

# "Along the Line of Smoky Hills": further Steps towards an Ecological Poetics

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By most of the best accounts, it was at the time of the Renaissance that attitudes to nature in western Europe took a turn for the worse. "In the period roughly from the end of the fifteenth until the end of the seventeenth century one sees ideas of man as a controller of nature beginning to crystallize, along more modern lines," writes Clarence J. Glacken in *Traces on the Rhondian Shore*; "[i]t is in the thought of this period (not the commands of God in Genesis to have dominion over nature. . .) that there begins a unique formulation of Western thought, marking itself off from the other great traditions, such as the Indian and the Chinese, which are also concerned with the relationship of man to nature. This awareness of man's power increases greatly in the eighteenth century. . . . It increases even more dramatically in the nineteenth century. . . , while in the twentieth, Western man has attained a breathtaking anthropocentrism, based on his power over nature. . . ."1 John Rodman agrees, finding in the rejection of animal rights evident in Samuel Pufendorf's *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* (1642) "a turning point in the history of thought."2 So, too, does Roderick Frazer Nash, who points out in *The Rights of Nature: a History of Environmental Ethics* that Descartes' mind/body dualism entailed the conviction that animals "were insensible and irrational machines . . . [which] could not feel pain. . . [and] did not suffer."3 In effect, the emergence at the Renaissance of the heady combination of scientific rationalism, protestantism, and capitalism that is known today as modernity, resulted in a reconceptualization of man and nature to the immense detriment of both; henceforth — which is to say, during most of the five centuries that took the American continents from their discovery by Europeans to their present dismal and worsening state — nature was alien, insensible, despiritualized4: fodder for subjugation and commodification.

But, as Stephen Toulmin has recently argued in *Cosmopolis*, there have for some time been signs that the "scaffolding" of modernity which was erected by Descartes and others during and following the Renaissance has begun to collapse. "[N]ow. . . the last timbers of that scaffolding — the separation of humanity from nature, and the distrust of emotion — have lost their credibility," writes Toulmin in 1990, and "no obstacle remains to studying nature however our experience requires."5 In its very optimism, this apocalyptic analysis is salutary, for it encourages a focus on *methods* of study in all fields, including literature, that are either consistent with the utter collapse of the obstacles erected at the Renaissance between man and nature or — to take a somewhat less optimistic view — the quickening diminution and perhaps eventual eradication of these obstacles. How, then, can literary criticism confirm or assist the reintegration of humanity and nature and the rehabilitation of emotion? How can critics of Canadian poetry participate in undoing

the erosion of people's sense of their integrity and interconnectedness with nature that began with the Renaissance?

The answer proposed here can be described as an ecological poetics — a poetics, that is, which elaborates on two key ecological assumptions — the assumption that man and nature are a "community of interdependent parts"<sup>6</sup> and the assumption that "diversity" in the human and natural world must be safeguarded and fostered<sup>7</sup> — to generate a method of reading which diminishes the gaps among people, their world, and their feelings while also emphasizing the uniqueness of all things, be they people or plants or poems, in face of the forces that would grind them down into a denatured uniformity. At the heart of the method of reading being proposed is an insistence on the mimetic and affective aspects of poetry, a resolve to examine the ways in which poems seek to recreate in the reader a sense of the world and the emotions that generated them, a conviction that many poems, especially when seen in the right light, act to bridge the gaps within and among things human and non-human that were opened by modernity. Of necessity, an ecological approach to Canadian poetry offers resistance to any and all forces that participate or cooperate in disprizing environments, people, and poems of their diversity by threatening to obliterate their unique, local, regional, and national characteristics. Of necessity — for what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of terrestrial life — an ecological poetics is opposed to any system, be it multi-national capitalism, architectural post-modernism, or deconstruction, in so far as that system contributes to the homogenization of nature and its creations, be they physical or linguistic. Since its aims are preservative and restorative, an ecological poetics unites conservation and conservatism in a search for manifestations in Canadian poetry of the feelings of responsibility, respect, duty, and interdependence that constitute the core of any bonded community worth imagining, from the feudal society of Coleridge and his fellow Romantic Tories<sup>8</sup> to the Gaian world of J.E. Lovelock and other contemporary ecologists.<sup>9</sup> Aldo Leopold's description of his "land ethic" as an enlargement of "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land"<sup>10</sup> succinctly describes the step necessary to arrive at the tory conservationism<sup>11</sup> in which lie the moral and political roots of the ecological approach to Canadian poetry being proposed here.

