

Gertrude and Elizabeth: Letters, Lives and Fictions

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This paper was first given as the Dorothy Green lecture at the Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature at James Cook University, Cairns, in July 2002. That ASAL has chosen to honour the work of a woman whose achievements, both academic and creative, were not, perhaps, in her lifetime given the institutionalized, public recognition they warranted is significant, and has a bearing on the topic of this paper. It draws on epistolary theory, and theories of epistolary fiction, of women's letter writing, of autobiography and autobiographical memory. Concerned as it is with women's letters, lives and fictions—specifically Elizabeth Jolley's *Georges' Wife* trilogy—it became a tribute not only to Dorothy Green, but also to Elizabeth Jolley herself.

LETTERS: A GENERIC HISTORY

Letters have long been recognized as a serious, if minor literary genre, one in which women have been implicated in various ways. Since at least the sixteenth century, when according to one scholar “the familiar letter was first thought of as a literary form” (Goldsmith, *Writing* vii), women's letters have been acknowledged as models of the genre: the female voice was said to be particularly suited to the familiar letter. Women were assumed to have an aptitude for this mode of writing, and what was thought to be their natural facility with its required languages was much admired through the seventeenth, eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, male writers began adopting female pseudonyms and publishing collections of letters, while by the eighteenth century

the epistolary novel, most usually written by a male, was established as a new and enormously popular genre. At the same time, there were few such publications by women, something that can be explained perhaps by an increasingly strict demarcation between the public and private spheres. This symbolic, ideological and material division was accompanied by a correspondingly strict regulation of middle- and upper-class women's virtue, which it was considered would be tarnished by their becoming public literary figures.

A literary history of letter writing, then, is often preoccupied with questions concerning gender and genre. Critics ask how the female epistolary voice has been defined by both its writers and readers; they recognise the status of the letter as an "ideological as well as an aesthetic construct"; and they explore the opportunities letter writing has offered women for self-expression at different historical moments, as well as the connections between the "figure of the female letter writer" and "changing cultural notions of both sexuality and textuality" (Goldsmith, *Writing* vii). Some critics argue that a history of women's letter writing is a history of its silencing; for others it is a culturally significant and widely recognised form of female literary endeavour, one that has given women a voice. Paradoxically, too, while women's letters are characteristically located in the private domain, they have also had a public function as part of the wider genre of letter writing, often as a mode of communication among groups of people, sometimes as a record of the woman writer's life, and in other ways. In her work, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, Elizabeth Cook claims that

in the course of the eighteenth century [. . .] the letter became an emblem of the private; while keeping its actual function as an agent of the public exchange of knowledge, it took on the general connotations it still holds for us today, intimately identified with the body, especially a female body, and the somatic terrains of the emotions as well as with the thematic material of love, marriage and the family. (6)

This doubled, public/private nature of the familiar letter gives it its compelling quality. While it expresses the most private regions of the self, those "somatic terrains of the emotions," Terry Eagleton argues that it is at the same time "turned outwards to another," lying as it does on the "troubled frontier between private and public" (52, 54–55). Evoking a self and invoking an other, letters function, for Cook, "symbolically as well as semantically" to "produce and organise" those selves in particular ways (7). In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf puts it more simply when she claims that "[w]ithout someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page, letters are worthless" (5).

GERTRUDE'S LETTERS

The letters that provide the initial focus for this paper were written in the English Midlands over a period of months towards the end of the Second World War, between July 1944 and April 1945. Only one side of the correspondence now exists. Written by an older to a younger woman—the writer is fifty five at the time of writing and her correspondent is twenty one—there are other striking differences between the two, of class and education as well as of age. The writer is relatively uneducated while the young woman has had a good liberal education and is in nursing training. The older woman is poor, eking out a living from a small land holding where she keeps fowls, selling them and their eggs cheaply on the wartime black market. The family of the young woman buy her produce and have established a familiar relationship with her over a period of years. Their economic and social status is very different from the letter writer's, although they are by no means well off. It is clear that the women enjoy a close friendship despite these differences and occupy an important place in each other's affections and lives, with the younger woman making the older her confidant, and the older adopting the position of advisor.

