

## “The Great Dreams Pass On” Phyllis Webb’s “Struggles of Silence”

“My poems are born out of great struggles of silence,” wrote Phyllis Webb in the Foreword to her 1980 volume, *Wilson’s Bowl*; “This book has been long in coming. Wayward, natural and unnatural silences, my desire for privacy, my critical hesitations, my critical wounds, my dissatisfactions with myself and the work have all contributed to a strange gestation” (9).<sup>1</sup> In this frequently cited passage, Webb is referring to the fifteen-year publication gap that divides her forty-year career as a poet. She put out two full volumes before *Naked Poems* in 1965 and two full volumes after *Wilson’s Bowl* in 1980, but in the interim she produced only a handful of poems that she judged publishable.<sup>2</sup> And yet, although it might have appeared from the outside in this period as though Webb had renounced poetry for good, archival evidence—numerous poem drafts in various states of completion, grant applications outlining the projects that she intended to pursue, and radio scripts elaborating on her creative efforts and ideas—reveals that this was not simply a period of absence or withdrawal. On the contrary, the middle years of Webb’s career, her “struggles of silence,” were fertile, eventually fruitful, and integral to her poetic development. The interval was characterized by “dissatisfactions” and “hesitations,” as Webb says, but also—and just as importantly—by ambition and an intense desire to grow and progress as a poet, to expand her vision and to write poetry, as she described it, of “cosmic proportions.”<sup>3</sup>

The creation of *Wilson’s Bowl* was “a strange gestation” because Webb’s “progeny” did not mature as expected: *Wilson’s Bowl* was not the volume that she had initially set out to write. In the late 1960s, she had grand plans

to write a long series called “The Kropotkin Poems,” about the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist prince, revolutionary, philosopher, and writer, Peter Kropotkin. Webb says that she has always been a political idealist, and Kropotkin captured her imagination because of his theories of communist anarchism, “the most idealist of all political philosophies” and “his particular dream” (“The Art of Ideas”).<sup>4</sup> As she sought to convey *her* poetic vision, what she conceived as a politically meaningful vision of “cosmic proportions,” to a wide and receptive audience, Webb was interested in how Kropotkin, the visionary, had sent *his* utopic dreams out into the world. His politics were appealing to her, but she also hoped that he would provide her with a model for the creative development that she desired. “Kropotkin” was a big idea, though, and Webb struggled to capture him in her verse. Her obsession with the “Kropotkin Poems” project grew throughout the 1970s, burdening Kropotkin with an iconic status that, rather than freeing and opening her vision, obstructed it instead. “The Kropotkin Poems” were never realized as Webb had intended, although she threaded some of their remnants into *Wilson’s Bowl*. The organization of that volume records Kropotkin’s disappearance as the poet let go of the blockage that had held her back for over a decade. Webb’s later poetry is revitalized by the accumulation of frustrated creative potential and its powerful release: in other words, by the rhythms of her “struggles of silence” (*WB* 9).

The idea of “silence” has been engrained in the critical discourse surrounding Phyllis Webb ever since her 1970s audience assumed, after five or six years had passed without a new book (aside from a *Selected Poems* volume that seemed retrospective in tone), that her creativity must have dried up. The clues—a certain set of clues, read a certain way, at least—all seemed to indicate the finality of her retreat. Sylvia Plath’s suicide in 1963 had, however unfairly, brought the trope of the confessional, suicidal “poetess” to the foreground of the popular imagination. As evidence that Webb might be doomed for a similar fate, a reader mistakenly conflating poetry and biography needed only cite the title of her poem “To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide,” published just a year earlier in *The Sea Is Also a Garden* (1962). The minimalist *Naked Poems* (1965), too, represented to some a “voluntary impoverishment of poetry” and a “reductive verse-making” that amounted, as George Woodcock put it, “to a kind of suicide” (“Question” 540). When Webb relocated from Toronto to the much more remote Salt Spring Island in 1969, critics such as Woodcock imagined a “growing withdrawal” that was “only in keeping with the solipsistic character of much of her verse” (“Webb”

1642). Moreover, her supposed "failure" to carry off "The Kropotkin Poems" as planned was a very public one: "a small literary legend," she calls it (*WB* 9). Between 1970 and 1972 she talked publicly about the project a great deal; she published some of the poems that she had managed to complete in journals and anthologies and recorded a selection from the series for CBC Radio's *Anthology*.<sup>5</sup> When "The Kropotkin Poems" did not appear in book form, it seemed even to many of Webb's greatest supporters that she had finally given up writing for good.

