

The Disloyalty of Elizabeth Hay: Reading the Autobiographies

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Midway through *Small Change*, her book about arriving “at middle distance in middle age” (186), Elizabeth Hay describes herself watching a movie. At a party, she meets an old friend who recalls *The Browning Version*, a 1951 British school drama about an unpopular master who uses his retirement speech to apologize for wasting his life.¹ Other friends have told Hay that Leonard was once in love with her, and here, seated next to her, he recites part of the dialogue “and is undone” (119). Several months later—spontaneity has little value in Hay’s world—both the layering of her memory and the hard edge of her current voice are clear as she watches the film, recounts the plot, and puts herself to bed with warm milk and a sleeping pill. She awakens repelled by Leonard’s tears. The teacher is an abject figure, to be sure, but both the screenplay and Leonard have used his admission of wasted opportunity for the cheaper sake of pity: the schoolboys applaud the speech, reinforcing ideals of fair play and forgiveness, while Leonard tries to force his memory of their relationship over Hay’s own, scripting the past around himself. “These dramatists,” she says, “how they set us up” (120).

Wary as she is of set-ups, the dramatic does not figure highly in Hay’s autobiography, which occupies four volumes previous to her outright fiction: *Crossing the Snow Line* (1989), *The Only Snow in Havana* (1992), *Captivity Tales: Canadians in New York* (1993), and *Small Change* (1997). The works are variously labeled “poetic history,” “documentary novel,” or some other blending that reflects a distaste for categorization and suggests a high level of shaping. They are not long on sustained plot, certainly not on demonstration; rather, they seem to resist the linear configuration of life story offered by the classic locations of autobiography. There are few references to her childhood in Ontario, her early career in radio, or the births of her two children. While such events offer

major plot structures to other writers, Hay uses them as points of reference, not to be relied upon for continuity or meaning in themselves; this foremost “disloyalty,” a resistance to conventional sites of importance, necessitates the focal and stylistic developments that follow. From the outset, she arrives with fully adult scales of value and responsibility: her self-characterizations favor analysis over event and slow metaphorical development over secure recognition.

Crossing the Snow Line begins with a loss. Hay’s marriage is collapsing, and she sends their dog to a new home: “We shed Stan because we shed each other” (11). The dog’s long coat is linked to the fur trade and thus to Canadian historical development (“Canada was founded on the desire for warmth” [11]) and then to Hay’s identity as a Canadian (“one day, after picking wild blackberries, I plunged my hands into his fur, soft against all the scratches” [11]). The cross-linkage of public and personal, set up in an experience that very rapidly develops into metonymy, establishes both a strategic and an emotional range that will handle a large part of Hay’s recollection. “We shed Stan because we shed each other. How do we shed missing?” (11). She will answer the question in part by suggesting a plenitude in which meaning is generated by perceived connection among disparate elements. Stan is named for the jazz musician Stan Getz, and the shiny metal of a saxophone becomes the chrome trim of the car that nearly kills the squirrel-chasing dog (*CSL Crossing* 22); event becomes technique, the writerly connection apparent within the act of naming. “In 1954 Stan Getz was arrested in Seattle for holding up a drugstore. That goes into the screech of his saxophone” (*CSL Crossing* 23), and that, in turn, goes into the dog owner’s always listening for the screech of brakes. Much later, in New York, Hay will broaden the connection to cope with a friend’s miscarriage after heavy activity: “to want something so badly and then almost deliberately give it up. I do the same thing. I gave up Canada the way I gave up my dog, and then they become the source of all my stories” (*CT Captivity* 41). But by that time, we know that Stan is long gone. In a late scene of *Crossing the Snow Line*, Hay, in Mexico and in love again, receives the news. “The day I found out I was pregnant I found out Stan had died. Hit by a car, a warm running bundle of fur. I spent the happiest afternoon, and the

saddest night. . . . I dreamt about Stan running through snow—a field of snow carved with roads. I was going to join him at any moment” (86). She has never actually unjoined him, but her continual envisioning of “Stan beside me on the hardwood floor” (*CSL* 20) allows us to trace clear resonances of her loss.²

The proliferating patterns of meaning which allow Hay to form a continuing record of a lost or missing location sometimes gather into what Paul John Eakin calls “microchronologies” (30), or small linear connections lodged specifically within a structure that denies such ordering on a larger scale. The recurrence of images, however, and especially their rapid linkage with others, allows them to function multidirectionally (Paillot 68). For example, the most prominent loss in *The Only Snow in Havana*, the second volume, connects with that of the first:

Down the street in a friend’s studio three photographs hang on the wall. They show a dead dog lying in a wood, the fur dusted with snow, then covered lightly as with wax, then covered completely. . . . The dog must have been hit by a car, and dragged itself into the woods to die.

I reread a letter from David. (113)

David is a photographer as well, so that the microchronological placement of images here quickly recalls Stan and anticipates David’s death from AIDS; the pictures, preserving the found object within the manipulated text, signify a relationship that will soon be based upon the memorial evidence, not the interaction, of love. “A photograph he took hangs above my desk. One of a series shot in Yellowknife . . . This one is weeds in snow” (103). Later, in *Captivity Tales*, the image of mortality suspended here will complete itself as a sense of the missing in New York: “in Yellowknife I read without a lamp a midnight. Fresh coffee was on the stove and my dog at my feet. . . . Now the north is reduced to birch-bark light around my desk, David’s photographs of snow on the wall, and David, dead” (7). So David proliferates backward into Stan, forward into artistic evidence, northward into the idea of Canada far away.

