

***The Hedge and the Labyrinth.
A Holistic Vision of Dorothy Hewett's poetry***

M.S. Suárez Lafuente

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Dorothy Hewett's poetry follows a complex architecture, a structure which encompasses her personal beliefs and the guiding lights that consciously and unconsciously led her life, while it also draws and deploys core elements from the literary tradition of Western culture. The primary image that pervades her poems is the garden, which is either the place where many of her poems occur or a significant component in others. Hewett's garden retains several of the characteristics of the primordial garden, such as innocence, abundance and placid solitude, but it also partakes of its Romantic nuances, which, after all, are the same as in Eden but enhanced by feeling and intensity. The garden as literary *locus* sets the pace of Hewett's poetry in that it links myth-making with literary tradition, the pillars that sustain the body of her poetic reality. This triangle, myth, tradition and reality, incorporates the main topics that the Australian writer inscribes in her work, and, while each corner retains its thematic substance, it also reflects the other two, thus giving unity to the whole poetic process. As Bruce Bennett pointed out as early as 1995, "place, appropriately conceived, is a meeting ground of mental, emotional and physical states and as such is a suitable focus for the literary imagination" (Bennett: 19).

The joint development of these structural components trace a complex path both for readers and writers, which can be described graphically as a labyrinth, a world of possible paths leading ultimately, and hopefully, to a meaningful centre. But in Hewett's labyrinth the progress is rough, full of dead ends and traps: distorting mirrors, imaginary monsters and a stubborn "reality" composed of family, work and the unavoidable facts of birth and death. To some extent, we all share, in different measures, in this labyrinthine nature of life - which is why it also runs into our notion of history and into any attempt writers make to explain humankind to humankind. Those attempts are expressed in different literary genres, fall into various cultural definitions and, ultimately, defy the affectations of biography or autobiography, problematizing objectiveness as such and enforcing their own meaning. But they can only be "attempts", truthful or imaginative accounts of what we perceive as our immediate reality. Life in the labyrinth, human life, is a terrifying experience for the individual mind, with too many sides to it, and, therefore, a challenging path to follow. The best equipment for that journey is to assimilate Jacques Derrida's notion of *dissemination*: "language is haunted by dispersal, absence, loss, the risk of unmeaning, a risk which is starkly embodied in all writing" (Peter Dews, *New Statesman*: 1981). Since we deal with language in order to express our knowledge of knowledge, to understand

ourselves, we might as well recognize that it is illusory to pretend that we are clearly defined or that we have the ultimate reason in rendering our own personal routes. Especially when we write, we are disembodied, we become a multiple subject - a reflection of all we have read, heard or said, a reflection of everybody we have met, we have loved or hated. Hewett knows that, as human beings, we need to put some order in our personal chaos, we need to find some means of delimiting our fiction and our reality, to differentiate what we think we are from what we might or might not be - and that is what she attempts to explore through her poetry.

In the fourth part of her poem "The Last Peninsula" Dorothy Hewett inscribed two lines that define, in my opinion, the core of her poetry:

there is a hedge between
this garden and the world

"Hedge" stands here for a not-so-clear-cut line dividing the garden, a space that has been amply connoted by the poet as the *locus* for myth making from the beginning of literature, and the world, meaning reality, everyday individual life, family and community. The hedge is a very appropriate symbol because it partakes of both sides: it is both natural and artificial, grown from the earth, but the result of careful planting and clipping. It separates but it also connects, stating a boundary, a frontier, and, therefore, conferring meaning to what lies here and beyond. The image of the hedge recalls J.L. Borges's idea of the labyrinth - it is a contradictory space, because it defends and imprisons at the same time (Rodríguez Monegal). Whatever has to be preserved or taken into account acquires its meaning from the yearnings on the other side, but that "other side" will not be such without a reference to what is expected here - thus making a thematic unity that needs both parts to exist.

As mentioned above, Hewett bases her poetic vision of myth and life, the garden and the world, on a third component present throughout her poems, that is, her recourse to previous literary works, which link her to a historical chain that expands the here and beyond towards an atemporal realm. To resort to the labyrinth image, we could say that in Hewett's poetry we are enmeshed in a rite of passage which will take us to a centre of sacrality, immortality and absolute *reality* (Mircea Eliade). Yet this reality is contradicted by the poems themselves, so that we are overturned from history to myth and from myth to history - that is, continuously crossing the hedge forth and back. Songs, stories, family history, literary quotations, previous symbols, nostalgia and remembrances make of Hewett's collected poems a cosmology of her own; as critic Katharine Brisbane asserts, Hewett "is possessed of the need for creative freedom and self-knowledge; like Patrick White she ranges through the poetic, lyric and symbolic" (Brisbane: 272).

