

Museums of the mind: My friendship with Australian poet, Gwen Harwood

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In late winter, 1986, I wrote a letter of appreciation to Australian poet, Gwen Harwood, for her *Selected Poems* (1975). I mentioned that I was planning to visit Hobart in 1987 and cautiously wondered if we might meet. I enclosed a stamped addressed envelope, hoping, perhaps presumptuously, to receive a reply. After all, it was rumoured she did not like academia and was arguably the finest poet then writing in Australia. She had already won seven prestigious awards and would go on to receive seven more, including three honorary doctorates.

To my delight, the envelope returned with a letter dated the eighth of September, 1986. Harwood wrote:

Thank you for enclosing the SAE – so many people don't. I hasten to use the last of my Christmas-gift butterfly paper to say I'd be happy to meet you . . . and answer in person any questions I know the answer to. In the meantime, please feel assured I'll reply if you write.

*In Southerly of this year there will be a prose article written by me about my work and background as a librettist. Also you might be interested in *Overland*, No. 10, December 1985, in which I write about my present house, and *Island Magazine*, No 225/26, Summer/Autumn 1986: 'An Interview with G.H'. I mention these only to save your time (you might find something you were going to ask).*

You can ring me . . . when you're in Hobart next year.

*All good wishes,
Gwen Harwood*

It was the start of an acquaintance that brought me further letters and cards, of which I still possess twelve items. I had no idea that I was corresponding with a renowned communicator, and only of recent years have I discovered that Gregory Kratzman edited *A Steady Stream of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen*

Harwood 1943-1995, published 2003.

In 2015, twenty years after her death, I feel a strong sense of obligation to the memory of Gwen Harwood, to share what I learned from both her correspondence and poetry. Not forgotten today in Australian university English departments, in New South Wales secondary school studies her name is now listed under texts – not prescribed but exemplary – for poetry across the curriculum. Her name stands with exemplary greats; Donne, Keats, T.S Eliot and others.

Her work is also used as a text for the Victorian Certificate of Education and in the West Australian Certificate of Education Literature Courses, in the poetry section for its literary value and complex themes. So Harwood speaks to a wide audience that also includes the teenage reader. Therefore, like Abel, she 'still speaks even although she is now dead' (Hebrews 11:4).

Before we met, in her second letter she wrote to arrange details of the full day we would spend together, starting off at her home in 18 Pine Street, Hobart. She suggested that I send my questions

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Photography: John Trim

ahead, should I wish to tape the interview. She also indicated further helpful reading, such as *Essays and Monographs Series, No. 3*, from the Centre for Research in New Literature.

In May 1987, Gwen Harwood greeted me at her front door. My initial awareness was of her slender build and height, several inches shorter than my own. I especially noticed her welcoming smile and twinkling eyes. She was not what I had expected and I found myself thinking,

*Either I mistake your shape and making quite.
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Call'd Robin Goodfellow.*

Shakespeare's Puck had flashed unbidden into my mind, linking with the pleasant lady who stood before me. I knew the range of her published work: scholarly and insightful, some of which, under her own name, was ironically playful, and fifteen others that she had written under the pseudonym of Walter Lehmann, published in 1960-61, to whom were attributed the two acrostic sonnets whereby she completely hoaxed *The Sydney Bulletin*. Other pseudonyms were Francis Geyer in 1960-64, (twenty-nine poems); Miriam Stone, 1962-63 (nine poems) and the eighteen poems by Timothy Kline, 1968-1975. Some scholars suggested that, in the early years, she wrote under several pseudonyms to avoid prejudice against women poets. She explained, later, it was a way to get as many of her poems published as possible.

Welcomed inside the Harwood home, I met her husband, retired professor of linguistics at the University of Tasmania. After introduction he quickly returned to his computer. Gwen commented that he was not keen on her bringing strangers to their house; that my visit was a special favour. "There was something about your letter that made me want to meet you," I remember her saying. I felt highly favoured.

She invited me to see through their small retirement home to which she refers in her article, 'The Seventh House' (*Overland*, No. 101, 1985), in which she reminisces the influence of her homes on her life and work. She remarked, as we went, that any ornaments on display had been gifts from family, friends or admirers. Pausing before a wall hanging, she asked if I recognised it. As I looked at the picture and its amber background, she began to quote lines from her poem, 'Flying Goddess' (*Collected Poems*, 153):

*A batik picture on the wall
springs suddenly to life: a Flying
Goddess made luminous by dying*

*sunlight. In a last western glow
her gold-edged feet and fingers shine.
In labyrinthine fantasies
her scarf weaves rapid arc of line
blue round her skin of ebony. . .*



As I listened and looked, the picture came to life through Harwood's vision and talent.

