
The Kropotkin Poems

Stephen Collis

“The Kropotkin Poems” is a book or sequence of poems about the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin that the Canadian poet Phyllis Webb did not write; they exist only as a 1967 grant proposal and several fragmentary poems (some titled “Poems of Failure”) that lie in the long gap between Webb’s 1965 *Naked Poems* and 1980’s *Wilson’s Bowl*.

I go to see Phyllis—the first time in almost a year, which is too long a gap, when someone is eighty-eight years old. Up early bus to first ferry the grey sea chopping against the causeway—November in August, the power still out at home—lowering and layered sky of various charcoals torn to shreds.

I’ve tried many times to write about poetry and anarchism. It’s too easy to fall into simple associations (the improvisational anarchy of contemporary “free” verse)—or to celebrate heroic figures—a problem Webb found herself up against with Kropotkin and his “saintly” image, the contradiction of “centralizing” anarchism’s history and ideas into an identifiable corpus.

I take the bus from Fulford Harbour to Ganges. Salt Spring Island is green in this storm despite the season’s long drought. Phyllis, too, is the same as ever, seeming not to have changed much over the twelve years I have been visiting. She is sitting in her chair, books and paintings all around her. By chance or clairvoyance, Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* is on the table at her side. “I don’t know how it got there . . .” she says.

Poetry and anarchism becomes another take on poetry and the political generally. Many poets (myself included) have been writing about this difficult nexus of late. Problems can arise when poets tell other poets exactly how this is to be done, how they are doing it wrong. Struggle is a particularity we each figure out alone

or in small groups. Though I think what we all want is the material, the street, real change—not escape into poems, but poems as avenues into the fight and fray. Thing is—one size never fits all, and difference is the difficult days we each must live, often or in large alone.

Phyllis says, off-hand, anarchism brought “messages for my poetry” (channelling William Butler Yeats). It’s not always so simply the poem’s proximity to action/activism that matters; often, it’s the passage walked in both directions between, the nature of the network, the relays that form an array between authors, ideas, movements, and yes, “actual” “actions.” We can become so mad for acts to replace words, for words not to supplant acts. Porosity is what I want in the relationship between art and politics. I want to go back and forth, as needed.

In her failed fragments of Kropotkin Poems, Phyllis writes of the “Insurrectionary wilderness of the I / am, I will be”—a temporal and transformative process that ends in being “something other.” Poetry pulls in the direction of such transformations, and it’s such insurrectionary wildernesses that keep pulling me back to it.

Phyllis and I decipher some of her marginal notes in Kropotkin, look at other books, a bright abstract painting (hers) we haven’t paid attention to before, order pizza, and drink beer. With each of us holding a copy of her new *Collected Poems*, me asking something about Kropotkin, Phyllis suddenly remembers a poem where someone is wearing a red hat, and we are both off searching for it, neither of us remembering. We find it at the same exact moment, working our way through the book from opposite ends.

What keeps drawing me back to Phyllis? Her strength to remain alone (which I lack), her resolute withdrawal, her ability to dwell in the glare of her fragments and failures. It’s as resistance that she continues. Islanded. Bulwarked. But open, curious.

What a barrage she had to endure—as a single, unaffiliated, unrepentant intellectual woman in her day.

I come to Phyllis for the possibilities of despair, for endurance, for the potentiality that remains in determined resignation (I can't go on / I will go on). And for her poems on Lenin and Kropotkin and the persistent and potent failures of our revolutionary dreams.

Her failures and refusals are fashioned from a position painfully honed in the negative space around the Western patriarchal colonial forward pushing and acquisitive arrow through time. Charles Olson: “it is unfinished business I speak of . . .” Webb: it is the business of not finishing I speak of—the Western and European urge to do, to make, to identify and dictate what is to be done that she undercuts, abandons. Her question is: what is to be *undone*? It's a question for the anthropocene—for this age of geophysical capitalism.

It is a luxury and a privilege to visit her. At just this moment—with the planet careening on its warming arc, spilling storms out of its darkening oceans, with young black men being regularly shot down in American streets and Indigenous land defenders holding the line in the path of numerous pipelines punching their way into the unceded heart of these mountains and rivers without end—it hardly seems the time to escape to an island to visit a solitary and aging former poet. But I do, as I must—holding to the resistances that I can.

Just before I leave, Phyllis mentions that she is getting rid of books, lightening her load. I ask about Kropotkin's *Memoirs*, on the table between us. No, she says, I don't think I can part with it yet. I leave soon after, with George Woodcock's *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin* (Boardman 1950) in my bag. It's a good second prize.