

# Don McKay and Metaphor: Stretching Language Toward Wilderness

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Article abstract

One characteristic of Don McKay's poetry is his striking use of metaphor; it demands a heightened state of attention and imagination that serves to stretch language beyond the merely descriptive. In considering both post-structuralist and phenomenological approaches to metaphor and poetics, a survey of some of the poems from McKay's collections *Birding*, *or desire* and *Night Field* reveals McKay's views of language and poetry as similar to those of Heidegger. Further, McKay's metaphors are shown as both informing and being informed by the poems that contain them. The use of metaphor in McKay's poetry acts a springboard into what can be best described as wilderness. Metaphor, in these instances, can be considered analogous in many ways to nature poetry.

## DON MCKAY AND METAPHOR: STRETCHING LANGUAGE TOWARD WILDERNESS

*Kevin Bushell*

*Who understands this? No one  
in his right mind. No one who  
resists, who rides his delicate shell  
safely through its craziness*

*"High Water on the Goulais"*

In his review of *Night Field*, Don Coles praises McKay's "gift for metaphor," and asks, "Who do you know who has half this poet's gift for metaphor?" (42). Indeed, one characteristic of McKay's poetry that makes it especially enjoyable to read is the poet's striking use of metaphor, providing the reader with insights into "essential similarities between things," to quote Aristotle. In McKay's poetry, we "see" migrating butterflies as flaying hankies, the nest of the baltimore oriole as a "sturdy fragile woven scrotum," and popcorn as "fluffy white fists," pummelling the underside of the saucepan lid. This ability to recognize essential relationships is, according to Aristotle, the mark of poetic genius.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at theories of metaphor, one immediately notices terms such as transcendence, mind-independence, the extra-linguistic, the extra-conceptual and the intuitive,<sup>2</sup> concepts that are red flags for the poststructuralist, who maintains that nothing exists outside language and, hence, thought. The problem is a semantic one: does meaning reside in the word or in the world? Post-structuralism generally argues the former; current theories of metaphor, however, maintain the latter. Of course, the two fields are not as distinct as I have suggested here, and it is at the points of intersection that we may find a resolution to our paradox. In "Meaning and Sense," Emmanuel Levinas draws our attention to

the literal sense of the word meta-phor: what carries away or over something. Levinas writes:

The reality given to receptivity and the meaning it can take on seem distinguishable. For it seems as though experience first gave contents—forms, solidity, roughness, color, sound, savor, odor, heat, heaviness, etc.—and then all these contents were animated with meta-phors, receiving an overloading through which they are borne *beyond* the given. (75)

According to Levinas here, meaning is conferred upon our experience of the world. "Experience is a reading," he asserts, "the understanding of meaning an exegesis, a hermeneutics, and not an intuition" (78). And referring specifically to metaphor, he states: "*This taken qua that*—meaning is not a modification that affects a content existing outside of all language. Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language, with possibilities no dictionary can arrest" (79). This sounds very much like poststructuralist thinking but without the limitation of meaning to the signifier. Meaning, Levinas seems to suggest, generates from relationships, both in the world (experience) and in language (metaphor).

In this sense we begin to see a notion of transcendence emerging in language. The statement "Man is a wolf," to borrow Max Black's renowned example, conveys a meaning that transcends the dictionary definitions of both "man" and "wolf." And as most theories of metaphor maintain, the full meaning conveyed through metaphor cannot be articulated literally. To say that Man is ferocious, voracious, predatory, etc., is to say something quite different and, arguably, less, than to say that "Man is a wolf." One way of looking at metaphor, then, is to see it as an attempt to break free from language and thought, to enter a realm of meaning that is extra-linguistic and extra-conceptual. As Karsten Harries states: "God knows neither transcendence nor metaphor—nor would man, if he were truly godlike" (82). This transcendental quality of metaphor, and here I come to the crux of the matter, carries for McKay as a nature poet associations not with Romantic or Neo-Platonic inspiration, but with notions of "home," "wilderness," and "Being" within an existentialist aesthetic of poetry. If we adopt Levinas's suggestion of the world and language as co-existent, metaphor may be seen as one way to transcend, or, more accurately, expand the parameter of language to provide a more accurate articulation

of experience than literal descriptive speech allows. For McKay, in short, metaphor is often used as a rhetorical vehicle that stretches language in an attempt to express some aspect of an extra-linguistic realm he refers to as "wilderness." The following, then, is an examination of a few of McKay's evocative metaphors with the intention of shedding some light on how they are operating toward this end.