Meanwhile, postmodernist critics such as Frank Davey were clearing space for a new style of poetry, and so they actually *wanted* to see poets of the older, modernist generation defeated or "silenced." Webb's apparent retreat made her an easy target. In *From There to Here*, an introductory guidebook to Canadian literature that emphasizes "the demise of the modernist period," Davey argues that in Webb's poetry, "the modernist's rejection of the secular and material and his campaign to purify the language have reached their ultimate end. Beyond lie only suicide and silence" (19, 264).<sup>6</sup> The "culmination of her work," Davey says, "has been the brief, understated and ironic *Naked Poems* (1965) and the seven years of silence that have followed" (262). Of course, such a view was clearly no longer tenable after the publication of *Wilson's Bowl*, and critics have been working ever since to heal Webb's reputation from attacks such as Davey's (as well as an earlier, longer, and much more vicious one by John Bentley Mays):<sup>7</sup> what she called her "critical wounds" (*WB* 9). Feminist critics in particular have sought to emphasize Webb's productive emergence from a "silence" brought on by "the inherited logos of a patriarchal culture" (Butling 200). Most recently, Stephen Collis has offered a compelling revision of Webb's career by arguing that it is not reclusiveness but responsiveness—to influences, conventions, and to the real world—that characterizes her oeuvre. Such work has certainly begun to complicate the idea of "silence" so easily associated with this poet. It is important, though, even when bringing her back from "silence," not to downplay the crucial role of that middle period in Webb's creative process. It was the *silence*, or her very sense of failure and frustration, that energized the new voice Webb was to develop.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the beginning of Webb's prolonged period of silence is characterized not by retreat or renunciation but by energy and hope. Webb announced the new directions she would like her poetry to take as early as 1962, in "Poetics against the Angel of Death," a playful mini-manifesto that turns ironically on the speaker's self-criticism to describe

with increasing confidence her efforts to “elude” the suffocating shadow of male, Western literary tradition. Many critics have remarked that this poem looks ahead to the formal changes that Webb would pursue over the following two decades. The speaker declares that she would like “to die / writing Haiku,” which was notably a form that Webb approached in the short, pared-down *Naked Poems*, “or,” she continues, “better, / long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo.” However, this was an objective that would prove much harder to carry out. Webb also outlines a conceptual concern in “Poetics Against the Angel of Death”: her growing distaste for the hierarchical, patriarchal “attitude / of private Man speaking to public men” (*Sea Is Also* 39). In both the *Naked Poems* and “The Kropotkin Poems,” Webb endeavoured to develop poetic forms that could decentre the authority of that “private Man.” In Kropotkin’s model of theoretical anarchism, she hoped to find a way in which a private, individual poet could engage with a wide public from a non-authoritarian perspective. She set out in 1962 with a sense of excitement—the poem concludes with an emphatic “Yes!”—but these were projects that would direct and consume all of her creative efforts for many years to come.

Webb concretized the ambitions described in her “manifesto” poem in an application to the Canada Council in the winter of 1963, when she sought funding to work on “two new books.”<sup>8</sup> The first became *Naked Poems*—“a small volume of small poems.” The second was to be titled “Scorpion and Bull,” and it would, she wrote, be a “book of big poems” that would “show evidence of new verse techniques.” In this “big” book lie the origins of “The Kropotkin Poems” project. Webb’s ideas for “Scorpion and Bull” were very substantial indeed—certainly not the plans of a poet in retreat. It was to be a book of “social satire” and “serious poetry of somewhat cosmic proportions.” Although the enthusiastic and assured tone is probably due in part to the fact that this is a grant application, the scope of the project expresses Webb’s passionate desire to progress, “to move onto new territory,” to expand her world view and to write poetry of wide, even universal significance: poetry of “cosmic proportions.”

