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But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot

— Epigraph to 'Ah! Those Dead Ladies'

Dorothy Hewett often invoked Tennyson's The Lady of Shaló epigraphs and allusions, as a tragic figure of beauty, longing and f artistry. In Rapunzel in Suburbia (1976), perhaps the most crit acclaimed of her poetry collections, the section entitled 'Ah! ' Dead Ladies' begins with images of the Lady, her mirror, and processions she watched as they passed by her tower. 'A funeral, plumes and lights and music' is a characteristically hybrid motif: therefore an appropriate image with which to begin a meditative Dorothy Hewett's work. Hewett might be described as a multi- nous writer, often depicted visually in the media as larger than outspoken, garrulous, flamboyant and even melodramatic. Smok mirrors is not far from Hewett's work in many of its parts.
There is, however, a deep, concomitant strain sounding beneath all of her poetic and dramatic work, a strain often barely heard, which might be called 'tragic'. In the poem 'Ah! Those Dead Ladies' it is not hard to enjoy the multiplicity and energy of Hewett's talent in the poem's wild juxtapositions: so many awkward snatches of memory, the raging at mortality, and the grotesque humour, brought together in a kind of nihilistic, surreal production of nostalgia, in a lost landscape replete with blue children in chlorinated pools, old sisters whinging in the attic, rape packs waiting 'to drown their girls/ in the duckponds of memory'. But as with its sister poem in the same section, the ballad 'In Moncur Street', 'Ah! Those Dead Ladies' has an accumulatively devastating effect, for all its mad, colloquial, humorous conjunctions. The groundswell of loss is registered most strongly in the jaunty rhythms of the ballad's refrain:

And Sammy Smiles (that lovely man!)
and Aime and Alf and little Fay,
and Beat and Bert and betting slips,
the man I loved, the child I bore,
have all gone under Bondi's hills,
and will return here nevermore,

in Moncur Street
in Moncur Street.

The casual flamboyance of these octosyllabic lines, together with their alliterative, colloquial Aussie humour, is not in the end at war with their representation of loss. It is part of the effect: a capaciousness of artistic talent at the service of grief at the relentlessness of mortality. This tragic base note can be heard from the earliest poems and plays, through to Hewett's late meditations on death. It can be heard in the haunting volume Peninsula (1994), with its epigraph from Virginia Woolf's own overwhelming, very English meditation on art and loss, To the Lighthouse: 'Out and out one went further and further until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone over the sea.' It is there also in that strange little collection, Alice in Wormland (1987),
'THE TRAGEDY OF DESIRE'

with its prophetic sense of doom for the star-crossed lovers, Alice and Nim, its 'retro' modernist symbolism, and its dark, almost indefatigable humour:

Gods can die he shouts
the shovels spark & sing in the air
an owl's feather flies

the grave gapes wide for Alice

The autobiographical bravado of Alice in Wormland is characteristic of Hewett's work. Making a fiesta – sparks and songs and feathers – of death is also typical, together with the very bodily confrontation of the horror and the diminishment of the human in death. Hewett fought all her life against such diminishment. This fighting was political, artistic and personal, each of these threads woven, and often entangled, through her work. That is why the term tragic – a brave rebellion, energy, artistic drive and multiplicity in the face of the impossible – is appropriate.

A description that emerges from Dorothy Hewett herself is 'multitudinous'. All those words, the crossings of genre, modes, tones, forms, all that body and hair, the positionings and repositionings, the plays, poetry, novels, the memoir, and the criticism. In one way or another, multitudinousness also seems to be the quality most often attributed to her, both by those who admired the person and the work, and those who felt overwhelmed by the huge chaos of 'Dorothy'. In the eulogy he gave on behalf of the Australia Council on 27 August 2002, Peter Goldsworthy said:

In whatever genre she wrote, her work resonated with passion, intelligence, honesty and the resolute courage of deeply held convictions. The loss of her vibrant, generous and inspiring presence in the writing community will be mourned by many.¹

And in his introduction to the 1995 'Introduction' to the Selected Critical Essays, Bruce Bennett wrote:
Hewett's failure as a revolutionary, either for Marxism or for some versions of contemporary feminism may be her saving grace as a writer. When ideological straitjackets threaten to restrict free expression she knows they must be thrown off...her relinquishment of Marxism in 1968 is to her vocation as a serious writer, which requires a total freedom of the imagination to roam where it desires, unhindered by propaganda, censorship or narrow proprietorial concerns. She refuses to accept a deterministic worldview and looks instead to the figures of the rebel and the nonconformist for signs of life.²