The opening of "At the Long Sault Parkway" from the long poem *Long Sault* will serve as our point of departure:

*The noise, the continual motion, and magnitude  
of the contending waves, render the Longue  
Sault, at once an object of terror and delight;  
these burst upon each other, and tossing aloft  
their broken spray, cover the stream with a white  
and troubled surface, as far as the eye can extend.*

And now you're nostalgia, you're a bowl of mushroom soup  
tepid and tumid,  
teeming with fat carp who feed on your reedy bottom.  
But everything's so tasteful, isn't it, so  
nice, really, the way they fixed things up with beaches and  
everything, and the picnic areas.  
No sutures, no Frankenstein bolts through the neck, only  
the dam at the end of the lake, a white wink  
like a distant TV set  
betrays the operation. (130)

The poem opens with the epigram by George Heriot from his historical account of the pre-dam Long Sault rapids, which acts as rhetorical contrast to the imagery in the first stanza, emphasized by the conjunction "And" that heads the stanza. Tone and energy gathered by the epigram are rapidly deflated with the short, poignant phrase, "And now you're nostalgia," which leads into the descriptive imagery of the dam-made lake that occupies the majority of the poem and establishes its primary theme of loss. The river is depicted in its adulterated state as a perversion of nature: the modern Frankenstein, the manufactured lake with its manicured beaches and park land that serve as substitutes for wilderness. The moral considerations of such an act of human power are intimated by tone and style throughout the poem, but especially here in the opening stanza, where grotesque imagery combines with the conspicuous rhetoric of phrases such as, "But everything's so tasteful, isn't it, so / nice, really, the way they fixed things up with

beaches and / everything," which reveals a sense of mock denial and deception.

It is fitting that McKay chose the dam itself as the metaphoric image of this deception, the "white wink" that "betrays the operation." This metaphor works primarily through comparison, drawing to our attention the visual similarity of a dam and a wink: a giant concrete eyelid, frozen at the moment of closure.<sup>3</sup> The gigantic proportion of the eyelid symbolizes on one level of reading the dimension of the operation, the dam's awesome magnificence and, by extension, the huge ecological change to surrounding landscape. We can also say that this metaphor operates interactively, placing the focus (the dam) into the frame of winking, to borrow Black's terms.<sup>4</sup> As interactive theories of metaphor claim, metaphor gains its meaning from the interaction between contextual thoughts. The dam, of course, carries connotations of technology, industry, and power (human, natural, hydroelectric), which we are asked to associate with the act of winking. When we try to associate these items with winking, we recognize that we require more information in order to decide which qualities of winking are to be rendered semantically significant. Winking can be a whimsical, playful, sexual, proud, mischievous, or surreptitious gesture, and we need to know which of these connotations resembles in some way technology, industry, or power. We therefore must go to the poem and contextualize these concepts in order to "see" what specifically about winking is significant in the metaphor. The poem seems to suggest primarily a sense of illusion, deception, and secrecy entailed in the process of dam-making: "No sutures, no Frankenstein bolts through the neck, only / the dam at the end of the lake . . . / . . . / betrays the operation." This is supported, as I have mentioned above, by the rhetoric immediately preceding the metaphor, the tone, and the idea of manufactured beaches and picnic areas offered as "gifts" to a duped public. The reader then maps this information onto the contextual frame of winking, and the wink, as a surreptitious gesture communicating secret, private knowledge, is thrown into relief.

In outlining the process of metaphor in this way, I have implied that metaphoric apprehension involves undergoing a series of distinct, semiotic steps leading to a sort of semantic apocalypse. This implication derives from my attempt to translate the process from the imaginative act of reading to the cognitive discussion of literary analysis. But as phenomenological theories of metaphor claim, no stages as such are involved in reading.<sup>5</sup> Contextual sig-

nification and the interaction of focus and frame are not to be regarded as individual concatenated steps, nor as a unified, instantaneous moment of revelation; rather, semiotic association, both inter- and extra-textual, is continuously happening during reading in what Barthes refers to as production of text, the complex and rapid mental process of constructing meaning. Metaphor complicates (and problematizes) this process by its illogical nature, for, as Northrop Frye has pointed out, in metaphor A is A, but A is also B, which is illogical.<sup>6</sup> The reading of metaphor demands a heightened state of thought in reconciling this illogicality; that is, the reader must maintain and assimilate references to multiple signifieds from a single signifier. To use Black's example, we are asked to read "Man" as both "mankind" and "wolf." With McKay's metaphor, "dam" is to be read as both "dam" and "wink."

