Voyaging In, Out and Down Under: a Discussion of Elizabeth Jolley’s ‘Vera Wright Trilogy’

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Publication Details

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Abstract
Journeys are a recurrent feature of My Father’s Moon (1989), Cabin Fever (1990) and The Georges’ Wife (1993). Protagonist Vera Wright travels continually by train, bus and bicycle. She voyages half across the world from Britain to Australia and flies from Australia to New York. On foot, she treads a maze of suburban streets, wheeling young children in England and pushing her husband’s wheelchair in Australia. Such journeying corresponds both to Vera’s progress through life as a social being and her inward development.

Keywords
out, voyaging, vera, jolley, elizabeth, trilogy, discussion, wright, under, down

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

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Voyaging In, Out and Down Under: a Discussion of Elizabeth Jolley’s "Vera Wright" Trilogy

Journeys are a recurrent feature of My Father's Moon (1989), Cabin Fever (1990) and The Georges' Wife (1993). Protagonist Vera Wright travels continually by train, bus and bicycle. She voyages half across the world from Britain to Australia and flies from Australia to New York. On foot, she treads a maze of suburban streets, wheeling young children in England and pushing her husband's wheelchair in Australia. Such journeying corresponds both to Vera's progress through life as a social being and her inward development.

Baldly summarized, the narrative covers Vera's experiences at her Quaker boarding school as a student nurse at a large Midlands hospital during World War II. Befriended there by a surgeon, Dr Metcalf, and his wife, Magda, Vera has a brief affair. But Dr Metcalf leaves for the war and is rumoured to have been killed. Now pregnant, Vera leaves the hospital and works as a mother's help. When her daughter, Helena, is born, she remains at the maternity home for several years as an unpaid assistant before taking a job as matron at a boarding school, Fairfields. Conditions there are so miserable, she departs for London, accompanied by Helena, in the vain hope of being rescued by a former colleague, staff nurse Ramsden. Vera then travels to Edinburgh in response to a magazine advertisement, arriving exhausted and destitute to work as a maid in the household of a brother and sister, Mr and Miss George.

An amorous encounter with Mr George shortly after her arrival results in another pregnancy and the birth of a second daughter, Rachel. Vera continues working as a maid, but—while Miss George cares for both children—eventually goes on to qualify as a doctor. Returning for a year as resident surgeon to the same hospital where she was nursing, Vera enters into a further erotic entanglement with Noël and Felicity, a brother and sister leading a bohemian existence on a small farm nearby. Contracting tuberculosis from Noël, she is forced to spend time in a
sanatorium. Shortly after, Vera and Mr George voyage to Australia to take up professional appointments, he at a university and she as a hospital surgeon. On board ship, she becomes involved with a wealthy widow and later visits her rural property where the two experience a brief idyll. Despite this, however, her life in Australia remains bound up with Mr George.

Such a bare-bones account gives little sense of an episodic, non-chronological narrative full of gaps which leave readers "to weld the pieces together by the spaces." The three novels resemble a musical composition (in sonata form perhaps?) as the narrative circles back on itself with themes and motifs repeating and echoing one another: "I know now that an image can be repeated as often as a phrase of music can be repeated, perhaps with slight changes of rhythm or key." Vera, who recounts her own story, is revealed as much through her relationships with people—her parents, staff nurse Ramsden and Gertrude, the old woman whose farm is located near her parents' home—as by events in her life. Through her narrator, Jolley explores both the concept of memory and its effect on narrative as well as the provisional nature of subjectivity. In late middle age and much chastened by experience, Vera relates events which happened fifty or so years earlier. Sudden shifts in chronology are accompanied by equally rapid shifts in mood as intense absorption in the turmoil of adolescence and youth is interspersed with moments of detached observation and analysis. As Vera moves through time, she continually represents herself to the world and we must view everything through her eyes knowing how devious and deceitful she can be, while even the mature narrator admits her memory is unreliable. The name, Vera Wright, with its puns on writing, righteousness and truth, points to a blurring of truth and fiction.

Similarities between Vera's autobiographical account and certain aspects of Jolley's own life blur the boundaries further.

