**The Poetics of Deep Time: Hugh Dunkerley Explores the Work of Don McKay**

The idea of deep, or geological time can be traced back to the Scottish geologist James Hutton, who lived from 1726 to 1797. Hutton’s realisation was that different strata of rocks lying on top of or next to one another came from different geological epochs. The earth hasn’t always been the same, it is in a constant state of change and that change has been going on for billions of years. The psychological effects of this realisation were summed up by Hutton’s friend and mathematician John Playfair who, on looking at the [strata](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stratum) of the [angular unconformity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconformity) at [Siccar Point](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siccar_Point), commented that "the mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time".

In this essay I am going to examine how Canadian poet Don McKay has brought together poetry and geology in his last two collections, *Strike/Slip* and *Paradoxides*. McKay’s work is well known in Canada and he won the Griffin Prize for *Strike/Slip*. To my mind he is one of the most important poets currently writing about our relationship with what ecophilosopher David Abram calls ‘the-more-than-human world’. Scandalously, McKay’s work hasn’t been published in book form in the UK, but his collections are easily available through online retailers. McKay has also published a fascinating series of books of essays about poetic practice.

McKay terms what he has been writing recently as ‘geopoetry’. As the poet points out in an essay entitled ‘Ediacaran and Anthropocene’, this term was first used by geologist Harry Hess to describe the theory of plate tectonics**.** McKay wants to bring together poetry and science in a new relationship.

Geopoetry makes it legitimate for the natural historian or scientist to speculate and gawk, and equally legitimate for the poet to benefit from close observation and the amazing things which science turns up. It provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. Geopoetry, I am tempted to say, is the place where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally come together, have a conversation in which each harkens to the other, then go out for a drink. (McKay, 2011, p. 10)

Later in the same essay, McKay states that ‘[g]eology, or broadly speaking, natural history of any kind, brings the rigour of the scientific frame; poetry brings the capacity for astonishment and the power of possibility – or perhaps more accurately, legitimizes them.’ (McKay 2011, p. 16) McKay is keen to avoid the tendency of facts to close down the imagination on the one hand, and that of ‘romantic poets’ to turn the object of perception into an ‘emotional condition’ on the other (part of McKay’s approach is an ongoing argument with Romanticism). We can see an example of McKay’s refusal to turn perception into an emotional condition in this excerpt from a poem entitled ‘Apostrophe’ from *Strike/Slip.*

Not basalt.

Rude, out of reach, it listens

inward to some proto-music played

in zero-zero time, the songs

of the continents colliding or the slow

churn of current through its mother magma. (McKay, 2006, p.40)

Basalt is characterised as being ‘out of reach’; we can’t dream up a relationship with something which is so other. There is no way the poet can tune human emotion to the ‘proto-music played / in zero-zero time’.

However, by engaging with the science of deep time, the poet can help us think about our relationship with the more-than-human world in fresh ways.

We tend to think of facts as hard entities, dense indivisible nuggets, in much the same way we used to think of atoms. It is one of the tasks of nature poetry to reopen facts to their resonance, to recover their lung space, opening their alveoli so that they can breathe again, rather than lying inert in consciousness like the accumulated landfill upon which theories are constructed. (McKay 2011, p. 122)

In a sequence entitled ‘Paradoxides’, from the collection of the same name, McKay writes about a fossil trilobite of that name. In the first piece in the sequence (a prose poem), he describes seeing the fossil ‘bold, declarative, big as my hand and just as complicated.’

It seemed the shale had suddenly broken into literacy,

publishing one enigmatic pictograph from a secret alphabet.

Suddenly it was refusing relegation to raw material. Suddenly it

was demanding to be read. (McKay, 2012, p.40)

What can it mean for the poet, as opposed to, or perhaps we should say in addition to the scientist, to *read* the fossil? The final poem in the sequence is *Pygidium* (the term for tail of a trilobite).

You pose on my desk in the photograph,

a riddle, an odalisque, a rune,

one plump cipher from a long-gone

semiotic system. Cryptic and Sapphic,

at once emerging from the stone

and scuttling into it, you earn

each micro-quantum of the consternation

promised by your name. The more I learn

about you and your family – e.g.,

your eyes were calcite crystals, spars of rock

arranged to transmit light, unique

in all of animalia – the more piquant

your present absence. Friend, stranger, paradoxidid,  
I wave one jointed arm.

I wink one endothermic eye.

