

# IN HER FATHER'S HOUSE: GWEN HARWOOD AS A SACRAMENTAL POET

**SARAH GOLSBY-SMITH**

University of Sydney and  
SCEGGS Darlinghurst, Sydney

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the first Eucharist—the Lord's supper—in a way like no other gospel. Framed by stories of lowly women who understand Christ's mission as his male disciples do not, the story of Christ's last Passover meal with his friends is punctuated by a tussle between these male disciples, arguing over who will be the greatest of them all. Christ chastises them: 'For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.' Luke's account of the first Eucharist uniquely suggests that Christ's divinity is characterised not by received notions of male power and might, but by a downward mobility, even to the point of becoming domestic: 'I am among you as one who serves.' The centrality of Luke's women throughout his gospel—Mary the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, Anna the Prophetess, the bleeding woman, the faithful widow, and Mary Magdalene—testifies to a pattern in Luke's gospel that reframes the Last Supper as a meal made great by its smallness, a meal made permanent by its evanescence, made transcendent by its materiality. For Luke, the power of that meal to signify something other than that meal—indeed, to surpass the Jewish Passover—is its refusal to yearn toward something other than it is.

Luke's emphasis asks the reader to acknowledge that Christ achieves the sacred work of atonement—to which the Last Supper testifies and signifies—not cosmically or ethereally, but locally and bodily. That Luke's women are locked out of stations of power means that they are better placed to understand Christ's commitment to smallness, to the expression of the cosmic through the body. In the same way as Christ himself brings the cosmic expression of his power through the bodily experience of death, so the Last Supper and the Eucharist bring representation of divine redemption through the material world of wine and bread. For the Christian poet, the analogy between the Eucharist and the work of the poet become compelling; just as the Eucharist brings like and unlike together in earthly bread and wine and the cosmic salvation that those sacraments represent and embody, so the poet brings metaphysical thought together with sensory and musical experience through the poem itself. Poetry's special offering is that its treatment of words is not only semantic but aesthetic, drawing upon the musical and visual qualities of language as much as its power to mean beyond that local moment of sensory experience. Readers of poetry must use ears and eyes before they employ the mind. The Catholic poet David Jones tells us that this is principally why the Christian poet might make an analogy between poetry and the Eucharist:

Whereas the body is not an infirmity but a unique benefit and splendour, a thing denied to angels and unconscious in animals... No wonder then that Theology regards the body as a unique good. Without body: without sacrament... Thus, with relative suddenness, the analogy between what we called 'the Arts' and the things that Christians called the Eucharistic signs became (if still but vaguely) apparent. It became increasingly evident that this analogy applied to the whole

gamut of 'making'. (166-67)

Jones suggests here that because poetry brings together the cosmic and the bodily, that it operates sacramentally. Far from the idea that our bodies are something for which we must atone, Jones's argument suggests that the body is necessary in order to experience not only art, but the redemption Christ offers.

This argument allows and presupposes two things: firstly, that the quotidian activities of human beings are not just profane, but also sacred; and, secondly, that because art, as corporeal and sensory, is at the centre of Christian religious activity. This view of art and sacrament—revising and reversing the view of the body as the source of sin and evil—is not exclusive to Jones. From John Donne through to the American novelist Flannery O'Connor, the view informs their understanding of themselves as bodies and as artists. In Judeo-Christian theology, there is a tradition that takes the body for its epistemological starting point (Heschel) (Polanyi) (Barth)—Christ's body and so all human beings—making *poiesis* a coextension of the Incarnation, where divine and earthly meet (Begbie) (Bentley Hart).

