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University of Wollongong

Year 1995

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Elizabeth Jolley's The Well

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This article was originally published as Turcotte, G, Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel's Bear and Elizabeth Jolley's The Well, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 26(2), April 1995, 65-91. Original journal available here.

This paper is posted at Research Online.

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**SEXUAL GOTHIC:
MARIAN ENGEL'S *BEAR* AND ELIZABETH JOLLEY'S *THE WELL*.**

GERRY TURCOTTE

“There was some connection, some unfingerable intimacy among them, some tie between longing and desire and the achievable.” (Engel *Bear*)

“[P]eople often judged by what they feared or knew existed in themselves.”
(Jolley *The Well*)

“Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: ‘Here are our monsters’, without immediately turning the monsters into pets.” (Derrida “Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, And Other Small Seisisms”)

In the process of retrieving female writing from patriarchal control, women writers have focussed on a number of sites for re-vision. This article is concerned with two areas which have received sustained critical and creative attention. The first is language itself and the possibility for underscoring this “politicized” subject—and here, in particular, the way generic categories such as the Gothic have been destabilized or re-appropriated in order to comment on those “systems” which institutionalize and perpetuate imperialist, sexist or so-called “normative” values. The second is sexuality and the body. Specifically, Canadian and Australian *Gothic* women’s writings have shown marked interest in expressing the physical side of feminine experience, although, it should be stressed, the two—language and body—are invariably connected.

In speaking of sexuality and the body, it is important to remember Teresa De Laurentis’ warning not to subsume such a discussion into a purely “oppositional notion of ‘feminine’ subject defined by silence, negativity, a natural sexuality, or a closeness to nature not compromised by patriarchal culture.” She goes on to say that “such a notion—which simply reverts woman to the body and to sexuality as an immediacy of the biological, as nature—has no autonomous theoretical grounding and is moreover quite

compatible with the conceptual framework of the sciences of man” (De Laurentis 161). Rather, what is of interest here are those texts which fracture in practice the very expectations governing how the female may be spoken of—imagined—and what, of female experience can (il)legitimately be introduced as the subject of discussion.

Indeed, it could be argued that many writers are concerned with expressing what Alice Jardine has called “the acutely interior, unabashedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces: the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body” (Jardine 33–34). The expression of women’s physical experience in fiction, moreover, is often presented in quite militant or shocking terms, as though what is being portrayed is designed to antagonize conservative or hegemonic values. One need only turn to Susan Swann’s latest co-production, “Sexual Gothic,” to see how the lurid, the extreme, the flagrant, can be used to create “greater awareness of her and her colleagues’ writing,” and, one could add, of the issues their work addresses (Ross E1).¹

This article explores how a number of the above preoccupations, textual strategies and political agendas intersect to common purpose in two rather well-known texts in their respective literary cultures—Marian Engel’s *Bear* and Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well*. Specifically, it is possible to argue that the Gothic mode is turned to by many contemporary women writers in order to present in mainstream texts the so-called “unspeakable” experience of women. It could also be claimed that postcolonial writers have found the mode particularly empowering precisely because of the mode’s formal dimensions: formulas are always especially noticeable, particularly when they are being broken.

Whether or not second world women writers alter the form significantly from first world writers is a question this article does not address for reasons of space. What *can* be suggested here is that texts by contemporary Canadian and Australian writers which do engage in re-visions or re-writings of central or canonical texts and forms, invariably problematize Old World certainties. As with most postcolonial texts, these acts of destabilization, of abrogation and appropriation, “assert the complex of intersecting

‘peripheries’ as the actual substance of experience” (Ashcroft, *et. al.* 78), and this, at the very least, undermines the feasibility of a reductive “monologism” asserted by totalising systems. It may be useful to consider this a form of counter-discourse in Richard Terdiman’s terms: such acts of resistance, once spoken, even to be silenced, acquire “a phantom but fundamental existence” (Terdiman 14).

This claim can also be made for female experiences and subject matter under patriarchy. Indeed, just as postcolonial writers have used the Gothic mode to speak of “national/regional identities,”² they have also found it useful to “speak” the body. This is not surprising. Gothic texts have always had a tremendous interest in the corporeal and in the sexual; and much contemporary Canadian and Australian writing uses this preoccupation as a way of commenting at once on the values embedded in the traditional genres, as well as to fissure such systems through the introduction of “unsuitable” material which does not conform to or reconfirm dominant values. Engel’s *Bear* and Jolley’s *The Well*, deliberately reverse or “corrupt” the orthodox, suggesting new areas of experience and new possibilities for “femaleness,” even though each is careful not to speak of “one” female voice, and each is at pains to define the price which is exacted, still, for such transgressions.

It is critical to note, before such a study can begin, that the question of gender is not merely a theme of this paper, but an issue in terms of its very construction as well. As a male, heterosexual critic, the following “readings” of these texts, and of the issues which they raise about sexuality and the body, are fraught with contradictions, investments and biases which need to be foregrounded, even in such a curtailed manner. Writing and criticism can never escape ideology and declaring one’s position does not neutralize perspective; but this is an effort not to obscure the evidence of bias. This article, then, attempts at the very least not to participate consciously in a patriarchal reading strategy, and to generate ways of engaging in counter-discursive strategies instead. Not discussing these issues, as a male academic, would seem to participate in a conspiracy of silence, an evasion of the very problematics which the Gothic, as a mode, specializes in presenting.

A definition of the Gothic is not easy to give. It is originally linked with ecclesiastical architecture of the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, but, during the Gothic Revival of the eighteenth century in England it came rapidly to mean anything unsophisticated and everything medieval. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is its disputed point of origin, and it sees an extraordinary development from that time on, from Anne Radcliffe's influential novels through to Victorian reworkings of the mode in works as diverse as *Caleb Williams* and *Dracula*. The twentieth century has been far from immune to its dark appeal, manifesting itself in a series of guises, from Angela Carter's unsettling tales through to the *Batman* and *Alien* movies.

