

# How to Know Now: “Zen” Poetics in Phyllis Webb’s *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*

ROB WINGER

In the poems we reveal ourselves.  
In prose others.

— Phyllis Webb, Notebook, 1969-1973

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

— Gary Snyder, “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution”

The proper response to a poem is another poem.

— Phyllis Webb, *Hanging Fire*

SINCE THE MID-1960S, Phyllis Webb’s poetry has involved an incisive stress on the present tense that examines how global histories inform her writing process. Because she engages the presence of the past in the moment of writing, Webb’s perspective in *Naked Poems* (1965) and *Water and Light* (1984) bears a striking resemblance to Zen Buddhism, which stresses the complexity of ordinary experience without requiring special, theoretical, or scriptural knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will examine Webb’s self-location in the present moment by locating what I will provisionally call her “Zen” poetics on a spectrum between the haiku and ghazal sensibilities functional in both books.

While the observational, minimalist, syntactically simple aesthetic (with its attendant references to the natural world) developed over millennia in Japanese poetry informs Webb’s influential linguistic aesthetic with a haiku sensibility, the harmonious disjuncture and spiritual longing of what I call “the ghazal sensibility” informs her structural methodology. What is primarily of interest to me is not only the established importance of *Naked Poems* in the history of Canadian poetry, therefore, but also its uncanny anticipation of the predominance of

the ghazal sensibility in post-1960s Canadian lyrics. In *Naked Poems*, Webb's processual, imagistic, intertextual, contradictory explorations of complex longing and redemption; engagements with influential artistic precedents; and admittance of poetic limitation arguably anticipate what at least one critic (in a review on John Thompson) identifies as "virtually a house style in modern Canadian poetry: clipped lines; terse diction; an extremely focused attention to birds, animals, and landscape; an atmosphere laden with doom, peril, or menace" (Sutherland 32). In order to map the communal connections between Webb and Thompson evident in this supposed "house style," however, it is first necessary to consider Webb's individuality.

Thus, part 1 defines what I call Webb's "intra-poetics" in three ways: by discussing the connections between Zen tenets and Webb's work, by explaining Webb's haiku sensibility, and by mapping the overlapping concerns of *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* to develop a processual, a-chronological reading of Webb's poetry. In part 2, I highlight Webb's writing process by reading *Naked Poems* with a Zen concentration on the present. To conclude, part 3 examines what Webb calls the "Influence of Anxiety" on her writing, a productive model of response and resistance that engages the presence of the past to stress the necessity of breaking its karmic grip on one's writing practices, a process that echoes the realization of impermanence in Zen.

### Part 1: Webb's "Zen" Poetics

Before going any further, I must admit an important caveat: my use of the term *Zen* does not mean to imply a thorough understanding of Buddhist doctrine, history, or practice. To avoid the kind of New Age sentimentalism or Orientalist tunnel vision that so often accompanies discussions of the Zen influence on Western cultural practices, I, therefore, conceptualize Webb's poetry as D.T. Suzuki generally does Zen practices — through a basic concentration on the importance of the present and ordinary, which depends upon an elementary rather than in-depth understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

Broadly speaking, most Buddhist traditions locate Enlightenment (called *satori* in the Zen tradition) as the ultimate goal — achieved over many lifetimes — of meditation. While Theravada Buddhists believe Enlightenment signals the end of karmic reincarnation, Mahayana students argue that enlightened individuals refuse to enter Nirvana

until all suffering has ceased on earth (thus, they are reincarnated as Bodhisattvas). Since Japanese Zen and Chinese Chan Buddhism are relatively newer versions of older Indian traditions, and since Buddhism often incorporates local traditions as it moves across historical time and geography, the Chinese and Japanese variations are quite different from the Indian, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, Thai, or Vietnamese traditions. Zen, in particular, which incorporates elements of Shinto and Taoism, has developed practices to encourage practitioners into relatively swift realizations, so that Zen Buddhists generally believe Enlightenment can be attained quickly, within a single lifetime (since one's Buddha-nature, in Zen theory, is empty rather than loaded with karmic energy).

By reading Webb's poetry as a Zen poetics, however, I am more interested in locating the harmonies between Zen and Webb's approach to writing as a present, processual, and phenomenological experience than in her debatable achievement of what Barbara Godard calls a "Zen *satori*" (34) in *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*.<sup>2</sup> As Suzuki makes clear after all, Zen's essential denial of "dualism" in deference to its *yes-nor-no* approach to binarism means that *satori* is nearly impossible for a mind committed to reason and logic to achieve. Locating Webb's poetry as a conclusive state of perfection is not as useful (for my purposes, at least) as comparing its process to one of Zen's most central, practical tenets: one does not gain insight through the mannered study of esoteric texts, but by a deepened perspective that arises while sitting still, concentrating on commonplace objects and the states of body and mind as they ebb and flow: breath, ambient sounds, and thought patterns (a meditative practice called *zazen*). Like Zen's emphasis on experiential insight, Webb's poetry resists theory and abstraction in order to focus on moments of creation during the experience of writing. Just as "the idea of Zen is to catch life as it flows" (Suzuki 45), the purpose of Webb's active, simple present is to record the process of a poem's composition as central to its content. This philosophy echoes Charles Olson's great imperatives, in "Projective Verse," that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (149), and that all poetic process occurs in an objective field wherein a poet exists as a translator between the world's energy and a poem's construction, and is therefore one among many objects. That Webb's poems do not proclaim endings so much as they validate the vital importance of attention and process coincides with Zen's both/and

framework, and implies the binary flaws inherent in lines of questioning indebted to Western logic.