Webb was awarded the grant and set to work immediately on the *Naked Poems*. She wrote “almost eighty” of the “very small” poems in the summer of 1963, and then departed on an extended research trip to begin work on the “Scorpion and Bull” volume. Yet as the excitement and momentum of the summer faded and the reality of the “big” project set in, Webb faltered. She began to wonder if she had not become, as she put it, “the victim of a

self-delusion" and if she had not simply fooled herself into believing that she could realize such a large-scale project. Her final report on the tenure of the 1963-1964 award comments poignantly on her difficulties:

On the whole this has been a period of great doubt, which is possibly the necessary preliminary to that revolution in my work which I feel must come. I speak both of technique and vision. I have become temporarily dumb because there is so much to be said and the issues are too big.<sup>9</sup>

Webb's ambition was, it seemed, getting the better of her. Her muteness came not because there was too little to say, but because there was too much.

"Scorpion and Bull" would never come together as Webb had proposed it in 1963. But four years later, in the summer of 1967 on a much-needed leave of absence from her hectic work as executive producer of the CBC program *Ideas*, the figure of Kropotkin came to her "through books and dreams"<sup>10</sup> and Webb began work on "The Kropotkin Poems." She wrote feverishly at first, and within a few months she had completed the "Poems of Failure," which were meant as a preface to the series (and which were eventually published as the "Preface" section of *Wilson's Bowl*).<sup>11</sup> In September of 1968, Webb applied for a grant to write "a book titled *The Kropotkin Poems*," explaining that "the undertaking [is] very complex indeed" and "the subject matter . . . requires immense research."<sup>12</sup> Having left behind one ambitious poetic project, Webb was suddenly absorbed in another. In 1970, a second succession of poems related to the Kropotkin theme "erupted,"<sup>13</sup> some of which were later published in *Wilson's Bowl* and some of which remain unpublished. But Webb's productivity waned over the following year. There are several drafts and fragments in the Phyllis Webb *fonds* at Library and Archives Canada that were clearly meant to be part of the series but were never finished. One last poem, left untitled and published in *Wilson's Bowl* as simply "from *The Kropotkin Poems*," was written in 1971.<sup>14</sup> Any momentum that Webb had enjoyed after the initial inception of the project had dissipated by that point, and she was left feeling discouraged and overwhelmed.

While the mental and artistic blockage caused by the unfinished "Kropotkin Poems" was probably what prevented Webb from taking on any major new poetic projects for most of the 1970s, she still remained deeply preoccupied with the creative process. In order to probe the nature of her struggles, Webb studied as many models of creativity as she could: in her radio talks, in her prose, and in the poem drafts that she did manage to write in the period. These poems articulate, often quite frankly, the agonizing feeling of creative impasse: "My mind rustles the pages of books / for

sentences I would like to write. / . . . Everything has been said. / Everything has been done. / The grammar of it chokes me.”<sup>15</sup> Such poems might have begun as exercises, in the hope that the act of writing itself would unfreeze her and pull her into new material, but they do not tend to express any consistent progress (which is probably why they were left unpublished). Webb was imprisoned by her own sense of failure, confined by the unrealized potential of her incomplete projects, and “choke[d]” by her very efforts to grow and move forward.

As much as the highly innovative *Naked Poems* had been intended to liberate the poet’s voice—Webb said that she wanted to “see what my basic rhythms were; how I *really* speak” (*Talking* 47)—they too threaten limitation and captivity.” The word “room,” which is central to the structure of the sequence, implies a simultaneous withdrawal and release. The vast white spaces dominating the pages suggest that the poetry has “room” to move; but they also isolate the little poems, as though each is alone in a “room.” Webb ultimately wanted to confront much bigger topics than the intimate subjects and small spaces of *Naked Poems* would allow. One of the speakers is “listening for / the turn of the tide” (Webb, *Vision Tree* 88)<sup>16</sup>—waiting and listening for some great, global sea-change that would occur outside of her little “room.” Webb wanted poetry—*her* poetry—to have such far-reaching effects. Even while she worked on the *Naked Poems* Webb remained obsessed with the bigger project she saw on the horizon: the “long poems” and “more complicated” subject matter that she was going to “go on to” next, as she told Dorothy Livesay in 1964 (*Talking* 47-48). She was clearly concerned that the private voice of the *Naked Poems* could not communicate a message large enough for anyone to hear; as one speaker remarks, “I have given up / complaining // but nobody notices” (*Vision Tree* 92). She feared self-absorption (the opposite of poetry of “cosmic proportions”). The *Naked Poems* stripped away convention and all decoration, but they left the poet feeling trapped inside her own, personal “solipsistic” vision.

