identify how the concept of nature in wilderness writing — at least in its relation to the solitary human subject within its confines — is the product of symbolic overdetermination, his continual presence within (and reverence for) the environment indicates a continued belief in the primacy of its presence, even if only as a source of estrangement. Rather, it is the discourse of subjectivity within the environment that ultimately leads to his self re-evaluation. Borrowing the term "sinthome" from Lacan, which he uses to denote "a fragment of the signifier, inescapably permeated with mindless enjoyment" (qtd. in Zizek 17), Zizek argues that when dealing with ideological constructs, we must "isolate the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination, to force us to see it in its utter stupidity, as a meaningless fragment of the Real. In other words, we must (as Lacan puts it in Seminar XI 'change the precious gift into a piece of shit'; we must make it possible to experience the mesmerizing voice as a disgusting piece of sticky excrement" (17). Steffler's deconstruction of the subject in nature accomplishes such an inversion. No longer viewing the wilderness as a space of solitude and salvation, he

comes to recognize it as a fragment of the Real, filled with an excess of elements that refuse to be accommodated within his symbolic paradigm. He comes to identify with the simplicity and utility of Carm's existence as his "mad" doppelganger the more that he is forced to encounter the excess hostility of the environment. He does this at one point while contemplating a gale outdoors, where Steffler invokes a correlation between the trauma of the Real and excrement that is meant to subvert idealized perspectives.

> Outside
> squatting to shit
> I'm nervous with all the leaping
> and battering going on
> I glance over my shoulder
> half expecting the wind
> to be standing there grinning
> ready to kick my arse. (115)

Here the narrator literally acknowledges his vulnerability, rather than authority, in regard to the elements. Squatting in a prone position, the Romanticism of his earlier relation to the environment has turned to shit, both figuratively and literally. In the absence of this discursive authority, he undergoes a process of estrangement that, paradoxically, brings him close to a true experience of nature, or to nature in its disclosure of the Real at the edge of experience. No longer an ideal, heroic subject striking out to sharpen his perceptions in solitude, he finds himself at the edge of madness, prone and exposed to elements that now interpellate him as subject of the Real, or of forces beyond his knowledge or control, rather than submit to the gaze of his idealistic discourse. In this regard, the wilderness, repressed by narratives of human progress, returns as that which cannot be adequately symbolized, and which works to demystify and estrange the authority of the human subject in relation to the Real.

Considering *The Grey Islands* exclusively as a work of Canadian wilderness writing therefore overlooks its complex theoretical response to both Newfoundland identity and to the ecological itself. By combining elements of the postcolonial and the ecocritical, Steffler's text subverts conventional Romantic approaches to writing the environment. Doing so provides a unique and essential means of approaching wilderness writing, one that opens a space from which the environmental can challenge the discourses that privilege its passivity in the face of human industry.

Notes

[1]Walt Whitman expressed an equally reverent affinity for the natural world, as is evident from works such as his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, where he proclaims, "The

land and sea, the forests and mountains and rivers, are not small themes ... but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects ... they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls" (10). Certainly such ideals are also evident in the British Romanticism of Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, and others, and can also be seen in the likes of Canadian poets such as Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, and Archibald Lampman.

[2]Poetic schools such as the Black Mountains, the Beats, the Deep Imagists, and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets have all provided unique interpretations of the individual within the natural world. While the Black Mountains emphasized the "opening of the field," their work challenged the integrity of the lyric self instead of using nature to secure that integrity; the "breath line" of the beats, adapted from Whitman, also owes to a conviction in the cosmic sanctity of nature, but is used to create a subversive, rather than regenerative, poetics. Charles Bernstein nicely summarizes a more experimental conviction about the place of nature in postmodern poetry when he proclaims "'Natural': the very word should be struck from the language" (qtd. In Perloff 29).

[3]See Lacan's Seminar XI, where he defines the Real (as opposed to the Symbolic and the Imaginary) as that which is beyond symbolization, and also as "the impossible," or that which cannot be attained through language. It is the Real's place beyond symbolization that provides it with a traumatic character.

[4]Recent studies include those by Rob Nixon, Dominic Head, Lawrence Buell, and Graham Huggan.