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

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

Webb's refusal to fully adopt Buddhism — due to her desire for suffering, rather than hope to cease suffering (one of Buddhism's "Four Noble Truths"<sup>3</sup>) — does not lessen the cultivation of a Zen sensibility in her poetry.<sup>4</sup> Her focus on a heightened awareness of the present moment suggests a *zazen* methodology, while her inclusive engagement with being "rational" and "socialist" makes possible a precise concentration on how her own subjectivity has formed and continues to take shape within the structures of Western reason, an essential investigation of the impermanent and limited notion of self examined in Buddhist practices. Webb's emphasis on subjectivity and suffering is both Zen — in its concentration on the material, the tangible, the immediate, the ordinary — and non-Zen — in its admitted desire for the continuation of "conflict and suffering for growth." Webb's subjective realization, therefore, extends her examination of the present to consider her own potential complicity in the social and global politics of the West as evidenced by her continued use of Western forms and North American lyric predispositions in her own poetry.

Because acutely self-referential, Webb's Zen concerns might more productively be considered as part of a larger structure that I call her intra-poetics. By *intra*, I mean to highlight the contradictory richness of the already-there, realized with a focus on the material context of the present in time and space. Within the time and space of poetic creation, intra-poetics stresses the importance of the private, the interior, the personal, the local, and the present, but it does so in the context of the public, the exterior, the political, the global, and the historical. It stresses

the present moment but also realizes that subjects are always historically and culturally mediated by the past. While Webb's lyric focus is interior, she does not dismiss history or global contexts. Her intra-poetics privileges the complexity of the here and now in the contextual light of the there and then. Despite their respective reinventions of form, therefore, *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* acknowledge both Eastern and Western lyric and philosophical traditions.

While *Water and Light* engages the work of John Thompson (introduced to Webb by Michael Ondaatje<sup>5</sup>) and Ghalib (through Aijaz Ahmad and Adrienne Rich) to transform the ghazal into what Webb calls the "anti-ghazal," *Naked Poems* engages a haiku sensibility to reconfigure the masculine ideals of Romantic lyricism.<sup>6</sup> To clarify how her poetry interrupts lyric expectations, it seems useful to situate the Western lyric tradition within and against which Webb writes. As recognized by Mark Jeffreys, Marjorie Perloff, and many others, and despite a lineage that often traces backwards from the twentieth century to the British Romantic and Renaissance poets (especially Keats, Wordsworth, and Donne), *lyric* connotes different things to different critics and poets, and does not simply refer to a historically set periodicity. The only broad parameter upon which contemporary critics seem to agree is that *lyric* is an overqualified term. As Jeffreys notes, almost all contemporary critical approaches to lyric history and contemporary lyric refashioning in the West are, therefore, "productive of paradoxical, meditative, and ambivalent formulations" (xxiii-xxiv) rather than resolved by agreed-upon theories or categories. Webb stresses such paradox, meditation, and ambivalence by engaging Western lyric conventions rather than merely rejecting them, *using* the lyric in order to transform its habits. Rather than motivated by either resistance or response, Webb creates poems of presence to include both. Her poems are not new lyrics so much as they are *now* lyrics.

Webb works within and against not only the Western lyric tradition, however, but also imports the tenets of other lyric traditions. Even a brief examination of how the haiku sensibility shapes Webb's poetics reveals the magnitude of its importance in her poetry. While Japanese lyrics have shifted and transformed during their long history, the sensibility that Webb applies from their traditions remains consistent during the haiku's modern development. The essential elements of the haiku sensibility are immediately evident in both *Naked Poems* and *Water*

*and Light*: plain observation of the real world (the “room” and Suites [n. pag.] of *Naked Poems* and Salt Spring Island flora and fauna in both texts); concrete imagery from one’s ordinary experience (books, blouses, and sunlight in *Naked Poems* and flowers, birds, and stars in *Water and Light*); simple and pared-down diction (“enclosed / by a thought / / and some walls” in *Naked Poems* and figured as “a sweet droplet / a sweet mantra” [48] in *Water and Light*); and focus on the perception of minute details, both material and interior (via “a good mind / that can embody / perfection with exactitude” in *Naked Poems* and sensing how “The universe opens. I close” [10] in *Water and Light*). Webb’s haiku sensibility thus articulates a densely allusive, controlled language that takes as its inspirational source a concentration on one’s present experience.

