

Even in such moments plucking
 Heart's harp with its sorrowful strings
 So that the mind in running
 Its fingers over the notes
 Blurs the print to the eyes,
 Thickens the voice in the throat,
 Just as, drawn out of ourselves
 By the God-given flight of birds,
 We are swept by a tumult of love
 Beyond the compass of words—
 Take then, dear friend, this thanks,
 Folded like a paper boat,
 And on deep memory's stream
 Suffice to let it float
 Further than ever it might
 Have hoped to sail on its own,
 Clear of the waiting reeds
 And the weirs of oblivion...

THE CRAZY PLACE

They move into the crazy place
 from various directions; some
 goofy-footed already, others
 with limbs writhing like triffids
 (they are already residents
 of another planet and the earthlings
 are terrified); for some visitors
 a howling vacuum
 is crying in sixteen extra-terrestrial languages
 to be filled, a plastic star or flower
 more real than the real; money—
 that relic of the third planet—
 changes hands; somewhere in Lemuria
 some very important aliens with
 the ability to appear human
 get considerably richer; meanwhile
 the poverty of those lying sprawled
 where even the paving is crazed
 breaks out all over them in pustules; trembling
 fingers pluck continually at the frayed ends
 of consciousness, time—
 now every city has its own Bombay
 and every night is a bombers' moon...

PRECISION AND PASSION

Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Hewett



Cairiona O'Reilly

Gwen Harwood, who died in 1995, remains a largely unknown figure to most non-Australian readers of poetry. The only available, if comprehensive, selection of her work is the *Collected Poems* published by Oxford University Press in 1991. This volume does not in fact include the entirety of Harwood's copious output over the span of her writing life, and was initially published in Australia as a *Selected Poems* by Angus & Robertson in 1975. The poems included in this revised volume are nevertheless ample testimony to a remarkable and (at least in this hemisphere) too-long unfamiliar writer. Harwood was born in Taringa, Queensland, in 1920 and raised in Brisbane, where her love for and interest in music (a theme which would come to underpin a great deal of her writing, as she was also a prolific librettist) showed itself at an early age. She eventually became an accomplished pianist and organist at All Saints, Brisbane. After a brief spell as a novice with the Poor Clares, in 1945 she married the linguist William Harwood and settled in Hobart, Tasmania. Although she had been writing more or less steadily since her early twenties, Harwood's publishing career proper did not begin until the late nineteen-fifties, when she rapidly made up for lost time, publishing an impressive body of poetry under four separate pseudonyms: Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, Miriam Stone and T.F. Kline, as well as under her own name. The motivation for creating these multiple personalities, apart from a constitutional playfulness, seems to have been the laudable attempt to get as much poetry as she could published in the shortest possible time. This strategy led to some hilarious results, with Lehmann and Geyer, both obviously male European intellectuals, doing particularly well. Harwood blew her cover in 1961, when Walter Lehmann published the seemingly innocuous sonnets "Eloisa to Abelard" and "Abelard to Eloisa", which read acrostically "So long Bulletin" and "Fuck all editors" respectively. When the hoax was eventually recognized the editor in question hastily recalled all copies of *The Bulletin* and printed the following knuckle-rapping indictment:

What is achieved by using this section of *The Bulletin* as a piece to scrawl a coarse word is hard to imagine. A genuine literary hoax would have some point to it. But the use of a "dirty word" seems a very sad jest indeed.

