The Dream Girl's Garden - Dorothy Hewett

Abstract
If autobiographical discourse is a mythologising practice that explores, rehearses and confronts the collective anxieties and beliefs of the culture then personal story will always be a metonym for deep and complex narratives about the contradictions and forces that shape the culture as a whole. And, since autobiography is predominantly concerned with origins and genesis, these metonymic stories about the discovery of self in the mirror world of the past can be seen as windows into the historical process whereby the entire culture understands, invents and constructs itself.

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If autobiographical discourse is a mythologising practice that explores, rehearses and confronts the collective anxieties and beliefs of the culture then personal story will always be a metonym for deep and complex narratives about the contradictions and forces that shape the culture as a whole. And, since autobiography is predominantly concerned with origins and genesis, these metonymic stories about the discovery of self in the mirror world of the past can be seen as windows into the historical process whereby the entire culture understands, invents and constructs itself.

Within the Australian context, the motif of the traumatised exile searching for a lost and unattainable home in the golden valleys of an idealised childhood is an essentially European and romantic discourse in which the pain of exclusion is counterbalanced by the Edenic possibilities of transcendency and homecoming. This search for an unattainable national space in the myth of a prelapsarian childhood may provide comforting anodynes for the trauma of exile but it also produces orthodox narratives which depoliticise the individual by transmuting the interested actions of everyday life into the disinterested powerlessness of essential childhood.

However, since autobiography is also revelatory and confessional in nature and often positions the protagonist as a victim in stories about difference, powerlessness and injustice, the form has radical, subversive and oppositional possibilities. The secret stories of convicts, homosexuals, migrants, Aborigines, artists and women represent an unauthorised and covert history which, by exposing the dominant cultural forces that suppress and silence minorities, open up the secret country of the untold past. By telling stories that deal with society’s fringewellers, autobiography can radically change perspectives, transform social practices and undermine mainstream ideologies.

This dialectic between historical process and poetic space, between autobiography as sociography and autobiography as personal quest is perfectly illustrated in the highly self-reflexive work of Dorothy Hewett. Her thinly disguised autobiographical narratives – ‘I’ve been criticised for writing a sort of endless autobiography’ – are concerned with what appear to be the unresolvable tensions between the poetic ‘I’ and the historical ‘other’. In *Wild Card*, the conflict between her political and
artistic self, between the historian and the poet, is central to an understanding of the way the wider culture speaks through her highly personalised narratives. *Wild Card* is both a domestic and political secret history in which the writer 'invents a pseudonym, a character, and follows that character through a series of events that appear to make up a life', a life suspended between two opposing pulls – political and poetic – each represented by different persona and different modes of narration. If the sociographer and political activist is expressed through the 'realism' of the referential historian then the anarchic romantic is expressed through the poetry of the preludes in which the golden valley of the Dream Girl's Garden becomes a metaphor for the lost world of childhood possibility.

*Wild Card* is a sociography about a middle-class woman whose development from country girl to city activist and romantic poet reflects the movement of a whole society as it copes with the traumas and contradictions of historical isolation, economic depression and war. The fact that the storyteller is a woman, a poet and an ex-communist reinforces the very isolation and dislocation that the sociography reveals. It is also a story about a society emerging from the myth of a bucolic paradise to embrace its fate as an extension of urban European history. When Dorothy Hewett decides to escape Perth and travel across the continent to Sydney, she is descending into an Orwellian Purgatory – 'my very own Wigan Pier' – in which the fall from the grace of childhood gardens is expressed through the desert of city life, 'a landscape of horror' (p. 166).

It is a landscape which not only reveals the collapse of mythic Australia as natural garden but also opens up the secret countries of Australian covert history, presenting us with a sociography of activism in post-war Australia, in which the female outsider battles against all odds (domestic, social and cultural) to establish feminist and Marxist alternatives in a predominantly conservative and unresponsive culture (p. 84).

