

Gwen Harwood: An Introductory Approach

Mário Vítor Bastos

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

Gwen Harwood: An Introductory Approach

Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) is still relatively unknown outside her country. In Australia, however, since the 21st century her writing has found its place in the curricula of literature in the advanced degrees of secondary courses as well as in the universities. Her case in Australian 20th century poetry is unique as a poet with her own voice, with an array of multiple forms and themes and complex dialogues with the cultural past and present. This makes her writing, with all its heterodoxy, didactic (even when it feigns that is not) and a paradigm for the study of poetry and general poetics in Australia today. As an adult, she lived in the town of Hobart on the southern part of the island of Tasmania, raising a family of four children and working as a secretary. Even so, she succeeded in writing verse, almost ceaselessly, until her death in 1995. Most of what we know about her life, ideas and views on poetry (apart from the poems about the art of poetry) comes from the voluminous correspondence with friends and Australian intellectuals,¹ to whom she dedicates many poems. The grand thematic scope of her poetry ranges from the trivial to the reflexive, from literature, culture and History to family, the cats, dogs and frogs in the neighbourhood. Dreams and nightmares, eroticism, social satires, the Australian natural landscape, art, particularly, music, philosophy and religion also have an outstanding presence in her poetry. She is at ease with the lyric, narrative and dramatic modes, and her poetry includes a few recognizable characters and *personae*.

¹ Gwen Harwood. *A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen Harwood 1943-1995*, edited by Gregory Kratzmann. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001. In fact, as the work of her excellent editors, Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann, show, many of her letters are invaluable to the exegesis of her work.

Gwen Harwood was born in middle-class suburban Brisbane in 1920, within an English-Australian family and raised in that city, where she received formal training in piano and organ. Her father was an English musician, who played the violin and the piano. Her mother was born in Australia and noted to her interest in religious matters (Anglicanism) and social activities. As an adolescent, some of Harwood's performances at the Brisbane's Anglican cathedral were memorable, and her relationship with music, like that with verse, lasted throughout her life. Music (in particular Austrian and German) is a major theme in all her poetry, being at the core, root and "flowering" of each of her poems, as in the one which borrows accidentally its title from Schubert's *Lied* "An die Musik", and which is full of references to composers, musical styles and phenomena. Contrary to what is more usual in Gwen Harwood, the rhythm of this poem is anaphoric (as in the *Psalms* and in Whitman) and unrhymed: "You of the Minute Waltz and the Four Seasons,/ you of the earthen flute and grand piano, you with your immortal number:/ the Nine, the Thirty-Two, the Forty-eight;/ you of the infant trying out the pitch, of its few syllables, you of the birds/of the first cuckoo in spring, the lark ascending/to carve its empire in a thousand notes; [...]"² Music can have, in her world, a social defining function as in "A Gypsy Tune",³ a poem reminding us of Francis Geyer and the Hungarian-Australians. In short, music is in the end a transcendental but always present religion: "If God exists/ then music is his love for me."⁴ for: "Music, my joy, my full-scale God".⁵ This functional presence of music as theme, motif and form was to gain a final expression, from the 60s onwards, when Gwen Harwood worked as a librettist to Australian composers of her generation, such as Larry Sitsky, James Penberthy, Don Kay and Ian Cugley. This set of librettos include,

² Gwen Harwood. *Collected Poems, 1943-1995*, edited by Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001, "To Music", p. 567.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 427.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

for example, an adaptation written in 1965 of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" to the homonymous work of Larry Sitsky, and the text for the opera *The Golden Crane* by Don Kay in 1985.⁶

