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### 'Fuck all editors': The Ern Malley affair and Gwen Harwood's bulletin scandal

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## **Framing Stories and Poetry**



# 'Fuck All Editors': The Ern Malley Affair and Gwen Harwood's *Bulletin* Scandal

Cassandra Atherton

Until the 1990s and Helen Demidenko, there have been only been two Australian literary hoaxes. The first was the Ern Malley Hoax; the second Gwen Harwood's *Bulletin* scandal. James McAuley and Harold Stewart were the two poets behind the creation of the 'great aussie battler' Ern Malley and Gwen Harwood was the quaintly titled 'lady poet' behind the suave European Walter Lehmann. McAuley, Stewart and Harwood are important figures in Australian literature, not just for their individual contributions to Australian poetry but for their construction of enduring literary figures. Ern Malley and Walter Lehmann were believed by many to have made a mockery of editors willing to publish their work, but the hoaxes reveal more than the Australian public's delight in the humiliation of editors Max Harris and the *Bulletin*'s Donald Horne. Despite the fact that Harwood and Lehmann's poems were no longer welcome at the *Bulletin*, she managed to perpetrate a further hoax (although less dramatic), where poems under other pseudonyms were published unknowingly by Horne.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of Ern Malley and Walter Lehmann illustrates John Rowan's theory of subpersonalities, where pseudonyms can be read as the manifestation of a sub-self. If a subpersonality is defined as 'a semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person',<sup>2</sup> then Ern Malley and Walter Lehmann betray the subconscious desires of their creators. In the Malley poems we can see 'a young man who believes in his vocation as a poet, recoiling from a broken love affair',<sup>3</sup> as well as the nightmares and self-doubt of McAuley. Those who have read Cassandra Pybus' *The Devil and James McAuley* will recognise his subconscious desires in this subpersonality. This is a particularly interesting theory when it is applied to someone like Henri Beyle, Stendal, Henri Brulard or Mr Crocodile, or any of the one hundred and seventy one pseudonyms or aliases he adopted.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, McAuley has been described by Harwood as 'four or five men rolled into one',<sup>5</sup> and by Horne as 'a multi-faceted presentation of himself as a series of performances'.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of Ern Malley, his sister Ethel, and Ern's poetical *oeuvre* is an entertaining account. They were all created 'one Saturday afternoon'<sup>7</sup> in 1943 in Melbourne by two young Sydney poets: James McAuley and Harold Stewart. Their dossier on Ern Malley is impressive. Ern had two very important things going for him: he was working class and he was dead. In a letter to Max Harris, co-editor of the *Angry Penguins*, Ern's sister wrote that:

Ernest Lalor Malley was born in England at Liverpool on March 14, 1918. Our father died as a result of war wounds in 1920, and the family came out to Australia, where mother had relations ... He did not do well at school ... Mother died August 1933 and Ern left school.<sup>8</sup>

Ern had been a car mechanic in Palmer's Garage on Tavernere's Hill and then, after moving to Melbourne at seventeen, he worked for National Mutual selling insurance policies. Ern died of Graves' disease at twenty-four years of age, conveniently leaving a manuscript for his sister to find. Ern was the perfect creation of both a national hero and a modernist hero, because his poetry was devoid of tired Australian clichés and exhibited a sophisticated knowledge of the international surrealist movement.

McAuley and Stewart wrote sixteen poems as Malley which they entitled 'The Darkening Ecliptic' The manuscript was then sent to the *avant garde* magazine *Angry Penguins* with a covering letter from Ethel Malley on behalf of her deceased brother:

Dear Sir,

When I was going through my brother's things after his death, I found some poetry he had written ... I am not a literary person myself and I do not feel that I understand what he wrote, but I feel I ought to do something about them. He was very ill in the months before his death last July and it may have affected his outlook.<sup>9</sup>

John Reed, Sunday Reed, Sidney Nolan and Max Harris co-edited *Angry Penguins*, and after reading the manuscript they decided to publish 'The Darkening Ecliptic' in the Autumn edition of their magazine. Harris critiqued the poems in this same edition, touting the poems as 'the work of a poet of great power'.<sup>10</sup>