This approach evokes Zen’s focus on awareness, but it also acknowledges a more general debt to the Japanese poetic tradition. Haiku influences are acknowledged in Webb’s poetry at least as long ago as 1962, when she expresses her desire “to die / writing Haiku / or, better” (*Vision Tree* 60) in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death” and concentrates on a “Japanese Plum Tree” in “A Long Line of Baby Caterpillars” in order to “Take away my wisdom and my categories!” (*Vision Tree* 56). Three years later, she also realizes many of the haiku’s traditional requirements. In *Naked Poems*, Webb’s evocation of natural cycles (tides, waves, sunlight, fruit, flowers, moons) echoes what Harold Henderson calls the haiku’s “almost inviolable rule” (5) of using “season words” (called *kigo* and used to subtly situate a poem during a certain time of year, a convention that solidifies in Japanese poetry because of the assumption that all subjects have at least a general relationship with the natural world). The haiku’s tightly condensed language — which eventually settles into a convention of a single, seventeen-syllable line broken into five, seven, and five syllables, respectively — is evoked by the torqued, dense lines of *Naked Poems*.<sup>7</sup> This continues in *Wilson’s Bowl*, in which Webb remains devoted to terse, lyrical descriptions amidst the sonic range of her experiments and portraits. Here, by concluding “A Question of Questions” with the insight that “The error lies in / the state of desire / in wanting the answers” (52), and naming a “red-crested woodpecker” as “*Zen Master*” (53), Webb recalls the basic tenets of Zen. Connections with haiku and Zen are also quite evident in *Water and Light*. Webb initially titles the third poem in the book’s “Frivolities” section “After reading haiku” (Drafts of *Water and Light* n. pag.) and invokes a “haiku

butterfly” (47) in the final version’s second couplet. She then references Basho “on the narrow road to the North” (*Water and Light* 47) in its third couplet, an allusion that recurs as an antidote for Ghalib’s intoxication in the book’s final ghazal, which suggests “a few cool Japanese images / to put you on the straight and narrow” (60). Webb’s speaker even self-identifies as “flying East / / with poems *From the Country of Eight Islands*. Hokku. / Haiku. Choku. Kanshi. Kouta. Tanka. Renga. *Seeds*” (*Water and Light* 15). The italicized title is a well-known collection of Japanese poetry that Webb read while writing her ghazals. By identifying Japanese forms as “*Seeds*,” Webb implies the sustained presence of the haiku sensibility in her work.

While *Water and Light* is dedicated to the ghazal form, it relies on the haiku sensibility by actively engaging the overlapping conventions of both traditions.<sup>8</sup> Both the ghazal and the haiku traditionally obey a set metrical foot, are untitled, and rely less on straightforward logical development than on what Henderson identifies in the haiku tradition as “*renso* or association of ideas” (5). Like the ghazal, “good haiku are full of overtones. The elusiveness that is one of their chief charms comes, not from haziness, but from the fact that so much suggestion is put into so few words” (Henderson 4). Perhaps most poignantly for my discussion, the ghazal and haiku also share a disjunctive aesthetic. In the haiku, the untranslatable use of Japanese *kireji* “(literally ‘cut-words’) . . . often indicate an unfinished sentence, . . . have in addition an elusive force of their own” (Henderson vii), and are commonly used to divide a haiku “into two parts that are to be equated or compared” (Henderson 8). Just as a ghazal requires controlled disjuncture throughout, *kireji* alters a reader’s perception during a haiku’s final units, revealing nuanced levels of meaning that force the reader to realize what may have been taken for granted in the poem’s opening phrases.<sup>9</sup>

Such active reconsideration — dependent upon a balanced deployment of the haiku’s and ghazal’s structural requirement for lyric disjuncture — is central to Webb’s Zen poetics and perhaps one of the central reasons that *Naked Poems* caused a revolution in Canadian lyric writing. Less commonly discussed is how it employs a poetics also used by ghazal makers: tightly controlled lyric lines that connect via an intuitive repetition of natural imagery, breaking on the reader as a series of discontinuous yet interrelated segments, which variously express a vital interrogation of the Beloved (as the object of both sexual love and celes-

tial desire), and form (in order to question rationality or closure). In my view, Webb's prescient vision in *Naked Poems* is the best articulation of the ghazal sensibility in Canadian literature before the 1970s, despite the fact that Webb did not directly engage or explore the ghazal form until later. Its use of the haiku sensibility to attain the ghazal's lyricism is a central part of this achievement.

As both John Hulcoop and Susan Glickman argue, the continuum between *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* is overwhelming. It is prefigured in Webb's 1963 application for a Canada Council grant, which proposes two projects: "The first, probably to be titled NAKED POEMS, will be a small volume of small poems. In inspiration they will perhaps derive from Sappho, Creeley, and, most importantly from Chinese and Japanese forms" (qtd. in Butling 146). The second, Webb hoped, would "be a book of big poems" (qtd. in Butling 146-47), reliant on the "long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo" (*Vision Tree* 60) she desires at the conclusion of "Poetics Against the Angel of Death." Despite a tendency for critical treatments (Collis; Butling; Hulcoop) to locate this second project — as Webb generally does — as the unpublished and abandoned *Kropotkin Poems* on which Webb worked from the mid-sixties to the late seventies, Glickman suggests an intriguing alternative:<sup>10</sup>

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

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

As such, they express an a-chronological intra-poetics rather than enacting start and finish lines for a reading of Webb's diachronic evo-



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

Reading for a poetics of present recurrences bears immediate fruit when one considers the pen name employed in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light*: “Fishstar.” First used in the epigraphic poem that opens *Naked Poems* (“star fish / fish star” [n. pag.]) to anticipate its “double lesbian subject” (Carr 72), “Fishstar” returns in *Water and Light*. While based in part on the geography of Salt Spring Island, where “fish” and “stars” are abundant, “Fishstar” also echoes “Ishstar,” a dualistic Babylonian goddess “located at the Persian roots of the ghazal itself” (Collis 77), who plays roles in both the earthly and celestial realms (see Butling 50). Ishstar’s invocation in *Water and Light* not only inverts the ghazal’s history (wherein a female Beloved is idealized by references to a masculine divinity), but also returns to Webb’s use of “Fishstar” in *Naked Poems*. When she names herself as “Fishstar,” Webb therefore evokes her past as part of her present and postulates the ordinary subject as elusive, a *zazen* insight perhaps best examined by reading the processual present of *Naked Poems* through the lens of *Water and Light*.

