"PROCEEDING BEFORE THE AMOROUS INVISIBLE"

Phyllis Webb and the Ghazal

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PHYLLIS WEBB'S LATEST BOOK, *Water and Light*, brings together five sequences of "ghazals and anti-ghazals," including "Sunday Water," first published as an Island chapbook in 1982, and "I Daniel" from her Governor General's Award-winning selected poems, *The Vision Tree* (1982). At first, one may wonder what it was about the ghazal, a highly conventional oriental lyric, which attracted a poet like Webb. A little preliminary history of the ghazal, followed by a consideration of Webb's career before she discovered it, should make clear how fortuitous the meeting has been for the writer as well as her readers.

1. The Ghazal

The most popular form of Urdu and Persian poetry, the ghazal traditionally consists of five or more couplets on a single rhyme: AA BA CA DA and so on. Although all ghazals follow the same rhyme-scheme, there are many different prosodic patterns to choose from; however, whichever metre is chosen is adhered to strictly for the length of the poem. A final convention is the insertion of the poet's pen-name in the closing couplet as a kind of signature.

A high degree of conventionality obtains also in the traditional characters, situations, and imagery of the ghazal. In its emphasis on poetic artifice and on the novel deployment of stock metaphors, the ghazal has much in common with the English sonnet; it also describes a similar world of courtly love. In the ghazal, the poet speaks as an unrequited lover, pining away in adoration of a Cruel Fair who wounds him with her eyes and ensnares him with her hair, sometimes even rejecting him for an unworthy rival. Webb illustrates this situation in the twelfth ghazal of "Sunday Water":

> Drunken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous
> journey of the ten lines.
>
> The singer sings one couplet or two
> over and over to the Beloved who reigns
>
> On the throne of *accidie*, distant, alone,
> hearing, as if from a distance, a bell

and not this stringy instrument scraping away,
whining about love's ultimate perfection.

Wait! Everything is waiting for a condition of grace:
the string of the Sitar, this Gat, a distant bell,

even the Beloved in her bored flesh.

For a student of European literature, this situation is strikingly familiar. The correspondence in literary conventions is based on social reality for in medieval culture, whether Islamic or Christian, marriages were arranged, often from childhood — hence "romantic" love tended to be extramarital (and therefore genuinely "dangerous" and often hopeless). A wider range of erotic experience is acknowledged in the ghazal than in the sonnet: besides desire for an inaccessible married lady or purdah girl, we also find expressions of love for courtesans and young boys. The lack of grammatical gender in Persian makes possible a lack of specificity as to the Beloved's sex; in Urdu, the Beloved is conventionally masculine, so as to suggest many possibilities.[1]

The ambiguity of the Beloved's identity is related to his/her stereotypical behaviour: in both cultures, what the poet is addressing is the nature of his passion for an elusive ideal which *may* be embodied in a specific individual but need not be. This is the link between social reality and metaphysics; as Ralph Russell puts it, "the situations of earthly love . . . are taken over bodily . . . and applied to the experience of divine love, or mystic love."[2] In Webb's ghazal even the Beloved is waiting for this "condition of grace," she too is waiting for a signal that all this repetitive behaviour is actually in the service of something transcendent, that her "bored flesh" incarnates a transforming principle.

The humour in this characterization of the Beloved's flesh, like that of the poet's description of her incompetent instrument, is profoundly related to the self-consciousness of the courtly tradition in its treatment by later writers. Elizabethan sonneteers, like nineteenth-century ghazal writers, continued to explore the possibilities of these conventions even when they no longer corresponded to "reality," because they recognized their symbolic content. So within the narrow compass of these forms we find both pathos and wit, traditional images and innovative developments of them, verbal brilliance and metrical conformity; the poet is at once committed *and* skeptical. In both traditions, writing within conventions while simultaneously transforming them is the great challenge.

We shall see how well Webb understands and appreciates this challenge, how her own career has consistently shown her testing the validity of poetic devices in just this way. For this reason alone, the ghazal clearly should appeal to her. But why the ghazal rather than the sonnet?