“Missing,” or reverberating sense of loss, structures much of Hay’s vision. While Cixous (883–884) and others celebrate the escape of femi-

nist autobiography from the traditional apology for penile “lack,” Hay does not seek a strictly physiological base. Bypassing or withholding issues of direct sexuality—which seem strained in her work, and on the way to larger points anyway—Hay does not have to be so rapid in her gender distinctions; the slow accumulation of detail allows her to examine relationships with detachment and control. For the most part, her concern begins with social conditioning expressed in public, adult situations. At work on a magazine, for example, she describes herself among those swept along as “Leonard’s sexuality filled the office,” but then comes to see that “his retarded yet active sexuality” (*SC Small* 110) is more concerned with claiming mastery over the female staff (and thus his later teariness over *The Browning Version* will seem suspiciously close to manipulation). More positively, Hay’s slow approach to gender categorization allows her to set up a line of inquiry, backtrack, and reinscribe the problem from another angle.³ When her husband supports an unworthy co-worker, for instance, Hay’s first record clouds the point:

I was the one who expressed the anger he felt, then felt the anger he no longer wanted to feel. He spoke about Rudy only once. He said, “The biggest mistake I made in that job was to let my friendship with Rudy interfere with my judgment.” That’s all. He said it in passing.

His attitude mystified me. It seemed completely kind and good. . . . I, on the other hand, took friendships between my teeth and shook them the way my old dog shook snakes. (*SC Small* 44)

The socialization of expression, she says, means that women in relationships are demonstrative so that men do not have to be, and are then patronized for losing control (Cixous 887). Fair enough, but then she looks again.

Hay is always good at allowing a later view to contradict a previous finding: here, she realizes that her need for exact expression of a problem has obscured other approaches. Then, when her husband reiterates his faith in the unworthy Rudy, “I looked at him and the following words dropped into my head: *He uses optimism to shield himself from pain. . . .* What had seemed a gift—the gift of eternal friendship—now seemed

like an exquisitely-arrived-at means of survival" (45). The admission of multiple tracks for emotional accommodation, with its allowance for varied interpretations and responses, and especially with its disinclination to fix behavioral constants or narrative categories, is a particularly strong and charitable aspect of Hay's examination (Brée 178). As with the photographs, the formation of insight into highlighted typography suggests that, for Hay, recognition becomes far more meaningful when it concentrates into a textual presence which can then reverberate throughout the *corpus*. Thus, while downplaying sexuality and physicality in general, Hay arrives rhetorically at the pleasure Cixous describes a woman finding in her body when "she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction" (885). In Hay's colder climate, however, it is the running of the profuse meanings that generates warmth for the body, not the other way around.

Since Hay declines to trace its origins as far back as physical anatomy, the methodical proliferation of images in her work lacks the spontaneity and phosphorescence of Cixous's unending erogenous surface. Her writing misses the audience appeal of eroticism and forgoes a powerful feminist strategy, described by Julia Watson, of gaining structural recognition by overtly dislocating male traditions of autobiographical progression ("Toward" 57, 59). A different solidity is gained, however, when Hay appropriates the methods of such inquiry without the celebration of an assured physicality which may dissipate, be outgrown, or, more importantly, seem uncertain in the northern landscape where Hay sites her epistemology. Again, her caution permits her to abstract Irigaray's great metaphor of a woman's skin as an "expanding universe" (31): initially set up to oppose the traditional phallic imagery of knowledge gained through "probing" and "penetration, the figure in Hay's expansion loses its sexuality but coincides usefully with other recent models.⁴ What is more, Hay seems unwilling to abandon the processes embodied in that arguable masculine vocabulary, and her distance from totalized physicality permits her to organize her stance selectively. One such process, in fact, provides a major narrative structure.

As with the recurring images of Stan and David, the figure of "the snow underlayer" begins as a writerly natural image:

This morning the ground was white. Missing accumulates. Layer upon layer, connection after connection, until we're bent over, buried. When snow is deep the layer next to the warm ground becomes a gallery of tiny glass logs through which small mammals move. Mice, voles and shrews live there protected from the wind and cold; in a howling snowstorm they hear only the creaking of tree roots in soil. Can this happen with missing? (*CSL* 12–13)

At its first appearance, the metaphor is misleading: this writer, it seems, will show how she made herself small and perhaps self-effacing in order to survive in the harsh world. But the error of such a conventional reading becomes clear when the image is repeated: then, it begins to reverberate within the text, revealing that Hay is more concerned with the possibilities of the snow tunnels than with the vulnerable creatures—too obvious, really—that shelter inside them. Beneath a surface of howling storms, Hay's image of a surface-beneath-the-surface penetrates a liminal yet literal world, generally unseen, with much different patterns of mobility and survival; in theory, the tunnels stretch co-extensively with the snowfield itself, and represent a specifically Canadian structure, made both necessary and possible by the cold climate. Because the tunnels may be plotted differently from the directness and linearity common to the accustomed surface, they may lead a nywhere unseen and permit lines of travel among points unpredictable using external measurements.⁵

Hay tries out her snow tunnel theory on the man who will become her second husband:

One night I tell him about the snow underworld, that intricate network of tunnels and galleries at the base of a thick snow cover.

