"Seeing Beyond the Scenery": Exploring the World through Metaphor[1]

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"We must not smuggle in the idea that we can throw the analogy away and, as it were, get in behind it to a purely literal truth. . . . For our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies."[2]

"To mean is always, in some measure, to carry across: *meta pherein.*"[3]

Abstract

Metaphor has been called a "form of listening." In its enacting of a hinge between language and the beyond of language, metaphor points to something bigger than language that Christians might call the glory of God revealed in the material world by common grace (Ps. 19:1–4, Rom. 1:20). Two contemporary poets who pay particularly careful attention to the matter of the world are John Terpstra, a Canadian Christian who writes a kind of *lectio divina* about the abused body of the earth, and Don McKay, Canada's premier "nature poet," who describes "the disturbing thrilling awareness that there really is a world outside language, which, creatures of language ourselves, we

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented as an ARCU (Association of Reformed Colleges and Universities) address at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto on March 27, 2013, and will be available in the ICS repository, together with a response from Dr Bob Sweetman.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer* (1963; repr. San Diego: Harcourt, n.d.), 51–52.

3 Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau, 2003), L51. Zwicky's book is unusual in format, in that each double-page spread is numbered identically, with the two pages differentiated only as "Left" and "Right." This format stresses the dialogic nature of Zwicky's enterprise. Typically, the right-hand page gives or considers the thoughts of other interlocutors—poets, philosophers, scientists—and the left-hand page records Zwicky's interactions with these thoughts.

translate with difficulty."[4] Thus, despite different belief commitments, both these poets create what Madeleine L'Engle calls "icons of the true"[5] that open new windows onto God's glory.

In this paper I want to consider how the poet is able to shed light through the anti-positivist attention of metaphor on the most ordinary and even on the most apparently unlovely of common material things, in such a way that the referentiality of language is opened up and surpassed, and we glimpse a thing's being-in-itself.



"even on the most apparently unlovely of common material things"

The Literal and the Metaphorical

There is a common and longstanding belief that there are two kinds of language: proper words and figurative words. Proper words, so this common view goes, are factual and rational, and refer to what they are naming in a literal way; figurative words, like metaphors, are to do with our perceptions and emotions about the facts, and are particularly the language of poetry. However, at its root, the way language refers to things is much less straightforward and is more creative than the notion of "proper" words implies. The word and the thing it names—the sig-

4 Don McKay, "Local Wilderness," *The Fiddlehead* 169 (Autumn 1991): 5–6.

5 Madeleine L'Engle, "Icons of the True," in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (1980); repr. in *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith* (ed. Darryl Tippens, Stephen Weathers, and Jeanne Murray Walker; 2nd ed.; Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 2005), 59 (entire article 59–78).

nifier and the signified, if you like—are, of course, nonidentical: the word "stands in for" the thing, and is, in that sense, figurative rather than literal. We would not mistake the word "donut" for the thing "donut" and try to eat the word on a menu. However, distinguishing between the literal and the figurative is not necessarily so straightforward: when we ask if the trains are running, we know that the movement we are referring to is analogous to human running, water running, elections running, and our minds running, though we might be hard put to decide which of these are metaphors, which are literal, and what exactly we meant by that. In fact, the word "literal" is itself a dead metaphor: it comes from the Latin "*littera*," meaning "letter, alphabetic sign," or, in the plural, "literature, book," and so we might even say that etymologically "literal" is tautological: all words could be called literal simply because they are made of letters, and not because of a particular kind of relationship to the concept to which they are referring.

Playing around with the common understandings of the literal and the metaphorical, I am in good company. Since the Renaissance, critical thinking about metaphor has moved away from the long-established view, dating back to Aristotle, that metaphor is a rhetorical ornament or a stylistic decoration to spice up an otherwise dull idea, which is probably how most of us learned to understand it in high school. Susan VanZanten Gallagher and Roger Lundin's little book *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith* has a helpful chapter on literary language, where, for the enlightenment of the undergraduate student, the authors draw on the magisterial work of French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur in arguing, "The relationship between words and things is not a matter of nature, as though only certain words 'belong' to certain things, but one of convention."[6] As a result, "Meanings [of words] . . . shift over the years as part of the metaphorical process at work in all of language."[7] Metaphor is then best defined not as a substitution, where "poetic" words stand in for "literal" ones, but as an interaction of a kind we engage in all the time: "When we use a metaphor, we *say that one thing is another*. We take a word from its conventional context and apply it to a new situation."[8] Arguing that

6 Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 20. See Paul Ricoeur, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language," *Philosophy Today* 17 (trans. David Pellauer; 1973): 97–128; repr. in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (ed. Mario J. Valdes; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 65–85.