John Thompson, whose book *Stilt-Jack* introduced Webb to the form, insists that "the ghazal is immediately distinguishable from the classical, architectural,

rhetorically and logically shaped English sonnet."[3] His description of the sonnet is rather eccentric; epithets like "classical, architectural" can more readily be applied to the Augustan closed couplet than to the sonnet which, however "rhetorical," uses the structure of logic more as a self-dramatizing posture or an argumentative tactic in the battle between the sexes than as a form of public statement. English sonnets tend to become more and more logically unstable upon analysis — just as many ghazals include apostrophes and moral statements and feints of logic.

But to make a distinction is also to acknowledge a similarity, and it is mainly Thompson's desire to keep us from classifying the ghazal as simply an Islamic sonnet that makes him overstate his case. What he wants us to recognize is the characteristic way a ghazal *moves* — by association and imaginative leaps rather than in linear, discursive fashion. This progress by implicit rather than explicit links is what makes the ghazal so appealing to modern writers like Thompson and Webb who hope to achieve "the poem of the act of the mind." That is, what occurs in *some* sonnets — especially those of Shakespeare — is the way of *all* ghazals: a surface tension of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, wordplay, and associative imagery holds together a structure discursively obscure. Connections are mainly thematic, not logical, and we are given a constellation of ideas, images, and feelings *around* a particular stance or in response to a particular event, itself not always clearly defined.[4]

Webb came to the ghazal via Thompson's free-verse imitations, and the renditions of contemporary translators who prefer not to be too restricted by rhyme or metre.[5] What these works share is first, a loosening of the formal conventions of the ghazal and second, a fervent appreciation of its phenomenological accuracy as a mode of expression. Retaining the couplet structure is integral to the character of the ghazal not only as a formal signal (as fourteen lines identifies a sonnet, even in the absence of rhyme or iambic pentameter) but also because its deep structure is one of setting thought against thought, image against image, discontinuously. For in the traditional ghazal each couplet is self-contained both in grammar and meaning: in effect, each is designed as a self-sufficient poem which can be savoured on its own, however much it gains from its association with the other couplets of the ghazal. Sometimes two or more couplets may form a continuous sequence within a ghazal, but this is so unusual it is especially noted in the margin. Similarly, there are "linked" (*musalsal*) ghazals in which the sense runs on coherently for the whole poem, but they are few in number and "not typical examples of the genre."[6] And even in a linked ghazal each couplet is still closed, designed to be appreciated as a finished expression.

Adrienne Rich explains clearly how the discontinuity of the ghazal provides an opportunity for a new kind of unity — one well-suited to the needs of a contemporary poet.

> The marvellous thing about these ghazals (for me) is their capacity for both concentration and a gathering, cumulative effect.... I needed a way of dealing with a very complex and scattered material which was demanding a different kind of unity from that imposed on it by the isolated, single poem: In which certain experiences needed to find both their intensest rendering and to join with other experiences not logically or chronologically connected in an obvious way.[7]

So ultimately the ghazal, as perceived by contemporary poets coming to it in translation, represents an orderly couplet structure used, paradoxically, as a non-linear method of development; a way of opening up the range of the lyric poem while maintaining tight structural boundaries. This is the form as Webb uses it, and as it is used by many other contemporary writers including Jim Harrison, W. S. Merwin, and Adrienne Rich. In her ghazals Webb reveals that she is familiar with the oriental tradition and recognizes how different her versions are from their models; she acknowledges this by calling them "ghazals and anti-ghazals." But cryptically, she doesn't specify which poems are which; this suggests that she also recognizes how profoundly she has been influenced by the tradition and how, in making its conventions her own, she is paying tribute to its continuing authenticity.

2. *Webb's Career*

It is not surprising to find Phyllis Webb going outside the mainstream of English poetry for inspiration since her whole career has been one of rigorous self-scrutiny and ceaseless experimentation. In many ways the ghazals, as oriental lyrics, are a natural progression from *The Naked Poems*, her 1965 volume of sapphic haiku.[8] In that book Webb created a larger narrative structure out of intense lyric moments by writing in suites, and then organizing these suites (five, like the five ghazal sequences of *Water and Light*) into a "story." In this way the static form of each brief poem was transcended, and a different kind of unity was discovered than that of the single lyric. A minimalist vocabulary of images — not metaphors, but colours and objects — was replayed again and again, so as to accrue value merely by the fact of repetition.

