Lee Harwood

New Collected Poems

Books by Lee Harwood

Poetry

title illegible
The Man with Blue Eyes
The White Room
Landscapes
The Sinking Colony
Penguin Modern Poets 19 (with John Ashbery & Tom Raworth)
Freighters
H.M.S. Little Fox
Boston-Brighton
Old Bosham Bird Watch
Wish you were here (with Antony Lopez)
All the Wrong Notes
Faded Ribbons
Monster Masks
Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems
Rope Boy to the Rescue
In the Mists: mountain poems
Morning Light
Evening Star
Collected Poems
Selected Poems
Gifts Received
The Orchid Boat

Prose

Captain Harwood's Log of Stern Statements and Stout Sayings
Wine Tales: Un Roman Devin (with Richard Caddel)
Dream Quilt: 30 assorted stories
Assorted Stories : prose works
Not the Full Story: 6 Interviews (with Kelvin Corcoran)

Translations

Tristan Tzara – *Cosmic Realities Vanilla Tobacco Dawnings*
Tristan Tzara – *Destroyed Days, a selection of poems 1943–1955*
Tristan Tzara – *Selected Poems*
Tristan Tzara – *Chanson Dada: Selected Poems*
Tristan Tzara – *The Glowing Forgotten : A Selection of Poems*

LEE HARWOOD

New Collected Poems

1964–2015

edited by
Kelvin Corcoran and Robert Sheppard

Shearsman Books

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The poems from *The Orchid Boat* were first published by Enitharmon Press, London, in 2010, and are reprinted here with their permission.

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Introduction

Lee Harwood (born 1939) was a leading poet of the British Poetry Revival, a term that is sometimes used to encompass a range of alternative, non-mainstream poetries that emerged in Britain during the 1960s. It largely propagated its work through unofficial readings and poet-run small press publications and little magazines. Rather than defining themselves in opposition to that mainstream poetry – they did not so much react against it as ignore it – it is better to see them as looking back with enthusiasm to Modernism (Surrealism was the flavour of the era), or looking abroad to the explosion of open field and open form poetries in the USA, the New American Poetry as that is often called, and – to a lesser extent – to the experimental poetry of Europe. Despite changes in his work and the literary world, Harwood remained committed to this outlier perspective. Occasionally, members of the British Poetry Revival rediscovered forgotten British poets; in Harwood's case, the elegant formal 1940s poet FT Prince (although it is surprising he did not discover the 1930s Surrealist poet David Gascoyne at this time, but earlier experimentalists had been largely eclipsed by the mainstream).

In the 1960s, Harwood was at the centre of several scenes, one minute dashing off to Paris to meet the veteran Dadaist and Surrealist Tristan Tzara (whose work he translated in a volume not republished here); or jetting to New York to absorb the contemporary avant-garde, meeting John Ashbery and Joe Brainard (he collaborated with both). Back in London (though he lived in Exeter for a while before settling in Brighton), he may be found reading at the Marquee Club on the same bill as folk singer Donovan, or editing his own little magazine *Tzarad*. Although he was not present at the famous Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall in June 1965 – dates on poems indicate he was travelling in France – Harwood was later a bookseller at Better Books, which operated as a nodal point of contact for alternative poetry and poets.

The most important, and lasting, literary technique he acquired was the use of collage, both from Surrealist practice and from the early 1960s work of Ashbery, as well as from visual art and cinema (with its use of jump-cuts and abrupt edits). Sometimes the transitions are rapid and revelatory, as in his first major poem 'As Your Eyes Are Blue'. Sometimes the lacunae are literal: he had a love of the torn piece of paper, the snippet of conversation, the indecipherable telegram. 'Animal Days' is perhaps his most fragmented

poem, appearing to deploy William Burroughs' cut up process. Later, the technique becomes gentler in practice, though movement from scene to scene, from vignette to vignette, can still be abrupt. Nevertheless, many of his early poems do not work in this way, and are more like the so-called 'I do this I do that' poems of Frank O'Hara, another poet he encountered in New York, or earlier than that, taking their permission from the free-wheeling, conversational stream of the Beats.

Harwood grew to favour elaborate (and lengthy) fictions, usually featuring the 'mythologies' of our time, whether British colonialism or the American Wild West, particularly in long poems of the late 1960s. Harwood, in the 'Foreword' to his 2004 *Collected Poems*, which we have included as an Appendix, speaks of the influence of Borges on his work. Yet Harwood has spoken of his 'puritan-cavalier routine', between sparse notational writing and this baroque fictionality, and some of the complexity of his work comes from encountering both in one poem. The early 1970s saw him experimenting at one extreme, with stark note-form (and complete eschewal of figurative language) which resulted ironically in his longest poem, the moving tracking of a tortuous relationship, 'The Long Black Veil'. Behind this work lay some of his earliest reading, Ezra Pound (whose own ideogrammic method is a species of collage) and that of Pound's followers Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. His extension of this austere impulse into writings which today would be called conceptual writing, but which at the time was called 'found poetry', prompted texts consisting entirely of extensive (but ironic) quotation, and this marks another outer limit of his practice.