“[I]t has been a rather fervent desire of mine for some time,” Webb wrote in 1968, “to move from what has been called a ‘solipsist’ position to a more open one.”<sup>17</sup> Choosing to write about Kropotkin, one of the most influential political revolutionaries of nineteenth-century Russia, certainly gestured towards the possibility of such an outward turn. She admired Kropotkin for “the reaches / of his mind so vast and intimate” and strove to emulate his “mind sent out to the people” (*WB* 16), but she also dwelled on his enforced imprisonment. “The Kropotkin Poems” urge a comparison

between Kropotkin, locked up for his beliefs and his revolutionary activities in a cell in the St. Peter and St. Paul fortress, and the poet on Salt Spring Island struggling to realize her creative intentions. An unpublished poem from the series expresses, in an epigraph quoting Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Webb's aim as she struggled to move out from the intimate, lyrical position of the *Naked Poems* towards a broader, worldlier perspective: "I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world."<sup>18</sup> She desired a link, a point of transition, a way of moving from her feeling of individual seclusion to meaningful communion with others, and she hoped that Kropotkin would be her guide.

Webb was legitimately interested in Kropotkin's anarchism as a political and poetic alternative to solipsism, because it promised the unconventionality and the egalitarian sense of engagement that she sought. But by turning Kropotkin into a "guiding spirit," Webb inadvertently silenced his inspirational power and essentially negated the very principles of his politics. Anarchism, Webb noted in a later interview, "is totally unauthoritarian except I had my authority in Kropotkin as a godlike or a Christlike figure. So I wanted to get rid of that" (Webb 34). In one of the unpublished "Kropotkin Poems," the speaker must command Kropotkin to "stand still"<sup>19</sup> as though he is "in a museum" so that she can find something to say about him: "I'll walk around you / and surreptitiously / touch the most / complaining places." She came to think of him as such a "saintly" (WB 15) authority that she could not engage with him. Kropotkin became so prominent in her imagination, so "holy" and "embellished," as she writes in the unpublished poem, that she even struggles to "worship" him. Indeed, he "requires / immense study, a / Russian peasant's / lifetime." The enormity of the task was overwhelming. Webb's obsession with capturing Kropotkin in her poetry, instead of guiding her out of herself, only left her trapped behind the feeling that her project had failed. .

The seven prefatory "Poems of Failure" chart the progress of a poet's growing sense of frustrated self-absorption. Kropotkin's presence slips away throughout the series: the first three poems focus on Kropotkin himself—his political theories, his biography, his imprisonment—but the later four are much more concerned with the speaker's efforts to write her own "masterpiece." The seventh and final poem in the series concludes in isolation and defeat:

The simple profundity of a deadman works  
at my style. I am impoverished. He the White Christ.  
Not a case of identification. Easier to see myself  
in the white cat asleep on the bed. Exile. I live

alone. I have a phone. I shall go to Russia. One  
more day run round and the 'good masterpiece of work'  
does not come. I scribble. I approach some distant dream.  
I wait for moonlight reflecting on the night sea. I can  
wait. We shall see. (*WB* 23)

The feeling that she is a solipsistic poet lingers. The speaker's sense of exile cannot be overcome; she has a "phone," but even that symbol of connection only leads to the conclusion that she will have to move physically out of her space—"go to Russia"—in order to find Kropotkin. She is more comfortable likening herself to the "white cat asleep on the bed"—a static (sleeping) domestic image. Webb had wanted to leave the domestic style and intimate subject matter behind after the *Naked Poems*, and yet here it attracts her speaker yet again. This style feels "impoverished" before Kropotkin's magnificent, Christlike presence. The near-prose lines might be "long," but they are certainly not "clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo," as she had desired in "Poetics against the Angel of Death" (*Sea Is Also* 39). They are halting and composed of short, subject-object sentences. Eight of the fifteen sentences in this excerpt begin with "I," an obsessive repetition that disrupts the flow. The "I" impedes vision: the speaker wants to reach Kropotkin's "distant dream"—*his* vision—but she cannot see past her own "I." Similarly, the experience of trying to render Kropotkin poetically left Webb even more conscious of the limitations of her own "I"—the so-called "solipsist" position— and perhaps even more frustrated with her sense of creative failure.

