

Bruce Bennett: Dorothy Hewett's Garden and City

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As readers and students of literature, we are sometimes led to believe that literary and geographical realities are wedged forever apart, the one as a wholly mental condition and the other as an objective physical actuality. Yet place, appropriately conceived, is a meeting ground of mental, emotional and physical states and as such is a suitable focus for the literary imagination. As cultural geographer J Nicholas Entrikin has remarked, place is always understood from a particular point of view. It is both 'a context for our actions and a source of our identity.'¹ The decentred viewpoint of the physical environment by the theoretical scientist, and of some theorists of the arts, should be questioned. Edward Relph has stressed the phenomenological basis of place:

*Geographical reality is first of all the place where someone is, and perhaps the places and landscapes which they remember — formal concepts of location, region or landforms are subsequent. It follows from this that geographical space is not uniform and homogeneous, but has its own name and is directly experienced as something substantial or comforting or perhaps menacing. It is the space of earth and rock, water and air, the built space of towns and villages, or landscapes expressing entire complexes of human intentions.*²

Such geographers challenge students of literature to meet them somewhere in the delimited realms of space we designate as place. Eudora Welty's assertion of the centrality of place to her conception of literary activity does this when she claims place as 'the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?" — that is the heart's field.'³ As in the American South, and to some extent the North American West, one can discern a powerful habit of place-making among Western Australian authors ranging from Peter Cowan to Randolph Stow, Elizabeth Jolley, Mudrooroo and Robert Drewe, for all of whom this part of Australia has been a haunting presence demanding some form of fictional reconstruction.

For Dorothy Hewett, imagery of place and especially of the remembered places of childhood is a necessary prerequisite to the figuration of human behaviour and action. This almost obsessive affiliation with place as 'the crossroads of circumstance' and 'the heart's field' (to use Eudora Welty's phrases again) has its origins in Hewett's isolated childhood (until the age of twelve) on her parents' farm near Wickiepin in the Great Southern region of Western Australia, which Margaret Williams accurately perceives as the chief source of Hewett's long poem 'Legend of the Green Country' and her 'pastoral' plays, *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), *The Fields of Heaven* (1981) and *Golden Valley* (1985).⁴ Williams has commented that all of these plays 'are concerned with imagination's power to heal the gulf between the human world and nature (including the rift in human beings' own divided nature) and with imagination as the only true means of resistance against the ravages of materialistic "progress".'⁵ Yet Hewett's imaginative engagement with other Western Australian authors who seem to share this outlook, especially Randolph Stow, Peter Cowan and Tim Winton, and British writers for whom 'organic' notions of local environments have counted, such as DH Lawrence, the Brontës and the Lake District poets, give her representations of place an intertextual richness and force.

Early influences on Hewett's poetry which represent the twosides in this perceived fracture of sensibility are Judith Wright and TS Eliot. Like Wright, she is an intuitive responder to Romantic doctrines of the sanctity of nature. In Eliot's footsteps, the mystique of the city offers both appeal and revulsion. Behind both, and in spite of Hewett's professed atheism, lies the biblical duality of good and evil, Paradiso and Inferno, the traditional dialectics of literary representations of place.

In the personal mythology of Dorothy Hewett's life in art, wherein places shape the individual and are in turn transformed by her in memory and imagination, 'garden' and 'city' are crucial signifiers. Her seminal essay 'The Garden and the City'⁶ sets the scene: 'There have been two places central to my imagination ... the state of Western Australia and the city of Sydney.' In both she has been struck by 'an almost utopian physical beauty' but underneath the skin of either society (the body metaphor is characteristic) 'the corruption ... is palpable.' In the case of Western Australia, the 'worm in the bud is secretive' whereas in Sydney 'the materialism is vulgar, articulate, unashamed.'⁷ Already one can see the biblical origins of an allegorical Eden ripe for spoiling in the West and the city of Mammon and Moloch in the East. But these polarities are not fixed: their imaginative dynamism derives from their changing roles in the life cycle of a person born into a family living on a wheat and sheep farm at Malyalling via Wickepin, and living now, in her early seventies, in a stone and iron-roofed, verandah-ed house, which looks like an old farmhouse, at Faulconbridge in the lower reaches of the Blue Mountains near Sydney. If houses are palimpsests of the imagination, it is tempting to see a return to the earliest imprints of childhood here; or, to change the metaphor, a return towards beginnings in the life cycle. Empirical details blur the pattern, however: Sydney, city of this author's growing up is only an hour and a half away and Arcadia is rent apart by the racket of heavytraffic to and from Sydney on the Great Western Highway outside the front fence and by goods trains at the back. In imaginative and emotional terms Sydney appears as the city Hewett had to have; and she seems unable to leave it entirely behind. This aspect of the personal mythology would be confirmed by Dorothy Hewett herself, reminding those who listen to, or read her, that her lifetime has in fact been split into two parts — around forty years spent in Western Australia and thirty in New South Wales, mainly Sydney. But within these apparent contraries, certain ambiguities and contradictions occur. These arise from Hewett's cumulative sense of a plurality of Australian places and their imaginative possibilities.

