

# STRUCTURE OF LOSS

*The Poetry of  
Phyllis Webb*

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**I**N SEARCH OF VALUES she cannot clearly see and will not live without, Phyllis Webb writes poems which reveal both the lacerating chaos of human experience and a deliberate cutting in to the hard core, the centre that may hold. Since one may not in the instant know whether pain is ultimately toward life or toward death, the experience of pain in these poems is not resolved in terms of the one or the other. The resulting balance communicates a kind of passionate tough-mindedness, an anguished will to completeness.

Many of Phyllis Webb's poems are luminous, sensuous, richly-colored, free in movement; some burst into a rollicking bawdiness or gait. In all of them, from the most reckless to the most serenely lyrical, wit both releases and controls the emotion. Balance, in craft and in attitude, is as significant as it is in the poems which look for "seeds of meaning".

In these poems, fury, despair and bitterness are responses to the corruption and insignificance of man in a meaningless world that "shifts like an island in the sea, uneasily / like the age", in a brutal world of "murder, ignorance and lust", whose history is characterized by years "when soldiers came / and the dogs and harpies visited churches". This world threatens to shatter or smother whatever value man may hope for. If he retreats, he is trapped in a self too small, too dark to sustain life. If he walks out under the tormenting but blank and nerveless sun, his day is splintered, chaotic in its endless round and rage.

It is in this life and on this earth that Phyllis Webb seeks a vision one might

claim “with tense impersonal unworth”. If it does not exist here, it does not exist at all. The vision and the hope in these poems are that roundness may show wholeness, that light may be luminous, that darkness may be “a deep place where green begins”. But there is always the other and terrible possibility, of meaningless circularity, withering glare, brutal and blank darkness.

In an early poem, “Sprouts the Bitter Grain”, against the knowledge of the hot rank growth of hatred in the human heart is set a wistful nostalgia for “the weather of meadows, / the seasons and gardens of children”. But it is not the brief longing at the end that balances the horror of the main part of the poem. The balance lies rather in certain images. Fury is seen as a “desperate love”; the bitter grain of hatred, growing green and fervent, is seen also as “a forest of green angels, a threat of magnificent beasts”. The poem moves from a sense of overwhelming destruction, through recognition of a kind of love, a kind of creativity and magnificence in the bitter experience, to a cry “to the gods of temperate climes”. But this cry of other gods, this prayer for “praise” and for the destruction of “these criminal branches”, hints no resolution. It is an exhausted posing of the central ambivalence, and out of the exhaustion comes the nostalgia for an earlier, simpler experience.

This ambivalence characterizes not only the private, singular experience but also the experience of love in its relationship to society and history. In another early poem, love is “like falling glass shaking with stars / the air which tomorrow, or even today, will be / a slow terrible movement of scars.” Always there are the two possibilities: that our shattering, fractional life may be just endless destruction, finally meaningless, and that this shattering may be necessary to a construction of value. A single poem may incline toward one view, but in the framework of the total poem and in its imagery, the possibility of the other is always maintained.

In “Pain” the dominant tone is positive.

Whether pain is simple as razors edging the fleshy cage,  
or whether pain raves with sharks inside the ribs,  
it throws a bridge of value to belief  
where, towards or away from, moves intense traffic.

Or, should the eyes focus to cubes and lights of pain  
and the breasts' exquisite asterisks breed circular grief,  
this bird of death is radiant and complex,  
speeds fractional life over value to belief;

The bridge spans by contemporary pain  
Centuries of historical birth.<sup>1</sup>

The view we are given in the first stanza is that pain, whether it cut into our flesh from outside or tear at us from within, does reach and reveal our essential structure of bone. This structure is like a bridge. Pain reveals, establishes "a bridge of value to belief".

This is a spatial image. In the second stanza, pain is seen as recurrent in time. The primary image is the phoenix. The great circle of flaming death and life rising from it contains both the pain which, like a bright light, stabs and burns our vulnerable flesh and also the pain bred, "a circular grief", in our bodies. Pain, like the phoenix "radiant and complex", is able to lift our "fractional life" to belief.

The space and the time images meet and spread out in the final quick stanza. Here the pain which reveals each man's framework and recurs in each man's time, our "contemporary pain" which has been, is and will always be now, is a bridge spanning "centuries of historical birth".