7 Gallagher and Lundin, *Eyes of Faith*, 21.

8 Gallagher and Lundin, *Eyes of Faith*, 23. Cf. Stephen I. Wright, "Words of Power: Biblical Language and Literary Criticism," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller; vol. 2; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 224–240. Wright, "Words of Power," 237, says, "metaphor does not function simply via the direct replacement in a reader's or hearer's mind of the literal 'meaning' by a metaphorical 'meaning.' Rather, the literal meaning lingers, as it were, in *tension* with the metaphorical meaning. It is by this means that language can at least begin to suggest the multifaceted nature of life, though it can never be equal to this task." Wright is here reporting favourably on Stephen Prickett's *Words and the Word*: *Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

"we acquire information, we organize what we know, and we make innovative breakthroughs through the use of metaphor," Gallagher and Lundin conclude that the "metaphorical process is at the heart of all our knowing."[9]



"The literal meaning lingers, as it were, in tension with the metaphorical meaning."

Already in 1936, the British literary critic I. A. Richards was writing that "*thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom."[10] The Russian formalists of the early twentieth century talked of metaphor's powers of "defamiliarization." We use metaphors, they said, to make something strange or alien more familiar, or to make something familiar more strange so that we notice it afresh. The first men on the moon described moondust as being like plaster, and home computers were designed with desktops and trashcans; on the other hand, a donut is shaped like a big pair of cashews, and running water may race us down the hill in slippery sneakers. In these sorts of ways, metaphor functions as "a primary means by which we make intellectual discoveries."[11] It is now forty years since Ricoeur asserted that metaphors should be understood as "a semantic innovation, an emergence of meaning"—even "an alternative strategy of discourse."[12] The consequences of such insights are likely to

9 Gallagher and Lundin, *Eyes of Faith*, 23.

10 I. A. Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94, qtd. in Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor*, R14.

11 Gallagher and Lundin, *Eyes of Faith,* 26.

12 Ricoeur, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," 65. For a thoughtful discussion of the problem of metaphor in biblical exegesis, using Ricoeur's formulations as a framework, see Ian Paul, "Metaphor and Exegesis," in *After Pentecost*, 387–402.

be far-reaching: we may become aware that metaphors affect how we live as well as how we think. For instance, if we describe our world as a complex machine, we are making a radically different claim about how to approach it and what it needs from us than if we call it a complex organism. When metaphor is perceived as a way of understanding the world, it will take us to quite new places of discovery.[13] Rather than being pegged as a decorative extra, this is metaphor used as a mode of epistemological inquiry.

Now, if this understanding of metaphor is valid, it will be true not only for literature, but also for science, economics, education, philosophy, and theology. In fact, there will be key metaphors in any discipline that have had particular effects on the development of its theories, positions, and calls to action. One thought-provoking instance of exploration into these issues is David Leary's book *Metaphors in the History of Psychology*, in which he argues that all knowledge is rooted in metaphor because a comparative, relational mode of understanding is fundamental to human cognition.[14] Leary sees fables, parables, allegories, myths, and models, including scientific models, as "extended and sustained metaphors."[15] Furthermore, in talking about commonly used metaphors for the brain in the history of neuroscience—piano, railroad, dam, telephone, thermostat, computer, hologram—he goes on to explore how each of these metaphors has a "historically significant directive function," in terms of where it focuses the gaze.[16] Here, however, I will consider metaphor in literature, because that is what I know most about. After all, if words and things are joined not naturally but conventionally, then literary writers, who are expected to be particularly self-conscious and skillful in their use of words, may help us in what one of the poets I will discuss describes as "seeing beyond the scenery"—and, in particular, in seeing how the material world and the transcendent interpenetrate.

Beyond language

Before we can turn to the literature itself, however, we need briefly to address the fact that any expression of a relationship between language and the material

13 See Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor*, L115.

14 David Leary, ed., *Metaphors in the History of Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2.

15 Leary, *Metaphors,* 5.

16 Leary, *Metaphors*, 12. Leary does, however, express wariness about the power of metaphor. Leary, *Metaphors*, 40, describes the dangers of allowing metaphorical understanding to become prescriptive, thereby narrowing rather than expanding options: "The *use* of metaphor [in science] is necessary and wonderful to behold; but the *abuse* of metaphor—its use as a tool of presumptuous prescription rather than tentative description—concerns me a great deal." He asserts that a subtle movement from metaphorical to supposedly literal conceptualizations of psychological phenomena is typical of the development of twentieth century psychological rhetoric, so that analogical *redescriptions* are taken to be new theoretical *explanations*; Leary, *Metaphors*, 51.