The hoax was exposed by the *Sunday Sun* on 25 June 1944 with the publication of a statement by McAuley and Stewart confessing to creating the fictional character Ern Malley and admitting that the poems were created as a 'serious literary experiment'.<sup>11</sup> They confessed to plagiarising from 'a chance collection of books which happened to be on our desk: the concise *Oxford Dictionary*, *Collected Shakespeare*, *Dictionary of Quotations*, *Ripman's Rhyming Dictionary* and the first three lines of the poem 'culture as exhibit' were lifted, from a quotation, straight from the American report on the drainage of breeding grounds of mosquitoes'.<sup>12</sup>

Harris was to be humiliated even further. On 5 September, the South Australian police took action against the content of some of the Ern Malley poems and other writing published in *Angry Penguins*. Detective Vogelsang, acting for the South Australian police, objected to seven examples of indecency in the Ern Malley *oeuvre*. The poem 'Egyptian Register' was prosecuted because it contained the word 'genitals' and he stated that 'I think it is immoral to use the word "genitals" ... I think it is unusual for sexual parts to be referred to in poetry'.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore he objected to the word 'incestuous' because, as he stated, 'I don't know what that means but I think there is a suggestion of indecency about it'. The line: 'shall rest snug and know what he means' in the poem 'Boult to Marina' was considered indecent because of the suggestion of the narrator's intentions. Vogelsang stated that: 'It offends my decency to suggest that a character means he wants sexual intercourse'.<sup>14</sup> Even more ludicrous was his objection to 'Night Piece' as Vogelsang believed that the indecency 'lay in the fact that the events took place in a park at night'<sup>15</sup> and anything done in the park at night was to be considered

indecent. The result was that Harris was found guilty of publishing indecent material and fined five pounds.

In contrast, the public was delighted by the hoax. To the average Australian, modernist poetry was incomprehensible and McAuley and Stewart had targeted this audience by publishing their confession in a tabloid. The *Bulletin*, to be hoaxed twenty years later by Harwood, lent their support to the McAuley/Stewart cause at the time, publishing the comment: 'earnest thanks to the diggers who are joint debunkers of Bosh, Blah and Blather'.<sup>16</sup> They did not show the same spirit, however, when the tables were turned and the joke was on them.

The Ern Malley poems have been subject to many different interpretations in the last fifty-seven years, while Harwood's sonnets are only just beginning to be recognised for their striking images. Opinion has shifted from the prominent belief in the 1940s that the Ern Malley poems were 'nonsense' and that Harris was indeed 'insensible of absurdity and incapable of ordinary discrimination'.<sup>17</sup> At the time of the hoax, Sir Herbert Read wired Harris from England. His cable read, 'I too would have been deceived by Ern Malley but hoaxers hoisted by their own petard as touched off unconscious sources or inspiration work too sophisticated but has elements of genuine poetry'.<sup>18</sup> Read believed that McAuley and Stewart had ironically 'hoaxed' themselves as the poetry showed 'effective use of vivid metaphor, a subtle sense of rhythmic variation ... even a metaphysical unity which cannot be the result of unintelligent deception', a concept that the poets had not believed possible.<sup>19</sup>

There are some very striking and memorable images in many of the Ern Malley poems. 'Durer Innsbruck, 1495' opens with the narrator reminiscing:

I had often cowed in the slumberous heavy air,  
Closed my inanimate lids to find it real,  
As I knew it would be, the colourful spires  
And painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the back,  
All reversed in the quiet reflecting waters –<sup>20</sup>

This imaging on the back of the eyelids like a reversed reflection is beautifully crafted. So, too is the much debated last line, 'I am still/The black swan of trespass on alien waters'. These lines in the first poem of 'The Darkening Ecliptic' hint at the deceptive nature of the hoax.

