The Endless Forms of Things:
Charles Harpur's Radicalism Revisited

Michael Falk
Western Sydney University

Charles Harpur was the outstanding radical thinker of his age. Though he led a retired life, he was a constant presence in the democratic journals and newspapers of the 1840s, 50s and 60s, penning squibs, satires, philosophical poems and brilliant short pieces of prose expressing his aspirations for Australian society. He lived through tumultuous times. Britain had granted New South Wales a partly elected Legislative Council in 1842. Within 15 years this body had transformed from a quasi-parliament in the grip of the governor into a bicameral sovereign assembly elected on the principal of manhood suffrage—an achievement that would evade Britain for another six decades. During the 40s, political alliances had shifted, and three broad camps had emerged: the conservatives, for whom the British connection, the Church of England, and the power of the great landholders were key; the liberals, for whom self-government, a free market in land and (eventually) widening the franchise were priorities; and Harpur's radicals, who dreamt of democracy and a republic, and for whom manhood suffrage, the ballot, a fully-elected upper house and interventionist land reform were not distant goals but urgent first steps toward a reconfigured society (Hirst 209-219, 253-254; Roe chaps. 1 and 4). Looking back on his radical youth, the most successful politician of the century would count Harpur one of his 'chief advisers in matters of intellectual resource and enquiry' (Parkes 1-9). How did the isolated poet achieve such eminence?

Harpur's radicalism was profound because it was poetic. Virtually all his poems are radical in form and structure, even if only a minority actually deal with political themes. This is because he had a radical way of seeing the world. This way of seeing had two main characteristics: it was *perspectival* and it was *progressive*. Harpur was a pluralist who tried to describe things from a range of viewpoints, and he was an idealist who described objects and events in terms of their progressive growth in time. By seeing things this way, Harpur gave his poems a democratic shape, so that even his simplest nature poems reveal 'an essentially republican bias' (Ackland, 'Charles Harpur's Republicanism' 83).

Harpur's poems were perspectival and progressive because of his spiritual beliefs in pluralism and 'the plastic nature of things' (Eggert h639a).[1] For Harpur pluralism was essential to poetry:

> Praise lyeth wide in Poesy's dominion,
> Wherein affection no strait limit knows … (h460a)

Nothing is foreign to the poet. The proper attitude to difference is love. Harpur wove many different voices into his bush poems, as Elizabeth Webby has shown (1-2). And as texts like 'The Death of Shelley' (1847), 'Aboriginal Death Song' (1858), and *The Witch of Hebron* (1867) reveal, it was not just the bush that Harpur described from many angles. His desire to see the world through others' eyes affected how he wrote about politics, art, religion, history, science and philosophy. His progressive ideal was equally fundamental to his poetry. He was a firm believer in 'the plastic nature of things,' and in 'the progressive capability of man to mould and adapt them to new and to higher ends' (h639a). The plasticity of the universe meant that for Harpur the truth was always out of reach:

> Form is soul, and soul projection
> Tow'rds an ultimate Perfection,
> > Never standing,
> > Still expanding
> Underneath the suns of Time … ('Onwards', h366a, ll. 55-59)

In poems like this one, or the great *The Tower of the Dream* (1865), he held that we can only ever progress towards the absolute, never attain it. As we will see, this progressive ideal permeates all aspects of his poetry, from his imagery to his syntax. When he describes a phenomenon such as 'Dawn and Sunrise in the Snowy Mountains' (1860) or 'A Flight of Wild Ducks' (1845), or even simply the rocky surface of the earth, he tries to capture its 'plasticity,' and show how it unfolds in time.

There is now a rich scholarly literature on Harpur's political opinions. Michael Roe has analysed Harpur's progressive theory of 'moral enlightenment,' linking his ideas of moral growth to Transcendentalism and the temperance movement (148-149, 167-168). Headon and Perkins argue that he was a confident liberal nationalist free from colonial insecurities (58), while Ackland argues he was a proponent of 'democratic equality' ('Charles Harpur's Republicanism' 77). All these scholars recognise the unique spiritual aspect of Harpur's radicalism. Indeed, Judith Wright argues he was so spiritual that his poetry wasn't really 'political' at all (4)! I depart from these scholars by focussing on the form of Harpur's poetry rather than the content. In what follows I consider first the perspectival and then the progressive aspects of his verse. I show how these formal aspects of his poems are rooted in his convictions, and hopefully offer some new insights into his politics and poetics.

