

Saturday

24/10/98 at Davids

## GROWING (DEFINITELY!) YOUNGER WITH PHYLLIS. A CRITICAL ESSAY

I once read a brief essay entitled "Aging With Grace", or something of the sort. It was an autobiographical, self-centered work spinning around the woes of an elderly woman smothered in oil, wriggling endlessly in the pit of a bathtub. An aggiornamento of a classical myth -- some sort of modern Prometheus, or Sisyphus. But the meaning of the allegory escaped my understanding at first. My preliminary interpretation led me to classify the work as an obscure petty-bourgeois lamentation for grounded whales bound for the frying pan.

I needed more information about the author. I only gathered that it was a woman (not a lady, mind you) most probably named Grace. But why the decadent, post-modern, surrealist reference to the miseries of aging with a big helpless fish in your bathroom? The mystery author intrigued me, and I promised myself to get to the bottom of the matter (not the bottom of the tub, mind you) and write a critical essay.

The information specialists at my centre's library shrugged. No information could be retrieved without the author's last name. But they did point out that they had just received a planeload of bibliography including a couple of titles from said author, but written under a pseudonym. And they were eager to get rid of some of those, because the author had sent copies of her own works in wholesale numbers. They also warned me that it was really heavy stuff. No ecology. No sex. No adult language. Just plain politics. I said: "No way. It can't be the same author."

Who could that (dis)Grace(ful) woman be? An informer gave me tip to compound my confusion. He said that certain critics argued that Grace and the other heavy-stuffed lady were two separate manifestations of one and the same split personality, in the best Jeckyl/Hyde tradition. Another school of thought -- he went on -- held the view that Grace (no last names, please!) was in fact the real name of a woman whose pen name was Phyllis Naidoo (who would ever invent such a pen name?), although the authenticity of the pen name's last name was also in question. Still other critics -- the informer concluded -- were ready to argue that Grace was in fact the name of Phyllis Naidoo's ghost writer. Recent testimonies before the Truth Commission have revealed that the author might have several more names.

Later on, I discovered that most of Phyllis'/Grace's friends had similar identity problems. One British Senior Citizen friend of hers was found to be a former bourgeois union worker -- "former" being the only undisputed truth in the equation. Moreover, said elderly Briton's wife (who was not really his wife) had the habit of introducing herself under one name, whilst purchasing and handing out (albeit with some reluctance and lack of firm decision) drugs under another name. Most importantly, rumour has it that the couple never married because they could not agree on whether to have a church or a

provided proceedings short enough to avoid a divisive argument risking to frustrate the wedding before the cheerleader could declare "I now pronounce you..." By the way, another feature common to Grace/Phyllis and her known friends was their Indianguinness. They tended to take back, at some point, whatever they gave. Medicines, books, compliments...

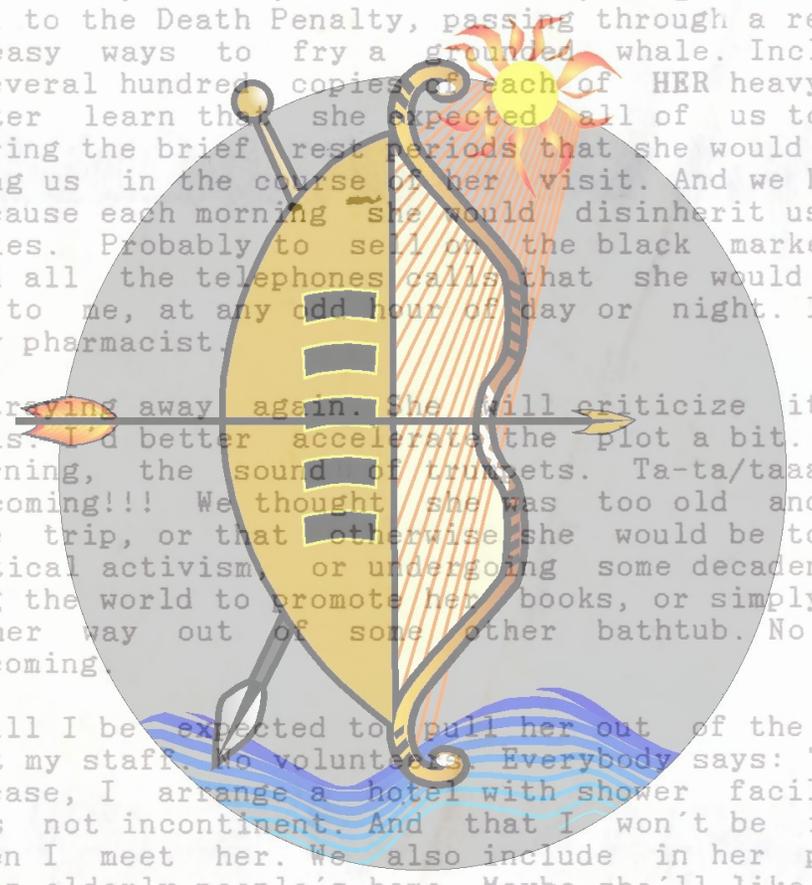
Anyway, I better get back on track: this lady makes my mind stray. Returning to the chronological approach, I will now attempt to summarize how I finally met the mysterious author. Some months ago, I was briefly (briefly is an understatement) informed that the author in question would be donating her personal library to my centre. Everything from Alice in Wonderland to the Death Penalty, passing through a recipe book on five easy ways to fry a grounded whale. Including, of course, several hundred copies of each of HER heavy stuffs. I would later learn that she expected all of us to read her works during the brief rest periods that she would Gracefully be granting us in the course of her visit. And we had to read quick, because each morning she would disinherit us of a few dozen copies. Probably to sell on the black market, so she could fund all the telephone calls that she would be making, basically to me, at any odd hour of day or night. I felt like an on-duty pharmacist.

