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After Dark: Reading Canadian Literature in a Light-Polluted Age

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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After Dark:
Reading Canadian Literature in a Light-Polluted Age

Monograph

by

David Hickey

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

A threat to nocturnal ecosystems and human health alike, light pollution is an unnecessary problem that comes at an enormous cost. The International Dark-Sky Association has recently estimated that the energy expended on light scatter alone is responsible for no less than twelve million tons of carbon dioxide and costs municipal governments at least \$1 billion annually (“Economic Issues” 2). Emerging research also suggests that excessive artificial light at night may compromise melatonin production, a hormone that has been linked to the suppression of certain cancers (Stevens 28; Haim 32). As scotobiologists seek to solidify the connection between the disruption of circadian rhythms and compromised states of physical and mental well-being, the impetus to study the cultural and literary meaning of the night sky becomes all the more pressing. Drawing on a range of affect theorists, the findings of nocturnal ecologists, and ecocriticism’s call to memory and mindfulness, this dissertation assembles a diverse crew to consider the ways in which Canadian writers have chronicled the shift from natural darkness to artificial light.

Too easily dismissed as nostalgic or sentimental, the desire to see the night sky make its return has never mattered more. To live in a time and a place where night never fully arrives is to know that the stars in a given volume of poetry may well outnumber those that remain visible in the sky. Literature itself has now drifted into an era of post-darkness, the world’s obsession with artificial light having ushered in a historical period that is, quite literally, *after dark*. For this reason, stories and poems that are rich in celestial allusions are worth studying because they place personal reflection, cosmological awareness, and empathetic witness in a century that has otherwise failed to appreciate the necessity of nocturnal environments the world over. Favouring lyrical persistence over nocturnal lament, the Nova Scotian poet Kenneth Leslie once set sail to “stubborn stars,” his imagination

desiring those truths that only take shape in a sea of dark (1). Seventy-five years later, his finest sonnet still invites us to follow – headlong into the passages we find in search of better light to read by.

Keywords

Canadian literature, ecocriticism, night sky, light pollution, dark-sky movement, P.K. Page, W.W.E. Ross, L.M. Montgomery

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Fig. 9. The Hodder and Stoughton cover of *Magic for Marigold* (1929). The image works through pairings that frame and naturalize the intergenerational exchange: four trees rise in the distance, two on either side; two more stand in the foreground, and two especially brilliant stars rise in the enchanted sky. Note, too, how Marigold's carefully balanced arms contribute to the sense of symmetry that governs the scene as a whole.

Fig. 10. "The Brockton Comet Chart." *Toronto Daily Star*, 16 April 1910.

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Fig. 13. Combining the geometric shapes of Cubism, the clean lines and angles of the Constructivists, the bright colours of the Fauvists, and Futurism's emphasis on speed and power, Art Deco was the popular face of high art from the 1920s to the 1940s (Duncan 142-44). In his analysis of Tamara de Lempicka's paintings, whose work is synonymous with the Art Deco period, Alastair Duncan has called attention to an "icy and enigmatic style in which contrasting angular images and bright colours predominated" (143). Montgomery's preference for this cover design of *A Tangled Web* (1931) and its depiction of an Art Deco comet indicates that she, too, could appreciate the value of the "icy" and the "enigmatic" in Modern visual art.

Fig. 14. Algol is located in the constellation Perseus, Alioth is the brightest star in Ursa Major, and Aldebaran and Alcyone both belong to the constellation Taurus (Bishop 340). Commonly referred to as the brightest star in the Pleiades, the winter sky's most prominent open cluster, Alcyone is actually a star system that consists of multiple components.

Fig. 15. Peter McMahon's First Nations star chart.

The stars go out,
the clouds like clouds
everywhere forget,
but the sky holds all
the heart can give it,
which is less
than light, which is more.

-Lorna Crozier, Small Mechanics (2011) (34)

INTRODUCTION

Ecology, Memory, and the Recovery of the Night

A threat to nocturnal ecosystems and human health alike, light pollution is an unnecessary problem that comes at an enormous cost. The International Dark-Sky Association has recently estimated that the energy expended on light scatter alone is responsible for no less than twelve million tons of carbon dioxide and costs municipal governments at least \$1 billion annually (“Economic Issues” 2). Once impervious to humanity and the passage of time, the very future of the night sky is now in question. “[G]round-based astronomy could be impossible in forty years,” the Cambridge University astronomer Gerry Gilmore has observed, “because of pollution from aircraft exhaust trails and climate change” (qtd. in Rincon n. pag.). The atmospheric lens between our planet and its broader reality is, quite literally, smoked to a dull grey smear. Emerging research also suggests that excessive artificial light at night may compromise melatonin production, a hormone that has been linked to the suppression of certain cancers (Stevens 28; Haim 32). The January 2009 issue of *Environmental Health Perspectives* reports that “[w]omen living in neighborhoods where it was bright enough to read a book outside at midnight had a 73% higher risk of developing breast cancer than

those residing in areas with the least outdoor artificial lighting” (Chepesiuk 27).¹ The practical need for public safety² has evolved into a poorly-designed infrastructure of excess, one in which the built environment actually jeopardizes, rather than promotes, the health of its dweller. According to the American cancer epidemiologist Richard Stevens, “[t]he policy implications of unnecessary light at night are enormous, [as] fully important as global warming” (28).

While the dark-sky movement faces many challenges as it attempts to restore nocturnal environments, perhaps the least acknowledged of these is a deficiency in the language through which this issue is articulated. Consider, for example, the number of migrating birds – between five and fifty million – that are killed each year in collisions with buildings and communication towers when they become disoriented by the nighttime glare of cities. An article in the August 2008 issue of *Nightscape* tries to explain

¹ These findings, as Chepesiuk acknowledges, originally appeared in the January 2008 issue of *Chronobiology International*. Since then, the International Agency for Research on Cancer has “[classified] overnight shift work as a probable carcinogen factor” (Haim “Effects” 34). Abraham Haim’s and Boris A. Portnov’s recently published *Light Pollution as a New Risk Factor for Human Breast and Prostate Cancers* (2013) is the first book-length scientific study to address the impact of LAN (light-at-night) on human health.

² Street lights are, of course, an essential component of public safety. The goal of the dark-sky movement is not, in fact, to darken city streets; rather, it is to support efforts to install more efficient lighting systems. For this reason, International Dark-Sky Association-approved fixtures are designed to concentrate light on those areas where pedestrians travel, while minimizing unnecessary glare and light trespass. As the IDA stresses in its literature, “‘Dark sky’ does not mean dark ground” (“Light Pollution and Safety” 2). The aim is instead to establish public lighting practices that reduce the negative impact on nearby wildlife and to enhance public safety by reducing unnecessary glare at night, which itself is a danger to public safety (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. In order for public lighting to play its part in ensuring public safety, unnecessary glare needs to be reduced with proper shielding. As the contrast between these two photographs by George Fleenor illustrates, exterior lighting can just as easily obscure what we would otherwise trust it to reveal.

how this happens. “[O]verly lit areas,” states one sidebar, become “curtain[s] of darkness” around “illumination point[s]” (8). Michel Foucault may well have become light pollution’s first theorist when he argued in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that the panopticon’s glare, while certainly making it possible “to see constantly,” actually creates “a lateral invisibility” in which the blinded subject becomes imprisoned (554). For Foucault’s prisoners, as well as for these nocturnally-migrating birds, so-called “[v]isibility is the trap” (554).

However ecologists, environmentalists, or even poststructuralists might attempt to conceive of it, the annual death of five to fifty million birds still remains unfathomable. What does the absence of five million birds look like? What does the absence of fifty million birds look like? With his poem “The Boy’s Own Guide to Dream Birds” (1983), Don McKay envisions something like the other side of this absence.³ This is not a poem about light pollution, nor does it need to be. It is, instead, a description of an avian

³ McKay revisits this conceit in *Strike/Slip* (2006). His poem “In Aornis” envisions a “birdless land” where the “uninflected sky extends / like rhetoric to the horizon” (4, 5). In this instance, “rhetoric” is associated with the “idée fixe,” or the pathological obsession with a particular notion that resists all forms of change. Without the inflexion of birds, the sky has, in other words, succumbed to the bland consistency of rhetoric. Inflexion, on the other hand, should be read here as not only a modulation in tone, but also as an indication that McKay understands birds as something like a naturally-occurring poetic whose shifting visual and aural patterns enliven the sky. This is perhaps easily dismissed as a poet whose propensity for metaphor has led him to mine the vocabulary of speech in an attempt to reinvigorate what is the already too-familiar terrain of avian lyric poetry. Yet what resonates here is the sense that a reciprocal relationship does exist between the specialized language of lyricism and the natural subjects its practitioners encounter. Even if this relationship is imagined from one side, the ability to conceive of a language that will accommodate nature’s alterity is contingent on the maintenance of such encounters. “Aornis,” the Greek term for a land without birds, is equally a place without the lyrical capacity to think beyond the fixed language of rhetoric, where “[e]ach item” is “insular” rather than interconnected (6, 7).

territory in which a notorious nineteenth-century naturalist, John James Audubon, has never set foot, and where, unfettered by his ornithological classifications, or his infamous shooting rifle, “dream birds thrive” (2). At the end of the poem, readers are left with “a huge, hunched, crested / multicoloured bird, a sort of cross between eagle / and macaw,” a creature that the speaker cannot adequately name (22-24). This inability to pin an identity on the animal speaks to the creature’s autonomy, as well as to the poem’s desire to preserve that autonomy, even as it seeks to engage with its very separateness through poetic language that is, like the bird it describes, both colourful and “gorgeous” (24). Populated by talking swans and kestrels nesting in a kitchen, the poem testifies to avian citizenry, its imagery supplying the missing papers of an otherwise neglected populace. McKay’s poem is also further proof that poetry continues to serve as the wildlife preserve of language – a place where the words we use go to get renewed and reinvented – and where the ecological problems we grapple with await their compelling articulation. For this reason, environmentalists and readers alike can turn to such poems for what Christopher Dewdney calls “novel configurations,” or those moments that harness the potential of language to foster new awareness (“The Information Cylinder” 78).

If this seems to express too great a faith in the function of “lyric subjectivity,”⁴ the

⁴ Arguably, the most significant treatment of lyric subjectivity remains Theodor Adorno’s lecture “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (1957), wherein he argues that the lyric “is itself social in nature” (38). “It implies,” Adorno explains, “a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive,” which is “the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life” (39, 40). For Adorno, the “lyric spirit,” even as it emanates from private and privileged exchanges native to bourgeois society, is actually a

alternative is certainly less satisfying. Regarding with skepticism the capacity of figurative language to conceptualize the complex array of relationships that exists among the living creatures of the world is tantamount to sanctioning the silence that otherwise presides over them. “In the last several decades,” Dionne Brand has observed, “instrumentalist language – the language of business, the language of war, the language of consumerism – has crowded the space of citizenship and we have become ‘taxpayers’ and ‘stakeholders’ and ‘consumers’ instead of ‘citizens’. And it is true we are taxpayers and stakeholders and consumers,” she adds, “but it is much more true that we are citizens” (1). Brand’s vision is as inclusive as it is inviting. “The language of citizenship is a capacious language, [. . .] a language where we engage and elaborate ideas of

sign of dissatisfaction with materialism. “In its protest,” he observes, “the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different” (39, 40). Not surprisingly, environmentalists have since been drawn to the lyric as a potentially subversive form of social discourse that retains the capacity to envision change. The Canadian poet Ross Leckie, for his part, refers to “lyric subjectivity” as a political and poetic site of witness that promotes ecological awareness among readers and writers alike (Leckie n. pag.). Such subjectivity emerges when the lyric is granted authority to conduct the ongoing negotiation between the past and the present, the individual and his or her respective environment, and, perhaps most importantly, those relationships that exist between the human and the non-human. While the precise role that lyric subjectivity plays in altering the public sphere is likely to remain intangible, it is nevertheless possible that Eric Miller’s *Song of the Vulgar Starling* (1999) has, in some ways, already realized its potential. Based in Victoria, British Columbia, Miller ranks among the finest of Canadian nature writers; and even though his work has not yet garnered a great deal of scholarly attention, the impact of his poetry and prose among environmentalists is discernable. In an article on the grass-root beginnings of Toronto’s Fatal Light Awareness Program, the dark-sky advocate Irene Fedun makes direct reference not only to Miller’s role in the organization’s inception, but also to the influence that his writing would later have on their work. In this sense, while the impact of lyric subjectivity may be difficult to pin down, it is nevertheless possible to recognize how this kind of writing can galvanize individuals who are receptive to what it has to offer.

equality, social justice, social responsibility, social well being,” and where, ultimately, “poetry may live” (1). Such optimism prompts us to consider the encouraging possibility that a productive relationship does exist between lyricism and responsible citizenship, one that invites us to explore the idea that the intimate and imaginative revelations of literature have a tangible role to play in the shaping of public life.⁵

With this prospect in mind, I set out in this study to guide concerns about nocturnal ecology towards Canadian writing, and, in so doing, to bring literary scholarship alongside dark-sky advocacy so that these respective fields can not only inform each other, but also together foster an interdisciplinary culture of change in Canada, where the shift towards sustainable lighting practices is just beginning to gain momentum.⁶ Drawing on a range of affect theorists, the findings of nocturnal ecologists,

⁵ Worth noting here is J.L. Austin’s distinction between descriptive utterances and utterances that actually perform the very acts that they reference (phrases, for example, such as “I resign” or “this meeting is adjourned”). Major critics such as Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have, of course, each used Austin’s philosophy of language to theorize how performative utterances play an active role in the creation of the world. As Sedgwick notes, Austin himself eventually abandoned the distinction between constative and performative utterances, having settled on the idea instead that “every genuine speech act is both” (Sedgwick 4; Austin 147). Following Sedgwick’s lead, I understand the performativity of language to be inextricably linked to affect, which necessitates an understanding of literature as contributing to the very fabric of private feeling and thought, neither of which exist, as Lauren Berlant has argued, at any great remove from what she terms the “intimate public sphere” (*The Female Complaint* 4). While the “novel configurations” that Dewdney addresses are not necessarily constative speech acts in themselves, they nevertheless show signs of the potential to promote new pathways to environmental knowing through the intimate cycles of literary stimulus, public affect, and private response.

⁶ While light pollution has long been a concern of Canadian astronomers, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada’s Light-Pollution Abatement Program only officially began in 1991, just three years after the International Dark-Sky Association was founded in Tucson,

and ecocriticism's call to memory and mindfulness, this dissertation assembles a diverse crew to consider the ways in which writers have chronicled the shift from natural darkness to artificial light. While certainly directed towards scholars who are interested in the places where literature and light pollution meet, this project will hopefully also be of interest to anyone who has ever looked up at the night sky and wondered – and then wondered why it is that we look up.

“A poem can give us night vision,” Anne Michaels writes;⁷ “getting used to the dark, we begin to make things out” (qtd. in Dawson 73). The need to do so has never been more pressing, since opportunities to experience an unpolluted night sky are now increasingly rare. In only the 130 years since Thomas Edison's first incandescent bulbs illuminated the streets of New York, the Western World has come close to making the rest of the cosmos disappear – or, at least, to making itself disappear in relation to it. Such displacements have the potential to breed the kind of alienation from both human communities and non-human environments that is synonymous with the shift into modernity in Canada and abroad. “Everything that was directly lived,” the French writer

Arizona (Dick and Welch 25; “History” n. pag.). Having since parted ways with the IDA over concerns that the IDA Model Light Ordinance did too little to prevent light pollution, the RASC LPA remains a world leader in the creation of Dark-Sky Preserves that has helped over twenty cities in Canada adopt policies that reduce light pollution (Huziak “Re: Greatest accomplishments” n. pag).

⁷ Joanna Dawson's essay “A Moon Without Metaphors: Memory, Wilderness, and the Nocturnal in the Poetry of Don McKay” uses Michaels's description of night vision as way of describing how McKay's poems associate nocturnal environments with “shape-shifting, de-materialization, memory, and non-empirical knowledge” (65).

and filmmaker Guy Debord laments in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), “has moved away into a representation” (12). For Debord, images themselves are not to blame for this breach in social relations; rather, it is the way that they have come to serve in place of direct interactions. Their cumulative “spectacle,” argues Debord, “is not a collection of images, [but] rather [. . .] a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (12). By extension, the desirable alternative is to achieve communal relations that are mediated instead by “directly lived” experiences that enable us to realize “a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience” that, in turn, fosters equality within a socially-responsible society (Ford n. pag.). Debord’s thinking, while aimed squarely at the “historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life,” nevertheless has an important message for environmentalists as well (Debord 29). His call “to wake up the spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images” is compatible with the environmentalist’s insistence on the immediacy of the ecological world, a system of thinking and being that values unmediated perceptual relations with nature over technological interventions that strain human continuity and community.⁸

⁸ The dark-sky movement would find little fault with at least a few of Debord’s ideals. In “Project for Rational Improvements to the City of Paris” (1955), for example, Debord and his fellow Lettrists argued that “[a]ll street-lamps should be equipped with switches,” and that “[p]ublic gardens should remain open at night, unlit” (Bernstein n. pag.). This radical thinking builds on the ideas put forth in Ivan Chtcheglov’s 1953 essay “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” which was later reprinted in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* in October of 1958. “Darkness and obscurity are banished by artificial lighting,” Chtcheglov observed of post-WWII Paris, “and the seasons by air conditioning; night and summer are losing their charm and dawn is disappearing. The man of the cities thinks he has escaped

For naturalists-of-the-night,⁹ Debord's desire to see "genuine activity" supplant "passive identification" translates directly into an emphasis on the experiential: the wonders of the night, having been observed in the public domain, are shared in an effort to counter the sense of alienation that has emerged between the nocturnal environment and the population at large. Too easily dismissed as nostalgic or sentimental, this desire to see natural darkness make its return has never mattered more. To live in a time and a place where the night never fully arrives is to know that the stars in a given volume of poetry may well outnumber those that remain visible in the sky. Literature itself has now drifted into an era of post-darkness, the world's obsession with artificial light having ushered in a historical period that is, quite literally, *after dark*. The American amateur astronomer Leslie Peltier laments this fate in his memoir, *Starlight Nights: The Adventures of a Star-Gazer* (1965). "The moon and the stars no longer come to the farm," he pines, "[t]he farmer has exchanged his birthright in them for the wattage of his all-night sun. His children will never know the blessed dark of night" (224). There is considerable precedence for Peltier's remarks. Taking seriously Ralph Waldo Emerson's youthful advice to "believe and adore" the stars, the Maine naturalist Henry Beston ushered this sentiment into the modern era by writing in *The Outermost House* (1928)

from cosmic reality, but there is no corresponding expansion of his dream life. The reason is clear: dreams spring from reality and are realized in it" (Chtcheglov n. pag.).

⁹ "Naturalist-of-the-night" is the term Canadian astrophotographer and popular science writer Terence Dickinson uses to describe environmentalists who advocate for light pollution abatement (304).

that “[o]ur fantastic civilization has fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature, and with none more completely than with the night” (Emerson 1111, Beston 165). While the Thoreauvian laments issued forth by writers such as Peltier remind us of the damaging ecological effects of light pollution on both human and non-human cycles, Beston seems already to have appreciated, in 1928, what it means to lose touch with an essential chronobiological phase to which divergent cultures have, for many centuries, assigned meaning.

The Night Sky as Imagined Community

“The night sky was the first book of poetry,” remarks the naturalist Chet Raymo, “and the constellations were the poems” (53). In such lyrical re-imaginings of the cosmos, all that initially seems inconceivable is rendered in familiar, if figurative terms: a transformative process that gestures towards multiple acts of community. First, there is the spontaneous celestial encounter itself, the instance during which the observer experiences the sublimity of night; and then, quite apart from such instances, there are the successive moments of community that are established when readers vicariously experience those nights for themselves through the enabling narratives. Benedict Anderson has established a similar framework for understanding the ways in which communal bonds are forged in his landmark study, *Imagined Communities* (1991). Anderson’s idea – that community can exist across time and space, regardless of geographical boundaries – is especially useful for thinking about the night sky. Through spontaneous exposure to the same text, Anderson argues, disparate individuals of a given community, most of whom “will never

know their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them,” nevertheless carry through each of their lives “the image of their communion” (6). The imagined community, as an organizing principle, then, is a productive way of thinking about the night sky and the relationships that exist among its observers. Forged through a combination of activities that includes reading about celestial sights and direct observations of them, stargazing communities come to exist through repeated exposure to the “texts” of the night: the night, that is, as both an immaterial zone that observers “read” when looking up, and the night as it exists in personal narratives that circulate through the medium of print culture.¹⁰

In Canada, such stories about the night now appear most often in the pages of amateur astronomy magazines such as *SkyNews*, where experienced backyard astronomers present personal essays about their most meaningful experiences with the sky, or where readers respond in the letters section about their most recent outing under the stars. These short pieces, most of which invariably grow from a deep reverence for the night, appear prompted by the desire to see and to share more of nature’s nocturnal wonders in ways that are both personally and communally enriching. While such

¹⁰ Other mediums can function in much the same way. In Guy Maddin’s short film *Night Mayor* (1993), the fictional Winnipeg inventor Nihad Ademi uses the power of the northern lights to broadcast images of Canada from coast to coast. Ademi, a recent immigrant from Bosnia, eventually has his operation shut down by government officials who take exception to the content of his broadcasts. The fictional documentary, narrated by Ademi’s children, describes the telemelodium as an “organic television” invented to “share the music of [the] aurora with the rest of Canada” (Maddin n. pag.). Using the conventions of the immigrant story and the medium of the postmodern short film, Maddin creates a populist vision of Canada that understands the aurora borealis as powering alternative forms of citizenship and media that circumvent the power of the state.

observers are knowledgeable in many respects, and occasionally do have professional credentials, they do not pose as experts on the anthropology of the night, nor do they offer detailed explanations of celestial phenomena like those one would expect to find in a professional journal of astrophysics. Instead, by consistently acknowledging their own limitations, and by humanizing their accounts with quotidian details of their own lives, such observers remain the self-effacing amateurs to whom others can easily relate.

While distinct in many respects, amateur and professional astronomy communities have a long history of overlapping in Canada, and these shared roots suggest historical precedence for the appreciation of populist accounts. In his history of Canadian astronomy, *The Cold Light of Dawn* (1988), Richard A. Jarrell describes how Canadian astronomy communities evolved differently than those of the United States and Britain, where professionals and amateurs eventually parted ways to form separate organizations. “The normal evolution of scientific societies,” Jarrell explains, “followed a line beginning with a large, comprehensive society” (80). As the interests of its members proliferated, these groups then broke off into smaller groups with specific areas of study and concern. The divide between professionals and amateurs has historically – in countries other than Canada, at least – been a part of this refinement process. Relating the story of how the Royal Astronomy Society, which began in 1820 as an off-shoot of the much older institution of the Royal Society of London, Jarrell states that “the professionals dominated the group, and the amateurs felt the need for a separate organization” (80). This divide seems never to have taken place in Canada, at least not in the same official manner. Rather, as Jarrell argues,

The Canadian situation differed. There was no comprehensive society – indeed, there is still nothing akin to the AAAS [The American Association for the Advancement of Science] – with a national character, although there was, in Toronto, the Canadian Institute. The original Toronto Astronomical Club was, in a sense, an offshoot of that group [. . .]. With its preponderance of amateurs, the Toronto group was not like the RAS or its American counterpart and was not, with its professional members, much like the British Astronomical Association. It was a unique creation, local with national pretensions, fitting the needs of a country with only a few amateurs and professionals. (81)

To reflect its increasingly national membership, the Toronto Society became the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada in 1902. According to Jarrell, the “Canadian character” of this society and its unique development resulted in publications that were in keeping with its nonexclusive composition (80, 81):

The [RASC] *Transactions*, later the *Journal*, was not a fully professional journal like the *Monthly Notices* or the *Astronomical Journal*, but neither was it an amateur bulletin. It was a bit of both and has remained so to the present. The ideology of the society, that amateurs and professionals can interact positively within one institutional framework, has worked for nearly a century. If that ideology is realizable and useful, then the smallness of the astronomical interest group in Canada has worked in a beneficial way. (81)

The “smallness” of this imagined community, and the way in which its publications have so consistently made space for the voice of the amateur, gesture towards the spirit of

generosity and congeniality that defines the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada's character. Through largely volunteer efforts, the RASC has for over one hundred years fostered a sense of community by sharing with the general public the wonders of the night sky. Its members' efforts to supplement public education through such publications as *Skyways* and, more recently, to raise awareness about the negative effects of light pollution on human health and the environment, have had, insofar as such things can be quantified, a uniformly positive effect.

This culture of cooperation found a counterpart in nineteenth-century Canadian newspapers, where personal accounts of celestial events appeared alongside cosmologically "scientific" explanations of nocturnal wonder. "It is interesting to know," one journalist writes in the 21 November 1899 issue of the Halifax *Chronicle Herald*, "that somebody in Nova Scotia was privileged to have a sight of the last Leonid shower [in 1866] [. . .] and if these lines should come under the eyes of any such fortunate ones they may be moved to tell us what they remember of the glorious spectacle" ("Star Gazers Have A Chance" 9). In this example from the turn of the twentieth century, the journalist invites an imagined reader to affirm the connection between communities past and present by recounting "the glorious spectacle" of 1866 (9). His or her "lines," in the process, become a textual link between generations, one that serves as a catalyst for exchange and interaction between witnesses past and present. The past records of the Leonids shower, in turn, provide a valuable context in which to understand the phenomenon that has yet to take place. In this way, the newspaper itself becomes a public site where reactions to both showers can be placed in relation to each other – where the

hope plays out that past witnesses “may be moved to tell” their stories, and where nocturnal phenomena and affect link communities over time. Since the most dramatic displays of the Leonids are expected every thirty-three years,¹¹ such articles come to form a continuous storyline, one through which they not only reconcile the past with the present, but also maintain these expressions of affinity from one generation to the next.¹² These intergenerational narratives, in turn, establish a tradition that upholds the belief that such natural phenomena are, in fact, “glorious” (“Star Gazers Have A Chance” 9). The ongoing result is a fluid exchange that builds community by blurring the boundaries between the night as a biosphere and the night as a cultural invention, and by establishing an open history to which the past, present, and future may contribute.

In “Forgetful of Former Care: Notes on the Past and Present State of Canadian Memory,” D.M.R. Bentley considers the social meaning of “public memory” within a Canadian historical context, one where each individual act of remembering implicitly contains within it the desire to see itself adopted, transformed, and absorbed into the more

¹¹ The source of the shower, the periodic comet 55p/Tempel-Tuttle, follows a thirty-three year cycle. When Tempel-Tuttle reaches perihelion (the point in its orbit closest to the sun) the sun’s heat causes it to shed dust and debris. The Leonids are, therefore, predicted to peak every thirty-three years, when the Earth passes through the remnants of this cometary matter.

¹² This memory transfer from one generation to the next is similar, yet still in some ways distinct from what the American critic Marianne Hirsch describes as “postmemory” (22). As Hirsch explains in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), “postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory,” she continues, “is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not only through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation [. . .]. [It] characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can not be understood nor recreated” (22).

lasting narratives of the public sphere. Especially significant is the connection that Bentley makes between these individual desires and the idea of society that Edmund Burke promotes in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1870). “Society is indeed a contract,” Burke contends; it is “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born” (120). This particular understanding of communal continuity between the past, present, and future defines the act of remembrance as participating in a social “contract” that brings community into continuous being. Implicit in each instance of articulation are the members of an imagined audience who carry the past forward through the filter of their present selves, and who imagine, in so doing, future acts of remembering that will do the same for them. If such gestures stem from a sense of responsibility to preserve the past for the benefit of the future, they also grow from a loyalty to the imaginative labours carried out by previous generations. This spirit of generosity and responsibility extends both ways along the time line, rendering these private-public memories in such a way that their lessons remain accessible for generations to come.

...

Had he taken an interest in stargazing, the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins¹³ would have understood the history of celestial events such as the Leonids as a series of interconnected “scenes” that are themselves sequences of stimulus, affect, and response (Nathanson 3). As Donald L. Nathanson observes in the introduction to *Affect*

¹³ Sedgwick’s interest in Tomkins’s work – specifically, her interest in his theorization of shame – helped make it possible to admire Tomkins’s thinking without downplaying the limitations of its essentialist claims.

Imagery Consciousness,¹⁴ Tomkins is particularly interested in the way in which “the combination [of immediate experience and triggered affect] reminds us of an analogous historical experience, the memory of which re-triggers that affect. Such sequences,” Nathanson adds, “may go on in the form of reminiscences that maintain the more-or-less steady experience of any affect” (3). The recollection of the affective scene, in other words, enables it to resonate long after the stimulus has ceased. Even though his systematic approach leaves no room to account for the ways in which the differentiating natures of culture, class, or gender expose the plurality of ways in which these scenes can be experienced, what Tomkins outlined as the tantalizing nature of positive affects nevertheless speaks to the way in which the Leonids captivated nineteenth-century observers. In particular, Tomkins would have seen the willingness of large crowds to gather together in anticipation of the Leonids’ return in 1866 as a sign of the “interest-excitement” affect at work on a communal scale. According to his theory of creativity, the impulse to describe the shower in writing was the by-product of this initial excitement, in much the same way that the desire to see these accounts published was equally the result of the need to see the Leonids’ affective potential extended over time (Tomkins 352-55).

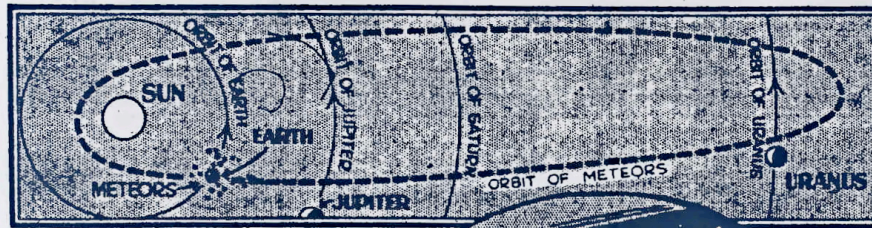
By 1932, such excited laymen accounts of celestial phenomena had begun to cede

¹⁴ Tomkins deliberately omitted the commas in his title because he felt as though his three sites of inquiry were intimately connected (Nathanson 1). The first volume of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* was published in 1962, the second appeared in 1963, and the third volume was published just before his death in 1991. The final volume in the series was published posthumously in 1992.

ground to the rhetoric of impersonal scientific description, the reason being that new technologies were playing a significant role in the shift towards a universalizing objectivity. In the process, the social aspects of stargazing that had once been chronicled in Canadian newspapers shifted into visual representation.¹⁵ The 15 November 1932 edition of the Regina *Leader-Post* illustrates these transitions well. “Scientific snapshots of a once-in-a-lifetime meteor display are sought in Saskatchewan,” begins an article that appears alongside an illustration of an affluent man and woman who have stepped out to enjoy a fall meteor shower (“Seek Snapshot” 1). As her white dress and his black suit establish their traditional roles, the enchantment of the night heightens their affection and sanctifies their unity (see fig. 2). The way in which the illustration of the couple overlaps with an astronomical diagram of the Leonids’ trajectory suggests that they, too, represent an instance of unintentional diagrammatic reasoning, the illustrator having depicted two biological creatures who will further their community through the romantic concession to the night. Meanwhile, the journalist details how a camera on loan from the prestigious Harvard University will make the Leonids’ return in 1932 all the more exciting. The appearance of such technology marks the shift away from first-hand exposures to celestial events, where the observer is present, both temporally and geographically, and, therefore, well-positioned to contribute to the communal scene and its potential meaning.

¹⁵ The tendency to visualize the social while narrativizing the scientific is still evident today. Local coverage of astronomical events typically consists of a photograph of a crowd gathered to witness an event (the social) and an accompanying article that condenses and simplifies astronomical knowledge (the scientific).

Reginans Look For Brilliant Display of Shooting Stars



SEEK SNAPSHOT OF METEORS IN SASKATCHEWAN

Harvard University Locates Camera Trap in Province as Leonid Display Comes

Scientific snapshots of a once-in-a-lifetime meteor display are sought in Saskatchewan. A big display of celestial fireworks is expected early, very early, Wednesday morning and again Thursday morning.

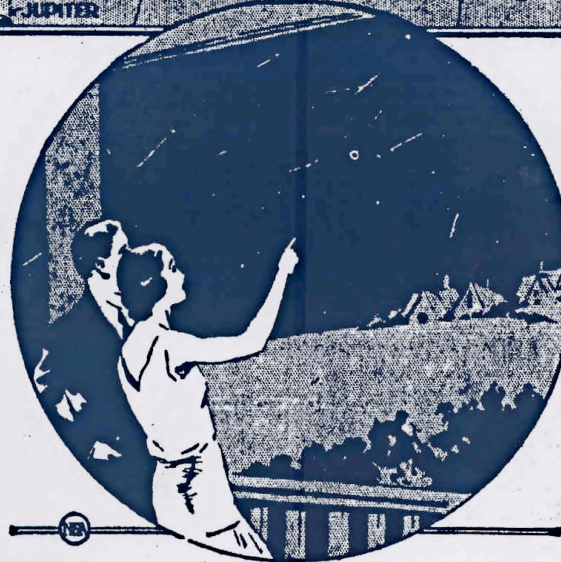
Harvard university experts have located a camera trap in Saskatchewan. This camera may be able to provide the first scientific snapshot of an important astronomical event.

Electrical Storms
This is really a big moment in the lives of modern astronomers. It will be man's first opportunity to discover whether electrical storms accompany showers of meteors. The Leonids, as this particular meteor group is called, are scheduled to reappear for one of their rare visits to the earth. One astronomer holds that a magnetic storm can be caused by the meteoric bombardment.

A Leonid enters the earth's outer atmosphere at a speed of 44 miles per second, so rapid that it is burned out before it reaches the ground. That's what makes the fireworks, and the Harvard men hope to shoot the meteors on the fly through a special spectroscopic prism placed on trap cameras.

Interests Children
While the wise men of astronomy are making elaborate preparations for the event one Regina sees in the meteor display a good opportunity for child education.

"I can well remember the 1866 display when I was a boy at school at Christ's hospital in London, England," M. H. Tallant told The Leader-Post. Mr. Tallant is a well-known Boy Scout official in Regina. "We were roused from our beds and permitted to witness the wonderful illumination. It made a lasting impression. Who knows but that your girl or boy might become a noted astronomer in consequence of the opportunity given her or him this week. I wonder if teachers will call the attention of scholars to the event which will certainly be educational."



Here's cosmic dust in your eye! Shivering Reginans, homeward bound early Wednesday morning, may have a ringside seat on a sensational display of celestial fireworks, such as comes only three times in a century.

As you'll notice from the above illustration, old Mother Earth's passage comes in contact with the 33-year-orbit of the Leonid meteors at this time. A brilliant display of shooting stars is likely and the astronomers are looking for a big night. Maybe they'll have to wait until Thursday morning.

Solar Waifs and Strays Visit Regina This Week

Regina is to have the opportunity, some time between November 15 and November 24, of making the acquaintance of the Leonids and the Andromids, spare parts of the solar system. In the following article, a Regina student of astronomy tells just what these pyrotechnic wonders are.

BY H. S. McCLUNG

The Leonids and Andromids are coming on their annual visit to us in November. That sounds like a visitation from poor relatives, doesn't it? Well, that's just what it is. And there are myriads of them. Poor, tiny, little waifs of the solar family. When they get here they will put on a magnificent pyrotechnic display. That is the way they announce their arrival, for they are swarms of meteors.

Cosmic Dust

Just what are meteors and why do they appear in swarms?

All the universe is more or less thinly filled with "cosmic dust," the

debris of shattered worlds, the particles of matter emitted by violent eruptions of flaming stars, the solidified remnants of comets' tails. The larger chunks of cosmic matter sometimes drop on the earth's surface, and are called "meteorites."

A huge one fell in Arizona ages ago, another in the Sahara. The latter is estimated to weigh a million tons! How would you like to be pelted by a shower of meteors like that? Don't be alarmed, however, for these giant meteorites are extremely rare, and do not associate themselves with meteoric showers at all. They are lone wolves. Only a few dozen which weigh more than a hundred pounds each have ever been found.

Make Daily Hits

Very tiny specks are falling into our atmosphere and pelting you and me every day in incalculable num-

Fig. 2. The front page of the *Leader-Post*, 15 November 1932.

In the place of the unmediated encounter, the increasing prevalence of astrophotography has enabled the vicarious experience, one in which viewers are able to participate in a celestial phenomenon from a potentially interminable distance that does not depend on time and place for its realization.

The night, as a “directly lived” experience, along with the corresponding sense of “self-consciousness” that the nightscape once engendered, has all but ceased to exist (Ford n. pag.). Canadian writers and naturalists have, for their part, been chronicling this shift for more than a century. “It was too true,” Duncan Campbell Scott writes in the opening lines of his short story cycle, *In the Village of Viger* (1896), that “the city was growing rapidly,” and that “the whole southern sky was luminous with the reflection of gas lamps” (3). Sky glow, which merits such careful attention in Scott’s fictional piece, is now a largely unacknowledged reality of Canadian cities and towns. Street lights have long since displaced most of the stars, and the relentless glare of round-the-clock artificial illumination now makes it difficult, if not nearly impossible, to establish those meaningful social interactions that once took place under the canopy of night. Insofar as it renders almost impossible instances of shared communal observance, inspired by nocturnal sublimity, light pollution also obscures our relationship with the past by preventing those occasions when the remarkable nature of the night sky would have otherwise prompted communal gatherings and the inter-generational exchange of memories.

To write about the night sky is, therefore, to find a way of renewing this tradition by expressing a fondness for the nocturnal world in a public way. It is to put individual

encounters in concert with each other – even if these naturalists-of-the-night are generations apart – so that personal reverence for natural phenomena becomes public reverence, a powerful mover that retains the potential to prompt public change. While certainly divergent in form and content, nocturnal narratives nevertheless consistently push back against a century that has tended to value profit over personal reflection, community, and empathetic witness. In memorializing instances of nocturnal beauty that forged meaningful communal bonds, these stories counter the states of isolation and social amnesia initiated by the modern neglect of what the French philosopher Michel Serres calls “the natural contract” (38). “[W]e must add to the exclusively social contract,” Serres insists, “a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect” (38).

By recognizing the relationship between the “social” and the “natural,” Serres adapts and extends Edmund Burke’s theory of the social contract to make clear the connection between memory and ecology, both of which appear threatened in the modern state. “If there is a material, technological, and industrial pollution,” Serres adds, “then there is also a second pollution, invisible, which puts time in danger, a cultural pollution that we have inflicted on long-term thoughts, those guardians of the Earth, of humanity, and of things themselves” (31). In this schema, “admiring attention” and “respect” paid towards natural phenomena, while desirable, are insufficient in themselves. Rather, it is the memories of such instances that are integral, since they also enable communities to maintain a sense of environmental belonging by sharing “knowledge” that does not

“imply property” (38). Since night was for centuries understood as a counterpoint to the mechanized rituals of day, nocturnal realms remain, for many, a place of apparent alternative subjectivity in which speakers may briefly gain relief from the commodification of their lives.

Perception and projection both play a role in this process. When the American naturalist Henry Beston looks to the sky in his essay “Night on the Great Beach,” he perceives not only the “holiness” of night, but also a compelling absence that doubles as a kind of void-in-waiting – an invitation to anthropomorphize a space that he and his fellow American naturalists experience in a state of “religious emotion” (165). The excursionists’ night can thus become an offering that only a certain kind of traveler can claim, in “a poetic mood,” as his or her own sacred text (173). Not unlike the speaker at the end of Mark Strand’s “Eating Poetry,” Beston’s disciples “romp with joy in the bookish dark,” and, by turns lyrical and austere, inscribe their nostalgic, most often male subjectivities into the night’s textuality (36). This ritualized process appears designed to somehow add deserving names to an imagined cosmological record, one which, even as it pre-dates Pythagorean star maps, turns immediately to palimpsest in the presence of the American nature writer. For this reason, the desire to preserve the night sky appears, initially, at least, as inevitably fraught by the singular blindness of “indulgent anthropocentrism,” its self-appointed keepers revealing their cherished subject to be as much a threatened entity as it is an essential presence in a specific kind of unmediated

religious experience, the patterned formulation of which extends into much broader forms of cultural and political imperialism¹⁶ (Wilson 17).

These more pernicious aspects of stories and poems about the night sky may well explain why scholars interested in the relationship between literature and the environment have thus far undervalued them. A certain degree of hesitancy is not only understandable, but also desirable: gleaning ecological and proto-ecological values from less than perfect texts, after all, necessitates a considerably more complex negotiation of antimodernism,

¹⁶ Fortunately, there have been attempts at preventing the night sky from becoming the next frontier. Emerging at the peak of the Cold War, and propelled forward by the ambitious aim of preventing outer space from being used for anything other than peaceful purposes, the 1967 *Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies* envisions space as “the province of all mankind,” a unified zone where economic and scientific development is to the benefit of all humanity (United Nations 28). According to the broad parameters of its legal imaginings, the authors of the moon treaty meant to establish a framework for the future of space law, one that would inhibit all forms of cultural, economic, and political imperialism in the outer realms, and yet do so without discouraging the human project of exploration. With the journey to the stars already well underway, its potential to improve international relations through cooperative governance stood as a great, if utopian, given. Over forty years later, the fundamental contradiction underlying the treaty’s logic – namely, that outer space should remain nation-less, even as it retains the promise to become the domain of its earthly, nation-bound citizens – still seems difficult to reconcile. With none of the countries operating manned-space exploration programs willing to ratify it, the moon treaty has since had no real impact on space flight. Nevertheless, its failure does remind us that much of what is conceived of as belonging to the global commons is also intricately bound to specific human interests, all of which have deep ideological roots that simultaneously define and transcend the nation. “In his loneliness and fixedness,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote of his wayward Mariner in 1798, “he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival” (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 429). The gloss that appears near the end of Part IV of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” speaks not only to the Mariner’s loneliness, but also to the longstanding inclination to imagine the sky as an autonomous “native country” – governed only by the stars – whose borders nevertheless extend amorphously into the reaches of Space.

environmentalism, and the politics of desire – negotiations that in themselves do not guarantee that the critical exercise will prove productive. Even so, the current impulse in ecocriticism towards more activist writing that makes its environmental message all but impossible to miss does, unfortunately, overlook the ecocritical potential of too many texts. At the risk of pathologizing the field, ecocriticism seems to suffer from an anxiety concerning the integrity of its texts and the purity of their author's motives.¹⁷ This anxiety surfaces in debates over what does and does not merit consideration from an environmental standpoint – debates that often devolve into arguments over whether a particular writer is sufficiently capable of distinguishing between his or her desires and the environments in which they are articulated.¹⁸ The very alterity of nature would seem to be at stake, as though the writer were singlehandedly capable of negating an otherness

¹⁷ These concerns receive greater attention in Chapter Four, where I consider them in relation to P.K. Page's poem "Address at Simon Fraser" (1997).

¹⁸ In 1999, Leo Marx attacked ecocentricism by calling its practitioners "the Puritans of today's environmental movement," all of whom are "critical of anyone – whether environmentalist or despoiler – who assumes that the chief reason for protecting the environment is its usefulness to human beings" (Marx 46). Some of Marx's critics, as Michael P. Cohen has observed, have since assumed a more moderate stance. Glen Love, in his *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (2003) describes his move away from "an aggressive anti-anthropocentrism," just as John Elder's more recent work, according to Cohen, focuses more on stewardship than it does on radical wilderness preservation (Love 6; Cohen n. pag.). It is likely that another deep ecologist will take the places left by Love and Elder, just as Marx's mantle will eventually be assumed by someone as equally eager to argue. In the meantime, critics wishing to read literature in relation to the environment face the difficult task of drawing attention to the trappings of anthropocentrism while still gleaning value from narratives that are, to varying degrees, inevitably homocentric. Even if the quest for the wholly biocentric text is unlikely to find its grail, such a pursuit still remains important, if only to serve as a reminder that nature should not be conceived of purely in relation to human need.

that somehow depends on the literary imagination for its realization. The quest for the elusively biocentric text is instead consistently at risk of overestimating the potential of programmatic narratives to maintain a boundary between the human and the non-human; in such cases, the self-conscious staging of detachment and humility can just as easily lead to the very aggrandizing gestures they seek to avoid. These conundrums deserve consideration at length, as does the very nature of desire itself.

“When we talk about an object of desire,” Lauren Berlant has observed, “we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make us and make possible for us” (33). While these “object[s] of desire” could be any number of things, what remains consistent is the significance of the interaction between the object and its witness, or the relationship that develops between the cluster of promises and those who would see them retain their potential. Berlant’s thinking is especially helpful for conceiving of the attraction between a given stargazer and the night sky, where “the subject [often] leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with their object” (33). To write about such experiences in retrospect is to “return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities” (33). Or at least this is one possibility. Affect is elusive and notoriously difficult to mobilize. Those scholars who embrace its “hazy, atmospheric” quality inevitably embark on varying degrees of idiosyncratic contemplation that deny tidy conclusions (Guattari 158; Seigworth 160).¹⁹

¹⁹ The opening lines of Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* summarize this tendency well. “*Ordinary Affects*,” she writes, “is an experiment, not a judgment. Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but

Yet overdetermined signifiers such as the night sky merit precisely these forms of contemplation. Moreover, while the sheer volume of celestial allusions in literature would seem to suggest that there are as many reasons why stargazers look up as there are stars in the sky, affect theory nevertheless proves especially helpful in explaining the night sky's appeal.

In her introduction to *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Kathleen Stewart issues a disclaimer that is worth repeating here. "My effort here is not to finally 'know' them," she writes of the scenes she studies, or "to collect them into a good enough story of what's going on – but to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form" (4). Fashioning a form of address here begins with the acknowledgement that it is not possible to "know" the night sky in any singular sense, nor is it accurate to suggest that stories and poems written about it over time can be easily categorized. Constructing a framework that is "adequate to their form" must involve some recognition of this elusiveness. The very same can be said of affect itself, a multivalent theoretical term whose malleable nature has enabled it to circulate widely and to spread across disciplines. In *The Affect Theory Reader* (2009), Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, for their part, define affect as "an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or

rather to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact" (1).

intensities” (1). They locate affect “in those intensities that pass body to body [. . .], in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (1). Affect is, for Seigworth and Gregg,

the name we give to those forces – visceral forces, beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (1)

Seigworth’s and Gregg’s alignment of affect with “vital forces insisting beyond emotion” reveal their debt to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) turns to the work of Baruch Spinoza in an effort to counter the elision of affect and feeling. Spearheaded by Brian Massumi’s translations of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s writings, this particular strand of affect theory wants little to do with the history of emotion, seeking instead to understand the body’s capacity to act and to be acted upon (Massumi 17). It is Spinoza’s description of *affectus* as a transitional state of increasing and of decreasing bodily potentials that proves most intriguing to Deleuze, Guattari, and their readers, since its emphasis on intangible forces and intensities does not assume the stability of the body, nor necessarily require what many poststructuralists would consider

an unsatisfactory return to subjectivity as the stable site of emotional response.²⁰

Ultimately, what this particular strand of affect theory provides is a way of extending and of reinvigorating biopolitical critique at a point when its concepts seem amorphous and its meanings diffuse.

Looking Up: Affect and the Night Sky

Yet not all scholars are so determined to see emotion removed from the affective equation. In *Looking Away, Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (2009), Rei Terada writes that “transient perceptual objects come to be loved because only they seem capable of noncoercive relation” (4). So understood, the relationship between those who look up and what they see rightfully takes as its basis the assumption that all such observers exist in one state of influence or another, and that their responses, unlike the transient objects that catch their eye, cannot exist free of such coercion. Terada’s thinking is especially helpful in explaining at least part of the night sky’s appeal. Expounding on her premise, she reveals how, “in the post-Kantian era [. . .] one needs particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences, perceptions that seem below or marginal to normal

²⁰ As Patricia T. Clough has observed, “many of the critics and theorists who turned to affect [in the wake of the affective turn] often focused on the circuit from affect to emotion, ending up with subjectively felt states of emotion – a return to the subject as the subject of emotion” (207). Clough shares this concern with Rei Terada, whose *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the “Death of the Subject”* (2003) seeks to move past the idea that emotion is inevitably tied to subjectivity. In fact, Terada argues the opposite, suggesting that emotion actually destabilizes the very subjectivity that it is conventionally thought to reinforce. Terada’s flights into poststructuralist theory are difficult to follow, but what does seem clear is that she is attempting to counter the notion the feeling and emotion have no place in a postmodern age that is supposedly typified by the “waning of affect” (Jameson 10).

appearance, to figure the possibility of fleeting relief from the pressure to endorse what Kant calls the world ‘as is’” (3, 4). The endorsement of the factual perceptual world comes at a price, Terada argues, for desire, especially those desires that do not find easy articulation (or cannot be articulated at all) are suppressed in favor of those fact perceptions that are deemed to be normative. She adds that these pressures not only force us to “take fact perceptions into account when navigating reality,” but also insist that “our feelings about them [. . .] stay within acceptance” (3).

Terada sees the imperative to translate these fact perceptions into normative terms as a defining feature of the ephemeral in philosophy and literature, a mime that she links to the suppression of desires that include the queer and the transgressive. Central to her argument is the notion that the primary attraction to the ephemeral perceptual object is an unarticulated dissatisfaction with the world from which the observer cannot remove him or herself.²¹ “Looking away shall be my only negation,” Nietzsche insists in *The Gay Science* (1882), a brief statement of intent that provides the title and the basis of Terada’s study. To look away is to effect a form of agency against forces of coercion that nevertheless, according to Terada, define the terms of subsequent response. As a result, the possibility that objects exist beyond such forces becomes all the more enticing. If “transient perceptual objects come to be loved,” it is also because they introduce the fleeting possibility that noncoercive relations do exist, and that, through the consideration

²¹ Tomkins actually conveyed virtually the same idea in *Affect Imagery Consciousness*. “An enduring discontent or at least the absence of complete seduction by the familiar,” he writes, “is a necessary condition for the pursuit of the novel” (354).

of these objects, observers get to participate briefly and vicariously in their non-conformity.

Over time, the lyrical has proven itself as a persistent, if peripheral, complementary discourse to the non-conformist desiring that Terada describes (99). This persistence is evident, for example, in the phrase “shooting star.” Stars, as any physicist will tell you, do not shoot; rather, shooting stars are pieces of debris, many of which are as small as particles of dust, that emanated at one time from a passing comet. These streaks of light are referred to as meteors, unless they survive the atmosphere and land on Earth, at which point they are categorized as meteorites.²² Neither term is as pleasing a descriptor as “falling star,” a phrase that more fully conveys the spectrum of desires that follow in one’s wake. Existing at distances that exceed our capacity to fathom, and originating so long ago that their life spans baffle our sense of time, stars appear as fixed visual signs of the eternal. To perceive one as either falling or in flight is to conceive of a momentary break in the otherwise steadfast nature of the stars. Fixity becomes flight, and, by witnessing this shift, observers are exposed, however briefly, to the possibility that the forces of time and space that govern their lives are open to negotiation. To refer to stars as shooting or as falling is to recognize the limitations of the clinical taxonomies of science, and then to see them supplemented with the more lyrical language of desire and longing.

