

INTERVIEW / SHEILA WATSON

This interview took place on Tuesday morning, February 13, 1975, in Sheila Watson's room in the Hotel Georgia, following her reading of the night before at Capilano College. Those present, indicated by initials in the text, as "interviewers" (not quite an accurate term, in view of Sheila's engaging propinquity to field the question back to the questioner) were Pierre Coupey, Roy Kiyooka, and Daphne Marlatt. What follows is a short version of the original transcript, edited by Sheila at the request of The Capilano Review.

PC I guess what I would like to hear you talk about is your understanding of language, and the kind of things you were concerned with in your fiction and in *The Double Hook*: the uses you were making in the language that you felt were new, that were taking up directions that have not been pursued since.

SW Well, I don't suppose at that stage in my life I thought very consciously about being new. After all, people had been talking about "newness" for a long time. Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Wyndham Lewis were all born in the same year as my mother, 1882. Pound's *Personae* was published in 1909, the year I was born. By the time I wrote *The Double Hook* one could hardly take language for granted. I did work with the form, the actual form. One makes ad hoc decisions really — decisions about specific things. And a decision is often the result of some trivial argument — about provincialism or regionalism, say — issues which are now dead, or should be — internationalism, globalism, and the inevitable result, exasperated nationalism. (To Daphne) It is as if someone said to you, "Why Steveston?" And you simply went on writing your poems. I happen to be interested in Steveston because my grandfather and his cousin Marshall English built the first really mechanized cannery on the Fraser River opposite New Westminster. Later Marshall English moved it to the mouth of the Fraser River at Steveston. It was called the Phoenix Cannery, I believe — a name which staggers the imagination. I was born and lived on the banks of the Fraser. There is a myth that people who are born on the banks of the Fraser come back to the river to die. The poems have a special meaning for me but they transcend any personal meaning. They create a now which is accessible to anyone. The voice speaks and voices speak through it, or resist it. It seems to me one of the interesting things happening in Canada now is the conversation which is going on. Like your voice, Roy — a voice going from some place to another place. And I think this is why people like bp Nichol and Ondaatje and so on are so important, because they're creating a conversation which then creates the country. It's like Emily Carr. Emily Carr did certain things. If I go to the Island now — although I've looked at

trees, not just noticed them — I do see them through Emily Carr's eyes. She created part of British Columbia just the way the School of Seven, for good or for ill, created Northern Ontario. It's a question of whether these images are viable as a part of history — not because they are representational, but because they have created a way of seeing which then becomes part of the history of seeing in Canada. It is something which goes beyond reference — beyond access to archives.

DM There's an interesting movement in "Antigone" in terms of landscape. That is, you start with what seems to be almost archetypal and mythic landscape, and as the story continues, it gets more specific, more and more concrete until you get the actual geographic landscape in part of the region.

SW Yes. I began to work that way when I wrote "Brother Oedipus." I don't know why I started the Oedipus thing. I've always had a resistance to — almost a dread — of using experience which involves people I know as if somehow or other you robbed them. Have you ever felt that?

RK No I haven't. No, I haven't. I'm exactly contrary in that sense.

SW Well, yes — no, you've turned — you've found another device — your letters. So you speak directly to the person. You don't turn people into fictions. You speak to them publicly. Theoretically they could answer.

RK No. No, I don't have the ability to literally conjure up a man or a woman.

SW I'm not sure that I solved the problem in *The Double Hook*. I wrote a novel before *The Double Hook* called *Deep Hollow Creek*. It was never published. It has some interesting material in it. But it was wrong from the start really, I had to get rid of the narrator. I realized that I was writing about something which was not experience necessarily although I had lived in the place I was writing about, the Cariboo. I was really an outsider, and I had introduced an alien consciousness into a situation which had still not manifested itself in any meaningful way to that consciousness. I had lived there, as I said, because in a sense I had been thrown there. When I began the work which became *The Double Hook* I knew I had to create a total

fiction out of experience which was concrete — which defied the clichés imposed on it. I wanted to get rid of reportage, the condescension of omniscience. I've wondered since about the use of the Coyote figure. I needed him technically at the beginning. Perhaps I could have structured the work in some other way, but I didn't.

DM Interestingly, you give him a speech that is Christian. It comes out of Biblical reference, Christian liturgy.

SW There are many references to the Old Testament — expressions of fear.

DM One reminds me of something Christ said — I think it was in the Sermon on the Mount — you used a similar kind of syntax.

SW I might have done.