For poets and novelists, faith and artistic activity become one and the same activity. In a letter, Flannery O'Connor makes this case perhaps more plainly than David Jones:

If you shy away from sense experience, you will not be able to read fiction; but you will not be able to apprehend anything else in this world either, because every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses. Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form ... all this may seem a long way from the subject of fiction, but it is not, for the main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life. (176)

The critical contribution that O'Connor makes here is interpreting the 'human form' as not only the bodily form of the artist but the artistic expression to which those bodies give rise, rightly suggesting that art form—even art form that arrives in the form of words—is given and received as a sensory experience. As Malcolm Guite explains the problem for the written arts, 'because a certain kind of 'bloodless' and abstract theology used words in such a way to alienate people from the incarnate Word, so now it falls to the artist to redeem language, to use imaginative language to restore what a language devoid of imagination has destroyed' (28).

In thinking that moves beyond specifically Christian terms, recent Australian thinking has drawn attention to the particular way that Australian writers have re-oriented their attention to insist upon the materiality of their work and, indeed, of knowledge itself. In their work on post-colonialism and 'the sacred', Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden explain that recent Australian writing reimagines the numinous as originating in the material: 'sacredness imagined in intimate relationship to place, not pre-eminently a universal or transcendent discourse ... this is the sacred imagined as earthed, embodied, humbled, local, demotic, ordinary and proximate' (2). The broad and ecumenical boundaries thrown by research into 'the sacred' emphasises not the transcendental possibilities of disembodied

truth—which according to this paradigm offers only empty abstractions from which we cannot, as human bodies, make sense—but on the possibility of sense experience to offer, paradoxically, ‘without-endedness.’ In a more specifically Christian conception of ‘earthed, embodied, humbled’ experience of the sacred, an interest in bodied truth necessitates an exploration of the Eucharist and the ways in which sacramental thinking and making operate in poetry. While Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden’s notion of the sacred shares some ground with this sacramental way of knowing, a more pointed investigation of the Eucharist as a binding and salvific agent yields a powerful reading of Harwood’s poetry.

***The Weatherboard Cottage on Stumps: Gwen Harwood in her father’s house***

Reading Gwen Harwood as a sacramental poet provides insights not gained through readings that emphasise the feminist possibilities of her poetry, or indeed her celebration of the quotidian without the particular focus that the Eucharist provides. Harwood’s Christian background and its influence on her work has been noted and yet not deeply investigated, most particularly by her friend Alison Hoddinott, who explains that ‘one of the strongest influences on the language and imagery of her poetry is the language and imagery of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer’ (26). Indeed, Harwood’s many allusions to biblical stories, Judeo-Christian use of images of water, light and darkness, and the musical cadence of her writing that is reminiscent of hymnals and liturgy all suggest some kind of debt to her Christian childhood and early adulthood. Yet commentators on Harwood’s poetry and its relation to her religious experience detect what they identify as a kind of ambivalence. Jennifer Strauss tells us that, while Harwood’s poetry is immured in religious language, she ‘offers little of doctrinal certainty’ (45). It is not my intention to speculate on Harwood’s personal faith, but to investigate the possibility that, if Harwood’s poetry is framed by ambivalence toward the Christian faith, it is so because her poetry strains toward a faith that takes the body and sense experience as its epistemological starting point. As Strauss says, ‘Harwood exhibits a tendency to see such divinity as may be known as immanent rather than transcendent, not utterly other than the individual, the flesh, the material, but resident with these’ (45). I would like to take this inquiry one step further than Strauss by suggesting that Harwood’s poetry does not merely use the tools of sacrament to explore something quite other, but employs those tools in order to enact sacrament for its own sake. As such, a consideration of the Eucharist as a framework for reading her poetry yields much. Les Murray warns us in his introduction to his *Anthology of Religious Poetry* (in which Harwood is included) that we should distinguish between outright rejection and an oblique approach to faith: ‘negative engagement ... is not to be confused with rejection’ (xi).

Harwood’s poem ‘Mother Who Gave Me Life’ is a curious place to begin for an investigation into the ways in which her poetry is inflected and in some cases propelled by her view of the sacramental and numinous nature of poetry. It is, as Harwood herself declares, a heartfelt elegy to her mother. Addressed directly to her mother, across the barrier of time and death, the poem is a celebration of matrilineal heritage and the ways in which language quivers through each generation born of woman: ‘Mother who gave me life / I think of women bearing / women.’ The poem draws strength not from the patrilineal heritage from which she draws her name, but from her mother and the many mothers before her:

Mother who gave me life  
I think of women bearing

women. Forgive me the wisdom  
I would not learn from you.