“It worries me how cold I've become,” he says. (*CSL Crossing* 48)

Then he tells an arctic story of his own. According to more traditional narrative structures, coldness is a negative trait and Alec's deflection of

attention to himself might foretell troublesome emotional competition. Underneath, however, in the tunnel model, his response is exactly right, because coldness actually supports the structure and survival within it. If we consider the doubled process of their self-revelations to be more important than the sequential admission of personal flaws, the match seems quite supportive: socially, vitally, such reconfigurations “play out into disseminating, ramifying, transmuting dynamics ... that keep text and communications labile” (Fischer 85–86). The characters abandon positions of strength and seek progressions of mutuality as they learn to survive in the delicate environment of new love.

The tunnel metaphor licenses connections of all sorts, not exactly at random but in ways unpredictable according to diachronic and generic logics. “The supplementary strategy interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative” (Bhabha 305), so that an observer need not apologize, as we have seen, for a reminiscent but odd link between a friend’s miscarriage and her abandoned dog, or for rapid, incurving shifts of time and space:

When I was fifteen a little girl came around the corner of our house and said with great feeling, “I just *love* your big beaver teeth.”

Twenty years later my daughter was teething and I was reading a book of beaver lore written in 1852. *The Castorologia* suggests putting beaver teeth around a teething child’s neck to hasten the process. I grinned at her more often.

My fondness for beaver comes not just from the teeth but from the lost tongue. As an ancient race beaver were endowed with speech, then fell into mute disfavour. In my childhood I never stopped talking, they say.

This is Canadian being and becoming. Being at a loss for words, becoming embarrassed. (*OSH Only Snow* 69)

Personal and public, adolescent/vulnerable and adult/self-conscious, concrete, speculative, emotional, and comic, spanning from ages fifteen to thirty-five, recalling Canada while living in New York, with a mythical past, reference to a century before her birth, and implication of the lapse between the teething and its description in print: episodes here

combine in excitingly flexible observational structures and narrative strategies. Figures such as Hay's snow tunnels, Watson suggests, allow postmodern and especially feminist autobiography to destabilize the linearity of traditional life-writing, replacing essentialized metaphysical development with reverberating metaphors ("Toward" 62). Hay's strategy installs that destabilization as an ongoing process, and then re-places it within an actually emergent metaphysics.

Since she is continually (self-)aware of the tunnels' proliferations, and is unwilling or even powerless to reduce connections into diachronic straightforwardness, Hay elevates permanent conditions of *différance*—or, more properly, continuing processes of differentiation. Hay's awareness of multivalent development begins very early, and her expression of it takes a variety of forms throughout her work; in *Captivity Tales*, for example, this understanding appears as a metaphor borrowed from a party conversation. "He said that every Canadian has an internal vision of the world in which the upper part is a wide horizontal snowy plane with a solitary figure on the horizon. 'Do you think that's right?' he asked me. It sounded good to me" (70).⁶ Then Hay, unable to resist differentiation and implying the tunnel structure beneath the plane, hollows out the image she will nonetheless use: "What does the rest of the world look like? But he didn't have a picture for that." The metaphor offers helpful contrast, a way to describe in New York a Canadian's sense of dislocation and missing, but it cannot become comprehensive until Hay uses its spatialization as part of a more precise metaphysical model. "My image of the north is of two bands: the lower one occupied by concrete and fields, the upper band story-filled and out of bounds." What begins as a traditional binary categorization, its limitations obvious, becomes a way of quickly describing indeterminacy and synchronicity. The described border between the two bands is not merely a fixed edge or even a permeable distinction; rather, the line becomes a notation of changing relationships, a trajectory in which items of data function in movement, as waves of meaning rather than as discrete particles of information and certainly not as stable facts. Evoking Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, Hay's data in motion have no apparent locations of their own, but acquire sense in textuality, when they describe direction and velocity,

colliding with other information and generally revealing the contours of Irigaray's infinitely "expanding surface" of the self.⁷

The metaphors of underlying tunnels and interzonal continuity point to Hay's continuing awareness of *différance* as an agitated, accusatory state, where critical principles of indeterminacy and necessitated self-authorization reveal troubling personal costs. Differentiation provides the means for close examination and complex—though never exact—definition, and permits as well a self-conscious method of claiming the distance needed to write one's own multiplicity. At the same time, however, all relationships are objectified to some degree, and all objectifications are destabilized. How, then, is a person supposed to have any friends? It is terrifically difficult to form lasting relationships, to be a consistent parent, or to belong to a particular country when nothing exists on its own terms. For Hay, the continual awareness of alternatives in space and time does not ask merely an acceptance of critical referentiality but demands commitment of the observer's personal, emotional presence. A traditional sense of loss, a ratio of past to present, thus turns to a state of missing, an unremitting condition of self-awareness in the midst of change: missing disables Hay from offering herself fully to any relationship and forces her to see that *différance*, in personal terms, amounts to disloyalty.

