

BETWEEN TWO DEATHS: THE LOVE POETRY OF GWEN HARWOOD

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Gwen Harwood's death in December 1995, draws attention both to her stature as a poet, and to the generative place of death in her work. For death is this poet's familiar. In "Night and Dreams", Harwood's intimation of mortality, the speaker tenderly addresses the ghosts that crowd to hear her: "O my lost loves" (190). The poem flirts with death disguised as the menacing but magnificent "Crab", resplendent in his swirling seaweed cloak. The "great questions" of life are interspersed with his macabre puns. "Night and Dreams" enacts what Lacan refers to as a "trespassing of death on life" (295), in the form of a dream that demarcates a space in which the speaker's desire is constituted. This is the space between two deaths: biological death and the second, symbolic death, that erases the subject from language. As Lacan comments, in the space between deaths, "everything that has to do with transformation, with the cycle of generation and decay or with history itself", is suspended and we are placed "on a level that is more extreme than any other insofar as it is directly attached to language as such" (284). The space between deaths is thus quite different from that "littoral space" which Jennifer Strauss privileges in her reading of Harwood. For Strauss, "Our most intense experiences . . . occur in those littoral regions where the boundary terms that define themselves on either side of us also overlap and interact" (35). But the space between deaths has a greater specificity: in that space, the essential vulnerability of the subject — its dependence on the signifier which represents it — is exposed. In Harwood's love poems the speaker's sense of herself is organised around the figure of the dead beloved, an embodiment of absence that denies absence. Their repeated refrain is to remember and to be remembered. By invoking ghostly presences and voicing the loved ones' names, the speaker recognises the need to anchor the beloved in the word and, thus, in the world.

In her study of Harwood, Stephanie Trigg comments that "Harwood speaks and writes from a powerful classical tradition which, through poetry, grants immortality to those it commemorates" (102). Trigg's discussion of Harwood's love poetry is concerned primarily with its representation of the woman as the subject of love. That is not my emphasis here. However, her reference to "the stillness that characterises [Harwood's] most erotic landscapes, the space in her work, where, ironically, the poet is most often alone in the world she has made" (93), is pertinent to my reading of love in terms of loss. Harwood's most powerful representations of love arise from the speaker's abrogation of separation from the beloved other, he who gave her a sense of coherence. The poem fills the gap of absence by perpetuating the fantasy of the lovers' completion of each other. It fixes the meanings of both lover and beloved at the point where meaning threatens to fade.

I am reading Harwood's love poetry as a defence against the second, symbolic death. Trigg distinguishes Harwood's work from traditional love poetry on the grounds that it speaks of fulfilled sexual desire, but she notes that

Harwood's poetry is "haunted by loss, and the fear of loss, the fear of falling away from the plenitude of the lover's presence" (76). I would like to locate the poetry differently. Rather than considering both loss and fear of loss as themes in Harwood's love poetry, I will argue that loss signifies love and that instead of a fear pertaining to loss, there is a recognition of an event that has always already occurred. There is no possibility of fulfilment here. Instead there is a tension between the imaginary continuity of the lovers' bodies and the separation upon which the representation of their love is contingent. For Harwood, love, like pain, indicates a "truth beyond the language game" ("The Wasps" 140). She intimates that there is something outside the field of signification and that the poem marks the limit of this field. Love is precisely the "sustaining violence" that the speaker of "Night Flight" experiences as she lies "alone in the black sky" (99). It continually destroys and reconstitutes itself. Love is enmeshed with death and in this process, death is eroticised. Thus love does not transcend death; death is the negative determination of love. It enables the resurrection of the beloved in the speaker's memory and dreams, in that space between deaths.

The body produced in that space is a sublime body that can die and be remade again and again. Such a notion seems to inform "A Little Night Music" (134), a poem about an absent beloved invoked in dream:

Listen, I will remind you
of what you have never known.
That's what our dreams are for,
and I will be your dream,
a ravishing latecomer
under your handsome skin.
Late this night I will find you

where nothing has a name,
where any page you turn
will long have lost its meaning.
Remember me, while music
melts you to understanding.
Sleep, while new planets burn,
and I will be your dream (134).

The poem concludes with the lines "and over/ your absence measureless/ silence extends the stars". The speaker disguises the beloved's absence with an image of her presence-in-him and his presence-in-her. Here, absence has a dimension of positivity. Yet, at the same time, there is a contingency to the process of representation: the name and the meaning can so easily be lost. As Lacan explains, the subject's relationship to death—and to life—is constituted through the signifier that represents him and thus "insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain . . . he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is" (295). In this and other love poems, form and imagery are shaped by the desire to reconstitute, to re-experience the body of the beloved. In order to explicate the way this desire is mediated in Harwood's poetry, I will focus my discussion on two love poems: "Night Thoughts: Baby and Demon" and "The

Lion's Bride", the eponymous poem of her 1981 collection.