This creative force is made manifest in a literary voice that becomes multiple in the process of writing down the poem. As the first person singular pronoun, *I*, becomes a graphic symbol on the page, it immediately takes on all the characteristics of fiction, its signifying multiplies and the singular form becomes generic and genesic, with the strength to move freely between myth and immediate history. This force is embedded in the eternal development of literature, it is embodied in the play and interplay of mirrors,

which echo and reflect the many *personae*, the many characters that Hewett inscribes up and down her poetic labyrinth:

I carry the mirror
into the labyrinth
("The Labyrinth: 205)

When the space of this vital labyrinth permeates the garden, or viceversa, the *I* used by Hewett becomes that of Eve, our primordial mother, by virtue of the Christian legend, "I am Eve, spitting the pips in the eye of the myth-makers" ("Legend of the Green Country", part I). Thus, the poet assimilates the Western heritage while she also inscribes an Eve in the full force of active decision taking. Not in vain, the poet admits to her being like Eve "[i]n the garden, in the morning" before the sun comes up and while the children are still asleep ("This Time", part III) - that is, before everyday routine encroaches her in.

The *I* in the garden may designate Safo, or the Lady of Shallott, or, even, impersonate Hewett's own grandmother, but often, the referential *I* is so wide-reaching, so pervasive, that it implies no one in particular and everybody at the same time:

I can't write autobiography because there is no me
Me is not a stable reality / the collective
Me...
("Creeley in Sydney": 156)

This collective *I*, as the poem suggest, dissolves notions of reality, because it is neither the voice of the poet nor the voice of any particular character, but a mixture of both and a development in time of all the previous literary *Is*. This stretching of the subject from all to no one and from nothing to everything follows suit with the modernist playing with time:

It's a quick now, here now, always, moment
("Quick now": 140)

This line accumulates so many contradictory manifestations of time that it disseminates its meaning in all directions: "now" is "always", it is a fleeting "quick" "moment", but it is also eternal, to be inscribed in cultural history, in our collective unconscious, to remind readers that we are only meaningful dust, as T.S. Eliot said in *The Waste Land* (1922): "I will show you fear in a handful of dust". It is no wonder that Hewett wrote a caution after the title, that "Quick Now" was written after re-reading T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), a book where time and space lose the characteristics that define them. Neither time nor space are any longer apt for measure. Because they are now a homogeneous One within the labyrinth, they simultaneously embody the personal and the historical, the mythical and the factual, thus, allowing us to understand and to admit that the more we know we know that we know nothing - which renders positive knowledge as intrinsically impossible.

This is the backbone of Hewett's poetry: sitting us in front of the mirror and forcing us to accept our heritage and leave a testament, while realizing how transient life is for us all:

All this has gone ... nothing remains
But a kind of peace grown out of
All you were.
("Requiescat": 30)

And, all the while, we / Hewett / the collective *I* should allow for new beginnings, for a second coming, for an embodiment of the renewal of desires. Even at forty, when we are halfway our span of life, yearnings and delights can be renewed, our mirror become clear again, but poetic experience informs us that while there are flowers, there are also corpses under those flowers. We may have been bred upon our ancestors but we are also doomed to leave our mortal flesh behind bearing knowledge and experience with us into the grave of history, as expressed in Hewett's play *The Chapel Perilous* (1972), "I had a tremendous world in my head and three-quarters of it will be buried with me."

"The Legend of the Green Country" is a good use of tradition in her poetry. It sets her heritage from the very beginning, from the first line: "September is the spring month bringing tides [...] / A dangerous month". On the one hand, its concomitance with Chaucer famous first line in *The Canterbury Tales* establishes the epic character of the vital journey that is under way, while Hewett's end of the sentence points clearly to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which fuses (and opens up) literary tradition in his "April is the cruelest month". April with its showers is the beginning of a fertile trip for literature, in the case of Chaucer, while it is cruel for Eliot because he feels he lives in times of spiritual sterility where fertility is only a painful tale. Hewett marks her field from the outset, she substitutes April for September, the beginning of spring in the Antipodean Western world, and brings the meaning to physical levels closer to Australian life in the outback in the first part of the 20th century. She does maintain many of the symbols present in her literary predecessors - water in full force, as a terrifying and plentiful parent and water creatures as icons of myth or reality - but, suddenly, in the fifth line, Hewett dissolves the magic with a down to earth "the ring of the till / is profit and loss", which introduces the poet's genealogy and its importance in the construction of Australia as an independent country.

