'A NOVEL I BELIEVE IN': READING ELIZABETH JOLLEY

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> *The Words* is a kind of novel also – a novel I believe in.
> (Jean-Paul Sartre, in Auster and Davis 15)
>
> I don't write autobiographical fiction.
> (Elizabeth Jolley, in Kavanagh 440)

ELIZABETH Jolley's *My Father's Moon*, *Cabin Fever* and *The Georges' Wife* form a literary sonata which for many readers is 'directly autobiographical' (Glover 64), 'fictionalised autobiography' (Hugo 10), 'confessional' (Daniel 33), a 'painful disclosure' (McKernan 93). In essays and interviews Jolley repeatedly resists this reading of these novels, and of her fiction generally. Most often she makes her point through patient recapitulation: 'My fiction is not autobiographical' ('Cloisters' 531); 'When I write "I" in a story or a novel I do not mean I – myself' (*CM* 7); 'I am not Hester' (*CM* 10); 'I am not Vera' (Willbanks 118); 'The truth is also that I am not any of [my characters]' (Moran 9) – 'I don't write autobiographical fiction'. Sometimes, however, denial modulates into something less categorical: at times through a qualifier– 'I am not a *strictly* autobiographical writer' (Moran 9, emphasis added); at times through a contradiction – one interviewer is told that *My Father's Moon* 'isn't an autobiographical novel by any means' (Kavanagh 440) and another that 'it is probably the most autobiographical book I have written' (Willbanks 118); and at times the modulation occurs through reflection– 'It is very hard for me to know where truth ends and fiction begins' (Willbanks 118).

Given the contradictions of such readerly insistence, on the one hand, and writerly resistance (and qualification), on the other, it may be hasty to conclude, as Paul Salzman does in his recent critical study of Jolley's fictions, that this tripartite narrative is 'not even fictional autobiography' (63). For such contradictions suggest that whether or not a text is fiction, autobiographical fiction, fictionalised autobiography or autobiography is not simply decided by a book-jacket or even an authorial statement. Rather they suggest a slippage in the reading of these interleaved novels, similar to the slippage when reading works – to take only a few examples – like Margarite Duras' *The Lover*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*, Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* or even Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*: sometimes these works are fiction, sometimes autobiography. The question, then, is what decides one or another generic realisation.

In part this generic ambiguity is conditioned by the close historical, functional and structural relationship between prose fiction and autobiography. Both types of writing fully emerge in the west at the end of the eighteenth-century, as part of a new social formation produced by the material and cultural revolutions which took place in Europe from the Renaissance onwards. Both types of writing (together with the coeval form of biography) encode a then-new apprehension of human nature – a notion that each human existence is contingent and evolutionary – a *process* shaped by large political and social forces, but invested with unique and enduring identity through individual agency. In this

view the simple fact of being may be owing to God or Nature, but it is the subject's acting within the constraints of particular historical forces that produces an individual identity or character – a 'life'. Specifically, the subject's productive activity consists of a self-reflexive consciousness– a consciousness of the inner and historical dimensions of being, a consequent sense of a continual succession (and so loss) of selves, and an ability somehow to recover and gather such successive selves into a single identity through the agencies of memory, judgement and moral will. In brief, these narrative forms articulate a humanist, individualist (see Smith 25-26), and – above all – historicist conception of the subject–a conception which is projected in the first-person, retrospective narrative structure common to most autobiographies and many novels.

Given such historical, functional and structural kinship, the boundary between autobiography and prose fiction is necessarily negotiable. In the nineteenth century that boundary was policed by the conventions of realism – by the twin notions that literature generally is a reflection of life in a given society, and that autobiography in particular is a reflection that can be empirically validated. From the later part of the nineteenth century onwards, however, realist notions of literature as mimesis (as the representation of a prior truth) and autobiography as history (as the representation of a prior 'life') give way to modernist notions of fiction as self-referential and autobiography as self-invention: where once the prior life was seen to produce the text, the text comes to be seen as producing the life – though, either way, such a 'life' is seen as coherent, volitional and (albeit enmeshed in history) somehow transcending contingent being. Still later, the boundary between prose fiction and autobiography is further problematised by post-modernist notions of individual and social being as the product of language, ideology or discourse, and consequently of the arbitrariness of distinctions between textuality and history, between fiction and reality. Now textuality produces the *effect* of reality, the *effect* of fiction, the *effect* of selfhood (Balibar and Macherey 66). Thus, in dialectical fashion, the self-identical individual of the nineteenth century evolves into the self-constructed individual of modernism, and then into the constructed subject (no longer a self) of post-modernism. Along the way, humanist notions of autonomous selfhood are stripped, but the sense of the historical nature of being persists. And so a central motivation for the genres invented to encode that sense of being remains potent.