On the other hand, although the book, as sociography, highlights the struggle of the marginalised and oppressed, it is far from being a political tract. Indeed, the main focus of *Wild Card* is not so much political and consciously historical as personal and romantic. It is the story of a poet whose central concern is the gap between the pain and disappointment of experience and the purity of the prelapsarian self. Her constant reference to the idealised childhood of Wickepin is, in effect, a yearning for the lost and transcendent possibilities of youth. The aged and experienced Alice cannot find a way back into timeless Wonderland – 'it's sad to grow up' (p. 237) – except through the union of memory and imagination in art. Even Hewett's political life – her energetic Marxist faith – has to be seen in terms of a romantic utopianism which seems to inform every aspect of her story, whether it concerns love, family, poetry or politics. Hers is the story of the battling and alienated self, of the child/artist as outsider, misfit and self-creator.
This conflict between the poet and the historian belongs to a set of dualities and oppositions which is central to an understanding of the way Hewett interprets her life. Doppelganger images of division structure a narrative in which the protagonist is seen as constantly at war with herself. The 'I' is divorced from the 'other', the watcher from the doer, the ascetic from the hedonist, 'the responsible Communist' from the 'wild girl' (p. 119), and the poet from the activist. 'The girl who moves and talks and rages and loves', is in direct conflict with 'the cold detached consciousness of the writer' (p. 90): the subjective actor and the objective vivisector, to borrow Patrick White's image, seem constantly at odds. Reconciliation seems to lie in the act of autobiography itself, in the conscious search for a past in which the divided can be made whole.

The preponderance of garden, glass and mirror motifs in Hewett's work is a clear indication of her fascination with ideal spaces and her tragic sense of being locked out of those spaces. Her identification with Lewis Carroll's Alice and her adventures in the mirror world of timeless wonderlands is central to an understanding of all her work, in general, but to Alice in Wormland, in particular, where Alice is a kind of Eve in an Edenic garden threatened by experience and the world:

Done Alice said All over
your wife domestic Eve will warm your bed
swallow your guilt & big with it your life
forfeit perfection let your garden grow
one winter's day you'll find behind the door
that white blurred mirror on the other side
reflecting all the Eden we possessed
the gift of self single distinct & whole
& your worn face.

The sense of a lost world of innocence in which the 'gift of self ... single distinct & whole' is what lies behind Alice's Wonderland door and Looking-glass world. Ironically, the mirror of the lost self is a motif that simultaneously denies the very thing it celebrates: inclusion in the unattainable world of childhood perfection. Although Nim is Hewett's attempt to reconcile the profane and the sacred, the sensual and the pure, it is the sense of expulsion from paradise that dominates the poems. Hewett's Alice has fallen into the world and cannot get back: she is in Wormland and she is going to die: 'I'm experiencing old age very hard'.

The 'Dream Girl's Garden', the Wickepin Eden, 'perfect circular' is blighted by 'the spotted snake' with 'hooded world-sick eyes' and Alice is 'driven howling from the garden', as time and the world take their toll.

In Bons Bons and Roses for Dolly, the protagonist is the 'dream of youth/That seems/Ephemeral, unreal ...', she is 'the fairytale Alice ... the dolly-bird in green' who inhabits the 'crystal palace' of cinematic dreams where mirror transformations are magic and childlike. In a fantasy that
underpins many of Hewett’s autobiographical figures, the middle-aged and dowdy Dolly Garden walks through the projecting mirror of art to emerge as eternally young and beautiful. The crystal palace is a kind of never-never land in which Alice/Dorothy never has to face the horror of growing old until the mirror smashes and the reality of time undermines the dream.

