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Reading Dorothy Hewett as boundary writer

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READING DOROTHY HEWETT AS BOUNDARY WRITER

by

Carmel Macdonald Grahame MA. DipEd.

**A Thesis Submitted to Fulfil the requirements for the Award of
Doctor of Philosophy (English)
at the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences
Edith Cowan University.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis locates the writings of Dorothy Hewett in a firm relationship with postmodern thought. The argument focuses on evidence that the dominant aesthetic of Hewett's writing is the feminine sublime which comprises a commitment to uncertainty. In this modality, reason does not foreclose on the action of the imagination in the sublime moment. The revised dynamic is explored with an emphasis on the radical nature of the doubt in question. It reflects a deliberate resistance to certainty, and follows from Hewett's early experience with communism.

At a formal level, in Hewett's texts, the commitment to uncertainty is not least apparent in layered operations of the sublime aesthetic within the writing. The feminine sublime also operates in the orientations of Hewett's subject construction, in which a complex sense of identity as processual and divided is clear. It is evident in thematic and political aspects of the writing which are inflected towards uncertainty in various ways and conform to this mode of the sublime. In this regard, the thesis illustrates, Hewett's engagements with the themes of death and the maternal, and her admissions of the irrational are exemplary. Such inflections produce moments of ethical tension, contradictions, ambivalences and accommodations of incommensurability, some of which are examined here. Hewett's diverse and wide-ranging engagements with genre provide another instance of the commitment to uncertainty, and this governs the selection of texts addressed in the thesis. The emphasis is on Hewett's prose writings. Their aesthetic diversity is produced, in part, by literary precedents and multiple discourses, which feed into the writing as inclusiveness, both of thought and artistry. The thesis addresses some of these and argues that, combined, these factors position Hewett as a writer with a postmodern sensibility.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

25th November, 1999

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INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Hewett is a senior Australian writer in several senses. Bruce Bennett's inventory shows her to be 'the author of thirteen published and ten unpublished plays, together with the recent trilogy, *The Wire Fences of Jarrabin*' (1995: 12). Poetry from Hewett's ten books has been gathered with early and late poems in the *Collected Poems*, edited by William Grono and published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press (1995). There are three novels, *Bobbin' Up* (1959) *The Toucher* (1993) and *Neap Tide* (1999).¹ In addition, in an autobiography, *Wild Card* (1990), Hewett reflects on her life from 1923 to 1958. Since part of that life has been spent as a university teacher of literature, Hewett has also produced many articles and reviews. Laurence Bourke's comprehensive 'Check List of Works By and About Dorothy Hewett' lists Hewett's oeuvre and I am indebted to his work (in Bennett 1995: 256-94). Of course, Hewett is still writing. Parts two and three of the trilogy to which Bennett refers were being completed in 1996 when I interviewed her, and the novel, *Neap Tide*, which was in progress at that time, has just been published. She continues to write poetry.

Hewett has a certain notoriety. About this and its possible effects on criticism I concur with Bennett that '[s]uch publicity is a two-edged sword: it helps to create an audience but that audience may be led to shallowly voyeuristic conclusions rather than intelligently critical investigations' (1995: 13). I interviewed Hewett with particular feminist and postmodern critical interests in mind. My strategy for averting the 'voyeurism' to which Bennett refers has been to allow the writer a certain presence as a subject within my academic discourse. To that end, I interrupt my commentary in places with pertinent excerpts of our dialogue. I mean these as acknowledgment of the limitations of my own project and an attempt to position myself as a participant in the ongoing construction of what Hewett has described as a 'myth of ourselves/& only just beginning' ('The Shape-Changers', *Collected Poems*: 306).

I position this methodology carefully in Chapter Three, but establish it here as an indication of my interest in forms of academic writing which critique inherited versions of objectivity, detachment, and theories of the subject for their 'delusional' content. That critique, in particular as it has been carried out at the intersections of feminism and postmodernism, is crucial to my approaches to Hewett's texts. For example, in our conversation, Hewett spoke about 'the two-edged sword' of reputation:

DH You know you're dealing with taboos. You know it! You have a gut reaction. You know immediately. But you have to go on. Otherwise you're a wimp. You chickened out.

CMG And at the same time, given what you've said about the desire to shock not being the point —

DH *It isn't the point.*

CMG *So somehow you have to negotiate that ---*

DH *You don't know how many commentators have said to me over the air or on television that you really love to shock people, don't you? That really irritates me because this isn't the point at all. The point is to deal with those things that are absolutely gut basic to living in the world it seems to me. And if you're not game enough to deal with them, well you shouldn't be putting pen to paper.*

The sense of reputation and of negotiating with it affect the dialogism of Hewett's writing, a consideration throughout my argument.

The extent of Hewett's published material has led me to concentrate on a narrow selection. It seems to me that postmodernism releases new possibilities for reading Hewett's prose writings in particular, and I choose texts which seem representative of the range of postmodern features I wish to explore. I make connections with the poetry only to demonstrate that characteristics which allow Hewett to be read in terms of postmodernism are also addressed poetically. This is particularly the case in my discussion of *Wild Card* which shares significant life content with the poetry. Hewett's recycling of material in different forms unsettles her engagement with autobiographical material. I argue that these instabilities are as much her subject as the retrospections from which they spring.

Put simply, I argue that a postmodern sensibility is evident in Hewett's writing. It is apparent in the dominance of a sublime aesthetic which comprises an overriding orientation, in both her poetics and thematic interests, towards forms of principled uncertainty. This sublime is based on a 'commitment to radical uncertainty' which Barbara Claire Freeman (1995) has theorised as the feminine

sublime. Freeman's formulation places a feminist emphasis on the ethics of aesthetic choices so, in reading Hewett's work for such a grounding in uncertainty, I concern myself with both aesthetic and ethical questions. I approach these through Hewett's shifting modes of subject construction, a focus which has determined my selection of texts, and some theoretical implications of which I explore. Applied to Hewett's writing, the feminine sublime illuminates aspects of her work not previously noticed and repositions features of it which have been indifferently received.

The thesis does not rehearse much of the feminist discourse on which it draws, but assumes this background. For example, I assume that the tendency for postmodernism to be viewed as a version of either an appropriated feminine or that which, once again, is 'outside' reason has been addressed in Luce Irigaray's work, and I depend on that work to some extent for the possibility of a postmodern feminism. I agree with Rosi Braidotti that, at the end of the millenium, feminist-inflected desire may be 'the foundational site for postmodern ethics and for specific forums of knowledge that cannot be adequately represented within existing academic discourses' (1994: 231). I am aware that the writing of theorists like Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva, all cited in this thesis, does not provide a homogeneous basis for feminist reading. However, insofar as the possibility of a postmodern feminism arises from their work, I use it circumspectly to identify elements in Hewett's writing which may be viewed as postmodern. Hence the feminism in which I base my readings is cautiously postmodern and postmodernly cautious and sees feminism as a primary locus of

an ethics of difference and resistance to certainty.

The feminism I discern in Hewett's writing reads as if it had been advised by Braidotti: 'Feminist thinking cannot be purely strategic — that is, be the expression of a political will — it must rather attempt to be adequate as a representation of experience' (1994: 203). That is, feminism need not be anchored in belief that all basis for ethical claims dissipates when it is linked to postmodernism. Taking up these questions as my argument proceeds, I interpret a feminism/postmodernism nexus as site of the commitment to uncertainty which is my emphasis, giving it particular attention when I turn to Hewett's autobiographical writings. The ongoing critique by which feminist discourse scrutinises its diverse selves indicates that such a commitment may be viewed as one of its sustaining impulses. Using the sublime in this formulation of a commitment to uncertainty, I trace some expressions and 'symptoms' of uncertainty through Hewett's writing to suggest that she is, in this sense, a feminist postmodern writer.

I connect aesthetic uncertainties with an emphasis on movement, impermanence, conflict, unreconciled difficulties, and unanswered questions. In Hewett's imagery, the strands of the web always blow wide, the light is altering, lives are performed improvisations, shelter is fragile; something is always beyond the fence-line, the garden, the hedge. Boundaries elucidate the 'beyondness' which is the sublime and, in the insight that they make diversity possible, lies a dominant impulse of Hewett's work:

there is a hedge between
this garden and the world
a holy bestiary that swarms and sings
to guarantee the multiplicity of things.

(*'The Last Peninsula'*, *Collected Poems*: 393)

Ethical questions entailed in the sublime resonate in Hewett's phrase, the 'myths of belief' (*'The Floating Island'*, *Collected Poems*: 316). Her writing continually evinces this view of belief, recalling the suspicion of master narratives by which Lyotard (1984) characterises postmodernism. Specific claims to *uncertainty* which Hewett's texts make in this regard are especially interesting when refracted through the boundaries implicit in the themes of death and maternity. I foreground these.

Hewett's writing demonstrates an imagination game to locate itself in desire and remain there. It is an imagination 'blindly spinning/almost out of breath,' able to 'grasp the threads/and climb/knee-deep in dreams', as she puts it (*'Lines to the Dark Tower'* in *Collected Poems*: 325). It is also, by contrast, an imagination attempting to organise a perceived chaos of life into art, which would be unproblematically modernist imaginings if they were anchored in beliefs in mastery and the inevitable success of such endeavour. My view is that, in Hewett's writing, the dominance of the sublime is explicitly connected with resistance to that closure. I want to recognise the 'desire to represent' which is predicated on a lively sense of the 'beyondness' of representability rather than on conviction or mastery of any kind.

Informed by Lyotard's sense of the sublime as the postmodern aesthetic, I use Freeman's formulation to foreground Hewett's commitments to uncertainty, particularly in relation to issues on which feminism, postmodernism and modernism 'converge' in current debates. Hewett's work exemplifies literary production which simultaneously acknowledges and scrutinises these fields of tension and has useful contributions to make in the areas of postmodernism and feminism in the Australian cultural context.

In Chapter One, I consider discourse on the sublime and, placing Freeman's version in that context, use it as a filter for my reading of Hewett's novel, *The Toucher* (1993). I connect Hewett's use of the sublime with complexities of subjectivity, her treatment of the theme of death and its relation to sex and language. The novel is exemplary of Hewett's fictional subject construction and positioned here as a touchstone text for subsequent chapters. I link its commitments to uncertainty with the sublime and compare it with a selection of Freeman's examples. This is necessary because she articulates the feminine sublime in terms of textual examples rather than by definition. As with all aspects of postmodernism, definitions are problematic.

Chapter Two develops links with postmodernism through a reading of *Joan* (1984), which illustrates Hewett's handling of an historical subject. Historiography is a site of uncertainty taken up in postmodernism. I place Hewett's vision in *Joan* within that context and relate it to complex ways in which feminism and the discourse on postmodernism intercept each other. The play specifically engages

with critiques of the Enlightenment, an aspect of both feminist and postmodern thinking. Central to that discourse has been the questioning of the dominance of reason over imagination, the tension at the core of the sublime. I examine Hewett's explicit engagement with that questioning stance to show that she laid claim to a form of radical uncertainty, before it was 'fashionable' to do so.

In Chapter Three, I consider Hewett's handling of the autobiographical subject. Features of *Wild Card* are linked to a selection of poetry which articulates uncertainty as a positive commitment. *Wild Card* illustrates that Hewett's subject construction is often hybrid, suspended between an autobiographically inflected fictional subject and a fictionally inflected autobiographical subject. Her interest in complex mediations between fictive and autobiographical material emerges not least in inclusions of other-worldly material which refer to questions about representability and self-life-writing. Again, the sublime is refracted through an embrace of uncertainty evident, in this instance, in negotiations between imagination and memory. This chapter also addresses constructions of Hewett's public reputation in which a postmodern sensitivity to consumer culture and image-making processes is evident as a form of submission. I argue that Hewett's self-representing practices are performative and improvisational. My argument is interspersed with transcriptions of our 1996 dialogue which I relate to contemporary critical pressure to connect the use of quotation and disjunctive textuality with self-reflexivity and postmodern critiques of objectivity.

Finally, I turn to the children's plays, *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals* (1985), and to *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1976) to argue that surrealist

inclinations in Hewett's dramatic writing reveal an interest in the fantastic which has implications for her manipulations of subjectivity as a site of wonder. I show that links between surrealism and postmodernism, which inform Hewett's writing, position her in a relation with both postmodernism and modernism. The modernist/postmodernist divide is partly contested over questions of representability. I examine them to show that Hewett's surrealist leanings are further evidence of the importance of the sublime in her writing. Insofar as the sublime deals with representability, the Surrealist Movement was engaged with these questions. Their claims to uncertainty mean that Hewett's use of their aesthetics is another signal of her own. Again, the plays reveal these connections in the handling of subjectivity which they demonstrate. In this chapter, examples of Hewett's more ludic and surreal subjects are my focus.

This thesis is motivated by an attraction to the writing of the Dorothy Hewett who is a mature and working writer — *senior* in the other sense. As she points out in our conversation, the point may need to be made:

My publishers, the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, send me these clippings every now and again — and they sent me one the other day which is a bit startling ... on that book of mine, Peninsula. And it started off by saying something like this. This is almost exactly what it says. She is old and sick, so this is probably her last work.... I think, you know, that if you can turn somebody into an object, it's almost as good as them being dead, you know. It's so much easier to deal with people who are dead, where everything's there.... And who are not going to be able to subvert it, or turn it upside down, or change it.

It is also motivated by the sentiments described by Susan Sontag when she states:

'I am not at all interested in writing about work I don't admire. And even among what I've admired, by and large I've only written about things I felt were neglected...' (in Plimpton, 1998: 326). My arguments proceed from a belief in the legitimacy of such a critical culture of admiration and focus on what I regard as neglected aspects of Hewett's writing and career.

To summarise, in Hewett's work, I notice certain uncertainties. The paradox is explicit and intentional. This uncertainty is an authentic choice, an orientation which is a form of the sublime and the dominant aesthetic of Hewett's work. In turn, insofar as the sublime is the aesthetic of postmodernism, this orientation anchors Hewett's writing in postmodernism. In it, boundaries between modernism and postmodernism, already unstable and contested, are operative in ways which even contribute to their scrutiny. Feminism is grounded in ethical commitments and commitment to social change, and therefore usually allied to modernism. This position, however, depends on construing postmodernism as a discourse of moral and ethical exhaustion in which depleted theories of the subject rob feminism of the capacity to theorise agency, crucial to feminist social and cultural commitments. Reading a selection of Hewett's writing for relationships with these positions, I find that her writing yields something in excess of, and/or between them.

Hewett's writing casts useful light on the complicated areas of postmodernism and feminism and, in turn, is usefully illuminated when read in terms of tensions between these discourses. Not least, connecting her work with them adds to existing scholarship on a significant Australian writer.

1. *Neap Tide* was published after the writing of this thesis. I acknowledge it in my bibliography and in these retrospectively written introductory remarks, but make no substantive remarks on the text in the course of my argument. My reading of the novel, however, confirms that features of Hewett's writing which I identify here mark the new text. It is dominated by the commitments to uncertainty for which I argue and they are present in the forms which I identify and relate to notions of shifting identity. The supernatural and uncanny are possibly more confidently invoked than ever before in Hewett's writing. The themes of maternity and death, and the turn towards life are active. Once again, the coastal setting allows the sublime to be the dominant aesthetic in various modalities.

CHAPTER ONE

Meaningful Uncertainties: A Reading of *The Toucher*

THE SUBLIME

Aesthetic judgments are understood in terms of a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. For Kant, beauty implies form, by which an object is bound. Our apprehension of that boundedness generates feelings of harmony. The sublime, by contrast, concerns a response to boundlessness, or limitlessness. In the classical formulation, either we apprehend magnitude in chaos, wildness, desolation, or we discern the absolute power of something over us; the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, respectively. Internal conflict is experienced when the imagination extends towards the sources of these feelings and cannot encompass them within understanding, cannot apprehend them. We make sense of such moments because reason, transcending the imagination's attempt to take hold of what it 'sees', forecloses on it. That is, the sublime is a feeling which follows

from a compound comprehension of the very incomprehensibility of whatever is provoking the response. In this way, according to Kant, the sublime is pleasure achieved by means of displeasure. At stake is a question of how to represent the unrepresentable to ourselves.

In the discourse on the sublime, the crucial dynamic is a relationship between imagination and reason in which questions of power are raised — the power of reason over imagination. Feminists draw attention to the inherited nature of models of aesthetic theory. Put simply, insofar as aesthetic values are given value by means of femininity and masculinity, the sublime is distinguished from the *merely* beautiful by aligning it with an illimitable masculinity against a diminished femininity.

According to Jane Kneller, the 'imagination in Kant's aesthetic theory seems irredeemably immature' (1994: 150). His philosophy shapes gendered dichotomies which still have currency. Kantian distinctions between 'particularity/universality, materiality/spirituality, intuition/discourse, desire/reason', still impinge on 'what the "modern woman" has become, a being at odds with herself and with nature' (1994: 150). Kneller critiques the implicit gendered dualism of models of the sublime, and the fact that these gender constructions are aligned with sexual binarism. Such feminist interest in a model of aesthetic reflective judgment which rests on oppositional notions of gender is my point of departure. Dissatisfaction with accounts of the imagination's role in the making of those judgments have implications for my reading of *The Toucher*, because the formulation of the sublime at work there is also revisionary. I will show that Hewett invokes the

oceanic sublime and, in her novel's orientation towards death, the Kantian sublime is operative. However, she incorporates into it a form of the sublime in which reason does not necessarily prevail. It is composed instead of an overriding commitment to uncertainty.

Kneller has little doubt that traditional models of femininity and masculinity are echoed in the dynamics implicit in models of sublime judgments. She writes:

where imagination's role is more prominent, it is still maintained under the wardship of the understanding in general or of reason. For feminists this is quite interesting, since immaturity (*Unmundigkeit*) and childishness are also the hallmarks of femininity for Kant.

In fact, I think it is not going too far to suggest that the fate of women in Kant's philosophy is closely tied to the fate of the imagination.

(1994: 148)

That fate is humiliation and submission in Kant's model, since the imagination is always attempting a task for which it is inadequate. Quoting *The Critique of Judgement* (1790: #245 and #260), Kneller brings into focus an imagination compelled towards unrealisable tasks, such as having to 'find a concept for a representation of infinite magnitude or absolute power' (1994: 148). Her critique fills out Kant's theorisation of these judgments, so I quote at length:

a feeling of pain ensues in the subject upon realising the inadequacy of its own imagination to complete the task. It is in this sense, then, that Kant says that natural objects that evoke the feeling of the sublime appear to 'do violence to our imagination'.

The feeling of the sublime is thus rather a perverse pleasure. It occurs on the one hand when the imagination is forced to try to comprehend

something that cannot be apprehended as a whole, producing in the subject a painful feeling of the inadequacy of the imagination. When the subject, who is always both imaginative and rational, recognises this inadequacy in himself (I believe that it is safe to assume that the subject is a 'he' for Kant), he feels a pain that is superceded by pleasure upon realising that reason is thus triumphant over nature. (1994: 148)

In the realisation of the superiority of reason over imagination, and so by a process of exclusion, a subject derives pleasure from a sublime experience. Kneller concludes by wondering whether critical philosophy has 'room for a spirited, powerful, equal partner to the understanding and reason — for a reformatory imagination' (1994: 150).

SOME REVISIONS OF THE SUBLIME

Theoreticians in various contexts postulate the imagination/reason relationship in new ways. Vijay Mishra (1994), for example, proposes a 'gothic sublime' which he identifies in literature in which reason is prevented from achieving the totalising manoeuvre of the traditional sublime. In Mishra's account, that process is destabilised in the gothic by irruptions of a sublime 'from the crypt', which question reason's power (1994: 38). Tracing the sublime from Kant to Freud, Mishra focuses on links with subjectivity and the compulsion towards self dissolution implicit in it. In this, the oceanic sublime, Mishra sees signs of a subject which 'embraces, *in spite of reason's interdiction*, the lawlessness of the sublime' (1994: 256, emphasis mine). The link between the gothic sublime and postmodernism is contained in this embrace.

There is disagreement about what value to give to postmodernism's embrace of 'lawlessness', especially for feminists, and I explore this in subsequent chapters. Mishra reconfigures the power differential in the relationship between reason and imagination, but his revision of the sublime in relation to the gothic continues to view it through thanatos. It operates in terms of a subject's desire for self-dissolution in death, for self-transcendence. It is possible, instead, to distinguish between this impulse and a subject's *submission* to death, which may be a submission to unpredictability in which desire is not implicit. That is, to conceive of a sublime in which reason does not foreclose on imagination, and of an embrace of 'lawlessness' which is not synonymous with the influence of 'the crypt'. The sublime need not incorporate a subject into desire for death.

Barbara Claire Freeman (1995) puts the relationship between imagination and reason differently: 'At stake is the question of how to theorise ravishment' (17). Like Kneller, Freeman notices that philosophies of the sublime rest upon assumptions about masculinity and femininity and prior notions of the proper dispersal of power between these two categories. She shows such assumptions to have remained unquestioned in a process of transmission between philosophers since Kant's eighteenth-century thinking. We continue to inherit theorisations of the sublime which rest on an also inherited blindness. As a result, Freeman argues, at the heart of an aesthetic system which has traditionally distinguished *in particular ways* between the beautiful and the sublime, there lies a political vacuum. Finding a gendered blindspot in speculations about aesthetic judgments, Freeman directs her scrutiny towards tropes of domination, mastery and control,

and of sacrifice and nullification, which have shored up conceptualisations of the sublime.

Such tropes are more obvious since the textuality of philosophical writings has come into focus. Metaphysical and philosophical writings are as subject to the contingencies of connection between word and meaning and the fragilities of *presence* as any other. 'Writing', as Derrida asserts, 'has always begun in language' (1976: 135). And scrutinised as *writing*, canonical texts on the sublime reveal their vulnerability to feminist critique.¹

The historical specificities of such texts are evident in their dependencies on limited versions of the feminine. Freeman summarises:

The sublime is a theoretical discourse, with its unique history, canon, and conventions, about the subject's diverse responses to that which occurs at the very limits of symbolisation.... [T]he canonical theories that seem merely to explain the sublime also evaluate, domesticate, and ultimately exclude an otherness that, almost without exception, is gendered as feminine.... [I]ts principal theorists are able to represent the sublime only through recourse to metaphors of sexual difference and ... the structure of the sublime depends upon (and results from) a preexisting construction of 'the feminine.' (1995: 3-4)

Freeman identifies texts which subvert these gaps in theories of the sublime and offer a positive answer to Kneller's question about the potential for the sublime to be conceived of in terms of an empowered imagination. Freeman elucidates a version of the sublime which does not conform to canonical versions and is largely overlooked. Her concept of the feminine is *not* biologically determined, but she confines her choice to female practitioners of this 'feminine

writing'. Her readings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, show how texts may produce encounters with the limits of representability which do not conform to traditional formulations of the sublime. They exhibit a politics based on 'taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness', as opposed to either mastery or appropriation of it (Freeman 1995: 11). In these texts, Freeman identifies structures, forms of characterisation or themes which make blindspots in traditional theorisations of the sublime explicit. That is, they exhibit a commitment to uncertainty precisely at the moment when, in the traditional accounts, reason would have imposed itself on imagination. She labels this turn away from closure, the feminine sublime.

THE SUBLIME IN *THE TOUCHER*

The sublime is the dominant aesthetic of Hewett's novel and, in its speculations about death, I will argue, it exemplifies the commitment Freeman describes. *The Toucher* contains considerable discourse on imaginings about how the dead 'live on', as well as on faith, doubt and strategies used by the living to cope with death's inevitability. It contemplates the role of death within a life, and the possibility of life in death, imaginatively blurring even this boundary of boundaries. Given these themes, the novel's dependence on the sublime is unsurprising. Hewett constructs, in Esther, a subject who resists both fear of death and desire for it. Esther's submission is, finally, to a condition of uncertainty. The following quotations illustrate the multivalence which is the result.

In this passage, Esther grieves the death of her friend and publisher, Ernest Richter Brown. She clearly hopes for control over the circumstances of her death, when it arrives. At this stage, she desires certainty:

She wept for days, knowing her grief wouldn't end. It's the season of death, she thought, even in this remote corner of the world; in one short year Matt and Ern, Iris Treece, and Macka's grandmother have all gone. How can we go on so calmly knowing that death waits at the end of it? Why don't we stop each other in the street and scream aloud with horror? She knew she was only frightened of a death that was arbitrary. If she could choose the time, place and manner, she could control the terror.

(The Toucher. 280)

The following passage illustrates a contrasting openness to the greater uncertainty at which Esther arrives:

We carry them with us, Esther thought, no one who has touched our life in any way at all, no one we have loved is ever dead or gone. They surface in dreams and memories. They become part of the commemorated pattern of our life when we too are gone. We are each other's immortality, but who are the dead and who are the living when the 'real' world is only a construct of the mind? *(The Toucher. 293)*

This is not ironic. Esther's reverie concerns the divide between real and imagined experience and recognises the potency of imagination. The passage gains significance from being a preface to the appearance of Maudie Chandler, her long dead school friend. The encounter is described without scepticism and written naturalistically up to the moment of Maudie's departure. Only then is her appearance given some semblance of the fantasmatic: 'Then she rose up in the clear, calm air and, with a last note of music and a flurry of charred paper, she

was gone, floating away down the French River' (*The Toucher*, 296). The verb is telling. It links Maudie's presence to a pivotal image — a floating muttonbird feather — in which Hewett condenses many of the text's undecidabilities. Not least, it is emblematic of a desire to relinquish control. Maudie's ghost appears in answer to Esther's question about the identity of the dead and the living, and, by answering in the form of a ghost, the text lends authority to pure imaginings, seeming to reply that she can no longer be sure about the difference. The dead and the living have begun to inhabit the same garden.

Maudie's visit signifies the call from beyond the grave, but carries no trace of an invitation to dissolution. Even if it were read as a symptom of mental decline in Esther — a (mis)reading not cued by the text — this would remain the case. On the contrary, Maudie's visit galvanises Esther to resist stasis and turn towards continuing life in a renewed commitment to her writing. Fear and grief are resolved into her acceptance of lack of control over the circumstances of her death. She submits, not only to the unknown that death is, but specifically to a condition of lived unknowingness, to unpredictability. This condition is the destination of several strands of the novel's treatment of the subject of death, and I return to it. It suggests that the form of the sublime in *The Toucher* dovetails with Freeman's formulation. It is worth noting, then, that the encounter between Esther and Maudie, between the living and the dead, concludes with an explicit turn towards the sublime in its familiar form, as nature: 'She saw the whole wild sweep of the coastline, its giant waves beating on the hollow sandstone cliffs...' (296). This more traditional sublime exerts its aesthetic force throughout.

THE FEMININE SUBLIME EXEMPLIFIED

Freeman points to the fact that the 'aesthetics of the incalculable' are at work in any 'process of translating and figuring events that exceed our frame of reference' (1995: 123). One example is a moment of extraordinary undecidability in *Beloved* (Morrison: 1987). Sethe, an ex-slave mother, is about to be recaptured by white slavers, with her children. For her, the children's death and the imminent denial of their humanity are indistinguishably insupportable. The killing of her daughter, Beloved, to prevent her capture is a moment at which 'yes' and 'no' meet. Beloved's death both is and is not necessary, moral, an expression of maternal love, an act of protection. Morrison actualises the possibility of 'a fate worse than death' to create a moment of ethical terror from which neither the surviving mother, nor the daughter who haunts her, are extricated. She confronts readers with the implosion of sense in such a choice. There is no possibility of a rational decision. Reason cannot foreclose on imagination which only continues to hover over such a moment.

The Awakening exemplifies the feminine sublime in another form. In Chopin's text, a woman walks into the sea in what appears to be imminent suicide based on a deadly *ennui*. According to Freeman, Edna is the expression of an attempt neither to appropriate nor submit. She represents a desire for death which is never reducible to desire for self-transcendence. That is, Chopin's ocean is not redemptive. It is suspended in a possibility of being *inextricably* both beneficent and overwhelming and, by this means, Chopin represents the impossibility of desire without loss. In Chopin's words: 'desire gives birth to its own death' (in

Freeman 1995: 37). Also, Freeman suggests that the ocean here is a medium for foregrounding aurality and makes audible neither simply presence nor simply absence, but expresses the concept of an absence to which Edna must bear witness. The result is a paradoxical articulation of 'the unsayable' in which a subject's closeness to death cannot be represented in language and yet to which, at the same time, she testifies (Freeman 1995: 32-35). Here, desire is an encounter with language in which the ocean signifies an absolute and untranslatable otherness. Rather than the action of a woman seeking her own extinguishment, Edna's walk into the sea is an expression of the desire for desire itself to be prolonged. In this interpretation, Freeman concludes, Chopin's novel arrives at a moment of suspension, like that between destruction and redemption in *Beloved*, only this time the imagination hovers over the longing to testify to what cannot be said.

Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) provides a third version of the feminine sublime. A woman is in such straitened circumstances that she becomes the initiating sexual partner of a man she detests, inviting her own victimisation. Sasha is a subject at an impasse which proceeds both from without and from within, according to Freeman. Her economic dependence makes the self-sacrifice simultaneously an act recognising its necessity and defying the circumstances which have produced it. Volition collapses. She is an un/willing subject. For Freeman, *Good Morning, Midnight* encapsulates the dynamics of the relationship between imagination and reason in theories of the sublime by dramatising 'the question of consent' (1995: 75).

To suggest that something solid about the feminine sublime can be grasped from these readings would misrepresent what Freeman proposes and congeal the affinities for the sublime which her examples demonstrate. This sublime cannot be fixed, especially in terms of a politics. Indeed, such varied political positions have aligned with the sublime that its capacity for exceeding definitions and categories is clear. The feminine sublime specifically encompasses a politics which takes 'a condition of radical uncertainty as the very condition of its possibility' (Freeman 1995: 12). It may be articulated in various ways, is a site of *unfixity*, and has no necessary or fixed modality. It is prescriptive of neither a reading nor a writing practice.

I take Freeman's point that to try to define this sublime is to ask the wrong question, and symptomatic of a desire for precisely the kind of domination and control which, being exercised in traditional versions, has generated the limitations with which she and other critics are concerned when they examine the discourse on the sublime. Related suspicions of certainty are familiar in the discourse on postmodernism, and I turn to these in due course. Freeman's focus is on *how* the feminine sublime *signifies*. She describes it as 'a site of passage and border crossing in which meanings collide and transform one another, an ongoing process of re-metaphorization in which we may perceive, in Judith Butler's wonderful phrase, "the movement of boundary itself"' (1995: 10). The commitment to uncertainty of her examples is effected in various ways: thematically, or by producing an unanswerable question about moral and ethical clarity, or by their treatment of desire. By redirecting some of the assertions and insights in

Freeman's readings towards Hewett's novel, I show that the feminine sublime signifies there.

I am in the domain of slipperiness here and want to remain there, unselfconsciously. However, conceptual rungs relating to unrepresentability have made their presence felt in the above quotations: non-combative encounters with radical alterity, collisions of meaning which transform it, metamorphoses, transformations, excesses of excess, borders and their crossings, and moving boundaries. Such notions concern both ethics and poetics, each having a place in this concept of radical uncertainty. The poetics of instability involved need not be an evasion of clarity, either. Postmodern challenges to notions of theoretical stability argue that lack of clarity, or homogeneity, or unity need not be evaluated negatively. The problematic of representation is the very focus of attention in the discourse on postmodernism. In that spirit, I take the feminine sublime to be a refinement of wider interest in attempts to signify the ineffable, but without the recuperation or subordination of difference which the role of reason usually comprises. To quote Freeman again, some writing exhibits 'not just a description of, but the wish for, sublimity' (1995: 12 & 16). This comprehensiveness, the 'not only, but also' position, is significant. It signals broad, modulating resistance to the closure implicit in usual accounts of the sublime.

This is inevitably the area of desire. The feminine sublime obtains in a text when the relationship between reason and imagination leaves a subject unsatisfied. Dissolution which implies self-transcendence is not the object of such a desiring

subject, who is constructed rather in terms of suspension in the liminal and remains extended. This may be most evident when the writing particularly attends to the fact that the sublime occurs when pleasure and displeasure intercept each other.

Most reformulations of the notion of pleasure achieved *by means of* displeasure are projected along a linear trajectory which, in its implicit movement towards an arrival at pleasure, depends on a distinction between the two holding. This is presumptive of the nature of pleasure and displeasure as well as the nature of arrival and journey. There is slippage in descriptions of the sublime which foreground a sequence in the events. In the gothic sublime which Mishra identifies, for example, the encounter between reason and imagination gives rise to 'an ambiguous state of pleasure and displeasure' (1994: 33). He quotes *The Critique of Judgement* where Kant insists on the simultaneity in the sublime experience:

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, *at once* a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain its estimation by reason, and a *simultaneously* awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law.

(#106, quoted in Mishra: 1994: 33, emphasis mine)

Unrepresentability is raised by the very fact that attempts to convey the dynamism of the sublime — its non-stasis — often require language which in some way erases the simultaneity on which Kant insists. I want to foreground it. As Mishra says, when it comes to the sublime, '[o]ne speaks under a kind of Kantian

interdiction' (1994: 36).

Freeman draws attention to the operation of a sublime produced when undecidability is foregrounded and a suspension in uncertainty occurs, either for a subject in the text or the subject reading it, or both. We are asked to conceive of a paradox: *mobile* stasis, or *static* mobility. The feminine sublime is an attempt to name a suspension in dynamism which may be present in a text in diverse forms. It may arise from unresolved tensions, intellectual or ideological contradictions, blurred boundaries, or from notions of transgression in which 'excess' is given a positive value, to name a few.

The Toucher exhibits the coexisting contrary impulses on which Kant insists, and is suspended in the tension which Freeman argues is particular to the feminine sublime. Hewett formulates a position for Esther which has her inhabit desire, rather than resolve it. She is represented in terms of an encounter with language, not least because she is a writing subject and engaged with questions of representability herself. She is also a subject at an impasse which is never strictly situated.

These features of *The Toucher*, on which I focus my discussion, are not confined to the novel. Hewett continually writes through an aesthetic and ethical framework which employs tensions and uncertainties in unsettled and unsettling ways. As I discuss in relation to *Wild Card*, the inclination can be linked to Hewett's political history, although it should not be viewed reductively as a change of heart, or self-contradiction. The point here is that a concept of 'radical uncertainty' is not as crude as 'not knowing one's mind'. This uncertainty is

radical, precisely because it comprises the choice of remaining *subject to*. There is no arrival at comfort.

The feminine sublime labels operations in texts which foreground the sense of simultaneity between pleasure and displeasure. As I have shown, Freeman's readings illustrate moments of extremity. Morrison depicts an infanticide in which rescue and destruction, emancipation and damnation, generosity and denial, inhabit the same action. Chopin depicts a final walk into the sea which signifies a desire to testify to an incommensurability which cannot be represented. Rhys describes a sexual encounter in which a subject is both victim and perpetrator, and also neither, placing the meanings of violation and volition just beyond reach. These examples resist the distinction between pleasure and displeasure at the heart of the classical sublime. Reason has no place in the decision. The boundary beyond which imagination supposedly cannot be extended remains in motion.

DEATH: *THE TOUCHER'S* SUBLIME THEME

The Toucher is dominated by liminal imagery. Boundaries between pleasure and displeasure, and imagination and reason, are destabilised. The question of a subject's desire for dissolution is firmly in circulation, being repeatedly invoked in the deaths of several characters: Esther's father; Brenda, her 'step-mother'; her husbands, Paul and Matt, and past lover, Seb; Iris, her lover Billy's wife; Ern, her friend and publisher; her first love, Maxie Crowe; as well as the school friend, Maudie. However, *The Toucher* is not reducible to the narrative of a subject preparing to embrace her own death. That embrace is denied to Esther and given

to Maxie Crowe instead. The novel's reflections on death place Esther's desire at an intersection between (out)living and dying, leaving her anchored in uncertainty.

The sublime operates on at least two levels in relation to this subject matter. Firstly, the novel concerns a subject's orientation to and imaginings of death, so the sublime has a place with respect to plot and theme. Mortality itself is the boundary over which Esther's imagination hovers. Secondly, the sublime dominates the imagery and supports these imaginings. At both levels, it is immediately operative and encloses the narrative. Early references are consolidated, either by repetition, or because they take up a proleptic or symbolic function. Both structurally and textually, this is a novel dominated by the sublime.

It opens with Esther dangerously balanced on a cliff edge beside the Southern Ocean. The importance of the moment is confirmed in her later recall of it (275). The conclusion has Maxie Crowe, significantly the object of her first sexual desire, suicidally adrift on the ocean. Even Maxie's encounter with death, whilst positively rendered, resists being an invitation from beyond the crypt and the invitation to self-transcendence is qualified. Although the novel approves his suicide by declaring it preferable to slow disintegration in a hospital (299), the death itself is described as a drift towards the maternal (300), and hence life. These are issues I explore in more detail. The point here is that sublime, liminal imagery frames the almost hypostasised liminality of the novel's coastal setting.

The concluding association with the maternal is well grounded, deriving particular significance from Esther's failed search for her mother, Madeline La Farge. Also, in a proleptic passage, Esther has presciently imagined 'a beneficent

presence circling the sound, stranded in the shoals, butting up against hidden reefs to follow the whales on a sucking rip to Antarctica' (188). Earlier still, when she telephones her adult children at Christmas, the imagery of the coastal location is linked to her own maternal status. As the following illustrates, the link is made, even when the sublime is inflected differently from the description of Maxie's death:

Hearing those beloved voices, she wanted to weep but, gulping on the final farewells, she managed to last the distance until she hung up. Then, sobbing into her pillow, she thought, what am I doing here alone on the edge of the world?

To be exiled on this far south-western shore had been all her own idea, the last place to run to from that two-faced bastard still painting on *his* river five thousand kilometres away. What had brought her back to this place? Was it the cold, impersonal, christening sea with its giant whales blowing through the sound? Or was it the seminal place, the enchanted forests of her childhood with the ice-green river running through them, the broad stripes of light slanting between the cathedral aisles of tingle and karri? (*The Toucher*. 136)

Modulations in descriptions of the sound, as a site of both cold impersonality and a consoling maternal light, signal ambivalence through the imagery. Pleasure and displeasure cohabit. Motherhood itself incurs this sublime multivalence, it seems to suggest. In Esther's willed separation from her children there are traces of her mother's flight, so her independence has a meaningful lack of clarity. References to the maternal, many of which proceed from sublime imagery, have contrasting resonances, and the combinations signal the uncertainty for which Freeman argues.

In the opening pages, Esther's near fall creates a sense of incipient danger and installs death as a theme. It pins her sense of mortality and 'passion for life' — which the novel seeks to make exceptional — to this moment in girlhood. The incident is the first encounter with the sublime for both Esther and the novel's reader:

She would never reconcile this old woman with the skinny teenager walking backwards towards the edge of the Natural Bridge, aiming her box brownie at the family group, struggling to get them into proper focus, until her father's voice warned her, 'Essie, do you know where you are?'

Looking over one shoulder she had seen the drop and teetered there, willing herself back, legs trembling, to sink down, dwarfed by a wall of granite on the edge of a chasm. (*The Toucher*: 1-2)

Since she is taking a photograph at the time, Esther's sense of the sublime is linked to representability, and its limins, from the outset. The passage continues:

When the photograph was developed it showed none of this — only a fuzzy print of Brenda and her father in limp cotton sun hats smiling sourly, side by side under the giant overhang. The least she had expected was a shadow in one corner, imprinted on the rock-face, tumbling backwards like one of those falling dreams that always ended with the jolt of waking. She must look at that old photograph again. Perhaps the shadow had developed at last, falling out of a corner of an eye. (*The Toucher*: 1-2)

Brenda and her father are first named in the novel's company of dead. Raising the possibility of 'untimely death', especially Esther's own, entails the text, from the beginning, in a notion of the proper span of a life. Sustained tensions between life and death, and voluntary and involuntary death follow from this incident. Esther's life on the southern coast, the affair with Billy Crowe, the writing of her novel

into a context of critical uncertainty, her progressive isolation and debilitation are all extensions of the movement of backing towards a cliff edge. The opening thus not only places the dissolution of a subject firmly on the agenda, but is a lingering metaphor for the movement of a life. Esther might be described as a subject 'backing away', from family of origin, husbands, lovers, even her own children. In this sense, the novel *is* the narrative of a turn towards solitude and death. However, the very fact of that temporally-driven, conventional narrative draws attention to how the novel resolves its movement, and the question of whether it does so.

Such a reading is echoed in Hewett's stylistic choices. For example, the final, isolated line reads 'like a feather in the wind' (300). The unpunctuated sentence suggests a 'falling off' movement. It also hovers over a question of whether the text aligns with modernist engagements with unrepresentability, or postmodern constraint about those aspirations. These are considerations taken up in subsequent chapters. Here, I want only to note that, at the moment of constructing Maxie's death, Hewett's text arguably acknowledges both possibilities. That is, theoretical concerns about representability, contested between modernism and postmodernism, are alluded to in these sublime imaginings.

The firmness, and promptness, with which notions of death as consolation, self-dissolution, self-transcendence and so on, are placed on the agenda, highlights the fact that the apprehension of death attributed to Esther, finally, is not this one. The favourable poise of the text towards death on Maxie's behalf is deflected away from her and the imagery kept trained on life:

The dawn broke like poured gold over the sound. The islands of the blessed surrounded him, glowing. His gummy jaw gaped. He pissed himself. A drizzle of spit trickled down his chin. The pod was moving, a giant maternal flotilla that drew him past the islands into an unknown light and an ultimate darkness. (*The Toucher*. 300)

We are invited to imagine simultaneous light and darkness, both the beatific vision and extinguishment. The contrary invitation is more than an oxymoron. It is a site of the implosion of reason associated with the feminine sublime, a way of giving expression to an idea of no-choice.

A pivotal question concerns the meaning of control over the circumstances of one's own death. The possibility of accidental death, raised in the opening pages, has been consolidated in the fact of Matt's drowning. That event also provides repeated opportunities for invoking oceanic imagery in ways which contrast with the imagery of Maxie's death, illustrating the diverse operations of the sublime in the novel. In Esther's reflections on her drowned husband, Hewett employs the sublime in traditional modes. Esther imagines Matt's body below the ocean, tossed about and disintegrating into the natural world which surrounds her, almost expectantly. He is a reminder of the process towards which she is both poised and resistant on her own behalf. However, his dissolution is at once a source of consolation and terror, ensuring that her desire is never reducible to the fate he chooses. On the contrary, at the point of facing her own mortality, Esther converts her reflections into renewed artistic energy:

A gull's feather passed in an eddy of light. All this time, Esther thought, and I'm still here watching a feather drifting by.

She took up her pen. (*The Toucher*. 296)

Just as she faces her necessarily imminent death, given her age, the emphasis is placed on Esther's unabated desire to live, and in terms of a desire for self-expression. The connection has already been introduced: 'Looking out ^{on} that mysterious and transcendental universe, she knew that, in spite of everything, she still couldn't bear to die. Impossible to leave the world until I've finished what I've got to say, she thought' (*The Toucher*, 139). In this way, language and representational practices are not only explicitly linked to the sublime's functions, but Esther's status as a writing subject is a vehicle for hitching the sublime to the commitment to uncertainty which makes it congruent with Freeman's formulation. Questions of art and Esther's complex connections with representational practices are deployed in the novel in several ways and I return to them.

TIME AND MEMORY

Hewett uses the image of the floating feather to refract Esther's perception of life as a kind of temporal collapse. In it, separate events are made to seem coincident, so that it becomes a figure for the experience of consciousness as ahistorical. It also refers to the question of representability, since it signifies obliquely, reductively and metaphorically, carrying a weight of immense and abstract ideas, but suggesting at the same time, by its fragility and sheer incongruity with the thematic burden, that they cannot be contained.

The feather's significance originates in a first adolescent experience of sexual desire when, as a girl, Esther was given a muttonbird feather by Maxie Crowe. In the quotation above, the image refers to the concrete effects of that single

transient moment on the senses. That is, among its various functions, possibly the most crucial is to signify a kind of synchronicity in the experience of time. It represents the past irrupting into the present and at the same time acknowledges their incommensurability. In the concluding passage, quoted above, the image alludes to Esther's submission to the incomprehensible and inevitable. And, since it links sex and death, therefore, the feather image alludes to a psychoanalytic construction of sexuality and, beyond that, possibly even to romantic conceptions of ecstatic death in which lovers may be united beyond the grave. Although it is entangled with these references, Hewett allows neither the image, nor the novel, to be reducible to the apprehension of sexual desire through death which they entail. Once again, the text is layered in its complexities.

The feather is also an imagined intersection of memories. In his essay, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), Walter Benjamin reflects on Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memories, explaining the first as 'the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of attentiveness', and the second as memories Proust associated with the taste of a *madeline* which 'transported him back to the past'. Benjamin comments on this version of memory:

it is part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in many ways. Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past.... In this way voluntary and involuntary recollections lose their mutual exclusiveness. (1992: 154-6)

Hewett's text displays such resistance to stable categories of recollection. It does

not confine the past to the past, as it were, and the floating feather encapsulates a desire to dismantle the 'mutual exclusiveness' of past and present. It captures the lingering significance of some memories and their involuntary nature. More importantly, it indicates that the Esther sitting in her garden beside the sea at the novel's close feels as intensely and is just as alive as the girl who was intrigued by the prospect of sexual relationships all those years earlier. That is, the novel unsettles the notion that an older subject should necessarily be construed as being closer to death than a young one. This has been achieved by the focus on accidental death, which is equally possible for both. Backing towards the coastal cliff, the young Esther was at least as close to the unpredictable and unpredicted edge of her life as this one is.

These considerations have a place in Hewett's commentary on her writing. In an interview with John Kinsella, she discusses recollection and the experience of time, and her comments elucidate the perception which she seems bent on achieving in these aspects of *The Toucher*. Kinsella's initial question links the issue to Wordsworth's terms for poetic recollection. He asks:

Since we are speaking of the past, do you think that the quality of an experience, of a 'spot of time', a moment, remains unblemished by time, that it remains pure in its own right?

Hewett replies:

In a sense I think it becomes purer because the dross falls off it, and you're able to view it from a distance, the very piercing heart of it.

(Kinsella 1996: 33-4)²

Later, Kinsella remarks that darker significances in Hewett's work may 'sneak up' on readers. The concept of time at issue has moved beyond the romantic, ego-contained notion at the heart of Wordsworth's thinking about recollection to a more fluid one. The following exchange is meaningful throughout my discussion of Hewett's writing, since questions about its autobiographical content are always in play. Also, the relationship between fact and fiction is a theme of *The Toucher* and directly relates to the question of how Hewett encodes Esther's recollections. Kinsella observes:

It's as if someone comes from the future into the past to tell you what to beware of; there's this qualifying of time by moving time around.

Yes — I love doing this. I like to make patterns of things and I think that's one of the ways that I do it. Because I've lived quite a long while now I've got a lot of stuff that I can refer to, backwards and forwards. I think that what happens as you get older — or old! — is that the past becomes remarkably clear. I didn't realise this would happen, but it does. Like seeing something, not in a glass darkly at all, but illuminated in the most extraordinary fashion. If you can take that and move it to now, you've got that patterning, self-referential sort of method which to me is what binds my poetry together. I've got to have a binding agency, and that to me is the central binding agency of what I do. So it becomes a pattern of the world, of life.

So instead of a poetry of autobiography which is about recounting what has happened, it's a poetry about the qualifying nature of time, about how a history actually comes into focus with its passing — the opposite to autobiography in a way, because it's reinventing every moment.

It is. It's also playing ducks and drakes with time. Time, in the sense of static time, doesn't really exist at all. It's like a tremendous game.

(Kinsella 1996: 33-4)

In this conversation, Hewett makes it clear that, for her, questions of representability and time are related. In *The Toucher*, the image of the feather is a binding agent between the two.

Matt's drowning is a vehicle for maintaining the resonance of the oceanic sublime. Because of him, Esther's imaginings combine fear and loss and his 'presence' in the ocean is both warning and lure. However, Esther's acceptance of the process of dissolution, of which she imagines him to be a part, should not be confused with desire on her own behalf: 'now Matt had gone, washed under the weedy forests of the sea. She wished she could take him in her arms and warm his heavy white body; but bruised and stiff with cold, sand in the sockets of his eyes, he was beyond warming' (11).

Heightening of the interface between land and sea in such quotations is noteworthy. Treatment of this boundary sometimes signals the text's interest in destabilised mutual exclusions, and in this description, Hewett incorporates the apparently separate domains into one another, laying claim to the sublime on behalf of the terrestrial world too. Above, the ocean is 'forested', and there are other examples of the permeability of these boundaries:

She saw the whole wild sweep of the coastline, its giant waves beating on the hollow sandstone cliffs, the white beaches, the granite islands bathed in light. Inland lay the rivers and estuaries, the forests and the ferny gullies.

The dark scrub, thick with germinating wildflowers, swung to the edge of the sea. (*The Toucher*, 296)

The sense of an edge is insistent, but incorporated into it is a suggestion of continuity between 'othernesses'. The writing hints at interpenetrating domains.

This permeability is reiterated in events. In a storm, for example, the mountain becomes 'fluid', like the ocean, breaking away to disclose Iris's body (249). Fred's house falls into the sea (252). In such subtle ways, the writing treats interfaces between differences as sites of connection as well as distinction. The fact that the coast is inscribed in ways which seem intent on a concept of liminality and foreground the contingency of meaning implicit in the very notion of 'boundary' is intensified. As a site of fusion, a boundary gives expression to difference without recuperating it. The dead visit; not only Maudie, but Matt also appears to Esther. The lover murders. The usual social/sexual meanings of age difference are overturned. Combined, such resistances ensure that indications of Esther's receptiveness to death float on a pervasively dual sense of how boundaries work. They infuse the text with ambivalence, insisting on the cliché of two sides to every story, at least. The point here is that Esther's acceptance of death is simultaneously and emphatically her acceptance of life, just as whatever lies beyond Maxie's voyage is simultaneously darkness and light.

From the opening pages, the ocean invokes the sublime and sets up resonances of danger. At the conclusion it invokes the sublime on behalf of self-transcendence and even tranquillity, since comfort and consolation are the implied culmination of Maxie's *purposeful* drift. However, because the imagery produces a

circularity between death and the maternal, the life-bearing meanings of the latter are not extinguished. Any implied link to self-transcendence is denied to Esther. Having opened with a death avoided to instate a sense of danger, the novel concludes with a death embraced to confirm a sense of comfort. In each instance, Esther is propelled away from death and towards life. The desire for self-transcendence, whilst acknowledged, is not given ascendancy.

ON REPRESENTABILITY

Esther is a writer. Her projects of self-expression bring her into particular relationship with the sublime. I have indicated that the novel's radical approach to boundaries is apparent in its destabilising treatment of even that between life and death. Hewett has Esther's imagination trained on that one in terms of un/representability.

It is worth noting here that Esther's reconciliation with the imminent unpredictability of her own death occurs just as she embraces the idea of a life of her own: 'Anyway, it's true, you can't live your life through your kids. Or a man either. He dies, fucks off or bores you to tears' (*The Toucher*: 189). That life has been presented in terms of a series of lovers. Billy will be the last. Arrival at solitude and self-reliance is thus a trajectory of the plot. Esther is engaged in a process of 'becoming single' and the setting reflects it. This is one significance of her masturbation, too, and of the fact that she derives both anger and comfort from the practice. Among other things, she is learning to be in relationship with herself.

This aspect of Hewett's narrative relates to Esther's relationship with desire for death and is a key to the role of the feminine sublime. Just as the novel's concern with a subject's progress towards death is not tied exclusively to a notion of self-transcendence, so the meanings given to Esther's solitude are more complex than merely presenting it as a step in the process of withdrawal from life. As well as representing a departure from the world, Esther's solitude represents an arrival in it. Her capacity for 'singleness' is won with difficulty and the struggle suggests that more is being represented than an affair between an older, disabled woman and a young, delinquent man. That narrative is in tension with another which concerns the acquisition of self-love and a move away from sexual dependence. Esther's reliance on the mediation of others for her sense of vitality decreases. Billy is a final step in an alternative process in which Esther's more significant affair is with 'the whole' to which she is subject, and which is represented in the text's absorption with the two domains of the natural world and history. In this larger sense, the novel is a narrative of relationships between part and whole, in which an individual learns to understand herself as *separate from*, and simultaneously submits to being only *part of*, a larger whole. The connections with the sublime are obvious, and the feminine sublime is apparent in the double movement of Esther's self-apprehension.

Hewett's imagery signals life/death fusions even when the sublime recedes. Although the following passage, for example, is inflected with the beautiful, rather than the sublime, the link with death is retained:

Esther stayed so still, held motionless in the glass of the morning, that the honeyeaters dropped out of the marri to forage at her feet. The sunlight warmed her closed eyelids, drying the tears, and like a benison, a yellow butterfly with black markings alighted for an instant on the back of one hand, brushing the death spots with gold. (*The Toucher*. 15)

The sublime is never far away, however, this being literally a calm before the storm, with all that this implies in terms of the plot. Clarrie and Esther are immediately forced to shelter under the eaves and the sublime re-emerges as the dominant aesthetic:

Together they watched the black clouds racing up from the point, the sky turning purple, foam clotting on the shoreline, the gulls standing with backs hunched together against the storm. Sheet lightning flared across the surface of the water. Thunder gathered and rolled. (*The Toucher*: 16)

Reminders that Esther's narrative is conceived as an attempt to signify inexpressible immensity are continually present.

Hewett's approach to all that this implies has several layers, not least of which is the engagement with artistic practices. In another proleptic example, Esther has described in her novel, *Ghost Letters*, the very situation in which she will find herself at the conclusion of *The Toucher*. In such ways, Hewett highlights complex connections between fictive material and a writer's life, refers to the difficulties of representation, and adds the self-reflexive element to *The Toucher* to which she refers in the interview quoted earlier. Esther writes:

Dear Sam,

I have been sketching the outline of a new novel but can't seem to work out how to open it. I keep seeing this woman in a garden on the banks of a river in a silvery light with the tide running out. She sits in

front of a stone house. There is a Cocos Island palm rattling and roses growing around her — a crippled woman, helpless and *waiting for some other kind of life to begin*. But who is the woman, what river is it, and will I ever write it? Sometimes it seems impossible, but mostly just melodramatic, false. Maybe I should try to bring in the whole stretch of coastline so that *the woman, condemned to stillness, is anchored in a vast swinging universe*. (*The Toucher*. 176, emphases mine)

In a conceptual oxymoron, like that between eternal light and darkness in the description of Maxie's death, the final image here gestures simultaneously towards both stasis and mobility. It is a way of conceiving of the notion of being *subject to*, and Esther is clearly suspicious of it, given the verb, 'condemned'. Moreover, the passage pre-iterates the commitment to life which Esther represents at *The Toucher's* conclusion. Esther is 'writing herself', as it were.

The passage exemplifies the operations of the sublime in *The Toucher's* reflections on art generally. Esther's epistolary novel is a means of cycling thematic material through the text in more than one form. That is, the embedded narrative guarantees that *The Toucher* will only be interpretable in layered and incomplete ways. It also insists on the contingent nature of attempts at representation. Concerns with un/representability, which lie behind these manoeuvres, are evident in many of the above quotations. They are constantly the subject of Esther's discussions with Billy, whose related role of amanuensis leads to their relationship in the first place.

Daughter of an artist, still recovering from separation from her artist lover, herself a writer self-consciously caught up in the difficulties of self-representation, then, Esther engages directly with the limits of representability. The coincidence

of pleasure and displeasure is given a role in her thinking:

As the night came down, the wind rose and the river started to rush; everything full of motion, outlined black against the pale grey of the sky. It was like living at the centre of one of Sam's paintings with only the glass between her and the world outside, both safe and still, tumultuous and passionate at the same moment. (*The Toucher*: 270)

Art has metaphoric status here. It is another means of imagining permeable boundaries, conceived of in this instance as a site of both retreat/transcendence and danger/immersion. The double movement referred to above is thus connected directly to aesthetic production. Desire leads to art and sets in play questions about its relation to the world. That is, questions about representability, on which the sublime is based, are foregrounded by Esther's occupation.

COMPARISONS: *THE TOUCHER* AND THE FEMININE SUBLIME

Spatial language helps delineate the novel's commitment to the sublime more sharply. *The Toucher* may be read as a compendium of boundaries, thresholds, edges, and liminal sites, to gather together some of these terms. I want now to register that view of it.

Such a vocabulary launches the novel into a relationship with the notion of transgression. Traditional descriptions of the sublime depict the imagination as transgressive and necessarily contained by reason. In the feminine sublime, that thinking is resisted by rejecting the implicit presumption of a fixed line. *The Toucher* contains accommodations, indeterminacies and instabilities which suggest the paradoxical relationship between stasis and mobility by which the work of the

imagination may alternatively be conceived. In Freeman's version, a transgressive imagination does not comply with boundaries, but she endorses its excesses. The feminine sublime neutralises the sense of an overweening imagination which has exceeded its authority and needs to be checked by reason. Since reason does not foreclose, the imagination is suspended in a process of reaching beyond itself.

Given that death is the line towards which *The Toucher* extends, Hewett's is an audacious encounter with imagination. The commitment to uncertainty arises from the inclination of the text towards imaginings about death which coincide with acknowledgments of the futility of that pursuit. Whatever death actually entails can never be the subject of fixed knowledge. It is a location of absolute universality because mortality is the shared certainty. It is also the location of quintessential uncertainty. Dead husbands do not return to make retrospective comments on their lives in the way Matt does (198). Dead friends do not visit. Notions of what lies beyond this boundary are matters of conviction but, by their very nature, can also only be the subject of speculation. Insofar as Faith and Knowledge meet at death, certainty and uncertainty overlap there. It is a point which draws the imagination so that it hovers, like the evocative hummingbirds Sethe hears in Morrison's novel (or, like a floating feather), over the impossibility of certain knowledge and the fact that faith requires a leap of imagination into conviction.

