
Dorothy Hewett's poetry looks like "confessional" poetry, like a transparent window onto "real" people. The notorious litigation surrounding Hewett's Rapunzel in Suburbia (1975) took this view to one conclusion. Another conclusion has been to dismiss the poetry as formless and self-indulgent. Here the window is seen to show the poet rather than others. Still other readers, one suspects, enjoy finding windows which disclose sensational views of love, lust and sexuality.

There are critical weaknesses in the view that Hewett's poetry is "confessional", and Kirsten Holst Petersen, introducing the selection, points them out. Rather than offering direct transcripts of the "real", the poetry typically proceeds through literary allusions, fairy tales and fantasy. A fascination with the histrionic is clear throughout the poet's career, at least as this volume represents the career. In poems from Alice in Wormland (1987) there is the story of Alice and Nim. In Rapunzel in Suburbia there's the Rapunzel story. In Greenhouse the poet takes characters like Madame Bovary and the Russian poet Mandelstam. And in Windmill Country (1968), Hewett's earliest volume collected here, there are the revisions of the bush ballads and of Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott".

Such persistent recourse to fictionality and in particular to the histrionic is a reminder of the importance to Dorothy Hewett of role-acting. As a schoolgirl she discovered her capacity to create and enter a role so as to bring a more satisfactory order to the chaos of experience. Speaking to Jim Davidson in Sideways From the Page (1983) she recalls:

I'd worked out that as long as you had a persona, you could get away with anything. Of course the persona I picked out for myself was the maddest, craziest sort of God's fool that I could think of. And I was quite good at it, I discovered. (p.188)

It is this kind of exploration of the histrionic with its possibilities to invent or impose order which seems to engage Hewett in her poetry.

We not only overlook Hewett's interest with the histrionic, we also undersell the pleasure of a good part of the artistry, the wit and irony, if we read this poetry only for "confession". Conversely we deny ourselves much of its emotive power if all we see in it is fantasy. The poetry's spark seems to come from leaping across the two poles of reality and theatrics. As Ken Goodwin points out in A History of Australian Literature (Macmillan, 1986), the poetry is "full of a sense of the larger-than-life personality of Dorothy Hewett in the act of balancing confession and play-acting" (p.205). Hewett's poetry continually dramatises this "act of balancing", and with seemingly inexhaustible fascination the poet explores the connections between confession and histrionics.

The poem "Lay Lady Lay" in its cultural references (The Story of O, the Bob Dylan song, and Mussorgsky's orchestral work of the witches' sabbath, "Night on the Bare Mountain") shows how deeply our culture inscribes a gender division. In "Lay Lady Lay," the novel The Story of O, with its catalogue of torture offered as eroticism, becomes an apt if terrible image for male objectification and use of women. The speaker leaves the novel for the air-hostess, perhaps a dry comment upon the air-hostess's role, or perhaps to educate the air-hostess into how men might see her. Through its drama rather than didacticism, the poem...
shows how women in this context have little way out: in the culture's terms, for the "Lady" to reject passive suffering and assume action is to become a "lay".

A poem reprinted from *Rapunzel in Suburbia* reflects further upon cultural objectification and abuse of women. (In the contents page the poem is called "The Witness", in the text it is "The Witnesses", which is it? The title makes a lot of difference to any reading.) The poem introduces a predatory animal and prey, a hawk and mice, and the speaker queries "Which of the three wild things am I... /Murderer, victim, recorded cry". The vignette is set against some "bumpkin boys" and a girl they have raped and murdered. The use of imagery from wild nature would be unfortunate to say the least if taken to justify the rape - as though the boys and their victim were enacting the same "natural" imperatives as the hawk and its prey. The juxtaposition of "nature" and "culture", for me doesn't illuminate but obscures the issue and breaks the poem's artistic integrity. A reply to this criticism might point to the speaker's query. In asking her question, the speaker goes beyond accepting any one role. The role options the culture offers do not answer her experience. To question, even implicitly, the validity of the roles is to undermine the justification that they are biologically rather than culturally determined.