Webb explained in a 1964 interview that what she was trying to come to terms with in the *Naked Poems* was

> phrasing ... the measure of the breath ... to clarify my statements so that I could see what my basic rhythms were; how I *really* speak, how my feelings come out on the page.... The *Naked Poems* ... are attempts to get away from a dramatic rhythm, from a kind of dramatic structure in the poem itself, *and* away from metaphor very often, so that they are very bare, very simple.[9]

Obviously this is a very different kind of intention than that behind the ghazals, with their reproduction of the rich chaos of the personal and historical moment through metaphorical abundance and a *refusal* to simplify, Nonetheless, in both

projects we are impressed by the poet's stylistic flexibility, her testing of limits. They are dynamic experiments to discover what her "true" voice is, setting self-conscious craftsmanship against the modern preference for open forms with their illusion of spontaneity.

From her earliest publications Webb has shown herself skeptical of the very poetics which she practises so elegantly. Although a loving maker of brief lyrics, Webb has never fully trusted the lyric's illusion of unity and control, of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." There has always been a nervous energy in her work questioning the very artifice which gives that work shape. This is often complemented by a summoning up of past masters to argue with them about the predicament they've passed on to her, exposing the assumptions and values associated with the poetic tools she's inherited. For example, the spirit of George Herbert is evoked in "The Shape of Prayer" (published in *Even Your Right Eye*, 1956, and reprinted in the 1964 *Selected Poems*). Though he is mentioned nowhere in the poem, it is impossible to read Webb's lyric without hearing it as a response to Herbert's sonnet "Prayer" — a bleak, modern corrective to his hard-fought-for faith that ultimately "something" is "understood" because someone is listening. Webb's version reduces Herbert's ecstatic catalogue of prayer's attributes to a single intellectually laboured-for definition of its "shape," that described by a pebble skipping on the water and then "drowning." Poetic strategy here is ethical in import, telling us that Webb's world offers her less evidence of divine presence than Herbert's did him. For the same reason, Webb rejects the sonnet form (God is not her beloved in this poem) and the chiming of cross-rhyme (with its connotations of order and stability).

Nevertheless she pays tribute to Herbert in the counterpointing of rhyme against line-length and stress-pattern; the form of her poem imitates his strenuous rhythm even as the content rejects his religious conclusion. We see the same process of evaluative parody much more explicitly in poems like "Marvell's Garden" (*Even Your Right Eye*), "Poems of Dublin" (*The Sea Is Also A Garden*), and "Rilke" (*Wilson's Bowl*). What these poems all confess is a simultaneous admiration of the achieved styles of past writers and a fear of being too easily influenced. Moreover the influence is perceived not only in the overt *content* of their poems but in the possibility that even using poetic devices associated with them will covertly imply their assumptions about the world. In "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" Webb enacts this drama of simultaneous attraction and repulsion with iambic pentameter as her adversary. Even metre is value-laden in Webb's poetics.

Poetics Against the Angel of Death

I am sorry to speak of death again
(some say I'll have a long life)

> but last night Wordsworth's "Prelude"
> suddenly made sense — I mean the measure,
> the elevated tone, the attitude
> of private Man speaking to public men.
> Last night I thought I would not wake again
> but now with this June morning I run ragged to elude
> The Great Iambic Pentameter
> who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress
> because I want to die
> writing Haiku
> or, better,
> long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!

The poem's success lies in its witty, imitative form, its explicit commentary on itself, and its expectation of a literate complicity with the reader. Most noteworthy is the poem's veering toward iambic pentameter as soon as Wordsworth is mentioned (lines 4-7 are all decasyllabic), then "running raggedly" to elude the metre which closes in again, finally regular by the *tenth* line of the poem. Equally obvious of course is the way the poem "dies" into lines the length of those in a Haiku, and then opens out for the final long line of affirmation.