McKay describes the fossil in terms of language – ‘rune’, ‘cipher from some long-gone / semiotic system.’ In trying to read the fossil, he comes up against ‘the consternation / promised by your name.’ But the scientific fact of the calcite eyes ‘unique / in all animalia’ presses his understanding to take in the distant relation of the human and the fossil trilobite. In the end, the fossil is both ‘[f]riend’ and stranger’. It is far distant in geological time, but there is also something – the fact of an eye - that connects the poet and the fossil. The poet may be evolutionarily very different, with a ‘jointed arm’ and an ‘endothermic eye’, but still he waves and winks in a moment of creaturely commonality. As McKay comments on the essay ‘Ediacaran and Anthropocene’, the poetic frame

permits the imagination entry, finding implications for ourselves. For although we are palpably here, our presence is no less a remote possibility in the long accident-riddled course of evolution than is that of the *Charnia wardi* and other Ediacarans embossed on the rock. (McKay 2011, p. 15)

McKay, in his ongoing argument with ‘romantic poets’, describes his approach to writing about nature as ‘poetic attention’. In an essay entitled ‘Baler Twine: Some Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry’ from an earlier collection of essays, *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*, he draws a distinction between what he calls ‘romantic inspiration’ on the one hand and ‘poetic attention’ on the other.

There is, for this nature poet, at any rate, an important distinction between poetic attention and romantic inspiration. The romantic poet (or tourist, for that matter) desires to be spoken to, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language (or slide show) without a palpable break. (McKay, 2001, p.27)

This kind of thinking is seductive, it ‘speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity’. But, for McKay, it isn’t altogether honest. It assumes the poem is somehow ‘a *vestige* of the other’ and takes no account of the act of ‘*translation’* that writing undertakes as we try to find a way of expressing something the otherness of the non-human in human terms. Poetic attention, as an act of translation, on the other hand, ‘celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause.’ This approach is key to McKay’s writing about deep time and his desire to avoid the pitfalls of ‘romantic inspiration’. He doesn’t wish to avoid anthropocentrism (how could we?), but to ‘enact it thoughtfully’. (McKay, 2001, p.29)

An enlightening example of this approach can be seen in the poem ‘Mistaken Point’ from *Paradoxides*. Mistaken Point on the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland contains some of the world’s oldest fossils, dating from the Ediacaran period. As McKay begins to describe the fossils below his feet, he struggles for similes: ‘a fernlike creature, a creature / like a picket fence, a shrub, a miniature / Christmas tree, a pizza disk’. The creatures look so alien, so different from anything now living, that McKay is forced to fall back on similes of the familiar. But the humourous and unexpectedly mundane character of these similes is their point; they suggest a mind struggling to characterise something so distant in time. Only by reference to the world we know can any sense be made of the fossils, and even that then fails to really get to grips with what they once were. A few lines later, McKay describes his mind as ‘boggling, Googling vainly in the Zenosphere’. The mind finally gives up and ‘files this in a shoe box, taped shut, / and tagged like a rogue elk’s ear, / somewhere near infinity.’ The poem ends with a question.

What shall we call

this antique frond, part fern, part feather,

part Art Nouveau and brand new Braille,

urgent and enigmatic as an oracle? (McKay, 2012, p. 38)

The poem then is a phenomenological record of the experience of encountering the fossils. It is an attempt to translate the wilderness of deep time into human terms. There is a sense of the otherness of deep time, the mind struggling to grasp the enormity of it, and failing. And yet the poem ends with the image of one of the fossils as ‘urgent and enigmatic as an oracle’. The fossils’ sheer strangeness as other examples of evolution, however distant; their extinction, these can tell us something about ourselves and our so far brief existence as a species. The poem gestures towards the strangeness of our experience here and now as conscious creatures contemplating our place in the scheme of things. Commenting on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, McKay explores poetry’s capacity to evoke wilderness in the essay ‘Ediacaran and Anthropocene’:

Culture [Levinas] says, can be interpreted as “an intention to remove the otherness of Nature which, alien and previous, surprises and strikes the immediate identity that is the Same of the human self”…It is against such reduction to the Same that poetry works, introducing otherness, or wilderness, into consciousness without insisting that it be turned wholly into knowledge, into what we know, what we own. Within poetic attention, we might say, what we behold is always “alien and previous,” whether it’s an exceptional fossil or an ‘ordinary’ rock or chickadee. In poetry there is not ‘been there, done that’; everything is wilderness. (McKay, 2011, p.20 - 21)

For me, McKay’s poetry and his essays suggest a vitally important way of writing about the more-than-human, particularly our relationship to deep time. Being a ‘nature poet’ in the twenty first century can seem like a strange and sometimes redundant activity. And yet it is precisely poetry’s ability to evoke our place in the larger world of evolution, extinction and deep time which makes it so relevant in a period of environmental destruction, when the desire to convert everything to some human use is so powerful. As McKay suggests, ‘[i]nhabiting deep time imaginatively we give up mastery and gain mutuality, at least for that brief - but let us hope, expandable – period of astonishment.’ McKay, 2011, p.24)

**Works Cited**

McKay, D. *Paradoxides* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 2012

McKay, D. *Strike/Slip* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 2006)

McKay, D. *The Shell of the Tortoise* (Gaspereau Press, Kentville, 2011)

McKay, D. *Vis à Vis* (Gaspereau Press, Kentville, 2001)