In a recent interview, Dorothy Hewett commented:

*I think I wear places out in my head. I'm a terrible user and I use places and perhaps people too, to a certain extent. I drain them, I get whatever I can from them and then I've got to go somewhere else.*⁸

Along with this honest admission of the ruthless egotism of a writer, however, goes a strong sentimental attraction to certain places and people, especially when they are revisited in memory. One is reminded of Randolph Stow's poem 'Ishmael' when his poetic persona asks: 'strip me likewise of softness, strip me of love, leaving a calm regard, a remembering care.' Hewett has had more trouble attaining this state than Stow, but the impulse is there.

In the classic Romantic mode, places are recalled for Hewett by their association with situations which produced powerful emotions. Thus, for example, just as the south-west coast of Western Australia, and Augusta in particular, reminded Peter Porter of the Brisbane bays of his boyhood in his poem 'The Ecstasy of Estuaries',⁹ so Hewett's images of south-coast New South Wales near Bermagui (not far north of Eden) remind her of childhood holidays near Albany on Western Australia's south coast. Such examples could be multiplied. Distance may do more than make the heart grow fonder; it may give perspective, test memory and clarify the emotions.

Dorothy Hewett's first garden, as her recuperative imagining presents it sixty years later in the autobiographical *Wild Card*, is the one attached to the farmhouse of her childhood, 'the sense of childhood become myth', which 'sits in the hollow of the heart':

*The little gate opens into the garden with the pink Dorothy Perkins rose climbing on the wire fence, the Geraldton wax bush blooming. The house is ringed with almond and fig trees. In spring the almond blossom falls in white bruised drips on the couch-grass lawn. In summer the twenty-eight parrots crack nuts over our heads till our father goes for the shotgun. At Christmas time we sit on the verandah preparing the nuts for the cake with a silver nutcracker. The twenty-eight parrots flash green and black as they fly away, the nutcracker flashes silver in the sun. We carry the almonds into the kitchen, plunge them in boiling water and peel off the skins, till they curl like brown tissue paper and the almonds emerge smooth and creamy white.*¹⁰

The metaphoric pressure here is towards inclusion. The speaker/ author is neither above nor below, but imaginatively enters 'into' the space designated as 'garden'. The father is the central figure here; throughout Hewett's writings he is the one who counts, brought low though he ultimately is by separation from the land he has tamed and the censorious, suburban ways of his wife. This garden of childhood dreaming is a charmed place where the father maintains order with his gun; and it leads in two opposite directions, outwards to the paddocks and the far horizon and inwards to the kitchen, the source of sustenance. A balance, an order is present despite (or because of) the absence of the mother.

Martin Leer points out that the garden in Australian writing is part of 'the conceptual apparatus Europeans brought with them to Australia'¹¹ but Hewett gives it her local habitation and name. For example, Hewett's grandparents' house on three-quarters of an acre in South Perth, named 'Cathay', is recalled as another, second magic garden. 'It became a kind of Garden of Eden for me,' she reminisced recently, 'it was a beautiful garden with fruit trees, I suppose not unlike this place [at Faulconbridge] in a way, lots of trees and flowering shrubs and with a marvellous view of the river as well.'¹² (And without the Blue Mountains traffic, she might have added, with its reminders of Sydney.)