world has in the last half-century had the rocky cliffs of capital-T "Theory" to contend with. Derrida's radical notion that there is "nothing outside the text," or "no outside to the text," has sometimes been read as a paeon of praise about how important we humans are in creating texts, rather than as a statement of humility about the limits on what and how we know. Christians in particular should always have known something of these limits—known that the human speaker is bound by his or her context, because no human speaker is in the position of God: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isa 55:8). At the same time, Christian theology points us to God's gift of a language adequate for humankind, language that is enough for us to be able to understand and to communicate with one another, and also enough for us to make beautiful literary forms. Theology points us, too, to other kinds of revelation above and beyond the limits of that language—we have been given not only the Book of Scripture, but also Jesus the Incarnate Word, still present with us by his Spirit, and the Book of Nature. Rowan Williams writes, "To use language more familiar in Eastern Christian thinking, each living being in the world rests upon a creative act of God, a unique communication from God within the infinite self-communication that is the one eternal Word. Every being has at its heart its own word, its own 'logos.' A truthful relation to anything is an uncovering of that word."[17] In fact, Christians must say that the material world is always manifesting something beyond human language, something that we might call the glory of the Creator revealed in and through the very being of even a fallen creation.

The American Christian novelist Madeleine L'Engle, in her book of essays *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, proposes that all "true" art is religious in nature because it is incarnational.[18] She quotes the Eastern Orthodox theologian Timothy Kallistos Ware, who says that even an artist who does not personally believe in God, "provided he is an artist of integrity, . . . is a genuine servant of the glory which he does not recognize, and unknown to himself there is 'something divine' about his work."[19] Kallistos Ware is talking here about visual art, but L'Engle extends the assertion to include literature and music as well: "all true art has an iconic quality," in that it can "become an open window through

17 Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston: New Seeds, 2007), 82.

18 Madeleine L'Engle, "Icons," 59. Though many Christian writers have talked about the incarnational powers of literature, other Christian thinkers, particularly from a Reformed persuasion, are allergic to this mode of description, insofar as it seems to turn the incarnation of Christ into a principle rather than an event. However, I would argue that L'Engle and others are more concerned to find an adequate way of describing "little incarnations" of spirit and of flesh in the arts than to cast any doubt on the once-for-all nature of the Grand Incarnation.

19 Timothy Kallistos Ware, "The Transfiguration of the Body," *Sobornost* 4.8 (1963), 420–434; reprinted in A. M. Allchin, ed., *Sacrament and Image* (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1967), 17–32; qtd. in L'Engle, "Icons," 63.

which we can be given a new glimpse of the love of God."[20] As a result, she argues, "all great works of art are icons of Naming," "vehicles of truth," that "open door[s] into the realm of the numinous."[21] The notion of poem-as-icon might be called a potent instance of metaphor as an epistemological mode.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we find an example of how this kind of hermeneutic works in the poetry of Ps 19, which might aptly be called "the language psalm." It describes the heavens (that is to say, the sky, the stars, the sun, and the moon) as "pouring forth speech" day after day and night after night; "their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world," and what the heavens are saying is "Glory to God, from the work of his hands." How did the psalmist hear this voice, though? Additionally, how might we? What is the relationship between this kind of spiritual language of the material world and our own everyday human language? Is it any more, some might ask, than another variant of the hermeneutical circle, which describes how we are conditioned by our own contexts and so will inevitably project our own interpretations onto what we see? What does it mean to say that the heavens "speak"?



"The heavens pour forth speech . . . into all the earth"

We might start by saying that without epistemological humility, we humans will surely be unable to hear the "voices" of the non-human world, just *because* we cannot simply step outside of our own texts and our own interpretations. However,

20 L'Engle, "Icons," 62.
21 L'Engle, "Icons," 75, 78.

I want to suggest that metaphor, as an "alternative strategy of discourse," may provide an unexpected way forward: perhaps it can show us the path of such humility—perhaps it can, in fact, give us the opportunity both to recognize our situation and to see—or hear—beyond it. I want to propose, then, that imaginative literature, whether by Christians or not, may offer a way to recognize the voice of a non-human world that speaks without human language, through the power of metaphor to place one thing in interaction with another that is both like it and unlike it. How might this work?

On Metaphor and Humility

In her beautiful book *Wisdom and Metaphor*, Canadian philosopher-poet Jan Zwicky develops this argument: "ontological attention is a form of love . . . Good poetry . . . enacts ontological attention. Metaphor is one of the means it uses to do this."[22] Zwicky's claim in this book is an ethical one—she writes in the foreword that "the shape of metaphoric thought is also the shape of wisdom: what a human mind must do in order to comprehend a metaphor is a version of what it must do in order to be wise." What does this mean? Poet and critic Sue Sinclair describes Zwicky's project as based on the desire "to expand philosophy's understanding of itself, to reconnect it with its wisdom-loving roots."[23] In this context, she cites Zwicky's comment that "wisdom is thought conditioned by an awareness of limits to the systematically provable, articulable, or demonstrable."[24] Zwicky thus positions herself in contradistinction to the reigning Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy. "To be wise is . . . not to dismiss the systematically provable, articulable, or demonstrable, but to see beyond these, recognizing the existence and significance of other modes of thought."[25] Zwicky reveals what Gadamer would call her "prejudgments" or "prejudices" when she maintains that "ontological understanding is rooted in the perception of patterned resonances in the world," and that "metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another."[26] In other words, her worldview embraces the notion that we live in a world of patterns and resonances where meanings are related to each other.[27] Though Zwicky does not label it as such,

22 Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor,* L57, L58.

