

Toward an (Avian) Aesthetic of (Avian) Absence

Travis V. Mason

Abstract

Science, broadly defined, seeks to bring humans epistemologically closer to the physical world by empirical means; philosophy and history of science remind that the apparatuses deployed by scientists (scientific method; mathematical formulae; language) always already maintain a distance. Certain literary/artistic endeavours do not fundamentally differ in their attempts to bring humans closer to the world via language/symbolism. After laying a framework for negotiating the shifting tensions between distance and proximity when contemplating literature's place in ecological thinking, I offer in this essay a series of comparative readings of bird poems complemented by an analysis of a book for young readers. Informing my readings of texts by British, Canadian, and South African writers is a thought experiment: what happens when we consider birds as works of art? For the first half of my argument, I offer readings of poems that sound an alarm regarding humans' carelessness and that posit faulty birdwatchers as exemplars of respectful poetic attention. For the remainder of the essay, I focus on texts about penguins as a critical case study for the first half's thought experiment. The texts that privilege distance and absence as preferable modes of engaging with birds also enable an understanding of birds as works of art independent of human designs.

Keywords: ecocriticism, birding/ birdwatching, science and literature, poetry, aesthetics, extinction.

Disappearing Distance

You call into the dark and dart
to where no nest of yours has ever been
and the most precious, secret-nurtured things
remain unseen (Dixon 2006:19).

Absence makes what
presence, presence (Thompson 1995:135).

The movement between distance and proximity, in scientific and experiential terms, offers a strategy with which to consider practical responses to such environmental problems as habitat loss and degradation, pollution, and extinction. Science, broadly defined, seeks to bring humans epistemologically closer to the physical world by empirical means; philosophy and history of science remind that the apparatuses deployed by scientists (scientific method; mathematical formulae; language) always already maintain a distance. In ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, Martin Heidegger claims that ‘Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces’ (1993:326). While pursuit implies a distance to be overcome and entrapment suggests a mode of overcoming that presumes to measure and comprehend (explain) ‘nature’, the possibility of a ‘calculable coherence of forces’ threatens, in Heidegger’s formulation, to collapse distances in dangerous ways. From an ecological perspective, Heidegger’s critique of technology, which he links through the Greek *technē* to the craft of poetry, points out the danger of humans relying too heavily on a set of practices—technological, poetical—that removes the world of its mystery. What Heidegger calls ‘enframing’, which he identifies as the essence of technology, ‘starts man [sic] upon the way of that revealing through which the actual everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve’ (1993:329). In other words, the danger of technology lies in its tendency, as Catherine Frances Botha notes, to usurp ‘all other modes of revealing. With everything standing in reserve for our use, ‘distance’ disappears’ (2003:162). The disappearance of distance is simultaneously a dangerous proximity and an absence, both of which find their ultimate home in extinction.

Consider the following analogy: distance is to proximity as absence is to presence. The analogy is not particularly challenging. But what if I substitute another pair? Distance is to proximity as extinction is to conservation. In other words, a distance/absence paradigm, which includes absence/presence and extinction/conservation, informs my argument in significant ways. In this essay I examine an aesthetic of absence by looking at writing about birds and the practice of birding. For the purposes of this essay, birders and poets both strive, like scientists, to achieve a proximal relation to the physical world. Elsewhere I have argued that the act of birding functions as a postcolonial strategy, that is, as a strategy for interrogating the limits of knowing the (nonhuman, avian) other while participating in efforts to learn the names and stories of the (nonhuman, avian) other¹. Although my attention here to works by Canadian and South African writers represents an implicit extension of my earlier argument, I stop short of claiming what follows as postcolonial in theory or in practice. There is simply not space enough to consider the relevant geographical, political, or ecological similarities and differences between Canada and South Africa.

After laying a framework for negotiating the shifting tensions between distance and proximity when contemplating literature's place in ecological thinking, I offer a series of comparative readings of bird poems complemented by an analysis of a book for young readers. For the first half of my argument, I have chosen poems that sound an alarm regarding humans' carelessness (Thomas Hardy's 'Wagtail and Baby' and Don McKay's 'In Aornis') and that posit faulty birdwatchers as exemplars of respectful poetic attention (Ingrid de Kok's 'Wattle-Eyes' and McKay's 'Pine Siskins'). If my readings of McKay's and De Kok's poems suggest a strategy for comparing avian poetics from Commonwealth nations—Canada and South Africa, respectively—my inclusion of British writer Hardy's poem is less political and more topical. Though Hardy's best-known bird poem is 'The Darkling Thrush', which has turned the eponymous bird into an icon of steadfast hope in the face of gloom, he has written other bird poems that demonstrate a poet attentive to actual birds and their

¹ See 'West-Coast Birding as Postcolonial Strategy: Literary Criticism in the Field' (Mason 2007a).

conservation². Analyses of, for example, ‘Shelley’s Skylark’ (1993:18)—in which the speaker reminds us that Shelley’s most famous bird poem, ‘Ode to a Skylark’, was inspired by an actual bird—and ‘In a Museum’ (1984:238)—about seeing a stuffed bird and imagining its return—fall beyond the scope of this paper. I wanted nevertheless to locate an antecedent to the philosophical (and perhaps ideological) aspect of the contemporary poems under discussion in this essay’s first half, to hint at a tradition of birdwatching poems, even at the risk of destabilising my comparison of postcolonial/Commonwealth literatures.

For the remainder of the essay, I focus on texts about penguins as a critical case study for the first half’s thought experiment. The penguin texts are less about watching, or attempting to watch an absent bird, and more about the constant threat of endangerment and human interventions to address such endangerment, though they also explore the shifting boundaries between absence and presence, distance and proximity. Phil Whittington’s *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin* (2001) is a well-intentioned attempt to educate young readers about oil spills, but I argue that the narrative—in both its style and its trajectory—renders benign the human rage for proximity by failing to acknowledge adequately the ways scientific research (on penguins) functions within a paradigm of human behaviour that, in addition to benefiting knowledge, is responsible for oil spills. Turning back to poetry, I argue that Jeremy Cronin’s ‘Penguins’ displays a similarly careless anthropocentrism, which essentialises penguins vis-à-vis humans in ways that are not so helpful to penguins or to humans. Ruth Miller’s ‘Penguin on the Beach’, by contrast, comprises a sad portrait of an individual penguin that has been oiled; it also serves as a critique of human behaviour in much the same way McKay’s ‘In Aornis’ does—subtly and self-consciously. The texts that privilege distance and absence as preferable modes of engaging with birds also enable an understanding of birds as works of art independent of human designs.