In order to resume writing and to regain confidence in her work, Webb had to find a way to reconcile her art and her political world view. "The cessation of poetry," Stephen Collis observes, was for Webb "a deeply philosophical issue, and a direct extension of [her] anarchism" (98). As Roger Farr proposes, developing an "anarchist poetics" might mean allowing a creative project to "fail," in a certain sense. "If artistic success, like the teleological model of historical 'progress,' involves the 'completion' and 'arrival' of a finalizing state(ment), . . . then 'The Kropotkin Poems' are quite self-consciously resigned to their failure," Farr explains (70). One way for a poet to divest herself of the obligations imposed by authority is for her poetry to "fail," or, according to Farr's model, to remain incomplete. *Wilson's Bowl* provides a forum in which the fragments of the "The Kropotkin Poems" can remain incomplete forever, even as they are legitimated by a book publication. "Failure" is thus validated as an essential part of the poetic process. Webb learned to value this process over closure and finality. In an interview with Leila Sujir she explains, "If you fail,



you presuppose that something can be achieved or perfected. And if you don't set up any proposition about success, perfection, completion, then you're not going to wind up with an idea of failure. You're going to end up with process" (Webb 41). Releasing the contained and obstructed energy of obsession, of frustrated ambition, is the "process" recorded in *Wilson's Bowl*: the *productive* process of Phyllis Webb's "struggles of silence" (9).

The organization of *Wilson's Bowl* enacts a release of Kropotkin and of the project that had consumed the poet over so many years. Just as Kropotkin's presence fades throughout the seven "Poems of Failure," his influence disappears in a broader sense over the book's five sections. The first section, the "Preface," contains simply the "Poems of Failure" as they were written in 1967. The second section, "Portraits," and the third, "Crimes," are composed of eight poems each, and in both cases, the first four are drawn from the original "Kropotkin Poems." The fourth section, titled "Artifacts," comprises only the "Wilson's Bowl" sequence, written between 1977 and 1980, and the final section, "Dreams and the Common Good," is almost entirely made up of new material written in 1978 or later.<sup>20</sup> Webb thus quite deliberately illustrates the process of writing herself out of "The Kropotkin Poems" and into *Wilson's Bowl*. The energy of letting Kropotkin go was the same energy that opened up her vision and allowed her to move on to new projects.

The "Question of Questions" series, placed right in the middle of the "Crimes" section of *Wilson's Bowl*,<sup>21</sup> consists of five poems that investigate the politics and power dynamics of the "question" to express just this shift away from a desire for programmatic knowledge and power—"completion"—towards a state of openness that allows such "letting go" or release to occur. Part V of "A Question of Questions" (WB 52-53) is dedicated to R. D. Laing, whose book on psychology, *The Self and Others*, Webb quotes in her "Notes to the Poems" at the end of the volume. Laing describes the shared task of the therapist and the "Zen Master": both recognize that people suffer because of "the state of desire they are in, whereby they posit the existence of 'an answer' and are frustrated because they do not seem to be getting it" (qtd. in WB 87). The speaker in Webb's poem knows in theory that "[t]he error lies in / the state of desire / in wanting the answer," but she seems, at first, unable to help herself. She is constantly "wanting" things: "wanting the red-crested / woodpecker to pose / among red berries / of the ash tree / wanting its names / its habitations / the instinct of its ways." She desires knowledge (the woodpecker's "names" and "habitations"), control (to dictate how it should "pose"), and the ability ("instinct") to reach answers.