Hay is first disloyal, she says, to Canada. Much of her work concerns expatriation: *Crossing the Snow Line* and *The Only Snow in Havana* are largely set in Mexico and the United States, and *Captivity Tales* is centered on New York, where she lived for several years before returning to Canada, the main setting of *Small Change*. The Canadian material itself is multiply sited from the outset, since it both identifies Hay directly through her social and cultural consciousness, and provides a zone of contrast, in the past and at a distance, which helps define her circumstances elsewhere. Images of snow, cold, and fur proliferate, especially where the mere thought of Canada signifies a gap between the individual and the current environment. In *Crossing the Snow Line*, for example, several references transform the mundane image of ice cream into a small, hand-held Canada, and thus to an immediate sense of what is missing:

On my way to Trotsky's house in Mexico City I walked past an ice cream store called Siberia. It made Eskimos, cold whipped drinks of fruit, milk and ice—a whimsical notion of cold, as though it's innocent and far away, and never sneaks up from behind. (56)

In Mexico they call ice cream stores *neverias*. From *nevar*, to snow. Where snow never falls. The flavour and texture of not here, of not belonging. (78)

Later, in *Captivity Tales*, the irony of *nevar*/never becomes more pointed when a reference to Robert Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North* shows the irretrievability in "missing":

The film was first shown in 1922. Two years later Nanook starved to death. In 1932, Flaherty's wife was in Berlin and bought an Eskimo pie in the Tiergarten. "It was called a 'Nanuk'," she wrote, "and Nanook's face smiled up at me from the wrapper." (99)

The destabilization of Hay's political sense of nationality is accomplished in familiar ways, to be sure; with Canada always occupying part of the narrator's thought of Mexico, instabilities and permeations serve for the most part as useful notations of the individual's trajectory. At a more personal level, however, the instability of self-identification means that even so simple an action as eating an ice cream cannot be counted upon for completion or fulfillment. Commodified, disseminated—still, Nanook's image on the wrapper represents a real individual, now dead. Theorized narrative construction will not stay emotionally detached, but tunnels away toward personal and painful conjunctions.

The expansion of *différance* into disloyalty describes a self-conscious loneliness that undercuts all commitment. On a trip to Cuba, for example, a small, lovely scene is hollowed out by the narrator's own discomfort:

A woman's voice drew us to a bar on the corner. Empty glasses of cane liquor covered her table, and a man with a guitar sat beside her. They sang for pleasure. Long earrings, low-cut

sleeveless blouse; she raised her arm and talcum powder shone in her armpit, the only snow in Havana. (*OSH* 34)

Hay can never let go completely, but must always create disloyalty to the scene in front of her by citing alternatives—like Milton’s Satan carrying everywhere the chill of Canada-*versus*-elsewhere. In Havana, the contrast is linked to her pregnancy: “The baby was my ticket home, the only thing that could have persuaded Alec to leave Mexico. And that in itself was all wrong” (34). Here, Hay approaches the powerful combination described by Sidonie Smith, “when the history of the body intersects with the deployment of female subjectivity as the woman writer struggles with multivalent embodiment” (271). But because each insight embodies its own critique in an awareness of what is missing, the gestalt results not in figurations of achieved stability but in further accusations that her behavior seems “all wrong.” The band of myth overarching the concrete and present, with the solitary upright figure as its image of purity and integrity, in fact emphasizes the discomfort of her mobility: “Somehow it seems very Canadian. To be so in touch with self-doubt that its rhythms keep us awake” (*OSH* 70). From this position, her best hope is to combine enough data to reduce the wild directional shifts of her thought; if she can hold the rhythms of self-awareness within a bearable range, she may find a sustainable metaphysical course—that is, locate longer-lasting definitions—that will approximate the now-abandoned stabilities of citizenship and individual certainty.⁸

If solidity is too difficult to locate, perhaps solidarity may help. Hay searches Canadian history for parallels and analogies to her condition, so that the movement between herself in the present and her more objectified description of historical figures forms the most characteristic structure of the middle two volumes.⁹ The resulting hybridity of subjects, tones, and degrees of empathy generates great energy but, for all the excitement, points to further categorical instabilities. Under the pressure of *différance*, works slip their generic bonds. First, they challenge the writing of history by paying little heed to chronology or causality. Within this mode, Hay’s citations distinguish between her objectification and traditional claims of detached objectivity; she maintains that

history is hardly useful, or even noticeable, until it is needed to confirm the present, and that even then its applicability will continue to be fluid and multidirectional. Thus, for example, Hay considers early Canada in relation to her own discomfort and suspected anonymity: “Champlain married an eleven-year-old girl. He wrote six volumes about his life and didn’t mention her once. For a long time I didn’t even know her name” (*OSH* 22). History studied for its supplementarities, then, aimed at recovering the losses caused by oppressive directionality, permits a transgressive time-reference focused upon the autobiographical present.

Second, as conventional claims of history-writing are challenged, so are common assumptions of life-writing. The self-referred singularity of the autobiographical subject—Watson’s “*bios-bias*” (“Toward” 59)—is refracted here because at least part of the narrative attention is directed toward depicting another life. “It snowed heavily on the day she and Champlain signed their marriage contract, December 27th, 1610. H  l  ne Boull  . Her signature on the dowry document is ‘that of a little girl whose fingers have not yet mastered the pen’” (*OSH* 23). Here, Hay’s text enfolds one of the sources cited at the end of the volume—and the need for a bibliography underlines in itself the “specific weirdness” of autobiographical indeterminacy (Gilmore 6). Her inventiveness, however, does not lead to greater security, since both historical and autobiographical defections from type indicate crises of organization or, in Hay’s terms, further disloyalties.