Harwood found herself at the centre of a controversy which was hardly of the same magnitude as the Ern Malley affair (presumably the rather oxymoronic "genuine literary hoax" referred to above) but which nevertheless caused her to hit the headlines briefly as the "Tas Housewife In Hoax Of The Year". Harwood and Lehmann were summarily banned from the magazine, later issues of which (in the same year) included work by Miriam Stone and Walter Geyer. All of these pseudonymous high-jinks, as well as being enormous fun, may also provide an unusual insight into the nature of Harwood's subsequent development. For one thing, they bear witness to a remarkable early confidence and intellectual independence, Harwood evidently not caring a rap for the opinions of the editors who sent flattering letters to Geyer and Lehmann as figures more instantaneously authoritative than the Tas housewife and mother. The poems from her first collection which are included in this volume were composed when Harwood was already into early middle age, and provide evidence of just such a degree of sophistication, as well as a virtually fully-formed poetic sensibility, a prominent feature of which is, unsurprisingly, satire. Harwood did not simply limit herself to pseudonymous personae. Eight poems in this section are devoted to Professor Eisenbart, a grandiloquent, rather vain academic whom Harwood utilizes in a parabolic fashion reminiscent of Stevens' Canon Aspirin. Eisenbart also "imposes orders as he thinks of them" but the fox and snake have here metamorphosed to "Panther and Peacock", in the main poem of the series, an elaborate meditation on Eisenbart's heavy responsibility (self-imposed) as guardian of an "incredible / formula that, spoken, would impel / prodigious ruin." Not unexpectedly, Eisenbart's more honest unconscious transforms him into the eponymous peacock in the course of a dream. Harwood's early poetry was criticised for its excessively cerebral and recondite lexicon, and this is certainly a charge which can be levelled with some justification at a poem like "The Glass Jar", in which she is in danger of falling prey to the very bombast which she elsewhere triumphantly sends up. But habitually, and refreshingly, humour is in never very far away, and Harwood demonstrates that she is far too canny a customer to be seduced into believing her own rhetoric. As befits a writer whose favourite critic was reputedly Harold Bloom, himself no stranger to ponderous rhetoric, Harwood produces some wonderful satires of what Bloom delights in calling the "Mouldy Figs" of academia. "Cocktails at Seven" springs to mind as a sparkling example of its kind, where the careerist manoeuvres at an academic cocktail party are conceived as the terms of a mathematical formula, A, B and X. The terminology also suggests of course that Harwood is very discreetly refusing to engage in pack-drill.

Eisenbart is discarded eventually in favour of the more resilient and

adaptable Professor Kröte, alcoholic accompanist and "second-rate musician in / an ignorant town". The Kröte poems are proof of something which becomes very clear the further one reads, that Harwood is much more than a satirist. If the formal rigidity and "numb dumb wordage" of early Plath exploded into the liberated anger and energy of *her* last poems, by contrast Harwood's early formal constraints are successfully subsumed into a style which grows increasingly confident in its treatment of more personal themes. Harwood's temperament is never less than calm and meditative, even when in the throes of erotic passion, or, as is more characteristic, in love's afterglow. Here I would cite the superb "Carnal Knowledge 1 & 11" which are distinguished examples of Harwood's combination of passion and precision and quite rightly two of her most widely anthologised pieces:

Roll back, you fabulous animal
be human, sleep. I'll call you up
from water's dazzle, wheat-blond hills,
clear light and open-hearted roses,
this day's extravagance of blue
stored like a pulse beat in the skull. ("Carnal Knowledge 1")

Such poems justify David Malouf's enthusiastic acknowledgment of her as "at once the most passionate and intellectual of poets, the most openly sexual, and the most ecstatically religious". The religious poetry of which Malouf writes occurs at the point where Harwood's identifiable personal concerns merge with her philosophical preoccupations, and the resulting marriage tends to raise both facets of her temperament to a higher power, producing such remarkably direct yet considered examinations of loss as "Dust to Dust" and "Mother Who Gave Me Life".

