

From 'Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet'

Anne Collett

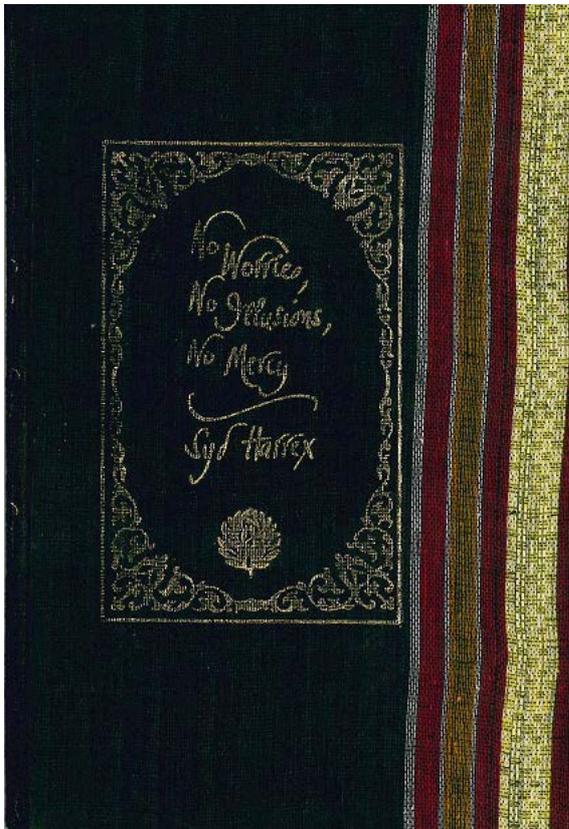
Encore, the west wind iterates, *encore*,
under the eaves of the house of the heart
and in the cavern of the pulsing ear
until – come the somersault of the year –
it's time for fluttering wings to rehearse
the oldest journey in the sky of verse.

[...]

The retrospective gives readers an opportunity to (re)discover a poet whose work does not have the kind of reach afforded by the big international publishing houses. Harrex's first volume of poetry, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (1984), was published by Dangaroo (Mundelstrup, Denmark) – the press founded by Anna Rutherford in tandem with *Kunapipi*. Dangaroo books were often distributed at conferences of commonwealth writing and book fairs, having arrived at the venue

in the back of Anna's four-wheel drive or in her backpack; and although Anna delighted in telling me that she did not really like poetry much (knowing how much I did), she managed to publish and sell quite a bit of it. Harrex's next two volumes, *Inside Out* (1991) and *Dedications* (1999), were published with Wakefield Press, an independent book publishing company based in Adelaide, South Australia. The fifth and sixth volumes, *Under a Medlar Tree* (2004) and *Dougie's Ton* (2007), were produced by Lythrum, another small publishing house, also based in Adelaide.

All five slim volumes have been designed and produced with an aesthetic eye – they look and feel 'good' as a book should; but the fourth volume, *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* (1999), is an *objet d'art*. It is a 'Writers Workshop Book' published by P. Lal (Lake Gardens, Calcutta). The book is a beautiful limited edition: 'gold-embossed by hand, hand-stitched & hand-bound by Tulamiah Mohiuddin with handloom sari cloth woven in South India.' Lal's credo is printed



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Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

at the back of the volume. Here he notes that '[a]lternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules' because of the nexus between 'high-profile PR-conscious book publishers, semi-literate booksellers, moribund ... libraries, poorly informed and nepotistic underlings in charge of book review pages ... of most national newspapers and magazines, and biased bulk purchases of near worthless books by bureaucratic institutions ...' (n.p.). This credo sounds more like a diatribe than a statement of belief; but although this might be Lal's (biased) perspective on the book trade in India, much of it sounds all too familiar to the Australian editor of this journal. However, whilst I believe that independence is something to be valued, the difficulties of distribution attendant on cottage-industry publishing is in part reason for my decision to institute the new tradition of a literary retrospective in this journal; the inherent irony is of course that *Kunapipi* too is a cottage industry and its distribution and accessibility is dependent on the loyalty of friends and colleagues, the inclination of individual subscribers and the buying policies of libraries. Yet whilst independent publishers allow copyright to remain with authors, the retrospective does not come at any cost. 'All copyright,' Lal notes of Writers Workshop publications, 'remains with the writer' (emphasis his) as of course it should if respect for the author's intellectual property rights is to be honoured.

