

Australian- Canadian Studies

A Journal for the Humanities and the Social Sciences

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Cover:

Still from *Black Robe*



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PHYLLIS WEBB



*"Poetry may
freely ravage the pulse of evil
that throbs in the dark incestuous part
of every earnest lover's earthly heart."*

"Two Versions", The Vision Tree: Selected Poems (1985)

Photographer:
Betty Fairbank

GERRY TURCOTTE AN INTERVIEW WITH PHYLLIS WEBB

Canadian poet PHYLLIS WEBB was in Australia recently to participate in the Adelaide Writers' Festival. She was born in Victoria, British Columbia.

Phyllis Webb is no stranger to radio. She worked as a writer and broadcaster for the CBC — the Canadian equivalent of the ABC here in Australia — and was Program Organizer and then Executive Producer of the program "Ideas" from 1965 to 1969, a program which has been called "one of the most important and successful series ever broadcast on that network".

Although Webb is a teacher, essayist and reviewer, it is fair to say that she is primarily known for her work as a poet. She has published ten books of poetry, and has won the distinguished Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1982 for her book, The Vision Tree.

GT: Phyllis, Welcome to Australia, and to the ABC. I recently went through a bibliography of your writing and I came across an entry entitled *"The Question as an Instrument of Torture"*. I haven't heard this radio piece but does it say anything about your own views about being interviewed, anything I should be wary about at the beginning?

PW: Well I know that interviewers become quite anxious when they know that I wrote this piece, but it did come out of a series that I was hoping to plan for "Ideas", and out of my own preoccupations about why I am so uncomfortable about being questioned, when in fact, my mode was to question, and I often earned my living, when I was a

freelance broadcaster, as an interviewer. I think, in some ways, it went back to my school days, but really this was a more philosophical investigation of the nature of the question itself in our language.

GT: So I'm fairly safe to proceed?

PW: I think so....

GT: I actually found out that you were coming to Australia quite by chance. I was recently in Canada and I stayed with the novelist Jack Hodgins in Victoria and while I was there you telephoned to ask Jack about his own love affair with Australia. And I got the feeling afterwards that you weren't a particularly confident traveller. Is this a fair assessment? Are you someone who doesn't like adventuring into unknown worlds?

PW: When I was young I used to be a quite ambitious traveller. I think young people travel more easily than older people and now it just seems to me to be very disruptive. But I can't seem to say no when the invitations come along. And I'd never been to Australia or New Zealand.

GT: I think it is fair to say that your work is complex, that it's fairly dense writing overall. Your approach is not of the sort that one sits down to in search of a simple formula, nor do I think it should be. But how do you think this complexity has affected your public reception in Canada? And alternately, how have public expectations also gone about shaping your own writing? For example, do you change your writing to suit expectations?

PW: Well perhaps I could start with the latter part of the question first. I don't think I attempt to write for an audience. I really don't think many writers do. I did once attempt to simplify my poetry to the barest bone, but it came about in a very unconscious way and it took me a little while to recognize what I was doing when I found these little tiny poems, very Japanese haiku-like, that were emerging. This was some time ago and that turned into a book called *Naked Poems*.

But once I saw that I was purifying my act, I realized that it was an autocritique of my earlier work which *had* been rather dense and elaborate. But now I don't know, I really enjoy the multiplicity of things happening in a poem and I like things to flash and leap and

perhaps I overdo it sometimes, but I think I also write fairly plain, straightforward poems.

GT: It's interesting that you say you like things to flash and leap because some of the rigour of your poetic structures would *seem* to argue against that sort of spontaneity. One of your recent critics, for instance, suggested that you are a poet of conceits — that you prefer to work within strictly set limitations. You mentioned the haiku, which is a very complex form to write.

PW: But I wasn't writing haikus, exactly, my work was just slightly influenced by that form.

GT: Still strictly defined conventions however. And also, more recently, your latest book seems to set an even more difficult agenda. I think you called it "Basing a series of poems on words, phrases or sentences that arrive unbidden in your mind" and then working with the product of this inspiration. Are you ever afraid of over-schematizing because of those sorts of demands you place on yourself, or do they work the opposite way with you?

