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Reviews

Mappings of the Plane: New Selected Poems by Gwen Harwood edited by Greg Kratzmann & Chris Wallace-Crabbe
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REVIEWED BY CASSANDRA ATHERTON

Gwen Harwood has been dubbed 'undoubtedly Australia's most loved poet' by Peter Porter and, as Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe note in the introduction of their selection of Harwood's poetry, Porter was also quick to proclaim that Harwood was 'the outstanding Australian poet of the twentieth century'. There is no doubt that she is an extraordinary poet, perhaps Australia's finest, and certainly one of the most sensual, exciting and multi-faceted. A plurality of voices marks Harwood's oeuvre as she published under a series of pseudonyms throughout her lifetime. A self-confessed 'notorious trickster-prankster writing under comic disguises', this new selection of her poems, Mappings of the Plane: New Selected Poems, pays homage to Gwen Harwood in all her guises.

Greg Kratzmann and Chris Wallace-Crabbe were both friends and confidantes of Harwood, and so it is fitting that they have edited this new selection of Harwood's poems, given their personal contact and relationships with Harwood throughout her lifetime. It seems very gracious of Wallace-Crabbe, in the introduction, to support Porter's title of Harwood as 'the outstanding poet of the twentieth century', but this is just a testament to Wallace-Crabbe's knowledge of, and affection for, her and her poetry. This is evident from the selection of technically masterful poems, alongside some heart-warmingly comic poems in Mappings of the Plane. In this way, Harwood's diversity is celebrated. Kratzmann, in combination with Alison Hoddinott, another personal friend of Harwood's, edited the definitive collection of Harwood's poems in 2003. This intimate knowledge of the poet, coupled with Kratzmann's brave decision to reinstate the pseudonyms under which she first published her poetry, demonstrated an integrity and understanding of Harwood in the Collected Poems 1943–1995. Kratzmann has carried over this integrity to the selection of poems in Mappings of the Plane, choosing poems from each of Harwood's books and an important selection from the Collected Poems, which were previously uncollected.

Together, Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe have captured Harwood's essence in this book and chosen an eclectic mix of her poetry ranging from her first book, titled simply, Poems (1963) to her final, The Present Tense (1995). Perhaps what is most exciting about this selection is the inclusion of two poems, previously unpublished, by Alan Carvosso, 'On Sleep Why Doest Thou Leave Me?' and 'On Wings of Song'. These poems are an interesting inclusion, with an even more interesting backstory. Some months after the publication of Collected Poems, Kratzmann unearthed what he believed to be references to another of Harwood's pseudonyms in a document, possibly performance that's death. Although, with Carvosso, the two poems is not Harwood's. In 'O Leave Me?', the narrator yearning to be a portrait in his like an image in the sparrows pro beaks. He sees on lover's 'smile'. The introduced as his image of an ideal parts of the whole.

Similarly, the love Song are abstract that pulls it down a flawless other way of. Perhaps friends with the dead evening closer to becomes a prison fire and a vessel by immortalised.

These poems sit debated and studied 'In the Park' was first in 1961 under Hart Walter Lehmann, sits in the park with encounters a man and a surreal moment, critics for its mode and discussion of a character's internal narrator describes from his head, each grace of God. It is
document, possibly a program for a radio performance that she had sent him before her death. Although written under the pseudonym Alan Carvossa, the set of preoccupations in the two poems is still identifiable as Gwen Harwood's. In 'O Sleep, Why Dost Thou Leave Me?', the narrator dreams of a sharp love, yearning to be with his lover. Her image, a portrait in his mind, becomes 'distorted', like an image in a 'fun-house mirror' as the 'sparrows propheticly sharpen their beaks. He sees 'one sharp tooth' but not his lover's 'smile'. The savage and grotesque are introduced as his memory fails to hold an image of an idealised lover; just fragmented parts of the whole.

Similarly, the lovers' faces in 'On Wings of Song' are 'abstract flesh' that pulls it down'. Nevertheless, 'each sees a flawless other' which makes the narrator envious. Perhaps for this reason the poem ends with the death knell that we are all one evening closer to the end. Here, memory becomes a 'prison...drinking the sublime love-fire' and a vessel by which the 'dead lovers' are immortalised.