It is not for my children I walk  
on earth in the light of the living.  
It is for you, for the wild  
daughters becoming women,

anguish of seasons burning  
backward in time to those other  
bodies, your mother, and hers  
and beyond, speech growing stranger

on thresholds of ice, rock, fire,  
bones changing, heads inclining  
to monkey bosom, lemur breast,

guileless milk of the word.

The pounding alliteration in her account of her lineage—‘burning backward in time to those other bodies’—suggests a life-force felt by the woman poet as she apprehends the power of her mother’s domestic activity. The monosyllabic ‘ice, rock, fire’ connects these women not to Hills-Hoist clothes lines, but to the generative and original drumbeat of life and Creation. The dominance of sound devices moving the poem forward indicates not only Harwood’s musical ear, but also a movement toward the sensory and temporal conclusion of the stanza. These swiftly moving stanzas reach an astounding conclusion as they come to rest on the ‘guileless milk of the word’, connecting the domestic, quotidian work of breast-feeding with *Logos*—‘the word.’ The line draws from the apostle Peter’s exhortation to the gentile church that it forsake deceit and instead as ‘newborn babes, long for the guileless milk of the word in order that by it you may grow into salvation, if you have tasted that the Lord is good’ (1 Peter 2: 1-3). And yet as Stephanie Trigg convincingly argues, it also invokes H el ene Cixous’s notion of female ways of knowing—* criture feminine*—which is the ‘white ink’ of female experience (68). In so doing, Harwood inverts the male way of knowing—the ‘Logos’ or Word to which Peter refers—and instead resituates the ‘word’ as female. Rather than arriving at language metaphysically and directly, the breastfeeding woman arrives at language—even divine language—through her body.

Harwood seems to insist upon yoking the quotidian with the numinous; the following stanza places the image of ‘Halley’s comet’ alongside the image of her mother ‘folding a little towel’:

I prayed you would live to see

Halley’s Comet a second time.  
The Sister said, When she died  
she was folding a little towel.

You left the world so, having lived  
nearly thirty thousand days:

a fabric of marvels folded  
down to a little space.

At our last meeting I closed  
the ward door of heavy glass  
between us, and saw your face  
crumple, fine threadbare linen

Again the delicate alliteration of the ‘t’ in the ‘little towel’ serves musically to illuminate the tiny world her mother inhabited, in seeming contrast to the cosmic scale of comets. It begins to appear that her mother’s life has indeed been ‘a fabric of marvels / folded down to a little space’, as the death that is ‘the ward door of heavy glass’ comes between living daughter and dead mother. And so, two stanzas before the conclusion of the poem, Harwood’s rousing discovery that women are the bearers of life, and of the ‘guileless milk of the word’, appears utterly cauterised by death. As Jennifer Strauss tells us, Harwood’s interest in mothers is not so much psychological, but in ‘its relation to concepts of time and mortality’ (120). Indeed, her mother’s achievements are but ‘a little towel.’

Harwood’s final two stanzas, however, re-route our attentions in a most unexpected way. The last line of the second to last stanza promises nothing but ‘Anguished: remembered hours.’ Again, Harwood’s musical devices conjure the existential loss that the poet has in view; the colons serve not only to emphasise the anguish felt by lingering on it, but they do so by musically creating absence. It is in the void of this absence that memory—and her final image—comes.

Then, somehow, smooth to a smile,

So I should not see your tears  
Anguish: remembered hours

a lamp on embroidered linen  
my supper set out, your voice  
calling me in as darkness  
falls on my father’s house.