Because language is the medium of poetry whether written or spoken, the contributions of recent critical theorists and applied theorists cannot be ignored in the formulation and practice of an ecological poetics. On the contrary, the insights of deconstruction, for example, are useful to an approach that seeks, among other things, to destabilize false hierarchies and to resist abstracting and totalitarian systems (including deconstruction itself, in its high-flying generalizations and its insistence that all words always obey the same rules).<sup>12</sup> Yet in so far as certain strains of critical theory have stressed the importance of language to the exclusion or near-exclusion of other matters, they have done literature a disservice by placing it in a realm remote from its physical, emotional, and moral contexts. Poems may be part of a verbal universe but not one that is independent of the physical world. The eye that reads, the voice that speaks, the ear that hears, the brain that perceives, comprehends, interprets, and remembers: all are physical,

as, of course, are books, and pages, and print. For corrective purposes or in the interests of balance (another tory-conservationist ideal), an ecological approach may emphasize the physical over the verbal aspects of poetry, but, ideally, its aim is to stress and examine their interdependence. In practice, this usually means approaching a poem with a view to discovering whether its formal and typographical configuration is fitting or suited to its subject. Has the form been chosen with care by the poet? Has it been adapted to the needs of the subject? Particularly when the subject is a human or natural one, positive answers to these questions can be indicative, not merely of the poet's competent matching of manner to matter, but also, in the first instance, of respect for the subject at hand and, in the second, of flexibility in negotiating a relationship between the artefacts of human civilization and their surroundings. A poet who simply impresses a given form on a subject is unlikely to be someone who — to quote Jeremy Swift's characterization of an "ecological conserva ti[ve]" — "respects and protects the biological needs of people, for stimulation, flexibility, diversity of life and surroundings, and is careful about altering community bonds or interfering with man's relationship to nature and to other men. . . ."<sup>13</sup> Nor is he or she likely to foster the kind of hyphenation of civilization-and-environment which, from an ecological perspective, is essen tial to the survival of both. Only when the "flexibility of the civilization . . . match[es] that of the environment," Gregory Bateson has said, will there be "a healthy ecology of human civilization."<sup>14</sup>

To many people the moral dimension of an ecological approach to Canadian poetry will doubtless be distasteful. But it is essential for the practice of an ecological poetic that it be accompanied by a moral awareness born of sensitivity to the grave danger that post-Renaissance man has come to pose to himself and other living things. It is essential that we ask of any poem whether it shows contempt or respect for the natural and human world. It is essential that, with an awakened ecological sensibility, we ask what is appealing and admirable in a poem and what repulsive and despicable. It is essential that we look to aspects of poems that we are used to passing over in our search for the issues and themes which have been raised to prominence by the anthropocentric, intellectual, abstracting, and unnatural movement that began with the Renaissance and climaxed with high Modernism. It is essential that we ask spatial and sensual as well as intellectual and temporal questions about the poems that we read. Ideas and dates, metaphysics and literary periods, will remain important, but they must be accompanied by other matters bearing on the place of poems and people in the world. Where and on what kind of paper was this poem printed? Was it directed towards a personal, local, regional, national, or multi-national audience (or none, several, or all of these)? What does it look like on the page or sound like in the ear? How effectively does it communicate a sense of place? How effectively does it communicate an emotion by generating in the reader or hearer a feeling analogous to the one that it purports to express? Does its speaker position him or herself above, below, or on a level with the external world? If above, does the poem convey a sense of respect or responsibility for what is looked over or, on the contrary, a sense of overlooking? If below, or even on a level, is the human devalued or scanted? Is respect for living things in evidence? Does the poem tend towards the abstract or attempt to ground itself in particularities?

And so — in the ecological direction indicated by this last question especially — to specifics and instances: to examples of the ecological poetic at work in the field of Canadian poetry.

I

"Indian Summer" by William Wilfred Campbell is surely one of the best known, most-anthologised, and least-discussed Canadian poems. Written in the early eighties and published by Campbell in various places — *Poems!* (c. 1881), the *Toronto Varsity* magazine (1881) and *Varsity Book* (1885), *Snowflakes and Sunbeams* (1888), *Lake Lyrics* (1889), and *Collected Poems* (1905)<sup>15</sup> — all of them Canadian, "Indian Summer" is unequivocally a poem by a Canadian for Canadians. This helps to account for its matter-of-fact quality, its simple and direct<sup>16</sup> presentation of a series of natural images and events — the call of "the blue jay," "the sumachs on the hills," "[w]ild birds flying south"<sup>17</sup> — which Campbell clearly assumes will be familiar to his central and eastern Canadian audience.<sup>18</sup> At the emotional core of the poem is the anticipation of seasonal change which, as much as seasonal change itself, characterizes life in a northern climate. Especially before and during the transitional seasons of spring and fall, Canadians are likely to feel the kinds of longings and regrets that bring to mind momentous thoughts of life and death, birth, regeneration, and, perhaps, even resurrection. In its two preliminary appearances in *Poems!* and *Varsity*, "Indian Summer" contained two stanzas that made elaborately and unnecessarily explicit the spiritual implications of its natural images and events:

And mists come up at golden dawn  
From the still lake beneath,  
And fold their tents upon the hills  
Like the white camp of death.