These poems sit alongside more famously debated and studied poems like, 'In the Park'. 'In the Park' was first published in The Bulletin in 1961 under Harwood's first pseudonym, Walter Lehmann. In the poem, a woman sits in the park with her three children and encounters a man whom she once loved. In a surreal moment, reviewed favourably by critics for its modernism due to the inclusion and discussion of a thought balloon expressing a character's internal horror, an omniscient narrator describes a small balloon rising from his head, excising the words, 'but for the grace of God'. It is the ambiguous and highly contested final line that has challenged critics.

'To the wind she says, "They have eaten me alive!"'

Harwood herself was the first to use 'dreaded' in relation to her poem, calling it, 'In the Dreaded Park', to provocatively suggest that the poem should be 'extirpated'. Her strong reaction to this poem may have been a reaction to one or all of the following issues surrounding the publication of 'In the Park'.

First, 'In the Park' was written very early in her career but was constantly requested at poetry readings. It is published in some nine different selections of poetry and studied by many students in their final two years in Australian schools. Harwood's 'dreaded' poem produced an overwhelming response. Second, many aspects of the poem, from the man who appears, to the enigmatic last line have been continually deconstructed in expositions of her poetry. 'In the Park' tends to override all else. However, it is a very clever and stunningly crafted sonnet and it is fitting that it appears in this new selection, despite Harwood's eternal concern that:

People read [In the Park] directly as Gwen Harwood of 8 Pine Street, saying that my children have eaten me alive. 'What rubbish,' I tell them. 'It says, She's sits in the park, her clothes are out of date. Mine are not. So why should you take this to be me?'

Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe have also included the brutal poem, 'Burning Sappho', originally published under the pseudonym of Miriam Stone, a disillusioned housewife. 'Burning Sappho' clearly documents the difficulties of combining writing with housewifery. In the course of a day, the narrator tries to find time to write. She continually picks up her pen only to be confronted with
one of many chores. The space is never her own; it is owned by her children, her husband and even the rector who comes to visit. This poem is the centerpiece of the Miriam Stone oeuvre, not only because of its contentious subject matter, but also because it is the one poem Harwood substantially redrafted before allowing it to be published in her second book of poems.

The poem is significant because it is the most openly critical poem of a woman's plight. It closely reflects the poem 'In the Park' and offers a retrospective explanation for her cry, 'they have eaten me alive'. The character Sappho became a personal myth for Harwood as evidenced by her 'Sappho cards'. Sappho cards are black and white pictures pasted onto stiff cardboard. The cards were sent as postcards with the words 'A Sappho Card' capitalised vertically down the middle back of the card. Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe were both recipients of a series of these Sappho cards. Harwood edited the black and white pictures with speaking balloons, thought balloons or a quotation, similar to the way the man in park is described as having a balloon rising from his head as he encounters his past lover. Sappho cards are laden with humour, often a black humour; a subversive kind of découpage, where instead of searching for pictures of flowers or teddy bears, Harwood was searching for a barbed comment to decorate her card.

In 1968, Harwood modified 'Burning Sappho', rewriting the rhyming couplet of the third stanza to create a more sanitized version of the poem before including it in her Poems II. In 1973, she chose to exclude 'Burning Sappho' from her Selected Poems, effectively censoring the poem by preventing its circulation. However, it is an important inclusion in this selection. Especially including, as Kratzmann did in his Collected, the final stanza in its original form:

My husband calls me, rich in peace,
To bed. Now deathless verse, goodnight
In my warm thighs a fleshless devil
Chops him to bits with hell-cold evil.

Harwood devotees will see that Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe have included her two 'hoax' sonnets. In 1961, Harwood achieved notoriety when she made headlines in Hobart, 'Tas. Housewife in Hoax of the Year'. This was precipitated by two sonnets that Harwood had sent into The Bulletin entitled 'Eloisa to Abelard' and 'Abelard to Eloisa.' Read acrostically, the sonnets read 'So Long Bulletin' and 'Fuck All Editors'. Harwood believed that the sonnets were 'poetical rubbish and will show up the incompetence of anyone who publishes them'. The poems were therefore written as a literary test for the editor of The Bulletin, Donald Horne—a test he failed when he published both these sonnets. The sonnets were published under the pseudonym Walter Lehmann and they are now considered to have some artistic merit, rather than just being viewed as a vehicle for her hoax.