DM Yes . . . “happy are the dead for their eyes see no more.”

SW What Christ said was, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God.” Coyote's song recalls Christ's promise, but it is quite ambiguous.

DM And “my servant Kip, my servant Kip” — that's Old Testament.

SW Yes. Kip — a myth is built up around him in the context of the novel itself. Angel believes that he sees in a way other people don't see — even the bugs and the stripes on the stones. Then the seeing becomes the dread of all the others because they are terrified of being seen or seeing what they don't want to see. So they create the old woman. Even after she's gone, they see her because they always expect someone to be spying on them. In one sense they want to see but they don't want to be seen, at least some of them. The old woman is shameless. She defies every sort of constraint. She just keeps looking for something they don't see.

RK What sort of thing were you reading that might have been a source for aspects of the book? What were you into yourself?

SW I wrote the book in Calgary, you know, the second year I was in Calgary. I don't know what I was reading although I remember

finding Gabriel Marcel in the Calgary Public Library. But I don't think I was reading anything at that particular moment because I was composing the book in my head before it ever got on paper. And so it was a total thing. You must have done that with painting.

RK Yeah, literally.

SW Or writing too. But you can't live that way and live with other people because that's it — there's no space.

RK Do you still tend to write that way?

SW "Brother Oedipus," "The Black Farm," and "Antigone" were all written at that time of my life. I haven't written anything . . .

RK Well okay, how about your critical things?

SW It depends on what time I have and why I'm writing them. I do a tremendous amount of revision after they're on paper — I have an untidy mind so I pursue things I know I'm going to have to cut out but I keep on until I've made the circuit.

RK Phil Whalen is the only other person whom I know who has told me that he composes largely in his head. In Japan, he'd go for a walk in the day and the whole business of that walk was to literally write a paragraph for that day. And he would go through this extended walk and back, formulating in his head.

DM Was yours in that detail? I mean, was it essentially the structure you had in your head or, for instance, passages of dialogue?

SW I can't — now — remember that sort of thing — the actual fact. I remember only the experience. I've often thought since about Eliot's comment that sometimes a poem starts with a rhythm, not anything articulate at all, just a movement. One day on Bloor Street, when we were living in Toronto just after the war, I knew what I was going to do. And then we came away and

worked at UBC, as you know. And then I went to Powell River for a year and then to Calgary and it was then that I started writing *The Double Hook*. Now this is a long time after the original rhythm.

DM Did that year in Powell River — Powell River's a small community — did that perhaps trigger some of it?

SW It was an interesting year. Powell River's a company town — or was then. When I went there I knew I was only going to teach there for a year. When I went to the Cariboo in the early thirties, I thought this is it. This is where God has flung me. The Powell River experience was quite different. Did you ever know Vito Ciani? [To Roy] He had been trained at the Vancouver Art School. He taught art in the high school and he and his wife Erol lived in the woods, on the edge of the town. I used to spend the weekends with them quite often. Erol was a portrait sculptor. And I would sit for her because I was interested in her work. And we talked. Vito was very articulate. He was Italian — Canadian-Italian I suppose. And he always used to say he'd been brought up by sitting on his mother's knee while she read Dante to him. And I believe it. I don't remember the isolation — only the damp trees, and the sea, and the weekends of talk, while Erol worked.

DM I'd like to get back to character, and to your statement about feeling that you would rob someone if you wrote about them. Did none of the characters in *The Double Hook* have a resemblance that you can see to the people you knew in Dog Creek?

SW Well, as I said last night, I knew the parrot. He didn't live in Dog Creek, but in the beer parlour in the Ashcroft Hotel. And I had the experience of living closely with people who felt intensely but who were not particularly articulate — in any conventional or predictable way. I learned things from them and I wanted to create a language for what I had learned. I could have done it the Lewis way — from external detail simply — the hides and pelts — although that is a simplification of a

very complex way of seeing — or the Robbe-Grillet way; he says certain things which remind me of the problems I faced then — the rejection of the “stream of consciousness technique” as I thought it was used by Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and the dread of the kind of writing that uses other human beings as subjects.

RK Is that a fear in terms of the thing that gets written or is it a fear prior to that — that is, a fear of responding to people in those ways, or being a part of a context, and yet always being outside of it so that you are watching what they are doing for the sake of . . .

SW I think it is a quite primitive fear — the dread of involving others, of doing something to other people, as if you could really operate on them . . .

DM Well, yes, that’s a real dread. And yet there is something about the “realness” of a person that I want to be able to get into language and onto the page.