Then steal away at even's hour  
Like hosts with banners furled,  
When the great purple sun hath set  
Along the murm'ring world.

Without these stanzas, "Indian Summer" invites rather than tells the reader to "dwell upon . . . nature as affecting the human" and uninsistently communicates its "impressive sense of the majesty of life and death":<sup>19</sup>

Along the line of smoky hills  
The crimson forest stands,  
And all the day the blue jay calls  
Throughout the autumn lands.

Now by the brook the maple leans  
With all his glory spread,  
And all the sumachs on the hills  
Have turned their green to red.

Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,  
Or past some river's mouth,  
Throughout the long, still autumn day

In the *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold borrows from P.D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* the term "*numenon*"<sup>20</sup> to describe moments like those depicted in "Indian Summer" when we sense the "imponderable essence. . . of material things." "Everyone knows," he writes, "that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffled grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead. . . . The grouse is the numenon of the northern woods, the blue jay of the hickory groves <sup>21</sup> Leopold's hermetic notion of the "*numenon*" refers, of course, to the spirit that he believes inheres in all living things and, thus, has limited value from an eco-poetical perspective. More useful to describe the three stanza version of "Indian Summer" might be the term vital moment, defined as the record of an intense awareness of living things in which the urge to abstraction has been kept to a minimum. Such moments are far from rare in Canadian poetry and prose, but they usually go unremarked and undiscussed for the very reason that, lacking abstract elements, they give little purchase to criticism in the modern mode. It is one aim of an ecological approach to spot vital moments and to exfoliate them, preferably less towards abstraction (or even Leopoldian hermeticism) than in close relation to the physical and emotional realm in which poems come into being.

In the opening line of "Indian Summer" — "Along the line of smoky hills" — the word "line" itself suggests an analogy between the words on the page and the contours of the landscape. Indeed, a few moments in the presence of the line will reveal that it replicates not only the horizontality of a distant "line of. . . hills" in, say, Ontario, but also, in the rising and falling of its lilting metre and lower and upper case letters, something of the hills' spatial rhythms and contours. With the second and third lines of the stanza, the words "crimson" and "blue" indicate the mimetic limitations of the black (or gray) and white format of traditional poetry and demand the mnemonic participation of the reader or listener in the process of recreating a sense of the "autumn lands." Yet the phrase "all d 醜 the bl 醜 j 醜" calls, with its internal rhyme and irregular emphasis, unobtrusively mimics the cry of the bird whose name itself derives from its raucous cry of "jay, jay." There is also more to the second and third stanzas of "Indian Summer" than may meet the careless eye and ear, for notice how the word "leans" hangs at the end of the first line of the second stanza to suggest the pendant aspect of the maple and listen to the mimetic qualities of the long vowels in the first line of the third stanza:

Now by the brook the maple leans  
With all his glory spread. . . .

Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,  
Or past some river's mouth,

Throughout the long, still autumn day  
Wild birds are flying south.

Finally, observe the way in which the only caesura in the poem — the comma between "long" and "still" in the penultimate line — conveys a

sense of the silence and motionlessness of the landscape being overflowed by the migratory birds.

A good deal more could be said about "Indian Summer," particularly about its technical and formal properties. Certainly worth noticing is Campbell's use of affective devices such as assonance and sibilance to guide the reader towards feelings of gently melancholy and wistfulness. So also worth noticing is his use in the final version of the poem of the three-part structure that underlies much popular music — music which is popular because emotionally stimulating. But perhaps enough has been heard and seen to establish that Campbell's short poem is an effective evocation of some of the sights, sounds, and moods of Indian Summer as they are observed and experienced in central and eastern Canada, a vital moment that succeeds well in putting its readers and listeners in touch with the natural world and their emotional life.