This very personal correspondence is not marked as unusual in any particular way. The letters are sent over a short distance and the women see each other quite regularly and often. There is little or no reference in the letters to historical, national or even regional events, nor is their style remarkable except for its apparent artlessness and its idiosyncrasies. The correspondence takes place at a time when letters were used as the most customary form of everyday communication, to make or break an appointment, to keep in touch, or to pass on commonplace information, and this use of letters is increased by wartime conditions. The period of the Second World War has been described as “the golden age of letter writing” (Hartley 183). However, the letters are by no means entirely unremarkable. The story they tell is traced through those “somatic terrains of the emotions” (Cook 6), expressing desires that transcend the social and writerly boundaries of habitual correspondence. While their friendship is well known, the writers are aware that others would be surprised by the nature and extent of their correspondence, and this remains absolutely secret between them. And their correspondence is of interest in still other ways—for the domestic history it constructs, for the gendered social and sexual ideologies it refers to, for the strong and vividly realized persona of the letter writer and the equally strongly realized presence of her correspondent, as well as for the insights it gives into the lives of both women. The claim that “[l]etters have long acted to defamiliarize the distance between fiction and reality by drawing attention to the fictiveness of the narrative act [. . .] enact[ing] the transformation of the personal to the political [. . .]” (Goldsmith, “Authority” 229) is supported by a reading of these letters, where there is a plot of kinds,

there are narrative gaps, there are characters, there is a context and there is a narrative voice. Moreover, the letters are mediated, by the writer's beliefs, by her responses to the dilemmas of the young woman's life, by her position as mentor and advisor, by the social structures the letters are filtered through and by the close, often passionately expressed fondness of the two women.

What makes the letters truly remarkable is the knowledge that Bunty, the young woman to whom they are written, becomes the writer Elizabeth Jolley. She in turn writes the letter writer, Gertrude, into her fiction, most transparently in the *Georges' Wife* trilogy, where Gertrude's Place figures as a centrally significant narrative space, as does a friendship and a correspondence between a character Gertrude and the narrator of the trilogy, Vera Wright. In the private collection of letters as it exists today, there are twenty two from Gertrude to Bunty, two from Gertrude to Bunty's parents, and one later letter, dated 17 August 1956, also from Gertrude to Bunty. There is a gap in Gertrude's letters between the first, dated 10 July 1944 and the next, dated 11 October 1944; then they are written at intervals of around a week, sometimes less, until they cease on 5 April 1945. Although wartime conditions meant that people were encouraged to write rather than to travel, telephone or telegraph, so that letters became an even more important means of public and private communication than formerly, the war provides only a minimal background to this correspondence. The writers save and re-use envelopes, which are apparently in very short supply. Gertrude writes that "after the war we might get the Electric and the water laid on & and we can have a proper lavatory" (12 February 1945),¹ a remark that reflects more on her own living conditions than on contingencies caused by the war. Food is a preoccupation, and Bunty's mother makes cakes for Gertrude, for which she is very grateful—sugar is in such short supply that cakes are a luxury. Gertrude's fowls and eggs are sought after to supplement public food supplies, and ration books are precious. Gertrude mentions sending her sweet coupons to her daughter. She offers Bunty clothing coupons and is very annoyed when she is cheated out of some of her food coupon points at the local grocery store.

Often, and especially in the early letters, Gertrude writes of everyday things. She describes her life on the farm, the poultry which are hard work, the weather which seems to be mostly very cold and wet. Her husband, Joseph, is a labourer, a strange, silent and difficult man, and she is very close to her daughter Marion, who is boarding at the Quaker school Bunty attended. Gertrude's sister-in-law and her daughter, her sister and brother-in-law, people in the district who are acquaintances and customers, Bunty's health and her work, Bunty's mother, father and sister, Gertrude's trips by bicycle and bus to the village and the town—all are recurrent topics. This quite banal reportage provides the ground on which Bunty's absent story is constructed. Her need to seek Gertrude's advice, and Gertrude's corresponding need to guide Bunty, shapes the narrative that unfolds as Gertrude

replies to Bunty's letters. Gertrude's advice is informed by her own life experiences, and accompanied by meditations on the kind of person she is and, indeed, on Bunty's nature. Gertrude writes that self-knowledge is a difficult but rewarding acquisition:

The hardest thing in life for all of us to learn is ourselves our own Nature, Pride, Temperament our own grabbin and self gratification, some of it people cant tell us we cant realise or wont let ourselves. What have I learnt, well cheifly & mostly that there is the most marvelous Happiness ready for everybody, but people don't see it. (5 December 1944)

In this, Gertrude's letters fulfill what Caroline Steedman contends is one of the functions of private letters, to assist in the "practice of self-scrutiny, [and] self-examination, that the Protestant churches and sects encouraged and that played a major role in the emergence of the modern self" (118).