Although they seem to be working from opposing positions – the writer as holder of 'deeply held convictions' and the writer as free, 'unhindered by propaganda' – these descriptions are two sides of the one humanist coin. This coin is flipped in the face of that overwhelming characteristic, Hewett's 'terrible chaotic frenzied multitudinousness'.³ The phrase echoes her own words in a 1983 interview. But there they were Hewett's projection of the threatening world, not of herself. If we bend that description back on Hewett, what can be said critically about this multitudinousness? Does it make her a saint or a fool? Is it seductive or monstrous? Is it about fecundity or abjection, freedom or dithering?

For Goldsworthy the problem was resolved in polite Romantic terms – author rich in resolute courage, deeply held convictions, passion and vibrancy. For Bennett the solution is equally though contradictorily Romantic, even Byronic – the writer as free-roaming, rebellious spirit, unhindered by dogma. Jennifer Strauss asks whether such multiplicity is about 'exorcism', 'a writing-out of unwanted outcomes for the self', though she rejects this as only a partial explanation, reading 'Hewett's relationship to identity as more postmodern, more ragged and fragmented than traditional autobiographical or ontological explanations of selfhood might allow. In arguing this, Strauss seeks to draw out the contradictoriness of contemporary female subjectivities, what Andrew Taylor describes in the poem 'Grave Fairy Tale' as 'the configuration of female sexual identity as radically self-divided'.⁴

In yet another formulation of what might lie behind Hewett's saintly or demonic 'multitudinousness', Strauss cites Hewett's own words about the need of artists to 'make a pattern for themselves',

206
patterns made with myths, symbols, images. She sees the multiple strategies, the hybrid and often bizarre tonal conjunctions of Hewett’s *Alice in Wormland*, as transformatory, the reclaiming of a lost Eden, though she sees such redemptive themes as the least successful, least convincing elements, preferring the rich ambivalences and contradictions, the Jungian doublenesses of the poem’s text.

But whatever the supposed root — moral, artistic, ideological, ontological — of Hewett’s ‘multitudinousness’, it has been the source of the highest critical praise, as well as the deepest opprobrium. For many readers there has been a monstrousness about ‘Dorothy Hewett’ the textual vaudevillian, the writer who flaunts herself across so many genres and is therefore never the artistic specialist. She is also never quite to be believed — for there in boisterous succession is the middle-class if struggling farmer’s daughter and the Communist; the mother/wife and the deserter; the lover and the whore; the spontaneous and the self-conscious artist; the feminist and the man-reliant woman – so that every new manifestation is perhaps merely ‘yet-another-turn’. Of course it is not as if these self-conscious twistings of the textual self are unrecognised by the writer. They are, in fact, one of her central themes.

Alice at the University
smoking Camels
in pale blue slacks
& a college sweater
wanted to be a Bohemian
(*Alice in Wormland*)

Loved or reviled — by readers and by herself — for such perceived contradictions and posings in *her life*, Hewett also continues to receive attention for what is seen as her messy blurring of the lines between life and art, in her autobiographical, confessional art. Some earlier critics and reviewers damn with faint, highly gendered incredulity: a 1959 Melbourne *Sun* piece was entitled ‘Busy Housewife Finds Time for Writing’; in 1961 she is still floundering in the domestic, with ‘Setbacks and Baby No Bar to Author’; in 1977 a Melbourne *Herald* article is headed ‘Dusting down the dust-ups: Dorothy Hewett, ageing enfant terrible looks back, but not
with anger'. Other, more recent critics can't get enough of the gargantuan, passionate, big-bodied Dorothy, eliding into One the woman, lover, witch, fleshy monster and artist. Hewett, complicit to differing degrees in these elisions of art, life and body, can be seen staring back from the cover of Bruce Bennett's *Selected Essays*, and in a different way the cover of *Wild Card*, with its vampish, airbrushed Marilyn Monroe of the 50s, both subject and object.