However, as a consequence of this evolution of a premise, contemporary theorisation of autobiography tends to erase the boundary between fiction and autobiography in various ways. So, to exemplify some of the major modernist permutations, for Northrop Frye autobiography is a subset of the novel (307-8); for Paul John Eakin 'the self that is at the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure' (3); for William C. Spengemann in contemporary autobiographical practice 'fiction [becomes] the only true autobiography' (137); and, to illustrate the post-structuralist position, for Paul de Mann autobiography 'occurs, to some degree, in all texts. . . . Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical' (70). This collapse of generic distinction under pressures of modernist and post-modernist notions of textuality, subjectivity and reality leads to Paul Jay's argument that 'the attempt to differentiate between autobiography and fictional autobiography is finally pointless. For if by 'fictional' we mean 'made up', 'created', or 'imagined' – something, that is, which is literary and not 'real' –then we have merely defined the ontological status of any text. . . .' (16). However, Jay's modernist/post-modernist solution to a generic conundrum does not wholly address the actual practice of readers, who continue to 'attempt to differentiate' between autobiography and fiction – the point being that such distinctions remain a condition of their making sense of a text. That is, in practice the

distinctions between autobiography and fiction remain functional, whatever the genealogical kinship or declared ontological status of these forms, and whatever the slippage from one reader to the next, or between two readings by the same person, or even within a single reading. And so the question remains: what prompts one or another generic realisation of those ambiguous narratives that Jolley's trilogy represents?

One way to begin to address this question is to see that, in practice, reading for fiction and reading for autobiography enact quite different patterns of identification. When a text is read autobiographically, the one who 'tells' the story is equated with the one who is 'told': that is, narrator and character are identified. Moreover, in a second substitutory chain, the one who tells (narrator) is further identified with the one who writes (author), and the one who is told (character) is equated with the one who was (the author in the past). The effect of these several identifications is the supposition that the narrative reveals something about the one who lives – about the author in the present. However, when even the same narrative is read as fiction, conventions block these identificatory patterns. Narrator and character may or may not be coincident; but in any case the narrator conventionally cannot be legitimately identified with the author, nor the character with the author's past self. As a consequence, read poetically, a narrative cannot reveal to the reader anything about the author in the present – though readers persist in making 'illegitimate' inferences, and critics find ways of theorising them.

These two different patterns of identification – a collapse of signifying constructs, on the one hand, and a tenuous discrimination between them, on the other – can be understood in Michael Polanyi's terms as two different patterns of 'tacit knowing': two different patterns of attending *from* one thing to another (9–12). In both cases what is attended *from* is the detail of the text; however, what is attended *to* is different. In an autobiographical reading one attends from the detail to the figure of the author, while in a fictional reading one attends from the detail to Henry James's figure in the carpet, the figure of fiction. And since what is attended *from* is identical when the same text yields each sort of reading, necessarily what determines the trajectory of a reading must be something more than what 'takes shape directly from the pages themselves' (Reid 48).

