**Some Thoughts on Poetry and Fracking**

In 2014 I was asked to give a poetry reading at the anti-fracking camp in Balcombe, West Sussex. Thinking about what to read brought into focus issues which, as a poet and an environmentalist, I have been ruminating on for a number of years. Fracking is sometimes claimed to be way of reducing CO2 emissions as the gas produced burns more cleanly than, for example, coal. However, as Anthony Ingraffea and others have argued, there are real concerns that fracking does in fact release large amounts of methane and black carbon, both of which are much worse contributors to global warming than CO2 on its own. Over one hundred years, the comparative impact of methane as a greenhouse gas is more than twenty five times greater than that of CO2. In addition to this, concerns about groundwater pollution and the waste products of fracking continue to dog the industry. Not only have there been numerous claims of groundwater being polluted in the U.S. and Canada; the industry also demands huge amounts of water for its operations. In the U.S. already arid areas are suffering water shortages because of fracking. France, Bulgaria and Germany have banned fracking. In Scotland there is currently a moratorium. Cameron’s government, on the other hand, introduced an amendment to the Infrastructure Act in 2015 giving the industry automatic access to ‘deep level land’ under people’s homes and grants the industry rights to ‘maximise’ hydrocarbon recovery. In 2015 Lancashire county council turned down Cuadrilla’s application to frack in Lancashire. Last year, Sajid Javid, the ironically titled ‘Communities Secretary, overturned the council’s decision and granted Cuadrilla permission to go ahead. But my larger point has to do with the attitude that fracking represents, an attitude that wishes to squeeze every last drop out of hydrocarbons from the ground rather than acknowledge that we need, urgently, to develop clean sources of energy. It is an attitude which is unsustainable in every sense of the word and which views the ‘more-than-human world’ as an almost infinitely expendable resource.

What has this go to do with poetry?

Poetry has a long history of protesting the despoliation of the natural world. Romanticism, that great amorphous animal, was, in some senses, a reaction against the industrialisation of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Think of Wordsworth’s horror at the proposed extension of the railway from Kendal to Windermere. In his poem ‘On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway’ Wordsworth describes the ‘false utilitarian lure’ that the extension represents. The poem ends with a plea to nature to speak up for itself:

Is there no nook of English ground secure

From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown

In youth, and ‘mid the busy world kept pure

As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,

Must perish: - how can they this blight endure?  
And must he too the ruthless change bemoan

Who scorns a false utilitarian lure

‘Mid his paternal fields at random thrown?

Baffle the threat, bright Scene, from Orrest-head

Given to the pausing traveller’s rapturous glance:

Plead for thy peace, thou beautiful romance

Of nature; and, if human hearts be dead,  
Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong  
And constant voice, protest against the wrong. (Wordsworth, 1844)

We may find this a bit twee today, as we have now adjusted to the idea of steam railways as somehow aesthetically pleasing, though the bulldozing of ancient woodlands to make way for HS2 may bring back such sentiments. However, Wordsworth’s plea to nature to speak for itself is an interesting move which suggests something beyond the ‘utilitarian lure’. Utilitarianism can cut both ways of course. Recent attempts to quantify the contribution of natural resources to economic wellbeing use a utilitarian approach to promote an environmental ethic. And this may well be necessary, particularly when arguing with those for whom economic growth, seemingly at all costs, is an unquestioned good. John Clare cried out against the effect of the enclosures on his childhood landscape in his poem ‘Remembrances’:

Enclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain,

It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill

And hung the moles for traitors – though the brook is running still

It runs a naked stream, cold and chill. (Clare, c.1832)

Both Wordsworth and Clare were strongly motivated by an attachment to place: to the Lake District in Wordsworth’s case, and to rural Northamptonshire in Clare’s. Clare’s attachment to place was in fact so crucial to his wellbeing that after removal to an asylum in Epping Forest, he eventually escaped and walked home to Northamptonshire. However, for Clare it was too late: his first love was dead and the landscape of his childhood had been changed irrevocably by the Enclosures.