1. Perspective

There are two main ways to incorporate multiple perspectives into a text: voice and focalisation. Harpur used both, though he used focalisation more often. Voice is the incorporation of different languages and styles into a text. The narrator or characters may each speak with their own particular grammar and vocabulary, or the writer may use various kinds of 'intonational quotation marks' to indicate that the words on the page are not their own words but somebody else's (Bakhtin 76). The second approach for incorporating multiple perspectives is 'focalisation,' a coinage of the great narratologist Gérard Genette (189-94; see also Bal, chap. 8). It is altogether harder to grasp than voice, because it relies on less tangible and more pervasive aspects of language than grammar and vocabulary. To focalise, the poet must describe the world as it appears to a particular mind in a particular place. They must see what can be seen, hear what can be heard, and feel what can be felt only from a certain imaginary standpoint. We will see that Harpur was a master of focalisation. It is the main structuring principle of many of his finest poems. He used voice mainly in his satires, though he did deploy it to great effect in his comic tale 'Lost in the Bush' (1842). Harpur's 'interest in the didactic possibilities provided by multiple view-points' had long been recognised by the critics (Ackland, *That Shining Band* 63). Here I will demonstrate for the first time how he achieved his multi-perspectival effects.

Harpur mainly used voice satirically. In his early play *The Tragedy of Donohoe* (1835), there is a contrast between the language of town and country. The corrupt judge Roger Tunbelly and the blustering constable Ned Bomebard speak in self-serving jargon, while the brave bushrangers and virtuous emancipists of the hinterland speak an idealised poetic diction. Harpur also penned scores of squibs that satirise the social meanings of words:

> Roe says one Doe's a scurvy rogue—for why?
> He cheated him of *two* or *six* or *more pence*
> And Doe pleads injury from a wicked lie,
> Because the smuggled sum was only—*four* pence! ('A Case for the Lawyers', h061a)

'Roe' and 'Doe' define 'scurvy rogue' and 'wicked lie' in their own idiosyncratic ways, revealing the debasement of society's moral code. In this, and in other satires, Harpur used voice to attack others' perspectives, but in some of his longer poems he used it more sympathetically. In 'Lost in the Bush,' he combines the techniques of the modern novelist—dialogue and free indirect discourse—to create the voice of Will, a bumbling English immigrant:

> How puzzling 'tis! still stranger seems to grow
> The backward scene o'er which he hurries so;
> Whereat Will mutters, scanning o'er the ground,
> 'Dang it! the world is surely twisted round!'
> And then, with sudden jerk, the anxious swain
> Turns, just to contemplate that hill again.
> Gad! which is which?—a dozen summits lie
> As like as eggs against the twilight sky. (h230a, ll. 9-16)

The poem is comic and ironic, establishing a clear distinction between Harpur's knowing viewpoint and Will's ignorant one (Webby 2-3). There is a contrast between the narrator's formal diction—'Whereat', 'anxious swain'—and Will's rather more banal idiom—'Dang it!,' 'As like as eggs.' The tone is more indulgent than satirical. Will's fear is natural, and his homely diction represents his ordinariness. He eventually finds his way home.

Of course, 'Lost in the Bush' does more than portray Will's speech habits. It also shows how the bush seems when you're lost. According to Adrian Mitchell, it was this ability to focalise which was Harpur's greatest strength:

> He writes about the processes of the mind, made conscious of itself as of the world about it, and in which it delights. He is at his best as he distinguishes between the different facets of the mind's attention, the various means by which the mind apprehends the experience around it (before it, above it) and discovers its meaning. (546)

This is true of much of Harpur's verse, especially his most famous poem, 'The Creek of the Four Graves' (1845). In 'Creek' he evokes a moonlit evening in the Blue Mountains from the perspective of an early white settler, Egremont. Egremont and his companions experience the strangeness, depth and fear of a land they do not understand:

> And as they supped, birds of new shape and plume,
> And wild strange voice, nestward repairing by,
> Oft took their wonder; or betwixt green gaps
> In the ascending forest growths they saw
> Perched on the bare abutments of the mountains
> Where, haply, yet some lingering gleam fell through,
> The wallaroo look forth: till eastward all
> The view had wasted into formless gloom,

