e-note: Gwen Harwood poetry

Harwood’s poetry embraces the contradictions of human experience – pain and love, life and death, suffering and joy. “Father and Child”, for example, employs a two part structure, Barn Owl and Nightfall, a diptych that emphasises the opposition between life and death, innocence and maturity, youth and old age. The image in Barn Owl of the “lonely child who believed death clean and final” gives way to the grotesque realisation that death is “obscene”, emphasised in the alliterative “dropped and dribbled”. This childhood epiphany becomes more significant forty years on in Nightfall. The father, “[e]ighty years old”, is subject to the burden of approaching death, and the child, now the mature speaker, denies the reality of mortality, suggesting that perhaps “death had no power / or were no more than sleep.” Yet, maturity has brought the knowledge that there are some “sorrows” that we must face, and embrace the pain as part of our human experience. Harwood’s aim in this representation of negative capability is to bring to light the presence of duality that exists within each human being. We are in constant battle with our opposing desires; however, for Harwood it is not a battle. It speaks of a more holistic conception of the condition of being human.

*The Glass Jar: A Psychoanalytic reading*

Harwood’s *The Glass Jar* takes as its principle point of view that of a child, whose nightly ritual, it would seem, offers no respite from the eternal cycle of the Sun and Moon. However, despite this everyday *natural* occurrence, the child is unable to cope with its *supernatural* repercussions that nightly haunt the innocent being. This constant battle between the forces of Light (and Good) and that of Darkness (and Evil) is brought out effectively in the poem through Harwood’s insinuations of the Oedipal Complex.
The child, in an attempt “to exorcize/ monsters that whispering would rise” at night in the form of hellish dreams, traps the light of the Sun, itself a symbol of the power of life, in a glass jar. The jar, in Harwood’s romantic symbolism, stands in place of the spiritual power of the Cross, and at once becomes for the boy, a vessel for the consecrated host to be adored, a “monstrance” that would keep him safe from the trouble he knows would come when Night vanquishes the sun, and when rest overtakes the conscious mind. In effect, therefore, the jar becomes the site at which the Freudian battle between Id and Super-Ego ensues.

Yet, the trouble to come, Harwood suggests, might stem from something already present within the boy, for he acknowledges the terrifying power of the “fiends whose mosaic vision saw/ his heart entire.” As such, the glass jar stands as his talisman against the Supernatural’s unique vision into his inner most being. Hence, the scarf he uses to hide the light in the jar becomes metaphorically the instrument by which he disguises the secrets of his heart. “(R)inged” thus, by the power of his monstrance and the hope of a suppressed unconscious, “(h)e slept.”

The Super-Ego, that which would maintain Order and Reason in the world, however, is foiled by Light’s quick retreat into the Darkness. The hope he harbours for a victory, falls, like the fallen angels in Biblical lore, “headlong from its eagle height.” The Id, it would appear, with “pincer and claw, /trident and vampire fang, envenomed/ with his most secret hate” dismantles the “mantling scarf,” and by doing so, reveals the child’s “heart entire.”

Now, with his heart thrown to the Gaze of the nocturnal demons, he runs to the one last hope of Salvation, the Mother-figure, that secret desire which he wishes to protect from the nightly torment of the Oedipal. It is here, in the fifth stanza, that Harwood reveals to us, possibly, the Child’s deepest fears, and the reason behind his monumental strategy. The mother, lying “in his rival’s fast embrace,” offers him no succour. Indeed, faithlessly, she embraces “the gross violence done to her” thus striking at the very heart of his secret. The child, reeling from the incomprehensible “score” of “Love’s proud executants” returns to do hopeless battle with the chief
villain himself, the father who now, in “worse dreams,” directs with his “fiddle and bow” the malignant ballet of the little one’s scandalous defeat. Skeletons dance, in that perpetual dance of death, the final ignominy against which the glass jar was meant to guard. The Oedipal desires of the child are exposed, by his greatest rival, whose nightly reign over the former’s “comforter” transform him into the personification of the dark forces that mock the equally secret drives of his Id. It seems, it is only in the deep recesses of his heart that his musical score can be enjoyed without the disruptive presence of the Super-Ego.

The Sun appears in the morning once again, winking and laughing where he had trapped it all along. The battle lost, the Sun’s resurrection comes too late; the “crumpled scarf” announces his forlorn defeat, despite the “fresh morning” and the “flower-brushed fields” suggesting plenitude and life.

This Oedipal rendering of the child’s nightly torment forces into the light of analysis the glaring truth of the duality that exists within each human being. We are in constant battle with opposing desires, and selves. Such a fragmentation of the individual, Harwood’s poetry seems to contend, cannot be denied. On the contrary, the human condition is marked by a fragmentation that runs deep within the veins of experience. Harwood is at pains in this and other poems to stress the almost Nietzschean impulse to embrace both pain and suffering, to combine the Appollonian and Dionysian elements of the human psyche in order to move forward. Harwood’s ‘moving forward’ should not be confused for “progress,” in the physical sense of the word, but should be taken to imply an overcoming of the world, a realisation of the Self, and of what it means to be human. This offers no protection from pain, as the child in The Glass Jar learns. However, it does chart out for us the path by which one must travel in order to remain human.

- written by Niven Kumar