

“that every feather is a pen, but living, // flying”¹

DESIRE: THE METAPOETICS OF DON
MCKAY'S *BIRDING*, or *desire*

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*The poet imitates the voices of birds
he cranes his long neck
his protruding Adam's apple
is like a clumsy finger on a wing of melody.²*

In Don McKay's *BIRDING*, or *desire*, the motif of flight and migration serves as an elaborate metaphor for the poetic process. As birds fly southward to places foreign, warm, and exotic, the poet-observer follows into visionary realms beyond the comparatively stagnant world of the habitual. Inspired by the birds' mobility, McKay partakes of nature's vitality by transplanting the vibrant energy of migration into his poetic vision. In the perpetual inconclusiveness that occurs between author and reader, where the inspired poet "conceives of literature as an end, [and] the world restores poetics to him as a means," the author rediscovers the world, an alien world" (Barthes *Critical* 145). By speaking freely about the imprecision inherent in the poet's creative process—the poet, after all, confesses to "wing it" through a fluid state of intention (McKay 15)—McKay further raises the issue of authorship in a post-structuralist age.

We are reminded throughout *BIRDING*, or *desire*, that artists bridge the human and natural worlds; they transpose observation into language through a heightened awareness that challenges the reader also to observe. Thus, the poet cannot exist isolated from the experience of the reader. Experience, meaning, the form itself, and the reader are never separated from the poet; the poet depends on each of these components of movement. Yet, in this

vein of contemporary literary criticism, critics must come to terms with how the author lays claim to "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash . . . a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes *Death* 231). Likewise, Foucault's questioning of the author as function of discourse asks us to consider the characteristic of a discourse which allows ownership of what was "not originally a thing, a product, or a possession" (Foucault 124). Under strict copyright laws the name-of-the-author moves from a "pure and simple reference," to a designated classification: instead of the name-signifier moving to the person-signified, the "name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence" (123). This Author-as-God, existing prior to the text, is understood as creator, nurturer of language, and thus perpetuates the notion of the author as subject-presumed-to-know. While many cling to "the intentional fallacy," post-structuralist theorists suggest that, on the contrary, "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text" (*Death* 230); he/she "[creates] an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (Foucault 116). In Don McKay's defense, where the "author" is dead, the writer-creator rises from the ashes, a Phoenix, singing "his own black rag" (McKay 33); where he finds liberty in shattering "author" expectations, that is, where the author deconstructs notions of how Western culture and critics have glorified notions of poetics and author as subject-presumed-to-know, he exposes "a cerebral process that evolve[s] not primarily from the brain but from the soul" (Michener 127), by drawing attention to the "magic" of a profound poetics.

In its four "movements," *BIRDING, or desire* discusses its own making: through the metaphor of birding, McKay addresses the nature of poets, the poetic process, and the poet-reader dynamic. McKay's poetics critique his own ability to adequately transcribe life's "realities" into language. His preoccupation with oral traditions includes languages in the vernacular, poetic and foreign bird-chirps, and suggests an ideal metaphor for post-structuralist ideology. Moreover, this self-reflexive look at language and the process of meaning/language-making is not limited to McKay's *BIRDING, or desire* but extends to his other, more recent works, *Sanding Down This Rocking Chair on a Windy*

Day (1987), and his latest work, the Governor-General's Award-winning *Night Field* (1991). The poems I have selected for this essay illustrate his explorations of poetic artifice.

Seen primarily as a "Canadianist" whose interest in the redeeming qualities of the natural world suggests aspirations to Romantic ideals, McKay's work rewrites the Canadian landscape, paying particular attention to Canadian details. As Robert Bringhurst comments, "Wordsworth's vision of the natural world was full of rapture instead of detail. He said "tree" and "bird" where McKay will say white pine, red pine, loon, or Blackburnian warbler . . . [thus, his] poems have less in common with the poems of Wordsworth than with the novels of Flaubert" (Bringhurst 183). His poetics are described as "a refreshing release from the style of nature poetry that is overly romantic" (Merchant 38). McKay's work stretches beyond that adolescent view of the natural world into poetry which requires the concentration and attention of an intelligent reader who is willing to devote time to savour McKay's detailed and complex images. As some reviewers have commented, McKay is not for everyone; a city-reviewer such as Torontonian Rhea Tregobov (though she writes favourably about him) claims that McKay's "aim and method present a sympathetic challenge to us city folk who tend to be more absorbed in the social . . . [and] who prefer people to cabbages" (34). Nonetheless, McKay's circle of devoted readers grows with his increased recognition. *BIRDING, or desire*, his fifth collection, seems to have launched McKay's career nationally with its nomination for the Governor-General's Award. Yet modesty prevents him from revealing himself as the person behind the poetry. He refrains from making any comments on his work, from giving interviews (including declining an offer from *Books in Canada*), and from actively reading critical reviews of his poetry. The merits of his work must rest solely on their own reception. In this way, McKay has been ironically praised as a poet who has "unquestioning, unforced Southern Ontario Canadianness" and who can "whip an inspiring poem out of an encounter with a chainsaw or Via Rail" (Oughton 12). Still, those many Canadians who adore McKay's "intensely intelligent, whimsical, witty, and profound mind" (Tregobov 33), agree that he writes with "thrilling precision," as a "poet who can touch us" (Bemrose E14).