²² See chapter one of Michael D. Reynolds’s *Falling Stars: A Guide to Meteors and Meteorites* (2001) for further distinctions between meteors, meteorites, meteoroids, and asteroids.

At the same time, the extent to which the rational discourse of scientific objectivity is even permitted to govern such responses – be they subjective, transgressive, or queer – depends in part on how the scientific and the lyrical are conceived to exist in relation to each other. “It is my suspicion,” writes Alan R. Wilson in “Good Seeing,” a brief but eloquent defense of the poetic imagination’s capacity to negotiate the scientific, “that the rumored duality of the human brain has been greatly exaggerated” (22). Wilson’s playful allusion to Twain means to undermine the notion that the brain is neatly divided into separate hemispheres, a “mental geography” that keeps the logical and the lyrical from interacting. The Toronto poet-mathematician Kim Maltman, according to Wilson, “has maintained that without the actual experience of being a research scientist, a poet cannot speak with authenticity about science, because it is ‘another mode of thinking’ that is closed to the layman” (21). Taking issue with the restrictions Maltman lays out, and with anyone, for that matter, who would “draw boundaries around what others write, reveal, or say,” Wilson concludes his essay on poetry and science with a few important reminders:

Science is itself a set of human constructs created to make sense of the unfathomable. What exists in nature may approximate those constructs, but the limits of our mental geography decree we will never know for sure. It is these very limits, and not those imposed by ideology, that give the human adventure its magic and excitement. They power both the urge to be more than we are and the hope that, in a moment of illicit clarity, we will snatch insights from the laps of the gods that were never intended for us. (22)

For Wilson, the inability to know nature with absolute certainty is not cause for existential crisis; rather, it is a source of creative energy and intellectual possibility that justifies the pairing of science and poetry as equally legitimate and complementary narratives, both of which, in turn, advance the human “adventure” for knowledge, clarity, and insight. Also embedded in Wilson’s optimism is the idea that such open-mindedness fosters a sense of agency and “excitement” that, together, “power [. . .] the urge to be more than we are,” and that may even enable poets and scientists to “snatch insights” that “were never intended for us” (22). The success of this “adventure,” however, first requires the willingness to see science and poetry as distinct yet syncretic pursuits, neither of which is purely logical nor wholly lyrical, but rather whose common origins in human desire ultimately empower their practitioners to challenge the limits of their own “mental geography.” This highly poetic interpretation of knowledge acquisition implicitly understands each moment of clarity or insight, regardless of its epistemological mode of deliverance, as fostering a sense of personal enrichment and communal enchantment among the members of an imagined society for whom such insights, while perhaps never “intended” for them, are nevertheless desired. Such desires play out in literary narratives about the night sky, where the appearance of a celestial phenomenon provides both the cue and the backdrop for narrators to unveil a revelation about themselves or about those in their physical, mental, or emotional proximity: “The century is ending,” laments one lyrical observer as he watches the Leonids streak overhead in the fall of 1999, “by New Year’s you and I will be through” (McOrmond 11, 12). Sight and insight come together here, as the end of a relationship finds a counterpart in the ephemeral beauty of streaking

meteors, the light from which will dissolve, like the affection that once existed between the figures, into a distant yet lasting memory. Such statements are, of course, nothing like scientific findings. Nor do they need to be. It is, in fact, the very subjectivity of such responses that invites readers to take them seriously and to consider their meaning in a variety of contexts.

Even if the experience of watching a meteor shower is relatively short-lived, its visual signs nevertheless jog the private and public memory, bringing into the present previous encounters with such light. In this way, each spontaneous instance shared between parties actually contains within it not only a record of past enchantment, but also the possibility that such a phenomenon may return, if in a distant future, where, inevitably, its witnesses have already changed. It is this distance, from the imagined past to the envisioned future, from initial to evolving community, from previous to possible selves, that enables such scenes to retain their affective potential. Since the ephemerality of such light is itself a metonymic narrative about the nature of mortality, its respondents are, at times, understandably crestfallen by the sense of beauty they experience. “It was so fair and lovely a vision,” Catharine Parr Traill writes of the aurora borealis in the closing paragraphs of *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), “I was grieved when it vanished into thin air” (233). Disappointment does inform the lyrical moment, for Traill must recognize that such joy is fleeting. Yet the strain of affect that permeates these accounts is never very easily delineated. Nocturnal longing, it would seem, both “hurts and

pleases.”²³

This complicated result is perhaps not that surprising, since night locates its subjects in a sensory environment whose boundaries are difficult to define. The dark that exists at ground level is also the darkness that permeates the sky, and the light of the stars, however distant, nevertheless appears at the limit of a visual acuity that cannot distinguish between one mile up and one million. The night, as a spatial category, is fluid, immediate, and difficult to chart with certainty, not unlike the emotional response it engenders. Characterized by multifaceted forms of disconsolate beauty that invite lamentation and inspire lyrical response, these nocturnal narratives, while each a product of distinct historical circumstances and investments, are nevertheless informed by those empathetic places between Earth and sky, past and future-pasts, and public and private observance that define shared hope, longing, disappointment, comfort, awe, and desire as legitimate responses to the sublimity of the night sky. During these moments, by gazing into what they understand as eternity, observers who are otherwise held in the station of an ordinary life can experience something that feels like an ephemeral instance of illumination, a moment that may facilitate the connection with something larger than themselves. The written records that exist of these experiences suggest that they serve instead not only to ground a given observer in place, but also to strengthen the communal bonds that he or she understands as shared with others. “The origin of desire –,” the

²³ This phrase appears in Alison Pick’s poem “Acquainted with the Night” (2008), which, of course, makes allusion to Frost’s famous lament for the disconsolate self adrift in the city night.

Canadian poet Steve McOrmond reminds us, is “from the Latin *de-* [to cease] and *sidus* [star]” (18, 19). It follows that “desire” should contain both the Latin name for the stars and the verb “to cease,” as the need to make fleeting instances of celestial beauty and community more lasting by writing about them is, inevitably, common to a number of Canadian stories and poems about the night sky.

Yet this shared sense of longing is not just a narrative convention. Whereas Jürgen Habermas famously conceived of the public sphere as an intersubjective space in which communicative rationality fosters ideal forms of exchange, more recent conceptualizations of citizenship have sought instead to understand the role that emotion plays in determining social relations. Berlant has argued that the public sphere is always an intimate one: much more than endorsements of the status quo, sentimental instances are telling signs of the utopian desire to participate in affective forms of citizenship (*The Female Complaint* 3). If an intimate public sphere is a space in which the circulation of familiar feelings hints at the possibility of recognizing more profound desires, there must also exist an intimate infrastructure that facilitates these movements, the filaments of which are the intangible result of the expression of empathy and other forms of conscientious feeling. In the much the same way that Raymond Williams understood “the structure of feeling” to be readily detectable “in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity,” poems, stories, and personal narratives about the night sky also hint at this intangibility in their efforts to provide imaginative alternatives to the institutionalization of public space (64). The desire to realize these alternatives is, in fact, intimately related to the night sky and to the affective astronomies that unfold beneath it:

the need for spontaneous experiences in an increasingly mechanical world, for the palliative effects of nature as a remedy for new forms of anxiety brought on by the busyness of urban environments and corresponding pressures to be productive, for the mystical and the unknown to supplement empirical ways of knowing, for Indigenous and eastern traditions to provide instances of spiritual and imaginative relief for a Western culture that has depleted its resources for re-enchantment,²⁴ for stable signifiers to lend a

²⁴ “The fate of our times,” Max Weber stated in a lecture entitled “Science as Vocation” (1917), “is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155). As Bruce Robbins observes, even though Weber’s famous allusion to Frederick Schiller did introduce the term “disenchantment” into critical discourse as a means of coming to terms with a modern world that is devoid of magic, Schiller and Weber actually had very different definitions of “disenchantment” in mind. For Schiller, disenchantment described the de-divinization of the world: “die entgötterte Natur,” or “A Nature shorn of the divine” (Schiller qtd. in Taylor 317). Schiller’s lament is not only for the declining interest in polytheism, but also a requiem for the natural environs that were once understood to play host to the gods (Robbins 75). Weber, on the other hand, had already argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that religion was itself responsible for the elimination of magic from the world (Robbins 75). Monotheistic forms of worship, therefore, cannot claim to be victims of disenchantment because they themselves were responsible for its realization (Weber *The Protestant Ethic* 60). Robbins’ distinction between Schiller’s *Entgötterung* (de-divinization) and Weber’s *Entzauberung* (the elimination of magic) is an important one to make, since debates over the merits of modern re-enchantment are not just between theists and secular materialists. John Caputo has argued that these debates are, in fact, “no longer between materialism and idealism, or hard-nosed Newtonians and far out spirit-seers;” rather, they play out between those who espouse a wide range of hybrid positions, which may include “materialist materialism,” or “theological materialism,” a “materialism with spirit, a materialism of the spirit, [or] a religious materialism” (Milbank qtd. in Caputo, n. pag.). Even as idealist and materialist camps begin to find common ground, debates over the implications of enchantment continue to unfold. As Brian D. Robinette writes, “[Slavoj] Žižek declares that we must renounce the effort to re-enchant the world and instead follow the modern forces of disenchantment all the way down, follow them to their bitterest end, and accept with honesty (and not a little humor) that our symptoms admit of no final cure” (96). The Christian theologian John Milbank, on the other hand, wonders “how genuine love, whether agapeic or erotic,” can possibly exist in a world entirely devoid of enchantment (Robinette 96). Between Žižek’s dismissal of the environmental movement as “late modern nostalgia” that “soften[s] the trauma of the Real,”

sense balance to the otherwise destabilized platforms of personal and cultural identity, and for public expressions of memory and feeling to counter not only the narratives of industry and progress, but also the commodification of history and time – these antimodern desires play out to varying degrees in stories and poems about the night sky, where the stars are summoned to comfort the modern soul in need of solace. These very subjective forms of stargazing share a number of characteristics with the antimodernist movement that emerged in the wake of successive industrial revolutions and that gained momentum as a cultural force in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

Antimodernism and the Night Sky

“Far from being the nostalgic flutterings of a ‘dying elite,’” T.J. Jackson Lears argues in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (1981), “antimodernism was a complex blend of accommodation and protest which tells us a great deal about the beginnings of present-day values and attitudes” (xv). The “complex

and Milbank’s insistence that the augmentation of material reality through Christian ontology is a necessity of the human condition, there must be room for a secular appreciation of enchantment and ecology alike that accepts some degree of projection as the inevitable by-product of the desire to see an affinity for nature reflected in modes of human expression and representation (97). To greet enchantment as neither a sign of delusion, nor as some indication of an underlying need for religious devotion is to allow for an environmentalist’s version of what William E. Connolly calls “little spaces of enchantment,” or those moments when the ecosphere announces itself memorably to those who remain attuned to its wonders (15).

blend of accommodation and protest” that Lears describes here is key to his overall argument. “American antimodernism,” despite its culture of resistance, “unknowingly provided part of the psychological foundation for a streamlined liberal culture appropriate to twentieth-century consumer capitalism” (6). The modern history of stargazing has equally proven to be “a complex blend of accommodation and protest” that has seen industry profit from the popularity of celestial sights. Telescope factories worked overtime to meet the demands of starry-eyed consumers in the weeks leading up to Comet Halley’s arrival in 1910, as the practice of watching the skies for celestial visitors became increasingly fashionable among the social elite.²⁵ Well before then, in 1833, the lectures offered by the Halifax Mechanics Institute on the Leonids meteor storm²⁶

²⁵ See “Comets’ Tail May Light Sky” in the 19 May 1910 issue of the *Toronto Daily Star* for a brief description of how the public excitement that preceded Comet Halley led to increased activity in telescope factories.

²⁶ The 4 December 1833 issue of the *Novascotian* includes a long summary of the Halifax Mechanics Institute’s most recent meeting, during which time Dr. Chalmers, a guest lecturer, was invited to expound on the “virtues” of astronomy. In the previous week’s issue, the newspaper had followed up on the Leonid meteor shower by re-printing an article that had originally appeared in *The Yarmouth Herald* the week before. In the issues that appeared before and after Dr. Chalmer’s astronomy lecture were the first pieces on the Leonid storm, which ran in the 20 and 27 November issues, and two other related items that appeared one week later in the 11 December 1833 edition. The first of these was a re-printing of an account that appeared in the *New-York Commercial Advertiser*, and the second was an excerpt from Denison Olmstead’s many published explanations of the storm. For its part, Dr. Chalmers’s lecture provides an example of the way in which Kant’s theory of the mathematically sublime was adapted to describe celestial phenomena in early Canada. “Let us contemplate this earth, a planet in the Heavens,” Chalmers states, “with the moon as its tributary, one system of seven (not to mention the inferior planets more recently discovered), all moving round the sun as a common centre of light and heat [. . .] their whirlings through the regions of space at velocities far beyond human conception [. . .]. If we abandon this life of reflection,” Chalmers continues, “and inquire into the moral history of the universe, and infer from analogy that the innumerable stars set in the skies are like our own sun the centres of other

contributed to its broader mandate of increasing the productivity of workers; these public talks sought to reform labourers and tradesmen by exposing them to new forms of knowledge while, at the same time, distracting them from vice. Even today, amateur astronomy provides a safe alternative to more seductive forms of nocturnal pursuit whose lingering after-effects run counter to the maintenance of the domestic sphere and to the productivity of day.²⁷ The cultures of production and consumption that have come to envelope amateur astronomy are, however, only telltale signs of its widespread appeal. Even as its rituals become commodified, stargazing remains attuned to the fundamental incongruity of an urban-industrial world in which night never fully arrives. As Lears notes in his epilogue, “[a]ntimodern dissenters, despite their drift towards accommodation, nevertheless preserved a powerful insight – a feeling, sometimes clearly articulated and sometimes only dimly sensed, that the modern secular utopia was after all a fraud” (301). This particular “feeling” has proven itself adaptable to any number of ends, some of which are relatively benign, while others remain profoundly troubling.

As Lears points out, antimodernist sentiment was prevalent in Nazi Germany, where a prolonged obsession with recovering an authentic sense of nationhood and self, coupled with competing fixations on agrarianism and new forms of machinery,

systems moving in independent spheres [. . .] and of these far distant and million systems are clothed with vegetable and redolent with animal-life, the mind will be lost in the grandeur and magnificence of its own conceptions” (1).

²⁷ For more on the cultural meaning of amateur astronomy as a decidedly male pursuit, see the conclusion to this project.

contributed directly to the quest for purity that resulted in the mass murder of six million Jews and enormous numbers of others²⁸ (308-9). Hitler's regime also re-imagined the heavens above, having claimed for itself a cosmology that countered Einstein's supposedly "Jewish" theory of relativity. This adaptation of Hans Horbiger's World-Ice Theory extended the Third Reich's purview into the depths of Space while rationalizing its desire to possess all the territories within it. Given the role of antimodernism in the most disturbing events of the twentieth century, scholars seeking to rally public feelings or to redeem values that seem even remotely retreatist in nature cannot do so without acknowledging their horrifying potential.

The night sky has conjured the worst from the antimodern imagination and undoubtedly retains the potential to do so. Fortunately, among the very same stars, survivorship has also found a place. In a recent issue of *SkyNews*, the Canadian astronomer David Levi shares his "childhood memory of the evening of Kol Nidre, meaning 'all vows' – the holiest of and most important evening in the Jewish calendar. I must have been 12 or 13 years old at the time," Levi recalls. "After the service was over, I decided to walk home. The evening was clear and mild, with a bright 10-day-old gibbous Moon hanging in the south. As I walked, it occurred to me that Jewish people all over the world were, on this very night, walking under that same Moon. Suddenly, a

²⁸ The Nazis also targeted, among others, Slavs, the Romani, all non-Aryan races, the mentally and physically challenged, the wealthy, the poor, Christian clergy, Jehovah's Witnesses, Free Masons, and gay women and men, over fifty thousand of whom were sent to concentration camps (Niewyk 50).

thought struck me. Since the Jewish festivals are based on the lunar calendar, on every Kol Nidre night for the past 3,000 years, at least, people had walked under this very same 10-day-old Moon. Somewhere deep inside us lies a connection between the night sky and our many and varied systems of belief” (41). In Levi’s recollection, the moon is a timeless mirror that reflects the presence of generations – past, missing, and present – while the night sky itself serves as a time capsule for their memorialization.

Celestial sights have long been used to envision a people’s past and future. Canada’s identity as the North Star is not only testimony to the forms of freedom and agency that the night sky can help provide, but also further indication that celestial signs can be adopted as lasting symbols of hope and empowerment.²⁹ George Elliott Clarke’s decision to entitle his 1997 anthology of African-Canadian Literature *Eyeing the North Star*, for example, is an effort to recover a celestial sign from the past in order to re-

²⁹ A case in point is the international campaign Take Back the Night, which holds rallies and marches in cities and towns around the world to protest violence against women. Even though the promotional materials for each event are produced locally, and, therefore, vary from place to place, celestial imagery is a common theme (see fig. 3). In these visual narratives, the enchantment of the night is recruited to cast a positive light on the event and to naturalize the very agency that its participants seek for themselves and for others. Given the various ways in which male desire has, for centuries, conflated women with the night, the alignment of femininity, the stars, and the moon, in particular, is perhaps also a renegotiation of the terms of a relationship – between women and celestial signifiers – that has otherwise been decided by men. In the case of London, Ontario’s 2013 Take Back the Night March, what resounds from the promotional materials is a decidedly rural sense of solitude and freedom that is achieved, paradoxically, by walking city streets in solidarity with others. Even if the London poster pairs the idealization of the rural with a remarkably conventional female figure, it is equally an attempt to locate female subjectivity in a setting that is synonymous with release from care or worry. At the very centre of this act of reclamation is an instance of celestial communion, one whose enchanted nature means to counteract the otherwise perpetual threat of violence.

envision the present. By recruiting its associations with the abolitionist movement,³⁰ the underground railroad, and the flight from slavery into Canada, Clarke is able to position his anthology as contributing to a long history of striving towards liberation. “I walked with bold courage,” the escaping slave Henry Bibb recounts, “trusting in the arm of Omnipotence; guided by the unchangeable North Star by night, and inspired by an elevated thought that I was fleeing from a land of slavery and oppression [. . .]” (85). The North Star that appears in *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), *Narrative of William Wells Brown* (1847), and Martin Delaney’s *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859, 1862) would not become a part of the Canada cultural lexicon until Martin Luther King’s Massey Lecture *Conscience for Change* (1967), which sought Canada’s allegiance in the civil rights struggle by renewing longstanding ties with its citizens.

“Deep in our history of struggle for freedom,” King stated near the beginning of his broadcast, “Canada was the north star” (1). Insofar as Canada’s Centennial can be conceived of as having played a significant role in imagining the modern identity of the nation, King’s remarks were perfectly timed to make a lasting impression. Since King’s

³⁰ The most obvious example is Frederick Douglass’s anti-slavery newspaper the *North Star*, which was published from 1838 until 1851. Douglass himself, however, was opposed to migration to Canada, since leaving the United States did little to redress the conditions of slaves who remained there (Finkelman 235). His decision to publish under the banner of the *North Star*, then, was more the result of the symbol’s popularity, its cultural credence, and its potential to galvanize his readership.

idealization of Canada as a place of heavenly freedom,³¹ what cultural currency the North Star retains is the product of its compatibility with Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, and of its capacity to serve as an immediately recognizable symbol of freedom and black bravery. As Clarke undoubtedly appreciates, such gestures are antimodern;³² yet, they also illustrate perfectly Susan Stewart's theory that nostalgia enables people whose lives are not represented in official histories to create spaces for themselves along the timeline by adding their own stories to what ultimately is a culturally-constructed past. "Hostile to history and its invisible origins," Stewart writes, "nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality" (23). The North Star, for Clarke, is one such "future-past," a celestial symbol whose promise remains steadfast in the long night of inequality and oppression.

For stargazers and dark-sky advocates alike, the impulse to seek novelty in celestial events is one that can quite reasonably be construed as a regressive form of escapism that doubles as a sign of discontent with modern life. Raymond Williams's observation that nineteenth-century nostalgia for the pastoral located a false sense of

³¹ "Heaven was the word for Canada," King stated in his Massey Lecture, "and the Negro sang of the hope that his escape on the underground railroad would carry him there" (1). Clarke addresses the various ways in which Canada was conceptualized by American civil rights leaders in part one of *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002), where he refers to their idealization of Canada as a "venerable archetype in African-American Thought" (28).

³² Clarke's Introduction to *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing* (1991) anticipates the more in-depth analysis of antimodernism he would go on to perform in *Odysseys Home*.



Fig. 3. 2013 promotional poster for London, Ontario's Take Back the Night March.

purity in the past remains true in a number of ways; those who look back idyllically will, at times, see visions of nature that conform to their present needs (*The Country and the City* 9-12). Yet, if the veracity of such claims merits scrutiny, so too does the impulse to correct the underlying desires that motivate their expression, since those who look up at the heavens equally negate what they know *not* to be true. To live in a city, after all, is to be intensely aware of its blinding artifice: over-lit storefronts, illuminated billboards, the hollow paths of searchlights tracing figure eights in the air – these spectacles are all too familiar. As an affective response, looking up is an affirmation of the legitimate desire to experience the cosmos in an unpolluted state and to re-negotiate a contract with the ecosphere that the “luminous fog” of late capitalism has surreptitiously voided (Cinzano 689).³³ Starved of darkness and the reprieve that night provides, stargazers welcome celestial sights as pleasing diversions because their appearance gives rise to these desires, and because they provide occasions for their expression. To witness them is to grant oneself a momentary stay against the alienating effects of modernity; to remember them later is to resist the commodification of time while simultaneously easing its passage.

Working from this premise, this dissertation is organized into chapters that reflect the various ways in which Canadian writers have claimed a sense of cosmological smallness, and sought to extend it to others through their work. Starting with reactions to

³³ The declaration that “[m]ankind is preceding to envelope itself in a luminous fog” appears frequently in the literature of dark-sky advocacy. This statement was originally published in the introduction to an article entitled “The First World Atlas of the Artificial Night Sky Brightness,” by the Italian astronomers P. Cinzano, F. Falchi, and C.D. Elvidge.

the Leonids meteor storm of 1833, Chapter One considers the ways in which reactions to this recurring celestial event found expression within the public sphere, while at the same time considering the meaning of these accounts from an ecological perspective. Through its attention to the life and work of L.M. Montgomery, Chapter Two examines the role of astronomy and stargazing in Montgomery's journals, novels, and scrapbooks. Chapter Three builds on this work by considering how the arrival of Modernism shaped literary depictions of the night sky. W.W.E. Ross's work provides valuable perspective on the ways in which poetry, impressionism, and mysticism overlap. Finally, Chapter Four traces celestial imagery through the poetry and prose of P.K. Page in order to come to terms with the relationship between the dark-sky movement and the idea of a planetary home. Together, these chapters aim to provide a context in which to understand the historical, cultural, environmental, and affective forces that shape literary depictions of the night sky in Canada. While no single study could possibly explain precisely why the night sky intrigues so many, the evaluation of these literary texts nevertheless seeks to establish a theoretical and historical framework in which to understand literary stargazing as an integral component of the dark-sky movement. Favouring lyrical persistence over nocturnal lament, the Nova Scotian poet Kenneth Leslie once set sail to "stubborn stars," his imagination desiring those truths that only take shape in a sea of dark (1). Seventy-five years later, his finest sonnet still invites us to follow – headlong into the passages we find in search of better light to read by.

CHAPTER ONE

Recollecting Light:
Accounts of the Leonids over Nineteenth-Century Canada

Far from the city lights, the sky is roaring.
Particles no bigger than grains of sand

strike the atmosphere at 40 miles a second.
Some gutter fast as they fall, others

shoot over the horizon, just grazing
earth's envelope, a lion flicking its tail.

-*Steve McOrmond, Primer on the Hereafter (2006) (36)*

In his decidedly lyrical re-imagining of the Leonids dramatic return in 1999, Steve McOrmond suggests a connection between the random streaks of light overhead and the paths of relationships here on Earth. The memory of the shower provides a framework in which to remember a past union, one marked invariably by attempts “to fit the ellipses / of [two] lives into something grander,” such as “mean / solar time, debris clouds,” and “celestial / precipitation” (9-11). These motifs coalesce in the poem’s final two lines, where the connection between desire, loss, and the memory of the lights overhead becomes clear. “We stayed until our necks / ached from looking up,” the speaker recalls, “until we had nothing / left to wish for” (14-16).¹

¹ In another poem, “Red Planet,” McOrmond employs a similar strategy as he humorously sets a married couple’s argument against the backdrop of Mars’s dramatic close approach in

It is not difficult to imagine such scenes unfolding across Canada, rural roadsides and darkened fields playing host to those who, by chance or careful planning, have gathered to witness debris from the periodic Comet Tempel Tuttle streak through the autumn night. Even though the Earth's atmosphere plays host to as many as twenty-one meteor showers over the course of a calendar year, the Leonids take up more pages than most in the Canadian stargazer's log book. While the shower itself is well-positioned for viewers in the northern hemisphere, the more pressing explanation for the attention the Leonid's have received in Canadian writing is their remarkable zenithal hourly rate, which, during peak years, is as much as fifty² more than its nearest rival – displays that justify the anticipation the fall meteor shower generates among sky watchers (Jenniskens 10).

Yet the Leonids greatest display over North America was anything but expected, the eruption of an estimated 200,000 meteorites within a space of approximately six

2003: "Mars shines on us, / million miles away, a whisker / in astronomical terms. Approximately / the distance between a man and his emotions, / my wife observes" (6-10). The vast astronomical distance between a celestial object and its observers serves as a metaphor for the sense of isolation and detachment that permeates the poem. For the couple depicted, a rare celestial event appears equally as a welcome distraction and as a source of wonder, one that alleviates uncertainty, sets conflict aside, and brings two people together, if temporarily, in a moment of shared observance. For stargazers and poets alike, the backdrop of night appears as a sympathetic text to be read, and each successive reading, in turn, renews the sky's place among its many readers.

² In *Leonid Storm Research* (2001), Peter Jenniskens, Frans Rietmeijer, Noah Brosch, and Mark Fonda remark that the zenithal hourly rate for the 1999 Leonids was fifty times higher than that of the Perseids's in the same year. The Leonids and the Persieds are generally regarded as the two most prominent meteor showers that are visible from Canada.

hours catching the colonial population of North America entirely off-guard. The most intense meteor storm on record, the Leonids of 1833 left many in a state of religious fervor, certain that the apocalypse was upon them. Churches filled, families were awakened in the middle of the night, and whole communities gathered to witness what seemed to many to presage the end of the world. A Virginian man, convinced that the storm was a sign of God's wrath, murdered his still sleeping wife. As an observer from Missouri notes in the *Salt River Journal*: “[f]orcibly were we reminded of that remarkable passage in Revelations [sic] which speaks of a great red dragon [. . .] drawing the third part of the stars of heaven and casting them to the earth” (“Phenomena as Observed at *Bowling Green*” 382). Mark Littman's history of the Leonid meteor storms, *The Heavens on Fire*, gathers together such examples of extreme behaviour and many more. According to Littman, the storm saw old feuds resolved, long-standing enemies become friends, and whole congregations speaking together in tongues, their church-hall voices filling the air as meteorites streaked through the dark (5).

Yet accounts of the storm were more varied than Littman suggests. In Halifax, a considerably more tempered description of the celestial event appeared in the *Novascotian*:

On looking out of the West window of my cottage in Dartmouth this morning I was surprised to observe a number of Stars shooting rapidly from the zenith towards the horizon, leaving very brilliant trains of light after them[.] I immediately went to the southern also to the eastern windows and observed the same appearance, twenty or thirty stars were in motion; in consequence of this

extraordinary occurrence, I immediately called my family who also observed the same thing, and sat at the windows, for the space of half an hour, admiring.

(“Singular Phenomena” 3)

In 1833, Dartmouth was still a small, outlying village consisting largely of tradesmen and labourers who worked at local enterprises, such as the cast-iron foundry and the cut nail shop. Until a new steam service began in 1825, residents traveling to Halifax had to take ferry boats to cross the harbour, a journey that seems to underscore Dartmouth’s status as a separate, yet proximal, establishment. Observing from a “cottage” just outside Halifax,³ the author of the account that appeared in the *Novascotian* was well-positioned to place the town and the storm in perspective:

While looking out of the window, the town and harbour became suddenly illuminated, as I thought by lightening, but on running to the South Windows we perceived a brilliant meteor had burst to the East of Fort Clarence, leaving a brilliant train of light in the sky which lasted I suppose 20 seconds after we reached the window; at the time we saw the greatest light, we heard an explosion distinctly – the shooting of the stars continued until daylight had so far advanced as to obscure them; a strong breeze to the west was blowing at the same time.

Being determined to see as much as possible of this singular phenomena I went

³ While the reference to his “cottage in Dartmouth” does conjure images of rustic retreat, the nineteenth-century use of the term actually refers to any number of rural dwellings, the full range of which included everything “from a peasant’s simple hut” to “a habitation worthy of a gentleman of fortune” (Malton 3).

out and observed a bright cloud to the N.E. and this surprising shower of Stars falling in every direction. (3)

The use of details such as the location of the windows and the time spent in observation speak to the author's investment in reproducing the memorable nature of his experience. Given its positive connotations, the persistent presence of a strong westerly "breeze" can also be read as both factual account and favoured detail.⁴ Significant, too, is the way in which the author locates himself in relation to such local landmarks as "the town and the harbour" and "Fort Clarence." The classicist Frances Yates describes the "art of memory" as "seeing the places," and then "seeing the images stored on the places" (20). In this account, the familiarity of "town" and "harbour" serve as the fixed points over which the starry "images" appear. The act of recounting the local and the distant together creates an aesthetic pairing that reveals, in turn, how topographical elements help to re-imagine celestial scenes that otherwise belie description. Moreover, the author's decision to wake his family so that they, too, could sit "at the windows, for the space of half an hour,

⁴ In Greek mythology, the west wind is personified by Zephyrus, the god of spring, who transports the beautiful Psyche under the cover of darkness to an ornate locale where her marriage with Cupid is consummated. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," the west wind is also responsible for "the steep sky's commotion," having shaken "from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean, / Angels of rain lightening" (15-18). Considered together, the west wind's mythology and subsequent interpretations include great feats of strength and romantic compassion, which may explain why, as the Leonids travelled overhead, the Dartmouth speaker thought to make note of "a strong breeze to the west" that happened to be "blowing at the same time" ("Singular Phenomena" 3).

admiring” stems from the desire to share with those closest to him a rare celestial event. In a similar account of the storm, the early Canadian memoirist Cannif Haight recalls how “the sight was so grand and beautiful” that his father “came in and woke us all up, and then walked up the road and roused some of the neighbours” (238). Waking others in the small hours to experience a rare celestial event in early Canada was likely not so different a gesture than it is now, although a similar instance of shared communal observance of the night sky within city limits today would require nothing short of a massive power outage.

Similar attempts to make sense of the storm would later appear in a number of other published accounts of early settler life in Canada, many of which have yet to receive anything more than passing attention. Insufficiently sensational for a popular audience, these accounts of the storm even appear to have been overlooked by astronomers whose research includes chronicling the history of celestial events. In his study of the Leonids, the Canadian astronomer Peter Brown is, for example, careful to establish the pressing need to correct “the propensity for subjective interpretation of the historical shower record” (289). Variations on the word “correct” actually appear twenty-nine times in Brown’s article, each instance of which reinforces the idea that a scientifically accurate version of a celestial phenomenon such as Leonids is more desirable – and, therefore, more valuable – than a subjective response. While such accuracy is undoubtedly important within certain contexts, Brown’s Baconian view also claims for itself a monopoly on knowing the night – one that effectively downplays the importance of any account not couched in the language of objectivity. The historical

consistency here (as well as the overriding irony) is that meteor science actually grew out of a desire to quantify what was otherwise a profoundly moving experience for the colonial population of North America.⁵ Indeed, the birth of this field was largely a process through which the subjective was placed aside in favour of establishing a rational record of what had actually occurred. The majority of this work was done, initially at least, by Donald Olmsted, an American astronomy teacher who himself had been awakened in the night to witness the Leonid meteor storm of 1833 (Littman 13). Describing Olmsted's methodology, Mark Littman explains that he "dutifully recorded [. . .] oddities just in case they might be significant, but focused his attention on what he gauged to be the essential science of the event" (13). This "essential science" was successful in determining a number of the meteor stream's characteristics, not the least of which was that the Leonids were, in fact, a recurring event – and not, as some argued, a sign of the impending apocalypse. Yet, in the process of discrediting superstitious assessments that generated unnecessary public fervor, the nascent field of meteor science also failed to appreciate the emotional complexity and ecological significance of these more personal accounts of the Leonids.

William Cronon's "The Uses of Environmental History" (1993) helps explain why scholars committed to environmentalism also overlook certain texts. In an effort to make others appreciate the severity of environmental degradation, the public face of

⁵ The early morning storm of meteors seen in the eastern United States on 13 November 1833," writes the comet historian Donald K. Yeomans, "marked the birth of modern meteor astronomy" (492).

environmental advocacy is most often a forlorn one, he notes, its grave expressions seeking to inspire a similar gravity in others that corresponds with the threats at hand. Reflecting on his own experiences in the classroom, Cronon concludes that the public performance of such “hopelessness” ultimately does a disservice to those who will carry the burden of environmental problems into the future (2). The same may well be true of environmental discourse as a whole, which is still learning to balance negative and positive affects in its efforts to inspire change. While it is certainly true that celebrations of natural wonders often seem blind to their fragility, and, therefore, become complicit in a broader politics of positive psychological imaginings that consistently seeks to endorse the status quo,⁶ environmentalism’s longstanding relationship with the elegiac can just as easily be construed as a form of “cruel optimism,” wherein the initial desire for the realization of more sustainable practices now competes with a mediating attachment to the worn conventions of lament (Berlant 33). The elegiac is, after all, a particularly mournful method of affectively mapping the present; in instances of proleptic elegy, the speaker even goes so far as to locate his or her ecological subject in the territory of the already lost.⁷ Rescue teams searching for survivors never begin with the assumption that

⁶ See Chris Hedges’s discussion of positive psychology, passive citizenship, and corporate America in Chapter Four of *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (2009).

⁷ “Everywhere,” Patrick Brantlinger writes of the depiction of Indigenous Peoples in nineteenth-century colonial writing, “the future-perfect mode of proleptic elegy mourns the lost object before it is completely lost” (4). What Brantlinger refers to as the “wished-for lack that is [. . .] an all-too-real obstacle to identification” has meaning for the dark-sky movement as well, and not only because of the incongruity between those regions of the world fully engulfed in artificial light and those that retain their view of the stars. As Brian Johnson has

none remain, and yet works of environmental advocacy consistently send forth their missives from a place of present and future loss where catastrophe is permanently imminent.⁸

Even if the most ethical responses to ecological exploitation inevitably lead to disconsolate states, relinquishing the multitude of emotional responses at one's disposal to convey current states of ecological crisis inevitably has the effect of limiting the intimate pathways through which an audience can be reached. Dark-sky advocacy, in particular, stands to benefit from the mobilization of the wide range of responses that celestial events have generated over time, since these not only serve as important reminders of the night sky's impact on humanity in the past, but also provide telling signs

observed, “[t]he nationalist-imperialist form of extinction discourse Brantlinger describes resonates powerfully with the proleptic elegies of conservation discourse” (339). Proleptic elegies for the environment, in other words, cannot be read as somehow existing apart from the colonial tradition of the proleptic elegy, even if green prolepsis means to serve as “a dire warning and an impetus to humanitarian intervention” (339). To be clear, the elegiac is one thing; the proleptic elegy is quite another. Expressing grief at states of environmental degradation is quite different from claiming future losses as inevitabilities, since extinction narratives are always haunted by assumptions of certitude and superiority that have made – and that continue to make – post-colonial violence possible.

⁸ Scholars of the night seem particularly inclined to eulogize its end. William Chapman Sharpe's *New York Nocturne: The City After Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography 1850-1950* (2008) and A. Roger Ekirch's *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (2006), arguably the two most influential cultural histories of the night to be published in the last ten years, both conclude on elegiac notes that lament the loss of their cherished subjects. While the recognition of environmental degradation is most welcome, the decision to locate this information at the end of their respective studies suggests that the night has arrived at its end as well. Such concluding statements have the after-effect of rendering the descriptions of night that precede them all the more dramatic for having taken place in settings that are, apparently, permanently lost to pollution and time.

of its relative absence from the present. The major risk of mobilizing these narratives, almost all of which convey a sense of fondness for celestial sights and their witnesses, is that the more troubling aspects of Canada's past are obscured by an otherwise well-intentioned effort to establish the darkness of early Canadian skies as a referential benchmark. Certainly, the night sky remains a contested space, a site where cultures collide, where gender inequalities make themselves known, and where legacies of imperialism can be traced.⁹ The question remains whether these accounts can also serve to remind the still dominant cultures of Canada that the night sky has undergone a considerable transformation as a result of their presence. "The night was cloudless and

⁹ Readers familiar with the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (1899) will recall that Fathers Millet and Le Jeune used their ability to predict eclipses to discredit Indigenous knowledge in an effort to convert the Iroquois and the Huron respectively (Millet 181-83; Le Jeune 137). These more pernicious aspects of the history of the night sky have not escaped those who would see the splendor of the stars restored. In its work with Unama'ki College, the Institute for Integrative Science and Health at Cape Breton University has aligned "Indigenous ways of knowing and Western scientific knowledge" in the optimistic hope "that the world is open to a new science paradigm, one that is inclusive of multiple perspectives and cultures, and one that is respectfully and meaningfully engaged with communities" ("About the Institute" n. pag.). Despite its success, a lack of institutional support for its unconventional approach led to the program's suspension in 2007. Even so, the optimism of its proponents was not misplaced. A new paradigm of cultural astronomy is developing in Canada, one in which names are added – or returned – to a shared cosmological record from which the dark-sky movement can gain momentum. The real strength of these efforts lies in the mutual recognition that western and Indigenous epistemologies are equally essential components of educational curriculums in Canada. Moreover, since the foundation of this partnership is the shared sense that western science on its own is incapable of preventing further environmental degradation, the need to come to terms with considerably less empirical ways of knowing is all the more pressing. The ecocritical impetus is, then, also one of coming to terms with the affinity that stargazers from many cultures feel for the night sky and of trying to understand what the distinctiveness of such expressions mean within the public sphere.

beautifully clear,” John Howison remarks in *Sketches of Upper Canada* (1821), “and the stars gave so much light that I could have read a book without any difficulty” (104). The growing popularity of sky surveys¹⁰ among Canadian environmentalists changes the meaning of such statements in retrospect, further revealing proto-ecological affinities that register in dramatic fashion the natural spectacle of unpolluted skies. Given the influential nature of *Sketches of Upper Canada* as a whole, the description that Howison provides of the Upper Canadian night sky in Letter XII is worth here repeating in full:

The skies in Canada, during winter, are peculiarly transparent and dazzling. The brilliancy of the different constellations, and the distinctness of the galaxy, make a stranger almost believe he has been removed to a new hemisphere, and brought nearer to the heavens than he ever was before. Fine skies are generally supposed to have an influence upon the character of those who live under them; however, the inhabitants of Upper Canada cannot be produced as an evidence of the correctness of this prevalent opinion. (104-05)

Howison’s description of the night sky stands as an important forerunner to the accounts of the Leonids explored in this chapter. Reflecting on the social dimension of the practice of natural history in Victorian Canada, Carl Berger has observed that “reports [. . .] were

¹⁰ While criticized by some for being overly subjective, the Bortle Dark-Sky scale has nevertheless become popular among amateur astronomers and dark-sky advocates as a method of determining the darkness of the night sky from a given area. Originated by John E. Bortle, the scale consists of nine categories, which range from pristine Class 1 skies to the Class 9 skies typically observed from urban areas (Bortle 126-29). The real value of Bortle’s scale resides not so much in its scientific accuracy as it does in its potential to call attention to the degradation of the night sky and to build community through the shared use of a simple, yet reasonably effective environmental tool.

often mingled with accounts of human activity and anecdotes concerning the observer as well as the observed” (14). The humorous nature of Howison’s remarks would, in fact, reappear in the gentle satires written in the wake of the Leonids’ return in 1866, many of which owe much to the British tradition of natural history that constituted “an accessible form of science” (Berger xii). Widely practiced in Victorian Canada, the popularity of natural history was not only the result of a pervasive willingness to view nature as a reflection of God’s harmonious designs, but also a reflection of the desire to see knowledge assume increasingly utilitarian and profitable forms (Zeller 3; Berger 10). While this may be true of natural history as a whole, encounters with nature in all its forms invariably engender responses that differ in form and content, some of which are ultimately more practical – and pious¹¹ – than others.

Stories about the night sky over early Canada merit attention in their own right. Since the modern pursuit of astronomy in North America was virtually non-existent prior to the Leonid’s arrival, the perceived value of a particular celestial account depended less

¹¹ It is worth noting that the influential English theologian William Paley was careful to distinguish astronomy from other scientific pursuits. “My opinion of astronomy,” Paley writes in *Natural Theology* (1802), “has always been that it is *not* [Paley’s emphasis] the best medium through which to prove the agency of an intelligent Creator: but that, this being proved, it shows, beyond all other sciences, the magnificence of his operations” (198). On the one hand, Paley’s hesitance is consistent with his belief that spectacular revelations are not necessary to prove the existence of God; such knowledge is, instead, in Paley’s reckoning, a natural component of what it means to be human. On the other hand, Paley was making a rather pragmatic observation that the laymen’s capacity to observe intelligent patterns in the sky is limited in comparison to the complicated patterns that are readily evident in a stone or a leaf (186). This helps explain why many of the accounts of the Leonids are not especially devout.

on the expertise of the observer than it did on the relevancy of the details that he or she provided. In the absence of the hierarchy of an established scientific community, the celestial witness narrative became an early North American genre all its own, one through which local nocturnal phenomena could be recorded by anyone literate enough to employ an evolving set of imported European literary and scientific conventions. The particular way these conventions manifested themselves grew from local assumptions about the order of the natural world, the observer's role in his or her particular community, the medium in which the observations were expressed, and, more often than not, the specific religious values held by the witness. These narratives captured the likeness of the regions that their authors had come to inhabit by recording chorographical interpretations of atmospheric phenomena and by communicating these back to a European readership whose interest in these descriptions conferred legitimacy upon them.¹² In the process, they also contributed to the environmental history of the night sky over Canada, which, even among the most conscientious of scholars,¹³ continues to exist

¹² “When eighteenth-century provincial naturalists recorded remarkable meteors,” Vladimir Jankovic remarks in *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather, 1650-1820* (2001), “they didn’t do it because they saw such phenomena merely as Baconian data, but because they practiced chorography and sought visibility within the national republic of letters” (8). Chorography is, in this sense, the Ptolemaic practice that values the “likeness” of a place over the boundaries of the surfaces that may otherwise define it. In bringing it to the fore, Jankovic understands events in the atmosphere to have meaning in relation to the communities that experience them.

¹³ Laurel Sefton MacDowell’s recent *An Environmental History of Canada* (2012) is, for example, admirable work of scholarship, and yet the compromised state of circadian rhythms receives no attention there. It remains to be seen whether the American ecocritic Paul Bogard’s *The End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light*

in a state of neglect. Offering vignettes of Canadian communities before the arrival of the street light, these candid recollections from 1833, 1866, and 1899 go far in explaining the night sky's longstanding appeal.

...

“I think it was on the 14th of November, 1833,” Samuel Strickland recalls in his two-volume autobiography *Twenty-Seven Years in Canada* (1853), “that I witnessed one of the most splendid spectacles in the world” (208). For Strickland, this moment and its recollection offer the opportunity to showcase the marvels of nature in North America and to create a link between its splendor and the English imagination's power to render lyrically fleeting instances of beauty. Strickland's nocturnal chorography, even as it attempts to capture his personal experience with the storm, is actually collaborative: it begins with a description of being awakened in the night, and then proceeds to the public perception of the Leonids, which includes references to “scientific” and popular speculation as to the storm's nature. Settler interpretations of the world after dark were also colored by divergent theories about the nature of the atmosphere, the movement of celestial bodies, and the spread of diseases such as cholera that were thought to travel by night. The cholera outbreak of 1832 certainly brought a range of theories into public discourse, all of which attempted to account for the disease's aggressive nature and the

(2013) will generate similar projects in Canada, or if scholarship in support of dark-sky advocacy will remain largely an American endeavour.

considerable damage that it caused. Prominent among these was the medieval notion that dangerous contagions were rampant in the air after dark and that the sun and the moon were somehow responsible for the spread of cholera. The sol-lunar hypothesis, which assigned a subtle sense of gothic horror to the moon, in particular, was similar to the notion of cometary influence, insofar as both theories proposed that the movement of heavenly bodies was potentially detrimental to human health.¹⁴ Another related theory suggested that cholera was the result of stagnant marshlands and decomposing matter

¹⁴ The Quebec painter Joseph Légaré borrowed from such lore to illustrate the damage and disorder caused by the outbreak of 1832. A full moon presides over his painting *Le grand cholera de Québec* (1837), its ominous presence in the otherwise shrouded night suggesting its culpability in the spread of the disease. Meanwhile, at street level, fumigation fires lend their eerie light to the row houses along Buade and Desjardins, the very few figures along their walkways appearing in sharp contrast to the painting's crowded foreground, where citizens are overrun by illness and despair. Légaré's choice of the city's marketplace is not accidental. A copier of religious paintings and portraits by trade, Légaré adopts here W. Walton's benign daytime scene *View of the Marketplace and Catholic Church, Taken from the Barracks, Fabrique Street* (1832), in which the town appears more like a quaint village, and the marketplace a civilized centre for commerce and trade. Légaré replaces Walton's pleasant meeting of the gentry with such rituals as the carrying away of the dead and the last rites of the sick administered by a Catholic priest. In the foreground, a man spontaneously succumbs to the disease, while others look on, uncertain how to care for the fallen. If *Le grand cholera de Québec* relays a sense of panic, it also suggests a sense of conscience and community. Within the disarray of Légaré's night scape, the artist nevertheless depicts the underclass as conscientiously attending to their sick as best they can. While cholera certainly killed indiscriminately, class did play a role in dictating who would or would not survive, as better living and traveling conditions favoured the wealthy. In both his role on the Quebec Board of Health and as a lobbyist for the French working class, Légaré was especially attuned to this reality, even if he himself belonged to the relatively small French Canadian elite. His decision to create a night scene, then, one of the first in Canadian painting, suggests that this artist saw in its the shadowy realms those social inequalities that were hidden by day. Art historian John R. Porter argues that Légaré felt a "profound attachment to his town and his fellow-citizens" (42). In keeping with this sense of attachment, Légaré's paintings demonstrate that he maintained an ongoing sense of responsibility to those less fortunate than himself, and that he possessed an intuitive understanding of how the political and social realities of Quebec differed by day and night.

emanating malignant phosphors into the night air. Still yet others argued that the disease had emerged from the bowels of the Earth during recent earthquakes in Southeast Asia; that it was the result of imbalances in the electrical matter that made up the atmosphere; that mosquitoes were carrying it from person to person, or that cholera could only be caught by exposing oneself “to the atmosphere of the sick” (Godfrey 8).

While at least one observer in the United States believed that the Leonids had been sent by God to ensure the “chemical restoration” of the atmosphere,¹⁵ such theories appear not to have captivated Strickland. He concludes his account of the Leonids instead with an excerpt from his oldest sister’s poem on the subject, Agnes Strickland’s (1796 – 1874) “The Shooting Star.”

‘Oh for an angel’s mighty wing,
To track thy radiant flight,
Thou unexplain’d, mysterious thing,
That glancest through the night.

“Traveller of paths to man unknown,
Through boundless fields of air,

¹⁵ An anonymous account that appeared in the *New-York Commercial Advertiser* describes “the magnificent meteoric shower” as a sign of “the goodness of God to man” (“For the Commercial Advertiser” 2). “In this glorious exhibition of the descent of the meteoric fire,” the chronicler states, “I thought I beheld the action of the Almighty Creator and Preserver, visibly restoring to our atmosphere some unknown principle of health which had been lost or injured” (2). The article was later republished in the 11 Dec. 1833 issue of the *Novascotian*.

Scarce marked by mortal eyes, ere gone,

None knows, none guesseth where. (1-8)

Another five stanzas of Agnes Strickland's poem are included in Strickland's account, the implications of which are worth considering in full. The poem's inclusion, most immediately, has the effect of underscoring the lyrical beauty of the storm, as if to say, in short, that shooting stars are the stuff of poetry. Yet the poet's description of the celestial phenomenon also places special emphasis on its "mysterious" and ephemeral nature, one that is "[s]care[ly] marked by mortal eyes, ere gone," where exactly, "None knows" (209). Strickland's celestial traveler is less an allegorical stand-in for God's mysterious journey through the universe than it is a unique source of marvel in itself. His insistence on "well known fact[s]" and observations made "without exaggeration" suggests that he favored a less mystical approach, even if, in recollecting the storm, he was eager to concede that "[n]o description [. . .] can give an adequate idea of the magnificence of the scene," one that he "would not willingly have missed" (209). More important, the inclusion of "The Shooting Star" creates a narrative bridge to his sister writing in England.¹⁶ Of all the Stricklands, Agnes enjoyed the greatest reputation as a writer, and

¹⁶ Such acts of homing would reappear in future accounts of the shower. "I can well remember the 1866 display when I was a boy at school at Christ's hospital in London, England," recalls one Regina resident in 1932. "We were roused from our beds and permitted to witness the wonderful illumination. It made a lasting impression" ("Seek Snapshot" 1). This memory provides M.H. Tallant, a "well-known Boy Scout official," not only with a sense of continuity between English and Canadian skies, but also with a lasting sense of enchantment that connects youth to old age. Later on in the article, Tallant aligns himself with a "girl or boy" who "might become a noted astronomer," and, in so doing, creates a bridge from his own past to a possible future, one in which both his and their memories will

so the authority of her voice offers yet another controlling measure that legitimizes this remarkable moment in the colonial experience. The storm itself was not visible from England due to cloud cover, so while Strickland's account is first hand, Agnes's is fancifully imagined, or likely reminiscent of another encounter, real or imagined, with the skies over England. In this way, English territory is transposed into a re-imagined night-scape of North America, the "boundless fields" of which render the night sky, quite literally, in topographical terms.

This insistence on seeing the sky as landscape is certainly not unique to the Strickland imagination. Samuel Thompson, too, recreates the night as hosting travelers over a heavenly terrain. "It was one night November following," Thompson recalls in *Reminiscences of a Canadian Pioneer* (1884), "when our axeman, William Whitelaw, who had risen from bed at eleven o'clock to fetch a new log for the fire shouted to us to come out and see a strange sight" (Thompson 73). Thompson rises from his slumber to venture outside where he is immediately "transfixed with astonishment and admiration" (73). In settler accounts of the Leonids, the starting point of disturbed slumber¹⁷ suggests

coalesce in a layered public record of nocturnal affinities that spans not only distinct territories, but also successive generations.