The “red-crested / woodpecker” is the speaker’s therapist-Zen Master who frees her from these desires. Webb notes, in her 1972 radio talk, “Calamities and Crystals: Poetry, Fate and the Unconscious,” that this poem “hints at a deliverance from self, the pileated woodpecker replacing my head with an instinctive wisdom I have long sought and long evaded.”<sup>22</sup> The speaker is struck by the bird’s wisdom at the end of the first stanza: “whiteflash of underwings / dazzling all questions / out of me, amazement / and outbreathing / become a form / of my knowing.” The gerunds evoke the suspended motion of instinctual “knowing” in the single “dazzling” moment. In the next stanza, the bird follows the speaker as she “keep[s] walking. / Trying to think.” Finally it “flies off / with [her] head,” and she is, as Webb’s comments suggest, delivered from herself. “Knowing,” in this new state, does not require “[t]rying to think”; it can be as simple as “amazement.” The woodpecker itself is a source of comfort to the speaker because it exemplifies that intuitive way of knowing, available only after she has given up “thinking” and stopped “wanting the answer.” Webb surrenders the authority of the “answer” just as she surrenders the authority of the successful, completed poetic project, and in so doing, she transforms the “silence” that follows in the wake of failing to respond to a question (or failing to bring a creative work to fruition) into a transitional moment preceding new knowledge—or new work.

The first substantial “new work” that came to Webb following her struggles with Kropotkin in the late 1960s and very early 1970s was “Wilson’s Bowl.” The sequence of short poems concerns the (real) tragic suicides, less than a year apart (in 1976 and 1977), of Webb’s friend Lilo Berliner, and a correspondent of Lilo’s, the anthropologist Wilson Duff.<sup>23</sup> Webb wrote the first poems of the series in 1977, just one week after Lilo’s death; they were, as she says in her “Notes to the Poems,” her “attempt to deal with Lilo’s obsessions and death” (*WB* 88). Between 1977 and 1980, she wrote as much “publishable” poetry as she had produced over the entire previous decade. Taking up the personal tragedy as a subject reanimated her sense of struggle, and also forced her to move beyond a very real “failure”—Lilo’s suicide—and even to seek creative inspiration in it.<sup>24</sup>

The speaker in “Wilson’s Bowl” develops a more open and engaged relationship with guiding figures than Webb had felt with Kropotkin.<sup>25</sup> In a four-line prelude to the sequence, Lilo’s voice, enclosed in single quotation marks, intones, “You may read my signs / but I cross my path / and show you nothing / on your way” (*WB* 61). Lilo presents herself as a guide who has left “signs”—presumably signs for understanding her death—but she will

"show" her interlocutor "nothing": reading the signs is making "your way," not hers. Accepting this mysterious challenge requires the receptiveness to unanswered questions epitomized by the woodpecker in "A Question of Questions." "What was the path she took? / As winding as her gut / with the pain in it? / Along the beach? / To the caves in the hill?" (WB 68). There are no answers; the questions themselves lead the poem forward.

Following "guides" in "Wilson's Bowl" can actually be dangerous. In Webb's poem "In this Place" (66), the evil, "mean spirits" of Salt Spring Island are misleading. They "chitter" and "scrabble radio waves," complicating the delivery of messages through the air: "At full moon / they come down on the rocks / of the sea's shore / deliver such messages: / are not gone. / We quake. We draw curtains / against the word's blaze." Fearful and overwhelmed by the "messages" of the "voices" in this poem, the speaker and her companion ("we") "quake" and withdraw, even falling silent for a time, "draw[ing] curtains / against the word's blaze." But when the "we" emerges from the curtained retreat, it is divided into "I" and "she": "She goes out on the water / hearing. / Is taken or given / by tides. / I go as far as I can / collaborating in the fame." Both "go" out decisively, but the "I," the speaker, bids farewell to the "she" as though to another part of herself: the part, represented by Lilo, that follows the guiding voices "out on the water" and is enfolded in the pattern of the "tides."

While the Lilo figure is passively "taken or given," "hearing" and following the "messages" of the spirits, the speaker "collaborates." "Collaboration" is a pivotal term for Webb, because it marks a departure from her previous efforts to follow, study, or capture faithfully. In collaborating, this speaker listens to the scrambled messages of the guides to a certain point, but she does not feel compelled to lose herself (by drowning in the ocean) in order to complete the journey. The speaker here, unlike in the seventh "Poem of Failure," does not dwell on the fact that she "can" only go so "far"; she recognizes that her restraint saves her from Lilo's ultimate fate. She "collaborates" to a point in the "fame" or dramatic nature of Lilo's death, just as she participated in the "fame" or "small literary legend" (WB 9) of "The Kropotkin Poems," but in the end she has to let both stories rest, both "failures" fade, and both guiding figures go on.

