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# Sharon Pollock : first woman of Canadian theatre

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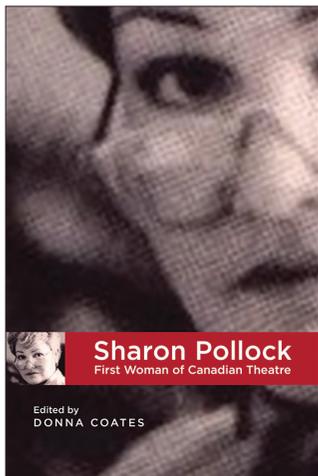
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## SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

ISBN 978-1-55238-790-0

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## Biography and *the* Archive

*Sherrill Grace*

*The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future.*

—DERRIDA, “ARCHIVE FEVER,” 18

### Biography

In a fascinating essay called “Poetry and Psychobiography,” Phyllis Webb observes that,

Biographers, bless them, have to make a good story out of a life, even an uneventful life, and they have to use all their resources as researchers, scholars, and writers to get things right. There are a lot of things to get right: drafts and manuscripts, letters, critical studies, recorded and printed

interviews, photographs, all kinds of data stored in attics and archives and libraries; in coat-pockets, in graveyards, in church and municipal records, in educational and mental institutions; on tapes and now on floppy disks.<sup>1</sup>

Webb continues her list with all the wives, husbands, lovers, psychiatrists and physicians, the travels, the literary influences, the quirks, the memorabilia, and she ends her observation on the resources of biography with a question: "The writer's work must surely be the reason for all this diligent activity – mustn't it?" (101).

Webb correctly identifies the main parameters and challenges of biography, and I especially appreciate her blessing and her recognition that biographers need to make good stories. I also agree with her that one writes a *literary* biography because of the literature, the *oeuvre*. But getting things right? That is for me the crucial question, the terrifying question, the black hole I fear when I tackle – or even read – a biography. What is right? How does one assert rightness over wrongness? What does one need in order to claim to be *right*? And finally – if anything can be final – what impact will rightness have when it finds its way into that good story about a life: for whom does this rightness matter and why? The same questions arise for wrongness. I will return to these fundamental questions because they accompanied me through the writing of *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock* and they are returning to nip at my heels as I venture deeper into the resources for my current work – a biography of Timothy Findley. But before I make this return, I want to digress, first to Tiff and then to 1985 and the Canadian story of biography. Bear with me; this double detour will return me to Sharon and to my questions.

I have called this talk "Biography and *the* Archive." I stress *the* to capture the complexity of archives – not one archive, not *an* archive but something far larger, far less well defined. I could also have called it "biography IN the archive" or, more autobiographically – "my life as a biographer in archives" – because archives are my foundation, my repository, the resource of all biographical work. Archives are precious.

Archives help one get it right. But archives are fragile, vulnerable – subject to what Derrida calls “archive fever,” the *mal d’archive*. They can also be dangerous and tricky; they can hide secrets – personal secrets, family skeletons, state documents sealed and classified so citizens will never know what happened or who did what to whom. Archives can be destroyed, and when they are, who knows what kinds of rightness are lost for ever – or maybe not lost because materials in an archive, when studied, must still be interpreted, woven into a story, made into a fiction. Which reminds me of that striking scene near the beginning of *The Wars*:

You begin at the archives with photographs. Robert and Rowena – rabbits and wheelchairs – children, dogs and horses . . . Boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the papers. All you have to do is sign them out and carry them across the room. Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps . . . The boxes smell of yellow dust. You hold your breath. As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you’ll never find. This is what you have. (*The Wars* 5–6)

Where Webb described the resources of *the* archive and the imperative of rightness, Findley has made *an* archive come alive. He has inhabited it: you and I are there peering at these fragile documents, smelling the dust, settling down to do what we can with these fragments, knowing we will never find everything and therefore never get it *all* right.

But wait. There is another archive in Findley’s work that I want to remind you about. Very near the end of *Famous Last Words*, the evil Harry Reinhardt, who has tracked Mauberley, our writer-protagonist and Second World War fascist sympathizer, to his hideaway in the Grand Elysium Hotel in the Austrian Alps and killed him by driving a pick axe through his eye, destroys the evidence he was hired to deal with – along with Mauberley. Here is what *we read*:

Reinhardt's final act was to get the boy to help him burn the notebooks. All of Mauberley's journals and papers and letters, poured into the bathtub and covered with kerosene and set ablaze. It was marvelous to Harry's eyes. The complete destruction of the man he had been sent . . . to kill – and all his words. (*Famous Last Words* 388)