However, the critical responses have also been duplicitous: revealing distaste, and behind that the sense of being overwhelmed, or hoodwinked or manipulated by the artist's contradicoriness, together with a complicity on the part of the critics themselves in blurring the lines between life and art. This duplicity is exemplified in the more sustained critiques of Hewett's writings, such as the directly dismissive, morally censorious criticism of Joy Hooton's review of *Wild Card*, 'Writing the Self', and the more sympathetic but highly ambivalent treatment in Susan Lever's essay 'Seeking Woman: Dorothy Hewett's Shifting Genres'.

Lever's essay is in part a questioning of Hewett's feminist credentials, and a detailed analysis of her crossing of the genres of poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography. While attentive to and provocative about the many effects of such crossings, it is unsure in the end what it wants to argue about the 'instability' which results. Lever aligns the writing's inability 'to confine itself within the boundaries of one form or another' with Hewett's 'demands that her life and her art be read together'. At base, Lever's essay seems concerned, like Hooton's, with the lack of control, both moral and artistic, as she records the tidal wave of Hewett's obsessively detailed self-depictions in *Wild Card*:

Every moment of importance is recalled; every significant dialogue, every lover, even every costume... *Wild Card* prefers the vivid recollection of events to reflection on them... Hewett resists self-assessment and self-knowledge. In her hands, the autobiography becomes an unironic mode, which refuses to pass judgement on her younger self.

Lever's unease is expressed in simultaneously aesthetic, moral and political terms, ambivalent about what to make of a writer who 'leaves us with contradictions rather than a secure position on sexual
politics', and whose greatest (dubious?) legacy is in exemplifying 'the intractable problems of representing female experience within literary genres which conventionally mask the woman'.

Such criticism seems to ask both too much, and not enough from literature. What it seems to be asking for is completion, consistency, more satisfying outcomes for the work of representation. This completion would come in the form of an ideologically feminist firmness of direction, an ironic placing of one's younger selves, a sterner sifting, discerning and selecting of what matters. Instead, what Hewett's oeuvre seems to offer this critic is volcanic activity, lack of selection, lack of discernment, lack of political and moral standpoint, insecurity and contradiction. But does lack of irony, if that's what is being seen here, equate with lack of judgment? Or is Hewett's work based on another kind of judgment, another kind of decision about subjectivity, and one that necessarily produces this volcanic multitudinousness?

David Brooks, in counterpoint to Lever, is more willing to embrace what he sees as Hewett's 'perpetual, unfulfillable desire (as) a conscious position': 'Satisfaction itself is to be avoided — as promoting complacency, yes, but more particularly as something which might then become a closure, a termination of a vector, arrival as a limitation, the beginning of an end of self.' Brooks sees such desire in aesthetic, psycho-analytic and historical terms. The processes of negotiation between a writer seeking to know the self, and a writer who at different levels of poetic and linguistic understanding realises the impossibility of ever reaching a self which is not immediately compromised and partial, are processes which Brooks suggestively places in a post-colonial context. He compares the use of European myths, particularly Rapunzel and the Lady of Shalott, in Christina Stead, Jessica Anderson and Hewett, and a number of more recent Australian writers, pointing to the recurrent tensions which gnaw away in Hewett's oeuvre.

In one sense this is quite clearly a post-colonial theme, or rather an accommodation of or advancement from that post-colonial dilemma that marks so tragically Boyd's Langtons or Richardson's Mahony...taking root in neither one's home nor one's new culture — having realised that each one is relative rather than natural or definitive...
With a related though distinct sense of post-colonial Australian culture, Jennifer Rutherford's controversial critical volume *The Gauche Intruder* addresses what she describes as 'the loss that is ours by virtue of our humanity – our language'. Rutherford employs Lacanian and post-structural models of language and signification in her compelling argument about what she claims as contemporary Australia's spiritual emptiness. She offers in this volume a discussion of Patrick White, for example, in terms of 'the tragedy of desire', a phrase that also resonates for the work of Dorothy Hewett. While the critical machine has often wanted to bundle up 'Hewett' and all her multitundinousness in one way or other, as lack of control, or an excessiveness of life and desire boiling over into art, or as (female) lack of specialisation, it is, I would argue, important to place her artistic oeuvre in this larger drama of signification and loss. 'What is language for,' Rutherford asks, 'if not to give us a footing in a world that, as subjects of language, we inhabit as subjects of death'?