> Night's front; and westward, the high massing woods
> Steeped in a swart but mellowed Indian beauty—
> A deep dusk loveliness,—lay ridged and heaped
> Only the more distinctly for their darkness
> Against the twilight heaven—a cloudless depth
> Yet luminous from the sunset's fading splendor;
> And thus awhile, in the lit dusk, they seemed
> To hang like mighty pictures of themselves,
> In the still chambers of some vaster world. (h080k, ll. 65-81)

Harpur clearly sympathises with Egremont's perspective, but there are nonetheless important differences. Harpur was born in Australia, so the birds were not 'new' to him as they were to this immigrant in the 'olden times' of early settlement (h080k, l. 1). For Egremont and his men, this is a 'wild' and 'strange' scene of 'wonder', as exotic as India. For Harpur and presumably his readers, this place was not exotic, it was home. Even if we set our knowledge of Harpur's own life aside, there are clues throughout the passage that we are seeing the world through the characters' eyes. The scene is described in the past tense rather than the lyric present. It is full of deictic markers that place us in the warm circle of the men's campfire: Things occur to 'westward' and 'eastward' of them, the distance far from them is 'formless,' the woods are 'high' and 'massing' above them. It is a masterly evocation of their particular experience.

'Creek' is a pluralist poem because of its focalisation. If its focalisation is overlooked, it is quite easy to read it the way Penny Van Toorn does, as an insidiously racist poem. As she quite rightly observes, 'Creek' is divided by an invisible colour line. It is the story of a battle, in which four white men and one Aboriginal man perish, yet there are only *four* graves at the creek side (Van Toorn 90). There is a pervasive opposition of light and dark: the invaders cluster peacefully round the fire while the Aboriginal warriors leap from the lightless woods (Van Toorn 88). The poem therefore does have imperialist and racist undertones. What Van Toorn does not consider is that it represents Egremont's perspective rather than Harpur's. Harpur certainly sympathises with Egremont, presenting him as a man of poetic feeling with a sense of the 'vaster world.' But Egremont is also an old settler, and he sees things as an old settler sees them.

In other poems, Harpur considered other perspectives on the frontier. In 'Aboriginal Death Song,' for instance, he attempts to present an indigenous consciousness, for whom the frontier wars have a very different meaning:

> There is a vacant place in the circle of the Seers:
> From the consultations of the wise and brave
> A bold voice hath gone up forever!
> And a whoop that late was loud on our border
> Is terrible only in the deeds of the past. (h002a, ll. 11-15)

Now Indigenous warmaking is 'brave' and 'bold'. The land is not a formless wilderness, but a country with a 'border.' The tribe is not a roaming band of savages, but a civilised troupe governing themselves by 'consultations.' Harpur moulds his language to this new consciousness. The unrhymed, end-stopped, five-line stanzas have an exotic flavour, reading almost like a translation. The speaker speaks in first-person plural, articulating a collective mindset. While the syntax of 'Creek' is dense and hypotactic, with long complex sentences and numerous conjunctions, the syntax of 'Death Song' is forceful and paratactic. The only

conjunctions in the poem are 'and' and 'but.' This is not entirely a matter of voice, because the vocabulary and syntax are not obviously idiosyncratic. It is the gentler effect of focalisation, as the things of the world arrange themselves according to a particular world view.

His supreme poem of focalisation is *The Witch of Hebron* (1867). It is a fantastical story, in which the protagonist repeatedly metamorphoses into different human and animal forms. Each time they metamorphose, they experience the world as a member of a new species, religion, gender or social class, and understand the world in a different way. As an eagle, for instance, the nameless protagonist experiences the freedom of three dimensions:

> … the faculty
> Alone of motion in a world so rich
> Was something noble: but to move at will
> Upward or forward, or in circles vast,
> Through boundless spaces with a rushing speed
> No living thing's might rival … (h689eb, ll. 163-68)

These animal transformations are designed to highlight both the limitations and the potential of the human perspective. As a lion or eagle, the protagonist communes more freely and directly with nature. But they lack moral agency. Eventually she is reborn as a woman and is entangled once more in the webs of empire, race and creed. She is a 'captive' in North Africa, is crowned a 'sultana' in India, and lives for a time as the 'mistress' and 'water-carrier' of a 'Turcoman' (ll. 263-69). These parts of the poem draw on Orientalist clichés—the East is a realm of magic, slavery and caprice—but there is an interesting twist to the tale. As she ends her journey across the human world, the protagonist reaches the West:

> At Alexandria I became the slave
> Of a harsh Roman matron, who was wont
> To flog and famish me to make me good,
> And when I owned myself converted, then
> She flogged and famished me the more, to make
> My goodness lasting. (h689fe, ll. 263-78)

From the protagonist's worldly viewpoint, the civilised Westerner, the 'Roman matron' living in the city of Alexander, Caesar and Cleopatra, is just another powerful person in an unequal world. Indeed, the matron's disciplinary method, 'flogging and famishing,' sounds quite similar to Britain's own methods in the early years of New South Wales. Through all these transformations, the protagonist achieves a composite worldview, in which no one perspective is supreme. The poem is an attempt to portray a universal consciousness encompassing all living things. Other nineteenth-century poets, such as Robert Browning and Walt Whitman, had similar aims, but Harpur's approach was distinct. Browning evoked different voices in his monologues, but did so with considerably more irony. Whitman described a mystical union of minds, while Harpur described a plurality of individual mentalities. The composite consciousness of *The Witch of Hebron* is a model for Harpur's poetry as a whole.

There was always a tension for Harpur between his desire for universal consciousness and his belief that experience is subjective. He confronted this tension directly in 'The Death of Shelley' (1847), a poem in which he praises the 'godlike thunder' of Percy Shelley's 'fearless soul' while lamenting the 'error' of his atheism (h088a, ll. 6, 101). In his note to the poem, Harpur concludes that 'Out of blending contrariety harmony arises; and our moral differences

should but constitute the moral music of life. For Truth, though one in its essence, is manifold in its attributes …' (h088a). Even a Christian like himself should value the true piety of the atheist Shelley. In his nature poetry as well as in his political writing, Harpur tried to capture the 'manifold' nature of truth, using voice and focalisation to present a range of perspectives; but he also aimed at a singular 'essence' that would unite these different minds. He was not naïve about the difficulty of this task—the protagonist of *The Witch of Hebron* ultimately fails and dies in agony. It was hard enough for a single poet to encompass the world in their imagination. It would be harder again for a whole society to encompass the world through justice and equality. In his more optimistic moods, however, Harpur was sure that humanity was progressing towards a great convergence of spirit.

2. Progress

The final transformation of *The Witch of Hebron* identifies a persistent aspect of being, that endures all changes of outward condition. After long centuries of wandering in various animal and human forms, the protagonist, for the first time, dies 'a natural death,' and is reborn one last time:

> Again I had some deep-down hold on being,
> Dim as an oister's in its ocean-bed;
> An aboriginal inception—yea,
> A self-producing knot of living shoots
> Which terminated all in one smooth surface,
> From which branched forth tentaculæ, that searched
> The darkling confines of my moist abode.
> Then came a sense of free space, light and air,
> And then of hunger, and along with this
> Strong suctatorial powers. I could detect
> Sweet food from sour, warm presences from cold,
> And was beyond all doubt some sentient thing—
> Some little vital centre, upon which
> Much comfortable influence impinged. (h689ge, ll. 8-21)

What persists is our 'aboriginal' power of 'self-producing,' our inborn ability to grow and create. Our nature is receptive to the 'comfortable influence' of the world. We instinctively 'branch forth' and search. To the nineteenth-century mind, observes Hannah Arendt, nothing exists 'as it is;' everything is always 'only a stage of some further development.' (Arendt 464) For Harpur too, nature was ever in flux, and that meant that the human race, and indeed human individuals, were also in flux.

He took the idea of progress to its logical extreme. If it is in the nature of things to change, then they will only ever change. He would have had no patience with 1990s notions of the 'end of history:' 'But dare we say the awful Law of Change, | From good to better still, hath here an end?' (h696c, ll. 48-50) Harpur posed this rhetorical question in the suggestively titled 'Cosmoplasticus' (1857). The poem itself was not immune to the 'Law of Change.' Harpur first published it in 1847 as 'Geologica', and kept expanding it to the end of his life. It is usually known by its final title, 'The World and the Soul.' Wright argues that the poem is Harpur's philosophical 'credo' (17). She compares Harpur's creed to Sufism and the philosophy of Henri Bergson, but the more obvious comparison would be with G.W.F. Hegel. Like Hegel, Harpur held that reality is constantly spiralling upwards, and that the evolution of the human mind is actually the process by which the universe becomes conscious of itself. Through history the

'World' has acquired a 'Soul,' which is 'individualised in all mankind' (h696c, ll. 79-80). His view of change is therefore teleological. The universe does not simply alter, it progresses 'From good to better still'. The Soul of the World 'evermore aspires' to a more perfect being (h696c, l. 83).