None of this casual expertise makes us doubt the poem's sincerity; we recognize it also in the self-deprecating irony of the opening, in Webb's acknowledgment of her public image as a suicidal, "morbid" poet. For her, inability to write truly *would* be death; hence being overpowered by Wordsworth's elevated tone, being run to ground by Iambic Pentameter, *would* be falling asleep to never wake again. She suggests two alternatives for herself here as ways of "eluding" the continuing presence of Wordsworth in post-Romantic poetry that were to shape her career for the next twenty years.

The first of these, the Haiku orientation, was followed by the *Naked Poems* whose intimacy — that of a private woman speaking to her lover — was far from the public ambitions of Wordsworth. But even while writing these brief lyrics, Webb anticipated a return to a more extroverted and ornate form of expression in a series of long-lined poems on the life of Kropotkin.[10] One of the more notorious facts about Webb has been her failure to complete this projected work; many writers might take this as confirmation of the superstition that one should never talk about work-in-progress to anyone until it's done! Certainly the first of her two apologia prefacing *Wilson's Bowl* (the book in which many of the "Kropotkin" poems appeared) suggests that her ambitions had grown too unwieldly, "too grand and too designed," and public interest in the work may have contributed to this over-explicitness.

In connection with the second apology, for the dominance of male figures in the book, John Hulcoop offers a different explanation (the two are not mutually exclusive). As he says,

> it seems reasonable to assume that Webb has abandoned her conscious pursuit of the long line because she has come to identify it as "male" and to associate it with an assertive, aggressive male domination.[11]

In support of this contention he quotes from Webb's remarks in her essay "On the Line" describing the long line in exactly those terms:

> aggressive, with much "voice". Assertive at least. It comes from assurance (or hysteria) . . . big-mouthed Whitman, yawp, yawp, and Ginsberg — howling. Male.[12]

But in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel published in *Books in Canada* (November 1983) Webb explained her abandonment of the project straightforwardly as the result of disillusionment with the *ideological* content of the work. She said:

> The Kropotkin Utopia enchanted me for a while until I saw that it was yet another male imaginative structure for a new society. It would probably *not* have changed male-female relationships.[13]

And in a private letter, Webb has declared that she was *never* disenchanted with the long line itself: "Completely opposite in fact — I want to expand and others to expand, though the short line has its uses of course."[14] The problem, therefore, was and remains the *ethos*, the rhetoric of assertion, Webb associates with the traditional use of the long line; the cultural context of the poetic technique. This is the predicament she addressed in her poem on Wordsworth and blank verse: the dilemma of a modern poet trying to write accurately of present experience in a language and with poetic conventions saturated with the values of the past. But now Webb has recognized a further dimension to the problem for any *female* poet: that past has been patriarchal.

Interestingly, Webb concedes in the *Books in Canada* interview that she never thought about these issues at the beginning of her career, when she was surrounded by "super-brilliant men" who, in her words, "allowed [her] in."[15] More recently, speaking at the League of Canadian Poets panel discussion of "The Female Voice in Canadian Poetry" (Regina 1984) she wondered whether her early acceptance by the predominantly male literary establishment had in some way inhibited her development as a poet, encouraging too great a reliance on masculine approval and the literary techniques which seemed to ensure it. So Webb's grappling with ancestral influence has assumed a new dimension for her since her experiments with private and public voices in the "Naked Poems" and the "Kropotkin Poems." This dimension is elucidated by the poems of *Wilson's Bowl*.

Ann Mandel describes *Wilson's Bowl* as

> a leaving, only partly in the sense of 'offering' but more a 'leaving behind', or an attempt to do so, of dominating presences, presiding instructors, an effort at throwing away the names of the great, throwing off the rhythms, the music that

> once enthralled. The poet struggles to throw off silence, but only if the words that then come are new words, her own language.[16]

She notes too the preponderance of "winged things — angels, gods, black birds, and envied chevaliers in many forms" as a motif in the book; most of Webb's "dominating presences" are apprehended as spirits hovering over her.[17] Like Wordsworth in the poem we looked at earlier, they are presented ambivalently; angels of death or guardians? Webb's not sure.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom borrows a figure from Blake to personify the artist's "creative anxiety" as it becomes identified with a "precursor poet" whose accomplishments are felt to be a block to originality. This figure is the "Covering Cherub," an illusion of the interference of past art with present creativity.[18] Whether or not Webb has read Bloom, she has arrived at the identical metaphor herself. She esteems these figures but at the same time, as she notes in "Socrates," suspects that their "claritas / hid from shadows / it alone cast." She wants to discover what is in the shadows, the female experience that has not been articulated; indeed, has scarcely been acknowledged.