But the demands in reading metaphor do not stop on the level of word; contextual associations surrounding both signifieds must also be balanced and assimilated, thus producing a style which is especially dense, unfolding meaning on a variety of levels. This is to say that metaphor does more than merely "depict themes in the poem that occasions it," as Phillip Stambovsky argues (109). Such a view reduces metaphor to a sort of visual summary, or symbol, of a theme which other poetic elements have developed. McKay's metaphor here generates meaning with such vigour that McKay has referred to poetic language as anthropomorphic (137).<sup>7</sup> His use of metaphor demands a heightened state of attention and imagination that stretches language beyond the merely descriptive. Elsewhere McKay has written: "I suspect that the quality of attention surrounding a poem is more important to me than poetry" ("Some Remarks" 207). Perhaps we can summarize thus far by saying that metaphor for McKay helps charge the poem with attention.

A different kind of metaphor exists in "The Great Blue Heron":

What I remember  
about the Great Blue Heron that rose  
like its name over the marsh  
is touching and holding that small  
manyveined  
wrist  
upon the gunwale, to signal silently—  
look

The Great Blue Heron  
 (the birdboned wrist). (*Birding* 32)

What is most apparent in this poem is its conventional syntax that produces a style of narrative very close to colloquial speech. There is something oddly non-poetic in this *discours*, a sense effected by the sentence structure ("What I remember. . .") which gives the impression that the speaker is telling instead of showing. The poem, however, is essentially metaphorical for a number of reasons. John Searle asserts that all metaphors entail a difference between the speaker's *utterance meaning*, and *sentence*, or *word meaning*. Other theorists have referred to this characteristic of metaphor as being simply the difference between figurative and literal signification (Levin, Sadock, Black), or as semantic deviance (Richards, Ricoeur, Stambovsky, Frye). "The Great Blue Heron" is metaphorical in that its literal meaning differs from its figurative or metaphorical meaning. If this were not the case, we would be inclined to believe that, indeed, all the speaker remembers of the heron-sighting is touching and holding the wrist upon the gunwale. Surely this is not what is intended in the poem. The utterance, or figurative meaning of the speaker's statement clearly goes beyond its literal sense to imply something about a similarity between the bird and the (birdboned) wrist.

Apart from semantics, the poem is also metaphorical in that its principal operative is comparison. Sensory resemblance between the bird and the wrist is subtly sensed in the image of "that small / manyveined / wrist," and more overtly through the parallelism of the last two lines that structurally set the great blue heron and the birdboned wrist in proximity on the page. The effect is to establish a resonance, underscored by the two lines' similar metrics and sound, between the images of the bird in flight and the wrist upon the gunwale: a metaphor that this reader apprehends by envisioning the bony, fragile legs of the heron. This sensory resemblance is, figuratively speaking, what the speaker remembers about the incident. At the risk of killing the poem through overreading, I would like to suggest that the poem extends beyond sensory resemblance to include contextual resonance in a way that says something about the ontological relationship of humankind and wildlife. In this reading, physical similarity extends into physiology, genetics, ecology, and that much-feared word in lyrical poetry, politics. In "The Great Blue Heron" a relationship is pronounced between species that spills meaning on each of these levels

as an expression of love and respect for the natural world—a way of Being without the urge to appropriate what is other. One of the pleasures of “The Great Blue Heron” is its subtlety. While these ideological ramifications are not the impetus of the poem, they are, however, included in our experience of reading, encouraged by the speaker’s urge for us to “look.” In this instance, metaphor is the vehicle which places the poem in a space that is both sensory and cognitive, enabling it in its own, subtle way, to both please and instruct.

“The Great Blue Heron” is what I would like to refer to as a singular metaphoric poem. By this I mean that, unlike the “white wink” metaphor of “At the Long Sault Parkway,” which is one element within a larger poetic construction, “The Great Blue Heron” centers on a principal metaphor on which it comes to focus at its close. A similar but not identical construction may be found in the poem, “Fridge Nocturne,” which gathers its images under a single, central metaphor:

When it is late, and sleep,  
off somewhere tinkering with his motorcycle, leaves you  
locked in your iron birdhouse,  
listen to your fridge, the old  
armless weeping willow of the kitchen.