Such a scene is – for me – almost worse than the *spectacle* of Mauberley's corpse; my sympathies for him are mixed at best. Except that Reinhardt is only successful in part. He has killed Mauberley and silenced him and he has destroyed Mauberley's carefully guarded archive, his original documents, but he has not discovered the walls where Mauberley has written his version of what he witnessed and what others did before and during the Second World War. The original archive has been transformed into an auto/biography – that is, Mauberley's own story and the stories of many others – Ezra Pound, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Sir Harry Oakes, etc., and of an era – in the narrative that unfolds on the hotel walls. These are the famous last words that the two officers will find and argue over and that we, as readers, must try to interpret. This text is a version of *Mene Mene tekel upharsim* (Daniel 5), a warning, a challenge, an appeal to rightness: *you* will be tested and found wanting.

Fire has obliterated the archive but not before some version of a story is created from it. If Reinhardt had killed Mauberley before he began, let alone completed, his desperate confessional auto/biography, then we would never be able to read his words or know anything about what he took part in. We could not be warned. Getting things right, setting the record straight, putting his lands in order before he dies – all this would have been impossible. There are many other archive-like objects in Findley's works – Cassandra's photograph album in the play *Can You See Me, Yet?*, the secret state files on Ambassador Raymond in *The Stillborn Lover*, Vanessa Van Horne's journal and photographs in *The Telling of Lies*, the notebooks and memories that Will Shakespeare draws on to tell his story about the Queen in *Elizabeth Rex*. But in *The*

*Wars and Famous Last Words* Findley truly makes us see the value and vulnerability of records, photos, letters, journals, clippings, events witnessed and noted down – the archive – with which biographers, among others, must work. If Harry Reinhardt had succeeded, we would not learn about the fascist cabal involving the Duke and Duchess, the state secrets on both sides of the war, or the behind-the-scenes maneuverings of those in power. And we would not listen to the two soldiers, Lieutenant Quinn and Captain Freyberg (the intelligence officer), argue over human morality and guilt, or see over Freyberg's shoulder his scrapbook of photographs from the liberation of Dachau that he has so recently witnessed and will not forget.

In short, Findley insists that the archive matters. To deliberately destroy it is a crime; to carelessly damage it is serious. The archive holds keys to the future, to stories yet to be told, stories repressed perhaps by governments or the secret police; it is the custodian of evidence essential to the courts or simply to a family's awareness of their genealogy. Archives are the repositories of memory, identity and, to some degree, of getting it right.

But archives can be lost by accident. Think of those boxes in the attic that relatives toss out when granny dies and the house must be sold; those files ruined by water as they lie under a leaking roof or in a flooded garage. Or, those boxes lost to fire when old wiring in a house fails and flames whip through the rooms. In such a case – and the case in my mind is Sharon Pollock's – one does not fret over boxes. One gets out alive with one's pets, one's cell phone, and one's wallet.

So much for my first detour, which has returned me to the individual biography and personal archives. For my second detour, I want to reflect on the development of Canadian biography, by which I mean the national story that can be told through an accumulation of biographical stories. My contention is that biography tells us who we are. Us/we, as the people who live here now, who have arrived recently or generations ago, who have been here for millennia. And because I place such importance on biography, I do not accept the idea that only the life-stories of our politicians, generals and military heroes, hockey

players, and business tycoons matter. If one begins from the assumption that biographies are composite narratives in an ongoing national narrative, then one must – it seems to me – open the door wide to include and stress the biographies of creative people – writers, as Webb reminds us, painters, composers, filmmakers, and performing artists – and so-called ordinary folks living among us.

In his 1985 essay on Findley's *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*, George Woodcock reflected on the emergence of biography (and history) in the 1980s as an important contributor to Canadian literary culture.<sup>2</sup> By 1985 Findley had established himself as the major Canadian novelist to explore history in his fiction through the narrative lens of auto/biography – Robert Ross's biography, Mauberley's autobiography, and the auto/biography of Canada within the twentieth century's cataclysmic wars. By 1985, Sharon Pollock had established herself as the most important Canadian playwright to examine history in her plays – *Walsh*, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, *Blood Relations*, and *Doc*. Like Findley, she chose to frame history with biography and autobiography. Neither Pollock nor Findley were interested only in their own life-stories, although I would argue that those stories are there in their works. Each was, however, very curious about Canada's life-stories and about the ways in which such stories functioned to connect the private with the public, the individual man or woman, family or community, with the nation. Moreover, both Findley and Pollock challenged the national biography we'd been handed – in history books, in narratives of nation-building through railways or at Vimy Ridge; and both revisited key – originary, foundational – stories about who we were (and are) by exploring what and who was left out, misrepresented, or silenced.