However the jewel in the crown of this volume is undeniably the selection of work from Harwood's late collection *Bone Scan*, which won her the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for poetry in 1989. The familiar verbal dexterity and humour are there still, but they are coterminous with a quieter faith, moving in its simplicity. The early part of this section is devoted to a recollection of Harwood's schooldays in "the class of 1927" where, in a poem entitled "Slate", she writes of her "morbid, chronic / nostalgia" remembering "all those bored demonic / infants whose purpose was to make / mischief purely for mischief's sake." As with most genuinely gifted writers, Harwood here displays a profound understanding of and ability to evoke the condition of childhood. The rueful reference to nostalgia could perhaps be applied with greater appropriateness to poems such as the naively entitled "The Magic Land of Music" or the rather cutesy

Marianne Moore-ish furry animal poems like "A Feline Requiem" in which the usual careful balance fails to assert itself. But there are satisfying instances of surreal wit and semantic pyrotechnics a-plenty in "Night and Dreams" in which the ghost of a crab, eaten forty years previously, returns to haunt the aging poet; and in the musically inspired formal *tour de force* "Divertimento" in four sections, *notturno*, *affettuoso*, *scherzo* and *postlude*. This late collection is in many ways Gwen Harwood's own best tribute, demonstrating as it does the humanity, effortless range and "passionate patience" of this most important of writers.

Harwood's work provides a strong feeling of connectedness, a sense of philosophical and artistic continuation, inside a tradition which is recognisably European. This is emphasised also by the fact that she was an indefatigable dedicatee of her poems, most of the dedicatees being fellow artists, very frequently male. A notable exception to this is her "Quartet for Dorothy Hewett", which unfortunately is omitted from the *Collected Poems*. If Harwood, despite her early unthreatening *enfant terrible* reputation, can be viewed as a major figure of the Australian literary establishment, Dorothy Hewett's position vis à vis any such institution is a less comfortable one. As Stephanie Trigg has written, "it would be hard to imagine two more strikingly different poetic styles and registers than Harwood's and Hewett's." Certainly Harwood's serenity and her Apollonian formality provide a forceful contrast with the Dionysian rambunctiousness of Hewett. An interview with *The Independent* quoted on the back cover of *Alice in Wornland*, her *Selected Poems*, gives the reader a fair idea of what to expect: "Hewett has lived out a soap opera of a life. Hers is a story of dips, dives, and sheer good fun. If she were a man, her life would be described as Rabelaisian and she, a hell-raiser. As a woman, she has to make do with 'sexually depraved'." The details of that life are available, with marvellous vividness, in her 1990 autobiography *Wild Card*, which affords an important insight into her work. Hewett was born in 1923 in Perth, Western Australia. She was thus an almost exact contemporary of Harwood's, but there all obvious similarity, in biographical detail as in everything else, ends. Her early life was spent on her father's wheat farm, where the deep attachment to landscape which saturates her imagination was initially formed. The account of her childhood given in *Wild Card* proposes an intimate relationship between the land and her burgeoning sense of sexuality, something which later provided a strong symbolic underpinning for such pieces as "Legend of The Green Country" and the "Nim" poems. After a period of late adolescent promiscuity (an outrage to the paranoid prudence of the middle-class mercantile society in which she was raised), and a failed suicide attempt, in 1945 Dorothy Hewett joined the Australian Communist party, the same year

that Harwood became a respectable Tasmanian housewife. In her adherence to party doctrine, as in all other matters, Hewett would appear to have been an extremist, even alongside the more or less fanatical characters she lived with in 1950s Sydney. One of these included her boiler-maker lover Les Flood, for whom she left her first husband and baby. She and Flood lived together for nine years, Hewett enduring his increasingly violent behaviour until he was finally diagnosed as schizophrenic. Hewett took their children and fled back to Perth, where in 1960 she married her second husband Merv Lilley. She eventually resigned from the Communist Party after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Her rigid toting of the party line had spelt disaster for her writing, as the autobiography makes clear: "where is the rebellious girl with the hooped earrings and the black velvet beret, who wouldn't be seen dead with her hair in a victory roll? In burying her, have I fragmented my personality so drastically that I have killed the poet in me, traded the gift of tongues for the dream of a Marxist Utopia?" Hewett ends by answering this question in the affirmative, and the non-stop, breathless vitality of the verse included in this *Selected Poems* provokes wonder at the thought of what *not* writing must have cost her. Not unlike Gwen Harwood, Hewett began, inside a relatively short space of time, to write and publish copiously, channelling her formidable vitality into the production of six collections of poetry, a novel, *Bobbin Up* (Virago, 1985), and many plays. *Alice in Wornland* provides a generous selection from her four collections *Windmill Country* (1968), *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975), *Greenhouse* (1979) and *Alice in Wornland* (1987).