The morning passed as our conversation moved to and fro concerning trends and development in Australian literature. Harwood also mentioned the oeuvre of her poet friends: Vincent Buckley, A. D. Hope and Vivian Smith and spoke highly of Veronica Brady. For a time we shared appreciation of the work of another friend and hoaxter, the renowned poet James McAuley. I mentioned that, in my opinion, their work might be compared and contrasted, for they shared the voice of the God-fearing, lyrical poet, especially in McAuley's final work: *Time Given* (1976).

Harwood then quoted lines from her poem 'Momento' (*Collected Poems*, 318) which remember James McAuley, and also from 'A Memory of James McAuley' (*Collected Poems*, 344). Her brown eyes, twinkling earlier, had now changed to depths of sadness which I felt and shared: a moment of bonding.

We ate lunch in the café of the Hobart Botanic Gardens, still talking together. Gwen coaxed me to confess my own interests - amateur music-maker in piano, organ, choirs and musical theatre, and she drew out of me the confession that 'Yes, I have had a few poems published.' Then I discovered that we were both mothers of five children and, with some delight, confirmed that we each had experienced and understood the friendship of cats! I had already enjoyed her tribute to the feline 'Tiglath-Pileser, named for the grand Assyrian kings ...' (*Collected Poems*, 391), also 'Schrodinger's Cat Preaches to the Mice' (*Collected Poems*, 392-93) and 'The Secret Life of Frogs' which introduced her Siamese cat, Mr Gabriel Fur (*Collected Poems*, 331). Mr Gabriel Fur is also recalled with the poignant

“ she wrote under several pseudonyms to avoid prejudice against women poets [and] as a way to get as many of her poems published as possible ”

memories of a cat lover in 'Twilight' (*Collected Poems*, 320), a loving lament from the museum of the mind.

During the afternoon, Gwen Harwood drove me to some locations in Hobart and beyond, places that were meaningful to her, which held echoes in her poetry, such as in the Oyster Cove Pastorals (*Collected Poems*, 307-307). Finally we went back to her home, to take photographs and to part with promises to keep in touch.

In retrospect, I felt she accepted me because she was an encourager and because we felt comfortable together. I was a late starter in academia, already aged in my fifties and, I suspect, she may have viewed me as being 'unstuffy'; that I was not there in order to write academic criticism but that, as a sort of disciple, I understood her perceptions and would give her poetry life.

I honoured that trust, especially when, by invitation in 1987, I visited Strathfield Adventist High School to speak to the HSC students who were studying Harwood's poetry. I told them of my memorable meeting with the poet, answered their questions and read and discussed some of her poems.

After my visit, one of the girls wrote on behalf of her class to tell Gwen Harwood how much they responded to her poetry, naming those poems and lines to which they particularly related. All the students signed the letter, adding their own brief, positive comments.

In Gwen Harwood's fifth letter (13/7/87), she wrote:

I was charmed to get the card from the HSC girl; such things mean more than a hundred critical articles!

I've just been up to Launceston for a week to take part in the Australian Studies in Literature conference, gave a reading and a launching and sat on a panel. Some of the papers were appalling; it alarmed me to think that the paper-givers might teach as they wrote and read. I'm glad there are people like you to keep the word alive.

Gwen Harwood's poetry that depicts experiences of childhood and youth, about decision making and confronting death, resonates with the sensitive, teenage mind: See the following from *Collected Poems* - 'At Mornington' (p.258-259); 'Class of 1927' (p. 365); 'Father and Child'; 'I, Barn Owl', 'II, Nightfall' (p. 375-377); 'The Twins' (p. 372); 'Mother who gave me life' (p. 381-382). For a taste of ironic wit, try 'Songs of Eve II' (p. 489-490, or for multiculturalism, 'Refugee' (p. 151). Harwood's poem, 'A Valediction' (p. 335), addressed to John Donne, includes the challenging lines that are as relevant in 2015 as when they were written:

*Who needs drugs if she has enough
uppers and downers in her head?*

In Letter Number Nine, 18/7/88, she wrote about her moving poem 'Ebb-Tide' (*Collected Poems*,141) noting a change in her point of view since the year of the poem's first publication, in *Australian Poetry 1962*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton. The poem begins, 'Now that you have no word for me/ I bring your bitter silence here' To me she commented:

*I gave a lecture on that poem once and said it was about death - 'the one picture is all that remains'; the emphasis would be, 'you smile **there** forever?' (i.e. nowhere else in the world). Does that seem ok?*

'Bitter' is often used in the O.T. In Job 3:20-21 for instance, Jeremiah 31:15, and Proverbs 5:4-5, in connection with death - I would read this poem as being about death. I'm glad I don't feel like that (Ebb Tide) now.