Hay’s refocused historical consciousness works in several different ways. In *The Only Snow in Havana*, set largely outside Canada, the expatriate hopes to ease her adjustment by desolidifying Canada as a physical space from which she is absent. When its totality no longer obtrudes, interesting and useful fragments become visible: for the observer disloyal enough to deconstruct the nation—a process which the political surface can render habitual—the underlayer may provide a viable refuge.¹⁰ “Warmth is found in unexpected places,” she says (150), and her study of Canadian history becomes a search for human individuality and feeling within the coldnesses of public record and time beyond recovery. To connect beneath the received facts is difficult, but the engagement may result in an honesty that overrides the initial disloyalty. In this sense,

biographical linkage reflects the success of self-examination, permitting “exploration of the self as a history rather than an ego and as a drama enacted over the duration and against the lapses of memory” (Watson “Shadowed” 181). Thus she begins a study of David Thompson’s travels in the early nineteenth century: “At the New York Public Library I untie the string around a book, take off the protective envelope, open the pages. Bits of brittle paper fall onto the table like confetti” (*OSH* 115). A dry study indeed, except that the text tunnels back just a few pages to the other David, the dying friend: “A valentine from David. I open the envelope and hearts fall out, keep falling out. Ten of them cut from fluorescent orange and pink paper, from regular red and white paper, and from a snapshot. . . . In fact, only nine. The tenth is the torn corner of the red envelope” (107). The tenth heart, the one she tears by herself and adds to the presented text of nine, becomes Hay’s lesson in reading Canadian history. Her method of reading Thompson, tutored by David, attempts to penetrate the surface to find “all the emotion otherwise only suggested by the careful tone, so nearly sensual in its appreciation of everything that touched his life” (116–117); the torn heart among the others locates the bearable range of thought she seeks, a method of appreciating her current life away from the familiar and a substitute for outmoded notions of stability:

When we bring the background forward shy images appear, wall-flowers and quiet animals. David Thompson was a reticent man and mapped a reticent country. Elsewhere I learn that he married Charlotte Small, a girl of fourteen, and with her had thirteen children. “My lovely wife,” he calls her in a single reference later deleted from the final version of his *Travels*. (116)

The shy observer, the undemonstrative Canadian in riotous Mexico and loud New York, finds confirmation in the oddly-diffused tunnel light of subtext.

The need for biographical analogues is more focused in *Captivity Tales*: early on, between discussions of the divorce of Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland, Hay describes her own sessions with a marriage counselor (29). Holding herself together is easier with the distance and formality of ob-

jectification: she finds great difficulty in speaking directly, but “finding out about Joyce Wieland ... is a joy” (30). Her strategy reverses Watson’s observation that when “the present acts as a pressure to displace the self from center-stage into the shadow of a real or typical other, self-disclosure is a process continually in the making” (“Shadowed” 182). For Hay, the process is already in motion, and biographical reference offers a momentarily bearable form for expressing it. She does not displace herself from center stage, but instead foregrounds her process—her relationship to the material—and highlights the making of text rather than simply objectifying the account of another life (Brée 174). To repeat the Heisenberg’s figure, her treatment of historical material indicates the velocity and direction, not the location, of her self-identity:

In my mind I change the map of New York from one of a city where I continually get lost to a place with Canadian landmarks, orienting me, shoring me up; invisible anchors, where other Canadians have stayed and suffered and been happy. A new sort of mapmaking—not David Thompson exploring a new world and seeing so well its future, the Indians dispossessed and probably forever, but rather a rolling back of the map to reveal a snow underworld: the galleries, lanes, avenues along which small inconspicuous Canadians travel. (CT 31)

Where the historical sections of *The Only Snow in Havana* are lengthy and nearly self-contained, the references of *Captivity Tales* are shorter and arranged to form counterpoints and juxtapositions among themselves as well as with Hay’s voice. Thus, her own hybridizing use of biography-within-autobiography finds confirmation and consolation on the very page of text that enacts it. This self-licensing of multiplicities (Cixous 1096) counterbalances Hay’s prolific accusations of disloyalty—to Canada as she lives elsewhere, to her family as she takes time to write, to her own strength as she probes her weakness.

While Hay expects Joyce Wieland to offer a close parallel to her own experience of New York, her later meeting with the artist is disappointing and scary. “Her marriage broken up, her country breaking up, her mind” (145): ideally, Wieland’s reductions should be energizing, since

“breaking up” for Hay initiates productive revisions. Instead, Wieland’s version of telescoping reveals perhaps the greatest danger for Hay’s self-defining method: “Underneath her friendliness and anxiety something is shifting, the ground is giving way. Events seem to have collapsed together in her mind. The move into the house, her return from New York, her separation from Michael Snow—they all seem to have happened in the same year” (143). The collapse of events makes their memory useless: Hay’s consciousness—tunneling, hybridizing, above all differentiating—in fact demands continual analytical clarity, and perhaps higher levels of self-criticism than those needed by an awareness more attuned to constants and standards. Tunnels may be followed at apparent random, and synchronous connections may be unforeseen, but the elements of data absolutely must be kept separate and unencumbered because the self may be defined only in its motion among them.

Horrified by Wieland, Hay finds better confirmation in other Canadians who have passed through her present space. Glenn Gould satisfies Hay’s Miltonic self-consciousness by appearing, overcoated, always to be in Canada. Dressed for winter in all weathers, filming *The Idea of North*, Gould becomes the solitary upright figure in the mythic band of Hay’s double vision. Both his ancestry (furriers) and his preparation for playing (soaking hands in hot water) become focal points:

In Gould all my fascinations coalesce: the notion of hot and cold as entities, of fur and snow as a tangible expression of those two forces. The small oriental rug at his feet—furs to China—embodies the longing for Cathay that unlocked a snowy country and led by indirect trade routes back to China. (CT 68–69)

The circuitous patterns, the invitation to connect, the historicity made present: Hay’s recognitions in Gould encourage her method. So, too, his studied slowness leads Hay from landscape to insight. “He associates music with great fields of snow. As a boy coming back from the cottage on Sundays, he listened to the New York Philharmonic broadcasts and saw that landscape roll by. His speech has the same contours, the monotonous tone and delicate construction of snow” (53). Similarly, Hay’s discussions

of landscape photography have shown that her interest is not in the climate itself but in the response to it, the way it requires deliberation and transformation into text “as the inscape of national identity” (Bhabha 295).

