

## Ms. Prufrock Gets Engaged

Stephen Collis. *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry/Anarchy/Abstraction*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007. 228 pp.

It is an unorthodox career, even for a poet. At age twenty-seven, Phyllis Webb appeared in her first chapbook from Ray Souster and Louis Dudek's Contact Press, the best—really the only—small poetry press in Canada at the time. She published her first book two years later in 1956 with McClelland and Stewart, well on its vodka-fuelled way to becoming CanLit's most important publisher of the next two decades. After McClelland's readers pissed her off, and Jack himself told her he didn't much care for poetry,<sup>1</sup> Webb took her second book to the United Church's Ryerson Press.

Then, in 1965, book three, a slim thing with a publisher in a city both then well off poetry's map, precious Periwinkle Press in Webb's hometown Vancouver. *Naked Poems* amounts to less than 250 lines spread over 47 pages, minimalist snapshots of blouses on the floor, flies on the ceiling, sunlight through plum curtains, someone asking questions in italics and someone else answering in roman. And, so the record says, it made Phyllis Webb's reputation.

Webb did not publish another book for fifteen years. After spending the rest of the 1960s working for CBC radio in Toronto (where she co-founded *Ideas*), she moved to Salt Spring Island and for the most part, stopped writing poetry. "I've settled, temporarily, for island waters, and quiet, parenthetical ways," she told *Maclean's* in 1971 (*Talking* 12). In the 1980s, Webb returned with four books of new poems, including what is generally thought her best, *Wilson's Bowl* in 1980, plus a selected poems that won her a sorry-we-missed-it Governor General's Award in 1982. In the early '90s, she stopped again, apparently for good this time. Still on Salt Spring, these days she paints.

Webb's first two books are better than most poetry, then or now. Some of the poems are as allusive as her potted bios have it, but not so many or so much. Allusion falls thickest in those the canon picked, especially the often anthologized "Marvell's Garden." Perhaps Webb's reputation for allusion comes from reading her in anthologies, i.e. her fondness for allusion is really teachers' fondness for allusion. They are difficult, yes, but their complexity comes less from chasing references than from unpacking their dense conceits and following their philosophical questions. These are poems that wear Webb's undergraduate degree—a BA in English and philosophy from the University of British Columbia—on their sleeve, poems

that use poetry to ask philosophical and spiritual questions like whether or not to keep on living, what love means in our time, whither sanctuary.

To my eye and ear, Webb's early work reads like a mashup of Eliot and Donne, which is to say pretty much like Eliot. They're poems of grief, of despair, expressed in Eliot's version of a conversational syntax through dense, repeating images, notably crystals and eyes. Her second book, written partly in Paris on a Canadian Government Overseas Award, adds a continental shade to the gathering doom: existentialist, post-war words like "nothingness" and "destruction." Eliot still dominates, but now Webb talks back. "Breaking," for instance, begins with a cry from the heart of *The Waste Land*: "Give us wholeness, for we are broken." "But who are we asking," Webb continues, "and why do we ask?"

There is a justice in destruction.  
It isn't "isn't fair".  
A madhouse is designed for the insane,  
a hospital for wounds that will re-open;  
a war is architecture for aggression,  
and Christ's stigmata body-minted token.  
What are we whole or beautiful or good for  
but to be absolutely broken?

(n.p.)

"Breaking" is a real poem, one of several from this period whose power comes from Webb's willingness to think through despair: "Lament," "Rhetoric for New Years," "To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide." Admittedly, the despair feels more learned than earned, more poetry than experience, but then so does the midlife crisis of the twenty-two-year-old author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

With *Naked Poems*, Webb's poems shortened dramatically in reach as well as length, becoming less about philosophy's "we" than confession's "me" and "you."<sup>2</sup> For the first time the poems connect into a barely discernible narrative, I think about a relationship that ends, as relationships do, with questions. But the most conspicuous change is Webb's paring down of her poems into what she called the "bone-essential statement" (Hulcoop), a few words in often no more than a few lines per page. In fact, thanks to its designer Takao Tanabe, *Naked Poems* is more naked than poems. According to a tipped-in blurb in my library's copy,

The space surrounding the poems is part of their total design and is conceived to be not only an aesthetic “distancing” but a time element as well—a pause, or pulse, just as the act of turning the page is part of the rhythm of the poems.