## II

Despite the cosmopolitan and abstracting tendencies of high Modernism, the writers of the so-called McGill Movement and their successors did produce some poems and portions of poems that are ecological in their emphasis on the local and the particular. These range from A.J.M. Smith's skilful recreation of the call of a "wild duck" in "The Lonely Land"<sup>22</sup> to Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy*, a well-grounded treatment of rural Saskatchewan during the dust-bowl years of the nineteen thirties. Let us look for a moment, however, at a poem that falls in length and complexity somewhere between these examples, A.M. Klein's "The Cripples," first published in Toronto in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). (That Klein published his work in Montreal, Philadelphia, and New York as well as Toronto is consistent with his negotiation in other areas of local, national, and trans-national loyalties.) Subtitled "*Oratoire de St. Joseph*"<sup>23</sup> in reference to the huge Roman Catholic church of that name in Montreal, "The Cripples" is written in *terza rima*, a form that is ecologically fitting for two reasons: because it is reminiscent of Catholicism's greatest poem, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (as well as of the *Stabat Mater* and *Dies Irae*) and because its architectural appearance and mounting rhymes (*aba, bcb, cdc*, and so on) reflect the purgatorial "mountain of stairs" by which the cripples ascend towards St. Joseph's. In the opening line of the poem — "Bundled their bones, upon the ninety-nine stairs" — two remarkable mimetic effects are observable: the use of alliteration and long vowels to slow the pace of reading towards the slow and painful progress of the cripples, and the occurrence of the word "ninety-nine" which, besides alluding to the biblical story of the ninety-nine and the one (Luke 15.7-10), was intended by Klein to "simulate steps: n-i: n-e: n-i: n-e: treads and risers."<sup>24</sup> So mimetic are many of the visual and aural features of "The Cripples" that it seems more than likely that the curved brackets that enclose its subtitle are a reflection of the "dome" of the "*(Oratoire de St. Joseph)*", which is described in the second stanza as "[t]he gourd of Brother Andr ! His sweet days/rounded!"

As the cripples ascend the stairs of St. Joseph's towards the promise of healing through faith in Brother Andr , the poet condescends to chronicle their movements and imagine their motivation. In doing so he indulges increasingly in a humour born of detachment,

progressing from reductive wit — "the knobs of penance . . . /the folded cripples" — through rollicking syllepsis — "They know, they know, that suddenly their cares/and orthopedics will fall from them"— to surrealistic *grotesquerie* — "*Roll empty away, wheelchairs, /and crutches, without armpits, hop away!*" But the tendency towards callous laughter is balanced in "The Cripples" by, among other things, a series of empathetic allusions to New Testament texts (Matthew 10.29, as well as Luke 15.7-10) which indicates Klein's willingness to think himself outside the Jewish framework of his own ideas and into the mental landscape of his Christian subjects. Out of this willingness to understand the "hope" of "the lame, /the unsymmetrical, the dead-limbed," to appreciate that "Yes, to their faith this mountain of stairs, is not!", comes the poem's final, Hardean lament: "And I who in my own faith once had faith like this, /but have not now, am crippled more than they." It is a token of the poet's movement from condescension to sympathy and self-knowledge that the one polysyllabic word in these lines — "crippled" — is applied by Klein to himself.

Although the focus of "The Cripples" is on shared humanity alone, its likening of the "palsied" to "aspen" trees and its allusion to Matthew 10.29, where Christ says that not "one [sparrow] . . . shall fall on the ground without . . . [the] Father," are ecologically engaging because they extend sympathy outwards from the human beings in the poem to other living things. In so doing, they recall Glacken's contention that blame for the idea of "man as a controller of nature" should not be laid simply on the shoulders of the Judeo-Christian tradition or, more specifically, on the notorious Genesis 1.28, where God tells Adam and Eve to "subdue" the "earth . . . and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Since the bulk of the poetry written in Canada to date has to some extent been shaped by Judeo-Christian assumptions, it is as well to remember that, according to this tradition, it was a love of the world, not simply man, that brought about the incarnation. Could this be why there are sheep and cattle as well as shepherds and wise men in the Christmas story? Tangential as it is to "The Cripples," this question has the salutary effect of bringing to the foreground once again the religious and ethical dimensions that come with an ecological approach to poetry. Nor — to bring these dimensions to bear on the author of "The Cripples" — was Klein unsympathetic to the view that man shares with other living things a divine and unifying spirit. "Thou art everywhere," he has a very hermetic Spinoza tell God in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," "a pillar to thy sanctuary is every blade of grass. . . . The flowers of the field, they are kith and kin to me. . . ." <sup>25</sup> Provided always that it does not elide genuine differences of belief, an ecological approach to Canadian poetry can and must be as ecumenical as its subject requires.

