

## **NOTE TO USERS**

**This reproduction is the best copy available.**

UMI<sup>®</sup>



**John Thompson, Phyllis Webb, and the Roots of the Free-Verse Ghazal in Canada**

by

Rob Winger,  
B.A., B. Ed., M.A.

A thesis submitted  
to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture:  
Cultural Mediations

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Canada  
August, 2009

© 2009, Rob Winger



Library and Archives  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-60125-9  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-60125-9

#### NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

#### AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## Abstract

This thesis charts the emergence of the free-verse ghazal in Canada in the 1970s by exploring the form's important influence on contemporary Canadian poetics. While the form's imagistic accretion, disjuncture, lyric impulse, and allusiveness – a complex I call “the ghazal sensibility” – are anticipated in the pared down, lyric experiments of Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* (1965), the free-verse ghazal literally originates in the American co-translations of Urdu ghazals that comprise editor Aijaz Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1971). Original free-verse ghazals were first written in the United States by Adrienne Rich, who was inspired by the form's open structure while translating Ghalib for Ahmad's anthology. Following Rich's example, John Thompson – the originator and most important practitioner of the form in Canada – re-invents the Urdu ghazal's traditional conventions in his remarkably influential but critically undervalued *Stilt Jack* (published posthumously in 1978). To trace *Stilt Jack*'s intertextual methodology – which involves overcoming the influence of Yeats by balancing (post)modern structural experimentation with a neo-Romantic lyric language – I posit Thompson's embrace of the ghazal sensibility as a re-invention of Keats' concept of negative capability, a term recuperated in the early postmodern era by Charles Olson. While Thompson's practice inspires many important Canadian poets, the most significant and successful is Webb. Her *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* (1984) employs a “Zen” poetics that balances haiku and ghazal sensibilities to engage what I call her “Ethics of Location,” an attempt to become accountable for Western privilege by transforming rather than merely rejecting the limitations of poetic predecessors such as Thompson and Ghalib. Supported by a critical dialogue with Peter Sanger, Margaret Atwood, Pauline Butling, Stephen Collis, Ken Norris, Susan Glickman, John Hulcoop, and others, my historical and critical overview of the free-verse ghazal form in Canada ultimately suggests that its current neglect in poetry criticism is a limitation that requires remedy, and that its primary practitioners in Canada – Webb and Thompson – correspondingly deserve lasting recognition.

## Acknowledgements

Several people were fundamental in my primary research. Thanks are especially due to the sons of Shirley Gibson, Graeme and Matthew, for allowing me access to the still-sealed *John Thompson Fonds* at National Library and Archives in Ottawa, which were a revelation and a pleasure; to Archivist Catherine Hobbs for facilitating access to Thompson's materials and also the *Phyllis Webb Fonds* at the Archives; to Michael Ondaatje for suggesting I have a look at the criticism and poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, and providing insights about the ghazal's appearance in Canada; to Phyllis Webb for providing memories about discovering traditional ghazals and writing her own free-verse variations; to Allan Cooper and Harry Thurston for sharing their recollections of Thompson's life and incisive readings of his work; and especially to Peter Sanger for his invaluable championing of Thompson's poetry, complemented by his willingness to chat about what it continues to mean for Canadian poetry.

I am also very thankful for mentors and colleagues at Carleton. For his wondrous, loyal support and encouragement over the years, I'm deeply indebted to Dr. Paul Théberge, head of Cultural Mediations. Similar kudos are due to Professor Chris Faulkner, who generously went way above and far beyond the duties of a second reader to make this project possible; to my external examiners, Dr. Douglas Barbour and Dr. Jody Mason, for their time and insights; and to Dr. Paul Keen for his insights into British Romanticism. For fueling many of my responses to *Stilt Jack* and *Naked Poems*, I am also indebted to those students who participated in the 1970s longpoem seminars I have led at Carleton since 2007.

This project would not have been possible without the initial inspiration and guidance of my co-supervisor, Dr. Robert Hogg, who not only steered me towards so much revelatory poetry, but did so with a genuine enthusiasm difficult to match in the academic world.

Finally, at Carleton, I must heartily acknowledge the many long hours spent on my writing by my co-supervisor, Dr. Brenda Carr-Vellino, whose editorial acuity and insight immeasurably improved my willingness and ability to put pen to paper.

Many friends, writers, and colleagues must be acknowledged for sharing valuable informal insights into the nature of Thompson's and Webb's work. I would especially like to thank Anita Lahey, Matthew Holmes, Triny Finlay, Deanna Kruger, Don Domanski, Thaddeus Holownia, Arthur Motyer, Chris Dewdney, Janna Graham, Alex Wetmore, rob mclennan, and the ever-shifting staff of the Glebe Bridgehead for their respective discussions, debates, and open spaces.

A penultimate thank you is required for my ever-supportive family – especially Janelle, Lynda, Larry, Angela, John and Darrin – who endured countless hours of complaint and revelation during this last half-decade of my scholarly journey.

Final, superlative thanks and love are due to my son, Davis, and partner, Kristal. Because mere expressions of appreciation are thoroughly inadequate to match the magnitude of their support, and because they deserve a precise rendering of my heartfelt gratitude, I'll defer to someone with a greater facility for precision than mine to give them their due: "Can't believe it, knowing nothing. / Friends: these words for you."

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction: “the alchemist in the engineer”.....	1
Chapter 1 Ghalib, Ahmad, and Adrienne Rich: Inventing the Free-Verse Ghazal.....	38
Chapter 2 Forming Impulse: From Yeats to Mir in John Thompson’s <i>Stilt Jack</i> .....	79
Chapter 3 Angler Poetics and Negative Capability in <i>Stilt Jack</i> .....	116
Chapter 4 How to know Know: “Zen” Poetics in <i>Naked Poems</i> and <i>Water and Light</i> .....	165
Chapter 5 Hear Here: Phyllis Webb’s <i>Water and Light</i> as an Ethics of Location.....	200
Conclusion: What the Ghazal Taught.....	226
Works Cited and Consulted.....	239

**Introduction:**

“the alchemist in the engineer”

All that the critic can do for the reader or audience or spectator is to focus his gaze or audition. Rightly or wrongly I think my blasts and essays have done their work, and that more people are now likely to go to the sources than are likely to read this book.

~ Ezra Pound, 1918 (47)

The poets who inspired the free-verse ghazal's Canadian birth existed in dark rooms, respectively wrestling with cultural collapse, political exclusion, psychological crisis, and an anxious complicity with Western artistic traditions. But, they refused to be blinded. Their poetic insight is the subject of this study.

While the poetics of Ghalib, Adrienne Rich, John Thompson and Phyllis Webb span several coastlines, centuries, and nationalities, their primary focus is shared: an attempt to access and record interior perception and artistic limitation in the ghazal form. Despite the solitary nature of their reflections, each ghazal poet also dialogues with other poets. Webb's appraisal of John Thompson (1938-1976) – the most important ghazal-writer in Canadian literary history – therefore summarizes not only his specific accomplishments, but also considers his relationship to the ghazal's traditions: "I remain convinced that Thompson was an intuitive writer with a brilliant shaping musical imagination and intelligence who wrote poems that 'can be spontaneous from moment to moment and yet fulfill a theme'" ("Ghazal Maker" 157). This emphasis on intuition and intention echoes my understanding of the "free-verse" ghazal form itself, which is anticipated by Webb's *Naked Poems* (1965), arrives on the Canadian scene with Thompson's *Stilt Jack* (1978), and is subsequently transformed in Webb's *Water and Light* (1984).<sup>1</sup> The free-verse ghazal in Canada modifies modernism without rejecting it, eschews the closure yet continues the musicality of a neo-Romantic lyric, and affirms narrativity while also denying its domination of one's poetic subjectivity. Perhaps this balance is what makes *Stilt Jack* such a magically insightful sequence and explains why it

has become so influential in contemporary Canadian poetry: it both rejects and continues a vital lyric tradition in Canadian letters, a dynamic discussed below.

In order to contextualize this discussion, my introduction re-considers the dominant *ad hominem* response to Thompson since the posthumous appearance of *Stilt Jack* in 1978, a critical treatment that prompts the broad objectives of my contribution to the field: critical recuperation, literary genealogy, and locating the emergence of what I call “the ghazal sensibility” in Canadian poetry. In dialogue with the crucial critiques of Peter Sanger, and brief, critical insights of Douglas Barbour, Margaret Atwood, Ken Norris, Patricia Keeney Smith, and others, my reading suggests that *Stilt Jack* is among the most important publications in the history of Canadian poetry. Similarly, Pauline Butling and Stephen Collis’ book-length studies, along with insights from Susan Glickman, Stephen Scobie, and John Hulcoop, lead me to read Webb’s *Water and Light* as a crucial re-imagining of the free-verse ghazal form that allows for its subsequent development in Canada after Thompson. What I call Thompson’s “angler poetics”<sup>2</sup> and Webb’s “Zen poetics” in my study are not only methodologically wed, but also *spiritually* interrelated. Their shared focus on presence demands not only a participatory reading of their lines, but also a critical renewal of their concerns. As critics and readers, therefore, we need to begin by answering the call that Sanger made nearly a quarter of a century ago, in *SeaRun*, the first sustained critical response to the ghazal in Canada, where he confidently anticipated a “much fuller discussion of Thompson’s work which others will no doubt carry out soon” (5). It is about time that such a conversation started.

### **The Ghazal Sensibility**

To understand the free-verse ghazal, it is necessary to understand the approach that it inspires in its practitioners, a poetics I call “the ghazal sensibility.” This term derives from a contemporary re-invention of the traditional ghazal form (explored in Chapter 1), which rejects the form’s originally rigid metric conventions and rhymes in order to embrace its intuitive rhythms and harmonies. As a short love lyric, the ghazal is organized in couplets that “have no necessary logical, progressive, narrative, thematic (or whatever) connection” (Thompson, “Ghazals” n.p.). Instead, the couplets relate intuitively, tonally, and illogically, and allow for a presentation of contradictions and multiplicity that is left unresolved. When adopting the ghazal sensibility, poets therefore depend upon a deployment of narrative and logical disjuncture to realize a deep understanding of personal subjectivity, which is clarified by engaging and overcoming their previous poetic models. The ghazal sensibility depends on both a self-reflexive interiority that is profoundly contemporary, and on knowledge of poetic precedents that is broadly historical, an active poetics of radical openness that negotiates previous poetic models to assert a self-reflexive exploration of unexpected, intuitively imagistic juxtapositions within lyric language. Stylistically, the ghazal sensibility is rather traditionally lyrical. It relies upon tight, torqued, and spare lines that are at once highly allusive and individually self-referential, addressing not only one’s private sense of love and loss in secular relationships, but also, ambiguously and simultaneously, referring to a wider, spiritual (self-)awareness. This mixture of the spiritual and the secular manifests itself in traditional ghazals as an address to the Divine in Islam and, in more

contemporary, free-verse ghazals, as an interior dialogue on both the ethics and the possibility or failure of personal belief. The voice that results from this mixture is at times erudite, but also vernacular, mixing classical intertexts from “high” art with instances of popular or political culture within the landscape of a poet’s specific geography. Ruled by the usage of an accumulative network of images that slowly gathers meaning as a poem proceeds (rather than overtly and immediately making obvious its symbolic significance), poets adopting the ghazal sensibility echo the ghazal’s required simultaneity of secular/divine address with an equal balance between lyrical musicality and structural disjuncture. This mixture is ultimately anchored by a commitment to subjective exploration that is characteristic not only of the high Romantics, but also of those early postmodernists devoted to investigating the fragmentation of contemporary subjectivity, and therefore willing to plumb the depths of their own presuppositions, shortcomings, and limited freedoms in a manner that the high Romantics arguably do not. In short, the ghazal sensibility is a lyric predisposition towards the ““drunken and amatory”” (Thompson, “Ghazals” n.p.), disjunctive, non-logical harmony of the ghazal form that relies on intuitive rather than rationally forced poetic connections, wherein sparse lines are favoured over flowery or extended linguistic logic, the materiality of everyday objects is examined alongside investigations of divinity, and poems are concluded with multiplicity and contradiction rather than with lyric closure.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that the ghazal sensibility is first articulated in Canada in 1965 – thirteen years before the publication of *Stilt Jack* – in a book that does not, at first glance, fall clearly into the ghazal tradition: Phyllis Webb’s *Naked Poems*

(1965). The tight lyrics, recurrent imagery, and private interiority of *Naked Poems* not only anticipate the ghazal's rise in Canada, but also prefigure Webb's own poetic practices, nearly twenty years later, after her discovery of Thompson and the ghazal tradition. Her *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals* (1982) and *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* (1984) continue the ghazal sensibility in Canada, not as an evolutionary step in Webb's maturation as a poet, but as an extended and alternative examination of the sensibility she first expresses in the mid-1960s. It is Webb's poetry that frames the ghazal's rise to prominence in Canadian poetry (even though it is Thompson who primarily establishes it), anticipating the possibilities of *Stilt Jack* and then adapting Thompson's innovations in a manner that makes possible the continuing renewal of the form for its Canadian practitioners.

The ghazal sensibility in Canada also engages diverse cultural and national spaces. As will be detailed in Chapter 1, after *Naked Poems*, it is the American publication of an anthology of translations – editor Aijaz Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1971) – that is most important for my investigation of the birth of the Canadian ghazal. This collection of thirty-seven Urdu ghazals in translation was a functional model for Thompson's adaptation of the form for *Stilt Jack*. Since it is an American book, however, co-translated by an Urdu scholar and by working American poets (including Rich), its centrality in my genealogy of the “Canadian” ghazal disrupts potential myths of any purely “national” tradition. The free-verse ghazal in Canada is less engaged with nationalist or internationalist discourse than it is a transnational and transcultural investigation of poetic “truth” arguably functional beyond and between such borders.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Lyric Impulse**

Poets who embrace the ghazal sensibility also harness what I call “the lyric impulse”: a productively tense response to both the innovations of modernism and the continuance of a neo-Romantic lyric language in postmodernity. The lyric impulse relates not only to the inspirational impulse that arguably provokes the creation of poetry in any era, but also signals a productive tension in the ghazals of Webb and Thompson. Both inherit and adapt a neo-Romantic lyric language that stresses rhythm, musicality, extended metaphor, closure, and metaphysical contemplation (continuing a lineage that derives from Yeats and Wallace Stevens). While they certainly use elements of such lyricism, Thompson and Webb are also suspect of it, and refuse to reify the lyric as some sort of nostalgic Romance – as many poets do throughout the twentieth century – at a time when modernism and early postmodernism (via Eliot and Pound/Williams) have already exposed the bankruptcy of the Romantic lyric and exploded “the norms of the Romantic crisis poem as of the Symbolist lyric” (Perloff, “Pound/Stevens” 22). To embrace what is a rather conventional lyric diction in their poetry, therefore, Thompson and Webb actively stress the limitations of the lyric in their ghazals, engaging a self-reflexivity that must be carefully controlled in order to avoid narcissism. Their primary methods for doing so are twofold: to stage anxious dialogues with the predecessors from whom their lyric language derives (Yeats for Thompson, Ghalib for Webb) and to employ a poetic form – the ghazal – to discipline their impulses. While the ghazal endorses lyric language, its disjuncture, multiplicity, and formal inclusiveness fundamentally counters those lyric conventions of control, closure, “organic unity and symbolic structure.”

(Perloff, "Pound/Stevens" 21) (all celebrated by New Criticism) that Thompson and Webb hope to avoid. The ghazal's insistence on leaving couplets open, intuitive, and non-logical is both neo-Romantic – in that it translates impulsive urges into subjective, lyric lines – and (post)modern – since it disallows singular answers. By embracing the ghazal sensibility, Thompson and Webb balance the Pound/Williams line of structural experimentalism with the Yeats/Stevens line of neo-Romantic lyricism that represents "an alternative pole to Postmodernism in the contemporary period" (Gelpi).<sup>4</sup> In their ghazals, this "alternative pole" translates essentially Romantic concerns – the internalization of the quest narrative, the idea of verse as sacred, the ego as a synecdoche for human experience – into a contemporary context and form that actively critiques the lyric's historical shortcomings (see Perloff, "Postmodernism"). In short, the lyric impulse of the free-verse ghazal is both open – because it openly embraces the contradictions of poetic inspiration in a form that allows multiplicity – and limiting – because self-censoring to avoid Romantic self-indulgence. This balance derives, in part, from the literary era in which Webb and Thompson write, a time when new concepts of poetic impulse were reformulating contemporary poetics. To contextualize such reformulations, I turn to two poets who clarify the contemporary function of impulse for the postmodern writing process: Robin Blaser and Denise Levertov.

In the late 1960s, reflecting on his own creative process, Blaser argued that poets catch fire, and that their instincts are not so much planned and intentional as they are surprising and impulsive. For Blaser, the essential power of poetry is "held in image, not a tract full of wisdom, but a reality created, held by image and sound" (245). A poem, he

argues, is “cosmic, but also most personal” (244); thus, for poets writing according to such impulses, “[t]he beauty of the spheres is quite real, but the sound of the earth must meet it” (236) in order to create an effective poem. What is recorded and carried over in poetry, for Blaser, is transcendent, cosmological, and holistic; but how it is recorded is necessarily subjective and must be brought down to earth to be legible for a reader. This balance between metaphysical inspiration and tangible textuality informs Thompson’s and Webb’s respective engagements with the ghazal form, wherein an individual lyric impulse is balanced against a carefully chosen formality. Thus, the ghazal sensibility is a functional methodology for harnessing the fiery offspring of poetic negotiations between the cosmic and the personal, the traditional and the innovative, the historical and the present. While Blaser might be more inclined to label such an urge simply “pulse,” or “impulse” to create a general theory on the nature of the creative process, I am more interested in contextualizing it via the political, social, and literary milieu of the period.

Denise Levertov’s definition of poetic inspiration is informed by this milieu.<sup>5</sup> Although she is certainly not speaking of the ghazal (with which she did not personally engage until 1984), her insights in “Some Notes on Organic Form” (1965) essentially summarize the central tenets of what I call the lyric impulse and the ghazal sensibility in Canada. This summary arises out of a response to the insights of Olson’s “Projective Verse,” which mandates that “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION” (149). Levertov qualifies Olson’s immediacy by stressing that

Great gaps between perception and perception [...] must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all. The *X* factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps. A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side – that’s ecstasy. (317)

The language of Levertov’s qualification – “religious devotion,” “splendor,” “ecstasy” – echoes the ghazal’s embrace of both a neo-Romantic lyric and an essentially innovative, (post)modern embrace of multiplicity and contradiction. To bridge Levertov’s “great gaps” between perceptions, Webb and Thompson embrace the impulse of Olson’s poetic field with a lyric language that not only critiques its own failings, but makes this critique an essential part of poetic content. The free-verse ghazal poet’s lyric impulse therefore spans the divide between neo-Romanticism and (post)modern structural reinvention, positing the poet’s subjective exploration as a productive fulcrum between them.

### **Critical Discomfort**

Despite my conviction that the ghazal strikes such a balance, my analysis proceeds uncomfortably. Theorizing a disjunctive, impulsive form has necessitated a fundamental examination of my role as critic. I share Butling’s concerns in *Seeing in the Dark* (1997) about exactly why, as a critic, I want to “say anything about a poem [since I d]on’t want to be the connoisseur who speaks from a position of superior sensibility” (*Seeing* 38). But I also recognize that the ghazal is an especially rich avenue for launching an ethical critique of poetic methods, and thereby theorizing the social and aesthetic functions of contemporary art not only in the early postmodern era, but also in the present. Like

Butling, “*as a feminist critic, teacher, writer, I want to look at political questions, see the poem in social and theoretical contexts*” (Seeing 38). If this is my purpose, however, how can I also “*get the sensual/experiential into critical writing*” (Seeing 38)? How can I balance respect for the ghazal’s careful irrationality against the critic’s potential role as medium between artistic vision and cultural reception and/or (re)construction? Attempting to distill the intuitive dynamics of the free-verse ghazal’s carefully contradictory disorderliness, after all, is quite a challenge for the critic, and has produced a central paradox in my scholarship: I am critiquing, defining, and analysing a poetic form that resists logical, definitive conclusions.

While resisting totalizing declarations, however, I *do* want to clarify the main trends that arise as the free-verse ghazal form is established in Canada. To achieve this balance, I have examined both Thompson’s engagement with his central predecessors – Mir Taqi Mir, Rich, Yeats, and others – and the open yet critical manner in which Webb both anticipates and carries forward his ghazal sensibility. Such interior open-endedness is strategic in both the ghazals and in my criticism. In these respects, I have been well counseled by Gaston Bachelard’s conviction in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* that “When we turn inwards upon ourselves we turn aside from truth. When we carry out *inner* experiments, we inevitably contradict objective experiment” (5).<sup>6</sup> Bachelard’s sense of “truth,” like the ghazal’s, does not conform to a scientific concept of proof. Instead, it implies an intuitive embrace of contrariness and simultaneity as a method for accessing a “higher” order that operates beyond deductive reasoning. What is essential in my present study (and arguably in Bachelard’s, Thompson’s, and Webb’s projects) is not *resolving*

conflict with a definitive theory, therefore, but investigating the *presence* of its tensions, seeking out the rational *and* the intuitive to look for what Bachelard calls “the old man in the young child, the young child in the old man, the alchemist in the engineer” (4). As much as my work traces the free-verse ghazal as a uniquely situated subgenre in North American poetry, it also resists axiomatic declarations that would inevitably oversimplify the cultural nexus of text, author, and reader within my genealogy. Rather than postulating rigid rules for the Canadian ghazal, my project is essentially recuperative and dialogic. It attempts to establish Thompson’s and Webb’s central places in Canadian poetics, but depends upon embracing a multiplicity of possibilities within the parameters of my main research questions: How does the free-verse ghazal balance formality and poetic impulse? How is one’s subjectivity tied to one’s literary and political practice? How can a literary lineage continue whilst both critiquing and endorsing its own poetics? And, finally, how can new writing both adhere to and expand its precedents?

Investigating these queries necessitates a reconsideration of Thompson’s (and Webb’s) influence on Canadian poetry. Why Webb’s *Water and Light*, Ahmad’s *Ghazals of Ghalib*, and the ghazals of Adrienne Rich are the most important touchstones in my history of the Canadian ghazal is obvious: they complete a direct line of literary influence in which Thompson’s *Stilt Jack* is the centerpiece. Less apparent is the inescapably central role of Thompson’s ghazals in the private imagination of Canadian poets after 1978, whose work in lyrics predominantly outside of the ghazal tradition remains highly influenced by Thompson’s ghazal sensibility. In an essay that sketches Thompson’s innovations for a popular (rather than academic) audience, therefore, I have

already called *Stilt Jack*'s influence on Canadian poetry "an earthquake" (27). Webb's influence is similarly essential, a fact affirmed by many poet-critics – Robert Kroetsch, Sharon Thesen, Michael Ondaatje – who identify *Naked Poems* as a transformative text in the history of Canadian poetry. These declarations are not hyperbole or wishful thinking. In my view, alongside Ondaatje, Thompson and Webb are among the most important poets in the development of a self-aware lyric in Canada. That their ghazals are routinely overlooked in scholarship is a failing that I seek to remedy.

To do so requires not only a diachronic mapping of the free-verse ghazal's historical lineage, but also a synchronic contextualization of Thompson's achievements and Webb's prescient sensibility within a wider, literary-historical field. I provide such context in two ways. First, I offer an overview of the poetic antagonisms that marked Canadian poetry during the 1960s and 1970s – informed by the influence of American poetics – in order to posit the free-verse ghazal as an exception to the binarity that tends to rule Canadian literature's respective aesthetic schools. Second, I position my project's analysis of *Stilt Jack* in opposition to what I see as a common, biographical misreading of Thompson that contributes to a critical neglect incommensurate with his vital influence on Canadian poetry. These contextual overviews will be followed by a brief breakdown of the chapters that comprise my study.

### **The Canadian Scene**

The dual lines of modernist experimentation and neo-Romanticism engaged in the free-verse ghazal are evident in the history of Canadian poetry, which grows out of a

historically contradictory opposition between poetic camps (colonialist vs. indigenous in the late nineteenth century; “cosmopolitan” vs. “native” in the modern period). The formative decade preceding the emergence of the free-verse ghazal in Canada is also defined by such functional binarity. Characterized by a (post)modern sense of fragmentary subjectivity, and a burgeoning postcolonial (self-)consciousness, the 1960s in Canada gives rise to two oppositional poetic schools that jointly establish what is generally labeled as the postmodern (or late modern) period of Canadian poetry: the Duncan/Olson-inspired *Tish* poets (including George Bowering, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt and others) and the Frye-inspired thematic poets (including Atwood, Milton Acorn, Al Purdy and others).

By now, this is a common story in overviews of Canada’s literary history (see Norris, *Little Magazine* or Butling and Rudy). But it bears repeating to contextualize the particular historical thread along which the Canadian ghazal develops. Along with the establishment of the Canada Council as patron, the swell of anti-American Canadian nationalism that emerges out of the 1967 centennial celebrations (partly responsive to cultural flows described in George Grant’s polemical *Lament for A Nation* in 1965) inspires both groups to experiment extensively with poetry during the 1970s, a decade that Kroetsch calls “a gift of poems” (“For Play” 85) for Canadian readers. Despite their differences, both the regional *Tish* poets and the national thematic poets desire change in Canadian poetry. Both are motivated by poetics that are specific to the literary economy of the late 1960s, but also informed by poetics on the creative process that stretch beyond their exact moment in history. The result is a period of exceptional literary productivity

in Canada that establishes the canon for CanLit as an accepted scholarly discipline over the next two decades.<sup>7</sup>

While the period's fiction arguably coalesces into a straightforward canonical trajectory, Canadian poetry of the 1970s is marked by an opposition between avant-garde and traditionally thematic poetic schools, which ultimately provides "the seeds of literary feuds that spread into Canadian literary history" (Norris, *Little Magazine* 117). In Norris' narrative of the period, these feuds come to a head when George Bowering writes a negative review of Milton Acorn, and also wins the Governor General's Award in 1969 (116-7), prompting both a defense of Acorn's book by Al Purdy, and a group of poets – Atwood, Irving Layton, Eli Mandel – who award Acorn their own, invented prize to counter Bowering's GG.<sup>8</sup> By its eighth issue, Norris notes, *Tish's* editorials directly reflect such antagonism. An unsigned editorial in the issue states, for example, that

Poetry is not an international competition. Moreover, poets do not write as patriots, but as men. [sic] Their country is merely incidental. Canada does not exist except as a political arrangement for the convenience of individuals accidentally happening to live within its arbitrary area...

Let's have no more superficial jingoism in poetry. If a man/poet ever comes to represent his homeland or his home town, he will do so inevitably, not intentionally. As for comparisons, the community of poetry is a universal thing, as is man, and political divisions can never apply. (qtd. in Norris 118)

According to Norris, *Tish's* simultaneous inter-nationalist and local focus counters those presented in thematic publications (such as *Moment*, *Alphabet*, or *Cataract*) that supposedly present carefully polished products as national symbols. *Tish* was mimeographed, reflecting its philosophy of working out what it was doing as it went, an approach that endorses art and poetry as a polyphonic process. By stressing the local to

argue against nationalism (by intentionally promoting Vancouver as a primary site for poetic content), *Tish* paradoxically inspires a vision of Canada as a spectrum of localities, a model embraced, by the 1980s, as a national mythos that Kroetsch eventually calls “Disunity as Unity.”

The postmodern period witnesses a challenge to Canada’s functional binarity. Materially, this challenge begins with the creation of Coach House Press in 1965, a publisher dedicated to presenting books that are aesthetically beautiful (a thematic goal) as well as formally experimental (a *Tish* imperative). Similarly, certain poets of the period – Thompson and Webb included – put aside divisive poetic manifestos in favour of an expression of simultaneity and multiplicity, allowing that both subjectivity and poems are at once contradictory and entrenched, experimental and thematic. Examples of this simultaneous approach include (but are not limited to) bpNichol’s lyric experiments throughout *The Martyrology* (1972-90); Ondaatje’s twisting of historical myth in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976); Marlatt’s sonorous tongue in *Steveston* (1974) and *touch to my tongue* (1984); Kroetsch’s re-invention of autobiography in *Seed Catalogue* (1977); Thompson’s irrational ghazals in *Stilt Jack* (1978); the poetics of failure in Webb’s *Wilson’s Bowl* (1980); Fred Wah’s tracing of multicultural and “split” identity in *Breathin’ My Name With a Sigh* (1981) and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985); and even Bowering’s exploration of locus in *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984). What is overwhelmingly evident in these examples is that attempts to embrace simultaneity are ruled not only by the literary lines of inheritance that these poets address (and often challenge), but also by an attempt to subvert poetic

conventions, updating formal poetic restrictions to reflect a shifting understanding of contemporary subjectivity in Canada.

It is important to clarify, however, that this self-conscious focus on form does not necessarily originate nationally, but is imported, to a large degree, via a lineage that traces backwards from the nationalist 1960s of Canada to the Black Mountain poetics of Olson and Duncan, the self-located American foot of the later William Carlos Williams, the feminist innovations of H.D., and the Imagistic poetics of Pound. All of these important poets use formal models to subvert the conventions of rationalism. Robert Duncan explains this strategy in 1961, noting that “[i]t is of the essence of the rationalist persuasion that we be protected, by the magic of what reasonable men [sic] agree is right, against unreasonable or upsetting information” (199). In this regard, Canadian poetry of the 1960s and 70s, influenced by modern American poetics, revolts against rationalism and New Critical unity by attempting to “upset” its presuppositions. In the process, such poetry validates the usage of a cautious lyric impulse that is central to the ghazal’s concept of connective disjuncture, creating a new kind of formalism by “following the sentence along a line of feeling until the law becomes a melody” (Williams, qtd. in Duncan 196). Such intuitive insight, of course, is not limited to ghazals, but emerges as a central element in much early postmodern poetry in North America, wherein an exploration of process is more valuable than any attempt to posit definitive answers to metaphysical queries. Robert Creeley summarizes this insight in 1967: “in writing, at least as I have experienced it, one is *in* the activity, and that fact itself is what I feel so deeply the significance of anything that we call poetry” (263-4). Ultimately, he

continues, “We arrive in poems at the condition of life most viable and most primal in our own lives” (269). The self-exploration and self-reflexivity of Thompson’s and Webb’s ghazals, therefore, take shape within a wider re-invention of poetic form during the early postmodern era, which collectively questions the concept of a stable subjectivity.

In taking the lead from Webb’s *Naked Poems* as informed by Black Mountain poetics, many Canadian poets from the mid-1960s forward subsequently privilege an exploration of poetic process in their work. As a result, they become attentive to how the writing process affects their lines, attempting to harness a lyric impulse within self-chosen formal experimentations. One method for doing so is the adoption and adaptation of previous poetic forms that are undertaken not as limiting containers, but as open-ended structures that counter not only historically metrical conventions, but also the predominance of a neo-Romantic free-verse lyric in North American poetry. The ghazal is one of the most interesting examples of such an adaptation. Part of what I explore in the chapters that follow is how the modification of a previously rigid poetic form – established in linguistic and cultural milieus that are radically different from 1960s or 1970s Canada – takes shape when poets follow the lyric impulse towards expressions of subjectivity that are less affirmative of answers than engaged with a process of questioning. With Webb and Thompson as my primary examples, I want to understand how poets in Canada adapt earlier poetic forms by translating them to open- or anti-forms.

This use of form is evident when one considers many of the experiments of the period. What is immediately striking when one examines bpNichol's *utanikki*, Marlatt's social documentary, Wah's *haibun*, or Ondaatje's biographies (in *Billy the Kid* and *Slaughter*), for example, is that these forms are already open-ended in their original (or, in the case of Thompson, adapted) lack of lyric closure or metrics.<sup>9</sup> What is even more striking, however, is that each is also a r/e/volution, in the sense that its alteration, in a North American context, at once allows the poetic traditions of Canada to move into new territory (to evolve), to counter what has come before by changing the rules of formal poetic tradition (to revolt), and to spiral inwards upon itself to examine the process at the heart of each poet's creative expression (as a subjective "volution"). These dynamics are also operative in the formal experiments of Webb's and Thompson's ghazals. By developing the ghazal sensibility to contain the lyric impulse, Webb and Thompson provide a space for considering Canadian poetry not as entrenched in the divisive camps of functional binarity, but as rejecting such binarity as simultaneously one extreme *and* another. Effective use of the ghazal sensibility thereby allows for the possibilities of what Wimal and Dissnayake identify as "the counterlogic of the both/and" (5), rather than what Erin Mouré once suitably dubbed "the tyranny of the *a priori* category" (202), thus articulating the necessity to operate beyond what bpNichol acerbically called "the stupidity of rigid category" (*Martyrology* IV n.p.).

For Thompson, such inclusivity is defined by both an active engagement with one's own influences (especially Yeats) and a postmodern recuperation of Keats' concept of negative capability, which eschews the traditional closure of lyricism to allow

contradictory statements to be left unresolved. For Webb, inclusivity allows for a protest against the patriarchal methods inherited from her most important influences – a list that includes Thompson – which she articulates with a “Zen” concentration on the material present to postulate subjectivity as an “Ethics of Location.”<sup>10</sup> How each ghazal poet uses the ghazal sensibility and lyric impulse to express such subjective realizations (both within and against what I’ve identified as a historically consistent functional binarity) is therefore the central methodological problematic for my study.

### **Notes towards a Reception History: John Thompson as “Mad” Genius**

Having sketched the historical contexts within which *Stilt Jack* arises, I will now consider the limiting critical reception that Thompson’s ghazals have received to give some context to the chapters that follow. My overview shares two central observations made by *Globe and Mail* reviewer, Cary Fagan. The first appeared more than two decades ago: “Not for his death should John Thompson be remembered, but for *Stilt Jack*, an astonishing and elusive work that is one of the finest collections of poems ever written in this country” (1986, 6). Such declarative observations are not rare, but rarely go beyond such brief praise. Because Thompson’s formal achievements are commonly overshadowed by voyeuristic celebrations of his personal strife, Fagan adjusts his assessment a decade later: “That [Thompson] ultimately failed, succumbing to the demons that had pursued him for years, takes away not one whit of his achievement of having written a handful of poems that are among the finest the country has the privilege

of declaring its own” (1995). With this second assessment, Fagan highlights the most common (mis)reading of Thompson and his ghazals: a biographical combination of mythologizing wonder and unexamined praise. Such (mis)readings routinely describe Thompson as a mad, Romantic genius, and resolve the formal disjuncture of his ghazals with a voyeuristic glorification of his tumultuous private life. In the process, they fail to recognize that Thompson’s ghazals are not merely personal reflections, but highly controlled, formalist poems, an oversight that makes the already slight scholarly literature on *Stilt Jack* disturbingly incomplete. In what follows, I separate my discussion of *Stilt Jack*’s reception by dividing critical responses into those that indulge such a biographical reading and those that arguably transcend it.

### ***Biographical (Mis)Readings***

The myth of John Thompson looms large when contextualizing his best-known work. Nearly all overviews of *Stilt Jack*’s composition cite not only Thompson’s research notes and writing drafts, but also include tales of his turbulent personal life, tragically affected by alcoholism, divorce, a debilitating battle for tenure at Mount Allison University (where Thompson taught), a house fire in which he lost the bulk of his possessions, and what Sanger describes as Thompson’s undiagnosed mental illness (Sanger, “Night Sea Voyage” 83). The ubiquity of such mythologizing is now part of the critical context within which readers receive Thompson’s text, but it is inappropriately overemphasized, especially given Thompson’s private nature and his illness.<sup>11</sup> As Sanger notes in his

introduction to *Collected Poems and Translations*, however, it is also unlikely to disappear:

It seems that almost anyone who spent more than half an hour with him has [an anecdote] to tell: how he rigged up mountain climbing gear and rappelled down the side of his office building at Mount Allison; how he arrived, caked in ice, at a Mount Allison faculty party, having driven his old Volkswagen off the road and crashed it into a ditch. (He proceeded to thaw all over an Axminster carpet.) At another faculty party, he got drunk and destroyed a tomato aspic with his elbow. And there are various accounts of his threatening management with hunting knives; he liked to carve up tavern tables with them; he flourished them and uttered dark words, as James Polk said in a memorial essay. Herbert Burke, a friend and fellow-professor at Mount Allison, watched terrified as Thompson stabbed his blade into a tabletop. Madness, histrionics, or both? I am not sure if Thompson himself knew. (15-16)

A minor cult centered on Thompson's rugged, "masculine," romantically depressed personality continues to swell, fueled in large part by such anecdotes of his private struggles. Despite the fact that such mythologizing might largely be credited with keeping Thompson's work in print, its continual repetition leaves a void of careful discussion of Thompson's actual *poetry*. Instead, the small amount of criticism on his contribution to Canadian literature consists mainly of critical postcards that address his idiosyncrasies rather than tackling the complex importance of his poetics.<sup>12</sup>

Curiously, this treatment echoes the much better known case of Glenn Gould, wherein critical conversations tend to be swept aside by praise for Gould's "wondrous strange" persona.<sup>13</sup> In the process, it is irksome to discover that biographical accounts of Gould's work dedicate many pages or chapters to discussions of his gloved hands or the sawed-off legs of his piano bench, but commit mere paragraphs to his revolutionary experiments in quadraphonic sound or the centrality of the recording splice to the

contemporary creative process, innovations that contradict the popular, organically virtuosic status Gould has attained in Canada since his death. Perhaps further study would uncover a general Canadian trend to celebrate the personalities rather than the innovations of artists. Or, maybe such fascination is part of the mechanizations of celebrity that have always lauded individual oddity rather than engaging with aesthetic or intellectual innovations that challenge conventionality. Possibly such voyeurism is simply human nature. Whatever the case, this response, however much its wide circulation has brought Thompson's work to new audiences, is critically inadequate.

That some of the stories that construct Thompson as a Romantic figure *might* be corroborated and proven likely are beside the point of their power in shaping how we now read Thompson's poetry by injecting a sense of apocalyptic doom into the often optimistic insights of *Stilt Jack*. At times, critics tend to take the entire collection less as an exemplar on the possibilities of negative capability (as I discuss it in Chapter 3) than as some sort of "brilliant suicide note" (Polk 6). Thompson's ghazals are read as the "feverish (albeit poetic) doubts of a man who knew he was dying, and didn't like it" (P. Hall n.p.), a reduction of Thompson's complexity that echoes other uninformed reviews that claim *Stilt Jack* has "No sense but a lot of feeling" (Bemrose). In and of themselves, such observations are not necessarily inaccurate. Promoting them as *critical* responses to *Stilt Jack*, however, effectively perpetuates the scholarly vacuum surrounding Thompson's work, endorsing a reification of personality steeped in anti-heroism rather than in contemporary concepts of historical subjectivity.

Most early reviews of *Stilt Jack* fail to recognize Thompson's references to personal struggles as part of a formal stance, which uses personal experience in order to test the themes of grief, loss, and divine longing that are traditionally mandated in the ghazal form.<sup>14</sup> Thompson's struggles with depression motivate not only private psychological introspection, but also the *formal* revolutions of his ghazals. When his speaker wonders in ghazal XXXVI, for example, if he has "dared the dark centre?" (XXXVI.4), this is not merely a statement about personal loss, but also a formal self-reflection.<sup>15</sup> Darkness and light – the imagery most commonly noted in biographical readings of *Stilt Jack* – are not merely metaphors for personal experience, but also reflections on the difficult struggle to overcome the limits of one's own poetic models and habits.

While Barbour is right that "biographical factors [...] represent only one reading of this complex poem" (106), to completely avoid the public figure of Thompson would not only be irresponsible, but would offer an incomplete analysis of *Stilt Jack's* influence on Canadian poetry. That personal darkness and difficulty inform many of the ghazals is obvious, and it is true *Stilt Jack* can easily be read "as an attempt to rise beyond grief and despair" (Cooper, "Way Back" 39) or as "a long meditation on whether or not it's worthwhile to remain alive, and if so, what for" (Atwood 311). But when such readings focus exclusively on Thompson's personal life, they simultaneously fail to consider his efforts to engage the ghazal, which traditionally requires a melancholic view of lost love alongside existential meditations. Any treatment of *Stilt Jack* that proposes to discuss Thompson's writing process or poetics (and not all biographical treatments make such a

proposal!) should only consider his supposed “preparation for life’s end, the farmer’s reassessment of the fields he must abandon” (Virgo n.p.) as it informs the structure, methodologies, and precedents that allow for his self-reflexively processual recording of such preparations. The biographical information I have re-contextualized within the present study does not reinforce a reading of Thompson’s life as melodrama, therefore, but uses personal details to enrich my analysis. As Fagan argues, we should remember Thompson for his magnificent poetry, not as a caricature of the troubled Romantic artist.

### ***Reading Beyond Biography: Other Responses to Stilt Jack***

Despite an arguably over-invested focus on personality, the high praise that critics award *Stilt Jack* is not uncommon. Alongside the relative critical neglect of Thompson’s work and *ad hominem* accounts of his life, readers also routinely recognize that Thompson creates “two volumes of poetry for which Canadian letters can offer neither precedent nor equal” (Bell, John WH 41). As Christopher Levenson puts it in 1979, “John Thompson stands out [...] as a poet of enviable clarity, directness and inclusiveness” (720). Such qualities lead Ondaatje to declare that *Stilt Jack* “should be a permanent book in our literary history” (qtd. in Sanger, *Collected* n.p.), prompt Atwood to recognize, years ago, that “certainly for readers of Canadian poetry in the 1970’s this is an essential book” (312), and encourage Thompson’s PhD supervisor, A.J.M. Smith, to describe Thompson’s ghazals as follows: “Poetry so unique as to be beyond ‘originality’” (*I Dream Myself*, back cover).<sup>16</sup> In 1978, therefore, Norris already sees Thompson’s ghazals as “the crucial last testament of a poet who deserves increasing recognition for

what he has achieved” (“Land Eels” n.p.). Even more striking is the fact, according to Patrick Lane, that “No one who reads his life’s work can go away unchanged” (Goose Lane Book Release). Such declarations hold significant water given that many of them come from poets – Atwood, Barbour, Cooper, Lorna Crozier, Lane, Dennis Lee, Levenson, Ondaatje, Sanger, Virgo, Webb, and many others – who not only celebrate Thompson’s work, but also admittedly dialogue with his influence in their own creative practice.<sup>17</sup>

Because of such active dialogue, the dominant *ad hominem* treatment of *Stilt Jack* has always been echoed by a much smaller handful of insightful critical commentaries, led by the invaluable scholarship of Peter Sanger – in *SeaRun* (1986), *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations* (1995), and *White Salt Mountain: Words in Time* (2005) – and complemented by a few valuable essays by Atwood, Barbour, Cooper, Fagan, Levenson, Norris, Webb, Smith, along with critics who read Thompson in order to talk about *Water and Light*: Butling, Collis, and Glickman. These critics seem to sense the radical openness of Thompson’s poetics. Beyond fascination with his life, they understand that *Stilt Jack* does not lend itself to absolute definition, but requires a nuanced and carefully wrought response. As Robert Bringhurst puts it, such readers realize that “We are not asked to answer the questions in these poems; we’re asked to share them instead, and to feel them burn” (309).

Like Sanger’s *SeaRun*, the only sustained, book-length study of *Stilt Jack* ever published, Patricia Keeney Smith’s rare, valuable, review of *Stilt Jack* perhaps suggests a reason why most readers do not engage its nuances: “The writer who ranges so widely for

form takes great risk. He needs to be a synthesizer of the subtlest kind, able to translate cultural assumptions and perceptions often foreign to the Western mind” (138).

Thompson’s abilities as such a translator are quite evident. Smith’s stress on “the Western mind,” therefore, is less a critique of *Stilt Jack* than an explanation of its reception by an audience reliant on predictable lyric formulas that Thompson calls “‘closed,’ narrative, continuous, logical poems” (n.p) in his first draft of his introduction for *Stilt Jack*. Such expectations affirm the insights of Urdu scholars Matthews & Shackle, who call the ghazal “a kind of poetry so unlike those forms which have been current in the West [that it tends to] prove unduly puzzling, or even unintelligible to the Western reader” (1). In all likelihood, the valuable historical context that Smith provides for the free-verse ghazal would likely have been unfamiliar to her readers:

Rich’s use of the form is cryptic and intellectually challenging. For Thompson, it is technically liberating. He is right in announcing the freedom found artistically, but wrong in denying that his ghazals are free-association poems. Most are, and often quite successfully so. Mood and emotion flow freely. (138)

Smith’s sense of Thompson’s obviously laboured intertextuality, well-researched formalist structures, and personal inventory of particularizing and multivocal imagery is evident, even if her postulation of their utility as a record of emotional freedom seems somewhat reductive. The rarity of her insight highlights the general lack of initiation Thompson’s audience brings to a form that relies less on narrative, logic, or extended metaphor than on implication, intertext, and complex imagistic harmonies.

Such complexity is not lost on Ken Norris, who recognizes (in one of *Stilt Jack*’s first reviews) Thompson’s formalism as functional beyond free-association or mood:

What links the couplets together is tone, nuance, so that the lyrical unity we've grown accustomed to in the English tradition is rendered irrelevant. What results is not the leaping surrealism in which the couplets are strung together to provide strange imagistic juxtapositionings; rather, the bringing together of disparate materials subject to a common tone or emotionality leads to the creation of feelings that threaten to break open the perceivable, objective world. (n.p.)

This sense that Thompson carefully re-invents lyric traditions is also implied in other period reviews (including Atwood's). Chris Levenson, for example, observes that the value of Thompson's poetry "resides mainly in the juxtapositions, in the spaces between the words" (719), while Sean Virgo understands that although Thompson "defines *ghazal* as five couplets linked not by subject but by tone [t]his is not as fragmentary as it sounds and most of the poems have a real unity" (n.p.). Although admittedly uninformed about the *ghazal* tradition, these observations are important evidence that Thompson's text was well received from the very beginning, even whilst many readers remained securely sequestered in a limited understanding of how a lyric poem might operate. Perhaps those who respond fervently to *Stilt Jack* are not only drawn to the mythic Thompson, therefore, but also demonstrate a collective hunger for a contemporary poetics that is both technically innovative and in conversation with literary traditions, a balance between past and present epitomized in Thompson's inclusive, dialogic, inspired *ghazals*.

### **Chapter Summary: Tracing the Roots of the Free-Verse Ghazal in Canada**

That John Thompson and Phyllis Webb are the most important *ghazal* writers in Canada is a matter, I contend, beyond productive debate. To show exactly why they deserve sustained recognition, however, requires discussion. In the chapters that follow, I

connect the context of Thompson's influence both backwards to a clear poetic lineage and forwards to the survival of lyric vitality in the postmodern age. This chronology gives shape to two chapters in the present study. The first, Chapter 1, expands the history of the English-language ghazal's emergence in North America that is partially sketched above, with a particular stress on the conventions of the Urdu ghazal as translated into a free-verse form by Adrienne Rich and Urdu scholar Aijaz Ahmad.

The second, Chapter 2, explores the productive relationship Thompson stages with his most dominant poetic precedent, William Butler Yeats. While Thompson's ghazals validate the use of lyric language to break the conventional standards of Yeats' lyric structure, they also posit as inescapable the nature of intertextual or responsive poetry as it relates not only to the well-known Western tradition, but also to one's own poetic discoveries of alternative and equally respected non-Western poetic modes (a discovery marked by Thompson's engagement with Mir Taqi Mir in *Stilt Jack*).<sup>18</sup> By peppering *Stilt Jack* with self-reflexive allusions to the English canon, Thompson bridges the perceived contradiction between his primary sources (i.e. the Urdu ghazal vs. the Western canon) to arrive at a subjective poetics wherein the lyric impulse marks the cogent necessity of residing *within* rather than *against* co-existing poetic traditions. While Thompson's struggle with Yeats broadly relates to Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" theory, its outcome is ultimately inclusive rather than dominating. By engaging in an intertextual practice akin to the contemporary musical sample, Thompson quotes Yeats and other predecessors in order to both acknowledge and transcend their influences, not simply to imitate and master them. By folding his predecessors' voices

into his ghazals, Thompson both continues the original language of his sources – which are often neo-Romantic – and transforms their contexts according to the predominant vision of *Stilt Jack* – which is a (post)modernist structural experiment. This methodology, which I call literary “sampling,” expands Bloom’s model to suggest the free-verse ghazal as an ideal venue for reconsidering the influence of one’s literary predecessors.