Superimposed on these images is the garden of The University of Western Australia campus where, in the autobiography *Wild Card* and the play *The Chapel Perilous*, and elsewhere, a serpent ('the snake of change, sex, adulthood, the joining outwards to the corrupt world'¹³) has comprehensively entered the formerly safe enclosure and takes her unawares in groves of trees, on sports grounds or by the river. The garden's most allegorical rendering occurs in Hewett's fifth volume of poems, *Alice in Wormland* (1987), written in the author's early sixties in various places including eastern and Western Australia over the previous five years and often exuding a strong sense of the locality and circumstance of their composition. As the book's title suggests, the protagonist Alice has moved through the life cycle from the Wonderland of childhood to the contemplation of her mortality as part of Wormland. This recognition makes the garden a more focussed, intense place of desire and imagining. The chief contrast is between the haunting presence of Wormland and the earlier 'Dream Girl's Garden' where

*There were dolls & rocking horses
gilt hornets built clay houses on the verandah
tom-tits swung dry grass nests in almond trees.
This was Eden perfect circular
the candid temples of her innocence
the homestead in the clearing
ringed with hills
the paddocks pollened deep in dandelions
the magic forest dark & beckoning.*

The dark forest, beckoning, will of course attract the young adventuress, but inside, a certain primal innocence remains like a birthmark on the writer's literary conceptions of her self. Nim, the speaker's idealised companion/child/lover in *Alice in Wormland* might be thought of as the son of TS Eliot's Fisher King, but he also anticipates other idealised figures of the lost 'other half' of Hewett's Romantic yearnings, including Billy Crowe in *The Toucher* — idealised males whose evil is never quite realised for what it is because she is rebelliously attracted to it. In *Alice in Wormland* this Nim waits

*curled like a leaf
in the womb of time
his fisherhat folded
his rods plaited
his bait tin ready.*

As a virtuoso of roles and styles throughout her writing career, Hewett has experimented with different ways of representing her garden and city worlds. As Don Anderson acutely observed of her second volume of poems, *Windmill Country* (1968), (the co-authored volume with Merv Lilley, *What About the People!*

(1963) was her first), 'the long unrhymed narrative line' was reminiscent of Whitman in 'trying to contain the land'. She was coping with 'the tyranny of distance', attempting to

*take things into herself by naming them, to understand her puritan ancestors who were so intimately a part of the land which shaped them, made them mean and avaricious.*¹⁴

Her poetry in this volume furthermore was 'energetic and muscular, representing a sensibility arguing strongly with time and place, wrestling with atavism and tradition.'¹⁵ Other moods and responses to place and time occur in other books and sequences of poems. For example, place and state of mind interact with almost symphonic effect in the two series of poems first published in *Overland*, written at Mornington Peninsula on Port Phillip Bay in Victoria (*On the Peninsula* and *Return to the Peninsula*), in which keenly observed imagery of place musically counterpoints the writer's recovery from two serious operations.¹⁶ Like Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor (Opus 132), in which the slow movement includes allusions to the composer's illness, these poems are generally quiet, contemplative, echoing the rhythms of a re-emergence into life, but they occasionally erupt with the storms of Hewett's passionate engagements with people and places.

Cities offer different challenges to the literary imagination. However, it is interesting to note that Perth does not figure in any archetypal sense as 'the city' to Dorothy Hewett, though she lived there (chiefly in South Perth among what she termed 'the bourgeoisie' through her Communist days) from 1935 to 1949 (between the ages of twelve and twenty-six); and then again, after her nine years in inner-city Sydney (especially Redfern and Rockdale) from 1958 until 1974, when she finally severed herself from Perth as her principal place of residence. Hewett's main literary representations of Perth are as suburbia. To some extent, her Perth recalls Tom Stannage's memorable history, *The People of Perth*,¹⁷ in which he characterises the central tendency of successive communities there as a particularly successful but ambivalent and in part self-destructive quest for 'internal peace'.¹⁸ Dorothy Hewett's poem 'Sanctuary' in her third collection, *Rapunzel in Suburbia*,¹⁹ presents Perth as a place of quiet suburban desperation where suicide seems the chief option for wild spirits:

*This nervous hollow city is built on sand,
looped with wires, circled with shaven trees.
The bleeding pigeons tumble outside the windows,
the children wring their necks.*