Although the term has been used with remarkable flexibility, so that it has come to describe horror fiction, romance novels and even westerns such as *Unforgiven*, it would be fair to say that all of these vehicles have displayed "common elements" in "what critics through the ages have seen as gothic." As Margot Northey has argued, the Gothic can be defined as that which represents

a subjective view of the dark side of life, seen through the distorting mirror of the self, with its submerged levels of psychic and spiritual experiences. Non-realistic and essentially symbolic in its approach, the gothic opens up various possibilities of psychological, spiritual, or social interpretation. (Northey 6)

This paper is particularly interested in what can be termed the "literary" Gothic, as distinguished from Romance writing, although, as has already been suggested, the differences between modes are far from clear-cut. It would probably be fair to say, however, that Engel's *Bear* is very much a parody of such romances, but, as importantly, that it is a rejection of the conclusions which such texts endorse.³

Both Engel and Jolley use the Gothic as a way to celebrate female experience; ironically, it is also true that theirs, like so many fictions which proclaim such a presence, do so in decidedly negative terms. Margery Fee, for example, refutes what is a common critical reading of *Bear* as a text which shows its protagonist somehow transcending her fractured self and moving, in the words of Elspeth Cameron, towards

“the integration of an alienated personality” (Cameron 93). Fee argues that Lou’s “resolution is incomplete, as indeed, it must be, given that Lou’s problems, are not simply personal, but also social” (Fee 21). Fee quite rightly maintains that “simply to close off the process, to see Lou’s identity as complete, ‘found’, and ‘integrated’ once and for all is to miss much of the novels [sic] interest for women” (22). Since “Lou’s experience is as much one of disorder and fragmentation, of violating norms,” as it is of conforming to social expectations that she will pull herself together, Lou must be seen to “fail” in her ultimate quest for personal integration. It would be a mistake, however, to confound the character’s failure with the text’s, as will be seen in the closing pages of this study.

Joan Kirkby reads a similar negative note in Jolley’s work as a whole, arguing that her “women have been celebrated for their strength and creativity, [but that] they are inevitably crippled in ways linked inextricably to their female sexuality” (Kirkby 46). Kirkby outlines several models through which to discuss Jolley’s fiction, and it would be useful here to detail these because of their applicability to the Gothic argument. According to Kirkby, Jolley’s figures engage in a denial of the maternal which results in them eliding their sexuality, violently rejecting other women, leading to the “murder or sacrifice of another who is in reality the self” (47), and in the confrontation with, or the return of, the repressed in some form.

The focus on such themes leads inevitably to encounters with “exaggerated representation[s] of woman as inscribed in the symbolic order” (47), encounters, that is, with an almost grotesque exaggeration of corporeality which make the books, in Kirkby’s words, “almost excessive, with female imagery” (47). Claire Kahane has argued that a number of the figurations of women which emerge to represent such imagery—voluptuous mother figures, or ailing post-menopausal women for example—are decidedly Gothic, “the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic, and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (Kahane 336)—figurations which are recurrent throughout Jolley’s novels.

Bear begins with the anti-thesis to voluptuous excess. Lou is a grub-like mole who, through the course of the novel, becomes progressively “filthier” and increasingly wild, until at one point, her very reflection in the mirror startles her. In the *un*Gothic house she moves to, even the cellar, traditionally the site of unconscious or repressed desire, is the repository of female clothing designed to neutralize femaleness: here, locked away, there are dresses with straps fabricated to hold down and deny breasts. The female Colonel Cary emerged from this “dungeon” transformed into a man; Lou reverses the process by wearing the dress for Homer, but her breasts fall free of the fabric!

Julia Kristeva’s theorizing on the subject of Abjection not only offers a vocabulary to describe confrontations with the feminine self/other, but also suggests a commensurability between such theorizing with the Gothic. In *Powers of Horror*, for example, Kristeva suggests that the abject emerges from the earliest moments of separation from the maternal. Kirkby, citing Kristeva, argues that the abject is experienced as “‘what disturbs identity, system, order,’ what draws attention to the fragility of the law, ‘what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’” (Kirkby 48; Kristeva 4).

In the model which Kristeva develops, the symbolic order, and paternal law, represent “the order of language and culture,” an almost antiseptic ordering which excludes the body and its effluences and which “represses maternal authority” (49). The mother, in this model, “effects the original mapping of the body into clean and unclean,” and “is associated with excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, corpse, etc.), with menstrual blood, in short with defilement and pollution” (49). Kirkby, still building on Kristeva’s model, goes on to say, “Abjection, signified by corporeal waste—menstrual blood, excrement, nail parings, decay—evokes the pre-symbolic maternal fusion and suggests the frailty of the symbolic order in its attempts to repress the mother” (49).

The Gothic is a mode which explores borderland positions, which engages with the grotesque, which allows sexes to blur to the point of transformation, and which speaks the supposedly unspeakable remarkably well. Moreover, the Gothic displays a

fascination with the subject of the abject—with corporeal effluvia for instance—a fascination which becomes increasingly exaggerated in contemporary writing.⁴ And the Gothic suggests ways of interrogating the symbolic order, exposing the vulnerability of its systems of meaning, underlining the tenuousness of its power base and questioning the substratum upon which its laws, values and logic are predicated; valuing, in other words, those very “shards, scattered remnants” which Luce Irigaray claims are representative of a “multiplicity of female desire and female language” in an oppressive system. The rejection of female experience “puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess” (Irigaray 30). Woman herself, in other words, becomes the abject.

As has already been suggested, Engel and Jolley have exploited the abject through their use of the Gothic and participate in bringing together in their work a fair number of the motifs and preoccupations listed above. Jolley, more than Engel, represents women warring against themselves, and displays a “fascination with abjection, inevitably associated with the repressed feminine” (Kirkby 49). Perhaps the clearest such moment is the scene in which the young Hester discovers her beloved Hilde Herzfeld collapsed on the floor of their shared bathroom, “her nightdress spread like a tent, red splashed, round about her” (Jolley 1987 121). This Gothic episode of revelation and horror, in which Hester discovers Hilde’s pregnancy by her father, is a moment of multiple betrayals which haunts the remainder of the novel. Hester abandons Hilde and returns to her room without seeking help, thereby abandoning her mother-figure; and Hester’s father betrays Hilde by forcing her to leave the house the next day. Clearly, pregnancy, intimacy, and the female reproductive role are meant to remain hidden; Hilde’s concession to desire exiles her and denies female needs.