Freeman's examples of the feminine sublime are pertinent here because they concern ways of thinking about such extreme imaginative thresholds. Loving Billy, Esther is poised, like Rhys's Sasha, between interior and exterior impasses.

He is a murderer, which appals her, and he is nevertheless the object of her desire and compassion. Beyond that, her attraction to him represents resistance to solitude she desires. Also, because of her age, she is balanced, like Chopin's Edna, on the verge of knowledge to which she wishes to testify, but about which it is impossible to do so. By the novel's conclusion, she is poised towards something which may be signified as un/certainty.

Esther's position has parallels in a postscript in *Ghost Letters*, written by her protagonist to an artist lover, Sam. He signifies a fact/fiction nexus, being modelled on Esther's most recent lover before Billy — her 'great love', it is suggested. *Ghost Letters* is filled with material fictionalising details of Esther's life, disclosed elsewhere in the embedding text, but which she continually defines as fiction. Echoes, parallels and cross-references are obvious. For example, Esther writes the following description of her protagonist's situation in *Ghost Letters*:

I suppose you'd say I've withdrawn from the world but I've found peace there. I want to set the record straight, Sam. I want to tell you that you touched me, transformed my life. You taught me patience and a strange kind of perception. You taught me how to invent my own vision of myself out of bleakness and loss, but, most of all, you taught me this sad, hard-won tranquillity. These letters will be a record for anyone who cares to look. It will be winter, full of rainy melancholy days, when I get back home. The storms will be sweeping across the Southern Ocean, the great rollers crashing against that fabulous coastline.... (*The Toucher*. 262)

Against the backdrop of the Southern Ocean, Esther is attempting to emancipate and articulate herself by writing a fictional account of a woman writing the truth about herself against the backdrop of the Southern Ocean. Hewett

thus catches writing processes and narrative structures in a continuous regression and destabilises the categories of truth and fiction. In doing so, she approaches questions about representation from yet another direction and her strategies, which play with boundaries between fiction and fact, are decidedly postmodern.

Esther's affair with Billy is related to these. It enacts both her desire to extend life and her submission to death. Given that Billy disrupts her own bid for 'sad, hard-won tranquillity', the affair demonstrates her continuing misrecognition of such relationships as a sign of emancipation and autonomy. In the process of discovering their futility, as the following quotation illustrates, she is again directed towards the commitment to uncertainty. Here, she is adrift in an unsuccessful suicide attempt which I discuss shortly:

She imagined what it must look like, the little boat drifting alone under the stars in all this immensity of black water. Her bones ached, but her limbs felt luminous, flowing; a silvery peace seemed to glow in her head as if she were some great fish surging through the estuary to the sea. Between the water and the sky, it was impossible to distinguish which were stars and which were reflections. The sky and the water had turned into one giddy opalescent surface, now this side, now that, with the boat spinning in the centre of a vortex.

[....]

Lying in the bottom of the boat, she went over her life trying to fit each event into the web, trying to reconstruct everything, knowing it was impossible. She had spent too much time living her life and not enough contemplating it. She had squandered her days on earth, dangerously depleting her reserves. Writers needed calm, order, protection, sameness, yet every time she had even approached this admirable state of stasis, she had deliberately shattered it. Why was she so perverse? What was it that

sent her whoring helter-skelter like a being possessed? (*The Toucher*, 267)

The affair with Billy is now linked to a pattern of mistakes and regarded as a symptom of Esther's continuing emotional dependence and poor judgment of sexual partners. This complicates its other evaluation, that it is a bid for companionship and a laudable demonstration of an older woman's continuing sexual vigour. Esther is never finally extracted from either form of optimism.

The reach for self-understanding is anchored in the sublime here. Both the vortex and the web — one oceanic, the other terrestrial — invoke the sublime. Hewett repeatedly uses the web to link individual experience to a broad social canvas and to conceptualise mobility and/as stasis, as in the previous example from Esther's novel. In the above quotation, the image recalls the fragilities of relationship between part and whole alluded to earlier as the novel's larger project. It composes Esther as an individual at the centre of her existence, and simultaneously as a subject *in relationship* and inextricably tied to all that is larger than herself. It is a connective image and suggests creativity, implications which ameliorate the inevitable subtextual suggestion that Esther, suspended at its centre, is either victim or predator. Given the inescapable cultural entailment of the web as a signifier, it is faintly sinister and carries a sense of entrapment which makes her position difficult to clarify. It encapsulates Hewett's efforts to avoid foreclosing on the diverse resonances of that position: the connections with right and wrong, strength and weakness, separation and connection, loss and gain, mobility and stasis, and above all, life and death.

In a related passage, and another modulation of the same imagery, Esther is

driving with Billy and reflecting on Matt's death. She contemplates 'the same sea lapping harmlessly below'. The oceanic sublime and the web are juxtaposed:

It had always seemed sinister to her, even as a child, and yet she belonged to it; the clarity, the patience, the isolation, were part of her. She dissolved into it: sea, rocks and sky; the dark curve of a land splashed with light; a giddy sense of clinging to the edge of things. In a strange way she had been waiting all her life to come back to it. This is my place, she thought, and ever since I came home I've been remembering, because this is all we've got, repairing the web. (*The Toucher*: 229)

The web is an image of dis/connection. In it, processes of separation, detachment and removal, in which Esther is engaged, are conceived also in terms of re/connection. Linked to her recollections of past events and relationships, it throws the concept buried in the term 're-membering' into relief. That concept explains the sudden centralising of Maxie Crowe in the latter part of the novel.

Let me recall that for Kant, the sublime can be magnitude, unboundedness which threatens to overwhelm and is kept at bay by reason. Freeman adds that this sublime can be of such 'incommensurable proportions' that it threatens to engulf and incorporate 'whoever would merely stand outside and observe' (1995: 89). Clearly, Hewett uses the oceanic sublime to generate a sense of threatening magnitude. Indeed, Kant's exemplary sublime appears in the novel also as lightning, storms and bushfire, leaving us in no doubt as to the text's general commitment to its aesthetic.

The sublime in *The Toucher* is not confined to encounters with nature, however, and derives from temporal as well as spatial impulses. The past has

more than personal significance. Hewett invokes it through historical event which, flowing as it does through television news announcements, establishes a temporal context and suggests another engagement with unboundedness, magnitude and the unrepresentable. The pertinent point, at such moments, is that Hewett prevents her subject from remaining in the position of the safe observer. The feminine sublime resists traditional formulations which treat the sublime as a transhistorical category. Freeman argues that it insists on its historicity. That insistence is evident in the following quotations, where the aesthetic register is produced by divergence between the narrative voice and Esther's apparent incomprehension, bafflement and awe at the magnitude of what she is witnessing. This is an urban and thoroughly historicised sublime. It construes threats which are not of the natural world, as sublime. In this example, Esther is explicitly troubled about the extent to which a subject can merely observe, even from the quintessential observer-position of television viewer:

She sat there in the half dark with the world blowing up: the earth quaked; flooded, polluted, cities tumbled; crowds massed and died for 'freedom' under the tread of the tanks; trains hit each other head on; planes exploded, to fall like infernos out of the sky; children were starved and brutalised; books were burnt in city squares; writers were threatened with institutionalised murder by hired thugs — but it hardly touched her. It was all a fiction, the fruits of some reporter's overheated imagination. All the chaos and suspense of modern life exploding around us, the power of death in our lives, and she didn't know any more if what was happening out there had any real meaning for her. Had she left it all behind her for a terrible indifference? Then why do I keep on trying at all, she thought? Why am I still here? Simply because I haven't the guts to be otherwise?

But what are my inner resources? Do I have any? I live but I am perishable, and suddenly the terrible, naked fear of death choked her down — no memory, no self, nothing; blackness, annihilation.

(The Toucher. 139)

The passage represents another strain of the sublime in which Esther is prevented from retreating, either into fear of death or attraction to it, and by which her uncertainties are made explicit. On this occasion, intense fear arises from self-questioning and a sense of being both distanced from, and unable to detach from, world events which threaten to overwhelm her. The interface between fact and fiction is alluded to and again linked to doubt about reality and unreality. For all her retirement into solitude, Esther is unable to separate from the world.

This expression of the sublime positions her own death in a relationship with violence and death in the world at large. Her questions are unanswerable. The text never resolves them. She is not extricated from uncertainty.

Later, in a similar vein, the text reads:

Esther sat alone in the dark watching the late night news. Trucks and dead soldiers lay dismembered and smouldering on the roads, a wild dog ran off dragging a human leg behind it. Six hundred burning oil wells poured their infernal fires out over the desert. *(The Toucher. 214)*

Clearly, this sublime is firmly anchored in historical awareness. And in a consistency which demonstrates the extent of it, we later read:

Esther poured herself a dry sherry and switched on the six o'clock news. In Eastern Europe governments rose and fell. The pimps, provocateurs and new rational economists leapt like messiahs out of the woodwork. On May Day in Moscow, the Russians marched carrying icons and portraits of the Czar. The last of the Romanoffs was blessed in the Russian Orthodox

Church in Leningrad. In Moscow, Esther had marched through Red Square under the crimson banners. The monster, Stalin, had smiled down from the Kremlin walls and they had waved back at him. They were the delegates to the conference of anti-fascist writers. They believed in the perfectibility of man and they knew nothing. (*The Toucher*: 275)

It is against this background of terror, then, that we are invited to view Esther's retreat to the 'edge of the world' (291) and to understand her sense of herself as one of the 'Lilliputians clinging to the edge of a shoreline'(151). Her personal sense of isolation, and its instability, extrapolates to the culture. We live on 'an island continent we've appropriated but never understood' (151), she says, in a remark which prevents Australia, in turn, from being a site of retreat to the position of observer implicit in a national sense of isolation. Hence *The Toucher* has an allegorical flavour encapsulated in another instance of self-reflexiveness. A quotation from Carlos Fuentes is the novel's epigraph and also used by Esther in *Ghost Letters* (151), implanting in both the embedded and embedding texts its sense of historical consciousness: 'You above all, you of the New World, you do have something more than an epic fatality, you do have a mythic chance'. In associating the mythic with the New World, the doubly deployed quotation articulates the both/and philosophy described earlier, disrupting, as it does, the sequential sense of new and old.

So, having instated a natural sublime as the dominant aesthetic and employed it in ways which both invoke and disturb traditional formulations, the novel also extends it into unfamiliar territory. It urges us to read history in terms of the sublime, expanding its perspective beyond that of an individual's feelings about

her own mortality. At the same time, the fact that her own mortality is at stake prevents her from being a detached observer.

Other comparisons with Freeman's work are useful, since she does not define this commitment to uncertainty, and I turn to them briefly. As I noted earlier, the feminine sublime implies a revision of the binary system around which the sublime is usually structured, with its implicit pattern of domination and submission. This sublime resists polarised opposites and displays instead a commitment to their co-implication. Freeman writes about Chopin's use of the ocean in *The Awakening* that '[t]he sea indicates polarities only to combine them': 'what lulls may just as easily lash ... what soothes also inflames' (1995: 27). In this respect, even a literal comparison with Hewett's conception of the sublime applies. Esther, the house and the town are alternately lashed and lulled by the ocean. It is the location of both death and a form of the maternal which is attached to and dissociated from death-dealing implications. It too represents a non-conforming sublime and bears witness to sublime experience without attempting to contain it. Esther is contemplating self-dissolution and, at the same time, turning aside from *fear of* that radical flux and dispersion. Such characteristics suspend the text in the imagining side of the sublime transaction with reason and support what will be obvious from my discussion so far, that polarities Hewett installs are also often combined.

Furthermore, Esther's impasse cannot be pinpointed. Freeman argues that *Good Morning, Midnight* addresses 'the complexity of the difference between' (1995:

91) by combining two kinds of impasse — interior and exterior. *The Toucher* exhibits this uncertainty. For Esther, any possibility of flight from her difficulties is circumscribed. Her body itself is an inscription of dependence, since she is in a wheelchair. Although disability is never allowed to be a reason for stasis, it draws attention to the spatialisation of her impasse, and even Rhys's spatial emphasis can be likened to Hewett's. Sasha's room is 'a surrogate for the protagonist herself', according to Freeman (1995: 91), who sees Rhys's persistent contemplation of rooms as a continual reminder that there is nowhere else to go. She interprets this as 'ironic commentary on Virginia Woolf's somewhat idealistic view of the role of private property in ensuring feminine happiness' (1995: 91). Given that Esther is a writer, this feminist literary history lends itself even more strongly to Hewett's spatial poetics. Esther's location is similarly an enfiguration of the impasse and comparably ironised. In a rather different account of Esther's location from being at the edge of the world, Hewett quotes Angela Carter to describe it: 'To live in a remote house in the country with a large garden is to be halfway towards a state of grace' (*The Toucher*, 220). The median reference point should not go unnoticed; it is another expression of resistance to closure and metaphoric of the many double movements Hewett manages here. Esther is never closer than halfway from/to a state of grace. Her remote house is the site of her final sexual withdrawal and capitulation to mortality, which is equally represented as an erotic adventure and resistance to mortality. Her sexual history culminates there, in a knowing withdrawal from the world into a sexual encounter in which she is both agent and victim. As with Rhys's Sasha, the relationship is based on economic

inequality but, in this instance, Esther is the provider. However, financial freedom only heightens the sense of her emotional dependence. Instead of being compelled by economic privation, age and fear produce her situation of no-choice. Meaning doubles again, since the affair causes her both grief and pleasure. It is not redemptive, but only highlights impending peroration. In addition, both before and after Billy, we encounter Esther angrily masturbating, which complicates the interpretation of the affair with Billy as little more than a storm before the calm. Her sexual desire is a continuing impulse and never only attributable to an attraction to him. By suspending Esther 'halfway to a state of grace', Hewett signifies a withdrawal from life which is also an entry into it.

The feminine sublime does not require the imagination's surrender. Examining Rhys's plot for a 'voice of reason' which indicates resistance to victimisation, Freeman finds it in Sasha's interior, chastising, mocking, monitoring voice which emphasises a socially constructed self, and mirrors the voices of society (1995: 95). Esther is given such a voice, and it is similarly a vehicle for indicating continuous internal struggle:

If Clarrie came back, life would settle down into the old, easy, comfortable routine again. She would never tolerate Billy Crowe. So you don't believe he's gone at all, do you, she asked herself. (*The Toucher*. 174)

When a friend, Emily, appraises the affair with Billy as harmful, Esther critiques her own response: 'It's true, Esther thought. Bullshit, mocked the voice in her head, what about Billy Crowe? You don't have much trouble when he's around' (*The Toucher*. 191). This subject's self-conscious, knowing consent to her own victimisation is thus also ambiguous. In Esther's case, it reflects her own erotic

desire, but this only suggests that the uncertainty Hewett produces proceeds from an even more radical interior impasse, like that Freeman identifies wherever a subject is 'free to choose only her own violation: just as the imagination has no choice but to will its own destruction' (1995: 101). According to Freeman, 'The one act to which [Sasha] can consent is her own rape, and the *commis* is the agent who enables it' (1995: 101). In Esther's case, Billy is the last opportunity for sexual fulfilment in a lifetime mapped by the socially compelled quest for the commitment it is supposed to offer.

Esther is accustomed to disappointment. Reflecting on the failure of her prior relationship with Sam Winter, she remembers demanding to know whether the relationship has ended:

'Why are you so heavy, Esther?'

'Because I want to know the truth. I want to know the reason why.'

'Truth,' he said bitterly, 'what's that?'

'Truth lives at the bottom of a well.'

He laughed. 'I like that.'

But this too was just another way to dodge the final responsibility. It all means nothing, she thought. In the struggle for survival some men lied to women without a qualm and there was no avenging angel.

(*The Toucher*. 174)

So, when Esther enters the relationship with Billy, she knows what to expect. Excessively submissive to her sexual desire, however, and viewing his interest in her as a reprieve, her response does not truly comprise choice. He represents her inability to face any 'last moment' yet. The erotic flurry which is the superficial substance of Hewett's plot, as well as the sexual politics raised by Billy's violence

and Esther's feminine misogyny towards his young wife, Iris, are all indications that Esther is a *willing* participant in a sexual drama which she knows to be self-destructive. Her willingness is reflected in its pleasures. Her disempowerment is reflected in her awareness that Billy is unreliable and unfaithful, which she detests and tolerates; and in her awareness that the relationship re-embroils her in sexual dependencies which she is there to unlearn. Sex with Billy briefly keeps at bay her fear of life 'beyond', which the text addresses in both the temporal and spatial senses of the word. Given these investments in the affair, the extent of Esther's courage, once it is over, is compelling. Understanding her choice to be between the ocean's embrace and immersion in the physical decay which Maxie has avoided by suicide, she consents to the latter. Not only is this the outcome against which the novel has proposed even suicide as the better alternative, but it is the choice which confronts her with the *unpredictable* disintegration she has most feared and resisted.

ESTHER'S DEATH

Hewett leaves Esther poised between possibilities. Having seized her pen, she sits waiting for the uncertain death of her fears. Articulating her submission to that uncertainty as loss constructs it as a form of self-victimisation in which she is not passive. As well as submitting to the process she most wishes to prevent, she is a subject participating in it. The significant submission is not to death itself, the inevitability of which she has faced, but to a death in which the circumstances will be outside her control.

By depicting the other possibility in Maxie's death, Hewett avoids foreclosing on imagination. Having reached 'the season of death' (280), Esther ponders how it is we can 'go on so calmly knowing that death waits at the end of it', again suggesting that this is a point at which *a human condition* can be generalised: 'Why don't we stop each other in the street and scream aloud with horror? She knew she was only frightened of a death that was arbitrary. If she could choose the time, place and manner, she could control the terror' (280). Her own arduous suicide attempt has failed, and her final determination is to 'sit out here in the garden until I become a frowsy old woman ... stinking and fishy with decay' (294).

A question of agency is at stake. Esther's situation has all the rhythms of the drama being enacted between imagination and reason in the sublime. When she sacrifices herself to an arbitrary death, she submits to terror. Her decision can be construed as sacrifice precisely because, despite her disabilities, she has proved capable of suicide. In addition, the death which she has foregone is projected as pleasure. This narrative necessity governs both the description of Maxie's drift out to sea and the contemplative content of Esther's drift back to land, which has prevented her own. At the conclusion, Esther is suspended in a sublime moment in which the will to mastery or power has been deflected.

This is the feminine sublime. There is no domination by the subject of her objects of rapture. Hewett positions Esther as a subject who 'exerts agency even as she confronts its limits', a hallmark of the feminine sublime, according to Freeman (1995: 6). At no stage in Esther's ambiguous encounters with self-

dissolution is she merely a victim being acted upon. For example, the description of her suicide attempt, quoted above, in which the vortex and web invoke the sublime, continues as follows. Ecstasy is proffered and prevented; the forgone pleasure quotient is clear:

She had spent too much time living her life and not enough contemplating it. She had squandered her days on earth, dangerously depleting her reserves.

[...]

She felt herself drawn along the river into a glowing world. The gulls wheeled and squawked and scattered. A sea eagle rolled out of a cloud and hung in front of her eyes. Under her closed lids, mandalas of light spun up and shattered. She felt the jar of the dinghy against a jetty and cried out. Hands lifted her up and she was borne up the steps towards the house.

(The Toucher: 267)

Esther does not withdraw from suicide because of fear. She merely fails. Since suicide is both possible and pleasurable, the choice to go on living is a form of submission. Indeed, the pleasure which infuses both accounts of voluntary death guarantees that Esther's acceptance of the arbitrary one cannot be attributed to aversion because of a prior unpleasant experience. On the contrary, she forgoes bliss. Hewett thus shepherds the text away from even these possibilities of a retreat into closure and resolves many of its strands into this staking of a contrary claim in uncertainty.

Moreover, the failed suicide attempt reiterates the situation of the young Esther warned to draw back from the edge just in time. Equally, it leaves her metaphorically closing her eyes and, this time, allowing the brink to claim her in

its own time. The novel's chief commitment to radical uncertainty lies in the coincidences of such contrary readings.

Just as she hints at a permeable boundary between oceanic and terrestrial imagery, Hewett also destabilises the boundary which distinguishes Maxie's voluntary death from Esther's now unpredictable one. Infused with pleasure and distinguished from the death Esther now exposes herself to, the description of Maxie's death also insists on the co-implication of opposites and prevents that polarity from taking hold. Maxie, too, must embrace inevitability at a certain level. In his case, the idea of choice over the circumstances is destabilised by his mental fragility. This offers readers another line of retreat into a clarity which is simultaneously blocked. Once he is beyond the point where death is certain, Hewett has him reflect most lucidly:

But no worries, death comes in the end, better to go out and meet it than die in a bloody bed at the General hooked up to all them tubes and catheters. And after a couple of days in the water, he'd be so blue and bloated even his best friend wouldn't recognise him.

(The Toucher: 296-300)

Hewett again converts Esther's choice into a willing sacrifice. Giving Maxie the relief of the death she has desired not only clarifies what she is consenting to deny herself, but presents his death as the *reasonable* decision. Seen in this light, Esther's option represents the imagination's situation in the sublime moment, and Maxie's the function of reason. The text's suspension is, finally, on the imagination's side of that transaction:

i'd like to float away like that

[...]

like a feather in the wind (*The Toucher*. 300)

So the novel closes with a male and a female figure, each the occasion of the other's sexual awakening and therefore, given the novel's plot, each a point of origin for the other, moving inexorably in the direction of their deaths. One, out of control, takes control of that movement; the other, desiring and able, submits to unpredictability instead. In this parallel structure, the role of a narratorially endorsed imagination is given to the woman. It is a feminine imagination, in the sense of Freeman's argument, because it represents a claim staked in the imaginative act in which the foreclosing action of reason is explicitly withheld. It structures a subject in terms of the consent to be delivered into an enigma.

SEX, GENDER AND LANGUAGE

The parallel structure in the deaths of Maxie and Esther invites consideration of the novel's approach to sex and gender. Maxie's centrality at the conclusion draws attention to how he signifies within the span of Esther's sexually active life. He is a figure of nostalgia, and an object of her desire for both literal and figurative return. He personifies an initiating and mobilising moment in her formation as a sexual and creative subject. He also represents their shared origins, the common ground of a specific social and cultural context.

Inverted gender paradigms can be discerned in Hewett's handling of the two characters to produce significant paradoxes. The inarticulate, passive Maxie is the vehicle for the enactment of a willed and voluntary death. The sexually

aggressive, articulate Esther (actively) takes up a passive position by contrast. And whilst Maxie's death constitutes a speculation about the likely outcome for Esther, her death is left unimaginable, despite her writerly endeavours. The theme is treated in tandem, and seems to reflect sexual dualism, but the case is more complicated than that.

Also, as I have noted, *The Toucher* sheers away from its naturalistic style at the conclusion. Reason breaks down. Logic no longer governs. The text gives way to language in which abstraction and image collide. Maxie's imaginings and Esther's even implicitly converge at this point, a possibility reinforced by a circular structure Esther hopes to achieve in *Ghost Letters*. She dictates to Billy: 'Last line: I'm going to perform a perfect circle' (239). Even this desire for closure is never realised, however. There is always a next line, as the text floats wide — like the strand of web, or the feather. The closure of the perfect circle is subverted in *The Toucher's* closing unpunctuated line.

Overall, *The Toucher* is an encounter with grounding mistakes which may be necessary to engage in representation at all. Just as the writing engages with the unrepresentable, and as the novel's topography persistently suggests the extension of imagination in the sublime, so Esther, as a subject, is placed at the edge of the gap between experience of self and the (im)possibilities of her secure representation in language. Hewett invites us to fix our eye on her creative efforts to articulate the self without asserting their success. In this respect, *The Toucher* is a text which *knows* that the 'cogito is never fully of the cultural world that it negotiates, no matter the narrowness of the ontological distance that separates that

subject from its cultural predicates', as Butler puts it (1990: 143). Hewett addresses the logical futility of attempting to match the enunciating subject to the enunciation in the sense of making her manifest *in* it, another site of unrepresentability. Esther's reflections on the autobiographical nature of her writing lead her to this conclusion: 'How extraordinary life was, and how impossible to make any sense out of it, any pattern at all. It was so much more satisfactory to make life up and write fiction' (*The Toucher*: 101). Again, Esther's imaginings are often situated in the contested space between fact and fiction, the real and the imagined — a significant expression of the novel's commitment to uncertainty. With regard to her attempts at self-expression, the novel directs attention to both her body and her 'pen' as the chief means of their making.

That is, considerations about language are linked to sexual difference. Billy kills Iris, the young woman whom he has married during the affair with Esther. There has been doubt over Iris's pregnancy and confirmation alters Billy's interpretation of his crime. This is the subject of a quarrel when Esther visits him in prison.

'Billy, for God's sake, what does the word matter?'

He glared at her ferociously. 'I need to know the word.'

(*The Toucher*: 277)

The contested word is 'infanticide' and the encounter metonymic of broader connections between sex and language in the relationship between Esther and Billy.

'The child *in utero* is yet another death, it should be noted, and one specifically located within the maternal body. That fact both collides with and furthers

Hewett's use of the maternal to infuse life-bearing resonances into the depiction of death in the concluding imagery. Death in life, life in death; the text will not be pinned down. The maternal is addressed in different modalities: the absent mother, the substitute mother, the inescapable oedipal drama in the relationship between Esther and Billy, the redemptive maternal flotilla of the conclusion. Such diversity feeds into the novel's questioning stance about the capacities of language to represent, ensuring that the sublime, as a question about representability, does not recede.

In the relationship between sex and language, the writing negotiates the crisis of representation — the sublime — in ways which exhibit an(other) 'ethical relation to otherness', in Cornell's words, and in which 'the subject does not seek to identify or categorise the object, but rather to let the object be in its difference' (1991: 148). If, as Freeman suggests, the feminine sublime occurs in attempts to testify 'in language to what language cannot render' (1995: 39), then what is being sought is the language of a desire *for* excess. Freeman cautions that this is not a 'discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes' (1995: 2). Hewett addresses that crisis. As a writing subject, Esther exemplifies Freeman's 'simultaneously disabled and empowered' subject which 'testifies to what exceeds it' (1995: 16). Although she does not walk into the ocean, like Edna, turning away from it suspends her in a confrontation with the impossibility of matching language to desire, the match for which she yearns, because she is a writer. In other words, Hewett allows the impossibility of giving

testimony to be played out in terms of language itself. Questions of representability proceed from the novel's methods of dealing with concepts of subjectivity and agency. Esther says, 'Everyone invents their own life anyway' (239), and has her protagonist address Sam: 'You taught me how to invent my own vision of myself out of bleakness and loss...' (261). Such statements pursue distinctions between real and constructed worlds and examine the role of language, or writing, in bridging the gap.

The self-conscious construction of Esther draws Hewett's text into the orbit of feminist inquiry. Butler writes:

A great deal of feminist theory and literature has ... assumed that there is a 'doer' behind the deed. Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within society. (1990: 25)

Others, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, defend the role of 'strategic essentialisms' in maintaining the impetus of that process of transformation (1990: 11).³ Butler calls for radical re-engagement with theories of the subject to avoid such manoeuvres, asserting that 'strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended'. She argues that feminism 'opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation' (1990: 4-5) by clinging to the possibility of a stable subject. Both approaches recognise that constructions of self are contingent. Butler reconceptualises identity to deprive 'the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: "man" and "woman"' (1990: 146), proposing that an 'epistemological account of identity' must give way to 'one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification*' (1990:

144). That is, gender is performatively produced rather than being based in ontology.

Spivak's references to a *necessary vulnerability* offer a way of acknowledging this critique and of interpreting a text like Hewett's, which superficially assumes an ontological foundation to gender, in terms of its orientation to performativity. As Spivak writes: '*to feel one is from an origin is not a pathology. It belongs to that group of grounding mistakes that enable us to make sense of our lives*' (1992: 781, emphasis mine). Butler admits as much when she suggests that the pronoun 'I' constitutes 'a kind of impasse'. It is the site of contestations of 'the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted' (1990: 146). This is familiar territory in the wake of Lacan's work, referring to the elusiveness of the subject which, as Eagleton suggests, 'will always slip through the nets of any particular piece of language' (1983: 170). The impasse of self-representation, which is related to the nexus between gender and identity, is a principal thematic concern of *The Toucher*. Esther struggles with this theoretical arena in her writing and in conversations with Billy. The constructedness of life, the production of identity, and the gap between word and meaning all have a place in her thinking as she educates him. Given that the embedded text is a vehicle of self-reflexivity for Hewett's novel as a whole, the reader is drawn into a spiral of textuality which relates to complexities of self-definition and self-expression. In the light of such questions, and all they have to do with (un)representability, Esther's ascription of the term 'post-modernism' (*sic*) to her writing is resonant (156). Put simply, *The Toucher* lays claim to uncertainty about the identity issues which Butler and

Spivak represent in their different ways.

There are related impasses here. The willing sacrifice of the imagination under conditions which make it the necessary response and make the status of the consent doubtful, mean, in Freeman's terms, that the imagination 'scapegoats itself' (1995: 75). She is distinguishing between identity produced in the Kantian sublime which is an effect of victimisation, and versions of identity produced by *self*-victimisation. Insofar as resistance and victimisation may inhabit the same gesture, and motivate the same subject, the resulting impasse provides a particular matrix for agency. In *The Toucher*, agency circulates through representations of desire, intimations of gender as performance, and a model of female sexuality in which only the *vulnerability* necessary to the experience of identity is evident and operates as a suspension in uncertainties about identity and otherness.

Esther testifies to the internalisation of conventional femininity. Cumulative experience has given her a predictable and limited repertoire of responses to the social and sexual world. She acknowledges a circumscribed performance of gender: 'The awful programming of her generation had marked her for life' (58). She refers to repetitious 'patterns' (104) in relationships and views her sexual compliance both as a weakness which results from 'having been trained by experts', and as a repetition based on her own desire:

But of course, she thought, this was the secret of it. For me they were the same. The knowledge had lain just below the surface of her conscious mind for all these months. I saw them both in the same light and there was enough similarity to make it work. One had never been enough so I invented this double; Sam stroking his cock with one hand up her dress,

Billy with his lips around her nipple until she came in a spurt of pure lust.

(The Toucher: 294)

More is at work here than mere sensitivity to social context and cultural heritage.

Hewett gives heterosexual interaction abyssal resonances:

But perhaps, she thought, there is some streak in me that likes to partner their punitive tricks, to balance on the edge of darkness before I draw back, for always she had drawn back, saving herself for another day.

(The Toucher: 105)

The balancing act recurs, another echo of the enclosing liminal images. The image of Billy, handcuffed, 'eyes staring out at her from the TV, a mad courage stiffening his backbone' (275) returns Esther to the opening memory of the cliff-edge and links it to the affair. This is a significant incorporation since comparable imagery becomes a vehicle for the novel's construction of her sexual desire.

Seeing Billy on the screen, she recalls:

She was standing on the edge of the Natural Bridge, teetering, toppling over, falling forever, arms flailing, mouth open, the breath torn from her body, the box brownie tumbling with her. The sickening thump as she saw herself lying far below, sprawled out, arms and legs twisted into strange angles. When she turned back to the TV, they were rehashing the whole story, the fibro house, the shallow grave, the landslide. Everything was diminished, criminal, mean. *(The Toucher: 275)*

In the ruined riverbank house of her childhood and using meaningful cultural markers, Esther reflects on the motherless context in which her sense of identity developed: 'With Napoleon bending his brow over me, *Wuthering Heights* ticking like a time bomb on the bedside table, and Peter La Farge rampaging through the tingle forest, what hope did I ever have, she thought' (110). References to

inheritance, legacy, apparatuses of cultural transmission indicate the text's consciousness of normative, regulatory processes and practices which produce a gendered subject. They cannot be traced to the influence of a single maternal role model, either, which broadens the contextual factors the novel suggests have shaped and (en)gendered Esther. All this depletes notions of gender as ontological. That is, the construction of gender is not unselfconscious and naive. It acknowledges its vulnerability.

Hewett's sense of that vulnerability is not confined to *The Toucher*, a fact which strengthens this reading. In Hewett's aging beautiful women and the operations of a particular feminine ideal in her plays, Margaret Williams (1992) identifies a form of psychic imprisonment and the representation of an impasse which may or may not be transcended (132). I return to this in Chapter Four. Much of Hewett's writing is performance-oriented in the obvious sense and, as Williams shows, she continually poses the internalisation of certain feminine ideals as a problem. That internalisation is a form of entrapment and positions a subject in the impasse faced by Esther.

Overall, Esther emerges as a situated and constructed subject, not in any simple sense an existential one, as the novel engages with vulnerabilities and contaminations to which language is subject and extends them into the domain of 'gender as cultural *inscription*', to quote Butler (1990: 146). Hewett repeatedly directs attention to the compulsions and regulatory practices brought to bear on the gender coherence of a subject. The gender performativity on which Butler insists is not a mask, not 'merely a cultural construct which is imposed on the

surface of matter' (1993: 2). She deconstructs the very idea of sex as an essential base with gender an act performed on the surface of a natural sexed body. This radically destabilising view of identity, and the vulnerability which, like Spivak, I regard as fundamental to the experience of it, both produce other ways of reading the novel's strategies for 'materialising' bodies as sexes. Read against this background, Hewett's text is also not naive about the instabilities and regulatory processes which govern the production of gender.

In Esther's case, gender is a highly wrought performance often carried by figurations of richly textured clothing: 'blue velvet gathered under the bodice' (43); 'red taffeta, her patent leather sandals swinging' (97); 'in her black silk shift, a black felt picture-hat shading her eyes, the patterns from the stained glass windows mottling her face ... like a black madonna' (120-1); 'grey-blue silky kaftan ... diamante earrings in her ears and a diamante necklace around her throat' (150); 'wine-red velvet' (287), and so on. Sometimes dressing herself and, significantly, sometimes being dressed by Billy, the act of clothing Esther is a signifying practice in which femininity is 'repeated stylization of the body', and in which she is gendered by means of 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame ... to produce the appearance of substance', to recall Butler's terms (1990: 33). Billy's ministrations enhance this. He executes well-rehearsed femininities acquired in prison, where his survival has depended upon skilful manipulations of the apparatuses of gender. So that we read: 'and, tenderly, like a woman, [he] helped her dress' (*The Toucher*. 43). Billy's prison experience acknowledges both homoeroticism and exigencies faced by incarcerated

individuals within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Hewett thus allows that gender is unstable and gestures towards the notion of rematerialisation. At the same time, in pronouncements about vestigial and ephemeral beauty (12 & 15), she constructs Esther as an embodied subject, but without insisting, it seems to me, on a primary corporeality which retreats from performativity, but rather as an aspect of it. Butler argues: 'once "sex" itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of the regulatory norm' (1993: 2). Hewett acknowledges that unthinkability.

Williams comments on controversial aspects of Hewett's constructions of female characters in the dramatic texts:

One of the reasons Hewett's women have aroused such antagonism is what seems to be their exhibitionist self-consciousness, the sense that they are continually posing, posturing, before an imaginary audience which includes themselves.... But just as performance is a central thematic element in Hewett's plays, it is intrinsic to her concept of female characterisation. 'Femininity' has been seen by various feminist and other writers as itself a form of performance, a charade, a consciously adopted role or series of roles; but like other recent women playwrights Dorothy Hewett takes the concept far beyond the negative connotations of femininity as 'masquerade', and *few go as far as she does in making every moment of her characters' existence a form of conscious enactment.*

(1992: 135-6, emphasis mine)

This recognises a prescient apprehension of femininity in Hewett's writing. Her female characters, according to Williams, try on 'possibilities of self "for size"' (1992: 136). As I show in Chapter Four, the plays offer a series of quixotic and provocative examinations of how Womanness may be experienced. In Williams'

view, they yield evidence of subversiveness and resistance to ideological certainties about what 'being woman' might mean (1992: 136). *The Toucher* is typical of Hewett, then, in producing a protagonist through a discourse of theatricality, transformation, metamorphosis and textuality. Also, plumb the depths of 'self' as hard as she might in her own fiction, Esther never arrives at ontological certainties. That difficulty is her subject, as I have shown. She is consistent with a conviction, exhibited in Hewett's dramatic writing also, that gender is an effect substantively produced by performance. Williams even suggests that a certain 'fluidity of structure' in the plays themselves is 'part of the same resistance to crystallising the self, or experience, into any fixed and permanent form' (1992: 136). Most pertinently, Hewett's central female characters often link creative energy and sexual fulfilment⁴.

Esther is a subject who *experiences* life in humanist terms as an essential self, but that experience is crosshatched with her function as a writer who insists upon fictional subjects and the inventedness of life. The novel thus ranges claims based in essentialist notions of identity and experience against her writing practice and has her engage with these questions when Billy makes naive equations between text and life: "It's a novel," she said patiently. "It's fiction, I keep telling you." (222). In response to Sam Winter's desire to collaborate on the publication of *Ghost Letters*, she testifies to the complicated relationship between experience and fiction:

So now he was taking over her novel, like he took over everything he touched. Losing any pretence of fiction, it would become a titillation. It made her feel totally exposed. Don't create anything, or it will follow you

forever. (*The Toucher*: 291)

In such ways, the novel resists dependence on untheorised conceptions of the subject and, rather, scrutinises the necessary *feeling* that subjectivity is coherent and can be traced to origins. Esther is gendered in ways which take into account the fact that identity is produced and maintained by ideological and discursive forces. Concealing, naturalising effects which produce and permeate her performance of self and the repertoire of signifying practices brought to bear on her performance(s) of self are, in part, her subject of investigation.

More is concerned here than the fact that humanist and romantic conceptions of a foundational and fixed subject have given way to proliferating categories of identity. Although even this proliferation has been described, in related language, as emerging from 'scrupulous and plausible accounts of the mechanics of staging', as Spivak puts it: 'What we call experience is a staging of experience...' (1992: 781). Such arguments illuminate the configuration of gender which produces Esther. She experiences herself as a substantive identity, but the text is self-reflexive about that. She inhabits a world which endorses a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, but she reflects upon that as an aspect of her cultural legacy and participates in its critique.

Merely to detach gender from what is supposed to be a stable and binary distinction between two sexes is insufficiently radical. This is Butler's point, as she criticises feminist thinking which views gender as culturally constructed and yet resists 'gender as a multiple interpretation of sex', remaining entrenched in dualism while explicitly rejecting essentialism (1990: 6).⁵ *The Toucher* addresses

and contests historical and cultural wellsprings of sexual dualism. In Esther's world, gender follows from sexual morphology, but she inhabits it as an effect, not a cause, of sexual dualism. In negotiations with sex/gender paradigms she perceives herself as a subject mired in naturalised and naturalising, circumscribed and circumscribing regulatory fictions and is aware that her position represents loss. The prominent loss concerns woman-to-woman relationships, exemplified in Maudie Chandler, who destabilises the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexist power and gives impetus to the critique. Indeed, the novel's most significant admission of other regimes of desire is its representation *as loss* of Esther's late comprehension that Maudie always loved her. Heterosexual connection is Hewett's subject. She foregrounds it, but resists privileging heterosexual relations over same sex relations, the least easily displaced way of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality.

In the end, the novel expresses compassion for a desiring female subject mired in a vulnerable apprehension of self. The boundary between Esther's view of identity as constructed, and her view of herself as an articulating subject — an experiencing 'I' and a grammatical 'I' — is another threshold which the text traces between theory and experience, reason and imagination.

Hewett has a number of strategies for insisting on a corporeal Esther, most obvious being her insubordinate sexual desire. Gender and sexual morphology are not detached in the manner which Butler argues has real political implications: 'When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of

sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice' (1990: 6). On the contrary, what she elegantly refers to as 'the specific paraphernalia' (1990: 3) of gender is the ground upon which Hewett's cohort of characters is erected. Nevertheless, the text veers between resistance to attributes traditionally clustered as feminine and their indulgence, shifts which recall Freeman's insistence that the feminine sublime is articulated in collisions of meaning. In this instance, constructions of gender as performative and subject-producing, and notions of the body as the natural and fixed location of subjectivity collide. As a result, the account of the female subject that the novel finally offers is troubled and complex.

Traditional gender categories operate, but in a combination which subverts them. Tensions with traditionally valued feminine attributes emerge not least in the relationship between language and sexual morphologies. As Benoîte Groult recognises, the lexicons available to writers of the sexual are 'risky' :

[E]very word, every forlorn, drab, coarse, grotesque, even frankly repellent word is waiting to betray me.... What sort of emotion is evoked by the word 'coition'? *Co-ire*, the Latin for 'go together'.... In these days of verbal inflation, when words fall out of fashion as fast as our clothes, we have only grubby obscenities rendered meaningless by constant repetition. The worthy 'making love' is always ready at hand, ready to serve but devoid of emotional thrill, neither scandalous nor erotic.... Words, recalcitrant bastards, insist on independent existence or impose received images on the transparency one seeks, coming as they do from slang or Latin, slime or the sublime. (1992: 4-5)

In the paucity of language available to writers of the sexual, Groult notices this other breach between representation and the real with which some writers must be

concerned.⁶

As several quotations already illustrate, Esther confronts it in her letters to Sam, and in a prior sense Hewett confronts it (confronts us with it) in her sexual lexicon. I choose the word 'confronts' advisedly. It is a commonplace that inherited paradigms of the feminine have incurred linguistic constraints for women, especially in the arena of sexuality. Hewett claims the impoverished and exhausted sexual vocabulary Groult describes. She is not alone in this assertiveness. Women increasingly produce erotic texts in which they claim un-beautiful, 'unfeminine' language and resist euphemism.⁷

Hewett's deployment of sexual language is evident even in early poetry. The following not only exemplifies her early insistence on linguistic freedom, it also contains a schematic account of Esther's plot in *Ghost Letters*, since she proposes that they will never be sent:

I turn your letters in a drawer,
and think of words I wrote,
know the old itch for permanence
made these sly icons of ephemera.

But here's the proof we lived
to write each other from our distant cities,
suffered alone in motel rooms,
put out a hand, smiled, sat up naked,
shared each other's bodies ...
phoney libertines and beautiful fucks!

('This Time', *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, 1976, in *CP*: 125)

In *The Toucher*, Hewett succeeds in what Virginia Woolf (1931) claimed never to

have achieved, the freedom of 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body' (in Eagleton 1986: 53). It is a significant silence and one Hewett addresses in *The Toucher*. Woolf's remarks provide a background for the observation that both the sexual vocabulary and the eroticised gaze at the female body link Hewett's text to a feminist history of the politics of language and narrative convention.

However, there is more to it than this. Vigorous sexual language and the enfiguring of the sexual body produce a sense of Esther's corporeality. Given her age and disability, she comprises a noteworthy defiance of convention, being a female body eroticised explicitly in terms of multiple and splendid imperfection. Esther's body is another site to which *The Toucher* turns in its engagement with unrepresentability, as well as theoretical instability and ideological uncertainty. It is a body which functions, in Butler's plural formulation, 'as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained' (1990: 33).

Itself a subject of uncertainty, the issue of how the body relates to gender continues to be debated in feminist discourse. This much is clear when Elizabeth Grosz addresses Butler's argument: 'the body that performs, however much Butler insists it is produced by the performance itself, must nevertheless abide between performances, existing over and above the sum total of its performances' (1995: 212). Hewett's approach to gender and sex is versatile and also reflects Grosz's view, that there is 'instability at the very heart of sex and bodies' which allows for even more radical possibilities. For Grosz, this instability concerns the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what any body is capable of doing is

well beyond the tolerance of any culture' (1995: 214).

As a narrative of the active sexuality of a disabled and aged subject, *The Toucher* points to a significant cultural intolerance. The corporeal Esther is held in a kind of suspended confrontation with more usual configurations of the desirable, desiring and sexually active woman: 'Unhooking her sarong, he lowered her naked off a flat rock into the sea.... When she came out, *crawling crablike up the sand*, he looped a necklace of sea-grapes around her throat like a rosary' (*The Toucher*. 237, emphasis mine). And later: 'he saw her for a moment, without pity, crouched on the sofa, all fat and false teeth and hair, like an old lioness' (257). From the first explicitly sexual encounter between Esther and Billy, the text acknowledges and resists exclusions implicit in usual constructions of female desirability:

Their eyes met, and he saw her fierce modesty melt in front of his gaze. 'I'd better stay then.' He helped her onto the toilet and waited.

'Turn your back,' she said.

He smiled. 'Now you're just bein' silly.' He slipped her nightdress over her head and held her hand while she stepped into the bath. 'Aphrodite,' she giggled.

[...]

'It's not hot enough,' she whinged. He turned on the tap and the white steam rose in a cloud over her half-submerged body.

'Y' look alright in the nuddy,' he said. 'Y' got nice tits.'

(*The Toucher*: 42)

Esther is a female subject given an active gaze, sexually empowered, and eroticised. At the same time, her body symbolises a shifting boundary, since it is marked by its mortality, changing, a body 'caught in the act' of its inevitable

dissolution. This further disconnects the text from heterosexual norms, radically adding to the oblique reference to 'the queer subject, the subject in drag' (Grosz 1995: 213), indicated in Billy's prison experience, and the fact of Maudie's lesbianism. Hewett centralises and eroticises the disabled, obese, aged body of a heterosexual female subject: 'crippled and fat and slovenly, with swollen knees.... heavy mottled arms, sagging breasts, wild white hair on end' (*The Toucher*. 12-13). Esther's body draws attention to the usual morphology of the sexually active, desiring and desirable female subject of literature, both performing and subverting its norms, and locating its subversions *within* the regime of heterosexuality. Although Esther is a heterosexual female subject, she is decidedly not symptomatic of a heterocentric text. Her body is more than 'a ready surface awaiting signification' (Butler 1990: 33) and more than a signifier of a politics within. In this 'more', the feminine sublime operates.

SEX AND DEATH

Grieving for Billy after his arrest and capture, Esther experiences a brief frenzy of sexual activity:

There was a sharp burst of Indian summer. Fred continued to fish the estuary. The headland, blackened with fire, waited to be rejuvenated by the rains. Obsessed by sex, Esther masturbated everywhere; in bed, on the sofa, in the sitting room, on the window seat in her study, out in the garden. Wheeling her chair away from the windows, she slipped down, legs flung wide. At night she dreamed that Billy Crowe, jeans stiff with fish blood, held her as tight as his own skin. Then the storm abated, leaving her spent and calm and scarcely regretful. I will never sleep with a

man again, she thought. (*The Toucher*: 280)

The passage precedes Esther's realisation, following the loss of Ern, that it is 'the season of death' (280). It proposes sexual abatement and, apparently, an arrival at stasis and tranquillity.

Once again, the case is not so simple. The moment is construed both in terms of loss, or death, and rejuvenation, or life. Metaphorised as 'storm', the links between Esther's prior sexual life and a sublime aesthetic are sustained. Also, the dream text illustrates an exchange of surfaces which is an alternative way of conceiving of sexual exchange, as I will show. In turn, it is a permutation of the 'ability to blur distinctions between observer and observed, reader and text, or spectator and event' which is a hallmark of the feminine sublime (Freeman 1995: 5). Esther's dream belongs to a discourse of rapture in which merger and identification are not nullified, as would be likely if this were not the feminine sublime. Freeman writes: 'the sublime event is precisely one in which what happens to "the other" also happens to the subject who perceives it' (1995: 5). Esther and Billy have got under each other's skin, in several senses, like the inter-surface imagery the text relies on for its oceanic and terrestrial scapes.

The plot has been moving towards this moment, the end of a subject's sexual life. And only now is Esther's novel, which Ern had rejected, accepted for publication. That is, sexual closure coincides with reopening possibilities for creative satisfaction, a conjunction of circumstances which floats, in yet another form, the generative notion of death. By it, the Freudian model of detumescence, suggested in Esther's mooted sexual subsidence, is turned aside. Indeed, since it

succeeds her acceptance of an arbitrary death, the latter passage seems more directed towards severing the connection between desire and death of the usual psychoanalytic model. As Grosz suggests: 'The sexual encounter cannot be regarded as an expedition, an adventure, a goal, or an investment, for it is a directionless mobilization of excitations with no guaranteed outcome' (1995: 200). That is, alternative interpretations of Esther's sexual past are possible, in which libidinal impulses are understood in terms of 'the sphere of influence of otherness', as Grosz writes: 'The other solicits, beckons, implores, provokes, and demands. The other lures, oscillates, presenting everything it has to offer, disclosing the whole body without in fact giving up anything, without providing "information" as such' (1995: 199-200).

Since Freud, sex and death have been linked; eros and thanatos, pleasure and death; the oxymoronic and paradoxical blend of pleasure and *un*pleasure which marks the experience of the sublime. Mishra remarks on the pessimism usually indicated by the sublime in psychoanalytic discourse: 'Desire becomes a thing in itself', he writes, 'and since it is founded on lack ... the oceanic sublime (the sublime as a state of total dissolution) becomes the goal of life' (1993: 20). This sublime is the momentary ascendancy of the death instinct, an 'image of a desire to return from the terrors of life to the seductively inviting tranquillity of death', as Mishra puts it (1993: 20), describing the process Freud called sublimation. That is, a return to tranquillity constitutes the recuperative move which the feminine sublime does *not* enact. This is the significance of Hewett's conversion of Esther's sexual closure into renewed creative vigour, instead of the stasis implied by

tranquillity, especially in the context of a turn to death which is an increased submission to unpredictability.

Grosz teases apart internal links between death and sex/pleasure which are immanent in connections between sex and procreation.⁸ She concentrates on libidinal impulses which signal 'superabundance', 'a going over the mark', 'an economy of luxury' (1995: 190). The altered focus is an attempt to disentangle sex from death. Sex is understood instead in terms of shifting boundaries between subjects:

the transformative, transubstantiating effects of erotic attachments are echoed in the seeping out beyond boundaries and the dissolution of lines of bodily organization prompted by orgasmic dissolution. There is something about the compulsive incitements of sexuality that may bring one to the brink of disgust and to the abject.... (Grosz 1993: 202)

She argues that the relationship between desire and death is neither universal, necessary nor inevitable, and seeks to reformulate desire in other terms (1995: 204). The argument identifies an instrumental, functional view of sexuality at the heart of psychoanalytic conceptions of desire because they are linked to procreation.⁹ Eroticism may be formulated, Grosz suggests, so that the co-implication of subject and other is centralised. Lovers are engaged in a paradox. The sexual encounter moves them towards self-containment and enclosure, and simultaneously towards the larger world, the social. When the corporeality of erotic exchange is viewed instead as 'a mode of surface contact', to use Grosz's phrase, erotic desire may be reflected better as a process which 'engenders and induces transformations, intensifications, a becoming something other' (Grosz

1995: 204). That is, erotic exchange has the transforming potential to make the subject other. This thinking moves the discussion away from procreation and towards 'the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought, energies never tapped, regions never known' (205). The sublime still has a place, as in psychoanalytic discourse on desire, but like Freeman, Grosz suggests that an instability within the discourse may be desirable and recuperable.

Esther's compulsion to continue the liaison with Billy, despite her better judgment, may be reviewed in the light of this injunction to sever links between desire and death. Their relationship certainly exemplifies sexual exchange which is in excess of functionalism. Esther quotes Thomas Hardy: 'And death may come, but loving is divine' (*The Toucher*. 39, 53), clearly juxtaposing desire and death. However, Hewett's handling of the sexual aspect of that equation, like her handling of the theme of death, only problematises the link. Esther's emphasis is on the durability suggested by divinity, rather than the inevitability of death, which she takes for granted.

Sexual desire is severed from death in ways which are consonant with Grosz's argument. When Esther's sexual pleasure in the novel concerns release or discharge, autoeroticism is the means of its achievement. Where sexual pleasure is an exchange between Esther and Billy, it is not reducible to that goal. Instead, it is an exchange in which Billy's allure is made possible by Esther's receptiveness, and vice versa. That is, they each produce in the other an attractiveness not made immanent in either. The relationship is at once a closing off from the world and, having the ambiguity of which Grosz writes, is a 'spreading out over many things,

infecting all sorts of other relations' (1995: 204). That is, Billy and Esther are constructed as co-implicated subject and other, which Hewett achieves without proselytising for any necessary reciprocity, or for sexual complementarity. The age disparity safeguards the relationship from being such a reiteration of the usual discourse. Esther's age places her sexual desire in the arena of 'irrational residue'. This sexual exchange has no orientation towards procreation, no point of connection between desire and the survival of the species, and thus to death. By contrast, the relationship between Billy and Iris is precisely placed within that regime, given her pregnancy. Iris's insistent, 'I'm not goin' t' top meself, jus' to please y', Billy Crowe' (115) signifies well in excess of its literal meaning, given events, making explicit a connection between sex and death which, again, implies Hewett's attention to it, not endorsement of it. Both the Esther/Billy and Iris/Billy relationships operate in terms of the familiar nexus between death and desire, but with differences so marked that the psychoanalytic model is never simply recycled. Again, Hewett's text is revisionary, and here too its contestations make it an allegory of language.

Reading, writing and speech are as thematically central to *The Toucher* as sex and death. When Billy enters her life, Esther is enclosed in her 'halfway-house' on 'the edge of the world' (136, 291). Through the encounter between the two, and using Esther's reflections in the embedded novel, Hewett characterises her by multiple ambivalences. The work of writing is performed on a boundary between solitariness and sociability, empathy and reclusiveness. For all her declarations to the contrary, Esther is both dramatically dependent on relationships and an

example of the self-sufficiency which the novel supposes is symptomatic of writing subjects and makes their work possible (154). As Esther reflects: 'writers are as watchful as cats' no matter what realities they are actually living at any given moment (191).

The matter of a writing subject's fluctuations between solitude and connection has a double presence, being also a theme of Esther's epistolary novel, as this declaration by her protagonist illustrates:

after being amongst crowds of people, I come back to silence, isolation, the nun-like seclusion of this room, feeling bruised and eaten alive, to recover the self. But then the isolation takes over and I begin to feel as if I have drowned under oceans of seawater and will never surface again, that because I am one of the living dead already I can't write anymore. I haven't written a single word for so long and when I can't write I feel doomed.... (*The Toucher*: 129)

The sentiment is repeated in the embedding text. Esther invites Ern to stay: 'you don't know how I ache for disturbances like you', she tells him. 'It's so tranquil here ... that sometimes I feel as if I've buried myself alive in it' (148-9). The imaginings, quoted earlier, of herself in a painting and enclosed behind glass are echoed: 'both safe and still, tumultuous and passionate at the same moment' (270). Tranquillity both is, and is not, desirable. The dominant impulse is undecidability.

The relationship with Billy operates against a background of contradictions about relationship *per se*, and the text finds language to be the best hope for connection. Since Esther's sexual history is the site of her central doubt, physical coupling does not mean union:

How do we know, she thought, the secrets of another's mind? They are

hidden from us always. Even what we think are those moments of greatest illumination, however brief, with another's innermost being, may well turn out to be the greatest illusion of all. (*The Toucher*. 198)

Theirs is also a teacher/student relationship and, in that sphere, Esther's disabled body and depleting strength are no longer paired with his intense physicality and vigorous youth. Esther has the ascendancy: 'My God, Esther thought wearily, this isn't a man at all. He's only a child' (88). They read together and, because he is her amanuensis, write together. That is, words are as much the currency of their exchanges as sex. Furthermore, suggestions of symmetry in the mismatch are destabilised by the greater value the text gives to language because, although each sits in a different relation to mastery of language and experience of literature, shared passion for words and a belief in them is what really connects them. The text allows neither what divides them, nor what joins them, to dominate.

To read is to be born, Billy's response to Esther's quotation of Angela Carter suggests, exemplifying that *The Toucher* becomes a tissue of references and allusions, often floating on other texts as it builds up this picture of varied intellectual activity. He says:

'I'll never catch up with all these smart bastards. Look at 'em, shelves of em, an' this is only the beginnin'.'

'That's what's so marvellous about it. You're so lucky, it's like being reborn. I can never recapture that again.'

But mostly he read only poetry, sitting cross-legged in front of her bookcases devouring the Americans; Hart Crane, Lowell, Berryman, Wallace Stephens, William Carlos Williams, Merwin and Ginsberg. One night, sitting poised on the arm of the sofa, he recited the whole of *Howl* as if he'd created it himself.

'I'd like to be a poet but it's not a real job, is it?' He giggled. 'Whadda y' reckon — Billy Crowe, poet? Don't sound right somehow.'

(The Toucher. 220)

Esther is aware of likely conventional views of the relationship: "I know nobody will understand," Esther babbled, "an old woman and a young man; they'll think it's disgusting, immoral, perverse" (210). She explains her willingness to take the risk in terms of a desire to listen as well as be listened to, and this too establishes reciprocity beyond the merely physical: 'He's a talker, Em. You don't know how I've longed for a talker' (211). When Billy discloses his decision to marry Iris and asks Esther to attend the wedding despite her feelings, his emphasis is on their verbal communication. The double entendre is clear and suggests the interweaving of sexual and verbal communication which is, finally, the novel's formula, if there is one, for sexual exchange: "'Listen," he said, "listen to me. We got somethin' goin' here nobody else understands. But we understand it alright. We can find our way in the dark, but we gotta trust each other"' (117). Among reasons given for the disastrousness of his marriage to Iris is the fact that, as Billy puts it: 'She reckons readin' aloud is bullshit, she hates poetry...' (142). The shared territory, the 'somethin' goin' for Esther and Billy, is literary. If anything, shared passion for language is the privileged connection, not sex, but because of the sexual aspects of the relationship, neither form of interaction is allowed to be transcendent.

Upon their first encounter after Billy becomes a fugitive, the meanings of love and death, speech and writing are at a crossroad:

'I read your poem.'

'I wanted t' show it to y' but a course I couldn't.'

'That's the trouble with murder, you shouldn't write about it.'

'Or talk about it, neither. I wanted to tell, I almost did.'

'Talk about it now.' (*The Toucher*. 258)

He does.