Such images recall the atmosphere of Randolph Stow's novel *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), Peter Cowan's book of stories *The Empty Street* (1965) or, further back, Philip Masel's neglected novel *In a Glass Prison* (1937). Trapped in 'the backyard of the bourgeoisie' with Merv Lilley in her second phase of domesticity and children, Hewett records her sense of restriction in *Rapunzel in Suburbia*. South Perth enters the book symbolically as the place of the zoo. However another kind of wildness is desired, expressed in Cat Stevens' popular song of the period, 'O! Baby, Baby, It's a Wild World', which provides the title of the book's central section. But the Romantic longing for freedom, danger and wildness in the years of her return to Perth is most typically expressed by Hewett in images of a lost, remembered world, in a Sydney of occasional escapes from the socialist realist routines of *Bobbin Up*, when she had lived dangerously as a go-between for Communist Party functionaries at rallies and clandestine meetings:

*O to live dangerously again,
meeting clandestinely in Moore Park
the underground funds tucked up between our bras,
the baby's pram stuffed with illegal lit.*

The place from which remembering occurs here is the imaginative tower to which, like Yeats, the poet has retreated to spin visions, and gain perspective. As Nicholas Hasluck and Fay Zwicky point out, 'the outer land-scape is now internalised, it has become larger than life, the stuff of legend ...'²⁰

Hewett's images of Sydney as a city of dreams are fractured, kaleidoscopic, in a modernist mode in her poetry, representing half a lifetime in different precincts of this city in a variety of emotional states. The more solidly specific novel *Bobbin Up* has provided knowledge and insights for at least one social geographer of postwar Sydney, who finds the novel as valuable a source as Ruth Park's novels.²¹ According to Hewett's own testimony, she has found Sydney 'territorial'; certainly the topography, architecture and circumstances of the three suburbs she has principally inhabited — Redfern in the 1950s, Woollahra in the 1970s and Darlinghurst in the 1980s — have offered radically different perspectives on experience. The house in Jersey Road, Woollahra, for example, becomes the author/hostess' 'salon' for Sydney playwrights and poets²² just as the house in South Perth had been for Western Australian writers. (Post-Redfern, all of Hewett's houses have been important meeting places for writers, artists and other drop-outs). The house at 195 Bourke Street, Darlinghurst, however, eventually becomes a place of disenchantment. Just off Oxford Street, and a short walk down the hill from the neon-lit sleaze of 1980s King's Cross, the Bourke Street house is located next door to a brothel and across the road from a church; always alert to the symbolic resonances of her dwelling places, this house and its surroundings come to epitomise an end of urban romance. In Dorothy Hewett's hands, this is achieved in a distinctly theatrical way:

*The mafia play Johnny Cash
at the barbecue
the bikies drag their girls
home by the hair
down Wisdom Lane
the molls argue
25 bucks to suck you off
a French letter
because of AIDS
& no kissing
the paraplegics line up
in their wheelchairs
for a fuck.*

If this scene smacks of 'over the top' melodrama, it is important to recall Hewett's own self-valuation that, although she had a strong memory, like Hal Porter, she lacks imagination. Her first job was as a reporter for the *Daily News* and many places and incidents in her poetry, prose and drama emerge from remembered events in her own life. Visitors to the Darlinghurst house for example, will vouch for the details in her poem. It is also noticeable that in the prose and poetry which situate Hewett's alter ego in fictional versions of the Bourke Street house, she is placed not in the streets themselves, as in *Bobbin Up*, but above them, from the point of view of a watcher, looking down (again like Hal Porter, though not from a cast-iron balcony). Implicit in this positioning is not the perspective of Gothic romance, as in the towers of Rapunzel, but a distancing of age. Esther expresses revulsion at this later image of a de-romanticised Sydney in *The Toucher*:

*Is the dawn streaking the horizon while I lie here in this dark, cluttered house mired in
the city like a huge old warehouse of half-forgotten dreams, redolent with them, dusty and
stinking like the city tip?*²³

The time has clearly come to be up and away where nature is closer, the air cleaner, and the spirit can again expand. The Blue Mountains offer her her next, perhaps last, writerly retreat.