The main image is constructive. But the bridge of the first stanza can carry traffic two ways, toward belief and away from it. The phoenix of the second stanza is a bird of death. And in the last stanza, partly through the image and partly through the stillness at the end of a couplet in a sequence of quatrains, we are given in "centuries of historical birth" a sense of pain stretched over vast travail, a sense of death and futility.

These undertones, precise and finely handled, have the effect not of blurring but of extending the meaning of the poem. Characteristic of much of Phyllis Webb's verse is the view that in a single fact there are conflicting possibilities, that it is of vital importance to know which is real, that the real truth cannot be known by any glossing over of the fact itself or dodging of its felt horror. Therefore whatever is must be known, must be used. It cannot be walked away from. No part or aspect can be ignored. The most powerful images in these poems are, therefore, transmuting, not transcending.

<sup>1</sup> We wish to acknowledge the permission of Miss Phyllis Webb to publish "A Pardon to my Bones", and of Messrs McClelland & Stewart to publish "Pain" and a number of extracts from other poems included in Miss Webb's volume *Even Your Right Eye*.—Ed.

ONE OF THESE IMAGES is bone. Bone is harder than flesh, and deeper; it can be fractured and is, finally, dust; it is shaped and shaping, rigid and jointed; it is the skeleton which glistens with death and it is the structure of our living.

This our inheritance  
 is our distress,  
 born of the weight of eons  
 it skeletons our flesh,  
 bearing us on  
 we wear it,  
 though it bares us.

In this first stanza of “. . . Is our Distress”, the shaping weight of eons is a dead weight, but we are in our living borne along by it. It is an inheritance of a kind that we can neither lose nor dissipate, since it is our core, our central fact. Yet there is a distinction in this poem between our living person and our bones which link us to our dead and to our death: we are aware; we wear our skeleton. Though we cannot choose not to, our will can consent or not. Here, the will consents, and so it is as if the skeleton were also worn externally, apparent and obvious.

The central image, clean as bone in the spare lines of the verse, is complicated in the first stanza by the grammatical tension in the line “bearing us on”, which holds together the action of our inheritance on us (it skeletons our flesh) and our action (we wear it, though it bares us.) Through rhyme, the word “aware” in the second stanza carries our wearing of our skeleton which bares us forward to despair; and through a kind of hovering sentence structure which has an effect like that of a hovering accent, despair is given both as the nature and as the result of our act. In the last stanza, the word “overture” carries the sense both of the involuntary and the voluntary; both our beginning and our act of disclosure are seen in the worn skeleton. This overture, made “where prayers of defeat are sown”, is, in the final image, an inheritance which is bright, though “bright with death / spangled with bone”.

In a recent poem, “A Pardon to My Bones”, the central image is no less complex, but the statement and structure of the poem are broader, easier. In the singular human experience of this poem, one’s own skeleton—always in some

way separate from one's self—though it seem sometimes master, sometimes partner, sometimes enemy, can be accepted. A kind of peace or truce can be made with it.

With the prescribed number of bones  
I have walked to this year,  
but have despised dear bones' intent  
to grow, to motivate, to be bent.

Some cracked, yet show now lovely through the tent  
of flesh. Although ignored, misused, can now relent  
in this casual thirty-third year  
because they walked me here.

Because they walked me here  
there has been gross expense  
of life's uneconomic science,  
of love's long argument with common sense,  
a relay race from past to present tense.  
The Horn of Plenty muted coming near.  
And so my bones have walked me here.

Because they walked me here,  
sleep-walking sight-seer,  
urban dirt, personal graffitti,  
the indecent exposure of my city,  
plucked from definite sex a baleful ditty,  
moved to a pagan shout, did not come clear  
because dumb bones have walked me here.

For they have walked me here.  
Or we have danced or pitched in pain.  
That all these bones are jointed by their hooks  
I am dumbfounded as by a great book  
whose leaves lie open, for illustration took  
the cheating history we revere.  
Bones of the appointed animal twitch the ear,  
and I must be appalled, merciful, must care  
that my human bones have walked me here.