After nine quatrains of a celebration of matrilineal heritage and the ways in which language quivers through each generation born of woman, the line is the first reference to a man, and in this light, the phrase is arresting. Indeed, Elizabeth Lawson recognizes in this line the potential to invite feminist dissonance: ‘this last line is curiously shaded with the recognition of a dispossession that mother and daughter share. However, the father’s house, under falling darkness, remains a memory; it was the mother whose voice inhabited and called from the house, giving from a different rich possession, ‘the gift of life’ (77). For Lawson, the jarring reference to the ‘father’s house’ is evidence of Harwood’s ‘mapping of the divided worlds of gender.’ Indeed, it is tempting to see the matrilineal heritage to which the poem is dedicated in contradistinction to this ‘father’s house.’ However, what Lawson critically misses is precisely what Harwood draws our attention to in the autobiographical essay ‘Lamplit

Presences.’ In this essay, Harwood muses on the source of her poetry, and tellingly expounds her use of the phrase ‘my father’s house’:

Can I go back to the origins of what poetry first was to me? I hear my grandmother’s voice reciting:

*Bind me a wreath of summer flowers  
And set it on my brows  
For I must go, while I am young,  
Home to my father’s house.*

At the time I did not realize that the girl, dying of disappointment in love, was going to a heavenly mansion. The words ‘my father’s house’ meant for me the small weatherboard cottage on stumps. When you were married you had a house of your own, but when you were young you always went home to your father’s house (247).

Harwood explicitly connects the ‘father’s house’ that Jesus speaks of in the gospels—‘a heavenly mansion’—with her suburban ‘cottage on stumps’, and in so doing she invites a sacramental view of the suburban, the domestic and the quotidian. And yet, that her child-self recognises the ‘cottage on stumps’ and her adult self revises that view is not to suggest a dichotomy. As we have seen in ‘Mother Who Gave Me Life’, the speaker’s revision of her childhood dismissal of her mother binds together past and present, making the act of remembering numinous. In the same way, then, this ‘father’s house’ of which Harwood speaks is *both* the ‘heavenly mansion’ and the house in Brisbane in which she grew up. It is both earthly and numinous. If we see these two interpretations of her ‘father’s house’ as coterminous, rather than as divided, then we are invited to see the whole stanza quite differently. The light of the ‘lamp’, the ‘embroidered linen’, the ‘supper set out’ and the ‘voice calling me in’ all contribute to an image of the Eucharist, wherein the divine and the physical meet.

Harwood’s original discovery that women bear the ‘guileless milk of the word’ finds resolution here, as the agent of this sacrament is not a priest, but her mother. And in this way, the ‘mother’ who prepares the family meal becomes a Marian image, one that is reminiscent of both motherhood and sacrament. We are reminded of the rendering of the Eucharist in Luke’s gospel, where Christ places emphasis not on power, but on service and its inextricable links to the preparation and serving of meals. As I have said, Luke’s notion of service and downward mobility as the locus for the divine is emphasised in his reliance on stories about women and their intuitive comprehension of Christ’s mission. And so it is her mother who ‘calls her in’, who is ‘the voice’ and so is the unexpected source of not only physical life, but poetic life. As the poem suggests in both form and content, the one cannot be thought of without the other. Indeed, it is women who continually and ritualistically bind the domestic to the numinous day after day. Harwood’s sense that the numinous becomes domestic does not set up father and mother as antagonists; it suggests that the sacrament at the centre of the image occurs not in a cathedral, but in a ‘weatherboard cottage on stumps’. It binds together irreverently and irrevocably the quotidian and the divine.

This is all confirmed in Harwood’s landmark poem ‘The Violets.’ Many critics have commented on her vision of the power of memory to transform mortal life. The poem undoubtedly is about and also constitutes the restorative power of memory. The poem begins

in a melancholy state, mourning the loss of the speaker's years, before vaulting back across the years to the first time the poet remembers feeling the jolt of the loss of time, when she awoke from an afternoon nap, disoriented:

It is dusk, and cold. I kneel to pick  
 frail melancholy flowers among  
 ashes and loam. The melting west  
 is striped like ice-cream. While I try  
 whistling a trill, close by his nest  
 our blackbird frets and strops his beak  
 indifferent to Scarlatti's song.  
 Ambiguous light. Ambiguous sky  
     Towards nightfall waking from the fearful  
     Half-sleep of a hot afternoon  
     At our first house, in Mitchelton,  
     I ran to find my mother, calling  
     For breakfast. Laughing, 'it will soon  
     Be night, you goose,' her long hair falling  
     Down to her waist, she dried my tearful  
     Face as I sobbed, 'Where's morning gone?'

