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Peacock Blue: The Collected Poems

Phyllis Webb

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When Phyllis Webb published *Wilson's Bowl* in 1980, Northrop Frye hailed it as "a landmark in Canadian literature": *landmark*, an event that marks a turning point in something (in this case, Canadian literature); and an instantly recognized feature of a landscape (in this case, the landscape of Canadian poetry). *Wilson's Bowl* was Webb's fifth volume of poetry. Three more followed and then she fell silent, turning from literature to abstract painting.

Peacock Blue compiles in a single volume all of Webb's published, unpublished, and uncollected works from a writing career that spanned fifty years. It offers readers the opportunity to relish the arc of Webb's entire poetic oeuvre, from the modernist lyricism of her early works, to the groundbreaking volume *Naked Poems* (1965), in which Webb created for herself a new minimalist language; from *Wilson's Bowl* to what Douglas Barbour calls "Webb's loving and subversive engagement with the ghazal" in *Water and Light* (1984); and finally to the postmodernist prose poems of *Hanging Fire* (1990). The concluding section of Peacock Blue contains almost fifty poems previously uncollected, some of which have never been published before. It is full of brilliant but forgotten poems and poetic surprises.

Brenda Carr has suggested that one of Webb's later essays, "Message Machine" (1990), "initiates a re-reading of her poetics and practice … Against her anxiety that she is a passive 'message machine' for masculinist culture … Webb posits another possibility – 'cross-dressing.' She theorizes her mimicry of the male persona as analogous to a 'masquerade' or 'street theatre' and in so doing reconstructs even her earlier poems as a performative space in which agency is possible." The truth of Carr's insight becomes increasingly apparent to anyone who undertakes to read through Webb's entire poetic output, gathered together, at last, in *Peacock Blue*.

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