When she was 25, her marriage to the linguist Bill Harwood took her to Hobart,⁷ to experience a life radically opposed to that she had known in Brisbane until then, as her verse remind us, in its typical autobiographical-confessional mode: "Nineteen forty-five. I have been sick/ all the way from Brisbane; first time in the air./ Another name now. All those burning glances/ cancelled, all those raging letters burned./ And my mocking friends – 'Holy MaTRIMony!'/ 'You've had your wings trimmed. You'll be Mother Goose. [...]."⁸ A familiar character in her verse, the professor of music Kröte, would say "later", presumably about her: "How could this brilliant girl become/ this shabby housewife? [...]."⁹ At first Tasmania, itself an Australian periphery, was for Gwen Harwood a place of "exile and knowledge",¹⁰ a remote part of her country and "civilization", although it was also there that she wrote the bulk of her verse. Brisbane would remain the native land, the place of original memory, of her first joys and sorrows: "In the old bridge in flaring sunlight/a ghost is waiting, with my face/ of twenty years ago, to show me/ the paths I never can retrace// Here as of old upon the river/ float light's beguiling images./ Over a quilt of blue branches/ bend with domestic tenderness.// Here, to my blood's exalted rhythm,/ silly with love I'd pace the hours/sifting the piecemeal revelations/ of life and time through falling flowers. [...]."¹¹ The sometimes over romanticized Brisbane gave place to Hobart in the poet's life, as she was "Changed from sex kitten into wife/ [and] learned the serious facts of life."¹²

⁶ This part of her work is excluded from the present study.

⁷ She was born Gewndoline Foster, but took her husband's surname, Harwood, as pen name.

⁸ Gwen Harwood, p. 407.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 355.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 556.

With time, Tasmania lost its initial hostility, as Gwen Harwood came to understand it better in its natural beauty and Aboriginal heritage. In fact, Tasmania has a complex meaning in her work¹³ which cannot be reduced into a simple love-hate relationship.¹⁴ I will divide it roughly into four phases: initial estrangement; contact; understanding; and fusion. The first one is defined by the tension created between the urban, civilized and “westernized” Brisbane of the past and wild Tasmania of the present. Through nature, Gwen Harwood had her first positive *contact* with Tasmania, a process later evolved into a wider *understanding* of that island, as shown in the recurrent poems written about the place of Oyster Cove,¹⁵ where historically the last Tasmanian Aboriginal tribes died, a fact never mentioned in her writing in a straightforward way (*fusion*). After her *initial estrangement*, she was able to capture the natural beauty of Tasmania and, through it, overcome the isolation she felt. In the following example, a wild autumnal landscape becomes the backdrop for the pains of loss she had when she got married: “Suns through a lofty bleakness fall./ Horizon, earth and sky remain./ Above the aching wilderness/ a warmth is kindled, glows with air./ Birds of prey with fiery quills/ scissor the fabric of the light./ Time drips to stone. A child knocks over/ a dusty god stuck in a case./ Doomed to repeat their honeycomb/ bees in an empty mask./ Unbearable, a voice intones:/ *Suffer and love, burn, shine and sing.*”¹⁶

As an Australian woman and poet, Gwen Harwood, like Australia herself, underwent significant transformations from 1943 to 1995. She envisaged early that Australian verse was, at this stage, to continue, at least

¹³ See as an example the poem starting with “No word can snatch or hold” (*Ibidem*, p. 106).

¹⁴ I do not agree with Peter Porter when he wrote, on his review of Gwen Harwood’s *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, that she had always hated living in Tasmania, longing for native Brisbane the whole time. See Peter Porter, “Satires in C major”. *Times Literary Supplement*, 07/05/2003.

¹⁵ As in “Oyster Cove”, “Evening, Oyster Cove”, “Oyster Cove Pastorals” or, “Springtime, Oyster Cove” (*Ibidem*, pp. 237, 302, 306-307, 360). These poems remind vaguely and offer an analogy to the impressionist technique of catching in canvas the different light and colours of a place during the phases of the day and of the year.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