My Father's Moon is probably the most autobiographical book that I've written...but Vera as a character is not really me. Her background is my background. The background of hospital and the school and of wartime is very real. The things that the father says to Vera, my own father said to me. But I am not Vera.5

4. The appearance of a collection of semi-autobiographical essays Central Mischief (1992) between the publication of Cabin Fever and The Georges' Wife adds to the complexity. We cannot avoid recognizing versions of Vera's eccentric high-minded English father and her Viennese mother, charming and fretful by turns, from Jolley's accounts of her own parents in interviews and essays. Like Vera, she weaves in and out of fiction and seems to have been creating these characters well before their appearance in the novels. In an interview, Jolley says her mother had a lover, and a piece about that situation first appeared in 1987, the author claiming in yet another interview that it "is sort of autobiographical."4 "Mr Berrington" was reprinted in Central Mischief with a comment by the editor, Caroline Lurie, that it was originally written as a piece of fiction. Mr Berrington then appears as a character in The Georges' Wife, as the lover of Vera's mother, and readers familiar with the essay in Central Mischief can scarcely help drawing on it imaginatively to amplify that particular episode in the novel.

Whatever echoes of Jolley's own life they contain, the "Vera Wright" novels are highly literary and richly intertextual assuming reader familiarity with a wide range of musical and literary compositions. They follow the tradition both of Bildungsroman and its sub-type Künstlerroman, though, strictly speaking, Vera becomes a doctor, not an artist. She frequently expresses a desire to write, however, and, in setting down her life story, she both engages in literary composition and comments on the nature of fiction. Moreover, Jolley equates healer and artist: "There is a connection between nursing and writing. Both require a gaze which is searching and undisturbedly compassionate and yet detached" (CM, 51). We follow Vera's development from adolescence to maturity in which a measure of self-knowledge and understanding have been painfully acquired.

I do not pass on anything from my work but carry it myself in my experience. There is a great deal that has to be known and, at the same time, it must stay hidden in the heart. To the questions, is there a Balm and is there a Physician? my answer is, yes. There is trust, there is courage and there is kindness. These are the ingredients. And anyone can be the Physician.5

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3. Willbanks, 118.
The *Bildungsroman* genre, which traditionally assumes a male protagonist, poses difficulties for writers who adapt it to a female hero because the range of social options available to young women has, until very recently, been so narrow. Moreover, the romance plot, culminating in marriage, generally assigned to fictional heroines is rarely congruent with the narrative structure of *Bildungsroman*.

Virginia Woolf grapples with this in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), set early this century and containing much debate about women's social role. A young woman, Rachel Vinrace, travels by sea with her aunt and uncle from London to South America where she spends time as their guest in the coastal town of San Marino. Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, a more aristocratic couple who join the voyage briefly, look down on Rachel and her companions as slightly weird, arty intellectuals. Rachel, however, is fascinated by them both, but shattered when, in an unguarded moment, Richard kisses her passionately. At San Marina, Rachel, her aunt and her uncle associate with a group of middle-class English tourists holidaying at a nearby hotel, a microcosm of Rachel's familiar social milieu. Among them is Terence Hewet, a young, aspiring novelist who accompanies Rachel on a group expedition to a village in the jungle. There they fall in love and become engaged, but must return to the constrictions of everyday social life in San Marino. Rachel falls ill from fever apparently contracted at the time of her engagement, and, after a brief illness filled with delirious visions, she dies. As Rachel Blau du Plessis comments: “The novel draws on the traditional concern of love plots—the production of the newly joined heterosexual couple—and of quest plots—the *Bildung* of the protagonist.”6 Rachel's engagement transforms the quest plot into a marriage plot whereby “the energies and potential of the female hero are contained” (52) and her death is Virginia Woolf's protest against the hegemonic power of such narrative conventions (50).

Dr. Metcalf recommends this novel to Vera on their first evening alone.

The book is *The Voyage Out* by someone called Virginia Woolf.

"A lady writer," I say and feel ashamed to have said such a stupid thing. "Thank you," I say. I like his hand, the feeling of it as he gives me the book.

I tell him I am afraid it may be too difficult for me.

"Try it," he says getting up.