¹⁷ In the lead up to the Leonids of 1899, one resident of Dartmouth recounts his disappointment at having slept through the shower of 1866. "I was greatly excited," he tells *The Halifax Herald*, "and have always regretted that he [his board, a Mr. Angus Mc Innis] did not have me wakened" ("Star Gazers Have a Chance" 9). His consternation was apparently worsened by the fact that Mr. Mc Innis described them "as forming a truly

that the domestic setting¹⁸ was suddenly replaced with the “clear and frosty” air of a mid-November night (209). Strickland, like Thompson, was woken “between two and three

wonderful spectacle,” and, “[d]uring the following years [. . .] often spoke of them” (“Star Gazers Have a Chance” 9).

¹⁸ When considering such excursions, it is worth keeping in mind that the domestic realm had its own atmosphere as well, one that was populated by its particular sights, scents, and sounds, many of which were most striking at night. Simmering meals, soaking bran, lye soap, wet wool, wet leather, stored lime – these smells and many others mingled with the still stronger scent of candles and lamps burning in the early Canadian home. As Loris S. Russell notes in his history of artificial lighting in Canada, *A Heritage of Light* (1968), “The nineteenth century was the age of lighting. [More was done] in those hundred years to push back the darkness than in all [the] time before” (318). Accompanying these early efforts “to push back the darkness” was the inevitable scent of burning animal fat, in lamp or candle form. In Canada West, tallow was more common than fish or whale oil, for the simple reason that it was more readily available; meanwhile, in New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia, local fisheries made marine fuels a viable choice. The strong scent of burning fish oil, however, made it quite unpopular (65). The slightly sweet, sickening smell of burning tallow was not much better, but this was scent that accompanied many settlers to bed at night, emanating as it did most often from either a candle or a tin betty lamp, named so possibly after the German term *besser*, meaning “better,” or *bette*, “the old form of the word bed” (53). As Russell remarks, “[t]his style of lamp was used in New England and was probably brought to Canada by United Empire Loyalists” (53). The betty lamp was preceded by the *cruisie*, a simpler design that owes its name to the Scottish word *cruse*, or “vessel for oil” (50). While messier than *bettys*, *cruisies* “work well with tallow or lard, but the usual fuel in Canada was simply a piece of fat” (50). It was perhaps this simplicity that made the *cruisie* popular in eastern Canada, as the heat from the oil itself provided the light, and the wick was often just a twisted piece of cotton cloth (51). In any case, such lamps were essential to such households, as it would be at least another sixty years until electric power illuminated them, and, in some cases, much longer. Curiosity about electricity, however, was already very much present. “When the frosts were most intense,” Catharine Parr Traill notes, “I noticed that when I undressed, my clothes [. . .] gave out when moved a succession of sounds [. . .] and in the absence of a candle emitted sparks of a pale whitish blue light, similar to the flashes produced by cutting loaf-sugar in the dark (127). This static electricity speaks most immediately to the dryness of the winter air. Its inclusion in Traill’s narrative, however, also defines such “pale whitest blue light” as already having a place in the domestic sphere. Electric light, at this point, is not yet a desired commodity or a source of pollution that

o'clock in the morning" and told "that it lightened incessantly" (209). Observers moved quickly outdoors, and, met with the strangeness of the celestial phenomena, employ what taxonomy they have to render the distant in familiar terms. "Those who have looked upwards during a fall of snow," Thompson reasons,

will remember how the large flakes seem to radiate from a centre. Thus I believe astronomers account for the appearance of these shower of stars, by the circumstance that they meet the earth full in its orbit, and so dart past it from an opposite point, like a flight of birds confronting a locomotive, or a storm of hail directly facing a vessel under full steam (74).

While observers such as Thompson were familiar enough with astronomical principles not to misconstrue the storm as a local phenomenon, both he and Strickland still frame their perception of celestial events in relation to meteorological conditions. In describing the "splendid appearance of the Aurora Borealis," Strickland states that "[it] is seldom seen during the very severe months, or during very severe weather" (211). This observation suggests a tangible connection between the northern lights and the local progression of the seasons. To bear witness to the celestial sights, then, is also to bear witness to the weather that frames their appearance. Thompson, in his choice of metaphors for the Leonid storm, further conflates the seasons and the stars by describing

obscures the night sky, but rather a natural by-product of settler living, one that would have included, among many other activities, the "cutting [of] loaf-sugar in the dark" (127).

the meteorites as “large flakes” of snow. The weather of the landscape becomes the weather of the nightscape, a process through which the observer not only renders the distant in local terms, but also reveals his or her intellectual and emotional investment in the phenomena. “I have since read all the descriptions of meteoric showers I could in our scientific annals, and watched year after year for a return of the same wonderful vision, but neither in the records of history nor otherwise,” Thompson pines, “since that night, have I read of or seen anything so marvelously beautiful” (75).

Despite his disappointment, Thompson’s insistence that he returned “year after year” also gestures towards a kind of hope and investment in the sky over his southeastern Ontario home. For settlers such as Strickland and Thompson, the lights that traveled the night’s terrain are unmistakably a source of marvel and comfort, and their descriptions are perfectly in tune with what would prove to be a longstanding sentiment in Canada. In the memorable closing passage of *The Watch That Ends the Night* (1959), Hugh MacLennan’s narrator remembers fondly that “the sky was not merely a night sky, but a radiance illuminating [his] fatigue” (369). Its redemptive powers in full view, this fictional night shines down sympathetically on MacLennan’s protagonist just as it did on the settlers’ lot, illuminating difficult lives, lessening fatigue, and rendering less impossible the distance between Earthly and heavenly realms.

One such gratifying instance of illumination also lends a sense of narrative closure to Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836). “I have seen,” the author relays in the last letter of her epistolary settler guide, “a splendid meteoric phenomenon that surpassed every thing I had ever seen or even heard of before” (251). In

her account of the Leonid storm of 1833, Traill's experience with the memorable celestial moment brings into focus not only the important relationship that exists between the ephemeral object and the individual, but also between those who share in the act of witnessing. "I was very much amused," Traill continues,

by overhearing a young lad giving a gentleman a description of the appearance made by a cluster of the shooting-stars as they followed each other in quick succession athwart the sky. "Sir," said the boy, "I never saw such a sight before, and I can only liken the chain of stars to a logging-chain (251).

Considering the boy's "logging-chain" to be "a most natural and unique simile," Traill observes fondly that his interpretation of the meteor shower arching overhead is "quite in character with the occupation of the lad" (251). This alignment of the boy, the gentlemen who accompanies them, and her approval of the boy's "simile" bears significance. As the young observer likens the streaking lights of the meteorites to a tool familiar to labourers,¹⁹ distant and local sights appear to coalesce in a "most natural" taxonomy, one that gestures as much towards the challenges of life in the region as it does to the "most

¹⁹ A similar act of witness takes in the opening chapter of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of the Lion* (1987), in which Patrick, a "boy of eleven," comes across a group of loggers on a frozen river playing a game of chase with burning cattails (21). In both scenes, a child on the brink of maturity experiences another generation's innocent delight in the offerings of the nocturnal realm, one that doubles here and elsewhere as a uniquely socialized space of ephemeral lights and sights that temporarily enables those within its bounds to exist apart from the pressures of the working day. "It was not just the pleasure of skating," the narrator insists, "[t]hey could have done that during the day. This was against *the night* [. . .]" (my emphasis). Their lanterns replaced with new rushes which let them go further past boundaries [. . .]. To the boy growing into his twelfth year, having lived all his life on that farm where day was work and night was rest, nothing would be the same" (22).

superb constellations” of old (252). This pairing not only enables the new celestial configuration of the logging chain to emerge from the quotidian demands of the boy’s labours, but also allows it to achieve equanimity with the less “rustic” European asterisms that more distantly precede them (252).

Equally present is a social chain of discourse through which this “unique” simile is realized. Since the analogy of the logging-chain is not directed at Traill, but rather a favoured detail garnered from an exchange overheard between a “lad” and a “gentleman,” the author appears just on the fringe of the exchange through which the rare event is negotiated (251). Nevertheless, her fondness for the boy’s choice of words does establish a kinship between Traill and the lad. Carefully formulated through the medium of retrospective narrative, her affinities also subtly align the author with the young face of an emerging populace that possesses the imaginative powers to inhabit the new (Bentley “Afterword” 300). In this way, even though the social hierarchies of gender and class are still very much present in the scene’s reenactment, the sublimity of the memorable moment brings these two figures – both marginal in their own way – together in a shared desire to bear imaginative witness. The lad’s monotonous work becomes “the logging-chain” in the sky, and, much later, “the unique simile” of Traill’s narrative. For both author and labourer alike, imaginative faculties enable a sense of inclusion. It is as though, through their shared encounter with the night sky, the very work of their lives takes on, if briefly, an air of dignity and enchantment.

Traill’s decision to include this scene near the very end of *The Backwoods of Canada* is also significant, especially since the event itself precedes her final entry of 1

May 1835 by more than two years. Its location within her settler guide, as D.M.R. Bentley suggests in his Afterword to *The Backwoods of Canada*, stems from a desire to round out the narrative by gesturing back towards the whole. “In his combination of polite deference and independent thought,” Bentley observes, “the young boy of Letter XVIII takes his place beside several other characters and creatures in *The Backwoods of Canada* who exemplify Traill’s middle-ground between hierarchy and freedom, tradition and newness” (Bentley 300). The cheerful negotiation of the “Old World and the New” is, as Bentley suggests, indicative of an emerging society whose members “cherished the past but welcomed the future” (300). Also clear from this passage is the way in which an encounter with the night sky can facilitate community not only between generations, but also transcend generations as well. Few images are, in fact, more prevalent in amateur astronomy circles and science education than those depicting one generation showing the splendors of the night to the next. For this reason, Bentley’s concluding assessment, namely that *The Backwoods of Canada* “is a reflection of an emerging culture and a distant mirror of what that culture has become,” also speaks to the study of the Canadian night (301). Without downplaying the differences between Traill’s Canada and the country in which organizations such as the RASC now operate, readers will recognize one such “distant reflection” in the logo used by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada for the International Year of Astronomy in 2009 (see fig. 4). Holding a young companion’s hand, a mature figure gestures openly towards the grandeur of night, and the youth responds by looking up in wonder. In this visual representation, the shared moment of enchantment provides a sense of continuity between the enjoined figures, one in which



Fig. 4. The official logo of the International Year of Astronomy 2009, which described itself as “a global effort initiated by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) and UNESCO to help the citizens of the world rediscover their place in the Universe through the day- and night-time sky, and thereby engage a personal sense of wonder and discovery” (“IYA 2009 General” n. pag.).

the desire to impart and the desire to know eliminate the distance between generations.²⁰

The desire to eliminate this distance is readily apparent in Thomas Conant's second-hand account of the Leonids of 1833. His version of the event, which appears in his memoir, *Upper Canada Sketches* (1898), suggests a few of the ways in which these nocturnal narratives traverse generations. It also illustrates how at least one Canadian author writing at the end of the nineteenth century situated the storm in personal and public memory. "One of the most important occurrences of the time," Conant explains, "and one from which many reckoned their local history, was a remarkable display of falling meteors" (54). Taking care to emphasize the storm's importance in the creation of a local identity, Conant then acknowledges the source of his narrative. "The following account," he explains, "is taken from memoranda left by my mother, and as told by my father" (54). While this may be the case, readers are left to guess at his mother's experience of the storm, as Conant tells his story almost entirely from his father's perspective. "On the night of the 12th of November, 1833," he writes,

my father, then a young man, was salmon-spearing in a boat in the creek, at its outlet into Lake Ontario, now Port Oshawa. One of his hired men sat in the

²⁰ Traill would later set another of these intergenerational exchanges to the sublimity of the night sky in her eighteenth book, *Lady Mary and her Nurse* (1856). In chapter ten of the novel, a governess named Miss Campbell introduces the young protagonist Lady Mary to the northern lights. Their exchange, which spans the entire chapter, is markedly different from the Leonids scene that appears in *The Backwoods of Canada*, insofar as the tone is explicitly religious. The Governess quotes from the Psalms in order to explain the source of the phenomena and to temper Lady Mary's response, who is, by turns, both delighted and frightened by the lights.

stern and paddled, while he stood close beside the light-jack of blazing pine knots, in order to see the salmon in the water. He, in common with the inhabitants generally was laying in a stock of salmon to be salted down for the year's use, until the salmon "run" again the following fall.

At or about ten o'clock of this evening, as nearly as he could judge, from out of an intensely dark November night, globes of fire as big as goose eggs began falling around his boat. These balls continued to fall until my father, becoming frightened, went home, – not forgetting, he quaintly added, to bring with him the salmon already caught. On reaching home, Lot 6, B.F. East Whitby, the whole household was aroused, and frightened too; but the fires ceasing they went to bed, to pass a restless night after the awe-inspiring scene they had witnessed (55).

With these opening paragraphs, Conant establishes the regional setting and offers a preliminary characterization of his father. The strange phenomenon of meteorites falling around the fishing boat emphasizes – perhaps even exaggerates – the immediacy of the storm and underscores the way in which the night sky itself seemed to descend on "Lot 6" of Port Oshawa. These details and others define the passage as contributing to a kind of regional lore, one enriched by "globes of fire as big as goose eggs" and other "quaintly added" elements of the tale (55). Yet the narrative Conant conveys reads more like family anecdote than social documentary. By affectionately casting his father in the role of fisherman surprised by the storm, Conant creates a family history that enlarges the early labours of his predecessors by setting them among the sublime adversities of a proximal

past, one whose enchanted properties mean to justify and to generate a sense of reverence for the lives of early settlers. The rest of Conant's account continues in this vein, authoritatively characterizing the storm as an experience shared between men, each of whom responds to the sublime display with varying degrees of piety:

Getting up before daybreak next morning, my father raked over the embers of the buried black log of the big fire-place and quickly had a blaze. Happening to glance out of the window, to his intense amazement he saw, as he said, 'the whole sky filled with shooting stars.' Quickly he called to the men, his hired help in the lumbering business, to come down stairs. They needed not a second invitation, and among them was one Shields, who, on reaching the door, dropped in a twinkling upon his knees and began to pray [see fig. 5]. The balls of fire continuing, his prayers grew more earnest, if vigor of voice could be any index of his religious fervor. Of the grandeur of the unparalleled scene my father said almost nothing, for I am led to think they were all too thoroughly frightened to think of beauty, that being a side issue entirely. The fiery shower growing more dense, my father went out of doors and found the fire-balls did not burn or hurt. Then he went to a neighbor's – a preacher of renown in the locality – having to pass through woods, and even in the darkness, he affirms, the fire-balls lighted his way distinctly. The preacher, already awake, was seated at the table beside a tallow dip reading his Bible, with two other neighbors listening and too frightened, he said, to even bid him good morning. He sat and listened to verse after verse, and still the stars fell.



Fig. 5. First published in 1898, Thomas Conant's *Upper Canada Sketches* includes this illustration, "Meteoric shower (1833)," and twenty-seven others by the Canadian painter Edward Scrope Shrapnel.

The preacher gave no explanation or sign, but read on. Looking eastward, at last my father saw a faint glimmer of breaking day. Once more he came out into the fire and made his way homeward. Before he reached there daylight broke. Gradually the fire-balls grew less and less, and, with the day, ceased altogether. To find a sign of them he hunted closely upon the ground, but not a trace was left of anything. Nor was any damage done. What became of the stars that fell he could not conjecture.

(55-56)

Not unlike his contemporaries, Conant indicates that the storm brought people out of their homes to bear communal witness. Yet the description of the Leonids that appears in *Upper Canada Sketches* deviates from other accounts of the storm in its attention to faith, and, more specifically, in its depiction of the preacher's home as a potential site of knowledge and refuge. As illuminated signifiers mark the night sky, the continuous articulation of Biblical passages provides a sense of readiness and comfort to its listeners. Conant appears to have been self-conscious about this part of his father's story, as he goes on to qualify the community's religious response. "Realize that in 1833," he adds, "astronomers had not taught Upper Canadians in regard to meteoric showers, as we know to-day, and we do not marvel at their consternation and fright" (56). Still yet unequipped with rationalism's potential to render the sublime into a safely aesthetic experience, Conant seeks to endear his readers further to those who experienced the storm by lending them an uneducated air of innocence. Finally, as testimony to the storm's important place in the environmental history of early Canada, the author includes a "bit of doggerel [that] went the round at that time" (56). The poem in question, Conant believed, was written by

“one Horace Hutchinson, a sailor whom my father had on one of his schooners.” Only one of Hutchinson’s stanzas is included:

“I well remembered what I see
 In eighteen hundred and thirty-three,
 When from the affrighted place I stood
 The stars forsook the fixed abode.” (56)

“A better sailor he was than a poet,” Conant concludes, “and yet, bad as the verses were, they were very popular in the thirties in a large section of the Home District, of which is this is a part” (57). Even if Conant thought little of the poem, his decision to include it is nevertheless significant. By revealing the way in which the experience of the meteor storm circulated in the popular imagination of his parent’s time, the author roots the otherwise incredible details of his account in the authority of an emerging society’s cultural memory. In so doing, Conant not only lends legitimacy to his narrative, but also grants it a satisfying sense of lyrical closure.

Ottawa *en dishabille*: The Absent Leonids of 1866

Given the Leonids’ dramatic appearance in 1833, it follows that a sense of public excitement would precede the shower’s next anticipated peak in 1866. The intervening years had also seen the appearance of numerous celestial sights,²¹ the most dramatic of

²¹ “The nineteenth century in Great Britain,” Robert J.M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff explain, “witnessed an unusually large number of spectacular comet apparitions, an unprecedented record that has not been matched since” (109). A total of eight great comets

which was Donati's Comet, whose sweeping tail had captivated Canadian observers in the fall of 1858.²² Visible in both the morning and evening skies, Donati had raised the bar for astronomical sights and undoubtedly expectations as well. Eight years later, as anticipation for Leonids' return grew, an anonymous author writing in the 15 November edition of the *Ottawa Citizen* gently derides the city's apparent sleeplessness and offers the following solution:

A SUGGESTION. – For two or three nights past one half the city has been cheated out its rest in waiting up for the meteoric shower which has not yet appeared. To obviate the necessity of the mass of our citizens losing any more of their sleep on account of the meteors, it has been suggested that Jack of all Trades – that is John the Sailor – be provided with a bell and commissioned for a few nights to come, to watch the movements of the celestial bodies. When the stars begin to fall he can run up and down town and begin to ring the bell, and at the same time below out – as he knows how to do – ‘now they come!’ ‘now they come!’ There could be a general turn out from the hammocks then, and all would

graced the sky during the nineteenth century, three of which appeared between the 1833 and 1866 (Yeomans n. pag.). Even though signs of these celestial apparitions are more easily found in nineteenth century European art and literature, Jonathan Odell's poem “The Comet of 1811” nevertheless suggests that early Canadian settlers were keeping a watchful eye.

²² An article by the Rev. James Williamson published in the November 1858 issue of the *Canadian Journal* indicates that Donati's Comet had in September become a naked eye object that was plainly visible from Kingston. So inspired was Charles Sangster that he characterized the bright comet in his poem “The Comet – 1858” as a “loosed Prometheus burning with disdain” (48).

see the sight. A cent a head of half the population would remunerate Jack for his trouble. (“A Suggestion” 2)

This brief Horatian satire, even as it pokes fun at those who lose sleep by laying in wait for the celestial show, nevertheless conveys a very real sense of community. Whether citizens share in the excitement, or would rather tease those who do – or perhaps prefer to do a little bit of both – a sense of unity and good will permeates these remarks. The tongue-in-cheek concern that the columnist shows for “the mass” of citizens who were in the process of being “cheated out” of the spectacle gestures towards what was undoubtedly a segment of the population who, while perhaps not nearly numbering “one half the city,” were still very much bound by anticipation (2). The imagined cry of “now they come!” bellowed by “Jack the Sailor” is also a sweet bit of nostalgic mockery. Writing from the modern medium of newsprint, the columnist not-so-subtly suggests that those losing sleep to watch the skies are sentimental, if endearing, figures who belong, like the bellman, to an increasingly distant past.

Even so, this sense of community and gentle ridicule also permeates the 17 November 1866 installment of “Local Intelligence,” where the *Citizen’s* columnist-reporter, “having purchased an Accident Insurance ticket and armed himself with a notebook, a huge overcoat and a sandwich, stationed himself about midnight of the 13th on the top of the office and calmly scanned the placid heavens for three frosty hours” (“That Meteoric Shower” 2). Despite the fact that “his teeth chattered till he wished he hadn’t been there,” the humorous witness nevertheless “heroically held out,” having maintained “the laudable aim of giving the readers of THE CITIZEN a minute detail of the

shower and attendant incidents” (2). His own mock heroic self-characterization sets up nicely the “disappointment” that he and others experience “when not even a shooting star reward[s] his patient vigil,” all of which only deepens when he realizes with “disgust [. . .] that the astronomy which he had been reading up for days before would serve him no practical purpose for thirty-three years to come!” (2). The “surprising shower of stars” that captivated a wide-eyed public in 1833 has been replaced by the kind of communal disappointment and “disgust” shared by those who “anxiously and patiently watched for the grand stellar descent” (2). Worse yet, the citizens of Ottawa had to contend with the knowledge that the shower was enjoyed elsewhere. “We have news of the ‘grand event’ having been witnessed in England,” the writer laments, “which makes the fact of this unfortunate part of the world having been entirely ignored by the meteors all the more aggravating” (2). Embracing pathetic fallacy to exaggerate their lot and to satirize the colonial position, the writer describes the meteors as having turned away from the city in favour of English skies. Recalling the way in which Strickland incorporated his sister’s poem in his account, the columnist, in the midst of reflecting on how “[t]he night was admirably suited to star-gazing,” and having just communicated that “almost every house had its watcher,” interrupts his account with the opening stanza of Robert Southey’s *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801):

No mist, obscured, nor cloud, nor speck, nor stain,
 Broke the serene heaven:
 In full orb’d glory then the moon divine
 Roll’d through the dark blue depths.

Beneath her steady ray

The desert circled spread

Like the round ocean, girdled with the sky. (3-9)

The columnist deliberately omits here the first two lines of *Thalaba the Destroyer*, in which Southey declares, without a trace of irony, “How beautiful is night! / A dewy freshness fills the silent air” (1, 2). Skipping ahead to the line that begins “No mist, obscured, nor cloud, nor speck, nor stain” humorously captures the stillness of the night in which the Leonids failed to appear. The gentle ribbing continues, this time with a description of the scene at street level, including those who had wandered out in the small hours without giving much thought to their attire:

Those on the street between the interesting hours of two and three in the morning beheld many an unique and very funny spectacle – as has been remarked, ‘a perfect inundation of nocturnal linen;’ Ottawa *en dishabille*; men at windows clothed like Falstaff’s recruits; and ladies peering expectant from half open blinds in the most approved costume of Lady Macbeth. (“That Meteoric Shower” 2)

Even if they are reminiscent of “Falstaff’s recruits” and “Lady Macbeth[s],” these spectators were nevertheless bound by a common expectancy. “All were waiting for the stars to fall,” the paragraph concludes, “and all were disappointed” (2).

Nowhere is this communal spirit more evident than in the closing paragraph of the account, where the satire softens in such a way as to suggest that the crowd has won at least a share of the reporter’s affections. “It is curious to contemplate the situation in regard to the phenomenon,” he begins.

All classes, ages and both sexes were on the lookout for the grand predicted event. The Natural Historian and the night watch; the Editor and the errand boy; the merchant and the mendicant; the policeman and the pork packer; all were in waiting for the stars to fall, and each had a distinct theory to offer in regard to the event – a lucid solution of the grave problem. Many after watching all night declared that they would not fall till next year, and looked learned and wise, as though they possessed the whole secret in a nut shell – with their brains. (2)

Playfully describing them as looking “learned and wise,” the reporter is clearly still amused by the occasion. Yet, also present is an acknowledgment that “the grand predicted event” brought people together who would not typically mix. The shared sense of hope for the shower and the promise to share in recognition of its fleeting beauty is enough, according to the reporter, to bring the city together in a rare way. Furthermore, if these characters deserved to be made fun of for believing “they possessed the whole secret” in “their brains,” they are also bound by their common folly. The hitherto stand-offish columnist even goes so far as to include himself in the crowd at the end of his article, where he acknowledges his common bond with those present:

But we have all been ‘out’ in every sense of the word. We have all been disappointed, and an immense amount of getting ready has been thrown away. The physicist mourns the opportunity which promised grand results, the persons who removed their beds to the roof and caught heavy colds, and those who slept on the street are greatly chagrined at the failure of the pains they took, and the severity of

the pains they experience; and sailer [sic] Jack is indignant as he intended to ‘come out considerably ahead’ by ringing people up when the shower began; but he consoles himself by the reflection that he will get the job in 1899 – the occasion of the next display (2).

None of this, of course, is source for serious consternation, but rather the kind of “indignant” response that lasts for as long as it takes for the city to catch up on its sleep. What resonates instead is the record of an eclectic group of citizens standing together in the frosty November night, disappointed perhaps by the absence of a rare nocturnal spectacle, but bound nonetheless by a sense of kinship. This feeling of commonality, however fleeting, supports the idea that the night sky played an important, if intermittent, role in the articulation of nineteenth-century Canadian communities, especially when such spectacles as the Leonids were expected to grace their skies.

The sense of humour evident in the *Ottawa Citizen*’s description of the absent Leonids of 1866 reappears in the 14 November 1899 issue of the *Toronto World*. Here, again, the gentle tone of the piece suggests that the sublimity of the night sky was not perceived as an antagonistic force in nineteenth-century Canada, but rather a welcome source of awe that provided occasion for humorous speculation. “Sad-eyed wanderers in the small a.m. hours who are thinking out excuses to use when they get home,” begins the brief notice, “are liable during the next few nights to witness meteoric manoeuverings [sic] in the sky that may lead them to believe that they have gone a little too far” (“Look Out for Meteorites” 3). The imagined scene is a delightful one: having gone “a little too far” into the drink, “[s]ad-eyed wanderers” are rescued by “meteoric manoeuverings”

whose spectacular nature justifies their being out all hours (3). This playful opening ties the meteors to revelry, and, in the process, also makes a subtle connection between public intoxication and the intoxicating power of the night.²³

In addition to reinforcing the idea that the Leonids are regarded with some fondness, this article may also suggest that the description of such natural sights changed slightly between 1866 and 1899. “Natural Pyrotechnics in the Sky Are Confidently Expected During the Next Few Nights,” the byline reads, equating the public spectacle of artificial pyrotechnics or fireworks with the “[n]atural [p]yrotechnics” of the Leonids. “FIREWORKS: Brilliant Spectacular Meteoric Display Promised for To-night,” announces another headline that appeared in the *Manitoba Morning Free Press*. In the 3 July 1877 issue of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, yet another writer describes the Dominion Day “pyrotechnic performance” as having “scattered showers of stars high in the darkened air” (“The Display of Fireworks” 3). The writer goes on to say that “the passion rose was pretty, and the streamers gay; while the shower of gold and silver rain, with brilliant stars[,] was lovely” (3). The “shooting stars” described in early accounts of the Leonids reappear here as artificial sights that engender a similar kind of affection. “On the whole,” concludes the description of the fireworks that illuminated Ottawa on Dominion Day in 1887, “the display was a grand one. It lasted for an hour and a half

²³ As recently as 1999, *SkyNews* editor and noted Canadian astrophotographer Terence Dickinson makes note of “an official warning about the meteor storm issued to citizens of the Republic of Georgia” (Dickinson 4). “Those who are lovers of alcoholic beverage,” Dickinson quotes from the warning, “should be especially careful, because during times of world cataclysms, people tend to become drunk more easily” (4).

without any intermission [. . .]. [T]he letting off of the fireworks, and the display was very well arranged. Thus ended the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Confederation” (3). As dramatic light shows that share the common backdrop of night, these journalists’ decisions to describe the Leonids as a form of “pyrotechnics,” and the fireworks as “stars high in the darkened air” should come as no surprise, since both displays were admired by a general public that had gathered to witness their sights. While the Leonids were greeted as a natural phenomenon, and fireworks as artificial, both ephemeral spectacles nevertheless inscribed themselves in their observer’s memories, brightening and fading palimpsests in the figurative book of the night.

Had celestial events such as the Leonids retained their audiences well into the next century, this slippage between the taxonomies of natural and artificial light would not require further consideration. Yet fireworks, which were originally designed to imitate natural wonders, have since come to replace them. The current pyrotechnic displays that take place on Canada Day owe a considerable debt to the Enlightenment’s desire to see nature conform to patterns that are both pleasing and predictable, the harmony of which reflects, in a highly visible way, the power of the State to generate an enchanted sense of order over its land and its peoples through the creative use of technology. Even though fireworks date back to antiquity, it was not until the eighteenth century that such displays became a means of revealing the potential of science to the absolute monarchies of Europe;²⁴ in return, rulers who funded the work of gunners, artificers, and set designers

²⁴ See the introduction to Simon Werrett’s *Fireworks: Pyrotechnic Arts and Sciences in*

were able to oversee elaborate spectacles that pleased, more often than not,²⁵ all levels of society. In the process, they also characterized themselves as the generous benefactors who had helped make mastery over light possible.

Nocturnal celebrations of Canadian nationalism show no signs of slowing.²⁶

Summer visitors to the nation's capital can watch as high-definition video projectors cast the Centre Block of Parliament Hill nightly in a luminous narrative of statehood. The visually stunning Mosaika Sound and Light Show is simultaneously a celebration of the

European History (2010).

²⁵ While widely greeted with enthusiasm, fireworks displays during the eighteenth century did not always go as planned. Werrett describes how the accidental ignition of a fireworks cache on the 30 May 1770 led to an explosion along the Sienne; many in the crowd that had gathered to witness the display were killed when they were pushed into the river and drowned, while others were trampled during the ensuing panic (221).

²⁶ The ending of Thomas Cary's early Canadian long poem "Abram's Plains" (1789) anticipates these illuminated celebration of nationhood: "Darkness shuts up the scene and all is night. / Except, where darting cross the swampy marsh, / From shining fire-flies lucid lightnings flash" (581-83). With the final lines of his poem, Cary makes the dramatic leap from the "lucid lightnings" of "shining fire-flies" to the "long silver streams" that "[s]end through the atmosphere their forked beams" (584-5). The poet's associative logic brings together two sources of light – the local enchantment of fireflies and the distant sublimity of atmospheric lightening – in order to suggest that the rustic charms of the Canada actively aspires to the "brighter glow" of the spheres above. The allusive nature of Cary's imagery makes his intentions clear. "For emulating Jove," writes Dryden in his translation of *The Aeneid* (29-19 B.C), "Salmoneus," a minor god who claims to be Zeus, "suff'ring cruel pains" (788-89). Dryden describes Salmoneus' tragic pride as "the rattling sound / Of mimic thunder, and the glitt'ring blaze / Of pointed lightnings, and their forky rays" (789-91). In the place of such hubris, Cary's poem imagines Canada as a minor presence that knows its place within the workings of empire and power. The "forked beams" that bring the poem to a close are, in Cary's imagination, the great lights of the British Empire arching dramatically overhead. They are as much reminders of the past and as they are harbingers of the future, arching capsules of time and light that require the English imagination to capture them – in a lyrical, and, therefore, lasting way – within a localized Canadian landscape.

differences that define Canada in the twenty-first century and an artificial transformation of public architecture, which has the misleading effect of invigorating an otherwise aging symbol of power. One does not have to be hostile to the show's message of national unity to see how its enchantment denies the progression of history, while suspending, however briefly, any last hope of seeing the stars from the city. Those who gather to witness them would likely not welcome the suggestion that such displays are wasteful from an environmental perspective, but it is necessary to distinguish these nocturnal sights from those that are naturally occurring, especially since doing so helps bring the ecological meaning of celestial sights more clearly into view.

While the popularity of fireworks and other forms of illuminated nationalism remains strong, contemporary Canadian poetry suggests that the large crowds that once assembled to witness the Leonids have been replaced by considerably more modest gatherings. Aislinn Hunter's "Watching the Leonids in November" (2004), for instance, provides a lyrical account of just two observers looking up from the outskirts of town, the terms of their relationship affirmed against the backdrop of night:

G. and I alone in a clearing,
on a drop sheet in the freezing cold,
three sweaters each, toques and gloves.
The dog running back and forth
into the woods while the sky did nothing.
It's a joke between us, how I have spent

years of my life waiting
 for fabulous things to happen. How
 I always want to pack it in just before they do.

So there we were. The same old night sky
 promising us a magic trick, holding out
 its palms for show. One black glove
 and then another and finally,
 bright beads of light, hurling across them.

How little it takes to move us: the universe
 on holiday, skipping stones across a lake,
 G. and I on a dock of earth below.

Those long stretches where so little happens
 a kind of preparation for what follows:
 that first flash of light, the spark
 that makes us. (1-21)

The opening stanza of this poem is broadly reminiscent of the scene described in the *Ottawa Citizen* in 1866, where chilled observers waited in anticipation while “the sky did nothing” (5). The second stanza, however, compensates for this lack of light by establishing a sense of longstanding intimacy between the two figures. “G” and the speaker share “joke[s]” between them, one of which is the speaker’s tendency to wait

“for fabulous things to happen” only to “pack it in just before they do” (8, 9). This self-denigrating humour establishes that the Leonids are themselves “fabulous,” just as it acknowledges, in jest, the flawed humanity of their would-be witnesses. More important, it also introduces the metaphorical implications of the “bright beads of light” that will eventually appear in the poem. When the sky finally does perform its “magic trick,” the couple is linked together under the transient points of light. They are bound not only by the “little it takes to move [them],” but also by the figurative “dock of earth” that they share in a lake of sky, across which the meteors go “skipping” (15-17). The final stanza reveals the meaning of this simultaneous act of witness, as their waiting for the Leonids becomes emblematic of “[t]hose long stretches where so little happens” (18). Yet, when the “first flash of light” interrupts the quotidian, the speaker is finally able to articulate the “spark / that makes [them]” (20, 21). Here, the lights of the Leonids are the ephemeral “spark” that renews the bonds between the lovers, a point of reference in the natural world that renews their beginnings and that reminds them of the light both between and within.

It is necessary to distinguish such scenes from the artificial spectacles that try to replicate the affective responses that they engender. What Raymond Williams recognizes as the fantasy of the pastoral childhood in nineteenth-century British literature finds a counterpart in light and sound shows that celebrate the Canadian nation, many of which depict Canada in its infancy as an unspoiled land of snowy reaches and northern lights.²⁷

²⁷ The opening ceremonies of the Vancouver Olympic Games, in particular, relied heavily on

The problem with these visions is that they are as regressive as they are artificial; the capacity to replicate the northern lights for an audience within a controlled environment makes it possible to recruit celestial sights into a progressive narrative of nationhood without acknowledging the compromised states of their naturally-occurring counterparts, let alone the ecological status of the environments from which they are most visible. The capacity to produce linear narratives that locate pristine environments in the past tacitly permits pollution to continue to exist in the present. The more pollution that the present generates, in fact, the more that the pastoral-past becomes an endlessly renewable resource that can be drawn upon to assuage states of malcontent.

With this cycle in mind, a chapter dedicated to observations of a meteor shower that captivated nineteenth-century Canada would seem complicit in the very practices it seeks to arrest. The issue is, however, always one of citizenship. Just as fireworks displays on Canada Day encourage citizens to celebrate the nation state, meteor showers foster a sense of cosmological belonging that calls attention to their observers' place on a relatively small planet, one that has been orbiting a yellow dwarf star for approximately 4.5 billion years in a universe that is, by most counts, nearly 14 billion years old. The distance between contemporary Canadian writers such as Aislinn Hunter and nineteenth-century figures such as Catharine Parr Traill is, from a cosmological perspective, much less than a fraction of a second. Yet recognizing what little separates literary stargazers

nocturnal settings to cast country in an enchanted light.

across time nevertheless has the paradoxical effect of piquing interest in their respective periods and their distinguishing traits. The task of satisfying this curiosity could find few better places to begin than with the work of Lucy Maud Montgomery, whose relationship with the night sky was, in many ways, emblematic of the times in which she lived.

CHAPTER TWO

Unearthly Pleasures: The Night Skies of L.M. Montgomery

“I have never had time to resume the studies in astronomy which so fascinated me a year or two before my marriage. I wish I might have but I suppose I never shall. The memory of them is most fascinating.”

-L.M. Montgomery, The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery Vol. II (1987) (248)

While her “studies in astronomy” may have been short-lived, L.M. Montgomery’s affinity for the night sky is nevertheless readily apparent in the journals, letters, novels, short stories, and poems that she wrote over the course of her career. An avid chronicler of celestial sights, she was especially fond of those bodies that appear just on the threshold of vision: the new moon, zodiacal light, Barnard’s Star, double stars that are difficult to split¹ – these and other challenging objects frequently receive attention in her writing, their very elusiveness providing, perhaps, in the most immediate sense, greater room for her imagination to work. This preoccupation with a celestial object’s potential – what it suggests, and what can be called into vision – coupled with the way in which

¹ Many amateur astronomers include double stars as a part of their observing routine. These are stars that either form a binary system, or that simply appear to be close together in the night sky, even though they are, in fact, separated by vast distances. While there are double stars that can be observed with the naked eye, a telescope’s ability to “split a close double” is often considered to be an informal measure of good optics. Double stars can also be quite beautiful to observe, since a number of them – beta Cygni, for example – differ in colour (Duval 296).

Montgomery frequently discusses important relationships and astronomical activities in tandem, indicates that her interest in the night sky helped realize fleeting instances of freedom and relief as well as meaningful forms of community; these would, in turn, provide inspiration for her work, satisfy a sense of intellectual curiosity, and prove – more often than not – personally edifying (3, 4).

More broadly, Montgomery's pursuit of astronomy is also indicative of the various ways in which specialized astronomical knowledge and popular speculation met during her time in the public realm. Such interactions produced imaginative alloys of fact and fiction that made possible new cultural narratives and artifacts, many of which captivated Montgomery and came to inform her personal relationships. Her exchanges with George Boyd MacMillan, for example, the Scottish journalist with whom she corresponded for nearly forty years from 1903 to 1941, are essential to understanding her interest in astronomy, since they make clear that the night sky, as a mutual source of fascination, played a role in facilitating their friendship. Indeed, for Montgomery, the stars themselves provided a form of companionship; and even though her fondness for the night sky underwent a transformation in the transition from aspiring author to mature artist burdened with the pressures of her daily life, Montgomery very much remained a naturalist-of-the-night: a public figure who was sensitive to the encroaching signs of modernity and who sought refuge, real and imaginary, in settings that recall and regenerate nocturnal enchantment. In calling attention to her sensitivity to these environments, this chapter registers her fascination with the stars both as a sign of her investment in the conventions of romance and as an indication that Montgomery was

aware of light pollution and incorporated this new reality into her fiction.

Montgomery's interest in the night sky was, of course, also a product of the New Thought movement that developed out of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and that shaped to a considerable extent the work of several of her contemporaries, including the poetry and prose of Bliss Carman, with which Montgomery was especially familiar.²

While she did not necessarily adopt these concepts as doctrine, Montgomery was nevertheless influenced by ideas so prevalent that their circulation towards the end of the nineteenth century advanced and popularized the Romantic-Victorian conceptualization of modernity as inimical to nature, and nature, in turn, as a place of ease where recovery was possible for those who participated, directly or even vicariously, in its processes. By virtue of its imagined otherness, the natural world was constructed in the post-Romantic era as the remedy for the mechanized and alienating rituals of the day, and was, therefore,

² The influence of this period on Montgomery's writing – its investment in antimodernism and the ameliorating powers of art – is increasingly receiving attention in scholarly circles. In "Matthew Insists on Puffed Sleeves": Ambivalence towards Fashion in *Anne of Green Gables*" (2010), Alison Matthews David and Kimberly Wah discuss the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement on the fashions of Montgomery's fiction, while Irene Gammel's "Reading to Heal: *Anne of Green Gables* as Bibliotherapy" provides, according to its author, the "first consistent argument for reading Montgomery's fiction within the important context of bibliotherapy, or the use of books in the treatment of personal and mental problems" (85). While Gammel focuses primarily on how *Anne of Green Gables*'s readership, her observation that "Montgomery herself was highly familiar with the use of books as therapeutic tools" is especially useful when thinking about the kind of relationship this author enjoyed with the night sky. Indeed, while a number of factors contributed to Montgomery's interest in the stars, not the least of which were intellectual curiosity and the pressing need for company, her stargazing was also a kind "reading" carried out with the hopes of ease and betterment in mind. Thinking of her engagement with astronomy this way is not necessarily reductive, but, rather, as Gammel asserts, an opportunity "to see reading as an active tool in identity construction that posits multiple and changing selves instead of a uni-dimensional or essential self" (85).

uniquely positioned as a site in which the pressures of post-industrial existence could be alleviated.³ This process was thought to counter nervousness and melancholia and eventually to foster psychological and spiritual wellness.

Since Montgomery's responsibilities extended beyond her demanding career as a writer to include the care of two children and a husband given to long spells of what she calls "religious melancholia," the basic recipe for nature-inspired wellness – repose, rest, and good reading – would have been very nearly impossible to implement in the course of her days (*SJ* 2: 334). The overwhelming nature of such obligations is readily apparent in Montgomery's journals. "It seems to me," she writes in the entry for 16 August 1920, "that my life nowadays is simply one mad rush to overtake work that 'must be done' in a dozen different departments of existence and that I never 'catch up', leaving me with a sense of breathlessness and failure that is depressing" (*SJ* 2: 388). In addition to the demands of her writing, Montgomery was also pulled between the unrelenting pressures of the social and domestic sphere. "I cook and sew and mend," she states plainly, "and train my children and write novels and endless letters, and run three societies and make innumerable parish visits and garden, and advise and can berries and encourage Ewan [her husband] and entertain endless callers and shop and plan menus and take snapshots – all mixed up together pretty much as enumerated, with countless interruptions thrown in, and undercurrents of worry over several things running all the time" (*SJ* 2: 388). Such

³ See Lears's description of the mind-cure movement in *No Place of Grace* (53-54).

tasks, and no doubt others, clearly took their toll. “Sometimes I feel quite desperate,” she confesses. “I get up at seven and generally work until twelve at night” (*SJ* 2: 388).

At first glance, these seventeen-hour days make the connection between Montgomery and the mind-cure movement seem tenuous at best. Yet retreats assume many forms, and Montgomery specialized in the imaginative movement into Romantic realms whose picturesque, natural settings provided the necessary, if temporary, tonic to present and foreseeable turmoil. By extension, the culture of the night, in its very opposition to that of day, could more easily be imagined as a zone that fostered an alternative form of subjectivity, one in which the pressures of the world were temporarily relieved. “The night was all my own and it was very kind to me,” Montgomery reports in her journal on the evening of 19 January 1923. “It was like a bit out of the olden years,” she adds, “and lightened a little my present disgust of life” (*SJ* 3: 109). What makes this lightening possible is the very “unearthliness” of the night sky – the very separateness of its “kind” stars and their perceived capacity to share their strength with those who revel in their sights. “Lean on the heart of night,” Carman recommends in one of his later poems, a piece of advice that imagines the nocturnal realm as a place of solace otherwise absent in the light of day (15). Montgomery’s cousin, Lucy Lincoln Montgomery, conveys a very similar sentiment in her poem, “Night is My Friend,” a piece that Montgomery liked well enough to include in her Red Scrapbook. “Learn what strength and comfort lie,” Lucy advises, “In star-set spaces of the sky” (*Imagining Anne* 19, 20).

While Montgomery certainly shared such beliefs, she nevertheless went to lengths to make them her own, preserving her perceptions of the night sky in her writing as

nocturnal revelations to which she could return for comfort. These returns, while made public through her writing, owe much to Percy Bysshe Shelley's notion that excursions into nature enable those who undertake them to carry out "a secret correspondence" with themselves. "[I]n solitude," he writes, "or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart" (540). Just as Shelley found in the motion of the leaves a way of corresponding with himself, Montgomery saw in the motion of the heavens the opportunity to initiate a similar kind of correspondence, one that at times did help alleviate the inevitable despair of such "deserted" states.

The intertextual nature of this correspondence comes under consideration in the first section of this chapter, since Montgomery's depictions of the night sky – many of which she re-wrote and included elsewhere – were influenced by popular astronomy texts circulating at the time. This section closes with an examination of Montgomery's interest in zodiacal light, one that frames this particular phenomenon within Montgomery's own understanding of "ideal beauty." The second part of this chapter focuses on Halley's Comet, accounting first for its representation in Montgomery's scrapbooks, and then for the various instances in which this author evokes the image of the comet in her fiction. Specifically, passages from *The Blue Castle* (1926), *A Tangled Web* (1931) *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), and *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) are read in relation to each other so as to develop an understanding of Montgomery's use of this celestial image and the extent to which the meaning of such comets changed, for her, over time. Finally, a concluding

section focuses on Montgomery's descriptions of celestial bodies later in life. While signs of increasing despondency are evident in places, the night sky itself nevertheless continues to serve as one of Montgomery's favourite settings, its capacity to connect the past with the present lending its observers a fleeting sense of harmony with themselves and their surroundings. Such moments, however, have their roots in the nocturnal narratives that precede them, the interconnected nature of which helps us locate the changing nature of Montgomery's interest in the night.

Thin Veils: The Night Sky as Intertextual Narrative

Even as they figure prominently in her writing, Montgomery's stories about the stars are never quite fixed; rather, they shift around in their own invented skies to suit various moods and seasons. Her claim, for example, that she "never had time to resume [her] studies in astronomy" appears both in a journal entry for 15 June 1918 and in a letter of 26 February 1919 to MacMillan, although the latter presents the sentiment in a slightly different form. "I have never had time to resume my studies in astronomy which so fascinated me a year or so before my marriage," she writes to MacMillan, "I am afraid I never shall" (*My Dear Mr. M.* 86). Even as these similar statements locate Montgomery's fascination with astronomy in her past, they nevertheless resonate in different ways. In the journal entry, astronomy remains a part of her life; it is the "fascinating" memory that stays with her in the form of unfulfilled desire. In the letter, the phrase "I suppose" has been replaced with "I am afraid," a substitution that exchanges a pleasurable sigh for a much less comfortable form of longing. The air of resignation present in this second

instance also sets a different tone for what follows. “I should have liked to have been an astronomer,” Montgomery adds in her letter, “failing that, to have a few astronomers among my acquaintances” (86). Readers familiar with *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) will recognize these lines from the scene towards the end of the novel in which Mr. Meredith, Miss Oliver, and Rilla gaze at the night sky from a potato field just coming into blossom:

“I think I would like to have been an astronomer,” said Mr. Meredith dreamily, gazing at the star.

“There must be a strange pleasure in it,” agreed Miss Oliver, “an unearthly pleasure, in more senses than one. I would like to have a few astronomers for my friends.” (303)

The desire to enjoy such company owes itself to the way in which these characters understand astronomy’s relationship with “earthly affairs” (303). “Perhaps,” the doctor speculates, “students of the canals of Mars would not be so keenly sensitive to the significance of a few yards of trenches lost or won on the western front” (303). The association is clear: those preoccupied with what Rilla calls “the gossip of the hosts of heaven” are less likely to be as “sensitive” to the realities of the First World War. Montgomery interrupts the unearthly spell of the stars with a “sudden bitter inrush of remembrance,” one that overtakes Rilla as she wonders to herself about her older brother Jem who, at this point in the novel, is still missing in France (303). Rilla displays the limitations of such enchantment when she “turn[s] away from the new star, sick at heart,” its “unearthly pleasure” revealing itself to be only temporarily effective in offsetting fears

on the home front (303).⁴

Few of Montgomery's descriptions of astronomy are, however, this conflicted. On 11 February 1910, she writes in her journal of "the strange, eerie, unearthly pleasure" that her "study of the stars" gave her (*SJ* 2: 3). The same phrase reappears in a 15 June 1918 entry in which Montgomery describes the "fascinating" memories she has of astronomy. "They gave me such a strange, spiritual pleasure," she writes, "an unearthly pleasure in more senses than one. I should have liked to be an astronomer – failing that to have an astronomer among my friends" (*SJ* 2: 248). The way in which these sentiments are woven through her writing is further proof, as Mary Rubio has pointed out, that Montgomery in 1919 undertook the project of re-copying her journals for posterity and that this process of "self-display and self-examination" would enable her "to spin her early memories of rural community life into new novels and stories" (273). It is also cause, as Rubio and others have suggested,⁵ not to take the journals at face value, but to

⁴ The "new star" in question is almost certainly Barnard's Star, which was discovered by E.E. Barnard at the Yerkes Observatory in 1916. While not especially bright, the newly-discovered star nevertheless garnered public attention because its slight, yet still noticeable movements in the night sky: over the course a year, Barnard's Star moves a full ten arc seconds, or roughly the diameter of a nickel held at arm's length (Kaler 23).

⁵ Responding to Rubio's and Waterston's claim that Montgomery "began to shape her life by making choices that fitted the pattern emerging in the journal," Carole Gerson has argued that it is "quite possible that this professional storyteller shaped her own story retrospectively," since Montgomery did, after all, "adjust her wording while she recopied the text and added numerous photographs" (*Writing* 36; "Dragged" 56). Perhaps unintentionally, Rubio and Waterston imply that Montgomery was not in control of the very patterns she was creating in her journals, as though she had to conform to them in real life in order to ensure a sense of narrative continuity on the page. A more likely scenario is that the act of keeping a journal was not only gratifying to Montgomery, but that it also provided her with some degree of

regard them instead as acts of storytelling, the details of which have been carefully selected to present a public persona that remains telling of the author who created it. “Ultimately,” Cecily Devereux writes, “Montgomery’s assembling of her life story in her journals has produced a compelling ‘real-life system,’” one in which her fiction, her characters, and the settings that she shared with her heroines “all signify in relation to one another” (“See my Journal” 255). That astronomy should so often figure in this “virtuoso weaving of enduring fictions of truth” is testimony to its significance within Montgomery’s life drama (257). She clearly wanted to be associated with the study of the stars; and while she may depict her interest in astronomy as short-lived, her fascination with it nevertheless merits inclusion in the stories scholars tell about her life.

...

Unlike Rubio’s recent biography,⁶ Mollie Gillen’s *The Wheel of Things* (1975) treats Montgomery’s interest in the night sky as a significant biographical detail. “She would always be enthralled by ‘star-hunting,’” Gillen writes. “A book entitled *Astronomy with the Naked Eye* [. . .] had sent her out with a pair of good field glasses along the Cavendish roads on starry nights” (96). Gillen draws her information from an unpublished letter that Montgomery sent to MacMillan in 1909. Dated 21 May 1909, one

artistic and personal agency, the opportunity to write about her life validating and perhaps even valourizing what were too often difficult circumstances.

