Canadian Poetry 102

The Beautiful Script: P.K. Page as Stargazer

by David Hickey

> 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)

"Star-Gazer" endorses a vision of a universe that is at once well-ordered, timeless, and absolute. Even though Page's 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 clear sign of the expansive cosmological outlook that consistently informed her creative life. 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: her stories and poems about the night sky remind us of the smallness of earthly inhabitance, and they do so in such a way that mobilizes public feeling around the planet's fragility and the pressing need for environmental change. By consistently asking her readers to share its hopefulness, her literary stargazing is an optimistic call to mindfulness in an age when ecological prognostication is rarely anything but dire.

Indeed, as William Cronon points out in "The Uses of Environmental History," the public face of environmental advocacy has become predictably forlorn. In an effort to make others appreciate the severity of environmental degradation, Cronon explains, environmentalists seek to inspire a gravity that corresponds with the threats at hand (2). While it is certainly true that celebrations of natural wonders often seem blind to their fragility, it is also true that environmentalism's longstanding relationship with the elegiac can just as easily be construed as endorsing the status quo, especially since the desire for more sustainable practices now competes with a

mediating attachment[1] to the cultures and conventions of lament. The elegiac is, after all, a particularly mournful method of affectively mapping the present, one that needs its subject to remain in a hopeless state in order to preserve both the authority and the relevance of its testimony. In instances of proleptic elegy,[2] the speaker even goes so far as to doom his or her ecological subject to the territory of the already lost, entirely so that the narrative is free to play out in what Patrick Brantlinger calls "the future-perfect mode" (4). Rescue teams searching for survivors never begin with the assumption that 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.[3] 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. Reflecting on his own experiences in the classroom, Cronon concludes that the public performance of "hopelessness" ultimately does a disservice to those who will carry the burden of environmental problems into the future (2).

Dark-sky advocacy,[4] 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 of its relative absence from the present. 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. 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. 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, even if it is difficult to know precisely where to begin. The sheer volume of celestial allusions in literature would seem to suggest that there are as many reasons to look up as there are stars

in the sky. Yet a few ideas do help explain, if only in a preliminary way, the night sky's longstanding appeal.

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). The very same holds true for Page. Just as "darkness," both literal and figurative, provided the opportunity for her imagination to work "harder," Page's fascination with celestial events gave her, however intermittently, ideas to structure this work around. These findings, most immediately, reflect the breadth of her reading and intellect. Yet they are also signs of Page's ability to bring together, quite seamlessly in places, wholly discrete forms of knowledge, all of which have a role to play in creating her capacious vision of the universe.

Page's efforts to capture the night sky have not, however, been uniformly well received. In "For Sure the Kittiwake: Naming, Nature and P.K. Page," Brian Bartlett, for his part, takes issue with the way in which Page positions the role of the poet in "Star-Gazer." "Who," he asks, "is the poet to 'proof-read' nature? How is she to declare it's errorfree? [sic] Is the 'script' perfect gibberish, or a perfect message, or something inbetween?" (103). Most immediately, these questions suggest that a level of distrust exists towards Page's depiction of the natural world; "Star-Gazer," according to Bartlett, reveals Page to be a poet who has exceeded her jurisdiction by reading perfection into the starry night sky. Never mind that a police line up of poets who have committed similar crimes would stretch clear across the centuries—what is truly unfortunate is that the poem itself has been given such short shrift, especially since the sense of delighted certitude that permeates "Star-Gazer" is the result of several subtle techniques, each of which helps Page succeed in her re-articulation and renewal of celestial affinities long synonymous with lyric poetry.

Consider Page's use of the passive voice in "Star-Gazer," which actually helps realize the poem's sense of assuredness: "The very stars are justified," the speaker states, possibly in reference to both their position on the page and in the sky. Their justification 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 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 star-gazer'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.[5]

The proofreader, 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,[6] to the kire-ji—or the splicing technique that disrupts syntax in order to create a 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.

An exercise in lyrical exactitude that values certainty and precision over abstraction and doubt, "Star-Gazer" channels personal testimony into a public forum and invites others to do the same. Its "beautiful script" is just one of the many instances of artful astronomy[7] that appear in the poems, stories, and paintings that Page completed over the course of her career, all of which are inextricably linked to her belief that transcendental beauty can be a tool for environmental advocacy. "Does beauty have a

use?" she asks in "Falling in Love with Poetry," 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.

Still, making sense of the relationship between the material and the immaterial in Page's writing is no easy matter. Cynthia Messenger has helped by remarking that Page's poetry and visual art "reflect the modernist belief that through art humankind can transcend the quotidian realm and imagine a Utopian fourth dimension" (80). Messenger's study tentatively concludes that Page's corresponding 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. Smith was quick to point out in his appraisal of Page's work, her "gardens may be imaginary, but more than the toads in them are real" (17).[8] The night skies that Page evokes in her writing are, likewise, very real reminders of the extent to which nocturnal environments the world over have been compromised. Rich as they are in myth, meaning, and insight, these literary engagements with the night sky ultimately constitute an important dimension of Page's relationship with the natural world; they testify not only to the expansiveness of her environmental vision, but also the extent to which she wished to see the wonders of nature preserved in her writing, all in the hope that others would be encouraged to consider them wondrous as well.

Rods and Cones: Community, Perception, and Sight

"As a child," 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. More details are recalled: "I had never seen my parents' eyes / so glistening, / 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 initiate a rite-of-passage for the child and an enchanted return for her parents, the simultaneous staging of which make the differences between the generations seem insignificant. Worth noting, too, are the child's bare feet (11), 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 of the section, "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, the enchantment of the stars softening the fixity of time and strengthening the bonds between those who collectively bear witness to their wonder (13).