This strong belief in progress made Harpur a radical thinker in some ways, and a man of his time in others. He was not remotely conservative. Even the most radical politicians of colonial NSW usually insisted that their ideas derived from the British Constitution. Harpur was part of a small minority who rejected this traditionalist ideal outright (Cochrane 54). Progress could not come about 'By chaining Enterprise and Thought | To the unyielding Past' (h588a, ll. 11-12). He was also radical in his opposition to economic growth and military might as the main measures of government. The only true progress was spiritual progress. Military victory, or 'national glory,' was not a worthwhile aim but a 'blood-drinking monster' (h393a, l. 12). 'Mammon' was a cruel master, digging a grave for 'beauty of the mind' (h534a, l. 13). War, wealth and monarchy might suit the Old World with its ancient resentments and inherited inequalities. The New World required another creed.

Harpur's progressive mindset infused nearly all his poetry. Even when he describes a completely static object, like 'The Rose Tree' (1846), he turns it into an unfolding narrative:

> A matchless Rose Tree! From the shaded mould
> Banked tow'rds the garden wall, its bole twists up
> Massive and knarled in miniature, and whence,
> As it ascends, a hundred lesser stems
> Branch off, and so, contorting all, are led
> Upward and spreadingly against the stones … (h484a, ll. 1-6)

This rose tree is standing still against a wall, but Harpur describes its 'mighty growth' from the earth towards the sky as though he were filming it through a time-lapse camera (l. 9). The plant has a powerful life-force. It 'twists' and 'ascends,' its stems 'branch off.' It grows from lower to higher, from the darkness of the 'shaded mould' to the 'celestial health' of its mature form (l. 19). He uses characteristically hypotactic syntax to bind all the elements of the poem into a single sinuous structure. Every sentence uses words like 'from,' 'to,' 'whence' or 'then' to carefully place each stage of the rose's growth into a sequence. Nearly all his descriptive poems have this temporal, unfolding character, whether he is describing the slow onset of darkness in a tragic poem like 'The Creek of the Four Graves,' or the slow arrival of the 'Spirit of Light' in an optimistic poem like 'Dawn and Sunrise in the Snowy Mountains' (h085b, l. 12).

This style of progressive description distinguishes Harpur from the British Romantic poets with whom he is so often compared. Ackland insists that Harpur's descriptive poems are Wordsworthian ('Wilderness to Landscape'), while Perkins argues they are more Coleridgean (83). Harpur himself acknowledged the influence of both these poets, but his poetry is really quite distinct from theirs because of its objectivity. As M.H. Abrams observed in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Wordsworth, Coleridge and their followers were more interested in human consciousness than in natural things themselves (Abrams). Even when Wordsworth is at his most objective, picking out details in a landscape, his main aim is to describe his own spiritual feeling of connection:

> There bloomed the strawberry of the wilderness;
> The trembling eyebright showed her sapphire blue,

> The thyme her purple, like the blush of Even;
> And if the breath of some to no caress
> Invited, forth they peeped so fair to view,
> All kinds alike seemed favourites of Heaven. (Wordsworth 298)

Harpur's rose tree has its own inward will and desire, its own principle of life, which it is his aim to understand. Wordsworth's flowers have no such separate being. They are arranged for human eyes and nostrils, 'showing' themselves, 'inviting' interaction and 'peeping forth' to the poet's 'view'. Wordsworth evokes a mystical sense that all is 'alike', whereas Harpur describes a world of clarity and distinction. Everything for Harpur is singular. Each being is a discrete entity, that splits or 'individualises' the 'Soul of the World.' To understand a thing, we must perceive and understand its inner force, its principle of growth.