Rupture is the key term for exploring "Night Thoughts: Baby and Demon"—a disturbing, destabilising poem. Its sardonic humour stays just this side of despair and, not surprisingly, critics have offered widely divergent readings. For example, Strauss considers "Night Thoughts" to be one of Harwood's "bravura dialogues of the divided self" (159), pitting spirit against flesh, art as "daimon" against artist as performer. In contrast, Stephanie Trigg emphasises the range of subject positions and the "fractured, dispersed" (91) voices in this paradox-driven poem. For Trigg, the poem expresses the obverse side of the sensuality celebrated in other love poems. While both these readings are persuasive, the complexities of the poem allow room for further manoeuvre. My emphasis will fall on the significance of the malaise of desire that afflicts the lovers. As Baby says to Demon in the second stanza: "Yours is mine./ Sickness and health". Here "sickness" is the dominant term. Love is pain, pain unto death and the trace of this understanding can be seen even in Harwood's most celebratory poems. "Night Thoughts" narrates a process of subjective destitution. The Demon is abject, poisoned by his own insatiable need: "Baby I'm sick. I need /nursing. Give me your breast./ My orifices bleed". Baby and Demon are old; they represent an eternity of desire. "Born under the same sign/ after some classic rape"; they will "share/ the end of this affair". But what is the "end"? Not death. Within the logic of Harwood's love poetry, death is imbricated with love. Demon's desire sickens him unto death but he cannot die and thus, he cannot love. Even as he exposes its seamy underside, Demon instructs Baby to keep the fabric of romantic fantasy intact through her songs: "Give them the old soft shoe./ Put on a lovely show./ Put on your wig, and go".

While Baby and Demon's imaginary identification is evident in their complicity, their essential alienation from each other is made manifest in the poem's formal and tonal breaks. Both stanza form and rhyme scheme change at this point, marking a divide in the consciousness of the poem. The lines lengthen into a series of rhymed couplets spoken by a narratorial voice that seems to be both outside and inside the poem: "The service station flags, denticulate/ plastic, snap in the wind". The malaise of desire in the opening stanzas appears to be symptomatic of a malaise in the world; the first section of the poem constitutes the knowledge that the second section tries to repress. Here we have "romance" staged in a rundown motel flanked by a service station, where "Hunched seabirds wait". Yet from this tawdry, even malevolent space arises a delicate love lyric:

All night salt water stroked and shaped the sand.
All night I heard it. Your bravura hand
chimed me to shores beyond time's rocking swell.

The references to music and a place beyond time are emblematic of Harwood's poetry. Here they express a desire to save the ideal of romantic love from contamination by gross reality, a desire for transcendence the poem reveals to be impossible. The participants construct a fantasy of love. They are elemental—water and sand; they are music—maestro and instrument. They are eternal,

unbounded. However, the end-stopped line that follows "chimed me to shores beyond time's rocking swell" and completes the couplet—"The last cars leave the shabby motel"—dramatically alters the mood. Its shock effect is compounded by the subsequent couplet: "Lovers and drunks unroofed in sobering air/ disperse, ghost-coloured in the streetlight-glare". The love lyric is effectively undermined.

Again the form of the poem changes. The lines contract with a brutal abruptness as the voice of a mordant chorus is introduced:

Rock-a-bye Baby
in the motel
Baby will kiss
and Demon will tell.

If love and death are two sides of the same coin, trust and treachery have their own obverse relation. Harwood has constructed a complex set of subjective and formal relationships here. Baby and Demon appear to be the alter egos of the couple in the motel who attempt to disguise their affair by looking at it through the hazy lens of romance. This intersubjectivity is suggested by the alternation of the "nursery rhyme" with the longer rhymed lines associated with the lovers trysting in the motel. Here the couplets have been joined to make quatrains. While "Demon's a mocker" and "Baby's a whore", the lovers are described with an exquisite pathos:

Draw up the voluptuously crumpled sheet.
In rose-dark silence gentle tongues repeat
the body's triumph though its grand eclipse.
I feel your pulsebeat through my fingertips.

However, the redemptive desire for unity in love falters: "the body's the best picture of the soul/ crouched like an animal in savage grace./ Ghost after ghost obscures your sleeping face". There is no unity here; the lovers, like the soul and the body, are divided.

At this point, the poem's form is recast for the last time. The quatrains are retained but line length and rhyme scheme alter and it seems that the various speakers of "Night Thoughts" have merged into a single, seemingly masculine voice that expresses his "love" as violence. The voice has the Demon's desperation, yet the address is to a non-capitalised "baby", figured vulnerably as a bird "that flutters from my side" and an empty beach, "ravished by the tide". The demonic voice imagines an obscene enjoyment:

So fair are you, my bonny lass,
so sick and strange am I,
that I must lie with all your loves
and suck your sweetness dry.

And drink your juices dry, my dear,
and grind your bones to sand,

then I will walk the empty shore
and sift you through my hand.

And sift you through my hand, my dear,
and find you grain by grain,
and build your body bone by bone
and flesh those bones again (109).

The speaker is manic in his insistent repetition and his sadistic desire. In this representation of the space between deaths, the sublime body that can die and live again, that can sustain all manner of disasters and be seamlessly remade, is once again evoked.