Gould scripted everything about his public appearances, every word of his radio performances, with a self-consciousness that reveals underlying fear of loss; in Hay’s terms, he invokes the cold, or its musical equivalent, silence, in order to gain the energy that comes from taking measures against it:

Gould boasted about making 131 edits in a speech of two minutes and forty-three seconds in his documentary on Richard Strauss—about one edit per second. He made his recordings very slowly, laying down two and a half to three minutes of music for every recording hour. (53–54)

In the (auto)biographer’s self-awareness, the increasing variety of experience must be continually monitored, and edited, to maintain the discrete separation of elements that permits accurate measurement of the mind’s high-velocity travel. Gould thus presents an antidote to Wieland, whose simultaneity represents not a strengthening of focus but a disturbing collapse of differentiation.

For autobiographical purposes, Hay’s references offer both analogical material and a methodology that eases her fears of effacement. She worries that her commitments as wife and mother, as expatriate, will subsume her adult clarity, so that the act of writing is fully linked to the defense of her autonomy. “How we wait! How women wait. Waiting for Canada. Waiting for light. Waiting for life to fill up and make sense. Waiting for words to arrive” (*CT* 123). Identifying herself as the active biographer is an important strategy, especially beneficial in the feminist proactive mode of rescuing others from oblivion. Champlain and Thompson hardly mention their wives, but Hay’s text works carefully to restore emotional resonance to their official coolness. Her discussion of Hannah, a nineteenth-century Inuit in New York, begins with a similar rationale. Hannah (Tookoolito) and her husband, Joe Ebierbing, traveled south with Charles Hall, appeared onstage at lectures and at P. T. Barnum’s Museum, and returned north with Hall’s disastrous polar

voyage of 1871. “The navy prepared an official account of the expedition ... Hannah isn’t even indexed. Tookoolito—see Ebierbing. And under Ebierbing—only Joe” (*OSH* 65). Hay’s account sets out to restore the value of Hannah’s life, especially by emphasizing her dislocation in a warm climate and her grief at the deaths of her two children. Writing it rescues Hay as well from the erasure she fears in her comfortable life in New York: “I could be happy there, except for the nagging inescapable feeling that I’d sold out” (*CT* 123). Acting on her own behalf, however, forces Hay to consider additionally whether she has reversed the direction of rescue. Does she exploit Hannah and the others by turning them into characters in her own book, buying autobiographical validity with their suffering? What, Hay asks, makes her treatment of Hannah different from Hall’s or Barnum’s? Again, her disloyalty, her refusal of seamlessness and fixity, preserves her integrity.

In *Captivity Tales*, Hay answers the justification problem with the hybridizing strategy we have seen, breaking up the extended passages of biography that help structure *The Only Snow in Havana*. Such long pieces offer a useful sense of roundness and complexity, but at the cost of disguising how active a narrator must be in acquiring material and manipulating text—turning Hannah into a character and her life into plot. By reconfiguring some of the same material into shorter passages in *Captivity Tales*, Hay relocates biography as referential within autobiography, focused upon self-aware processes of acquiring and analogizing data. The time frame shifts from a narration of the past to a notation of her awareness of the historical past at a more recent period of autobiographical construction. Thus, Glenn Gould’s habits as a pianist do not so much form a portrait of Gould in New York as they corroborate the writer’s present awareness there in an apartment that receives too little sunlight: preparing to record *The Goldberg Variations*, “he poured scalding water from a kettle into a basin and soaked his hands for twenty minutes (the length of time this room is soaked in light)” (*CT* 52–53). Similarly, she joins the stories of two others Canadians “stranded in New York” (115) to underpin her own anxiety:

When Minik went back north, it didn’t work out. Nor did it work out for Hannah. She went back with Hall, and then re-

turned south with him... I sit in the old rocking chair from Renfrew and listen to Stan Getz... It isn't relaxing or expansive, this business of being Canadian, at least not the way I'm living it: uncertain about whether to go back and when, distrusting my desire to return even while I believe in it, thinking about little else. (117)

Her present dilemma is historicized, giving the autobiographer at least the consolation of not feeling so singular after all; at the same time, the details of past lives are presented in unusually vivid emotional context as components of ongoing, complicated, genuine anxieties (which illuminate the commentator's own, of course). Hay's disloyalty, here an inability to devote herself entirely to an objectified topic, becomes at last a source of stability. Dealing instead with the biographical past as reference, she avoids reductive assumptions of full understanding and, at the same time, can attach the validity of objectified comparison to the analysis of her own experience (Mason 41); this method is precisely the kind of locating mechanism demanded when principles of indeterminacy disallow claims of fixed identity.