Engel too creates a notable female figure in *Bear*, who through her self-loathing comes to question the symbolic order and emerges (possibly) from its grasp. To do so, she, like so many of Jolley’s characters, must explore the marks of abjection: menstrual blood, excrement and so forth. It will be the task of the remainder of this study to investigate such explorations—as well as the more general uses of the Gothic—through

two texts which have come to figure centrally in both Canadian and Australian representations of women under patriarchy.

Bear, by Marian Engel, is very much part of a tradition of “women’s books,” as the author herself terms the novel, refusing the characteristic rejection of such labels as pejorative (Gibson 113). Written in part as an exercise to raise money for the Writers’ Union in Toronto (Jones 72), *Bear* has been called a mixture of “pastoral, pornography and myth” (Howells 1987 109) and appeared to acclaim and to a fair measure of controversy as well.

The novel tells the story of an archivist’s move to the “wilderness” in order to catalogue the works of an estate recently bequeathed to her employers, the Historical Institute in Toronto. Potentially an idyllic holiday spot, the Cary Estate is home to a bear who has the power to fracture that idyll, an androgynous, anthropomorphized creature with which Lou becomes increasingly involved, both spiritually and sexually. Much like Atwood’s *Surfacing*, the novel articulates the journey of one woman from her safe though stultifying “civilized” landscape, into the untamed “wilderness”—a journey, that is, to a world separated from expected norms of behaviour, desire and sexuality. (Ironically, in the course of the novel it is this “civilized” landscape which comes to appear most Gothic—Lou, imprisoned in her dungeon-like enclosure, victimized by the bloodless Director....)

Howells has called *Bear* “a Canadian pastoral about landscape and wilderness, about a quest, about a bear, about the relation between civilization and savage nature” (108). Like many of Canada’s apparently “Pastoral” texts, however, *Bear* is in fact concerned to shatter the Edenic implications of the pastoral landscape, and to push female experience into territories far less placid. *Bear* may not be a “classically” Gothic text, but it does have recourse to the mode’s devices, deliberately blurring the line between pastoral and Gothic. The novel suggests that the past, in some forms, is idyllic,⁵ but the text also clearly links notions of the pastoral with imperialism and masculinity, and narrates the “escape” from such a tradition through the Gothic by becoming anti-

pastoral. As with most Gothic works, therefore, at the heart of the tale is a preoccupation with the profane, the sexually deviant and with the taboo⁶—with the abject—an unorthodoxy designed to repudiate the myth of controlled (or absent) female sexuality. As the character herself notes, “what she disliked in men was not their eroticism, but their assumption that women had none. Which left women with nothing to be but housemaids” (130).

The novel opens with Lou described alternately as a mole and as pale as a slug, sequestered below ground in mid-winter in the cellar of the Institute, and it closes with a revitalized though ambiguously transformed woman who has hazarded the wilds of both animal and psychic wildernesses, almost violating the boundaries of humanity and animality.⁷ As Dorothy Jones puts it, “She leaves, not to return to her old job at the Institute, but, no longer under the director’s control, to strike out for a new life. Lou has learnt to accept, not only her physical nature, but the essential otherness of the bear” (76). Lou, initially described as past her prime, with “waning flesh” and pathetic sexual relationships, leaves the island clearly different. “She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman. The sedentary fat had gone, leaving the shape of ribs showing” (157–58). Again, whether or not the conclusion is a positive one as some critics have suggested, is a debatable point and will be returned to later.

Where, for writers such as Margaret Atwood and Kate Grenville, the body is an important element in the Gothicizing of their works, in Engel it achieves prominence. The body is at the centre of this story, and women’s strength, vitality and well-being are intimately explored. And implicit in the exploration is a fascination with blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, areas where resuscitation can be attempted. Jones has noted that what makes *Bear* an interesting although problematic text is that the relationship of sexual intimacy with the bear is related largely through “detailed naturalism” (75), and so the moments of fantastic encounter threaten always to strain credibility, in a way which a non-naturalistic discourse might not. And yet, it is exactly in this tension between forms that the novel locates its particular strength. What Rosemary Jackson identifies in Victorian Gothic novels applies in this instance to *Bear*:

such novels “suggest that within the main, realistic text, there exists another non-realistic one, camouflaged and concealed, but constantly present.... A dialogue between fantastic and realistic narrative modes often operates within individual texts, as the second attempts to repress and defuse the subversive thrust of the first” (Jackson 124). Here, however, the text-within-a-text is not repressed, it is joyously evoked, although occasionally tentative; it is balanced but not feared. As Coral Ann Howells has argued, “*Bear* seizes on ... subversive elements and makes them the main text instead of the subtext...” (1986 109).

Because the Gothic is used to question accepted positions in society, it is often at its most effective when it challenges on a number of levels, including textually or formally. The Gothic uses recurring motifs to destabilize a reader’s secure position. Among its catalogue of pre-occupations are transgressive impulses towards

incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, recidivism, narcissism and “abnormal” psychological states conventionally categorized as hallucination, dream, insanity, paranoia ... all of them concerned with erasing rigid demarcations of gender and of genre. Gender differences of male and of female are subverted and generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred ... [to] undermine “realistic” ways of seeing. (Jackson 49)

This thematic tension is duplicated at the level of form, the very oppositionality of realist and fantastic modes serving to destabilize or suspend outright, non-problematic meaning in either mode. As Jackson has said of fantasy generally, it “re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (20).