According to Bloom, the presence of the Covering Cherub is a particular problem for "strong" poets who recognize their literary debts and therefore feel themselves engaged in a constant struggle against the influence of their mentors. He describes the revolt of the "ephebe" against the "precursor" as archetypally Oedipal, as though identity of *gender* — rather than of literary ambition — were necessary to account for the younger poet's ambivalence toward the elder(s). But Webb too identifies the men who originally influenced her as "fathers"; in fact, she speculates that it was because she lost her biological father at an early age that she "gravitated to men, to fatherly figures."[19] For Webb, too, men represented authority, and in the literary world only men had power, and were empowered to approve her work.

In the foreword to *Wilson's Bowl* Webb confesses that

> the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation [has been] so overpowering that I have, up to now, been denied access to inspiration from the female figures of my intellectual life, my heart, my imagination. The 'Letters to Margaret Atwood' are an exception; I was *asked* to write on the subject of women at that time.

"Letters to Margaret Atwood" concludes the "Portraits" section of the book, with its valedictions to Webb's male muses. In it, the poet expresses the hope that some day a genuinely female aesthetic will be found, and affirms her faith that "the poems and paragraphs eventually proceed before the amorous invisible, governed by need and the form of its persuasions." Again, ethos and aesthetic are one, as they are in the Romantic manifesto of Coleridge, whose desideratum for poetry — that it embody "form as proceeding" rather than "shape as superinduced" Webb seems to echo here. For Coleridge, "the latter is either the death

or the imprisonment of the thing — the former is its self-witnessing and self-effected sphere of agency."[20] Ironically, his champion Wordsworth has become the deadly exponent of "shape" for Webb. As a Covering Cherub he is a "demon of continuity" whose

> baleful charms imprisons the present in the past. . . . This is Milton's 'universe of death' and with it poetry cannot live, for poetry must leap, it must locate itself in a discontinuous universe, and it must make that universe (as Blake did) if it cannot find one. Discontinuity is freedom.[21]

3. Webb and the Ghazal

Discontinuously, we arrive with Webb at the ghazal, a form which "allows the imagination to move by its own nature . . . the poem of contrasts, dreams, astonishing leaps."[22] It should be clear by now why Webb should find the ghazal so congenial. It is formally challenging, yet unrestrictive. It comes from outside English literature and so, whatever associations and inhibitions it has within its own culture, it can have few for Webb or her Canadian readers. Moreover the movement by couplets provides a perfect mean between the extremes Webb posited for herself of either "writing Haiku" or "long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo." Writing in couplets gives her units of expression which are the rhetorical equivalent of long lines within the ghazal as a whole. At the same time, each couplet may be a self-contained little poem, like a haiku.

One could go even further and say that Webb has discovered a kind of aesthetic androgyny in the ghazal, equivalent to its traditional ambiguity as to the gender of its subjects. For if long lines, to Webb, are "male," and the couplets approximate long lines, the white spaces between the couplets resemble "those gasps, those inarticulate dashes" of Emily Dickinson's which she cites as a "*subversive*, Female" alternative within the English tradition itself.[23]

I'd like to conclude by looking closely at one of Webb's ghazals to see how she uses it to unite her public and private voices, her extroverted "male" concerns and her shadowy "female" ones. Webb tells us that she turned to the ghazal in order to open up:

> I wanted something to subvert my own rational mind, to get more free flow of images a little wilder in content, to liberate my psyche a bit.[24]

Like Thompson and Rich, she sees the ghazal as an embodiment of "form as proceeding." At the same time we will see that she has relinquished none of her technical expertise in the ghazal; the narrative and thematic movement of the poems may be more open but she still strives for tight relationships at the level of detail. Imagery, stress-pattern and rhythm, rhyme and sound effects are all highly controlled.

