

Moonlight, Metaphor, and the Influence of Wallace Stevens in Don McKay's *The Book of Moonlight*

In 2000, Don McKay published *The Book of Moonlight*, whose eponymous poem includes an epigraph excerpted from Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C": "The book of moonlight is not written yet" (*Collected* 27). On the back cover of this chapbook, there is a fraudulent quotation, supposedly by Wallace Stevens, that reads, "I wish I had written this book!" Even though the speaker of Stevens' poem asks that room be left for Crispin in the book of moonlight, McKay boldly appropriates both Stevens' poetry and voice in moves that are simultaneously characteristic of McKay's humour and anathema to his poetics (27). A simple explanation might suggest that McKay is just trying to bait his reader, whether they revel in the playfulness or take offence. But any longtime reader of McKay will know that his poetry is rarely simple, and that his humour almost always points to something deeper. Perhaps the very explicitness of McKay's gesture is what gives away the game; after all, McKay could be performing a gesture done "in homage," writing back to Stevens what he has synthesized from his predecessor: "So, this is *for* you but not *about* you," as McKay puts it in "The Appropriate Gesture" (178). In this paper I explore why, in his ninth book of poetry, Don McKay felt the need to write what Stevens, and his infamous hero Crispin, had left undone—and to trace how this epigraph ends up leaving its mark.

McKay is a self-professed "nature poet," a label that may be slightly reductive considering the depth of his oeuvre, but one that nonetheless points toward the wellspring of his poetry. *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, the first collection dedicated to McKay's work, is full of admiration for the precise, attentive, sensitive, and often humorous language with which McKay crafts his poems. While "everything is grist to McKay's poetic mill" (Levenson 52), however, it is by and large McKay's ability to let the otherness of nature peek out from behind human constructs that gets the most attention. McKay has become almost inseparable from a particular "community of Canadian poets concerned with relationships among poetry, philosophy, and the environment" (Dragland 881).¹ In the only monograph dedicated to McKay's work (to date), *Ornithologies of*

Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay, Travis V. Mason emphasizes the “biological and ecological specificity evident in McKay’s writing” as a way to “[argue] for the capacity of ecocriticism to read across genres and disciplines, to listen to many different stories, to speak/write polyphonically” (xi). Mason suggests that the scientific side of McKay’s writing is as important as its literariness. Conversely, despite McKay’s references to Heidegger and Levinas within the first handful of pages of the often philosophical *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*, Stan Dragland explains that “McKay is annoyed whenever he is labelled an academic poet” (883). However unlikely a connection, this last sentiment ultimately reminds me of Stevens—another poet who refused to parley with academia too much, yet whose erudition bespeaks a deeply philosophical bent and also lands him perennially on university reading lists. While Stevens is not considered a nature poet, his linguistic precision, perceptual sensitivity, and ability to unhinge the constructions of the human mind make him an inspiration for many poets. When McKay invokes his predecessor in “The Book of Moonlight,” he makes the connection explicit and casts the whole collection in a new light.

Harmonium, Stevens’ first stand-alone collection of poetry, was famously published when the poet was forty-four years old, and “The Comedian as the Letter C” is often considered a dramatization of Stevens’ poetic maturation up to its publication. As such, the poem fits into the tradition of “imaginative voyaging” and of the Romantic quest poem, especially in its resemblance to Shelley’s *Alastor* (Longenbach 91).² “The Comedian as the Letter C” is an extended rumination on Stevens finding his voice as both an inheritor and pallbearer of certain poetic legacies in a new socio-cultural climate. In this light, it makes sense to think of McKay’s *The Book of Moonlight* as a meditation on his own development. It also opens a two-way dialogue between these poets. There is a long history of critics tracing Stevens’ influences and inheritors. The *Wallace Stevens Journal* regularly publishes special issues on Stevens’ literary (and sometimes personal) relations with poets ranging from Robert Frost and Walt Whitman to Seamus Heaney and John Ashbery. Bart Eeckhout and Lisa Goldfarb have edited a far-reaching and diverse collection of essays on Stevens’ influence. Studies like these purport, at times, to hammer out concrete connections or definitive incompatibilities, but at others they make modest attempts to open spaces in which comparisons put into relief otherwise unnoticed or seemingly minor facets of different poets’

work. Eeckhout and Goldfarb hold “that influence studies in literary criticism had better retain a tentative, speculative, occasionally even experimental character” (2). Interestingly, tentativeness, speculation, and experimentation are often characteristics of McKay’s poetry. Through epigraphs, allusions, and naming, McKay often opens his poems to the voices of others; this intertextuality is an important part of his poetics and effectively puts his oeuvre into open-ended relationships that, like the “angular unconformities” that inspire his *Collected Poems*, expose the myriad layers beneath his poems.³ Although Stevens was writing half a century earlier, and from an American modernist context, his presence breaches the surface in *The Book of Moonlight*, “spiking” McKay’s poems with Stevens’ own rich poetics. As *The New Wallace Stevens Studies* (2021) claims, moreover, there is still much work to do to take Stevens scholarship in compelling new directions that better align with decolonial, ecocritical, and other urgent perspectives (3). While Stevens and McKay may already be poetic giants in their respective contexts, putting their work in dialogue with each other may also help to resist and expand the sometimes limiting canonical readings of their work.