Bear actively uses most of the above-mentioned motifs. For example, the novel seeks to push sexuality well beyond socially accepted levels. Lou’s “love scenes” with the bear not only include her fondling of the animal’s organs, but also several graphically described moments where the bear licks her genitals and brings her to orgasm. And

although Lou uses the loaded expression of having the “Curse” to avoid sleeping with Homer, she delights in having the bear lick her at this time, commenting that “her menstrual fever made him more assiduous” (129). This is a long way from the terror or fear of the unbroachable nature of menses described, for example, in Janet Frame’s autobiographies. As Suzette Henke has argued,

One cannot help wondering why so many dimensions of female experience—from menstruation and sexual initiation to contraception and childbirth—have virtually been banned from written discourse, as if the words themselves reeked of blood and tissue. Why have women writers maintained a myth of physiological wholeness, metaphorically sealing the blood that flows from female genitalia in such a way as to render their characters doll-like, castrated figures? (Henke 89)

Engel, for her part, deliberately rejects this “castrated” figure by blending the abject and the taboo, and reclaiming as positive, experiences or elements which have been excluded from the symbolic order.

What is most interesting about these encounters is that they are recounted in the context of former failed relationships. When Lou thinks of her years of being a mistress, or of being in a relationship with an elegant, “civilized” man who in fact was nothing more than a sexist cad, the bear, for all his bulk and smell and simplicity, cannot help but seem a superior partner. Citing Bruno Bettelheim and his study *The Uses of Enchantment*, Jones quite rightly points out that the theme of the animal-husband is popular in fairy-tales, and could well have been used as a way of reassuring young girls “that the apparently monstrous demands a new husband may make of them will, as a result of love, come to be highly desirable—the beast will be transformed into a prince.” But here, as Jones goes on to argue, a woman writer uses “the story to suggest that the beast is more lovable than any prince” (75).

And yet, Lou herself realizes that her flirtation with this animality is potentially dangerous; part of the appeal of this encounter, in fact, is the threat of danger: “She was half afraid of him, but drunk and weak for danger” (129). It is a flirtation which

cannot—or should not—be consummated. In fact, the first time that she attempts to have the bear mount her, “Nothing happened. He could not penetrate her and she could not get him in” (142–43). This attempt at consummating human and animal is construed, by the character herself, as wrong: “She had broken a taboo. She had changed something. The quality of her love was different now” (143). And when she attempts, one final time, to position herself in such a way that the bear will mount her, she is sliced with one stroke of his massive paw, from shoulder to buttock, a token, however, which is “not a mark of Cain,” but a symbol of sorts, that she has freed herself from socialized orthodoxy.

Of course, there are other reasons which may rest at the heart of this incompleteness of desire (if this is what it is). On one level, the union of the powerful human figure (she is very much in control of the bear at this stage), with that of compliant Nature would reduplicate the imperial/patriarchal takeover of Nature which this text goes on to criticize. As Fee has argued, “Although she aspires to the condition of the dominant male subject, she cannot finally adopt it, because it requires that she become dominant, a repudiation, for her, of her female experience” (22). It is important, in other words, that Lou escape her limitations without participating in oppressor strategies. Her liaison with the bear, therefore, is equal, each party gaining strength from the other.

On another level, it would be possible to read this as a typical Gothic scenario, the textual aposiopesis replaced here by onanism—withdrawal before desire can be fulfilled. Engel’s text, in refusing closure—or union in this case—frustrates the desire for closure at the heart of romance, a fulfillment which would be anathema to the “message” of *Bear*. It is a refusal which rejects fairy-tale—or which rewrites it to some measure—so that in this version, the protagonist does not transform her beast into a man, but rather sets off on her own, keeping company with her own emerging strength.

It is also possible that “penetration” can work another way, with the bear taking up the dominant male position. It could be argued that her desire to be penetrated is “wrong” not because transgressive, but rather because it mirrors or re-enacts the patriarchal sexual “norm.” Engel may quite simply be rejecting the notion of phallic consummation, suggesting the “intercourse” between bear and woman *has* occurred—it

is not necessary for it to penetrate her in order for their coupling to be seen as consummated.⁸

As well as with bestiality, the novel is also preoccupied with the theme of metamorphosis and with what would appear to be “‘abnormal’ psychological states.” The bear is alternately referred to as an old woman, as a defeated and pathetic creature, as a potent symbol of masculinity—in short, it is always changing, or promising potential transformation: “It struck her when she opened the door to him that she always expected it to be someone else. She wondered if he, like herself, visualized transformations, waking every morning expecting to be a prince, disappointed still to be a bear” (101).

As well as dwelling on the metamorphosis of the bear, Engel troubles clear-cut gender categories, attacking the expectations of role-playing. In her former life at the Institute, Lou is complicit in a tawdry affair with her boss, an episode of “fucking” on her desk at the office (105), an experience described by Jones as being “reduced to a passive object of male sexual desire ... her self-respect ... so eroded she feels her soul is gangrenous” (74).⁹ Once at the island she re-discovers that one of the Cary Colonels is actually a woman (83), and she herself becomes an aggressor in her relationship with the bear, assuming control over her own sexuality in a manner clearly meant to reject her earlier “passive feminine” role. At several stages the androgynously named Lou actually becomes animal-like, a shift not only away from the human, but as importantly, away from Imperial models. In one scene Lou raises “her nose to the air like an animal” (45), and later, following Lucy’s advice, she defecates with the bear in a rejection of “European” manners.

The bear, too, shifts in gender. Very explicitly drawn as a male, it comes to be described as “a middle-aged woman defeated to the point of being daft, who had sat night after night waiting for her husband for so long that time had ceased to exist and there was only waiting” (34). This description, together with the references to Homer Campbell the store-keeper, suggest that at the heart of the image Engel invokes lies Penelope (so to speak) waiting for the return of the unfaithful Odysseus, in *The Odyssey*.

This particular scene may well be a direct critique of the role of women as passive figures, and it is a realization made possible by Engel's deft use of the Gothic and fantasy motifs, which sparkle like jewels against the dullness of a naturalistic setting.

Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* participates in similar attacks on formal and social constraints, and like Engel, Jolley chooses to articulate this attack through the Gothic mode. More than Engel, however, her *oeuvre* itself is characteristically Gothic, peopled with incestuous relationships, sinister couplings, and mad or deformed people—occasionally confined to attic rooms. Her characters experience and live on what Jolley has herself called the “edge of exile” (Jolley 1983 6), in the “calculated uncertainty” of her fictions (Walker 91).

