

“A Strange Gestation”:

Periods of Poetic Silence in Modern Canadian Creative Careers

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“The sun climbs to the middle of the sky and stops. It’s noon.
It’s the first bell of noon ringing loud from the cathedral tower.
... Great shovelfuls of sound dumped in the grave of our
activity. The sound fills up every space and every thought. ...
The future is blocked. The past is plugged up. Layer after layer
of the present seizes us, buries us in one vast amber
paperweight. Sealed under twelve skyfuls of the only moment.”

— Leonard Cohen, *Death of a Lady’s Man* (1978)

“Sit in a chair and keep still. Let the dancer’s shoulders emerge
from your shoulders, the dancer’s chest from your chest, the
dancer’s loins from your loins, the dancer’s hips and thighs from
yours; and from your silence the throat that makes a sound, and
from your bafflement a clear song to which the dancer moves,
and let him serve God in beauty. When he fails, send him again
from your chair.”

— Leonard Cohen, *Book of Mercy* (1984)

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Abstract

This dissertation unites a diverse group of Canadian poets who all fell silent for a prolonged period in the middle of otherwise productive and successful poetic careers: P.K. Page, Phyllis Webb, John Newlove, Anne Marriott, and Leonard Cohen. Their “silences” are characterized not by an absence of creative energy or effort, but by the poets’ reluctance to publish and their struggles to bring new work to satisfactory completion. The dissertation’s four chapters approach the gaps in creative careers from several methodological angles in order to develop a multidimensional definition of “poetic silence,” while also offering insight into individual poets and their *oeuvres*.

Part I of the dissertation concerns critical constructions of creative silence, first from the outside looking in—the perspective of critics—and then from the inside looking out—the perspective of poets. “Silence” is a malleable metaphor with both deathly and regenerative connotations, and Chapter One reviews the ways in which critics have seized upon the concept to advance a wide variety of critical and theoretical projects. The poets, meanwhile, have frequently reflected retrospectively on their own fallow periods; Chapter Two surveys the material, psychological, and creative barriers that they have cited as impediments to their progress, and shows that the writers who moved most fully beyond those obstacles also idealized middle silence as a phase of rebirth.

Part II of the dissertation narrates the experience of silence as the writers represented and worked through it in their pre- and post-*lapsus* poetry. Drawing on both published and unpublished, complete and incomplete poetic work, Chapter Three demonstrates that Page, Webb, and Cohen all underwent a crisis of poetic authority in the middle of their careers; when they lost confidence in their mastery as “makers” of artistic order and meaning, “silence,” a feeling of impotence that they often expressed through images of excess and disorder, began to

invade the poems. Chapter Four, finally, illustrates that once these three writers stopped fighting against silence, they learned to embrace it as a receptive and fertile creative condition. Newlove and Marriott's returns to writing were less dramatic than Page, Webb, or Cohen's because they never fully released the shame and guilt that creative obstruction had initially implied for all five writers. The most innovative and confident post-hiatus poetry was composed by the poets who came to believe that fallow periods were in fact an integral part of their creative careers, and that the most sustainable models of creativity are fuelled by the silences at their core.

Résumé

Cette thèse traite de cinq poètes canadiens qui ont vécu une période de silence prolongée au milieu d'une carrière poétique productive: P.K. Page, Phyllis Webb, John Newlove, Anne Marriott et Leonard Cohen. Leurs « silences » se caractérisent non pas par une absence d'énergie créative ou d'effort, mais bien par la réticence des poètes à publier et par leurs difficultés à achever de façon satisfaisante leurs nouvelles œuvres. Les quatre chapitres de la thèse abordent ces interruptions de carrières poétiques à partir de plusieurs angles méthodologiques de façon à développer une définition multidimensionnelle du « silence poétique », tout en se penchant sur les poètes individuels et leurs œuvres.

La première partie de la thèse concerne les constructions critiques du silence créatif, d'abord d'une perspective extérieure—la perspective des critiques—et puis de la perspective intérieure – la perspective des poètes. Le « silence » est une métaphore malléable aux connotations de mort et de régénération, et le premier chapitre passe en revue les diverses façons dont les critiques se sont servis du concept pour mettre de l'avant une panoplie de projets critiques et théoriques. Les poètes, de leur côté, ont souvent médité de façon rétrospective sur leur période de silence. Ainsi, le deuxième chapitre effectue un survol des barrières matérielles, psychologiques et créatives qu'ils et elles ont invoquées comme des entraves à leur progrès et démontre que les poètes qui ont le mieux surmonté ces barrières idéalisent aussi le silence intermédiaire comme étant une phase de renaissance.

La deuxième partie de la thèse raconte l'expérience du silence telle que les poètes l'ont représentée et affrontée dans leur poésie pré- et post-*lapsus*. En se basant sur des œuvres poétiques publiées et inédites, complètes et incomplètes, le troisième chapitre démontre que Page, Webb et Cohen ont tous vécu une crise d'autorité poétique au milieu de leurs carrières. Lorsqu'ils ont perdu confiance en leur capacité de créer la structure et le sens artistique, le

« silence », un sentiment d'impuissance souvent exprimé à travers des images d'excès et de désordre, a commencé à envahir leurs poèmes. Finalement, le quatrième chapitre illustre la façon dont, une fois que ces trois poètes ont cessé de combattre le silence, ils ont appris à l'adopter comme une condition créative fertile. Le retour à l'écriture de Newlove et Marriott est moins dramatique que celui de Page, Webb ou Cohen parce qu'ils ne se sont jamais entièrement libérés de la honte et la culpabilité initialement vécue par les cinq poètes à la rencontre du blocage créatif. La poésie post-hiatus la plus innovatrice et confiante a été composée par les poètes qui en sont venus à croire que les périodes d'inactivité formaient en fait une partie intégrante de leurs carrières créatives et qu'au cœur des modèles de créativité les plus durables on retrouve le silence.

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In these pages I argue that “struggles of silence” are integral to all creative projects and that the painful and frustrating experience of blockage is crucial for intellectual and artistic growth. I am endlessly grateful to everyone who helped me through my own “struggles of silence” as I undertook this work, and reminded me of my reassuring argument along the way.

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Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations in parenthetical citations to indicate frequently cited primary texts throughout the dissertation (full reference details are provided in the Works Cited list):

<i>AA</i>	<i>Apology for Absence: Selected Poems, 1962-1992</i> , John Newlove
<i>BJ</i>	<i>Brazilian Journal</i> , P.K. Page (eds. Suzanne Bailey and Christopher Doody)
<i>BM</i>	<i>Book of Mercy</i> , Leonard Cohen
<i>CC</i>	<i>The Circular Coast: Poems New and Selected</i> , Anne Marriott
<i>DLM</i>	<i>Death of a Lady's Man</i> , Leonard Cohen
<i>ES</i>	<i>The Energy of Slaves</i> , Leonard Cohen
<i>H</i>	<i>Hologram: A Book of Glosas</i> , P.K. Page
<i>K</i>	<i>Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems</i> , P.K. Page (ed. Zailig Pollock)
<i>NDS</i>	<i>The Night the Dog Smiled</i> , John Newlove
<i>PB</i>	<i>Peacock Blue: Collected Poems</i> , Phyllis Webb (ed. John Hulcoop)
<i>SM</i>	<i>Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs</i> , Leonard Cohen
<i>WB</i>	<i>Wilson's Bowl</i> , Phyllis Webb

To refer to archival material, I indicate the relevant collection using the poet's initials, and then indicate box and folder numbers separated by a period. For example, "PKP 27.5" indicates a reference to the P.K. Page *fonds*, Box 27, folder 5. For references to the Phyllis Webb *fonds*, I also include a unit number (as a Roman numeral), and occasionally a sub-unit letter, in between box and folder numbers, because the folders are numbered by unit rather than by box. For example, "PW 15.V.G.4" indicates a reference to the Phyllis Webb *fonds*, Box 15, Unit V, section G, folder 4. Full reference details for the archives are in the Works Cited list. The abbreviations of archival collections are as follows:

AM	Anne Marriott Papers, University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections Library
JN	John Newlove <i>fonds</i> , University of Manitoba Rare Books and Special Collections
LC	Leonard Cohen Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto
PKP	P.K. Page <i>fonds</i> , Library and Archives Canada
PW	Phyllis Webb <i>fonds</i> , Library and Archives Canada

Introduction

“My poems are born out of great struggles of silence.
 This book has been long in coming. Wayward, natural and
 unnatural silences, my desire for privacy, my critical hesitations,
 my critical wounds, my dissatisfactions with myself and
 the work have all contributed to a strange gestation.”
 — Phyllis Webb, Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl* (9)¹

“Tell me about Book of Mercy. What were the circumstances that generated it?”
 “Silence. I was silenced in all areas. I couldn’t move. I was up against the wall ...
 I could pick up my guitar and sing, but I couldn’t locate my voice.”
 — Leonard Cohen in conversation with Alan Twigg (45)

Phyllis Webb and Leonard Cohen, two poets with very different idioms and interests, both testify in the passages above to the painful and yet strangely generative qualities of a creative condition that they call “silence.” Webb was referring to the fifteen-year interval that separated *Wilson’s Bowl* (1980) from *Naked Poems* (1965): an interval during which she produced only a handful of poems that she judged publishable. Cohen, for his part, was describing the six years between *Book of Mercy*, published in 1984, and *Death of a Lady’s Man*, a volume that he was already prepared to characterize, in 1978, as the product of “obscene silence” (*DLM* 11). Similar lacunae divide the careers of several other Canadian modernist poets. P.K. Page, whose artistic career spanned more than seven decades, did not publish any new poetry at all between 1956 and 1967; she, too, diagnosed that creative state as “my poetic silence” (*BJ* 235).² John Newlove and Anne Marriott likewise moved from early success—numerous book and chapbook publications, and a Governor General’s Award apiece—through a middle period when they barely published and

¹ This Foreword can also be found in *Peacock Blue*, p. 211. Although I cite *Peacock Blue* for all of the poems, for the sake of clarity, I refer to *Wilson’s Bowl* for its Foreword here and throughout the dissertation.

² The phrase “my poetic silence” was in the 3 January 1959 entry of Page’s typescript draft of the *Brazilian Journal* as well as in the published version. See “Brazilian Journal,” p. 189 (PKP 113.16).

struggled to write at all—a “long long silence,” Marriott called it³—to a late phase of renewed poetic output. Mid-career, Webb, Cohen, Page, Newlove, and Marriott all found themselves at a creative impasse to which poetic silence was the only possible response.⁴ And in all five cases, an extended hiatus eventually spawned new work. For all five writers, “silence” was a necessary, if uncomfortable, stage in the creative process. But what makes a poet feel “silenced in all areas,” and what forces inspire, what conditions facilitate, his return to speech? What role do “great struggles of silence” play in the “gestation” of creative work?

This dissertation approaches the “middle silences”⁵ in twentieth-century poetic careers by considering the ways in which these phases have been imagined and assessed by literary critics, biographers, and by the poets themselves, and then by reconstructing, through close readings of published and unpublished poetry, the actual experience of “silence”: the creative crisis and its resolution, the blockage and its release, as these stages register stylistically and thematically in the poems. The silences under study in these pages were *lived*—they are biographical facts—and they were felt deeply by all five writers. Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott all faltered, in their own ways, under the weight of critical expectations and high personal standards, and they struggled to sustain the aesthetic mastery and innovativeness that they understood to be core tenets of modernist poetic practice. Sometimes they found themselves utterly stymied by these burdens, and sometimes they were merely frustrated and unfulfilled, unable to bring new work to satisfactory completion and unwilling to share what they did write with an audience. Their periods of public silence varied in intensity and duration—from Cohen’s six years to Marriott’s

³ Letter to Susan Ioannou, 21 August 1983 (AM 3.8).

⁴ I narrate the poets’ career trajectories in greater detail at the beginning of Chapter Three (for Page, Webb, and Cohen) and in Chapter Four (for Marriott and Newlove).

⁵ Brian Trehearne used the phrase “middle silence” to describe P.K. Page’s experience in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* (see p. 41 and the entire chapter on Page, “Imagist Twilight: Page’s Early Poetry,” pp. 41-105), and subsequent critics have cited him (see for example Irvine, *Editing* 131; Pollock, “Introduction” 10; Rackham 332; Rose, “Anthologizing” 156; and many others). But “middle silence” is so common in the language of this dissertation and so natural a description of the phenomenon that it defines that I do not cite Trehearne hereafter.

twenty-six—but their careers are all marked by a noticeable, measurable gap in an otherwise flush publication record.⁶ Sometimes, whether by choice or by necessity, the poets directed their creative energies towards pursuits other than poetry—painting, prose, song-writing, performance; radio, critical, and editorial work—and sometimes, besieged by financial concerns, health problems, or family obligations, they could find little energy for creativity at all. But always they felt “silenced” poetically: they felt, as Page has put it, as though they “wanted to write very badly” but “couldn’t write at all” (“Fried Eggs” 148, 156)—and this is the crucial point. The silences were as diverse in character as the artists who lived through them, but always the poets experienced them—and drew attention to them—as “silence.”

That said, as lapses in the poet’s public record that ultimately allowed for new work, these mid-career caesurae were only characterized by “the absence of all sound or noise” (*OED*)—or by “silence,” straightforwardly defined—from the perspective of readers and critics. For the poets, a “great long silence” (Webb, “Excerpt” 81) could actually prove to be a “fertile” stage in the creative process, as Phyllis Webb has noted. “[I]n that fertile silence,” Webb reflects, “I am hearing many things and taking in a great deal, so that it doesn’t necessarily feel like silence to me. It’s just silent from the performance point of view. It requires silence in order to hear, and I suppose that is a very important aspect of the whole process” (Webb, “Seeking” 25). Notably, Webb was making that observation in 1992, from the comfortable side of three new book publications; her comments from the early 1970s were not nearly so confident. As I show in Chapter Three, the poets felt most acutely blocked during the stage of “creative crisis” that preceded silence, while they were still trying to write but constantly coming up short. Their remarks in journals, letters, and essays, as well as the sparse poetic work that they did produce,

⁶ For details concerning the poets’ publication records (including journal and anthology publications), see, as a starting point, Lecker and David (eds), *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada’s Major Authors*, volumes 2 (Cohen) and 6 (Page, Webb, Newlove) (Marriott does not have an entry in the *ABCMA*).

all reflect that anxiety. Once they stopped labouring against obstruction, however, as I argue in Chapter Four, they found themselves liberated to attend to new ideas and approaches; “silence,” from that vantage point, seemed a generative state of being with the potential to foster new growth. There are thus three tangled but distinct points of view on creative silence, all of which I take into account in the chapters that follow: the perspective of the critic, waiting in the audience for the curtain to rise or, later, puzzling over a gap in the collected *oeuvre*; the perspective of the poet in creative crisis, feeling anxious and self-conscious and as though she might never write again; and the perspective of the post-hiatus poet, appreciative of silence as a creative position from which to listen, and eventually to speak.

Whether we consider them links or interruptions, bridges or chasms, middle silences are dynamic stages in poetic careers: the evidence of the poetry on either side of the gap confirms as much. And so while this dissertation is preoccupied with those intervals in particular, it is also concerned with the broad shape of modernist literary careers. Modernist writers themselves often rejected the whole notion that they *had* a “career”: the word connoted the pragmatic, the professional, and especially the public side of their work, and it seemed to smack of “generalities and pomposities” (Lipking, *Life* xi)—of an impure interest in the reputations of poets rather than the quality of their poetry.⁷ But “career” also implies vocation, and has to do with the sense of calling and profound personal dedication that draws an artist through his or her creative life. Even more basically, a “career” is a path (“the course over which any person or thing passes,” in the *OED*), and a “poetic career” is the route that the poet takes from one work to the next.

“Career” as I use it in this project need not suggest any kind of grand design or intentional

⁷ See Aaron Jaffe’s *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* for much more about modernist writers’ conceptions of their literary careers. Jaffe calls high modernist writers out on their supposed “anti-careerism” and argues that they were far more interested in the “business” of self-promotion and the accrual of public prestige than they generally let on. If the typical modernist career appeared un-fashioned, Jaffe suggests, it is because the modernist writer had quite self-consciously fashioned it that way.

plotting, but it does describe the trajectory of an artist's creative life and the contours of his or her *oeuvre*. Every artist has a career, and there is much to be gained from studying these careers comparatively. As the parallel stories of Page, Webb, Cohen, Marriott, and Newlove clearly illustrate, there are notable repetitive patterns—a prolonged middle period of silence is one of them—in the careers of very different artists working in similar contexts.

Despite these patterns, modern “poetic careers” have only been—and perhaps can only be—rather hazily defined, and this amorphousness is, I believe, behind at least some of the anxiety that characterizes fallow periods for many twentieth-century writers. Often, “poetic career” is taken to imply “Classical career”; the Virgilian example of progressive movement through the genres—from pastoral to georgic to epic, from local to universal themes—set a remarkably influential standard of planned, self-conscious artistic maturation that poets both emulated and repudiated for centuries. But such programmatic development has proven difficult to achieve in the modern period, as Philip Hardie and Helen Moore point out, not least because “contingent circumstances such as financial exigency, occasion and commission increasingly [came] to dominate the writing lives of many authors” after the Renaissance (13). The internal progression of modern literary careers, Hardie and Moore explain, tends to be “unplanned and fortuitous” rather than “modelled or managed,” and often displays “range and quantity rather than generic development” (13-14). Such haphazardness and comprehensiveness places a substantial burden on the writer, for the notion that creative achievement is largely “fortuitous” might well leave the artist in constant fear that progress could grind to a halt at any moment. Moreover, the emphasis on “range and quantity” seems—troublingly, to the poet feeling blocked—to demand constant productivity rather than slow and exacting advancement towards

an ideal. The rhythms of typical careers set standards and produce critical expectations, and these in turn reverberate within individual writers' experiences of the creative process.

"Career criticism" emerged in the 1980s as a specifically *literary* alternative to biographical criticism. It is concerned with the creative rather than the personal life: the life of the poet *as a poet*, "the biography [that] gets into poems" (Lipking, *Life* x). Career critics dwell productively on the "tension between the internal shape of a career—its movement or progress from one sort of work to another—and the external conditions that allow an author to function or just to stay alive" (Lipking, "Inventing" 288). They look chiefly to the creative work for evidence of that tension playing out, for as Lawrence Lipking says, "[t]he poems themselves, above all, declare the life of the poet" (*Life* ix). My subject, "poetic silence," is bigger than the individual lives of poets, however, and accordingly, I look beyond the poetry—to critical studies, biographies, interviews, journals, and correspondence in particular—to account for the ways in which "silence" has been defined and the cultural value it has acquired. But to recount the actual *experience* of creative obstruction—which, after all, has most meaning to the creative life, the life within the *oeuvre*—I rely, "above all," on "the poems themselves." Close readings that highlight the contrasts and continuities in the poetry written on either side of the creative lacunae illustrate the dynamism of middle silences. In Chapters Three and Four, I emphasize formal and stylistic signs of stress or resolution where they exist; I also locate in the poems the poets' creative obsessions. For example, Page, Webb, and Cohen's pre-silence poetry dwells on disorientation and chaos—the feeling of being "silenced"—whereas a new appreciation of attentive stillness—the "silence" that permits listening—characterizes their later work. Marriott and Newlove both self-consciously affirm their earlier approaches in their post-silence poetry, which suggests a new confidence born of the temporal distance that a publication hiatus affords.

Such observations, drawn from a comparison of these five similar career trajectories—the creative biographies—substantiate my description of poetic silence throughout this dissertation.

To date, the gaps and breaks in literary careers have been of critical interest primarily within feminist scholarship. Feminist writers from Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), to Tillie Olsen, in “Silences” (1962), to Adrienne Rich, in “*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision*” (1971), to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), all contend that creative women have been silenced throughout history because they have been unable to achieve the uninterrupted conditions required for artistic production.⁸ Feminist theory emphasizes the oppressive influence of external conditions, from patriarchal standards to domestic responsibilities, on women’s innate creativity. “[M]ale judgement, along with the misnaming and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer,” says Rich: “problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival” (37). Literary critics such as Sheila Kineke, Miriam Fuchs, and Rachel Blau Duplessis have analyzed the ways in which these “problems” have shaped the creative careers—and silent periods—of writers such as (for those three critics respectively) Marianne Moore, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.⁹ Women’s literary silences are not simply absences, feminist critics have justly argued, but result from outside pressures that are beyond the control of the writer herself. And this premise applies not only to women but to any

⁸ Olsen’s essay, which was collected and published in *Silences* (1978), remains the single most focused study of biographical periods of creative silence. She proposes a number of reasons that writers fall silent, including “paralyzing of capacity,” “abandonment of the medium,” “a wearing attrition,” and religious, political, or self-censorship. She also describes different varieties of silence: “hidden silences” left by “work which does not come to fruition,” “foreground silences, *before* the achievement,” “[c]ensorship silences,” “[d]eleitions, omissions,” and “silences where the lives never came to writing”—the silences of “those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women” (Olsen 8-10).

⁹ Duplessis conceives of H.D. as having had “two ‘careers’ as a writer—one associated with the First World War and one associated with the Second. The second career,” she continues, “completes and transforms central issues from the first” (179, note 2). My argument about the five poets in this dissertation is similar, though in contrast to Duplessis, I consider all writers to have one career, which sometimes has a gap in the middle.

writer for whom class, race, sexuality, religion, or geography makes the “coming to voice at all ... an exhausting achievement” (Olsen 9).

My own study largely removes patriarchal determinants of creative silence, highly compelling and culturally significant though they obviously are, in order to develop a differently nuanced account of artistic blockage. Certainly, as I outline in Chapter One, P.K. Page, Anne Marriott, and especially Phyllis Webb’s careers have been considered from a feminist angle—not at all wrongly, and in Webb’s case, partly at the poet’s own urging.¹⁰ And, like earlier feminist critics, I am engaged in a project of recovery: the recovery of the hidden richness behind the public absence. Moreover, I am interested in the obstacles that each of my writers encountered, and the burden of the woman writer—to speak creatively with the weight of a male critical apparatus on her shoulders and only a feeble awareness of a women’s literary tradition to bolster her confidence—was considerable indeed. But Cohen and Newlove’s experiences bear such striking resemblances to those of the three women in this project that gender simply cannot tell the whole story. The poets in this dissertation faltered *despite* relative privilege, and that is what preoccupies me chiefly here. Page, Webb, Marriott, Cohen, and Newlove were all critically acclaimed writers. Publishers were eager to have their work. They were white, Anglophone, well-connected, and certainly not politically or religiously oppressed. What, then, was the problem? The answer, as I will argue, has to do with modernist aesthetics and critical conceptions of the poet’s role in twentieth-century Canada.

In a sense, the idea that creative careers would be punctuated—even dominated—by fallow periods should be utterly unremarkable. After all, the pages of literary history are blighted

¹⁰ See for instance Dean Irvine, Laura Killian, Nancy Paul, and Diana Relke on Page; Pauline Butling, Cecelia Frey, Liza Potvin, Relke, and Janice Williamson on Webb; and Irvine, Sharon Nelson, and Marilyn Rose (“Anne Marriott”) on Marriott. I summarize this substantial body of work, and the feminist approach to silences more generally, in Chapter One.

by stories of silence and struggle—from Milton to Coleridge to Tennyson to Valéry to Rilke, and many more besides.¹¹ What *is* remarkable, then, is that the silences I study here have been remarked at all—and remarked so self-consciously by the poets and with such curiosity by their critics. The story of poetic silence is especially dramatic for these Canadian modernist poets not because of any constitutional idiosyncrasy in the writers themselves, but because of two particular contexts—one aesthetic, one national—that made creative obstruction seem like a dangerous sign of weakness. First, the modernist idiom lacked the language to describe “*natural* silences—what Keats called *agonie ennuyeuse* (the tedious agony)—that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation” (Olsen 6; emphasis in original).¹² In theory at least, the modernist aesthetic demanded craftsmanship and authority on the part of the writer, rather than deference to a Romantic muse or (in quite a different sense) to the meaninglessness of postmodern life. This placed the responsibility for sustained creative output and innovation, as well as the liability for any perceived lessening of that output, squarely on the shoulders of the poet alone. Unproductive periods seemed not only frustrating but shameful, embarrassing, and personal. And the Canadian context only compounded those associations. Canadian culture was blossoming in the mid-twentieth century: institutions to support Canadian artists and platforms to recognize their work were springing up in droves. But this spirit of growth could not account for periods of obstruction or withdrawal. And creative

¹¹ These five were all middle silences. Milton wrote almost no poetry from around 1639 until 1658, and did not publish after 1645 until *Paradise Lost* in 1667. Coleridge’s best known and most intense period of poetic silence ended with the publication of *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, among other poems, in 1816. Tennyson famously experienced a decade of silence between volume publications in 1832 and 1842. Valéry did not write poetry between 1892 and 1912 and focused on his *Cahiers* instead. Rilke struggled with the *Duino Elegies*, two of which he composed in 1912 and the remaining five, after a lengthy silence, in 1922.

¹² The phrase “*agonie ennuyeuse*” comes from a series of correspondence between Keats and Benjamin Robert Haydon. “The ‘agonie ennuyeuse’ you talk of be assured is nothing but the intense searching of a glorious spirit, and the disappointment it feels at its first contact with the muddy world,” Haydon reassured Keats on 14 January 1819 (257) (quoting Keats’s use of the term in an earlier letter). In the passage from the Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl* that I quoted as an epigraph to this Introduction, Phyllis Webb was alluding to Olsen when she described her “natural and unnatural silences” and the “strange gestation” that had generated her volume; she has also cited Olsen directly in an interview (“Addressing” 35).

obstruction—simple, straightforward paralysis, writer’s block, “hitting the wall,” “getting stuck”—happens to all writers, alas: even dedicated modernist craftsmen, even Governor General’s Award-winning Canadians. Poetic silence is above all a *feeling*, as I have suggested, and it runs far deeper, proves far more painful, when the poets lack even the words to explain it to themselves.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot theorizes a “relation of the poem to its author” (18) that does not leave much room for Keats’s “tedious agony” (Olsen 6) in the poetic process at all. Eliot describes “the mind of the poet” as a “transforming catalyst” that “transmute[s]” “passions” but remains itself “inert, neutral, and unchanged” (“Tradition” 18). Although these “passions” are the poet’s own, it is the “neutral,” seemingly detached “mind” that does the work of making the poem. Eliot specifies that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (18). This is an explicit rejection of the archetypal Romantic model of creativity. The poet is not exempt from the experience of suffering, Eliot implies—indeed suffering might even be one of the “passions” that the mind “transmute[s]” (18), one of the “emotions” that it “work[s] . . . up into poetry” (21)—but “suffering” should not be a part of the actual process of making poems. Writing poetry should be “a continual extinction of personality” (17), according to Eliot: an ongoing surrender not simply of the poet’s private emotions to the purer medium of poetry, but of the artist’s private suffering to the purer process of creation.

A.J.M. Smith, whose “relation of influence” with Eliot “was one of the principal conduits of modernism’s influx into Canadian literature in English,” as Brian Trehearne has written (“Impersonality” 195), enthusiastically endorsed the older poet’s “theory of poetry” in his own

1964 essay on creativity, “The Poetic Process: On the Making of Poems.”¹³ “For Eliot, and for the modern poet generally,” Smith summarizes, “poetry is not an expression but a distillation of experience; passion is transmuted; and suffering ... is digested” (370). But what if all of this distillation, transmutation, and digestion *causes* “suffering” in the poet? Realistically, some kind of anguish—“tedious agony” (Olsen 6)—would surely be involved in the difficult task of continually extinguishing one’s personality (Eliot, “Tradition” 17). In other words, Eliot’s theory clearly implied a certain kind of suffering, but did not explicitly account for it. Both Eliot and Smith stress the “great labour” (Eliot, “Tradition” 14) of “the poet’s work as maker” (Smith 358), and Smith in particular insinuates that hard work and conscious effort can lead the writer out of difficulty.¹⁴ “[P]oetry is an art and a craft,” he says, “and [the poet] seeks, by study, practice, imitation, and discipleship, to master it” (Smith 354). Of course, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “The Poetic Process” articulate ideal *theories* of poetry, not realities, and the gulf between modernist theory and practice is notoriously wide.¹⁵ But theories are telling because they reflect, and also affect, the ways in which artists *think* about their work. They also

¹³ Trehearne (“Imitation” 197) and Anne Compton (29) both discuss this essay as well. Trehearne remarks generally that “the Eliot influence could ... suggest Smith’s datedness” after the 1940s (195), and indeed in “The Poetic Process” Smith recapitulates ideas that Eliot had formulated over four decades earlier. That said, Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott all matured as poets in an atmosphere in which Smith was an influential presence in his own right; correspondence shows that Webb, Marriott, and especially Page looked to him for feedback and guidance. An offprint of “The Poetic Process,” inscribed “To Pat Page with affectionate regards—Art Smith,” is in one of three folders of articles and other research on “Creativity” in Page’s *fonds* (PKP 47.26).

¹⁴ In fact, Smith is much more stringent in his advocacy of active effort—“consciousness ... judgment and technical manipulation,” for instance (358)—in the creative process even than Eliot. It is worth remarking that Eliot’s rhetoric is cautiously non-committal in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and the creative process that he describes is arguably quite a Romantic one, in non-Romantic terms: his “mind which creates” is not so very different from Shelley’s “mind in creation” (in “A Defence of Poetry”); his “shred of platinum” (18) not so very different, after all, from Shelley’s “burning coal.” The fact that Eliot *ostensibly* repudiates the Romantic model while simultaneously and covertly endorsing it suggests, as I will propose below, that the basic Romantic conception of the creative process is more realistic and sustainable than the modernist model: and that, indeed, *all* artists would create “Romantically” after the turn of the nineteenth century, even when, as many modernists did, they tried in *theory* to articulate and adopt new habits.

¹⁵ One of the most convincing expositions of the space between theory (how poets conceptualized the creative process) and practice (how they actually wrote) is John T. Gage’s *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism*. Gage demonstrates that although one of the principal aims articulated in imagist theory was to eradicate “rhetoric” from poetry, imagist poetry has its own rhetoric nevertheless.

set critical standards. Regardless of whether anyone other than Smith truly hoped to emulate T.S. Eliot by the 1950s and 60s in Canada, the carefully anti-Romantic—and anti-suffering, anti-agony—model of creativity that the latter laid out in his influential essay profoundly altered the general vocabulary in which writers conceived of their responsibilities and critics judged their achievements.

The most significant theoretical difference between Romantic and modernist conceptions of creativity, at least as far as their respective evaluations of silence are concerned, stems from the essential opposition between the typical Romantic posture of yearning for an ineffable beyond, and the typical modernist work of “making new” the materials at hand. The Romantic sensibility, in aesthetic theory as in philosophical thought, was defined by an “aspiration for the infinite” (Rauber 213): by a strong, religious conviction that all human experience is incomplete, and so too must be all art. Many modernists reacted forcefully against this notion.¹⁶ In “Romanticism and Classicism,” T.E. Hulme stressed the merits of a “dry, hard, classical verse” that would have “nothing to do with infinity” and would direct its energies instead to “the contemplation of finite things” (69).¹⁷ This new verse promised to release the poet from an agonizing and impossible search which, Hulme says, “always tends ... to be gloomy” (62). But as I asked of Eliot and Smith’s models above, what happens when the poet finds himself stymied—as, realistically, all poets will at some point—even in the midst of such a “finite” and

¹⁶ There are many modes that we might call “modernist,” of course, and some (especially symbolism) are friendlier to “the ineffable” than others (especially imagism). I am interested in the imagist perspective, with its classical leanings, because it was the imagist aesthetic that eventually troubled Page and Webb, and because, as Trehearne has shown (in *The Montreal Forties*), imagism had a strong presence in Montreal during these writers’ formative years. Notably, in her early (1978) article on Page, “A Size Larger than Seeing: The Poetry of P.K. Page,” Rosemary Sullivan rightly argued that a focus on symbols rather than images helped the poet to begin writing again after silence (*cf.* pp. 38-9).

¹⁷ Smith compares Wordsworth’s notions of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and “emotion recollected in tranquility” to Eliot’s separation of “the mind which creates” and “the man who suffers” (“Tradition” 18), and comments that the contrast “clearly define[s] the distinction between the romantic and the classical point of view with respect to poetic creation” (370). He was thus also thinking in Hulme’s terms, and was evidently keen to align himself and Eliot with “the classical point of view.”

supposedly achievable task? He cannot explain the obstruction to himself or to his critics, at least not in Hulme's language. The Romantic model of perpetual incompleteness, on the other hand, "gloomy" though it might have been, made the silences in a writer's career not only "natural," to use Olsen's term, but inevitable.

The genre of the Romantic fragment poem—which includes Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, Keats's *Hyperion*, and Byron's *The Giaour*—thematizes and embodies that necessarily interminable, indeed infinite, process of creation.¹⁸ Conversely, the modernist fragment poem—Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*—exemplifies the modernist drive towards completion and wholeness. Whereas the Romantic fragment poem is "usually presented as a *partial whole*," Anne Janowitz explains, modernist fragment poems "are wholes made entirely of fragmentary parts" (442, 447; emphasis in original). This fundamental difference—partial whole versus whole made of parts—places a fundamentally different kind of pressure on the creator of the poem. Janowitz continues,

The affirmation of the Romantic fragment poem is an affirmation of the ideal, and as such, it necessarily undervalues its own achievement in the face of its unachieved ideal completion, its "beyond." ... The modernist fragment collage poem does not allude to an invisible beyond, but instead generates new meanings out of visible and discrete remnants and ruins. The modernist fragment poem exhorts the poet to abandon a fruitless search for the "beyond" and embrace the here and now. (448)

¹⁸ In "The Fragment as a Romantic Form," D.F. Rauber writes that "[t]he fragment" is "the ultimate romantic form" (215). Edward Botstetter holds the opposite view in *Romantic Ventriloquists*: he saw the fragment as a sign of the failure of the Romantic poetic project (as Hulme would have, too). See Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* and Thomas McFarland's *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Modalities of Fragmentation* for the fullest theorizations of the genre.

This would seem a relatively simple exhortation, and, like Hulme's directive to "contemplat[e] finite things" (69), one with a greater probability of fulfillment. But finding affirmation in incompleteness—in an ongoing process of creation—is liberating in a different sense. The Romantic model sentences the poet to an impossible, never-ending search, but it does not imply, as the modernist model does, that each new utterance should be polished and complete. Phyllis Webb recognized the value of the Romantic model in one of her post-silence remarks: "if you don't set up any proposition about success, perfection, completion," she reflected, "then you're not going to wind up with an idea of failure. You're going to wind up with process" ("Addressing" 41). The notion of an unending process is inherent in the very definition of vocation: it is the task to which all poets are called, whatever era they inhabit. For Webb and Page in particular, remembering this sense of vocation in process would alleviate the weighty expectation of constant mastery that had previously left them feeling deficient and reluctant to publish their work.

In the modernist creative process, then, silence signalled a "failure" of poetic authority, and not one that was built into a theory of continuous creativity, but one that exposed the poet's inability to "generate new meanings" out of the "here and now" (Janowitz 448). If a Romantic poet produced a fragment, it was a gesture towards "the beyond." If a modernist poet could not complete his poem, it was a sign that his poetic craft—his power to cull meaning from the world around him and shape it into poetry—had failed. The image of the modernist "mind which creates" that I have been assembling—a "transforming catalyst" that, through "the contemplation of finite things," "form[s] ... new compounds" (Eliot, "Tradition" 18; Hulme 69)—highlights the absolute centrality of the artist's authority to the modernist creative process. As Astradur Eysteinnsson writes, "Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of

the chaos of the modern world ... sees art as ... an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind” (9).¹⁹ “Silence” seemed a danger to modernist writers because it is, both conceptually and aesthetically, the opposite of authority: it implies both the absence of statement and the absence of art. The modernist movement sought formal innovation, the invention of new forms that would contain and also display, in all its fragmentariness, the dissonance of modern life. And the experience of silence was an experience of formlessness: modern life was still out there, but the poet could not find the forms to express it or give it meaning.

My readings in Chapter Three of Page, Webb, and Cohen’s mid-career poetry, including unfinished fragments from Page’s and Webb’s archives,²⁰ demonstrate that these three poets’ creative crises were crises of poetic authority. When their authority as “makers” faltered, “silence”—a feeling of impotence that they often expressed through images of excess and disorder—began to invade the poems. Some might say that this was an inevitable end to the entire modernist project, for the “quasi-religious” mastery and “aesthetic heroism” (Eysteinsson 9) that the modernist creative process seemed to demand could not possibly be sustainable. Certainly, as I show further in the metacritical analysis of Chapter One, this was the logic of many postmodernist writers and critics.²¹ The postmodern “aesthetic of silence” that both Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan theorized in the late 1960s was indeed at least partly a response to a general and widespread “crisis of authority”: finding that language was no longer sufficiently

¹⁹ Eysteinsson quotes several sources on this; most directly, the idea comes from Eliot, in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923). Eliot wrote that “myth” was “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177; also qtd in Eysteinsson 9). “The Rage for Order” is the first of Eysteinsson’s “paradigms” in his chapter on “The Making of Modernist Paradigms” (8-49).

²⁰ Page’s and Webb’s fragmentary poems are what Marjorie Levinson calls “true” fragments (as opposed to the “deliberate” Romantic fragments that represent incompleteness purposefully): poetic efforts that simply never came to fruition.

²¹ Critics of Webb’s work in particular have argued that she revitalizes her poetry by adopting a postmodern aesthetic; see especially Pauline Butling’s “Paradox and Play in the Poetry of Phyllis Webb” and Stephen Scobie’s “Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and the End(s) of Modernism.” In their pre-silence poetry, Page and Webb both express their own concerns about the sustainability of the classical and imagist modes: see for example Page’s “Arras” and Webb’s “Images in Crystal” and “The Glass Castle.”

powerful or authentic and wishing to destabilize its supremacy, postmodern artists sought to convey “silence” instead—the opposite of both authority and art. They produced an “anti-art” that was, as Sontag writes, frustrating, so difficult as to be unintelligible, babbling, chaotic, playful, “frenetic and overgeneralizing,” and characterized by “radical, sometimes nihilistic irony” (33). But this was not the direction that the poets in this dissertation took—although Cohen flirted with it in *Death of a Lady’s Man*. When something like the disordered “aesthetic of silence” began to encroach on their poetry, the writers that I study here did not embrace it, but retreated: stopped writing poems. They eventually reconceived of poetic authority not by dissolving it entirely, but by adopting a Romantic stance of creative humility: by surrendering their own mastery over the poems to an external, guiding influence. Authority did not disappear, but changed hands. This approach implied that the poet’s most important work would be to listen: to be silently receptive. Page, Webb, and Cohen moved beyond creative crisis and obstruction by imagining a creative process in which silence was “natural” (Olsen 6) and, once again, unremarkable.

And yet silence was painfully remarkable in quite a different sense in the Canadian cultural landscape of the mid-twentieth century: this is the second context that made artistic blockage seem menacing and shameful. Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott were by no means the only modernist poets whose careers were divided by a prolonged middle silence: one might think also of Wallace Stevens, H.D., and even T.S. Eliot.²² But silence was touchier—differently sensitive—within the nascent Canadian literary tradition. In one sense, Canadian

²² After gaining recognition in the 1920s, Eliot and H.D. produced very little new work in the 1930s; and then for both, the Second World War helped to ignite a new flame of creativity. Wallace Stevens’s period of silence, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, was the most complete of these three, and has received the most critical attention: see for example Tony Sharpe’s *Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life* (especially chapter 5, “1923-37: From the Edge to the Centre,” pp. 111-46), and James Longenbach’s *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, which is organized around Stevens’s silences: sections I and III are titled, respectively, “The First Silence” and “The Second Silence.”

authors of the 1960s were still writing against the country's lingering colonial identity; and as Dennis Lee wrote in "Cadence, Country, Silence," to reflect on one's colonial existence was "to fall silent, discovering that your authentic space does not have words" (47).²³ Canadian writers were thus, according to this formulation, writing against Canada's very lack of a voice: overthrowing an entire history of silence in much the same way as Harold Bloom imagined "strong poets" overthrowing their precursors in *The Anxiety of Influence*.²⁴ The anxiety, in Canada, was silence.

At the same time, this was the most intense phase of the canonization and institutionalization of Canadian literature, and the pace of critical judgment was rapid and sometimes precipitous. To critics anxious to recognize and describe patterns in contemporary literature, even a small hiatus in a poet's career could seem permanent. For instance, in an address on "Canadian Literature in the Fifties," presented in 1961, Desmond Pacey somewhat prematurely remarked that "many poets [had given] up on poetry" over the previous decade, and argued that this was evidence of "a period of decline" in "Canadian verse" (201). Page and Marriott were among the poets who had "given up," in Pacey's estimation; though of course, time has revealed that their careers were not over at all.²⁵ Such quick pronouncements on a living

²³ Lee writes in that essay about his own four-year period of poetic silence, between 1967 and 1971. "[B]y 1967," he says, "I began to find literary words impossible." For him this was a response to "our spineless existence in this colonial space" (41); Canada had "become an American colony," he contends (38).

²⁴ A more apt analogy is probably Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's female version of Bloom's struggle, the "anxiety of authorship": the woman writer's "radical fear that she cannot create ... because she can never become a 'precursor'" (49). According to Bloom, the "anxiety of influence" was behind the *agon* of the Romantic poet: it was a reason for inhibition, obstruction, and even silence. The only way in which this concept is really relevant in a Canadian context is, as I am suggesting here, as a kind of "anxiety of silence."

²⁵ As evidence of the "decline" beyond "Miss Page's ... desertion of poetry for painting" and Anne Marriott's "laps[ing] into virtual silence," Pacey cited A.J.M. Smith's "paucity of poems," and he observed that A.M. Klein had "lapsed, most unfortunately, into silence," and that Leo Kennedy and Earle Birney had "abandoned the craft" (Pacey, "Canadian" 200-01). Pacey had remarked the beginnings of the same decline in 1954, when he wrote of "a sudden ominous pause" in Canadian literary progress, a "slackening" of creative and critical activity ("English-Canadian" 101). He believed that the "sense of national excitement and pride" generated by World War II had "beg[un] to evaporate" after 1947, and "[p]oets, not quite sure of the direction of their thinking, wrote less" (102).

tradition—Pacey was summing up “the fifties” just two years after the decade had ended—did not have enough perspective to account for temporary lapses and pauses.

Moreover, the category or archetype of the “disappearing poet” seemed, to some critics, a key component of the national literary tradition that they were defining. “When we hear of poetic decay and anti-climax,” wrote Milton Wilson in 1958, “we must not forget that the disappearing or declining or emigrating poet is a Canadian institution, one of the most important traditions” (“*Other Canadians*” 79). He then cited a number of writers whose poetic production started off strong but petered out or was suddenly arrested in mid-development: Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, Leo Kennedy, W.W.E. Ross, and A.J.M. Smith.²⁶ In fact, just one year later Wilson wrote an article on Margaret Avison—the first critical treatment of her work—in which he claimed that “the period from 1949 to 1956 was a kind of hiatus” for Avison, “with just one published poem” in the seven years (“Avison” 54). Avison had not even published a volume of poetry yet and already, in his enthusiasm for the “Canadian institution” he had identified, Wilson was categorizing her as “another of Canada’s prodigies without staying power” (54). The publication of *Survival* in 1972, in which Margaret Atwood described the “paralyzed artist” as an archetypal Canadian figure, only further entrenched this “institution” in the popular imagination.²⁷

²⁶ He also makes some very interesting, and remarkably prescient, observations about the possibility and potential of *middle* silences: “Sometimes, like Roberts in *The Iceberg* ... the poet recovers after a long rest. W.W.E. Ross, for example, is a dying and reviving poet to gladden the heart of any anthropologist. Smith himself must by this time have become weary of hearing elegies on the decline of his power ... So when poets descend underground to the CBC or the novel or the stacks, or simply hibernate for ten years, they are certainly not departing from the native tradition, and there may be more to the descent than meets the eye” (Wilson, “*Other Canadians*” 79).

²⁷ See in particular Chapter 9, “The Paralyzed Artist” (211-31). *Survival* was a “thematic guide to Canadian literature,” and so Atwood was interested in “paralyzed artists” as figures or characters *in* creative work. But the image stuck. And Atwood carried it over into her criticism of actual artists—not simply their characters—too. In her article, “How Do I Get Out of Here: The Poetry of John Newlove,” published contemporaneously with *Survival*, she classified Newlove himself as one of her archetypal “paralyzed artist” figures, for, she argued, the poet backed himself into aesthetic and psychological “corners” that were “a life-and-death obsession” for him (59).

The fast-paced and volatile conditions of the Canadian cultural atmosphere and the trends of “silence,” “decline,” “disappearance,” and “paralysis” that commentators such as Lee, Pacey, Wilson, and Atwood were observing thus rendered Canadian poets’ withdrawals a topic of great interest among critics. The flourishing of Canadian culture deeply affected the writers themselves, too, though in quite a different way. Awards, honours, and other ways of celebrating and honouring Canadian artists proliferated between the 1940s and the 1980s, but many writers found this support as inhibiting as it was encouraging. As Northrop Frye observed in his “Conclusion” to the *Literary History of Canada* in 1965, “Canada is not a bad environment for the author, as far as recognition goes; in fact, the recognition may even hamper his development by making him prematurely self-conscious” (215). Within the energetic atmosphere of 1960s Canada, bathed in the glow of nationalist pride radiating from the Centennial celebrations in 1967, assisted by generous grants from the Canada Council, regaled with positive reviews and honoured with a Governor General’s Award, what was a blocked poet—a poet for whom the words simply were not coming—to do? Just as the modernist idiom seemed to exclude the agonized silence of the endlessly searching artist from the creative process, the Canadian spirit of cultural expansion could not, from the poets’ points of view, account for their unproductive periods. This left them feeling guilty, anxious, self-conscious, and as though silence was a very big deal indeed.

Periods of silence in the 1960s and 1970s, precisely when Webb, Newlove, and Cohen were losing their poetic voices and Page and Marriott were finding theirs again, were also remarkable and remarked upon because “silence,” in a multiplicity of forms, quite simply seemed ubiquitous in these decades. The term was on the tips of many critical tongues, and the concept was alive in many imaginations, and this is one reason that periods of obstruction that

might otherwise (perhaps more comfortably) have been called “writer’s block” were labelled “silence.”²⁸ 1967, the year of Page’s first book in over a decade, *Cry Ararat!: Poems New and Selected*, and the year in which Webb began the “Kropotkin Poems” series that she would never be able to complete, also saw the publication of three critical studies of “silence”: Sontag’s “The Aesthetics of Silence” (in *Styles of Radical Will*), Hassan’s *The Literature of Silence* (a study of Samuel Beckett and Henry Miller), and George Steiner’s *Language and Silence*. For these critics, “the ideal of silence ha[d] been elevated as a major standard of ‘seriousness’ in contemporary [1960s] aesthetics” (Sontag 7). Language, Sontag and Steiner elaborate, had become “watered down” by “mass culture” (Steiner 25) and “weighed down by historical accumulation” (Sontag 15), and as a result it seemed to be “the most impure, the most contaminated, the most exhausted of all the materials out of which art is made” (Sontag 14).²⁹ This general disillusionment with verbal language had been mounting since “the age of Milton”

²⁸ There are a multitude of other reasons that poets refer to their blockages as “silences,” of course. For one thing, other poets from Coleridge to Rilke had used the word to describe their own conditions. For another, as poets (who were historically performers) they felt called to “speech,” and silence is the absence of speech. The drama of the word also indicates the gravity of their situations and the seriousness with which they interpreted their roles as poets; we hear, notably, of *poetic* silences more frequently than we hear of the “silence” of prose writers (although Tillie Olsen covers some silences of novelists, including Herman Melville and Thomas Hardy; cf. “Silences,” pp. 6-9). See Joan Acocella’s “Blocked: Why do writers stop writing?” in the 14 June 2004 issue of *The New Yorker* for a most cogent and useful discussion of “writer’s block.” Acocella’s language is remarkably close to my own and that of the poets in this dissertation, and her definition of “writer’s block” is essentially the same as mine of “silence”: “Sometimes, ‘block’ means complete shutdown: the writer stops writing, or stops producing anything that seems to him worth publishing. In other cases, he simply stops writing what he wants to write. He may manage other kinds of writing, but not the kind he sees as his vocation.”

²⁹ This sense of contamination and the desire for a medium of expression that, like silence, could be pure and ahistorical, reached an apex after the Holocaust (which was also one of the most atrocious “silencings” in human history), and Theodor Adorno’s 1949 observation that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34) continued to reverberate throughout the 1960s and 70s. It is worth noting that Adorno did not intend this now frequently cited phrase to be a pronouncement or directive; in fact it was a passing observation in an essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” about the practice of cultural criticism and the responsibilities of cultural critics. Of course, the fact that Adorno simply mentioned the barbarism of poetic speech as though it were obvious suggests the extent to which he believed that language—German, for him—was contaminated after the Holocaust. Incidentally, the English translation of “Cultural Criticism and Society” that is now widely read and cited was published in that key year, 1967.

(14), Steiner contends, and it culminated in the postmodern “aesthetic of silence.”³⁰ The silence that filled the air in this period thus emanated not only from critical studies such as Sontag, Hassan, and Steiner’s but also from the creative work that they analyzed. Most viscerally obvious in its preoccupation with silence was John Cage’s 1952 composition, “4’33,” which instructed musicians *not* to play their instruments for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.³¹ Of course, Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott’s silences were biographical, not aesthetic or theoretical. But the concentrated cultural preoccupation with silence clearly shaped critical reactions to creative obstruction, and might even have provided the poets with some of the terminology that they adopted to describe their experiences.

An acute awareness of biographical silences also pervaded critical and popular discourses in this period. As I have already pointed out, feminist readings of women’s silences proliferated in the 1970s: Olsen’s *Silences* was published in 1978; Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, another essay collection, was published in 1979; and there were many more. There is absolutely no doubt, as I have also already pointed out, that interest in Page, Marriott, and Webb’s silences arose largely from that context, and that feminist theory—especially Rich’s work—gave Phyllis Webb the terms to account for both her withdrawal and her return.³² Stories of the very real “final” silences of contemporary artists were also in the air at this time. The deaths of Sylvia Plath in 1963 and Anne Sexton in 1974, for instance, brought the image of the

³⁰ Symbolism and surrealism were also among the aesthetic responses to this disillusionment. Recall Mallarmé’s desire, which Eliot recapitulated in “Little Gidding,” to “*Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*.” Importantly, Mallarmé and Eliot were both trying to purify language *in* and *through* language, not through a postmodern aesthetic of silence. Imagism, too, was a response to the supposed imprecision of language—which was “a large, clunky instrument,” in Hulme’s view (qtd in Gage 27). But importantly, although the imagist aesthetic certainly exploited the possibilities of “silence” in some ways—the white space surrounding the lines on the page, the relative absence of rhetoric, the absence in the poem of the author’s personality, the aural implications of the stillness evoked by formal restraint—it is not an “aesthetic of silence” at all, but, as I suggested above, an aesthetic of authority.

³¹ Cage also published a collection of experimental critical and creative works—essays, lectures, and compositions—titled *Silence*, in 1961.

³² See “Addressing a Presence,” Webb’s interview with Leila Sujir, where she describes the importance of Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (published in 1976): “It was, for me a structural revelation of society,” she says (34). I say more about Webb’s feminist account of her silence in Chapter Two.

“suicidal poetess” to the forefront of the popular imagination; this would dictate assumptions in particular about Webb, who just happened to have written a poem in 1962 called “To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide.”³³ In Canada, meanwhile, news was spreading of the dramatic withdrawal from public life and the alarming and total literary silence of a friend, mentor, and major modernist poet: A.M. Klein.

The story of the final silence that ended Klein’s career and his life is now well known, and it frames the account of middle silence that I unfold in this dissertation. The startling muteness of Klein’s later years rocked the Canadian literary community and profoundly affected the ways in which writers and critics conceived of—and continue to conceive of—modernist poetic silence in Canada. With only minor exceptions, Klein wrote no more new poetry after the publication of *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* in 1948. He published a novel, *The Second Scroll*, in 1951, and he continued to write prose and to revise old poetic work in the early 1950s, but by the latter half of that decade he had not only ceased such creative work but had stopped communicating altogether. He died in 1972, but spent the preceding fifteen years in “self-imposed exile” (Popham vii), sometimes “remain[ing] completely silent for days at a stretch,” even with his own family (Caplan 211).³⁴ P.K. Page, who had known and worked with Klein in Montreal in the 1940s, heard of his “complete breakdown” while she was living in Brazil in 1957 (and struggling with her own poetry), and she recorded her shock and sadness at the news in her journal. “I can hardly believe it,” she wrote; “I would have thought Klein safer than most of us” (BJ 93). Some years later, a young Leonard Cohen lamented Klein’s silence in a speech that he

³³ See Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* for a thorough treatment of Plath’s “afterlife” and the ways in which the “myth of Plath” was generated by the various biographical studies published after the poet’s death. The closest male equivalent to the “suicidal poetess” archetype was probably the “wasted genius” of F. Scott Fitzgerald (there is obviously much to be said about the troubling discrepancy between the two); and certainly, the abundance of hard-drinking male authors in the mid-twentieth century would have given readers an easy way to explain the withdrawal of Newlove, who struggled with alcoholism for much of his life.

³⁴ See Usher Caplan’s *Like One That Dreamed: A Portrait of A.M. Klein*, particularly pp. 210-13, for a thorough and sensitive account of this period in Klein’s life.

delivered to the Montreal Jewish community. “He has fallen into silence,” said Cohen; “now we have his silence.”³⁵

The desire to “explain the mysterious silence of [Klein’s] last seventeen years” (Kertzer 31) has motivated many critical studies of the poet’s work. The most thorough and convincing of these are Zailig Pollock’s *A.M. Klein: The Story of the Poet* and Brian Trehearne’s “The Poem in the Mind: The *Integritas* of Klein in the Forties” in *The Montreal Forties*. In their accounts of his career and the impediments to its progress, both critics establish Klein’s impossibly ambitious conception of the modern poet’s responsibilities, his stringent commitment to the modernist project of envisioning, as Pollock puts it, “a unifying pattern underlying the bewildering multiplicity of the world” (*A.M. Klein* 3), his ambivalent attitude to his own religious and artistic communities, and, finally, “the psychic and spiritual burdens of the Holocaust” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 161). The particular intensity of Klein’s personal and creative devastation following the Holocaust stemmed from his “identification of himself as a conduit of race consciousness” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 128), and it was because this consciousness was so unbearably, irredeemably shattered that Klein’s experience of poetic and personal silence was so complete. Importantly, though, the other obstacles that he faced—especially his conception of the poet’s responsibilities and his commitment to an ambitious modernist project—were shared by many

³⁵ “Loneliness and history, a speech before the Jewish Public Library, Montreal, 1964” (LC 9.1). Cohen astutely (if somewhat abstrusely) contemplated the reasons for and implications of Klein’s silence: “[H]e spoke with too much responsibility, he was too much a champion of the cause, too much the theorist of the Jewish party line ... and sometimes his nostalgia for a warm rich past becomes more than nostalgia, becomes, rather, an impossible longing ... Then there is no room for ‘we’ and if I want to join him ... I must make my own loneliness. ... His silence marks the beginning of a massive literary assault on this community. ... Klein saw [greed] in communities across the country, but the Jews were under siege ... He chose to be a priest and to protect the dead ritual. And now we have his silence.” Ian Rae proposes that “Cohen criticized A.M. Klein” for his choice “to be a priest” and that the younger poet was “convinced that Klein’s nervous breakdown in the 1950s was a result of his attempt to reconcile the roles of poet and ‘theorist of the Jewish party line’” (203). I do not think that Cohen’s tone is critical at all, however: rather, he *laments* that Klein’s “priestly” approach and persona had to end in silence, and he “criticizes” the community that could not accept them.

twentieth-century poets, including, to varying degrees, the five writers of particular interest in this dissertation.

Both Pollock and Trehearne, then, while remaining sensitive to the specificity of Klein's experience, also offer readings of his career in which we should recognize elements of other, if less dramatic, modernist creative crises. Trehearne argues that Klein's erasure of his Jewish identity in the poetry from 1944 on was a kind of "thoroughgoing impersonality" (*Montreal* 132) with impossibly high stakes: he was eliminating from his work "the matter ... that had given his poetry its fabric for twenty years" (125), as well as his very sense of self. But Trehearne's monograph contextualizes Klein's crisis within a broader story about the limits of dogmatic modernist impersonality for achieving the aesthetic wholeness—the "*integritas*"—that many 1940s poets, including Page, desired. Pollock's account focuses solely on Klein, but the basic career narrative that he develops is similarly suggestive. He stresses that Klein "abandoned poetry" because of "a loss of confidence in his story of the poet rather than a failure of poetic skill" (Pollock, *A.M. Klein* 253). For Klein, as for the others, poetic silence was a *feeling*: a *feeling*, as Pollock says, of broken confidence, which would become the *feeling* of being "silenced," blocked, unable to speak at all. And for Klein, as for the others, the sensation of creative obstruction was only intensified by a lofty sense of what the modern poetic career—the "story of the poet"—must entail.

The initial effects of that "feeling" register both aesthetically and conceptually in what I call, in Chapter Three, the "poetry of creative crisis" for Webb, Cohen, Page, and, I add here, for Klein. All four of these writers convey in their metapoetic reflections a strong desire to change, combined with a crushing sense of paralysis. All four write poems that conclude with an implication that, since the writer herself is powerless to bring about the change that she desires,

she will simply have to wait—in silence, as it turned out—to see if the necessary transformation would ever occur. Klein’s “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” (*Collected Poems* 634-9) evokes this mood precisely. The poem, which holds a significant place in Klein’s *oeuvre* as the final piece in his final volume (although it was not the last poem he wrote), has been compelling to critics both for its brilliant statement of a problem and for its hesitant proposal of a solution. Four of the poem’s six sections meditate on the status of the modern poet: “lost, lacunal,” “ignored,” and “outmoded.” He has been “cuckolded,” Klein’s speaker proposes: displaced in his relationship with his art, his community, and even with himself, and replaced by “the local tycoon,” the orator, the troubadour, the jazz musician, and others whom society now seems to hold in higher regard. And yet although “fame”—public recognition—would act as “adrenalin” upon the forgotten poet’s “thrombotic” heart, the speaker announces in the fifth section that what really inspires him—“stirs him from his sleep”—is fame’s opposite: “stark infelicity.” With this in mind—“Therefore,” section six begins—the speaker describes two very different ways in which the poet might attain such total detachment: either he might climb “in imagination” to “another planet, the better to look / with single camera view upon the earth,” or he might “[live] alone ... At the bottom of the sea.” The first of these options is a hopeful projection: from his distant, elevated vantage point, the poet would be able to see the world whole—its “total scape”—and find a vision that “he would like to write down in a book.” The second form of “stark infelicity” refers to the poet-subject’s current position. He “entertain[s]” (distinctly modernist) poetic “ambitions”—“to make a new thing,” for example, or to “bring / new forms to life”—but for now, “[m]eanwhile,” he is “[a]t the bottom of the sea,” unable to view any of the world at all (let alone its “total scope”), though its whole weight presses down on his shoulders.

The landscape of this poet's moods is a mountainous one, and his rapid elevations and deflations—or, the speaker's elevations and deflations *of* the poet—evoke profound uncertainty about the future. The contrast in section six between the poet up in space—on “another planet”—and “[a]t the bottom of the sea” echoes the contrast in section two between the poet “zoomed to zenith,” where “sometimes he hopes again,” and “depressed to nadir,” where “he will think all lost.” The parallel confirms, for me, the dark mood of the poet's underwater conclusion, for if “the bottom of the sea”—which is, after all, just about as low as he can go—is reminiscent of, or even equivalent to, his earlier emotional “nadir,” then from that position he must fear that “all [is] lost.”³⁶ The poet's essentially chiastic movements in the two sections—from nadir (stanza two) up to zenith (stanza five) in section two; and then in section six, from outer space (stanza three) back down to ocean floor (stanza six)—intimate the finality of that last, low image: a “very dangerous ‘meanwhile’ state,” as Pollock puts it, in which the poet must not “linger” overlong (172). That said, the broad structural rise and fall across the two sections—from darkness to light back to darkness, from depths to height back to depths—also evokes the movement of the sun across the sky. In Milton's *Lycidas*, to which Klein's poem is persistently allusive, the speaker finds the organic metaphor of the sun comforting: Lycidas “is not dead,” he says, “Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor; / So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed, / And yet anon repairs his drooping head.” Like the sun, Milton writes, Lycidas has “mounted high” in

³⁶ The poem's conclusion has understandably provoked some critical disagreement. For instance, whereas Milton Wilson insists that “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape” is “fundamentally affirmative” (15) and D.M.R. Bentley suggests that section six is “mutedly triumphant” (11), both Trehearne and Pollock—importantly, the two who are most concerned with Klein's imminent silence—propose a more cautious reading: the poem's conclusion is “wishful,” in Trehearne's view (140), not celebratory. Pollock points to “meanwhile” as the “key word” in Klein's final stanza: “the poet still has not completed the journey on which he has set out,” he observes (172). The discrepancy in these reactions is noteworthy, for it hints at how our interpretation of the poetry is guided—magnetically attracted or repelled, even—by the silence and our knowledge of it: by our critical desire either to look for the signs of silence's intrusion into Klein's style and images, or to dissociate the poem from a biographical reality with which we are uncomfortable—or to which we wish, at least, to remain indifferent.

an eternal afterlife. Rising once again might be possible for Klein's poet, too, but not without complete transformation: not without anything less than death and rebirth in a new form.

Where we leave Klein's poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is where we leave all of the poets in creative crisis, and the speakers in their poems: "wishful" (Trehearne, *Montreal* 140) for change, but fearful that "all [is] lost." The final line of Phyllis Webb's "Poems of Failure," written as she wondered if her "Kropotkin Poems" series would ever come to fruition, is "I can wait. We shall see" (*PB* 223). The difference between Webb's career and Klein's, however, is that she *could* wait, while he, sadly, could not. For the poets in this dissertation, as I illustrate in Chapter Four, the mental assault of creative crisis—of feeling *silenced*—would fade in time, and in time the silence would become an open, "fertile" (Webb, "Seeking" 25) creative state. But this crucial transformation required a psychic calm that Klein's racial and historical awareness rendered impossible for him. That period of calm—the lapse, absence, or break from the active labour of creation—was absolutely essential in permitting the writers to move beyond creative crisis and to let go of the critical judgments and expectations that had been holding them back. Klein's story is a painful reminder that all silences are not created equal, and neither do they allow for equal creation and growth. Although they might be "natural" and necessary stages in poetic careers, as I have been arguing, they must not be considered a kind of "solution" to creative strife or blockage. Sometimes the return to voice is a triumphant resolution and the new poetry looks eagerly towards the future; so it was, to varying extents, for Page, Webb, and Cohen. Sometimes, as for Marriott and Newlove, the return to voice is muted, and the poetry retrospective and self-justifying in tone. And sometimes, as for A.M. Klein, silence does not foster the "gestation" of a new and liberated vision at all, but rather signals the termination of a rich poetic life.

The study of “middle silences” in particular as opposed to “silence” in general is valuable because it does not simply explore the causes of obstruction, but considers also the powerful currents that impel a poet back into speech, even against all of the theoretical discourses and practical circumstances that, for Canadian modernists at least, did not leave space for struggle and hesitation. This dissertation provides a multidimensional account of mid-twentieth-century, mid-career poetic silence and its meanings both in the writers’ own creative careers and in critical interpretations of their work. The first two chapters concern critical conceptions of silence: first from the outside looking in—the perspective of critics—in Chapter One; and then from the inside looking out—the perspective of poets—in Chapter Two. The subsequent two chapters focus primarily on the poetry itself, moving chronologically from creative crisis and paralysis, in Chapter Three, to the emergence into new work, in Chapter Four. My attention over the following pages is by no means evenly distributed among the five poets, and I do not seek to narrate each poet’s creative life coherently or fully. My object of study is, instead, that compelling blank page in the story of their careers: middle silence itself.

PART I:
CONCEPTIONS OF SILENCE

Chapter One:

“From the Performance Point of View”: Critical Conceptions of Creative Silence

“In [Phyllis Webb’s poetry] the modernist’s ...
campaign to purify the language [has] reached [its]
ultimate end. Beyond lie only suicide and silence.”

— Frank Davey, *From There to Here* (264)

“[I]n that fertile silence I am hearing many things and taking in a
great deal so that it doesn’t necessarily feel like silence to me.

It’s just silent from the performance point of view.”

— Phyllis Webb, in conversation with Smaro Kamboureli (25)

Creative silence, as Phyllis Webb’s comment above implies, seems most complete and most dramatic from the perspective of the audience. As though they are viewers of an unexpectedly arrested performance, readers and critics on the spectators’ side of the curtain feel the absence or blankness of the poet’s withdrawal most palpably, and it is in this attentive auditorium that my account of mid-career poetic silences begins. “Silence” has proven a compelling critical problem and a powerful critical tool in part because it is so mysterious: a shadowy offstage corner of the creative process that critics have illuminated in order to advance their own nationalist, theoretical, political, and literary-historical agendas. In later chapters I will argue that silence can be a “fertile” stage in a writer’s career (as Webb says, above), but here I want to demonstrate that it has been a fertile *critical* concept too. Through a metacritical survey of reviews written during the poets’ mid-career hiatuses and of scholarship published since, this chapter shows that silence has taken shape in a number of critical projects: that Canadian literary critics since the mid-twentieth century have used the metaphor of silence—silence as crisis, rupture, failure, absence, paralysis, retreat, regenerative space; as “ultimate end,” to use Davey’s term (264), or as “pivot”

in the career, to use Zailig Pollock's ("Introduction" 9)—in order to reach the interpretive conclusions that they desire.

As I indicated in the dissertation's introduction, three essential contexts guided critical reactions (or the lack thereof) to Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott's careers and to their periods of silence between the 1950s and the 1970s. The first was the massive boom of Canadian cultural activity and the foundation of institutions to support it; the second was the noisy rise to prominence of postmodernism and its dismissal of a supposedly archaic and irrelevant modernist aesthetic; and the third was the parallel rise to prominence of feminist scholarship and its commitment to invigorating a lost line of female creativity. In their discussions of creative work, nationalist, postmodernist, and feminist critics mobilized "silence"—first the possibility that a given poet *might* fall silent, and later the fact that he or she *did*—to their own ends. In so doing, they freighted the term and the concept with provocative and primarily negative implications. Canadian critics in these decades sought a literary "hero," a "major poet" who would have a long, energetic, and fruitful career, both nurtured by and adding to a thriving literary tradition. They valued prolificacy and energy, to which the possibility of silence was clearly a threat. Meanwhile, postmodernist writers and critics wanted to silence their predecessors: to announce that the old approach was tired or dead and that their new approach would offer a more vital alternative. In their pursuit of this ambition, proponents of postmodernism associated both the modernist aesthetic and modernist artists themselves with silence—an elision of artwork and artist which, though critically unsound, proved influential nonetheless. Feminist critics, for their part, desired recuperation: their project was to reclaim women writers from the ashes of a silence imposed by a stifling patriarchal tradition. They also tended to put a more positive spin on the void that "silence" might imply by reimagining the

woman writer's absence as a fertile space that, when harvested, yields creativity. Above all, though, the concept of "silence" represented weakness, obsolescence, and oppression within all three of these influential critical contexts.

Later critics looking to substantiate developmental arguments about Canadian literary history or about individual poets and their *oeuvres* have valued and conceived of silence differently, in part because they knew—in the cases of the poets in this dissertation, at least—that the withdrawal which might have seemed an ending to commentators in the 1960s was in fact just the middle of the story. These scholars have often imagined mid-career lacunae as decidedly mysterious conversion experiences. The gap in the narrative of the writer's progress, their accounts generally imply, signifies an evolutionary crux: the "pivot around which [the] career turns" (Pollock, "Introduction" 9). The poet faces a crisis or reaches an impasse, and then a hiatus follows. That hiatus—the silence—has the dramatic effect, as far as these critics can tell, of a *deus ex machina*: it comes and goes with a powerful agency of its own, and then the poet emerges, "freed, healed and whole," as Laura Killian wrote of P.K. Page (102). If earlier Canadian critics wanted to articulate a distinctive national tradition, and if postmodern writers were hoping to carve out space for their own work, and if feminist critics wished to highlight the patriarchal oppression of female creative energy, these later critics sought to illustrate historical patterns and teleological progression in poetic careers, and the poets' silences helped them to advance their stories. What these later accounts have in common with the earlier commentaries is an emphasis on the enigmatic nature of "silence": critics all take grateful advantage of its flexibility as a metaphor. Indeed, the concept is most powerful for furthering critical agendas if its machinery remains unexplained.

This chapter follows the concept of silence in a very rough chronological sense through a number of different critical contexts and projects between the 1950s and the present. I set the scene first by surveying reviews of Page, Webb, and Newlove's mid-career volumes. Reviewers rarely spoke of "silence" directly, but their criticism of qualities suggesting the reticence or detachment of either poet or poetry indicates their preference for writers and work that were vigorous and engaged. Next, I describe a vicious critical controversy that sprang up around Phyllis Webb in the early 1970s in order to show how "silence" was an essential strategy on the battlefield of twentieth-century aesthetics. Canadian nationalist and postmodernist critics displayed similar preferences and deployed a similar vocabulary in their search for vitality, but the stakes for the latter group were much more personal. More than simply establishing the robustness of the national tradition, theorists of postmodernism wanted to advance their *own* creative points of view, and this ambition could—as indeed it did in the exchange surrounding Webb—fuel a venomous and harmful rhetoric.

While the first two sections of this chapter mainly concern the *possibility* of silence—the environment in which silence acquired negative connotations and the ways in which younger writers used that idea to mark a changing of the literary guard—the third and fourth sections cover criticism of the actual *fact* of silence in the poets' careers, first from a feminist angle, and then as a part of developmental studies and literary-historical accounts. The fifth and final section of the chapter, which operates as a coda to the rest of the discussion, outlines recent accounts that have "call[ed] into question the very idea of ... silence," as Emily Ballantyne put it in her MA thesis (34). This is not the same as the feminist project of reimagining silence as productive; this last group of critics have not been concerned with exposing the woman writer's unjust silencing by oppressive male standards, but they have sought instead to reveal the other

activities that animated the writer's creative life while she was not composing poetry. In all five of these critical contexts most attention has been devoted to Page and Webb, and accordingly their presence dominates my discussion here. Even if interest has not been evenly distributed among each of the writers, though, the reviews, personal essays, profiles, guidebooks, scholarly articles, biographies, theses, and monographs that I consider in the following pages permit a full and fair evaluation of artistic silence in twentieth-century Canadian criticism, where it holds meaning as a malleable tool and a "fertile" possibility in widely varying readings of poetic *oeuvres* and creative lives.

I. Vitality and Virility: Canadian Book Reviewers and the Pursuit of a Literary Hero

Canadian book reviewers between the 1950s and the 1970s obsessively tabulated achievement in their pursuit of a literary hero with the kind of energetic persona that would fortify the budding national tradition. Their reviews were preoccupied with contribution, potential, and staying power, and their judgments were primarily motivated by a spirit of cultural nationalism and a desire to describe Canada's literary canon as healthy. They tended to categorize poets as either "major" or "minor," using language untroubled by the variety of marginalized voices that later critics, and canon theory itself, would eventually draw out; reviewers at mid-century simply aimed to delineate a distinctive and homogeneous tradition. The "heroic" poet that they sought,

their reviews suggest, would be prolific, and his poetry would be exuberant, engaged, and virile.¹ These ideals partly explain Irving Layton's meteoric rise to fame in the 1950s: in some ways, *he* was just the poet that many Canadian critics were looking for, and we might keep him in mind as a measure of success, and as a notable contrast to the writers I study here.² Page, Webb, and Newlove were also successful poets, but when they were unfavourably reviewed, it was on the grounds that their poetry did not live up to the energetic standards of the period—that it was austere or minimalist in style, solipsistic or disengaged in perspective, and essentially insignificant in impact.

In the decades following the Massey Commission and the establishment of the Canada Council, critics and writers alike were anxious to demonstrate that the newly available financial support for artists was being put to good use. This critical anxiety comes across in some book reviewers' strange preoccupation with *numbers*: the prolificacy of artists and the expansive styles of their art seemed easy evidence that taxpayer dollars were indeed generating Canadian culture. Inappropriate as word counts might be for assessing poetic significance, reviewers nevertheless attempted to determine value based on the quantity of poems that a given poet had produced.

