doesn't shirk from didactic tones. But the reader is never quite sure whether Prynne really is being didactic or whether he is exploiting the mode of didacticism to make a point that, as it turns out, undercuts its own assumptions. Take, for instance, "Questions for the Time Being." It begins with assertions about poets or politicians, those "self-styled masters of language" who "control the means of production," and then asks us who is creating history for whom. Towards the end of the poem, Prynne reshapes a line from Auden and makes four pedantic, numbered assertions, only the first of which I will include here:

> Buy one
> another or die; but the cultured élite, our squad
> of pronouns with their lingual backs to the wall,
> prefer to keep everything in the family. The up-
> shot is simple & as follows: 1. No one has any right
> to mere idle discontent, even in conditions of most
> extreme privation, since such a state of arrested
> insight is actively counter-productive.

Is Prynne parodying academic asseverations or is he darkly spoofing? Who would dare to charge that someone "in conditions of most / extreme privation" might not be sufficiently productive? Is the language merely rhetorical in as much as its means to influence someone are situated in a poem destined for a limited audience? Or is this a serious gripe? Don't we agree, generally, that those who aren't making any effort to change things shouldn't bitch? Are we expected to concur intellectually, to protest, to welcome the language as a representative type, or to go with the flow, appreciating the severity of the tone, the muscular rhythm, the diction?

If you aren't sure, then you are already engaged in thinking about the work and its implications. And so being, you are beyond the easy satisfactions, ready-made responses, and agreed-upon values that characterize a different kind of poetry. Prynne's work reminds us that poetry, besides offering a variety of sensorial and emotional pleasures, can be something with which to think.

Forrest Gander

§

Lee Harwood, *Collected Poems*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2004. 521pp. $28

Easy poetry isn't worth reading twice. But the same can't be said for the poetry of *ease*. Lee Harwood is a giant of this kind of poetry, which might include considerations of natural beauty, assurances of love's bounties, gratitude for

friendship, praise of art, and a gentle mockery of self-importance. That is a good thing, not only because life is nasty and brutish and so on and we could all stand to take a deep breath now and then (one of his poems ends, "People of the World, relax!") but also because the usual suspects working at this sort of poetry are either hacks or bores. And whatever else may be said about Harwood's work—that it is a joy in some places and too full of joy in others; that it is wonderfully obscure and lamentably direct, or wonderfully direct and lamentably obscure—Lee Harwood's *Collected Poems* is, thank god, not a hackneyed or boring book. His slightest-sounding work turns out to be deceptively strong; even Kenneth Koch, no stranger to a poetry that delights more than instructs, might have been too self-conscious to write the following, from Harwood's 1968 collection, *The picture book open:*

> New Zealand outback
> *for Marian*
>
> "The three horsemen" is written down in the book
> You gave me the book. I love you
> My great-grandfather, his brother and a friend
> rode out and someone took their photo.
> Snap.
>
> It is Sunday and the scent of lilies
> really floods the room. It is also a sultry afternoon
> in summer. I love you.
> The picture-book is open on the table
> and shows an engraving of a lily,
> your poem about a lily and our love.
>
> The three horsemen disappear over the horizon
> I feel as confident as my great-grandfather
> that I love you.
> Snap.

What kind of poet repeats "I love you" three times in fifteen lines? A poet who gambles on the quotidian—who trusts that ordinary conversation is anything but.

Harwood is an anti-symbolist—later in the *Collected* he writes: "The tricks are pulled // blue skies flash across the screen // The falsity when anything becomes a symbol"—which is why he appears to be so terribly sincere. And yet in this poem sincerity only takes us so far. The photographic frame of the poem, with its harsh, repeated "Snap," reconfigures sentiment into history and fixes the speaker's observations as moments in time. ("All photographs are *memento mori*," Susan Sontag writes.) The confidence of

the speaker's ancestor and the rapture of the lover are not permanent but transitory, and they're defined by the circumstances in which they appear. The picture book memorializes and commemorates the remnants of life, and the poem does the same, at one remove.