formally, the “mother” English tradition. While confronting herself with only a few relevant examples in the Australian Anglo-Saxon tradition,¹⁷ from which she could draw continuity and identity, she turned to the English tradition as her main source of tools, and, to a lesser extent, to thematic inspiration. Although the first verse dates back to the early 40s, her first book, *Poems*, was published in 1963. Her affinity with Australian poets of her age, such as the expatriate Peter Porter (b.1929), is more superficial than real, while the main poetic influence on her comes from another significant Australian poet almost unknown in the northern hemisphere, A. D. Hope (1907-2000). Gwen Harwood was even able to easily impersonate Hope’s style, with fondness.¹⁸ Like her, Hope was a cultivator of traditional forms. This may explain, in part, why the radical Australian surrealist group, the influence of the *Angry Penguins*, who shook the Australian literary milieu of the 40s, are not seen in young Gwen. Besides A. D. Hope’s example, Gwen Harwood’s young formal conservatism is akin, *grosso modo*, to that of the English poets of the *Movement* and to that of the American *New Critic* and *Confessionalist* poets of the 50s. Like early Donald Davie, Thom Gunn or Philip Larkin in England, Gwen Harwood was cautious about the “open” modernist modes. However, she often turns what is traditional (an Elizabethan or Romantic formal basis, motto or element) into the unmistakably original contemporary poem. Such poetic hybridisations as “A Valediction”,¹⁹ a modern variation on the famous poem by John Donne, and her Two Meditations on Wyatt²⁰ are exemplary of this type of work. Occasionally, however, as her poetry progressed she allowed a certain formal modernist

¹⁷ The Australian Aboriginal oral tradition, until recently almost neglected, has in fact a much longer tradition, and the identity cohesion – crucial for the emergence of a poetic-literary canon – that the poetic Australian Anglo-Saxon tradition still has not.

¹⁸ “A Divination”. Besides this poem, Gwen Harwood dedicated at least two more poems to Hope in which she recognizes her debt to him, in particular in the first: “To A. D. Hope” and “Shrödinger’s Cat Preaches to the Mice” (*Ibidem*, pp. 192, 195-197, 392-393)

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 335-336.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 270-271.

openness into it. As she wrote: “We poets are as diverse as birds, varied in sound and feather [...]”,²¹ while insisting on the classic-modernist rule, according to which “the physical material of poetry was *sound*.”²² Moments like these form part of the ironic and meta-poetic dimensions in her verse. The poetic colloquial style of Gwen Harwood, however, makes many references to the modernist culture – and here starts the hybridisation –, towards various expressive purposes, as in this reminiscence of former old times in Brisbane: “[...] O the heady taste! –/ Joyce, Eliot, Proust, the mighty Russians,/ Berg, Bartok, Schoenberg, Beckmann, Klee/ the wind has blown so much away,/ but never those late-night discussions/ on literature and life and art/ with lively friends close to my heart.”²³ This hybridism extends to the expressionist voice and satiric barbs heard in many of her lines,²⁴ as in those where the Brisbane of past childhood is remembered with all its cruelty. The childhood memories form a set of texts which are the central part of her 1989s book *Bone Scan* where poems with titles like “Class of 1927”²⁵ redirect us to the personal past of

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 563.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, 454. Joan Miró, Jean Cocteau, Wallace Stevens, Stravinsky are among the many other modernists mentioned in her verse.

²⁴ A good example of this expressionist trend is “Out of Hell”. Written in 1991, is one of her most painful and nightmarish poems, that seems to explore the ambiguous impact made on her by the paintings of the American abstract painter Jackson Pollock, when she saw them for the first time at an exhibition in Brisbane in 1974 (“Notes”, *Ibidem*, p. 602). Pollock’s painting “Lucifer” (1947) plays an important role in that poem, which is in fact a lobotomy nightmare written in “free verse”, which brings to mind Wittgenstein (“Mental events are physical events”) in his guise of Lucifer after the fall: “One morning when my brain was open/ I heard the neurosurgeon say/ “Mental events are physical events.”/ They showed me Pollock’s *Lucifer*./ I felt it as a linear headache./ Skeins of enamel clogged my frontal sinus./ the aluminium paint thrilled my back fillings./ “Nothing”, the surgeon said. The students/ dutifully echoed, “Nothing.”/ The pretty nurse said, “Not a trace.”// They closed my head up. Now I don’t/ speak, but fly at dawn and dusk/with webbing in my arms and high-/frequency shrieks. The surgeon says/ “Cognitive dissonance”, and asks me: “What is it like to be a bat?” (*Ibidem*, 478).