¹There were several calls to revitalize Canadian poetry in this period: see Louis Dudek's "Academic Literature," for instance, or "Où sont les jeunes," in which he demands outright, "Let there be energy" (143). See also Desmond Pacey's "English-Canadian Poetry, 1944-54," in which he identifies a disturbing "slackening" in poetic production following the Second World War (101; see also page 17 and note 25 in the dissertation's introduction, above). Michèle Rackham discusses the desire for energy in 1950s Canadian culture at length in her dissertation chapter entitled "'Let A- / tomic unsplittable REALITY / now at last / be exploded to hell': The Energy of Canadian Modernist Poetry and Visual Art in the Fifties" (225-331). She argues that Canadian modernist poets sought to cultivate an energetic aesthetic in their work "as a way of combating a collective mental, spiritual, and cultural lethargy they perceived as a threat to artistic expression in postwar Canada" (228); one of the ways in which they accomplished this, according to Rackham, was by incorporating the energetic tensions of visual art into their poetry. By the 1960s and 70s, which are more squarely my decades of interest here, a general preference for postmodern playfulness and chaos above modernist order and craftsmanship had been added to the *mêlée*.

²See for example Desmond Pacey's review of Layton's *The Bull Calf and Other Poems* (1956): "Irving Layton is a man of many masks ... But behind all the masks is one constant element: vitality. If the poet is ... 'a man fully alive in his own age,' then Layton is a poet. His stature as a poet is perhaps the result of the fact that he is both fully alive and fully ready to declare his aliveness" ("Rev. of Layton" 54). Layton was also prolific; in 1956, for instance, when Pacey reviewed *The Bull Calf*, Layton also published *Music on a Kazoo* and *The Improved Binoculars*: "The year 1956 is certainly Irving Layton's year, as far as English Canadian poetry is concerned," wrote Northrop Frye, before concluding that Layton "appear[ed] to be gathering together the powers and range of what is certainly the most considerable Canadian poet of his generation" ("Letters ... 1956" 310, 311).

“For the statistically minded,” wrote Stephen Scobie of P.K. Page’s *Poems: Selected and New*, “this new selection contains forty-one of the fifty-seven poems in *Cry Ararat!*, plus a further forty-four not in the previous selection” (“Rev. of Page” 645). Ralph Gustafson likewise emphasized the “slimness” of *Cry Ararat!*. The volume “collects all that Miss Page cares to preserve from [her] early books,” he wrote—“40 out of their 71 poems—and includes 17 new poems. To descend to mathematics ... that is about a poem a year since her last book was published” (373). *Cry Ararat!* was Page’s first publication following a thirteen-year hiatus, and Gustafson’s last remark draws attention to that gap. He insists that he wanted “only to underline a regret that we have not been given more” (373), but even his “regret” reveals an assumption, or a wish, that poets should “give” something to their readers—and ideally something substantial. By not churning out poems with sufficient speed, Gustafson’s well-intentioned comment implies, Page was not providing a good return on investment.

Much more extreme than Gustafson’s statement of “regret”—he was, after all, reviewing a “New and Selected” volume, and so some discussion of the poet’s rhythms is warranted—was Alan Pearson’s bizarre dismissal of Phyllis Webb’s 1965 *Naked Poems* on essentially “mathematical”—and mathematically value-laden—grounds:

I couldn’t help feeling that Periwinkle Press (yes, Periwinkle) had a nerve to ask \$2.25 for Phyllis Webb’s *Naked Poems*. After all the book has about fifty pages to it and a total wordage of about five hundred. Really, there’s no need to buy such a book: I estimate the total reading time for this in a book store at about three minutes. (“Poetry Chronicle” 87)

Pearson “values” the book both monetarily and culturally here. His argument, although he is clearly being a bit facetious, is simple: more words, more value. This equation is obviously very

problematic, and it reflects in a hyperbolic way the general emphasis that cultural commentators in this period placed on strength of statement—on noisiness, essentially. They judged the poet’s output not only by actual poems written—“a poem a year since her last book” (Gustafson 373)—but by “total wordage” *in* the poems (Pearson, “Poetry Chronicle” 87). And if minimalism of style was going to be associated with minority of stature, then Webb’s sparse, anti-rhetorical *Naked Poems* would indeed, as Pearson hinted, seem to indicate the poet’s inadequate contribution.

Notably, the understated, imagistic properties of the *Naked Poems* with which Pearson took such issue in his review were qualities that had previously been associated in a positive way with modernism, or with a particular strand of modernist practice. But a “spare and disciplined” (Weaver 10), “pared-down” (Hunt 100) aesthetic made “no great impression” (Marshall 50) for reviewers of the 1960s and 70s, as several assessments of John Newlove’s work proposed. Stylistic reticence was no longer fashionable by this period, and modernism itself seemed, to some, incongruous with the forward-looking spirit of the times. As Gary Geddes put it in a profile of Newlove, the poet’s minimalist approach suggested that his voice might soon “refine [itself] out of existence” (399). Geddes’s direct allusion here to James Joyce’s (quintessentially modernist) *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen Dedalus explains that “the personality of the artist” working in the impersonal mode “finally refines itself out of existence” in his art (233), clearly suggests that the *modernist* aesthetic was part of Newlove’s problem. Tellingly, Geddes collapses a kind of silence *in* the art (the artist’s personality) and the silence *of* the art (its non-existence) in his allusion. He thus implies that the artist’s disappearance from his work—modernist impersonality—was the same as, or might lead to, the work’s disappearance from notice or even from “existence.” The coincidence of a general desire for energy in

Canadian letters with the increasing demand for an energetic “postmodern” aesthetic only hastened the decline of modernism’s reputation—and the reputations of modernist poets—in Canada. Critics such as Geddes and Pearson associated the *modernist* qualities of the poems, particularly impersonality and imagist minimalism, with silence; these qualities seemed, for Geddes, to foretell a kind of death, and certainly implied, for Pearson, the failure to produce a sufficiently robust statement.

Reviewers of P.K. Page’s work in the 1950s similarly objected to some of its typically modernist properties, although in Page’s case it was decadence rather than minimalism and difficulty rather than sparseness that seemed to lessen the immediacy or emotional impact of the poems. Both Gustafson and Northrop Frye, for example, though otherwise positive in their assessments, found Page’s poetry overwrought. For Gustafson, the “crafting [got] in the way” and “the poem [was] too much a sequence of metaphors” (374); and for Frye, “some of [the poet’s] points [were] made over-conceptually” and her conceits could be “squeezed to a pulp ... or dragged in by a too restless ingenuity” (“Letters ... 1954” 251-2). The effect was stifling, they implied, and the poetry seemed, again, to lack vitality. Milton Wilson found Page’s poetry “peculiarly oppressive” and “insulated”: the rigorous structure of her poems created a “glass-tight aquarium,” he said, which left him “gasping for air” (“*Other Canadians*” 80). And according to A.R. Bevan, Page’s careful craftsmanship additionally produced poetry that was “extremely obscure” and that left the reader “with the uncomfortable feeling that the intended meaning ha[d] eluded him” (97). Elusiveness, insularity, and abstractness: these were the aesthetic qualities, along with sparseness, to which Canadian reviewers objected by the mid-twentieth century, for they all seemed to suggest silence and distance rather than energy and

engagement. The hushed intensity that many modernist writers aimed to cultivate in their finely tuned verse had become, for some, little more than a fading whisper.

It was not only style that concerned reviewers, of course, but stance and attitude, too. Page and Webb were both accused in some way of “solipsism”: of writing self-centred, self-conscious, withdrawn verse, and verse that could have “no great impact” (Marshall 50) for that reason. Fred Cogswell, for instance, wrote cryptically (and also recursively) that the world of Webb’s poetry was “a solipsist’s world of her own making—and,” he added, “I refuse to enter it” (68). Likewise, Alan Pearson, who clearly did not have much of a taste for either Webb or Page, argued that all Page could offer us were “glimpses into her solipsistic world” (“Rev. of Page” 17). Millar MacLure judged that Page’s poetry was “stealthily abstract[ed] from public experience” and “nourish[ed] in the secret chambers of the brain” (31); indeed, according to Pearson her primary objective was to “find that personal sanctuary from the world and preserve it” (“Rev. of Page” 18). In emphasizing the “private vision” and “solipsistic world” of Page’s and Webb’s poetry, critics such as MacLure, Pearson, and Cogswell associated apparent self-absorption with artistic limitation. Page’s “secret[ive]” poems had little real effect but made “good chamber music,” according to MacLure (32); similarly, Webb was “building ‘in sonnets pretty rooms,’ not in epics concert halls,” according to R.D. Matthews (207).³ Although both MacLure and Matthews conceded that the poets were at least competent, this was not an era in which writing “pretty” “chamber music” was considered valuable. Instead, once again, both reviewers insinuated that the poets were working in an irrelevant, inconsequential mode, and that

³ Unfortunately for his purposes, Matthews misuses the allusion to John Donne’s “The Canonization,” which actually *defends* sonnets and intimate love songs: “We can die by it, if not live by love, / and if unfit for tombs and hearse / Our legend be, it will be fit for verse; / And if no piece of chronicle we prove, / We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms” (Donne 665). His point is clear enough nonetheless: Webb wrote “minor” poetry, to be heard and acknowledged only by few.

the supposed privacy of their visions, the supposed lack of scope of their poetry, was part of the reason for this insignificance.

There are clearly, and unsurprisingly, gendered overtones to these assessments. Newlove, too, was accused of “excessive concern with himself as a poet” (Hornyansky 348) and “exclusive interest in the pangs and twinges of [his] own flesh” (Hunt 98), but reviewers additionally judged him to be “the most important poet in Canada today” (Safarik 82), or at least “capable of becoming a very important poet” (Ryan 295). In a review of *Lies* in 1972, Michael Estok believed that “Newlove’s vision is beginning to assume the proportions of the really international talent this country has been waiting for” (667), and by the time *The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-72* came out in 1976, Len Gasparini could say that Newlove’s best poems had “monumental force” and had become “ingrained in our national consciousness” (D7). This faith in Newlove’s potential arose partly from the young poet’s early prolificacy—he had published two chapbooks, four full-length volumes, and had won a Governor General’s Award by the age of thirty-four (after which, however, he did not publish a book of new work again for fourteen years)—and partly, I believe, from his assiduous perseverance through the “realms of self-pity, desolation, and accidie” that coloured his poetry (Marshall 52). Whereas Webb’s “sharply realized ... moods of doubt, loneliness and unhappiness” (Frye, “Letters ... 1956” 307) seemed distasteful and her supposed self-absorption a personal limitation, Newlove was viewed as a dark and courageous philosopher: not on the edge of silence, but on the cusp of articulating penetrating truths with “monumental force” (Gasparini D7).⁴

The silence of withdrawal and absence, then—the kind of silence that posed a threat to the burgeoning Canadian literary tradition—was clearly gendered feminine in many critics’

⁴ Leonard Cohen was frequently viewed in the same way. For a more extended scholarly assessment of Cohen as a kind of “dark philosopher,” see Sandra Djwa’s 1963 article, “Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic.” Cohen also discusses his own “Black Romantic” image in his interview with Alan Twigg.

minds. Certainly, some reviewers did not believe that a woman could be “the really international talent” that Canada had “been waiting for” (Estok 667), and this was because women’s poetry was (supposedly) not “monumental” or forceful enough. Page and Webb were both very successful despite or regardless of their gender, but even still, there have been some terrifically patronizing remarks in assessments of their work that align them, and women’s writing generally, with insignificance and passivity. For example, John Berryman set the tone of a generally bad-tempered review of a number of volumes, including Page’s *The Metal and the Flower*, by declaring that he would deal with “women and children first” (52). He then proceeded through one gendered jab after another. He stressed Page’s “sensitivity”: it was a good quality of her poetry, he believed, but it was derivative of Rilke, “so that it is Miss Page’s disciplined admiration for that brilliant poet to which we should attend” (53). We should not mind such imitateness or be surprised by it, Berryman tells us snidely, for Page “is a lady (in private life, says the jacket, Mrs. Irwin, the wife of the Canadian High Commissioner to Australia), and this circumstance ought to change things” (53). “Ladies,” Berryman implied, were “melodious, delicate, submissive” (53). They were certainly not creative or authoritative.

Desmond Pacey’s review of “A Group of Seven Poets,” which he structures following the “Sunday’s Child” nursery-rhyme, proposes a similarly gendered assessment of Phyllis Webb. “*Monday’s child is fair of face*—this is certainly Miss Phyllis Webb, who both in person and in poetry is very beautiful,” Pacey wrote, troublingly: “Her poems have almost always a lovely liquid flow, they are full of bright colours and especially of green, and they are packed with images which reveal the fertility of her fancy” (“Group of Seven” 112; emphasis in original). Pacey’s appraisal of Webb reveals a dubious set of assumptions: in particular, that a female poet’s “fairness of face” would be at all related to the “fairness,” the “lovely liquid flow,” of her

verse. Pacey even articulated the problem himself: “to say that her work is fair of face,” he reflected, ironically unaware of the gravity of what he was, in fact, saying, “implies a certain lack of substance” (112). Indeed it does. Pacey confused the beauty of “person and poetry,” and presumed the “lack of substance” of both, because Webb was a woman. Both Berryman and Pacey associated “female” poetry and poets with derivativeness and insubstantiality: qualities, like minimalism or detachment, that suggested an aesthetic of silence. Poetic silence was judged a female condition, and in a literary culture that preferred virility and energy over reticence and delicacy, it was therefore also a negative condition.

The purpose of bringing together the comments that I have surveyed thus far has not been to catalogue every unfavourable thing that anyone has ever said about Page, Webb, and Newlove, for indeed the praise far outweighs the criticism in their literary receptions, and I confess to that extent to having developed a somewhat skewed impression here. I intended rather to demonstrate that what was devalued in their work (and, by unfortunate association, in their artistic personalities) by mid-twentieth-century book reviewers was their feminine submissiveness, their perceived solipsism, and their detached (either understated or overwrought) aesthetic. These were the qualities of a modernism that did not seem appropriate in the vigorous environment of 1960s Canada, and of a “feminine” writer who ostensibly could not be the heroic presence that the country needed to galvanize cultural enthusiasm even further. When Matthews wrote that critical inattention to Phyllis Webb—the lack of “shouting about Miss Webb’s work”—was a “deserving silence” because of Webb’s apparent proclivity for “sonnets” over “epics” (207), he made his—and, I propose, the era’s—preferences perfectly clear. To be worthy of critical “shouting,” a poet would have to write “epics.” Canadian critics were on the look-out for a “major” poet, and that poet—like Irving Layton, or later, Al Purdy—would have a big, loud

voice that would animate a big, robust *oeuvre*. Any hint that a poet might “refine” her poetry “out of existence” (Geddes 399) seemed to strike a disturbing note of weakness within a national literary tradition that was still persistently and animatedly fighting its way *into* existence.

II. Webb “in the Critical Crossfire”: Mays, Davey, and the “Silencing” of Modernism

As Geddes’s comment about the deathly consequences of over-refinement implies, some reviews and essays from this period betray a troubling assumption that one short step away from the sparse asceticism of the poetry was, finally, the silent lifelessness of the poet. “[G]rowing maturity as a poet has meant growing withdrawal” for Phyllis Webb, George Woodcock asserted in 1975: “a narrowing of the circle of the creative self in keeping with the solipsistic character of much of her verse” (“Webb” 1642).⁵ Webb’s move from Toronto to the much more remote Salt Spring Island in 1969, just four years after the publication of her minimalist *Naked Poems* in 1965, seemed to confirm, to some, that her poetic and biographical “withdrawal[s]” were related: that Webb, the poet, was electing silence and obscurity just as her poetry now seemed to be retreating into the empty white spaces on the page. For postmodern writers seeking to validate their own approach as an alternative to modernism, eliding the aesthetic qualities of the artwork and the personal qualities of the artist was, more than simply the expression of an assumption, a conscious tactic, especially when both could be associated with silence. Webb was an easy

⁵ In the same passage, Woodcock remarked the contrast between Webb’s “growing withdrawal” and the mood of Canadian culture in the 1960s: “The careers of many Canadian poets—perhaps responding to an expansive movement within the culture,” he wrote, “have been marked by a growing and unstemmed exuberance in production and in manner” (“Webb” 1642). Woodcock also associates Webb with modernism, here; his characterization of her “growing maturity” as a “narrowing of the creative self” echoes T.S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality, about which I say more below. Here, it is important simply to note that Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” like Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist*, was describing the artist’s withdrawal from the *work*, but for Woodcock, in this profile of Webb at least, modernist maturation implied the total withdrawal of the artist from public life. Woodcock also says more about Webb’s “impoverishment of form” and “saint-like reclusion” in a later (1986) essay, “In the Beginning: The Poetry of Phyllis Webb” (538).

target, in part because of that coincidental poetic and biographical “withdrawal” (so-called), and in part because of the solipsistic and pessimistic attitude (so-called) of some of her early poetry.

Famously, both Webb and her work were caught up in the middle of a fierce debate in the early 1970s concerning the value and longevity of modernism. There is no better example of the way in which a poet’s reputation can escape her entirely amid the competing desires of her critics, with the malleable metaphor of silence at the centre of it all. As I explain in more detail over the following pages, the dispute migrated from the Introduction to Webb’s *Selected Poems, 1954-1965*, in which John Hulcoop cast the poet as an exemplary modernist; to an essay in the Fall 1973 issue of *Open Letter*, in which John Bentley Mays mounted a blistering attack on Webb, who was, he insisted, a “permanently minor poet” (11); to Frank Davey’s *From There to Here*, in which Davey, the “[c]hief spokesperson of postmodernism” in Canada (Relke 207), took up and extended Mays’s argument as part of a sweeping pronouncement that the modernist movement was over.⁶

In *The Concept of Modernism*, Astradur Eysteinnsson stresses the importance of modernist “death” as a motif for postmodernists who wanted to claim their own space in literary history. “Theorists of postmodernism ... [were] eager to sign the death certificate of what [was] felt to be, paradoxically, both an overpowering and lifeless tradition,” he explains (Eysteinnsson 104). That paradox—that modernism was both “overpowering” and “lifeless”—is important, and telling. Modernism, as Eysteinnsson writes, cultivated an “aesthetic of authority” that “postmodernism, tending toward aesthetic anarchy, [sought] to silence” (129). In other words,

⁶ I say at the beginning of this paragraph that the controversy was “famous” because almost all of Webb’s feminist critics throughout the 1980s and 1990s commented on it. See in particular Jean Mallinson’s “Ideology and Poetry” and Diana Relke’s “Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology: Digging in Critical Graveyards and Phyllis Webb’s Gardens,” in *Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women’s Poetry* (205-34). The correspondence in Webb’s archive suggests that the Canadian literary community in the 1970s was also aware of the exchange. “Just a short note, dear Phyllis, to say that I think the Mays article in *Open Letter* is the worst thing I have ever read, written obviously by a madman who does not know what he is talking about,” wrote Don Stephens, for example, on 30 January 1974 (PW 9.II.A.7).

modernism's "overpowering," authoritative aesthetic seemed "lifeless" to postmodernists, who wanted to revitalize art with an energetic, disruptive, "anarchic" aesthetic. Postmodernists endeavoured "to silence" modernism by demonstrating that its "lifeless" aesthetic was essentially already silent.⁷ And thus, in the exchange that concerns me below, John Hulcoop could extol the imagistic *Naked Poems* as evidence of Webb's modernist achievement, finding their understatement an indication of her rigorous "control over ... powerful emotional impulses" ("Introduction" 24), and at the very same time, Mays and Davey could decimate the little poems as "small gestures in a white nakedness ... opaque, contemptuously clever ... stupid, hypertrophized [*sic*], unrelenting" (Mays 31), and finally "suicid[al]" (Davey 264).⁸ Webb's champion argued that the poems were well-crafted and impersonal, and her detractors argued that they were "overpowering and lifeless." Hulcoop, Mays, and Davey all believed that Webb's career had culminated with the *Naked Poems*, but for Hulcoop this announced a great accomplishment, whereas for Mays and Davey it represented the final "demise of the modernist period" (Davey 19).

In his Introduction to Webb's 1971 *Selected Poems*, a lengthy essay that looms large over the volume, Hulcoop was anxious to demonstrate a teleological progression from the cynicism and existential despair of the poet's early work to the purity and minimalism of the *Naked Poems*, her most recent publication at that time. Webb's development, for Hulcoop, was precisely the "progress of an artist" that T.S. Eliot theorizes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (17). The poet achieves impersonality by "surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done," Eliot writes (22); he has

⁷ For more on modernism, postmodernism, and silence, see especially Susan Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence" and Ihab Hassan's *The Literature of Silence*, both of which I discuss in my introduction to this dissertation (see page 20, above).

⁸ In order to emphasize the minimalism and solipsism of the *Naked Poems*, Mays also quotes both Alan Pearson's and Fred Cogswell's reviews of the volume (11), which I have cited above.

“not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium” (20). Wishing to illustrate just such a modernist “sacrifice” and “surrender” in Webb’s career and *oeuvre*, Hulcoop paraphrases Eliot: “Sooner or later,” he declares, “all great artists”—he means to imply that Webb is one of these—“appear to lose themselves, or their preoccupation with self, in an increasingly passionate desire to master their medium” (“Introduction” [SP] 32). He argues that Webb’s earlier poetry was “flood[ed] with pessimism, self-pity, doubt and despair” (36), but that she moved beyond this “sinister worldview” (23) by progressing “toward self-objectification” (43). The “frugal” (17), “abstract” (22), and “self-contained” (29) *Naked Poems* were, for Hulcoop, the pinnacle of the poet’s success.⁹ Unfortunately for Webb’s reputation, however, Hulcoop’s efforts to establish her position as a “great artist” (32) in the line of Eliot were controversial, in 1971. “Great artists” are literary heroes, and literary heroes were not, at least not in Canada after the 1950s, associated with frugality, self-objectification, or silence. In other words, Hulcoop had situated Webb right in the middle of a movement that seemed, to many, to have ended.

John Bentley Mays’s vitriolic assault on Webb in *Open Letter* has become notorious in discussions of her work—the most devastating of the “critical wounds” that she identified as part of her “struggles of silence” in the Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl* (9)—but the essay actually begins as a response to Hulcoop and a relatively cogent appraisal, informed by the cultural emphasis on energy and engagement that I described earlier, of what it meant to be a “heroic” poet in Canada. Mays denounces Hulcoop for trying, unfairly and (as her editor) selfishly, to classify Webb as a “major” poet—a “great artist” (Hulcoop, “Introduction” 32)—when in fact, in Mays’s view, she

⁹ This is an extension of the argument that Hulcoop developed in his 1967 article, “Phyllis Webb and the Priestess of Motion,” in which he was even more explicit about Webb’s Eliotic connections; for instance: “Miss Webb’s vocation as Maker (‘making / certain order’) is comparable to what Eliot calls an ‘occupation for the saint’—namely the attempt ‘to apprehend / the point of intersection of the timeless / with time’” (“Phyllis” 31). Hulcoop is quoting Webb’s “Making” and Eliot’s “The Dry Salvages.” John Bentley Mays also cites that very passage from Hulcoop’s 1967 essay in order to dismiss Hulcoop, Webb, and Eliot with a single blow (10).

is no such thing: “her work sprawls and breaks and refuses to assume the shape of greatness,” in his judgment (11). Throughout Mays’s entire twenty-two-page essay, Webb’s poetry and career serve chiefly to demonstrate the worthlessness of Hulcoop’s critical preferences and thus, by extension, of Eliot’s theories of modernism. Webb is no “great artist,” Mays writes; on the contrary, she is

a poet whose whole desire goes out, finally, to the barbarian silence and lithic insensibility of things: whose poetry does not “mature,” but merely changes as her tactics of self-destruction vary; whose work is as vain, sectarian, as without acme or direction, as distorted by her lusts, and as inconclusive as any in the recent career of literary modernism. (11)

And with that, he announces the failure of the impersonal aesthetic and of the entire modernist project. Modernist literature, Mays proposes, was never properly impersonal at all, but was “distorted by ... lusts” all along. Eliot’s “self-sacrifice” and “extinction of personality” (“Tradition” 17) were merely “tactics of self-destruction,” for Mays: paths to “barbarian silence” and “lithic insensibility.” Of course, to suggest that Phyllis Webb “desired” either of these things is to misread her work completely, but Mays was more interested in dismissing Hulcoop and the modernism that he promulgated than in accurately representing Webb’s poetry. Webb, as Diana Relke has put it, was simply “caught in the critical crossfire” (206), and her poems were banished, in Mays’s words, to “ominous *silence*” (30; emphasis in original).

Notably, the stakes of Mays’s argument were nationalist as well as postmodernist, and his rejection of Webb shows how the two critical agendas often compounded one another’s faults. It was not just the “barbarian silence” of Webb’s poetry that troubled Mays, but her lack of prolificacy, too, which seemed to indicate her abdication of responsibility to Canadian society.

He accuses her of having “written very little” and, further down the same page, of having “given very little ... [S]he has not,” he repeats, “given this culture another Name with which to counter its pervasive sense of inferiority” (Mays 11). These comments echo Ralph Gustafson’s “regret that we have not been given more” (373) of P.K. Page’s work, which I mentioned above: both Mays and Gustafson, though in drastically different spirits, betray their expectation that poets ought to “give” something to their culture. And it was *because* Webb had “written very little,” Mays further implies, that “her books [had] been received, generally, with the polite clichés reserved for permanently minor poets” (11). Once again, Mays’s implicit target was Hulcoop, who had judged Webb a “great artist” (“Introduction” 32). A “great artist,” in Mays’s view, would not have written so “little.”

The vocabulary throughout Mays’s essay clearly reflects the 1970s taste for vitality and virility in poetry, and disturbingly but predictably, Webb’s “minor” stature is confirmed by her gender. For instance, Mays contends, rather than trusting Hulcoop’s misleading assessment of Webb’s greatness,

we must accept her testimony, as a woman and as a writer, of decisive,
unmitigated failure. ... [W]e could transvalue this failure ... if only she had
given us one monumental poem, or had she loved and hated heroically. ...

[But] we are left with her work as it is: not a monument to supreme effort, but a
mirror of our own small motions. (12)

As Janice Williamson has noted of this passage, “[i]n the context of [Mays’s] rhetoric, Webb’s failure is her refusal to write ‘like a man’—a ‘monumental,’ ‘heroic’ literary saviour” (156).

Indeed we might recall here that although reviewers judged Webb and Newlove to share a similarly bleak and confessional outlook, it was Newlove whose poems had “monumental force”

(Gasparini D7); Webb's, on the contrary, simply seemed to suggest her "growing withdrawal" (Woodcock, "Webb" 1642). Mays himself even makes room for a certain kind of modernist in the upper echelons of literary achievement, though Webb is not it, for "she lacks the prodigious energy of an Artaud or the antic grandiosity of a Leonard Cohen—she lacks, that is, precisely those characteristics of the modernist exemplars which make them susceptible to elevation to the status of 'classics'" (11). Masculine "energy" and "grandiosity" might make even the most modernist of poets "major," Mays suggests; but unfortunately, Webb was a woman. Of course, Mays's mean-spirited and misogynistic comments cannot really be taken seriously, and he only buries himself further as the article proceeds and he outrageously characterizes Webb as, among other things, a "hidden princess" in a castle or "a queen crowned but useless" (17; the image comes from Webb's poem, "The Glass Castle"), "liv[ing] wholly at the mercy" of her "fluctuating emotional responses" (24). And yet he was just expressing with ugly candour what other critics were hinting more tactfully: that Canada in the 1970s was in need of a loud, confident, "heroic," and "monumental" poetic voice and that a modernist—and worse, a *female* modernist—could not be it.

Mays's article has not sustained much credibility in the corpus of Webb criticism. But his argument was recapitulated and amplified by Frank Davey in the latter's introductory guidebook to Canadian literature, *From There to Here* (1974)—a form that was, as Eleanor Wachtel has pointed out, "more harmful" to Webb "because more widely circulated" (8).¹⁰ Even more emphatically than Mays, Davey wanted to see the end of the modernism that, following Hulcoop's cues, he believed Webb to exemplify. "Phyllis Webb's poetry stands at the juncture between the modernist and post-modernist sensibilities," Davey writes; "[i]n it the modernist's rejection of the secular and his campaign to purify the language have reached their ultimate end.

¹⁰ Davey was also the editor of *Open Letter*, and so he was behind the publication of Mays's article in the first place.

Beyond lie only suicide and silence” (264). Just as both Mays and Hulcoop did, Davey invokes T.S. Eliot here as a representative of modernism: in “Little Gidding,” Eliot had written of a collective desire “[t]o purify the dialect of the tribe” (*Complete Poems* 194); this, he believed, was one of the tasks of the poet.¹¹ But for Davey, that modernist ambition had ended in “silence”: it had “refine[d] [itself] out of existence” (Geddes 399; Joyce 233). That “the culmination of [Webb’s] work” seemed, in the mid-1970s, to have been “the brief, understated and ironic *Naked Poems* (1965) and the seven years of silence that [had] followed” (262) only offered conclusive proof to Davey that the modernism of Eliot had finally disappeared.¹²

In *From There to Here*, Davey went after many other Canadian modernist writers beyond just Webb, although she was probably the most gravely wounded by his remarks since they so clearly built on Mays’s attack. He boldly announced “the demise of the modernist period” (Davey 19) in his introduction, and then laid out his position quite plainly: “Modernism was essentially an elitist, formalistic, anti-democratic, and anti-terrestrial movement,” he says (we should note the past tense), “the theories and philosophies of [which] ... became untenable in the new electronic environment” (Davey 19-20).¹³ He continues:

The modernist collapse is evident throughout contemporary Canadian writing.

The modernists—Smith, Finch, Dudek, Webb—who recoiled from the popular mechanical world of homogenous culture and looked toward a largely mythical

¹¹ As I remark in note 30 of the dissertation’s introduction, above, Eliot was in turn alluding to a line from Mallarmé’s “Le tombeau d’Edgar Poe.” “*Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*” was a prime motive of the Symbolist movement.

¹² Davey’s summary of Webb’s career echoes Mays’s characterization of the *Naked Poems* as “Miss Webb’s last book before lapsing into the last eight years of almost unbroken silence” (30).

¹³ The past tense, and Davey’s particular phrasing, echo the title of Harry Levin’s influential article, “What Was Modernism?”, first published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1960, and collected in *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* in 1966. In the conclusion of that essay, alluding to Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (as we have seen Gary Geddes doing in a similar spirit), Levin proposes that the aim of modernist artists had been “to [create] a conscience for a scientific age” (295). Davey extends that notion here, implying that the “scientific age” of the earlier twentieth century had been replaced by an “electronic environment”: the egalitarian environment in constant flux defined by Marshall McLuhan, as opposed to the “elitist, formalistic” environment of modernism.

world of stability, religious devotion, and artistic splendour, are here noisily succeeded by the postmodernists. (Davey 20)¹⁴

Modernism was not appropriate for, or tenable within, the “electronic environment” of the 1970s, Davey contends. He found ways to associate a number of other writers, including Page and Newlove, with a brand of modernism that, in his view, could only possibly end in paralysis and silence. John Newlove, for instance, “appear[ed] to believe he [was] chronicling the decline and extinction of humanity,” according to Davey (206). P.K. Page’s vision, meanwhile, seemed cold and stultifying: “the reduction of experience into simple, artistic patterns remains one of Miss Page’s most frequent themes and her dominant technique,” he wrote; “[m]any of her poems actively transform a living scene to the lifeless permanence of glass, ice, snow, lace, metal, or pattern” (Davey 232).

Davey thus “sign[s] the death certificate” of modernism by characterizing it explicitly as “an overpowering and lifeless tradition” (Eysteinsson 104). Craftsmanship, artistry, restraint, “stability” (Davey 20): these qualities were associated with withdrawn, minor, and—importantly—modernist poets, and they were all pressed into the silencing service of postmodernism. Eliot’s theory of impersonality seemed more outdated than ever in the “electronic” (Davey 19) Canadian cultural landscape of the 1970s, which demanded big, strong, *personal* voices—the opposite of “the reduction of experience into ... artistic patterns” (Davey

¹⁴ Davey’s inclusion of Dudek in this group of “recoiling,” insensible modernists is ironic, as Dudek himself had identified a “lack of liveliness” in the “academic poetry” of the 1950s (“Academic” 105). “Let there be energy,” Dudek urged in 1952, as I noted above; “[t]he tone of a poem need not be limited to grey *nature morte*, melancholy and mediation” (“Où sont” 143). Dudek, however, had denounced McLuhan on numerous occasions in the late 1960s (see “Marshall McLuhan Defined,” “McLuhanism in a Nutshell,” and “Hot or Cold McLuhan,” for instance), and McLuhanism was an essential context for Davey’s characterization of the contemporary “electronic environment.” In a more general sense, Davey wanted to “silence” Dudek and Webb’s generation just as Dudek had sought to “silence” Smith and Finch’s, and just as younger artists have tried to “silence” their elders for centuries. The move was particularly resonant, however, in relation to the modernist and postmodernist aesthetics of authority and anarchy.

232).¹⁵ The particular desire for energy in Canadian culture in this period only fuelled the “noisy” succession of the detached, impersonal modernist aesthetic by the vigorous, lively postmodern one (Davey 19). If we can get past Mays’s cruelty and Davey’s inconsistencies, their assumptions about the “culmination” of Webb’s career in the *Naked Poems* and the “years of silence that ... followed” (Davey 262) do make some sense: after all, Webb had not produced a new volume in nine years when Davey published *From There to Here*. But as we know now, those claims of “suicide and silence” (Davey 264) were premature, and prematurely totalizing. Coloured by the critics’ desires to have their own voices heard and by the intense rhetoric that such an objective can provoke, remarks that might have begun as simple observations about the poet’s “frugal” (Hulcoop, “Introduction” 17) style quickly became false conclusions about that poet’s final demise. Indeed, the pace of cultural commentary in mid-twentieth-century Canada was just as vigorous as the literary style that it advocated. Between the *Selected Poems* in 1971 and *From There to Here* in 1974, Webb was defended, disparaged, and dismissed—but she never got a word in herself.

III. “Something powerful, rather than annihilating”: Feminist Revisions of Silence

Webb’s history thus provides a powerful example of just the kind of female “silencing” by male commentators that feminist critics in the late twentieth century endeavoured to undo. These feminist critics sought, more broadly, to recuperate lost female voices from a silence that had been imposed or assumed by a pervasive cultural ethos. In discussing the poets in this project,

¹⁵ In “Image and Ego: Layton’s Lyric Progress,” Brian Trehearne argues that the adoption of a big, strong, personal voice was a key transition for Layton in the 1950s: he “with[drew] from early-modernist and late-Imagist strictures [in 1953-4] in the direction of a greater and more complex modernist subjectivism than Canadian poetry had so far witnessed” (*Montreal* 229). The poets that I have been discussing here were criticized or dismissed for *not* making that transition, especially as cultural commentators and theorists continued to demand various registers of subjectivism through the 1960s and into the 1970s.

Canadian feminist critics were concerned with the actual *fact* of extended mid-career publication hiatuses rather than the threat of disappearance based on the aesthetic qualities of the poetry. That said, they also located “silence” in the themes and styles of the poetry. They argued that women writers reimagined silence in their work as productive, and suggested that critics and readers might reimagine the silences in creative lives in a similar way. They emphasized the oppressive and enforced qualities of silence, while at the same time reconceptualizing the condition as transformative and regenerative. Women’s careers that had been divided by *middle* silences were especially attractive to this basic feminist program, because middle silence—the break in writing and then the return—played out just the restorative “gestation,” to use Webb’s own word (*WB* 9), that feminist critics wanted to see. Indeed, the fact that silence has allowed critics to see what they want to see has been behind its attractiveness as a critical tool for critics seeking a poet’s new life as much as for critics who desire that poet’s creative death. That is, “silence” might represent a promising and fertile condition to feminist critics rather than a deathly and obscure one, but the concept has been used just as bluntly to advance the feminist agenda of recovery as to advance the postmodernist agenda of dismissal.

Webb, Page, and Marriott’s periods of silence have all been read from a feminist perspective, but here I focus primarily on feminist accounts of Webb’s career, which have been abundant and enthusiastic; I also consider, briefly, the equally enthusiastic but less abundant feminist studies of Marriott’s experience.¹⁶ Many scholars and commentators have followed Webb’s lead in interpreting her silence as a transition from “oppression” (“Read” 332) to “gestation” (*WB* 9): a story that she has repeated frequently over the years, as we will see in Chapter Two. Webb’s critics have devoted much more attention to her post-*lapsus* poetry,

¹⁶ I discuss some of the feminist readings of Page’s work in the next section of this chapter; I do not cover them here because Page’s critics were more invested in producing a developmental argument about the poet than in articulating a feminist argument using Page’s experience as evidence.

particularly the “Wilson’s Bowl” sequence from *Wilson’s Bowl* (1980) and the *ghazals* from *Water and Light* (1984), than to her early work.¹⁷ According to Webb’s Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl*, the poems in that volume had been “born out of great struggles of silence” (9). Taken alongside Webb’s commentary on her experience, the 1980s poetry thus furthered the feminist agenda by illustrating that Webb’s mid-career hiatus was indeed a productive period that had fostered the revitalization of the poet’s creative energies.

Janice Williamson’s article on the “figure of the suicidal woman” (155) in Webb’s poetry successfully models the feminist approach to rereading silence as a generative condition. Williamson focuses explicitly on the *theme* of silence in Webb’s poetry: not silence as an aesthetic strategy, and not even the poet’s actual silence, but silence as one of Webb’s notable thematic preoccupations. Even in early poems such as “To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide” (1962), in Williamson’s view, Webb employed “a strategy of parodic reversal” in order to “create a discursive field in which suicide is seen not as self-destructive silencing, but as creative act” (159). “Rather than a representation in writing of women’s silencing,” Williamson says, “Webb’s poems strategically push at the boundaries of language and form” (171-2). She argues that Webb reverses the traditional “Ophelia complex”—the pattern of the drowning, suicidal female overcome by emotion—in her “Wilson’s Bowl” sequence, which concerns the suicide by drowning of Webb’s friend, Lilo Berliner, in order to generate “an integrative lyric call and response to death” instead of simply a “meaningless surrender” (161). Williamson thus detaches “silence” from its connotations of feminine passivity and submissiveness, and emphasizes the dynamic and responsive “creative act” (159) that it can allow instead. This argument is not biographical, but importantly the *stakes* are biographical: if silence as

¹⁷ Several feminist studies of this late work are collected in the “Festschrift for Phyllis Webb” issue of *West Coast Line* (Winter 1991-92), edited by Pauline Butling. See in particular the essays by Susan Rudy Dorscht, Brenda Carr, Susan Knutson, as well as the article by Janice Williamson that I discuss below.

represented in the poetry can be active, creative, integrative, and strategic, then so too can be the silence in the woman writer's life.

Sometimes, feminist and postmodernist agendas converged in their view of silence as the result of a "lifeless and overpowering tradition" (Eysteinsson 104): for feminists, of course, that tradition was patriarchal; for postmodernists, it was modernist. Indeed feminist theory in the mid-twentieth century was initially supported in part by the same postwar anti-authoritarianism that gave rise to the postmodern aesthetic. Commentators on Webb's later work have tended to remark its anarchic, destabilizing energy and to argue that the poet was liberated from creative obstruction by her rejection of authority both modernist and patriarchal, aesthetic and political. Pauline Butling, for instance, asserts that Webb's period of silence was a forced paralysis, the culmination of her "gradual recognition of and struggle with the stultifying and paralyzing effects of the male power culture which constrain[ed] her both as woman and as writer" ("Paradox" 191).¹⁸ Webb was constrained "as woman," according to Butling, by the basic patriarchal structures of society, and "as writer" by her adherence to the masculinist principles of modernism and to the modernist standards of her (mostly male) mentors and early contemporaries. In Butling's view, as for many postmodernists, these modernist structures and standards were too rigid and preoccupied with power ("overpowering," as Eysteinsson had it [104]), and as such they mirrored patriarchal hierarchies that could only be "stultifying" to the woman writer. The solution, according to Butling, was "play" and "creative disorder" in the poetry. Butling proposes that in Webb's later poetry, she "expand[ed] ... formal boundaries ... to

¹⁸ Butling develops a similar argument at greater length, and from an even more explicitly feminist perspective, in her monograph on Webb, *Seeing in the Dark: The Poetry of Phyllis Webb* (see especially Chapter One, "Webb's Poetics of Resistance," pp. 1-37). In *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry / Anarchy / Abstraction*, the other monograph to focus solely on Webb, Stephen Collis similarly attributes her silence to "power culture," though it was less specifically about patriarchy than simply about authoritarian politics, in his view. Collis argues that Webb was paralyzed by the incompatibility of her artistic approach and her political worldview: "[t]he cessation of poetry," he observes, was "a direct extension of [Webb's] anarchism" (98)—as in, her rejection of authority, which necessarily included the authority of the artist (I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Three).

bring more elements of the poem into play” and also “expand[ed] ... conceptual boundaries to bring more of her intellect into play” (“Paradox” 202). Such aesthetic and conceptual disruption and playful or strategic boundary-breaking was particularly important for women writers, Butling explains, for they had to “struggle to disrupt not only their own resistances and the weight of tradition, which every writer must confront, but also to disrupt the gender-based hierarchies, attitudes, and expectations that limit[ed] their creative impulse” (“Paradox” 192).

The trouble with Butling’s generally fair and sound analysis is that it seems to presume the inevitability of silence for a woman writing out of the modernist period. Her essay is essentially a scholarly, well-reasoned extension of the early book reviewers’ assumptions about modernism: because the tenets of modernism were what they were, and because patriarchal power structures were what *they* were, a modernist woman writer’s survival was impossible. This is the basic premise underlying Butling’s argument, even if it was not her intended implication. And such a premise is too extreme to be entirely convincing. The feminist approach, like any other critical or theoretical methodology, could be heavy-handed. Sometimes enthusiasm for the objective—even a noble objective such as recuperation—replaced sensitive analyses of the poetry or context. Of course, Butling’s primary agenda was to write about Webb, and she has been one of Webb’s most dedicated and influential champions. But her secondary agenda, to show that Webb’s silence was inevitable and enforced and that her triumphant re-emergence as a writer was synchronous with her overturning of masculinist hierarchies, might have had more to do with her feminist and postmodernist perspective than it did with the reality of Webb’s situation.

The consequences of overzealously pursuing a feminist critical agenda are especially evident in Liza Potvin's earnest but muddled reading of Webb's career.¹⁹ In her 1994 article, Potvin wants to depict silence as a process of death and rebirth, but her reliance on imprecise rhetoric and binary logic renders her argument forced and unconvincing. She initially sets out to analyze Webb's development as a poet: "In evaluating Webb's development in her nine volumes of verse," she writes,

what we witness is the death of the self-censoring, self-destructive patriarchal poet and the regeneration of a poet whose primary concern is woman's relationship to that patriarchy ... Webb transforms the silence of suicide and despair into the life-affirming action of creative writing. (Potvin 38)

Potvin does not suggest how or why the transformation from "self-destructive" to "life-affirming" occurred; it occurred, vaguely, because Potvin herself wanted it to—because it seemed the only possible way in which a woman writer could escape patriarchal oppression, and because "life-affirming action" redeemed that woman writer from charges of passivity and absence: from the "web of powerlessness, subterfuge, and silence" where she was "free to observe but not to participate" (Potvin 42). This is a fairly typical feminist reading of silence.

Unfortunately, in carrying out her ambition to rescue Webb's reputation from oppressive male judgment, and more specifically, I believe, from Mays and Davey's critical attacks, Potvin rather misreads the placement of the *Naked Poems* in the poet's career. She is more dedicated to responding to the critics, in other words, than to a logical and accurate reading of Webb's *oeuvre*. Potvin argues that in the short, Sapphic, haiku-like *Naked Poems* "[s]ilence is transformed into something powerful, rather than annihilating, celebrated as a period of waiting

¹⁹ Other important feminist readings of Webb's work that I would deem slightly "overzealous," if less muddled, are Cecelia Frey's "The Left Hand of Webb" and Diana Relke's "Feminist Ecocritique as Forensic Archaeology: Digging in Critical Graveyards and Phyllis Webb's Gardens" in *Greenwor(l)ds*.

and discovery” (51). This might be true, but her reading of the *Naked Poems* as “a breakthrough volume which breaks silence” (54) upsets her supposed interpretation of Webb’s “development” (38), for the *Naked Poems* were published *before* Webb’s fifteen-year hiatus: they marked the *beginning* of the poet’s biographical silence, not the breaking of it. Potvin understandably wanted to undo Mays and Davey’s reading of the *Naked Poems* as a creatively suicidal conclusion to Webb’s career, and to heal Webb’s reputation from Mays’s misogynistic and condescending attack. But as I have pointed out, Mays and Davey were also stating, if not very kindly, a fact—or what appeared to be a fact, from their vantage point in 1973 and 1974. Potvin, by contrast, and if much more kindly, jumbles the facts in order to advance her own agenda. Just as Mays and Davey were responding to Hulcoop in their dismissal of modernism, Potvin was responding to Mays and Davey in her dismissal of the masculinist criticism that they represented.²⁰ Webb’s silence advanced both agendas, for it could be both a burial ground for the supposedly defunct “modernist period” (Davey 19), and a fertile ground for the “regeneration” of liberated and “life-affirming” (Potvin 38) women’s creativity.

As Williamson, Butling, and Potvin’s criticism suggests, feminist readings of Phyllis Webb’s silence have tended to be aesthetic: they have tended to propose that the poetry was paralyzed by confining patriarchal (or modernist) influences and power structures, and that after a lengthy break, Webb revitalized her creative voice by envisioning silence instead as an open, creative space. Feminist readings of Anne Marriott’s twenty-six-year hiatus, on the other hand, have tended to be more strictly biographical: they stress, as Marilyn Rose has written, that “the conditions of daily life contributed to an unevenness and intermittency of poetic output,” and more specifically in Marriott’s case, that “the demands of family ... blunted [the poet’s] impetus

²⁰ Potvin does indeed respond directly to Mays and Davey in her article (41-2), and she is just as harsh towards them—her tone is biting sarcasm—as Mays was towards Webb.

as a creative writer” (“Anne” 149).²¹ Within feminist scholarship, both aesthetic and biographical interpretations imagine silence as the result of oppression. Such oppression was not actively imposed, but simply existed as a fact of “daily life” for a woman living in a patriarchal society. Rose has elsewhere identified the presence of Marriott’s “powerful male mentors” (“Literary Archive” 240), including J.F.B. Livesay, Lorne Pierce, and Alan Crawley, as stymieing to the poet’s creative freedom; and she has remarked, too, with regard to Marriott’s later reputation, that she “did not fare well at the hands of modernist male anthologists over the years of poetic ‘canon-building’ in Canada” (243).²² Marriott’s career has not been the focus of very much critical discussion at all. But as Rose’s initial comments indicate, Marriott’s middle silence, like Webb’s, could be a compelling example in the feminist narrative of women’s “silencing” at the hands of overpowering masculinist social and literary standards.

Of course, the fervent desire to advance this narrative can lead to misreading and exaggeration in biographical interpretations too, just as it did in Potvin’s (more or less) aesthetic analysis of Webb’s work. For instance, Sharon Nelson has argued that “the hiatus in book publication that affected Anne Marriott among other women writers” in the decade immediately following the Second World War was related to “cultural problems experienced generally by women in post-war society” (35). More specifically, according to Nelson, women writers had to make room for men who were “cast as heroes” in the postwar years. “A book is a public statement and appears in the public sphere from which women had been cast out,” she explains; “[i]n this cultural milieu women writers ... did not easily find book publication for their work”

²¹ The most extended treatment of Marriott’s silence is Dean Irvine’s in *Editing Modernity*; I discuss Irvine’s monograph in the next section of this chapter, because although he was writing about women, the stakes of his argument were literary-historical and sociological more than they were strictly feminist.

²² The pressure of living up to the standards of her supporters was the principal reason that Marriott herself has given for her creative obstruction, as I will show in Chapter Two; Marriott, however, does not stress her mentors’ gender at all. On a different note, in “Anthologizing P.K. Page: The Case of a Protean Poet,” Rose was explicitly interested in the effects of middle silence on anthology- and canon-making, though not necessarily from a particularly “feminist” perspective.

(Nelson 35). This idea is important in a general sense, of course: many women doubtless *were* “silenced” by the patriarchal biases of the postwar “cultural milieu.” But Anne Marriott was not among them. Marriott, as I show in Chapter Two, was not silenced before she had the chance to become successful; she was successful before she fell silent. The view of silence as the result of patriarchal oppression, too bluntly adopted, can actually obscure the patterns of the career, as Nelson’s reading of Marriott and Potvin’s reading of Webb (unfortunately) illustrate.

Noble and valuable as its recuperative ambitions are, then, the feminist project sways interpretation just as much as any other critical agenda. And so it should—that is what an agenda *is*, after all; but we should not unthinkingly allow its restorative arguments to pass as truth. To feminist critics, creative silence has illustrated female subjugation by authoritative male standards; and feminist critics have striven to describe that silence’s transformation into “something powerful, rather than annihilating, celebrated as a period of waiting and discovery” (Potvin 51). Feminist critics have sought, too, to detach women’s experiences and writing from the negative associations of passivity, reticence, seclusion, and submissiveness that the term and the idea of “silence” have accrued throughout history—associations that were particularly harmful in the energetic atmosphere of 1970s Canada. A notable limitation of this project is that feminist criticism, obviously, only recuperates *women* from silence. Newlove’s silence, for instance, was presumably not the result of patriarchal oppression, and so his critics have tended to propose that he *elected* silence—“indulged in [it] for pleasure” (Atwood, “How Do I” 62)—rather than succumbing to it. Critical neglect of Newlove’s experience is important evidence of the boundaries of this otherwise boundary-breaking critical program. And yet although it only admits women, silence has proven fertile terrain within the feminist project of recovery, for it has offered an open space in which to seed a new tradition of female creative activity.

IV. Crisis, Conversion, Continuation: Silence in the Narrative of the Career

The rich potential of silence as a critical tool is deeply dependent on such openness, for the concept is most powerful, as I have suggested, if it can be overwritten with the story that a given critic hopes to unfold. In developmental and literary-historical accounts of poetic careers, middle silence has wielded the enigmatic power of a *deus ex machina*: the poet encounters artistic blockage, falls silent, and then somehow emerges into new work, the obstruction dissolved and the voice transformed. While Webb's feminist critics probed her post-silence poetry in order to describe the new voice that had emerged following her long hiatus, critics whose primary interest is the poet's maturation or her place in a particular cultural climate have tended to analyze the obstruction as it was anticipated in the early poetry. These critics narrate a career trajectory that leads towards what they characterize as a "crisis," "impasse," or "rupture": "the accumulated effect" (Irvine, *Editing* 25) of an unresolvable creative tension.²³ The actual period of silence indicates the supreme effort required to work through that tension, and the post-hiatus work marks "the advent of a new poetics" (Irvine, *Editing* 41). In the critical accounts that I outline here, the later poetry generally serves simply as a kind of epilogue, proof that the crisis has been overcome and that the story has a happy ending. The silence itself is not the object of study for these critics, but an aspect—though a crucial aspect—of a larger narrative. The lacunae in poetic careers have meaning in such accounts as proof of shifting cultural energies, and also as generative but clandestine phases that magically permit positive creative evolution.

P.K. Page's "period of poetic silence" (Irvine, *Editing* 41), her "ten-year silence" (Killian 100), her "prolonged middle silence" (Trehearne, *Montreal* 41), her "long mid-career silence" (Pollock, "Introduction" 8), her "silence as a poet" (Swann 196), her "13-year gap in ... book-

²³ See Irvine, *Editing Modernity* pp. 25 and 38 and Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* pp. 89 and 98 for more fully justified uses of the terms listed in this sentence.

publishing” (Rose, “Anthologizing” 156) between *The Metal and the Flower* in 1954 and *Cry Ararat!* in 1967 has been a topic of substantial critical curiosity over the last two decades, and thus Page criticism dominates my discussion here.²⁴ Page’s experience has predictably attracted feminist readings; but whereas Webb’s feminist critics, such as Butling, argued that modernist and patriarchal authority paralyzed the poet and that she found the disruptive aesthetic of postmodernism liberating in the 1980s, Page’s feminist critics have tended to dwell on her struggle *within* “the gendered conditions of Canadian modernism” (Irving, *Editing* 25). Webb has been of interest as a transitional figure: critics have seen her as a “postmodernist in the trappings of modernism,” as Stephen Scobie has it (61); a writer “at the point where modernism ... expands ... into postmodernism” (Woodcock, “In the Beginning” 528). Page, meanwhile, has been a major player in literary-historical accounts of Canadian modernism. Moreover, just as critics have followed Webb’s lead in interpreting her hiatus as both the result and the catalyst of a feminist awakening, critics have followed Page’s cues in viewing her silence as a “creative metamorphosis” (Sullivan, “Size” 38). Page has stressed that she began to pursue painting and drawing seriously when she was unable to write—“[w]hen I couldn’t write, I began to draw,” she has stated repeatedly (“Interview” 34; see also “Fried Eggs” 156)—and critics have been interested in the transformation that this move inspired. This is why Page has proven such a popular subject of developmental studies. Both she and her critics have located a mysterious and

²⁴ As this dissertation was being submitted, a special issue of *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* dedicated to P.K. Page was published. The journal issue displays, and even foregrounds, the critical fascination with Page’s silence. The first essay, by Emily Essert, begins: “A significant issue for critics and scholars of P.K. Page is her period of public silence in what was otherwise a very prolific career” (9). The second essay, by Michèle Rackham Hall, begins: “Following P.K. Page’s poetic crisis of the 1950s, she fell ‘silent’ for over a decade (Trehearne), shifted her focus to the visual arts, and began a successful career as the artist P.K. Irwin” (25). The third essay is my own, and it is titled “P.K. Page’s Poetic Silence” (it does not, however, begin with a sentence about silence). The “Documents” section of the journal issue is titled “Editing Silence: P.K. Page’s Brazilian Poetry”; here, Emily Ballantyne presents a genetic parallel text edition of the poetic fragments that Page produced in 1957-58 (which I discuss in detail in Chapter Three; for more on Ballantyne’s work, see note 19 to that chapter).

powerful artistic conversion in her middle silence: “the pivot around which [her] career turns” (Pollock, “Introduction” 9).

Page features prominently in the two monographs that are most explicitly preoccupied with the silences in Canadian modernist literary careers: Brian Trehearne’s *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* (1999) and Dean Irvine’s *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures, 1916-1956* (2008). Trehearne theorizes a distinctive “forties poetics” that he finds exemplified in the work of four Montreal poets in particular: Page, A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, and Louis Dudek. These writers were bound by their common “desire for a new wholeness for modernist poetics” (*Montreal* 65) which, Trehearne demonstrates, both Page and Klein struggled to reconcile with the rigorous impersonality that characterized their 1940s poetry. The fact of Page’s silence contributes decisive evidence to Trehearne’s case: the “difficult transition” away from her sense of obligation to modernist impersonality would prove “to be so challenging,” he asserts, “that a prolonged period of . . . silence was necessary to its undertaking” (*Montreal* 100). Irvine, meanwhile, underlines a connection between Page, Marriott, Dorothy Livesay, and Miriam Waddington’s “crises of communication”—their shared experience of withdrawal from literary production—and the disappearance of the little magazines that published their work. More specifically, Irvine proposes, the “subjective, personative, self-reflexive style” (*Editing* 25) encouraged by Alan Crawley and Floris McLaren of Vancouver’s *Contemporary Verse* “provoked women modernists’ self-consciousness about their own gender and the socially-constituted gender of . . . modernist poetics,” a self-consciousness that “end[ed],” for Page, “in a period of poetic silence” (*Editing* 41). Just as Page’s silence was evidence of a crisis in ’forties literary culture for Trehearne, the poet’s

withdrawal was evidence of her responsiveness to the influential rhythms of little-magazine culture for Irvine.

A period of silence can also be a dramatic narrative high-point in article-length accounts of individual poets' careers. Rather than recounting a social or literary history, these studies unfold a creative progression, and they invest the silence itself with powerful agency to propel the poet from conflicted middle crisis into a calm, resolved, and accomplished maturity. At stake for Trehearne and Irvine was the credibility and impact of an aesthetic and historical argument; at stake in these developmental accounts is triumph and resolution in the poet's career. Laura Killian's essay about P.K. Page's transcendence of the "gendered dialectic" of modernist aesthetics, the poet's progression from crisis to resolution, exemplifies the approach. Killian, like Irvine in *Editing Modernity*, argues that this "gendered dialectic"—impersonality and personality, objectivity and subjectivity, hardness and fluidity—"alienat[ed]" P.K. Page "from herself" (102). We might expect Page's "subjective I/eye ... to be gendered feminine," Killian explains, but "*she* characterize[d] it as masculine" (93; emphasis in original). Her "poetic and impersonal objective eye," on the other hand, was "characterized by feminine fluidity" and "receptivity" (Killian 93). In order to reunite the alienated halves of her divided self and to survive as a poet, Killian proposes, Page had to "[claim] her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self" (97; emphasis in original)—in other words, to accept her "subjective I/eye" as feminine. And indeed she achieved this, Killian announces in her final paragraphs: Page's "ten-year silence" (100) allowed for the emergence of a "healed and whole poetic self" (102), a "poetic self" that was "unabashedly gendered female" (101). Silence, Killian implies, though it is not quite apparent how or why, permitted the evolution from bifurcation to wholeness in the poet's vision and identity.

Killian's argument is entirely convincing. The problem with her approach is that it allows, and even encourages, a too teleological understanding of the poet's advancement towards wholeness and unity. The late-career coherence might finally be what the *critic* wants to see more than what the poet actually accomplished (we encountered Butling and Potvin's similarly wilful vision, above); and the inexplicably (it would seem) transformative power and potential of a period of silence helps to drive the narrative forward. This is certainly how Susan Glickman imagines Phyllis Webb's development, in her generally insightful analysis of the *ghazals* that Webb wrote in the 1980s, shortly after breaking her silence with *Wilson's Bowl*. Glickman idealizes the *ghazals* as a formal "mean between the extremes [the poet] had posited for herself" earlier in her career ("Proceeding" 56). The *ghazal's* five couplets are held together only by the most tenuous thematic, metric, or symbolic connections. To Glickman, the form produces an impression of "aesthetic androgyny": a balance of masculine energy and statement—the couplets—and feminine reticence or sparseness: the white spaces and disjunctions between the partnered lines. Thus, Glickman argues, when Webb emerged from her long mid-career hiatus, she was able, in the *ghazals*, to "unite her public and private voices, her extroverted 'male' concerns and her shadowy 'female' ones" (56). This is a reasonable interpretation. But although Webb had indeed identified two competing, and gendered, energies in her early poetry, it is not clear that she ever wanted to synthesize them.²⁵ Glickman overemphasizes the "unity" of the *ghazals* because as a champion of Webb's, she wanted the poet's career to culminate in the

²⁵ See "Poetics Against the Angel of Death," in which Webb's speaker articulated a plan to change her poetics by writing "haiku"-like short lines—to get at some essential truth ("how I *really* speak," she put it ["Polishing" 48])—and "long lines," to tackle more complex subject matter. In "On the Line" (*Talking* 66-71), she associated short lines with feminine brevity and long lines with masculine aggression.

resolution of an earlier (presumed) struggle, and because the progression from dividedness to unity was the kind of growth that she hoped, or assumed, that middle silence would facilitate.²⁶

Both Killian and Glickman are largely silent about the period of silence itself in their accounts of Page's and Webb's development. Instead of extended exposition on the details of the hiatus, critics writing developmental accounts have tended to allow the poet's own comments to stand in for the entire phase of the obstruction and its dissolution. I do not say this to point out a flaw, necessarily, but merely to remark one of the inevitable implications of compressing an entire career narrative into a single essay. For example, in her foundational article on Page, all Rosemary Sullivan really says about the actual experience of silence, which she judges a crucial "creative metamorphosis" ("Size" 37), is that Page was "reduced to wordlessness in a foreign culture" (37). (Page lived in Brazil and Mexico between 1957 and 1964, the most intense phase of her poetic silence.) Sullivan redeploys the poet's own vocabulary in that observation. In her 1969 essay, "Questions and Images," Page had associated her inability to write with her clumsiness in Portuguese, and she had wondered, "Where could wordlessness lead?" (17). Sullivan also paraphrases Page's explanation of the change that occurred in her artistic vision. The poet was liberated from creative paralysis, Sullivan argues, when "images dissolved into their symbols": when her aesthetic became more symbolist and mystical than imagist and classical ("Size" 38). Page herself had written that when she was in Mexico, "[o]bjects dissolved

²⁶ Glickman's article was published in 1987, when Webb's most recent volume had been *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*, in 1984; this is why the *ghazals* would have seemed, to her, the "culmination" of Webb's career (just as the *Naked Poems* had held the same status for Mays and Davey in the mid-1970s). In 1988, Glickman published "Driving Home with John Newlove," which remains the only essay to consider the meaning of his middle silence in any detail. It focuses on his first full post-hiatus volume, *The Night the Dog Smiled*, published in 1986, and describes his "development of new themes" (98) in the 1980s poetry, focusing especially on his newly positive outlook: his "affirmation of life as a process" (96). Glickman desires continuity and positive development in Newlove's career, too: she argues that his later work responds to his early work by "revealing the bruised idealist one had always suspected of lurking under the nihilist's shiny armour" (95). Newlove had written himself into a corner with his earlier nihilism, she proposes, and the post-hiatus poetry demonstrates resolution because the newly revealed idealism offered him a fresh way forward.

into their symbols” as everything around her seemed to acquire deep, symbolic meaning (“Questions” 19). Killian, too, trusts Page’s reflections from “Questions and Images” more or less exclusively to explain the poet’s transformation. During the period when she could not write, Page had explained, the “emergence of [new] ideas began to clear a way, remove the furniture and provide a new space” (“Questions” 20). “In [the] ‘new space’ cleared away,” Killian argues, “Page’s poetry of the late 1960s confidently picks up” what had merely been a “tentative thread” (of female subjectivity) in her earlier work (100). Killian and Sullivan are not at all wrong to listen to Page’s account of her experience, but it is notable that they let those brief cues from the poet—“wordlessness,” dissolution “into symbols,” “new space”—stand in for the entirety of such a “metamorphic” stage in her career. I have been arguing throughout this chapter that “silence” is most powerful as a critical tool when it remains relatively opaque and unexplained. In single-author, developmental studies, the fact of silence has stood in, opaquely, for the seemingly unexplainable resolution and regeneration of the poet’s creative powers.

Page’s critics have also tended to let a comparatively hasty reading of the post-hiatus poetry, or even just a brief nod to its existence, stand in for the whole latter part of the poet’s *oeuvre*. “Cry Ararat!”, one of the first (and most important) poems that Page completed as she began to consider publication again in the mid-1960s, has been fascinatingly reliable as a conclusion to studies of her early and mid-career struggles, but critics usually refer to it simply as a kind of concluding flourish, a bow on the wrapping of the essay. Killian (102) and Jane Swann (197) mention “Cry Ararat!” in their final sentences, Suniti Namjoshi refers to it in his final paragraph (30), Irvine considers it in his penultimate paragraph (“Two Giovannis” 40), and Trehearne discusses the poem in his final three pages—at much greater length than the others, but his chapter is also three times as long as the articles (*Montreal* 103-5). Killian cites the poem

as evidence that “Page’s poetic vision [was] ... transformed” (102), Irvine proposes that it represents “the resolution of Page’s crises” (“Two Giovannis” 40), Swann deems it an expression of “triumph” (197), and Trehearne suggests that it signals Page’s “substantial new confidence” in her poetic powers (105). These critics all invoke “Cry Ararat!” as easy proof that the silence was productive and that Page evolved creatively towards mature self-assurance and achievement. They are right, of course; but it is the pattern of such fleeting and conclusive treatments of the poem that interests me.

The uneven distribution of critical attention to different stages in the poet’s creative development makes sense: like many good stories, these accounts of Page’s career feature a lengthy and dramatic period of rising action (the early work and crisis), a momentary and transformative climax (the period of silence), and a quick and tidy *dénouement* (the post-silence work). For the critics that I have discussed here—for Trehearne and Irvine in their literary histories as for Killian, Glickman, and Sullivan in their developmental narratives—the silence itself was a necessary and ambiguously meaningful time-out. But their accounts all leave numerous questions unanswered. First among them is, why silence? All of the critics that I have mentioned essentially agree that Page had reached an impasse and needed to transform her poetic approach by the middle of her career. They also agree that this transformation would prove “so challenging,” as Trehearne put it, “that a prolonged period of ... silence was necessary to its undertaking” (*Montreal* 100). But what could a prolonged period of silence accomplish that an ongoing revision of the poetry could not? What happened during silence that allowed Page to unknot and retie the tangled strands of her poetic gift? These critics do not tell us, in part, quite reasonably, because the answer lies in archival research beyond the scope of their studies. But simply to widen the scope would not necessarily help their critical projects, for to explain the

silence would be to lessen the transformative magic of the poet's time off stage—transformative magic that could be such a useful narrative device. And so, they have happily and gratefully allowed “silence” itself to intervene mysteriously in the story of the career, with the potential of a creative conversion experience, and the power to generate a newly unified vision and voice.

V. Calling Silence into Question

Some of the most recent criticism, however, has changed tack rather dramatically. Encouraged and supported by the popularity of archival research, critics, mainly over the last decade, have wanted to pull back the curtain on silence to look more closely at the activities that drove or facilitated the poet's “creative metamorphosis” (Sullivan, “Size” 38). This has inevitably led them to “[call] into question the very idea of ... silence” (Ballantyne, “Exile” 34), if that was not in fact their objective from the start. Obviously if we look carefully at the writer's personal biography—at the life that was ongoing even while the poetry was arrested—any number of relevant developments and achievements might obscure the impression of “silence.” The desire to erase silence by filling it in has often been motivated by critics' discomfort with the negative associations that silence has accrued over the years: silence as an abdication of responsibility to society (not enough “giving”), silence as the fate of writers who produce anemic and solipsistic art, silence as feminine submissiveness. Understandably squeamish with the term, and influenced by feminist theory if not pursuing feminist projects themselves, these contemporary critics wish to save writers—to save Page and Webb, that is—from charges of such weakness.²⁷ Close

²⁷ The influence of feminist ambitions, and the extension of feminist methods, is evident in the fact Cohen and Newlove have not been “saved” in the same way as Page and Webb have. Because of the histories of silenced or oppressed women that feminist theory has illuminated, “silence” seems more harmful, more derogatory, when it describes a woman writer's condition; male poets, as I proposed earlier in this chapter, might instead be taken as tortured philosophers—strong and courageous rather than weak. In this dissertation, I propose that we must move away from the assumption that “silence” necessarily implies passivity.

cousins of the developmental critics but dwelling especially on the gulf of silence instead of the poetic shores on either side, these critics emphasize, not just in theory but through tangible evidence of artistic or intellectual activity, the energetic, dynamic qualities of so-called “periods of silence.”

When she found herself unable to write in the late 1950s, P.K. Page began to pursue the visual arts in earnest. It is this fact of her artistic biography, which Page herself has emphasized repeatedly, that has prompted many critics to “question” the “idea” that Page fell “silent” at all (Ballantyne, “Exile” 34). In *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page*, for example, Sandra Djwa doubts the many “literary critics [who] have referred to Page’s time abroad [in Australia, Brazil, and Mexico between 1953 and 1964] as her ‘decade of silence.’ There is some truth in this comment as far as her poetry is concerned,” Djwa concedes, “yet during this period [Page] was extraordinarily creative ... Much of her creative energy was applied to visual art, which stands for strong communication, not silence” (171-2). Although I think that this is an overstatement—it is clear that Page desperately *wanted* to “communicate” poetically and found the experience of verbal blockage painful and frustrating, as I will show in later chapters—Djwa is right that we should qualify her experience as one of *poetic* rather than *total* silence. Cynthia Messenger, Barbara Godard, Jane Swann, Michèle Rackham, and others have all written about the importance of visual art for Page. Swann and Messenger link Page’s pursuit of painting to her difficulties with language: both with living day-to-day in a foreign language (this was one of Page’s own explanations for her poetic obstruction, as we shall see), and with the aesthetic crisis that left her verbally stymied. “[V]isual art might have allowed [Page] a purer translation of experience into art” than poetry did, Swann proposes (196). Messenger, meanwhile, suggests that

Page viewed Brazil through “notional ekphrasis”: she perceived the landscape as though it were a painting, because she had no other language to describe it.

By contrast, Godard and Rackham obscure the impression of “silence” by arguing that Page’s new poetic style took root in her painterly style in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rackham in particular insists that Page “did not entirely abandon poetry for painting in Brazil” but “practiced the two arts at times simultaneously, at times alternately” (224). “When [she] began to practice visual arts in Brazil,” Rackham elaborates, Page “picked up where her poetry had left off aesthetically by exploring and challenging the modernist dichotom[ies]” that had troubled her early verse (394). Rackham concludes, convincingly, that it was in her visual art that Page developed a “synthesized aesthetic ... which she subsequently incorporated in her poetry” (426) (Rackham provides precisely the detailed explanation that I noted as missing in Laura Killian’s shorter account of the poet’s progress towards “synthesis”). Rackham’s analysis of the continuum between Page’s verbal and visual arts, which offers the most satisfying explanation to date of what actually occurred during the middle period of Page’s artistic career to stimulate the wholeness of vision that characterizes her later poetry, emphasizes the poet-painter’s very active creative life and suggests that she was certainly not passive or submissive even when she felt blocked poetically.

Creative development need not stem only from creative work, however, and other critics have studied both Page and Webb’s intellectual and philosophical activities during the periods when they were not writing. By demonstrating that these pursuits also contributed to the two writers’ ongoing growth as poets, critics such as Pauline Butling and Margaret Steffler have aimed, once again, to recast the publication hiatus as an active rather than a passive stage. In “Phyllis Webb as Public Intellectual,” Butling argues that Webb “develop[ed] the intellectual

and ethical discourses necessary for the social critique that she had envisioned but failed to realize” in her early poetry (240) through her work as a program organizer and executive producer of the CBC radio program *Ideas* between 1965 and 1969, in which capacity she had the opportunity to engage with many prominent philosophers, politicians, artists, and academics. Margaret Steffler advances a similar argument about Page’s philosophical growth in “P.K. Page’s ‘Religious’ Homecoming: Writing Out of the Mexican Night.” Steffler marshals compelling and abundant archival evidence to demonstrate that through her reading in psychology, philosophy, and religion, and through a dedicated program of “spiritual searching” while she lived in Mexico in the early 1960s, Page developed a “‘religious’ identity” (40) that would eventually liberate her to begin writing poetry again. Steffler wants to show that Page was more conscious in her efforts to “write out” of silence than critics have previously assumed, or than the poet herself would have us believe: “the myth of the loss of the ability to write in Brazil was, to a certain extent, deliberately constructed [by Page],” she argues (41). Page’s journal from Mexico, as yet unpublished, records the poet’s “struggles against” the too-fluid vision that (she felt) she had developed in response to Brazil’s lush landscapes (38); in Mexico, Steffler claims, the poet “trained herself” to overcome those troubles of perception (48). Steffler is quite right to read Page’s retrospective and “deliberately constructed” (41) account of her experience skeptically. By plumbing the unpublished archival material and insisting on Page’s conscious intellectual activity, Steffler hopes to muddy any impression of passivity or disappearance in the poet’s life and career.²⁸

²⁸ Steffler’s cautious use of the term “silence” suggests her discomfort with it, and she encloses the word in quotation marks to indicate her skepticism: “In *Brazilian Journal*,” she writes, “Page explores the poetic ‘silence’ that overcame her during [her] posting [there]” (38). Djwa did the same in the passage I quoted above, regarding Page’s “decade of silence” (*Journey* 171). Later, Steffler quotes Trehearne’s statement that “Cry Ararat!” was “the first major poem of Page’s return to her work” (qtd in Steffler 39; cf. Trehearne, *Montreal* 103), but she qualifies this by adding, “or more accurately to her *poetic* work” (39; emphasis in original). Here, she asserts that Page was actively “working”—and thus by extension, not really “silent”—even while she was not writing poetry.

My own ambitions in this dissertation are somewhat similar to those of this last group of critics that I have discussed. I, too, aim to pull back the curtain on silence, to confront the middle gaps in literary careers head-on. I, too, study evidence from the archives in order to explain, as far as explanation is possible, the mechanics of “creative metamorphosis” (Sullivan, “Size” 38). But I maintain that what we are looking at when we peer backstage *is* still, quite importantly, *silence*. And I contend that “creative metamorphosis,” for the writers in this project at least, could only occur when the poets had accepted the condition of silence as an integral part of the poetic process. Critics have been uncomfortable with the notion that “silence” means absence or abdication, and thus this last group of scholars have endeavoured to invigorate the fallow periods in Page’s and Webb’s careers with evidence of creative work and intellectual struggle. And they are absolutely correct that life goes on; that the absence was in the *poetic* work, not the artist’s personal or even creative existence. But as I will demonstrate in later chapters, we do not always need to fill in the silence in order to indicate ongoing creative activity: indeed, one of the most important shifts in the poets’ thinking after their middle hiatuses was marked by their recognition that silence *itself* is an active creative state. At the outset of this chapter, I quoted Phyllis Webb: “in that fertile silence I am hearing many things and taking in a great deal so that it doesn’t necessarily feel like silence to me. It’s just silent from the performance point of view” (“Seeking” 25). “From the performance point of view,” the point of view of critics, the silent periods in the creative process might appear to be passive. But from the poets’ points of view, silence is something very different indeed. From the poets’ perspectives, silence itself can be active, full, and fertile.