While she doesn't adhere to a formal philosophy or religion, and makes no claim to personal goodness, Gertrude is very clear that the goal of human life is to achieve "Happiness," and it is the "Happiness of God" (continual references). This spiritual discourse is delivered in very practical terms. "We can each," she writes, "have our own [Happiness] tap" (9 January 1945). While "most lives are carried on in a trial and error sort of way [. . .]" (8 November 1944), "[T]here is a Perfect Happiness that everyone can reach, [. . .] its like learning the Piano & must be got in tune with it" (20 November 1944). Gertrude educates Bunty into happiness by way of numerous analogies and examples, in which she plays a central role. For example, she twice tells the story of two-year-old Malcolm who wants a "bright sharp knife," a desire which is "quite perfectly natural" (24 February 1945) to a child. Gertrude watches and waits for him to discover that it is dangerous. Conscious that her own life would have been easier if she had had the guidance she can give Bunty—"I should have been so glad if I could have had someone to whom I could rely on for the truth about life when I was your age," (27 November 1944)—Gertrude's philosophy enables her to dismiss or overcome anger, disappointment, envy and other negative human emotions. It is expressed through love. Happiness, she writes, comes from "seeing & being with you" (16 October 1944) and in knowing she is "loved & treasured" (5 February 1945) in return. Gertrude ignores class; for her "all people are an equal" (27 November 1944) and, while she acknowledges the power of social convention, she does not adhere to it and despises hypocrisy. In her last letter, she is amused by Bunty's writing that she wouldn't mind having a baby. While she warns that "an unlicenced baby is against Public Opinion still the most powerful deterrent there is," she "don't see that its wicked [. . .]" (5 April 1945).

By late November, the letters begin to address personal questions that Bunty has raised and which Gertrude writes that she will deal with “in detail.” The first concerns “the desire for Alcoholic Drink” and she has an answer: “when I was 3 to 5 I was used to drinking as much beer Etc as I could tope down [. . .]. When I was 12 I joined the Band of Hope. [. . .] I signed the Pledge and kept it.” The “desire of or for Sexual Experience” is “in a Diff: category altogether,” but can be dealt with. Gertrude has “proved it can be fully eradicated at least when one is older.” “For the young,” she advocates “Hot Water Fomentations [which] will cause the body to break into a sweat & clear off all the undesirable inclinations.” About “having bouts of being rather blued or brouned off despair of everything, life not worth living sort of idea,” she acknowledges, “well we all get em.” Depression can be countered with love: “our thoughts each of the other in Happiness” will help (all 20 November 1944). By early February Gertrude is writing that she is “very concerned” about Bunty’s health. She is too thin, “Eithierial,” and Gertrude advocates a complete rest: “I should like [you] to have a few weeks out at grass” (5 February 1945). Another letter is received before this one can be sent, revealing a far more serious problem, but Gertrude writes that she “understand[s] all about it and will help as far as my help can be accepted.” She says she has been “in partly the same circumstances & will write you a letter telling you all about it, so you will feel more comfortable rest assured.” While Gertrude is “very disappointed” that Bunty has encountered what she calls “the Pitfall,” it had been foreshadowed in her reading of Bunty’s hands, which yielded ambiguous results: “you have it all on the one hand, promised, but the other is doubtful.”