² Coincidentally, De Kok has taken the title of and epigraph to her 2002 collection, *Terrestrial Things*, from Hardy’s ‘The Darkling Thrush’.

Utility Versus Art

The work of art shows us that ‘truth happens in the guise of the primordial struggle between “clearance” and concealment’ (Steiner 1987:135).

Distance between humans and birds is necessary for bird conservation because it enables birds to live away from human disturbance. Proximity is also necessary for their conservation because humans have much to learn from avian biology and culture that might prevent us from intervening too destructively. If we—Western middle-class environmentally conscious citizens—loosen our epistemological grip on birds, even as we learn their names, their habits, their songs, their habitats, then we might reduce the manic drive toward ownership that dominates our relations with them and much of the world. Canadian poet and nature writer Don McKay—well-known for his writing about birds—observes that ‘pieces of equipment [...] are used up in their equipmentality, unlike works of art’ (2001:57). In McKay’s poetics, the tendency to define things under the heading of utility gets disrupted during moments of breakdown: an untied shoelace, a failed yardsale, a flat tire. McKay identifies such moments as ‘wilderness’—‘not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations’ (2001:21). Such moments are necessary ‘for us to see that tools exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design’ (McKay 2001:57). Recognising this otherness means recognising our (mostly human) dependency on tools alongside the dangers of using tools to reveal too much of the world.

What happens if, modifying McKay’s discussion of tools in the usual sense, we think of *birds* as tools, as equipment to be used in gauging, and often celebrating, our own place in the world? How might we imagine such a formulation? Consider the way birds, both generally and specifically, get appropriated as symbols representative of the natural world, of hope, of freedom. As Alberto Manguel notes in *The Bedside Book of Birds* (Gibson 2005), birds historically serve as signs for other ideas: ‘Noah’s dove, Macbeth’s rooks, Horace’s swans, Omar Khayam’s pigeon, Theocritus’s nightingale, Count Fosco’s canaries—they are no longer birds but usages of birds, feathered with words and meaning’ (Gibson 2005:17). Consider how

some birds get used as resources, as quarry for hunters, as food for consumption, or as the basis of scientific research. Consider how birds generate revenue for tourist and birding industries, both as objects of desire and as extensions of the equipment—binoculars, scopes, camouflage, field guides—produced to make seeing and identifying them possible. ‘Even among birdwatchers’, writes Graham Gibson, ‘there are those who feel the need to possess the birds, if only symbolically’ (2005:227). But Jacklyn Cock argues that even symbolic possession can have real-world consequences when she claims that, ‘ironically, bird-watchers may be contributing to the decline of birds’ (2007:60). If we consider birds as tools, then they, too, will inevitably be used up. With 1.3 percent of birds globally having become extinct and another 12 percent threatened with extinction, such a claim exceeds merely philosophical claims (Stutchbury 2007:5). If we stop thinking of birds as tools, like an old typewriter or toaster we relegate to the attic or garage, birds might respond to our defamiliarising gesture by shifting, as McKay suggests other tools do, ‘a few degrees in the direction of art, that class of objects which are eloquent and useless’ (2001:56). What happens if we consider birds as works of art?

Works of art, particularly those that challenge conventional wisdom and perception, satisfy McKay’s criteria for wilderness, which is one reason they do not get used up like pieces of equipment. Works of art tend to get preserved in galleries and museums, in private and public collections. What would happen if we were to consider birds as works of art? Not merely to collect and display, as we do in natural history museums, but to admire and protect. We already maintain a distance between them and us through a process of othering that has become, with some exceptions (see Preece 2005), essential to our ontological status as human. So birds might resist utility, as art does, by presenting a version of the world that is *other*.

Not just bird song inheres as poetry, though; I want to push at the limits of recognising birds as poets and singers. To acknowledge birds, as French composer and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen does, as ‘not only virtuosos but artists, above all in their territorial songs’, no longer seems to test the imagination much (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:316). Messiaen might have helped normalise the characterisation of birds as musicians, and many ornithologists and ecocritics might take it for granted—but French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari push it, in their inimitable

way, beyond the mere sonic. Deleuze and Guattari discuss territorialisation's presence 'in the becoming-expressive of rhythm or melody, in other words, in the emergence of [a bird's] proper qualities (color, odor, sound, silhouette ...)' (1987:316). In other words, those qualities that enable quick identification in the field. The rhythm of shape and movement expresses a territory by delineating shifting boundaries. 'Can this becoming', Deleuze and Guattari ask, 'this emergence, be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art' (1987:316)³. Not a result of an artist, but of art. Or, a result of artist and art. A bird that uses song and colour and silhouette to mark territory makes art, and that art is himself. The body, the hollow bones, the feathers, the ecological niche—all cohere as artistic gesture, as gesture with myriad possible meanings, including those that remain inaccessible to human cognition. When birders accept their inability to access a bird in the field, then the bird's absence—from view, from understanding—manifests as a hidden but real presence.

In *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, however, Malcolm Budd writes that 'the appreciation of birdsong is free from [...] the understanding of its meaning as art' (2002:11). I appreciate Budd's focus on birdsong in his philosophical ruminations, but something in his confident declamatory tone makes me suspicious. His rhetorical use of the pronoun 'you' in passages like the one below, rankles the ecocritic and the birder in me. Not to mention the English teacher. Budd dismisses the possibility that

your delight is aesthetic only if you hear the sounds merely as patterns of sounds. On the contrary, you hear the sounds as products of [unaided] bodily actions, of 'voices', or 'whistles', or 'warbles'. But you do not hear them as intentionally determined by artistic considerations. You delight in the seemingly endless and effortless variety of a thrush's song—variations in pitch, timbre, dynamics, rhythm, and vocal attack, for example—but not as the product of artistry and not as a construction aided by consideration of its effectiveness as art (2002:11).