VI. Conclusion

Another of my ambitions in this dissertation, then, is to disencumber the concept of “silence” of the negative connotations that it has accrued as it passed through the critical and cultural contexts that I have surveyed in this chapter. This, after all, was what the poets had to do in order to embrace silence and move on in their poetic lives; and as we shall see, those who moved forward most fully were those who most fully banished the shame and guilt that their fallow periods had seemed to hold. Silence, as I have just been suggesting, need not imply oppression or weakness or abdication of responsibility. It *seems* to signify those things because of some of the critical agendas that it has served in Canada between the 1950s and the present (and also because of its theoretically unwelcome position in the modernist creative process, as I will suggest in Chapter Three). Because the metaphor of silence is so malleable, its signification depends heavily on context. In an anxious but expanding cultural environment seeking energy and prolificacy, it was a sign of weakness: evidence of the poet’s “minor” stature, an indication that she was not “giving” sufficiently to her readers. And this impression of silence, as we have seen, has both allowed violent dismissals—of Phyllis Webb and all of modernism—and inspired fervent resurrections, with silence newly cast as regenerative. The concept of silence has been defined and redefined amid competing critical desires, emptied and filled, darkened and illuminated as the argument demanded, its very flexibility explaining its attractiveness as a critical tool and as a narrative device.

Periods of poetic silence have also drawn critical attention quite simply because they add intrigue to the story of a poetic career. “[T]he interest is very high,” Webb observed somewhat sardonically as she was preparing the final manuscript of *Wilson’s Bowl* for publication, “in this

breaking of the Webbian silence.”²⁹ By this time, R.D. Matthews’s remark that there had been very little “shouting about Miss Webb’s work”—which he had deemed a “deserving silence” because of her poetry’s aesthetic minimalism and supposed conceptual limitation (207)—certainly seemed outdated, for there was a very great deal of “shouting” about Webb’s silence as she returned to publication in the 1980s: “Webb Shatters a Poetic Silence,” proclaimed the *Montreal Gazette* (16 April 1983); “Poems Born Out of Silence for Phyllis Webb,” announced the *Vancouver Sun* (25 March 1983).³⁰ Scholars and general readers alike wanted to know what the silence had meant and why it had occurred. Page and Webb’s poetic silences have offered evidence of literary-historical trends from “the demise of the modernist project” (Davey 19) to the woman writer’s “alienation from herself” (Killian 102); critics have also reimagined the poets’ long mid-career hiatuses as occasions for “the regeneration” of a “life-affirming” feminist voice (Potvin 38) or more straightforwardly for the “spiritual searching” (Steffler 40) that permits creative growth. In pursuit of their own critical agendas or simply drawn in by the captivating drama of a poetic career with a wide open space at its core, critics have come repeatedly and persistently to these poets asking, “Why did you stop writing?” (Page, “Questions” 18).

²⁹ Letter to Gary Geddes, 18 February 1980 (PW 10.IV.C.14).

³⁰ Reviewers of *Wilson’s Bowl* all refer to the end of Webb’s “silence”; it became the most important feature of that volume. See for example reviews by W.J. Keith, Lola Lemire-Tostevin, Anita Hurwitz, and Ann Mandel.

Chapter Two:

“Why did you stop writing?”: Poets Accounting for Poetic Silence

*What has most “hinder[ed] your writing activities
or limit[ed] your success as a writer? Why?”*
 “Poor remuneration ... [b]ecause I have to sacrifice time,
mind and body to other, trivial ways of earning a living.”
 — John Newlove

“I was so frustrated and paralyzed by the sense that whatever
I wrote was going to be below my own standard that when
a poem began to well up in my mind it was instantly
dammed up and blocked by this conviction of pre-failure.”
 — Anne Marriott

“On the unconscious level the silence is the result of oppression.”
 — Phyllis Webb

“[T]he most important thing I can say ... is that
you don’t learn by talking ... You don’t find any of the
great enlightened masters sitting around rapping.”
 — Leonard Cohen

“I write because *it* writes me—the minute *it* stopped I didn’t write.”
 — P.K. Page¹

As these five comments suggest, the poets in this project devised a variety of compelling responses to probing critical questions about the long gaps between their publications. To be sure, they sometimes seemed to resent having to rationalize the rhythms of their creativity—“[i]nstead of talking about literary ideas,” Phyllis Webb lamented in one interview, “I end up talking about psychology or psychiatry!” (“Read” 331-2)—but they have also been eager to justify their feelings of obstruction, to “apologize” for their “absences” (as Newlove did in the

¹ The sources for these remarks are: Newlove, Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild survey, 29 May 1986 (JN 22.22); Marriott, notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6); Webb, “Read the Poems, Read the Poems. All Right?”, interview with Janice Williamson (332); Cohen qtd in Paul Saltzman, “Famous Last Words with Leonard Cohen” (80); Page, “Fried Eggs and the Workings of the Right Lobe: P.K. Page,” interview with Jon Pearce (148).

title of his 1993 Selected Poems volume, *Apology for Absence*), and to establish the arc of their artistic developments. More often pre-emptive than defensive, many of their remarks anticipate criticism for lack of prolificacy or for their failure to fulfill the cultural responsibilities of a poet.² Some of them foreground the hiatus, as Webb did by announcing in the Foreword to *Wilson's Bowl* that the volume was itself the progeny of her “struggles of silence” (9); and some of them more subtly obscure it, as Page did, for example, by insisting that “the pen that had written began to draw” (“Fried Eggs” 156)—that the empty space left by her stymied poetic voice had filled with visual art instead. The epigraphs above reveal that the poets have, like their critics, described silence both as a “result of oppression” and as a source of “enlightenment.” The reasons that they have given for their fallow periods range in character from Newlove’s eminently practical “poor remuneration” to Page’s maddeningly enigmatic “*it stopped*.” They have sought to transfer responsibility for their supposed failings to an assortment of other sources, from funding agencies to reviewers to patriarchal power structures to the vagaries of a capricious and unpredictable muse. But most importantly, whether their explanations were material, psychological, creative, or a combination thereof, justifying silence validated it—to critics and to the poets themselves—as much more than simply a sign of weakness or demise.

For the most part, the poets’ public commentary on silence reflects retrospectively on the actual experience, and so it is tidily polished with the wisdom of hindsight. In an interview with Sylvie Simmons for her 2012 biography, *I’m Your Man*, Leonard Cohen observed that “[i]n retrospect,” his withdrawal from the public eye in the late 1970s seemed simply “a very common

² Many of them have commented self-consciously on their “slowness” as writers, as though to beat their critics or correspondents to the punch: for example, Page reflected that she has “not been a prolific writer” (“Fried Eggs” 148), Webb announced that “the one thing [she] can confirm is that [she is] a slow writer” (Report to the Canada Council, 14 June 1970 [PW 17.VII.3]), Newlove observed that he has “always written slowly” (Letter to George Johnston, 8 November 1985 [JN 19.28]), and Cohen stressed that “the pace [he] work[s] at is so very slow” (qtd in Chaffin 11).

and almost routine assessment of [his] work,” the kind of “assessment” that all writers undertake “at different periods” in their careers. “Often one’s best work is at the time considered inadequate or incompetent,” he said; “I certainly struggled with those notions” (326).³ Decades after the so-called period of “assessment,” Cohen was able to regard his troubles as “routine,” and he was able to see that *feelings* of inadequacy do not necessarily mean that the work is, or was, substandard. But he was certainly singing a different tune in the midst of the “assessment,” caught up in those feelings of incompetence: “I’m just reeling, man. I’m just reeling,” he told Paul Saltzman in 1972 (70); “I’m always in a state of crisis about my work,” he told Robert Martin a few years later: “I always feel that I have nothing to say” (15). P.K. Page in particular, as I will show later in this chapter, developed an elaborate retrospective narrative of artistic rebirth in order to expunge the pain and blockage of her creative crisis from the public record, and even from her own memory. The poetry that she tried to write during that crisis, which I study in Chapter Three, offers ample evidence that she *felt* painfully blocked as she imagined herself “com[ing] bang up against ... [her] own stone wall limits.”⁴ But here, I am primarily interested in the ways in which Page and the other writers evaluated the experience of middle silence after the fact and gave it meaning within their larger career trajectories.

This chapter, then, continues to survey public conceptions or formulations of silence, adding the poets’ voices to those of the critics that I have already discussed. I draw especially on the poets’ interviews, correspondence, notes for readings and lectures, and essays or other reflections on the creative process. I read the poets’ remarks cautiously, for they all had their

³ Critics have not generally associated Cohen with “poetic silence,” and for this reason, he has not often been asked to reflect retrospectively on the experience. As a result, his presence is rather muted in this chapter. Simmons’s biography is an exception, and Chapter 16, “A Sacred Kind of Conversation” (314-33), helpfully elucidates the circumstances and qualities of his withdrawal. “Had you lost interest, or simply run out of steam?” Simmons asked. “I don’t know, I suppose it reflected a certain insecurity about what I was doing,” Cohen answered (326).

⁴ “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

own critical and personal agendas, not least of which was to develop and defend their own self-images. That said, I also set much store by their accounts. Even if public and retrospective descriptions of creative obstruction are intended to justify or rationalize that feeling, such commentary tells us much about what the poets wanted or needed “silence” to represent in the stories of their careers. Moreover, the explanations that they have provided usually make good sense, whatever self-protective or self-promotional agendas inspired them. And thus, although I frequently highlight the particular critical contexts to which they were responding, and I want to be clear that their interpretations are *interpretations* and not straightforward facts, throughout this chapter I am often accounting for poetic silence—summarizing credible, significant reasons for writers’ struggles and hesitations—alongside the poets themselves.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first two present reasons that the poets have given for their sense of blockage or lack of prolificacy, the second two describe ways in which the poets have retrospectively conceived of the whole experience of middle silence, and the last combines both—a reason for silence, and a theory of silence’s role in the creative process. The reasons that they have given for silence have been both physical and psychological: some of the writers, John Newlove in particular, have emphasized the economic pressures that drew time and energy away from poetic composition; others, especially Anne Marriott, have highlighted the burden of living up to public expectations and the paralyzing self-consciousness that they felt as they grew older and their literary renown increased. These accounts quite convincingly justify what was, to them, an essentially undesirable condition: the simple absence of poetic activity. Phyllis Webb’s account of silence, which I discuss in the third section of the chapter, also offers a reason for her inability to write poetry: the difficulty of finding creative expression for the “change in [her] political outlook” as “more and more [she became] feminist” throughout the

1970s (“Addressing” 34; “Excerpt” 85). But although Webb viewed the silence itself as “the result of oppression” (“Read” 332), she additionally and importantly judged the experience transformative: her hiatus “allow[ed] for the integration of ideas and emotions,” she has said (“Interview” 8). P.K. Page, for her part, retrospectively described the experience of middle silence as *totally* transformative; in the fourth section below, I consider some key differences between the unpublished typescript draft of the journal that she kept in Brazil between 1957 and 1959 and her published *Brazilian Journal* (1987) in order to show how she consciously constructed a narrative of potential rather than paralysis. Finally, in the last section of the chapter I consider Page, Webb, and Cohen’s post-*lapsus* descriptions of the creative process, which dwell on the frustrating but central role of silence itself in the mysterious making of poems.

The chapter’s structure encourages a comparison between Newlove and Marriott’s justifications of obstruction on the one hand and Webb and Page’s narratives of rebirth on the other. In this contrast we can begin to see the disparate attitudes that characterized the poets’ very different late-career poetry, which I study in Chapter Four. Newlove and Marriott never really moved beyond the blockage that ground their early poetic composition to a halt, although they did eventually write again, and in both their public commentary and their poetry they tend to reflect defensively on the initial obstacles to their progress. For Page and Webb, meanwhile, the very act of reimagining silence as a productive, fertile stage opened up new creative possibilities. If they could view the protracted experience of middle silence in their careers as transformative, as they do in the accounts that I summarize here, then they could move forward with an awareness of the creative potential of silence in the poetic process, as indeed they did in their later poetry.

This new, more sustainable perspective on silence is evident in the comments that I summarize at the end of the present chapter, which show the poets invoking the inconsistency of the muse as a reason—even *the* reason, in Page’s case—for their inability to write. Publicly relinquishing control of the creative process to an enigmatic higher power was in some ways an easy out: it permitted them to shift the blame for their unproductive periods to a source that was, as Cohen put it, “free from explanation” (“Leonard” 44), and thus to deflect or deny further questioning altogether. But relinquishing control and even deflecting further questioning also allowed them, in their own thinking, to rid silence of shame and embarrassment. To suggest that poetry comes from muses, that the poet is “taken over” (Page, “Fried Eggs” 149) when she writes, is to draw on a Romantic model of creativity in which fallow periods are not merely passive, as many of the critics from whom we heard in Chapter One presumed, but active stages in which poets alertly awaited inspiration. This Romantic model, in other words, provided the poets with a way of defining “poetic silence” as productive and valuable. Acquiring the terms to explain the experience to themselves as much as to their audiences, whether these explanations were creative, psychological, or material, was a crucial part of moving through middle silence for all five poets: so crucial, in fact, that the qualities of their later work would depend largely on the terms that they found.

I. “They want cash, not honour, in payment”: Citing Economic Obstacles to Poetic Prolificacy

It is simply a fact that there is very little money to be made in the poetry business. As Louis Dudek warned the young Phyllis Webb in 1951, poetic composition had to be accomplished under entirely “non-economic conditions”: “[Alexander] Pope bought himself a house and established himself as a gentleman by writing,” Dudek observed; “[t]oday, the most successful

poets can only make a few hundred dollars a year out of poetry.”⁵ But day-to-day existence is not, alas, a “non-economic” affair even for the most frugal among us, and Webb, Marriott, Newlove, Cohen, and Page (before she was married) all had to find other ways of earning a living.⁶ The four of them who were not international pop stars held positions ranging from librarian (Marriott) to office manager (Webb) to candy-maker (Newlove) to CBC producer (Webb) and broadcaster (Webb and Marriott) to National Film Board scriptwriter (Marriott and Page) to writer-in-residence (Webb and Newlove), and plenty more besides. Secretarial and confectionary work aside, many of their extra-poetic pursuits were creative—fiction-writing, journalism, criticism, song-writing—but Newlove, Marriott, and even Cohen have all stressed, reasonably, that these activities left little energy behind for poetry-writing. Economics cannot *fully* account for an extended withdrawal from publication, and the writers’ moments of greatest financial stability did not necessarily align with their periods of greatest creative productivity. But Marriott and especially Newlove have cited financial obligations as a prime reason for the intermittency of their poetic outputs because it is a straightforward and concrete explanation, and

⁵ Letter from Dudek to Webb, 1 July 1951 (PW 9.IV.B.5). Concerning the earning strategies of the “most successful” contemporary poets, Dudek notes, “Cummings says that he could not live on what he makes; he has to sell bad paintings which he turns out for an income. Spender turns to journalism . . . Perhaps Eliot is the only living poet who makes a respectable income by writing; but this only late in his life, and for reasons which may be irrelevant to poetry.” Dudek was writing in response to a survey questionnaire that Webb had distributed among nineteen prominent Canadian poets and three publishers, asking for information regarding the Canadian poetry publishing industry (she received answers from sixteen poets, two of whom were Page and Marriott. Marriott, mid-silence at the time, interestingly noted in the preamble to her response, dated 12 April 1952, “I haven’t written any poetry for several years, or at least very little, so all the enclosed seems like very past history now”). Webb presented her findings at the Canadian Writers’ Conference in Kingston in 1955, in a *Queen’s Quarterly* article, and in a CBC radio broadcast. See Lorna Knight’s “With All Best Wishes, High Hopes and Thanks: Phyllis Webb, Canadian Poetry and Publishing in the Early 1950s” for an introductory discussion of this very interesting survey.

⁶ Page’s husband, Arthur Irwin, was the Canadian High Commissioner to Australia and Ambassador to Brazil and Mexico, and later he was the publisher of the *Victoria Times*; before they were married, he was the editor of *Maclean’s* and Commissioner of the National Film Board. Suffice it to say, their financial situation was quite comfortable. Life as an ambassador’s wife came with its own distractions and obligations, which Page describes in detail in her *Brazilian Journal* and her *Mexican Journal* (a published version of which is forthcoming from Porcupine’s Quill); but she does not attribute her poetic silence to these duties.

one which permitted them—Newlove, at least—to turn the blame back on public institutions for failing to offer sufficient support to Canadian artists.

“Scrounging is a full-time life”: this was the basic point that John Newlove repeated over and over again to his friends and critics from the 1960s right through until the 1990s.⁷ Newlove often had to assume menial, laborious positions in order to support himself and his family, and as his journals and correspondence make patently clear, he was also burdened by an uncomfortable and exhausting *worry* about the source of his next paycheque. He frequently claimed that this worry infected his poetry and restricted his creative freedom: “Money has nothing to do with poetry,” he reflected in 1985, “but it does make life easier ... I can assert that poverty of the body does *not* purify or exalt the soul. On the contrary, it leads to a pinched meanness of the spirit that easily becomes obvious in the writing.”⁸ Having enough money to “[pay] the rent and the children’s dentist bills” (Carson 12) was a strangely central part of the writing process, Newlove insisted: economic stability meant not only basic physical nourishment, but mental calm, both of which he (understandably) found essential to artistic creation. “[S]o much in writing depends on the superficiality of one’s days,” he observed; “[w]ouldn’t be true for everyone; largely is for me.”⁹ By adding the latter clause, Newlove makes the general observation personal, and thus arguably more convincing as an explanation for *his* bouts of

⁷ Letter to Tim Longville, 24 April 1970 (JN 19.37).

⁸ Letter to “Bill,” 20 September 1985 (JN 21.15).

⁹ Letter to “Keith,” 16 February 1970 (JN 21.17). Newlove is quoting Graham Greene, from *The End of the Affair*. “I was trying to write a book that simply would not come,” says Greene’s protagonist Maurice Bendrix: “So much in writing depends upon the superficiality of one’s days. One may be preoccupied with shopping and income tax returns and chance conversations, but the stream of the unconscious continues to flow undisturbed, solving problems, planning ahead: one sits down sterile and dispirited at the desk, and suddenly the words come as though from the air: the situations that seemed blocked in a hopeless impasse move forward: the work has been done while one slept or shopped or talked with friends” (Greene 12-13). Newlove was implying that his financial worries did not allow “the unconscious ... to flow undisturbed,” and as a result, creative “situations ... blocked” in “hopeless impasses” did not, and could not, “move forward.”

unproductivity. “Superficiality,” we are to understand, was impossible to achieve within a “full-time life” of “scrounging.”

None of the other poets was ever in financial straits quite so dire as Newlove’s. But “full-time” work need not only consist in “scrounging,” and Marriott and Cohen also cite the fullness—the un-superficiality—of their days as an important reason for their respective absences from poetry publication. When Robert Martin of *The Globe and Mail* asked Cohen about the effects of his life in music on his poetic career, Cohen’s response was “a short expletive.” “That sort of life has its hazards in terms of time,” he explained: “You can spend a great deal of time doing other things than writing” (Cohen qtd in Martin 15). Cohen was certainly not “scrounging” by the time he made that comment (in 1973), but his very decision to go into music in the first place was, he claims, motivated by “economics”: it was “an economic solution to the problem of making a living and being a writer,” he says; “[t]he only economic alternative was, I guess, going into teaching or university or getting a job in a bank like the great Canadian poet Raymond Souster” (qtd in Simmons 143-4) (and after all, picturing Leonard Cohen behind the counter of a bank tests even the most elastic of imaginations). Life took rather a different turn for Cohen than it did for Newlove and Marriott, but all three insisted on “the necessity of taking on other jobs ... to make money,”¹⁰ which, in exchange for “a living,” required the poet to spend his or her time and energy on “other things than writing.”

In a Canada Council application in 1976, Marriott asserted that she “want[ed] the opportunity of concentrating entirely on [her] poetry for the first time in [her] life.”¹¹ The reason

¹⁰ Marriott, Canada Council Application, 9 August 1976 (AM 8.5).

¹¹ *Ibid.* In a letter to Fred Cogswell from some years earlier, Marriott describes a stint of housesitting that she had just done for Dorothy Livesay: “I had two splendid days staying in her apartment all to myself with [no one] demanding attention. As a result I did some work on a new long poem ... (No wonder Edith Sitwell got so much done with a maid bringing her breakfast in bed every day)” (letter of 5 March 1973, AM 7.10). The “long poem” was probably “The Circular Coast,” a fairly substantial piece that would become the titular poem of her first full post-silence volume.

that she had not written more, this statement implies, was that she had not previously been able to “concentrate” on poetic work. Indeed, she stated quite plainly in a short biographical paragraph earlier the same year that “[t]he big gap in [her] poetry publications ... was because [sic] [she] was so involved in ... other types of writing, or in library work that there seemed no creative energy left over for writing poems.”¹² She carefully nuances the “no time” pretext here by asserting that it was other *creative* work that consumed her energy; in other words, she stresses that she remained committed to a life in art even when she was not writing poems. The facts of her biography and bibliography support this claim, and her contention that “other types of writing” sap creative energy simply makes sense.

When Marriott was young, she was determined to become a writer at all costs, and she explained in several letters, applications, and public presentations between 1976 and 1984 that she never had “any conscious intention of being a poet” specifically.¹³ Her poetic star rose rapidly in the early 1940s following the success of her long poem, *The Wind Our Enemy*, which was published as a Ryerson chapbook in 1939, and her Governor General’s Award-winning *Calling Adventurers!*, published in 1941. But Marriott was more preoccupied in that period, she claims, with “trying to find something that would make [her] enough to live on, which ... poetry certainly couldn’t do.”¹⁴ And so, as she recounts in her later reflections on the period, in the 1940s she wrote school broadcasts for the regional CBC in British Columbia, and she even tried

¹² Letter to S.W. Jackman, January 1976 (AM 2.1). Jackman was a professor in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria, where Marriott was applying for a position.

¹³ Notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6).

¹⁴ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1). Marriott noted in 1982 that her “total royalties on the [entire] edition” of *The Wind Our Enemy* “were \$12.50” (letter from Marriott to Heather Spears, 8 November 1982 [AM 9.2]). By contrast, in 1975 Robert Weaver, producer of CBC’s *Anthology*, offered her \$700 for the broadcast rights of a short story called “Suitable Employment” (letter from Weaver to Marriott, 28 May 1975 [AM 8.1]; “Suitable Employment” was read on *Anthology* on 31 January 1976). The comparison between a chapbook in 1939 and a CBC radio broadcast in 1976 is not really fair, but the disparity is striking nonetheless: Marriott made fifty-six times more for the single story than she did for the entire 250-copy run of the (remarkably successful) chapbook. This contrast rather tidily explains Marriott’s pursuit of “other types of writing” in order to make a living.

to join the Air Force and the Canadian Women's Army Corps as a writer, until finally she "achieved what seemed to be the most a writer or artist or film-maker who wanted to earn a living could hope for at that time, and in March 1945 went to work at the National Film Board in Ottawa as a scriptwriter."¹⁵ After marrying Gerald McLellan in 1949, she moved back west where she became, for a time, Women's Editor at the *Prince George Citizen*. By the 1970s, Marriott had had over one hundred school broadcasts on the air, and many of her short stories had been published in journals and magazines or read on CBC's *Anthology*. She had *become* a fairly successful writer, in other words, and she quite reasonably deployed the fact of her ongoing creative activity as she accounted, in later remarks, for "the big gap in [her] poetry publications" over the previous two decades.

Newlove spoke of financial burdens throughout his entire writing life, but he often attributed the dramatic decline in his poetic output between 1970 and 1986 in particular to the fact that this was also the first time in his life that he was working steadily at jobs that would earn him a decent income. (He had been on and off welfare—"scrounging"—throughout the 1960s.) In other words, the 1970s and early 1980s were simply, by his account, a very busy time. Once again, the facts support the claims. In August 1970, shortly after the publication of his third full volume of poetry, *The Cave*, Newlove relocated with his wife and two young stepchildren from Terrace, British Columbia, to Toronto to take up a job as a Senior Poetry Editor with McClelland and Stewart. He found the job draining. "I'm tired of working; this is now the

¹⁵ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1).

longest job I've had in my life—two years,” he complained to Roy Kiyooka in 1972.¹⁶ The editing of other people's poems did not, for Newlove, complement the writing of his own. He stayed at McClelland and Stewart until 1974, when he left first to work as a Special Messages writer in the Prime Minister's Office, and then to take up writer-in-residence appointments at Concordia University (1974-75), the University of Western Ontario (1975-76), the University of Toronto (1976-77), and the Regina Public Library (1979-80); he also taught creative writing at David Thompson University College in Nelson, British Columbia (1982-83).¹⁷ He did not find teaching conducive to writing either, though: “I, oddly, find I enjoy teaching,” he remarked, “but I'd like to be able to write a little bit too.”¹⁸

After 1957, the Canada Council was in place to help alleviate just the sort of practical burdens that I have been describing here, and it is no coincidence that Newlove's most poetically productive years during that very busy period between 1970 and 1986 were the two in which he held grants. Newlove held a Senior Arts Grant in 1985-86, and sure enough, *The Night the Dog Smiled*, his first full volume of poetry after a fourteen-year hiatus, was published in 1986. Obviously, it was with the money and extra time, and the relative mental calm afforded by both, that Newlove was able to dedicate himself fully to polishing his poetry and preparing the volume. But funding did not necessarily or automatically equal publication or creative fulfillment. In 1977-78, with the support of another Senior Arts Grant, Newlove had apparently

¹⁶ Letter to Roy Kiyooka, 10 July 1972 (JN 19.30). It is worth noting that although Newlove published a new volume of poems, *Lies*, in 1972, two years into his editorial job, he had finished the book *before* he began at McClelland and Stewart: he wrote in his final report to the Canada Council on 11 September 1970 that the poems he had written “over the past year and a half”—in 1969 and the first half of 1970—“[would] be in a new book from McClelland and Stewart tentatively titled LIES” (JN 22.12). Two months later, he explained to Alden Nowlan that the book had been “scheduled for Fall ‘71” but he had “cancelled it so [he could] hold the slot [in the publisher's catalogue] open for someone else” (letter of 23 November 1970 [JN 20.14]).

¹⁷ Between 1983 and 1985, the two years missing from my account above, Newlove was plagued by health problems. The years were marked by extended illnesses and intermittent hospital visits, as well as detox from alcohol (in June 1984) and the extraction of all his teeth (on 21 January 1985). The years between *The Cave* (1970) and *The Night the Dog Smiled* (1986) thus really were full of distraction—work and health—for Newlove.

¹⁸ Letter to Terry Heat, 17 November 1982 (JN 21.16).

put together a new book; in his January 1978 profile of the poet, A.F. Moritz announced: “Later this year M & S will be bringing out [Newlove’s] first volume of new poems in six years; the tentative title is *The Soft Tirade*” (10). And indeed, Newlove’s correspondence with Linda McKnight of McClelland and Stewart in February 1978 reveals that he was ready to publish that spring.¹⁹ But plans for the publication fell through: displeased with some changes in copyright policy at McClelland and Stewart necessitated by funding cuts, and evidently hesitant to publish in any case, Newlove withdrew the manuscript. He had a year-long reprieve from full-time “scrounging,” and still he did not publish his work.

Significantly, the economic explanation for his absence from poetry publication allowed Newlove to shift accountability from himself to “society.” He insisted that writers needed to be compensated for their work just like everyone else. “It is a dangerous delusion to think that writers are specially reserved,” he noted in a speech in 1989: “It is most dangerous of all to writers ... because it permits society to pay us in honour—and damned little of that—instead of in cash. God knows, when we go to buy a loaf of bread they want cash, not honour, in payment.”²⁰ He is right, of course: the assumption that writers are somehow above such mundane realities as buying bread—that they somehow exist outside of the real world—can indeed leave them “dangerously” outside of the very real support that they need to survive. But Newlove also implies that any “society” that asks poets to contribute their art to its cultural identity—to “give” something, as, we might recall, Ralph Gustafson expected of Page (373) and John Bentley Mays expected of Webb (11) (see Chapter One, above)—must contribute support in return. “I still cannot see that Canada will ever have a truly professional, world-class literature so long as writers are routinely expected to hold another job, treating their writing as sideline or hobby,” he

¹⁹ See the exchange with McKnight in JN 23.14.

²⁰ Notes for “Moving in Alone” Talk, Regina, 1989 (John Newlove *fonds*, 1998 accession, Box 18, folder 13; this is the only document from this accession that I cite in the dissertation).

asserted in response to a question about the “hindrances” to his “writing activities” in 1986.²¹ Elsewhere, he elaborated: “When the Canada Council gives money for limited terms to writers it does some of them some good, though we would be better off to have Civil List pensions for those who have devoted their lives to the art.”²² Temporary support did not allow for full-time devotion to an artistic vocation, Newlove proposed: that is, poets who were only supported through limited-term grants, as he was, would only have limited terms of creative productivity, and nothing more should be expected of them.

The “full-time life” of “[s]crounging,” then, or of necessary and distracting engagement in “other types of writing,” might very reasonably account for a poet’s inconsistent or small output, but the relation between money and poetry is not simple or direct.²³ The fact that Phyllis Webb, who had to work to support herself as much as any of the others, has almost never cited the interference of other employment or of general financial worry to justify her “struggles of silence” (*WB* 9) throws Newlove and Marriott’s reliance on economic explanations into some relief. Critics such as Pauline Butling and John Hulcoop have pointed out that Webb was very busy with her work at the CBC between 1965 and 1969, and this does indeed seem a logical reason (one reason among many) that she did not publish any new work immediately after the *Naked Poems* in 1965.²⁴ But Webb herself rarely refers to any of this in her own explanations of her silence, which have been frequent and diverse.²⁵ Marriott and Newlove (and in a different sense, Cohen) *chose* to emphasize financial and professional diversions as concrete, publicly

²¹ Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild survey, 29 May 1986 (JN 22.22).

²² Letter to “Bill,” 20 September 1985 (JN 21.15).

²³ Newlove, letter to Tim Longville, 24 April 1970 (JN 19.37); Marriott, letter to S.W. Jackman, January 1976 (AM 2.1).

²⁴ Cf. Butling’s “Phyllis Webb as Public Intellectual” and Hulcoop’s introduction to *Peacock Blue* (especially pp. 16-17).

²⁵ An exception was in conversation with me in August 2012. Webb had read my research project on her “struggles of silence,” and one of her reactions to it was that I had not sufficiently stressed simple financial realities in my account of the obstacles that she faced as a poet. “Economic conditions—making a living,” she wrote, starred with an asterisk, in her notes on my work.

acceptable reasons for a “big gap in ... poetry publications.”²⁶ But to listen uncritically to Newlove’s bitter complaints about the lack of financial support available to writers is to wonder how he, or any Canadian authors, managed to produce anything at all. Newlove cited “poor remuneration” and “sacrifice [of] time, mind and body to other, trivial ways of earning a living” as the chief “limitations” to his writing activities because these were genuine concerns, but he emphasized them repeatedly in his correspondence and public remarks because poverty inspired pity rather than disparagement from a Canadian public seeking and expecting prolificacy from its artists.²⁷

II. “Praise isn’t always the best help”: Anne Marriott, *The Wind Our Enemy*, and the Impediment of Critical Success

Thus far we have seen Newlove and Marriott (with a cameo appearance by Cohen) offering primarily material, physical reasons for their respective poetic silences. But all of the poets have also described powerful mental blocks that made them hesitant to publish and sometimes even paralyzed their poetic impulses altogether. These psychological inhibitions were usually related to the problem of meeting, defying, exceeding, satisfying, confronting, or otherwise thinking about audience expectations. “The minute the world has any expectations of you,” P.K. Page has said, “you can’t help but be affected by them. You become self-conscious. Ideally one should never show anything to anyone” (“That’s Me” 56-7). Ideally, indeed, “you would finish the poem and then burn it and totally forget it,” as Newlove has reflected; “[b]ut we’re also human beings,” he adds, and “I’ve often said that the poem is not complete until someone else has read it and liked it—or at least *read* it” (“The Dance” 120; emphasis in original). Thinking about readers and hoping for admirers was an exhausting endeavour. Newlove’s correspondence in

²⁶ Marriott, letter to S.W. Jackman, January 1976 (AM 2.1).

²⁷ Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild survey, 29 May 1986 (JN 22.22).

particular is peppered with anxious references to his “reviewers,” whom he judged careless and ignorant, and whose reactions he found “depress[ing]” and “discourag[ing].” “After the reaction to *THE CAVE*,” he wrote in 1970, “I don’t feel much like publishing another book at all ... There is no interest whatsoever in my poetry. Period.”²⁸ Just as Phyllis Webb noted her “critical wounds” as a painful ingredient of her “struggles of silence” (*WB* 9), Newlove frequently cited critical neglect and mistreatment to justify his reluctance to publish new poetry.

And yet much graver concerns than lack of attention and critical disdain were, for all of the poets except Newlove, too much attention and critical praise. Page, Webb, Cohen, Marriott, and Newlove (despite his protestations to the contrary) were all very successful poets, and they all struggled under the heavy burden of living up to that success. It is no coincidence that four out of the five of them had won Governor General’s Awards for the volumes that immediately or almost immediately preceded the beginning of their middle silences.²⁹ Where does one go from there, with the impression that all eyes are watching in hopeful anticipation? Webb has asserted that “success [was] very threatening” to her: “When it hits,” she says, “you’re really scared that (a) I didn’t deserve it, and (b) now they’ll get me” (qtd in Wachtel 8). Expectations are the

²⁸ Letter to George Bowering, 16 June 1971 (JN 18.14). Newlove was annoyed that “hardly anyone I sent copies [of *The Cave*] to ... has bothered even to acknowledge getting the book—a bad sign” (letter to Nelson Ball, 16 May 1970 [JN 21.15]). The terms “discouraged” and “depressed” also come from his correspondence: “Putting out a book and then hearing some of the talk, it gets me pretty depressed,” he complained to Bowering (letter of 5 May 1965 [JN 18.14]); “[i]t seems pretty easy to get discouraged in this damned business,” he wrote to Margaret Atwood (letter of 8 January 1969 [JN 18.7]); “I am discouraged ... when I see the sort of casually disdainful comments on me such diverse people as Louis Dudek and Doug Fetherling feel free to make,” he explained to Al Purdy (letter of 30 March 1971 [JN 20.20]). He mentions “reviewers” in many other letters, including, as just a sample, messages to Atwood (30 January 1969; JN 18.7), Henry Beissel (28 April 1981; 21.15), “Bobby” (8 May 1972; 22.2), Bowering (8 July 1976 and 3 May 1966; 18.14), George Johnston (22 January 1986 and 8 November 1985; JN 19.28), Tim Longville (24 April 1970; JN 19.37), Sid Marty (15 January 1986; JN 19.44), John Metcalf (26 September 1986; JN 20.7), and Purdy (30 June 1975; JN 20.20). If his correspondents are to be trusted, however, Newlove was quite wrong that there was “no interest” in his poetry. John Metcalf was particularly insistent in a letter of 5 April 1984: “Just mail the bloody stuff in a garbage bag. We—many of us—want to see this bloody book. Will you—for ONCE—be sensible?! SEND ME THIS DAMN STUFF IMMEDIATELY” (JN 20.9).

²⁹ Marriott won a Governor General’s Award for *Calling Adventurers!* in 1941; P.K. Page won an award for *The Metal and the Flower* in 1954; Newlove won an award for *Lies* in 1972; and Cohen, though he did not accept it, won an award for his *Selected Poems, 1956-1968* in 1968. See the standard bibliography of the Governor Generals’ Awards: Andrew Irvine, “The Governor General’s Literary Awards: English-Language Winners.”

baggage of success; internalized, they produce an oppressive self-consciousness that all of the poets, especially Anne Marriott, have invoked as an overwhelming suppressant of creative freedom.

In recollecting her early career and the circumstances that surrounded the publication and reception of *The Wind Our Enemy*, Marriott has dwelled emphatically on the very fears that Webb described—"I didn't deserve it" and "now they'll get me"—and she has cast those fears as the main force behind her "long long silence between books—1945 to 1971."³⁰ As she explains it, the enthusiastic encouragement that she received from friends, mentors, and reviewers for her early poetry, and particularly for *The Wind Our Enemy*, eventually proved "more of a hindrance than a help," because she worried that she could never live up to their esteem.³¹ She reflected in 1983 that among the Canadian Authors Association writers in Victoria in the 1930s, she "was (regrettably) considered almost a child prodigy."³² She came to consider that "prodigious" reputation "regrettable" because it established a high standard that she—who had been merely a "child," after all—felt compelled but unable to meet. "I developed a really painful block around 1945," she recalled many years later, "and whenever I tried to write a poem I felt, 'Oh, well, this won't be as good as 'The Wind—' and so it would die a-borning."³³ "[G]radually," she concluded in a different version of the same story, "I ... stopped writing poetry altogether, feeling nothing I did would be good enough. I virtually stopped writing poetry for over twenty

³⁰ Letter to Susan Ioannou, 21 August 1983 (AM 3.8). Ioannou, the Associate Editor of *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly*, had written to Marriott asking if she would like to write a piece about women poets' creative development for the magazine. Marriott wrote a short article called "The Poet Mothers," in which she contemplated the relationship between her "maternal urge" and her "equally powerful urge to write."

³¹ Letter to Heather Spears, 18 March 1983 (AM 9.2).

³² *Ibid.* Marriott repeated this characterization of herself in her letter to Hancock: "I had won several prizes in CAA contests around 1934, and became sort of the child prodigy of the CAA!" (AM 4.1).

³³ Letter to Susan Ioannou, 21 August 1983 (AM 3.8).

years.”³⁴ This dramatic outcome, as Marriott has it, stemmed not from any failure or criticism, but from her success.

According to Marriott’s retrospective account, part of the problem was that she more or less stumbled into *The Wind Our Enemy*, and her critics and mentors interpreted it as more than it really was—or as more than she had consciously intended it to be. When Alan Crawley, later the editor of *Contemporary Verse*, moved to Victoria in the 1930s, Marriott developed a close friendship with him and he became one of her most influential guides.³⁵ He helped to teach her about modernist literature and encouraged her to move away from the lyric “nature poetry” that she had been writing in her late adolescence. He “urged me to try something longer,” she has explained; “*The Wind Our Enemy* was the result.”³⁶ When she published it, *The Wind Our Enemy* was taken up by critics and reviewers as an important statement about the harsh conditions during the Depression on the Canadian prairies: a “social protest” poem, as Marriott has termed it, similar to the work that Dorothy Livesay was writing at the time (such as “Day and Night”). But Marriott has been keen to clarify that in fact she did not set out to write a poem in “the Livesay tradition of social protest” at all. “I got to know Dorothy *after* that,” she explains, “and had not read her work ... Actually I wasn’t making any kind of ‘social protest’ in ‘The Wind—’ just recounting what I had seen, and heard.”³⁷ In other words, when Marriott wrote that now much-anthologized modernist long poem, with its echoes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

³⁴ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1). Notably, Marriott follows this statement up immediately by adding, “Though of course I was very involved with other kinds of writing, and with people, as I hadn’t been before, and that all used up most of my creative energy.” She announces her poetic silence, but quickly counterbalances it with a description of creative activity (the same description that I quoted earlier in this chapter). Marriott told this story repeatedly, most fully in the letters to Hancock, Susan Ioannou, and to a “Ms. Petrone” (probably Penny Petrone, a professor of English and Education at Lakehead University between 1961 and 1989), as well as in her Saskatoon Reading and Talk of 1971, all of which I cite often throughout this section of the chapter.

³⁵ See Dean Irvine’s discussion of Marriott in *Editing Modernity* (92-110) for more on her relationship with Crawley and the significance of *Contemporary Verse* to her poetic career.

³⁶ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1).

³⁷ Letter to [Penny] Petrone, 20 March 1974; this letter is a response to queries concerning *The Wind Our Enemy* (AM 19.6).

and its elements of “social protest,” she was simply “try[ing] something longer” and “recounting what [she] had seen”: nothing more ambitious or pretentious than that.³⁸

Marriott has insistently and repeatedly accentuated the humble origins of *The Wind Our Enemy* in her many depictions of its composition and publication. I quote here at some length to show how she has unfolded the story:

In the late 1930s I had an illness of several months’ duration and afterwards went to my aunt’s farm in Saskatchewan to convalesce in the more bracing atmosphere—and was confronted by the drought and its attendant poverty. After the greenness of Victoria, the barren prairie and the blowing dust were a tremendous emotional shock.

I wasn’t really aware of this shock at the time, however; I felt very distressed by the hard times my relatives and their neighbours were having—but on the other hand, I was having such a wonderful time in a large, young family group that my main feelings were great enjoyment and happiness. ...

However, when I got home to Victoria, my subconscious reaction to the drought scenes surfaced, I guess ... [W]hen I’d been home three weeks or so, one day just as we (my mother and I) were sitting down to lunch ‘The Wind—’ began to form in my mind and I wrote most of it right then, on odd bits of paper—I still remember my mother cautioning me not to get ink on the clean white tablecloth!

³⁸ The echoes of Eliot are almost certainly not accidental. Marriott has described experiencing a kind of modernist awakening at a Canadian Authors Association meeting, when Ira Dilworth, who was then a professor at the University of British Columbia, “gave a reading of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’ [*sic*]. The Keats and Shelly [*sic*] et al I’d had at school fell away into the past and I sat there truly enthralled. I thought ‘The Fire Sermon’ the most wonderful piece of writing I had ever heard. I really walked out of there a different person” (letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 [A.M. 4.1]).

... I belonged to a poetry group at that time, led by Doris Ferne, and Dorothy Livesay's father, J.F.B. Livesay came to Victoria and Mrs. Ferne, knowing his interest in poetry, showed him 'The Wind—' and he took it back to Toronto with him and showed it to Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press who published it as a chapbook.³⁹

This account highlights the importance of *other people* in the success of the poem. Marriott characterizes *The Wind Our Enemy* as the product of a collaborative community effort. "I was really *lucky*, all along," she declares: "Without Alan [Crawley]'s initial goading, I might have stayed in the CAA sonnet rut. Without J.F.B., I might never have had a book. I'm grateful!"⁴⁰ If Crawley had not "urged [her] to try something longer," if her "subconscious" had not "reacted to the drought scene," if Ferne had not shown the poem to Livesay, if Pierce had not published it: many forces seem to have been responsible for shepherding this poem into print—many forces, that is, with the exception of Marriott's own skill. Presumably she truly was grateful. But just as Newlove attached the creative fortunes of poets to the financial support of "society," Marriott's story here displaces responsibility both for her achievement and, by extension, for her eventual struggles and withdrawal. If she was simply "really *lucky*" with her early success, as her account proposes, then it was not a personal failing that had caused her "virtually [to stop] writing poetry for over twenty years," but the all too predictable dissipation of that luck.⁴¹

³⁹ Letter to [Penny] Petrone, 20 March 1974 (AM 19.6). She tells very similar versions of this story to Hancock, Ioannou, and in her 1971 Saskatoon Reading and Talk (AM 4.1, 3.8, 19.6), among other places.

⁴⁰ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1). Elsewhere in the letter, she notes that Doris Ferne showed J.F.B. Livesay the letter at a Canadian Authors Association meeting that Marriott herself could not attend, exceptionally, because she was ill. Her complete absence at the centre of this story is remarkable and seems almost fated.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* See also Irvine, *Editing Modernity*; Irvine argues that Marriott's withdrawal from publication was related to the demise of *Contemporary Verse* in 1952-3: not, as she would have it, the disappearance of "luck," but the disappearance of the community that had supported her.

In her accounts of youthful success and the prolonged sense of impasse that ensued, then, the older Marriott casts herself as a kind of *ingénue*, scribbling the poem on “odd bits of paper” while her mother cautioned her not to dirty the tablecloth; a “child prodigy” at the centre of an influential network of literary personalities. The retrospective insight that she had simply been “lucky” in her success offered Marriott, looking back, a plausible public explanation for her retreat from writing, as well as a logical way of explaining to herself the “conviction of pre-failure” that supposedly overtook her whenever she imagined having to repeat the achievement.⁴² Her story is convincing. The threat of critical disapproval is understandably graver for a writer who has previously enjoyed a largely positive reception—a writer with a reputation to uphold, with something to lose if she does not “measure up.”⁴³ And self-consciousness only accumulates over the years of a life in writing and publishing: as P.K. Page has noted, “one becomes more self-conscious, as one grows older. When you first started writing you just wrote. At least I did. And now one has the feeling that one has to write well” (“Interview” 35). Unfortunately, the “feeling that one has to write well,” simple as that ambition might appear, can block any writing from occurring at all.

Marriott and Page both idealized the uninhibited energy of their younger selves, but importantly, they did so from completely different angles. The older Marriott of the 1980s looked back nostalgically on a time in Victoria fifty years earlier, before her “creative spontaneity” had become paralyzed, and she repeatedly recounted the happy and innocent genesis of her most successful poem. Conversely, as we will see later in this chapter, when Page reflected on her silence she told a story of rebirth. She proposed that the experience of poetic silence had been a kind of “deconditioning” (Page, “Verbatim” 19): that during the middle

⁴² Notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6).

⁴³ Marriott, letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1).

period of her career she gained a new perspective which “began to clear a way, remove the furniture and provide a new space” (“Questions” 20). For Marriott, the story had ended with the obstruction—with the “conviction of pre-failure” that “dammed up and blocked” her poetic energies. She had begun writing poetry again by the time she was articulating these recollections, but in her mind, the silence had not been a transformative return to youthful spontaneity and freedom, but rather an unfortunate end to her promising and “prodigious” early career. Page, by contrast, took the duration of the silence itself into consideration in her accounts. From her post-hiatus point of view, the silence had allowed for the “clear[ing]” of “new space” in which to grow. The next section of this chapter shows that Phyllis Webb, too, retrospectively imagined her period of silence as a rebirth: an opportunity to “[empty] out” (“Addressing” 34) old ideas and influences and to welcome new ways of seeing. I am stressing the comparison because, as I have suggested briefly already and as I will argue at much greater length in Chapter Four, the fundamental contrast in their attitudes would determine the mood of their post-hiatus poetry: Marriott and Newlove’s rationalizations of obstruction accompanied poetry that was backward-looking, self-justifying, and nostalgic; whereas Page and Webb’s depictions of middle silence as a dynamic phase that opened up new space accompanied forward-looking poetry exploring unfamiliar and inspirational creative territory.

III. “A structural revelation of the society”: Phyllis Webb’s Feminist Account of Silence

Marriott, interestingly, did not call attention to the fact that the influential trio of midwives who facilitated *The Wind Our Enemy*’s entrance into the world—Alan Crawley, J.F.B. Livesay, and Lorne Pierce—were all men. Much more troubling in her view was her paralyzing desire to live

up to the expectations of her supporters, no matter their gender.⁴⁴ Phyllis Webb, on the other hand, has insistently attributed her silence to her sudden “overbearing sense” in the late 1960s and early 1970s “that there had been too many fathers, literary and otherwise,” in her life and *oeuvre* (“Read” 324). Further, she has proposed, “the domination of a male power culture in [her] educational and emotional formation” had “denied [her] access to inspiration from . . . female figures” (*WB* 9). The long interval between *Naked Poems* and *Wilson’s Bowl*, as she describes it, was a phase of “emptying out that shelf of venerables and looking for something new”—only, she notes in retrospect, “I wasn’t ready to move into anything terribly new and I didn’t move very far in my poetry,” at least not right away (“Addressing” 34). She needed time, she has explained: time “for the integration of ideas and emotions” (“Interview” 8), and time to make sense of the “change in [her] political outlook” (“Excerpt” 85). Like the feminist critics of her work, Webb has both emphasized her sense of oppression under the “general weight of the patriarchal culture” in which she matured (“Addressing” 32), and reimagined her period of silence as a transformative stage during which she gained “a freedom of expression that [she] didn’t feel before was available” (“Seeking” 32).

In her many interviews between 1983 and 1993, Webb evoked her “overbearing sense of too many fathers” by describing the “heavily, heavily male-dominated” literary community of

⁴⁴ Marriott might not have emphasized the gender of her mentors, but critics such as Marilyn Rose and Dean Irvine have done so. Of course, one of the reasons that the entirely male circle of Crawley, Livesay, and Pierce did not bother her as a woman was that by 1941 she was also part of a strong *female* circle with Dorothy Livesay, Doris Ferne, and Floris McLaren, the co-founders (along with Marriott) of *Contemporary Verse*.

her poetic apprenticeship in Montreal in the 1950s (“Read” 321).⁴⁵ The problem was not that anyone was actively trying to oppress her; quite to the contrary, she clarifies, “I was given a whole contemporary poetic culture by these men” who were “my publishers, my editors and my dominant influences” (“Read” 321; “Addressing” 32). The problem, instead, she has suggested retrospectively, was that she simply “did not have access to or give enough credit to the women in [her] life” (“Excerpt” 85). Her principal “female influence” was Marianne Moore, and yet even Moore had been “handed to me on a plate,” she says: “Frank Scott gave me her poems; Louis Dudek knew her” (“Read” 321). Likewise, although Webb remembers encountering P.K. Page’s poetry as a student at the University of British Columbia, and she recalls that it “entranced [her]” and “made [her] feel [she] wanted to be a poet,” she notes that it was finally F.R. Scott’s encouragement that “led [her] to go to Montreal where [she] ... began to write seriously” (“Addressing” 31).⁴⁶ Part of her motive in describing this “male-dominated” sphere of influence was to present a feminist version of Canadian literary history, and especially of Canadian modernism: the story from the point of view of—as she describes herself—“the only young woman writer in the group” (“Read” 321). “[W]e have a received history,” Webb has said, “a story of how it happened, and according to Scott and [A.J.M.] Smith, it happened when they came on the scene. And there are not many women in there, trying to tell the story or allowed to

⁴⁵ The exchanges on which I draw most heavily in this section are Webb’s interview with Leila Sujir (“Addressing a Presence”), conducted in 1985 and published in 1988; her interview with Janice Williamson (“Read the Poems”), published in *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers* in 1993; and the “excerpt” of her interview with Ann Munton, conducted in 1983 and published in the special “Festschrift for Phyllis Webb” issue of *West Coast Line* in 1991. I also refer occasionally to Webb’s comments from the profile on her that Eleanor Wachtel published in *Books in Canada* in 1983 (“Intimations of Mortality”) and from her interview with Smaro Kamboureli (“Seeking Shape, Seeking Meaning”), published in the *West Coast Line* special issue in 1991. There was, obviously, a great deal of interest in Webb and her work (and generally in interviewing Canadian writers) in this period. As the overlapping and intersecting quotations throughout my discussion indicate, Webb repeated the same story, or only very slightly altered versions of the same story, many times throughout the decade.

⁴⁶ Webb first met F.R. Scott when, at just twenty-two, she ran as a candidate for the CCF in the 1949 British Columbia provincial election; Scott was national chairman of the CCF between 1942 and 1950. She moved to Montreal in 1950. She was a student at UBC between 1945 and 1949, and so she could only have encountered Page’s very early poetry there.

tell the story” (Webb, “Addressing” 31).⁴⁷ Over and over again throughout the 1980s, then, Webb told the story—and it was a story that accounted for her own “struggles of silence” (*WB* 9) quite compellingly.

In reflecting on the middle period of her career, Webb has pinpointed two developments that frame her experience of feminist awakening as a kind of death and rebirth, or a dismissal of the old and an adoption of the new. First, according to her recollection, she was struck by that “overbearing sense” of “too many fathers,” and felt compelled to let them go. In two separate interviews, she has referred to “a little prose piece in which I dispatched the fathers to the river Lethe, and I saw them all sail away” (“Read” 324).⁴⁸ This “prose piece,” although she does not name it in the interviews, was a short meditation entitled “The Old Masters” that she wrote on 30 December 1969. In the piece, she describes watching the “bond” that she had shared with her influential guides—lovers, teachers, and father figures—“plunge into the deep without ill will.” Writing the little essay was an acknowledgement that these “old masters” had loomed too large in her imagination and needed now to “move back into the shadows.”⁴⁹

The second key development that Webb has identified in her evolution as a feminist was her reading of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which was published in 1976, and which she must have read shortly after that. The book was, for

⁴⁷ Webb said almost exactly the same thing to Eleanor Wachtel two years earlier: “now when I look back on the way that the history of Canadian literature has been written, it’s been documented mainly by Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith themselves and they have created their own little history” (qtd in Wachtel 14).

⁴⁸ Referring to the same “little prose piece” in a slightly more vicious mood eight years earlier, she noted that she had “sent all my male gurus off to the river Lethe, I think, in a boat, and I probably drowned them” (“Addressing” 34).

⁴⁹ “The Old Masters” (PW 3.I.A.266). Perhaps significantly, Webb also drafted a poem, or part of a poem, on that date, 30 December 1969: “Wonder invades the optic silences” (PW 3.I.A.262). There is also an undated poem among Webb’s archival papers in which she executes a similar but more light-hearted ejection of male presences from her consciousness: the speaker describes a dream in which she “was driving / a station wagon / when out flew one of the male passengers / and bounced across the 8-lane highway”; but this release only makes her “anxious,” for she assumes that “[t]here must be something wrong / with [her] driving” (PW 3.I.A.224). The little poem suggests that while Webb was ready to bid farewell to her “old masters” in this period, she was not ready yet to move on with her new, “passengerless” perspective.

her, “a structural revelation of the society ... [A] genuine shift began to take place where I could no longer accept [patriarchal] analyses,” she explains: “I was beginning to see society in a different way” (“Addressing” 34).⁵⁰ In her references to “The Old Masters” she described a farewell; here, she highlights new vision—a “different way” of “see[ing].” Between about 1967 and 1971, Webb had worked intermittently on the “Kropotkin Poems” series that she would never be able to bring to fruition as she had intended (as we will see in some detail in Chapter Three). She carried the weight of that unfinished project with her throughout most of the 1970s, but she proposed in her later interviews that after reading *Of Woman Born*, “Kropotkin began to disappear”: “I realized,” she recalls, “that his was just one more male analysis of the society as it is” (“Addressing” 34). Webb claims that once Rich’s book had revealed to her a new, more appealing way of seeing the world, she no longer felt dedicated to—or blocked by—the poetic project that had held her back for so many years, and she was free to move forward creatively.⁵¹ Together, her references to an imaginative evacuation of “old gurus” and an eye-opening reading of feminist theory define the transformation in her thinking. She could not have understood this pattern so coherently while it was all happening, but in retrospect, she has quite tidily established her period of silence as a philosophical, psychological, creative rebirth by surrounding its most intense years, between 1969 (when she wrote “The Old Masters”) and 1976 (when *Of Woman Born* was published), with a release and a revelation.

Of course, the overt affirmation of a new ideological attitude does not happen overnight, and Webb has also justified her “great long silence” by emphasizing the psychological strain of

⁵⁰ The “analyses” to which Webb refers are Marxian and Freudian. Immediately preceding the comment that I have quoted here, she explains that Marx and Freud were the thinkers who defined her previous understanding of society.

⁵¹ She repeated almost the same thing in two other interviews. To Eleanor Wachtel in 1983, she said: “The Kropotkin utopia enchanted me for a while until I saw that was yet another male imaginative structure for a new society. It would probably not have changed male-female relations” (“Intimations” 13). To Ann Munton, also in 1983, she said: “This was another male utopian theory, and more and more I was becoming feminist and disconnecting emotionally from those hero, cult figures in my life” (“Excerpt” 85).

accepting and then creatively expressing her “change in ... political outlook” (“Excerpt” 85).

Once again, she reaches quite far back into the past to explain why the feminist awakening initially caused her such an “enormous amount of discomfort” at a subconscious level, and why her psyche supposedly “repress[ed]” her “disruptive” new insights (“Read” 332) for so long.

Growing up in Victoria in the 1930s, she recalls, she was taught that there were “things you must not say, particularly when you’re brought up ... to be a very nice person, you see, and well-behaved and all that” (“Addressing” 35). This ordered and traditional education “accounts for the silence,” she says, “the very uneasy period for me when I’m not writing” (“Read” 332), because “I’m really afraid of what I might say when the gloves are off or the mouth is unzipped. And so I go in and out of these zippered-mouth periods because I know ... what can come out when the subconscious is brought to the surface” (“Addressing” 35).⁵² This mixed metaphor hints at the courage required for the nascent feminist to emerge from Webb’s particular background: when the polite, reticent lady takes off her gloves and enters the public sphere bare-knuckled, her free speech upsets the smooth surface of the status quo. It is a rather dramatic way of explaining that for around a decade in the 1970s, Webb had begun “to see society in a different way,” but “wasn’t ready to move into anything terribly new” in her poetry just yet (“Addressing” 34).

As we know now, Phyllis Webb *did* “move into ... new” poetry, and as I propose in Chapter Four, *Wilson’s Bowl* is deliberately structured to evoke the feminist transformation of her vision and voice. Importantly, although she has “account[ed] for the silence” (“Read” 332) by proposing that she was “overpower[ed]” by patriarchal culture and was thus “denied access”

⁵² Shortly after this in her interview with Leila Sujir, Webb notes that the kind of “silences” that she was referring to were the “silences [that] have been imposed ... the unnatural silences that Tillie Olsen speaks of in the book, *Silences*: ... they are social ... there are all those things that you must not say” (“Addressing” 35). *Silences*, which I discussed in my introduction to this dissertation, was (and still is) the best-known study of creative silence and was a keystone feminist text after its publication in 1978; by invoking it, Webb explicitly aligns herself with the feminist movement.

to a fundamental female line of “inspiration” (*WB* 9), Webb’s remarks on the period also dwell on her “intellectual and emotional liberation” (“Addressing” 35)—the birth, after a “strange gestation” (*WB* 9) and a taxing labour, of a new perspective and a new “freedom of expression” (“Seeking” 32). She has stressed the “heavily, heavily male-dominated” universe of her literary life in Montreal (“Read” 321), and also her upbringing as “a very nice person” (“Addressing” 35), in order to accentuate the great weight of the culture that she had to break through; the magnitude of the breakthrough justifies retroactively the lengthy period required to achieve it. Webb’s interpretation of her mid-career hiatus was obviously and necessarily retrospective, for she cast the silence as generative not only of a new poetic approach but of the very vantage point from which she reflected on the experience. Her account of the years leading up to *Wilson’s Bowl* unfolds a distinctly feminist narrative in which she “empt[ied] out” (“Addressing” 34) her male-dominated imagination and then, in time, planted a female perspective in its place.

IV. The Pen Began to Draw: P.K. Page’s Narrative of Artistic Rebirth

The motifs of “emptying out” and “new vision” that I have highlighted in Phyllis Webb’s feminist reading of her middle silence also characterize P.K. Page’s retrospective reflections on her time in Brazil and Mexico between 1957 and 1964. Like Webb, Page has been asked frequently about that stage in her life and artistic career, and she has also written about it herself in essays and in her *Brazilian Journal*. The journal, which she published in 1987, recounts Page’s growing obsession with drawing and painting: non-verbal art forms that allowed her to capture the lush flora and fauna and the vibrant people of Brazil when she felt that she lacked the vocabulary to do so in words. Sandra Djwa notes that Page “began to think about publishing her

diary in 1963 and worked on it on and off for two decades” (*Journey* 174).⁵³ The original manuscript and several subsequent versions remain in her archive, and a comparison of the first and final versions reveals Page’s editorial changes as she gained insight on the events that she was describing. The final, published journal presents a carefully sculpted narrative intended to explain her poetic silence and the artistic transformation that she underwent in the middle stage of her career. In forming that public narrative she excised many of her original reflections on the pain, frustration, and anxiety of her initial creative obstruction. In the *Brazilian Journal* and indeed in all of her reflections on her period of poetic silence, Page depicts the gestation and birth of a new, “freer, more demonstrative” “Brazilian self” (*BJ* 278) and dwells on her liberating transition from poetic paralysis into fresh painterly possibility.

Page has consistently claimed that she found herself unable to write poetry when she was immersed in the new language and foreign environment of Brazil. “I couldn’t write ... there at all,” she has explained,

and this had perhaps something to do with an inability to find the vocabulary
and not hearing my own speech rhythms because I was really listening to
Portuguese all the time and speaking it, and I just couldn’t move on paper. I’d
stare at a blank sheet of paper and be totally unable to do anything at all until
the pen that had written began to draw. (Page, “Fried Eggs” 156)

⁵³ Page wrote to Jack McClelland on 28 June 1965, “As I understood it, you agreed to do two books—a Selected Poems in 1966 and the *Brazilian Journal* in 1967 ... I don’t think we did more than mention the fact that if the *Brazilian Journal* were successful one or more Mexican ones might be possible” (PKP 15.4). Page probably wanted the journal to follow closely on the heels of the poetry volume because the former could account—as indeed it *does*, through a carefully managed narrative—for her long gap between publications. More journals—from Mexico—would, of course, just extend that account. For more on Page’s editing of the journal for publication, see Suzanne Bailey’s introduction to the 2011 edition of *Brazilian Journal*. Bailey characterizes the published journal as “Page’s substantially edited version of a series of journals she kept in the 1950s” (8). See also Bailey and Margaret Steffler’s “Editing Brazil and Mexico: Light and Shadow, Strands and Gaps in P.K. Page’s Mid-life Writing,” which concerns both the *Brazilian* and *Mexican* journals.

This is the core narrative that Page has articulated frequently over the years, and it has two key principles. First, she evokes poetic silence in the “blank sheet of paper” and in her sense of physical and imaginative immobility when confronting it. She attributes that silence---her inability to write—to the non-English “speech rhythms” that she heard and used in her everyday life, and also to the unsuitability of English vocabulary for describing the natural and social environment of Brazil. Second, she suggests that her shift from poetic to visual art was entirely seamless, and proposes that she had no agency in the transition: the very same “pen that had written began,” apparently of its own accord, “to draw.”⁵⁴ Like Webb, Page very clearly wanted to define her silence as a rebirth. Webb, as we have seen, described a release—the dismissal of her “old masters” into the shadows—and then proposed she had found, in feminist theory, a new way of seeing. Page, similarly, established an empty space—the “blank sheet of paper”—and then suggested that she had found, in drawing, a new artistic approach.

And yet while it was an important part of Webb’s feminist agenda to highlight her feelings of oppression, anxiety, and obstruction even as she narrated the formation of a new political and poetic outlook, Page very rarely refers to the pain of silence at all in her retrospective and published remarks. Instead, she looks almost exclusively forward, emphasizing the new beginning and the sense of possibility that it held. In her 1969 essay, “Questions and Images,” for instance, she excitedly contemplates the potential of “wordlessness”—*wordlessness*, significantly, not *silence*. “Where could wordlessness lead?” she asks; and

⁵⁴ Page held fast to this explanation from the time when it was happening—“words do not describe it, perhaps drawings will,” she wrote on 28 August 1957 (“Brazilian Journal,” p. 74 [PKP 113.12]; *cf.* also *BJ* 113)—until the end of her life: “[M]y pen wouldn’t write,” she recalled in her 2006 verse memoir, *Hand Luggage*: “It didn’t have words. / (No English vocabulary worked for Brazil.) / I stared at blank paper, blank paper stared back. / Then, as if in a dream, the nib started to draw” (59). Her imagery—the lack of vocabulary, the blank paper, the independently wilful pen—was the same in 2006 as it was in 1980, when she gave the interview response that I quoted above. She also lifted the image of the writing pen that began to draw right out of “Questions and Images,” published in 1969: “by some combination of factors,” she noted in that essay, “the pen that had written was now, most surprisingly, drawing” (18).

answers: “[s]hocks, insights ... astounding and sudden dematerializations, points of view shifting and vanishing” (17-18). “Wordlessness” led, she contends here, to vigorous mental, spiritual, and creative activity. Page underlined her feeling of “wordlessness” in Portuguese, and also the appealing “wordlessness” of visual art, because it suggested rebirth, new life, and a time before or outside of language. “[H]ad the move from writing to drawing”—to “wordlessness,” that is—“been a return to the primitive in myself[?]” she wonders: “Was it a psychological starting again from the pre-verbal state?” (Page, “Questions” 17).

A “starting again” was evidently what she *wanted* her “wordlessness” (or poetic silence) to be: a rare opportunity to wipe the slate clean, to reset the system. Page had in fact been feeling rather “wordless” before she arrived in Brazil: as I show in the next chapter, she had begun to feel stymied poetically at least as early as 1954, when she was still living in Australia. The “wordlessness” of navigating an unfamiliar language and confronting an exotic landscape was thus a logical and convenient explanation for what was already occurring—what *had* already occurred—in her poetry. And in retrospect, the loss and gradual reacquisition of language offered her a metaphor for the rebirth, the “starting again,” that she later wanted to highlight in the progress of her creative life. With limited skills in Portuguese, Page reflected in 1987, “I couldn’t express myself except in the simplest terms so verbally I reverted to being almost a child again” (“That’s Me” 55). “One is a toy at first, a doll,” she elaborates in “Questions and Images”; “[t]hen a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult” (17). For Page, “wordlessness” came to imply a return to childlike innocence at a moment when, discouraged and unsatisfied with her efforts to write poetry, she desperately sought a fresh start.

The published *Brazilian Journal* quite self-consciously narrates the gestation of a new self: Page's "Brazilian self," which, she reflected retrospectively, is "so different from my Canadian self" (278).⁵⁵ More precisely, the journal evokes the conversion of painful poetic silence into passionate painterly "wordlessness"—a conversion that, as Page tells it, was as smooth and uninterrupted as "the pen that had written [beginning] to draw" ("Fried Eggs" 156). In her descriptions of the hot, humid rainforest air, Page conjures an environment in which her old self can melt away: "A thought is barely born before it melts," she writes, "and in its place so lovely a void one could hardly have guessed emptiness so attractive" (*BJ* 37). Like the "blank sheet of paper" ("Fried Eggs" 156), this is a fertile emptiness: a space in which something new can take root and grow. And indeed, at times Page's descriptions of the Brazilian atmosphere make it sound remarkably like the inside of a womb. "One does not *like* the heat," she remarked on 3 February 1957; "yet its constancy, its all-surroundingness, is as fascinating as the smell of musk. Every movement is slow, as if under warm, greenish water" (*BJ* 37).⁵⁶ In that same day's journal entry, she recalls visiting a posthumous show by Pegi Nichol at the National Gallery in Ottawa, "of works painted when she was dying—beautiful, brilliant, large canvases, filled to overflowing. It was as if the lethal proliferating cancer cells within her had been transformed into a multitude of life-giving images which made dance the grey air of the gallery" (*BJ* 37). Both in 1957 when she wrote this passage and in 1987 when she published it, Page clearly wanted her

⁵⁵ There is no mention of a "Brazilian self" in the unpublished journal. All of the other quotations in this paragraph are in both the published and unpublished versions, however.

⁵⁶ Sandra Djwa has also remarked that "[t]he encompassing metaphors for [Page's] Brazilian experience," as she depicts it in the published journal, "are sexual and reproductive" (*Journey* 174). For Djwa, this imagery evokes a love story between Page and Brazil; and indeed, there is much evidence of this in Page's comments: "I seem to be falling in love with the world," Page observes; "How do I write my love song? ... *Can* one fall in love with a country?" (*BJ* 98, 107). "I was in love with Brazil almost the way one is in love with a man," she recollected many years later ("Fried Eggs" 156). Djwa suggests that "at some level [Page] saw her paintings ... as children of her union with Brazil" (174). She might have clung to this idea with particular urgency because, as the unpublished journal reveals, in 1957 Page learned that she would be unable to bear children of her own (see "Brazilian Journal," 31 December 1957, p. 104 [PKP 113.14]). "The later process of editing *Brazilian Journal*," Djwa writes, "may have ameliorated some of the pain of not having a child of her own" (174).

own story to describe a similar development. Whether this story depicted old ideas rapidly melting away and new selves gestating in their place, or whether it dwelled on “lethal” pain transforming into something “life-giving,” it would be a positive, forward-looking account of artistic rebirth.

To smooth the contours of this narrative for her published journal, Page deleted many of the passages that express the frustration and even agony of finding herself unable to compose poetry. For instance, in the manuscript entry for 27 March 1957, she muses regretfully on the fact that she has written so little in so long, and remarks, “I have reached, I think, a kind of spiritual menopause—or perhaps just come bang up against one of my own stone wall limits.” She compares the feeling to “hit[ting] rock bottom”: to the uncomfortable collision of “spade on rock.”⁵⁷ This vivid depiction of creative obstruction is nowhere in the published *Brazilian Journal*. Similarly absent is her “humiliation,” recorded at around the same time, concerning an interview that she had been asked to give. It was, she wrote, “something I really cannot bear, because of the extent of my own inadequacies ... As a poet I am not that good ... and at the moment I cannot believe I am a poet anyway.”⁵⁸ Some months later, she reflected impatiently on her oppressive self-consciousness and described her failure to write as a physical wound. Relating a visit to a beautiful chapel, Page recalled feeling “almost self-conscious before myself. Distrustful, suspicious of myself ... Returned [home] and tried to write a poem! Christ how this shard hurts!”⁵⁹ The tenor of the “shard” is somewhat unclear, but the pain evidently includes

⁵⁷ “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11). She already suspects in this journal entry that she is “in the worst throes of culture shock and [the poetic silence] ... may be a by-product of it”; this, as I have been saying, was the public narrative that she repeated frequently in her retrospective accounts.

⁵⁸ “Brazilian Journal,” 18 March 1957, p. 21 (PKP 113.11).

⁵⁹ “Brazilian Journal,” 20 September 1957, p. 78 (PKP 113.13). The “poem” that she tried to write is probably the following fragment, held now in Page’s archive among her other poetic efforts from Brazil (which I discuss in detail in Chapter Three): “The candles gutter in the rack & smell / remove the body of the church / the wax / drops on the iron / in Latin icycles [*sic*] / grey ostrich feathers curl above the wicks // walker among so many supplicants” (PKP 27.5, poem 19).

Page's unfruitful effort to "write a poem." The image of the shard, moreover, suggests that the pain lingers and festers, like a splinter of glass lodged in her skin. All of this is missing from the published journal entry for that day, in which Page merely describes being "almost reduce[d] ... to tears" by the exquisite decoration of the chapel (*BJ* 119). Of course, it makes perfect sense that she might want to remove complaints, self-criticism, and even particularly painful memories from a published document. But it is still important to register that the feelings of obstruction and inadequacy in her original journal manuscript trouble the triumphant narrative of artistic growth that she has produced elsewhere, and, as I showed in Chapter One, that many critics have happily trusted.⁶⁰

In an interview in 1987, Page reflected that the "wound" left by her inability to write poetry—by that painful "shard," we might imagine—"was greatly staunched by a drawing pen" ("That's Me" 55). Drawing and painting must indeed have offered a comforting outlet for her creative energies when she felt poetically blocked in the late 1950s. But as I have been suggesting, the transition was not nearly as easy and painless as her later retellings make it seem. She developed a celebratory account of new beginnings because the retrospective *narrative* of rebirth as a visual artist also "staunched" the gap in her public record: it ensured that the silence was active and full, a dynamic moment of artistic growth rather than a shameful disappearance. Just as she eliminated most of her expressions of limitation and frustration from the published *Brazilian Journal*, Page also added material to substantiate that genesis story. For instance, in the published entry for 15 June 1957, Page's account of her attempt to fire a servant, Salvador, is

⁶⁰ The critics I mentioned who have "trusted" Page's account include Rosemary Sullivan and Laura Killian (see pages 66-7 in Chapter One, above). More recently, though, critics including Sandra Djwa, Emily Ballantyne, Margaret Steffler, and Suzanne Bailey have studied the unpublished journal material from Page's time in Brazil and Mexico and have illustrated, as I do here, the "deliberat[e] construct[ion]" (Steffler 41) of the published narrative: the standard interpretation is now to cast serious doubt on Page's retrospective version of events. I especially want to highlight, here and in Chapter Three, and even more than other critics have done, the great *pain* that the feeling of "poetic silence" (Page, *BJ* 235)—of creative obstruction—caused the poet in the late 1950s as she was still struggling to write.

rendered as a powerful epiphanic moment that marks her birth as a visual artist. A felt-nibbed pen, bought in Ottawa to mark her boxes and trunks for the move to Brazil, “was on the desk when I gave Salvador his notice,” she recounts. Page was nervous and struggled with her Portuguese, and so she fiddled with the pen: “I doodled as I talked,” she says, “and I fell in love with the nib, which is very black and totally indelible” (*BJ* 89). When her husband Arthur returned home, he suggested that she should begin to draw seriously, and the next day, as she tells it, he bought her a roll of drawing paper. “The episode ... is highly wrought,” as Emily Ballantyne notes (“Exile” 72, note 7), and it is nowhere to be found in the typescript papers of Page’s original journal.⁶¹ To be sure, she might really have been doodling as she fired her servant and simply neglected to describe the scene the first time around. But her choice to include the event in her published journal was clearly intended to enhance the narrative of her creative rebirth. In the Salvador episode, Page literalizes her conversion from word to image, transforming her struggles with language into a productive moment of artistic creation.