Humble murmur, it works its way  
like the river you’re far from, the Saugeen, the Goulais  
the Raisin  
muddily gathers itself in pools to drop things in  
and fish things from,  
the goodwill mission in the city of dreadful night.

(*Birding* 37)

As suggested by the title, the poem centers on the image, “your fridge, the old / armless weeping willow of the kitchen.” This metaphor is remarkable in itself, and warrants closer examination. Theorists speak of tension between the two objects of metaphoric comparison, or between focus and frame. When the similarity between the two items may readily be apprehended, the tension is said to be low; the transition from sentence meaning to speaker’s utterance meaning is facile. New metaphors lose their tension through use, gradually becoming easier to apprehend as they approach cliché, until their tension becomes close to non-existent, as in the phrase “Sam is a pig,” in which “pig” nears the status of symbol.<sup>8</sup> What makes McKay’s metaphor striking is its high degree of



tension: the disparity between its metaphoric units. In what way is a fridge like a weeping willow?

I do not want to attempt to translate this metaphor into its so-called literal equivalent; similarity in this case exists on a much more visceral level than to speak about your wilted celery or how wind murmurs through the willow's vines. One has the intuitive sense that not only is this sort of criticism silly, but also that the tension of the metaphor—the element that gives the metaphor its energy—would somehow be in jeopardy if such a literal exegesis were possible. Here I am following phenomenological theorists in believing that the apprehension of this sort of metaphor relies on lyrical and emotional intuition, and cannot be successfully reduced to a linguistic formula. The metaphor is, however, informed by context, and we can gain insight into its nuance through studying the poem in which it appears. "Fridge Nocturne" is a mock ode in its wry honouring of a central object, namely, in this case, the common fridge. The poem extends beyond the ode in mood as it shifts away from objective expressiveness to include the speaker's state of mind and feeling, which pools from the nocturnal setting. In addition to the rhetoric of the closing line, the poem's imagery seems to express a sense of anxiety and disquietude. The speaker is metaphorically locked in an iron birdhouse; the fridge somehow reminds him of rivers he is far from, partly by its murmuring sound, an onomatopoeic description that reminds us of Wordsworth's "Yew Trees," "Tintern Abbey," Archibald Lampman's "The City of the End of Things," and in general the literary motif of the consoling river in nature.

This reading is strengthened by the allusion in the final line to James Thomson's poem "The City of Dreadful Night," and on a more immediate level by the rhetoric of this closing phrase that helps tie up the loose nocturnal and natural images which are dropped into the poem apparently at random. The rhetorical emphasis of this phrase lies of course on the adjective "dreadful" that modifies night and, indirectly, city. We receive a slight exhilaration upon reading "dreadful" because dread is precisely the feeling that has existed on the periphery of the poem, despite McKay's playful use of imagery and the poem's whimsical tone. It seems improbable that McKay's use of this particular term is coincidental in its existential connotation; Heidegger's notion of dread resonates strongly with the mood and feeling inhabiting "Fridge Nocturne." Summarizing Heideggerian thinking on dread, Michael Gelven writes:

Within the experience of most reflective and serious people can be found instances of a weird and uncanny feeling, in which the whole familiar world seems to lose its normal significance. In such instances those things that usually affect us with familiar and intimate significance seem to take on the property of oddness and unfamiliarity. Our room, for example, suddenly seems to be a room in a strange land or even on another planet. Our mind tells us that it is the same room in which we have always felt quite at home. Yet in an uncanny way, the very logic that assures us of our familiarity with the room seems in such circumstances to emphasize our alienation with it. . . . Plucked out of the stream of our daily concerns, we seem forced to reflect upon our existence as if it were a totally new revelation. We observe ourselves, suspended from the concerns that occupy our consciousness, almost as if we were strangers to ourselves. Perhaps we even become aware of ourselves as something independent of our daily concerns. (115)

This peculiar *angst* seems to be the feeling suggested by the poem's images and nocturnal setting—the feeling of dread that occasioned the poem and, therefore, also spawned its central metaphor.