A twentieth century version of this cry can be seen in David Craig’s poem ‘Against Looting’ from his 1987 collection of the same name. The poem begins:

**Against Looting**

Leave the mahogany where it is!

Leave the mahogany trees in Borneo

Where the orangs embrace them gently.

Leave the geodes where they are!

Great egg-wombs toothed with crystal,

Leave them in the Brazilian darkness.

Leave the edelweiss where it is!

Its foliage woven of frost,

Leave it to root on the bergs of the Dolomites. (Craig, 1987, pp 7-8)

Instead of a localised cry, this poem ranges across the globe as the destruction is now global and globally known.

But what, if anything, can poetry offer beyond a cry of protest? Can what poets say really offer a challenge to something like the behemoth of the fracking industry? In thinking about this, we may begin with Martin Heidegger’s famous essay ‘What Are Poets For?’ The essay takes its title from a line in Hölderlin’s elegy ‘Bread and Wine’: ‘…and what are poets for in a destitute time?’ What is interesting about Heidegger is that he was, in some ways, a proto-environmentalist, though notoriously also a member of the Nazi party from 1933 until the end of the World War II. Elsewhere in his work, Heidegger provides some useful ideas about the way in which modern Western civilisation has seen nature as a resource to be exploited. His concept of the ‘technological attitude’, for example, crystallises a certain way of perceiving the world solely in terms of raw material to be transformed for human benefit. Similarly, he uses the term ‘enframing’ to describe a mode of thought which allows us, for example, to ‘enframe’ a forest in terms of its use as timber. That forest then becomes what Heidegger terms ‘standing reserve’. In ‘What are Poets For?’ Heidegger contrasts this attitude with that of the poet. The singing of poets he suggests:

is turned away from all purposeful self-assertion. It is not a willing in the sense of desire. Their song does not solicit anything to be produced. In the song, the world’s inner space concedes space within itself. The song of these singers is neither solicitation nor trade. (Heidegger, 1975, p.135)

In fact, what Heidegger is championing here is poetry’s essential uselessness, at least in terms of the world of production, of making money or converting raw material into products. Heidegger’s argument is that, at its best, poetry *doesn’t* have an agenda. It isn’t part of the furious self-assertion of so many of our activities, and it is this which allows it a special privilege. For Heidegger, the furious self-assertion leads to the turning of things into objects. As he says in the same essay, ‘As long as man is wholly absorbed in nothing but purposeful self-assertion, not only is he himself unshielded, but so are things, because they have become objects’ (p. 129). There is much more in Heidegger’s essay, which I am not going to go into now, but his ideas have undoubtedly had an effect on a number of contemporary poets and thinkers who are concerned with our present ecological crisis.

One of those poets is the Canadian Don McKay. McKay expands on these concerns in both his own poetry and in a series of fascinating collections of essays on poetry and nature. I want now to turn to McKay’s ideas and then look at some of his poems. In ‘Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry’, from his 2001 essay collection *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness,* McKay describes how he found a dead raven strung up by the side of the road in New Brunswick. For McKay, displaying the dead raven represents an extreme form of human colonisation:

Shooting the raven was one thing: we all know, each of us, that sinister delight in casual brutality and long-distance death. Displaying it was another – controlling its death, as well as taking its life. Displaying it declares that the appropriation is total. A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements; this one is required to function as a sign, a human category – a sign which simply says “we can do this.” The raven’s being, in Martin Heidegger’s terms, was not just used, but used up. (McKay, 2001, p.19)

McKay characterises this extreme form of objectification as ‘matérielization’.

To make tools into matériel, we engage in further appropriation. This second appropriation of matter may be the colonisation of its death, as in the case of the raven, the nuclear test site, the corpse hung on a gibbet or public crucifixion. On the other hand, matérielization could be a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition, their return to the elements. (McKay, 2001, p.20)

McKay contrasts this with the experience of ‘wilderness’ which he defines as ‘the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations’. Therefore wilderness could be ‘dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet’. But this experience of wilderness might also occur without warning, when we ‘glimpse some thing’s autonomy – its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being.’ McKay riffs wittily on the distinction between thing and object in a section entitled ‘*Thingamajig*’ from his most recent poetry collection *Paradoxides*.