This tragic, death-oriented understanding of signification is familiar from much post-structural and Lacanian psychoanalytic debate. But does it give us a fruitful context in which to think about Hewett's long literary questing? The mirror is often a symbol of impossible quest in Hewett's work. It is employed to question the impossibility of representing the self, of ever comprehending in one frozen image, the contradictions of subjectivity, the perpetual frenzy of the not-yet-self seeking reality in the still, wordless image of the mirror. In 'Madame Bovary' 'the mirrored cadenced voices/ (are) faking it'; in 'Grave Fairytale's bizarre rewriting of the Rapunzel myth, 'there was no mirror in the tower', though there was the erotic horror of self-disgust and self-consciousness – 'Crouched in a corner I perceived it all,/ the thighs jack-knifed apart, the dangling sword/ thrust home'. In 'Recent Poems (1994–95)' the mirrors are there, but most often take the shape of dreams, memories, old ghost lovers

come back
from the war or a long journey
hardly changed at all.
Taking my face in your hands
you pinched my cheeks
My darling you said
why have you grown so old?
('Visitors')

It would be easy to contextualise away these last poems as those of an ageing poet who is full of nostalgia, and suffering physically. Yet the armoury of techniques for encountering loss – vaudeville, nostalgia, farce, lyric epiphany, political struggle – were forming from the beginning. In the earliest poems of the 1940s and 50s, Hewett was already beginning to hone a lifetime's meditation on loss. In 'Testament', the poem that was awarded the Australian Broadcasting Commission poetry prize in 1945 when Hewett was twenty two, we read in its now slightly dated, slightly grandiloquent phrases:

And I have loved
An old house lying silent in the summer,
Haunted by children, flowers, and orchards,
Days that seemed a dim and golden
Heritage of dream; and
All these have I lost, being too much beloved.

Does such awareness of loss and haunting come from the tragic nature of signification and the psyche itself, as Rutherford suggests? From the post-war moment in which Hewett matured? From Hewett's modernist literary heritage? From the personality of The Poet? From the embracing and equally passionate letting go of historical and political ideologies? From the post-colonial Australian condition described by Brooks? Whatever the causes of this poetic preoccupation, it is undeniable as a strain, a tragic – because finally impotent, silenced, unsatisfiable – lament threaded through Hewett's work.

Critical commentary most often falls upon the concrete and realisable, the perceived object, whether aesthetic, moral or ideological. It might seize upon the well or poorly constructed plot; the use of symbolism; the negotiated relationship between art and life; the perceived lack
of control, artistic and/or moral, in all those generic crossings; themes of female subjectivity, or the landscape, or communist Australia, or aging, or death. But such approaches are partial because they do not (and perhaps cannot) take into account the obliterating effect of the linguistic: its impossible questing, its painful reaching through language to a place that might have utopic ‘recourse to Otherness’, might be able to move beyond loss. This threatens to bring about the end of representation, to point towards silence. Surely it might be argued that for Hewett it meant the opposite, a volcanic and ongoing production? I would claim that Hewett’s ‘terrible chaotic frenzied multitudinousness’ needs to be read as both a courageous refusal of death’s still, cold, final voice, and as a tragic realisation of that very mortality.

& she knew now
that there was no garden
the garden the fire & the last day
were every day
love lust sin wisdom
coexisted
& every moment
was the last moment
but the garden was a continual yearning
for what must always be lost
& found & lost again.
(Alice in Wormland)

When could the act of poetry writing, placing word upon word—love lust sin wisdom—ever be free of self-betrayal: that simultaneity of knowing and yet acting otherwise; multitudinous coexistence and emptiness together; volcanic production and silence? Dorothy Hewett’s poetry replies again and again: ‘never’.

All references to Dorothy Hewett’s poems in this essay are to William Grono’s edition, Dorothy Hewett: Collected Poems 1940–1995 (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995).
4 Jennifer Strauss, 'Writing the Legend of a Glittering Girl', in Bennett, 53–69.
5 'A Busy Housewife Finds Time for Writing', Sun (Melbourne), 17 Aug 1959; 'Setbacks and Baby no Bar to Author', West Australian, 28 Feb 1961; Tess Lawrence, 'Dusting down the dust-ups: Dorothy Hewett, ageing enfant terrible looks back, but not with anger', Herald (Melbourne), 19 Jan 1977, p.21.
8 David Brooks, 'The Wheel, the Mirror and the Tower: Desire in the Writings of Dorothy Hewett', in Bennett 180–201; Brooks 192.