## Part 2: Light, Now: The Processual Present in *Naked Poems*

In contrast to her earlier work, Webb recognizes *Naked Poems* as an exercise in seeking “the total music of the poem” (“Polishing” 48). Instead of simply evoking images, Webb records the process involved in their discovery. By resisting conventional closure, *Naked Poems* attempts, Webb

explains, to escape from “the preconceived notion of a poem . . . that is not open enough to receive its own intentions in a way; so it’s limited when it doesn’t have to be” (50). Thus, her lines pause to consider the complexity of the moment, so that her “hesitation even to write the long poem” (Kroetsch 63) becomes an essential part of the content of *Naked Poems*.<sup>11</sup> As Kroetsch argues, Webb (and the peers she influences) is thereby “driven back to the moment of creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in beginning itself” (“Polishing” 62). Such a focus on the creative process links to both the haiku sensibility’s emphasis on material imagery and Zen’s stress on the present as a site of impermanence and potentiality.

From the very start of *Naked Poems*, Webb wants us to know that “There is room” for movement within and beyond her text, a poetics that intuitively anticipates the strategies Thompson will employ in *Stilt Jack* a decade later: simple but allusive language, lyric disjuncture, imagery that repeats and gains meaning as the poems unfold, an interrogation of the lyric *I*, and a charting of personal love and loss. By making “room” for a lesbian erotic in the sweet hotel suite of Suite I, Webb also actively challenges the lyric tradition’s heterosexual and masculinist predispositions. Despite “MOVING / to establish distance” in the book’s opening phrase, however, Webb’s speaker soon “welcome[s] you in,” emphasizing the importance of “here” and “this room” as methods for achieving self-awareness. By Suite II, the past is made present by being “held . . . like this / in my mind.” The sunlight that continues to come “through / plum curtains” combines with how “*The room that held you / / is still here,*” activating memory as part of a present experience that is self-reflexively recorded by the presence of “*Poems naked / in the sunlight / on the floor,*” a gesture that involves the reader in Webb’s writing process. “Non Linear” continues this participatory focus on the present, using an initial “instant of white roses” to challenge Romantic myths by claiming, “My white skin / is not the moonlight,” a possible refutation of the condescending idealization of women common in Western lyrics. By “listening for / the turn of the tide” from her specific location on “Cyprus Street,” Webb’s speaker also emphasizes how past preconceptions in a “tracery of last night’s / tide” are altered

by her gradual embrace of the “now” lyric. By the middle of this section, a change seems imminent:

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

We disappear in the musk of her coming.

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

Because she is aware that her haiku minimalism and ghazal-like intuition are not mainstream in 1960s Canadian poetry, Webb does not pretend to have revolutionized the status quo. Instead, like Thompson’s, her poems enact a listening that simultaneously signifies the world and the poem, the act of love and the record of love.<sup>12</sup> This breakthrough from a limiting lyric past to Webb’s actively fertile lyric now is reflected in the book’s penultimate section — “Suite of Lies” — which stages Webb’s resistance to male precedents through concentration on the present act of writing. Here, Webb’s speaker “knows the way / of the pear tree” rather than a theory of the exterior world. Her reliance on sonic patterns (for example, “*the way of what fell / the lies / like the petals / falling drop / delicately*”) and intricate and unexplained imagery (“*brother and sister / those children*”) anticipate an overt challenge to logic. When

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

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

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

Yeah

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

First, her speaker notes, "I am trying to write a poem," implying that artistic reflection is an active process that can create tangible change. Her second answer could be a manifesto for intra-poetics: "Listen. If I have known beauty / let's say I came to it / asking." The process of attention, investigation, and present concentration, in other words, is not only a means but also an end, so that existing within the complex contradictions of the present might be seen as an objective for Zen poetics. Not only does this show the active participation of the writer, but it also leaves her book's conclusion open-ended, a resistance to closure that is fundamental to the ghazal sensibility and often figures centrally in both haiku and Zen Koans. By thus concluding, with the authoritative voice's final question placed alone on the last right-hand page, unanswered — "*Oh?*" — *Naked Poems* effectively ends actively, attempting to "know beauty" by way of the openness required for Webb's focus on

the intra-. Such a stance ultimately frames history and subjective formation in the present, compelling a response that *Water and Light* also provokes: “a participatory reader who is willing to construct, dissolve, and reconstruct meanings as she reads” (Butling 37).

