

# Careers and Explorations

## A Conversation with Phyllis Webb

**P**hyllis Webb is one of Canada's most respected poets, political voices, radio broadcasters, and visual artists. She published her first poetry collection, *Trio*, in 1954 with Gael Turnbull and Eli Mandel. Her latest volume, *Hanging Fire*, was published in 1990. Talonbooks has kept *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems*, for which Webb won the 1982 Governor General's Award for Poetry, in print. In addition to her work as a poet, Webb has published two volumes of critical prose: *Talking* (1982) and *Nothing but Brush Strokes* (1995). These collections include articles on Webb's drive to revolutionize the poetic line, her CBC broadcasts, essays on her left-leaning political views, a small sampling of reviews and correspondence, and several essays on her intensely visual approach to poetry. In 2014, Talonbooks published Webb's *Peacock Blue: Collected Poems*, edited by John Hulcoop; Hulcoop is also the author of *Phyllis Webb and Her Works* (ECW 1990). Announcing the release of Webb's *Collected Poems*, the Vancouver Writers Fest hosted "A Celebration of Phyllis Webb," which brought together writers on whom Webb had a major influence, including George Bowering, Sharon Thesen, and Daphne Marlatt. The *Collected Poems* offers a retrospective on nearly fifty years of her writing. It includes published, unpublished, and uncollected works that demonstrate her profound impact and achievement as a major Canadian poet of the twentieth century.

*This interview was conducted by Jeffrey Weingarten over the phone during December 2010 and January 2011.*

Jeffrey Aaron Weingarten (JW): I was rereading some of your essays recently, and I noticed you often think about where poems (yours and others') come from.

I think that is a suitable place to start. Since writing those essays, have you thought more about where your poetry comes from?

Phyllis Webb (pw): Do you ask that because they don't come about anymore? [laughs] They used to arrive usually with words and phrases and sentences that were given, that I heard. They simply arrived. That was usually the beginning of the poem. They arrived with an initial rhythm and a kind of impulse. But I also worked quite consciously, too; I wrote down words and phrases and rhymes and so on. Little notes that I would make in free association.

jw: I've always found that those fragments lead to poems that offer very strong, empowered voices. Is that how you perceive your own poetic voice?

pw: I'm not sure. I can't really characterize my own voice. It developed over time. I guess when I look at my early poems, apart from being embarrassed, I feel there is this young person, and of course there was. A kind of naiveté is there.

jw: Why do you say that?

pw: Because many of the poems are very subjective. Not all of them, but many. When I very recently read through old collections, I actually found myself sort of surprised that most of the poems aren't naive. But the ones that are . . . they are simply too uninhibited. My love poems, or my drastic expression about this love affair or despair or any of that. It is so open. Having become a more formal writer, I wouldn't be so revealing in my writing now, nor was I in my later writing. In my later poetry, there is still the "I" roaming around, but there I remain much more outside the poem, more distant, less subjective. The early poems are not so: "And In Our Time" and "Sprouts the Bitter Grain" and "Lament" are good examples of the naive poems. In a good poem, the persona protects one from self-indulgence, it establishes the poet as a real maker.

jw: Are you a better "maker" in the later writing?

pw: I suppose so. The content and especially the sound in my later poems are so much more beautiful. I think my ears opened somehow after those first early works. I became much more attuned to the language I was using. I really feel I developed as a poet. I don't mind saying that. I look at the beginning to the end: I am quite amazed at times at what I did. How did I do that? I sometimes wonder. I'm surprised that I could do things that looked so adept and accomplished in my later career. I have some admiration for myself, but mostly for the later work. It is there in some of the earlier ones, too, but not as often.

jw: Are there certain criteria that come to mind when you think about what makes a poem “likeable”?

pw: I’m not sure! I’m not a critic. I so often just read things and put them away. I can’t tell you much about them. Critics can say what is likeable.

jw: One of the most likeable things about your poetry, I think, is its iconoclasm.

pw: That is there, certainly. In the later work, the breaking and shattering becomes much more political for me. The earlier work is psychological: the idea of breaking down, that fragile sense of being. I think later work strikes me as quite revolutionary in its iconoclasm.

jw: Are you thinking of *Naked Poems* [1965]?

pw: No, even later than that: *Hanging Fire* [1990], which I think of as a very angry kind of book. I seem more liberated in that work. My anger was set free, and it comes out in a very strong voice.

jw: What made you such an angry poet?

