and that it was not a particularly liberating period. For those familiar with Pierson's earlier work this will not come as a surprise but for those who are not, they will be unable to see WWII in quite the same optimistic light again. What has to be kept in mind, however, is that women themselves were primary supporters of traditional careers for women. As Pierson points out, "middle to upper-class women's organizations, recognized by government as the representatives of women's interests, placed their influence behind the prevailing inclination of public policy to preserve sex-typed occupations, the sexual division of labour, and the class-based occupational structure." (p.63)

"They're Still Women After All" is now the major source for those interested in Canadian women in the 1940s. It is elegantly written and interspersed with excellent photographs and cartoons. The research is prodigious, and as a result Professor Pierson has uncovered a wealth of information for historians to feed on and has provided new and exciting leads for future research. WWII may not have been a lasting experience for women, but it did teach one lesson which we should not forget – where there is political will the government and society can change and do change. It would be comforting if we could rediscover that political will without having it coincide with another World War.

TRADITIONALISM, NATIONALISM, AND FEMINISM: WOMEN WRITERS OF QUEBEC

Edited by Paula Gilbert Lewis. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Jeannette Urbas

This book is a collection of seventeen essays on women writers of Quebec considered, as the title indicates, within the framework of three categories: traditionalism, nationalism and feminism. It combines a historical perspective with contemporary analysis ranging from the end of the nineteenth century with a discussion of Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun* to the creative production of the early 1980s.

In her introduction Paula Gilbert Lewis stresses the unique situation of Quebec, at the crossroads of both American and French thought. The essays fall into three time periods, each corresponding with a particular outlook, from the pre-1960s when traditionalism is most evident, to the 1960s when nationalism is central, to the 1970s and 1980s when feminism comes to the fore. Inevitably, there is an overlapping of categories in the study of individual authors. In addition, the close link between nationalism and feminism in Quebec has never been abandoned.

Some women writers have been omitted because of a lack of current research on their writing but those who are included offer a good representation, as well as considerable variety. The only writer who is not specifically Québecoise is the Acadian, Antonine Maillet, whose work, however, fits into the overall context and the themes of the book. All but three of the authors are still living.

As the essays move into the more recent period, issues particularly pertinent to feminist writing are explored, e.g. the emphasis on the power of language, the search for expression in a specific female discourse, the use of myth and a newly discovered female mythology. The relationship between lesbian feminism as a way of life and as a revolutionary force in literature is also examined. Approaches to change vary from the belief that the liberation of each individual must come from within and the fundamental struggle for women must be against a patriarchal society (Nicole Brossard) to concern with the social conscience of Quebec and skepticism of any discourse urging women to wage war indiscriminately on their male compatriots (Madeleine Gagnon). The final essay is an update on women's theatre in Quebec and its attempt to replace unacceptable female stereotypes on the stage.

The essay on Louky Bersianik points to a paradox faced by feminist authors in their desire to communicate: "the more she speaks the phallic language, the better understood she makes herself *L'Eugélionne);* the more she speaks in the female (fluidity, polysemy, etymologies, babble), that is, the more she subverts the normative code (especially in *Maternative),* the more restricted becomes the group to whom she addresses herself and who understands her."

This collection is designed to appeal to both specialists familiar with the authors discussed and non-specialists who seek an introduction to a fascinating new area of knowledge. Specialists, like myself, will disagree with individual researchers about some points, such as the interpretation of the ending of Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska,* but the book as a whole is thought-provoking and informative.

WATER AND LIGHT: GHAZALS AND ANTI GHAZALS

Phyllis Webb. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984.

Heather Murray

The title of *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* lures the reader with the seductions of the exotic and the obliquely oppositional. (If we wonder what is a ghazal, still less can we imagine its antipart). The mirrored pairings of water and light, ghazal and anti ghazal, suggest multiple inter- and cross-relationships, counterings and encounterings. The cover photo by Gordon Robertson for this handsome volume, of water lilies and pond grasses, inmixes indistinguishably the reflected and reflecting, as will the verse itself. And "Webb" on the cover completes the reader's ensnarement – for her production is as spare as the poems themselves, and a new book by her is an event.

The table of contents shows a five-section division to the book: "Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals," "The Birds," "I Daniel," "Frivolities," "Middle Distance." These too, intrigue, for their relationship is not easily ascertained. An accompanying series of cryptic dublets ("No one denied you your memory of wings: / those clouds, although faces, are not your own.") adds complexity to perplexity. On the facing page, an acknowledgement to *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu,* edited by Aijaz Ahmad, with translations by W.S. Merwin, William Hunt and, most intriguingly, Adrienne Rich, encourages the reader to learn more about Webb's poetic project here.

The ghazal, writes Ahmad, provides the basic poetic form in Urdu from the beginning of the language until the middle of this century. It is composed of at

least five couplets which are linked only through rhyme and metrical equivalence, for each couplet is independent in meaning and forms a complete thought unit. It is, in Ahmad's opinion, a highly abstract form of verse, dependent on repeated patterns of imagery, and suited to the abstract nature of Urdu itself. "The movement is always *away* from concreteness. Meaning is not expressed or stated; it is signified." Ghalib, one of the greatest of the ghazal writers, lived and wrote in the years of the British conquest of India and the breakup of an older civilization; and his attraction to Western progressivism, his abhorrence of Western violence, goes to form an ambivalence at the heart of his "poetry of moral privacies."