Before returning to the poem, we need first to consider the importance of feeling on imagination and metaphor. In an essay entitled "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," Paul Ricoeur argues that imagination and feeling function semantically in the metaphorical equation. We have already concluded that the imagination is an integral part in the creation and apprehension of metaphor; Ricoeur's essay is of particular interest here for its discussion of the specific role that feeling plays in the metaphorical process. Following Stephan Strasser, Ricoeur argues that feeling is the internalization of thought:

To *feel*, in the emotional sense of the word, is to make *ours* what has been put at a distance by thought in its objectifying phase. . . . Its function is to abolish the distance between knower and known without cancelling the cognitive structure of thought and the intentional distance which it implies. Feeling is not contrary to thought. It is thought made ours. (154)

The transition from objective thought to subjective feeling finds its literary significance in the establishment of mood in poetry. Here, Ricoeur relies on Northrop Frye's argument that poetic language creates mood: "Each poem, he [Frye] says, structures a mood which

is *this* unique mood generated by *this* unique string of words," and quoting Frye, Ricoeur agrees that, "'the unity of a poem is the unity of a mood,' and 'this mood is the poem and nothing else behind it'" (155). Mood, Ricoeur seems to suggest, is effected by our ability to feel what we are thinking, or imagining, while reading poetry; it is, to use his terminology, "*the iconic as felt*" (155).

How does feeling, then, figure in our reading of "Fridge Nocturne," and specifically in our understanding of its central elusive metaphor? Ricoeur's discussion is directed toward the reading of metaphor; however, his insights into the relationships between feeling, mood, and metaphor can equally apply to the creation of metaphor, the perceptual moment in which one thing is seen as another. This requires us to reverse, so to speak, the metaphorical process: instead of examining how metaphors effect mood, we must consider how mood effects perception. To be more precise, we can gain insight into how a fridge is seen as a weeping willow by coming at it from the angle of mood influencing perception. The question becomes not in what way is a tree like a fridge, but rather how does the feeling of dread simultaneously bring to mind both willow and fridge. Returning again to Gelven's description of dread, it seems that the weeping willow stands out for the speaker for its constancy, longevity and, perhaps, suggestion of immortality. Like Wordsworth's yew tree, McKay's old, weeping willow comes to mind as "a living thing / produced too slowly ever to decay; / Of form and aspect too magnificent / To be destroyed." Following this line of thought, the fridge therefore is likened to the willow for its similar qualities—its constant, reliable murmuring, its (armless) solidity, and most of all its fixity as the centre-point of kitchen and household. And added to the image of the fridge as willow tree is the extended metaphor of the fridge as river, another symbol of continuance and immortality which often finds expression in Wordsworth's existential and spiritual meditations. But of course these associations are tinged with humour through the somewhat ridiculous comparison of a willow tree and a household refrigerator. Humour, it appears, is one way McKay approaches the absurdity of life, or at least the disturbing moments when one's daily concerns, indeed one's existence, seems to lose significance. To sum up, then, the principal metaphor of the poem gathers its rhetorical force from the poem as a whole, funneling mood through a sort of linguistic venturi to produce startling lyrical results. Metaphor in this example is both informed by and informs the poem in a reciprocal dynamic. I have

discussed primarily the way in which the metaphor is informed by its context. My discussion would be incomplete without looking at the effect produced in the poem by this extraordinary metaphor.

Until now I have avoided addressing the problem of reference in metaphor. My use of the term "problem" is mildly facetious because metaphor only presents referential difficulty when we consider it as a form of descriptive language. But of course it is not; as we saw in studying McKay's metaphor of dam as "white wink," metaphor falls within the domain of poetic language (Jakobson's term), or the imaginative idiom (Frye's term), and as such behaves referentially in ways unlike conventional descriptive language. Roman Jakobson pointed out that poetry suppresses the referential function of language, that is, it draws attention to itself through its poetic features in a sort of self-reflexive referencing that differs from the aim of descriptive language to refer to an assumed, external reality. Frye sees poetic language as requiring the suspension of judgment, an idiom in which the boundary between the emotional and the intellectual dissolves (Words 22-24). In both cases, what is emphasized is poetry's characteristic to present fantasy, or an imaginary world, which is different from our normal, empirical view of how things are. This quality of metaphor possesses important ontological significance in McKay's nature poetry. On a primary level, the metaphor of the fridge as "the old / armless weeping willow of the kitchen" demands that the reader view the fridge in an extraordinary way that breaches the decorum of common sense. But it does much more: when emotion and intellect converge in imaginative reading, such a metaphor transports the reader to nothing less than a *Lebenswelt* (a life-world), to use Husserl's term, in a type of Gestalt at the moment of metaphoric apprehension. It is important to note that only in our conventional sense of the world is such a world defined as "fantasy." In Heideggerian thinking, the "world" is constituted by what can be found within the parameter of consciousness, an alternate view of worldhood in which fantasy is no less "real" than the tangible, concrete world of our daily living. Heidegger, it has been said, destroys the Cartesian duality of subject/object underlying our notions of fantasy and reality (Barrett 217).