pw: My feminism, in part. But also my sense of the social or political world as one that I am incapable of changing. There is some residual anger about the horrors of the world and the stupidity. I guess the anger is also more personal, it just comes out of a place in me which I didn’t access until late in my career. I think I expressed it best in my last poetry book [*Hanging Fire*], better than anywhere else.

jw: The anger seems germane to your work, but so does your attention to many poetic antecedents. I often hear Emily Dickinson, for example, in your writing. You seem in dialogue.

pw: With regard to dialogue broadly, yes, I think that’s true. I am often in dialogue with some “other” or another, like in “For Fyodor,” which is from the point of view of a beetle in the cabbage soup. It became a dramatic monologue and I didn’t deliberately set out to write one, but it ended up that way. That kind of poem is me in dialogue with some other voice: the voice of the beetle! I am very fond of that poem, I think it was one of my best, because of that sense of exchange. But Dickinson? I am not sure there is much of her in my work.

jw: I suppose I hear an echo, because I have always understood her as a poet struggling in her own way against the patriarchal line and conventions. I see that same struggle in something like “Poetics Against the Angel of the Death.”

pw: Ah, yes. I see what you mean. She never talks about metre the way I do, I suppose. But she is definitely breaking, or at least trying to break, the regularity and expectedness and the repetitiveness of poetry. It comes out

of her passion as a poet. She had a need to break through the accepted way of doing things, but she did that without totally smashing the system. I suppose I've said things like that before in my work. I oscillate between my anarchism and my timidity. I'm not totally timid, but, especially as I've grown older, I've become increasingly reluctant to act out my political beliefs. Just lazy, really. When I think about my relationship to Dickinson, when I throw her into parts of *Nothing but Brush Strokes* [1995], it is because she does what she does with respectable restraint. I suppose I can be that way, too. But then again, I never think of myself as being consciously influenced by Dickinson.

JW: Who were your major influences then?

PW: Gerard Manley Hopkins always comes to mind. Of course, Marvell. In his writing, I was won over by the cosmological and geographic aspects. I'm dealing with such things in "Marvell's Garden." The thinking aspect of those seventeenth-century poets, their ability to *think in* the poem, it just made me want to write that poem. I just recently reread "Marvell's Garden," and I don't think there is that much thinking going on there. But in it, I've incorporated Marvell's work, played with it, internalized his lines and images. And I identify with these things, of course; his garden is my garden, too.

Donne, too, was important to me. I suppose the seventeenth-century poets in general were very important to me. I think that comes across in my work clearly. I was fascinated by the intellectual content of the period, the way they worked it into the poetry. It became part of the intensity of the poem. It made an intellectual demand of the reader. Donne, for example, is always tussling with ideas. He struggled with ideas as though they were parts of his soul; they weren't just rational or intellectual struggles. He was up against a system, too, which I suppose made it another struggle I identified with. I equate my general intensity of thinking with his. But many of those poets dealt with such content in an amazing way.

JW: What about more contemporary poets?

PW: Louis Dudek and Frank Scott were major influences on me. Auden, and Spender, and all those folk from England. William Carlos Williams was very important to me. Dudek introduced me to his work. And, of course, Marianne Moore had a major impact on my writing. Another Dudek influence! He introduced me to her writing. He really got me into the American poets in a way that no one else had, because he had so much personal contact with them. Dudek was a mature man, very well-connected, by the time I was writing; he knew Pound, he knew many of them.

Then when I was in Montreal, I felt as though I discovered a light coming onto the page. Discovering all of these American poets felt like that. The objectivity, the plainspeaking, the spareness of their work. If only because he showed me them, Dudek had a huge effect on my writing. The time I spent in Montreal during the fifties was very educational.

Someone like Irving Layton, though, didn't have much of an influence on my writing. I understood him as a person (I think), but, at the time, I didn't understand his poetry; I was young and somewhat unsophisticated about poetry. It was complicated stuff in the fifties, but now not so much. But they were new poems, obscure and difficult in their era for me. Then you go and look at Williams: you understand it right away. Robert Creeley, the same thing. They're very lucid, they're clear. Very musical, I think. Very plain music, a plain song. I include Moore in there, of course.

jw: Did you know Moore?

pw: Not really. I went to New York in the sixties when I was working for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], and her publisher or someone had given me her phone number. I was going to call her for an interview, but someone had apparently made a terrible faux pas, and it did not go well. I *assumed* I could call her. It was one of those calls I made all the time at the CBC. But I can't remember who I talked to, but it was clear I never should have had the number in the first place! I felt very embarrassed, because I would never have done it if I had known it wasn't right to do. That was as close as I ever came to meeting her.