23 Sue Sinclair, "Wisdom" in *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky* (ed. Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet; Toronto: Cormorant, 2010), 157 (entire article 157–165).

24 Jan Zwicky, "Dream Logic and the Politics of Interpretation," in *Thinking and Singing* (ed. Tim Lilburn; Toronto: Cormorant, 2002), 145 (entire article 121–151).

25 Zwicky, qtd. in Sinclair, "Wisdom," 157.

26 Zwicky, *Wisdom,* L7, L6.

27 Even more fundamentally, as Zwicky, *Wisdom*, 43L, notes, "one can no more hope to understand metaphor if one is not sure the 'real world' exists, than one can hope to understand music if one does not have a body."

this is a belief that rings true for the Christian. For instance, Christian Reformed scholar Elaine Botha's recent book, on the importance of metaphorical models in scientific theorizing, *Metaphor and its Moorings; Studies in the Grounding of Metaphorical Meaning*, is premised on just these relationships.[28]

For Zwicky, the connections or interactions suggested in metaphor point beyond language because they are, as one critic puts it, "reflective of ontological form: the shape of the world; the way things hang together; the *fittingness* of given parts to a complex whole."[29] As Gallagher and Lundin suggest in *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, "since making a metaphor involves 'saying that one thing is another,' well-wrought metaphors give us a glimpse of what it would be like to live in a world where everything makes sense and holds together."[30] However, for Zwicky, and this is key, "the implied 'is not' in a metaphor points to *a gap in language through which we glimpse the world.*"[31] Adam Dickinson, a young Canadian poet and academic who has studied under Zwicky, suggests that this is how metaphor provides a hinge between the presence of something and its absence, and between human language and the "beyond" of language; a dependence on metaphor, he says, "emphasizes the insufficiency of language to present matter fully."[32] Metaphor, then, functions as servant rather than master; we might say it *enacts* a kind of epistemological humility. In this way, argues Dickinson, the language of metaphor can be called "a form of listening . . . that might serve to hear the imperative of the other, human and nonhuman."[33]

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28 Elaine Botha, *Metaphor and its Moorings: Studies in the Grounding of Metaphorical Meaning* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). Like Ricoeur, Botha, *Metaphor and its Moorings*, 72, asserts that "metaphor represents a new way of seeing that creates or opens up a new semantic field which is the result of the interaction between at least two domains or semantic fields." However, Botha's interests and mine diverge somewhat. Botha's Dooyeweerdian distinction between metaphors and analogies on the basis of the difference between *entities in* reality and *aspects of* reality (see, for instance, *Metaphor and its Moorings*, 81) is concerned to determine the basis, or "moorings," for metaphor. Botha, *Metaphor and its Moorings*, 41–42, describes "the structural stratification and categorization of human experience [and] the human body" as conditions that "constrain analogical and metaphorical meaning transfer, cross domain mappings and blends in cognition and in language." My own concern is, rather, to explore the power of metaphor to escape the limits of human textuality by foregrounding its expressed limits.

29 Darren Bifford, "Metaphor and Ecological Responsibility," in *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky* (ed. Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet; Toronto: Cormorant, 2010), 192 (entire article 192–196). In terms of the relation of one domain to another, Zwicky's book is also concerned to demonstrate the relationship between metaphor and mathematics, in particular as this intersects with the notion of visual proofs.

30 Gallagher and Lundin, *Eyes of Faith,* 27.

31 Zwicky, *Wisdom,* L10; italics in original.

32 Adam Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics: Ecocriticism, Material Metaphoricity, and the Poetics of Don McKay and Jan Zwicky," *Canadian Poetry: Studies/Documents/Reviews,* Special Issue on Ecocriticism, 55 (Fall/Winter 2004): 36 (entire article 34–52).

33 Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics," 50.



"the fittingness of given parts to a complex whole"

"Seeing beyond the Scenery"

"The implied 'is not' in a metaphor points to *a gap in language through which we glimpse the world*."[34] In order to pay ontological attention, then, and in light of this assertion by Zwicky, I want to consider some recent work by two Canadian poets who embrace metaphor as an enactment of epistemological humility. These two poets are both energized by a kind of ecocritical desire to show not only the glories but also the suffering of the material world. Both have been well-established names on the Canadian poetry scene for twenty-plus years. John Terpstra, a Hamilton resident, won the CBC Radio Literary Competition's first prize for poetry in 1992; he was a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 2004, and in 2006 he was a finalist in the equally prestigious Charles Taylor Prize for Creative Non-Fiction. Don McKay, who presently lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, has twice won the Governor General's Award, in 1987 and in 2000. In 2007, he also won Canada's biggest prize for poetry, the Griffin, and in 2008, he was made a Member of the Order of Canada for his services to literature. I want to consider, first, Terpstra's *Falling into Place*, which is actually a collection of essays and prose meditations, with half-a-dozen interspersed Terpstra poems, considering the history and the geography of the westernmost tip of Lake Ontario.[35] I then want to

34 It is perhaps worth noting here that Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor*, L35, also affirms "the fundamentally metaphorical nature of self: one is, and is not, one's body."