The death-driven speaker figures his relationship to "baby", in terms of predator and prey:

and like some gentle creature meet
the huntsman's murderous eye,
and know you never shall escape
however fast you fly (105).

The speaker, describing himself as "unhoused", takes on the guise of one of the "unroofed" drunks of the earlier stanza, thus linking this final, brutal dénouement—"Be sure I'll have you heart, my love,/ when all your loving's done" (105), with the second lyrical section of the poem. "Baby" is victim, lover and ghost, figures associated with Gothic romance. Here, however, the monster is creator rather than created. In this song of consuming passion, the demonic voice threatens to destroy and remake "baby" in the form of his "love".

I have been arguing that Harwood's love poetry anticipates the terrifying possibility of the second death, the erasure of the subject from language, against which the cry of lover and beloved, "remember me", is the only defence. Such an understanding emerges most dramatically in "The Lion's Bride" (119), a sonnet in which that Gothic trio, victim, lover and ghost, reappears. Again, this poem has produced conflicting interpretations, from Strauss's emphasis on its parodic elements to Hoddinott's reading of the poem as "a powerful allegorical statement in sonnet form of the mutual unintentional destructiveness associated with the trappings of conventional marriage" (72). I would argue that the poem should be read seriously despite the fun that Harwood has had with it, although my reasons for doing so are very different from Hoddinott's. For me, "The Lion's Bride" is the paradigmatic instance in Harwood's work of the constitution of love in the space between deaths.

Spoken in the voice of the lion, the poem is indicative of the way in which the speaking subject structures his or her reality through fantasy. The lion and his beloved, the keeper's daughter, are caught in a net of fantasy, and both are figured in terms of misprision. While the lion is personified, the woman is perceived as animal: "I loved her softness, her warm human smell,/ her dark mane flowing

loose". The imaginary dimension of this love is clear: the lovers complete each other, "soul to soul". While the keeper may have fed the lion, it is the daughter who nourishes his dream of love. Barefoot she brings their "love feast" in their "special bowl". It is through the lion's relationship to her that he identifies himself not only as lover but as "brute king".

The octave describes the imaginary scene of courtly love. For the lover, the value of the beloved is contingent upon her idealisation, a process in which he finds his own ideal image. In the sestet, this fabric of fantasy is rent by the sudden appearance of "an icy spectre/ sheathed in silk", with "pointed feet", "scented veil" and "painted lips". Already described as a "spectre", the woman's death is anticipated as the effect of this encounter between the lion's fantasy and the impossibility of his desire. The laws of nature, suspended in the first stanza, come into play and the lion responds as the beast he really is by devouring this creature stopping only to exclaim "A ghost has bones, and meat!" This moment of rupture signifies a traumatic knowledge that must immediately be repressed. The narrative of romantic love is revived in order to suture the gap that death has created: the beloved is transformed into the sublime body; she will fill the void of her own absence. With unconsciously mordant irony, the lion invites "my love, my bride" to share the meal that she has, in fact, become.

The lion is the agent of a death that is disavowed in the immediate restitution of the love object. But the act of eating that formerly united "brute king" and "tender woman" has been gruesomely transmogrified. If we see the octave as the locus of the beautiful -- the harmonious, loving relation of beast and human -- the sestet is the locus of the sublime. The "lion's bride", the figure of fantasy, is the defence against the second death of the beloved. The fantasy staged in the sestet reveals the dimensions of the fantasy constructed in the octave. For the reader, the pathos of the last line derives from the knowledge that the object of desire/s irrevocably lost. In the space between deaths, "The Lion's Bride" intimates the self-destructive limit of the signifying process.

The eroticisation of death in "The Lion's Bride" develops the imagery of "Night Thoughts: Baby and Demon" as well as that of other poems written between 1969 and 1974. In Harwood's poetry of love, Death is a voyeur who hovers around the lovers' bed in the knowledge that they are his. One of the most erotic moments in her work is this challenge in the final stanza of "The Sharpness of Death", a poem collected originally in *The Lion's Bride*:

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 (155).

Death, like the lovers in "Night Thoughts: Baby and Demon" and the lion of "The Lion's Bride", is sharp-toothed and predatory. As we have seen, it is out of physical dissolution that the image of love arises. In its pure negativity, Death is the guarantee of love; it fixes love in the speaker's memory at the moment of its most intense and intimate expression. For Harwood, the impossibility of love is its condition. There is not a "fall" from the plenitude of love just experienced but rather, a promise of enjoyment yet to be had. If she cedes her desire, it is Death's turn to take her. Both desire and lack are located in the space between deaths, and it is there the poet reigns. As Harwood says of loved ones now dead: "you have to wrestle with the grief itself . . . you bring them back into the world of light in a poem" (Williams 54). Love complicates the distinction between life and death: the dead beloved is embodied in the poem and lives on in the word. It is precisely through an identification with death that the speakers of Harwood's love poems consort with their beloved ghosts in that space between deaths.

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