In his review of Dorothy Hewett's novel, *The Toucher*, David English²⁴ accurately observes that this is 'a water book' in which 'the estuary, the beaches and cliffs from childhood, deaths by drowning, tourists out surfing, the fishing, the last voyage' are predominant. There is no quiescence in this though. Albany and the south coast are not calm like the Mornington Peninsula and Port Phillip Bay in *Peninsula*. The Romanticism is Byron's rather than the Lake Poets' as, in David English's words, the novel's protagonist is 'swept by great waves of memory' expressed in 'a defiant poetic surrealism.' The Albany and surroundings of Hewett's childhood, which she revisited in 1987, are not a place to slip quietly towards a clichéd 'eventide'. Dylan

Thomas' 'Do not go gentle into that good night' expresses more appositely Hewett's rebellious sense of the *inappropriateness* of an 'appropriate' attitude to conventions such as ageing gracefully. The secret of Hewett's power to embarrass by excess, to overflow the page, is evident when, in *The Toucher*, her protagonist Esther is spoken to by the garden: "'Be told", said the garden.' She refuses this command, even as a crippled, wheelchair-bound septuagenarian. She will not accept the garden's order and quiescence. Like earlier Hewett protagonists, she is impelled by romantic desire and physical need to one more grand adventure. In this most recent novel, then, garden and city give way to the sea and the notion of voyage 'past the islands into an unknown light and an ultimate darkness.' The immortality which Sally Banner's adolescent confidence had foreseen beyond the limitations of Western Australian suburbia is countered by the older writer's recognition of mortality in contemplation of Australia's southern seas. The garden has become too-enclosing a symbol; the city no longer offers salvation by excitement and anonymity. The tower is no longer necessary. The sea draws her beyond old limits towards 'an unknown light and an ultimate darkness.'

Notes

1. J Nicholas Entrikin. *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*. London: MacMillan: Intro.
2. E Relph. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976: 5. See also RJ Johnston. *Philosophy and Human Geography*. Melbourne: EdwardArnold, 1983.
3. Eudora Welty. 'Place in Fiction', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 55: 1, January 1956: 55–72.
4. Margaret Williams. 'A Debt Repaid: Dorothy Hewett's Pastoral Plays', *Contemporary Australian Drama*. ed. Peter Holloway. rev edn., Sydney: Currency Press, 1987: 486–497.
5. *Ibid.*, 487.
6. Dorothy Hewett. 'The Garden and the City', *Westerly*. 27, 4, December 1982: 99–104.
7. *Ibid.*, 99.
8. Interview with Bruce Bennett, Falconbridge, NSW, 18 May 1993.
9. See Peter Porter. *Possible Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989: 10–11.
10. Dorothy Hewett. *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923–1958*. Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1990: 4.
11. Martin Leer. 'Imagined Counterpart: Outlining a Conceptual Literary Geography of Australia', *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*. gen. ed. Giovanna Capone, St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1991: 8.
12. Interview with Bruce Bennett, Falconbridge, 30 May 1993.
13. 'The Garden and the City', 100.
14. Don Anderson. *Southerly*. 29, 1, 1969: 75.
15. *Ibid.*
16. These poems appear in Hewett's latest collection, *Peninsula*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994.
17. CT Stannage. *The People of Perth: A Social History of Western Australia's Capital City*. Perth: Perth City Council, 1979.
18. *Ibid.*, 7–9.
19. Dorothy Hewett. *Rapunzel in Suburbia*. Sydney: Prism, 1975; 1976.
20. See Nicholas Hasluck and Fay Zwicky. 'Poetry', *The Literature of Western Australia*. ed. Bruce Bennett. Nedlands: The University of Western Australia, 1979: 170.
21. See Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather. 'Early Postwar Sydney: a comparison of its portrayal in fiction and in official documents', *Australian Geographical Studies*. 28: 2, October 1990, 204–223.

22. See *Alice in Wormland*. Paddington, NSW: Paper Bark Press, 1987: 49.
23. Dorothy Hewett. *The Toucher*. Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble/ Penguin, 1993: 200.
24. David English. 'Deep Water Explorer', *Weekend Australian*. The Weekend Review, 19–20 June 1993: 6.

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