⁶ *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings* (2010), for its part, makes no mention of astronomy or stargazing.

passage in particular sheds light on her enthusiasm for stargazing. “Just now,” Montgomery informs MacMillan, “I am concerned with housecleaning, new spring ‘taggery,’ gardening, and star-hunting. The last of these,” she continues, “is so fascinating that half the time I don’t know whether I’m on ‘the good red earth’ or roaming the Milky Way” (9).⁷ Included within a list of duties, “star-hunting” probably gave Montgomery a much-needed break from mounting obligations of house and home. “Night,” as Bryan D. Palmer notes in *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (2000), “offers escape from the drudgeries of the day, a break from the routines that define humanity in specific duties, obligations, and tasks” (13). The remainder of the 21 May 1909 letter frames night as a place of release where “ordinary surroundings were strange and forgotten” (9). It also provides some sense of Montgomery’s approach to stargazing, which appears to have included time spent in observation of the sky as well as in supplementary study. “A few weeks ago,” she writes,

I bought a book called ‘Astronomy with the Naked Eye’ – a capital thing. It gives a chart of the constellations for every month in the year, with the names of all the stars etc. Every dark starry night I go out and search the heavens. I can’t describe the feeling it gives me. When I come in I feel as if I had literally been millions of

⁷ *My Dear Mr. M: Letters to G.B. MacMillan from L.M. Montgomery* (1980) only presents a selection of the letters that Montgomery and MacMillan exchanged over the course of their correspondence. The remaining unpublished letters are available through Library and Archives Canada as a part of the George Boyd MacMillan fonds. Because MLA provides no standard guidelines for the parenthetical documentation of unpublished letters, I have elected to reference here the page numbers that Montgomery herself included in her letters. In some instances, I have included the date of the unpublished letter as well to ensure clarity.

miles away and that all my ordinary surroundings were strange and forgotten. I have a good field glass which adds much to enjoyment and shows the different colour of the stars. I think astronomy must be the most fascinating study in the world. I would dearly love to get a glimpse through a large telescope (9).

First published in 1908, Garrett Putnam Serviss's (1851–1929) *Astronomy with the Naked Eye* does provide “the constellations for every month in the year,” as well as additional chapters on the southern constellations, the Milky Way, the zodiacal light, the planets, and the moon. Montgomery also owned at least one other of Serviss's books, *Curiosities of the Sky* (1909), a work that she mentions in a letter to MacMillan dated 20 February 1910 (15). A science popularizer, journalist, and author of science fiction by trade, Serviss frequently cites the advantages of using a “field glass” when observing doubles, star clusters, and other deep sky objects. One such device later makes an appearance in *Emily Climbs* (1925) as the affable Dean Priest's “splendid new field-glasses” (29). The kind regard in which Emily holds Dean is just one example of the way in which Montgomery uses aspects of astronomy to cast characters in a positive light, the most obvious being Emily herself. “Starr should be your first name,” Dean Priest remarks shortly after Emily's fall and subsequent rescue from the steep banks of a shoreline cliff (282). “You look like a star,” he continues, “you have a radiant sort of personality shining through you – your proper habitat should be the evening sky just after sunset – or the morning sky just before sunrise. Yes. [. . .] I think I shall call you Star” (282). Dean's gift to Emily is his ability to see her as “an artist in words,” a characteristic that deepens their friendship and that furthers Emily's development as a writer. “Stars are prismatic,” Dean

adds, “palpitating – elusive. It is not often we find one made of flesh and blood” (283). While Dean’s gentle advances seem lost on Emily at this point, they nevertheless provide some indication of how Montgomery envisioned celestial beauty, in its ideal form, as combining the ability to articulate “prismatic” aesthetic experiences that otherwise remain “elusive,” or perhaps become even more “palpitating” through their very elusiveness (283). This conceptualization of beauty as somehow tantalizingly unrealized may well be related to Montgomery’s vision of the artist figure; at the very least, it is in keeping with her decision to set Emily’s development against the backdrop of the new moon. Aside from its obvious association with beginnings, this phase of the lunar cycle is also remarkable in that the moon itself is not illuminated, positioned as it is directly between the Earth and the Sun. Instead, the new moon appears as a shadow that is difficult to see; it is symbolic of new works, invisible power, and potential about to be realized. Montgomery was sufficiently invested in both this symbol and its real-world counterpart to complain to her friend Ephraim Weber that the waning moon was accidentally featured on the cover of *Emily of New Moon*’s first edition (see fig. 6). “It was not a new moon on the cover of Emily,” she remarks to Weber, “but an old moon” (*After Green Gables* 115). The mistaken cover not only gave Montgomery justifiable cause for complaint, but also the opportunity to announce that she knew the difference. The pride that she takes in astronomical correctness also indicates that “new moon” was more than a fictional setting for Montgomery. Rather, the new moon is meant as a metaphor for Emily, one that she both sees and inhabits, and to such an extent that she becomes its companion star “made of flesh and blood” (*Emily of New Moon* 283).

Moreover, the affinity that Montgomery expresses for the new moon through her protagonist is also consistent with her broader fascination with celestial objects that appear just on the threshold of vision. In a letter of 1 September 1910 to MacMillan, to whom Montgomery dedicated *Emily of New Moon*, she describes her observations of the double star Mizar in the constellation Ursa Major. “I am one of those who can see it double with the naked eye. I understand it is considered a test of far sight” (19, 20). The ability to split Mizar from its companion, Alcor, is actually a very old method of testing eyesight, sometimes called “the test” or “the riddle,” which was used in Ancient Persia to evaluate the vision of warriors (Bohigian n. pag.; Moore n. pag.). Montgomery may have gleaned her description of this pairing from Serviss’s *Astronomy with the Naked Eye*. “These stars are sometimes called the Horse and Rider,” notes Serviss. “Any good eye can easily separate them, and yet they were at one time regarded as a test of naked-eye seeing” (69). Montgomery’s account also makes mention of the same asterism. “They are sometimes called ‘The Horse and Rider,’” she explains in the same letter, after which she makes use of one of Serviss’s favourite terms to describe celestial objects (20). “What a wonderful *assemblage* [my emphasis] of stars that dipper is,” she tells MacMillan, evoking a poeticism that appears a number of times in both *Astronomy with the Naked Eye* and *Curiosities of the Sky* (20).⁸ The extent to which Montgomery was influenced by

⁸ See Serviss’s descriptions of Orion, Gemini, Cancer, Virgo, and Sagittarius in *Astronomy with the Naked Eye* (9, 55, 59, 82, 114). He also makes frequent use of the term of “assemblage” in *Curiosities of the Sky* to describe celestial sights (4, 10, 24, 30, 110).



Fig. 6. The old moon wanes faintly above the tree line on the cover of the 1923 edition of *Emily of New Moon*.

Serviss's text, however, is less important than the belief that she expresses here with regards to her own sight. In one way, the ancient eye test becomes an opportunity for Montgomery to represent herself as "one of those" whose vision is exceptional, a select see-er *and* seer with the gift of probing deep into the heavens. This description is also the product of the kind of enthusiasm one expects from a stargazer who, having taken her private studies outdoors, finally sees in the sky what she otherwise only read about in a book. These different forms of enthusiasm feed off each other, so that, for Montgomery, the joys of observing the night sky stem not only from the application of her reading, but also from the opportunity to internalize such knowledge and to share such discoveries with a close friend.

Nowhere is this process more evident – or more telling – than in those passages where Montgomery describes the zodiacal light to MacMillan. "The Zodiacal Light concerning which you inquire," Montgomery writes, "is like – is like – well, imagine a faint, pearly pyramid rising from the west after sunset, its peak inclining to the south. It looks like a faint white stair in the sky" (1 September 1910: 16). Montgomery's previous description of the zodiacal light actually appears immediately after her first mention of Halley's Comet and the Daylight comet of 1910 (20 February 1910: 16). Together, these descriptions form a picture of hope, anticipation, delight, and personal discovery, all of which are informed, once again, by one of Serviss's texts. "I have never had the delight of a peep through a telescope," Montgomery begins in a letter of 20 February 1910,

I hope to some day. Did you see the expected new comet which was visible lately? I got a good view of it just one night. I've had cloudy weather during

most of its stay. I am longing to see Halleys [sic]. It will be something to gaze upon the comet which glared so forebodingly on Harold's sight before the fatal day of Senlac Hill. One night a fortnight ago I succeeded in seeing the Zodiacal Light for the first time and great was my delight. I never knew there was such a thing until I read 'Astronomy with the Naked Eye.' Flammarion's idea of a world lighted by colored suns is a fascinating one, isn't it? (15, 16)

Montgomery's reference to the French author and astronomer Camille Flammarion's description of distant worlds illuminated by "colored suns" is yet another indication that she was actively seeking out literature about astronomy. While Flammarion does discuss "colored suns" in other works, of which there were more than fifty, Montgomery either encountered these celestial bodies in *Astronomy for Amateurs* (1915), the English translation of his most popular text,⁹ or in one of the articles that Flammarion wrote prior to its publication. In his chapter on double stars, Flammarion asks his readers to "picture the fantastic illumination of the worlds that gravitate round these multiple and colored suns,"

⁹ Her journal entry for 6 March 1925 reports that she had read "a delightful book of astronomy by Camille Flammarion" (SJ 3: 222). Having already mentioned his name in the letter of 20 February 1910 to Macmillan, she nevertheless introduces the French science fiction author and amateur astronomer in her journal as though she were new to him. "He is a poet as well as a scientist and his book is charming," she writes. "As I roamed with him among the stars I felt that, after all, Zephyr is not the universe" (222). It is possible that Montgomery was, on this occasion, actually re-reading Flammarion, who published his last book, *L'inconnu: The Unknown*, in 1900. Either way, what is clear is that Montgomery found Flammarion to be good company, his imaginative interpretation of the universe having reminded her of the world beyond.

referring here to possible worlds in orbit of double stars of different colour (71). The concept of “a planet illuminated by two [of these] suns,” while fanciful, is nevertheless a great source of delight for Flammarion, who revels in the “fairy spectacle” of life elsewhere in the universe (71).

Montgomery’s fascination with Flammarion’s suns aside, her familiarity with *Astronomy for Amateurs* is intriguing for another reason. The frontispiece of the 1904, 1910, and 1915 editions feature a painting by the French artist Paul Renaud in which a young woman looks up at the new moon as it waxes over a body of water (see fig. 7). Renaud’s *Contemplation* (1904), while certainly distinct from the image that would eventually appear on the first edition of *Emily of New Moon*, nevertheless makes use of the same pairing between figure of youth and the most youthful phase of the moon. Whether this particular painting resonated with Montgomery or not, Renaud’s work is nevertheless worth acknowledging as an example of the way in which the night sky could be made to mirror the human in late Edwardian art. It also illustrates how a celestial object is understood to provide companionship for an otherwise solitary figure, a concept that Montgomery clearly favoured. This relationship between exterior and interior realities is evident in Montgomery’s understanding of another celestial wonder, the zodiacal light, which was influenced by what she was reading. In *Astronomy with the Naked Eye*, Serviss quotes a description of the phenomenon written by the nineteenth-century anthropologist Paul Du Chaillu, who saw the zodiacal light as “a pyramidal shape high in the sky” (183). While Chaillu’s account may have inspired Montgomery’s



Paul Renaud.
CONTEMPLATION

Fig. 7. Paul Renaud's *Contemplation*, as it appeared in Camille Flammarion's *Astronomy for Amateurs* (1910).

description of it as a “pearly pyramid,” her poetic rendering of “a faint white stair in the sky” appears to be her own vision of the sky’s inviting structures (1 September 1910: 16). Montgomery’s description of the zodiacal light as “rising from the west after sunset [. . .] on a February night” seems entirely plausible, since the interplay of sunlight and dust grains in the inner solar system is only visible twice a year, either in mid-winter or fall (16).¹⁰ As the Canadian radio astronomer Ken Tapping has explained, the zodiacal light is actually “quite easy to see,” provided one has access to unpolluted skies and knows where and when to look (Tapping n. pag.). Montgomery nevertheless appears quite taken by its appearance and is eager to share the details of her observations with MacMillan. “I believe I had often seen it before last winter but had not known what it was,” she writes, “taking it for a reflection from the sun. I saw it at nine o’clock on a February night. It would probably be brighter earlier in the evening. It is a spectral sort of thing,” she adds, “like the ghost of light arising from its grave, but it has an aerial beauty all its own” (1 September 1910: 16). Montgomery’s response to MacMillan’s inquiry into the zodiacal light’s nature is a form of personal testimony enriched by poetic description. Her act of witness provides an opportunity to share her enthusiasm with a distant friend and to remark with pleasure on her own increasing knowledge of the night. In terms of its

¹⁰ As Tapping states in his online column, “Astronomy & Space,” “[t]he reason we cannot see the Zodiacal Light throughout the year is that it is faint [. . .]. [W]e need to have the ecliptic coming up from the horizon as steeply as possible [. . .]. This happens,” according to Tapping, “in February-March and September-October” (Tapping n. pag.).

appeal, the zodiacal light may have also provided Montgomery with a real-world counterpart to the imagined twilight scenes of her fiction. While certainly distinct from each other, the “spectral sort of thing” that Montgomery observed and the time of day commonly known as twilight are both synonymous with sunrise and sunset, appearing as they do at transition points in the diurnal cycle.

Elizabeth Epperly has argued that Montgomery makes use of such associations between twilight and change to highlight important stages in her most popular protagonist’s growth (*The Fragrance* 32). “In each of the sunset-marked experiences,” Epperly explains, “Anne learns something about herself and grows” (*The Fragrance* 33). The notion that the fading light of day has the power to mark important milestones in a protagonist’s development suggests, in turn, that twilight serves as the outward sign of maturity, the very act of its observation signaling not only the slow phases of the enlightenment process, but also the relinquishing of another day and the slow dissipation of youth. Twilight is, in this way, an important threshold for post-Romantic personae such as Anne; its appearance is the outward sign of an internal process that is otherwise difficult to describe.¹¹ Since the zodiacal light appears as though it were twilight, albeit in

¹¹ Geoffrey Hartman has considered the literary meaning of evening, twilight, and its celestial counterpoint, Venus – the evening star – at length. His reading of William Collins’s “Ode to Evening” in *Beyond Formalism* (1966) establishes evening as a setting that lends itself particularly well to a number of Romantic tendencies, not the least of which is to locate the supernatural in nature while, at the same time, appreciating the evening’s calmness as a transition away from the day’s commotion (320-21). No less important is Hartman’s essay “Evening Star and Evening Land,” where he examines at length the genre of the “Evening Star poem.” “Hesperus,” Hartman writes, “tends to personify the threshold and evoke an enchanted spot in time in which a richly ominous signifier is all there is” (54). The planet

its most dramatic form, the meaning of the two may have overlapped for Montgomery. This elision does not, however, downplay the attention she gives the “spectral sort of thing” that she observed.

Describing the zodiacal light as “the ghost of light arising from its grave,” but one with “an aerial beauty all its own,” Montgomery creates a scene haunted by beauty’s return – somewhat gothic, yet safely so – an effect that she achieves by personifying, and then reifying the light so as to evoke cycles of death and re-birth (1 September 1910: 16, 17). The light contains its own past and is subject to the same cycles as the landscape over which it appears. Considered in conjunction with a previous metaphor, this “aerial beauty” joins facets of heaven and earth, a “faint white stair in the sky” that bridges realms and that invites the observer to imagine what resides there. Montgomery’s description bears a resemblance to an often-quoted passage from her autobiography, *The Alpine Path* (1917), one that she later reproduces in *Emily Climbs* as a statement of both her and her character’s investment in the sustaining power of beauty. “It has always

Venus is, in this sense, ominous because its appearance is a reminder that the sun has, in fact, set, and, therefore, another transition towards darkness at day’s end has taken place. This cycle is inevitably a subtle reminder of the poet’s mortality that marks the unrelenting passage of time. Venus is, however, also a precursor to the enchantment of night (54). A bright point in an otherwise starless zone of transition, Venus is both a source of comfort and apprehension, since its presence is simultaneously a comfort against loss and a reminder that loss is inevitable. “The evening star,” Hartman observes, “rises in that space, on that loss; and however strongly it rises there is often the fear of new withdrawal” (54). While certainly just one component in an unending diurnal cycle, Venus nevertheless oversees a rich zone of contemplation that is neither night nor day, but that still manages to bring both equally in mind.

seemed to me,” she reflects,

ever since early childhood, that, amid all the commonplaces of life, I was very near to a kingdom of ideal beauty. Between it and me hung only a thin veil. I could never draw it quite aside, but sometimes a wind fluttered it and I caught a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond – only a glimpse – but those glimpses have always made life worth while (47, 48).

The zodiacal light appears to have been one of those “glimpse[s]” that “made life worth while” for Montgomery, its ephemeral presence constituting both “a kingdom of ideal beauty” and the “thin veil” that hung between her and its attainability.

Especially significant here is the emphasis Montgomery places on the deferral of enchantment’s realization, for the edifying dynamic that she establishes between the desire for beauty and its fleeting nature also speaks to the dissatisfaction that she conveys when she finally does see Halley’s Comet. “Oh, did you see Halley’s comet?” she asks, after providing a description of the zodiacal light. “What a disappointment it was, after the tremendous fuss that was made about it” (1 September 1910: 17). Describing it as “little more than a dull white star,” the reality of Halley was, for Montgomery, disproportional to the sense of excitement that had preceded it (17).¹² Unlike the zodiacal

¹² Disappointment in Halley’s Comet was fairly widespread. “After a man sits up several nights in vain,” the *Toronto Daily Star* editorialized on 14 April 1910, “and then gets up early several mornings, also in vain, he may be pardoned for doubting if there ever was such a thing as a comet” (8). The brief notice, just one of many to have declared Halley a monumental let down, was featured alongside a small drawing of man shaking his fist at a comet. “I’m done with you!” he announces, as the indifferent spectre streaks by in the night.

light, whose amorphous form and mysterious appearance had invited poetic reflection, the spectacle of Halley failed to provoke the kind of enthusiastic observations for which astronomy popularizers such as Serviss had advocated. Montgomery states that she “looked at it and tried to ‘enthuse’ somewhat, remembering that this self-same star hung over the doomed Jerusalem in its memorable siege and lighted Norman William to his English conquest,” but even this attempt to supplement the experience of observing the comet with its history results only in wistfulness (17). “It will be 75 years before the comet calls again,” she writes (17). “By that time neither you nor I shall be searching for it in the springtime skies. But perhaps,” Montgomery imagines, “we may be in some ‘far countrie’ where comets are commonplaces and nothing ever disappoints” (17, 18).

Montgomery’s allusion to a “far countrie” probably refers to Félix Mendelssohn’s

“We’ve a bonnie wee flower,” a Scottish folk song that evokes an idyllic landscape “In a

One notable exception was W.W. Campbell, who tracked Halley’s Comet in April of 1910 and who appears to have taken great pleasure in its progress. His poem, “Stella Flammarum” (1910), which Carl F. Klinck has interpreted as an “illustration of his theories,” serves as yet another sign that Campbell’s “dogmatic idealism” wished to see nature outshine the increasing materialism and rationalism of his time (259). “The great danger of the nineteenth century,” Campbell insists in the 16 January 1904 issue of the *Ottawa Evening Journal*, “was the dominance of purely material mind [. . .]. In the crowded city and the grim turmoil, the modern slavery of class, the rich in their strife for place, the poor for very existence, materialism and despair are rampant” (Campbell qtd. in Klinck 250). Existing apart from the “earth’s mad seething,” Halley’s Comet provides the occasion to reflect on the powers of the intellect in relation to the grandeur of the human soul (Campbell 44). “Our mind is finite,” Campbell wrote in his journal on 13 April 1910, “but the soul is wider in its dim consciousness of things outside its comprehension” (qtd. in Klinck 260).

far countrie” where “the sky is ever fair” (4, 5). Contained within Montgomery’s reflection is not only an awareness of her own mortality, but also yet another expression of affinity for a “kingdom of ideal beauty” to which she might yet gain access. For Montgomery, her disappointment in Halley dissolved into the imaginative questing for “a far countrie” in which “comets are commonplaces” (17). The very impossibility of such a place represents the ultimate postponement, thus enabling Montgomery to dwell on the object of longing and to revel in the desires that seem to sustain her. Her desire to reside imaginatively in such unrealized realms does not necessarily amount to a fear of the future, but rather serves as an example of a mind trying to sustain itself amid disappointment by plumbing the depths – and heights – of its imaginative reach. As Montgomery’s letters to Macmillan illustrate, the fathomless night sky provided her with the occasion and motive to do so, just as the medium of correspondence itself ensured that her observations, even those that were less than fulfilling, would nevertheless contribute to an intimate friendship based on common understanding and shared interest.

Vagabonds of Space: L.M. Montgomery and the Comets of 1910

Prominent among these interests were the comets that would captivate the world’s attention in 1910. Well before Halley reached perihelion on 20 April, the great January Comet, sometimes called the Daylight or Sunset Comet, had already made news around the world by outshining Venus in the morning and evening sky. Appearing in relatively quick succession of each other, the January Comet and Halley’s Comet would later be conflated in recollections of the celestial events of 1910, observers mistaking the

dramatic appearance of the first for Halley's significantly less impressive display. Such slippage in public memory is in large part the product of the considerable public excitement generated by seeing the first of these spectacles. In Canada, this excitement is palpable in a letter that appeared in the 5 February issue of the *Globe* in 1910, the details of which recount how one group of people made an effort to escape both natural and artificial light in order to get a better view. Having "wasted no time before the mirror," they sped out of their home on a Sunday evening and went "racing up the sidewalk:"

At the corner we saw it! Just like the pictured comets it was: the nucleus star-like and reddish, the luminous train stretching w.s.w – a conspicuous object despite the flooding radiance of the moon and the glare of the arc lamps [. . .]. [T]he children and I sped down a side street in the endeavor to leave artificial light behind. ("Seeing the Comet" 10)

Two new realities of stargazing are evident in this description. The first is a reference to "the pictured comets" of astrophotography, which not only attests to the prevalence of such images, but also conveys how the experience of seeing a comet in the sky – near the beginning of the twentieth century and onwards – almost inevitably evokes the memory of seeing photographic representations of them. These typically more dramatic portraits, in turn, come to be the bar against which firsthand exposures are measured, and not surprisingly so, given that the arrival of electric lighting in Canadian cities and towns changed dramatically what had previously been a lived experience. The interval between the appearance of Donati's Comet in 1858 and the comets of 1910 saw the Canadian cityscape dramatically transformed. In 1884, Hamilton, Ontario, then known as "the

electric city,” became the first town in Ontario to adopt the arc light for public lighting by electricity (“The ‘White Way’ in Canada” n. pag.). In Quebec, even though gas lights had long been a fixture in Montréal it was not until 17 July 1886 that the first arc lamps illuminated its streets (Malins n. pag.). The Royal Electric Company had, in the previous year, also set up the first street lighting systems in Charlottetown and St. John’s (Bell 8). Other Canadian towns would follow, including Waterloo, Ontario, which initially ran on a “moonlight schedule,” the community depending on natural light to illuminate its streets when the moon was full (“Street Lamps” n. pag.). Downtown Toronto was temporarily illuminated with electric lighting in 1883 in order to display the arc lamp’s potential; two years later, street lights were already a prominent part of the city’s nightscape (Walden 304). An illustration from the 25 July 1885 issue of *The Illustrated War News* captures this transition memorably. As Quebec’s 9th Battalion marches down Toronto’s Yonge Street, brilliant street lights turning the night very nearly into day (see fig. 8). Meanwhile, comets streak in the distance, their presence lending a different kind of light to the scene as they mark the passage of time.

Montgomery was well-aware of this shift in lighting practices and incorporated it into her fiction. While she does make room for the appreciation of illuminated cityscapes and the distinctly modern impression that they make,¹³ her prevailing sentiment with regards to such environs is that they obscure forms of beauty that were more meaningful

¹³ As Epperly notes in *The Fragrance of Sweetgrass* (1993), Anne delights in aspects of Montréal’s street life, while other elements of the city accentuate her anxiety and loneliness.

for her. The pattern that emerges is one in which country dwellers “know the real charm of night [. . .] as town dwellers never do” (*Anne of Green Gables* 21). In places, this distinction is a source of anxiety for Montgomery’s characters. For example, Emily worries whether Teddy still thinks of her each time he sees Vega, or if “the electric lights of Montreal blot it out” (*Emily’s Quest* 12). Similarly, Anne also finds herself alone in the “city” when she leaves for Queen’s College, the unfamiliar infrastructure of Charlottetown isolating her far from home. Following a description of the pastoral setting of Green Gables, which includes, of course, “a vast starry sky,” Anne becomes acutely aware that “outside her window was a hard street, with a network of telephone wires shutting out the sky, the tramp of alien feet, and a thousand lights gleaming on stranger faces” (*Anne of Green Gables* 307). Their identities obscured by the “gleaming” light that shines on them, the citizens that move through Anne’s imagination crowd out “the pleasant consciousness of a great green still outdoors” she would otherwise prefer to maintain (307). The tension that emerges here is between two strains of thought – one comforting, one alienating – as they occupy a single mind. Tellingly, as Anne attempts to slow her tears, she states that she “must think of something funny to stop them” (307). In so doing, Anne attempts to self-correct her emotional state by channelling the force of her thoughts. This kind of intervention, made necessary by the imagined conditions of the city outside, signals the presence of mind cure practices and antimodernism in Montgomery’s fiction. Another novel, *Jane of Lantern Hill*, not only reveals these influences at work, but also illustrates how the night skies of Montgomery’s fiction mean

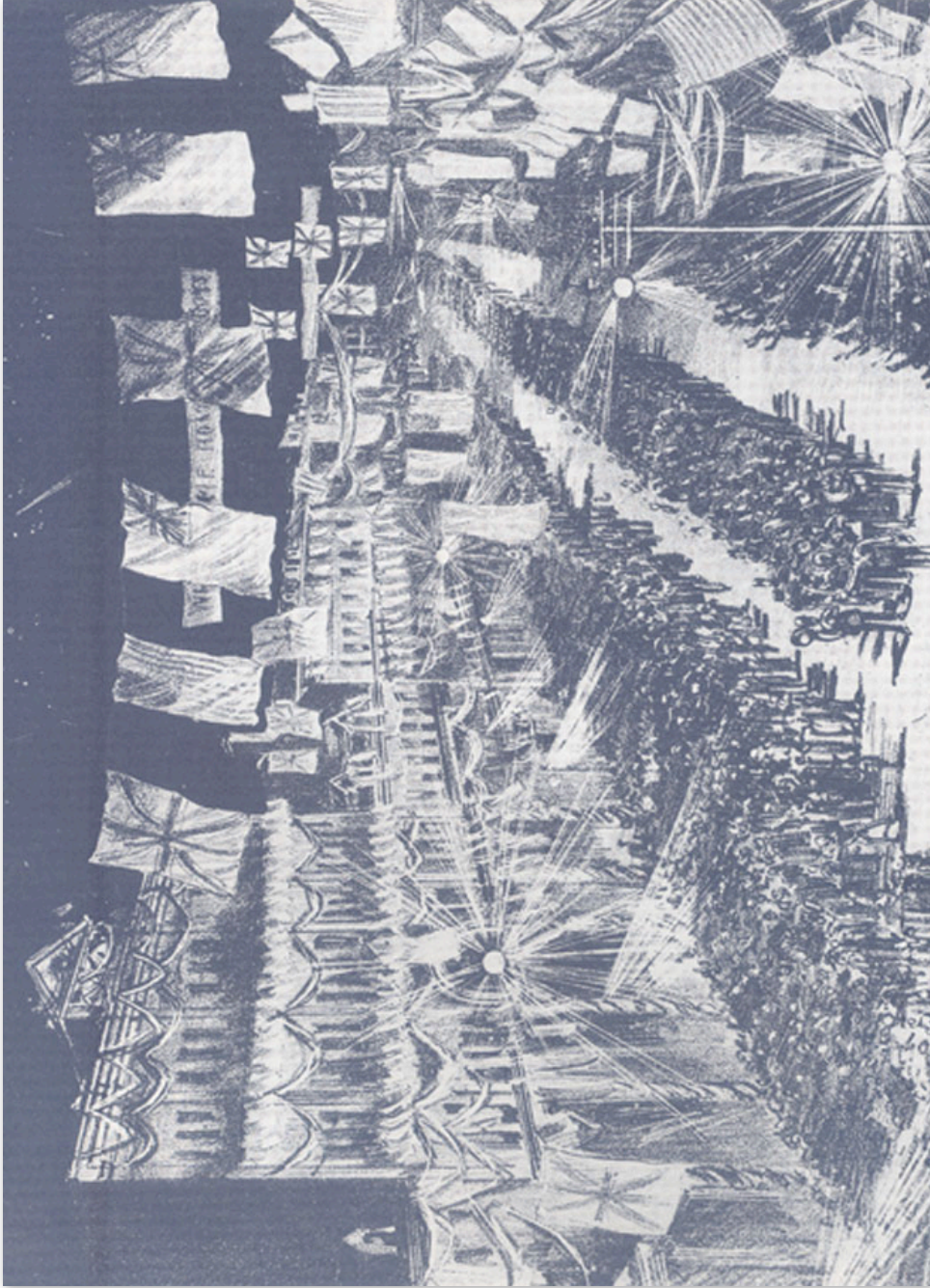


Figure 6. Recently installed streetlights steal the show as Quebec's 9th Battalion marches down Toronto's Yonge Street. *Illustrated War News*, 25 July 1885.

to edify the individual by facilitating community between those who share in their witness.

These instances of solace ameliorate mind and spirit alike. In *Jane of Lantern Hill*, Montgomery's protagonist acquires an understanding of the night sky that emboldens her to walk home alone in the dark, during which time she takes "friendly counsel with the stars" (226). The scene is meant to show the change that Jane, a Toronto native, has undergone as a result of her father's tutelage in Prince Edward Island. "Dad had given her lessons in astronomy all summer," the narrator tells us, "having discovered that the only constellation she knew was the Big Dipper" (226). In stark contrast to Phyllis, who also hails from the city, Jane has learned to embrace the beauty of the countryside at night, the memory of her father's insistence keeping her company as she walks home. "This won't do, my Jane," she recalls him telling her; "You must know the stars" (226). In the lament that follows, Dad becomes the voice for sentiments native to Emerson and, one suspects, Montgomery as well: "Humanity in its great lighted cities is shut out from the stars. And even the country folk are too used to them to realize their wonder. Emerson says something somewhere about how marvellous a spectacle we should deem them if we saw them only once in a thousand years" (226). Montgomery's transparent allusion to the opening lines of *Nature* testifies to the extent to which Emerson's conceptualization of the night sky stayed with her, his then-youthful insistence on an individual's capacity to overcome broader states of neglect still making itself know in her work. Equally present in this scene is the transcendentalist logic that the indifference of many can be countered by the actions of the few, provided these include

excursions undertaken to gain not only greater knowledge of nature's workings, but also fleeting access to those mystical qualities that have come to be associated with it. "So," the narrator continues, "with dad's field-glasses, they went star hunting on moonless nights and Jane became learned in lore of far-off suns" (226).

Jane's process of becoming "learned" involves the seemingly contradictory act of sitting "out on the hills with dad in the dark" so as to revel in "the beautiful aloneness" present there. The "aloneness" that Montgomery emphasizes here does not signal isolation, but is instead an attempt to quantify how the night resides apart from the teeming company of day. It is the rare solitary state that can be shared between individuals who accede to its tranquility and the "beautiful" feelings that nocturnal settings engender. Guided by her father through such vast distances, Montgomery's protagonist comes to know the stars by name: "Polaris, Arcturus, Vega, Capella, Altair," the narrator recounts, listing some of the more prominent stars in the summer sky, "she knew them all" (226). The reader's appreciation of her father's motives for doing so is not complete, however, until he reveals his belief that the heavens can mend the soul and steady the mind. "Watch the stars whenever you are worried, Jane," she remembers him telling her. "They'll steady you . . . comfort you . . . balance you" (226). The continuity between Emerson and William James is made clear in the last line of the chapter, where "dad" regrets his failure to learn what the night sky has to teach much earlier. "I think if I had watched them . . . years ago . . . but I learned their lesson too late" (226). Knowledge, like the owl of Minerva that flies at midnight, always arrives "too late." Even so, Jane's father still hopes that she is able to learn from his mistake and to familiarize herself, at a

much earlier age, with the palliative qualities of the night. These instructions, passed as they are from one generation to the next, also speak to the way in which nocturnal settings are understood to facilitate such exchanges, the timelessness of the stars fostering a form of unguarded subjectivity that invites the transfer of knowledge.

A similar dynamic appears in Montgomery's fourteenth novel, *Magic for Marigold* (1929), which she dedicated to her long-time friend and fellow teacher in Cavendish, Nora Lefurgey Campbell, "in memory of a world that has passed away." The "world" implied here includes Marigold's befriending of the dark, as well as her eventual knowledge of the stars and what she learns by sitting under them with her great grandmother, Edith (see fig. 9). This intergenerational scene is notable because the evening that they spend out sitting on a stone bench enables Marigold to imagine her "old grandmother," or great grandmother, in her youth, the moonlight making "jewels of her eyes" and enabling her to lean only "very lightly on her cane" (90). The night is transformative, lending its timelessness, however briefly, to Edith, who responds to its invigorating energies by recalling the flirtations of her youth, at which point she also passes along her wisdom to Marigold. "Never mind the old traditions," she tells her granddaughter. "And don't think too much about what people will say" (89). Recalling her own "spunk," Edith hopes Marigold lives "joyously," while still "playing the game of life according to the rules" (89). The bestowal of this wise rebelliousness is made possible by the atmosphere under which the two characters appear: the moon is situated "over the cloud of spruce" in such a way that "the orchard became transfigured" (77). For Marigold, a "garden of flowers in moonlight is a strange, enchanted thing with a touch of

diablerie,” one whose “charm” she feels “long years before she [can] define it” (77). The night is a space whose qualities, however difficult to articulate, are nevertheless transformative and wholly distinct from those of day. “Nothing was the same as in daylight,” the narrator explains at the outset of the scene, at which point the dark becomes the essential setting for these two characters to interact in a way not otherwise possible (77).

These intimate exchanges between characters, made possible by the perception that the night’s distinctive nature heightened bonds by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and wisdom, are actually at odds with much of the public fervor that surrounded celestial events of the time. In 1908, the relatively new field of spectroscopy enabled astronomers to determine that cyanogen was present in the gaseous tails of comets, and while the poisonous element was far too diffuse to do any harm, this discovery, coupled with the knowledge that the Earth would be passing through Halley’s tail, sparked a spree of apocalyptic predictions. In New York, while the city’s well-educated elite held comet parties on rooftops, street vendors took advantage of public fears by selling anti-comet pills and comet umbrellas¹⁴ for exorbitant fees. Retailers in Toronto, both big and small, ran advertising campaigns that featured Halley’s Comet

¹⁴ While widespread instances of cometophobia are well-documented in the United States, evidence suggests that these fears were also present, albeit to a lesser extent, in early Canada. In a letter sent to her sister Catharine Parr Traill, Susanna Moodie writes grimly of the arrival of Comet C/1881 K1. “Have you see the awful things expected of the new comet[?] [. . .]. No less than the complete destruction of all life upon this planet” (3 January 1881).



Fig. 9. The Hodder and Stoughton cover of *Magic for Marigold* (1929). The image works through pairings that frame and naturalize the intergenerational exchange: four trees rise in the distance, two on either side; two more stand in the foreground, and two especially brilliant stars rise in the enchanted sky. Note, too, how Marigold's carefully balanced arms contribute to the sense of symmetry that governs the scene as a whole.

prominently. Ryrie Bros., an upscale jewelry company located at the corner of Yonge and Adelaide, marketed safety pins and scarf pins as mementos of the celestial visitor, while Dunlop Tire ads paved the heavens with starlight. Eaton's also made use of comet imagery in its advertising that year, a streaking capital "E" announcing the arrival of its February furniture sale. Perhaps the most original campaign, however, was initiated by the Brockton Shoe Company of Massachusetts, which consisted of eleven ads featuring "the Brockton comet" (Smith 81, 82) (see figs. 10 and 11). Running in the *Toronto Daily Star* from 11 April to the 21st, the ads tracked the progress of a fictional comet that arrived just in time for the Brockton shoe store's grand opening, bringing with it "a whole train of good shoes" ("The 'Brockton' Is Here" 7).

Meanwhile, in Montgomery's home province of Prince Edward Island, public excitement grew as the predicted date of the comet's arrival approached. On 17 May 1910, the management of the *Guardian* newspaper actually went so far as to make special arrangements with city hall to wake Charlottetown's residents in the middle of the night should the long-awaited spectacle appear:

Acting on the suggestion of a prominent citizen and with the permission of His Worship the Mayor and the Chairmen and members of the Fire Committee[,] The Guardian has arranged for the ringing of the Fire Bell should anything noteworthy occur during the morning. The regular ringing of the bell (without any ward number to designate it from a regular fire alarm) can be accepted as a signal to citizens that there is something worth seeing transpiring overhead. By this means

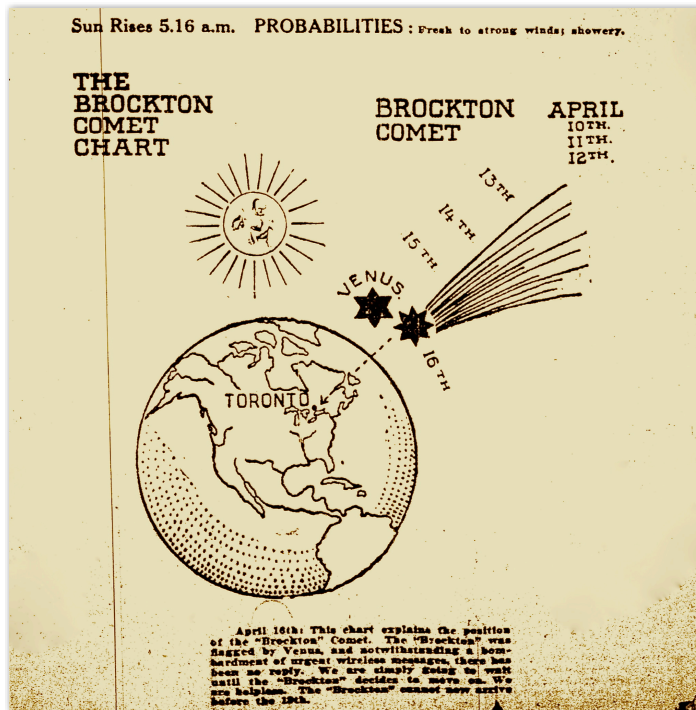


Fig. 10. "The Brockton Comet Chart." *Toronto Daily Star*, 16 April 1910.

THE "BROCKTON" IS HERE

The
Comet
Arrives

April 21: The "Brockton" Comet is here. We have experienced in our city, Toronto, with this "Brockton" Comet. It was to arrive on the 10th. On that date it passed through the Venus zone. There there was trouble. The "Brockton" simply vanished, and we were left. We had to wait until the "Brockton" got through with his first day. The "Brockton" was at first 10,000 miles away from Venus. The distance was 100,000 miles to reach a station, but on the Venus belt it is "just across the road."

Brockton the "Brockton" is here, and it brought a whole train of good shoes. "Oh, please, don't see just what the "Brockton" means to you."

We acknowledge that we are not the first people to open a shoe store in Toronto, but we do claim that we are the first absolutely one price outfit in the shoe game in this city. What's more we are working between factory and wearer and thereby cut out all the profits that generally go to the middleman. We find wherever we have located that there is the general kick, that the existing stores have an elastic scale of prices. If you select a shoe and the clerk finds you want that particular one, up goes the price. Not so with us--There is one price, \$3.50, no more, no less, and only the best of quality.

You can purchase cheaper shoes than we sell, but for Five Dollars you cannot purchase the duplicates of them. Three-fifty is the honest price for an exclusive shoe at the factory and that is the price we are asking for the "Brockton."

"Brockton" is an exclusive production every way and we are anxious that you consider it alongside any other shoe you have seen. It is "BROCKTON" with a large "B"---Brockton quality and Brockton style. It has imitators, but none has as yet approached the original. It doesn't matter what time you call you'll find some good-mannered clerks to look after you and show you around.

Brockton Shoes on Sale
SATURDAY, THE 23rd INST.

Fig. 11. The 'Brockton' is Here." *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 April 1910.

citizens may retire at the usual hour on the assurance of any important change, atmospherical [sic] or heavenly, which may result from the comet's tail passing over the earth ("Comet Envelops Earth Wednesday" 1).

The *Guardian*'s unchecked enthusiasm earned the ridicule of at least one rival newspaper. On 18 May, the *Daily Examiner* replied with its own front-page article about Halley's Comet, one in which the *Guardian* is taken to task playfully for trying to "take full charge of the heavenly wanderer" ("Who Saw the Comet? Ha! Ha! Ha!" 1). "The comet no doubt prefers having its liberty," speculates the *Daily Examiner*, "without being subject to heartless newspapers which would try to step on its tail and scare it with firebells if it didn't just happen to act in the way a well-behaved comet should" (1). In its brief satirical response, the *Daily Examiner* greets its rival's plans with its own hyperbolic observations so as to define the affair as absurd. "Big bevvies of excited maidens and herdes [sic] of howling young hyenas of the male human persuasion scurried forth into the night," states the editorial, "and peered into the night till their eyes ached and the man in the moon grinned [. . .]. Some who went even took their meals with them, probably thinking that the comet might like to stay for breakfast" (1). Apparently, the satire cut deep. The following day, the *Guardian* issued a retraction that acknowledged public objection to its plan "on the ground that it might create unnecessary alarm" ("The Firebell" 1). More defensive than apologetic, the brief notice is a dramatic departure from the previous day's notice, written as it is in a decidedly cool and detached tone. "The statement in yesterday's issue of the *Guardian* was correct at the time," the newspaper insists, perhaps in an attempt to save face, "the contradiction in an afternoon

daily notwithstanding” (1).

Montgomery was by no means immune to the excitement surrounding Halley’s arrival. The comet’s history aside, this enthusiasm may have also grown from her observation of the January Comet; she states in a letter of 20 February 1910 to MacMillan that she got “a good view of it just one night” (15). Regardless, this enthusiasm fades quickly once Halley’s Comet finally arrives. “To-night,” she writes in her journal,

I succeeded in seeing Halley’s comet. It was a sorry spectacle – little more than a dull white star. There has been so much concerning it in the newspapers and periodicals of the past 6 months that everyone expected a wonderful sight and we have been proportionally disappointed [. . .]. It will be seventy-five years before this comet “calls” again. By that time I shall not be searching for it in the tremulous spring-time skies. I shall be lying somewhere under the grasses and eyes now unborn will be gazing at the famous vagabond of space (*SJ* 2: 8).

In describing the comet as a “vagabond of space,” Montgomery evokes Thoreau and Carman alike, both of whom associate their vagabond figures with the pleasurable enterprise of passing in a leisurely manner from one town (and tavern) to the next, “[w]illing to let the world go by” as they travel on a “wandering wind” (“The Vagabonds” 32-34). Carman’s poem, “The Vagabonds,” defines these travelers as not only existing apart from the communities through which they pass, but also as personas unaffected by time itself. They are a dyschronous tribe, human figures infused by nature, blown along by “the sea-wind” in such a way that they enjoy a perpetual separateness

from civilization, just as their social distinctiveness stems from – and enables – freedom from care and worry (11). Montgomery’s comet, in this sense, seems to fit within a broader spectrum of transcendentalist imagery whose evocation is synonymous with those forms of leisure that literature enables vicariously. Yet, even as she gestures towards such meanings, Montgomery also recognizes how she exists apart from the sphere in which they play out. As a harbinger of her mortality, Halley’s Comet is, in this entry, at least, primarily the immortal visitor whose presence reminds her to make much of the time she has. This prompts an allusion to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), (“Get leave to work; / In this world tis the best you get at all,”) which Montgomery uses as stepping-off point to consider the merits of labour. *Emily of New Moon* borrows from the same passage, and in both instances the allusion is meant as a statement of artistic intent that mirrors the determination of Browning’s protagonist, Aurora, who sets off to write on her own¹⁵ (Epperly 191). There is, however, also an insistent quality to Montgomery’s statements that make them difficult to trust: her unqualified exuberance in “the work for which [she was] fitted” appears untroubled in this instance by the difficult realities that such efforts entail. Montgomery nevertheless tries to illustrate the correctness of these principles through biblical allusion, reminding herself that God sent Adam and Eve out to “labor – and not all their dreams of Paradise, ‘whence the four great rivers flow’ could have been as truly sweet as those which

¹⁵ See Epperly’s analysis of Emily in *The Fragrance of Sweet Grass* (1993) (191-92).

crowned their days of toil” (8). What Montgomery’s disappointment in the experience of seeing the comet actually generates is a rehearsal of the tenets of a Protestant work ethic, one whose performative appeal to piety, courage, and biblical authority is meant to stand as an untroubled statement of belief in a standard of conduct to which she was expected to adhere. If the negotiation of these pressures means to edify Montgomery, they also make her relationship with Halley’s Comet all the more important to understand.

The back cover of Montgomery’s last Island scrapbook actually features one of the many images of Halley’s Comet that circulated widely in the spring of 1910 (see fig. 12). Unlike several other clippings included in these scrapbooks, Montgomery removed the bi-line that would otherwise identify the image and its source, a decision that seems to privilege the timeless meaning of the comet over the historical moment of Halley’s return.¹⁶ Held in the stasis of the scrapbook page, the diffuse streak of light is less spectacle than spectral figure, a portrait of an idea held out of time that nevertheless passes from one generation to the next. In *Imagining Anne: The Island Scrapbooks of L.M. Montgomery*, a popular selection of the first two scrapbooks published by Penguin in 2008, Epperly provides a helpful analysis of the Halley image. Her description, geared as it is towards a reader encountering the scrapbooks for the first time, understands the

¹⁶ An exhaustive review of the periodicals of her time did not reveal the source of Montgomery’s comet image. Its proximity in the scrapbook to Ethel M. Hewitt’s poem “An Epitaph of Egypt” (1910) may, however, provide one possible clue, since the Helwan Observatory near Cairo captured numerous images of Halley’s Comet, a number of which circulated widely. Even so, these prove difficult to match, since only the negatives are readily accessible.

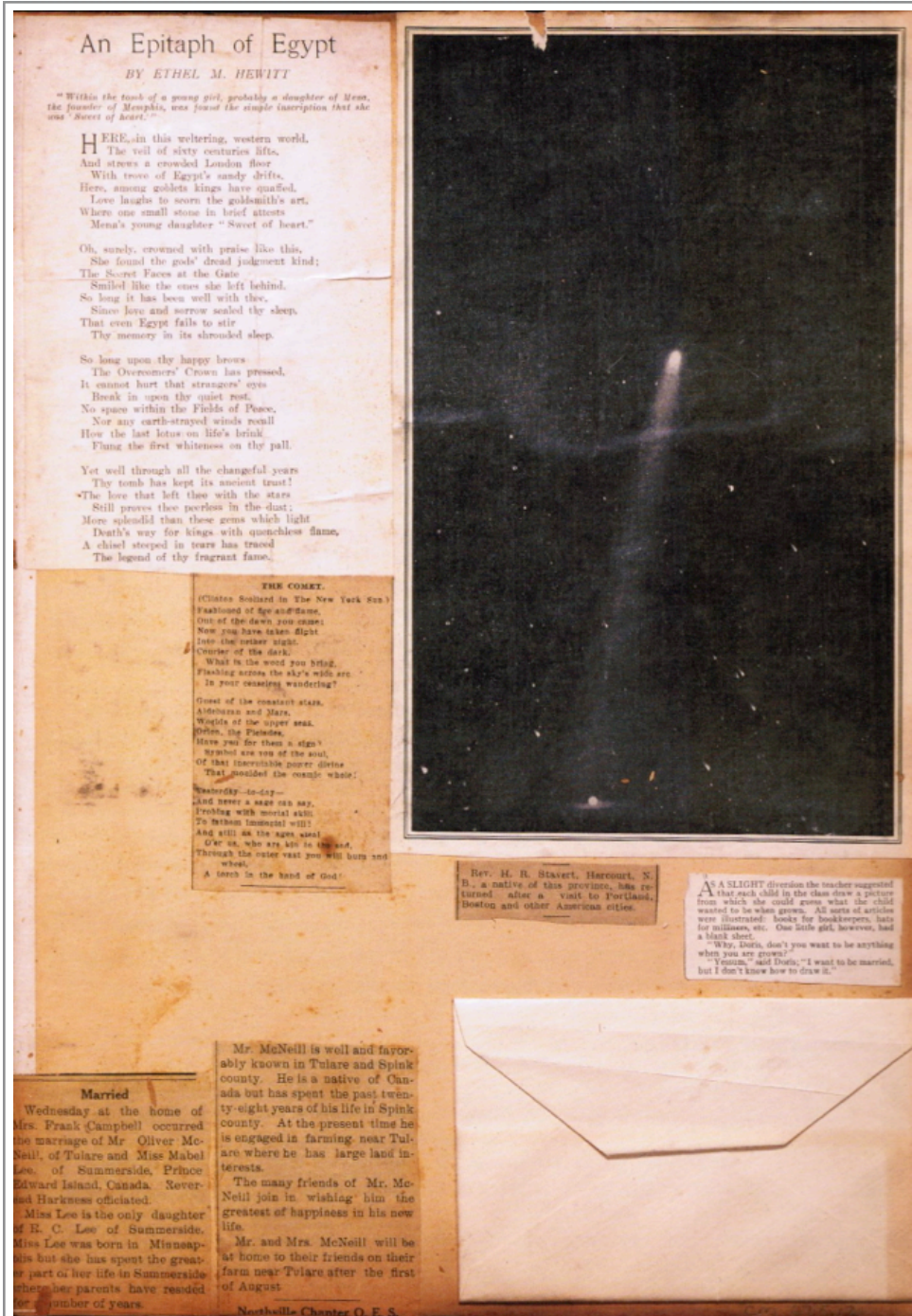


Fig. 12. Inside the back cover of L.M. Montgomery's Red Scrapbook.

comet's meaning primarily in relation to the items that surround it. "At the top half of the page," Epperly writes, "the comet belongs to timeless romance; at the bottom, it may suggest human frailty. In a larger context," she adds, "it may be a mature artist's declaration of purpose and power" (166). Epperly's hesitant approach is appropriate, given that the image remains tinged with mystery even as the items surrounding it modify and complicate its meaning. To the left, Ethel M. Hewitt's poem, "An Epitaph of Egypt," appears in contrast to the dark backdrop of Halley's night. While it is certain that this published version of Hewitt's poem appeared in the June 1910 issue of *Harper's Monthly*, relatively little is known about the poet herself. A biographical note describes her only as "an English writer who has previously appeared in *Harper's*" (130).¹⁷ In Hewitt's poem, "An Epitaph of Egypt," the "veil of sixty centuries lifts," and the "weltering, western world" gives way to "sandy drifts" of ancient Egypt, where a solitary

¹⁷ Hewitt actually published twenty poems in *Harper's Monthly* between September of 1903 and December of 1925; she also published three novels (*The Heart of Sheba*, 1890; *In a Cinque Port: A Story of Winchelsea*, 1894; and *The Effacement of Oriel Penhaligon*, 1894) as well as *A Chaplet of Myrtle* (1910), a book of devotional verse. Of these works, *The Heart of Sheba* may well tell us the most about "An Epitaph of Egypt," described as it was at the time of its publication by one reviewer as "a tender romance" that "takes up a popular legend among Christian Ethiopians to the effect that the Queen of Sheba was their ancestress" ("New Books" 503). The appeal of Hewitt's novel among female Victorian readers no doubt resided to a significant extent in its exotic storyline about a foreign land, one in which a woman of prominence has the power and agency to dictate, or, at the very least, to have some say in her fate. Recent studies have considered at length the relationship between feminism and Orientalism, as well as the ways in which Victorian proto-feminist novelists, poets, and painters imagined otherness visually and textually as a liberating territory in which to realize alternative white female subjectivities for themselves in nineteenth-century British society. Hewitt's re-imagining of the Queen of Sheba narrative appears consistent with such motives, especially since her female protagonist, Balkis, is ultimately allowed to live out her days unwed (rather than having to share her love of Solomon with other women).

tomb keeps “Mena’s young daughter” (1-8). The poet’s insistence that she was “Sweet of heart” likely means to counter the biblical narrative of Solomon’s wife, the unnamed daughter of a pharaoh whose influence is understood to have led to her husband’s downfall. Reading the poem in this way establishes Hewitt as providing a romanticized end for an otherwise obscure, vilified figure by granting her a transcendent, eternal resting place beyond those male figures who otherwise enshroud her identity. Yet it is the final lines of the poem that make the connection between the image of Halley’s Comet and Hewitt’s figure most clear. “The love that left thee with the stars,” writes Hewitt, “Still proves thee peerless in the dust: / More splendid than these gems which light / Death’s way for kings with quenchless flame” (27-30). Within the context of Montgomery’s scrapbook page, the comet could thus be construed – in relation to the poem adjacent to it – as either the tireless symbol of the daughter’s lasting “love” that is “splendid” and “peerless;” or, alternatively, as one of the decidedly masculine “gems which light / Death’s way for kings.” Given that the year of the comet’s appearance was also marked by the death of King Edward VII (6 May 1910) and literary royalty in the person of Mark Twain (21 April 1910), the latter of these interpretations seems just as plausible, especially considering the way in which Montgomery aligned her own fascination with Egyptian history with behaving boldly, and in such a way that defies male authority.¹⁸

¹⁸ In a journal entry dated 16 September 1910, she recounts a dinner party in which she spoke quite “sassely” to a male guest on topics that included ancient Egyptian history. “At one end of the table,” she writes, “was a man I did not know and at the other, just at my right hand

A similar boldness shows through the other clippings that make up the Halley scrapbook page. In the lower right corner, an envelope containing the wedding notice of Oliver MacNeill, a suitor Montgomery had rebuffed the previous year, appears just below a brief anecdote in which a young girl is baffled by a classroom activity. “As a slight diversion,” the notice begins,

the teacher suggested that each child in the class draw a picture from which she could guess what the child wanted to be when grown. All sorts of articles were illustrated: books for bookkeepers, hats for millners, etc. One little girl, however, had a blank sheet.

was a homely, red-haired, insignificant individual who, I had been told by someone, was a human being named Brock [. . .]. Accordingly, I held him in no awe and talked to him quite ‘sassely,’ laying down the law on the politics of ancient Egypt (the history of which I have been studying lately) and the untimely fates of the British Empire, contradicting him flatly as to democracy’s designs and telling him the story of how I once got drunk on a medicinal dose of whisky. Later on I was somewhat horrified to discover that he was really Lord Percy, the A.D.C. [aide-de-campe] in waiting of the Earl’s suite” (*SJ* 2: 15). While Montgomery may have been “horrified” by her discovery, she nevertheless admires herself in the moment. It is telling, too, that she should be laying “down the law” on ancient Egypt just a few months after the publication of Hewitt’s poem, and just before she recalls her youthful spell of accidental intoxication, which, of course, had already inspired Diana Barry’s encounter with currant wine. In assembling these safely provocative elements – each suggestive of self-assertion, well-read worldliness, and harmless rebellion – Montgomery characterizes herself as confident and at ease in the company of guests, even when they included a visiting Governor General and his aide-de-camp. This entry also makes clear the connection between Montgomery’s interest in ancient Egypt and a latent desire to be at ease in the company of men. Her casual refutation of evolving colonial self-governments in favour, presumably, of a strong monarchy that recalls “the laws and politics” of an ancient civilization indicates Montgomery was intrigued by a society where men and women both held power and were understood to have similar legal status. These topics of conversation, run together as they are, create a portrait of an energized Montgomery, her spirit and humanity both generously on display.