One of the titles that Webb considered for *Wilson's Bowl* when she was preparing the manuscript was "The Great Dreams Pass On." She liked "Wilson's Bowl" "for its utter prosaicness,"<sup>26</sup> but "The Great Dreams Pass On" would certainly have been an appropriate alternative. In the volume's

final poem, “The Days of the Unicorns,” a detached speaker watches as a herd of unicorns “mov[es] on . . . beyond the story”—away from her “private property”—just as the “the great dreams pass on / to the common good.” The unicorns represent Webb’s past idols (such as Kropotkin); the “great dreams,” her poetic ambitions from twenty years earlier. The speaker is fond of these “delicate beast[s]” and dazzled by their “jewelled / horns,” and she thinks of them nostalgically. But their presence, as she remembers it, could also be stifling, demanding: “It seemed they were always near / ready to show their eyes and stare / us down, standing in their creamy / skins, pink tongues out / for our benevolence” (*WB* 84-85). As Ann Mandel notes in her review of the volume, when the unicorns and the great dreams “pass on,” they leave us “to our own stories” (89).

This sense of resolution should not suggest conclusion. In fact, to say that would be to erase the essential emphasis on “process” that came out of the long period of struggle. After *Wilson’s Bowl*, Webb wrote first a chapbook and then a full volume of *ghazals*, a form that is motivated by “contrasts, dreams, astonishing leaps” (Thompson 5). These “leaps” in logic mean that “silence” must be a tool in the *ghazal*—the principle of progression. Webb builds energy and then releases it, jumping from one couplet to the next. The form, described this way, sounds ideal; and yet even the *ghazals* were not an “answer” or an ending. In fact, Webb told Eleanor Wachtel in 1983 that they were “a transitional thing” for her. “A little bit superficial perhaps. Before I go into the cave again for the big spiritual stuff” (Webb qtd. in Wachtel 14). She recognizes—indeed, not long after coming *out* of the cave for the first time—the ongoing *process* of her poetic development.

Periods in “the cave,” or “struggles of silence,” were absolutely necessary to Webb’s continued creativity. Her prolonged “silence” in the 1970s was defined by an extended and obstructive suspension of her ambitions and “great dreams” of the previous decade. The impetus to assemble *Wilson’s Bowl* was provoked by her release of those very projects and ideas. Webb feared that her poetry was narrow in scope and insignificant in import, and as a result she became obsessed with expanding her vision, confronting big topics, and finding appropriate ways to connect her personal, private dreams to much larger global concerns. “Obsessions,” Webb has written, “are vital to the creative process, a stalling often, a signalling, a belligerent mental tic” (*Talking* 58). It was, finally, in overcoming the stagnation of “stalled” obsessions that Webb revitalized her creative energies. *Wilson’s Bowl* proposes that new beginnings grow out of endings: a new way of seeing grows out of the departure of the old “great

dreams." In "Eschatology of Spring," flowers blossom from the barrel of a gun and "insects divulge occult excrement / in the service of [a] hyacinth" (WB 82): a new season emerges from a final summing up, and beauty can be found amid destruction. In Phyllis Webb's poetic career, a new voice grows, old obsessions are laid to rest, and "poems are born out of great struggles of silence" (WB 9).