### III

In several ways, the work of Canada's low modernists, particularly certain members of the *Tish* group such as George Bowering and Daphne Marlatt, comes close to being the kind of Canadian poetry that would be written out of a full ecological awareness. Following in the footsteps of the Black Mountain poets (most notably, Charles Olson) and their American precursors and successors, the *Tish* poets held in the 'sixties and 'seventies that verse should be "projective" or

"proprioceptive,"<sup>26</sup> that it should embody the life-rhythms of its creator and reflect the environment of its composition, seeking in the process to allow the form of a poem to proceed from its content, both human and non-human. Following the European phenomenologists (Francis Husserl and Francis Ponge especially), the *Tish* poets attempted to replicate in their writing the textures of the perceived world while also accepting the impossibility of approaching "factual things"<sup>27</sup> other than through subjective experience. Mimetic in their poetics, the *Tish* poets were also, by grace of Olson, Ponge, and others, hermetic in their philosophical leanings. "Knowing that the opposers of nature always place themselves above her ways, I am determined to place myself, according to my nature, beside nature, to imitate nature, as William Carlos Williams did," said Bowering in 1971; "I think that the poetic act is largely in realizing the common energy that runs through the nature in me and the nature I find myself among."<sup>28</sup> From an ecological perspective, these are laudable goals, and they led to the creation of many poems, including several of Bowering's early lyrics and Marlatt's serial poem *Steveston* (1974), that succeed more than sporadically in honouring and inspiriting the existent, both human and non-human.

With its mimetic line lengths and stanza forms, its hermetic allusions,<sup>29</sup> its hostility to environmental degradation, and its insistence of the interdependence of all things in "webs . . . of strange connection,"<sup>30</sup> *Steveston* is the most extended outcome of the ecological component of *Tish*. Its opening lines convey something of the ability of low modern Canadian poetry to reach across the gaps between poem, reader, and external world by means, in part, of what Lampman called "true pictures" of the "phenomena of outer life":<sup>31</sup>

Imagine: a town  
  
Imagine a town running  
(smoothly?)  
a town running before a fire  
canneries burning  
  
(do you see the  
shadow of charred stilts  
on cool water? do you see enigmatic chance  
standing  
just under the beam?<sup>32</sup>

Provided that the reader adds his or her own imaginative energy to the promptings provided by the poet, the answer to Marlatt's last two questions is yes: there do appear in the mind's eye images of the phenomena that we are invited to envisage. Assisting the reader in envisaging the stasis and movement described in the lines are the present participles ("running," "burning," "standing") that are repeatedly placed in terminal positions. Like the use in the passage of brackets that are opened but not closed, these kinetic and centrifugal participles are consistent with the low modern view of reality as an ongoing, open-ended, and unpredictable happening — hence the "enigmatic" figure of "chance standing/just under a beam," beneath a structure which, in falling, will reveal the vanity of human aspirations to order.



As perhaps already gathered, a key word for the low modernists and their successors is open, and for quite obvious reasons. If reality is a free-flowing process (as Alfred North Whitehead seminally suggested in *Process and Reality* and as the Fraser River in *Steveston* continually insists), then writers who would be true to nature, be it internal or external, must be the open-minded conduits of open-ended poems. Temperamentally and philosophically hostile to enclosures, especially those originating in European culture, the *Tish* writers have been consistent to a fault in their attempts to subvert conventional patterns in life and art, frequently forgetting to remember that conventions and patterns are as much an aspect of natural and human life as are chance and process (an error that has become increasingly apparent in the last few years with the disclosure by scientists such as Benoit Mandelbrot that even so-called "chaos" is "stable" and "structured" as well as "ubiquitous").<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the energetic, liberating, and ecologically attractive amalgam of projectivism and phenomenology among Canadian low modernists in the 'sixties and 'seventies was to decompose in two directions that have moved writing in Canada away from the ecological ideals of interdependence and diversity. The first of these is towards a concentration on the experiencing mind that has led many writers into a self-centredness that is, by turns, banal, solipsistic, and aesthetic — disconcertingly oblivious to large moral, social, and political issues in its heavy emphasis on the subjective and personal. The second is towards a concentration on language as an isolated and uniform system that is not continuous with life but, as some literary theorists would have it, constitutive of a reality that has no meaningful existence outside of words and texts. To accept that the world does not exist and therefore cannot be changed except in our perceptions is to accede to fatalism. To think of language as a system that dictates individual utterances is to deny responsibility for one's own words. To rest in the open, the relative, the ambiguous, the indeterminate, the game-like is, like the archetypal liberal of F.R. Scott's "W.L.M.K.," to refuse to take a firm position, to deny the presence of real conflicts, to cheat the reader of authentic options, and, thus, to threaten the purposeful existence of a great many Canadians and their culture. It goes without saying that multi-national consumer capitalism has everything to gain from such undecidedness, and the distinct social and physical environments of this country a very great deal to lose. That writers associated with and influenced by the *Tish* group are among the poets and critics who are becoming aware of the ideological implications of critical theory and post-modernism will surprise no one who has perceived the ecological thrust of much of the original *Tish* work. Nor is it surprising that such poets as Don McKay, Andrew Suknaski, Anne Szumigalski, and Brian Dedora, whose roots lie in the same Black Mountain soil as *Tish*, are responsible for some of the most ecologically sound poetry being written in Canada today.