Because it is partly an investigation of the epistemologies of postmodernism, Chapter 3 engages Charles Olson’s *The Special View of History* (1970) to posit *Stilt Jack* as a postmodern reinvention of Keats’ concept of negative capability that is less responsive to Keats’ actual poetry than to Olson’s recuperation (circa 1950) of his central poetic concept. I explore Thompson’s implicit embrace of negative capability as an “angler poetics” by locating its subjective dynamics through a close reading of hooks, gardens, mountains, Christian intertexts, and the self-reflexive language of *Stilt Jack*. My main claim is that Thompson engages not only what one would expect of the postmodern subject – contradiction, simultaneity, multiplicity, polyvalence – but also older modes of knowing predominantly seen as passé by the great majority of postmodernists: divine faith, universalism, singular truths. Only by refashioning Keats’ recuperated concept, I contend, can Thompson embrace negative capability as an innovative *modus operandi* within early postmodernism. These two studies – on literary “sampling” and negative capability, respectively – ultimately acknowledge Thompson’s ability to move from the closed Yeatsian lyric model of his education and early writing to the ghazal’s disjunctive, inclusive poetics in *Stilt Jack*.

Of all of the poets affected by Thompson's work, Phyllis Webb is by far the most compelling. Her stunning investigation of political knowledge and poetic subjectivity in *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* not only considers her own, anxious engagement with patriarchal models of poetry (which include both Thompson and Ghalib), but also replaces Thompson's investigations of the sacred with an examination of feminist politics and "Zen" self-awareness. As a result, Webb's *Water and Light* continues a lyric vitality in Canada, but also questions its foundational exclusions. An exploration of this dynamic is the basis for my two concluding chapters.

In Chapter 4, my investigation of *Water and Light* begins by postulating Webb's focus on the material and processual present as a "Zen" poetics, which gains its insights by careful observation and intuitive connection. Beginning with the spare, torqued, and self-critical lines of *Naked Poems*, I suggest that Webb's ghazals are not only a movement away from a conventional lyric sensibility, but also engage personal preoccupations that begin to appear in her work during the 1960s. I therefore locate Webb's subjective realization in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* along a continuum between the ghazal sensibility and what I call her haiku sensibility, which derives from her stylistic and philosophical engagement with Buddhism and with Japanese poetic forms. Alongside my rejection of a biographical teleology for Webb's work, I read the tension of her lyrics as an engagement between (what she acknowledges as) her patriarchal predecessors and an emergent feminist politics. By inverting Harold Bloom's theory to what she calls "The Influence of Anxiety," Webb treats her patriarchal influences as personal motivators for locating subjective responsibility in her writing.

Thus, *Water and Light* not only enacts a “poetics of resistance” that counters poetic precedents (as Butling convincingly argues), but also creates a “poetics of response” that communes with them (as Collis contends), effectively utilizing the free-verse ghazal to draft a multivalent response to lyric traditions, at once critical *and* continuing.

Based upon the insightful observations of Adrienne Rich’s 1984 essay, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Chapter 5 continues my investigation of Webb’s “Zen” poetics by considering her literal and material geography as an “Ethics of Location” in *Water and Light*. This enables a concept of multi-locality that examines distant, violent, political realities alongside a complex investigation of localized privilege to reconsider the responsibility of Western artistic practice. Beginning with the material locations Rich deems crucial for accountable feminism, Webb’s ghazals stress the necessity for social and subjective self-critique in order to effect an ethical treatment of location in one’s verse. Her imagery, based in her Salt Spring Island landscape, effectively demonstrates how subjective self-location is therefore a central methodological requirement for the free-verse ghazal in Canada after Thompson.

In short, my study proceeds by outlining the ghazal’s historical emergence in Canada (in Chapter 1), examines its first and most important practitioners (in Chapters 2, 3, and 4), and charts the manner of its continuation (in Chapter 5). The centerpiece of my recuperative strategy – *Stilt Jack* – enables not only a genre study or literary history, however, but ultimately a call for political engagement. It is especially appropriate, therefore, that my two chapters on Thompson are strategically bookended by others that highlight the poetics and politics of Rich and Webb. These women, who surround,

anticipate, articulate, and challenge the ghazal's traditions of masculine despair and patriarchal divinity, do not represent a secondary history folded into my admitted championing of *Stilt Jack*'s rightful place in the Canadian literary canon. Instead, they are essential to and fundamentally a part of such an emplacement. Without the innovations, transformative poetics, or understandings of Rich's early ghazals and/or Webb's *Naked Poems*, it is quite possible that *Stilt Jack* would not have been either imagined nor able to capture a Canadian audience during the 1970s. Nor would it continue, in all likelihood, to have such a broad and profound impact on the writing practices of so many contemporary Canadian poets. This continuity – based upon the long line of poets who have responded directly to *Stilt Jack* ever since its first appearance – is the primary subject for my project's Conclusion, which attempts to bridge the critical shortcomings of *Stilt Jack*'s scholarly reception with the “creative” influence that his ghazals have had on many individual Canadian poets. If my work has no other effect than to establish John Thompson and re-affirm Phyllis Webb as essential parts of Canadian literary history, my energies will not have been wasted. If it reaches beyond such recuperation, I hope it will resolutely establish the free-verse ghazal's North American birth – and the exemplary ghazals of Webb and Thompson – as central to the development of a vital lyric tradition in contemporary Canadian poetry.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> As explained in Chapter 1, North American “free-verse” ghazals in English are related to (yet significantly different from) the classical Urdu ghazal of nineteenth-century India. For an excellent overview of the difference between these traditions, see Agha Shahid

---

Ali's introduction to *Ravishing Disunities* (Hanover: Wesleyan, 2000) where he coins the term "free-verse ghazal." I am indebted to Michael Ondaatje for recommending Ali's essays on the ghazal.

<sup>2</sup> This term was originally coined by my co-supervisor, Brenda Carr-Vellino, during conversations about my work on Thompson.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, himself, is an example of mixed nationalities. Born and raised in England, Thompson took his MA and PhD in Michigan, and lived in Canada for only one decade. When critics canonize him as a distinctly Canadian poet, therefore, they overlook the bulk of his experiences and the predominant national affiliations he legally claimed.

<sup>4</sup> For a productive dialogue on these differences, see, especially, Mark Jeffreys' introduction to *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture* (New York: Garland, 1998) (ix-xxiv) and an attendant response to it (in the same volume) by Marjorie Perloff (245-255).

<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of Levertov is not tangential, but connects explicitly to the history I am tracing. As Sanger notes in *Collected Poems*, Thompson "met and liked" (27) Levertov during his doctoral studies in Michigan, and later praised her poetry in his classes at Mount Allison. Levertov was also one of the speakers at the 1963 UBC Poetry Symposium, an event that largely inspired a revolutionary change in Webb's poetic practice. Levertov is also a ghazal-maker, and includes "Broken Ghazals" in her 1984 book, *Oblique Prayers* (New York: New Directions, 1984) (6-7). For more on her role in the ghazal's development in the USA, especially as it relates to Rich, see David Caplan's "'In that Thicket of Bitter Roots': The Ghazal in America" (126-7). For more on Thompson's relationship to Levertov, see Sanger's *SeaRun* and his Introduction to *Collected Poems*. For notes on Webb's experience at the UBC Poetry Symposium, see her recollections in "Polishing Up the View."

<sup>6</sup> According to Sanger, Thompson read and re-read Bachelard's text many times while he was composing *Stilt Jack* from 1973 to 1976. See *SeaRun*, which charts Thompson's reading and teaching materials during the early 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> Many of the central writers in Canada's now classic postmodern poetry canon – bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, and the list goes on – published their most widely anthologized and commonly discussed works during this period.

<sup>8</sup> This kind of divisive reaction to awards continues throughout the period, and comes to a head again in 1980, when Phyllis Webb's *Wilson's Bowl* (Toronto: Coach House, 1980) is not shortlisted for the Governor General's Award; Douglas Lochhead's *High Marsh*

---

*Road* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1980)– a book that mentions John Thompson – is listed, and Stephen Scobie’s *McAlmon’s Chinese Opera* (Dunvegan: Quadrant, 1980) wins. Echoing the controversy around Bowering’s award a decade earlier, another group of primarily Ontario poets – Atwood, bpNichol, P.K. Page, and Ondaatje – rally around Webb and collect money for a private award for her book. In contemporary Canada, this sort of division continues to make headlines whenever national prizes are awarded. The recent “controversy” surrounding Jacob Scheier’s 2008 Governor General’s Award for Poetry in English is therefore only the latest in a long line of such antagonisms.

<sup>9</sup> The use of most of these forms is self-evident, but bp Nichol’s poetry as *utanikki*, or Japanese “poetic diary,” may require explanation. See my 2008 essay, “‘a magician explaining his best trick’: postcard poetics from bpNichol’s ‘You Too, Nicky.’”

<sup>10</sup> This term arose in direct response to Adrienne Rich’s essay “Notes towards a Politics of Location,” and was refined during editorial conversations with Brenda Carr-Vellino.

<sup>11</sup> Phyllis Webb’s poetry is given a similar treatment in critical literature previous to *Naked Poems*. See Butling’s Preface for a 1991 festschrift for Phyllis Webb in *West Coast Line*, “I Devise, You Devise, We Devise” for an overview of such reception.

<sup>12</sup> Because nearly all of these biographical treatments are identical, I have not treated them individually. For a basic sample of their tone, see Bemrose, Hall, or Polk. In addition to Sanger’s scholarship, and a festschrift he organized for *The Antigoneish Review* in the mid-1990s, recent studies are starting to counter such treatments. For a good biography of Thompson that carefully examines his personal background against his creative methodologies, see Sanger’s excellent, comprehensive introductory essay in *John Thompson: Collected Poems & Translations* (15-44). Or, see the feature on the *White Salt Mountain* poetry festival held in Sackville in November 2008 (organized by a previous student and Thompson enthusiast, Janna Graham) in issue 62 of *ARC Poetry Magazine* (a feature I conceptualized as ARC’s current Poetry Editor along with our editor, Anita Lahey), especially Lahey’s “Editor’s Note” (5-7), introductory notes by Janna Graham (25-6), essays by me (27-36) and Peter Sanger (72-85), and interviews about Thompson with four of the six poets from the festival: Harry Thurston (41-4), Amanda Jernigan (48-50), Peter Sanger (53-7), and Allan Cooper (61-3).

<sup>13</sup> *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (New York: Oxford UP) is the title of a 2004 study of Gould by Kevin Bazzana.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson perhaps anticipated this trend, once noting that “I write poems, not barroom anecdotes” (“The Junior Professor’s Reply”, *Collected Poems* 249), a reply, in part, to those that miss the point of his work, and addressed to Irving Layton, who once publicly mocked Thompson’s poetry. See Sanger’s *Collected Poems* (249-50).

---

<sup>15</sup> Rather than citing *Stilt Jack* according to a specific publication (there are three: the original, 1978 Anansi edition, the 1995 Goose Lane edition, and the 1991 Anansi edition, and the text for each edition is identical), I have opted to cite *Stilt Jack* parenthetically, first naming a specific ghazal in Roman numerals, as it appears in Thompson's text, and then citing the couplet number from that ghazal in standard numerals. In this case, the citation XXXVI.4 means that this is the fourth couplet of ghazal thirty-six. When referring to Thompson's archival notes, my citations are linked to the final versions of his drafts. When referencing Webb's *Water and Light* or the ghazals of Adrienne Rich, I use page numbers from the first editions of each title.

<sup>16</sup> Atwood manages her insights despite her close personal connections to Thompson. At House of Anansi Press, Atwood edited Thompson's first book, while her first husband, James Polk, "edited" *Stilt Jack*, receiving the completed manuscript in the mail after Thompson's death, an event he describes in the introduction to *I dream myself into being* (Anansi, 1991). In addition, as Sanger noted in his keynote address at the *White Salt Mountain* festival, Thompson's partner while writing *Stilt Jack* – the late poet and editor, Shirley Gibson, who was singly responsible for preserving and depositing Thompson's archives at the National Library and Archives Canada – was the ex-wife of Atwood's current husband, Graeme Gibson. In a letter to Phyllis Webb, Atwood calls Thompson a "nice man," and is happy that Webb was inspired by his example in *Stilt Jack*.

<sup>17</sup> This list includes poets who are not only influenced by Thompson, but also write critically about his work. If only one of these requirements were removed, however, I could easily expand this list to include many more poets whom he directly influences, including (but not limited to) the following: Di Brandt, Geoffery Cook, Susan Glickman, Matthew Holmes, D.G. Jones, Sonnet L'Abbé, Ross Leckie, Douglas Lochhead, John Lofranco, rob mclennan, Catherine Owen, Molly Peacock, Andrew Steeves, Harry Thurston, Andy Weaver, Jan Zwicky, and more.

<sup>18</sup> At a 2007 reading at the Ottawa International Writer's Festival, George Bowering addressed this concept by claiming that one's poetic tradition is determined less by some set of periodized, national, or other categorical groupings than by the specific texts one happens to bump into on one's way to writing one's own verse. In other words, every person's tradition is multivocal and unique, and cannot be reduced to simple literary precedents based exclusively on narrow national, historical, or cultural categories.

Chapter 1:

Ghalib, Ahmad, and Adrienne Rich: Inventing the Free-Verse Ghazal

In his introduction to the most celebrated book of ghazals in Canadian literary history, John Thompson anticipates the novelty of his form by summarizing the history of the Persian and Urdu ghazal to a North American audience likely unfamiliar with its traditions. Simply entitled “Ghazals,” Thompson’s eloquent preface is perhaps the first critical overview of the ghazal written and published in Canada:

Originating in Persia, the ghazal is the most popular of all the classical forms of Urdu poetry. Although the form as it is now written first appeared in Persia, it probably goes back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The great master of the ghazal in Persia was Hafiz (1320-1389). Five hundred years later, Ghalib, writing in Urdu, became an equally brilliant master of the form, which is full of conventions, required images, and predetermined postures.

The ghazal proceeds by couplets which (and here, perhaps, is the great interest in the form for Western writers) have no necessary logical, progressive, narrative, thematic (or whatever) connection. The ghazal is immediately distinguishable from the classical, architectural, rhetorically and logically shaped English sonnet.

The link between couplets (five to a poem) is a matter of tone, nuance: the poem has no palpable intention upon us. It breaks, has to be listened to as a song: its order is clandestine.

The ghazal has been practiced in America (divested of formal and conventional obligations) by a number of poets, such as Adrienne Rich. My own interest in the ‘form’ lies in the freedom it allows – the escape, even, from brief lyric ‘unity’. These are not, I think, surrealist, free-association poems. They are poems of careful construction; but of a construction permitting the greatest controlled imaginative progression.

There is, it seems to me, in the ghazal, something of the essence of poetry: not the relinquishing of the rational, not the abuse of order, not the destruction of form, not the praise of the private hallucination.

The ghazal allows the imagination to move by its own nature: discovering an alien design, illogical and without sense – a chart of the disorderly, against false reason and the tacking together of poor narratives. It is the poem of contrasts, dreams, astonishing leaps. The ghazal has been called ‘drunken and amatory’ and I think it is. (n.p.)

Here, Thompson not only establishes the ghazal as a respected and widely practiced form, but he also stresses its primary “interest [...] for Western writers”: a balance

between the illogical and disjunctive nature of the poems and the essential harmony and intuitive unity of their “careful construction.” His introduction therefore functions as a reading guide for *Stilt Jack*, anticipating and then invalidating conventional approaches to the lyric, which expect closure, extended metaphor, narrative, and/or autobiography.<sup>1</sup> Because this explication precedes Thompson’s ghazals, many readers engage *Stilt Jack* by seeking evidence for his introductory claims.

In a review that appears shortly after *Stilt Jack*’s publication, for example, Margaret Atwood discusses Thompson’s lucid introduction as a counterbalance to the darkest corners of his poetry. After his preface, she writes, “having armoured himself and convinced us that he’s a craftsman and a sane fellow, that he’s deliberate and controlled, that his disunity is fully intended and perhaps the slightest bit pretentious, [Thompson] proceeds to kick us into the pit” (310). The “pit,” of course, consists of both the visceral, bloody imagery of Thompson’s text (that co-exists alongside his complex intertexts), and the book’s darkest, most troubling suggestions about consciousness. In Atwood’s terms, this means that Thompson’s preface is a trick, since, she contends,

*Stilt Jack* is not in fact the rather academic exercise that the Introduction suckers us into expecting. It’s a cross between a moan and a beautifully modulated howl; a profoundly anguished and despairing book. [...] Nor is the book the disjointed creature Thompson describes. Although the individual poems do make the leaps Thompson promises, the book as a whole presents an overwhelmingly unified vision. (310-11)

What is most compelling in Atwood’s remarks is her focus on Thompson’s approach. That she is “suckered,” expecting, from Thompson’s introduction, a “rather academic exercise,” is a fact that speaks less to the dynamics of Thompson’s poetry itself than to

the general reaction he anticipates in his uninitiated readership. Atwood's contention that *Stilt Jack* is unified rather than disjointed is apt. But it relies upon a preconception of traditional lyric closure that fails to recognize the ultimate inclusiveness of the ghazal as what Adrienne Rich once called "a *different kind of unity*" (qtd. in Ahmad xxv; my emphasis). As evidenced by his mention of "clandestine" order or his insistence that the poems are not free-association surrealism, Thompson's introduction never claims that his poems are anything *but* unified. What is compelling, then, is the *surprise* that Atwood records in finding a kind of lyric poetry that is at once disjunctive *and* unified, a reaction that summarizes *Stilt Jack's* general reception.

By establishing the ghazal as storied and respected, Thompson challenges the formal dominance of "the classical, architectural, rhetorically and logically shaped English sonnet" as a lyric model for the West, offering up the ghazal as its supposedly liberating opposite. The English-language, "free-verse" ghazal, "divested of formal and conventional obligations," Thompson stresses, allows for "freedom," "control," "astonishing leaps," and some sense of sublime essentiality, supposedly unlike the sonnet, which he says is "rhetorically and logically shaped," and thereby trapped in rationality. That Thompson's ability to explain this difference relies on a comparison to its distant, English cousin in the sonnet highlights his ambivalent relationship with the English canon (a dynamic I discuss in Chapter 2). One must therefore read Thompson's praise of the ghazal as "the essence of poetry" with some sense of his own lyricism. While he claims to reject a "form, which is full of conventions, required images, and predetermined postures" (as the Urdu ghazal arguably is), he still uses a formalist

aesthetic in *Stilt Jack* that seldom breaks out of its own self-imposed strictures.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, his lyric diction, musicality, imagery, and symbolism are not grammatically or syntactically experimental, but rather conventional. While his ghazals are certainly radical structural experiments, the primary reason that they are revolutionary is their *balance* between a seemingly avant-garde formality and an extended lyric meditation.

This balance derives not only from Thompson's brilliant imaginative talent, but also the history and conventions of the ghazal form itself. While Thompson's foundational role in bringing the ghazal to Canada is indisputable, it is therefore essential to track and consider his formal influences. This is the primary purpose of this chapter. In Part One, I outline the Urdu ghazal's traditional conventions and practitioners via a unique anthology of translations that initiates the form's reinvention in 1960s North America. In Part Two, I consider how these translations subsequently inspire the original, American ghazals of Adrienne Rich that influence Thompson. Finally, in Part Three, I briefly examine the subsequent emergence of the ghazal sensibility in Canada in the ghazals of Thompson and Phyllis Webb.

### **Part One: Classical Models**

When tracing the ghazal's beginnings in Canada, we are lucky to be able to draw a rare, direct line of influence from Indian birds to American scrap iron to Thompson's Atlantic trout to Webb's Pacific tides. This lineage dates back to eleventh and twelfth century Persia, when the ghazal was established as a major lyric form (Matthews & Shackle 2). The most celebrated Persian practitioners of the ghazal were "Hafiz" (1325-1389) (also

spelled “Hafez”), which means “reciter,” a pen name for Khwajah Shams al-Din Muhammad Ibn-i Muhammad (see Kashani; Hillmann; Bashiri); and “Rumi” (1207-1273) which means “The European” or “The Roman,” the pen name for Jalâl al-Din Rumi (aka Maulana/ Mevlana Jalalu’ddin Rumi) (see Lewis; Friedlander). While poets in India continued to write in Persian in pre-colonial India, Urdu became the language of choice for Muslim culture on the subcontinent by the early eighteenth century, and arguably reached its apex in the nineteenth century courts of Delhi and Lucknow.<sup>3</sup> There is some debate about who claims the title of “greatest” Urdu poet: “Mir” (1723-1810) the pen name for Muhammad Taqi (aka Mir Taqi Mir, or Meer Taqi Meer), who was known in Delhi as “Khuda-e-Sukhan” which means “God of poetry” (see Matthews & Shackle; Russell & Islam); or “Ghalib” (1797-1869), which means “dominant” or “victorious,” and is the pen name for Mirzâ Asadullâh Khan (see Ahmad; Matthews & Shackle).<sup>4</sup> (When writing in Persian/Arabic, Ghalib also used the pen name “Asad,” which means “lion,” a name in evidence in translations of his work by Rich and original ghazals by Webb.) While Mir was involved in the emergence of the Urdu language itself, Ghalib is often read as the greatest and final representative of its cultural values in the final days of the Mughal courts in British India.<sup>5</sup> Both are more important for the scope of my lineage than are the original Persian masters of the ghazal, Rumi and Hafiz. This has nothing to do with the quality of their poetry, but instead reflects their seemingly concrete influence on North American poetry and poetics.

For my purposes, it is Ghalib’s poetry (rather than Mir’s) that has the most direct effect on the emergence of the free-verse ghazal in North America.<sup>6</sup> In the late 1960s,

Ghalib's work reached a renewed audience due to the centennial celebrations of his death via its first significant translation into English since the Victorian era: *Ghazals of Ghalib*, a project conceived and edited by Aijaz Ahmad, "commissioned in the United States for the Ghalib Centennial Year 1969-1970 by The Asia Society of New York" (Sanger, *Interview 56*), and well-known to Thompson when he began his own ghazal experiments.<sup>7</sup> Without doubt, this book is the most important publication in the North American ghazal's early history, effectively introducing the form's central English-language conventions via Ahmad's insightful editorial practice.

As an Urdu scholar, Ahmad's strategy was to provide literal translations of Ghalib's ghazals to working American poets, including W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford and others, whom he subsequently charged with the task of creating nuanced poetic treatments in English. He engaged poets rather than linguists, he wrote, because, "Like Persian, Urdu is also very much a language of abstractions" (xv), but abstraction "is also a way of thinking – of reflecting on man's [sic] place in the universe and his relations with the world, with others, with God, with his own interiority" (xv-xvi). Linguistic rules or exacting lexical matches are not as important, Ahmad insists, as a general sense of a ghazal's harmonies. Ahmad's book features several translations per ghazal, an attempt, he contends, "to get a multiplicity of responses, rather than one" since "there *is* no one right way of translating a poem" (Ahmad xviii), a view that reflects his "conviction that scholarship can best serve its own purposes by acknowledging its limitations" (xix).

By stressing the vital challenge of translating the form into English, Ahmad effectively argues that its original Urdu rules *must* be suitably transformed when removed from their original cultural, political, or personally subjective contexts. To clarify this complication, he focuses on one of the most common challenges faced by any translator of interior, non-logical poetic forms:

[...] translations of poetry, though based on scholarship, have to have a *poetic pulse* that transcends the limits of what a scholar can ever accomplish. The fact is that formal devices, such as rhymed couplets or closely scannable prosodic structures are, in contemporary English as opposed to the nineteenth-century Urdu, restrictive rather than enlarging or intensifying devices. The organic unity of the ghazal, as translated into English, does not depend on formal rhymes. Inner rhymes, allusions, verbal associations, wit, and imagistic relations can quite adequately take over the functions performed by the formal end-rhymes in the original Urdu. (xix; my emphasis)

In its classical phase, the “formal devices” mentioned here were what essentially defined the ghazal as a distinct form. Each poem generally consisted of five to twelve couplets (though length could theoretically be limitless) called *sh'er* or *bait*, split by the line break into two half-couplets. The first of these couplets (called *matla*) presented a schematic unity that was sustained in the subsequent couplets, driven primarily by the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of each line in the first couplet (called *radif*), and subsequently repeated at the end of each second line in the remaining couplets: a refrain. A ghazal's *radif* was further qualified by an interior rhyme (called *qafia*) that appeared immediately before the *radif*, quite a trick given the form's requirement of *takhallus* (which means “ending” in Arabic, and signifies the inclusion of a poet's pen-name) in the ghazal's final couplet (known as *makhta*) as “as a kind of signature” (Matthews & Shackle 8). In addition to these restrictions – which set up a meditative stretching out of lines that

wander out of their specific requirements into investigations of loss, grief, and cosmological wonder only to be reigned in by the necessity of a grounded rhyme and refrain – was the requirement of a particularly rigid meter, which could vary from ghazal to ghazal, but needed to be of a consistent foot within any individual poem. An Urdu ghazal's metre involved not only syllabic count, but also the pace and particular stress put on phrases and syllables during a poet's reading. Translators therefore face quite a challenge when they attempt to translate the poems literally, leading Ahmad, for example, to note in each of his literal translations in *Ghazals of Ghalib* that lines have “approximately” (34) so many syllables, or metric feet.

Matthews & Shackle describe all of these exacting requirements succinctly:

Formally, the ghazal may be described as a short love-poem of some four to thirty couplets, or *bait*. Each couplet is divided into two half-couplets, or hemistiches, known as *misra*'s. The two *misra*'s of the first couplet (*matla*' ) rhyme with each other and with the second *misra*'s of the remaining couplets, so that the rhyme-scheme is / a a / b a / c a etc. / Some ghazals have a double *matla*' , that is, two couplets rhyming *a-a*, or even more. The rules for rhyme are also elaborate: the lines are thought of as having a single 'masculine' rhyme, the *qafiya*, which is followed by one or more syllables identical throughout the poem, the end-rhyme or *radif*. (8)

Because most translators do not attempt to transfer rhyme and meter from the original Urdu, finding a decent English example of these strictures at work is difficult. The best samples I have located are in Matthews & Shackles' anthology *Classical Urdu Love Lyrics*, a collection that Thompson knew well.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Ahmad's co-translations, the poems in Matthews & Shackle “make no claim to literary merit, and are intended only to be accurate prose renderings of the Urdu text” (160). They also do not present a consistent loyalty to the Urdu ghazal's rules. The best example I have located is one of

the anthology's Mir translations, which demonstrates *radif*, *qafia*, and *takhallus*, but lacks consistent metre: <sup>9</sup>

My friends, excuse me, for I am drunk.  
If you give me anything now, then give me an empty cup, for I am drunk.

Every time the jar comes round, then give me just a sip, like this.  
Do not fill the wine-cup, for I am drunk.

My intoxication has made my speech incoherent.  
You too can call me what you like, for I am drunk.

Either receive me with respect, as you would a glass of wine,  
or walk a little way with me, for I am drunk.

I am sorry if I cannot walk straight.  
But do not be angry with me, for I am drunk.

Friday prayers do not rush by so quickly. I am also coming,  
so wait a little while for me, for I am drunk.

Mir is dreadfully sensitive. (Treat me) like a glass of wine and  
do not be too familiar with me, for I am drunk. (qtd. in Matthews & Shackle 68)

The repetition of “for I am drunk,” doubled in the opening couplet, and repeated throughout is the *radif*. The ghazal's *qafia* is most likely focused on “me” or “with me,” and is discernible in the final four couplets (which repeat rather than rhyme, here), but absent from couplet two and buried in couplets one and three (in the original Urdu, the *qafia* would have preceded the *radif*; the literal version could easily be re-arranged to reflect this by changing, for example, the second line of couplet two from “[d]o not fill the wine-cup, for I am drunk” to “do not fill the wine-cup *for me*, for I am drunk”). The *takhallus* occurs at the start of the final couplet with “Mir is dreadfully sensitive.” When

paired with the form's Urdu metre, the overall effect of these strictures should be a tension between the drunken departure from and return to the *qafia* and *radif*.

As is evident in this literal version, however, such tension is somewhat lost in the shuffle of English diction and syntax, and perhaps sheds some light on Ahmad's decision to re-work such literal versions into more nuanced *literary* versions. As a result of Ahmad's editorial approach for translating Ghalib, the initial North American ghazal practitioners – which included Rich and Jim Harrison in the USA, and Thompson in Canada – were nonetheless well aware of the ghazal's traditional rules, yet unanimously deemed them untenable in English, resulting in the general diminishment of their hold on the ghazal in North America. The newly formed “free-verse” ghazal therefore arises directly out of an interaction with translations knowingly divested of their original formal restrictions.

### ***“Real” versus “Free-Verse” Ghazals in English North America***

As Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) – who was the pre-eminent contemporary ghazal scholar and practitioner in North America – vehemently points out, however, the restrictions that Rich, Thompson and others exclude have subsequently been embraced by English-language poets who create “real ghazals” rather than what he calls, instead, “free-verse” ghazals. For Ali, who claims to be steeped in the Islamic and culturally-specific interactions engendered by the ghazal's original formalities, poets who engage in free-verse, associative, or thematic couplets that lack metrical consistency, *radif*, and *qafia*, do not create ghazals at all, but, instead, pen exercises in Orientalist exotica. In his

view, “free-verse” ghazal poets essentially sample from foreign traditions without understanding how the ghazal’s formal qualities relate precisely to the traditional cultural milieus out of which they arise. Thus, Ali claims that in the 1960s and 1970s,

Those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit. [...] For those brought up in Islamic literary traditions, especially the Persian and Urdu ghazal, to have many of these arbitrary near-surrealistic exercises in free verse pass for ghazals was – is – at best amusing. (1)

Ali’s irritation with free-verse ghazals is well-informed and accurate, especially since many contemporary practitioners of the form have so little awareness of the ghazal’s history that they even mispronounce the very name of the form (“ghazal” *should* have an initial pronouncement of “gh” that relates to the French “r” rather than the hard “g” of English, and should stress the syllable “gha” to avoid inverted English mispronouncements that often render something closer to “gazelle” than the more accurate “ghuzzle”). Ali is so irritated with the predominance of this cultural sampling, in fact, that he claims that “Many American poets (the list is surprisingly long) have either misunderstood or ignored the form, and those who have followed them have accepted *their* examples to represent the real thing” (2), a misrecognition, in his estimation, of the complexity and tone involved in the form’s original, refrain-like structures. Such continued use of the ghazal for “a momentary exotic departure” (13) into a supposedly “authentic” foreign culture, Ali argues, ultimately belittles the form’s original cultural specificity.<sup>10</sup> Such ignorance, Ali contends, not only generates naïve experimentation that borrows from the ghazal’s historical authority to validate itself, but also completely misses the point of the original form’s essentially public, interactive spirit:

One essential ingredient missing in unrhymed ghazals is the breathless excitement the original form generates. The audience (the ghazal is recited a lot) waits to see what the poet will do with the scheme established in the opening couplet. At a *mushaira* – the traditional poetry gathering to which sometimes thousands of people come to hear the most cherished poets of the country – when the poet recites the first line of a couplet, the audience recites it back to him, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit. This back and forth creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the suspense will be resolved in terms of the scheme established in the opening couplet; that is, the first line of every succeeding couplet sets the reader (or listener) up so that the second line amplifies, surprises, explodes. (8)<sup>11</sup>

Without *radif*, of course, this interactive tension is not possible in the manner that Ali describes. If what ignites one's interest in the ghazal relies fundamentally on the complex journey, in mid-line, out and away from the regulation of the form's inevitable arrival at its *qafia* and *radif*, the removal of these elements obviously means a degradation of the form that must border on offense or stupidity to one committed to its traditional tensions.

Despite my essential respect for Ali's championing of the use of traditional ghazal formality in English, his outright rejection of what happens following Ahmad's project seems rather shortsighted to me.<sup>12</sup> Although Ali's claim that "a free-verse ghazal is a contradiction in terms" (2) might be valid when discussing an unchanging (and therefore culturally dated) formal modality, his absolute insistence on the continuance of Urdu formality misses something important.<sup>13</sup> While it is certainly true that the ghazals of Rich, Thompson and others do not conform to the original dynamics of the form, this does not necessarily mean that they do not realize or deeply respect its traditions, or are unaware of the free-verse version's inherent contradictions. Their dismissal of the form's original rules is not flippant, but carefully considered; those poets and translators that first

envision the free-verse ghazal form believe that the intuitive and allusive character of their *vers libre* stylistics “can quite adequately *take over* the functions performed by the formal end-rhymes in the original Urdu” (Ahmad xix; my emphasis) rather than ignoring them. Ali’s exclusive focus on the value of *radif*, *qafia*, and metre therefore fails to make space for the emergence of a new kind of ghazal tradition that perhaps grows respectfully rather than blindly out of the Urdu tradition he defends and admires.

To be fair, Ali *does* attempt to contextualize the existence of the free-verse ghazal by considering the poetics and tastes in vogue in the early days of 1960s political postmodernity. But, in the process, he misses the respectfully generative possibilities of a free-verse form when he dismisses its arrival simply as a hapless sign of the times.

Wondering if “[p]erhaps the business of rhyme and refrain just did not suit the aesthetic politics – and the political complexion – of various contexts in the late sixties and early seventies” (11), he argues that North American writers and audiences essentially adopt the form as a vehicle for defining their own, egotistically political agendas. While Ali takes this adaptation as a critical misstep tied to thoughtless colonial practices, he also contextualizes its utility for many poets in postmodern North America:

The ghazal, as many of those poets practiced it, gave them the authority of a foreign and rich culture; it allowed them formally to question the authority of their own culture’s often rigid proscriptions, and perhaps they saw in the thematic freedom of the couplets a chance for all kinds of liberation. What would have been paradoxical to many Westerners – the ghazal’s blend of ‘unity and autonomy’ – would have attracted them. (Ali, *Introduction* 11-12)

Even if Ali is right that poets have borrowed authority from a foreign structure, surely their personal adaptations of Urdu conventions into individual nuances and

transformative, new formalities highlights the highly charged, re-contextualized nature of free-verse lyric poetry in general during the 1970s. Those who create the new tradition of the free-verse ghazal in Ahmad's collection not only pay respect and give due consideration to the Urdu tradition, via Ghalib, but also refuse to attempt a transplant of the culturally-specific nineteenth-century form into the living bodies of their own cultural contexts. Instead, they create a new kind of ghazal that is not only revolutionary, but also committed to precepts of the Urdu ghazal tradition: imagistic harmony, intuitive impulse, and a self-referentially disjunctive lyric economy. Ali is correct that when *certain* "poets go crazy with the idea of composing thematically independent couplets in a free-verse poem, they manage to forget what holds the couplets together – a classical exactness, a precision so stringent that it, when brilliant, surpasses the precision of the sonnet and the grandeur of the sestina" (13). But I think it is inaccurate to assume that this exactness and stringency can only *ever* be defined by formal structuralism or effectively neo-formalist regulations, or that free-verse ghazal writers should not have the agency to transform an inherited form to suit the subjective and culturally-distinct contexts of their lives and poetic practices.

If Ali is right that "[t]he ghazal's disconnectedness must not be mistaken for fragmentariness" since such disconnectedness "actually underscores a profound cultural connectedness" (13), how could any writer of the ghazal in English-speaking North America use any of the form's original rules without altering such connectedness by the very nature of his/her own contemporary subjectivity or poetics? Doesn't such a re-positioning of time and space from a nineteenth-century context of British colonialism in

India to the mid to late twentieth-century's ontological crises of subjectivity necessitate a re-consideration of the central usefulness or effect of rigidly ruled formalism, especially given the revolutions of formalism evident in early postmodernity? And, wouldn't any particular retreat to either an absolute formalist tradition or a haughty avant-garde experimentalism yield only a partial answer to the difficulty of individualizing a new form within the confines of a poetic lineage that, even as long ago as Pound's or Williams' imagisms, had declared the lyric an old tired horse? Perhaps Ali's supposition, that "[i]f one writes in free verse – and one should – to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself *from* Western civilization" (13), therefore misses the point of the free-verse ghazal's inherent preference for openness, exploration, and contradiction rather than closure and finality. This ghazal sensibility is as essential to the overall structure of the free-verse ghazal's "unity" as the tension of open lines versus *qafia* and *radif* are to the traditional form's staging of exploration and return, freedom and domination, nostalgia and grief, love and loss. What remains when Ali's formal conventions are removed by Ahmad and company in the late 1960s are therefore those intuitive elements that allow a free-verse version of the form to emerge that is just as true, free, unified, yet disconnected as the "real" form championed by Ali. Such personal, intuitive, interior elements deserve a brief sketch before proceeding.

Regardless of Ali's insistence on the centrality of metre and rhyme, the overall structure of any ghazal's coherence – either Persian, Urdu, or North American free-verse – has always been intuitively *implied* rather than logically connected, so that, as Lorna Crozier puts it, in the ghazal, "[s]tory is sacrificed for suggestion, implication, allusion"

(60). Traditionally, any single couplet could be extracted from a ghazal and stand on its own as a complete poetic expression that does not rely on its particular textual context to be considered fully formed. Thus, “[t]he *only* link [between couplets] is in terms of prosodic structure and rhymes” (Ahmad xvi), a concept confirmed in virtually every overview of the form’s history, including those constructed by Ali. In free-verse English ghazals, where such rhymes and structures are eliminated, the absence of logical connection looks revolutionary rather than required, perhaps explaining the form’s excitingly liberating sense of ambiguity that Thompson pinpoints (in his prefatory note for *Stilt Jack*) as its source of attraction for North American writers.

This is not to say that there are not recurring and cohesive thematic requirements in ghazals; quite the opposite is true, especially regarding imagery. Urdu ghazals operate according to an inherited, culturally-specific bank of images, so that the skill of the Urdu poet is judged less by an ability to invent *new* imagery than to manipulate and re-contextualize already established imagistic codes. The “unity” of the Urdu ghazal therefore relies on a public store of predetermined cultural symbols. As Douglas Barbour explains, this use of common imagery is “absolutely central to a major aspect of the ghazal tradition” (102), a fact made apparent to Thompson during his own research on the ghazal’s history (see Thompson, “The ghazal”). Aijaz Ahmad explains this best. In its traditional, Urdu form, he says,

[...] the ghazal functions with an easily identifiable and almost repetitious pattern of imagery – the rose, the tulip, the nightingale, the seasons, a handful of descriptions of this or that, human or extra-human states – as does Japanese poetry, in which a certain flower, a certain time of day, even the plunge of a stone, can signify something other than itself. (xvi-xvii)

Given the stress on the ghazal's traditionally unified and already-understood images in overviews by Ahmad, Matthews & Shackle, and others, it is intriguing that Ali bemoans the tendency of North American readers to "automatically be looking for thematic unities" between couplets in free-verse ghazals. His argument that "the actual form, by its very nature, erases that expectation, preempts it" (13), in fact, seems to apply *less* to the traditional ghazal he champions than to its reinvention in contemporary North America. To replace the publicly shared images that prefigure unity in the Urdu ghazal, free-verse ghazal writers tend to invent individual networks of imagery that slowly accrete during their specific sequences in order to communicate intuitive rather than authoritative meanings (evidenced, in Canada, by recurrent images of trout, stones, water, bait, and hooks in *Stilt Jack*, or the birds, shores, flowers, and stars of Webb's *Water and Light*). Because North American audiences tend to apply rational analysis to explain new images in specific lyric poems, these imagistic networks short-circuit reader expectations. Essentially, such frustration means that the free-verse ghazal's unity goes *beyond* thematic readings or formal meter, affirming in the free-verse ghazal both Ali's non-logical view of the "real" ghazal, and Thompson's summary of the ghazal's clandestine order and drunken/amatory spirit.

Along with the ghazal's traditional requirement for recurring images, Thompson's research on the ghazal form reveals other thematic elements commonly invoked in the Urdu ghazal (including allusions to Biblical figures that Urdu poets might "reference without necessarily naming" ["the ghazal" n.p.]), some of which eventually appear in

*Stilt Jack*. The content included on Thompson's list of "common subjects" ("the ghazal" n.p.) for the Urdu ghazal highlights the form's original reliance on a common language of thematic preoccupations that continues to inform the subject matter of ghazals in Canada:

1. poet's love for the loved one
2. indifference of the beloved
3. sad state of lover's heart
4. cruelty of fate
5. sorrows of parting and joys of the nights of love now gone
6. instability of human glory
7. fleetingness of life ("the ghazal" n.p.)

As is evident in the darkest moments of his work, these subjects of failure and despair are central to how Thompson understands the ghazal form. The same is also true of Webb, whose ghazals in *Water and Light* begin with an execution (9) and end by figuring humankind as "tilting in this stranded ark / blind and seeing in the dark" (59). The seriousness of these themes is also evidence that ghazals are not an appropriate forum for expressing one's secular anger or personal, petty objections since "The ghazal is not an occasion for angst; it is an occasion for genuine grief" (Ali 13).<sup>14</sup> Such grief is inherent in the form's very definition. As Ali notes, "one way to welcome the shackles of the form and be in emotional tune with them is to remember one definition of the word *ghazal*: It is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die" (3), a definition Thompson also notes in an earlier draft of his prefatory note for *Stilt Jack*.

While Ali, David Jalajal, Andy Weaver, Peter Sanger, John Lofranco and others are right that contemporary free-verse ghazals are sometimes poorly used as surrealistic containers for recording random impressions rather than exploring a set theme of grief or spiritual longing, it is useful to keep in mind that ghazals are supposed to be *limited* by

their required conventions. Thompson realized this in his original draft for *Stilt Jack's* introduction, which declares that the ghazal has always been “a strictly formal poem” (n.p.).<sup>15</sup> Such stringency is essential not only for those composing “real” ghazals, but also “free-verse” ones. As Thompson rightly notes, the free-verse ghazal can only achieve its “astonishing leaps” with “careful construction” and “the greatest controlled imaginative progression” (“Ghazals” n.p.). Rather than a catch-all for lyric reflection, therefore, the free-verse ghazal is as difficult and as rigorous a form as was its main, Urdu antecedent.

### ***Ghalib, “love,” and cultural collapse***

Whether the ghazal’s traditional rules are obeyed or not, the ghazal’s required, simultaneous focus on both divine and secular love has always been central to its tone.

This is perhaps best expressed by Ahmad’s insights on Ghalib’s thematic priorities in his preface for *Ghazals of Ghalib*:

The metaphysics of Urdu poetry, and of Ghalib in particular, can be approached in terms of three questions: What is the nature of the universe and man’s [sic] place in it? What is God? What is love? For the Urdu poet, as for the Persian, these questions are interdependent. There is no question of clarifying man’s place in the universe without first contemplating the nature of God, or of love. Similarly, there can be no poetry of love unless love is understood, first, as a human reflection of a divine possibility, and, second, as a definition of man’s place in his moral universe. (xvi)

Rather than open to random self-expression, ghazals demand the inclusion of a particular *type* of content centred on concepts of divine love. In this sense, “[t]his is a poetry of intense moral privacies; and of love – not *about* love, but *of* love. Love is the great, over-arching metaphor because love is conceived as the basic human relation and all life is

lived in terms of this relation – even when those terms are terms of failure” (Ahmad xxiv-xxv). In both its traditional form and its free-verse usage in North America, ghazals therefore contain a poet’s impulses within a predetermined set of thematic requirements.

As Thompson explains in his research notes, the Urdu ghazal’s content was traditionally based on a metaphysical viewpoint, but typically featured an arrival at “sadness” and “regret” via an exploration of “love” (“the ghazal” n.p.), a pattern also evident in *Stilt Jack*.<sup>16</sup> As Ahmad notes of the Urdu form, this is not simply romantic love, but love that simultaneously addresses a higher power and a lower one – an earthly beloved and a divine God. Since “[f]or Ghalib, the particular *is* the universal [and] a man’s [sic] history is the history of his intelligence, *plus* his emotions, *plus* his times” (Ahmad xxiv), the ghazal traditionally fuses a specifically youthful love as *eros* (often in painful retrospect) with a sense of universal, deified, abstractly experienced love as *agape* (often in present wonder). Here is one example from Ghalib:

I went there too (to the beloved’s house), but what answer could I give to her  
insults? All the prayers I remembered I used up on the doorkeeper.  
(Matthews & Shackle 120)

Here, “the beloved’s house” signifies a lover’s house as much as it symbolizes heaven or a place of worship. Ghalib’s “prayers,” similarly, are fundamentally tied to his romantic pursuits. This simultaneous invocation of divine and romantic love leads to what Matthews & Shackle identify as one of the greatest challenges for the Western reader of the ghazal: “the ambiguity of the beloved’s identity” (9), which derives from a “lack of grammatical gender in Persian” (9). This is perpetuated in Urdu ghazals by using the masculine to “make possible a lack of definition of the beloved’s sex” (9), therefore

admitting “the possibility that the beloved is not human at all, but divine” (9), or the further implication that the poet can safely comment on either heterosexual or homosexual romantic relationships. Such ambiguous gendering allows the ghazal to remain open, so that its shifting registers and references might allow for the presentation of a variety of (sometimes contradictory) views that are simultaneously valid.

When English translations of Ghalib are attempted in 1960s North America, this non-gendered ambiguity results in the common usage of “you” to capture the ghazal’s inclusive, multivalent tone. Use of the second-person voice can variously be read as a direct address to readers, a reference to a specific reader, a poet’s interior self-address (either to her/his present, past or future perceptions of herself/himself), and/or a general “you” that refers to universal or sacred understandings. In English translations, this makes Ghalib’s ghazals seem refreshingly open. As a result, poets began to adopt the form presented in Ahmad’s watershed collection not only as a rebellion against mainstream lyrical conventions, but also as a way to re-connect with a pre-rational or pre-scientific sense implicit in the form’s ambiguous address and disjunctive harmonies. By the 1970s, the English-language free-verse ghazal therefore becomes an avenue for contemporary poets to articulate a new sense of the sacred in contemporary lyric poetry, actively seeking, as Thompson does in *Stilt Jack*, “God’s shadow” (VIII.2), “the gods I’ve invented” (XIII.6), how “[d]ivinity sounds in machines, / shines darkly from the pleasure of birds” (XXV.3), or “[t]he Lord stuck on a bulletin board” (XXIII.5).

Since Ghalib’s work is the source for the form’s initial introduction in North America, a brief outline of his biography might prove useful to explain a few broad

connections between his preoccupations and those of poets who combine the sacred and secular in the late 1960s and 1970s. The difficult, financially stressful, personally defaming circumstances of Ghalib's life are set out in Ahmad's introductory notes. Ghalib wrote his best Urdu lyrics as a teenager, turning to the form's traditional (and more conventional) Persian confines only in middle age (in an effort to legitimize his craft), before returning to Urdu in later life, when his establishment as a poet had been successful. Amidst these linguistic shifts, Ghalib lived the bulk of his adult life during the final destruction of the Moghul courts by the British Empire in India, an intensely insecure era of political and cultural turmoil that marks many of his poems with a focus on transience, death, shattered youth, and wasted love, all topics for traditional ghazals, but marked by a personal urgency in the work of Ghalib, who watched his national culture crumble throughout his writing life.

Ahmad reads Britain's colonialist assault on Ghalib's cultural life as implicitly connected to the apocalyptic tones of literary production in twentieth-century North American cultures: "Ghalib lived at a time in the history of the subcontinent similar to the present in America, in the sense that a whole civilization seemed to be breaking up and nothing of equal strength was taking its place. Worse still, what replaced the older civilization ran altogether counter to what Ghalib stood for" (xxi), an entropy perhaps implicit in some of Ghalib's best-loved lines:

After the close of the gathering of the festival of childhood, the days of my youth  
were spent in drinking.  
Now I have come to the brink of the region of non-existence (old-age), O past  
life, take a step forward to greet me!  
(Matthews & Shackle 132).