³ Translator Brain Massumi indicates no difference between Art and art in Deleuze and Guattari's writing. I take the difference to be that between product (Art) and process (art).

I don't know who Malcolm Budd imagines his audience to be, but *I* certainly don't identify with his imagined *you*⁴. Actually, I don't think Budd's *you* exists; the language he uses is meant to articulate abstract philosophical ideas about concrete human experiences. That he avoids positing himself as subject in his scenario about listening to birdsong speaks volumes about how certain methodologies presume standard aesthetic experiences. Even if I were to accept Budd's argument—assuming art by definition requires reflexive intentionality—I fail to be convinced by his presumption that birds themselves cannot be considered works of art.

Canadian poet and translator Robert Bringhurst writes against such presumptions, arguing that 'Poetry is not manmade; it is not pretty words; it is not something hybridised by humans on the farm of human language. Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence. It is the thinking of things' (2002:155). This description supports the idea that birds are poets when they sing their songs; it also supports my reading of birds *as* poetry, as art. But what does such a reading imply in regard to the conservation of birds and their habitats? I'm not suggesting arts grants to help hadda ibises through lean times; but a paradigm shift might change the relation between humans and birds for the better. More distance, less proximity. More dialogue, less deforestation. Maybe I'm looking idealistically for a poetic genre such as natural history to act as a salve against prosaic science and policy narratives, which seem to have brought us too close to the physical world too quickly. Maybe I'm looking for a form of writing about the physical world that aims for proximity while maintaining a respectful, even healthful, distance, and thus encourages a reading of the world as complex artistry we can interpret

⁴ Budd's position might be considered akin to the concept of the Aeolian harp, which suggests the sounds of Nature (birdsong included) pass through a human voice to proclaim the eminence of human experience. McKay addresses this Romantic concept, arguing that 'Aeolian harpism relieves us of our loneliness as a species, reconnects to the natural world, restores a coherent reality' (2001:27-28). As a response to the way that Romanticism thus 'ends in the celebration of the creative [human] imagination in and for itself' (McKay 2001:28), McKay suggests as an alternative 'poetic attention [which] is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness' (2001:28).

and discuss and protect. ‘The library was here before we were’, writes Bringhurst: ‘We live in it. We can add to it, or we can try; we can also subtract from it. We can chop it down, incinerate it, strip mine it, poison it, bury it under our trash. But we didn’t create it, and if we destroy it, we cannot replace it’ (2002:160). Bringhurst’s metaphor of the world as prehistoric library draws a clear distinction between art created by humans (in the conventional sense) and art created by other-than-humans. Unlike Budd, who does not allow for this distinction in his aesthetic philosophy, Bringhurst argues for ecological conservation on grounds of artistic, as distinct from aesthetic, merit. Negotiating the tension between distance and proximity, between absence and presence while birding represents one way to pay homage to the library⁵. Birding and writing—whether field notes or poetry—invite closer attention without the need to see fully and to determine whether a species or a biome holds value for humans.

Absence as Extinction: Hardy & McKay

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard
If others sang; but others never sang
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.
No one saw him: I alone could hear him
Though many listened. Was it but four years
Ago? or five? He never came again (Thomas 2004:145).

Thomas Hardy’s short lyric ‘Wagtail and Baby’ (2004:76) achieves much with its formally conventional and conceptually quotidian tale. Hardy presents a series of encounters between a diminutive wagtail drinking in a ford and four different mammals: a bull, a horse, a dog, and a man. The baby watches through innocent eyes as the wagtail negotiates each of his significantly larger counterparts in turn. Not one of these formidable animals poses a threat to the wagtail as he drinks and preens in a ford. Hardy employs language that describes each animal’s essential qualities without naming

⁵ For more on McKay’s project of paying homage to bird song, see Mason (2008).

them explicitly, foregrounding the disparity between bird and mammal by noting the respect each shows the other: 'A blaring bull' wades through while 'The wagtail show[s] no shrinking'; 'A stallion splash[es]' frenetically, yet the bird responds to 'nearly sinking' with a matter-of-fact 'twitch and toss'; and a dog 'slowly slink[s]' around the ford but fails to cause the bird's languid, canny gaze to falter. In short, Hardy composes an ecology of discretely consilient forces. He simultaneously notes the differences between wagtail and others and demonstrates how proximity can enhance their similarities.

But when a 'perfect gentlemen' approaches, the distance between bird and man reaches a crescendo. The slightest hint of proximity causes the wagtail to rise 'in a winking / With terror' and to disappear from view. The man is clearly a different animal here. He is not likely to use the ford for anything other than crossing to the other side, though a perfect gentleman might rather find a bridge or transportation to avoid getting wet. Nevertheless the wagtail's experience tells him that terror and flight represent his best chance of survival. Many a gentleman, after all, has been known to shoot birds from afar with as little compunction as if it were merely distance he were shooting down in his quest for proximity. Gentlemen like John James Audubon. But the wagtail doesn't simply take flight at the man's approach. He *disappears*. Disappearance portends an ultimate unbridgeable distance. The wagtail's disappearance augurs not so well for the fate of birds more generally. The wagtail's *rising* action coupled with the baby's *falling* action at the end of the poem reinforces a distance that is more likely to endanger the planet than help it. That the baby only falls 'a-thinking' rescues the poem from complete despair.