Such participation is registered not only by a reader’s intellectual contemplation, but also by the physical act of reading *Naked Poems* on the page. The extraordinary white spaces of the book echo the “rooms” that frame Webb’s poems, just as her speaker is “enclosed / by a thought / / and some walls.” Thus, when “FLIES” are observed from “down here” in Suite I, “down here” appears on the bottom of the page; the books and blouses thrown on floors in Suites I and II suitably appear on the bottoms of pages; and sunlight is commonly placed higher on the page. “Non Linear” alternates between the placement of poems at the top and bottom of pages, a pattern that echoes the “waves” central to the section’s tidal imagery, and the implied ebb and flow of the sexual act of Webb’s “Priestess of / Motion.” Finally, the interrogation and responses that comprise “Some Final Questions” are placed in the centre of the paper, so that one perspective balances the other, differentiated by italics as the present experience of Suite I (in regular type) is paired to the present memory of recalled experience (in italics) in Suite II. This physical placement of the words on the page actively signifies both lexical meanings and Webb’s processual choice to select and emplace them in her poems. By equating her subject position to her poetry, Webb’s speaker echoes Webb’s content, and becomes “small like these poems” in order to lay out “*Poems naked*” for the reader, flawed and incomplete. Perhaps the central risk of *Naked Poems*, therefore, is embracing both the writer’s and reader’s flawed subjectivities as central to any book’s meaning: a record of process, not a pitch for progress. In *Naked Poems*, Webb explores not only subjectivity, but also the very *idea* of subjectivity. She lyricizes personally in order to question how one can possibly be personal or lyrical in the present tense.

Such a concentration on subjectivity has been expertly considered in both major critical overviews of Webb’s career (see Collis; Butling) and the best histories of postmodern poetry in Canada (see Kroetsch; Butling and Rudy). All of these overviews support one of Webb’s central claims: a writer’s relationship to his or her predecessors is not static or predetermined; it involves an active engagement with her or his ongoing subjective formation. Webb’s intra-poetics involves not only her own

writing process and subjectivity, therefore, but also the inescapable presence, within it, of an entire community of other voices. Her negotiation between response and resistance to these voices is the focus for my final section.

### Part 3: What's Past is Present:

#### "The Influence of Anxiety" in *Water and Light*

My location of "response" and "resistance" as key terms for Webb's intra-poetics in *Water and Light* draws on two valuable, complementary studies of Webb's poetic influences: Stephen Collis's notion of Webb's "Poetics of Response" and Pauline Butling's formulation of her "poetics of resistance." While Collis ultimately suggests that *Water and Light* evokes "not fusion, but more a social sense of companionship" (76) between and among writers from a variety of historical and cultural contexts, Butling argues that it initiates "a seeing *within* the dark" (1) of historically devalued female experiences, which Webb must make legible by actively subverting the ghazal's traditional structures. Rather than sticking to a strict couplet format, therefore, Webb sometimes deploys "a renegade single line" (Butling 63) in her ghazals. Rather than a clearly disjunctive break between couplets, she attempts narrative flow. Rather than enforcing the length of the ghazal's traditional metre, she often reduces her lines. All of these strategies, Butling argues, effectively "undermine the binary underpinnings of the romance tradition" (51) and thereby challenge the ghazal's patriarchal past.<sup>13</sup> Because Webb is actively "attuned to the voices within the voices she reads" (Collis 78), however, her critiques respond not only to her primary influences, but also to all of the writers who have influenced *those* writers. As a result, her concentration on the present effectively implies an interaction with the entire history of her literary lineage. Because many figures in that lineage — F.R. Scott, Olson, Creeley, Williams, Ghalib, Basho, Thompson — are patriarchal, Webb's engagement with them "not only thematizes female vulnerability [but] also initiates a transformative process" to make space "for action and agency" (Butling 29). Such exposure of the present-ness of the past might be best understood by considering Webb's discovery of and engagement in the ghazal form.

One might productively start such a consideration with Webb's title: *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. Two phrases exist here, conjoined by the open possibilities of an *and*. The terms on the right-

hand side of this conjunction are not simply complementary, however, but also contradictory. As Stephen Scobie explains,

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

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

Such simultaneity informs Webb’s recollection of her discovery of the ghazal in *Stilt Jack*, which she articulated several years after the publication of *Water and Light* during a “Panel Discussion on Risk” at the Manitoba Writer’s Guild. This brief chat illuminates Webb’s subsequent creation of “Anti-Ghazals” in *Sunday Water*. In her “Discussion,” Webb skeptically summarizes Harold Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” theory as “the anxiety writers are *supposed* to feel about their literary fathers, or precursors” (1; emphasis added). But she also adds an important caveat: Bloom’s idea, she says, is a “devastatingly masculine theory deriving from Freud’s Oedipus and castration complexes” (1), which fundamentally excludes women and feminist theory from its purview. As she does with the socialist inspirations of F.R. Scott in the 1940s and the poetics of Duncan and Olson in the early 1960s, however, Webb refuses simply to reject such limitations without also examining the exclusivity arguably inherent in her most important “literary fathers.” Thus, she considers their effect on her self-awareness and subjectivity:

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

Anxiety indicates that something intangible, unknown, dark and hidden is threatening to present itself, shape and substance looming, awaiting form. Paul Borum, a Danish poet and critic, says,

“Anxiety is mastered with the imagination’s precision. “ANXIETY IS MASTERED WITH THE IMAGINATION’S PRECISION.” Precision of observation, of listening and hearing releases anxiety. It leads, I think, to freshness, originality, and even voice and style in writing. (“Panel Discussion” 1-2)

This final observation, regarding “precision of observation” to release anxiety, is an exact summary of *zazen* as an avenue for realizing impermanence, and, therefore, easing suffering or “anxiety.”<sup>14</sup> Not only does Webb’s inversion of Bloom acknowledge how her patriarchal influences make her “more and more anxious” and, therefore, limited, but she also makes space for their *positive* influence as a “sudden inspiration.” By inverting Bloom’s phrase, she implies that the debilitating literary haunting present in Thompson’s ghazals exerts a different, arguably more productive force in her own work.