Perhaps my introduction to Syd Harrex's work is too much of an introduction to the publishing industry and the publication of poetry in particular, but then, this is the first retrospective I have mounted and it seems it must come with the usual explanation of *raison d'être* and indeed, something of a credo. So to the poet and his poetry, and my selection of poems ... I have titled this piece 'Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet,' not so much to indicate that the poet is in the Autumn of his life (although he is that), but to suggest something about the mediative quality of Harrex's poetry that tends, even in its earliest incarnations, to nostalgia – by which perhaps I mean an awareness of, even a dwelling on, mortality and the inevitability of loss. This is an inevitability tempered by a faith in life, love and beauty. Keats is never far away (as acknowledged by Harrex in the epigraph to his first volume, *Atlantis*, and carried by the west wind of 'Encore' into his latest volume, *Dougie's Ton*).

An overt example of Harrex's tendency is the poem, 'All a Green Willow,' included in the volume *Inside Out*:

A boy's year like mine
had just two seasons:
Aussie Rules and Cricket.

The discovery of girls
and swimming after tennis
also glowed with summer good,

but the time on which I gloat
is saturated by the smell
of linseed oil in willow wood.
Rich then and complex now
the leather rush of red, the race
across the stain of green:

They helped me read a poem's
beauty through, see its stumps of birth
and death, with life running in-between.

To describe a poem like this as nostalgic is a bit misleading, for unlike Keats, Harrex does not dwell in, or feed on, melancholy, rather, the place where he is now is constantly evaluated in light of where he has come and what brought him here – the experience of a life that gives precedence to the art of friendship (a green willow). 'And that's how death should be / the past nurturing the future' Harrex writes in 'The Rain it Raineth Every Day.' 'So be yourself,' he enjoins:

So be yourself ... once insignificant
now a chiseller of messages
on headstones (a dying art you say)
but a decent way of making a living.

A warm sense of humour and an (extra)ordinary humanity, pervades Harrex's poetic observation and reflection. The poem as a cricket pitch, or indeed, life itself as a cricket pitch, is a metaphor that might seem either forced or clichéd but Harrex manages to avoid both pitfalls. The poet is well-aware of the dangers, remarking in the sonnet, 'Surviving Clichés,' that:

Some simple words refuse to serve our needs
without banality, while true and tried
experience decays to platitudes.

But some simple poems do not refuse to serve the poet's needs. 'All a Green Willow' retains a simple integrity – it carries the aura of being truly felt. The achieved effect of 'truth' is the poet's craft – an art so skilled that it gives the appearance of artlessness. Perhaps this is just an indication of my personal preference, but for me Harrex's best work is that which is not asked to carry too great a burden.

[...]

For Harrex, poetry is a lived experience – it colours who he is, the way he sees the world and the way he gives that world back to himself and his readers in his poetic art. 'Walking Out in the Clare Valley' is a perfect example (but then so are all the poems I have chosen for this retrospective). In a poetic exemplar of the Romantic ethos (whose title calls to mind the Romantic poet John Clare) Harrex wonders as he wanders in nature: writing is mind-walking that takes its pace and rhythm from the body. Stanza six reads:

A large log
across your path
invited you to sit

a while and rest
between stanzas.

Like your last footsteps,
your thoughts are melting ...

Limb, eye and mind are as one with, and yet distinct from, the world through which they travel:

But suddenly I shudder
in my tracks, stopped by an idea
that all I breathe,
touch, taste, see, hear,
is only magic waiting to vanish,
as men ordain,
in everlasting death.

The 'ritual of renewals' after bushfire, as 'secure as the sun is secure,' reminds the poet not only of the cyclic nature of life in which death never has the final word, but of the singleness, the solitariness of human life, divided from the natural world by consciousness:

Winter rains raise the word
of death to speech of seed and leaf;
the single human has only one
life's chance of being heard.

[...]

The editors would like to thank Anne Collett, Associate Professor of English Literatures at the University of Wollongong, and editor of Kunapipi, for her permission to reprint 'Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet,' which first appeared in Kunapipi, 30.1 (2008), 188-93.