GWEN HARWOOD - A SEARCH FOR MEANING

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All sorrows can be borne, if you can tell a story about it.
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If there is a pattern to the search for meaning in life in Gwen Harwood's poetry, it is to be found in the life cycle of birth, growth, marriage, motherhood, aging and death — her response to such events in her own life pervade much of her work. The experiences of her own life have served as the catalyst to express the discoveries she has learnt along the way. It is because she has had to confront and try to come to terms with the experiences life has given her, that her poetry has the power to speak to others who are grappling with their own stories.

As a poet Harwood frequently looks back into her past and links the memories of her childhood or adolescent experiences with the situation she is experiencing in the present. Memory becomes a kind of consolation that in turn gives meaning to the present. *Violets* is one such poem that begins in the present situation but, triggered off by the perfume of violets, reaches back in memory to her childhood experiences. The poem according to Elizabeth Lawson,

> dramatises the way details of the present, fragile, minute and personal, touch off memories of experiences actually quite other and remote which once contained details similar. This in turn produces a meditation and emotional response such that the 'present world' of the return at the end of the poem is changed not only by the ever-continuing lapse of 'external time' but by an internal change in the speaker. [1]

It is out of these experiences, beyond time as we know it, that discovery comes to her as enriched knowledge and understanding of life itself. Such a discovery is not without cost. In the poem

Carapace, Harwood suggests that it is memory that eventually brings wisdom, and with wisdom, healing:

> I hold
> in my unhoused continuing self
> the memory that is wisdom's price
> for what survives and grows beneath
> old skies, old stone.
> Fresh mornings rise
> the carapace of night with gold.
> The sand grains shine, the rock pools brim
> with tides that bring and bear away
> new healing images of day. [2]

Harwood has found in writing poetry an attempt to satisfy her deep inner necessity to realise in words those moments that gave her life its meaning. When being interviewed by Anne Lear, Harwood responds to the question 'what do you think is the influence of the past on the present?' by saying that:

> 'memory really is all we poets have to work with, if you think of it in the absolute sense. Somebody whose memory is destroyed does not have the kind of life in which poetry can be made. Because of the circumstances of my own life, I see an unbroken chain from past to present and then to the future.' [3]

Frequently in her poetry Harwood writes about her key memories as an outsider. She is able to look back at herself from the present perspective and comment on past incidents often humorously, often regretfully, at the selfish, self-absorbed person she was at the time. 'The Class of 1927' series of poems seem to be not only the memory of the room full of school children during Scripture class but also an attempt to make reparation for her childish behaviour, a theme taken up further in *The Spelling Prize* and *The Twins.* The knowledge that such reparation is now impossible is reflected in her shame for her behaviour at the time. *Barn Owl,* too, depicts strongly and honestly the shame felt still over her senseless killing of an owl. *David's Harp,* a nostalgic return to adolescence, is another such poem. While being able to poke fun at herself, turning her 'seventeen-year-old profile a trifle heavenwards', and:

> He's sound of wind. His kiss is long.
> We share at last a common need for air,

the poem ends with a nostalgic sadness and wisdom learnt through pain:

> Where's that bright man who loved me, when
> there was not much to love? He died
> soon after. The undying flow
> of music bears him close again,
> handsome and young, while I am tried
> in time's harsh fires. Dear man, I know
> your worth, being now less ignorant of
> the nature and the names of love.

Experience of life has given Harwood a 'woman's wisdom' which has as its essence the knowledge that life contains both pain and joy and that neither one by itself holds all the answers. Her earliest poetry reflects this belief strongly. Poems such as *The Wine is Drunk* bear evidence that life brings damaging pain, frequently without any sense to it. But it is only through the attempt to find understanding in pain and joy that any semblance of sense of life can be found. In a discussion with her friend, the writer Vincent Buckley, Harwood reports her response to his question about happiness in life:

> if you are to be a poet you must immerse yourself in the shades, accept your own death, before you can praise the world and make some answer to the powers that will grind you small whether you challenge them or not. [4]

While acknowledging the importance of her own life experiences in providing material for her writing, Harwood's great respect for the ideas of the philosopher Wittgenstein has also been a source of inspiration to her. Harwood's realisation of the poetic ideas expressed throughout Wittgenstein's writings have given her a strong sense of the mystical nature of life and death that have led to quotes from his works being included as part of her own poetry. One particular example of this is found in the poem *The Wasps*, dedicated to her friend, the artist Edwin Tanner. In this poem,

recollections about good and evil from both her childhood and that of Tanner become the catalyst for a discussion about Wittgenstein's reflection on the problem of pain and the ways of depicting it:

> 'The image of pain is not a picture,'
> said Wittgenstein, 'is not the same
> as anything we call a picture'.

Wittgenstein's philosophy demonstrates that the most important questions about life are mystical, ethical and aesthetic questions. Such questions about the real world are answered by artists and poets through relationships between 'the real and the imagined world'. Harwood discusses Wittgenstein's ideas in poetry addressed to him, such as *Some Thoughts in the 727* and fantasises about speaking to him *Dream of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein and Engelman* is one poem that reflects Harwood's ever-deepening understanding of his truths:

> formal and courteous they talk
> of the Count's hawthorn flower:
> how nature and or thought conform
> through words' mysterious power;
> how propositions cannot state what they make manifest;
> of the ethical and mystical
> that cannot be expressed;
> how the world is on one side of us
> and on the other hand
> language, the mirror of the world
> and God is, how things stand.