The speaker trills Scarlatti's song to no effect; the blackbird bird is 'indifferent' and this reflects the break with the natural world and the 'fretful' poet within it. Scarlatti's song is significant here. Harwood's intricate rhythm and meter is built upon a Scarlatti fugue, which builds its theme progressively between different octaves. Harwood renders these progressive octaves poetically; the child's poignant question parallels the adult speaker's question, foreshadowing the existential crisis that occurs in the later years of her life, represented by the 'dusk' in which the adult speaker meditates. The memory provokes an abrupt revision of her melancholy—represented by a pronounced indentation—catapulting the reader into defiance in the face of death:

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 drift in air.

The speaker's mind, moved backwards via memory, defies the devastating power of death's destruction by moving contrary to the onward march of time. Most critics, quite rightly, focus on memory and time as the concerns of this poem. Alison Hoddinott suggests that 'the enemy, of course, is time' (15) and Elizabeth Lawson tells us that 'memory (which can be defective) means to all of us, richness, sanity and loss, all three. The poem shows it as an agent of a recovered sense of life' (43). And yet, while it is clear that memory is the vehicle through which the adult speaker finds peace, this view neglects the vision towards which the

memory moves. The domestic scene—the ‘lamplit presences’ that illuminate her ‘mother’s goldbrown hair’ in her ‘father’s house’—are all remarkably concordant with the vision of the quotidian Eucharist sketched in ‘Mother Who Gave Me Life’. It is the sacrament of everyday living that propels the adult speaker back into her earlier years, confident that those numinous moments are numinous not in spite of our boundedness in our bodies, but because of it. Memory offers the adult speaker access to the holy of holies, officiated for Harwood not by a priest, but by her mother and father. The ‘father’s house,’ like the ‘heavenly mansion’ of which Harwood speaks, is the site of access to the divine and a place of rest. It is the sacramental nature of memory and of poetry that offers the mortal poet the way in.

### ***Unconversion: From Philosophical Creeds to Poetry’s Credo***

Harwood’s vision of religious faith is not orthodox. The font of grace is suburban, female and utterly ordinary, corroborating Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden’s view that Australian religious poetry is an epistemological and phenomenological revision of Euro-centric modes of faith (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden). Indeed, this revision of the centre of religious life could be considered an ‘unconversion’, as Harwood herself describes it. Alison Hoddinott relates the story that Harwood tells of, praying liturgically to the streets of Brisbane: ‘Streets of Brisbane, pray for me. As Saul was converted, I was unconverted. I saw that for me the new and the old Jerusalem would always be the Queensland of my childhood’ (26). Here again, Harwood’s religious attention is not on the altar, but on her own backyard.

Another of her poems, ‘The Sharpness of Death’, sets up poetry and other art forms in contradistinction to the declarative form of philosophy. Like ‘Mother Who Gave Me Life’, this poem celebrates not a cerebral and abstract response to living and dying, but an aesthetic and concrete *making*. This poem suggests that the oblique work of poetry works not in spite of its embeddedness in the sensory earth, but because of it. In contrast, the ‘complex logic’ of philosophy approaches the numinous directly—without the earth, as it were—and leaves us with ‘untranslatable’ descriptions of death. It is poetry that makes signs that exist beyond the maker—‘plaster mouldings’—not because those signs seek to exist beyond the moment of their making, but precisely because they submit to the boundedness of that moment. The poem itself is structured in a quartet; the first and last stanzas are direct addresses to death, initiating a conversation with mortality that draws on John Donne’s sonnet ‘Death Be Not Proud’. Indeed, Harwood’s address to death sees it as a particular attack on her mother, who remains stranded, alive and alone, in ‘my father’s house’, the phrase again sustaining the telling motif that runs throughout her poetry:

Leave me alone. —You will?  
 That’s your way with us women.  
 You’ve left my mother so,  
 desolate in my father’s house.  
 But that’s not what I mean.  
 Suppose we come to terms:  
 you take one day for each  
 day that I’ve wished to die.  
 Give me more time for time  
 that was never long enough.