Alphabetical is just one of a number texts in which Page reflects on the act of stargazing as means of achieving communion, both with others and with the divine. "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 see-

ing," she adds. "Seeing in the dark involves the rods—a kind of indirect sight. If I look directly I can see nothing" (38).[9] In this description of first-hand 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 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—enabling the poet to catch a glimpse of the world not just as it is, but also as it could be. As Diana Relke has pointed out, "suspend[ing] our binary habits of thought" 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). Relke makes use of Jessica Benjamin's concept of "the intersubjective mode of spatial representation" in order to call attention to the interplay of senses in poems such as "Landscape of Love" and "Personal Landscape." This sensual awareness amounts to a "relaxing, opening out onto nature," with the speaker's 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 (Relke 15, 25). Similarly, Page's efforts to raise nature's profile by imaginatively promoting a broader cosmological reality serve to remind us of our place within a very real environment, one whose ecological cycles encourage us to think beyond the western world's post-industrial conceptualizations of time.

This paradoxical vision of transcendental beauty with Earthly applications is directly related to Page's investment in the night sky and the divine. "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. "We are one with the starry heavens and our bodies are stars," Page writes in her short story "Unless the Eye Catch Fire." That such knowledge 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 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 fire 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 (188). By locating such potential in the vastness of outer space, Page also implicitly 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. The night sky, in the process, becomes a site of unlimited potential through which conventionality can be renegotiated so that more meaningful forms of selfhood and community can be realized.

The Overview Effect

Page's desire to re-imagine the outer realms was also a product of events that would, over time, find their way into her writing. 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. As testament 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 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. 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 by dramatically reimagining them as catalysts for environmental change.

These first pictures of Earth from outer space eventually supplied imagery for at least one of Page's poems. In "Address at Simon Fraser" (1991), she 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 Page 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. Such statements of unity are 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.

In alluding to astronauts who have been "transformed" by their experiences in a public address, Page weds 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. By asking her audience to "remember" stories of returning astronauts, Page recruits this history into her poem, and, in the process, invites her audience 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 proof as a blithe form of denial, Page goes on to question the effectiveness of "lobbying politicians" and "making speeches," revealing a sense of ambivalence towards polemical writing that she nevertheless feels compelled to embrace ("Address" 83, 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 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 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, insofar 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.[10] A more generous reading would 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 witnessing their permanent disruption (116).

Tellingly, the process of reconnecting with these cycles is to a significant degree, for Page, contingent 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 unpavemented, 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 […] 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, 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 “unpavemented” 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, Page’s affection for the sky is on full display:

> And sky—such an O! overhead—night and day
> must be burnished and rubbed
> hands that are loving
> 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.

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," where Page writes about herself, or some version of herself, through the guise of a persona. "Mimi"—or *Me Me*, to extend the biographical reading further—travels to an unnamed observatory[11] in hopes of catching a glimpse of a summer 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, to ooh and aah as an 'earthgrazer' comes close, only to be expunged as it is about to touch her," the narrator speculates. "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 August meteor 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-natured 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—for 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, however, 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.

Mimi's anxieties about the past and the future are, for example, temporarily lessened by those faint memories that she is still able to recall. She recalls "sugared almonds in a silver dish," an image from Page's own early childhood that she once described as a moment of delight,[12] 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 a fleeting portrait of a life that connects three generations of women: the speaker, her grandmother, and her "youngest" niece. Yet, even as she establishes this lineage, the limitations of memory and foresight become 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 is a society that also cannot "lengthen," or take measures to accommodate any temporal moment but its own. 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. 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 stories and poems go 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 a 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. Ultimately, 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.

Notes

1 As Lauren Berlant has pointed out, "a poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near *x* (as though *x* has autonomous qualities) from the activity of the emotional habitus I have constructed by having *x* in my life […]" (34). Where this "splitting off" becomes problematic, Berlant argues, is at the point where individuals build such a strong attachment to their understanding of how a given desire should be realized that it competes with, and ultimately prevents the realization of the original aim. This "cruel optimism" persists, Berlant explains, until the subject is willing to relinquish the mediating attachment, or at least to re-conceptualize it (33).

2 "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 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 pro-

leptic 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.

3 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.

4 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, Arizona (Dick and Welch 25; "History" n. pag.). The RASC LPA has since become a world leader in the creation of Dark-Sky Preserves; its members have also helped over twenty cities in Canada adopt policies that reduce light pollution (Huziak "Re: Greatest accomplishments" n. pag).

5 Page followed modernist conventions by using the language of objectivity in order to articulate what were ostensibly personal observations. As Brian Trehearne observes in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*, 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;" Trehearne adds that "this search for a fusion of subjective and objective modes was constitutive of Canadian poetic development well into the 1950s" (59, 60).

6 See Pound's "Vorticism," in which he acknowledges his debt to the "hokku," "an older term" for haiku that was once used to describe the opening verses of the Renga form (Hakutani 68).

7 The phrase "artful astronomy" appears here on loan from the twelfth chapter of Abbas Tashakkori's and Charles Teddlie's *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research*, a text concerned with—among other things—the role of aesthetics in scientific practice. In their brief discussion of artful astronomy, Tashakkori and Teddlie call attention, in particular, to a 1988 study by Lynch and Edgerton, "Aesthetics and Digital Image Processing: Representational Craft Contemporary Astronomy," which examines the role that "craft" plays in the development of astronomical images and how such aesthetic decisions ultimately 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 and to aestheticize personal findings through mediums of artistic expression.

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).

9 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.

10 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.

11 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 Perseids' arrival. Since the most anticipated meteor shower of the summer stargazing season coincided that year with a new moon, the darker-than-usual skies heightened the sense of anticipation that preceded the shower and prompted the Observatory to extend its hours (Kines A1).

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

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