As Kirsten Holst Petersen explains, one of the claims Dorothy Hewett's poetry has on our interest is its vigorous assertion of the quest, taking for women that which men have traditionally reserved to themselves. The speaker's opening role in "Lay Lady Lay" is very much the Byronic hero ("I'm the celebrity here", she says in one of those lines which seems so throwaway yet prove so apposite). In the Alice and Nim stories from *Alice in Wormland* the active and passive, falcon and owl, are explored in a quest pattern which eventually resolves, not for "ever after" but for "the time/when they made friends with death". For Alice and Nim there will be other times and other adventures.

Dorothy Hewett's interest goes beyond the reversal of stereotypes and expectations. In her poetry if self-definition comes through social roles, it also closes off other possible selves, other experiences which characters desire. But while roles are a means of social control, they also offer a security of identity. To change is to assert control over one's self, while, paradoxically, surrendering the self by dissolving certainties and entering the chaos of unformed life. Metamorphosis becomes one of the poet's obsessions. And perhaps one of the reasons why Hewett writes with such gusto of the sensual experiences lust, love and death is that such primary experiences most strongly test the cultural constructs we take (or are taught to take) and through which we define ourselves.

It is also worth remembering that for all its importance, sexuality has not received much attention from writers - certainly nothing like that accorded war and landscape. Despite the advertised taboo-breaking of the modernists, the subject of sex seems to remain difficult for writers. Perhaps this is marked in Australia where writers reflect social habits of assuming a public role and denying individuality, or to take it in its more positive aspect, of respecting privacy and individual dignity. Gwen Harwood, reviewing Hewett's *Alice in Wormland* in *Westerly* (1987, No. 4) offers that the poems are "a grand evocation of the agony and exhaustion of all-consuming romantic love" (101); and comments: "Many women have been forced into silence, or into disguise and evasion, trying to write poems like these" (101). All of which is to suggest another reason why Dorothy Hewett's poetry is of importance and will remain so.

Jim Davidson refers to Hewett's "sense of the incredible richness of the moment" (198). And certainly this richness is reflected in the poetry and in the characters' powerful passion (with all the ambiguity of that word). Replying to Davidson, Hewett speaks of absorbing herself in the particular moment as a way to understand a more generalised reality. She relates this to having a weak sense of structure. Overwhelmed by the richness of the moment, she explains, one can lose sight of larger patterns. The comment can be misleading if we then read her poetry as a spontaneous upwelling of powerful emotion. Certainly there is a romantic sensuality in the poetry, but there is also a cooler perspective with a strong sense of shape and structure, an eye with a lively sense of wit, an ironic perspective beyond the reach of the characters caught up in their lives.

Hewett's poems present themselves as largely "chance" imagistic poems, rendering strong "given" moments, powerful experiences which resist imposed patterns of concept as they resist imposed poetics. Yet to read the poetry is not to experience the chaos of a random notation, although the world of the poem may be bizarre and challenging indeed; rather it is to be caught up in a very strong onrush which moves with its
own compelling sense of form and assurance. Typically each detail - seemingly incidental and unrelated - is observed and set down in a style pared back to the basic naming. The cool precision itself offers an ironic commentary on the intense and intimate events being dramatised. The disposition of detail and event serves as a kind of pulse, a metric of experience, while it can also carry and develop the poet's thematic concerns. Usually the movement converges upon a detail which gathers up earlier observations. This strategy serves the poet variously to recapitulate, to conclude, to comment ironically, or to expose as ever-present a significance which earlier had been hidden. And then again, as if to undercut such epiphanic closures and the will for order, the poet sometimes ends on a detail which seems nothing more nor less than another detail.

For gathering the work of this important writer A Tremendous World in Her Head: Selected Poems should be warmly welcomed. Kirsten Holst Petersen's introductory literary-critical essay is a model of sympathy, tact and lightly-worn scholarship and usefully ranges from the critical reception of Hewett's poetry to an overview of the poet's development. The book itself is attractively produced by Dangaroo Press with a striking cover design, "Paradise Lost", from a lino cut by the Danish artist Henry Heerup. In addition to the wrong title for "The Witnesses", there are four literal errors in the text. This is a "select" selection, which means the book is a peak of achievement but many favourites known from anthologies have been left out. And as the early volumes are now unavailable there is a growing need for an enterprising publisher to bring out a Collected Poems to complement this lively book.