Jolley's novels are replete with images of the abject.¹⁰ And yet, again like Engel, this Gothic side is often recounted through what appears to be a realistic, or naturalistic, prose. As Sue Gillett has argued, however, Jolley posits “new ways of conceiving of meaning—of formulating the relationship between writing and life—by offering new metaphors”:

Central to Jolley's feminist challenge to the pretended neutrality and transparency of realist representations of experience is her use of the body as a metaphor for creativity. This metaphor replaces the terms by which realism claims to operate with a new set of terms. Impression is replaced by expression, capture by release, possession by play and transformation, inevitability by change, solidity by fluidity, achievement by process, conclusion by entrance, end by beginning.... (Gillett 106–07)

The struggle which takes place in Jolley's fictions, therefore, is an entangled, suspended one, posited between masculine and feminine economies, and negotiated, frequently, through the female body. Indeed, as Gillett suggests, Jolley describes “a new conception of the way in which fiction can create rather than replicate meaning, derived specifically from female anatomy, describing functions and desires from a female perspective” (107).

The Well illustrates this point convincingly. It tells the story of an aging, unmarried woman, a cripple, who lives on an isolated though successful farm caring for her father. The woman, Hester Harper, returns from the town one day with a young orphan whom she has adopted. In fact, in place of an epigraph, the novel begins with this moment:

“What have you brought me Hester? What have you brought me from the shop?”

“I’ve brought Katherine, Father,” Miss Harper said. “I’ve brought Katherine, but she’s for me.”

The novel, therefore, begins with a delimitation—an assertion of possession, which reproduces patriarchal ownership values. Hester, in other words, the father-identified daughter,¹¹ challenges her father for control.

The story builds on this “unnatural” moment and goes on to tell of Hester’s increasing distance from her father and from her responsibilities for their property, due to her consuming interest in Kathy. The relationship is made to seem “unnatural” in a number of ways. The very isolation of the pair is commented upon by other characters, an aloneness made all the more complete by the father’s eventual demise. Hester’s possessiveness, suggested in the “epigraph,” is reinforced by her habit of making clothes for, and her dressing of, Katherine to suit her own designs; her insistence on reading Katherine’s correspondence; and her reluctance to have Kathy’s friend visit her.

This “peculiar” relationship of “orphans” (yet another standard of the Gothic) is not one-sided of course. Katherine is shown to be attentive and even slightly manipulative, is happy enough to let Hester read her letters, and is content to cook and sew with the older woman, rarely expressing any dissatisfaction with her way of life. But it is exactly this potential or ambiguous relationship of jealousy and exploitation which helps to create the suspense in this book, a suspense which functions in large part because of the reader’s inability to place either character’s motives and gestures in an unshakeably secure category. Jolley deftly delineates an increasingly possessive older woman conspiring at all costs to keep the younger girl to herself. The child’s behaviour, because

ideal, also troubles the reader, and this, conjoined with Mr Bird's warnings to Hester about not trusting the girl too entirely, work to build a remarkable sense of paranoia.

This dialectic is exploited in the opening of the book, which, in many ways, offers a classic thriller or detective story "hook," but with a difference. As Veronica Brady notes, "the traditional detective story ... finally resolves the tension; crime is confronted and punished, and order restored. But here a sense of evil remains" (Brady 57). Moreover, the style of the passage is peculiar; the text, like the opening of *Lilian's Story*, is unjustified, the tone is fairy-tale-ish—"One night..."—and the passage is written in the present tense unlike its re-telling later in the novel. The text, in other words, signals its transgressive status both at the level of form and content.

The Well begins simply enough, with a party that Hester has reluctantly attended and then the long drive back to her farm. The unlicensed Katherine inveigles the older woman to let her drive home and as she nears the farm she increases her speed until, quite horrifically, they strike something on the track. Jolley's Gothic narration of subsequent events bears citing in full:

"It's not a roo, Katherine. It's not a roo. Don't come out, it's too horrible. We've caught something on the bar. Stay there where you are."

Hester moves slowly round to Katherine's side, "there's only one thing do," she says in the same low voice which is like a hoarse breaking whisper. "Stop crying! Stop making that noise. I want you to listen carefully and do everything I tell you. We've no choice. We've not got much time. Heaven knows there may be someone else around. We can't know. Now come on. Drive slow. Slow as you can and as quiet as you can. We're nearly in the yard. I'll keep here alongside. When you get in the yard turn straight away and get the bar as close as you can to the well. Yes, I said the well. There's nothing wrong with the Toyota, not yet, just get as near to the well as you can. Yes. I said the well..." (6)¹²

In a few subtle strokes Jolley twists what could be an innocent though tragic accident into a moment of dramatic uncertainty. Is the body in fact that of a kangaroo which the hysterical Katherine never dares to see? is the body truly dead? what are Hester's

motives in concealing the body? All these questions emerge in the course of the book because of the opening's careful orchestration of information (or lack thereof).

If it is typical of Gothic tales to refuse to allow certainties to emerge, then Jolley's tale is peculiarly adept at this. For one thing, the intruder is made to seem a fiction (or a creation) of Hester's mind, a ploy to keep Kathy in check. Shortly after his introduction, however, the reader discovers that there is *in fact* an intruder in the area and that he has stolen money from the Bordens; later, Hester discovers that her own stash of money has been taken, and she surmises that it must be in the well. She insists that Kathy will have to go down to retrieve it, prompting the young girl to become hysterical. Kathy, very soon after, informs Hester that the man is alive and has been talking to her, although he is silent when Hester investigates. Finally Katherine produces one of the \$100 bills from Hester's stash to prove that she has spoken to the man, prompting Hester to think that Kathy has herself stolen the money. Is Kathy pretending that the man is alive in order to conceal her crime and avoid the well? This, and a host of other uncertainties, are raised by the text and kept operative until the reader can be certain of little.