The first movement in *BIRDING, or desire* opens the poet's

mind to the creative muse, here conveyed through the birds' migration. When "birding," the poet carefully and accurately observes the birds' markings, sounds and movements. Grounding his poetry in observations aided by his field guide, *The Birds of Canada*, McKay creates his own "birdbook full of / lavish illustrations with a text of metaphors" (McKay 15). On a more philosophical level, McKay uses birds and birding as a means of examining the desire for movement and for exploration into the unknown in the hope of satiating curiosity and intellect. Yet in the juxtaposition of what is "grounded" and what is ethereal, McKay's metaphor of flight also allows us to see human constructs, such as language, as stagnant, as "caged" in a monotonous existence "made smooth with use" (16). To communicate, the poet must fly from the nest of the mundane. Birding then, like reading/writing poetry, is not passive bird-watching but an active participation in cognizance.

In *BIRDING, or desire*, McKay engages in mental migration from this staid world into the freer circle of fantasy. Essentially, McKay's mandate stresses imaginary egression by any possible means, thus aligning the motif of flight with the poetic process. The poet's desperation is accentuated through McKay's variety. Seeking "Accidentals, exotics, and escapes," the poet dreams of a world where "all birds exist, including those / we only hoped to see" (26), and experiences a meta-universe that may later transform into a meta-language. McKay's "kestrels [are] dreamt by Joe into our kitchen" while "all night huge flocks of Whistling Swans / are whistling milky ways across our dreams" (26). In this process, the poet-speaker 'accidentally' discovers this "hope" to "pick," "perch," and "whistle" as birds do; hence, he communicates with them in *their* foreign "exotic" world in his attempts to "discover" rather than "appropriate." However, the lack of detailed descriptions indicates the poet-speaker's inability to translate these dreams meaningfully. The kestrels who are "dreamt by Joe" "pick outrageous stories from the air," but we are not introduced to Joe, nor are we told about these stories. Furthermore, the "Whistling Swans" are "whistling" (26); this repetition of "whistling," a strange and uncommon word used to describe the honking sound swans make, suggests a form of swan-communication which is unknown in our conscious reality; it transcends "ordinary speech" but it is meaningless. The poet-speaker cannot accurately com-

municate his dream-world. When he awakes his dream-discoveries are lost. In the final stanza "we awake" and "plunge into [the] reality" of

our hungry mouths stuffed full of feather,
our pillows slit like bellies. (26)

In this "awakening," birds are no longer befriended; the poet-speaker is not only inarticulate, he is the enemy. These birds, foreign to the human sensibility, must be protected by "angels" "from the flight patterns of Air Canada lest they / plunge into [the] reality" of "our hungry mouths" (26). The poet-speaker, like a predator, is a cat which defines the bird out of his own needs: as the cat desires the bird, the poet, whose mouth is "stuffed full of feather," craves the imaginary realm of the "exotic." If swans are understood at all, even in the dream-world, it is likely because "we only hoped to see." The "escapes" in the final stanza then, are illusionary misinterpretations—"misspeakings." By using "we" in this poem, McKay suggests a universal condition of mis-communication through artifice. By illustrating the poetic process as a frustrating exercise, oftentimes resulting in futility, McKay's final product here simultaneously documents a working poetic. At the very least, this attempt at a poetic which bridges the "real" and the "fantastical" stresses its own necessity.