My intention in this paper is to hold *The Book of Moonlight* up against “The Comedian as the Letter ‘C’” and several of Stevens’ other poems, hoping that doing so helps illuminate some facets of each poet’s work. Reading these poems in tandem exposes the former as being similarly shaped by the dialectical relation between reality and the imagination, and provides a new perspective on what McKay calls “wilderness” and “home.” This reading promotes a broader understanding of McKay’s poetics, especially as an inheritor of Stevens’ legacy. McKay invokes Stevens so that he can work within Stevens’ poetic framework, but in doing so, he makes a significant poetic statement of his own.

With its epigraph from “The Comedian as the Letter ‘C,’” McKay’s titular poem “The Book of Moonlight” points beyond itself: both as an address to Wallace Stevens and as a link to McKay’s inherited poetic history. As Gerard Genette explains in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, “[t]he most direct function” of an epigraph “is one of commenting—sometimes authoritatively—and thus of elucidating and thereby justifying not the text but the *title*” (156). This is certainly the case with the epigraph to “The Book of Moonlight,” which is placed into a context that it seems to fit explicitly. In “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Crispin’s “book of moonlight” is still unwritten (*Collected* 27). With

“The Book of Midnight,” McKay arguably writes it. As a result, the function of McKay’s epigraph becomes inverted. As Genette elaborates, “[a] rarer effect is the reverse one, when the title modifies the meaning of the epigraph” (157). In a move typical of his poetics, McKay puts his epigraph into question, as the epigraph and title modify the meaning of each other. However, if “The Book of Moonlight” is considered as a dual interrogation of the poet’s creative process and (its mirror image) the reader’s interpretive process, then its recursive/subversive nature becomes clearer. Because it is a citation, McKay’s epigraph functions as a paratext. J. Hillis Miller famously explains the linguistic underpinnings of paratext:

“Para” is an “uncanny” double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. (441)

While some of the language here may be outdated and problematic, Miller’s framework seems amenable to McKay’s poetics. Seen in this way, “The Book of Moonlight” dwells on this threshold and takes on a dialogic tension with its ancestor.

Published in *Harmonium* in 1923, “The Comedian as the Letter C” is Stevens’ first long poem. As alluded to above, the “hero” of the poem is Crispin, who is often thought to be part semi-autobiographical representation of Stevens and part ironic post-Romantic quester. Briefly, Crispin leads a voyage, or “pilgrimage,” in search of a poetic home; he leaves stale Bordeaux behind, finds and rejects fecund Yucatan, and then finally settles in the Carolinas. The line borrowed by McKay comes from the middle section of the poem, where Crispin is approaching the Carolinas by sea. It is important to note that Crispin has not yet arrived at his new home:

The book of moonlight is not written yet
 Nor half begun, but, when it is, leave room
 For Crispin, fagot in the lunar fire,
 Who, in the hubbub of his pilgrimage
 Through sweating changes, never could forget
 That wakefulness or meditating sleep,
 In which the sulky strophes willingly

Bore up, in time, the somnolent, deep songs.
 Leave room, therefore, in that unwritten book
 For the legendary moonlight that once burned
 In Crispin's mind above a continent. (*Collected* 27)

Keeping this passage in mind, why does McKay write "The Book of Moonlight"? One may well understand the way McKay boldly finishes what was to be left undone for Crispin as a humorous, tongue-in-cheek gesture. If Crispin is Stevens' "hero," and he has yet to arrive in his new poetic home, then could "The Book of Moonlight" be about Crispin, the so-called "arriviste" addressed in the first line? If Crispin is on the verge of finding his poetic voice, is on the "cusp of change" (McKay, *Book* 11) through "his observant progress" (Stevens, *Collected* 27), could not Crispin be McKay's potential hero-voyeur?

Perhaps a better way to frame these questions is to ask why McKay decides to "write" Stevens' unwritten "book of midnight." The answer to this question may become clearer by looking at Stevens' image of the moon more closely. Frank Kermode's influential reading of Stevens assumes an oppositional relationship of sun and moon, pitting sun-reality against moon-imagination (47). I do not dispute the significance or usefulness of this formulation; however, I think there is another way to approach this dichotomy that complicates it, and also layers it with nuance and possibility. By inhabiting the moonlit moment that Crispin experiences before he reaches his destination, McKay borrows/imports some of Stevens' poetic framework. By invoking Stevens' poetic legacy like this, McKay creates his own lunar perspective and pays tribute to Stevens. Let us briefly consider Crispin's voyage. After leaving the excesses of Yucatan ("That earth was like a jostling festival / Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent" [26]), Crispin senses that he is on the verge of finding his true poetic home. Approaching the Carolinas at night, Crispin enacts what Harold Bloom calls the "*kenosis* or self-emptying of the poem" (78). This shedding of previous poetic formulations initiates a brief and possibly unique state of receptiveness in Crispin—a state that maps nicely onto McKay's notion of "poetic attention" (as I discuss below). Interestingly, *kenosis* can also refer to the waning of the moon—a meaning with serendipitous significance: if the moon is most closely associated with the imagination and Romanticism, then this is the moment when Crispin begins to transition to realism and the sun. Here, for the first time in his voyage, Crispin comes "without palms / Or jugglery, without regalia" (28). He has apparently shed