One even begins to doubt that there is a body in the well, and certainly that it could possibly be alive, but even this suspicion is dashed when Hester finally makes her way to the well during a raging storm: she "was sure she saw a hand grasping the lowest metal rung.... She thought ... that she saw too a man's head which, because of being drenched, was small, sleeked and rounded" (148). Again, at the heart of this juggling is an insistence to show the very variability of meaning; throughout the text, in fact, the reader is told as much. "It is difficult to see anything which is partly and, at times, wholly submerged" (148), could equally be about "truth," "reality" and "values" as it is, in this instance, about the figure in the well. One effective metaphor depicting the ease with which "reality" is altered is the photograph of Hester as a young child: "The skilful photographer had arranged her to sit in such a way that the little body and limbs looked perfect, the lame foot was tucked in behind the good one" (47). Not surprisingly, Hester removes this piece of photographic artifice, preferring those of her own construction.

The *way* details are represented affect their very essence. Even patterns of speech play a part in the system. Hester, for example, regrets having allowed Kathy to use her American accent: “now it played an alarming rôle in the representation of unreality” (124). (Kathy’s accent is in part a defence mechanism, but it also reveals that she has not yet developed her own identity, or found her own voice, and that she has not really become her own person.) When Hester begins increasingly to doubt Kathy, she remembers how tinkers were perceived by people as bad. People, she reflects, look as we look upon them: “... people often judged by what they feared or knew existed in themselves” (116).

The well is the symbol of lurking danger, introduced at the beginning of the story at its worst and then dropped. The Gothic motif of being on the outskirts also figures here as does the constant movement away from a centre. The old cottage, like the Fowler’s octagon in *Bear*, is isolated. It sits “on the edge of the property,” and although it is implied that the location is actually safe from intrusion, Jolley suggests a lurking presence: “She had always felt perfectly safe once on the property as though nothing could touch her there. She told herself several times that she should not allow fear to enter her life like this ...” (59).

The well, then, becomes an anomalous zone, a borderland in which values and certainties are tested. Like the Gothic Castle to which heroines have traditionally been kidnapped, the well becomes the locus of hidden fears, prejudices, and false or patriarchal stories. It is, in fact, the source of a plethora of patriarchal discourses aimed at women: declarations of love, proposals of marriage, threats of violence. It is, therefore, the site of multiple generic discourses, including, because of repeated references to the rhyme “Pussy in the Well,” fairy-tales.

The fairy-tale, often used to socialize young men and women into their proper roles for the future, is here exposed for what it is—a dangerous, double-edged construct:

The fantasy created over the years contained in its invention all that was romantic and beautiful; the fairy-tale lovers and the safe dangers of cosily imagined evil lodged in some distant place. There was the idea of a world

of caverns lined with jewels and perhaps the possibilities of magic practices which made wishes come true. There were the sounds too of the rushing wind, the dripping of precious water and the unintelligible murmuring of voices, which could be human, in the depths of the well. (144)

This, then, is a wishing well of sorts, offering the promise of prince charming (Kathy dreams of wedding the hidden intruder/prince), and the dark side of such masculinity (he vacillates between promises of marriage and threats of murder). As Hester puts it, “If we get him up, your young man ... he’ll just as soon put us both down there....” And then, with macabre humour she goes on, “anyone who comes back to life after being killed by a truck and thrown down a well is not going to take things lightly” (136). It is, to quote Salzman, “a threat which needs to be conquered. Its plenitude is, for her, emptiness, death, destruction and avoidance” (1993 20).

In other words, the well is not simply one thing or another (just as one could argue that the bear is not). It is the site of polyglossia, of multiple discourses; it is both a “masculine” and a “feminine” focus promising and denying freedom. The dark side, the novel suggests, is that for women to seek to fulfill their desires, they will, like Lou, be marked—like Hester, crippled. There will be a price and a benefit. Hester’s ragged male-consuming well,¹³ also devours her passion—Kathy—and the lid is shut firmly over it (ironically, and yet with a certain dire logic, by the novel’s most potent masculine figure in patriarchal terms: Mr Borden, fertile, bull-like, voracious and acquisitive). The price for the denial of sexuality seems to be the gift of telling—the control of words. And this point is perhaps best understood in a consideration of the resolving strategies which emerge in each book.

Both *Bear* and *The Well* participate in a number of representational ploys characteristic of many Gothic texts. As has already been suggested, the Gothic rarely moves towards conclusions, or if it does, it signals the failure of closure either overtly or covertly. In the writings of Kate Grenville and Margaret Atwood there is offered a

suggestion of arrested or impossible resolution, particularly in texts such as *Dreamhouse* and *Bodily Harm* for example, and Engel and Jolley present similar endings. Engel leaves the reader wondering what the future will hold for her transformed protagonist who clearly carries the mark of change upon her. Like Louise in *Dreamhouse*, Lou's is a more or less positive resolution overall, yet still engaging in the peculiar aposiopesis of the Gothic text. The reader does not—cannot—know the future.

The Well's conclusion, however, seems more indefinite, perhaps because it has assumed for itself the structure of the mystery story, and so solutions are “expected.” The reader's questions are not answered. The book's ending, moreover, is deliberately “literary” in its cast. Hester, riding off to get petrol in Mrs Borden's car, is asked to tell the children a story—and the story she will tell is that which the reader has just completed. It is a dark inversion, in some ways, of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, which similarly begins and ends in a car, telling a story that is both known and unknown. Hester assumes the role which earlier belonged to a minor character, and becomes a storyteller herself, using the stock opening, “It was one dark night ... along this very road ... something ... happened” (175). Her “audience” then speaks the book's closing line, “Go on Miss Harper! ... tell us what happened” (176). The novel ends, therefore, not merely with the promise (unfulfilled) of a story to come, but also with a return, on many levels, to the beginning of the text, which itself began *in medias res*. The “one dark night” of the close echoes the “One night” of the opening, suggesting at once a circularity, an endlessness, of story. Both ending and beginning are mysteries, promising a Gothic *frisson* that is never allayed. “Make it real scary [sic]!” one of the children pleads, and Miss Harper comments, “I'll have to decide which monster I'll tell you about” (175).