If "New Zealand outback" recalls, in its faux throw-away tone, the playfulness of the New York School, this is no accident. Harwood, who met John Ashbery in Paris in the 1960s, might be considered Britain's ambassador to that movement. His *Collected Poems* is steeped in Ashbery and in a few places sounds like a sedated Frank O'Hara, but the book, in its stylistic variety, frustrates these easy analogies. While many of Harwood's subjects have remained the same over the years, his poetic technique has subtly and frequently changed. This has something to do with the heterogeneous group of poetic models he follows; in the revealing preface to his *Collected*, Harwood explains his eclecticism as a consequence of his philosophy:

> Language is never perfectly reliable but—obvious enough—it's all we have to talk to one another. It's to be used as well as possible, as precisely and clearly as possible, but not to be wholly trusted. The complexity of language and people and "life" is to be worked with, accepted, and all their contradictions to be relished. I learnt this, and ways of mapping it all, early on when still in my teens from reading Ezra Pound, and then a year or two later from Tristan Tzara, Jorge Louis Borges, and John Ashbery. After that, the list of writers I'm indebted to spreads far and wide.

This grouping of Pound, Tzara, Borges, and Ashbery might seem intuitive to some, especially those who see vanguardist history as a united front of innovation across cultures and languages. But allowing for certain fleeting common interests among members—a tendency to rework, revile, or reconstruct Whitman, for example—there is very little this work has in common on the page.

It takes some time for a poet to figure out which radical strategies play well with others. This doesn't make for high drama so much as high comedy, as Harwood accepts what his models have to offer by way of technique, and occasionally, but deftly, blends their various thematic concerns with his own. Consider this passage from the poem "Summer":

> these hot afternoons "it's quite absurd" she whispered
> sunlight stirring her cotton dress inside the darkness when
> an afternoon room crashed not breaking a bone or flower.
> a list of cities crumbled under riots and distant gun-fire
> yet the stone buildings sparkle. It is not only
> the artificial lakes in the parks…perhaps…
> but various illusions of belonging fall with equal noise and regularity
> how could they know, the office girls as well

"fancy falling for him…" and inherit a sickness
such legs fat and voluptuous…smiling to himself
the length of train journeys

the whole landscape of suburban railway tracks,
passive canals and coloured oil refineries
it could be worse—

at intervals messages got through
the senate was deserted all that summer
black unmarked airplanes would suddenly appear
and then leave the sky surprised at its quiet
"couldn't you bear my tongue in your mouth?"

Arresting if somewhat generic images, a dose of surrealism, intellectual insouciance: at first glance, this all sounds like Ashbery's *Rivers and Mountains*. And yet real history lurks around the margins of the poem—the riots and gunfire, the office girls, the deserted senate, the ominous airplanes. These hints of calamity, however, are stalled, or at least slowed, by a "yet" and "perhaps," and later by recollections of overhead speech. The tone of the poem rings out in just four words and a dash: *it could be worse—*. This is summer, after all.

The poem continues: "skin so smooth in the golden half-light / I work through nervousness to a poor but / convincing appearance of bravery and independence." Quite the interpretation of the stiff upper lip—it would be hard to imagine an American poet from the same era being so candid about his sexual anxieties. And yet, besides a few incidentals (references to the poet's beloved Brighton, for example), little else about the poetry suggests a national affiliation of any kind. Harwood's poems are often praised for being cosmopolitan, and it bears noting that none of the poets he lists as major influences are British. This is not just a philological curiosity: it confirms the extent to which the British Poetry Revival was really a reverse British invasion. American and Continental models were deployed against the Movement poets, whose institutional priority in Britain dwarfed the dominance of any postwar movement in the US. If Harwood and Tom Raworth seem less radical to American readers than they do to their British counterparts, it is because these poets were responding to and working with forces that had already begun to emerge in the New American Poetry.