Page rarely employed the word “silence” in her many accounts of the years when she “couldn’t write” (“Interview” 34; “Fried Eggs” 156) or “didn’t write” (“Biographical” 47; “Fried Eggs” 148) or “stopped writing” (“That’s Me” 53; “Questions” 18), probably because she did not want to associate herself with the weakness or absence that the term risked implying to some

⁶¹ In fact there is no entry at all for 15 June in the unpublished version. On 13 June 1957, she noted that “[t]he day before yesterday [she] fired the head servant,” and then expanded at length on his flaws and other staffing problems before adding, as a kind of afterthought, “I have been drawing with my felt tipped pen and so much enjoy it” (pp. 54-5 [PKP 113.13]). As they were preparing the final version of the journal for publication, an editor at Lester and Orpen Dennys commented on the scene with Salvador in her notes to Page: “there are some weaker entries here too,” she remarks; “things without context—like suddenly firing Salvador. This would be quite dramatic if we’d heard about his faults along the way!” This telling reaction suggests that Page’s addition seemed too conscious, too conspicuous. Of the whole section surrounding this entry, the editor observes: “There’s quite a lot on painting in this section, also, though it’s not clear whether you are writing, or if not, why not” (letter from Gena K. Gorrell to P.K. Page, 3 November 1986 [PKP 27.1]). It was probably Page’s intention to be unclear about “whether she was writing,” and of course, she did not really *know* “why not.”

critics.⁶² A notable exception is a passage from both the original and published versions of the *Brazilian Journal* in which Page describes a “complex note” that she made for herself in “an attempt to understand my poetic silence” (*BJ* 235): this, of course, indicates that she was indeed thinking of her condition in those terms in 1959, and that she was willing to let the phrase pass into publication in the 1980s.⁶³ The excised journal passages that I have quoted above, as well as Page’s abortive poetic efforts from the late 1950s, which I study in Chapter Three, clearly demonstrate that she was *feeling* “silenced.” But Page’s objective in recollecting the middle stage of her career was to diminish the impression of obstruction and to emphasize instead the fluid transition into a new kind of creative activity. In this sense, the story she tells is very different from the backward-looking narratives of Newlove and Marriott, and even from Webb’s feminist interpretation, which needed to evoke the obstruction in order to illustrate the release. That said, Page, too, displaced the blame for her silence onto an external source. In fact, in her post-silence commentary she renounced responsibility for the rhythms and products of her creativity altogether. To account for these unpredictable rhythms she looked not to money or to mentors but to that time-honoured scapegoat and saviour of creative individuals: the muse.

⁶² Page also did not really entertain the feminist interpretations of her experience that the term “silence” would inevitably have conjured in her readers’ minds by the 1970s. “I consider myself a feminist but not a feminist writer,” she told John Orange in 1988 (“Conversation” 70). Moreover, by the time she was producing her various retrospective accounts of the period, Page had come to associate “silence” with a kind of mystical “beyond,” rather than with obstruction. For instance, when she wrote in the last two sentences of her 1970 essay, “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” that “writing and painting” were “alternate roads to silence” (40), she meant that both activities reach towards a higher, ineffable plane of meaning. I say more about this in Chapter Four.

⁶³ This line is from the 3 January 1959 entry of the *Brazilian Journal*. It is only very slightly different in the unpublished version, in which she describes the “complex note” as “the skeleton of an attempt to try to understand the poetic silence” (“Brazilian Journal,” 3 or 4 January 1959, p. 189 [PKP 113.16]). The change from “the” to “my” clarifies her meaning, but is not otherwise significant. In both instances, she was also trying “to know what this translation into paint is—if it is anything.”

V. “It’s free from explanation”: Page, Webb, and Cohen’s Post-hiatus Conceptions of Silence and the Creative Process

“Dear Jack,” wrote P.K. Page to Jack McClelland on 7 April 1963:

I should have written to you a long time ago ... answering your remark that you have seen nothing of mine lately. I am reminded [now] of my answer ...: if publishers paid as well as art dealers, I’d stop painting and write poetry.

However that’s not the truth either, for one has no control over what one does.

One does what the gods dictate.⁶⁴

In this playful note, Page quite literally “answers” for her absence from publication. Her rather opaque response, though, refuses rationalization: just as we have seen her attribute the commencement of drawing to her “pen,” here she insists that she simply “does what the gods dictate,” with no real agency of her own. Phyllis Webb has relied on a similar defence, emphasizing especially the unreliability of the poetic “gods”: “my faith in the muse is not constant, I fear,” she has said; “she comes and goes like an alarming bird.”⁶⁵ Leonard Cohen has been even more bluntly evasive when asked how he writes: “There is no explanation for it. It’s free from explanation,” he maintains (“Leonard” 44). It has become a bit of a cliché: the poet writes to her publisher blithely claiming to have “no control” over her work; the writer shrouds his process in mystery by shrugging off “explanation” in his interviews. And to be sure, Page’s

⁶⁴ PKP 12.8.

⁶⁵ Letter to Alice Simpson, 29 September 1972 (PW 16.VI.A.9). Webb was writing to acknowledge an award that she had just won from the B.C. Library Development Commission, for her contribution to the literature of British Columbia over the last five years. She notes that she “feel[s] a little guilty about being so honoured because [her] output these past few years has not been great.” The image of the muse as an “alarming bird” is from Part V of “A Question of Questions,” which she had drafted two years earlier, and which I discuss in Chapter Four. She puns on “alarming,” here: the poet feels “alarmed” by the unpredictable arrival of the bird, but the bird also acts as an “alarm” to alert her attention. It was an image on which Webb drew many times over the years: in her 1990 essay, “Message Machine,” for instance, she describes the arrival of a poetic cue “like a bird on the wing, a plump robin; it brushed my ear,” she notes, “zoomed past again” (136). Webb also wrote a feminist essay titled “The Muse Figure” in 1983 (see *Nothing But Brush Strokes* 3-5), in which she pushes back on the traditional gendering of muses as female and poets as male.

invocation of “the gods” is just as light-hearted as her suggestion that publishers ought to pay writers more handsomely for their work.

But I propose that we should also take the poets’ testimony of “no control” and “no explanation” seriously, however cheekily it might be phrased. Page, Webb, and Cohen have all evoked, primarily in their post-silence remarks, a poetic process in which their role is primarily to receive inspiration—“givens,” as Webb has called the signals from her muse (“Seeking” 24)—when it comes. In this process, most crucially, “[i]t requires silence in order to hear,” as Webb has noted (“Seeking” 25). Rather than defining silence as antithetical to creativity, the poets had begun to celebrate an attentive, receptive “silence in order to hear” as integral to the process of poetic composition. Their playful references to “gods” and “muses” were simply a way of publicly articulating this process—a process that was otherwise “free from explanation” (“Leonard” 44). The genuine shift in their understandings of creativity is not necessarily evident from their public commentary alone, and I will describe it at much greater length in Chapter Four, where I consider the poets’ more nuanced reflections on the creative process in their post-silence poetry. In their interview and essay remarks, however, we find the convergence of the two impulses that I have described so far in this chapter: the straightforward justification of obstruction or absence, and the reconceptualization of silence as dynamic and generative. It was a creatively productive convergence, because it allowed the poets to dispel shame, guilt, and the impression of passivity from the condition of poetic silence.

The first and most obvious function of the poets’ references to “gods” and “givens” was quite simply to account for the long gaps between their book publications. They denied responsibility in a way that was incontestable because inexplicable. “I write because *it* writes me,” Page has said; “the minute *it* stopped I didn’t write ... [A]s to what *it* is—... I would be

dissatisfied with any definition I might give you. *It* is as protean and indefinable as love” (“Fried Eggs” 148; emphasis in original). She suggests that the same source that inspires her poems is the source that withholds them, and she insists that “it” comes and goes at its own pleasure, not hers. Cohen made the same point when he declared that “you can never abandon poetry. It abandons you” (qtd in Martin 15). His comment affirms his strong sense of vocation—“you can never abandon” the calling—but he proposes too, with regret, that the poet might not have control over *poetry*’s choice to desert him. In “Questions and Images,” Page made a similar point by staging a dialogue between herself and an imaginary questioner. “Why did you stop writing?” the questioner asks. “I didn’t,” Page answers in her own voice: “‘It stopped.’ ‘Nonsense,’” pursues the questioner: “‘you’re the master.’ ‘Am I?’” Page wonders: “Who would not, after all, be a poet, a good poet, if one could choose? If one could choose” (18). This exchange allowed Page both to deny responsibility for the cessation of her writing, and, as Cohen did, to reiterate her commitment to poetry: of course she *would* “be a poet, a good poet” if she “could choose,” she insists, but she is not “the master” of her own work. “Good” is a notable qualification here: one might “choose” to write poetry, but one cannot summon “good” poetry, which comes from a higher source.

By referring to “poetry” as an inscrutable and independently wilful “it,” then, both Page and Cohen take the possibilities of choice and explanation right out of the creative process. Poetry, the “master,” “love,” whatever force makes them write, is “indefinable” and seems to “abandon” them arbitrarily. There is no shame in silence, they imply, because they do not “choose” to write in the first place. Both poets also propose that they are “taken over,” as Page puts it, when they write (“Fried Eggs” 149). Cohen claims that good poems are conceived in “moments of grace”—moments of self-forgetfulness—which “arise spontaneously” (“Leonard”

43). Page, meanwhile, draws on Robert Graves's distinction, in *The White Goddess*, between "Muse poets," who "go into a kind of trance," and "Apollonian poets," who "manufacture poems." She thinks that she must be a "Muse poet" because, she avows, "I don't have any control. I don't feel that I'm writing" (Page, "Fried Eggs" 149).⁶⁶ Not only can they not command the arrival of "moments of grace," but they "don't have any control" once they are "taken over." And just as Webb spoke of the unpredictable "com[ing] and go[ing]" of her "alarming" muse, Page accounts for her *particular* intermittency of output by emphasizing the particular fickleness of her muse: "I don't think my muse ... is as constant as that of some writers," she explains; "[i]t comes and goes" ("Fried Eggs" 149). Relinquishing control of the creative process, at least rhetorically, allowed Page, Webb, and Cohen to blame the muse for their lack of prolificacy, and also to justify the necessity of their fallow periods, for any amount of silence might be required in awaiting those "spontaneous" "trances" that the poets felt unable to bring about themselves.

But they also stress that the waiting silence was not a passive silence. Beyond simply justifying the existence of the gaps between their poems, both Page and Webb have insisted that those seemingly blank stages actually demand great alertness on the part of the poet. According to Webb, the muse is an "inner voice" that "tap[s] you on the shoulder" with "various mysterious signs and signals about what is important and what is not important, and when to sit down and pay attention" ("Addressing" 33). The poet, then, must be prepared to respond at any moment to the tap on her shoulder. Page explains, "I can't begin a poem without being given a line ... [I]t's as if the whole germ of the poem is in that nucleus," which "contains the poem as a seed contains

⁶⁶ Although John Newlove does not usually draw on the same Romantic language as Page and Cohen do to describe the creative process, he too was a reader of Robert Graves (*cf.* "The Dance" 122-3) and described in one interview the "spontaneity" and "trance"-like qualities of his poetic composition: "I hate to make it sound like a poetic trance," he explained, "but the first draft does come very quickly, very spontaneously. I don't have much control over what's happening at that point" (qtd in Carson 13).

the plant” (“Fried Eggs” 150; “Traveller” 40). The seed or germ phrase “must be caught at once,” she elaborates, “for it comes like a boomerang riding a magical arc and continuing its forward path and it will vanish unless intercepted” (“Traveller” 40). In other words, even when she is not actively putting pen to paper—when she is not in her “trance and ... taken over” (Page, “Fried Eggs” 149)—the poet must be awake, attentive, and ready to catch the “boomerang” when it flies in her direction. “Just waiting around for these things to arrive is passive in itself,” Webb has acknowledged; “[b]ut, in a sense, it requires active attention ... because these things can slip away” (“Seeking” 24). In this model, in which the poet must listen in order to “receive” the “given” before it “vanishes” or “slips away,” attentive “silence” is the condition necessary for inspiration to occur.

If all of this sounds rather Romantic, and also rather religious, that is because the model of creativity that Page, Webb, and Cohen have described in their post-silence remarks *is* both Romantic and religious. The Romantic model of creativity, in the most instinctive, bluntest of ways, provided these modernist poets with the terms—with the personifying “muse,” for instance—to explain their experience of silence and the new creative process that they subsequently embraced. The poets often couched their public references to these highly traditional paradigms of creativity in a kind of mock grandeur—“one does what the gods dictate”—because they remained just a little bit sheepish about how conventional and how fanciful they sounded: “One could get very highfalutin about this, if one didn’t watch out,” Page warned (“That’s Me” 57), while Webb insisted that “there’s nothing extraordinary really about [the] process” (“Seeking” 24). In some ways, as I have noted, the whole story is an evasion, a denial of accountability. But it was an essential evasion and a liberating denial of accountability. A faithful willingness to “do what the gods dictate,” to surrender mastery of their creative work,

and to operate in a realm “free from explanation” (“Leonard” 44) was the attitude that would allow Page, Webb, and Cohen to move beyond their crises of poetic authority and into a new stage of their creative lives. Through their many remarks about “gods” and “givens” and their avowals of powerlessness to control either, Page and Webb in particular suggested that silence, far from being an abdication or an absence, was an active stage in the process of poetic composition. Indeed, as Webb has said, “it’s only silent from the performance point of view” (“Seeking” 25).

VI. Conclusion

And with that, Webb reminds us that the poets hear something during their periods of silence that we, the audience, cannot detect, and we find ourselves back in the public auditorium where we started at the beginning of Chapter One, staring once again at a curtain drawn on the inner workings of the creative process. In this chapter, the writers have each had their chance to step out in front of that curtain and to account for the backstage activities that held up their poetic performances for so long. To those critics who had viewed silence as a sign of weakness or as evidence of creative demise, the poets responded by stressing their vigorous activity. Even Newlove and Marriott, who were more straightforwardly concerned with describing the obstacles to their progress, emphasized how overwhelming those obstacles were in order to indicate the extent of their struggle. Page and Webb, as we have seen, clearly viewed and presented their mid-career hiatuses as dynamic stages in their personal and creative developments. The accounts that allude to muses and trances and “givens” are particularly significant because they define silence *itself* as active: more than just facilitating the growth of a new political outlook or a fresh artistic sensibility, silence, Page and Webb claim, also allows for the gestation of poems. There

are two varieties of silence at play here: there is the long hiatus in the career that the poets have described as a rebirth, and there are the alert, attentive silences in the creative process. These are crucially linked, as I argue further in Chapter Four, because living through the hiatus prompted Page, Webb, and Cohen to heed, without anxiety, the silences in the creative process.

As we will see in the next chapter, one of the most stymieing aspects of poetic silence was the sense of shame and guilt that it provoked. The notion that withdrawing from constant visible poetic production somehow represented a failing, as I suggested in Chapter One, grew out of the energetic critical atmosphere of mid-twentieth-century Canada. Finding the terms to explain their hiatuses and to justify them as active rather than passive states, then, allowed the poets to shed, or at least to rebut, shame and guilt in the very public realm where these associations had been assigned or assumed. P.K. Page's "complex note" in her journal entry of 3 January 1959—her "skeleton of an attempt to understand the poetic silence, and to know what this translation into paint is—if it is anything"—is evidence of her search for those clarifying terms.⁶⁷ Phyllis Webb found the terms to describe her experience in a deepening understanding of feminist theory. For Marriott, the explanation lay in the origin story of *The Wind Our Enemy*, a careful narrative worked out over years of retrospective analysis, which emphasized her "luck" in the poem's success as well as the "damming" effects of too much praise.⁶⁸ Newlove never managed to stop "apologizing" for his "absences," but he did endeavour to refute the shame of those absences by attributing them to the strain of financial obligations. Cohen is the one exception to this pattern. Unlike the poets who have claimed most of my attention in this chapter, Leonard Cohen had already developed *before* his crisis and silence that essentially Romantic

⁶⁷ "Brazilian Journal," p. 189 (PKP 113.16).

⁶⁸ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1); notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6).

understanding of artistic vocation which would eventually prove so helpful to Page and Webb.⁶⁹

This does not mean that he was any less blocked or that he felt any less self-conscious or inadequate or disoriented, but it does mean that he was equipped to theorize the experience more fully even while he was “reeling” through it (Cohen qtd in Saltzman 70).

As we turn now to poetry written in the midst of the crisis, including Cohen’s, it will become evident how much the sands of time have smoothed the thoughtful and convincing narratives of artistic and ideological rebirth that we have seen Page and Webb presenting here. Just as critical conceptions of creative silence were shaped and inspired by particular agendas, the poets’ public and retrospective accounts were motivated by their desire to explain the experience to themselves and to their audiences. Page in particular idealized her “wordlessness” as a seamless “translation into paint” because, as I have proposed, the fact of this “translation” helped to “staunch the wound” of her “poetic silence” (“Questions” 17; “That’s Me” 55; *BJ* 235). But her abortive and broken poetic efforts tell quite a different story. Indeed, as Page, Webb, and Cohen sunk deeper into creative crisis, any chance of hearing the call of the gods was loudly drowned out, as Page hinted in her unpublished 1957 journal entry, by the dissonant scrape of “spade on rock.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ For more on Cohen’s Romantic interpretation of artistic vocation, see Colin Hill’s MA Thesis, “Leonard Cohen’s Lives in Art: The Story of the Artist in His Novels, Poems, and Songs.” Cohen’s essentially Romantic view of artistic careers might have been inspired by his friendship with Irving Layton, who had a similar outlook, and it might also have been related to his religious education and background.

⁷⁰ “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

PART II:

THE EXPERIENCE OF SILENCE

Chapter Three:

“The Whole Breathless Predicament”: The Experience of Creative Crisis

“There should be more to say but I become
when confronted—dumb—

Like a bird in a cage, ~~won't~~ can't sing ~~won't sing at~~ on request”
— P.K. Page, unpublished fragment from c.1957¹

“I wish I could stop starting poems,” P.K. Page started a poem, in 1957: “2 lines sharp as a factory whistle which stop as steeply.”² Page was living in Brazil when she wrote this, and her poetic powers were eluding her. She *wanted* to write poetry, and she *tried* to write poetry, but for some reason that she did not understand, she could not follow her labours through to satisfactory conclusions: the poems stopped “steeply” as she “c[a]me bang up against ... [her] own stone wall limits.”³ The late 1950s were, as critics have observed and as we have seen the poet herself recounting insistently (and retrospectively), an “extraordinarily creative” (Djwa, *Journey* 171-2) period for Page: she had begun to draw and paint seriously—“as if my life depended on it” (“Questions” 18): and indeed, her creative life *did* depend on it, in a way, for she could not write. She was convinced that her poetic efforts were failures: a series of “unrelated images on paper,” she wrote in “A wish,” as lifeless as “400 dead whales in Tasmania.”⁴ By July 1958, it seemed to her as though her “talent” (Page, *K* 99) for writing had dried up completely. In the title of one

¹ PKP 27.5, poem 4. All poems and poetic fragments in Page’s archive are numbered, although the numbers do not indicate chronology. Hereafter I will attach the poem number to my abbreviated archival citation, thus: “PKP 27.5.4.” The crossings-out of “won’t” and “won’t sing” in the lines quoted here are in Page’s original draft.

² “A wish” (PKP 1.8.3). This poem draft is undated, but it is included with a group of others in Page’s archive in two folders (8-9, in Box 1) labelled “Poems for Unpublished Collection, c. 1957.” Page was evidently considering a “Poems Selected and New” volume, as she had set aside typescripts of poems from as far back as 1944. They are arranged more or less chronologically in the archival folders; “A wish” is third from the top.

³ “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

⁴ “A wish” (PKP 1.8.3).

last poetic attempt, she wondered, “Could I Write a Poem Now?”⁵ That question would linger for almost a decade. With just a handful of exceptions, it was the last poem Page would complete until 1966.⁶

Some years later, in the early 1970s, Phyllis Webb was in a similar predicament. She had hurtled through the 1960s, leaping from one creative project to the next, but all of this activity ground to a halt as the decade came to an end. She had attended the game-changing Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963 and announced her intentions, in a report to the Canada Council that August, to embark on a new project of “cosmic proportions.”⁷ She had published the highly innovative (and, as we have seen, critically contested) *Naked Poems* in 1965, and launched, with William A. Young, the CBC radio program *Ideas* that same year. In 1967, she began the “Kropotkin Poems” series, a “very complex”⁸ investigation of “the *problem* of [political] power”⁹ inspired by and focused on the Russian anarchist prince, Peter Kropotkin. But here she faltered. We have seen that by the mid-1980s, Webb had arrived at a feminist interpretation of the project’s demise—“Kropotkin began to disappear” because “his was just one more male analysis of the society as it [was]” (Webb, “Addressing” 34)—but she did not have these terms

⁵ There are at least two drafts of “Could I Write a Poem Now?” in Page’s archive, and one of them is dated “July 58” (PKP 3.17.1). This poem was among the first of Page’s unpublished efforts from Brazil to be “published,” in a 1994 article by Cynthia Messenger in *Canadian Literature*. The poem is also included in *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems* (2010), along with a series of previously unpublished poems written in 1957-58.

⁶ Page wrote two short poems in Portuguese for a speech that she delivered in 1959 at the Brazilian Academy of Letters: “Gigantic Bird” and “Golden Spider Web.” But as she admitted to Eleanor Wachtel, these poems “were pretty juvenile” (“That’s Me” 57). She wrote them, as she said in her speech, to “pay homage to the Academy” and to “thank [them] for the honour” that they did her by inviting her to speak (PKP 17.14). She also wrote one quite important poem (“a poem of mine that I like,” she has deemed it [“Fried Eggs” 156]) during this period: “The Snowman.” (Zailig Pollock dates this poem “1958-1967” in *Kaleidoscope*; it is the only poem in the volume to which he allows such a large date range.) And although *Cry Ararat!* did not come out until 1967, Page had obviously begun writing again by the previous year. She must have had a manuscript of the volume ready by the fall of 1966, because on 30 October 1966, A.J.M. Smith wrote to Page that he “would be delighted” to “look at the ms. of [her] new book,” and told her that the “batch of poems you have just sent me is quite up to your old mastery” (PKP 12.9).

⁷ Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2).

⁸ Application to the Canada Council, 16 September 1968 (PW 17.VII.3).

⁹ Script for “Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*” for CBC radio’s *Anthology*, recorded 25 June 1970, broadcast 11 August 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4); emphasis in original. Hereafter “Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970.”

for it at the time. Instead, as she sought a way into the series, she found herself more preoccupied with communicative impasse—with her own ineffective “scribble[s],” her futile attempts to realize her “good masterpiece of work” (Webb, *PB* 223)—than with the political questions that she had hoped to explore. By 1972, she was comparing her “struggle with the poems that would not arrive” to Rilke’s similar struggle with the *Duino Elegies*, noting that Rilke “suffered years of poetic silence, as I have done.”¹⁰ In 1973, she published one last poem, “Letters to Margaret Atwood.” “I refuse to publish what I write,” the speaker in that poem announces, vowing to lock her work away “in the National Museum in Ottawa, otherwise known as the Great Canadian Coffin,” where the poems could await their slow transformation “into satisfactory failures” (Webb, *PB* 239). With just one exception, Phyllis Webb would not complete any more poetry until 1977.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Greece and Montreal and New York and on the world’s largest stages, Leonard Cohen was in the midst of what seemed to be a very public “spiritual collapse” (Snider BL5). There were tangled personal and popular (and perhaps pharmaceutical) reasons for this breakdown, but on top of everything else, Cohen worried that his poetic powers were flagging. His popularity had skyrocketed after the release of his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, in 1967, but on the first page of *Death of a Lady’s Man*, which was published in 1978, he judges

¹⁰ Script for “Calamities and Crystals: Poetry, Fate and the Unconscious” for CBC radio’s *Ideas*, broadcast March 1972 (PW 15.V.F.17). Hereafter “Calamities and Crystals.”

¹¹ The one exception is “Lines from Gwen. Lines for Ben” (published in *Wilson’s Bowl*), the draft of which is dated 7 November 1975 (PW 3.I.A.233). Webb also notes in her Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl* that she “was asked to write” “Letters to Margaret Atwood” (which was published in *Open Letter* in 1973) (9); it, too, is a kind of exception. Poetry had mostly dried up for Webb by 1971, when she wrote the last of the “Kropotkin Poems” (the poem beginning “Syllables disintegrate...”, which is published in *Wilson’s Bowl*; the typescript draft is dated 19 September 1971 [PW 3.I.A.252]). There is a folder in Webb’s archive labelled “Drafts of Poems, Worksheets 1969-76” (Box 3, Unit I.A, folder 265) which contains some fragments and poetic efforts: Webb was clearly *trying* to write, at least on occasion, in this period. But she did not produce anything that she wished to publish, or to preserve (outside of her “satisfactory failures” in “the Great Canadian Coffin”—in, that is, the very folder that I have just mentioned...). The first poem that she would write from the “Wilson’s Bowl” series is dated 21 January 1977 (PW 3.I.A.223). Writing this series marked a kind of “return” for Webb: between 1977 and 1980 she would produce as much “publishable” poetry as she had written in the entire previous decade.

the entire “ten years” in between the two—his “career as a lady’s man,” as a celebrity—a period of “obscene silence” (Cohen, *DLM* 11). In other words, he felt, or feared, that when he became a singer-songwriter, he had surrendered his *poetic* identity to the lure of “fame and money” (Cohen, *ES* 39) and had lost his ability to craft verse: not song lyrics, but publishable verse poetry.¹² Cohen wrote about this fear obsessively. Both *Death of a Lady’s Man* and *The Energy of Slaves* (1972) tell a deeply self-conscious story of failure and obstruction, and feature a poetic speaker who feels bereft of his gift. “The poems don’t love us anymore,” he laments in *The Energy of Slaves*; “they don’t want to be poems / Do not summon us, they say / We can’t help you any longer.”¹³ Instead, the poems lie in a “river in Miami,” “half-rotten half-born”: failed, abortive efforts at art, left to rot like debris under the water (Cohen, *ES* 117). The composition, assembly, and publication of *Death of a Lady’s Man* proved a deeply uneasy process: even after he had submitted the manuscript (then titled “My Life in Art”) to McClelland and Stewart in 1976, Cohen pulled the volume back from the brink of publication not once but twice, both times—much to Jack McClelland’s consternation—after it had already been typeset and advertised. Over those two years the poet revised his book anxiously and substantially, adding over one hundred pages and totally changing the focus, before finally releasing it, at long last, in

¹² For more on the essential dividedness of Cohen’s poet/celebrity personae, see Joel Deshayé, *The Metaphor of Celebrity: Canadian Poetry and the Public, 1955 to 1980*, especially the second of his two chapters on Cohen, “‘I like that line because it’s got my name in it’: Masochistic Stardom in Cohen’s Poetry” (109-36). See also Cohen quoted in Simmons: “One feels a sense of importance in one’s heart [as a celebrity, as a performer] that is absolutely fatal to the writing of poetry” (260).

¹³ In “Letters to Margaret Atwood,” which I quoted above, Webb’s speaker alluded to this line by Cohen when she commented that her failed poems “may yet roll over like dead dogs, howling, ‘We never wanted to be poems anyhow,’ which I think is a line by Leonard Cohen” (*PB* 239). *The Energy of Slaves* was published the year before “Letters to Margaret Atwood.” Webb evidently recognized that she and Cohen were experiencing similar feelings of doubt and frustration; although notably, she also recognized that Cohen might have had a greater capacity to express those feelings poetically than she did: her poems “may yet roll over ... howling,” like his did, but for now, in 1973, she had begun to believe that she could not write anything powerful or satisfactory at all.

1978.¹⁴ After that, Cohen retreated from poetry-writing for six years. “I felt I had been gagged and silenced for a long, long time, a number of years,” he has said of that period (qtd in Simmons 330): “I was silenced in all areas. I couldn’t move. I was up against the wall. I could pick up my guitar and sing, but I couldn’t locate my voice” (“Leonard” 45). The singer-songwriter could perform, Cohen claims, but as he perceived it, the “gagged” poet had lost his ability to create.¹⁵

What happened? How did Page, Webb, and Cohen—very successful poets, by all measures—end up here, voices misplaced, comparing their images to “dead whales,”¹⁶ describing their poems as “half-rotten” (Cohen, *ES* 117), assured of present and future “failure” (Webb, *PB* 239), and referring, all three, to years of “silence” (Page, *BJ* 235; Webb, “Calamities and Crystals”; Cohen, *DLM* 11, “Leonard” 45)? Moreover, how did they move from the stifling confines of their “stone wall limits”¹⁷ into an attitude that would allow them to formulate the stories of triumphant artistic transformation that I have just discussed in Chapter Two? I address the first question over the following pages, before turning to the second in Chapter Four. The

¹⁴ Cohen had been working on the volume that would become *Death of a Lady’s Man* for several years even before he agreed to publish it. In June 1973, he claimed in a *Toronto Star* interview to be working on a “new book” that he planned to call “The Woman Being Born.” In January 1975, he described that same project as a “massive book” and compared it to the *I Ching* (MacSkimming E16). In March 1976, Cohen submitted the manuscript, now titled “My Life in Art,” to McClelland and Stewart. That fall, he revised it significantly, and resubmitted it as “The Final Revision of My Life in Art,” and then again as *Death of a Ladies’ Man* (“Ladies” plural, as in his 1977 album). Both versions were typeset and advertised, and both times Cohen withdrew the manuscript at the last minute. Between his original submission of the manuscript in 1976 and its eventual publication in 1978 Cohen nearly doubled the volume’s length and changed the title four times, settling finally on *Death of a Lady’s Man*. I say more about Cohen’s last round of revisions later in this chapter. See Ira Nadel, pp. 219-23, for a full account of the volume’s difficult and complicated publication.

¹⁵ Cohen remained quite busy in 1979 and 1980, touring in Israel and throughout Europe and Australia to promote *Recent Songs* (1979). But then, as Sylvie Simmons recounts, “[t]he next four years were spent out of the public eye” (327; see *I’m Your Man*, chapter 16, especially pp. 326-8, for Simmons’s account of this period). Cohen pursued some other creative (non-poetic) projects in this time—he co-wrote the rock musical *Night Magic* (1985) and worked on the short musical film *I Am A Hotel* (1983) for CBC television—and he even drafted some poetic work, too: he attributes seven of the eleven “uncollected poems” in *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* (1993) to the period between 1980 and 1983. But Cohen was clearly not prepared to publish this work right away. Even when he published *Book of Mercy* in 1984, he did so at the strong urging of Dennis Lee, who was then the poetry editor at McClelland and Stewart. The volume largely came together at the last moment, after the period of silence; as Lee recalls, many “of the very best pieces were written later in the process” (qtd in Simmons 331).

¹⁶ Page, “A wish” (PKP 1.8.3).

¹⁷ Page, “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

present chapter is about the creative crises that left Page, Webb, and Cohen in states of near-total poetic silence.¹⁸ Creative crisis occurred for Page, Webb, and Cohen, I argue, when the obligations of mastery that they had assumed in their youth became unsustainable; when they felt their authority as independent “makers” of meaning falter; when the faithful representation of chaos demanded by modernist habit no longer seemed fulfilling or possible; and when, finally, silence was the only expression of incoherence and powerlessness left to them. Creative crisis preceded the actual cessation of writing, for these poets, but the crisis itself involved the *feeling* of being “silenced in all areas” (Cohen, “Leonard” 45): a feeling brought on by the writers’ vigorous but uneasy efforts to continue composing new work. The poetry of creative crisis dwells on imprisonment, immobility, blockage, and death. Perhaps less predictably, it is also troubled by excess. The poets’ obsessions with excess reveal their shared sense of poetic impotence and their growing fear that, whatever they did, creative death—or “silence”—might be imminent.

I unfold the story of creative crisis according to a rough chronology in this chapter. First, I consider poetry written immediately before, or in the early stages of crisis. At this point, the poets recognized that something needed to change in their creative approaches and were acutely aware of an impending threat to their ongoing poetic composition, but the revolution that they desired did not, or could not, yet occur. The moods of these poems range from ambitious and

¹⁸ My use of the term “crisis” is carefully considered. I rely on this word firstly because Brian Trehearne employs it in his discussion of Page’s “middle silence” (41)—his chapter is a study of her “creative crisis” (45) or “stylistic crisis” (107)—and this work set the tone for many following treatments of this period in the poet’s career (*cf.* Jane Swann and Dean Irvine, for example). But more than that, Reinhart Koselleck’s study of the term (“Crisis,” originally published in German in the eight-volume *Basic Concepts in History: A Dictionary on Historical Principles of Political and Social Language in Germany*, and translated into English in 2006) suggests that it is indeed the right one for the experiences that I wish to describe. The “crisis concept contains four interpretive possibilities,” Koselleck writes: it can mean “that chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required,” “a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever,” or “situations in which decisions have momentous consequences,” and it can indicate “a historically immanent transitional phase” (371-2). These dimensions all have vastly different origins and implications—theological, political, and personal, among others—but they all have some relevance to the periods of *creative* development that I explore in this chapter.

optimistic—Webb’s “Poetics Against the Angel of Death”—to nostalgic and nihilistic—Cohen’s *The Energy of Slaves*—to disheartened and self-critical—Page’s “After Rain”—but they all identify a gap between what the poets believed poetry *should* be and what they feared *they* were doing. Then, in the remainder of the chapter, I consider poetry written during the acute stages of creative crisis, as the poets tried to go on writing but continually felt overwhelmed and obstructed. As I show in the chapter’s second section, the poets were questioning their authority: they were not at a loss for *what* to say, but for *how* to say it. The world seemed to offer up plenty of raw material—indeed, an excess of material—but Page, Webb, and Cohen did not feel able to sculpt it into poetic art. They felt powerless, and conveyed that feeling in their poetic efforts both in images of proliferating and uncontrollable excess, as I show in section two, and in depictions of imprisonment and paralysis, as I show in section three. “Creative crisis,” I wish to be clear, is part of the “experience of silence” that Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation describe together. The poets were not literally “silent” because they were trying vigorously to write, but they *felt* “silenced” by their inability to produce art that they judged satisfactory.

Such judgments of failure belong primarily to the poets, not to their readers. One of this chapter’s key premises is that a writer can feel “silenced”—inadequate, overwhelmed, able to write words down on the page but unable to believe in their meaning as poetic art—even while he or she goes on writing compelling and coherent work. And thus, some of the poems that I discuss in the following pages remain incomplete, some were finished but never published, some were published many years after they were written, and some (few) were published right away. These “poems” range from a handwritten, one-line poetic effort by P.K. Page to a 216-page volume by Leonard Cohen; I want to show that both total speechlessness and verbal excess can convey the excruciating feeling of powerlessness that defines creative crisis: both can convey the

“silencing” of the poet’s authority. Page’s incomplete drafts, which illustrate quite literally the breakdown of poetic authority—the handwriting often “breaks off” and the bottom half of the page is a wide open and “silent” white space—and Cohen’s very full *Death of a Lady’s Man*, which theorizes the breakdown of poetic authority articulately and powerfully, show the two poets at similar points in their creative careers.¹⁹ Indeed, whatever the quality of their work, the three poets shared a very similar career trajectory: they all expressed their impressions of creative impotence and entrapment in poetic work that they were sometimes able to complete and sometimes not, they all refrained from publishing or published only with great hesitation, and then they all withdrew from the active struggle of trying to produce new poetry before finally, after a period of silence, emerging with new work that responded explicitly to their earlier problems.²⁰ In other words, Page, Webb, and Cohen underwent similar crises of authority, faith, and confidence which all ended in real periods of withdrawal, but they responded to those crises differently in their poetic efforts (or lack thereof), and that is why some of the poems (or fragments) that I study in this chapter are not very good at all, while others are excellent. When I write of limitations and failure, then, as I do frequently throughout these pages, I do not mean

¹⁹ The “incomplete drafts” by Page that I refer to here and throughout this chapter were written during the first year-and-a-half (approximately) that she lived in Brazil, in 1957-58. They are now held together in a single file in her archive: Box 27, folder 5. Emily Ballantyne has recently published a genetic parallel text edition of these fragments in the Page issue of *Canadian Poetry* (see “Editing Silence: P.K. Page’s Brazilian Poetry”); she has transcribed the drafts exactly, and also produced a fair-copy version of each one. I cite the unpublished archival papers throughout this chapter because they were the materials that I worked with; Ballantyne’s edition, which will be in the future an eminently useful resource for anyone interested in this period of Page’s career, was published as this dissertation was being submitted.

²⁰ I will expand on this progression much more vigorously in Chapter Four. In some ways, it can be helpful to read the careers backwards: the sources of the poets’ troubles become more evident when we see precisely what problems they resolved in their post-silence work. For instance, I argue throughout this chapter that all three poets represented their crisis of authority through images of uncontrollable excess; in Chapter Four, we will see all three poets dwelling on the process of emptying out their poetry of that very excess. I argue in this chapter that the poets set impossible standards of *mastery* for themselves; in the next chapter, we see them repeatedly affirming their commitment to creative *humility*. “I turned you into a silence which became a roar of accusation,” Cohen’s speaker confesses to a higher inspirational force in *Book of Mercy* (35): in other words, he first (in the poetry I study in the present chapter) attempted to “master” that force, and later (in the post-hiatus poetry I study in the next chapter) becomes humble before it. The present chapter, then, offers only a partial view of the experience of silence—a view of impending silence, of a silence that the poets were doing everything in their power to fend off.

that the poems *are* limited failures (though of course they might be), but rather that these obsessions shaped and still haunt the work.

I explore creative—aesthetic and conceptual—problems in this chapter. But the personal, psychological reasons for the whole mess of creative crisis, particularly the self-consciousness that Anne Marriott’s account of *The Wind Our Enemy* conveyed so powerfully, remain an essential backdrop to the drama. Very simply, and very importantly, these poets’ shared expectations of constant improvement inhibited their creative freedom even while fuelling their work. “I think one of the greatest fears for a writer is that one might cease to grow and change,” Webb reflected in the 1980s: “And I have a great will to change in my life and in my work. If that ever goes, I’m finished” (“Addressing” 39). Such drive motivated her, but it also caused her to set impossible standards; the “fear” that she might stagnate loomed large. Not only was she pressured by an inherited modernist responsibility to “make it new,” but she was spurred on by her own vocational commitments. This is not surprising, of course: the desire to climb higher with each new project is built into the very definition of “vocation.” The maturing poet naturally has higher expectations of herself than she did when she was just starting out. But as we saw in Chapter Two, this can seriously hamper her creative spontaneity. In 1956, Page mused in her journal that it was becoming “more and more difficult to write” as she grew older, because “*twaddling* on is not good enough” for a mature poet: “there must be a harder core to one’s work.”²¹ A year later, she remarked that she is “the type of writer who digs down into [her]self for [her] work,” and “this is the most difficult kind of all. For unless [this type of writer] is able to continue to grow [she] must either write the same thing over and over again or hit rock bottom.”²² Having “a great will to change” (Webb, “Addressing” 39) but feeling *unable* to

²¹ “Australian Journal,” 27 March 1956, p. 27 (PKP 113.7).

²² “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

change means hitting, with “great” force, “rock bottom.” The poetry that I study in this chapter anticipates and then confronts “rock bottom,” not only for creative reasons but for vocational, psychological, and really rather plainly human ones as well.

Of course, “rock bottom” looks different to everyone. For Page, as others have argued, it was a final sense that the “impersonal poetics” she had idealized in much of her early career “obscured sympathy” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 100)—the sympathy that she believed poets should cultivate and poetry should convey.²³ It was an ethical dilemma: she recognized “the gap between her art and the world around her” (Pollock 13), and became “concern[ed] about her inability or unwillingness to feel compassion at the expense of aesthetic appreciation” (Steffler 39). For Webb, “rock bottom,” or the obstruction that she encountered, was her inability to write the politically engaged poetry—poetry of “cosmic proportions”—that she had hoped to develop in the “Kropotkin Poems.”²⁴ Throughout the 1960s, it had been her “rather fervent desire,” as she put it, “to move from what has been called a ‘solipsist’ position to a more open one.”²⁵ She turned to Kropotkin, whose theoretical anarchism appealed to her as a political and poetic alternative to solipsism, as a “guiding spirit”;²⁶ but as she struggled to capture him in her verse, she was led not *outside* of herself, but *inside*, where she finally ran into an overpowering sense of creative failure. Cohen, for his part, was concerned that his “unceasing struggle for fame and money” (*ES* 39) had led him to sell out, to betray his poetic “calling” (*DLM* 91) in favour of the

²³ See also, for example, Laura Killian, Dean Irvine, and Margaret Steffler. Page was clearly trying to inspire sympathy for the subjects of the many “portrait” poems that she wrote in the 1940s, such as “The Landlady,” “Man with One Small Hand,” “Young Girls,” “The Stenographers,” and others.

²⁴ Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2).

²⁵ Application to the Canada Council, 16 September 1968 (PW 17.VII.3). This criticism—that she was guilty of writing from “what has been called a ‘solipsist’ position”—was not actually as common, at least in published reviews, as she makes it seem (Fred Cogswell, cited in Chapter One, is an exception). Being considered “solipsistic” was a personal, creative, and political anxiety of Webb’s, and as such, she might have interpreted reviews that found her work despairing or pessimistic as charges of solipsism (*cf.* R.D. Matthews and Northrop Frye, also cited in Chapter One; John Bentley Mays’s attack [1973] and Frank Davey’s dismissal [1974] had not yet been written when Webb articulated her “fervent desire” in 1968).

²⁶ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4).

easy spoils of celebrity. On the second page of *Death of a Lady's Man*, Cohen describes his “rock bottom”: “Now I lie in a pool of fat,” his speaker confesses, “ashamed to be what I am.” Shame, guilt, and failure, along with the thwarted “will to change” (Webb, “Addressing” 39), made these “rock bottoms” very disagreeable places to be indeed.

All three poets needed to adjust their visions and formal approaches in order to recover confidence in their writing. Page needed to develop a poetics that reconciled her wish to express sympathy with her propensity for distraction by beauty. Webb needed to escape the prison of her (perceived) solipsism. Cohen needed to alter the register of his desire, to convert lust into longing. And in all three cases, “a prolonged period of [poetic] silence” would be “necessary to [the] undertaking” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 100) of these transformations. Silence, as I argue in Chapter Four, permitted the spiritual attentiveness that allowed the poets to reconfigure their desires, to dissolve obstruction, and to release the obligations to which they had felt beholden in the early parts of their careers. But P.K. Page, Phyllis Webb, and Leonard Cohen did not choose silence or adopt it willingly. From their pre-silence points of view, not yet having acquired the wisdom and perspective that their poetic hiatuses would afford, “falling silent” could only possibly seem an ending, a prison sentence, a final consequence of their failures of authority, and, as I said above, a kind of creative death.

I. “One vision is not enough”: Poems on the Edge of Crisis

In the years immediately preceding their periods of silence, Page, Webb, and Cohen all wrote poems that express—or imply, through statements of frustration or self-deprecation—not only the hope but the *necessity* for creative growth and change. Webb’s “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” (1962) and some of the *Naked Poems* (1965), Cohen’s *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), and

several of Page's poems from 1955-56, including the well-known "After Rain," display the poets' fear that the continuation of their poetic lives was in imminent danger. Webb explained, for instance, that "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" "express[es] my preoccupation with the actual poetic problems involved at this moment in my writing" ("Polishing" 47). In a similar vein, Cohen said that he wrote *The Energy of Slaves* "at one of my real low points" ("Leonard Cohen" 31), and Page confessed to writing "After Rain" in a mood of "excessive uncertainty."²⁷ These poems oscillate between hope and dejection, between prayer and self-criticism: between a positive vision for the future and painful admissions of ineptitude on the part of the poet. All three writers came to believe that the styles they had previously mastered were no longer sufficient, and worse, that these styles were now holding them back.²⁸ They could identify the problems in their work, and to a certain extent they were also able to articulate programs for change. But even as they longed for something new, they spun their wheels helplessly in the ruts of their old and tired modes.

From its powerful position on the final page of *The Sea Is Also a Garden* (1962), "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" serves as a kind of mini-manifesto, announcing the directions that Phyllis Webb hoped her poetry would take in the future. But even this playful piece is motivated by an ominous shadow—a very real threat with grave implications that the speaker is just barely, for now, evading. As several critics have noted, Webb outlines a plan for formal change in "Poetics Against the Angel of Death," foretelling both the short-lined haiku-like *Naked Poems* and the "long lines" of a bigger, more (or differently) complex volume that would never quite

²⁷ Undated letter to Floris McLaren [Spring 1956] (PKP 8.16).

²⁸ Although he was writing these lines in a different context, with reference to contemporary politics, we might recall Cohen's line in "Style" (of *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964): "A silence develops for every style" (31). Every "style" that the artist embraces throughout his life finally ends in "silence."

take shape as she imagined.²⁹ The poem turns ironically on Webb's self-criticism to describe her efforts to "elude" the suffocating shadow of male, Western, elitist poetic tradition:

I am sorry to speak of death again
 (some say I'll have a long life)
 but last night Wordsworth's "Prelude"
 suddenly made sense—I mean the measure,
 the elevated tone, the attitude
 of private Man speaking to public men.
 Last night I thought I would not wake again
 but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude
 The Great Iambic Pentameter
 who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress
 because I want to die
 writing Haiku
 or, better,
 long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes! (*PB* 145)

Webb conveys her rather desperate need to stay ahead of convention by altering the usual sonnet structure and dramatically varying her line lengths. For instance, she extends the pentameter in the eighth line, "run[ning]" all the way into heptameter to "elude" the danger of letting the poem become a straightforward sonnet. In the eleventh and twelfth lines, she disrupts convention by breaking what would otherwise be a single line of perfect iambic pentameter: "because I want to

²⁹ See for example Pauline Butling (*Seeing*), Diana Relke, Stephen Collis, and Susan Glickman. Webb told Dorothy Livesay in 1964, "When I go on to the long poems I think the ideas, the subject matter will be much more complicated for one thing, and I think this can perhaps find expression in a more knotted line, in a more tangled breath" ("Polishing" 47-8). In a rudimentary sense, short lines meant intimate subject matter, and long lines meant complicated subject matter in Webb's thinking at this point.

die / writing Haiku.” She toys with our expectations over the line break, first tempting us to believe that the speaker “wants to die,” and then assuring us instead that she wants to *continue* writing all the way *until* her death, whenever that might be.

Conventionality is a kind of silencing in this poem: conforming to convention would mean speaking in someone else’s voice—becoming a puppet for Wordsworth’s “measure,” “tone,” and “attitude.” Wordsworth’s “Prelude” “suddenly made sense” to the speaker, the poem implies, when she realized that she had begun to fit in too easily to his tradition. And with this realization arrived her late-night conviction of death—of creative death, or silence. The enjambment of “I want to die / writing Haiku” is a blunt reminder of the possibility of such death-by-conventionality: if that first line had continued unbroken, the speaker would have been caught up, for the second time in a row, in the heavily patterned, aggressive pentameter of the earlier lines, that “Hound of Heaven in our stress.” But “writing Haiku” contradicts both “deathly silence” (Relke 232) and iambic pentameter, and together with the even “better / long lines,” shows how much more the speaker “want[s]” to do before her creative life ends. In both the *Naked Poems* and the “Kropotkin Poems” Webb would endeavour to develop poetic forms that could decentre the authority of the poet as “private Man”; she would explore the ways in which an individual (“private”) poet could *engage* with a wide public without merely speaking “to” them. These are projects that she undertook with a sense of excitement (“Yes!”) but that would consume her creative efforts over the next two decades.

In truth, I view “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” as an optimistic poem. It is energetic, ambitious, and it articulates a clear vision and purpose. The space on the page next to the short lines illustrates the freedom offered by the compact haiku, and the “syllabic” long lines

promise growth and vitality, as in the poem's final line which builds to that triumphant "Yes!"³⁰ But Webb's mini-manifesto also proposes that the consequences of *not* achieving the vision and purpose that it sets out will be very dire indeed. If she grows complacent in a creative vision where Wordsworth and the tradition that he represents "ma[kes] sense"—where she, too, speaks in "the attitude / of private Man speaking to public men"—then she might not "wake"—or write—"again." And even though, in this poem, the speaker *does* "awake" on the June morning unexpectedly and happily rejuvenated, she must nevertheless "run ragged"—with a certain amount of desperation—"against" the draw of tradition. Failing to "elude" Wordsworth's "measure" and "tone" and the "stressful" presence of the hovering "Great Iambic Pentameter," she fears, will lead to nothing less final or dramatic than poetic death.

Even as she worked on the *Naked Poems* Webb remained obsessed with the bigger project that she saw on the horizon: the "long poems" and "much more complicated" "subject matter" that she was going to "go on to" next, as she told Dorothy Livesay in 1964 (before the *Naked Poems* had been published) ("Polishing" 47-8). The intimate spaces of the *Naked Poems* were a temporary resting place for Webb's poetry. One of the speakers is "listening for / the turn of the tide" (Webb, *PB* 180): waiting and listening for some great, global sea-change that would take her outside of her little "rooms."³¹ Webb wanted poetry—*her* poetry—to have such far-

³⁰ Webb's speaker's "Yes!" is also clearly an allusion to the "Yes" that begins and ends (and dominates) Molly Bloom's "long-lined" soliloquy in the final chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Like Webb's planned future poetry, that soliloquy is an obvious assertion of (female) voice, especially compared to Molly's first word in the novel, the "sleepy soft grunt," "Mn," in chapter four (Joyce 46). Webb also aligns herself with the modernism of Joyce as opposed to the "tradition" of Wordsworth by setting her wakeful morning in "June," which of course is when *Ulysses* takes place. Webb might additionally have been thinking of the final line (which is itself an allusion to *Ulysses*) of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the paradigmatic modernist female *Künstlerroman*: "Yes, thought Lily, I have had my vision" (209). Webb's speaker, too, has "had [her] vision" in "Poetics Against the Angel of Death."

³¹ Webb herself insisted on this interpretation, pointing to this particular image, "the turn of the tide," in a conversation that I had with her in August 2012. I had suggested that she was hoping for formal change—the "tide" evoking a poetic line that might "turn" or break—but Webb recalled that her preoccupations were political at the time. I place "rooms" in quotation marks here because many of the poems take place in a "room" shared by the speaker and a lover; as well, the first two sections of the book are titled "Suite I" and "Suite II."

reaching effects. She was clearly concerned that the private voice of the *Naked Poems* could not communicate a message large enough for anyone to hear; as another speaker remarks, “I have given up / complaining // but nobody notices” (Webb, *PB* 184). She had perhaps eluded “private Man speaking to public men” (Webb, *PB* 145) and adopted instead an attitude of “private woman speaking to private woman,” but this was not the end. Phyllis Webb feared self-absorption and hoped to write poetry of what she considered to be “cosmic proportions,”³² but the *Naked Poems* were not it.

We cannot and indeed must not read “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” or the *Naked Poems* as necessarily forecasting the “years of poetic silence”³³ that, as it turned out, they preceded. But we can read them as a kind of prologue to the story of creative crisis: poems that express the poet’s desire to change her style and stance, and that evoke the menace of creative death or at least imprisonment—confinement in an attitude that is unacceptable to her—if she cannot effect the change. Leonard Cohen’s *The Energy of Slaves* operates from a similar position, though Cohen, unlike Webb, would have us believe that poetic death has already occurred; the vitality of Webb’s “June morning” (*PB* 145) certainly seems very far off in *The Energy of Slaves*. Whereas Webb’s poem looks to the future—to a “morning” when the speaker knows what she “want[s]” to write (*PB* 145)—the past tense dominates *The Energy of Slaves*. Cohen’s is a speaker much more certain of his shortcomings. Many poems develop confessions of creative failure. In “The progress of my style,” for instance, the speaker addresses a “darling” muse of whom he “rarely think[s]” anymore: “My inspiration failed,” he admits: “I abandoned the great plan” (Cohen, *ES* 52). But repeatedly he *recalls* “the great plan” of his poetic vocation. “Sometimes I remember / that I have been chosen / to perfect all men,” the speaker confides in

³² Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2).

³³ Webb, “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17).

“Overheard on every corner”: “I was meant to be / the seed of your new society,” “to speak for love alone” (Cohen, *ES* 22, 55). If, as the disillusioned speaker announces on the volume’s first page, “[t]here is a war on” (9), then the role of the poet, and of poetry, is to enter the fray on behalf of beauty and love, because no one else will. The poet must “speak for love alone,” which is to say, he must speak *only* for love and nothing else, and he must also speak alone, in isolation, for love. And all is not lost for this poet. “[F]ireflies” still “remind him of his art” (22); his “work” still “calls to [him] / sweet as the sound of the creek” (28). Cohen still cherishes a poetic ideal in *The Energy of Slaves*: his speaker knows what he *should* be doing—what he has been “chosen” (22) to do—but he fears that from his current position, unless something changes, he will not be able to fulfill his vocational contract.³⁴

The problem is greed. The speaker has been greedy. His “unceasing struggle for fame and money” (Cohen, *ES* 39) has blunted his artistic talent and taken the place of inspiration in his heart. In “Beauty speaks in the third act,” the muse addresses the poet: “money found an honoured place / at your expanding table,” she observes; and when it did, she “moved aside,” “left [him] for another hungry man / who waited for [her] ... / as [he] once did [him]self” (59). Greed has cheapened the poet in these pages: he “has overeaten / in fact he [writes] / at another café / waiting for his second dinner,” and as a result, there is “little hope / for his art” (18). He recalls that he once “laboured / to distill a tiny drop” of “old yellow sunlight” (71), “laboured to abstract / the beauty of female travellers” (115). Cohen himself, like this speaker, valued the cleanliness, austerity, and craftsmanship of modernist poetry, but the material greed that

³⁴ The notion of a “vocational contract” reappears several times in Cohen’s and Page’s poems and remarks. Page writes of having “pledged [her] troth” to art in “Could I Write a Poem Now?” (*K* 99). She also reflects, in her notes for a lecture that she delivered in the 1970s, that silences, for her, are “periods when I have not actually forgotten my contract but been unable to complete my part of it” (PKP 65.28).

compelled him to take up a career as a performer contradicts such disciplined energy.³⁵ “I hate my music / I long for weapons,” the poet-speaker in *The Energy of Slaves* confesses (74). His poetry should be sharp, piercing, and as such, effective in the “war.” But he feels impotent. “It turned out that / I was only a scribbler / and not the slice of apple / you would cut your wrists upon” (41). This speaker has lost his edge. Instead of “labouring” towards “distillation” and “abstraction,” he has grown lazy: he is “willing ... to be ravished / by certain Muzak adaptations” (115). He has sold out, he fears: his art grown as hollow and ephemeral as “smokerings” (*sic*) (22). Cohen feared the same for himself at this point in his artistic career. In a 1972 interview, he characterized himself as “a glutton,” “not unacquainted with the craving of greed,” and remarked, “I feel I have to start again now” (“Leonard Cohen” 31). And he worked through this rather threatening feeling—the necessity to “start again” because his (perceived) gluttony was unacceptable—in his poetry. Just as tradition threatened to swallow Webb’s voice if her speaker slipped into complacent conformity in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death,” Cohen’s speaker’s greed in *The Energy of Slaves* not only distracts and immobilizes him, but threatens to negate the very purpose of his art.

And yet the speaker presses onward (as Cohen did), writing and labouring, scribbling and singing, recalling the “fireflies” and “remembering” his mission (Cohen, *ES* 22). The lingering message of *The Energy of Slaves* is the poet’s lamentation, “I have no talent left / I cannot write a

³⁵ Sylvie Simmons reminds us of the biographical reality of this “material greed” for Cohen: “[E]veryone, including Leonard, agrees on why he decided to be a singer-songwriter: economics” (143). In Chapter Two, above, I noted that Cohen considered his music career “an economic solution to the problem of making a living and being a writer” (qtd in Simmons 143). In the early 1970s, however, when he wrote *The Energy of Slaves*, he was beginning to fear that this “solution” had gone too far. Describing, in 1973, the reasons that he pursued a life as a performer, he noted, “[m]uch of it was my greed and ambition” (qtd in Martin 15).

poem anymore” (112).³⁶ But this oft-cited assertion is misleading if we fail to see the irony.³⁷ Cohen’s speaker is complaining that he cannot write, but he is, after all, writing (or speaking), and by all appearances, what he is writing is a poem, even if it is not a very good one. And he does not seem about to stop: “I guess I should pack it up,” he reflects, “but habits persist / and women keep driving me back to it” (112). The problem is that he is not writing the way he wants to or believes he should. He is writing, instead, according to persistent “habit,” which, like the blade of a “weapon” (74), grows dull with time. And the “poems don’t love [him] anymore” because, he explains, they “never were entertainers” (117). Poetry is nobler than that, and it refuses to be pressed into the service of the poet’s greed. Depleted of talent and deserted by his poems and by his muse, this poet-speaker is “no master of anything”; “only my greed remains to me,” he remarks, “biting into every / minute that has not come with my insane triumph” (65). Greed breeds more greed, until (and because) it is all that he has left. *The Energy of Slaves*, like Webb’s “Poetics Against the Angel of Death,” makes it clear that something must change. Cohen’s poet has to banish his “greed” and find space again at his “table” for pure poetic inspiration (*ES* 59). But like Webb’s speaker in the *Naked Poems* whom “nobody notices” (*PB* 184), Cohen’s speaker in *The Energy of Slaves* feels, for now, confined in an unsatisfactory manner and powerless to realize any transformation at all.

³⁶ Page, too, in remarkably similar terms complained of the loss of her “talent”: “I seem to have mislaid whatever small talent I had,” she wrote in 1954; “I really need some dynamite to blast down the brick wall that seems to have arisen between me and what I want to write” (qtd in Djwa, *Journey* 143). Interestingly, to add an extra note of consonance between the two writers, Cohen described blockage just as Page did, though he conceived of “writing” itself as the “wall,” and “speaking” as the form of communication that he desired: “I felt that writing was a kind of self-conscious activity that might come between me and what I wanted to speak,” he said (“Leonard” 46). The “wall,” of course, is the sensation of being blocked and “silenced.”

³⁷ This line was “oft-cited” in many journalistic portraits of Cohen in the 1970s. See for instance Robert Martin in *The Globe and Mail* in 1973, Roy MacSkimming in *The Toronto Star* in 1975, and an unattributed 1973 *Toronto Star* article titled “Leonard Cohen: A sad poet gets happy,” in which the by-line and beginning of the text read, “Critics worried: ‘I have no talent left: I can’t write a poem anymore,’ he [Cohen] penned, and the critics, ladies all, worried over Leonard Cohen, once a Governor General’s award winner, and took him at his word” (31).

P.K. Page's "After Rain" develops a deeply anguished expression of poetic powerlessness within a prayer for change. "After Rain" has been, as Laura Killian puts it, "universally recognized by [the poet's] critics as a pivotal Page poem" (97).³⁸ It is "pivotal" perhaps most obviously because along with "Giovanni and the Indians" it was, in the November 1956 issue of *Poetry*, Page's last poetic publication before her period of silence. But the poem is also fertile and attractive critical territory because, as Brian Trehearne writes, it "lends itself to dramatic readings of the Page career as a whole" (*Montreal* 44), and more specifically, as Zailig Pollock says, it "provides us with a powerful dramatization of the tensions between the opposing impulses at the heart of Page's poetry of the forties and fifties" ("Introduction" 10). Critical consensus has it that Page struggled, in terms related to modernist aesthetics and gender, with her inability to reconcile impersonality and sympathy in her poetics.³⁹ In its conception of a speaker whose fluid vision—the vision that allows her to produce an "impersonal consciousness awash in imagery" (Killian 94)—prevents her from any identification with her companion in the poem, "After Rain" (Page, *K* 90-91) brings that struggle to a climax.

The poem describes a lush garden "after rain": the clothes-reel is "rigged with guys of rain," "sequins" of water "glisten" on the threads of a spider web, and the gardener, Giovanni, "squelches by" in "gumboots." This "garden abstracted, geometry awash— / an unknown theorem argued in green ink / dropped in the bath" clearly stands in for the space of a poem: Page is considering a poem in which "glistening" images "seem to metamorphose spontaneously" (Sullivan, "Size" 32) and cluster in the lines, pulling them out of shape—

³⁸ Indeed, many critics have treated this poem in detail: see for example Irvine, "Two Giovannis" 36-9, Jamieson 75-6, Killian 97-8, Pollock, "Introduction" 9-10, Relke 51-2, Rooke 191-2, Sullivan, "Size" 32-4, Swann 193-6, and Trehearne, *Montreal* 41-6. We might recall, too, that in the line I quoted as an epigraph to Chapter One, Pollock called Page's "period of silence . . . the pivot around which [her] career turns" ("Introduction" 9); critics have always recognized the close relation of the "pivotal" poem and the "pivot" in Page's career.

³⁹ See in particular Trehearne, Irvine, and Killian.

“ellipsoid.” The poet-speaker in this poem-garden is hopelessly seduced “by each / bright glimpse of beauty” that passes before (and through) her eye. The real drama, though, is that her preoccupation with beauty comes at the expense of sympathy. The garden belongs to Giovanni, the gardener—it is “*his* ruin” (emphasis added)—and he “shakes a doleful head” over the mess. But despite his expression of chagrin, Page’s speaker can feel neither empathy nor sympathy for him: though she “almost weep[s] to see” his sadness, she does not weep *for* him; and neither does she weep *with* him over the “ruin.”⁴⁰ Instead, she observes how “beautiful and diademed” he is: her gaze inadvertently transforms him into yet another jewel-like image.

The first-person subject, “I,” enters the poem only five times, always in self-criticism, and always to express helplessness or shame (the first-person object, “me,” is present twice more, but I am firstly, and chiefly, interested in the accountability of the “I”). First, she interrupts her own description of the “green lace” and “broderie anglaise” that the snails are making of the cabbages to note, “I see already that I lift the blind / upon a woman’s wardrobe of the mind.” Sensitive that her “intensely imagistic poetics” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 43) might be dismissed as “female whimsy,” Page pre-empts potential masculinist critics here. She is, however, primarily concerned with this wardrobe’s “whimsy,” whatever its gender: the “whimsy” that “floats about [her] like / a kind of tulle, a flimsy mesh,” isolates her and obscures her vision. Although these lines are merely an observation—“I see,” she says, as in ‘I notice’—the “already” conveys her frustration: she cannot *help* that the “wardrobe” behind her mind’s eye is a female one, a whimsical one that has “already” revealed its flimsiness by the third line of the poem. When the “I” returns at the beginning of the third stanza, it is to express that lack of control once again: not

⁴⁰ Of course, in reality, the garden that Page is describing in this poem did not “belong” to Giovanni; it “belonged” to the Canadian High Commission to Australia—and thus it was more Page’s garden than it was Giovanni’s. But in the poet’s view, and in her speaker’s view in the poem, the garden belongs to the one who tends it, and also to the one who is most devastated by its ruin.

of her image selection this time, but of the poem's structure. The speaker notes that she feels "none too sober slipping in the mud" of the rain-soaked garden; and it was *her* fluid and "whimsical" vision that caused the mess. She is "slipping" in "mud" of her own making.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, the speaker admits accountability for the ruin more explicitly: "I suffer shame in all these images."⁴¹ The images proliferate despite her shame, however, and in the fifth stanza, when the "I" returns for a fourth time, she is distracted by Giovanni's beauty, the sparkle of his "hands so wrung with rain," and confesses, "I find his ache exists beyond my rim / and almost weep to see a broken man / made subject to my whim." Giovanni's pain exists outside of the "rim" of the impersonal, image-making "eye" that has assumed control of the poem. This "eye," focused on how "beautiful and diademed" Giovanni appears to be, "*almost* weep[s] to see a broken man / made subject to [its] whim"—but it does not weep. "Whim" reigns inside this eye's "rim" and makes Giovanni its "subject" by appreciating only his aesthetic appeal. "Eye" has overtaken "I" here, and any sympathy for which the "I" might wish is excluded.

The first person dominates the final stanza, which is framed by "me" and "my" in the first line and the fifth and final statement of the "I" in the last line. The difference between object and subject is important. In the first line, the speaker has relinquished authority, crying out to the birds to help her change things: "choir me," she beseeches them, "to keep my heart a size / larger than seeing"—larger than the "rim" of the "whim"-filled eye—so that "the whole ... meaning" of the poem and garden and Giovanni's pain "may toll" in one harmonious chord: beauty and sympathy together. The "I" in the final line, however, offers a final expression of distress and weakness—a subjective statement of her lack of authority. She remarks that "myriad images ...

⁴¹ "I suffer shame in all these images" forcefully recalls Page's earlier lines from "Arras" (1954): "I confess: // It was my eye"—the speaker's eye that allowed a "voluptuous" and disruptive peacock into the peaceful scene on the tapestry (K 79). The images, and the peacock, enter the poem *despite* and *because of* her.

still— / do what I will—encumber [the] pure line” of meaning in the poem. As much as she is aware that “the myriad images” obscure integrity of meaning, she feels powerless to eradicate them from her verse, and indeed, she has relied on this very same oppressive image-manner in the previous stanzas. The “I” is tentatively enclosed in dashes over the final two lines, surrounded and controlled as ever by the “myriad images” and their “encumbrance” of her lines.

As these five first-person interjections make plain, Page’s speaker in “After Rain” can very clearly identify what she does not like about her supposedly “flimsy” vision. Too much whimsy and lack of control, too much impersonality and lack of sympathy, too many images and lack of coherence: these things cause “shame” and frustration. And as her prayer in the final stanza reveals, she even knows, vaguely at least, what kind of poetry she would *like* to write. She would like her “heart” to determine the structure and boundaries—the “rim”—of the poem’s meaning, rather than her “eyes.” This confidence in the future direction that she wants to take—like Webb’s in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death,” but without the excitement and agency that Webb’s speaker assumes—has encouraged several critics to seek the positive in this poem.⁴² Killian, for instance, reads “After Rain” as a new beginning, a “necessary first step in a move toward a new wholeness” for Page’s poetics (97). Killian notes that Page’s speaker draws Giovanni into her female vision in this poem, but she adds quite rightly that the poet’s “reclamation of a feminine identity is disturbingly self-deprecatory” (97). As I see it, the “self-deprecation” is strong enough that “reclamation” is not the right word. Giovanni is “made

⁴² Unfortunately, this critical longing to see the redemptive has led to some mistaken readings, as in Diana Relke’s assertion that “the female mind has its own unique metaphysic of order and beauty which is capable of transforming a ruined garden into the poem” (51), or Jane Swann’s suggestion that “[t]he speaker recognizes the need to exercise a similar ‘whim’ over Giovanni, for neither her shame nor his regret corresponds with the dynamic of the scene as she has experienced it. She thus does not allow her shame to prevent the continued generation of images by which she seems momentarily embarrassed” (194). Sara Jamieson wishes to read, in the image of the clothes-reel, “the attainment of a new poetic voice through the death of an old one,” but like Killian, she concedes that “[t]he poem ends ... on a slightly ambiguous note that conveys some doubt as to whether this new voice can be sustained” (Jamieson 76). In my view, “slightly ambiguous” and “some doubt” are putting it mildly.

subject to [the speaker's] whim" as a *consequence* of everything that Page believed was wrong with her poetry, and this is, for her, a cause for despair—indeed, where nothing else will, it “almost” makes her “weep.” The danger is that aesthetic appeal will always trump personal connection—that Giovanni’s beautiful hands will always attract her eye more than his sadness will affect her heart—and that the poems will thus remain fragmented (by “bright glimpses of beauty”) and insubstantial: all dazzle and no substance. And this danger, like Webb’s “Great Iambic Pentameter” (*SAG* 39) or Cohen’s “unceasing struggle for fame and money” (*ES* 39), is a threat to the continuance of Page’s poetry because she feels powerless—“do what I will”—to change it.

Page described “After Rain” as a statement of “self-chastisement.” “Everything I do seems so slight,” she wrote to Floris McLaren in the spring of 1956; “After Rain” was “self-chastisement for just this.”⁴³ At around the same time, in March 1956, she wrote a journal entry exploring “the stimuli which make me write.” “I told someone once that insights into people stimulated me [to write poetry],” Page says, “but surely if the insights do not occur the fault lies with me”—with, she concludes, “my own what—whimsicality?”⁴⁴ This is the crux of the problem. What critics subsequently described as her “cris[is] of subjectivity” and the failure of her “impersonalist poetics” (Irvine, “Two Giovannis” 37, 36), Page imagined in terms of “insight” and “whimsicality”: the obstruction of the former by the latter. She feared that if she could not produce “insights into people,” she might no longer be “stimulated” to write; and she

⁴³ Undated letter to Floris McLaren [Spring 1956] (PKP 8.16). Page had sent McLaren a group of poems—“After Rain” and “Giovanni and the Indians,” and several others—in March 1956, and requested McLaren’s feedback. McLaren sent Page her reactions to the poems on 19 April 1956. Page explained that “After Rain” (which was titled “Kitchen Garden” at the time, further to emphasize her “whimsy” and “slightness”) was a poem of “self-chastisement” in her own response to McLaren. For more on McLaren’s influence on Page’s poetics in this period, see Dean Irvine’s article, “The Two Giovannis: P.K. Page’s Two Modernisms,” and his chapter on Page in *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956*.

⁴⁴ “Australian Journal,” 27 March 1956, pp. 26-7 (PKP 113.7).

believed, too—“suffer[ing] shame,” perhaps—that “the fault” lay with her. Page felt that she needed to release her “whimsicality” in order to get back to those stimulating insights. But how?

This question would plague the poet for many years to come. In her continuing poetic efforts from Brazil, Page’s concern about her too-easy seduction by “bright glimpse[s] of beauty” only grew deeper, the threat more sinister. In one incomplete poem, just five lines long, the speaker’s captivation by a “bright glimpse of beauty” is a source of “alarm and drama”:

At my feet as we walked
the butterfly Navy-blue
mismatched in death
How beautiful I said & bent to touch
But Homero’s voice full of alarm and drama⁴⁵

The fragment breaks off there. Like Giovanni, the servant in these lines, Homero, has some insight that the speaker lacks—that she lacks so hopelessly, in fact, that she cannot even record it in his “voice.” Homero is part of the scene while the speaker is not; he knows the secrets of the natural world—the potential danger of the butterfly, which we can assume must be poisonous—while she is drawn instead to the butterfly’s *unnaturalness*: its bright “Navy-blue / mismatched in death.” The butterfly’s colour, in the second line, is more important to the speaker than its death, in the third. Troublingly, “alarm[ingly],” she is attracted to its beauty above all else.

All of the poetic speakers that I have discussed thus far have been in similar danger. The pattern in the poetry immediately preceding creative crisis is clear: the speakers express, through some combination of ambition, hope, prayer, surrender, fear, dejection, irony, and self-criticism, the urgent need to do something different—or else accept creative death. Webb felt pressured to

⁴⁵ PKP 27.5.26. Homero is identified in the *Brazilian Journal* as one of Page’s cleaners at the Canadian Embassy in Brazil (78-9).

“elude” tradition, and her speaker “run[s] ragged” through the long and short lines of “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” in order to do so (*PB* 145); but although she might have found her own “basic rhythms” (“Polishing” 47) in the small “rooms” of the *Naked Poems*, she felt obliged also to “elude” the possibility of “solipsism” that they seemed, to her, to imply. Cohen needed to grow “hungry” again: to sharpen his weapons (*ES* 74) and get back to “practising / the craft of verse” (*ES* 24); but he also knew that this would be impossible as long as he continued asking his poems to be “entertainers” (*ES* 117), catering to his greed for “fame and money” (*ES* 39). And Page, as I have just said, hoped to cast off the “flimsy mesh” (*K* 90) of “whimsicality” in order to produce poetic work with a “harder core” of “insight,”⁴⁶ but she continued to reach towards “beautiful”—if deadly—images nonetheless.

“One vision is not enough”: Page summarizes the problem tidily in this line from a particularly ominous poem-fragment written in 1955-56.⁴⁷ “One vision is not enough,” she repeats at the beginning of the third and fourth stanzas, and continues, “a second one ... must follow hot foot on that first in a blinding / and see the crazy first undone.” Cohen and Webb were similarly compelled by this imperative. But Page’s poem explores the condition of a speaker for whom “[n]one followed”: no visions followed the first. The poem is a reflection on the past: the first-person speaker describes her present situation in the first stanza, and then recalls “the faces of my youth—a girl / in a black hood, beautiful / who painted a vision, foundered in its pool.” The “black hood” suggests that the girl has given herself over to her artistic vocation as to religion (three or four years later, Page would write, in “Could I Write a Poem Now?”, that she had “pledged her troth” to “art ... the highest loyalty” [*K* 99]). She cannot come up with any new

⁴⁶ “Australian Journal,” 27 March 1956, pp. 26-7 (PKP 113.7).

⁴⁷ PKP 3.97.34. The draft is undated, but it is clearly contemporaneous with “After Rain.” It must have been written in Australia, because it is typed, and then continued in handwriting, on a piece of legal paper with an “Office of the High Commissioner” header; Page’s husband Arthur Irwin was the Canadian High Commissioner to Australia between 1953 and 1956.