35 John Terpstra, *Falling into Place* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau, 2002).

examine McKay's *Vis-à-Vis*, which is also a collection of essays and prose meditations, with half-a-dozen interspersed McKay poems and half-a-dozen poems by others.[36] Each of these books pays careful attention to the relationship of human beings to the material world of wild nature and, in the prose as well as the poetry, each demonstrates a deep awareness of metaphor as a "form of listening."

John Terpstra's Falling into Place

Does the natural world "speak"? Terpstra believes so. He says, "I hug only the occasional tree, but a tree by itself has a terrific amount to say to anyone who would stand beneath and listen. Any place truly loved and attended to will likewise respond."[37] In *Falling into Place*, Terpstra is moved by the maltreated and scarred land of his hometown of steel-city Hamilton into writing a kind of love-story for "a piece of geography whose brokenness mirrors my own." Terpstra's growing awareness of love for "this dwelling, where I feel myself both landed gentry and honoured guest,"[38] leads him to feel pain for the land's wounds because they are his wounds too: "*we're made from this stuff,* this earth, this shale, this mud and suffering clay."[39] He is particularly drawn to the sandbar under the highway on the west side of Hamilton Harbour, "where the host landscape continually shifts, stirs and reveals something inestimable of itself, lifts another stone from its Bar, relates the story, . . . and invites me to consider all that it has as my own."[40] Terpstra "pledg[es] to return the favour," because the relationship between people and geography is a reciprocal one: "Come, let us anthropomorphize the landscape. The story here is about bodies—human, liquid, and that one called earth—about where and how they meet, and what happens then."[41] He imagines the sandbar as a sleeping giant, fingers clenched and then stretched out one by one to touch the far shore as bridges are built. He is, he says, "attached to how the lines are drawn here. *Geo graphis*. I am attached to what is written. Inlet, shoreline, sandbar, ravine."[42]

Though the traditional direction for central Canadians to go to discover their spiritual connection with nature is north, away from the city and into Ontario's lake district on the Canadian Shield, Terpstra wonders if there is not "more to receive, and to give, here where the Bar's arm lies broken . . . where the inlet's mouth is closed and landfill meets the saddened water, than can be dreamt of on

36 Don McKay, *Vis-à-Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau , 2001).
37 Terpstra, *Falling*, 264.
38 Terpstra, *Falling,* 313.
39 Terpstra, *Falling,* 149; italics in original.
40 Terpstra, *Falling,* 313.
41 Terpstra, *Falling,* 26.
42 Terpstra, *Falling,* 66; italics in original.

starry nights by northern lakes."[43] For "the Sleeping Giant," he says, "is what used to be called a Christ-figure. . . . There's a connection, here, between that figure and the landscape, between the suffering human body and the body of the earth. I think that what the earth does when we come to settle upon it is give up its own blamelessness."[44] In this linkage of physical and spiritual geography, Terpstra has been profoundly affected by the ancient British notion of the earth as a sleeping giant or king; that notion was overlaid with Christian symbolism as the sleeper came to be identified both with Christ and with the church as the body of Christ before the final resurrection. In 1982, over thirty years ago now, Terpstra published an article on "The Sleeping Lord," a long poem by the twentieth century Welsh poet David Jones. Here Terpstra spelled out the connection expressed by Jones, that is also expressed by Terpstra, between land, people, and culture. He writes of Jones's poem that "the lord who sleeps is the embodiment of a whole people and their culture, and this embodiment includes their physical landscape."[45]

However, in these connections it is important to recognize that Terpstra is also true to his own spiritual roots in the Dutch Protestant world of a Christian Reformed expression of faith, where the "sacred" is profoundly and intrinsically implicated in the "profane." In the European Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reflections on God's handiwork in creating the earth and its inhabitants brought an understanding of geography itself as a theologically oriented discipline, what one commentator calls "the science of the visible side of the Divine revelation."[46] And for someone raised in that branch of the Christian Reformation which leads into nineteenth century Neo-Calvinism, not only is the natural world sacramental, in the sense of manifesting the glory and presence of God, but so too, potentially, are the human-made cultures that have grown up upon and within it. In fact when Terpstra writes, "I am attached to a piece of geography, in an urban setting,"[47] the urban setting is crucial, because "I am looking to see the love and desire this landscape evokes made manifest in the landscape of the city itself, in the city's story."[48] So his "looking to see" is a spiritual reading: "My *lectio divina*, this landscape"[49]—learning to read the earth and humankind's interactions with or appropriations of it.