When she first encounters Billy, Esther is preparing for silence, and for her, to be unable to inhabit the word-world is a kind of death. The weight of unexpressed self and untold words is conveyed in the sublime image of the ocean governing descriptions of Matt's death. It is no small matter that the death Esther designates to express her feelings about not writing is drowning, the manner of her husband's death. A symbol of his desire to write from 'under [Esther's] shadow' (162), and a reminder that he too 'had dreamed of being a writer' (255), Matt's Remington has been stored in a workshed since. Billy's appropriation of it is more than an act of mimicry of Esther, or of childish and unlikely literary ambition, more even than a sign of her effective tuition. All of these would be a false foundation for being a writer, anyway, according to the novel. Such a meagre engagement with the art is reserved for Iris's unsustained attempt to write (56), the inclusion of which defines the value the text gives to the 'dream of writing'. The word-currency between Billy and Esther exceeds such insubstantial motives and is enriched by the fact that her novel is written 'through' him. Billy's poem is a realisation of his independent taking up of the pen and places him alongside Matt, who was the author of a single novel. An important distinction between them remains in place, however. Matt was 'always such a moody man, closed off. I lived with a stranger for thirty years' (149-50), Esther tells Ern. So, Matt was not a talker. Spoken

communication is foregrounded here. Written and spoken communication are not interchangeable, and both offer redemptive possibilities. On the several levels of linguistic capacity that the novel puts in place, Esther is arch-speaker and arch-writer. Her tongue 'lashes' both Matt and Billy (61, 103). Compared with her skill with words, all her lovers, including Billy, are found wanting.

In fact, effective relationship through language is so concentrated in Esther that a note of exploitativeness and opportunism enters her character and creates a possibility for Billy to be read as a victim of her self-absorption. That is, the figure of Esther as the novel's touchstone of opinion is also destabilised, creating room for readerly sympathies to be extended to him, despite everything. Speech is given its greatest value when others are communicating themselves to Esther. It is the means by which they become more available to her, as human subjects. Amelioration of the boundary between subjects is for her purposes. In part, this is why she wants 'a talker'. Her position as listener has a poised, predatory aspect.

Writing also has its greatest value when it is Esther's. In the clutch of writers among the novel's characters, she is the legitimate author among novices and aspirants. In this novel, in which writing is the privileged mode of communication, there is a hierarchy of commitment and skill and Esther occupies the summit. Her only artistic equal is Sam Winter, the past lover for whom Billy is, finally, a cypher, and whose self-revelatory conversations she fictionalises in her novel. However, Sam's means of artistic communication are not verbal. Like her father, he is a painter. He does not compete with Esther in the domain of language. In a clear division of the labour of symbolic production, he would

illustrate their collaboration on *The Ghost Letters* (291), should it happen. Even this, Esther finds threatening.

Gathered together, these factors are an expression of the novel's commitment to words as life-sustaining. They recall the quotation made earlier: 'Impossible to leave the world until I've finished what I've got to say' (139). For Esther, 'saying' is writing. As she tells Ern when he remonstrates with her about the relationship with Billy: 'Perhaps I might get another novel out of it' (164). Whichever way we approach *The Toucher*, it seems, questions about representation are at work.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that Esther's statement suggests a romantic view of the artistic subject. Caught as she is between withdrawal from, and participation in, the social, Esther views artistic endeavour as a way of transcending suffering. It is a means of survival. Yet the artist must participate in life in order to produce the desire for that very activity of transcendence. Having 'harvested' a great deal of experience which, it must be said, is more brutal for Billy and Iris than for herself, Esther writes: 'I long so for peace and tranquillity, gentle things: a tree in a garden, a new book to read, the slow gestation of a novel. I need boredom and solitude to be able to write again' (238). It is difficult to accept the text's invitation to enter into Esther's view of what it means to suffer, if this is what defines it. And since tranquillity is desired in this instance, it is also difficult to avoid facing its many contradictions.

On the contrary, Hewett chips away at the edges of that romantic conception of artistic consciousness. Esther has herself been subjected to the tyranny of its self-privileging. And her explanation of her father's suicide adds implications of

generosity and selflessness to her own rejection of it: 'like all artists, in the end nobody counted but him' (110). In the relationship with Sam, she occupied the position Billy inhabits in the relationship with her. Her suspicion of Sam's self-centredness, added to his assertion that had they stayed together it 'would've been a disaster. I wouldn't've let you work', signal Hewett's diffidence about the romantic artist subject, which I explore further in my discussion of *Wild Card*. Here, the fact that it is finally Billy who rejects Esther, rather than the reverse, makes it clear that the novel is simultaneously using and refusing that conception of artist as subject.

I began by linking the sublime to evidence of this novel's commitments to uncertainty and suggesting that they reflect a sublime less anchored in imagery than in its familiar guises. *The Toucher* is an exemplary text of the commitment to uncertainty which is a dominant impulse throughout Hewett's writing. The uncertainty in question is radical because Hewett chooses and insists on it, an insistence also evident in her dramatic texts, as my next chapter, on *Joan* (1984), will illustrate. Wherever Hewett's writing seems most to take a stand, that is also the likely site of its most earnest questioning.

1. Freeman addresses in detail Longinus' *Peri Hyposus*, Burke's *Enquiry*, Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the three seminal texts in this discourse.
2. Italics are used here to indicate Kinsella's questions and distinguish them from Hewett's answers, as in the original.
3. Another of Spivak's epigrammatic phrases might also be useful in relation to my attempts above to describe this domain of the feminine sublime. In summing up what he calls 'the deconstructive movement', Geoffrey Hawthorn offers Spivak only two possibilities for its likely effects. Is it, he asks, 'a declaration of war, or the celebration of a victory over the grands récits?' Spivak's response is useful in the context of the feminine sublime: 'I think of it myself,' she responds, 'as *a radical acceptance of vulnerability*' (Spivak 1990: 18, emphasis mine).
4. Williams makes this point about the plays (1992: 132), suggesting that the texts' sexual ideology is often produced in juxtapositions between female sexuality and creativity.
5. Kristeva, for example, construes the dichotomy man/woman as metaphysical and proposes a third level of feminist consciousness in the refusal of a masculine/feminine dichotomy based in sex. Famously, an effect of her extrication of gender from sex is the relational definition of femininity as 'that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order' which results in a finding that largely male-authored texts are exemplary texts of feminine writing subjects (Moi 1985: 163-7).
6. Groult gives examples from literature and, in her introduction, settles ironically for 'firkytoodling', a sixteenth-century term for sexual play (1992: 6).
7. I think of Linda Jaivin's *Eat Me* (1995) and Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia* (1995), to name but two in the Australian context of women writers claiming explicit eroticism as their subject.
8. Grosz takes from Roger Caillois a comprehension of sexuality based on attributes and behaviours which exceed the matter of a species' survival. He considers an 'irrational residue' in sexuality, libidinal impulses which go beyond strategies for survival and procreation. Grosz uses Lingis' work to recognise interconnectedness between subjects (1993: 202).

- 9 Grosz acknowledges Caillois' work in conceiving of 'the masculine projection of woman as cold, mechanical, inanimate, machine-like' (1995: 203). She argues that these appear when eroticism is structured programmatically or reduced to a 'hydraulic model': 'a means to an end ('foreplay'), a mode of conquest, a proof of virility or femininity, an inner drive that periodically erupts, or an impelling attraction to an object that exerts a 'magnetic force' (Grosz 1995: 204).

CHAPTER TWO

Joan: A Bundle of Contradictions

HEWETT'S SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION

Hewett's Joan is a provisional and arguably postmodern construct which exemplifies the divided, shifting subject-in-process. Furthermore, Hewett's treatment of the familiar historical narrative evinces Shapiro's understanding that 'a subject that is historically situated and not, as Descartes presupposed, the sole guarantor of truth, undermines the modernist conception of epistemology itself' (in Hekman 1990: 63). That is, ruptures between Hewett's writing and features of modernism are evident in this text. Here, I consider these aspects of *Joan* as evidence of an early postmodern commitment to uncertainty consistent with *The Toucher*.

Having argued that this commitment is identifiable in Hewett's recent writing, and that it relates not least to subject construction, I want to link those arguments to Hewett's earlier interest in the status of the subject and epistemological doubt.

Joan suggests that the self-consciousness demonstrated in Hewett's work is not entirely contained by the formal aesthetic self-consciousness usually ascribed to modernist texts.¹ Insofar as modernism is regarded as an inheritor of asymmetrical Enlightenment dualities, one of which is the Subject/Object opposition, this text contains elements which fall outside its parameters. It illustrates that the problematics of self-representation which infuse postmodern versions of subjectivity and destabilise this opposition are the crisis towards which Hewett's writing inclines.

Such considerations have implications for moral and ethical stances. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests: 'one can recognize the moral self by its uncertainty whether all that should have been done, has been' (1993: 12). This is the nature of the uncertainty in which Hewett's writing is anchored, generally. In this instance, she is committed to the provisional nature of an historical subject such as Joan, relating her to postmodern concerns like those Marshall sums up: 'any time we speak of the subject we must also speak of the social because the subject is fabricated within signifying practices' (1992: 97). The choice of a subject whose convictions incur death heightens the importance of connecting morality, or ethics, with uncertainty. Here, too, Hewett reminds us that the body is a limit.

Jennifer Strauss (1995) addresses Hewett's sense of the constructedness of subjects in her essay, 'A Ride with Love and Death: Writing the Legend of the Glittering Girl' (in Bennett 1995: 53-70). Strauss connects the multiplicity of Hewett 'selves' with a desire to write against the grain of heroic narratives of

myth and legend as well as to construct 'a legendary "self"' (1995: 59). The fictionality of subjects in Hewett's texts has been a point of particular critical interest because she has so often been a target of naive equations between herself and her textual constructs. As she indicates in *Wild Card*, she has 'experience of the Australian habit of equating fiction with reality' (248). The related question arises of whether unstable connections between Hewett's fictional subjects and historical fact link her to postmodernism. I argue that there is evidence that they do, as early as the writing of *Joan*, first performed in 1975, published in 1984.

Hewett's demonstrations of the constructedness of self are never merely evasion of self-disclosure either, which Peter Nicholls identifies as a common defensive posture among modernist writers; a tactic for 'obscuring the social location of the writer's voice', and a defence against 'otherness' (1995: 4). On the contrary, identity construction in Hewett's writing seems personalised and directed towards intimacy. It operates out of an apparently opposite desire for self-disclosure and suggests a suspicion of the boundaries between self and other, which were her legacy as a woman writer, a colonial, and a West Australian. Moreover, insofar as *otherness* in modernism is often the feminine, as Nicholls argues (1995:4), the *elimination* of which he suggests is 'the very mark of that triumph of form over "bodily" content', it seems plausible that Hewett's projects contest the masking strategies modernist writers' personae comprised. Both a literal interest in masks in Hewett's writing and the style of her public self-representations suggest a complicated view of subjectivity and careful regard for processes of communication between self and world. She does not take these

matters to be self-evident.

In conversation with Drusilla Modjeska, Hewett declares her perception of problems which attach to self-representation. Her remarks acknowledge an impasse:

At first I was very nervous of this 'I' and I found it very difficult just to write the word 'I'. Then I began to think, which is a truism, that once you write 'I' you've created a character anyway and that no one can write who they are because no one really knows. (Chamberlain 1988: 96)

Such self-consciousness about self-representability indicates an awareness that writers are necessarily operating in the gap between the subject of the enunciation and the enunciating subject. In Hewett's treatment of that gap there are affinities between her writing and Lyotard's argument (1984) that knowledge should be understood in terms of narrative and language game, as well as its corollary, that the aesthetic of postmodernism is the aesthetic of the sublime. Self-knowledge is a point at which writers can be said to be necessarily engaged with the sublime insofar as they are engaged in attempts at *self-expression*, or *self-representation*.

I have suggested that 'I' is a site of the kind of simultaneity of desire and impasse which attaches to the sublime. It is where, in language, the subject becomes 'in-visible'. It is even reminiscent of the strategy for subversion described by Kristeva as a 'solution to the Death of Man':

through the efforts of thought in language or precisely through the excesses of the languages whose very multiplicity is the only sign of life, one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void. This is the real cutting edge of dissidence.

(Quoted in Hekman 1990: 90).

Whether fictional or autobiographical, Hewett's writing displays few illusions about the possibilities of real self-representation or the capacities of language to serve that purpose. This is true even of *Wild Card*, the autobiographical text, and hence the one in which boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and narrative, self and other become most contentious. There, Hewett gives a different emphasis to her sense that writing not only fabricates, but is productive of 'selves'. As I show in my next chapter, she broadly grounds her work in a sense of the performative aspects of claiming a public voice, but her writing is never an act of self-effacement or social evasion.

Julie Ewington links postmodernism with sexual politics: the 'advent of the postmodern era has been structured in part by women's increasing participation in public arenas including culture' (1995: 119). She wonders 'whether the changes of the postmodern era have been beneficial to women' (1995: 119). Changes in definitions of achievement and artistic reputation have led to women's increasing participation in art and their impact shapes postmodernism to some extent. As Ewington writes: 'feminist (and feminine) creative action, and the evolution of new feminine modes of subjectivity, have barely begun *the poignant work of making the unimaginable*' (1995: 119, emphasis mine).

Hewett's writing participates in the 'poignant work' to which Ewington refers, but without implying the abandonment of agency which, I will show, troubles feminists. The fact that Hewett's texts contain socialist, feminist and postcolonial critiques necessitates a postmodernism which allows for a possibility of agency. I want to locate her writing, therefore, in complicated territory where the discourses

of postmodernism and feminism, and postmodernism and postcolonialism, may intercept each other. At this point, theories of the subject are contested for their possible effects on political action, since these discourses are sometimes seen to require a coherent subject for their cultural, political and social agendas. I connect Hewett's writing with an alternative view that a fractured, fabricated postmodern subject represents no necessary threat to commitments to change. To do so requires closer acknowledgment of this important difficulty in the interactions between postmodernism and political criticisms such as feminism. They produce an interface which concerns significant commitments to uncertainty in Hewett's writing, as my discussion of *Joan* will illustrate.

Repudiations of the authoritative subject have long been an aspect of Hewett's dissidence. However, her work raises a question of whether that commitment has involved the replacement of one kind of authoritative subject with another, herself. On this point, her commitments to *uncertainty* and moments in her work where the self remains a site of the unknown and of instability take on particular interest. In my view, claims to transcendence in Hewett's writing consistently lack the finality, substance, closure, or completion which infuse the transcendent subject of romanticism, which is in turn the version of the subject that lingers in modernism. Hewett has most usually been read in terms of these categories and has seen herself as belonging to them. There is another version of the subject in her work, however; the participative, performative, and inconclusive one summed up in her lines from 'The Labyrinth':

when I die will you make a flute out of my bones?

until then *my uncompleted self goes on*

accumulating the world (Collected Poems: 209, emphasis mine)

POSTMODERNISM/FEMINISM: POSSIBILITIES OF COMMON GROUND

Patricia Waugh (1992) proposes two dominant styles of postmodernism which she designates as 'radical fictionality' and 'radical situatedness'. Hewett's approaches to identity are traversed by both. The first recognises psychoanalytic theories of the self which inform postmodernism and give us constructed, divided selves. This is the impulse to which the phrase, self-as-construct refers. It is the 'uncompleted self', the self in process. The second registers the self 'accumulating the world'. Its emphasis is on the social connectedness and relationship important to feminism and postcolonialism.

Some feminist accounts of postmodernism doubt notions of an 'incoherent', 'attenuated' self which is able to step 'outside all its projects, that questions whether any of them has any value over any other', to quote Alison Assiter (1996: 92-3). However, there is disagreement over whether oppositional discourses such as feminism and postcolonialism necessarily depend upon a metaphysical, Cartesian subject because of their commitments to change. For some, feminist commitments to social and epistemological change can exist in a mutually fruitful relationship with postmodernism. When I ascribe a postmodern consciousness to Hewett, I assume that possibility, which Susan J. Hekman outlines:

Feminism and Postmodernism are the only contemporary theories that present a truly radical critique of the Enlightenment legacy of modernism. No other approaches on the contemporary intellectual scene offer a means

of displacing and transforming the masculinist epistemology of modernity.

This fact alone creates a bond between the two approaches. (1990: 189)

Postmodern feminism is mistrustful of critique which installs alternative doctrines or metanarratives. As Hekman notes, these are tensions among feminisms divided between a desire 'to deconstruct the phallocentrism of Enlightenment thought, a project that has much in common with postmodernism', and a desire 'to articulate a distinctively feminine voice that can oppose masculinist discourse' (1990: 186).

Joan illustrates Hewett's long held view that suspicion of certainty, and of notions such as objectivity, are emancipatory impulses. It demonstrates that she subscribes to a view that political struggle which is grounded in certainty and a belief in objective truth undermines the possibilities of its own project. The Subject operating in Hewett's writing is the one defined by Hekman as 'an entity that is constituted by discourses but is also capable of resistance to that constitution' (1990: 189). It is not the depleted, politically incapacitated subject to which Assiter suggests that postmodernism confines us.

This has implications for the ethical and moral commitments of Hewett's work, in which the ingredient of resistance has been described as a continually widening 'impatience with limits' (Bennett 1995: 14). In that impatience there are signs of the "wild" — autonomous, obstreperous and uncontrolled — sources of moral judgement' which Bauman (1993: 12) argues are reactivated by postmodern opposition to modernity's legislative moral mindset. These sources are the very impulse which modernity sought to smother. According to Bauman, postmodernism replaces a tendency to 'substitute heteronomous, enforced-from-

the-outside, ethical rules for the autonomous responsibility of the moral self', and as he suggests, 'that means nothing less than the incapacitation, even destruction, of the moral self' (1993: 12).

Moral and ethical dimensions of debates about modernism and postmodernism are important to my reading of identity in Hewett's writing. I agree with Waugh that it is reductive to see the subject of postmodernism as '*simply* a bundle of competing language games, *utterly* constructed through language and *totally* devoid of agency' (1992: 65, emphases mine). Such assertions of certainty are the problem. Like Hekman, Waugh sees no necessary collapse of commitment in the instabilities of identity which postmodern thought addresses. She is emphatic about the possibility of a postmodernism which recognises that 'as one writes the self one's self is similarly written' (1992: 65). That interpretation of the complexities at stake is consonant with Hewett's notion of writing and being written in 'The Labyrinth'. The sentiment is reiterated continually, suggesting an accretion of selves and a sense of gathering conflicts and dialogues between them. Hewett puts it another way in 'Shape-Changers':

it is the myth of ourselves

& only just beginning (Collected Poems 1995: 306).

With many of Hewett's texts, not least *The Toucher*, as I have argued, beginnings do not have endings as their necessary corollaries. In the wake of beginnings can come the unimaginable. As I will show, these factors are at work in Hewett's engagement with the narrative of Joan of Arc. The question of what is and is not

imaginable is central to the discourse on the sublime. The feminine sublime, as a commitment to uncertainty, dominates the text.

JOAN: POSITIONING THE TEXT

The fact that feminist and postmodern insights may coexist without mandating a reconciliation of their incommensurabilities is reflected throughout Hewett's writing in a tolerance for incompatibilities, ambiguities and ambivalences. As Linda Hutcheon suggests: 'Postmodern art is not so much ambiguous as it is doubled and contradictory' (1988: 119). The sense of agency on which Hewett's social critique depends reflects the insight that one can only contest from within insofar as 'one is always implicated in the values one chooses to challenge', as Waugh puts it (1992: 33). Hewett often puts in place forms of self-surveillance which apply this difficulty. For example, in a move which insisted on the contemporary materiality of the text, members of the audience of *Joan* (1975) were confronted with their own likely complicities with the moral frameworks used to persecute Joan of Arc, by being incorporated into the performance as revellers at her burning. This was a strategy for interrogating the conviction with which, as an audience, they had just rejected the social structures giving rise to that persecution. Whilst there are 'complicities' in Hewett's writing with aesthetic and ethical structures critiqued by postmodernism, these are also challenged. The challenges are the focus of my reading of *Joan*. I do not strictly categorise the play in relation to modernism, or postmodernism, but want to recognise its resistances to the very possibility of categorical clarity. It seems to me that this is

its pivotal argument.

In *Joan*, Hewett expresses doubt about epistemological, historical, cultural and spiritual certainties. The feminine sublime is evident in her method of playing comedy and tragedy off against each other, and more obvious in her use of superstition as a way of legitimising doubt. Superstition operates as a boundary discourse between religious and scientific 'unknowns'. Joan's witchcraft is formulated as knowledge. Even when it is positioned as the text's privileged discourse, it is grounded in Joan's convictions that all knowledges are limited. Witchcraft nominates an argument for inclusive rather than exclusive thinking and for the emancipation of the imagination which that might represent in an opposition between imagination and reason. In the representation of Joan as a subject suspended in the act of imagining, a subject poised towards the inexplicable, lie the play's connections with the feminine sublime.

I approach *Joan's* postmodern resonances from various vantage points, then. The text exemplifies the fictional construction of an historical subject in which History is revised as history. The figure of Joan exemplifies decisive and playful fragmentations of character which comprise an appraisal of the metaphysical subject. In turn, she is a vehicle for proposing a form of postmodern uncertainty which clings to a basis for political action.

JOAN AS A CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE

Witch Joan: What about the private judgments of people of genius?

Cauchon: That's a ... burning question. (*Joan: Act Two*)

Cauchon: [Enthusiastically] ...The divided self — yes, I do see her amongst nettles and buttercups. (*Joan: Act Two*)

These two quotations are germane to the play's apparent project: a defence of personal genius. That defence rests upon the intactness of the individual's subjectivity and calls to account definitions of madness which actually serve to keep non-conformism at bay and maintain a questionable status quo. The play refuses to endorse the rationalist arguments for which the intellectual priest, Cauchon, is its vehicle. The allocation of enthusiasm for theories of a divided subject to Cauchon, therefore, suggests Hewett's lack of confidence in the concept. The authoritative voice is Witch Joan's, so the fact that she seems to subscribe to a version of subjectivity which might best be described as liberal humanist and Cartesian (shorthand for a theory of human subjectivity opposed to postmodern uncertainties), suggests that this theory underpins the play. However, in the debate between Witch Joan and Cauchon, the play's core, both positions are destabilised. The account of subjectivity is multiple, finally, and this division of opinion is not left intact.

Hewett's fractured and composite Joan is a victim of the powerful discourses of psychiatry, militarism, religion and politics, which can all be traced to epistemological dependencies on Enlightenment thought. They are presented as authoritarian, self-legitimising discourses in tension with each other over the intellectual terrain and vying for power. The struggle is played out over the identity and control of *an individual*.

As a ludic recovery of the historical Joan of Arc, the play is aligned with

descriptions of the past 'in which knowledge is the realm of the imagination', as Pybus remarks (1996: 13), and in which a commitment to imaginatively recovered histories dominates. Joan's persecution is framed as an effect of widely dispersed institutional capacities to condemn individuals in the exercise of power. The willingness to persecute is due, in part, to the centrality of a metaphysical conception of the subject which supposes the proper human self to be coherent and self-determining and which therefore insists on particular modes of accountability. The play suggests that this supposition may have the grim social consequences of which Joan's death is metonymic. The body — its death — sets a limit to metaphysical play, but only after Joan has been articulated through a kind of serial metempsychosis in which each 'new' body is her 'own'. In these respects, *Joan* can comfortably be read as a tracing of what Anna Gibbs describes as 'ways in which formations of power-knowledge produce different kinds of selves and hence possible modes of resistance to the policing of identities' (1995: 140).

The power-knowledge grid is refracted through Witch Joan's ability to 'see through' the authorities. Their transparency is key. That it is as a Witch that Joan imparts the views endorsed by the text, positions the voice of critique beyond sanctioned and dominant versions of knowledge. It implies that, by their resistances, critics such as Joan place themselves outside hegemonic discourses. The play privileges critiques which arise from sites of illegitimacy, and aligns Witch Joan, as its ethical subject, with 'the insane'. She is both outside the law and outside reason as these are defined by, and define, those who subscribe to the prevailing codes. The contest between Cauchon and Joan compares with what

Bauman describes as a significant tension between postmodernity and modernity's 'mistrust of human spontaneity, of drives, impulses and inclinations resistant to prediction and rational justification', which gives way in postmodernism to 'mistrust of unemotional, calculating reason' (1993: 33).

As a signifier of mutation and difference, Joan is the chief means by which the play leans away from modernist dependence on reason and simultaneously drains notions of the unified subject of substance. This happens in several ways. At different moments she is in the positions of the feminine, masculine and androgyne; Joan is mystic, heretic and sceptic; she occupies the poles of sanity/insanity, lunacy/reason and positions in between.

Onstage, Joan has four avatars, each of which sustains her mythic status. The cast list reads:

Joan Lark: [*Called Joan The Peasant*] The peasant visionary

Joan the Soldier: Militant, masculine, strong-minded

Joan the Witch: [*Called 'the mad'*] A strange mixture of all the

Joans...Sometimes demented, sometimes strongly intellectual.

Joan the Saint: An unreal and holy icon.

This multiplicity is enhanced by having the action begin with Charlie (the Dauphin) 'doll-making' with jigsaw pieces from which he constructs effigies of these versions of Joan. They circulate through the play as iconic representations of her voices and pluralise her even further. Combined with the masking of other characters, this sets in place a conjunction between centrifugal multiple Joan subjectivities, marked not least by her 'polymorphism', and a firm dualism which suggests that a contrasting centripetal model of the subject is also at work. This

'cohabitation of the many' is a characteristic of postmodern thought (Lovibond 1994: 75). By it, the play exhibits suspicion 'of the ideological values of organic unity' without retreating into nostalgia for stability which, as Lovibond suggests, may lead to re-enclosure 'within an arbitrarily "normal" mode of cognition' (1994: 75). Hewett's text works on a boundary which Lovibond connects to subjectivity when she outlines a risk in postmodern critique:

... we may overestimate the value of order and so establish within ourselves the psychological equivalent of a dictatorship; but then the countervailing risk that we may romanticize the fragmented, decentred condition by representing it as a force for social change when, really, it would be more accurately regarded as a manifestation of post-political apathy — and the alternative, the (severe, 'puritanical') attempt to form a fixed purpose and act on it, as the real threat to existing power structures.

(Lovibond 1994: 74-5)

As early as the writing of *Joan*, Hewett subscribed to a version of the fragmented subject and wished to critique views of human subjects as coherent, autonomous individuals able to exercise sovereign power over their social and historical contexts. She contrives a subject who is thoroughly embedded in history and is, in effect, a question about how we think we can either know or represent the past with any certainty. The mode of that character's construction is related to Hutcheon's assertions that postmodernism

establishes, differentiates and ... disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past. It both installs and then subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity; it both asserts and is capable of shattering 'the unity of man's being through which it was

thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past'.

(1988: 118, quoting Foucault 1977: 153)

The question of how to deal with the play's invitations to comprehend Joan in terms of her own insistences on individualism is a question to which I turn later in the chapter. These are destabilised by the kind of 'shattering' described here, through which the play enunciates everything it has to say about the historical figure.

Certainty itself is the target of much of the text's critical content:

Witch Joan: And you're bigots, more priestly than the priests.

Prof. Crock:[*Indignant*] We're enlightened men of science. We stand for toleration and light.

Witch Joan: Infallible judges, infallible Parliaments, you're all infallible, aren't you? (*Joan: Act One*)

Witch Joan suggests the ubiquitousness of belief in infallibility when she mocks obvious fractures in claims to ahistorical knowledge made by those who have power over her: 'So the doctors have succeeded the priests, but they have no souls to be damned', she declares (*Act One*).

There is no retreat into a simplistic opposition between Joan and a secure edifice of knowledge, however. On the side of authoritative discourse, the play opposes Professors Crock and Cauchon — zealot and sceptic, believer and agnostic, exponent and critic, faith and reason — and shows that, despite their differences, each is finally submissive to certitude itself. Where Crock and the Doctors exemplify compliance with the dominant epistemological regime and its various methodologies, Cauchon encapsulates self-interested, self-satisfied

resistance. Both are coercive. Cauchon's engagement of Joan in *reasonable* debate is a methodology geared towards the same end — her submission — which, when he does not achieve it, leaves him entrenched in simplistic and debased opposition: 'anti-clerical, anti-mystic and anti-Joan' (Act Two).

Intellectual opportunism and the fragilities of certitude are ironised when both sides resort, blindly, to Joan's own position and even to the language of her argument, to which they give a rather different value when it issues from their own mouths:

Prof Crock: You must not keep raising objections.

Doctor. We've proceeded according to the rules, and who knows, there may be a miracle. She may come out of it saner than she went in. How can we ever know? It's always such a mystery.

Cauchon: [*Gloomily*] That's true. (Act Two)

The play suggests that the status of *uncertainty* depends upon a speaker's place in the establishment. What has been taken by the authorities to signify superstitiousness, insanity and perversity in Joan, is conversely transformed into an attitude of enquiry. The unknown towards which the establishment sees itself as poised, is seen as a legitimate object of desire and endeavour. By contrast, they position Joan's recourse to the mysterious as mere failure of, and resistance to, reason. In their eyes, her insinuations on the unknown are illegitimate, improper and intellectually empty.

In this way, the discourses of science and religion are presented as supporting a bilateral picture of knowledge and the nexus between that picture and power is scrutinised. Joan's disempowerment is attached to a question of her access to

meaningful utterance. It lies not in *what* she says, but in her (in)capacities to 'make her presence felt' in speech, and the (im)possibility of being heard within a regime of meaning-making which uses the very same signifier to contrasting ends, depending upon the speaker's relation to the (symbolic) order. As the site of resistance 'beyond', or an 'other' view, Joan occupies the feminine. Again, however, the text resists the attractions of binarism, never attributing the difference of view to her femaleness, as the negative positioning of the nurses and Sister Skull within the dominant discourse demonstrates. Rather, Joan's exteriority to the categories by means of which those in power seek to make sense — not least of her-self — locates her in the feminine. Between the incapacities of language to make the self fully 'present' in the world, and the incapacities of the establishment to 'read' her, Joan is composed as a complex and paradoxical identity.

Self-definition eludes her as much as it eludes her opposition:

Witch Joan: I'm neither an imposter nor a lunatic. It's true that I'm mad, not half mad or a quarter mad, but wholly mad, a secretary of angels. I see what you do not see. The world is full of mystery.

Doctor 3: Condemned out of her own mouth.

Cauchon: [*Smiling*] I think you're teasing us Joan. You're just a strong-minded country girl with a bit of a bee in her bonnet.

Witch Joan: It's true I'm a woman of policy, a realist. I'm a peasant, hard-headed, practical. I never expected cities to fall at the sound of my trumpet. (Act Two)

When doctors administering shock treatment to 'cure' Joan of her mysticism become aware of having caused her death, their self-contradiction and self-

aggrandisement are explicit and heavily ironised, not least by the euphemisms in which they couch their appraisals of the treatment:

Doctor 1: All precautions were taken.

Doctor 2: These accidents are unfortunate.

Doctor 3: Accidents do occur in enlightened communities. (Act Two)

Hewett contemporises the critique by this correspondence between witch-burning and electric shock treatment. The play asserts that, whilst mechanisms of medical practice may change, questionable practices continually remain which are attributable to rationalism.² Joan's fate emerges as an effect of the claims of science and religion to ahistorical knowledge, claims robustly questioned within the rubric of postmodernism. Not least, as Assiter expresses it, for the ways in which 'the Cogito and its reasoning powers ... provide the foundation for the discourse of the human sciences, which "objectify" "the subject"' (1996: 74). Joan is overwhelmed by a world view in which distinctions between subject/object, us/them, good/evil, friend/enemy, sanity/insanity, masculine/feminine are regarded as dependable.

The last should be stressed since the play is emphatic about it, employing Joan's cross-dressing to heightened effect. Hewett destabilises such oppositions, not for the purpose of extracting a 'virtuous', 'victimised' and somehow 'real' Joan from historical information, but to show that subjects are produced within discontinuous and diverse contexts of power, with which they negotiate and which are historically contingent. At the same time, the text expresses the collateral view of interrogation and medical intervention between mediaeval and modern institutional practices that makes the 'relationship between then and now ...

analogous and proportional, not direct'; this, as Caroline Bynum argues, is the most persuasive way to represent remote periods and events:

First, if we situate our own categories in the context of our own politics, we must situate those of the Middle Ages in theirs.... [T]he past is seldom usefully examined by assuming that its specific questions or their settings are the same as those of the present. (1995: 29)

Hewett does not make that mistake. In *Joan*, she achieves an approximation of Bynum's injunction. The categories of the present are not simply imposed on the past. Theatrical rambunctiousness notwithstanding, the present is cautiously situated among the past's categories in ways which are geared towards recognising the inherited nature of the discourses in question. As Bynum writes: 'the conversation about nature and difference, about individuality and identity ... has roots in centuries of debate' (1995: 30).

In the main, Witch Joan laughs at presumptions of certitude and makes interceptions between discourses such as those wishing to further dialogue between feminism and postmodernism might make. For example, she narrativises her life in the language of literary genres: 'Joan of Arc ... the romance of her rise, the tragedy of her burning, and the comedy of posterity trying to make amends' (46). The four Joans together place the story in religious discourse with a parodic, but literal, invocation of 'the name of the father':

Four Joans: [*Chant*] *Joan*... beautified, canonized, blessed saint and virgin, suffered under Charlie the Flasher, crucified by Peter Cauchon, dead and buried in Rouen, rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven, wherein she sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven

and Earth. From thence she shall come to judge the quick and the dead....

(Act Two)

In such ways, Joan is recognisable as both the 'radically situated' and 'radically fictionalised' subject of Waugh's description. History is performed here, and the audience incorporated in ways which insist on representations of Joan of Arc as historiographical and provisional. In this sense, the play is a question about representation, and with that question comes its use of the sublime.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the sublime is present

when representation comes to know itself to be such and comes *to present itself* as such (that is, also to criticize, distance, deconstruct, or destroy itself) a moment which constitutes the history of modern art and thought, it takes up at unknown cost a question — at once traditional and unheard of — of presentation.

The question of the sublime is passed on and down to us as the question of presentation. (1993: 2)

As Nancy adds, 'the question of presentation is the question of what is at play at the limit of the essence' (1993: 2). These are the questions which circulate throughout the play.

Insofar as Truth is at stake, and access to it, knowledge is reconfigured to equate with Joan's *uncertainties*. In her identity as peasant, she makes this clear: 'sometimes... there came to me... a great multitude of... things...' (Act One).

Identity is related to this:

Joan: I had a Mission. I had a ... Vocation.

Three Joan Voices: To do what?

Peasant Joan: Why... to ... *be*. (Act One)

Against a background of conflicting discourses, blind to their own partiality, Hewett places a composite Joan whose own commitment, finally, is to 'the *will* to believe' (Act Two, emphasis mine), and who simultaneously insists on the world being 'full of mystery' (Act Two). In this way, an ethics of *not knowing* is affirmed.

Postmodern destabilisations of inherited notions of truth have been seen to lead to nihilism. This is the basis of the concerns among feminist and postcolonial critics outlined earlier. Hewett's play belongs among texts which move in the alternative direction, challenging Truth and History, but proposing the fruitfulness of proliferations of truths, histories, and knowledges. In *Joan*, attention to diversity, difference and multiplicity, suggests Hewett's interest in what might lie 'beyond' authoritative bodies of knowledge. Joan's version of knowledge places the unknowability of things at its centre. Her insistences, in response to her inquisitors, are on voices, and the 'mystery' which attaches to them. There is more to this than a reiteration of traditional forms of religious conviction, or mysticism.

Joan represents what Freeman describes as:

the mark [of] a trauma that exceeds language, it simultaneously impels and disables symbolization, and its effect is that we can never relinquish the attempt to find words for some of the unspeakable things that remain unspoken. (1995: 116)

Joan's adversaries have rightly identified her questioning attitude as different from theirs. Where, for them, uncertainty is a moment of intellectual impoverishment in which they see themselves poised towards knowledge, for

Joan, it is a shifting site in which the subject necessarily remains.

MASKS AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Hewett favours a plural, multiple, unstable, unrepresentable identity in this text, and understands it in terms of complexities and difficulties of 'self-expression'. The theatrical device of surrounding Joan with masked characters indicates an engagement with subjectivity and dramatises the commitment to the relativity of knowledge. As Cauchon says to Witch Joan: 'This is no old Jeanne d'Arc melodrama' (Act Two).

The script directs that Professor Crock, Sister Skull, the Clerk of Courts, and all nurses and doctors 'wear smiling masks on the back of their heads' and are 'thus presented as two-faced, Janus-faced' (*Joan*, 'The Costumes': 64). The masks are a dramatic convention which makes explicit, Brechtian fashion, the fact that the audience is in the presence of a narrative which understands itself to be mediating, not reflecting, reality. They add a visual dimension to the scrutiny of definitions of sanity and contribute to the play's exposure of their institutional basis. These Janus-faces add layers of complexity to the engagement with subjectivity and relate it to moral responsibility.

They do so in more than one way. Eagleton's study of Benjamin's work on Brecht clarifies how such a politics may be expressed in drama: 'fragmented, device-baring, non-hierarchical, shock-producing; theatre as dispersed, gear-switching and dialectical, ostentatious and arbitrary yet densely encoded' (1981: 23). There is a suggestive comparison between what Hewett attempts in *Joan* and

this theatrical practice. A more subtle point of comparison, however, is that Hewett has managed, as Eagleton suggests Brecht did, to produce such theatre 'and be non-melancholic into the bargain' (Eagleton 1981: 23-4). The playful, carnivalistic style of the critique deflects nostalgia.

Barthes recalls that in Greek tragedy masks 'had a chthonic origin, to distort, to alienate the voice, to make it come from somewhere under the earth' (1978: 115). The masked figures in *Joan* critically allude to this tradition. Their 'magical function', as Barthes calls it, is to expose a site of dissimulation and hence an ethical evasion (1978: 115).

In the first place, the masks in *Joan* reflect the wider considerations of authorial self-representation alluded to earlier. Nicholls' argument that modernist writers elaborated 'masks of the self' to distance their social contexts is relevant here. As he suggests, the strategy 'cultivate[s] an essentially closed model of the self' (1995: 4). Diversity in Hewett's use of masks distances her from such strategies. In *Joan*, the model of the subject to which the voices of infallibility adhere, and of which they are representations, is precisely dependent on such a closed model of the self and implicitly seen, in turn, to be symptomatic of their authoritarianism. In general, Hewett's use of effigies, masks and dolls in the dramas critiques the very evasions which Nicholls identifies as a lingering 'symptom' of modernism, and from which she is also distancing herself by implication. Rather than being symptomatic of a desire for distance from the world, Hewett uses such strategies self-reflexively, installing and critiquing them and the version of subjectivity on which they depend. In this case, by assigning

these evasive, distancing masking strategies to the voices of 'infallibility' — priests, doctors — she exposes the connection with authoritarianism and rejects them for it. Implied is a desire to reject the view of subjectivity on which such a 'self defence' rests. Rather, it indicates a 'seeing through' them.

Aside from being connected with strategies for avoiding self-disclosure, the device of masking may also be linked to a writer's imaginative focalising through a figure of history and myth, such as Hewett attempts in *Joan*. The duplicity of the reviled masked figures inflects the writing away from this mode of relationship with the world. Insofar as it does, it moves my own discussion towards Hewett's autobiography, *Wild Card*, links it with her poetry, and returns me to the questions raised by Strauss's recognition that one of Hewett's 'ongoing projects' has been to construct 'a legendary self' (1995: 59). First, however, I want to recognise that masking devices may conversely reduce the gap between reader and writer.

Hewett's specifying of dualism with respect to these masks furthers the play's questioning of models of identity and directs attention to forms of self-concealment, self-delusion, hypocrisy and posturing. They provide a layer of reference to capacities for dissimulation, defined in psychiatry as 'the ability or the tendency to appear mentally normal when actually suffering from disorder: a characteristic of the paranoid' (Barnhart and Stein, 1967: 879), and so to the diagnosis of Joan. Dualism stands in particular relation to definitions of normalcy and the opposition between sanity and insanity which are among the play's ideological targets. This is the play's second strategy for multiplying the model of

identity and it does not operate according to the same principles. The manifold Joan, by comparison, is constructed around an internal splitting signified by her voices. That is, the play distinguishes between, and employs, both multiple and dual constructions of identity. Since this relates specifically to subjectivity, the combination is worth closer examination.

In *A Lover's Discourse* (1978), Barthes makes suggestive references to madness. To use his terms is to see Joan's transgressions as being of an order which frighten a culture and are not recuperable by it, at least not in the way that the 'craziness' of the amorous subject is for Barthes (1978: 120-1). Distinguishing between kinds of madness, Barthes places that madness within range of ordinary understanding: 'it is in the amorous state that certain rational subjects suddenly realize that madness is very close at hand, quite possible' (120-121). Such presumption of empathy is one way in which Hewett's play lays claim to its audience's allegiances. Joan represents an alienation more extreme than the 'impoverished, incomplete, *metaphorical* madness' of Barthes' lover, however. The following phrases, all Barthes', suggest the difference. Joan's is no 'mere irrationality' and she is undoubtedly more than 'simply unreasonable', since she dies. She does 'communicate with the supernatural' and makes explicit claims to having 'something of the sacred' in her, which is how Barthes exemplifies the visible madness against which he compares the 'dim' irrationality of his amorous subject (1978: 120). However, he reminds: 'For a hundred years, [literary] madness has been thought to consist in Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*"'. He uses the

example to show how, in literature, madness is pervasively presented as 'an experience of depersonalization' (121).³ Against this background, Barthes reflects upon shifts in the subjectivity of the lover, who has quite literally, and by contrast, 'become a *subject*: *I am not someone else ... I am indefectibly myself, and it is in this that I am mad: I am mad because I consist*' (121).

Hewett shifts her consideration of madness away from science and medicine into the discourses of love and literature. Joan's 'I am not myself' (13) is not merely an example of the kind of depersonalization which Barthes notices in accounts of madness, but is also an articulation of a multiplicity which *consists*. Her statement should be read in relation to her other declaration: 'my voices are myself' (44), which signifies differently and effects a decisive movement away from the paradigm of a unified subject out of which the first utterance may appear to operate. The two models are not synonymous, but here they are coterminous and used to insist on a compound plurality which allows for the *con*-sistence of subjectivity and compares with the site of angst for Barthes' lover.

Barthes' poetic approach to the subject shows that connections made between and within discourses illuminate definitions of madness, showing them to be suggestive for thinking about subjectivity. Hewett's critical account of madness operates in a similar oppositional vein in the interplay between sanity and sainthood. In her text, duality and multiplicity circulate against this background and the variations which coexist within the play are significant.

When asked about the identities of her voices, Joan the peasant refers to them

as Saint Joan, Saint Joan and Saint Joan (Act One). 'I am not myself. I move by my voices', she says (Act One). And although the voices 'appear to give me orders', 'never lie', 'speak in riddles', and sometimes advise reluctantly (Act One), the play resists externalising them. They are all aspects of the same woman:

Witch Joan: [*Proudly*] I come from Domremy. I conquered Orleans and
led my Dauphin to be crowned at Rheims. My voices brought me.

Doctors and Nurses: *Your voices!*

Cauchon: What voices, Joan?

Witch Joan: My Voices are Myself. There are four of us.

(*Joan: Act Two*)

This is a dramatic reaching towards possibilities more multiple than a straightforward model of dissimulation or delusion would suggest. Insofar as she is constructed around a metaphoric splitting of the mind which gives us a subject segmented into functions, Joan is indicative of the conceptual link between *schizophrenic* multiplicities and postmodernism, rather than the modernist link with *paranoia* and dualism.⁴ Crock and the medical establishment diagnose her as a sufferer of paranoia and dismiss her as merely deluded (Act Two). However, it is explicitly to their version of insanity and their assessment of Joan's condition that the play objects. Instead, it incorporates both characterisation which leans towards multiplicity and openness and theatrical devices which illustrate Nicholls' 'closed model of the self' — the paradigm on which a diagnosis of paranoia traditionally rests.

Elizabeth Wright explains the distinction. The schizophrenic (postmodern) pole, she says, is marked by 'multiplicity, proliferation, becoming, flowing, a

breaking of boundaries, and is constituted by partial objects, fragments of experience, memory and feeling, linked in chance and unexpected ways' (1984: 164). This is different from the paranoiac (modernist) pole which is marked instead by 'unifying procedures' and a 'search for order, similarity, wholeness, assuming identity and completeness of objects and selves within conforming constraints and recognized limits' (Wright 1984: 164). The latter resembles the conceptual framework from within which both Crock and Cauchon address Joan, the position which the play subverts by also exhibiting the textual play which marks a postmodern text. In all, it resists coherence. Joan's 'schizophrenia' is stacked up against a dubious medical establishment's own 'paranoia', by undermining their epistemological dependencies and making them objects of their own diagnosis, in a 'physician heal thyself' manoeuvre.

By locating the schizophrenic pole in the character of Joan, the play favours postmodern texts which, as Wright argues, lean in that direction. It distinguishes between masks of the self which operate as a site of retreat and dissimulation, and masks of the self which refer us to difficulties of self definition and identity and seek to foreground plurality and constructedness.

Nicholls identifies 'aesthetic form and ironic tone [as] necessary *defences* against the other' in modernism, where he recognises a dependence on 'absolute otherness to protect the poet's self from the full recognition of identity with other people' (1995: 4). That retreat into illusory otherness contrasts with what is to be found in Hewett's work. Since the model of the self for which she strives is marked rather by a desire for connection and a recognition of connectedness and

relationship, the subject/object boundary is scrutinised and based on contingent theoretical premises, rather than being merely introspectively examined, or unreflectively shored up. This continual admission of contingency aligns her with postmodernism.

CONTINGENT CERTAINTIES

Joan's death has ethical implications which relate to relativism, contingency, and uncertainty. The question arises of whether the fact of her martyrdom need necessarily mean that she represents an insistence on absolute value and universal truth, a related claim in which modernism is also anchored, as the following quotation from Susan Suleiman illustrates. Hewett's play clearly commits to an ethical position and Joan's is a voice of principled opposition, facts which return us to the controversy over whether it is possible to theorise an ethical postmodern subjectivity which provides a basis for political action. As Suleiman phrases the question, the persistence of which she finds 'astonishing' (and I agree): 'is it possible to argue for a political postmodernist praxis' (1994: 230) in a context which asserts that 'postmodernist thought has no moral foundation' and 'no firm epistemological ground' (231). Suleiman lays out the ground of the argument:

The universalist (or, if you will, modernist) claim is that only by ascribing universal validity to one's ethical beliefs is one able to act ethically. A postmodernist ethics refuses to take that step, arguing that such ascriptions merely elevate one set of contingent beliefs to 'universal' status and that too many horrors have been inflicted by some human beings in the name of *their* universal values.... [W]ithout claiming anything as grand as a general unifying theory, one must consider a postmodernist conception of

the self to have public relevance. (1994: 231-33)

Suleiman subscribes to arguments for the possibility of political committedness in postmodern irony and the contingency, rather than disappearance, of conscience.⁵ She shares Richard Rorty's conclusion that, from within a postmodern view, 'belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by ... contingent historical circumstances' (1989: 189). Such arguments as these by Suleiman and Rorty conspicuously resemble Hewett's in *Joan*.

It is clear that several critiques of 'grand narratives' are at work in this play and comprise possibly its central affinity with postmodernism. The historical events to which the play refers are presented as a narrative of which Joan herself is always already in possession. Her prescience, which is an effect of her prior knowledge, renders her both object and subject of history. It also ironises her relationship with the audience, who are assumed to be in likely prior possession of the substance of the narrative, such is its auratic status. In this sense, mythic elements serve to question and reinscribe an historical situation. Taking his cue from Benjamin, Eagleton describes the usefulness of this conjunction: 'What is transmitted by tradition is not "things", and least of all "monuments", but "situations"'. He adds: 'tradition is the practice of ceaselessly excavating, safeguarding, violating, discarding and reinscribing the past' (1981: 59). This is the kind of participation in tradition for which Hewett aims in *Joan*. The meaning she gives to history compares with how it is understood in Brechtian epic theatre: 'history is not a fair copy but a palimpsest, whose deleted layers must be thrust to

light, written together in their episodic rhythms rather than repressed to unruptured narrative' (Eagleton 1981: 59).

Hewett shares among the Joans a submission to imminent death in which there are explicit and constant signals of a comparison with Gospel accounts of Christ's vigil in Gethsemane and subsequent self-sacrifice, a move which also narrativises weighty Christian dogma. Peasant Joan, promised Paradise instead of Rheims says: 'I listen and I hear and I cry, yes, yes, I am ready' (Act Two). Soldier Joan's Entry into Orleans parodies Christ's into Jerusalem. Witch Joan declares: 'It's done then, my time's nearly up. You'll sell me soon, Charlie. I'll be sold like Jesus' (Act Two). This biblical allusiveness radicalises the play's critique of religious discourse and heightens the events to which Joan is subjected, by imagining her as a similarly knowing participant in the narrative in which she and the reluctant Dauphin are caught up:

Soldier Joan: Look behind you Charlie, we've got priests with their
cassocks tucked up to their knees, cattle, sheep and pigs all
marching with us. We can't turn back now.

Charlie: I don't want to come.

Soldier Joan: But you've got no choice, poor lad, you've been selected.

Better come quietly. (Act Two)

Joan's task is to induce the (parodic) Dauphin, or Charlie the Flasher, to participate with her in the historical drama, for which they are necessary ingredients. Both are characterised in ways which dramatically distance them from serious historical accounts of Joan of Arc. Nevertheless, these are given presence in Hewett's text in an initiating summary by the trial clerk at the inception of the

play-within-the-play that is the trial. The embedded reminder of the historicised version is enough to galvanise Hewett's critique and, at the same time, ties it to the authority of the traditional accounts: 'Joan of Arc, a village girl, burnt for heresy, witchcraft, sorcery, rehabilitated 1456, called Venerable 1904, declared Blessed 1908, canonized a saint 1920' (Act One).

In Hewett's version, events are played out analeptically within the structure of a medicalised trial. The criteria and methods, by which both Joan's sanity and sainthood are measured, place, by implication, science and religion and their accompanying institutions on trial for a contemporary audience. As I have said, the transposition of Joan's persecution into electric shock treatment entails the text in a critique of psychiatry as well as religion. The temporal arrangement of events calls to mind Kristeva's assertion that '[a]ny thought mastering the subject is mystical: all that exists is the field of practice where, through his expenditure, the subject can be anticipated in an always anterior future' (1984: 215).

Hutcheon has coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' (1988) to describe texts which transform History into histories and rewrite it from positions and in voices which insist on its retelling. To the boundaries being patrolled in Hewett's play, this adds those between fiction and history. Shared conventions between historiography and narrative fiction, Hutcheon argues, construct an area of dangerous necessity: such 'problematizing of the nature of historical knowledge ... points *both to the need to separate and to the danger of separating* fiction and history as narrative genres' (1988: 111, emphasis mine). That is, there is no comfortable certainty here either. As with the complex 'juggling act' of the desire

to reject the metaphysical subject and the apparent requirement for agency of the political commitments of feminism and postcolonialism, so Hutcheon points to this other postmodern tension, which drives Hewett's consideration of Joan of Arc and is a bridge between subjectivity and the subjectiveness of history.

Since Witch Joan's ideas of truth are endorsed in the text, it is important to try to arrive at some sense of them. Once again, the matter of individualism and whether or not Joan, finally, is an example of Hewett's own exclusive commitment to it arises.

Bennett acknowledges a popular view that Hewett retreats into individualism, a matter which I examine in the context of *Wild Card* in Chapter Three. He refers to Hewett having been seen by 'some communitarian social reformers' to 'cop-out', to 'retreat to an allegedly outmoded individualism and liberal humanist beliefs' (1995:13). This would be one way of reading Witch Joan's conversation with Cauchon, for example, in the following exchange which both relates to this question and returns this discussion to my initial remarks on the play:

Cauchon: I do have a sense of the value of originality, Joan. Believe me.

Individually (sic), even eccentricity can be ... important. And saviours can be mistaken for lunatics, or blasphemers.

Witch Joan: But you have no place for free-thinkers here. You refuse me.

You refuse me ... contemptuously. And if I don't recant I'll stay in a dungeon all the rest of my life.

Cauchon: You have such ... enormous pretensions Joan.

Witch Joan: Can you give me any reasons for your orders?

Cauchon: Yes, I can.

Witch Joan: But I don't understand your reasons when you give them.

What about the private judgments of people of genius?

Cauchon: [*Dryly*] That's a ... burning question. (Act Two)

This is a pivotal moment in the central debate of the play between the rationalist, Cauchon, and the Mystic/Witch, Joan. Their debate enacts the tension between reason and imagination, in which Joan occupies the position of the latter with all that attaches to it of desire and excess. In this respect, her views align more closely with postmodern critiques of Enlightenment thinking than with a reinstatement of 'obsolete thinking' — Cauchon's interpretation of her position. Cauchon's views are compromised by his sexual agenda, as well as his position in the discourses which are the target of the play's critique. The obsolescence to which he connects Joan equates with 'the feminine', insofar as the feminine is the site of difference, particularly within the framework of knowledge to which he subscribes: 'She is subtle with a woman's subtlety', he claims, in an attempt to convert the scientist, Crock, to his view (Act Two). His explanation of Joan's Voices follows: 'You made us see them, Joan. You have a great gift of the imagination. Your problem is to differentiate between fantasy and reality' (Act Two). It is significant, then, that Cauchon's own paradigm of knowledge is obsolescent and that, in another bid for *uncertainty*, Hewett offers the signifier, Witch, as alternative. The connection is also made by this means between evaluations of the feminine and mediaeval witch burnings, and it aligns Cauchon/Reason with the values which gave rise to them.

When Cauchon asks Witch Joan for her definition of sainthood, she replies:

Witch Joan: A Saint is a person of heroic virtue, whose private judgment
is ... privileged.

Cauchon: You believe in the supremacy of private judgments. I cannot.

Society must draw the line somewhere between allowable conduct and ... insanity. (Act Two)

Thus the play focuses explicitly on a question about the stability of boundaries between sane and insane, proper and improper and relates them to excess. Cauchon's definitions are geared towards containment and reminiscent of the relationship between imagination and reason in theories of the sublime.

Cauchon differs from his colleagues in his assessment of Joan, nevertheless. For him, she is 'Remarkable! Astonishing!'. He resists their formulaic dismissals robustly:

Doctor 1: She is mentally defective.

Cauchon: No, mentally *excessive*. She has such an *appetite for knowledge and power* I cannot treat her as an illiterate. (Act Two, emphasis mine)

Clearly, the question of individual sovereignty is central to the dialogue between Joan and Cauchon. At times, as above, Joan seems to adhere to the Cartesian position and her desire seems to be poised in the very directions with which I have been asserting that she is in tension. However, the several other factors I have shown to be at work in the play — multiple masking, a critique of History, explicit resistance to certitude — combine to suggest that the apparent resolution based on individualism might fruitfully be read in terms of another desire, which Bennett attributes to Hewett this way:

her paramount and reiterated commitment after her relinquishing 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. (1995: 13)

Joan is a text grounded in this desire. *Witch Joan* is an expression of attempts

to resist the subtleties and seductions of rationality as represented in Cauchon's discourse. Hewett has assigned to Cauchon the more obvious and rudimentary critique of vulgar oppressions as they are practised by the unenlightened authorities of Joan's world, such as Professor Crock and Sister Skull. That is, it is quite precisely with an idea of *enlightened* rationality that Witch Joan most closely contends and in relation to which she is the mark of excess.

It is for this reason that tensions between Joan and Cauchon resemble the relationship between an excessive imagination and a legislative reason which is the basis of the feminine sublime. A principle of *uncertainty* is its primary characteristic. The convictions, for which Joan is the vehicle, attest to that principle: voices, mysticism, knowledge which cannot be represented.

On a pragmatic note, Lovibond has made the point that 'at the limit, the rejection of centred subjectivity is inconsistent with any ambition to express ourselves in a public language' (1994: 73). In Witch Joan, as elsewhere, the writer Hewett faces the inherent difficulty of the subject of speech, the obviousness of which is clear in Lovibond's description of the experience of utterance, akin to Spivak's point about the vulnerability which is necessary to the experience of identity:

... whatever I say, my speech is liable the very next moment to leave me feeling dissatisfied — feeling that I have not expressed myself definitively or even adequately. But *what* was I trying to express, then? (Who am I?) From one point of view the task seems hopeless ('It is always a multiplicity that speaks and acts'); the speaking subject (that is, the actively, creatively, speaking subject) is engaged in a constant struggle to transcend itself, it 'supersedes and jettisons [its own external records] as

soon as they are formed'.

(Lovibond 1994: 75, quoting Collingwood 1938: 275)

In *Joan*, Hewett avoids becoming caught up in an infinite regression of selves by provocatively coming to rest at the attempts of a witch to talk sense. Those attempts coexist with significant, doubt-proliferating other possibilities and do not triumph over them in a way which allows individualism to triumph. Again, the death of Joan raises ethical questions and attaches grave implications to a desire for the possibility of a postmodernism of resistance. As Suleiman argues:

Conceptions of the text and conceptions of the self are, of course, not unrelated: unity, coherence, stability are all categories that apply to the one as well as to the other. But how much higher the stakes are where the self is concerned, and how much more urgent the dilemmas it poses....

(1994: 229)

Insofar as *Joan* is a critique of notions of truth and a text with a clear sense of itself as *historiography*, insisting on the contingent elements in what we know of events such as those of the life of Joan of Arc, Joan's insistence on the mystical is a retreat into neither mysticism nor individualism. It can be read, rather, as a version of not-knowing and hence of an overriding commitment to the imagination. Between them, the Joans are an inscription of radical subjectivity which is both fictional and situated. Hewett gives us a shifting, fragmented and pluralised self, drawn up in ways which unsettle the idea of the subject as a single governing centre of consciousness. In addition, by its imprecisions and gestures towards what is beyond it, the play exhibits interest in the crisis of representation which concerns postmodern thought. Its manner of doing so complies with

Nancy's suggestion, quoted earlier, that the sublime is present when the question of presentation itself is taken up.