I'm not sure I can say the same about Don McKay's poem 'In Aornis' (2006:66), published approximately a century after 'Wagtail and Baby.' I am tempted to call McKay's poem 'speculative lyric' for the way it imagines a post-avian world in verse. The distance between bird and human far exceeds that depicted in Hardy's poem. Hardy's repetitive *-ing* sounds imbue 'Wagtail and Baby' with a hopeful sense of forward momentum despite the sombre note on which it ends. That final 'thinking' gestures toward the possibility of reducing the portentous dangers implied by massive distance. By contrast, McKay's use of negative words and suffixes reinforces unrecoverable distance as extinction. So much in Aornis is *not*, is *un*. The

prospect of utter loss resonates in frightening ways throughout the poem. Aornis translates, as the poem's speaker tells us, as 'birdless land'. This is a land whose 'uninflected sky extends / like rhetoric to the horizon', as if the landscape itself were defined by the presence of birds. Bushes and trees still contain tangles, but they are not nests; the wind still carries flying objects, but they are not birds. They are machines presumably controlled by humans, but not necessarily. It seems Aornis is birdless *and* humanless land. It seems McKay is suggesting that the absence of birds indicates bad times ahead for people, as well. Humans exist in the poem as spectres: if not flying those machines, we are presumably responsible for their construction; if not present in the landscape proper, we are at least remembered by one of the branches that 'now and then' shrugs to 'shed its load' of snow. Likewise, and more to the point, the single mention of a specific bird resonates like an echo in an empty room. The branches—and note the double negative sound—'know / no junco will descend to instigate / the tiny blizzard like a sneeze / which frees them.' This is a nightmare version of what Hardy's baby falls a-thinking. A world in which birds are present only as fading boreal memories and where absence manifests in calm, matter-of-fact tones. The 'unsung sun, / it turns out, comes up anyway' while flying machines ride like cyborg Icaruses on the empty wind.

That image of the wind being ridden by machines instead of birds hints suggestively at a Heideggerian critique of technology. As the only human product in the poem—unless we consider the absence of birds as something we will have produced—these flying machines represent the most direct way humans have used birds. The science that informs aerodynamics and the engineering technology that enables powered flight both rely upon knowledge of bird physiology and biology. This is one way we have posited birds as tools in the Enlightenment narrative called progress.

Attending (to) Absence: De Kok and McKay

Bird, thy form I never looked on,
And to see it do not care (Howitt 2004:141).

Ingrid de Kok and Don McKay have each written a poem about a different sort of birdless land. In both De Kok's 'Wattle-eyes' (2006:28) and McKay's

'Pine Siskins' (2006:64), the eponymous birds appear only in name; the birds themselves remain physically absent from view. De Kok's speaker finds this absence disheartening at first, evidence both of her lack of birding skill and of her companions' colonial affinities with Victorian explorers. While her companions 'stalk[...] the drizzle' with poised binoculars, the speaker trails 'myopically behind / displaying a slouching, unfit jizz'. The language in these opening lines emphasises sight as the primary grammar of this expedition: these explorers are bird-*watching*. Or trying to. They are almost *willing* the bird to appear, an arrogant gesture which causes the speaker to distrust their sighting of 'the wattle-eyed flycatcher in the tangled bush / that after two hours showed its apparently / luminous, tiny, shy eye'. Though obviously frustrated that she does not see the bird, the speaker makes seeing and appearances the focus of her poem; she is clearly inspired by the flycatcher's evocative designation as wattle-*eyed* and by her companions' desire *to see*. She also describes herself in visual terms as myopic and displaying an unfit jizz. To display is a peculiarly avian act, as well; and jizz refers to the gestalt of a species, the characteristic shape, colour, and behaviours that enable quick identification in the field. That De Kok's speaker describes herself in avian terms complicates her identification as a bad bird-watcher while implicating birds in artistic creation. The final strophe verifies the speaker's distrust of her companions and completes her identification with the eponymous bird. She refers to the sighting as a gift they gave themselves and reiterates the link to Victorian-era discipline; she reads this gift, in turn, as 'a rebuke' to her 'wattle-eyed and hooded sight', a signal that she has not been admitted to the club, as it were. But the object of her frustration seems to have shifted in the end. Somehow in *not* having seen, the poet achieves an ontological status that resists connotations of colonial exploration and 'disciplined delight'. De Kok does not clarify why this should be the case. By identifying with the bird, is she suggesting that he, too, has suffered a rebuke by these bird-watchers? Does the rage for proximity and presence somehow endanger or insult the absent and distant wattle-eye? De Kok's speaker does not say. But her emphasis on vision in a poem that doubts the veracity of a bird sighting implies that absence can perhaps be a valid, albeit distant presence.

McKay's speaker, by contrast, accepts the visual absence of the pine siskins as a comfortable distance between himself and the birds. He knows

birders cannot will birds to appear in the bush any more than poets can will words to appear on the page. Each requires patience and an attentive readiness. The speaker of “Pine Siskins” writes self-consciously as what I call a birder-poet, an observer who cultivates a mode of attention that is helpful in the field and at the desk⁶. This mode of attention typically impels the birder-poet into closer proximity by encouraging familiarity with bird names and ecologies; it also stresses the importance of recognising and maintaining distance between observers and observed.

The poem begins with a version of visual absence. But McKay’s attention does not rely upon sight alone: ‘Unseen in the pines the pine siskins / are unlocking the seeds from the pine cones, click / click click’. These negative prefixes do not have the same effect as they do in ‘In Aornis’. Here they indicate avian agency and intelligence—the birds exist beyond the birder’s field of view and eat their meal as if unlocking the secrets of life. In their absence they provide the birder-poet with material to write about, namely the husks from the pine cones they are consuming and the patterns they create as they fall. The chaff that ‘freckles the air, / the lawns, the parked cars, / and the notebook’ in the poet’s lap enters the notebook as ‘fallout’ and ‘dross’ and ‘dun-coloured memos from entropy’ (McKay 2006:64). Each description invokes the energy exchange taking place in the pines, the clicks that release the protein to keep the siskins warm and that deliver the unwanted waste, no longer filled with potential heat, to gravity and the earth below. Midway through the poem, the speaker abruptly halts his metaphorical musings, as if to prevent himself from overwriting and writing over the pine siskins. He reminds in the poem’s second half that birds are cultural beings who play and make music. Unseen in the pines,

the siskins party on, now and then
erupting into siskin song — upswept
ardent buzzes, part
wolf whistle, part raspberry, part Charles Ives’
“Unanswered Question”:
tragic-comic operas crammed
into their opening arpeggia (sic) (McKay 2006:64).