PW: No, I don't think the projects last that long. Before I wrote *Hanging Fire*, which is the book you're referring to, where I was picking up on "given" words and phrases and sentences, I wrote a book called *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* — an old Persian form which I was challenging in various ways. And that was certainly a very set agenda. But the book wrote itself fairly quickly; it was a very good expression for what I wanted to say, and how I wanted to proceed. And then when I moved into the next book, it was a project but, I suppose I enjoy doing these things so much, I don't feel constrained by it, I just sort of swim in there and do it, and then it's over, it's gone and I move onto something else.

GT: It's a strange combination, imposing a limitation but also working on intuition.... Bouncing off the set constraint as it were.

PW: Yes.

GT: In an early poem simply called "Poet", you described the role of poet in almost mystical or religious terms: "I am promised, I have taken the veil, I have faced each station of the cross", which are lines from the

poem. Now I realize that there is a fair level of irony in the poem. But is your sense of the poet accurately represented in these terms?

PW: No. I was pretty young at that time. And I'm not really a Christian. I'm really more of an atheist than anything else, and at that time I don't know why, I adopted this nun-like mood, or the analogy of the nun, but in some ways it did work, because the life of the poet does require a great deal of silence, solitude, meditation, commitment, a sense of wonder and awe and so on.

GT: But one could say in fact that your career has almost negotiated a path between these sorts of extreme silences and creative outbursts. Some fifteen years separate one of your collections from another. And then in 1982 *three* volumes appeared. Are you conscious of a need for silence? Are you, like Rilke, jealous of a privacy of thought before expression can be performed?

PW: Yes, I live very much in silence and I have lived on an island for quite a long time now, venturing off and doing things like teaching which are very social, or going to festivals which are also extremely social. So I am not a total recluse, but I do have an enormous need, just a private personal need, to be quiet and reflective.

GT: It's interesting to hear you say that because in all of your books I've also had the sense of a community of writers around you. Your books allude frequently to writers, both in dedications and in the poems themselves. There is the well-known story about one of your poems inspiring Timothy Findley's restructuring of his novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and perhaps an even more remarkable story which has to do with your 1980 book *Wilson's Bowl* which Northrop Frye called "a landmark in Canadian poetry". Apparently, when that book failed to win a nomination for the Governor General's Award, it's said that a group of poets led by Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and P.K. Page, actually got a collection together of \$2300 and sent it to you as a commemoration of your work and as a protest at this exclusion.

PW: I think I should just add b.p. Nichol who started the whole thing.

GT: That's very unusual. This is not something that happens all the time.

PW: Well it has happened once before in Canada and that was with Milton Acorn who was given "The People's Poet's Award" as well. It was very moving and I received a beautiful card that thanked me for being a model of good poetry, or something like that.

GT: I guess I'm trying to suggest that it was a significant statement by the Canadian writing community. Did it change, as it were, your status in that community? By that I mean, having suddenly made this major proclamation of your work — and such well known writers — did it prompt a reassessment of your place in Can. Lit.?

PW: I don't think it was very much publicized. I don't think they wanted their names to be known, for instance, and so it wasn't that well known that this was done. It was really just for me and it wasn't broadcast around that much.

GT: I suppose that it doesn't need to be said that that community role in your life is crucial? Simply to know it's there, even if you don't happen to live amidst it.

PW: Yes, the community of poets and other writers in Canada has been extremely important to me over the years, and this has shifted. You know, the personnel has shifted.

GT: I'd like to look at that because you've always seemed to me to be a West Coast poet, and in fact you've said yourself, and I quote you here, "the West Coast is my psychic home". Yet one of the most important early communities for you was the poet's group in Montreal in 1950s which included Louis Dudek and Leonard Cohen to name a few....

PW: Irving Layton, Miriam Waddington.

GT: At least two of them are great patriarchs in Canadian circles. How much does this division between East and West now influence you, particularly given the schism between East and West which has really been exacerbated by the politics. How have you made that move from these two communities?

