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PHYLLIS WEBB'S
SELECTED POEMS

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Fidelity

as in love

is in poetry

an unexpected satisfaction

So writes Phyllis Webb in a book of verse, itself an unexpected satisfaction so closely does it adhere to the spirit of her poetic development over the last fifteen years.

In his introduction, John Hulcoop describes this development as "the general movement of Miss Webb's poetry away from obsessive subjectivity towards self-objectification." He implies that the early poems fail somewhat through their "self-pitiful obsession with the despairing self," and that the later ones succeed through "a much more critical preoccupation with language as a means of proclaiming or presenting the nature of present things." Noting the influence of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus in her work, he goes on to conclude that Miss Webb's poetry is "fundamentally existential in direction."

Miss Webb herself concurs with Mr. Hulcoop's conclusion in a letter to him, 3 July, 1970. It is entirely too easy, however, to pigeon-hole a poet as "existential." Few moderns can escape the influence of the great writers on despair and alienation: we are their legitimate heirs. But the existential tradition proper belongs to the first half of this century, not to the latter half in which a new conception of the world is being created through the works of writers like Phyllis Webb.

Admittedly, the word "existential" connotes more than the literary and philosophical tradition which calls

itself "existentialism." But what the word connotes is redundant even when applied to modern poets in its broadest sense. One could as easily say "poetic" as "existential."

In the post-traditional world of contemporary life, where can the poet begin *but* with the self and personal existence? And where can he end but as Miss Webb's "Mad gardener to the sea, the moon"? His vocation is to tend the fecund, inevitably cruel, ultimately beautiful mystery which is the existence which we all share. His every word is a moonbeam which illuminates, yet preserves through the brokenness of its reflected light that mystery which is the origin of all growth and decay.

Miss Webb's "existential despair" is not that of a Kierkegaard, a Sartre, or a Camus; it rests upon poetic intuition, not metaphysic. She writes,

What are you sad about?

*that all my desire goes
out to the impossibly
beautiful*

Yes, she is, as she says elsewhere, "l'homme inconnu et solitaire." She writes of death, petrification through time, and the futility of love. She writes of the uncertainty of all things, and her words are filled with *angst*. But she, "The poet in his vision tree" who "imparts immaculate necessity / to murder, ignorance, and lust" sees *beauty* in existence—even if it is an impossible beauty.

Like the quilt under which the sleepers keep warm in her poem "Making", Miss Webb's poems are "made-ness out of self-madness / thrown across the bones to keep them warm": they are a compensation and a defence. They are also a transcendence:

*From the making made and, made, now making
certain order—thus excellent despair
is laid, and in the room the patches of the quilt
seize light and throw it back upon the air.
A grace is made, a loveliness is caught
quilting a quiet blossom as a work.
It does.*

The fidelity of Miss Webb's poetry is that she is faithful to the paradox of being, the sea-garden of dissolution and growth, of despair and beauty. Her despair is "excellent despair" by which "A grace is made, a loveliness is caught", as she puts it in her poem "Lament", in "the shape of a frugal sadness."

What characterizes Phyllis Webb's poetry is this kind of sublime *pathos*. Her poetic techniques evolve, her attitudes, ideas, and logic change from poem to poem. But always the pathos remains. I am reminded of Eliot's lines in "Little Gidding":

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Miss Webb's "still-point of turning time" is an "excellent despair" which has been caught in "the shape of a frugal sadness." It is this pathos, rather than an "existential attitude" which gives continuity to her poetic development.

If there is anything "obsessive" about her early poems, it is not her subjectivity, but her sense of the power and the weakness of words. As a post-traditional poet, Miss Webb *must* explore, and yet always arrive where she first started. Early poems like "Lear On the Beach at Break of Day" and "The Construct of Years" are almost baroque in their complexity and technique: it is difficult to compare them to her "Naked Poems", haiku-like in their simplicity. In her early poems, Miss Webb is creating a language for herself from the forms of common speech and poetic tradition. As she progresses in her poetic development, she discards what is unsuitable in the way of poetic conventions, continually striving for a purer Voice, a more comprehensive Word. By 1962 she is writing,

*. . . I want to die
writing Haiku
or better,
long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo.*

She clearly realizes the insufficiency of past tradition, of convention, of her history generally as a source of

poetic tools. She desires a *natural* line "clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo."

That Miss Webb should arrive at this conclusion is illuminating. What she is concerned with in her poetry are the three essentials of Japanese Haiku as set forth by the Master Basho in the Seventeenth Century (see N. Yuasa's introduction to Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*).

The three essentials of Haiku are *sabi* (loneliness), *shiori* (tenderness), and *hosomi* (slenderness). Now, *sabi* is the subjective aspect of the poem objectified in a special way: it is the unsentimental pathos in which the loneliness of the world by itself, and the loneliness of man by himself in that world meet. *Shiori* is the tender fidelity with which the pathos of this meeting is rendered. And *hosomi* is the clarity with which this rendering is realized, a line "clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo." While the Haiku is perhaps the most conventional of all poetic forms, relying as it does on an unwritten code of aesthetic properties, it is, at its best, the most *natural* of poetic forms. And it is the harmonious conjunction of these three qualities which make it so.

Even when she is writing most "metaphysically," Miss Webb works tenderly with slender lines of meaning, weaving a tapestry which evokes the quality of *sabi*. In "A Tall Tale," for instance, Miss Webb fashions a conceit in which a whale carves out a cave for a mermaid's rest, and the mermaid "sweet as dust" devises "a manner for the whale / to lie between her thighs." The lovers petrify in this unusual embrace, and one is left with an abiding sense of the petrifying power of time and the futility of love. The theme of the poem is by no means original, the attitude of the poet might be called "existential" with a little analytic overkill, but poetic success is achieved in terms of *sabi*. Somehow, this tortured metaphor achieves a sublime pathos. It is a tender thing, and slender in a way faithful to Basho's sense, however much he might disapprove of the poem on general principles.

In her "Naked Poems," the Oriental quality of Miss Webb's poetry is even clearer:

Tonight

quietness

in the room.

We knew

What is most important in Oriental poetry is not what is said, but what is not said, not what *is*, but what is not. Here *sabi* is achieved with maximum economy of expression in tender, slender verse. It is the void which separates the last line from the first three which counts; it is the *pastness* of the past tense in that last verse, and the stark emptiness of the first three which are important. This poem is not an existential statement: it is a lonely world in itself—one which we all know intuitively.

Haiku belongs to a tradition in which the conventions of art are means towards an end which transcends all cultural values including aesthetic conventions themselves. For the Haiku writer, however, the realm of the Buddha is not beyond the world, it *is* the world stripped of non-essentials. One might think therefore that Miss Webb, living in a post-traditional age, would have an advantage, that she is half-way into the realm of the Buddha through historical necessity.

Not so. Logical as it might be for Miss Webb to seek transcendence of a fragmented and fragmenting culture, hers is a difficult task if she actually wishes to achieve that transcendence. The Haiku-writer's culture supplied the means for achieving his end. Miss Webb, however, must create these means herself. She must create her own conventions, and in that creation transcend both them and herself. In her early poetry, "shapes fall in a torrent of design / and over the violent space / assume a convention." In her later poems, poetic form is in "the shape of a frugal sadness." Quieter and more contained, Miss Webb stares at reality as it is:

Why are you standing there staring?

*I am watching a shadow
shadowing a shadow*

Miss Webb's poetry is very much of this world. She is faithful to its impossible beauty, ever-changing and as unpossessable as a faithless lover. Like the shadow, she shadows a shadow.