Here, Ghalib's "old-age" is spent watching the destruction of those Mughal courts that made possible his poetic career – "spent in drinking" – a fact that makes him long for his "past life." This connection between the erasure of nineteenth century India's Muslim culture and North America's supposed twentieth-century cultural bankruptcy is also stressed by Rich. In the preface for her first sequence of ghazals, "Homage to Ghalib," Rich notes that Ghalib was "a poet self-educated and profoundly learned who owned no property and borrowed his books, writing in an age of political and cultural break-up" ("Leaflets" 59); she also admits that the violence of his life affects her present writing. As David Caplan notes, Rich's response to Ghalib effects a cross-cultural connection, linking the political ruptures caused by the Vietnam War, the divisions within second-wave feminism, and the violence of the civil rights era with Ghalib's records of cultural collapse, so that her ghazals translate "the time's sociopolitical and literary-historical contours into stylistic and formal terms" (119). In "Homage to Ghalib," Rich therefore describes an "[a]rmitage of scrapiron" (64), tells us she "long ago stopped dreaming of pure justice" (67), exposes military aggression by saying "Killing is different now: no fingers round the throat. / No one feels the wetness of blood on his hands" (65), and in "4/8/68," a ghazal written "for *Aijaz Ahmad*" (68), claims the failure of civil rights:

If these are letters, they will have to be misread.  
If scribblings on a wall, they must tangle with all the others.

Fuck Reds    Black Power    Angel loves Rosita  
– and a transistor radio answers in Spanish: *night must fall*.

Prisoners, soldiers, crouching as always, writing,  
explaining the unforgivable to a wife, a mother, a lover.

Those faces are blurred and some have turned away  
to which I used to address myself so hotly.

How is it Ghalib, that your grief, resurrected in pieces,  
has found its way to this room from your dark house in Delhi?

When they read this poem of mine, they are translators.  
Every existence speaks a language of its own. (“Homage” 68)

Here, Rich highlights the violence of international politics (“Fuck Reds Black Power”) and the destruction it wreaks on citizens in the west (“a wife, a mother, a lover”) and her own perspectives (“this poem of mine”). She therefore links Ghalib’s “grief, resurrected in pieces” to her own “room” in contemporary North America.

While the violence of British India *may* be tenuously echoed by the claims of cultural bankruptcy or fragmentation prevalent in mid-twentieth century North America, the experience of mainstream North American subjects cannot be equated with the violent experience of British rule in India. By highlighting the parallels suggested by Rich and Ahmad, I mean to stress a thematic resonance for the free-verse ghazal in North America, not an equivalence between postmodern experience and colonial oppression. Rich, Thompson, and Webb each respond to various kinds of violence in their own ghazals, respectively engaging Ghalib’s history (and the patriarchy of the ghazal tradition), personal experience, and contemporary politics. In so doing, they also maintain the vital importance of a linguistic connection to sacred, non-logical experience in contemporary verse. The line of influence from Rich to Thompson and Webb therefore deserves further attention.

**Part Two: Early Free-Verse Pilgrims: Jim Harrison and Adrienne Rich**

For my purposes in tracing the roots of the ghazal sensibility in Canada, this political search for the sacred is most important in the work of two *American* poets: Jim Harrison and Adrienne Rich. A friend and fellow doctoral student of Thompson's at Michigan State in the 1960s, Harrison was a poet whom Thompson admired; he copied and distributed poems from Harrison's *Outlyer and Ghazals* (1971) for his classes at Mount Allison. In an introductory essay often figured as a central influence on Thompson, Harrison begins by acknowledging Rich's ghazals, and then summarizes what he sees as the form's essential English-language tenets:

I have not adhered to the strictness of metrics and structure of the ancient practitioners, with the exception of using a minimum of five couplets. The couplets are not related by reason or logic and their only continuity is made by a metaphorical jump. Ghazals are essentially lyrics and I have worked with whatever aspect of our life now that seemed to want to enter my field of vision. Crude, holy, natural, political, sexual. After several years spent with longer forms I've tried to regain some of the spontaneity of the dance, the song unencumbered by any philosophical apparatus, faithful only to its own music. (26)

Since they follow an impulse supposedly outside of regular lyric conventions, Harrison's sixty-four ghazals are related to those encountered in Ahmad's anthology. What is essential here, however, is Harrison's view of the ghazal as absolutely open to "the spontaneity of the dance," so that content may enter it of its own volition, as though following an impulse that is not ruled by the traditionally autobiographical poetic voice. Yet, Thompson only names Harrison in preliminary drafts of his own introduction to *Stilt Jack*, ultimately acknowledging only one poet who works in the format: Adrienne Rich.

Rich's poetic sensibility is much closer to Thompson's than is Harrison's.<sup>17</sup> While Harrison arguably represents the kind of free-verse license to which Ali so vehemently objects, both Rich and Thompson are open to the difficult explorations of pain and loss required by the ancient form. They also limit their language to networks of imagery that, in different ways, continue the tradition of reflecting on love both within and beyond Eros.<sup>18</sup> Rich's introduction to and engagement with the ghazal grew *directly* out of her involvement in Ahmad's project, an experience she expresses so eloquently to Ahmad that he quotes it in his introduction to *Ghazals of Ghalib*:

*The marvelous thing about these ghazals, is precisely (for me) their capacity for both concentration and a gathering, cumulative effect....a different kind of unity [...] not logically or chronologically connected in any obvious way. I've been trying to make the couplets as autonomous as possible and to allow the unity of the ghazal to emerge from underneath, as it were, through images, through associations, private and otherwise.... what I'm trying for, not always successfully, is a clear image or articulation behind which there are shadows, reverberations, reflections of reflections.* (Rich, qtd. in Ahmad xxv-xxvi)

Rich's observations are essential for understanding how the free-verse ghazal enters English North American poetry, and her usage of the form for original work deserves further attention to examine how the ghazal sensibility allows her to balance "a clear image" alongside "reflections of reflections."

In her ghazals, Rich shows respect for the form's historical conventions while contextualizing such formality within the cultural and subjective limitations of her present literary and historical moment. Her ghazal experiments culminate in two extended sequences: "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib" (published in *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* in 1968) and "The Blue Ghazals" (published in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-*

1970 in 1971).<sup>19</sup> Selections from these sequences were published before they appeared in book form. In the opening acknowledgements of *Leaflets*, Rich notes her previous publication of “Six ghazals in *The Nation*” (n.p.), therefore dating the official appearance of the form in American poetry to before 1968. Selections also appeared in a special centennial booklet in honour of Ghalib, published in 1969. But Rich is not the only poet engaged in such experiments. Publication of occasional ghazals in the late 1960s and early 1970s include appearances by Rich and William Stafford in *The Hudson Review* (1969-70) (noted in Thompson’s research notes at National Library and Archives Canada), by W.S. Merwin in *Poetry* (1970), by David Ray in *Transpacific* (1970), and selections from Ahmad’s anthology in both *Mahfil* (1968) and *Delos* (1970). In addition, publication of “Versions by Thomas Fitzsimmons, David Ray, William Stafford, and Mark Strand first appeared in *The Malahat Review*, Number 14, April, 1970” (Ahmad n.p.), perhaps the first appearance of the free-verse ghazal in Canada. This minor groundswell of interest in the form, accompanied by Ahmad’s anthology and several academic studies on the Urdu ghazal that also emerge in the early 1970s, provide some literary context for Thompson’s first encounters with the form.

Regardless of these pioneering publications, it is Ahmad’s project that has the greatest effect on Rich. In her opening note for “Homage to Ghalib,” Rich identifies her sequence of ghazals as a single poem by saying “This *poem* began to be written after I read Aijaz Ahmad’s literal English versions of the work of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib” (*italics mine*, 59). After explaining how “the structure and metrics used by Ghalib are much stricter” (59) than her own, Rich then outlines what will eventually become the

conventions of the free-verse ghazal form in North America. She highlights her use “of a minimum five couplets to a *ghazal*, each couplet being autonomous and independent of the others” (59), and suggests that “continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single *ghazal*” (59). Given the simultaneity of the concrete and abstract in Ghalib’s work in general, what Rich states next is essential for understanding Thompson’s later individualization of the form in Canada: “My *ghazals* are personal and public, American and twentieth-century; but they owe much to the presence of Ghalib in my mind” (59). This direct expression of debt to Ghalib highlights what ultimately becomes a trademark of the English-language ghazal: intertextual references to the poetic traditions out of and *against which* it is written, a method that links Rich to Thompson by prefiguring a dialogue similar to the one he creates with Yeats in *Stilt Jack* (see Chapter 2). In Rich’s ghazals, such intertextuality is complicated by her dialogic, troubled mention of “LeRoi Jones” (22) in “The Blue Ghazals” and to “LeRoi” (66) in “Homage to Ghalib,” both of which refer to Amiri Baraka, who had by then dismissed white readers in favour of a specific African-American politics (see Caplan 120-123). In “Homage to Ghalib,” Rich’s relationship to Baraka is pleading:

LeRoi! Eldridge! listen to us, we are ghosts  
condemned to haunt the cities where you want to be at home.

The white children turn black on the negative.  
The summer clouds blacken inside the camera-skull. (“Homage” 66)

Here, Rich vehemently demands an avoidance of civil violence by arguing for an equality of races that Baraka refuses to engage. Her insistence that “white children turn black” is

ineffective, and her failure to revolutionize civil rights makes her “condemned.” Rich’s response to “Baraka through Ghalib” (Caplan 123) therefore marks poetic dialogue, in the emergent free-verse ghazal tradition, as fraught with complex self-reference and subjective exploration. Rich’s address to Baraka in “The Blue Ghazals” is even more self-referential than her pleas in “Homage to Ghalib”:

Late at night I went walking through your difficult wood,  
half-sleepy, half-alert in that thicket of bitter roots.

Who doesn’t speak to me, who speaks to me more and more,  
but from a face turned off, turned away, a light shut out.

Most of the old lecturers are inaudible or dead.  
Prince of the night there are explosions in the hall.

The blackboard scribbled over with dead languages  
is falling and killing our children.

Terribly far away I saw your mouth in the wild light:  
it seemed to me you were shouting instructions to us all. (22)

Here, Baraka’s influence on Rich’s writing is much more internal, concerned with how Rich can negotiate the “thicket of bitter roots” of Baraka’s work as it relates to her own social politics. Her acknowledgement that old methods are dying – “the old lecturers are inaudible or dead” – does not diminish her urgency, since such methods continue to affect her writing and her politics, a sentiment epitomized by the “dead languages” of Rich’s “blackboard” “falling and killing our children.” Rather than pleading with Baraka to conform to her expectations, Rich acknowledges his “wild” attempts to guide social politics forward, “shouting instructions to us all.” This ghazal is less about Baraka, therefore, than it is about Rich’s understanding of his influence. While Rich’s

relationship to Ghalib means that the free-verse ghazal's line of influence from Ghalib to Ahmad to Rich to Thompson to Webb is evident both as a critical history and as recorded in the poems themselves, her subjective, ambivalent relationship to Baraka means that each free-verse ghazal poet also writes out of a dual tradition, engaging not only the traditional ghazal's masters, but also her/his own precedents from the Western tradition.

Rich's ghazals are also self-referential in a spirit that anticipates those of Thompson, while at the same time expressing the social and political concerns important to Webb. In "14/7/68: II," for example, Rich establishes the ambiguous use of a second person pronoun to query the relation between her present project and the male tradition out of which it emerges, and against which it is no doubt reacting: "Did you think I was talking about my life?" (62) she asks in her opening couplet. Answer?: "I was trying to drive a tradition up against the wall" (62). In other words, as Webb does later, Rich wants to transform the ghazal by *using* rather than rejecting its traditions. This connection to her poetic predecessors is stressed even more directly in the aforementioned ghazal that links directly to Ghalib, where his "grief, resurrected in pieces, / has found its way to this room from your dark house in Delhi?" (68). The two temporal registers of these lines – nineteenth century India and Rich's evocation of "this room" in 1960s North America – ultimately address the free-verse ghazal's lineage, stressing the important balance between contemporary practitioners and their poetic forebears. This echoes Rich's balance between concrete and abstract reflection, which is subsequently summarized by her realization that "There's a war on earth, and in the skull, and in the glassy spaces, / between the existing and the non-existing" (68). Here, Rich

resists definitive answers by evoking a liminality between the externally concrete – the war in Vietnam, perhaps – and the abstractly interior, a balance that is also functional in the ghazals of Webb and Thompson.

The final couplet of “Homage to Ghalib” is important because it returns to the simultaneously concrete and metaphysical theme of love so important in the delicate balance of many traditional ghazals:

How frail we are, and yet, dispersed, always returning,  
the barnacles they keep scraping from the warship’s hull.

The hairs on your breast curl so lightly as you lie there,  
while the strong heart goes on pounding in its sleep. (69)

Rich’s intimacy in this final couplet is startling, and the spirit it calls forth is also what is transporting in the most moving moments of Thompson’s work. Here, as opposed to the “warship’s hull” that precedes it, hairs on a chest become the object not only of sexual or romantic love, but also the focus for a meditation on the nature of Rich’s personal involvement in perception. The “strong heart” in the ghazal’s final line is simultaneously the speaker’s heart, the lover’s heart, and Rich’s heart. It “goes on” just as the barnacles on the warship are “always returning,” highlighting the poem’s and the poet’s ability to return to love from observations of war, destruction, or chaos. Thus, the poem’s final couplet manages to get outside of the lyric by *using* the lyric, using a self-referential questioning of the nature of tangible knowledge to connect personally to similar metaphysical treatments of love that occur across the arc of the ghazal’s history.

Rich’s ghazals are also important for the tone of their social politics. The nine presented in “The Blue Ghazals,” for example, mark a shift away from the privacy of

“Homage to Ghalib” towards something more directly political, an urgency embedded in Rich’s title and epigraph, which is taken from Charles Olson: “What does not change / is the will to change” (qtd. in *The Will to Change* n.p.). But this is not cold dogma. Rich’s politics are intensely intimate, and her subjective surety perhaps explains the personalization of particular ghazals in her sequence that are dedicated, respectively, to Wallace Stevens (21) and “LeRoi Jones” (22). Part of this politics involves Rich’s engagement with exclusive educational and poetic practices. Her observation that “Most of the old lecturers are inaudible or dead” (22) and “The blackboard scribbled over with dead languages / is falling and killing our children” (22) is a call not only for personal and poetic, but also for social change. Her effort to “Refuse even / the most beloved old solutions” (23) is an attempt not only to renew her own poetry, but also to challenge the socially-inherited limitations she experiences as a *female* poet. This attempt to renew both poetry and social practice is reflected in the final couplets of the “The Blue Ghazals,” wherein Rich’s concerns with the political violence of everyday life combine with her own experience as a gendered subject:

*The moment when a feeling enters the body*  
is political. This touch is political.

Sometimes I dream we are floating on water  
hand-in-hand; and sinking without terror. (24)

These couplets are indicative of the kind of discourses that abounded in late 1960s poetry, which widely recognized the limitations of the lyric stance and subjective ego in articulations of serial or sequential poetics. The free-verse ghazal sensibility arises within such a context. While its preoccupations are unique and its mode of address can be

located as a particular subgenre in the wider movements of open-ended 1960s poetic practice, the early examples of its aesthetic have much in common with a general movement towards fragmentary, open, and contradictory poetics. The fact that Rich's "we" sinks "without terror," for example, highlights not only the propensity of the ghazal's contemporary practitioners to embrace contradictions, but it also showcases Rich's hopes for an emergent feminism in the 1970s (which predates her later assertions that she can't speak for everyone or every *body*).<sup>20</sup> Rich's final "we" illuminates the wide call for social change dominant in the 1960s, a trend not given enough attention in critical overviews of the free-verse ghazal's dynamics. In Rich's ghazal, bodies are *routinely* invaded, making common touches "political" ones. Her use of a tacit *takhallus* ("I dream") therefore combines with the social "we" of her final couplet to include the reader in her potential r/e/volution, inviting him/her to be part of Rich's politics, "floating on water / hand-in-hand," recalling the traditional ghazal's public recitation, where an audience repeats and shares in the delivery of a poet's opening lines. Such a participatory gesture is crucial in the ghazals of Webb and Thompson, which similarly depend on active reader participation to construct poetic meaning. By using the ghazal's intimate disjuncture as it arises out of the period's common call for new poetic models and social change, Rich therefore initiates the free-verse ghazal's reliance on communal interaction. By turning the form's impulsive observations into a call for change, her ghazals are not only marked by their particular cultural context and history, but also by their anticipation of the free-verse form's development in Canada during the 1970s.

**Part Three: The Form Goes North: *the ghazal sensibility in Canada***

That Rich is the most important writer of the ghazal in the U.S. is widely acknowledged (see Caplan). What remains understated in critical studies, however, is Rich's role in shaping *Canada's* poetry, especially since Thompson's understanding of the ghazal is directly filtered through Rich. Once dismissed by Canadian nationalists, this type of cross-border poetic exchange is of central importance for understanding how the form develops in Canada. Rich establishes the ghazal not as a *national* model, but as a local one, based more in a specific New Jersey geography than a hyperbolic American one. The splitting of the ghazal's development into subsequent American and Canadian branches, therefore, is less interesting as a nationalist argument than as a useful shorthand. While the American ghazal has been a recent topic for scholarly study, the form's basic history in Canada is only well-known by a handful of critics and its own practitioners, all of whom pinpoint *Stilt Jack* as its most important ancestor and pay homage to Thompson in much the same way that Rich pays homage to Ghalib.<sup>21</sup> Of these writers, Webb is the most important for my own overview of the form's roots in Canada.

Webb's ghazals are influenced not only by her belated introduction to *Stilt Jack* by Michael Ondaatje (who also edited *Water and Light*), but also extend her turn towards a lyric impulse in the first work to presciently encapsulate the ghazal sensibility in Canadian literature: *Naked Poems*. Because it grows directly out of her participation in the 1963 poetry symposium at UBC, and is indebted to both Black Mountain projectivist poetics and a Japanese haiku sensibility, the processual poetry of *Naked Poems* uncannily

resonates with both the anti-logical, non-narrative methodology of Thompson's work and the period's serial poetics. When she later attempts her own ghazals in *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals*, Webb immediately acknowledges her reliance on Thompson's formal innovations, trying to "semaphore for help (calling stone-dead John Thompson)" (9) in the second line of her text. Despite admitting that she knew "little more about this ancient Persian form than what Thompson had said in his preface" (n.p.), Webb's approach in *Sunday Water* is nonetheless attuned to the ghazal's traditions. Her use of the free-verse ghazal's couplets, disjuncture, and harmonious networks of imagery are expanded and deepened in *Water and Light*, which replaces the Urdu ghazal's spotlight on an idealized beloved and Thompson's mystical Christian focus on divine truth with an ethical exploration of self-location that effects both a transformation of Thompson's style and a continuation of the free-verse ghazal's demand for subjective innovation. With her insistence on spiritual/ethical exploration, Webb's ghazals reveal a collective thirst, perhaps, for a non-rational, non-narrative poetic tradition in Canada *that still uses lyric tools*. By balancing novelty and tradition, her poetry – from *Naked Poems* forward – embraces a transformative poetics that effectively prepares Canada for a new kind of music.

Thompson's ghazals are one way of hearing such harmonies. *Stilt Jack* balances a whole antique tradition by locating experience with an exact geography, an intuitive pen, and a chosen formality. Past its dark borders of bloody hooks, Thompson's ghazals arrive not at a *defined* sense of meaning, but at an *approach* to comprehension that is always in *process*, a "White Salt Mountain" (*Stilt Jack* XI.6) that collapses as you near its

summit at sea. The qualified sublimity you may experience while reading Thompson's ghazals is therefore inexpressible, because it precedes our laws, understandings, and rationalism. Ultimately, *Stilt Jack* actively avoids what Mouré calls "the tyranny of the *a priori* category" (202). Instead, as Rich's ghazals did a half-decade before, and as Webb's will a half-decade after Thompson's death, it *includes* you in its revelatory suspensions of categorical reason, inviting an active, social participation in its formal, personal reflections. From his opening couplet onward, Thompson encourages us to forge a new kind of Canadian library, looking back at specific influences in order to embrace new poetic configurations that not only rely on their predecessors, but also carry us beyond their possible limitations, so that, he implies,

Now you have burned your books: you'll go  
with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart. (I.1)

The complexity and richness articulated by going forward "with nothing" but your "heart" essentially summarizes how the free-verse ghazal develops in Canada by following the lyric impulse within a structured body of literary precedence. Collectively, Ahmad, Rich, Thompson and Webb are midwives to the emergence of an urgent, mature, and deeply nuanced form that requires as much patience, acuity, and insight as any other technical challenge in English-language poetry. The free-verse ghazal in English represents the best of what can be accomplished in a contemporary lyric that is not only self-reflexive and politically contemporary, but also devoted to understanding the roots it sends back across the historical arc of its own traditions to the fading light of Ghalib's Delhi. The development of the free-verse ghazal in Canada is not merely a birth, but a

re-birth, a reincarnation of the form's essential intuitions and harmonies in the context of another century, carefully responsive to the precise cultural dynamics and ripe energies of 1960s North American counter-culture, yet uniquely positioned to inspire a new line of poetic inquiry in the decades that follow.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Many of these preconceptions arguably respond to a lyric more suited to the High Romantics than to contemporary audiences of the 1970s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Thompson's introduction also relies on a reader's familiarity with a wide swath of lyric traditions in English that might, in any decoding of *Stilt Jack*'s intertextual references, allow access to Thompson's particular samplings of English poetry. See Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> This dedication to the free-verse ghazal's conventions is given a different treatment by Webb, who relies on a critique of how the ghazal's formalism is connected to a patriarchal and fundamentally exclusive tradition. See Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps useful to point out, in addition, that the Urdu ghazal borrowed from and surely altered the strict traditions of the Persian form, an idea routinely included in sketches of the ghazal's early history. As Matthews & Shackle note, "all the great masters of the Urdu ghazal were familiar with Persian, and in most cases also composed Persian ghazals themselves" (3). The Urdu ghazal develops, they contend, "as a natural continuation" (3) of the Persian ghazal, even though "no poet born in Persia has since succeeded in rivaling the poetic achievements of the masters of the Urdu ghazals from the early eighteenth century to the present day" (3). Perhaps a further investigation of the Urdu form's relationship to the Persian original would yield insights into the North American ghazal's relationship with its own immediate predecessors.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Ghalib, see both Matthews & Shackle and Ahmad, both of whom claim Ghalib is the better poet. Inversely, see Russell & Islam, whose 1969 study, *Three Moghul Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard UP) commits three full chapters to a critique of Mir to proclaim his work the greatest in Urdu history.

<sup>5</sup> Like Thompson, both Mir and Ghalib are read biographically by critics who routinely stress the immense upheavals and interior grief of their personal lives. For my purposes, both Mir's supposed "madness," reputation for arrogance, and grief and Ghalib's

---

relatively low output of ghazals and public image of recklessness compare to the common critical treatment of Thompson as a troubled and difficult poet.

<sup>6</sup> While Thompson was arguably less influenced by Ghalib's work than by the ghazals of Mir, Rich and Phyllis Webb both dialogue with Ghalib in their ghazals. See Chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> In his introduction, Ahmad discusses how previous translations of Ghalib were very badly executed, attempting to fit the imaginative leaps of the ghazal form into a Tennysonian mode of thinking that did a disservice to the original complexity and cultural specificity of Ghalib's work. Thompson was also involved in translating classical ghazals, evidenced by a project that was never completed, to be modeled after the methodologies of Ahmad's anthology. At least one of the ghazals in *Stilt Jack* (Ghazal XXXV) is a loose translation of a poem by Mir. For more, see Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> There are some significant research notes on the historical ghazal in Thompson's papers at National Library and Archives Canada. Included are not only references to Ahmad's book, but also to other studies that appeared during the same period, most notably the introduction to the Matthews & Shackle collection, which Thompson copied in full.

<sup>9</sup> While the Urdu text of the poem appears in *Classical Urdu Love Lyrics* with exact line-breaks, the English version seems simply to obey the book's margin. I have re-arranged the line breaks to demonstrate the *radif* more clearly. For further examples, see their translations of Sauda (46-7) and Mushafi (80-81). For a more thorough sense of how the traditional form operates in English, see the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

<sup>10</sup> Ali also makes a central connection to similar treatments of Japanese forms in North America during the period, arguing "that when [American poets] heard that an ancient culture sanctions a poem of thematically independent couplets, various surrealistic juices overflowed. It is the same sort of thing that happens with haiku" (10). This is an excellent parallel to the ghazal's emergence as a popular form that, in its least considered articulations, becomes an exercise in egotism or automatic writing rather than a careful, considered, formal challenge. Given the use of Japanese forms in Canadian poetry of the period, perhaps this parallel would prove very useful for a correlative study of formalism as adopted in the carefully constructed haiku, *haibun*, or *utanikki* models forwarded by such poets as Roy Kiyooka, bpNichol, or Fred Wah, all of whom mix formal concerns with an investigation of (and often subsequent rejection of) lyric modalities in their work during the 1970s and 1980s. For my own discussion on the influence of Japanese form, see my discussion of Webb's "haiku sensibility" in Chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the sung or performed aspects of traditional ghazals, see Crozier, Matthews & Shackle, and the introduction to both Ali's and Ahmad's anthologies.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ali validates and celebrates his view in both his own verse, especially in the posthumously published *Call Me Ishmael, Tonight* (New York: Norton, 2003), and the anthology, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (Hanover: Wesleyan, 2000), a project conceived and edited by Ali to champion the great variety of contemporary American poets who write traditionally formal ghazals in English.

<sup>13</sup> While discussing Ahmad's project, Ali *does* admit that one "could make a case for [translators'] discarding of the form in the context of their immediate aesthetics and see in their ghazals a desire to question all kinds of authorities by getting away from linearity and that crippling insistence on 'unity'" (11). Thus, Ali seems to agree with the essential *spirit* of Ahmad's literal translations, which reject the *qafia* and *radif* because they are too difficult to reproduce in English without sounding staged.

<sup>14</sup> Again, Ali also makes excellent, valid points in this regard. Specifically, he praises the work of poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) as being brilliantly political, able to establish a secular grief and tone of political protest by treating political problems as a form of the Beloved, an interpretation of the ghazal's required address to the divine. For more on how Webb makes a similar transformation tenable, see Chapter 5.

<sup>15</sup> The treatment of the form in English as a surrealist exercise has led at least one critic to label the poem's contemporary incarnation as "the bastard ghazal" (Weaver), a view that Ali would surely have supported. For more, see Weaver or the section entitled "Is the ghazal a form or a genre?" in Jalajal's essay.

<sup>16</sup> Sanger's keynote address at the *White Salt Mountain* conference in November 2008 affirmed this sense of a narrative trajectory in *Stilt Jack*. Because the ghazal is essentially disjunctive, and Thompson's lyrics effectively challenge expectations of narrative closure, however, this arc from domestic love to depression to potential resolution, in *Stilt Jack*, is further evidence that Thompson's text forwards an open-ended embrace of negative capability that both continues and refutes lyric traditions. See Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>17</sup> Also of interest for this comparison is Sanger's contention in *SeaRun* that Thompson's ghazals "are far closer in tone, intent, and content to those of Mir Taqi Mir and Ghalib" than his contemporaries, Adrienne Rich and Jim Harrison (7) since both Thompson and traditional poets "work within explicit religious traditions" (7), unlike Rich and Harrison. Thompson, Sanger stresses, was a dedicated Christian, but his "ghazals efface the customary distinctions between sacred and secular not to dismiss the sacred but to assert it" (7). For more, see my discussion of sacredness in Chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> Rich's use of repeated images in her own ghazals recalls not only a similar strategy at work in both *Stilt Jack* and the classical Urdu ghazal tradition in general, but a similar

---

tendency evident in other stripped-down lyric experiments of the period, balancing the classical ghazal tradition with contemporary, North American poetic precedents.

<sup>19</sup> According to Sanger, Thompson knew both of these sequences, and had also read Rich's translations in the Ahmad anthology with close attention (see *SeaRun*).

<sup>20</sup> In "Notes toward a Politics of Location", Rich expresses this limitation as follows: "*You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say 'I'; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through. / And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem*" (224). For more on this essay, see Chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> The best sample of such a study that I have located is David Caplan's 2004 essay, "'In That Thicket of Bitter Roots': The Ghazal in America," which takes its title from Rich's ghazal for "*For LeRoi Jones*" in "The Blue Ghazals" (22).

## Chapter 2

Forming Impulse: From Yeats to Mir in John Thompson's *Stilt Jack*

The exemplary balance John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* achieves between a respectful engagement with predecessors and a break from their poetics is the primary subject of this chapter. It is this inclusive break that allows Thompson to embrace the ghazal sensibility without rejecting the foundational influence of the Western lyric. To chart Thompson's balanced deployment of the ghazal, I read *Stilt Jack* as an extended sequence rather than as a miscellany. When treated biographically, this approach quickly reveals a narrative that unfolds within the formal disjunctures of *Stilt Jack*, delineating a personal journey from domestic bliss (in the first dozen ghazals), to terrible personal turmoil (in the centre of the book), to the heightened reflections of open-ended resolutions (towards the end of *Stilt Jack*).<sup>1</sup> For my purposes, this rough model also illuminates Thompson's engagement with his main predecessor – Yeats – which moves from a relatively happy absorption in Yeatsian lyrics, to a difficult struggle against his own habits (accomplished by engaging a Yeatsian Keats), to the breakthrough of the ghazal's capacity for inclusiveness, disjuncture, and contradiction (solidified by an engagement with Mir). In what follows, I address Thompson's engagement with Yeats (and a Yeatsian version of Keats) in Part Two, and his subsequently liberating embrace of Mir and the ghazal in Part Three. But first, in Part One, I must explain the collage-like method that Thompson uses to evoke and integrate his predecessors throughout his ghazals, an intertextual strategy I call literary "sampling," which ultimately allows Thompson's primary engagement with Yeats to be an inclusive, self-referential dialogue rather than a battle that must result in exclusive domination.

**Part One: From Collage to Sampling: Thompson's Intertextual Methodology**

By dialoguing directly with the poetry of his main predecessors, especially Yeats, Thompson engages an entire line of twentieth-century lyric influence that unfolds alongside the High Modern, and is carried forward from Yeats by Ted Hughes in Britain and by A.J.M. Smith (Thompson's PhD supervisor) in North America. This line of inheritance develops differently than does the parallel genealogy rooted in the Imagism of Pound and H.D..<sup>2</sup> While Thompson's lyric style is indebted to the Yeats line, his embrace of the ghazal sensibility moves him into contact with the Pound line. The resulting balance, in *Stilt Jack*, between a symbolist, lyrical, ironic language and an imagist, projective, self-reflexive impulse is an important part of how Thompson employs the ghazal's intuitive disjuncture without surrendering a more traditional lyric language. By *engaging* with rather than merely rejecting or obeying his predecessors, Thompson's ghazals open to new associations, alterations, and connections that transcend the "brief lyric 'unity'" (Thompson, "Ghazals" n.p.) he "had grown dissatisfied with" (Cooper, "Way Back" 39) by the end of his first book, *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* (1973). But how did Thompson achieve such a balanced transcendence?

Part of the answer is that Thompson's ghazals rely on a spirit of *inclusivity*. While *Stilt Jack* may well be "the most allusive book in Canadian poetry" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 7), Thompson's intertexts are fundamentally absorbed rather than overtly challenged in his ghazals. Except for Thompson's anxious dialogue with Yeats, this strategy is markedly different than the "essentially Romantic theory of lyric" (Perloff, "Postmodernism" 174) forwarded in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, wherein

any “possibility that poetry might deal with anything outside the enclosed self is immediately brushed aside” (Perloff, “Postmodernism” 174). Thompson’s relationship to his predecessors, I contend, is more akin to those techniques pioneered by T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the essential mode of which is “that of *collage*, the setting side by side or juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations between elements. [...] in favour of relations of similarity, equivalence, or identity” (Perloff, “Postmodernism” 183). Since Thompson is writing “at a time when free verse, once revolutionary, has become the orthodoxy of our time and hence the vessel to be shattered” (Perloff, “Postmodernism” 189), his collage techniques are at once revolutionary – because they reject a New Critical desire for what Perloff calls “organic unity” (177) – and established – since they reflect similar strategies employed by the line of influence that moves from Eliot and Pound to Williams to John Cage and postmodernism. Who, besides Yeats, then, are his particular predecessors?

Herein lies the absolutely invaluable role of Sanger’s *SeaRun*, which posits *Stilt Jack* as “a complex, coherent world of allusion, quotation, crisscross reference, and experience” (46), wherein “the Taoist and Sufi reference to *drunken and amatory* at the end of Thompson’s preface becomes a warning, and a confirmation, as to how carefully *Stilt Jack* was written, and how carefully it can be read” (7).<sup>3</sup> Positing Thompson’s borrowings as vital to the imagistic harmony of his ghazals, Sanger meticulously tracks down references to a wide swath of canonical texts, including Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”; Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*; Walton’s *The Compleat Angler*;

Melville's *Moby Dick*; Joyce's *Ulysses*; Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Herodotus; various poems by Rich, Harrison, Donne, Rilke, Dante, Ted Hughes, Trumbull Stickney, Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Mir, Theodor Roethke, René Char, Denise Levertov, Wordsworth, and Gerard Manley Hopkins; texts from Christian (often High Anglican) scripture and rites; the King James Bible; Chinese and Taoist philosophy; and a variety of interwoven gestures towards Aeschylus' Orestes myth. All of these are incorporated into Thompson's text to enhance his content and celebrate his predecessors.

Because such intertexts appear within Thompson's careful evocation of the material present, his collage of intertexts also reflects the era in which he writes. Thus, *Stilt Jack*'s intertextual methodology is correlative to the use of musical samples central to the early days of DJing and hip hop. Pioneered in pop culture collage techniques as long ago as the 1950s, these techniques are only brought to general public attention in the recording experiments of late albums by The Beatles, exactly when modernism's failure had first become common knowledge for artists (according to Andreas Huyssen). For both Thompson and his musical cousins, "sampling" is generally defined as a method wherein an artist includes brief, unacknowledged quotations of other artists, removed from their original contexts and re-worked into the music of a new poetic voice, so that the primary meanings and inferences of said quotations shift, while their original contexts continue to define the multivocality of their newly unified meanings. The result, in most cases, is the creation of a mood or artistic product reliant as much upon the logical unity of a single poetic or musical voice as it is upon a sense of implied, repeated, varied and continued derivative meanings. The sampling artist's intuitive re-constructions of his/her

original subject matter ultimately form a new, unified mosaic that incorporates and openly acknowledges its influences to build a unique, holistic artistic construction.

Thompson's strategy of "stealing" words from others – a "crime" acknowledged before his reading of ghazals-in-progress at U.N.B. (*Reading*) – is therefore similar to a DJ's sample in that his quoted materials appear without italics, quotation marks, or proper citations, signaling a re-invention of original sources as part of Thompson's specific vision.<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Thompson is intentionally in tune with the wider, synchronic sphere of artistic production, wherein sampling becomes increasingly mainstream during the late 1970s; nor do I mean to argue that he is knowingly on the cutting edge of a wide swath of electronic art that emerges during the period. But his use of this technique within the literary realm perhaps indicates that his ghazal sensibility presciently engages with art forms and artistic methodologies that had not yet been given institutionally categorical or canonical parameters. While it might be a stretch to argue that *Stilt Jack's* literary "sampling" makes it an avant-garde text, it is not far-fetched to argue that Thompson's intertextuality is an early example of postmodern aesthetics in Canadian literature. Thompson's "samplings" express a general intersection between one's specific historical era and one's inevitable placement within an already rich, overwhelmingly complex history of artistic expression and cultural production. Part of Thompson's triumph is achieving a balance between the former (which stresses novel innovation) and the latter (which stresses artistic genealogy) by uniquely and inclusively resolving his relationship with his predecessors.

### **Part Two: “High Talk” and Two Hearts: Thompson’s Use of Yeats**

While the bulk of Thompson’s allusions are immediately and painlessly incorporated into his ghazals, for my purposes, the heart of Thompson’s relationship to his poetic predecessors centres on one influence that presents challenges to his literary “sampling”: W.B. Yeats. Because of the towering stature of Yeats in twentieth-century literature, overcoming his influence also means overcoming the traditional lyric habits that are challenged by the ghazal, especially unity and closure. Thompson invokes Yeats not only to wrestle with Yeats’ own poetry, which he deeply admired, but also to consider his own internalization of that style, creating a dynamic, in *Stilt Jack*, that resonates with Bloom’s theory despite Thompson’s “sampling” methodology.<sup>5</sup> Bloom’s contention that acknowledging one’s overwhelming debt is a necessary part of artistic growth because “no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded” (154) seems applicable to Thompson’s attitude towards Yeats, as does his insistence that “[p]oetry whose hidden subject is the anxiety of influence is naturally of a Protestant temper” (152). But rather than overcoming a predecessor by wrestling with him/her “even to the death” (5), Thompson *engages* Yeats (and the lyric tradition he represents) in order to break into a new sensibility that can ultimately allow his *inclusion* alongside a myriad of intertexts, a transformation that does not easily fit into Bloom’s neo-Romantic ideology.

Because overcoming Yeats’ influence is part of Thompson’s “sampling” strategy, it is useful to chart his central influence on Thompson’s poetry before the composition of *Stilt Jack*. Thompson’s traditional English training at a variety of Manchester schools from age four to seventeen fostered his initial interest in Yeats (see Sanger, *Collected* 18),

which continued while he studied psychology at the University of Sheffield from 1955-58, and developed under the tutelage of A.J.M. Smith during his graduate studies at Michigan State from 1960-66 (see Sanger, *Collected* 21-6). By the early 1970s, while teaching at Mount Allison, Thompson published an ironic translation into local vernacular of Yeats "Leda and the Swan" called "William Butler Yeats Surfaces Somewhere in the Maritimes Complete With Myths, Or, Leda and the What?" (*Collected* 240; 272). His first trade publication, *At the Edge of the Chopping There are No Secrets*, also includes direct references to Yeats. In "Our Arcs Touch" (*Collected Poems* 54), he refers to Yeats' "Estrangement: Extracts from a Diary kept in 1909" (qtd. in Sanger, *Collected* 258); in "January February March Et Cetera," he quotes "crazy salads" from Yeats' "A Prayer for My Daughter" (*Collected Poems* 72; 259); and in "The Skins of a Dream," he calls the woods "wine-dark" after Yeats' "A Woman Young and Old" (*Collected Poems* 79; 260).<sup>6</sup> All of these Yeatsian references are essentially respectful.

In *Stilt Jack*, however, Yeats is engaged much more thoroughly and critically.<sup>7</sup> The centrality of Yeats in Thompson's ghazals is difficult to refute given Thompson's own admission in a letter to R.D. Wayne Tomkins, a fellow professor at Mount Allison, that they are meant to be "a dialogue with WBY" (qtd. in Sanger, *Collected* 263).<sup>8</sup> Thompson confirmed this in his U.N.B. reading, where he introduced his ghazals-in-progress by explaining that "There are a lot of steals in these too; in some ways I think there's a dialogue with Yeats going on, and with some other people, too" (*Reading*). It is this dialogue, variously admiring, full of seething frustration, and/or engaged through explorative contemplation, which motivates Thompson's overall deployment of the

ghazal form in *Stilt Jack*, staging a break from Yeats' lyricism that simultaneously admits and admires his influence.

Unsurprisingly, Thompson's allusions to Yeats are both validating and mocking in *Stilt Jack*, expressing a sense of "awe with dismissal" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 17) of the older poet's influence. Respectful and serious references to Yeats primarily occur along two referential threads.<sup>9</sup> The first of these quotes Yeats' mature, revisionist, sonnet "High Talk" (published the year of Thompson's birth, 1938), and appears in Thompson's title (*Stilt Jack*), first epigraph ("Those great sea horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn" [n.p.]), ghazal XXVIII (as "STILT JACK" [XXVIII.6]), and ghazal XXXVII (as "high talk" [XXXVII.4]). The second thread refers to Yeats' epitaph at the end of "Under Ben Bulben" ("Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!" [92]) in ghazal I ("a hard, hard eye" [I.4]), ghazal XVIII ("Cast a cold eye, cast / a cold eye" [XVIII.4]), and ghazal XXXVII ("not love, and hard eyes / over the cold" [XXXVII.6]). While these allusions seem straightforwardly admiring, other references to Yeats in *Stilt Jack* are parodic, as in ghazal IX: "Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats./ Why wouldn't the man shut up?" (IX.1). This anxiety continues with acerbic references that question Yeats' "The Cold Heaven" by scrutinizing "The rook delighting heaven? / I've seen one crow" (XIII.1) (Sanger, *SeaRun* 19-20), and inverting Yeats' "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?" to "why should not young men be mad?" (XX.1). However, these critical references are not merely confrontational; they also stage an *internal* struggle. The Yeats invoked in *Stilt Jack* is not necessarily the historical Yeats, therefore, so much as it represents Thompson's internalization of Yeats and the Western canon he represents.

Perhaps the best example of this internalization is the dialogue Thompson highlights in ghazal IX, an absolutely pivotal poem in *Stilt Jack*, which begins with an evocation that poses as a rejection, originating the self-referential doubt that subsequently resonates throughout the rest of Thompson's text:

Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats. Yeats.  
Why wouldn't the man shut up?

The word works me like a spike harrow:  
by number nine maybe I get the point.

It's all in books, save the best part; God knows  
where that is: I found it once, wasn't looking.

I've written all the poems already,  
why should I write this one:

I'll read Keats and eye the weather too,  
smoke cigarettes, watch Captain Kangaroo.

Big stones, men's hands, the shovel  
pitched properly. The wall of walls rises.

If I weren't gone already, I'd lie down right now:  
have you ever heard children's voices?

Sometimes I think the stars scrape at my door, wanting in:  
I'm watching the hockey game.

Likely there's an answer: I'm waiting,  
watching the stones. (IX.1-9)

What is at work here is multiple and singular, complex and simple, self-referential and self-effacing, a record of success and a record of failure. Process is central. Thompson admits to finding "the best part," for example, only when he "wasn't looking"; he tells us he's "waiting" for a "*Likely*" answer, beginning to understand, but not *arriving* at

conclusions. This is why “by number nine maybe I get the point” is a reference to this, the ninth ghazal in the book, a connection emphatically declared in Thompson’s editorial notes.<sup>10</sup> He is both present and “gone already.” He admits, while writing *this* poem, that he has “written all the poems already.” What is central, then, is his existence *within* multiplicity, his final resolution that the best strategy, in the end, is not *permanently* metaphysical speculation or declaration, but “watching the stones,” and “watching the hockey game.” Thompson’s internalization of Yeats’ poetics is similarly in process throughout *Stilt Jack*, and actively explored via both self-critique and self-reference.

In ghazal IX, such processual self-referentiality is made possible by Thompson’s opening couplet. Thompson does not tell Yeats to “shut up”; he asks why Yeats would *not* “shut up,” a complaint that speaks less to Yeats’ past career than to the influence of Yeats’ poetry on Thompson’s present poetics. Rather than being merely evasive, many of the remaining couplets in the poem express failures of language and imagination: “maybe I get the point,” “It’s all in books, save the best part,” “why should I write,” “watching the hockey game” instead of considering “the stars,” “Likely there’s an answer.” As evidenced here in a tentative turn towards processual poetics – “maybe,” “waiting”, “watching”, “likely” – Thompson therefore recognizes both a canonical and a personal debt to his primary predecessor; but he simultaneously rails against it, ultimately relying on the ghazal’s essential resistance to closure and logical unity to break away from the limitations of Yeats while also presenting his influence on his poetic practices.

In what follows, I will chart this inclusive, progressive embrace, critique, and transcendence of Thompson’s Yeatsian model in three ways: by considering Thompson’s

resonance with the mature Yeats via a close reading of “High Talk,” by postulating his subsequent use of “low” pop-cultural references as a counterbalance to the “high talk” of poetry, and by discussing how Thompson’s alliance with a Yeatsian version of Keats allows him to transcend the predominant authority of Yeats in order to embrace his influence as one of many functional within *Stilt Jack*.

***“High Talk”: The Mature Yeats in Thompson***

Thompson’s internal dialogue with Yeats is evoked from the very start of his ghazals, when he borrows, for his book’s title, a phrase from the sonnet whose last line also provides *Stilt Jack*’s first epigraph, Yeats’ “High Talk”:

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.  
What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,  
And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher,  
Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence or a fire.  
Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but poor shows,  
Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes,  
Because women in the upper storeys demand a face at the pane,  
That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,  
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.  
All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose  
Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks loose;  
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;  
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn. (73)

A focus of several critical explorations of the later Yeats, “High Talk” is often read as a summary of the poet’s mature poetics, wherein an ironic voice critiques the Victorian assumptions evident in his own, earlier work, a strategy commonly analysed in critical discussions of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.”<sup>11</sup> In “High Talk,” a contemporary

craftsperson is dismissed because his/her lack of “high stilts” means that his/her poems never catch the public eye as a recognizably showy “procession” might. This not only criticizes the public’s approval of *familiar* artistic forms, but also critiques the public demand for *novelty*, which requires that seemingly new content be expressed in familiar registers, or that new forms constantly be presented to counter old ones. The public demand for “Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes” and “a face at the pane” therefore dismisses Yeats’ traditional circus animals – “piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions” – as “poor shows,” regardless of their potential artistic merits. This is a trap for the Stilt-Jack, because he is unable to propose the falsity of staged art (“led bears, caged lions”) as a subject for artistic reflection. As a result, he becomes “wild,” overwhelmed by a public need for familiar forms of entertainment that simultaneously dismiss those new artistic or philosophical models that might affirm his melancholic insights. Rather than reaching a willing audience, an art that stresses the falsity of its own artifice is doomed, Yeats implies, a worry suggested in “High Talk” by the low stilts stolen by “Some rogue of the world” for either utilitarian use “to patch up a fence” or use in “a fire.” That this worry is both generational and genealogical – passed “from stilt to stilt, from father to child” – is significant, because it marks as permanent the public desire for either familiar forms of art or constant (and therefore conventional) change and newness, rather than positing such demands as exceptional responses to a markedly desperate era.

When the “dawn” arrives, then, Yeats understands that it will be followed by another cycle that leads to a further sense of night. Perhaps this is why his speaker figures “All metaphor” as loping through the darkness, seeking a new, compelling form

to express the seemingly eternal failure of artistic forms to investigate human existence. When “the dawn” breaks, via “the terrible novelty of light,” it receives not an ovation or a meditation, but great laughter and a baring of teeth, a combination of irreverent joy and hopeless intimidation. The dawn, after all, is not something a writer can control; it “breaks loose” no matter what Malachi or Yeats might desire. That Malachi decides to “stalk on, stalk on” despite recognizing the cyclical pattern of the public demand for newness or familiarity suggests that Yeats is not only commenting on the general dynamics of artistic reception, but also mounting a self-critique. Perhaps this explains why the voice of Yeats’ poem is the voice of a worker, a jack who offers products that give us a temporary perspective – standing on stilts – to view our dailiness, a critique not only of the “high talk” of poetic rhetoric, but also of Yeats’ own engagement with such talk in his poetry.<sup>12</sup> Just as Thompson will deceptively call himself “just a man who goes fishing” (XXII.1) in *Stilt Jack* (a claim that recalls Yeats’ desire to understand a “wise and simple man” [3] in “The Fisherman”) perhaps Yeats is telling us that he is essentially a worker, a craftsman, and that the elevation earned through standing on the stilts of poetic perspective must always be followed by a fall from such heights, a return to the earth via a self-conscious understanding of one’s role in the public imagination.

Thompson seems to share this self-critique. That the first draft of Thompson’s posthumously published poem “Professor’s Last Stand” is written on the back of a copy of “High Talk” is therefore a significant detail.<sup>13</sup> His efforts in “Professor’s Last Stand” to encourage students to think for themselves, to resist blindly following their professor’s preoccupations, offer a lesson in how Thompson may have read and used Yeats for *Stilt*

*Jack*, and/or how he hoped his own poetic inheritors might use his breakthroughs in their own practices. The “high talk” of the Yeatsian tradition needs to be carefully considered and contextualized while reading *Stilt Jack*, in other words, not simply swallowed whole. When Thompson notes that “I guess there are a lot of words / half-words, syllables (etc) lying on the floor” in “Professor’s Last Stand” (*Collected* 251), he does so in order to ask his students to leave them alone, advising “for Christ’s sake don’t pick them up, please / don’t believe a word I’ve said” (*Collected* 251). This ironic advice to take seriously a message of rejection and individualism relates fundamentally to a similarly paradoxical one delivered in “High Talk.” Both poems describe situations wherein a creator – the professor, the Stilt-Jack – continues with her/his craft despite his/her own sense of failure or isolation, laughing at light amidst a great darkness, encouraging a belief in disbelief, and continuing to work despite the failures inherent in her/his attempts to articulate pressing contradictions and insights.