In *Narrative Exchanges*, Ian Reid argues that the meanings readers generate through narrative texts are formulated by several sorts of framing. The details of a text – what 'takes shape directly from the pages' – provide what Reid calls 'intratextual' cues or frames. Additionally, there are 'intertextual' frames, that is, a reader's apprehension of some 'similarity to and difference from certain other types of texts' (51). The close historical, functional and structural kinship between prose fiction and autobiography is a lucid instance of such intertextuality, and it is precisely the large degree of similarity between these intertexts that is an important condition of the slippage in reading them. Further, Reid identifies two other sorts of frames: 'circumtextual' cues, defined as the 'physical adjuncts that can seem to enclose [the text]' (45), and 'extratextual' frames, described as 'any kind of information, expectation or preoccupation that a reader may bring to bear on the material for interpreting it' (46). What is pertinent here in this schema is its helpfulness in explaining what Gérard Genette calls the 'whirligig' of 'endless discussion between a reading of [any] novel as fiction and reading of the same novel as autobiography' (qtd. in de Mann 69).

Circumtextual shifters – the appearance of Jolley's titles in a publisher's fiction list, on a library's fiction shelf or on a university reading list, her insistence that they are fiction, a comparable critical assertion like Salzman's, and so on – prompt a poetic reading of these interleaved narratives. However, along with these potent circumtextual frames, there exists a particular extratextual frame, that consists largely of Jolley's many

autobiographical essays and interviews, and that for many readers functions with equal potency to generate an autobiographical reading. Hence Genette's whirligig – read one way, the way of Jolley's insistence, the apparent autobiographical detail functions metaphorically to provide the ground for the reading of fiction; read another way, the way prompted by the information of the interviews and the essays, that same detail provides the ground for attending to the figure of Elizabeth Jolley. Thus the reader is drawn two ways at once, with the result that these narratives successively can be read both poetically and autobiographically. What follows is a ride on that whirligig – a consideration of Jolley's trilogy first as fiction and then as autobiography, in an attempt to trace both the liminal reading practice that results from their multiple framings, and leads to these and similar texts acquiring that ambiguous status which the terms 'autobiographical fiction' and 'fictionalised autobiography' attempt to describe.

> little pauses and spaces of mystery
> (*Cabin Fever* 74)

It is the reading-set – the disposition to read for one or another kind of truth – that finally gives one or another generic realisation. To read these intercalated narratives as fiction is to read with a certain set of expectations – still another intertextual frame – and the most central of these expectations is, in Frank Kermode's phrase, 'the sense of an ending'. In Aristotelian terms this expectation amounts to a disposition to read for plot, for a concord of beginnings with endings across the developments and reversals (the peripeteias) of the middle. The trajectory of such a reading is not simply prospective from beginning to end, nor extensive from text to the world of human activity; more crucially, it is also retrospective and intensive – meaning is fabricated by finding a congruence between the text's ending and what has gone before. Reading this way, according to Roland Barthes, is a 'mantic activity', an activity that is 'engaged in the world by the course of meaning which it remakes with the world, but disengaged from the contingent meanings which the world elaborates' (127-28). And the motive for such activity is to provide what history never can, namely a meaning that comes from the sense of an ending.

Readers familiar with Jolley's fictions will know that she has a magisterial sense of an ending. She describes her method of composition as 'a ragged and restless activity with scattered fragments to be pieced together rather like a patchwork quilt' (*CM* 10). And the degree to which that activity is governed by a sense of an ending is evident in her description of one of her 'method[s]':

> I have a manila folder that I open out, and I might make little squares and write little bits in there so that the pages are actually resting on what is like a map of the structure of the book. Very often some of the things I write on that folder are the very last things of the book. They will be the actual end of the book. One of the troubles with *Cabin Fever* . . . is that I haven't actually written the end and I'm putting it off all the time. (Willbanks 120)

It seems to me that it is especially this sense of an ending that underpins Jolley's repeated claim that she does not write autobiographical fiction, and that leads her to worry that a reader's knowing that one or another element 'was a real thing' might 'spoil the structure of the book' (Willbanks 118), and that produces the textual structures that prompt a reading of these narratives as fictions.