In 'Sonnets for the Novachord', the rhyme scheme is monotonous, 'Hawk at the wraith/ Of remembered emotions/ Vindicate our high notions/ Of a new and pitiless faith'. However, the three line stanza: 'If this be the norm/ Of our serious frolic/ There's no remorse' clearly defines the situation and cleverly suggests that choices should be made confidently. In 'Sweet William' the surreal is layered with sexuality when the narrator states, 'And I must go with stone feet/ Down the staircase of flesh/ To where in a shuddering embrace/ My toppling opposites commit/ The obscene, the unforgivable rape'.

Finally, 'Perspective Lovesong' locates itself in Melbourne, giving a refreshing cultural illustration of existence with a clever play on words:

Princess, you have lived in Princess St.,  
Where the urchins pick their nose in the sun  
With the left hand. You thought  
That paying the price would give you admission

To the sad autumn of my Valhalla.  
But, I, too, invented faithfulness.

Despite McAuley and Stewart's belief that the poems were all 'absurd', the process they used to create poetry was a radical idea in 1943, although it was overlooked at the time. Using existing sources of writing to create something new was an incredibly avant-garde exercise that simultaneously exposed the authors' preoccupations. The choice of words and creation of images and rhyme schemes revealed a sexualised stream of consciousness. Some of the images are not very different from images McAuley used in his later poetry. With its surreal imagery McAuley's 'Gnostic Prelude' could well be a poem by Malley, just as the Malley poem 'Durer: Innsbruck 1945' was based on a poem by McAuley.

Harwood created the character Walter Lehmann in 1960 and wrote fourteen poems as this subpersonality. Only two of the poems in the Walter Lehmann *oeuvre* were written as a hoax. As McAuley and Stewart did with Malley, Harwood gave Lehmann a personal history which made him more than a pseudonym. He was an 'apple orchardist in the Huon Valley in Tasmania, and husband and father'.<sup>21</sup> In 1961, Harwood achieved notoriety when she made headlines in Hobart: 'Tas Housewife in Hoax of the Year'. Harwood was miffed by the 'Tas Housewife' section of the headline, claiming that once again that she was not taken seriously as a poet because she was a woman. This was precipitated by two sonnets that Harwood had sent into the *Bulletin*. Read acrostically, the sonnets read 'So Long Bulletin' and 'Fuck All Editors'. Harwood believed that the sonnets were 'poetical rubbish and [would] show up the incompetence of anyone who publishe[d] them'.<sup>22</sup> The poems were therefore written as a literary test.<sup>23</sup> They were first sent to *Meanjin* and rejected by the editor Clem Christesen. When this failed she sent the acrostic to Horne at the *Bulletin*. Horne failed the test and decided to publish both sonnets. In a letter to her friend Alison Hoddinot, Harwood concluded, 'I forebore to say that those who couldn't tell poetry from a bunyip's arse might well be laughed at'.<sup>24</sup>

There are three possible reasons for Harwood concocting this hoax. Firstly, she outlines in her interview with Candida Baker:

It was just a natural piece of mischief. I was talking to Hal Porter one day, and I said to him that a lot of people wouldn't know a poem if it hit them. I bet him that I could drop a sonnet into the *Bulletin* with a foul acrostic in it, and they would publish it.<sup>25</sup>

The second reason is much more practical as Harwood believed that 'lady poets', as she called them, did not receive the same acceptance as males. She supported this statement by publishing under at least three male pseudonyms — Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer and Timothy Kline — and claimed that she received far more invitations and favourable letters to her male pseudonyms than she ever did herself.