“High Talk” therefore demonstrates to Thompson that formal concerns always guide poetic content, making self-consciously clear, as Olson put it (quoting Robert Creeley), that the form of one’s verses is “NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (148). Yeats’ sonnet, after all, concerns a stilt-maker’s disillusionment with the grand old parade. Thus, it is ironically written – in rhyming couplets – to ironize a grand old style, complete with breakage between octave and sestet. Malachi’s subsequent decision to keep working despite the fact that “whatever I have learned has run wild” echoes themes of continuance that are also implied by *Stilt Jack*’s staging of self-conflict. Malachi’s self-positioning between tradition and innovation is therefore a

central metaphor for Thompson, himself. Both Thompson's speaker and Malachi continue seeking truth, regardless of the perceived limitations of their verse. When Thompson's speaker claims that he "Can't believe it, knowing nothing" (XXXVIII.7) at the end of *Stilt Jack*, "knowing nothing" is not only an expression of failure, but also an accomplishment of non-logical insight, a sentiment that echoes Malachi's view of "the dawn" in "High Talk." Thompson's effort to investigate formal concerns within an anti-logical structure (the ghazal) therefore reflects Yeats' reinvigoration of an outdated form (the sonnet) to write against the sentiments it traditionally props up.

Sanger contends that such structural attentiveness stems from Thompson's "determination to write poetry of the *parole* – as had Heraclitus, Rimbaud, Holderin, Rilke, Char, and Yeats – at a time when the 'high style' Yeats had inherited from the nineteenth century and refined to his own purposes was really no longer accessible" (*SeaRun* 17). That Yeats' sonnet is entitled "High Talk" is a joke that is not lost on Thompson, since philosophical consideration is fundamentally at odds, in the poem, with the "wild" endeavours of the stilt jack. Thompson's own "wild" impulses – represented by the "imaginative leaps" and startling juxtapositions of his ghazals – are similarly difficult to articulate within traditional forms; thus, "Thompson knew he had to find his own way, without bequests" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 17). Because the Yeatsian sonnet that he deeply respects is an impossible model for his own writing, Thompson highlights its inadequacies in his introduction to *Stilt Jack*. Unlike traditional Western forms, he writes, the couplets of a ghazal "have no necessary logical, progressive, narrative, thematic (or whatever) connection" (n.p.). Thus, "[t]he ghazal is immediately

distinguishable from the classical, architectural, rhetorically and logically shaped English sonnet” (n.p.) because “It breaks, has to be listened to as a song: its order is clandestine” (n.p.). Because Thompson was not arrogant enough to assume that this “clandestine” “order” could be understood without a thorough and honestly considered record of his own literary inheritance, Yeats and the Western canon he implicitly represents become inclusively dialogic in *Stilt Jack* as he struggles to acknowledge and simultaneously transform traditional lyric methodologies. Thus, as John W.H. Bell notes, “[w]here Thompson apparently repudiates the prophetic role of the poet suggested by the name Malachi, he nevertheless scatters echoes of the mature Yeats throughout this book” (41). While he refutes the “logical” shape of the English sonnet, he does not deny or reject its influence on his ghazal sensibility, which uses lyric language in a new, disjunctive formality in order to engage contradictory realities.

Such contradictions inform Thompson’s only overt use of *takhallus* – the traditional inclusion of one’s pen-name in a ghazal’s final couplet – in *Stilt Jack*:

I haven’t got time for the pain,  
name your name,  
  
the white whale, STILT JACK, in her face,  
where I have to go. (XXVIII.5-6)

In Thompson’s manuscript notes, this *takhallus* originally read “John Thompson” rather than “STILT JACK,” a change handwritten by Thompson, himself.<sup>14</sup> By equating the generic role of a jack with the specificity of his own name, it seems that Thompson tries to inhabit the role of Yeats’ stilt-maker.<sup>15</sup> By replacing the original specificity of his name with the more generic “Stilt Jack,” however, Thompson makes a more general

comment on the nature of the poet. A poet is ruled, he implies, not only by metrics or biography, but also by a sense of intuition and impulse that goes (following Roethke's lead) not only where s/he wants, but, more importantly "where I *have* to go" (my italics, XXVIII.6).<sup>16</sup> This dynamic between an adopted formalism and an inherently kinetic poetic energy is central to Thompson's relationship with Yeats.

It is also a foundational part of *Stilt Jack's* original conception, inspiring Thompson to "lay claim" to "the Malachi Stilt Jack poem as title or epigraph" (qtd. in Sanger, *Collected* 263) as early as the fall of 1973, evidence that his impulse was always balanced by his form. The fact that this important balance is achieved by Thompson's *takhallus* is a detail not lost on Sanger, who writes that

*STILT JACK* [...] is both the poet and poetry, both of them amorally turbulent, unpredictable, calculating. Their roots are in sacred tradition, the *garden*, and in the secular, the *foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart and dirt*. *Stilt Jack's* is a poetry at once aristocratic and common. It is a poetry both of high style and contempt for the contrivance of style. In the profoundest sense, it joins the sacred and the profane. Perhaps it was with these congruencies in mind that Roethke wrote in his notebook: *I'd say the intuitive worker might take some hints from what Yeats did at the very last in 'High Talk'*. (*SeaRun* 34)

If Sanger is right, Thompson's *takhallus* not only recognizes his relationship to Yeats and the Western canon, but also to the ghazal tradition, which requires a simultaneous address to the poet's lover and the divine, and inspires an equal treatment of high and low, dark and light, and sacred and profane. What is central in such oppositions is that Thompson's concerns run parallel, if not always synchronously, with those expressed in "High Talk." In both poems, work that is traditionally considered unenlightened or "low" culture (which Sanger calls "common") – Malachi as proletariat, Thompson as hunter/gatherer –

is presented *alongside* more routinely canonized elements traditionally deemed “high” (which Sanger calls “aristocratic”) – including the poetry itself. Yeats’ worker uses his “low” status in order to present an enlightened, ironic understanding that exposes not only the “high style” of Yeats’ early poetics, but also expresses his subsequent “contempt for the contrivance of style” in his later writings. In the process, Yeats both endorses and critiques his own use of literary language, at once invoking and rejecting “high talk.” How Thompson proceeds in a similar fashion deserves further discussion.

***“Low” Talk: Popular Culture as Counterpoint***

In Thompson’s work, a critique of poetic “high talk” is achieved via postmodern references to popular culture. As Andreas Huyssen notes in *After the Great Divide*, artists in the 1970s were “working out of the ruins of the modernist edifice, raiding it for ideas, plundering its vocabulary and supplementing it with [...] images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary mass culture” (196). Huyssen’s view of the postmodern sensibility seems to clarify what I have been discussing as Thompson’s formal self-positioning regarding his engagement with Yeats:

[...] my main point about contemporary postmodernism is that it operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress vs. reaction, left vs. right, present vs. past, modernism vs. realism, abstraction vs. representation, avant-garde vs. Kitsch. (217)

*Stilt Jack* certainly situates itself between such binaries, a strategy supported by the ghazal sensibility’s insistence on inclusion and contradiction. But if high modernist

mockery of pop culture was an outdated artistic model by the 1970s, as Huyssen contends, Thompson's deployment of "low" cultural imagery is serious rather than ironic.

Often, elements of pop culture in *Stilt Jack* are deployed to counteract pretension, while canonical references are presented alongside "merely" popular ones in order to overcome the limitations of Yeats' influence. This is arguably why Thompson decides, in ghazal IX, to "smoke cigarettes, watch Captain Kangaroo" (IX.5) rather than "write this" poem, a wry critique that references not only a children's TV show, but also lyrics from the 1965 Statler Brothers song, "Flowers on the Wall,"<sup>17</sup> the chorus of which clearly speaks of Thompson's state of mind regarding his own literary endeavours:

Counting flowers on the wall  
That don't bother me at all  
Playing solitaire til dawn with a deck of 51  
Smoking cigarettes and watching Captain Kangaroo  
Now don't tell me I've nothing to do.

While the futile nature of this chorus echoes Malachi's realization, in "High Talk," that his stilts are bound for fences and fires, Thompson's presentation of such sophisticated social commentary within the supposedly pedestrian realm of pop culture collapses the division between "high" forms of art and "low" culture. That he sometimes states a *preference* for the popular realm expresses antagonism towards the lofty "high talk" that Yeats both represents and writes against. Because he has internalized Yeats, this critique is also a *self*-critique, exposing a self-conflict that pits Thompson's public image as a down-to-earth outdoorsman against his roles both as a professor and as a creator of elusive poetic experimentation. While Thompson's "low" culture fundamentally rebels against the rigidly refined barriers of intellectual or elevated art forms, his self-conflict

scrutinizes his own “high” role in the production of esoteric literature. By critiquing his poetic teachers, Thompson ultimately questions his *own* ability to avoid repeating or affirming the posturing that he finds questionable in their work.

If Huyssen is correct that quoting pop culture in the 1970s means launching a critique against modernism – and therefore against Yeats – *Stilt Jack*’s combined references to “mass” and “high” culture also mock Thompson’s own temptations to grandiose aphorisms. One sample of this strategy is evident in couplets from Ghazal VII:

Terror, disaster, come to me from America.  
Middle of the night. Highs in the seventies. Penny Lane. Albany. Albany?

What letters of van Gogh I remember, I’ve forgotten.  
He cut off his ear. Crows. Potato eaters.

[...]  
I’m waiting for Janis Joplin: why,  
why is it so dark? (VII.1-2, 4)

Here, Thompson highlights not only a pedestrian weather report (“Highs in the seventies”) and generic urbanity (“Albany”), but also claims to have “forgotten” the importance of Vincent van Gogh’s imagery (of which “Crows” and “Potato eaters” figure prominently in the imagistic network of *Stilt Jack*) while remembering and anticipating both The Beatles (“Penny Lane”) and “Janis Joplin.” Van Gogh and Joplin are similar, even if van Gogh is seen retrospectively as representative of high culture (because never acclaimed during his lifetime) and Joplin is figured as popular (despite some of her work being credited with artistic merit). Both struggled with mental illness and substance abuse, as did Thompson, lending an intertextual undercurrent of tonal urgency to their inclusion in *Stilt Jack*.<sup>18</sup>

What is evident in such intertexts is that Thompson's self-conflict analogously concerns a tension between his own impulses (often figured as crass, chaotic, drunken, and/or visceral) and the tightly controlled influence of Yeats (and the mannered, Western canon he supposedly represents). If references to pop culture are meant to challenge Thompson's reliance on Yeats as a reified model, his Yeatsian intertexts are equally meant to contest his willingness to relax into pop culture and triviality. Thompson needs both of these elements in order to launch a balanced self-critique and break through old binaries into a new poetic approach with the ghazal; citing only one of them would reduce his personal struggles to a one-dimensional effort to achieve a firm resolution rather than to open his writing to unexpected insights. Thus, it is only after fusing "low" and "high" sources (Joplin and van Gogh) that Thompson begins to break through the domination of Yeats:

I talk to a poet: he goes on, drunk:  
I pray he's writing, don't dare ask.

Hang on, hang on: I'm listening,  
I'm listening to myself. (VII.5-6)

Here, Thompson realizes self-awareness by "listening to myself" rather than relying on an exterior poetic model. Such self-realization begins a struggle that continues until the penultimate ghazal of *Stilt Jack*, which ultimately dismisses "stories: yes, and / high talk: the exact curve of the thing" (XXXVII.4), a critique directed not only at the Western canon that enables his lyric impulse and informs his literary "sampling," but also at what Thompson perceives as his own, lyrical shortcomings in *Stilt Jack*.

*Words from a sweet-shop schoolboy: Embracing a Yeatsian Keats*

To overcome such shortcomings, Thompson aligns himself with a literary version of Keats. The Keats that Thompson engages, however, is not the actual *historical* figure of Keats so much as the figure Yeats creates in his early dismissal of Keatsian Romanticism. Thus, it is no coincidence that the first mention of Keats in *Stilt Jack* occurs in Ghazal IX alongside “Captain Kangaroo” following Thompson’s most overt engagement with Yeats (“why wouldn’t the man shut up?” [IX.1]). When Thompson places himself on Keats’ deathbed in Ghazal XVII to respond to the poet’s oft-quoted dying words, “*Severn – I – lift me up – I am dying*” (qtd. in Sanger, *SeaRun* 22) by writing “Lift me up, lift me up..., he said: / I would have, I would” (XVII.2), therefore, his sympathy is directed less at the *actual* Keats than it is deployed *against* Yeats’ dismissal of Keats. By embracing the Romantic, impulsive Keats constructed by Yeats, Thompson ultimately transcends Yeats’ stranglehold on his poetics, not by *rejecting* Yeats, but by folding his influence into an embrace of the ghazal sensibility. To understand the difference, perhaps it will prove useful to clarify Yeats’ 1915 treatment of Keats in “Ego Dominus Tuus.”

Placing Keats in a subservient, inexperienced, apprentice-like role, Yeats’ speaker in “Ego Dominus Tuus” says that “I see a schoolboy when I think of him / With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window” (84), a post-Victorian denigration of Romantic sensibility.<sup>19</sup> Situating his insult in a dialogue between “Hic” and “Ille,” Yeats’ speaker concedes that “No one denies to Keats love of the world” (83) or “his deliberate happiness” (83), but s/he also asks a central question: “His art is happy but who knows his mind?” (84). Thus, Yeats’ speaker postulates that Keats died “ignorant” (84), with

“His senses and his heart unsatisfied” (84). The subtext, of course, is that the ultimate path to a satisfied heart is a well-articulated mind, not necessarily a “happy” art. Yeats’ dismissal of Keats therefore prefigures Thompson’s qualified transcendence of Yeats. However, Thompson’s ghazals arguably depend less upon the mind’s control than the heart’s impulsive, non-rational connections. This is why Thompson eventually embraces a poetics of impulse, deliberately assuming a “schoolboy” role as a method for refuting the logical influence of Yeats on his approach to a non-Western poetic tradition. Keats becomes a double for Yeats in *Stilt Jack*: an anti-Yeats and an anti-self.

To understand how this affects the relationship between Thompson and Yeats, it is useful to consider the penultimate lines of “Ego Dominus Tuus”:

Hic     Why should you leave the lamp  
          Burning alone beside an open book,  
          And trace these characters upon the sand;  
          A style is found by sedentary toil  
          And by the imitation of great masters.

Ille     Because I seek an image not a book.  
          Those men that in their writings are most wise  
          Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.  
          I call to the mysterious one who yet  
          Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
          And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
          And prove of all imaginable things  
          The most unlike, being my anti-self,  
          And standing by these characters disclose  
          All that I seek; [...] (84-5)

Here, it is not the speaker, but “my double” or “my anti-self” who can clarify “All that I seek.” For Thompson, it is therefore not ultimately true that “style is found by sedentary toil / And by the imitation of great masters.” Rather, as Bloom suggests, style at least

partially arises from a *transcendence* of one's precedents, at times by embracing models that counter their influences. For Thompson, this counterpoint is Keats.<sup>20</sup>

Thompson's progress from exterior imitation to interior self-realization is therefore anchored by his embrace of a Yeatsian version of Keats. This becomes clear when one contrasts *Stilt Jack*'s opening couplet, wherein Thompson's speaker tells us "Now you have burned your books: you'll go / with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart" (I.1), the last three words of which quote "Ego Dominus Tuus," with Ghazal XXXVII's opening couplet: "Now you have burned your books, you'll go with nothing. / A heart" (XXXVII.1).<sup>21</sup> By removing the originally "blind, stupefied" qualifications of his speaker's "heart," Thompson implies that he begins *Stilt Jack* by seeking Yeats' type of "blind, stupefied" wisdom, but concludes with something else, aligning himself with Keats in order to transcend and incorporate Yeats' influence without denying its foundational influence on his poetics. While it is true that "Voices of other poets haunt the lines (Yeats, Roethke, Ted Hughes) [of *Stilt Jack*, therefore], the elemental images and the compassion are Thompson's own" (Fagan 6). If Yeats represents what books have been "burned" en route to this self-realization, perhaps Thompson is arguing that one must not only self-consciously overcome but also respectfully recognize one's forebears before one can move towards a new model.<sup>22</sup>

It is only by so balancing an awareness of lyric influence against a transcendence of lyric predispositions that the ghazals of both Thompson and Phyllis Webb are able, according to Douglas Barbour,

[...to] attain a highly lyric tone when necessary yet refuse the traditional temptations of lyric egotism and sentimentalism [...] this is their great accomplishment, made possible through their imaginative transformations of an alien and highly conventional form into a new and exploratory one in English. (104)

If Barbour is right, Thompson's use of a Yeatsian Keats illuminates his formal desire to get out of the lyric without denying its foundational influence on his writing. The "traditional temptations of lyric egotism and sentimentalism" are therefore a crucial part of Thompson's self-conflict in *Stilt Jack*, symbolized by the antagonistic relationship he stages between Yeats and a Yeatsian Keats. Essentially, this antagonism enables Thompson to apply conventional language within an unconventional ghazal formality. The manner in which he moves forward from such balanced transcendence into "a new and exploratory" sensibility involves his relationship with a new mentor: Mir Taqi Mir.

### **Part Three: Going After Mir's "beautiful terrors"**

While his influence certainly enables it, it is not Yeats that ultimately solidifies an original and visionary voice in *Stilt Jack*, but Thompson's alignment with classical ghazal writers. Thus, Thompson's research on the ghazal is very important for understanding his relationship between Western traditions and the ghazal form. Already wary of the power of poetic influences, Thompson follows the leads of Rich and Harrison, examining the traditional ghazal form in order to engage with and overcome its particularities, translating its exacting cultural specificity – meter, rhyme, gesture, communal imagery – into an appropriate English-language form. In the process, he overcomes the dominance of modern/Romantic lyrics to realize his own subjectivity. In what follows, I will briefly

examine this progression by first considering Thompson's initial experiments with the ghazal form and then discussing his subsequent relationship to the form's masters, epitomized in *Stilt Jack* by Thompson's collaborative translations of Mir Taqi Mir who, along with Ghalib, is perhaps the most famous of all Urdu poets.<sup>23</sup> What is at stake in *Stilt Jack's* engagement with Mir is Thompson's ability to recuperate the lyric as a viable part of the free-verse ghazal form he helps to establish in Canada.

Part of Thompson's journey towards a workable free-verse ghazal model remains evident in his writing notebook (which Sanger calls the "Black Book"), wherein nearly all of the ghazals in *Stilt Jack* are first recorded and edited. Thompson's first few drafts for *Stilt Jack* not only evidence the basic tenets he eventually adopts, but also indicate experimentation. The most obvious of these explorations involves the strict couplet format of the Urdu ghazal. Although Thompson eventually adheres to this tenet in all but one of his book's couplets ("I don't know" [XXXVI.1]), his early drafts are sometimes written in three-line stanzas, perhaps echoing some of the translations in Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib* anthology.<sup>24</sup> This experimental approach is evident in first drafts for Ghazals II, III and IV (which also include solo lines), and repeated for the first two couplets of Ghazal V, which were originally three-line stanzas, but were later arranged into regular couplets on a facing page.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Ghazal II originally ended with a three-line stanza, and opened with two others, followed by a solo line that read "and old acquaintance" (a phrase that currently begins couplet four), and couplets three and four of Ghazal III had three lines each until the opening segment ("Why I'm reading these foolish poems, I don't know") was removed during editing and couplet four was changed

to conform to Thompson's eventual style.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the first ghazals that Thompson wrote for *Stilt Jack* originally had conventional titles rather than the roman numerals he seems to have adopted from Rich and Ahmad for his final manuscript. These titles only exist in the first drafts of the first five ghazals. In the *Black Book*, respectively, they are "Setting the Chimney Stone: A Ghazal: for Wayne [Tomkins]: 23 September 1973" (ghazal I), "Together, carefully, we make our bed" (ghazal II), "Shall these bones, live" / "(for Wayne: it's my turn)" (ghazal III), "Another ghazal" (ghazal IV), and "Two Poems" (ghazal V). That *all* of these early experiments end with Ghazal V is an indication that Thompson's writing initially relied upon a methodological spirit of experimentation in order to determine his best approach for writing ghazals in English. By attempting and subsequently rejecting some of the formal alternatives also explored in the Ahmad anthology, Thompson effectively establishes the free-verse ghazal's formal parameters in Canada, an influence that continues to be felt. In short, Thompson moves from an inherited poetics of formal constraint (the Urdu ghazal) to an interlude of experimentation (via early drafts) to a regular formal method (in *Stilt Jack*), a process that echoes his engagement with Yeats in *Stilt Jack*.

Besides these early drafts, another passage in *Stilt Jack* illustrates this formal evolution: Ghazal XXXV. This poem was originally written as part of an unrealized translation project that Thompson tentatively began in the early 1970s with a Michigan professor named Surjit Singh Dulai.<sup>27</sup> Included in the *John Thompson Fonds* are documents that support this claim, as well as a response letter to Thompson from Surjit, identifying Thompson's previous query about critical overviews of the ghazal's history.

In his letter, Surjit not only recommends various critical overviews and anthologies that Thompson uses to fill out his understanding of the form, but also implies profound respect for Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib*. As Surjit puts it, "Some remarkable translations & take-offs from Urdu have been done recently by teams of native speakers & practicing poets of English" (n.p.). His subsequent inclusion of Thompson in this emerging tradition is spelled out with the following question: "Would you be interested in pursuing something similar in collaboration with me?" (n.p.). It seems evident, in retrospect, that this inquiry is part of what fuelled Thompson's devotion to the ghazal, especially since his papers include a title page that envisions an eventual translation project on Mir comprising "50 ghazals./ 30 pages intro. / life. / place in Urdu. / Urdu poetry. / ghazal. // catchy title // Mir in subtitle" (Thompson, *Mir Taqi Mir* n.p.). Ghazal XXXV is the only completed element of this envisioned project, but Thompson's deep respect for the ghazal tradition is evident when one examines his careful notes for this poem.<sup>28</sup>

Currently collected in a thick folder labeled "Mir Taqi Mir: Ghazals in Translation" and "Draft 1," Thompson's translation separated Mir's original poem into one *sh'er* (couplet) per page.<sup>29</sup> His handwritten notes on how to transform Surjit's literal translations into spirited poetry thoroughly cover each page. In addition, Thompson performs a careful scansion of Mir's poem that notes the "6 foot line" of the "MISRA/METRE," showing a marked attention to formal detail alongside his commitment to the spiritual and emotional tone of Mir's original. When Thompson underlines the second line of the page devoted to "she'er 4," he also stresses a deep understanding of the ghazal's possibilities, noting the idea of "terrible beauty" and

“beautiful terrors” in Mir’s verse.<sup>30</sup> This contradiction signals Thompson’s need for “clearer literal versions – more precise – too much ambiguity.” But, it also brings forth his eventual usage of the English-language ghazal’s second-person voice as a response to Urdu’s inclusive pronouns when he wonders, “To whom is ghazal addressed?” Part of his answer recalls the simultaneous address of traditional ghazals to lovers and gods. But it also speaks to Thompson’s general view of the ghazal as a form that invokes both specificity and generalization. As he notes on the very first page of his Mir translations, Thompson hopes to stress, through Mir, the “PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL,” how the “poet speaks from the heart,” and how the ghazal must rely on the “poet’s agony” to make its points effectively, an approach later adopted for Thompson’s own ghazals.

Additionally, one of Thompson’s very first notes in the Mir file reads as follows:

Mir Taqi Mir

1. Treat the whole poem as a personal farewell.
2. Treat the images as a sustained metaphor for the poet’s state of mind. (n.p.)

It is difficult to read these lines without noticing that *Stilt Jack* is also popularly read as “a personal farewell” that relies on metaphorical summaries of Thompson’s own “state of mind” during the turbulent years of its composition. In this respect, the final version of the five couplets in ghazal XXXV summarize Thompson’s overall project:

XXXV

*after Mir Taqi Mir*

Love, look at my wounds, the shame I’ve drunk –  
I wouldn’t wish such suffering on my bitterest enemy.

Walk the graveyards: did you know the dead could have such hair?  
But devouring fate would have gnawed at them forever.

You're well off: don't make your home with this history of disasters:  
The cold desert always destroys my bed.

I know: your pale green eyes speak what's final:  
Sweet deaths never spoken of, beautiful terrors.

It's clear: the broken moon is suddenly full for me.  
As always, drops gather into a limitless ocean.

Drunken shame, living graveyards, cold deserts, sweet deaths, beautiful terrors, full and broken moons: the final version of Thompson's loose translation offers not only an inventory of his own imagery, but also walks a fine line between extremities, suggesting encampment within contradictions, a significant departure from Thompson's previous reliance on closed lyrics. If this poem is a "farewell," it is contradictory rather than conclusive. That the moon is both "broken" and "suddenly full" of possibility acknowledges the shortcomings *and* breakthroughs of Thompson's project. While the "pale green eyes" of couplet four are "final," they also "speak" in the present tense, indicating an active, possible future. Like Yeats' "dawn" in "High Talk," the "limitless" ocean is not only impossible to imagine or control, but also indicates an unbounded imaginary. While Thompson ends up residing in "the poem's isolate place" (XXXVI.3) by the very next ghazal in *Stilt Jack*, therefore, he is ultimately isolated amongst perceived equals – Yeats, Mir – sensed not only on the periphery of his couplets but also inclusively embedded in his ghazals as active literary "samples." In the end, Yeats and Mir become *part* of the rich fabric of Thompson's isolated communion, incorporated and enmeshed rather than conquered or exiled.

Whether or not Thompson realized this achievement, his balance between respectful acknowledgement and individual transformation is so compellingly struck in *Stilt Jack* that his book posthumously assumes the influential position he grants to Yeats, guiding a whole generation of Canadian poets. His exploratory engagement with Mir therefore becomes the catalyst for a new, inclusive ghazal sensibility in Canada, shaped by both traditional models of “Western” lyrics and the leaping disjuncture of “Eastern” ghazals. Thompson’s ghazals are most intriguing, for me at least, because of this balance between experiment and tradition, which relies less on the closed pre-occupations of rigid rules than on the emergence of a new kind of negative capability. For Thompson, this philosophy is detached from yet reliant upon the original context of its Romantic articulation, allowing him to embrace and re/present a variety of traditions via a sound grounding within his own motivations, intuitive systems, and psychological geographies. His methodology for such a reinvention is the primary subject for my next chapter.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the approach that Sanger took during his keynote “Tribute” to Thompson at the *White Salt Mountain* festival in 2008. Read biographically, *Stilt Jack* is also numbered to match Thompson’s age, 38, when the manuscript was completed in 1976, a number that also reflects the year of his birth: 1938. Sanger’s most recent concentrated scholarship on *Stilt Jack* confirms this by quoting a letter Thompson sent to his friend, the poet Douglas Lochhead, in the fall of 1975, which explains its inclusion of “Two more [poems] for the sequence of ‘guzzles.’ I hope to have 37 (my age) or 38 (my age in Spring) for the book. Hope I can make it. But they are coming (I think).’ One ghazal for each year of his life: *Stilt Jack* was his own time transformed into the time of poetry” (*White Salt* 143). The number 38 is also significant since it adds one extra poem to the 37 included for translation in Ahmad’s groundbreaking collection, *Ghazals of Ghalib*.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on the development of what he calls “an alternative pole to Postmodernism in the contemporary period,” see Gelpi.

<sup>3</sup> Sanger’s exhaustive tracing of these intertexts is certainly worth examining, and no other critic has yet come close to paying Thompson’s intertextual dialogue due attention. Throughout the present study, I rely on Sanger’s scholarship to track Thompson’s references to his literary precursors.

<sup>4</sup> This strategy emerged during the editing process, at least in part. In its original version, for example, Ghazal XVII used quotation marks to surround both the second line of couplet one, “No one shall sleep,” and the first line of couplet 2, which quotes Keats’ dying words, “Lift me up, lift me up....” Thompson removed the quotation marks in the red pen that seems to have been used throughout the *Black Book* to correct his first complete draft of all the ghazals in *Stilt Jack*.

<sup>5</sup> If Bloom is right, Yeats also wrestles with this dilemma. As Richard Ellmann makes clear, his major influence is William Blake, whom Yeats often compared to his own poetic practice, noting the parallel between his own initials – W.B.Y. – and the initials of his Blake – W.B. – and arguing that Blake’s work directly corresponded to an Irish sensibility. For more, see Ellmann’s authoritative biography, *Yeats: The Man and The Masks* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) (especially 119-120).

<sup>6</sup> Sanger tracks these Yeatsian references in his notes for *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> This relationship is noted in essays and reviews by Brian Bartlett, John W.H. Bell, Cary Fagan, Phil Hall, Christopher Levenson, Sean Virgo, and others.

<sup>8</sup> Tomkins and Thompson originally began writing ghazals in 1973, taking turns with new drafts that they regularly exchanged. Early dedications to “Wayne” in Thompson’s drafts are for him.

<sup>9</sup> I have relied on Peter Sanger’s *SeaRun* to track the following references. In addition to what is listed here, Sanger also postulates that the “whiteness of swans’ wings” (XXXIII.1) in ghazal XXXIII refers to Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” and “The Wild Swans at Coole” (*SeaRun* 37). These are also references, however, to the Swan Pond at Mount Allison University, where Thompson conceived this ghazal while collecting feathers to make necklaces for his daughter (Cooper, “Personal Interview”).

<sup>10</sup> In previous drafts of Ghazal IX, the poem’s numbering was different, a fact evidenced by Thompson’s own editorial changes in his writing notebook (*Black Book*). In each version, Thompson adjusted line 4 so that the number at which he might “get the point”

---

matched the number of the ghazal in which it appeared. In his final manuscript notes, Thompson stressed this connection, noting that the line must be changed to match the numbering accordingly.

<sup>11</sup> In this oft-discussed poem, Yeats admits that, in youth, he “sought a theme and sought for it in vain” (17), so that his “circus animals were all on show” (17), implying an early reliance on traditional, beautiful lyrics and intricate, noble symbolism. As the poem’s narrator ages, Yeats becomes disgusted by his tendency to “enumerate old themes” (18), self-referentially listing his previous poetic subjects, all of which failed to articulate his intentions or insights, so that “Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of” (18). Ultimately, Yeats manages a breakthrough at the end of the poem by reversing Romantic notions of poetic inspiration to celebrate the gritty realism of what he famously called “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (18). For related discussions on “High Talk,” see especially the essays collected in Jon Stallworthy’s *Yeats: Last Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1968), Robert Snukal’s *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973), and chapter 5, “Malachi Stilt Jack,” of Dwight H. Purdy’s *Biblical echo and allusion in the poetry of W.B. Yeats: poetics and the art of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell, 1994) (74-102).

<sup>12</sup> This stress on elevation and perspective is taken up in *Stilt Jack* via mountaineering imagery, especially in Ghazal XXXIV, a pivotal passage for understanding Thompson’s poetics. See Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> This draft of the poem is part of the *John Thompson Fonds* at National Library and Archives Canada. Thompson read it at the U.N.B. reading, suggesting that it was written either before or while he was composing his ghazals between 1973 and 1976.

<sup>14</sup> As is true for most drafts of the ghazals in the *John Thompson Fonds*, this poem is numbered differently from its final version. In this incarnation, it is called XXVII, one less than the final. In another draft of what becomes ghazal XXVIII, this time printed on Anansi headstock and dated 24 October, 1974, Thompson’s original *takhallus* remains unchanged. In this version, which predates the corrected typescript, he has handwritten his two first epigraphs on the bottom of the page along with “STILT-JACK,” possibly his first formal recognition of his book’s eventual title.

<sup>15</sup> Considering the careful construction of Thompson’s ghazals, and his frequent resistance to including proper names or biographical anecdotes from his personal life, one might also consider that “Jack” is an informal version of “John,” that “John,” in certain circles, is an informal word for a generic man, and that Yeats’ father was named John. For more on the de-personalization of Thompson’s references, see note 13 for Chapter 3.

---

<sup>16</sup> Roethke's poem "The Waking" includes the line "I learn by going where I have to go," which Thompson quotes parenthetically to frame ghazal XXVIII.

<sup>17</sup> Sanger mistakenly identifies this as a 1970s Isley Brothers song in *Collected Poems*.

<sup>18</sup> Even Thompson's banal reference to "Albany" might be read in this light, so that instead of merely citing suburbia, it also functions as a reference to Roethke's treatment "at Albany General Hospital after a breakdown in 1946" (Sanger, *Collected* 263). Tragically, like Thompson, both of the figures he activates here died young, van Gogh at 37 and Joplin at 27.

<sup>19</sup> Before his discussion of Keats in this poem, Yeats presents a dialogue about Dante, wherein Hic argues that his "hollow face" is as close to Christ as a human can be, implying that he finds his ultimate meaning in his work, to which Ille replies with another query: "And did he find himself / Or was the hunger that made it hollow / A hunger for the apple on the bough / Most out of reach?" This invocation of the Eden story is important, especially since this line is also quoted without credit (or perhaps unknowingly) in the final sequence of Webb's *Naked Poems*. Here, the authoritative, interviewing voice asks the poetic voice, "What do you really want?" and she answers "want the apple on the bough in / the hand in the mouth seed / planted in the brain want / to think 'apple'" (36), a resolution that the questioner fails to understand.

<sup>20</sup> That these two monumental figures are "a visual pun" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 17) save their first letters – Keats, Yeats – also speaks of the "anti-self" of Yeats' poem.

<sup>21</sup> As is true for many of Thompson's intertexts, this also refers to elements in his personal life. As Sanger notes, Ghazal I is written for Wayne Tompkins, who "burned books preliminary to leaving Mount Allison University" (*White* 145).

<sup>22</sup> Critics have also been quick to point out that Thompson lost most of his personal possessions and books when his Jolicure home burned to the ground on Sept. 25, 1974, during the composition of *Stilt Jack*, while he was away in Toronto on a year of stress-leave/sabbatical. Some elements of this analysis are useful, but must be contextualized with Thompson's theories and influences, not merely forwarded as samples of psychoanalysis or biography.

<sup>23</sup> Mir rose to prominence in eighteenth-century Delhi and Lucknow, where he helped to establish the Urdu language. For more, see the biographies listed in Matthews & Shackle, Russell & Islam, or my discussions of Ghalib and Mir in Chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> The three-line English-language ghazal format continues to be used, most recently by Robert Bly in his 2001 book of ghazals, *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* (New

---

York: HarperCollins, 2001) and in a work-in-progress by Allan Cooper, three poems from which appear in ARC Poetry Magazine's special feature on the 2008 *White Salt Mountain* festival (58-60).

<sup>25</sup> This was Thompson's general strategy for drafting all the ghazals in the *Black Book*. His first drafts appear on the right-hand side, and subsequent re-writes are recorded on the left facing pages, and on subsequent pages. Thompson attempts at least a few other spatial experiments with the ghazals using this strategy. Of particular interest is what seems to be the first draft of ghazal VII, scribed on a loose leaf and housed in the *John Thompson Fonds*. In addition to writing the first version of what becomes couplet 2 at the top of the page, Thompson records his first draft in an epistolary form, as follows:

Letter to Wayne, "30 September '73"

Wayne:

The obvious violences, terrors and disasters  
come to me from America in the middle of  
the night. Hank Aaron's failure. Highs in  
the 70's. Penny Lane. Albany. Albany?

I look around my table for certainty and  
see crazy squash, burnt tomatoes, the char  
of poems and sour milk. A candle done  
down.

I'm waiting for Janis Joplin. Why is  
it so dark?

Here is my decided sequence I-V; more  
coming. Ghazals, that is.

Tonight I talked to a poet, friend; in disaster;  
he goes on, drunk; I hope he's writing, I didn't  
dare ask.

Hang on, hang on. I'm listening. I'm listening to  
myself.

John

<sup>26</sup> Nearly all of these changes and rewrites are dated in Thompson's hand.

<sup>27</sup> This is the best I can do with the difficult penmanship that identifies this scholar, an elusive character who even Sanger gives up on trying to trace. My spelling of his surname might be incorrect, but the scholar's first name is definitely Surjit.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson's skills as a translator were honed during his PhD on René Char, which consisted largely of English translations of the French poet's difficult work. In *Stilt Jack*, Thompson also engages in a translation written "after *Tu Fu*" for Ghazal XII, a process

---

that Sanger argues (in *White Salt Mountain: Words in Time* [Kentville: Gaspereau, 2005]) was heavily influenced by reading Florence Ayscough's translations of Tu Fu while writing *Stilt Jack*. While Tu Fu is certainly connected stylistically to Thompson's ghazals, his influence is less important for the present study than are those formal practitioners that taught Thompson how the ghazal operates. Rather than forwarding a pan-Asian theory of influence or a generalized comment on style (via Tu Fu, Char, and others), therefore, my focus on Mir is an attempt to illuminate Thompson's influential, formal evolution in *Stilt Jack*.

<sup>29</sup> Also included in the folder is a copy of the Introduction by Matthews & Shackle, suggested by Surjit, which deeply influenced Thompson's understandings of ghazals.

<sup>30</sup> The idea of "terrible beauty" also reflects Yeats' "Easter 1916," which repeats the line "a terrible beauty is born" three times (203, 205) throughout the poem.

### Chapter 3

#### Angler Poetics and Negative Capability in *Stilt Jack*

There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning [...].

~ William Carlos Williams. *from* "Introduction to the Wedge" (1944).

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.

~ *from* John Keats' letter to George and Thomas Keats;  
(Sunday, 22 December, 1817).

I think I may be able to draw the large lines of clarity on the Modern by returning again to a part of Keats' quote which, so far, we have left undealt with: what he says does undo a man from Negative Capability, vis, 'irritable reaching after fact and reason.' Without going beyond his thought one can spell this out by recognizing that he is exposing two different methodologies; reaching after fact is the experimental method and reaching after reason is logic. And I need not, I should imagine, emphasize that, in these two methodologies, you will recognize the whole previous history of Western man from the 5th Century in logic and the whole history of man since the 17th Century in physics.

~ Charles Olson. *The Special View of History* (1970)

Walking home from London nearly two centuries ago, John Keats realized why certain writers resonated with his own sensibilities. In a moment of revelation, he wrote to his brothers, “at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature” (*Letter 902*). Here, it seems to me, Keats stands up, grows out of the schoolboy romanticism that Yeats attributes to him, and moves into the brief fire of his most famous concept: “I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (*Letter 902*). In other words, what counts as understanding cannot simply be positivist, obvious, permanent, or absolute, but must also form negatively, temporarily, and without resolution. Such a counting not only requires a deconstruction and defusing of logic, but also a re-visioning of the scientific method predominant in Western cultures since Cartesian methods overtook the Polis. Poets simply cannot continue, Keats implies, to endorse Coleridge’s resistance to “half knowledge,” but must leave their lyrics open. They must plumb the depths of their respective valleys, finding the darkest places, and only then raise their arms.

Such a journey – from knowing to unknowing to unknowing-as-knowing – is at the heart of *Stilt Jack*, and resonant with the free-verse ghazal’s capacity to embrace contradiction in a lyric modality. Thompson presents contradiction by harnessing the lyric impulse to both resist and embrace the secular and divine, popular and erudite, and dark and light. In the process, he produces both a statement on faith and belief and a skeptical analysis of the possibility for faith or belief in a supposedly secular age. By positioning his ghazals between and amongst contradictions rather than reifying any one

half of such binaries, he takes up a liminal and liberating space between “the sky / and the stove” (XXXVIII.6) in *Stilt Jack*. This chapter’s central purpose is to chart Thompson’s inclusive negotiations of extremes, positing his self-aware, self-reflexive, non-logical, lyric methodology as a re-invention of negative capability that ultimately becomes the unspoken manifesto of the ghazal sensibility in Canada.

To examine Thompson’s subjective positioning in what follows, I position his reinvention of negative capability in Part One *not* via Keats, necessarily, but through Charles Olson’s recuperation of Keats’ concept. To demonstrate how this operates in *Stilt Jack*, I posit negative capability as central to what I call Thompson’s “angler poetics,” which I examine in Part Two via images of hooks, gardens, and mountains in Thompson’s ghazals. In Part Three, I scrutinize Thompson’s use of Christian intertexts and stories to relate his angler poetics to the Urdu ghazal’s formal requirement for secular and divine address. Finally, in Part Four, I discuss the ontological skepticism of Thompson’s use of language/words to posit his reinvention of negative capability as a subjective poetics of self-knowledge and self-reflexivity.

### **Part One: Positive as Negative: Re-inventing Negative Capability**

To contextualize Thompson’s embrace of negative capability, I must clarify that Keats’ actual poetry is not as important for my argument as what is now read as his central poetic theory. If Yeats’ early dismissal of Keats (in “Ego Dominus Tuus”) is any indication of a wider trend, the modernists arguably read Keats as the antithesis to radical, poetic experimentation. Perhaps this is because his sonnets and odes were a

favourite example of lyric unity in the New Critical school, and therefore influenced the continuation of a neo-Romantic lyric that the Imagism of Pound, Williams and H.D. rendered anachronistic. The sort of neo-Romanticism that Keats inspires during the twentieth century is more applicable to a line of influence that Albert Gelpi identifies as “an alternative pole to Postmodernism in the contemporary period,” which arguably moves from Yeats to Wallace Stevens to Ted Hughes, than it is to the radical transformations of the Pound-Williams line, which intuitively embraces negative capability during early modernism. Such an embrace is articulated in terms of negative capability only when Charles Olson recuperates the term circa 1950 (as implicitly expressed in “Projective Verse”). But Olson’s recuperation must not be read as a renewal or endorsement of Keatsian lyrics so much as a resuscitation of what was previously a rather minor Romantic insight: negative capability. It is arguably because of Olson’s re-application of this term that it became so influential for mid-to-late twentieth-century North American poetics. While William Spanos points out that “[i]t has often been remarked that Keats's famous definition of ‘Negative Capability’ plays a significant role in Charles Olson's thinking about existence and poetry” (38), part of the reason for its “famous” status derives from Olson and projectivist poetics, *not* Keats. Perhaps a further explication can illuminate the centrality of Olson’s application of negative capability for Thompson’s development of a self-aware lyric in *Stilt Jack* that balances both neo-Romantic lyric language and a modernist poetic sensibility.

The connection between negative capability and Thompson’s resistance to lyric closure mirrors the connection between Olson and Keats’ concept, especially considering

[...] the remarkable contemporaneity of Olson's appropriation of Keats, that is, the very close, if not conscious, parallel between his understanding of Negative Capability and that de-centered epistemological Care that informs the postmodern de-structive hermeneutics of the phenomenologists [...] especially Martin Heidegger. (Spanos 38-9)

Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*, which Spanos translates as "letting be" (40), and which theological literary critic Nathan A. Scott, Jr. calls "*that spirit of disponibilité before What-Is which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery*" (xiii), is often paralleled to Keats' concept of negative capability, against New Critical treatments forwarded by critics such as Walter Jackson Bate (see *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats*). I am less interested, however, in the *critical* discussion that has arisen since early postmodernism around negative capability than in the term's vital influence on and incorporation into the *poetry* and *poetics* of writers since the 1950s. These two lines of influence – poetic and critical – are related, but not identical. To inform Thompson's implicit embrace of negative capability, it is much more important to situate his poetry within a lineage of poetry than a parallel history of critique.

In Thompson's book, negative capability is employed as an attempt to follow his impulses to the "astonishing leaps" ("Ghazals," *Stilt Jack* n.p.) and lack of closure that characterize the ghazal form. The end of ghazal XXV is a succinct example of his resistance to closure:

If I ask questions, you'll show me  
some beautiful thing you have made. (XXV.8)

Here, Thompson's speaker refers not only to a specific person, but also to a sense of the beloved and to himself. Rather than postulating a closed, lyrical answer for his "questions," he, his addressee, and the divine offer "some beautiful thing," a gesture towards the impossibility of firm answers. Such open-endedness reflects the ghazal's "astonishing leaps," which are perhaps best expressed in a couplet from ghazal IX:

Sometimes I think the stars scrape at my door, wanting in:  
I'm watching the hockey game. (IX.8)

Here, Thompson moves from a symbol for accessing metaphysical and cosmological awareness – "the stars scrape at my door" – to a pedestrian and secular experience that is decidedly not "natural" – "watching the hockey game." This juxtaposition is startling, illogical, and non-narrative, but also linguistically harmonious, resonant, and nuanced. It combines a sense of self-critique with a sense of self-confidence, allowing that Thompson's speaker is *both* triumphant *and* foolish (rather than one or the other) in his refusal to let the stars enter the "door" to occupy his domestic space.

Such an embrace of the negative, unfinished, or contradictory echoes Spanos' view of Olson, whose anti-positivist "appropriation" of negative capability fosters "a poetry the essential activity of which is not, as it is in the tradition, *confirmation* (the achievement of correspondence between the mind and its object from the vantage point of a certain distance) but *discovering*" (70). By re-inventing Keats' concept to apply directly to their contexts, Thompson and Olson desire an investigation of process and openness, rather than composing lyrics that insist on categorical closure. Thus,

[...] Olson's poetics come to be understood as a profound and compelling discovery of the need for a descent into a renewed measure of man [sic], a measure

"grounded" in Negative Capability, the generosity in the face of being that acknowledges his essential "fallenness"- multiplicity, dispersal, absence, temporality, be-ing, words, that is, *différance* - as his *occasion*. (Spanos 79)

Through negative capability, Spanos argues, Olson embraces the multiple and imperfect by acknowledging the "essential 'fallenness'" of humanity. Rather than police her/his impulses, Olson says a poet must remain open to a poem's energy, allowing absence, multiplicity, and contradiction to co-exist within his/her verse.

Thompson's use of negative capability should not be mistaken as a blind embrace of Olson's Keatsian philosophy, however, but a contextualized reinvention of its central tenets. *Stilt Jack* includes not only moments of *negative* enlightenment, after all, but also predictable (and sometimes clichéd) moments of lyric sunlight and flowers, love and sexual union, landscape and weather. Alongside disjuncture, contradiction, and absence, Thompson also includes ghazals that proclaim closure, as in the finality for Ghazal II:

Let's agree: we are whole: the house  
rises: we fight; this is love

and old acquaintance.  
Let's gather our stars; our fire

will contain us; two,  
one. (II.3-5)

This celebration of love, I contend, is not a lapse into conventionality, but a careful choice. Here, the "stars" ignored in ghazal IX will be gathered for a domestic fire that allows for a closed, romantic union. Agreement, wholeness, love and containment are the central dynamics of the poem, not disjuncture, contradiction, and paradox. At such moments, which are scattered throughout *Stilt Jack*, Thompson exploits not only

counteractive and rebellious negativity, but also affirms and includes what might initially be called *positive* capability: that ability to embrace single answers as definitive, despite the obvious existence of reasonable contradictions to the extremity of such absolutes, especially within the postmodern milieu of (seemingly standard) doubt fundamental to the development of Canadian poetics. Thus, Thompson's speaker not only embraces multiplicity, but also makes affirmative pronouncements such as "Snow will come" (VIII.7) or "The drunk and the crazy live for ever, / lovers die" (XV.6). He embraces not only "negative" contradiction and process, but also "positive" confirmation and closure.

In the postmodern era of ontological doubt, however, such an embrace must ultimately involve not only a resistance to absolute answers, but also a resistance to such a resistance. In postmodern writing, after all, the refusal to accept absolutes, the avoidance of universalisms, or the cautious qualification of one's subjectivity is standard fare. In fact, the positing of an absolute or universal truth is normally a mark of naiveté in contemporary lyrics. By inflexibly resisting truisms, however, writers routinely end up reifying and neutralizing any potentially revolutionary properties they might hope to forward in their own work, accidentally strengthening a new, monological model that insists on the incomplete, the unsure, the archaeological, and the failed just as much as a predominantly, non-Keatsian pre-Modern modality insisted on a unified, reasonable, scientific whole that postmodern purists rightly find despairingly narrow.<sup>1</sup> Since universalism is so fundamentally out of fashion within the twentieth-century avant-garde, Thompson's use of it requires qualification in order to be understood as a *part of* rather than counter to negative capability.