While Thompson’s literary predecessors (especially W.B. Yeats) operate as a disciplinary, exterior force *against which* he struggles (in *Stilt Jack*) to break free from the philosophical assumptions of Western rationality, Webb’s anxiety, as described here, is a responsive force that *inspires* her work within and against patriarchal literary and social structures. Both methods combine political and subjective concerns, relying on self-reflexive exploration either to transcend (in Thompson’s case) or to utilize (in Webb’s work) the pressures of inherited voices and forms. Webb inverts Bloom’s theory to use “anxiety” as motivation, highlighting its present internalization to stage a conflict between her feminism and the predominant masculinism of her literary predecessors.<sup>15</sup> In *Water and Light*, she actively tries to work through such internalization, using “THE IMAGINATION’S PRECISION” to overcome those rationalist lyric conventions she has actively critiqued in her poetry since *Naked Poems*. Rather than relying upon logic, carefully hermetic symbolism, or rational control in her poems, she trusts the lyric impulse of her “IMAGINATION’S PRECISION,” enabling a Zen focus on the present that links to the ghazal’s non-logical harmonies. This approach parallels Thompson’s reliance, in *Stilt Jack*, on imaginative leaps as a means of arrival. Like Thompson, Webb says she allows “the imagination’s precision and the upsurges of the unconscious [to] do their work” (“Panel Discussion” 3) in her ghazals, balancing a stringent formalism against the intuitive impulses of “chance” and “inspired contingency” (“Panel Discussion” 3) central to the ghazal sensibility.



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

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

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

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

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

This does not mean, of course, that *Stilt Jack* is not absolutely central to the ghazal tradition in Canada. Rather, Barbour suggests that Webb’s treatment of the form makes possible its ongoing, contemporary reinvention. He implies that Webb affirms the value of personal adaptation over formal imitation, an effort to break “the rules” of poetic formalism rather than an attempt to “to follow the guide book” of particularly admirable poets like Thompson. In many ways, Webb’s Zen-inspired focus on the present provides a way out of Bloom’s categorical-historical anxiety. She finds a way to respond to what she once

called Thompson's "brilliant shaping musical imagination and intelligence" ("Ghazal Maker" 157) that pays him suitable respect without attempting to imitate his style. It seems to me that this is a crucial intervention in the history of Thompson's influence since, as Harry Thurston recently noted, it is dangerously tempting for poets simply to imitate *Stilt Jack's* style. Because he recognizes not only the exacting complexity of Thompson's ghazals but also the difficulty of transplanting his innovations into a new subjective context, Thurston wonders how one could "possibly approach what he's pulled off there, or want to" ("The Iconography" 43). Webb's ability to do so is part of what makes *Water and Light* — the first (and, in my view, most successful) sustained response to *Stilt Jack* in Canada — such an extraordinary text.<sup>16</sup>

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

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

This concept of the "singular plural" suggests Webb's ability to engage a community of poets while focused on the singularity of her own experience in the present moment, and connects her responsive poetics to Zen, which similarly focuses on the instability of subjectivity and the interdependence of all aspects of reality. At the same time, Webb's "singular plural" interrogates the viability of solidarity in second-wave feminism by implying that feminists cannot achieve tangible, social change without a private process of self-realization and self-examination.

For Webb, this means re-examining not only her own previous texts, but also those of both male and female writers who collectively influence her poetics. Thus, by the mid-1980s, she acknowledges "the influ-

ence of anxiety” as motivational, perhaps a change from 1980, when she lamented “the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation so overpowering that I have, up to now, been denied access to inspiration from the female figures of my intellectual life, my heart, my imagination” (*Wilson’s Bowl* n. pag.). Webb’s relationship to her influences in *Water and Light* is, therefore, transformative and multiply responsive: her present anxiety involves a historical lineage; her self-knowledge uncovers the instability of her subjectivity; and her sense of poetic community is approached through the isolation of her singular poetic voice. Webb’s ability to reach a shared community that includes women marks her inclusive stance not only as formally or strategically transformative, but also as personally and self-reflexively liberating.

This emergent balance between community and isolation is the sub-text of Webb’s introduction to *Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti-Ghazals*, the chapbook that precedes *Water and Light* and eventually constitutes its opening section, “Sunday Water.” Here, Webb not only examines the ghazal’s capacity for engaging “an ear and an eye to music and song” (n. pag.). She also makes an essential intervention in its patriarchal idealism by moving “toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private” (n. pag.), rather than affirming the ghazal tradition’s representation of the Beloved as “not a particular woman but an idealized and universal image of love” (n. pag.). Although she specifically acknowledges Thompson’s *Stilt Jack* (including his suggestion of the ghazal’s disjunctiveness as “‘Drunk and Amatory’ with a ‘clandestine order’” [n. pag.]), Webb remains centred in an ongoing, *interior* struggle, which considers both community and history, and individuality and presence, as complementary dynamics in *Water and Light*.

