

Harold Stewart's Fear of Flying: poetry, homosexuality and the Ern Malley affair

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From at least his early thirties on, Harold Stewart adopted an avuncular persona and acted publicly as if sexuality was of little concern to him. While he sympathised with the amorous trials and elations of friends, he was noticeably reticent about the state of his own heart. To many, he projected himself as an aesthete abstaining from the flesh, and even his sister, when asked why Harold never married, replied: 'Because he was such a holy man'.¹ Finally, from the safe distance of Japan he maintained for almost 30 years the posture of a man wedded to Dame Celibacy, as in this letter of 1970:

[Freud's] pansexual interpretation of dreams is inadmissible. For a married man like yourself still living an active sexual life, one would expect to find sex symbols in your dreams. But my sexual activity turned off like a tap many years ago after a certain spiritual experience, and has not reappeared since, in fact sexual activity would be a simple impossibility to me after that ... I simply do not think of sex from one year's end to the next and have long since ceased having sexual dreams and fantasies. I am, of course, an old man now and dying, but I am convinced that sex is not the most important thing in life – only one of the most important, and then not for one's whole life.²

Harold, at fifty-five, was neither old, dying, nor done with sex. He had come to Japan in 1966 hard on the heels of the love of his life, Ueshima Masaaki, and although painful experience made him jaundiced about relationships, better knowledge rarely deflected Cupid's dart. To a close correspondent he could maintain that 'domestic bliss is in 99% of cases a fugitive illusion', only to confess two years later with evident pride: 'Nice to know that at my advanced age of 70, or rather

69, I was still able to make a conquest'.³ What these statements reflect is the strictly compartmentalised, almost schizophrenic nature of his existence. For Stewart was a gay who never became reconciled to his own sexuality. Born in 1916 and growing to adulthood in a fiercely homophobic community, he learnt to hide and displace his forbidden needs. His case, of course, was not an isolated one, but it became unique, indeed exemplary, when he sought to compensate for personal humiliations through literary greatness, and so embarked on a career which led from confessional to increasingly impersonal verse, peaked in local notoriety with the Ern Malley hoax, and ended in self-chosen exile in Japan.

The impact of homosexuality on Stewart's career cannot be overstated, beginning with his attitude towards family and school. His debt to his parents was greater than he acknowledged. Thanks to his father's Anglo-Indian background Harold was early introduced to Asian cultures, and his family was also supportive of individual talent: their boy was encouraged to pursue his diverse interests in art and music, as well as to build up a private library. Yet years later notebook entries reveal bottled-up resentment: 'Childhood will be the last slavery to survive. Fortunately it is one out of which some grow in time'.⁴ Scoffing at St Marx, St Engels and St Lenin's quest for a perfect society, he underlined that inequality will remain as long as there are 'families, parents & children'. A related conundrum is raised by his educational record at Fort Street Boys' High School. On the one hand, there is no shortage of testimony to Harold's ability, if he chose to apply himself. His English master in 1935 remembered him as the most remarkable student he ever taught. On his army aptitude test he scored 98 per cent,⁵ and he himself acknowledged having an 'elephantine memory, which I modestly describe as only semi-omniscient'.⁶ This promise was already evident in his third form results in 1932: English A, Mathematics I B, Mathematics II B, Latin A, French A, Elementary Science A, Greek B. The *Fortian*, however, gives no results for him in 1933 and at his first attempt at the Leaving Certificate in 1934 he passed only five of the required six subjects. Finally, in 1936 he dropped out of courses at Sydney University after two months to become an autodidact, notable for considerable erudition as well as self-defensive pedantry and a deep-seated insecurity about his own expertise, even in matters which he had studied intensely.