Olson's concept of "positive" and "negative" perhaps provides sufficient qualification. In *The Special View of History* (the second epigraph of which comes from Keats' *Letter*), Olson argues that the positive relates absolutely to power – politically, subjectively, rationally, formally – while the negative connotes enlightenment:

Thus, the use of positive and negative is not as of reason so much as it is of will: one can choose to use the implicit powers either negatively or positively, and the difference between the positive and negative use is the whole difference. One is power. The other is achievement. One is the self as ego and sublime. The other is the self as center and circumference. (45)

As a lyric poet, Thompson uses a concept of capability that employs both "positive" and "negative." He relates both to a Romantically egotistical yearning "self as ego and sublime" as the primary purpose of poetic imagination, and also postulates "the self as center and circumference," resonant with modernist treatments of poems as naturally a *part of* rather than superior to or divorced from a wider world. In *Stilt Jack*, objects (or what Olson calls "objectism" in "Projective Verse") interrelate, so that Thompson transfers energy from an existent (but not exterior) world into and through the poem (projectively), rather than catching, overpowering, or encapsulating such energy within a rigid formality.<sup>2</sup> While "negative" insights signify more valuable "achievement" for Olson, Thompson ultimately exploits both negative achievement and positive "power."

Such a simultaneous stress on both Olson's negatives and the lyric's positives – those very elements both within and against which (post)modern poets write throughout the twentieth century – ultimately allows Thompson's ghazals to operate beyond their own anti-logical trappings, and herein lies the magic of the book for so many of its readers: Thompson's familiar lyric musicality does not simply offer a turn of phrase or a

charge of words; it effects “listening for / the turn of the tide” (Webb, *Naked Poems* n.p.), and looking, in the end, for what Rich first desired, too: “a change of world” that remains dedicated to the insights and complexities of the past whilst moving forward into a new lyric model. If Olson is right that “what does not change / is the will to change” (qtd in Rich, “The Will to Change”, n.p.), Thompson’s ghazals also continue a tradition of counter-discursive protest, invoking and then destabilizing Western expectations of unity and harmony without an absolute rejection of the lyric as a valuable *modus operandi*. As Olson says of Keats, Thompson therefore refuses to flatly “fall back to Understanding” (Olson, “Special View” 46). By actively allowing both negative and positive-as-negative to co-exist in his ghazals, Thompson proves Olson’s rule “that equally, Beauty, Love, and Idea are nothing if the function of Will – the infinitive of being/becoming – is neglected or left out” (46). What is at the heart of all poems of negative capability, Olson contends, is therefore “Actual willful man [sic]” (46). Subjectivity becomes the fulcrum between negative and “positive,” being and becoming. Thus, one might consider *Stilt Jack*’s embrace of negative capability as an investigation of contemporary subjectivity that actively interrogates its own assumptions, histories, and contexts.

### **Part Two: Trout, Dirt, and Summits: Thompson’s “Angler” Poetics**

To understand *Stilt Jack*’s employment of negative capability, one must consider Thompson’s self-reflexive explorations of his own subjectivity. To do so, I posit Thompson’s methodology as what I call an angler poetics, which utilizes the ghazal’s disjuncture, simultaneous address to the sacred and secular, and self-reference via a

contemporary embrace of negative capability.<sup>3</sup> To make this investigation concrete, in what follows, I will elaborate Thompson's angler poetics via three imagistic networks that demonstrate a subjective centering of negative capability: hooks, gardens, and mountains. For each network, Thompson plays the role of intermediary between poem and phenomenal world, self-reflexively examining subjectivity as a symbolic hunter-angler, gardener, and mountaineer.

### *Hooks, Lines and "Angler" Poetics*

In Thompson's ghazals, hooks denote not only the author's admitted love of fishing, but also refer self-reflexively to his poetic approach. Combined with "[i]mages of iron, of metal and cutting edges, [which] occur again and again" (Atwood 311), Thompson's prevalent use of the hook articulates a self-awareness that is central to his particularized continuation of the Urdu ghazal's imagistic traditions, and also consistent with the self-reflexive poetics common to much postmodern poetry. Hooks are the most obvious symbols of Thompson's angler poetics as a methodological strategy for re-inventing negative capability.

Thompson's use of hooks is perhaps best illustrated in ghazal XXI, which operates around a central comparison of a poem to a fish hook:

I know how small a poem can be:  
the point on a fish hook;

women have one word or too many:  
I watch the wind;

I'd like a kestrel's eye and know

how to hang on one thread of sky;

the sun burns up my book:  
it must all be lies;

I'd rather be quiet, let the sun  
and the animals do their work.

I might watch, might turn my back,  
be a done beer can shining stupidly.

Let it be: the honed barb drowsing in iron water  
will raise the great fish I'll ride

(dream upon dream, still the sun warms my ink  
and the flies buzzing to life in my window)

to that heaven (absurd) sharp fish hook,  
small poem, small offering.

Here, Thompson refers to his poem as a “small offering,” caught by letting “the honed barb” of his poetics snag poetic insight from the “iron water” of experience. The process of his poetic construction therefore becomes central to his poetic content. But the rhyme between “a kestrel’s eye,” “sky,” and “lies” in couplets three and four accentuate that the poem is *not* pure experience. By privileging nature and the animal world – “I’d like a kestrel’s eye” – over the poem – which “must all be lies” – Thompson acknowledges his poetic practice as imperfect and unnatural in comparison to how “the sun / and the animals do *their* work” (my emphasis). The results of poetic observation are therefore compared to being “a done beer can shining stupidly,” rather than sentimentally lauded as superhuman. But this does not stop Thompson’s “work” of creating a poem. His embrace of imperfection is an embrace of negative capability, not only admitting the limitations of poetry, but *stressing* such limitations as central to one’s poetics. The poetic

process does not guarantee insight, therefore, but is akin to fishing. By luckily catching “the great fish I’ll ride” from outward experience to poetic transformation, Thompson does not achieve a correlative “great” poem, but, instead, a “small poem, small offering” that confirms his first couplet’s conceit that a poem can be as “small” as “the point on a fish hook.” Such smallness, of course, is paradoxical, since the poem’s success is simultaneously of utmost importance. While the poem that results from admitting contradiction, imperfection, and disjuncture is ultimately “small,” it is also a type of “heaven” that allows Thompson to record the process of his poem without the urgent need to resolve its imperfections or declare control over nature. Rather than demanding control and domination of his materials, his speaker “might watch, might turn my back,” an open-ended embrace of the lyric impulse, based in a fishing metaphor, that affirms both the “positive” power of the poem and ultimately celebrates the “negative” and the “absurd” contradictions of its imperfections.

I therefore agree with Sanger’s claim that this ghazal “begins the more overt development of the symbolic meaning of fish and fishing in *Stilt Jack*” (*SeaRun* 26), which slowly accretes via references to fish in Ghazals I, III, XII, XVII, and XIX. That Thompson was an avid outdoorsman also illuminates the multiplicity of his fishing images in ghazal XXI: they simultaneously connote both tangible and self-reflexively metaphorical meanings, drawing upon literary sources both within the mainstream Western canon (Melville’s *Moby Dick*, poems by Hopkins), and beyond it (*SeaRun* 26-7). The most important of these is Isaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (1651) (which Sanger calls “the finest book about fishing ever written” [*SeaRun* 27]), which includes

the following observation: “*Angling is somewhat like Poetry, men are to be born so: I mean, with inclinations to it, though both may be heightened by practice and experience*” (qtd. in Sanger, *SeaRun* 27).<sup>4</sup> The link between the solitary, silent, and potentially deadly actions of a fisher is equivalent to that of a poet venturing towards an exploration of dark consciousness or realities. Thus, “Thompson also saw *The Compleat Angler* generally as a parallel to his own intentions in *Stilt Jack*” (Sanger, *SeaRun* 27), since “Angling in Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (note his completeness) is both ‘action’ and ‘contemplation’, just as fishing, poetry, and finding *le mot juste* attempt to be in *Stilt Jack*” (*SeaRun* 28). Both fishing and Thompson’s poetry involve casting lines and hooking life as it flows by rather than attempting to divert the energy of life into staged constructions. Whatever is hooked by such a process, in Thompson’s ghazals, becomes part of the content of his poetry, a self-reflexive embrace of negative capability.

The notion of poet-as-fisher is originally stressed in Thompson’s first draft for his first ghazal, wherein his speaker self-identifies as “(assassin, poet)” (*Black Book*). Here, Thompson effects a self-reflexive comment not only on the specific poetic project he undertakes in *Stilt Jack*, but also on the whole purpose of poems that seek a form of knowledge counter to reason, self-assurance, or closed affirmation. His view of both writing poetry and fishing as types of assassination lends credence to his definition of the ghazal as a series of “astonishing leaps.” Both actions – catching a real fish and landing a poetic leap – need lines to be skimmed correctly across the surface, set to the right depth, and reeled in at exactly the proper moment. Thus, “how small a poem can be” depends upon striking the right balance between letting out too much line (and thereby exposing

one's intentions) and casting far enough to make possible a catch. When Thompson claims, in Ghazal XXII, that "I'm just a man who goes fishing" (XXII.1), therefore, he does not confess to an insignificant hobby, but underwrites the complex significance of fishing in his poetics. When he says, with assurance, that "We'll fish tommy cod: that's enough;/ come April I know where I'll go" (XII.3), he expresses a faith that grows out of placing himself within the right mental, spiritual and literary contexts – via the ghazal form – for receiving and interpreting his poetic impulses. Thompson's use of the fishing hook communicates both an individual translation of the natural world and a self-reflexive comment on the nature of that translation. His angler poetics depend on both, affirming both positive observations of his life and negative contradictions in his experience.

My view of Thompson's angler poetics as negative capability is also evident in the remaining, overt appearances of hooks in *Stilt Jack*, as follows:

On the hook, big trout lie like stone:  
terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved. (I.2)

All night the moon is a lamp on a post;  
things move from hooks to beautiful bodies. Drunk. (XIV.1)

myself, a fish hook tinged with blood,  
a turned furrow, (XIX.4)

Dark April, black water, cold wind,  
cold blood on a hook. (XXII.2)

Sweetness and lies: the hook, grey deadly bait,  
a wind and water to kill cedar, idle men, the innocent (XXXVII.5)

Each of these examples details a hook that is cold, bloody, and deadly, and symbolizes the metallic interference of one realm of symbolic meaning into another. In each instance, the hook transforms the objects it pierces, so that “trout” becomes “stone,” “things” become “beautiful bodies,” “myself” becomes a ploughed field, “April” becomes “cold blood,” and “Sweetness and lies” becomes deadly nourishment.<sup>5</sup> In each case, a living body is related to an abstract description, and a hook makes possible the movement between specific references and more universal meditations. Thus, angling with the hook is suggestive of change, or, in some instances, catharsis, and its appearance marks the importance in *Stilt Jack* of exploring not only one aspect of a given concept, but also its inverse and (cor)relative meanings. Such transformations suggest the process of preparation, inspiration, recording, and refinement essential to writing ghazals, which translate an interior poetic impulse into exterior, textual realities. Because impulsive, the nature of such translation is unstable and contradictory. Rather than creating traditional unity, Thompson’s hook images therefore point out the instability of both subjective experience and the idea of closed, lyric unity, utilizing the ghazal’s disjuncture to enable a poetics of negative capability across the temporal arc of *Stilt Jack*.

***“the wildflowers grow anyway”*: Garden Imagery in *Stilt Jack***

This embrace of multiplicity is also evident in another central imagistic network in *Stilt Jack* that relates to both domestic action and wilderness: the garden. Alongside images of fire, which do similar work, Thompson’s garden imagery expresses the possibility that civilization and cultivation can run wild, and thereby echoes the ghazal form’s central

tension between wild impulsive leaps and a bounded, cultivated formality. By co-presenting domestic flowers (which symbolize the ghazal's formality) and weeds or wilderness (which symbolize poetic impulse), Thompson expands his embrace of negative capability. Because a garden must be plotted and maintained by human interaction with the wild, his garden images posit poetry as a constantly failing attempt to control natural energy, thereby revealing the garden of Thompson's poetry as ultimately imperfect and constructed rather than absolute and natural. Because Thompson employs a poetics of negative capability, this is not a problem, but part of the solution. By treating his poems as failed gardens, overrun with wildflowers, suddenly invaded by wilderness, forgotten and painful, Thompson-as-gardener disallows the concept of a poem as utterly controlled and embraces impulse and process as central to the writing act. By allowing the wilderness and domesticity to contaminate one another, Thompson exposes the idea of human control to be an idealist paradise, just as Eden is an inaccessible garden.

Perhaps the best demonstration of Thompson's balance between domesticity and wilderness is his treatment of the garden in ghazal XXVII (quoted in full):

You have forgotten your garden (she said)  
how can you write poems?

That things go round and again go round  
In the middle of the journey...

Folly:  
the wildflowers grow anyway.

I wait for a word, or the moon, or whatever,  
an onion, a rhythm.

All the rivers look for me,  
find me, find me.

The small stone in my hand weighs years:  
it is dark.

To turn, and remember, that  
is the fruit.

Despite it being “Folly” to grow a garden because “the wildflowers grow anyway,” the implication is that the garden is still maintained. This echoes Thompson’s poetics. It is folly to assume perfect control, ruled logic or absolute answers, but Thompson writes “anyway.” The question that opens the poem is therefore ironic. If the garden represents a ruled, logical maintenance of poetic control that must vigilantly disallow ugly weeds or conflicting truths to inhabit the poem, the reason that Thompson is able to write is precisely *because* he has “forgotten [his] garden.” Rather than attempting to resolve all of his themes, he attempts to exist “in the middle of the journey” of his lines and his writing process. He is willing to allow “a word, or the moon, or whatever” to enter his couplets, treating each equally within the controlled disjuncture of the ghazal in order to embrace multiplicity. The content of his poem therefore co-presents “an onion, a rhythm.” As a gardener or angler, Thompson is not attempting to invade or control the natural world, but to exist within it. Rather than seeking out fish (or ideas) to hook, his speaker says that “[a]ll the rivers look for me,” arriving in the poem via impulse rather than being captured or plotted. Thus, Thompson’s poetic “garden” is epitomized in his final couplet, wherein “the fruit” of poetic inspiration and innovation (his ghazals) is cultivated by the ability “[t]o turn, and remember” rather than to carefully police one’s

content. Thompson's poetic garden can therefore "turn" away from lyric preconceptions – closure, singular proclamation, novelty – to "remember" the value of contradiction, multiplicity, and poetic precedents.<sup>6</sup>

A fall from old, lyric habits into the non-logical possibility of angler poetics ultimately allows Thompson to embrace and celebrate contradiction and influence rather than to demand end points for one's insights that would demand the kind of "brief lyric unity" ("Ghazals" n.p.) he is writing against in *Stilt Jack*. This kind of inclusive embrace is perhaps most obvious in another invocation of the garden, which opens ghazal XXVIII:

I learn by going;  
there is a garden.

Things I root up from the dirt  
I'm in love with.

Here, Thompson openly acknowledges that his poetics are processual. His ability to "learn by going" produces the "garden" of his poems. Thus, he embraces "the dirt" of poetic and life experience as fertile. By embracing those aspects of reality that are buried in the darkness of experience, Thompson is therefore able to be "in love with" a variety of poetic materials ("[t]hings I root up from the dirt") at once. His garden is dark and light, terrestrial and celestial, natural and constructed, found and made.

How Thompson balances such multiplicity depends on his effective role as gardener, another symbol for the poet. His garden imagery therefore connotes both the potential of his inclusive impulses and the possibility that such impulses will carry him beyond a controlled balance in his poetry. This dynamic is best expressed in ghazal X, a poem with which I will conclude my discussion of Thompson's garden imagery:

A pineapple tree has grown in this kitchen  
two years, on well water. Right here,

a man went to set a fire in the stove  
and the blaze froze on the match.

Those winds: in summer turn the head rancid, in winter  
drive a cold nail through the heart down to the hardwood floor.

Daisies, paintbrush, bellflower, mustard, swamp iris;  
hackmatack, crowns driven northeast: they're there.

Pigs fattened on boiled potatoes; horses mooning in hay;  
in the woodshed he blew his head off with a shotgun.

Here, Thompson stages a contest between domestic comfort and the natural world that surrounds it. For my purposes, domesticity symbolizes a poetics of absolute control and closure, while wilderness represents a corollary poetics of complete release and impulse. The "pineapple tree" that grows "in this kitchen / two years, on well water," represents absolute poetic control (since pineapples are impossible to grow naturally in the Canadian wilderness), while the fourth couplet's list of maritime wildflowers – "[d]aisies, paintbrush, bellflower, mustard, swamp iris; / hackmatack" – represents an utter surrender to poetic impulse. These groupings are clearly antagonistic since the pineapple is "Right here" in the domestic safety of the house, while the wildflowers are "there" in the overrun garden or field. Between the safely domesticated pineapple (i.e. poetic control) and the proliferation of wildflowers in the garden (i.e. a lyric impulse run wild) Thompson stages two failures. First, the "stove," a symbol of domestic safety, cannot be lit by the "man who went to set a fire" because "the blaze froze." Second, natural wind invades the head and the house, "turning the head rancid" and driving "a cold nail

through the heart.” If the house represents poetic control and the wind and wildflowers represent chaos, Thompson ultimately stages the central choice of his angler poetics: controlled closure or impulsive inclusivity. But his final couplet suggests that *both* options are limiting. Juxtaposing the calm domestication of “[p]igs fattened on boiled potatoes; horses mooning in hay” and the terrifying suicide of his final line, Thompson suggests the danger of fully embracing an absolute poetic approach. Rather than choosing between control and impulse, *Stilt Jack*’s use of angler poetics therefore allows for a balance between them. It is therefore appropriate that the man’s suicide takes place “in the woodshed,” a structure built to house items harvested from the natural world, but meant to heat (and therefore empower and prolong) the domestic or constructed one. The capacity for one’s survival within both domestic and wild space depends, in this poem, upon balancing these worlds. That the man who “blew his head off” uses “a shotgun” is therefore significant. Here, a domestic tool meant to tame the wilderness (via hunting) is used to annihilate domestic safety, suggesting the danger of Thompson’s poetics. To succeed in his ghazals, Thompson must balance the ghazal’s (domestic) formalism against the (wild) impulses of negative capability’s radical inclusivity. This is the primary struggle that his garden imagery ultimately represents.

### ***The relative Heights of Abraham: Mountain Images***

To emphasize the importance of such a balance, I will briefly examine Thompson’s use of one other imagistic network that represents a poetics of negative capability: mountains. In *Stilt Jack*, mountains are of three varieties: actual, perspectival, and limiting. Because

“Thompson was an experienced, enthusiastic rockclimber and mountaineer” (Sanger, *SeaRun* 38), his references to mountains also go beyond standard apostrophes regarding sublime heights or the “spiritual journey [...] implied by the naming of mountains” (Sanger, *SeaRun* 38-9). Instead, they connote an active, subjective journey from a previous poetic model to an embrace of the ghazal sensibility.

Thompson’s arrival at the summit of his poetic breakthroughs is not easy or beatific, but necessitates journeys through valleys of creative and personal darkness. This combination of valleys and peaks is perhaps most thoroughly treated in ghazal XXXIV, a poem harmonized by naming actual mountains and mountaineering equipment:<sup>7</sup>

I surrender to poetry, sleep  
with the cinders of Apollo.

Belay to words:  
Stubai, Kernmantel, Bonnaiti,

Karrimor, K.2., Nanga Parbat,  
Jumar, Eiger, Choinard, Vasque.

Annapurna. The mountain wakens:  
a closing hand.

Love lies with snow, passion  
in the blue crevasse. Grief on summits.

Let me climb: I don’t know to what:  
north face, south face?

Maybe the roping down,  
the last abseil.

The proper names in couplets two, three, and four all refer to mountaineering companies or Himalayan and Swiss mountain ranges and peaks (see Sanger, *Collected* 267). But the

remaining couplets counter such specificity with self-reflexive comments on the contradictions of the poetic act as a “[b]elay to words.” In couplet five, Thompson finds “Grief on summits” rather than joy or triumph, symbolizing the descent into difficult psychological terrain required for his ascent to a new poetic model in *Stilt Jack*. This paradox is perhaps why Thompson’s speaker asks permission to “climb” up, in couplet six, only in order to start “roping down / the last abseil,” why “The mountain wakens” as “a closing hand” (a reference to Blake [*SeaRun* 39]), or why “[love] lies with snow” rather than via predictable images of roses or sunshine. Implicit in these contradictions is the fact that finding a new model (ascending the mountain) is a fleeting accomplishment, since if one summits, one must also climb down. Such a realization marks Thompson’s new angler poetics as foundationally contradictory, so that “grief” must be equivocally paralleled with inspiration. The central question is not only how to ascend or descend, therefore, but also how to manage the paradox of arrival or departure, a processual concern symbolized by the speaker’s “surrender to poetry” via “the cinders of Apollo,” the Greek god of poetry, in couplet one. Thompson’s “surrender to poetry” is also a surrender of ego and control. Rather than a clear destination, what ultimately matters is the act of arrival, so that Thompson’s speaker asks the reader to “Let me climb: I don’t know to what,” marking a breakthrough from a previous reliance on lyric closure (in Thompson’s first book) to a poetics of negative capability, harnessed with the ghazal sensibility in *Stilt Jack*. Like his roles as angler (with fishing hooks) and gardener (of wildflowers), Thompson’s active role as mountain climber is therefore a central symbol for the poet’s subjective mediation between extremes during the writing process.

This subjective mediation is stressed in Thompson's third epigraph for *Stilt Jack*, a line that also closes ghazal XXXIII, and is my primary example of perspectival mountains in *Stilt Jack*:

I have only to lift my eyes to see  
the Heights of Abraham. (XXXIII.6)

A "conflation" of Psalm 121 and a letter by Emily Dickinson (Sanger, *SeaRun* 8), this line plays a crucial role in defining Thompson's mountains as subjective experiences. While the mountain is "a symbolic spiritual axis" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 8) in *Stilt Jack*, in Ghazal XXXIV Thompson does not climb the mountain; he *sees* it. Thus, his mountaineering images are comments on the difficulty of poetic and subjective perspective. If negative capability represents a method for breaking through Thompson's previous devotion to lyric closure, this mountain image articulates such a breakthrough. Thompson does not need physical strength to enact a new poetic modality, but only to "lift [his] eyes" and adjust his vision.

It is therefore productive to note that Thompson's "Heights" are not simply metaphorical; they are also subjective and possibly remembered ones. As detailed on their tourism website, the "Heights of Abraham" are a tourist attraction in Derbyshire, near Thompson's place of birth and childhood, named after Québec's "Plains of Abraham" ("The Heights"), a connection that would not have been lost on Thompson. Mined by the Romans, and established as a major tourist site in the mid-nineteenth century, the Heights celebrate geological variety, and offer visitors not only broad perspectives of the surrounding land, but also visits to caves (publicly toured as long ago

as 1810) and to spa waters harnessed during the Napoleonic Wars (“The Heights”). The Heights’ mixture of caves (dark) and summits (light) echoes Thompson’s inclusive negotiation of extremes in *Stilt Jack*. But since this site likely exists within Thompson’s memory, his lifting of “eyes” in Ghazal XXXIII involves a lifting of imaginative memory. The Heights are not included simply to comment on poetic perspective, but also rely on achieving self-awareness by considering one’s particular, subjective experiences within the confines of one’s poetics, perhaps explaining why Thompson’s various “angler” roles – fisher, hunter, gardener, mountain-climber – so centrally mediate his realization of negative capability in *Stilt Jack*.

While the “Heights” represent the possibility to break into difficult, new truths via subjective exploration, Ghazal XI’s mention of “White Salt Mountain” symbolizes a warning against subsequently assuming absolute answers:

Last night I died: a tired flie woke me.  
On White Salt Mountain I heard a phrase carving the world. (XI.6)

That Thompson’s speaker “died” is significant, because it marks a complex rebirth with the next line. Awoken by “a tired flie” (that references Emily Dickinson’s “*I heard a Fly buzz – when I died*” [qtd. in Sanger, *SeaRun* 19]), Thompson’s speaker now stands atop “White Salt Mountain,” a legend from Taoist myth, wherein a maritime island eventually reveals itself as a mirage when approached by desperate sailors. Because literally standing on a mirage is impossible, Thompson self-placement on White Salt Mountain signals his fruitless effort to “tell the truth” using lyric closure, a fact represented in *Stilt Jack* by both “salt” (a symbol of eternity, according to Yeats) and the “white” elements of

the mountain (symbols of purity) (*SeaRun* 25; 47-8). But standing on a mountain of illusion also symbolizes the inherent limitations of any poetic method. Thompson therefore admits, on White Salt Mountain, that part of what is central in his embrace of negative capability is a recognition of his failings. His speaker's ability to "hear a phrase carving the world," a symbol for poetic insight, depends on a balance between disjuncture, multiplicity, and inclusiveness, and a realization that his ghazals are essentially imperfect, processual, and inconclusive. In the end, what is of central importance is not Thompson's arrival at an actual elevation of his poetic achievement, but his awareness that such an arrival is always limited by one's subjective and poetic limitations. In what follows, I attempt to accentuate the centrality of realizing such subjective and poetic limitations by examining one of the central obsessions of Thompson's ghazals: where, how, and when divinity is present or presentable within a postmodern exploration of subjectivity that takes as a given the instability of monolithic structures/strictures of universal understandings.

### **Part Three: *Stilt Jack* as Ecclesiastical Sacrament**

While it is true that *Stilt Jack* is "influenced by both Eastern and Western religious ideas" (Cooper, "Way Back" 39), its spiritual foundations are arguably rooted less within Sufism, Taoist myth, or other "Eastern" traditions than in those Christian rites most familiar to Thompson.<sup>8</sup> Thompson's allusions to Christian rites, scriptures, and stories throughout the ghazals are fundamentally tied to his form, which demands a simultaneous address to the secular and divine. His ghazals express not only the tangible dailiness of

Thompson's secular, psychological challenges, therefore, but also function as "desperate prayers" (Fagan, 1995), "effac[ing] the customary distinctions between sacred and secular not to dismiss the sacred but to assert it" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 7). The nature of his poetics, for better or worse, is therefore fundamentally Ecclesiastical, a strategy that may be intentional given Thompson's regular participation in "[h]igh Church Anglican services" throughout his life (Sanger, *SeaRun* 6). Like Ecclesiastes, *Stilt Jack* uses a single speaker to organize a series of lyric reflections on daily experience, but ultimately declares the pursuit of human action to be vain and futile, a fact that the first chapter of Ecclesiastes summarizes as "chasing after the wind" by declaring that "with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief." What is central in both texts is the cultivation of wisdom regardless of this inevitability, a paradox that Ecclesiastes implies with its famous declaration that "[t]here is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven," and that Thompson expresses in his ghazals by welcoming dark and light, positive and negative, affirmation and denial without resolving them, giving each its "time" and "season" in his ghazals.

Thompson's Ecclesiastical model is perhaps best outlined in ghazal XXXII, a poem that references both Christian and Urdu texts:

A woman to quench the fires of my eye:  
song: sweet, comely song.

We sing hymns: we care  
for the sound of grief and the grieving.

But we'll dance, her ashen hair  
tenting my body;

we join hands, eyes, lips: one:  
as safe as a toad in God's pocket.

Love the final loss, the last  
giving.

This is the day which the Lord hath made;  
we will rejoice and be glad in it. (XXXII.1-6)

While Thompson's recitation of Psalm 118 ("[t]his is the day which the Lord hath made; / we will rejoice and be glad in it") seems to overcome the "grief" of couplet two, this is only accomplished with "loss" and a reference to the Christ story as "the last giving." The thankfulness of the last couplet therefore depends upon the grief of couplets two and five, which allow "loss" and rejoicing to co-exist without resolution. What is central is therefore process: the "grieving" of "grief" and the "giving" of loss. References to secular/sexual love in couplets one ("A woman to quench the fires of my eye"), three ("her ashen hair / tenting my body"), and four ("we join hands, eyes, lips: one"), are similarly in the present progressive tense, accentuating the *process* of union amidst Thompson's evocations of both grief and thankfulness. "Hymns" are actively sung in couplet two to introduce both "the sound of grief and the grieving," which inverts a couplet by Ghalib, translated by Rich in the Ahmad anthology as Ghazal XII, one of several Ahmad-Rich translations that Sanger claims Thompson distributed to his students: "No wonder you come looking for me, you / who care for the grieving, and I the sound of grief" (58). Both "grief," the emotion, and its articulation, "grieving," are important here, just as Thompson's actual content is as central as his processual poetics.

This reference to Ghalib is not the only link to the traditional ghazal. Couplet one's evocation of a "woman" as "song: sweet, comely song" evokes Song of Solomon, also known as "Song of Songs," the shortest Old Testament text, which recites a loving union between a man and woman that is often read allegorically to symbolize a loving union between humanity and the divine, effecting the traditional ghazal's simultaneously loving address to the divine and secular. Couplet four also makes this connection with a line that Thompson originally wrote on a matchbook and carried in his pocket "as a reminder of how he wished always to write" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 36): "safe as a toad in God's pocket." Sanger stresses the connection of this line with divinity, arguing, "As W.H. Bond [...] points out, [that] the toad does not appear in the Bible; therefore, its survival was believed to be God's special care" (*SeaRun* 36). By putting the ugly toad in the pocket of God to describe the state of a "join" between the poem's speaker and his implied beloved, Thompson stresses a union between homely and holy that similarly echoes the ghazal's traditional fusion of secular and sacred. He effectively embraces death and life, ugliness and beauty as essential parts of existence, an inclusivity that relates to negative capability, but depends upon Thompson's own subjectivity – via his memory of his original line – for articulation. Essentially, in this single ghazal, Thompson balances the ghazal's traditional formality (surprising to some readers) against his own (often conventional) lyric language, demonstrating a poetic achievement that undercuts its own success by highlighting the grief of hymns, the "ashen hair" of dance, the loss of giving, and the secular in the divine.

In addition to several further references to Hymns, Scriptures and Christian rites (in ghazals XVII, XVIII, and XXXIII), Thompson also follows an Ecclesiastical method to investigate a tension between secular despair and divine longing. This is perhaps most obvious in the allegorically subjective references to Job that appear directly in *Stilt Jack*, the most straightforward of which parenthetically frames a single poem:<sup>9</sup>

The Lord giveth.  
I wrote letters,  
  
[...]  
something  
taken away. (XXIX.1, 9)

These couplets open and close Ghazal XXIX, a poem filled, from couplets two to eight, with a list of items that are self-referential, intertextual (referring to poems by Valéry and Gary Snyder, and Rilke's letters), and operant between poles of both absence and presence and fullness and emptiness. They refer to "Job 1:21: *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord*. These words are used at the beginning of the Anglican Order for the Burial of the Dead" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 34) and affirm Thompson's reliance on Christianity to order his metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> Thompson's exploration of subjectivity via poetry ("I wrote letters") tests his limits, self-reflexively interrogates his faith, yet remains committed to the poetic act as a useful and enlarging metaphysical exercise. Such explorations echo the scriptural story of Job, whose faith and life, infamously, were used for a bet between Satan and God, which God, of course, won, rewarding Job's enduring faith with long life and prosperity. Just as Job remains faithful to God, Thompson remains dedicated to poetry, despite its difficulty.

This connection continues in the next couplet to reference Job in *Stilt Jack*:

Why be my own Job's comforter?  
A bottle of cheap rye: an empty head. (XII.5)

“Job’s comforter” refers to Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who are ultimately punished for failing to comfort Job with a respectful treatment of the divine. Thompson’s couplet applies such punishment to the particular torments of his own life. That “cheap rye” yields “an empty head,” after all, is not an abstract statement given Thompson’s destructive alcoholism. Thus, Thompson’s referral to himself as “my own Job’s comforter” not only alludes to the three friends who give the Biblical Job false comfort, but also destabilizes traditional notions of divinity (and therefore mystery) as external or supreme. Instead, Thompson, himself, *becomes* the “comforter,” a transformation that is not only secular (because related to Job’s friends), but also divine, since “comforter” is a moniker for God preferred by many Victorian and Romantic poets, including Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose sonnet, “God’s Grandeur,” is referenced in ghazals XXVI and XXXVII.<sup>11</sup> What is central in Thompson’s simultaneous assumption of mortality and divinity, however, is its tentativeness. The voice of his poem is unwilling to declare itself divine, but also mocks its own efforts to compare itself to the tortured figure of Job. If Thompson’s speaker comforts himself-as-Job, he perpetuates a cycle of victimization, unable to emerge from a temptation towards grandiose lamentation that will test his faith in poetry or the divine. If Thompson’s speaker can become both his own Job and also his own divine comforter, what is the purpose of an external, supreme divine power? Instead of telling us, Thompson allows his ghazal to remain open-ended. Rather than completing

his allegory, he leaves the reader unsure if Thompson-as-Job will receive redemption or if Thompson-as-secular-comforter will receive condemnation. Instead of seeking such closure, Thompson ends with rye and emptiness (or, wry emptiness, even), a stance that allows for both, neither, or either one of these possibilities, an embrace of negative capability that is both disjunctive and open, blasphemous and faithful, secular and divine.

Other references to divinity abound in *Stilt Jack*. Most of these connote an inability to access divinity, combining Thompson's open embrace of negative capability with his Ecclesiastical method for questioning the value of wisdom. The most useful of these for the current study are as follows:<sup>12</sup>

I can't talk to God. Tonight, I dug  
three hills of potatoes. Sadness, what's that? (III.2)

Lord, lord. I'm thinking of you.  
I'm gone. (III.8)

It's all in books save the best part; God knows  
where that is: I found it once, wasn't looking. (IX.3)

I believe in unspoken words, unseen gods:  
where will I prove those? (XVI.3)

In each of these couplets, Thompson struggles between belief and doubt (often expressed as self-doubt) that tends to satirize the speaker's own despair by ironically dismissing his "Sadness," "thinking," the "unspoken" or "unseen" sublime, or any literal location as an answer to spiritual longing. He also dismisses his own poetry, saying that only "God knows" how to access "the best part." Thompson's foundational belief in mystery, however, is steady in each of these couplets, even if he "can't talk" of it, can only be "thinking" of it when "gone," can only access it when not "looking" for it, cannot see it,

and cannot locate it in his secular life. He continues to believe in “unspoken words, unseen gods” by invoking an ineffability that rejects singly authoritative answers (preferring multiple “gods” over one “God”), a strategy that echoes his embrace of negative capability. There is a desire for answers, of course, within these lines, but this does not overpower the necessity of process (“I’m thinking of you / I’m gone”), the importance of allowing questions to remain asked and unanswered (“where will I prove these?”), and the centrality of considering one’s subjectivity as a flawed, flexible, and changing constant.

Despite naming the “Lord” in his ghazals, Thompson seeks to affirm *faith* more than a personal relationship with divinity. Thus, his speaker prefers closeness to divinity rather than a singular definition of it. This attitude – which admits the limitations of language and the failure of previous models of divine relationships – is perhaps best articulated in a couplet from ghazal VIII: “I want to wake up with God’s shadow / across me: I’m a poet, not a fool” (VIII.2). By referencing at least twelve instances in the Bible that refer to “God’s shadow” (especially Psalm 91, which says “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty”), this couplet makes clear Thompson’s cautious self-awareness and desire for faith rather than proof.<sup>13</sup> Since he is “a poet, not a fool,” he says, he wants the shadow, not the shadow’s maker. Proximity and humble wonder are more important, here, than absolute definition. That poetry is not rendered foolish means that Thompson’s (failing) attempt to reach understanding remains worthwhile, despite Thompson’s realization that such poetry will be limited, and will not ultimately achieve perfection, but only “God’s shadow.”

This difference between poetry and divinity is perhaps best expressed in a couplet that concludes a ghazal filled with failed expectations, disappointments, and self-critique:

I'm in touch with the gods I've invented:  
Lord, save me from them. (XIII.6).

Fear of “the gods” here not only references Thompson’s interests in primitivism and poetic impulse, but also refers to both his own creativity in *Stilt Jack* and his reliance on Christianity as a basis for his imagistic investigations. Thompson’s self-invented “gods,” a menacing presence from which he requires salvation, represent his actual ghazals, and the wild impulses that he seeks and harnesses in order to write them. That the “Lord” remains properly named and separate from Thompson’s “invented” gods signals another paradox: the co-existence of a singular, exterior “Lord” and the multiple, interior “gods I’ve invented.” The “Lord” is both specific, referring to a Christian god, and colloquial, referring to a secular vernacular (as in “God help me”). But, Thompson is really talking to himself here; he realizes that only he can “save” himself from the dangerous impulses of his life and his poetry. Because he is not interested in formulating ultimate answers, *Stilt Jack* offers no resolution to this paradox (unless one reads this lack of resolution as a kind of closure). Rather than closure, Thompson reifies faith and desire as a record of poetic process. By allowing his poems and attitudes to become “the gods I’ve invented,” Thompson signals both the ghazal form (which combines secular and divine love) and his subjective stance (by combining a Romantic concept of the sublime as both beauty and terror and a postmodern tendency to treat truth claims with subjective skepticism). Via his Ecclesiastical model, references to Job, and failure to communicate directly with the

divine, Thompson's processual poetics stages a self-reflexivity that refuses to settle for single answers. In her early review of *Stilt Jack*, Margaret Atwood succinctly summarizes this achievement:

When Thompson says he would rather be a stone or the Great Bear, he wants escape from the human body and in particular from the human head. [...] The voice of these poems would like to want honesty, simplicity, happiness and love, but cannot quite believe in their possibility. Nor can he believe he does in fact want them. 'I'm in touch with the gods I've invented,' he says. 'Lord, save me from them.' (311)

#### **Part Four: "Give up words" (III.3): Self-Doubt as Negative Capability**

Thompson's struggle to get the words right in *Stilt Jack* is an important part of the book's content, and fundamental to how his ghazals communicate with the reader. Although such self-doubt is often paralleled to a loss of control in Thompson's personal life during the composition of *Stilt Jack*, his self-reflexivity does not merely reflect biographical hardship.<sup>14</sup> In his ghazals, Thompson meditates on the basic *idea* of hardship, extending his personal example not only to the readers' individual lives, but also to the presence of such struggles in literary history. Despite what some critics claim, such a stance is surely the result of a *considered* entrance into mystery rather than an unfortunate or Romantic error that spills Thompson over the edge of reason, etc. In my analysis, Thompson's self-doubt and self-reflexivity are therefore fundamental manifestations of his postmodern re-invention of negative capability, which make the potential failure of his poems central to their content. Because such an acknowledgement eschews singular answers, Thompson rejects "The muck of endings" in favour of seeking "drunk beginnings, / yattering

histories, rodomontades, anabases” (XXX.4). All of these examples present ideas that used to be monological: absolute concepts of origins (or “beginnings”), history (which is supposed to be fixed), ego (via the boastful talk of rodomontades), and exteriority (via “anabases,” which denotes a journey to the interior). But they also imply how complicated such ideas become when one considers (post)modern exceptions to the rule: how origins are “drunken,” how history is neither silent nor fixed, how ego is delusional, and how exterior claims ultimately depend on subjective preconceptions. Rather than focusing on simplistic resolutions (“the muck of endings”), Thompson investigates the complicated multiplicity of his present context and subjectivity, admitting the limitations of language while also affirming the vital importance of linguistic communication. Because words are a central symbol for his fraught self-reflexivity, Thompson’s battle with language (which echoes his inability to access the sacred) in *Stilt Jack* is therefore an inevitable part of his exploration of contemporary subjectivity.

Perhaps the most obvious articulation of “words” as a self-reflexive manifestation of negative capability is the end of ghazal XXVI:

there are ways, and signs: the woods  
point one way,

the words: there is a word:  
there are words, lie about us,

dogs and the night and children  
poured out in looseness

and children  
on the grassy ground. (XXVI.4-7)

Here, words “lie,” never truly capturing the signified as “signs.” But they also “lie about us,” a phrase that signals both misperception – offering a skewed vision of “us” – and presence, as though language is physically scattered about “us” as readers, “poured out in [the] looseness” of Thompson’s impulses. By utilizing assonance to draw attention to a choice between “words” and “woods,” Thompson highlights the echo between the world and the poem, a connection also implied in ghazal III when his speaker decides to “[g]ive up words” for “a good knife, honed” (III.3). By drawing attention, via repetition, to “the words: there is a word: / there are words,” Thompson highlights the process of diction necessary for creating a poem out of the phenomenal world. All of the words here – “dogs and the night and children” – are therefore lexical choices for the poem, but also signifiers for actual “dogs,” “night,” and “children” that exist beyond the text. While the first use of “children” is a poetic choice of words, therefore, Thompson’s final couplet implies a phenomenological record of the actual world: “children / on the grassy ground.” This self-reflexivity highlights Thompson’s intermediary role as writer who actively translates the organic world into his ghazals.<sup>15</sup> By so shattering verisimilitude, the ghazal’s “words” admit the fact that Thompson orders and understands the world from his own, flawed, subjective perspective. That they are “poured out in looseness” therefore represents a dual possibility: that Thompson might achieve an exacting type of open or “loose” line (that succeeds), or that he might expose an undisciplined or “loose” craft (that fails). By making both failure and success equally possible, Thompson self-reflexively adopts negative capability not only to embrace the contradictions of his content, but also to scrutinize the multiplicity of his processual poetics.

Because he remains dedicated to poetry despite its inherent imperfections, Thompson argues that one can only rely on words if one embraces their limits. This conviction is best expressed in ghazal XXIII:

Put two words together: likely  
it's your name.

I don't know mine:  
the words have taken it, or someone's hand.

I dream myself into being,  
a poor man.

[...]

I don't hear your words: I hear the wind,  
my dreams, disasters, my own strange name. (XXIII.6-8, 12)

Here, words both succeed and fail. The “two” Thompson has his speaker put “together” are “likely” his name, but ultimately he does not confirm this, saying “I don't know mine” since the poems or “the words have taken it.” To proceed, Thompson must dream meaning, but such dreams, he realizes, are impoverished. He does not “hear your words,” therefore, or the poem itself, as some transcendental signifier for what he really wants to access: “the wind, / my dreams, disasters, my own strange name.” Far from simply uttering a Freudian shiver of the *unheimlich*, Thompson expresses the failure of system and language that is rooted not only in existential philosophy, but also postmodern critiques of subjectivity. Part of Thompson's problem relates to what Robert Kroetsch identifies as a general challenge for poets writing in 1970s Canada: how to honour a “disbelief in system – that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story – and at the same

time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity” (“For Play” 62). Thompson’s challenge, then, is how to present a united idea on the premise that unity is a sham, using a flawed system of language to transcend the failure of systemic language. By doing so in *Stilt Jack*, Thompson presents something new: a unified concept of disunity that relies on negative capability and the ghazal form to clarify its inclusiveness. This is not an easy task, and its difficulty sometimes spills over into precise expressions of an inability to capture either the sublime or poetic eloquence. Thus, “Thompson’s ‘words, goddamit, words’ in Ghazal VIII are condemnation and emanation of a lexical fatality in English, a cultural obtuseness, an imaginative defect. And the condemnation and damnation echo through *Stilt Jack* whenever ‘word’ or ‘words’ are used” (Sanger, “Night Sea Journey” 81). As both gift and curse, “words” anchor Thompson’s lyric impulse and formal disjuncture by exposing language as a failed, yet necessary system for subjective expression.

For my purposes, the best examples of such self-reflexivity are the two final ghazals in *Stilt Jack*. But, some precedence for these is established in ghazal XIV:

All night the moon is a lamp on a post;  
things move from hooks to beautiful bodies. Drunk.

I think I hear the sound of my own grief:  
I’m wrong: just someone playing a piano; just.

Bread of heaven.  
In close.

In dark rooms I lose the sun:  
what do I find?

Poetry: desire that remains desire. Love?

The poet: a cinder never quite burned out. (XIV.1-5)

Leaving aside Thompson's exquisite references to the moon, his own alcoholism, the transformative power of Romantic imagination, and the Eucharist of couplet three, what remains obvious in this ghazal is a complex self-reflexivity. Thompson invites our lyric expectations with statements of grief (that reference Rich and Ghalib), but then upsets them by claiming error ("I'm wrong: just someone playing the piano") at once legitimizing his self-analysis and undermining a lyric expectation for holistic completion. In the "dark rooms" of the ghazals, the lyric's unified and logical "sun" is therefore lost, strategically, in order to "find" something new. Thompson therefore retains his faith in the poetic imagination, obliquely quoting lines from Char's "Partage Formel" in the ghazal's last couplet to claim, for poetry, longevity, resonance, continuance, and energy, even though expressed in the flawed systems of language.<sup>16</sup> Poetry, he says, is "desire that remains desire," and must embrace process rather than attempting to resolve its own tensions. Thus, a poet is not a captured flame or a raging, emotive burst of insight, but, like a dying star, "a cinder never quite burned out." These two lines essentially summarize Thompson's adaptation of negative capability: poetic investigation does not end in answers; it remains, endures, continues, and still burns long after books are closed and pens are capped, despite the subjective failures of its author or the limitations of its lexical systems.

The final two ghazals in *Stilt Jack* perhaps articulate these complexities best. Ghazal XXXVII begins by returning to the questions of Thompson's opening poem. By the end of the text, however, a reader is told that "Now you have burned your books,

you'll go with nothing. / A heart," an endorsement of lyric impulse and negative capability rather than a confirmation of final wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Rather than affirming Arnold's "Sweetness and Light", Thompson figures such poetic ideals as "Sweetness and lies" (XXXVII.5), a "folly of tongues" (XXXVII.3) that must be admitted in the poems themselves if they hope to attain any level of useful or resonant truth rather than becoming "a wind and water to kill cedar, idle men, the innocent" (XXXVII.5), an indictment of both lofty, nostalgic neo-Romanticism and grounded, conventional logic.

In order to get past the impasse of his own education within the Western canon and the logical traditions of poetic metaphysics, however, Thompson realizes that he must work *within* the canon rather than completely reject it. This is why he says of Flaubert's "*le mot juste*" that he must "forget it; remember" (XXXVII.8). His invocation of Flaubert's self-prescriptive phrase indicates both a shared obsession over finding the right words and an attempt to remain open to the intuitive impulses of the ghazal sensibility. By both forgetting and remembering the value of the Western canon, Thompson attempts to balance a healthy usage of its insights with his breakthrough into a new kind of writing:

(the grand joke: *le mot juste*:  
forget it; remember):

Waking is all: readiness:  
you are watching;

I'll learn by going:  
Sleave-silk flies; the kindly ones. (XXXVII.8-10)<sup>18</sup>

For my argument, what is most important in these couplets is a sense of alertness, openness, and readiness. Thompson insists that in addition to the obsessive prescriptions of older models of art, what is important now is process, self-awareness, a willingness to “learn by going,” accepting contradiction as well as absolute answers, another explication of Keats’ revitalized philosophy grounded by a formal consideration of both poetic precedents and contemporary subjectivity.

It is not until we reach the final couplets of *Stilt Jack*, however, that Thompson offers his most thorough summary of the importance of self-reflexivity for his project:

Should it be passion or grief?  
What do I know?

My friend gives me heat and a crazy mind.  
I like those (and him).

Will it all come back to me?  
Or just leave.

I swing a silver cross and a bear’s tooth  
in the wind (other friends, lovers, grieving and passionate).

I’ve looked long at shingles.  
They’ve told.

I’m still here like the sky  
and the stove.

Can’t believe it, knowing nothing.  
Friends: these words for you. (XXXVIII.1-7)

This ghazal not only articulates an open-ended poetics, established via Christian and non-Christian structures (the cross and aboriginal bear’s tooth) that ground Thompson’s formally imaginative leaps, but it also re-iterates the central importance of processual,

subjective exploration within the postmodern milieu. When his speaker admits that “I don’t know,” Thompson rejects ultimate answers, ultimately saying he “[c]an’t believe” in a closed lyrical unity. The “passion or grief” that opens the poem therefore becomes adjectivally “grieving and passionate” by mid-poem, stressing process over finality.