### Conclusion: “Ah Ghalib, you are almost asleep”

While a muse-like invocation of Thompson opens *Water and Light*, Webb’s text ultimately reaches further back in literary history to build a sustained engagement with Ghalib. As Collis notes, “On the book’s contents page, the title of each sequence is appended with an epigraph from *Ghazals of Ghalib*, thereby creating a ghazal-collage no more or less disjunctive than any of Ghalib’s own” (73-74). In a letter to *Coach House* editor Sarah Sheard, Webb stresses the importance of what she calls this “ghazal-collage,” making it “clear that the Table of Contents is

to include the quotations: they are not supposed to go individually with each section. It's supposed to look like a five couplet ghazal in itself" (1). From the very beginning, therefore, *Water and Light* privileges a direct response to Ghalib, even if it is filtered through "his English-Canadian adaptor, John Thompson" (Collis 68). But Webb's relationship to Ghalib is not simply historical; it is also essentially interior. Thus, when she "addresses 'Ghalib' *in Ghalib's voice*, in a poem imitating Ghalib's ghazal, she is also addressing herself" (Collis 76).

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

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

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

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

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

The ghazal's next two couplets suggest that Ghalib — who signals the ghazal sensibility — should embrace Webb's haiku sensibility, a

fusion of her Zen poetics that ultimately forwards the centrality of present awareness:

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

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

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

Ah Ghalib, you are almost asleep  
head on the table, hand flung out,  
  
upturned. In the blue and white jar  
a cherry branch, dark pink in moonlight — (61)

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

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

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

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

with a youthful flourish. Remember Asad,  
Ghalib?

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

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

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

While the details of Ghalib's biography are certainly in the past tense, Webb's memory is anything but passive. Her expression of "love" for his "graceful script" notes how it is "flowing across the page" right now. She recalls actively "watching" Ghalib write his poems rather than constructing a scene wherein she simply receives them. She grants his poetry a theme that is "recurring" rather than one that "recurred." This presentation of Ghalib speaks more to Webb's personal incorporation of his work than to a thorough understanding of his socio-cultural history. Despite knowing his name and the major details of his life and activating his presence in her poetry, therefore, Webb does not claim to understand him, allowing her *zazen* concentration on the present to reveal the instability of subjectivity. Instead of granting Ghalib the stable realization of what used to be or might have been possible, Webb focuses on what's here, in front of us.

Ultimately, it is not a historically-contextual Ghalib that invades, makes anxious, or ultimately influences the subjective poetics of Webb's ghazals; it is the presence of Webb, herself, who influences how we read Ghalib. This inversion means that Webb's exacting, specific, particular subjectivity, represented by the cherry blossom branch, does not suggest closure so much as it highlights confidence in her self-reflexive awareness. Webb moves into the territory of Ghalib's lyrics not as a metaphor, abstraction, or theory, but as a marker of contemporary, self-aware, subjectivity. Her poetry builds an imaginative bridge between its own history and its contemporary reinvention. In the end, it is the present-tense subject — Webb — who arrives. What is arguably most important in

Webb's poetry is not the historical lineage out of and against which she grows, therefore, but the context that she and her readers create by situating new visions beyond the limitations of tradition and against longings for a perfected future. Such a Zen realization of the present tense does not ultimately provide abstract answers so much as it examines the ongoing presence of subjective tensions, expressed in both *Naked Poems* and *Water and Light* by the continual arrival of new, processual possibilities, harvested

from the land of  
only what is. (61)

## NOTES

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

<sup>2</sup> By the mid-1960s, Godard claims that *Naked Poems* achieves a "Zen *satori*" that effectively rejects "the whole tradition of Western subject/object dualism" (n. pag.), so Webb's adoption of "the paradoxes [and] non-logical sequencing, of the Persian mystical poets in the ghazal . . . [becomes] a model for her (and our) *satori*" (Godard n. pag.) by the early 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> "All is suffering," or *Dukkha*, is the first of the "Four Noble Truths" of Buddhism. The other three flow from this realization: suffering (or *Samudaya*, which creates karma) is the result of craving; it is possible to achieve a cessation of craving (called *Nirodha*); and the best way to achieve such cessation is via "The Noble Eightfold Path" (*Marga*), a practical guide for right thinking and action taught by the Buddha as best practices rather than absolute or conclusive rules. See *The Dhammapadda* or Rahula.

<sup>4</sup> In her discussion with Wachtel, Webb claims that her "antagonism toward conventional religions of all kinds is focused on the patriarchal structure. I don't want to become more involved with that, thank you. I want to become less involved" (13). She goes on to recall her decision that Kropotkin's idealism could not ultimately change "male-female relations" (13) because it "was yet another male imaginative structure for a new society" (13). Her emergence as an "intuitive feminist" (13), she continues, therefore, relates to originally being "surrounded by all these super-brilliant men" (13), who were part of "the patriarchal order" (13) when she started writing.