In the first sonnet, 'Eloisa to Abelard' explores the themes of exile and of spiritual struggle, especially when tempted by desire. In a dramatic monologue, Eloisa expresses her torturous feelings of loss to Abelard. Although some of the lines are a little stilted, such as 'God's finger trace on fields of frozen darkness: Youshallfindloss,absence,nothing', the imagery is powerful. The line 'You shall find loss, absence, nothing' clearly captures the void Eloisa feels at being separated from her beloved, twinn

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clearly captures being separated from her beloved, twinned with her remorse at the betrayal of her religion. Similarly, the richness of images in the second stanza conveys the sharpness of loss,

no face that is not mine, while filtering through
gaps, honey combs of memory you seem
but the faint ghost of a remembered dream.
Unveiled by pain, I bleed. My wound is you.

Abelard replies in sonnet form to Eloisa in a second sonnet that acrostically spells 'Fuck All editors' and follows the same meter as the first. His dramatic monologue centralizes his demand that she should revoke him, 'Deny me now. Be doubting Thomas! Thrust into my side the finger of your grief.' The commands to 'Stare the sun up...think yourself blind' and 'stop your ears' are devastating in their harshness and for the suffering and pained tone Harwood is able to instil in Abelard's words.

Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe have also chosen lighter poems such as 'Frog Prince', which explores the role of women in marriage. This was originally published under another male pseudonym, Timothy Kline. This poem inverts the original fairytale so that the prince slowly turns into a frog after the kisses and, in a coy twist, after the honeymoon. It is a comment on how men change after marriage and perhaps show their 'true colours' to wives already trapped by marriage. In a violent act that clearly reminds her of her role, the princess is finally silenced, 'her mouth stuffed with a golden ball.' She must endure the marriage in silence.

And finally, another important inclusion, from Collected Poems, is 'Emporium'. The young lady in 'Emporium' strives to fill her 'gaping heart' with 'a beautiful model with floating hair'. The floating hair is a recurring motif in Harwood's life and poetry. Harwood clearly saw herself as having 'flashing eyes and floating hair', both physically and metaphorically. In her 20s she had flowing titian hair and was renowned for her quick wit. She believed that she was 'one of [a] kind', like the model in 'Emporium', and divinely inspired like Kubla Khan himself. In this way she alludes herself with other famous poets such as Coleridge, and musicians such as Beethoven, who is also described as having wild hair. Her poetry is thus enchanted, a slice of paradise.

'Emporium' is about the choice between safety and passion. The salesman begins by mocking the young lady's needs, suggesting that she is like every other woman, 'Yes of course you want a lover.' He offers her first 'the beautiful model with the floating hair', flattering her ego and highlighting her superficiality by suggesting that she will be the 'envy of all her friends. It is an unrepeatable offer', which is in fact repeated in the last stanza when the young lady chooses sex and the dark side of love over respectability. This is the dangerous sexuality promoted in 'Emporium'. Although the first model 'got out of control in the dark' and refused to be 'handled', he is the only thing that years later can 'fill that gaping hole in Madam's heart'. As the young woman matures into the Madam of the fourth stanza, she regrets her decision to listen to her parents, trading in the beautiful, overtly sexual dirty talker. The salesman intimates that the new model will leave her wanting. Even though she returns for the perfect children, 'good on their potties pretty and clean, obedient, socially well-adjusted', they are like the Stepford children and her 'Alpine' husband an inversion of The Stepford
Wives. The new, safe husband is so sterile, so impotent that it is no wonder she must return and purchase the children rather than conceive them. Whereas the first lover was an individual, one of its kind; this model is the ‘regular number’. His ‘sag-proof’ ‘Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair’ smile is indeed a ‘drag’ and further hints at the androgyne of this model and self-referentially points to Harwood herself in the guise of a dangerous demon lover with ‘floating hair’. Being in ‘drag’, dressing up in the clothes of the opposite gender, is a self-conscious statement inserted to maintain the theme of masks and disguises.

Kratzmann and Wallace-Crabbe have carefully pieced together a new selection of Harwood’s poetry, which pays homage to her diversity and series of masquerades, beginning with Walter Lehmann and ending with the recently discovered Alan Carvoso. Published by Carcanet, it is the first time that Harwood’s poetry reaches readers in the Northern Hemisphere, and this selection introduces them to a diverse array of her most famous, but also, many of her more obscure poems.

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