his former beliefs; he is neither carrying a cultural burden nor trying to import foreign poetics. He approaches under “the mistiness of the moon,” which suggests a blurred or altered picture of the world (27). This misty light provides, simultaneously, an obfuscating veil and a blurring together of things seen. The moonlight, though, leaves an indelible impression upon Crispin; although the moonlight is a thing of “legend,” it also initiates a movement or awakening in Crispin’s mind that allows for the “deep songs” to arise. This movement is what Helen Vendler calls “a poetry of the transitional moment, of the not-quite-here and the not-yet-gone,” a world not of “antinomies” (between reality and the imagination) but a poetic “midworld between them” (47). Crispin cannot tell if he experiences “wakefulness or meditating sleep” and in this transitory state he approaches his destination—both his new home and, possibly, poetic maturity. Significantly, this moment in the poem marks the crucial shift in Crispin’s voyage that McKay invokes.

Crispin’s approach to the Carolinas marks the “transitional moment” of the poem, both in the poem’s structure and in Crispin’s poetic maturation. He has not yet settled in a literal or poetic home, and thus a tension remains between sun-reality and moon-imagination. The final two sections of the poem present Crispin embracing realism fueled by locality and quotidian matters as he enters “social nature”: he settles down and starts a family/colony, seemingly instead of a new poetics (*Collected* 35). As Hi Simons declares, “The remaining two cantos deal more particularly with that other, cognate theme, the personal relation of the poet to society. And the tone of frustration in the conclusion of this section is due to the poet’s failure to solve the problem he undertook to solve” (462). While Crispin does seem to leave behind his fascination with moonlight in favour of sensible and localized reality, lunar vision undoubtedly influences him. While “the book of moonlight is not written yet,” the speaker implores the reader to “[l]eave room” for it to be written sometime in the future (*Collected* 27). This yet unwritten book is what I want to examine more closely. While his newfound belief that “what is is what should be” (33) provides a stable source of inspiration, Crispin also finds that “the quotidian saps” his imagination (34). Moonlight, however, provides an alternative to sunlight, and thus a different way of seeing.

Before arriving in the Carolinas, Crispin finds himself conscious of the “lunar fire” that illuminates his imagination in his new surroundings (27). As Crispin understands it, “[p]erhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave /

The liaison, the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment” (28). The moonlight is a “blissful liaison” in that it lays bare the role of the mind’s imaginative powers in how Crispin experiences, or makes sense of, the world. Vendler explains of Crispin’s new perspective, “The effect is of something half-glimpsed, half-seen, and that is, finally, what Stevens achieves over and over: if he has a dogma, it is the dogma of the shadowy, the ephemeral, the barely perceived, the iridescent” (35). For Stevens, this way of seeing can be desirable because it forces the edges of perception to become visible and breaks language free from denotative certainty. Crispin-Stevens may transcend his Romantic influences, as the rest of “The Comedian as the Letter C” suggests. Yet I think that some of the lessons he learned therein continue to operate in his poetic imagination. Perhaps Crispin-Stevens had yet to learn how to synthesize his imaginative powers with the localized reality he encountered. Stevens would later come to realize that overcoming the banality of the everyday would require putting his imagination to use in abstracting reality—even though this reality must always remain the anchor for such abstractions. This moonlit way of seeing—seeing that is free and sensitive—is one way that McKay invokes Stevens. In *Vis à Vis*, McKay explains his own understanding of this “glimpsing”:

[T]here is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism . . . [I]n such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse some thing’s autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being. (21)

While Stevens may not have explained his poetic motivations in these terms, his ability to see what surrounds him without preconceived notions—poetic or otherwise—captures McKay’s attention.

Crispin’s moonlit approach initiates a temporary state of receptivity and imaginative power unhooked from previous poetic frameworks. As for McKay, “The Book of Moonlight” focuses on the moment of arrival, but it challenges the assumption that the one arriving has the privilege of discovering something new:

Arriviste, you are the reader
 who has come too early, or too late,
 and lingers in the spill of light

which might be aftermath, might be
anticipation.