43 Terpstra, *Falling,* 66.
44 Terpstra, *Falling,* 94.
45 John Terpstra, "'Bedad He Revives! See How He Raises!': An Introduction to David Jones's 'The Sleeping Lord,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 102 (entire article 94–105).
46 C. C. Park, "Geography and Religion: Context and Content." in *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.
47 Terpstra, *Falling,* 66.
48 Terpstra, *Falling,* 217.
49 Terpstra, *Falling,* 281; italics in original.



"we're made from this stuff, this earth, this shale, this mud and suffering clay"

At the same time, as it is a project of *lectio divina*, this book is a project of archaeology, in which Terpstra burrows beneath the layers, human-made and geological, to uncover the landscape of desire. "Understand," he says, "that this is a landscape I love; the one I have adopted, or has adopted me, that reveals itself to me over time in a kind of slow, affectionate undressing."[50] The earth seems to enact its desire: "The landscape itself woke and made me willing and wanting to see beyond the scenery [there's that phrase from the title of this paper], to read the lines of the storied shapes and contours I was passing through."[51] He has come to love it, "to override the fact that it is a dump. I love the folds and shapes overlaid, altered, by humanly-made shapes competing in scale with the original work, that have let me into their secret."[52] The anthropomorphism is profound—seeing the land as a person. Furthermore, of course, it is suspect: "I am speaking as if the sandbar is a person, again. The sandbar is not a person. My feeling is one of empathy nonetheless."[53] Paul Ricoeur says, "to see sameness in the difference is the genius of metaphor"[54]; Terpstra's writing is the stronger for his articulation of this paradox. A fellow Canadian poet, Anne Simpson, names the paradox in an article she has written on the work of Jan Zwicky: "Metaphor seeks out otherness without losing sight of similitude. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of poetry."[55]

50 Terpstra, *Falling,* 250.
51 Terpstra, *Falling,* 140.
52 Terpstra, *Falling,* 141.
53 Terpstra, *Falling,* 40.
54 Paul Ricoeur, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," 80.
55 Anne Simpson, "Look at Things Like This," in *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan*

If, then, we return to Zwicky's own formulation, we may say that Terpstra's metaphor of sandbar-as-person points to a gap in language through which he not only glimpses but also identifies with the material world. The patterns of meaning that intersect and echo here include his own body: the reason the human changes to the landscape have such a visceral effect on him is that they are in some sense done *to him*—because "we're made from this stuff, this earth, this shale, this mud and suffering clay."[56]

Even of his home, he points out that it is "made of bricks that are made from the red clay shale . . . of the northshore ravines,"[57] so that "our home [is] made from the stuff we are made of."[58] The ancient Genesis story, of Adam shaped from the dust of the earth, is just under the surface here. However, Terpstra is clear that it is an act of love to anthropomorphize the landscape as a sleeping giant and, in a material kind of *lectio divina,* to make a connection between the suffering human body and the body of the earth.

Don McKay Face to Face

For McKay, too, the natural and the non-human but human-made have a way of communicating. However, the central metaphor is less that of a person speaking or a body revealing itself than of a face looking back at us, a wildness looking askance. McKay, too, is concerned with a scarred world; he describes his writing as "nature poetry in a time of environmental crisis."[59] In *Vis à Vis* he is embattled by human inhumanities. In the New Brunswick countryside, he comes across a shot raven hung up at the side of the road, and he describes the display as a "colonization of its death."[60] He has to pass the utter ruination of a deserted army base where the soil is corroded with chemicals, wire, and unexploded shells.[61] He laments the shame that humankind has inflicted on the earth in clear-cut deforestation.[62] His emphasis is different from Terpstra's in that rather than working from the recognition of a material sameness of self and other, he uses the terms of Emmanuel Levinas: he talks of the "face" of the wild as the sign of something inescapably other.[63]"When a lake or a pine marten looks back, when we are—however momentarily—*vis à vis*, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to

Zwicky (ed. Mark Dickinson and Clare Goulet; Toronto: Cormorant, 2010), 154 (entire article 151–156).