Sunday Water, Ghazal 1

I watch the pile of cards grow.
I semaphore for help (calling stone-dead John Thompson).

A mist in the harbour. Hydrangea blooms turn pink.
A game of badminton, *shuttlecock,* hitting at feathers.

My family is the circumstance I cannot dance with.
At Banff I danced in black, so crazy, the young man insisting.

Four or five couplets trying to dance
into Persia. Who dances in Persia now?

A magic carpet, a prayer mat, red.
A knocked off head of somebody on her broken knees.

It is clear why Webb made this poem not only the first in "Sunday Water," but also the first in *Water and Light* as a whole. It sets up the poet's situation, harbourside, in summer, learning to write ghazals. It adds a little local detail — people outside playing badminton, mist, hydrangeas soaking up moisture and changing colour. Then it contrasts this outwardly serene scene to the poet's inner conflict about her family, and flashes back to a seemingly unrelated memory of dancing at Banff. So far we are in the familiar world of twentieth-century lyric poetry; confessional and inconsequential. Except for the disturbing fact that John Thompson is dead, this is a fairly soft piece so far. But in the last two couplets everything shifts, and the death of Thompson, the poet's embarrassment at her inappropriate behaviour at Banff, the fact that she is trying to write ghazals, all come together to reveal their public and political implications. We are presented with the contrast of the muddleheaded poet, able to dance but unwilling, with a headless woman, fallen on broken knees. What the subject of the poem is revealed to be then, is Webb's ironic awareness of the impropriety of her borrowing a middle-eastern lyrical form to speak of her "predicament" as a poet in the West, in the light of what's going on simultaneously in the Middle-East. Her concerns seem lightweight, a mere "hitting at feathers," when Persia itself is dead, the magic carpet grounded, prayer ineffectual. The red of the prayer mat is contrasted to the pink of the hydrangea, the game of shuttlecock with the knocking-off of heads, and the death of John Thompson becomes a symbol of the loss of a link between the two worlds.

The shape of the ghazal is particularly appropriate for enacting this tension of opposites, the incompatibility of the worlds being emphasized by the self-sufficiency of each couplet. In later ghazals Webb was to experiment with enjambment, running the sense along from couplet to couplet and playing against the visual pattern and the pausing suggested by it. But here the traditional discontinuity of the ghazal is enlisted by Webb to recreate the experience of a divided mind. Both lines of the first couplet begin with "I," signalling the poet's

self-preoccupation; in contrast, both lines of the next couplet begin with the indefinite article "a," taking us outside to the objective world. The third couplet is again personal — "*My* family" and "At Banff *I*" — but it turns the analytical viewpoint upon the self, exploring motives and behaviour. The reason for this scrutiny becomes clear with the abrupt, ironic transition from Persian poetry to Persian politics in the last two couplets. By the last couplet the perspective is "objective" once again, linked to the second couplet by the use of the indefinite article, but the tone is no longer detached. Rather than simple description, the items listed in the last couplet are value-laden because of the ironic contrast set up earlier, and because of the intrinsic horror of "A knocked off head of somebody on her broken knees." The poem tells us that this is what is happening in Persia *now*, in contrast to the here and now of the speaker's situation.

What the poem enacts, then, is a movement outwards, from self-absorption to a compassionate identification with the sufferings of others. And the reason for this transition is the poetic form itself, as a historical phenomenon. Robert Hass suggests that the form of a poem is "the shape of its understanding," and reminds us that the way a poem orders its experience and leads us through it is a large part of what it is *about*.[25] We can see how the shape of the ghazal suits Webb's intent in making us feel with her the simultaneity and the incompatibility of what she is feeling as a writer, as a daughter of her family, as a woman, as an observer of the local scene, and as a citizen of the world.

Rhythm and sound are equally attuned to meaning here. The repetition of sounds in "sema*phore for*" sets up an initial stutter indicating strong feelings. A sense of hopelessness is engendered by the spondees in "stone-dead John Thompson" — it is clear that no help will be forthcoming from that quarter. The flutter of dactyls in the second line of the second couplet links the frivolity of badminton with dancing at Banff in the third; this waltz rhythm continues into the fourth couplet for ironic contrast ("trying to dance / into Persia. Who dances in Persia now?"). Finally the last couplet links back to the first, with the heavy stresses in "A knocked off head" recalling John Thompson's deadness.