The third reason is much more calculated. Harwood had become disenchanted with her poetry being published in the *Bulletin* alongside poetry she considered of 'marked inferior quality'<sup>26</sup> and her cunning hoax would both give her extensive publicity and prove her point. It was not only considered a scandal because of the expletive but, to Harwood's dismay, because it was attributed to a housewife. A

staff correspondent responding to the hoax in a subsequent edition of the *Bulletin* condescending that Harwood had ‘apparently imagined that the acrostic would remain her private secret forever. Such are the fantasies of lady poets’.<sup>27</sup> In her defence, Harwood continued to argue that it was the typesetter who first noticed it and that she had no intention of exposing the ‘foul acrostic’.<sup>28</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that it was the staff and students at Melbourne University who first detected the scam, prompted by Vincent Buckley, who in turn had been tipped off by Harwood.<sup>29</sup>

Harwood’s sonnets ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ and ‘Abelard to Eloisa’ typify the ferocity of emotion inherent in the poetry written under the pseudonym Walter Lehmann. Much more has been written on the acrostic embedded in these sonnets than on the artistic merits of the sonnets themselves. It was popular to believe, in line with Harwood’s judgement, that the poems were indeed ‘poetical rubbish’. Harwood’s view of these poems is much more scathing than contemporary analyses of their merits. Trigg and Hoddinott emphasise the positive use of meter and imagery in the sonnets. Hoddinott states that the sonnets are ‘poems of musical mellifluousness, full of words poetically evocative of loss and despair’, but then concludes that they are ‘almost completely devoid of overall sense’.<sup>30</sup> Trigg is more favourable in her analysis and argues that the poems ‘fulfil [the] technical requirements of a sonnet, and include ... a small handful of powerful images, even if they do rather tumble over one another’.<sup>31</sup> If the sonnets are deemed to be well crafted pieces, then the impact of Harwood’s irreverence is diminished. The publication of these two sonnets in the *Bulletin* has been read, Trigg argues, as ‘an example of the anti-establishment resistance’.<sup>32</sup> Horne could not detect a hoax or indeed a bad poem when he came across one. The two sonnets have some literary merit and, if Harwood had not prompted Vin Buckley to read and publicly identify the acrostic, they may well have stood as two mediocre poems written by a passionate male poet.

The characters Eloisa and Abelard are an interesting choice. Known for their passionate correspondence and taboo relationship, they are a conscious choice for Harwood and specifically for the subpersonality Walter Lehmann. In the first sonnet, ‘Eloisa to Abelard’, which spells acrostically ‘So lONG bULLetIN’, Harwood explores the themes of exile and spiritual struggle, especially when tempted by desire. In a dramatic monologue, Eloisa expresses her torturous feelings of loss to Abelard. Though some of the lines are a little stilted, the line ‘You/ shall find/ loss, absence, nothing’ clearly captures the double void Eloisa feels at being separated from her beloved and her remorse at the betrayal of her religion. Similarly, the richness of images in the second stanza conveys the sharpness of loss. The words ‘My wound/ is you’ speaks of an intense and physical pain and suffering at the heart of their separation, just as a wound by its very nature separates tissue. The mention of a ‘wound’ also overlays the imagery with the pain of abandoning her religious beliefs to lust. The final line of the last stanza is also a powerful indictment of physical and spiritual love: ‘No heart escapes the torment of its choice’.<sup>33</sup>

Abelard replies to Eloisa in the second sonnet that acrostically spells ‘Fuck ALL eDiToRs’. As the male, Abelard is stereotypically characterised as stronger than Eloise and less blinded by romantic love. His dramatic monologue privileges his



demand that she should revoke him. The commands to 'Stare the sun up ... think yourself blind' and 'stop your ears' are devastating in their harshness and for the suffering and pain Harwood is able to evoke in Abelard's words. Harwood incites Abelard to sacrifice his own feelings for Eloisa's soul to 'Recall no ghost of love'.<sup>34</sup>

Characters in Harwood's poems like Abelard and Eloisa or Krote and Professor Eisenbart are not subpersonalities. Subpersonalities express a facet of the core self, while characters help subpersonalities explore their preoccupations. Just as the woman in the park, in the most famous sonnet of Walter Lehmann, is a character that may be used to express many of Harwood's feelings, so too Abelard and Eloisa provide a way for Harwood to reveal a deep sense of loss. The sonnets should be read as an expression of undying love for a lover out of one's reach. Perhaps the unrequited love experienced by a young Harwood may well have been the basis for the manifestation of the subpersonality Walter Lehmann. Her psyche, helping her to overcome these disappointments, placed these emotions within the Walter Lehmann subpersonality. By using the subpersonality of Walter Lehmann to write these sonnets, the passion and intensity of the emotion cannot be misread as a parody. The part of Harwood that is Walter Lehmann does not joke; perhaps that is why the hoax is synonymous with the unveiling of the Lehmann pseudonym.