I have risked misleading the reader here in stating that the world as defined by Heidegger is reduced to consciousness. In fact, existential phenomenology has often been referred to as anti-Platonic in its reversal of the Platonic paradigm of the world, indicated in Husserl's famous slogan, "Back to the things themselves!" Reality, according to phenomenologists, is not an intellectual en-

tity existing beyond the sensible world of things, but stems from immediate experience. Levinas writes:

There does not exist any *meaning in itself* which a thought would have been able to reach by jumping over the deforming or faithful, but sensory, reflections which lead to it. . . . For phenomenologists as for Bergsonians, a meaning cannot be separated from the access leading to it. *The access is part of the meaning itself*. The scaffolding is never taken down; the ladder is never pulled up. (83–85)

The phenomenological world, therefore, is a world founded on the surety of consciousness, but it is also a world in which the sensible and the felt have ontological bearing. Transcendence according to this paradigm does not imply transportation to an alternate, alien realm, but rather to new, hidden meaning that exists within our immediate world. We need to get past the view of “reality” as a concrete, objectified entity, to understand that metaphor such as McKay’s uncovers, or, more accurately, *discovers* the world and leads the reader into new areas of experience and knowing. McKay’s term for this domain is “wilderness”:

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. . . . the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and *imagism* . . . [when] we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse some thing’s autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being. (131)

Metaphor acts for McKay as a springboard into wilderness, which is never really entered but only glimpsed. In “Fridge Nocturne” the metaphor of fridge as willow attempts to defamiliarize both fridge and willow in order to apprehend some aspect of their alien, and essential, beings. Metaphor in this instance, we might say, helps us circumvent the mind’s categories, to see beyond the surface significance of things to a level which is extra-conceptual.

The relationship between mind and wilderness, tantamount to nature poetry, is the central interest in McKay’s poem “Walking at the Mouth of the Willow River”:

Sleep, my favourite flannel shirt, wears thin, and shreds, and birdsong happens in the holes. In thirty seconds the naming of species will begin. As it folds into the stewed latin of after-

dream each song makes a tiny whirlpool. One of them, zoozeezoozoozee, seems to be making fun of sleep with snores stolen from comic books. Another hangs its teardrop high in the mind, and melts: it was, after all, only narrowed air, although it punctuated something unheard, perfectly. And what sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink? Scritch, scritch. A claw, a nib, a beak, worrying its surface. As though, for one second, it could let the world leak back to the world. Weep. (*Night Field* 3)

The poem takes place during the ephemeral moment of waking, in the space between sleep and consciousness. By drastically decelerating time in the poem, McKay is able to stretch this fleeting moment into an experience rich with imaginative detail, fitting to the semi-conscious state of the speaker. Very little of the poem refers directly to the external world; the natural setting is depicted in a highly metaphoric idiom that underscores subjectivity as it attempts to express the sensorial and cognitive processes of the self receiving an ever-encroaching world. The effect is a glimpse into the mind of the speaker freed from the dominance of a totalitarian consciousness—an interior monologue of a mind “here at the brink.”

The poem gains its high degree of poeticism primarily from McKay’s distinctive use of metaphor. Consider, for example, the opening line: “Sleep, my favourite flannel shirt, wears thin, and shreds, and birdsong happens in the holes.” Recalling Shakespeare’s “Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care” (*Macbeth*, II, ii, 36), McKay’s sentence is remarkable in that its syntax plays against the sentence’s highly metaphoric nature; the syntax unfolds in a seemingly descriptive, rather than figurative manner, each word apparently referring to a corresponding referent in the objective world, and the reader only belatedly comes to see the intended metaphoric meaning. In other words, McKay does not overtly disclose through the sentence’s syntax the fact that he is employing metaphor; metaphor is concealed, rather than “set up.” This idiom involves the sort of emotional and intuitive associating of objects which is needed in reading and apprehending the central metaphor of “Fridge Nocturne”; however, the technique is extended here in the opening sentence of “Waking” in a sequence of metaphors requiring prolonged suspension of descriptive referential judgment. To put it perhaps a better way, the reader of “Waking” does not

merely grasp a single, albeit difficult metaphor, but, figuratively speaking, "steps into" the imaginative space of the poem.