Like Rachel, Vera voyages outward into new realms of experience and inward within herself, but, unlike Rachel, she is a survivor. She also has rather more freedom—a career in the paid workforce is a real possibility and she is less strictly chaperoned through her twentieth-century education has prepared her little better than Rachel's nineteenth-century one. Her fascination with Dr Metcalf and Magda resembles Rachel's with Richard and Clarissa Dalloway. When Rachel first recognizes her sexual vulnerability and the need for a chaperone, she reflects:

By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever—her life that was the only chance she had—a thousand words and actions became plain to her.8

Hedges form an important motif in Vera's story. Once she transgresses social taboos by becoming pregnant to a married man, she feels hedged out, rather than hedged in. Beyond the hedges she looks at lies a realm of apparent security and social acceptability: “I like this garden and wish that it was my place with the children's toys all over it and a husband coming home in the evening.” (CF, 67) The link with Woolf's novel is further reinforced as the names of its two principal women characters, Helen and Rachel, are repeated in Vera's naming of her two children, Helena and Rachel.

The young, unmarried mother of two small children is an improbable *Bildungsroman* hero and a still more unlikely protagonist of romantic fiction as Jolley ironically indicates. Soon after her arrival in his household, Mr George gives Vera a poetry anthology inscribed with the following quotation:

You have first taught me,  
You have opened my eyes  
To the unending value of life (CF, 230)

The lines, from the poetic sequence *Frauen-Liebe und Leben* (Woman's Love and Life) by Adalbert von Chamisso and set to music by Schumann, occur in the poem “Du Ring an meinem Finger” where the young woman rejoices in the engagement ring, which will become her wedding ring, promising to live solely for her.


husband. Initially Vera accepts this view of love, though her only wedding ring is one she has bought herself for sixpence and it is many years before Mr George provides another.

Vera's youthfulness in comparison to Dr Metcalf and Mr George also corresponds to a convention of romantic fiction where heroes have the advantage of age, experience and social class. In each relationship she yearns for release from social isolation and marginality to participate in a larger life of culture, art and intellect, but while this happens to some extent with Mr George, she still feels an outsider. Although Jolley does not engage in class polemic, she delineates sharply the fine lines, even within Vera's middle-class milieu, which distinguish outsiders from outsiders. At boarding school, Vera seeks to place herself within social hierarchies based on appearance, a process she continues when nursing and again when working at Fairfields.

Almost at once I begin my game of comparisons, placing myself above someone if more favourable and below others if less favourable in appearance. This game of appearance is a game of chance. Chance can be swayed by effort, that is one of the rules, but effort has to be more persistent than is humanly possible. (MFM, 31)

Food, in the novels, is an important signifier of social privilege, desire and the relationship between them. At the hospital, Vera steals food from a supply of luxuries in tea-chests marked "Emergency—Iron Rations. Doctors Only" to brighten up the meals she must cook for nurses on night duty, and her affair with Dr Metcalf is a further attempt to filch some happiness for herself. The Metcalfs appear unaffected by food restrictions, offering Vera an array of delicacies whenever she visits, completely unaware that foxy Magda is serving her up as a special treat for Dr Metcalf. Food rationing, which persisted for several years after the war, becomes an indicator of how people are forced into vigilantly protecting their share of necessities with each nurse carrying around her own allocations of butter, sugar and jam while the pregnant Vera struggles to obtain the appropriate ration book. The old farm woman, Gertrude, provides a supply of black-market eggs and poultry for Vera's family and her place becomes a haven for Vera, but the dressed fowl, damaged by a fox—"not much taken, just a wing and bit of breast"—Gertrude offers her,

symbolises her eventual fate at the hands of the Metcalfs, for she too will suffer clipped wings and a wounded heart (MFM, 109).