Look, here's a list of names.  
 Take these, the world will bless you.  
 Death, you've become obscene.  
 Nobody calls you *sweet* or *easeful* now.  
 You're in the hands of philosophers  
 who cut themselves, and bleed,  
 and know that knives are sharp,  
 but prove with complex logic  
 there's no such thing as sharpness.

The middle two stanzas of the poem constitute the contrasting forms of poetry and philosophy; the second stanza is entitled 'Heidegger' and for its form takes on a series of couplets, which suggests the logical form of philosophical discourse, while the third stanza takes for its theme Harwood's childhood teacher, Vera Cottew, where the free verse stands in contrast to the more predictable structure of the 'Heidegger' couplets. Accordingly, the two stanzas set up contrasting motifs. While philosophy's legacy is 'black everlasting flowers', Vera Cottew's sculpture studio is decorated with 'Nasturtiums', which are of 'purest of colour' and remain attached to that moment and die when the moment leaves. Darkness is contrasted with the 'light like a noble visitor' that streams through the 'room's eccentric fenestration', representing the deeper contrast between the attempt at permanence that characterises philosophical discourse and the celebration of temporary moments that occupy the artist—the 'plaster mouldings' representing that celebration. That contrast is set up again in the two deaths. Heidegger's death becomes so sterile as to provoke the pain of poignancy—'He thought much about dying. No one could die for him'—while Vera Cottew's death is intimate and particular:

How would you ever know me now  
 if I came to your grave and called you,  
 unless I brought those flowers, those colours,  
 that ray of light

The direct address to Vera Cottew makes her death intimate and personal, corroborated by the repeated demonstratives—'those flowers', 'those colours', 'that ray of light'. The contrast between the two stanzas—one male and reaching, the other female and local—sets up the same contrast as Luke's gospel does, between the male disciples grasping at unseen power and hierarchy and the Christ who serves real food and wine. It is, in the end, an epistemological distinction that Harwood's poem makes: we can only know anything about the divine from the dwelling place of our consciousness, which is our body. A poetic knowing is necessarily aesthetic, and it is this commitment to aesthetic and bodily knowing that gives Harwood's poetry its sacramental nature. Harwood's prayer to Brisbane, then, suggests a movement away from rational and logical ways of knowing and moves toward the kind of sacramental poetic that Jones suggests is the source of religious art.

The parenthetical stanzas of 'The Sharpness of Death' give us a stronger impression of the likeness between this poem and 'Mother Who Gave Me Life', contributing to a sense of Harwood's architectonic sense of sacrament and art. After dwelling on the power of poetry, bounded and earthly, to make any sense of death, Harwood immediately returns to a

meditation on women and their experience of it. She moves from the flowers in Cottew's studio—'seed of the seed of countless seasons / blossoms to hold the light that's gone'—to a sensual image of pregnancy and sexual love:

Death, I will tell you now:  
 my love and I stood still  
 in the roofless chapel. My  
 body was full of him, my  
 tongue sang with his juices, I  
 grew ripe in his blond light.  
 If I fall from that time,  
 then set your teeth in me.