⁶ This figure is central to my doctoral work on McKay’s avian poetics (Mason 2007b). See also Cook (2006) and Elmslie (2006).

The speaker explains siskin song with a complexity typically reserved for describing Mozart concertos or Thelonious Monk performances. But it seems to be a complexity humans are not entirely capable of comprehending. The tragic-comic aspect is easy enough to understand—we are in many ways an ironical species willing to appreciate the come-hither qualities of wolf-whistle that get undermined by the pejorative, childish raspberry. But we might have difficulty comprehending how these competing sounds come together as a full opera ‘crammed into’ an opening arpeggio. It’s a little like trying to imagine an entire novel stuffed into its first sentence. Of course, humans are physiologically incapable of hearing birdsong as birds hear it. For that we need advanced recording and playback equipment. How’s that for irony? Just as the poet’s attention does not rely on sight alone, however, so his rendering of the siskin song does not rely on sound alone. The siskins’ operatic performance comprises their song and their opening act—eating seeds—so that they become not just singers but song. The way they *erupt* into song, which the speaker describes as *ardent* buzzes, completes the energy transfer begun in the first lines. They eat in order to sing; they sing in order to live. At least that’s what evolutionary theory implies—some questions remain unanswered.

Based on my readings of these four poems, relations between humans and birds have been one-sided affairs. Because despite our supposed aesthetic appreciation of nature, we tend to ignore the artistic qualities of non-humans. Instead we exploit what we can for our own gain. We might acknowledge birdsong as pretty or as nostalgic. But we seldom admit avian musical achievement that compares to our own. Bringham articulates one difference between human and bird song, which goes some way to revealing the consequences of such arrogance: ‘If the proportion of individual creation in human song is greater than in birdsong, that’s no cause for pride, though it may be very good cause for excitement. What it means is that nature and culture both are at greater risk from us than they are from birds’ (163). The siskins in McKay’s poem are complex collective works of art. And as such they should compel us to fall, like Hardy’s pensive baby, a-thinking. I think McKay’s birder-poet gestures toward a viable response to our complicity in extinction—namely, embracing an absence that resembles the distance between a work of art and our capacity to let it elude our minds’ appropriations.

Penguins in Oil: Whittington and ‘Peter’

This may not be art’s last word, but art went that route, as did the bird: motifs and counterpoints that form an autodevelopment, in other words, a style (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:319).

What does all this mean with respect to actual birds living in actual territories? How might an understanding of birds as works of art alter an understanding of specific birds in a specific place? I want to shift my focus to the ongoing plight of African penguins (*Spheniscus demersus*) endemic to Southern Africa’s coast by way of offering a case study in support of my thought experiment. According to reports, ‘Low-level oiling events occur nearly continuously’ (Wolfaardt 2001:45). The most recent major oil spill to affect South Africa occurred on 23 June 2000. The *Treasure* spill affected nearly 40 000 African penguins: over 19 000 were oiled on Robben and Dassen Islands, and ‘a further 19 500 unoiled penguins were collected’ and ‘evacuated to Cape Recife in the Eastern Cape, to prevent them from being oiled’ (Wolfaardt 2001:45). The *Treasure* spill also sets the stage for Part Two of *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin*—Peter is one of the penguins evacuated⁷. Phil Whittington, who wrote the book while completing his PhD in statistical sciences from the University of Cape Town’s Avian Demography Unit (ADU), provides a narrative following the ‘adventures’ of a penguin many South Africans came to know as Peter. Peter and two other penguins, named Percy and Pamela, featured in media reports following clean-up efforts. Each of the alliteratively named penguins was fitted with a satellite tracking device designed to transmit data to a website associated with the ADU. Unlike Percy and Pamela, though, Peter was never found, his transmitter—which communicated his return to Robben Island—never recovered.

⁷ In Part One, Peter actually gets oiled, only to be rescued by a passing ornithologist who takes him to the SANCCOB rescue centre in Cape Town. While determining the book’s temporal logic is a bit difficult, this early oil spill is likely from the *Apollo Sea*, a bulk iron-ore carrier that sank off Dassen Island on 20 June 1994 (Wolfaardt 2001:45).

This strange phenomenon offers an interesting example of absence as presence: despite efforts to bring Peter into greater proximity, he remains ineluctably distant, inexorably penguin. I am not interested in analysing *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin* as a work of fiction; nor do I want to question the scientific and conservationist value of the ADU and the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). Rather, I want to examine the distal and proximal qualities that biologists sometimes demonstrate, which Whittington expresses when he writes that ‘Peter helps us to discover what it feels like to be an African penguin’ (2001:82). At least two Peters appear in Whittington’s book, and I’m not entirely certain which one he claims helps us (nor to whom ‘us’ refers). The passage I’ve just quoted introduces Part Three, ‘The Serious Bit’ that follows the story proper. Peter, then, is a metonym for all the African penguins SANCCOB members have rescued and/or studied. This is an example of proximity in the service of conservation. Except that in this case, the proximal bird has been made present in a fictional sense to make up for his physical absence.

So, why make Peter, the one that effectively got away, the star of his own book? What is it about Peter’s absence that makes his story the preferred one to inform readers about the wonders of penguin biology/ecology and the dangers of oil spills? Perhaps, like De Kok and McKay, Whittington is interrogating the rage for proximity by highlighting human failure. He portrays biologists in the book—metonyms for humans, surely—as imperfect clowns who keep getting bitten by frightened and sanctimonious penguins. ‘In torn tee-shirts, jeans, leather gloves and gumboots’, the narrator observes as some biologists approach, ‘they looked a mean gang of desperadoes’ (Whittington 2001:26). Such a characterisation does little more than offer readers a chance to laugh at figures who might otherwise be considered quite scary and violent. Children love a buffoon, don’t they, especially when adults fill the role. My main point of contention with the book—which is otherwise a well-intentioned effort to engage young minds in environmental issues—is that Whittington stops short of examining the complexity of human-penguin (biologist-Peter) relations. Peter is portrayed as a naïve youngster who alternately suffers in one oil spill and benefits from preventive measures put in place by SANCCOB in the wake of the *Treasure* spill. *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin*, for all its biological

accuracy and ‘serious’ agenda, ultimately acts as a justification for the activities of SANCCOB and similar organisations. By casting Peter in this story about the importance of maintaining conservation efforts, Whittington finally succeeds where his colleagues failed—namely, in capturing Peter and putting him to use. Knowingly or not, Whittington ensures that Peter fulfils his usefulness to SANCCOB. Unable to glean data from his tracking device, Whittington instead deploys language and illustrations (by Fred Mouton) to wrest as much use as possible out of the Penguin name Peter.

