

PHYLLIS WEBB AND THE PRIESTESS OF MOTION

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PHYLLIS WEBB's most recent and most complex book, *Naked Poems*, confirms a preoccupation with certain themes — love, poetry, and love as poetry — which was already evident in *Even Your Right Eye* (1956): “Moments are monuments . . . Caught/ pressed into words/ made crazy in colour/ Made act/ as in love.” The *Naked Poems* clarifies and perhaps finalizes a tendency apparent in the earlier volume towards reduction of refinement as Miss Webb's characteristic solution to certain technical problems arising out of her particular emotional and intellectual temperament: “doubled up I feel/ small like these poems/ the area of attack/ is diminished.” This solution reflects the poet's attitude towards life. No moment is too short, no event too small, no experience too trivial, to merit the poet's attention. The poems are “small” not because the subject-matter is unimportant, but because the poet's eye sees precisely. Apparently casual and often brief, her glance is exacting and uncompromising. She refuses to magnify or over-state. Hence the absence of sentimentality in her treatment of some kinds of experience (lovers' parting) which might tempt a less honest poet to romanticize:

Then you must go.
I sat cross-legged
on the bed.
There is no room
for self-pity
I said
I lied

In "Poetry," published in the 1956 collection, Miss Webb writes: "Fidelity/ as in love/ is in poetry/ an unexpected satisfaction." Her own fidelity to the bare and sometimes seemingly inarticulate facts of daily experience — "a/ chair, a lamp, a/fly two books by/ Marianne Moore" — is, though not by now unexpected, still one of the most powerful and sustaining elements of her poetic vision:

I go in search
 neither intense nor anxious
 but in observation of the small event . . .

These,
 events,
 these separate
 minutiae
 dot the horizon

like small birds flying south for winter
 leaving quick facts
 in my collection of unknowns,
 making the new familiar,
 and now intense.

(*Sunday Morning Walk*, 1956)

The same quiet insistence on the deceptively "small satisfactions" — "small joys and quiet ecstasies" — resounds in the 1962 volume, *The Sea Is Also A Garden*: "My cat is asleep under the tree./ She is a brief lyric/ of singing fur . . ./ To find some terrible meaning/ in this round space sleeping . . ./ would be, perhaps, to have struck/ God's thunder." And in the *Naked Poems* (1965), Miss Webb repeatedly strikes thunder out of the "brief lyric" and the sound is "terrible" because "unexpected" in so small a verbal unit which manages to be dramatic and narrative as well as lyric in its economic complexity.

INTRODUCING THE "Naked Poems" (Suites I and II in the present volume) at a 1963 poetry reading in Edmonton, Miss Webb called them poems refined down to the "bone-essential statement." She said she was trying to establish "a kind of narrative line with a lyric intention". On the almost invisible "narrative line" she threads each "brief lyric" or "pearl poem" and in so doing

reveals her self-confessed debt to Sappho and the haiku, and perhaps an unconscious debt to Browning whose experiments with the dramatic lyric opened up the form and left it charged with a potential which twentieth-century poets have fully exploited. The elusive but essential “narrative line” with its “lyric intention” accounts for the careful arrangement of poems in the new volume, and suggests how the five sections are to be approached and read. “Suites I and II,” “A Suite of Lies” and “Some Final Questions” all have to be read *en suite*. It would be difficult to anthologize any single poem from a particular suite — for most obvious example, “*Oh?*” — and justify its autonomy or defend its meaning. But “Non Linear,” the central of the five sections, suggests that the eleven poems contained therein do not stand in line, even though they have in common certain thematic material (the creative and the love-making process). Each poem stands alone, just as the whole “Non Linear” section stands alone, flanked on both sides by two suites. It is the still and lyric point of the turning narrative world, “An instant of white roses” or an arrangement of “yellow chrysanthemums . . . a stillness/ in jade”, images and ideas which echo ideas and images in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

Miss Webb’s movement towards the “still point”, the “intersection of the timeless/ With time”, the lyric with the narrative or dramatic, is clearly felt in poems like “Rust On An Anchor” which appears in the 1956 volume: “If to be remote/ (if only momentarily)/ as a Chinese poem/ Is to achieve sanity/ Then you and I/ like a Japanese ballet/ touch it as if/ Between the acts/ of a violent comedy: ? that is to say:/ Now and Then/ the rare mountain air/ is caught/ in a small/ Venetian glass bottle. . . .” The same movement manifests itself in *The Sea Is Also A Garden*. Poems like “Countered”, “Breaking”, “Making”, the “glass” poems, “A Tall Tale”, “Flux”, “To Nellie” and “Poetic Against The Angel of Death” announce in images that call on the tradition of mysticism and the apocalyptic, in allusions to the Buddha and St. John of the Cross, that Miss Webb’s vocation as Maker (“making/ certain order”) is comparable to what Eliot calls an “occupation for the saint” — namely, the attempt “to apprehend/ The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time.” “No occupation either, but something given/ And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love.”