I return to Woodcock here, himself a distinguished biographer, to identify a watershed moment in twentieth-century thinking about the role of biography and history within the literary life of the country. Canadians had written biographies prior to 1985, most notably about politicians, and we had some autobiographies/memoirs, again, usually by men in public life or the military. The *Dictionary of Literary*

*Biography* already existed as a reference resource; so did the *Canadian Who's Who* (now in its 112th year). And Hurtig began *The Canadian Encyclopedia* in the 1980s. But I would not claim that Canadians had a rich or varied corpus of biographical writing. Our examples of autobiography were fewer still. Since 1985, however, this has changed. In this century, we are increasingly aware of and rich in both genres – so much so that one rarely opens the *Globe and Mail* (or reads it online) without finding a new Canadian biography just published. The 2005 biography of Alice Munro by Robert Thacker was updated and reissued in 2011, and I have recently read Charles Foran on Richler, Allen Levine on Mackenzie King, Brian Busby on John Glassco, Jane Lind on Paraskeva Clark, James Neufeld on Lois Marshall (a wonderful biography), Carol Bishop-Gwyn on Celia Franca and, most recently, *A Fiery Soul*, the 2011 biography of John Hirsch by Fraidie Martz and Andrew Wilson.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of Richard Gwyn's new two-volume biography of Sir John A. (yes, another massive study of Macdonald) in his 10 December 2011 column in the *Globe and Mail*, Jeffrey Simpson stresses the aptness of the title *Nation Maker* and praises Gwyn's "recapturing [of] Macdonald's immense contributions to defining Canada" (F9). In short, Simpson understands – as Woodcock did over two decades ago – that biography tells a national story and that the biography of an influential person is also part of, a contributing element in, the production of the nation's biography. I was puzzled, therefore, to read Simpson's final remark to the effect that such biographical work doesn't fall on fertile ground in Canada. I was puzzled because I think the ground – readers, students, anyone interested in matters of identity – is very fertile right now. I also think that the writing of biography is a critically important activity – a responsibility to take very seriously. Where I diverge from Simpson or Levine or the long line of political biographers (John English on Trudeau, Denis Smith on Dief as rogue Tory, and so on) is in where I place my emphasis. I don't disagree that Macdonald was a nation maker, just as I don't quarrel with the nation-making story of Vimy Ridge (as long as it is self-reflexive

and inclusive), but I do insist that biographies of our artists tell equally significant stories, that artists' lives and works are crucial identity-shaping stories. As Ted Chamberlin reminds us in his 2003 book *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*, we must have stories if we claim this land is ours. His title comes from a First Nations Elder who confronted white settler/explorers with this reality – you need stories to tell you who and where you are. And it is our artists who give us these stories and biographers who tell their stories, who get the story out there – as *right* as possible – on the walls before anyone messes with the archive. So I suggest that biographers should heed Woodcock (and even Simpson) and look beyond the accepted subjects for biography – politicians, generals, and the like – to the creative nation makers. This is what, I believe, we are increasingly witnessing in Canadian biography today, in our century. To do this, however, we must have resources, data, archives, and we must have access to these resources; hence my anxiety when a government destroys the records of the long-gun registry, abandons the long-form census, and makes crippling cuts to the budget of the National Archives.<sup>4</sup> Or when Michael Healey resigns from the Tarragon to protest its rejection of his play *Proud* because of its “potentially libellous” portrayal of a prime minister (see Brown).

## The Archive

The archive, as Foucault and Derrida have told us, is as much a system (Foucault) and a concept (Derrida) as it is a physical place or collection of materials.<sup>5</sup> And for both thinkers it is a critically important socio-psychological-political-cultural repository or function of memory, life, and the future. These days it is also a feature on our email software and a verb: a box pops up (usually interrupting our work) to ask if we want to *archive* old messages now. I usually hit “yes,” but given my allergy to technology I have never tried to “access” this archive. I prefer physical archives in real libraries, the kind that Findley describes in *The Wars*. These can be treasure troves of information for biographers

and historians. They can also be traps, uncharted territory with hidden corridors, dead ends, and false floors. Everything about archives depends on who made the initial collection and why, on how the materials deposited reach the library, and on how and by whom they were catalogued. Moreover, there may be conditions placed on what can be consulted; access may be denied, as it was to Peter van Wyck when he tried to see the files of the Eldorado mining company for his book about the Second World War, uranium, and the highway of the atom.<sup>6</sup> If you go to an archive expecting to find Truth, you are almost certain to be disappointed or deceived. If you go expecting perfect order and continuity, then you will quickly realize you are in the wrong place looking for the wrong things. If you expect to find *all* the material you may need for a biography in an archive, then you have some dangerous illusions to discard. All these warnings add up to this: getting it right, as Phyllis Webb wants one to do, is very hard.