Theorising historiographic metafiction as a postmodern genre, Hutcheon distinguishes between postmodern narratives and 'extreme late-modernist auto representation', in which she also locates a 'view that there is no presence, no external truth which verifies or unifies, that there is only self-reference' (1988: 119). The difference is that postmodern fiction contains a self-conscious suggestion of the latter 'signal[s] the discursive nature of all reference — both literary and historiographical' (1988: 19). Joan's commitment to her voices and to the inexplicable is such a refusal of self-reference. It is *that* presumptuousness in Cauchon's rationalist discourse which Joan resists. It is the precise edge of the disagreement between them.

Hewett is not denying 'the real Joan of Arc'. She is only making a postmodern claim that we can only know her history 'through its traces, its relics', as Hutcheon puts it (1988: 119). Mark Currie asserts that readers of historiographic metafiction 'respond to historical material ... with a double awareness of its fictionality and its basis in real events' (1995: 71). I agree. In this doubling, history is opened up to the present and inconclusiveness becomes creditable. The tragic events in which Joan of Arc was a central figure are neither suppressed nor dishonoured in Hewett's play. Rather, particular theatrical and performative emphases comprise a metafictional layer by which the text asks 'how do we know the past?' and by which it resists the 'ontological sleight of hand' involved in deploying real figures from the past in writing which blends fiction and history.

As Hutcheon shows, postmodern writing need not dismantle the opposition between fact and fiction. It honours it, but with a clear view to problematising the relationship. It does so, as she writes, by the simultaneous and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries (Hutcheon 1988: 114). *Joan* is an example.

I conclude with two quotations from Williams (1992), who characterises the convictions proclaimed in *Joan* in a way which explicitly associates Hewett's feminism with uncertainty and draws some of these themes together:

Just as Joan can be all four contradictory personalities, and both virgin and whore, so quite explicit contradictions may co-exist within a play. In this, some of Hewett's writing can be seen as in tune with one strand of contemporary feminist literature which *refuses to acknowledge categorical meanings and definitive viewpoints, and depicts all facts and perspectives, even personality itself, as a series of possibilities rather than certainties.*

(Williams 1992: 68, emphases mine)

Williams notices that, although the dramatic structure of *Joan* is straightforward and episodic, it resists precise exegesis. She alerts us to the fact that this has in the past been linked to questions about Hewett's competence as a playwright. That link makes recognition of Hewett's postmodernism significant, since postmodernism provides a basis from which to rescue her texts from critical evaluations which would interpret such inexplicit and imprecise meaning as hesitancy, or even failure. It seems to me that such a critical framework cannot hope to recognise the full extent of Hewett's resistance or subversion. In Williams' words:

The difficulty in reading explicit meanings into much of Hewett's work has

often been seen as a dramaturgical fault, and attributed to a lack of discipline or structural skill on her part. But *there seems to be a deliberate refusal in much of her work to allow simple 'meanings' to be imposed or deduced.* (1992: 68, emphases mine)

In the context of a postmodern feminism, it is possible to recognise in that refusal a commitment to uncertainty which, given Hewett's subject matter, is firmly attached to desire for social change, feminist and otherwise. *Joan* illustrates the difficult correspondence between these two positions. In *Wild Card*, to which I now turn, Hewett specifies her interest in that difficulty in terms of her personal history.

1. Rita Felski, for example, in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) characterises modernist texts as 'formally self-conscious, experimental, antimimetic' (25), but acknowledges the heterogeneity of modernist textual production.
2. This is comparable to Morrison's argument, in *Beloved*, that slavery was an institution shored up by recourse to reason. Although the tone clearly differs, Hewett makes a similar claim that the vulnerability of reason is historically demonstrable.
3. The phrase would translate, *'I' is another* and resonates with the uncertainties of self-presence.
4. This division of tendencies has currency since the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Ihab Hassan (1985) *Paracriticisms*, Illinois: 123-4 has used it in his schematic account of distinctions between modernism and postmodernism.
5. Suleiman strengthens Richard Rorty's (1989: 22) argument by her emphasis on a sense of tragedy and by developing the relationship between the public and the private, a focus which arises from her feminism (1994: 233-42).

CHAPTER THREE

My Subject, Myself: *Wild Card* and Self-Representation

On the subject of writing autobiography, Hewett quotes Julian Barnes:

It's the time when the final pellets of vanity accumulate into a cyst, when the self starts up its last pathetic murmur of 'remember me, remember me' ... it's the time when the autobiographies are written, the last boasts are made and the memories which no one else's brain still holds are written down with a false idea of value. (In Hewett 1991: 173)

In this chapter, I consider Hewett's self-representational practices and the extent to which they are inflected by postmodern doubt. Still at issue is the question of whether or not Hewett stakes her claim in uncertainty. I argue here that she does in three areas: her autobiography, her poetry, and her participations in image-making processes which have produced her public reputation. I consider the related question of whether her rejection of communism entails a shift to individualism. Combined, *Wild Card's* religious lexis and spatial poetics suggest at the levels of both conviction and poetics that her expressions of a desire for

certainty and security should not be interpreted as claims of having found them. Conjunctions between incommensurable discourses, silences, and a capacity for wonder inflect the life writings also with postmodern doubt. Again, my emphasis is on the prevailing sense of subjectivity and how it relates to the feminine sublime.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

The following points position my approach to *Wild Card*. Firstly, I begin with a dual reminder from Barthes and Irigaray that writing cannot be understood as resolving desire in the writing subject. On the contrary, for Barthes, to write is to be willing to inhabit desire. It is 'to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely *there where you are not* — This is the beginning of writing' (1978: 99).

In a train of thought related for its interest in the (im)possibilities of self-expression, Irigaray attends to the particular case for the woman who writes, indeed who uses language. She refers to psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses which theorise a relationship between the feminine and the symbolic order in terms of the feminine as 'other'. This theoretical ground of the feminine places Woman beyond the possibility of symbolic self-representation. Irigaray accepts that there is a point at which the very capacities of language to carry the feminine are extinguished. When asked what it means to speak as a woman, she responds:

the difference is perhaps hard to detect.... Except for — among other

things — the number of perplexities, uncertainties, and questions that reveal the lack of some pre-established system by which my language would be ordered in advance? But there is no way I can give you an account of "speaking (as) woman"; *it is spoken, but not in metalanguage.*

(1985b: 144, emphasis mine)

Wherever one stands on the sexual opposition around which this thinking is organised, Irigaray's caution not to take relationships between sexual identity and language for granted is a reminder of the importance of 'perplexities, uncertainties, and questions' in any attempt to 'give an account of' Hewett's writing. Insofar as it necessitates a 'metalanguage', I understand my own text to operate from within the limitations Irigaray describes.

I do not presume to find access to the woman herself in Hewett's writing and do not invest that kind of authority in her autobiography, or our conversation in 1996. In that text, the insight that speech is a kind of writing sometimes takes on literal meaning, since Hewett responds, at times, in words previously appearing in *Wild Card* and elsewhere. However, she operates in the zone of the 'always already written' self-consciously, not naively. In my study, then: 'The speaking subject is the entire subject' (J.B. Pontalis, quoted in Gaudin 1987: xxiv). This is not to sidestep feminist insistences that subjectivity is at issue. On the contrary, I consider that Nettlebeck's comment on relationships between author subjects and their fictocritical writings applies equally well to autobiographical writing:

This is not to say that an identity declares itself strictly in terms of the lived experience of the individual, but it does declare itself as a politic to be viewed, reviewed, contested, and above all engaged with.... there is, after all, the presence of a powerful subjectivity, but it is one that is

localized, contingent, and which says both more and less than it seems to say. (1998: 12)

Since it is autobiography, *Wild Card* weighs heavily in the direction of self-declared identity, but in the end, the autobiographical subject Hewett constructs is contingent, local and textual.

Secondly, these concerns lead me to include excerpts of our conversation throughout this discussion of Hewett's autobiographical practices. I mean these inclusions to multiply connections between Hewett's 1990 written recollections and more recently expressed views. Moreover, the strategy allows cross-references between *Wild Card* and her other writings to suggest themselves.

Contemporary critique of academic writing encourages the methodology. Stephen Muecke connects such critique with discourse on the subject: 'the precision of the classical academic text lay in its clear relation of subject to object, where only the object was visible, and the speaking subject was a mere cipher for a disembodied rationality' (1997: 171). That precision has long been regarded as exclusionary and selective in ways which feminist, postcolonial and postmodern scholars have contested. For these reasons, I position myself here as 'the affective academic subject whose complex intersubjective relations are part of [her] writing', as Muecke puts it (1997: 171). Those relations have particular immediacy in an 'interview', and the strategy seems meaningful where the construction of identity at issue is a writer's own. At this point, postmodern questions which concern the gap between utterance and the uttering subject are

most compelling.

The conversational insertions also function as 'invitation' and 'visitation', terms Chambers uses to describe 'the leap, capture and cut of quotation':

itself a form of visitation, that is, the importation into a given generic and aesthetic context of material from another semiotic environment that thereby acquires new significance and uncanny relevance — 'uncanny' in that there is deliberate play between the material's 'old' sense and the 'new' signification it takes on as a consequence of its iterability.

(in Muecke 1997: 173-5)¹

Ghostly presences and other manifestations of the uncanny have a place in Hewett's conversation with me and reverberate throughout her texts, even the autobiography.

Benjamin's use of quotation famously illustrates how meaning is generated by the collection and relocation of utterances. In Eagleton's estimation, Benjamin 'restores writing to its true significance by violently displacing it from context': 'signifiers torn from their signified' are 'flexibly recomposed to weave fresh correspondences across language', he writes (1981: 62-3).² My incorporation of these practices is intended to set up a play of allusion by contiguity. By creating a web of intersections between speech and writing, subject and object, poet and prose writer, Hewett's past and present utterances, and so on, such interruptions produce layers of meaning. Hence, I employ these excerpts as interruptions without observing the usual conventions of quotation. This reduces the risk, it seems to me, of connections and intersections which they produce seeming to suggest the intentional fallacy.

I use the term 'conversation' advisedly. According to de Certeau, ordinary conversations are 'verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners, creations of a conversation that belongs to no one' (1984: xxii). The 'rhetoric' of my conversation with Hewett, to use de Certeau's terms, included the sharing of food, the occasional presence of another interlocutor and the purchase of furniture, among other things. I acknowledge the way in which this 'interview' was marked in the act, therefore, and is here 'parted from its circumstances' (1984: 20). It demonstrates, nonetheless, that 'we are "caught" within ordinary language' no matter what the discourse, as Wittgenstein insisted. According to de Certeau: 'Wittgenstein wanted his work itself to be composed only of fragments' so that it would be 'inscribed in a texture in which each can by turns "appeal" to the other' (1984: 10-11).

Desire to participate in revisions of a traditional academic genre arises in part from the feminist basis of this thesis. It pertains to Irigaray's analysis of how women are listened to when they do speak. She notices 'the resistances to that voice that overflows the "subject." Which the "subject" then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow' (1985b: 112). In shifts between related utterances by Hewett, something of that flow may be released. Irigaray insists on the theoretical difficulty of interpreting women's speech: 'interpreting them where they exhibit only their muteness means subjecting them to a language that exiles them at an ever increasing distance from what perhaps they would have said' (1985: 113).

It is not too literal a representation of either Irigaray's arguments or Hewett's poetry to suggest that Hewett has declared a comparable sense of what it is to be a subject in and of language. For example, in *Peninsula* (1976), 'Let Candid Speech at Last' concerns the desire for self-expression: 'In old age I will learn to use my tongue/And all this babble turn to speech at last' (CP: 116)³. The same poem recognises the impossibility of that desire being realised: 'all the stones/Of words that trip and weigh upon my tongue/*May serve me nothing but an old wet mouth*' (CP: 116). 'Sanctuary' expresses dissatisfaction with ways in which the woman poet is listened to, linking meanings given to her sex to an experience of being 'silenced': 'I am only an old doll reading her poems in the lamplight,/waiting for the fourth cremation' (CP: 119). Such statements illustrate Irigaray's opinion that a woman's speech, given the position of the feminine in the symbolic order, may be understood as 'exhibited muteness' (1985b: 112). Hewett's sense of this is another reason for attending to her declarations of uncertainty.

Thirdly, in turning to the autobiography, I acknowledge that to demonstrate a *commitment* to uncertainty, I paradoxically depend on the tenacity of some of Hewett's declared convictions. I use cross currents between *Wild Card* and other texts to support the argument that the commitment to uncertainty persists, not least in mobile boundaries between Hewett's fictional narratives, poetry and historical retrospection.

Paul Crowther sums up a point taken from the work of Derrida, Lacan and Foucault. As contributors to postmodern thought, all three have revised ways in

which the Western traditional subject is seen to operate:

If meaning is only producible within an unstable field, then the relation of self to work, and self to its own self-understanding, are both, at best, provisional. Their 'essence' is to be constantly re-made, as the overall field of meaning itself undergoes reconfiguration. The self and its position in the world have no fixed centre; they are ex-centric. (1995: 9)

This kernel of postmodern thinking about subjectivity allows me to place the significantly incomplete Hewett autobiography, and other texts in which she may be understood to be 'speaking for herself', in a positive relationship with postmodern views of the subject.

CONVERSATION:

CMG *The 'web of correspondences'. Can you tell me about that phrase?*

DH *Now where did I get it from? When I was doing third year novel at W.A. University, and I did an exam in Winthrop Hall, there was some question about Middlemarch and the web of correspondences. I wrote on the question and got terribly involved, so that I spent far too much time on that question. It stayed in my mind.*

CMG *You use it a lot.*

DH *Yes. It fascinated me. It seemed to me to be the phrase that best described for me how a writer goes about making a world, and I've used it ever since. It's become part of my thinking, I suppose.*

CMG *In your work, ideas seem to 'densify' around particular notions and this web of correspondences is one of them, as is the image of the web itself. The image seems sublime to me. To be about pleasure and displeasure?*

DH *I think the idea of the web comes from even further back than I said. It also comes from my absolute fascination as a child with 'The Lady of Shallott'. There weren't many poetry books in the house. As in many Edwardian houses,*

there was a big leatherbound copy of Tennyson which belonged to my grandfather. That was one thing that showed that you were cultured, you know. You had a piano and you had your Tennyson. It was 'The Lady of Shallott' that caught my attention. It was easy to learn off by heart; it had that lulling rhythm, 'The Lady of Shallott', that really fascinated me. And then later on when I was teaching Tennyson and 'The Lady of Shallott' at W.A. University — it must have been a third year poetry course or something — I started thinking about the dilemma of the artist, which that poem seems to me to be about. You know, the artist as someone engaged in life, or shut away, is it possible to do both. Since I had been involved in politics this was particularly germane to me. So the idea of the tower and the web — 'out flew the web and floated wide', and all that — I think became quite central to me, without my knowing, as a child. I somehow knew that this had a particular resonance for me, but I didn't know why.

CMG It circulates through the poetry and between the poetry and the novel. Sometimes it's malevolent.

DH Yes. What I think I try to do, because I never feel that I've exhausted a subject, is keep approaching it from another angle. And that's why you keep seeing these same images, because I'm trying to get hold of them, trying to explain them to myself, and in a sense they're unexplainable. There will always be more there than I can possibly explain.

UNCERTAINTY AND A WILL TO CHANGE

No genre highlights contemporary tremors in the fact/fiction, art/life divide more clearly than autobiography. Hewett's declares that she knows this. Foregrounding that knowledge makes it possible to draw from *Wild Card* an implicit conviction that the self represented in the autobiographical project is provisional because 'textual'. There is every indication that Hewett is intent on containing the 'truth

ambitions' of the genre, as well as those of her own recollection. Even as she understands autobiography to be an assemblage of memories and hence an imagined reconstitution in the present of her past experience, she also positions it as necessarily caught up in the play between the knowing and the speaking subject. She acknowledges that autobiographical writing is selective, has no direct access to the past, or to experience, and never assumes that either provides her account with a bedrock of truth. As she expressed it long before the publication of *Wild Card*: 'It seems to me that in order to write autobiography, the writer *invents* a pseudonym, a character, and follows that character through a series of events that *appear* to make up a life' ([1985] in Colmer & Colmer, 1987: emphasis mine). Such statements make plain that an issue of representability is at stake.

In relation to the 'life' side of the art/life divide, a continuing 'will to change' inflects Hewett's writing by situating her in an obvious relationship with 'risk'. Her career has drawn hostility as well as acclaim, and it is in relation to her 'will to change' that I review any sense of 'outrage' and 'scandal' which has attached to it, either on or off the stage⁴. The life-content of *Wild Card* stresses what might be described as a 'picaresque' desire, represented most clearly in the series of houses by which the text is structured, a metaphor I consider later in the chapter. A desire for mobility is involved, and at times expressed poetically as 'yearning':

the garden was a continual yearning
for what must always be lost
& found & lost again ('The infernal Grove', 49, CP: 279)

Crowther asserts that 'whilst novelties, outrage and scandal have always been an important element in modernism, in postmodernism they are demanded almost as a matter of course' (1995: 10). Encountering such terms in both contexts makes them unhelpful for positioning Hewett's work. However, postmodern thinking broadens the scope for interpreting critical opposition as resistance from within the local culture to a commitment to change. Hostile reception to Hewett's work has been a response to both her aesthetic and political 'impudence', and neither excludes her from the postmodern.

Where she writes about metamorphosis, self-transformation, movement, Hewett's commitment is to change itself in ways which do not fit a modernist idea of progress neatly. Outcomes are not the point of this kind of revisionism. It gives value to change without implying revelation, or depending on notions of improvement. It involves an emphatic willingness to risk. It does not presume to inhabit a space 'outside' the culture from which to launch critique. In fact, Hewett's account of her departure from communism is a narrative of the dissipation of her sense of such exteriority. In that departure it is possible to trace a shift away from modernism, rather than the reverse.

CONVERSATION:

(1)

CMG *The gaze in a lot of your work is the female gaze?*

DH *It seems to upset a lot of feminist writers, a lot of feminist critics.*

CMG *I wonder why? Is it a confusion of a heterocentric woman's text and a heterosexual woman's gaze with heterosexism? I think that's one mistake we make. That's why a character like Maudie is so crucial in The Toucher.*

DH *Yes. I'd agree with that. Very much so. Then there's the other thing, that some readers, some women readers were obviously — and men too even more so — were totally shocked by that novel. I was astonished at this. Well, I wasn't all that astonished, I suppose — I can't pretend to be that innocent. I deliberately set out to subvert certain ideas about sexuality and women. One being that a woman of sixty-seven, or whatever she is, cannot have a full-on sexual relationship with a man so much younger than herself, twenty years or more, no more — thirty years. And secondly, that not only is she old, but she's also crippled, which gives her a sort of double burden, or something to subvert. It seems to me that there are taboo subjects in Australian society. One is death. You don't talk about death. And I've always been fascinated by death and what it means and what it doesn't mean — all that. And as an atheist, trying to come to terms with that whole blocking out of a human being. So death's one. Sex for the older woman is another one. And sex for the handicapped person is a third. When I set out to write the novel I deliberately wanted to engage with all those things, as well as those other subjects we've been talking about.*

CMG *Esther makes you realise how homogeneous the body of the sexualised woman is in literature. She has just not been there really — in the sense that her body has been an assumption?*

DH *Yes, well I've always felt this very strongly. So I suppose it's the subverting of all that, that's, yes, disturbing.*

CMG *It's confronting.*

DH *But you would think in 1994 that, particularly younger women ... I would have thought they would have been quite able to.*

Opposition to a status quo is a problematic way of linking Hewett's work to postmodernism, but the connection develops when, after breaking with communism, she recognises limitations to counter-culture positions. In *Wild Card*, her undergraduate *avant-gardism* is heavily ironised. As well as being infused with

intellectual excitement and creative enthusiasm, the resistant days at the University of Western Australia are remembered as hubristic. There is a sense of having emulated imported modes of rebellious behaviour. The foundations of Hewett's early anti-establishment activities lay in Europe's entrenched traditions of activism. The desire to be a 'citizen of the world' came with instructions, but these activities had serious implications. Political and social yearnings which they reflected caused 'an impassable gulf that can never be bridged again' to open up between 'children of privilege' and their 'well-off middle-class parents', Hewett records in *Wild Card* (86). Acquired reservations about the ambition and superficiality of such youthful expressions of resistance are clear in *Alice in Wormland*:

Alice at the University
smoking Camels
in pale blue slacks
& a college sweater
Wanted to be a Bohemian

('Days of Violence Days of Rages', 16, *CP*: 232)

Hal Foster (1983) connects postmodernism with resistance in a way which applies to Hewett's mature writing. Foster envisages a postmodernism characterised by processes of incorporation and combination. It is marked by thought in which critique coexists with accommodations:

In opposition (but not *only* in opposition), a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental

pastiche of pop — or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations. (1983: xii)

The point seems obvious, but it is worth stressing that desire for change and commitment to resistance imply doubt about the social and cultural context in which a subject finds herself. Hewett's reputation for 'transgressiveness' has been defined by and is as much an effect of her context as it is of her own activities. Many supposed transgressions have dissipated behind her as time has passed and social mores have changed. She exemplifies how a subject is produced by the arenas in which she operates even as she contests them.

More is at work in 'Miss Hewett's shenanigans' than bids for freedom, 'dubious' or otherwise, personal or aesthetic, bids which would dovetail most easily with the usual view of Hewett as a modernist.⁵ Early dissatisfaction — 'Everyone is going somewhere or changing their lives' (*Wild Card*: 134) — results in more radical and ongoing instability than suggests merely a restless bourgeois woman. Often, in the autobiography and elsewhere, in relation to change, desire and disappointment, pleasure and pain are inseparable. To recall Foster's terms for postmodern art above, 'critique', 'question' and 'exploration' are key ones, but so is submission.

Evidence of a significant commitment to uncertainty is unsurprising in such a context and, as I have shown, links Hewett's writing to the sublime. Postmodernism, as Lyotard states, is grounded in 'the real sublime sentiment ... an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain' (1984: 81). Read within the framework

of this combination, accommodations of contrary impulses in Hewett's writing signal postmodern thinking. The desire expressed in 'Let Candid Speech at Last' for a language with combined powers flags a larger acceptance of disparities:

Hard, fine and passionate, can language glow
Like ice and fire, both luminous and cool
A benediction falling from the mouth? (CP: 116)

Nigel Wheale regards the postmodern subject as characterised by 'radical discontinuities in fundamental beliefs about the relation of private experience and social conventions' (1995: 52). Suleiman describes postmodern work as 'self conscious' and 'multiply ironic' (1990: 192). On these fronts *Wild Card* is interpretable as a text which proposes a subject who dispenses with conviction without presuming to *know*, and whose construction is changing and discontinuous. The writing is marked by related recognitions of its rhetorical and provisional nature.

These observations may be linked more specifically to *Wild Card* by reflecting upon a series of quotations which concern Hewett's recollections of her relationship with the communist party. They provide an opportunity to show that strong scrutiny of conviction sets in after this experience and the mode of resistance changes. In 'Alice Travelling' 46 (*Alice in Wormland*, 1987), that shift is condensed:

Alice exhausted never joined the New Left
she had lost her capacity for belief....
the simple optimistic view had vanished
it was time to put her house in order
it would take years to get it all together....
she reinstated Art as her religion.... (CP: 266-7)

The selections from *Wild Card* also exemplify autobiography's dual operations of recollection and evaluation and illustrate Hewett's sense of the genre. They reveal changes in her intellectual, political and other commitments which relate to reconfigurations in her thinking about subjectivity. In shifts between the roles of activist and artist, the dominant commitment of the writing becomes the radical commitment to uncertainty of the feminine sublime.

The first passage grows out of Hewett's recall of her experience at the Alexandria Spinning Mill. It signals the extent of her political idealism and capacities to act on it in unusual and demanding ways. Class structures in Australia had become increasingly visible and desire for social change led her to take up a position within the class with whose interests she aligned herself. She was motivated, as others were, by what Spivak has called, 'the itinerary of the silencing' (1990: 31). Insofar as history can be viewed as sets of competing narratives, Hewett was among many Australians who saw 'which one rises, which one falls, who is silent' (Spivak 1990: 31). She was among those who had begun to insist that working class Australians be heard and did not regard class boundaries as impassable. Taking up the kind of labour she describes here, at the cost of the security her family afforded her, is justly seen as an attempt to

'unlearn her privilege as a loss', as Spivak puts it (1990: 9). Hewett's radical choices should not be underestimated in this regard.⁶

Nevertheless, Hewett invests these earlier commitments with a naiveté based on more than a retrospective sense of misguided politics. Evaluations of her younger self are self-deprecating. She is seen as 'well on the way to becoming that most dangerous and humourless of creatures, a martyr to a cause' (*Wild Card*: 175), and later as having been an 'interloper' (168). This period spent in the mills is the substance of the early novel, *Bobbin Up* (1959), written while she was a member of the *Realist Writers* group and in which she was following the advice of Frank Hardy: 'Use your talent to further the working class struggle' (Hewett 1985: ix).

Often, Hewett's reminiscences about the period are also reflections on identity:

Unless you lived in the same place all your days, life was like that, divided up into compartments, particularly if you were a woman. It was easy to take on the protective colouring of a different man, a different name, a different city, harder to hang onto any real sense of your own identity. And anyway, there was something oddly exhilarating about the fresh start, unburdened, homeless, with no ties or possessions and a change of name. To be someone else opened up such giddy possibilities. (*Wild Card*: 174)

As it continues, the text links a shifting sense of identity to politics and art:

Before the 'cult of the individual' became a Communist Party slogan, I was a devotee of the death of the ego. The ego stood for all the negatives — selfishness, vanity, corruption, bourgeois individualism — therefore it must be rooted out and replaced by this selfless servant of the masses. T.S. Eliot's line 'a condition of complete simplicity costing no less than

everything' always appealed to some deeper religious sense in me, for although I had long since changed from agnostic to atheist, pacifist to militant revolutionary, the mainspring of my political belief was utopian faith rather than any philosophical, scientific Marxism.... Marxism for me was a conversion, an act of personal salvation. (*Wild Card*: 174)

There is a marked convergence in the understanding of identity here. At first, the terms for describing her departure from Marxism combine self-abnegation and self-invention, but this gives way to the significantly different terms of ego-retrieval: 'only *in extremis* did I discover that ego intact and indestructible: only by going to the edge was it possible for me to find myself again' (175). The declaration reads like a manifesto of the sovereign humanist individual. However, that reading depends on effacing the companion emphasis on flux, which contests the value traditionally given to concepts such as 'conversion' and 'personal salvation'.

This is not mere self-contradiction, but the site of a major tension in the text in which flexibility and contradiction in Hewett's thinking about identity emerge. Notably, the self referred to in the last quotation is being retrieved from 'enlightenment', associated here with Marxism, but also suggesting modernist idealism. Hewett is describing a process of *becoming* in which she is increasingly uncertain of her ground as an individual in charge of her history. After this, she attaches her convictions to change itself. The rejection of Marxism makes her alert to absolutism. The above passages convey her gradual apprehension that what she had construed as an exemplary and radical site of resistance, in which ideology was as easy as 'false consciousness', had turned out to be a regime in

which it was still necessary to negotiate power relations. Her response at the time was to reinvest power into her own judgment, but in the withdrawal from Marxism there was also a growing realisation that there is no space outside ideology and power. The surviving 'intact' and 'indestructible' self of the last quotation is simultaneously aware of herself as 'subject to'. After this, although the terms persist, the convictions upon which 'personal salvation' and 'conversion' are predicated are out of the question. Hewett has recognised what Diane Elam (1997) describes as 'the old modernist paradigm through which knowledge of the system is freedom from it' (184), the paradigm which had governed her communist years.

CONVERSATION:

CMG I wanted to ask you about myth, ways you draw on it; moving towards questions about how you write, I suppose. I'm struck by a quote from your interview with Paul Kavanagh, in which you said, 'the trick is not just to be a swallower upper, but to be a swallower upper and regurgitator in a different form'.

DH Right. I do see the difference of form, and that it's not just a recycling. [...] I am a terrible pincher of other people's stuff, there's no doubt about that. I mean I'm like a — what — a magpie, or something? I read a great deal, particularly novels, and particularly modern ones, Australian, American and English ones. I'm always picking up stuff. So that it too — I don't think I'm answering your question, but never mind — so that it too becomes part of the whole maelstrom of what I'm trying to write about and find out about. And it becomes transfigured — or I hope it does — in the retelling, or the re-ordering, or whatever you want to call it. And it seems to me that all the things we've been talking about, the tower, the web, the spectres, the voices — whatever you want to call them — are all a part of the myth. This to me is

myth. This is how myth is formed. By these multitudinous very strong images, plus the kind of wafting quality of the voices. Does that make sense?

CMG Yes. I find it very evocative, about resisting dogma, and 'fixed packages'?

DH Yes. I hate dogma. Which is rather strange, considering I was a communist for twenty three years. Maybe that's what put me off it.

CMG Do you think that?

DH I think that's part of it.

CMG Was that experience like a 'cautionary tale'?

DH It is a cautionary tale.

CMG This is going right back to the idea of your commitment to uncertainties...

DH It's a very cautionary tale...

CMG You use a quote from Carlos Fuentes.

DH At the beginning of The Toucher?

CMG About a mythic chance?

DH Yes. We've got a mythic chance. People say why on earth did you put that in the front of the book. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with it. To me it's got everything to do with it.

CMG Tell me.

DH Read it out to me, so I've got it right.

CMG 'You above all, you of the New World, you do have something more than an epic fatality, you do have a mythic chance.'

DH Well, why did I choose that? Because I was equating the place and the characters with 'You of the New World'. Particularly on that edge of the ocean, and the next stop's Antarctica or something. You know, that sort of feeling. So that whatever myths form out of this would have to be something different to the old, heavy Europeanised myths, to the 'epic fatality' — that wouldn't work in this new sort of insubstantial drifting world in which we Australians find ourselves. That was why. It seemed to me to say something about what I was trying to do.

CMG *You also say things about 'spitting in the eye of the mythmakers.' And in many places you've talked about the irritation you feel when people mythologise you, or attempt to make you 'speak one particular thing'. So there's a pushing away of myth.*

DH *Yes. But that's that really fatal sort of myth. Which doesn't seem to me to be appropriate at all for this country, or for what I as a writer am trying to do in it. It doesn't work somehow. The presence of human beings on this continent is too ephemeral for that to work.*

CMG *So, there is not simply a re-use of myths?*

DH *Yes. Now the image of the tower; a few months ago I went and gave a talk and reading at Sydney University to Australian Literature people, on The Collected Poems. And I thought, I'll go through and I'll find what links these poems, you know, over the whole spectrum — if I can. And one of the central things that I used as a linkage was the tower. But what fascinated me was how it had changed. Because there's a very early poem which won a Meanjin competition called 'Dream of Old Love', in which this woman — again old, although I was only seventeen at the time — is sitting up in the tower watching a husband or a lover or whatever with young courtesans or something. And it's quite a bitter poem, particularly, I think, for a seventeen and a half year old. And the tower there is a much more Europeanised image, much more conventional in a way. And then there's the poem called 'A Grave Fairytale', which is often quoted and which was actually a dream I had — the transcript almost — well, the situation by situation of the dream, and I woke up and wrote it the next morning. One of those given poems that just sort of happen somehow. And there, the tower has become, it seems to me, a much more complex image, and very strongly linked to 'The Lady of Shallott' idea, but still trailing gauzy bits of myth from Europeanised reading and all that. But then 'Lines to the Dark Tower' is taking a big jump. It's something quite different it seems to me because it's still the tower, she's still in it, she's very obviously weaving things, she invites the young man into the tower and that seems to have been fairly disastrous. But there's a deliberate attempt here to*

make the tower belong in an Australian landscape. In other words, it's a silo. Filled with rotting straw. So it's no longer the tower of pure Europeanised myth. It has something more. It has an absolute relationship to the real landscape. So that, in a way, by the time I'd written that poem, by the time I got to that depiction of the tower, I felt that I'd got the kind of solid tower I wanted. And I don't know that I'll ever write about the tower again. I can't say that — you don't know, but I do feel that, very much. Somehow in that poem I got hold of something that I'd been trying to get, but which had been obscured for me by the power of European myth.

CMG *So 'regurgitating in the new form'?*

DH *Yes.*

CMG *The phrase 'the myths of belief' goes to the question of uncertainty; that belief itself is a myth. Do you think that?*

DH *Yes. I do. You know, I think people try to order their lives by myths: some by religious myths, some by political myths, some by personal collection of myths of various kinds or other. Maybe marriage, children, whatever. I think in the long run it's all very much a construct of the person themselves, that they have made what they needed at a particular time, and sometimes it solidifies around them and they can't escape it, and sometimes it doesn't.*

CMG *Yes.*

DH *And this was very much what happened to me. I joined the communist party first of all when I was nineteen without really knowing very much about it and kind of drifted out, and then came back again when I was twenty two and, as I've said, stayed in it for twenty three years. And it ordered my life. I was in a state of — I tried to commit suicide — I was in a state of emotional shock I suppose, and seemed to be totally unable to make sense of the world, or know who I was, and this was a way out. Much like a conversion on the road to Damascus. And it became so much a structure of my life that the thought of branching away from it was pure terror, because it was through this — through Marxism — that I was trying to make sense of the world. But then the trade-off was that I couldn't write. I mean it's classic, really, so classic that*

it's almost ridiculous. I literally could not write. And it was only when that whole structure turned out to be so flimsy — the sense that what I believed it was, it wasn't — you know when Stalin's crimes and marching into Czechoslovakia and all the guns and the Gulags — the whole thing started to come out. It took quite a long time to infiltrate into Australia. Then, only then, it became possible to start to write myself out of it. And that's exactly what happened. I started to write myself out of this myth I'd constructed.

CMG *When I read about this period of your life, I find myself wondering about relationships between discoveries. Like discovering the flimsiness of that structure. The reason I'm thinking about this is that one 'definition' of postmodernism is 'a suspicion of master narratives'. A master narrative is Marxism?*

DH *Absolutely.*

CMG *So there was information which revealed that this was a 'master narrative', and a 'con', for want of a better word, but to what extent was it also personal? How much were you critiquing, doubting, fretting for yourself already, from within? So that when the information comes you are in a position to realise?*

DH *Yes, I know what you mean. Yes, very much so. And the greatest threat was the inability to do the thing which had always been so central to my life, and that was to order my life by writing. I'd lost it. And this was a constant nagging sense of tragic loss. I can't put it more strongly and I can put it as strongly as that. It was. And I was very busy all the time. I had three children. I was living with a madman, who got madder and madder. I was working in the communist party quite hard doing various things. I was editing a women's magazine. I was going to work to try and keep us all. So the time for reflection was rather limited, but still it was always there.*

In *Wild Card*, Hewett anchors her personal withdrawal from faith in the devastating revelations of the Twentieth Congress: 'the crimes are monstrous', she

writes; 'our beliefs and our lives made ludicrous, naive, even criminal, because we have lived this lie for years, and preached it everywhere — the lie of the perfection of Soviet society...' (233). In that shock Hewett discovers her capacities for 'blindness': 'It has never occurred to me before — the chilly perfection of a Communist paradise will never exist because it isn't even human' (*Wild Card*: 248). These events alert her to a capacity for being overwhelmed by her context, so it is not surprising that increasing suspicion and resistance to conviction follow. A significant outcome is the desire to be receptive to whatever has 'never occurred' to her before.

This signal rejection is accompanied by a developing sense of identity as an 'effect' of event and history. There is no attempt in Hewett's writing to suppress the past. Rather, it is marked by a generalised sense that increased *receptiveness* grows out of retrospection, the value of which Esther describes:

Don't look back, they said, but you had to look back. It wasn't a case of cutting off and going on as if nothing had ever happened. It had all happened and the happening made up the texture, the web of correspondences that in the end was all there was of a life.

(*The Toucher*: 184)

Hewett insists on this balance between looking forward and looking back.

A religious lexis is evident in the above quotations from *Wild Card* and should not be passed over lightly in an argument that Hewett's 'apostasy' is a movement away from certainty. In descriptions of 'changes of heart' this is the language of choice. It ironises the retrospective sense of submission to an orthodoxy which

had promised to 'make sense of the world' and had offered 'a positive future': 'I am like a shy convert to a new religion, but I am still divided in my allegiances, and my literary preferences are deeply suspect' (*Wild Card*: 112).

Those preferences are characterised by modernist writers she regards as exemplary: Peter Cowan, Eve Langley, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound. Hewett lists them to introduce an account of herself as a 'turncoat'. In the wake of the Ern Malley hoax, she would write an attack on Pound, using it to target 'the new Modernist voice in Australian poetry' — *The Angry Penguins* — as philistine. In her analysis of that reversal in *Wild Card* (113-4) linguistic choices connect her literary convictions with the intersection between politics and faith:

Like any good convert who needs to nail her new colours to the mast, my conversion has become absolute.... How could this have happened so suddenly? Had I abdicated my conscience? The answer was that I wanted so desperately to believe, and was so afraid of backsliding. I had to attack what I had most loved and admired to make my conversion complete.

This is written from the position of a subsequent reversal, obviously, but that should not be taken to mean eventual arrival at a fixed position. It is yet another moment in continuing insistences on transience and ambivalence, epitomised in 'The Infernal Grove, 49' of *Alice in Wormland* (1987):

what metaphor was this
that lived at the heart of yearning
to be glimpsed for a moment
& lost yet never lost
to be experienced
& not experienced

& survive

the fragments made up the pattern

but no one could ever read it.... (CP: 279)

Political apostasy and the turn to writing are both conceived as yearning in which the promise of resolution is recessive, and of which a religious vocabulary is symptomatic. Yearning itself, an idea of unrepresentable desire, becomes a primary impulse both politically and aesthetically.

CONVERSATION:

CMG *Postmodernism doesn't see knowledge as something you can acquire in quite the way that word suggests, not as something you arrive at and have, or can get. Knowledge is seen more as a perpetual 'becoming' process and...*

DH *That's what I've been saying.*

CMG *For a long time, so I'm a bit mystified by certainty in claims that yours is a body of purely modernist work?*

DH *Well, that's because of the period. I come from that period.*

CMG *The work's full of material people argue theoretically.*

DH *My daughter, Kate Lilley, is a feminist at Sydney University in the English department. Bill Grono discovered all those early poems of mine which I'd forgotten about, in Pelican, at the University of W.A., and she was entranced by them because she works on 17th century women poets and postmodernism. This is the work of people I've never read. She's said that I was doing that in isolation in Western Australia when I was seventeen and eighteen years old. Maybe in a clumsy and inept manner, but trying. And I don't know why someone so isolated would have been trying to attack questions which the poetry magazines that I was reading — like Meanjin, and Poetry was another one, and The Jindyworobaks, for godsake. None of those were. Only the Angry Penguins were, and I remember clasping onto them as if*

they were some sort of light in the darkness. I think that the only way I could possibly have come into contact with any of that kind of post-modernist strain in writing was through the Angry Penguins, and I have a lot to thank them for.

CMG What about 'intuitively'? Having reached a suspicion that—

DH Yes, but there's usually got to be something, hasn't there, that shows you the way to go? Something. I can remember sitting on the ferry, because I lived in South Perth, and going across to the city and seeing the first of what I thought were skyscrapers appearing on the skyline, and thinking I wanted to write about them, but I couldn't use any of the language.

Hewett's account of her changing desires contains a narrative of the desire to please, not least apparent in the reflections on membership of the communist party. She acknowledges her past compliances with specific members of the party context as misguided. She presents herself as having been partially motivated by desire to prove herself to its power-brokers. She also shows that complicating and complicated sexual relationships link political activism and the social and erotic life of the activist context: 'So my salvation will be politics and marriage, in that order' (111). When neither proves redemptive, the insubstantiality of salvation becomes the point. Subsequent self-reliance is partly a refusal to repeat this history and partly a resistance to being bullied again. The distinction is important. Since her vulnerability to pressure at the time was an effect of her own desire to please as much as anything, in the turning-away which follows, there is a significant turn towards self-doubt.

FAITH VERSUS KNOWLEDGE

An irony of the religious vocabulary of *Wild Card* is that it encodes Hewett's retreat to the edge of the very possibility of 'utopian faith'. Her expressions of a desire for faith should not be interpreted as a sense of having it. This is implicitly the substance of an exchange between Esther and Ern in *The Toucher*.

'Do you know what annoys me most about my years in the party now? That for so long we were apparently content to take the word of men who were our intellectual inferiors. Why did we do it, Esther?'

'Because we wanted to change the world,' she said. 'Because *we wanted to believe*.' (158, emphasis mine)

The religious discourse in *Wild Card* relates to genre. According to Colmer, Australian autobiography can be generally distinguished from European on the grounds of a leaning towards the secular. Here, he argues, the 'struggle for self-identity rarely involves revolt against an oppressive religious creed' (1989: 10). Instead, identity struggles in Australian autobiographies are likely to centralise authoritarian educational structures. Certainly, *Wild Card* revisits Hewett's efforts in *The Chapel Perilous or the Perilous Adventures of Sally Banner* to examine that target, but it also illustrates that such texts depend heavily on a religious vocabulary and connect political commitment with 'some deeper religious sense'. This draws attention to Hewett's fervent description of her investment in Marxism as 'salvation' (*Wild Card*: 111): 'I need order in my life. I need a pattern, a systematic view of the world — and Marxism will give it to me', she writes, using the very words used later to describe the reinvigorated desire to write.

It is unsurprising that the departure from Marxism, accompanied as it was for

so many, by disillusionment and disappointment, should be a shift towards uncertainty. Hewett recalls beginning to 'pretend to a confidence I no longer feel' (*Wild Card*: 234). She quotes a poem written in the period to indicate her developing determination 'to have it both ways, a pantheon of Communist heroes plus an awareness of the cult of the individual' (*Wild Card*: 254). Hewett's 'struggle for self-identity', to recall Colmer's words, involves resistances made up of 'dramatic moments', construed as 'religious acceptance or rejection' (Colmer 1989: 10). Although she declares her atheism early in *Wild Card*, Hewett explicitly represents her politics as religious zeal: 'The only difference was that I believed in a purely earthly heaven, a secular heaven called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (*Wild Card* 1995: 174).

Colmer also notes that Australian autobiographers define themselves by rejecting the patriarchalism of religion. In *Wild Card*, however, patriarchalism intersects with Marxism. The arena which Hewett saw as an escape from conventional religious values proved to be equally patriarchal. She writes:

Feminism and the equality of women were not causes dear to the hearts of working-class Australian men, nor were they particularly popular in the male-dominated hierarchy of the Communist Party.... male supremacy was alive and well amongst the higher and lower echelons of the Party.

(*Wild Card*: 175)

Sex and gender are significant in this struggle for identity, as Hewett disperses her awareness of patriarchal attitudes across political, religious and artistic arenas.

In all, *Wild Card* does not comfortably meet Colmer's terms for Australian autobiography, partly because Hewett's critical focus is conviction itself. She

occludes boundaries between the secular and the religious. The distinction gives way to what Robert Siegle (1994) has characterised as 'new' in writing: 'It is hungry for spirit without theology and the church' (quoted in Daniel and Modjeska: xii). Hewett exhibits such qualified spiritual hunger in the continual displacement of religious signifiers, sometimes applying them to what she rejects and sometimes to that for which she yearns. This language, which inflects her life-writing, poetry and fictional texts, is a vehicle of her rejection of the confidence, even the optimism, implicit in conviction.

Fractures in the self-evaluative aspect of the autobiography suggest mobility in Hewett's construction of identity. Some memories are dense with meaning which she reiterates, giving them interrupted but persistent presence in her texts. Certain recollections recur discontinuously within *Wild Card* and are dispersed throughout the other writing. Statements issued autobiographically recur in the plays, reappear in Esther's reflections in *The Toucher*, and appear word for word in the poetry. These transverse connections explain why Hewett's work is persistently regarded as autobiographical. Hewett 'plagiarises herself', Elam's phrase for such 'intertextual relations' which, she argues, 'split apart the fusion of originality and identity that grounds the modernist notion of creative authority, or authorial subjectivity' (1997: 195-6). In Hewett's writing, the dispersal destabilises any possibility of reading a single rendition as the last word. It draws attention to *Wild Card's* staccato explanation of her arrival at the version of subjectivity to which, as writer of the 1990 text and as interlocutor in 1996, she says she

subscribes.

This appraisal of the Marxist years and her former idealisation of the USSR is subsequent to those quoted earlier:

How unforgivably naive I was. Yet *how can I, in 1990, attempt to remember* the dangerous innocence of that first journey; how can I hope, after thirty-eight years, to hold on to that peculiar ardent cast of mind that censored all experience and saw only what it wished to see?

(*Wild Card*: 201-2, emphasis mine)

Here, truth claims are explicitly doubted and nostalgia for the earlier 'cast of mind' is viewed with suspicion.

Later, Hewett links the (re)turn to writing to the extrication of her younger self from conviction. In the connection there is reason to be cautious about how to interpret a repeated assertion that she 'ordered her life by writing', since this was also the reason for being attracted to Marxism. She writes:

I am still preaching Marxism in a different form, struggling to find my own ways of doing so. It's true that the rock-hard certainty of belief has crumbled a little — more than a little — under the impact of the Twentieth Congress. Maybe that is the reason why I have found my way back again to the country of the imagination. (*Wild Card*: 247)

Earlier, reflecting on a youthful commitment to 'politically correct' writing, she wonders: 'How do we ever know if what we are writing is any good or not? And the task becomes even more difficult when the critical faculty is atrophied by political blindness' (*Wild Card*: 208). As a result of combined disappointment in herself for being beguiled and in the failed dream of social transformation, she

begins to view uncertainty itself as the desirable position:

I'm very suspicious of people with beliefs, but particularly strongly held beliefs. because I know that it breeds fanaticism, narrow mindedness and a bigoted attitude. And therefore I think I'd prefer someone who'd believe in nothing than someone who believes something very strongly.

(In L'Huede, 1984)

That shift coincides with a developing commitment to creativity and the imagination.

Both religious language and the role given to imagination signal Hewett's dependence on the sublime insofar as that relates to a sense of the unrepresentable. It is particularly evident in enigmatic inclusions in the autobiography which gain importance from their reiteration in the poetry and elsewhere. For example, in *The Toucher*, in one of several moments of cultural estrangement, a man on the beach remarks to Esther on the Australian habit of wading into the sea and gazing out towards the horizon (232). The passage infuses the importance of the coastal edge for Australians with the religious desire of cargo cults.⁷ Esther's response resonates with what might be meant by 'spiritual hunger' and exemplifies the combination of pleasure and pain: 'It is lonely but I think that's why I like it', she replies. 'It's like living with one foot on the earth's border. You could fall over any time. That's why they do it. They're out there looking for something' (*The Toucher*. 232). As I argued in my discussion of the novel, this is related to the function of the ocean in invoking the traditional sublime.

The incident proceeds from Esther's reflections about membership of the

communist party (*The Toucher*. 229). That context generates a sense that she feels emancipated from the certainties that accompanied those years. However, the juxtaposition implies a simultaneous recognition that continuing and unresolved loss is inherent in the experience, as the following quotation, which concludes the passage, illustrates. It involves a conceptual intersection between release from certainty and entry into an infinity of repetition. The Hindi allusion acknowledges issues of representability and refers to human investment in a transcendental signifier. In a word which lies beyond Hewett's text time is extinguished. Rather than inflating the significance of a political change of heart, this indicates a desire to conceive of a co-incidence between loss and emancipation. In making the two overlap, the sublime is drawn into the text's account of the rejection of communism, which is recognised as the loss of a much larger dream:

Those years in the communist party, safe, cloistered, part of a unified vision, chaos held at bay, history made easy, *but there was no permanence, no past, no future, only a repeated pattern. In Hindi the word for yesterday was the same as tomorrow.* (*The Toucher*. 229-30, emphasis mine)

The moment signifies broadly, as a related recollection in *Wild Card* indicates. An early moment of epiphany, recalled among memories of Hewett's religious training, similarly draws attention to the function of religious discourse in her work. Ironised and carefully positioned as irrational, this incident is placed among early realisations about mortality.

As is so often the case, the interest in irrationality extends both to content and mode of writing. The following example illustrates chapter-concluding passages in *Wild Card* in which the prose alters and realism is abandoned. Clusters of detail

about a given period represent it synecdochically, and suggestions of autobiographical accuracy are subverted by imaginative distortions in the method of recording the past. Such passages maintain the hold that questions of representability have over Hewett's writing:

In Albany, at the end of that year, I *imagine* I have some kind of transcendental experience. I am walking along the beach alone in the evening, the sand glistening as the tide recedes, when I hear a voice that comes from the sky. I write a poem on the wet sand, given to me like automatic writing, but the surf washes it away and by the time I get back to the beach house I've forgotten it. Sitting on the end of the jetty staring at the dark water while my father fishes, I feel I am experiencing the mystery of the universe, but after that, until I fall briefly in love with a Catholic who plays 'Souvenir' on his violin, I set my face against all *organized* religion. (*Wild Card* 1995: 67, emphasis mine)

That determined rejection, central to *The Chapel Perilous or the Perilous Adventures of Sally Banner*, is also reflected in the ludic treatment of Joan of Arc and articulated throughout the poetry. The specific moment remembered here, for example, compares intriguingly with the subject of the poem, 'Epiphany':

a day like this
both dark and bright
with cloud
loudness of water
and found words ... (*CP*: 342)

That is, the substantive experience, irrational as it is seen to be, is resuscitated more than once in the mature writing. Again, juxtapositions are meaningful. The eponymous 'Coastwatchers' of the poem which appears beside 'Epiphany' in

Peninsula (CP: 343), also figure in a fragment in *Homeland* (189). Each reiterates the incident from *The Toucher*, described above. These repetitions and cross-textual connections comprise an insistence on their content which, in these instances, indicates Hewett's interest in the irrational and inexplicable, interests which coincide with her use of the sublime.

The 'epiphany' of the above quotations takes on diverse resonances, depending upon the terms in which it is read. It might, for example, be interpreted through feminist thinking which addresses psychic experience by means of the corporeal. For example, moments of 'psychotic depersonalisation' which Grosz describes: 'the subject's ego is no longer centred in its own body, and the body feels as if it has been taken over by others or is controlled by outside forces' (1994: 43). Such an explanation allows this kind of incident to be reclaimed for the rational and is implicit in Hewett's account in *Wild Card*. However, it does not alter the fact that hallucinatory and irrational elements of the event have remained sufficiently intriguing to be recorded so much later. This seems clear in the autobiographical passage where Hewett suppresses retrospectively, by irony, the same significance which she is simultaneously recalling that the incident had for her.

Put another way, given the connection between romantic and modernist versions of subjectivity and the notion of 'epiphany', it is noteworthy that the substance of this memory relates to knowledge rejected, rather than knowledge acquired. No 'breakthrough', or insight into truth, of the epiphanic moment is present. In Hewett's retrospections the moment refers to not-knowing rather than knowing. The very inclusion of such a memory, although suppressed in

importance, relates to her acceptances and rejections of the irrational, the sacred, the paranormal, the divine, all of which raise, in some sense, the desiring imagination and the sublime.

Hewett teases fervour, belief and conviction from institutionalised religion in *Wild Card*. Her suspicion, predominantly directed towards dogma, generally has fixed knowledge as its target, even favouring ignorance over limited, or dogmatic thinking. She valued this tendency early and presents the years in the communist party as a departure from which she retrieves a 'truer' self. As a result, the retrospective view of the autobiographical subject, Dorothy Hewett, is based on synonymy between suspicion and emancipation. The condition to which she sees herself as having been restored is 'a condition of *not*-knowing. She maintains boundaries between receptiveness to knowledge and its actual content. Her position recalls the one favoured by Bachelard when he writes, 'perhaps it is better to listen to the mythologist who reimagines than to the mythologist who knows' (1987: 90).

The commitments which replace early convictions entail continual re-imagining which Hewett distinguishes from the acquisition of knowledge. This distinction echoes the relationship between imagination and reason in the sublime, being effectively the same as Kant's in *The Critique of Judgment*: 'an aesthetic judgment, which is not a judgment of knowledge, can be produced' (Section 36: 122, 130). In turn, this claim, expanded and refined, lies behind the feminine sublime as an embrace of uncertainty. As Crowther suggests in his comments on the postmodern sublime, two 'realms of experience which border on, or overlap

with, the sublime' are 'religious awareness' and 'the organization of memory through artistic means' (1995: 7). The resonance of religious discourse throughout Hewett's writing, although she is a declared atheist, is a call on the sublime. I turn later in this chapter to 'the organization of memory through artistic means' in which other connections with postmodernism are evident.

CONVERSATION:

CMG You have been claimed for modernism, but I see a lot which is postmodern. I see your work as more inclined to uncertainty. I think you're quite explicit about it.

DH I think I am, too. And I think it's very much my own personality. I'm really uncertain about a whole lot of things. So it's bound to reflect in some way. The older I get, the more uncertain I become. I used to think I knew a whole lot of things once. Now I don't think I know much at all.

CMG I don't mean uncertainty only as not knowing, I mean it also as installing things and then critiquing them as well. So that your work can only be 'fixed' by omitting something. Would you say something about all this? The sublime. And uncertainties.

DH When I started off to write The Toucher, the first image I had in my head was of a woman in a wheel chair teetering on the edge of a cliff. It wasn't necessarily a real cliff. A cliff of the mind or of the imagination or whatever you want to call it. I also wanted this to be a metaphor for Western Australia because I've always felt — and even when I go back there I still feel it — that Western Australia is still so far away from the rest of the country that it's literally as if you stepped off in space. There's something terribly fascinating about this because it's so challenging and so mysterious, and yet also frightening in a way. And I've always wanted to set a novel in Albany because I've always felt that landscape is so beautiful and yet so foreboding, so threatening. It seemed to be the perfect place to try to bring together these

ideas that I was wrestling with. And the idea of murder, which is also very unsettling. And drowning. And standing on the edge — when she's standing on the edge of the natural bridge and nearly teeters over. And falling in love with a young man who all his life had teetered on the edge of trouble, all these things.... I wanted to make a web of correspondences between all these things so that the whole novel became a metaphor for what you're talking about, really. I really was very aware of it. Whether I'd be able to do it was another question, but that's what I set out to do.

THE UNSTABLE ARTIST SUBJECT: OTHER EXAMPLES

Hewett has been seen as relocating her early, outwardly directed political convictions into herself after rejecting communism. For example, Peter Fitzpatrick interprets self-referential aspects of Hewett's writing as 'the cultivation of a radical nonconformity through the pursuit of the romantic role of the artist individualist' (1995: 95). John McLaren writes: 'Hewett commences her writing career with a commitment to achieving a socialist community and finishes as a passionate individualist' (1990: 9). Bennett's response to such appraisals, however, delivers Hewett from the critical agenda underpinning them:

Hewett's failure as a revolutionary, either for Marxism or for some versions of contemporary feminism may be her saving grace as a writer. To some communitarian social reformers this may seem a cop out, a retreat to an allegedly outmoded individualism and liberal humanist beliefs. For Hewett, however, her paramount and reiterated commitment after 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.... (1995: 13)

Bennett is addressing critics of Hewett's renewed commitment to writing who fail

to recognise its contemporariness, which he celebrates. Implicit in his statement, however, is a view that Hewett failed in the political arena. I would qualify it to the extent that Hewett's disappointment arises from the failure of the political programme itself, rather than her performance. Her vision was larger than Bennett's defence suggests. Although it is not his emphasis, Bennett links Hewett's turn towards writing with a formulation of the imagination in which the emphasis is on freedom and mobility.

Readings like McLaren's, and others to which Bennett is responding, are validated by Hewett's own declarations. For example: 'it became possible to start to write myself out of it. And that's exactly what happened. I started to write myself out of this myth I'd constructed', and 'to order my life by writing'. The idea of a retreat into individualism cannot be lightly dismissed. Hewett's work clearly gives interrupted expression to a notion of artistic transcendence involving the romantic construction of an artist subject which postmodernism rejects. For such a subject, art is a means of containing excess, a form of transcendence. It provides the artist subject with closure. However, the interrupted nature of those claims is the focus here.

Just as Hewett does not construct Esther as a romantic artist subject, so her construction of herself is similarly unstable. Hewett's poetry demonstrates that her work cannot be characterised by individualism, for example, without overlooking persistent contradictory features. Ambivalence and a willingness to accommodate apparently irreconcilable impulses equally suggest that the committed artist-subject which emerges from the certainties of the political activist is grounded in

uncertainties.

Hewett's poetry sometimes appears to depend on the 'chiasmatic reversal' which is a feature of romantic art and would tie her to a construction of subjectivity implicit in individualism. Freeman describes this reversal as 'a shift from "victimized body" to "poetic force"' in which a subject 'celebrates a "turning away from near-annihilation"' (1995: 20).⁸ The feminine sublime resists the turn away from the potential for annihilation. Hewett's writing is characterised by the alternative continuation into risk which this suggests, and an insistent openness to multiple meanings is one effect.

A notion of artistic transcendence seems clear in 'Conversations' in *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, 1976, for example:

... never mind — if I lose

I write a poem about loss

& win. (CP 1995: 133)

However, other possibilities are also apparent. Hewett's words are compellingly similar to those Éliane Escoubas (1993) uses to describe the imagination's role in the sublime: the imagination is 'the faculty of the production of the *unimaginable*' itself. In this 'unimaginable instance' which is 'an effect of the imagination' itself, to use her terms, the sublime is experienced: 'The unimaginable, or *the sublime is the effect of a game of "whoever loses wins" played by the imagination*' (1993: 66, emphasis mine). The non-transcendence and non-closure upon which Freeman theorises the feminine sublime is operative here. That is, even the traditional

model, used by Escoubas, allows the win to be located *in* the loss, rather than entailing the subject in the transcendent move. Hewett's poem is open to interpretation as an expression of equivocation about transcendence. It may be a statement on behalf of a triumphant artistic subject, but it may equally be a declaration in which winning and losing cannot easily be extricated from each other. In this 'game of the imagination', as Escoubas shows, even the Kantian model presents imagination as 'the faculty which confounds and interferes with all the other faculties, which confuses the terms of all dichotomies and trichotomies' (1993: 69). In whichever form it takes in Hewett's writing, the sublime seems directed towards the impossibility of extracting certainties.

