‘In the Dreaded Park’: Gwen Harwood and Subpersonality Theory

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Whether they are labelled masks (or masques), voices, faces, guises, identities, characters, selves, personae or subpersonalities, Gwen Harwood’s predilection for pseudonyms creates a provocative double bind. The construction of a fictive identity directs criticism away from the biographical and toward a linguistic and philosophic emphasis on the performative. This is primarily because fictive identities presuppose a language game, in which the author is subservient to the codes of the language system. By creating a name or a word to replace the unified self of the tangible authorial figure, the author acknowledges the primacy of language. However, the causal relationship is destabilised by psychoanalytic readings of a situation in which pseudonyms are identified as belonging to a particular author. Emphasis returns to the author because readings of the text are informed by an understanding of the author’s subconscious.

Biographical analyses of Harwood’s poetry have often focused on the division of self, specifically in ‘In the Park’ and the poems featuring the characters of Eisenbart and Krote, at the expense of the more melancholic or erotic poems in her oeuvre, such as ‘Sharpeness of Death’, ‘A Case’ and ‘Space of a Dream’.¹ The critics’ coyness could be explained by their association with Harwood. Many of the biographical critics had lasting relationships with the poet, maintained, for the most part, through a long series of letters.² In fact, Greg Kratzmann, Harwood’s biographer, remarks: ‘Gwen Harwood’s remarkable gifts, given through her poems and her friendships, will long be carried “life to life”’.³ Admiration for both her poetry and her friendship is a constant in biographical analyses, an esteem equally present in feminist and post-structuralist analyses of Harwood’s poetry. In this respect the critics form a homogenous group. They consciously or subconsciously empower Harwood as the ‘maker of meaning’ for her poetry.

The function of biographical analyses is to expose and emphasise the private forces acting on a public work. Antithetically, deconstructionists, feminists and ‘new critics’ attempt to wrest control away from the author and the private self, focusing instead on the language system and the forces of the contemporary dominant ideology. Despite invoking Barthes’s and Foucault’s ‘death of the author’, deconstructionist critiques of Harwood’s poetry in fact often emphasise Harwood’s creative process, contradicting their conviction of the primacy of the language system.

Stephanie Trigg’s ‘new critical orthodoxy’⁴ is a prime example. Though she does analyse much of Harwood’s poetry by deconstructing language codes, she also pre-empts her forays into biographical analysis by conceding that ‘There are times when I appeal to facts about Harwood’s life, or her own discussions of her poetry and its interpretation’.⁵ Similarly, Andrew Taylor concludes his essay on the fictive identities in Harwood’s poetry thus:
When she starts to sound most like ‘herself’ and least like a ‘fabulous artificer’ (who we must remember was also confined, though involuntarily, to an island) then we should most be on our guard.5

The parentheses in the quotation above highlight the biographical snippet that Taylor finds that he cannot suppress in his essay. This kind of reference could be understood as reductive to his analysis, as he is so eager to argue that the woman in the park in no way represents the biography of the poet.

Harwood was a forthright personality who was keen to emphasise her authorial intent and ultimate control of her work, asserting, ‘I am in complete control of what I publish’.7 This can be interpreted in two ways: first, that she publishes only what she chooses and thus controls her public output; or, second, that she has ultimate control over her poems after publication. This kind of control could be exerted through self-reflexive public interpretations of her poetry in interviews, at conferences and at poetry readings. It is this second compulsion for control that I will examine.

Critics of Harwood’s poetry have ascribed much importance to her interviews. They frequently argue that her construction of a public self was a ploy to mask her private life. These interpretations stemmed from Harwood’s personal convictions concerning the divided self. Harwood initiated, and subsequently nurtured, responses to her poetry of which she approved. For example, in an interview with Barbara Williams, she clearly shows a preference for Andrew Taylor’s analysis of ‘In the Park’. This analysis focuses on the spiritual interpretation of one’s children eating one alive and on the use of the word ‘they’ in the line ‘they have eaten me alive’. Taylor deflected attention away from possible interpretations involving postnatal depression and instead argued that the narrator could be stating that it is her feet, rather than her children, that are eating her alive, or that she was only spiritually giving herself to her children. Harwood responded to this critique by stating:

Andrew has written a wonderful exposition of that poem … I feel like getting his piece copied and handed out to the questioners who say ‘Did you really love your children’.8