Although a professionally structured archive – Fonds – resides in an institution, cared for by highly trained professionals, *the* archive needed for a biography far exceeds such places of quiet, decorum, cleanliness, white gloves, and assistance. Biographers must be prepared to get dirty, to dig around, to inquire, beg, remind, travel (camera at the ready), and ask questions of as many people as possible. This questioning requires permission to interview people, time to sit down with them, to follow up, to persist; and it requires sensitivity and courtesy. Eighty-year-old Aunt Sally may well have a stash of letters in a dresser drawer underneath the woollies and the moth balls; John, the jilted lover or ex-partner, may have kept a lock of hair, photographs of happier days, and the note telling him it was all over. These casual, precious, intimate documents are part of *the* archive that a biographer gathers outside the professional precincts of an archive, and as physical documents they belong to Aunt Sally and John.

At best – with luck – you will find much to work with in and beyond an archive, but you will never find everything, and some materials may be off limits, classified. A lot of what you do find will be irrelevant, trivial, and of no use to your story. Sharon's shopping lists

are of little interest; her veterinary bills are of passing interest; however, her records of books borrowed from libraries or a list of titles in her personal library are of potential value because they may shed light on her inner life, her interests, her own research in libraries and archives, and even on references, allusions, and echoes in her work. Of primary importance, of course, are manuscripts, letters, scrapbooks, diaries and journals, photographs, records of births, marriages, and deaths, and wills. But even these cannot be assumed to be right or reliable; never trust a diary; always treat letters as little narratives (the better the letter, the more likely it has been crafted); triple-check registries and wills; and handle photographs with the utmost caution. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it can also lie.<sup>7</sup>

Let me briefly share with you some of my biographical adventures with archives and one or two examples from the work of other biographers. No one working on Malcolm Lowry can fail to be grateful for his voluminous surviving manuscripts of *Under the Volcano* or for the drafts (yes – drafts!) of his famous letter of January 1946 to Jonathan Cape. You will find these materials in the University of British Columbia (UBC) Lowry Collection. You will also find dozens of love notes that he wrote to his second wife, Margerie, and pinned to trees around their cabin. While these little ditties do provide a glimpse into his marriage, they provide diminishing returns: they quickly become embarrassing, cloying, and repetitive. I selected just a few representative ones for volume two of *Sursum Corda!* However, the Lowry archive extended far beyond UBC, as I discovered when I visited Lowry's first wife in California. She had, she claimed, many letters and some important manuscript material that scholars believed had been destroyed in a fire. Yes, indeed, a fire. I keep returning to fire.

Lowry was terrified of fire and with good reason. When his shack on the foreshore at Dollarton burned down on 7 June 1944, he lost most of his papers; Margerie saved the drafts of *Volcano*. A handful of charred fragments of the *lost* autobiographical novel manuscript were scooped up from the beach – a mere handful, pieces the size of a saucer or smaller – and they survive now, sealed in plastic, in the collection to

tantalize and frustrate scholars. This woman – his first wife – was very gracious to me and generous. She was also adamant. I could see a few of her letters from Malc, but not all. And I would not see the *lost* (not really entirely lost) manuscript. I stayed in her home the night I was there but I scarcely slept. In the next room sat her archive, pulsing with secrets, glowing in the dark, whispering to me. I stayed in my room unable to imagine myself sneaking next door or surreptitiously opening files (damn, I hadn't thought to bring a flashlight or a camera). I have regretted my scruples, lack of preparedness, and cowardice ever since!

Occasionally, an archive will hold amazing items – like Mackenzie King's voluminous diaries, or a letter of such significance that it has a decisive influence on a biographer's interpretation of the life. When one happens upon such a document, I swear the earth moves under one's chair. I've been known to shriek with shock and delight and leap up to search for someone with whom to share my discovery. I had fervently hoped to find such a document when working on Sharon's biography and with her Fonds here at the University of Calgary, and you may be able to guess what that desired document was . . . the letter from her dead grandmother Chalmers, the one that grandmother wrote to her son, Everett (Sharon's father), and the one *he* (actor/character/father/son?) holds, unopened and unread, in *Doc*. As we know, Doc does not open or read this letter because he and his daughter agree to burn it (oh dear, fire again) at the end of the play. I understand that this is a theatre device and that it makes for good stage business, but that unopened, unread letter is also very eloquent, strategic, thematically important, and symbolic. So is that damn trunk sitting there on stage (in the attic, in a back room of the house), daring me to creep up and lift the lid. I will never be convinced there was not a *real* letter, by the way, not even if Sharon swears on a bottle of scotch that there wasn't.