One way to consider those structures is through one of Jolley's many metaphors for her way of composing: the image of the 'hinge.' She tells of how a chance-heard phrase, 'cabin fever', gave her a 'hinge' from which 'swings a novel started about 30 years ago'

(Graham 47). And if these three novels together swing from a single hinge, then it is probably the passage from St Augustine that appears as an epigraph to the last chapter of *Cabin Fever*:

> *All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory. . . . In it I meet myself as well I remember myself . . .*

This epigraph points to the doubled structure of these works – doubled because the drama occurs significantly both on the level of the narration and on that of the narrated. At the level of narration the action consists of the older Vera Wright's remembering and reflecting, of her recovering memories that must be 'hunted and caught and fitted', so that in the end each is linked and 'applied to where it belongs in human life' (*CF* 171, 195). This is an internal action; to borrow Toni Morrison's fine word, it is an action of 'rememory' – one that is slighter in the first volume, more developed in the second, and dominant in the third, such that this last book has as much the feel of a meditation as a novel. And because the three narrations are structured in this way – as a drama of reflection and meditation –the action at the level of the narrated is dislocated. It emerges in fragments selected from different time frames, and linked associatively rather than chronologically. There is, however, a firm underlying *Bildungsroman*-like chronology that provides each book with a temporal centre and ensures the forward progression across their overlapping, discontinuous narratives.

However, while redemptive memory structures the narration of each narrative, irredeemable loss provides the structure of the narrated – in *My Father's Moon* the loss of innocence, in *Cabin Fever* the loss of place, in *The Georges' Wife* the loss of intimacy. For reasons of time, I will elide my discussions of the structure of loss in the narrated of *My Father's Moon* and of *Cabin Fever*, except to mention that the climactic scene in the former is Vera's almost-suicide, and in the latter it is the night Vera and her daughter spend in a London homeless shelter. Instead, I will focus on loss as it structures the narrated of *The Georges' Wife*. That book is effectively a long conversation with someone who was once a lover, companion and confidant but now who, through age and illness, can be none of these things. Throughout most of her story the loss of such an other, of intimacy and love, has driven Vera from one place to the next, and from one person to another. The invocation at the end of each the first two novels of a intense friendship with Nurse Ramsden, more imagined than real, reflects this impulse to recover what is lost and/or desired by discovering a intimate/lover. But Ramsden is not invoked at the close of *The Georges' Wife*. Instead, the narrator no longer looks forward through remembering, but rather backward through sustaining memories – memories of having loved and been loved; of voices from the past; of places recalled as catalogues of street-names, trees or flowers; of moments of serenity associated with a certain light, the sound of doves or the glow of red bricks. All these become 'remedies' (that constant Jolley word that Kerry Goddard spoke of in another paper) for what is in this novel more steadily confronted than in the earlier ones, the knowledge that – in Vera's refrain – 'I want to be the giver and the recipient of the whole and it seems that I never shall be' (81). What remains is an existential widowhood – a way of being alone in the world that is modelled by the generous, gossipy rice-farm widow, and made bearable by the consolations and insights of memory.

These, then, are narratives shaped by contrapuntal endings, endings in which loss on the level of the narrated is mitigated on the level of narration. Yet, however much mitigated, loss is never quite redeemed. For the memories which console are also, in

Helen Daniel's phrase, 'memories which enclose others, all licking around an old wound' (33). That 'wound' is everywhere and nowhere expressed, for it pertains both to the unspeakable and to the unspoken – both to what is known but cannot easily be said, and to what is not known because it was never said or because it belongs to the time before speech. The torque of that unspeakable/unspoken wound is no more evident than in Vera's compulsively repeated triangular relationships. These seem patent iterations of Freud's family romance, that triangle formed when the child's first awareness of the father disrupts its dyadic intimacy with the mother. Always sexualised, that intimacy with the mother is sometimes experienced as a nameless bliss– a fusion of self and other in which the child is, indeed, both 'the giver and the recipient of the whole'; and sometimes it is experienced as the terrors of being abandoned or of being overwhelmed – experiences invoked by Vera's homelessness, and by her somehow distant and always oppressive mother.

