

The Lonely Seas and Dream Guests: Two Approaches to the Inner Poetics of Age by Australian poets Ada Cambridge and Gwen Harwood

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is derived from my research thesis *Born of Fire, Possessed by Darkness: Mysticism and Australian Poetry* (2008), to be published by Cambria Press in 2011-2. Having said that, it gives me some pleasure to set aside the often contentious subject of mystical discourses in literature to simply talk about two Australian poets' expansive approaches to the aging process and what insights these approaches can offer future directions in aged care. For the purposes of clarity and brevity I will be limiting my discussion to Ada Cambridge's 'The Lonely Seas' and 'The Night' and Gwen Harwood's later dream poems.

THE LONELY SEAS

In 1911 Ada Cambridge (1844-1926) published 'The Lonely Seas', a passionate autobiographical account of her soul's journey beyond the confines of her pastor husband's 'official religion' to 'the Spirit of the illimitable Universe, the One who knows All, never missed or lost' (Cambridge, 1911). This was re-envisioned as the soul's quest for, discovery and rest in God in her subsequent poem 'The Night' (1913). Cambridge's life was one of Anglican piety as seen in her early liturgical works and her marriage to the intellectually progressive minister Rev. George Cross, which resulted in her arrival in Australia as a young woman. A series of life crises precipitated her best known collection to *Unspoken Thoughts* (1887), a scathing anonymous collection she later withdrew (not least because as her anonymity was as *The Brisbane Courier* put it, an 'open secret' and the collection skewered both society and the clergy (Cambridge, 1988). Further, as Patricia Barton (1988) notes, during the composition of *Unspoken Thoughts* Cambridge was recovering from major 'almost certainly gynaecological' surgery and genuinely feared she might not survive (Cambridge, 1988). Her recovery offered her the chance to explore the themes of spirituality beyond 'the cramp of creed' as she put it, first in her better-known fiction then in 'The Lonely Seas' and in her final collection *The Hand in the Dark* (1913), mostly comprised of reworked poems from *Unspoken Thoughts*.

On face value, 'The Lonely Seas' is a late minor work published outside Australia comprising just six pages of *Atlantic Monthly*, but for Australian metaphysical poetry it is a vital, founding document which, true to form, details a mysticism which is not 'mysticism' by name, opting instead for an image from *The Prelude*:

Wordsworth's metaphor of the Lonely Seas, where nothing comes to you, but you yourself go forth, untrammelled, independent, to voyage where you will, — far and wide in the quiet sanctuaries of thought, with only the god you know for God, Spirit of the illimitable Universe, without form, but not void, nay, living in every breath of air, every pulsing wave, every shining star, — a still, deep, surrounding Sympathy, beyond the definitions of human sense, — this answers satisfactorily to the name of freedom, if any figure of speech can do so. (Cambridge, 1911)

Beyond its debt to Wordsworth, 'The Lonely Seas' is rarely imitative, based on a retrospective contemplation of Cambridge's own life, including her two-near death experiences, the second of which culminates in her refusal to be consoled by a clergyman:

Though it were my last breath, I had to use it to defend my soul's sanctuary at such a solemn time ... My soul was out on the Lonely Seas, with the One Who Knows All; and never did official religion with all its complicated dogmas and impossible demands, seem more purely official, more unreal, and out of place. (Cambridge, 1911)

From her 'place of peace' at the age of sixty-six, Cambridge spends much of 'The Lonely Seas' reconfiguring her life crises in terms of a spiritual pilgrimage from 'passionately devout girl' to 'inward wails' of apostasy, to the origins of her 'break with ecclesiastical authority' through her reading of biblical criticism and her search for answers from the religious spirit 'with its one clear call to be sincere at every cost' (Cambridge, 1911). To reach the place of peace, however, is to challenge both the theological orthodoxy and social constructions of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia, and Cambridge is acutely aware that a berth on the Lonely Seas does not come painlessly:

But, O Heaven! What it costs to arrive at this ... hard indeed to bear when it is his [sic] own nearest and dearest with whom he must live, spiritually, an utter stranger ... But waves are calm under the darkening

sky, and the voyager does not feel himself [sic] drowning. Too long has the soul been sailing open water to be afraid of it now. The 'Ocean of His Love' has become its home, and no place could find it less lonely. Everywhere, everywhere, — in every breath of air, every pulse of sea, every glint of star, — lives the Spirit of the illimitable Universe, the One who knows All, never missed or lost. (Cambridge, 1911)

For Cambridge, the necessity of 'obedience to what, for me, has been the divine call ... is my course laid down, and whither it leads is not business of mine' (Cambridge, 1911).