"Accidentals, exotics, and escapes" suggests that there is no single set of rules which precisely render our perceptions: the 'real' is "never anything but an influence, subject to the responsibility of choice; it is never anything but language, its being is in language" (*Critical* 159). In light of this realization, the author's role begins to fade and artistic process dies simultaneously with its creation; the author creates "an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (Foucault 116). Yet McKay rightly pleads for a position in the poetic process. *His* poetics fill the gap between reader and author. He argues that,

(while deep inside cacophony
their group mind takes the microphone:
non, je ne regrette rien, le grand
trombone du vent the wintry
dicta, enfin let the
space between our voices be my nom de plume). (54)

The juxtaposition of English and French blends two distinctly separate Canadian cultures, suggesting a merging of many voices through this author's poetics: McKay asks that the "space between our voices," the sparrow's and his, be his "nom de plume," his abridging pen. However, like the sparrows who are "a movable ghetto," poetry exists in constant motion. Without risking death of the author, the poet's writing is "an endless beginning, a constantly new first time, like intercourse or pain" (Kunert 138)³; in this way, the artist perpetually (re)creates the world for the audience. McKay's word "sparkles with infinite freedom and is ready to radiate towards a thousand uncertain and possible relations" (*Critical* 183). While the reader "naturalizes," through educated interpretation, the world which he/she shares with the poet, the poet has made it "exotic."

McKay, who is very much aware of these problems of translations, provides a disclaimer for any 'truths' he appears to be positing. In his first poem, "Field Marks," a prologue of sorts, the poet "utters absolutes he instantly forgets" (15). As well, "intention [is] in a fluid state [so] it is / impossible for it to 'miss'" though it may be "comprised entirely of errata slips" (15). His sophisticated treatment of this mysterious endeavour of creative writing offers suggestions which nonetheless revel in the beauty of poetic language. Whether this work is "errata slips" or not is inconsequential. Humourously, McKay suggests the poet has no intentions, no devious plans, no reservations: "he wings it" (15).

McKay's phenomenological approach to viewing birds reveals how the object of one's attention is portrayed in language. While language is essentially constructed, McKay, reflects on its nature to constantly anthropomorphasize natural phenomena. Words are necessarily translations of things, but these translations are the foundation on which the poet can rebuild and reconstruct a way of responding to the natural world. Suspicious of egocentric humanist ways of viewing nature, McKay is also conscious of his own appropriating and misappropriating the voice of the natural world. Nonetheless, he, carefully, never "becomes" bird. Furthermore, in section one, he replaces bird-whistling with an onomatopoeic representation of bird-words in the final section. "Our ears // are empty auditoria for / scritch scritch scritch rr-ronk" (123). By calling attention to the problem of (mis)appropriation, McKay effectively qualifies, and clarifies his poetic voice.

Much of the struggle in poetic flight is knowing where and how to land within language. Initially, in the poetic-writing process that McKay describes, before poets are ready to address language and the craft, they are imprisoned, caged by their own cultural baggage. The poet—like the reader who must interpret the common signification of the poet's poetic—reads and "naturalizes" the world's landscapes. In "Scrub," the landscape is the poet-speaker's "mindscape," deadened by habit. Yet, he desires freedom:

the land has been made plain
 reasoned, and made smooth with use.
 Then why this restless pecking in his brain
 as though its prisoner were trying to break loose

into another music? (16)

The poetic objective, then, is liberation from the prison which bars one from accessing his or her source of inspiration. As in "Accidentals, exotics, and escapes" (26), the poet-speaker's imagination is broadened by an ability to dream. But the conscious mind also must remain open for the "heart [to be] suet" (15). Thus, when the world of imagination, inspired by visionary observation, begins to seep into the writer, he/she must watch, wait, and listen for the cue: the poet

wears extra eyes around his neck, his mind
 pokes out his ears the way an Irish Setter's nose
 pokes out a station-wagon window. (15)

Initially, the poet-speaker is annoyed by an interruption, and questions why it bothers him. In "Leaving," he asks: "how am I supposed to drive with these derangements and my head / already full of Monarch Butterflies" (25)? These butterflies, symbols of metamorphosis, foreshadow the poet-speaker's poetic vision; when his soul is in flight, he undergoes a transformation. Meanwhile, though, the ideas that are "trying to break lose // into another music" drive the poet-speaker mad until he incorporates this "restless pecking" into his poetry (16). He fears change while he simultaneously anxiously anticipates it:

Even leftover overstuffed adjectives . . .
 now done down and bottled up
 are on the prowl, tense,

dangerous as boy sopranos. (18)