As with her biographical analogues, Hay constructs an encompassing narratorial present that elicits her own past at several different removes; she does not necessarily expect past events to offer continuity or precursory rationalization, but rather welcomes their elusive complexity as a truer sign of engagement. So, as we have seen, she begins a story in Mexico: "On my way to Trotsky's house in Mexico City I walked past an ice cream store called Siberia" (*CSL* 56). Then she draws a more general point about her two-zone viewpoint: "We start in the south and end in the north. We look for warmth and find Siberia" (57). A few pages later in another chapter, "Siberia" has become the title of the Trotsky essay as she describes writing it, and the point is her attempt to work in the midst of distraction: "Today ice fell. It covered the patio and battered the rose. As I was working on 'Siberia'" (63). The discontinuous, multivalent usages of Siberia as place, object, and text acquire more fullness by remaining distanced and differentiated than they would by collapsing into static symbolic coherence. Aspects of the self occupy discrete spaces and times (Nussbaum 133–134); the tunnel metaphor here

allows a kind of time travel, in which the observer encounters herself at a variety of different periods in the same location (i.e., within the space of the page).¹¹ In *Small Change*, completed after her return to Canada, the autobiographical incurve is nearly complete in itself, so that Hay's previously characteristic analogizing disappears, along with the expatriate's useful distinction between Canada and elsewhere. Disloyalty now becomes a matter of self-definition.

That *Small Change* does not evoke national identity as a major concern may seem jarring after its high prominence in the previous volumes. Certainly, Hay's return to Canada has reversed the direction of its comparative value—has opened, that is, an entirely new set of tunnels for locating nexuses of self and nation. Now there is Canada in the complicated present, along with the several versions of Canada, resided in or invoked while living elsewhere, in the problematic past. With the reversible time schemes of observation and memory, this multivalent orientation, more precisely the ability of polarities to shift in time, suggests further disloyalty: Hay has come to see nationality as an interactive reference, useful only outside itself. The mythic upright figure actually depends upon an observer to see it in the snowy landscape, or a narrator to put it there, and once the Heisenbergian consequences become obvious the image can no longer be considered encompassing but must appear as a textual arrangement within the self-conscious mind.¹² Thus, while "friendships gone wrong" is the nominal cover-blurb topic of *Small Change*, the volume more accurately presents a tightening of Hay's autobiographical focus to concentrate upon her own participation in constructing and narrating complicated transactions.

Extending the present while eliminating the need for temporal certainty allows Hay to pack together several time referents at once (Gilmore 10). Her encounter with Leonard after years of absence, for example, first arouses a crisis of accommodation. "At home I made a pot of tea and looked out the window for a long time. I looked for big words to balance all the hurts—innocence, betrayal, humiliation. But big words don't begin to compensate for small memories" (SC 107). Concept and textuality cannot be applied, but will have to emerge, in order for the past to be brought into present sense. Back at age twenty-seven, but at

the same place in the text, there was the fascination of late-night work and endless companionship:

Leonard talked and I listened. Politics, old movies, baseball, odd encounters, figures from history; he had a way with an anecdote, a joke, a telling phrase; I listened, and there wasn't a single thing he said that wasn't interesting. What do I remember now of all those well-turned sentences? (109)

Hay of the past was absorbed, perhaps too thoroughly, and Hay of the present can see that she was and be generous about it, but the scattered listing of topics offers little help in extending Leonard's charm to the present. By the end of the opening segment of the story, the voice has toughened: "Here are some memories, Bethie's memories of Leonard B." (108). Hay has outgrown his neediness, his filling the air with words, but her own memories still invade dreams and waking patterns (110), creating further disturbances.

"A year ago I was at my desk writing to old friends to tell them I had moved to Ottawa. I reached for my address book and it fell open to *Leonard Brooks*. . . I made myself walk down his street. . . At the corner there was a café not unlike one we had gone to in Toronto" (111–112). The present recollection in this text of a previous text ("I was writing") accidentally finds another text ("my address book"), which calls up memory with enough disturbance that she must describe herself needing "force" to control it.¹³ Yet the multiple textualizing, at several periods and levels of formality—book, letters, address book—shows how the ironic stabilities of distance and discontinuity ("not unlike") are achieved. Traits of deliberation and continual self-questioning, differentiation maintained at high and costly levels, prevent Hay's sensitivity from slipping into the bathetic manipulations of Leonard, distorted collapse of Joyce Wieland, or the abject self-disgust of the teacher in *The Browning Version*.

Ultimately, for Hay, experience forms the cold, snowy field, through which travel small, vulnerable texts. Words announce the life, but writing leaves her unguarded; abandoning another friendship, she is staggered by the power of experience—"I wrote down: I am taken over by what I'm drawn to: her vivid, effusive, perceptive, exaggerating presence.

I wrote: I am afraid she will read this, yet I write it anyway; always afraid of someone's reaction, yet writing anyway." (SC90). Turning the self into text is a dangerous activity, raising the fear of discovery, of unintended self-revelation, of artifice. There is also the disloyalty of writing itself: "Again and again I find a small interesting observation passed over in favour of a 'telling' image or metaphor. I'm always trying to make what I see *into* something, in an odd and unhappy overextension of myself" (104). Text tends to concretize meanings, and the process of reading successive pages tends to enforce linearity—two of the fearful errors Hay works to avoid. Her corrective gesture, then, locates the self by maintaining differentiation while avoiding a fixed or encompassing summation. With techniques of nonlinear progression and notations of trajectory instead of position, Hay examines a life of multiple directions, conflicting judgments, and liminal definitions. In search of a clarity all the more admirable because it continually questions how much it can bear, Hay charts the expanding surface of her consciousness, feeling in every passage the pang of disloyalty but always, courageously, "writing anyway."