'Alice Travelling, 46' in *Alice in Wormland*, 1987, differently appears to make claims for art as transcendence:

the world rolled on
smoked dope & played it cool
in the Cafe of Peace love and trust
sat dying
Smack alcohol & art around her
Alice wrote it down. (CP 1995: 267)

Here, writing apparently functions in the manner of the Wordsworthian sublime. In this form, according to Freeman, the sublime is 'precipitated by a collision with mortality' and 'celebrates the self's triumph over anything that would undermine its autonomy or interfere with its movement toward transcendence' (1995: 21). If Hewett's commitment to writing is synonymous with such belief in the subjective

mastery of the artist, the subject in her writing is likely to be the self-privileging one 'who subsumes all experience into an infinitely expanding "I"', like the subject in the romantic sublime (Freeman 1995: 8). That subject would take an epiphany to mean the acquisition of knowledge and could replace her political convictions with investment in self. However, Hewett's rejections of such confidence suggest instead the concept of an imagining subject who seeks value in the idea of remaining unsatisfied and unresolved. As the following examples demonstrate, her writing suggests a subject much less sure than the 'infinite expansion' of 'I' implies.

'Alice Travelling, 46' not only duplicates the narrative content of recollections in *Wild Card*, but the conjuncture between the loss of a 'capacity for belief' and a commitment to art is present:

Alice exhausted never joined the New Left
she had lost the capacity for belief
[...]
she reinstated Art as her religion. (CP: 266-7)

There is the same transference of religious discourse from politics to art. Also, by allowing the obvious paradox to stand, Hewett avoids equating belief with religion, and simultaneously avoids equating confidence in art with confidence in Self, the equation assumed by those who read in her work a retreat into 'passionate individualism'.

Rather than being a movement away from chaos to unity — the movement of

traditional theories of the sublime — Hewett's turn from communism towards what Freeman calls 'poetic force', and Bennett describes as 'freedom of the imagination to roam where it desires', may equally well be understood as a movement *away* from Unity, but *towards* something for which Chaos is too convenient an opposition. The conceptual framework to which Hewett turns compares better with what Freeman identifies in Sappho's poetry. That is, a form of the feminine sublime in which 'linguistic and libidinal energies' turn out *not* to be 'neatly separable'. This sublime is 'visceral *and* verbal', Freeman insists, ~~and~~ occurs when a poet 'inscribes both "body" and "poetic force" *without collapsing the differences between them*' (1995: 21, emphases mine). Hewett's lines, 'Smack alcohol & art around her/Alice wrote it down', give flat equality to body and poetic force and contain the withholding of judgment which lies at the core of Freeman's argument.

The subjectivity in Hewett's writing proves to be more fluid than romantic constructions of artistic transcendence would have it. Her turn from politics back to writing is not reducible to the privileging of individual experience and private judgment on which that heritage depends. The 'infinitely expanding I' of the romantic sublime is not dominant. The 'win' which the writing of a poem represents above refers just as easily to a desire to maintain and manage radical uncertainty as to hopes of overcoming it.

At times, paradoxical circularity is a strategy for avoiding transcendence:

... back at that lonely place
where I began.

Anything's possible
now that I am alone,
anything at all,
now heaven is impossible,
and all's well.

('Anything's Possible Now', *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, 1976, CP: 148)

'In Pissing Alley', from the same anthology, is addressed to 'the anxiety of influence': 'My brain is reeling from some ague or fit/Of words, all borrowed...'. Here, the poet welcomes a modernism metonymically figured by 'Tom Eliot'; but she is simultaneously distanced from it. There is a gap between artistic desire and its realisation in writing:

Well, warm your ghostly shanks around my fire,
No execution equal to desire
Can plague my pen, I abdicate a throne,
And piddle in a gutter of my own. (CP 1995: 141, emphasis mine)

Hewett's 'individual gutter' is an effect of being a woman. The poem calls on a female literary tradition of the kind Showalter described as *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Individualism is invoked, but is circumscribed by a feminism which separates this poetry from the modernism which Eliot represents and to which, therefore, she both does and does not belong.

The feminism of the text raises other considerations. A gynocritical thread travels back through Virginia Woolf to Sappho in Hewett's poetry, and it contains an imagined synchronicity between her poetic voice and theirs:

No need to dig my ribs, of course I know
Great Sappho died three thousand years ago.

In the black mirror shadows pass, repass.
The raging gardener screams, 'Keep off the grass.'⁹

(CP 1995: 142)

Sappho's substantial presence in *Greenhouse* (1979) is noteworthy, given that she is exemplary of the feminine sublime. Because of its historical resonances, the word, 'Sappho', is itself a signifier of 'the visceral and the verbal' but, more to the point, according to Freeman her poetry incorporates 'both "body" and "poetic force" without collapsing the differences between them' (1995: 20). In this doubling, a text's willingness to testify to excess without repressing it is revealed. It is another deflection of the gesture of transcendence which settles things. *Greenhouse* contains examples which link accommodations of uncertainty with the problematics of self-representation and illustrate this willingness. The following even have direct connections with life-writing:

free will's a joke

[...]

Now that she's written out

I'm tired of her (unfortunately

biography continues, grows more

outrageous more sensational)

the journey's circular

('Lancelot's Lady', CP: 160)

In these lines, *bio-graphy* (life writing) is ambiguous, as Hewett plays with cause and effect. Writing not only records a life, it generates it, the poem suggests. As the writing persists, so the life follows. This circularity defeats linear narrative trajectories, in life, in the work of the imagination, and in relationships. It disputes the notion of author as origin. These are postmodern assertions.

In 'Coming to You', writing is a double process which produces a writing subject as well as her work. That subject is suspended in craving for the completion which artistic transcendence might give, but resolution is withheld. There is always desire for 'wholeness' which cannot be realised. Incompleteness is proposed to be the very condition of the writing subject, recalling Barthes' assertion that writing 'compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing' (1978: 99). Identity, for Hewett's poet-subject, is thus simultaneously affirmed and undermined and suggests circularity in the doubt which follows about how to distinguish cause from effect. Again, to be a writer is to be suspended in the desiring imagination:

so many roles the lives are double-crossed
it's true enough we've made each other up
but then we are so good at composition
invent a word a talisman

all writers I suspect crave wholeness
my dresses fall apart & I can't mend them. (CP: 164)

'Return' explicitly addresses the matter of certainty. The truth/fiction boundary

crucial to autobiographical writing is a site of explicit doubt here:

Time is collapsed:

the lie becomes the truth the truth the lie
& this is all we can be sure about. (CP: 169)

Doubt is not resolved. All 'we can be sure about' is that boundaries shift, definitions give way, and dependability is only to be located in uncertainty. It is the central paradox of Hewett's work.

Hewett's poetry often speculates about what is at stake in autobiographical (self-life) writing. *Greenhouse* concludes with '3 The Labyrinth', in which, until death 'the uncompleted self goes on/accumulating the world' (CP: 209). A quotation from Anaïs Nin, which introduces 'Beata Beatrix', makes the point using a phenomenological conception of identity: 'I read the legend of myself from an enormous book'. In a wider kind of circularity, this poem employs images of incompleteness to insist on the fragilities of the autobiographical project:

I am writing an autobiography, crystal-gazing my childhood
eyeglasses without a glass half a book half a toy
(*'Beata Beatrix'* in CP: 184)

In these texts, Hewett resists the polarisation which makes it possible to describe her in terms of a shift from political commitment to individualism. That opposition is mediated by insistences on the contingency of relations between self and literary/textual production, and beyond that, by a sense of how unpredictable

literary reception may be. The result is doubt about the relationship of self to text of the kind postmodernism foregrounds. Formal first person unity in Hewett's texts is shadowed by a postmodern sense that 'the dispersion of subjectivity [is] a structural necessity that both constitutes and confounds communication', to use Elman's words (1997: 193). Hewett makes no claims more secure about the process of writing the self, either as poet or autobiographer, than that which she describes in 'Creeley in Sydney':

Arriving at conclusions is so sad the reference
is enough.
To go swimming is not to get
 to the other side
of the lake
 but to go swimming.
Because I've never arrived I can't reassure you
& it's nearly time to go (CP. 156)

This honours a willingness to sustain inconclusiveness and uncertainty and amounts to a refusal to use the unrepresentability of 'the other side' as reason for not engaging in process. It distinguishes between attempt and accomplishment. It detaches desire from the teleological vision implicit in destinations, arrivals, or outcomes. It is more than an acceptance of uncertainty. It is a commitment to it.

Discontinuities in the ways in which the writing subject is represented persist into Hewett's mature writing. The desire expressed in 'Let Candid Speech at Last' (1976) is a reaction to the silence Hewett attributes to her years in the communist

party: 'For eight dumb years words lay beyond my reach'. The same desire is expressed in 'What do I do Now' of the 'Recent Poems' (CP: 407, 1994-5), where the mature poet imagines herself as a recluse, listening alongside 'lots of old mad women/in these mountains/shut up in their houses dying' and 'the wind howls/ripping my poems to shreds'. Still striving for self-expression, she is still not claiming to have achieved it. As in the earlier work, late poems entertain contradictory notions of artistic transcendence. On the one hand, it seems perfectly clear:

the poem is the reprieve
the chime the charm the pardon
suspending time

('In the Garden', *Invisible City* 1994 in CP: 388)

On the other hand, the subject and her art are held in tenuous connection:

(Fabulists
consumed with memory
dazzled and dazed
we improvise our lives
play out these scenes
before the magic backdrops)

('Return to the Peninsula', 1994: CP 348)

The presence of both possibilities indicates Hewett's acceptance of internal contradiction, not least in relation to her understanding of what it means to write

and to be a writer.

In short, Hewett's poetry repeatedly articulates a commitment to uncertainty which is a basis for linking her to postmodern discourse. Destabilisations of identity as well as a doubt-inflected, shifting concept of the imagination are evidence of the feminine sublime. Such poetry complicates a view that Hewett simply moved from doctrinaire politics to individualism, since the theory of subjective mastery on which that account depends precludes the kind of imagination which remains determinedly irresolute in the way that Hewett's does. These characteristics of the poetry draw attention to declarations of doubt in *Wild Card* and invite scrutiny of the topography she has in mind when, after her rejection of communism, she writes: 'I have found my way back again to the country of the imagination' (*Wild Card*: 247).

CONVERSATION

(I)

DH *I think that's why the web appeals to me so much. It's a thing that drifts. You know. A cobweb is so, in a sense strong and insubstantial.*

CMG *It suggests many strandedness, a resistance to 'the straight line', even subverts distinctions between circles and straight lines, perhaps. You use the image so often. In 'Lines to the Dark Tower', in which the female figure is weaving the web...*

DH *Yes.*

CMG *And the male figure takes it...*

DH *Yes. 'Lines to the Dark Tower'...*

CMG *Esther talks about 'the perfect circle', but there's always a strand which has to go off after the circle is perfected, beyond it. The perfect circle never*

happens...

DH *No. And can't.*

CMG *Perhaps that's why the web is a sublime image, enfiguring the impossibility of those sorts of arrivals. The patterns will always be untidy, will always be...*

DH *Skewed. Yes.*

CMG *The conclusion of The Toucher is like one of the strands of the web floating off. It dismantles the controlled rational style that's been there all the way through, like that strand going off beyond the circle?*

DH *Yes. When I first wrote it, the novel actually ended with Esther sitting in the garden with all those spectres and voices coming in on her. I wanted a very disoriented feeling. And then, I don't know why, but I became obsessed with the idea that the link between her and old Maxie Crowe had to be re-established. And that while she is going out into the spectral world of the garden, he is going out into the spectral world of the sea. Or something like that. And this is their correspondence. My editor wanted me to cut that last bit out, but I refused.*

CMG *I'm glad.*

DH *You have to do these things sometimes.*

CMG *Maxie's death is the one which she could have had if she'd been willing to go through with the suicide. It's peaceful, beautiful. It's a kind of drift into serenity. And she's sitting back there accepting an uncertain death. You have Esther make a commitment to uncertainty rather than to the sort of...*

DH *Yes. Yes. I think that's true. At the same time something else is supposed to be happening. Well, I suppose it's the same thing, really. He has his death for her. He embraces death for her.*

(II)

DH *The time for reflection was rather limited, but still it was always there.*

CMG *Was it? Even when you were doing all that, were you clear in your own mind that you were a writer, or while you were inhabiting all of that were you*

actually desiring to be and struggling towards it? I've wondered about this. Did you have confidence there at the heart of it all?

DH I kept on saying to myself... I met a friend I'd known in Western Australia — he was a communist, actually, a rather cultured one. I just happened to meet him in the street — he was from Sydney — and he said to me, what happened to all those novels you were going to write? And I remember saying, I'll write them, but I'm not ready yet, I don't know enough. And I really did feel that. I felt that there was something missing, something missing from my view of the world, which if I put it down then would be all skew-wiff. And of course I was right! Because I had organised myself around this dogma and I knew there was something missing. And I would have to understand a lot more before I could free myself to write anything much that would be of any use. So yes, I was aware in some part of myself.

CMG So you were pushing down suspicion? Because you have shown courage, all the way through.

DH I honestly don't feel very courageous. I think things just sort of happen, and I had to do something about them.¹⁰

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROJECT

Contradictory impulses in the poetry do not preclude *Wild Card* from being an account of Hewett's life in which the author at the moment of writing reflects upon her own enlightenment. Such a reading still leaves Hewett tied to what Elam describes as 'the epistemological anonymity of the knowing subject' (1997: 183). This is also an essentially romantic position antithetical to postmodernism. I turn now to aspects of Hewett's self-representations which militate against that analysis.

As with the poetry, concessions prove necessary first, because *Wild Card* is

marked by combinations of thought. By repeated references to Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and phrases like 'the country of the imagination', Hewett declares her obligation to the romantics: 'There are moments like Wordsworth's "spots of time" that emerge from the flux of the seasons', she writes (*Wild Card*: 38). She repeatedly recycles such moments. This debt to romanticism is well recognised. Bourke refers to 'ideas that have remained fundamental to Hewett criticism: the movement between romanticism and irony in her work, the relation between life and art, and the problematic issue of self-identity' (in Bennett 1995: 248). His view acknowledges the signals of more in Hewett's writing than a straightforward shift from communism to individualism.

Feminist critics have appraised Hewett in terms of a retreat into individualism. For example, Carole Ferrier opposes 'the ideology of femininity which informs expectations of the roles women should play' in Hewett's work (quoted in Bourke, 1995: 249). Such responses necessitate some refinement of the assertion that Hewett's feminist convictions actually limit her modernism. The value given to those limits depends upon which feminist principles are applied to her writing. Allegiances to romanticism and to modernism may just as easily be regarded as circumscribing her feminism. Hewett's feminism should be contextualised in a period when the concept of a female imagination was less problematic and feminist literary discourse was dominated by identity politics. Postmodern feminist thinking, like that which has produced the concept of *écriture féminine*, for example, had not been theorised. Hewett is increasingly attracted to resistant writing practices, but her earlier postmodern sensibility is most evident in

accommodations of sometimes abrasive boundaries between these discourses which appear in her work, and her tolerance of incommensurabilities between them.

Hewett recognises prior artistic movements as the ground of her artistry. Recognition that 'debt' is inevitable is a basis for postmodern circumspection about romantic notions of the artist subject. Elements of romanticism, modernism, feminism, postcolonialism, surrealism, socialism, and individualism circulate throughout to exhibit a sense of writing as a destination for disparate resources. This is also true of her use of genres. Fairytale, folk legend, pulp fiction, romance and other popular culture forms feed into the writing alongside texts of high culture, ameliorating suggestions that she sees herself as 'originary' artist and seeks to represent herself as an author/ity, with all that this implies. Postmodern pastiche is implicitly a critique of the artistic vision which modernism espoused and Hewett's flirtations with it destabilise representations of her as that kind of writer. As with her politics, she does not assume the exteriority necessary to such a vision and works from within. Hence, her romantic and modernist sources add to the disparate aesthetics of her work, rather than anchor them.

The knowing subject of *Wild Card* is unsettled by Hewett's play with irony and romanticism. Earlier, I commented on stylistic surges which register that history, even when personal, can neither be adequately grasped nor communicated. Where this modality takes over, the writing not only works at the boundary of desire and representability, it also reflects circumspection about autobiography. Such passages exhibit a combination of irony, which implies knowing, and

incredulity, which implies not-knowing. Resistance to certainty is implanted in *Wild Card* at a precise textual level in the combination. It is effectively a refusal to choose between opposing positions, as the following illustrates:

So we pick up the cards and build again, but the clear outlines have vanished. The houses seem to be so crowded now — full of images, noises, footsteps and change. I can hardly separate one year from the next, scarcely decipher what happened when. As it gets closer, everything moves further away. It is a mystery — this remembering. It plays weird tricks with perspective.

If I struggle hard enough, I can bring back an image suddenly spotlighted. There is a big, white, dead cat swarming with maggots at the side of a house with a false attic in a street in Melbourne.

If I listen hard enough I can hear a dog bark hoarsely and the little steam train whistle as it leaves the station. The creek, swollen with water from the hills, gurgles under the wooden bridge in Darlington.

There is the sound of boots going away down an endless, dark, frosty street. There is a baby lying asleep in his pram with pollen dropping on his cheeks. There is ... what? — I don't remember. (*Wild Card*: 57)

This is the feminine sublime. The abject image of putrescence, and hints at the unforeseen death of Hewett's child, are insistences on the body, the visceral. Mortality engulfs abstraction, but without dismantling it. These recollections relate to the remorselessness of time, regret for lost memories, for the fragmentation and reduction of a life's realities into residual 'portmanteau' images, awe at the unpredictability of the future, and so on. The reader is situated in firm relation to the remembering subject's *unknown*, a self-reflexive move, evaluating how much confidence readers might expect to have in authorial recall. This is writing invested by what Elam describes as 'desire that cannot itself be given "realist"

expression, that remains alien to realism, since it is not simply the property of a speaking subject' (1997: 190). The passage is flexed towards lived realities, and towards the vestiges of any single subject's life in the present, and beyond that to the ineffable. Suspended between the unpredictability of the future and the irretrievability of the past, such writing suspends its autobiographical subject in uncertainty. What is *not* remembered is firmly inserted into the likely paradigm of autobiography towards which Hewett's is poised.

Elsewhere, linearity breaks down and temporal collapse furthers the text's refusals to be dominated by reason. Details in the following, for example, have already been narrated elsewhere by the time this passage occurs. Different parts of Hewett's life merge here, with each other and with the text's present. The fusion resists chronology and exposes it as another 'trick' of autobiographical writing. As in *The Toucher*, the prose breaks away stylistically and rhythmically from the realism which has been governing it to remind us that realism is only a 'style' too. Such departures from 'good sense' are significant bearers of irony in *Wild Card*:

But I am looking back like Lot's wife, past the silver silo and the black sickle, I am standing outside London Court wearing the New Look, laughing with Sam Aarons in the rain. He leans across and flicks the gilt spider pinned to my lapel.

'Very appropriate,' he says. 'The female spider always eats her mate.'

My red flannel skirt whirls as I turn and see Strahan smiling at me over the heads of the crowd. The clock whirrs and strikes the hour. The rain falls. The medieval knights perambulate around the painted face, their lances tilted.

A child is calling, 'Mummy, Mummy!' all the way up the hill to the Darlington train, a ute is driving into the dusk and distance while I stand

bleeding at Joan Williams's gate, Lilla in her school uniform is coming towards me through the Guildford grass, my grandmother's dying breath fills the back room like a bellows, the wind in the unripened wheat flows in a green sea to the foot of Rock Hill. (*Wild Card*: 145)

By the epilogue, Hewett and her forbears have become uncannily synchronic in a playful present tense, and the text closes on an explicitly divided version of subjectivity, declared doubt about how confidently the author might ever be able to 'utter' her self, and a collapse of logic:

'Tuesday's child is full of grace,' chants my mother on her good days. 'Great gawk!' she screams on her bad days.

Probably both are true. A great gawk full of grace, a Tuesday's child, I stagger forth to make my history.

'You've said enough,' snaps the ghost of my grandmother, 'so hold your tongue.' (*Wild Card*: 273)

Such moments invert the problematics of representation. They play, conversely, with the capacities of writing to contain, imaginatively, what reality cannot. In texts, the dead can speak to the living and life can be relived.

SECRETS, SILENCES AND OMISSIONS

Hewett occasionally represents herself by silence, another mode of self-reflexiveness. I noted earlier that sexual relationships played a role in political and intellectual transformations described in *Wild Card*. Her personal life has been a popular orientation of Hewett criticism and Hewett's sexual history is a substantial organising theme in *Wild Card*. The issue is an opportunity to show that more is entailed in Hewett's uncertainty than disappointed political conviction. Having

noted that reflections on communism are dispersed throughout *Wild Card* so that there is a gradual accretion of doubt, to the point that it is the dominant logic of the autobiography, I want to suggest that doubt may alternatively be articulated as wonder, a theme I take up in relation to surrealism in the next chapter. Here, I use it to show that the kind of doubt which marks Hewett's work is more than acquired suspicion in the wake of disappointment.

Wonder is the sentiment of the dedication in *The Collected Poems: For Merv Lilley/in wonderment at a partnership/that has endured for thirty-five years*. Contextualised among Hewett's public declarations on her sexual history and views of sexual relations, the utterance is poised towards controversies occasioned by her personal history and brings me to my point about a function of silences, or the unsaid, in constructions of Hewett as a writing subject.

As a result of controversies, Hewett continues to be represented by omissions not her own. Given that controversy was an effect of her historical and cultural context, perhaps even the legal implications of the complex disentanglement which took place between herself and her first husband, Lloyd Davies, would be unlikely to excite public interest now. Times *have* changed. Nonetheless, those conflicts linger in the texts: a black rectangle signifies continuing need to censor quotation (in McCredde 1995: 136); and for legal reasons, three poems linked to the relationships in question are excluded from *The Collected Poems* — 'Uninvited Guest', 'Re-Union' and 'Envoi' (Grano ed. 1995: 14). So, there are occasions when Hewett continues to be linked to transgression and represented by writing not available to her readers.

However, other silences she installs herself. Since *Wild Card* is poised towards public dialogue about Hewett's personal life, one silence at its core is intriguing and multiplies the signifying possibilities of the title. Rather than being simply omitted, the identity of the first lover, the 'lost' lover, is withheld¹¹ and, in a move which undermines autobiography as a project of self-disclosure, Hewett's is wound around a public concealment in the very arena which has given rise to public attention. The strategy signifies resistance to the implicit expectations of autobiography as a genre.

Again, cross-reference amplifies significance. Absence is also highlighted in *The Toucher*. I have alluded to the maternal absence at its heart in the figure of Esther's mother. More importantly for my point here, the embedded novel, 'Ghost Letters', constructs a withholding of identity similar to the one in *Wild Card*. The hidden letters of Esther's novel are a vehicle for her writerly attempts to disrupt the fact/fiction divide:

If she could discover those real letters, she could add them to the invented ones. It would give another time shift, another dimension. She suspected that the tone might be completely different, less literary, although writers probably wrote even their private letters self-consciously, manipulating the words with one eye on posterity. (*The Toucher*: 166)

This idea of withholding also appears in 'Visitors' of the 'Recent Poems':

...between the pages of my books

I have hidden the unposted letters

when I die someone will find them

a space a breath a sigh ... (CP: 404)

In other words, a trope of concealment is suggested. Clearly, Hewett is not as unreserved about public disclosure as her early reputation for being deliberately transgressive was made to suggest.¹² Rather than deflecting equations between herself and her texts, these instances suggest that she scrutinises dissimulation and uses self-revelation as a discretionary form of opposition. However, once her self-disclosures operate in combination with deliberate withholding, another form of irresolution becomes apparent. The notions of identity which inform her personal relations with the public are obscured.

The dialogism of Hewett's texts can be discerned in such manoeuvres. In *Wild Card*, the impulse towards self-disclosure shares the stage with an explicit public secret. The silence in question is a form of critique because it responds to the equation of fiction with reality to which Hewett takes exception (*Wild Card*: 248). This is consistent with *The Toucher*, where Esther negotiates with the fragility of fact/fiction boundaries specifically in relation to authorial reputation (291). Both the fictional and life writings address suggestions which have trailed Hewett, that she has been a sexual adventurer and opportunistically self-imaging. The disclosure of a significant silence impinges on both imputations and achieves multiple effects. In *Wild Card*, a secret relationship launches the narrative of Hewett's sexual past. Honouring it places a value on the initial encounter as the inception of a woman's lifelong sexual history. This theme is developed in *The Toucher* and, as I have argued, explains the focus on Maxie Crowe at its conclusion. The emphatic omission in *Wild Card* is equally a means of adhering to a view of autobiography as a partial and inconclusive act. By it, Hewett

recognises connections between writing and the real, and at the same time insists on their impurity. However, it simultaneously represents her as desiring to write a scrupulous autobiography. The inclusion of an exclusion connects her with theoretical issues about fact/fiction boundaries, challenging readers who like to discern facts in her fiction and repudiating the quest for an authentic subject implicit in that kind of reading. In this instance, Hewett achieves it by what she refuses to say.

Silence also centralises a theme of loss. *Wild Card* presents a self-deprecating and un-idealised version of maternity, in which Hewett locates one certainty: the pain of her first child's death remains the most significant of all losses. Of that event and of having left him, she writes: 'Twenty years later, my sister asks me have I ever regretted that choice. "I'd never leave a child for any man again," I tell her' (*Wild Card*: 144).

Unlike *The Toucher*, in *Wild Card*, return is unpleasurably linked to maternal lineage:

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 turned into a grown up woman's nightmare. I even experience the identical loneliness my mother must have felt, the sense of hopeless entrapment. (*Wild Card*: 237)

Hewett situates herself in a chain of forbears through her mother: 'a pretty postmistress kicked an exploding primus down the main street of Corrigin' (*Wild Card*: 272). Her grandmother, as ghost, is given the last word (*Wild Card* (273).

Hewett's position in this lineage is emphatically as descendant, as daughter. Her own maternity is realised almost exclusively in terms of mothering her lost child. Her living children are given a protectively low profile, similar to what is afforded the first lover, but unstaged in comparison, and only relevant here for the fact that this heightens the status given to the latter as 'secret'. The meagre sense of Hewett's current family is also a likely function of the incompleteness of *Wild Card*, concerning, as it does, only the years to 1958. Whatever the reason, it is noteworthy that the gap between Hewett's lived reality and the autobiography as it stands is widest where she represents herself as a mother, and this is in some measure an effect of what she excludes. The revised choice Hewett described to her sister is a telling one.

CONVERSATION:

(I)

DH *It's one of the things that's always fascinated me, this whole concept. The female body and its — what grows out of it. In the sense of how the fact of being female colours what you do, say and think. In what ways. Both negative and positive. And on top of that, the position that you find yourself in, in the world.*

CMG *Luce Irigaray argues that we think we've imagined the difference, but never really have.*

[...]

One of the things which she sees to have gone missing is the maternal. Where, for Freud, the sons killing the father lies behind the cultural imaginary, she sees a missing mother. In The Toucher, you have Maxie drifting off into the maternal.

DH *The whales.*

CMG *You use the word 'maternal' there.*

DH *And also the image of the sea is, as you know, of a great maternal bosom of some kind.*

CMG *Is that another 'uncertainty'? The sea as the sublime, the falling off, but simultaneously the return to the maternal, to the site of comfort?*

DH *Yes, Yes.*

[...]

CMG *Certain things are simultaneous. They seem like oppositions, but you've actually overlain one on the other?*

DH *Yes. When Esther goes off, as she thinks to commit suicide, she is trying to get back to that great maternal, enveloping sea. But she changes her mind.*

CMG *So would you tell me about the mother, the maternal?*

DH *I suppose I'm going to start delving into a bit of amateur psychology here. I never got on with my own mother at all.*

CMG *That comes through in Wild Card fairly clearly.*

DH *And I always envied those people who had close relationships with their mothers. Not that she didn't want to have a close relationship with me. She wanted to swallow me whole, that's what she wanted. Not that she knew it I suppose, but it seems to me what she wanted to do. So, I suppose, you know, in a primitive sort of way, my whole attitude towards the mother figure is extremely ambivalent. Because my relationship with my own mother never worked at all. I had six children, which is a lot in the modern world. I left my first husband and child, deserted him, I suppose you'd have to say, to go off with a lover. And he died. Therefore there was always a terrible feeling of guilt.*

CMG *The pain of it is clear in Wild Card.*

DH *The guilt was appalling. It was almost as if every child I had was a replacement, but he never could be replaced.*

(II)

CMG *Another thing that I wanted to ask you about is the significance of*

women's relationships with each other; woman/woman relationships, whether sexual, or mother and daughter. Going back to Irigaray's idea that the presence of the mother has never been fully rendered in the imaginary world — all of those things led me to thinking about why Maudie's so important. She's not the only one, but she's a figure of connection between women, women as friends.

DH She's the one in a sense who's lasted the longest because she's the earliest, whereas Emily has stayed, and it's different, she's much more pragmatic.

CMG So in relation to these as heterosexist texts and a notion that to be feminist you have to be in any way rejecting of men.... I don't think that's the point at all.

DH Oh I don't, either. Yes I agree with you totally. Absolutely. I think men are infuriating and fascinating.

CMG We go back to the female gaze that you've 'galvanised' all the way through, and woman/woman relationships are there as well all the time.

DH Yes, well they're certainly meant to be, very strongly there. Which is why I have those characters. Because I wanted to explore that side of her life.

CMG Some women might not know that as a side of their lives?

DH You mean friendship with other women?

CMG Yes, and to give it that kind of a place — a psychological place. That symbolic significance, too?

DH Probably not.

CMG So the novel makes it clear that once again it's both/and.

DH Well, even though it's fairly obvious, but Maudie herself is a lesbian. In a way, it's sort of important, but not terribly important, as far as Esther's concerned. She is capable of love for both sexes.

In many respects, it seems clear, Hewett's writing is as concerned with what can and can't be said, and what should and should not be said, as it is with forms of self-disclosure.

SELF-IMAGING

In another expression of the idea that she is driven by individualism, Hewett has been seen as a self-conscious image-maker. Feminist commentators drawing critical attention to her work sometimes assume transparency in her self-representations. I examine two examples to argue that Hewett's engagements with the public may usefully be reinterpreted with less certainty about connections between her public profile and the woman herself.

Barbara Holloway calls them 'her habits of self-representation' (1995: 123) in an essay analysing publicity photographs. Lyn McCredden refers to her 'self-staging autobiographicality' (1995: 128). Both critics formulate a relationship between images of Hewett and her sense of authorial identity in ways which are sympathetic to the exigencies of relationships between author, text and public domain. However, both assume that 'individualism' is the basis of a 'changing photographic persona, that is both "her" and a theatrical image', as Holloway phrases it (1995: 115). I infer a more postmodern sense of performativity from Hewett's reinventions of self than either suggests.

Holloway regards Hewett's career as a form of negotiated self-imaging through photographs in the visual media and on book jackets. She argues that photographic texts produce Hewett as an artist subject and 'uncover the embeddedness of writing in representations of the writer' (125). Taking this point and accepting Holloway's inventory of how Hewett's changing personal style is revealed in her negotiations with the media, I remain uncomfortable with attributions of intentionality which underpin the analysis and the meanings given

to them: 'The look Hewett adopted.... This prevailing image is still a performance...', and so on (1995: 122-3). For Holloway, the extent to which Hewett can be said to have governed the processes by which her reputation grew is only limited in the sense that Hewett is '[s]haped by ideological conventions' like everyone else (Holloway 1995: 116). For her, public/private, artist/woman tensions surface in pictorial images to reveal ambivalent desire, on Hewett's part, to be both artist and *desirable* woman. Holloway interprets this as commitment to a conventional femininity in which it is possible to trace a history of gender. However, the essay implies that mutually contradictory meanings of 'artist' and 'woman' have drawn Hewett into complicity with image-making processes which objectify women (1995: 125). At one level, Holloway is enjoining female artists to represent themselves in more useful, more feminist ways and implies that Hewett might have done so had she been emancipated from a feminine ideology which Holloway thus subtly deplores. For her, Hewett has heroicised 'female sexual individualism' in ways which deplete it of its 'material and social reality' (1995: 121-2). Among Holloway's convictions about that reality, then, is dependence on the notion of an authentic, unstaged self which postmodernism problematises.

Hewett's changing images might conversely be interpreted as symptomatic of uncertainty about, rather than claims for, female sexual individualism. Linked with feminist arguments that identity is discursively produced and a signifying practice, her image-awareness seems more radical than this analysis allows. Threadgold's summary of feminist attempts to show that identity itself 'is *not one*' is a reminder

of another apprehension of identity:

a network of multiple positions, constructed in and through many chains of signification, always realised in texts, enacted and performed, read and written, heard and spoken, in verbal and visual, graphic, photographic, filmic, televisual and embodied forms. (1997: 5)

In contrast, Holloway assumes that Hewett naively conflates art and life, fiction and truth:

It is precisely in the ideologically disputed zone of the sexually active female body, *which Hewett's poetry and plays insist is the author's bodily presence*, that subjectivity becomes problematic. The photographs are far from a transparent record of Hewett's life, and are not more revealing of the 'true' bodily Hewett than her writing is of her lived experience.

(1995: 116, emphasis mine).

It is far from clear that Hewett's texts make only this insistence, or that pictorial representations comprise the attempts at 'self-enhancement' of Holloway's analysis. The same documents are also evidence of acquired submission to public life and inevitable image-making and commodifying processes. Homologies between fictional female bodies in Hewett's texts and her own body are one way in which she patrols the fact/fiction, art/life boundary. They challenge traditional rigid constructions of sexually desirable women in literature, and readers who insist on this equation between author and text.

An analysis comparable to Holloway's could be made of Hewett's use of a fashion discourse in *Wild Card*, in which she continually includes details of clothes worn at significant moments. This focus is interpretable as an investment in conventional femininity and desirability, but that would be a diminished, and

diminishing, reading. These are historiographical signifiers and belong to a vestmentary code Hewett uses to key her texts to period and social context. They also indicate awareness of non-verbal semiotic processes. That is, rather than being merely an insistence on 'self-presence', they reflect the way 'the imaginary and the actual are involved in a complicated economy' in autobiography, to use McCooey's phrase (1996: 56).

Hewett's willingness to be autobiographical in such ways is evidence of the 'organization of memory through artistic means' which Crowther (1995) argues is among 'realms of experience which border on, or overlap with, the sublime' (7). It would be reductive to assume that, where recall is organized as details of dress, physical appearance and other minutiae of self-representing activity, we find evidence of Hewett being governed by a limited and limiting paradigm of femininity. Rather, they indicate that she is aware of the 'intextuation' of the body, a phenomenon Grosz describes:

Bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses, which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, narratives not always or even usually transparent to themselves. Bodies become emblems, heralds, badges, theaters, tableaux, of social laws and rights. (Grosz 1994: 118)

In her commentaries on Hewett's work, McCredden is mindful of complexities postmodernism may bring to interpretation. Yet her analysis of Hewett's image-making and fluctuations in her public identity is similar, even though she links

these to 'a poetics of the body' and to resistant writing practices. The multiplicity of public Hewett selves is summed up by McCredden: 'Hewett's poetic career has been remorselessly constructed around her body as a text, or many texts: all those Dorothyesque bodies and salacious poetic narratives' (1995: 132). Whilst McCredden links Hewett's identity as poet/artist to postmodernism, she interprets Hewett herself through her writing and assumes an autonomous 'choreographer' at work behind the scenes of the authorial reputation.

What is at stake here is whether or not Hewett can be accurately described as an individualist in the old-fashioned sense, which has implications for the view of subjectivity operating in her writing. Again, individualism seems to dominate *Wild Card* at certain points:

I can't remember the exact moment when I became conscious of the divided self. There is the girl who moves and talks and rages and loves and there is the writer who watches and writes it down, who even in her most passionate moments is saying, 'Remember this'.

This cold, detached consciousness that always writes it down afterwards without fear or favour, who is she? Does this mean that I will never be able to experience anything fully with sincerity and passion? Whoever she is, she has come to live with me for the rest of my life — analysing, taking account of, describing everything ... a monster? (*Wild Card*: 90)

However, the passage is reminiscent of Barthes' assertion with which I began, that 'writing is precisely *there where you are not*' (1978: 99). It describes critical detachment, but simultaneously expresses submission to the desire to which Barthes refers, and is another link to a sublime which, as Freeman has argued, 'does not depend for its construction upon *the repression* of excess' (1995: 25,

emphasis mine). For Hewett, the monstrous is being unable to be fully present in the lived moment and the experience of lagging behind her life. Writing is thus a pleasure arrived at by displeasure. By making her writer self a monster, she expresses mistrust and uncertainty about the desire to write which she has elsewhere called 'salvation'. In Barthes' words: 'writing sublimates nothing' (1995: 25).

This is another illustration of conflict between constructions of identity in *Wild Card*. In comparison the following is speculative about identity and the emphasis is on flux: 'of course I will never go back. Or if I do I will be somebody different who remembers this only like a long-ago horror movie I once lived through' (264). That is, Hewett accommodates divergent theories of identity as rhetorical tactics necessary to writing autobiographically.

Such doubts have no place in McCredden's analysis of Hewett's changing public images, which also allows the apparent 'desire to be desired' to dominate. This desire, according to McCredden, 'threads its sinuous way through even the most parodic and refusing of poems' (1995: 138). Elsewhere, McCredden is sceptical of the conflicting combination of self-historicising and self-mythologising which Hewett's work exhibits (1996: 68). However, that very ambivalence exemplifies the capacity to accommodate irresolution. The feminine sublime operates in the contradictory tendencies, which represent, In Freeman's words, the 'simultaneously disabled and empowered self', testifying to what exceeds it (1995: 16). Seen through this framework of testimony, fluctuations in Hewett's public identity are converted into willingness to remain 'at risk', as much

as a will to be in control of public images

McCredden identifies 'a powerful and exemplary female textuality' in Hewett's poetry (1996: 81). However, the desire to which she links it is

that dangerous and sticky notion of desire: desire for bodily and artistic presence, and for a sense of agency and a designated role or mission, together with a knowledge of the absence or negation of self, which has become the postmodern dilemma, *par excellence*. (1996: 68-9)

Another value for desire is possible. Because the version of postmodernism on which her emphasis falls entails existential terror, McCredden finds in Hewett's writing the desire of a subject seeking to dissipate that terror by means of self-triumph (1996: 69). As she acknowledges, however, both 'Postmodernism and desire are roving concepts' (1996: 68).

Hewett's postmodernism is not nihilistic. Desire which exerts the commitment to uncertainty disentangles uncertainty from nihilism. It makes it possible to frame the mobility in Hewett's 'habits of self-representation' in different ways from what McCredden finds as a result of this paradigm of postmodernism.

Aspects of Hewett's career interpreted to mean that she is vulnerable, even subservient to fame, are also evidence of willingness to understand that the body has a role in signifying practices. As de Lauretis puts it, as well as being 'generated by codes and subject to historical modes of sign production', bodies are 'vehicles for social meaning' (1984: 25). Theoretical collisions are likely between an author whose sense of identity proceeds from a will to change, commitment to uncertainty and a logic of doubt, and critics whose feminisms differently contest the boundaries of female subjectivity, and whose arguments remain attuned to

what has been summed up as 'strategic and political essentialism ... partly grounded in a real bodily essentialism' (Assiter 1996: 126). In these evaluations, the certainties of the critics' feminism is evident. For me, the determinism of Hewett's participation in the production of her celebrity remains open to question and she remains indecipherable in relation to a boundary between submission and control.

It is a question of whether Hewett's feminism limits or links her writing to a modernist conception of the artist subject. To reiterate, postmodern acceptance of instabilities and inconsistencies in identity cannot be countenanced by some feminists who see these as depleting agency. Conversely, feminism may entail clarity about the nature of femininity and even femaleness which postmodernists find unsustainable. Internal contradictions between these positions in Hewett's work make it possible to place her writing on the cusp of possibilities between which she does not choose.

Whilst I subscribe to McCredden's overall view that Hewett has courageously attempted to rewrite the female body, I find less possibility of control over media representations than she suggests in her examination of Hewett's engagements with the public arena, and more submission in Hewett's 'performances'. McCredden writes: '*one possibility is to avoid such marketings of the self, refuse to enter into a compact with the camera, at least. But Dorothy Hewett began her dangerous flirtation with self-imaging three decades ago*' (1995: 133, emphasis mine). On a pragmatic level, this alternative may have required 'bodilessness'. The camera is not easily resisted. Its use has altered even the extent to which

individuals can depend upon the presumption of innocence.¹³ Images produced for public consumption on behalf of fame, or the construction of a public personality recall simulacral effects of mass market commodification which mark postmodern culture, and of which it is necessary to be mindful. Both Holloway and McCredden finally construe Hewett's relationship with the camera as an expression of self-interest and volition, rather than of tactical submission to these forces.¹⁴ In their analyses, Hewett's history is strung between Holloway's presumption that her self-staging has been deliberate and governed, and McCredden's suggestion that she has exercised too little control where control is assumed to be an option. In both cases, changing cultural possibilities and the possibility of Hewett's awareness of them are under-recognised. Her cooperation in constructing public profiles equally suggests awareness that personal will has only limited currency in the matter. Construing Hewett's engagements with image-production as deliberate self-commodification, or mythomania of some kind, effaces the power of commercial and media culture and risks assuming transparency of intent, a problematic assumption.

De Certeau's distinction between tactics and strategies suggests another possibility. Holloway's and McCredden's arguments rest on a view of Hewett as a poor strategist, by supposing that 'a subject of will and power ... can be isolated from an "environment"', to quote de Certeau (1984: xix). The modernism/feminism nexus causes both to assume the existence of what de Certeau describes as 'a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*' (1984: xix). Hewett is better viewed as a tactician. De Certeau explains the difference:

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.... The 'proper' is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time — it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.' Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'. The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements.... [T]he intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is 'seized'. (1984: xix)

This constitutes another way of considering a commitment to uncertainty and could aptly describe the self-representing aspects of Hewett's career. She counts on neither a 'proper outside' nor her own exteriority. Tactics are a camouflage practised by subjects in everyday life, to use de Certeau's eponymous phrase. Subjects are not passive in relation to the culture they inhabit. De Certeau reflects on the importance of popular culture and redescribes a cultural whole, without erasing heterogeneity, into which he reinserts privileged discourses such as scientific rationality, but as the partial discourses that they are (1984: 6). He explores how in everyday life 'the weak' use 'the strong' by operating in culture in precise ways. The argument contains a generalised echo of early feminist insistences on women's covert power within traditional feminine/masculine regimes. For my purposes, it recuperates Hewett's engagements with image-making as 'maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike' (de Certeau 1984: xix). Having read the 'heterogeneous and mobile

data', to persist with de Certeau's terms, Hewett has effected decisions and decided upon 'ways of operating' consonant with her positive stance towards popular culture and obvious understanding of its consumerist nature. They are also consonant with her sense of herself as one of 'the weak' in the cultural and artistic context.

The cover photograph of Bruce Bennett's *Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays* yields another kind of reading, then, from those made by Holloway and McCredde. It represents Hewett in self-reflexive mode, positioned in front of the 1990 Archibald Prize-winning portrait by Geoffrey Proud. As an assemblage of two images of her, it signifies more richly than Hewett 'performing a pose', which is Holloway's reading (1995: 124). The photographic image mimics the painted image behind her and sets in play the possibility of serial textual selves which sit in varying relation to the real: the recessive, painted image is both larger and less lifelike; it is the one inclined towards art and away from realism. The more looming and distorted the dimensions of the figure, the further she is from the origin of the gaze. This is no subject receding towards vanishing point; on the contrary, the greater the slippage of verisimilitude, the larger the figure. The combination implies Baudrillard's copy for which no original exists since nothing in the photograph actually proclaims the authenticity of the foreground figure in relation to the painted one. The combination becomes an implied question about the concept of authenticity and an allusion to questions about whether it is a lost possibility.

The relationship between photographic image and painted image illustrates that

the commitment to uncertainty which develops after Hewett's early, more rigid political endeavours leaves room for a political consciousness. It evinces doubt about what may be defined as 'the proper' when it comes to tensions between high art and populist cultural production. Hewett participates in the image as an object in a still-life, making her sense of the culture of the simulacrum observable. Nothing in the composition allows the viewer to determine an authentic subject. Rather, it addresses links between artistic status and the construction of female subjects through spectacle, image and display. In Felski's words:

The linked imperatives of scopophilia and epistemophilia, the desire to look as exemplifying the desire to know, are blocked by the blankness of a body that is nothing but surface, an empty screen that simultaneously attracts and repels the hermeneutic gaze. (1995: 194)

Between the photograph of Hewett and the photograph of the painting of her, a conceptual space opens up in which the living subject is elsewhere and other than what is contained in either image in this representation. The photograph signals a position on the matter of public availability, as well as the authentic self. It invites flexible interpretations of Hewett's dispersion of identity in other encounters with the camera, and invites re-examination of the extent to which she really does proclaim autobiographical status for her texts, as critics pervasively assume. Just as often as she makes that claim, she also insists that art, her own included, mediates between herself and the world. This ambivalence, crucial to her writing, is obvious in these self-representing visual images.

The recent cover of *Dorothy Hewett: Collected Poems*, (William Grono ed., 1995) provides a related example. The golden girl image of the Percy Trompf

postcard achieves several things. It is a reprise of the romantic image of the golden-haired child of the West Australian wheatbelt and signals Hewett's interest in the unachievable circularity referred to earlier. As an exclusively textual figure and distanced from any literal connection with Hewett now, it salutes the complexity of these very questions of self-representation, self-invention and self-imaging. The image is a bundle of signifiers which connect with Hewett's writing as well as with writing about her. It has a dialogic quality, therefore, being poised towards interpretations which purport to find in pictorial images Hewett's actual desire as a living subject to represent herself in particular ways, or which use multi-directional relationships between her life and processes of image (re)production to evaluate her political and literary commitments. Hewett has described her hope for this text, that it will 'lay some of the canards: that I can only write autobiographical poetry, that I'm a completely wrapped-up-in-myself, ego-conscious person' (in Kinsella, 1996: 38). She explains her ironic view of the cover. The dialogism of the image is clear in her remarks:

Bill Grono sent me as a joke a postcard that he'd discovered in the West Australian Art Gallery, by this guy who did a series of kitsch paintings for the West Australian tourist trade around the late thirties.... And I rang Bill up and said, 'You know that postcard: you might think I'm mad, but that's the cover'.... He was worried they would take it at face value. I said, 'Fuck them, if they take it at face value, too bloody bad'.... Merv was against it, because he said I was sending myself up. I said, 'That's the whole point.'

(Kinsella 1996: 38)

Kinsella responds: 'You always do send yourself up, and that's anti-egotistical. Surely your work is about defeating the ego ... A lot of people don't realise that

you can actually joke and be serious at the same time' (1996: 38).

In a postmodern context, the reproducibility of images, which Benjamin saw as emancipatory, has caused less celebratory thinking.¹⁵ Resonances of Jameson's account of postmodern culture as the urge to package and commodify human subjects relates to the question of Hewett's cooperations with publicity. Jameson understands postmodernism 'not [only] as a style but as a cultural dominant' (1984: 56), and Hewett's engagement with the camera and other image-making technologies suggests her sense of the processes to which he alludes. Subjects are 'themselves commodified and transformed into their own images', Jameson argues, in a point echoing Baudrillard's. Jameson explicitly links the 'waning of affect in postmodern culture' to the role of photography (1984: 61). Again, a more positive view than either Jameson's or Baudrillard's may be derived from de Certeau's suggestion that, within the impositions of a consumer culture, ordinary people use 'procedures and ruses' to 'compose the network of an antidiscipline' (1984: xv). Self-styling visual Hewett images connect with concerns about the manufacture of celebrity, and with examinations of the distance which ensues between the living person and the socially and semiotically encoded one. Hewett's sense of what it is to create a reputation as Author is no more grounded in certainty than her ideas of what it is to be one. She submits, radically, to the logic of her culture.

In a related way, Hewett describes the difficulties of writing for the theatre, its mixed pleasures, and comments on 'the hostility of critics':¹⁶

CONVERSATION:

CMG The same thing happened to Patrick White. I think about Bon-Bons and

Roses for Dolly in Perth, and the flowers down the toilet and all that and I think it wouldn't happen now. White felt the same disappointments, didn't he, in the reception of his plays?

DH He did. I was enormously influenced by White. As a playwright. He was trying to do some of the same things I was, only at a much earlier period, and therefore was even more confronting. By the time I came along at least he'd been there, even if not accepted in any large way. So, the hostility was so personal, and so vicious, that you couldn't help but think that there was some hidden agenda here of which you were not aware which had something to do with — something very strongly to do — with hatred of women.

CMG Did you think you were in a different position from White because you were a woman?

DH Yes. I was always, I think, extremely reasonable in rehearsals and working with directors, even when I disagreed with them. As women have been taught to do, I tried to be reasonable and rational and discuss things properly. What amazed me was that I found out afterwards that many of these people had said how difficult I was in rehearsals. And I wasn't. But I knew that many male playwrights were extremely difficult in rehearsals and were always interrupting things and demanding and being quite recalcitrant. I was never like that. Rather the reverse in fact. I think I should have been more...

CMG Too accommodating?

DH Yes. And so I was using all the experience — and the guile — that I'd learnt as a woman. Because don't forget, I didn't really start writing plays until I was forty. I wrote a few plays when I was very young, but there was no theatre and you know, what was the point? I came back to it when I was forty. But I'd always wanted to. So what happened was, I'd had a very brief honeymoon, round about the time of Man from Mukinupin — which always astonished me. Here was a play that was accepted by nearly everybody. It was a smash hit at the Opera House, travelled all over the place, and although it was written about a little country town in Western Australia seemed to hit some nerve with people. And then I wrote another play called The Fields of

Heaven which said a lot of things I wanted to say about conservation, and salt covering the land, as well as saying a lot of things about the relationship between men and women. Because it's basically a love story, about this Italian and a young girl, and how it's the fact that love turns sour that turns the land sour. That was the concept. It went on in Perth first and was attacked for being a melodrama. Then it went on at the Opera House and it didn't do too badly. Nothing like *Mukinupin*; about eighty percent houses or something, and had some quite bad crits. And the Sydney Theatre Company, with whom I'd developed a relationship, dropped me, just like that, as if I'd never existed. . ' the same time they were busy promoting Louis Nowra in particular, who I think is a very talented playwright, and to a certain extent Stephen Sewell, although that was more the *Nimrod*. The *Nimrod*, which was supposed to be the centre of Australian Plays, had never put on one of my plays and was actively hostile towards them. The *Pram Factory* in Melbourne had never put on any of my plays and was, I suspect, as actively hostile to them. These were the two centres of the birth of Australian Drama. Something funny was going on, obviously. Anyway, I wrote a few more plays — there were actually three of them — that never had any professional production of any kind. And I thought to myself, what's the point? You know, why am I going on bashing my head against this brick wall and all I seem to be engendering is this enormous amount of hostility. Wouldn't it be better to switch over and do what I've always wanted to do secretly, write some more novels?

Hewett's reputation as a controversial figure goes back at least to the reception of *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* in Perth in 1972. In an unpublished letter to Clem Christesen, then editor of *Meanjin*, she outlines events which led to the Playhouse Theatre's cancellation of the play. She testifies to experiencing little control over the public sphere:

I have just had a pretty heartbreaking time myself. My new play, Bon-Bons

and *Roses for Dolly*, at the Perth Playhouse has just had its season cut by four nights because of public hostility, and lack of audiences. The violent almost pathological response by many Perth citizens has been disturbing, even frightening... pornographic letters, destruction of posters, the photographs in the foyer torn up and shoved down the dike, cancellations of season tickets, screams of obscenity and filth. Apparently the play hits some people where it hurts. The West Australian gave it a bad review, not on the basis of the skill of the writing, or the direction, and performance, but on the grounds that it was a depressing and ugly play that left people without dignity and hope in the future. My best review, strangely enough, came from the Catholic Record. They praised the play wholeheartedly. Katherine Brisbane's review in The Australian was also favourable. I myself think it by far the best play I have done. So *Mother Grundy* lives again. The Playhouse has broken its contract with me and, apparently, there is nothing I can do short of spending thousands I haven't got on litigation, and probably losing the case anyhow. Besides, this would probably blacken me in the eyes of other theatre managements in Australia. The Playhouse did not even have the decency to inform me of the decision to cancel the rest of the season. I was informed by a newspaper reporter looking for a knocking story. And so we go on. (Dorothy Hewett Correspondence, 1967-73, unpublished letter dated 18/7/72: 2)

Such experiences have led to Hewett's acceptance that writers are at the mercy of critical reception. However, she is equally persuaded of inevitable slippage between her intent and what appears in the public domain. That is, she submits to mis-representation. This has a bearing on her wry tactical participations in the subsequent production of a public reputation. Experiences like this one with *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* have continually furthered her conviction that the arena of self-representation is an arena of risk.¹⁷

Bourke (1995: 236-8) regards 'the Hewett legend' as an effect of the 'focus on

personality' and on 'Hewett as character, as flamboyant artist'. For him, it derives from recycled tales about her critical reception and, being based on events and commentaries which occurred 'off the page', lacks historical substance. *Bon-Bons and Roses For Dolly* was closed for more complicated reasons than parochial narrow-mindedness, in his view. Nevertheless, Hewett's sense of powerlessness over those events and the controversy which followed are conveyed in the letter to Christesen which, significantly, was not a public text. It is a reminder, therefore, that Hewett's 'material and social reality' (to recall Ferrier's phrase), is as relevant as any other here.¹⁸ It indicates little pleasure in, or desire to build, a reputation as a transgressive artist. That is something Hewett submits to, rather than constructs, but she also resists being determined by it. Combined, her diverse reflections about the past produce a narrative in which her own resistances and the context which defined them both play a part. The unstable boundary between these two forces for defining her is a boundary along which she writes.

A RETURN TO THE SUBLIME

The place of the sublime in Hewett's writing is evident in continual overlap between the autobiographical resonances of fictional writing and poetry, and conversely, the literary/fictional resonances of the autobiographical writing. An effect is that the inscribed self is always 'elsewhere', as I have suggested but, also, the feminine sublime emerges in the continuous spinning of a fact/fiction boundary into existence, another result of non-compliance with a demarcation between the two. In whichever mode she is writing, its other is always also

encoded. Continual overlap between fictionalised life-writing and autobiographical fiction creates a conceptual 'space' in which it is possible to discern Kristeva's poet giving 'witness' to 'the perviousness of the limit' (1982: 61). By allowing her own identity to be the basis of her writing, Hewett is caught up in the elaboration of 'the outside' described by Kristeva: 'by means of a projection from within, of which the only experience we have is one of pleasure and pain' (1982: 61). This ambiguity in Kristeva's account of narcissism has a parallel in Freeman's (1995) model of an imagination which remains in the position of reaching beyond itself in the feminine sublime. It does not seek the closure immanent in notions of self-disclosure. Hewett's persistent use of her life as the ground of her writing is a further indication of the feminine sublime, and even psychoanalytic discourse makes it clear that her focus on self is a richer aspect of her work than crude desire for self-promotion.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe finds potential for 'readerly pleasure' (1990: 194) in mixtures of authorial self and created character, and in the 'to and fro play' (1990: 194) between fact and fiction. His analysis enables the history of Hewett's engagements with publicity to be untangled from such assessments. It also broadens the context in which we are able to interpret her sense of herself as a writer. He writes:

*It is the divided self mobilized into facets or fictions, masks or episodes, that we respond to in much contemporary writing, from Elizabeth Jolley's dangerous archipelago of novels to Dorothy Hewett's *Alice in Wormland*.... The manifestation of division makes for a desirable narrative.*

(1990: 194, emphasis mine)

Wallace-Crabbe's remarks raise a possibility of another language for describing Hewett's engagements with her identity, one which moves away from psychoanalytically influenced models of interiority/exteriority altogether.

SPATIAL ORIENTATIONS

Critical discourse offers a variety of tools for reading subjectivity. Following Deleuze and Guattari, ways in which subjects inhabit the world spatially have produced competing representations of it. Conceptualisations of space are understood to be social and specific. As de Certeau writes, lines on a map also 'refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by' (1984: 97). Focus on space and movement has led to what he describes as a 'rhetoric of walking' (1984: 99) in which Space means Place-in-practice. Benjamin's concept of the city, derived from the flâneur's passage through it, is recalled here. However, as Janet Wolff (1995: 52) shows, the flâneur was a quintessentially modern figure of mobility and an example of how modernity may be 'defined entirely from the point of view of men, since women were not (and, for that matter are not) at liberty to engage in aimless and anonymous strolling'. Implicit in use of the flâneur's view of the world to represent modernity is modernism's dependence on the universal subject to which postmodernism emphatically does not subscribe. Hewett has continually seized traditionally masculine space. This applies to her communist party activism, desire to be a writer, and directiveness in relation to her public profile. It exemplifies her willingness to *risk*, and distances her from modernist dependence on a universal subject. However, she also refracts her

autobiography through domestic space, organising it, as she does, through the series of houses in which she has lived.