‘Why, Doris, don’t you want to be anything when you are grown?’

‘Yessum,’ said Doris; ‘I want to be married, but I don’t know how to draw it.’

Materially, this “diversion” fills the space between the image of Halley’s Comet and the wedding notice that remains tucked out of sight. On the one hand, the comet appears fully visualized, a quality that renders the spectrum of its attendant meanings relatively accessible: independence, freedom, and “steadfastness of purpose,” as Epperly suggests, are all signified by this photographed body of light. Marriage, however, is more difficult “to draw.” Within this particular arrangement, the material signs of matrimony line the bottom of the page, while Halley streaks dramatically away from them. The Clinton Scollard poem that appears adjacent to this photograph also privileges the individual path, suggesting as it does that comets are transient messengers, guests “of the constant stars” “that “burn and wheel” through time. As Epperly notes, Montgomery’s inclusion of Scollard’s “Invictus” on the facing scrapbook page further defines this image as a dramatic marker of personal agency. The presence of “Invictus,” furthermore, invites the realization of what already seems readily apparent, which is that “The Comet” is as much a poetic evocation of a celestial body as it is a veiled description of the late Edwardian subject who has mastered fate to become “the captain” of his or her “soul.” While it is important to stress that these elements are not necessarily conclusive in what they signal, they nevertheless indicate that the author of this page uses both the image and the idea of comets to conceptualize a past relationship, an instance in which she appears glad to privilege the romance of the individual over those synonymous with courtship.

It is worth noting that the June 1910 issue of *Harper's Monthly* in which Hewitt's poem appeared also included a short story about astronomy and romance that may have caught Montgomery's eye. George Weston's "The Goddess of Love" tells the story of an astronomer named Hollis who, having fallen behind on his rent, finds himself subject to his landlady's unwelcome advances. To earn his way out of his troubles, Hollis enlists the help of Thompson, an aging artist and sign maker who shares the top floor of the boarding house. Well aware that Hollis had been trying to make a living by charging members of the general public ten cents to look through his telescope, Thompson convinces him that he could "do a better business" with a few carefully-worded signs. The story continues in this vein, with the artist effectively selling the celestial wonders to the public while the professor sighs at his proclamations. "THE MARTIANS ARE DIGGING CANALS, TOO," announces one sign, "WATCH THEM MAKE THE DIRT FLY ONLY 10c" (158). Topical references to the construction of the Panama Canal and to the cost of milk not only help the professor escape Mrs. Mansfield's advances, but also earn Thompson a job at the Sensational Dry-goods Store, its owner having been impressed by the artist's efforts. The story then ends with the predictable twist that Thompson has long pined after Mrs. Mansfield. The revelation of his affections and their happy ending is then followed by a final tableau of the professor, who, having set up his telescope in Central Park to sweep through the stars, remarks of the heavens, "Ah my lady, my lady [. . .] how brightly do you shine for me to-night!" (158). Whether Montgomery read Weston's story or not, "The Goddess of Love" is worth recounting here because its treatment of the night sky – as well as the various relationships that

unfold beneath it – reflects the time in which these authors were writing. The professor’s understanding of the night is, of course, decidedly gendered; he takes it as his “lady,” and, in so doing, participates in the longstanding literary tradition that sees night as the idealized, unattainable female entity to which lonely poets and stargazers swoon.¹⁹ More than just muse, this version of the night sky prompts the expression of such desires and serves as the sympathetic entity whose movements have the potential to facilitate their

¹⁹ Stephen Leacock plays with these tropes in his short story, “The Transit of Venus” (1926), a gentle satire that follows the courtship between “Little Mr. Lancelot Kitter, Professor of Mathematical Astronomy at Concordia College” and one of his students, Miss Taylor. Initially, the professor tries to impress her with his knowledge of the night sky, only to realize too late that the “astronomy had sunk in too deep” (364). With the science of the heavens presiding over their every exchange, the night sky itself seems to stall their union. This comic reversal is especially evident in the scene that plays out near the end of the story, where Professor Kitter walks Miss Taylor to her dormitory at sun down. “After hearing an extension lecture on the service of Babylon to the modern world,” the narrator recounts, “she stood a moment on the stone steps, her hand in his, to say good-night” (364). With snowflakes “glistening” around them, Professor Kitter appears ready to profess his love, only to lose his nerve once again:

‘There’s something I’ve been wanting to say, Miss Taylor –’ He paused.

She looked into his face, her own illuminated beneath an arc lamp, and said: ‘Yes?’

He paused again, struggled, and finally added, ‘About the orbit of Halley’s Comet.’ (364).

Leacock’s reference to “the service of Babylon to the modern world,” while comedic, is also laced with a playful sincerity. As Gerald Lynch has pointed out, Concordia College is one of those institutions in which Leacock imagined the best of the old brought forward, an aging building that nevertheless makes possible certain “historical associations that argue for the continuance and conservation of tradition” (Lynch 138). By virtue of its setting, Kitter’s and Taylor’s eventual union takes its place alongside the Pupkin-Pepperleigh romance of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) one that Leacock took care to present as the triumph of romantic love over the corruption of greed and society. Since we learn in the end that Miss Taylor had kept Kitter’s “letter about the proper motion of the sun” because it had “seemed to her the sweetest letter she had ever dreamed of,” we can also say that the comic reversal is only a temporary measure to postpone the inevitable romance of the stars. In this way, Leacock’s story is not so different than Weston’s “The Goddess of Love,” where the night sky ultimately retains its authority over the lives that unfold beneath it.

realization. This understanding of the night is amply evident in depictions of Halley's Comet that circulated in 1910 and that Montgomery would have encountered, many of which locate couples in close embrace under an enchanted sky. In such instances, the night heightens the couple's affection and sanctifies their unity, just as the stability of their presence serves as a counterpoint to the ephemeral light that arches overhead. In many of these images, the pairing of white dress and black suit mark the traditional couple whose romantic concession to the night's drama naturalizes their bond and underscores its appropriateness. Such depictions not only signal futurity, but also temper public response to the night's sublimity by providing subtle instructions for how desire can and should be expressed.

Given how widely available these images were, Montgomery's decision to include a realistic photograph of a comet does challenge the romantic ways in which Halley was imagined. Yet if Montgomery counters such conventionality in her scrapbook, she nevertheless puts it to good use in her fiction, where her alignment of courtship and comets would have resonated with a readership steeped in such associations. In her novel *The Blue Castle* (1926), the description Montgomery provides of heroine Valancy Stirling's first car ride with a suitor, Barney Snaith, uses a comet to signal her protagonist's new-found freedom. "She ceased to feel ashamed," Montgomery writes of Valancy's twilight adventure in Snaith's automobile; "She ceased to feel anything except that she was part of a comet rushing gloriously through the night of space" (109-10). In her assessment of this passage, Sasha Mullally writes that the "speed of motoring dissipates Valancy's shame, symbolizing new possibilities of escape and

pleasure” (122). Snaith’s automobile is also, quite literally, the protagonist’s vehicle of rebellion against the social norms that would otherwise restrict her to spinsterhood and the domestic sphere. Within this context, the comet becomes synonymous with mobility and the awakenings it makes possible. Just as the automobile “encode[s] the tropes of courtship and sexuality,” the celestial metaphor Montgomery employs also deepens and broadens this meaning by lending an air of individualism and timeless vigour to the courtship episode (122). Even though the passage marks an important development in the relationship between the two would-be lovers, its real significance, as Mullally observes, lies in the nature of Valancy’s own awakening, and the way in which riding with Barney serves as the catalyst to imagine herself as something more. Not only does she cease “to feel ashamed,” but she also briefly understands herself as existing beyond the rigid boundaries of time and “space” (110). As a result, Valancy is able to achieve a sense of transcendence – both with Barney and on her own – she previously could not have imagined. Montgomery had, in fact, been thinking about the relationships that exist among cars, comets, and freedom for some time. “I like travelling by night in a car that acts well,” she remarks in a journal entry for 2 September 1922: “It always gives me the delightful sensation of being a comet, rushing through the darkness of space by my own light . . .” (*SJ* 3: 68). The assertion that she was travelling by her own “light” seems to emphasize how cars and comets have nocturnal mobility in common, their mutual ability to rush “through the darkness” granting those that accompany them a sense of agency and transcendence.

These twin vehicles are present in one later work of fiction, *Anne of Ingleside*

(1939), where the widow Mrs. Mitchell asks Anne to write “an obitichery” for her late husband Anthony that makes mention of the “big comet” that was on visible the day they were married (147-50). Again, Montgomery aligns comets and driving, further testimony to the way in which Halley’s appearance coincided with the emergence of automobile culture.²⁰ “Well, we were married,” Mrs. Mitchell explains, “[t]here was a big comet that night . . . I remember seeing it as we drove home” (150). Prior to the recollection of this memory, Mrs. Mitchell describes Anthony in his youth as a determined, “good-looking” suitor who was “mad” about her “for years” (150). The widow also takes pleasure in characterizing herself as “[s]lim as a trout” on her wedding day, “with hair yaller as gold, and such a complexion” (149). Not surprisingly, the fond portrait that the widow creates of their courtship is also tinged with a sense of loss, but one that the memory of the comet seems temporarily to offset. “It’s a real pity you couldn’t have seen that comet, Mrs. Blythe,” she adds, “It was simply pretty” (150). The comet becomes the sign of a “simple,” idealized past, one in which Mrs. Mitchell’s young husband is able to tell her

²⁰ Montgomery may well have also been influenced by the early twentieth-century novelist Katherine Spokes, whose popular fiction tracked the adventures of the “motor maids,” a group of women enjoying the freedom that their automobile has to offer. Appropriately named “the Comet,” the trusted vehicle of Spokes’s novels is yet another of example of the way in which the simultaneity of comet and automobile culture resulted in the conflation of these two exciting signifiers of travel in the popular culture of the time. Yet some important differences present themselves between Montgomery’s and Spoke’s work, not the least of which is the American author’s tendency to lend animal-like qualities to the motor maids’ vehicle. More pet than machine, the Comet earns the affections of its passengers without engendering transgressive behavior. As Deborah Clarke has noted, “[w]hile the Motor Maids’ car, called the Comet, is gendered male, the relationship is basically maternal rather than sexual or romantic” (28).

again that she has “the ethereal charm of moonlight” (149). Anne’s response to her request to include the celestial body in the obituary reads somewhat cryptically:

“ . . . I don’t suppose you could work it into the obitchery, could you?”

“It . . . might be rather difficult . . .”

“Well,” Mrs. Mitchell surrendered the comet with a sigh, “you’ll have to do the best you can . . .” (150).

Anne’s difficulty is, in the most immediate sense, the product of a stilted politeness that grows more impatient by the moment. The novel, as a whole, is marked by unwanted visitors who overstay their welcome. Yet if Mrs. Mitchell’s expectations are unrealistic, they are somewhat endearingly so, since her simple request belies an innocence to the larger difficulty of putting such things in words. Anne’s task – namely, to articulate a past that is not her own – is challenging, and this explains the way in which Montgomery tinges this episode with animosity. Mrs. Mitchell’s continued use of the word “obitchery” is after all a coarse bit of satire meant to remind us of her lack of education and to call attention to her obnoxious nature. How this affects a reading of this comet is difficult to say, since Anne eventually does produce a poem, “The Old Man’s Grave,” for Anthony, whom she had met “once or twice” and “had liked” (155). Ultimately, readers are left with Anne’s anger at Mrs. Mitchell for adding a stanza to the poem before publishing it in the local paper. Concerned that Anne’s version does not mention marriage, religion, or his wife, the widow adds the following lines:

A wonderful husband, companion and aid,

One who was better the Lord never made,

A wonderful husband, tender and true,

One in a million, dear Anthony, was you. (158)

Its heavy-handedness aside, the final stanza also undermines the solitary resting place that Anne creates for Anthony – one where “pine boughs,” “starshine,” and “the murmur of the sea” provide him with peaceful company – by setting his legacy in relation to others. Anne’s romantic logic defies such gestures by locating him among “things [that] to him were dear,” which, for Anthony, included the “fields he reaped and trod” and the “Trees he planted long ago” (156). Anne’s frustration may simply be with Mrs. Mitchell’s presumptuous inclusion of her own stanza, and, in a more general way, with bad poetry. Within the context of the novel as a whole, however, this episode is also indicative of Anne’s underlying anxieties, principally with what she fears are Gilbert’s waning affections – all of which are made worse by the reappearance of another woman, Christine Stuart, from his past. Even though these worries turn out to be unfounded by novel’s end, they may explain why Mrs. Mitchell’s untroubled recollection are not met by Anne more enthusiastically. It is also possible that Mrs. Mitchell’s fondness for the comet is another sign that Montgomery has crafted a satirical portrait, one in which an aging, nostalgic woman remembers the past too fondly, the very heavens themselves having consented to her marriage. Yet her memory of the comet is also the redemptive charm that rounds out her character, Montgomery encoding her own affinity for the night sky within Mrs. Mitchell so as to soften the scene. The comet could then be understood as everything that Mrs. Mitchell surrenders “with a sigh,” its memory synonymous with lost youthfulness, desirability, and the enchantment of the past. If Valancy Stirling’s comet

signals such beginnings, Mrs. Mitchell's celestial memory wistfully recalls them (150). Together, these novels represent the comet in its least troubling form, as a figment of nature whose power mirrors not only the technology of the age, but also the timeless rituals of courtship and romance.

Perhaps with these meanings in mind, the Frederick A. Stokes edition of *A Tangled Web* (1929) featured two comets on its cover whose collision course, Montgomery remarked in her journal, was "better suited to the book" than an earlier design (see fig. 13).²¹ While the novel itself does not contain any direct references to comets, Donna Dark's desire to "soar to the stars" in an effort to escape "her smug, prosperous, sensible home-keeping clan" nevertheless defines celestial flight as a desirable, if impossible escape from stifling circumstances (75). The tumultuous relationships that span the novel are also aptly described as collisions, since exchanges between its characters are uncharacteristically heated for a Montgomery work, even one written for adults. For example, a scene that begins with Donna impatiently awaiting Peter Penhallow's arrival ends with Donna calling off their elopement by telling her lover to "Go to hell" (194). Yet even as such exchanges gesture towards greater realism, the

²¹ As Carolyn Collins has noted, Montgomery actually disliked the first of the two covers that Stokes had prepared of *A Tangled Web*. Montgomery writes in her journal that "the figure in poke-bonnet and crinoline on it will suggest a sentimental novel of the Victorian Era, which is the last thing I want people to think it" (Collins n. pag.; *SJ* 4: 146). Two weeks later, Montgomery states her preference for the new cover in a journal entry for September 10, 1931. "Stokes have got a new jacket for the book after all," she writes. "They have gone to the other extreme and the design looks like a head-on collision between two comets. However, it is much more 'striking' than the other and better suited to the book" (*SJ* 4: 149).

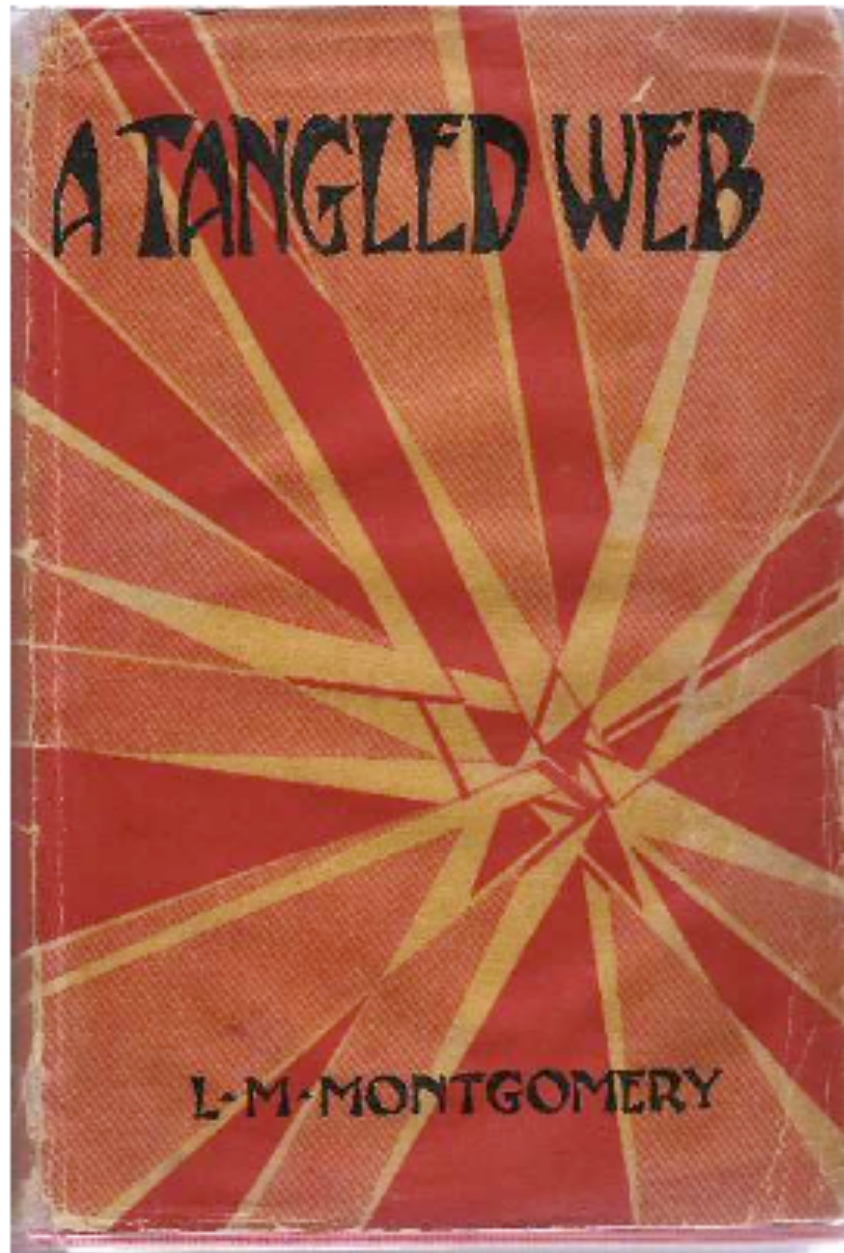


Fig. 13. Combining the geometric shapes of Cubism, the clean lines and angles of the Constructivists, the bright colours of the Fauvists, and Futurism's emphasis on speed and power, Art Deco was the popular face of high art from the 1920s to the 1940s (Duncan 142-44). In his analysis of Tamara de Lempicka's paintings, whose work is synonymous with the Art Deco period, Alastair Duncan has called attention to an "icy and enigmatic style in which contrasting angular images and bright colours predominated" (143). Montgomery's preference for this cover design of *A Tangled Web* (1931) and its depiction of an Art Deco comet indicates that she, too, could appreciate the value of the "icy" and the "enigmatic" in Modern visual art.

happy resolution that the author provides for these characters, as Epperly has noted, ultimately locates its plot in the world of romance. Moreover, Donna's concern that eloping with Peter will end her chances of receiving the Woolner jug – the object around which the novel's various narrative strands develop – is at odds with what would otherwise appear to be an attempt on Montgomery's part to make room for more realistic dialogue in her fiction. The elopement scene itself, even with Donna's emphatic dismissal of Peter, is nevertheless presided over by Donna's distinctly antimodern motivation to possess a relic from a previous age, and, therefore, indicative of the authority that Montgomery invests in the Arts and Crafts object. Not surprisingly, the night sky also figures in the scene. Donna encounters "dancing northern lights over the dark harbour" when she leaves home to wait for Peter; and then, when Peter finally arrives, he remarks that Donna is "as lovely as dark moonlight" (192). When Peter loses his temper at the mention of the jug, the narrator states that "Donna opened the car door and sprang out, her eyes blazing in the pale starlight" (194). Even in its most heated moment, this passage still manages to define these characters as safely belonging to a world of evocative celestial signifiers. Such animosity is, in fact, only a precursor to their inevitable union and subsequent departure for Africa. In this way, Donna does manage to escape "her smug, prosperous, sensible home-keeping clan," but does so through the predictable channels of courtship; her "soar to the stars" is actually an antimodern journey back into the world of romance. Given the association that Montgomery creates between Donna and celestial flight, *A Tangled Web* seems to provide further evidence that Montgomery associated such departures with the best possible fates, or at least those

idealized forms of self-realization that overcome conflict and lead to wish fulfillment.

These investments, however fanciful, did permeate the world in which Montgomery was writing. “Recently a new and exceedingly brilliant star arose above the literary horizon in the person of a previously unknown writer of ‘heart interest’ stories, Miss L.M. Montgomery,” Thomas F. Anderson mused in the 14 May 1911 issue of the *Boston Daily Globe*, “and presently the astronomers located her in the latitude of Prince Edward Island” (12). Faye Hamill has examined the article’s mix of praise and condescension at some length,²² but Montgomery nevertheless found it interesting enough to place it in the first of her Ontario scrapbooks. Given her interest in the night sky, the reviewers playful allusion to astronomers, even as it exaggerates the distance between Boston and Prince Edward Island and the supposed difficulty in locating the small province, may well have pleased Montgomery, the celestial metaphor providing an opportunity to picture herself, both figuratively and literally, as a newly-discovered star on the rise. What Montgomery could not have known at the time was that her writing would one day make a journey among them. One-hundred-and-one years after its publication, pages from her first novel, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), were among the personal items brought to the International Space Station in 2009 by the Canadian astronaut Bob Thirsk. The CBC reported that Thirsk brought the selection “in honour of

²² This “review” was actually just one section of a longer travel writing piece about the province of Prince Edward Island. Montgomery only includes the subsection entitled “A Literary Star” in her scrapbooks, which obscures to some degree the extent to which Anderson may have viewed her writing as local colour.

Koichi Wakata, one of his fellow space travellers and ‘our Japanese friends who are also big fans’” (“Thirsk Brings Canadian Mementoes” n. pag.). As a gesture of diplomacy and friendship, the eventual exchange of these pages in space represents a dramatic example of the bonds formed through the shared exposure to a single text, one whose presence, by virtue of its inclusion on an international mission to outer space, comes to signify its nation of origin. The inclusion of Montgomery’s writing among a select number of “Canadian mementoes” on board the space station makes clear its importance as a material signifier of Canada’s cultural memory. The essential supplement to its brief presence in Space is the knowledge that Montgomery would have appreciated the meaning of its journey towards the stars, and, as someone who had hoped to one day “peep through a telescope,” would have ultimately taken great pleasure in its travels.

Going Home to the Evening Star: Astronomy and Age

It is sadly true that the night sky was not always a comforting presence in Montgomery’s life. “I have had to drop my studies in astronomy for a time,” she writes in a journal entry dated 11 February 1910 (*SJ* 2: 3). “In my present nervous condition they had a bad effect on me” (*SJ* 2: 3). Such a statement, issued shortly after Montgomery’s first observation of the zodiacal light, heralds what would eventually prove to be her disappointment at the directions astronomy would take, as well as at her own inability to keep pace with such developments. “While convalescing this past week,” she recalls in one of many letters to Ephraim Weber,

I have snatched the chance to read Sir James Jeans’ *The Universe Around Us* and

several more of that ilk. Time was when I loved books on astronomy – and understood them. I can't understand the new ones – they seem to require a new language. When a scientist like Jeans tells me that a 'quantum' of energy can 'pass from one orbit of the atom to another without crossing the intervening space' I metaphorically turn up my toes. (*After Green Gables* 177)

Recalling her fondness for books by the likes of Serviss, Montgomery finds the memory of these at odds with the “new language” of relativism and quantum mechanics. Even though Jeans' study was based on public lectures and written with the non-specialist in mind, the language that he employs is clinical, at least in comparison to the styles of Serviss and Flammarion.²³ While astronomy may not have always met with her expectations, the mention of it here nevertheless indicates that Montgomery's interest in this branch of science stayed with her much longer than she once stated. If she felt, at times, “crushed” by “those dreadful, enormous distances between the stars,” she was also absorbed by a “great and indescribable fascination” with them, one that she would

²³ In her journal, Montgomery reports that she spent the evening of 4 January 1920 reading about an “astounding new discovery of the nature of light made by Einstein,” one Montgomery contends will “utterly revolutionize most of the beliefs held by scientists for two hundred years” (*SJ* 3: 364). She then goes on to describe Einstein's breakthrough as simultaneously destructive and wonderful. “It is a curious thing,” she notes, “that this upsetting discovery should come just a time when almost everything else that made up our old world is being upset, revolutionized, or torn to pieces. The result will probably be in the end a very wonderful era of development in everything” (364). The difficulty for the reader here lies in determining whether Montgomery's treatment of Einstein is earnest or ironic. On the one hand, Montgomery may have been genuinely enthused by what she read; or, she may have just wished her future readers to see her as such. The vagueness of the hyperbolic phrase, “a very wonderful era of development in everything,” however, does seem like Montgomery at her sarcastic best.

remember fondly for years to come (3). A letter to MacMillan in the fall of 1926²⁴ recalls the height of her astronomical pursuits as a period of “enchantment,” the signs of which are still present in the landscape around her. “After supper this evening,” she begins,

Stuart and I raked fallen leaves and had a bonfire of them. While they were burning we prowled about star hunting. We re-found Aquarius, Fomalhaut, Aquila, Corona, the Pleiades and the Hyades. I recalled the days of fifteen or sixteen years ago when I roamed over the Cavendish hills and fields in spring and summer and autumn twilights star-hunting. This evening I had one of those hours where the enchantment of the past falls over me once more. I saw the gulf waters silver under the moon. I saw old familiar red ploughed fields on a frosty autumn night, gardens by the sea that have in them something no inland garden can ever have, beautiful young eyes that once looked upon those scenes with me. All about us, beyond the flickering light of the burning leaves was the strange deep sadness of a dead landscape on a late fall evening. But its darkness was peopled for me with the ghosts of a far land. (*Mr. Dear Mr. M.* 125-26)

In this passage, darkness enables a figurative return to the preferred landscapes of an earlier time. The “enchantment of the past” reddens the soil, just as the “gardens by the

²⁴ A journal entry written two years earlier indicates that this description of star-hunting with Stuart actually recalls a much earlier episode. “The boys had raked up the fallen leaves,” she writes in the entry for 22 October 1924, “and Lily was having a bonfire of them outside the gate. But Chester and I prowled up and down the road star-hunting. We re-found Aquarius, Fomalhaut, Aquila, Corona, the Pleiades and the Hyades . . .” (*SJ* 3: 204).

sea” are, quite literally, recalled into an otherwise “dead landscape.” Under a tapestry of stars, signs of southern Ontario and the north shore of Prince Edward Island meet, the porous nature of the re-imagined night permitting distinct geographical regions to inhabit a single space, one in which the speaker can safely enjoy the “strange deep sadness” of the present while still embracing the ghostly comforts of the past (126). It is significant, too, that the “gardens by the sea” Montgomery evokes “have in them something no inland garden can ever have” (126). Not unlike the members of Stephen Leacock’s Mausoleum Club, who languish far from their roots in the Envoi of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), the landscapes and waterways of youth supply forms of nourishment that have been lost in the long journey to the present. They are, in fact, only accessible through those channels of memory that appear most easily travelled in the later hours of evening. Montgomery’s stargazing in the fall of 1926 represents one such journey taken under the cover of darkness, one in which the landscapes of the past appear fertile and life-giving, while the present, with the exception of the company and the stars overhead, is by and large defined by decay. Its reverie, then, is not just a personal one, but also a literary evocation of the “strange deep sadness” ever-present in cycles of change.²⁵ The presence of Montgomery’s son, Stuart, signals her distance from this past

²⁵ The very same phrase would, in fact, later appear in *Emily Climbs* (1925). “The snow had banished all the strange deep sadness of a dead landscape on a late fall evening,” Montgomery writes, “and the slopes and meadows of old New Moon Farm were transformed into a wonderland in the faint, early moonlight” (210-11). Even though terrestrial decay is lessened by what the skies have to offer in both instances, the air of enchantment that eases the transition between seasons is more pronounced in the novel.

and renders the passage subtly intergenerational, his companionship suggesting that the fondness Montgomery expresses for the stars is connected to a broader affinity for those around her, and perhaps even for previous (and possible) versions of herself. The night sky facilitates such instances of community, just as the act of recounting them in letter serves to maintain and to strengthen her connection with MacMillan. It was in this way that astronomy retained meaning for Montgomery, its evocations imbued with the mature awareness of “sadness” and enchantment alike.

Later that year, Montgomery would recall an excursion in her journal that in many ways encapsulates her relationship with the night sky. Following a description of a less than enjoyable United Church bazaar, where she “was whispered at hostilely by several Unionists” for being Presbyterian, Montgomery counters the memory with a more pleasant recollection of the outing that followed. “Then tonight,” begins a new paragraph,

I walked down the street to make a call. There was a half-moon over the pines – an old friend of mine – not too bright for stars. And under the stars the shadows of the pines on the snow. And the line of a poem read long ago came in my mind,

‘I will go home to the evening star

To the light on the edge of the world.’

So I went down the street hand in hand with delight. What a pity you can’t photograph starlight! Yet – is it? Isn’t it just as well there is something that cannot be caught? (*SJ* 3: 318)

Just as Anne “sailed over storied seas [. . .] with the evening star for pilot,” Montgomery

takes a similar journey here “to the land of Heart’s Desire” (*Anne of the Island* 11). The passage begins with the common place, a walk “down the street to make a call,” only to dissolve into a description of the sky and the landscape around her. The sublime operates in reverse here: Montgomery begins with the half-moon overhead, and then gazes down to pines, and then to their shadow on the snow. The narrative subsequently moves inwards to lines from a remembered poem, an allusion that layers the scene by adding not only the time and place in which she first encountered it, but also the evocative sphere of the poem itself. The entry then returns to street level, where Montgomery walks “hand in hand” with “delight,” which we can understand to be the sum total of these reflections. What is masterful about this brief passage is the way in which the anapestic description of the exterior world (“of the pines / on the snow. / And the line / of a poem [. . .]”) anticipates the imagery in the second line of the poem: “To the light / on the edge / of the world.” The pairing of these anapestic sets creates a bridge between what Montgomery sees and what the unnamed poet imagines, and in such a way that the two visions overcome their distinct geographies and temporalities to infuse and to improve the single space of the speaker’s mind. All the while, the half-moon presides over this scene, its tempered light, by virtue of it being “not too bright for stars,” foreshadowing at the outset the eventual harmony between the realms – past and present, real and imagined – that Montgomery envisions in the landscape before her.

While the comfort that Montgomery finds here is, in part, a product of a literary process, the source of her solace likely lies more immediately in the meaning of this imagined journey to “the light on the edge of the world.” In its original context, the

phrase could well be an allusion to William Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* (1853-54), a devotional painting that depicts Christ in the doorway to a nocturnal realm, where, presumably, he serves as guide. Yet, in the enchanted world of Anne's imagination, "the evening star is a lighthouse on the land where the fairies dwell" (*Anne of Avonlea* 146). As a result, when the evening star is adopted as a "pilot," the light of the planet leads to a liminal place where the pressures of the world all but cease, and new forms of personal enrichment become possible. "And she was richer in those dreams than in realities," Montgomery writes of one such journey, "for things seen pass away, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (*Anne of the Island* 11). In Anne's world, the imaginative not only supplants "the cayenne speeches of malicious neighbors," but also grants access to the unseen worlds of dream and myth. Montgomery valued these worlds and the imaginative celestial gateways that led to them, just as she recognized their place in the writings that would inspire her own.

In a journal entry for 10 December 1916, Montgomery reflects on the poetry of William Wordsworth, suggesting that the "classic calm and repose and beauty of his lines seemed to belong to another planet and to have as little to do with this world-welter as an evening star" (*SJ* 2: 197). By proposing that Wordsworth's poetry not only has the power to elude this world, but also to quell her anxieties,²⁶ Montgomery reveals her investment

²⁶ The entry in which this description of Wordsworth appears is especially fear-ridden, capturing as it does Montgomery's emotional and mental state as she followed the events leading up to the Central Power's victory in Bucharest on 6 December 1916. One of Montgomery's characters, Miss Oliver, would later provide the same description of

in literature as release from worry and care. Its power to capture transformative moments, in turn, brings another medium's potential to mind. "What a pity you can't photograph starlight!" Montgomery exclaims in a lament that enables her to debate the relative virtues of lasting and ephemeral images (*SJ* 3: 318). The rhetorical question she asks here – namely, whether or not it is "just as well" that some things "cannot be caught" – invites some equally open-ended conclusions about the meaning that celestial objects held for her. In the case of Halley's Comet, a photograph did enable Montgomery to capture the celestial visitor's significance in her scrapbook, even if, as her fiction illustrates, its appearance in her writing left behind an equally impressive trail of potential meanings. In this way, the creative outlets that matter most to Montgomery – whether they be literary or photographic – are those that have the potential to grant access to worlds of romance. Equally present in each medium is the desire to evoke, postpone, preserve, and recall, a constellation of self-assuring practices that can supplement the present with the enchantment of the past. By putting these tools to use, Montgomery was able to envision in the night sky an unearthly imaginative terrain, which gave her a method of eluding, however temporarily, the "world-welter" in which she found herself. With its abundance

Wordsworth in chapter 18 of *Rilla of Ingleside*, where speculation about the war dominates the conversation. Following Anne's anti-Semitic description of "a German Jew pedlar" who sold her dye that turned her hair green, Mrs. Blythe sighs after "those Green Gable days," wishing they no longer "belonged to another world altogether" (195). Miss Oliver reply to Blythe's observation that [l]ife has been cut in two by chasm of the war" is that the poetry of Wordsworth now feels "ancient," as though it were left behind in the divide, and, therefore, as distant as it is comforting (195).

of companion objects, the celestial sphere also provided Montgomery with a form of company that was most often untroubled, just as her tendency to revise the literary transcriptions of her observing sessions signaled both isolation and the desire to overcome it through the channels of her own memory. Even if she “never had time to resume the studies in astronomy which so fascinated [her] a year or two before [her] marriage,” it is nevertheless significant that she still managed to maintain, for a significant period of time, its presence in her life.

Seeing much in the night sky that fascinated her, Montgomery nevertheless remained a discriminating reader of celestial texts. In 1919, she waged a war of words in Toronto newspapers with the Canadian astronomer, poet, and spiritualist Albert Durrant Watson, who had just recently published his theosophical tract *The Twentieth Plane* (1919). Montgomery’s dismissal of its astrological themes as not only “absolutely unconvincing,” but also “exquisitely funny” reveals that there were limitations to the imaginative liberties that she was willing to entertain, even in relation to the night sky and its enchanting qualities (78, 79).²⁷ At the same time, Durrant’s preoccupation with pink twilights and distant celestial planes was not so eccentric as it may now seem. Spiritualism, which the Victorian author J.M. Peebles defined as striving with “the soul’s higher senses,” played an important role in cultivating both visual and literary depictions of the night sky over Canada during the first half of the twentieth century (5). The

²⁷ Montgomery provides this description of *The Twentieth Plane* near the end of a letter to Ephraim Weber dated 26 May 1919. See “Letter 3” in *After Green Gables: L.M. Montgomery’s Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916-1941*.

spectrum of beliefs associated with occultism, Spiritualism, and Theosophy can, in fact, be traced to varying degrees through the works of the major poets and painters of a period that saw mysticism come to the fore as a popular source of intrigue and artistic inspiration. In few places, however, does the relationship between these new spiritual possibilities and stargazing come more clearly into view than in the work of William Wrightson Eustace Ross, a poet and geophysicist whose interest in the night sky was both personal and estoric at once.

CHAPTER THREE

In Praise of Night: The Celestial Poetry of W.W.E. Ross

W.W.E. Ross's two poetry collections, *Laconics* (1930) and *Sonnets* (1932), both of which were privately printed, established a range of formal interests that later selections would only confirm. In addition to his verse experiments, he wrote prose poems that were modeled after the work of the French surrealist Max Jacob,¹ whose writing he had translated; *Irrealities, Sonnets, and Laconics* (2003), the most recent selection of Ross's poetry, sees many of these prose poems appear alongside the sonnets that he crafted over the course of his career. Ross's appreciation for the sonnet form, his attention to its subtleties, and his eagerness to see it renewed is plainly evident in *Sonnets*. "There is present the Spenser-Sidney-Milton-Wordsworth elegance," Marianne Moore remarked of *Sonnets* in 1933, "and an ingenuity with dactyls, which recalls the Melic poets" (*Complete* 297).² As Moore was well aware, Ross's poetry amounted to far more than a series of "simple imagistic notions" whose significance stems only from "their tentative

¹ Ross confirms his debt to Jacob in a letter of 20 March 1950 to A.J.M. Smith. Reflecting on Jacob's work, he writes that his "prose pieces aroused my interest many years ago and it is improbable that without them I would have written, in that way at least, my own short prose pieces" (Ross qtd. in Darling 93).

² Moore's review of *Sonnets*, "Modern Thoughts in Disguise," appeared in the May issue of *Poetry* magazine in 1933.

modernism” (Mooney n. pag.).³ Rather than signifying a dramatic break with the traditions that precede it, his poetry carries forward a range of styles and techniques, and, in so doing, offers a sense of continuity between eras. For Canadian literary stargazers, Ross’s versatility serves as an important reminder that the vastness of the night sky, its timelessness, and the complex range of emotions it evokes necessitate an equally wide-ranging repertoire.

Formal dexterity is, however, just one aspect of what Ross’s poetry has to offer. As Brian Trehearne has observed, “Ross’s openly subjective Imagistic poems, his subliminally subjective Imagistic poems, his spiritual, supernatural Modernist poems of death, and his traditional late nineteenth-century sonnets constitute a body of poetry heavily weighted towards the personal, the emotional, the reflective” (60). Evident in Trehearne’s remarks is the multivalent nature of Ross’s poetry: its debt is not only to modern poetics and to the traditions that precede it, but also to the personal, the spiritual, and to the experiential as well.⁴ Even when he contemplates distant planes, signs of

³ See Jacob McArthur Mooney’s *Globe and Mail* review of *Modern Canadian Poets* (2010), a somewhat eccentric anthology of Canadian poetry, edited by Evan Jones and Todd Swift. *Modern Canadian Poets* includes Ross – a decision that Swift would later defend in *The Winnipeg Review* – but omits such poets as E.J. Pratt, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood. The anthology also provides another sign that unsubstantiated claims about Ross are hardly a figment of the past. In its Introduction, for example, Todd Swift argues that Ross’s “two privately printed collections [. . .] made an impact few poets of his generation achieved” (5). As Zach Wells has already noted in his review of the anthology, Swift’s failure to provide any supporting evidence or even explanation detracts from the validity of his claim (Wells n. pag).

⁴ Ross himself considered his poetry to be personal in nature. “To me,” he writes in a letter to Cid Corman in 1952, “poems, especially short ones, are simply a personal record of feelings and of use primarily to the writer, in enabling him to live his own life. As for other people,

engagement with the environment are everywhere present. Grounded in the world, yet nevertheless hinting at the possibilities that lie beyond, the best of Ross's poetry is imbued with a sense of mysticism that is far more subtle than the occultist doctrines that otherwise held his attention.⁵ Indeed, a number of his poems about the night sky reveal the care with which he could balance the symbolic and the material; they also provide clear signs of a productive relationship between his powers of observation, his imagination, and his desire to see the affective dimensions of the night sky preserved through a body of poetry that consisted of both experimental and traditional forms.

Ross's fascination with Spiritualism is partially responsible for the number of celestial allusions that appear in his poetry. "In Praise of Night" (1935), for example, celebrates the night sky by advancing the inverted trope of darkness as a source of illumination. "Of night and dark I sing," Ross exalts with an allusion to the delayed verb of epic, "significances barely seen / and glimmerings from hidden zones / I now attempt to note and bring / Some explanation, keen / examination of the way things move in the most strange of worlds" (1-7). The significance of these "glimmerings" within a number of mystical traditions would not have been lost on Ross. Theosophy, a system of esoteric

sometimes these records prove contagious, sometimes they don't. It is of course flattering if they do, in the case of people whose opinion one respects. But this mechanization of the process of 'response' etc. as if there was something automatic and necessary about it, I regard as an illusion of professors of English" (4 June 1952).

⁵ Gavin Matthews has suggested that Ross's "reading of occult and spiritual material seems to have begun in the late twenties or early thirties" (13).

beliefs that grew popular among Toronto artists, journalists, and intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century,⁶ held as one of its principles that night constitutes a zone of absolute communion in which “every atom is resolved into one homogeneity” (Blavatsky 58). This state of totality, according to Helena Blavatsky’s influential text, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), is consistent with the esoteric principle that darkness constitutes the “Absolute Light” of the spiritual and material universe. The midnight hours, for both Blavatsky and the theosophical societies that adopted her texts as doctrine, are worthy of praise for their sublimity, their mysterious qualities, and for the significance they hold in the tracts of divergent traditions. Blavatsky herself takes care to position this time of day as one held in high regard by Roman-Hellenistic religions, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah. “Hence,” she writes in *Isis Unveiled* (1877),

⁶ As Gillian McCann observes in *Vanguard of the New Age: The Toronto Theosophical Society, 1891-1945*, the TTS (Toronto Theosophical Society) was “a hothouse for incubating artistic movements and included in its ranks members of the Toronto literati and artistic community. In a marginal environment and in a country still struggling to develop its own identity,” McCann adds, “the TTS provided an ideological framework and a welcoming space for those who were articulating possible visions for the emerging nation” (5). Coming to terms with the precise nature of this “ideological framework” is, however, a difficult task, since Theosophy drew from multiple traditions at once. As McCann acknowledges, the boundaries between Theosophy, Spiritualism, the New Thought movement, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity were “soft,” since many members of the TTS were churchgoers and theosophists at once (15). The overriding belief, however, was that in the wake of the Industrial Revolution Western epistemologies were in need of supplementation not only to counter the rise of materialism and rationalism that was bringing the world to the brink of annihilation, but also to realize a new era of social justice in its place. It was within this bifurcated culture of apocalyptic forecasts and hopeful pronouncements that Ross came to identify himself as a Spiritualist – a seeker of hidden truths in the broadest sense who read widely and who experimented with various forms of occultist observation. And while references to Theosophy in his personal papers are rare, a record of a séance from the spring of 1934 indicates that Ross shared his explorations of the supernatural with members of Toronto’s theosophical community (“Record of a Séance”).

“we may understand why the sublime scenes in the Mysteries were always in the night. The life of the interior spirit is the death of the external nature; the night of the physical world denotes the day of the spiritual. Dionysus, the night-sun, is, therefore, worshipped rather than Helios, orb of day” (xiv). Blending logic with myth, such syllogisms lend an air of authority to Blavatsky’s explanations. They also absorb and dissolve discrete traditions from the past into a holistic epistemology that mirrors the totality of the night. The diurnal cycle, meanwhile, dramatizes the occultist desire to see Dionysus eclipse Helios, the “orb of day.” As the world of daylight slowly becomes draped in darkness, its authority gives way to those possibilities that are less-readily discerned. Night becomes proof that even materiality can lose its shape and ultimately give itself over to imaginative speculation. The seamless nature of the nocturnal realm also serves as a kind of narrative model for Blavatsky’s writing, insofar as it diminishes all forms of difference in favour of a cohesive whole.

While such contextualization is important to understanding Ross’s interest in the night sky, any interpretation of his nocturnal poetry that maps Blavatsky’s investments directly onto it without acknowledging the possibility of other influences would ultimately be limited in its scope and understanding. “Summer Sky” (1925), for instance, is both plain-spoken and personal. The poem makes use of a number of conventions of celestial witness narratives, many of which locate the poem within the broader tradition of nature writing about the night sky. Consider, for example, its opening stanza:

And saw the Northern Crown;
Great Jupiter was riding high

But the moon was nearly down
 To the dark edge of the farther roof;
 Her parting seemed a quiet one,
 Serene and beautiful. (1-7)

The locations of the Corona Borealis, the planet Jupiter, the setting moon, and Capella – a star that the second stanza places “High in the middle heaven” – all suggest that the speaker is describing the late summer night sky.⁷ What makes the poem distinct within the body of Ross’s work, however, is the allusion he makes to his daughters in the last stanza of the poem. As he shifts his attention from distant objects in the night sky to his immediate surroundings, the tone of the poem shifts slightly as well. Whereas certain efforts have been made to elevate the tone of the first and second stanzas, either through obvious rhyme or inversion, the third stanza trades in such loftiness for a diction that is considerably more direct than what precedes it, and yet no less effective in its progression:

Within a room, not far, they lay,
 And both of them I loved.
 I heard them talking, as I passed
 The door. They talked, and moved,
 And then were silent – as were the stars –

⁷ Capella is similarly positioned in late July at approximately three in the morning, but moon tables from 1925 provide no corresponding moonset. If Ross is, in fact, recalling actual sights, the most likely candidate is a late August sky past midnight.

I loved them both. They were
 The very centre of my life
 As they lay sleeping there. (16-23)

In this stanza, the unguarded moment relays an intimacy that emanates from the “very centre” of the speaker’s self. The one inversion that appears among these lines is considerably more subtle as well: “And both of them I loved,” Ross states plainly, “I loved them both” (17, 21). As William E. Engel has observed, a chiasmic pattern phrases a central concept one way “only to play it back differently so as to imbue it with new implications” (22). In the first instance, the delayed verb presents his daughters syntactically as the object that precedes his affection, whereas the more conventional and more candid ordering of the second statement recalls the intensity of his love at some remove from the scene itself, as though the speaker were seeking to preserve and to commemorate the intensity of these feelings through a mnemonic device. The ending of the poem also succeeds through the understated quality of its conversational tone, an effect that Ross achieves by carefully controlling the cadence of this stanza. The caesura that slows “Within a room, not far, they lay,” for example, is without precedence in the poem; its pauses, while certainly helping to re-focus the reader’s attention elsewhere, actually set up the unrestrained statement of affection that follows (“And both of them I loved”) (16, 17). A similar pattern unfolds just two lines later. “They talked, and moved / And then were silent – as were the stars – / I loved them both” (19-21). Like the moon whose parting seems “a quiet one,” the speaker’s daughters only remain audible for a time, after which the speaker must internalize their presence in order to preserve them. As

Trehearne notes, Ross's poetry has the capacity to "record moments of beauty and intensity that unfold onto personal horizons previously un contemplated and then pass suddenly, leaving in their wake the pain of half-understood meanings" (24). This pattern of attachment and subsequent "pain" conveys how deeply felt are the subjects of his poems.