Harwood refuses to recognize the boundary between verse and poetry, his prosody being, in any case, conversational in a particular way. He has no use for the poetic prose often evoked by the term prose-poetry. His prose is often closer to fiction and, once or twice, in *Wine Tales* and in *Dream Quilt*, he approximates the short short story sub-genre, another stylistic limit case.

Later work (roughly the second half of this *New Collected Poems*) sees Harwood refining these techniques and combining them to create that gentle collage style that can swing with surprising ease (but still with surprise) from stark nodal description to ornate narrative, from intimate speech to contextual quotation, several times within one poem. He can call on exhibitions of camp and arch silliness to stage interventions in his own inventions, sharp switches of tone, as if restlessly embarrassed with, or questioning, his affections. Artifice and lived experience jostle for our attention.

If this account of Harwood's technical mix-and-match odyssey seems overly dry, it is important to recognize the humanity and affectivity of the work, the closeness of such textual ambiguity to human equivocation, to the synapse-sparking structures of thought itself. One poem of the 1980s, bearing the gloriously evocative title 'Faded ribbons around the lost bundle now being devoured by moths', calls the changes to emphasize the intersectionality of Harwood's cultural experience (his references are wide and eclectic) and his appetites and loves: 'A 13th century ceiling meets Schubert meets/ a glass of chilled white wine and a ripe peach'. The serial lovers and multiple friends and family members who are addressed, or who are recipients of dedications, and other unnamed addressees, testify to Harwood's commitment to communion and intimate community.

The reader is not excluded amid these restless and rapid changes of focus and attention (the theme of movement, or more abstractly, process, is felt throughout the work). Invitation to the reader is effected by textual lacunae, so that the reader may feel compelled to fill the gaps or complete the fragments, to metaphorically step into the poems, in an intimate readerly embrace. Direct address suggests this too. Sometimes poems actively ask us to step inside an interior or into a landscape. The final line of the poem 'One, Two, Three' implores us to cojoin its three parts: 'Now put it together'. Harwood could not make this appear simpler, though it is the result of careful authorial positioning.

This occurs despite the poems' contrary movement towards withdrawal in his sudden jumps to other matters, but this too registers the linguistic difficulties of thought and communication. Poetry seems shamefully inadequate to his task, at times, and yet there is no other fit medium, particularly as Harwood has uniquely adapted it to combine incompatible elements and impulses in his meticulously constructed textual 'meetings'. This represents a supplementary 'puritan-cavalier' routine that is far more extensive and ambitious than his earliest uses of collage. In his 2004 'Foreword,' Harwood itemises *some* of his later influences, 'the thought and imagination of Jack Spicer', 'the sharpness and heart of Anne Stevenson' and 'the amused tenderness of Constantine Cavafy', but readers may recognize others as they make their way through this volume.

There is a direct relationship between the compositional processes of a Lee Harwood poem and the way in which Lee Harwood the poet read his poetry. Both work through an apparent simplicity which is typically intimated as the almost innocent disguise and disavowal of complexity and significance. Through collage and various forms of declared and undeclared incompletion, the reader or listener is gently taken unknowingly into

complex and charged moments of recognition, as if things have just fallen together that way in this poem as the world appears to unfold itself in similar fashion after all – and there the reader stands and asks, 'How did I get here?'

This is evident throughout the poetry from the earliest work through to the last. This fundamental feature makes hearing Lee Harwood read important. Readings can be found on YouTube of varying technical proficiency. The recordings in the British Library archive are extensive but not currently available online. The PennSound collection of readings is a major resource covering 40 years of Harwood's poetry, and a guide to where other readings are available: writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Harwood.php. The calm, measured, unostentatious delivery introduces the ambition and confidence of the poem. This is not a sort of coyness or false modesty but rather an acknowledgement of the scope and depth of the lyric as language at its most intense and meaningful – at which point it perhaps behoves the poet to keep out of the way of what is happening and not make claims, erroneous or otherwise, about what it all means. Indeed what Harwood admired in the work of James Schuyler, as explained in the afterword to Schuyler's *Last Poems*, describes this characteristic feature of his own work, '…poems that are clear and elegant and seemingly direct and simple. Poems where the poet is not an isolated heroic figure but a social creature enjoying or enduring the "ordinary" experiences of life. He talks with us, doesn't harangue us.' Harwood was sceptical of elaborate theorising about poetry. His response at one reading, in which he was introduced at length, and with considerable theoretical elaboration, was to suggest, 'Well, yes of course, but just one poem can undo theory, maybe. OK. I'll begin with this poem.' What we hear is a man talking in a very particular way and articulating what poetry can be.