While Jolley shows the oppressive effects of rank and hierarchy, she particularly condemns society's sexual hypocrisy and secrecy. Considering the stigma once suffered by unmarried pregnant women, the mature Vera comments ironically on changed social mores: "Playful spinsteres and exuberant lesbians give birth and special seminars are held to discuss the phenomenon of these people wanting to keep their babies" (CF, 6). But the youthful Vera is castigated by hostile Health Visitors: "Paid for your pleasure with pain eh? Didn't think of that did you? Can't have the one without the other can you!" (CF, 112) Her mother reproaches her for "breeding like a rabbit" and her father's sister, Aunt Daisy, travels to Edinburgh to inform Vera she has disinherited her (TGW, 37-8). Mr George can't bring himself to tell Miss George that he and Vera are lovers and even Vera feels she cannot inform him that he is Rachel's father. But the passage of time renders such secrecy futile. The importance of being unable to tell Miss George "the one thing we needed to tell her" withers "like the limbs of an old man when he no longer walks" or like household possessions in a house no longer used (TGW, 36). Mr George becomes a helpless old man and Aunt Daisy's treasures, once denied to Vera, decay and corrupt. These novels also challenge the "norms" of heterosexuality and marriage by portraying so many characters in different types of relationship. Even Dr Metcalf, reputed to have had eleven nurses pregnant, leaves job and wife in pursuit of Smithers, a male hospital orderly. Characters who are themselves involved in irregular sexual relationships condemn others' transgressions. Vera's mother takes a lover and Aunt Daisy enjoys a lesbian relationship with her Companion, Miss Clayton. Vera reflects that such "meaningful relationships" occur not only in the rarefied setting of novels like Women in Love with "all those stockings, a defiance of red, of coral and canary" but among quite ordinary people. "My own stockings, like Miss Clayton's and my aunt's, are black" (TGW, 56).

As a young woman, Vera struggles constantly to establish her own identity. Although pregnancy and motherhood affirm her, they limit her choices about who she is while making more urgent the question of where she belongs. In My Father's Moon Vera must contend with institutions like schools and hospitals, but Cabin Fever recounts her search for a home where she can feel at home, a place which contains books, music and a friend with whom she can share insights about them. This need is linked to the very practical problem of finding physical shelter. Jolley explores home and homelessness through the framing image of Cabin Fever—an

overheated hotel room in New York where the mature Vera attends a medical conference. Despite arriving a few days early, hoping to visit art galleries and walk in Central Park, she is psychologically trapped in this room, just as, when young, she remained for long periods in households deprived of beauty or cultural stimulus because she required shelter. Sheltered enclosures threaten stagnation, but leaving them is perilous, as in the anecdote Vera recollects of a young man who has lost all inclination to leave the hut where he is snowed up in the mountains. Once enticed out and encouraged to cross an ice-covered stream, he finds the ice too thin and is soaked in freezing water, just as the youthful Vera spends much of her life on very thin ice.

Looking down from her hotel window, Vera sees someone living on the frozen New York footpath "partly surrounded by bags stuffed with rags and possessions" (CF, 90) and finds herself obsessively watching this image of her homeless, younger self. Inhabiting safe enclosures isolate individuals from their past selves, from the homeless and even from those on the same level as themselves.

I am still here on the twenty-fourth floor and when I sit in front of my mirror I can see, in the mirror, someone on the twenty-fourth floor across the street. He is sitting upright at a table and is in his shirt sleeves. I have no idea who he is (CF, 51)

Vera also fears that mysterious streams of water trickling behind the walls may break through, inundating her room. Reassured this is merely the sound of an old-fashioned heating system, she recollects many similar pipes in the past which ones "lined rooms, passages and corridors", realising it is floods of memory which threaten to overwhelm her.

Home is a principal site where gendered identity is constructed and Jolley presents Vera's story not only in relation to romantic fiction, but also to Freud's Family Romance. The trilogy explores her relationships with her parents directly and indirectly through linking it to her relationships with men, with couples and with various older women characters. For Vera, one meaning of home is her parents' household, which she simultaneously yearns for and longs to escape.

I do feel I want to be at home with my mother. I know this is stupid. The very stupidity of the wish is enough to make me start crying. I know that after a very short time in my mother's house I always want to leave, to go on to some other place—somewhere else. (CF, 65)

Socially, Vera feels uncomfortably set apart by speaking German at home, her mother's tongue and the language of cherishing which, in wartime, becomes the language of the enemy—a paradox reflecting the relationship between mother and daughter who remain embattled throughout the narrative. In patriarchal societies, women are expected to maintain the facade of respectability and police their daughters morally. Vera internalises her mother's constant reproaches—"How could you with your education and your background breed like a rabbit" (CF, 199)—carrying on resentful debates in her head.

For myself I don't seem able, in my mind, to get rid of my mother's thoughts, her voice or her tears. And there is no welcome, at present, for her in me. (CF, 201)

Yet simultaneously, she remembers her mother's tender cherishing and yearns frequently for her presence.