Judging from his journals,⁸ his letters, and his poems, Ross possessed a wide range of intellectual interests that included literature, film, music, mathematics, physics, and philosophy. While his exploration of immaterial planes is certainly captivating in retrospect, his own allegiances very much lay with family and with his writing. And even though he worked as geophysicist at the Dominion Magnetic Observatory in Agincourt by day, his interest in celestial sights seems to have had very little to do with his work as a scientist – except perhaps as a pleasing diversion from the often monotonous nature of

⁸ While most of Ross's personal papers are held by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, the University of Toronto's Archives and Record Management Services also has a small collection of items in storage. The maintenance of these separate files, while perhaps simply the result of two distinct archives evolving in isolation of each other over time, seems nevertheless to have kept a set of diaries more or less hidden from Ross scholarship. With entries dating from 1919 to 1938, these diaries describe, among other things, his experiences as a graduate student in the Department of Physics at the University of Toronto, his courtship of Mary Lowrey, and his search for meaningful work. They also provide insight into Ross's early experiences as a scientist, his perception of himself as a young man, his aspirations, interests, and hobbies, his preoccupation with the stock market, and his relationship with his family. The personal nature of these journals, on the other hand, characterize Ross as a self-conscious young man who found his research at the University of Toronto uninspiring and who was unsure which career to pursue. They also call attention to his "fits of depression" and his habit of spending his evenings alone at the "picture-shows" (89).

the tasks he performed there.⁹ Readily apparent from the poems themselves is the fact that Ross's enthusiasm for the night sky had a significant influence on his writing, and that his interest in a variety of poetic traditions enabled him to capture its sights in ways both old and new.

White and Dark Space: Ross's Impressionistic Night Sky

Ross's interest in celestial sights has thus far received only passing attention. In her brief reading of the poem "Stars" (1927), Anne Compton observes that it strikes a decidedly different chord than F.R. Scott's "New Names" (1926). "Whereas Scott would give new names to the stars," Compton writes, "Ross would shimmy beneath the name to the thing itself, to what it is made up of" (71). "Stars" is distinct from "New Names" in that the imperative to invent a culture for Canada¹⁰ is set aside in favour of affirming a connection to a distant past. The apparent newness of the Canadian night sky, and its corresponding lack of mythology, may not be what motivate Ross in this particular poem.¹¹ Yet he was not, as Compton suggests, always just interested in "the thing itself."

⁹ Annual reports submitted to the Dominion Observatory indicate that the work Ross performed was tedious and repetitive, consisting almost entirely of retrieving and tabulating data obtained from the various instruments at use at the Agincourt station.

¹⁰ As A.J.M. Smith observes, "'New Names' develops in a personal and indeed almost rapturous way the old thesis that writers as different as Mrs. Traill and Mr. Douglas Le Pan have united in expressing – that Canada is a country without a mythology. Scott suggests we must make our own anew" (29).

¹¹ What Ross describes as "the sharper tang of Canada" in the Foreword to *Laconics* did influence his depictions of the night sky (*Shapes* 10). These scenes come under consideration later in this chapter.

A lifelong admirer of the stars, Ross was among the first Canadian poets to adopt the principles of literary impressionism, and the combination of these interests helped realize a new method of capturing the night sky over Canada.¹² “Stars”¹³ is a case in point: Ross

¹² As Jesse Matz has explained, the term “impressionism” was first coined in 1872 by French art critic Louis Leroy, who used it to satirize Monet’s “Impression: Soleil Levant” (1872), a painting that he considered to be incomplete (Matz 12). Five years later, Joseph Conrad employed the term no less derisively to describe Stephen Crane as “*the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist;” in the same letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad dismissed Crane’s work as “concise, connected, and never very deep” (Conrad *Letters* 155). Ezra Pound was just as eager to distance poetry from what was then a popular trend in visual art: “impressionism belongs in paint,” Pound insisted in a review of Ford Madox Ford in 1912, “it is of the eye” (“The Book of the Month” 133). These complaints anticipated the extent to which impressionism would remain a contentious term in the years to come. In 1968, a symposium on literary impressionism that was held at the American Comparative Literature Association’s annual meeting came to the counterintuitive conclusion that the term impressionism should no longer be used in literary criticism, even though impressionism itself was ubiquitous in Modern literature (Matz 14; Howarth 41-42). Such advice went unheeded by Maria Elizabeth Kronegger, who argues in *Literary Impressionism* (1973) that novelists such as Gustav Flaubert and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt are best understood in relation to the Impressionist painters. More recently, John Peters’s *Conrad and Impressionism* (1992) has argued against the idea that literary impressionism owes a debt to visual art by characterizing it instead as a movement that drew heavily from phenomenology in order to brace against the rising tide of scientific positivism (7-9). Richard M. Berrong, for his part, has argued that literary impressionism – a phrase first used in 1879 by Ferdinand Brunetière in his essay “L’Impressionnisme dans le roman” – draws from both philosophy and visual art (203). I second Berrong’s arguments here, not only because any line drawn between the phenomenological and the visual seems arbitrary at best, but also because Ross’s poetry is clearly self-conscious in its attempts to convey the experience of encountering the world and to capture “pictorial descriptions of shifting light and color” (Matz 3).

¹³ “Stars” appears in both *Irrealities, Sonnets, and Laconics* and *Shapes and Sounds* (1968), if in slightly different forms. In Souster’s and Colombo’s edition, “Algol and Alioth” are “shining,” whereas, in Callaghan’s edition, they are “flaming” (4; 4). Callaghan also changed the star name “Alezone” to “Alcyone” (9). Given that Ross refers to “Names Arabian those old / astronomers saw,” the likelihood that he actually meant to reference a star that does not exist (Alezone) seems unlikely. *Alcyone* (1899) was, of course, also the title of Archibald Lampman’s third collection of poetry, in which he regards man’s “little aims” and “half-blind toils” as inconsequential in light of a star that is “[i]mmeasurably old” and “immeasurably far” (28, 29; 2).

relays there an affinity for names that are both astronomical and ancient in origin, even as he embraces a new way of writing about the night sky that uses the page itself as a means of reimagining the scene. Helpful here is the definition of literary impressionism that Maurice E. Chernowitz offers in *Proust and Painting* (1945) and that Richard M. Berrong recovers in his essay “Modes of Literary Impressionism” (2006). Chernowitz describes it as a narrative technique that presents things “in the order in which we perceive them, rather than first explaining them in terms of their causes” (165). Maria Elizabeth Kronegger has argued much the same: “Impressionists,” she writes in *Literary Impressionism*, “state phenomena in the order of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility” (37). Whereas the novelists that these critics examine were limited by the conventions of page, the typographic experimentations of e.e.cummings and Marianne Moore¹⁴ provided Ross with fresh means of recording and reenacting his perceptions in verse; true to impressionist form, he drew from these influences to develop his own method of evoking “a mind in the act of experiencing the outer world” (Bender 39). By treating the page as a canvas, not only could he recreate the act of encountering the stars one by one in the sky, but he could also do justice to those moments when the stars seem to come into view simultaneously:

¹⁴ Ross acknowledges the influence of Moore and cummings in a letter of 14 April 1944 to A.J.M. Smith (Darling “On Poetry and Poets” 83) and then again in a letter of 1 December 1944 to Ralph Gustafson (Whiteman *A Literary Friendship* 22).

I saw
 the stars Alderbaran
 Algol and Alioth
 flaming

in distance
 Suns

Names Arabian those old
 astronomers saw

Algol Alcyone
 in the night
 glittering afar
 each point of light, each star. (1-12)

Mallarmé's "meaningful silence"¹⁵ reappears here as the white spaces that permeate the

¹⁵ Michael Davidson ties the appearance of white space in Mallarmé's poetry to an increasing awareness of materiality in an age of mechanical reproduction. "[W]hen newspapers, photography, and mass-produced popular novels threatened to destroy the 'aura' of a work's originality and uniqueness," he argues, Mallarmé turned "to the material resources of the printed page – varying fonts, type sizes, white space – to disturb syntactic and semantic relationships" (10). This is certainly one possibility, although the poet's own explanation seems more driven by aesthetics than political, social, or economic concerns. As Joseph

poem's opening lines; as a typographical technique, these spaces treat the page like a canvas in order to establish the significance of certain images visually, while at the same time creating semantic pairings. Brian McHale has suggested that white spaces "function as semanticized figures for landscapes [. . .] or for non-visual or metaphysical referents" (278). In this sense, these absences either symbolize such things as "sea, desert, [and] sky;" or, they are attempts to visualize "silence" or "the void" (278). In both instances, the use of white space is mimetic. It is used to evoke physical space, or to capture those considerably less tangible states of emotional, psychological, and spiritual deliberation. Not surprisingly, in poetry about the night sky, white space sometimes achieves both effects at the same time. White space can also serve, in the Hegelian sense, as the invisible bridge that enables meaning to travel back and forth between distinct signifiers that are simultaneously held together and kept apart. To extend the metaphor further, this

Acquisto has pointed out, Mallarmé's theory of the page as landscape was not solely the result of his investment in impressionist painting, but also the product of his engagement with music as an art form that had important implications for poetry. In support of this point, Acquisto calls attention to an essay on Edgar Allan Poe in which Mallarmé makes clear his theory of typographical space: "L'armature intellectuelle du poème se dissimule et tient – a lieu – dans l'espace qui isole les strophes et parmi le blanc du papier: significatif silence qu'il n'est pas moins beau de composer, que les vers" (Mallarmé 659). The possibilities of the page appear here as sources of visual and aural pleasure for the French poet, a blankness as beautiful as verse itself. I recount this information here because Ross did, in fact, read Mallarmé in the original; his use of white space is not just a sign of his engagement with Imagist poets such as Hulme and Pound, who themselves drew from the Symboliste movement, but rather the result of his own ability to process a tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century (Darling 121).

particular form or poetic infrastructure can direct semantic traffic in more than one direction at once.

Serving a similar function to punctuation, the white space in “Stars” grants Ross another measure with which to control the pace of a given line, as well as a method of clustering particular words or phrases. While the effect, most immediately, is meant to appeal to the eye, these arrangements also play a part in determining the poem’s sound structure. In musical terms, the white space that appears between the phrases “Names Arabian” and “those old” can be interpreted as either a rest or a pause.¹⁶ The idea that such moments exist in typographic verse is certainly not new. Denise Levertov has, for example, gone to lengths to argue that William Carlos Williams’s objectivist concept of the variable foot “is not spatial (and thus visual) but temporal and auditory” (24). Levertov’s insistence on the “temporal” and the “auditory” is helpful here, since the white spaces in “Stars” appear as deliberate attempts not only to control the visual rate at which images progress, but also to dictate the poem’s phrasing.

The description of “Alderbaran / and Alioth / flaming,” for instance, is held in semantic and typographical stasis, its autonomy made possible by the white space that surrounds it. The prepositional phrase “in the distance” serves a qualifying afterthought,

¹⁶ The difference between “rests” and “pauses” is worth considering. Rests, even as they vary in length, are nevertheless definitive; they are the measured silence in a musical phrase that constitutes a specific gap in the sound. Pauses, on the other hand, are more intuitive; while still transcribed, they remain open to interpretation. The difference would not have been lost on Ross, who, as his journals from 1921 indicate, was a skilled pianist; he played Beethoven and was fond of skipping Mass in order to stay home and practice.

while the isolation of the word “Suns” on the next line dramatizes the image of multiple suns alone in the vastness of Space. Just as important, however, the distance between certain words and phrases works like an exaggerated pause – both visual and aural – whose effect is not entirely unlike the medial caesura of Anglo-Saxon metre. This is perhaps significant, since “Stars” relies so heavily on alliteration in order to achieve unity. Aldebaran, Algol, and Alioth – while these bright stars are all visible in both the fall or winter sky, nothing in particular binds them, either astronomically or astrologically (see fig. 14). What Ross appreciates here instead is the sound of the names themselves and their shared origin in the Arabic language. The literary astronomy practised here is almost purely alliterative, where the [æ] sound cluster at the beginning of each name is more than enough to justify each star’s place in the poem.

The decision to pair Algol and Alcyone near the end of the poem does, however, mark a slight shift, since Alcyone’s etymology is Greek. Their close proximity may well be Ross’s subtle way of admiring both cultures at once while downplaying the differences between them.¹⁷ Certainly, both astronomy and poetry owe a profound debt to

¹⁷ Ross may also have been aware that Algol and Alcyone are both eclipsing binaries whose brightness varies. “Eclipsing binary stars,” Dan Bruton explains, “are just one of several types of variable stars. These stars appear as a single point of light to an observer, but based on its brightness variation and spectroscopic observations we can say for certain that the single point of light is actually two stars in close orbit around one another. The variations in light intensity from eclipsing binary stars is caused by one star passing in front of the other relative to an observer” (Bruton n. pag.). Variable star enthusiasts regularly turn their attention to “the Minima of Algol,” a phrase that describes how Algol “fades and rebrightens like clockwork every 2.87 days” (Ashford and MacRobert n. pag.). Alcyone’s variations in brightness are not nearly as dramatic, however, and so it is somewhat unlikely that Ross would have paired these stars based on their shared status as eclipsing binaries.

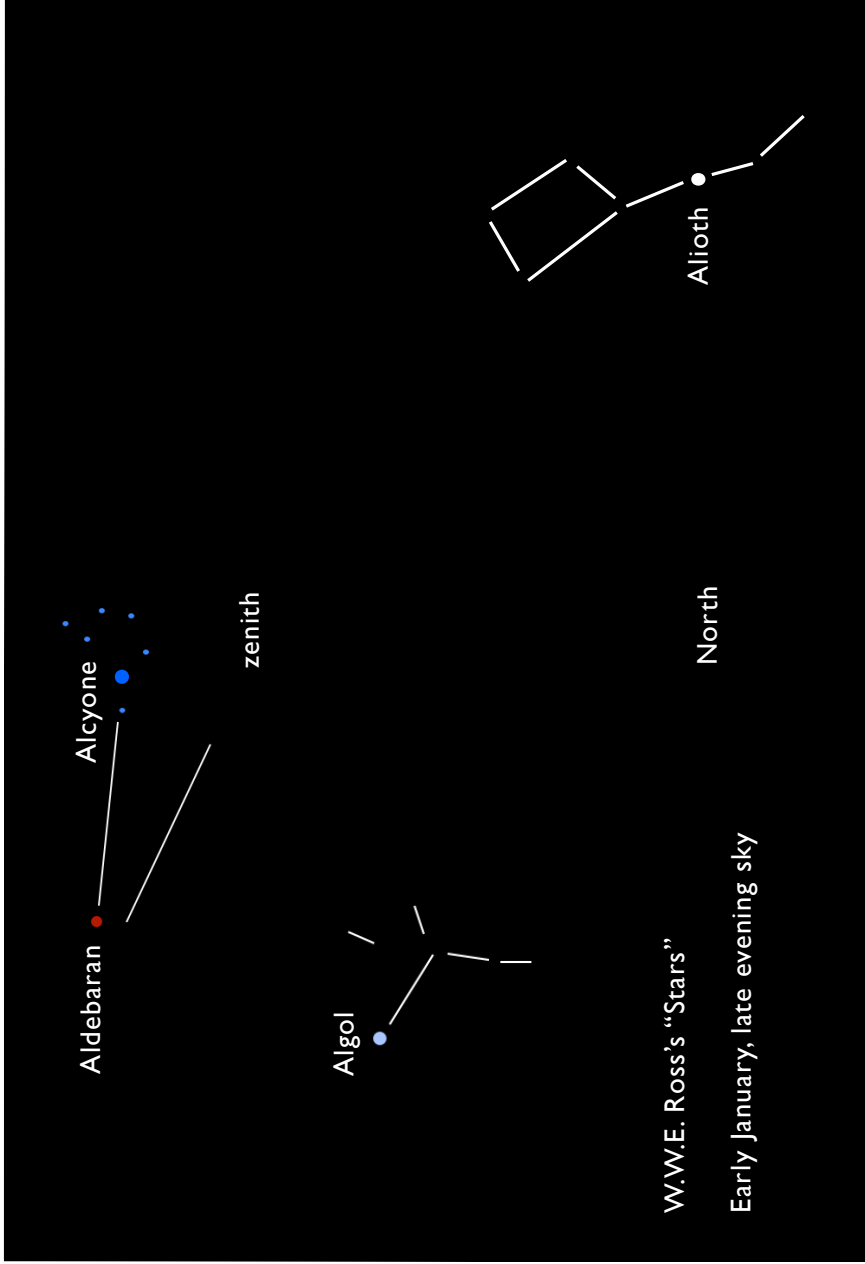


Fig. 14. Algol is located in the constellation Perseus, Alioth is the brightest star in Ursa Major, and Aldebaran and Alcyone both belong to the constellation Taurus (Bishop 340). Commonly referred to as the brightest star in the Pleiades, the winter sky's most prominent open cluster, Alcyone is actually a star system that consists of multiple components.

each. Either way, their proximity marks the first time in the poem that two stars appear next to each other on the same line. In fact, the final four lines of the poem are distinct in that they appear as a unified stanza. Having done away with typographical intervention, Ross relies instead on rhyme (night/light, afar/star) to create sonorous pairings that further bind the elements of the poem. Despite the predictability of these, the sparse lines in which they appear prevent them from seeming too conventional; rather, by progressively lengthening the final three lines, Ross conveys language and imagery that is reminiscent of an earlier age through a distinctly contemporary pattern. What Moore refers to as “unemphasized rhymes” contribute to the “more fluent guise” of his work (265). Such subtlety is likely to appeal to stargazers as well. Because “Stars” is understated and observational, yet still carefully crafted to convey the impressive spaces and silences that govern the night sky, the overall effect is not unlike the experience of observing celestial sights in solitude. The absence of fellow observers does not render the poem impersonal; on the contrary, what resonates instead is a strong attachment to the scene itself and a corresponding desire to see it assume a more lasting form.

Northern Lights

Ross’s depictions of the night sky over Northern Ontario, many of which appear in *Laconics*, function in a similar fashion. These poems are, in a sense, emblematic of the collection as a whole, since they convey a fascination with the north that was fostered not

only by Ross's experiences as a student assistant with the geological survey of Canada,¹⁸ but also by what Renée Hulan calls, referring to the Group of Seven, a "conflation of 'the Canadian north' and 'Canada as north'" (140). For Lawren Harris, in particular, this northern nationalism, while hardly new, was nevertheless essential to imagining a new spiritual plane built almost entirely on theosophical principles. In texts devoted to delineating occultist ideas, observations of the Aurora Borealis, in particular, give rise to questions about the nature of reality. "Would you call the sudden flashes of the aurora borealis, the northern lights," Blavatsky asks, "a 'reality,' though it is as real as can be

¹⁸ Relatively little is known about the summers Ross spent between 1911 and 1915 working as a field assistant in the geological survey of Northern Ontario. Occasionally, the voluminous published records that make up the *Geological Survey of Canada* do mention certain students who appear to have distinguished themselves in the field, but Ross is not among them. Given how rare these references to field assistants are, however, they bear little significance. More attention should be given to historical accounts of the Survey, such as Morris Zaslow's *Reading the Rocks: The Story of the Geological Survey of Canada* (1975) and Christy Vodden's *No Stone Unturned: The First 150 Years of the Geological Survey of Canada* (1992), which provide information that helps contextualize Ross's experiences. As Zaslow points out, the process that enabled Ross to secure his student position in 1911 had undergone considerable change seven years before. "In 1904," he explains, "when the universities added their complaints to those of the Survey against the system of political influence that had almost monopolized appointments to the field parties, a system of summer training was instituted from which the Survey expected to secure its staff needs" (286). Reginald Brock, Director of the Geological Survey of Canada from 1907-14, appears to have maintained this commitment to eliminating patronage from the appointment process. Vodden credits the new director as having "laid the groundwork for the Survey's role as a training ground for the Canadian geoscience community. Students interested in geology," she notes, "received guidance and practical experience through their employment as field assistants to GSC scientists" (23). According to Zaslow, Brock was meticulous in his selections. "Brock proceeded with such great care," he remarks, "that it seemed almost as if each new employee, down to the typists, had been hand-picked for his or her position by the director" (289). Whether or not Ross had been "hand-picked," these accounts do at least suggest that Ross's achievements in school had earned him his place on the survey and that his work was carefully monitored thereafter.

while you look at it? Certainly not; it is the cause that produces it, if permanent and eternal, which is the only reality, while the effect is but a passing illusion” (58). The northern lights provide proof, for theosophists, that another reality encompasses this one. Their observation grants the spiritualist the opportunity to acknowledge “the only reality” that matters while, at the same, reversing conventional notions of the ephemeral. If the daylight world is “a passing illusion,” then the northern lights are lasting signifiers of the only reality that matters.

Yet Ross’s poems about the night sky over Northern Ontario amount to much more than poetic renderings of occultist doctrine. Evident in these as well is a complex poetic order that employs a number of techniques to recreate scenes that are themselves far more subtle than the northern lights. Consider, for instance, “Curving, the Moon” (1926), where the pairing of moon and pine is infused with a sense of mystery:

Curving, the moon
 over the mirror lake;
 the new moon
 thinly curving
 over the lake.

Below, the pine
 standing dark and tall,
 through its black

topmost branches
 the curved limb
 of the new moon.

Rising, it leaps from the ground,
 immobile –
 the dark pine
 moon-illuminated
 on the shore
 of mirror-lake.

Is it a breeze?
 No sound from the pine,
 but on the water
 a long shadow
 ripples.

“Ross invests his image with the transitoriness, or fluidity,” Compton observes,¹⁹

¹⁹ In her otherwise impressive efforts to reconcile Imagism’s debt to Impressionism through Ross’s poetry, Compton does not entertain the possibility that Ross was simply an impressionist whose experiments in typographic verse had anything to do with Imagism itself. The bibliographic entry for Ross’s personal papers, which identifies him as an “imagist poet [. . .] whose writings from between the wars presaged the modern poetry movement in Canada,” is, in fact, misleading, since Imagism itself was a relatively short-lived literary movement that had all but ended years before Ross’s first poems appeared in print

“which is inherent in the object even as his poem fixes the image” (59, 60). The use of gerunds in “Curving, the Moon” (“Curving,” “Standing,” “Rising”) are connected to this impulse; as non-finite verb forms, they are well-suited to convey the paradox of implicit motion, insofar as they indicate action without establishing its beginning or its ending. Gerunds can also obscure their subjects, and, in so doing, introduce a sense of ambiguity that mystifies their origins. This ambiguity finds a counterpart in Ross’s use of an ambiguous pronoun. “Rising,” the third stanza begins, “it leaps from the ground, /

(“Canadian Literary Collections” n. pag). In some ways, the inclination to label Ross an imagist is understandable, since he was, like T.E. Hulme and Pound before him, seeking not only an alternative to the conventions of Georgian poetry, but also a fresh means of confronting modernity itself. Yet to describe Ross as such is to deny both the intensity and ephemerality of Imagism itself. While by no means a coherent group, the Imagists were nevertheless bound by a common dissatisfaction with poetry as it was written at the beginning of the twentieth century and a desire to “make it new” by drawing on – and by diverging from – a variety of sources that included Impressionism, Cubism, the French Symboliste movement, *vers libre*, Japanese poetry, and, in Ezra Pound’s case, Chinese Confucianism (Gage 5-7; Pound 265). John T. Gage describes T.E. Hulme as Imagism’s first theorist and Pound as its “chief publicist” (6). Indeed, while Hulme is generally credited as having fostered a shift towards *vers libre* as far back as 1907 under the auspices of his School of Images, it was Pound’s decision to publish Hulme’s work alongside his own in *Ripostes* (1912) that gave Imagism greater visibility, not only in Europe, but also in the United States, where *Ripostes* was published the following year (Gage 6). Even though a series of anthologies and manifestos would see their way into print before the movement more or less came to an end in 1917, arguably, Imagism gained its most important forum through Pound’s relationship with Harriet Monroe, the founder and long-time editor of *Poetry*, the Chicago-based monthly that Monroe had founded in 1912. For Canadian writers such as Ross, *Poetry* not only provided exposure to new works by Pound, T.S. Eliot, and others, but also influenced *Dial*, the American literary magazine that would eventually publish Ross’s poetry under the editorial guidance of Marianne Moore. By the time Ross had absorbed these influences, Imagism itself had already faded into memory.

immobile –” (12, 13). “It” may refer to the moon, the stand of pine, or to the scene as a whole. Without downplaying the sense of uncertainty that surrounds them, the lines nevertheless seem to provide self-reflexive commentary on the poet’s process of encountering – and then of registering – the overlapping imagery of moon and trees. The overall structure of “Curving, the Moon” supports this possibility. In the first stanza, Ross focuses on the moon “thinly curving” in the sky “over the mirror lake,” whereas, in the second, his attention shifts to the pine, and then follows their branches back to the sky (3, 2). At this point in the poem, the moon and the pine are connected, yet nevertheless autonomous entities. It is not until the fourth stanza that the scene is distilled to just four lines: “the dark pine,” the speaker states, “moon-illuminated / on the shore / of mirror-lake” (14-17). As the use of alliteration connects the “moon-illuminated” pine to the “mirror-lake,” these hyphenated phrases serve as epithets for the scene itself. Keeping in mind that reflections on the water are themselves impressionistic, “the long shadow” that “ripples” represents a significant shift in imagery: as the ripple spreads, the watery reflection of the moon and the trees presumably softens into less definite forms. Structurally, the absolute clarity that the first four stanzas work to achieve actually dissolves in the fifth, when the image is revealed to be more delicate than a breeze on a lake. Here, the faint wind signals the presence of the unseen: mysterious, intangible, yet nevertheless felt, the breeze is a reminder of those subtle forces that only briefly become apparent as they interact with the material world.

To consider the poem as a whole, the particular kind of literary stargazing that Ross practices in “Curving, the Moon” is one that appreciates how the apparent stillness

of bodies – both terrestrial and celestial – actually belies the subtlety of their movements; the poem’s alignment of a new moon and a “dark pine” also speaks to the subtle ways in which the features of a given landscape influence a stargazer’s impression of the night sky. This attention to regional detail – readily evident in *Laconics*’s recurring imagery of woods and lakes, of ice, moss, and lichen – evokes a distinct place where “the northern wind / is master,” and where northern lights are easily seen (“Island with Trees” 7, 8). Ross describes such light shows in two poems, “Aurora Borealis” (1928) and “Aurora” (1926), both of which celebrate the magnetic phenomenon as a “shifting, fantastic” spectacle of the “northern night” (“Aurora Borealis” 1, 22).

As suggested earlier in this section, these poems about the night sky over Northern Ontario are in part the result of a culture of northern nationalism whose origins date back to the nineteenth century.²⁰ Certainly, as the Foreword to *Laconics* makes clear, Ross wanted to incorporate into his writing “something of / what quality may mark us off / from older Europe, – / something ‘North American’ – / and something of / the sharper tang of Canada” (11-16). Years later, in a letter of 23 September 1956 to Ralph Gustafson, he would write that “[his] own ‘Canadian feeling’ was most intense in the twenties” (Whiteman *A Literary Friendship* 36). However “intense” such feelings may

²⁰ In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Sherrill E. Grace traces this vision of Canada as a northern nation back to Robert Grant Haliburton’s *The Men of the North and Their Place in History*, a lecture delivered in Montréal in March 1869 to promote the Canada First Movement’s nationalist, yet ultimately Aryan vision of Canada. In response to Haliburton’s description of Canada as a new Christian civilization “kindled [. . .] in the icy bosom of the frozen north,” Grace writes that “[i]f the United States was busy formulating its manifest destiny, Haliburton was not far behind” (58).

have been, the affinity that Ross conveys for Canada in his writing is still understated and carefully qualified. And even if “an evening’s discussion of Canadian nationalism with friends” did inspire the composition of “[p]ractically all the first section of that book *Laconics*,” as Ross claims, the resulting depictions of the aurora borealis far more closely resemble the paintings of Tom Thomson than they do those found in early twentieth-century tales of the Canadian north (36).²¹ This is an important distinction to make, since the northern lights themselves deserve to be treated as something more than just an immediately recognizable symbol of Canada. For Thomson and Ross, both of whom observed the northern lights first-hand,²² such naturally occurring spectacles were remarkable in their own right.

²¹ According to Hulan, stories such as Gilbert Parker’s *Northern Lights* (1909) imagine the Canadian north as a beckoning foreign territory where adversity and adventure lay waiting. Hulan distinguishes these boys’ adventure stories from those written for girls and women, where the north remains a far-off place that is only accessible through flights of fantasy (108). In Agnes Maule Machar’s *Majorie’s Canadian Winter: A Story of the Northern Lights* (1893), for example, the protagonist ventures no further north than Montréal; she relies instead on a fairy tale entitled “A Story of the Northern Lights” to experience the north from a distance (108). The northern lights in Machar’s story are, perhaps not surprisingly, described in decidedly Christian terms as signs of God’s lasting presence in the wilderness. Yet the appeal of the aurora borealis in such narratives may also lie in their capacity to help readers visualize the north who are otherwise discouraged from answering its call.

²² A number of biographers have indicated that Thomson’s depictions of the northern lights are at least in part the result of first-hand observations. Joan Murray indicates that “Thomson’s first nocturne was done in 1914,” and that, thereafter, “the subject became a favourite with him. To paint night scenes,” she explains, “he would stay inside Mowat Lodge, the hotel in Algonquin Park where he sometimes lived, then go out as often as he needed to check the scene” (81). Sandra Webster-Cook and Anne Ruggles state that “Thomson stood contemplating the aurora borealis for a considerable time before painting a sketch in a cabin by lamplight” (141). Their assertion is based on the recollections of Mark Robinson, a park ranger who was interviewed for William T. Little’s *The Tom Thomson Mystery* (1970).

In “Aurora Borealis,” Ross uses a combination of alliteration, repetition, caesura, and enjambment in order to depict the patterns of light:

The northern night,
a steely sky
with sparkling clusters
of sharp stars –
the black of the sky
is filled with stars –
There is no sound
upon the earth.

Not alone
are the stars tonight –
there is a glowing,
a shifting, dissolving; –
great fantastic
curtains of light
and long spears
that shoot high up

into the heavens
above our heads.

No sound is heard
 upon the earth, –
 and away to the northward,
 shifting, fantastic,
 the northern aurora,
 the northern lights!

The repetition of words, sounds, and phrases is a mimetic device that conveys the way in which patterns of light not only repeat themselves, but also reflect off surfaces and refract. Images also reappear from stanza to stanza, if in a slightly different form, as though there were reflective surfaces in the poem itself. At all times, however, the focus is on conveying a sense of the night sky. In much the same way that the northern lights’s “fantastic / curtains” ripple and overlap as they shift overhead, aural and visual patterns vary as the poem progresses. As Compton observes, “[t]he repetition of images in the structures of nature – the silhouette of the tree repeated on the water surface, the shadow of the fish cast by the moving fish – is echoed in Ross’s poetic method of presentation and re-presentation of an object in successive stanzas” (59-60). Yet, as each object is re-introduced, subtle shifts in phrasing, syntax, and description reveal these to be more like refractions than mere repetitions of the original. For example, Ross shortens his description of the northern lights in the second stanza (“shifting, dissolving; – / great fantastic”) to simply “shifting, fantastic;” in the poem’s closing lines; this instance of compression is consistent with the changing, at times intensifying nature of the aurora borealis.

While Ross uses a variety of punctuation to control the rate at which these patterns unfold, his decision to employ no fewer than four em-dashes in “Aurora Borealis” is telling. Given the difficulty of conveying the sublimity of the night sky, these momentary pauses help to dramatize the scene by providing him, paradoxically enough, with another controlling measure through which to envision its grandeur. By prolonging the syntactic afterthought of an image, and by permitting it to exist as a moment of promise, the em-dash technique has the effect of highlighting certain affinities while granting brief stay to their suggestiveness. In his succinct assessment of Ross’s poetry, Trehearne has called attention to those “moments of Aesthetic arrest” in which “the speaker has been stricken with a keen sense of the world’s power and beauty” (24). If dashes help signal these states of arrest, they also call attention to the emotive sensibilities that reside just beneath the surface of these poems. In this sense, Ross’s dashes in “Aurora Borealis” can also be categorized as instances of affective delay whose austerity hints at an unarticulated subtext of feeling.

Yet it seem equally important to point out that it is actually the use of enjambment that makes these moments of arrest possible. In “Aurora,” for example, the second of Ross’s poems about the northern lights, a similar combination of caesura, enjambment, and end stop lines dramatizes the scene:

Behold Aurora!
 Behold the dawn
 in her rose-coloured
 chariot drawn

by white horses.

She comes, she comes
out of the feast.

Night flees before her.
And now she opens
with long fingers
the gates of the East
and pours the dew
on the quiet earth
that lies beneath
in still darkness
waiting, waiting.

And now she urges
her horses on –
They move speedily
across the sky.
The light brightens,
the stars fade,
the earth awakes,
and day is near.

Before Aurora, the goddess of dawn, “urges / her horses on,” the scene is briefly suspended in a state of anticipation; the repetition of the word “waiting” and the

description of the “still darkness” suggest that the very Earth itself is captivated by the movement of light overhead (17, 18). Note, too, how Aurora’s epithetic “rose-coloured / chariot” evokes Ancient Greece and the red hues of the northern lights alike: Ross would have been well-aware of the significance of celestial bodies in Greek myth,²³ and so his decision to locate the goddess of dawn in the night sky over Ontario is an attempt at registering the sublimity of the scene through the associative and ennobling powers of allusion.²⁴ In the process, Ross also categorizes mythopoeia and natural splendor as mutually compatible sources of delight. Tellingly, the speaker’s excitement fades towards the end of the poem, where both the syntax and line breaks become predictable: the “light brightens, / the stars fade, / the earth awakes, / and day is near” (21-24). The arrival of day brings an end to the brilliant light show, and, as a result, the world is robbed of its mythic potential.

²³ Researchers at the University of Aegean have determined that displays of aurora borealis, while rare over Greece, did influence the orientation of at least two of Apollo’s temples (Liritzis and Vassiliou 14). While this finding is relatively new, archaeologists were already aware of the influence of celestial bodies on Greek architecture by the beginning the twentieth century. The British archaeologist and astronomer Francis Penrose had, in fact, published an article on the influence of celestial bodies on the orientation of temples in Greece in 1892 (Liritzis and Vassiliou 14).

²⁴ In using Greek myth to describe the Canadian environment, Ross joined a long tradition of Canadian nature writing – from Charles Sangster’s *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay, and Other Poems* (1856) to Tim Lilburn’s *Orphic Politics* (2008) – that has sought to “affirm the existence here of a mythic heritage that stretched back to the roots of Western civilization” (Bentley “Pan and the Poets” 64). While by no means as prevalent as Pan, the Greek god of shepherds and pastures, Aurora is nevertheless at odds with “the cacophonous world of the city;” in personifying the northern lights, she appears to Ross as “a vital force” in the wilderness that rejuvenates and inspires (68, 69).

Evocative as they are of Northern Ontario, poems such as “Aurora,” “Aurora Borealis,” and “Curving, the Moon” all celebrate the remoteness of the region while, at the same time, making it more accessible. The appeal of the stars, the northern lights, and the new moon over a pristine northern lake suggest that Ross’s affinity for the night sky was to a considerable extent closely aligned with this territory. If the aesthetic complexity of “Curving, the Moon” is any indication, the features of this landscape also helped Ross realize his impressionistic style. These northern poems fuse not only the personal and the aesthetic, but also the mythic and the material as well. As such, they reveal the extent to which the northern night sky captivated Ross as a site of mystery and intrigue.

The City Night

Ross’s nocturnal world was, however, very much an urban one as well. Street lights, factories, and skyscrapers all populate his poetry, and his depictions of these cityscapes provide another perspective on the way in which Canadian cities such as Toronto were illuminated during the first half of the twentieth century. As further testimony to the diverse style and tone of his work, a number of his descriptions are as much a product of lingering Victorian sentiment as they are of urban topography; they are, in a sense, instances where poetic tradition encounters the relatively new realities of the city to produce lines that bridge the two eras. In “Hymn to Night” (n.d.), for example, Ross evokes the trope of the night as a restorative force that replaces “the day’s too garish light” (4). The poem itself is written in iambic tetrameter and adheres to a strict a b a b rhyme scheme. Ross’s diction – his use of the word “thee,” especially – is decidedly pre-

modern, and yet from within the poem signs of modernism emerge. Reflecting on the day as a time when “noise prevailed upon the street,” Ross valorizes the darkness as an entity that “covers up each cruder light” (34). These descriptions, while perhaps unremarkable in themselves, do nevertheless set up the most memorable line in the poem. “Night,” Ross casually remarks, “grows stranger flowers at our feet” (35). While the image of a night flower is resonant enough on its own, Ross’s rhythm, his use of alliteration and internal rhyme, and his decision to include the adjective “stranger” together formulate a poetic conceit that is both sonorously and semantically suggestive. It is, as well, a product of two worlds: the sense of delight that the speaker takes in the offerings of night is nevertheless tinged with estrangement. These “stranger flowers,” then, even as they recall Edenic myths, are the growth of a new urban garden whose blooms are tinged with the uncanny.

Given that the city night was, for Ross, at times both attractive and alienating, only the most selective reading of his work could possibly support Don Precosky’s claim that Ross wished to convey only “disillusionment” with urban spaces through his poetry (22). Rather, Ross’s poems address both the positive and negative aspects “of city lights / on city streets” (23, 24). In “Night Lights” (1926), for instance, the artificially illuminated skyscape is unmistakably a source of intrigue and wonder; Ross describes it as “wistful / romantic and / hurting of mystery” (3-6). These lights “that are / seen to / extend all / along the / skyline,” he adds, “may / lead to the / searching of / hearts and the / sharpest / desiring” (12-17). In this particular poem, the city fosters an atmosphere of longing in which distant lights become signifiers of the unattained. Similarly, in “Lights”

(n.d.), another of Ross's unpublished poems, the city appears as a "maze of lights" that recedes into the distance (9). "Lights that sparkle," Ross begins,

glimmering lights
 extending far
 to the dark ocean. –
 Below the hill
 the city lay, –
 long lines
 of electric lights. (1-8)

"Lights" documents the pervasiveness of artificial illumination by understanding the nocturnal city entirely in visual terms. Not unlike a time-lapse photograph of traffic at night, "Lights" records sources of illumination as a "pattern" of "lines" that are indicative of relentless motion (10,13). Ross describes "a pattern woven / of multitudinous / glowing points / lines curving / where streets curved" with the "moving lights of automobiles" (13-16). Ultimately, the aim of the poem is to register an impressionistic moment in which the "city seemed / all built of lights," the brilliancy of which appear "sharp against / the black background / of the night" (17, 18; 22-24). Even Ross's choice of verbs ("glimmer" and "glowing") reflects the sound symbolism of [gl] consonant cluster, which linguists writing in the 1920s and 1930s linked to the movement of light.²⁵

²⁵ See Otto Jespersen's discussion of phonosemantics – the idea that sounds possess intrinsic meaning – in *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922) and Wolfgang Köhler's theory of the bouba/kiki effect in *Gestalt Psychology* (1929), which explores the relationship

Not only do such poems speak to the broad range of responses that urbanization evoked in Ross, but they also provide proof that uniformity – in either content or form – did not interest him. Delighted at times by the “triumphant” lights of the skyline, Ross nevertheless remained sensitive to the ways in which industrialization was changing both the city and its population. Helpful here is the distinction that James Thurber makes between “two kinds of light,” since readers frequently encounter in Ross’s poetry “the glow that illumines, and the glare that obscures” (146). In “Factory at Night” (n.d.), Ross describes the “sharp designs / of light and shadow” that are the result of “arc-lightings glaring” (7, 8; 5). By describing this particular factory as “facing the city / and the night,” he subtly suggests that it exists apart from both, as though the enclosed industrial area were an architectural disruption in urban and nocturnal space²⁶ (15, 16). The factory, a

between the visual appearance of objects and the sounds that native speakers associate with them. Ross’s brief poem “Shapes and Sounds” (1923-1929) hints at the possibility that he was attuned to these theories. “Shapes and sounds, / We know them well,” Ross writes. “They are our / Companions daily marching / Along with us” (1-4).

²⁶ Ross was certainly not the first to write poems about the industrialization of Canadian cities. In “The City of the End of Things” (1894), Lampman envisions a city where “an awful sound / Keeps roaring on continually” from “a thousand furnace doors,” and where the “hideous routine” and “inhuman music” of all-night factories dehumanize citizens (16-32). Sensitive to the alienating effects of urbanization and industrialization, Lampman described the poem to the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* as “what we are coming to, if the present developments of machinery continue under the present social and economic conditions” (qtd. in Bentley, *Gay]Grey Moose* 196). Published nearly thirty years later, Louise Morey Bowman’s *Moonlight and Common Day* (1922) expresses similar anxieties. As Wanda Campbell points out, Bowman’s poem “Timepieces” initially relays a sense of terror at the “monstrous whirring engines” of “a great factory;” these fears, however, lessen as the precise movement of the machinery become rhythmic and predictable (75-78). Sensing that the

“huge box,” is not only set in a “big yard,” but also “brick-surrounded”; figuratively, it is a fortress of glaring light whose “bright windows” and “humming machinery” only hint at internal workings, all of which remain hidden from view (2-5). To look out from such a factory, the speaker imagines, is to witness “the crazy tangle / where traffic plunges / to and fro; patchwork patterns; the glistening of city lights / on city streets” (17-24).

Even though the first image in these, the final lines of “Factory at Night,” is one of discord, the mention of “patchwork patterns” in the next line suggests that some degree of order may exist amidst the chaos. The poem then ends with the image of “glistening” lights, as though the geometric uniformity of the city were somehow softened by the reflection of an otherwise antagonistic light. What the poem seeks here is a quick succession of alternatives: the speaker shifts from the disordered to the topographically urban, and then finally to an intangible glistening that animates the scene. Significantly, this last image appears at some distance from the initial description of the factory itself. Ross begins this last stanza with a specific signifier, only then to recede from the canvas that he has created in order to allow the viewer to appreciate the whole.

“rhythmical beat of these mighty engines” constitutes a new form of industrialized time, the speaker in Bowman’s poem thinks of “deep, green caverns / Far under the roar of the ocean” where time remains “slow. . . . slow. . . . slow” (84-89). Her use of ellipses is clearly an attempt to slow “the roar and the rhythm” of the machines that otherwise leave her “understand[ing] nothing” (83, 94). Her allusion to “deep, green caverns” is also evocative of geologic time, the sheer magnitude of which makes the misguided enterprises of the present seem small and meaningless in comparison.

In much the same way that a number of Impressionist paintings depict factories distantly in the background, the literal description of the factory that initiates the poem ultimately suggests that an aesthetic tension exists between industrialization and those aspects of urbanity that remain salvageable from a lyrical and spiritualist standpoint.

“Factory at Night” succeeds in large part because Ross avoids the heavy-handedness that hinders some of his other portraits of city life. “The City Enforces” (1930), for instance, ends with a string of rhetorical questions that clearly mean to indict the city as a geometric space in which “men” become nothing more than “things” (24). The commodification of humanity within increasingly industrialized zones is an important topic to address, but the poem’s eagerness to editorialize exists in tension with the subtleties of its aesthetic. The predictability of noun clauses such as “rows of lights,” “tall buildings,” and “great square blocks” is also a missed opportunity to register in more resonant terms the images that are otherwise so central to the poem. Whereas the compression of “Factory at Night” creates meaningful juxtapositions for the reader to unpack, the final lines of “The City Enforces” replace such suggestiveness with obvious gestures whose minimalistic nature does little to invigorate them. Ross’s occasional missteps, however, do not diminish the otherwise nuanced negotiations of both green and urban space that make him such an interesting poet to consider from an ecocritical standpoint. By extension, his depictions of natural and artificial light also retain value from an environmental perspective, entirely because they insist that at least part of the night sky’s appeal lies in its mystical nature. In seeking to establish its legitimacy, the dark-sky movement has not surprisingly chosen instead to focus on scientific studies of

environmental degradation that adopt an objective outlook. Meanwhile, the subjective realms of affect, mysticism, and negative theology go largely unacknowledged, even though these, too, must be understood as contributing to efforts to preserve the night.

The Watcher Poems

Plainly evident in his Watcher poems are Ross's efforts to make these subjective dimensions memorable by employing a variety of Early Modern, Romantic, and neoclassical conventions. "Hope – the Watcher Speaks – 1" (1932), "The Watcher Speaks – 2" (1932), and "The Watcher Speaks – 3" (n.d.) recollect the appearance of a brilliant celestial sight in Petrarchan sonnet form. While "The Watcher Speaks – 3" remains unpublished, Callaghan did include the first two sections in *Irrealities, Sonnets, and Laconics*, where, most likely in error, "The Watcher Speaks – 2" actually appears twice (41, 150).²⁷ Unlike his sparse free verse poems, which deliberately forego any form of incidental meditation, Ross's sonnets tell the reader precisely how the celestial sights should be perceived, which may explain why some critics have considered them failures.²⁸ In fact, these sonnets complicate the critical trajectory that would otherwise

²⁷ Such issues speak to the pressing need for a scholarly edition of Ross's poetry. The recent proliferation of interest in the relationship between science and literature, the ongoing research into the development of Modernism in Canada, and the emergence of ecocriticism as a prominent discourse all suggest that such a project would serve a wide range of readers and researchers.

²⁸ As Susan Glickman observes, Don Precosky devotes less than a page to Ross's sonnets, implying that they do not merit commentary (Glickman 195; Precosky 168).

treat Ross as poet who broke with convention in order to establish a Modernist method of writing poetry in Canada. Categorizing these poems as failures not only obscures Ross's investment in them, but also prevents readers from appreciating how these sonnets relate to the rest of his work.

Considered together, the Watcher sonnets reveal the extent to which Ross was invested in a particular dramatic scene: in all three poems, the speaker recalls the appearance of a celestial body in motion whose presence transforms its witnesses. Ross establishes this pattern in "Hope – the Watcher Speaks – 1," where a celestial body appears distantly overhead:

"Moving through mists of blackness and despair
 High, high above the storms of human ill,
 That blow relentlessly and bleak and chill,
 I saw one star that, radiant, pure and rare,
 Beamed in lone splendour through the troubled air,
 Like some bright beacon set upon a hill
 To guide the weary mariner until
 Dawn comes upon the waste of waters bare;
 And I wondered what that star might be,
 So clear, so far, yet comforting kind,
 A whisper crept into my waiting mind,
 Saying, Behold me, I am Hope, from me
 Solace for man's most wretched lot, and cheer."

In locating the celestial traveler “high above the storms of human ill,” Ross establishes the “bright beacon” as existing apart from earthly troubles.²⁹ As its “lone splendour” shines in the “mists of blackness and despair” that mark its path, it is “the star to every wandering bark,” providing both guidance and company to the weary who travel beneath it (Shakespeare 7). Tellingly, the celestial apparition in “Hope – the Watcher Speaks – 1” is never identified, even though the description of a moving “star” as guide, set out on the horizon, seems consistent with comet imagery. Rather, the speaker is left wondering precisely what kind of star it is, as though the opportunity to contemplate its mystery were an important component of its appeal. Indeed, the sonnet turns on this very question: “And I wondered what that star might be, / So clear, so far, yet comforting kind” (9, 10). The answer that the speaker receives – namely, that the apparition is a symbol of hope – is only made possible by his or her “waiting mind” (11). This metonymy suggests that patience, reflection, and receptivity are necessary characteristics if one is to become fully acquainted with the mysterious forces of the universe. If celestial sights of this nature provide their witnesses with the opportunity to entertain, however briefly, the possibility of transcendence, contemplating them into the “Dawn” hours is – in this poem, at least – the key to galvanizing such feelings into a more lasting

²⁹ The mention of a “mariner” in “Hope – the Watcher Speaks – 1” is possibly a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” The Australian astronomer Duncan Steel has speculated that Coleridge’s description of the “upper air burst[ing] into life” in Part V of the poem is actually a reference to the Leonids meteor shower of 1797, which Coleridge witnessed with Dorothy and William Wordsworth along the Somerset coast (Coleridge 313; Steel 20).

form of optimism.

Whereas “Hope – the Watcher Speaks – 1” finds “cheer” in the “mists of blackness and despair,” “The Watcher Speaks – 2” offers a purely pastoral recollection of a celestial sight. Even though Ross begins by echoing Keats, the “bright star” that he describes is neither “stedfast” nor is it “unchangeable” (9):

“One night I saw a bright star fall from heaven
 Beaming more powerful than many moons,
 Like that most fervent sun on hot noons
 Bends his strong glance until the hour of even.
 Where keen and polishing winds have strongly striven.
 ‘A spirit come to earth!’ I loudly cried,
 ‘Come to make merriment and careless glee,
 To drive away the darkness from beside
 The hearts of men that sleep and never wake
 To quiet all the winds upon the sea,
 And sing the beauty of the mountain lake.”

A falling star, “[b]eaming more powerful than many moons,” evokes the image of a fireball,³⁰ or an especially bright meteor falling to earth.³¹ The speaker characterizes this

³⁰ While hardly common, Ross could well have witnessed a meteor procession from Toronto at the age of nineteen. According to Randall Rosenfeld and Clark Muir, the Great Meteor Procession of 9 February 1913 “was one of the most remarkable astronomical incidents to be seen over southern Canadian skies” (167). Following the disappointment that was for many Halley’s Comet, the Great Meteor Procession renewed the general public’s interest in the

“spirit” as possessing the power not only to calm the seas and to “sing the beauty of the mountain lake,” but also to replace “darkness” with “merriment and careless glee.”

Tranquility and beauty in the natural world will, in other words, provide the outward signs that moral order has been restored.

This impulse towards bucolic settings and the suspension of all forms of strife is all but absent from the next sonnet in the Watcher sequence. Even though they share the same opening line, “The Watcher Speaks – 2” and “The Watcher Speaks – 3” are actually very different poems. For example, the strain of affect that permeates “The Watcher Speaks – 3,” is distinct from the exuberant testimony that otherwise characterizes the sequence. Through an especially well-placed allusion, the unpublished sonnet ends instead with a pleasing sense of loss:

“One night I saw a bright star shoot from heaven.
It fell a-flaming to the darkened ground
Shedding a potent radiance all around,
For it was many hours since the even;
Its birth place up among those sisters seven

night sky. So favourable was Canada as a site from which to witness the event that some historians have referred to it as “the Canadian fireball procession” (167).

³¹ A meteor is classified as a fireball when its apparent visual magnitude reaches -3. For reference purposes, any object with an apparent visual magnitude of 0 or less is visible with the naked eye. The moon, for example, has a magnitude of -12.74. On 25 April 1966, observers in eastern Canada witnessed a fireball whose magnitude was estimated to be -15 (McIntosh and Douglas 162).

Who spin most smoothly and in silence sound
 Their notes harmonious; where too is found
 The wreath of stars by Apollo to Daphne given.
 Long did the gleaming linger in the far
 West, a glory and a beacon sign
 When sunken in the depth of dark despair,
 For we should weep to see so fair a star
 Surpassing all the rest in radiance fine,
 A strand plucked out from Berenice's hair."

Berenice's hair³² is an asterism that owes its name to the Egyptian Queen Berenice II, who sacrificed her hair in order to ensure her husband's safe return from war. After her locks went missing, the distraught Ptolemy Soter III took solace knowing that Jupiter had retrieved this symbol of her devotion and placed it in the sky (Staal 149). This wistful allusion in the final line of the poem effectively brings together the themes of lost beauty and consolation that are central to this version of "The Watcher Speaks – 3." The reference to the celestial body as a "strand plucked out from Berenice's hair" is also a playful allusion to the etymology of the word "comet." Once commonly referred to as "hairy stars," "comet" is actually a derivative of the Greek term "kometes," the literal

³² When the eighty-eight modern constellations were established in 1930, Eugène Delporte listed Berenice's hair as Coma Berenices, and so it remains both a small constellation and an asterism in the summer sky (International Astronomy Union n. pag.).

translation of which is “long-haired” (Pasachoff 10). The image of a single strand of hair lends an air of delicacy to the celestial body, one that appreciates just how ephemeral such sights are.