Once the ability to perceive physical "reality" is developed, the poet moves freely outside his own perceptions and into the more spiritual and imaginative quest of poetics in *BIRDING*. However, perception alone, as McKay suggests, does not a good poet make—poets must understand the craft. The book (and poet) thus slide into the second movement: a discussion of the writing process itself. Here, the poet pays closer attention to conscious and unconscious perceptions. Though no longer annoyed, he recognizes his unique vision and ceases to ignore a landscape he once feared to translate—he searches for a means of communicating these experiences and he self-consciously investigates writing. However, the poet-speaker is still apprehensive:

The first snow falls and the kids
explode with this fresh magic you
refuse
wombed up in sadness. (41)

The "longing" for winter (18) is replaced with a "sadness"—a feeling which indicates that the poet's "spark" is fleeing and must be recorded before it is lost. Further, the poet-speaker explains:

You will not want
to not want babies growing in your belly but
resist the current, make the air
articulate its violence on your body. (18)

He reluctantly embarks on a quest for his poetics; yet he does not "want / to not want babies growing in [his] belly." Thus, "inside [his] sadness," we also find / the mute heart's answer to the sky's / pure fury flowing" (18). Where "clouds continue / and continue like crazy Irish music unable to find the exit" (62), and "ice crystals wink" (43) the poet now senses an urgent need to respond immediately to this "sensual revelation."

Though working within the bounds of language, McKay finds freedom in metaphor and in the poetic form he creates. His poems, unadorned with difficult language, obscure allusions or weighty punctuation, and often conversational in style, contrast his leaps into philosophical thought, drawing attention to liberating potential in language and form. Thus, he asks us to look at the

limitations of the writing process, while simultaneously demonstrating how enduring works of art extract meaning from the ordinary. *BIRDING, or desire* is such a testament. In "Adagio for a fallen sparrow" (55), for instance, McKay reinvents a typical response to a dead bird while, simultaneously, he revives the meaning behind funeral rites. The poem begins with the mundane problem of disposing of the body. The poet-speaker is annoyed, but since it apparently died "exercising squatters' rights in [his] garage," he feels responsible for the bird. Initially, the poet-speaker has no respect for "this item, this frozen / lump on the floor;" it "resembles" a live sparrow ("burning / bright bright bright") but "not much." This "body" is any bird, "a fallen sparrow." The presence of this quite ordinary bird in the poet-speaker's garage is meaningless but when he decides, "I'd like to toss it in the garbage can," he finds that he "can't let go / so easily." McKay, by establishing a common lack of concern for that which is dead and insignificant, grounds the poem in a cultural indifference towards so-called insignificant life-forms. Having addressed the concern, McKay undercuts it. If we consider that the Adagio begins in the second stanza where the lines shorten, words have fewer syllables and generally the rhythm relaxes and slows down, then the "adagio" takes place after the poet-speaker has contemplated funeral possibilities. New or renewed meaning in funeral-rites result when the customs are attached to the sparrow's death. The poet-speaker considers burial, then cremation, and finally, most absurdly, taxidermy.

The suggestion of cremation is followed by three reasons why he will not perform it; it is "much too big a deal, too rich and bardic / too much like an ode" (55). By considering cremation, the poet-speaker elevates the sparrow's significance; however, by dismissing this option he decentralizes the bird's importance. Effectively, this tripartite anaphora, by stressing the sparrow's insignificance, entices us to pity the bird as the poet-speaker eventually does. In stanza two, where the "adagio" begins, the poet-speaker finally recognizes the egocentric attitudes he expressed in the first stanza. He buries the bird not for the bird's sake but for his own: he feels that this "sparrow," which he now addresses as having a "fierce heart," deserves respect, but he does not know what form it ought to take. He cannot bridge the gap between

human and natural worlds: he will "write on air, [and] brood on marble eggs / to bear such traces, nearly / legible" (71). So, the poet-speaker offers no prayers at the burial: "there is nothing to be said" (55). Furthermore, to commemorate the occasion, he resists writing an ode (too grandiose, or too mundane?) but writes, instead, an "adagio." Significantly, he chooses a form without words to immortalize the sparrow but creates a musical movement in slow time through the rhythms of his words. Clearly, this poem analyses perception and how it can be altered through the visionary in art.