Certainly, in "Legend of the Green Country", the first poem in this volume, there is a tremendous sense of release and triumph at the liberation into language of impressions too long dammed up. The poem is an act of creative reclamation, of the salt-rusted country of Hewett's childhood, of the generations which inhabited it, as well as of her own voice. Edna Longley has called it "mythic as well as epic, a mother-narrative of Australia". But the poem is far from an idealized narrative of place. A deeply ambiguous historical burden is inescapably present throughout the entirety of Hewett's work, as a later poem makes clear:

*I'm a changeling she cried
I don't belong with them*

she imagined they'd found her
under the rhubarb plants
swaddled glistening with frost
but she was wrong

the blood of all of them swam in her
 she was caught in the web of their history
 like the tarantula
 hanging from the chaffhouse rafter
 waiting to reel her in (from "The Alice Poems, 5")

The poet of *Windmill Country* similarly recognizes that "there is no end to it" and shoulders the responsibility of realising her childhood ambition to "make legends out of this place". Hewett's political experience still ghosts this narrative, with its tone of passionate declamation and its concern with the economic factors which led to the despoliation of the landscape. Financial miserliness is equated with religious dogma and sexual frigidity in Hewett's description of her grandmother, who "had a bite like a sour green apple / Little and pitiless she kept the till / counted the profits, and stacked the bills of sale... / She balanced the ledger and murmured 'God is love', / feeling like God, she foreclosed on another farm." A sharp division exists between what may be termed the male and female principles in Hewett's work, and here it is the women who come off worse, "lying locked and cold in their sexless beds, / putting greed in their men's fingers instead of love. The men are in part redeemed by their energy, their animal lusts and their hard drinking, while female sexuality, at least in this context, is a deathly burden: "Mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone. / My mother sits silent with nothing to remember." As one of the major symbolic preoccupations in this collection, sexuality is treated comprehensively, but its darker side is never overlooked and it is frequently associated with violence. "Grave Fairytale" is Hewett's irreverent reworking of the Rapunzel myth, where the sexually depraved black Witch is figured as a part of the narrator's own self, and where the fairytale Prince metamorphoses into a crude rapist:

I watched all night the beasts unsatisfied
 roll in their sweat, their guttural cries
 made the night thick with sound.
 Their shadows gambolled, hunch-backed, hairy-arsed,
 and as she ran four-pawed across the light,
 the female dropped coined blood-spots on the floor.

Rapunzel triumphs in the end by killing the "framed-faced bully boy" and with him her own slavish lust. The poem closes on a note of nonchalant humour, which is another of Hewett's most appealing characteristics. Her humour is primarily linguistic, taking the form of unexpected colloqui-

alisms which are also on occasion remarkably touching: "but it was only a fluke / we found each other / & for such a short time..." There is something vaguely ridiculous in this, as in the semi-humorous "Moon-Man", but it hints at a gentler side to Hewett's occasionally strident temperament, and is reminiscent too of the courageously frank and wide-eyed quality of her autobiography. She also displays real daring in the portrayal of some unbearably painful personal losses, as in "Anniversary" from *Greenhouse*, where she commemorates the death of a child with minimum verbal fuss.

Hewett lacks Harwood's multi-faceted technique, her speculative skills and range of tone. But she is a challenging, unsettling and entertaining writer, and like her near contemporary, is deserving of a greater share of attention in this part of the world, not least for her full-blooded, head-on clashes with conventional social, sexual and creative *mores*.

Books discussed in this article:

Gwen Harwood, *Collected Poems*. Oxford, 1991

Dorothy Hewett, *Alice in Wormland: Selected Poems*. Bloodaxe, 1990