This letter marks a shift into a different register. There is a sense of increasing urgency in Gertrude’s writing as Bunty is represented as being in a position of moral danger. Gertrude drops her pretence that Bunty is working too hard and simply not well. She adopts a discourse of spiritual struggle in her attempts to help Bunty overcome the pit fall. Bunty’s “difficult situation” has been initiated by her friendship with a married couple, one that Gertrude insists is not good for Bunty and must cease. Her continual advice is to make a “clean cut, an entire break” (6 February 1945), and the next letter is full of plans for Bunty to join Gertrude in farming and poultry raising as a way of avoiding the couple’s influence. This idea continues to be called on in the letters that follow. Another letter dramatises Bunty’s situation in the language of martyrdom. She is represented as “stand[ing] at the cross roads pulled here and there [. . .] [she is] suffering but [. . .] will emerge strong, having fought thro’ The temptation of diff: thoughts [. . .] & no fixed rock to hold them down.” Gertrude presents herself as a saviour, who “will never fail you and never reveal any confidence, do not ever fear to trust me” (12 February 1945). In a later letter she reports asking Bunty’s mother if she approves of her daughter’s friendship with the couple, suggesting to her that as the man is an invalid, the wife may be “trying an unloading stunt” (20 February

1945), an idea the mother dismisses.

Gertrude is now convinced that Bunty is in the grip of an “attack of Broodyness” in which she has Gertrude’s “very very great heartfelt sympathy.” Broodyness is represented as extremely serious: “no effort of will really conquers Nature when she gets going on a Broody attack,” Gertrude writes. Continuing to advocate “the clear break,” Gertrude offers to go with Bunty to see these people, or to go by herself and ask them not to see Bunty again. In the meantime, she advocates reading “some very restful poetry, something big or a Historical Account of some very big World Improvement.” If this fails, there is “the Hot Water Stunt,” for which she gives careful instructions. Alternatively, Bunty should fix her mind on someone else (“your Daddy Praying for you”), take a friend with her when she goes to visit the couple, or invent a friend as an excuse not to visit them (all 20 February 1945). Through all this and more advice, Gertrude remains convinced that Bunty’s parents should not be told of her situation. By 27 February she has received a letter with good news: “I was hoping very much that the Problems would be settled in this way [. . .],” she writes back. Later in the same letter, she warns that there is no room for complacency, reminding Bunty of the story of the giant with seven heads: “well you have been very plucky indeed and very good and have chopped one head off.” But there are “other heads that may and probably [will] rear up.” She has written what she refers to as “the emergency letter” and encloses it to be kept “for a chopper.”

On 19 March Gertrude responds to Bunty’s report that “everything [is] going along well” by saying she is “very glad indeed the other situation is ending up so comfortable,” but admitting that she “got the wind up for a bit.” However, on 20 March she writes to Bunty’s parents, apologising for what may seem interference: “I am very sorry to have to insist, but the Friendship of Bunty and these People must be broken off.” She suggests that she and Bunty’s parents visit the couple to do this. But only she will be able to look after Bunty. Writing to Bunty on 27 March she reports that Bunty’s mother has told her that Bunty is spending the weekend with the couple, who are leaving Birmingham. Acknowledging that her letter to Bunty’s parents may have seemed a breach of confidence, she explains that it was prompted by a “Duty to your parents.” There is only one more letter, the one in which Gertrude expresses her interest and amusement at Bunty’s writing that she “wouldnt mind having a baby.” Bunty has told Gertrude to expect a Message from Bunty’s mother which has not yet come; Gertrude assumes it is connected with “where you say you hoped I wouldnt be cross about you going somewhere.” Gertrude apologises again for the letter to Bunty’s parents, hoping Bunty will understand and forgive her, since it was her sincere attempt to help Bunty. She ends, “I am very glad indeed things are so well with you, & that you are Happy. I am loving you & thinking about you every hour. My Best Love Gertrude” (5 April 1945).