Implied in this storytelling is a self-consciousness about the role of storytellers, hinted at when Hester encounters a would-be writer in the Grossman's general store. The Writer explains that she is planning to write a book very much like *The Well* itself: “I'm writing a perfectly horrific little drama set, do you see, in a remote corner of the wheat. Very regional.” She goes on to explain the conventions of such texts: “In writing it I

have to keep certain rules which have been accepted in literary circles. I'm in trouble already ... the tradition is that the story has a narrator who has gone through all the experiences in the novella and is relating them. I simply have no narrator!" (156–57). These "rules," ironically, leave Hester "at a complete loss for words." The writer continues: "the novella has to be a narrative, fiction of course.... The characters can have names but they are mainly known by what they do in life...." Hester answers, "Like ... the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker," once again invoking the world of fairy-tales.

Finally, the Writer reveals—as though Jolley herself had stumbled upon Hester in a corner store and were relating the tale—"As a novelist ... I need an intruder to distort a relationship..." (157). By this late stage in the novel, of course, the reader is well aware of the effects an intruder, real or imagined, can have on a situation.¹⁴ When Hester then has to tell her own story, she rehearses the Writer's instructions: "What was it the woman on the other chair in Grossman's said about the story having to be a narrative fiction told by someone who has actually had the experience" (175).

The Well narrates the variability of storytelling, and the relativity of systems of meaning, describing the importance of who holds the power of interpretation, and constantly making problematic either the authority of the teller, the "facts" which are offered up to the reader, or the very prescriptions embedded in literary modes as authorized by the "rule makers" in "literary circles." Such rules, it has been made clear, can leave one at a "loss for words"; they are also inextricably associated with a masculine, and indeed a realist, representational voice. In *Bear*, Engel offers several similar moments. As has already been pointed out, *Bear* opens in the archives of the Institute. The novel displays its preoccupation with "history" (as opposed to her-story) through the invocation of the Colonel's past. *Bear* is a book conceived in ideas of history and with the "perversion" of such evidence. Early in the book, the reader is told that "The Canadian tradition was ... on the whole, genteel. Any evidence that an ancestor had performed any acts other than working and praying was usually destroyed. Families handily became respectable in retrospect but it was ... hell on history" (5).

In *Bear*, as with Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*, or Mervyn Ondaatje's rebellious life in *Running in the Family*, the sanitizing of history is linked to imperialism and its own quest for "whiting out" history—in this case through the story of the Colonel, very much a figure of masculine hegemony—a man intent on duplicating the Byronic dream of owning his own island (and his own bear). It is a dream which comes to fruition in Canada in a landscape which the feminine rejects at first (his wife "refused to go further into the wilderness and face the inclemencies of the north" [6]). And yet, it is also a resistant landscape which threatens to absorb the history of empire. At one stage the reader is told, "The ones who were most truly romantic perished horribly, she remembered. Fell through the ice, contracted pneumonia or tuberculosis, died of strange fevers, scurvy, depression, or neglect. Only the hardiest survived and their few memoirs. Often the diaries that were left to the Institute *broke off when the settlers arrived from England*" (99, italics added). According to the Imperial Script, it is up to the visionaries of the Old World to inscribe the land with meaning—to fill the void as they themselves would claim. Colonel Cary's possession of the island and the bear, moreover, is metaphorically associated with this domination of the land, but the "outsider" status of the Colonel and his legacy is continually asserted. Joe King, a native Indian who occasionally cares for the bear, expresses it best when he says to Lou, "I don't suppose you found any buried treasure [in the house]. They didn't know much, people like the Carys. They were tourists" (163). And tourists, like intruders, are transformed by the wilderness, or destroyed by it. At first, the symbol of "reason/ableness" of imperialism, the early house itself,¹⁵ is described as an example of "colonial pretentiousness" (35) filled with imported, mainly British books. So much so that Lou realizes that she will have to "fabricate" a use for the house if it is to remain an appendage of the Institute. After all, "You do not come to northern Ontario to study London in 1825." Her next comment puts the lie to this: "Or do you?" (47).

In the end, however, the bear has been freed of its "squalid domesticity" to a large extent—it has at least departed with the Natives, the land's true royalty, King and LeRoy—and the house has come into its own through contact with nature: the house is

“no longer a symbol [of colonialism], but an entity” (162)—the representation of imperialism’s legacy given new shape by the land.

In both books there are set stories against (or over) which the female protagonists inscribe their own her-story. The world of thrillers, Gothic or fairy-tales, imperialist histories, even conventional romances—all are offered as pre-inscribed texts with set conventions which women (like Jolley’s Writer) must or are conditioned to follow in order to speak. They are part of a Master Narrative which prescribes their actions, articulates their desires and their sexuality, even their fictions. In order to escape the (patriarchal) Word, the respective protagonists must break with the symbolic order, a rupture more easily achieved by the texts themselves. Engel and Jolley use the modes of the Other but they deviate from the script; and they turn for *subject* matter to all that is outside the symbolic order’s prescribed domain: particularly the abject. Their stories create a fusion of the linguistic order with that of its unwanted elements—a fusion at once impossible and yet productive.

Kirkby argues that the price for such “deviance” is often women’s sexuality. Fee maintains that to “reject power is to be forced into Lou’s untenable position, cut off from both sexuality and a voice” (26). A similar moment is evoked in *The Well*, one which metaphorically links sexuality and voice. Salzman sets the scene this way: “Hester is fourteen, entering puberty, when Hilde’s blood severs their relationship. From that point on, Hester’s self-image is that of the cripple, ‘dot dot dotting’ after her father but never catching up” (19). It could be argued that this “dot dot dotting” is the visible elipsis mark representing that which is unspoken but present in the father’s discourse. This dark scenario emerges, necessarily, in each novel’s close. Their endings are characteristic of Gothic aposiopesis, of artificial or forestalled endings, and there is a sense that, deliberately or not, the texts make fairly negative comments about the state of the battle between feminine and masculine orders of sexuality and discourse.