Webb uses alliteration, rhyme and half-rhyme with similar finesse; within the ten lines of the ghazal she deploys a full range of poetic devices. Particularly effective is the use of short "a" sounds and rhyme in the third couplet as a unifying pattern in "family," "circumstance," "dance," "Banff," "danced," "black," and "man." Clearly, for Webb the ghazal does not represent a rejection of the conventions of English poetry. While the apparent discontinuity of the ghazal form is what enables her to surprise us with the gap between what she sees around her and what she thinks of as she writes, coherence is maintained by the devices of sound and rhythm, which insist on relatedness. One might suggest that it is *because* the ghazal's movement is essentially non-linear and associative, *because* of its thematic and narrative discontinuity, that Webb feels free to pull

out all the stops and play with sound and language as she does. She doesn't have to worry about the poem feeling too constricted and cerebral as she might if it were equally controlled in its propositional sense. Another ghazal sequence, "Frivolities," consists of poems which move almost entirely by verbal and visual associations; its very title tells us not to look too hard for "serious" content. So, one of the things the ghazal seems to have done for Webb is to have, briefly, solved her old dilemma about the nature and consequences of using poetic devices.

By borrowing a structure for her poems from another culture, Webb has been able to perform an act of translation by which finding becomes making and "shape as superinduced" becomes "form as proceeding." The character of the ghazal itself, with its tendency towards abstraction and its discontinuous structure, make it well suited to adaptation by a Western poet whose orientation has always been metaphysical both in theme and technique. Perhaps ironically, although Webb discovered in the ghazal a way of liberating herself from the patriarchal tradition of English literature and presenting more accurately her modern, female experience, she was able to do so only by adopting yet another "father," Ghalib. And so, the last poem in *Water and Light* bids farewell to this mentor as earlier poems did the others. Ghalib, the tutelary spirit of the poems, materializes as a sad man drinking himself to sleep, dreaming of "what was / what could have been possible." He is oblivious to the emblem Webb makes her own, "a small branch of cherry / blossoms, picked today, and it's only February." The unseasonal blossoms would seem to represent a miracle and yet Webb holds the cherry branch up as a flag, "dark pink in moonlight — / from the land of / only what is." That is, the poem closes embracing the present and the real and eschewing the luxury of nostalgia. The gap perceived in the opening ghazal of the book has not closed for Webb, but she leaves Ghalib tenderly, having learned what she can from him.

The ghazal represented one solution for Webb's on-going struggle with form. Inevitably, it was not *the* solution for Webb whose career has been one of continuous experiment; once she solves a problem, the solution itself becomes a problem if it threatens to become habitual and restrictive. This is the way any good poet works, but for Webb it is also one of the great topics of her poetry. Given the rich results of her attempts to solve her dilemma as she is forced, again and again, to confront it, one trusts that "the amorous invisible, governed by need" will find a new form for its persuasions.

NOTES

[1] See Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 37-39, and Ralph Russell, "The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 29.1 (1969-70), pp. 107-24 for further exploration of the idealization of illicit love in medieval society and literature. For the European context, the locus classicus is C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (N.Y.:

Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 1-43. Lu Emily Pearson studies the transmission and evolution of courtly love conventions in English poetry in *Elizabethan Love Conventions* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1933).

[2] Ralph Russell, "Ghalib's Urdu Verse," in *Ghalib: The Poet and his Age*, ed. Russell (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 110. In the English tradition, the ascent from carnal lust to humble adoration of the Divine in its mortal and female incarnation comes from the fusion of Provençal eroticism and neoplatonic introspection in the "Dolce Stil Nuovo," as transplanted by Sir Thomas Wyatt. That Wyatt underplayed the metaphorical fusion of the Beloved with God in order to explore the psychological implications of masculine erotic experience didn't completely inhibit the development of this identification in English poetry; think of Spenser's *Amoretti*, for example. And the subconscious split between body and mind suggested by the need to "transcend" mere fleshly desire in order to make love spiritual is taken to outrageous limits, made to burlesque itself, in Shakespeare's sonnets with their division of love into chaste homosexual worship and misogynist lust.