56 Terpstra, *Falling,* 149.
57 Terpstra, *Falling,* 313.
58 Terpstra, *Falling,* 313.
59 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 9.
60 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 20.
61 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 41–44.
62 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 101.
63 See McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 95–99.

sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?"[64] Though Levinas is wary of ascribing anthropomorphic qualities to anything other than "anthropos," humankind, McKay, like Terpstra, shows how a certain aspect of anthropomorphizing can provide a strategy of responsibility that is deeper than the language we have for it—"envisaging rather than naming: to bring in all that a face presents."[65]



"entry points where wilderness re-invades"

In fact McKay says that "the first indicator of one's status as nature poet is that one does not invoke language right off when talking about poetry, but acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both."[66] McKay's "prejudgment" of this "extra-linguistic condition" can be seen, again, as an act of epistemological humility. "Poetry," he says, "comes about because language is not able to represent raw experience, yet it must."[67] He describes "the disturbing thrilling awareness that there really is a world outside language, which, creatures of language ourselves, we translate with difficulty."[68] He talks of "the abject thinness of language" that can never encompass the moment, and then our awareness of "the enormous, unnamable wilderness beyond it—a wilderness we both long for and fear."[69] For McKay, wilderness represents "whatever falls outside the

64 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 101. In the ethics of Levinas, Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics," 12, says that "the openness of the self to the other is a relation of metaphoricity, it is articulation, a whole that is at once not a totality." This definition of the metaphoric relation as an articulation suggests the kind of dialogic interchange that McKay celebrates.
65 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 101.
66 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 26.
67 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 65.
68 McKay, "Local Wilderness," 5–6.
69 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 64.

mind's appropriations," and it becomes a moral category, which judges human response to itself. Even in tools, wilderness lies hidden, waiting to reassert itself—in rust, in decay, in the surprising interruption of our human intentions. Most of all, it lies in words; metaphors, writes McKay, are "entry points where wilderness re-invades language, the place where words put their authority at risk, implicitly confessing their inadequacy to the task of re-presenting the world."[70]

For naming, he writes, is "obviously *artificial*"—"even 'apt' names touch but a tiny portion of a creature, place, or thing."[71] To demonstrate this, he writes a lovely comic retake, "A Small Fable," on the first Adam's job as originary namer. After a long day's work of naming, Adam realizes that "his edge was off" when he named the screech owl, and "little aluminum ladder" (a phrase McKay borrows from the American Christian poet Mary Oliver) does a much better job of describing the "sad shaking of the air, a small whinny" that is the owl's voice as it flutters down. However, there is more undermining of linguistic positivism to come, when Adam makes the disconcerting discovery that things look different at night: "Would everything have to have a day name and a night name?"

> Suddenly he felt, rather than saw or heard, a stirring as a presence flew past him, a darker darkness that swept down the path and into the foliage, leaving a little whinny hanging. That was "little aluminum ladder of its scream" alright, but now Adam realized that the new name, much though it improved on "screech owl," did nothing for that gentle fatal presence on the path, that extra hush he had lived with for a moment. It was as if—Adam groped inwardly as he made his way back to the bower, holding the quality of the experience in his mind as though cradling an egg. It was as if . . . Would it be later that night, or the next day, or very much later after sex and the fall, that he'd finally name that presence on the path as the little sister of death? Or would that be one of those that never came to words?[72]

As McKay names "little aluminum ladder of its scream" and "little sister of death," we recognize how these metaphors foreground the gap, the lack of consonance between the word and the thing, the signifier and the referent. In speaking back to any kind of linguistic positivism, metaphors proclaim the inability of language to wholly capture anything—or, as the contemporary terminology would have it, to totalize. The "presence on the path" may just be "one of those that never

70 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 85.
71 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 63–64; emphasis in original.
72 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 91–92

came to words."[73] Dickinson suggests that "the '*this*ness' of things . . . requires a metaphorical understanding; it is not given in the language of definitions and names."[74] Poetry, says McKay, "introduces the unnameable . . . into nomination, with the result that all namings, including the poem in which it speaks, becomes provisional."[75] This is the way in which there is a kind of epistemological humility built in to metaphor: McKay writes, "Thanks to metaphor, we know more; but we also know that *we don't own what we know.*"[76]

McKay's understanding of his key term "poetic attention" is also energized by humility. He argues that it is "a species of longing which is without the desire to possess . . . a kind of pure applause of the being of something else."[77] In the last poem in *Another Gravity*, the book for which he won the Governor General's award for poetry in 2000, McKay talks about leaving home—how each thing will "not cease to exist / after your departure, but go, / slowly, each in its own way, wild." The poet's best insight is this one: each thing's wildness is beyond human appropriation and is to be honoured. Leaving home is as good a time as any to recognize the inadequacy even of poetry to do more than acknowledge resonances and gaps:

> . . . a time to cast
> away stones, to stop
> building and remembering and building artful
> monuments upon the memories.
> To leave.
> To step off into darker darkness,
> That no moon we call new.[78]

Spiritual Geography

So in their metaphors, these poets are enacting, rather than naming, a hinge between prose and poetry, history and geography, the clay of the human and the clay of the earth, language and the 'beyond' of language. For both of them, as McKay says, "poetic attention . . . leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it."[79] For, in McKay's words, "an excellent translation does not wish

73 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 92.
74 Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics," 48.
75 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 66.
76 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 69.
77 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 26. See Ken Babstock, "The Appropriate Gesture, or Regular Dumb-ass Guy Looks at Bird: An Interview with Don McKay," in Tim Bowling, ed., *Where the Words Come From: Canadian Poets in Conversation* (2002); repr. in Brian Bartlett, ed., *Don McKay: Essays on His Works* (Toronto: Guernica, 2006), 177 (entire article 167–187).
78 Don McKay, *Another Gravity* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), 69–70.
79 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 28.