.....
In the scene you've missed, or are
about to witness, desire
and departure rendezvous. No hero happens,
unless it is you, the creature at the cusp of change,
the avid unabashed *voyeur*. (11)

"The Book of Moonlight" is peculiar in that it fulfills the prophecy of the speaker in "The Comedian as the Letter C," but does so without instructions or even a request for it to be written. Not only does McKay take this liberty, but his speaker also seems to challenge the "arriviste." It is not difficult to see Crispin as the "arriviste," as someone bent on arriving—though the term may exaggerate Crispin's ambitions—and thus this address helps clarify the context of McKay's poem. But the rest of the first line—"you are the reader"—creates a parallel address to the reader, too. This has the effect of putting the reader into Crispin's shoes, of collapsing the reader's and Crispin's perspectives. McKay aligns reading with creating poetry, which makes "arriving" a metaphor for poetic arrival. McKay conflates perception, interpretation, and poetic creation, considering all of these as necessary acts of the poet-reader who is, in a phenomenological sense, always arriving at a new scene. Exploiting this sense of reading, McKay implies that poetry comes both from the experience of reading other poetry and from reading life—each of which always influences the other. In *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens writes that "one reads poetry with one's nerves" (189) and that "[p]oetry is the expression of the experience of poetry" (190). McKay's poet-reader formulation seems harmonious with Stevens' characterization of reading and expressing poetry. The act of reading is always too early, as "desire," for either what is *anticipated* or for the *correct* reading, always "departs" just before the poet-reader arrives. Reading also happens too late, both because consciousness is always catching up with the senses and because one cannot read without one's prior experiences and knowledge influencing the reading. McKay often focuses on the transitional moment between earliness and lateness, and in "The Book of Moonlight" he channels Crispin as the reader about to arrive, about to make his *reading*. The only time Crispin is referred to as a "hero" is the moment he lands in the Carolinas (Stevens, *Collected* 28), the moment immediately after his moonlit meditation. In fact, his arrival

is the moment that “[t]he moonlight fiction disappeared” (29). Nobody can dwell in this transitional moment for long, and just as Crispin must continue on his journey, “[n]o hero happens” (McKay, *Book* 11) unless the reader-poet commits to a reading-poem and the narrative moves on. Just as Crispin “inscribed / Commingled souvenirs and prophesies” upon landing in the Carolinas (*Collected* 30), McKay’s speaker calls upon the reader-poet to finally arrive, to inscribe their own commingling of souvenirs and prophesies.

Homing in on this moment of anticipation, McKay also gestures toward a second sense of belatedness in “The Comedian as the Letter C.” Harold Bloom explains of Stevens’ early poetry, “[T]he malady indeed was belatedness. Whitman came early, or early enough; but Crispin-Stevens came later. The reader looks in vain for the transumption of this lateness into an ever-earliness, but that will not take place until *Ideas of Order* and afterward” (82).⁴ Bloom, here, speaks to Stevens’ anxiety about his place next to the great American poets that beat him to establishing new, American poetics: Stevens worries that his “arrival” is too late. McKay recognizes this anxiety, but leaves the addressee ambiguous and then plays on Stevens’ later conception of “ever-earliness,” which, according to Bloom, will not surface until *Ideas of Order* and after (82). Moreover, if McKay is addressing not only Stevens, but also poets generally, then he, too, must share in the anxiety of finding his place, or of being placed, amongst the literary giants. It is possible, then, to read the final line of “The Book of Moonlight” as a pep-talk: the speaker is urging the reader-poet both to do poetic justice to their subject and to accept that their forebears will always loom large. But, as if to prevent the presumptuous belief that one can manifest one’s own “arrival” in either the poetic or biophysical world, McKay infuses the moment of arrival with humour that resonates through the anxiety. By maintaining an ongoing desire for looking, sensing, and seeing, McKay playfully resists the fixity of definition that accompanies the arriviste’s arrival.

For both Stevens and McKay, the moon is charged with metaphorical power. If the moon and its light unify *The Book of Moonlight*, then it can also be seen as an exploration of the nature of metaphors, and even language. Similar to the phenomenological uncertainty or defamiliarization associated with moonlight (due to lower levels of light and the often pale quality of its radiance), metaphor poses a question as to the limits and uses of language. As Kevin Bushell explains in his excellent analysis of McKay’s

use of metaphor:

The phenomenological world . . . is a world founded on the surety of consciousness, but it is also a world in which the sensible and the felt have ontological bearing. Transcendence according to this paradigm does not imply transportation to an alternate, alien realm, but rather to new, *hidden* meaning that exists within our immediate world. We need to get past the view of “reality” as a concrete, objectified entity, to understand that metaphor such as McKay’s uncovers, or, more accurately, *discovers* the world and leads the reader into new areas of experience and knowing. (71)