Charitably, the space gives the poems and the reader time to breathe. Uncharitably, it lends weight to what needs it, what could not be a book without it.

For me, over forty years later, *Naked Poems* is a much lesser book than *Even Your Right Eye* or *The Sea Is Also a Garden*, certainly than *Wilson's Bowl*: less striking, less enjoyable, less important. There is nothing wrong with it, but nothing really right either, nothing that hangs in the heart or the head. I like “Flies”—

tonight  
in this room  
two flies  
on the ceiling  
are making  
love  
quietly. Or  
so it seems  
down here  
(n.p.)

—but it’s a brief pleasure, a small smile for a small delight. I cannot see in Webb’s *Naked Poems* what it was that “secured her reputation as a poet,” to quote just the latest anthology, Robert Lecker’s *Open Country* (472). Was this sort of poetry really so new in Canada in 1965? Was it the content more than the form, the hints that the relationship is sexual and between women? Was this a big, bold, feminist book when I was two? Did you have to be there? Did you have to be high?<sup>3</sup>

The British Columbia poet and professor Stephen Collis was not there either: he and *Naked Poems* arrived on the planet the same year. But Collis has spent much more time thinking about and talking with Phyllis Webb than I have, so I hoped to find some answers to these questions in his book *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry/Anarchy/Abstraction*, published in April 2007 by Webb’s sometime publisher, Vancouver’s Talonbooks. Long story short, I remain ignorant.

Collis begins beautifully. His Introduction is the most engaging and best written of any of the fifteen books of English Canadian literary criticism published in 2007, and for my sins I have read them all. Collis is will-

ing to vary the Standard Academic Sentence from time to time, to show some personality in the style as well as the sense. And it is a likable personality, thoughtful and passionate. Mostly, I admire Collis's willingness to put the poetry first, to be *interested* in his subject, to describe his book from the start as an attempt to "pay tribute to the most startling poet the Canadian West Coast has produced" (21).

As its title suggests, *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good* wants to set aside Webb's reputation as CanLit's archetypal reclusive artist in order to show her considerable public side: her work for public radio and as a teacher, her reading in philosophy and progressive politics, and, especially, her commitment to a philosophically and politically engaged poetry.

For Collis, Webb's engagement starts with her "poetics of response," a phrase inspired by Webb's remark that "The proper response to a poem is another poem" (27). As Collis sees it, Webb's responses to other poets—all those allusions—stem less from an anxious, Bloomsian struggle between individuals, more from a feminist and increasingly anarchic sense of poetry as "common property" (17). Webb could have learned this sense of poetry as easily from Eliot as from feminists or anarchists, something Collis acknowledges but I don't think gives its due (28). He does, however, make a thorough case for Eliot as one of the two poets to whom Webb responds most, from the uncollected "New Year Message for J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1953 ("to soothe you I will comb your hair / and part what is left to care") to a ghazal in 1984's *Water and Light* that admits, "I have lost my passion. I am Ms. Prufrock" (qtd. in Collis 50, 69).

Besides Eliot, says Collis, the early Webb responds most to H.D. This newer line runs aground on two admissions, one in the text and the other hidden in a note: Webb's poetry contains no allusions to H.D.'s poetry (52), and Webb herself told Collis that H.D. was not a significant influence (83n64). Unperturbed, Collis argues for their similarities, the most significant of which turns out to be that they are both female poets who "turned to the sea" (54). (Yes, they and thousands of other poets of both genders: finding poets who ignore the sea would be harder.)

Webb responds to other poets as well, direct addresses in her poems early and late to Marvel, Rilke, Robert Duncan, Margaret Atwood, the nineteenth-century Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. I think Collis's discussion of these and other conversations unintentionally exaggerates the distinctiveness of response to Webb's poetic: all poets respond to other poets, many as often as Webb. But his main point is well made, well said, and an important correction to Webb's reputation as a reclusive, solipsistic poet: "this is a poet at grips with *Poetry* more than struggling with *her self*, a beach-

comber gathering the gear of dead men to see what a woman now might wear" (59).