Philip Mead’s urging of critics to consider psychoanalysing Eisenbart and Krote should therefore be revised to encompass the whole of Harwood’s oeuvre, not just two of her poetic characters. A reading of this kind would disempower the conscious intentions of the poet and instead promote interpretations of her subconscious. Harwood’s penchant for elaborating on her love of masks, then, becomes fodder for a humanistic psychoanalytic reading where her need for control can be understood as masking a fear of the lack of control she has over her poetry. Her claim that it is an ‘operatic I’, a fictive, theatrical ‘I’,9 that functions in her poetry (not the ‘I’ of self), can be read as a deflection away from the private preoccupations evident in her work. As Harwood herself has said: ‘With one hand, dear reader, I am extending my deathless verse; with the other I am keeping you away from my private life, which is mine and nothing to do with you’.10

Subpersonality theory is pertinent to a study of Harwood because, although it focuses on an analysis of the writer, it also returns control to the reader. In the same way that I was compelled to respond to the silence surrounding
psychoanalytic readings of Harwood’s poetry, John Rowan, psychotherapist and fellow of the British Psychological Society, was compelled to write a book in response to the ‘extraordinary fact that there is at present no systematic book on subpersonalities, and the word does not appear in any text on personality theory’. In his later essay ‘The Normal Development of Subpersonalities’ he underlines that the development of sub-selves ‘seem[s] to be universal and … are quite normal’. There does not seem to be any limit to subpersonalities: people develop as many as they require. However, Rowan argues that he is inclined to ‘feel that from 4 to 8 is the normal range’. Any number more than this suggests that similar subpersonalities have not been integrated.

In one case study a woman of ‘about thirty-five’ listed her subpersonalities:

- Carmen Miranda: Black, beautiful, dramatic, sensual, bitchy.
- Earthy Mangold: Has children, animals, grows things, intuitive, compassionate. Can also be gossipy, dirty, lazy, sluttish.
- Good Son: Very brave, never cries, tough male.
- Little Wilhelmina: Very suppressed, needs taking care of, doesn’t like imposing on people. Needs to ask for love.
- Apple juice: Ascetic, meditates, wrapped up in mysticism, vegetarian. Wants to be balanced.
- Mostly Me: Strong, independent, rather impatient, easily hurt, expects rejection and criticism. Can also be stiff necked, proud, not to be comforted.

When subpersonalities are listed and given names and characteristics in this way, they become more obviously ‘homunculi — little people within the person’. In the most basic of examples, this explains how people can describe an individual in very different ways, or how an individual may feel out of control in a situation, unable to believe they have said or done something they consider to be totally out of character. Different personalities or ‘little people’ can be said to control different aspects of the individual’s life.

‘In the Park’, first published in the Bulletin in 1961 under Harwood’s first pseudonym, Walter Lehmann, is an example of Harwood listing one of her subpersonalities. In the poem, a woman sits in the park with her three children and encounters a man whom ‘she loved once’. In a surreal moment, reviewed favourably by critics for its modernism, an omniscient narrator describes ‘a small balloon rising from his neat head’, encasing the words ‘but for the grace of God’. However, it is the ambiguous and highly contested final lines that have challenged critics: ‘To the wind she says, “They have eaten / me alive.”’

‘In the Park’, or ‘In the Dreaded Park’, as Elizabeth Lawson has perceptively dubbed it, is the best illustration of a site of conflict between scholars of Harwood’s poetry. In fact, Harwood herself was the first to use ‘dreaded’ in relation to her poem and to provocatively suggest that the poem should be ‘extirpated’. Her strong reaction to this poem may have been informed by the issues surrounding its publication. First, ‘In the Park’ was written very early in her career but was constantly requested at poetry readings throughout her life. It is published in some nine different collections of poetry and is studied by students in
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Australian secondary schools. Second, many aspects of the poem, including the man, an old lover of the woman who appears in the poem only to realise his narrow escape, and the enigmatic last line about children ‘eating [one] alive’ have been deconstructed continually in expositions of her poetry. Third, scholars have identified the poem as central to the debate on self, many of them conflating the ‘she’ in the poem with Gwen Harwood, the poet, in biographical readings.