<sup>5</sup> Ondaatje and Webb make appearances in one another's poetry. In "Tin Roof," for example, which is dedicated to Webb and paired to the publication of *Sunday Water* at Island Press, Ondaatje expresses a desire for "the long lines my friend spoke of / that bam-

boo which sways muttering / like wooden teeth in the thin volume I have" (42), a reference to Webb's closing lines in "Poetics Against the Angel of Death": "I want to die / writing Haiku / or, better, / long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!" (*Vision Tree* 60). Webb not only dedicates *Water and Light* to Ondaatje (and F.R. Scott), but also cites images from at least two of Ondaatje's poems: "Explanations of My Postcards," to which Webb refers in the fourth ghazal of her opening section when she says "you have sent me a card / with a white peacock spreading its tail" (12), a connection confirmed by Ondaatje (Personal Email); and "Elizabeth," referenced in one of Webb's ghazals with mentions of "Elizabeth" (30), "Essex" (30), and more "Peacock blue" (30). Hulcoop notes this relationship without naming or realizing Ondaatje as the influence in question, calling him the man "who presumably directed her attention to John Thompson's *Stilt Jack*" (155).

<sup>6</sup> This approach is noted in the first reviews of *Naked Poems*, but for all the wrong reasons. Alan Pearson's now infamous review best captures this oversight, lamenting the absence in Webb's poems of what he names essential to successful lyrics: "content in the form of a 'message', a vision, memorable language, art and so forth" (n. pag.). Pearson fails to recognize these conventions as limitations that Webb tries to overcome with her minimalism. Instead, he postulates Webb's ignorance, devaluing the specificity of her allusions or the inherent exclusivity of the lyric habits against which she writes. Pearson claims that "all Miss Webb's poems reflect an obsessional [sic] concern for her private world of sensibility, which is so irrational, so peculiar that it excludes almost everyone" (n. pag.), and eventually complains that *Naked Poems* is not worth the \$2.25 it originally costs since there "are about twenty four pages to the book and about 500 words" (n. pag.). (Today, mint copies of *Naked Poems* routinely sell for more than two hundred dollars.)

<sup>7</sup> It is only through its translation into English that the haiku came to be popularly read as a three-line poem. Previously, all haiku were written as single vertical lines in Japanese. Haiku also had a formative effect on the emergence of Modernist Imagism, especially as conveyed by the short lyric poems and haiku of Ezra Pound.

<sup>8</sup> Despite sharing a tradition of strict metrical length, however, traditional ghazals and haiku differ in their linguistic conventions, most notably due to the lack of rhyme in the Japanese tradition (since "all Japanese words end either in a vowel or in 'n', and rhyming would soon become intolerably anonymous" [Henderson ix]). Interestingly, early English ghazal translations, such as *Ghazals of Ghalib*, removed rhyme to effect a stronger sense of allusiveness, while Henderson's translations of haiku *inserted* rhyme in English in order to tighten the haiku's implicit formalism (see Henderson ix-x).

<sup>9</sup> For a brief, but informative history of Japanese haiku poetry, see, especially, Thomas Rimer's introduction to *From the Country of Eight Islands* and Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku*. For an actual example of the form, the best general starting point may be *From the Country's* selections of short poems by Bashō, Issa, and Shiki.

<sup>10</sup> Hulcoop argues that the central setback for Webb's *Kropotkin Poems* was her identification of long lines "with men and aggression" (151-52). Webb's abandonment of this project is noted in the preface to *Wilson's Bowl*, and discussed at length in Collis.

<sup>11</sup> Kroetsch goes even further, identifying *Naked Poems* as "a short long poem" (63) that is the primary inspiration "behind many of the long poems of the 1970s in Canada" (63).

<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, differences in Webb's and Thompson's subjective approaches, not the least of which is Webb's engagement with an emergent, feminist, lesbian erotic versus Thompson's reliance on masculine and heterosexual experience. My comparison between Thompson and Webb relies less on this kind of sexual categorization, however, than on a shared, attentive aesthetic.

<sup>13</sup> This subversion extends to the final poem of *Water and Light*, from which Butling locates the heart of her theory in *Seeing in the Dark*: Webb's expansion of "the epistemic field to produce a hybrid or mottled subject" (48). Because Webb "admits her attraction



to and complicity with the discourse of romance” (Butling 47), however, her supposed embrace of hybridity is less straightforward or final than it appears in Butling’s analysis. Webb’s refusal “to settle into a single position” (Butling 53) must therefore be taken quite literally, and her “mottled subject” should be considered as only one of *many* subject-positions expressed in *Water and Light*.

<sup>14</sup> For a compelling and clear summary of three, central Buddhist tenets that inform my discussion — Impermanence, No Self, and Nirvana — see Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh’s “The Practice of Looking Deeply” in *No Fear, No Death*.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent summary of Webb’s movement from social politics to spiritual and philosophical existentialism to Buddhism to feminism, see Liza Potvin’s “Phyllis Webb: The Voice That Breaks.”

<sup>16</sup> Other, early responses to *Stilt Jack* are not of the book-length variety. Perhaps the most notable one that appears in the “ghazal” form is D.G. Jones’s sequence of “Imperfect Ghazals.” Other non-ghazal references to Thompson appear early as well, most notably in Douglas Lochhead’s *High Marsh Road*, Michael Ondaatje’s “Claude Glass” (which first appeared in *Secular Love*), and other miscellaneous poems, including one by Thurston: “Minding the Homestead” in *Clouds Flying Before the Eye*.

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