Notes

- 1 The title refers to Robert Browning's 1877 translation of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, and helps establish themes of betrayal and loss which are also general concerns of Hay's work. Crocker-Harris, the teacher, had begun a new translation early in his career, but abandoned it; he will renew the project in retirement with greater knowledge of pain and survival. For Hay, the transformation of experience into text is a primary method of locating identity.
- 2 Both the rhythm and the intertwining of text and sensation echo Khayyam (46):
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.
A harder, more coarse version appears later in the third person: "She wants to ... hunker down beside a fire and brew a nasty cup of coffee. Maybe a dog for company, maybe a bottle or two of gin" (SC 101).
- 3 See Smith: "The politics of the body can open up a space of contradiction, drift, homelessness, a gap through which a complex heterogeneity destabilizes our sense of any stable identification" (267).
- 4 The boundary of a black hole, for example, offers an infinite interior surface formed by gravitation so strong that space and time are curved upon them-

- selves and “nothing can escape” (Ferris 80). Also formed by extreme gravitation, a worm hole is an elongated “tunnel connecting two distant points in space. Wormholes could provide the ultimate in efficient travel: a wormhole a mile long might connect two regions of space hundreds of light-years apart” (Ferris 100). Or, metaphorically, a line of text could connect two distant and seemingly unrelated regions of experience. Hay is not alone, of course, in linking subjective time schemes to contemporary scientific models. *The Stone Diaries* explicitly makes such a connection with Irigaray: “The self is curved like space ... and human beings can come around again and again to the sharpness of early excitations. The sexual spasm ... is the way we enter the realm of the ecstatic” (Shields 247).
- 5 This uncertainty of motion also characterizes theoretical behavior of material within a black hole (see n. 8 below). Again, *The Stone Diaries* offers a similar image of pathways: “biography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams” (196). Shields’s geological figure is stable enough in human time that her narrator can still refer to fixed standards and thus to judgments of “error.” Hay’s tunnels, on the other hand, are chaotic systems, subject to change with variations in weather, conditions of the surface above, and the passage of traffic within.
 - 6 Cf. Ricou’s description of prairie landscape drawn by such writers as Wallace Stegner and Margaret Laurence: “in its stark simplicity—solitary vertical man against the uninterrupted, empty horizontal—they find it an ideal mirror for the dilemma (and often the strength) of existential man” (145). For Hay’s modification below, see also Bhabha: “If, in our traveling theory, we are alive to the *metaphoricity* of the peoples of imagined communities [...] we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of ‘doubleness’ in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a ‘centered’ causal logic” (293).
 - 7 “Heisenberg indeterminacy reveals that subatomic particles do not have definitive positions in spacetime; rather, their locations can be specified only in terms of probabilities ... the point is not that it is hard to find out just where, say, an electron is, but that the electron actually *has* no exact location” (Ferris 97).
 - 8 In chaotic systems, including Hay’s patterns of disclosure, causality and linearity are discounted, and order becomes a matter of statistical arrangement. The goal is to create a field of information so dense that the instability of any particular item will have only a small effect upon the whole. Such density, however, also increases the probability that oscillation of small items will set up a harmonic resonance that can expand into larger sequences and unpredictably affect the entire narrative system.
 - 9 Mason notes that in early modern autobiography: “the disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (22); the apparent selflessness of biography licenses a heightened awareness of the narrator’s relationship to the subject, and thus enables autobiographical assertion (23).

- 10 “New York gives me Canada in a way that is more vivid, more sentimental, than Canada gives me itself” (CT82). Meeting other Canadians in New York, Hay’s sense of foreignness leads more easily to discussions of unstable national sovereignty than to assertions of a solid home identity (72–73).
- 11 Ferris (101) notes that some physicists dislike the gaudy implications of “time travel” and refer instead to “closed timelike loops,” as in the quoted description of an incurving, captured past by J. Richard Gott III: “Imagine that you fall into a black hole. Hoping to survive as long as possible, you steer for a closed timelike loop. There you see, lets say, eleven images of yourself. The first one says to you, ‘I’ve been around once.’ The second says, ‘I’ve been around twice,’ and so forth. You whirl through the first loop and see yourself in the past, falling in from the black hole horizon. Wanting to be helpful to yourself, you call out, ‘I’ve been around once.’ Another loop and you’re second in line. ‘I’ve been around twice,’ you shout” (102). For the psychological insecurity within such a pattern, cf. Bhabha’s sense of time and self-recognition: “The cultural moment of Fanon’s ‘occult instability’ signifies the people in a fluctuating movement *which they are just giving shape to*, so that postcolonial time questions the teleological traditions of past and present, and the polarized historicist *sensibility* of the archaic and the modern” (304).
- 12 See Nussbaum: the postmodern autobiographical self is “less a reified thing than an ideological construct Individuals construct themselves as subjects through language, but the individual—rather than being the source of his or her own meaning—can only adopt positions within the language available at a given moment” (131).
- 13 The time-frame and textual images make clear how much effort this required:

A year ago I was at my desk writing to old friends to tell them I had moved to Ottawa. I reached for my address book and it fell open to *Leonard Brooks*. His name coiled in black ink off the page. His address was less than a dozen blocks away.

I made myself walk down his street. It took several months to screw up my courage and even then my heart was pounding. A block short of his building, I chickened out and cut over to another street. Some weeks after that I made myself go all the way. (SC 111)

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