And what about things Charles Foran found in the Mordecai Richler Fonds, also here at the University of Calgary? If you have yet to read *Mordecai: The Life and Times*, then I will not spoil the surprise. Suffice it to say that Foran found a letter – *the letter* that Richler wrote to his “Dear Maw” on 4 August 1976 in which he blamed her for all

his pain, accused her of almost every selfishness and sin under the sun, made it clear that he disliked her, and dismissed her from his life – unless she were to be in financial need. In the published book, this epistle runs to seven pages; it is, therefore, a very long, as well as a very intimate, document. But I come away from reading it wondering why Richler's widow granted Foran permission to reproduce it. I wonder whose version of the life-story is at stake here? I certainly wonder if Foran has got it right. "Dear Maw" is long dead and cannot protest.

Tiff's archive is still very much in flux. Much of it was gathered by Tiff and his partner Bill Whitehead and sold to the National Archives in the 1980s. Further acquisitions have been made over the years until now it is a vast, sprawling collection, parts of which remain uncatalogued and inaccessible. Smaller parts of the Findley archive are held here in Calgary and in Guelph, and still other parts – important documents like his letters and photographs – are scattered in others' archives and in private hands. Because many people who knew Tiff are still alive, I am trying to find them before I continue to tackle the Findley/Whitehead Fonds in Ottawa. I am counting on fire alarms, sprinkler systems, and strict regulations to safeguard these Fonds (a misplaced trust, perhaps, given the current budget crisis at the Archives), but nothing can safeguard peoples' garages, attics, and basements, or the people themselves. All this work takes time, so when well-meaning folks ask me when Tiff's biography will appear, I (cursing inwardly) tell them politely: not for some years. I got the same question over and over again with *Making Theatre*.

Finding *the* archive, working in/with/through it, and striving to get things right, takes a lot of time. However, this much I will share with you today in hopes of arousing enough curiosity to last for some years, and it is this: I have found one stunning letter by Tiff to his ex-wife in an archive and another remarkable one in the archives that extend so far beyond our institutions. I will use these letters, and others I hope to find, to create my story of Tiff's life because I hear him, see the man as he performed himself (and wanted others to see him) in such letters. If I have any regrets when I hold and read such precious items,

it is that people don't write letters like this anymore. I doubt we'll ever see another tour de force like Lowry's letter to Cape; I wonder if sons will bother to write parents in such bitter detail and at such length, as Richler did – an email or a tweet is faster and potentially as shattering; and I *hope* a person will not need to write the kind of letter Tiff wrote, even though it tells me so much about him.

## The Biographer

In this final section I want to reflect on some of the tasks faced by the biographer, on the role of such a writer, and on the decisions, actions, influences, successes and failures, and challenges of being a biographer. I will take myself and “Sharon Pollock” as the examples. I am fairly certain that I got most of Sharon's story right, at least up to the time when I stopped the story. But I also know that some things escaped me, and there were other things I decided not to write about. I think I was honest in *Making Theatre* about both categories – what escaped and what went untold – except that I will never really know precisely how much escaped. If there is no trace, no faint scent, no partially obscured fingerprints to alert me to the letter or anecdote or fact that got away, then it remains an absent presence haunting the archive and my narrative. As for silences, well, I have to hope I made sound, ethical decisions on those matters.

Then there are the materials not yet deposited with the Pollock Fonds, or the materials held in private hands that I could not see or did not know I should ask to see! Can a biographer, could I, ever get it right without access to these things? And how do I navigate around a playwright or novelist who is also a biographer, an autobiographer, and an historian, who works – as I do – with archives? How does the *real* (the real?) biographer handle such slippery material? Diaries, journals, and notebooks are always pre-selected, maybe even carefully edited: remember that King had his transcribed and he edited parts; never forget what Mauberley told us about his version of his auto/biographical/historical narrative: “everything is true, except the lies.” Already

I begin to feel like Winnie the Pooh going around and around in his own tracks under the illusion that I am hunting a “Woozle.” This is where preparation and planning are crucial: biographers are like forensic auditors or like scientists. We open the books or go into our labs armed with theories, facts, dates, and hypotheses; we are on the watch for evidence, nothing is too small to ignore. And we know we must cross-check, verify, and confirm all our conclusions. The tests we perform on the letter, the photograph, the manuscript, the genealogy and the Will must be capable of being repeated with consistent results. The rest is intuition, craft, and luck. (Unless, as Derrida reminds us about Freud, the subject, in a fit of “*mal d’archive*,” has deliberately burned his own archive (63). And then we are unaware of our bad luck.)