Landscapes, The Coast, and *The Long Black Veil: A Notebook of 1970–1972*, are highlights of Harwood's career. Some concoction of distance and friendship helped the poet blend various antagonistic, or at least distinct, brands of American poetics to his own. The results are impressive. *The Long Black Veil,* which recounts a love affair, shows the poet in a more austere,

more ambitious mode. The poem moves beyond youthful confusion and intoxication into real difficulties of passion and pain. Harwood often shifts into straight, unadorned prose narrative as if to counterbalance the delicate verse passages. Large block quotations from Stendhal and Valéry stand like mile markers along the path traveled by the lovers, whose story comes to rest in the unlikely, but somehow fitting, bosom of Ancient Egyptian mythology. Pound looms here (there's an epigraph from canto 77 on the title page) and one can hear an echo of the *Pisan Cantos* in Harwood's lines. Here is an excerpt from Book Eleven, where the speaker attempts to shed the past and look toward the future:

> And ahead?
> The mountains, the wind, the sea are there
> we move through them, across their surfaces
>
> like a moving hunter
>
> On a "threshold"? in the open
> dazzled by the sunlight, and "nervous",
>
> but moving—and that with care.
> No end.
>
> But the quality
>
> The dreams do happen—
> And there is no "home" we come to
> —but on this earth, and open to its powers

For all its humor and grace, much of Harwood's work after 1975 does not measure up to his earlier efforts. *Wine Tales: un roman devin* (written with Richard Caddel) is a series of short narratives based on the labels of wine bottles: they are charming, but, on the whole, they feel like an unsuccessful attempt at rewriting Borges in English. *Dream Quilt*, a batch of thirty stories from the early 80s, is more enjoyable but slight. However wonderful and perverse they can be, they seem an indulgence compared to the better poems.

That's not to say the second half of the book is not worth reading: it is, if only for its less characteristic moments like "Dreams of Armenia," one of the few overtly political poems in the book. On the whole, though, it appears that Harwood's later work may have been the unintended victim of a life less bleak: his early lyrics were dogged by confusion and need, tempted by fleeting satisfaction, and wryly funny. They feel necessary in a way the later ones don't. When the later poems work, it's usually in their parodies of the

self-involvement of youth and the myopia of criticism. It may be true that Harwood is no longer an experimental or an avant-garde poet in the sense in which those terms have come to be commonly defined (i.e. out to purify the language of the tribe, out to push the boundaries of what the poem can do, and so on) but it's also true that the joke of such claims is on us, since those definitions are no more adequate today then they ever were. It is felicitous when a poet's work satisfies such criteria at some point in his or her career, but only the purest genius can write the same kind of poem for forty years and get away with it. Lee Harwood is not a pure genius; he is, these days, a singer of beautiful and poignant songs. Like he says, it could be worse.

V. Joshua Adams

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Michael Haslam, *The Music Laid Her Songs in Language*. Todmorden: Arc, 2001. 68pp. £5.95.
Michael Haslam, *A Sinner Saved by Grace*. Todmorden: Arc, 2005. 82pp. £8.95.

In 1895, the Victorian writer F. Anstey had a self-deprecating Lady Rhoda declare, in his *Lyre and Lancet*, that she was "no good at poetry—can't make head or tail of it, some'ow. It does seem to me such—well, such footle." The *OED*, which defines footle in its verb form as "to talk or act foolishly, to trifle or 'potter,'" gives only three examples of its usage, two of which are from Anstey, who was clearly quite fond of the term. It was therefore somewhat surprising when "footle" turned up again quite recently, in the first poem of the Yorkshire poet Michael Haslam's 2001 collection, *The Music Laid Her Songs in Language*:

> I had been following, or so I felt, a futile so-called
> calling, and a false trail, and I had failed.
> Footloose I lay, and heard another sweet cascade
> of little falls, and something solitary, smaller:
> the green withens aura.
>
> There's an air to the wild upland willows.
> Halo To The Sallows. Hello There
> young green yellow willow warbler
> footles through light leafs
> an odd fluff-suited, coloured, call. Subtle
> the way it's fluted this june.
>
> ("Green Withen Aura")