This was a woeful outcome for a student with an extraordinarily retentive memory, and highlights an abandonment of conventional aspirations well under way before Sydney University. Two records exist of the pivotal years of failure 1933-34: Stewart's poems published in the school magazine and the memoir of a former teacher at Fort Street, John Tierney.⁷ Both are spectacularly revelatory. The verse in question begins in the December 1933 issue of the *Fortian* and ends in December of the following year, as Harold turned eighteen. Usually it is dedicated to R.M. '(If he will have it)' and, when read in sequence, graphs the bloom and eclipse of a youthful passion.⁸ The works open cryptically with 'Whither Away - ?' and 'Estranged', which deal with a threatened or transient relationship terminating in 'the grave where true love laid to rest/his golden curls' (15), because the speaker's beloved is 'unheeding, poisonous proud/and full of scorn'

(17). But subsequent poems become insistently personal, concluding in 1934 on an intense, homoerotic note:

I held firm your arm in my hand
 I held my eyes fixed on your browning skin
 I grasped your shoulders
 I took your face in my cupped hands
 and held you

looking into you
 feeling you enter into me with your life
 like a new fire. (6)

Remembered scenes of 'sun-glare on the wet sand' and exposed bodies evoke Sydney and a summer romance – linked now with 'the unfulfilled want of you/.../who are denied to me'. A related, acute sense of male beauty infuses 'Model. The Artist Speaks':

'Oh that you never spoke! but only stood
 and stood, that I might gaze with endless gaze
 upon your form, and feast my lusting eyes
 with tireless surfeit of the naked flesh;
 that I might touch and smooth with trembling hands
 the curving mouldings of your body's shape'. (18)

The model's words are coarse ('all that's foul upon the earth') compared to the projected ideal; nonetheless, the artist chooses life over art, supplicating him to speak and 'break the poem's spell'.

By December, 1934 the point of absolute rupture, foreshadowed by tensions and setbacks, is reached in the poems 'Ambition' and 'Betrayal'. Here bitter frustration and hurt inspire, not great verse, but direct speech:

How, now have you slipped back,
 and away from me,
 with your littleness and your no other ambitions
 than to live, work and to marry, enjoy, breed and
 to die

...
 wearing a precious, only life away, to be unknown
 to another age
 one of a mass of mere robots.

...
 Instead I will surmount
 I'll overspread the years, I will span on to greatness. (20-1)

The final nails in this coffin, the first of many closed upon his humbled emotions and shut off from curious onlookers, are scornful rejection and his lover's derision aimed at poetry for being 'a fool's toy/a self-sympathy, a dramatic casing for an over-sensitive and sentimental soul' (21).

His bleak prospects, midway through 1934, are encapsulated in a poem entitled 'The Empty Room', which bears the smokescreen subtitle 'A fantasy on a line from T.S. Eliot'. Life's passage is:

Pain to enter,
 Pain to leave,
 But you must go through this way
 this way,
 ever this the only way.
 Two doors
 a whitewashed hall,
 an empty, narrow hall –
 two swords, two doors,
 a paper wall
 but whitewashed? why?

White-washed sanctity and paper-thin convention prove insurmountable to the speaker, so that:

I have not even room to spread my wings
 crushed wings
 poor broken and deformed things –
 . . .
 cramped ambitions, plans and purposes despoiled,
 expression trodden down.
 I must fight,
 but I cannot push down the paper walls
 for I am weak with laughter and despair. (22)

Caught in this 'lane-like room of Life' Stewart, almost eighteen, now recognises himself as deformed, constrained, with no way back to his former state of heedless security.

This personal turmoil obliterated his academic ambitions and alienated him from his family, as the master's memoir reveals. Tierney recalled how Stewart's two years of fifth form were marked by 'complaints, reports, carpetings' and recriminations, with Harold remaining infuriatingly cool in the face of intense pressure from both family and school. His father, determined that his son 'must be fitted for some profession', insisted he repeat, while the boy's obvious lack of application in 1935 led to talk of expelling him from Fort Street. This was thwarted by Tierney's high opinion of Stewart: it was 'a rare privilege to have [him] in class. Something to make

one happy, if it happened only once in a life-time'. To him Harold seemed brilliant alike in verse and prose, 'his compositions were priceless'. Tierney was confident Stewart would top the State in English. Instead he failed to get Honours and managed only a B, and his other subject results were no higher, leaving the master to note with regret that 'there was no place in a modern school for such as Stewart'.⁹ Thereafter Harold would fulminate at 'the miseries of babyhood schooldays and adolescence', and practise passive resistance when confronted with society's unfair, unrelenting compulsion.