“Who would call me to still centres/ needs a lesson in desire,” says the speaker in “Flux” (1962):

Who would kiss me on the mouth
 claiming me another self
 needs my body on their flesh
 tasting little bites of death,

death rerising in desire
 naming nothing but its hope,
 spiralling in calling flights
 flaming into nothing's throat.

Nothing finally is final —
 every love is a rain
 opening the bud to fire
 asking and receiving its own Easter.

The image of flux here is a fine example of purposive ambiguity, of Miss Webb's ability to pack *multum in parvo*. In Eliot's Heraclitean world, "Desire itself is movement," and opposed to the "still point" which is "inner freedom from the practical desire,/ The release from action and suffering." In Miss Webb's world of flux (where "Nothing" is substantively final, so that finally nothing can be called final), the desire to lead one's beloved to "still centres" needs to be instructed in the nature of desire: in other words, the desire for "inner freedom from the practical desire" leaves a lot to be desired, is desire which still has much to learn. In Miss Webb's vision of mutability, "love is a rain" (the "small" and "Western wind" variety) inspiring the bud to burst into flames (another kind of fire, another kind of "refiner's fire", like the "great rain" in Ezra, cataclysmic, destructive, death-dealing); death rerises, Phoenix-like, in the rain-refined fire or desire to love which asks and receives "its own Easter" (symbol of a "lifetime's death in love"); and the resurrection takes place at the "still point," "spiralling in calling flights/ flaming into nothing's throat" — and nothing, we know, can be called finally final. The lovely contrapuntal pattern by which Miss Webb makes "certain order", defines the indefinable but sharply felt "still point", discloses the timeless centre, or completes the perfect circle of her poetic vision, begins to emerge if we set beside the 1962 image of flux a sequence from the last suite of *Naked Poems*: "all my desire goes/ out of the impossibly/ beautiful // *But why don't you do something?*/ I am trying to write a poem // *Why?*/ Listen. If I have known beauty/ let's say I came to it/ asking // *Oh?*" Here the poet asks herself "Some Final Questions" and receives some answers ending in "Oh", in zero, in "Nothing" which is finally final because "every love is a rain/ opening

the bud to fire/ asking and receiving its own Easter." The last poem in *The Sea Is Also A Garden* ends with a single affirmation, "Yes!" The final question in *Naked Poems* is, though obviously ironic, equally positive since it implies another answer, as yet unspoken, from which the perpetual question will "rerise in desire" for yet another answer. The reader may be puzzled; some are even irritated by the enigmatic brevity of these poems, by the seeming emptiness of "Oh?" But Miss Webb confirms Rosamund Tuve's assertion that mature irony appears as "a courageous and thoughtful willingness to see all aspects of reality" by anticipating the reader's exasperated interrogation:

*I don't get it. Are you talking about
process and individuation. Or absolutes
whole numbers that sort of thing?*

Sardonically, the poet answers "Yeah."

Implicit in these poems from the final suite of the *Naked Poems* is the identification of two processes, love-making and poetry-making, both of which are seen as making a "certain order". In "Non Linear", this identification is explicit and many of the poems are "about" poetry and love-making. Using the sea, perhaps the most important single symbol throughout Miss Webb's work, as an image of *flux*, of perpetual *motion*, she writes: "I hear the waves . . . / they are the root waves/ of the poem's meter/ the waves of the/ root poem's sex." *Root* means source, essential point or part, and one suspects that the "root poem" is for Miss Webb what "central poetry" is for Wallace Stevens. Writers of central poetry are "mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward the ultimate good sense which we term civilization." Civilized "good sense" is an unmistakable element in Miss Webb's more mature poetry. What she says in "The Glass Castle" (1962) accurately describes all her major utterances: "I merely make a statement, judicious and polite." All the synonyms for "judicious and polite" — directed by sound judgment, wise, polished, refined and cultivated — can be applied without reservation to both Miss Webb's recent volumes. The "root poem", itself a sexual image, derives its basic nature, its sex, from the rise and fall, the love-making up and the breaking-down death of the wave which, while it appears to be in motion through time and space, is essentially still and so motionless. A "wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same," says Wallace Stevens, and he expresses the same thought in "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
 So evenings die, in their green going,
 A wave interminably flowing.