Here we can see the link between the progressive and perspectival aspects of Harpur's politics and poetry. The world is made up of things that grow. Each thing is separate, so can only be understood from its own perspective. Each thing is organic, so can only be understood in terms of its progress through time. He was a staunch individualist both politically and metaphysically. Though briefly interested in the egalitarian teachings of Robert Owen, for instance, he later felt that Owen's particular brand of socialism was authoritarian and conformist (Normington-Rawling 73). The mature Harpur was drawn to William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson, post-colonial liberals who reverenced the unique individual (Perkins; Roe 148). He learnt from geology that even the mute rocks were active beings with their own particular ways of moving and growing:

> First emerged
> Mountains abrupt, like those upon the moon,
> Scarred through with fissures out of which there seethed
> A white volcanic heat … (h696g, ll. 44-47)

At times he expresses an ecological worldview, in which plants and animals are equal citizens of a world they share with their human overlords. In 'The Kangaroo Hunt' (1860-63), which is mostly a poem of manly excitement and exertion, he briefly considers the quarry's point of view. To the fleeing kangaroo, the birdsong has a different meaning:

> Fellow child of the forest primeval,
>   Hitherward haste thee!
> Gain our wild hold, and those creatures of evil
>   In vain shall have chased thee!
> Look! our guardian thorns shall meet
> Their coming, our woodvines entangle their feet. (h209gd, ll. 85-90)

The kangaroo is not a mute member of creation, but a living being of equal stature to the humans who pursue it. It interprets the birdsong, and is driven by its own inner forces of fear and desire. In the note to his poem 'Finality' (1847), Harpur summed up his ideal community in a single Kantian maxim: '… "the greatest good to the greatest number" *is not* a final principle of human community, and is fast giving place to another that is: namely, *the greatest good to each and all*.' (h131b, note) In a poem like 'The Kangaroo Hunt,' he showed how this maxim could be extended to encompass not just 'human community,' but the community of all life.
It must be said that Harpur was not always so cosmopolitan or ecologically minded. In one respect, he believed in a very nineteenth-century idea of progress: he was sure that humans

were the most advanced species to date and advocated European agriculture as the latest development of the human spirit. In 'The Vision of the Rock' (1842), he describes gazing down on the young farms of the Hunter Valley, and is thankful for the progress that has already been made:

> Straight I bethought how once the scene
>   Spread in its primal horror there:
> When but some lone bird's cry of teen,
>   Or howlings from the wild dog's lair,
> Or rush of startled kangaroo,
> As near some stealthy savage drew,
>   With hunger in his air,
> Or from the stream some casual sound—
> Broke the dread slumbers there of solitude profound. (h665a, ll. 19-27)

He goes on to imagine the 'villages,' 'orchards' and 'cities' that will one day bless the valley (ll. 37, 38, 47). The notion of *terra nullius* haunts much of Harpur's poetry, despite his attempts to present indigenous perspectives. There was 'solitude profound' in Australia before the Europeans came, even if birds, dingoes, kangaroos and people were present.

Harpur's belief in *terra nullius* sat poorly with his otherwise liberal and outward-looking politics, and it introduced strange contradictions into some of his poems. At the beginning of 'The Kangaroo Hunt,' for example, Harpur invokes 'Euroka,' claiming that this Aboriginal word for the sun is 'robust and euphonious' and therefore suitable for poetry (h209bc, note b). He continues to use Aboriginal words for plants and animals throughout the poem. But despite invoking an Aboriginal muse and drawing on Aboriginal language, he also feels a sense that he is the first poet to describe the country:

> While thus Euroka riseth red,
> Up, even to the kingly head
> Of some proud mountain, lo, we climb,
> Whereon, amid the crags sublime,
> Australia's yet unchristened Muse,—
> A wandering Spirit of beauty rare,
> Loves oft to gem her streaming hair
> With heaven's selectest dews,
> And scarf her bosom bright and bare
> With a robe of morning's richest hues;
> Giving the while to all objects there,
> All sounds,—the water-drip, just heard—
> The hum of insect—voice of bird,—
> To every echo and every air
> A poetry unfelt elsewhere. (h209bc, ll. 41-55)

The passage is riven with tensions. On the one hand, the land is imbued with 'poetry,' lit by 'Euroka' and graced by a 'wandering Spirit of beauty.' And yet the 'muse' of this country is 'unchristened.' The word is suggestive. Is Christian civilisation essential to poetry? What line does Harpur draw between his work and the songs and poetical words of the first Australians? Harpur never overcome this tension in his verse, between his admiration for Aboriginal people and his belief that European civilisation was synonymous with progress. The fact that he felt

this tension at all set him among the more enlightened colonists of New South Wales. It is a tension that has yet to be eradicated from the Australian psyche.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