We might ask, then, what brings Webb to a form so abstract and formal, archaic and "foreign." Is she merely participating in a form of "orientalism" (as Edward Said describes it), that shunting of signification onto the other, from which place it may be excavated, its fragments retrieved and displayed? Adrienne Rich's comment on the ghazal is helpful, when she speaks of its "capacity for both concentration and a gathering cumulative effect:"

> *I needed a way of dealing with 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 their intensest rendering and to join with other experiences not logically or chronologically connected in any obvious way . . . what I'm trying for . . . is a clear image or articulation behind which there are shadows, reverberations, reflections of reflections.*

In an earlier "Poetics Against the Angel of Death" *(Selected Poems)* Webb writes of running "ragged to elude/ the Great Iambic Pentameter/ who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress." The ruling rhythm must be overthrown: she will choose haiku "or better / long lines, clean and syllabic as knotted bamboo. Yes!" – her own run-on line enacting the joyous boundary-breaking and affirmation she advocates. Wary of the "gestures of law" and fearful of the "logicians of dispersal" ("Eichmann Trial," *The Sea is Also a Garden),* Webb early anticipated a poetry based on alternate ordering principles:

> *Hieratic sounds emerge*
> *from the Priestess of*
> *Motion*
> *a new alphabet*
> *gasps for air.*
> ("Non-Linear," *Naked Poems)*

Always an experimenter, and an analyst of rhythms and phrasing, Webb contemplates "the physics of the poem" in her 1981 poetic manifesto "On the Line." She contrasts the aggressive, assertive "male" long line to the terrifying candour of the "modulated" short line, sets Ginsberg and Whitman against Sexton and Dickinson, looks to a subversive verse that may overrun the bounds of the poetic altogether. "– Emily – those gasps, those inarticulate dashes – those incitements –." For while Webb had been able to work with wit and proficiency in the haiku and related forms, she had been unable to write the "syllabic" long lines she desired, and her self-seen failure here led to a silence of many years. When she discovered the ghazals of John Thompson, published posthumously by Anansi, she set herself the exercise of writing one per day, on file cards. "As I learned more about Ghazals, I saw I was actually defying some of the traditional rules, constraints and pleasures laid down so long ago," she writes in the "Preface" to *Sunday Water:*

> *"Drunken and amatory" with a "clandestine order," the subject of the traditional Ghazal was love, the Beloved representing not a particular woman but an idealized and universal image of love. . .Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private. There are even a few little jokes. Hence "anti Ghazals." And yet in the end (though I hope to write more), Love returns to sit on her "throne of* accidie,*" a mystical power intrudes, birds sing, a Sitar is plucked, and the Third Eye, opal, opens.*

The results were first published as the limited edition chapbook *Sunday Water* in 1982; four more sections were added to compose *Water and Light.* (That puzzling table of contents, then, might be read as itself a ghazal, its doublets formed of title and quotation). The appeal of the form to a poet so simultaneously abstract and lyric, detailed and non-conclusive, is apparent. (One "joke" at work here is the play on "dialectical:" a reference to the colloquial, local, and spoken, on the one hand; to the investigation and unification of opposition, on the other). It is a characteristic turn, that Webb should have begun with the "anti," the oppositional; *Sunday Water* may well be read as a counter to the "Sunday Morning" of another poet of "moral privacies", Wallace Stevens. In the foreword to *Wilson's Bowl* Webb had explained the predominance of male figures in her portraits: "They signify the domination of a male power culture in my educational and emotional formation 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." Against Stevens' dreamed and dreaming muses Webb places real silenced women:

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

Against the "complacencies of the peignoir" are set day to day awakenings:

> *Mrs. Olsson at 91 is slim and sprightly*
> *She still swims in the clamshell bay.*
> *Around the corner, Robin hangs out big sheets*
> *to hide her new added on kitchen from the building inspector.*

The other, the "Beloved," speaks.

Throughout *Water and Light* Webb works many changes on the ghazal and its conventions. The poems range from the plainly referential to the powerfully imagistic; some maintain the strict autonomy of the couplet, while others run sense or sentence on past the two-line boundary. Some rhyme, some do not; at times the meaning unit is one line only, even a word ("heart"). Webb's signing practice here takes the letter as the literal, takes the word at its word:

> Dentelle, *she-teeth, milk-tooth*
> *a mouthful of lace.*
> *Cobwebs with the devil's ace*
> *cut tooth, cuttle fish, scrimshaw.*
> *You there, you too were only a piece*
> *of string in the needle's eye, once,*
> *now frantic, idle in the sun, a great*
> *cobweb strung across your mind:*
> *you spin it out, saliva and*
> *heart's beat battering the great*
> *hole of emptiness in space –*
> *somewhere – in lachrymose*
> *galaxies crying for their done,*
> *banged-in stars.*

The couples of "water" and "light," "word" and "thing," "poet" and "Phyllis," dance until they settle to rest in

> *. . . the land of*
> *only what is.*