#### IV

*the year in pictures* by Barbara Carey was published in 1989 by the Quarry Press in Kingston, Ontario. Modestly and attractively printed and bound by Hignell Printing of Winnipeg, it is a fine example of the kind of poetry that we need if we are to see a diminution and disappearance of the effects of modernity in Canada. Intensely engaged with the world in which we live (the title refers to those

annual gatherings of significant photographs in *Time* and *Life* magazines and elsewhere), it is also extremely engaging emotionally and thoroughly down-to-earth — indeed, ecological — in its refusal of the abstractions and simplifications of multi-national consumer culture. "The year in pictures," begins the title poem,

is usually big on war, disasters  
political tricks & men  
kissing trophies, many sizes  
& shapes, some  
women too  
but no potatoes. . . [34](#)

As even these few lines indicate, *the year in pictures* is aligned with the Greenham Women's Peace Movement in its opposition to militarism, masculine priorities, and the oppression of women from a position grounded in ecological and feminist awareness. [35](#) In the body of the title-poem Carey wittily uses a commodity that is at once artificial and suggestively male — "golf balls" — as an emblem of a patriarchal order which, as seen in the poem's conclusion, devalues individual human lives and denatures earth's living things:

sometimes my life feels  
like what got left out  
of the year in pictures

sometimes it's like potatoes  
scrubbed bald & glossy  
as golf balls, so consumers  
in Ontario aren't reminded  
that potatoes come from the ground

sometimes I feel like kissing  
potatoes, for their calm & solid  
taste of hugging earth,  
for their plainness  
of shovels & boots  
& dishes & other things  
no one takes pictures of

As witness the unobtrusive but evident complexity of the phrase "bald & glossy," Carey's poetry is both highly intelligent and — unlike much post-modern writing — very friendly to the ordinary reader. Since the audience that it seeks — "consumers/in Ontario" (and elsewhere) includes everyone here (there); it is down-to-earth in manner as well as matter. Repetitive, colloquial, and emotional in a way that recalls popular songs and ballads, it also, and of necessity (for this again is its theme and message) uses everyday images — "potatoes," "shovels & boots/ & dishes & other things" — to celebrate the mundane world in which nature and mankind have their unglamorous but interdependent existence.

Put quite simply (as we have just seen that it is), the argument directed by Carey towards the readers of *the year in pictures* is that there are ways to resist and dismantle the world view which has since the Renaissance led increasingly to the domination and homogenization of nature, be it human or non-human. The choice is between "golf

balls" and "potatoes," between playing power games with artificial toys and taking good care of earthly life, between the imposed uniformities of a system that attempts to place itself above nature and the irregular shapes of the particular, the local, the female, the natural. "[W]hy should power/mean looking down" concludes "why it takes that shape," a meditation on the forms of power that advances various alternatives to the aggressively masculine "shape . . . / & trajectory" of "rockets." These include "the corkscrew/twist of how life's/coiled into the cells," "the/intimation of heart/in an artichoke's outer leaves," and various objects in the everyday world especially (but not exclusively) of women, such as an "apron" or "a wooden/spoon":

why not something  
comfortable in the hand  
as an apple or a doorknob,  
as sturdy to the foot  
as a floor. . . [36](#)

The man-made structures in these lines are acceptable from Carey's ecofeminist perspective because they have equivalents and parallels in the natural world and thus suggest the harmony that can and must exist between nature and humanity. A similar point is made more explicitly and joyfully in "breasts are so beautiful," which makes good use of *enjambement* reinforced by initiative and terminal verbs to mimic the shapes and movements being described:

breasts are so beautiful  
it's no wonder  
the wheel was invented  
to honour their roundness,  
rolling history forward;  
& sundials were made  
circular, to hold time  
& light together, the way  
breasts do the unpredictable  
physics of need and desire. . . [37](#)

Of course, an "unpredictable/physics" was not the physics dreamed by post- Renaissance science, and breasts in themselves accord not at all with the value placed on technology, power, and the transcendence of nature by modern man; indeed, it is because of "their absence of technique,/because they aren't muscle,/because they change/in cycles like the seasons. . ." that breasts are an epitome of the moral-aesthetic of ecofeminism and a reminder, too, that in its unpredictable and diverse forms terrestrial life preceded the modern era and has partly survived its onslaughts. "[T]hey have been with us/from the beginning," the poem concludes, and "we are beginning/to realize/how much of the world/that isn't flat/there is".