LETTERS AND FICTIONS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

Gertrude's letters are doubly mediated—in their original writing and in their translation into the fiction. The original letters narrate a lived experience while the *mise-en-scene* they represent initiates a fiction that both includes and moves away from the history they relate and refer to. This movement between the letters and the fictions into which they are written, and which are published more than forty years later, is a complex one. Traced by memory, and replete with questions to do with the relationship between the fictional and the real, it also includes the ways in which a writer like Elizabeth Jolley calls on these categories in her writing. It is significant that Gertrude's letters refer several times to acts of writing and reading. These references are generated from the side of the correspondence that is missing. In her first letter Gertrude says, “[I]f ever you get down to writing a book I can tell you some to put in it,” and lists several suggestions. A few pages later, she writes, typically in the midst of other things: “I hope you make a start with the book it sounds like a grand idea. I am glad to say the rain has filled our tanks. Very sorry you have a cold” (July 10 1944). In a later letter she tells Bunty that her “desire to write [. . .] is quite different from the other things (alcohol and sexual experience) you mention.” She goes on: “You are very possibly gifted in that way,” and counsels that such a gift is best used to help others to “know Pitfalls & realize the truth of Life.” Urging Bunty to “cultivate that Gift,” Gertrude offers her help: “if you can improvise on any of my ideas or scribbles you are only too welcome” (20 November 1944). In the last letter she reiterates this offer: “I should be very glad indeed if I wrote anything that is likely to be useful to you, in your writings” (17 August 1956). Bunty sends Gertrude her poetry and her writings on “Human Justice” (11 March 1945). Gertrude also refers to her own writing practice, which members of her family call “parlarvar” or “twaddle and Balderdash” (16 October 1944): “its astonishing what comes into ones head as a letter gets written. I cant think why i got the above wrote [. . .]” (27 November 1944); and she speaks of her pleasure in this letter writing: “what a comfort to be able to write and not have to bother how the letter gets drifted around in its wording” (19 February 1945).

Just as an understanding of letters as literary texts has helped to deconstruct traditional divisions between fiction and reality, contemporary autobiographical theory has brought into question the assumed distance between autobiography as a representation of the real and fiction as a representation of the imaginary. In doing so, it has blurred the boundaries between these categories by its recognition of what Paul Salzman calls “the essentially fictional nature of the autobiographical [. . .] narrative” (67). Jolley's writing often suggests, directly or indirectly, the nature of the relationship between the fictional and the real. In *The Georges' Wife*, as Vera is in a position to begin to write, what she writes about at first is “the tremulous and fragile boundaries [between the fact and the imagined] [. . .] through

which the writer moves with caution” (Jolley 8). At the same time, the autobiographical nature of Jolley’s fiction has been the subject of a great deal of speculation. Although she is typically indirect or circuitous in response to questions or assumptions about the links between her life and her fictions—in one instance she says, “When I write ‘I’ in a story or a novel I do not mean I myself. Some people have been disappointed that I am not any one or all of my characters” (“What Sins” 7)—she also refers to her belief that “all writers draw heavily on their early experience” (“What Sins” 3), and in many of her essays and commentaries she explores the relationship between autobiographical memory and fiction.

Writing of what she calls the “catalogue of consolation,” which is composed of remembering “thoughts and feelings and experiences” from the past that then become part of the fiction, she insists that “[T]his does not mean that the fiction is autobiographical,” only that “certain truths and moments of awareness are saved for recollection at some time in the future” (“Strange Regions” 113). Her description of the way memory functions—“Memory has an odd way of giving things back to us, not in any chronological sequence and often most unexpectedly”—indicates the narrative impulse of the trilogy. About her experience of nursing training in a “new general hospital in the largest city in the English Midlands” during the war, Jolley ponders—apparently naively—on her continual return to this time in her writing: “Why do I choose this period as particularly significant in my progress towards becoming a writer. It was many years before I was able to use much of it as ‘material’” (“Who Talks of Victory?” 58). This experience, like others in Jolley’s life—the influence of and relationship between her parents, being sent to boarding school, the journey to Western Australia and so on—are analogous to what Suzanne Nalbantian calls “crisis experiences” in the writer’s life, in her discussion of the work of modernist writers Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anis Nin (2–3). These experiences are made paradigmatic of “turning points,” which then appear and reappear in a process that relies on a principle of repetition, an often remarked structural principle in Jolley’s writing and one she works with: “I know now that an image can be repeated often as a phrase of music can be repeated perhaps with slight changes of rhythm or key or it can be written again in its original form” (“Strange Regions” 113).