Dorothy Hewett might have been a Romantic at heart, but her genealogy is pure dirty realism (if not magic realism!), and her garden of Eden is peopled with very practical characters who have a clarivident idea of where the good of this world lies. The poet has no qualms in depicting the shortcomings of Eve's immediate family:

My grandmother had a bite like a sour green apple,
...
She bought the shops and the farms,
...
While the only child wept for love
She could argue like a man, politics, finance, banking.
("Legend of the Green Country", part II, p.73)

The weeping child, the poet's mother, or, should we say, the poetic *I*'s mother, is still "demanding love" in her deathbed ("Death of My Mad Mother"), but since love was not hers to transmit, the chain of hatred continues and from "mother to daughter the curse drops like a stone" ("Legend of the Green Country", part VIII). The celestial punishment obviously runs on, and crystalizes in "Calling on Mother", a postmodern poem that blends love and fear, blessings and chastisement, monsters and the practicalities of life. The sequence of "The Garden" in four poems summarizes in its last stanza the frame of mind we need to survive in its equivalent vale of tears:

time runs out & all is pardoned
betrayal & and joy together grow
the paradox is to accept & know
the calm & tender secret of the garden.
("The Garden", part 4, p.204)

But before we acquire that fundamental knowledge, before we grow old enough to find the calm to decipher the secret of the garden that will deliver us from the cloister of the labyrinth, the impulse is to cross to the other side of the hedge

Wake me from my dream & hand in hand
like the first children
we will steal out of the garden
("The Labyrinth", part 2, p.207)

Love sought and not found, riches and adventures tasted to no satisfaction, the poet comes back to the same garden "timidly / pushing open the door" ("The Labyrinth", part 3) and finds there a wealth of names, of deeds and works of art - enough to make her want to remain part of it: "when I die will you make a flute out of my bones?" ("The Labyrinth", part 4). In this line we find, once more, the need of the individual to be heard, to become part of the cultural imaginary, to have an echo in future generations and to belong to the tradition that is sung in folk tales that make the ground solid and fertile for literary heritage.

To this effect, the last line of The Labyrinth series is, again, a standing point to appreciate Hewett's cosmogony: "I stand in a planetarium whirling with stars". In an interview with Nicole Moore, given in 1999, Hewett proposes what may be taken as a glosse to the previous quotation, she defines the "whirling stars": when a poem "turns out well, there is nothing like that feeling of triumph [...] to be able to say so much in such a contained form and with such intensity" (Moore, 1999: 14). So that, to enjoy to the full the craft of poetry writing, Hewett lets herself be influenced by the world around while joining her voices to those writers that preceded her. Thus, she, once more, explicitly accepts the dissemination of culture:

I get a lot of ideas from novels or poetry or plays or whatever,
autobiographies of other people, biographies, I even get stuff from off the
TV sometimes, anywhere, from conversations, or just somewhere out of
your head, from god knows where.

Such influences come together in the titles of some of her collections of poems, such as

Rapunzel in Suburbia (1976) or *Alice in Wormland* (1987), but also in series of poems like "Memoirs of a Protestant Girlhood", an obvious reference to Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957). The second poem in this series starts with the line "Under a bell jar ...", taking readers to the frame of mind explicit in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Actually, Hewett's *Collected Poems.1940-1995* includes two pages of literary references, the poet's "own original acknowledgements and comments" (409-410). Hewett uses quotations from other poets as headings to her own - from Tennyson, from T.S. Eliot, from Robert Duncan, from Walter de la Mare, from Anaïs Nin, from Coleridge, from Robert Creeley, Russell Hoban, J.M. Barrie, Dylan Thomas, Gwen Harwood, Randolph Stow, William Blake, Virginia Woolf, Robert Browning or Frances Webb, to name but the best known ones. This wealth of intertextuality enriches not only Hewett's own work but that of the writers she quotes, creating a web of knowledge that expands meanings, renews concepts and opens up spaces for other voices to be heard.

As far as readers are concerned, we are also invited into that web of knowledge. "My Fortieth Year", a poem that rounds up previous experience ("full circle goes my life") and marks the renewal of life ("now I grow"), ends with a stanza that expresses in full clarity my own feelings in reading Dorothy Hewett's poems:

I gather at my knee the children of my spirit,
Old as a legend, new as milk from heaven,
In the round green wood of the world. (67)

María Socorro Suárez Lafuente is Professor of Literature at the University of Oviedo, Spain. Her interests lie in the field of Contemporary Literature, both in English and Spanish, in Feminist and Postcolonial Culture and Literature and the development of the Faust theme. She has published extensively on those fields, and has been co-editor of several volumes of essays, such as *Translating Cultures* (Dangaroo Press/KRK, 1999). She has published articles about the work of Elizabeth Jolley, Jennifer Strauss, Olga Master, Judy Duffy and about Joseph Furphy and Cervantes, Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and early 20th century Australian Literature.

Note

All references and quotations to Dorothy Hewett's poems in this essay are from the following edition:

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