*An object is a thing that has been removed from its party line*

*of rhizomes, hyphae, and roots, and treated to public scrutiny –*

*framed, analysed, experimented upon, known.* (McKay, 2012, p.55)

McKay ends the piece with the idea of something being lost as ‘*we pursue the inescapable human work of objectification.*’ Yet his poetry is often an act of seeing things again, not as objects, but as things in their own right, even if only for a moment. Later in the same collection, he comments, ‘Phenomenology is one name for the path back from the object to the thing, the counterbalance to objectification, or “progress.” Poetry is another.’(p.66)

The kind of thinking with which we can counter the temptation to turn the world into objects or matériel he calls ‘poetic attention’. He describes this as ‘a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess…’ It gives, McKay suggests, ‘ontological applause.’ This kind of thinking, and writing, is first about listening:

And when poetry does become speech, it returns to the business of naming with this listening folded inside it. It introduces the unnameable (that is, wilderness under the sign of language) into nomination, with the result that all namings, including the poem in which it speaks, become provisional. To name without claiming is to wear ears on the outside of the statement (McKay, 2001, p.66).

Unlike what he terms ‘Romantic inspiration’, poetic attention doesn’t pretend to be a ‘vestige of the other’; rather it is a ‘*translation* of it.’ Language is a human tool and as with every human tool, there is always the risk of turning what is other into ourselves. Poetic attention, however, carries with it a sense of language as a tool, one which is being used to *translate* the other rather than contain or control it. ‘Nature poetry’, McKay states, ‘should not be taken to be avoiding anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully.’

We can see how this approach works in McKay’s poem ‘Song for the Song of the Common Raven’, published in his 2006 collection, *Strike/Slip*.

You could say it carries, you could say

dwells. *Corvus corax*: even in Latin

you can hear that smoke-and-whisky brogue –

*croak, curruck*, and (swallowing the syllable)

*tok.* You could say a fierce

unsayable secret has possessed the voice,

which has to speak and must not tell and so

is hollowed out and rendered terminally

hoarse. Of its brutal

seismic histories, its *duende*,

it says nothing. Nothing of the flowing and bending of rock,

of the burning going down and coming

up again as lava. Of rogue gods

loitering among the hemlocks nurturing the urge

to break out into body it conspicuously

does not sing. While sending messages that might

say “Watch your asses, creatures

of the Neogene” or might say “Baby,

bring it on.” (McKay 2006, p.27)

McKay is a keen birdwatcher, and this is one of a number of poems he has written in which the title begins ‘Song for the Song of…’ The implication of course is that these aren’t the songs themselves, but songs about the songs, acts of translation. The poem opens with two conditional clauses, suggesting that what we are about to hear is guesswork of some kind. The poem then does explore the onomatopoeic qualities of the raven’s Latin name. But we are soon back to the conditional clauses and a description of ‘a fierce / unsayable secret’ which ‘must not tell’. The poem goes on to tell us things the voice doesn’t speak of, suggesting a whole unspoken history of ‘lava’ and ‘rogue gods’. At the end of the poem we are given a sense of what the voice might be saying: ‘“Watch your asses, creatures / of the Neogene”’ or ‘’”Baby / bring it on”’. While the poem does tell us something about the song of the raven, it also constantly points up the contingent nature of its own approach. This isn’t a vestige of the raven’s song; it is a human translation of it, one which is necessarily encultured.

In a poem called ‘Stumpage’, also from *Strike/Slip*, McKay addresses the issue of clearcutting:

How the slash looks: not

ruin, abattoir, atrocity; not

harvest, regen, working

forest. How it looks. The way it

keeps on looking when we look away,

embarrassed. How it gawks,

with no nuance or subterfuge

or shadow. How it seems to see us now

as we see it. Not quick.