DOLLY: (to music) The Crystal Palace, it all fell down, we all grew old ... we all grew old. They promised me the world, and I ended up with a lousy, empty, out-of-date picture show.10

*Wild Card* attempts to reverse this process by turning the past into a longed for but inaccessible dream of childhood possibility. The author is Alice who, on cold winter days when mutability threatens the dream, attempts to rebuild the ideal space of childhood.11 ‘The small clean enclosed space of filtered light’ is the unattainable ideal that lies at the end of the search for the lost childhood. Although her size and age prevent her from entering the golden space, with the aid of the narcotic of memory, she plans to enter, inhabit and explore her own fragile construction, her own biography. The attempt to reverse time fails and she is left feeling excluded, ‘a giant amongst the Lilliputians’, an outsider, a lady of Shalott, condemned to a life of yearning whilst being locked out of worlds she will never be able to inhabit. However, in spite of the losses, guilt and pain, ‘the little sour apples’ that ‘still grow in my heart’s orchard’ continue to come up ‘out of the dead country’ (p. 267). It is the pain of exclusion and failure that prompts Alice to continue to build her fragile houses of cards as she searches for an integration and inclusion in the ‘enclosed space of filtered light’ that reflects ‘all the Eden we possessed’.12

The prelude to part 1, in which the adult Hewett rebuilds the first house of the heart, is a richly realised collage of images and fragments which recaptures the fixed and immutable space of ‘permanent childhood’ where memory and imagination combine to produce ‘the poetry of the past’:13

The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away. It is the first house of childhood become myth, inhabited by characters larger than life whose murmured conversations tug at the mind. (p. 3)

This is the timeless garden of the imagination where the orchard ‘heavy with peach and apricot, nectarine and mandarin, quince and pear’ (p. 7) celebrates the richness and fullness of life, and where the running child, if she runs fast enough, will find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow (p. 8).

However, no sooner has she concluded her celebration of paradise than she introduces the cold reality of chronology and ‘realistic’ narration. The same events are reworked into a narrative voice that abandons Alice and
poetry and speaks with a harsher more objective tone, as the 'skinny tenyear old' (p. 11) begins to face the world. In this narrative world the comforting anodyne of the coherent childhood self is counterbalanced by a more historical perspective in which the developing self is seen in terms of the cultural forces that shape the roles that constitute the life: 'Daughter, sister, lover, wife, mother, grandmother, domestic treasure, I will be suborned into all these roles' (p. 11).

It is always important to bear in mind that this story, like most autobiographies, charts the development of self, the experiencing and integrated 'I', through the fictive conventions of the reflective cohesion of the narrating 'I'. As a result, the tension between the romantic notion of the self as absolute and the historical notion of the self as culturally determined permeates the telling. If the historical mode produces the sociography - social history when told through people - then it is the romantic mode which guarantees the integrated mind of the child/artist. Although Hewett sees herself as fragmented into roles determined by the past and by her upbringing, her identity as a writer is an absolute that draws the pieces together. The 'I' in this narrative is made coherent by a destiny that seems to predate history: the 'I' is a character that only has definition and existence in so much as she is a creation of her own autobiographical act. In other words, being a writer is like being a child: it provides you with an absolute wholeness and unchanging identity beyond the fragmenting and alienating flux of history:

I have my vocation. It is outside sex, and yet my sex is part of it. It is already fixed, brutal, implacable, complete. There is nothing I can do about it, except to get better at it. It shakes me, seductive as love. Words fall out, I am possessed by them. (p. 11)

Although this act of self-creation seems to transcend everything, it drives a narrative that, even in its most ahistorical moments, reveals the culture's deepest concerns - the question of genesis and historical identity. Although the story is a personal account of an individual life - with the writer as hero - it is also a narrative which, by contextualising the individual and textualising her into fiction, produces myth that refracts the culture through the mirror of self. The character of the misfit, the outsider/artist - 'Everything seems to mark me off as different' (p. 44) - in a distant land which is both remote and exotic, both isolating and rich in potential is a figure that rehearses dreams close to the centre of the Australian myth of exile in paradise. It is a double image which hints at romantic possibilities only to expose the blight beneath. Emerging from 'a seemingly gentle, unpolluted, isolated world of space, white beaches and long golden summers', the exiled child turns into a radical romantic who, as she scratches 'the thin skin off the top of this utopia', finds 'corruption beneath ... and a vicious world that blocks everything' (p. 88-9).