Attention has been directed to the cartographies of a life in postmodernism. Foregrounding its spatial structures shows *Wild Card* to be a narrative of relocation in which an autobiographical subject is constructed in relation to the literal mobility of her negotiations with the world. In this context, Muecke's reflections on 'the series'¹⁹ enable an alternative reading of Hewett's career in terms of a series of 'I's. Both autobiographical statements and public self representations may be viewed as the production of a chain of selves, rather than through organic concepts like growth, or metamorphosis, in which claims to a final subjective unity are privileged over claims to discontinuity. Threadgold's concept of the self as 'a network of multiple positions' is relevant here (1997: 5).

Muecke learns from Aboriginal culture how to understand relationships between movement, place and art by re-imagining artistic production in discontinuous terms linked to changing location. Spatial considerations within a text gain importance from this. Muecke writes: 'The *series* is a nomadological feature, like that of travelling through the country, one place after another, and a chain of stories' (1997: 211). When foregrounding correspondences between 'story' and place, he explains, 'one cannot be subsumed by the other, each one is a site of renewal and decay, as in *the desire to paint and to live from plateau to plateau of intensity, without a climactic structure*' (1997: 211, emphasis mine). Brought to bear on relationships between place and writing, this insight into nomadic artistry provides a link between commitments to mobility and the

feminine sublime. The concept of a desire to keep moving from plateau to plateau of intensity is essentially a restatement of the willingness to remain in/at 'risk'. Both models adhere to a principle of uncertainty.

Discursive interfaces here are fraught with dangers of appropriation. However, the aboriginal artistic values Muecke describes, weave into postmodernism through postcolonial critique of universalising concepts of identity. Also, postmodern rejections of official history have resulted in increasing emphasis on the local. Resistance to modernism's respect for 'high culture' generates intersections between postcolonial and postmodern thinking which recall those between feminism and postmodernism. So, whilst there is no equivalence between Hewett's life and work and that of a nomadic artist, the concepts make it possible to highlight the fact that, like the subjects in *The Toucher* and *Joan*, the autobiographical subject of *Wild Card* is too mobile and too carefully situated to be a claim for universality. As de Certeau and Benjamin show, movement is a significant aspect of how we inhabit our worlds and of ways in which we conceptualise or imagine them. A notion of serial identities allows self-transformations, which circulate through Hewett's writings and are effected in her public self-imaging, to be repositioned. The serial Joans of the history play become differently suggestive, too. And, since the autobiography is explicitly structured by a series, being organised in terms of Hewett's retrospective progress through houses and places, it has a spatial orientation with implications for the ways in which identity is constructed.

The desire for change, which I have suggested is a singular impulse in

Hewett's life and writing, is apparent here. Discontinuities in her self-imaging may even suggest an inclination to resist Western story-telling's dominant structures, described by Muecke as 'a hierarchically constructed narrative of plots and sub-plots' (1997: 211). Both Muecke's elucidation of the series, and Freeman's account of the feminine sublime, depend on a formulation of desire in which continuing mobility is critical. Both are positively oriented towards the absence of climax and closure.

These considerations recall the 'roaming' imagination Bennett recognises in Hewett's writing. Wordsworth's 'spots of time' (*Wild Card*: 38, 76) resonate again, too, although they relate to moments given purely retrospective significance, and so are a function of memory rather than desire. A concept of desire hinging on 'serial intensities' is forward-looking, not nostalgic, and another sign of positive orientation towards unpredictability. Hewett's retrospections are as poised towards the future as the past. This is clear in the concluding words of *Wild Card*, quoted earlier, where Hewett codifies both future and past in terms linked to uncertainty. A contingent future is opposed to a residual and uncanny past.

Neither Hewett's acts of public self-representation, nor her orientation towards autobiographical writing, can be contained by a psychoanalytic conception of desire. That conception depends on opposing lack to 'plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity', to quote Grosz (1994: 165), the opposition which remains intact in descriptions of Hewett as an individualist. She also orients identity towards 'becoming' in ways which resist these suggestions of (en)closure. Her

autobiographical subject is complicated by a processual model of desire akin to what postmodernism produces and which Grosz summarises as desire which 'assembles things out of singularities and breaks things, assemblages, down into their singularities. It moves; it does' (1994: 165). Mobility, change, risk, discontinuity, combination and self-misrepresentation in Hewett's writing combine to make it apparent that the horizontal, surface-oriented imaginings of postmodernism have a place in her re-imaginings of self.

CONVERSATION:

DH *It's very eerie country that wheatbelt country because it's so open, stretches for miles, and there's this huge sky over it, and sense of space and light and everything which I love, but there's also this sense that you shouldn't be there, somehow. I remember riding my pony about, and the night would come down and I would get this total terror. I didn't know what I was terrified of, and I would ride very hard. I'd gallop home to get back into that lighted circle of civilisation, because something seemed to be out there in the bush. Lawrence talks about this, doesn't he? This presence in the bush. And I think it's there. I don't know, is it the spectres of the murdered Aborigines? Is it the past? What is it? It's something terribly ancient; terribly, terribly ancient landform.... There's so much that's mysterious of which we know absolutely nothing. Or virtually nothing.*

CMG *I was thinking about myth, and your use of myth, and I wanted you to talk to me about that, if you would. I was thinking about the importance of magic and ghosts — the presence of the uncanny in your work. It's another account of the un-representable, if you like.*

DH *I suppose, rationally, that I don't believe in ghosts, but I do. I believe in presences, or something. I do believe in places having presences. For instance, this house, which is very old — as soon as I walked into it, I didn't feel ghosts,*

I felt a sort of benign presence, and I've felt it ever since. Someone else has said that middle room is thronging with ghosts. That was the room that they used as a tap room. This was a Cobb & Co. stopping place in about 1837 or something, which is old for an Australian house. And that was the tap room, where they would have come and had a drink while they watered their horses on the way over the mountains. She said there was someone who came in there and served the drinks every evening.

Now, I don't mean that I'm conscious of ghosts in that sense. I mean they seem like real beings to her. To me, it's just a sense of presence and it's all linked with the past, with the burden of the past, and in another way with the liberating influence of the past. Both. Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by the past, when I'm writing or thinking or whatever, that I hardly know where I am.

Spatial symbolisms arise from the structuring of *Wild Card* around Hewett's recollections of houses. She describes the first house as 'the house of childhood become myth, inhabited by characters larger than life' (*Wild Card*: 3). It is edenic: 'The farm is the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden, but I always know that under the bridal creeper and the ivy geraniums, the black snakes wait and slide' (32). The biblical allusion has been taken as nostalgia. McCooey (1996: 55-57) interprets the notion of all subsequent houses being constructed of cards as a figurative falling away into insubstantiality. For him, a contrasting substantiality in the first house grounds *Wild Card* in nostalgia for lost childhood innocence and a desire for return which the edenic myth evokes. It represents 'imaginative loss the adult feels for the lost garden' (McCooey 1996: 56). This assumes that mythic attachments provide such substance and, in turn, relies on a version of subjectivity in which what Bachelard calls the 'ossification of internal experience' is apparent

(1987: 30). Bachelard's spatial poetics evoke alternatives, as I will show.

Without denying Hewett's debt to myth, I want to shift attention to the notion of insubstantiality itself. The myth which constructs the first home as an object of yearning also flaws it. Hewett is attentive to the negative aspects of the edenic narrative, as the quotation above shows. Rather than being 'an attempt to regain the condition of childhood' (McCooley 1995: 54), or an instatement of lost secure origins, the childhood home shares in the insubstantiality of subsequent locations. Only the modes of insubstantiality are different.

That is, impermanence pervades the spatial imagery. The South Perth house is a 'magazine' house which 'throbs like a bruise' and is 'swollen ... with hatred' (*Wild Card*: 54-5). The house in the hills belongs to fairy stories, becomes a 'washout', and is 'like a real house' only years later, when Hewett will never occupy it (*Wild Card*: 56-7, 136-9). Residences take on the dimensions of reality retrospectively, as an effect of Hewett's estrangement from them. In this way the imagery reiterates the sense of *unreality*, discussed above, which Hewett attaches to the ways in which she experiences the present moment.

Houses, like clothing, are markers of change and signify social and cultural context. In *Wild Card*, they signify cultural terrain against which Hewett's mobile self-awareness was played out. And change is specifically attached to movement; this is not a colonising view of the world. Rather than being images of suspension, enclosure, or territoriality, the house series is paradoxically a means of attaching greater importance to passage than to residence. They work in tandem with imagery which directly resists containment by alluding to the sublime. The

emphasis on the coastal edge and sense of expansiveness in descriptions of the wheatbelt farm are examples. The one interior site explicitly yearned for appears in the following quotation, and is just as explicitly only literary in origin, and so given the status of fantasy. That is, 'closure' is again placed beyond reach and even the structuring images indicate a willingness to remain in the process of imagining, the willingness attributed to the feminine sublime.

Moreover, spatial images may designate combinations of contrary impulses. For example, after events in the communist party and the breakdown of her marriage, Hewett leaves Sydney. The city is symbolised by the harbour bridge in a perspective regretful enough to resist any equivalence between 'being filled' and 'fulfilment': 'The bridge spanning the harbour arches over our heads, singing in the wind, and I remember the first time I saw it when I was only five years old: two incomplete arches, and a space in the middle waiting to be filled' (*Wild Card*: 263). In both *Wild Card* and *The Toucher*, departures from Sydney, marriage, the communist party, are couched as emptiness. This is hardly surprising, but worth noting for the spatial orientation it indicates. In figures of passage and emptiness, Hewett fuses ideas of loss with ideas of desire and dream, producing an overlap between retrospection and receptiveness. Such fusions maintain the simultaneous poise of the text towards past and future.

Even speculations about 'the ideal place' follow 'the loss of everything' and so comprise a combination of contrary impulses:

Perhaps now that I have nothing I can find that empty space of sunlight,
'the clean well-lighted place' in the middle of the world.

'The only irreconcilable loss,' writes Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'is the

loss of one's private solitude ... but one morning you will walk into an empty room and be cheerful.' (*Wild Card*: 265)

I have referred to this imagery in *The Toucher* (220, 261), which generates Esther's ambivalence about solitude. The 'middle ground' of Angela Carter's phrase, discussed in Chapter One (*The Toucher*. 220) is at work here, too. That quotation reappears as a fragment in *Homeland* (Hewett 1991). These repetitions comprise an insistence on the ambivalence to which the images refer.²⁰

Just as there is simultaneous interest in past and future, so houses bearing traces of their prior occupants symbolise intersections between past and present. Once again, this is devoid of nostalgia. Far from being idealised, the past may be malevolent. For Hewett, desiring freedom from history does not prevent it from lingering. As the narrator says hopefully in the opening of 'The Darkling Sisters': 'That's one way to confuse the ghosts. If they can't recognize the place they might stay away forever' (Hewett 1993: 147). They don't, however. Hewett's spatial poetics continually convey the sense that the past inhabits a place, evincing an interest in time/space intersections without claiming mastery of them.

This further contests the view of Hewett as individualist. As Margaret Higonnet (1994: 3) shows, individualism is a bourgeois concept linked to space, having developed alongside the public/private dichotomy. Hewett encodes private space with instabilities, insubstantialities and dangers which seem antagonistic to the ideas of retreat from public life immanent in an individualist account of her development. The repeated fantasy of well-lit solitude is both an imagined arrival and a falling off — once again, a form of doubling in which pleasure and pain

coincide.

Houses do not immediately evoke the sublime. However, my quotations from Hewett's writing throughout have contained accumulating hints of it in this imagery. Bachelard's reflections on spatial poetics make the connection, by separating spatial images aligned with memory from those aligned with imagination. Seen as a poetics, such imagery has broader functions than merely representing domestic and private spheres. Reflecting on 'the oneiric house', as opposed to the memory-oriented 'childhood house', Bachelard links the desire of the imagination to a desire for solitude. The link with the sublime is in that connection:

The oneiric house is a deeper theme than that of the house of our birth; it corresponds to a more profound need ... We dream of it as of a desire, an image that we find sometimes in books. Instead of dreaming of what has been, we dream of what should have been, of what would have stabilized forever our inner reveries.... (1987: 98)

This gives meaning to the tension between the childhood house and the oneiric house in *Wild Card*. As a site of yearning, Hewett's oneiric space is explicitly linked with the sublime when she escapes with her children from an unsalvageable world of bad politics and a bad marriage into an uncertain future:

Underneath lies the darkening Nullarbor with the waters of the Great Australian Bight breaking against its giddy limestone cliffs.

Perhaps now that I have nothing I can find that empty space of sunlight, "the clean well-lighted place" in the middle of the world.

(*Wild Card*: 265)

Any nostalgia in her recollections of the farmhouse where her memories begin has

already been overwhelmed:

We drive away in the late afternoon, leaving the house huddled under watery clouds, and I am not sorry. There is nothing left of the dreams of childhood. We can never relive them. Thomas Wolfe was right, you can't go home again. (*Wild Card*: 237)

Implicit in Hewett's imagined space is what Bachelard describes as the 'dialectic of the dreamer withdrawing into ... solitude and initiating waves of reverie in search of immensity' (1987: 98-9). In such ordinary spatial images imagination intersects with desire for faith, and links them to the sublime. Overall, the structuring of *Wild Card* by a series of houses, and propositions of an oneiric space, inflect the text with a dream of stability which is not confused with assertions of having found it. The commitment to uncertainty is maintained in that distinction.

Spatial imagery has implications for the construction of a writing subject, since it is related to the role Hewett gives to the imagination. Bachelard locates realism and memory in writing which favours perception. Where the emphasis falls on imagination instead, according to his argument, writing has the dynamism and instability of a mirage. In his view, perceiving and imagining 'are as antithetic as presence and absence'. He writes: '*To imagine is to absent oneself*; it is a leap toward a new life' (1987: 21-2, emphasis mine). This both recalls the action of imagination in the feminine sublime and reframes Barthes' assertion that, 'writing ... is precisely *there where you are not*'. Where Barthes' formulation turns on loss, Bachelard's is a positive formulation which turns on the writing subject's active desire. It parallels the movement in descriptions of the imagination's function in

the sublime. He is emphatic: 'it is the journey which interests us' he writes, 'the continuous passage from the real to the imaginary' (1987: 21-2).

Bachelard's poetics, like Muecke's description of movement through a series of intensities, provides an alternative way of noticing relationships between place and creative activity. Whether it derives from myth, paper, flesh or card, each house in *Wild Card* relates to 'the imaginative role of language' and the 'riches of the tropes generated around a word' which Bachelard attributes to a mobile image (1987: 21-2). None is evidence of a desire to stabilise these recollections, or to secure Hewett's narrative of the past as the authoritative one. Rather, her memories are doubt-ridden and description repeatedly resists realist presumptions.

Memories of a place introduce most chapters: 'The first house sits in the hollow of the heart...' (3), 'This is the house of my adolescence... (54), and so on. As the list of places she has occupied accumulates, so does their unexpected effect of signifying the ephemeral and temporary nature of habitation, rather than the reverse. A series of houses, then, produces intersections between stasis and movement and weighs the text in the direction of imagination rather than perception, and uncertainty rather than control.

As I stated in Chapter One, Benjamin cautions doubt about assuming a clear boundary between voluntary and involuntary memories, but it is possible to speculate that Hewett's houses operate in a comparable way to Proust's madeline, that in the act of writing, attention given to each site has given rise to involuntary and unexpected recollections. Benjamin's caution is a reminder that a text like *Wild Card* necessarily refers to events in which the author's past intersects with

that of others. The conjunction is a point of risk for an autobiographer, since it is the point at which her record may be contested. For this reason, it should be noted that Hewett assembles her memories in ways which combine acknowledged elements of uncertainty and randomness in her retrieval processes with respect for intersections between her own and a collective past. In particular, she limits her perceptions of events by insisting also on the role of her imagination. It follows that the autobiography displays resistances to certainty about the extent to which writing itself may be viewed as a transcendent act.

CONVERSATION:

CMG You said something interesting about your publisher from Virago in Homeland, the collection edited by George Papaellinas?

DH Oh yes, yes. That's right.

CMG I was interested in this piece because it impinges on The Toucher. You write: 'these clever English women. How backward and somehow ephemeral, restless, weightless they make most Australian women seem. What is it that makes us so lacking in weight? Is it the ruthlessness of our lives in this continent? The continual sense of exile and rejection of being blown away...' And then, 'It's in the men too, perhaps even more so. I've always hated it, rejected it, and wanted a belonging, wanted a rootedness.' It's a really tough appraisal and you include yourself in it. I was interested in that desire for rootedness, desire for belonging. And whether you can ever have it?

DH I think — I don't know, this is all supposition — but I think that Australians are born with a sense of exile. Still. And maybe all colonial peoples are born with this, I don't know. I don't know enough about all the other ones. But Merv and I went across to England in 1990 — no, 1989, because our daughter was at Oxford — and we stayed there seven months. And the only time I'd ever spent in England before that was three weeks or

something, and only once. I was absolutely fascinated. We mostly lived in the country — we didn't go into London all that often — or the sort of semi-country anyway. But the feeling I had of the rootedness of those people! How they were absolutely a part of the landscape they lived in, and you couldn't imagine them anywhere else. Whereas I can always imagine Australians somewhere else. It's as if they were like driftwood or something.

CMG It probably is something to do with the things that you're talking about — colonised peoples. Another area that I think you're sensitised to — it's very clear in the texts — is those presences and those voices, such as of aboriginality, that it's only recent generations that have struggled with attempts to have a non-English voice, to get away from that, and we probably haven't actually achieved it yet.

DH Yes, well my grandparents used to talk about going home. My grandmother was born in New Zealand, and my grandfather in Beechworth in Victoria. And yet they still perceived England in some weird way as home. It's quite obvious that as a third generation Australian I can't ever say that, I mean Australia is home.

CMG So you're of a generation where you're resisting that and also can't feel the rootedness that we hope will follow that eventually.

DH Yes.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that Hewett's inclusion of youthful 'revelatory' experiences, even in autobiography, indicates a positive orientation towards the uncanny and irrational and a capacity for wonder. Examples of the miraculous, the marvellous and the supernatural are plentiful in the fictional writing also, and as I show in my next chapter, link Hewett to surrealism. Their relevance here is for connections with questions of representability, and Hewett's (un)certainly about

identity, which they imply. Their presence in even the autobiographical writing gives rise to a construction of subjectivity which resists both faith and despair. In the words of Escoubas: 'The resistance by means of which the imagination elaborates the sublime is not the position of the object, but the very position of *Offenheit* [Openness]. Not the yawning of the abyss, but the patency of Openness' (1993: 69). This 'openness' is another way of detaching postmodern uncertainty from nihilism and, in my view, most closely approximates Hewett's position.

It impinges on the question of whether, in writing *Wild Card*, the subject, Dorothy Hewett, finally commits to an originary humanist self by engaging in the requisite acts of personal retrospection and inscription. The writing of autobiography may alternatively be interpreted as an attempt to imagine an inaugural 'opening up'. In Hewett's case, this is signalled by evidence that, after her rejection of the 'salvation' which communism failed to deliver, she countenanced again the 'unlimitation' and the 'unforseeable' which Escoubas tells us 'are the modality itself of the *sublime*' (1993: 69).

A concept of 'opening up' adds meaning to the liminal spatial figures discussed in the context of *The Toucher*. Such liminality, related to the sublime, suggests caution about how rigidly we attempt to define the subject position from which Hewett writes her mature work. Identity is consistently enfigured in terms of, or contextualised by, insecurity, instability, mobility, or the unknown. To assume that she has retreated to the foundational self of traditional humanist constructions in relation to her own identity is to suppress these strands of her discourse.

In turn, this has implications for how far she may be said, despite her own

assertions, to have adopted the certainties and élitist aesthetic criteria of modernism. Hewett's feminism is a complicating factor in that version of her artistic commitments. As McCredden shows, her feminist consciousness gives rise to a subject whose 'female bodily experience [is] inextricably tied to artistic and historical imagination' (1996: 81). Writing is a bodily act and Hewett insists that being a woman means specific things in relation to it. From the earliest poems she has focused on female sexuality and insisted on active female desire. On that ground alone, she does not adhere to a universalised artistic subjectivity. Nor do her repeated assertions that, by writing, she is pattern-making and imposing order on life tie her artistic vision to the modernist agenda. We are left wondering where the inflection would fall: *pattern*-making, or *pattern-making*, that is, whether the emphasis is on process and postmodernism, or on the transcendent artistry of modernism. For Hewett, writing is not the originary and revisionary activity that it was for modernists whose work was nonetheless exemplary for her. In comparison, she is engaged in processes of rearrangement, re-circulation and intertextuality which, in postmodern thinking, are recognised ways of understanding creative production. Esther's words in *The Toucher* can be superimposed onto Hewett's vision: 'no permanence, no past, no future, only a repeated pattern' (230).

I have described Esther's reflections in *The Toucher* on the relationship between the dead and the living, and real and imagined worlds. She remembers people from her past: 'I'll never see any of them again.... They would become part of that ghostly tribe, her own personal shades *gathered up* out of the past, never

faltering, incapable of change' (293-4, emphasis mine). *Wild Card* is such a process of 'gathering up' for Hewett. If the idea of subjectivity which it adumbrates seems immutable in places, that is because the act of writing suspends a subject in the 'web of correspondences' which Hewett considers binds any individual's story together (*Wild Card*: 256). Her postmodern sensibility is evident in the way she continually reopens the field of the contested self.

In the end, *Wild Card*, like *The Toucher*, is a tissue of the circumspection which inhabits postmodernism about how to think about writing and being a writer. Hewett distances herself from notions of writing as either a 'creationist' act, or a monument to the self in which an author's ego is finally 'knowable'. At the same time, she radically submits to the fact that this is how writing itself may be 'caught in the act'.

1. Iterability is also evident in this process of quoting Chambers quoted in Muecke. I see this as another way of preparing for the conversational interruptions, or irruptions, for which I am making a case here.
2. Although I cite Terry Eagleton's work on Brecht and Benjamin, I am aware that Eagleton's studies claim these writers for different purposes. In his subsequent work, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), Eagleton rejects the passivity of postmodernism, the view of it from which I distance myself here. It is Eagleton's insightful readings on which I draw.
3. My source for the poetry is *Dorothy Hewett: Collected Poems*, William Grono ed. and cited as *CP* from this point.
4. Lawrence Bourke's excellent and detailed examination of the history of Hewett's critical reception makes this point (in Bennett 1995: 241): that media interest in 'the colourful' has meant a dependence on anecdote about the extent of hostility towards her. However, he properly stresses that to turn to textual sources alone for the history of her reception would be reductive.
5. In Hewett's engagement with self-imaging, Lyn McCredden finds 'at best a dubious freedom ... which leaves the subject utterly vulnerable' (1995: 132). Although the context is not quite the same, Hewett's life and career have widely been regarded in terms of attempted emancipations which are now considered to have doubtful value. Hence, I use the phrase deliberately. McCredden's work on Hewett will become central later.
6. I am reminded of comparable attempts by George Orwell and Simone Weil to reposition themselves. Malcolm Muggeridge summarises their efforts: 'They were both possessed with a passion to identify themselves with the downtrodden and oppressed, which they sought to achieve by sharing their way of life and experiencing their deprivations' (Forward to *Simone Weil* 1979: x). Hewett's efforts deserve to be valued in this manner, and have not been. I make this point because of a tendency I discern to belittle aspects of Hewett's activism as self-serving and lacking in seriousness. Intersections between her sexual and political history and the likely privileging of a woman's sexual history over her political one have possibly occluded the significance of this commitment to praxis. Lloyd Davies, whose perspective would obviously be determined (without in any way being dishonourable), provides one such example: 'In recent years Dorothy has endeavoured to portray herself as something of a civil libertarian heroine by reason of her appearance before the Commission'

(Lloyd Davies 1987: 11).

7. This is reinforced by the poem on the same subject, 'Coastwatchers', from *Peninsula*, 1994, in *Collected Poems*: 343.
8. In this passage Freeman is quoting Hertz's interpretation of Sappho, in which she sees him to be resisting a refusal of containment in Sappho's work. This was dealt with substantively in my comments on theories of the sublime in relation to Freeman's theorisation of a feminine sublime.
9. I take this to be a reference to the incident in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which Woolf describes herself being expelled from the lawns of what she calls Oxbridge, pp.5-6.
10. Hewett's remarks on the use of appellation in her work are also relevant here. I quote them in Chapter Four in the context of surrealism.
11. Listed in the appendix as 'secret lover': 91-3, 115-116, 117, but also 144.
12. The substance of the controversy about *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* in Perth and other examples are scrutinised by Bourke in his essay, 'Dorothy/s Reception in the Land of Oz: Hewett among the critics' (in Bruce Bennett, ed., 1995: 218-36). I do not re-examine these in detail and assume their general content to be understood by my reader. This is an effort to move on.
13. Instances of the inability to evade the camera, such as Lindy Chamberlain's, show that public self-representation leads to distortions which profoundly affected an individual's life. We cannot assume the real presence of the person in any image.
14. Since first writing this, the death of Princess Diana has caused a heightened consciousness of the question of control over media-constructions and production by any subject.
15. Benjamin's essay, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936) famously considers the effects of reproducibility on how we value art objects. Celebrating the advent of mass culture, he argued that the relationship between art and tradition would be transformed by the possibility of plural copies (1992: 215). The 'aura' of uniqueness, which was an effect of the residual past attaching to 'high art' objects, would be removed, he argued: 'Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics' (1992: 218). It also produces an historical divide between what he saw as fascist aestheticising of politics and communist politicising of art (1992: 235). Although Benjamin moves away from this opposition, he continues to see mass culture as an emancipation from 'hidebound' views of art, a view which belongs among

Marxist debates of the time about high art versus the fetishisation of popular culture. As I have argued, Hewett was aware of the European arena and responding to issues debated in this context. Both the immature political activism which divided her from her family and her later involvement with the communist party are linked to them. These matters are not usefully sheered away from the Australian context. If nothing else, Hewett's life writings testify to immediate effects of the European debates about art and social responsibility in this country. Her work inserts readers (and viewers) into these divides.

16. See my Chapter Four (342) for the quotation from our conversation in which Hewett describes her pleasure in collaborative writing, but acknowledges how vulnerable this writing context makes her.
17. I have edited the few typographical errors of the original to do justice to the content and spirit of the text.
18. As I write this, I am mindful of the closure today, 12th October 1997, of the Serrano exhibition at the Victorian National Gallery in Melbourne. This closure is due to attacks on the image entitled 'Piss Christ' and members of the gallery staff which are motivated by religious zealotry. There is irony in how Hewett's difficulties in 1972 are continually attributed to a supposed Western Australian parochial narrow-mindedness. Hewett has often been the occasion of critical commentary which shores up centre/margin relationships in Australia in this way.
19. Stephen Muecke's concern is aboriginal art, not the same context, but nevertheless, the significance he gives to the series resonates in relation to Hewett's use of places in which she has lived as the structuring principle of the autobiography.
20. The phrase is given its source in *Homeland* (1991). Angela Carter uses it in her Introduction to *The Poems and Stories of Walter de la Mare*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Con/Fusions and Fabulous Subjects: Hewett's Surrealism

HEWETT'S SURREALIST ORIENTATIONS

Hewett's affinities with surrealism have a significant place among the networks of similarity and difference through which her writing may be read.¹ They create further scope for connecting her work with postmodern thought, not only because a layer is added to the artistic and socio-political affiliations on which the writing draws but, in particular, because the sublime is the dominant aesthetic in both discourses. My chief interest in the surreal elements of Hewett's writing is for the dependence they suggest on a form of the sublime which, in turn, depends on a radical commitment to uncertainty.

In this chapter, I emphasise two ways in which Hewett uses surrealism. Firstly, she shares its preference for disparate and disjunctive compositions which are antithetical to coherence. In this mode, her work may refer to abjection and approach a sublime aesthetic by that means. Secondly, she is interested in 'the

marvellous' which for her, as for the surrealists, comprises a critique of rationalist thought and celebrates imagination. In this mode, her surrealism has links with the sublime, since the marvellous essentially mimics the action of the imagination on questions about representability.

It needs to be acknowledged at the outset that Hewett's uses of surrealism also characterise her affiliations with modernism, obviously, and mark her writing as conventional. As Nettlebeck observes:

The term 'modernity' is used to designate the postmedieval age of European Enlightenment — the age of science and reason — as well as to designate the collapse of that Enlightenment tradition in the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century, a once-radical movement now considered to be, in itself, conventional. (1998: 2)

However, postmodernism entails the recognition that no space is entirely convention free. In this spirit, I read Hewett's writing for cohabiting conventions, an aspect of her eclecticism, or the kind of postmodernism which produces forms for which Robert Venturi has argued: 'less simple, more complex forms of unity, which constitute ... "the difficult whole"' (in Cahoon 1996: 325).

In Hewett's prose, modernist literariness is generally fractured by a protest-oriented popular culture aesthetic, a sign of her receptiveness to 1960's politicisation of popular culture. This feature of her work shares the impulse of postmodern architecture in which previously coherent styles and aesthetics inhabit a single site. Hewett may not produce unequivocal collage, or pastiche, but mixture in her writing is nonetheless symptomatic of openness to rupture, which

was also a feature of surrealist art.

I discuss here the idea that surrealism is a pathway between the discourses of modernism and postmodernism in some respects, a fact apparent in Hewett's use of it. Just as *Joan* demonstrates her interest in debates about the traditionally hegemonic discourses of science, reason and religion and their exercise of authority over an individual doubting, wondering and resistant subject, so her surrealism is 'a critique of origins not a return to them' — Hal Foster's definition of a resistant postmodernism (1985: x). Rather than simply defining her as an 'old-fashioned avant-garde' thinker, therefore, surrealism in Hewett's writing also distances her from that position. Difficult to define, it is a site of the confusion of literary categories, and relates to her recognition of a still-developing body of convention over the time that she was writing, particularly for the theatre. Ambivalence which arises from the fact that surrealism links her to both modernism and postmodernism only further problematises these distinctions, and the presence of surrealism becomes, in itself, an instance of uncertainties governing Hewett's texts.

In asserting that Hewett's writing exhibits a logic of diversity, I do not want to use that description as a way of smoothing over the terrain to which it refers, and the 'seamed', surrealist features of the writing provide an opportunity to resist the temptation because they are the site of an aesthetic precedent for that logic. In general terms, surrealist forms of expression revel in diversity, fracture, fragmentation, differentiation and reconfiguration. The result is various fusions of disparate imagery.

Surrealism is disjunctive: Meret Oppenheim (1913-?) produces a fur-lined, fur coated cup which has an effect on imagined ingestion more provocative than watching someone eat a lemon (*Fur Breakfast*, 1936, in Bradley 1997: 43). It frustrates expectations: signifiers of regeneration and decay are blended in Leonor Fini's (1918-?) painting of a woman's full-breasted torso rising from a lake of darkness watched by semi-submerged skeletal, sharp-beaked birds. The image hints at female ascendancy and autonomy — the end of the world as Fini knew it, perhaps, and indicative of a complicated nexus between feminism and surrealism which I will discuss (*The End of the World*, 1948, in Chadwick 1985: 17). Surrealism employs boundaries as sites of connection as well as distinction: Toyen (1902-80) connects the organic and inorganic in an image of a girl hanging upside-down against a wall of which she is also an extrusion (*Reldache*, 1943, in Chadwick 1985: 169). In such examples, surrealism seems oriented towards holding difference within the field of vision, characterised as they are by the very fact of incommensurability, and giving expression to, rather than suppressing it. Or, put another way, instead of recuperating or minimising difference, surrealists produce texts in which a rudimentary critique of what Irigaray describes as an 'economy of the same' takes form. They make a display of their resistance to the suppressions of alterity which, she argues, have dominated the imaginative landscape (1984, 1993). Despite this quality in their art, sexual ideology among the artists is problematic, as I will acknowledge more carefully, and this fact should be taken into account when describing work that surrealist texts do.

The question of Hewett's familiarity with specific practitioners of surrealist art

is beside the point. Their artistic commitments provide a lens through which surreal characteristics in her writing may be read. My selection of surrealist women artists as a springboard for that comparison, for the most part at least, allows that reading to be sensitive to the sexual politics of the comparison.

Hewett uses blunt juxtapositions to produce analogies, as the surrealists did in both visual and verbal texts. Real and fantastic subjects often butt up against each other in her plays, a process illustrated in my discussion of *Joan*. As I will show here, one effect is that boundaries between the forms we use to represent identity are placed firmly on the agenda. Transubstantiating subjects suggestive of myth and play, like several characters in *Song of the Seals* and *Golden Valley*, are combined with naturalistic character constructions. Such subjects are also vehicles of less playful critique. The politically inflected transformations of Mukinupin's residents, the different 'textures' of corporeality given to characters in *Bon-Bons* and *Roses for Dolly*, like the multiply fractured Joan, are connected by the fact that the aesthetic used to portray them is an effect of unlikely combinations, obvious rupture and rejections of coherence.

Perhaps surrealist painting most famously comprises a collection onto one visual space of a conglomeration of signifiers. 'The real' is referred to in bits and pieces, as it were. This is illustrated in Salvador Dali's paintings. *A Dismal Sport* (1929, in Bradley, 1997: 10), for example, combines recognisable body parts, clothes, insects, statuary, and architecture as a set of signifying conjunctions which appear to float across the canvas in a blend of literalism and fantasy. Conjunctions between signifiers, rather than the signifiers themselves, provide the

sense of unreality in such texts. Details exhibit naive literalism predicated on, and explicitly referring us to, the dream of mimesis, being rendered in a high degree of realism. However, the disjunctive, unexpected connections between them simultaneously query and resist it.

Hewett similarly speculates about reality and realism by throwing multiple signifiers together into a single context and using abrasive combinations to achieve her purpose. The dark side of town in *The Man From Mukinupin*, for example, is contrived by combining references to astronomy, water divining, aboriginal cultural objects, Shakespearian literature, stereotypical young love, widowhood and sexual exhibitionism, World War I service and a local history of racial massacre. The play assumes that these collective ingredients are disjunctive and the disjunctions are geared to produce analogies between scientific argument and superstition, sexual and cultural emancipation, global war and racial oppression, to name but a few. The audience/reader makes connections with lived experience and historical event through the very disparities in which the play's surrealism lies and which are placed in the service of an ethical position. As I have shown, it is a matter of debate whether this sense of purpose divides the writing from postmodernism.

Hewett continually uses the strategy. It produces the political texture of *Song of the Seals*, where a traditional Celtic myth is reconfigured by using surreal visual effects and converted into an unlikely vehicle for addressing questions of conservation, oppressive government, capitalist culture, literacy and so on. Human subjects are played off against fantastic ones which, in this case, are based in a

notion of hybridity. For example, we are given to understand that Myrna Moonlight, *a selchie in her fifties*, only disguises her non-human features, and both her 'forms' have currency in the text. The concept of hybridity is also favoured by Marigold's solution to the estrangement of the Selchie, Fyshe, from his marine existence by the lack of a skin. She contrives to have a patchwork sealskin constructed from donations, a figure in which collage is also at work. In *Golden Valley*, sound, light and transformative effects contest the trappings of reality and argue for a dimension of wonder which, the play proposes, is a weapon against individualistic capitalism. Here metamorphosis is the key to transforming subjects. In relation to modernism and postmodernism, the appearance of both concepts in her work — metamorphosis and hybridity — echoes Hewett's openness to the paradigms of both paranoia and schizophrenia in *Joan* and similarly places her in a relationship with both modernist and postmodern thought. They are evidence of her pluralism.

In *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals*, 'bits and pieces of reality' are fused with magical, marvellous elements which are its antithesis. Stage directions and notes illustrate the combinations, as the following quotations show. I quote at length because the content indicates the importance of sublime imagery even to Hewett's most playful work, and her related interest in liminality. Moreover, these quotations suggest the allusiveness which enables my comparison with postmodern architecture above. The overarching point here is to illustrate the disjunctive encounter between signifiers of reality and fantasy which produces uncertainty about the status of the real. It recalls strategies used in *Joan* to

question the status of Truth.

In her introduction to the published children's plays, Hewett writes:

For *Song of the Seals* I moved into another landscape central to my imagination, the sea. Again I used a shape-changing animal myth, the Celtic myth of the Selchie, half-seal, half human and exiled my Selchie community on the Australian coast, setting them amongst the *real* world of woodchippers, big game fishermen, boataramas and National Trust villages. There were even faint echoes of *Alice and Wonderland* in the trial scene, and of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* in Willow Ogilvie's opening voice-over. (1984: 11)

The SETTING for *Song of the Seals* makes the point another way, explicitly connecting Hewett's intentions with surrealism and giving us a sense that she deploys it to suggest the primacy of the imagination:

Mystery Bay, a lonely beach between the sea and the spotted gum forest. A stretch of sand with two black rocks and a cliff face — the sea a shimmering backdrop. Out to sea are three black rocks, the Brothers. Upstage is the house of Mrs Moonlight: it is composed of bleached verandah posts, a door, a window, a fireplace, a narrow staircase, a kitchen table, maybe a fishing net strung up. It is a surreal space with no walls at all, a house that is no house but magic, a figment of the imagination.

(*Song of the Seals*: Act One)

The SETTING for *Golden Valley* similarly employs objects to anchor the play visually in a real world, but in her AUTHOR'S NOTE, Hewett indicates that these references should not produce a coherent effect. Here, too, signifiers of reality and fantasy are combined. She writes:

The play may be performed by eight actors. Nim plays Joe Anchor, the Wishing Tree and Yarriman; Uncle Di doubles as the Warden and Tib as

the Mother Superior. The animal characters should be given only stylised appearance of animals; and the Wishing Tree may be represented by a green stockinet sack like a giant-sized baggy stocking. Nim's falcon and owl are stuffed birds as *real* as possible. Yarriman should enter on a caparisoned or wooden horse like a mediaeval knight or cowboy.

(*Golden Valley*: Act One)

These resistances to coherence and the accompanying interest in blended aesthetics and even blended modes of thinking about representation have roots in the work of surrealists who used fracture and disparity as a way of producing meaning, and of whom Dali was my example above.

A surrealist with whose work Hewett's compares rather differently is Leonora Carrington (1917-?). Carrington's child-like animal figures and mythic references offer a related way of reading Hewett's, especially in the children's texts. Both depend on a version of the marvellous. Historically, this was a feature of surrealist attempts to realise products of the unconscious mind in art, a point I develop later. Carrington wrapped real-life figures (herself, Max Ernst) in fantasy, but in a flat, low-key style which deploys the fantastic as if it were real and, by implication, scrutinises boundaries between reality and fantasy. Carrington's surrealism is an effect of combining mythic and realistic signifiers to subvert logic. In her case, the use of mythic structures exemplifies what Cahoon (1996: 8) explains as 'the seriousness of the modernist search for the alienated soul and the essence of reality'. In contrast, Hewett's use of these structures in the theatrical texts inclines towards the '[l]iterary irony and camp' which he conversely identifies in

postmodern art (1996: 8). That is, differences here only further an impression of Hewett's postmodernism. Nevertheless, her understated, naturalising crafting of fantastic subjects in *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals*, and the poising of these texts towards a tradition of children's literature for serious purposes, has a surrealist precedent in Carrington's painting. Both use such content to demonstrate the obscurity of aspects of identity and, for both, the marvellous is a means of subverting logic. Hewett's interest in this subversion is clear from my discussions of *Joan* and *Wild Card*. Interaction between fantastic and naturalistic subjects in the children's plays extends her questioning position about the status of the ir/rational. These are pivotal interests in surrealist work and linked to their use of the marvellous, a concept to which I return in detail.

SURREALISM: AN UNSTABLE TERM

Identifying the surrealism in Hewett's writing is necessarily imprecise, because definition is elusive. The term refers variously to a movement, to artistic processes and to aesthetic modalities. This multiplicity alone produces a sense of surrealism as an expression of radical uncertainty and possibly a specific site of that thinking in Hewett's writing. Shortly, I consider reasons why it is a struggle to describe surrealism, much less define it, uncertainties which increase the likelihood that Hewett's writing derives postmodern resonances from its particular aesthetic heritage. I take liberties with complex analogies between visual and verbal art, but my emphasis on Hewett's dramatic texts is determined by their visual nature; anti-realist disjunctions are often contained in theatrical effects, and her surrealism is

most explicit in stage directions.

My purpose is wider, however, namely to show that Hewett's surrealism is evident in the foregrounding of boundaries and use of them to interleave difference and oppose exclusionary thinking. Boundaries are not naturalised in surrealism and hence it provides an aesthetic background for Hewett's emphasis on them as sites of con/fusion rather than of exclusion. Surrealism scrutinises the permeable, two-sided, undecidable nature of boundaries — *parerga* — which makes it a likely form of expression for a commitment to uncertainty.

None of this applies exclusively to visual texts, however. Mary Ann Caws describes surrealist writing as marked by a 'double centre' (1970: 19). Her description provides an alternative way of thinking about the 'simultaneities' which I identified in my discussion of *Wild Card*, where I argued that the text is inflected by points of indeterminacy, somewhat like Toyen's *Relâche* (1943, in Chadwick 1985: 169), to which I referred earlier. According to Caws, surrealism works through 'reality and dream, presence and absence, identity and distance, intimacy and loneliness, unity and multiplicity, continuity and discontinuity, language and silence, mobility and immobility, clarity and obscurity and so on' (1970: 19). The fact that such double-centredness comprises resistance to certainty — indeed it proselytises in favour of political and philosophical doubt — is related to surrealism's historical context between two World Wars. Whilst double-centredness may be recessive in Hewett's non-dramatic prose compared with the plays, Caws' description of surrealism offers a basis for linking the purely verbal works to surrealism as well.

For example, double-centredness is evident in *The Toucher*, both in variations of genre (realist narrative prose, epistolary forms, popular romance novel), and in the suddenness of the shift to discontinuous prose which creates the novel's concluding gesture towards silence — its inconclusive conclusion. Esther is continually characterised by 'presence and absence, identity and distance, intimacy and loneliness' and even, at a literal level, 'mobility and immobility', to pursue Caws' terms. In the following example, which produces a sense of Esther's past, it is evident in the stringing together of details to contextualise character. This is a writerly economy with surreal effects, especially when it draws on dream imagery and mirroring, both ingredients the surrealists used widely which repeatedly serve Hewett:

As if it were a film clip, she saw the quicksilver water with gothic palaces mirrored like perpendicular dreams. All the orchestras were playing Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. The steps running down to the water's edge were covered in green slime. The Contessa sat in her palace above the canal, tapping her red claws nervously on the glass tabletop. Watery light slid on the marble walls. In the corners of the reception rooms loitered her stable of handsome boys, cruel machismos and pretty pros she sold off to the highest bidder.... She moved through the rooms like an outsider, her lumpy body reflected in the full-length mirrors. Tough little bastards, hard as nails, the male prostitutes sniggered and whispered.

(*The Toucher*. 235)

Dream material is specifically a vehicle for the novel's surrealist elements:

That night, Esther dreamed she was the wicked witch hurrying over melting snow in tight, red-hot iron boots to watch the prince fucking Snow-white in her glass coffin. The witch's mouth was crimson, her skin

pallid; a mane of black glistening hair switched down her back. As she walked, she shrieked with pain. She dug her penknife into the prince's heart and turned it. (*The Toucher*. 102)

Such examples occur with sufficient regularity to make surrealism an aesthetic force in this text: 'That night Esther dreamed that her drowned body, sitting bolt upright, rose streaming from the depths of the river, a huge crab nuzzling at her breast' (*The Toucher*. 274).

The short story, 'The Darkling Sisters', also exemplifies double-centredness in Hewett's non-dramatic prose. Hewett overlays the lethal animosity of ghost sisters of the 1920s onto complexities of separation between living sisters in 1993, by means of a house purchased in 1974. Both contiguity and separation operate within and between the set of sisters' relationships and these historical moments. As well as sibling relatedness, sisterhood is an opportunity to consider 'identity and distance, intimacy and loneliness'. Overlap of the kind Caws describes enters the story on several levels. It operates as contradictory impulses in figurative detail, as in this description of a photograph of the prior owners which turns equally on estrangement and intimacy: 'The light is bad but staring into the camera lens there is a look they both share, an indefinable air of unbearable sadness and dislocation. They are obviously sisters' (Hewett 1993: 147). At a thematic level, changes to the Jersey Road house refer to historical 'continuity and discontinuity' in the broadest sense and the text concerns continuities and discontinuities within an individual's life. Both are exemplified in passages where Hewett describes 'the seven ages of woman' (156) and the dis/comfort of being 'enfolded' into family history (157). These elements shore up the central function

of the ghosts which, by their very nature, refer us to temporal dis/continuities, being figures in which past and present coincide. Haunting is a formulation of questions about 'clarity and obscurity' and operates as a metaphor for the ability to 'read' circumstances which exceed logic:

'Who's there?' I call. But when I look down the stairwell is thick with shadow. I move carefully, one step at a time. The music is louder now, almost deafening. 'Velia, ah Velia, the witch of the wood' — it seems to fill every corner — 'would I not die for you, dear, if I could.' The walls are rocking. A foul smell is saturating the hall. I stop and cling to the banister. My hands are slippery with sweat. At the foot of the stairs, two brutish figures are locked together, snarling. One looks up. Her face is disfigured, dark with such baffled fury and malice I fall back and close my eyes. When I open them the house is silent. Where the figures wrestled there is only a patch of sunlight spreading under the front door.

(Hewett, 1993: 160)

'The Darkling Sisters' is essentially a consideration of certainty, and that inflects this passage. The sister ghosts represent intrusions of the inexplicable into the sensible. Being sure of the evidence of one's senses is explicitly distinguished from 'knowingness' which is given a more diffuse form and linked to *uncertainty*:

So you see *I know about sisters*, but what about the two little blonde sisters asleep in the top of the house? *What do I know about them?* ... [B]eneath it the loyalty survives, the strange underground familial allegiance, *the female knowingness that mothers and daughters share with sisters*. (Hewett 1993: 157, emphasis mine)

The story employs a version of the marvellous so earnestly that it alerts us to a possibility that Hewett's use of it in texts geared towards an audience of children may entail something more than play.

Cross-textual investment again proves fruitful. Maudie Chandler is a significant irruption of the uncanny into *The Toucher*, and Hewett's way of emblematising her by gloves, that is, by the suggestion of disembodied hands, is a Dali-esque touch. In conversation with me, Hewett cites Maudie in the context of her perceptions of her own sensitivity to the past, her sense of her own imagination at work, and a desire to be open to the inexplicable:

DH *Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by the past. When I'm writing or thinking or whatever — that I hardly know where I am.*

CMG *I'm struck by that. Even something like The Man From Mukinupin is filled with the magical, the uncanny, the strange, the inexplicable...*

DH *The dark end of the town.*

CMG *Through to The Toucher. There's the word ghost — ghosts of the past. This shadowiness.*

DH *And the dead who talk in her head, or those who are absent who talk in her head. And Maudie Chandler who floats down the river.*

CMG *Yes. Maudie's wonderful. Maudie's really important.*

DH *Well, she came quite late. She wasn't even in the book and then suddenly this woman, or girl first of all, started to appear. She first appeared as white gloves up standing by the railway, in Perth. So she was like an emanation of white gloves floating in the air like some spiritualist sort of thing, and then she gradually became realer, but never entirely real.*

CMG *In that sense, there's very strong resistance to the rational. I wonder about the various modernist certainties that the work is often packaged in. It seems to me that there are also things which exist, and which are irrational. The irrational erupts all over the place as another way of enfiguring that which we have a sense of and reach for and attempt to understand. The unrepresentable?*

DH *Yes.*

Both *The Toucher* and 'The Darkling Sisters' indicate that 'double-centredness', described by Caws as the core of surrealist writing, operates in Hewett's non-dramatic prose. Her surrealist aesthetics and thought are neither confined to, nor exclusively derived from, theatrical convention. Her links with surrealism are more complex than that.

William S. Rubin asserts that dadaist and surrealist art have not strictly existed since 1950 (1968: 178-85). Historically, surrealism was a critique of received definitions of art and, according to Rubin, this critique was achieved between 1916 when Dada was conceived in Zurich, and the 1950s when, after World War II, surrealist ideas were widely disseminated. He regards surrealism as having been replaced by a broad modified set of possibilities in art. In Fiona Bradley's opinion, surrealism disappeared as a coherent movement after André Breton's death in 1966: 'Its diffuse nature became apparent, and it dispersed into a network of influence and inspiration, constantly to be rediscovered in new places and by new generations' (1997: 65).

In the main, Hewett's writing reflects only this generalised absorption across western culture of both surrealist 'anti-aesthetic' intent and the familiar tone of surrealist imageries. That fact, however, does not reduce its importance as an aesthetic preference which leans towards the sublime and indicates a perspective on politics, art and culture. Her dramas exemplify the broad inheritance in an Australian context. Surrealist representational practices have entered the 'cumulative vocabulary of art', as Rubin puts it (1968: 185), and Hewett uses its

idioms. Bradley's summary conveys the extent of the dispersion and, significantly for my focus on Hewett's variable subject-construction, relates it to subjectivity in particular. The breadth of surrealism in this respect is clear:

In one sense, *any art which ... prioritises subjectivity, may be said to have Surrealist 'influence'*. In addition the word has passed into the language, so that any work of art, literature or film which is disjointed, hallucinatory or disconnected is likely to be classed as 'surreal'. Surrealism was an international movement, spreading its influence through the migrations of its members and the publication of their ideas. Its network of influence is potentially enormous. (1997: 74, emphasis mine)

By the time Hewett was writing *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1976), *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), *Joan* (1984) and the children's plays, *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals* (1985), this diffuse influence had reached the Australian stage, not least through the dramatic works of Patrick White: *The Ham Funeral* (1961), *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962) and *A Cheery Soul* (1963). It did not have an easy introduction to Australian audiences accustomed to realism and 'the confines of Australian working-class characters and speech', as one critic, Harry Kippax, put it (quoted in Marr 1991: 395). Hewett's acknowledgment of White's influence is indicated in her comments on critical hostility towards her dramas and the difficulties she has faced in having them produced — difficulties experienced also by White. She considers that her ability to disrupt the realist theatrical tastes of Australian audiences was additionally affected by the fact of being a woman.

It seems obvious that negative reactions to Hewett's plays were as likely to have been a response to their surrealism as to anything intrinsic to the author's vision. The reception of *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* in Perth in 1972,

discussed in Chapter Three, is attributable to the fact that it is among Hewett's more surreal texts, and the 'ugliness' of which she was accused, is located in that aesthetic.² The play is a conflation of musical, literary and theatrical conventions which treats none of these respectfully. Dolly shoots six characters, then herself, accompanied by 'Humoresque' on the cornet, organ music and ANGEL VOICES off, singing 'All for you'.³ Such disjunction between action and aural ambience produces a surrealism which the play's visual orientation reinforces. One of Dolly's victims is the theatre manager, whose *head crashes on the organ, the blood drips down his shirt front, but he revives, and goes on playing softly*. Stage directions are crucial: *The lights turn red. OLLIE crawls across the stage, escaping, dragging MATE with her, bleeding and screaming*. MATE, it needs to be noted, is one of five dummies which populate the play alongside the actors. The scene exemplifies how Hewett fractures realist representation and combines the disparate result with the absurd, which MATE introduces here. Oblique references to magic, and hence the marvellous, are synecdochic of theatrical illusion, the reason for the play's dependence on surrealism. *DOLLY shoots out the fairy lights. one by one. OLLIE screams and crawls to the exit. DOLLY shoots out the neon sign, 'SPELLS' (Act Two)*. At the verbal level, dialogue is often anti-naturalistic and always anti-literary, so that disjointedness governs this dimension as well:

MADDY: Talks to Mother by Helen Pelham Smith: to make tough meat tender, to set a jelly quickly, clean a Panama hat, keep butter cool, when the milk is burnt, never add salt to boiling turnips it makes them stringy ... superfluous hair, to lengthen the life of a clothesline, but what about my

life... *my life*... (Act One)

Hewett uses dummies widely. The representation of Tatty Hollow, in *The Tatty Hollow Story*, as a blonde-haired female dress dummy in a perspex telephone booth with her back to the audience throughout the play is a quintessentially surreal image, arguably reminiscent of figures like André Masson's female mannequin with its caged vision (*Mannequin with Birdcage* 1938, in Bradley 1997: 67). The stage for *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* is dominated by *huge, highly coloured blow-ups of the stars: Garbo, Dietrich, Gable, Tracy.... (et cetera)*. They recall Cabooone's remark about the dominance of ironic camp in postmodern art and, in performance, operate as a sustained reference to popular culture. In fact, the persistent presence of dummies in Hewett's texts is a reminder of their use among surrealist artists. As a signifier of emasculation and mute, incompetent intersexual relations, MATE is comparable with figures which Hans Bellmer contrived to represent female bodies for his, albeit different, sexual agenda. (For example, *The Doll*, 1936, in Bradley 1997: 45).

Ollie's allusions to the refrigeration of aborted fetuses, and to their disposal by flushing them down a septic tank (Act Two), still have potential 'shock value', akin to what the surrealists invoked in Europe, well before Hewett was writing. Indeed, Hewett's rejection of the proposition that she desires to shock is explained by the simple fact that the shock value in her texts derives from the general aesthetic territory of surrealism on which she drew, and to which she could well have expected Australian audiences to be reasonably receptive, given earlier assaults, such as White's, on naive realism.

Another link with White is evident in a criticism of *The Ham Funeral*, which carries a sense of the shared cultural context. White's play was rejected for being 'work which quite fails to reconcile poetry with social realism. There is practically no character development and the dialogue is insufferably mannered. *As for the abortion in the dustbin ... really, words fail me*' (quoted in Marr, 1991: 390, emphasis mine).

Also related here are reverberations of abjection in Ollie's references to abortion in *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*. The abject, being that which is not in its proper place, draws us into an ambiguous realm in which fascination and horror, attraction and repulsion coexist⁴. In Kristeva's description, 'the abject is edged with the sublime' (1982: 11). It poises a text away from the beautiful in the direction of an aesthetic which incorporates the experience of displeasure. Kristeva suggests that 'in true theatre, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live'. She writes: 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (1982: 3-4). In *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, Ollie's speech distils this last:

OLLIE But I was a bit of a girl in the ol' days, wasn't I, Mate? I had a figure all right. Marilyn Monroe of the twenties. And so fertile. Nothing wrong with my plumbing. Aborting meself every month with the knitting needle for a while there. I remember I useta keep them in the fridge to show you when you came home. (Act Three)

Refrigerated, self-aborted fetuses are a keen image of death infecting life and of the corpse-body having taken on 'the abjection of waste' (Kristeva 1982: 108). Being overlaid onto a site of food storage and preservation, a chain of taboos is

set off in which ideas of waste and abomination intervene in consumption. Here, Hewett's text even forces a confrontation with cannibalism and what Kristeva refers to as 'the devouring mother' (1982: 54). Hewett's image seizes and claims the maternal by seizing and claiming permission to display its 'lining of abjection'. It violates the usual privileging of a medicalised (masculine) gaze with respect to such 'objects'. It also subverts boundaries between the comic and horrific. Ollie projects onto Mate, her interlocuter, the likely reception of these displacements, which means that the text preempts the expected moment of 'thrusting aside' in the audience: 'Upset you a bit the first coupla times, specially when you could tell the sex,' Ollie says. 'You went quite pale. You always did have a queasy stomach, Mate' (*Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*: Act 3).⁵

Kristeva remarks about abjection that it 'neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them' (1982: 15). A similar observation can be made of surrealism, namely, that it attempts to delimit oppositional thought and to recompose what we define as art. Both have been Hewett's projects, and this is the purpose to which she generally puts surrealism in her texts. She arranges encounters between signifiers so that her reader/audience is invited to connect with fragmentation and rupture, and apparent invitations to repulsion in some of her writing derive from this controversial artistic critique much wider than her own.

DISCURSIVE INTERSECTIONS

I return now to the question of boundaries between discourses, since I am suggesting that Hewett's writing is traversed by several. In defence of my assertion that the surrealist aesthetics of her work align her with, and distinguish her from, both modernism and postmodernism, I make excursions into feminism, postmodernism, and briefly Dada and *esprit nouveau*. I argue that in divergences between feminism and surrealism, Hewett places surrealist aesthetics in the service of the former, like the surrealist women artists I name. Where postmodernism and surrealism diverge, she inclines towards postmodernism because her surrealism belongs in the context of pluralist thinking and aesthetic eclecticism; she uses it *as* convention. In the historical context of the surrealist movement *per se*, tensions existed between high modernism, surrealism and Dada, each an artistic discourse in its own right. The fact that Hewett's artistic commitments are never this clear is symptomatic of her greater uncertainty.

A strict interpretation of surrealism through its historical coexistence with modernism is likely to be anchored in an understanding of literary and artistic categories in terms of their cumulative chronological development — not the view to which I subscribe. However, I am aware of implicitly falling back on an idea of surrealism as nascent postmodernism, and whilst I do not choose between accounts of literary and artistic diversity, I elaborate on this. Postmodernism questions the need to legislate such choices. More to the point, difficulties of definition are a reminder that the term, postmodernism, labels an 'awareness of being-within a way of thinking' and a 'recognition that such an awareness

disallows the speaker (the subject) the comfort of absolutely naming the terms of that moment' (Marshall, 1992: 3). The permeability of discursive boundaries in Hewett's writing exemplifies the inclusiveness which may follow from such recognition.

Subjectivity is pivotal in this discussion. In the discourse on surrealism, 'wonder' and 'the marvellous' are key terms which indicate an attitude and a repertoire of imagery. The attitude entails openness to irrationality, the illogical and 'unknowingness', openness which is active in surrealist aesthetic choices and modes of representation. Along these lines, the mixed morphologies in Hewett's children's plays give theatrical form to an idea that it is desirable to extend the imagination beyond the limits of the rational. Populated by magical animal/human, human and ghost figures, they recall the imagery of surrealist painting like Carrington's without making the same claims for deep symbolism. Rather, they are a way of being attentive to intersubjective relations.