Ooops. Straying away again. She will criticize it when she reads this. I'd better accelerate the plot a bit. Then, one bright morning, the sound of trumpets. Ta-ta/taaa!!! She's actually coming!!! We thought she was too old and frail to endure the trip, or that otherwise she would be too busy in her political activism, or undergoing some decadent therapy, or touring the world to promote her books, or simply trying to wriggle her way out of some other bathtub. No. she was actually coming.

Panic. Will I be expected to pull her out of the bathtub? I sound out my staff. No volunteers. Everybody says: "Nooo way". Just in case, I arrange a hotel with shower facilities. And pray she's not incontinent. And that I won't be incontinent (yet) when I meet her. We also include in her programme a visit to an elderly people's home. Maybe she'll like it there.

Next day, someone reads me a fax over the phone. She's coming tomorrow. We all act as we do in crisis situations. Numb, I drop the receiver. Norma faints. Carmelina breaks down in tears. Zelmys starts an argument. The rest of the staff requests urgent leave. I adopt an authoritarian attitude: all leaves are cancelled! We all have to ride together this slippery whale! I make a moving speech, trying to boost their morale. I remind the staff of all the difficult times we've survived together in the past: no big old fish is going to beat us! I try to remember all those more difficult times, but nothing comes to mind. Anyway, it must be true in principle.

I can't sleep that night, trying to review what the mysterious author might be like. The more I think, the more I worry. How many damn years is a score? Our first calculations were that she must be about 235. I get up in the middle of the night and



make a few phone calls to friends who might know where I can get things like a wheelchair, diapers, a bedpan... Next morning, no time to recover my sleepless night: She's coming tomorrow!! God, even the car breaks down!! Fortunately, tomorrow comes, and I'm told it's tomorrow again. Could I perhaps strap the whale on my bike's bar? Definitely not. I would settle for a cart, a car being almost out of the question. A car finally appears on the horizon, while I have a session with my psychoanalyst, preparing for Moby Dick.

The flight is now on route: there's no turning back. I learn that she's got a family in Cuba (Good! **THEY** can pull her out of the tub!) and she's not arriving alone. She's coming with Peter, Liz/Betty and Georges. Georges is her friend the monsoon/hurricane. That's Grace/Phyllis for you.

Actually, Georges (coming on his own) arrives in Havana a few minutes before Grace/Phyllis. He adorns her welcome with all the grandiose pomp that she reigns to dislike. And Georges stays on for the whole weekend. But while I'm fighting Georges and the overexcited relatives of the incoming doctors, I realize that I have no idea of what Grace/Phyllis looks like. The truth is that I had sought a composite picture from a couple of available people who knew her. Their descriptions were useless: they all said "ah" or "wonderful" or other expressions of delightful ecstasy. I couldn't work on that. So I decide to ask the guys at immigration to please direct me to any slippery whale trying to wriggle her way into the country. That didn't work either. Fortunately, the driver had an eye for fish. I didn't have to display the two signs that I prepared (one reading "Phyllis" and the other "Grace") that I doubted she might see (at her age) anyway.

She's finally here. First surprise: she doesn't look as flimsy and frail as we feared. I think she's strong enough that I might tell her we don't have a definite programme. Would she like to go to Hemingway's hideaway? The decorative arts museum? The aquarium? Sort of a strange elderly woman: she doesn't like those. She'd like to meet people. She'd like to see the cemetery. She'd like to go to (a) jail. Try to arrange all that for her! How do we tell her we don't have a car today? Are we going to be our own selves, or adopt a formal attitude?