Photography: John Trim

What did I learn from Gwen Harwood's correspondence? I encountered the lively intelligence of an insightful, well-rounded intellectual who had a great capacity for friendship, as is shown in her several poems about Vera Cottew and those about other friends she mentioned to me. It was also evident from her topics that she was well-versed in religion and proficient in classical music; that she wrote texts for vocal compositions, particularly for the composer, Larry Sitsky. She was also a participant with nature and events:

*We've had some hard frosts but the spring bulbs will soon be open. We've had flocks of Eastern Rosellas in the bare trees Love from Gwen
(Letter Number Five, 13/7/87)*

I had a marvellous week at ASAL conference and saw some of the stars of Aust. Lit. I had breakfast with them, even!

Gwen Harwood's poetry that depicts experiences of childhood and youth, about decision making and confronting death, resonates with the sensitive, teenage mind

We're looking forward to spring in the garden which is still bare but promises to be beautiful and fruitful.
Love, Gwen.
(Letter Number Six, 18/8/87)

I went to see the children and grandchildren. One day, Mary (my daughter) and I caught the early bus from Canberra to Sydney and stood in the queue to see Gold of the Pharaohs. It was worth it! Love, Gwen.
(Letter Number Eleven, (9/2/89)

The cards that Gwen Harwood sent me were ones she had carefully chosen. Some examples were: from the National Trust, one depicting hydrangeas and leghorn chickens by Hardy Wilson; from the Australian National Gallery, *Water-Lilies* by Monet. Another was a 'Convict Transport Brig', painted by Tony Crago; also one showing women in eighteenth century costume.

Sometimes Gwen commented in detail about particular poems, for example:

I've been thinking about the sonnet (The Lion's Bride). A Polish friend said it was 'a bitter commentary on Anglo-Saxon marriage.' Mark Strand said it was 'mysterious.' Perhaps the lion is an image of the poet resenting the conventional finery covering the naked, sensual poetic self. Perhaps not. I'll write more about it soon.
(Letter Number Three, 15/5/87)

In Letter Number Four, (28/5/87), she added:

*The lion in The Lion's Bride probably owes something to Psalm 22 which fascinated me as a child. Verse 2: 'Save me from the Lion's mouth'.
I used to look up all the references to animals in my grandmother's Concordance to the Scriptures; the lion gets a good go in the O.T.*

What I learned most from the letters of Gwen Harwood emphasises her interest in, and knowledge of, the work of the Austrian-British philosopher, Wittgenstein who worked primarily in logic and especially concerning the philosophy of mind and language. She was fascinated by his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with its use of aphorisms and philosophical conundrums. She said, "When I read in Wittgenstein, 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is' I took my first step towards being a poet." It is therefore not surprising that his quotations precede or are alluded to in some of her poetry, as in 'Evening, Oyster Cove' (*Collected Poems*, 302):

What is history to me? Mine is the first and only world.
– Wittgenstein.

In Letter Number Five she told me that one of her favourite books was *Zettel* by Wittgenstein, and

she proceeded to fill almost a page of its quotations which she found memorable. Examples I especially noticed and could relate to in Harwood's poetry were:

- *Like everything metaphysical, the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language.* (Entry 55)
- *How words are understood is not told by words alone.* (Entry 144)
- *The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.* (Entry 160)

In Letter Number Ten, 12/12/88, she wrote:

The academic scene fills me with neurotic angst. I think of Wittgenstein with the Tractatus written but not published. He said that if it was first-class work it didn't matter when it was published; if it wasn't, better it never should be published.

She added, "Vin said the last time I saw him that fulltime academic work was incompatible with writing at full stretch (he was speaking of poetry)." That remark, made by Vincent Buckley, reminded me of one made to myself at the University of Sydney when another eminent poet warned me that if I wanted to write, I would find academia soul-destroying.