We have now seen how deeply intertwined Harpur's spiritual and political convictions were. Whether he was addressing a political topic or describing the natural world, the same principles applied. He was pluralist: to see reality aright, it had to be seen from a variety of perspectives. He was progressive: to describe anything, whether it was a person, a society or a mountain, it was necessary to describe its history from birth to maturity. There were, to be sure, limits to both his pluralism and his progressiveness. He had a strong faith in European civilisation, despite all his talk of escaping the strictures of the 'Old World,' and though he attempted to imagine the world from the widest possible variety of perspectives, there were limits and contours to his sympathy.

In what sense was he a radical? Michael Roe provides the correct answer to this question. On some matters, Harpur held extreme and unorthodox opinions. On other matters, his views were more conventional. He was not a radical because of his opinions on particular topics, but because of the 'intellectual' quality of his opinions in general (Roe 88). He was a radical in the original sense of the word—he went to the roots of things. He took all his ideas back to first principles. His political and spiritual convictions were closely linked because he made the effort to link them. He saw the progress of the cosmos in a pot plant. He took a perspectival approach to the planting of cucumbers.

When Charles Harpur went to the roots of his own ideals, he came back a sceptic. There is never a final perspective on events, and progress never ceases. In *The Tower of the Dream*, he envisions a 'lustrous Lady' who represents all his personal and poetic ideals (h642c, l. 624). She vanishes, leaving him 'Standing alone in a wide waste' (l. 632). He is not even sure whether his visions are really inspired or merely fanciful: 'vain is all | Conjecture: they are Dreams!' (ll. 40-41). This is the most attractive quality of his poetry today, its careful, questing, branching, self-conscious, thoughtful quality. What is sometimes seen as Harpur's awkwardness is really his truthfulness. He is one of the most idealistic and least ideological poets in the settler tradition of Australian poetry, and in this 150th year of his death, his voice is more necessary than ever.

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953.

Ackland, Michael. 'Charles Harpur's Republicanism.' *Westerly*. 29. 3 (1984): pp. 75-88.

____. 'From Wilderness to Landscape: Charles Harpur's Dialogue with Wordsworth and Antipodean Nature.' *Victorian Poetry*. 40. 1 (2002): pp. 21-32.

____. *That Shining Band: A Study of the Australian Colonial Verse Tradition.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* rev. edition, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.* 3rd edition, Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009.

Cochrane, Peter. *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy.* Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2006.

Eggert, Paul. *Charles Harpur Critical Archive*. Sydney: Sydney University Press. Accessed 24 August 2018. http://www.charles-harpur.org/.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Headon, David and Elizabeth Perkins, editors. *Our First Republicans: John Dunmore Lang, Charles Harpur, Daniel Henry Deniehy, Selected Writings 1840-1860*. Leichardt: The Federation Press, 1998.

Hirst, John. *Freedom on the Fatal Shore: Australia's First Colony.* Melbourne: Black Inc, 2008.

Mitchell, Adrian. 'Review of *the Poetical Works of Charles Harpur*, Ed. By Elizabeth Perkins.' *Australian Literary Studies*. 11. 4 (1984): pp. 541-546.

Normington-Rawling, J. *Charles Harpur: An Australian.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962.

Parkes, Henry. *Fifty Years in the Making of Australian History.* London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1892.

Perkins, Elizabeth. 'Emerson and Charles Harpur.' *Australian Literary Studies*. 6. 1 (1973): pp. 82-88.

Roe, Michael. *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia, 1835-1851.* Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1965.

Van Toorn, Penny. 'The Terrors of *Terra Nullius*: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality.' *World Literature Written in English*. 32. 2 (1992): pp. 87-97.

Webby, Elizabeth. 'Representations of "the Bush" in the Poetry of Charles Harpur.' *JASAL*. 14. 3 (2013): pp. 1-8.

Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. Edited by Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest De Selincourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Wright, Judith. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

[1] All of Harpur's poems, and the 'notes' he often wrote to accompany them, are now available on the Charles Harpur archive. Each version of each poem in the archive has been catalogued and assigned an 'h' number, which I will cite by way of reference.