At loggerheads with her mother, Vera is drawn to and inspired by her idealistic, unworlly father. He is a somewhat abstract character, perhaps because he is such an ideal figure, although his impracticality—"your father has given away his winter coat again" (TGW, 83)—is mildly comic, as when he insists on taking Vera and some school friends for a picnic in the rain. "This has always been his attitude to rain, the fact that it will not be much and what there is will do good" (CF, 181). Yet Vera's memories of him, particularly when he sees her off on her various journeys, are deeply sorrowful, infused with a guilt which is never quite explained. When working as a nurse in theatre, the resemblance between the anaesthetist's voice and her father's makes her long for home (MFM, 53), and in her relationships with Dr Metcalf and Mr George, both so much older, she seems to seek a father figure, even though, "There is something hopeless in being hopeful that one person can actually match and replace another. It is not possible" (MFM, 53).

Vera's association with an array of couples provides further narrative comment on her relationship with her parents. Some, like Sister Peters and Hoob, or Mr and Miss George, provide refuge, whilst others, like the Metcalfs, involve her intimately in their relationship. Unaware of being patronised for her naive and social background, Vera is almost as attracted to Magda as to the husband for whom Magda has procured her. After living with the Georges for seven years, Vera is drawn into a similar relationship with the androgynous brother and sister, Noel and Felicity, Oxford graduates eking out a living on a farm near her parents' house.
Socially superior to the Metcalfs, they are much poorer and even more corrupt. Vera’s prime function is to provide food supplies and their contempt for her social origins is barely concealed; “her accent is appalling” (TGW, 76). Nevertheless, they manipulate her into bed, all three together. But, as with the Metcalfs, Vera feels she is entering a wider cultural sphere, “encouraged towards all that is worthwhile and beautiful” (TGW, 80). Noel and Felicity, however, identify her with Ibsen’s Hedwig in The Wild Duck, a young girl losing her eyesight whose family have transformed their loft into an imaginary forest where they keep a wild duck injured in one wing, symbolic, among other things, of Hedwig herself. When the fantasies and deceptions represented by this world of illusion are exposed in the course of the play, Hedwig plans first to kill the wild duck, but, distraught at her father’s rejection of her, deliberately shoots herself instead. Vera’s vision is metaphorically defective and the wild duck with its injured wing becomes yet another image of her thwarted aspirations like the damaged fowl Gertrude once gave her to take to her mother. Nevertheless, unlike Hedwig or Rachel Vinrace, she remains a survivor.

Despite its harmfulness, she laments losing her relationship with Noel and Felicity and all it appeared to offer.

Patients and illness are on one side of life and romantic beauty and ideals seem to be removed to another unreachable side.... If I am to be outside or only a part of a special obligation it is not enough.

I want to be the giver and the recipient of the whole and it seems that I never shall be, (TGW, 93)

The tuberculosis with which Noel infects her symbolises both the taint of corruption and its necessary purgation: “With an indescribable terror I picture the haemorrhage which will, if it does not kill me, rid me of the diseased areas in my lungs and allow the quiet unseen healing to commence” (TGW, 89). The sanatorium proves a turning point in Vera’s life as she gradually comes to accept her marginality, even acknowledging its positive aspects. Associating with the Metcalfs and with Noel and Felicity has disrupted the career and conventionally respectable marriage her mother desired for her, but also delivered her from their stultifying boredom. “Not knowing then that I was being, in the eyes of my mother, wrecked, I went forward towards the consequences, being rescued at the same time” (TGW, 71)

Several older women act as surrogate mothers in Vera’s life. Gertrude, with her mixture of innocence and shrewd commonsense, tries to warn her against the Metcalfs, offering to extend her little farm so Vera can become part owner. Even though she ignores this offer of an alternative home, memories of Gertrude’s pastoral retreat console Vera throughout her life.