THE GEORGES’ WIFE TRILOGY

Elizabeth Jolley’s stories and some of the early novels, especially *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* and *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, circle around and refer obliquely to significant events in her past. But it is the novels that make up the trilogy, *My Father’s Moon* (1989), *Cabin Fever* (1990), and *The Georges’ Wife* (1993), that have been widely recognized as relating in different ways to their writer’s past. That recognition has been assisted

by the publication of *Central Mischief* (1992), a collection of Jolley's essays, talks and commentaries, many of them autobiographical. Jolley insists however that "[f]or me, fiction is not a form of autobiography" ("The Little Herb of Self-Heal 51). Nevertheless, in a remark which is simultaneously revealing and concealing, as so much of her writing is, she concedes that "*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 [. . .]. But I am not Vera" (Willbanks 118). Like other modernist or postmodern writers, Jolley's fiction often includes a self-reflexive commentary on her method that encourages a reading of her work in its own terms, as complexly self-referential. The title of Paul Salzman's book on Jolley's fictions refers to this narrative method as "tangled."

The trilogy is made up of the episodic, non-chronological recollections of the past of its narrator protagonist, Vera Wright. These remembrances are presented as seemingly more or less haphazard and are often repetitive, of themes, motifs, words and events from that past. Thus both the structure and the content of the trilogy is driven by memory and meditations on memory, as well as by a contemplation of the nature of the relationship between past and present. These preoccupations are most strongly evident in *My Father's Moon*. At a central point in the narrative, Vera remembers

unwillingly, all kinds of things. One small thing only, the sight of an unknown nurse going in to an unknown patient across the road, is needed to bring back memories mysteriously stored in such a way that all seem fresh and whole as if they belong now at the present time, perhaps yesterday, the day before yesterday or this morning [. . .]. (102)

The memories which follow, held within less than a page and including remembering "the schoolgirl game of comparisons," "the fat stomachs, the thick waists of some of the nurses," her realization "one morning that this [her own flat stomach] could not always be so" and the feeling of nausea that accompanied this thought, "the wedding ring for sixpence," "what happened to Dr Metcalf," and so on, act like an elliptical plot summary of the novel (102). In *Cabin Fever*, Vera muses on the work of memory and of writing:

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties is the piecing together of people and events. This is often a blending together of the present with the past. One remembered thing leads to another. Some match with an exquisite naturalness and others have first to be hunted and caught and then fitted. (171)

Immediately, she remembers her father quoting from St Matthew, chapter nine, verse sixteen, as they walk together in the rain at Fairfields. Vera understands that “My father is telling me that not only is there a present and a past, there are several aspects of the present and several layers of the past” (171).

From the narrative perspective of *The Georges' Wife*, where the remembered past finally meets the present, Vera thinks

It seems strange now to remember small things from years ago.
Perhaps remembering them means that they are not so small. [. . .]
One memory leads without real sequence to another. (13)

The trilogy tells the story, much amplified but still full of silences and secrets, that Gertrude's letters hint at, but from the position of the other letter writer in that correspondence, Vera in the novels. In late middle age, when she has become a doctor, a profession that she says requires “a ruthless self-examination,” Vera scrutinises her past, hoping to overcome the incapacity of not being able to “see anything beyond the immediate” (*Cabin* 7). During one of the periods of enforced stasis that punctuate the trilogy—she is in a sanatorium with tuberculosis—Vera recounts this desire and its inevitable failure:

Sometimes, like now, my thoughts are too heavy. While I was studying I thought that when I qualified everything would be different, that I would be raised in some way because of passing my exams and because of being able to understand the work I would be doing and in the knowing more about human life. And I thought I would be wiser myself and on the same level as other people instead of the wrong level. But it is not like this. I make the same mistakes. I want the same things I have always wanted and always I am on the edge of other people. Patients and illness are on one side of life and romantic beauty and ideals seem to be removed to another unreachable side. And then there are the obligations, the special obligations special people have towards each other. 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. (*Georges'* 93)

Vera depicts herself as devious, opportunistic and manipulative, referring to herself more than once as a shabby person. She is also trusting and innocent, and has always sought access to a finer kind of life, which she imagines those people who influence her are living.