PHYLLIS WEBB, in the *Naked Poems*, declares herself a daughter or an apostle of "the Priestess of Motion", of Flux, for which the "wave interminably flowing" is a perfect image. From the sea, which "is also a garden", the "mad gardener" (and "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact") collects still moments, poems, "pale/ delicates at peace/ on this sand/ tracery of last night's/ tide." In "listening for/ the turn of the tide", she hears, is hounded and taken by "the wave of the/ root poem's sex":

Hieratic sounds emerge
 from the Priestess of
 Motion
 a new alphabet
 gasps for air.

We disappear in the musk of her coming.

The "brief lyric" cries uttered by the Priestess of Motion in her coming to a sexual-poetic climax in "the Act" of making love with the Logos, the godhead to whom she has dedicated herself, whose service is her vocation (an "occupation for the saint") — these are the "hieratic sounds", the cryptic letters of "a new alphabet" which "gasps for air" and is given room to breathe in the beautifully printed volume of her *Naked Poems* which was designed by Takao Tanabe.

This "new alphabet" with which Miss Webb spells out the language characteristic of her best poetry, can be seen in embryonic form in both her earlier volumes:

The slight touch
 and the words turn
 (the spelling of swift eyes) (1956)

The shape of prayer
 is like the shape of the small
 beach stone . . .
 curved and going nowhere, to fall
 in pure abstraction saying everything
 and saying nothing at all. (1956)

A smile shakes alphabets over my belly
 and I bend down scrabbling "Yes" from a young Adam.
 (1962)

In the *Naked Poems*, the new alphabet, taken like a rib from a young old Adam, becomes the "bone-essential statement" with which the poet chooses to work almost exclusively. And though some of the poems she makes out of it are longer than the lyric "Yes" in "I Can Call Nothing Love", all the poems in the latest collection are what she says they are, "hieratic sound", *hieratic* meaning (according to Webster) "an abridged and somewhat cursive form of hieroglyphic writing which in late use was reserved for religious writings," and which is therefore related to what Miss Webb calls the "shape of prayer".

THE "abridged and somewhat cursive form" of these new poems can, if we speak by analogy, certainly be called hieroglyphic:

brother and sister
 conjunctive and
 peaceable

Here, "conjunctive" and "peaceable" can be taken as adjectives qualifying "brother and sister". At the same time, the poem can be expanded (something like a telegram) to read, "Brother *and* sister: the simple statement of a relationship in which 'and' is conjunctive and expressive of the fact that the siblings are at peace." And if, as has been suggested, Miss Webb's attempt to create "a kind of narrative line with a lyric intention" is seen as her attempt to "apprehend/ The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time," to reach the still and "very center of consciousness" out of which comes Steven's "central poetry"; and if the dedication of oneself to such an attempt is an "occupation for the saint" or for the Priestess of Motion who makes out of the world of flux a "certain order" in the form of poems articulate with the "brevity of bone", then there is every justification for calling such writings "religious". They are religious in exactly the sense that James Joyce suggests when he speaks of the artist as "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuted the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life."

Nowhere does the "lyric intention" intersect the "narrative line" more dramatically than in the first two suites of the *Naked Poems*. Here, too, is the most

elaborate expression of what I have called the theme of “love *as* poetry”: a subtle metaphorical statement of the act of love as the act of imagination as the act of worship in which the beloved (who is the speaker in these poems) becomes the poet who becomes the Priestess of Motion whose “hieratic” utterances are the “brief lyrics” Miss Webb has written; and each “poem is the cry of its occasion/ Part of the res itself and not about it,” to quote Stevens again.

“Suite I” begins by making a room. The speaker is “enclosed/ by a thought and some *walls*”. There are “two flies/ on the *ceiling*”. She has thrown her “blouse on the *floor*”. At the *window*, “plum curtains”. There is a bed in the room, a “chair, a lamp, a/ fly two books by/ Marianne Moore”. And the room is in a house to which the speaker has recently moved, “Moving/ to establish distance/ between our houses.” Very quickly, at the end of the first poem, the room assumes meaning beyond that of a place in which to put furniture and live. After moving to establish distance, the speaker says:

It seems
I welcome you in.

Your mouth blesses me
all over.

There is room.

Room not only denotes the space contained within four walls, floor and ceiling, but also suggests the room which must be made for love to live in. Having separated, moved apart, the speaker has made room in which to be herself, living by herself, and room in which to love.

In the third poem, the room becomes an image for the body and the mind of the speaker: “Tonight/ quietness. In me/ and the room./ I am enclosed/ by a thought/ and some walls.” The image is a chinese box. The room contains the speaker’s body which contains her mind which contains her thoughts, her psyche or soul or whatever it is that constitutes who she is. Her self waits quietly enclosed by a thought as her body waits quietly enclosed by the room. When she speaks of peopling the room with things, the process is (by implication) repeated in her mind with thoughts, images, visions, poems:

While you were away

I held you like this
in my mind.