The advent of the father mediates the dynamics of bliss and terror between child and mother, and requires that the diffuse sexuality that characterises this dynamic be repressed in the interests of the child's developing of a socially approved sexuality. What results is a kind of holy family with an asexual mother/father pair aligned with one another but oriented to caretaking the child. This is the configuration represented several times in the narratives: by Sister Peters, Mr Peters and Vera; by Mommy Doctor and Daddy Doctor and Vera; and by Gertrude, her shadowy husband and Vera – though here the essential absence of Gertrude's husband suggests that in Gertrude Vera finds the good mother of the dyadic union. If so, then this last triangle can be seen to be repeated in the configuration formed by the older Ramsden, the also shadowy Nurse Pusey-Hall and Vera, the difference between the two sets of relationships being that the feeling toward Ramsden is more clearly eroticised. Whatever the case, in each of these triangular relationships, Vera finds something essential missing – Sister Peters and her husband are too ordinary, Mommy and Daddy doctor are too domestic, the nurturing Gertrude is too simple, and Nurse Ramsden too unobtainable. In short, what is missing in each of these triangulations is the possibility of being 'the giver and the recipient of the whole', the possibility of the passionate intimacy that characterises the child's relationship to the mother, and that is especially invoked by Vera's imagination of intimacy with Ramsden.

Moreover, the family romance of these narratives is played out in a still more complicated way by yet another set of triangular relationships. Central among these is the triangle formed by Vera's mother, her lover Mr Berrington, and Vera's father. In this trio the father is placed in the position of the child, in that his being betrayed repeats the betrayal felt by the child when it becomes aware of the parents' intimacy. As a consequence, Vera identifies with her father, seeing him as standing, like herself, on the edge of other people's happiness, and – evoking still another triangle (Vera, her desire, her child) – like her neglected daughter Helena, white-faced and uncherished. And so the triangular affair between her parents and Mr Berrington doubly intensifies the compulsion of family romance for Vera. First, it repeats and so redoubles the original wound of the mother's inevitable betrayal of the child. And, second, her consequent identification with her father skews the 'normal' vectors of desire, whereby the child's preoedipal desire for the mother is displaced by an oedipal one for the father in preparation for her 'normal' adult heterosexuality. For here the identification with the father conjures a permutation of the romance in which the child stands in the place of the father, and so becomes the mother's beloved in some oedipal fashion. This hopelessly entangled pattern of desire produces the several *ménages á trois* that Vera compulsively enters into – with Dr Metcalf and his much older wife Magda, with Mr George and his much older sister (a triangle which yields the title of the last narrative), with the ambiguously-sexual bohemian couple

Noel and Felicity, and finally with Mr George and the rice-farmer's ageing widow.

In *The Georges' Wife*, the narrator explicitly reflects on all the triangular relationships she has experienced and on others she has observed, offering not so much an explanation as an acknowledgment of their compulsion. A gloss of one sort, however, is offered in a phrase that is repeated with gathering momentum across the three narratives: 'There is something hopeless in being hopeful that one person can actually match and replace another' (*MFM* 53, *et passim*). A related, and similarly reiterated, phrase occurs in *Palomino*, Jolley's first published novel: 'its not the immediate thing one misses but something from before . . .' (2, *et passim*). The difference between these related phrases measures the later narratives' more sombre understanding of loss and desire – measures their particular sense of an ending. Such endings are partly the effect of the extratextual framing that results from reading with a sense of an ending. And partly these structures form an intratextual frame for such a poetic reading: for piecing together, across the narrative elisions that Jolley call 'sophisticated spaces' (*CM* 124), a poetic realisation of the works' the architectonic themes of loss, memory and desire.

> what the reader does is to weld the pieces together by the spaces
> (Elizabeth Jolley, in Willbanks 119)

Still, despite the magisterial, contrapuntal endings of these works, they remain open to being read as autobiography, for they are powerfully framed by the extratextual cues provided by the autobiographical essays and interviews. These are not, as the discussion of reading for the sense of an ending indicates, the only extratextual shifters that readers might bring to bear upon an interpretation of these narratives. Nevertheless, within contemporary Australia, many readers will be aware of the many interviews and autobiographical essays, partially collected and readily available in *Central Mischief*. And so they will be aware of the autobiographical origins of the landscapes and settings of the trilogy, of Vera Wright's background, of Vera's father and mother, and of particular episodes – such as the mother's liaison with Mr Berrington, Vera's war-time nursing, her migration to Australia, an so on. And, similarly, they well might be struck by the fact that whole lines and phrases, and even some characters like Mr Berrington, appear identically in the two sorts of publications. Such widely available public knowledge of the overlap between the life and the fiction is the major extratextual condition of reading these books autobiographically.