Louis Dudek showed her my poem, "Standing." I dedicated that poem to Earle Birney, because it was about him. The title was a joke, you see: he had been in a cast for months after falling out of a tree, and I was in a body cast when I wrote it. So I wrote it for Birney and then Dudek showed it to Marianne Moore.

jw: What did she say?

pw: I don't think she was that thrilled. Actually, I shouldn't say that. I don't think she was *that* impressed by it, but I don't think she was appalled either. But Moore was a powerful influence for me. It was her intellectualism, like Donne's, that attracted me to her. It was also the wit. I liked her humour.

jw: You mentioned the American "spareness" earlier, which makes me think of Moore's continual shortening of "Poetry" until it was only three lines long. Is that the kind of precise, imagistic style that you had in mind when you wrote collections such as *Naked Poems*? I ask, in part, because you allude to Moore in that poem.

pw: I would say that Creeley had more of an influence on *Naked Poems* than did Moore. He was at UBC when I wrote those poems and we were good friends. But it was, of course, my exposure to Japanese and Chinese poetry, and to Sappho, that partly inspired *Naked Poems*. Moore didn't play so big a role. Apart from the reference you mention, I wouldn't say she inspired much of the collection.

jw: Speaking a bit more broadly, though, your poetry does often seem to have a lingering imagism in it. Was there a conscious interest in that literary style?

pw: It has been so long since I've thought about it. I think it was the fact that Moore went off on her own, did her own thing; I liked that. I have been looking at H.D. again recently, and I think she probably did a lot for my work, too. For me, imagism and little tiny poems go together; that's inevitable. I guess I had reactions similar to those of the people who were originally influenced by the imagist movement, such as H.D. and Moore, in that I wanted to clean up my work, make it brisker, and more substantial in terms of objects and such. I think I understood it at the time, even if I don't understand it now. All I remember is that it led to a kind of clearing out, a clarification in the poetry, and moved me away from Romantic indulgence. I think. I think!

jw: Imagism, and especially as it evolved in Canadian literature out of the Group of Seven influence, is obviously very concerned with the visual image. Poetic images and literal images seem so closely related in our writing. It's true of your work, isn't it? I find it difficult to separate your career as a poet from your career as a visual artist.

pw: I don't think of it as a career. I don't think of anything I've done as a career! My poetry was a calling. My painting was an exploration.

jw: How did the exploration come about?

pw: My brother was the painter in the family, and in his early years he painted quite a lot. He was very passionate about Emily Carr, so in my teens I knew about her, who, of course, lived in Victoria as well. She was so famous in the city. I began there. Then when I was at UBC I met Jack Shadbolt, a famous British Columbian artist, an icon here, and various other artists who were around. There were quite a few artists around who mingled with students.

And then, when I was in Montreal, I knew Marian Scott, but I didn't know too many more than her. Her work was very familiar, though. I knew others, of course: Betty Sutherland (or Betty Layton), Morton Rosengarten, and Stanley (Buddy) Rozynski. In fact, Rosengarten I knew well. I have something by him. I don't remember why he gave it to me, but it is a nude.

Not me, though! But I still have it; I've kept it. Betty Layton was my very dear friend during the fifties. She was certainly another living artist I was very close to. Though, I never totally understood her painting. I never watched her paint, but I saw the pictures as they developed. She also did the cover for *Trio* [Contact Press, 1954]. Eli Mandel's name is misspelled on that cover! She might have been responsible for that typo. Maybe not. But she did design that cover. She was a lovely, lovely person. She was sweet. Well, not sweet. That's the wrong word for Betty Layton. She was beautiful.

jw: What about the art scene in Toronto? You spent time there in the fifties and sixties.

pw: Oh yes, I was there. William Ronald, Greg Curnoe, Michael Snow; I knew all of those. I went to many of the openings and the galleries. Dorothy Cameron had a gallery in Toronto. She was a "gallerist"—a new word I've discovered that is apparently used by everyone these days! I was *au courant* with all of that stuff. I was very excited by their work. Ronald actually freelanced at the CBC and did art programming, so I might have even worked with him a bit.

jw: Did you paint during those years?

pw: Art was more about viewing for me during that period. I spent a lot of time at the museums in Montreal. I used to spend my weekends, a lot of my time, just looking at pictures. I loved the El Grecos that they had there. I think it would be fair to say that art has kind of travelled with me through my life, quite closely. When I lived in London during the fifties, for example, I spent lots of time at the galleries there. Same thing in Paris when I lived there for a year and a half, also in the fifties. I went to Paris and met Joe Plaskett, an artist from BC. It was in those cities, Paris, London, and Montreal, that I became fairly passionate about art. I just enjoyed observing.