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 365-367.

the poet, to present us with the little cruel bullies she knew as a child, as well as other peculiar children.

This modernist presence is crystallised in a poetic-philosophic dialogue with the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a true obsessive lifelong intellectual companion of Gwen Harwood. Only the name of the Viennese (and somewhat Anglicised) Wittgenstein is more frequent than the names of musicians, in her work. In fact, Wittgenstein embodies for her everything that is universal and true, beautiful, uncanny and contradictory, metaphysical and physical: “Wittgenstein was handsome/ as Lucifer before the fall.²⁶ Born in Vienna (a much beloved city to her), and having a concert-pianist as brother, Wittgenstein’s symbolic presence is also strongly musical, as when she remarks that: “(Wittgenstein had learned/ to play the clarinet;/ could whistle, too, in perfect pitch, / one part from a quartet)”²⁷ In fact, Gwen Harwood engaged almost all her poetic career in a sort of “game-dialogue” with Wittgenstein. She incorporated in one of her last poems on the Austrian philosopher what, perhaps, she wanted to “hear” from him as a reader of poetry: “[...] “a poem can pierce us”/ he wrote. Also, “A poem is not/ used in the language game of giving information””²⁸ Logically, she was able to make a poetic synthesis, an encapsulated reading, of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thoughts and their evolution, spoken by an impersonation:

Show me the order of the world,
the hard-edge of this-is-so
prior to all experience
and common to both world and thought,
no model, but the truth itself.

Language is not a perfect game,
and if it were, how could we play?
the world’s more than the sum of things
like moon, sky, centre, body, bed
as all the singing masters know.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 483.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 313.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 483.

Picture two lovers side by side/
 who sleep and dream and wake and hold/
 the real and the imagined world/
 body by body, word by word/
 in the wild halo of their thought.²⁹

Unexpectedly, the poem ends with a quasi-reminiscence of a surreal love scene, as depicted in Magritte's small series of paintings, of 1927-28, in which the identities of the lovers (of a man and of a woman) are mysteriously shrouded, in white cloth.³⁰ She was acquainted with the *Tractatus Philosophicus*, from which she often quoted, and was familiar with the "game theory", as developed later in *Philosophical Investigations*, as with the rest of Wittgenstein's thought and life. Sometimes this fundamental influence is turned into a personal (love/hate) dialogue with Ludwig "Wittgenstein, austere and lonely",³¹ interweaved with the English poetic tradition, as at the beginning of the poem starting with a line from the famous sonnet of Auden on old Yeats: "We all know that Yeats was silly/ like us, but Wittgenstein was sillier/ and really like not us at all. He said himself he wrote for men/ who'd breathe, one day, a different air./ In the case, they'd need different lungs./ Never rely on metaphor."³² One is tempted to ask, how could she admire this clever man (that she never met personally), who, sometimes, is depicted cold in his feelings to the point of hating mankind. In short, not only does Gwen Harwood make of Wittgenstein a poet, he is also a major factor in making her a poet-philosopher.

As a woman and a creator of her own era, in her relative Tasmanian isolation, she was attentive both to the "little" life surrounding her and to

²⁹ *Ibidem*, "Thought Is Surrounded by a Halo – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 97", *Ibidem*, p. 274.

³⁰ Incidentally, one of these paintings (oil on canvas), *Les Amants* (1928) was bought by the National Gallery of Australia in 1990, but it is improbable that Gwen Harwood had seen it by the time she wrote this poem on Wittgenstein. See also Miriam Stone's poem "The Blind Lovers" (*Ibidem*, p. 163).