SW I know, but there is another way — a way in which the whole of experience is dissolved in a vortex — a kind of metamorphosis — which is different from trying to capture someone truthfully, or even to presume, I suppose, that you can do that.

RK It occurs to me that probably the metamorphosis of the actual inhabitants of that place has to do with the fact that it is many years later and through a good deal of movement that you came to write the book.

SW Yes, the images came. It wasn’t an act of reconstruction — like going back and saying I remember this — no one I ever knew did or said the things which are done and said. The people and the country and the animals and the plants gave me images for what I wanted to say.

- DM* So in fact it's filtered through the growth of our own consciousness, through the experiencing of those interim years.
- SW* Oh, I think this is inevitable — isn't it?
- DM* But do you think the characters in some way more internal?
- SW* Do you mean that the whole thing is a hoax?
- DM* No, *no* . . .
- SW* I mean, are you saying although you don't want a central consciousness, inevitably that's what you've got?
- DM* Not as a technique. I'm trying to get at how a character somehow evolves from, on the one hand, the actual people you live with, and then, many years later, on the other hand, a novel that creates a character out of the very sparse movements that are indicated, out of a sensing of each character's relationship to that place, to that locale.
- SW* The people in the novel are defined in terms of their relationships. It seemed to me that somehow, by some process, you had to create people the way you know them from day to day without documented history, without description, as you see living people who escape you at every minute but who are resolutely there. The way we are here. Narrative (history) doesn't matter. People are not estranged by absence or silence. You encounter them again and there's no gap that needs filling in. Does that make sense?
- RK* Yes, that makes sense. It makes a lot of sense.
- DM* The internal quality I feel is how you manage to create those people in their way of speaking to each other. That is, they do not, they hardly ever speak *to* each other. They speak obliquely, across a kind of isolation. They speak like people who are not used to speaking very much.
- SW* In fact, in those situations people speak very little. And why I should feel compelled to make them speak I don't know.

- DM* Oh no — I mean, how could you write a novel without having them speak?
- SW* I wanted to fuse the dialogue with the context — the reaching towards speech — the speaking out of silence — out of space.
- DM* But the various characters have very special questions they need to ask each other.
- SW* Yes. And often don't ask each other.
- DM* Yes. Or often don't get the answer.
- SW* Don't get the answer they want.
- PC* I was thinking earlier that when you were talking about not wanting to have an external narrator, any observer, that indeed — that gave me the feeling that I'd had from just reading the novel — not that it's simply poetic prose, but that you were actually using techniques of poetry in the novel.
- SW* I'm glad you avoided the term "poetic prose." It always upsets me because poetic prose means — to me — purple passages. I often think of Virginia Woolf in that way. I've always been afraid of sentimentality — the two kinds — the — the second as frightening as the first — the sentimentality of the naturalistic novel, the sentimentality of violence, the ash-can world and the prostitutes and so on.
- DM* The not-falling between the two sentimentalities makes for a very spare form of writing which recognizes the simple facts of existence, both of oneself and others, as well as what may happen between them. They happen, they *happen*, and nothing is made of them internally in the stream of consciousness way. That allows for a kind of phenomenal quality.

SW I'd like to think so. So one makes arbitrary statements like the thing is the adequate symbol — that's Pound —or the archetype is now, or I'm a phenomenologist. I'd read some Husserl in translation around 1950 because he was talking about things I was interested in. You asked about mediating. Before I ever went to the Cariboo, I'd read Eliot, and Pound, and Joyce, and Lawrence, and novels like *Sanctuary* and *The 42nd Parallel*. I wasn't innocent. I wasn't naive.

RK I was thinking how that being true, how it is that in *The Double Hook* whatever of that other thing was part of your awareness it is certainly buried in the matrix of the book, so that it doesn't separate itself out as some sort of influence or anything like that.

SW You can't escape influence. It starts at the beginning of your life. I suppose the greatest influence in my life — I mean at the beginning — was Beatrix Potter. And I always think there is a bit of Beatrix Potter in *The Double Hook*. I only thank God I was spared Christopher Robin.

RK Oh you were, were you?

SW Yes. He came later. My response to *The Tailor of Gloucester* was like a response to a play of Shakespeare. I can remember muttering as I often do still, "Alas, alas, I am undone and worn to a ravelling for I have no more twist." You're never innocent. You're compromised the minute you are born. Then there is the terrible responsibility for something like language which you can't destroy — the utterances which are going on around you if you pay attention to them — the responsibility for taking something into your consciousness.