McKay conflates the edges of sensory perception and the linguistic manifestation of thought/experience—and to describe what is past this edge, he uses the term “wilderness”: “By ‘wilderness’ I want to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations” (*Vis à Vis* 21). As humans, we have the tendency to appropriate our surroundings in order to make them familiar, so wilderness is, by definition, beyond our capacity to “grasp.” McKay borrows Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of “the ‘primordial grasp,’” which indicates the fundamentally appropriative nature of human language and understanding (*Vis à Vis* 22-23). For Levinas, “*Auffassen* (*understanding*) is also, and always has been, a *Fassen* (*gripping*)” (“Ethics as First Philosophy” 76). But, as Bushell explains, “[m]etaphor acts for McKay as a springboard into wilderness, which is never really entered but only glimpsed” (71). While it is desirable to glimpse wilderness, it is an impossible task if one tries to capture one’s object with denotative language. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens writes, “[A] language, considered semantically, evolves through a series of conflicts between the denotative and the connotative forces in words; between an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations” (*Collected* 650). But to glimpse wilderness in, as Stevens says, “[a] minor meeting, facile, delicate” (*Collected* 28), is for the possibility to open. The use of metaphor allows for abstraction, which takes place in the imagination. Thus, while a metaphor is not literal, it is just as real to the poet as what his or her senses perceive. In *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens explains that seeing and thinking are intricately interwoven: “Accuracy of

observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking” (185). But “accuracy,” here, does not mean denotative specificity. Rather, Stevens emphasizes that perception is always bound up in interpretation, which requires paying careful attention to the language that best communicates the observation. The interpretive process is open to metaphorical thinking. As Jan Zwicky elucidates, “[m]etaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another” (6). “The implied ‘is not’ in a metaphor,” Zwicky continues, “points to a gap in language through which we glimpse the world. That which we glimpse is what the ‘is’ in a metaphor points to” (10). As Dickinson writes, “[m]etaphor is that pause in language reminding it of its nature as apparatus. Metaphor prevents language from becoming a closed system. It is, essentially, the trickster after his metamorphosis into a trick-turning figure of speech” (78). What both poets take up, here, is that metaphor is a way of seeing and thinking about things; metaphor resists the tendency of language to denote, and in doing so, makes it more creatively potent and intellectually challenging. The poet must carefully expose this “gap” that Zwicky describes: or, as Stevens suggests, “[p]oetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully” (*Opus* 197).

Besides “The Book of Moonlight,” there are other poems in McKay’s collection that compare to Stevens’ work. “Moonlight Becomes You” features a rather conspicuous container, which in this case might capture some moonlight for the artist seeking inspiration:

If you want
to carry it home in a jar, a sort of superior
propane for the stoves and fridges of the arts, it simply
swims into the wish and
spikes it. It becomes you. It reads you
backward . . . (10)

For McKay to choose a “jar” of all vessels to carry this “superior propane” necessitates comparison to Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar”:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

.....
 It took dominion everywhere. (*Collected* 60-61)

There are a number of possible symmetries here; for example, of the ten times that Stevens uses “wilderness” (this ever-central term in McKay’s lexicon), it appears twice in these twelve lines (“Online”). And, true to McKay’s overarching address to Stevens in *The Book of Moonlight*, because Stevens’ speaker is the “I” that places the jar, McKay’s “[i]f you want / to carry it home in a jar” positions the poem as a possible response to Stevens’ poem (10; emphasis mine). By invoking Stevens in this way, McKay translates Stevens into his own poetic philosophy.

“Anecdote of the Jar” has been discussed widely by Stevens scholars, who often treat it as a compass by which the rest of *Harmonium* can be understood. Buelens and Eeckhout have traced a number of these critical threads; discussing interpretations of the jar itself, they explain,

Not being a universal nor a culturally established symbol, the jar’s symbolic dimension must remain to a considerable extent personal, leaving the reader with a multiplicity of possible identifications. Some will read it as a “surrogate for the human imagination” (Miller 257), others as symbolic of the intellect (Yvor Winters, disputed in Riddel 43), still others as indicative of “the spirit of abstraction” (Lentricchia, *Ariel* 19) or of a wide range of cultural phenomena including “an institution, custom, habit, or form of art or religion” (Legget 200). (52)

While the exact nature of the jar is perhaps impossible to pin down, Stevens evidently rejects the “Aeolian harp-ism” of the Romantics, or the belief that a poet’s sensitivity is uniquely suited to capturing the essence of nature. McKay similarly rejects this self-centred compositional method (the moon is windless, after all). He understands that “things” have a life of their own outside of human understanding; therefore, the poet is not “spoken to” (*Vis à Vis* 27). Stevens reworks and complicates this romantic tradition in “Anecdote of the Jar” without fully resolving the relationship between art, artist, and the world. But in so doing, he exposes these problems and brings them to the surface. McKay takes up the same issues and shifts the perspective slightly. Mark Dickinson explains,

In the Romantic view, nature sung effortlessly through the poet, yet this simply did not accord with [McKay’s] experiences as a birder. He became increasingly

disenchanted with the Romantic emphasis on emotionalism in which the poet's capacity to be moved by a non-human other threatened to supplant that other. For McKay, nature poetry had to avoid this kind of anthropocentrism and the one-way drain of energy it involved. (67)

However, in "Moonlight Becomes You," the moonlight also reads back into the reader, as McKay structures the relationship of viewer/viewed to extend both ways. By projecting a sense of order onto the moonlight, it is possible to trace that projection back onto the viewer—thus allowing the moon to read into the speaker. In perceiving the moon, the viewer allows the moonlight into their apperceptive cycle. So the moon "becomes" the viewer as it momentarily occupies their thoughts and becomes part of their cumulative experience. Like Stevens, and especially Crispin, McKay's speaker recognizes that some of his own "pages" are "heavy with names" or "sticky with praise" (10); in other words, the influence of others will always play a part in how he sees. Interestingly, because the speaker uses the second-person pronoun "you," this poem becomes a generalized meditation on the nature of perception/apperception. Similar to how "Anecdote of the Jar" becomes generalized by being categorized as an anecdote, a brief story that is easily shared, McKay's ambiguous "you" is both specific and universal. This clever sleight of hand allows McKay to enter into the realm of ambiguity, tentativeness, and transition that Stevens so expertly engages, making a potent poetic statement without having to fully commit to a single outcome.