## NOTES

- 1 *Wilson's Bowl* will hereafter be cited parenthetically as WB.
- 2 The early volumes are *Even Your Right Eye* (1956), *The Sea Is Also a Garden* (1962); along with Gael Turnbull and Eli Mandel, Webb also contributed to *Trio: First Poems* (1954). The later volumes are *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* (1984), and *Hanging Fire* (1990); she also published a chapbook, *Sunday Water*, in 1982. There are also two selected poems volumes, one from 1971 (containing just two new poems) and one from 1982.
- 3 Phyllis Webb *fonds*, Box 17, Unit 7, folder 2. Report to the Canada Council, 28 August 1963. All archival material quoted in this essay is from the Phyllis Webb *fonds* at Library and Archives Canada, 1983 accession. I will hereafter cite simply the box number, followed by the unit number (and letter, where relevant) and the folder number in parentheses, e.g., "Box 17 (7.2)."
- 4 Box 15 (5.G.4).
- 5 The journals and anthologies include *The Canadian Forum* (April-May 1970), *The Tamarack Review* (Summer 1971), *The Capilano Review* (Spring 1972), *Contemporary Poetry of British Columbia* (1970), and *Mountain Moving Day: Poems by Women* (1973). The *Anthology* program was broadcast on 25 June 1970 (Box 15 [5.G.4]).
- 6 Davey is alluding to Eliot's "Little Gidding," the fourth of the *Four Quartets*, when he writes of "the modernist's campaign to purify language." Eliot is in turn alluding to Mallarmé's "Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe." "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu," or "To purify the dialect of the tribe," was what Mallarmé and Eliot believed to be the task of the poet. When Davey mentions "suicide," he is surely thinking of female poets such as Sylvia Plath.
- 7 See John Bentley Mays, "Phyllis Webb (for Bob Wallace)." *Open Letter* 2.6 (1973): 8-33.
- 8 Box 17 (7.2). All quotations in this paragraph and the next are from this folder—Webb's application and reports to the Canada Council of 26 February 1963, 28 August 1963, and 8 April 1964.
- 9 Box 17 (7.2). Report to the Canada Council of 8 April 1964.
- 10 Box 15 (5.G.4). Roger Farr notes that Webb had probably learned about Kropotkin in the early 1960s when she taught in the English Department of the University of British Columbia along with George Woodcock, who wrote a biography of Kropotkin, *The Anarchist Prince*, published in 1950.
- 11 Notably, and perhaps surprisingly to readers who have only encountered these poems as they are printed in *Wilson's Bowl*, the series was titled "Poems of Failure" from the beginning (in 1967), and it was always intended as a preface to "The Kropotkin Poems." "Failure" refers to a major theme of the series, and not to Webb's "failure" to finish the volume.
- 12 Box 17 (7.3).
- 13 Box 15 (5.G.4).

- 14 All of the drafts mentioned in this paragraph are in Box 3. See for example 1.A.214, 220, 229, 243, 247, 262, 267; see also Webb's script for her 1970 *Anthology* reading (Box 15 [5.G.4]).
- 15 Box 3 (1.A.238).
- 16 I will cite the version of the *Naked Poems* printed in *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems*.
- 17 Box 17 (7.3).
- 18 Box 3 (1.A.229). The reference is *Richard II*, V.v.1-2.
- 19 Box 3 (1.A.269). All following quotations in this paragraph, unless cited otherwise parenthetically, are from that folder, which contains a typescript of an untitled poem beginning "your body's ablaze."
- 20 All except for "Lines from Gwen. Lines for Ben," which is dated 7 November 1975 in Webb's drafts (Box 3 [1.A.233]). I have been able to locate dated drafts of nearly all of the poems in *Wilson's Bowl*.
- 21 "A Question of Questions" is literally at the centre of *Wilson's Bowl*: thirty-three pages of poetry precede it and thirty-one pages of poetry follow it. Although some parts of the series were in fact written in July 1970 (see Box 3 [1.A.244]), and therefore they fit chronologically with "The Kropotkin Poems." The placement of the sequence indicates Webb's understanding of its significance in the progression of *Wilson's Bowl* as separate from the earlier project.
- 22 Box 15 (5.F.17).
- 23 "Wilson's bowl" is a small basin carved in rock on the beach near Webb's Salt Spring Island home. Berliner discovered it and dedicated it to Duff. The two had formed a strangely intimate bond through an extensive correspondence that Berliner left on Webb's doorstep immediately before walking into the sea in January 1977. Webb included excerpts from their letters in "A Correspondence," an essay published in *Talking*.
- 24 For more on Webb's productive response to "suicide," see Janice Williamson.
- 25 Critics such as Pauline Butling and Stephen Scobie have suggested that this growing openness and engagement in Webb's poetry and perspective was also related to a turn towards postmodernism in her writing.
- 26 Box 10 (4.C.11). Letter to Helen Sonthoff, 22 January 1980.

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