And then many years later, in 1993, I had had some dreams. I started having visual dreams full of colour, like explosions almost. And I thought, "either I am going crazy or telling myself I should try to do something with colour." So a friend of mine gave me a late birthday present: paper and watercolour paints and brushes. And that was the beginning. I started doing just little funny things, and then gradually (though quite quickly) began actually painting. I started with watercolours, collages, and mixing the two. I would get up in the middle of the night and start painting. It overtook me. I moved on to acrylics, and I live now in this living room surrounded by my paintings. They are stacked up everywhere!

jw: Your description makes the process sound very automatic. Michele Rackham Hall recently completed a doctoral thesis at McGill University in which

she suggests that Montreal poets were interested in automatism in the early 1950s. Those dates line up with your time in Montreal. Did you encounter the work of Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, and Rita Letendre, *Les Automatistes*?

PW: I knew Pierre Gauvreau. When I was working as a secretary at MacDonald College, I organized an art show of paintings by Marian Scott and Gauvreau (who seems to still be around! I can't believe he is, but, then again, I am, too). But I didn't know Leduc or Letendre's work very well, but I knew they were there. I suppose it was in part the English/French divide. But Frank and Marian knew their work well. I had a wonderful arty life there.

As influences? I'm not sure. I went from watercolours, to collage, to acrylics and canvas. I suppose some of this background in automatism and Abstract Expressionism was there in my painting, but it is just how I work and I never considered myself an *Automatiste*. It isn't conscious, even unconscious, but perhaps it informed my painting a little. I have various styles, but I'm mainly an Abstract Expressionist painter, if I can even call myself a painter. Abstract Expressionism was very big for me, long before I painted I was very interested in that school, the New York school. It was a wonderful discovery for myself, albeit a late one. But at this point, I haven't painted for a year at least. I might never go back to it, because I am not ready yet to stand around and paint at this age. It is the same with my poetry, I suppose. It is likely not just a break this time in either case.

JW: It seems you have often taken breaks between publications, though. How do you understand the long gaps between your poetry volumes?

PW: I don't understand the gaps. I never did. I was never a very prolific poet, except in little phases, when I produced a lot of work in short periods of time. Then I would go quiet. But I think there was a particularly long gap between *Naked Poems* and *Wilson's Bowl*. I tried to explain the silence in my introduction to the latter collection. I suffered a critical wound after Frank Davey published John Bentley Mays' article in *Open Letter*. And that attack single-handedly explains my silence. It was very hurtful. George Woodcock told me to sue Mays! [laughs] But it really did undermine me so badly. It was so appalling, and I was reacting very personally to it. So many people were upset by it, and I had a lot of support. It went beyond criticism, didn't it? It was personal. He was attacking me as a person, not as a writer.

JW: Even still, though, it seems those gaps had little effect on your status. Does it surprise you to know that many scholars of a younger generation study your poetry and visual art?



pw: They are? Oh yes, that amazes me! [laughs] Amazing to think: you tell me about this work being done on me, I know I'm taught at Simon Fraser University and elsewhere, and my selected poems [*The Vision Tree*] keeps selling after all these years. I actually get royalties! Talonbooks keeps it in print. I see all these books written about me, based on a very small output on my part. To think it generated so much commentary. I haven't written a word for years, I might as well be dead! [laughs] It is gratifying, though, you know, to hear that work is happening.

jw: I think perhaps the attraction to your work is its diversity. You change so much and work in so many media. I imagine the time away from writing has given you a lot of time to reflect on such things. What do so many accomplishments, callings, explorations, and decades look like in retrospect?

pw: It looks to me that I haven't done much in the last twenty years. [laughs] I feel distanced from it all. You see, you as a scholar have to put up with me, this ignorant person I am; you are immersed in this world and I have been removed from it for so long. But when I think back, I am quite satisfied with the things I've done with my life, except the last few years, when I feel I've been too lazy. The paintings, I don't show them to many people. I keep them all around me, it's a narcissistic thing. I also don't have as much energy as I used to, and my health hasn't been that good. You slow down a bit at 83! In some ways, I feel I've stalled at the moment. And whether or not I will recover enough to get back to writing or painting, I don't know. But it has made me think about what is important. Many years ago, I set up an Amnesty International group on Salt Spring Island. Then I got out of it, because I am not a meetings person! We had a good group, but I also felt burned out; seeing so much of the world through that lens can be exhausting. But it was something useful I felt I had done. I feel like now I appreciate people who do good work, or good works. The people who are socially useful. Perhaps that is the most important thing any of us can be.