Temporary though her life may be, the female speaker holds the 'seed of the seed' in her 'ripe' body, flaunting the female power to give life in the face of death. The rich sensual imagery celebrates sexual and profane love and its groundedness in the earth. That their chapel is 'roofless' suggests both the power of birth to transcend the parenthesis that is the mother's birth and death by generating 'countless seasons,' but also alludes to the movement of the sacramental rites outside of the church and into the world. As if to confirm this, Harwood's last stanza is reminiscent of the cry of Israel in exile in the Psalms: 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.' Israel's 'tongue' on the 'roof' of her mouth are here modulated from a cry of exile to a cry for reconciliation—'my love and I stood still in the roofless chapel ... my tongue sang with his juices'—where Israel's fallen temple becomes the speaker's own body in the natural world. Just as 'Mother Who Gave Me Life' brings the Eucharist to the 'weatherboard cottage on stumps', so this poem brings the sacrament of marriage to a slice of time, a moment where lovers revel in the open air. As Jones tells us, for the religious poet, sacrament comes to describe this 'sign making' activity of human beings.

Finally, Vera Cottew's 'plaster mouldings' come to represent Harwood's own poem as she creates an impression of this one moment, shared with a lover. Like a woman's capacity to give birth, the poet's capacity to retell and shape a moment gives it 'countless seasons,' defying the 'sharpness of death.' On these moments, Harwood tells us that such 'evanescent things can't be taken away from you if they are given over to art ... That's the real text: it can be recreated' (Digby 47). Harwood's poetry meditates on the paradox that only the evanescent can offer permanence in the remembering and the telling. While Heidegger sought to confront death without contingency—directly, abstractly—poetry offers Harwood the contingency of her own body and her own memory.

This oblique and concrete epistemology is what suggests that Harwood's poetry is a kind of sacrament, because it suggests that—like the Eucharist, and Christ's passion that the Eucharist represents—the only way of knowing anything divine is through the earthly signs at our fingertips. Tracing the theological missteps that Heidegger makes, theologian David Bentley Hart argues this:

Thus, for Christian thought, to know the world truly is achieved not through a

positivistic reconstruction of its ‘sufficient reason,’ but through an openness before glory, a willingness to orient one’s will toward the light of being, and to receive the world as a gift ... the truth of being is ‘poetic’ before it is ‘rational’ ... and cannot be truly known if this order is reversed ... Heidegger himself, ever the creature of his early theological teaching, came close to realizing this, in his attempts to deliver the language of truth from the confines of every form of positivism ... but ultimately he proved too forgetful of the radical question of beauty that Christian thought had raised, and so retreated back again along the tenebrous woodland paths of ontological necessity, in search of the ‘how it is’ of the event rather than the ‘that it is’ of the world (132).

The wonder of Harwood’s poem is that she understands precisely this, and yet, unlike Bentley Hart, she uses form to do it. If Bentley Hart meets philosophy with philosophy, Harwood meets philosophy with art. To partake in the Eucharist means a submission to the boundedness of a body, and Harwood’s poetry accordingly submits to its boundedness within its aesthetic form. She draws a line between the ‘little’ world of the women whose lives she conjures and sketches in her poems, through to the Eucharist, and then on into the world of poetry and language itself.

### **Women, the Eucharist, and the ‘little space’**

In all of these poems, Harwood illuminates the world of women in all their materiality. Whether these worlds are domestic scenes of cooking and preparing food, love-making and pregnancy, or the bridging of two worlds between girls and women, daughters and mothers, these poems are a rendering of women in suburban Australia. Harwood’s poetic vision seems as far from the sacraments as Tasmania is from Rome. And yet, Harwood’s insistence on the domestic and the local is pre-empted and solicited by the Eucharist itself. In the last stanza of his poem ‘Jerusalem,’ Kevin Hart illuminates this paradoxical movement of the ethereal into the corporeal, being found only there:

Now feel this stillness  
 where two opposing forces clasp; this is the room  
 where bread is broken  
 to make us whole, the inn of our desire.

Harwood’s poetry is characterised by ‘two opposing forces’ woven inextricably together, and that much has united commentators on her poetry. Yet Hart’s more traditional and explicit imagery here of both the historic and new Jerusalem acts as an illuminating companion to Harwood’s poems. Both Luke’s gospel and Hart’s poem circle the ‘room’ where the Eucharist began, and it is their explicit reference to ‘bread broken’ that denotes their interest in the Eucharist. And like the women who remained outside that room and yet understood far more than the twelve disciples for whom Jesus broke bread, Harwood’s poetry is just as interested in ‘opposing forces’ and their ‘clasp’, and yet renders this clasping not in cathedrals, inns or even in scripture, but in the places that she inhabited. For all that, and perhaps because of that, the Eucharist becomes earthed and incarnated in suburban Australia through the poetry of Gwen Harwood.