Trigg has supported Harwood’s indignation concerning the self-referentialism of the sentiments expressed by the character of the woman in the park. She argues that questions leading to an evaluation about Harwood’s love for her children ‘belong to the domain of biography or worse, gossip, they are not the business of literary theory’.24 Certainly, if Harwood was ever actually asked by an interviewer ‘Do you love your children?’, the bluntness and naivety of the question would support Trigg’s argument. However, the related and more pertinent question ‘Is there or was there any of yourself in the woman in the park?’ requires a very different answer.

I would argue that the woman in the park enacts a subconscious desire of Harwood’s made possible by the construction of the pseudonym Walter Lehmann. This is not to suggest that Harwood’s children ‘ate her alive’ but that a part of Harwood felt this domestic claustrophobia at some point, and this was channelled into the personality of Walter Lehmann, an expression of self who absorbed this feeling and expressed it wholeheartedly in a poem.

An examination of these contradictions and tactics will assist in chiselling away Harwood’s control over interpretations of her poetry. In interviews Harwood used a sharp, derisive tone to reprimand interviewers who challenged her personal interpretations of her poetry, or those who sought to limit her discussions of the divided self. For example, in an interview with Barbara Williams, Williams commented on what she saw as ‘an impulse of self-expression’25 in the poem ‘In the Park’. Harwood immediately dissented with her famous response: ‘But it says she sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date. Mine are never out of date’.26 Harwood’s tone is intended to manipulate the reader’s response. The reader prioritises Harwood’s interpretation at the expense of the interviewer’s for three possible reasons. First, despite the incursions of postmodernist and psychoanalytic theories, there remains the overwhelming popular conviction that the creator is the maker and thus the definer of meaning in the text. Second, in Harwood’s case, the reader’s belief in her stems from her convincing and forthright manner. Finally, the reader subconsciously wants to avoid the hostility and dissension that Harwood publicly displays.

Harwood’s treatment of interviewer Candida Baker was similarly harsh. Baker’s question ‘How do you like your coffee?’ was perhaps only an attempt to lighten the tone, personalise the interview and even to befriend the poet. Harwood’s response was dismissive:

How do I like my coffee? Fresh and hot! I’m willing to talk about these peripheral things, but if I could go back I might well publish all my work anonymously and remain permanently behind my tastefully decorated screen.27

Harwood was always keen to repeat such sentiments concerning anonymity and the divided self. Her comments on the public and private Gwen Harwood divert the reader away from her private life while simultaneously providing the reader
with personal interpretations of her poetry. For example, ‘I am horrified at the
tendency of people to identify the I with the author … I keep saying that the I of
the poems is not the I making jams jellies pickles and chutneys’28 and “The I that
writes down the things on the page is certainly not the one who sits talking about
writing and the things on the page”.29

If her private life is indeed her own and ‘nothing to do with’ the reader, then
why did she tell an interviewer that ‘Nasturtiums’ in ‘The Sharpness of Death’
suite of poems refers to the time in the mid 1930s where she would take flowers
to her teacher, ‘a schoolgirl bringing flowers’?30 Her preference for anonymity is
also questionable given the fact that she claimed her pseudonyms in her books of
poetry and gave many interviews. When, in the Baker interview, she stated how
given her time again she may have ‘remained permanently behind [her] tastefully
decorated screen’, it is important to note the use of the word ‘might’ and the
qualifying statement that caps off this quotation: ‘Once you associate yourself
with your poetry it’s too late to take your name and person back’.31 Similarly, in
an interview with John Beston she states:

One doesn’t ever like to hurt the living. I do agree with Jim McAuley that it is better
that the finest masterpiece should remain unwritten if it causes human pain. So I
suppose the thing to do is stuff it all in the bottom drawer for a while.32

But whereas Jim McAuley’s ‘hurtful’ poems remain unwritten, Harwood’s are
written and placed in a bottom drawer ‘for a while’.

Certainly, some poison-pen letters she received exaggerated her sense of injury.
One stated, ‘You are never happy unless you are in the public eye … unless you
are up there in public being praised, you can’t do without it’.33 Harwood discusses
this particular piece of ‘hate mail’ in her interview with Jenny Digby, but this does
not suggest that she was the recipient of a lot of this kind of mail. Nonetheless,
those few poison-pen letters weighed heavily on Harwood’s mind, despite her
flippant attitude toward them in the interview. This, perhaps, is because the letters
did not attack her poetry; rather, they were aimed more personally at her approach
to her public role as a poet.