“pools” of vision, however, and thus the speaker in the present tense of the first stanza is in a state of “high unease”:

Out of a high unease these verses flow
 like hilly seas that splinter on a prow
 knot after watery knot
 to toss and shake and shudder in the wood:
 these images, unceasing now
 break chilly in my blood.

She refers explicitly to poetry here—to the “flow” of “verses”—even more explicitly than in “After Rain.” And her situation is more extreme than the speaker’s was in “After Rain.” More than simply squelching through a muddy garden, this speaker is caught up in a full-on flood. Indeed, what was formerly the quiet “pool” of a “painted vision” has now become a “hilly sea”; out of control and violent, images and verses “toss” and “shake” and “shudder” both into her—“splinter[ing] on [her] prow”—and “out of” her. The “myriad images” that obscured the “pure line” of “meaning” in “After Rain” are more than just an encumbrance now: they “break chilly in [her] blood” and pour out of her at rapid speed, in “watery knot[s].”

As in “After Rain,” this poet-speaker caused the flood: *she* was the one who “painted” the original “pool.” The trouble was, as I have said, that “one vision [was] not enough.” Pleasing as that first pool, that first vision, might once have seemed, if she stands in it for too long, then it will seem to take on a life of its own, to usurp her poetic powers. And in this poem it has done just that. The “pool” has, by the poem’s final stanza, turned into a “waterfall” of “arctic waters.” The “images” come at her of their own accord, “unceasing now.” “Unceasing” implies, in this context, total lack of agency on the part of the speaker; notably, Cohen uses this term in the same

way, deploring his “unceasing struggle for fame and money” (*ES* 39). “Unceasing” also implies excess. The images, and the greed, overwhelm. In the next section, I show that feeling overpowered by an “unceasing” onslaught of chaotic images and desires is the defining feature of a modernist poetic crisis.

II. “& those ... & those & those”: Confronting Excess in the Poetry of Creative Crisis

The creative crisis that left all three poets in this chapter feeling “silenced in all areas” (Cohen, “Leonard” 45) was a crisis of poetic authority. Page, Webb, and Cohen all lost confidence in their abilities as “makers,” and struggled to maintain control over their work. They conveyed this struggle through images of excess, which, perhaps counterintuitively, express their impression of impending silence. “Poetic silence,” for these poets, implied the absence of authority to produce poetic art out of the world’s excesses. The garden in “After Rain” is not arid but rather too lush; the speaker’s vision is not barren but too fertile. The world offers Page’s speaker too many images, and she fears that she lacks the capacity to organize them into something meaningful. That is what it means to feel “silenced” as a poet. “I have become temporarily dumb,” Phyllis Webb explained in a Canada Council report, “because there is so much to be said and the issues are too big.”⁴⁸ Although Webb writes here of muteness, what she meant was that she felt (temporarily, she hoped) incapacitated before the enormity of everything that she wanted to say. The poets did not lack material, but confidence. They felt their poetic mastery crumbling; or, in other words, they felt poetic *silence*—the opposite of mastery or authority—encroaching. This is why they contemplated themes such as failure, imprisonment, surrender, impotence, and regret; it is also why they hesitated to publish: Webb’s “Poems of Failure” were not published in book form (in *Wilson’s Bowl*, in 1980) for thirteen years after they were written (in 1967), and

⁴⁸ Report to the Canada Council, 8 April 1964 (PW 17.VII.2).

Cohen's publication of *Death of a Lady's Man* was, as I noted earlier, very rocky and uncertain indeed. Images of excess dominate the poetry of creative crisis, even complete, published poetry in which the poet conveys a sense of creative impotence and stagnation, as Cohen does in *Death of a Lady's Man*;⁴⁹ excess also dominates the struggling poet's imagination until, as we can see in Page's incomplete drafts, she is unable to write anything coherent at all. Through repetitive or disorienting lists and speakers who are powerless or overwhelmed by the full and chaotic world around them, Page, Webb, and Cohen express profound anxiety that their creative authority was collapsing altogether.

The problem was a particularly *poetic* one. Page described the South American flora and fauna just fine in her *Brazilian Journal*, but she struggled to turn those scenes into poems. Her turn to drawing and painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s has been well documented by others;⁵⁰ it is enough to remark here that the visual arts offered her media through which she could represent the "excess" and foreignness of the Brazilian landscape more easily and possibly more effectively than she could in linear forms of poetic verse. Webb wrote about many of her "Kropotkin Poems" themes—time, memory, creativity, questions, incarceration, power, and madness, for example—in the scripts for her radio talks of the early 1970s; evidently, the personal essay format of the broadcasts allowed her a looser, less concentrated forum in which to

⁴⁹ Cohen noted in 1973 that in *The Energy of Slaves* he "was talking about a certain condition that all of us feel—impotence" ("Leonard Cohen" 31). This, I argue here, was his primary concern in *Death of a Lady's Man* too, and he evokes the feeling of powerlessness with even greater urgency and intensity in the later volume. Even if Cohen was not *literally* "impotent" as a poet, it was a creative obsession of his which he could only dispel during a retreat from writing—a period of poetic silence.

⁵⁰ See in particular Michèle Rackham, Emily Ballantyne, Jane Swann, Barbara Godard, and Cynthia Messenger, all of whom I discuss briefly in the final section of Chapter One, above.

explore the critical questions that she could not work through in her verse.⁵¹ Similarly, throughout the 1970s Cohen packaged his longing—bleak though it sometimes was—into popular songs; it is his *poems* from the same period that are suffused with shame and anxiety that the longing had become greed: a greed that would devour his craft and blunt the edge of his poetic art.

As young poets, Page, Webb, and Cohen would have imbibed the modernist belief that the artist should distill meaning from the chaotic world around him and sculpt it into art. This responsibility was a weighty one. As Astradur Eysteinnsson writes, “Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world ... sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality” (9).⁵² If the artist’s ambition is “ordering” and he falters in that work, however or for whatever reason he falters—including biographical, psychological reasons such as self-doubt, hesitation, other life changes that have caused him to see things differently, or the simple desire to do something new—then he will feel overwhelmed by the “chaos of the modern world”; or, more simply, more generally, by the “chaos” out of which he is failing to produce art. In another sense, “chaos,” if it is the absence of art, is also silence. Feeling overwhelmed by the “chaos of the modern world” was, for the modernist poets in this chapter, the feeling of being silenced. And in the poetry of their creative crises, they represent “chaos”—or their perceived inability to make art—as excess: too many

⁵¹ These radio talks include “Waterlily and Multifoliate Rose: Cyclic Notions in Proust,” about “time and memory and the way a work of art develops” (broadcast on *Ideas* on 2 November 1970 and collected in abridged form in *Talking*, pp. 18-30; see also PW 15.V.F.6); “The Question as an Instrument of Torture,” about the creative potential and power dynamics of questions and answers (part of an *Ideas* series on evil in May 1971 and also collected in abridged form in *Talking*, pp. 31-45; see also PW 15.V.F.10); “Calamities and Crystals: Poetry, Fate and the Unconscious” (PW 15.V.F.17); and “Rejoice in the Lamb: The Offering of Christopher Smart” (PW 15.V.F.15).

⁵² This idea comes from T.S. Eliot, in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth.” See note 19 in the dissertation’s introduction.

images, too much wealth; “there is so much to be said,” as Webb put it, and they felt unable to say it all.⁵³

That very impulse to say it all is the most important creative reason that these particular poets struggled with their artistic “ordering” duties. Page, Webb, and Cohen were all compelled by what Medrie Purdham calls an “encyclopedic *intention*” (“Encyclopedic” 3; emphasis in original). The “encyclopedic imagination,” Purdham writes, is “a special brand of artistic idealism that reveals itself in the artist’s unselective attention to *everything*” (2; emphasis in original) and his or her “expectation of artistic failure if the work should leave anything out” (3). It is the “basic modernist drive” of the “rage to order” “heightened” to a state of “fervour” (Purdham 16). Purdham studies P.K. Page and Leonard Cohen in her dissertation, “The Encyclopedic Imagination in the Canadian Artist Figure”; Phyllis Webb does not always fit the bill, but her ambition to write a poem-series of “cosmic proportions” that would require and display “immense research” indicates that she too was motivated by such an “encyclopedic intention” at a certain point in her career—or, more precisely, at the point of *crisis* in her career.⁵⁴ The theoretical or imaginative desire to encompass and order *everything* inhibits creative production because it is unsustainable in practice. As Purdham says, the artists set themselves “impossible standards of closure for the work and the self,” and thus “the imagination that is impelled toward endless demonstration will fail”—indeed, *must* fail—to produce a “complete response” to the world (2).

In *The Montreal Forties*, Trehearne writes that the poets of Page’s generation shared a “desire for a new wholeness for modernist poetics” (65), a wholeness that would grant

⁵³ Report to the Canada Council, 8 April 1964 (PW 17.VII.2).

⁵⁴ Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2); application to the Canada Council, 16 September 1968 (PW 17.VII.3). See also Purdham’s “‘Who is the lord of the world?’: Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and the Total Vision” for more on the “totalitarian spirit” that was not only the subject but the motivating formal energy of Cohen’s *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Beautiful Losers* (1968).

“sufficient coherence and force to be of value in a war-driven world without reducing modernism’s ... embodiment of that world’s fragmentation, dissonance, and violence of style” (317). Even as they raged for order, modernists could not impose unity where it did not exist. Their art had to offer “wholeness” of meaning while still accounting for the dissonant parts that underlie reality. Walking the line between coherence and chaos, between the “unity of art” and the “shattered order of modern reality” (Eysteinsson 9), is a balancing act that some writers—*these* writers, Page, Webb, and Cohen—could not sustain. Their duty as poets to provide “salvation” (Eysteinsson 9) from chaos in their art was an “impossible standard” (Purdham, “Encyclopedic” 2) of order; and trying to uphold such “impossible standards” caused all three poets to feel as though their authority was disappearing: to enter, in other words, a state of creative crisis. Modernist creative crisis, as I am defining it here—the kind of creative crisis that, as we know in retrospect, precedes poetic silence—occurs when the poet, mired in self-doubt for any number of creative and personal reasons, feels powerless to shape the overwhelming excess of the “world’s fragmentation” (Trehearne, *Montreal* 317) into a “complete response” (Purdham, “Encyclopedic” 2) or, indeed, into anything unified or meaningful at all.

The subjects that Page, Webb, and Cohen explored as they struggled to write through their self-doubt—Brazil, Kropotkin, and the material greed of celebrity—all serve as metaphors for the kind of impossible poetic excess that I have described above (and, as I noted, “excess” is itself a metaphor for the absence of authority, or the inability to write, or silence). In “Questions and Images,” Page muses, “I now wonder if ‘brazil’ would have happened to me wherever I was?” (18). Certainly, the specific images and language might have been different, but the *creative* experience that she went through in Brazil would indeed, I believe, have happened to

her “wherever [she] was.”⁵⁵ After all, she was already writing that “images, unceasing now / break chilly in my blood”⁵⁶ several years before “Brazil pelted [her] with images” (“Questions” 17). Page’s “brazil,” with a lower-case “b,” is a stage in a poetic career. The physical excess of “Brazil,” the country, evokes the mental and creative chaos of “brazil,” the period of creative crisis.⁵⁷ Specifically, in Page’s poem-fragments from 1957-58—the height of her lower-case-b “brazil” period—“Brazil” the country represents the chaos that was already overtaking her poetry before she arrived in South America. Her inability to complete many of the poems illustrates rather dramatically her faltering capacity to organize this chaos into art.

Page’s poetic efforts from Brazil are full of the assault of the rainforest. “Our house is all openings / Everywhere you turn / doors or windows open onto / sheets of hot air,” begins one short fragment.⁵⁸ There is no escaping the humidity, the “all-surroundingness” of the heat (Page, *BJ* 37). The speaker or subject often looks out from her bedroom window, perched “in the sill of the sunny morning” to observe, from a safe distance, “the jungle straining its leashes” below.⁵⁹ In one poem, Page attempts to describe the “total spectrum” of “greens” that she sees in this “straining” jungle:

There are two things here: the giant leaves
the 15 greens within a frame
green crowding green & being more than green

⁵⁵ Eighteen years after publishing “Questions and Images,” Page said to Eleanor Wachtel, who had asked her about that “question” from “Questions and Images”: “Was it Jung who said that when you’re ready for a thing, it happens to you? Certainly Brazil might have happened to me wherever I was. In addition to tropics, it was a period of rethinking my whole life” (“That’s Me” 54).

⁵⁶ “Out of a high unease...”, PKP 3.97.24.

⁵⁷ It is notable that Page uses a *place* in her metaphor for the chaos of creative crisis. As I show in Chapter Four, she and the other poets describe “silence” as a period of clearing “new space” (Page, “Questions” 20). “Silence,” of course, is nothing; it is an absence; it can only be understood through metaphor. And although “a period of silence” is a temporal experience, the poets turn to physical, spatial metaphors to describe it (I say more about this in the present chapter’s conclusion).

⁵⁸ PKP 27.5.15.

⁵⁹ PKP 27.5.23.

til green became
 the total spectrum
 in the prism see light split & break
 one drum in this green sea

 the other: the high cries of girls –
 cries like the speech
 of each green stalk
 the ones that end in feathers.⁶⁰

“[G]reen crowding green & being more than green”: this is the excessive, overwhelming aesthetic of “brazil.” The speaker struggles to capture the depth of it in language; painting, of course, would allow Page to represent the gradations of the “crowding greens” without requiring a word for each spectral shade. Here, she resorts to repetition. “Green” is repeated three times in that third line alone, and seven times throughout the rest of the eleven-line poem. This verbal excess responds to the world’s excess, and yet it lacks nuance: she sees “15 greens” but can only find one word—“green”—to describe them. And these greens, demanding to be named, are aggressive. “Crowding” and “being more than” one another, they are related to the harsh sounds of “drums” and “cries.”⁶¹

But importantly, the violent intensity of the greens is a subjective impression of the landscape. The poem describes the “two things” that dominate the speaker’s “frame” of

⁶⁰ PKP 27.5.2.

⁶¹ Much later in her career, Page would write about “greens” from an entirely different angle, in “Green, How Much I Want You Green,” a *glosa* of 2002 based on Lorca’s “Somnambular Ballad” (K 218-19). That poem implores, “Come water, come springtime / come my green lover . . . The Ice Age is over”; it is about a thaw. It was written more than forty years after Page was in Brazil; if there is any correspondence between the *glosa* and the “brazil” aesthetic I am evoking here, it is related to Page’s very positive retrospective view of her period of silence as a rebirth. “Green” always represented fertility to Page, but during her period of creative crisis that fertility and lushness was so overwhelming that she felt stymied before it. As an older poet, no longer in the throes of crisis, she could embrace the “greenness” of the world with confidence and joy.

perception; if there is an aggressive assault of “crowding” and “crying” here, it is because the speaker *feels* the “greens” that way. Page’s draft of the poem actually begins with an incomplete line, “I feel it in my...”: a false start at the top of the page, above the stanzas that I have quoted here. The poet is unable to tell us directly what she feels (“it”) or how and where she feels it (“in my...”). Page then skips two lines and begins again, writing only a single word this time: “In.” By eliminating “I feel,” Emily Ballantyne suggests, she attempts to “depersonaliz[e] feeling without removing it” (“Exile” 51). But this formulation does not work either, and so she moves to an impersonal description.⁶² The information from the two false starts affirms that this is indeed a poem about feeling, impression. And if Page had not already been struggling with the management of excess in her poetry, with the “myriad images” flooding her lines (*K* 91)—with, that is, the creative phase of “brazil”—then she would have represented “Brazil,” the “green” country, very differently.

More self-aware than Page’s fragmentary poetic efforts, and also, despite the poetic speakers’ professions of failure, more capably articulate, Leonard Cohen’s sprawling 216-page *Death of a Lady’s Man* is also explicitly concerned with the effects of “excess” on poetic craft. When Cohen revised the volume between 1977 (after he abruptly halted its publication) and 1978, he increased its length by a third, adding companions, or responses, to eighty-three of the

⁶² Ballantyne’s reading of this poem emphasizes impersonality as the problem. Indeed, as Trehearne, Killian, Irvine, and others have shown (and as I have noted above), Page’s modernist wariness of subjective responses impeded her poetry in this period.

ninety-six poems in the book.⁶³ These responses, which Cohen later called “commentaries” (in *Stranger Music*), “interrogate, elucidate, undermine, criticize, canonize, deconstruct, reconstruct, explicate, obscure, enhance” the poems that they accompany (Norris 52). They allow an evaluative voice—a reader, a lover, a critic, another poet, an older poet, an older version of the poet—to enter the text. Above all, they make the poet’s negotiation of excess palpable.

The critical commentator, who is sometimes a kind of archival researcher, and sometimes an older incarnation of the poet himself, frequently cites original, expanded, or alternative versions of the poems from various “Notebooks,” and also from the “unpublished manuscript called My Life in Art, from which,” the critic explains, “many of the pieces of [*Death of a Lady’s Man*] are excerpted or reworked” (Cohen, *DLM* 21). Producing the first, 1977 manuscript was, as the critical voice tells it, a process of “excerpting” or, as another commentator says, “distill[ing]” (12). It was a process of trimming away the excess, in other words: sculpting the work into poetic art. By calling attention to “original” and “more accurate” (75) versions of the poems, the commentaries hint that something has gone wrong with the poet’s creative process: that when he—“he,” the poet-figure in the book, and also “he,” Cohen, reflecting on his own compositional process—“distilled” those 1977 poems from even earlier “Notebook” versions, he falsified the work somehow. “This poem fails because something has been ‘withheld’ from the reader,” the commentator accuses in “I Have Taken You” (39). Such commentaries suggest that

⁶³ A memo of 20 June 1977 from Lily Miller (an editor at McClelland and Stewart) to Jack McClelland summarizes a meeting with Cohen about what was, at that point, to be the “final” version of the book: “Leonard has given me six additional selections and will probably call in two others. With this new material, the book will amount to 160 pages.” The actual final version that *was* published, in 1978, is 216 pages long (fifty-six pages longer than she thought); the “new material” to which she refers was itself an addition to the 1976 manuscript of “The Final Revision of My Life in Art.” Cohen was clearly struggling to contain the volume, and was perhaps not really ready to publish it, even as the publishers were in a hurry to get it out: “despite the adjustments to be made,” Miller wrote, “our schedule will not be affected and we will plan on having books in September. Leonard will complete the reading of the proofs this weekend” (LC 8.9). *Death of a Lady’s Man* has an “excessive” presence in Cohen’s archive at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. Proof pages, revisions, revised proof pages, additions, revised additions: these fill four boxes of fifty or so folders each. Notably, Cohen revised the poems yet again, in some cases substantially (as in “Death to this Book,” which I discuss below), when he republished them in *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* in 1993. These were poems that would never sit still for him.

the whole process of excerpting—or ‘sculpting’ poems—is a kind of lie, or that it at least represents “a deep stinginess with the truth” (39). According to this line of thinking, the modernist practice of “distilling” “unity” out of “chaos” might be a similar kind of lie. Cohen’s own poetic process is thus thrown into question.

Indeed, Cohen added the commentaries to *Death of a Lady’s Man* between 1977 and 1978 because, as William French put it (summarizing an interview with the poet), he feared that he had “distilled too much” (21) as he prepared his initial drafts for publication. And so he made the book about that fear. He flooded the volume with sections that he had earlier judged superfluous, suggesting, just as the commentator does in “I Have Taken You,” that there is more truth in the original and unformed “excess” than in the “distilled” poems. The poet-persona in *Death of a Lady’s Man*, according to many of the commentator-personae, has completely lost his capacity to select the important, the truthful, and the meaningful, out of the “chaos of modern life” (Eysteinnsson 9). Cohen’s process of composing and assembling the volume clearly indicates that he was himself in a similar position to this poet-persona: unable to “form” verse poetry that he judged successful, he gave us *everything*—and did so in a mood of some desperation, having just hauled his book back twice—once in 1976, once in 1977—from the brink of publication. *Death of a Lady’s Man*, as it was released in 1978, is in truth tightly constructed and carefully patterned, and is evidently the product of a poet still very much in command of his work. And yet the fact that Cohen’s primary revision to the volume was to reinsert the excessive material that he had previously excised suggests that he was genuinely struggling with, if not yet totally overcome by, the same crisis of poetic authority that he represented so powerfully in his poems.

The loss of poetic vision and skill, Cohen insists in *Death of a Lady’s Man* as in *The Energy of Slaves* (and in his own interviews), occurs when the celebrity’s (excessive) material

greed overtakes and consumes the poet's spiritual longing. The poet-persona in *Death of a Lady's Man* has "spent [his] strength in boasting and lust" (91), and as a result, now, he claims, he can speak only "a garbled language, the letters weak and badly formed, the parchment stained with excrement" (Cohen, *DLM* 143). The "parchment" suggests both the Torah and the sacred archival documents of great historical poets, and Cohen's persona has sullied these papers with his "garbled," inexpressive words. *Death of a Lady's Man* is obsessed with uncleanness: with "excrement," fat, waste, obscenity, and various forms of contamination "which have soiled [the poet's] finest passages" (29). The very first poem, "I Knelt Beside the Stream," and its commentary, establish that the poet in these pages has been seduced by celebrity, has succumbed to the "obscenity" of his desires, and has betrayed his poetic calling. The speaker summarizes,

I knelt beside a stream ... A feathered shield was fastened to my left forearm.

A feathered helmet was lowered on my head. I was invested with a duty to

protect the orphan and the widow. This made me feel so good I climbed on

Alexandra's double bed and wept in a general way for the fate of men. Then I

followed her into the bathroom. She appeared to turn gold ... [S]he suggested

that I give up and worship her, which I did for ten years. Thus began the

obscene silence of my career as a lady's man. (Cohen, *DLM* 11)

This poet-speaker begins in an attitude of humility: kneeling. He is passively "invested" with a "duty"—a "*high* duty," he clarifies in the commentary (12; emphasis added)—by some unnamed power. This "duty" is to defend all that is innocent and powerless in the world. But he follows a woman "into the bathroom"—the least sacred of rooms—where she "appear[s] to turn gold," or, as the commentary clarifies more confidently, "she turn[s] golden ... gold and towering, suggesting strongly with an immense chrome hand that I give up and worship her"

(12). And, the poet confesses, he did so: he gave up and worshipped her. His surrender, or “marriage,” to this golden woman, a goddess of celebrity, marked the beginning of what he calls “the obscene silence of my career as a lady’s man” (11).

“Obscene silence” is Cohen’s lower-case-b “brazil”: it was a creative stage when, he felt, excessive desires—lust and gluttony—and violent emotions—anger and pride—marred his ability to say anything *poetically* meaningful. This silence is not literal for the poet-persona in Cohen’s volume, just as Cohen himself was not literally silent—though, as we know in retrospect, he would soon feel “silenced in all areas” (“Leonard” 45). “Obscene silence” rather suggests Cohen’s *sense* of his failure to live up to his calling, a failure that he assigns most decisively to his poet-persona. Moreover, the notion of an “obscene” silence clearly links excess—excess as impurity, uncleanness, obscenity—with silence, or with the feeling of being silenced: voice dampened, power blunted. Whereas in his initial encounter with the golden woman Cohen’s poet-speaker was “starving” and “so thin she was alarmed” (12), now, he confesses, in his period of “obscene silence,” “I lie in a pool of fat, ashamed ... to be what I am” (12). This “pool of fat,” I have suggested, is Leonard Cohen’s “rock bottom”: it is the absolute worst place that a poet could be. Hunger suggests longing, but pure and clean longing; the excess of the “pool of fat” in which he now “lies” (the word, of course, has two meanings) represents his contamination by the greed that led him to “give up” in the first place. The shame of this surrender pervades the volume. In the commentary to “Angelica,” for instance, the speaker recounts, “I fell to one knee remembering the feathered helmet and shield and how I had betrayed my calling, clinging to the glory of the investiture, my strength spent in boasting and lust while I embraced the alibi of the artist” (91). In order to break the “obscene silence” of “glory,” “boasting,” “lust,” and fake artistry (the “alibi”), in order for Cohen to move beyond this

stage in his poetic career, the “lady’s man” persona—the slave to the muse of celebrity and excessive ambition—must die. *Death of a Lady’s Man* tries, though finally fails, to bring that death about, for “Leonard ... can still be seen / hobbling with his love” on the very last page (212).

Phyllis Webb also found her poetic vision blocked by a towering muse-like figure, though hers took quite a different form: Kropotkin. Kropotkin was Webb’s metaphor for excess: in this case, an excess of authority—the subject’s, not the poet’s. As she struggled to find a way into the “Kropotkin Poems” series, Kropotkin became “excessive” in Webb’s imagination, and the whole project became, as she reflected later, “too grand and too designed,” and “perhaps too big ... for me” (*WB* 9). Webb’s authority as a “maker” was in question as she laboured to “make” Kropotkin and the creative and political ideas that he embodied for her into verse. In an unpublished poem from the series, the speaker explains the problem, addressing Kropotkin:

your body’s ablaze
 with little loons
 I can’t worship them all
 each face requires
 immense study, a
 Russian peasant’s
 lifetime
 I could work faster
 on the profane
 I could pretend you’re
 not an embellished

holy place
 Stand still
 you're in a museum
 I'll walk around you
 and surreptitiously
 touch the most
 complaining places⁶⁴

Kropotkin has become so elaborate and “embellished” in this speaker’s mind that she “can’t worship” him fully or well. She sees something “holy” in him and has placed him on a pedestal, “in a museum,” but this deprives him of his engaged, egalitarian political viewpoint. Kropotkin has become an icon. And the speaker’s activity suggests her struggle: she worships, studies, works, pretends, walks, and “touch[es] the most / complaining places” in an effort to find something to say. But this project of “immense study,” she fears, could take a “lifetime.” She “could work faster / on the profane,” but Kropotkin has become, for her, “an embellished / holy place”: too big, too complex, and too powerful to portray.

Maps are an important recurring symbol for this poet who “walk[s] around” her “guiding spirit,”⁶⁵ endeavouring to approach him. Webb longs for the “map” that will guide her out of herself, the creative map that will lead her to Kropotkin and to the poem-series about him, the map that will help her organize the “immense” project into something meaningful and coherent. In the fifth of the “Poems of Failure” (Webb, *PB* 221) the speaker goes for a drive. She has “a road / map of Salt Spring Island”—an actual map—and she also carries “a map / of the U.S.S.R.

⁶⁴ PW 3.I.A.229.

⁶⁵ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4). It was in Webb’s application to the Canada Council for a grant to work on the “Kropotkin Poems” project (of 16 September 1968) that she expressed her “rather fervent desire to move from what has been called a ‘solipsist’ position to a more open one” (PW 17.VII.3). That is why she is critical of this speaker, near “failure” in the “Poems of Failure” series, who is not escaping her own “head” at all.

in [her] head.” But it is “too big / for my head,” she confesses: “Too big to remember how many independent republics, airline routes, rivers, / mountain ranges, lakes, and all named places.” She struggles to hold it all. The poem expresses an ironic critique of the speaker, who is so caught up in her “solipsistic” vision—as opposed to an engaged, “open” one—that she attempts to contain the entire map of the U.S.S.R. in her own head, to swallow up a guidebook—the map—that ought to lead her *out* rather than in. Her response to the excess—to its being “too big”—is to become preoccupied with herself, which is exactly the position that Webb had hoped to escape. The day’s journey simply brings her “back home in front of the fireplace,” to a comfortable domestic space where she contemplates her project. “I am aware,” she concludes, vaguely. This line rhymes with the final word of the poem, three lines later: “Nowhere.” Despite the efforts of her mind—her “awareness”—she has gotten “nowhere” with her understanding of Kropotkin and his country.

Formally, this feeling of powerlessness manifests in a number of “list” poems written by all three poets during their respective periods of creative crisis. In *The Infinity of Lists*, Umberto Eco describes two varieties of modernist and postmodernist lists: “chaotic enumerations” and “coherent excesses” (327). In “chaotic enumerations,” Eco explains, “the author’s voracious glance” picks up many different things and the text is overtaken by a feeling of “vertigo” (324). Page, Webb, and Cohen’s enumerative lists are, for the most part, “disjunctive”: they express “a shattering, a kind of schizophrenia of the person who becomes aware of a sequence of disparate impressions without managing to confer any unity upon them” (Eco 323). That said, there is an important difference in kind between Page’s abortive drafts on the one hand and Cohen and Webb’s finished poems on the other. In Page’s drafts, the “person who becomes aware” of the excess and struggles to “confer ... unity” is Page herself, for she could not bring her poems to

fruition; in Cohen and Webb's poems, a poetic *persona* "becomes aware" of or overwhelmed by "disparate impressions." Cohen and Webb's poems, because they are complete, offer conscious depictions of a particular creative position; and chaotic as they might be, their lists are evidently managed by poets still in relative command of their craft. Cohen's lists in *Death of a Lady's Man*, as I will show in a moment, might even be called "coherent excesses," for in their "blend of immoderation and coherence" they do manage to "convey unity, albeit a fairly paranoid one" (Eco 279). And yet all of the lists that I study in the following pages reveal Page, Webb, and Cohen's *fear*—their "paranoia"—that they could not "confer any unity" (Eco 323) upon their subjects (even if they *did* do so effectively). These poems put the poets' perceived failures of creative authority on dramatic, dizzying display.

Phyllis Webb encapsulates the problem of "making" the excess of Kropotkin into meaningful art in a list of books in the fourth of her seven "Poems of Failure." The poem opens with a rhetorical question: "Shall I tell you what I do to pass the time / here on the island at night?" (Webb, *PB* 220). The speaker explains that she has been spending her evenings "cut[ting] out diamonds from a pattern piece / by piece" and sewing them together into new "designs." Within the "Poems of Failure" series, the "pieces" that Webb and her speaker have been "fitting together" are the fragments of Kropotkin's politics and biography; here, those "pieces" are represented by the red and purple velvet, the "colours / of the mystic and revolutionary." This poem is about "passing time" and it also "passes time": the speaker stalls with a self-centred anecdote about her sewing project until she can find a way to approach her poetic project, Kropotkin. But abruptly, in the middle of the poem, with no warning or context, she launches into a list of books:

I sew two pieces, one purple
 one red, together, attach another making designs
 as I go. Mapping it into some kind of crazy
 poncho. I am absorbed in the fitting together
 of pieces. Troika the white cat watches.
 Red velvet on purple purple on red colours
 of the mystic and revolutionary. *The Politics
 of Experience, Love's Body, Psycho-
 pathology and Politics, Trotsky's Journal, Pushkin,
 The Possessed, Social Contract, Journey into Russia,
 Memoirs of a Revolutionist, The Romantic Exiles,
 Anarchism, 'Eleanor Rigby.'*

The image of a poet-artist “making designs” recalls Webb’s earlier poem, “Making,” from *The Sea Is Also a Garden*, in which a speaker describes “making” a “quilt”: “under the patches a smooth silk loveliness / of parts” (PB 109).⁶⁶ As she wrestled with Kropotkin, Webb might have longed for the quiet confidence and easy intimacy of the quilt-making scene. The speaker in “Making” describes an ideal artistic creation, one in which the parts exist in harmonious, untroubled relation to the whole. No such “smooth silk loveliness” exists in the fourth “Poem of Failure,” however. On the contrary, the “mapping” and “fitting together” in this poem—the artistic process that the speaker tries to follow throughout the series in her efforts to depict Kropotkin—devolves into a rather incoherent list.

⁶⁶ “Breaking,” a companion poem to “Making” (the two appear on facing pages in *The Sea Is Also a Garden*), is also relevant to this discussion. A paradigmatic poem about the fragmentation and faithlessness of modernity, it begins, “Give us wholeness, for we are broken. / But who are we asking, and why do we ask?” The poem is finally affirmative, though, concluding that “brokenness” is necessary as an energy that animates the progress of humanity: “What are we whole or beautiful or good for / but to be absolutely broken?” (Webb, PB 108).

The list in the final five-and-a-half lines of the stanza quoted above comprises nine books, one pamphlet, one poet, and a popular song.⁶⁷ The items are all related to Kropotkin and the “Kropotkin Poems” themes, but they are not arranged according to any obvious logical principle. The titles indicate the breadth and depth of Webb’s reading and thinking in the late 1960s: the beginnings of the “immense research”⁶⁸ that she believed the “Kropotkin Poems” would require. The rather weighty themes of these texts include, for example, alienation, exile, psychology, power, idealism, human innocence, human potential, corruption, conformity, anarchism, communism, prison, and revolution. These concepts overlap with the similarly weighty topics that Webb wanted to explore in the “Kropotkin Poems”: “prison and liberation, repressed sexuality and political authority, islands and isolation, the mask, the shadow, maps, left-handedness, Russia, the mystic, the revolutionary, the dream and failure.”⁶⁹ The overwhelming list in Webb’s poem illustrates the poet’s struggles to bring all of these subjects, questions, and ideas together. Notably, although the first-person speaker is supposedly “tell[ing]” us about how she “pass[es] the time,” and as much as she clearly intends this poem to demonstrate her persistent “solipsism,” alone “on the island at night,” she is absent from the list of those last five lines. “I am absorbed in the fitting together of parts,” she confessed earlier; but

⁶⁷ Webb lists R.D. Laing’s *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (1967), Norman O. Brown’s *Love’s Body* (1966), Harold D. Lasswell’s *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), Leon Trotsky’s *Diary in Exile* (1935), the writings of the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* (1872), the “social contract” which doubly alludes to the Communist policies of the Brezhnev-era USSR and (in its italicized form, as Webb lists it) to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762), Laurens Van Der Post’s *Journey into Russia* (1964), Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1898) and *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal* (1896), E.H. Carr’s *The Romantic Exiles* (1933), and “Eleanor Rigby,” that popular anthem of loneliness and exile by the Beatles (1966).

⁶⁸ Application to the Canada Council, 16 September 1968 (PW 17.VII.3). I say “the beginning” because she wrote this poem (and the list therein, obviously) in early September 1967, a full year before she wrote the grant application. Webb was already well-read in philosophy and politics at this point, of course: she had studied philosophy at the University of British Columbia (1945-1949), and when she graduated she ran as the CCF candidate in the BC provincial election. Moreover, by this point in 1967 she had been the program organizer of CBC’s *Ideas* for two years; see Pauline Butling’s “Phyllis Webb as Public Intellectual” for more details about the importance of this period in her creative and intellectual development.

⁶⁹ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4).

here the “I am” has been “absorbed” *by* the parts: by the grandeur of their themes and the incoherence of their forced union.

The speaker’s sewing in the fourth “Poem of Failure” demonstrates the challenge of balancing pattern and disorder. She is “fitting” the pieces “together” into “designs,” but at the same time she is producing “some kind of crazy / poncho”: an utterly unstructured garment, and a particularly “crazy” one at that. Her process—fitting designs together into an unstructured whole—is related to the fundamental dilemma of the “Kropotkin Poems”: how does an author, who must obviously and necessarily maintain authority over her work, represent anarchy or explore anarchic ideals?⁷⁰ Webb gestures towards this move symbolically by transforming royal “diamonds” of “velvet” fabric into the humble, loose-fitting “poncho,” but as the poem develops, the garment remains only a garment: it is no help in transforming the pieces of Kropotkin from a list of books into a “good masterpiece” (Webb, *PB* 219) of poetic work.

In one of P.K. Page’s fragments from Brazil, the speaker fears that if she cannot unite her images or find coherence among them, then never mind a “masterpiece”: maybe they cannot even be a poem at all. It is the problem of the “myriad images” in “After Rain,” intensified: not only does the presence of so many images “encumber” a poem’s integrity and obscure wholeness of meaning (Page, *K* 91), but perhaps these images, seemingly presented in a mere list, remove its very claim to be a poem. Maybe a poet who has “no talent left” (Cohen, *ES* 112)—no authority to coax art out of the world around her—writes lists, not poems. The lush rainforest

⁷⁰ Roger Farr and Stephen Collis have both written about Webb’s efforts to develop an “anarchist poetics”: a thorny challenge, Farr explains, because “[i]f artistic success ... involves the ‘completion’ and ‘arrival’ of a finalizing state(ment) ... then the ‘Kropotkin Poems’ are quite self-consciously resigned to their failure” (70). In other words, at a fundamental level “art” implies “authority,” and thus the only way to eradicate “authority” from an artwork is to allow it to “fail” (even a “poncho” has *some* structure). That said, to release “authority” entirely is to feel artistic impotence: to falter before the excessive and chaotic feeling of having “too much to say” (PW 17.VII.2). Farr’s argument correctly implies that a “crisis of authority” was inherent in, and necessitated by, the very concept of the “Kropotkin Poems.” In *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry / Anarchy / Abstraction*, Collis has stated more plainly that “[t]he cessation of poetry” was, for Webb, “a deeply philosophical issue, and a direct extension of [her] anarchism” (98).

offers a richly poetic scene in the following fragment, but the speaker struggles to capture that poetry in her words:

Write, & imagine a poem that list of trees
 if you will, if you want; / the list is still a list
 is not dissimilar to the laundry slip
 what if those leaves *are* as large as the ear
 of the Indian elephant?
 & those like a woven fan
 & those & those
 spiked, plumed, feathered
 hand-blocked, carved, embossed.

Together though—en scene—entier

The draft breaks off there as the call for coherence chokes the poem. The last line might gesture hesitantly towards wholeness if we take “entier” as a noun —“together though,” the speaker begins to suggest, in a single “scene,” the leaves make a whole (“entier”)—but the awkwardly repeated dashes indicate that this is a proposition made entirely without conviction; a proposition, as the fragment’s incompleteness confirms, that she cannot follow up.

Like Webb, Page uses a list to convey her faltering authority and to lament her inability to discern coherence in the overwhelming abundance of the leaves. She opens with a command: “Write.” But the condition for writing poetry is that she must be able to “imagine” that a “list of trees” can be a “poem.” Page’s speaker struggles to make what Eco calls “an important distinction ... between practical or ‘pragmatic’ and ‘poetic’ lists” (113). A “laundry slip,” like a shopping list (or indeed a library catalogue, as in Webb’s poem above), is a “pragmatic” list.

What makes it poetic, Page's speaker wonders? Eco answers, honestly and frustratingly, that the distinction is often "only the intention with which we contemplate it" (371). In other words, if Page does not *feel* that her poetic powers are working properly, then she cannot "contemplate" her "list" and "imagine" it as "a poem." To the poet struggling to believe in her poetic authority, a "list is still a list." And so as her confidence abandons her, the speaker downgrades from the opening imperative ("Write") to a request ("if you will") and then to a suggestion ("if you want"). She concludes by insisting that "those & those" leaves, however "large" and strikingly "plumed" or "feathered" they might be, do not "together" make a poem simply by virtue of their being "together" in a "list."

The poet is hindered here by a typical Page impulse: "the author's voracious glance" (Eco 324), the hungry eye that insists on taking in "each bright glimpse / of beauty" (Page, *K* 91) at the expense of the "whole," the "entier." The speaker cannot focus her attention on just one variety of leaf but gets distracted by "those ... / & those & those" until her poem becomes a list. The thrice-repeated "and" drives the lines forward, suggesting the gluttony of her perception. Indeed, Page characterizes *herself* as "voracious" in another Brazilian fragment. She describes the "monkeys" and "the bright innocent flowers" and the "small lizards nude as chickens" that inhabit the jungle, but concludes, in frustration, "It is not enough to describe it / who wants a list of fauna beside myself / voracious."⁷¹ In Page's handwritten draft, that final word hangs alone, suggestively, on the final line of the page. The speaker exits the poem frustrated with her insatiable—and yet in her view, insufficiently poetic—appetite for "list[s] of fauna."

Insatiable yet insufficiently poetic appetite is, as I have already suggested, a problem of epic proportions in *Death of a Lady's Man*. The "dizzying voraciousness" (Eco 137) of the lists in "I Should Not Say You" and "The Asthmatic," lengthy prose-poems placed side by side in

⁷¹ PKP 27.5.4.

Cohen's volume, conveys both the poet-persona's hubristic notions of mastery in his anxious compulsion to "account for everything" (Purdham 2)—his "voraciousness"—and also his disorientation and panic as his comprehensive lists begin to feel overwhelming—his "dizziness." "I Should Not Say You" (Cohen, *DLM* 52-3) is a kind of anti-prayer, and it is preoccupied with the consequences of the poet's overblown drive for power and authority. The speaker first admits his faithlessness: "I lose the Name [of God, of a higher power] in my thrust of greed," he confesses in the opening paragraph. In a move towards self-improvement, he seeks a renewal of belief, and he asks, in the meantime, for protection "in the terror of [the] absent Name" (62). But in the subsequent paragraph, the prayer turns into a list of all the ways in which he does *not* want to be protected: "Not by oracles. Not by the Bible. Not by ghosts ... Not in shadows. Not in braided manes ... Not by meteors ... Not by the counting of petals. Not by the signal of winds ... Not by dough of cakes ... Not by a change of kings" (62-3). This list, which comprises sixty sentence fragments each beginning "Not by....," is encyclopedic in its scope: religion, superstition, magic, the cosmos, the natural world, people, tools, animals, and words, are all among other forces, objects, patterns, and energies whose protection this speaker rejects.

Unlike Page's list of leaves, this is "coherent excess" (Eco 324): Cohen organizes the listed items into rough categories so that the implicit links among them are evident and we can feel the poet's imagination leaping from one item to the next.⁷² And yet this list conveys only "a fairly paranoid [unity]" (Eco 279), for what Cohen's speaker so coherently describes is an excess

⁷² When he was preparing the final, 1978 version of *Death of a Lady's Man*, Cohen added five items to the version of this poem that was to be published in the 1977 *Death of a Ladies' Man*: "Not by sacrificial fire," "Not by red-hot iron," "Not by clamp," "Not by walking in a circle," and "Not by drawing a circle" (LC 5.12). Perhaps he wanted to make the number of items in the list an even sixty, or perhaps he thought these additions would bring new dimensions to the poem. These revisions reveal just how carefully managed this list is, but just as importantly, they betray Cohen's *own*—not just his persona's—compulsion to excess. More broadly, despite the coherence and power of "I Should Not Say You" as a poem, Cohen's own fearfully hubristic impulse to cover everything lurks behind his decision to fill out *Death of a Lady's Man* with all of the self-reflexive commentaries that undercut criticism and deflect praise: "to account for everything" (Purdham 2).

of absence. The list emphasizes his twinned terror and hubris: he wants to assure us, and perhaps himself too, that he has covered *everything*, and yet the more sources of protection he denies, the more alienated and exposed he becomes. Rather than opening himself to “the Name,” the speaker barricades himself inside its absence. “I Should Not Say You” evokes quite plainly and self-consciously a crisis of poetic authority: the poet’s efforts to exert control—here, through a comprehensive but paranoid list—only take him further from the comfort, protection, and self-improvement that he desires.

On the next page, in “The Asthmatic” (Cohen, *DLM* 64-5), the faithless poet has grown breathless with panic, “suffocating” as though in the midst of an asthma attack. The speaker assaults the poet with a list of reasons that he “cannot breathe”: “Because you will not overthrow your life ... Because of the panic of homelessness ... Because you will never have the beautiful one ... Because your sorrow will not return to its birthplace.” Whether this speaker is an aggressive critic or a kindly teacher addressing his struggling pupil, the excessive, all-encompassing list is overwhelming to the poet-interlocutor. Twenty times, in between each listed reason (“Because”), the speaker reiterates “[y]ou cannot breathe.” As the commentary to “The Asthmatic” asserts, “exposure” to the “sinister rhythm[s]” of the lists in both poems provokes “a suffocating attack” for those who, like the poet-speaker in “I Should Not Say You,” seek “self-reform” but experience “profound indecision” or are resistant (“Not by...”). The repeated staccato phrases mimic the poet’s panicked efforts to regain composure, but the “whole breathless predicament” of the “suffocating attack” is, Cohen proposes, the feeling of creative crisis.

The emphasis on the poet’s “breath,” which is explicit in “The Asthmatic” and implicit in the “sinister rhythms” of all of the list poems that I have discussed here, is highly significant.

M.H. Abrams has shown that Romantic poets conceived of “wind”—“air-in-motion, whether it occurs as breeze or breath, wind or respiration—whether the air is compelled into motion by natural forces or by the action of the human lungs”—as the animating force of their poetry (37). Cohen takes this image up frequently throughout *Death of a Lady's Man*; “The Asthmatic” is about a poet who has something seriously—deathly, even—wrong with the way in which “air-in-motion” passes into his “lungs.” The problem, crucially, is with the poet, not with the wind. Abrams explains that normally, for Romantic poets, “[t]he rising wind ... is correlated with ... the renewal of life and emotional vigor after apathy and a deathlike torpor, and an outburst of creative power following a period of imaginative sterility” (37-8). But the modernist poets in this study struggled with *excess* rather than “sterility” and “apathy.” They were not lacking inspiration: indeed, they might never have been lacking inspiration, even during the years when they found themselves unable to write anything at all. On the contrary, as their disorienting lists and metaphors of excess suggest, Webb, Page, and Cohen experienced a gale, a windy blast of creative possibility, but they doubted their own abilities to convert it into poetic art. Even if Cohen, and Webb to a degree, *were* still able to produce coherent, even excellent, poems about that very doubt and disorientation, their profound discomfort throughout the process—Cohen’s anxious eleventh-hour revisions to *Death of a Lady's Man*, Webb’s inability to get beyond the prefatory “Poems of Failure” in her “Kropotkin Poems” series—clearly indicates that they were *feeling* just as insecure as the personae who inhabit their work. Creative crisis, for these modernist writers, occurred when they judged themselves incapable (regardless of what the rest of us might think) of inhaling “the chaos of the modern world” (Eysteinsson 9) and exhaling it as poetry.

We can imagine the experience of creative crisis for all three poets, then, as something that felt rather like an asthma attack. The poets were supposed to be “mediators between outer motion and inner motion” (Abrams 38), but because they had lost confidence in their poetic skill (“I have no talent left” [Cohen, *ES* 112], no change is possible, “do what I will” [Page, *K* 91]), they struggled to produce art out of the tempestuous “shattered order of modern reality” (Eysteinnsson 9). As I have shown, they often expressed this “breathless predicament” (Cohen, *DLM* 65) through repetitive lists, and by describing poet-speakers who are overwhelmed by their subjects or surroundings. In Cohen’s “The Asthmatic,” the overwhelmed poet has “commanded the guards to shut down the doors and take away breathing” (*DLM* 64): only a complete cessation of breath—or, to pursue the analogy, of the intake and output involved in poetic composition—will allow the asthmatic poet respite from his “suffocating attack,” from gasping and wheezing—or, to pursue the analogy once more, from trying and struggling to create. This is a very important point in our understanding of the poets’ progressions from the “breathless predicament” of creative crisis—from feeling “gagged” (Cohen qtd in Simmons 330), trapped in a habit, a persona, an attitude, a mode or a style, and from trying but finally being unable to “overthrow” their lives (Cohen, *DLM* 64)—to the more complete periods of silence that would follow for all three. To go on straining for authority, fighting to regain control of the projects that seemed to be eluding them—capturing Brazil or Kropotkin in poetry, ending the “obscene silence” of the celebrity poet’s “career as a lady’s man” (Cohen, *DLM* 11)—would only be to prolong the “suffocating attack.” The only way that these crises of poetic authority could possibly end was in the “tak[ing] away” of “breathing” (Cohen, *DLM* 64): in poetic silence.

P.K. Page’s fragments from 1957-58 illustrate this trajectory vividly, for they take us just one step beyond the *feeling* of being “silenced” in creative crisis—as in, not writing in a way that

the poet judges satisfactory, but still writing—towards more literal silence—as in, no words on the page at all. But strikingly, the “silent” white spaces in Page’s drafts are responses to *excess*. For instance, among the poet’s Brazil papers is a page with “On looking out of My Bedroom Window” handwritten across the top: a clear announcement that she intended a poem to follow. But the ‘poem’ that Page began to write below stops after just one line: “15 greens within a frame.”⁷³ It is only five words long, but this line conveys the poet’s painful confrontation of excess just as powerfully as Webb’s list of books or Cohen’s aggressive assaults do. Page sees “15 greens”—which is quite a lot of greens—“within a frame”—her bedroom window—but she does not know what to do with them, how to turn them into a poem. “There should be more to say,” she remarks in another fragment, “but I become / when confronted— dumb— // Like a bird in a cage, can’t sing on request.”⁷⁴ When “confronted” by all of the many things that there are “to say,” she becomes “dumb.” (Recall Webb’s very similar self-diagnosis: “I have become temporarily dumb because there is so much to be said.”)⁷⁵ Feeling “dumb” for the modernist poet involved a perceived absence of skill, talent, craftsmanship; feeling “silenced in all areas” (Cohen, “Leonard” 45) meant lacking the authority, the *sense* of authority, to organize everything that there was “to be said”—the “15 greens,” for instance—into a poem. One response to this feeling was to attempt to “account for everything” (Purdham, “Encyclopedic” 2), as Cohen did when he anxiously expanded *Death of a Lady’s Man* by nearly one hundred pages between 1976 and 1978. The other response was to break off altogether, as Webb did with the

⁷³ PKP 27.5.21. Page was persistent with this line, and this view out of her bedroom window. She expanded it in the poem that I discussed above, “There are two things here: the giant leaves / the 15 greens within a frame” (PKP 27.5.2), and also “This Whole Green World,” which, like “There are two things here,” describes the greens and the “screams” of the children playing outside (PKP 27.5.3, 4; published in *Kaleidoscope*, p. 103).

⁷⁴ This is actually the beginning of the poem that ends with the speaker’s bitter dismissal of her “voracious” description of fauna, which I discussed above. Page seems to have been uncertain just how much control she (or her speaker) had over her “singing.” In this third line in the draft, “won’t” is twice deleted and replaced with “can’t”: as I quoted it in the epigraph to this chapter, the line in her draft reads, “Like a bird in a cage, ~~won’t~~ can’t sing ~~won’t~~ sing ~~at~~ on request” (PKP 27.5.4).

⁷⁵ Report to the Canada Council, 8 April 1964 (PW 17.VII.2).

“Kropotkin Poems” series, and as Page did in the majority of her individual drafts from Brazil. Both responses, Cohen’s very full pages and Page’s very empty ones, express the poets’ crushing sense of inadequacy, and their fear that, “do what [they would]” (Page, *K* 91), they could not order the world around them into meaningful poetic art.

III. “Being so shut in”: Feeling Imprisoned in the Poetry of Creative Crisis

The chaos of unmade art feels to the faltering poet as impenetrable as a “brick wall” (Page qtd in Djwa, *Journey* 143). As they obsessively considered their sensations of poetic impotence, the three poets all wrote poems about imprisonment and paralysis. Page’s poet-speaker who “can’t sing on request” compares herself to “a bird in a cage,” her song stifled by her confinement—or perhaps more accurately, her feeling of “songlessness” as good as a cage. The poets all imagined creative impasse as physical immobility. All three found themselves helplessly shackled to the very styles, attitudes, and desires that they had sought so fervently to escape earlier: Webb’s so-called solipsism (“Addressing” 42), Page’s fluid image-making, Cohen’s appetite for “fame and money” (*ES* 39). Sometimes their speakers are confined in the claustrophobic depths of their own minds. Other times they are physically immobilized: their inability to move evokes their inability to speak. They frequently emphasize the physical pain of poetic obstruction, as Cohen did in “The Asthmatic.” In Page’s “This Whole Green World,” for instance, “silence” “aches” around the whole world as the speaker perceives it, a “bruise in three dimensions ... a slow / chrysoprase fire to gut the head” (*K* 103).⁷⁶ For Cohen, “silence” is a barrier against which many “poets ... have bruised their mouths” (*DLM* 187). Phyllis Webb describes Ezra Pound,

⁷⁶ “This Whole Green World” is important as one of Page’s more “complete” Brazilian poetic efforts: among her papers, there are two drafts of the poem, both typed (which is significant because all except one of the other poems in this folder are handwritten). Critics who focus on the relationship between Page’s visual and poetic arts, such as Michèle Rackham and Emily Ballantyne, have noted that in the later draft, instead of simply describing the “ache” of “silence” around the “whole green world,” Page’s speaker additionally proposes, “Paint it.”

imprisoned in Pisa, “shaking and sweating, being so shut in” (*PB* 233). The actual experience of creative crisis was a crisis of authority, as I have shown, but for the writers, this *felt* like obstruction: they felt confined by the limitations of their skill.

Death of a Lady's Man bursts at the seams with all of the excesses of greed, lust, power, and Cohen's celebrity lifestyle—his “triumph of blazing genius” (21)—but at the same time, it fixates on and even enacts imprisonment. The personae in the volume are all trapped in various ways. The “lady's man” is “locked” (Cohen, *DLM* 55) in his marriage—to a wife, but also to the “golden” and “towering” temptress of celebrity from “I Knelt Beside the Stream” (12). It is a marriage that “will not yield to violence or dissection” (115) despite his best efforts: it “heal[s] itself the moment it is condemned” (55). The poet in these pages is also stuck in the “pool of fat” that has collected around his greed; he is frozen in “the obscene silence” of his “career” (12). *Death of a Lady's Man* should record the “death” of this paralyzed and slavish “lady's man,” but as one of the voices declares, “[t]here is no death in this book” (113). Indeed, as I noted briefly above, on the final page he “can still be seen / hobbling with his love”: “his death belongs to the future” (212).⁷⁷ The book ostensibly goes nowhere (though this is of course the interpretive point of interest that takes it *everywhere*): the voices contradict themselves, the poems circle back on themselves, and Cohen's efforts to eradicate the contaminating presences from his poetic work are finally futile.

The poet-persona in *Death of a Lady's Man* is also ensnared in endless self-examination. The volume is in many ways an address by the poet to “a man in the mirror” (Cohen, *DLM* 192); the commentaries, although their speakers are diverse, provide the mirror. The commentaries

⁷⁷ In fact, it is “Leonard” who “can still be seen” on the final page of *Death of a Lady's Man* (212). But as Joel Deshayes observes, Cohen's “use of his own name [in his poetry] is self-promotional” (117), and thus this “Leonard” is associated with his lady's man or celebrity persona. Indeed, in the poem from *The Energy of Slaves* where he claimed to “have no talent left,” he also invited us to “call [him] Len or Lennie now” (112).

were born in a spirit of “confrontation”: Cohen told Sylvie Simmons that when he revised the volume he wanted to “‘confront the book,’ to go back through it page by page, and write his reactions to what he read” (311). Although in effect the commentaries open the poems and provoke the reader, their purported aim *within* the volume is to “discredit and neutralize” (Cohen, *DLM* 25) the poetry. Their dominant tone is antagonistic and evaluative. They expose the speakers of the poems in lies, omissions, exaggerations, and inaccuracies—or they endeavour to do so, at least. “Death to this Book” (20), for example, is a very angry poem: the speaker curses the book, his life in art, and his unhappy marriage. But the evaluative voice in the commentary pacifies and contains the emotion of the original poem by questioning and revising it: “Does he really wish to negate his life and work?” (21). The commentary offers a “different picture” in which “the energy is similar”—similarly robust—but the tone is boastful. “I am the stylist of my era and the only honest man in town,” declares the speaker of this “different picture” version of the poem.⁷⁸ They cancel one another out. The “hours in the mirror” afforded by the volume’s self-reflexive structure turn out to be “disagreeable” and meaningless, according to the speaker in “The End of My Life in Art”: nothing more than an exercise in “moronic frivolity and despair” (198). The exercise, this speaker feels, has led him nowhere except deep into a “hall of mirrors” (Norris 52) populated by his own infinitely replicating image.

Phyllis Webb also explored the imprisonment of the creative mind in solipsism and self-consciousness. She is even more literal than Cohen in her thematic considerations and formal enactments of confinement. “Prison and liberation” were first among the subjects that she

⁷⁸ Cohen revised several of the commentaries from *Death of a Lady’s Man* heavily before republishing them in *Stranger Music* in 1993, and the commentary to “Death to this Book” was one of them. He changed the first person to third person: “It will become clear that he is the stylist of his era and the only honest man in town” (224). The commentary becomes, as a result, less a “cancelling out” than a (somewhat hyperbolic) critical judgment. I quote the versions of these poems that were published in 1978 because I am interested in how Cohen established the relationships between poems and commentaries at that time.

intended to explore in the “Kropotkin Poems,”⁷⁹ and accordingly, there are many actual (historical) prisons and imprisoned figures in that series: Ezra Pound, whom I mentioned above, in his cage in Italy, Dostoevsky in Siberia, Socrates in Ancient Greece, and, of course, Peter Kropotkin in the St. Peter and St. Paul fortress. When she began the project, Webb was interested in prisons because she hoped to execute a jailbreak from the isolation of the individual mind. Imprisonment was a metaphor for the artist’s initial creative position: the dream vision that will become the poem first exists inside the mind, and the challenge is getting it *out*. One of the “Kropotkin Poems” drafts expresses, in an epigraph quoting Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Webb’s aim as she struggled to move out from the intimate, lyrical position of the *Naked Poems* towards a broader, worldlier perspective: “I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world.”⁸⁰ She seeks a link, a point of transition, a way of moving from individual seclusion to communion with others.

But the poet-speaker concludes the “Poems of Failure” very doubtful as to whether such a transition will ever be possible for her. The “Poems of Failure” sequence was intended as a preface to the larger “Kropotkin Poems” project, and so presumably Webb would have explored this problem further, if not worked it through to a solution, in the rest of the series. As we have seen, though, she struggled to capture Kropotkin’s “godlike” (“Addressing” 34) presence and became absorbed—imprisoned—instead in her sense of creative failure: the very position that she had hoped to escape in the first place. The “Poems of Failure” sequence, Webb has explained, “moves gradually into prose, as the creator spirit withdraws and the failure of the

⁷⁹ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4).

⁸⁰ These are lines 1-2 of Act V, scene v. The poem is “Richard II,” originally one of the “portraits” (like “Ezra Pound,” “Socrates,” and “For Fyodor,” which were published in *Wilson’s Bowl*) written towards the “Kropotkin Poems” (PW 3.I.A.229). “Richard II” has now been published in the “Uncollected and Unpublished Poems” section of *Peacock Blue: Collected Poems* (p. 457), without the epigraph.

poetic project seems imminent.”⁸¹ By the last of the seven poems, the speaker cannot find a way to depict Kropotkin or to express his dream:

The simple profundity of a deadman works
at my style. I am impoverished. He the White Christ.
Not a case of identification. Easier to see myself
in the white cat asleep on the bed. Exile. I live
alone. I have a phone. I shall go to Russia. One
more day run round and the ‘good masterpiece of work’
does not come. I scribble. I approach some distant dream.
I wait for moonlight reflecting on the night sea. I can
wait. We shall see. (Webb, *PB* 223)

The speaker’s “exile”—her “solipsistic” isolation—cannot be overcome. She has “a phone,” but even that symbol of connection will not link her to Kropotkin: she will have to move physically out of her space—“go to Russia”—in order to find him.⁸² As in the unpublished poem that I discussed earlier, the speaker “can’t worship” her subject properly because he has grown too “holy” and “embellished.”⁸³ She struggles to identify with his magnificent, Christlike presence.⁸⁴ She considers the near-prose of her lines “impoverished” before the paradoxically but ideally balanced “simple profundity” of Kropotkin, the anarchist prince. The speaker “scribbles” rather

⁸¹ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4).

⁸² Indeed, Webb *did* travel to Russia just after she had written this poem: as Sharon Thesen writes in the “Biography” in *The Vision Tree*, during her six-month leave from “Ideas” in the second half of 1967, the poet took “the long way back to Toronto” from Salt Spring Island, “stay[ing] for a short time in Russia, having become interested in the anarchist movement, contemporaneous with the Russian revolution” (158).

⁸³ PW 3.I.A.229.

⁸⁴ The image of Kropotkin as the “White Christ” comes to Webb most directly from George Woodcock’s biography of Kropotkin, *The Anarchist Prince* (1950), the fifth chapter of which is titled, “The White Jesus.” But Woodcock is alluding to Oscar Wilde, who described Kropotkin in his *De Profundis* as “that beautiful white Christ that seems coming out of Russia” (185). Wilde would certainly have appealed to Webb as an imprisoned artist figure; the material for *De Profundis* was written in prison. He was also interested (particularly in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*), like Webb, in the relationship between individualism, socialism, and art.

than writes; she “approaches” the dream but does not reach it. The lines are halting, composed of short, subject-object sentences. Most prominently, the obsessive repetition of “I” breaks up the passage. Eight of the fifteen sentences in this excerpt begin with “I.” The “I” impedes vision: the speaker longs to reach Kropotkin’s “distant dream”—*his* vision—but she cannot see past her own “I,” her own vision of a “good masterpiece of work” that will not come (Webb, *PB* 219).

Webb seems to conclude, or she does not get past the problem, that the “solitary confinement” of either real-life incarceration or of psychological “solipsism” finally silences the creative mind. The prisoners in the third of the “Poems of Failure” can communicate only inarticulately: “Tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. / Prisoners in the St. Peter and St. Paul fortress / sending their telex messages” (Webb, *PB* 219). Prison stifles even Kropotkin’s artistic and revolutionary spirit in several of the other “Kropotkin Poems.” In one unpublished piece, Kropotkin catches himself “singing from [his] favourite opera,” but the guard commands him to stop. They argue: “‘I will sing.’ / ‘You must not.’ / ‘I will sing nevertheless.’” But Kropotkin’s resolve falters, and following an ellipsis, he confesses, “A few days later I had lost all / desire to sing. I tried to do it on principle, but it was / of no avail.”⁸⁵ Part of this conversation comes directly from *Comrade Kropotkin*, a 1908 study of the revolutionary leader by Victor Robinson. According to Robinson’s account, Kropotkin began to sing at first in response to the “utter silence, [the] intense stillness, [the] grave-like deadness” of his jail cell: “When the killing silence first began to oppress him, he hummed a tune.” The guard reprimanded him, and “a few days later, Peter Kropotkin could not sing” (Robinson 61). Like Kropotkin, Webb “hummed a tune”—or wrote poetry—in an effort to *escape* the “silence” and “deadness” of her creative imprisonment, but in time the poet, like her “guiding spirit,”⁸⁶ could not “sing” at all.

⁸⁵ PW 3.I.A.267.

⁸⁶ Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 (PW 15.V.G.4).

One way to escape the mind, we might say, is to lose it. Deliberately relinquishing conscious control over certain aspects of the creative process was one of the ways that Webb eventually found to begin writing again after her middle silence, as I will show in Chapter Four. But in her poetry and also in her radio broadcasts of the 1960s and 1970s Webb was preoccupied with a more dangerous, less willed loss of mental control: madness.⁸⁷ Madness was supposed to be one of the principal themes of the “Kropotkin Poems,” and Webb wrote several “portrait poems” about “mad” figures in confinement. In “Ezra Pound” (PB 233), Webb considers Pound in his cage “under the Pisan sunfire.” The limits of this cage represent the ends of the earth for the imprisoned poet, who “hikes from pole to pole / to plot once more the stars of his fixed / obsession.” Pound is “obsessed” with his work—the *Cantos*—and his ideas about Eastern philosophy: he is “obsessed” as Webb was herself with the “Kropotkin Poems” project. His confinement is thus a kind of parallel to hers. The reality of Pound’s situation is disturbing: his “old man’s hair is matted with rain / and wardust” and his captors “shine light all night / on the perplexity of his predicament.” And yet, though physically he “slumps in a corner wondering what went / wrong,” “the reaches of his mind” (Webb, PB 217) are, like Kropotkin’s, admirable. Pound “sees straight / through the bars into the court of Confucius.” His vision is vast and his creativity persists: “the canto aris[es]: ‘*And if the corn cat be beaten / Demeter has lain in my furrow.*’” The agricultural imagery of these lines, from Canto 80, reinforces the fact that Pound’s

⁸⁷ As she struggled to produce new poems, Webb also wrote a radio play, “Rejoice in the Lamb: The Offering of Christopher Smart,” that investigates the composition of Smart’s *Jubilate Agno*, which he wrote at least partly while confined in an insane asylum (PW 15.V.F.11). “Rejoice in the Lamb” was broadcast on CBC’s *Tuesday Night* in April 1972. Escaping the mind by losing it is also the fundamental strategy of the characters in Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*. Importantly, the loss of conscious control that Webb embraced later in her career was not Surrealist automatism, but a surrender to a higher order of wisdom. I say much more about this in Chapter Four. Concerning the more ominous connotations of “madness” as a way of “escaping the mind,” recall A.M. Klein’s line about the fate of poets in “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”: “And some go mystical, and some go mad” (637). This binary does not need to be all-encompassing, obviously, but the distinction resonates here: some poets surrender to a higher order of wisdom, as Page, Webb, and Cohen would, and others, sadly, succumb to a different kind of psychological “loss.”

creative mind remains fertile despite his imprisonment. The reason for this fertility, however, is disturbing: the poet's mind is freed by fever and madness.⁸⁸ Pound has become a "divine old paranoid" who "understands / nothing" of his situation. The "canto aris[es]" of its own accord. Madness is one way to liberate the mind even when the body is held captive under the most appalling conditions, but as Webb concludes in "Ezra Pound," madness represents a total loss of control and is, finally, its own form of imprisonment and isolation.

Ezra Pound "shaking and sweating, being so shut in" (Webb, *PB* 233), Kropotkin "sending telex messages" in the St. Peter and St. Paul fortress (219), Webb's speaker "alone" and "scribbling" on Salt Spring Island (223), Cohen's "lady's man" "locked" in his marriage (Cohen, *DLM* 55) to the "golden" and "towering" muse of celebrity (11), his "man in the mirror" (192) trapped in obsessive introspection: all of these figures evoke the feelings of alienation and self-absorption involved in the poets' creative crises. Webb and Cohen both associate imprisonment with creative stasis and inarticulateness. But such imprisonment need not occur within the frames of a "hall of mirrors" (Norris 52) or between the walls of a prison cell. The poets often erect walls in their poems to evoke the containment of the solipsistic mind, but they also describe straightforwardly immobilized bodies. Both forms of immobility—of the mind and of the body—express the writers' frustration and anxiety as they "come bang up against ... [their] own stone wall limits":⁸⁹ as their poetic powers fail and the poems they want to write continue to evade them.

In P.K. Page's poem-fragments from Brazil, the feeling of physical paralysis brought on by the "constancy" and "all-surroundingness" of the tropical heat (*BJ* 37) symbolizes the poet's

⁸⁸ In "For Fyodor," similarly, Dostoevsky manages to produce creative work during his confinement in Siberia—indeed, Webb writes that all of his "greatest works began brewing in that cauldron of penal servitude"—but his ability "to turn this freezing hell into an ecstatic emblem" is only active when he "writhe[s] in epileptic / visions" (*PB* 231): not madness, here, but a feverish, disturbed, and indeed dangerous loss of control.

⁸⁹ Page, "Brazilian Journal," 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

inability to communicate in Portuguese. “[E]very movement is slow,” she wrote of the oppressive humidity in her journal on 3 February 1957, “as if under warm greenish water” (Page, *BJ* 37). And in a poem draft that must have been written at around the same time—during her first summer in South America—she draws on identical imagery to explore her “muteness”:

My muteness induced by ignorance of the tongue that is spoken here

The heat & weight of it

the warm wet water

through which I move

silently lumbering

through green rooms.

— — —

& the green garden

where flowers like parrots

form their ocean floor

ascended slowly on a fleshy stalk

move in a tiny current an instant

float then more velvet silent than before

Motionless now that green warm water dense

as a cube of green glass⁹⁰

The poem breaks off here, as “motionless” as its closing image. Once again, “wind” and “poetry” are related, though here, rather than blowing violently, the “wind” seems to have become liquid, a stagnant pool, moving only in “a tiny current.” Heaviness and stillness reign. Flowers

⁹⁰ PKP 27.5.8. The three dashes in the middle of the poem are Page’s usual sign, in drafts, for missing words that she has left out in an initial writing but intends to fill in later.

resembling parrots are “velvet silent.” Throughout, the humid, “dense” air is as tangible as “warm wet water” and surrounds the speaker: its “all-surroundingness,” as Page wrote in the journal passage (*BJ* 37), permeates the “green rooms” and restricts her movement so that all she can do is “lumber” “silently.” Like several of Page’s other fragments from this period, the draft begins with a speculation about the poet’s “muteness.”⁹¹ And as she did in many of her retrospective and prose accounts of her time in Brazil, Page proposes here that her inability to write poetry—her *poetic* “muteness”—has been brought on by her inability to speak Portuguese.⁹² “It” at the end of the second line forges the metaphor: “it” refers doubly to “ignorance of the tongue that is spoken here,” and to the “warm wet water” of the humid air. She clearly compares her physical clumsiness and the near-total motionlessness of the scene to linguistic clumsiness and the paralysis of her poetic powers. The speaker moves unpoetically, “silently lumbering” through the foreign, oppressive (and certainly *excessive*) substance. “Muteness” is “motionlessness” in this poem: the foreign language, like the foreign environment, holds the speaker in a prison as “dense / as a cube of green glass.”

Cohen conjures a remarkably similar metaphor for creative paralysis when he describes, near the end of *Death of a Lady’s Man*, a speaker trapped in the midday sunlight as though in a “vast amber paperweight” (203). “The Politics of this Book” (Cohen, *DLM* 202-3)—the title of which suggests summation—is a final statement of inertia. Time fixes in the eternal present, and

⁹¹ Other drafts that begin the same way are, for example, “Write, & imagine a poem...” (PKP 27.5.10) and “There should be more to say...” (PKP 27.5.11), both discussed above.

⁹² Page wrote “My muteness induced by ignorance of the tongue that is spoken here” across the top of the page and then skipped several lines before continuing with the poem, so it is not absolutely clear that this line was meant to be a part of the poem. In any case, the poet was evidently preoccupied with her feeling of “muteness” as she began writing. As we saw in Chapter Two, this line about her “ignorance” of Portuguese became one of the poet’s refrains about her silence in the years after she returned to Canada.

the speaker is frozen in a single moment: at noon in the garden of his “life in art.”⁹³ The scene does not seem unpleasant at first: the speaker sits in the sun, surrounded by bumblebees and birds and butterflies and a spider web and a cat. He explains that he is “in a terrible hurry” because he is going away to fight in Jerusalem. Like Webb, this speaker seeks political engagement, and like Page’s speaker in “After Rain,” though less acutely, he is concerned about allowing “aesthetic appreciation” to come at the “expense” of “compassion” for others (Steffler 39). He wants to do something more than sit in a garden. But in the “pool of fat” (Cohen, *DLM* 12) of his excessive life as a celebrity, his “career as a lady’s man” (11), he has grown complacent. The “sun,” which represents the poet-singer’s power and glory—his fame—throughout *Death of a Lady’s Man*, “climbs to the middle of the sky”—reaches its greatest height—in “The Politics of this Book.” But there it “stops.” Time stands still as the cathedral bells strike twelve:

Great shovelfuls of sound dumped in the grave of our activity. The sound fills
up every space and every thought ... The future is blocked. The past is plugged
up. Layer after layer of the present seizes us, buries us in one vast amber
paperweight. Sealed under twelve skyfuls of the only moment.

Cohen’s speaker’s “life in art”—his “career as a lady’s man” (*DLM* 11)—will “not end” (*DLM* 168), and so here he is buried alive. He will live on in the eternal present of a “vast amber paperweight”—which is to say, “hobbling with his love” (212) in the pages of “this book.” His “politics,” moreover, will remain only “of this book.” The consequence of his imprisonment is

⁹³ Like Page in “After Rain,” in *Death of a Lady’s Man* Cohen imagines his “life in art” as a garden; he refers several times to “The Garden Section of the original manuscript of My Life in Art” (163). His poet-speaker is often sitting in, and writing from, a beautiful Mediterranean garden: walled, sunny, populated variously by snails, bees, butterflies, and birds, as well as the speaker and his wife. But though this garden might once have been a happy place, the speaker confesses that with his increasing celebrity, the garden has gone to seed: “an untidy aspect of the garden is revealed, things fallen, crushed, dried, tangled...” (*DLM* 164; ellipsis in original).

that he “won’t be going to Jerusalem after all”: he will remain trapped in futile solipsism—or, as he says in “The End of My Life in Art,” caught up in “the moronic frivolity ... of hours in the mirror” (Cohen, *DLM* 193).

As they struggled through creative crisis, all three poets in this chapter shared the feeling that Cohen describes in “The Politics of this Book.” Unable to write in the way that they wanted to—even if they were still writing poems that seem compelling to us—they felt “blocked,” “plugged up,” “seized,” and “buried” in a “grave” with the “vast ... paperweight” of their work as a tombstone, an eternal reminder of their failures. Poets in crisis feel exiled from their gift, banished to a state of self-consciousness and ineptitude. Just as they expressed their faltering authority through metaphors of excess—a muddy garden, the green jungle, a statue in a museum, a roadmap, a poncho, a “golden” and “towering” woman (Cohen, *DLM* 12)—Page, Webb, and Cohen represented their inability to capture, sculpt, evoke, and master those things as physical paralysis. It was an uncomfortable state that only a period of poetic silence would finally undo. The actual period of silence, a “retreat from [the] battle” of creative crisis (Webb, “Interview” 8), would be, as we have seen both Webb and Page describing it in their retrospective remarks, “a kind of emptying out” (Webb, “Addressing” 34) for all three poets: the unplugging or unblocking of obstruction. And after their periods of silence, all three poets would find, in their own ways, “another space” like the one that Page describes in her 1969 poem of that title: a space where “all the atoms,” “hitherto / in stasis locked,” could finally “pass” “to-fro” “in bright osmosis” (*K* 114). But for now, limited by their self-assessed incompetence, restrained by their overwhelming conviction that they were “no longer at [their] best practising / the craft of verse” (Cohen, *ES* 24), Page, Webb, and Cohen all had to remain where they were, “in stasis locked.”