The third movement of *BIRDING, or desire* moves into a self-reflexive study of the artistic process and pays particular attention to the ways in which sounds, as well as language, form meaning. McKay has already recognized a cultural bias in his pedagogy, yet his allusions to birding as a metaphor for the writing exercise are explicit. The poet-speaker, now conscious of the ideas before him, illustrates how he must skillfully combine inspiration with language; he sculpts the words, and makes them come alive in a three-dimensional artscape, activated in the reader's imagination. The artistic birthing of life-experience is described in terms of musical movement: each poem is dotted with allusions to the writing process, and entwined with references to music. In "To Sing and Feed," Bach, "among the spruce," "would put this evening on the cello / and chew it . . . [and] you would understand the Red-winged blackbirds calling / konkeree konkeree . . . arrive home empty // covered with burrs // ready" (92). McKay is moving towards the final product, beauty. But we must first partake of his artistic journey, sail on his "word-craft." We too must hear the word, (as in "Streaks of Bird Music") the

notes that are the air bunched,
shaped by body and released
clearly through a ruthless beak (97)

as the writer "takes his / pen and stabs each / member of his alphabet."

In "Identification" (91), the poet-speaker retrospectively recognizes the moment of inspiration. Here, McKay uses the metaphor of a birdwatcher spying a "hawkish speck," who discovers, by luck, a "*Peregrine*," an "endangered species." Stanza one, frag-

mented and almost inarticulate, evokes excitement that cannot be expressed. The birdwatcher, caught off guard, wants binoculars, but does not reach for them for fear of losing sight of this rare bird

... moving
 far too fast its where are those
 binoculars sharp wings row row row the air above
 the Campbell's bush it
 stooped and
 vanished
Peregrine.

"Row row row" reflects both the bird's fast-moving pace and the watcher's own intentions to move quickly although he cannot. In lines 1-4, the language is compressed—time is altered as it further expands into wide spaces in the lines that follow. The watcher demonstrates that such moments of clarity are "rare and inarticulate as you, o dangerous / endangered species." As the watcher will reach for binoculars, the poet will run to pen and paper, hoping not to lose a thought. In this poem, the watcher does not reach the binoculars and the poet does not "write it down" until it has "vanished." McKay recreates the gap between inspiration and recollection. Large spaces between the lines inscribe what is missing, lost or never recorded. As in "The Man with the Itchy Teeth," "a mind sows / gives itself away to the wind / inscribes in air this vanishing / wingbeat" (80), the poet's mind follows the hawk. However, when he reflects on this inspirational moment, the raw emotion must be transcribed intellectually; he writes down "*Peregrine*" (91). By italicizing and capitalizing "*Peregrine*," McKay further distances the experience from the language used to describe it. Notice the repetition of "because," in the following passage:

I write it down because
 I write it down *because* of too much sky
Because I might have gone on digging the potatoes
 never looking up *because*
 I mean to bang this loneliness to speech you
 jesus falcon. (91)

This repetition suggests a vacillation in meaning, an attempt to pinpoint the reason why he writes down "*Peregrine*" when he is

not sure he even saw more than "a hawkish speck." The poet-speaker, therefore, forces meaning onto the situation. Otherwise, he would be the potato digger who never looks up to gain access to this ephemeral experience. The potato digger is one who, in part one, would have resisted the discomfort of witnessing his landscape.

Finally, by writing it down, he means "to bang this loneliness to speech you / *jesus falcon*." What is this "loneliness," this "slow sad pocket of awe," but the same "sadness" felt in "Snow Sadness" (41)—a feeling that the inspiration has passed and an immediacy urges the observer to record it. Here the poet-observer is afraid that he has missed the moment altogether, but he reclaims his vision in the perpetuation of recreation. As "a pen poised a beak / attacks its shell a mind a mind . . . gives itself away to the wind" (80), the poet-speaker will invoke this great bird, "*jesus falcon*," orally, through a language both he and the bird understand: his voice "would yodel into stratospheric octaves" (91). As "whistling" represents communication with birds in "Accidental, exotics, and escapes" (26), and the "adagio" replaces the ode in "Adagio for a fallen sparrow" (55), here, too, music is the mode of communication between bird and human. However, "whistling" is in dream-language, the "adagio" is written for a dead bird, and in this poem the poet "*would yodel*" (emphasis added); the poet-speaker could make the connection in this moment of heightened experience, but does not. There is no language which effectively bridges the gap between natural and human worlds, just as words inadequately reflect inspiration. Thus, the poet,

still without one wingbeat turn
 and spiral even higher, climbing in their kettle so far into blue
the eye
 is sucked up through the lines into its element
 and blinded
pitched past all capacity. (70)