THE NIGHT

'The Night' (1913) infuses the insights of 'The Lonely Seas' with 'At Liberty', one of the most overtly religious poems of *Unspoken Thoughts*, ending 'with my Maker face to face' (Cambridge 1988). The ocean imagery, the absent cross uprising in the sea, images of terrifying openness and the conviction of the Divine Call are all consistent with 'The Lonely Seas':

What will the voyage cost?
We are already lost
Who turn from land and love, to face
This blank immensity of space.

Push out. We have to go,
Whether we fear or no.
And why stand shiver and appalled?
We go because the Voice has called. (Cambridge, 1913)

Similarly to 'The Lonely Seas' there is also the feeling of estrangement from the tabernacled 'Captain of the Quest', who 'was never put to sea' and without whom the journey to the 'Port of Rest' must proceed. 'The Night', wholly reverses the ecstasy-to-confusion dynamic of 'At Liberty', and gradually, out of the sea that is 'His — safe as the land / Within the hollow of His hand', 'The Night' begins to address the 'bitter questions' of 'At Liberty' in answers infused with the language and imagery of 'The Lonely Seas':

The open — heart of grace,
It is a lonely place!
No light on any onward track!
Too far — too late for turning back!

... Changed, changed, for ever changed,
Since hitherward we ranged,
To vision in a space so vast,
All the perspectives of the past.

How infinitely small
The once so broad and tall —
The aims, the pursuit and the strife
Shut in the sheltered grooves of life!

... Night — and the drifting soul
Still without path or goal.
Yet was the voyage worth the cost.
We are not drowned. We are not lost. (Cambridge, 1913)

Cambridge's unspoken questions of 1887, her fears of human frailty, insignificance, and failure to comprehend the 'great design' are directly engaged in three ways. First, in the recognition that indeed 'the heart of grace ... is a lonely place' and one does not venture there without a Dark Night of the Soul or sense of tumult and loss, for 'the night is dark / Beyond that only ark!'. Second, in the contrast of 'a space so vast' to the 'infinitely small' wrangles of human affairs. Third, although 'The rock of ages cleft for me [Exodus 33:22] / The Cross uprising in the sea' are 'gone, gone — forever gone!', the Maker of 'At Liberty' is present not in images of the 'countless stars' but in *voice* and, in a radical counterpoint to the absent cross, it is Christ's voice of Revelations 1:17 reinforced by the Gospel of John (6:9, 8:12):

'Tis I. Be not afraid.
Moonlight and the stars may fade.
One walks the ocean and the night.
We have no further need of light.

What matters where we go?
We do not ask to know.
He called us, and we came. The quest
For us is ended, and we rest. (Cambridge, 1913)

This is a more authoritative, refined expression of a religiosity which has moved beyond imagery to the direct auditory presence of Christ. To receive Christ's voice in a 'space so vast' replaces the grandiose 'face to face' of 'At Liberty' with a more precise, more *humble* sense of presence, but a presence that is given agency rather than left to the vagaries of a final stellar metaphor. This of course aligns her with one of the most ancient and abiding tenets of Western Christianity where the ear is considered less capricious than the eye. A major change in tone from 'The Lonely Seas' is Cambridge's insistence on the plural in 'The Night', whereby 'we' rather than 'I' hear the call (despite the cabin-bound captain), despite little elucidation of who the other passengers may be. Perhaps this is just an allegorical device, but it does serve the purpose of inclusivity: Cambridge's soul is called out on the lonely seas, but not necessarily as the only pilgrim of the inner journey; others may join or follow.

HARWOOD'S DREAM GUESTS

A far more interconnected approach is ventured by Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) in her final decades, with an abundant variety of dream guests including fellow poets, younger selves and ancestors appearing in her poems. Harwood lived in vastly different times to Ada Cambridge with vastly different opportunities and while any comparison of biographies is critically hazardous, Harwood and Cambridge did share some similar poetic inflections, notably the King James Bible, English Romanticism and the hymns of the Anglican liturgy.

Harwood's dream guests, it must be noted, did not originate with the onset of age. In 'Alla Siciliana' from *Poems Volume Two* (1968)

I see that lost enchantment wake
in light, on water, and the spirit
like a loved guest on earth can take
its needs and its delights, and wander
freely. (Harwood 2003)

While the figure of the 'loved guest' recurs throughout Harwood's later poems, the 'windfall silence, / another tongue' in 'Alla Siciliana' points to another poem from the same 1968 volume, featuring 'pure silence in a dialogue of grace':

Mystery grows lifesize as I'm brought to meet you.
(Loved, as Donne says, before your face or name ...)
A day like any other, with the same
things to be done, and soon after I greet you
I have to take my leave. Others demand
your presence, and walk, away from you,
on the fine edge of *now*, as we all do,
with an eternity at either hand. ('Sonnet', Harwood 2003)