At the same time, the particular strain of affect present in “The Watcher Speaks – 3” also resists apotheosis by regarding its subject as simply a “bright star” among stars. The stance of the speaker remains observational; even if this version of the poem presents the star as “a glory and a beacon sign,” the speaker wants nothing more from it than its “radiance” (8-13). It is ultimately the memory of its beauty that retains the potential to lift one from the “depth of dark despair” (10). The near Petrarchan rhyme scheme of ABBC ABBC DEF DEF is supplemented with a pattern of off rhymes. The words “even” and “heaven,” for example, complete the first and the fourth lines, while “star” and “hair” round out the twelfth and fourteenth. These off rhymes work in combination with enjambment to lessen the rigidity of “The Watcher Speaks – 3.” While certainly not conversational, the tone of the sonnet is less conventionally ornate than its counterparts in the sonnet sequence, even though these lines still manage in places to be perfectly iambic. “For we should weep to see so fair a star,” for instance, is a subtle combination of monosyllabic words, internal rhyme, and staggered alliteration that gives the impression of organic utterance to a sentiment whose apparent spontaneity belies its design. This description is perfectly suited to the celestial apparition itself, since such sights are not only spontaneous spectacles, but also reminders of a higher order, one that is as ancient

as the Harmony of the Spheres.³³ The reaction that comets, fireballs, and shooting stars elicit is the result of the unanticipated opportunity to contemplate otherworldly possibilities and the inevitable realization that such breaks from the quotidian are short-lived. Yet, even as they cause their witnesses to “weep,” the catharsis that they engender is ultimately restorative. The task of the watcher-poet, therefore, is to bear witness to these sights, and then to extend their effect through the more lasting vehicle of public testimony.

Five years after he wrote his Watcher sonnets, Ross composed a modern topographical poem entitled “The Watcher” (1937), which takes the city as its setting and the fate of humanity as its subject matter. Even though it is distinct from the sonnets that

³³ Even though the precise origins of the concept are unknown, Pythagoras (582-507 B.C.E.) introduced the doctrine of the Harmony of Spheres to Greek culture after years of study in Egypt, where he had grown fascinated with the intersection between music and math (Hammil 4). Carrie Hammil explains: “[Pythagoras] had learned – in Egypt or Babylon, probably – that if a vibrating string of any length were divided into halves, thirds, fourths, etc., the resulting tones (overtones, or harmonics) always bore a fixed intervallic relationship to the fundamental tone produced by the whole string” (4). For Pythagoras, the relationship between motion of the strings – and the “fixed” tonal ratios that such motions produced – led him to theorize that the planets and the fixed plane of stars also oscillated with motion of the spheres. We do not hear their music, Pythagoras reasoned, because we have, in fact, been listening it since birth (4-5). Approximately two centuries later, Aristotle’s *De Caelo* (350 B.C.E.) would challenge Pythagoras’s doctrine, describing the Harmony of the Spheres as a theory that “shows great feeling for fitness and beauty,” but that ultimately falls short of its own reasoning (Aristotle qtd. in Hammil 5). If such celestial music existed, Aristotle contended, it would be overwhelming, and certainly too great to ignore (5). Yet, as Hammil argues, the Harmony of the Spheres has nevertheless had a lasting effect on English literature. Even after Newtonian physics gained acceptance in the eighteenth century, the Pythagorean concept of a starry night sky set to its own music retained its appeal. Even today, to describe the stars as singing is to evoke not only a timeless form of synesthesia that hears music in the heavens, but also to recall a time when their harmony was taken as cosmological truth (139).

precede it, “The Watcher” nevertheless marks a return to a poetic persona that Ross obviously found intriguing.³⁴ This reprisal indicates that Ross’s sonnets were not isolated experiments; rather, they contribute to a broader vision that carries through his work. The most telling feature of “The Watcher” is its end-stopped lines that isolate the speaker’s observations and that foster an understated sense of detachment. Heightening this effect is Ross’s irregular use of rhyme, which contributes to the poem’s overall sense of uncertainty. These techniques are readily evident in the poem’s opening stanza:

After midnight now.
 The sounds of the street are done.
 The houses are all dark
 and the watcher is alone
 looking out on the street.
 The tower clock strikes one. (1-6)

Ross’s subtle use of alliteration and repetition gives the impression of unadorned speech.

³⁴ Ross’s interest in the Watcher figure may be connected to his fascination with mysticism and theosophy. In Hebrew Scripture, the Watchers are described in the Book of Enoch as fallen angels who rejected God’s authority and embraced the carnality of man. Their willingness to share forbidden knowledge on a wide range of subjects explains why theosophists would eventually attempt to redeem these figures and even to model themselves after them. In fact, the role of the watcher in theosophical circles is two-fold; on the one hand, watchers are those among the unseen Earthly colonies of deities who see to the care of humanity. This specific imagining of the term accrues meaning through various religious and mystical traditions, such as Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and even Celtic paganism. In the broader sense of the term, a watcher is simply a practitioner of theosophy who is attuned to signs of the ancient spiritual truths as they make themselves known in the world.

In fact, these lines work from a three-beat pattern that approaches the conversational without ever seeming prosaic. What enables Ross to achieve this effect is his understanding of how monosyllabic words, when used in combination with each other, lend free verse an austere quality that fosters the very rhythms from which subsequent lines may deviate. Enjambment also plays a key role in this first stanza of “The Watcher,” since the length of the syntactical unit that spans lines three to six serves in contrast to the brevity of line seven. Yet, the dramatic effect of this final line owes as much to its masculine ending as it does to the various ways in which its elements affirm a pattern of syntax and sound already established by the lines that precede it. “The tower clock strikes one” is one of three declarative sentences in the stanza, all of which begin with the same article. While the rhyme between the seventh and second line is obvious, the interplay of elongated vowel sounds in the stanza is far less so. The [au] diphthong of “tower” subtly echoes in the words “now,” “sounds,” and “houses” (1-3). This assonance finds a counterpart in the repetition of the [aʊ] diphthong in “houses” and “out” (3, 6). Even as the repetition of these vowel sounds connects words and images throughout the stanza, the final spondaic phrase, “clock strikes one,” is nevertheless distinct. Here, Ross’s onomopoeic description establishes what is, quite literally, an ominous tone (6).³⁵

³⁵ “The Watcher” may reflect the increasing public apprehension that preceded World War II. Even though the poem does not reference specific events, its composition coincides with the bombing of Guernica by Nazi Germany in April of 1937, an event that Bryan D. Palmer describes as not only a crisis point in the Spanish Civil War, but also as a harbinger of the violence that would engulf the globe in the years to come (321). Yet, at the very same time,

Since the daylight hours are synonymous in modern Western culture with progress, industry, and order, the poem adapts a nocturnal setting to suggest that the fate of humanity is now located within the realm of uncertainty. The “intruding tone” of the tower clock is troubling to the speaker because he cannot determine what it signifies:

What message does it tell

of welfare or woe?

Over the sleeping roofs

the lingering echoes go.

The citizens are asleep.

Their houses are locked and keep

in safety the citizens now.

They cannot hear it all,

hear that intruding tone;

That tongue whose echoes may well.

What prophecy does it bring?

What morrow may come

at any hour now

the anxieties that Ross articulates are not necessarily specific to the period; they pre-date modernity and continue unabated today.

from the heavens bending down
 as the heavens overflow
 with light to visit a town? (7-24)

This third stanza marks a shift in the speaker's deliberations. What begins as a meditation on the sound of the tower clock ultimately leads to speculation on a "light" from "the heavens" that is otherwise absent from the scene (22-24). Unlike the Watcher sonnets, which recollect moments when "the heavens overflow[ed]," "The Watcher" waits on intervention from overhead that has yet to arrive. The speaker's faith in this possibility, however, continues unabated. "We call upon the dark / to allow us to know," Ross writes in the final stanza of the poem "to see what may the issues be, / and here in the dark we await / the issue silently" (27-33). Just as apophatic theology locates God past the threshold of articulation, the particular brand of mysticism at work in "The Watcher" understands divine knowledge to reside in a similarly unrealized state. Whereas the novelty of the celestial apparitions in the Watcher sonnets provides the speaker with an opportunity to consider what other possibilities the universe may yet disclose, their very absence in the "Watcher" is interpreted as an equally promising silence that could still precede the long-awaited revelatory gesture.

The Lake-Shore Lights

Ross's correspondence suggests that he was personally invested in this poetic persona. His own status as a Watcher is readily evident in his own observations of a phenomenon – imagined or real – that he describes in his correspondence as lake-shore lights. "The

puzzling behaviour of lake-shore lights was repeated this summer,” Ross remarked in a letter of 24 August 1950 to the British Admiralty. “Briefly, my flashlight exposures, intentional or casual, were followed with a far higher frequency than if normally accidental [. . .]” (2). The description Ross provides here is just one of a number of accounts that he sent to the British Admiralty’s Director of the Department of Research, Programmes, and Planning in the years following World War II. The effort that he put into these memos on the “lake-shore lights,” all of which appear to have been politely dismissed by the Admiralty, seem to have come at some cost to his career. “Since ten years, off and on, of attention to this matter,” Ross stated, “[have] led only to my departmental discredit through its diversion of my effort – and, from my point of view, humiliation, I have naturally no intention of ever resuming these memos unless instructed or asked, by governmental authorities here, to do so, whether specifically or indirectly, i.e. without definitely naming the matter” (1). Determined to have his visions of the night sky authenticated – and his efforts recognized – by an authoritative body, Ross’s closing statement reveals a particular form of reasoning at work. The admission of his “departmental discredit” and personal humiliation, even as they refer to circumstances that are unlikely ever to be fully delineated, are nevertheless clear signs that his preoccupation with otherworldly possibilities was not without consequence. Whether his insistence on the phenomenon of the lake-shore lights was the product of mental frailty, increasing paranoia, a dogged belief in ufology or some varied combination of these and other possibilities, such statements do complicate Gavin Matthews’s assertion that Ross’s career as a scientist, if unremarkable, was nevertheless an untroubled one marked by

modest success (9).

An unpublished, untitled poem dated nearly one month prior to his 24 August 1950 letter reveals a different side to these frustrations. Since Ross was apparently still deciding between certain phrases, the 25 July 1950 version of this untitled poem, presented in its entirety here, includes alternatives in brackets:

The far-shore flashing light no more
 Can fascinate me as before,
 Their spell is ended now.
 Is it forever a day
 That activating interplay
 Has lost its kindling glow?

In darkness I shall stand and wait
 Watching, though the time be late,
 For some more certain sign;
 Of an endeavor to persuade
 Belief in what is overlaid
 With doubt obtuse, condign.

Is it condign? It is obtuse?
 It is an erroe [sic] to refuse
 Signals so remote

Illusory as they may be?

For many years they were to me

Arms that held afloat [kept]

Upon a turbulent-running stream

A bold attempt to build a dream

Into a substance true

For guidance, written words to tell

The promptings of an oracle

Concealed from public view.

That effort, sinkin [sic], was upheld

By indications that compelled

Credence in something strange

Impossible to understand [difficult to]

Emanating from a land [Originating in]

Loath to acknowledge change.

Repeated shocks have snapped the link.

The dreaming man is left to think

A mere mirage was all

This passing semblance of a boon –

Fabric unreal, beneath the moon

Swift-risen, but to fall.

Disenchanted, yet still quietly determined, the voice in this untitled poem reflects candidly on the disappearance of the lake-shore lights. Even as he reveals their significance, however, Ross also shrouds the phenomenon in greater mystery. The first line of the final stanza, for example, is unmistakably a reference to the shock treatment that he underwent as treatment for severe depression,³⁶ its emotional valence lays bare the extent of his suffering and loss. Even so, the poem's concluding unit only opens into questions that are likely to remain unanswered. On the one hand, Ross seems to position himself here as the "dreaming man" who is now willing to entertain the possibility the lights were "mere mirage" (33, 34). Yet, the untitled poem about the "far-shore flashing light" suggests instead that the speaker still believes that a link did exist, even if their "spell" has ended. His declaration, issued earlier in the poem, that he "shall stand and wait / Watching" suggests that Ross never entirely relinquished the possibility that he was the recipient of clandestine messages that were hidden from "public view" (7, 8; 24).

One of many neglected unpublished poems that merit close attention, Ross's unfinished far-shore lights poem is, in every way, a lament for the disappearance of potentially "Illusory" signals that nevertheless held great meaning for him (16). It also

³⁶ "It is unlikely," Matthews speculates, "that even Ross himself would have been aware of the potential link between his therapy and personality changes, between shock treatment and loss of some brain function" (12). On the contrary, the reference to his shock therapy here suggests that he was well aware of its consequences.

characterizes him as a Watcher in the tradition of his own writing, even if it does little to resolve the mysteries that surround much of his life. Still, his desire for holistic forms of knowledge, his appreciation for Nature in all forms, and his own mental and emotional fragility do help to explain his longstanding fascination with the night sky, as do the troubling nature of his times. “In view of the international efforts now being made to disarm the world and abolish war from land and sea,” the Canadian astronomer and poet Albert Durrant Watson remarked in 1922, “it seems appropriate that in all arts and sciences, religion and commerce, politics and industry, as well as in our international and social relations, the great principle of mutuality should be observed” (46). While most of his writing labours under the influence of his Christian and Spiritualist dogma, Watson’s essay “Astronomy in a Poet’s Life” is nevertheless telling in its alignment of astronomy, poetry, and the pacifist movement. At the root of Watson’s desire to reconcile the rational and the imaginative is a call to greater mindfulness that Ross would have appreciated. Watson’s unwavering belief in the potential of Spiritualist and literary endeavors to quell self-righteousness and to improve humanity is equally present in Ross’s writing, where Ross’s own interpretation of the “great principle of mutuality” resulted in a poetry of wide-ranging appeal.

...

Thirteen years after his death, three of Ross’s many works of translation appeared in *To Say the Least* (1979), an anthology of short Canadian poems edited by P.K. Page. One of these, in particular, reveals Ross’s sensitivity to terrestrial and celestial sources of natural light:

The fireflies,
pursued,
hide themselves
in the moonlight. (1-4)

In this brief poem, the ephemeral light of fireflies disappears into the eternal light of the moon. The unity achieved here is not only between earthly and heavenly realms, but also between the unpredictable movement of fireflies and the steadfast path of a celestial sphere. As the animate and intimate momentarily overlap, the moon becomes a refuge to all creatures that are drawn to its light. Ross's nocturnal scene is perfectly in place among the many brief lyrics that appear in *To Say the Least*, no fewer than sixteen of which include celestial imagery. The anthology not only reflects its contributors' fascination with the night sky, but also the work of Page, who makes frequent reference to celestial events in her poetry and prose. Rich as they are in myth, meaning, and insight, these instances of artful astronomy represent a significant dimension of her creative life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dark Spectrums: The Artful Astronomy of P.K. Page

The very stars are justified.
The galaxy
italicized.

I have proofread
and proofread
the beautiful script.

There are no
errors.

-P.K. Page, *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies (1981) (85)*

P.K. Page's "Star-Gazer" conceives of the night sky as a flawless text onto which "the beautiful script" of the heavens is written (6). The poem most immediately registers as a conflation of affinities: a love of the starry night and a love of the written word expressing themselves simultaneously in four syntactical units, their brevity contradicting the immensity of the sky and the countless lines of poetry that have already been inscribed upon it. While Amy Lowell famously opposed "the cosmic poet," Page's channeling of Imagist concentration seems like the exception that proves the rule¹ (vii).

¹ "We oppose the cosmic poet," Lowell writes in her preface to *Some Imagist Poets* (1916), "who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art" (vii). The "real difficulties" to which Lowell refers are the challenges of conveying, as precisely as possible, specific images as opposed to "vague generalities" (vii). Without saying so, Lowell was advocating for a form of synecdoche where the attention given to a single image elevates its status and suggests that its meaning is somehow emblematic of a broader, if enigmatic whole. Lowell's preface to *Some Imagist Poets*, however, exaggerates the extent to which the poets included in there

An exercise in lyrical exactitude that values certainty and precision over abstraction and doubt, the poem ushers personal testimony into a public forum, and, in the process, invites others to do the same.

Easily mistaken for “simply a song of praise,”² the sense of delighted certitude that permeates “Star-Gazer” is actually the result of a subtle set of techniques, each of which helps the poem succeed in its re-articulation and renewal of celestial affinities long synonymous with lyric poetry (Bartlett 105). Page’s use of the passive voice, for example, actually helps realize its sense of assuredness: “The very stars are justified,” Page writes, possibly in reference to both their position on the page or in the sky. Their justification, in both instances, emanates from the past, or from some form of ongoing past that precedes and overlaps with the speaker’s timeline (1). As a result, this opening

break with tradition. Lowell’s own poem, “Patterns,” which describes a walk among daffodils, could just as easily be described as Wordsworthian (77).

² In “For Sure the Kittiwake: Naming, Nature and P.K. Page” (1997), Brian Bartlett expresses a preference for the “varied naming” of Seamus Heaney’s modernization of a medieval poem over Page’s “Star-Gazer” (105). Bartlett also takes issue with the way in which Page positions the role of poet in the poem. “Who,” he asks, “is the poet to ‘proofread’ nature? How is she to declare it’s errorfree? [sic] Is the ‘script’ perfect gibberish, or a perfect message, or something in between?” (103). While Bartlett does not provide an answer to these questions, he does acknowledge in a subsequent interview with Anne Compton that his article on Page is very much an exercise in working through his own anxieties surrounding the potential of poetry “to pigeon-hole” its subject (192). Bartlett’s self-awareness does not necessarily negate his concerns, nor do they suggest that Page’s vision of perfection is not, in many ways, out-of-sync with the expectations of readers, many of whom are now accustomed to the emphasis social realism places on the very imperfection of the world. Rather, Bartlett’s candour rightfully puts his questions into dialogue with his own writing – questions that inform, among other things, his own vision of what a nature poet can and should be.

statement becomes a pre-determined truth that the poem then adopts as its given. “The galaxy,” likewise, has been “italicized” (2, 3). In this instance, however, the omission of the auxiliary verb shortens the line, a decision that grants a sonorous balance to the first two syntactical units. The apparent objectivity and equilibrium of these opening lines also lend an air of balance and authority to the stargazer’s testimony. Pound referred to this technique as “super-position,” or the placing of “one idea [. . .] on top of another” so as to avoid a poetry “of secondary intensity” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 103). For Pound, the stacking of ideas was a phenomenological attempt “to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (103). Pound’s observation is helpful in understanding “Star-Gazer,” since the poem’s closing statement also blurs the line between subjective and objective engagement.³

The proof reader, unable to find fault with the text, affirms its quality (“There are”) through negation (“no / errors”). The statement owes its resonance as much to its understated nature as it does to the enjambment that isolates the absent “errors” from the rest of the poem. This break after the word “no” also owes a debt, as much Imagist poetry does,⁴ to the kire-ji – or the splicing technique that disrupts syntax in order to create a

³ Page was far from alone in her desire to use the language of objectivity in order to articulate what were ostensibly personal observations. As Brian Trehearne has explained, the “investigation of the boundary between subjective imagination and objective pictorialization was a major if implicit goal of the Imagist doctrines enunciated by Pound in 1913” (59). In *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* (1999), Trehearne argues that “this search for a fusion of subjective and objective modes was constitutive of Canadian poetic development well into the 1950s” (59, 60).

⁴ See “Vorticism,” the essay in which Ezra Pound acknowledges his debt to the “hokku,” “an older term” for haiku that was once used to describe the opening verses of the Renga form

moment of pause, which, in turn, heightens the Haiku's meditative quality (Yasuda 77). Since the opening section of "Star-Gazer" also consists of no fewer than three spondees – eight of the poem's first twelve syllables are, in fact, stressed – its sound structure is, initially at least, marked by intensity and compression. The nearly unnoticeable shift at the end of the poem ultimately gives "Star-Gazer" a subtle symmetry. Even though these lines are sonorously distinct, they still manage to echo the poem's beginning; together, two definitive assertions have the effect of making the subjective middle statement about the sky's "beautiful script" seem incontestable. Governing this dynamic is the definitiveness of the poem's punctuation, four periods linking the terms "justified," "italicized," "script," and "errors" to each other, drawing the reader's eyes from one to the next, as though the poem itself were a minor constellation mapped out on a page. Seeking to materialize the sky like so many stargazers before her, Page's textualization of the night endorses a vision of a universe that is at once well-ordered, timeless, and absolute. Even though her choice of metaphors – night as text, and, by extension, nature as book – pre-dates the first European star charts, its transposition into this contemporary poem is nevertheless a sign of an expansive cosmological vision that continues to instill public mindfulness. By fostering a sense of belonging that extends into the heavens, Page's writing advances the idea of a planetary home so as to insist on its care.

(Hakutani 68). Readers interested in the influence of Japanese poetics on Pound, and, more broadly, on the imagist movement as a whole, may wish to consult Earl Miner's foundational study, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (1958).

As John D. Barrow observes in his Introduction to *The Artful Universe* (1995), the realization that “we live in a Universe that is big and old, dark and cold” has done little to quell the desire to bring warmth to it. Rather, the very absence that Space represents seems to have provided an inexhaustible source of fuel to the human imagination (vii). In “The End of All Things,” Kant attests to the longevity of this notion, especially where he speaks to the appeal of the eternal abyss. Reflecting on the way in which the subject responds to such encounters by seeking comfort in speculation, Kant claims famously that “the imagination works harder in darkness than it does in bright light” (195). Just as “darkness,” both literal and figurative, provides the opportunity for Page’s imagination to work “harder,” astronomy gave her, however intermittently, ideas to structure this work around. These findings reflect the breadth of her reading and intellect and should be understood as a sign of her ability to bring together, seamlessly in places, quite different, if not entirely conflicting forms of knowledge, all of which have a role to play in creating the capacious vision of the universe Page fosters through her work.

In their brief discussion of artful astronomy, Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie call attention to a 1988 study by Michael Lynch and Samuel Edgerton, “Aesthetics and Digital Image Processing: Representational Craft in Contemporary Astronomy,” which examines the role that “craft” plays in the development of astronomical images and how such aesthetic decisions abet public outreach (184). While these studies describe artful astronomy as the incorporation of artistic practices into scientific discourse, I use the phrase here to describe a mirror process, one through which curious parties such as Page borrow from astronomy in order to articulate their own

concerns, in part, through the images, metaphors, and ideas that circulate in the wake of new astronomical findings. Not unlike the scientists that Lynch and Edgerton describe in their study, who play down the role that art plays in their process, Page is equally ambivalent about the ways in which scientific discovery figures in her work; she chooses instead to emphasize art as an essential epistemological practise, the authority of which resides in its potential to channel beauty towards memorable and meaningful ends. Before considering instances of artful astronomy at length, Page's investment in beauty and her conceptualization of it require some attention in their own right.

In "Falling in Love with Poetry," Page uses the forum of the personal essay to convey her enthusiasm for the possibility that beauty could be used as tool for environmental advocacy. "Does beauty have a use?" she asks towards the end of the essay, and, if so, is it "a reminder of something we once knew, with poetry [serving as] one of its vehicles?" (31). Page's questions, in part, grow out her reading of Kathleen Raine's *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967), a collection of essays that upholds a Keatsian view of the relationship between beauty and the poetic imagination. At the time of the essay's composition, at least, Page considered Raine's work "remarkable" (31). Decidedly antimodern in her leanings, Raine conceives of beauty as facilitating a reconnection with the natural world that has been all but lost as a result of successive stages of industrialization. The artist, according to the British poet, has a key role to play in this return; "a work of the imagination [serves as] a magic glass," Raine asserts, "in which we may discover that nature to which actuality is barely an approximation" (160). Beauty exists, in other words, in an immaterial and transcendental state; the role of the

writer, correspondingly, is to help society recover its “soul” by putting the imagination to use in the pursuit of what George Russell has called “the politics of eternity” (157). Not surprisingly, Raine considers social realism as part of the “pseudo-arts” that are “too human,” their fidelity to things as they are betraying a higher calling to envision instead their potential as shades of Platonic idealism. While her outspoken environmentalism places Page at odds with some of Raine’s retreatism, “The Use of the Beautiful” may have resonated with her for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its attention to the practicalities of celebrating beauty, paradoxically enough, in its most transcendental forms. As a result, an appreciation of Raine’s outlook helps explain the seemingly contradictory vision of Page’s environmental poetry, where her praise of the immaterial appears alongside her celebrations of material reality.

Furthermore, as Diana Relke has pointed out, “we need to suspend our binary habits of thought if we are to grasp what is meant by complementarity” in Page’s poetry (16). Doing so enables us to appreciate those fluid relationships Page sees as existing between time and space, and those that may yet exist between present and possible realities (16, 17). Making use of Jessica Benjamin’s concept of “the intersubjective mode of spatial representation,” Relke calls attention to the interplay of senses in poems such as “Landscape of Love” and “Personal Landscape,” which amount to a “relaxing, opening out onto nature,” their embrace of the land’s “green upspringing” serving as proof that Page maintains a tangible connection to the natural world that she captures in her writing (15, 25). If beauty is a “magic glass” that helps envision nature’s return, Page’s attention to it is not a sign of the Earth’s neglect, but rather a reflection of the desire to put beauty

to good use by benefiting from its lasting appeal. To focus on the beautiful, for Page, is to raise nature's profile while promoting a broader reality in an effort to remind human societies of their place within an environment whose ecological cycles transcend the western world's post-industrial conceptualizations of time.

This vision of transcendental beauty with earthly applications needs to be considered in relation to Page's investment in the divine. Fully appreciating the various eastern and western religious philosophies that informed Page's writing has, however, proven to be a difficult task. As W.J. Keith has pointed out, her readers are still waiting for a full account of the extent to which Sufism has (or has not) shaped her poetry, a study that will require, one supposes, not only an expert knowledge of the mystical tradition of Islam and its popular manifestations in Western culture,⁵ but also considerable knowledge of Page's work. In the interim, it is nevertheless possible to

⁵ In an interview with John Orange that took place in the summer of 1984, Page acknowledged that her understanding of Sufism was largely the product of having read Idries Shah's *The Sufis* (1964) (75). Shah's work, which included twenty-two books on Sufism alone, was instrumental in introducing the mystical dimensions of Islam – or at least his interpretations of them – to a Western audience. It is worth noting as well that *The Sufis* does contain a number of references to the moon and the stars, many of which appear as either the precursor to a revelatory gesture, or as the defining imagery of an illustrative example that appears in an aphorism's wake. In one parable, Nasrudin, a playful character who frequently appears in Sufi writings, declares that "[t]he moon is more useful than the sun" (77). When someone asks why, he replies: "Because at night we need the light more" (77). Shah recounts this story to illustrate his idea that "mystical experience and enlightenment cannot come through a rearrangement of familiar ideas, but through a recognition of the limitations of ordinary thinking" (77). In another story, one mystic points to the sky and declares that "[t]here is only one truth, which covers us all" (90). While hardly unique to Sufism, the depiction of the sky as a site of "truth," as a place of meditation, revelation, and extraordinary thinking is nevertheless one component of the mystical tradition that Shah outlines and that Page appears to have contemplated at length.

recognize how such ideas may already be compatible, if not synonymous, with aspects of her poetry that are already apparent. “With the maturation of Page's writing,” as Vivian Vavassis has noted, “elemental ideas [present in her early work] blossom with images inspired by Sufism and other eastern philosophies but, ultimately, they express the higher level of consciousness that has always been central to her poetics: the carrefour where the personal self, its universal and divine archetypes, the human plane, and the greater universe meet” (130). It is possible, then, to understand Page’s Sufism as consistent with the broader trend in her writing towards spiritual, ecological, and artistic convergence. The night sky itself is one such “higher level,” a “carrefour” from which she was able to articulate a vision of the universe, appropriately enough, through the taxonomies of sight and perception.⁶

In her efforts to come to terms with the meaning of these celestial visions, Cynthia Messenger has remarked that Page’s poetry and visual art “reflect the modernist

⁶ It is worth keeping in mind, too, that while some of her readers may be eager to pin down her relationship with Sufism, Page seems to have little interest in resolving such matters. In the documentary *Still Waters* (1990), for example, she describes a spiritual awakening of sorts, one through which she became “interested in something beyond.” “I had some kind of a feeling for something immaterial,” she states, “more a feeling than a concept.” Page expresses quite earnestly here that the terms of her faith are couched in vagaries and ambiguities that she herself cannot resolve, which, in fact, may also be the source of their appeal. Such speculation aside, scholars seeking out additional context for her spirituality will hopefully continue to value the obvious, which is that Page’s vibrancy, personality, and even spirituality was readily accessible to those in her presence. “I felt,” Andre Alexis recalls in his memoir, *Beauty and Sadness* (2010), “meeting P.K. Page, the cost and value of a life spent allowing the world to come through oneself in language and images. I could feel the nobility of her surrender to the process, and it renewed my own commitment to what is, in the end, a spiritual exercise” (179). Even as new insights into her faith emerge, such pragmatic appreciations of the “spiritual exercise” at the centre of Page’s life will hopefully not lose their place.

belief that through art humankind can transcend the quotidian realm and imagine a Utopian fourth dimension” (80). Messenger’s study tentatively concludes that her preoccupation with the immensity of Space “probably grows out of Surrealism” (87). This emphasis on other dimensions shares common ground with those studies that position Page in relation to her interest in Sufism, mysticism, and the transcendental possibilities that the night sky seems so often to invite. In such reckonings, the night sky serves as this rich, symbolic space in which Page, the poet-visionary, is free to imagine realms – be they spiritual, aesthetic, or some varied combination of the two – that the material world otherwise denies. While these sound approaches certainly enrich our understanding of a poet who undoubtedly invited such interpretations on more than one occasion, what does get lost in the process is the reality of the night sky itself. As A. J. M. Smith⁷ was quick to point out in his appraisal of her work, Page’s “gardens may be imaginary, but more than the toads in them are real” (17).⁸ Taking precedence, then, from other studies that have interpreted her work semi-autobiographically, and prompted by concerns over the degradation of nocturnal environments, this chapter examines a selection of Page’s writing in order to consider the role of the astronomical in her work

⁷ Smith was himself a literary stargazer. His brief poem, “The Taste of Space,” which Page included in *To Say the Least*, delights in synesthesia: “McLuhan put his telescope to his ear; / What a lovely smell, he said, we have here” (1, 2).

⁸ Smith, of course, alludes here to Marianne Moore’s famous prescription for poetry: “when dragged into prominence by half poets, the / result is not poetry, / nor till the poets among us can be / ‘literalists of / the imagination’ – above / insolence and triviality and can present / for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’, shall / we have / it” (“Poetry” 27-35).

and to determine the nature of her contribution to the dark-sky movement.

Rods and Cones: Community, Perception, and Sight

“As a child,” P.K. Page writes in *Alphabetical* (1998), “I was wakened / taken from my tent / to look at the velvet / vastness of the night” (1-4). Like many accounts of the night sky that precede it, this brief recollection not only chronicles the stars, but also those relationships that unfold beneath them. “I had never seen my parents’ eyes / so glistening,” Page continues, “such wonder on their faces / like the look of love / they gave me in the mornings” (5-9). The “vastness of the night” is recalled through the channels of memory, this time to make the differences between parent and child seem relatively insignificant, the “velvet” night initiating both a rite-of-passage and an enchanted return. Significant, too, are the child’s bare feet, since they underscore the unexpected nature of the encounter while emphasizing the direct connection that she experiences with the land, a connection that is mirrored in the intimacy that she shares both with her parents and the canopy of night. The final line, “Eternity rushed past,” makes explicit an idea that the poem develops from the outset – specifically, that instances of nocturnal community seem to possess a temporality all their own,⁹ the

⁹ In “Unless the Eye Catch Fire,” for example, Page tries to articulate not only the way in which intense sensory experiences seem to soften the otherwise mechanical passage of time, but also the way in which such perceptions inevitably arch inwards, their internalization a process through which observations of the material world give way to reflections on their place in the “spaces” within. The protagonist experiences one such moment where she describes how “the lawn, the bushes, and the trees” cease to be “*there*,” having relocated themselves “[r]ight in the centre of [her] being” (188). Significantly, this inability to

enchantment of the stars softening the fixity of time and strengthening the bonds between those who collectively bear witness to their wonder (13).

By re-imagining such moments in her writing, Page is participating in a literary tradition that understands a relationship to exist between nocturnal community and memory, so that her lyrical recollection becomes an expression of faith in literature's capacity to order emotion in ways that are memorable and lasting. Moreover, the intergenerational tableau that Page presents in *Alphabetical* is the necessary counterpoint to the image of a woman reading outside at midnight, the surrounding light pollution suppressing her body's melatonin production as the overhead glare illuminates the page.

distinguish between “*There*” and “*here*” is short-lived, a characteristic that once again brings temporality to the fore. “As suddenly as the world had altered,” Page writes, “it returned to normal. I looked at my watch. A ridiculous mechanical habit. As I had no idea when the experience began it was impossible to know how long it had lasted. What had seemed eternity couldn't have been more than a minute or so. My coffee was still steaming in its mug” (188). This passage describes the narrator's self-conscious re-entry into chronological time and the subsequent disorientation her “return to normal” causes. The garden outside is “not as it had always been,” but rather it seems diminished somehow, appearing at “a far greater loss of dimension” (188). Page's use of the pathetic fallacy here indirectly characterizes her protagonist as having suffered “a grievous loss,” the absent “bright spectrum” lingering in memory and making the world seem dim in comparison. In this passage, one of two binaries that prove central to the meaning of the story comes into view. On the one hand, the protagonist's moment of heightened awareness play outs in its own temporal-spatial zone of meaning, one in which she experiences a different relationship with time and matter than would seem otherwise possible. The ambiguous display of ephemeral lights, at the same time, transforms and unites its witnesses in a shared, yet still somehow singular state of transcendence. “We are one with the starry heavens,” the narrator concludes, “and our bodies are stars” (207). Referring to the multitude of colours before her, the narrator describes them as “[w]hole galaxies [. . .] blazing and glowing,” the splendor of which provides “no time [. . .] to wonder, intellectualize” (187).

Given that light pollution has so gradually become an altogether accepted dimension of daily life, Page's descriptions of an unpolluted Prairie night sky are as likely to entice as they are to strain the imaginations of most readers, many of whom have never experienced such views.

Alphabetical is just one of a number texts in which Page reflects on the possible meanings of the night sky in relation to broader issues. "Rods and cones," she writes in the second volume of her Mexican journal, "I can see 'god' if I look with the rods. It's a night seeing," she adds. "Seeing in the dark involves the rods – a kind of indirect sight. If I look directly I can see nothing" (38).¹⁰ In this description of firsthand observation, seeing "god" is synonymous with averted vision, a technique that astronomers have long used to tease out details in deep sky objects. For Page, the anatomy of the eye also provides the opportunity to create two distinct categories of perception: those direct observations that make use of the eye's cones – that is, those photoreceptors that provide the bulk of sensory information to the brain – and those sidelong glances that employ its rods, which are sensitive to faint light (Kalat 156). Not surprisingly, Page favours "indirect sight," since this form of vision accommodates all that is lost when looking "directly" (38). The implications of this preference are clear: to observe with "the rods" is to look at things differently, and, as a result, to be willing to allow hidden possibilities to emerge. This willingness may also be the product of a sense of dissatisfaction with the

¹⁰ This quotation from Page's Mexican journal appears with the permission of Page's literary executor, Zailig Pollock. My thanks to Margaret Steffler, who reviewed these journals for references to the night sky on my behalf.

purely rationalist mindset, which seeks to counter its banality with other ways of being and knowing. There is, as well, a corresponding sense in Page's writing that emotion is the essential supplement to empiricism, the capacity to feel – and to articulate feeling – that enables the poet to catch a glimpse of the world not just as it is, but also as it could be. By locating such potential in the dark, Page also dramatizes the night as a zone of mystical contemplation, where looking “directly” accomplishes much less than the sidelong gaze, and where perception eventually gives way to more imaginative ways of seeing.¹¹

This technique of generating a sense of community, drama, and excitement by alluding to a celestial event is very much present in Page's novella, *The Sun and the Moon* (1944), which she published pseudonymously. “The world throbbed to the excitement of a lunar eclipse,” the narrator states at the outset of the story. “Astronomers and their bastard brothers, the astrologers, worked busily charting the heavens, linked at this moment by mutual concern for the moon” (1). With these opening lines, Page not only establishes a compelling backdrop for her tale, but also dramatizes a particularly

¹¹ A similar pattern unfolds in “Dark Kingdom,” where Page remarks that “blacknesses abound,” which leaves her in a state of not knowing “in or out” (13, 14). She then responds to these conditions by personifying the interplay of light and dark and by taking it as her guide: “O Shadow, take my hand” (15). This plea to the personified darkness echoes, most immediately, St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* (1578-79), a poem in which the soul faces the darkness of despair so as to emerge purified in a state of union with God. The decision to emphasize the “Shadow” may also mark the influence of Sufism on her writing. According to Islamic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, the thirteenth-century mystic Ibn Arabi understood shadows as the ongoing result of the way in which the radiant light of the Absolute inevitably dissolves into terrestrial obscurity. In Izutsu's interpretation of Arabi's cosmology, each shadow serves as a reminder of how this world remains separate and distinguishable from the higher realm of divine perfection (89-96).

telling form of conflict between two distinct groups that are nevertheless connected by “mutual” absorption and shared “concern” (1). Page’s decision to situate this tension between astronomers and astrologers at the beginning of the novella is significant. Not only is she acknowledging the way in which their common objects of study bind these two very different kinds of stargazers, but she is also establishing a tension that she wishes to address between the rational mindset and those less tangible ways of knowing, which include the imaginative, the emotive, and the intuitive.

The Sun and the Moon

The Sun and Moon has thus far been accurately read as a romance that is, at its core, an allegory for the role of the modern female artist.¹² Kristen, an eccentric child whose own parents feel at odds with her nature, matures into a young woman who nevertheless retains the distinctive qualities of her youth. Using the myth of the eclipse baby as a shortcut to characterization, Page creates a protagonist who is, quite literally, moony: having been born during a lunar eclipse, Kristen comes to embody the celestial body’s traits. “She’s so pale,” her mother observes early on in the novel, during a family visit to the beach. “Course I’m pale,” Kristen replies, having returned from her place on a

¹² See Sandra Djwa’s reading of the novella in *Wider Boundaries of the Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women’s Poetry* (2009), an interpretation that Djwa revisits in *Journey With No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page* (2012). Michele Rackham-Hall’s “P.K. Page’s ‘*The Sun and the Moon* and the Conflict of Modernist Aesthetics,” a paper delivered in 2012 at ACCUTE, similarly combines aesthetic and biographical concerns to argue that “the narrative stages a gendered conflict of modernist aesthetics that the poet struggled with and addressed in her poetry of that period” (Rackham-Hall 1).

stoney ledge above the sea. ““I was a rock”” (6). The symbolism at work here is clear. Positioned above the high tide, Kristen is herself a small white moon tugging at the shoreline below. Her paleness, coupled with her status as a “rock,” anticipates the role that she will eventually play in relation to her lover Carl, a male artist who becomes the sun to her moon.

“The male and the female figures of this novel are associated with the sun and the moon respectively,” Sandra Djwa observes in her assessment of *The Sun and Moon*, “but the novel is also exploring prevailing stereotypes about the social roles of men and women in relation to perception and art” (88). Worth noting here as well is the extent to which early twentieth-century visual artists portrayed night as a decidedly female presence.¹³ Yet, what Page presents is a female character who is self-reflexive in that role and well-aware of the various ways in which she is perceived. Djwa calls attention to a particular passage that defines Kristen as a character who is simultaneously comforted by the stability of these roles and yet incapable of seeing beyond them. Describing the depiction of a boy in one of Carl’s paintings, she reveals the terms of their relationship and foreshadows its eventual failure. “He looked strong and virile and masculine against

¹³ Appearing on the cover of the 27 October 1910 issue of *Life Magazine*, Sewell Collins’s *A New Constellation*, for example, imagines the night as a woman whose ethereal form blends like the stars into the darkness of space. The contrast between her ghostly figure and the visibility of her face seems to emphasize her simultaneously attractive yet unattainable nature. Strongly influenced by Charles Dana Gibson’s iconic conceptualization of the American woman at the turn of the century, this conflation of woman and night charts a constellation of desire that defines both as spectral figments of the male imagination to be conjured and claimed as signs of sexual and intellectual virility. Page’s characterization of Kristen as a celestial figure is consistent with these longstanding associations between women and the night, and, more specifically, with the alignment of women and the moon.

the pale femininity of her bedroom,” Kristen states.

Here we have it, she said to herself, the sun and the moon together, and she looked from the painting and felt secure. Carl will predominate, she thought, as he does here; but as she thought the apple-green curtain billowed out with a sudden gust of wind, billowed out and over the picture and left the room untouched, free of Carl. (82)

As Djwa notes, “Page is clearly intrigued by the modernist debate about the nature of the creative consciousness [. . .] and its relation to gender” (88). The very conventionality of the sun and the moon as signifiers¹⁴ of male and female identity provides only a fleeting sense of comfort that is easily “eclipsed” by Kristen’s powers of perception. She is ever-attuned to elemental forces such as the wind, and she retains the potential to absorb and to transform the people and things that surround her. The realization that these powers actually threaten to subsume Carl becomes the source of internal conflict that is ultimately externalized in the novel’s climatic scene, where Kristen, possessed with the power to metamorphosize, turns herself into a tree¹⁵ in order to withstand the wind’s

¹⁴ See Joelle Rollo-Koster’s discussion of the perceived power of the moon during the Early Middle Ages, during which time the celestial body was not only associated with lunacy, but also construed as a female presence that possessed the power to heal. “Diana,” Rollo-Koster observes, “goddess of the moon, maiden of the night, one who effected cures beyond the purview of the church, herself demonized, became a metaphor of female magic and ritualized power” (27).

¹⁵ Kristen’s metamorphosis may well owe a debt to Greek mythology, where Daphne escapes Apollo’s unwanted advances by pleading with Peneus, the river god, to change her form; he complies by turning her into a tree. Unlike Daphne, of course, Kristen possesses the power to change on her own.

furor (Djwa 87).

Djwa interprets this climatic scene that unfolds on the eve of Kristen's wedding as both consistent with the conventions of the time and as an expression of strength and agency. That Kristen should sacrifice herself so that her lover could succeed as an artist, Djwa argues, does not completely overshadow this resonant metaphor of "woman-as tree," which should be read as "strong and self-assured" since Page, unlike her protagonist, did choose the life of the artist (67). This biographical reading should also be extended to a brief, but telling passage that appears just before the climatic scene. "Mathematicians know nothing, nothing at all," Page writes. "There is another field, a field beyond the realms of accepted mathematics where allowances are made for figures and they can and do add up quite differently. One and one equal two is a truth no longer – it is an instance only" (119). The desire for "another field," one where logic cedes ground to the contingencies that inevitably result from the complexities of human relationships, should be read in relation to Page's various engagements with the findings of science, wherein empirical observations require an affective element in order to ring true.

This desire to see logic supplemented by other ways of knowing also speaks to the metaphor of eclipsed and eclipsing bodies that governs the relationships in the novel. It is significant, after all, that when Carl and Kristen drive to a nearby park to witness a widely predicted eclipse of the moon,¹⁶ the presence of clouds is not a source of

¹⁶ Unlike intense meteor showers, whose rarity invites readers to consider whether a particular author happened to witness them, eclipses occur on a fairly regular basis, and, therefore, make such autobiographical overtures seem entirely speculative. For the record,

consternation for Kristen. In this scene, Page articulates through the voice of her protagonist an appreciation for the place of feeling in the world as an epistemology that runs counter to disappointment and doubt:

Clouds had rolled up out of the west and covered the sky. “Damn,” [Carl] said, “we shan’t see that eclipsed moon after all.” He expected her to be disappointed.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said, ‘It doesn’t matter a bit. It is there just the same, the feeling’s there.’

“Could you tell by the feel?”

“Of course,” she said. “I was born during an eclipse.” (57)

Kristen’s relationship with a recurring celestial event is a key component of her identity, one that has developed over the course of her life to supply her with another way of knowing the world and a corresponding sense of self-assurance. Even if the moon is absent, which is to say doubly-occulted in this scene by the sun and the clouds, Kristen has so completely internalized its presence that she does not need to observe it visually in

however, Page could have observed any one of the four eclipses that occurred while she was writing *The Sun and the Moon*. Two lunar eclipses were visible from Canada between 1939 and 1940, but neither garnered much public attention. It was instead the annular solar eclipses that took place on 19 April 1939 and 7 April 1940 that proved noteworthy. “While a partial eclipse provides nothing of the spectacular,” the Canadian astronomer R. M. Motherwell noted in 1930, “an annular eclipse is a striking phenomenon” (56). Whether or not one of these inspired Page is impossible to know, but these events did captivate Canadian astronomers and even casual stargazers at the time.

order to benefit from its company. Page's protagonist, in other words, possesses a strong connection to "another field" that is only made accessible to her through the bonds of feeling and faith. Given that this particular exchange between the young lovers anticipates Kristen's eventual awareness that she has the power to eclipse Carl, the absence of the eclipse serves as a fitting metaphor for Kristen's not-yet conscious awareness of her potential. By extension, the clouds that Page places over them relay the shrouded fate of the female artist who must imagine a path that is otherwise not readily visible. The role of the night sky in both of these processes is to serve as the site of unlimited imaginative potential in which conventionality can be renegotiated or rejected outright so that more meaningful forms of selfhood and community are realized. While perhaps tentatively staged here, this vision would eventually mature into one of cosmological, ecological, and divine awareness that was directly attuned to its time.

Unless the Eye Catch Fire

Not unlike Kristen's faith in the unseen, Page's protagonist in "Unless the Eye Catch Fire" possesses a sense of the divine that doubles as an intuitive, if elusive, form of holistic knowledge. Whereas the rituals of romance and self-realization that play out in *The Sun and the Moon* do so on a relatively small scale, the visionary purpose of "Unless the Eye Catch Fire" is far more ambitious, insofar as it seeks to make plain the precarious place of the planet and its peoples within the broader universe.¹⁷ That such knowledge

¹⁷ Obviously, "Unless the Eye Catch Fire" is not an example of life-writing – that is, unless

should make itself known through backyard “galaxies” and “starry heavens [. . .] translated into densities of black” is telling, since these descriptions seem to establish the celestial sphere (accurately or not) as a definitively non-human zone that remains free of technological intervention (188). It remains free, as well, of the chronological units of time that govern the division of labour and that make possible ecological catastrophe and the commodification of human life. To let the eye catch fire¹⁸ is to glimpse a greater truth, one that undermines the false terms or the “mechanical habit[s]” of existence and that exposes the smallness of humanity and the fragility of the Earth itself.

Page’s treatment of these ideas may owe a debt to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest, paleontologist, and French philosopher whose writings position faith and science as compatible enterprises, and whose emphasis on the necessity of seeing is remarkably consistent with Page’s own investment in the mystical and ecological principles of sight and vision. Her painting, “to be lost finally in the incandescence of a personal universe,” takes its title from the first chapter of Teilhard de Chardin’s *The*

the category expands to include works of fiction that represent the expression of personal desires and fears, at which point it may lose much of its original meaning and become considerably less helpful in the organization of works. Rather than press against these boundaries, I consider the short story here instead as a helpful fiction, one that serves as a gateway to a number of other texts that do read biographically.

¹⁸ Even though the phrase “Unless the Eye Catch Fire” originates with Blake, Page’s epigraph acknowledges Theodore Roszak’s use of the phrase in *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (1972). In so doing, it is possible that Page evokes, at once, the ideas present in Blake’s poem “Pentecost” and the political meaning that Roszak finds in them.

Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life (1957), an autobiographical work informed by the desire to articulate a faith that was, for him, compatible with scientific discovery. “All around us,” he observes, “the physical sciences are endlessly extending the abyss of time and space, and ceaselessly discerning new relationships between the elements of the universe” (13). The efforts of scientists, he adds, should not register as antagonistic to the faithful, but rather as “aspirations towards a vaster and more organic One” (13). This theological understanding of cosmology sees the ever-expanding universe as a sign of the totality of Christ, wherein all light and matter, however distant, still constitutes the one body of God.

Having embraced this outlook, *The Divine Milieu* suggests, you “shall be astonished at the extent and the intimacy of [your] relationship with the universe,” and “you will see how easily the two stars [‘pagan beauty’ and science], whose divergent attractions were disorganising your faith, are brought into conjunction” (27, 15). Teilhard de Chardin’s choice of an astronomical metaphor characterizes the night sky as a harmonious visual tapestry whose “conjunction[s]” have the power to reconcile internal tensions and to reveal divine truths.¹⁹ While it is difficult to say whether this particular

¹⁹ Such moments of celestial revelation are central to Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of the universe and the role of faith in it. “Throughout my whole life,” he writes in *The Divine Milieu*,

during every moment I have lived, the world has gradually been taking on light and fire for me, until it has come to envelop me in one mass of luminosity, glowing from within [. . .]. The purple flush of matter fading imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, to be lost finally in the incandescence of a personal universe. (14)

metaphor would have resonated with Page, it is nevertheless clear that “a personal universe,” perhaps even a plurality of personal universes, held some appeal, as did the idea that instances of communion are preceded by a period of preparation.

If Page creates these binaries to define ideal forms of communities made possible through ecological and cosmological awareness, she eventually collapses them with the same end in mind. At the end of the story, these divisions actually disappear in a dramatic fusion of epistemologies, temporalities, and spatial categories that otherwise differentiate exterior and interior worlds. “The colours are almost constant now,” the narrator conveys. “There are times when, light-headed, I dance a dizzying dance, feel part of that whirling incandescent matter” (207). With the colours in constant view, the very subjectivity of the narrator seems to dissipate into the shining “dead world” that she observes (207). Switching to the plural of the first-person, the narrator begins to testify on behalf of the singular community that remains, an entity that may well recall the end stage of Jungian individuation, where the one and the many merge in a final act of spiritual communion. “We are together now,” she states, “united, indissoluble. Bonded” (207). The oneness she describes here finds its counterpart in time’s seamless “continuum.” Whereas previously the narrative oscillated between moments of banality and heightened awareness, *kairos* has displaced *kronos* as the presiding temporal reality by the story’s end. Within this

Having described the long-anticipated moment of the spirit’s arrival, Teilhard de Chardin’s personal Pentecost fades into a desire for lasting transcendence.

transcendent state, the remaining “we” still suffers “cramps and weaknesses,” but “they are as if in another body” (207). The key phrase here, “as if,” maintains the sense of corporeal oneness while still managing to convey the sense that suffering now occurs at a distance. Their body is, in fact, as “inviolable” as it is “[i]nviolable” (207). “We share one heart,” the narrator states, an observation that locates integrity and inviolability as emanating from the symbolic centre of human emotion. Tellingly, having established the “heart” as the core of humanity, an image of the heavens follows:

We are one with the starry heavens and our bodies are stars.

Inner and outer are the same. A continuum. The water in the locks is level.