Harwood's hoaxes and pseudonyms were more than just a way to expose the prejudices of editors. Though she claimed that she employed a variety of pseudonyms (Theophilus Panbury, Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, Miriam Stone, Tim Kline, W W Hargendoor) to ensure that as many of her poems as possible gained publication, her pseudonyms were much more than publicity ploys: they revealed her as a complex psychological being who consciously employed subpersonalities to explore a range of feelings she felt were not acceptable for her own public persona. Harwood's ability to create an array of pseudonyms reveals a psychological awareness. Both Vincent O'Sullivan and Gregory Kratzmann have referred to Harwood's inner complexity, describing her as a poet and friend with a 'complex and enigmatic mind'.<sup>35</sup> This kind of complexity is not an unusual trait in writers.

It is Harwood's conviction that in interviews, 'the person to whom you are now talking is not the same as the one who writes poems ... the person writing is not the person speaking'.<sup>36</sup> 'invisible glass' lies between her 'two selves'.<sup>37</sup> Harwood continually analysed the division she saw not only in the public and private spheres of her life but the division she saw in herself: 'I thought how inwardly fierce I'd always been, but how calm and untroubled my exterior had been'.<sup>38</sup> This split in identity supports the assertion by James Vargiu, Director of the Psychosynthesis Institute, that 'we express different aspects of ourselves at different times'.<sup>39</sup>

Many writers have pointed out that in our personality there exist a multiplicity of personages — of subpersonalities — each one attempting to fulfil its own aims, sometimes co-operating but more often isolated or in a state of conflict.<sup>40</sup>

It seems remarkable that despite the interviewers' and critics' emphases on Harwood's divided self, a psychosocial, or what I will term a psychomutative or psychovocal, reading has never been attempted. Both Hoddinott and Trigg flag the

issue of multiple selves in their expositions, but neither attempt to read her poetry in the light of her pseudonyms.

The theory of subpersonalities is appropriate for application to literature. First conceived by humanistic therapists John Rowan and Mick Cooper, the 'notion of competing subpersonalities also favours a more distributed sense of self'.<sup>41</sup> We can be many things at one time, just as we may feel many emotions at one time. When used as a tool for the study of literature, this theory allows the critic to 'gain access to individuals in the creative acts of understanding themselves, projecting their aspirations and desperations, and relating to the significant individuals in their lives'.<sup>42</sup> The nature of subpersonalities is best expressed by social researcher Thomas R. Whitaker, who captures the complexities inherent in the use of subpersonalities. Two opposing yet connected processes define the way in which subpersonalities are controlled and in turn exercise control. Whitaker describes a 'multi-dimensional ... internal community of subpersonalities ... a somewhat disorderly congeries of partly subliminal and rather malleable entities who voice their feelings and knowledge when accessed or provoked by our present situation'.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to suggest that there is not a core self that governs these subselves. Though a personality is composed of a series of subpersonalities, there is an overriding personality that is often referred to in the first person; the 'I' that is most often present in non-threatening situations. In an interview with Beston, Harwood argues that 'I feel that I have sometimes been handicapped by being the poet-housewife figure; you know how she can make a nice apricot sponge and write poetry too. There is a savage, nasty part lurking somewhere down there, and yet this is part of the kind mother too.'<sup>44</sup> This revelation adds credence to the theory that a very divided self manifests itself in subpersonalities. Studying Harwood's poetry by creating dossiers on each of her pseudonyms facilitates a process of analysis where her poetry is read as a product of this subpersonality, and therefore provides a new insight into the psychological underpinnings of her poetry.