Put another way, Engel and Jolley present at times aggressive “counterparts” or “antidotes” to a repressive symbolic order. But their continually maimed characters, their

ambiguous conclusions, or their “artificial” up-beat endings suggest that these “sorties” are less than totally effective. Read in a psychoanalytical light, one could conjecture that the quest for reuniting with the matriarchal is still being negotiated, and that the paternal or masculine order—the symbolic order—continues unthreatened. In this reading one would have to concur with Fee when she writes, of Engel, that she “manages to debunk the colonial mentality, the male, literary tradition, and even that representative of the wilderness ... the bear, but she cannot, finally, debunk patriarchy.” Fee goes on to say that, “At the level of female identity, then, the novel becomes serious, deformed by irreconcilable tensions” (20). But to a great extent this reading positions women’s writing as an Other and as responsive, emphasizing what Salzman has called “the constriction of a Kristevan reading which can find only repression” (24).

Perhaps it is possible to read the conclusions to these texts in a more positive light. Fee avers that “what ultimately prohibits the text’s attempts at resolution is not just male power, but the equation of sexuality, voice, and power, and the rejection of them all as male” (Fee 26). But an Irigarayan reading, which entails, “a repositioning of women, of female desire, of feminine language, does not offer a naïve overturning of patriarchal language, but a way of relocating it, of finding in its interstices spaces for female voices” (Salzman 24).

The Gothic’s role in this is certainly not clear-cut, nor must it be present in order for disruptive female voices to speak. It is still true, however, that the mode has proved popular with women writers, particularly among those who would disrupt patriarchal language without resorting to an idealized and hence problematic solution for dealing with its oppressive voice. The Gothic may be appealing because it is itself plagued by a double-edged desire, at once wishing escape from rationalism and sanitized order, and adhering to the boundaries which define it and allow it to protest. Nevertheless, the Gothic script also enables escape from confining strictures, deciphering the “dot, dot, dotting” of the female footnotes usually left unread, so that they eventually come to overwhelm the Master Narrative. Paul Salzman has said of Jolley’s various “unorthodox institutions” that they “usually explode in wild anarchy which may not necessarily

change them permanently ... but which undercuts the network of power and authority” (Salzman 1986 60). Certainly *Bear* and *The Well* succeed in doing at least this much, and often a good deal more.....

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Notes

- ¹ Swann’s work would sit easily in the present discussion, particularly *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World* and *Wives of Bath*. The latter has been described as “a lurid tale of gender confusion, murder and dismemberment ... told in the sensible, low-key voice of [the humpbacked] Mouse.” See Ross, E2.
- ² There are a number of studies to support this. See Northey and Mandell as introductions to these ideas. I have extended this argument through several studies, first in my own doctoral work of some years ago, “Peripheral Fear: Australian and Canadian Gothic Fiction.” More recently I have explored this function of the Gothic in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian literature in “Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script,” 1993a; see also “How Dark is my Vally? Canadian and Australian Gothic,” 1993b.
- ³ For specific studies of romance writing for women see Modleski, Radford and Whitlock. Particularly useful background material on the Gothic would include Birkhead, Day, Jackson, Todorov and, for contemporary applications of the Gothic to female writing, Fleenor (ed.) and Moers.
- ⁴ For a detailed discussion of scatological imagery, and the politics of “masculine” eschatological Gothic, see Turcotte, “Speaking the Formula of Abjection.”
- ⁵ See, for example, the moment when Lou thinks herself “into a rugged, pastoral past that it was too late to grasp, remembering ... how she burned the hired man’s European frilled shirts with a flat-iron once, even though it sang when she spat on it” (154). Pastoral, as it is here depicted, suggests both an eighteenth-century, imperial concept, but also a moment of fracturing this imperialism. The scorching of

the European shirt, moreover, is remembered as she rests lazily with her potentially transgressive other, the bear.

⁶ As Donald S. Hair puts it, “The breaking of the taboo is crucial, since, when a barrier ... is broken, all barriers begin to fall” (38). Whilst I would agree with this, my conclusion to this paper favouring an Irigarayan reading contradicts Hair’s statement that with the falling of taboos “a new unity can begin forming itself. But the re-establishing of the taboo is equally crucial.” My thesis here is that the notion of a single unity is a patriarchal “phallusy,” and that the re-establishment of taboos is but a safeguarding of the monophthongising impulse of the patriarchal voice.

⁷ Ironically, the novel begins with a character described in animal terms, and ends with a character whose association with an animal—and with nature—has left her very much humanized, bearing the sign of that difference, a claw mark from shoulder to buttock, imposed upon her by the bear itself, at the penultimate moment of fusion. This motif will be examined further in the chapter.

⁸ For other, or extended, readings of this infamous moment, see Fee, 24; Monk, 33; S.A. Cowan, 86–87, to name a few.

⁹ Given the text’s critique of imperial urges, which prompt people like the Colonel to penetrate the wilderness and conquer its virgin soil (to use terms familiar to the discourse of exploration), there may well be a partly-veiled pun in the fact that this sterile copulation takes place amidst the “maps and manuscripts” of the Institute (1, 105).

¹⁰ An extensive list of such details is provided in Kirkby’s article.

¹¹ See Kirkby’s reading, cited above.

¹² The non-justification here is reproduced exactly as it is in Jolley’s edition. Note, too, the repetition of “I said the well,” an incantation of sorts which sets the focus clearly on the well from the very first.

¹³ It is difficult not to draw connections here with Jung’s notion of the *vagina dentata*.

- ¹⁴ Earlier, in fact, the reader was told, the “dead man, the intruder, had distorted their relationship” (134).
- ¹⁵ Houses hold central roles in both Gothic and postcolonial texts. For a reading of the latter see Ferrier. It would have been useful in this article to look at the way the dwelling plays a role in both novels as a substitute for the Gothic Castle. Reasons of space prevent this. It is especially interesting in *Bear*, however, since the Fowler’s octagon is the apparent anti-thesis of the Gothic edifice. Appearances are always deceiving in the Gothic, and here is no exception. The house is “neither as perfect, nor as self-sufficient, as the contained bulk of its form on the landscape suggests” (Gadpaille 152). It is in fact marked by growths, called “fungus,” suggesting the hump that marks the favoured monsters of the mode. Both Gadpaille and Hair produce interesting readings of the house in *Bear*. It is important to note that in many readings of *Bear* Nature is presented unproblematically, as though it could somehow exist outside of cultural systems of representation. This article rejects this assumption.

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