PW: My membership in the Montreal community really was a long time ago — and I have been on the West Coast now for twenty years, so that I really have little connection in Montreal, except with one younger

poet/ editor/ painter and a couple of other writers I know slightly. More of my friends now live in Toronto, Alberta, Winnipeg and BC.

GT: I'd like to touch briefly on politics.... The density of your imagery and the specificity of many of your poems, suggests that it would be difficult for you to be intensely political in your writing. But in fact that's not true. You've been remarkably committed to politics throughout both your life and your work. Recently, however, you were quoted as saying that you are "disillusioned about political ideology". Which political movements have specifically disappointed you and how has your commitment to these ideologies changed in your writing over the years?

PW: My first political commitment was to the socialist party in British Columbia, when I ran as a candidate when I was 22 years old. I was quite a passionate Socialist at that time and remained so for a while and then gradually became critical and over the years have been more and more disillusioned. First of all, with the NDP, which is the social party in Canada and their slow movement towards realizing the importance of the environmental movement, of the women's movement ... they have caught up now ... but it was very slow. A little reluctant, a little too reluctant and also I just felt they were too middle of the road, middle class and so on. Then I went into my anarchist phase, having been moved by Paul Goodman's book *The Empire City* to begin to study anarchism and the figure of Peter Kropotkin became a kind of father figure and ideal.

GT: In fact, you actually wrote a sequence of poems then, that you considered a failure?

PW: Yes.

GT: Why a failure?

PW: Well, because I intended to write a book and I only wrote a sequence, or a few poems and then the whole impulse of that book faded, as my feminism began to arise and I saw that the anarchist's was just one more patriarchal utopia and I'd better get on to something else.

GT: That leads me to my final question, because one of the most notable changes of commitment that I've noticed in your work, in reading through from your early poetry through to the present, is a

shift away from masculine influences to feminine ones. Your early references are to Marvell, Donne, Marx, Rilke, Pound and Joyce — not to mention the Montreal school of mostly male poets of the '50s, led by Louis Dudek. More recently you've appealed to Gwendolyn MacEwen, Margaret Atwood, Bronwen Wallace. How do you account for this shift in emphasis and was it a deliberated change on your part?

PW: In part yes. Because after I failed to write the Kropotkin poems I produced a book called *Wilson's Bowl*, in which I wrote a foreword and said that I felt that I had really been repressed, in a sense, or that there had been a kind of self-censorship, that I had not really adequately acknowledged the female influences in my life. So, with my consciousness raised, I did begin to acknowledge and write differently.

GT: Did you find this community suddenly write back to you in a sense?

PW: Yes, because some of the feminist critics then began to take on my work. Reviews were written and I thought my goodness I am a feminist poet. It seems that it's there and that they're picking up on it and a reinterpretation of my work has occurred....

GT: I wonder if you would mind ending this interview with a poem.

PW: You mentioned Bronwen Wallace who was a poet. And before she died — about two years ago — she produced a book of stories as well. So she was a storyteller, and this is a poem about Bronwen.

Bronwen's Earrings

long, or large and circular
the only decoration on her
tall frame, her plain façade
the better to hear the high
vibrations of your health, your
sorrows. A touch of fantastic
as she moved her head
to follow the plot
silver or gold flashing
hilarious light on the lure
of the pierced ear.

Spangles. Trapezoids, fluttery
things. Wild bird.

The pair I gave her
turquoise, oval, Chinese
I think and very long
with a history of survival.

As I drink this tea
on an ordinary day
someone crosses
a street in Kingston
picking up flute notes
soprano complaints
her earlobes tugged by a small weight
of chimes
the need to be heard, desire.

*The following interview was broadcast on ABC Radio and is reprinted here with permission of the producer of "Books and Writing", Robert Dessaix, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

"Bronwen's Earrings" is from *Hanging Fire* by Phyllis Webb (Coach House Press, 1990). It is reprinted here with permission from the author and Coach House Press.

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