In the end, Thompson invites his readers into a private communion, a shared community based upon interiority. Readers are left as “friends,” with “words,” however flawed, because Thompson’s balanced poetics is as applicable to their own subjectivities as it might be to his own. By admitting in couplet one, for example, that he doesn’t “know” the answers, or, in couplet three, that he is unsure what will ultimately happen next, Thompson implicitly invites readers to participate in his processual queries, which equates their participation with his supposed authority. But he also responds to such multiplicity by the final couplet, where his speaker claims to know “nothing,” a profound understanding (of the idea of nothingness) that Thompson offers to his readers (“these words for you”). Openly admitting that words fail to capture the sublime thereby becomes a new method for achieving a qualified sublimity. This is the implicit message of *Stilt Jack*’s negative capability, with Thompson’s subjectivity (and therefore subjectivity, itself) serving as its primary sample, and his final lines – in ghazal XXXVIII – offering his insights to those of his participatory readers willing to accept them.

### **Concluding between “the sky / and the stove”**

While one might aptly read Thompson’s ghazals as examples “of the careful melding of two worlds: the wilderness [Thompson] loved and interacted with and the private world

of the poet, the drive of the spirit toward illumination” (Cooper, “Way Back” 39), one must also remember that *Stilt Jack* does not aim for resolution between privacy and spiritual enlightenment. Instead, “Thompson is clearly seeking a polyphony of voices” (Barbour 106) that the ghazal form, by its own requirements and traditions, “invites” (Barbour 106). To re-invent negative capability, Thompson neither ignores the breakthroughs of modernism nor so fundamentally endorses them that the previous insights of the Romantics and Victorians are dismissed absolutely from his ghazals. Instead, *Stilt Jack* forges a neo-Romantic model while also continuing the project of modernity. To understand his angler poetics, one must therefore re-read Keats’ Romantic vision through Olson’s modern projections, so that Thompson’s postmodernity is revealed as a non-progressive synchronicity, wherein one subjectivity is made up of a variety of poetic lineages. In his ghazals, Thompson demonstrates that chaos and order are not ruled by entropy, divinity, or subjective insight, but by the gaps between such labels (or, as Bowering phrases it, “the road between the stars” [*Kerrisdale* 133]), a realization articulated by the failures of language to capture experience – both secular and sacred – absolutely. Thompson resides, both in the end and in the beginning, not as one or two or twenty potentialities or contradictions, but as all and none of them. Thus, *Stilt Jack* operates somewhere amongst categories. When readers reach Ghazal XXXVIII, therefore, they are forced to realize that Thompson is “still here like the sky / and the stove” (XXXVIII.6), not just between, among, or above his readers, but *within* and fundamentally participatory in their mutual reception of the text. He remains, in a Western reader’s poetic imagination, not simply as the sky *and* the stove, or as the sky *or*

the stove, but as a possibility *between* such extremities: grounded and in flight, historical and contemporary, affirmative and negative, present and gone.

An energetic openness is therefore an essential part of Thompson's residence within negative capability in *Stilt Jack*, enacted each time readers open his posthumous sequence to its opening lines: "Now you have burned your books, you'll go / with nothing [...]" (I.1). This nothingness is not empty, but full of potential, less a *tabula rasa* than a palimpsest, wherein traces of Thompson's, Yeats', Mir's, and our own experiences texture our approaches to *Stilt Jack*'s multiplicities. This is how Thompson invites the reader into his self-reflexivity, asking us, too, to (re)consider a poetics of non-logical inclusivity, wherein various literary histories, voices, and modalities mingle, overlap, contradict one another, and, at certain moments, harmonize.

Maybe this is what Thompson meant, in the brief scrawl of ink he left on a pack of King Size Belvederes, in 1974, that has since found its way into his fonds at the National Library and Archives in Ottawa. Turn the package inside out, and you'll find an invitation to join the implicit impulses of Thompson's poetics, put into two lines, quick, marking his journey through the ghazals not only as intensely private, but also as fundamentally communal. Reading these, what is clear, to me at least, is that the postmodern search for subjective understanding begun in *Stilt Jack* remains firmly in the our hands, today:

the user is  
the content of the poems.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> A similar argument regarding the always-already mainstreaming of the avant-garde is convincingly presented by Butling in *Writing in Our Time* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier, 2005). Her rejection of avant-garde poetry's self-definition is achieved by arguing that it is an essential part of the mainstream by the 1990s, when "radicality could no longer be adequately described within the discourses of avant-gardism [since] the 'new' as often as not critiques the privileged subject formations and grand narratives" (26), an argument that places subjectivity and political claims for ontology above and beyond formal innovations. For more, see her excellent chapter, "(Re)Defining Radical Poetics".

<sup>2</sup> My primary source for this summary is Olson's "Projective Verse" essay.

<sup>3</sup> As noted in my Introduction, "angler poetics" is a term coined by Brenda Carr-Vellino.

<sup>4</sup> Sanger also traces references to Walton in ghazals XXI, XXIII, XXVIII, XXXIII, and XXXVII (*SeaRun* 27).

<sup>5</sup> This is a veiled, ironic reference to Matthew Arnold's summary of idealized culture as "Sweetness and light" in *Culture and Anarchy* (Sanger, *SeaRun* 21-2). That Thompson changes Arnold's "Sweetness and Light", which he references in Ghazal XVI, to "Sweetness and lies" for Ghazal XXXVII, contributes to *Stilt Jack*'s sense of personal growth, since it indicates a shift in perspective from admiration to skepticism. See Chapter 2 on Thompson's relationship to Yeats.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps such memory is why this ghazal is also laced with intertexts, alluding to Stevens' "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," Dante's *Inferno*, Wordsworth's sonnet on the death of his daughter, Rilke's *The Sonnets of Orpheus* (*SeaRun* 30-31), among others. Such intertextual "sampling" means that *Stilt Jack* grows a new kind of garden, carefully and inclusively allowing wildflowers and crops to co-exist, so that Thompson's ghazals venture upwards towards the sunlight of a new literary model by growing roots down into a historical tangle of past literary models. Structurally, this strategy echoes a similar one employed in Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1977), a poem also composed and released in the mid-1970s, which bases its own journey of self-discovery in a set geography, via a particular biography, and as part of a longer literary tradition that both extends and revolutionizes its own sources. As Wanda Campbell argues, Kroetsch's poem grows a "synchronous garden," that moves upwards into a new literary model and downwards into historical literary models. Just as Kroetsch's "fall from the horse is a fall *into* the garden, not out of it" (Campbell 29) in *Seed Catalogue*, Thompson's embrace of the ghazal sensibility in *Stilt Jack* enacts a fall from the grace of his previous poetic ideals into the fertile soil of negative capability. Because they base their texts on an Edenic fall, Kroetsch and Thompson also engage the sacred, and are

---

samples from a much wider swath of poets attempting similar engagements in 1970s Canadian longpoems. The best and most sustained example of such a method for reconfiguring the sacred is bpNichol's *The Martyrology* (Toronto: Coach House), the first four volumes of which are released during the 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> Sanger argues that "the symbolic use made of mountains and mountaineering" in this ghazal is fundamentally linked to "other heights and mountains" in *Stilt Jack*, including "the Mt. Lykaion of Stickney's poem, which was the source of *Stilt Jack's* second epigraph. [...and] *Malachi Stilt-Jack* himself, standing on his *timber toes*, in Yeats, 'High Talk'" (*SeaRun* 38-39).

<sup>8</sup> Sanger claims that "Thompson's ghazals "are far closer in tone, intent, and content to those of Mir Taqi Mir and Ghalib" (*SeaRun* 7) than the ghazals of his contemporaries, since he and these predecessors all "work within explicit religious traditions" (*SeaRun* 7). Like Northrop Frye, Thompson believed that Biblical allusion was essential to Western literature, that all poetry must be keenly aware of Biblical precedents, and that "no poet working within the context of western civilisation could write good poetry without having read the Bible" (Sanger, "Night Sea Journey" 74).

<sup>9</sup> Sanger also makes a strong case for a similar strategic treatment of Leviathan, and therefore the inclusion of the Biblical figure and book of Jonah as self-representation in Thompson's ghazals. For more, see his notes on ghazals XXI and XXII in *SeaRun* and his work on *Stilt Jack* in *White Salt Mountain*.

<sup>10</sup> In biographical readings, much is made of such references given Thompson's impending death and focus on death and destruction throughout *Stilt Jack*. Though I concede that Thompson is actively engaged with and contemplating death throughout *Stilt Jack*, such readings tend to overemphasize biographical assumptions rather than mounting balanced considerations of Thompson's formal choices.

<sup>11</sup> One example of this use of "comforter" to represent God or the Holy Spirit is from Hopkins' "'No Worst, There Is None'," which asks, "Comforter, where, where is your comforting? / Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?" (167). This comes from one of Hopkins' so-called "terrible sonnets," which defied conventional rhythm structures and linguistic conventions in order to address both an inability to express oneself and to bemoan one's distance from the Holy Spirit (a wonderful, complex parallel to Thompson's own project). Hopkins' opening line in "God's Grandeur" is "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Thompson refers to it twice, in ghazal XXVI.1 ("the world is full of...") and ghazal XXXVII.2 ("The world is full of grandeur, / and it is").

<sup>12</sup> These are not the only examples of an inability to comprehend the divine. As far as I can tell, such concerns are also overtly expressed in at least nine other ghazals, including

---

III, VIII, IX, XIII, XVI, XXI, XXIII, and XXV. Elsewhere, many of the images or tones of the ghazals imply a similar dynamic between poetic expression and ineffability.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of “God’s Shadow” is referenced and applied in a variety of Christian faiths, but I found my best support for this reading in an unexpected place: an article by Henry Morris on a Creationist (and therefore literalist) Christian website called the “Institute for Creation Research,” useful, for my purposes, for its dependence upon the concept of scriptural concordance. Reference’s to “God’s Shadow”, Morris says, occurs in Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 63:7, and 91:1, Isaiah 4:6, 25:4-5, 32:2, 51:16, and 49:2, Lamentations 4:20, and II Peter 1:4.

<sup>14</sup> As noted in my Introduction, Thompson experienced a great deal of personal strife while composing his ghazals. He dealt with the fallout of an attempted firing at Mount Allison, his marriage disintegrated, his house and belongings were lost in a fire, and his beloved daughter – originally named on *Stilt Jack*’s dedication page and in ghazal VIII (*Black Book*) – left the country with his ex-wife. Biographical and mythological readings of *Stilt Jack* routinely cite these losses as the source of Thompson’s plunge into darkness rather than considering such a descent as at least partially aesthetic or strategic.

<sup>15</sup> The tension between impulsive openness and structural control is also reflected in Olson’s poetics. In his poetry, Olson tried to understand how to energize form and content while also accessing some form of poetic “truth.” His concept of “will” ultimately enters into the poetic process to determine which words should comprise the poem, and which should not. See “Projective Verse” or *The Special View of History*.

<sup>16</sup> Sanger quotes the translation Thompson uses in his PhD thesis on Char: “*A poem is the realization of love – desire that remains desire; [...] The poet, a magician of insecurity, can have only adopted satisfactions. A cinder never quite burned out*” (qtd. in *SeaRun* 21).

<sup>17</sup> What is rejected here is “Too many stories: yes, and / high talk: the exact curve of the thing” (XXXVII.4), a refutation of the Yeatsian ideal with which *Stilt Jack* begins (I.1). See Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> Of note here are literary references to Roethke’s “The Waking” (cited in the opening lines of couplets nine and ten), Aeschylus’ Orestian trilogy (marked by “the kindly ones” that end the poem), the “Ripeness is all” of *King Lear* (in couplet 9, see *SeaRun* 41), and a reference to one of Shirley Gibson’s books *I am Watching* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) (in couplet nine; see note [k] for Ghazal XXXVII in *SeaRun*).

## Chapter 4

How to Know Now:

“Zen” poetics in *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*

In the poems we reveal ourselves.  
In prose others.

~ Phyllis Webb (Notebook, 1969-1973)

The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East  
has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both.

~ Gary Snyder  
“Buddhism and the Coming Revolution” (1968-9)

The proper response to a poem is another poem.

~ Phyllis Webb in “Hanging Fire”

Since the mid-1960s, Phyllis Webb's poetry has involved an incisive stress on the present tense that simultaneously examines how global histories inform her writing process. Because she engages the presence of the past in the moment of writing, Webb's perspective in *Naked Poems* (1965) and *Water and Light* (1984) bears a striking resemblance to Zen Buddhism, which stresses the complexity of *ordinary* experience without requiring special, theoretical or scriptural knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will examine Webb's self-location in the present moment (in this chapter) and immediate space (in Chapter 5) by locating what I will provisionally call her "Zen" poetics on a spectrum between the haiku and ghazal sensibilities functional in both books.<sup>2</sup> While the observational, minimalist, syntactically simple aesthetic (with its attendant references to the natural world) developed over millennia in Japanese poetry informs Webb's linguistic aesthetic via a haiku sensibility, the harmonious disjuncture and spiritual longing of the ghazal sensibility informs her structural methodology. A consideration of both is necessary. Part One defines what I call Webb's intra-poetics in three ways: by discussing the connections between Zen tenets and Webb's poetics, by explaining her haiku sensibility, and by mapping the overlapping concerns of *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* to develop a processual, a-chronological reading of Webb's poetry. In Part Two, I highlight Webb's writing process by reading *Naked Poems* via a "Zen" concentration on the present. To conclude, Part Three examines what Webb calls the "Influence of Anxiety" on her writing, a productive model of response and resistance that engages the presence of the past to stress the necessity of breaking its karmic grip on one's writing practices, a process that echoes the realization of impermanence in Zen.

### **Part One: Webb's "Zen" Poetics**

While reading Webb's poetry as a "Zen" poetics, I am more interested in locating the harmonies between Zen and Webb's approach to writing as a present, processual, and phenomenological experience than in her debatable achievement of what Barbara Godard calls a "Zen *satori*" (n.p.) in *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*.<sup>3</sup> As D.T. Suzuki makes clear, Zen's essential denial of "dualism" in deference to its *yes-nor-no* approach to binarity means that *satori* (which roughly translates as the state of "enlightenment" central to all Buddhist traditions<sup>4</sup>) is nearly impossible for a mind committed to reason and logic to achieve. Locating Webb's poetry as a conclusive state of perfection is not as useful (for my purposes, at least) as comparing its process to Zen's central, practical tenet: one does not gain insight via the mannered study of esoteric texts, but by a deepened perspective that arises while sitting still, concentrating on commonplace objects and the states of body and mind as they ebb and flow: breath, ambient sounds, and thought patterns (a meditative practice called *zazen*). Like Zen's emphasis on experiential insight, Webb's poetry resists theory and abstraction in order to focus on moments of creation during the experience of writing. Just as "[t]he idea of Zen is to catch life as it flows" (Suzuki 45), the purpose of Webb's active, simple present is to record the process of a poem's composition as central to its content. This philosophy echoes Olson's great imperatives, in "Projective Verse," that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (149), and that all poetic process occurs in an objective field wherein a poet exists as a translator between the world's energy and a poem's construction, and is therefore one

among many objects. That Webb's poems do not proclaim endings so much as they validate the vital importance of attention and process coincides with Zen's both/and framework, and implies the binary flaws inherent in lines of questioning indebted to Western logic.

Though its influence is arguably evident in poems throughout her career, Webb never fully embraces Buddhism as a religious discipline. Her initial interest in it actually wanes by the late 1950s or early 1960s, several years before she begins *Naked Poems*:

I actually made this real decision about whether or not to become a Buddhist. I was living on University Avenue [in Montreal], in an awful beastly room. I read Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which produced the need for a decision. I concluded that I was too much a North American, that I really believed in conflict and suffering for growth. I was too much of a materialist – the rational, socialist world brought me back. (Webb, qtd. in Wachtel 11).

Webb's refusal to fully adopt Buddhism— due to her *desire for* rather than hope to cease suffering (one of Buddhism's "Four Noble Truths"<sup>5</sup>) – does not lessen the cultivation of a Zen sensibility in her poetry.<sup>6</sup> Her focus on a heightened awareness of the present moment suggests a *zazen* methodology, while her inclusive engagement with being "rational" and "socialist" makes possible a precise concentration on how her own subjectivity has formed and continues to take shape within the structures of Western reason, an essential investigation of the impermanent and limited notion of "self" examined in Buddhist practice. Webb's emphasis on subjectivity and suffering is both Zen – in its concentration on the material, the tangible, the immediate, the ordinary – and non-Zen – in its admitted desire for the continuation of "conflict and suffering for growth." Webb's subjective realization therefore extends her examination of the present

to consider her own potential complicity in the social and global politics of the West as evidenced by her continued use of Western forms and “North American” lyric predispositions in her own poetry.

Because acutely self-referential, Webb’s “Zen” concerns might more productively be considered as part of a larger structure that I call her “*intra-poetics*.” By “intra-,” I mean to highlight the contradictory richness of the *already-there*, realized with a focus on the material context of the present in time and space. Within the time and space of poetic creation, *intra-poetics* stresses the importance of the private, the interior, the personal, the local, and the present, but it does so in the context of the public, the exterior, the political, the global, and the historical. It stresses the present moment, but also realizes that subjects are always historically and culturally mediated by the past. While Webb’s lyric focus is interior, she does not dismiss history or global contexts. Her *intra-poetics* privileges the complexity of the here and now in the contextual light of the there and then. Despite their respective reinventions of form, therefore, *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* acknowledge both Eastern and Western lyric and philosophical traditions.<sup>7</sup>

While *Water and Light* engages the work of John Thompson (introduced to Webb by Ondaatje<sup>8</sup>) and Ghalib (via Ahmad and Rich) to transform the ghazal into what Webb calls the “anti-ghazal,” *Naked Poems* engages a haiku sensibility to reconfigure the masculine ideals of Romantic lyricism.<sup>9</sup> To clarify how her poetry interrupts lyric expectations, it seems useful to situate the “Western” “lyric” tradition within and against which Webb writes.<sup>10</sup> As recognized by Mark Jeffreys, Marjorie Perloff, and many others, and despite a lineage that often traces backwards from the twentieth century to the

British Romantic and Renaissance poets (especially Keats, Wordsworth, and Donne), however, “lyric” connotes different things to different critics and poets, and does not simply refer to a historically set periodicity. The only broad parameter upon which contemporary critics seem to agree is that “lyric” is an overqualified term. As Jeffreys notes, almost all contemporary critical approaches to lyric history and contemporary lyric re-fashioning in the West are therefore “productive of paradoxical, meditative, and ambivalent formulations” (xxiii-xxiv) rather than resolved by agreed-upon theories or categories. Webb stresses such paradox, meditation, and ambivalence by *engaging* Western lyric conventions rather than merely rejecting them, *using* the lyric in order to transform its habits. Rather than motivated by either resistance *or* response, Webb creates poems of *presence* to include both. Her poems are not “new” lyrics so much as they are “now” lyrics.

Webb works within and against not only the Western lyric tradition, however, but also imports the tenets of other lyric traditions into the present. Even a brief examination of how the haiku sensibility shapes Webb’s poetics reveals the magnitude of its importance in her poetry. While Japanese lyrics shift and transform during their long history, the sensibility that Webb applies from their traditions remains consistent during the haiku’s modern development. The essential elements of the haiku sensibility are immediately evident in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*: plain observation of the real world (the “room” and Suites (n.p.) of *Naked Poems* and Salt Spring Island flora and fauna in both texts); concrete imagery from one’s ordinary experience (books, blouses, and sunlight in *Naked Poems* and flowers, birds, and stars in *Water and Light*); simple

and pared down diction (“enclosed / by a thought / / and some walls” in *Naked Poems* and figured as “a sweet droplet / a sweet mantra” (48) in *Water and Light*); and focus on the perception of minute details, both material and interior (via “a good mind / that can embody / perfection with exactitude” in *Naked Poems* and sensing how “The universe opens. I close” (10) in *Water and Light*). Webb’s haiku sensibility thus articulates a densely allusive, controlled language that takes as its inspirational source a concentration on one’s present experience.

This approach evokes Zen’s focus on awareness, but it also acknowledges a more general debt to the Japanese poetic tradition. Haiku influences are acknowledged in Webb’s poetry at least as long ago as 1962, when she expresses her desire “to die / writing Haiku / or, better” (*Vision Tree* 60) in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” and concentrates on a “Japanese Plum Tree” in “A Long Line of Baby Caterpillars” in order to “Take away my wisdom and my categories!” (*Vision Tree* 56). Three years later, she also realizes many of the haiku’s traditional requirements. In *Naked Poems*, Webb’s evocation of natural cycles (tides, waves, sunlight, fruit, flowers, moons) echoes what Harold Henderson calls the haiku’s “almost inviolable rule” (5) of using “season words” (called *kigo*).<sup>11</sup> The haiku’s tightly condensed language – which eventually settles into a convention of a single, seventeen-syllable line broken into five, seven and five syllables, respectively – is evoked by the torqued, dense lines of *Naked Poems*.<sup>12</sup> This continues in *Wilson’s Bowl*, in which Webb remains devoted to terse, lyrical descriptions amidst the sonic range of her experiments and portraits. Here, by concluding “A Question of Questions” with the insight that “The error lies in / the state of desire / in wanting the

answers” (52), and naming a “red-crested woodpecker” as “*Zen Master*” (53), Webb recalls the basic tenets of Zen. Connections with haiku and Zen are also quite evident in *Water and Light*. Webb initially titles the third poem in the book’s “Frivolities” section “After reading haiku” (“Drafts of *Water and Light*” n.p.) and invokes a “haiku butterfly” (47) in the final version’s second couplet. She then references Basho “on the narrow road to the North” (*Water and Light* 47) in its third couplet, an allusion that recurs as an antidote for Ghalib’s intoxication in the book’s final ghazal, which suggests “a few cool Japanese images / to put you on the straight and narrow” (60). Webb’s speaker even self-identifies as “flying East / / with poems *From the Country of Eight Islands*. Hokku. / Haiku. Choku. Kanshi. Kouta. Tanka. Renga. *Seeds*” (*Water and Light* 15). The italicized title is a well-known collection of Japanese poetry that Webb read while writing her ghazals.<sup>13</sup> By identifying Japanese forms as “*Seeds*,” Webb implies the sustained presence of the haiku sensibility in her work.

While *Water and Light* is dedicated to the ghazal form, it therefore relies on the haiku sensibility by actively engaging the overlapping conventions of both traditions.<sup>14</sup> Both the ghazal and the haiku traditionally obey a set metrical foot, are untitled, and rely less on straightforward logical development than on what Henderson identifies in the haiku tradition as “*renso* or association of ideas” (5). Like the ghazal, “good haiku are full of overtones. The elusiveness that is one of their chief charms comes, not from haziness, but from the fact that so much suggestion is put into so few words” (Henderson 4). Perhaps most poignantly for my discussion, the ghazal and haiku also share a disjunctive aesthetic. In the haiku, the untranslatable use of Japanese *kireji* “(literally

‘cut-words’) [...] often indicate an unfinished sentence, [...] have in addition an elusive force of their own” (Henderson vii), and are commonly used to divide a haiku “into two parts that are to be equated or compared” (Henderson 8). As does the requirement for controlled disjuncture throughout a ghazal, *kireji* alters a reader’s perception during a haiku’s final units, revealing nuanced levels of meaning that force her/him to realize what s/he may previously have taken for granted in the poem’s opening phrases.<sup>15</sup> By utilizing a “Zen” poetics along with haiku and ghazal sensibilities, Webb’s participatory strategy forces the reader’s active engagement, interrupting his/her expectations. That *Naked Poems* subsequently represents a revolution in Canadian writing is a difficult position to counter.<sup>16</sup> Less commonly discussed is how it employs a poetics also used by ghazal-makers: tightly controlled lyric lines that connect via an intuitive repetition of natural imagery, breaking on the reader as a series of discontinuous yet interrelated segments, which variously express a vital interrogation of the Beloved (as the object of both sexual love and celestial desire), and form (in order to question rationality or closure). In my view, Webb’s prescient vision in *Naked Poems* is the best articulation of the ghazal sensibility in Canadian literature before the 1970s, despite the fact that Webb does not directly engage or explore the ghazal form until later. Its use of the haiku sensibility to attain the ghazal’s lyricism is a central part of this achievement.

As both Hulcoop and Glickman argue, the continuum between *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* is overwhelming. It is prefigured in Webb’s 1963 application for a Canada Council grant, which proposes two projects: “The first, probably to be titled NAKED POEMS, will be a small volume of small poems. In inspiration they will

perhaps derive from Sappho, Creeley, and, most importantly from Chinese and Japanese forms” (qtd. in Butling 146). The second, Webb hoped, would “be a book of big poems” (qtd. in Butling 146-7), reliant on the “long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo” (*Vision Tree* 60) she desires at the conclusion of “Poetics Against the Angel of Death.” Despite common critical treatments (Collis; Butling; Hulcoop) that locate this second project – as Webb generally does – as the unpublished and abandoned *Kropotkin Poems* on which Webb works from the mid-sixties to the late seventies, Glickman suggests an intriguing alternative:<sup>17</sup>

In many ways the ghazals [...] are a natural progression from *The Naked Poems* [sic] [...]. In that book Webb created a larger narrative structure out of intense lyric moments by writing in suites, and then organizing these suites (five, like the five ghazal sequences of *Water and Light*) into a ‘story.’ In this way the static form of each brief poem was transcended, and a different kind of unity was discovered than that of the single lyric. (51)

Glickman ultimately suggests that Webb’s ghazal couplets “are the rhetorical equivalent of long lines,” (56), and therefore fulfill her 1963 promise to write a book of long lines. Despite my hesitation to endorse Glickman’s notion of “natural progression,” her linkage between *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* is noteworthy. Both open up the constraints of adapted forms. Both employ an Eastern poetics to engage a Western lyric. Both organize a narrative arc via imagistic connection rather than plot. Most importantly, both suggest a focus on the here and now.

As such, they express an a-chronological intra-poetics rather than enacting start and finish lines for a reading of Webb’s diachronic evolution. While the ghazals in *Water and Light* perhaps “transform the long line [by] bringing it from the soap-box and

pulpit [...] down to the kitchen tables at which women write” (Hulcoop 151), this does not mean that such transformation is necessarily evolutionary. Both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* express profound, *internal* struggles that reveal a “subject-in-process” (Butling 65), not a stable, singular, lyric “I” that inevitably matures over time. As markers along a chronological timeline of her career, these texts are more akin to what Butling (via Fred Wah) calls a “*re* poetics” (*Writing* 21) than a teleological narrative. Their shared concerns locate Webb’s work as “lateral, spiral, and/or reverse movements rather than the single line and forward thrust of avant-gardism” (Butling, *Writing* 21). By examining them together, I mean to collapse notions of individuation, reading them as “recurrences, intersections, and interventions within social and epistemological formations” (Butling ix) that are focused by Webb’s attentive examination of the present.

Reading for a poetics of present recurrences bears immediate fruit when one considers the pen-name employed in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*: “Fishstar.” First used in the epigraphic poem that opens *Naked Poems* (“star fish / fish star” [n.p.]) to anticipate its “double lesbian subject” (Carr 72), “Fishstar” returns in *Water and Light*. While based in part on the geography of Salt Spring Island that is central to both texts, “Fishstar” also echoes “Ishstar,” a dualistic Babylonian goddess “located at the Persian roots of the ghazal itself” (Collis 77), who plays roles in both the earthly and celestial realms (Butling 50), just as “fish” and “star” do in Webb’s local geography. Ishstar’s invocation in *Water and Light* not only inverts the ghazal’s history (wherein a female Beloved is idealized by references to a masculine divinity), but also returns to Webb’s use of “Fishstar” in *Naked Poems*, “a gesture that re-calls the past of the writing and

uncloses the bounded text as a sign of Webb's self-inscription" (Carr 72).<sup>18</sup> When she names herself as "Fishstar," Webb evokes the past as part of the present, and postulates the ordinary subject as elusive, a *zazen* insight perhaps best examined by reading the processual present of *Naked Poems* through the lens of *Water and Light*.

### **Part Two: *Light, Now: The Processual Present in Naked Poems***

In contrast to her earlier work, Webb recognizes *Naked Poems* as an exercise in seeking "the total music of the poem" ("Polishing" 48). Instead of simply evoking images, Webb records the process involved in their discovery. By resisting conventional closure, *Naked Poems* attempts, Webb explains, to escape from "the preconceived notion of a poem [...] that is not open enough to receive its own intentions in a way; so it's limited when it doesn't have to be" (50). Thus, her lines pause to consider the complexity of the moment, so that her "hesitation even to write the long poem" (Kroetsch, "For Play" 63) becomes an essential part of the content of *Naked Poems*.<sup>19</sup> As Kroetsch argues, Webb (and the peers she influences) is thereby "driven back to the moment of creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in beginning itself" ("For Play" 62). Such a focus on the creative process links to both the haiku sensibility's emphasis on material imagery and Zen's stress on the present as a site of impermanence and potentiality.

From the very start of *Naked Poems*, Webb wants us to know that "There is room" for movement within and beyond her text (a strategy that uncannily resembles Thompson's "astonishing leaps" a decade later<sup>20</sup>). By making "room" for a lesbian

erotic in the sweet hotel suite of Suite I, Webb also actively challenges the lyric tradition's heterosexual and masculinist predispositions. Despite "MOVING / to establish distance" in the book's opening phrase, however, Webb's speaker soon "welcome[s] you in," emphasizing the importance of "here" and "this room" as methods for achieving self-awareness. By Suite II, the past is made present by being "*held [...] like this / in my mind.*" The sunlight that continues to come "*through / plum curtains*" combines with how "*The room that held you // is still here,*" activating memory as part of a present experience that is self-reflexively recorded by the presence of "*Poems naked / in the sunlight / on the floor,*" a gesture that involves the reader in Webb's writing process. "Non Linear" continues this participatory focus on the present, using an initial "instant of white roses" to challenge Romantic myths by claiming "My white skin / is not the moonlight," a possible refutation of the condescending idealization of women common in Western lyrics. By "listening for / the turn of the tide" via her specific location on "Cyprus Street," Webb's speaker also emphasizes how past preconceptions in a "tracery of last night's / tide" are altered by her gradual embrace of the "now" lyric. By the middle of this section, a change seems imminent:

Hieratic sounds emerge  
from the Priestess of  
Motion  
a new alphabet  
gasps for air.

We disappear in the musk of her coming.

As Butling notes, the disappearing "We," here, represents Webb's rejection of a lyric model that "idealizes women to the point of immobility" (26), figuring them as "the

iconic moonlit figure, the figure hiding her head, the self-parodying figure, the figure who is afraid of the female dark” (26). Here, women are activated as freed subjects. *Naked Poems* therefore becomes much more self-referential after the “new alphabet” takes shape, so that “the waves / hounding the window” become “the root waves / of the poem’s meter,” a gesture that figures the transformational experience of writing as central to Webb’s concentration on the present. This does not mean, however, that everything has changed. Real waves continue both within and outside of the poem; Webb’s “new alphabet” does not form a legible grammar; and the world takes little notice of her personal change, a paradox she stresses by admitting “I have given up complaining // but nobody notices.” Ultimately, Webb marks the present as ripe with transformative potential rather than proclaiming an absolute, completed transformation.

Because she is aware that her haiku minimalism and ghazal-like intuition are not mainstream in 1960s Canadian poetry, Webb does not pretend to have revolutionized the status quo. Instead, like Thompson’s, her poems enact a listening that simultaneously signifies the world and the poem, the act of love and the record of love.<sup>21</sup> This breakthrough from a limiting lyric past to Webb’s actively fertile lyric “now” is reflected in the book’s penultimate section – “Suite of Lies” – which stages Webb’s resistance to male precedents through concentration on the present act of writing. Here, Webb’s speaker “knows the way / of the pear tree” rather than a theory of the exterior world. Her reliance on sonic patterns (e.g. “*the way of what fell / the lies / like the petals / falling drop / delicately*”) and intricate and unexplained imagery (e.g. “*brother and sister / those children*”) anticipate an overt challenge to Western logic. When Webb’s speaker tells us

she deliberately uses “*the word groves [...to find] what fell by a breath,*” Webb describes the poem, the ideas *behind* the poem, and the process of creating it while paying attention to the breathing of her own body, a self-reflexivity that echoes the ghazal’s requisite disjuncture (as it relates to a Zen realization of impermanence) and affirms the haiku’s immediacy (via a concentration on the present moment).

In “Some Final Questions,” Webb’s speaker presents a variety of possibilities for lyric, subjective, and social change, without reducing them to dogmatic closure. By telling us she wants “the apple on the bough in / the hand in the mouth seed / planted in the brain want / to think ‘apple,’” Webb’s speaker rejects abstraction in favour of present, material experience. Because the voice interrogating her represents authority and binary logic, it doesn’t understand such a phenomenological perspective:

*I don’t get it. Are you talking about  
process and individuation. Or absolutes  
whole numbers that sort of thing?*

Yeah

As with Thompson’s ghazals, Webb’s affirmation is openly contradictory and unexplained. The rational, logical voice – against which the best ghazals and haikus protest – cannot understand this multiplicity, and demands material production: “*But why don’t you do something?*” it asks. Webb’s two answers are the keys to her intra-poetic sensibility.

First, her speaker notes, “I am trying to write a poem,” implying that artistic reflection is an active process that can create tangible change. Her second answer could be a manifesto for intra-poetics: “Listen. If I have known beauty / let’s say I came to it /

asking.” The process of attention, investigation, and present concentration, in other words, is not only a means, but also an end, so that existing within the complex contradictions of the present might be seen as an objective for Zen poetics. Not only does this show the active participation of the writer, but it also leaves her book’s conclusion open-ended, a resistance to closure that is fundamental to the ghazal sensibility and often figures centrally in both haiku and Zen Koans. By thus concluding, with the authoritative voice’s final question placed alone on the last right-hand page, unanswered – “*Oh?*” – *Naked Poems* effectively ends actively, attempting to “know beauty” via the openness required for Webb’s focus on the intra-. Such a stance ultimately frames history and subjective formation in the present tense, compelling a response that *Water and Light* also provokes: “a participatory reader who is willing to construct, dissolve, and reconstruct meanings as she [sic] reads” (Butling 37).

Such participation is registered not only by a reader’s intellectual contemplation, but also by the physical act of reading *Naked Poems* on the page. The extraordinary white spaces of the book echo the “rooms” that frame Webb’s poems, just as her speaker is “enclosed / by a thought // and some walls.” Thus, when “FLIES” are observed from “down here” in Suite I, “down here” appears on the bottom of the page; the books and blouses thrown on floors in Suites I and II suitably appear on the bottoms of pages; and sunlight is commonly placed higher on the page. “Non Linear” alternates between the placement of poems at the tops and bottoms of pages, a pattern that echoes the “waves” central to the section’s tidal imagery, and the implied ebb and flow of the sexual act of Webb’s “Priestess of / Motion.” Finally, the interrogation and responses that comprise

“Some Final Questions” are placed in the center of the paper, so that one perspective balances the other, differentiated by italics as the present experience of Suite I (in regular type) is paired to the present memory of recalled experience (in italics) in Suite II. This physical placement of the words on the page actively signifies both lexical meanings and Webb’s processual choice to select and emplace them in her poems. By equating her subject position to her poetry, Webb’s speaker echoes Webb’s content, and becomes “small like these poems” in order to lay out “*Poems naked*” for the reader, flawed and incomplete. Perhaps the central risk of *Naked Poems*, therefore, is embracing both the writer’s and reader’s flawed subjectivities as central to any book’s meaning: a record of process, not a pitch for progress. In *Naked Poems*, Webb explores not only subjectivity, but also the very *idea* of subjectivity. She lyricizes personally in order to question how one can possibly be personal or lyrical in the present tense.

Such a concentration on subjectivity has been expertly considered in both major critical overviews of Webb’s career (see Collis; Butling) and the best histories of postmodern poetry in Canada (see Kroetsch; Butling and Rudy). What is of interest to me, then, is not only the established importance of *Naked Poems*, but also its uncanny anticipation of the ghazal sensibility in Canada, wherein processual, imagistic, intertextual, contradictory explorations of complex longing and redemption arguably anticipate a common style during the 1970s, effectively transforming Canadian lyrics by proposing a newly balanced modality that admits its limitations and engages its precedents.<sup>22</sup> As Webb makes clear, this relationship to one’s predecessors is not static or predetermined; it involves an active engagement with one’s ongoing subjective

formation. Webb's intra-poetics involves not only her own writing process and subjectivity, therefore, but also the inescapable presence, within it, of an entire community of other voices. Her negotiation between response and resistance to these voices is the focus for my final section.

**Part Three: *What's Past is Present: "The Influence of Anxiety" in *Water and Light****

My location of "response" and "resistance" as key terms for Webb's intra-poetics in *Water and Light* draws on two valuable, complementary studies of Webb's poetic influences: Stephen Collis' notion of Webb's "Poetics of Response" and Pauline Butling's formulation of her "poetics of resistance." While Collis ultimately suggests that *Water and Light* evokes "not fusion, but more a social sense of companionship" (76) between and among writers from a variety of historical and cultural contexts, Butling argues that it initiates "a seeing *within* the dark" (1) of historically devalued female experiences, which Webb must make legible by actively subverting the ghazal's traditional structures. Rather than sticking to a strict couplet format, therefore, Webb sometimes deploys "a renegade single line" (Butling 63) in her ghazals. Rather than a clearly disjunctive break between couplets, she attempts narrative flow. Rather than enforcing the length of the ghazal's traditional meter, she often reduces her lines. All of these strategies, Butling argues, effectively "undermine the binary underpinnings of the romance tradition" (51) and thereby challenge the ghazal's patriarchal past.<sup>23</sup> Because Webb is actively "attuned to the voices within the voices she reads" (Collis 78), however, her critiques respond not only to her primary influences, but also to all of the writers who

have influenced *those* writers. As a result, her concentration on the present effectively implies an interaction with the entire history of her literary lineage. Because many figures in that lineage – F.R. Scott, Olson, Creeley, Williams, Ghalib, Basho, Thompson – are patriarchal, Webb’s engagement with them “not only thematizes female vulnerability [but] also initiates a transformative process” to make space “for action and agency” (Butling 29). Such exposure of the present-ness of the past might be best understood by considering Webb’s discovery of and engagement in the ghazal form.

One might productively start such a consideration with Webb’s title: *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. Two phrases exist here, conjoined by the open possibilities of an “and.” The terms on the right-hand side of this conjunction are not simply complementary, however, but also contradictory. As Stephen Scobie explains,

Webb doubles herself against the great Persian poets of the tradition .[...] But in doubling her sensibility *against* that tradition, Webb is engaged in altering and modifying the form: hence she calls her work ‘anti-ghazals,’ simultaneously affirming and denying the connection, doubling her own form as a definition of its negation. (63)

This doubling perhaps explains why Webb does not identify which of her ghazals are demonstrations of an “anti” form (aside from the unexplained subtitle of “Sunday Water”): all of the poems in the book both affirm *and* deny their own conventions, functioning, at once, both as continuations of an imperfect lyric language, and negotiations of an exclusive, patriarchal formalism.

Such simultaneity informs Webb’s recollection of her discovery of the ghazal in *Stilt Jack*, which she articulated several years after the publication of *Water and Light* during a “Panel Discussion on Risk” at the Manitoba Writer’s Guild.<sup>24</sup> This brief chat

illuminates Webb's subsequent creation of "Anti-Ghazals" in *Sunday Water*. In her "Discussion," Webb skeptically summarizes Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" theory as "the anxiety writers are *supposed* to feel about their literary fathers, or precursors" (my emphasis, 1). But, she also adds an important caveat: Bloom's idea, she says, is "[a] devastatingly masculine theory deriving from Freud's Oedipus and castration complexes" (1), which fundamentally excludes women and feminist theory from its purview. As she does with the socialist inspirations of F.R. Scott in the 1940s and the poetics of Duncan and Olson in the early 1960s, however, Webb refuses simply to reject such limitations without also examining the exclusivity arguably inherent in her most important "literary fathers." Thus, she considers their effect on her self-awareness and subjectivity:

When I was thinking about risk and feeling more and more anxious, I had the sudden inspiration to invert Bloom's phrase 'the anxiety of influence' to 'the influence of anxiety.' I experienced that 'ah-ha' feeling of revelation. "That's it," I said. "That's it."

Anxiety indicates that something intangible, unknown, dark and hidden is threatening to present itself, shape and substance looming, awaiting form. Paul Borum, a Danish poet and critic, says "Anxiety is mastered with the imagination's precision. "ANXIETY IS MASTERED WITH THE IMAGINATION'S PRECISION." Precision of observation, of listening and hearing releases anxiety. It leads, I think, to freshness, originality, and even voice and style in writing. ("Panel Discussion" 1-2)

This final observation regarding "precision of observation" to release anxiety is an exact summary of *zazen* as an avenue for realizing impermanence, and therefore easing suffering or "anxiety."<sup>25</sup> Not only does Webb's inversion of Bloom acknowledge how her patriarchal influences make her "more and more anxious" and therefore limited, but she also makes space for their *positive* influence as a "sudden inspiration." By inverting

Bloom's phrase, she implies that the debilitating literary haunting present in Thompson's ghazals exerts a different, arguably more productive force in her own work.

While Thompson's literary predecessors operate as a disciplinary, exterior force *against which* he struggles to break free from the philosophical assumptions of Western rationality, Webb's anxiety, as described here, is a responsive force that *inspires* her work within and against patriarchal literary and social structures. Both methods combine political and subjective concerns, relying on self-reflexive exploration either to overcome (in Thompson's case) or to utilize (in Webb's work) the pressures of inherited voices and forms. Webb inverts Bloom's theory to *use* "anxiety" as motivation, highlighting its present internalization to stage a conflict between her feminism and the predominant masculinism of her literary predecessors.<sup>26</sup> In *Water and Light*, she actively tries to work through such internalization, using "THE IMAGINATION'S PRECISION" to overcome those rationalist lyric conventions she has actively critiqued in her poetry since *Naked Poems*. Rather than relying upon logic, carefully hermetic symbolism, or rational control in her poems, she trusts the lyric impulse of her "IMAGINATION'S PRECISION," enabling a Zen focus on the present that links to the ghazal's non-logical harmonies. This approach parallels Thompson's reliance, in *Stilt Jack*, on imaginative leaps as a means of arrival. Like Thompson, Webb says she allows "the imagination's precision and the upsurges of the unconscious [to] do their work" ("Panel Discussion" 3) in her ghazals, balancing a stringent formalism against the intuitive impulses of "chance" and "inspired contingency" ("Panel Discussion" 3) central to the ghazal sensibility.

While Webb recognizes how “John Thompson became one of those precursors Bloom talks about as soon as I read *Stilt Jack*” (“Panel Discussion” 3), this concession does not weaken her work. Instead, it becomes a source of strength:

I so admired these wonderful poems [in *Stilt Jack*] that I wanted to try them for myself. I too defied many of the traditional requirements of the ghazal; rule breaking is part of the pleasure of working with received forms. It's too easy to follow the guide book, and it's more fun to adapt from the masters – you see how the Bloomian theory requires the patriarchal vocabulary – and use them for one's own purposes. (“Panel Discussion” 3)

What is central, here, is Webb's active, subjective exploration of her literary inheritance as a source of both “pleasure” and “fun” and subversive innovation. She engages the “received forms” of her predecessors for her “own purposes,” focusing on her presence to shape an adaptation that is not only difficult, but enjoyable.

Such lyric influence and re-invention, of course, is not new. What is striking in Webb's adaptation is her dynamic attempt to interrogate and *use* past traditions rather than simply affirm or reject them. Her exemplary achievement of such a balance is perhaps what motivates Douglas Barbour to declare her treatment of the form ultimately more important to Canadian poetry than *Stilt Jack*:

A masterwork from a major writer, Webb's *Water and Light* is, I think, the more open, the more generous and innovative text, partly because its feminist poetics does more to expand the range of the transformed form they both translated into personal use. But both have already influenced and will continue to influence many writers. (“Ghazals in the North” 115)

This does not mean, of course, that *Stilt Jack* is not absolutely central to the ghazal tradition in Canada. Rather, Barbour suggests that Webb's treatment of the form makes possible its ongoing, contemporary re-invention. He implies that Webb affirms the value

of personal adaptation over formal imitation, an effort to break “the rules” of poetic formalism rather than an attempt to “to follow the guide book” of particularly admirable poets like Thompson. In many ways, Webb’s Zen-inspired focus on the present provides a way out of Bloom’s categorical-historical anxiety. She finds a way to respond to what she once called Thompson’s “brilliant shaping musical imagination and intelligence” (“Ghazal Maker” 157) that pays him suitable respect without attempting to imitate his style.<sup>27</sup> This is part of what makes *Water and Light* – the first (and, in my view, most successful) sustained response to *Stilt Jack in Canada*– such an extraordinary text.<sup>28</sup>

While Thompson’s exorcism of Yeats alludes to a broad swath of canonical (and predominantly male) influences, *Water and Light* includes both canonical and non-canonical “responses to other poets – many of them women – within the structure offered by male predecessors” (Collis 73), reacting “more to a poetics than to any single poet” (Collis 68). Collis finds echoes not only of T.S. Eliot in Webb’s ghazals, but also of feminist texts, including Mary Melfi’s *A Queen is Holding a Mummified Cat* and H.D.’s *Trilogy* (Collis 71-3). Thus,

Webb follows Thompson into Ghalib and finds Eliot and H.D. once again. A poem of response becomes responsive on ever-increasing levels, to ever-increasing depths, breaking down the *disconnective* structure of the ghazal with which the original response began, revealing voice to be voices, the lyric self to be others, being to be singular plural. (Collis 71)

This concept of the “singular plural” suggests Webb’s ability to engage a community of poets while focused on the singularity of her own experience in the present moment, and connects her responsive poetics to Zen, which similarly focuses on the instability of subjectivity and the inter-dependence of all aspects of reality. At the same time, Webb’s

“singular plural” interrogates the viability of solidarity in second-wave feminism by implying that feminists cannot achieve tangible, social change without a private process of self-realization and self-examination.

For Webb, this means re-examining not only her own previous texts, but also those of both male and female writers who collectively influence her poetics. Thus, by the mid-1980s, she acknowledges “the influence of anxiety” as motivational, perhaps a change from 1980, when she lamented “the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation so overpowering that I have, up to now, been denied access to inspiration from the female figures of my intellectual life, my heart, my imagination” (*Wilson’s Bowl* n.p.). Webb’s relationship to her influences in *Water and Light* is therefore transformative and multiply responsive: her present anxiety involves a historical lineage; her self-knowledge uncovers the instability of her subjectivity; and her sense of poetic community is approached via the isolation of her singular poetic voice. Webb’s ability to access a shared community that includes women, in her ghazals, marks her inclusive stance not only as formally or strategically transformative, but also as personally and self-reflexively liberating.

This emergent balance between community and isolation is the subtext of Webb’s introduction to *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals*, the chapbook that precedes *Water and Light* and eventually constitutes its opening section, “Sunday Water.” Here, Webb not only examines the ghazal’s capacity for engaging “an ear and an eye to music and song” (n.p.). She also makes an essential intervention in its patriarchal idealism by moving “toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private” (n.p) rather than

affirming the ghazal tradition's representation of the Beloved as "not a particular woman but an idealized and universal image of love" (n.p.). Although she specifically acknowledges Thompson's *Stilt Jack* (including his suggestion of the ghazal's disjunctiveness as "'Drunk and Amatory' with a 'clandestine order'" [n.p.]), Webb remains centered in an ongoing, *interior* struggle, which considers both community and history, and individuality and presence as complementary dynamics in *Water and Light*.