In 'Sonnet' things that cannot be put into words begin to cohere with things that cannot be put into *worlds*, heralding the arrival of a new type of 'guest' and a new liminal space of dream consciousness in later poems, where the guests include departed poet friends James McAuley ('Three Poems for Margaret Diesendorf: Memento', 'Infant Spurwing', 'A Memory of James McAuley', 'Springtime Oyster Cove') and Vincent Buckley ('Scenic Lookout'). These guests are different to previous historical 'guests' such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Lou Salome or Harwood creations such as Professor Eisenbart in that they continue real-world conversations and relationships from the poet's own life. Younger selves, such as in 'Class of 1927', may carry portents or messages, but the departed poets demand creativity – to Buckley for example, Harwood concedes in 'Scenic Lookout' from *The Lion's Bride* (1981) 'It is fifteen years, and I must find my tongue / for the poem I've long owed you' (Harwood 2003). In the title poem from *The Present Tense* (1995, also the year of Harwood's passing, though the composition dates to six years earlier) the 'owed' poem is realised:

"What does it mean to move
out of the present tense?"
I asked you in a dream
not long after your death.
You said, "We live two lives.
One in the world, and one
in what others write about us."
In the dream it was towards evening. (Harwood 2003)

In writing this poem, by fulfilling the task owed, Harwood is by definition nourishing one of her departed friend's lives. For Harwood in 1981 dreaming was an art and a meeting place between worlds:

Things fade and fail, but not the dream
Let me enter it now, and learn the language.
Alter the secret balance of my brain
lost at the threshold of the waking world.
Come soon. I shall not have another life.
(‘Dreaming’s An Art’, Harwood 2003)

The final line, however, is contradicted by Buckley’s dream response in 1989 where the second life is ‘in what other write about us’, so here the dream guest is taking on another role, that of teacher beyond the material world. Unlike other, more nostalgic, dream guests, the friend-poet-teacher is of tremendous comfort to one in anticipation of ‘the liberation I long for’ as Harwood put it in her final letters (Harwood 2001). These letters also reveal her struggles with sleeplessness, at one point telling her GP “‘I need to dream’ but ‘she explained it’s one of the things medicine hasn’t solved: any drug that puts me to sleep will leave me without the dreams I need and make me feel worse in the morning’ (Harwood 2001) though later in the piece ‘welcome sleep’ thanks to morphine means ‘For a moment after waking I forget I am ill’, perhaps a micro-dream state all of its own.

CONCLUSION

The approaches of Ada Cambridge and Gwen Harwood to the poetics of aging provide some salient points for issues of aging and spirituality. To begin with, aging and spirituality are both intensely personal processes and thus individual personality must be acknowledged in aged care initiatives. The case of Ada Cambridge shows that aging can provide the opportunity for spiritual resolution of the anger and confusion of earlier times. Her adoption of the Wordsworthian metaphor of the Lonely Seas reflects a newfound valuing of inner journeying and initial solitude on the path from orthodoxy towards the divine. The almost talismanic construction of a central metaphor, for Cambridge (no doubt influenced by the immigrant experience) the sea, and for Harwood the dream, is for both poets imperative to their claiming of peace before death and such metaphors, symbols, images, modes or totems must be respected which has not always been the case in the post-Enlightenment West. Dreams and contemplative states are immensely valuable as they connect individuals to their inner selves and to others beyond the present day, the material world, the body and also beyond language. Companionship in solitude and solitude in companionship is the fertile paradox suggested by this examination of Cambridge and Harwood’s late poetry, but it is an examination wreathed in poetry, which leads to a final, and I admit, open point: what roles can poetry play in faith-based or other aged care?

Recently I was asked by a Warrnambool winemaker approaching retirement age to find a poem for him. It was one his mother read to him and his siblings and they could only remember the last line, but it never left them. They desperately wanted to find this poem as it connected them to their care and comfort of their mother as they faced the unknown. Poetry for the mother’s generation was a cornerstone of everyday life and a way of passing on cultural knowledge, something learned and passed down by rote. For the winemaker and his siblings this one poem, when found, will provide them with a limitless reservoir of peace, for it comforts and connects them beyond the bounds of language and the material world. It connect them to their mother’s voice, to their lives as children, to the room it was read in, to the feelings and smells of that extinguished time, to the meanings of the poem for them etc., expanding out and out to the present (Rafferty, private correspondence).

Poetry, especially recital is a powerful arbiter of memory, especially important to those with dementia or memory issues: they may not recognise the date, friends or relatives, but many could recite verses of Browning, Longfellow or Tennyson with pride and recall where they first heard it if someone knew to ask them. Poetry has an undervalued role within issues of aging and spirituality and not just for poets or ‘literary types’, and this is my message as I continue to search for the winemaker’s verse, the last line of which reads: ‘The prettiest thing I ever saw was my mother’s face’.

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