IV. Conclusion

Creative obstructions grow out of creative ambitions: the natural ambitions of a poetic career. If P.K. Page's "thirst" had been quenched by her first vision in the untitled poem from 1956 (see section I above), then she would have felt content rather than confined in her "pool" with its "crystal waterfall" of images.⁹⁴ If Leonard Cohen had been satisfied rather than "ashamed" in the "pool of fat" (*DLM* 12) and "obscene silence of [his] career as a lady's man" (11), then he might not have sought to end his "life in art." If Webb had been fulfilled by a personal rather than political position in her poetry, she might have been happy to let her "Poems of Failure" speaker go on stitching "crazy poncho[s]" in her island home (*PB* 220). But mid-career, these poets were restless. Pacing the metaphorical rooms of their poems, they became hyper-aware of, even obsessed with, their own perceived limits. They wrote about these limits; they re-imagined them and criticized them, emphasized them and attempted to transcend them. They felt imprisoned and alone and longed for guides to lead them out. The sense of confinement itself so preoccupied them in these periods that it was, finally, the only subject that they could write about—until, that is, writing dried up altogether.

Although all three poets clearly recognized that some kind of hiatus might be necessary to unbind them from the styles and visions that had come to seem restrictive, Page, Webb, and Cohen did not go gentle into silence. On the contrary, they fought and struggled and slipped in the mud and waged war and "[ran] ragged" all the way to Russia to "elude" it (Webb, *PB* 145). They did everything that they could to master the images, subjects, ideas, and discipline that seemed, in the "brazil" or "obscene silence" stage of their careers, to be beyond their control. As modernists, Page, Webb, and Cohen felt a "quasi-religious" duty to produce, through "the unity of art," "a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality" (Eysteinnsson 9). The poetry of

⁹⁴ "Out of a high unease..." (PKP 3.97.34).

creative crisis reveals their vigorous efforts to live up to this obligation, even as their confidence as “makers” waned dramatically. Not to write poetry would be to break a sacred vow: as Page proposed in “Could I Write a Poem Now?”, “to let / a talent lie about unused / is to break faith” with “art,” “the highest loyalty” (*K* 99). And so they went on trying.

Leonard Cohen’s explicit association of *time* with creative paralysis as the cathedral bell strikes noon in “The Politics of this Book” is significant. As the examples in this chapter have revealed, the poets typically relied on spatial metaphors to explore and express their creative struggles—prisons and gardens and rooms and houses. But periods of creative crisis and poetic silence are finally temporal matters: stages that come and then go. Caught up in the “suffocating attack” (Cohen, *DLM* 65) of poetic crisis, the poet *feels* as though time stands still, as though he is paralyzed in “the only moment” (Cohen, *DLM* 202) of his creative existence. But the drama will pass. The command or resolution to “wait and see” is repeated several times in the poetry of creative crisis. “I can wait. We shall see,” Webb concludes the “Poems of Failure” (*PB* 223). This statement conveys both her determination—“I can wait”—and, in the colloquial “We shall see,” her doubt that such waiting will ever amount to anything. The “I” remains isolated in the first statement: she will wait alone. But if her poetry develops as she hopes it will, away from solipsism, towards engagement, then “We,” an “I” along with a community of others, “shall see” the new vision together. Page’s speaker in “After Rain” must also wait: she waits for a heart that, she prays, will understand sympathy and will be able to “see” differently. She prays to the “birds” to “let [Giovanni] come to rest / within” the beauty of her garden scene “as one rests in love.” This resting place is not ideal—the beauty must stand in for love—but Giovanni’s sojourn here will only be temporary: “till” the speaker’s own heart can understand (or “know”) that “tears are a part of love” (*K* 91). Likewise, in “I Should Not Say You,” in the midst of his crisis

of faith Cohen's speaker notes, "My heart is like something that waits" (*DLM* 62). It waits because it must. It waits, as Page, Webb, and Cohen waited: anxiously, uncomfortably, uncertainly.⁹⁵

And so, silence falls. All that remains is the fear: "This time I never *would* write again" (Page, "Questions" 18). From the prison of his "paperweight," Cohen's speaker bids farewell to the reader: "Goodbye," he says, and assures us that he "will be here if [we] look back, at this very table, in this very garden" (Cohen, *DLM* 202-3). He will be there indefinitely, waiting in silence to find out if that chiming clock sounds a death knell or if it rings in new life.

⁹⁵ See my discussion of A.M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" at the end of the dissertation's introduction for another example of a poet awaiting, "wishful[ly]" (Trehearne, *Montreal* 140), new vision: "At the bottom of the sea" (Klein 639).

Chapter Four:

“Then let us start again”: Writing Out of Poetic Silence

“Defeated by silence, here is a place where the silence is more subtle.”
 — Leonard Cohen, *Book of Mercy* (45)¹

Of course, the silence *did* end, and a new poetic life *did* begin for Page, Webb, and Cohen, and also, if less dramatically and less completely, for John Newlove and Anne Marriott. As the years crept forward, the echoes of failure receded and eventually, in time, writing poetry seemed possible again. A period of poetic silence affords temporal distance: time for the dust of panic and frustration to settle; time for the creative terrain to grow arable once more. Silence was, Phyllis Webb has suggested, a “retreat, like a religious retreat, or a retreat from battle.” It was a self-protective retreat from judgments both critical and personal, a break from the struggle “to allow for the integration of ideas and emotions. Healing time and making time,” Webb added, “[f]or me and the poems” (“Interview” 8). This does not mean that any of the poets willed or even welcomed silence: on the contrary, as I have just shown, they resisted it vigorously. Webb could reflect in retrospect that silence permitted “healing” and “making,” but it was not until the faltering writers had found themselves completely paralyzed—had been rather violently “thrown back into . . . silence,” as Cohen has put it (“Interview” 58)—that the healing could occur. The “silence” had to transform from verb to noun, from act of oppression to state of being. The poets first felt “*silenced*”—“[d]efeated by silence,” Cohen wrote in the prayer that serves as an epigraph to this chapter. Once they accepted it, though, the condition of “*silence*”—the “more subtle” silence (Cohen, *BM* 45)—permitted recovery. To use Webb’s imagery, a “retreat from

¹ There are no page numbers in *Book of Mercy*. The prayer-poems are numbered, 1-50, and I will cite them according to that system.

battle” became, most unexpectedly, a “religious retreat” (“Interview” 8). And crucially, the extent of this transformation determined the mood of their post-silence poetry. The more fully they embraced “silence” as both a natural stage in their artistic careers and as an integral part of the creative process, the richer their returns to writing could be.

In this chapter I highlight the processes and preoccupations of those returns to writing as the poets reflected on them in their post-silence poetry. Page, Webb, Cohen, Newlove, and Marriott all responded explicitly to their earlier creative obstructions in their late-career work. Sometimes, these poems are confessional in tone: not usually autobiographical confessions, but creative ones, in which the speakers contemplate the habits and attitudes that got them into trouble. “I turned you into a silence which became a roar of accusation,” Cohen’s speaker tells the God to whom he addresses his prayers in *Book of Mercy* (35): it was, as we saw, pride and hubris—his “turn[ing]” of God “into a silence” as he struggled for his own authority—that overwhelmed and finally paralyzed the speaker in *Death of a Lady’s Man*. The post-silence poetry often recasts old images in a new light: the “rim” that excluded Giovanni in P.K. Page’s “After Rain,” for instance, exerts a centripetal pull on the speaker in “Another Space”; the modernist “waste land” becomes “The Green Plain” in John Newlove’s 1981 long poem of that title. The poets self-consciously released the old ambitions and wounds that had held them back or given them pause: Kropotkin’s presence fades gradually and deliberately throughout *Wilson’s Bowl*; in “Conversation with Herbert,” Marriott ridicules her old critics for their demands. In their post-hiatus volumes, all five of the poets reflected in some way on the fact of their long middle silence, sometimes by obscuring it, as Page and Marriott do in their respective “Poems New and Selected” volumes (*Cry Ararat!* and *The Circular Coast*), and sometimes by emphasizing it, as Webb does in her Foreword to *Wilson’s Bowl*, as Newlove does in the title of

his *Selected Poems* volume, *Apology for Absence*, and as Cohen does in the poetry throughout *Book of Mercy*.

As I established in Chapter Two, however, there were substantial contrasts between Page, Webb, and Cohen's late-career attitudes on the one hand and Marriott and Newlove's on the other. Page, Webb, and Cohen all dwelled obsessively on the creative process in their earlier work and continued to explore that theme in their later work; though after silence, instead of representing creative crisis, they theorized new, more sustainable forms of poetic authority. Marriott and Newlove were principally preoccupied with the critical pressures that had plagued them as younger poets, and thus in their post-silence work they summarize and assert, often anxiously and quite bluntly, the value of their *oeuvres* for themselves and for their critics. The tone of this poetic work accords with the tone of their public commentary on creative obstruction: both Marriott and Newlove meditate retrospectively and apologetically on the obstacles to their progress, and even though they did produce new poetry, they did not, either in their poems or in their other remarks, depict the experience of silence as a transformative one. Page and Webb, as we have seen, produced elaborate public narratives that clearly cast their mid-career hiatuses as dynamic stages, and evidence of the new visions that they described in those narratives is very apparent in their later poetry. Along with Cohen, they experienced creative crisis more acutely than Marriott or Newlove did, and they also emerged from silence more dramatically. Page, Webb, and Cohen devised a more robust post-silence poetics than either Marriott or Newlove was able to develop, not necessarily in volume—Cohen would write only one full collection of totally new work, *Book of Mercy*, while Marriott would publish *The Circular Coast* and then two new books after that—but in tone. Much post-silence work registers gratitude for the opportunity to speak again, but Marriott and Newlove express their thankfulness

reactively, by looking back and reporting that the “absence,” as Newlove calls it, is over; Page, Webb, and Cohen, by contrast, announce that a new creative life has begun by looking ahead: by considering liberated creative perspectives from which, as Page wrote, a “new / direction opens / like an eye” (*K* 114).

To begin writing again from the utterly defeated positions in which we left them at the end of the last chapter, Page, Webb, and Cohen needed not only to develop a new model of poetic authority, one free of the impossible standards of mastery that they had set themselves earlier in their careers, but to release the feelings of failure and inadequacy that had accumulated as they found themselves unable to meet those standards. As I argue in the following pages, these three poets wrote out of silence from a position of creative humility, cognisant of their own limitations but newly faithful in the existence of a higher source of creative energy and order, above and beyond their control. In her 1970 (post-silence) essay, “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” P.K. Page described the creative process as an effort “to copy exactly something which exists in a dimension where worldly senses are inadequate. As if a thing only felt had to be extracted from invisibility and transposed into a seen thing, a heard thing” (“Traveller” 35). This new understanding of art-making as sensing, then extracting and transposing, would have lifted an enormous burden from a poet who had previously felt, however vaguely, that her art should be the “ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind” that would provide “a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality” (Eysteinsson 9). According to Page’s reformulation of the creative process, poets must be alert to the presence of a higher order and attentive to its manifestation—of course this is itself no small demand—but they are not obliged to generate meaning or coherence independently. “Defeated by silence” in that weighty ambition, Page, Webb, and Cohen found “a place where the silence is more subtle” (Cohen, *BM* 45): a silence

necessary to the creative process, a receptive silence that would allow listening. They discarded the frustration, anxiety, and embarrassment that had overwhelmed them and instead learned to value and even *use* silence. In earlier chapters I cited Webb's very important observation that "the writer ... often ... feels like a receiver ... hearing many things and taking in a great deal." She stressed that "[i]t requires silence in order to hear"; and indeed, "listening" and "hearing" became, for all three poets, "a very important aspect of the whole process" of poetic composition (Webb, "Seeking" 24-5). Silence, for the poets who struggled most ardently against it, finally became an ideal state from which to speak.

In the progress of the life of an artist, poetic crisis and middle silence are the creative equivalent of a near-death experience. Recall Webb's speaker in "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" who feared, after an unsettling creative insight, that she "would not wake again" (*PB* 145), or Page's concern, recollected in "Questions and Images," that "[t]his time I never *would* write again" (18). The experience is similar to the "rite of death" that the Jungian psychoanalyst Joseph Henderson describes in *Man and His Symbols* (which Page, and probably Webb, read after it came out in 1964). In the mid-life stage of "initiation," Henderson writes, the individual "learn[s] a lesson in humility by experiencing a rite of death and rebirth that marks his passage from youth to maturity" (125).² In the throes of crisis, all five poets feared the permanence of their verbal paralysis, and as they began to write again, they contemplated the continuation of

² The experience of "initiation," Henderson adds, usually occurs most powerfully "at the period of transition from early maturity to middle age" (131). Page, Webb, and Cohen were fifty-one, fifty-three, and fifty when their first post-silence volumes were published, in 1967, 1980, and 1984, respectively (Newlove and Marriott do not quite fit this pattern: they were forty-three and fifty-eight when their first post-silence chapbooks were published, forty-eight and sixty-eight when their full books appeared). Although I hesitate to invoke the pop psychological term "mid-life crisis"—having written enough, after all, of "mid-career *creative* crisis"—one might nevertheless conclude that they were all, as Sandra Djwa delicately put it in her biography of Page, at "an age when many thoughtful people re-evaluate their lives" (*Journey* 180). Quite practically, by the time a poet who started publishing in his or her twenties (Cohen was twenty-two, Newlove twenty-four, Marriott twenty-six, Webb twenty-nine, and Page thirty when their first solo volumes or chapbooks were published) is in his or her forties, the need to "re-evaluate" both life and creative *oeuvre* would logically feel quite pressing indeed.

their poetic lives with new insight, greater perspective, and a sense of gratitude—as anyone would who has faced death. They emerged from silence not simply as older poets but as more mature artists. They “learned a lesson in humility,” as Henderson says: Page, Webb, and Cohen all realized that their “task” was “to submit to a power greater than [themselves]” (125). We do not have to think psychoanalytically to recognize that the pattern is one of surrender. It is a variation on T.S. Eliot’s theory of poetry as a “continual self-sacrifice” (“Tradition” 17): not to the impersonality of art, here, but to the impersonal higher power that is, in Cohen’s words, “the source of things” (qtd in Simmons 337). Notably, the more violent the near-death and the more complete the sense of paralysis, the more exaggerated the “lesson in humility” and the more total the surrender will have to be.

Certainly, the experience of feeling forcibly silenced—unable to write satisfactorily, “do what I will,” as Page wrote in “After Rain” (*K* 91)—or of feeling powerless to “will” the poems into existence would have driven the poets to question “the source of things”: the source that gives and the source that withholds. George Steiner puts Henderson’s “rite of death” in apt, if rather grandiose, creative terms. The enforced silence of the poet, he suggests, is a reminder of the presence of the divine. The poet’s creative use of language, “with the utmost strength of the word,” is “god-rivaling,” “potentially sacrilegious,” and thus “supremely ... dangerous,” in Steiner’s view:

Being, in the nature of his craft, a reacher, the poet must guard against becoming, in the Faustian term, an overreacher. But it is decisively the fact that language does have its frontiers ... which gives proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. It is just because we can go no further,

because speech so marvellously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. (39)

Aside perhaps from Cohen, the poets in this study were probably not thinking in terms of “god-rivaling” or Faustian overreaching. But creative crisis made them all acutely, painfully aware of the “frontiers,” if not of language, then of their own capabilities as poets to master their material: “my own stone wall limits,” as Page described her perceived constraints.³ A productive way forward with this new insight was, as Steiner says, to consider that perhaps they were not themselves “the source of things” (Cohen qtd in Simmons 337) after all. This is why I have proposed, in Chapter Two, that we should take their playful public comments about “gods” and “muses” seriously: that, when Page wondered, in “Questions and Images,” whether she was truly “the master” of her writing (18), she was not simply being evasive or expressing mystification about her absence from publication, but voicing the genuine new wisdom that her creative crisis and period of silence pushed her to accept.

In *The Life of the Poet* Lawrence Lipking maintains that “summation” is one of the three stages common to all poetic careers: all poets, Lipking argues, reread their *oeuvres* in search of meaning and unity, hoping to glimpse among their “fragments” evidence of “a single great confession” (70). And indeed, as they grew older, all of the poets in this project reflected on the achievements and significance of their creative lives in retrospective work: later in this chapter we will see Page pursuing this ambition in the *glosas* of her 1994 volume, *Hologram*. But nearly three decades had passed since Page’s emergence from middle silence by the time she wrote the *glosas*: three decades in which she had taken up numerous other creative projects (and also, it is worth noting, passed through numerous other fallow periods). Marriott and Newlove, meanwhile, were concerned in almost all of their post-silence poetry with “extending,

³ “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

completing and validating” their poetic lives (McMullan 25)—for, as Newlove put it, “[i]t’s better to celebrate / your funeral before you die” (*AA* 187)—and thus a mood of “lateness” dominates that entire body of their work. Most importantly, whereas Newlove and Marriott’s “late” poetry is generally defensive and self-justifying, as though they feared that their long absences from publication had permanently detracted from the enduring value of their *oeuvres*, Cohen, Webb, and especially Page’s retrospective work is affirmative, confident, and—crucially—celebratory of silence as a vital component of the poetic process.

This chapter begins with the reintroduction of Newlove and Marriott to the story of mid-career poetic silences. Their post-hiatus work is *silence-ending*: an announcement of presence where before there was absence. It is profoundly aware of the poet’s relation to a critical audience, and seems generally intended, as Marriott put it, to “[establish] the fact that I am a working poet *now*.”⁴ As much as this poetry defiantly asserts the writers’ voices and visions in the face of past or potential criticism, however, it is finally limited by its recapitulative and apologetic tone. By contrast, in their own later work, Page, Webb, and Cohen developed a new position from which to proceed. In the chapter’s second section, I consider poetry by these three more creatively preoccupied writers that theorizes the post-silence position of humility. Then, in section three, I consider poetry that thematizes the clearing, emptying, and releasing that would, for Webb and Page at least, allow new attitudes to flourish. The energy of release animated Webb’s post-silence poetry in particular: many of the poems in *Wilson’s Bowl* interact with tradition and authority in a collaborative mood, in which the poet and her speakers both listen humbly to guiding figures and release them confidently.

Once I have established these new attitudes and approaches, I take a chronological leap forward to consider what the poets were actually liberated to write in a truly post-silence stage of

⁴ Letter to Seymour Mayne, 1 January 1976 (AM 3.9).

their careers. Cohen is notably absent here, for although *Book of Mercy* very clearly responds to and resolves his pre-*lapsus* crisis and confidently announces a new creative approach, he did not assemble any more volumes of new poetry after 1984 (until *Book of Longing* in 2006, which is firmly retrospective on his entire career). Page and Webb, on the other hand, put their new theories and freer perspectives to use in poetic work beyond the collections that marked their initial returns to publication. In the final section of the chapter, I explore Page's *glosas* and Webb's *ghazals*, both attractive forms to writers who had learned to appreciate silence as the core of the creative process. Both forms encourage and even demand attentive, silent "listening" in their very modes of composition. Taken together, the poetry that I study in this chapter illustrates how the experience of silence shaped five diverse poetic careers.

I. "Sneaking another letter onto the stone": Marriott and Newlove's "Late" Poetry

Although two more temperamentally different poets than John Newlove and Anne Marriott would be hard to find, the patterns and attitudes of these two writers' respective returns to poetry publication after middle silence were alike in several revealing ways. The first new statements for both poets were small press chapbooks, Marriott's *Countries* from Fiddlehead Press in 1971 and Newlove's *The Green Plain* from Oolichan Press in 1981, and both chapbooks feature long poems (the title poems) that unfold a positive, fertile, energetic creative vision.⁵ In both cases, as I will show, this vision responds quite explicitly and directly to the critics, mentors, and readers who, the poets felt, had pronounced limiting assessments of their work earlier in their careers.

⁵ In fact, *The Green Plain* was not published until 1982: Newlove wrote to George Johnston on 8 November 1985, "In 1982 (though the copyright says 1981), Oolichan published a little book of mine called *The Green Plain*" (JN 18.14). In *A Long Continual Argument*, Newlove's 2007 *Selected Poems*, compiled and edited after the poet's death by Robert McTavish, "The Green Plain" is dated 1979. I have used 1981 for the sake of consistency, for it is, as Newlove says, the date in the copyright. Newlove also dated his Preface to the chapbook, which I discuss below, "August 1981."

Both poets wanted to dismiss perceived critical misjudgments or accusations and to demonstrate, with renewed vigour, the value of their poetic approaches. They worked to these ends not only in their chapbooks but in the full volumes that followed: Marriott's *The Circular Coast: Poems New and Selected* in 1981 and Newlove's *The Night the Dog Smiled* in 1986. Both poets were clearly responding to the reality of their silences, though they did so in starkly different ways: Marriott arranged her *New and Selected* volume to smooth over any sense of creative struggle, while Newlove, in the title of his own *Selected Poems*, which would follow seven years after *The Night the Dog Smiled*, emphasized his failures by offering an "Apology for Absence." These opposing responses were consistent with their radically opposed personalities: Marriott's exuberant earnestness was completely unlike Newlove's understated cynicism. They were also, though probably unwittingly on the part of the poets, gendered responses: Newlove could advertise his silence and come off as a dark hero, a tortured philosopher, whereas if Marriott admitted weakness or inconsistency, she could risk being written off (unfairly, of course) as a housewife who had given up serious poetry-writing for her husband and children.⁶ But regardless of their methods, their priorities were similar. Both Marriott and Newlove were concerned above all to police their reputations and curate their *oeuvres*, to affirm their commitment to poetry, to set their affairs in order and, after years of obstruction, to have the last laugh in the face of their critics.

Marriott, as I showed in Chapter Two, struggled with poetry throughout the 1940s because she feared that nothing she could write would measure up to the success of *The Wind*

⁶ This was more of a risk than a reality; if any such writing off has occurred, it has not been in print, but rather in the general critical neglect of Marriott (apart from recent more substantial studies, as I noted in Chapter One, by Dean Irvine—in *Editing Modernity*—and Marilyn Rose, in two separate articles). The fact that Marriott is the only one of the five poets in this project who is absent from *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors* is telling: it suggests that when the bibliography was being assembled in the 1980s—not long after *The Circular Coast* had been published in 1981—Marriott was not considered sufficiently "major" to have an entry of her own.

Our Enemy. “[A]ll the poetry I wrote was judged in comparison to *The Wind Our Enemy* and found wanting,” she explained. “People urged me to ‘do something like *The Wind—*’ or attempt to ‘get back where you should be on the level of *The Wind—*’ ... I was defeated before I began, feeling that anything I wrote was bound to be a disappointment.”⁷ That exemplary modernist long poem (which also, Marriott remarks, “created the myth that I am a prairie poet”: she was on the contrary a dedicated British Columbia coastal poet) established Marriott, in her words, “as following the Livesay tradition of social protest.” And yet she claims, as we have seen, that she “wasn’t making any kind of conscious ‘social protest’ in ‘*The Wind—*’” at all, but “just recounting what [she] had seen, and heard.”⁸ Marriott’s later critics have been correct in suggesting that “her prevailing poetic tendency [was] to produce imagistic catalogues [and] romanticist reveries” (Irvine, *Editing* 100), and that the “short lyric—informed by modernist interests in economy, aestheticism, and imagism ... may have always been her true but unacknowledged métier” (Rose, “Literary” 244). But as Marriott remembers it, this was not the kind of poetry that her contemporaries—from her less generous reviewers to her greatest supporters—wanted her to write. She recalls, “I used the coastal scene a great deal, prompting Alan [Crawley] to tell me that a catalogue of natural wonders didn’t constitute a poem.”⁹ She felt as though she needed, for herself as much as for Crawley, “to find some theme, some event, bigger than the laurels and rivers ... of southern Vancouver Island.”¹⁰ But when Marriott published *Countries* in 1971, her first (small) collection in twenty-six years, “natural wonders” were unabashedly her subject.

⁷ Letter to [Penny] Petrone, 20 March 1974 (AM 19.6).

⁸ The quotation in parentheses is from Marriott’s untitled notes for a poetry reading. The quotation that ends the sentence is from Marriott’s letter to [Penny] Petrone, 20 March 1974 (AM 19.6).

⁹ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1).

¹⁰ Notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6). The “laurels” that Marriott mentions refer to her early poem, “The Laurel Hedge.”

Marriott fairly straightforwardly “blame[d]” her “long long silence between books,” then, on “two or three critics who were always bemoaning the fact that I wasn’t writing another *Wind Our Enemy* which of course I couldn’t do,” and also on the oppressive self-consciousness that these critical expectations produced for her.¹¹ The contrast between two different poetic responses to these critics, one from 1955 and the other from 1970, illustrates Marriott’s altered, newly confident perspective after her prolonged retreat from their disapproving gaze. The first of these, “Beaver Pond,” depicts the retreat.¹² In the final lines of the poem, the speaker takes refuge in a “secret house,” like a beaver underwater in its dam, vowing not to “break the public surface against my wish / for sticks or stones or softest coaxing words” (Marriott, *CC* 48). This was “something of a personal statement,” Marriott confessed to a friend in 1959: “actually it was a retort to something Dorothy Livesay wrote about my ‘withdrawn personality’ though she doesn’t know that, I think.”¹³ “Beaver Pond” is a poem of self-protective hibernation. “Not furred nor wet, the pointing words yet make / a feel of plush slip moistly through the mind,” Marriott begins. The poet’s “mind” is capable of transforming critical barbs to “a feel of plush,” but only when she imagines herself isolated from human eyes, hiding under the tough “basket

¹¹ Letter to Susan Ioannou, 21 August 1983 (AM 3.8). The “two or three critics” to whom she refers might have included John Sutherland, who was dismissive of what he called Marriott’s “magazine verse” in a review of *Sandstone* (100), and certainly included Dorothy Livesay, who was equally dismissive of *Salt Marsh* as “adolescent verse” (13). Marriott was probably also thinking of Alan Crawley, whose comments, she recalled, “paralyzed a lot of my spontaneity” (letter to Heather Spears, 18 March 1983 [AM 9.2]).

¹² “Beaver Pond” was one of Marriott’s few (three or four) poems that saw publication between 1945 and 1971: she published it in *Fiddlehead* shortly after it was written in 1955. The other published poems in this period include “The Old Maid” and “Holiday Journal,” both printed in the twilight issues of *Contemporary Verse*; cf. Irvine, *Editing Modernity*, pp. 92-110. Her decision to publish “Beaver Pond” but not the other two in *The Circular Coast* suggests her desire to respond satisfactorily at last, in that volume, to the problem that it posits concerning the poet’s relationship with her critics. There is some irony, of course, in Marriott’s decision to publish a poem about retreat in the first place; evidently she had not fully retreated just yet. But the fact that she shared the poem also suggests her discomfort with the retreat, and her desire, already, to account for her relative absence from poetry publication over the ten years between 1945, when *Sandstone* was published, and 1955.

¹³ Letter to “Jan,” 14 May 1959 (AM 7.10). “Jan” had apparently written an article on some of Marriott’s work in the *B.C. Library Quarterly*, and Marriott was writing in response. So far I have not been able to locate the comment by Livesay to which Marriott refers; though Livesay’s review of *Salt Marsh* was vicious, it does not seem to imply that Marriott was particularly “withdrawn.”

crown” of the dam. The speaker feels safe among the “rich deep greens and browns” of her underwater world, and she imagines a kinship with the beavers, for they are all of an “infrequent kind.” Although “tourists ... question and cluster round the still, small pool,” she writes, no “eyes” can see “through the sealed lattice” of the dam or the “shut surface” of the reflective water. Any substantial new poetic statement would require Marriott to “break the public surface” of that comforting pool, exposing herself to the threat of critical “sticks and stones,” and this, in 1955, she was not yet ready to do.

In *Countries* in 1971, Marriott published a completely different response to a critic. “To Herbert,” revised and renamed “Conversation with Herbert” in *The Circular Coast*, “address[es] ... a certain critic who didn’t like my work,” Marriott explained in her notes for a poetry reading; “especially it’s [*sic*] dependence on particular lands[cap]es].”¹⁴ Rather than taking shelter in peace and seclusion as in “Beaver Pond,” however, Marriott now vehemently defends her “dependence on landscapes.” In the poem’s first stanza, Marriott’s speaker caricatures “Herbert” as a shallow, uncaring reader. She imagines his nose as a “pale pointer,” eagerly sniffing out meaning as it “prods along the poems / turns to chalk writes *no*”: a negative reaction based on Herbert’s misguided assumption that “*landscape has no meaning in itself*” (Marriott, *CC* 51; emphasis in original). The speaker contradicts that judgment with outraged hyperbole. The landscape, she declares,

Teems with meaning!

Teems: (you insist

¹⁴ Untitled notes for a poetry reading (AM 19.6). I believe that Herbert was not one particular critic, but an amalgamation of several critical impressions. For the purposes of this discussion, I refer to the revised version of the poem, “Conversation with Herbert,” in *The Circular Coast* (as opposed to “To Herbert” in *Countries*). The variations are fairly minor. The title change—from the unidirectional “To Herbert” to the more fluid “Conversation with Herbert”—is perhaps the most significant revision, although Marriott did not in fact open up any space for “Herbert” to respond within the poem. That she retitled it a “conversation” indicates her preparedness not merely to react defensively to critical attacks, but to enter an ongoing exchange with her critics and reviewers.

on definitions)
prolific swarms with as ants
 or a tapestry
 teeming with figures and five million stitches.
 Swirl the ants on to the tapestry—
 that's still blank
 compared to this piece of ground

Marriott's poem derides the critic and his inability to see beyond the surface of the "ground," and her speaker ridicules his staid obsession with "definitions." The speaker contends that the landscape itself—the "piece of ground"—has more meaning even than the art—the "tapestry"—that represents it.¹⁵ The landscape, she proposes, is "so dense with messages" that it takes more than a human lifetime even just to "decod[e] the first layer." As her excitement grows throughout the second stanza, the speaker's outright scorn for the critic turns to ironic pity, so that by the end of the poem, she feels sorry that he must inhabit a "vacuum world" where "specimens" are "freeze-dried" and "meticulous under glass": where everything is transparent, cold, and immobile. "Conversation with Herbert" is an unsubtle affirmation of Marriott's poetic vision. The poet is confident, here, that not only was her "dependence on landscape" valid all those years ago, but that this very preoccupation with the natural world will fuel creativity for generations to come.

Marriott also displays her faith in the vitality of landscape in the title poem of *Countries*. But "Countries" is not about the possibility of future work; rather, it suggests that the places and

¹⁵ It is possible that Marriott was alluding to P.K. Page's "Arras" in this image. More probably, however, she was simply emphasizing the contrast between nature and art, and responding to her earlier modernist critics who wanted elaborate art as opposed to a "catalogue of natural wonders" (letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 [AM 4.1]). Of course, whether conscious allusion exists or not, Page had also used the image of the tapestry, the arras, to convey her concern about an overwrought aesthetic mode.

“natural wonders” of the poet’s past will offer her, and by extension her poetic *oeuvre*, eternal life after death. The speaker in “Countries” is lying in a hospital bed suffering from “fatal pain.” As she “wait[s] / for the peaceful needle” to bring her some respite, she “think[s] of countries.” She imagines her faltering body as a landscape: “sutured hills ... draining plains / and bubbling creeks in tubes” (Marriott, *CC* 73). This speaker shares the knowledge of Herbert’s feisty opponent: that the land “teems” with meaning and energy. In the first section of the poem, she invokes the “country” as both painkiller and life-force: “I am past strength / in this white bed,” she observes, “but I call on a green country / to give me love” (73). A writer lacking creative strength, feeling as though she is in the final, palliative stages of her existence as a poet, might likewise “call on” the “natural wonders” that had inspired the best work of her career.

Gratefully injected with the comforting thought of her “green country,” the speaker in the hospital bed slips in and out of a happy dream throughout the remainder of the poem. “Countries” is a six-part celebration of rural and urban Canadian locales: of, as Marriott has explained, “some of the places I have known across Canada, and their emotional significance.”¹⁶ The poem reflects autobiographically on the places of a life lived: on Marriott’s childhood in Victoria, at “the edge of the live map / so close if I turned carelessly / I might fall off the rim / down down into the western water” (*CC* 74), and then on the significant period she spent in “South Saskatchewan” where the “Assiniboine ran between leaves / pink in a yellow autumn” (75), and then on her years working at the National Film Board in Ottawa, “[i]n the middle of the land / in the middle of my life / in the womanful city of wartime” (77). The “emotional significance” that Marriott attributes to these places is directly related to the poetry that she produced (or did not produce) there, and thus the poem reflects on a *creative* life lived as well as a personal one. For example, as we have seen, she felt trapped in her reputation as “just the

¹⁶ Untitled notes for a poetry reading (AM 19.6).

author of ‘The Wind Our Enemy,’”¹⁷ and correspondingly, the speaker in “Countries” feels abandoned in the prairies, desperate to return to her coastal home: “I tear through [the prairie] screaming / I must go back / once more once / but it was only a whisper / over the ribbed barrens” (Marriott, *CC* 75). Marriott herself was only in Saskatchewan for a summer, but she felt in the 1940s that her *poetry* would be stuck there forever. Once liberated, the speaker recalls, she wandered from the “cedar-tented mountain[s]” (64) of the west to the “blowing marshes” and “redgold beaches” (75) of the east and back, and “now,” near death, she “hold[s] the whole thing” in her memory (79).

The imagery of sickness in “Countries” is a conceit for Marriott’s mortal illness as a poet: she had not, after all, published a book in twenty-six years when *Countries* came out in 1971. Although the soothing injection of the remembered “green country,” which clearly represents the poet-speaker’s faith in “natural wonders,” is not an antidote, it might allow her creative life to persist just a little bit longer, or it will at least comfort her as she exits that life. The “countries” of the poem’s title are both Canada and heaven, and also, in a less literal way, Marriott’s *oeuvre*, which had itself dwelled on the “country”: “the places [she had] known across Canada.”¹⁸ Marriott quotes Henry Vaughan’s “Peace” as an epigraph to Part VI of “Countries”—“*My Soul, there is a Countrie*”—in order to align her “country,” Canada, and by extension the poems she has written about it, with his “country / Afar beyond the stars”: heaven.¹⁹ Canada, Marriott’s poetry, heaven: the comparison hints not only that Marriott’s past and present poetry will have enduring life and relevance in itself, but that this body of work and the (very Canadian)

¹⁷ Letter to Seymour Mayne, 1 January 1976 (AM 3.9).

¹⁸ Untitled notes for a poetry reading (AM 19.6).

¹⁹ Marriott also alludes to Vaughan’s “The World,” which opens with a speaker who “saw Eternity the other night / Like a great ring of pure and endless light.” Later in her poem’s sixth section, Marriott’s speaker sees “the echoing rings run / in the Welshman’s glorious air / to the end of / no end” (*CC* 78). In both instances, she is clearly looking ahead to the afterlife.

“country” it describes will be an eternal dwelling place for her poetic persona. This was, to Marriott as to her speaker, a reassuring “revelation” (CC 78). After a long break from poetry publication, Marriott came to realize that she had a valid creative existence—that she “belonged,” as her speaker says in “Countries”—as a poet who wrote about “the world’s country”: about the landscape and “natural wonders.”²⁰ She accepted, also, that she did not need to fear criticism or dismissal for this so-called, or previously assumed, lowly ambition: “Nothing to fear,” her speaker announces. “Countries” is an affirmation of that new validated and validating attitude, and it is also a direct and confident response to the critics who had, she claimed elsewhere, forced her into such dangerous creative infirmity. At the same time, though, the poem is firmly retrospective, and the speaker’s death is assured.²¹ “Countries” might well describe a vital green “landscape” that “[t]eems with meaning,” as in “To Herbert” (Marriott, CC 51), but the poem reads primarily as a final poetic “summation,” to use Lipking’s term, before death.

In “Countries,” then, as she evaluates her poetic life, Marriott comes to terms with the old poetic habits for which she had been criticized in the 1940s, and she asserts these old tendencies with new confidence. She returned to poetry publication at least in part because she felt that she finally had a satisfactory response to critics such as “Herbert” who had told her that “*landscape has no meaning in itself*” (Marriott, CC 51). John Newlove similarly struggled to write and certainly refrained from publishing because he, too, felt confined by his critical reputation and wanted to present his reviewers with a strong response. He wrote to Al Purdy in 1976 that he was

²⁰ Notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6).

²¹ Marriott herself, of course, would go on to publish three more volumes of poetry after her chapbook: *The Circular Coast* (1981), *Letters from Some Islands* (1985), and *Aqua* (1991). But I suspect that this late prolificacy was unexpected to her when she was beginning to write again after a hiatus that had endured for nearly three decades. The retrospective mood that she established in “Countries,” moreover, would dominate much of Marriott’s late *oeuvre*, as I argue here.

“very timorous” about the upcoming publication of *The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-72* because, he feared, it would “give reviewers, if any, a chance to go on about how goddam gloomy I am. Again.”²² To be sure, as we saw in Chapter One, many of Newlove’s readers in the 1960s and early 1970s commented on his obsession with “isolation, alienation, and aloneness” (Purdy 70), and on the potential limitation of bleak confessional poems which “explore the very lyrical realms of self-pity, desolation, and accidie” and thus can “only rarely rise to the objectivity of larger vision” (Marshall 52). These were by no means the only or even the principal responses to Newlove’s work, but the poet understandably grew frustrated with the repetitive declarations of his pessimism. In his post-silence poetry, then, Newlove directly addressed his critics and reviewers and attempted to rebut their assumptions—just as Marriott did. Unlike Marriott, however, who reasserted the value of an old perspective, Newlove ostensibly countered his earlier work by conveying an utterly transformed vision. Much of his most notable 1980s poetry, especially “The Green Plain,” seems life-affirming and celebratory. And yet his lingering and oppressive fixation on his critical audience suggests that he had not fully embraced any new disposition at all. Instead, Newlove offered up stubbornly optimistic poems as an ironic—and ironically obedient—surrender to the wishes of his critics, and as a defiant dismissal of “quick” reviewers who thought that they knew what to expect from him.²³

Newlove’s first full volume after his fourteen-year hiatus from book publication, *The Night the Dog Smiled* (1986), is obsessively preoccupied with the poet’s relationship to his

²² Letter to Al Purdy, 20 July 1976 (JN 20.20).

²³ The term “quick” comes from a letter to George Johnston of 8 November 1985, in which Newlove wondered if “*The Night the Dog Smiled*” was “another title which will cause quick reviewers to call my stuff ‘dark’” (JN 19.28). He persistently sought to overturn critical expectations; for instance, in a letter to John Metcalf of 26 September 1986, he wrote, “The arrangement of the pieces in [*The Night the Dog Smiled*] is extremely (well, quite) clever, and so it will largely elude the reviewers. If there are any reviewers” (JN 20.7). Newlove’s anxious repetition here of “if ... any” (from the letter to Purdy, quoted earlier in this paragraph)—as in, “if there are any reviewers”—hints that reception and reputation were constantly, heavily on his mind. I noted his concern with reviewers in Chapter Two as well; see pages 90-1, above, and in particular note 28 to that chapter.

readers. The mood swings between disdain for their demands and addiction to their approval. In “Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” for instance, Newlove contemplates the poet’s intense longing to be loved by an audience: “All of the couples of Shakespeare’s sonnets / make sense to me,” the speaker announces; “[i]t was another love / other than the Dark One he reached for. // Us” (*NDS* 41). The poet’s ultimate love, the one whose attention he desires above all, is his reader. And yet the poems also express resentment of this very desire, for writing to please an audience risks tainting the poetry with dishonesty and over-facility. In “Concerning Stars, Flowers, Love, Etc.,” Newlove’s poet-speaker disparagingly voices an audience that wants comfort rather than truth from poetry: “Make it easier, they say, make it easier. Tell / me something I already know, about stars or flowers or, / or happiness ... [Y]ou should try / to cheer people up, they say” (*NDS* 17). The repeated phrases and syntactical structures in this poem are chant-like, haunted, and sorrowful. The poet does not “*want* to be sad” (emphasis in original), but he is. To write honestly, he must write his sadness. Newlove is reproachful of critics who imagine that poets “should try / to cheer people up,” for he would have to “lie” through his sadness to do so, and he is also scornful of readers who simply want to be told what they “already know.”

Dismissive as he is of that audience, though, Newlove’s approach to speaking again after poetic silence was to comply with their demands. “To Hell with it,” the speaker concludes in “The Light of History: This Rhetoric Against That Jargon” (*NDS* 57): “to Hell” with the poet’s exhausting pursuit of truth, “to Hell” with his efforts to voice humanity’s “sweaty visions” (44). The speaker in “The Light of History...” surrenders to the mysterious beauty and symmetry of the universe—to ideas that might “cheer people up” (17)—with bitter irony:

When the day comes that these cries will be ridiculous mementoes,
some amusing fable, ununderstandable

even in the light of history, then God bless you happy people.

It would be my wish that you could not comprehend
sadness or cruelty, but lived your vigorous lives in peace

There is time enough, has been, for understanding.

To Hell with it. So long as the green Earth grows
and the great stars shine, live on and love each other.

Being is admirable and the graceful trees in the wind
sway in concert with you in this ever deathless world. (*NDS* 57)

Newlove's speaker arrives at this redemptive vision of admiration, grace, and harmony by giving in to a perspective of which he clearly disapproves. "God bless you happy people" is an ironic, even regretfully disgusted dismissal, not a genuine blessing. The first stanza professes deep sadness at humanity's inability and unwillingness to learn from history, and also at our custom of turning "cries" *against* that history—including, we might infer, the bleak but honest poetry that Newlove himself had written earlier in his career—into "ridiculous mementoes."²⁴ Significantly, in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, Newlove placed "The Light of History..." immediately after "Pygmies" and "Speech about a Blackfoot Woman with Travois." In so doing, he proposes that theirs are among the "cries" to which we should listen. The Blackfoot woman, "queen / of the prairie," is "dead now," he writes (55). Something is very wrong, Newlove's ironic stance reminds us—*ethically* wrong—if "even in the light of history," we ignore her death in favour of happiness and peace in an "ever deathless world."

²⁴ Newlove was very interested in history in most of his early poetry, as most critics have noticed; for a recent treatment of his attitude towards colonial history in "The Pride," his well-known long poem of 1964, see J.A. Weingarten's "'A Half-Understood Massiveness': Revisiting John Newlove's 'The Pride.'" Notably, Newlove's speaker "cries" out against civilization earlier in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, too, in "The Cities We Longed For." That poem summarizes the poet's life: first his "eyes opened briefly" and he "saw" with "disgust"; he "was angry, foolishly, for not having seen" earlier, and he "want[ed] to cry: / ... Throw out the mechanisms ... no love / until they die" (Newlove, *NDS* 11).

The image of the “sway[ing]” trees in the last line of “The Light of History...” alludes directly to Newlove’s 1981 long poem, “The Green Plain,” which, as I have noted, was first published as a chapbook and then reprinted in *The Night the Dog Smiled* five years later.²⁵ In “The Green Plain” (NDS 19-23), as in “The Light of History...”, Newlove’s speaker observes “[t]he forests, the forests, swaying,” and remarks that “there is no reason why they should be beautiful. / They live for their own reasons, not ours. / But they are.” Although the chapbook would not have had a wide readership, “The Green Plain” was, symbolically at least, the poem that announced Newlove’s return to publication. The poem offers a redemptive vision of cosmic wholeness. Read independent of the poems in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, it seems a genuine and straightforward, if unexpected, articulation of new optimism from Newlove. But read “in the light of” “The Light of History...”, this happy, life-affirming perspective can only possibly be ironic.

“The Green Plain” was, more precisely, an ironic response to the audience that had, in Newlove’s view at least, demanded a poem “concerning stars, flowers, love, etc.” (NDS 17). “Even in these worn-out days, / worn-out terms, / once in a while our poets / must speak // of Spring!” the speaker in “The Green Plain” proclaims (21); the poem is itself evidence of Newlove’s own apparent acquiescence to that imperative. The exclamation mark encapsulates the forced exuberance of this move. And yet, “worn-out” though he and his “terms” might be, the poet-speaker in “The Green Plain” seizes the opportunity of vernal rebirth: “The flowers / blow in [poets’] faces too,” he says, “and they smell perfumes / and they are seduced / by colour—rural as the hairy crocus or urban as a waxy tulip.” Here are the “flowers” that

²⁵ I will cite “The Green Plain” as it is printed in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, for ease of reference. But it is important to note that the poem looked very different in its original chapbook publication. In the chapbook, each (very short) stanza has its own page, so that the poem unfolds slowly, serenely, one image at a time. This formal arrangement evokes the spiritual tranquility that Newlove wanted his poem to convey.

Newlove's readers wanted; this poet-speaker is not immune to images of romance or sentiment, and the seductive colours of the crocus and tulip impel him to poetic (figurative) speech. Here too is the "love" that Newlove's readers wanted: the lonely poet enfolded in a community of others, "our poets" all "smell[ing]" the same "perfumes" together. There is no "I" in the poem at all: only the collective, communitarian "we." Everything is unified in "The Green Plain," in fact, for the "[s]tars sew up [our] lives together" and "[e]verything is always here, / and burning." "The Green Plain" is, finally, just as Newlove's readers requested, "something [we] already know, about stars or flowers or, / or happiness" (*NDS* 17).²⁶

In the chapbook, *The Green Plain*, Newlove prefaced the poem with a three-page meditation on his poetic past called "An Accidental Life." Like the poems in *The Night the Dog Smiled* that I discussed above, "An Accidental Life" dwells uneasily on audience, and in so doing, it demands that we read "The Green Plain" as a response or statement to that audience. It betrays the poet's desire to explain himself to his critics: "What do [I] write about?" he asks; and answers, "The 'What' is up to the reader, the sympathetic reader's completion of the poem. Please make of it what you will. But read with your ears, not with your eyes alone. And do not

²⁶ Susan Glickman, the only critic to write at any length on "The Green Plain," observes that the poem suggests "that much of what we see is beautiful and to be cherished, and that it is the vulnerability of this beauty—its very transience *because of* the fact of death—that makes us cherish it the more." This, in Glickman's view, was a substantial "concession for Newlove to make, for his chief thesis up to *The Green Plain*" had been that "death ... makes a mockery of both the idea of civilization and the premise of love" ("Driving" 95). I propose that her interpretation of the poem has much to do with the critical desire, which I analyzed in Chapter One, to view positive evolution in creative careers—evolution facilitated by the magic of middle silence (see note 26 in Chapter One, above). In a sense, according to my more skeptical view of things, Newlove, with profound irony, was playing right into the hand of critics such as Glickman: if they wanted silence to engender "positive" growth, then he was going to emerge from silence by giving that "growth" to them emphatically.

read everything you believe.”²⁷ These are the instructions of a deeply anxious writer. He *wants* to leave the poem’s meaning “up to the reader,” but he qualifies that it must be a “sympathetic reader.” He *wants* to let us “make of it what [we] will,” but he compulsively tells us how to read. The point of the chapbook, then, if we take “An Accidental Life” and “The Green Plain” together, is Newlove’s careful management of his own reception.

The call-and-response structure of the preface and poem in the chapbook only further illustrates the extent to which Newlove’s return to poetry publication was a “response” to his readers’ supposed “call” for a less “goddam gloomy” vision.²⁸ Although one is prose and the other verse, the preface and poem are almost perfectly balanced: “An Accidental Life” is 567 words long, and “The Green Plain” is 562 words long—just five words short of an *exact* “response” (“exact” in a manner of speaking, of course—a defiant manner that would definitely have appealed to Newlove). Within *The Green Plain*, the fertile, reassuring poem is not simply an announcement of new vision, but a precise answer to the questioning, anxious preface. It does not really matter whether Newlove had truly come to believe that “poets / must / speak // of Spring” or that “[s]tars sew up [our] lives together.” What matters, here, is that Newlove did not feel able to publish new poetry until he could offer that unexpected vision, sincere or not, to his readers and reviewers.

With new work finally in print after all of those years and old perspectives reasserted—affirmatively or by ironic denial—both Newlove and Marriott were also very conscious of the

²⁷ This last imperative, “do not read everything you believe,” was a particular concern of Newlove’s. In a letter to a friend (“Bill”) on 20 September 1985, Newlove wrote, with regard to critics: “I am annoyed, angry, with the people who develop ‘theories’ and then accept or reject the evidence, the poems, as it fits or does not fit the theory. Backwards. This . . . is more than specious and more than a handy sort of intellectual and academic censorship. It is wrongheaded, it fosters clique-ishness and group-making, it enables people to write without thinking” (JN 21.15). Newlove was referring in particular to the *TISH* group of Vancouver poets with this comment. His hope in the preface to “The Green Plain” was to call out those “backwards” critics who “write without thinking.” Newlove’s notion of an audience reading only what they believe also inspired his ironic rehearsal of their request, in “Concerning Stars, Flowers, Love, Etc.,” for the poet to “[t]ell / [them] something [they] already know” (NDS 17).

²⁸ Letter to Al Purdy, 20 July 1976 (JN 20.20).

ways in which they presented their long silences to the audiences that they so deeply longed to satisfy. Newlove drew attention to his “absence” by apologizing for it, not only in the title of *Apology for Absence*, but in poem after regretful poem. In the exact middle of *The Night the Dog Smiled*, the eighteenth of the volume’s thirty-five poems, is a short piece called “Report on Absence.” Although it is not a very substantial (or particularly good) poem, its placement obviously highlights the centrality of a “report” on the poet’s “absence” to the collection. Poems, Newlove’s speaker observes with deep regret, have turned out to be as rare as “oases I never thought I’d need” (NDS 33). Newlove continued in this wistful mood in much of his later work; in “Progress,” for instance, the long poem of sixty-five quatrains that closes *Apology for Absence*, the speaker defines poetry as an “absurd, absurd game” of “[w]aiting for rainbows that never come in, / trying to find a word” or “a vision / that would explain” their beauty (193), and he apologizes, again with profound regret, for “so few lines / written down and so many of them dreamed” (196). Newlove accounts both for his long mid-career absence and for the general sparseness of his *oeuvre* by comparing poems to “oases” and “rainbows”: rare and, in the latter case, ephemeral phenomena. These images assert the poet’s commitment to and even *need* for poetry: a need as great as that of a parched wanderer in the desert. Newlove continued to think of poetic silence as a barren absence right up until the bitter end of his career, but he emphasized and apologized for that absence in order to affirm the significance that poetry had for him—when it came.

Anne Marriott took quite a different approach to accounting, in her poetry, for the long gap between her book publications. She organized *The Circular Coast* so that it would offer a strong statement of enduring presence rather than any absence. In the selections and arrangement of that “New and Selected” volume, Marriott attempted to give the impression of a long, unified,

uninterrupted and still lively poetic career. One of her chief objectives in the late 1970s was, as she wrote to Seymour Mayne in January 1976, to “[establish] the fact that I am a working poet *now*.”²⁹ Mayne had been “urging” Marriott to publish a retrospective collection: “A selected poems should be in print and I have offered to publish it,” he insisted, mystified by her reluctance.³⁰ But she was aware of the effects that such a collection would have on her already diminishing—or already diminished—reputation. “I do feel that, *at this point*, it would do me little good as a poet to have any of that older work reissued,” she continued in her letter (emphasis in original):

Fred Cogswell’s publication of ‘Countries’ did show I was still working, to some extent, but not enough—this was something I realized very forcibly at the League of Canadian Poets’ meeting in Victoria last Thanksgiving—that I do need to change my image as just the author of ‘The Wind Our Enemy’, ‘long, long ago’ as someone put it.

That poem, and some other of those 1939-45 poems were sincere and of value in their time ... but right now I feel the important thing is to get a group of current poems out for exposure. This has been in the back of my mind for quite a while—I have a title poem for it, at least, but am not sure how much I have yet which is ready to go with it.

Marriott was mindful that publishing a Selected Poems volume would only further immortalize her as “just the author of ‘The Wind—’”: a mantle that she had already tried to shed nearly four decades earlier. As her comments to Mayne reveal, Marriott was concerned above all about her

²⁹ Letter to Seymour Mayne, 1 January 1976 (AM 3.9). The long quotation in this paragraph is from the same letter. Marriott had been similarly conscious of reputation in the early part of her career; regarding some poems that she decided to remove from *Sandstone* at the very last moment, she wrote to Lorne Pierce, “I do not feel they would do the book or my ‘literary reputation’ any good” (qtd in Irvine, *Editing* 101).

³⁰ Letter from Seymour Mayne to Anne Marriott, 6 January 1976 (AM 3.9).

“image” among other poets. She wanted—reasonably—to be accepted as an active member of the group, and she knew that this would require greater “exposure” than the modest statement of a chapbook could offer. It took five more years after her exchange with Mayne for Marriott to assemble a collection that she felt would satisfactorily represent the ongoing vitality of her work.

As it happens, Marriott came quite close to publishing exactly what Mayne had in mind, for she *did* reissue “older work” in *The Circular Coast*. The book is similar in many ways to *Cry Ararat!*, P.K. Page’s first post-silence volume. Both are “*Poems New and Selected*” collections that place the “new” before the old in their titles, and both Marriott and Page jumble chronology by grouping the poems thematically. This arrangement emphasizes the coherence of their *oeuvres* rather than the linear development of their poetic thought or craft, and as a result, it masks any gaps or silences. But although she does not present them in order, Marriott provides dates for the poems at the bottom of each page. “[Y]ou’ll see from the dates at the bottom,” she wrote to a friend, that *The Circular Coast* “really covers a lifetime!”³¹ According to these dates, the volume contains two poems from the 1930s, five from the 1940s, four from the 1950s, two from the 1960s, and seventeen from the 1970s. Of the thirty poems total, fifteen had previously been published, and fifteen were new. The largest gap is between 1956 (“Two Poems of Walls”) and 1967 (“When My Mother Died”).³² Five poems from 1973 represent the greatest concentration of new work from a single year. The volume is divided into three sections: “The

³¹ Letter to Heather Spears, 8 November 1982 (AM 9.2).

³² Marriott did draft and even publish some poems during this gap, though relatively few. There are forty-six poems under the cover “Poems 50s + 60s” in Marriott’s archive (AM 15.2), some marked with specific dates and some not. Eleven of those are from 1955–56, when Marriott was living in Prince George. There are ten additional poems with dates between 1950 and 1953 under the cover “Poems by Anne Marriott, 1939–”. In that same series, there are 251 poems dated between 1934 and 1949, and under the cover “Poems 1930s–40s,” an additional forty undated poems (AM 15.3–4). In other words, a very rough survey of the archival drafts—without taking into account any drafts that are missing, or considering which were published and which were not—suggests that Marriott wrote approximately five times as many poems in the first fifteen years of her poetic career as she did in the next twenty. In *Editing Modernity*, Dean Irvine summarizes Marriott’s publications during this period: between 1934 and 1945, he says, “she published more than two hundred poems in periodicals” and then “entered a period of decline. She published only eighteen more poems between the appearance of *Sandstone* in 1945 and the closure of *Contemporary Verse* in 1952–3 and only nine more throughout the remainder of the 1950s” (93).

Littoral,” which chiefly contains new work (twelve post-1970 poems and four poems from 1936 to 1969); “The Interior,” which chiefly contains older poems, including “The Wind Our Enemy” (nine pre-1970 poems and four poems from 1970 to 1973: note that the distribution of new and old is almost exactly reversed between the two sections); and “Countries,” reprinted from the 1970 chapbook.

In its title, “*The Circular Coast*,” and its section titles, “Littoral” and “Interior,” and in the themes and formal progression of its two longest and richest poems, “Countries” and “The Circular Coast,” Marriott’s 1981 volume gives an impression of wholeness: not necessarily of unity, but of completeness, of coming full circle. “[F]rom coasts you came / to coasts you must return,” her speaker intones in “The Circular Coast” (Marriott, *CC* 19). This is how Marriott presents her poetic career, after silence. The poems in *The Circular Coast* reflect on death or on a life winding down. “The Clock,” for instance, is a five-part meditation on time, and especially on time running out: the speaker listens to the “tick / of time / clicking back,” and confesses, “I do not want to hear it stop ... My pulse / my clock / irregular / runs now fast, now slow / irrevocably / runs down” (Marriott, *CC* 36, 38). Even the happier poems in *The Circular Coast* tend to look back nostalgically; for instance, in “Floencia Bay / Wreck Harbour” the speaker recalls a family outing and longs for her youth: “My own jeans off / (the children shocked) / I wash in a warm rock pool / wash and splash and wish: / *to have been young!*” (30; emphasis in original). In “Countries,” as we have already seen, Marriott’s speaker was not looking ahead to another worldly journey but was on her deathbed contemplating eternity. Although Marriott had wanted the volume to demonstrate her ongoing poetic activity, and although she did assemble more collections of new work in the decade that followed, *The Circular Coast* is very clearly a conclusive poetic statement.

Newlove was just fifty-five when he published *Apology for Absence*—quite a bit younger, that is, than Marriott’s sixty-eight in 1981 when *A Circular Coast* came out. And yet the new poems that he wrote for that collection are just as preoccupied with age and death and what Lipking calls the “summation” of his career as Marriott’s were. Poetic silence left both poets in a reflective “late” phase of their poetic lives, in other words, no matter their actual ages. Of the nine new poems that Newlove included in *Apology for Absence*, four are titled “Autobiography.” These very short pieces are tongue-in-cheek reflections on being a poet— “[t]his job is making my voice shrill,” one of the speakers observes (Newlove, *AA* 188)—and characterizations of the personae that Newlove’s audience knew well: “Always the neglected lover, / always the forlorn lover confessing / to an empty hall, an empty hell” (186). They are self-deprecating assessments: “I just live in this world / I don’t know much about it” (186). Most importantly, whether they are “true” to Newlove’s own life or not, they thematize autobiographical reflection. After having survived the creative “death” of poetic silence, “life” became a topic for both poets: Marriott returned to her family life, her travels across the country; Newlove recollected his life as a poet, his creative regrets and revelations.

The impulse to autobiographical reflection is the impulse of a poet not only anxious to evaluate his life and prove his worth, but uncertain whether he will have the chance to speak again. Both Newlove’s and Marriott’s post-silence poetry displays the qualities of “lateness” as Said defines it: “the idea of having survived beyond what is acceptable and normal” (13). In “Such Fun, Such Fun,” the third-last poem in *Apology for Absence*, Newlove delivers a eulogy for his own life as a poet because, his speaker says, “[i]t’s better to celebrate / your funeral before you die” (*AA* 187). This mood permeates all of the volumes that I have discussed in this section of the chapter. Possessed by a sense of having “survived beyond” silence (Said 13), both

Newlove and Marriott thought of their new poetry as an opportunity to “celebrate” their own “funeral[s] before [they] die.” For Marriott, *The Circular Coast*, a volume of poems “new and selected” from a creative “lifetime”³³ spanning five decades, was part of the celebration (or eulogy). So too, for Newlove, the selection represented one last chance to “apologize” for “absence.” Both writers sought to confirm their identities as poets, against the evidence of a period of silence that they clearly considered a blot on their records: a gap to be covered up or an absence to be apologized for. The unexpected survival beyond middle silence permitted both poets a final, grateful evaluation of their creative lives.

“Such Fun, Such Fun” is itself just such a summative statement. Playfully self-referential, Newlove’s poet-speaker runs through his reasons for writing, his doubts and struggles, his revelations. “I went about and tried to describe my country,” he recounts (like Marriott); “I found that though my soul was obscure / it was common. Liquor cured me or calmed me / and pain and long lying lines.” He regrets that “the booze tastes good even if the body aches / and the end is shame,” but he is grateful for “the sheer pleasure / of the gift, of a few gloomy words.” Despite all the sadness, he insists, his poetic career was “such fun, such fun.” But the poet making these assessments is finally, as Newlove quite fittingly characterizes him, “a ghost with a steel chisel / sneaking another letter onto the stone.” Back from the death of silence, this poet is “a ghost,” no longer “absent” but not quite present either, seeking permanence by “chiselling” more words—just a few more poems—into his *oeuvre*, the gravestone that will represent him for eternity. Silence was an ending for John Newlove and Anne Marriott, and their post-*lapsus* poetry was principally an echo of their earlier poetic work.

³³ Letter to Heather Spears, 8 November 1982 (AM 9.2).

II. “If It Be Your Will”: Page, Webb, and Cohen’s Creative Humility

For Page, Webb, and Cohen, there was no option of ghostly limbo. They were so totally paralyzed by their crises of poetic authority that they needed, far more than just an adequate response to critics (although that was important to them too), an entirely new way of thinking about the creative process and their roles as “makers.” The near-death experience of poetic silence provoked, for them, poetry that looked hopefully ahead in a “new / direction” (Page, *K* 114) rather than ruefully back to account for “so few lines / written down” (Newlove, *AA* 196). Silence was a humbling experience for all of the poets, but converting shameful *humiliation*, which engendered regretful apologies for absence, into productive *humility*, which opened new directions, was essential to moving forward. As Cohen in particular repeatedly suggests, comfort and relief came when the writers stopped struggling for autonomous authority over their poetry and instead conceded, graciously, to their limitations. “I am a singer in the lower choirs,” the speaker announces on the first page of *Book of Mercy*: “born . . . to raise my voice this high and no higher” (1). This singer is not alone in the spotlight, but he *is* singing. By assuming an attitude of humility—taking up their places in the “lower choirs”—Page, Webb, and Cohen were able to release the impossible duties of modernist mastery and control that had left them feeling powerless and overwhelmed in their periods of creative crisis.

The function of the moral and theological virtue of humility is, according to St Thomas Aquinas, “to temper and restrain the mind lest it press forward immoderately to high things”

(91).³⁴ Humility for the modernist writer, then, would “temper and restrain” the impulse to “aesthetic heroism” implied in the “quasi-religious” responsibility to produce “a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality” (Eysteinnsson 9) that some artists—Page, Webb, and Cohen among them—assumed, with varying degrees of seriousness. That said, although humility implies submission to limitations, it does not mean simply giving up or renouncing all ambition. On the contrary, as Thomas continues, to be humble is “[t]o strive after ambitious objects” with “confidence in divine help” rather than “confidence in your own abilities ... since,” in Thomas’s Christian view at least, “the more one humbles oneself before God the more one is lifted up before him” (97). Humility “expels pride, which God resists, and makes a man ... ready to receive divine favour” (Thomas 107). Receptivity is the most important aspect of creative humility. Once they had accepted “defeat” in their own struggles for authority, Page, Webb, and Cohen opened themselves up, in theory at least, to the wisdom of a higher order. Surrendering conscious control of the poetic process left them in an uncomfortably precarious position, but as long as they could accept that uncertainty, then the attitude of humility could also fuel a remarkably sustainable creative approach.³⁵

³⁴ The concept of humility has an extensive religious and philosophical history, and I use it only in a general way here. It has primarily been a Christian (Catholic) virtue. In the Classical tradition, it is related to the cardinal virtue of temperance, as Thomas’s definition suggests. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Spinoza found it problematic because, as Mark Button summarizes, it seems to “deny ... autonomous moral value to human reason and the individual self” (844). Obviously much modernist thought evolved in this line, but as the experiences of the poets in this study suggest, Nietzschean “mastery” might not be a sustainable creative position, at least not for all poets. Indeed, Leonard Cohen’s idealization of humility in the 1980s is evidence of his movement away from Nietzsche’s influence in the later stages of his career. A point of particular objection with regard to humility has also been the temptation to *false* humility. St Thomas Aquinas writes, “When the abasement [of the humble individual] is merely in outward signs and by pretence, this is ... sham humility” or “overweening pride ... [A] virtue does not consist in outward show ... but in the mind’s inward choice” (93). Importantly, the kind of “humility” I am describing here does not involve posturing in the poems: it is not humility as a rhetorical device, but as a way of *thinking* about the creative process after crisis and silence.

³⁵ Recall the words of another modernist previously preoccupied with mastery, T.S. Eliot, in his own meditative late-career, post-(poetic) hiatus (in the 1930s) poem, “Burnt Norton”: “Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, / Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. / The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (*Complete Poems* 179). Poets need not fear “belonging to another,” Eliot’s speaker suggests. Page, Cohen, and Webb accepted this same “wisdom.”

The three poets represent “wisdom of a higher order” in various forms in their post-hiatus poetry and commentary. Page imagined a mystical “other space”; Cohen threw his faith in God, or a God-like “Master” and “Lord of Unity” (*BM* 22); and Webb looked to the unconscious. In “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” Page develops a helpful image of this “higher order” and of the creative artist’s relationship to it. “I am a two-dimensional being,” she writes:

I live in a sheet of paper. My home has length and breadth and very little thickness. The tines of a fork pushed vertically through the paper appear as four thin silver ellipses. I may, in a moment of insight, realize that it is more than coincidence that four independent silver rings have entered my world. In a further breakthrough I may glimpse their unity, even sense the entire fork—large, glimmering, extraordinary. Just beyond my sight. Mystifying; marvellous.

My two-dimensional consciousness yearns to catch some overtone which will convey that great resonant silver object. (36)

Page is explicit here about the limitations of her “two-dimensional consciousness,” but she does not feel trapped or paralyzed by this constraint because she does not seek to escape it. She is not free of the artistic impulse to represent the “glimmering” presence that she has sensed, but rather than feeling obliged to capture it exactly, she “yearns” to “convey” its essence. Such yearning for an ineffable beyond is, notably, a Romantic rather than a modernist attitude.³⁶ The P.K. Page who asserted this perspective is very different from the P.K. Page who broke off in frustration when she feared, in her Brazilian fragment about the abundant varieties of rainforest leaves, that

³⁶ See my discussion of modernist and Romantic attitudes towards fragments and “the infinite” in the introduction to this dissertation. Page is breaking away, in “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” from T.E. Hulme’s directive, in “Romanticism and Classicism,” to “contemplat[e] finite things” (69).

she was failing to discern the whole meaning of the scene “[t]ogether ... entier.”³⁷ In “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman,” she recognizes that although the artist has a privileged sensibility that allows her, “in a moment of insight,” to “glimpse” the “unity” of the four “independent” dots, the “entire fork”—the “whole” that she had previously sought to articulate—will always remain “just beyond [her] sight.” The ellipses in the paper indicate an unutterable power; and reassuringly, one that “exists,” as Brian Trehearne writes, “independent of her self altogether, and [that] will continue to be there whether she exerts her eyes or not” (“Surrealism” 58).

Page’s faith in a “mysterious” and “marvellous” extra dimension was clearly influenced by her interest and reading in Islamic mysticism in the 1960s. But the humility that I am defining here need not be attached to a particular system of belief. Rather, as Page has said herself, it is “religious” in a basic, essential sense. In “The Sense of Angels,” her 1973 essay-tribute to A.M. Klein, Page reflected on the etymology of the word “religious,” dwelling especially on its Latin root, *ligare*: “to bind.”³⁸ Religion, she proposed, is the “binding together of what is, in reality, bound; of what appears fragmented only when seen through the prismatic eye of unregenerate man” (Page, “Sense” 68). A religious “eye” would be a kaleidoscopic one, an eye capable of holding all the parts together and yet apart at once, permitting a kind of coherent fragmentation. As Page wrote in a poem many years later, the “kaleidoscope” offers a “magic” lens through which “each single thing is other— / all-ways joined / to every other thing” (*K* 176). The religious eye can see the “ellipses” made by the tines of the fork in the paper (Page, “Traveller” 36), and can believe that they come from—are “bound” to—a larger organizing presence. The “religious” eye offers a vision of order that the poets were not themselves responsible for making. Developing and believing in such an “eye”—whether it was Christian or Jewish or Sufi

³⁷ “Write, & imagine a poem...” (PKP 27.5.10). See my discussion of this poem in Chapter Three (page 167, above).

³⁸ Steffler (42-3) and Vavassis (133-4) also remark the significance of this passage in Page’s essay.

or Buddhist or simply “kaleidoscopic”—was a crucial first step towards assuming the attitude of humility that would make new poetic life possible.

Page did not think of herself as a Christian, and it took many years for her to appreciate that she could have a religious “eye”—could believe in “something greater than oneself,” as she defined religious belief (“White” 143)—without following a particular creed. But in 1961, after about three years of near-total poetic silence, she began to refer to herself as a “religious non-Christian.” She repeated this self-characterization twice more over a period of more than twenty-five years, using increasingly grandiose language as she came to understand its significance in her spiritual and creative development. In her journal entry of 21 October 1961, written in Mexico, Page observed, “[A]fter all my life thinking I was an unreligious Christian now I think I am a religious non-Christian.” This was, she adds, “a comforting conclusion.”³⁹ Eight years later, in “Questions and Images,” Page referred to the same moment of “religious non-Christian” insight, but this time, she characterized it as an “initiation” (20), using Joseph Henderson’s psychological term. The allusion suggests that she now recognized the period in Mexico when the “religious” thought had come to her—the early 1960s, which were also the years of her deepest “poetic silence” (Page, *BJ* 235)—as a “meaningful transition ... between phase[s] of development” (Henderson 125). Finally, many years later, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1987, Page spoke of a conversion experience that was explicitly religious in character. “I had an extraordinary insight one day when I awakened and realized that I was not the unreligious Christian that I’d always thought myself to be,” she explains; “I realized in a sort of flash that I was a very religious non-Christian” (“That’s Me” 59). Even in the informality of the interview Page’s language is spiritual and dramatic: her “insight” was “extraordinary” and she “awakened” to a totally new point of view “in a sort of flash.” Steffler rightly insists that Page deliberately

³⁹ “Mexican Journal,” vol. 1, p. 166 (PKP 113.26). See also Steffler 40.

constructed this story to account for the rhythms of her creativity. Nevertheless, the way in which she constructed it—“comforting conclusion” became psychological “initiation” and eventually “extraordinary insight”—demonstrates her growing confidence in the liberating value of a “religious” perspective.

Page’s “Another Space” (K 113-14) is a poetic account of her “religious non-Christian” awakening. She wrote the poem in 1969, at around the same time that she described her “initiation” in “Questions and Images.”⁴⁰ The poem proposes religious “binding” as a new model of poetic authority. A “new / direction opens” for the speaker when she feels bound to “another space”: to “some dimension [she] can barely guess,” or to what Rosemary Sullivan calls “an informing structure” (“Size” 42). In the poem, Page’s dreaming speaker catches sight of a group of dancers “spinning in a ring” on a beach as though they are revolving around an “axis ... vertical / invisible / immeasurably tall” which “rotates a starry spool.” The speaker is “reel[ed] ... in” to their motion as though she is “on a string,” “willingly pulled by their rotation,” naturally and inevitably “as the moon pulls waters.” Once she submits to the dance, to the system connecting beach to stars, individuals to universe, “fixed parts / within [her]” are “set in motion / like a poem.” Page responds explicitly here to her earlier feeling of creative paralysis: when her speaker recognizes the existence of “another space” and joins those who are connected to it—when she “submit[s] to a power greater than [her]self” (Henderson 125)—the obtrusive “pane that halved [her] heart” “melts” away and she is free to move poetically again. “The poem’s

⁴⁰ Steffler, citing Zailig Pollock, says that Page wrote “Another Space” “by February 17, 1969” (54, note 4); the poem was published in the August 1969 issue of *Poetry*. “Questions and Images” was published at exactly the same time, in the Summer 1969 issue of *Canadian Literature*. Essay and poem were clearly companions, and in the essay, Page alludes specifically to the “circular dance beside the sea” of “Another Space” (“Questions” 20) (although the essay’s original audience would not have recognized the reference unless they were readers of both *Poetry* and *Canadian Literature*). Significantly, “Another Space” is a poetic rendering of a dream that Page had in Mexico and recorded in her journal on 14 November 1960 (“Mexican Journal,” vol. 1, pp. 69-70 [PKP 113.25]), just about a year before she wrote of her “comforting” religious “conclusion” on 21 October 1961 (“Mexican Journal,” vol. 1, p. 166 [PKP 113.26]). The original 1960-61 dream and insight were obviously related, as were Page’s poetic and prose treatments of them in 1969.

humility is moving,” writes Sullivan: “only once [a higher] order is sensed ... does the heart melt” (“Size” 42). Submission permits creative freedom.