This pair of poems can, I think, help readers recognize Stevens as an influence on McKay's poetic theory. The moonlight in "Moonlight Becomes You," perhaps against the speaker's desire, can be seen as representative of "wilderness" put into tension with the ability of language, or the poet, to take it "home." "Home," for McKay, "is the action of the inner life finding outer form; it is the settling of self into the world," and "it turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness" (*Vis à Vis* 22-23). Stevens' jar forces the wilderness to react to it—causing the wilderness to surround the jar—but fails to bring about any practical form of order. Because a sustained examination of the poem is beyond the scope of this essay, I will "place" this useful explanation from Buelens and Eeckhout:

Here the representation of the surrounding wilderness, in relation to which the jar should be able to define its

identity, comes into play . . . Its interaction with the jar, moreover, is typically double-edged again. On the one hand, the wilderness responds to the jar by borrowing some of its qualities: the jar's own roundness forces the wilderness to "surround" it and the jar's inactive objectivity effectively tames the wilderness . . . On the other hand, the jar is disconnected from its environment, alienated and unable to establish a fertile relationship to it, not giving of bird or bush and not capturing the country's organic essence, as the final line insists. Thus . . . the synecdochic relation between artistic production and the American landscape is both invited and obstructed. It is staged as an unresolved question and an enactment of the very desire *for* cultural linkage rather than as a convincingly established connection. (56)

In the end, both the jar and the act of placing it characteristically resist our attempts at interpretation; but while Stevens' jar is most fruitfully considered as representative of the relation of the art object to reality, McKay focuses more directly on the process of art- or homemaking—suggesting that the process leaves one with an expanded ("larger") understanding of the world, but also with the knowledge that wilderness is ultimately uncontainable, inscrutable, and far bigger than it appears (making one feel "less") (10). This process, for McKay, is called "home-making," a process that describes how one "both *claims* place and acts to *become* a place among others. It turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness" (*Vis à Vis* 23).⁵ "Moonlight Becomes You" goes further than "Anecdote of the Jar" in examining the relationship between art-poet-reality by positing that creating art requires intimacy. One must open oneself up to interpretation via the resulting art object in order to re-present its content.

To put a jar on something is to trap it, to contain it, and McKay and Stevens both reject this goal in their poetics; to see something as it actually is, one must see it in a different "light." Of the nighttime in McKay's work, Joanna Dawson explains, "Night undermines the exactitude of definition and reminds us that there is a point at which categories become obscured, even eclipsed, and that while the mind may try to drape itself over the external world, there is a kind of wilderness in everything which resists transmission" (66). "Moonlight Becomes You" is a reminder that we have the opportunity to see the autonomy of the "thing," though sometimes

we need to see it differently, to defamiliarize the thing, to see the reality that is always already present. Poetry, and specifically metaphor, is a way to tap into the infinite possible significations of the signifier, a way to avoid trapping the subject in its denotative “jar.”⁶ Developing this idea, McKay suggests that “moonlight” not only provides the possibility to defer signification, but that it also “becomes you.” Just as the wolf howls in solitude, so the poet perceives and imagines his or her subject subjectively. In this process, the poet takes the thing in, and, in doing so, not only perceives the thing but also becomes an object of perception as the thing “reads you backwards.” Stevens writes of the poet that

his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination.
(*Collected* 657)

McKay more specifically contemplates the ethics of this process of abstracting, of taking-in. For the poet to avoid appropriating his or her subject matter in a way that constricts its autonomy, McKay suggests the need for what he calls “poetic attention,” a “form of knowing which counters the ‘primordial grasp’ in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause. Even after linguistic composition has begun, and the air is thick with the problematics of reference, this kind of knowing remains in touch with perception” (*Vis à Vis* 26-27). Perhaps reasoning like this is what tends to confine McKay to the “nature poet” category, but there is significant continuity here between McKay and Stevens poetically. Thus, it may not be fair to McKay for scholars to emphasize the “nature” and not the “poet.”