The capacity for wonder suggests an ethical position on intersubjectivity — self/other relations — a question central to feminism. Irigaray (1993) uses the term 'wonder' to describe a 'moment of illumination ... between the subject and the world' (362). For Roberts (1998: 3), Irigaray's work in this regard has produced 'an ethics of generosity and respect, of actively valuing otherness and its voices, its desires', and I agree. That this is the value given to difference in *Song of the Seals* and *Golden Valley* will become clear as my comments on the two texts accumulate. Being written for children, they have a pedagogical dimension which adds to the ethic-bearing function of their imagery. They draw attention to

cultural definitions of otherness and are expansive about relations based in difference, using playful morphologies to place different (im)possibilities within the same orbit and to give expression to incommensurability.

I have noted that Irigaray argues the losses involved in reducing self and other to versions of the same. As Roberts puts it (1998: 3), she clarifies the fact that 'space which contains the self and the other is not so limited that one must predicate its subjectivity or its becoming on some oppressive/restrictive definition of the other'. Intersubjective relations which Hewett imagines in the children's plays make the similar point that imagination can yield a relation of self to other grounded in the ethic of respect for which Irigaray argues. In Roberts' words: 'The one remains contemplative, attentive, toward the other who/which is continually rare and extraordinary' (1998: 5). Irigaray concentrates on male/female relations within a phallic economy of subjectivity, offering an alternative ethical theory for sexual difference in which difference itself produces a diverse humanity. She postulates that a mutual gaze in sexual difference may be the site at which humanity is actualised, as and by difference. These arguments are more radical than a desire to accommodate and recognise diversity because Irigaray forecloses on the very possibility of pre-existing ground on which humanness can be theorised, precisely the use to which Woman has been put in all forms of western discourse, according to her arguments.

Hewett's writing is not this high-minded, but she continually links a capacity for wonder with sexual relations. In *Song of the Seals* and *Golden Valley*, she makes imaginative leaps of subject construction which are not reducible to the

fact that children are the target audience. Rather, they suggest that a 'poethics' comparable to that which Roberts (1998) discerns in Irigaray's writings, is at work in Hewett's. It is a postmodern element of Hewett's feminism. She foregrounds wonder. She produces surreal character combinations as vehicles for multiplying possibilities of fundamental and cohabitative difference. Some texts are shared sites of representation in which diverse forms of radical difference are retained. And even if this is symbolic, it makes the irreducibility of difference a target of her imaginings. Her emphasis is on multiplying possible sets of relations, rather than on formulating particular identities.

Seen in the light of the surrealists' interest in the uncanny, the incidence of marvellous, chance and supernatural elements in Hewett's work and her insistent use of a term like 'wonder' link her commitments and techniques of subversion with theirs. Simultaneously, this is a link with the sublime and has implications for subjectivity in relation to it. Drawing the two together, Foster (1993) argues that the marvellous in surrealism relates generally to beliefs about identity, is both personal and political (20), and evokes the sublime (28). For him, 'Surrealism sought to overcome two oppositions above all: waking and dreaming, self and other' (210). This commitment produced what he calls 'the surrealist ideal of convulsive identity [which] was subversive, at least in relation to a fixed bourgeois ego' (210). According to Foster, 'a critical loss of self' is represented in surrealism, possibly even 'an everyday condition of asubjectivity' (210). He relates spatial transformations in surrealist art to 'transformations in subjectivity' (1993:

210) and recognises a place for surrealism in the discourse on postmodernism (210). He makes the crucial distinction between surrealism and modernism, that the fantasmatic which modernism represses is the very stuff of surrealism (96). Hewett's interest in the fantasmatic, therefore, signals that her alignment with surrealism is simultaneously a difference from modernism.

In recognising the importance of the sublime in surrealist aesthetics, Foster argues that surrealism 'not only stresses the formless and the unrepresentable, as with the sublime, but ... also mixes delight and dread, attraction and repulsion...' (1993: 28). Like the feminist commentators cited in Chapter One, Foster notices that 'the terrain of this surrealist sublime' has been mapped 'on the female body' (29). Hence, in both discourses, surrealism and the sublime, questions arise about how feminism and surrealism interact.

FEMINISM AND SURREALISM

Suleiman asserts that 'the subject position of Surrealism, as it was elaborated at the inception of the movement, was male' (1990: 24). She suggests, however, that a female subject existed for the surrealists which has been under-represented. She recovers that subject position from 'internal polemic' in women's surrealist art which she regards as 'dialogically related' to the art of their male counterparts (1990: 27). In this dialogism she discerns 'a general strategy adopted in different ways by individual women wishing to insert themselves as subjects into Surrealism' (1990: 27). Dialogism in Hewett's writing has the similar effect of limiting congruence between her work and aspects of surrealism which are

antithetical to feminism. It is also similarly a site of her constantly shifting constructions of identity.

Chadwick (1985) has teased out the problematic relationships between women artists and the European movement. Her work foregrounds women surrealists and describes complex exclusions and inclusions produced in part by their reluctance to submit to constraints which membership demanded. Commentators on the movement generally recognise the 'muse-dependence' of the men at its centre. For example, the writers, André Breton, Louis Aragon, Tristan Tzara, Paul Eluard and Robert Desnos, and the artists, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, as well as Bellmer and Dali already mentioned. Women have particular negotiations to make when the feminine is positioned as the pivotal site of creativity. The subject position of surrealist male discourse was not one which women could claim easily. By placing their own images and realities at the centre of their work, artists like Carrington, Fini, Frida Kahlo, Ithell Colquhoun, Kay Sage, Eileen Agar resisted the concept of Muse as Other. Gwen Raaberg suggests that an effect of their ill fit with the movement of the time is that such surrealists are recognisably 'proto-feminists', since they articulated 'moments of precise definition of women's position in society', not just in the surrealist movement (1991: 5). Such woman-centred commentary on surrealist art (Chadwick 1985, Suleiman 1990, Foster 1993, Brophy 1998) points to the fact that intersections between surrealism and feminism are likely to produce ideological clashes. As I have shown, Hewett's feminism draws criticism from feminist critics who, for various reasons, wish her work were less subjective than it is. No matter where Hewett's readers stand on

this, they cannot fail to recognise, in the surrealism of her plays, a desire to contravene conventions which historically circumscribed women's behaviour and limited their entitlement to a public voice. Hence, her surrealism is usually charged with opposition to sexism and racism. This is the ethical aspect of her 'poethics', and the level at which Hewett's work dovetails with Suleiman's argument that in the dialogism of surrealist women's art it is possible to identify a strategy for constructing an alternative, and feminist, subject position.

Scenes evoking the 'dark side of town' in *The Man from Mukinupin*, for example, are the location of this play's surrealist aesthetics. They carry its condemnation of racist violence in Australia's colonial history. In *Golden Valley*, Hewett creates a composite figure in Nim, a ghost/boy subject suggestively overlain onto Yarriman, the part-Aboriginal Stockman who is Marigold's rescuer — 'a strange, proud man' (ACT TWO). Nim is a figure of metamorphosis used by Hewett to indulge ideas about unstable identity in *Golden Valley*. He is also its vehicle for acknowledgment of Aboriginal history. Tib, the cat rescued by Marigold, transforms into a witch/woman and is the voice of anti-sexism. Shape-changing is the play's metaphor for assertions of freedom, and the following quotations illustrate the politics which Hewett brings to it:

MARIGOLD: ... You've found the secret. You can be Nim who ran away from the Boys' Home — or you can be Nim the Green Prince in the Forest... or Joe Anchor, the goldminer, or Yarriman, the horse-breaker ... or even the Wishing Tree. You can be whatever you want to be.

(*Golden Valley*: Epilogue)

The text's pedagogical discourse thus suggests a 'melting-pot' philosophy of race

and class differences. A similar appeal is made on behalf of sexual politics:

MARIGOLD: It must be fun to change your shape whenever you want to.

TIB: Oh it is, it is.

MARIGOLD: But I can only be a girl.

TIB: Fiddle-de-dee. You can be anything you want to be.

TIB: Imagine it, that's all you've got to do, imagine it.

(Golden Valley: Act Two)

Postmodernism queries the appeals to individualistic autonomy and self-determination implicit in these quotations, but the 'non-sense' of attaching those appeals to a cat/woman and a boy/ghost/stockman is critical to the meanings they generate. They are equally an appeal to imagination which locates the play's political and philosophical inclusiveness in a capacity for wonder and sustains a connection with the sublime.

Making that appeal by means of fantastically transforming bodies in child-oriented texts is a link between Hewett and an artist such as Carrington, but there are other connections with surrealist women artists. The self-hagiographical aspects of Hewett's work liken her to Carrington in another way, and to Fini and Kahlo (1910-1954), whose self-images and personal lives were their paramount source of material. This applies even when their self-representations were not literal; Carrington's animal figures not only project her sense of her own psychic reality, but are consistently grounded in images of herself. Photographs of Fini at work reveal that her self-imaging as an artist goes well beyond the canvas. (For example, in Chadwick 1985: 112). Fini's use of the sphinx as a figure of hybridity mediating between animal and human worlds provides a specific surrealist

precedent for Hewett's interest in images of transformation.

As with Hewett, these preoccupations among surrealist women artists indicate broad, self-conscious engagements with identity, which would be diminished by being attributed merely to personal narcissism. They were attempting to construct diverse subject positions for women and to produce a context in which surrealist art emerges from circumstances specific to their lives. Unconventional, even anarchic, these surrealists were exerting identity-making processes against conventional definitions of 'woman' and 'artist' which surrounded them. Kahlo's image of giving birth to herself famously exemplifies the focus on identity construction and projects it as struggle (*My Birth*, 1932, in Herrera 1992: 8). She also claims an explicitly female point of view by continually citing maternity. This is a pertinent insistence in relation to Hewett, since her interest in the maternal is repeatedly caught up with complexities which may still adhere to women's lives as a result of unresolved conflict between maternal responsibilities and artistic ambition. Overall continuity with this surrealist heritage of feminist scrutiny and resistance can be claimed on Hewett's behalf precisely because of her self-referentiality, literal and otherwise. Her participation in public constructions of herself as an artist subject are further dignified by it, and she has consistently demonstrated similar social and political commitments.

As well as being a recurring matter for scrutiny in Hewett's writing, the maternal is a site of its double-centredness. Interest in the ambivalence which motherhood may produce is clear where the texts patrol splits between domestic

and public spheres, which they repeatedly do. Variable and recurring figures of 'lost' children mediate between blame for an 'absent mother' and the depletion of autonomy which motherhood can represent and about which Hewett's texts are never passive. Her treatments of this theme provide evidence of a more postmodern feminism in Hewett's writing than is generally recognised, and it often flows from surreal imagery.

In *The Toucher* Esther's situation is inflected by different kinds of separation from her children which are positioned as both emancipation and loss. The question of whether Iris is pregnant hovers over the plot and the fact of whether she has died pregnant determines the moral appraisal of Billy's actions. Abandoned by her own mother, Esther has engaged in a fruitless search which occasions a surreal dream-text employing animal figures with mythic significance:

'Frère Jacques, frère Jacques, dormez-vous, dormez-vous?' She was still singing, wound up in the mosquito net, when she woke from a dream of running panic-stricken through endless aisles of trees. 'Maman! Maman!' she cried out, startling the owls. Their white wings brushed her face. 'Where is your mother?' they asked her. 'She's gone, lost in the forest.'

(The Toucher. 240)

Esther's unsatisfactory relationship with Brenda, her father's subsequent partner, conjures up the step-mother function in children's literature. The Madeleine La Farge whom Esther eventually traces is never confirmed to be her mother, an instance of Hewett hitching the plot to uncertainty. Because of their ages, the relationship between Esther and Billy is a site of cultural tension through which resonances of maternal incest flow. The question of absent mothers operates even

at the symbolic level in Hewett's linking of Esther to Aphrodite (*The Toucher*, 42). A mythic figure, Aphrodite is sometimes represented in a manner which makes of the father a primary, if not exclusive, progenitor: 'Kronos then took Ouranos' severed genitals and flung them into the sea ... and from the genitals themselves was born Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love' (Smith, 1992: 66). In such versions of the myth, she is the daughter of only a father and the mother of a son; woman, sprung fully-formed from the father.⁶ Added to Esther's motherlessness, the invocation of Aphrodite lends further interest to the novel's concluding drift towards the unrepresentable which, as I have shown, is constructed explicitly as a site of the maternal, as well as a site in which death and life coincide. References to the maternal, then, weave through the novel's fluctuations between finely nuanced postmodern invocations of the unrepresentable and modernist attempts at its mastery, one distinction crucial to placing Hewett in relation to a modernist/postmodernist divide.⁷

The radio play, *Susannah's Dreaming*, is equally invested in the maternal and, once again, its speculative treatment of the theme makes it possible to position Hewett both in continuity with the surrealists who preceded her and with aspects of postmodern feminism. The play concerns the death of a child-woman, Susannah, also pregnant. Through her mother, Darcy, questions are raised about maternal competence and how cultural conflicts between maternity and sexual availability place mothers and daughters in contest. Darcy's resentment of Susannah's youth inadvertently leads to the daughter's death. The matter of intention is crucial, since it extrapolates the estrangement of older and younger

woman into cultural comment. Darcy's behaviour results from the sense of losing value in a culture which predicates her sexual viability and hence, she believes, her survival, on remaining desirable to an abusive man who covets her damaged, but youthful, daughter.

The play depicts the estrangement of mother and daughter which Irigaray is convinced arises from sexual relations based on imagining sexual difference through an 'economy of the same'. Mother/daughter relations in *Susannah's Dreaming* recall her remarks:

The elder seems to repeat to her daughter what has been forced upon her as a woman. A dominant male culture has intervened between mother and daughter and broken off a loving and symbolic exchange. The position of the man relative to the object has separated the two women subjects.

(Irigaray 1996: 130)

Darcy's circumstances exemplify the devalorization of motherhood which is an effect of making a child into something a woman *has*, instead of 'the fruit of love *with*', according to Irigaray (1996: 131). Susannah's death is an effect of Darcy having been reduced to her role as mother and, in turn, unwittingly reducing Susannah to a bizarre version of the same. Susannah's child-like and distorted maternal desire is refracted through dolls, the usual social significance of which only supports Irigaray's point. Here, however, they are a reminder of Hewett's surreal representations of human subjects elsewhere. In this case, they provide a visual focus for Darcy's belief that Susannah will dangerously misunderstand her maternity. This is ironic, given that in her own 'normal' hands misguided mothering leads to Susannah's death. The crisis between Susannah and Darcy

enacts what Irigaray describes as, '[t]he still common practice of reducing the woman to motherhood' which, she argues, 'leaves her without any cultural mediation to help her relate to her gender' (1996: 131). *Susannah's Dreaming* is an imagining of tragic consequences which may follow from that practice.

Notions of 'the bad mother' are also important to *Bon-Bons and Roses For Dolly*, carried in part by Ollie's reflections about abortion, but also attached to Dolly's mother whom she blames for her misguided dreams of fame and hence her disappointment. Once again, mother and daughter are in conflict. This time the daughter is the agent of the mother's death. At stake are similarly intriguing doubts about the transmission of a feminine culture in which the text again concludes that it is regressive to follow in a mother's footsteps, another version of mother/daughter estrangement. Dolly's experience of aging is the central cause of her terror. She has not expected to be like her mother — to be 'in her mother's position'; her mother's is the life she has dreamt of transcending. She perceives herself as having been duped by social and cultural illusions of which her mother is the chief vehicle of transmission. The play conceives of those kinds of illusions as catalysts for madness and violence and so mounts an argument against them.

In a noteworthy example from *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, a confronting scene has the post-natally depressed Wendy, neglected by an ambitious husband, baking and serving up her baby: 'It's so tender ... tender as a newborn babe', she says. Stage directions indicate that she brings out *a large baking dish in which is the trussed up body of a naked baby, and carving fork* (*Mrs Porter and the Angel*: Act One).⁸ Arthur Ballet notes about this text that 'the whole devastatingly sexual

portrait of academe, their closets crammed with skeletons are *both funny and terrifying*' (in Hewett, 1976: viii, *sic*).

No combination of humour and terror should be glossed over in the context of surrealism. It is also worth noting that this scene predates a postmodern text like Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) in which the visual centre is this very spectacle of a glazed, baked human body. In both examples, that spectacle has its roots in shocks to convention which surrealism aimed to deliver. Hewett's images can be as fantastic, dream-like and provoking as any the surrealists produced, and still have postmodern resonances.

Even texts as contrastingly light as *Golden Valley* contain figures of 'lost' children which approach the theme of maternity from a different direction. *Golden Valley* concerns the adoption of an unwanted child, Marigold, in place of a missing adopted daughter, Jenny, whose body is discovered in a well. It is because Willow in *Song of the Seals* is orphaned that she comes to be living with her Selchie grandmother and is befriended by Billy the Kydd, son of a drowned aboriginal woman. One way or another, structures related to maternity in Hewett's texts continually refer us to an arch-ambivalence; namely, motherhood may both deplete and fulfil women, threaten and nurture children. Neither children nor mothers are idealised. Rather, their relations are at best a site of difficult pleasure.

This said, Hewett's position is less extreme than that of the surrealist women named above. They generally understood access to artistic production to depend on rejecting maternity for themselves, as Chadwick explains:

Turning to their own sexual reality as source and subject, they were unable

to escape the conflicts engendered by their flight from conventional female roles. Adult female sexuality necessarily includes woman's role as the bearer of life, but the imagery of the sexually mature, sometimes maternal woman has almost no place in the work of these artists. Their conflicts about this aspect of female sexuality reflect the difficult choices forced upon women of their generation who attempted to reconcile traditional female roles with lives as artists in a movement that prized above all else the innocence of childhood and violently attacked the institution of family life. (1985: 129-130)

Although Hewett never rejects maternity and images of sexually mature women pervade her writing, her battles are an extension of these earlier ones. Not only have her personal sexual realities been her 'source and subject', but she has consistently given explicit expression to female sexuality and legitimised resistance to traditional female roles. Her female characters are rarely oriented towards conventional marriage. When they are, like Mrs Porter or Ollie in the examples above, they may be linked to madness. In *Susannah's Dreaming*, Darcy's commitment to the traditional social structure produces tragedy, since her submissiveness to Freddy Sachs causes the outburst which, in turn, leads to Susannah's death. By contrast, *The Man from Mukinupin* is resolved by three weddings: Harry Tuesday and Lily Perkins/Touch of the Tar, Polly Perkins and Jack Tuesday, and Mercy Montebello and Cecil Brunner. An excess of closure is achieved by these multiple alliances, and the neat resolution which results is converted into an allusion to popular romance genres and so becomes an alternative, more postmodern mode of critique. Hewett cites her 'sources of ... quotations and pastiches' in notes to this text, alerting us to the 'many references

to popular and classical works' which relate to marriages and weddings:

Beside the Montebellos' travesty, 'The Strangling of Desdemona', the reader will have recognised Lady Macbeth behind Edie's sleepwalking scene and the marriage ceremony of Miranda and Ferdinand from *The Tempest* in the 'wedding' of Lily and Harry.

Playful revisiting of prior marital texts and contrived sexual symmetries produce an implicit critique of the conventions which have proceeded from the culture's history of representing sexual difference.

The position which Hewett's texts most often endorse for female characters has them poised towards a public domain, whilst being located away from it. Esther's solitude in *The Toucher* is a case in point. Having a public profile as an author, she is deeply imbricated in the public sphere from which she is separated. The novel is insistent about her desire for isolation, even while it concerns a series of characters who enter her life, explaining the relationships in terms of her commitment to separateness. Billy's access is attributed to a role in the domestic maintenance of Esther's house and, as I have shown, their relationship is constructed to avoid positioning her as helpless; rather, being her amanuensis, his presence is linked to Esther's public role as writer. Hewett is assiduous about Esther's physical independence (mobility), despite her disability (immobility). All this positions Esther's isolation as choice rather than loss.

The households in the children's plays, even when presided over by a matriarchal figure like Willow's selchie grandmother in *Song of the Seals*, similarly represent unconventional domestic structures inhabited by female figures

whose political and/or social activism poises them towards the public world from which they are seen also to be apart. That is, Hewett repeatedly examines and disrupts public/private distinctions.

In her essay in *Homeland*, she comments directly on the vicissitudes of domestic management and its demands on her writing, a specific site of tension in her own life:

I sometimes have the feeling that all this stuff, this debris of our lives in this house is so heavy a burden I can never write again. It's just like my mother's house, only worse. At least her clutter was relatively harmless — innocent old hats, recipes, photos, false teeth, balls of wool and bits of raffia. This clutter is positively malevolent. It's as if it could rear up on its hind legs like a high stalking animal and suffocate you with its letters, manuscripts, diaries and reviews — most of it mine. It's like a giant spider I've spawned from inside my head, spinning its interminable web downstairs. (1991: 180).

As an aside, the connective tissue between fiction and autobiography is exemplified by the use to which Hewett puts this passage. It appears in one of Esther's letters to Sam in the embedded epistolary novel in *The Toucher* (201), where Esther is reflecting on 'the limbo' in which she lives and on the difficulties of writing without Billy's assistance

We can deduce from such examples that Hewett has sympathy with the views attributed to surrealist women artists. She too has generated a critique of circumscriptions on women's lives with attention to domestic positions. Like them, she has been accused of attacking the 'institution of family life' (to recall Chadwick's description of their project), not least by her first husband, Lloyd

Davies (1987). Her anti-bourgeois stance during the communist party days was expressed as a commitment to sexual emancipation and rejection of marriage as an inviolable institution. Although such a stance is commonplace now, Hewett's public reputation bears traces of how radical it was then. Also like Carrington, who had two children, Hewett builds significance into 'the innocence of childhood' and her children's texts derive layers of meaning from being read in the light of surrealist women's convictions of these kinds.

Even the notion of 'the *femme-enfant* as the perfect embodiment of femininity', which Chadwick shows is a significant figure for surrealist women artists (1985: 130), is apparent in Hewett's texts. Such a figure is discernible in characters as disparate as Willow in *Song of the Seals* and Polly Perkins in *The Man From Mukinupin*. She is invoked in the choice of the Percy Trompf postcard for the cover of the *Collected Poems* (1995), discussed in Chapter Three, which indicates Hewett's sense that a notion of the *femme-enfant* has marked her personal reputation.

The 'glittering girls' of Hewett's work, to recall Strauss's words, relate to the *femme-enfant*: 'sexy girls who will be called whores and sluts...; outrageous girls who will neither placate nor abide "the tea-cup tongues of the town"; wilful girls whose appetite for love is matched by an appetite for adventure...' (1995: 53). Esther, in *The Toucher*, is arguably an example of this version of female identity extended far into a woman's life. But Hewett has created more melancholy *femmes enfants*, like Susannah, Touch of the Tar, Millie Darkling. The outcomes of Dolly's age-related defiance of her social context illustrate its censorious power.

There are contrastingly assertive, insightful girls, whose capacities for acting in and on their worlds are instead coded in terms of the marvellous. Tib and Marigold, in *Golden Valley*, are examples. Tib, the cat/woman/witch, is an instance of fantastic metamorphosis used to postulate a radical femininity and a reiteration of the witch as a voice of social and political scrutiny which Hewett constructed in *Joan*. Connected with the marvellous by a capacity to communicate across boundaries between human and fantastic subjects, Marigold has a mediating function. She represents resistance to logic and, as a representation of imaginative openness to non-sense, is given a broader function than mere childish play. This is one significance of modifying her child status by the romantic references on which Hewett consistently draws for dramatic effect. At the climax, Marigold is in the position of a heroine in melodrama, villain's knife at her throat. The EPILOGUE has her in a white nightgown discussing with Nim his romantic feelings for Tib. Hewett's texts persistently attach signifiers of potential sexuality to girl characters in this way when the explicit sexualisation of relationships would be inappropriate. In *Song of the Seals*, romantic conventions link the fourteen year old Willow with both Fyshe and Billy. Sexual difference, producing a sense of the surrealist *femme enfant*, is continually in play where a text seeks to generate the sense of wonder.

The fact that Hewett's critique of women's roles does not involve rejections of convention as extreme as the surrealist women's is a mark of a (more postmodern?) commitment to uncertainty. Double-centredness in her writing has less to do with unilateral opposition to social mores than these predecessors

articulated from their more entrenched avant-garde position. In her case, it has more to do with increasing occupation of unclear ground.

For example, Hewett constantly ameliorates her oppositional thought, as the theme of the maternal also illustrates. Marigold is both unwanted orphan *and* chosen child. Her situation, like Willow's and Billy's in *Song of the Seals*, ascribes maternal nurturance to parenting figures who are not birth mothers. That is, these 'children' are both 'lost' and 'found'. In *Golden Valley*, Jenny's death, like Susannah's in *Susannah's Dreaming*, is evaluated as the play's tragic core. Hence, both plays affirm parental love at the same time as they signal its frailties. At no stage in *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* are Ollie's excesses of self-determination endorsed; she represents failed maternity. Wendy, in *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, by contrast, represents maternity failed, and by the structures which purportedly support it, the traditional nuclear family and women's friendship. In *The Toucher*, Esther's children are adult, so her separation from them is thoroughly naturalised whilst being positioned as absence to produce the sense of her solitude. In other words, similarities between Hewett's views of women as subjects who act in and on the world and the position of surrealist women artists are comparable but do not imply bids for the same kind of autonomy. Hewett exemplifies complexities in women's relations to both public and private domains without taking up a fixed position upon how they should act. She locates characters outside, but at the same time deeply involves them in the social fabric, demonstrating that the opposition does not hold. She imagines a series of painful *and* pleasurable negotiations in which maternity, among other themes, becomes a

significant site of the feminine sublime.

Both feminism and surrealism, as oppositional discourses, have prised open received ideas and Hewett draws on the capacities of each to do so, without claiming the certainties of retrospection and rejection implicit in an avant-garde position. Such claims would make her efforts seem merely conventional, to recall Nettlebeck's assessment of surrealist resistances. In Hewett's case, once such convictions were left behind with communism, both surrealism and feminism entered the writing as increasing inclusiveness. Their intersection is a significant site of radical uncertainty and a point at which apparent self-contradiction is, in fact, receptiveness. Her surrealism delimits oppositional thought, but by incorporation rather than by replacement. It is an effect of gathering together even political disparities. The feminism is surreal, the surrealism is feminist; each discourse providing the other with its double-centre. The combination prevents each from producing the exclusionary thought which it may equally achieve and is the usual link between each and modernism.

So, although surrealism and feminism differ over female subjectivity, Hewett places surrealist aesthetics in the service of woman-centred ideas, as Carrington, Fini and Kahlo did. *Joan* is the narrative of a woman in contest with a male-dominated world, indeed with men, and specifically over a role in public life and access to privileged discourse. *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* exemplifies the illusory and ephemeral nature of success predicated on stereotypical notions of feminine excellence and the sexual objectification of women, issues which continue to be contested. It speculates about the status of the feminine. Both plays

are dominated visually by surreal effects. In the background of Esther's isolation in *The Toucher* is a struggle with Sam, her ex-lover, for the independence of her authorial voice. The surrealist mode here is put to the task of constructing her identity as artist and, in turn, referring readers to the difficulties of that project. In the children's texts, where the surrealism is closely tied to the marvellous, girl figures prove to be no exception: Marigold's successful opposition to the acquisitive land-owner, Jack Swannell, shapes *Golden Valley*; and Willow, in *Song of the Seals*, conceives the plan which prevents a government's irresponsible conservation policy from being exploited by an unscrupulous developer. Metonymic of resistance and activism, both characters exemplify Hewett's legitimations of the raising of women's voices in public. The following illustration should be read mindful that Willow is the locus of the text's romantic undertones. That is, her *femme-enfant* (*enfant-femme*?) characteristics extrapolate her into an allusion to questions about who has rights to speak publicly and, in context, with specific reference to access to the law:

CAP'N: [...] Who spoke? Who is the child who spoke?

WILLOW: Me, (*sic*) Please Cap'n. I spoke.

CAP'N: Why do you interfere in the Round Table?

[....]

CAP'N: By the Great Horned Toad it's that child again.

THE DOLPHIN: The child is always speaking out of turn. But she seems a sensible child — for a human.

THE MARLIN: She doesn't know her place.

(*Song of the Seals: Act Two*)

Like Carrington's, Hewett's attempts to explore what 'knowing one's place' has

meant to women are playful, allusive, often fantastic, and they honour the specific links between women and children subversively and without idealising them.

Hélène Cixous, numbered among those who theorise a basis for a postmodern feminism and *écriture féminine*, has proposed that, when women speak publicly, their history of limited access to public speech and their particular relation to the symbolic order are disclosed. Cixous writes:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away — that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak — even just open her mouth — in public.... (1976: 251)

Both the attempts of surrealist women artists constructing themselves as (speaking) artist subjects in their own right, and Hewett's layered efforts to depict 'speaking women' and to speak *as a woman*, are usefully regarded in light of the access and effort Cixous describes. Beyond these references lies a history of women's lives circumscribed in particular ways and of their (mis)representation in public discourse. Reading Cixous to mean that women have a 'privileged relationship with the voice', Alison Bartlett makes the following observation: 'It's the publicness that renders the speaking woman out of place, because of the authority with which patriarchy imbues public speech' (1998: 80). Seen in this light, Hewett's repeated positioning of female figures at the fringe of public discourse is intriguing. When they do step into a political arena, they are 'out of place' in such ways and often represent this kind of experience.

Moreover, like the surrealist women I have named, it should not be forgotten that Hewett herself has been attempting to do what Cixous' famous injunction

calls on women to do — 'write themselves'. In this project, Cixous locates a more negative and gendered double-centredness than Caws identifies in the operations of surrealist writing. Cixous writes:

To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: *for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and not having any....*) — tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. (1976: 250, emphasis mine)

Or, as in the case of the militant surrealist men for whom woman was chiefly a muse, she is reduced to being a tool. This fact distanced surrealist women artists from the movement of the day, whilst ensuring that their art was in close dialogue with it. They were giving 'voice' to social revisions and are reductively treated in criticism which subsumes them into a merely old-fashioned conventional form of avant-gardism. There is much to be gained from retaining a sense of surrealism's heterogeneity, and one way of doing so is by attending to both the feminism of some of its artists, and the art of some of its feminists.

POSTMODERNISM AND SURREALISM IN HEWETT'S WRITING

Surrealism cannot simply be mapped onto postmodernism. The surrealists *did* see themselves as avant-garde and regarded artists as autonomous individuals working from a position outside the culture they inhabited. As I have argued, postmodern critiques of power expose the difficulties of assuming that an object of opposition can be isolated and represented in these ways (Waugh 1995: 39-55).

The fact that subjectivity is differently critical to the two discourses is particularly significant, although even in this regard there is a tantalising lack of clarity. Surrealism persists with a romantic artist subject, but the question of whether it reinstalls it, rather than invoking it critically, is debated. Surrealist art was often collaboratively produced in an attempt to relinquish conscious control by individual artists. The production of *exquisite corpses* is a case in point. More than a simple commitment to randomness, images and verbal texts were cooperatively produced to avoid individual self-expression.⁹ According to David Batchelor (1993), the process illustrates the lengths to which surrealists went in their attempts 'to *systematically* outflank "any aesthetic or moral concern"' (in Feret al: 55), the very 'outflanking' which troubles critics of postmodernism like Eagleton, who cautions that 'the left, now more than ever, has need of strong ethical ... foundations' (1996: 134). The surrealists assumed that building on random material would allow their images to proceed directly from the unconscious. Nonetheless, an *exquisite corpse* is an intertext produced by a process which depletes the concept of author as origin, and so goes against the grain of both romantic and modernist views of the artist/text relationship. It also

indicates that surrealist manoeuvres to outflank aesthetics and ethics were limited by the fact of their resistance to prevailing values.

Hewett is least a surrealist insofar as surrealism was a movement. She left 'clubbishness' behind when she left the communist party. Nevertheless, her sustained love of theatre is based partly on pleasure in collaborative thinking and labour, as she admits in conversation with me:

DH Of all writing, as I think I've said many times, and I still think so, it's the most brutally confronting for the writer.

CMG It makes you vulnerable.

DH Absolutely. And not only in the rehearsal process and the fact that all these people are taking over what you have written and turning it into something else, inevitably, and you have to accept this, but the awful moment when you sit in the audience watching the audience watching your play. It's almost indescribable in its 'confrontingness'. And yet, I did find it extraordinarily suborning in some way. You're part of a cooperative team of people working together, so that some of the responsibility was in a sense taken off you and you joined with other people, and that loneliness of being a writer on your own — which is so real that it's palpable — was dissipated. And the sense of being able to actually create three-dimensional figures that walked around and spoke in a vaguely representative recognisable world enchanted me. What happened of course — I did have quite a few bad experiences with directors and critics and all the rest of it — I don't know whether I could have continued as long as I did, but I happened to stumble on Rodney Fisher — and really 'stumble' was more or less the word — and developed this relationship with the director which was like some dream, because our minds just seemed to coincide so remarkably. And I began to see that this situation which I'd always imagined, could actually be so, where everything seemed to go together and work in this amazing way. What was extremely difficult, though — all the time — was the hostility of most of the

critics.

Sometimes, Hewett's writing for theatre seems aimed at effects akin to the *exquisite corpses* of surrealism, in which dismemberment and recomposition, fragmentation and fracture are the dominant effect. *The Chapel Perilous*, *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* and *The Tatty Hollow Story* strike such a note. In the historical context, such texts were a result of techniques employed by surrealists to deflect realism and dominant artistic conventions, which their random and cooperative constructions of poetry and drawings set out to do. Hewett does not use these techniques. However, her writing shares implicit resistances to traditional artistic forms and the mindsets which they reflect.

In 'Dance the Springtime In' (1984), she comments directly on collaborative art. Their third successful project, *Song of the Seals*, was worked on in 1983 by Hewett, the composer, Jim Cotter, and the theatre company, Magpie. Of working with Cotter she writes: 'My theatrical vision and his have a peculiar sympathy impossible for me to define. Enough that it exists' (1984: 11). She describes the contributions of the company as an 'advantage' if a 'mixed blessing': 'the ideas that came out of it changed and strengthened the final script' (1984: 10). Hewett's continuing desire to write for theatre, given her sense of writing into critical hostility, is related to enduring interest in artistic collaboration.

Of course, surrealist collaborative practices were based on philosophical conviction. Breton's call for a commitment to 'moral asepsis', in *The Second Manifesto*, simultaneously articulates a desire to extend the value which is given to imagination (in Gascoyne 87-88).¹⁰ He writes:

We maintain that the only chance of success for the surrealist operation lies in its being performed under conditions of moral asepsis, and the idea of this asepsis is still one that few men will entertain. Yet otherwise there can be no arresting of that cancer of the mind which consists in thinking far too sadly that certain things 'are' when others, which might so well be, 'are not.' We have contended that the things which are and the things which might so well be should be fused, or thoroughly intercept each other, at the limits. What has to be done is not to be content with that, but *to be unable to do less than tend desperately towards those limits.*

When surrealism attempted to emancipate artist individuals from dominant artistic and intellectual traditions and conventions by emphasising artistic process, performance and production, questions of representability and the role of imagination were at stake. As Gascoyne suggests, more is involved than literary and artistic experimentation:

The most vital feature of surrealism is its exclusive interest in that point at which literature and art give place to real life, *that point at which the imagination seeks to express itself in a more concrete form than words or plastic images.* Hence the surrealists' frequent reference to this phrase of Lautréamont's: 'Poetry should be made by all. Not one'.

(1970: 61, emphasis mine)

These ambitions of achieving disinterested thought and representing 'real thought' are antithetical to postmodernism. Breton saw surrealism as 'Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations' (in Gascoyne, 1970, 61). This depends on the exteriority which postmodernism disputes and fails to recognise that all renderings of thought are mediated.

A concept of consciousness ties the surrealists to modernist subject

construction, then. Postmodernism refers to a more far-reaching epistemological crisis and crucial doubt about self-knowledge. Nevertheless, in opposing the high art which contemporary modernists espoused and in arguing for literary production in terms of 'process, performance, happening', the surrealists contributed to the postmodern moment.¹¹ Mismatches which make the two discourses discontinuous also open paths between them, as de Certeau (1986) suggests is always the case: 'It is in fact difference which carves the isolating gaps into the homogeneity of language and which, conversely, opens in each system the paths to another' (quoted in Threadgold, 1997: 26). I have indicated pathways between surrealism and postmodernism at the levels of aesthetics, political orientation, and processes of production. In the background is a comparable *state of mind* which Hewett shares with both.

For Robert Short (1976), this phrase finally defines surrealism. The surrealist movement was at its strongest in Europe between World Wars I and II. In Short's view these historical origins mean that surrealism is best conceived of, not as artistic style or practice, but as a state of mind intimately related to radical doubt about the nature of civilisation in the wake of World War One. Such doubt led to vastly heterogeneous art in which the common factor is an insistence on re-valuing the ir/rational. This insistence intersects with postmodernism and feminism, since all three discourses query post-Enlightenment privileging of rationality and speculate about its definition. There are significant differences, however, in the uses to which surrealist and postmodern arguments against rationalism have been put, and again, tensions relate to differences over

subjectivity.

Surrealism compares most easily with postmodernism when it is framed in this way, as a state of mind in which doubt is pivotal. Defined this way, too, it arguably influences Hewett's work more than is generally recognised, even by her. For her part, Hewett variously defines herself as an 'expressionist' and 'basically realist with a dash of symbolism' (in Featherstone, 1994). Her own uncertainty about the stability of these categories is clear. Understood as a state of mind, surrealism labels something broader than an aesthetic mode and this formulation justifies the wider application of the category to Hewett's themes as well.

To quote Short:

The Surrealist contention is that the world would cease to be a conglomeration of unrelated fragments in which man feels himself to be alien and lost if the associative faculty of the mind could be restimulated and developed. This means regaining the use of powers we once possessed before they were emasculated by a materialistic civilization: powers which children, primitive peoples and the insane seem to be the last among us to retain. (1976: 302)

Hewett resists the rigid opposition between 'civilised' and 'primitive' thought on which Short depends here. That is her postmodernism, and a significant reason for noting the intricate ethical stances of her children's texts. It is also a reason for recalling that the strategy in *Joan* is to reclassify what constitutes insanity, rather than celebrate it as 'primitive wisdom'. Thus a limit is shifted, and Hewett's postmodernism can be seen to lie partly in a willingness to embrace ideas in which thought, 'supplementary to logical analysis', as Short puts it (1976: 302), is revalued. Even the simplest exchanges of dialogue contain appeals to redefine

what actually comprises rational thought, along the lines that Short identifies on behalf of the surrealists. For example, in *Golden Valley*:

MARIGOLD: Why does everybody, except Tib, pretend they've never heard of you?

NIM: They're protectin' me.

MARIGOLD: From what?

NIM: The world — because I'm a runaway. But I'm the Lord of the Forest now. I'm smart, see.

MARIGOLD: You have got tickets on yourself. I suppose you're ... magic?

NIM: [*laughing*] Magic! That's just soft talk. No, anybody can do what I've done, providin' they've got the brains.

MARIGOLD: That's what Tib says.

NIM: She's right then, for once. All you need is play-actin'.

MARIGOLD: Imagination?

NIM: S'pose so. Everybody's got it, only they won't use it.

MARIGOLD: Will you teach me? (*Golden Valley: Epilogue*)

As Short indicates, the surrealist movement aimed to re-immasculate extra-rational thinking by challenging the limits to what is regarded as rational. Similarly, Hewett is less interested in opposing rationality than in wondering about how it is defined and limited, and in posing questions about what the effects of that may be. Even the surrealist desire to reconnect masculinity with extra-rational knowledge is echoed in her work. The construction of Nim as a benchmark figure for the imaginatively revised notion of rational thought which is invested in *Golden Valley* is caught up with this very renegotiation.

Nim derives significance from cross-textual, lateral processes in Hewett's writings. He exemplifies the fact that when we allow ourselves to play across their

interconnected surfaces, particularities of each poem, story, play, may expand into a text which engages with ideas about the self and author/ity and writing and the body, with social and cultural formations such as class, and their critique. Sometimes, even stridently and triumphantly, a text emerges which engages with traditional formulations of female desire and female (hetero)sexuality and what it means to be A Woman. Nim contributes to that text by personifying the object of such desire. In *Golden Valley*, where he practises only provocative deceptions, he is predominantly a figure of playfulness. He has a more serious avatar in the poetry, however, as Alice's interlocutor in *Alice in Wormland* (1987).

Hewett recalls Nim's 'origins' in *Wild Card*:

My favourite book is *The Dream Girl's Garden*. It has a story about a fairyboy called Nim who has a wicked heart but a beautiful face and body. Gradually, like Dorian Gray, his face distorts and his body twists grotesquely to match his cruel deeds. Only, when he begins rescuing beetles, ladybirds and dragon flies from pools of water does the tide turn. He recovers his great beauty and becomes a boring Goody Two-Shoes. The morality tale is lost on me. I love the wicked Nim ... the brilliant face with the beautiful, lying eyes. (47)

Despite this assertion, the deceptions practised by the Nim of *Golden Valley* are redemptive. Hewett converts the fairy boy of her childhood reading into a shape-changing figure which confounds equations between beauty and (im)morality. An association with wonder is carried in Nim's magical capacities which metaphorise difference, but he is also anchored in the corporeal, as subsequent quotations will illustrate.

In 'The Shape-Changers' (*Alice in Wormland*, 1987, in CP: 297-306), surreal

images mount a series of vivid sensual encounters. Falcon and white owl are manifestations of Nim and Alice, respectively, recalling Carrington's mythic emblematising of herself and Max Ernst. Nim is not merely a representation of 'one true love' here, however. He is a fusion, a generalisation, the condensation of several love(r)s into a single love object. Hence, he escapes cliché and becomes a means of enfiguring a woman's desire as active. In an economy of meaning-making, the poem derives energy from familiar cultural references. Well-established narratives and poetic traditions are invoked to produce a version of inter-sexual love¹² and convert the tradition of 'until death do us part' into fantastic flight (and hence a flight of fantasy). The poetry is allusive, intertextual, and swings between so-called high and low cultural sources, between biblical myth and fairytale, metaphysical poetry and the vernacular, drawing readers into argumentative invitations about themes as diverse as sexual relations and love, and nihilism:

Nim strikes at the rock in a fury
the blood pours down the striata
Gods can die he shouts
the shovels spark & sing in the air
an owl's feather flies... (Stanza 68)

The latter recalls the image in *The Toucher* of the floating feather which also refers to the transience of desire and life. Both images acknowledge connections between sex and death. This too is apparent in 'The Shape Changers':

Your sword she whispered

*it was the most beautiful
and deadly sword in all the world
& it was for me
but it was only a fluke
we found each other
& for such a short time (Stanza 71)*

Also, as usual, 'The Shape Changers' is no mere recycling of prior narratives on Hewett's part. Biblical references, romantic and modernist poets, and fairy tale material are all revisited for shared meanings, but they are revised, re-played, played with. Again, appeals to imagination are made:

*I see things that are not there
says Alice.... (Stanza 71)*

And:

*I am the owl she hoots
half-blind with light
& double visioned
is it over? (Stanza 72)*

Again maternity and death are connected:

*Alice knows what death is
corpses glow in her life
the blue infant (Stanza 66)*

Here, too, disparate signifiers force meaning from disjunctive combinations, and not merely as 'a conglomeration of unrelated fragments in which man feels himself to be alien and lost', to recall Short's words, but in a manner which resists that interpretation of fragmentation. Like the surrealists', Hewett's conglomerating effects make the text operate in a predictive mode, relying on readers to make the necessary associative, meaning-producing connections:

the handful of friends
the husband who never caught his great fish
a shimmer of silk below them
a wash of surf the coffin slips

on her sons' shoulders
her daughters stumble
Nim stands on the clay reciting
steadyng himself against a granite boulder
the heat runs up his palm to his elbow
his voice thin as a reed
a peregrine falcon sweeps in from the sea
his eyes follow it blurring (Stanza 68)

What blurs is subjectivity, since Nim is also the falcon.¹³ He is a reminder that Hewett uses transforming, shifting subjects in serious adult texts. The texts are not self-enclosed. Wherever he appears, Nim is a figure of anti-rational representation and 'The Shape Changers' illustrates the fact, its chief strategy being defiance of logic. Connections across the writing, which the very appellation, Nim, sets in place, indicate that the enigmatic effects which Hewett attaches to him in *Golden*

Valley are not reducible to the fact of that text being a melodrama for children.

The surrealists saw the irrational as a means of transcending rationalism. They were pessimistic about rationalist modes of modernist expression which did not regard war as symptomatic of a declining civilisation but viewed rationalism as the 'saving grace' of the historical context, a difference I develop shortly. Postmodernism critiques the very hierarchy of value implicit in this aspect of surrealist opposition to rationalism and their work is driven, in comparison, by inclusiveness.

Combinations of fantasy and resemblance are a key to surrealist aesthetics and distinguish it from mainstream modernism. As Foster cautions, the opposition between representation and abstraction, which governed modernist art, did not govern surrealism. Surrealism 'subverts the representational paradigm', he argues; it 'unfounds it, pulls out the real from underneath it' by simulating it (1993: 97). Modernist attempts to cancel representation by abstraction only preserve it, Foster argues, explicitly linking simulation and fantasy: 'Both can confound origins, and both are repressed within modernism for doing so' (1993: 97). In another example of de Certeau's point that, where interests intersect, they also diverge, Hewett's attraction to surrealist techniques and themes, and her openness to fantasy, disturb connections between her writing and modernism. Even her extensive use of myth does not necessarily imply a modernist dependence on deep mythic structures. Reading her exclusively that way forecloses on the use to which the cultural heritage is put in her writing. As Rubin points out:

The iconography of older art was largely drawn from a store of familiar symbols — religious, mythological, historical — that were ready at hand for the artists. Even a cursory glance at the art of the last century reveals that these symbols have no longer seemed viable; while the modern artist has moved toward abstraction he has largely eschewed iconographic schemes and narrative situations. The Dadaist and Surrealist attempts to invest painting with these symbols and stories led paradoxically not to greater illumination but greater mystification. (1967: 20)

Characters such as Nim, the fantasy figures of the children's plays, and ghosts like the Darkling sisters open the realist aspects of Hewett's representational style to the possibility of 'more to be said', and to a sense of something beyond the limit. The appeal to imagination is made by adding layers of mystery onto the ordinary. The cultural store is employed to keep in play a sense of the inexplicable, rather than (and as well as), to illuminate experience. The result is an 'apologetics' of the ineffable.

On a pragmatic level, surrealism provides playwrights with methods of subverting naturalism and realism whilst exercising economies of casting, time and hence money. Hewett's uses of dummies and masks to reduce cast sizes reflect commercial impulses in art which postmodernism has long recognised. More to the point, however, they mark her as philosophically in tune with postmodernism because the illogical, unrealistic elements in her writing are directed towards creating space for both rational and irrational thought within a text, rather than towards the exclusion of either. Simplistic evasions of the rational are viewed as the 'soft talk' to which Nim refers in the above quotation from

Golden Valley. Hewett's critique of a reason/imagination opposition is never reducible to that.

Hewett's inclusiveness takes several forms. It may be political. Rationalism is distributed across both sexes and different cultures, subverting the tradition of locating rational thought in white masculinity. Instead, that position is repeatedly exemplary of irrational behaviour, as in the cases of Zeek and The Flasher in *The Man From Mukinupin*. He may be the location of greed, as are Eek Perkins in *The Man From Mukinupin*, and Jack Swannell in *Golden Valley*. He may comprise a scrutiny of sexual exploitation and oppression like Freddy Sachs in *Susannah's Dreaming*, or misguidedness and a capacity for violence like Eek Perkins in *The Man from Mukinupin*, Swannell in *Golden Valley*, and Billy in *The Toucher*. Hewett continually contests the identity of the 'pillar of the community', an element of her dialogism evident in repeated constructions of prosperous male individuals with public position who are coercive and lack integrity. This is symptomatic of her socialism and class sensitivities. She invests a preferred or 'truer' rationalism in figures traditionally regarded as irrational and more usually feminised. This constitutes the dual move of re-locating and redefining the rational. Again, the preferred model of reason in *Joan* is located in a self-proclaimed witch. Examples are plentiful. As well as being advised by Nim, Marigold is mentored by Tib, witch-figure and arbiter of common sense in *Golden Valley*. *Song of the Seals* presents a collective rationality which includes not only fantasy figures, but also *HONEYMAN*, a young hippie from the forest ... representative of the forest people, and *MISS PRISSY PRYNN*, a spinster

schoolteacher. Locating reason in such figures is revisionary and a dialogic inflection of a text which opposes them to a developer, a minister and a manager.

The configuration has a parallel in *The Toucher* in tensions between the community and Victor Sobolev, millionaire investor in Esther's father's artistic legacy. Gertie McBride, an anti-pollution activist who subsequently becomes curator of the La Farge art gallery developed by Sobolev, is a reconstructive figure. Her combined social and conservation commitments suggest a 'common-sense' position straddling the oppositions which, as administrator of the gallery, she recognises ironically: 'I'm still collecting signatures. Take what you can from the ruling class but don't give up without a struggle. I don't forget. It's the Celt in me' (281). The novel constructs Gertie's as a knowing, rational voice, but Hewett dresses her in signifiers of the opposite. As a conservation activist doorknocking in winter she is a surreal figure: 'Dressed in white organdie splattered with sequins, a silver bandeau wound tightly across her brow' (262). At the gallery opening, where she appears in 'black jumpsuit, silver boots and a tiara' (281), her formal dress is excessive, but indicates willing adaptation. She is a social chameleon. Her dress is ironic and self-reflexive in ways that I have suggested may apply to Hewett's own performances as a public figure. As Gertie puts it when, at their first meeting, Esther offers her respite from the cold: 'I'm not dressed for the weather. I was trying to make a statement but most of them don't even get it' (263). Like Marigold and Willow, Gertie is one of the mediating, activist figures in which Hewett locates the optimism of her texts. As in *Joan*, the strategy has been to cast doubt over the ascendancy of the rational so that

assumed boundaries between rational and irrational are reframed as questions about definition and power.

The Man From Mukinupin particularly illustrates Hewett's interest in such combinations of rational and irrational thought. Here, the irrational erupts through 'the dark side of town', populated by bizarre figures but simultaneously the site of insights into the version of reality endorsed by the play. There is a clear focus on irrationalism. The Flasher fends off the voice of Marconi which is urging him to kill. He mutters continually about perpetual motion, by which he refers to masturbation. A composite figure of rational and irrational thought, Zeek is both astronomer and water diviner — an intuitive and unexplained capacity. At the conclusion of Act One, he locates water, an instance of the ascendancy of the irrational. At the conclusion of the play, he discovers a planet, an instance of effective empirical observation. Without interpreting the character too seriously, he is a mechanism for horizontalising the value of these two discourses and for inserting doubt into the opposition between them. In turn, that doubt is politicised. Zeek's dementia is attributed to the experience of witnessing a massacre of Aborigines, an event which is the dark historical heart of the play. Hewett does not use the past as an evasion, however. She insists on the lingering effects of that history into the present in the figure of Lily Perkins/Touch of the Tar. By exemplifying the perpetrators of those events in local businessman and father of the bride, Eek Perkins, she implicates the dominant and supposedly rational culture, and revalues the mad, outcast and supposedly deluded, like Zeek. She insists on linking a history of violence to the dominant tradition and queries it, as

the surrealists did when they linked war to the ascendancy of rationalism.

It is pertinent that Hewett uses surrealist aesthetics when drawing signifiers together to achieve such purposes; in this case, to create the dark side of Mukinupin. Act One introduces The Hobby, a tall cloaked figure crowned by *a simulated horse's skull on a broomstick, with glass bottles for eyesockets, and a lolling red tongue*. The scene's surrealism is heightened by the sounds of bullroarers and didgeridoos on a darkening stage. The dark/light opposition creates an obvious seam between the appearance of a rational, well-run and apparently benign social order and elements which it seeks to contain, but in fact never does; elements which draw out and expose its potential for brutality. This is the potential that the surrealists believed had emerged and against which their bids to emancipate themselves from Reason were directed.

Hewett's capacity for inclusive, cohabitative thought materialises differently in *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals*, but is no less noteworthy. The ordinary discourse of social interaction is dispersed among human figures, beings with metamorphic and metaphysical capacities, and ghosts, all of which are equalised by understatement. Tone is an element of their surrealism. Bradley's description of 'classically "Surrealist"' paintings captures the nature of the technique; they 'combine in bizarre and inexplicable contexts a variety of objects, each painted with a dead-pan, unremarkable, cut-out clarity' (1997: 28). The dead-pan delivery of the fantastic in *Golden Valley* and *Song of the Seals*, and of abjection in *Bon-Bons and Roses For Dolly* and *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, and of the banality of madness in *The Man From Mukinupin*, creates a comparable effect of conferring

on the irrational the status normally accorded the rational. Understatement naturalises the fantastic. In the children's plays, such effects are linked to expressions of doubt about 'civilisation', since the property developer, businessman, government minister — all likely signifiers of 'progress' — are brought into question. As in surrealist art, conjunctions are continually made between the irrational and rational by combining realms as disparate as magic and commerce, witchcraft and science.

The 'state of mind', indicated by these combinations, meets Short's definition of surrealism as radical doubt (1976: 302-7). From its inception, the movement acted on perceptions of meaninglessness by investing value in imagination. As Short writes, 'the consistent aim of Surrealist art has been to show the degree to which the world is porous to the imagination. Poets and painters alike seek to demonstrate that the fantastic belies its fantasy by being obstinately real' (1976: 307).

In a move consistent with the postmodernism I have espoused, the surrealists responded to an apparent collapse of values and categories of meaning, by asserting that the mind has the capacity 'to sustain itself' in the midst of chaos, to swim in the waters of discontinuity like some *poisson soluble* (soluble fish) as if they were its natural element' (Short 1976: 302). For a postmodernist, this may seem somewhat obvious. Or, interpreted as a state of mind which resorts to individualism, it describes an anti-postmodern position, and so Hewett's doubts about individualism notably distance her from it. It may also be interpreted, however, as a basis for art which accommodates disparities and sets about

'swimming in the waters of discontinuity', a fair description of postmodern artistry. It emphasises a subject's discontinuous and constantly renegotiated relationship with power.

Psychoanalytic discourse, as it has developed through poststructuralism, is pivotal in a surrealism/postmodernism nexus, given that differences over subjectivity are crucial. Deriving its initial impulse from Dada, which was explicitly grounded in anarchy, surrealist repudiations of rationalist thought oriented their art towards imagination. The position overlaps with Lyotard's version of postmodernism and also reiterates the value given to the imagination in the feminine sublime.

Surrealist desire to delve into the contents of the individual unconscious was based on ideas about identity which Freudian psychoanalysis had just conceived. They attributed the absurd, incoherence, madness, and so on, to 'strange forces' in the unconscious. Subjective dualism and a subject fixed to 'inner depths' remain intact in this view. Even practices like automatic writing posited a self-contained interiority which the artists proposed to excavate to uncover essential truths about art and human nature. This is the familiar unified depth model of identity (white and male, historically), critiqued by postmodernism, feminism and postcolonialism alike.

Such hopes of releasing the contents of the unconscious into art misconstrue the structures Freud theorised. The unconscious is not deliberately retrievable and cannot be articulated at will. However, the vision is historically embedded and, as

I have noted, the art which came of it projects a sense of the artistic subjectivity which subsequently developed within poststructuralist psychoanalytic discourse. For example, both postmodernism and feminism have deployed Lacan's formulation of a subject constructed in language, or theories like Kristeva's, or Irigaray's, in turn, have differently revised it. That is, there are links between surrealism, postmodernism and feminism in the matter of subjectivity.

Describing Lacan as a surrealist poet-scientist (1998: 150-187), Kevin Brophy construes Freud, Lacan and surrealism as an intricate knot specifically related to creativity. He writes:

where Freud sees neurosis in contrast to the Surrealists who see a supreme form of expression, Lacan sees a way for psychoanalysis to re-align itself with Surrealism (and hence with artistic creativity): it is not the unconscious the Surrealists show us, but the narcissistic ego. (1998: 157)

Freud challenged determinism and recognised the role of social and cultural forces in subject development. The surrealists participated in this paradigm shift. Ideas about identity opened up to contradiction, unpredictability and uncertainty, all of which gave force to surrealist resistance to the realist art which preceded them.

Blurred boundaries in respect of surrealist and postmodern constructions of identity make it possible to position Hewett's writing in a relationship with both. The modulations of subjectivity and critique of the body in *The Toucher*, the fracturing of identity in *Joan*, the constructedness of subjectivity and its social specificities in *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, the doubling of subjects in *The Man from Mukinupin*, the destabilised polymorphous subjects in the children's plays with their capacities for metamorphosis and hybridity: all entail Hewett's

writing in themes and artistic techniques, grounded in surrealism, which have implications for a subject linked to postmodernism.

I have suggested that where surrealism and postmodernism differ over conceptions of identity, Hewett's writing tends towards postmodernism since her use of a romantic artist subject does not comprise the dependence which the surrealists retained. Remarking on Picasso's stylistic combinations on the surrealist canvases, Batchelor clarifies the implications of this distinction between use and dependence:

It suggests, first of all, that each style is an example of *a* means of representing, but that neither can assume a *privileged* relationship with the world it depicts. If nothing else, this emphasizes the issue of the material character of representation. It is hard to suppress the sense, when faced with such work, that *we are looking, not so much at the object in a picture but at a way of picturing an object.*

(In Fer et al, 1993: 66-7, emphasis mine)

That is, a meta-artistic level is discernible in the dominance of diversity.

Breton's description of surrealism suggests, in a related way, the movement's sense of responding to the limits of representability:

The horror of death, the pantomime of the beyond, the total breakdown of the most beautiful intellect in dream, the towers of Babel, the mirror of inconstancies, the insuperable silver-splashed wall of the brain, all these startling images of human catastrophes are perhaps nothing but images after all. (*The Second Manifesto*, quoted in Gascoyne 87-88.)