I wonder what I would find, and if I could verify my findings, if I returned to Sharon’s story tomorrow? She has not stopped living and working, and her archive has grown with her. At least, what has survived of that archive has grown. As far as I know Sharon does not – yet – suffer from archive fever.

If I were to return to her biography I would go back to the summer of 2008, at almost that moment when *Making Theatre* was published (or at least launched in Vancouver) and the terrible news reached me that Sharon’s house had caught fire and that she was in it when it burst into flames. Shortly after receiving this news I learned that she was all right – she had got out in time with some of her beloved pets. The house itself was severely damaged, however, by a fire that started in the basement and was caused by faulty wiring. Like everyone else, my initial response was concern for her physical safety and emotional well-being, and when I later learned that she had insisted on performing her role in a play that evening I felt somewhat reassured: this was the feisty, indomitable woman I knew; the show would go on. However, perhaps *unlike* anyone else – and I confess this here – my next response was horror and dread: FIRE; the basement; boxes; papers; files – an archive. Precious documents I had never seen, two decades of papers not yet organized and added to the Pollock Fonds, and god knows what other personal and family documents were stored in that basement!

For all I knew Grandmother Chalmers' letter to her son Everett was in one of those boxes and now it really had gone up in flames – real life imitating art! Did Sharon herself know – remember – what was stored down there? Could anything not reduced to ash be salvaged from smoke and water damage? Charred Lowryan fragments maybe? Alas. Such questions should not be uttered or even thought, but as soon as I realized that she was okay, these were my frantic questions: this too – this necrophilic obsession – is what it means to become a biographer.

When I agreed to give this talk to celebrate Sharon's seventy-fifth birthday, I did so knowing I would have to go back to that fire, that *mal d'archive* of demonic electrical wiring. I knew I would have to talk with her and ask nose questions. Time passed, I hesitated, then we set a date to talk by phone, more than three years after that *auto-da-fé*. Between 2008 and 2012 she has more than *carried on*, so there was a lot to talk about. The house was restored and she was happily ensconced there again and still surrounded by cats and dogs. She has continued to act, to travel, to review plays for the CBC and, most importantly, to write. And she is, as she was before 2008, full of delight with all the things her children and grandchildren do. She also wanted an update on my children and grandson. This part of our conversation was woman-to-woman, not biographer-to-biographee. Another touch that reminded me of our many telephone conversations prior to 2008 and *Making Theatre* was the canine and feline interruptions. One rarely talks to Sharon without the dogs wanting in on the act, but this time there was an unusual feline act that I will share with you. At one point, in mid-sentence, I heard that old familiar “uhh, sigh/groan” (only Sharon makes this sound), after which she explained that her new little cat was fascinated by push pins and would climb up on the desk to get at the board, pull them out, and put them in piles. Presumably the items on that board – items for an archive? – fell to the floor, were scattered hither and yon, even lost! Wretched puss!

Of course, I wanted to know what she had been up to. How was the trip to Kosovo? (Fine.) Did she approve of their production of *Blood*

*Relations?* (Yes.) How was it staged? (Expressionistically, symbolically.) What language was it performed in? (Albanian.) Who directed it? (Jeton Neziraj.) And would she work with him again? (Yes, indeed – she has returned to Kosovo and he has come to Calgary; they are working on a script together.) When I asked how this collaboration was working out, she confessed her worry about their very different perspectives, but concluded: “I’m enamoured of it!”<sup>8</sup>

She has continued to work with Atlantic Ballet for the creation of a new work called “Ghosts of Violence,” for which she did “a ton of research.” And she has continued to act. Indeed, she performed in *Marg Szkaluba (Pissy’s Wife)* for the conference, so I won’t describe it here, except to note Sharon’s observation that at eighty to ninety minutes in length it is quite a challenge for a seventy-five-year-old memory. And there have been other activities: more than two years reviewing plays for CBC Calgary, a new CBC Radio proposal for a series that, if accepted, will fill the vacated “Afghanistan” slot. And there’s a new stage play brewing on a subject that has intrigued her since well before the fire: Agnes Smedley (1892–1950), the American journalist, novelist, spy, Communist, and China advocate. Toward the end of our conversation, she cheerfully announced that she had bought a Kia mini-van and was planning to drive to Arizona via Fort Erie this summer to consult the Smedley archives at the Arizona State University. Now, if you have ever been a passenger in a car driven by Sharon (as I have) your eyebrows will be up around your hairline, as mine were when I heard this. Oh yes: What did she think about this conference? WELL. I will leave that to your imagination, but I am sure you know that this lady does not like the spotlight, unless it is in a theatre and she’s playing a role, not herself.