Gertrude, Gertrude's Place and Gertrude's letters make up a powerful network

of recollection for Vera, forming an evocative discursive space in the novels. Gertrude is characterised throughout the trilogy as she is in her letters as strong, honest and loving with a kind of direct and homely, if singular, commonsense. Her Place is situated as a pastoral ideal, a haven where Vera will always be welcome and find shelter and comfort, where Gertrude is figured as a kind of goddess/mother figure. Together, they form a stable point of reference for Vera in what is the chaos of her life. Gertrude's letters signify all this and they form a strong bond between her and Vera, who looks forward to them, reads and rereads them, and carries them around with her so that thoughts of Gertrude's Place are always with her as she works on the hospital wards. Later, in her haste to leave her parents' house for Fairfields, the sham progressive school which she thinks will offer her and her child security, Vera leaves the letters behind. Her father brings them, "just as I left them, in a small brown paper bag" (*Cabin* 173). Like the originals, they are distinctive, written "in big black handwriting on paper used for wrapping boiling fowls" (*Father's* 105). This characteristic is commented on several times. Sections of the original letters, slightly rewritten, are made part of the fictions, where Vera's letters to and conversations with Gertrude, as well as Gertrude's letters to Vera, express the moral drama she is involved in. She has been taken up by Dr Metcalf, a surgeon at the hospital, and his wife Magda. Her desire for what the Metcalfs represent to her—in their sexual freedom, their lavish display of social privilege, their appreciation of Vera who they show off to their friends, and their cultivated learning (Dr Metcalf plays Vera classical music and lends her books, notably Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*)—is matched by her acknowledgement that Gertrude recognises the Metcalfs as "bad company" for her (*Father's* 107).

As desire and duty are juxtaposed, Vera thinks, "I do not want to give back the special thing I am being given [by the Metcalfs]. Gertrude I feel sure will tell me not to take" (*Father's* 111). Her increasing entanglement with the Metcalfs means that her visits to Gertrude's Place decrease, and the moral ambiguity of her position is captured as Vera waits "in the queue in the hall of the Nurses' Home for letters half hoping for and half afraid of having a letter from her" (*Cabin* 3). The drama is inescapably written into the letters: "I have been writing to her and must expect replies" (*Cabin* 3). When Vera chooses desire over duty, however, the letters cease: "All our letter writing stopped when I told her I did not want her advice and when she wrote to say she felt she had betrayed my confidence (her words), and I did not reply" (*Cabin* 64). She can no longer visit Gertrude's Place because of her pregnancy, which she has hidden from Gertrude. Although for Vera the letters "have a strange power" to evoke Gertrude's surroundings, so that "while reading them over again, [I] [. . .] can [. . .] be back once more in her small living room" (*Cabin* 179), nothing can console her for their loss. She suffers "the awful remembering of how I felt and do feel, when the thought comes to me that there is no one for me to write to. I had never imagined this. Especially I took for

granted the letters I sent to Gertrude and, perhaps even more as my right, the letters she wrote to me” (*Cabin* 64). The inconsolable ending of *Cabin Fever*, a narrative so concerned with non-communication, has to do with this absence: “I do not have letters to look forward to now” (*Cabin* 237).

Vera’s dominant memory in *My Father’s Moon* is of watching from the hill above Gertrude’s Place as the district nurse climbs up the field path to tend Gertrude, who is very ill. It recurs four times in this novel, signifying Vera’s deep yearning for all that Gertrude’s Place symbolizes to her. That yearning coincides with her simultaneous denial of her obligation to and love for Gertrude, which is consequent on the physical transformation of her pregnancy. Vera is an immobilised, irresolute watcher. She does not go down as she longs to, and “because of what was happening to me, I never went back there again” (*Father’s* 102). Wishing for Gertrude’s comfort, she knows she can no longer ask for it, “It should be me comforting her” (*Father’s* 161). This moment of apprehension of absolute loss is continually recalled throughout the trilogy. In *Cabin Fever*, Vera links it to her last visit to Gertrude: “The last time I see Gertrude to speak to I am quite unable to tell her how things are with me. [. . .] How can I tell her that I already know how things are with me and that I shall have no one to rely on, no one to help [me] along” (4).