[3] John Thompson, Intro. to *Stilt Jack* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1978).

[4] Many contemporary critics of Shakespeare's sonnets discover their unity in their imitation of "the richness, the density, the logical incompleteness of the mind." See Arthur Mizener's essay "The Structure of Figurative Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets" (from which the preceding quotation was taken) and the essays by C. L. Barber and Winifred Nowottny in *Discussions of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Barbara Herrnstein (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1964). Stephen Booth's phenomenological readings have been very influential in this regard, both in *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969) and in his 1977 Yale University edition of the sonnets.

[5] Aijaz Ahmad, the co-translator and editor of the translations Webb cites in *Water and Light* suggests that

> formal devices such as rhymed couplets or closely scannable prosodic structures are, in contemporary English . . . restrictive rather than enlarging or intensifying devices. The organic unity of the ghazal, as translated into English, does not depend on formal rhymes. Inner rhymes, allusions, verbal associations, wit, and imagistic relations can quite adequately take over the functions performed by the formal end-rhymes in the original Urdu.

Intro. to *Ghazals of Ghalib* (N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), p. xix.

[6] See D. J. Matthews and C. Shackle, Intro. to *An Anthology of Classical Urdu Love Lyrics* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 10.

[7] Adrienne Rich, letter to Aijaz Ahmad, quoted in *Ghazals of Ghalib*, p. xxv.

[8] John Hulcoop notes that *Sunday Water* "begs to be compared with her 1965 *Naked Poems*." See "'Bird song in the apparatus': Webb's New Selected Poems," *Essays in Canadian Writing* 30 (Winter 1984-85), p. 359.

[9] Phyllis Webb, "Polishing Up the View," in *Talking*, ed. Gary Geddes (Montreal: Quadrant, 1982), pp. 46-47.

[10] In her 1964 interview she picked up the adjective "knotted" from "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" to describe the long lines of the "dark . . . more heavily laden poems" she hoped to write as soon as *Naked Poems* was finished. See "Polishing Up the View," pp. 47-48.

[11] John F. Hulcoop, "Bird song in the apparatus," p. 364.

[12] Phyllis Webb, "On the Line," *Talking*, p. 68.

[13] Eleanor Wachtel, "Intimations of Mortality. [The Splendid Isolation of Phyllis Webb]," *Books in Canada* 12.9 (November 1983), p. 13.

[14] Letter to Susan Glickman, April 19, 1986.

[15] Eleanor Wachtel, "Intimations of Mortality," pp. 13-14.

[16] Ann Mandel, "The Poetry of Last Things," *Essays in Canadian Writing* 26 (Summer 1983), p. 89.

[17] Mandel, "The Poetry of Last Things," p. 85.

[18] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 36, 24.

[19] In the interview with Wachtel recorded in "Intimations of Mortality," p. 14.

[20] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art," in *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 26. Throughout Coleridge's criticism there are discussions of "organic form" and the necessity of imitating *Natura naturans* in the creative act. The impact of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's challenge to Augustan notions of form, and its legacy in the pluralism of modern poetic styles is discussed at length by Donald Wesling in *The New Poetries: Poetic Form Since Coleridge and Wordsworth* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1985).

[21] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 39.

[22] John Thompson, Intro. to *Stilt Jack.*

[23] Phyllis Webb, "On the Line," p. 69.

[24] Recorded by Eleanor Wachtel in "Intimations of Mortality," p. 14.

[25] Robert Hass, "One Body: Some Notes on Form," *Antaeus* 30-31 (Spring 1978), p. 33.

ANTIGONISH SUMMER

Lachlan Murray

Popcorn and music
the breeze
lifts the gasp of an accordion
to the one boy, twelve; the other thirteen
hidden within the body
of a towering maple
two hearts pale green, fluttering
in sympathy with the leaves

below, the muddied river
slow as August
the near-side trailer park
strings of lights
against the softening day,
the thick summer people
sunk in folding chairs