Hewett gives similar reflections to Esther in *The Toucher*:

Sometimes her whole past life seemed like an opera, a comic opera, in which she moved from place to place, playing out these hopeless love

stories against different backdrops, all as flimsy and artificial as stage scenery. The complications were sordid and miserable and funny, the men all had interchangeable faces, only the orchestral accompaniment ennobled the stories and only she heard it. It was the music, so passionate and prophetic, that transcended the second-rate plots and scoundrelly lovers. It suggested something elemental and immortal, as if life really had a meaning after all. But the plots were always drearily banal, and the dialogue so repetitious that she grew deathly tired and sick of it all.

(59-60)

In these quotations, a leap into the sublime relates to a subject's sense of the gap between experience and representation. Hewett expresses the same concern as Breton about whether or not there is anything more available to the representing subject than image. Both writers refer to the desire for a 'life meaning' which can be rendered in art, and both doubt its possibility.

Hewett's diverse installations of subjects within and across her texts may be viewed in the light of Batchelor's insight, as presenting ways of presenting subjects. One surrealist ingredient of her writing is an aesthetic result of interventions into how identity might be conceived of and represented. That is, variety itself constitutes a meta-fictional level, with antecedents in surrealism, which links her with the postmodern.

The idea of surrealism as 'proto-postmodernism' is not new. Barthes suggests it in 'the Death of the Author' (1977). His description of surrealist artistic methods connects them with postmodern views of art and author/ity:

Surrealism, though unable to accord language a supreme place (language being system and the aim of the movement being, romantically, a direct subversion of codes — itself moreover illusory: a code cannot be

destroyed, only 'played off'), contributed to the desacralization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist 'jolt') by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of several people writing together. (1977: 143)

Barthes' observations identify pathways between the two discourses which do not conflate them.

There are several connections to be made. Insofar as surrealism involves a commitment to uncertainty, it echoes the feminine sublime. Although the surrealists did not display postmodern recognition of the constructedness of social and cultural systems, their art is meta-discursive in ways that contributed to the 'reflexive moment' which, Ommundsen notes, is 'central to most definitions of postmodernism' (1993: 82). In turn, it is her surrealism which produces meta-discursiveness in Hewett's work. As Ommundsen suggests, although discourse on postmodernism is varied, there is a shared perception that it refers to 'a project of *denaturalisation*' (1993: 82), and surrealism was clearly that. Also clearly, denaturalising projects imply doubt.

There are implications here for my focus on postmodern characteristics in Hewett's writing. Metafictional aspects of surrealist and postmodern texts ward off occlusions that both realist and modernist representational processes render 'innocent' in contrasting ways. The use of codes in realist representations assumes the possibility of mimesis. Modernist representations imagine that codes can be transcended. Postmodernism doubts both possibilities and considers, to recall

Barthes' words, that 'a code cannot be destroyed, only "played off"' (1977: 143). Hence, the 'playing off' of codes, and submissions to their inevitability, position Hewett as a writer with a postmodern sensibility. If surrealism is best described as a state of mind which reflects radical doubt, reflexivity governs postmodernism, and the feminine sublime is a commitment to radical uncertainty, then a nexus between the three discourses relates to doubt. Hewett's status as a postmodernist can be located in shared ground between surrealism and postmodernism where radical uncertainty is evident in a comparable dependence on the sublime. There is a difference in the nature of that sublime, however, and I will argue shortly that, in Hewett's case, the feminine sublime dominates.

I have resisted accounts of postmodernism which construe it as artistic commodification and cultural 'exhaustion', and which regard the possibilities of agency and political commitment as 'illusory' (Eagleton: 1996). Ommundsen identifies a threshold marking critics' use of the very term 'postmodernism' which describes my position: 'If ... a critic wishes to salvage postmodernism for political radicalism, he or she will include in this category the kinds of writing that combine reflexive techniques with an awareness of extra-textual realities' (1993: 88). A corollary of this is that entrenched concerns with 'extra-textual realities' do not produce a necessary clash with postmodernism, either for the surrealists or for Hewett. Such exclusions depend on the definition of postmodernism. Once again, it cannot be. Nor is it therefore possible to interpret Hewett's surrealism as symptomatic of concern with extra-textual realities of a kind which disqualifies her from being described as a postmodern writer. Rather, it is evidence of her

'playing off' of codes.

Postmodernism and surrealism are also linked by a questioning stance about the logic of genre. Genre may be foregrounded, as postmodern detective fictions like Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1991) illustrate. Both elaborately comply with disparate generic conventions. Another well-used example is John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which transgresses the narrative pattern by reformulating the 'happy-ending' of the romance plot as a question. The strategy interrogates (à la Barthes) the authority of author and reader in relation to the larger meaning-making structures of genres. Genres are 'apparatuses of capture', according to Muecke: '[y]ou can tell the genre by the mode of capture, and the feeling is the 'snare': fear, amusement, sadness. Writers capture readers in this way...' (1997: 160-61). Hewett's execution of diverse genres and engagements with genre within a single text, as in *The Toucher*, suggest an awareness of working with an 'apparatus' and complying with its limits. In another engagement with processes of submission and the 'playing off' of codes, she avoids naturalising genre.

Alternatively, postmodern fictions use genre parodically to confound rationality, as the postcolonial writing of Salman Rushdie demonstrates. In *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), to name just two texts in which genre is subverted, historiography combines with romance fiction and ghost stories, among other genres, taking reason to its limits. Such writing subverts 'master codes', producing 'mutant' and 'polymorphous' texts, to use descriptors by which Hassan (1985) distinguishes between postmodern and

modernist writing.

Hassan's taxonomy of postmodernism includes features which also translate to surrealism, however, and so further problematise a view of surrealist art as simply one expression of modernism. Since he explicitly links Dada to postmodernism, a claim that Hewett's surrealism is an indication of her postmodernism draws attention to yet another boundary, between Dada and surrealism. This distinction provides an opportunity to elaborate on the heterogeneity of political and artistic critiques within the historical context and, in turn, tensions *within* the context allow me to distance Hewett's writing from the nihilism which marked Dada. More importantly, it is an opportunity to return to her use of the sublime.

Blurred territory emerges from these discursive indeterminacies traversing Hewett's writing; boundary territory. No privileged relation with the world is claimed in her representational practices, only experience of it, which she relates only doubtfully.

HISTORICAL DIFFERENCES AND LINKS WITH THE SUBLIME

The boundary between surrealism and Dada is as unstable as any. Employing a concept of 'openness' to describe surrealism as 'open realism', Caws undermines distinctions between these contemporary movements as well. Her account of surrealism supports my overall argument that uncertainties about the boundaries between discourses mean that Hewett cannot be fixed to one. Caws writes:

The question of what is Dada and what is surrealist is not an easy one. No single quality is alone sufficient to classify a text as surrealist, neither polar opposites and their dialectical resolution, nor manifestations of the

unconscious in the realm of the conscious, nor the power of the analogical image, nor language as an alchemical work.... Breton claimed that the distinction of a surrealist work was its surrealist *motive*, that it was written as a surrealist text; *the fact that no exterior categorization is possible leaves the text open. And openness is precisely the quality emphasized by the most striking images and descriptions of Dada and of surrealism: Dada as the place where the 'yes' and the 'no' meet, not in castles but on street corners.* (1970: 6. emphasis mine)

In addition to recognising shared anti-élitist impulses in Dada and surrealism and broadening what may be regarded as surrealist textuality, Caws names here a site of the collision of 'yes' and 'no', the very collision used by Freeman to define the feminine sublime as a radical commitment to uncertainty. As I showed in Chapter One, Freeman locates the feminine sublime in a textuality based on undecidable confrontations with boundaries. She elucidates territory 'in excess' of volition from which certainty cannot be extracted. She theorises writing which fuses these boundaries and makes it impossible to discern 'where the "inside" begins and the "outside" ends' (1995: 115-16).

The feminine sublime operates in synonymous affirmatives and negatives, like those Caws identifies as the feature common to surrealism and Dada. It concerns moments in which inadequacies of ethical and moral frameworks are revealed without arguing for their abandonment. That is, it directs our attention to the critical importance of doubt. Breton's recognition of sites of fusion, at which moral choices intercept each other and imagination takes over 'at the limits', is echoed here. Also, in Freeman's terms, the sublime 'simultaneously impels and disables symbolization, with the effect that *we can never relinquish the attempt to*

find words [for images?] for some of the unspeakable things that remain unspoken (1995: 116, emphasis mine). It will be evident that surrealism, like Dada, was interested in what impels and disables symbolisation. In Hewett's writing, surrealism is a vehicle for the sublime not least because it complicates how readers/audiences are able to derive pleasure from her texts. She addresses even the relation between moral terror and the action of the imagination. Often, the commitments of her texts to radical indecision, and their engagements with 'speak[ing] the unspeakable', relate to, or proceed from, their surrealism.

In *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, these discursive intersections are again evident in the treatment of maternity and maternal love. Drawing on World War Two and the Vietnam War, the play combines the sublime and the banality and dead-pan delivery of surrealism. Ollie invokes the sublime, flatly:

OLLIE: I remember the day she was born, Mad. It was a blood red dawn over Kununoppin. You screamed for hours, woke the whole ruddy town up. (*Laughing wildly*) 'Well, Maddy,' I said. 'Other women have to put up with it. Why not you?' Laugh, I laughed till I cried. (Act Two)

A later speech shifts the rejection of maternity away from vanity and volition and ties it to an appraisal of the world into which her children would have been born:

OLLIE: [...] The violence! I dunno what the young things are coming to. Honestly I don', Mate. When I see it I can only say I'm glad all of ours finished up down the septic. I never let 'em get past three months. You get too fond of them otherwise. (Act Two)

The focus on life/death imagery incorporates abjection and the sublime. Maternity and blood are connected in ways which draw confusion over the territory of the

maternal. The 'blood red dawn over Kununoppin' associated with birth is echoed in Ollie's monthlies, her menopausal 'Flooding ... [a]ll over me new white shantung', and picked up in Dolly's suicide: 'left her blood all over the Axminster' (Act Three). The thread of bloody images becomes a distended boundary between birth and death, a boundary which preoccupies the poetry also. For example, lines in 'Alice in Wormland' (1987) follow Alice's grief over the departures of her children:

there will be no more children

she hated the menopause

the end of that rhythm

left her askew forever

she wanted blood (in CP: 285)

In the play, the question mark placed over maternity in the figure of Ollie is linked to institutionalised violence. Action takes place against a cine news film: *of Hitler, of war, of Nazi meetings, burning buildings, fleeing refugees, Nazi Leaders, Jewish victims, concentration camp victims* (Act Two). The manager's song invokes the Vietnam War: '....My Lai, /That's the American way /The American way, /And you'll die, and you'll die /Because violence is as American as cherry pie' (Act Three). It transpires, therefore, that Ollie's rejection of maternity is never trivial and, since *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* concerns a matricide, it is given substantial force. Simultaneously, she is a vehicle of the play's social derisiveness. That is, she is an instance of the combination of humour and terror

in which aesthetic presentation is bluntly juxtaposed against serious moral questions which the text does not presume to answer.

The most poignant and comparable example of the undecidability at stake here occurs in *Wild Card* in Hewett's account of her son's death. There is no trace of the ludic in this instance, of course. The description of Hewett's vigil beside his hospital bed emphasises the child's distress:

Great blue bruises disfigure his face and body. There is a jug of water beside the bed. I moisten his lips. I wait. Silent tears drip down my face. He quietens down and takes my hand. 'Don't cry any more, Mummy,' he whispers. 'Don't be sad.'

I watch him lapse into the last coma. He is scarcely breathing. 'Die,' I whisper. 'Die now.'

Only when I am sure it is too late, I call the Charge sister from her desk at the end of the ward. I have protected him. No more drugs. No more torture. (*Wild Card* 182)

This writing calls on neither surrealism nor abstraction. It illustrates that the feminine sublime is more than an aesthetic mode. Here, it is present in a moral impasse contextualised within the profoundly moving maternal situation of 'desiring' the death of one's child. Hewett's text does not resile from the question, and since it recurs in her treatment of maternal themes elsewhere, as I have shown, albeit with other aesthetic resonances, a layered response to the impasse is the result. Similar propositions of uncertainty, made using more abrasive, surreal aesthetics, as in *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, are no less attentive to the uncertainty of such moments and such impasses. Seen in the light of this greater question, Ollie is a representation of the conviction that unresolvable complexities

are attendant on the very fact of maternity.

Identical material appears in the poem, 'Anniversary' in *Greenhouse* (1979). In turn, information in the following quotation is explicitly repeated in *Wild Card*. In the poem, however, it is manipulated into a largely unpunctuated series of images, details strung together to distil the event and the grief into densely signifying fragments. The poem moves inexorably towards a question about what it means to be a mother:

he said *don't be sad*
I sat there overweight in my Woolworth's dress
not telling anybody in case they kept him alive
with another transfusion —

Afterwards I sat by the gas fire
in my old dressing-gown turning over the photographs
wondering why I'd drunk all the stout
& massaged my breasts every morning to be
a good mother. (CP 172-3)

Also in *Greenhouse*, in 'Psyche's Husband', Hewett sifts legend surrealistically and creates a hybrid corporeality for a child of the union between woman and beast which has been so much imagined. That mythic child is refracted through maternal eyes:

[....]
I run shrieking through the palace
as I snatch up the child the crow pecks at my wrists

the carpet lifts with the draughts under the doors
the air conditioner humming is set up high
I look back only once

[....]

my son with the beast's snout the toad's horn
& the crow's claw snuffles for acorns
along the floor of the rainforest
kiss me he snorts *kiss me* (CP: 166-7)

Links with surrealism are obvious here. However, the manner in which detail proceeds through the poem is similar to that employed in 'Anniversary', so that stylistic similarity straddles their tonal differences and produces discontinuous links between texts, which relate to their dependence on the sublime. The surreal imagery does not weaken the sense of uncertainty infusing the maternal theme in the latter example.

Invocations of the sublime may be unexpectedly flat and still launch a text into the commitment to undecidability which distinguishes the feminine sublime. A similar resonance of banality to what I have described in *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* infuses horrific events in *The Toucher* where Hewett's treatment of Billy Crowe's murder of Iris, as well as Esther's appraisal of it during the events which follow, is markedly atonal. This presents as restraint, given that passages which concern Esther's view of the world, historical events relating to war and natural disasters and her oceanic imaginings of the drowned Matt, all discussed in Chapter One, invoke the sublime in a heightened register. Hence, the novel

appears to risk depleting the seriousness of Billy's crime. Hewett has commented on this directly in our conversation, and I quote her shortly. This apparent withholding of judgment pertains to the novel's commitment to uncertainty.¹⁴

Given that the sublime is, strictly speaking, neither a textual feature nor a self-contained aesthetic, but a subject's response, Hewett's varied treatments of motherhood construct the theme itself as a site of the uncertainty which is the feminine sublime. She repeatedly suspends her texts in ambivalence, ambiguity, undecidability in relation to this theme, and uses it to implode the pleasure/pain boundary. In the example from *Wild Card*, the implications of that nexus are taken beyond aesthetic questions and Hewett forces us to confront them in terms of her lived experience.

Again, the poetry indicates the persistence of these strategies. 'The Last Peninsula' (1994), for example, concerns a woman's post-hysterectomy reflections on her place in the life/death progression, given her capacity to bear children. That capacity is a key to the call made by the text on the sublime:

the nurturing womb
is an envelope of torn flesh
 thrown away
[....]
one ovary left to swing
like a bell
like a petal blowing
alone in the dark
the black hole
that spreads and flowers

under the flesh
in the first brush
with death (CP: 391)

Hysterectomy is seen here as disablement and loss. The apprehension of death which it incurs, is simultaneously an affirmation of life and the life-bearing, life-transmitting capacities of the female body. The poem, 'Peninsula', grieves:

I die and the lost womb
and the last light
and the dark mystery
between the thighs
goes with me (CP: 395)

In such examples, Hewett's poetry affirms the female body in ways which recall Irigary's commitments to female morphology, that it represents 'the self-affection and self-representation of her body', and that 'the female body should not remain the object of male discourse and various male arts, but should become central to the process of a female subjectivity experiencing and defining it/herself' (in Jardine and Menke: 1991: 103). Hewett continually represents that commitment and often connects it with women's maternal capacities. In 'The Shape-Changers' ('Alice in Wormland' 1987, in CP: 211-297) we read:

I have stopped calling out to anybody
the hole between my legs is dying
the small tuft of hair above its mouth
is dry (CP: 299)

[...]

where are the lips now Alice.[sic]
that opened to the man you loved
& the strong thighs
that held him close as birth?
Three feet is enough in the clay
three feet of earth is deep
they sleep sound they settle down
the sweet flesh falls off
like a snake's skin (CP: 301)

In such ways, female morphology generates images from which the leap to the sublime is made. 'The Island of Glass' ('Peninsula', 1994) shares related resonances with *The Toucher*.

the anemones
open and shut
like mocking vulvas
the seals shake their heads
in the gulf
the sperm whales
blowing (CP: 319)

'Legends' ('Peninsula', 1987) is sexually inexplicit, but the anemone/mouth signifies the vulva because of prior uses of the image:

the open-mouthed anemone
knowing why man
with clouded brain

leaving his footprints
on the sand
obsessed by guilt
to be forgiven
looked up
and so created heaven. (CP: 341)

The lines containing the sublime reference here are neatly inflected with doubt in the inversion of heaven's usual origins.

That is, a repertoire of images is at work. Hewett's interest in sexual difference, her constructions of it in terms of difference based on wonder, her absorption in sexual narratives can be distilled to a 'dark mystery/between the thighs' which she insistently links with female capacity for child-bearing. The feminine sublime resides in her abiding resistance to taking this for granted. Her interest, like Irigaray's, is in seeing 'the culture of the subject ... evolve in the direction of a culture of the sexed/gendered subject and not in the direction of a heedless destruction of subjectivity' (in Jardine and Menke: 1991, 103). In addition, rather than being reduced to a bleak Freudian apprehension of sexuality through death, female sexuality is treated in terms of its place in a life/death/life progression. Whether in terms of pleasure or pain, the womb and its links to the production of life are a continual site of wonder.

The writing cannot be reduced to biological essentialism on these grounds. That misreading is often applied to Irigaray also. Both writers reject the opposition implicit in fear of essentialism which has permeated much feminist discourse. Hewett asserts the possibility of a biological impulse *and* views it in

terms of sociocultural relations. She writes in *Wild Card* about moving to Sydney with Joe Flood and leaving Clancy behind in Perth with his father:

I have never seen myself as a particularly maternal woman. I have opted for lover rather than child, but I have forgotten to take my own female biology into account. Every time I see a child in the street or a baby in a pram, I turn my eyes away. My mother writes to tell me how Clancy has run after a blonde girl in the street calling out 'Mummy! Mummy!'

(*Wild Card* 1990: 162)

Irigaray rejects essentialist arguments. She refuses, however, to be deflected from simultaneously foregrounding women's maternal capacity — which, as she argues, is specific to women whether they enact it or not — and resisting injunctions upon women to enact it. The flow of meanings in Hewett's writing about maternity, and their links with the sublime, are similarly complex because they relate to what Irigaray describes as '[i]ssues associated with the respect for life and culture, and with the continuous passage of the natural into the cultural, the spiritual into the natural' (1990/1993: 13).

As the following excerpts from our conversation reveal, many of these considerations will continue to be projected onto Hewett's writing:

CONVERSATION:

DH I started initially writing plays thinking, now this is going to be very difficult. I've got to really concentrate on this. And I'll always keep on writing poetry because I have to do that. But I deliberately stopped writing prose, except for the odd critical article or something like that. So I must have some idea in my head that there was something wrong with this sort of hopping from one genre to the other. I don't think this at all any more. I think it's all

nonsense. *I think certain — well, I can't even say certain subjects — suit certain forms, because the same ideas and obsessions keep surfacing in whatever I write. So they're all closely bound together. And one of the criticisms against the plays was what was seen as their form was, you know, no beginning, middle and end. Another one was: 'Too poetic'!*

CMG *Whereas the poetry erupts into the plays, the drama erupts into the poetry —*

DH *That's right. And it all erupts into the novel.*

CMG *Yes. And this is one of the reasons why I'm pro-postmodernism, because you can actually think about these things in exciting ways that emancipate you from those kinds of —*

DH *— rigid concepts —*

CMG *Well, yes. And if you go back and start thinking these things through in terms of that anti-rigidity, you end up looking at the way you've moved from genre to genre.*

DH *Yes. Whatever I'm doing at the time I'm terribly involved in, so I'll just tell you a bit about this trilogy that I'm coming to an end of. It's been a much more gigantic task than I ever imagined, actually, because in the middle of it I've been ill, and all sorts of things have happened. Anyway, it was just a huge thing to do, and pretty frightening really. I mean the only other person that ever did it was Ray Lawlor, and he was a man, and he was writing in a very naturalistic style anyway. But — and here's the obsessive thing — I'm back in a country town again. Something between Wickepin, Corrigin and Yealering, and something of its own which doesn't exist anywhere. And I follow the lives of these people from 1920 until 1948, through the three plays. And when I was talking to somebody about this — it was Rosie Scott, actually — the other day, and it was the first time I'd really talked to her about it at all. She said to me, Good heavens, you're trying to write the myth of Australia. And I in a sense thought, well, yes, I guess I am, and that's why it's so hard. And the town starts off, you know, as the sort of typical wheatbelt town just sort of appearing in the twenties, or getting some sort of solidity. And ends up — because the play*

actually has an epilogue which takes it to 1970 — as a town which is blown away, and virtually nothing remains except the ghosts. So it's a reworking of all those things we've been talking about, really: the spectres on the wind, the ephemeralness of Australia and our place on it, in it, on it.

CMG *Does it lament that?*

DH *What?*

CMG *Does it lament that ephemeralness?*

DH *It laments it and accepts it. That this is what happened. The play has its tragic moments, but I don't think it's totally tragic, because at the end, as well as the spectres three characters remain in the town. One is the town drunk who recites — his name is Sweeney and he keeps reciting some of the best lines I think Henry Lawson ever wrote:*

*And in afternoons in cities, when the rain is on the land,
Visions come to me of Sweeney with his bottle in his hand,
And the rainy night behind him, and the pub verandah-post —
And I wonder why he haunts me more than any other ghost.(Sic)*

So he's there, and he has his ghostly attributes, obviously. And the old store-keeper, who was a real con man in a way, who always had a scheme; one of those Australians, you know, who always have a scheme? They're perpetual optimists. And in this wrecked town, where he's pushing his wife, who has Alzheimers, in a wheelchair — so her conversation is extremely fractured but sometimes hits the mark in a rather uncanny manner. His dream is that he will set this place up as a big tourist place for the Japanese to come. You know, a wildflower town. And of course it'll never happen, probably. Well, we don't know whether it will or not. But there he is, the eternal optimist, with the wrong dream in a way, but he's still got a dream. So it seems to me that this play is in a funny sort of way about all the things we've been talking about.

[...]

CMG *And full of things that I want to think about in relation to your work —*

to go back to what we were talking about before, about magic. Like Golden Valley where you use the idea of metamorphosis and transformation —

DH Oh, Song of the Seals.

CMG That kind of thing. Where you actually —

DH Yes, well that transformation myth fascinates me—

[....]

DH There was something else. It was about doubleness. The shadow self. I suppose in a funny sort of way, the shadow self of Esther is Maudie Chandler. Just as the shadow self of Billy Crowe is Sam. Yes. And in this novel that I have to get back to after the end of this month, there are doubles all over the place. One of the central metaphors of it is a marvellous sculpture that I saw when I was in Rome and I went to the ... what are those gardens called, those famous gardens? Anyway. You go into this little art gallery, palace and right in the foyer is a marvellous sculpture of Daphne turning into a tree, with Apollo reaching up for her, and her limbs in the statue are in the process of becoming leaves, boughs. And that was really the beginning of this novel for me.¹⁵ Because it's all about — not literally about that, but subliminally about — that. The central figure is in this case a fifty year old woman, an academic, whose husband has just left her for a research assistant. She's gone to a fishing village on the south coast of New South Wales to try and recover, because she's got some sabbatical leave. And in the course of all this, she does in a sense recover and sets off to live, as far as she knows, the rest of her life in Rome. So she leaves the Australian Continent altogether.

CMG That's a departure, then!

DH It is departure! A departure. And talking about the maternal, she goes to live with her daughter, her grand-daughter and her son-in-law in Rome. Her daughter that she partly rejected as a young woman. So she takes up — she's taking up she's going to another country and she's taking up the maternal role which she's rejected. And she doesn't know what's going to happen. But it's a

radical departure — for her as well as me.

CMG Well, given what you were saying earlier about the New World and myth, to take her to Rome is to —

DH — take her back into the Old World.

CMG Into where 'the epic fatality' came from?

DH Yes. And also into the place that I said, in that quote you showed me, that I want to have, that depth of culture, that is there and has been there for thousands of years. Except of course, in a sense, it's been in Australia even longer —

CMG That's right.

DH But that's aboriginal myth, and I think very difficult for us to latch onto, except in a sympathetic manner. It's not our myth really. They're not our myths. And never can be, I don't think. No matter how much you may sympathise, they're not ours. Ours are something different.

CMG It sounds fascinating. I look forward to it.

DH I'm looking forward to writing it. I really enjoyed writing *The Toucher*.

CMG Well, I think it's a terrific novel, and that all sorts of things are going on in it for a postmodern critic. The fact that it's self-reflexive, uses genre — the 'Mills and Boon' genre, the idea of genre, and then doesn't do many things that it's set you up to expect; and the text within —

DH — One critic, you know, said it was *Mills and Boon* pretending to be intellectual.

CMG Missed it completely! I wanted to ask you about names in relation to myth. Esther La Farge?

DH I don't know. I really don't know where I got that from. Esther.

CMG Once I started thinking about Aphrodite, I started thinking about names. And then about Esther. Esther in The Bible is fascinating. She rejects her nation. And names like Billy Crowe. Crowe? It seems obvious that the names are calling up —

DH Yes, they do. They kind of come to me out of the ether. I don't know how. The La Farge, actually, I stole, off a friend of my daughter's in Oxford

who was a lecturer there, and I loved the name and wanted a French-sounding name, so I stole it. Esther Summerton was originally Summerhayes, but then I remembered that there was a well known family in Perth called Summerhayes, so I couldn't use that. But I wanted some sense of coming to fruition — Summer, you know the sort of thing? And all the Crowes — they sort of 'hop?

CMG LAUGHS Yes. They do. At the edges of my imagination they connect with Golden Valley. There is still that sort of imagination at work.

DH There's something very menacing about the Crowes, too. Even when they're being benevolent they're a bit menacing. I wanted that. Just like crows. Having been brought up in the country in Western Australia, you know, crows — eating the eyes out of lambs, and all the rest of it — were always symbols of... murder I suppose. He murders. Billy Crowe murders.

MERV LILLEY Cruelty.

DH Yes, cruelty I suppose. All that. But also some sort of black, emblematic bird. Close to the raven. You know, the raven craving evermore. I've always been quite fascinated by the crow.

CMG Naming keeps the text connected with a sense of you as fabulist.

DH Yes. I wanted fabulous names for them. And Maudie Chandler — that just sort of came floating out of the air, and I couldn't think of her as being anything else ever but Maudie Chandler.

CMG What about Iris? Iris and Esther. You preempt likely feminist reactions—

DH LAUGHS Yes.

CMG It connects with issues about women's support of each other — I was going to bring you back to this when I asked about the woman-woman relationship. That's where that comes from. And the violence against women. I don't know, the novel is very restrained and doesn't deliver the judgment against Billy that some people might want.

DH No. In fact I didn't want to deliver a judgment against anybody. In fact, I remember on a television programme on SBS: How could that woman Esther

have ever loved such a horrible little bastard as that Billy Crowe? And I said, well, to me he doesn't seem like a horrible little bastard at all. He just seems like a man. And he does. With his good points and his bad ones. I mean after all, she was no angel, either.

Compatibilities between surrealism and postmodernism are refined by examining tensions between surrealism and modernism. Both the former operate as critique *and* construct, using the means which modernists hope to transcend (Hutcheon: 1988, 1989). According to Hutcheon, texts which abandon realistic representation, but remain autotelic in orientation, are late modernist and not to be confused with postmodern texts which, by contrast, transgress 'codes of representation' without attempting to escape them (1988: 40). As with the matter of whether or not texts make sustained reference to extra-textual realities, this is a crucial point of difference between surrealist art and the abstraction which became modernism's aesthetic dominant. It is also a point which further aligns Hewett with postmodernism. Once her texts are released from naive autobiographical equations, even their apparently 'autotelic orientations' are open to interpretation as evidence of submission to codes.

Also, if, as Ommundsen (1993) argues, transgressive postmodern texts 'have the function of demasking cultural codes or ideological paradigms' (88), then they are not ethically empty, as models of postmodernism which present it as the triumph of empty commercialism would have it. This 'demasking' agenda produces shared ethical ground between surrealism, postmodernism and Hewett's writing. The notion of 'demasking' reframes a possibility of social and cultural

opposition without the entailment of transcendence discussed earlier. Hutcheon's (1988, 1989) version of postmodernism as critique and construct is evident in Hewett's plays in their surrealist imagery which, although it bears a weight of ethical comment, continually negotiates a boundary between modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism, surrealism and Hewett's writing share a project of transgressing established codes of representation *by means of their installation* in the ways Hutcheon suggests. The point reiterates Batchelor's above, about Picasso's work. The surrealists sit on the cusp of the argument, 'problematis[ing] narrative representation, even as they invoke it', to use Hutcheon's terms (1988: 40), but their reflexivity remains inward-looking in ways that Hewett's does not.

This point is at the heart of my interest in these discursive boundaries. Where surrealism and postmodernism divide on subjectivity, Hewett's postmodernism comes into view. She uses surrealist aesthetics to explore possibilities of narrative representation, exhibit tactics of installation and critique, transgress codes rather than escape them, 'play them off', and add layers of extra-textual and metafictional references to patterns of realist discourse which she also uses.

Difficulties of delineating surrealism's boundaries do not preclude its description. As a movement, it developed by means of journals, manifestos and selective exhibitions and operated as a 'culture of exclusion', requiring formal membership and guided by leaders, Breton in particular. Features of surrealist artistic practice are more meticulously related to reference points in art history

than have concerned me, but even the movement formation has meaningful resonances in Hewett's life. Her enthusiastic membership of the communist party was based on an inclination for collaborative artistic activity as well as political activism. Such a context generates artistic energy, and members legitimate each other's endeavours. Membership implies contingent approval, however, as was demonstrated in Hewett's departure from the party. As with the surrealists, non-conformist members were expelled from this company of non-conformists. Hewett arrived at the postmodern irony about 'exteriority' which this insight contains and, as I have argued, it provides a truer explanation of her subsequent commitments than the idea of a retreat into individualism.

There are shared politics here, too. In France in the 1920s, the surrealists had attempted to align with communism. Their efforts failed, in part because of a view that their artistic commitments were insufficiently Marxist. They were not social realists. Nevertheless, the dialectical aspect of their endeavours is evident in the formation of a movement to separate from the more extreme negation of Dada. These manoeuvrings represent the wider cultural and political background to Hewett's activities in Australia, against which the ethical commitments of her art are more richly understood. She was informed about artistic and political trends in Europe. Her resistances to both rationalist thought and realist art are forms of self-positioning in relation to them and a dialogic feature of her texts. She has struggled to be read in terms of this wider context, and tensions between her and the dominant Australian cultural milieu connect with widespread ambivalence about the ways in which Australian writers fit into global contexts. Many

Australian writers, Patrick White and Christina Stead among them, have suffered from unreceptiveness to their internationalism.

This point is related to understanding Hewett's as writing which only transgresses codes. She did not realise her early, skyscraper-inspired aspirations to find a language 'which *must* be radically different' (*Wild Card*: 78). Her writing repeatedly confronts the presumption of that project. Later like-mindedness with the Angry Penguins indicates that her aesthetics developed more specifically in the direction of surrealism than the aesthetic which she admired from the ferry, and which belongs to the sustained rationalism of high modernism. The Angry Penguins were a significant force for importing surrealist influence into the Australian arena and Hewett's work is pervasively more attuned to their playful hybridity and disruptive forms than to the forging of the new.

As I suggested in Chapter One, the conclusion of *The Toucher* is symptomatic of this. Its trailing off into the unpunctuated image of 'a feather on the wind' (300) may be interpreted as an attempt to 'escape codes' in the modernist sense. Read superficially, that is, the writing aspires to represent what lies beyond death and the text becomes abstractly 'experimental' by breaking away from conventions which have governed it to this point. The sudden fragmentation, the disruption to punctuation, even the entry into Maxie's dying consciousness cannot be read unmindful of the modernist rendering of interiority of Joyce, or Woolf. However, it also trails equal measures of romanticism and realism. Hewett produces a critical installation of modernist engagements with unrepresentability by incorporating these possibilities together, and by interspersing text intent on

evading convention with text which remains compliant with it. Heightened imagery is offset by Maxie's idiomatic language; romanticised whales by sharks ('noahs'); the discourse of visions and miracles by that of 'catheters', 'piss' and 'drizzle'. The text *illustrates* attempts to represent the existence of the unrepresentable but is not reducible to the ambition to give expression to it. It becomes, instead, an implicit question about the possibility of such representation.

The result is hybrid. The explicit postmodern reference to unrepresentability is encoded in conventional paragraph form. Conversely, the modernist desire to contain the unrepresentable is reflected in a concrete image, the feather. Rather than arriving at symbolic mastery of the unimaginable, the figure resonates with exhaustion and silence, a 'petering out'. Hence the text exchanges two different economies of representation: modernist and postmodern. The modernist project of attempting to represent the unrepresentable is encoded in a mode which operates from within postmodern pleasure in convention. Equally, postmodern submission to unrepresentability is caught up in a modernist textual mode which alludes to the dream of 'the new'. Codes are never escaped, or reinvented. This is the postmodern position which Hutcheon describes and which exemplifies emphasis on the materiality of representation. It is what Batchelor discerns in Picasso's use of two or more styles within a single canvas, and what Barthes means by 'playing off'.

I have referred to the lingering recognitions of social(ist) imperatives which mark Hewett's later writing. These too are an extension of compliances within her work. Rather than seeking to abandon the past, she accommodates and recycles it

both as content and as modes of writing. There are links here with the inter-war critique in Europe. *Bobbin Up* was an attempt to comply with the genre of social realism but, like the surrealists, Hewett never did relinquish her artistic commitments in favour of zealous political prescriptiveness. Like the surrealists, she retained leftist convictions, despite political apostasy and, like them, she was convinced that realist forms of representation were never the only way for artists to contribute to social and political change. That is, like the surrealists, her politics had transformed into a more diffuse and inclusive ethics. Two World Wars had caused social and political structures to shift globally and Hewett's social consciousness and artistic vision were never entirely isolated from them.

The heterogeneity of the European critique and Hewett's politics make it unsurprising that she can be linked equally with the aesthetics of other movements of the time, such as *esprit nouveau*. This is a reflection of the difficulties of definition and further reason for considering her writing in terms of its inclusiveness. Any work which 'aims to be a candidate for the modern in art', according to Batchelor, 'embodies a series of pointers that *serve simultaneously to associate it with and dissociate it from* a range of precursors and alternatives' (in Fer et al, 1993: 24, emphasis mine). Hewett's is no exception.

Despite shared politics, surrealism differed from its contemporary movements over strategies for resisting the naturalism which had governed artistic tradition. The surrealists regarded the abstraction of *esprit nouveau* (Jeanneret — Le Corbusier — for example) as a continuation of the 'rationality, clarity of conception and precision of execution' which characterised institutionalised art

(Fer et al 1993: 20). On the other hand, compared with Dada, surrealism may be viewed as an idealistic attempt to redeem chaos, since it adumbrated a concept of imagination which allowed it to maintain some sense of progress. Dada had rejected that possibility. In Caws' neat appraisal, the differences are that 'as Dada denies, surrealism asserts ... Dada's negativism broke down the aesthetic barriers and cleared the way for surrealism which then built up a new set of theories' (1970: 18).

A view of history is at stake in these differences. It questions whether war can be construed as an educative ordeal from which order can be restored, or represents an end to the possibility of order. *Esprit nouveau* was an argument for the former, and Dada for the latter. To the surrealists, war demonstrated the failure of rational thought and, in response, they proposed a commitment to the imagination. In 1924, Breton wrote as follows:

The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience.... Under the *pretence of civilization and progress*, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed *superstition or fancy*; forbidden is any kind of search after the truth which is not *in conformance with accepted practices*.

('Manifesto of Surrealism' 1924, in Fer et al 1993: 49, emphases mine)

Put simply, surrealism comprises an emphasis on imagination and denounces preconception and 'the reign of logic' (Breton quoted in Gascoyne, 1970: 59).

TRANSLATION: ANOTHER SITE OF UNCERTAINTY

This excerpt from the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, by Breton, often appears

in the discourse on surrealism, a fact which raises other significant indeterminacies. It introduces another uncertainty into attempts to define surrealism and so to position Hewett in relation to it.

The same text has been differently translated as follows:

Even experience is dependent on immediate utility, and common sense is its keeper. Under *colour of civilisation, under pretext of progress*, all that rightly or wrongly may be regarded as *fantasy or superstition* has been banished from the mind, all *uncustomary searching after truth* has been proscribed. (Breton 1924, in Gascoyne 1970, 59-60, emphases mine)

The two translations produce a different emphasis and are a reminder that we are caught up in mis-reading. Slippage is inevitable, and meanings are at stake in the differences.

The translations are consistent about the surrealist movement's rejection of the 'civilization and progress' that *esprit nouveau* desired to further. The greater affinity between surrealism and uncertainty is represented by a desire to embrace ways of thinking which had hitherto been rejected as non-knowledge. The term 'superstition' is consistent in the two passages. In the more recent translation, however, 'fantasy' has become 'fancy', a diminishing term for thought which is regarded as irrational. 'Customary' is linked to conformism rather than to the familiar, which suggests a submissiveness not produced by the earlier translation. In the more recent version, 'civilisation' and 'progress' are more equally governed by an idea of pretence. The possibility of redefining 'civilisation' is allowed for in Gascoyne's version and his translation adheres to a possibility of progress in some other form. That is, different translations telegraph differences of view about the

surrealists' intellectual commitments, and differently position Breton's thinking in language which aligns his words more, or less, closely with modernism and postmodernism.

This slippage is another source of difficulties in grasping surrealism in the form of a definition, and there are other examples. In my opening comments, I referred to Dali's *Dismal Sport* (1929, in Bradley, 1997: 10) as an example of surrealist confrontations with form. The title of the same painting is elsewhere translated as *The Lugubrious Game* (1929, Rubin 1967: 108). Shifting resonances like these are another reminder of de Certeau's caution about the ease with which language catches us in 'presumptions of mastery' (1984: 11). They also remind us that surrealism is more elusive than description and quotation will admit. When Hewett scrutinises rationalism, in surrealist fashion she turns to 'fantasy' and derives material from discourses likely to be devalued as 'superstition'. This is more than merely fanciful. The inclusions have a pedagogical value in her writing for children. In *Song of the Seals*, the Celtic legend is used to mount arguments for conservation and environmental sensitivity. In adult texts, similar material is a vehicle for interrogating issues of marginalisation.¹⁶ In *The Man From Mukinupin*, the 'dark side of town' is a territory of the imagination by which the text confronts racism and incorporates magic, and by which its vision extends from sexual desire to cosmic exploration. In other words, that which is 'only imaginable' is incorporated into texts in the service of historical fact, a process which also occurs in 'The Darkling Sisters', *Joan* and *Wild Card*. This inclusiveness becomes even clearer in *The Man From Mukinupin* and *Bon-Bons*

and Roses for Dolly, where the im/balance between rational and irrational asserts the value of imagination over reason and stages, quite explicitly, a confrontation between inclusive and exclusive thinking. Foster describes the importance of the surrealist 'challenge to rational causality' as

essential to the medievalist aspect of surrealism, its fascination with magic and alchemy, with mad love and analogical thought. It is also fundamental to its spiritualist aspect, its attractions to mediumistic practices and gothic tales ... where the marvelous is again in play. (1993: 19)

Hewett's surrealist aesthetics have a basis in such thinking, which surrealism embraced and which opens out in postmodernism as 'play', allusiveness and doubt.

Problems of translation only highlight the role of uncertainty in surrealist art which is fruitfully seen (postmodern fashion) in terms of slippage itself. Surrealists paid particular attention to relationships between artistic process and product with an emphasis on process. The overriding desire to which they gave expression was the desire to imagine differently; that is, to perform the act of imagining in new ways, rather than to produce new imaginings. They wanted to relinquish control, but they also resisted nihilism. These defining features of their diverse artistry converge with features I have identified in Hewett's writing as links to postmodern thinking.

Postmodernism dismantles the unified truth which Breton assumes in the 1924 manifesto, but uncertainty and questions of how to give expression to it have a place here and elsewhere in his writings. Breton's rejection of proscriptions against the unknown, the unfamiliar, the uncustomary is typical of the movement.

It is similar to positions which have since gained purchase as a result of postcolonial and feminist discourses which insist on 'a pluralizing multivalency of points of view', to return to Hutcheon's terms for a postmodern textuality (1988: 161). Such political insistences have fed into postmodern interrogations of the 'chains of preconception' in which cultural production and social and political structures on the contemporary scene are caught up.

Hewett's writing is marked by surrealism as an aesthetic, then, and she has broad sympathies with the surrealist heritage of political and artistic critique and resistance. Surrealism and postmodernism share a heightened sense of an 'abyss' of meaninglessness and, in both, this may take expression as an appreciation of generic 'chaos'. Simulacral art, pastiche, collage, *tromp l'oeuil*, are modes of representation by which both confront the real and question representability. In postmodernism, however, 'play' does not incur 'a spirit of mourning for the lost dream of truth and absolutes', rather it highlights interpretation, function, 'the endless play of language and meaning' and remarks the 'joyous affirmation' of play, to quote Marshall's descriptions of the postmodern moment (1992: 69-70). As Foster (1993) argues, using Breton's concept of 'convulsive identity', all these matters relate to subjectivity.

Even the term 'aesthetics' applies contingently to surrealism. Terms such as 'aesthetics' and 'literature' are burdened with the artistic history and value system from which the surrealists were breaking away. According to Ferdinand Alquié, in fact, the idea of a surrealist *aesthetic* is a contradiction in terms:

What the surrealist condemns is beauty as a spectacle, beauty separated

from action and from life, a beauty to be contemplated, which does not instantly transform the person perceiving it. For all aesthetic perception of the beautiful supposes precisely an attitude of onlooking, of detachment, of withdrawal. (quoted in Caws 1970: 7)

The sublime denies the possibility of detachment. Hewett attacks sites of detachment in her incorporations of the audience into spectacle-making (*Joan*), of popular culture into the language and conventions of the literary (*The Toucher*), and of the supernatural into an atheistic apprehension of the world (*Wild Card*). All such combinations are sites of the simultaneity of yes and no and amount to an insistence on drawing onlookers and readers into the work of the text.

The fantastic subjects of *Song of the Seals* and *Golden Valley* arise from the 'open-mindedness' which I have connected with a capacity for 'wonder', and which is apparent in surrealist emphasis on 'the marvellous'. Being children's plays, these texts allow Hewett free rein as a fabulist. In them, she foregrounds her surrealism playfully, but, as I have shown, it also takes form in the serious adult dramas, such as *The Man From Mukinupin* and *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*. Surrealism is consistently a vehicle for insisting on uncertainty itself as a desirable position.

In *Joan*, Hewett constructs a carnivalistic serial character who enacts a critique of dominant ideologies as tragic farce. As historiography, *Joan* demonstrates the attitude to 'ordinary language' which, de Certeau says, indicates willingness to 'change the place of analysis' and exemplifies 'submission to ordinary use'. This ordinary use indicates further resistance to 'presumptions of mastery', in which language catches us (de Certeau, 1984: 11).¹⁷ The desirability and possibility of

'mastery' are at stake in differences between modernism and postmodernism. In postmodernism, it is an exhausted concept. So the mixed value Hewett gives to literariness and language in *Joan, The Toucher* and elsewhere aligns her with the postmodern. Hassan distinguishes between modernism and postmodernism by opposing 'master codes' to idiolects, respectively, and Hewett continually signals the egalitarianism and resistance to hierarchies which underpin both de Certeau's argument and such taxonomies as Hassan's. That is, suspicion of 'literariness' pervades her linguistic choices and positions her in the contest between modernism and postmodernism over the question of the autonomy of art.

As always, this risks making these distinctions too simplistic. As well as being characteristic of postmodernism, suspicion of 'literariness' existed as a point of tension between surrealism and high modernism. Surrealist artists insisted on incorporating 'common experience' and 'common objects' into their art and questioned modernist convictions about the autonomy of art. They attacked hierarchies and their participations in such artistic change were 'moves in a paradigm shift', as Threadgold puts it (1997: 24). Insofar as this description applies to aspects of surrealist enterprise, it offers another way of recognising the nascent postmodernism of their work. For Threadgold, 'change which in the long term will have come to constitute the difference between a modernist view of the social and a postmodernist one' is change in 'constructions of subjectivity and the emergence of a new set of spatial metaphors' (Threadgold 1997: 24). She argues that, since poststructuralism and postmodernism have 'flattened out' the social order, 'discourses and bodies would begin to 'circulate' in space, rather than be

"constrained" from above or below' (Threadgold 1997: 24). The surrealists' view of desirable social, political and cultural change reflected a similar 'horizontalising' of values and was expressed in part by interventions into constructions of subjectivity, in turn expressed in terms of perceptions of bodies in space, as well as modes of thinking about the limits of representation in relation to them. Duchamp's images of mechanistic movement, Dali's redispersions of the body, Bellmer's dolls exemplify surrealist attention to the circulation of bodies in space, and to the question of why that is interesting. Their production of *exquisite corpses* is also a case in point.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that, in *Joan*, Witch Joan's rejections of religion are fused with a heightened capacity for wonder of a kind that her other avatars depend on for their religious convictions. The implicit contradiction is made deliberate by composing Joan as a repository for religious as well as other esoteric knowledges. Such fusion signals both surrealist interest in the dismantling of oppositions and the place of deconstruction in postmodernism. It is worth noticing the same conjunction of interests in Breton's statement in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* which, I have suggested, contains familiar echoes of postmodernism:

there exists a certain spiritual plane on which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not conceived of as opposites. It would therefore be vain to attribute to surrealism any other motive than the hope to determine that plane, as it would be absurd to ascribe to it a

purely destructive or constructive character; the point at issue being precisely this, that *construction and destruction should no longer be flaunted against one another*. (Breton 1929, *Second Manifesto*, quoted in Gascoyne 1970: 86, emphasis mine)

Despite the more avant garde mindset of surrealism, this declaration provides a background even for moments in Hewett's writing which delineate a territory of inclusiveness in relation to her generalised commitment to uncertainty. Where two or more discourses make conflicting claims, she inclines the writing towards resistance and subverts the opposition between them. She demonstrates openness even to the modes of thought which underpin religious belief without disabling her atheist position. Instead, she signals a 'will to curiosity' and an orientation towards desire which cannot be reduced to residual religious conviction.

Diverse thinkers have adhered to the paradoxical position in which this entails her. Albert Einstein, famously agnostic, makes the following distinction between religion and religiousness (1932):

The most beautiful and deepest experience ... is *the sense of the mysterious*. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavour in art and science.... To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness ... To me *it suffices to wonder*.... (from 'My Credo', in White and Gribble 1993: 262, emphasis mine)

Simone Weil expresses the position slightly differently: 'Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist' (1951: 90). Weil combined openness to religious experience with a decision to align herself with uncertainty.

By refusing formal admission to Roman Catholicism, she sought to avoid separating herself from those for whom the comfort of conviction was elusive.

Such active submissions to uncertainty should not be confused with passive accommodations of relativism. On the contrary, they are explicit insistences on the capacity to wonder. Weil's case feeds into postmodern feminism. Irigaray acknowledges her as a foundation upon which her own work builds where she attempts to think through questions of equality and (a)symmetry in rigorous spiritual and cultural terms, rather than adhering to the culture's emphasis on economistic thinking (1993: 93-99). Hewett's attentiveness of the same paradoxical kind indicates her earnestness about comparable capacities for openness and inclusive thinking.

This is the basis of Witch Joan's refusal of decisive knowledge and her insistences on indeterminacy. In her way, Hewett's Joan is a figure of the surrealist 'marvellous' and represents all that it signals; in Foster's terms, 'a rupture in the natural order, one, unlike the miraculous, not necessarily divine in origin' (1993: 19). In *Wild Card* disparateness and multiplicity become features of autobiographical writing. Hewett extends radical uncertainty into connections we might make between her own identity and writing. A notion of serial self-representation describes the outcome as well as any other. Hewett's declared atheism is complicated by the kind of creative focus that Weil describes and which Einstein refers to as a 'sense of the mysterious'. By according a significant place to that sense in the explicit context of her life, Hewett prevents us from attributing its presence in other texts, such as *Joan*, to fictional religiosity. This

lateral process also applies to the children's plays. An attraction to ghost stories, children's fantasies, myth and fable which permeates the writing signifies a pervasive capacity for wonder and a heightened sense of 'more than the mind can grasp' which is the sublime. Combined with a predilection for the ludic and linguistic playfulness, it takes form overall as a postmodern writing in which surrealist aesthetics play a significant part. Overlap and slippage are everywhere, and they are the territory in which Hewett's texts revel.

1. Throughout this discussion I emulate commentators who use the lower case to nominate surrealism. As I will show, the term has become a general descriptor in the way that this implies. Dada, however, remains more specifically a movement and its origins as a proper noun have not been diffused.
2. I refer here to my quotation, in Chapter Three, of Hewett's description of responses to *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* in her letter to Clem Christeson.
3. One scene compares with Stanley Kubrick's famous surreal disjunction between musical accompaniment and visual violence in *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), in which a brutal bashing occurs to the tune of 'Singin' in the Rain' and is choreographed to allude to the Gene Kelly dance of the 1952 film of the same name. Other comparisons between dramatic moments in Hewett's work and those in more clearly postmodern film texts like this one support my argument.
4. For Rosi Braidotti's lucid discussion of this see *Nomadic Subjects*(1994), Chapter Three, in which she reads Kristeva's essay in relation to figurations and images of woman as monster.
5. This kind of abjection is also at work in the unpublished 'Mrs Porter and the Angel'. There it occurs in the singing of lullabies to a dead baby whose presence is put to work in these ways.
6. This account may conflate the figures of Athene and Aphrodite. In other versions of the myth, Aphrodite is born from the ocean (taken to represent the feminine), after the genitals of Saturn have been tossed there by Zeus. Nevertheless, the very fact that the myth circulates in this form makes it possible to suggest a link between motherlessness and the symbolic in this instance.
7. To recall Lyotard's distinction (1984: 80-81), only 'infinitesimal nuance' is needed to distinguish the postmodern from the modernist, so that they may be 'almost indistinguishable' and 'often coexist in the same piece'. *The Toucher*, referring as it does to the unrepresentable in all manner of ways, is such a work, and its bifurcation is evident not least in the treatment of maternity. On this theme it is clear that Hewett's thinking leans towards 'assay' rather than (and as well as), 'regret'.
8. The notes to *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly, The Tatty Hollow Story: Two Plays by Dorothy Hewett*: Sydney: Currency, 1976, include the following: 'Mrs Porter and the Angel had a brief Sydney season in 1969', (x). Arthur

Ballet's notes (xiii) read Wendy as schizophrenic (sic).

9. See Rubin (1967) for a series of reproductions which locate such imagery in a narrative of historical development. Examples of *Exquisite Corpses* (83) illustrate the connection even between this 'random' image-making and figures of the human body.
10. Gascoyne cites as follows: Trans. Edward W. Titus, from *The Quarter*, Vol.5, No.1, September 1932.
11. Hassan 1985: 123-4. These are terms used in his schematic distinction between modernism and postmodernism.
12. I am guided by Moira Gatens' (1996: 42) advice that the 'concentration on heterosexuality rather than intersexuality, in some feminist theorising, falls into the traditional trap of reducing relations between women and men to the conjugal model. I see in Hewett's poetic figures an attempt to avoid this.
13. This is a move reminiscent of magic realism as it occurs in a text like Julio Cortazar's *Axolotl* (in Stone, Packer & Hoopes 1976: 563-6).
14. Toni Morrison's description of writing the scene of infanticide in *Beloved* sheds light on the restraint in question:

I wanted to give the reader all the information and the consequences surrounding the act, while avoiding engorging myself or the reader with the violence itself.... Each time I fixed that sentence so that it was exactly right, or so I thought, but then I would be unable to sit there and would have to go away and come back. I thought the act itself had to be not only buried but also understated, because if the language was going to compete with the violence itself it would be obscene or pornographic.

(In Plimpton 1999: 303)
15. The image appears in *Neap Tide* (1999: 151) and contributes to the transformative, unstable notion of identity through which I argue that Hewett constructs self-representation..
16. The legend of the selchie reappears in *Neap Tide* (1999), for example, in ways which explicitly link it with uncertainty about identity.
17. De Certeau gives Wittgenstein credit for theorising the use of ordinary language in this way. De Certeau's parenthetical note is further support for my methodology in the last chapter: '(Wittgenstein wanted his work itself to be composed only of fragments), inscribed in a texture in which each can by turns "appeal" to the other, cite it and refer to it' (1984: 11).

CONCLUSION

Dorothy Hewett's writing inhabits space which opens up when clear dichotomies between modernism and postmodernism are resisted and the possibility of an *adversarial* postmodernism is entertained. Writing like Hewett's illuminates boundary territory produced by the opening out into uncertainty which follows from these discursive intersections. In Hewett's case the uncertainty is a form of commitment tied to her rejection of communism and the implicit entailment in 'the modern' of those former politics. In the wake of this 'turning away' a form of postmodern doubt appears in her writing in diverse forms which are linked through their orientation towards the sublime.

The ethical and political implications of postmodernism have troubled some commentators and their concerns relate to the function of the sublime in explanations of postmodern desire.¹ However, because the feminine sublime rejects rational closure and insists in its place on the commitment to uncertainty, it offers an alternative perspective of this impasse without evading its implicit politics, indeed by confronting them. Hewett's writing invokes a sublime in which

the totalising move that motivates that suspicion is rejected. Whilst the forms of this commitment vary, it dominates her themes and aesthetics, and my chief project has been to expose its importance in her work.

Disparity is the tenor of postmodernism. I have resisted the coherence which would insist on matching Hewett's texts to a specific theoretical perspective. Rather, I have aimed to view shifts, ideological movement and instabilities in Hewett's writing in terms of renewed possibilities, produced by postmodernism, for celebrating them.

This much is clear from my readings. *The Toucher* demonstrates Hewett's dependence on the sublime. *Joan* is a text fully engaged with related ethical questions and demonstrates that the epistemological doubt which marks postmodernism inflects her writing sufficiently, and early enough, to draw attention to it in these terms. In *Wild Card*, tensions between truth-telling and the fictiveness produced by writing itself are a feature of the autobiographical project. The text positions Hewett as an autobiographer who understands life-writing in terms of instabilities which arise from a poststructuralist sense of language, of the kind which have fed into postmodern discourse. In Hewett's dramatic writing, aesthetic preferences and a questioning stance about the nature of art combine in surrealist forms of expression which have demonstrable links with postmodernism. In these texts, Hewett's orientation towards the fantastic emerges. They illustrate the argument that, in relation to both aesthetic practices and taking up a position of radical uncertainty, the imagination exhibited in her writing embraces postmodern thought.

Many questions remain. Since Hewett has written prolifically, my assertions about these texts have by no means been tested against an *oeuvre*. The question of a commitment to uncertainty and dependence on the sublime in the poetry has been addressed only in general terms, as I have turned to the poetry selectively for cross-textual support. It is as a poet that Hewett is particularly identified with modernism, indeed has identified herself as a modernist. So that significant body of texts remains to be considered further in the light of postmodernism. The primary rationale for my discussion has been to bring to bear on Hewett's writing some epistemological and aesthetic shifts which postdate it. Clearly, such a project of expanding the readings of her texts needs to be pursued. For example, my investigation points to the significance of certain themes in Hewett's writing which invite more thorough exploration. Hewett's interest in the maternal and in the supernatural are promising lines of research on their own and have not, to my knowledge, been seriously addressed. Research which was to focus on these issues would contribute to textual scholarship on Hewett's writing which has barely begun to gain momentum.

I have argued for the presence of the postmodern in Hewett's writing from a position which holds that distinctions between postmodern and modernist art are unstable. Once the idea of postmodernism as that which succeeds the modern *really* yields, fruitful re-readings of Australian modernist texts become available. Since Hewett's ethical stances often come into view in features or moments in her writing where the postmodern sensibility is recognisable, the discourse on postmodern feminism and on tensions between these two forces has been a

consistent strand of my argument. Hewett's writing contributes to the elucidation of overlap between these territories.

Hewett's writing is disposed towards a sublime aesthetic in which more is at work than a privileging of desire. The ethical stance which attaches itself to that aesthetic may constitute an embrace of uncertainty. In proposing that Hewett's writing exemplifies this embrace, I have shown that hers is the modest postmodernism of Elam's description, marked by its dependency on the systems with which it is in tension and remaining in them, 'with all the undertones of the incomplete, the "left-over", the less than heroic' (1997: 199). Hewett's writing frames uncertainty as a commitment to thinking inclusively, rather than exclusively, even at the risk of seeming to suspend judgment. If I have desired to insist on anything in this text, it has been on this quality of exemplary inclusiveness.

1. For example, Andreas Huyssen locates the 'secret desire for totality' (1984: 266) in the sublime as it has historically been understood. She is troubled about its political and ethical implications, asking, for example, 'what could be more sublime and unrepresentable than the nuclear holocaust?' (1984: 266).

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