At some point in many interviews, Harwood keenly suggests that she is a
‘trickster-prankster’ or a ‘magician’ with words.34 For example, in an interview
with Ann Lear, she stated:

I’m a notorious trickster-prankster writer under pseudonyms and comic disguises,
and I am often amused to see the ‘I’ of other poems read as Mrs Harwood of 18
Pine Street, West Hobart.35

Such statements are, in themselves, a challenge to readings of her texts and
interpretations of the transcripts of her interviews. If Harwood is a ‘trickster-
prankster’ or ‘magician’, does she tell the truth or conjure illusions? Why should
we believe her when she states that she is not the woman in the park or she is
indeed the narrator of ‘An Impromptu for Ann Jennings’?36 What the poet tells the
reader in interviews should not be the sole basis of an interpretation of her poetry.
This is most obvious in the way Harwood divides her poetry, much like she
divides herself. Such statements as ‘The I of my poems is an entirely operatic I’37
are qualified by the statements: ‘The only case that I is I myself is when a poem
is addressed to a particular person. Most often now to the memory of a person’38
and ‘Any poem addressed to one of my close friends ... is a poem of ... integrity. You can read these poems as spoken from my heart, my heart and nobody else’s’.  

Lear, very mindful of Harwood’s prejudices about the self, chose her words carefully when she asked:

At the end of The Lion’s Bride you have written a very moving poem not necessarily about your own mother, but nevertheless about a relationship between daughter and mother.

Harwood responded:

No. No. The Lion’s Bride is a poem nakedly to my mother. It is my mother ... I am speaking. I did not inscribe it to my mother. It just says ‘Mother Who Gave Me Life’, but it is my mother.

Biographical elements, as we are told, also appear in poems that are not dedicated to specific people. For example, Harwood and her childhood friend Alice used to ‘cradle [frogs] in our hands while we listened to the adults on the verandah and learnt about life’. Harwood confided that this biographical event is referred to in ‘The Secret Life of Frogs’.  

This parallels her anecdote on the Australia Council video recording in 1987 where she details her experience of playing for Rubenstein and connects it to the ‘she’ who ‘once played for Rubenstein, who yawned’ in ‘Suburban Sonnet’.

Harwood’s stance on poetic criticism was at odds with her use of multiple pseudonyms. This was typified by her validation of the biographical in her poetry and the fierce defence she mounted to protect her private life. For Harwood there was always a right and a wrong answer. She said, ‘I wonder if these poems are more explicable to me than to anyone else? I resist interpretations that are quite wrong’. She clearly believed that the poems were indeed ‘more explicable’ to her. For example, she rejected an interpretation of ‘In the Park’ as an account of a battered wife, as she felt ‘you cannot read into that’ such a meaning. However, Harwood also stated, ‘There is no use pinning notes to [a poem] after it has left home’. It can be argued that her insistence on establishing the accurate interpretations of her poetry in interviews is in fact a rather detailed note that she pins to her poetry post-publication.

The politics of naming raises questions for the pseudonym and the identity behind the pseudonym. As Hortense Calisher reminds us in her essay on the history of the pseudonym, ‘pseudo, after all means false; it has an edge of masquerade’.  

Harwood’s creation and subsequent unmasking of her pseudonymous identities requires careful analysis. The choice to use a pseudonym and the choice of a name for this identity has great significance, especially for Harwood, whose pseudonyms are loaded with meaning.

If, as Neal Pendleman states, ‘a name indicates membership in families, ethnic groups and gender classes’, then Harwood’s preference for publishing poems under a collection of pseudonyms denies these ties and misleads reader response. The Helen Demidenko/Darville incident illustrates that as a culture we place much emphasis on the naming process and thus the identity of the author. If Walter Lehmann had remained the author of ‘In The Park’, fewer or perhaps no questions at all would have been raised about the identity of the woman in the park.
If pseudonyms are a form of ‘masquerade’, what, then, is Harwood masking? Calisher argues:

Historically, the reasons behind the pseudonyms have been both brutal and mild, ranging from the political safeguards against being killed for subversions, to the merely social, when you didn’t want the King’s court, or your relatives around the corner, to know what you wrote.47