"the surplus of meaning which suggests its essential wildness"

to supersede the original, nor make us forget its existence. . . . It would not be wrong to say that a translator's real power lies in her humility: and this includes not only reverence for the source, but a remembrance of language as apparatus"—that is to say, a concern "to use and inhabit [language] with an awareness of residual wilderness."[80] Where Terpstra's humility stems from an awareness of what Adam is made of—dust you are, and to dust you shall return—McKay's humility stems from a recognition of this wilderness in things that, by definition, Adam cannot name. A contemporary Adam, Adam Dickinson, suggests that to describe the material world in metaphor is to engage in a kind of "lyric ethics" that recognizes the being-in-itself of things most clearly in their connectedness.

Each of these poets, then, pays careful attention not only to obviously beautiful nature but also to abused nature and the "gentle fatal presence" on the path.[81] Each engages in metaphor as a "form of listening"[82] that humbly recognizes that the referent in the world always exceeds its translation into language. Though Terpstra's work is grounded confessionally in Christian tradition in a way that McKay's is not, nevertheless each poet offers a kind of spiritual geography of the material world, the human being's relationship to it, and the surplus of meaning that suggests its essential wildness, or, to put it into the context of faith, that which is transcendent. Furthermore, each poet shows that paying careful poetic attention leads both to respect what is undomesticated and to an acute awareness of the

80 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 62–63.
81 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 92.
82 Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics," 50.

necessity that any human action be undertaken with humility: "we don't own what we know."[83] In the end, metaphor, in its refusal and surpassing of any naïve realist naming, "gives us a way to stand"[84] in relation to "the unfathomable mystery which engulfs and inhabits the world"—a phrase from Pope John Paul II's "Letter to Artists."[85] As such, as Ricoeur puts it, "what is changed by poetic language is our way of dwelling in the world."[86]

One of John Terpstra's most celebrated poems in *Falling into Place* recognizes this mystery of metaphor and otherness at its very heart in a lovely, playful re-imagining of the prehistory of the Niagara Escarpment—before the coming of the White Man from Europe, perhaps even before the appearance of the First Nations Peoples.[87] It is called "Giants."

> There used to be giants,
> and they loved it here. They'd sit
> their giant hinds in a row along the top edge
> of the escarpment, and pick at the loose rock
> with their hands or their feet, then throw or skip the smoothest
> stones across the bay, to see who could land one
> on the sandstrip, three miles away;
>
> or they'd spring themselves off the scarp top
> like you would off a low wall, and go running
> all the way to the end of the sandbar,
> then jump across the water to the other side,
> or jump in, splashing and yelling up the ravines,
> chasing each other's echoes.
>
> This was only a few thousand years ago, and the giants
> were still excited about the glaciers,
> which were just leaving; about not having to wear
> their coats all the time, and what
> the ice and water had done, shaping and carving
> this gentle, wild landscape!
>
> They loved it here.

83 McKay, *Vis-à-Vis,* 69.
84 Dickinson, "Lyric Ethics," 6.
85 Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, Section 5, 1999. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html
86 Ricoeur, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," 85.
87 Project Bookmark Canada installs permanent markers in places where the Canadian landscape has been enshrined in a literary work. In October 2011, Terpstra's poem "Giants" was installed as Bookmark 9 in Hamilton's Sam Lawrence Park, at the edge of the Niagara escarpment.

> I'm telling you, they absolutely loved
> every living minute here,
>
> and they regretted ever having to leave.[88]

In this fable of ancient childlikeness, Terpstra makes present both the unfallen historical beginnings and the long-ago voices of the "gentle, wild landscape" that he loves.[89] Like the psalmist in Ps 19, Terpstra, in his "form of listening" through metaphor, enacts a hinge between human language and the beyond of language; if we listen carefully, he, like McKay, reveals something otherwise unnamable of "what it means to be human, on and of this earth"[90]—something that we might call the glory of God in the material world.[91]

88 Terpstra, *Falling*, 45.

89 Ricoeur, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," 85, writes, "the strategy of metaphor is heuristic fiction for the sake of redescribing reality."

90 John Terpstra, email correspondence with the author, June 7, 2011.

91 Photo credits: all photos here, as visual metaphors, are by John P. Bowen, and are used as a provocative intertext, with many thanks.