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 474.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 483.

the changes in the world during her lifetime, which roughly overlapped with the Cold War era. For this reason, she was occasionally a poetic chronicler of her times, as in the sonnet on Yuri Gagarin's first trip ever into outer space, made in 1961. Gagarin is here a god-like entity who acknowledges himself in his first orbit of the earth "reduced" to the condition of the first poet: "Yuri Gagarin, first of men since time/ began, hurled into empty space, flies spaceward, and lives.[...]" He has "[...] a god's eye view/ of mankind [...]/ but knows no more than any poet knew// since time began; since the first poet dreamed/ that calm in dizzying solitude above [...]" Gagarin's huge accomplishment ends being of a lesser personal degree of importance than his first discovery of love for – as stated in the Eliotesque/ Augustinian end of the poem – "it seemed/ less than the vision when he kissed his love/ and lay with the world's fever, burning, burning."³³

Until the 70's, she was sometimes "heteronymic", an episodic tendency in contemporary English poetry and, even more, in Australian poetry.³⁴ Yet, the modern origin of the use of masks in English goes back to the former traditions of Shakespeare and, in particular, of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues which had continuity with the poetic masks made by the early Anglo-American modernists,³⁵ and by Fernando Pessoa in Portugal. Yet, she never lost her typical colloquial bend in those specific poems. This universe peopled with characters, masks and pseudonyms denotes in Gwen Harwood the still modest place of women in

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

³⁴ It is not clear when and how Gwen Harwood discovered the technique of "heteronymy". I am not sure she ever came to know the heteronyms that the modernist Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa invented. Certainly not when she began experimenting with this technique. A poet associated with the *Movement*, John Wain, only discovered Pessoa in the late 70s, as his 1980 poem "Thinking about Mr. Person" seems to suggest. Wittgenstein's game theory may offer, as well, a conceptual framework for this phenomenon. The same is applied to Michael Hamburger's book, *The Truth of Poetry*, which presented Pessoa's heteronomic theory and practice to a wider Anglophone academic public, which knew the first edition in 1968.

³⁵ Her knowledge of Wittgenstein's game theory may offer, as well, a conceptual framework for this particular poetic technique made by Gwen Harwood.

the Australian poetic-literary *milieu* in mid 20th century, although it goes beyond, by amplifying the illusion of greater poetic activity in Australia. These “heteronyms” occupy a significant part of Gwen Harwood’s work of the early 60s. Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, Miriam Stone and Timothy Kline are among those lyrical masks. Sketchy as some are, each one has a precise social ideological and cultural function. Francis Geyer, for example, is the young Hungarian refugee, representative of the former Hungarian immigrants in Australia of the 50s. In 1961, “he describes himself” in the following way: “I am a musician, particularly interested in Bartok and who have spoken English fluently from about the age of seven.”³⁶ A musician, Geyer is also the creator of the character Professor Kröte – another fictional musician with a wider role in Harwood’s universe than Geyer.³⁷ We may even notice that among these *personae*, the Tasmanian farmer Walter Lehmann is a virtuoso sonneteer. By the end of the 60s the “heteronym” Timothy Kline was created, a young Vietnam protester, wild and provocative, who was born in Hobart, in 1946,³⁸ and who wrote poetry between 1968 and 1975 (in fact, Kline seems almost like a son of Gwen Harwood). By the end of the 70s this technique, however, disappeared from Gwen Harwood’s writing, as if dissolved in the texture of the remaining 20 years of her poetic work.

Created in 1961, Miriam Stone was her only feminine mask. She stood for the frustrated woman with a housewife’s routine, who started writing “confessional” poetry, with her hints (Miriam’s) on the sacrifices of relocation and acceptance of the traditional family duties. Miriam Stone’s style was in fact very close to Gwen Harwood’s and her themes, which match those of the isolated woman. Gwen Harwood wrote moving lines about her mother – as in the poem starting with “Mother who gave me life/ I think of women bearing/ women. Forgive me the wisdom/

³⁶ “Notes”, *Ibidem*, p. 583.

³⁷ Kröte (“the ugly musician”, *Ibidem*, p. 583), means *toad* in German, and young Gwen Harwood looked at him as if he, one day, could turn, perhaps, himself into “Prince Charming”. See also about this subject the poem of Timothy Kline, “Prince Frog” (*Ibidem*, p. 218).

³⁸ “Notes”, *Ibidem*, p. 588.