Not dead. (McKay 2006, p.22)

This is a very different poem to David Craig’s ‘Against Looting’. The poem contains a sense of our complicity in making this landscape (‘we look away / embarrassed’), but it doesn’t end with that thought. Rather it carries on looking. The stumpage isn’t just ‘ruin, abattoir, atrocity’, but nor is it what the forester would see, ‘harvest, regen, working/forest’. McKay refuses to see the clearcut as one thing or another. Finally, he senses that the stumpage is looking back. It ‘gawks, / with no nuance or subterfuge / or shadow’. In doing so, McKay acknowledges that, although it has been clear cut, the place retains something beyond its reduction to human terms, whether such a reduction is physical or imaginative. It is neither quick nor dead. The act of looking goes both ways. McKay has said how he can’t write as a traditional nature poet any more:

...I couldn’t be a nature poet in the old sense; you turn to nature as the kindly nurse and it soothes your cares and reminds you of the still, sad music of humanity – well, when you’re standing in a clear cut that still, sad music starts to sound like the grinding machine of humanity. (Bartlett, 2006, p.183)

McKay’s poetry, then, takes us into the Anthropocene, an epoch which is defined by significant changes in the world’s ecosystems brought on by human activity. For McKay the poet can no longer be the passive recorder of nature’s impressions. We are no longer so innocent, either about our behaviour as a species, or about our tendency to idealise nature and co-opt it for our own ends, even poetically.

I would like to finish by looking at a poem by the Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie entitled ‘Water Day’:

For four hours every eight days

our terraces’ *acequias*

run with snow melt,

sufficient for the almond

and orange trees, poppies,

irises, pimpernels.

And whether it’s the water’s

urgency or the beauty

of its governance, the way

it slakes the clay-

lined channels, its blithe

career through sluice gates;

or the fig tree

swelling over holding tanks

as water spills

through weedy gullets,

oracular and olive-green –

couldn’t we make

heavy weather of it all?

Proof of remote

beneficent mountains; the mind’s

release from silence, the boll

and eagre of sex, perhaps,

or poetry?

Or we might just follow

the custom hereabouts,

and rise at dawn on water day,

walk a mile in its company

as it falls, level

down to level, till it simply

quits the tenancy of our short lives,

and let it go. (Jamie, 2004, pp.8 – 9)

The poem describes the watering of terraces, presumably in Spain, with water from snow melt. But it is also a meditation on how we think of that water. ‘[C]ouldn’t we make / heavy weather of it all?’ Jamie asks, having already hinted at the poetic in the word ‘oracular’. We could think of the water symbolically, as ‘[p]roof of remote / beneficent mountains; the mind’s / release from silence, the boll / and eagre of sex, perhaps, / or poetry?’ But Jamie avoids these temptations to appropriate the water. Instead she suggests we might just follow it for a while, until it ‘quits the tenancy of our short lives, / and let it go’. Rather than thinking of the water as something we have to ‘use up’ physically and poetically, we can share a moment with it, tenant it, then let it pass into itself once again. This, I think, is a real example of the poetry of sustainability, one which refuses the desire to make every *thing* into a resource, to co-opt the world solely for our own ends. Yes, we may use its resources to help us live and feed ourselves, but always with one eye on the fact that those resources are more than just resources, that they have an existence beyond our limited conception of their use value.

Can a poem like this help challenge our government and the fracking companies in their desire to industrialise large parts of the English landscape, to tap the remaining fossil fuel reserves when ‘a third of oil reserves, half of gas reserves and over 80 per cent of current coal reserves should remain unused from 2010 to 2050 in order to meet the target of 2 °C’ according to a letter in *Nature* (*Nature* 517, 08 January, 2015, ps. 167 – 190)? In a straightforward sense, no; but then the poem isn’t speaking the language of politics. It is ‘turned away from all purposeful self-assertion’. Rather, the poem suggests a way of being which is ‘not willing in the sense of desire.’ This is, of course, at odds with what we are constantly told is ‘the real world’, the requirement to objectify both the human and the non-human so that we can make use of them. But that is the point surely. The poem asks us to look beyond the ‘false utilitarian lure’ of that so called ‘real world’, to *think* *again*.

‘Song for the Song of the Common Raven’ and ‘Stumpage’ are excerpted from *Strike/Slip* by Don McKay. Copyright © 2006 by Don McKay. Reprinted by permission of McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

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