It is the metonymic dimension of the personal story which gives the
autobiography its strong sociographical slant. The tribal stories of the clan, ‘the inherited traumas’ that constitute family history belong to an order of myth that enacts the values and anxieties of the wider culture through the particular story of the Hewetts. The early part of the autobiography is full of the murmurs of ‘adult voices endlessly recounting the web of stories that crisscrossed the generations’ (p. 27). The anecdotes about convicts, pioneers, farmers, swaggies and secessionists, the references to the depression, to the war and to growing up on a sheep and wheat farm in Western Australia combine to produce a view of Australian social history which is mediated through the myths of family folklore and then validated through the intimacy of personal story.

In spite of the sociographical detail, however, it is the essential romance of these stories that draws the reader into the world of the developing child, into the fables that shape the writer. For example, Hewett’s account of her grandfather’s wild ride into the bar of the Wickepin pub – a romanticised story she has inherited from her mother – is told with a delight that not only celebrates the power of myth to poeticise and immemorialise the past, but which also reveals the writer’s own particular preference for a narrative that freezes time into perfect moments of space:

This was her dream father, a kind of ‘man from Snowy River’, thundering up the turkey red carpet, throwing his hat in the ring, the red horse rearing, glamourised and frozen for ever in that one magnificent gesture. (p. 24)

A similar romanticisation of the past can be seen in the way Hewett characterises her mother as the mythic source of her own divided self. The evil stepmother punishes her daughter for inheriting the non-cautionary romanticism that has plagued her own life. She wreaks revenge on the innocent and beautiful fairy princess by poisoning her with guilt. In this wonderland fable, the magical potion of transformation is a poisonous drug designed to destroy the very innocence that keeps both wonderland and the pristine self intact:

She is standing by the dressing-table, her shadow huge on the white walls. The carved heads of the griffins are grinning at me from the doors ... She is holding a tiny bottle in her hand, full of some brownish liquid. I think of Alice In Wonderland and the white rabbit. Her eyes ablaze. (p. 31)

And so myth and history are united in the trope of the blighted wonderland in which the innocent child is cast out of the timeless garden. The farm may very well be ‘the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden’ but the ‘black snakes’ of guilt and sensuality that ‘wait and slide’ (p. 32) in the undergrowth suggest a dark and guilty lust for life that is both attractive and threatening. This contradiction between the need for experience and the yearning for Eden is resolved into poetry when the dreamer turns her past into static space, into the pure myth of
the idealised first home:

I have given my heart once and for all and I know that I will never have another real home in the world again ... I'll make legends out of this place ... the Golden Valley of my childhood with Nim, the boy with the owl on his shoulder and the falcon on his wrist, buried at the foot of the orchard ... I'll write poems and plays and stories full of ghosts. (pp. 48-9)

As the narrating self searches for coherence in the firsts of sexual and intellectual experience, it is the trauma born of exclusion from the Golden Valley of childhood which dominates the discourse. The search for wholeness, and for the other half that will make the 'I' complete manifests itself in the utopian idealism and impulsive romanticism which characterises all her actions whether they are political, personal or artistic.