Memory of loss is matched by another recurrent but consoling memory, of Gertrude sitting at her door “plucking fowls, singeing feathers and burning quills with the little flame she nurtures in an old sardine tin beside her chair” (*Georges’* 88; *Cabin* 5). In these memories, in Gertrude’s words and in her writing, as well as in Vera’s occasional feeling that if she just turned aside from where she is at any moment she could walk along the path that leads to Gertrude’s door, Gertrude is depicted as the vital, independent centre of the potential for goodness in the trilogy. Gertrude’s positive significance is figured through another typical narrative structure in which she is compared, explicitly or implicitly, with other people in Vera’s life to suggest the different possibilities they offer her. In *My Father’s Moon*, the tension between such differences is most strongly present in the long section called “Gertrude’s Place,” where the movement between the peace and contentment of Gertrude’s Place and the flamboyant sophistication of the Metcalfs’ is continuous. At Gertrude’s Place, where “the sky always seems nearer,” Vera thinks about its being “connected in an undefined way with Dr Metcalf and how I feel towards him, and then there is Gertrude sitting across on the other side of the table. Two separate people but joined together because of how I feel about them” (108).

Magda, Dr Metcalf’s wife, who also represents a centre of desire for Vera, is likened to the foxes who prey on Gertrude’s hens. Her hair is “the colour of fox” (*Father’s* 124). Sending a fowl to Vera’s mother, Gertrude repairs its damaged wing and breast with her dressmaking scissors, explaining that she “has had a fox get to her.” Suggesting the dichotomies of domestic and wild, of motherly care and predatory seduction, this conjunction also suggests that Vera will be wounded

and grounded by her experiences. Ramsden, the nursing sister Vera admires and with whom she imagines an intimate relationship, epitomizes the good taste and cultivation Gertrude lacks. Yet Vera comes to understand that each knows that love is infinite: “when it is too late [I know] that Gertrude, though she did not use the same language as Ramsden, was in her own way, saying the same thing” (*Cabin* 174). Vera’s mother visits Gertrude often and Gertrude writes that she once had a passion for her, while Vera’s father was the first to go to Gertrude to buy eggs and helps her when she is ill. Mr Wright is even more emblematic of innocent goodness than Gertrude is, and she and he are likened in their inability to imagine that an adult could willingly harm a child (*Cabin* 192). As she pushes Mr George in his wheelchair at the beginning of *The Georges’ Wife*, Vera thinks she wants to ask him about the past: “Gertrude too, does he remember Gertrude?” (2). Vera also connects her visits to the derelict farm where Noel and Felicity, the corrupt, learned, ambivalently-sexed couple with whom Vera is just as fascinated as she had been with the Metcalfs years before, with those to Gertrude. They are a “repetition of my journeys to Gertrude’s Place” (*Georges’* 54), although the moral climate there is very different. And she likens a wise comment made by the Rice Widow she meets on the voyage from Britain to Australia to “the kind of thing Gertrude would have said” (*Georges’* 159).

The tension inherent in these contiguities indicates the question that haunts the trilogy—is the whole attainable?—which might perhaps be answered by referring to Gertrude’s injunction to Bunty to seek happiness. However, the ethical dimensions of Vera’s struggle to reach that whole, to be both recipient and giver, denies this simplicity. In a letter that resonates with the complications of the ethical structure of the trilogy, based on those economies of desire and choice and commitment, Vera writes to Gertrude confessing her love for Dr Metcalf and saying that she cares more for Gertrude than anyone else. As she tries and fails to incorporate into this letter something she has just read—“a passage written by George Eliot to Caroline Bray after she has started her life with George Lewes,” where Eliot writes, “I should like never to write about myself again; [. . .] but only to try and live more faithfully and lovingly every fresh day”—it is clear that the whole represented by Dr Metcalf *and* Gertrude is unattainable. On her first leave from the hospital after writing this letter, when Vera has promised to visit Gertrude, with no thought of that promise she accompanies Dr Metcalf to the Metcalfs’ shack by the river. Jennifer Livett argues that through aspects of the “metafictional play” that characterise her writing, Jolley sets up “several opposing ethical frameworks in each work” (Livett 11). In this most serious of all Jolley’s writing, Vera must learn from her own experience that the whole may be only perilously and momentarily achieved. The silence that falls at the end of the sequence of Gertrude Wheeler’s letters to Bunty is matched by the silence and emptiness which are central motifs of the trilogy. They signal the necessary

difficulty of ethical choice when such choices are caught between the rewards of personal gratification and the demands of interpersonal emotional responsibility.

Endnote

1. Gertrude's writing has been reproduced in all instances exactly as it occurs in the letters. However, extracts from the letters have been dated conventionally. This letter in the original is dated "Sat and Monday Feb 12th 1945."

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