Tendering the Cup

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Gwen Harwood
COLLECTED POEMS 1943–1995
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W. H. AUDEN, following Samuel Butler, thought that ‘the true test of imagination is the ability to name a cat’, and plenty of people, poets and others have believed this: to recast a dictum of Christ’s, if you can’t be trusted with the cats, why should we trust you with the tigers? Gwen Harwood could be trusted with the cats, and with yet more domestic things; here, for example, is her fairly late poem ‘Cups’:

They know us by our lips. They know the proverb about the space between us. Many slip. They are older than their flashy friends, the glasses. They held cold water first, are named in scripture. Most are gregarious. You’ll often see them nestled in snowy flocks on trestle tables or perched on trolleys. Quite a few stay married for life in their own home to the same saucer and some are virgin brides of quietness in a parlour cupboard, wearing gold and roses. Handleless, chipped, some live on in the flour bin, some with the poisons in the potting shed. Shattered, they lie in flowerpot, flowerbed, fowlyard. Fine earth in earth, they wait for resurrection. Restored, unbreakable, they’ll meet our lips on some bright morning filled with lovingkindness.

It is a poem that embodies several of Harwood’s distinctive qualities, one of which is what might be called succinct command. A great deal of poetry, including some that is masterly, proceeds by way of implication and evocation, almost as freestanding conditions, but there is hardly any of this in Harwood’s work, even in the fragments: it is as if she believes that, if something cannot be incised, then it is not worth saying. Perhaps the frequently invoked spirit of her beloved Wittgenstein is behind this, but it seems to run very deep in her own nature. Hence ‘Many slip’; hence ‘Most are gregarious’; hence ‘Fine earth in earth, they wait for resurrection.’ That last touch, though, also displays her ability at outreach, also known as wit. ‘Fine earth’ is both applause and declination, the cup exalted and the cup brought low: and ‘wait’, in the circumstances, both sojourn and policy. Gwen Harwood usually writes as though to discover the fields of force in which she is lodged, the radiations both within and about the language to which she gives utterance. Whatever the temper of individual poems, festive meditative or lamenting, the words are fully in play with or against one another, as if, when she touches one, she is touching a power.

Touching of that kind is itself a power, of course, and when I read her I think of Auden’s, ‘How beautiful it is, / that eye-on-the-object look’, which he attributes to those expert in many realms. Harwood’s look, though, is rarely quite solitary. Her ‘some are virgin brides of quietness’ is natural in someone with a headful of other people’s poetry, but it is also an act of comradeship with the Keats, whose Grecian Urn might stand grandly on the shelf beside some of the cups that she is animating. Never less than her own person as a poet, she can be most herself in dexterous homage.

The homage, in her case, is fourfold: towards loved or admired people, towards the physical world, towards the truth of things, and towards the very language that mediates and monumentalises all the rest. The generously conceived and admirably noted Collected Poems 1943–1995 (edited by Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann) shows the whole span of Harwood’s ingenious and passionate nature as a poet. Many of the poems are either dedicated or addressed to friends, and, although in the nature of the case these will have special resonance for individuals, they commonly look as though the people concerned are as much collaborators as recipients — are, as she might have said, in concert. The modes and the realm of music are never far from her imagination, and those named point and counterpoint the lines, sometimes — especially in her elegies — with great intensity.

As to the world in its physicality, Harwood can lend herself to it with zest, but has no romantic wish to lose herself in it. ‘September Snow, Hobart’ begins: ‘Snow in the streets, snow on suburban homes, / settling on hyacinth-hearted slicks of oil, / on dwarfs in primary colours, hunchback gnomes; / snow in the city, piling ermine on / King Edward’s mantle, covering Sir John / Franklin’s heroic seagull-favoured head; / snow fluttering on the winter-bitten soil / of council gardens, resting where the dead // rest under lawn ... ’ A book might be written about how snowing has been handled
in modern poetry, and, if it were, ‘Franklin’s heroic seagull-favoured head’ would immediately signal Harwood’s presence — genial, precise, grateful and amused. She is engagingly ready to gamble on the natural world’s biddable character as something comic, even when the drive of a poem is grave enough: ‘Shellgrit’ concludes, ‘A thousand griefs ground fine / by the sheer weight of the past / blow in a wind as active / and fretful as a child / who will not wait for answers, / but wants only to ask’, but the way has been prepared with, ‘Shells from old oyster middens / crush at the lightest blow. / More parables of fate! / My hens quarrel and fret. / There’s one like Neddy Seagoon / who clucks What-what-what-what?’ The ghost of Wordsworth grows paler still as he reads this, but Donne and Byron cheer her on.

She was after the truth, and she did not care who knew this. She never supposed that truth had only one face or figure or tongue, and in fact she probably thought that rigidity was the enemy of constancy: but she wanted to know what the score was from point to point and from moment to moment, and her remarkably supple intelligence allowed her — pressed her, in fact — to register this with great variety. Hence the noms de plume, which were also noms de guerre: hence the work, half by stylus and half by scalpel, on her satirical figures: hence ‘An Acrostic Birthday Greeting’ to A.D. Hope, and ‘The Feast of Gwendoline’ at a lunch in celebration of her seventieth birthday; hence the lyricism in the midst of all and in spite of all. But hence too, for example, ‘Bone Scan’:

In the twinkling of an eye, in a moment, all is changed: on a small radiant screen (honeydew melon green) are my scintillating bones. Still in my flesh I see the God who goes with me glowing with radioactive isotopes. This is what he at last allows a mortal eye to behold: the grand supporting frame complete (but for the wisdom teeth), the friend who lives beneath appearances, alive with light. Each glittering bone assures me: you are known.

‘Bone Scan’ has for epigraph a fragment of Psalm 139, ‘Thou has searched me and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising’, whose phrases acquire a deeply ironic tilt in the poem. Emily Dickinson’s ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’ might have been made for Harwood, who could assume novel viewpoints for the purpose of entertainment, but who more usually worked on the assumption that a slanting gaze offered the best hope of insight. The first line, the last phrase and half a dozen other points in

‘Bone Scan’ pick the whole experience of the medical test and its meaning out against a biblical matrix, but the effect is indeflectibly original. It offers, in a strong and complex sense of the word, realisation.

And it is in that vein that Harwood offers homage to language. Her poetry never looks as though she believes that words alone are certain good, but she does clearly judge that they deserve all the praise they are likely to receive. ‘On Poetry’, written for the Spoleto Festival of 1987, proceeds with buoyant wit for most of its course and is well tempered to the last, but its final gesture is one of what might be called smiling awe: ‘Everyone’s called, but few are chosen / to wrestle, from our common speech, / the brightness of the word, to reach / the life that lies beyond our frozen / habits of thought, to show with love / much that can not be spoken of.’ From ‘Alter Ego’ to ‘Late Works’, the framing poems of the whole, this Collected Poems offers a body of work that vindicates triumphantly the hope in that claim.