Nowhere in her poetry is the dichotomy between pain and joy better expressed than in Harwood's 'mother poems'. Her recollections of her own mother, her own motherhood, and her awareness of other women's situations have given her experiences that become expressed in poems such as *Mother Who Gave Me Life, To My Children, In the Park, Suburban Sonnet: Boxing Day* and *An Impromptu for Ann Jennings.*

In the Park and *Suburban Sonnet: Boxing Day* are a reflection of Harwood's 'power to imagine the situation of a mother stressed beyond her capacity for sustained wholehearted giving of self',[5] a situation with which many of us who are mothers are able to

empathise and sympathise. Of the woman described in *In the Park,* Harwood jokingly says that while 'her clothes may be out of date, my clothes are never out of date'.6 This poem has been viewed by some critics as a description of Harwood's experience of motherhood, yet Harwood's own memories are far more positive. To Anne Lear she says, 'I had four children and they were a great joy to me. I loved their childhood and gave myself up to it entirely.[7]

The autobiographical poem, *An Impromptu to Ann Jennings,* written while Harwood was travelling in a plane to Sydney to meet her friend, is a wonderful celebration of the completion of mothering and the subsequent freedom this brings for mothers. In this poem, Harwood writes of motherhood as having a spiritual or religious self-giving obligation that, unlike the surrender of a person to God or wisdom, does have an end simply because one's children do grow up and move on to live their own lives. Once parenting is finished, aging becomes for women a resurrection:

> But we have risen.
> Caesar's we were, and wild, though we seemed tame...
> We are our own.

Harwood says of this poem and others addressed to her friends that these are poems of integrity. 'You can read those poems as spoken from my heart, my heart and nobody else's.' [8] Such poems speak about her own life journey, her own joys and pain and the challenge that these have brought to grow as a human being.

The poem *Mother Who Gave Me Life* is a loving acknowledgment of her mother and the chain of women in her family who preceded her. For Harwood, it was in the death of her mother that the realisation of the pattern of women bearing women is fully understood. The grief comes with the wisdom that it is only through the death of the mother that this pattern of completion and continuity becomes a reality. Thus, the line of mother to daughter becomes:

> anguish of seasons burning
> backward in time to those other
> bodies, your mother and hers
> and beyond, ...

It is a poem that speaks of language — women's language — a language that recognises that daughters become inheritors and gift-bearers of the future. It is the woman whose voice brings life, even within the house provided for by the man:

> my supper set out, your voice
> calling me in as darkness
> falls on my father's house.

In her later work, poems such as *Iris* and *Violets* reflect a woman who has comes to terms with life and death — not just her own life and death, but an acceptance of the inevitability of the passing of time, separation from and loss of people who were part of her life and the compromises that demands of the ordinary things of life have forced her to make. *Iris*, addressed to her husband, is a poem that is not simply a description of the building of one of the family boats, it is more than this. It is also a poem of the 'fragile miracle of an enduring marriage'.[9] Marriage has not been a sentimental journey for Harwood. It has taken concentration and care, and has not always been a fulfilling experience for her. The poem concludes that it has been an accomplishment both affirming as well as difficult. The concluding lines, with their reference to Noah's ark, acknowledge the strength and durability of the marriage .

Harwood has been able to express a strong commitment to life and to what it demands as something that is to be valued and affirmed, even in the face of sorrow, pain and death. In an interview with Barbara Williams she states:

> grief [at the death of irreplaceable friends] is unspeakable, but there's still the great dazzle of love; they have been part of the universe, of my life.

Later in the interview she refers to her poems dedicated to Edwin Tanner, the artist:

> Physical pain cannot be shared; emotional pain and grief can be shared if you "tell it from the heart" but, even then, perhaps you make it more painful.[10]

But it is not only of pain that Harwood writes so well. The people who have coloured her life, the situations that make up her life

journey have given her a peace and affirmation for life that is stronger than pain or death and a belief that whatever happens, death is not just an event to be feared. Her speech to Death in *Mid-Channel* assures the reader that she will fight for life to the death:

> I'll tire you with my choking weight
> old monster anchored in the void.
> My God, you'll wonder what you've caught.

Perhaps the memories past have been able to give her the assurance that life, time, and mortality is a fate not to be feared but that is something to be embraced. Certainly, in the *Bone Scan* poems written after Harwood's cancer and the mastectomy that followed its discovery, there is an irony that is reflected in the use of the biblical image of Psalm 139: '*Lord, you examine me and know me* ... ' It is the scan that shows her the image of her own skeleton that becomes more of a comfort than the beliefs of religion. Fear of the future is still a real part of life in *Night Watch*, but in *Carapace* there is recognition of healing and a growth in strength that overcomes the fear.

Harwood in her latest poems has shown a further understanding that life can still, despite the pain of living and dying, provide healing and renewal. This in turn brings about a fuller awareness of life itself as well as the peace and acceptance of the inevitability of death. Harwood's own words from her interview with Barbara Williams during Writers' Week at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, in March 1988 are best:

> My life seems to have given me everything I needed. In a sense, my journeys have all been made in one place, but they have been long journeys, just the same. I hope that I'll go on writing to the end, that the last day — when I'm lying in my Eventide Home — a feeble hand will come out from under the sheet, grope for the pencil and write — possibly on the sheet, to Nurse's displeasure — the last words of the last poem. However, I might have a luckier death. I might be struck by lightning; I'd rather like that.[11]

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