Harwood's poetry challenged me by its range of topics and points of view and the way she moved perceptively beyond description and memory to explore the very crux of an issue. Many of her poems sing on in text and imagery, especially as she wrote:

*If by some chance I wrote
a fine immortal poem
it would have a mortal theme.
All that excess of life
in museums of the mind
still there to contemplate.*

Harwood's 386 published poems flow from many memories of childhood, relationships, people, places and experiences, stored in her own 'museum of the mind.' Her poem, 'The Violets' (*Collected Poems*, 247) is such a one where the final verse wraps up unforgettably:

*Years cannot move
nor death's disorienting scale
distort those lamplit presences:
a child with milk and story-book;
my father, bending to inhale
the gathered flowers, with tenderness
stroking my mother's goldbrown hair.
Stone curlews call from Kedron Brook.
Faint scent of violets drifts in air.*

“
Still in my
flesh I see
the God who
goes with me
glowing with
radioactive
isotopes.
This is what
he at last
allows a
mortal eye to
behold
”

I would not categorise Harwood as a writer of Christian verse, as is James McAuley who is recognised as such by the English poet, literary critic and scholar Donald Davie in his *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, 1988. However, biblical knowledge and Christian thought underpin her work as in ‘Religious Instruction’ (*Collected Poems*, 370). She mentions Sunday School attendance in ‘Mother’s Day’ (*CP*, 530), later she was an organist at the All Saints Church of England in Brisbane before her marriage; in 1941 she entered an Anglican convent for a time. Death and beyond death often absorb her mind.

Someone suggested to me that Gwen Harwood was an agnostic. When I questioned her about it, she denied it strongly in Letter Number Nine, 18/7/88:

Who said I was an agnostic? How could anyone read that into the poems? – particularly ‘Mid Channel’ (in The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets) and ‘Seven Philosophical Poems’ (in The Lion’s Bride) (Collected Poems, 286-289).

Harwood’s poem, *Bone Scan*, is a brilliant testimony of faith in God, written after being treated for breast cancer in 1985 and published in 1988 (*Collected Poems*, 373):

Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and my uprising. – Psalm 139

In the twinkling of an eye, in a moment all is changed: on a small and radiant screen (honeydew melon green) are my scintillating bones. Still in my flesh I see the God who goes with me glowing with radioactive isotopes. This is what he at last allows a mortal eye to behold: the grand supporting frame complete (but for the wisdom teeth), the friend who lives beneath appearances, alive with light. Each glittering bone assures me: you are known.

An astounding poem, it can be used in a science lesson or in religion as well as within Australian or World literature.

Written in 1994 when her cancer had re-emerged, Harwood’s final, unpublished poem, ‘Late Works’ (*Collected Poems*, 571) is laced with her ironic humour while being both prophetic and a benediction:

Time to think of your Late Works in the pure daylight atmosphere of mystical acceptance, freedom from old monsters, etcetera . . . All those you wanted to impress are dead or sick or pretty crazy and those you know will understand it are not yet born. Nurse, I need paper, No, not that kind, you idiot girl, The kind you write on. Get me Matron.

The poem continues:

Matron I need a fountain pen. If you have any wits about you they’re PhDs requesting access to things you can’t remember writing . . .

Her final words, speaking to her dying self, are:

No matter now. You have your life before you, you’re a child enjoying yourself, the unity of contrasts. Whose hand is it that holds your pen?

Partnered with her poems that declare her faith in God, such as ‘Bone Scan’, I believe this layered ‘late work’ indicates that Gwen Harwood faced her future beyond death with confidence of union between the mortal and immortal: ‘the unity of contrasts’, and in recognition of the source of her gift.

In late 1995 I noticed the Australian flag in the window of a large London bookstore. On investigation, I saw with delight that it was surrounded by photographs of Gwen Harwood, pictures of Tasmanian scenes and a full window display of her many publications, for her readership had extended to Britain. To my dismay, however, it also announced the sad news of her death on December 5th.

Vale, Gwen Harwood, my friend. May those who were ‘not yet born’ in 1994 relate to ‘museums of the mind’ and respond to ‘the unity of contrasts’, becoming like a host of others, enriched by poetic vision.

Notes

1. Quotations of poems are from *Gwen Harwood Collected Poems, 1943 – 1995*, edited by Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann, University of Queensland Press, 2003.
2. Quotations from Harwood’s letters are from her personal correspondence with me.

“Gwen Harwood faced her future beyond death with confidence of union between the mortal and immortal: ‘the unity of contrasts’, and in recognition of the source of her gift.”