“Another Space” not only resolves Page’s general sense of paralysis—of being “in stasis locked” (*K* 114)—but also responds directly to several of the specific doubts and frustrations of her mid-1950s poetry. In 1958, for instance, in “Could I Write a Poem Now?” she had implored, “But how do you write a Chagall? / It boils down to that” (Page, *K* 99). As Cynthia Messenger has argued, Page frequently employed ekphrasis in her Brazilian fragments. She was wondering in her poetic effort why painting Brazil seemed so much more appropriate—and indeed, so much more possible—than writing it.⁴¹ Chagall returns in “Another Space,” but not, this time, within an agonized question. Describing the “dark-skinned” and “beautiful” dancers in the fifth stanza, the speaker observes simply, “nearer still I see them—‘a Chagall.’” By placing “a Chagall” in quotation marks, she is not only self-consciously “writing a Chagall,” but quite directly rebutting the earlier poem. Page had felt overwhelmed by the lushness and energy of the green Brazilian landscape, and she felt that painting could capture this more effectively than words. But her new faith in an “informing structure” (Sullivan, “Size” 42)—represented here by the vertical axis and its “starry spool”—meant that she no longer felt obliged, in poetry, to wrangle that chaotic energy into order. “Another Space,” it must be said, is not a “chaotic” poem: Page clearly *was* producing “order” among her images. But the lifting of obligation—the sense that she merely had to “catch some overtone” (Page, “Traveller” 36) of the scene’s energy—freed her from her earlier crisis of poetic authority.

⁴¹ Messenger also suggests that Page invokes Chagall in particular because he is a modernist painter and thus “cannot be easily paraphrased” (112) through traditional iconography. Page relies on ekphrasis because “[t]he painterly language intervenes for her and allows her to frame Brazil ... and thereby contain it,” Messenger argues (111).

Additionally, the speaker's "momentary glimpse of an informing structure" in "Another Space," as Sullivan argues, "initiates the ... break from solipsism" ("Size" 42) that Page had longed for in "After Rain" and also, I would add, in "Arras." Whereas in "After Rain" Giovanni's "ache" had "exist[ed] beyond" the "rim" of the speaker's eye (Page, *K* 91), in "Another Space" the "turning circle" of beach dancers "winds around its rim" to "reel" her "in." This inclusive dance offers a model for the poet's "heart." The size of the structure matters far less than the centripetal pull that its motion exerts. The jubilant dream dance also provides a sharp contrast to the "infinite" "stillness" of the cold garden party that Page evoked in "Arras," the final poem in her 1954 volume, *The Metal and the Flower*. The speaker in "Arras" was a solitary trespasser in a garden of stoic, uncaring others. "The spinning world is stuck on its poles," that earlier speaker observed: "the stillness points a bone at me" (Page, *K* 79). Constance Rooke notes that "the pointing of a bone is an aboriginal hex which brings death to the accused" (69). The speaker in "Another Space" is also a trespasser on an outdoor party of sorts, but this time she is welcomed rather than threatened. The "headman" among the dancers "shoots" an arrow "to strike the absolute centre of [her] skull," but it lands with "such staggering lightness / that the blow is love."⁴² Rather than causing her to "fear the future" as the bone did in "Arras," the "blow" in "Another Space" prompts the healing of the speaker's heart. Now that she has joined the dance and, with it, the much larger system that spins the "starry spool" above, making contact with other presences in the poem—whether she is welcoming them into her own heart or

⁴² The "blow" of "love" in the sixth stanza of "Another Space" is directly responsible for the "melting" of the "pane that halved [her] heart" in the seventh. This, too, is an allusion to "After Rain"—or, to an early version of "After Rain." In Page's typescript drafts of the poem and in the version that she published in the November 1956 issue of *Poetry*, the speaker hoped that she would one day acquire "a heart that knows tears are *the half* of love" (emphasis added). She changed the proportion to the slightly less extreme "a part of love" in the *Cry Ararat!* version of the poem, but the repeated imagery of "halved" hearts sounds yet another note of correspondence between "Another Space" and "After Rain."

being welcomed *by* them into their community—no longer disrupts coherence, but stimulates the opening, at long last, of a “new / direction.”

In “Another Space,” Page’s speaker derives comfort and energy from her submission to the rhythms and rotations of “another space,” “a different spectrum,” “some dimension [she] can barely guess.” In *Book of Mercy*, Leonard Cohen similarly dwells on the healing power of submission, but he also emphasizes, more insistently than Page does, the need to be open and receptive to the restorative influence that she called “love” and he calls “mercy.” Cohen’s volume is a collection of fifty psalms, prayers, and confessions in which a speaker acknowledges his sins of pride and greed, asks for the forgiveness of God, and prepares himself, with praise and with gratitude, to receive divine mercy.⁴³ Cohen suggests compellingly that adopting an attitude of humility is indeed the *only* possible way to proceed out of creative crisis and silence. “Not knowing where to turn, I turn to you,” the speaker confides to his heavenly interlocutor; “[n]ot knowing what to hold, I bind myself to you ... Not knowing how to speak, I speak to you” (Cohen, *BM* 45). The speaker in these poems “call[s] on” God “from the dust, when there is nothing but dust, and the coils of his defeat” (40).⁴⁴ He recognizes that he has been “[d]efeated by silence” (45), and there is nothing left for him to do but to accept that defeat. “The meditations of the great are above me, and the entwining of the letters is beyond my skill,” this lowly, humble speaker is able to admit. He will only truly be receptive to mercy and healing

⁴³ Cohen was fifty in 1984 when *Book of Mercy* was published; the fifty poems in the volume represent each of his fifty years. The speaker on the first page, moreover, states that he was “born fifty years ago.” Although we must not conflate Cohen and his speaker, Cohen himself signals their alignment to suggest that *Book of Mercy* is a private, intimate volume, free of personae, artifice, and what he frequently calls “strategies” (for instance, in poems 1, 6, and 40). Of course, such a suggestion is itself a strategy, but we can accept his intention.

⁴⁴ The frequent references to “dust” throughout *Book of Mercy* (for instance, in poems 6, 13, 40, 44, and 48) recall Abraham’s expression of humility, in Genesis 18:27: “I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.” “Humility” and “dust” are etymologically related: “humility” comes from the Latin root *humus*, which means “earth.” One who is humble bows down to the earth—knows that he is of the earth and not of heaven.

once he has stopped struggling for stardom and accepted his position as “a singer in the lower choirs” (1).

The God in *Book of Mercy* is an ordering force who “gives a form to desolation” and who, in creating the world, has “written [his] name on the chaos of the universe” (46). Not only is the poet free of any obligation to perform those tasks, Cohen’s prayers affirm, but it would be hubristic—overreaching, as George Steiner suggested (39)—for him to try. One who “dare[s] to live without God” gets caught up in his own false power: “you rule over chaos ... you hoist your flags with no authority ... You decompose behind your flimsy armour, your stench alarms you, your panic strikes at love” (27). The interlocutor of this address closely resembles Cohen’s earlier poet-persona, right down to the armour: the “feathered helmet” and “shield” that the speaker donned on the first page of *Death of a Lady’s Man* (11). But entering poems as though setting out for war was not a sustainable approach to creativity, *Book of Mercy* proposes. Poetry need not be a display of power. “[Y]our cowardice has led you to believe that the victor does not limp,” observes the wise *Book of Mercy* speaker of that earlier, ailing *Death of a Lady’s Man* persona (27): it led him to believe, in other words, that victory was complete mastery. On the contrary, as the prayers imply collectively, the true “victor” professes his own weakness—humbly accepts defeat—and thus opens himself to God’s mercy.

Book of Mercy in fact responds quite extensively to the creative problems that Cohen had expressed in *Death of a Lady’s Man*, countering above all the earlier hubris with newfound humility. The responses often take the form of confessions; for instance, “I grew swollen as I conspired with my ambition, I struggled, I expanded,” the speaker summarizes in one poem (Cohen, *BM* 2). He recognizes the error of his earlier attitude: he had been “harvesting lost triumphs ... far from the real and necessary defeat” (39). In other words, he dwelled on his

failures and disappointments and even exploited (or “harvested”) their creative potential with a sense of entitlement—imagining them as “lost triumphs”—rather than with the “necessary” humility of “real ... defeat.” Pride and excessive appetite paralyzed the poet-persona in *Death of a Lady’s Man*, and in *Book of Mercy*, he can explain why. “When the heart grins at itself, the world is destroyed,” he observes: “Then the dangerous moment comes: I am too great to ask for help ... I legislate from the fortress of my disappointment” (31). Cohen points here to the chief difference in perspective between the two volumes. The speaker suggests that when ambition and success—the self-satisfied, self-absorbed “grinning” heart—proved destructive to him and to his “world,” instead of reaching out “for help,” he settled inside a vision of “disappointment”: the “pool of fat” where the *Death of a Lady’s Man* persona lay, “ashamed to be what I am” (12). He made it his poetic *duty*, even, to “legislate” from that unpleasant, stagnant, and even harmful position.

In *Book of Mercy*, Cohen proposes instead to dismantle the “fortress.” One of the speakers instructs,

Return, spirit, to this lowly place. Come down. Draw back your song from the
middle air where you cannot follow it. Recall your longing to the loneliness
where it was born ... Refine your longing here ... under the low-built shelter of
repentance ... Kneel here, search here, with both hands, the cat’s cradle of your
tiny distress. (Cohen, *BM* 16)

The “low-built shelter of repentance,” obviously, contrasts markedly with the earlier “fortress of disappointment” (31). The speaker must recognize that his “distress” is “tiny”: insignificant, individual, and of importance only to him. Repentance from this “lowly place” will allow the speaker to alter his mode of desiring, to “refine” it from greed and selfishness to spiritual

“longing.” Cohen also describes the hard *work* of humility in this passage. The humble, kneeling speaker must “search” actively—“with both hands.” The image of the “cat’s cradle” evokes the tangled threads of his faith, which he must carefully unknot so that, eventually, he can rebind them to God’s guiding presence.

The humble speaker in *Book of Mercy*, unlike the poet in crisis in *Death of a Lady’s Man*, has learned that if he stops trying to assert his own authority by building fortresses *against* God’s much greater power and instead submits to the supremacy of that “king of absolute unity” (Cohen, *BM* 20), then divine influence will become a source of healing rather than a source of terror as it was in earlier poems such as “I Should Not Say You” and “The Asthmatic.” “[T]he more one humbles oneself before God the more one is lifted up before him,” wrote St Thomas Aquinas (97). In *Book of Mercy*, the speaker prays,

Awaken me to the mercy of the breath which you breathe into me. Remove
your creature’s self-created world ... Dissolve the lonely dream which is the
judgement on my ignorance, and sweep aside the work of my hands, the
barricades of uncleanness, which I commanded against the torrents of mercy.
(48)

Wanting to believe only in his own sovereign powers of creation—his “self-created world”—the speaker “commanded” “barricades” against the winds of divine inspiration. This recalls quite directly the persona in “I Should Not Say You,” who demanded protection against the absence of God’s “Name” in his heart but who, rather than opening himself up to that protection, launched into a dizzying list of all the ways in which he did *not* want to be protected (Cohen, *DLM* 62-3). In other words, as this *Book of Mercy* confession recalls, he “barricaded” himself within an excess of imperatives “against the torrents of mercy.” Likewise, in “The Asthmatic,” the speaker

observes that the panicking, overwhelmed poet has “commanded the guards to shut down the doors and take away breathing” as the only possible form of relief from the attack on his distressed lungs (Cohen, *DLM* 64). In *Book of Mercy*, God’s breath is still powerful and even potentially destructive—it comes in “torrents”—but it is no longer overwhelming. When the poet stops resisting these winds, when he stops trying to “command” and control them from within his “self-created world,” then they become a life-force, an animating breath, a comfort instead of a menace. The speaker in *Book of Mercy* can now pray, referring to the defeated, humble poet in the third person, “Heal him inside the wind, wrap the wind around his broken ribs” (17); one imagines the ribs broken from the assault of the asthma attack. This poet’s error, finally, was his struggle to assume a position of mastery that made such healing, mercy, and inspiration a threat to his own authority.

Cohen’s view of humility was obviously inspired by theological traditions—Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism—just as Page’s was to some extent at least rooted in Sufism. Phyllis Webb, by contrast, despite a brief interest in Buddhism, explicitly rejected “conventional religions of all kinds.” Her “antagonism” towards organized systems of belief was, she told Eleanor Wachtel in 1983, “focussed on the patriarchal structure. I don’t want to become more involved with that, thank you. I want to become less involved” (Webb qtd in Wachtel 13). She wanted to reject authority of all kinds, and that included religious authority. But Webb’s attitude actually considerably enriches my definition of post-silence creative humility. Despite her ostensible rejection of religion, Webb responded to the crisis of poetic authority that all three writers had experienced just as the other two did: by acknowledging the existence of a higher order of meaning or creative energy and by emphasizing the absolute necessity of remaining open and receptive to its wisdom. If we consider Page or Cohen in isolation, the “very big

change” (Page, “That’s Me” 54) registered in both *oeuvres* might seem merely to be the result of a mystical or traditionally “religious” conversion. But Webb’s emphasis on a kind of faith and submission totally separate from any “conventional religion” whatsoever indicates a bigger pattern: a *creative* conversion that allows a poet to emerge productively from silence. At the same time, regardless of Webb’s aversion to “convention,” all three creative conversions were essentially “religious” in character.

The terms of Webb’s essentially “religious” conversion were psychological: the “higher power” that became her source of creative energy and authority was the unconscious. “Why is my unconscious so clever and I such a slow-witted dunce?” she asks in the script of her 1972 radio talk, “Calamities and Crystals: Poetry, Fate and the Unconscious.”⁴⁵ The location of the unconscious as compared to Cohen’s God or Page’s glimmering “fork” might seem at first to render them categorically different: the unconscious is *inside* and God is *outside*, a separate entity. But Jung wrote, as both Page and Webb would have known, that “[w]e cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities” (468). They might simply be two different ways of describing the same thing, in other words. Vivian Vavassis elaborates on this principle: “Because the unconscious is a collective, largely intangible, transcendental concept apprehended through psychic symbols,” she writes, “it articulates divine material that emerges from a superior source”—like “God”—“and cannot be grasped directly” (133). The poets shared the basic sense, in other words, that their material “emerged from a superior source,” even if Webb’s terms remained more modern. In her radio talk, Webb proposes rather humbly that “[t]o go beyond ... [t]he concepts of Fate, or, more benevolently, the Muse, or more intricately and confused the unconscious ... is the work of the poem ... [But] to get beyond them is perhaps

⁴⁵ PW 15.V.F.17.

asking too much of the poet.”⁴⁶ Instead, the poet must “listen” attentively (“Seeking” 24), to use Webb’s own language, for “mysterious signs and signals” (“Addressing” 33)—like the “ellipses” of Page’s fork (“Traveller” 36)—and assemble them as best she can; if she is successful, the poem will express the wisdom that she could not consciously apprehend in the process of creation. She must relinquish conscious control of the poem in order to receive the much bigger signals of God, Fate, the muse, or the unconscious.

Relinquishing consciousness turns out to be an answer, of sorts, in Webb’s “Question of Questions” series. Webb began this five-part sequence in the early 1970s while she was still working on the “Kropotkin Poems,” and she eventually published it in *Wilson’s Bowl*.⁴⁷ “A Question of Questions” investigates the politics and power dynamics of the “question” to express the poet’s shift away from a desire for programmatic knowledge and control towards a state of openness. The speaker experiences a literal loss of consciousness when a bird “flies off / with [her] head” (Webb, *PB* 255), “replacing it,” Webb elaborated in “Calamities and Crystals,” “with an instinctive wisdom I have long sought and long evaded.”⁴⁸ Like many of Cohen’s poems in *Book of Mercy*, Part V of “A Question of Questions” (*PB* 254-5) is about the reconfiguration of desire. It is dedicated to the psychologist R.D. Laing, whose book, *The Self and Others*, Webb quotes in her “Notes to the Poems” at the end of *Wilson’s Bowl*. Laing describes the shared task of the therapist and the “Zen Master”: both recognize, he says, that people suffer because of “the state of desire they are in, whereby they posit the existence of ‘an answer’ and are frustrated because they do not seem to be getting it” (qtd in Webb, *WB* 87; cf. *PB* 289). The speaker in Webb’s poem understands this notion—that her “error lies in / the state of desire / in wanting the

⁴⁶ “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.5.F.17).

⁴⁷ “A Question of Questions” also began as a kind of companion to Webb’s radio talk, “The Question as an Instrument of Torture,” which was part of an *Ideas* series on evil in May 1971; an abridged version of that talk is in *Talking* (pp. 31-45).

⁴⁸ PW 15.V.F.17.

answers”—but she seems, at first, unable to help herself. She is constantly “wanting” in the first stanza: “wanting the red-crested / woodpecker to pose / among red berries / of the ash tree / wanting its names / its habitations / the instinct of its ways.” She desires knowledge (the woodpecker’s “names” and “habitations”) and control (to dictate how it should “pose”), and at the same time, she covets the bird’s natural “instinct.”

The “red-crested / woodpecker” is the speaker’s therapist-“Zen Master,” able to free her from her desires. According to Webb’s account in “Calamities and Crystals,” the poem is based on a real experience that she had while she was out for a walk near her home on Salt Spring Island. “I was walking along the Isabella Point Road,” she says,

when a brilliant, red-cockaded bird in a tree caught my eye—caught, seized my eye. I stood very still to watch it; it seemed to me the most exotic bird I’d ever seen in this region. In its beauty it appeared at that moment an emblem, herald, sign. It flew off, leaving me with the taste of some until now unknown ecstasy.⁴⁹

As Webb describes it, the “exotic” bird jolted her into some foreign—“unknown”—part of herself: the “wisdom” she had “long sought and long evaded.” It overtakes her—catches and seizes her—and shocks her into attentive stillness. The speaker in “A Question of Questions” is similarly struck by this “ecstasy” and “wisdom” as the first stanza comes to a close: “whiteflash of underwings / dazzling all questions / out of me, amazement / and outbreathing / become a form / of my knowing.” The gerunds evoke the suspended motion of instinctual “knowing” in the

⁴⁹ Webb, “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17).

single “dazzling” moment.⁵⁰ In the next stanza, the bird follows the speaker as she “keep[s] walking. / Trying to think.” Finally it “flies off / with [her] head”—with her consciousness.⁵¹ “Knowing,” in this new headless state, does not require “[t]rying to think”: it is as simple as “amazement.” Webb quotes the description of the (scientifically named) “pileated woodpecker” from Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to Western Birds* in the final stanza of the poem. Significantly, the knowledge that the speaker sought at the outset—precise, empirical facts about the woodpecker’s “names” and “habitations”—is available to her only now that she has given up “thinking” and transcended the conscious “state of desire.”

Part V of “A Question of Questions” is about the importance of self-forgetfulness, as Webb claims in “Calamities and Crystals.” The speaker goes beyond the individual ego to reach a deeper, “instinctive” way of knowing. Webb ends her radio talk with reference to another psychologist, Norman O. Brown. Brown said that “[t]he solution to the problem of identity is, get lost,” according to the poet’s tongue-in-cheek summary. “Or,” she continues, “as it says in the New Testament, ‘He that findeth his own psyche shall lose it, and he that loseth his psyche for my sake shall find it.’ Brown returns us to the conventional wisdom, and so, I think, does the poem [‘A Question of Questions’].”⁵² One senses Webb’s “antagonism” towards “conventional religions” (qtd in Wachtel 13) in this paraphrase, but she is serious about the value of “the conventional wisdom”—that is, the loss of self. Ridding the poetry and indeed the creative

⁵⁰ “Outbreathing” also has formal, compositional resonances. Webb had been interested in Robert Creeley’s method of “open field” composition at least since the mid-1960s, when she set out in the *Naked Poems* to study “the measure of the breath” in order to “see what my basic rhythms were; how I *really* speak” (“Polishing” 47). See also Butling, *Seeing* 22; and see Webb’s 1981 poem, “Field Guide to Snow Crystals,” in which she self-consciously employs “field” composition: clearly the method still intrigued her all those years later (*Talking* 61; *Vision Tree* 140-1; “Field Guide” is not in *Peacock Blue*). The poem was originally a part of Webb’s essay, “Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process,” in *Talking* (51-65).

⁵¹ This image recalls Leonard Cohen’s Oscotarach the Head-Piercer in *Beautiful Losers*, whose “function [was] to remove the brains from the skulls of all who went by” (196). Although Webb was probably not alluding to the novel intentionally, it is notable that both she and Cohen were interested in—and indeed idealized—the removal of conscious thought: magic “spawns in an empty mind,” Cohen writes (*Beautiful Losers* 168).

⁵² Webb, “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17). She is referring to Brown’s *Love’s Body* (1966).

process of the obtrusive, controlling “self” was liberating, because “[t]rying to think” gets in the way of receptivity and instinct. Possessed by greed, pride, or too strong a desire for autonomous control, they will feel overwhelmed—“lost,” as Webb says. By surrendering their “selves”—their egos and their conscious minds—to a higher order, they will “find” healing, mercy, and “instinctive wisdom.”⁵³ The experience of creative crisis and silence, importantly, forced the poets into this position of surrender in a very real way.

Imprisonment in self-consciousness was a common motif in the poetry of creative crisis, as I showed in Chapter Three. For instance, we saw that Cohen’s speaker dismissed his “life in art” as a “disagreeable” and futile address to “a man in the mirror”—himself—in *Death of a Lady’s Man* (192, 198), and that Webb’s speaker concluded the “Poems of Failure” obsessed with an obtrusive “I,” “exile[d]” within her own solipsistic perspective (*PB* 223). The post-silence poetry escapes such imprisonment by emphasizing self-forgetfulness. Page’s “glimpse” of “some” distant “dimension” in “Another Space” occurs, importantly, in a “dream” (*K* 113). Her speaker, similar to Webb’s in “A Question of Questions,” is “struck” in the head—“in the absolute centre of [her] skull” (Page, *K* 114); this implies, even within the dream, a further loss of consciousness and self. *Book of Mercy*, likewise, is all about losing the self. Cohen’s prayers are purportedly deeply personal: *Book of Mercy* was “a secret book for me,” he explains (“Interview” 56). But the very *mode* of prayerful address, as Jahan Ramazani writes in *Poetry*

⁵³ Webb, “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17). The motif of “surrender” recalls Eliot’s instruction, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that the task of the artist is “surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (22), or that “[w]hat happens” in the (impersonal) creative process is the artist’s “continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable” (17). In the more Romantic model that I am articulating here, rather than surrendering to the “work to be done” or to the artwork (the thing “which is more valuable”), the poets surrender their own individual authority to a higher master, and they surrender too to the uncertainty that this move necessarily inspires.

and Its Others, is often “characterized in terms of self-forgetfulness” (133).⁵⁴ Ramazani demonstrates that modern poetry often “exposes” and critiques the “metaphoricity” and “rhetoricity” of prayer (171), but Cohen looks in the opposite direction: he employs the form of prayer as a way of critiquing the pretensions to mastery of the poetic creator.

Prayer implies focus and attention. As they looked to move beyond the panic of creative crisis, a prayerful stance became an ideal position for all three poets, whether they were actually writing “prayers” or not. They had earlier written excessive and overwhelming list poems, which expressed the feeling of being “silenced” as they struggled to maintain mastery over their material; “prayerful” poems, on the other hand, evoke the “silent” humility of attending to another authority. W.H. Auden’s definition of prayer is illuminating:

As an antidote to pride, man has been endowed with the capacity for prayer, an activity which is not to be confined to prayer in the narrow religious sense of the word. To pray is to pay attention or, shall we say, to ‘listen’ to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—be it on a landscape, or a poem or a geometrical problem or an idol or the True God—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying. (*Certain* 306)⁵⁵

Auden highlights the importance of understanding prayer beyond its “narrow religious sense.”

He also emphasizes the crucial activity of “listening” with concentrated attention, and he describes the loss of individual “desire” in the yearning to receive the more substantial wisdom

⁵⁴ The conventions of prayer that most often appear in the modern and contemporary poetry that Ramazani studies in his chapter on “Poetry and Prayer”—“intimate address, intercession, adoration, awed colloquy, ritual incantation, solemn petition, anthropomorphism, musical repetition, the language of the Bible” (171)—are all present in *Book of Mercy*.

⁵⁵ I was led to Auden’s essay by Ramazani, who also quotes and discusses this passage in his chapter on “Poetry and Prayer” (see Ramazani pp. 130-1).

of the “other.” This, too, was how Page, Webb, and Cohen began to envisage the ideal creative process as they began to reconceive of silence as attentive listening rather than forced suppression. Ramazani remarks, with reference to Auden, that the “concept of prayer as openness to the other, as intense listening, as making of oneself a vessel for the other’s speech, recalls many descriptions not only of prayer but also of the poet’s relation to the muse.” The aim in both cases is for writer or worshipper to “lose their everyday selves and potentially rediscover themselves anew” (Ramazani 130-1). Recall Webb’s quip: “He that findeth his own psyche shall lose it, and he that loseth his psyche for my sake shall find it.”⁵⁶ Of course, writing poems does not—and would not, for any of these poets—*always* necessitate adopting a prayerful stance, but the *ideal* of prayer offered Cohen, Page, and Webb, at least in theory, the possibility of escape from future moments of overwhelming self-consciousness.

“Defeated by silence, here is a place where the silence is more subtle”: the “place” to which Cohen’s speaker refers is the humble position of prayer (*BM* 45), the reverent “silence” of “amazement / and outbreathing” (Webb, *PB* 254). If prayer involves “listening to what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306), then silence is essential to prayer. And just as they evoke creative obstruction as physical paralysis, the poets represent prayerful listening as physical stillness. The difference between paralysis and stillness is the difference between the stymied silence of “defeat” and the “subtle” silence of receptivity. One feels enforced and the other is elected; one illustrates powerlessness, the other, potential. In *Book of Mercy*, Cohen instructs,

Sit in a chair and keep still. Let the dancer’s shoulders emerge from your
shoulders, the dancer’s chest from your chest, the dancer’s loins from your
loins, the dancer’s hips and thighs from yours; and from your silence the throat
that makes a sound, and from your bafflement a clear song to which the dancer

⁵⁶ “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17).

moves, and let him serve God in beauty. When he fails, send him again from
your chair. (26)

Elegant athleticism emerges from stillness, “sound” emerges from “silence,” and “clear song”—clarity, insight—emerges from “bafflement.” This stillness could not be more different from the total immobility in “The Politics of this Book,” where the speaker felt “plugged up” and “bur[ied] in a “vast amber paperweight” (Cohen, *DLM* 203). From one who sits still and waits patiently will materialize someone else—someone better, someone more creative, a dancer, a singer. Cohen considers the possibility—even the certainty—of eventual failure, but there is no fear in this, for the creative individual can always return to his “chair,” his stillness and his silence. This is the twenty-sixth poem in *Book of Mercy*, the final poem in the first of the volume’s two slightly uneven parts. The gap between sections in the near-middle of the book mimics the silence between phases in the near-middle of a poetic career. From such a powerful, pivotal position, the poem suggests that achieving a calm state of openness and “bafflement” will permit creativity to continue in the poems that follow.

Both Cohen and Webb were attracted to Buddhism, if only temporarily in Webb’s case, and their depictions of stillness, “bafflement” (Cohen, *BM* 26), and “amazement” (Webb, *PB* 254) were inspired at least in part by Zen meditative practice.⁵⁷ But once again particular religious systems do not tell the whole story, for P.K. Page’s description of “stillness” as the

⁵⁷ For more on Phyllis Webb and Buddhist “knowing,” see Rob Winger’s “How to Know Now: ‘Zen’ Poetics in Phyllis Webb’s *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*.”

perfect creative state in “Cry Ararat!” (*K* 105-8) is strikingly similar to Cohen’s.⁵⁸ She idealizes dreams because “when dreaming,” her speaker observes, “you desire / and ask for nothing more / than stillness to receive.” In dream, as Webb might have added, we transcend “the state of desire / [of] wanting the answers” (*PB* 254). Like Cohen, Page’s dreaming speaker delivers a number of gentle imperatives—this time, to one who wishes to glimpse Ararat, the promised land, which has appeared in her dream:

Do not reach to touch it
or labour to hear.

Return to your hand
the sense of the hand;

return to your ear
the sense of the ear.

Remember the statue,
that space in the air
which with nothing to hold
what the minute is giving
is through each point
where its marble touches air.

The image of the longed-for mountain will appear to the perceiver who remains still and alert as a statue, these lines suggest. Page’s speaker instructs her interlocutor not to “reach” or “labour”

⁵⁸ In Chapter One, I noted that many critics mention “Cry Ararat!” relatively briefly as a conclusion to their developmental studies of Page. A.J.M. Smith recognized the resolution that this poem offered to Page’s earlier impasse before anyone else, in his comments on an early typescript of *Cry Ararat!*, the volume. “Perhaps it shd come after Arras [your greatest (for me) poem because most concentrated and intense and terrible] because in a sense it resolves the dilemma and achieves an absolution” (Smith to Page, handwritten page titled “Comment,” [n.d.] [PKP 1.11]). Initially, Page had placed “Cry Ararat!” after “The Snowman”; it was followed by “Dark Kingdom” and then “Arras,” which concluded the volume. She took Smith’s advice, which suggests that she agreed with him about its significant place in her *oeuvre*.

in an effort to bring “the faraway, here.” Likewise, the poet must not “labour” to master her vision: she must not “reach” after images, such as Ararat, that she will never be able to “touch.” The stillness of the statue does not imply either confinement or laziness, though. The poet must be hyperaware of her senses, open to the “air,” and receptive to what each “minute is giving.”⁵⁹ When the viewer of the mountain—or the poet, the reacher after mystical visions—just “*is*,” desiring “nothing more / than stillness,” as Page’s speaker suggests, “*then* will each leaf and flower / each bird and animal / become as perfect as / the thing its name evoked” (emphasis added). The flora and fauna possess their own, “perfect,” original meaning, which will become apparent to the attentive poet when she stops “labouring” to confer, determine, or create that significance herself—just, indeed, as the “names” and “habitations” of the “pileated woodpecker” came to Webb’s “Question of Questions” speaker when she stopped “[t]rying to think” (*PB* 254).

But “Cry Ararat!” is agonizingly, acutely aware that this ideal visionary state—“the focus of the total I”—cannot be sustained indefinitely. The second section of the poem evokes the dreamer’s disappointed waking “to the unreality of bright day”: her wakeful mind returns to interfere, and her vision is disrupted. Just like the poet who has found herself stymied and has had to confront, as Page did, the possibility that “this time I never *would* write again” (“Questions” 18), the speaker in “Cry Ararat!”, “raw with the dream of flying”—with the memory of her perfect vision—confronts the possibility “that with the next tentative lift / of [her] indescribable wings / the ceiling [will loom] / heavy as a tomb.” Page, Webb, and Cohen might have learned to adopt stillness and receptivity as attitudes that would allow the mind and the eye

⁵⁹ Notably, this speaker also idealizes the statue because it does not labour “to hold” onto each passing “minute.” In these lines, Page rejects her earlier poetry’s obligation to adhere to Imagist theory, in which “holding” onto the arrested moment was a key imperative; Ezra Pound’s definition of “image,” after all, was “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Page’s statue just “*is*,” experiencing the whole of time and of the air around it, rather than experiencing time fragmented into instants.

to leap to “instinctive wisdom” and “faraway” visions, but such an approach to the creative process—creativity with silence at its core—is deeply uncertain. The poet must always wonder, *will* I ever “write again” (Page, “Questions” 18)? “Will the grey weather wake us,” the speaker asks in “Cry Ararat!”, “toss us twice in the terrible night to tell us / the flight is cancelled / and the mountain lost?” (Page, *K* 108). Perhaps it will. The notion of “precarity” is built into the definition of “prayer”: they come from the same Latin root, *precarius*, which suggests uncertainty, doubt, and dependence on the favour of another. Likewise, doubt is built into the notion of faith. A poetics that operates by “listening to what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306)—or by prayer—is a necessarily precarious one. As she “stub[s] against” the “underground” of her own limited consciousness while waiting for another “perfect” dream, the poet must somehow keep faith that “the other” *will* speak again. “Cry Ararat!” should remind us that just because Page, Webb, and Cohen came to imagine silence (represented metaphorically as stillness) as an ideal creative position, composing poetry did not suddenly become easy. Not only was the right kind of focused silence difficult to attain, but they would have to endure fearful periods of waiting in between the flashes of insight that were unpredictable and ultimately very rare.

“O, then cry Ararat!” is an affirmation of faith in the face of all that. It is a kind of mantra that the poet can repeat when she gets caught up in doubt, in fearing the future in the realm of her art. It is a prompt to emulate the “washed and easy innocence” of the “dove,” who “believed” unquestioningly that “her sweet wings” would carry her where she needed to go; a reminder that there *is* dry land somewhere, even if she cannot (for now) reach it. “Ararat!” is the same kind of cry as Leonard Cohen’s very widely heard “Hallelujah,” in the song by that title on his 1984 album, *Various Positions*. Cohen says that “Hallelujah,” both the song and the word, were about

“total surrender [and] total affirmation.” Despite “the whole mess” of the world and “the impossibility of your situation” in it, he explains, “there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms . . . and you just say ‘Hallelujah! Blessed is the name’” (Cohen qtd in Simmons 338). In the final couplet of “Cry Ararat!”, “total surrender” to the reality that “[a] single leaf can block a mountainside” coexists with the “total affirmation” that so too can “all Ararat be conjured by a leaf.” This juxtaposition really only has meaning for the perceiver who has adopted a position of “stillness to receive”; if a leaf got in the way of the “labouring,” “reaching” poet, she would presumably just adjust her vantage point. But then she might also miss the vision. Accepting the grace given in moments of inspiration requires graceful acceptance of the moments when that vision is lost.

Late one night in December 1980, alone in a hotel room in New York City, Leonard Cohen wrote a prayer that expresses the surrender, silence, humility, faith, and receptivity of the three writers’ shared new theory of poetic creativity:

If it be your will
that I speak no more,
and my voice be still
as it was before,
I will speak no more,
I shall abide until
I am spoken for,
if it be your will. (*SM* 343)

The speaker in this prayer concedes his “defeat” by silence and acknowledges the greater controlling “will” of a higher authority. He hints that he will stop greedily claiming, desiring,

and lusting after things; instead he will wait—“abide”—until *he* is claimed, or “spoken for,” by the will of another. In the same lines, he vows to wait in “still” silence until he hears God’s merciful and inspirational speech on his behalf: until the divine interlocutor of the prayer speaks “for” him.

There are some noteworthy biographical resonances between this proposed vow of silence and Cohen’s composition of the prayer. According to Sylvie Simmons, after he finished writing the poem in 1980, Cohen put it aside for four years while he turned his attention to other things. In 1984, when he finally felt ready to release *Book of Mercy* and *Various Positions*, he set the piece to music and included it on his album. The story of Phyllis Webb’s “A Question of Questions” is similar. As I have noted, the poem was inspired by a walk on Salt Spring Island in the summer of 1970. Webb began writing it almost immediately, but she did not recuperate it and find a place for it until she used it to mark a turning point in *Wilson’s Bowl* a decade later.⁶⁰ “Another Space,” meanwhile, was based on a dream that Page had in the fall of 1960, though she did not write the poem until 1969.⁶¹ She reflected much later that she “carried the dream around in [her] head” for all those years because she “didn’t know what it meant but [she] felt it had real meaning for [her]” (Page, “Conversation” 74). The seeds of “If It Be Your Will,” “A Question of Questions” (Part V), and “Another Space” were planted many years before the poems were completed or published because the insights that they carried would require a lengthy psychic and spiritual “gestation” period in order to bear creative fruit. Truly to understand the significance of silence—of humbly “abid[ing]” until “spoken for,” of relinquishing the “desire”

⁶⁰ To signal its significance in her creative development, Webb placed “A Question of Questions” right at the centre of *Wilson’s Bowl*: thirty-three pages of poetry precede it and thirty-one pages of poetry follow it. Some of Webb’s drafts for the series are dated 7-9 July 1970, and one other page (a draft of Part I of the series) is dated 5 July 1971 (PW 3.1.A.244).

⁶¹ See Page’s “Mexican Journal,” 14 November 1960, vol. 1, pp. 69-70 (PKP 113.25). See also Steffler (50-1) and Djwa (*Journey* 191-2); both quote the entire relevant passage from the journal.

for “answers,” and of submitting to the pull of a greater organizing system—the poets had to live through the experience of silence. And as the stories of these three pivotal poems suggest, somewhere in the middle of middle silence there might just be an actual moment of surrender, a moment when the silence transforms: when the crisis is over and the attentive waiting for new work begins.

III. “The Great Dreams Pass On”: Forms of Release in Post-Silence Poetry

Page, Webb, and Cohen’s relinquishment of autonomous authority and surrender of conscious control over the poetic process was the theoretical release that prompted the dissolution of their old creative obstructions. But what were the practical implications of this move? Having determined in theory that an ideal model of creativity involves attentive “listening to what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306), as well as the emotional and spiritual “stillness to receive” (Page, *K* 106) the wisdom of that “other,” what kind of poetry did the poets go on to write? And what energies prompted Newlove and Marriott, whose poetry conveys no evidence of “religious” awakening whatsoever, to resume their publication careers nevertheless? These are the questions that drive the remainder of this chapter. The present section considers some of the ways in which Page and Webb reflected on, represented, and carried out their theoretical shifts in attitude in their poetry. They took two distinct steps, that is, first theorizing humility in poems such as “Cry Ararat!” and “A Question of Questions,” and then endeavouring to enact it, in poems such as Page’s “Knitter’s Prayer” and Webb’s “Wilson’s Bowl” series; Cohen, meanwhile, both theorized *and* enacted humility in the form of his prayers in *Book of Mercy*, and thus he does not play a role in the discussion to follow. I focus in particular on the motifs of release that fill and animate Page’s and Webb’s post-hiatus work. Both poets self-consciously

gave up old habits and let go of old obligations, and in various ways discarded, cleared out, erased, abandoned, and bid farewell to old ambitions. Page and Webb, as we saw in Chapter Two, both came to view their periods of poetic silence as creative rebirths, and in the following pages we will see them contemplating the “emptying out” (Webb, “Addressing” 34) that, in their retrospective accounts, permitted and accompanied new vision.

Newlove is also of interest here, for although he did not adopt an attitude of humility as I have defined it above, his post-silence poetry does, in its own way, dwell on surrender and release. But whereas this section of the chapter is only transitional in my discussion of Page and Webb—it shows how they moved from the initial insights that liberated them to begin writing again to the mature work of their *glosas* and *ghazals*, which I consider next—it marks the end of the road for Newlove. The gap between Newlove’s heavy-handed, ironic, and defeated renunciation of his old cynicism on the one hand, and Page and Webb’s more nuanced dismissals of their old obligations—especially the obligations of mastery, certainty, and completion—on the other, only extends the contrast that I have already established between Newlove’s backward-looking and *reactive* late-career perspective and Page and Webb’s newly forward-looking and *active* post-silence outlooks.

Like all of the poets in this dissertation, Newlove was initially—at the point when he stopped publishing—“[d]efeated by silence,” and yet he did not find that “place where the silence is more subtle,” as Page, Webb, and Cohen did (Cohen, *BM* 45). On the contrary, as we have already seen in both his public commentary on the experience and in the highly self-conscious poetry of *The Night the Dog Smiled* and *Apology for Absence*, Newlove continued to fixate on the defeat: to emphasize the obstacles that had held him back, and to “apologize” for his “absences” rather than embracing their “subtlety.” He grudgingly released his old nihilism by

quite defiantly offering the polar opposite in his unexpectedly and determinedly affirmative “Green Plain”; but in the end, that poem, taken together with its preface and with the other pieces in his 1986 volume, seems little more than an acquiescence to his audience’s demands, or a superficial elusion of their “quick” expectations.⁶² Newlove felt as though his critics and reviewers had written him into a corner—an unfairly “gloomy” corner—and the only way out of that position was to teleport himself to another room entirely.⁶³ But he chose a space that he could not inhabit comfortably or sincerely. The title of *The Night the Dog Smiled* proposes that the poet is trying something new: the cynical “dog” “smiles.” In that image, though, Newlove’s persona does not shed his coat of cynicism, but merely consents to an outward expression of happiness. In *The Night the Dog Smiled*, Newlove ostensibly gives up his relentless pursuit of difficult truths. And yet he “gives up” not with a humble prayer to a higher authority, but with a weary sigh of “to Hell with it” (*NDS* 57).

The call of “enough” echoes throughout *The Night the Dog Smiled*. “[E]nough / of this,” one speaker judges (15); “[t]his is unsupportable,” admits another (68). Dissatisfied acceptances of limitations pervade the volume. Right in the middle of “White Philharmonic Novels,” for instance, one of Newlove’s speakers observes: “And then he saw / that he was secure / in the cultivation / of this minute garden. // Oh” (62). These lines recall the “poets” who “once in a while” (with forced and ironic gusto) “must / speak // of Spring!” in “The Green Plain” (Newlove, *NDS* 21).⁶⁴ The speaker in “The Green Plain” finds some “security” in the

⁶² See note 23 in this chapter (and note 28 in Chapter Two), above: Newlove wrote that he wanted the arrangement of *The Night the Dog Smiled* to “elude the reviewers”; and he dismissed the judgment of “quick reviewers” (letter to John Metcalf, 26 September 1986 [JN 20.7]; letter to George Johnston, 8 November 1985 [JN 19.28]).

⁶³ See Newlove to Al Purdy, letter of 20 July 1976 [JN 20.20]).

⁶⁴ In the image of the poet “cultivating” his “garden,” Newlove was also alluding to the conclusion of Voltaire’s *Candide*, “il faut cultiver notre jardin,” which insists that we base our judgments on tangible, earthly evidence rather than abstract philosophizing. Such a conclusion promised comfort, security, and an alternative to the relentless wandering and metaphysical questioning that had consumed *Candide* throughout the novella, just as they had consumed Newlove and his personae throughout his poetic career.

“cultivation” of conventional poetic images concerning the “hairy crocus” or the “waxy tulip” in the “green and happy” “garden” of Earth (*NDS* 62, 21, 22)—as indeed Newlove must himself have found some “security” in the same endeavour before he published the chapbook. If the poet works within “minute” boundaries, and if his poetic task is to sow images of tulips and crocuses—to write poems, as we have seen Newlove putting it in one of his titles, “Concerning Stars, Flowers, Love, Etc.”—then he is safe (“secure”) from the disparagement and presumptions of reviewers.

But according to the speaker’s retrospective judgment in “White Philharmonic Novels,” this insight about his “minute” limitations was not a particularly dazzling one: the unenthused response—which, isolated in a stanza of its own, might be the expression of the speaker or of the poet-persona or even of his utterly indifferent audience—is merely, “Oh.” This is not an ‘O!’ of surprise or relief or radiant happiness, or even an ‘O’ of supplication, though it gestures to all of those things ironically. It is not a cry of faith, as “O, then cry Ararat!” was for Page (*K* 108); it is not the gasp of Webb’s amazed “outbreathing” at the touch of her avian muse (*PB* 254); and it is not even the panicked wheeze of Cohen’s “asthmatic” poet in crisis in *Death of a Lady’s Man*. It is just “Oh”: the bored and blasé “Oh” of ‘that’s all?’ The poet of these lines has renounced risk in favour of security, ambition in favour of restraint. It was also within such “secure” parameters that Newlove began publishing poetry again with *The Green Plain* in 1981. But the neutral “Oh” implies that this move, finally, has had zero effect at all.

“The Permanent Tourist Comes Home,” which was, significantly, Newlove’s original title suggestion for the volume, offers an even more conclusive acceptance of creative and philosophical limitations than the one stanza in “White Philharmonic Novels,” but once again the

surrender of old habits and ambitions proves unfulfilling.⁶⁵ As the poem's title suggests, in "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home" Newlove proposes to give up "permanent" metaphysical "tourism," or the imperative to follow big existential questions insistently through to their ends. He seeks, instead, a home, a comfortable resting place, for the "hitchhiker persona" (Atwood, "How Do I" 62) that had wandered through his *oeuvre* up to that point.⁶⁶ But there is a contradiction, an unresolved tension, in the idea of a "permanent tourist" coming "home": if he is "permanently"—by nature—a tourist, then he will never be satisfied at home. It will always seem a concession, a defeated withdrawal.

In "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home," a poet-speaker reflects on his vocation and quite decisively announces his retirement. He recalls an initial command—his calling—to "[s]peak. Speak. But"—this calling is quickly modified by a warning, a restriction on his free speech as a poet—"be careful of making moulds / which the spiritually illiterate / can fill up with gumbo." Throughout his career, the "permanent tourist" poet has proceeded "careful[ly]," Newlove implies, in a manner that was "[g]uarded and guided," in order to avoid such "gumbo": a sticky substance in which he would risk getting stuck, a messy stew that would sully the pure truths that he wanted to find and convey. "Gumbo" implies nonsense, sentiment: the nonsensical and sentimental misinterpretations of the poet's "spiritually illiterate" audience. In "Concerning Stars, Flowers, Love, Etc.," Newlove disdainfully voiced that very audience's desire for a poetic

⁶⁵ Newlove wrote to Jack David at ECW Press, who eventually published the book, on 8 May 1981, "Actual, as opposed to working, title of the book is: *The Permanent Tourist Comes Home*. I really like it, so if you have any objections, they better be pretty violent ones." But then on 24 February 1984, he wrote again to Jack David: "Can't use title 'Permanent Tourist', because it's Pat Page's. Just found out" (JN 21.15). According to Newlove's memory and letter, he was not alluding consciously to Page. The original letter to David, dated 1981, shows how long it took the poet to assemble the final book, which was published in 1986. It also suggests that he was writing "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home" around the same time as "The Green Plain." This is notable because both poems dwell on the poet's ironic acceptance of limitations.

⁶⁶ See also Jan Bartley on Newlove's "intensely personal and frustrating" "process of searching" (23, 19) or Douglas Barbour on the poetry's insistence "on the near impossibility of achieving any kind of real truth, in any area of human endeavour" ("John" 265).

“mould”—“something [they] already know,” “gumbo” concerning beauty and happiness that will “[h]elp [them] not to know” sadness and truth (*NDS* 17). The “[g]uarded and guided” speaker in “The Permanent Tourist,” Newlove implies, has heeded the warning to “be careful” of such “gumbo” and he has, up until this point, refused to make any such false “moulds” for ignorant nonsense—or for “mould,” rot, decay. Newlove himself had done the same, of course.

And yet here, in the second half of the poem, the speaker unfolds a very sentimental scene indeed—just as Newlove himself had unfolded a beautiful and happy vision in “The Green Plain.” The “permanent tourist” speaker thinks of his mother—“[y]ou sparrow, mother, you beautiful sparrow”—and he tells her, “I love you.” He remembers her as a “simple apparition” in an “orange flannel nightgown” who “walk[ed] in slow motion / on her delicate ankles” and came to “sit on the edge of [his] bed” at night. This soothing memory produces “a scoop in time” for the speaker, to which “whatever self [his] self is” can “[return]” when he needs nourishment or comfort. According to the cynical voice in the first stanza, “time” is the enemy that carries us all unerringly towards death: “your only function is to die,” that voice declares. But the foundational memory of his mother makes the speaker feel as though “[t]ime is dead”—stopped—instead. The “scoop in time” allows him to triumph over death and time itself. Of course, the “scoop in time” is also a “mould”: precisely one of the “moulds” against which he had been cautioned. The speaker decides here, however, that the sentimental image is worth the risk of “gumbo.” It provides “security,” just as the “minute garden” does in “White Philharmonic Novels” (*NDS* 62). The poet gives up his “[g]uarded and guided,” “careful[ly]” truthful approach to poetry in favour of an image of childhood purity and maternal love that helps both him and his potential readers “not to know” (17).

Just as the relatively trivial earthly cultivation left the poet-persona unfulfilled in “White Philharmonic Novels,” though, the speaker in “The Permanent Tourist Comes Home” is most unexcited by his “scoop of time” in the end. Newlove builds to a remarkably anticlimactic conclusion after the intensity of the exchange between the child and his mother. “Well,” the speaker sums up in the final stanza, “to die in the Spring / and to be buried in the muck / seems reasonable. Enough / of this” (Newlove, *NDS* 15). Yet again, we might recall the “Green Plain” speaker’s assertion, or concession, that sometimes “poets / must / speak // of Spring!” Newlove’s “permanent tourist” persona has had “[e]nough / of this”: enough wandering, enough reaching, enough cynicism, enough treading cautiously around the “gumbo.” He is exhausted, and if the answer is to produce “moulds” or “scoops”—homes for sentiment and comforting un-truths—then so be it. The prospect of creative death—of ending his poetic career—while singing happy songs of “Spring,” and the possibility of getting stuck for eternity “in the muck” of that “gumbo,” finally, he says, “seems reasonable.” But he quickly and rather insistently qualifies his acceptance of that conclusion. The caesura and heavy enjambment of those lines—“seems reasonable. Enough / of this”—isolate and emphasize the mere sufficiency of a mucky burial in “Spring.” The permanent tourist accepts a home, a final resting place, which “seems reasonable enough,” but only because he has had “enough of” cautiously avoiding that fate.

Of course, “to die in the Spring / and to be buried in the muck”—to write happy poems—is entirely “reasonable,” and a poet who “speak[s] / of Spring!” can produce entirely competent, even poignant poems. And as I argued throughout the previous section of this chapter, the acceptance of creative limitations can be a productive, liberating move. But Newlove’s poet, “secure / in the cultivation / of this minute garden” (*NDS* 62), is very different from Leonard Cohen’s speaker addressing God from “the garden where you placed me” (*BM* 12), or observing

that God “let [him] sing, though only from this curious corner” (*BM* 10). Cohen’s humble, faithful speaker celebrates his limitations because, as St Thomas Aquinas had it, “the more one humbles oneself before God the more one is lifted up before him” (97). Newlove, on the other hand, had nothing to reach for. Disburdened of his relentless search for authenticity and meaning, the poet-speaker that he describes in these poems has ended up rather lost: unfulfilled—sighing “Oh”—in the “security” of a “small garden,” but missing the compelling quest that drove him on earlier in his career. *The Night the Dog Smiled* dwells on the release of old attitudes (cynicism) and ambitions (“permanent tourism”), but the volume as a whole lacks direction and conviction because Newlove, as he returned to publication after his long hiatus, did not release the actual mandate that had held him back. The principal obstacle for Newlove, as both the poems and his correspondence suggests, was his oppressive desire to attract his audience’s appreciation and to challenge his reviewers’ judgments. *Those* were the obligations that he needed to dismiss from his imagination and his work. But by allowing such motivations to direct his poetry, to direct even the release of old imperatives and moods that his late work so ironically and so grudgingly expresses, Newlove remained inside of the obstruction: “[d]efeated,” even in his continuing poetic speech, “by silence” (Cohen, *BM* 45).

Phyllis Webb’s *Wilson’s Bowl* also dwells on and illustrates the release of old poetic projects and lofty ambitions, but for Webb, the dismissal is very clearly a liberation rather than a concession. Unlike Newlove, Webb *did* let go of precisely those things that had paralyzed her creative energies. In her “Wilson’s Bowl” series, for instance, Webb’s speaker quite decisively lets go of “the state of desire,” of “wanting the answers,” that the poet had recognized as an “error” in Part V of “A Question of Questions” (*PB* 254). “Wilson’s Bowl” was Webb’s poetic response to a personal tragedy: the suicides, less than a year apart (in 1976 and 1977), of the

anthropologist Wilson Duff and his correspondent, Webb's friend Lilo Berliner. Webb wrote the first poem of the "Wilson's Bowl" sequence just one week after Lilo's death; the series is dedicated "to the memory of Lilo, who walked into the sea, January, 1977, Salt Spring Island" (*PB* 263).⁶⁷ Taking up grief as a subject prompted Webb's acceptance, in a real rather than merely theoretical way, that sometimes the only way to go on living is to give up the search for "answers"—to stop "[t]rying to think" rationally (*PB* 254)—because there simply *are* no answers to the tragedy of suicide. In "The Place Is Where You Find It," the fifth poem in the series, Webb's speaker contemplates Lilo's route to the sea—imagining both the physical path that she followed, and the metaphysical impetus for suicide. She wonders, "What was the path she took?" Was it "[a]s winding as her gut / with the pain in it? / Along the beach? / To the caves in the hill?" (*PB* 270). Neither Webb nor her speaker will ever know the answers. This simple and painful reality had crucial creative resonances for Webb, for it showed her that she might never have all of the "answers" necessary to complete the "Kropotkin Poems" series, but that her poetic life could carry on regardless. The speaker in the "Poems of Failure," as we saw in Chapter Three, had hoped desperately to understand Kropotkin, but he proved "[t]oo big / for her head" (*PB* 221). The speaker in "Wilson's Bowl" will never understand the "[p]ath of [Lilo's] mind," but the questions themselves lead the poem forward.

⁶⁷ "Wilson's bowl" is a small basin carved in rock on the beach near Webb's Salt Spring Island home. Berliner discovered it and dedicated it to Duff. Webb and Berliner became friends through their shared interest in petroglyphs. Webb had interviewed Duff for the CBC program *BC Folio* in 1975, about his exhibit at the B.C. Museum, "Images Stone B.C.: Thirty Centuries of North West Coast Indian Sculpture." Berliner had formed a close bond with Duff through an extensive correspondence that she left "in a black plastic bag on [Webb's] doorstep ... the night she walked into the sea" in January, 1977 ("Correspondence" 147). Webb published excerpts from the letters in an essay, "A Correspondence," in *Talking*. The dates on the poem drafts in Webb's archive illustrate just how close a response to Lilo's death the poems really were: both handwritten and typescript drafts of "Imperfect Sestina," which Webb eventually placed last in the "Wilson's Bowl" series, are dated 21 January 1977, and they bear the epigraph, "W.D. In Memoriam L.B."; the initials indicate Wilson Duff and Lilo Berliner (PW 3.I.A.223). "Found Poem," which is based on lines from Lorca's "Duende," and which Webb would place first in the series, is dated 8 February 1977 (PW 3.I.A.221). The other poems followed over the next two years. Webb was clearly not too rusty as a poet even after five or six years of silence and struggle, for "Imperfect Sestina" is a poem truly virtuosic in its complex formal patterning.

There is a striking and noteworthy parallel between Webb's experience and Anne Marriott's. Although Marriott was not as self-consciously interested in "emptying out" (Webb, "Addressing" 34) her poetry as Webb was, and although, as we have seen, Marriott returned determinedly to an old perspective rather than releasing it in favour of a new one, many of the poems in *The Circular Coast* were also provoked by grief. Marriott's husband died in September 1974, her father had two heart attacks that same fall, and her mother had died some years earlier.⁶⁸ Grief permeates the 1970s poems in *The Circular Coast*, including "Gone Underground," "When My Mother Died," "Grief," "Psalm," "January 1975," and "Battered." Marriott claims that when she began writing again after her husband's death, "the preoccupation with landscape which [her critics] had deplored seemed to have left [her]."⁶⁹ In fact her poetry suggests otherwise, as I have shown; but I think that Marriott believed "grief" finally gave her a real topic that felt important enough to write about. When she was unable to reproduce the political urgency of *The Wind Our Enemy* in the 1940s, she was overwhelmed by a feeling that she was writing inconsequential poetry. Working through the emotional urgency of grief would have countered this impression. Like Webb, Marriott emphasizes uncertainty and the impossibility of answers in her poems of grief. The thick fogs and "winding" thorny "paths" (Webb, *PB* 270) of the Pacific coast dominate both poets' image-scapes. "I wake alone / out on the cold sand," Marriott writes in a section of "The Circular Coast" titled "Fog": "fog all around me / foghorn mourning / *death is a dark sea / deep sea quiet sea / still sea*" (CC 23). Marriott plays on "sea" and "see" in these lines to suggest that despite the foggy depths of grief and the ominously "still sea," the speaker can "still see." Painful as it was, the experience of grief cleared

⁶⁸ See Marriott's letter to Sylvia Burns of 6 January 1975 for a summary of this difficult time (AM 8.5). Her husband, Gerald McLellan, died on 19 September 1974; and interestingly, though this was understandably an incredibly disturbing event with grave consequences for Marriott and her family, it stimulated her poetic emergence rather than any further retreat.

⁶⁹ Untitled notes for a poetry reading (AM 19.6).

the poetic air for both Marriott and Webb. Like the mourner who accepts the mysteries of death, the poet who accepts the fogginess of the creative process might find that this uncertainty is itself a way of seeing.

As she abandoned the desire for certainty and answers, then, Webb also abandoned, once and for all, any sense that she must bring the “Kropotkin Poems” series to completion in the way that she had initially imagined it. In the very arrangement of *Wilson’s Bowl*, the poet quite deliberately illustrates the process of releasing Kropotkin and the project that had held her back for so many years. Kropotkin’s presence fades gradually throughout the book’s five sections. The first section, the “Preface,” contains simply the “Poems of Failure” as they were written in 1967. The second section, “Portraits,” and the third, “Crimes,” are composed of eight poems each, and in both cases, the first four are drawn from the original “Kropotkin Poems.” The third section, importantly, ends with the revelatory “Question of Questions” series; and after this point, the volume is made up almost entirely of new work. The fourth section, “Artifacts,” comprises only the “Wilson’s Bowl” sequence, which, as I noted, Webb began in 1977 and which instigated her return to writing; and the final section, “Dreams and the Common Good,” contains new poems written—with just one exception—in 1978 or later.⁷⁰ As the structure of *Wilson’s Bowl* suggests, the energy of letting Kropotkin go, and of letting Lilo go, and of letting her desire for completion and answers go, was the same energy that led Phyllis Webb out of obstruction and into new work.

⁷⁰ The one exception is “Lines from Gwen. Lines for Ben,” which is dated 7 November 1975 in Webb’s drafts (PW 3.I.A.233). I have been able to locate dated drafts of nearly all of the poems in *Wilson’s Bowl*. In “‘The Great Dreams Pass On’: Phyllis Webb’s ‘Struggles of Silence,’” I argue that “*Wilson’s Bowl* provides a forum in which the fragments of the ‘Kropotkin Poems’ can remain incomplete forever, even as they are legitimated by a book publication” (Cameron 79). See also Roger Farr for more on the necessary “failure” of a project of “anarchist poetics” such as the “Kropotkin Poems”; see also note 70 in Chapter Three, above, for a more detailed reference to Farr.

One of the titles that Webb considered for *Wilson's Bowl* when she was preparing the manuscript was "The Great Dreams Pass On." She liked "*Wilson's Bowl*" "for its utter prosaicness," she has explained, but "The Great Dreams Pass On" would certainly have been an appropriate alternative.⁷¹ In the volume's final poem, "The Days of the Unicorns" (Webb, *PB* 286-7), a detached speaker watches as a herd of unicorns "move[s] on ... beyond the story"—away from her "private property"—just as "the great dreams pass on / to the common good." The unicorns represent Webb's past idols and guides; the "great dreams," her poetic ambitions from twenty years earlier. The speaker was fond of the "delicate beast[s]" and dazzled by their "jewelled / horns," and she bids them farewell with a sense of nostalgia. But their presence, as she remembers it, could also be stifling, demanding: "It seemed they were always near / ready to show their eyes and stare / us down, standing in their creamy / skins, pink tongues out / for our benevolence." Too "great," too wild, too fantastical, the unicorns never really belonged in the "private property" of her poems: "where they slept," the speaker recalls, "the grass was bent / by their own wilderness / and I pitied them." "[N]ow," in the present tense, "as we cabin ourselves in cold / and the motions of panic / and our cells destroy each other"—writing in 1979, Webb was referring to the Cold War and the atom bomb—the "delicate" old unicorns are less relevant than ever, and they "[move] on with the courtly sun" where the speaker cannot follow (just as Webb could not follow Lilo out to sea). And when the unicorns and the great dreams "pass on," they leave us, as Ann Mandel writes, "to our own stories" (89).

⁷¹ Letter to Helen Sonthoff, 22 January 1980 (PW 10.IV.C.11). She also considered calling the book "Dreams and the Common Good," which she eventually selected as the title for the fifth and final section; she decided against that title because Adrienne Rich had published *Dream of a Common Language* two years earlier, in 1978. The two poets' "common" interests are clear; as I noted in Chapter Two, Webb has described reading Rich's *Of Woman Born* as an essential moment of feminist awakening. We will see in the next section of the present chapter that Webb and Rich also both wrote collections of *ghazals* at around this time.

Wilson's Bowl proposes that new beginnings grow out of endings: a new way of seeing grows out of the departure of the old "great dreams." In the volume's penultimate poem, "Eschatology of Spring," flowers blossom from the barrel of a gun and "insects divulge occult excrement / in the service of [a] hyacinth" (PB 284): a new season emerges from a final summing up, and beauty can be found amid destruction. P.K. Page's "Cry Ararat!" conveyed precisely the same idea in its evocation of the Biblical flood: after the entire world had been washed away, a fresh start was possible. As I have shown, this was also how both Webb and Page characterized their periods of silence in their interview and essay commentary: as an "emptying out" (Webb, "Addressing" 34) in preparation for new vision; a rebirth. For Webb, this rebirth had explicitly feminist dimensions: it involved the mental evacuation of "old masters" and the adoption of the feminist "analysis of ... society" that she had found, as she recalls it, in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* ("Addressing" 34). Ridding her poetry of attractive but ultimately oppressive figures—the unicorns, the great dreams, and Kropotkin himself—was thus not only an imaginative dismissal of old ambitions, as I have been arguing, but a way of representing creatively the broader ideological shift that had come to define the period for her by the time she assembled *Wilson's Bowl* in 1980. For Page, as "Cry Ararat!" implies, the process of artistic rebirth involved a deep and total cleansing of her creative tools: "a return to the primitive in myself," as she has described it; or a "starting again from the pre-verbal state" ("Questions" 17). Once she had come to believe that such "starting again" was what the hiatus between poetry publications had meant, she too, like Webb, reflected on and depicted the process of clearing out, letting go, washing, unknotting, discarding, and erasing in her poetic work.

Page's "Knitter's Prayer," written in 1969, is a more minor piece than "Cry Ararat!" and its imagery is more mundane, but it portrays a "return to the primitive" with just as much

conviction and clarity. The six-line poem expresses Page's impression of her spiritual progress over the entire previous decade: the process of washing away or undoing the accumulated clutter of her old self and art, and then the "religious non-Christian" awakening ("Mexican Journal"; "Questions" 20; "That's Me" 59) that prompted her rebinding to a higher guiding authority. Page's speaker prays that her whole self might be unravelled so that she can make something new.⁷²

Unknit me—
 all those blistering strange small intricate stitches—
 shell stitch, moss stitch, pearl and all too plain;
 unknit me to the very first row of ribbing,
 let only the original simple knot remain.

Then let us start again. (Page, *K* 115)

"Knitter's Prayer" offers a clear response to the particular problem of "excess" that had plagued P.K. Page in the mid-1950s and led to her creative crisis. By classifying the poem as a "prayer" in her title, Page invokes the clarity and focus of that mode, just as Cohen did—albeit in a rather different register—in *Book of Mercy*. In the very form of her address, then, she gestures towards the self-erasure that is also the content of her prayer. The list of "strange small intricate stitches" in the third line recalls the overwhelming lists of her creative crisis that I discussed in Chapter Three: the list, for instance, of "those & those" leaves—"spiked, plumed, feathered / hand-blocked, carved, embossed": abundant and yet so incoherent that her description might, she

⁷² In the last two lines of "Lakeshore," F.R. Scott similarly suggests that total destruction is necessary to prepare for a new beginning; and like Page in "Cry Ararat!," he alludes to the Biblical flood: "Watching the whole creation drown / I muse, alone, on Ararat" (51). Sandra Djwa reads "Cry Ararat!" "(in part) as a response to Scott's 'Lakeshore'" (*Journey* 209). I mention Scott's poem here specifically because I wish to highlight the *totality* of the undoing: in all three poems—"Lakeshore," "Cry Ararat!," and "Knitter's Prayer"—the "whole creation" is erased.

feared, resemble a “laundry slip” more than a poem.⁷³ The earlier speaker felt overwhelmed by the variety and responsible for discerning the meaning of all the leaves taken “together”; and the fragment breaks off sharply when she finally cannot fulfill this duty. In “Knitter’s Prayer,” by contrast, the speaker hopes to *discard* the “blistering” excess, to undo everything except “the original simple knot.” She hopes to go all the way back to the beginning: all the way back, her Biblical allusion suggests, to the “rib” that created Eve—“to the primitive in [her]self” (Page, “Questions” 17).

Throughout her later *oeuvre*, Page continued to delight in paring down, in clearing away the excess and going back to something “simple” and essential rather than trying to account for *everything*. “Traveller’s Palm” (Page, *K* 116-17), another poem of 1969, illustrates the process of “unknitting” in action.⁷⁴ Page’s speaker first considers several metaphors that might capture the essence of a palm tree in the rainforest—“a sailor’s knot,” perhaps, or “a growing fan” or “Quixote’s windmill”—but she subsequently dismisses those comparisons as “what-you-will” in favour of the one image that gives the tree most meaning for her: “a well.” What spills from the palm tree’s core to quench the speaker’s thirst recalls Page’s “old” fluid poetic vision: “old water / tasting green, / of vegetation and dust, / old water, warm as tears.” In the agonized “Could I Write a Poem Now?”, Page had feared that a “hard frost lock[ed] / [the] lovely waters” of her poetic voice. Here, that “old water” flows “warm” again. It “gush[es]” powerfully, not in an overwhelming, destructive flood as in “After Rain,” but with direction, into the speaker’s ready

⁷³ “Write, & imagine a poem...” (PKP 27.5.10). Page also drafted a much darker poem about knitting while she was in Brazil, to which “Knitter’s Prayer” could have been a kind of response. The poem, “Knitters,” describes “women knitting ... a kind of mist,” “surrealist and slightly sinister, / driven by motors strong beyond their wills,” as their creations “devour / more hanks of wool, more cubic feet of air” (*K* 100-01). The whole motif of “knitting” might allude obliquely to Page’s “Arras,” which described an intricately woven tapestry, the inhospitable environment of which the poet might have happily imagined undoing.

⁷⁴ In *Kaleidoscope*, the poem’s title is spelled “Travellers’ Palm.” In *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* and *The Hidden Room*, it is “Traveller’s Palm.” As there is no explanation for the change in *Kaleidoscope* and thus it might be inadvertent, I am using “Traveller’s Palm.”

and waiting “cupped mouth.” What she is tasting, moreover, are the “tears” that the speaker in “After Rain” had been unable to summon: that earlier speaker “*almost*” wept, but finally found that Giovanni’s “ache” existed beyond her powers of empathy (K 91; emphasis added). Notably, though, even as the “Traveller’s Palm” speaker draws on the “well” that she has selected as an appropriate metaphor for the palm tree, the presence and self-conscious release of all the other images—the “what-you-will”—in the second stanza is crucial. The fact that Page mentions the extraneous images at all suggests the relief and even pleasure that she takes in banishing them as the poem proceeds. The speaker who deems the excess “what-you-will” confidently refuses the angst of the “After Rain” speaker who could not produce coherence, “do what I will.”

The difference between Page’s ambitions in “After Rain” and in “Knitter’s Prayer” or “Traveller’s Palm” illustrates her transformed, post-silence understanding of the poet’s role and authority. And the energy of release—the release of the “myriad images” from the poem and the related, perhaps consequent, release of the poet’s obligation to make their “whole” meaning “toll” (Page, K 91)—is central to the transformation. The earlier speaker wanted to make sense of the whole, and the later speakers want to unknot the mess and find, somewhere within it, a single, nourishing image. What the speaker desires in “Knitter’s Prayer” is not mastery—not a “heart a size / larger than seeing” to control the poem, as in “After Rain” (Page, K 91)—but humility: a position of absolute simplicity. The “original simple knot,” anchored and strong, recalls the idealized creative position of “stillness to receive” that Page evokes in “Cry Ararat!” (K 106). Once she has attained that position, in “Knitter’s Prayer” as in “Cry Ararat!”—once the unravelling or the washing away has been accomplished—then, at last, she might “start again.” And importantly, Page proposes collaboration in the final line of “Knitter’s Prayer.” “Unknit *me*,” she begins; but when that is done, “[t]hen let *us* start again” (K 115; emphasis added). This

is a very different kind of prayer from the supplication to the birds that concludes “After Rain.” In the earlier poem, the speaker’s last hope is that the birds will bring about a revision of her poetics, because she feels utterly powerless to do so herself. There, her understanding of authority is binary: either she has total mastery of the “pure line[s]” of her poem, or, “slipping in the mud” and “none too sober,” she has no control whatsoever (Page, *K* 90-1). Either she succeeds or—“do what [she] will”—she fails. In “Knitter’s Prayer,” on the other hand, Page’s speaker first submits to a higher authority, and then hopes to “start again” in partnership with that guiding force.

The notion of collaboration valuably nuances and extends the theory of creative humility that initially helped both Page and Webb to move beyond their crises of poetic authority. For Page, the process was fairly straightforward, and also essentially religious: the poet unravels her old ideas, she stops struggling for mastery, she assumes an attitude of anchored “stillness,” and she proceeds from there, “hand in hand” (as she would later write) (*H* 9) with a guiding authority. Webb, by contrast, despite her acknowledgement of a higher order of wisdom to which the poet might listen for signals about how to proceed, continued to think in more modernist terms than Page did. She was also more ambivalent about all forms of authority in her post-silence poetry. An attitude of receptivity, as well as her acceptance of incompleteness and uncertainty, was fundamental to the reinvigoration of her creative energies, as I have suggested. Beyond that, though, her mature mode of poetic composition involved a kind of dialogue with guiding figures and the traditions that they represented. In this sense, it involved both the receptive “listening to what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306) that I described in the previous section of this chapter, as well as the release or “emptying out” (Webb, “Addressing” 34) that I have been considering here. In poems such as the “Wilson’s Bowl” series, “Composed

Like Them,” and later, the *ghazals*, Webb attends to her guides up to a certain point, and then she dismisses them in order to proceed in her own way. She *collaborates*, in other words, with authority.⁷⁵ Such collaboration was only possible once she let go of any expectation of “total” authority, as Page did. If she did not have to be totally authoritative, then she could “listen” to guides without anxiety—without, that is, the anxiety of influence, or the anxiety of having to overthrow them. Webb’s renunciation of both the obligation to master her subjects by capturing them accurately, as she had hoped to do with Kropotkin, and the sense that she was mastered *by* them or dominated by their influence, was the most important transformation in her post-silence approach to the creative process.

Throughout her “Wilson’s Bowl” series, Phyllis Webb evokes the particularly high stakes of careful, active “listening” as opposed to passive “hearing.” She demonstrates, in other words, that for her, “listening to what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306) cannot be a simple or straightforward submission to that “other,” but must involve some agency—some collaboration—on the part of the listener (or the poet). In “In This Place” (Webb, *PB* 268), the fourth poem in the “Wilson’s Bowl” sequence, uncritically following guiding voices actually has deadly consequences. The evil “mean spirits” of Salt Spring Island “chitter” and “scrabble radio waves,” Webb writes, complicating the delivery of “messages” through the air. The Lilo Berliner figure in the poem follows these messages to her death: she “goes out on the water / hearing.” Webb’s speaker, on the other hand, only “go[es] as far as [she] can / collaborating.” Her distinction between Lilo’s obedient “hearing” and her own “collaborating” is crucial. In collaborating, this speaker listens to the scrambled messages of the spirits up to a certain point—

⁷⁵ It is in this sense, too, that her approach is essentially modernist: like Eliot’s in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” it involves knowledge of tradition as well as the poet’s own “individual talent.” Webb’s process, however, was free of the heavy burden of learning that Eliot’s model implied, for the poet was not obliged to engage with the whole of the literary tradition or to change it—to *master* it—with her own utterances.

she does not tune them out—but neither does she feel compelled to lose herself (by drowning in the ocean) in order to follow them fully. She also claims in the final lines of the poem that she “listen[s] carefully”—actively, that is—to Lilo’s own “songs.” As she appears and disappears throughout the “Wilson’s Bowl” series, Lilo is a kind of muse-like guide who has left “signs” and clues for understanding her death. But she vows to “show” her interlocutor “nothing”: “I cross my path / and show you nothing / on your way,” she intones in a four-line prelude to the sequence (*PB* 263). Webb’s speaker “listen[s] carefully” to Lilo’s “songs” (*PB* 268) as she would to the signals of a muse or a guiding authority, but interpreting the story of her friend’s death is making “your way”—her own way—not Lilo’s, in the end.

In “Composed Like Them” (*PB* 279-80), which immediately follows the “Wilson’s Bowl” series and also opens the final section of the *Wilson’s Bowl* volume, Webb models a kind of formal collaboration. Here, too, she “listen[s] carefully” to guiding figures—in this case, to the “old masters” and literary conventions of her poetic past—even as she announces their obsolescence and bids them farewell.⁷⁶ The poem describes a dream in which these “old masters” are flying figures: “winged things,” as both Ann Mandel and Susan Glickman have noted, reminiscent of Harold Bloom’s “Covering Cherub” in *The Anxiety of Influence* (Mandel 85). But the winged figures are mocked rather than menacing in “Composed Like Them”: they are a “[t]acky / old spiritual pair” of “strange old birds” with wings of “silvery-grey.” By the fifth stanza of the poem, the speaker identifies them as Dante and Beatrice—Dante, of course, an

⁷⁶ The term “old masters” comes from Webb’s “little prose piece” (“Addressing” 34) by that title, which I discussed in Chapter Two. In “Composed Like Them,” written in 1978, Webb takes up the project of bidding her “old masters” farewell that she had begun in that little meditative essay from 1969.