On a personal level, her grandfather is 'my other self, the gay, blond, tender, blustery companion of my childhood' (p. 121). Her first lover is a 'secret lover, my other self', (p. 92) the ideal companion for the non-cautionary romantic. On a political level, a similar search for wholeness can be found in Hewett's uncompromising commitment to Marxism: 'I will proletarianise myself. I will be a heroine of the Marxist revolution' (p. 160). The Pilbara strike, the visit to Russia, the political campaigns, the personal involvements, the self-sacrifices all point to a need to resolve the duality in her nature:

the mainspring of my political belief was a Utopian faith rather than any philosophical, scientific Marxism. I actually believed that Communist had saved my life ... Marxism for me was a conversion, an act of personal salvation. (p. 174)

Once again, the energetic pursuit of the 'other' in the mirror world of ideal reflections seems to exacerbate the division between the two selves. The figure of the responsible Communist attempting to bury the ego in the language of social realism is constantly at war with the the figure of the 'rebellious girl with the hooped earrings and the black velvet beret, who wouldn't be seen dead with her hair in a victory roll?' (p. 123). The conflict between the two selves seems to represent a direct threat to the wholeness that the romantic poet requires for her art. Living the outer life too strenuously leads to fragmentation of the self and the destruction of the poet:

In burying her (the wild girl), have I fragmented my personality so drastically that I have killed the poet in me, traded the gift of tongues for the dream of a Marxist Utopia? (p. 123)

This pursuit of the self and belief in the inner life is strongly connected with the desire to be a child again, to be free of the responsibility that ties her to the outer world of action. But the escape from responsibility brings with it the sort of pain that is closely associated with the motif of expulsion. Her decision to leave Lloyd Davies, Clancy and Perth for Les
Flood and Sydney is an experience that is once again expressed in terms of the pain of exile and separation. As she leaves Perth, the clock chimes, the rain falls and her timeless childhood comes flooding back in a rush of images that suggest a yearning for an irrecoverable ideal violated by time and experience. A child calls, a grandmother dies and the ‘wind in the unripened wheat flows in a green sea to the foot of Rock Hill’ (p. 145).

And so Alice, driven by the ‘maggot of love’, tumbles out of wonderland into the Orwellian nightmare of her Sydney years. The journey from childhood, from the poetic self to the cold reality of adulthood and objective responsibility is a journey from Arcady to hell, from the blessed country to the ugly city. This mythic journey belongs to the sort of narrative paradigms Richard Coe outlines in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Australian. The myth begins with ‘a passionate, an overmastering love for the “magic” and mystery, for ... the tangible “timelessness” and “agelessness” of the Australian bush’. According to Coe, this blessed beginning is followed by ‘an uneasy, half-nauseated contempt for Australian “civilisation” ... with its ugliness, conformism, petty-mindedness and philistinism’. The urban hell which is Hewett’s Sydney is the house of cards that seems to lie furthest from the golden spaces of her childhood.

Although, Hewett’s activist years in the ‘city of the poor and dispossessed’ (p. 171) reinforce her need to withdraw from politics into poetry, they provide a telling insight into the unofficial and secret history of Australia’s political left. Her experiences at the Alexandria mill where she campaigns for equal pay and gets sacked for being eight months pregnant is just one example of the way her particular story reflects the lives of many. The party meetings, the rivalries, the debates, the expulsions, the world events, the Petrov affair, the referendum, her own disenchantment with the movement are all part of a radical, covert history in which feminist and socialist perspectives undermine the dominant ideologies.

Nevertheless each strand of the narration, whether personal or political seems to take us back to the central motif of the estranged and alienated self searching for harmony, integration and wholeness. Indeed, Wild Card can be seen as a confessional discourse in which the alienated ‘I’ seeks coherence by attempting to exorcise those ghosts that prevent the guilty Alice from finding a way back into the garden. Unfortunately exorcism merely seems to result in a deeper sense of alienation. The death of Clancy, for instance, is bathed in an imagery which suggests that the loss is as much to do with her own loss of innocence as it is to do with the actual death of her son. Her dream of the child drowning is, of course, a metaphor for the boy’s death, but it is also a chilling reminder of her deep sense of alienation from the centres of her own mythic childhood:

From this angle the pool looks innocent and clear. Only when I come closer I can
see something lying on the bottom – a shadow? Puzzled, I lean over the surface and see the drowned child, the white face turned upwards, the floating sandy hair, the open eyes reflecting the sky. I am weeping uncontrollably, groping for the dead child in the limpid pool. (p. 183)