**Conclusion: 'Ah Ghalib, you are almost asleep'**

While a muse-like invocation of Thompson opens *Water and Light*, Webb ultimately reaches further back in literary history to build a sustained engagement with Ghalib. As Collis notes, "[o]n the book's contents page, the title of each sequence is appended with an epigraph from *Ghazals of Ghalib*, thereby creating a ghazal-collage no more or less disjunctive than any of Ghalib's own" (73-4). In a letter to *Coach House* editor Sarah Sheard, Webb stresses the importance of what she calls this "ghazal-collage," making it "clear that the Table of Contents is to include the quotations: they are not supposed to go individually with each section. It's supposed to look like a five couplet ghazal in itself" (1). From the very beginning, therefore, *Water and Light* privileges a direct response to Ghalib, even if it is filtered through "his English-Canadian adaptor, John Thompson" (Collis 68). But, Webb's relationship to Ghalib is not simply historical; it is also essentially interior. Thus, when she "addresses 'Ghalib' *in Ghalib's voice*, in a poem imitating Ghalib's ghazal, she is also addressing herself" (Collis 76).

Such an intra-poetic self-exploration is perhaps most overt in the final ghazal of *Water and Light*, a poem that directly addresses Ghalib by enacting a vital continuum between the ghazal's past traditions and its emergent, free-verse conventions. His presence here is not a matter of a "master" and apprentice. In fact, these roles are reversed. Not only does Ghalib's collapse with his "head on the table, hand flung out" (61) echo Webb's position in "Leaning," with her "sick head on the table where I write / slumped one degree from the horizontal" (*Water and Light* 58), therefore, but it also reconfigures and ultimately deflates Ghalib's power over Webb's poetics.

In the first two couplets of the ghazal, Webb's address to Ghalib is playfully scolding and wistfully recuperative rather than obedient or aggressive, an inversion of traditional concepts of both chronological poetic influence and Freudian envy:

Ah, Ghalib, you are drinking too much,  
your lines are becoming maudlin.

Here, take this tea and sober up. The moon  
is full tonight, and I can't sleep. (60)

Although this apostrophe literally addresses the dead, these lines are resolutely in the present tense. While the full moon centralizes Webb's local and temporal geography, it also connects the moment of her own writing to Ghalib's. Ghalib's "lines are *becoming* maudlin" in the poem, not being received or interpreted as such. Webb's humorous tone not only berates Ghalib for drinking, but also makes his compositional process contemporary to her own. Both authors are awake, activated, and present. "This tea" is a promise for continued engagement.

The ghazal's next two couplets suggest that Ghalib – who signals the ghazal sensibility – should embrace Webb's haiku sensibility, a fusion of her Zen poetics that ultimately forwards the centrality of present awareness:

And look – this small branch of cherry  
blossoms, picked today, and it's only February.

You could use a few cool Japanese images  
to put you on the straight and narrow. (60)

The Japanese theme of this imagery recurs in the two penultimate couplets of the poem:

Ah Ghalib, you are almost asleep  
head on the table, hand flung out,

upturned. In the blue and white jar  
a cherry branch, dark pink in moonlight – (61)

This lullaby for Ghalib is achieved by juxtaposing a contemporary “branch of cherry blossoms, / picked today” with both the “moonlight” of traditional ghazal practitioners and “cool Japanese images” (cherry blossoms and moons are common *kigo* used in Japanese haiku, and “straight and narrow” references Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). These images unite Webb's haiku and ghazal sensibilities with a careful, *zazen* concentration on the present moment, addressing Ghalib's drunkenness in the ghazal by the precise rendering of a haiku's spare references to the phenomenal world, and thereby presently positioning Webb's poetics between both forms. Ultimately, Webb's construction of acute phenomenological subjectivity (as attuned to the delicate aesthetics of “the blue and white jar / a cherry branch, dark pink in moonlight” [61]) transforms the ghazal's traditional assumptions and symbols by rendering Ghalib in the present tense. Rather than historically distant, her imagery is confidently contemporary,

recording the material context of her current landscape to stress an ongoing dialogue with her poetic precedents.

In the center of this present-tense parenthesis are six couplets that offer a biographical sketch of Ghalib. The effect, however, is not to place him strictly within history, but to situate his poetry as fundamentally active in Webb's couplets:

Still, I love your graceful script,  
Urdu amorous, flowing across the page.

There were nights I watched you dip your pen  
into the old Persian, too, inscribe 'Asad'

with a youthful flourish. Remember Asad,  
Ghalib?

Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, who are you really?  
Born in Agra, of Turkish ancestry,

fond of women, politics, money, wine.  
'Losses and consequent grief' a recurring

theme, also 'a poetry ... of what was,  
what could have been possible.' (60)

While the details of Ghalib's biography are certainly in the past tense, Webb's memory is anything but passive. Her expression of "love" for his "graceful script" notes how it is "flowing across the page" right now. She recalls actively "watching" Ghalib write his poems rather than constructing a scene wherein she simply receives them. She grants his poetry a theme that is "recurring" rather than one that "recurred." This presentation of Ghalib speaks more to Webb's personal incorporation of his work than to a thorough understanding of his socio-cultural history. Despite knowing his name and the major details of his life and activating his presence in her poetry, therefore, Webb does not

claim to understand him, allowing her *zazen* concentration on the present to reveal the instability of subjectivity. Instead of granting Ghalib the stable realization of what used to be or might have been possible, Webb focuses on what's here, in front of us.

Ultimately, it is not a historically-contextual Ghalib that invades, makes anxious, or ultimately influences the subjective poetics of Webb's ghazals; it is the presence of Webb, herself, who influences how we read Ghalib. This inversion means that Webb's exacting, specific, particular subjectivity, represented by the cherry blossom branch, does not suggest closure so much as it highlights confidence in her self-reflexive awareness. Webb moves into the territory of Ghalib's lyrics not as a metaphor, abstraction, or theory, but as a marker of contemporary, self-aware, subjectivity. Her poetry builds an imaginative bridge between its own history and its contemporary re-invention. In the end, it is the present-tense subject – Webb – who arrives. What is arguably most important in Webb's poetry is not the historical lineage out of and against which she grows, therefore, but the context that she and her readers create by situating new visions beyond the limitations of tradition and against longings for a perfected future. Such a "Zen" realization of the present tense does not ultimately provide abstract answers so much as it examines the ongoing presence of subjective tensions, expressed in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* by the continual arrival of new, processual possibilities, harvested

from the land of  
only what is. (61)

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Because the page layout of *Naked Poems* is part of my general argument in this chapter, I have chosen to cite the original edition, published by Takao Tanabe's Periwinkle Press in Vancouver. The reprint that is closest to the correct layout, as per the original, is in *The Vision Tree* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982; 61-108), but even this version has significant differences from the original, including a lack of "Contents" and placing the poems in "Suite of Lies" too high on the page. The version included in Thesen's *Long Poem Anthology* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991) drastically alters the poem's essential tone by cramming together all of the poems without page breaks or proper layout, effectively re-creating its meaning. Because the original edition has no page numbers, I have not provided page references for my quotations of *Naked Poems*.

<sup>2</sup> By using "Zen" I do not mean to imply a thorough understanding of Buddhist doctrine, history, or practice; doing so without proper training or knowledge would be too close to New Age sentimentalism or Orientalist tunnel vision. Instead, I conceptualize Webb's poetry as D.T. Suzuki generally does Zen practices: via a basic concentration on the importance of the present and ordinary.

<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1960s, Godard claims that *Naked Poems* achieves a "Zen *satori*" that effectively rejects "the whole tradition of Western subject/object dualism" (n.p.), so Webb's adoption of "the paradoxes [and] non-logical sequencing, of the Persian mystical poets in the ghazal [...becomes] a model for her (and our) *satori*" (Godard n.p.) by the early 1980s. See note 4 for an explanation of "*satori*."

<sup>4</sup> In very broad terms, most Buddhist traditions locate Enlightenment as the ultimate goal (achieved over many lifetimes) of meditation. While Theravada Buddhists believe Enlightenment signals the end of karmic reincarnation, Mahayana students argue that enlightened individuals refuse to enter Nirvana until all suffering has ceased on earth (thus, they are reincarnated as Bodhisattvas). Since Japanese Zen and Chinese Chan Buddhism are relatively newer versions of older Indian traditions, and since Buddhism often incorporates local traditions as it moves across historical time and geography, the Chinese and Japanese variations are quite different from the Indian, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, Thai, or Vietnamese traditions. Zen, in particular, which incorporates elements of Shinto and Taoism, has developed practices to encourage practitioners into relatively swift realizations, so that Zen Buddhists generally believe Enlightenment can be attained quickly, within a single lifetime (since one's Buddha-nature, in Zen theory, is empty rather than loaded with karmic energy). For more on the Zen tradition, see Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1964). For more on Theravada, see Rahula's classic *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1967). For a general introduction to Buddhist teachings, see *The Dhammapada* (I've listed the Maseiro translation I know best, as well as a newer, more critically-acclaimed version by Carter and Palihawadana).

---

<sup>5</sup> “All is suffering,” or *Dukkha* is the first of the “Four Noble Truths” of Buddhism. The other three flow from this realization: suffering is the result of craving (or *Samudaya*, which creates karma); it is possible to achieve a cessation of craving (called *Nirodha*); and the best way to achieve such cessation is via “The Noble Eightfold Path” (*Marga*), a practical guide for right thinking and action taught by the Buddha as best practices rather than absolute or conclusive rules. See *The Dhammapadda* or Rahula.

<sup>6</sup> In her discussion with Wachtel, Webb claims that her “antagonism toward conventional religions of all kinds is focused on the patriarchal structure. I don’t want to become more involved with that, thank you. I want to become less involved” (13). She goes on to recall her decision that Kropotkin’s idealism could not ultimately change “male-female relations” (13) because it “was yet another male imaginative structure for a new society” (13). Her emergence as an “intuitive feminist” (13), she continues, therefore relates to originally being “surrounded by all these super-brilliant men” (13) who were part of “the patriarchal order” (13) when she started writing.

<sup>7</sup> Webb’s focus on the present as a site of internal interruption and struggle arguably begins at the 1963 UBC Poetry Symposium led by “the left-wing of American-Canadian poetry” (Webb, “Polishing” 46) (including Ginsberg, Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Levertov and Avison), an event that largely inspires *Naked Poems*. See “Polishing Up the View.”

<sup>8</sup> Ondaatje and Webb make appearances in one another’s poetry. In “Tin Roof,” for example, which is dedicated to Webb, and paired to the publication of *Sunday Water* at Island Press, Ondaatje expresses a desire for “the long lines my friend spoke of / that bamboo which sways muttering / like wooden teeth in the thin volume I have” (42) a reference to Webb’s closing lines in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death”: “I want to die / writing Haiku / or, better, / long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!” (*Vision Tree* 60). Webb not only dedicates *Water and Light* to Ondaatje (and F.R. Scott), but also cites images expressed in at least two of Ondaatje’s poems: “Explanations of My Postcards,” to which Webb refers in the fourth ghazal of her opening section when she says “you have sent me a card / with a white peacock spreading its tail” (12), a connection confirmed by Ondaatje (Personal Email); and “Elizabeth,” referenced in one of Webb’s ghazals with mentions of “Elizabeth” (30), “Essex” (30) and more “Peacock blue” (30). Hulcoop notes this relationship without naming or realizing Ondaatje as the influence in question, calling him the man “who presumably directed her attention to John Thompson’s *Stilt Jack*” (155).

<sup>9</sup> This approach is noted in the first reviews of *Naked Poems*, but for all the wrong reasons. Alan Pearson’s now infamous review best captures this oversight, lamenting the absence in Webb’s poems of what he names essential to successful lyrics: “content in the form of a ‘message’, a vision, memorable language, art and so forth” (n.p.). Pearson fails

---

to recognize these conventions as limitations that Webb tries to overcome with her minimalism. Instead, he postulates Webb's ignorance, devaluing the specificity of her allusions or the inherent exclusivity of the lyric habits against which she writes. Pearson claims that "[a]ll Miss Webb's poems reflect an obsessional [sic] concern for her private world of sensibility, which is so irrational, so peculiar that it excludes almost everyone" (n.p.), and eventually complains that *Naked Poems* is not worth the \$2.25 it originally costs since there "are about twenty four pages to the book and about 500 words" (n.p.). (Today, mint copies of *Naked Poems* routinely sell for more than \$200 CAD.)

<sup>10</sup> Webb follows in the footsteps of many American poets who actively challenge the conventions of lyric by eliminating moralistic extension during Imagism (Pound, Williams), challenging patriarchal masculinism (H.D.), and subsequently re-configuring lyric poetics (following the innovations of the Black Mountain school). For an overview of such lyric re-invention, see Perloff's "Postmodernism and the impasse of lyric."

<sup>11</sup> Henderson explains *kigo* as season-words used to subtly situate a poem during a certain time of year, a convention that solidifies in Japanese poetry because of the assumption that all subjects have at least a general relationship with the natural world.

<sup>12</sup> It is only via translation into English that the haiku came to be popularly read as a three-line poem. Previously, all haiku were written as single vertical lines in Japanese. Haiku also had a formative effect on the emergence of Modernist Imagism, especially as conveyed by the short lyric poems and haiku of Ezra Pound.

<sup>13</sup> In later printings, this anthology includes an endorsement from John Ashberry, who calls it "one of the greatest books of poetry I know" (n.p.).

<sup>14</sup> Despite sharing a tradition of strict metric length, however, traditional ghazals and haiku differ in their linguistic conventions, most notably due to the lack of rhyme in the Japanese tradition (since "all Japanese words end either in a vowel or in 'n', and rhyming would soon become intolerably anonymous" [Henderson ix]). Interestingly, early English ghazal translations, such as *Ghazals of Ghalib*, removed rhyme to effect a stronger sense of allusiveness, while Henderson's translations of haiku *inserted* rhyme in English in order to tighten the haiku's implicit formalism (see Henderson ix-x).

<sup>15</sup> For a brief, but informative history of Japanese haiku poetry, see, especially, Thomas Rimer's introduction for *From the Country of Eight Islands* (New York: Columbia, 1981) and Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958). For an actual example of the form, the best general starting point may be *From the Country's* selections of short poems by Basho, Issa, and Shiki.

---

<sup>16</sup> For my argument, the most useful analysis of the composition and effectiveness of *Naked Poems* is in Butling's *Seeing in the Dark* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier, 1997). See her opening and closing chapters, "Webb's Poetics of Resistance" and "The Bio as Text".

<sup>17</sup> Hulcoop argues that the central setback for Webb's *Kropotkin Poems* was her identification of long lines "with men and aggression" (151-152). Webb's abandonment of this project is noted in the preface to *Wilson's Bowl*, and discussed at length in Collis.

<sup>18</sup> In *Water and Light*, Webb's "I" is intentionally ambiguous, guided by the ghazal's English-language convention of using the second-person voice to address a variety of subjects simultaneously. In *Naked Poems*, her "I" mutates, variously assuming a third-person observational perspective, addressing a lover, and referring to itself. For more, see Butling's discussion of "Non Linear" in *Seeing in the Dark* (24-5).

<sup>19</sup> Kroetsch goes even further, identifying *Naked Poems* as "a short long poem" (63) that is the primary inspiration "behind many of the long poems of the 1970s in Canada" (63).

<sup>20</sup> Webb's gradual development of her "now" lyric in *Naked Poems* intuitively anticipates the strategies Thompson will employ in *Stilt Jack*: simple but allusive language, lyric disjuncture, imagery that repeats and gains meaning as the poems unfold, an interrogation of the lyric "I", and a charting of personal love and loss. Webb addresses the limits of the lyric tradition, therefore, long before she engages Thompson or Ghalib.

<sup>21</sup> There are, of course, differences in Webb's and Thompson's subjective approaches, not the least of which is Webb's engagement with an emergent, feminist, lesbian erotic versus Thompson's reliance on masculine and heterosexual experience. My comparison between Thompson and Webb relies less on this kind of sexual categorization than on a shared, attentive aesthetic.

<sup>22</sup> At least one critic sees Thompson's adaptation of the style I locate in Webb as "what was virtually a house style in modern Canadian poetry: clipped lines; terse diction; an extremely focused attention to birds, animals, and landscape; an atmosphere laden with doom, peril, or menace" (Sutherland 32).

<sup>23</sup> This subversion extends to the final poem of *Water and Light*, from which Butling locates the heart of her theory: Webb's expansion of "the epistemic field to produce a hybrid or mottled subject" (48). Because Webb "admits her attraction to and complicity with the discourse of romance" (Butling 47), however, her supposed embrace of hybridity is less straightforward or final than it appears in Butling's analysis. Webb's refusal "to settle into a single position" (Butling 53) must therefore be taken quite literally, and her "mottled subject" should be considered as only one of *many* subject-positions expressed in *Water and Light*.

<sup>24</sup> A typescript of this five-page discussion, delivered in October of 1987, is held at National Library and Archives Canada in the *Phyllis Webb Fonds*.

<sup>25</sup> For a compelling and clear summary of three, central Buddhist tenets that I engage in my discussion – Impermanence, No Self, and Nirvana - see Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's "The Practice of Looking Deeply" in *No Fear, No Death* (New York: Riverhead, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent summary of Webb's movement from social politics to spiritual and philosophical existentialism to Buddhism to feminism, see Liza Potvin's "Phyllis Webb: The Voice That Breaks."

<sup>27</sup> This is a crucial intervention in the process of Thompson's influence since, as Harry Thurston recently noted, it is dangerously tempting to try to imitate *Stilt Jack's* style. Thurston wonders how one could "possibly approach what he's pulled off there, or want to" ("The Iconography" 43), because he recognizes not only the exacting complexity of Thompson's ghazals, but also the difficulty of transplanting his innovations into a new subjective context. For more, see my Conclusion, "What the Ghazal Taught."

<sup>28</sup> Other, early, responses to *Stilt Jack* are not of the book-length variety. Perhaps the most notable one that appears in the "ghazal" form is D.G. Jones sequence of "Imperfect Ghazals." Other non-ghazal references to Thompson appear early as well, most notably in Douglas Lochhead's *High Marsh Road* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1980), Michael Ondaatje's "Claude Glass," which first appeared in *Secular Love* (New York: Norton, 1984), and other miscellaneous poems, including one by Thurston: "Minding the Homestead" in *Clouds Flying Before the Eye* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1985).

Chapter 5

Hear Here:

Phyllis Webb's *Water and Light* as an Ethics of Location

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction. Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process [...] a rebellion against the idolatry of pure ideas, the belief that ideas have a life of their own and float along above the heads of ordinary people – women, the poor, the uninitiated.

Abstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans.

Theory – the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees – theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth.

~ Adrienne Rich,  
“Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984)

No one today can afford to be innocent, or indulge himself in the ignorance of the nature of contemporary governments, politics and social orders.

~ Gary Snyder  
“Buddhism and the Coming Revolution” (1968-9)

In *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*, Phyllis Webb tells us that “everything is waiting for a condition of grace” (20). The staging of this waiting and the grace it enables is epitomized by what I call Webb’s “Ethics of Location”: an effort to become accountable for the privileged material conditions under which one writes by considering one’s immediate locale on a spectrum along which other distant but concrete cultural localities co-exist. In her ghazals, this affirmation of multi-locality exposes Webb’s uncomfortable awareness of the “distance” between her self-location as a privileged Western subject and other violently politicized locations (Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, Afghanistan) that include the historical homelands of the borrowed form in which she writes. Such awareness highlights a process of subjective self-realization that extends my investigation of Webb’s “Zen” poetics, positing Webb’s attention to “Interbeing,” no-self, and the interdependence of presence and absence as crucial to her self-location.<sup>1</sup> In Part One, I address such material attentiveness by situating Webb’s specific, Pacific self-location on Salt Spring Island via the grounded interventions of Adrienne Rich’s “Notes towards a Politics of Location.” In Part Two, I apply Rich’s insights to illuminate what Webb calls “middle distance,” an anxious exposure of political oppressions contemporary with her writing process. Part Three builds upon the ethical self-location of “middle distance” to suggest Webb’s employment of meta-poetic techniques as a method for locating her text as both individually limited and socially fertile. Ultimately, I suggest *Water and Light’s* self-location and difficult investigation of complicity in Western privilege as a formal exemplar for the free-verse ghazal form in Canada after Thompson.

**Part One: *This Water, This Light: Grounding a Politics of Location***

Salt Spring Island geography is not merely a default setting for Webb's ethical self-location; it fundamentally shapes Webb's imagistic aesthetic. Reachable only by ferry, Salt Spring is the largest and most populous of the southern Gulf Islands, situated between the British Columbia mainland and Vancouver Island in the Strait of Georgia. After initially visiting in 1967, Webb settled on Salt Spring in 1970, and has lived there ever since.<sup>2</sup> Rural and temperate, the Island is well-known for its strong community of artists, and has attracted many notable Canadian writers over the years, many of whom have visited Webb at her home near the island's main port, Fulford Harbour. In tension with its tight-knit community of artists and steady stream of visitors, Salt Spring's physical isolation is suggestive of Webb's simultaneous commitment to both community and individuality in her ghazals.

The island's natural boundaries – the sea and the sky – are self-reflexively represented in the title of Webb's book: *Water and Light*. Like poetic concepts, water and light can be transparent or made opaque, either by darkness or colouration. Like a poetic impulse, neither water nor light have boundaries that can be fixed; they overflow, follow their own courses, are fluid, cannot be boxed, and absorb energy and additions so that they are, at once, both singular and plural, and therefore reflective of complex subjectivity and form. Water and light are not only nouns, but also verbs, acting and acted upon. They enable what Butling calls "an insistent particularity" (51), rooted in Webb's exacting subjective exploration and specific geography.<sup>3</sup> Just as *Naked Poems* uses tidal, marine metaphors to connect to a broad haiku tradition, therefore, *Water and*

*Light* ties the ghazal's traditional imagistic repetition to the specific celestial and marine imagery of the Gulf Islands. When "Hydrangea blooms" (9), "the clamshell bay" (11), "Seawrack" (16), "the ferry" (17), birds such as a "gull" (28), "thrush" (29), "oriole" (29) and "Four swans in Fulford Harbour" (32), "Mulberry" and "Catalpa" trees (45), "river-stones" (57) or "cherry / blossoms" (60) appear, they denote active engagement with the phenomenal, Salt Spring Island world. This stress on materiality ultimately grounds Webb's subjectivity, highlighting the distance between her own privileged location in politically stable Canada and the violently limiting cultural realities of other feminists in physically distant locations around the world. In order to develop Webb's "Ethics of Location," it is necessary to theorize "location" as always-already politically and subjectively determined. To do so, I will examine the most astute essay I've encountered on the relationship between ethical utility and artistic subjectivity: Adrienne Rich's "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (1984).

Not only is Rich's formative influence on Webb most powerful during the same period that Webb originally discovers Thompson's ghazals, but Rich's essay is also published the same year as *Water and Light*.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Webb's ghazals and Rich's essay are both responsive to feminist politics from a generationally shared, self-aware North American perspective.<sup>5</sup> As Hulcoop points out, Webb was not only reading Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1979) in 1980 "to clarify and so further her own feminism" (152), but she was also examining Rich's poetry, a journey that ultimately "influenced the outcome of Webb's search for new verse forms [...] and ways to handle the verse or line" (152). Webb acknowledges the influence of Rich's *The Dream of a Common*

*Language* (1978) in “On The Line” (71), and takes several selections from Rich’s translations in *Ghazals of Ghalib* to form the epigraphic “ghazal-collage” for the Contents page of *Water and Light*. Rather than anxiously patriarchal, Rich’s influence is communal, especially since “[i]n translating the form into English, Webb and Rich *both* found freedom from oppressive discursive patterns” (Butling 65; my emphasis).<sup>6</sup> Because her poetic dialogue with Rich signals participation (through the ghazal) in broader currents of feminist thought, Rich’s insights are especially useful for theorizing Webb’s engagement with feminist politics as an insistent Ethics of Location during the early 1980s.

Rich begins “Notes toward a Politics of Location” by questioning her assumptions of a fixed center-periphery, actively resisting “absolute conclusions” (211) by rejecting her own, previous assumption that she existed at the center of a community, state, nation, continent, hemisphere, and world. Instead, Rich tries “to understand how a place on a map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (212). This stress on the intersection of subjectivity, history, and specific geographical location requires feminists, Rich argues, to “[b]egin with the material” (213) realities of their own, privileged locations. Rich wants “to get back to earth – not as a paradigm [...], but as a place of location” (214); she wants to develop *self*-awareness, not an abstract theory wherein pure ideas “float along above the heads of ordinary people – women, the poor, the uninitiated” (213). Thus, Rich’s politics are consonant with Webb’s intra-poetics: both insist on paying attention to the contexts that allow for and inform the present rather than postulating theories of history or vaguely

gesturing towards possible futures. Rich warns that such theories are counter-productive because they defer discussion of present oppressions. This is why she writes against the “lofty and privileged abstraction” (213) of any feminist theory that, she says, fails to engage with tangible political realities, and finds most academic theories are “rarefied into an elite jargon, an enclave, defined by little sects who feed off each other’s errors” (217) rather than addressing the material world. Instead of abstraction, Rich insists, feminists must begin “where we are [in 1984], forty years after the Holocaust, in the churn of Middle Eastern violence, in the midst of decisive ferment in South Africa – not in some debate over origins and precedents, but in the recognition of simultaneous oppressions” (227).

In order to realize such oppressions, both Rich and Webb start with *self*-location. This involves “having to name the ground we’re coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted” (Rich 219), including complicity with the power structures that both make possible and delimit their relative positions of privilege.<sup>7</sup> While Rich’s self-location is essentially political (because Rich is motivated by an agenda for socio-political change), Webb’s is fundamentally ethical (because Webb is morally responsive to such an agenda). In *Water and Light*, this creates a productive anxiety. By stressing an evaluation of her location both geographically (in Canada versus Iran) and artistically (via her apprenticeship to Thompson and Ghalib), Webb ultimately advocates ethical responsiveness to global politics without overlooking the privileges of her material locality.

Rich synchronously achieves a similar stance in her essay. Realizing that “there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’” and that “there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through” (224), she suggests that feminists can only work against patriarchal structures by collectively embracing their limitations. Thus, one must first *recognize* one’s Western privilege as productive of a flawed perspective before one can usefully engage in social politics. Such a process is at the core of Webb’s Ethics of Location in *Water and Light*. Webb’s ghazals are only able to recognize “the ghazal’s role in a culture [in Iran] that often violently oppresses women” (Butling 65), therefore, because she evokes the multi-locality of “distant” political realities and “simultaneous oppressions” while also intensely observing and critiquing her own location.

### **Part Two: “Middle Distance” as an Ethics of Location**

In the third-to-last poem of “Middle Distance” in *Water and Light*, Webb contrasts Western, literary history with the ethical necessity of recognizing her own location:

The Authors are in Eternity  
or so Blake said,

but I am here, feet planted,  
on the ground; (57)

Webb’s interrogation of the “eternal” canon is not only a response to traditionally limiting cultural structures on behalf of feminist communities; it is also an intimate self-examination that is realized by the immediacy of her physical location. Rather than depend on abstract references to the eternal, Webb’s ghazals stress the material present. References to stars and heavenly bodies throughout *Water and Light* do not only

symbolize mystical exploration; they also stress the necessity of viewing such idealism via one's material context, planting one's feet "on the ground" to prevent floating into a poetics of pure abstraction. This strategy for grounding her Ethics of Location is perhaps best expressed in the opening poems of three of *Water and Light's* five sections: "Sunday Water," "The Birds," and "Middle Distance." All of the initial ghazals of these sections contextualize Webb's location against both historical records and violent political realities, an ethical balance that Webb calls "middle distance."

On the first page of "Sunday Water," Webb occupies a middle distance by considering the political violence of early 1980s Iran – the traditional home of the Persian ghazal – under the Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>8</sup> Her opening lines establish the speaker's domestic safety when the "Hydrangea blooms turn pink" (9). However, the physical distance between the political realities of Iran and Canada is bridged by the final couplet: "A magic carpet, a prayer mat, red. / A knocked off head of somebody on her broken knees" (9). These stereotypical carpets and prayer mats are contrasted with the physically "red" blood of the prisoner in order to scrutinize the supposed detachment of Webb's domestic sphere from global oppressions. By articulating the "conundrum of the poet 'trying to dance / into Persia,' but always asking 'Who dances in Persia now?'" (Butling 65), this ghazal therefore reveals what Glickman calls

[...] Webb's ironic awareness of the impropriety of her borrowing a middle-eastern lyrical form to speak of her 'predicament' as a poet in the West, in light of what's going on simultaneously in the Middle-East. Her concerns seem lightweight, a mere 'hitting at feathers,' when Persia itself is dead, the magic carpet grounded, prayer ineffectual. (57)

Webb not only admits her historical, geographical, and literary debts in this ghazal, but also questions her active participation in their respective privileges. Unlike the ghazals in the “I Daniel” section, this poem overtly stresses contemporary politics, contrasting the violent suppression of dance “in Persia now” to the domestic peace of Webb’s own landscape. Bridging these worlds, of course, is her own writing, which enacts a nautical “semaphore for help (calling stone-dead John Thompson)” (9) that signifies both the distance between Webb’s mediated involvement in a borrowed poetic form and a lack of tangible participation in a current, Iranian political reality. Essentially, this bridge – built as “the pile of cards grow” (9) (a reference to the index cards upon which she writes her ghazals) – is Webb’s method for making her writing tangibly political by stressing the politically determined advantages of her location.

The troubled domesticity signaled by this ghazal’s “Hydrangea blooms” (9) continues throughout *Water and Light* via Webb’s imagistic network of local flowers, trees, and plants. The centrality of this network is clarified in the opening, epigraphic ghazal of *Water and Light*, which names “the forest’s mossy undergrowth” (6) as a breeding ground for “Old doom” (6) (perhaps symbolizing patriarchal or exclusionary practices in both artistic and political life). The central image of this ghazal is not “the grand dark” (6) that lurks in its background, however, but the productive change that “Shiva” (6) – the Hindu god of destruction or transformation – calls forth by “waking the waterlilies in the pool” (6). Effecting a fusion of the darkness of water, the light needed for photosynthesis, and the mud that grounds its roots, the ghazal’s “waterlilies” (6), though technically a different species, imply the lotus flower, a symbol of enlightenment

in most Buddhist traditions. The lotus is rooted in the mud on the bottom of a pond, but reaches through dark water towards the light of the surface to blossom, a metaphor for personal growth that enacts a Zen focus on present awareness as an avenue for liberation, and reflects Webb's insistence on charting a global ethics from a specific self-location. By suggesting that Shiva's dance awakens this water plant, Webb also implies that a potential transformation of "Old doom" (6) begins by meditating on the profound richness and complexity of the present.

Such transformation reflects the Zen concept of "Interbeing," which stresses the profound inter-connectedness of all things, and transfers one's attention from a focus on *self*-awareness to a realization of "no self". The most allusive example in Webb's ghazals of what one might call "no-self awareness" (which balances, in the Zen tradition, contemplations on individual being with realizations of communal "Interbeing") appears in the second ghazal of "Sunday Water":

Heidegger, notes of music  
in his name.

The rose blooms because it blooms in the trellis.  
A scale of black death because a scale of black death. (10)

The rose in this ghazal derives, in part, from Heidegger's response to Leibniz's "Principle of Ground" in *The Principle of Reason* (see Caputo, 59-66; Webb, "The Question" 45).

Like Heidegger, Webb quotes from the seventeenth-century German mystical poet Angelus Silesius, who writes that "The rose is without a why, it blooms because it blooms / It pays no attention to itself, asks not whether it is seen" (qtd. in Heidegger, *Principle* 36). The rose's transcendence of egotism into a purer state of being, Heidegger

argues, should be an example for humanity: to experience itself without the clutter of representation provoked by concepts of a self, an approach that coincides with Zen consciousness (see Caputo).<sup>9</sup> Webb's reading of the rose as a model for personal enlightenment is therefore resonant with Heidegger's. By stressing her rose's material location "in the trellis," Webb ultimately echoes her emphasis on self-location as an ethical avenue for achieving no-self awareness. Such enlightenment involves the realization of not only beauty, but also ugliness, not only life, but also death. If one accepts the beautiful rose as itself, one must also accept the ugliness of its eventual death as equally part of its natural reality. Thus, the peaceable and "natural" state of Webb's rose is syntactically matched by "a scale of black death" in her ghazal, so that the rose's beautiful domesticity connects to the ugly political realities that Webb struggles to acknowledge in her ghazals. Such acknowledgement informs the co-presentation of Krishna and Shiva in Webb's opening ghazal and the "knocked off head of somebody on her broken knees" (9) that closes the opening poem in "Sunday Water." By ending her observations with such present-tense executions, Webb highlights "the simultaneity and the incompatibility of what she is feeling as a writer, as a daughter of her family, as a woman, as an observer of the local scene, and as a citizen of the world" (Glickman 58). By situating her shocking endings in domestic familiarity, Webb forces readers to make similar considerations of their own subject-positions relevant to the violence occurring not only in the ghazal, but also in the ghazal's cultural homeland. This participation is crucial; it forces readers to acknowledge that Webb does not use the ghazal as an Orientalist fantasy. Instead, it must be read as part of present, local experience that

simultaneously connects one's specific location to other equal and equivalent locations across the globe.

This participatory realization of multi-locality is also evident in the opening poem of "The Birds":

Yoko Ono was seen in the Empress Hotel today.  
She can never be seen for herself alone again.

Shots ring out in Iran, Afghanistan,  
El Salvador.

At night here pitlammers  
kill deer.

Everywhere the killings go on.  
In my own hand a flea died only yesterday.

I sit in my quilted jacket calling the birds  
whose warning cries strike just beyond the window. (25)

Here, Webb not only locates the disappearance of a female identity within the "dark" shadow of its celebrated male counterpart, but also links such erasure to both specifically global and broadly local contexts. John Lennon's then-recent New York murder relates to ongoing international murders implied by Webb's specific naming of "Iran, Afghanistan, / El Salvador," all violent political conflicts in which the United States, Canada's biggest trading partner, played a significant role in the early 1980s.<sup>10</sup> This list therefore enumerates and claims responsibility for "killings" that are happening *right now*, enacted by a government that Webb's predominantly Canadian readers economically and politically depend upon despite their (arguably common) anti-American sentiments.<sup>11</sup> Such violence is also linked to Webb's local experience of the

birds about to strike the window in the poem's final couplet and the speaker's murder of "a flea" in her "own hand," implicitly tying global violence to the seemingly peaceful innocence of privileged Western locations. By exploiting her reader's familiarity with both public examples – "Yoko Ono," "Iran, Afghanistan" – and more directly private landscapes – birds, fleas, windows – Webb associates the present experience of reading with a wide variety of ongoing violence outside of the poem, which forces the reader to acknowledge his/her Western privilege as part of the poem's present, political reality.

A similar tactic is used to open "Middle Distance." Here, Webb moves from a seemingly autobiographical "panel whose topic was // *Why Poetry?*" (55) to a fusion of global politics and subjective locality:

The man from Iraq in the audience said,  
'Where I come from when you fill out a job

application you begin by quoting poetry  
and when you flirt you quote poetry

and when you marry poetry is all around you.  
Why don't you speak of feelings!'

And when you die at the executioner's hands  
(he did not say this though most of his family

was murdered) do you also quote poems, Amin?  
Oh Allah. Why not? (55)

Ending with a negation – "Why not?" – that is also an affirmation, Webb manages to disallow escapism or abstraction here by engaging the political realities of contemporary Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Formally, she also challenges the ghazal's demand for non-logical, non-narrative breakage, allowing her narrative repeated enjambments that construct the kind of "scene"

commonly disallowed by the form's required disjuncture. "The man from Iraq" who makes these queries, furthermore, is not constructed as distant, authoritative, or irresponsible – a common strategy in Orientalist discourses – but is properly identified as "Amin" – and directly questioned. Such naming implies an active engagement with the (patriarchal) violence ("most of his family // was murdered") that is at the heart of Webb's concerns in *Water and Light*. By naming him, he is humanized; by citing the violent oppressions that plague his unspoken experience, he is politicized. Thus, Webb reduces the distance between her reader's experience and the experiences of "Amin" so that both parties simultaneously realize not only the pleasures of her text (with "feelings" and "poetry"), but also their respective roles in oppressive political realities. This simultaneity captures the overall methodology of *Water and Light*, which records both discomfort and beauty by stressing the multi-faceted potential of the local. But how does Webb forward such a materialist ethics within the confines of a lyric that traditionally idealized the Beloved and abstracted one's relationships to the material world? Part of the answer involves a healthy dose of self-critique.

### **Part Three: Meta-poetics as Local Ethics**

Webb's insistence on the material present over the abstractly distant produces a critical sense of self-reflexivity in her ghazals, most overt in moments of self-parody and self-reference. Not only does she slyly interrogate the Pastoral tradition (and her own lyrical past), noting the "Pathetic fallacies deep in these bones" (16) that tempt her to record "the up-there claptrap" (18) of solipsistic reflection, but she also attempts to short-circuit her

own urge towards abstraction by including the “unlyrical plumage” (19) of her physical, material realities.

At the same time, Webb realizes that “Nothing is pure praxis” (28), and questions the suitability of stressing materiality in a poetic form that traditionally idealizes reality and divinity. This meta-poetic stance is most obvious in her ghazal about writing ghazals, the second-to-last poem in “Sunday Water”:

Drunken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous  
journey of the ten lines.

The singer sings one couplet or two  
over and over to the Beloved who reigns

on the throne of *accidie*, distant, alone,  
hearing, as if from a distance, a bell

and not this stringy instrument scraping away,  
whining about love’s ultimate perfection.

Wait! Everything is waiting for a condition of grace:  
the string of the Sitar, this Gat, a distant bell,

even the Beloved in her bored flesh. (20)

This summary of the traditional ghazal, which begins by quoting Thompson’s description of the ghazal as “[d]runken and amatory” in *Stilt Jack*, is followed by two parts clearly split at the fifth couplet by the word “Wait!” The first part parodies the traditional ghazal’s idealization of the Beloved by calling it “this stringy instrument scraping away, / whining about love’s ultimate perfection” (20). The effect of one’s expressive grief in the traditional ghazal, Webb implies, is self-serving, and does not ultimately affect “the Beloved in her bored flesh” (20) because it does not take into account its own or her

material conditions. In Webb's ghazal, the Beloved ignores the poem to focus on ordinary sounds from the experiential world. Via the "bell" heard in couplet three that recurs in couplet five as "a distant bell," one might read this kind of concentration as an intuitive link to *zazen* practice (since bells are similarly rung in *zazen* to signal the beginning, end, and breaks in meditation). Webb is arguably less interested in poetic musicality than in material attentiveness, highlighting a difference between her treatment of the Beloved, and a traditional treatment of "the Beloved who reigns // on the throne of *accidie*," an archaic term (also called "acedia") that refers to spiritual or mental sloth. The bell is figured as "distant," therefore, because an awareness of *zazen* cannot be directly addressed in a poetic mode that has not yet escaped its own artifice.

In couplet five, however, Webb realizes that her poetry is not only an art form, but a tangible reality that her reader is experiencing in the present. Thus, she halts her ghazal to tell her reader to "Wait," arguing that "Everything is waiting for a condition of grace," including "the Beloved." Such a condition, for Webb, can only be effected by validating the experience of her poetry as part of, rather than exterior to, material attentiveness. That "everything" is waiting is significant. "Everything" includes the Sitar string (previously called a "stringy instrument scraping away" to symbolize self-involved poetic reflection); this Gat (a musical rhythm from North India often played on the tabla, used to symbolize the continuation of a lyric rhythm in Webb's poem); a "distant bell" (which links to Webb's Zen poetics); and "even the Beloved" ("in her bored flesh").<sup>13</sup> All are simultaneously validated and critiqued, here. The "condition" that they await therefore symbolizes Zen self/no-self-awareness, the "grace" of which depends not only on poetic

originality, but also on the realization that Webb and her reader must actively critique the limitations of the poem while simultaneously listening to (and enjoying) its music.

Such self-critique is also evident in Webb's adaptation of the ghazal's traditional conventions, and perhaps best summarized by her use of *takhallus* (the traditional inclusion of a pen-name in a ghazal's final couplet) in *Water and Light*. Webb not only employs the pen-name first evoked in *Naked Poems* – "Fishstar" – but also follows Thompson's lead, using her proper name in a single ghazal, which eventually opens her "Fivialities" section:<sup>14</sup>

Mulberry tree with innocent eyes,  
Catalpa with your huge hands,

I am looking at you  
so why can't you look back?

Seduce me, Mulberry, with your silk-spun eyelashes,  
applaud; Catalpa, with your leafy ambushades.

I am a patient person from time to time,  
willingly would I fall into your entrapments

of silk stockings and flowery candelabra.  
Or should I save myself with long voyages

interstellar longings  
where we might meet as pure event

and I would say Mulberry tree, Catalpa,  
and you would say, simply, Phyllis. (45)

Linkages between subject and object, history and present, and abstraction and materiality are all important in this ghazal. Perhaps most overwhelming, however, is Webb's intimate attempt to communicate with the non-human world. Her speaker directly

addresses the “Mulberry” and “Catalpa” trees in a playful tone that sexualizes and romanticizes their “silk-spun eyelashes,” “silk stockings and flowery candelabra.” Not only is this mildly self-mocking, ironizing the pastoral tradition, but it is also unsuccessful. Although her speaker is “looking” at them, Webb’s trees “can’t look back”; they are unable or unwilling to respond directly to Webb as a private subject. Part of the reason is Webb’s language in the ghazal’s first five couplets, which attempt to personify the trees with highly staged lyric phrases that become “entrapments” rather than catalysts for connection. To “meet” the trees, Webb’s speaker ultimately replaces an overwrought lyricism with a haiku sensibility, so that “pure event” is symbolized by simply naming the objects of one’s materiality – “Mulberry tree, Catalpa” and “simply, Phyllis” – a gesture that carries with it a complex realization of the present. By using “Phyllis” as *takhallus* in a poem that accentuates both the importance of material attentiveness and the failure of lyric abstraction, Webb suggests that the intimacy of one’s poetry depends on a *material* manifestation of the Ethics of Location, wherein private subjectivity is inevitably part of poetic practice and reception.

At the same time, Webb also exposes her writing voice as different from her private subjectivity. To stress this difference, she uses her traditional *takhallus*, “Fishstar,” in *Water and Light*, a self-reflexivity I will examine by reading the third ghazal in “Fivialities”:

Is there such a thing as a vulgar plant?  
Oh amaryllis, out of Africa, forgive me.

Will the haiku butterfly decorously  
settle on the bronze bell?

Whose song is it anyway?  
Is it a song being sung

on the narrow road to the North?  
Oh *Fishstar!*

The cabbage moth looks innocent  
on the green leaf. Kiss, kiss.

These lines are also hungry  
biting a hole in the yellow paper

on which Fishstar writes. (47)

Two kinds of distance are investigated here: the distance between poetic influence and present writing, and the distance between poetic interpretation and material reality. Webb highlights the first of these by explicitly referring to what is perhaps the best-known Japanese poem in the West (Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*), a gesture that evokes her use of the haiku sensibility since the mid-1960s, and acknowledges how past writers continue to influence her present practice. When Webb asks "Whose song" is "being sung," she therefore questions the ability of a lyric subjectivity to remain stable when it enacts voices from other precedents, recalling a basic concept of "Interbeing" and no-self. Part of her answer is simply to investigate her present, material location "on the narrow road to the North," a geography that fuses Basho's poetry and Webb's location in Canada. The second distance that Webb addresses concerns the space between poetic composition and material reality. Because her poetic process is self-reflexive and self-critical, Webb uses the undecided "haiku butterfly" to represent the choices a poet must make to create a poem. Her speaker does

not know if the butterfly will “decorously / settle on the bronze bell,” just as she is unsure how a poetic record can capture materiality. By addressing herself in both the second person (“Oh *Fishstar!*”) and third person (with “the yellow paper / on which Fishstar writes”), Webb extends this indeterminacy. The hunger of the “cabbage moth” about to devour “the green leaf” (an active symbol of the material world) is therefore linked to the hunger of “these lines” that are “biting a hole in the yellow paper // on which Fishstar writes” (to create the world of the poem). Thus, Webb’s description of the moth as “innocent” also refers to how her own writing process as “Fishstar” seems innocent until carefully examined. Her ghazal, therefore, reveals its own material production, exposing the literary debts, decisions, and thought processes that must be negotiated to create any lyric poem, a meta-poetic self-critique resonant with Webb’s focus on political accountability via material location. While the “Mulberry” ghazal makes private subjectivity essential to one’s poetic practice, this ghazal presents poetic practice as inevitably part of Webb’s private subjectivity. Because both notions of “self” – Phyllis and Fishstar – compete in her ghazals, Webb’s self-reflexive use of *takhallus* ultimately exposes subjectivity as plural and unstable rather than singular and fixed, tying Webb’s local individuality to her global concept of multi-locality.

As an Ethics of Location, this balance between individual and communal is perhaps best realized by briefly examining the only ghazal given a title in *Water and Light*: “Leaning” (58-9). One of the most widely cited ghazals in critical overviews of Webb’s work, this poem symbolizes Western culture as the semi-erect Leaning Tower of Pisa. With its references to powerful Western artists, explorers, and scientists –

Brueghel, Rodin, Columbus, Einstein, Bohr – the Tower is a phallic symbol for the West’s patriarchal domination. Webb’s individual self-location in the Tower therefore connects to her reader’s communal involvement in the wider culture it represents:

I am half-way up the stairs  
of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Don’t go down. You are in this  
with me too. (58)

By instructing her reader not to “go down” because “You are in this / with me too,” Webb’s speaker not only implies the importance of engaging the present to realize change, but also places Webb and her readers on a spectrum of multi-locality that stresses the inter-connectedness of their experiences, empowering communal self-awareness as an avenue for material change. By positioning her speaker “half-way up the stairs,” Webb resists but does not reject involvement with patriarchal structures, implying that “self-liberation takes place within the tower” (Butling 55) rather than beyond it. As the poem proceeds, such liberation is deemed natural, so that the Tower is revealed as a failed proof of the dominance of Western reason over nature, moving against “the slouch / of the ground” to expose “the hiccup of the sludge about the stone” (58).

This does not make engaging the Tower’s present oppressions an easy task. Webb and her readers require not only individual self-realization (so that her speaker “must change my life or crunch / / over in vertigo, hands / bloodying the inside tower walls” [58]), but must also realize a shared self-awareness of “the whole culture leaning...” (58) towards collapse. Such awareness is the ultimate goal of Webb’s ghazals, which collectively present an individual Ethics of Location to provoke, in readers, participatory

self-locations in the political and material worlds that exist both beyond and within

Webb's text. In the end, therefore, readers are not yet liberated, but engaged:

And you, are you still here

tilting in this stranded ark  
blind and seeing in the dark. (59)<sup>15</sup>

Rather than promoting a conclusive answer, Webb encourages active, attentive self-examination. By figuring both the Tower (Western culture) and the poem (Webb's self-location) as "this stranded ark," Webb does not evoke apocalypse or Eden, but the liminality of a Biblical Deluge. We are left between the end of what we knew and the beginning of a new world, flooded but afloat, "blind and seeing," complete and "still here," both "tilting" in a failed system, and making a tilt against its previous dominance.

**Conclusion: *Build Your House Upon the Sand***

Webb's extension of the "Ethics of Location" to her reader summarizes her contribution to the free-verse ghazal after Thompson: a personal re-invention of form actively based on one's political, literary, and subjective self-location both within and against the lyric tradition that enables not only direct engagement with one's predecessors, but also a spiritual investigation of one's present location. By achieving such middle distance in *Water and Light*, Webb exemplifies the free-verse ghazal's capacity for engaging not only the historical, public and political, but also the present, private and personal. Such a fusion is not ultimately resolved as a political, poetic, or social theory, but within the anxious, intimate, material practice of one's own writing. This process takes time. But if

engaged “during the period when the poem is brewing its shadowy substance” (“Panel Discussion” 4), Webb contends, it also yields valuable perspective, allowing what Webb calls “the imagination’s precision [to] Make me see closer and smaller, yes. But only when I’m ready to see the world in a grain of sand. (“Panel Discussion” 4).