This process, it should be noted, is aided by the sound, prosody, and rhythm of the prose poem form; the reader is helped into the speaker's mind-space by the music of spoken language. The predominance of sibilants and fricatives in the opening sentence combine with the poem's rocking rhythm and regular metre to effect a soothing line that reflects the speaker's sleepiness. This mood gives way to the terse, matter-of-fact tone of, "In thirty seconds the naming of species will begin," which is either spoken by a different speaker, or enters the monologue from a different part of the psyche. Assonance and alliteration in the remainder of the poem likewise work to hold the reader's attention through the demands placed upon imagination. The prose poet must be rigorously attuned to the sound quality of language, or, as Robert Bly says regarding this matter, "the intelligences lose interest, and the game of art collapses. The cat cannot get the mouse to play any more, and either leaves it or eats it" (203).

To return to the issue of metaphor, I would like to examine some of the key metaphors in the poem that attempt to express the various birdsongs entering the speaker's hazy consciousness. One song is first described onomatopoeically by "zoozeezoozoozee," and then this description is used to form the metaphor, "seems to be making fun of sleep with snores stolen from comic books." In an ingenious and playful maneuver, McKay uses the physicality of the written word to establish one of the metaphoric units, thus turning the sound of the particular song into a visual unit of literary metaphor. The result is not only a foregrounding of the literalness of thought and poetry, but also a humorous connection between the natural wonder of birdsong and the triviality of comic strips. Metaphor is often humorous in that, like the punch line of a good joke, the connection is both obvious and unexpected. For a moment, we are pleasantly surprised by the relation of sound and sight, not to mention natural beauty and pop culture. The ability of metaphor to undermine conventional categories of the mind makes it the perfect tool for nature poets. Nature poetry, McKay tells us, involves "a slight deformation of human categories, an extra metaphorical stretch and silliness of language as it moves toward the other, dreaming its body" (137).

Another birdsong described in the poem literally undergoes physical deformations: "another hangs its teardrop high in the mind, and melts: it was, after all, only narrowed air . . ." There is

a metamorphosis here of molecular states as this birdsong is first described metaphorically as a liquid teardrop, but upon further reading we discover it was, in fact, frozen. This information requires us to return, so to speak, and modify the initial image, which becomes further complicated when we are told that "it was, after all, only narrowed air." The reader, therefore, is asked to juggle multiple images of the same sound as the sentence unfolds during reading in a sequence of metaphors, similar to the opening sentence of the poem. Structurally, one unit of the metaphoric description remains constant—the birdsong—but the corresponding unit changes twice as the sentence continues. One might map McKay's metaphor sequence in the following way:

birdsong                      teardrop                      frozen teardrop                      air

The irony behind this metaphor is that, having accomplished the imaginative gymnastics required to follow the sentence, the reader discovers that the particular birdsong, in the end, "punctuated something unheard, perfectly," and thus needs to be associated once more, this time to something unheard, and undefined. We therefore actually have four associations to the birdsong—all in the course of one, highly imaginative, sentence. This imaginative quality of McKay's style is gained largely through metaphor's violent capacity to disorder language and thought, stretching both linguistic and epistemological parameters in approaching wilderness. As McKay states: "Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction" (137–38).

Following these metaphors, the poem turns inward with the change of voice at, "And what sort of noise would the mind make, if it could, here at the brink?" The shift here is to more direct speech as the speaker asks a somewhat rhetorical question (there is a tone of sincerity, although the question cannot be answered) pertaining to a central issue in the poem as a whole: the processes of the mind, and specifically, its relationship with what is other. The question presents an alternate perspective of the mind—not as passive receiver, as it has been through the poem thus far—but as an extensive, affective thing, "worrying its surface." This alternate view of the mind is important because it resonates with the outward gesture of McKay's sense of home, the ontological place of the self. "Home makes possible the possession of the world," McKay argues,



"the rendering of the other as one's interior," but it is also "the site of our appreciation of the material world, where we lavish attention on its details, where we collaborate with it" (132). An important feature of home-making for McKay is this dual movement, both inward and outward, the gathering from environment in constructing the self, and the gift-giving gesture toward what is other. "Waking at the Mouth of the Willow River" comes to focus at this theoretical point of contact between mind and other, the place where home meets wilderness, and wilderness, home—in short, in its linguistic form, poetry. Perhaps this is why the poem opens the volume *Night Field* and is set off from the body of the text as a sort of overture. What sort of noise *does* the mind make at the brink of itself?—Poetry.