We move to a higher water. A high sea.

A ship could pass through. (207)

The figurative sea of the “starry heavens” seems to give way to its literal counterpart, although the ambiguity of the ending does leave room for an imaginative fusion of the two. What is certain is that Page balances her lofty, metaphysical conceit of celestial oneness with the concrete image of a waterway lock, a device that makes it possible for ships to travel from one level to the next.

The Overview Effect

Ultimately, “Unless the Eye Catch Fire” leaves its readers to consider the view that such suspended “ship[s]” provide and the sensibilities that they generate. Similarly, in “Address at Simon Fraser” (1991), Page asks her audience if they “remember how / celestial our planet looked from space / and how the astronauts who saw it small /

floating / above them like a ball / thrown to delight a child, returned to view / their world transformed” (90-97). The type of imagery that she evokes here comes under consideration in *The Overview Effect* (1987), the American journalist Frank White’s attempt to come to terms with the reports of those who have seen Earth from above and who have subsequently made an effort to articulate the experience. White argues that a specific kind of subjectivity emerges in each narrative, one imbued by a new-found care of the Earth and a borderless affinity for all those who reside there. “The Overview Effect,” he explains, “is the experience of seeing the Earth from a distance [. . .] and realizing the inherent unity and oneness of everything on the planet” (38). Insisting that “a shift in perception” is the overview effect’s defining feature, White calls attention to the transformative process through which “the viewer moves from identification with parts of the Earth to identification with the whole system” (38). Such accounts are also further proof that vast distances, while perhaps an inevitability of the world below, can nevertheless be overcome with sufficient perspective: the supposed autonomy of communities dissipates in the eyes of the poet-traveller who, for a brief time, is at liberty to recognize the connections that exist among them.²⁰ Such statements of unity are

²⁰ The American poet Ted Kooser captures one such moment memorably in his brief poem, “Flying at Night” (1985). Gazing out the window of an aircraft, Kooser’s speaker reminds readers that the view may include not only “constellations” of cities and towns, but also those territories of darkness that engulf still fainter signs of settlement (1). Having been granted temporary stay in that relatively calm layer of air located above the troposphere, such passengers are uniquely positioned to observe the illuminated expansiveness of human communities. Such beacons, witnessed at night from a dimly-lit aircraft, have the potential to foster a mood that blends solitary reflection with a latent desire to see things differently, a visionary disposition that is made possible by the passenger’s affinity for both darkness and

contradictory in a sense, since solitary seekers must first remove themselves from their respective communities so as to evoke them. Yet, as a result of their travels, these narratives provide broader frames of reference in which to understand – and to renew – the place of origin along the way. Both meanings of the verb “to oversee” also register in such statements of guardianship, for the act of looking down from above lends itself not only to those forms of contemplation made possible by perspective, but also to a sense of meditative stewardship that results from bearing witness to the whole.²¹

illumination alike. Just as pilots navigate their planes to avoid the turbulence of shifting weather patterns, Kooser guides his reader back to the comforting image of a farmer who “snaps on his yard light, drawing his sheds and barn/ back into the little system of his care” (5, 6). It is the perceived smallness of such systems and the idea that they merit such “care” that makes these views worth witnessing.

²¹ The Canadian poet, playwright, and novelist Earle Birney also wrote from similar vantage points, his lifelong affinity for mountains figuring centrally in such major poems as “David,” (1941) “Bushed,” (1952) and “Vancouver Lights” (1941). The influence of such elevated landscapes on his writing has, for years now, provided readers with sure footing with which to begin their consideration of his poetry. Of lesser note is Birney’s interest in aviation and the way in which images of flight and travel permeate his work. In “North Star West,” for example, the speaker proclaims that he and his fellow passengers have “ridden the wings of our people’s cunning / and lived in a star at peace among stars” (122-3). These fanciful journeys enable them, by poem’s end, to “return to [their] ferment of earth with a memory of sky” (124). Rising to see, and then returning to remember, Birney’s passengers are a part of a narrative pattern that uses geographical elevation as a position from which to consider the possible fates of humanity. Just as the journeys of mind follow those of the body, imaginative and geographical heights give way to each other, the result of which is a peaceful, if utopian vision of a people “among stars,” where, presumably, the advancements that have made such journeys possible have coincided with progress in social unity. This affinity for flight, while risking technological determinism, actually places its faith squarely in poetry’s capacity to herald this society into existence. Birney lyrically conceives of the sky as a zone of possibility, one that plays host to a temporary community held aloft by its shared “cunning” and that carries with it “a memory” of its existence even after it returns to the “ferment of earth.” His vision, while optimistic, is not a naïve one. As such poems as “Vancouver Lights”

Distantly recalling the “elevated thoughts” of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” such narratives seem to renew themselves with each successive generation as writers seek them out in order to comprehend what otherwise seems elusive.²² In Canada, perhaps the most compelling literary precedent for Page’s use of the overview effect is Gabrielle Roy’s essay “A Telling Theme,” which first appeared as the introduction to *Terre des hommes / Man and His World* (1967), an album of photographs celebrating Expo 67. The essay would later appear in *The Fragile Lights of the Earth* (1978), Roy’s contemplation of humanity’s relationship with the planet supplying both the title for the collection and its resonant conclusion. Her account also provides a useful entry point into such poems as “Address at Simon Fraser” and “Planet Earth,” where Page negotiates, in slightly different ways, both existential and ecological crisis. “Earth,” Roy writes in the conclusion to her essay,

our planet wandering in immeasurable space, insignificant sphere on the frontiers

attest, Birney actually embraces such departures and returns with the mature knowledge that the very same “wings” could deliver humanity to its violent end.

²² Prominent examples from North American nature writing include John Muir’s *The Mountains of California* (1894), especially the concluding paragraph of his opening chapter on the Sierra Nevada; and, more recently, a poem from Gary Snyder’s *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (1993) entitled “At Tower Peak:”

It’s just one world, this spine of rock and streams
 And snow, and the wash of gravels, silts
 Sands, bunchgrasses, saltbrush, bee-fields,
 Twenty million human people, downstream, here below. (35-38)

of infinity, possibly unique because of its cargo of suffering and aspirations, perhaps the sole point in the universe conscious of its destiny and therefore tragic in its essence, what is to become of you? What is to become of us?

Are we to disappear together one night in a fleeting flash like those falling stars of our childhood August nights, too rapid for us even to hook a wish upon them?

Are all our dreams, our projects without end, our births and deaths, our wars and precautions against wars, are all these things to disappear one day, leaving no more trace than other worlds that may have disappeared already? (222)

Roy's vision of humanity takes shape around the threat of destruction, her questions about the fate of the planet and its inhabitants permeated by an angst that is as lyrical as it is elegiac. The Earth itself wanders in "immeasurable space," seemingly in the absence of cosmological order or divine intervention; its only company are those planets that may have distantly preceded it. The projection Roy performs here is deliberate and meaningful, a transference of the modern condition onto the planet that enables the Earth to stand, paradoxically, as a potentially tragic symbol of isolation that nevertheless unifies its population. By supplementing Antoine Saint Exupéry's depiction of the desert at night with a vision of the Earth as a whole, Roy's perspective not only bridges these two eras of flight, but also recruits the culture of courage, uncertainty, and sacrifice synonymous with Exupéry's era into her description of a precarious new moment in history. She responds to the prospect of global crisis with the consolation of a shared

global fate, one that retains the potential to elude tragedy provided its members come to terms with the fragility of their planetary home.

In “Address at Simon Fraser,” a poem that asks its readers how best to “account for planetary warming,” Page also evokes the cosmological perspective so as to establish both the scope of ecological problems and the nature of the response needed. In alluding to astronauts who have been “transformed” by their experiences in a public address, she weds, as Roy does, the personal to the public, a gesture whose success depends in large part on her audience’s familiarity with such accounts and the extent to which they, too, understand themselves as having been transformed by them. This idea – namely, that images of the Earth have the potential to generate a shift in public attitudes that lead to conservation and environmental action – has its own rich history. In 1966, the artist and environmentalist Stewart Brand began the Whole Earth movement in San Francisco, a grassroots campaign that lobbied NASA to make public the first images of Earth from space; his efforts corresponded with the publication of *Earth Photographs from Gemini III, IV, V* (1967), a collection of images taken by three satellites that orbited the planet in 1965. The release of the now famous “Earthrise” image would follow, a colour photograph of the Earth taken on 24 December 1968 by the crew of Apollo 8.²³ As testimony not only to its lasting appeal, but also to its relevance to Page’s poetry, a similar photograph captured by Apollo 11 would eventually appear on the cover of

²³ The U.S. Lunar Orbiter had actually captured a black-and-white photograph of the Earth rising over the moon on 23 August, 1966, but the image was only made public after it had been restored in 2008 (Pringle 1322).

Page's *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New* (2002). NASA now credits the first of these full-colour "Earthrise" images as having helped initiate the inaugural Earth Day Celebration in 1970.²⁴ Insofar as this public event continues to galvanize the environmental movement, the appearance of these and subsequent NASA images in the Whole Earth Catalog stands, in retrospect, as a rare instance in which counterculture values could, in some small way, pacify Cold War technologies and dramatically change their meaning within the public sphere.

By asking her audience to "remember" stories of returning astronauts, Page recruits this history into her poem, and, in the process, invites them to participate in what she hopes is a resonant cultural memory. Her decision to do so was part of a self-conscious effort to respond to those public voices who insist that global warming must first be "proven" before it can be taken seriously, which she likens to Nero's fiddling while the flames of Rome drew near. Having categorized their insistence on irrefutable

²⁴ The first Earth Day was actually held in San Francisco on 21 March 1970, roughly twenty months after Brand had started the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a publication dedicated to "understanding whole systems" and to providing readers with "access to tools" essential to global thinking (3). In keeping with these aims, the first issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, released in the Fall of 1968, featured on its cover a full colour photograph of the Earth that had been taken by an ATS satellite in November of 1967. The magazine offered 8 x 10 copies of the image for sale, along with a "16 mm 400-foot silent color print of the film" that included "several forms of the 24-hour cycle and close-up cropping of specific sectors as their weather develops through the day" (6). Just below this notice appeared a positive, if brief review of *Earth Photographs from Gemini III, IV, V*, NASA's 1967 publication that was made available not long after the Whole Earth campaign began. Given the time required to prepare such a text, it seems unlikely that Brand's lobbying led directly to its release, but rather that his efforts happened to coincide with a project that was already underway. Even so, Brand does deserve credit for calling attention to these images, for creating a forum in which they could circulate, and for promoting them as symbols of hope.

proof as a blithe form of denial, Page goes on to question the efficacy of “lobbying politicians” and “making speeches,” revealing a sense of ambivalence towards polemical writing that she nevertheless feels compelled to embrace (177, 84). “I was never good / at argument or logic,” she confesses, “never felt / the writer had a role beyond the role / of writing what he/she must write but if / the whole great beautiful caboodle hangs / in the balance [. . .] and, if our future here is unconfirmed, / and we are on probation, maybe I / must change my tune” (85-100). Page places her allusion to the astronauts in the middle of this statement, a parenthetical aside that appears just after the word “balance.” Even as a digression, its appearance nevertheless affects the way in which we read this carefully-qualified declaration of intent. What Page asks of her audience, after all, is that their world be “transformed” in much the same way that it was for the astronauts who saw Earth from Space. The efficacy of the poem, as a form of environmental action, that is, depends on its capacity to move its listeners, and their corresponding willingness to be moved in return.

The key phrase in this parenthetical aside, and perhaps even in the poem as a whole, is Page’s insistence that “beauty is in the eye” (95). While she stops short of repeating the truism in full, the implication is that the act of beholding reveals a kind of “beauty” that transforms its witness and that prompts public testimony, which, in turn, enables shifts in individual perspectives to affect broader communities. In this instance, environmental change depends on our ability to cease ineffectual approaches to such problems as global warming – especially those whose purely empirical nature slows the impetus to act – and to invest authority instead in those moments in which “beauty” and

“delight” appear to have the potential to re-define, if not re-set entirely humanity’s relationship with the planet. “Surely,” she goes on to argue, “our break with nature,” and, presumably, with “beauty” as well, “is the source / of all that’s out of kilter, out of sync” (115-16). Timothy Morton has categorized such assertions as unintentionally supporting the very dynamic they seek to correct, in so far as they imagine “nature” as elsewhere, both geographically and temporally, an elusive entity towards which nature writers and environmentalists may endlessly travel, each journey taken in hopes of healing the rift between humanity and the green places it left behind.²⁵ A more generous reading would

²⁵ According to Morton, the very idea of “nature” can, itself, be detrimental to the environmental cause, synonymous as it is with an amorphous, distant territory that denies the ubiquity of the ecosystems that sustain us. Morton makes an important point in *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), but he does so at the expense of the idea of nature itself, since his project discards the rich possibilities of both the word and the concept in favour of starting again. The question that remains is whether it is entirely necessary to do so, or whether “nature” can now encompass new forms of environmental knowing that embrace the organic materiality of the present while, at the same time, embodying a heritage of green thinking that contains within it a long history of its strengths and shortcomings. It is worth noting, too, that nature writers are not of one mind on this issue, nor is it even possible to say that each instance of the word “nature” can be read as having the same meaning. In *Vis a Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* (2001), McKay anticipates this criticism of nature writing when he argues that wilderness is, in fact, everywhere, insofar as it is “implicit in things we use everyday” (57). His use of the word “nature” contains within it not only the immediacy of the material “ecology” that Morton desires, but also a record of the way in which such desires have been articulated over time. Certainly, it is true that “nature,” for many, will continue to exist *out there*, but the assumption that contemporary writing is not self-reflexive enough to notice this and to discourage it, reveals the limits of Morton’s reading, not to mention the hazards of building an argument around the present-day use of “nature” largely in reference to the writing of the nineteenth century. A less acrimonious relationship with the term “nature” might spend less time trying to usurp its authority, and pay attention instead to the various ways its meanings have and have not evolved, or how such stalls and shifts have translated into literature and the language of

interpret Page's desire to locate "the source / of all that's out of kilter" as an attempt to define human populations not only as alienated from the very cycles that maintain them, but also on the verge of permanently losing their signs (116).

Tellingly, the process of reconnecting with these cycles is, for Page, contingent to a significant degree on the availability of the night sky, without which a shift towards greater ecological and cosmological awareness will not be possible. "How can a city dweller visualize / a world unpaved, unstreetlamped?" Page asks in the poem's ninth stanza,

or

imagine how the constellations shine
 as night ingathers earth and sets alight
 the topaz pole star pulsing in the north -
 front runner of vast galaxies that stretch
 clustered in patterns like huge honeycombs. (117-23)

In this passage, Page describes the way in which urban infrastructure reduces the lives of city dwellers by cutting them off from the sky above and the Earth below. Bracketed by pavement and street lamps, such individuals are unable to imagine "how the constellations shine," or to appreciate the immensity of a universe in which "vast galaxies

environmental discourse. The very same can be said of stories and poems about the night sky, where the desire to preserve and the need to project inevitably overlap.

[. . .] stretch / clustered in patterns like huge honeycombs” (122-23). Whereas, in the previous stanza, Page looks down at Earth from above to evoke an affinity for it, she now shifts perspective to imagine an “unstreetlamped” night through which the immensity of the universe may be realized (118). The two positions complement each other well, insofar as the first evokes humanity’s capacity to take in the planet as a whole, while the second describes the way in which “night ingathers earth,” both of which are figurative forms of embrace that envelop the planet in care. Correspondingly, the city dweller’s inability to “imagine how the constellations shine” prevents him or her from participating in the enchanted sense of order that would otherwise be visible from the planet.

An earlier poem, “Adolescence” (1945), anticipates this vision. As street lamps sing “like sopranos,” two young lovers stroll through the city night, artificial lights overhead shining with “a violence they never understood” (12-14). Even as Page uses personification and synesthesia in tandem to convey the position and the impression the street lamps make, her playful gesture is quickly undercut by the suggestion of their threatening natures. The meaning of street lamps, in this instance, at least, is contingent on the meaning of the adolescent lovers, whom Page identifies in the first line of the poem as held together in “a green embrace” (1). Not surprisingly, their love is intricately connected to the natural world, where a “silken rain” and “flowering trees” take turns approving of their courtship (2-6). It follows, then, that they should find the “violence” of the street lamps incomprehensible, since their love is “unpaved” and “unstreetlamped,” even if the city streets they walk are not. At risk, it seems, are the very cycles and ceremonies through which love is realized – bonds that are dependent on not

only the predictable shift from one season to the next, but also the more frequent changeover from day to night that preserves circadian rhythms. These cycles, of course, are maintained by the turning of the Earth as a whole, a process that “sets alight / the topaz pole star pulsing in the north,” a star whose brilliance, Page suggests, may remind us of the “galaxies” beyond (120-23). Correspondingly, if there are “patterns” to be found in the reaches of space, there should also be a corresponding sense of balance and belonging here on Earth. The degradation of the night, these poems suggest, affects the capacity to detect – and to be affected by – both local and distant patterns, street lamps reducing the city dweller’s ability to “visualize” those imaginative departures from which they return with “their world transformed” (95).

A similar pattern unfolds in “Planet Earth,” where Page frames global stewardship in domestic and artistic terms that amount to fanciful interventions of ecological care. In this, her most popular glosa,²⁶ Page’s affection for the sky is on full display:

And sky – such an O! overhead – night and day
 must be burnished and rubbed
 by hands that are loving

²⁶ As Djwa explains, “it was Robin Skelton who provided P.K. with the poetic form, the glosa, for which she became known in the nineties through her collection *Hologram: A Book of Glosas*. On 9 January 1992,” Djwa recalls, “Skelton urged Marilyn Bowering to write what he called a ‘Glose,’ a complicated poetic form because it consists of an opening four lines from another poet’s work, followed by four ten-line stanzas, their concluding lines taken consecutively from the initial quatrain, their sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth” (*Journey* 273).

so the blue blazons forth
 and the stars keep on shining
 within and above. (24-29)

The act of looking up provides points of reference that not only reinforce the Earth as home, but that also render the planet small in the process. By cherishing the sky in a poem about the Earth, Page once again defines the two as inextricably linked. The diurnal cycle of “night and day” makes such realizations possible, without which the stark contrast between “the blue [that] blazons forth” and “the stars” that must “keep on shining” becomes considerably less dramatic, and, by extension, considerably less moving (24-28). Given that the poem assumes a productive relationship between affect and environmental action, this correlation is significant: variations on the word “love” appear in the poem seven times, each reoccurrence an insistence that emotion has a role to play in defining a sustainable relationship between the planet and its human inhabitants.

While the stars also need to be “burnished and rubbed / by hands that are loving,” it is worth observing that they are located both “within and above” (25, 26). The fluid geography of the heavens reminds their witnesses that they have a personal stake in their care. Overall, what Page asks in this poem is that the Earth be drawn and painted so that the planet may be newly conceptualized by “pencils and brushes and loving caresses” (39). These acts of artful stewardship all stem from the ability to conceive of the Earth not only as an object that deserves care, but also as one whose care is a task that is humanly possible to perform. To this end, the poem itself is deliberately endearing; it

wishes to promote its affinity for the planet and to charm its readers into joining a celebration that will ensure its future existence. Key to this process is the very idea of delight itself, which, as Sara Ahmed has suggested, “involves a loving orientation toward [an] object,” an intentional turning towards something whose goodness is already established in the moral economy (32). Page quite literally delights in the planet by engaging it as an object and by praising its qualities in familiar, yet compelling terms, all of which encourages her readers to be moved to action by the same affective strain.

While this air of delighted certainty is, in itself, one of the defining characteristics of Page’s engagements with the night sky, its elusiveness also has a place in her writing. Consider, for example, the closing stanza of *And Once More Saw the Stars* (2001), a text that brings together their correspondence with various versions of the incomplete renga that Page and Philip Stratford wrote together between 1997 and 1999. Fittingly, an allusion to a collaborative discovery concludes the narrative:

A week before your death astronomers
 reported planets circling a star
 deep in the Milky Way – three, Jupiter-class –
 the first true solar system outside ours.
 Oh, Philip, do you rage in space?
 Do you? (1-6)

The astronomers mentioned here include San Francisco State’s Paul Butler and Geoffrey Marcy, who announced on 15 April 1999 the discovery of the first multiple-planet system (other than our own) to orbit a normal star. While the first of Upsilon Andromedae’s

planets was detected in 1996, it was not until two other teams of astronomers completed their studies of the outer planets that the system could be verified.²⁷ This final stanza sets this announcement alongside an allusion to Stratford's second collection, *The Rage in Space* (1992), a suite of poems on astronomy-related matters that includes a number of drawings and celestial photographs. In her Introduction to *And Once More Saw the Stars*, Page singles out this collection as a catalyst for their collaboration. "I greatly admired Philip's poetry – especially *The Rage in Space*," she explains, noting how her reading of the book prompted her to ask Stratford to write a renga with her (11). Page's admiration is a source of curiosity in itself, since the reception of Stratford's experiment in literary astronomy was mixed at best. Unimpressed by its somewhat lavish production, one reviewer suggested that the poems "hardly justify such an elegant setting" (230). This observation comes as no surprise, given that the reviewer is also unapologetic in his preference for the "visionary imagination" of science over art: "These days it is probably fair to say that the music of the spheres is interpreted more poetically by the astrophysicist than by the poet. Or arguably this has always been so" (Oliver 230). A more sympathetic reader of *The Rage in Space* might see past its weaknesses to consider it as an enthusiastic attempt to recognize how poetry and astronomy both grapple with similar questions, if in decidedly different ways. That Page should find this particular volume compelling serves as yet another indication that she was actively interested in the

²⁷ Astronomers from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and the High Altitude Observatory in Boulder, Colorado conducted a concurrent four-year study of the two outer planets that verified Geoffrey Marcy's and R. Paul Butler's findings.

night sky, an affinity that she extended to others equally mesmerized by its imaginative potential.

Page, Perseids, and Time

Page's unflinching celebratory gestures, her mature appreciation of a timeless universe, and her channeling of promise and hope are plainly evident in her late short story "Perseids and Time," one of the thirty-one micro-fictions that make up her last collection of new prose, *You Are Here* (2008). First published under the title "Fifi" in the summer 2008 issue of Toronto's *Exile Quarterly*, these brief sketches are a continuation of what readers find in such poems as "Cullen," "The First Part," and "Melanie's Nite Book,"²⁸ where Page writes about herself – or some version of herself – through the guise of a persona. In the spirit of reading this story at least semi-autobiographically, it is worth mentioning that the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory in Victoria, BC did host a community observing session on 11 August 2007 to mark the Perseid's arrival. Since their appearance that summer coincided with a new moon, the darker-than-usual skies heightened the sense of anticipation that preceded the shower and prompted the

²⁸ See Sandra Djwa's "P.K. Page: A Biographical Interview," which appeared in the 1996 P.K. Page issue of the *Malahat Review*, where Page describes "The First Part" of "Melanie's Nite Book" as plainly autobiographical: "Oh, it was me!" she declares in response to Djwa's inquiries (34). Page then goes on to qualify "Cullen" as "semi-autobiographical," while "Melanie's Nite-Book" contains "more fiction than truth" (35). Previously, in *Still Waters*, Page had described Melanie as charting "a parallel existence" to her own, albeit "in a key significantly lower." This discrepancy is not so much a contradiction on Page's part as it is further proof that the boundaries that separate fiction, biographical, and autobiographical are fluid ones, their porous natures requiring that the reader to consider the possibility that all three could exist in the same place at once.

Observatory to extend its hours (Kines A1).

It is possible that such ideal conditions follow “Mimi” – or *Me Me*, to extend the biographical reading further – as she travels to an unnamed observatory in hopes of catching a glimpse of the meteor shower that, “year after year,” she “tries to see” (7). “Some years,” the narrator relays, “the sky is overcast; some years she is so deep in the heart of the city that nothing is visible through the haze of man-made light” (7). The description of disappointment in years past establishes the main character’s relationship with the Perseids, a longstanding connection imbued with disappointment, enchantment, and desire. “It is as if she needs to see those stars,” the narrator speculates, “to ooh and aah as an ‘earthgrazer’ comes close, only to be expunged as it is about to touch her. She cannot avoid those involuntary gasps of surprised delight” (7). Given that the narrator describes the scene as generating in its participants an “involuntary” response, it is possible that what “Mimi” desires is to be affected in such a way that she is, quite literally, sublimated, her selfhood dissipating into a communal scene. Here, the event evokes a response that is, in a sense, both gasp-worthy and generic at once. It is the rarity of the event and, at the same time, the familiarity of its impact on its witnesses that fuel Mimi’s ritualistic return to the Perseids. What she needs is to participate in this scene of nocturnal affect in which her “ooh[s] and aah[s]” are actually quite common, and, therefore, reliably predictable from year to year, provided the conditions are right. This consistency not only makes it possible for Page to use the occasion of Perseids to move back and forth through time, but also to consider the past, the workings of memory, and, ultimately, the fate of humanity in an increasingly automated world.

Structurally, the story begins and ends in Greek myth, a narrative strategy that subtly aligns the fate of one lost civilization with a contemporary world teetering on the brink of dissolution. Especially significant is the way in which each of these allusions is deployed, since the shift from ambivalence to certainty corresponds with a change in the main character's outlook. "This is the month of the Perseids," Page begins, "when Zeus showers Danae's lap with gold, or so say the Greeks" (7). This casual statement is followed by with an allusion to Islamic cosmology, after which Page states that her protagonist seeks the Perseids out annually "[w]hatever the truth" may be (7). Her pursuit of the Perseids is shrouded in uncertainty, and, perhaps, in part, is prompted by it. In contrast, the closing reference to the myth of the Phoenix is confident in the meaning of the myth that it recalls. "And then she cheers up," Page concludes her story. "If a Phoenix is dying, then surely a new Phoenix is born" (9). The adverb "surely" is a sign of the character's faith in a broader cycle of loss and renewal through which the narrator finds comfort and hope and shares these with her reader.

What takes place between this initial moment of doubt and Mimi's subsequent recovery is a description of the event itself – the gathering that takes place to greet the shower and the correspondingly reflective mood that such occasions engender. As is the case with many other celestial witness narratives, the present gives way to the past, one form of community prompting the recollection of another as the revelation of personal history pulls the scene back through time. "They drive up in early evening," Page begins her third paragraph,

and watch the darkness gather, bringing with it families, friendly, good-natured

families, parents laughing with their children – a golden community – like something from her past. She remembers the glow of her mother under a cone of light, embroidering, and her father under another cone, reading aloud. It is warm in her memory, perfectly retained. The three of them united, as perhaps they always will be, always have been. A glimpse of the eternal. (7)

As “darkness” gathers, the light of the present and the past come into view. One “golden community” brings another into focus as Page’s description of “good-nature families” finds its counterpart in an image of her own parents, their glow still “warm in memory, perfectly retained” (7). This vision of the narrator’s childhood is, appropriately enough, as idealized as the circumstances that produce it. In other words, the anticipation that precedes the shower casts the past and the present in, quite literally, the best possible light. Moreover, since it is the occasion of the Perseids that enables the narrator to make these positive associations, it is the night sky and the promise of the ephemeral lights overhead that facilitate their realization. The zeugmatic “glimpse of the eternal” that concludes this paragraph not only qualifies the shooting stars, but also connects them to an image of a unified family that has survived the passage of time. If, internally, then, the narrator experiences eternity as a “glimpse,” the Perseids become the temporal equivalent of this process, their brief paths turning to traces of memory against the infinite backdrop of Space.

In the paragraph that follows, the narrator focuses more intently on the past than the present. With the “Big Dipper [. . .] immediately overhead,” she “remembers seeing it as a child on the prairie where the skies were vaster than the ground beneath their feet”

(8). The appearance of Ursa Major also triggers the memory of “her mother saying, “Look, Maggie. Look up” (8). These words of instruction and encouragement echo forward, becoming a part of Mimi’s proximal past as well. “Here, once again,” the narrator notes, “parents were saying the same thing to their children. ‘Look up. Up’” (8). The repetition of this phrase suggests that the rituals of celestial witness, for Page, create a bridge between generations across time. This passage also bears a strong resemblance to the description of the Prairie sky that appears in the poem “Alphabetical.” Again, in “Perseids and Time,” the ceremonies of childhood are recalled, prompted this time by “families [who] have twisted their red glow sticks into circles,” and who “move about silently” as “haloed invisible beings” (8). While perhaps a solitary observer amidst these angelic figures, Mimi’s affinity for them is an extension of her fondness for her own family, the past keeping her company as the constellations arch overhead. Describing “the Dipper” as “probably her oldest heavenly friend,” even though “it is [the absent] Orion with his jewelled belt she loves most,” Mimi suggests that the constellations have long been a source of companionship (8). The affection that she feels for them is also consistent with her love for the longevity of the past. “She is dizzied, as always,” Page remarks of her main character, “by the realization that what she is seeing occurred light years ago” (8). The temporality of the stars, even as it sets her head “spinning,” is nevertheless a source of delight and comfort.

Deeper concerns do, however, eventually come to the fore in “Perseids and Time,” the most pressing of which is the fate of the individual and his or her society as the past becomes inaccessible. In Mimi’s “darker moments,” the inability to “bring [the

past] into focus” results in “an automated world” where “whole countries are dying for want of water, computers crash, criminals and lunatics escape, banks close, and people get stuck in their virtual realities – fore ever” (9). The associative logic of this litany connects the “struggle” to recall “a time within living memory” to the inability to chart the future with any amount of certainty (9). What prevents this dystopian vision from seeming melodramatic is the tentative way in which Page moves from the difficulties of maintaining personal memory to an unrealized vision of human culture in a state of irreparable decline.

At one end of the spectrum, Page recalls “the past colours of sugared almonds in a silver dish,” an image from her own early childhood that she describes elsewhere²⁹ as a moment of delight, one through which the possibilities of colour first came into view. The memory of almonds in a silver dish emerges intact from the vagaries of the past; its sharpness gives Page a reliable place to begin to tell the story of her life, and then to project her artistic identity forward from an imagined place in time. In “Perseids and Time,” her selfhood appears as the product of her grandmother’s willingness to comment on one of her drawings (“Sweetly pretty, my dear”) even as she takes her husband’s dictation (8). By describing her grandmother as “painstakingly trying to write” her husband’s letter, Page defines herself, in part, as the product of perseverance, patience, and kindness. What emerges, as a result, is not only a fleeting portrait of her life, but also

²⁹ Near the beginning of *Still Waters* (1990), Page recalls seeing these almonds as a toddler at an Uncle’s Christmas party.

a brief biography of some of the women in her family, one that establishes a connection between herself, her grandmother, and her “youngest” niece. Yet, even as she establishes this lineage, the limitations of memory and foresight becoming increasingly troubling:

Why, she wonders, will her mind not stretch further into the past? Perhaps a PhD in history would have provided her with stepping stones leading her back and back – to what? She is equally unable to go forward beyond her youngest niece’s graduation. And even here she can only see the child, lengthened into a young woman, not the society in which that child will live. It must already be here, just as the past is. Why can she not bring it into focus? (9)

Unable “to go forward” or “stretch further into the past,” the limitations of Mimi’s mind find their counterpart in a society that also cannot “lengthen,” or take measures to accommodate the past. Unwilling to heed the warnings of the future, or to benefit from the wisdom of the past, humanity risks an automated existence whose failures are the product of obliviousness to time. Faced with these prospects, Page responds with the timeless power of myth, with its potential to transcend historical circumstance, to compensate for the limitations of memory, and to signal the endless possibility of renewal. The Phoenix that appears at the end of “Perseids and Time” facilitates a reconnection with the past that also continues indefinitely into the future. It is the mythic creature whose flight paths connect the sky to the Earth, and whose nightly death (and eventual rebirth at dawn) corresponds with the diurnal cycle (Van den Broek 283). Its appearance here at the end of the story also serves as a reminder that the constellations, which Page expresses such a fondness for, are not just mnemonic devices for the

positions of their stars, but also visual reminders of the myths they contain. These longstanding narratives, which assume visual form in darkness of the night, serve in contrast to the prospect of an automated world that operates in the absence of memory.

. . .

Page's emphasis on the restorative power of myth does not detract from the environmental message that her writing presents, but rather serves to enlarge it. Rather than signifying a departure, she understands the capacity of the imagination to make possible a graceful return; her accommodating ecology is one wherein the capacity to produce culture actually reaffirms humanity's place in the ecosphere. Page's lyrical response to nature is, after all, one that looks past secular materialism to see storytelling and mythmaking as expressions of affinity, community, and environmental care. Less interested in the rhetoric of loss and longing native to more elegiac forms of nature writing, Page instead presents delight as a renewable resource, an underestimated emotive strain that has the power to mobilize public feeling and to channel it into the possibility of environmental change. By consistently asking her readers to transcend the limitations of self in order to achieve, paradoxically, a more symbiotic sense of personal, cultural, and ecological awareness, her poetry goes even further to promote humility and wonder as both communal and cosmological imperatives. "Star-shine," as the speaker in "Cosmologies" insists, "is far more wondrous than my light" (67). Such declarations honour a broader history, one in which the present plays only minor role, and where humanity's dependency on the planet assumes its rightful place. This does not amount to

a denial of the present realities that grip the globe, but rather a reminder that the conscientious self should loosen its claim on the time and the place that sustain it.

CONCLUSION

Reading Literature in a Light-Polluted Age

In the fifteen years since he polished his first mirror, Normand Fullum of Hudson, Québec has become one of Canada's most respected telescope makers. The recipient of numerous awards for craftsmanship and design, Fullum is best known for his wooden Newtonian reflectors, each of which is meticulously decorated with elaborate astrological symbols and ornamental carvings. Whereas most other manufacturers now use aluminum in the construction of their mounts, Fullum continues to fashion his trademark man-in-the-moon alt-azimuth bearings from pine. These remarkable telescopes would seem to recall the golden age of telescope building, a time during which the beauty of the stars necessitated equally beautiful instruments – that is, of course, if such an era had ever existed. Built to accommodate large mirrors whose capacity to gather light provided views that were impossible to achieve with refractors, pragmatic concerns such as cost and weight have long determined the materials used in Newtonian telescope construction. The Dobsonian design that Fullum employs did not, in fact, become popular until the 1970s, just a few years after John Dobson, an amateur astronomer from San Francisco, had invented this simpler method of mounting an astronomical mirror. Ultimately, while they may resemble Victorian heirlooms, the past that Fullum's telescopes recall is largely imaginative.

These objects are, however, far too easily dismissed as simulacrum. On the

contrary, Fullum's telescopes are the direct descendants of the Arts and Craft movement; the distinctiveness of each instrument resists the legacy of sameness that has been handed down by successive phases of industrialization. Moreover, the planetary symbols that mark them are both astronomical and astrological, reminding us that cultural histories of the night sky inevitably see the scientific and the spiritual wrest meaning from the same signifiers. Fullum's telescopes are also the very inversion of utilitarian design; they are objects of pure leisure, each one purchased at a considerable cost to enhance the hobby of stargazing, which, in turn, provides brief relief from the pressures and obligations of the day. As Steven M. Gelber has noted, hobbies also have a long history of preserving – or of seeming to preserve – the stability of the domestic realm, insofar they provide safe alternatives to more transgressive forms of escape, the various avenues of which can seem all the more enticing under the canopy of night (1). Amateur stargazing offers, in this sense, another entry point into the night, a place where desires that remain unarticulated are re-directed towards the stars, all of which remain safely unattainable. The very phrase “backyard astronomy” seems to summarize this well, given that the role of the suburban backyard is to extend the domestic realm away from the public infrastructure of the street while still retaining a sense of privacy and enclosure. It is a guarded space, the only real escape from which is into the night sky itself. Tellingly, the stars become that much easier to see when all the house lights are out.

Since these are the connotations that inevitably follow amateur astronomy – that it is a decidedly male, privileged, and retreatist pursuit – it has been the work of this dissertation to complicate these observations by appreciating the communal,

environmental, and affective dimensions of stargazing as well. While it is true that many literary descriptions of the night sky are the product of solitary encounters, what seems equally plain in considering these narratives is that they are also public gestures; they seek broader connections, and they use the night sky as a way of expressing desires that are not easily articulated elsewhere. Not unlike Fullum's telescopes, the decidedly antimodern traits of stories and poems about the night sky can easily overshadow their more pressing purpose, which is to bring the night into view and to share its sights with others. They remind us to look up, and the care that goes into crafting them asks for equal attention in return. Just as sidewalk astronomers position their telescopes on busy city streets in hopes of making the heavens more accessible, literary stargazers tell stories about the night in order to promote similar forms of mindfulness. Much can be gained from these encounters, provided that readers know where – and how – to look.

Contemporary Canadian literature has an important part to play in promoting this mindfulness. McKay's *The Book of Moonlight* (2000), Rebecca Elson's *A Responsibility to Awe* (2001), Stephen Brockwell's *Cometology* (2002), Robert Bringhurst's *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* (2003), Dewdney's *Acquainted with the Night* (2004), Alan Wilson's *Sky Atlas* (2008), and Sue Goyette's *Outskirts* (2011) all attest to the various ways in which nocturnal environments and celestial sights have captivated contemporary Canadian writers. This list is by no means comprehensive, nor is there any reason to believe that similar publications will not continue to appear well into the future. Given the central place that the night sky assumes in each of these texts, a comprehensive study of the night sky in Canadian literature would seem incomplete

without them – and, in many ways, it is.

While his particular brand of nocturnal flânerie is curiously detached from his surroundings, Dewdney nevertheless deserves credit for bringing the problem of light pollution to a broader readership. Appearing just as the dark-sky movement began to receive recognition, *Acquainted with the Night* remains one of the few works of Canadian nature writing to call attention to the ways in which the circadian cycle has been compromised. No less deserving of attention is the poetry of Elson, whose life was tragically cut short by cancer at the age of 39. Born in Montréal, Elson was educated in Canada and the United States before completing her PhD in astronomy at Cambridge, where she eventually accepted a research position at the Institute of Astronomy. Even though a posthumous selection of her poetry was eventually published by Carcanet Press, her writing still awaits scholarly attention. Bringhurst's *Ursa Major*, meanwhile, is a remarkable text, if only because the challenging nature of its polyphonic script serves as a fitting metaphor for the difficulty of simultaneously staging Native and European identities in Canada. *Ursa Major* is also an important reminder that the constellations most Canadians recognize are nothing more than imported cultural inventions, the Eurocentricity of which needs to be challenged.¹ Wilson's *Sky Atlas*, for its part, distantly

¹ Even though the RASC's *Skyways: Astronomy Handbook for Teachers* (2003) does not yet provide information on Native astronomy, the popularity of Wilfred Buck's presentations on the Cree and Ojibway sky at Canadian Star Parties suggests a possible future role for First Nations astronomy in the mainstream primary and elementary Canadian school curriculums. Buck, a Cree science educator with the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, has already contributed to *Pearson Science 7: Manitoba Edition* (2012).

recalls Charles G.D. Roberts's use of the constellations as a conceptual framework in *Orion, and Other Poems* (1880), and, in so doing, relays a sensitivity to the ways in which the commodification of public space extends into the sky. Goyette's *Outskirts*, on the other hand, is far more retreatist in nature, seeking Thoreauvian asylum in what darkness still exists beyond city limits.

While distinct in many ways, these recent publications about the night sky nevertheless share a common origin that would likely be obscured if they were read in isolation from events that distantly precede them. The complex pattern of impulses, inclinations, habits, values, and preoccupations that together constituted the antimodernism of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century continue to appear in contemporary narratives about the night sky, the often anachronistic characteristics of which are nevertheless consistent with the increasingly productive relationship between literary and dark-sky communities in Canada and abroad. The one-time British poet laureate Andrew Motion, for example, has lobbied on behalf of The British Astronomical Association's Campaign for Dark Skies, a public outreach effort that promotes light pollution awareness through its annual star count. In an editorial that appeared in 1 February 2013 issue of the *Daily Telegraph*, the former poet laureate reminded his readers that "excessive lighting isn't just a benign extravagance; it is a colossal waste of money and energy at a time when both are in short supply" (Motion n. pag.). Evoking "the moonlit ramble[s]" of Wordsworth, Motion also advanced the idea that the Romantic spirit has a role to play in protecting the night sky. In Canada, dark-sky advocates in Thunder Bay sought a similar alignment between literary past and starlit future by

naming the city's new observatory after David Thompson, whose affinity for stars is readily apparent in his *Narratives of his Explorations in Western America 1784-1812*. "My men were not at their ease," Thompson observes, "yet when night came they admired the brilliancy of the Stars, and as one of them said, he thought he could almost touch them with his hand" (477). The observatory's publicly accessible Dall-Kirkham telescope retains the promise to introduce celestial wonders to a new generation of stargazers, a number of whom may be inspired to protect what little is left to see of the heavens. At the very same time, the David Thompson Observatory seems especially well-positioned to play a role in educating its visitors on the role that imported cosmology played in the colonization of North America. Canadian science education, whether it takes place in a classroom, or through programming at a public observatory, needs to take an active role in teaching First Nations Astronomy,² otherwise Canada will remain a country where the cultural uniformity of its constellations fails to reflect its diversity.

Public life, public gestures, public memory – these are the keys to preventing the dark-sky movement from drifting into retreatism. The creation of dark-sky preserves comes with this risk, since such designations inevitably have the effect of exoticizing

² Readily available resources include storiesofthenightsky.ca, which "brings together Aboriginal youth from across Canada to gather and share diverse and rich Aboriginal night sky stories from community Elders" ("Stories of the Night Sky" n. pag.). Virtual Museums Canada's online exhibit "Cosmic Quest: Ways of Looking" also provides information on Cree and Anishinabe star patterns ("Cosmic Quest: Constellations" n. pag.). Drawing on a diversity of sources including Paulette Jiles's *North Spirit: Travels Among the Cree and Ojibway Nations and Their Star Maps* (1995), the dark sky advocate Peter McMahon has created a star chart that consists of "the constellations of the Ojibway, Cree, Blackfoot, and other First Nations of what is now known as Canada" (McMahon n. pag.). See Fig. 15.

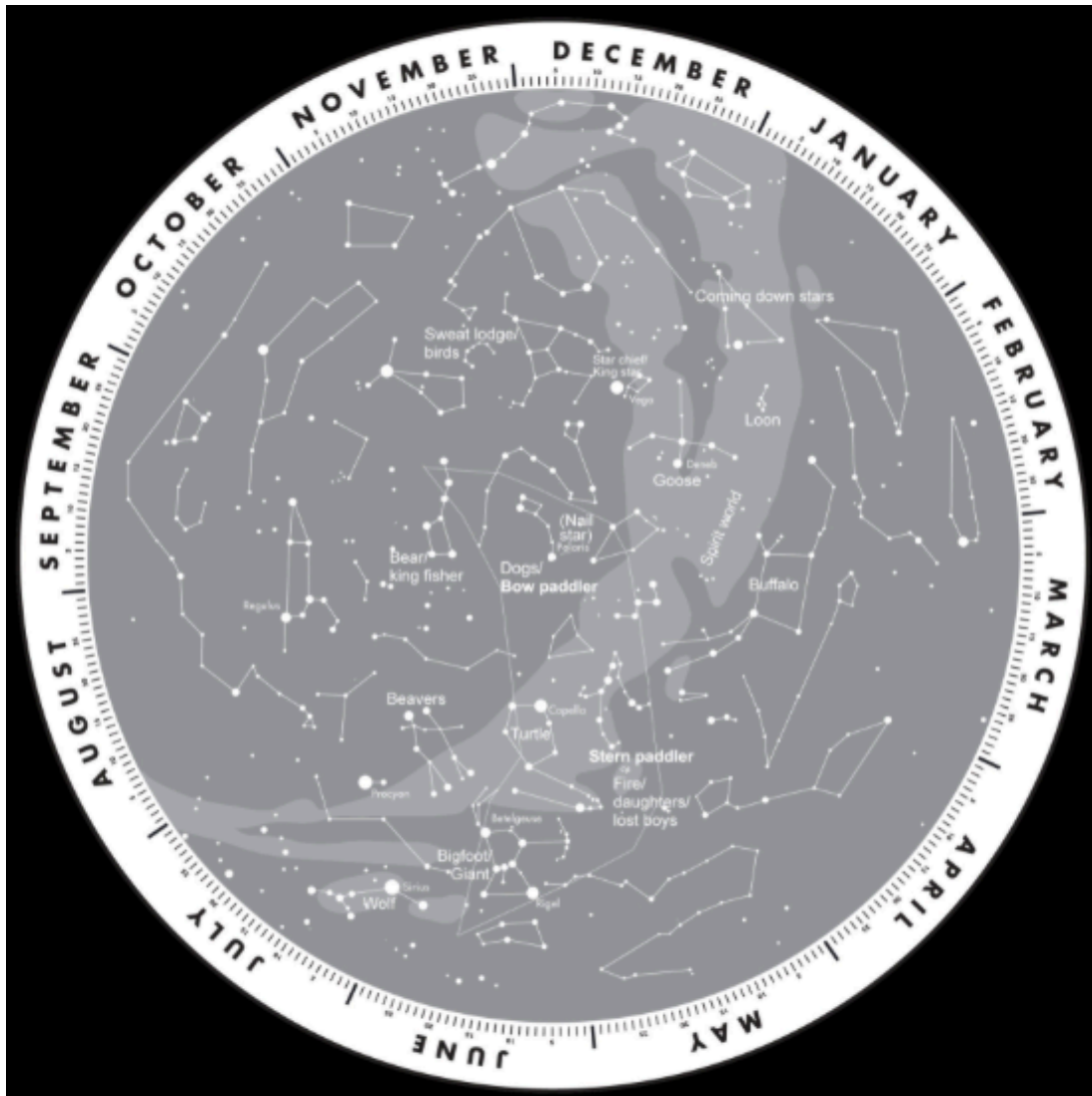


Fig. 15. Peter McMahon's First Nations star chart.

certain conditions. In preserving the wonders of the night sky, a dark-sky preserve becomes, by its very nature, the exception that proves the rule. Such exceptionality, however, is not the end goal of the dark-sky movement; it is instead a starting place from which to initiate change. In Saskatchewan, for example, the creation of Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park Dark-Sky Preserve in 2004 and the addition of Grasslands National Park Dark-Sky Preserve in 2009 have since made it possible to challenge the ordinances that apply to all of the province's parklands. "At Cypress," Richard Huziak explains, "we implemented new lighting codes for construction within the park, and we got new state of the art computer dimmable full cut-off street lights installed" (Huziak "Greatest Accomplishments" n. pag.). Given the overwhelming popularity of the interpretative programs at these parks, dark-sky advocates such as Huziak are now in a position to lobby the Park Design Department in Regina to adopt these new lighting codes as basic standards. The only other option, Huziak explains, "was to go into every one of our fifty four parks and convince fifty four managers," and then to have these managers, in turn, "go to Regina to have their parks declared. We had to do two," Huziak adds, in order "to avoid doing fifty four" (Huziak "Greatest Accomplishments" n. pag.).

Even as the RASC LPA works towards making these standards the norm in parklands across Canada, its membership remains just as committed to transforming the ways in which cities themselves are lit. The technology already exists to do so, but a number of barriers remain in the way, not the least of which is a lack of the public mindfulness concerning the issue at hand. All but absent, too, is the sense that poetry can help us better inhabit the urban spaces in which we live, even though the past century has

seen Canadian cities imaginatively transformed by the poets who have studied their features. “Streetlights” (1966), a brief poem by Eli Mandel, professes a kinship with a historically unpopular element of the city landscape, prompting its readers in the process to think about their own relationship with street lights and the subjectivities they engender. “They’re not sunflowers,” Mandel writes,

yet they burn on their stems
like the golden eyes of those other plants

and they bend
in such an iron complaint
toward the street’s inverted sky

I’d like to think
they know as much of final things
as any living creature who endures the dark. (1-9)

Professing a fondness for elements of city life is by no means antithetical to the environmental cause. Quite the opposite, in fact, since what Mandel’s “Streetlights” envisions is actually a more mindful relationship with urban infrastructure; it is a candid poem whose imagery provides the blueprint for a different kind of public sphere. Reading literature in a light-polluted age requires us to consider such poems carefully, and to respond by fostering a less antagonistic relationship with the “iron complaint[s]” that arch over so many Canadian streets. Doing so requires a particular kind of literacy that is

capable of appreciating what lyrical utterances such as Mandel's offer to the public sphere, as well as what the public sphere can offer in return. Far from statements of public policy, the terms of which too often serve corporate interests by facilitating cycles of economic growth, poetry provides instead carefully crafted signs of citizenship and intimate inhabitation that can be valued as alternative perspectives on city life. The very extent to which these perspectives are valued will help determine how inhabitable a given neighbourhood is, and how likely it is to foster a sense of community among its residents. As fanciful as it may seem, the preservation of the night sky may depend on it. Venice, the last city in world to retain its view of the Milky Way, has only managed to do so through the use of low-density lighting (Cinzano 701). Originally designed to inspire romance, the street lights in Venice's old quarter are now a model for sustainable living that challenge the idea that the city and the night sky are permanently incompatible. By extension, such settings also leave open the possibility that willing cities around the world could collectively renew their citizenship in the universe beyond.

"There's not a lot of time to appreciate the wonders of existence," the Canadian poet John Smith once remarked in an interview, "but the record of poetry enables us to extend and speed up that process of acquaintance with this universal house in which we have been born" (397). Even as light pollution obscures the windows of "this universal house," Canadian writers continue to work at restoring the view. For those now living in light-polluted cities and towns, literary efforts to chronicle the night help provide the essential record of what once was visible to us. These statements of nocturnal affinity spread darkness in an over-lit age, not only as stays against forgetfulness, but also as

hopeful signs of things to come. As poets have insisted for centuries, the power of the stars is staggering: in the time that it takes to read even the briefest of poems, the Earth receives enough radiation from the sun to supply the world's cities for months on end.³ Starlight, the most powerful source of energy our planet has ever known, is still waiting for us to realize its potential. Measures taken to reduce unnecessary light at night should in the meantime be regarded as contributing to a broader effort to reclaim a sense of cosmological smallness, one that is otherwise lost in the starless drift towards an all-encompassing solipsism. The simple act of reading can resist this outcome, especially when we turn our attention to the imaginative ways in which Canadian authors have, for over one hundred years, written us back into the night.

³ The International Energy Association and the U.S. Energy Information Administration use different units of measurement to convey rates of global energy consumption – the IEA reports the figure in tons of oil equivalent (8918 million), whereas the U.S. Energy Information Administration uses quadrillion British Thermal Units (524). Both bodies nevertheless indicate that recent rates of global energy consumption stand at approximately 3.8×10^{20} joules per year (International 29; United 13). A brief poem such as P.K. Page's "Star-Gazer," meanwhile, takes just over thirteen seconds to read. The Earth receives about 2.7×10^{21} joules of energy in roughly the same period of time, two-thirds of which is immediately reflected back into Space (Moan 16). Even so, by the time most readers finish reading "Stargazer," the Earth's surface will have received enough energy to meet humanity's energy needs – at the current rate of consumption – for no less than twenty-nine months. Since urban centres account for at least seventy percent of total global energy consumption each year (Climate 3), the sun delivers enough energy in less than fourteen seconds to power the world's cities for more than one thousand days.

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