It is this loss of the essential self that eventually prompts a return to the ‘first house in the hollow of the heart’, to the mythic centres that might compensate for the failures. Going back to the bush is, of course, the final stage in the ‘paradis-perdu’ myth whereby the ‘vanished past’ of childhood can be reconstructed into a ‘Paradise which is at one and the same time real and inaccessible’. 15

Although the heart leaps to see ‘the house lying in the hollow amongst almond and fig trees’ (p. 236), the exact moment of fulfilment in the golden childhood is undercut by the harsh realities of history and change. Not only has the garden disappeared but instead of the longed for reunion with the mirror landscape of the past, the dominant image is one of desolation and flatness in which her own children, the inheritors of this blessed land, ‘stand, small and desolate, on the verandah, staring out across the empty flats’ (p. 236). Indeed, the homecoming alerts the narrator to the way in which dream and nostalgia masks the cultural and historical forces that shape the self. Behind the facade of the ‘Golden Valley of (her) childhood’ lie the mechanisms that shape destinies, the stories that write the culture and which in turn write the self:

The Golden Valley of my childhood has gone for ever. I am reliving my mother’s life on the farm, finding out the difference between illusion and reality. A child’s vision has changed into a grownup woman’s nightmare. Standing by the kitchen window, staring out across the creek bed, I even experience the identical loneliness my mother must have felt, the sense of hopeless entrapment. (p. 237)

Although this recognition of the impossibility of returning to the idealised spaces of childhood prompts a realisation of the power of time, change and history in determining the shape of a single life, the failure of the return does not destroy the dream. If anything, the impossibility intensifies the sense of longing for the inner spaces. This is reinforced by the narrator’s gradual abandonment of the political life for the imaginative life of the artist. Shortly after her return to Wickepin, ‘the miracle happens’ and the narrator is able to write again after ‘ten silent years’ (p. 246). She has found her way back again ‘to the country of the imagination’ (p. 247), a country whose inspiration lies in the poetry of her mythic childhood. The clash between the outer and inner lives, between the prose and the passion, between history and poetry is resolved in favour of poetry. As she travels back to Perth, ‘tired, defeated, sadder, older, wiser perhaps’, (p. 264) the exile’s dream of renewal is grounded in a desire to rediscover “the clean well-lighted place” in the middle of the world’ (p. 265).

Hewett’s song of exile ends with an epilogue in which the aged Alice
returns for the final time to the site of her childhood. Having tasted the ‘sour apples that still grow in my heart’s orchard’ and experienced the desolation of the ‘dead country’ the poet confronts the reality of her exile and is empowered to speak: ‘Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth’ (p. 267). When she discovers that the landscape of her mythic childhood is denuded and desolate she is repeating the rituals of a tribe whose genesis myth is grounded in the dialectic between the garden and the desert, homecoming and exile.

Although the ‘tarnished glass’ of memory shows us ‘what social history can look like when told through people’ the closure of the story seems to reinforce Gaston Bachelard’s maxim: ‘we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost’. As Hewett turns away from the site of a golden childhood blighted by history, the poetry that was lost is now ‘secure in the hollow of the heart’ (p. 273). She doesn’t need to return to the Dream Girl’s Garden in Golden Valley because the poetic space has become her art, has become story. The ghosts that keep ‘walking in our sleep’ (p. 273) are the narratives that make up the art of self that informs all of Dorothy Hewett’s work, an art of self that celebrates, exposes and reinvents the social and cultural practices that constitute the rituals of the tribe.

NOTES

3. Dorothy Hewett, Wild Card (Ringwood: Penguin, 1990), p. 150. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. Dorothy Hewett in Bons Bons and Roses for Dorothy.
7. Alice in Wormland, p. 10.
11. Alice in Wormland, p. 100.
15. Richard Coe, p. 137.