



Phyllis Janowitz

March 9, 1930 – August 17, 2014

Phyllis Janowitz was born in New York, N.Y., to Lillian Reiner and Morris Winer. Her mother worked as a homemaker and in retail sales, and her father was a police officer. She grew up with an older sister, Ruth Winer, in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. In 1951, she graduated magna cum laude from Queens College and married Julian Janowitz, a psychiatrist. During her eleven year marriage, Phyllis lived in San Francisco and Amherst, Massachusetts. In the 1960s she began writing poetry and was awarded a graduate fellowship to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she studied with Robert Lowell, among others. After receiving an MFA in 1968, she spent two years in Israel with her daughter Tama and son David. Upon her return to the U.S., Phyllis was twice made a Fellow of the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe. In 1978, Elizabeth Bishop selected her book *Rites of Strangers* for the Associated Writing Programs Poetry Prize. This was the first of many honors Phyllis received for her poetry, including a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton and two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Phyllis taught at Princeton, Harvard, and a number of other institutions before coming to Cornell in 1980 as a visiting assistant professor. In 1982, Maxine Kumin selected her second book, *Visiting Rites*, for publication by Princeton University Press. The book received critical acclaim and was a finalist for The National Book Award in 1983. It has been reissued as part of the Princeton Legacy Library series. In *Visiting Rites*, Janowitz expands upon earlier themes of isolation and identity to include poems about rituals of aging, communion, and confining cultural roles. She was tenured in 1986, and her third book, *Temporary Dwellings*, was published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 1988. A fourth collection, *Truck With Marvelous Creatures*, remains unpublished. Her poems appeared in the most distinguished literary venues, such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Poetry*. Phyllis was promoted to full professor in 1992, and 29 of her 39 years of teaching were devoted to Cornell students. She directed the creative writing program from 1980 to 1983 and from 1986 to 1991. In 2009, she retired from teaching and was granted emerita status.

A colleague who once asked Phyllis if she had models, antecedents, other poets who were “sort of like her,” remembers that she looked serious and answered quickly, as if to dispense with discussion: “No one.” This was not a statement of grandiosity or defense. Her work was singular. The world, with all its heartbreaks and humors, assumed a phantasmagoric vividness in her poems, which resemble a blend of Sylvia Plath and Samuel Beckett, leavened by a helping of the absurd. The lines are bright with surface; the comedy tinged with tragedy; the sardonic wit deepened by empathy. In her poetry, as in her life, Phyllis evinced an unwavering generosity. Her poems were musical and intricate, but she remained open to all literary possibilities. For her, all of the arts were interconnected, and she celebrated poetry’s ability to ennoble and democratize.

Phyllis began writing during the second wave of feminism, and many of her poems center on the difficulties faced by women as mothers and as breadwinners. The limitations of traditional male roles are treated with equal discernment in poems that recount the yearnings of men who “wear their simple birthrights like / shiny gold watches on long gold chains.” A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* praised *Visiting Rites* for being “little affected by neo-Romantic narcissism” or “Oedipal influence-anxiety.” *The Michigan Quarterly* deemed Janowitz “a student of survivors and of those who ask more of life, despite the slim chances of receiving the desired plenitude,” and cited *Visiting Rites* as “one of the few recent poetry books that does justice to our helplessness and resilience.” Of Phyllis’s third book, a review in *Prairie Schooner* notes “The humor, the word-play, and the sheer energy of the language in *Temporary Dwellings* are infectious and invigorating. They are at once so human and humanizing....”

Although her work was celebrated, Phyllis’s humility and sensitivity probably proved a hindrance rather than asset in a literary culture that tends to reward self-promotion and networking. The density and originality of her unpublished fourth book set it apart from the dominant modes of the day. As on the page, so in the world. Phyllis’s self-effacing manner might have allowed her to float under the radar in the English department were it not for her elegant, quirky sense of style, which could take the form of winklepicker shoes or vintage cashmere coats. A little dog often trotted alongside her wearing a matching outfit.

In person she might be reticent, but on stage Phyllis was mesmerizing. Her public readings of her work were unconventional delights of music, costume, and dramaturgy. A colleague recalls the first time she heard Phyllis read, in 1989: “A large boombox stood on a chair to the side of her. After reading a couple of poems Phyllis approached the machine almost delicately, leaning down as if to consult it. She pushed a button and out came circus music. While this briefly played, she regarded her audience with what I would come to recognize as the quintessential Phyllis look: a little smile suffused with wonder, humor, wisdom, love, a look that said, modestly, ‘How can this be?’ and ‘This must be.’ When she pushed the button again, the music stopped and she read another poem. And so it went, throughout the reading. This was a strange, exhilarating synchronicity that seemed logical in the fantastical way that poetry means to be, operating on terms beyond logic, lifting understanding beyond the words and hitting the heart in a way the heart comprehends. The audience was ecstatic throughout. For Phyllis this was not a show, a ruse, a trick, but an essential act: that was the major amazement. All the same, she had a bit of the old Vaudevillian in her and knew how to hold, surprise, thrill, and educate her audience. She had the power to turn the world out once again as brand new and wholly astounding.”

The greatest teachers offer something more than knowledge, and Phyllis enacted the most capacious possibilities of what a mentor could be. She was a steadfast advocate for her students, generously helping them toward professional goals and offering advice through personal dilemmas. She corresponded with many long after they'd graduated, attended their weddings, took them to lunch when they came to town. She nurtured, championed and even sheltered students in her home as a matter of course. In class, she brought an encyclopedic knowledge of literature, the arts, and cultural studies to her textual analyses — for she was no respecter of divisions. As a colleague, she quieted rather than concocted drama, a blessing in any situation but especially when departmental personalities and politics threatened to implode.

Maya Angelou noted that “*People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*” Phyllis made others feel accompanied: less alone and more alive. She was funny and fearlessly willing to fight for her beliefs, which were expressed with a wit that recognized and forgave human foibles. The audacity and élan that critics prized in her work allowed her to turn ordinary — even dreary — events into memorable adventures. She also was a headspring of pithy aperçus. “Another last straw,” she’d sigh in the face of adversity. “The possibilities are not infinite, they are yours.” Or as she said to a frightened colleague, “You are perfectly perfect.” In Phyllis’s world, “all weeds were regal.” “Are there //...no monasteries for a heretic?” she wondered in a poem. She was the least calculating writer imaginable, one who never allowed her core values — at times quite inconvenient ones — to be subverted by literary politics. Her autobiographical poem “Cells,” ends with a daughter who glimpses some graffiti from a train after visiting her dying father:

The word love, read in a jolt of wheels.
Astonishing. Ineludible. Like a blissful
couple, joined at the chest, thighs,
knees, kissing in the doorway
you’re trying to exit through.

The corridors of Goldwin Smith Hall are long and narrow. We see approaching figures from a distance and there is time for a constellation of emotions to gather as our paths converge. In these halls, Phyllis appeared as an unlikely apparition: oracle, witness, shaman, fellow traveler, revisionary mother goddess. The speaker of her poem “Birthday” describes her disorientation when separated from her mother on a mythic subway trip:

She has taken an escalator down to where
I can no longer see her...
I’m afraid without her I will lose
gloves, manuscripts, even the map of my
destination in the dim chambers underground.

Generations of students and colleagues will cherish Phyllis’s guidance. She will be remembered with abiding gratitude and affection, for there never was a more brilliantly original and endearing poet, teacher, or friend.

Alice Fulton, chair; Kenneth A. McClane, Maureen McCoy