I would not learn from you. [...]”.³⁹ This is a touching confession of the divergent ways two women, mother and daughter, took in their lives and the self-sacrifices involved in them. She also wrote several poems about the Biblical Eve,⁴⁰ an archetypal persona adapted to the contemporary world, and one of her more powerful masks. This “modern Eve” is particularly evident in Gwen Harwood’s last phase, where the struggles between man and woman are counter-balanced with intelligence, humour and irony, as in this rap-like song of 1992: “Look how I tamed/ the unicorn/ who laid in my lap/ his fearful horn/ and now adores me/ says he’s my slave/ and buys me a Porsche/ and a microwave/ and a washing machine/ and a fan-forced oven/and all the symphonies/ of Beethoven/ on compact disc/ and a great TV/ and queensized waterbed/ just for me.”⁴¹

The “heteronimic” phenomenon in Gwen Harwood seems strictly associated with her confrontation with the cultural reality of Europe. Sometimes she is concerned with exploring the limits of national identity, when she imagines a cosmopolitan alternative country with its centre in Europe, more precisely, and in the Austrian capital, Vienna, the ideal and idealized place, enhanced by Harwood’s knowledge of German poetry and music, of Wittgenstein’s philosophy and life, and characters such as the professors of music Eisenbart and Kröte. This invented alternative geographical world, the “perfect” Austria, cannot, therefore, be estranged from the Australian/Tasmanian reality she lived in. It is as if the cultural sophistication of little Austria knocked down the meagre cultural landscape of big Austr(al)ia. “Austria” becomes, in this context, an ideal of what Australia should be. In her work, 19th century and early 20th century Austria (and to a lesser extent Germany) – with their intellectuals (Wittgenstein hovering above them all) and musicians at the centre of civilization in the northern Old World (Europe) – is contrasted with the white barbarism she still felt and saw in Australia. For this reason, the

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 361.

⁴⁰ See “The Farewell”, “Songs of Eve I” and “Songs of Eve II”, among others (*Ibidem*, pp. 143, 428, 489).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 490.

poetic self of Gwen Harwood is often located within this “Austro” dialectics between the old, now smaller civilized and central-eastern European country (*Austria/ Österreich*) and the new southern and far-eastern continental country where she lived most of her life. In these ideal moments, western civilization comes to full size in a sort of imaginary “eastern empire” (literally *Österreich*), embracing western civilization in a far-eastern land, Australia, where South is at the heart of its name with Far-East, as well as South, as its main cardinal points. The East is then the West in Austria, while the West becomes the East in Australia. This compass rose cultural paradox, however, is not without flaws, although the powerful fixation in Viennese Austria and the German-speaking world was to last in her work. Symptomatically, Britain, as mother-country, has a discrete presence in her recreation of European civilization and geography. With this “alternative world”, she is perhaps again betraying the limits of her unconscious wish for an Australian cultural coming of age.⁴²

Eroticism has significant part in her writing as well. “David’s Harp”⁴³ has organ playing as a setting. Here, a seventeen-year-old organ player (in Brisbane) falls in love with a stranger, more imaginary than real, thirteen years older than her, in a situation that seems more like a *reverie* than a distant memory. The past excitement and ignorance are gradually substituted by knowledge and coolness: “Saturday morning. I rehearse/ the Sunday hymns, fortissimo,/ in the cool twilight of the church,/ adding new stops at every verse. [...] The undying flow/ of music bears him close again,/ handsome and young, while I am tired/ in time’s harsh fires. Dear Man, I know/ your worth, being now less ignorant of / the Nature and

⁴² A rare (although also seeming) exception to this imaginary Germanic landscape where part of Gwen Harwood’s poetry evolves is the poem “In Highgate Cemetery” (*Ibidem*, 346). This well-known cemetery is located in London and is famous for being the burial place of the social philosopher Karl Marx, which incidentally has a big headstone with the shape of a grand piano. So even in this ironic London poem, German culture, society and music insist on making themselves prevail, even at the traditional centre of the Anglophone culture. Wittgenstein offers as well an important exception for he not only studied in Cambridge under Bertrand Russell and was his associate, but because he ended his days there in 1951.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 261-262.