A recognition of the integrity and interdependence of all life forms leads Carey in several poems in *the year in pictures* to regret and question the separation of mind from body and words from things which began to be taken for granted at the Renaissance and thereafter became a rarely examined assumption of modernity. The opening and concluding lines of "if the brain were closer," for example, describe the barriers to communication and understanding that might fall with

the abolition or narrowing of the gaps assumed by rational dualism:

if this sentence had a throat  
like a bird's  
you could touch it, feel  
warm life near  
the surface, so almost-  
exposed & close to being  
opened, lost

\* \* \*

if the brain were closer  
to the surface of the body  
would it be less confused  
would words

mean closer to some  
real shape we could be  
less afraid of seeing  
opened, lost<sup>38</sup>

"[A]lmost-/exposed. . . words/ /mean closer": the aural and visible gaps in these phrases indicate the impossibility of fully overcoming the barriers to intersubjectivity that exist in the nature of things. But they also replicate these same gaps, and, with the hint of direct communication sounded by "you could touch it" and the touch of wistful emotion conveyed by the repeated "opened, lost," suggest that poems can at least diminish barriers and bring people and things towards each other, and in ways that respect the integrity and rights of each. "[R]emember the divisions/are thin, there are/other lives below" writes Carey in "universal time" and her advice holds good for any ecological approach, including the one suggested here to Canadian poetry.

\* \* \*

What has been urged here is not a new way of theorizing poems away into abstraction. It is not one more mill for grinding Canadian poetry and Canadian trees into the pulp upon which essays and articles are written and printed. It is instead a personal and "sub-theoretical"<sup>39</sup> attempt to reintegrate literature, criticism, and the world by examining a few poems in their environments and from a perspective born of ecological awareness. It is a record of what can happen when we take more account in our reading than is currently fashionable in Canada of such matters as the origin of the book to hand, the shape of a poem on the page, the effect of its words on our emotions, the feel of its syllables on our tongues and in our ears. Where generalizations have been offered, they have been directed either towards locating poems in the natural scheme of things or towards identifying some broad principles that might assist us in engaging specific poems by individual authors in particular places. When ungrateful words have been written about the systems that militate against what Michael Baxandall calls the "peculiarities of particulars"<sup>40</sup> this has been done in the conviction that, as we near the close of the so-called modern century, it is critically important to think in terms of the ecologically bad and the ecologically good.

## Notes

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1. *Traces on The Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 494. See also Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1972), and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), *passim* and Jeremy Swift, *The Other Eden: a New Approach to Man, Nature and Society* (London: John Dent and Sons, 1974), p. 16: "[t]he Genesis notion of man above and against nature was first formulated into a philosophy of science and progress in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." [\[back\]](#)
2. "Animal Justice: the Counter-Revolution in Natural Right and Law," *Inquiry*, 22 (Summer, 1979), p. 9. See also Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). [\[back\]](#)
3. *The Rights of Nature: a History of Environmental Ethics*, History of American Thought and Culture (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 17-18. [\[back\]](#)
4. See William Barrett, *Irrational Man: a Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958) pp. 20 ff. [\[back\]](#)
5. *Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 168. [\[back\]](#)
6. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949; rpt. London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 203. [\[back\]](#)
7. See Swift, p. 138. [\[back\]](#)
8. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (London: Chance, 1830), p. 124 for the Romantic-Tory definition of the ideal "State" as one in which "the integral parts, classes, or orders are so balanced, or interdependent, as to constitute, more or less, a moral unit, an organic whole." Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) is another case in point, as is Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912); see Gerald Lynch, *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