The American poet Kathleen Norris makes an explicit link between the quotidian world that women have traditionally inhabited and the Eucharist, suggesting that it is this link that invites the divine into everyday lives. She tells the story of becoming arrested by the sight of a priest washing up after serving the Eucharist to his congregation at a wedding:

I found it remarkable—and still find it remarkable—that in that big, fancy church, after all of the dress-up and the formalities of the wedding mass, homage was being paid to the lowly truth that we human beings must wash the dishes after we eat and drink. The chalice, which had held the very blood of Christ, was no exception (3).

Norris rightly registers the terrifying territory that she treads as a feminist, acknowledging that to investigate the ways in which the quotidian facilitates communion with the divine can simultaneously condone practices that have kept women out of places of power, just as the faithful women who followed Jesus in Luke's gospel were not recorded as being in the room while his male disciples jostled and scrapped for their place by his side. The link between the quotidian and the divine, then, does not valorise the oppression of women, but instead highlights the Christian religion's doctrine as necessarily committed to corporeal activity for all human beings.

Harwood's poems testify to this kind of domestic activity and their relation to not only the Eucharist but to the Incarnation that the feast represents. If Harwood goes beyond Hart's poetry in her insistence on local and intimate sites of numinous activity, she also goes beyond Norris when she renders this activity poetically. In some ways, she supersedes the Gospel of Luke, since the women to whom Luke gives importance remain voiceless, remain outside the room where the Eucharist is served. Harwood's women might have small worlds, but they are the ones who reside in the holy of holies, 'calling us in' to that sacramental space. Harwood finally makes that space available to us through her poetry, where the fusing of sensory and corporeal experience with the heady world of divine and numinous presence takes place. Like Norris, Harwood's women are not a sign that she condoned a mute and dutiful acceptance of a 'woman's place' as somehow lesser—upon hearing that Vincent Buckley had suggested women write better when they consign themselves to a particularly female space, Harwood exploded 'Well, up him!' (Digby 48)—but instead are a sign of Harwood's poetic and sacramental theology. The poem 'Mother Who Gave Me Life' tells the story of a woman whose life was 'a fabric of marvels / folded down to a little space.' What Harwood's poetry pursues is the ways in which the Eucharist, the lives of women and poetry are able to fold 'a fabric of marvels' down to the corporeal 'little space' of their worlds, and so to behave not as marginal women locked out of the upper room, but as sites of the divine.

### Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden. *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature*. Adelaide: ATF Publishers, 2009.
- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark Publishers, 2004.
- Begbie, Jeremy. *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts*. DLT/Baker, 2000.

- Bentley Hart, David. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Digby, Jenny. *A Woman's Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996.
- Guite, Malcolm. 'Through Literature: Christ and the Redemption of Language.' Begbie, Jeremy. *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts*. Ed. Jeremy Begbie. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001. 27-46.
- Harwood, Gwen. *Collected Poems 1943-1995*. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Lamplit Presences.' *Southerly* 40.3 (1980): 247-254.
- Hoddinott, Alison. *Gwen Harwood: The Real and the Imagined World*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.
- Jones, David. *Epoch and Artist*. London: Faber and Faber, 1959.
- Lawson, Elizabeth. *The Poetry of Gwen Harwood*. South Melbourne: Sydney University Press, 1991.
- Murray, Les. *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*. Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1986.
- Norris, Kathleen. *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work*. New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Polanyi, Michael. *Knowing and Being*. Ed. Marjorie Grene. University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- Strauss, Jennifer. *Boundary Conditions*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992.
- Trigg, Stephanie. *The Poetry of Gwen Harwood*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994.