However, by turning Peter the Penguin into a fictional character—effectively a work of art—Whittington poses some challenges to my argument thus far. What happens if we consider birds as works of art unselfconsciously? Let me answer with a question from Heidegger: ‘What is a plant and animal to us anymore, when we take away use, embellishment, and entertainment?’ (1999:194). In the case of *Peter the Penguin*, his construction as entertainment reclaims his usefulness, which he took away himself by eluding capture and remaining visually absent yet physically present. But entertainment is not necessarily art, and I think Whittington’s Peter avoids the latter even as he inhabits the South African imagination as the former. Consider, for example, that by avoiding capture, Peter is also avoiding getting ‘pink stuff on [his] feathers’ as Percy does (Whittington 2001:77). ‘Once Percy’s satellite tracker had been removed,’ Whittington recounts in ‘The Serious Bit’, ‘some bright-pink dye was *painted on him* so that scientists [...] could find him easily’ (2001:91 e.a.). If painting a penguin in this manner does not quite mark an attempt to turn him into a work of art, the practice might usefully be viewed in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s territorialisation and deterritorialisation. By avoiding being painted by the scientists, Peter is in fact expressing his characteristics as a work of art rather than as a signboard meant to appropriate his body. He maintains ‘rhythm’, the colours that are ‘associated with interior hormonal states’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:315), which represents the territorializing factor.

Avian artistry resides in each bird’s ‘jizz’, what Deleuze and Guattari call rhythm or melody (though it need not be musical in the conventional sense). Moreover, ‘The discovery of [...] the properly rhythmic character marks the moment of art when it ceases to be a silent painting on a signboard’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:319). In spite of SANCCOB’s efforts

to find Peter and retrieve ‘their’ data, and in spite of Whittington’s imagined capture of the elusive bird, Peter refuses to be ‘a silent painting on a signboard’. His encounter with pink Percy at the end of the book only reinforces his refusal. The real Peter—that is, the individual penguin fitted with a tracking device and released from captivity following the *Treasure* oil spill—remains distant amid all efforts at rendering him proximal, and thus useful. He remains, thus, a work of art: distant, ‘eloquent and useless’ (McKay 2001:56).

Penguins in Verse: Cronin and Miller

[N]ature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully (McKay 2001:29).

Most of what Deleuze and Guattari have to say about distance in their work on the refrain pertains to beings of the same species, beings that are likely to jockey for territorial positioning. ‘The territory’, which they describe as a melodic refrain such as the singing of male wrens or the spraying of felines, ‘is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). Distance in this case is a necessary component of subjectivity: ‘What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). Between beings of different species, the distance resounds in obvious ways as physiological rather than rhythmic or melodic difference. In ‘Penguins’ (2006:52-54), Jeremy Cronin attempts to bridge this distance, offering a strained set of relations between humanity and penguins.

Cronin’s poem poses questions about possible homologies between penguins and humans in a confessional, free-verse style that attends to his role as poet and as politician. For ecocritic Julia Martin, this duality is central to Cronin’s poetry: ‘Multiple visions, or seeing from different places, is after all, one of the things that some of us sentient beings do rather well. Herons, for example, and flamingoes’ (2007:74). And penguins. Indeed, the poem’s ultimate question, which Cronin poses parenthetically, can easily extend to both poets and politicians: ‘People are starving, why give a damn

about birds?’ (2006:54)⁸. The question implies a common resistance to environmental concern by those—politicians, poets, academics, and laypeople alike—who isolate social ills. By posing the question, Cronin implies, quite rightly I think, that concern for social health and concern for environmental health are not mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, his version of an answer relies, much as Whittington’s narrative does, on essentialist notions of penguin-human relations, effectively rendering ‘penguins’ as proxy humans.

I admit to placing a perhaps unfair burden on Cronin’s poem. My critique, though, should not be taken as an attempt to dismiss works of art that fail to meet the criteria that I have set out as important for considering birds *qua* birds. My concern is with how the poem’s aesthetic qualities—word choice, cadence, tone—communicate intentionally or not a position vis-à-vis an (avian) aesthetic of (avian) absence, such as I discuss in the essay’s opening pages. Poets cannot, of course, avoid anthropocentrism, as Don McKay notes in the epigraph to this section, but they should attempt to enact it thoughtfully (2001:29) if they are willing to address environmental concerns and humans’ complicity in ecological crises. As a result of what I see as not-so-thoughtful anthropocentrism in ‘Penguins’, the poem never really rises above the author’s anthropomorphic designs, which see in

⁸ I borrow the idea of homology in this context from Susan Fisher as a way to identify a relation between penguins and people that exists beyond the symbolic and implies a biological (evolutionary) link. Fisher develops this notion in an essay about McKay’s bird poetry. Homology, in Fisher’s reading, represents ‘a subtler form of comparison’ that relies upon similarities evident among species with common ancestors, for example bone structure among mammals (Fisher 2007:57). ‘Whereas metaphor presents a similarity that is an artefact of poetry’, Fisher writes, ‘homology presents similarities that are the product of evolution, the result of shared genetic history’ (2007:57). So, homology enables McKay and by extension Cronin to write about birds ‘without the distancing tropes of analogy, metaphor, or simile’ (2007:57). The proximity afforded by homology in a poetic context recognises birds as works of art fashioned by genetic mutation and time, but it is a proximity that threatens to collapse distance altogether if not handled with sufficient knowledge of homology’s scientific basis.

penguins an opportunity—again, like Whittington—to reify the apparently contradictory, and exemplary, meeting of nature and culture in humans. A concern for birds that manifests in recognition of what Martin identifies as their multiplicity, that is, seems to justify attempts to have herons and penguins stand in for people.