Such microcosmic vision is certainly accomplished in the ghazals of both Webb and Thompson. Each poet launches what Peter Sanger might call a “Night Sea Voyage,” begun in individual darkness, and concluded in a collective present tense that articulates Blake’s individual grains of sand as a symbolic collective. If we, as individual readers and subjects, hope to arrive on the shores of Webb’s middle ground, it seems to me we must realize that both poets teach us the same lesson: we won’t get there with simple hope, because the free-verse ghazal is not driven by fate, logic, or familiar mechanics; it is steered, instead, by the hearty rudders of an active, collective, responsible readership. If we truly desire arrival on such shores, it is up to us to make landfall.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> “Interbeing” is Thich Nhat Hanh’s term. It derives specifically from the more general Buddhist concepts of “no self” and impermanence and relates them to what he discusses as the interconnectedness of all living beings. For more, see Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines For Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Webb has also spent significant time away from the Island over the years, most notably while teaching or serving as writer in residence at UBC, the University of Alberta, the University of Victoria, and Banff.

<sup>3</sup> Butling argues that Webb thereby stresses “processual rather than predetermined meaning” (52), a contention she tests with a close reading of Webb’s epigraphic ghazal for *Water and Light*, which lists “LIGHT” eight times in one couplet, pairing it with the

---

“and here” (n.p.) sequence presented in Suite I of *Naked Poems*. This specific ghazal is discussed in more detail in Part Two of the present chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Rich is also the only North American ghazal poet Thompson mentions in his introduction to *Stilt Jack*.

<sup>5</sup> Rich was born in Baltimore in 1929; Webb was born in Victoria in 1927.

<sup>6</sup> As Barbour aptly notes, however, “the form of the ghazal probably proved even more immediately congenial to [Webb] than to someone like Rich; for Rich it was something entirely new, while for Webb it was a kind of confirmation” (100), a familiarity that Barbour locates by reflecting on Webb’s use of ghazal-like qualities in *Naked Poems*.

<sup>7</sup> Like Rich, “Webb is never single-minded, complacent, or romantic in her feminism. Always compassionate on the subject of women, she is also self-mocking, critical, and sometimes even satirical in writing about her own sex” (Hulcoop 154).

<sup>8</sup> A Shia imam both venerated and decried in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini inspired the Iranian Revolution in 1979 to depose the Shah and monarchy. Upon return from exile in Turkey, he was elected head of state as “Supreme Leader” in December 1979, and instituted an anti-Semitic theocracy based on Jihad and Sharia law that he controlled until his death in 1989. Among his more infamous political acts were his roles in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), a large scale, nation-wide execution of political prisoners in 1988, and the 1989 declaration of a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his portrayal of Islam in *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988). The admittedly violent misogyny of Iran’s civic and cultural policies under Khomeini was no doubt troublesome and morally offensive to Webb, and deeply influenced her adapted use of the ghazal form in Canada. For a recent overview of Iranian state policies regarding women since 1979, see Sheibani.

<sup>9</sup> In “The Question As An Instrument of Torture,” originally written in 1971 and revised for *Talking* (1982), Webb ultimately finds Heidegger’s reading of the rose “suggestive, but finally not very satisfactory” (45), arguing that “curiosity is of the mind and body both and may be unappeaseable except at the level of Heidegger’s mysticism” (45). Her ghazals, however, affirm Heidegger’s perspectives, concentrating, like Zen, on the present and local in order to achieve a similarly transcendent mysticism. It is unclear if her views on Heidegger changed while preparing *Water and Light* for publication in 1984, or if she unknowingly contradicts her own poetics with such objections.

<sup>10</sup> American support of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran is well-documented. Webb’s inclusion of El Salvador and Afghanistan was similarly contemporary in 1984. El Salvador’s 1979 military coup precipitated a horrendous civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992, and was predominantly fought with functional, military support from both the

---

U.S.S.R. and the Reagan administration. Similarly, both the Carter and Reagan administrations responded to the escalating Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s by arming and training members of the Mujahideen, a group actively supported by Osama bin Laden. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, civil strife resulted in the rise of the Taliban, who took full control of the country by 2000.

<sup>11</sup> The 1984 transition from Trudeau's and Turner's Liberal government to Mulroney's nearly decade-long Conservative majority in Canada does not mean that Webb's audience was predominantly supportive of a more right-wing political agenda. Rather, her listing of American military aggression is an attempt to highlight Canada's tacit support of American policy (especially given the close ties between Mulroney and Reagan), and therefore to provoke her audience into a guilty realization of complicity.

<sup>12</sup> Given her engagement with the Iranian revolution in the opening ghazal of *Water and Light*, it is reasonable to infer that "Amin," as a "man from Iraq," is politically related to Webb's focus on the Middle East, and "Persia" in general. The ongoing casualties of the Iran-Iraq war, which had reached a deadly pitch by the time of Webb's writing, are therefore reflected here. In 1982, after Iraq's invasion into Iran had been successfully repelled, Khomeini refused to sign a peace treaty, instead declaring Jihad on Saddam Hussein and ultimately escalating the conflict. In addition to functioning as a generic name (and signifying the masses), "Amin" may also be a reference to the second president of contemporary Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, who was assassinated after only one month of rule in late 1979, and whose political party introduced unpopular secular and democratic reform to the country.

<sup>13</sup> For examples of Gats, listen to tracks 2 and 3 on Ravi Shankar's "The Spirit of India" (Deutsche Grammophon, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Thompson originally writes "John Thompson" rather than "STILT JACK" as the *takhallus* for Ghazal XXVIII. See my discussion of "High Talk" in Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> When he originally heard the ghazal during one of Webb's readings in Toronto (*Inside Memory* [Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990] 219-20), this couplet inspired Timothy Findley (a friend of Webb's) to subvert the male authority and violence of Old Testament parables in his widely-celebrated novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (Toronto: Viking, 1984). This couplet also provides Butling with the title for her critical overview of Webb's work, *Seeing in the Dark*. Butling's central conclusion about Webb's subjectivity in *Water and Light* also connects with Findley. Butling claims that Webb expresses "mottled truths" (57) in *Water and Light*; Findley gives the name "Mottyl" to one of his central characters – a blind cat – in *Not Wanted On the Voyage*.

**Conclusion:**

**What the Ghazal Taught**

My investigation of the free-verse ghazal's birth in Canada began in the dark rooms of my primary sources. By charting each poet's individual exposure and development, I have tried to illuminate the complex value of ending in the processually present tense. In what follows, I attempt to contextualize such presence by summarizing the ghazal sensibility's continuing influence on contemporary Canadian poetry, suggesting best practices in the free-verse ghazal form via Webb's and Thompson's examples. To do so, I will broadly sketch the ghazal's transnational parameters and note its most insightful practitioners in Canada since the early 1980s. Such a tracing, necessarily brief, is motivated by a re-consideration of the central queries of my project: How does the free-verse ghazal balance formality and poetic impulse? How is one's subjectivity tied to one's literary and political practice? How can a literary lineage continue whilst both critiquing and endorsing its own poetics? And, finally, how can new writing both adhere to and expand its precedents?

**“My only nation is the imagination”** (Derek Walcott, qtd. in Brand)

Although I have championed the proper place of *Stilt Jack* in Canadian poetry, my treatments of Ghalib, Rich, Thompson, and Webb have stressed a transnational concept of geography and location. In Canada, the ghazal sensibility is informed not only by traditional cultural contexts – pre-Modern Japan, twelfth-century Persia, nineteenth-century India and Britain, twentieth-century America – but also by adaptive, contemporary realities. All are made present in the moment of writing or reading. Thus, in the haiku-influenced, Imagistic, West coast ghazals of Webb, one can also glimpse

Thompson's Atlantic reply to both Western reason and Mir's Urdu innovations, Rich's response to 1960s civil rights and feminism, and Ghalib's despair regarding British Imperialism. One cannot speak of the free-verse ghazal (or, most likely, of any form), therefore, as though it were purely national. The form's history in Canada is at least continental. Despite structural and contextual differences between the American and Canadian ghazal traditions – most notably an American strain, led by Agha Shahid Ali, that has re-introduced the strict rules abandoned by Aijaz Ahmad in the late 1960s – the free-verse ghazals of both national spaces share a common ancestry (in both Rich's ghazals and Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib*) and develop along similar stylistic trajectories (via both Olson-inspired experimental postmodernism and lyric neo-Romanticism).<sup>1</sup> Whatever initial trends one senses in the Canadian version are therefore linked to the American one (a commonality that applies to many twentieth-century poetic movements in Canada).

Just as it would be irresponsible to discuss the Canadian ghazal as though it existed in a political and cultural vacuum, it would be equally misleading to dismiss its development as *identical* to that of American ghazals. Such a strategy would not only efface Canada's contemporary cultural complexity, but also erase the nationalist debates taking place in Canada when the ghazal first emerged in the early 1970s (and subsequent debates during the 1980s and 90s), an era that was markedly different in Canada than in the USA. It would also dismiss the fact that ghazal poets in Canada tend to name *Stilt Jack* as their most formative free-verse ghazal influence, an identification that is absent from American literary development (perhaps because American readers tend to pay little

or no attention to Canadian writers). Because all new poetry relates to both historical precedence and local awareness, this continued stress on Thompson in Canada's free-verse ghazal lineage effects a self-location that is different than the American line. By discussing a specifically "Canadian" ghazal tradition, therefore, I am attempting to trace a self-aware transnational presence in Canadian poetry that subverts nationalist agendas while also demanding local and material self-identification.

Local subjectivity is therefore a key concept in the free-verse ghazal in Canada. Explored via both Webb's "Zen" poetics in my discussions of *Water and Light* – and its specifically West Coast lexicon of imagery – and "angler poetics" in my examination of *Stilt Jack* – with its Atlantic network of images – this stress on the local reflects the regionalist debates that have informed Canadian literature throughout its history. What I label "Canadian" in this study therefore implies a harmoniously multi-regional unity that relates to Webb's insistently materialist "Ethics of Location." Perhaps this is why both Thompson and Webb ultimately engage in non-national, interior struggles in their ghazals, prompting the kind of self-reflexivity demonstrated in the late lyrics of Yeats: paradoxical, ironic, gritty self-reference that is at once hopeful and despairing, effecting simultaneous investigations of both the limitations and potential of contemporary artistic practice.

The prevalence of such subjective introspection in the ghazals of Webb and Thompson establishes self-reflexive exploration as another hallmark of the ghazal sensibility in Canada, which endorses lyric musicality but rejects lyric preconceptions. Just as Thompson engages and overcomes Yeats (via Mir) by reinventing negative

capability, Webb challenges male Romanticism to overcome Thompson, Ghalib, and postmodern poetics (using “The Influence of Anxiety” as inspiration) by employing an “Ethics of Location.” In the process, both poets produce subjective revolutions that also respect the ghazal’s traditionally formal precepts: ambiguous address, a meditation on grief, a reflection on divinity or ethics, and an essentially stylistic disjuncture, unified by creating an intuitive network of images that slowly accretes meaning and harmony as a ghazal sequence proceeds. This necessary balance between traditional formality and individualized poetics is perhaps the central methodological lesson of *Stilt Jack* and *Water and Light*. Rather than blindly following conventional rules, the free-verse ghazal poet must enable a nuanced, contemporary adaptation of the ghazal’s historical parameters by examining the limitations of his/her own poetic practice.

Given the ghazal’s co-presentation of harmony amidst disjuncture, contradiction among affirmation, and intuition within formalism, all of these emergent tenets – self-location, self-reflexivity, adaptive adoption – are appropriate markers of the ghazal sensibility in Canada. Essentially, a strategic re-invention of lyrical form that reconsiders political/literary inheritance in relation to private/subjective exploration now defines successful sequences of ghazals in Canada. In the end, therefore, perhaps Agha Shahid Ali is right: these are not “real” ghazals. They are *free* ones. Rather than weighed down by convention, they use conventional limitations to their advantage. The results, as Webb and Thompson so eloquently demonstrate, are both grounded and moving.

### **The Post-Thompson Ghazal in Canada**

Thompson's influence continues to be felt in Canadian poetry, even if not always manifested in the form of new ghazals. Perhaps such influence is surprising, given the common misunderstandings of Thompson's work, the relative critical neglect his ghazals have suffered, or the fact that *Stilt Jack* is a profoundly allusive, challenging, and difficult text to summarize, clearly "explain", or productively discuss without long pauses for silent reflection. Its overwhelming intertexts, sometimes narrow postures of masculinity, esoteric allusions to Taoist and Christian philosophy, and incredibly erudite expressions of darkness make *Stilt Jack* very difficult for an average reader to approach without initiation. Furthermore, one would not think of it as a traditionally "teachable" text – with clear themes and easily approachable topics for ethical debate or critical analysis – and it is not commonly studied in Canadian university courses, even at Mount Allison, where it was largely written, and where Thompson spent his entire professional academic career.<sup>2</sup> In my experience, however, having taught the book to several groups of upper-level undergraduates, this is rather convincingly not the case. More often than not, in fact, Thompson's language and illogical imagery generates as much imaginative energy in contemporary undergraduate students unversed in the ghazal as it always has in more initiated readers, inspiring new writing, new concepts of subjective contradiction, and new discussions of the viability and vitality of the lyric voice. That *Stilt Jack* sets ablaze the creative imagination of young readers and writers surely marks Thompson's innovations as lasting, powerful, and worth preservation.

Perhaps the relatively few ghazals published in response to Thompson's example

since the 1980s therefore means that Canadian poets generally heed Peter Sanger's warning that *Stilt Jack* is a dangerous model for new writers. Those who *do* copy Thompson, Sanger complains (without naming names), normally lack the sophisticated self-reflection of *Water and Light*, and commonly produce "glib imitations" (Interview 55) that are "opportunistic attempts to graft assumed or trivial attitudes upon the stock of Thompson's work and life [so that h]is manner is appropriated and machined into mannerism" (Interview 55). The terrain between imitation and innovation, in other words, is very difficult to navigate.

Poet and critic John Lofranco agrees. He argues that Thompson's stylistic influence is so monumental in contemporary Canadian poetry that despite the free-verse ghazal establishing "a life of its own in this country" (31), *Stilt Jack's* influence is ultimately too difficult to overcome.<sup>3</sup> In the final analysis, he argues, "Canadian ghazals are an exercise in imitation" (31). Not only does this unfairly overlook the innovations of *Water and Light* (and other texts), but it also dismisses "imitation" as though no poetic breakthrough ever rooted itself in a sense of influence, and represents a narrow understanding of how innovation occurs *within* and *alongside* poetic communities, not merely outside or against them. Lofranco essentially oversimplifies the best insights of Bloom's theory concerning "the anxiety of influence": to articulate one's own vision, one often needs to attempt the style of one's teachers in order to overcome them; or, in the case of Webb, one must empower the limitations of one's apprenticeship and use it to one's advantage. Is it not possible, therefore, that respectful imitation *can* eventually yield insightful poetic breakthroughs? Is that not one of the central themes that the

ghazals of Thompson and Webb so brilliantly address?

Surely Thompson and Webb demonstrate that considered apprenticeship can motivate exceptional individual insights. To achieve them, however, one must move beyond imitation into innovation. As Harry Thurston recently noted, any poet that sets out simply to *copy* Thompson's masterpiece is therefore doomed before s/he begins. The student of *Stilt Jack* cannot reproduce Thompson's specific relationship with language, Yeats, baits and hooks. Instead, s/he must follow his *formal* lead, adopting and adapting the ghazal's conventions to suit the specific purposes and particular, subjective context of her/his writing life. This can only be accomplished in free-verse ghazals, Sanger argues, by achieving a "real understanding of the ghazal form" (Interview 55) beyond basic lyric musicality and narrative disjuncture. Thus, before attempting to write free-verse ghazals, one must first consider how carefully constructed free-verse ghazal adaptations relate to the traditional rules that they both transform and complement. Only then can one apply such rules and adaptations to one's own contexts by re-imagining the ghazal's formality within one's own specific precedents and privileges.

Such self-examination and formal reinvention obeys what I posit as the central tenet of the ghazal sensibility to be engaged by all new free-verse ghazal poets: a contextual re-consideration and application of negative capability to address the political and cultural preconceptions of one's specific historical, psychological, geographical, and cultural present. This is how Thompson embraces negative capability as a way of working, endorsing a poetic ideal that is both resonant with postmodern fashions – by stressing multiplicity, disjuncture, fragmentation, polyvalence – and profoundly out of fashion – by

occasionally confirming absolute answers to resist postmodern skepticism. Webb's ghazals do similar work, embracing an "Ethics of Location" to posit Western privilege as an active part of the oppressions that unfold beyond and within her text (a pose that also accuses her readers of complicity). By adapting and endorsing negative capability in their ghazals, Thompson and Webb effectively question the functional limitations of their own poetics, not by rejecting the faults of inherited perspectives, but by engaging them, an inclusivity that encourages resistance to absolute conclusions, finalities, and self-congratulation in their poetry. By occupying the vital and contradictory space of arrival, beginning, and birth, they eschew a poetics of progress. Thus, their ghazals are profoundly, compellingly processual, offering a functional model to new ghazal poets who wish to write in their tradition. The manner in which new poets have continued such a tradition in Canada following the Ghalib-Rich-Thompson-Webb line is a history that remains to be written, and this is not the place for such an overview. An analysis of the Canadian ghazal experiments of Douglas Barbour, Di Brandt, Geoffery Cook, Susan Glickman, Matthew Holmes, D.G. Jones, Sonnet L'Abbé, Ross Leckie, Douglas Lochhead, John Lofranco, rob mclennan, Catherine Owen, Sandra Ridley, Andrew Steeves, Harry Thurston, Andy Weaver, Jan Zwicky, and many more, therefore, awaits a future scholar.

***"The Swimmer's Moment": Nuanced Apprenticeship, Structural Re-birth***

Before concluding, however, I must stress that not all of the ghazals that follow Thompson's example have been universally condemned in Canada. While he abhors the

current ubiquity of the form in Canadian poetry, even Sanger names two sequences that, he claims, transcend poetic imitation: “Phyllis Webb’s *Sunday Water: 13 anti-ghazals* (1982)” and “Jan Zwicky’s ‘Kant and Bruckner: Twelve Variations’ in *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (1998)” (Interview 55):

Both Webb’s and Zwicky’s sequences are, like *Stilt Jack*, allusive and referential. They are concerned with ideas, with cultural relationships, with metaphysical paradoxes, as well as with feelings, emotions and some very restricted play of autobiography. It is no accident, but significant of their real understanding of the ghazal form that both Webb and Zwicky, like Thompson, present their work with prose commentary. (Interview 55)

While Sanger’s evaluation depends on a certain pre-conception of what counts as poetry – “ideas,” metaphysics, emotions, and a resistance to the so-called “intentional fallacy” – he also offers valuable insight here. These exemplars demonstrate a successful way to move past the example of Thompson while also engaging his insight and methodology.<sup>4</sup>

Zwicky’s “Kant and Bruckner” is an example of what I call “nuanced apprenticeship,” a continuation of one’s primary influences that adopts and personalizes their examples without overtly challenging their structural methodologies. The network of musical imagery that resonates throughout Zwicky’s poems follows the formal requirement for an individualization of imagistic networks established in both *Stilt Jack* and *Water and Light*, while her active response to Kant and Western philosophy creates a dialogic anxiety that relates to Webb’s dialogue with Ghalib and Thompson’s struggles with Yeats. As do the ghazals of Webb and Thompson, Zwicky’s allusive lyric emerges from difficult self-exploration, a journey best crystallized in her two influential books of poetic theory – *Lyric Philosophy* (1997) and *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003) – which

literally situate her own poetics alongside her most formative influences. Essentially, Zwicky's tightly constructed ghazals are a demonstration of how to follow the stylistic leads of Thompson and Webb by adapting the tenets of the ghazal sensibility – self-exploration, formalistic re-consideration, a balance between the subjective present and one's past influences, an embrace of contradiction – while neither imitating nor denying the influence of their formative examples. Her nuanced apprenticeship to the free-verse ghazal's challenges is one way forward from the magnificent eloquence of *Stilt Jack*.

Another is to follow Thompson's methodological lead to re-invent the ghazal's essential form: a strategy I call “structural re-birth.” While nuanced apprenticeship relates more directly to a neo-Romantically self-reflexive lyricism, structural re-birth depends more directly on a modernist and postmodernist spirit of formal experimentation. One example of this innovation is the “breath ghazals” of Barbour's *Breath Takes* (2000), which translate the free-verse ghazal's disjunctive intuition into “breath” lines that echo the poet's body. Such structural re-birth, when well performed, transforms the ghazal's structural parameters while also addressing its traditional subject matter and acknowledging its primary practitioners. While perhaps not as emotionally affective as nuanced apprenticeship, effectively executed structural re-birth creates a self-aware investigation that both validates and interrogates its own traditions, forwarding a subjective poetics that acknowledges and exploits its own limitations within a radically liberating adaptation of the ghazal's inherent formalism.

Both nuanced apprenticeship and structural re-birth give us a road map beyond the quagmire of imitation into the rich waters of the new that applies not only to the ghazal

tradition, but to any contemporary artistic practice cognizant of its role as a crossroads between past and future. Such innovative self-realization dares “the dark centre” that Thompson faced in ghazal XXXVI, enables the “seeing in the dark” (59) that closes Webb’s *Water and Light*, and takes the plunge that Margaret Avison spoke of nearly half a century ago, engaging “the black pit” of “the whirlpool” instead of playing it safe on the banks of the river. The ghazal sensibility of all the free-verse poets I have examined ultimately enables an ability to forge ahead into such subjective darkness, a decision that Avison calls, in a different context, “The Swimmer’s Moment”:

For everyone  
The swimmer’s moment at the whirlpool comes,  
But many at that moment will not say  
‘This is the whirlpool, then.’  
By their refusal they are saved  
From the black pit, and also from contesting  
The deadly rapids, and emerging in  
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.  
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn  
Pale and forever on the rim of suction  
They will not recognize.  
Of those who dare the knowledge  
Many are whirled into the ominous centre  
That, gaping vertical, seals up  
For them an eternal boon of privacy,  
So that we turn away from their defeat  
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for  
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret  
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth  
Where one or two have won:  
(The silver reaches of the estuary). (203)

If the free-verse ghazal in Canada can guide us to such waters, and escape “an eternal boon of privacy,” it truly encapsulates what Thompson calls “something of the essence of poetry: not the relinquishing of the rational, not the abuse of order, not the destruction of

form, not the praise of the private hallucination” (“Ghazals” n.p.). Our response to its breakthroughs, therefore, cannot continue to measure *Stilt Jack* and *Water and Light* with the paralyzing habits of critical binarity or biographical voyeurism that have thus far carried them away from the recognition they so obviously deserve.

### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> To gain a sense of how the ghazal takes shape in the United States, see Ali’s introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities* and Caplan’s “‘In that Thicket of Bitter Roots’”. Caplan sketches a history for the free-verse form (including *Stilt Jack*) that unfolds chronologically by author as follows: Rich (1969), *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1971), Jim Harrison (1971), Thompson (1978), Denise Levertov (1984), Agha Shahid Ali (1997-2003), Robert Bly (2001), and others.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, whether or not a Canadian text is widely taught in Canadian universities often plays an important role in deciding whether that text is generally remembered and reprinted, or doomed to obscurity and the excited purview of a few experts. bpNichol’s *Martyrology* survives, for example, because of the determined promotion of a few critics, and the financial commitments of Coach House Press. Many other essential, experimental Canadian books of poetry have not received such rescue.

<sup>3</sup> Influenced by Thompson’s use of “the home-grown version of the form” (31), Lofranco identifies the Canadian ghazal’s characteristics as follows: “familiarity of tone, the suggestion of violence, preoccupation with death, and the hint of sex” (31). These themes, he claims, were not invented by Thompson, but borrowed from Jim Harrison and Adrienne Rich.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the appropriate place to develop an extended close reading of such texts. By including them, my primary intention is to accentuate the continued, formal influence of Thompson and Webb on the ongoing ghazal tradition in Canada.

### Works Cited and Consulted

- Ahmad, Aijaz, Ed. *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu by Aijaz Ahmad, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Mark Strand, and William Hunt*. New York and London: Columbia UP, 1971.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *Call Me Ishmael, Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2003.
- . Introduction. *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 2000. 1-14.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Last Testaments: Pat Lowther and John Thompson" (1978). *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 307-312.
- . *Letter to Phyllis Webb*. December 12, 1982. Box 2, fond 6: Water and Light: correspondence 1984-86. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessions. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.
- Avison, Margaret. "The Swimmer's Moment" (1962). *15 Canadian Poets X 3*. Gary Geddes, Ed. Fourth Edition. Don Mills (ON): Oxford UP, 2001. 203.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. (1938; French). Trans. Alan C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Barbour, Douglas. *Breath Takes*. Toronto: Wolsak & Wynn, 2001.
- . "Ghazals in the North: John Thompson's male romanticism & Phyllis Webb's female subversion" (1989). *Lyric/Anti-Lyric: essays on contemporary poetry*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2001. 96-115.
- Bartlett, Brian. "If Not Poets, Who?". *Books in Canada*. February, 1996. 37.

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. (1957) Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.
- Bashō, Matsuo. "The narrow road through the provinces." (1689). Trans. Earl Miner. *Japanese Poetic Diaries*. University of California Press: 1969.
- Bazzana, Kevin. *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Bate, Walter Jackson. *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1939.
- Bashiri, Iraj. "The Life of Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz." (1979) Iraj Bashiri Homepage. <<http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Poets/Hafiz.html#Top>>. July 6, 2009.
- Beardsley, Doug. Review of *Water and Light*. *Times Colonist*. Phyllis Webb Fonds. National Library and Archives Canada. (n.p.)
- Bell, John W.H. "'Malachi Stilt-Jack am I. Whatever I have learned has run wild' – some echoes of the mature Yeats". Rev. of *At the Edge of the Chopping There are No Secrets and Stilt Jack*. *Globe and Mail*. 17 June, 1978. 41.
- Bell, John. "Takhallus in *Stilt Jack*" *Antigonish Review* 102-103 (1995 Summer-Autumn). 302-6.
- Bemrose, John. "No sense but a lot of feeling". Rev. of *Stilt Jack* by John Thompson, and *The Woman I am* by Dorothy Livesay. *Toronto Star*, 30 June, 1978. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.

- Blaser, Robin. "The Fire" (1967). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 235-246.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Bly, Robert. *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Bly, Robert, Ed. *Leaping Poetry: An Idea With Poems and Translations*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
- Bowering, George. *The Gangs of Kosmos*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.
- . *Kerrisdale Elegies*. Toronto: Coach House, 1984.
- . Reading. Poetry Cabaret 1 (with George Murray and rob mclennan). *Ottawa International Writer's Festival*. 15 April, 2007.
- . *Rocky Mountain Foot*. Toronto: M&S, 1969.
- Brand, Dionne, Dir. "Listening For Something: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation." Film. National Film Board of Canada, 1996.
- Brandt, Di. *Now You Care*. Toronto: Coach House, 2003.
- Bringhurst, Robert. "Belay to Words." *Antigonish Review*, 102-103 (1995 Summer-Autumn), 307-310.
- Butling, Pauline. *Seeing in the Dark: the Poetry of Phyllis Webb*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1997.
- . "'I Devise, You Devise, We Devise'." Preface. *West Coast Line*. (25.3) 1991. 14-17.
- Butling, Pauline and Susan Rudy. *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2005.

- Campbell, Wanda. "Strange Plantings: Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Littérature Canadienne*. 21:1 (1996). 17-36.
- Canclini, Nestor Garcia. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Exiting Modernity*. Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari & Silvia L. Lopez. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Caplan, David. "'In That Thicket of Bitter Roots': The Ghazal in America". *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4. (Fall 2004). 115-134.
- Caputo, John D. *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1978). New York: Fordham UP, 1986.
- Carr, Brenda. "Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric?: Reframing the Questions in Phyllis Webb's Lyric Sequences". *West Coast Line*. (25.3) 1991. 67-79.
- Collis, Stephen. *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry / Anarchy / Abstraction*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007.
- Cook, Geoffery. *Postscript*. Montreal: Signal/Vehicule, 2003.
- Cooper, Alan. Personal Interview. *White Salt Mountain: A gathering of poets for John Thompson*. Sackville, New Brunswick. November 1, 2008.
- . Three poems. *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 58-60.
- . "'Way back the woods are wine-dark' – The Poetry of John Thompson". *ArtsAtlantic*. 17; Summer, 1983. 38-39.

- Creeley, Robert. "I'm Given to Write poems" (1967). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 263-273.
- Crozier, Lorna. "Afterword: Dreaming the Ghazal into Being." *Bones in Their Wings: ghazals*. Regina (SK): Hagios Press, 2003. 51-74.
- Davey, Frank. "Phyllis Webb." *From Here to There: A Guide to English Canadian Literature since 1960*. Erin (ON): Porcépic, 1974. 261-5.
- The Dhammapadda*. Trans. Juan Mascaro. New York: Penguin Classics, 1973.
- The Dhammapadda: A New English Translation with the Pali Text*. Trans. John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Domanski, Don. "Poetry and the Sacred." Ralph Gustafson Distinguished Poets Lecture. Vancouver Island University: Institute of Coastal Research, 2006.
- Doolittle, Hilda (H.D.). *Trilogy: The Walls Do Not Fall, Tribute to the Angels, The Flowering of the Rod*. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- Duncan, Robert. "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" (1961). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 195-211.
- Ellmann, Richard. *Yeats: The Man and The Masks*. New York: Macmillan, 1948.
- Fagan, Cary. "Remembering Stilt Jack". *Books in Canada*. May, 1986. 6-7.
- . "Suffering infused poet's 'sweet barbarisms'". Rev. of *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*, ed Peter Sanger. *The Globe and Mail*. Friday, 20 Dec, 1995. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.

- Findley, Timothy. *Inside Memory: Pages from a Writer's Workbook*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990
- . *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. Toronto: Viking, 1984.
- Friedlander, Ira. *The whirling dervishes: being an account of the Sufi order, known as the Mevlevis, and its founder, the poet and mystic, Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- Frye, Northrop. "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada" (1965). *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. 1995 Edition. Toronto: Anansi, 1971. 215-253.
- . *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature* (1982). Toronto: U of Toronto, 2006.
- . "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry" (1946). *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. 1995 Edition. Toronto: Anansi, 1971. 147-157.
- Gelpi, Albert. "The Genealogy of Postmodernism: Contemporary American Poetry". *The Southern Review*, Summer 1990 (517-541). 18 Jul, 2007. 15 Dec, 2008. <<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/gelpi.html>>
- Gibson, Muriel. "An unbearable rightness of seeing". Rev. of *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*, ed Peter Sanger. *Atlantic Books Today*. 11. Fall, 1995. 24.
- Gibson, Shirley. *I Am Watching*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973.
- Glickman, Susan. "'Proceeding Before the Amorous Invisible': Phyllis Webb and the Ghazal". *Canadian Literature*. 115 (Winter 1987). 48-61.

- Godard, Barbara . Review of *Water and Light* by Phyllis Webb, and *The Body Labyrinth* by Sharon Berg. *Poetry Canada Review*. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.
- Goose Lane. BOOK RELEASE: *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*. Peter Sanger (ed.). Press release. November, 1995.
- Graham, Janna. "Out of Hiding." *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 25-26.
- Grant, George. *Lament for a Nation: the defeat of Canadian nationalism*. Toronto: M&S, 1965.
- Hall, Phil. "Posthumous Poetry: The duty's a pleasure". Rev. of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets and Stilt Jack*. *Windsor Star*. 19 August, 1978. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax, 1993.
- . *No Fear, No Death: Comforting Wisdom for Life*. New York: Riverhead, 2002.
- Harrison, Jim. *Outlyer and Ghazals*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Discourse on Thinking* (Trans. of *Gelassenheit*). Trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- . *The Principle of Reason* (1955-6). Trans. Reginald Lilly. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

The Heights of Abraham (Matlock Bath) Ltd. "Education". 2006; November 19, 2008.

<<http://www.heightsofabraham.com/en/Education.asp>>

Henderson, Harold G, Ed and Trans. *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets From Basho to Shiki*. New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958.

Hillmann, Michael C. *Unity in the Ghazals of Hafez*. Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976.

Holmes, Matthew. *hitch*. Madeira Park (BC): Nightwood, 2006.

*The Holy Bible*. New International Version. Grand Rapids (MI): Zondervan, 1978.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "God's Grandeur" (1877). *The Major Works*. Ed. Catherine Phillips, 1986. London: Oxford UP, 128.

---. "No Worst, There Is None" (1885/6). *The Major Works*. Ed. Catherine Phillips, 1986. London: Oxford UP, 167.

Hulcoop, John. "Webb's 'Water and Light'". Rev. of *Water and Light*. *Canadian Literature*. No. 109 (Summer 1986). 151-159.

---. *Phyllis Webb and Her Works*. Toronto: ECW, 1991.

---. "Phyllis Webb, 'Priestess of Motion': Putting the Naked Poems in Perspective". *Undated Typescript*. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986.

Jalajal, David. "A Short History of the Ghazal". *The Ghazal Page*. 3 Nov, 2007.

<[http://www.ghazalpage.net/prose/notes/short\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_ghazal.html](http://www.ghazalpage.net/prose/notes/short_history_of_the_ghazal.html)>. May, 2008.

- Jeffreys, Mark. "Introduction. Lyric Poetry and the Resistance to History." *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture*. Ed. Mark Jeffreys. New York and London: Garland, 1998. ix-xxiv.
- Jones, D.G. "Imperfect Ghazals." *A Throw of Particles: The New and Selected Poetry of D.G. Jones*. Toronto: General Publishing, 1983. 77-79.
- Kashani, Manoochehr Aryanpur. Introduction. *Odes of Hafiz: poetical horoscope*. Trans. Abbas Aryanpur Kashani. Lexington (KY): Mazda, 1984.
- Keats, John. "Letter to George and Thomas Keats." December, 1817. *Longman Anthology of British Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. Vol. 2A. Eds. Susan Wolfson and Peter Manning. New York: 2003. 901-902.
- Kroetsch, Robert. "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989. 21-33.
- . "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian longpoem". *Dandelion* 8.1 (1981): 61-85.
- . *Seed Catalogue*. (1977). Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1986.
- L'Abbé, Sonnet. *Killarnoe*. Toronto: M&S, 2007.
- Levenson, Christopher. Rev. *At the Edge of the Chopping There are no Secrets and Stilt Jack*. *Queen's Quarterly*. Vol. 86, No. 4, 1979. 718-720.
- Levertov, Denise. "Broken Ghazals." *Oblique Prayers: New Poems with 14 Translations from Jean Joubert*. New York: New Directions, 1984. 6-7.
- . *O Taste and See: New Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1964.

- . "Some Notes on Organic Form". (1965). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 312-317.
- Lewis, Franklin D. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Poetry and Teachings of Jalal Al-din Rumi*. Oxford: Oneworld: 2000.
- Lochhead, Douglas. *High Marsh Road: Lines for a Diary*. Fredericton (NB): Goose Lane, 1980.
- Lofranco, John. "Stalking the Canadian Ghazal." *Books in Canada*. April, 2006. 35: 3. 31-32.
- Marlatt, Daphne. "Difference (em)bracing". *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*. Eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel Toronto: Coach House, 1990. 188-193.
- . *touch to my tongue*. Edmonton: Longspoon, 1984.
- Marlatt, Daphne and Robert Minden. *Steveston*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974.
- Matthews, D.J. and C. Shackle. *An Anthology of Classical Urdu Love Lyrics: Text and Translations*. London: Oxford UP, 1972. 1-16; 184-216.
- Melfi, Mary. *A Queen is Holding a Mummified Cat*. Montreal: Guernica, 1982.
- Morris, Henry. "God's Shadow". *Institute for Creation Research*. Sept., 2005; Dec. 18, 2008. <<http://www.icr.org/article/2334/>>
- Mouré, Erin. "Poetry, Memory, and the Polis". (1988). *Language in Her Eye*. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, eds. Toronto: Coach House, 1990. 201-208.

- Nichol, bp. *The Martyrology Books III and IV*. Toronto: Coach House, 1976.
- Norris, Ken. "Land eels and illogical ghazals". Rev of *Loosely Tied Hands* by Joe Rosenblatt and *Stilt Jack* by John Thompson. *Books in Canada*. Aug/Sept, 1978.
- John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.
- . *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-1980: Its role in the development of modernism and post-modernism in Canadian poetry*. Toronto: ECW, 1984.
- Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse" (1950). *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 147-158.
- . *The Special View of History*. Ed. Ann Charters. Berkeley: Oyez, 1970.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: left-handed poems*. Toronto: Anansi, 1970.
- . *Coming Through Slaughter*. Toronto: Anansi, 1976.
- . "Elizabeth". *The Dainty Monsters*. Toronto: Coach House, 1967. 68-69.
- . Personal Email. Sunday, January 11, 2009.
- . "Claude Glass" (1984). *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems*. Toronto: M&S, 1989. 94-101.
- . "Tin Roof". *Secular Love*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1985. 21-43.
- . "Translations of My Postcards". *Secular Love*. New York: WW Norton, 1985. 103.
- Ondaatje, Michael, Ed. *The Long Poem Anthology*. Toronto: Coach House, 1979.
- Owen, Catherine. *Shall: ghazals*. Toronto: Wolsak & Wynn, 2006.

- Pearson, Alan. Review of *Naked Poems* by Phyllis Webb, *Smoking the City* by Brian McCarthy, and *The Wooden House* by Daryl Hine. *The Montreal Star*. December 18, 1965. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. (1 page)
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Postmodernism and the impasse of lyric." *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern UP, 1985. 172-200.
- . "Pound/Stevens: whose era?" *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern UP, 1985. 1-27.
- . "A Response." *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture*. Ed. Mark Jeffreys. New York and London: Garland, 1998. 245-255.
- Polk, James. "Introduction: Remembering John Thompson". *I Dream Myself into Being*. Toronto: Anansi, 1991. 1-9.
- Potvin, Liza. "Phyllis Webb: The Voice That Breaks." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*. 32 (Spring/Summer, 1993). University of Western Ontario. <<http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjm/vol32/potvin.htm>>. July 8, 2009.
- Pound, Ezra. "A Retrospect". 1918 (with some notes first printed 1913). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 36-48.
- Purdy, Dwight H. "Malachi Stilt-Jack." *Biblical echo and allusion in the poetry of W.B. Yeats: poetics and the art of God*. Lewisburg: Bucknell, 1994. 103-115.
- Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. (1967). New York: Grove Press, 1974.

- Reaney, James S. "Weaving works into continuous whole links these poets". Rev. of *Stilt Jack* by John Thompson and *Private Parts* by John Robert Columbo. *London Free Press*, 16 Sept, 1978. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.
- Rich, Adrienne. "The Blue Ghazals". *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*. London: Chatto and Windus / Norton, 1971. 20-24.
- . *A Change of World*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1951.
- . "Diving Into the Wreck". *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. New York: Norton, 1973. 22-4.
- . *The Dream of a Common Language: poems 1974-1977*. New York: Norton, 1978.
- . Foreword. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. vii-xiv.
- . "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib". *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968*. London: Chatto and Windus / The Hogarth Press, 1968.
- . *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- . "Notes toward a Politics of Location" *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York, London: Norton, 1986. 210-231.
- . *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*. London: Chatto and Windus / Norton, 1971.
- Rimbaud, Arthur. *A Season in Hell and Illuminations*. Trans. Mark Treharne. London: J.M. Dent, 1998.

- Rimer, Thomas. Introduction. *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. Eds. and Trans. Sato Hiroaki and Burton Watson. New York: Columbia UP, 1981. xxix-xliv.
- Roberts, Jim. Rev. of *Black Flamingo* by Kenneth Sherman and *Water and Light* by Phyllis Webb. *Toronto Poetry Review*. 19-24. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking, 1988.
- Russell, Ralph and Khurshidul Islam. *Three Mughal Poets: Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1978.
- Sanger, Peter. Interview, with Janna Graham. *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 53-57.
- . Introduction. *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*. 15-45.
- . "Night Sea Voyage: John Thompson". *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 72-85.
- . "Notes on the Poems". *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*. 261-268.
- . *SeaRun: Notes on John Thompson's Stilt Jack*. Antigonish (NS): Xavier Press, 1986.
- . "A Tribute to John Thompson". Keynote Address. *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Mount Allison University, Sackville (NB). November 1, 2008.

- . *White Salt Mountain: Words in Time*. Kentville (NS): Gaspereau Press, 2005.
- Sato, Hiroaki and Burton Watson, Eds and Translators. *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1981.
- Scheier, Jacob. *More to Keep Us Warm*. Toronto: ECW, 2008.
- Scobie, Stephen. "I and I: Phyllis Webb's 'I Daniel'". *Open Letter*. Sixth Series, 2-3. (Summer-Fall, 1985). 61-68.
- . *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*. Dunvegan (ON): Quadrant, 1980.
- Scott, Nathan A. *Negative Capability: Studies in the New Literature and the Religious Situation*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1969.
- Shankar, Ravi. *The Spirit of India: Ravi Shankar Plays Ragas*. 1979 & 1980. Deutsche Grammophon, 1994.
- Sheibani, Azar "Women of the Revolution". *Red Pepper*. 30 January, 2009. <<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Women-of-the-revolution>>. July 12, 2009.
- Singh Dulai, Surjit. Letter to John Thompson. March 16, 1975. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.
- Smith, Patricia Keeney. "Hit and Miss" Rev. of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* and *Stilt Jack* by John Thompson, *Soviet Poems* by Ralph Gustafson, and *Mister Never* by Miriam Waddington. *Canadian Literature*, 1980. 136-140.
- Snukal, Robert. *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge UP, 1973.

- Snyder, Gary. "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution". *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 392-4.
- Spanos, William V. "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation". *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Winter, 1980). 38-80.  
Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207863>> (Access: December 13, 2008).
- Stallworthy, Jon. *Yeats: Last Poems: a casebook*. London: Macmillan, 1968.
- The Statler Brothers. "Flowers on the Wall". Columbia Records, 1965.
- Steeves, Andrew. *Cutting the Devil's Throat*. Fredericton (NB): Goose Lane, 1998.
- Sutherland, Fraser. "Maudit Mancunian". Rev. of *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. Peter Sanger. *Books in Canada*. Dec 1995 (Vol. 24, No. 9). 32.
- Suzuki, Daisetsu Teitaro. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. (1934; 1948) New York: Grove Press, 1964.
- Thesen, Sharon, Ed. *The New Long Poem Anthology*. 2nd Ed. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991.
- . Ed. *The New Long Poem Anthology*. 3rd Ed. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001.
- Thompson, John. *At the Edge of the Chopping There are no Secrets*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973.
- . Black Book. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives of Canada.
- . *Collected Poems and Translations*. Ed. Peter Sanger. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995.
- . "The ghazal". Research Notes. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives of Canada. c. 1973.

- . "Ghazals". *Stilt Jack*. Toronto: Anansi, 1978. n.p.
- . *I Dream Myself into Being: Collected Poems*. Toronto: Anansi, 1991.
- . "The Junior Professor's Reply". *Collected Poems and Translations*. Ed. Peter Sanger. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995. 249-250.
- . "Mir Taqi Mir: Ghazals in Translation". *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives of Canada.
- . "Professor's Last Stand". *Collected Poems and Translations*. Ed. Peter Sanger. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995. 251.
- . Reading. Audio recording. University of New Brunswick. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives of Canada. Spring, 1974.
- . *Stilt Jack*. Toronto: Anansi, 1978.
- . "Tarantella" (First draft for the introduction to *Stilt Jack*). *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives of Canada.
- Thurston, Harry. *Clouds Flying Before the Eye*. Fredericton: Fiddlehead books, 1985.
- . "The Iconography of the Maritimes". Interview, with Janna Graham. *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 41-44.
- Trehearne, Brian. *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*. Toronto: U of T, 1999.
- Virgo, Sean. Rev. of *Stilt Jack*. *Quill & Quire*. 5 July, 1978. *John Thompson Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. n.p.

Wachtel, Eleanor. "Intimations of Mortality: Once Threatened by 'the terrible abyss of despair,' Phyllis Webb has moved beyond mysticism and anarchy to a curiously domestic isolation." *Books in Canada*. 12.9 (November, 1983). 8-15.

Wah, Fred. *Breathin' My Name With A Sigh*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981.

---. *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1985.

Weaver, Andy. "That Bastard Ghazal". *Poetics.ca*. No. 1. Ed. rob mcLennan, Stephen Brockwell. 12 Nov, 2002. <<http://www.poetics.ca/poetics01/01weaverprint.html>>. April, 2008.

Webb, Phyllis. "CRITICALLY SPEAKING: Report by Phyllis Webb on the Poetry Seminar recently held at the University of British Columbia". September 25, 1963. Box 17, fonds 1 and 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessions. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. 1-5.

---. Drafts of Poems for *Naked Poems*. Typescripts and loose leaves. Box 4, fonds 12-18; 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessions. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.

---. Drafts of *Water and Light* on Index Cards. Box 2, Fond 8; 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessions. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.

---. "Ghazal Maker". Rev. of *SeaRun: Notes on John Thompson's Stilt Jack*, by Peter Sanger. *Canadian Literature* 112 (Spring 1987). 156-7.

---. *Hanging Fire*. Toronto: Coach House, 1990.

- . *Letter to Sarah Sheard at Coach House Press*, June 27, 1984. Typescript. Box 2, fond 7: Water and Light: correspondence 1984-86. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Accessions. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. 2 pages.
- . *Naked Poems*. Vancouver: Periwinkle, 1965.
- . Notebook, 1969-1973. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.
- . Notebook, 1979-1982. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada.
- . "On the Line." *Talking*. Montreal: Quadrant Editions, 1982. 66-71.
- . "Panel Discussion on Risk". *Manitoba Writers Guild*. October, 1987. Typescript. *Phyllis Webb Fonds*. National Library and Archives Canada. 1-4.
- . "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" (1962). *The Vision Tree*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982. 60.
- . "Polishing Up the View" (1976). *Talking*. Montreal: Quadrant, 1982. 46-50.
- . "The Question as an Instrument of Torture" (1971). *Talking*. Montreal: Quadrant, 1982. 31-45.
- . Reading. *Naked Poems Suites I and II*. Audio Recording. *Canadian Poets I*. Toronto, CBC: 1966.
- . *The Sea Is Also A Garden*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1962.
- . *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals*. Lantzville (BC): Island Writing Series, 1982.
- . "Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process." *Talking*. Montreal: Quadrant, 1982. 51-65.
- . *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982.
- . *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. Toronto: Coach House, 1984.

- . *Wilson's Bowl*. Toronto: Coach House, 1980.
- White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 5-7; 25-63; 72-85.
- Whiteman, Bruce. "everything is waiting for a condition of grace." Rev. of *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. *Brick*. Fall, 1985. 6.
- Williams, William Carlos. "Introduction to the Wedge" (1944). *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Ed. Donald Allen & Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, 1973. 137-9.
- Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake. "Introduction: Tracking the Global/Local". *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, Eds. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996. 1-17.
- Winger, Rob. "A brief history of the Canadian ghazal". *White Salt Mountain: A Gathering of Poets for John Thompson*. Ed. Anita Lahey. Special Feature. *ARC Poetry Magazine*. 62 (Summer, 2009). 27-36.
- . "'a magician explaining his best trick': postcard poetics from bpNichol's 'You Too, Nicky'." *Open Letter*. Thirteenth Series, No. 5. Spring, 2008. 10-24.
- Yeats, W.B. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Ed. Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985. 17-18.
- . "The Cold Heaven" (1912). *Collected Poems*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. 140.
- . "Easter 1916" (1916). *Collected Poems*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. 202-205.

- . "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915). *The Wild Swans at Coole*. London: MacMillan, 1919. 79-85.
- . "The Fisherman" (1916). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Ed. Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985. 3-4.
- . "High Talk" (1938). *Last Poems and Plays*. London: MacMillan, 1940. 73.
- . "Leda and the Swan" (1924). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Ed. Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985. 11.
- . "A Prayer for My Daughter" (1921). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry and Poetics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Ed. Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1985. 7-10.
- . "Under Ben Bulben" (1938). *Last Poems and Plays*. London: MacMillan, 1940. 89-92.
- . "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?" (1936). *Collected Poems*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. 388-9.
- . "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1919). *Collected Poems*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. 147-8.
- Zwicky, Jan. "Kant and Bruckner: Twelve Variations." *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*. London (ON): Brick, 1998. 17-31.
- . *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1992.
- . *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Kentville (NS): Gaspereau, 2003.