The sky always seems nearer at Gertrude’s Place. It seems to come down, rain soft and swollen, the clouds rosy at the edges and shining as if pearls are sewn into their linings, to the top of the grassy slope which goes straight up from the windows of the living room (MFM, 108)

Miss George, although a spinster, spends her life mothering, first her younger brother and then Vera’s two children. One complexity of Jolley’s trilogy is that some characters assume an emblematic dimension. Despite her self-reproach for past actions, the narrator expresses little remorse that her daughters have been raised by another woman, but this, perhaps, is because Miss George emblematises Vera’s maternal aspect. Indeed, she seems to assume that Vera will continue her own maternal role with regard to Mr George—She sees in you someone who can go on looking after him. People don’t ever do things with complete unselfishness”—and by the end of the trilogy, Vera is playing mother to her elderly husband (TGW, 26).

Vera is mothered in differing ways by two other characters—staff nurse Ramsden whom she meets through her hospital training and the rice farm widow who befriends her on the voyage to Australia though ultimately she rejects them both. Ramsden, a refined, cultivated woman versed in music and literature, seeks to enlarge Vera’s horizons by encouraging her to listen and read; while the yearned-for intimacy never actually develops, she remains an ideal figure haunting Vera’s consciousness. The widow is a more material and materialistic character whose pretensions to culture are dismissed by Mr George: “her talk about music...is the kind of rubbish put on record sleeves to enable people like her to talk as if they enjoy music and know something about it” (TGW, 114). But her earthy vulgarity is pitted against European cultural snobbery much as the character, Madge, is set at odds with the Viennese Heimbach family in Jolley’s earlier novel, Milk and Honey.

Like Madge, the widow epitomises Australia itself, particularly its promised abundance after the deprivations of post-war Britain, as she lavishes clothes on Vera and explains how she and Mr George will “have to learn to eat meat, to really eat it” (TGW, 115)

Vera’s life story provokes shrewd commentary. On hearing that the Georges supported her through medical school, “the widow bets all the same that my mother and father would have turned themselves inside out to put me through and would not have required me as a maid or for other services” (TGW, 110). The widow’s
property, which Vera eventually visits, corresponds in some respects to Gertrude's little farm as an image of female independence and autonomy. It also reminds Vera of her mother: "Like my mother's house, my widow's house stands open to the spring, to all the seasons..." (TGW, 164-5). The property also represents a space where women can relate to one another personally and sexually, free from social pressures and intrusions. As a young woman, Vera idealises the intimacy she observes between pairs of women friends, like Ramsden and staff nurse Pusey-Hall at the hospital whose discussions range from "music theory to deeply religious philosophy" (CF, 103) or Sister Russell and Dr McCabe discussing books or plays while working at the maternity home (CF, 146).

Vera experiences lesbian desire in her brief relationship with Lois, a fellow nursing student, in her yearning for Ramsden which, though never expressed in word or deed, appears to be reciprocated, and in her encounters with the widow. But relationships with men determine the course of her life. Falling in love with Dr Metcalf, she rejects Lois and, when Ramsden complies with Vera's request to visit her family home, she turns her back at the railway station unable to cope with informing the older woman she is pregnant. As the widow points out, "a man, like an illness, can separate people, can break a friendship..." (TGW, 116). But although, for Vera, lesbianism remains essentially the road not taken, in the novels it seems to offer a haunting possibility of harmony and mutual understanding between women. In Cabin Fever the mature narrator warns readers not to expect a romantic resolution: "I mean, how can anyone's life in reality, at the present time, contain the fulfillment of expectation and the happy ending of a romantic fiction" (CF, 237). The "happy ending" implied here, however, is not heterosexual union, but "a confrontation of recognition, a reunion" with Ramsden in the present in Australia. The actual ending of the trilogy where Vera wheel her ageing husband through suburban streets is counterpointed by the immediately preceding account of her brief pastoral idyll with the widow, and news of the generous legacy she bequeaths many years later despite Vera's failure to maintain contact. Another possible "happy ending" is cancelled out.