Harwood’s choice to publish many of her contentious poems under a pseudonym may fit into this second category, though the reason is not a minor one when her pseudonymous poems are read as an oeuvre in themselves. Harwood had a sophisticated understanding of the division of self and was able to label her subpersonalities through the use of pseudonyms or signatures on her letters. Some of these subpersonalities were Little Gwendoline, the eccentric intellectual snob; Ginnie, the naïve ingenue; Walter Lehmann, the suave European hoaxer; Francis Geyer, the passionate and melancholy lover; Miriam Stone, the disillusioned mother and housewife; and Timothy Kline, the angry young man. In addition to these semi-autonomous subpersonalities there is also a series of underdeveloped subpersonalities much lower on the hierarchy of evolution: Theophilus Panbury, the flirtatious and lovesick writer stumbling upon a creative gift; Fred Hackleskinner, the cheeky observer; and the newly discovered Alan Carvosso, the envious dreamer.

The process and politics of naming are significant when turning our attention to subpersonality theory. In addition to seeking the man or woman behind the pseudonym, many studies are now equally concerned with the actual choice of pseudonym. For example, it was once enough to state that the Brontes wrote under the male pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton in order to gain publication in a patriarchal society. What needs to be asked is why they chose these particular names — why not Charles, Ernest and Andrew, if they were intent on keeping their first initial? What does the choice of christian name in this instance reveal about the Brontes’ interests and preoccupations?

Choosing a name for oneself can be seen as a reclamation of the power we are denied at birth. Also, as Alison Hoddinott has suggested, ‘A mask can provide a way of saying things that could not be said without the danger of being misunderstood or hurting others’.48 This may have been one of the most important reasons for Harwood choosing to write poems like ‘In the Park’ under a pseudonym, but, nonetheless, she unmasked these pseudonyms. Though Harwood has argued that when she wrote ‘In the Park’ she ‘saw that woman and felt [her] way into what she was thinking’,49 in fact, imagining and recreating this kind of anguish in a poem relies on some assimilation of that feeling. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to argue that no mother has ever felt even a momentary flash of frustration or despair or anguish. Harwood’s constant reiteration that she never felt anything but a ‘sensual pleasure’50 in having her children is unlikely. If she had remained firmly behind her pseudonyms, she could have avoided the constant reproachful autobiographical questions, which suggests that these creations are indeed indicative of a tendency toward subpersonality, rather than of her genuine longing to stay behind that ‘tastefully decorated screen’.

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2 The critics with whom Harwood maintained a correspondence include Vincent Buckley, Alison Hoddinott, A D Hope, Gregory Kratzmann, James McAuley and Chris Wallace-Crabbe.


5 ibid., p 4.


10 ibid.


12 ibid., p 8.


14 Rowan, op. cit., p 53.

15 ibid., p 48.

16 ibid., p 10.


20 ibid., line 8.

21 ibid., line 14.

22 Lawson, op. cit., p 75.


24 Trigg, op. cit., p 2.

25 Williams, op. cit., p 57.

26 ibid.


29 Digby, op. cit., p 51.

30 ibid., p 63.

31 ibid., p 138.


33 Digby, op. cit., p 54.

34 Lear, op. cit., p 3.

35 In the interview with Ann Lear, Harwood states that poems addressed to her friends and family are spoken from her heart. As Ann Jennings was her friend, it can then be argued that Harwood is speaking to her friend in ‘An Improvemnt to Ann Jennings’.

36 Lear, op. cit., p 3.

37 Edgar, op. cit., p 74.

38 Lear, op. cit., p 3.

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39 ibid., p 3.
40 Edgar, op. cit., p 75.
42 Digby, op. cit., p 51.
43 ibid., p 52.
44 Edgar, op. cit., p 75.
47 Calisher, op. cit., p 53.
48 Hoddingott, op. cit., p 87.
49 Lear, op. cit., p 4.
50 Baker, op. cit., p 139.

blackBOX: Painting A Digital Picture of Documented Memory
Tatiana Pentes
7 ibid.
8 ibid., p 2.
9 ibid., p 3.
10 ibid., p 6.
13 John Conomos discusses notions of new media an interview conducted at Sydney College of the Arts, 2004.
17 Landow, op. cit., p 156.