“Like this” seems to mean that she is now literally holding her lover in her arms in the room, and metaphorically in the poem, which holds the lover present in the mind, and the memory of the lover present in the room:

It is a good mind
that can embody
perfection with exactitude.

The room contains the body, the body the mind, the mind the poem, and the poem “perfection with exactitude.” It is the paradox of perfection *embodied* in the *mind* that enables the reader to catch the reciprocity of all these images: the room-body-mind welcomes the lover in, holds the lover in mind, embodies her so that lover, perfection and poem are superimposed and become synonymous. Hence the final poem of “Suite II”:

You brought me clarity.

Gift after gift
I wear.

Poems, naked,

in the sunlight

on the floor.

The “clarity” which the lover brings and the “perfection” with which she is synonymous, and which is embodied in the speaker’s mind, are clearly related. In fact, the clarity which enables the speaker to embody (or make poems) with exactitude is inspired by the perfection *embodied* in the poet, in the mind and in each poem, by the lover. They are indistinguishable. “Gift after gift/ I wear”—these lines refer back to the beginning: “Your mouth blesses me/ all over.” The kisses are blessings, are gifts, gift after gift: “And/ here/ and here and/ here/ and over and/ over your mouth.” “Again you have left/ your mark,” says the speaker in “The Bruise” (Suite I, poem 4). Bruises (“little bites of death” in “Flux”) and kisses, kisses and blessings, blessings and blouses, blouses and gifts, all these have the same essential meaning. “Gift after gift/ I wear./ Poems . . .”: the gifts are the poems inspired (i.e., made) by and embodying the perfection of love and love-maker. Because the gifts are also kisses, the poems are embodied in the kisses, or the kisses in the poems — “hieratic sounds”. The poems are “naked” like bodies

making love and, therefore, making poems. The poetry is in the love; the love is in the naked bodies; the naked poems and bodies are in the room; and all are enclosed by or held in the mind of the poet which embodies perfection with exactitude.

The poems are “naked,/ in the sunlight”:

The sun comes through
plum curtains.

I said
the sun is gold

in your eyes.

it isn't the sun
you said.

It is love and desire that are gold, like the sunlight, in the eyes of the lover (“Who would call me to still centres/ needs a lesson in desire”). Desire strips (down to the “bone-essential statement”) and leaves the poet whose mind embodies the poems “naked/ in the sunlight/ on the floor”. “I have thrown my/ blouse on the floor.” The speaker’s blouse is a gift from her lover: “On the floor your blouse”. And the light of desire in the eyes of the lover which, says the speaker, “took/ with so much/ gentleness/ my dark,” falls “more golden/ going down”. The images all relate with miraculous clarity and consistency. The lovers embody each other (that both are women is important and too obvious to need comment); they make love on the floor — “two flies/ on the ceiling/ are making love/ quietly. Or/ So it seems/ down here” — and in making love on the floor of the room, in which room is made for love and self-pity, the poems are made.

Lyric poetry is, more often than not, love poetry, and love is at once the most personal of all experiences yet the most common to all men and so the most universal. Miss Webb intensifies both the personal and non-personal aspects in her own poetry by setting her lyrics within the framework of an allusively suggested narrative, and by relating lyric moods, emotions, states of mind to a particular location.

Pearl poem
white with virtue
or opal
marred, shining

hold out for the moment
 when you'll be heard
 then speak
 from the absolute
 location
 of your mist

The paradox at the end of this unpublished poem describes exactly how the *Naked Poems* speak. The location and occasion (a room in which room is made for making love) are, like the speaker's mind, absolute and specific, they are so because clearly defined by the poet's "narrative line". But since the intention is lyrical, the poems are suffused with a universal mist which obscures the location of the location. A room, yes; a house, yes; but where, when? Fully realized, the lyric intention makes it impossible and irrelevant to answer these questions. The Priestess of Motion, in uttering her "hieratic sounds" (and read *en suite*, they constitute a formidable "lesson in desire"), succeeds in placing us at that intersection of narrative or historic time and lyric timelessness, and "We disappear in the musk" and in the mist "of her coming".

In poetry, as in all art, says Stevens, "the central problem is always the problem of reality." The poet whose poetry is "central" acknowledges "imagination as a power within him to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very centre of consciousness." In identifying this still point and very centre of consciousness with the sexual orgasm, and in writing "brief lyrics" the form and hieratic sound of which reflect the private and ephemeral nature of those "small joys and quiet ecstasies", Miss Webb offers an evaluation of her experience of life. If life has any value, it is to be found in love; if love has any meaning, it resides in its power to inspire the priestess of the eternal imagination to transmute the daily narrative of experience into a radiant body of timeless lyric poems.