Collis's main case for a political Webb rests on the argument that her poetry follows not only avant-garde poetics but also anarchist philosophy in its movement from "I" to "we," the lyric self to the multitude. He finds this anarchic turn announced in Webb's rejection of the "small, perfect closed poem" for the "serial poem" in *Naked Poems* (90) and ultimately in her silences, "an anarchist's abdication of positions of power and authority" (9). It is an intriguing argument, supported if sometimes distracted by detours into Webb's extensive research in Russian radicalism, especially for her aborted series of poems begun in 1967 on the anarchist Peter Kropotkin.

But pointing out that a poetic form is similar to a political form is, like any analogy, more interesting than illuminating. Presumably *Naked Poems* are more than a series, more than their form. Anything can be a series: these poems are particular words, in a particular series. Collis's reading leaves those particulars largely untouched, and so leaves me without any better sense of what I'm missing, what it was about these poems that made their author's name. It could be the form itself, but if it was groundbreaking Collis does not say, and in any case I have a hard time believing that a "formal analogue of anarchism's decentralist philosophy" could make anybody's reputation, even in Vancouver (90).

For Collis, Webb abandoned poetry for abstract painting in the early 1990s as a purposeful, political last step in her career-long move away from representation. For what it's worth, Webb did not say she abandoned poetry: she said poetry abandoned her (Collis 160). She also did not say she did it for politics' sake, anarchist or otherwise: she said she did it for pleasure's sake, to give up the vexed profession of poet for the happy hobby of painting (Collis 207-08). Myself, I suspect Collis comes closest to the real story when he notes that Webb's turn to abstract painting in "a strange way...returns to the late modernism of her origins as a poet" (162). There is nothing strange about it. Webb was a late modernist poet; now she is a late modernist painter. Understandably, but impossibly, we want our artists not just to survive the generations but to become them, to be forever hip. Phyllis Webb, forgivably and I hope contentedly, has not.

*Phyllis Webb and the Common Good* is a smart book, a book from which I learned enough to disagree with it at times. Regrettably, at least to my taste, Collis forgets his opening promise to put the poetry first. After the first chapter it gets increasingly hard to see Webb through the theory, a shift that puts Collis's already Heideggerian prose into overdrive. Collis

starts writing like this: “Poetry is language that we notice” (11). He ends up like this: “The real writing of the lyric is a writing of the not-lyric, and ultimately the real potentiality of writing lies in writing its not-writing” (207). I prefer the first.

I cannot fault Stephen Collis for not answering my questions about *Naked Poems*—they were my questions, after all, not his. But I come away from his book with a kind of answer all the same. Maybe he did not have much to say about *Naked Poems* beyond their form because there is not much else to say. Maybe what really made Webb’s reputation as a poet was not *Naked Poems*, but the silence afterwards, much the way suicide can make an artist’s career. As Webb wrote in “To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide,” “consider the drama! It’s better than a whole season / at Stratford.” *Naked Poems* made Phyllis Webb’s name not because we thought it was her best, but because we thought it was her last. Happily, we were wrong about both.

## Notes

- 1 “As you well know, poetry is not a personal interest of mine and therefore I don’t care too greatly what we publish in the field. We publish it because we consider it an essential part of our function that we do so” (McClelland to Webb, 1 Sep. 1961, in Solecki 58).
- 2 So it’s said, the usual story has *Naked Poems* influenced not by the confessional poets but by the other New Americans, the Black Mountain poets who visited UBC while Webb was teaching there in the early ‘60s: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and especially Robert Duncan, with whom Webb became close during a winter in San Francisco in 1963-64. John Hulcoop also plausibly suggests the influence of Sappho and haiku, while Webb herself later compared their “compacted passion” to Emily Dickinson’s lyrics (*Talking* 69).
- 3 Coach House, some of you will remember (or perhaps you won’t), started publishing the same year under the slogan “Printed in Canada by Mindless Acid Freaks.”

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