In late interviews Stewart passed over the ensuing phase of his life as a drop-out in virtual silence: 'I stayed [at university] only a very short time. By this time the war had broken out and I was called up for Military Service' (Tipping 26). The period in question stretched from 1936 to 1942, during which he led a desultory, unstructured existence which was antithetical to his father's ethos of responsible labour. Trying to understand himself and to justify his life-choices, he read widely in both Western and Eastern lore, but published little, allegedly because he was busy working his way through English poetry and the Elizabethan dramatists. This may have been so. But what his verse reveals distinctly is a shift towards oblique statement or subterfuge when dealing with matters close to his heart. For example, in 'Annunciation' (1940), Aurora, the Greek goddess of dawn is recast as a youth of striking physical beauty, while 'Autumn Nakedness' (1942), appropriately to the season, has 'fallen love' between heterosexuals as its ostensible subject. Yet apart from being addressed to 'my lady', this account of casual coupling in a park, together with threatening outside forces, evokes a homosexual encounter. It ends:

Rain on our nakedness will not be warm,
so part and flee before the sombre storm:
never again to be, no more to lie
like fallen leaves together, when they die. (*Arna* 51)

Now, too, his earlier sense of claustrophobic entrapment depicted in 'The Empty Room' is gradually modified, as in 'The Magic Hand' (1939). There the speaker's lack of decisive action is presented positively as a Taoist openness to existence. It can bring 'wonder ... unasked', more lovely 'than rare experience, sought desirously', leading ideally to release from society's cage of 'iron determinism':

I stand and have my living done to me,
my breath removed at each remove of chance,
my spirit lifted from me by the view
through sombre pylons of a clear expanse. (*Hermes* 1939)

Nevertheless, reality remained grimly intransigent, with Stewart dependent on stray coins to alleviate his penury.

In addition, this outwardly unproductive period witnessed the emergence of crucial self-vindicating strategies which would shape his life and work. Dismissing

sexuality in this veiled, yet public manner – the fundamental cause of his alienation – as if it were of little consequence to him, he set his sights on creative and spiritual goals. The social order had no place for him, so he rejected commitment to it. It threatened to crush him, therefore he stridently affirmed his self-worth. With a dialectical panache that would have done credit to a Marxist, he began to read setbacks as necessary trials or evidence of his uncommon gifts, and to console himself with a vision of his life's perfectly adjusted pattern, 'building an aesthetic structure from my birth. Not an atom is wasted. Not an atom is lost. In this balance, natural, inevitable, nothing can be felt as incongruous or redundant if you can but once see the design steady and see it whole'. His unabated sense of self-worth, denied adequate public expression, expanded to fill pages of his notebooks with staggering assertions: 'My life has run its course, it is fulfilled & consummated. I can rise no higher than this, I have achieved the summit of human experience in the art of living ... "God" walks with me'. Such grandiose claims answered profound compulsions and were sufficiently true to his desired self-image to be preserved for posterity. Finally, poetry became the ultimate test of his special status as well as a potent means of recording it. During his last year at Fort Street, Harold, true to his boast to 'R.M.' ('I know and will greatness'), let it be known that he was contemplating his own version of *Paradise Lost* and 'refraining from reading Milton, lest he be unduly influenced'.¹⁰ One measure of the hurt caused by repeated failures, and of the odds against which he struggled, was the compensation they demanded. Both then and later nothing less than the highest form of poetic achievement, the epic, would do.