Moreover, and contradictorily, such an autobiographical reading can be cued *á le mineur* by certain intertextual and intratextual features as well. The first-person, retrospective narration, focalised on a particular life and structured as a *Bildungsroman*, can key an autobiographical as well as a poetic reading. Similarly, the sombre, introspective, and sometimes lyric, tone of these narratives can reinforce the inclination to read autobiographically on the part of those readers who compare this tone with the manic black humour and more distanced voice of many of Jolley's earlier novels. And, finally, an autobiographical reading is intratextually framed by the several reflections on writing in these narratives. Like the repeated phrase about the hopelessness of imagining that one person could replace another, these references to writing gather momentum across the three books, so that by the last one the narrator figures less as a character – a doctor of some sort caught in moments of remembering – and more as a writer conducting a silent conversation with others through the act of writing. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in an early passage from *The Georges' Wife* where the narrator reflects, 'As I, begin to write now. . . . [t]hree things emerge':

> one is that a mother always forgives. The second is that it is often not possible to write about events until they are over or sufficiently of the past, that they can be regarded as being in that twilight between the fact and the imagined. . . . And thirdly; secrets, if they are revealed completely, become mere facts. Secrets, if partly kept, can be seen as relating not to some kind of imitation but to something extra to real life. (8)

The ambiguities of this passage are provocative. On the one hand, the passage suggests that Jolley's 'sophisticated spaces' function to construct a poetic meaning that is 'extra to life', that is comprised of the 'experience that finds expression only in writing' (*CM* 6). But, on the other hand, it points to a life that exists apart from the fiction – to 'events' that are 'over or sufficiently of the past'. In short, such a passage can frame both a fictional and an autobiographical reading; but either way the reader will her-or-himself be helplessly entangled in the filiations of desire, silence and writing in Jolley's narratives.

When writing *Cabin Fever*, Jolley remarked to an interviewer, 'For some reason, I can't seem to face the end' (Willbanks 120). Such a remark might lead some readers into autobiographical speculation, especially if they know from the interviews that some of the 'material' for Vera Wright's story was first written 'as long ago as 1953 or 1954'; that 'a whole terrible novel' called *Georgie's Wife and the Feast* lay 'in a whole lot of notebooks' for some 20 or 30 years, and that Jolley 'couldn't write the material for a long time because it was the painful experiences one has during the war' (Willbanks 119, Graham 47, Glover 64, Hugo 10). Readers so disposed to read autobiographically might note the broken syntax of this last quotation, and wonder if the elision there relates to the inventions and 'spaces of mystery' in Vera Wright's story. And at such a point of wondering so begins the whirligig of reading these ambiguous texts.

Autobiography is, in Paul de Mann's phrase, 'not a genre or mode but a figure of reading' (70). To read poetically is to read metaphorically, to read from the text to the figure of meaning that a sense of an ending gives. To read autobiographically is to read metonymically, to read the narrative as a figural displacement (in de Mann's terms a 'defacement') of the writer. To read autobiographically, therefore, is to read not for a sense of an ending but for a sense of voice – for a sense of a personality invested in all parts of the narrative (Abbot 606). Jolley's narratives inhibit an autobiographical reading both by the artifice of their endings and by the naming of a character/narrator. But inhibition is not prohibition and, framed by the extratexts of the essays and interviews, the narrator/character Veronica Wright – whose first name translates as 'icon of truth' and surname perhaps echoes the point – can also be read as a veil of silence by readers attending to the figure of the author, as a writing that simultaneously conceals and discloses a 'secret' that is only 'partly kept'. It is as though the figure of the character simultaneously points in two directions, leaving readers, like Jolley herself, not easily 'know[ing] where truth ends and fiction begins'.

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