‘Penguins’ comprises three brief sections. The first addresses penguins—as ‘you’—in earnest homage to their amphibious life on land and in water. In the first half of part one, Cronin describes penguins in stereotypical fashion:

Waddle, bray away
Shuffle down your dune
Grunt, grunt again
Head looming over tummy
Short-sightedly to check
On your own clown-footed step (2006:52).

On land these creatures elicit descriptions that focus on their awkward locomotion and harsh voice⁹—in short, their clownish appearance and movement. Cronin’s depiction implies a silliness that reflects in these opening lines’ bathetic rhyming, alliteration, and cadences, and continues in the glib, punning description of the birds’ inexplicably ‘bandaged wings’ unwinding their ‘sheer // Flippery’ (2006:52). This flippery—at once frippery and flippancy—signals a shift from clownish waddle to ‘porpoise-like’ swimming that brings

the ocean’s immense, in short
Orchestra
Speechless
... to hush (2006:52).

—a marked difference from the barely pedestrian penguin on land. The transition is meant to be as sudden as a penguin slipping—‘flopping’ in

⁹ Until recently, African penguins were called Jackass penguins because of the braying sound to which Cronin refers.

Cronin's terms—from rocky shore into wavy sea. Were the poem to end there, I might have been convinced by the awkward language and phrasing as playful homage to a creature well-known to many South Africans. But the following two sections render the opening as mere metaphorical set-up for a contemplation of a potential homology between penguins and humans. The poem ends up being more about the speaker, and humans in general, than about the eponymous birds.

Only in the final section do I recognise an idea augmented by the language of and politics behind the poem. After a middle section in which the speaker wonders if the penguins retain a 'weak vestige of [the] in-built capacity' to hear an alarm clock 'a shade / Of a second before it actually goes off' (2006:53), the speaker asks his listener to 'Imagine these words dropped off in remote bays / Swimming with uncanny instinct / Towards the end of a poem' (2006:54). This shift in focus to the poet's words—language itself, not the humans who speak it—is in keeping with Cronin's interest in poetry and politics. By imagining words in place of penguins, though, Cronin effectively makes the birds described in the poem's first section—albeit in clichéd terms—disappear. Abandoning the penguins in the final section belies what the speaker identifies in this section as his 'fascination for penguins', a fascination he admits can be 'Easily dismissed' by, presumably, those non-environmentalists to whom he silently attributes the rhetorical question 'People are starving, why give a damn about birds?' (2006:54). The presence of the question, if not its parenthetical placement, lays bare what Cronin hopes to accomplish with the poem. A poet's interest in, or fascination with birds needn't detract from his humanitarian efforts. Poetry, after all, traffics in symbolism and metaphor, in saying what is not strictly true in order to get at a truth or set of truths worth pondering in the eyes of the poet. But even this claim, at least as it pertains to an appreciation of birds, raises questions about how interest in (and fascination with) birds translates into their conservation.

In *The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice*, sociologist Jacklyn Cock wonders about the extent to which a fascination for birds is capable of helping birds, let alone people by metaphorical and ecological extension: 'Is the growing appreciation of birds enough when birds all over the world are facing unprecedented threats to their survival from factors such as climate change, population pressures, habitat

destruction, the loss of traditional feeding and nesting grounds, persecution through hunting and the massive use of pesticides' (2005:57)? Despite some successful breeding years following the *Treasure* spill—thanks in large part to the efforts of SANCCOB—after a 90% decrease in their population during the twentieth century, the African penguin is still listed as vulnerable by the World Conservation Union (Crawford and Dyer 2000:7). Cronin's poem does not offer a response to such a quandary, despite indicating a fascination for penguins. In the end, his 'words want / To splash, home' like penguins while wondering, like a poet, whether it is wrong 'To feel wonder // For penguins' (2001:54). The question, as Cock implies, has little to do with right or wrong and much to do with adequate or inadequate responses to the crisis.

Unlike 'Heron's Place' (2006:47-48), a poem that appears in the same collection and which Martin suggests 'ends with the affirmation of a kind of [...] practice of vigilance, locatedness, specificity' (2008:73), 'Penguins' ends with a claim about the poet's fascination 'seeking / some hint of compassion in chaos / In this too often cynical place with its oil spills / And nature's alarm clocks going off' (2006:54). The vagueness of the language echoes the poem's lack of direction, its inability to swim home successfully from the realm of dreams. Whereas 'Heron's Place' 'is about the intimate, wakeful, situated knowledge of place' (Martin 2005:73), 'Penguins' eschews such specificity: 'this place' could be anywhere in the Southern hemisphere where penguins live; penguins themselves might as well be people; and the recurring image of nature's alarm clock fails to signify anything beyond a vague set of crises that, I suppose, Cronin feels people should wake up to and initiate action against. The poem leaves me feeling quite literally bereft of engagement with penguins as birds or as art—in short, as living beings worthy of my attention, conservationist and otherwise.

Ruth Miller demonstrates nearly half a century earlier than Cronin how to 'feel wonder for penguins' without marginalizing them and reifying the written word. With 'Penguin on the Beach' (1990:35-36), Miller has written a poem that encourages a respectful distance between penguins and people even as she acknowledges the necessity of conservation efforts. From the title, the difference between Miller's and Cronin's poems appears clear: whereas Cronin conflates all penguins in his poem with humans, Miller focuses her attention on a specific penguin in a specific place (even if she

does not name the place¹⁰). This penguin on the beach, however, has been made a 'Stranger in his own element', a 'Sea-casualty' and 'castaway manikin' because of the oil that 'Has spread a deep commercial stain / Over his downy shirt front' (1990:35). Note that Miller does not refrain from evoking stereotypical images of penguins. Her penguin 'Waddles in his tailored coat-tails' and his shirt gets stained (1990:35). The difference between Miller's anthropomorphism and Whittington's and Cronin's is critical and ironical. Whereas the two contemporary writers seek to bring penguins closer to human experience, Miller uses anthropomorphic language to chastise readers, to distance us from the bird we so easily and carelessly read as a clown in a tuxedo. This seemingly innocuous reading, Miller argues, has played a hand in the suffering the penguin in her poem experiences. In the first five lines, Miller dispenses with the notion of clichéd penguins occupying the realm of art while critiquing their position as tools for human use.