By the time the Ern Malley poems were composed in October 1943, poetry had become a psychological mainstay and a means of studied self-projection or, more accurately, self-concealment. Whether in recasting Chinese parables or verse by Paul Valéry, Stewart's creativity was finding an outlet in acts of translation that ensured his invisibility, as did the persona of Ern Malley. In 1942 he expounded his artistic credo. Ideally, according to him, verse brings 'release ... from the tyrannic license of your feelings' ('Dionysus ad. lib' 31), and control: 'Art has a beginning, a climax, a denouement and an end. Life is all tangled and unfinished and fuzzy at the edges'. Composition concentrates, selects and orders to produce something at once more 'alive, – and ... more dead': 'Art is not life. It is made out of life, but it has death in its form, looking out at you from every frame. Its formality makes it life at one remove, – life behind glass' ('Dionysus ad. lib' 35). Formal constraints were freely chosen, not imposed by society, and, depending on the subject matter, helped keep the public at a considerable remove from his actual experience. Stewart, in short, was seeking in verse a mastery and resolution denied him in life, as well as confirmation of his life-choices.

The Ern Malley affair afforded an opportunity to discredit a dangerous rival in Max Harris and, obliquely, for Stewart to flaunt his disdain for a society which was almost as hostile towards modern verse as towards homosexuality. His compatriots could be relied on to reveal their typical interest in serious poetry only as a subject of derision, while Harris had excited the ire of McAuley and Stewart by pouring scorn on the poetry of the Sydney set to which they belonged ('little of *Hermes'* work

was worth publishing in a mediocre school magazine' ['M.U.M. Resurrected']), and by assuming the roles of genius and arbiter of taste to which they aspired. Stewart had bitten back ineffectually in 1942 in the pages of *Homi Soit*. For Harris, he had prescribed 'a good course of epigrams and a sense of satire' to offset the 'fatal facility' of 'semi-surrealist verse ... [A]ny poet of talent could produce a hundred lines of it a week for the rest of his life. Once you get the knack, it is no harder to do than a free-association test' – adding a bitchy remark which certainly fitted himself if not the Angry Penguin: Harris 'will regret having let his juvenilia out' if he 'ever lives to find out what he is really doing in his poems' ('Harris Harrassed'). Stewart's rancour and jealousy ran deep. Nationally he was a nobody who wrote occasional art criticism for *Homi Soit* and struggled to place his poems in Angus & Robertson's annual anthology of Australian poetry, whereas Harris was an established writer with a magazine in which to air his views. Hence Stewart struck at the two areas in which Harris overtopped him. He produced for Ern Malley both collages and conjointly poems, in which evidence abounds of his interests, whether in a monologue addressed to a star of his literary pantheon, John Keats, in allusions to his life-long preoccupation with Chinese art forms, or in lines that might have been lifted from one of his future haiku: 'Among the water-lilies/A splash – white foam in the dark!' (*Poems of Ern Malley* 78). At last Stewart achieved a literary éclat, even if it was, as Ern Malley put it, 'in this No-Man's language appropriate/Only to No-Man's Land' (*Poems of Ern Malley* 92), and this was clearly a source of lingering pride when, in 1995, he corrected 'the standardised error' concerning the hoax was 'that while J.P. McA was obviously the front legs and head with the brains, I was merely the hind legs (forgetting that it is between the hind legs that there hangs all the potency of the donkey!)'.¹¹

As this comment from his final year underscores, libidinal and poetic drives were intricately linked throughout Stewart's career. His sexual awakening resulted in a major personal and academic check, and brought about a crucial deflection of his creativity. The youth of 1934 who spoke from the heart, who chose life over art and who acknowledged needing 'the crudeness of your brain', otherwise 'I could write nothing/feeling nothing/true' ('Model. The Artist Speaks'), would in future omit intimate feelings from poems whose spell was now to be unbroken. It was a choice that contributed significantly to the waning of his poetic star, for local reviewers would find that his subsequent works, devoid of lived experience, rang hollow or were stillborn.¹² Similarly, his rejection of poetry based on psychological self-exposure, coupled with his desire to wage war against an uncomprehending society on his own terms, underpinned his participation in the hoax. Then potency, as so often, was also an issue, as was the need of the outwardly feckless, rootless failure to justify his long artistic apprenticeship. Shortly after Harris's public discomfiture, Stewart mailed a humorous photo of Malley to his co-conspirator, spelling out its arcana for McAuley's delight:

What say we send it anon. to Max with an arrow pointing out the head
of Lois Lidden in Ern's crutch while ... his other hand seems to be

groping something or one under the dining-room table. A cunningly
conceived conceit ... is't not? ... prick'd out in right merrie symbols.
(13)

By the end of the war, Stewart was already a master of innuendo, subterfuge and sexual sublimation, who made one protagonist, caught in lustful flames, speak from the heart of his own dilemma: 'Why must the mortal urge be born again?/.../When will the endless round renew no more?' ('The Phoenix Palm'). Release remained a pious hope. Eros, in the decades ahead, would make him jump through innumerable burning hoops, though with each stumble was registered the determination to succeed as a poet, or to prove, as he had asserted to R.M., that the one passion he could publicly proclaim was not merely a 'fool's toy' or 'dramatic casing for an over-/sensitive ... soul' ('Ambition'), but afforded an alternate and reliable promise of individual mortality.

Notes

- ¹ Interview with Michael Ackland, 5/1/99.
- ² Letter to Kurt Forrer, 10 January 1973. Stewart Papers, National Library of Australia. MS 8973/1/1 (NLA indicates a ms. collection held at the National Library of Australia, Canberra.)
- ³ Letter to Peter Kelly, 1 August 1987. Stewart Papers, NLA MS 8973/16/34.
- ⁴ Notebook, Stewart Papers, NLA MS 8973/6/1. Unless otherwise indicated, notebooks held at this location are the source of Stewart's subsequent comments.
- ⁵ Although Cassandra Pybus claims he scored a perfect pass (32), Stewart gives the lesser figure in a letter to Heyward, 30 November 1988. Heyward Papers, La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria. PA MS 96/159/6.
- ⁶ Letter to Keith Richmond, 27 September 1993, Michael Ackland collection.
- ⁷ This account of Stewart's final years is based on a ms. submitted to McAuley as editor of *Quadrant* by J.L. Tierney, Norma McAuley collection., Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
- ⁸ Only the dedication to 'Water Images' contains this parenthetical comment. Locations of quotations from the school magazine are cited parenthetically in the text.
- ⁹ He attained English A, Latin B, French L (a pass at a lower level), Mathematics I B, Modern History B, and failed presumably Mathematics II. The following year when he repeated his results were English B, Latin L, French (oral) B, Mathematics I B, Mathematics II B, Modern History B.
- ¹⁰ From respectively 'Ambition' and Tierney's account.
- ¹¹ Letter to Michael Ackland, 10 August 1995.
- ¹² See his letter to McAuley in which he acknowledges being 'particularly grateful that someone has at last announced that my poems *are* about something!' This was a great step forward from Vincent Buckley's recent description of them as 'all surface glitter with cardboard behind the facade!', n.d. (1955), Norma McAuley collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
- ¹³ Letter of 3 August 1944, Norma McAuley collection, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

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- . 'Autumn Nakedness.' *Arna* (1942): 30-5.
- . 'Dionysus ad. lib.' *Arna* (1942): 30-35.
- . 'Harris Harrassed.' *Honi Soit* (21 May 1942): 4.
- . 'Model. The Artist Speaks.' *Fortian* 2 (1934): 19.
- . 'M.U.M. Resurrected.' *Honi Soit* (17 September 1942): 2.
- . 'The Magic Hand.' *Hermes* 2 (1939): 24.
- . 'The Phoenix Palm.' *Meanjin* 5 (1946): 303.
- . 'Water Images.' *Fortian* 2 (1934): 5.
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