But I am circling the most crucial issue and I cannot avoid it any longer: Archives. The Biographer. And Fire. Much of our conversation involved revisiting the summer of 2008. “I have the ability,” she told me, “of compartmentalizing,” and this helped her deal with the trauma of the fire and the losses she faced over the following eighteen months while she lived in temporary digs. “It could have been so much worse,”

she stated matter-of-factly, and yes it could have. Not all the pets survived, but she did – with her cell phone. She had gone to her bedroom for a rest before the evening’s performance: “I was asleep . . . with the door closed . . . and woke up to a flash of white light – like a bulb bursting.” Then she heard a sound, like water rushing, and smelled an odd odour; she roused herself and opened the bedroom door, to be met by a wall of black smoke. She fled out the back door and dialled 911. When the District 12 firefighters arrived, all “geared up,” “they were wonderful” and saved one of the dogs and her computer. Of these terrible few hours she vividly recalls the permeating, acrid, burning-rubber stench (from old plastics in the basement). The house would need to be washed and sprayed three times to eradicate the smell. And she had none of her own clothes, so borrowed shoes from this person, a T-shirt from that one, and slacks from someone else. What’s more, she refused to go to the hospital, so when Melinda resigned herself to that stubborn fact, she drove her mother to the theatre, where, as if this real drama were not enough, Sharon was performing the role of Margaret in Judith Thompson’s *Habitat*. If you know the play, you know it’s about houses, a neighbourhood, an elderly female resident, and homeless people, and it ends with a house that “goes up in flames” (78). And you can begin to see how the biographer works to weave a story from the archive of facts.

Conversations, interviews really, like the one I had with Sharon a few months ago are crucial for a biographer. If the biographee co-operates, is generous with her time and thoughts, frank and open about events and responses, then the biographer’s task, with a *living* subject, is certainly made easier. This ease, however, does not mean naive acceptance or belief. No one tells a nosey biographer everything and no one, even with the best intentions, remembers everything accurately. Forgetting is both inevitable and necessary. Revising is something we all do. Of far greater importance for a biographer is the archive, and so I had to ask Sharon: did anything stored in that basement survive the fire? Apparently more survived than one might think, but she has not yet found the time to go through the boxes to see what is still in

them, what might have suffered serious water damage, and what is lost forever. She plans to do this difficult work – sometime, maybe soon, maybe later. And she shifts away from the topic to tell me about that Kia mini-van and the road trip she wants to take to consult Smedley's archives.

While Sharon is making her research-cum-road trip this summer, I will also be travelling (by plane and train—I don't do road trips). There are Findley interviews to conduct in Ontario, letters to find, old newspapers to study for clues to the past, and institutions to visit, from the Fisher Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection in the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto to the Metropolitan Reference Library, the Clarke Psychiatric Institute, and the National Archives. I will once more walk through the streets of old Rosedale, past the public school and the site of the Rosedale Library (which, so Lilah Kemp, the schizophrenic librarian in *Headhunter*, tells me, burned down – arson). These streets, this historic neighbourhood, with its elegant homes (now mostly divided into rented flats), and the Rosedale Ravine, surface frequently in his novels like a landscape of memory haunted by ghosts. I will probably never get Rosedale *right* – it has never been part of my identity. But neither was Fredericton, and I walked and walked its streets trying to sense the place, its past, its role in Sharon's life – trying to get it right.

If you ask me which resources are the most important in my search for Timothy Findley, I would say letters (his own, his Uncle Tiff's, others' letters to him) and geography: these two aspects of life were also crucial for him because he performed, self-consciously in his letters, many of which are descriptive, diary-like, funny, serious, and moving, and he always saw himself in his places, his Toronto houses and streets and, above all, the fields, barns, roads, and fellow creatures at Stone Orchard. All these aspects of life – these things, documents, places – belong in the archive that I am gathering. It will take time and I will do my best, with Webb's words echoing in my ears, because "the writer's work" is "the reason for all this diligent activity." And inextricable from the writer's work is her or his time and place, wisdom and warnings,

and their significant contributions (I believe) to Canadian and human identity. Timothy Findley's biography, like Sharon Pollock's (or Richler's, Munro's, Franca's, Hirsch's, and all the others), helps tell our collective story.