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9. See J.E. Lovelock, *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth* (1979; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). [\[back\]](#)
  10. Leopold, p. 204. "A land ethic," Leopold continues, "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." [\[back\]](#)
  11. Tory as opposed to neo-conservative. See F. Fraser Darling, "Man's Responsibility for the Environment," in *Biology and Ethics*, ed. F.J. Ebling, Symposia of the Institute of Biology (London: Academic Press, 1969), pp. 177-122 for a discussion of man's role as a biological "aristocrat" with the privileges and responsibilities that accompany his position of "dominion over the creatures, the planet cover, and the very landscape of his planet." [\[back\]](#)
  12. See Wendell V. Harris, "Towards an Ecological Criticism: Contextual versus Unconditional Literary Theory," *College English*, 48 (February, 1986), 117 for deconstruction as an "ultimately absolutist" and "totalizing" approach and David Solway, "The Pursuit of Absence, or Culling and Dereading," *The Antigone Review*, 77-78 (Spring-Summer, 1989), pp. 57-67 for "Structuralism Inc. or Deconstruction Fiduciare" as "global" or "multi-national" movements towards "sameness." [\[back\]](#)
  13. Swift, pp. 153-154. [\[back\]](#)
  14. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 494. [\[back\]](#)
  15. See *William Wilfred Campbell: Selected Poetry and Essays*, ed. Laurel Boone (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1987), p. 208. [\[back\]](#)
  16. See *ibid*, p. 179 for Campbell's attribution of "simplicity and directness," as well as "naturalness," to the greatest writers. The echoes of Wordsworth in Campbell's poems and critical writings align his practice with the determination of the early Romantics to use the common language of men as a corrective to neo-classicism, which was the multi-national language of the day. [\[back\]](#)
  17. *Ibid*, pp. 20-21. All quotations of "Indian Summer" are from Boone's edition, as is the quotation of the three cancelled stanzas (p. 179). [\[back\]](#)
  18. See Harris, p. 123 and Marilyn M. Cooper, "The Ecology of Writing," *College English*, 48 (April, 1986), pp. 364-375 on shared knowledge and specific audience as aspects of communication. Also pertinent here are several essays in Donald Davidson's *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) which argue for a "social theory of interpretation" based on a "Principle of Charity" in regard to the beliefs and consistency of others. [\[back\]](#)

19. *Ibid*, p. 180. These quotations are from Campbell's "Introduction" to his *Collected Poems* (1905). [\[back\]](#)
20. See Nash, pp. 65-68. [\[back\]](#)
21. Leopold, pp. 137-138. [\[back\]](#)
22. *Poems New and Collected* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 50: ". . . the ragged/and passionate tones/stagger and fall,/and recover,/and stagger and fall. . . ." [\[back\]](#)
23. This and subsequent quotations from "The Cripples" are taken from the text in *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*, comp. Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), pp. 298-299. [\[back\]](#)
24. Letter of March 6, 1948 to Frank Flemington, kindly supplied to me by Zailig Pollock. [\[back\]](#)
25. *Collected Poems*, p. 132. [\[back\]](#)
26. See Olson's seminal essays, "Projective Verse" and "Proprioception" in, respectively, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966) and *Additional Prose*, ed. George Butterick (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974). [\[back\]](#)
27. "The Most Remarkable Thing About Tish" *Tish*, 20 (August, 1963), p. 2. Bowering is differentiating the *Tish* poets from "young romantics," who rely on "some intensity of feeling" in the hope of "inundat[ing] the reader with expressions of their own superhuman soul. . . ." [\[back\]](#)
28. John Robert Colombo, *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 10-11. [\[back\]](#)
29. See "Ghost, . . .," *Steveston* (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1974), pp. 83-84. [\[back\]](#)
30. "Or there is love," *ibid.*, p. 86. [\[back\]](#)
31. *At the Mermaid Inn: Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott in the Globe 1892-93*, ed. Bane Davies, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 335. "Anyone who loves the earth and the things that grow and move upon it will love these two or three sonnet-landscapes, and feel them in some sort as he would feel the originals," continues Lampman about works by J.F. Herbin. [\[back\]](#)
32. *Steveston*, p. 43. [\[back\]](#)
33. James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 76. [\[back\]](#)
34. This and the subsequent quotation from "the year in pictures" are taken from *the year in pictures* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1989),

pp. [9-10]. [\[back\]](#)

35. See Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere: Dreams, Ideas and Actions from the Women's Peace Movement* (London: Pluto Press, 1983) and *Healing the Wounds: the Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989). [\[back\]](#)
36. *the year in pictures*, p. 29. [\[back\]](#)
37. *Ibid.*, p. 48 [\[back\]](#)
38. *Ibid.*, p. 43. [\[back\]](#)
39. *Patterns of Intention: on the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 14. [\[back\]](#)
40. *Ibid.*, p. 13. [\[back\]](#)

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