The oil on this penguin 'clogs the sleekness' that to Cronin only manifests while the birds are under water (Miller 1990:35). For Miller, words, particularly clichés, function much as oil does to endanger the penguin, a starkly different role from the words Cronin wants to become penguins. This distinction imbues Miller's poem with pathos and paradox: it is a poem about the dangers of human behaviour, including language, rich with linguistic adroitness and beauty. Miller's words, ironically, and not Cronin's resemble the penguins about whom both write. Through Miller's words, the eponymous penguin 'recall[s] the past, to be so cautious' of the '[s]leazy, grey' slick infecting his water and beach (1990:35). Here, the poet's description is in keeping with ornithologist Bob Rand's observations of penguins following an oil spill in 1952. Les Underhill quotes Rand, who claimed that 'Soiled penguins died on the beaches or lingered on the islands to perish of hunger. Where nesting birds were affected, chicks also died. No matter how small the contamination, the birds refused to take to the water' (Underhill 2001). This refusal to enter the water, this caution, robs the penguins of their characteristic ambivalence, prevents them from expressing

¹⁰ While it is tempting to imagine that 'Penguin on the Beach' was inspired by the major oil spill that occurred near Cape Town in May, 1968 (a few months prior to publication of *Selected Poems*), the poem first appeared in *Floating Island* (1965).

their melody or rhythm, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. This loss leads to their death, individually, and ultimately might lead to their extinction. Miller's depiction points an accusing finger after inviting readers to take a closer look:

Watch him step into the waves. He shudders
Under the froth; slides, slips, on the wet sand,

Escaping to dryness, dearth, in a white cascade,
An involuntary shouldering off of gleam.
Hands push him back into the sea. He stands

In pained and silent expostulation (1990:36).

Shuddering in the water and shivering to remove the frothy gleam back on dry land betray a coldness that penguins do not naturally experience when their plumage is in good shape¹¹. Oiling prevents penguins from insulating themselves against the frigid temperatures of the two oceans they inhabit. Knowing this, biologists are often able to clean oiled birds successfully—though the long-term success is still not known for certain—and, as in the case of SANCCOB's response to the *Treasure* spill, evacuate birds before they have a chance to be oiled.

The human presence in this poem, which makes its first appearance as 'Hands push[ing]' the penguin 'back into the sea' in the lines above, represents a shocking indictment. To whom do these hands belong, and why are they attempting to force the oiled penguin into the sea? One answer lies in the caution with which the penguin, we are told, perceives the waves, a caution learned from past experience. The shudder and shiver, then, is not the physiological response of an oiled bird, but a psychological response of a previously oiled bird. Miller's penguin is back on the beach, it seems, after having been rescued and cleaned by caring hands. His 'pained and silent expostulation' (Miller 1990:36) indicates just how deep the stain on his coat has been, regardless of the successful de-oiling. It also reminds of Peter the

¹¹ Unlike most birds, penguins cease foraging for food while moulting, so important is a healthy coat of feathers. See 'News from the ADU' (2007/2008:52).

Penguin eluding capture, both literally (by evading biologists tracking his position on Robben Island) and figuratively (by resisting Whittington's attempts to turn him into a caricature). The moment when the penguin on the beach turns to stand in silent expostulation echoes 'the moment of art when it ceases to be a silent painting on a signboard' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). His characteristic jizz now comprises shuddering 'from the clean flinching wave' (Miller 1990:36). Moreover, in a move that indicates his resistance to being made into either a tool or a work of art—in a move that marks Miller's discomfort with her role as artist/poet—the penguin:

Turns and plods back up the yellow sand,
Ineffably wary, triumphantly sad.

He is immensely wise: he trusts nobody. His senses
Are clogged with experience. He eats
Fish from his Saviour's hands, and it tastes black (1990:36).

Words, Miller seems to suggest, lack the capacity to express the penguin's state between wariness and triumph. The wisdom he has gleaned from unfortunate experience, immense as the ocean he used to call home, subsumes his ability to trust as the image of 'Oil on sea, / Green slicks, back lassos of sludge' consume the thoughts in his 'head's small knoll' (Miller 1990:36). The penguin's 'Saviour', likely an early incarnation of a SANCCOB volunteer and thus full of good intentions, can do nothing but recapitulate the trauma suffered by this penguin. After rescuing, cleaning, returning, and feeding the oiled penguin, the volunteer's hands can offer nothing more than black-tasting fish.

Miller deploys the synecdoche in scrupulous fashion: she is not aiming to criticise the individual humans whose knowledge and efforts save penguin lives—nor, for that matter, am I—but rather a particular set of human behaviours. The decision to portray the human in the poem as 'hands' is enough to make her indictment clear. No matter the clean-up and rescue efforts of well-intentioned scientists and volunteers, humans are collectively responsible for the oiling of penguins (and other marine life). The association is one that the penguin on the beach has difficulty getting past; it is one that Miller makes difficult for readers to ignore. If Hardy's observant baby were

around to witness the scene Miller describes, he would be in his late sixties and, assuming his thoughtfulness continued into later life, would fall a-thinking yet again. No doubt he would be reminded of that diminutive wagtail making a statement about humanity by disappearing from view. Unlike that wagtail, though, the penguin—though de-oiled and potentially able to continue life as before—is unable to disappear. He remains caught between the sea that used to define half his life and humanity, which is responsible for both his suffering and his (precarious) survival. The longer he remains visible on the beach, unable or unwilling to trust the sea again, the more difficult it is to imagine him as a work of art such as the pine siskins in McKay's poem or the elusive African penguin named Peter. If he could disappear often enough, he might just be able to thrive as a work of art whose use-value to humans is negligible: a bird whose absence enables him to remain eloquently present.

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Department of English
Rhodes University/Dalhousie University
tvmason@dal.ca