the names of love".⁴⁴ In the sonnet "The Lion's Bride" (which gives the title to her 1981's book) the visionary eroticism is harsher, nightmarish and perverse, gothic and expressionist, with the convergence of several of Gwen Harwood's motives. Based on a legend of a lion in the zoo of Vienna who became infatuated with the keeper's daughter and killed her when the beast found out she already had a love of her own. This disturbing story of jealousy was first put into verse by the German romantic poet Adalbert von Chamisso, in 1826 which, in turn, provided the lyrics to Schumann's weird homonymous *lieder*. In the second stanza of Gwen Harwood's version of this odd romantic tale, the impersonated lion confesses his disturbance, after the slaughter of his beloved, by deliriously inviting her ghost to join him in the bloody feast, without realizing that she was dead by then: "[...] an icy spectre sheathed/ in silk minced to my side on pointed feet./ I ripped the scented veil from its unreal/ head⁴⁵ and engorged the painted lips that/ breathed our secret names. A ghost has bones, and meat!/ Come soon my love, my bride, and share/ this meal."⁴⁶ An allegory for the tensions and difficulties underlying "marriage" as an institution in Australian and European culture, the poem tragically stresses (even if with some regret) the ultimate victory of brutal nature over culture.⁴⁷

In the last years of her life, in the 90s, when her themes became more philosophical, the value of Gwen Harwood's writing was, finally, acknowledged, as her verse had been since then studied in academic and

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ The image of the lover with his head covered reappears, as in "Thought Is Surrounded by a Halo" (*Ibidem*, p. 274) discussed above.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

⁴⁷ Yet, Gwen Harwood made also a lighter and comic reference to this tale, full of dark humour. In fact, Schumann's "The Lion's Bride" is mentioned in another poem of the volume in friendly familiar context: "Jim's wineglass set on my piano, as he sight reads through a book of lieder./ He tries "The Lion's Bride", by Schumann./ At the moment when the love crazed lion/ begins to crunch the keeper's daughter, the translator/ makes the youth calling for a weapon,/ ineptly cry, "Give me an arm"/Jim roars and chokes and waves his wine glass,/leonine, overwhelmed by laughter (*Ibidem*, p. 318).

educational circles, for her thematic density and prosodic virtuosity, and the ease she explored the Horatian balance between pleasure and knowledge. Gwen Harwood's realism, naturalism, knowledge and formal virtuosity remain her hallmarks, while the seeming popularity she enjoys in Australia remains somewhat of a mystery and debatable from the outside. Her cultivation of traditional English forms, which makes her oeuvre didactic, but the achievement of Gwen Harwood goes beyond that, for she is now a clear reference in the emerging canon of Australian poetry. At the beginning of the 21st century, her verse is at the centre of what has been Australian culture and poetry in English over the past 50 years. More than that, Gwen Harwood remains an intellectual challenge, and an invitation to those who wish to understand a poetic hermeneutic system where music, aural and *ekphrastic* aesthetic effects, the incursions into philosophical enquiries and ironic hedonism make the central themes and techniques.

Works Cited and Selected Bibliography

- Dobrez, Livio. "Australian Poetry". Ed. Neil Roberts. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, pp. 281-292.
- Harwood, Gwen. *Collected Poems, 1943-1995*. Eds. Alison Hoddinott and Gregory. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001.
- . *A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen Harwood 1943-1995*. Eds. Gregory Kratzmann. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001.
- Hoddinott, Alison. *Gwen Harwood: The Real and the Imagined World*. Australia: Angus & R., 1991.
- Porter, Peter, "Satires in C major", *Times Literary Supplement*, 07/05/2003.
- Russell-Matthews, Frances, *Gwen Harwood: 1920-1995*, Albert Park: Phoenix Education, 2000.
- Strauss, Jennifer, *Boundary Conditions: The Poetry of Gwen Harwood*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992.