“old master” himself.⁷⁷ But here, those “dear lovers” are “[t]oo old to mate” (or to produce anything, that is), and they are “secretly bored” in their flight, having been “aloft too long.” The flying figures sail into the speaker’s dream, but their summons is not compelling: they arrive, she says, “knocking my ivory gate, / calling me up to see / some old-time movie I knew / I never wanted to be.” The ivory gates permit false dreams to rise up from the underworld, but the fact that Webb’s speaker was being called “up” to see an “old-time movie”—not only an emblem of “tacky” low culture, but an outdated one—suggests that the elevation is misleading and ironic.⁷⁸ The speaker claims, moreover, that she “knew” all along that she “never wanted to be” a part of the drama that the “old-time” mode represents.

Above all, “Composed Like Them” roughly parodies Auden’s “September 1, 1939” in order to critique “mechanically free” modernist convention.⁷⁹ Webb derives her rhythmic and stanzaic pattern from Auden, but here the repetitive trimeter creates a stilted, sing-song effect that suggests formal entrapment: “odd awkwardness at play.” Although the speaker might once

⁷⁷ In the fifth stanza, the speaker asks, “do they get / from Alighieri’s shore / a voyeuristic view of this / small round polished floor / which makes us passionate”? In her “Notes to the Poems,” she points out that this image comes from Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto XII, in which the earth is seen as “the small round floor which makes us passionate” (*PB* 291). Note that the version of “Composed Like Them” in *Peacock Blue* incorrectly elides the first two stanzas of the poem, so that the lines I cite here appear to be the fourth stanza; I have followed the stanza divisions in *Wilson’s Bowl*, *The Vision Tree*, and Webb’s drafts.

⁷⁸ It is possible that Webb was thinking of another “old master” when she selected the image of the “ivory gates”: in T.S. Eliot’s “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” “Sweeney guards the hornèd gate” (*Collected Poems* 56)—the gate of true dreams and visions of the future, as opposed to the “ivory gate” of false dreams. There are many resonances between Eliot’s poem and Webb’s. For instance, Sweeney’s blocking of the horned gate suggests that he does not want the future to emerge; Webb’s speaker, by contrast, and in possible response, wishes to evoke the “extinct[ion]” of the past. “Apeneck Sweeney,” moreover, is a brutish male figure, inspired by the violent Agamemnon; Webb would have liked the idea of rewriting him in her own poetic speaker. In the “nightingales” of its title and its penultimate stanza, Eliot’s poem also alludes to the myth of Philomela: the most famous “silenced” woman in Greek mythology. Webb was surely not pursuing her own allusion this far when she wrote “Composed Like Them,” but I am certain that she would have appreciated the implications: a “silenced” woman speaking again in response to old and oppressive male standards.

⁷⁹ Webb dates her poem “November 11, 1978” in parentheses under the title. Auden’s date indicates a beginning; Webb’s, a day of ending and remembrance, of recalling—fondly, respectfully—a time that has passed. Webb’s title also comes from Auden’s poem: the speaker hopes that he, a poet, can be like the “ironic points of light” that “flash out” to “exchange messages”; he prays that, “composed like them [the lights] / Of Eros and of dust,” he can do the same job that they do of binding people together in a time of war and political unrest. She also points out the “rough parody” herself in her “Notes to the Poems” (*PB* 291).

have been “awed” by such awkward patterning, Webb implies, now she is only able to judge it “odd.” In “Composed Like Them,” Webb releases any sense of obligation to “compose like” those “idle, extinct, and adored” old masters, or to *be* “composed” of the same “[t]acky,” “spiritual,” and “strange” desires and inclinations as they were, or indeed to be “*composed*”—as in, polished, formal, “mechanical”—“like” they were.

And yet to produce the parody, she also “composes like them.” This method marks a significant shift in Webb’s attitude towards tradition and authority. In “Composed *Like Them*,” the speaker does not “run ragged to elude” the metre of an old master as she did in “Poetics *Against the Angel of Death*” sixteen years earlier (*PB* 145). In the 1962 poem, the speaker had feared that “composing like” an old master—speaking in the rhythms of Wordsworth’s “Great Iambic Pentameter”—would lead to her creative death: that she “would not wake again” if she conformed too easily to his conventions. (See my discussion of this poem in Chapter Three.) In response, although she did write a fourteen-line sonnet, Webb quite deliberately broke and extended the lines of pentameter: “but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude” runs into heptameter, for instance, and “because I want to die / writing Haiku” is pentameter decisively cut in two. In the 1978 poem, by contrast, Webb sustains Auden’s trimeter throughout.⁸⁰ Whereas Wordsworth seemed an “Angel of Death” to the earlier speaker, the “strange old birds” in the later poem are merely “moth-eaten skeletons.” Now, because she has both released their authority over her and, at the same time, developed a more humble definition of her own role as a creator, she does not feel obliged to overthrow or to outrun them, but can engage with them as she chooses. In the final lines of “Composed Like Them,” the speaker is empowered. She remains “under the supernova” of her old masters’ accomplishment and

⁸⁰ In her “Notes to the Poems,” Webb says: “This poem arrived first as pure rhythm and metre, and though I disliked the movement I went with it to discover it was a rough parody of W.H. Auden’s metre in ‘September 1, 1939’” (*PB* 291).

influence, but she takes ownership of the poem: “I the dreamer dream / this flight,” she declares.⁸¹ And yet, again, just as she delivered her critique of modernist formal patterns in Auden’s metre, the speaker in “Composed Like Them” announces her “new life” as a poet in Dante’s language: “I with my *Vita Nuova*,” she concludes; “I with my lines undone.” She engages collaboratively with the older poet, “listen[ing] carefully” (Webb, *PB* 286) to his words even as she claims them for her own.

The final image in “Composed Like Them,” the image of the poet-speaker with her “lines undone,” connotes many things. Her claim to be “undone” might well hint that she has stumbled or been exposed in a ruse and is unsure how to proceed. But in the context of “new life,” “undone” also suggests that her lines are unfrozen, released from creative paralysis. She might not know what to do next, but she is at least free to move, and to move on. “Undone” implies that something has been opened—“undone” like a zipper. (Recall that Webb has referred to her silences as “zippered-mouth periods” [“Addressing” 35].) It also means unknotted, untied, untethered from the “moth-eaten skeletons” of her poetic past. Un-done means un-finished: continuing. Similar undoings, openings, and releases animated the “continuing” post-silence poetry of all the poets in this project. Page needed to unknot the tangled threads of her poetic gift in order to bind them to something new—to the knitting hands that would guide her new art, for instance, or to the “starry spool” of cosmic meaning in “Another Space” (*K* 113). In “Knitter’s Prayer,” in utterly humble and quotidian terms, Page depicted the kind of spiritual emptying that would prepare her to receive divine wisdom. Newlove and Webb, meanwhile, both gave up old ambitions and obligations. Newlove gave his “permanent tourist” persona a “home” in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, and Webb laid the fragments of the “Kropotkin Poems” to rest in *Wilson’s*

⁸¹ In some of her drafts of “Composed Like Them,” Webb dedicates her poetic dream of flight “to P.K. Page,” in recognition of “Cry Ararat!” (PW 3.I.A.209). Page was also an appropriate dedicatee as a contemporary female poet as opposed to an old male master.

Bowl. But whereas Webb's fond farewell to her old "great dreams" instigated the undoing of her poetic lines, Newlove's ironic acquiescence to the demands of his critical audience was the end of the line in his creative evolution. He recognized that renouncing old attitudes was a "secure" (NDS 62) way of responding to his audience, and so he acted out that renunciation—with a cynical smile. For Webb, conversely, releasing the "great dreams" freed her to "[move] on ... beyond the story" (PB 287) of her planned project's stagnation and to attend to new poetic work.

IV. "Still, on [s]he goes": "Process" in Webb's *Anti Ghazals* and Page's *Glosas*

After they had announced their initial returns to poetry publication with *Wilson's Bowl* and *Cry Ararat!*, both Phyllis Webb and P.K. Page sought new directions in which to "move on" and, at the same time—for the two were no longer contradictory—new ways to assume that focused "stillness to receive" (Page, *K* 106). They also sought ways to continue practising the creative "collaboration" that had proven so empowering as they were first beginning to write again. In pursuit of these objectives, both poets found fresh approaches in forms outside the English tradition: for Webb, the *ghazal*, and for Page, the *glosa*. Both poets "collaborated" with the structural guidelines and "old masters" of these forms: Webb pushed back against the conventional *ghazal* and wrote what she called "anti *ghazals*," and Page proceeded through the *glosas* "hand in hand" (*H* 9) with the influential poets of her youth. Their excitement about these forms would eventually spawn full volumes: first Webb's chapbook, *Sunday Water* (1982), which grew into *Water and Light* (1984), and later, Page's *Hologram* (1994). In this substantial post-hiatus work, importantly, Page and Webb actually *celebrate* the generative power of silences within the ongoing process of poetic creation and the continual unfolding of their poetic careers. Thus, although Page's *glosas* are the "late" reflections of an older poet who wishes to

ruminate on the making of her poetic voice, they do not share the regretful and self-justifying tone of the “late” work by Newlove and Marriott that I studied in the first section of this chapter. Whereas the latter two poets obscured and “apologized” for their absences in their late-career summations, both Page and Webb contemplate and even demonstrate, without any defensiveness at all, a poetic process with silence at its core.

In the mid-1980s, Phyllis Webb remarked in an interview that she had developed “a theory about how some poets react to extreme emotional circumstances by turning to a very formal approach to a poem” (“Addressing” 39). The experience of creative crisis had certainly been an “extreme emotional circumstance” for Webb, as for Page and Cohen, and working within formal guidelines helped all of them to banish anxiety and frustration and work instead, humbly, within the boundaries of poetic structure. But this was not merely the limited “cultivation” of a “minute garden” that Newlove described in “White Philharmonic Novels.” On the contrary, as I will show in a moment, the reassuring containment of a “very formal approach” also liberated the poets to cast their attention in other directions.

Ghazals and *glosas* are both quite strict traditional forms, though significantly, the orthodoxy of both exists outside of English literary tradition. Page and Webb could thus work within “very formal” borders even while evading the conventions of their own place and time. The *ghazal* is a variety of ancient Persian love poetry, and the *glosa* was a form used in the Spanish court in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to pay tribute to the great poets of the

past.⁸² The *ghazal* is made up of couplets, each one “wholly independent of any other in meaning and complete in itself as a unit of thought, emotion, and communication” (Ahmad xvi). Although the couplets are independent, they are not isolated: set on the page with at least four other couplets for company, each individual unit becomes part of a larger whole. The *glosa*, too, negotiates the relationship between parts and whole—or, more precisely, between the poet’s individual voice and the voices of tradition. *Glosas* open with a “quatrain written by another poet,” Page explained in her Foreword to *Hologram*, “followed by four ten-line stanzas, their concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain; their sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth” (*H* 9).

Notably, although they are peripheral to my discussion here, both Cohen and Newlove have also remarked the value of working within traditional poetic structures. Newlove’s “Progress,” which I mentioned briefly earlier as the concluding piece in *Apology for Absence*, is a long poem composed entirely of metrical four-line stanzas. “The thing goes in quatrains, which are not fashionable, but that’s the way it is,” he wrote to a friend in the spring of 1986: “The interior lines range from eleven to fifteen syllables; so I have, if you will, a sort of rigid cargo to contain myself, with some freedom to swing a cat a bit if I wish.”⁸³ Newlove’s description of the

⁸² The *ghazal* in particular travelled a circuitous path from its origins in Ancient Persia to Phyllis Webb in Canada in the 1980s, and as Susan Glickman observes, this would have been part of its appeal to Webb (“Proceeding” 56). The form was adopted by the nineteenth-century Urdu writer, Ghalib, whose work was collected in an anthology of free translations or adaptations by American writers in 1971. Adrienne Rich, who worked on the collection, was inspired by the form and wrote her own series of free-verse *ghazals*, and John Thompson, the first Canadian to work extensively with the form, followed suit with *Stilt Jack*, which was published in 1978. When Webb discovered *Stilt Jack* and reviewed it for *Canadian Literature*, she considered the *ghazal*’s “drunken and amatory” wanderings “an invitation” (“Ghazal-Maker” 156). P.K. Page’s invitation to the *glosa* form, according to Sandra Djwa, occurred aurally, when she heard Marilyn Bowering read aloud her own *glosa*, “Letter from Portugal,” in June 1992. As Djwa recounts, “After Marilyn had explained the *glosa* rules, P.K. told her that she ‘had been seized by the *glose* form and was writing madly—as she hadn’t for years’” (*Journey* 273-4) (“*glose*” is the English term for “*glosa*”). The fact that her first encounter with a *glosa* was *hearing* it read aloud was important to her understanding of the form: “I was introduced to the *glosa* through the ear,” Page writes in the Foreword to *Hologram*; “[i]ts form, half hidden, powerfully sensed, like an iceberg at night, made me search for its outline as I listened” (9). The form, in other words, invited the “searching” and “listening” that Page now understood as crucial aspects of the poetic process.

⁸³ Letter to Ron Smith, 6 April 1986 (JN 21.18).

syllabic pattern as a “rigid cargo to contain myself” resonates with Webb’s theory about formal approaches. Cohen, for his part, recalls that in the early 1980s he was “working experimentally, for my own instruction[,] on the form of the Spenserian sonnet ... a very complex metrical and rhyme form—just to keep my chops up in metre and rhyme” (qtd in Simmons 329). His recollection suggests that these “very complex” Spenserian stanzas were a kind of mental exercise: meant for his “instruction.”

Instructive exercise is exactly how Webb described the origins of the poems in *Sunday Water*: they began, she writes, “as an exercise in the ghazal form” (*PB* 301). Likewise, Page remarked that writing *glosas* was like doing a puzzle, at least in the beginning: she found it “challenging—rather in the way that a crossword puzzle is challenging” (*H* 9). The importance of “keeping one’s chops up” with playful mental challenges is not to be underestimated, especially when completing satisfactory, publishable work feels impossible, as it did for Cohen when he was writing those Spenserian stanzas. Imagining that they were only doing “exercises” liberated the writers from the oppressive sense that each utterance would or should become a “good masterpiece of work” (Webb, *PB* 223). In the Preface to *Sunday Water*, Webb goes so far as to emphasize the “exercise”-like modesty of her writing process: she explains that she wrote the thirteen *ghazals* that make up the chapbook between 18 September and 29 November—a very small window of time—on a set of “unlined file cards.” She even lays out the measurements of the cards—6” x 4” and 3” x 5”—in order to demonstrate the total unpretentiousness of the whole endeavour (Webb, *PB* 301).

At the same time, the idea of performing a daily poetic “exercise,” as Webb did in filling out those thirteen file cards, has religious connotations and implications. St Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* were a month-long program of spiritual contemplation designed to orient and

strengthen Christian faith (and, somewhat incidentally, to be carried out during a silent religious retreat). Although Cohen was probably the only one who would have thought in those precise terms, Page and Webb also used the poetic “exercises” to direct their energies toward a higher order of meaning. A “very formal approach” can be a “prayerful” approach: a self-forgetful approach through which the poet reaches towards a condition of grace. An external structural grid—whether stanza form, puzzle analogy, or literal writing material (“file cards”)—freed the poets to listen to signals beyond the limits of their conscious minds. As Webb explains it,

The ghazal form gave me a lot of freedom ... to explore different areas of my psyche ... Having this simple format [the *ghazal*] allowed the unconscious to take over. I actually arrived at a stage where I would know I had got five couplets without counting ... So then I could forget about that and let the leaps occur. That was what the exercise was all about for me. (“Addressing” 38)

The “leaps” to which she refers are the “imaginative leaps” (Glickman, “Proceeding” 50), the “astonishing leaps” (Webb, “Ghazal-Maker” 156) by which the *ghazal* form proceeds. Webb suggests that the controlling structure helped her to let go of her own conscious control over the poem. “Having [the] simple format” encouraged her to stop “[t]rying to think”—like her speaker in “A Question of Questions” (*PB* 255)—in order to “leap” towards some higher “instinctive wisdom.”⁸⁴ Page, too, claims that she “liked being controlled by [the *glosa*’s] three reining rhymes—or do I mean reigning?—and gently influenced by the rhythm of the original [quatrain]” (*H* 9). This said, she additionally emphasizes her own agency in determining those “originals,” for she had to find lines that would harmonize with her own voice. The work of *glosa*-writing thus took Page beyond the level of the “crossword puzzle” exercise and into the

⁸⁴ Webb, “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.5.F.17).

domain of the “spiritual exercise”: reaching, as she put it, to “that deeper level where one’s own drums beat” (*H* 10).

The *ghazal*, John Thompson wrote in his Preface to *Stilt Jack*, “has to be listened to as a song: its order is clandestine ... 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” (5). It was the *ghazal*’s “clandestine” order that appealed to Webb: the sense that she might “listen” to her unconscious or her imagination as though to a “song” and find there an “alien design, illogical” but truer and richer than anything she could have produced at the conscious level alone. In one of her early *ghazals* she describes this process:

The pull, this way and that, ultimately into the pull
of the pen across the page.

Sniffing for poems, the forward memory
of hand beyond the grasp.

Not grasping, not at all. *Reaching* is
different—can’t touch that sun.

Too hot. That star. This cross-eyed
vision. Days and nights, sun, moon—the up-there claptrap.

And down here, trappings of ‘as above’—crosswalks,
traffic lights, sirens, this alexandrite burning on this hand. (Webb, *PB* 312)

This poet-speaker's writing "hand" is following a "forward memory," as though it is uncovering a script that already exists—or as though it is "remembering ... something I already know but have forgotten I know," as P.K. Page described her creative process in "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman" (35-6). Webb's speaker will never be able to "grasp" the insight of her "forward memory" wholly, but she will "reach" for its essence: searching, listening, allowing herself to be "pull[ed] ... across the page." The search occurs within the humble (and perhaps "very formal") limits of "down here," among "crosswalks, / traffic lights, sirens": simple imitations of the cosmos. These signs, however, relatively mundane as they might be, still gesture towards something higher—they are "as above." Just as they direct traffic, they also guide her search. For Webb, the "trappings" of the *ghazal* form likewise permitted the "imaginative leaps" (Glickman, "Proceeding" 50) of the "forward memory" to occur.

As she wrote her *glosas*, P.K. Page similarly found that she was moving in two directions at once, forging ahead to something that in fact she "already kn[e]w" ("Traveller" 35). Once she had selected the four lines that she would use to structure the poem, she explains, she felt as though she was "constructing the poem backwards": "the final line of each stanza is, in effect, the starting line" (*H* 9). She thought of the poem as a "journey" back into herself from there (10): "backwards" from the "starting lines" drawn from the other poets, towards some essential truth of her own. She had proposed a similar approach in "Knitter's Prayer," as we have seen: the speaker in that poem looked to a higher authority to "unknit" her, to lead her back to the "original simple knot" of her own self (*K* 115). Moreover, considering Page's basic post-silence wish to "get rid of substance" (Steffler 43), or to clear away excess, I think that she would have liked the idea of starting with the "excessive" presence of a major poet—Eliot, Rilke, or Neruda, for instance—and paring that influence away in order to get back to "the original simple knot" of

her own voice.⁸⁵ In her 1969 poem, “A Backwards Journey,” the speaker travels “backwards through the eye of the mind” until she reaches “the smallest point / [her] thought could hold to.” She focuses on that point with a “delicate jet / of ... attention” (Page, *K* 112) similar to the prayerful focus that she, Webb, and Cohen all sought and idealized in their post-silence poetry.⁸⁶ This too was the journey that Page took in each of the fourteen *glosas* in *Hologram*.

The poem constructed “backwards” operates by “subtraction,” similar not only to the undoing in “Knitter’s Prayer” but also to the dismissal of images in “Traveller’s Palm.” “Reality is glimpsed not only by addition—courtesy of ‘the perfect, all-inclusive metaphor’ [as in her 1987 poem, ‘Kaleidoscope’],” Page explains in her Foreword, “but by subtraction as well” (*H* 11). The lines from Wallace Stevens’s “Credences of Summer” that inspired her *glosa* “The Gold Sun” (*K* 192-3) make the same argument. His initial quatrain is about how to attain a “centre” akin to the focused state of “stillness to receive” (Page, *K* 106) in “Cry Ararat!” and “Knitter’s Prayer.” Reaching for such centred stillness, Stevens writes, feels like “[t]rac[ing] the gold sun about the whitened sky / Without evasion by a single metaphor” and “[l]ook[ing] at it in its essential barrenness.” Page’s poem describes the rather titanic effort of “subtraction” that this process requires:

Push aside everything that isn’t sun
the way a sculptor works his stone,
the way a mystic masters the mystique

⁸⁵ In other words, “excessive” as their presence might have been, Page’s relation to these major poets was not an anxious one. For more on Page’s un-Bloomian relationship to “precursor poets” in *Hologram*, see Robert David Stacey, “Looking at ‘The Gold Sun’; or, The Glosa’s Glasses,” especially pp. 109-10.

⁸⁶ In “Eastern Perspectives in the Work of P.K. Page,” Don Fisher remarks that the process Page describes in “A Backwards Journey” “sounds very much like Buddhist ‘concentration meditation.’” This observation also recalls Cohen’s “bafflement” (*BM* 26) and Webb’s “amazement / and outbreathing” (*PB* 254). Fisher cites Daniel Goleman: “If the mind merges in Samadhi [a state of absorption in a single object] with the meditation subject, and then transcends its subject to even higher levels of jhana [another term for samadhi], then one traverses the path of concentration” (130).

of making more by focussing on one
 until at length, all images are gone
 except the sun, the thing itself, deific.

Robert Stacey suggests that Page “misreads herself” in “The Gold Sun”: he proposes that “the progression of allusions” and images in the poem “valorizes ... a vision of vision” rather than of “the thing itself” (115-16).⁸⁷ But that is the point. In “Traveller’s Palm,” Page’s speaker presented extraneous images just so that she could discard them; likewise, in “The Gold Sun,” she develops a “too various” list of images and comparisons for the sun—the “spinning coin,” “Phoebus,” a “heroic principle,” “gold”—in order to illustrate the process of “[p]ushing” them “aside.” In Stevens’s four lines, there are three imperatives: “trace” the sun about the sky, “look” at its barrenness, “say” that it is “the centre that I seek”; and in the original fifteen-line stanza from which Page extracted that quatrain, there are ten imperatives (Stevens 322-3).⁸⁸ These imperatives suggest activity. “The Gold Sun” does not evoke the mastery of actually *capturing*

⁸⁷ Indeed, as Stacey remarks, “The Gold Sun” is an allusive, self-referential poem. Page alludes to at least four of her own earlier poems: “Stories of Snow,” in the image of the “white sky behind your lapis eyes,” a “[s]ky whitened by a snow on which no swan is visible”; “Cry Ararat!”, in the reference to the “glass” or “periscope” that the speaker could use—but does not—to look at the sun; “After Reading *Albino Pheasants*,” in the opposition between the “darkness” of the speaker’s “lapis” eyes and the “paleness” of the sky; and, more obliquely, to “The Snowman,” in the “barrenness” and “prime” indivisibility of “the thing itself,” which like the snowman, represents both zero and infinity. This last allusion hints at the thematic and philosophical similarities between Page’s and Stevens’s *oeuvres* more broadly, for Page’s snowman poem has many resonances with Stevens’s own “The Snow Man.”

⁸⁸ This passage from “Credences of Summer” is principally concerned with achieving a state of stillness: with giving up “the metaphysical pine” and taking “[j]oy” in the “permanence” of the present moment, in “ignorance / Of change still possible.” “Let’s see the very thing and nothing else,” Stevens writes: “Exile desire / For what is not” (322-3). As Page does in “Cry Ararat!”, Stevens concludes in “Credences of Summer” that such impersonal focus is not sustainable by humans, for our subjective perspective must intervene; but for both poets, the “credence”—the faith, the belief—in moments of “arrested peace” (Stevens 323) proves comforting and valuable. “Exil[ing] desire / For what is not” was essential to moving beyond creative obstruction for all of the poets in this dissertation; we have seen Webb, for instance, recognizing that “[t]he error lies in / the state of desire / in wanting the answers” (*PB* 254); likewise, we have seen Cohen reconfiguring his speaker’s greedy and lustful desire as humble spiritual longing. That said, Stevens was describing the renunciation of Romantic longing—the “metaphysical pine”—in favour of an Imagist focus on “the thing itself”; and the poets in this project, while they might not have been “pining,” did adopt, after middle silence, a recognizably Romantic model of creativity as a never-ending process. Page, I am suggesting here, was more interested in the “process” of poetic vision, of active poetic *seeing*, than she was in the “sun” at the centre. The existence of the sun, or “the thing itself,” or the “still centre,” is very important because it draws the poet on, and Page, at this mature stage in her career, desired no more than that: to be drawn on, not to attain.

the sun, but rather the sensation of actively “seek[ing]” it: the *process* of trying to approach it, of “[r]eaching,” as Webb put it in the *ghazal* that I discussed above, but “[n]ot grasping, not at all” (*PB* 312; emphasis in original). And the *glosa* form itself allowed Page to work through that “process” in the very mechanics of her composition: to pursue, as she constructed her stanzas, the “backwards journey” or “subtracting” or “unknitting” that she had explored thematically in her poetry of the late 1960s. She listened to the voices of other poets, such as Stevens, and from their “starting lines,” wrote towards her own “centre.”

Webb similarly considered the *ghazal* form itself to be a kind of “starting line,” but she strained *against* it to produce “anti” *ghazals*. The formal conventions of the traditional *ghazal* provided the poet with a set of signs—just as the Lilo figure did in “Wilson’s Bowl” or as Auden and male modernist tradition did in “Composed Like Them”—that she could read and rearrange as she chose. And she has insisted that what she came up with were “anti” *ghazals* more than true *ghazals*. She made this assertion most prominently in the title of her chapbook, *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals* (emphasis added). “The subject of the traditional ghazal,” she wrote in her Preface, “was ... an idealized and universal image of Love ... Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and the private ... Hence ‘anti ghazals’” (Webb, *PB* 301).⁸⁹ Webb’s characterization of her own poems might be somewhat misleading, however. They are certainly preoccupied with “private” subjects: neighbours, birds, flowers, music—the “trappings” of “down here” (Webb, *PB* 312). But they are also interested in much larger topics: the Middle East, Russia, Heidegger, the atom bomb. The addition of “Ghazals”—without the “Anti”—in the title of *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* suggests that Webb was hoping in that volume to move in both directions at once: both with and against the *ghazal* form,

⁸⁹ Webb’s decision not to hyphenate “anti Ghazal” suggests that she was not defining a *new* form, but simply proposing to work against—“anti”—the existing form. She did not feel bound to total originality—to producing something that had never been done before—but instead strove to reimagine an old form.

engaging with tradition even as she eluded it (as we have seen her do several times now). In the *ghazals* and anti *ghazals* Webb explores *both* the specific and the general, the actual and the imagined, the individual and the community. She places the creative process that occurs on small unlined file cards “at ... kitchen tables” (Webb, *PB* 306) in conversation with the “[d]runken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous” (314) wanderings of the unconscious. By engaging and eluding she collaborates with tradition, and in so doing, she sets different realms and registers in active dialogue.

There are two guiding “masters” in *Water and Light*: John Thompson and Ghalib. They provide Webb with a point of entry and then their influence fades. Their presence in the volume is similar to Kropotkin’s in *Wilson’s Bowl*, although Webb calls and then dismisses them wilfully, confidently. Rob Winger notes Webb’s “muse-like invocation of Thompson” (“John” 224) in the first poem, when her speaker “semaphore[s] for help” with her “file cards” (Webb, *PB* 303), but the older *ghazal*-writer subsequently disappears. Meanwhile, she quotes the translated *Ghazals of Ghalib* in her table of contents, a couplet for each of her own volume’s five sections, to indicate Ghalib’s lingering and indeed structuring presence in her own work. But by the end of *Water and Light*, rather than idolizing the older poet, Webb’s speaker possesses wisdom and authority that he lacks. “Ah Ghalib, you are drinking too much, / Your lines are becoming maudlin,” she advises in the final poem: “Here, take this tea and sober up.” Ghalib’s time has passed, the poem implies; he is now “almost asleep, / head on the table, hand flung out, // upturned” (*PB* 354), reaching for words that he will no longer receive.

Whereas Webb’s notion of “collaboration” was largely antagonistic (“anti”), Page’s was primarily affectionate. Both poets prioritized the important work of “listening,” but for Webb, the emphasis was on *conversation*; for Page, it was on *chorus*. In each *glosa*, Page suggests, she

and the other poet proceed “hand in hand”: their relationship is one of “affinity” (*H* 12), a “curious marriage—two sensibilities intermingling” (*H* 9). Part of the reason that she highlights this harmonious interaction is that throughout *Hologram* Page was trying to discover how her “own specific song” (*H* 12) fit into a community, or “choir,” of poetic voices. In this sense, Page’s *glosas* have many of the qualities of a “late” work—a work of “summation,” like the poetry by Newlove and Marriott that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Rosemary Sullivan writes that throughout the volume “one feels Page coursing back through a lifetime, summing it all up.” The poems are “rigorously organized,” Sullivan observes, “to make a life narrative of sorts” (“Hologram” 126, 125). But quite unlike Newlove’s retrospective apology, in “Progress,” for “so few lines / written down and so many of them dreamed” (*AA* 196), or Marriott’s awareness, in “The Clock,” of her “pulse ... / irregular,” which “irrevocably / runs down” (*CC* 38), Page’s late-career “life narrative” is about the composition of her current, thriving poetic voice: about all of the musical strains that have come together to form the song she sings *now*. Moreover, she engages actively with the voices of her past. She suggests that she wanted to “use [the *glosa* form] as a way of paying homage to those poets whose work I fell in love with in my formative years” (Page, *H* 9-10). What she came up with was not simply a collection of retrospective tribute poems, but a volume that explores her *own* place in a poetic tradition.

At the end of her Foreword, Page explicitly articulates her theory of poetic influence through collaborative exchange. The poet’s search “for [her] own voice” amid the voices of “the giants of [her] youth” is similar to the natural process by which “song birds learn to sing,” Page writes, citing “a report by an ornithologist.” Brought up in isolation, song birds will learn “a kind of song—not species perfect—but recognizable.” Once they are introduced “to the songs of a variety of birds *not* of their species ... they cho[o]se the notes and cadences that, combined with

their own attempts, complet[e] their species song.”⁹⁰ Page recalls thinking to herself when she read this report, “Of course! ... [T]hat is what poets do. We have a song—of a kind. But it is not until we have heard many other songs that we are able to put together our own specific song” (*H* 12). In this sense, much as Webb was often straining *against* “old masters” and formal guidelines and Page was proceeding “hand in hand” *with* them, the two were engaged in the same work: attending to the voice of another, and then making their “own specific song.” The poet “listen[s] carefully” (Webb, *PB* 268) to the voices of other writers—Ghalib and Thompson in *Water and Light*, for Webb, and earlier, Auden and Dante in “Composed Like Them”; Wallace Stevens and thirteen others for Page in *Hologram*—and they teach her “notes and cadences” that she will use, patterned according to her own natural inclinations, to produce something new.

Lawrence Lipking notes that as poets near the end of their careers and seek patterns of unity among the “fragments” of their creative output, “music” often “serves as a metaphor” (*Life* 72), as indeed it did for Page. Wallace Stevens, Lipking notes, wanted to title his *Collected Poems* “The Whole of Harmonium, Collected Poems of W.S.” (70). The harmonium, a kind of reed organ, was an important image for Stevens throughout his career. But Lipking remarks the lack of article in the poet’s proposed title: Stevens was not referring to “a harmonium,” but rather to “harmonium,” a concept suggestive of “deeper strains, the harmony in which a poet hopes the

⁹⁰ Page’s song bird theory of influence is a humbler variation of Eliot’s, from “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” “[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created,” Eliot writes, “is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.” He proposes that the “really new” work of art must alter “the whole order,” so that “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted ... [T]he poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities” (15). Page is more interested in how the other singers have changed *her*, though any image of a choir of singers—like Cohen’s, too—will resonate with Eliot’s model. Importantly, in moving forward “collaboratively” with precursor poets, Page and Webb were freed from the Romantic “anxiety of influence”; and in accepting art-making as an infinite, ongoing process in which they were not “masters” and they were not responsible for producing polished “wholes,” they were also freed from the modernist burden to “write ... with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer ... ha[d] a simultaneous existence” “in [their] bones” (Eliot, “Tradition” 14).

pieces of his book will join” (71).⁹¹ Late in their careers, poets seek harmony not only among their own fragments, but in the relation of their work to the wider world and “the whole of” (in Stevens’s terms) poetic tradition. This is what Page does in her *glosas*. The *glosa*, we might say, is something like an aural kaleidoscope. If the idea of kaleidoscopic (“religious”) vision offered Page the possibility of holding fragments together in a single lens, or viewing a fractured whole, the form of the *glosa* offered her the possibility of bringing individual “notes” from different sources together into a single poetic structure, and of “collaborating” as a singer does in a choir.

But as she examines and summarizes her creative development, what kind of unity will a poet find in a career rent in two by a long middle silence? Page and Webb found poetic careers in which the search was the substance. With the perspective of time and age, they could both see that “[r]eaching” for the “sun”—or the “good masterpiece of work” (Webb, *PB* 219)—was more important than “grasping” it (Webb, *PB* 312; emphasis in original). As I wrote earlier, Page suggested in 1970 that the creative process involved “extract[ing]” a “thing only felt ... from invisibility” and “transpos[ing]” it “into a seen thing, a heard thing.” The “[p]oem or painting,” she added, was merely a “by-product” of the “struggle” to extract and transpose (Page, “Traveller” 35). This theory stayed with her. In “The Gold Sun,” the *process* of “[p]ushing aside” metaphors and comparisons, like Webb’s “[r]eaching,” was more important than actually seeing—“grasping” or mastering—“the thing itself” (Page, *K* 193). For Webb, arriving at this conclusion helped her to move past the feeling of “failure” that had gotten in the way of the “Kropotkin Poems.” “If you fail,” she suggested, “you presuppose that something can be achieved or perfected. And if you don’t set up any proposition about success, perfection,

⁹¹ Many strains of poetic and critical understanding converge here, on Stevens and the harmonium and the idea of seeking musical unity in a poetic *oeuvre*: Lipking discusses Stevens’s “blue guitar” as a “distinctive instrument on which [the poet] play[s] his tunes” (71) and Page also wrote, with reference to Stevens, a later *glosa* (in 2002) called “The Blue Guitar.”

completion, then you're not going to wind up with an idea of failure. You're going to end up with process" (Webb, "Addressing" 41). She learned, in other words, to give up, at least in theory, any modernist ambitions of mastery, and to adopt instead a Romantic stance of humility within an ongoing creative process. (This is also a religious stance: the two are closely related.)

Both the *glosa* and the *ghazal* foreground the collaborative "process" of conversation between the poet and her guiding voices, then, one through "affinity" (*H* 12) and the other through antipathy (the "anti" *ghazals*). The *ghazal* also displays "process" rather flamboyantly in the "astonishing leaps" (Webb, "Ghazal-Maker" 156) that both poet and reader must make to move from one couplet to the next. Importantly, Webb's *ghazals* privilege silence as a principle of progression in this "process": the visual silences of the white spaces between couplets and the logical silences of the disjunctions between ideas. The "journey of the ten lines" (Webb, *PB* 314) involves at least four very obvious silent spaces, between the five couplets. For the poet who has faith in process, "silence" holds the search together.

In "Poor Bird" (*K* 194-5), her most comprehensive and straightforward meditation on creative life, Page proposes that process is inherent in the very concept of vocation. She draws her guiding quatrain this time from Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper." Both Bishop's and Page's poems describe a bird who is searching "for something, something, something" among "the millions of grains" of sand, which are both plain—"black, white, tan, and gray"—and

extraordinary—“quartz grains, rose and amethyst.”⁹² The sandpiper recalls the sweet-winged dove in “Cry Ararat!”: both are, like the poet, questers, discoverers. The bird in “Poor Bird” is destined to pursue an “endless search ... a vocation / year in, year out, morning to evening,” beginning “[f]rom birth, from the first astonishing moment” of his existence. Similar to a poet who has a life to lead in the real world, the bird is occasionally “distracted”—in his case, “by nest-building, eggs, high winds, high tides.” But “still, on he goes”: “he is obsessed!” The first three stanzas of “Poor Bird” are dominated by the unexceptional. Despite the bird’s daily examination of the sand, “the millions of grains” remain frustratingly “black, white, tan and gray.” Page, aged seventy-seven in 1993 (when she wrote this poem), on the far side of one long middle silence and many shorter silences too, knew that this is how poetic careers go. The poem reflects calmly on struggles that were not so easy for the poet to accept as they were happening: “just because he has not found / what he doesn’t know he is searching for,” the wise speaker assures us, “is not a sign he’s off the track.” Intuition, obsession, faith, and the sense of his own vocation draw him ever onwards.

Only in the final stanza does the bird have a brief moment of artistic insight. The moment is surprising, beyond his control. “[O]ccasionally, when he least expects it,” Page writes,

⁹² We should note the consonances between Page’s (and Bishop’s) ordinary and extraordinary “grains of sand” and the well-known visionary proposition that opens William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.” Notably, Webb also refers to Blake when she is considering, as she does so frequently in her *ghazals*, the quotidian and the visionary (in Page’s terms), or (in her own terms) the relationship between her humble position and the high truths at which her poems gesture: “The Authors are in Eternity, / or so Blake said, // but I am here, feet planted / on the ground,” she writes (*PB* 351). Those first two lines (about Blake) actually come from her 1972 radio talk, “Calamities and Crystals”: “The Authors are in Eternity, or so Blake said,” she announces; “[b]ut this is the house that Jack built.” She was somewhat obscurely making the point, with reference to Blake, that “poems” can “get beyond” what the poet’s conscious mind is able to comprehend (*PW* 15.5.F.17). Page explores this same idea, with her own Blakean echoes, in “Poor Bird.”

in the glass of a wave a painted fish
 like a work of art across his sight
 reminds him of something he doesn't know
 that he has been seeking his whole long life—
 something that may not even exist!
 Poor bird, indeed! Poor dazed creature!
 Yet when his eye is sharp and sideways seeing
 oh, *then* the quotidian unexceptional sand is
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

The sandpiper's vision of the fish riding by in the wave resembles the religious or creative awakening that Page described in "Another Space"; here, she gestures towards the particularly artistic implications of this awakening by comparing the "painted fish" to a "work of art." It leaves him "dazed"—"baffle[d]," like Cohen's speaker in *Book of Mercy* (26); "dazzl[ed]," like Webb's speaker in "A Question of Questions," into "amazement" (*PB* 254). The fish "reminds" the bird "of something": the "something" that he "already know[s]" but has "forgotten" he knows, as Page put it in "Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman" (36). All of these concepts converge—the "dazed" loss of conscious control, the strange familiarity of the "forward memory" (Webb, *PB* 312)—in the image of the mystical, marvellous "painted fish." It comes and goes as quickly as a wave rises and falls. But the vision jolts the bird into an ideal creative state, and "*then*," most unexpectedly, he is able to see the sparkling colours in the sand.⁹³

⁹³ "Then" is an interestingly important word in Page's poetic descriptions of the creative process: "Remember the statue," she instructed, and "[t]hen will each leaf and flower" become "as perfect" as "its name"; "O, then cry Ararat!" she cried; "Then let us start again," she prayed; and here, "*then*" the sand appears extraordinary (*K* 106, 108, 115, 195). This is mostly grammatical coincidence, but I note it because it suggests that Page's creative personae frequently have to prepare themselves somehow for faith, for new beginnings, and for artistic insight: one thing happens, and "then" another can happen. The emphasis is on process.

Importantly, the colours were always there, “mixed” with the “quotidian” and the “unexceptional.” The change is in the bird’s perspective. When he is “sideways seeing,” momentarily dazzled out of his conscious search, “*then*” he is receptive to the colourful, sparkling sand that has surrounded him all along.

Despite the calm omniscience of her poetic speaker, Page does not suggest that the search of the “Poor Bird” is easy; he is “poor,” after all. But the search—a search that involves much more silent sifting through “quotidian” grains of sand than it involves exclamations of triumph—is all that he has. In *Hologram* and *Water and Light*, Page and Webb explored forms, the *glosa* and the *ghazal*, that actually exploit silence—the silence of listening to the “notes and cadences” of other poets, or the silence of disjunctive leaps—in order to move forward. Working within the traditional forms (though not *too* traditional, for Canadian poets and audiences) also allowed Page and Webb to explore and even put to use those aspects of the creative process that they had theorized in their earlier post-silence work: listening, collaboration, stillness, subtraction, reaching, and unconscious leaping. They idealized silence, to be sure; but idealizing silence was the most productive and sustainable way to move forward with a poetic life in which that silence would always be a part of the process.

V. Conclusion

Retrospective idealizing aside, the experience of creative obstruction, of “com[ing] bang up against ... [one’s] own stone wall limits,”⁹⁴ of unexpected imprisonment within artistic and personal “frontiers” (Steiner 39), was a “lesson in humility” (Henderson 125) for all of the poets in this dissertation. The quality of their response depended on their ability or inclination to embrace humility as a position from which to move forward, and to release the humiliation of

⁹⁴ Page, “Brazilian Journal,” 27 March 1957, p. 23 (PKP 113.11).

their earlier defeats. All five writers composed new work after silence that dwells on the limitations of the poet, whether that poet is lying in a hospital bed, as in Marriott's "Countries," cultivating a "minute garden," as in Newlove's "White Philharmonic Novels" (*NDS* 57), or singing "in the lower choirs," as in Cohen's *Book of Mercy* (1). These are the unpretentious spaces where creativity happens. Phyllis Webb announced the measurements of her file cards in the Preface to *Sunday Water* in order to establish the modesty of the whole *ghazal*-writing endeavour, in direct contrast to the ambitions of "cosmic proportions"⁹⁵ that motivated the "Kropotkin Poems" series, and the "literary legend" that its failure became (*WB* 9). Cohen's speaker in *Book of Mercy* observes that his "heart" has learned "to search itself in simple ways, with broom and rag" (44). His objective, with these humble tools in hand, is to clean and clear: to sweep away the dust of his previous failures and disappointments, and also to create in his heart "a new space," as Page put it ("Questions" 20), for faith and new growth.

But whereas Newlove resolutely considered his acceptance of "reasonable" (*NDS* 15) ambitions to be a failure for which he must apologize, Page, Webb, and Cohen were able to transcend the limitations of file cards and "simple" projects because they also released any sense of shame in these positions. In "Could I Write a Poem Now?" Page's speaker had recognized that the "hard frost" that "lock[ed]" the "lovely waters" of her poetic voice was "scarcely a matter of ice, / but a matter of guilt," for "to let / a talent lie about unused" felt like "break[ing] faith" with her artistic vocation (*K* 99). Emerging productively from silence—unlocking those waters—was in turn a matter of melting away "guilt." Marriott and Newlove, I have argued, never truly accomplished this move. When Marriott looked back on her career in *The Circular Coast*, she saw the constant imaginative nourishment of the "green country" (73) and arranged her poems to suggest that her belief in its value had never faltered: that her *oeuvre* had never

⁹⁵ Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2).

been blighted by silence but was unbroken and “really cover[ed] a lifetime!”⁹⁶ When Newlove looked back on his career in *The Night the Dog Smiled* and *Apology for Absence*, he imagined his poems as “oases” in a desert of “absence” (NDS 33) and lamented that he had only managed to get “so few lines / written down” (AA 196). Whether they were erasing or emphasizing their silences, both Marriott and Newlove were in their own ways “apologizing” for them. Page, Webb, and Cohen, by contrast, insisted in their *glosas*, *ghazals*, and prayers that silence was not just “unused voice” but active listening. Silence in the poetic process can imply prayerful attention to “what the other has to say” (Auden, *Certain* 306): the perfect, focused “stillness to receive” creative vision (Page, *K* 106).

It was the sense that they could relinquish conscious control of the poem and the process of its making that permitted Page, Webb, and Cohen’s seizure of silence as a valuable creative position. The poet will only feel ashamed of breaks and gaps in her output if she believes that she is, or should be, in complete, autonomous control of that output. If, however, she is looking to another “source of things” (Cohen qtd in Simmons 337) outside of or beyond herself, then any breaks in her speech or song can be periods of waiting: “abid[ing],” like Cohen, until she is “spoken for” (Cohen, *SM* 343). Mastery proved impossible for these poets to sustain, but after their long middle silences all three of them recognized, as Cohen put it in *Book of Mercy*, that the “true victor” is one who “limp[s]” (*BM* 27), who surrenders his pride to a higher authority, for, in St Thomas’s words, “the more one humbles oneself before God the more one is lifted up before him” (97). In the physical terms that Page, Webb, and Cohen often employed to evoke creative states, the difference between anxious loss of control in crisis and humble renunciation of control to a higher power is the difference between paralysis and stillness. They wrote out of silence by assuming the latter positions (humble renunciation and stillness), of course. “Defeated by

⁹⁶ Letter to Heather Spears, 8 November 1982 (AM 9.2).

silence, here is a place where the silence is more subtle,” Cohen wrote (*BM* 45). That “place” was humility.

In a way, all five poets refrained from publishing new books until they felt that they could adequately respond to their earlier dilemmas. Marriott and Newlove spoke back to their critics, as I have demonstrated; in *The Green Plain*, the chapbook, Newlove quite self-consciously “redress[ed] the one-sidedness of [his] earlier vision” (Glickman, “Driving” 95) by presenting equal (right down to the word count) and opposite perspectives in the anxious preface and the reassuring poem. His audience had asked for a poem “Concerning Stars, Flowers, Love, Etc.,” and so, with heavy-handed irony, he gave it to them. Cohen, Page, and Webb’s shared theory of creative humility, meanwhile, was a direct response to their particular crises of poetic authority. They might all have released their “great dreams” and even accepted an attitude of openness towards unanswered questions, but the desire for some kind of balanced resolution still shaped at least a portion of their post-hiatus work. Dreams, prayers, questions, confessions, and imperatives dominate the poetry that I have studied in this chapter. These forms and modes of address convey the poets’ creative preoccupations: in their questions and confessions, they respond to previous struggles, errors, and attitudes; in their dreams and prayers they theorize—and enact, as much as possible—the liberating loss of consciousness and of self that would open them up to new and higher wisdom; and in their imperatives, often instructions detailing the adoption of a particular creative position, they reflect on the creative process.

Faith in the persistence of that process became the end and the whole of the story, at least for the poets who emerged most confidently from silence. “I have a lot of faith in the activity of artistic formation going on at a subliminal level,” Webb reflected in 1985: “I have faith that something is going on there and I will just wait and see” (“Addressing” 35). In the final *ghazal* in

Sunday Water, Webb's speaker surrenders control of the poem to a mystical "Third Eye," an "oracular seer" which will "read the ... signs" and make the poem. Like Page's "Poor Bird," this *ghazal* is an expression of creative faith. "[F]lickers of doubt tic mouth, twitch eye's lid," Webb's speaker observes; "[b]ut it's open—always—the third [eye]" (*PB* 315). In the final prayer in *Book of Mercy*, Cohen's speaker recounts, "I lost my way, I forgot to call on your name. The raw heart beat against the world ... But you are here. You have always been here ... Blessed is the one who waits in the traveller's heart for his turning" (50). Webb, Cohen, and Page's post-silence poetry is full of such statements and restatements of faith, because process involves the losses as well as the visions, the crises as well as the triumphs. But when "flickers of doubt tic mouth" or the "raw heart" grows anxious, then the poets who keep faith will "cry Ararat!" and pray: "let us start again."

Conclusion

“The universe opens. I close.
And open, just to surprise you.”
— Phyllis Webb, *Sunday Water*

With a new beginning, then, the story of middle silence ends. Importantly, the extent to which the poets were able or likely to think about “newness” after a prolonged mid-career hiatus—as opposed to speaking again as they had before, looking back defensively, closing down old debates, and “sneaking another letter onto the stone,” as John Newlove put it (*AA* 187)—depended on the extent to which they accepted and even celebrated silence as a basic component of creativity. The poets who moved forward with the most sustainable new attitudes were the three who most fully converted the silence of “defeat” into the “subtle” silence of prayerful listening (Cohen, *BM* 45): the silence of a “retreat from battle” into the silence of a “religious retreat” (Webb, “Interview” 8). P.K. Page, Leonard Cohen, and Phyllis Webb all realized this conversion through something like a religious awakening: they sensed, or remembered, a higher “source of things” (Cohen qtd in Simmons 337)—God, the muse, another dimension—and they opened themselves to its wisdom. These modernist poets also “awoke” to an essentially Romantic understanding of the creative process as infinitely aspirational. They renounced their sense of obligation to produce, through the “unity” of their “art,” order within and out of “the chaos of the modern world” (Eysteinnsson 9) in favour of “glimps[ing] [the] unity” of a “[m]ystifying” order that existed independent of their making; they gave up any desire to capture such visions accurately or wholly in favour of “yearn[ing] to catch some overtone which [would] convey” their essence (Page, “Traveller” 36); and they surrendered the “impossible standards of

closure” (Purdham, “Encyclopedic” 2) and completion that they had previously set for their art in favour of focusing on “the endless search” (Page, *K* 194): a process, as Webb wrote, not of “grasping, not at all,” but of “[r]eaching” (*PB* 312; emphasis in original). After the experience of middle silence, these poets released their “great dreams” of “good masterpiece[s]” (Webb, *PB* 287, 218), and came to view the “search” and the “reaching,” and indeed the lapses in visible productivity while those activities took place, as the defining work of their poetic vocations.

The conversion that I have been describing here was an imaginative act. Deciding that they might not be the “masters” of their own poetry (*cf.* Page, “Questions” 18) was a liberating imaginative move for Page, Webb, and Cohen because it implied both a displacement of blame—and thus a rejection of the embarrassment that had initially accompanied their struggles—and also a statement of faith. An imaginative or creative conversion was necessary for all three of them because their crises of poetic authority had also been creative. “Write, & imagine a poem that list of trees,” Page commanded herself in one of her Brazilian fragments;¹ creative crisis was, for her, feeling unable to perform that feat of imagination.

But Newlove’s and Marriott’s more subdued returns to writing remind us of the limits of imaginative acts, and they remind us too that conversion is not a prerequisite for emerging from a prolonged mid-career period of poetic silence. Gaps between book publications are sometimes dictated more by practical and psychological obstacles than by creative or aesthetic ones; and while creative obstruction produces a more dramatic story of crisis and rebirth in the poetry,

¹ PKP 27.5.10.

material and personal obstacles might well be more difficult, in the end, to overcome.² The adverse economic conditions that Newlove repeatedly cited as a primary hindrance to his writing activities, for instance, were a problem that could not simply be imagined away. The two poets' knotted and needy relationships with their audiences proved similarly hard to undo. Even more than the demands of earning a living, the self-conscious desire to please or defy (or both) their readers directed Marriott and Newlove's rhythms of publication, both the retreat and the return, the blockage and its denial. In retrospective accounts of her career, Marriott in particular stressed the utterly paralyzing effects of critical expectations, which she described as a "great bulky barrier that kept [her] from getting poetry out."³ But breaking that barrier, for Marriott, was not a matter of revising her entire approach to the creative process. It was a matter, as we saw in Chapter Four, of devising an adequate response to the critics whose standards and judgments she had found oppressive.

Middle silence was not always transformative, then, but for the five poets in this project, it was always definitive of the later *oeuvre*. Much of Marriott and Newlove's post-silence work was self-justifying and reactive, intended to reassert the value of their old creative visions and to affirm their commitment to poetry despite any absences. In Page, Webb, and Cohen's post-hiatus volumes, meanwhile, we have seen numerous metapoetic reflections and meditations on the

² Of course, Page, Webb, and Cohen dealt with many practical distractions too: a career as a singer-songwriter or as an executive producer and broadcaster for the CBC, for example, or the duties of an ambassador's wife. Page's isolation from the Canadian literary community could also be considered a kind of obstacle. Webb had to deal with the psychological trauma of her "critical wounds" (*WB* 9; John Bentley Mays's 1973 essay), and all three writers struggled with depression (for Page, see Djwa, *Journey* 174, 202; for Cohen, see Simmons 56, 369; for Webb, see Wachtel 9 and "Phyllis Webb's Art of Ideas"). The *primary* source of their obstruction was creative, though, and it was dissolving their creative impasses that freed them to look ahead to new work. That said, the precise duration of their hiatuses probably depended in large part on practical and external factors. For instance, it is clear that Page began to think about assembling a new volume of poetry after she returned to Canada in the mid-1960s, and Webb was moved by the tragedy of Lilo Berliner's suicide in 1977 to compose the "Wilson's Bowl" series.

³ Notes for Saskatoon Reading and Talk, 1971 (AM 19.6).

liberating models of creativity that they had developed and put to use.⁴ Perhaps most significantly, all five poets' late work is characterized by much more modest ambitions than they had pursued earlier in their careers. Gone, for instance, are any notions of assembling volumes of "cosmic proportions," as Webb had planned to do in 1963.⁵ No longer did they forecast, as Webb had done in 1964, necessary and impending "revolution[s] in [their] work."⁶ Marriott wrote autobiographical poems about family and aging that contrasted markedly with the "social protest" poems that she had felt obliged, if unable, to write in the 1940s. Cohen's *Book of Mercy* was, in his view, a "secret book" ("Interview" 58), quite unlike the "massive book" that he had envisioned for *Death of a Lady's Man* (qtd in MacSkimming E16). There is a striking recurrence of domestic spaces in this poetry: of poet-figures "chittering / in the old kitchen" (Newlove, *NDS* 68), "work[ing] late at ... kitchen tables" (Webb, *PB* 306), "lean[ing] ... over the table"—the "aimless table" where they scribble their lines (Cohen *BM* 13, 46). Page's 1981 volume, *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*, is replete with poems on seemingly mundane topics: "Domestic Poem for a Sunday Afternoon," for instance, in which the speaker and her husband are "settled down" and "dozing" on the porch (*K* 147), or "Finches Feeding," in which she examines little birds as they "skirl like a boiling pot" around their seed, and then remarks that although she "delight[s]" in watching them, the poem has "recorded ... nothing profound." "[W]hat have I said?" the speaker wonders: "Not much" (*K* 134). But she is at peace with her trivial observations.

⁴ Although such self-reflexive work was obviously not *all* they wrote, Page and Webb continued to contemplate the creative process in a great deal of their late poetry. For instance, in "Attend," published in *Hanging Fire* (1990), Webb's speaker follows the train of the mind in "getting the poem on the page": "a voice tells her on this day / attend" (*PB* 403). "Listen to the poem talk, hear the words come together," Page wrote in "How to Write a Poem," a *glosa* of 2007; "[t]he poem is expecting / your total attention" (*K* 232-3). These late-career reflections, of course, express the wisdom that they had acquired through the experience of creative crisis and silence: wisdom that would carry them through to the ends of their poetic careers.

⁵ Report to the Canada Council of 28 August 1963 (PW 17.VII.2).

⁶ Report to the Canada Council of 8 April 1964 (PW 17.VII.2).

In some ways, this peace in triviality is simply the natural mode of an older poet—of any older poet. It is the peace of a humble poet who views her poems as single notes in the much larger chorus of her *oeuvre*: who no longer feels obliged to vocalize masterworks with every utterance. Peace in relative restraint is also the attitude of a poet who feels that the great work of her career is behind her, and even Page, Webb, and Cohen, who had adopted such sustainable new creative approaches, seem to have sensed that the drama of their poetic evolutions had passed. For all five writers, breaking middle silence, whether they did so in a mood of triumph or regret, arguably *was* the “great work” of their careers. And while Page and Webb at least had new directions to explore, their late-career growth was horizontal, not vertical. They continued to surprise and delight their readers with innovative poetry, but their maturation as artists was largely complete.

The fullest creative revolutions, notably, did not necessarily result in the most robust later *oeuvres*. Anne Marriott’s attitude and aesthetic—her predilection for “natural wonders”⁷—did not alter substantially at all as she began to write again in the 1970s, and yet she was quite productive in the final two decades of her life, putting together two full volumes even after *The Circular Coast*. Leonard Cohen’s *oeuvre*, on the other hand, displays in the remarkable contrast between *Death of a Lady’s Man* and *Book of Mercy* the most pronounced creative conversion of any of the five writers, and yet he would largely cease publishing poetry after 1984, directing his energies almost exclusively to song-writing instead.⁸ Similarly, although Phyllis Webb assembled three full books of new work between 1980 and 1990, after the last of these, *Hanging*

⁷ Letter to Geoff Hancock, 22 November 1984 (AM 4.1).

⁸ Cohen himself clearly distinguishes writing song lyrics from writing poetry that was to be published in books. “When you’re working with just a printed text,” he has remarked, “whatever gestalt you convey has to be within the flesh of the syntax. You won’t have the guitar to move the words along ... [The] words live on the pages ... The ideas and emotions are not fluid in the sense that a song is. They have a kind of rhythm and authority, but it’s a different kind of process” (qtd in Chaffin 11). It was the relatively fixed (“fleshy”) “authority” of written words that Cohen moved away from in his later life. As I noted early in Chapter Four, he did publish a new volume of poetry twenty-two years after *Book of Mercy*: *Book of Longing*, in 2006.

Fire, she too stopped writing poetry (it would seem) for good.⁹ These are not the silences of voices cut off prematurely or thwarted in their growth, however. *Book of Mercy* and *Hanging Fire* convey none of the anguish of *Death of a Lady's Man* or of the "Kropotkin Poems" fragments, and neither do they express the same ambitious and obsessive desire for change. Cohen and Webb's terminal silences represent rather the natural, conclusive retreats of writers who feel that they have said what they need to say poetically.

Crisis and resolution, blockage and release, doubt and revelation: these stimulate the undulations of all creative careers. The stages of crisis, blockage, and doubt were surrounded by extended intervals of poetic silence for the writers in this project. A different writer, though, might work through his sense of obstruction in ongoing poetic work—might continue writing and even continue publishing in between spurts of actual creative growth. In a review of Webb's recent Collected Poems volume, *Peacock Blue*, Phil Hall observes: "The increase in publishing opportunities [in Canada] since 1965 means that poets now tend to do their growing in public. We watch them widen or stagnate, book by book. In contrast, Webb did her growing in private, so that each of her books came as a surprise, an unexpected turn" (79). In other words, in an environment where publication opportunities are abundant and prolificacy is encouraged, even expected, some writers might well "stagnate" in published work. Others, like the five poets in this dissertation, might prefer to "do their growing in private." The point—and it is a crucial one here—is that prolificacy does not determine richness of artistic evolution, even if it sometimes seemed to determine a writer's stature in mid-twentieth-century Canada. During the fifteen years

⁹ Just as Page had done much earlier in her life, Webb took up painting fairly seriously in the 1990s; some of her images are included in *Nothing But Brush Strokes*, and one graces the cover of *Peacock Blue*. Betsy Warland discusses this transition in "Phyllis Webb and the Spirit of Inquiry." She notes that Webb's cessation of poetry-writing coincided with the death of her mother; in conversation with me in 2012, Webb, too, with reference to Warland, wondered whether those two major life changes might have been linked. In "Essay on Abstraction: Phyllis Webb and the Death of the Lyric," Stephen Collis argues that Webb was already moving towards the abstract aesthetic of her painting in much of her late poetry.

of Webb's middle silence, 1965 to 1980, Irving Layton published *sixteen* volumes of new poetry, not including selections and collections. Al Purdy published fourteen new volumes in that time, and including chapbooks and book-length long poems, George Bowering saw twenty-two publications in those years. This is not the place to evaluate Bowering, Purdy, or Layton's development throughout that period, but, although their output is impressive, surely their growth was not *more* pronounced than Webb's was between *Naked Poems* and *Wilson's Bowl*.

Considering the striking disparity between Bowering, Purdy, and Layton's publication records on the one hand and Webb's on the other, Canadian critics of the 1960s and 1970s can be excused for their assumption that Webb had given up writing after she had not published a new volume in several years. But in the broad history of poetry, Layton's remarkable fecundity is far more unusual than Webb's intermittent output. When Milton Wilson observed, in 1958, that "the disappearing or declining ... poet is a Canadian institution" (*Other Canadians* 79), what he was really noticing was that the pace of critical commentary in mid-twentieth-century Canada far outran the natural pace of poetic production for many writers. The poets were not necessarily disappearing: the critics were *announcing* their disappearances before they had the chance to speak again.¹⁰ Sometimes, for the writers in this project at least, those announcements were motivated by the postmodernist agenda to proclaim "the demise of the modernist period" (Davey 19); as we saw in the case of John Bentley Mays, Frank Davey, and Phyllis Webb, a writer's apparent withdrawal seemed easy evidence that the movement she represented was defunct. Poetic disappearances could also be declared with relative neutrality within the expanding body of criticism on the Canadian literary tradition. "P.K. Page ceased to write verse after the publication of *The Metal and the Flower* in 1954," wrote Munro Beattie decisively in 1965, as he

¹⁰ See page 18 of the dissertation's introduction, where I show Wilson doing just this with Margaret Avison (in "The Poetry of Margaret Avison").

listed off the fates of various modernist poets in *The Literary History of Canada* (297). Little could Beattie have imagined that Page's final volume of poetry, *Coal and Roses*, would be published over four decades later, in 2009, and that only her death the following year would truly mark the end of her poetic career.¹¹

Reviewers and critics of the 1960s would probably have been surprised not only at the continuation of Page's and Webb's careers, but also at the amount of attention that the two poets have received precisely *because* of their silences. The initial attention to Webb, as we have seen, stemmed in large part from the popularity of feminist criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, for her experience seemed so clearly to illustrate the transformation of female silence from oppression to liberation that feminist critics wanted to see. The more recent attention to Page is partly related, meanwhile, to the interest in Canadian modernism that has gathered steam over the last fifteen years. These two poets have also drawn critical attention to their own middle silences by advancing compelling narratives of the transformations that they underwent while they "couldn't write at all" (Page, "Fried Eggs" 156). As we saw in Part I of this dissertation, poets and critics have worked both with and against each other in defining and describing the condition of "poetic silence." Disagreement has tended to fixate on the extent to which "silence" is a passive or active creative state. "Silence," indeed, can imply both an ending—the consequence of a blockage or impasse—and a new beginning, or a clean position of great potential, and this is why, as I argued in Chapter One, the concept has been used to advance such a wide diversity of critical projects and developmental narratives.

¹¹ Although Page's career was long and varied, Marilyn Rose perhaps exaggerates somewhat when she refers to "Page's amazing fecundity since 1967" ("Anthologizing" 157) (and Rose is certainly not the only critic who has viewed Page's productivity in such an optimistic light). As evidence of this fecundity, she cites Page's volumes of 1974, 1981, 1991, 1994, and 1997. Five volumes in thirty years, and only two of them fully composed of new work (and one of those, *Hologram*, only containing fourteen poems) would not be called "amazingly fecund" by (for example) Layton or Purdy's critics. What Rose is noticing here, I think, are the "surprising" and "unexpected" qualities of each of Page's utterances, just as Hall observed of Webb's volumes (79). The poet's memorable growth and innovativeness, viewed retrospectively, makes the career *seem* "fecund" in volume.

My reading of the experience of silence in Chapters Three and Four took into account both its “deathly” qualities and its regenerative ones by dividing the middle period that, “from the performance point of view” (Webb, “Seeking” 25), merely resembles one long publication hiatus into stages of “creative crisis” and retreat, or more literal poetic silence. The latter is the phase following Phyllis Webb’s “I can wait. We shall see” at the end of the “Poems of Failure” (*PB* 223), or the interval of “abid[ing]” that Leonard Cohen sang about in “If It Be Your Will” (*SM* 343). According to the evidence of the poetry, the phases of “crisis” and “silence” both involved some kind of activity, whether vigorous or meditative. It was during the stage of creative crisis that the poets felt most violently *silenced*: blocked, gagged, choked, imprisoned, or paralyzed, for instance. These were the feelings that Page was referring to when she wrote of “my poetic silence” in her journal in January 1959 (*BJ* 235); likewise, they were the feelings that Webb was thinking of when she observed in 1972 that she had “suffered years of poetic silence.”¹² Once they had accepted the silence and stopped struggling against it, the absence of their actual poetic output became more complete, but the poets themselves no longer felt forcibly stifled or oppressed. The silence was more “real,” that is, but they felt it less acutely. Page, Webb, and Cohen have described the activity of this later period variously as “listening” (Webb, “Seeking” 25), “healing,” “making” (Webb, “Interview” 8), “emptying” (Webb, “Addressing” 34), “gestation” (Webb, *WB* 9), “sweep[ing] aside” (Cohen, *BM* 48), “search[ing]” (*BM* 44), “clear[ing] a way,” “provid[ing] a new space” (Page, “Questions” 20), and “starting again from a pre-verbal state” (“Questions” 17). As all of these comments indicate, “silence” was not a passive or stagnant condition. And yet the fact that it *was* “silence”—that the “emptying” or “searching” was done during a period when the poets did not feel able to complete satisfactory poems—is nevertheless absolutely crucial. Silence or retreat was the only possible response to

¹² “Calamities and Crystals” (PW 15.V.F.17).

the modernist crisis of poetic authority that left Page, Webb, and Cohen feeling powerless and inadequate. So too was silence the only position from which they could develop the attitude of receptive humility that would inspire the continuation of their poetic creativity.

By stressing the centrality, even necessity, of “silence” itself, I have approached the gaps and breaks in poetic careers in quite a different manner from the recent critics I considered at the end of Chapter One. These critics hoped to “[call] into question the very idea of . . . silence” (Ballantyne, “Exile” 34), and argued that Page in particular was “extraordinarily creative” during her so-called “decade of silence,” for “her creative energy was applied to visual art, which stands for strong communication, not silence” (Djwa, *Journey* 171-2). The method of these critics has been to counteract silence’s implications of passivity with evidence of activity: to erase silence, as I proposed in Chapter One, by filling it in. And to be sure, as archival material becomes more widely available, and as more “previously unpublished” poetry is published, the fissures in creative careers can and will begin to narrow. For instance, the recent collections of Page’s and Webb’s poetry, *Kaleidoscope* (2010) and *Peacock Blue* (2014), both include work composed during the stages that have been defined as “silences”: an editorial decision that clearly invites us to adjust our impressions of the poets’ rhythms and outputs.¹³ In one way, obviously, gaining access to more material can only enrich our understanding of literary careers and *oeuvres*; and to be sure, I have made grateful and abundant reference to unpublished documents in this dissertation. But we must restrain the impulse to attribute equal value to published and

¹³ In fact, all of this material was written during the early part of the poets’ publication hiatuses, the stages that I have defined as “creative crisis.” There are eight poems in *Kaleidoscope* dated “c.1957-58.” *Peacock Blue* contains forty-nine “previously uncollected and unpublished poems”; they are undated, but ordered chronologically, as my research among Webb’s dated drafts confirms. (The fact that they span nearly four decades, the 1950s to the 1990s, is also apparent from the changes in Webb’s style and thematic preoccupations.) Just eight or nine of them were written between 1965 and 1979, and only one of those after 1971. These eight are “Poem,” “For Robert Duncan” (c. 1966) “Continuum,” “‘Mirrored Room’ in the Albright Knox” (c. 1968), “The What Is To Be Done Poem” (24-26 December 1967), “Notes from an Unuttered Revolution,” “Richard II” (before June 1970), “Antisong” (1973, according to Hulcoop), and possibly “Alex.” (Webb’s drafts of this poem are undated, but it was written in the mid-1960s.)

“previously unpublished” poetry—especially unpublished drafts from obvious periods of strife in the writers’ careers.¹⁴ There were reasons that Page and Webb did not publish the poems that remained in draft form in their archives; often, quite simply, the reason was that they were not, and are not, very good poems. The poetic fragments that I studied in Chapter Three should not stand as evidence of ongoing artistic achievement, but rather as evidence of vigorous artistic struggle: of the poets’, especially Page’s, *desire* to go on writing even as they kept coming up short. Fragments and abortive poetic efforts, and even sometimes full poems left unpublished, should stand as evidence, finally, of just how intensely the silence was felt.

John Hulcoop, the editor of *Peacock Blue* and a long-time champion of Webb’s (as we saw in Chapter One), is especially keen to demonstrate that “despite Webb’s sense of herself as a ‘minimalist producer,’ she has a lot to say” (2). In his lengthy introduction to Webb’s recent collection, Hulcoop acknowledges the fifteen-year gap in the poet’s publication record, but then, of “Webb’s critics” who have called that gap a “period of silence,” he states, quite dismissively: “The hidden wholeness of the truth is, of course, very different from the half-truths sketched by those who haven’t done their research” (16). His clarity is somewhat muddled by his allusion to Webb’s poem “Propositions” (“the hand sketching in the air / a half-moon, its hidden wholeness there” [*PB* 106]), but what he means is that to characterize Webb’s experience as “silence”

¹⁴ Ballantyne generally demonstrates such restraint in her framing and editing of Page’s Brazilian fragments in the recent P.K. Page issue of *Canadian Poetry*. She clarifies that “these poems are of interest solely for their literary historical value,” and explains: “As an editor, the story I want to tell about Page’s Brazilian period is the story of artistic frustration and silence. To achieve this goal, I engage in a process that narrativizes the revision and emphasizes the incompleteness of these poems” (Ballantyne, “Editing” 125, 132). That said, she also claims that the “poems,” which I would prefer to call “fragments,” “create an important counter-narrative to ... silence” (125). On the contrary, in my view, they put “silence” on rather blatant display: not literal silence, perhaps, but the feeling of silence that invaded Page’s abortive poetic efforts.

would be, in his view, a sign of insufficient research.¹⁵ By 1980, Hulcoop asserts, “[a]lthough fifteen years had elapsed since the appearance of *Naked Poems*, Webb had been far from unproductive—apart from a short period in the 1960s when she was too busy and too exhausted to write poetry and another in which she retreated to lick her [critical] wounds” (17). I agree with Hulcoop that *Wilson’s Bowl*, of 1980, shows evidence of remarkable growth and advancement, and that we might thus call the period between 1965 and 1980 “productive,” in a manner of speaking. But that stage was productive *because* of—not in spite of—the poet’s “struggles of silence” (Webb, *WB* 9).

I hope, then, that this dissertation will sound a gentle note of caution to those critics who seek or are tempted to obscure the silences in poetic careers, because those phases were so important to the poets’ developments and to their mature conceptions of the creative process that we would lose something vital in losing them. At the same time, I hope to have alleviated some of the critical discomfort that the term and the very concept of silence tend to inspire, for “silence” should certainly not imply, as it did in so much mid-twentieth-century Canadian criticism, passivity, weakness, submissiveness, or mere absence. We do not need to close the gaps in poetic careers; we need rather to open our minds to silence’s myriad meanings. The shapes that silence has assumed in critical narratives reveal the stories that we have wanted

¹⁵ Wishing to demonstrate that Webb was indeed productive between 1965 and 1980, Hulcoop says: “A report to the Canada Council establishes that almost all of the poems in the ‘Portraits’ and ‘Crimes’ section of *Wilson’s Bowl* were completed by 1970-71. More poems, including the bitter ‘Antisong,’ ‘Solitary Confinement,’ and ‘Letters to Margaret Atwood’ belong to 1973” (17). However, just eight out of the sixteen poems in the “Portraits” and “Crimes” section had been written by 1970, not “almost all,” and the Canada Council report that he cites as evidence actually only mentions five poems that would end up in *Wilson’s Bowl* (“Socrates,” “For Fyodor,” “Ezra Pound,” “Treblinka Gas Chambers,” and “A Question of Questions”), and a few others that remained unpublished (*cf.* Report to the Canada Council, 14 June 1970 [PW 17.VII.3]). Additionally, “Solitary Confinement” was not written in 1973: although the draft that I have seen is undated, it had to have been written before 25 June 1970, when Webb recorded it in a reading for CBC’s *Anthology* (*cf.* Readings from *The Kropotkin Poems*, 1970 [PW 15.V.G.4]). Hulcoop also claims that Lilo Berliner’s dedication of “Wilson’s bowl” to Wilson Duff in 1976 “initiat[ed] the composition of the ‘Artifacts’ section” of Webb’s volume (17); in fact it was Lilo’s death the following year which “initiated” that process. In his ambition to close the gap of Webb’s hiatus, Hulcoop dates “Solitary Confinement” three years too late and “Wilson’s Bowl” a year too early. He wants to counteract the impression of silence in Webb’s career, but it is an impression that—the “whole truths” of dates “research[ed]” and recognized—will not go away.

Canadian literary history to tell. Silence is above all a metaphor, and for Anne Marriott, John Newlove, Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and P.K. Page, it signified everything from violence, chaos, blockage, paralysis, and oppression, to absence, retreat, mystery, and healing, to humility, reverence, and potential. Periods of silence hold creative careers together. Likewise, the condition of silence yawns at the core of the creative process, where poems may be sensed, lost, and found again through some kind of “strange gestation.”

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