The inherited and shaping structure, the number of whose bones is prescribed, is imposed on the person of this poem. She has walked with them, but feels more insistently walked by them, as if she were victim to them. Because they have

relentlessly walked her to this place, they have involved her in an expense that seems wasteful, in a race from past to present to past to present that seems interminable and exhausting.

But these bones are not simply inherited, shaping. They themselves grow and are bent. They may even crack and yet be finally lovely. Dumb, persistent, they are also so tenaciously jointed as to make a whole, a single structure, so intricately jointed as to be capable of quick animal responsiveness.

Though the person of the poem has ignored, misused, despised this inherited structure of her living, struggled or argued or shouted out against it, she has now arrived at a view both comprehensive and detailed before which she acknowledges, wryly but honestly and warmly, her own requirement: she must be appalled; she must also be merciful, must be concerned.

The struggle recalled in this poem with wry humor is a struggle maintained by a refusal to stop short, by a will to pay whatever must be paid that the full truth of living be known. "The cheating history we revere" is not enough. But the search is bewildering, the searcher uncertain because the facts seem to speak contraries.

"Double Entendre" is centred on these contraries, and on the question, rising from them, whether "the right / the light" is in the facts of the impersonal, inimical universe or in those facts seen, reflected in man's eye. The first sequence of images reveals a connection between structures of the impersonal world and man-made structures.

The seed white  
                                   beneath the flesh  
   red and diamonded  
   under the skin  
   rough, round,

of the round pomegranate

                                  hopes in essential shape  
   for a constellation of fruit

Just as the pregnant woman  
                                   in the street  
   carrying her three-year-old son

is one and entire  
                                   the tribe of woman  
   weighed down by the race of man —  
   always to be renewed,

For the man killed  
                                   by the Temple clock when it fell  
   told me time had not stopped —  
   Oh, only for him,

  though I saw

in this unflattering  
                                   accidental  
   irony  
   that he had indeed come

to a timely end  
                                   within the courtyards of the English  
   Courts of Law.

The tough skin of the pomegranate is not, like the skin of an apple, a covering for flesh so much as it is a bag for many seeds, many cells of seed and thin red flesh. Seed upon seed within the flesh within the skin, this is the shape, tasting slightly acid, of hope—for more fruit, more seed.

The woman who carries both her unborn and her born, male child carries seed upon seed, but in this second image the natural impulse toward eternity, fertility, hope of which the pomegranate is a symbol is reinforced by the woman's caring for her three-year-old son. It is by acts not only of body but also of human imagination, or emotion, or will, that she bears the hope "always to be renewed".

This hope, moving in human history, is shaped into concepts and images of Time, concepts and images of Justice so important and real to man that, for example, his own "timely end" does not end time. Destroyed by his own images of time, man may acknowledge the end of time for himself and yet speak its continuance.

These images are seen as "exaggerations of the nature of the Thing", and they are compared to such reiterations in works of art as Octavian's successive masquerades in *Der Rosenkavalier*, or as "the portrait of the artist / holding a mirror." The comparisons elucidate the meaning of the first sequence of images as

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exaggerations of the nature of the thing. When the painter uses a conscious contrivance which clearly distinguishes between the man and the painting, he emphasizes the paintingness of the painting, shows a portrait not as a facsimile but as itself, a new creation. And these comparisons with works of art also carry us one step further than the first triad of images did into a contemplation of man as making, as compelled to make, even out of his bone and flesh, "a structure for his loss". The image of bone and flesh, and the next, "seeds of meaning", recall the first and simplest image. For the pomegranate's "hope" obviously requires its own destruction; it is the shape of fertility and eternity only as it loses, must lose, its singular form. So the woman "weighed down by the race of man"; so the man "indeed come / to a timely end". A circling through the whole chain of images tightens again to the structure of hope as a structure for loss, to the copious seed as "pitiful", taken "from the dross".

The double meaning that lies at the heart of many of Phyllis Webb's poems leads to this circling journey which man the maker, the seeker, the observer must take.

For in his strange  
                                peripheral orbit  
  of reality and dream

he wanders, wonders,  
                                through the play within the play  
  knowing not  
  which is the right  
  the light

the star in the cold, staring sky,  
                                or the star reflected in a human eye.