I quickly found Phyllis/Grace very inquisitive, perceptive, with a need to communicate beyond words. As Miguel put it, it's hard to "sustain" a conversation with her... and avoid being lured into a deep intercourse, a profound exercise in mind-picking. More than that: soul-picking. She's way beyond us all.

She's so beyond, that she soon behaves like a wife. She confused me, arguing that her maiden name was "David", to the point that she almost convinced me that, unlike Peter and Liz/Betty, we had in fact already married some time in the distant Hindu past. I don't fall for that. Then she calls on the phone, once and again. Then she stops calling. Then I start calling, but she's never there... she begins to behave

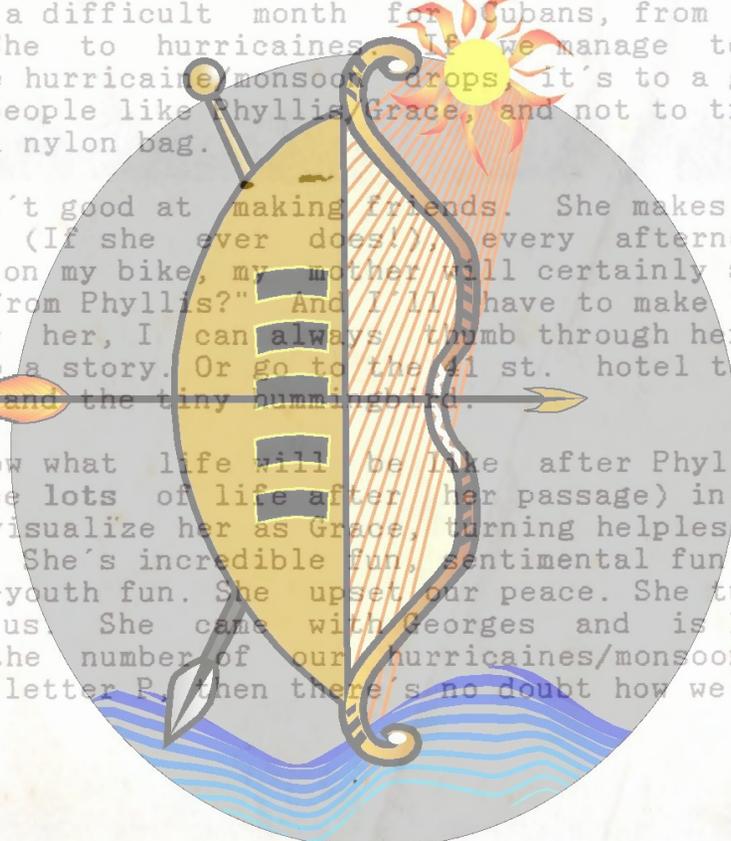
like a lover. She did prove one thing, though. She was much younger than her CV promised. There was no starch in anything she did. Much younger than I, and certainly much younger than anyone I saw her interact with. Regardless of the fact that she never knew who Prince was.

I witnessed when she touched peoples' heart as she did my own. I will never forget her, and I doubt that others she met here might forget her. She's probably the best thing happening to me in 1998 (and there's not much more left of 1998), a testing year.

In Cuba -- as elsewhere, I'm sure -- she's left little pieces of herself lying around. In Santiago, she left a tooth (there aren't many more of those left, either), pulled out in all due pomp. They're probably building a shrine around it by now. And I'll be among the pilgrims flocking there every October, which is always a difficult month for Cubans, from the missile crisis to Che to hurricaines. If we manage to cross "in between" the hurricane/monsoon drops, it's to a great extent thanks to people like Phyllis Grace, and not to trousers in an anachronical nylon bag.

Phyllis isn't good at making friends. She makes family. When she leaves (if she ever does!), every afternoon, upon my return home on my bike, my mother will certainly ask me: "Have you heard from Phyllis?" And I'll have to make up a story. When I miss her, I can always thumb through her books, and also make up a story. Or go to the 41 st. hotel to see Miguel, the orchids and the tiny hummingbird.

I don't know what life will be like after Phyllis (because there will be lots of life after her passage) in Cuba. I can no longer visualize her as Grace, turning helplessly in the pit of the tub. She's incredible fun, sentimental fun, funny fun, fountain-of-youth fun. She upset our peace. She turned things around for us. She came with Georges and is leaving with Mitch. If the number of our hurricaines/monsoons this year reaches the letter P, then there's no doubt how we'll name it.

A circular illustration of a yellow harp with a sun and waves. The harp is the central element, with a sun rising behind it and blue waves at the bottom. The sun has rays extending upwards and to the right. The waves are depicted with horizontal lines. The harp has a wooden frame and yellow strings.

Rcd, 24/10/98.  
Saturday at Dads