McKay's view of language and poetry is akin to that of Heidegger, who theorized that thought derives from language and not the other way around. Heidegger's book, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, suggests in its title the hierarchy he envisioned: poetry informs language, which in turn shapes thought.<sup>9</sup> Poetic language, then, for Heidegger as well as McKay, is "vitaly metaphorical," as Shelley argued in his *Defense*, "that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their relation" (Shelley 1073). In fact, what I have essentially been arguing throughout this essay is that nature poetry is in many respects analogous to metaphor. Metaphor functions through the interaction of thoughts conventionally associated around words, producing new meaning which is not reducible to analogy, or any single thought or concept; likewise, nature poetry acknowledges the linguistic and cultural bias of perception and poetic composition, yet maintains "some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both" (McKay 134). The strength of the nature poetry aesthetic is that it incorporates aspects of both postructuralist and Romantic thought. It seems that the theoretical pendulum has swung to its extreme, and may now be traveling back towards a more sober account of literature in which the recent emphasis on language and culture is balanced by a reaffirmation in the existence of something other influencing the creative process, or at least intimated in the poem. "There really is a world outside language," McKay asserts, "which, creatures of language ourselves, we translate with difficulty" ("Local Wilderness" 6). McKay's gift for metaphor, inscribed throughout his poetry, helps us make this difficult translation with conviction, and delight.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to Section 22 of *Poetics*, in which Aristotle states: "But by far the most important matter is to have skill in the use of metaphor. This skill alone it is not possible to obtain from another, and it is, in itself, a sign of genius. For the ability to construct good metaphors implies the ability to see essential similarities" (60).

<sup>2</sup> Theories of metaphor generally purport that metaphor is constructed by either explicitly or implicitly bringing two things into relation. In "essential," or what has also been called "fresh" metaphor, the lyrical and imaginative resonance produced by the relation generates meaning which is vague and far-reaching, and which cannot be reduced to any single concept or literal interpretation. George Whalley states in his entry on Metaphor in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* that "'essential' metaphor cannot be translated without severe cognitive loss, and is inexhaustible to analysis" (495). Metaphoric meaning transcends conceptual thought and literal meaning; in this way, metaphor is said to be extra-conceptual, or extra-linguistic. For a thorough presentation of the major theories of metaphor see Stambovsky 10-44; Hausman, *Metaphor & Art* 22-45. For discussions pertaining specifically to the transcendental quality of metaphor, see Harries; also Hausman *Metaphor & Art* 182-208, and "Language and Metaphysics."

<sup>3</sup> As the name implies, comparative theories of metaphor are based on comparison, maintaining that metaphoric meaning is generated by a resemblance or similarity between the metaphoric units.

<sup>4</sup> Interactive theories of metaphor purport that metaphoric meaning is generated through the interaction of differing contextual thoughts in which both comparison and contrast play a part. In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I.A. Richards argues that metaphor is not merely "a shifting and displacement of words," but rather, "fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts" (94).

<sup>5</sup> Phenomenological theories of metaphor take into consideration the difference between "our awareness, apprehension, or use of metaphor from our interpretive inferences to the meaning or intent of the metaphor" (Yocis 81). Essentially, phenomenological theories of metaphor consider the metaphoric equation not as a semiotic or linguistic process, but as an imaginative and intuitive phenomenon which cannot be defined analytically.

<sup>6</sup> In Frye's discussion of metaphor in *The Great Code*, he writes: "The Bible is full of explicit metaphors, of the this-is-that, or A-is-B type. Such metaphors are profoundly illogical, if not anti-logical: they assert that two things are the same thing while remaining two different things, which is absurd" (54).

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references are to "Baler Twine: thoughts on ravens, home, and nature poetry."

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of tension theories of metaphor, see Hester 16-18.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to J. S. Porter for this point (61).

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