Part of what defines both McKay’s and Stevens’ poetics, as aforementioned, is the act of ordering thoughts in the imagination—thoughts whose inceptions are derived almost simultaneously from sensory perception and imaginative abstraction. In “Snow Moon,” McKay explores the perspective of the poet-observer:

With no name
and no mask. Not the dusty rock,
not the goddess, not the decor of romance,
not the face. Express from infinity

it arrives in a flood of cold desire like a
tooth, like a voracious
reader. (*Book 14*)

The poem begins by stripping the moon of all its mythical and cultural connotations, even going so far as to break it away from plain language (“dusty rock”). In place of these limiting, stale, and faulty signifiers, the moon comes “[e]xpress from infinity,” or, in other words, from beyond the denotating labels of human language; every month, the moon takes the shape of an airborne zero, “signifying nothing” in a Macbethian echo. Once this defamiliarization has taken place, the moon is referred to again, but this time through simile: “like a / tooth, like a voracious / reader.” By shifting signification to metaphorical language, the poet is admitting that the moon is not these things—and that the moon “transcends language and thought” (Bushell 59). Again, McKay dramatizes this moment of apprehension as a two-way street, with the moon, the great celestial mirror of the sun, becoming like (mirroring) a “reader” who sees it—and by extension the reader of the poem. The moon cannot be fixed into language as a single signifier because it comes “[e]xpress from infinity,” which suggests it is *not finite*, or unfinished. However, challenging what might otherwise seem like a poststructuralist sentiment, the moon also “refuses to defer,” imposing itself upon the viewer in its inscrutable sublimity (*Book 14*). McKay explicitly rejects seeing the moon as a symbol for the romantic imagination, but also as a mythical or religious figure (goddess), the man in the moon (face), and even anthropocentric diminution (dusty rock). McKay holds up the moon in apposition to a broad range of references, ultimately emphasizing what the moon is not; but in doing so, he shows both how the moon has accrued layers of meaning and how language works as a system of differentiation. Instead of lamenting the slipperiness of this lunar experience, though, McKay works in the comedic mode, ambiguously suggesting either that only a “loon”-atic would actually believe in capturing the moon with denotative language or else that his poetics embraces a little “loon”-acy as a way to destabilize language enough to make room for “ontological applause” (*Book 14*; *Vis à Vis* 26).

That the “Snowy Owls” of McKay’s poem are immediately followed by the abrupt presence of “[t]he mind of winter” recalls Stevens’ poem “The Snow Man”:

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

 and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
 (*Collected* 8)

The “misery” that is often associated with winter is neutralized by Stevens as his listener shifts his perspective by assuming “a mind of winter.” “The Snow Man” has a particularly long and complicated critical history. Bart Eeckhout captures much of this history in his thoughtful chapter on the poem:

“The Snow Man” thus heightens our awareness of its textual-linguistic status as a something-nothing that is at once determinate and indeterminate, material and disembodied, present and absent—like the vicarious visions and sensations it sets off in the reader’s imagination: at one or more removes from reality, yet in its own imaginary and potent way quite real. The poem enhances our awareness, in other words, of the act of reading by proposing that we address the question of how much we are reading—are forced to read—*between* the lines. (*Wallace Stevens* 108)

The ultimate effect of this reading “between the lines” for Stevens is to recognize that no thing (“nothing”) has any meaning—emotional or otherwise—except what one thinks of it. In other words, we are always surrounded by “nothing,” and it is only our imagination that says otherwise. McKay, by invoking Stevens’ “mind of winter,” destabilizes language itself, suggesting that understanding language must follow the same processes as understanding “reality.” Language, like reality, always already exists outside of human thought. As Stevens’ and McKay’s poems

suggest, each time language or reality is brought to life/experienced by an individual, it is made in their imagination. Instead of Stevens' "snow man," McKay invokes a "snow moon," a presence that both reflects its viewer and remains obdurate in its silent lunacy/"loon"-acy. By recognizing the otherness inherent in reality and language, McKay gives ontological respect and quells the "desire to possess" (*Vis à Vis*, 26).

While I could continue tracing the connections between McKay and Stevens in their poetry, I will try to conclude my thoughts about McKay's invocations of Stevens in *The Book of Moonlight*. If, as Frye asserts, "[a] writer's desire to write can only have come from previous experience of literature" (14), then we must see all poets, at least in part, as products of their reading. The poems in *The Book of Moonlight* were later included in *Another Gravity* (2000), a larger, book-length collection that won the Governor General's Award (the poems are placed in a new order, among new poems, and the phony Stevens quotation is missing). While this new title erases the immediate reference to "The Comedian as the Letter 'C,'" it also hints at the constant, if gentle, pull of one of its influences. Wallace Stevens drew upon the Shelley, Keats, Mallarmé, Whitman, Emerson, and others for poetic inspiration, and we can see McKay's influences in the same light. The very idea of an epigraph, for example, is to pay homage or respond to the poetics or legacy of another. Every poet will write his or her own poetry, so to speak, because, as Stevens claims, "There can be no poetry without the personality of the poet" (*Collected* 670). By invoking Wallace Stevens, McKay is paying respect to his own poetic inheritance. To pay tribute to one's predecessors is to recognize one's position within a particular history of literature. Of course, respect for being on the edge of this history is also built into McKay's poetics: "Whatever [the poet's] admiration for wilderness, she remains a citizen of the frontier, a creature of words who will continue to use them to point—sometimes at the moon, sometimes simply at the figure of the departed sage" (*Vis à Vis* 87). *The Book of Moonlight* uses its words to point at both the moon and the figure of the departed sage; and even if McKay maintains a playful insouciance, he does so in the spirit of past "comedians" like Stevens' Crispin. "Poetic attention," writes McKay, "leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it" (*Vis à Vis* 28). The poet writing with "poetic attention" does not simply remake the poems or poetics he inherits, but translates them. McKay writes what was "not written yet" (Stevens, *Collected* 27), suggesting a translation of his own poetic stance; he realizes