Vera's rejections and betrayals of other women also represent the failed relationship with her mother which fills her with sorrow and guilt comparable to that evoked by memories of her father. Although her mother and Ramsden appear as opposites, the narrative establishes certain links between them. Like Ramsden, her mother seeks to develop Vera's musical tastes, sending her records of a Beethoven string quartet and some Bach: "You might not like this music at first...It is a sophisticated music. You will like it very much later on...You must learn to wait" (CF, 27). When Ramsden offers Vera a gift of any book on her shelves, she chooses, as she considers, badly, "a book full of embroidery designs and diagrams of needles in the act of making stitches" (CF, 46). Later she realises how her mother could easily interpret the designs, recreating them in exquisite stitches. Embroidery recurs throughout the novels as an image both of refined, delicate beauty and of artistic creation. Miss George was an embroidery teacher and her students' work contains some of "the daintiest and prettiest things" Vera has ever seen (CF, 226), while the widow's house and its surroundings are "a green embroidery stitched with firm green seams into a corner of the pale bleached land" (TGW, 164).

Although Vera never learns to sew, she constantly embroiders the truth, something artists inevitably do, as Jolley indicated when her heroine, remembering Ramsden's embroidery book, regrets not having chosen poetry instead: "Rilke, for example, the Orpheus poems" (CF, 46). Encouraged by Ramsden to read Rilke, Vera associates her with these lines from his poem, "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes".

But hand in hand now with that God she walked,
her paces circumscribed by lengthy shroudings
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.

Wept in herself, like one whose time is near... (MFM, 22)

Set in a surreal, ghostly landscape, the poem describes Orpheus walking through the underworld while his dead wife Eurydice and the messenger god, Hermes, follow behind. Unlike other versions of the legend, Rilke's Eurydice is too preoccupied—"Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness / was she with her great death"—to notice her husband's presence or to comprehend his attempts to rescue her. 10 When Hermes tells her Orpheus has destroyed her chance of escape by looking back, she "took in nothing, and said softly: Who?" In Jolley's trilogy, Vera is the Orpheus figure and Ramsden, her principal source of inspiration, corresponds to Eurydice. "I never told Ramsden I was trying to write because what I wrote was about her. I wanted to write about Ramsden. How could I tell her that?" (MFM, 23) Just as Orpheus fails to bring his beloved back from the dead, so Vera cannot make contact with the woman on the train whom she imagines might be Ramsden. Worse than the likelihood she is not, is the possibility she actually is Ramsden and has entirely forgotten Vera, merely asking like Rilke's

Eurydice, "Who?" Whereas Rilke's Orpheus holds a lyre which appears to have grown to his hand "like twines of rose into a branch of olive", the youthful Vera carries an empty violin case to impress other people, but also indicating her artistic aspirations. It is empty because she is still too young to have acquired the experience and skill necessary for an artist, though these are ultimately manifest in the narrative she composes.

To express and fully develop her artistic vision, Vera must, like Orpheus, descend to the underworld. Her misdeeds, errors and follies form part of the process as she plumbs her own depths, reaching a nadir in her relationship with Nôel and Felicity and the resulting illness. Eventually Felicity, quoting from Dante's Inferno urges Vera to leave and "go with your illustrious and suffering ma and pa" (TGW, 97), for it is values they have instilled which ultimately enable her to emerge from darkness. Nôel and Felicity address Vera as Persephone (as well as Hedwig), the goddess who emerges every spring from the realm of death where she is held captive by Pluto and released only through the efforts of her mother, the corn goddess, Demeter, a figure associated with Vera's mother and the widow (who farms rice), both of whose houses "stand open to the spring".

Ironically, deliverance is further accomplished by moving to Australia, the land down under, with the widow as psychopomp. Not only does this remove Vera, to some extent, from narrow and inhibiting class boundaries which enclosed her in Britain, it provides a perspective of distance from which she can view her formative experiences on the other side of the globe. Like any writer, she relies on the underworld of her own subconscious and, to record her life story she must also penetrate the past, probing the depths of memory. As Orpheus sought to resurrect his beloved wife from the dead, so Vera tries to recreate as living presences people who once shaped her life and consciousness.

Vera's life is constantly disrupted, but this, Jolley implies, is inevitable within fiction recounting a young woman's experience in the mid-twentieth century. The Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman genre, with its pattern of individual development towards an achieved goal, is disrupted by the romance genre where heroines move inevitably towards a culminating marriage which absorbs them without trace. The romance genre itself is disrupted by a peculiarly twentieth century consciousness of how adult sexuality is infused with the complexity of children's relationship to their parents. In Vera's narrative we see a young woman negotiating conflicting desires and expectations while both shaping her own nature and learning to live with the person she has become.