From epiphany springs the fourth movement. Here, the artist seeks a higher knowledge, a truth, a beauty that result in an ecstatic vision of Platonic realms or Blake's "four-fold" vision.

and eats it
 shrieking into melody. (119)

On one level, the bird, as a means of survival, is stalking its prey. Poetry as communication or revelation is likewise a necessary aspect of the human condition: art feeds our desire to understand through an emotional response. In this poem, the pursuit metaphorically serves as the violin, which is "poised / coiled" and "enters with surprising lightness, / tight, in full / possession of the tortured // sinews of his instrument." The audience watching the bird gracefully moving towards its prey is simultaneously listening to the "concerto for violin and Orchestra," waiting in anticipation for the catch or the conclusion. The audience anticipates an expected resolution in the final V-I chord progression, but what happens in the meantime is a super-intense awareness of beauty, a keen observation of sound and movement, an appreciation of beauty which, as the piece concludes, drives the audience into divine pleasure, "shrieking into melody." "Birding" is true "desire," absolute ecstasy is its final outcome; it is the dance of reader and poet through the moving rhythm and meaning in the poetic form.

The act of creation is metamorphosis. Poets, like caterpillars rooted to their earthly baseness, eventually take flight, thereby transforming their own intellect into revelation and dances, as migrating butterflies flutter in a cloud of festive colour. Significantly, these symbols of metamorphosis appear only in section one of *BIRDING, or desire*, therefore suggesting the poet-speaker's own metamorphosis as he takes flight travelling into the beyond.

The poetic use of language represents a perpetual rewriting of the writing-subject and his/her necessary reader-subject. Significantly, "moving" is the last word in *BIRDING, or desire* and it is preceded by a colon, suggesting that something is to follow—a desire for more. McKay achieves a type of silence as his powerful endings and unique metaphors lock us into anticipating the next poem, anticipating the reader's *desire* for birding. In the silence, both poet's and reader's eyes still see, hear and sense the sound of "the Great Blue Heron that [rises] / like its name over the marsh" (McKay 32), and "a bat / [that] breaks out like a butterfly's subconscious flashing / dancing his own black rag"

(33). Listening is the most important message conveyed in *BIRDING, or desire*, for if we can find meaning in the

scritch scritch scritch rr-runk the
shh uh shh of greater

anonymities the little
brouhahas that won't lie still for type
and die

applauseless,

we too can be poet. (123)

Notes

¹ *BIRDING, or desire* (75).

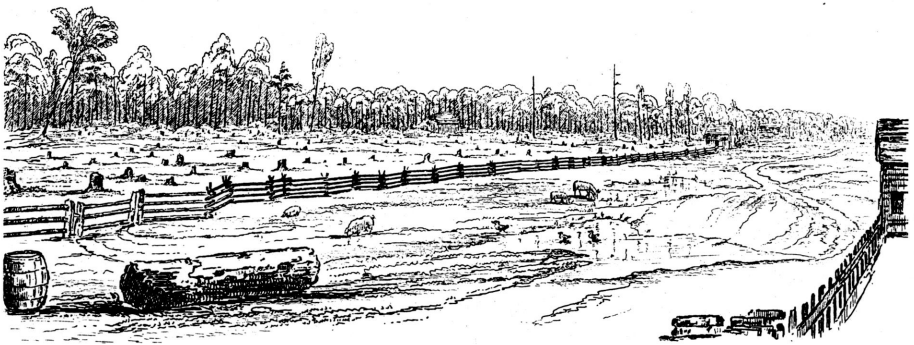
² "A Tale." *Selected Poems: Zbigniew Herbert* (44). *Selected Poems: Zbigniew Herbert* appeared as a core text in Professor Don McKay's Honours English/Western Literature and Civilization course entitled "Poetry in Translation" (The University of Western Ontario: Term II, 1990). Furthermore, at a recent poetry reading at the University of New Brunswick, McKay concluded his reading from *BIRDING, or desire* with Herbert's "A Tale" (5 October 1991).

³ By McKay's own admission, *The Poet's Work* is another influence. This text is recommended to students studying creative writing with him both formerly at the University of Western Ontario, and currently at the University of New Brunswick.

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Newly Cleared Land