his own poetic “arrival,” doing so as a mature poet paying his respects. As Frye writes, “The simple point is that literature belongs to the world man constructs, not to the world he sees; to his home, not his environment” (8). Thus, for McKay to envision himself on the “frontier” of a history of literature, he has to “construct” or enact it. In this way, *The Book of Moonlight* is more than a collection of fifteen poems: it is a way for McKay to “glimpse” his own stature as a poet. *The Book of Moonlight* stakes out a claim adjacent to Stevens’ oeuvre and proves that Don McKay is a poet with his own gravity.

Notes

1. For a more recent investigation of philosophy and ecology in the work of McKay and other poets like Jan Zwicky and Tim Lilburn, see Mark Dickinson, *Canadian Primal*.
2. Helen Vendler discusses the poem in similar terms in “Fugal Ruins,” the second chapter of her monograph on Stevens, *On Extended Wings*.
3. Here I play with the title of McKay’s collected poems, *Angular Unconformity*.
4. Bloom takes a uniquely strong position on “The Comedian as the Letter C” as a poem about the anxiety of influence.
5. McKay’s concept of homemaking, here, seems to be inspired by Northrop Frye: “The world you want to live in is a human world, not an objective one: it’s not an environment but a home; it’s not the world you see but the world that you build out of what you see” (4).
6. McKay writes that “metaphor’s first act is to un-name its subject, reopening the question of reference” (*Vis à Vis* 69). In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens reminds us that “[i]f it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed” (*Collected* 664).

Works Cited

- Bartlett, Brian, editor. *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*. Guernica, 2006.
- Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Cornell UP, 1977.
- Buelens, Gert, and Bart Eeckhout. “Always a Potent and an Impotent Romantic: Stylistic Enactments of Desire in Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* and Wallace Stevens’ ‘Anecdote of the Jar.’” *Wallace Stevens Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1, spring 2010, pp. 37-63.
- Bushell, Kevin. “Don McKay and Metaphor: Stretching Language toward Wilderness.” Bartlett, pp. 59-80.
- Dawson, Joanna. “A Moon Without Metaphors’: Memory, Wilderness, and the Nocturnal in the Poetry of Don McKay.” *Journal of Ecocriticism*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 2009, pp. 65-75.
- Dickinson, Mark. *Canadian Primal: Poets, Places, and the Music of Meaning*. McGill-Queen’s UP, 2021.
- Dragland, Stan. “Be-Wildering: The Poetry of Don McKay.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, fall 2001, pp. 881-888.
- Eeckhout, Bart. *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing*. U of Missouri P, 2002.

- Eeckhout, Bart, and Gül Bilge Han, editors. *The New Wallace Stevens Studies*. Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Eeckhout, Bart, and Lisa Goldfarb, editors. *Poetry and Poetics after Wallace Stevens*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. 1987. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Kermode, Frank. *Wallace Stevens*. Oliver and Boyd, 1967.
- Levenson, Christopher. "Fine Points of Translation." Bartlett, pp. 50-54.
- Levinas, Emanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." 1984. *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Seán Hand, translated by Hand and Michael Temple, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 75-87.
- Longenbach, James. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. Oxford UP, 1991.
- Mason, Travis V. *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013.
- McKay, Don. *Angular Unconformity: Collected Poems 1970-2014*. Icehouse Poetry, 2014.
- . "The Appropriate Gesture, or Regular Dumb-Ass Guy Looks at Bird: An Interview with Don McKay." Conducted by Ken Babstock. Bartlett, pp. 167-87.
- . *The Book of Moonlight*. Outlaw, 2000.
- . *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*. Gaspereau, 2001.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "The Critic as Host." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3, spring 1977, pp. 439-447.
- "Online Concordance to Wallace Stevens's Poetry." *Wallace Stevens Society*, <http://www.wallacestevens.com/concordance>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.
- Simons, Hi. "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Its Significance." *The Southern Review*, January 1939, pp. 453-468.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, Library of America, 1997.
- . *Opus Posthumous*. 1957. Edited by Milton J. Bates, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Vendler, Helen. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Harvard UP, 1969.
- Zwicky, Jan. *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Gaspereau, 2003.

Kevin Tunnicliffe is a PhD candidate at the University of Victoria. His dissertation challenges conventional understandings of modernism's shock aesthetic by advancing a version of "anaesthetic modernism."