My chief anxiety is not about what I will find but what I will not find and what may be unfindable. Fire haunts Tiff's work, just as it followed Lowry around and has now reached its ruthless fingers into Sharon's life and archive. As I reflect on this anxiety, I realize there are two elements fuelling my apprehension. One is comparatively simple: I hate the thought of losing, missing out on, never seeing with my own eyes, documents that may be useful. The other is more complex and troubling, and it is my fear about personal, collective, and nation-wide government-sanctioned archive fever, the death wish it represents and mobilizes, and the amnesia it produces. It was no accident, after all, that the Nazis burned books, records, and corpses. They sought to destroy the past, memory, traces of what had been (and what had been done). If we cannot find the evidence, if we do not survive, then we cannot bear witness, and biographers (like historians, artists, Holocaust survivors, and fictional autobiographers like Eme in *Getting It Straight* and Mauberley in *Famous Last Words*) are charged with bearing witness. I do not need Freud or Derrida to tell me that to live is to resist death, to hold off the "radical evil" (Derrida, 19) of a *mal d'archive*, not just for the sake of the past and the present, but for the future. Likewise, to write is to insist that this living matters, that it adds to the ongoing story of the characters, the *real* people, the places, the communities, and the always changing nation. Canada needs as much biography as we can produce because a national life-story is only as full and diverse as the memories and the archives that animate it. Of course, biographers will never get it all right, but we can resist getting it wrong by finding and preserving archives and using them to tell stories of being here now, then, and in the future.

## NOTES

- 1 This essay, first given as a lecture in 1993, was published in *Nothing but Brush Strokes* in 1995, hence the reference to floppy disks, which none of us use anymore. This volume of Webb's essays is dedicated to "Tiff and Bill, faithful friends."
- 2 In "History to the Defeated: Notes on Some Novels by Timothy Findley," Woodcock observes, with his typical prescience, that Findley is part of – I would suggest a progenitor of – the "emergence of the historic imagination" in Canada that gives "our collective life an origin and a meaning [and] that has tended to shape Canadian writing during recent decades and to induce its formative myths." Woodcock also remarks that biographical writing is another sign of this "collective life" (17).
- 3 The Hirsch biography is a classic example of what I see as the relationship of one person's story to the wider national story because Hirsch's life in Canada is a direct result of the Second World War and Canada's policy toward Jewish refugees, especially children. By telling this part of his story his biographers have expanded the national story and filled in a part of the narrative that has been suppressed and forgotten and that many Canadians perhaps do not want to accept.
- 4 To find out more about the current crisis facing Library and Archives Canada, go to [www.savelibraryarchives.ca](http://www.savelibraryarchives.ca). This situation has been developing for some time, but to the best of my knowledge it has received little public attention and less protest or advocacy on the part of Canadians. To the degree that the national archives are constrained by budget cuts, reductions in professional staff, and limitations in access, scholars and citizens are denied information on their cultural heritage, history, and the resources necessary to develop a larger, more complex and multiple, national story.
- 5 Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (first published in 1969) was the first contemporary theorist to identify the importance of archives and to develop a methodology – the system he calls archeology – that included a theory of the archive; see part 3 (126–31). Since this formulation of the archive, considerable attention has focused on the ideological nature and social/psychological role of archives. In "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," Derrida revisits the idea and develops it in fascinating, but troubling, ways. For Derrida, the term *mal d'archive* (translated as archive fever) names a death wish that operates by destroying memory, foreclosing on the life-affirming force of personal and collective remembering that can be enhanced, enabled in fact, through archives. Among Derrida's worst examples of such archive fever are the Nazis' attempt to exterminate Jewish books, identities, lives (corpses), and culture, and he warns against the "radical evil" of any state-authorized control of archival records. Individuals can, of course, choose to destroy their personal archives and they can put limits on aspects of an archive when it is deposited in a library, but it is the so-called *authorized* suppression or destruction of evidence that most worries Derrida.
- 6 In his study of the Canadian history of uranium mining and our contribution to the Manhattan Project, van Wyck describes the obstacles he met when attempting to gain access to records held in the National Archives (9–11). His frustrations make for chilling reading, especially since Canadians know next to nothing about this aspect of their Second World War history or the impact of the mining on the Dene of Deline at Great Bear Lake. This subject has been explored by Peter Blow in his film *Village of Widows* and by Marie Clements in her play *Burning Vision*.

- 7 See Adams, Egan, Hirsch, and Sontag on auto/biography and photography.
- 8 All quotations are from my telephone interview with Sharon Pollock on 29 January 2012.

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