Harwood died in 2015, by which time his published work was extensive, as collected here, and while he did not enter the British mainstream literary world, he had many supporters and advocates. The appearance of the previous incarnation of a *Collected Poems* in 2004, and a subsequent *Selected Poems* in 2008, suggests a garnering of his strengths. His poetry appears in many representative anthologies and is discussed in numerous critical accounts of British poetry. The late acquisition of a Cholmondeley Award was an institutional recognition of his lifetime's dedicated work, and the housing of his archive in the British Library is a public and national acknowledgement of his work's continuing value.

Kelvin Corcoran and Robert Sheppard

A Textual Note

New Collected Poems follows on from the three previous editions edited by Lee Harwood from his separately published work: *Collected Poems,* 2004; *Selected Poems,* 2008, published by Tony Frazer's Shearsman Books, and *Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems*, 1988, which appeared in the Paladin Poetry list started by John Muckle.

New Collected Poems assembles all the poems (and creative prose) Lee Harwood published in pamphlet or poetry collection form (and includes brief uncollected material only from the end of his career). The exception is the pamphlet *Captain Harwood's Log of Stern Statements and Stout Sayings* which contains a 'daybook' of quotations, along with lyric poems that appear, in any case, in subsequent volumes, collected here. Poems in magazines have not been considered.

We have presented poems in broadly chronological order, as Harwood had himself in the 2004 *Collected Poems*. (This follows his own adjustment of the reverse chronological arrangement of his volume *HMS Little Fox*, which is happily available in the Shearsman Library series). We have followed Harwood's divisions in *Collected Poems*, which themselves follow the divisions between and within his previous volumes, and we have maintained their titles as far as possible. We have used this as a guide to integrating his subsequent collections within this new book.

Collected Poems omits one entire collection, Harwood's first, *title illegible*, and we have included this volume intact. This appears at the start of the collection (and not as an appendix, given that Harwood himself approved of its 1996 reprint by Writers Forum; some of these early poems found their way into *Collected Poems* by having been included in a section of *The White Room*, but we have republished them in their original context). We have restored individual poems omitted from *Collected Poems*, using the original books as a guide to position. This includes several poems dropped between *The Man with Blue Eyes* and its incorporation into *The White Room. Boston-Brighton* was the most eviscerated of the volumes and we have restored both text and images, particularly to 'Notes of a Post Office Clerk'. The poems in the section 'Moon Phase' were published in 'A Do-it-yourself Edition of 12 Copies for "Connoisseurs", Hove 1993', entitled *In the Mists: Poems 1988–1993* but were not reprinted in the 1993 pamphlet *In the Mists: Mountain Poems* or in *Collected Poems*. The original images have also been restored to *Wine Tales.*

Where a dedication accompanies (or once accompanied) a poem, we have decided to elect for the fullest identification of the dedicatee. We have collected Harwood's collaborative works, which appear intermittently from early to late work. Some individual collaborative poems are among the restored texts; others were included in *Collected Poems* – and we have largely followed the selection and arrangement established there. (He included the separate texts written by Ric Caddel for *Wine Tales* but not those by Tony Lopez in *Wish You Were Here*, and we have followed this precedent). One late collaborative venture, with John Hall, 'Loose Packed', is included in its entirety. 'Loose Packed' was originally devised as a pack of playing cards to be read in the chance order dealt. We have allowed what must be regarded as Lee Harwood's final poem, 'Philatelic Counter', to stand in a section of its own. We believe the lateness and isolated nature of these two works justifies their inclusion, in a strategic departure from our editorial principles.

There have been some other areas where we have had to exercise editorial judgement: in matters of conventions of presenting epigraphs, punctuation or spelling, though these result in minor and local changes. There have been occasions when a judgement has had to be made about whether a passage is in prose, or not, particularly where an earlier decision about layout and lineation seems to have been forgotten, or printing conventions adopted as though they were choices of lineation. Again, these occasions are rare. Where poems have appeared in *Collected Poems* we have generally followed Harwood's occasional revisions or corrections. We have corrected a few typos which have either been carried through, or have crept into, subsequent appearances of poems in print. We have to concede that not all the wrong notes are right.

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