

Mute Eloquence:  
Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* as Encrypted  
Melodrama

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See  
I will not forget you...  
I have carved you on the palm of my hand.  
*The Well* (161)

The sub-title on the cover of my edition of *The Well* (a 1987 reprint) describes the novel as 'a dark and disturbing parable'. This essay contends that the mysteries at the heart of Elizabeth Jolley's dark parable, its allegorical melodrama, begin to be glimpsed (and heard) through close attention to the novel's juxtapositions of song and speech. With only each other for company in a colonial stone cottage perched on the edge of a Western Australian wheat field, and haunted by the un-silent body they have buried in their well, Hester and Katherine act out erotic desires, express anxieties about death and flirt with the idea of enchantments that exist below the watery grave outside their cottage. They imitate accents and declaim phrases heard on television and in Hollywood films, they listen to and share one another's music and they also become attuned to 'the idea of secret streams and caves' trickling 'beneath the ordinary world of [Western Australian] wheat paddocks, roads and towns' (131). To hear as well as to read the novel's stagey voices in the context of its cross-section of song fragments—which range from biblical hymn to German lieder and American pop—is to situate *The Well* in a musical-dramatic tradition that, reaching back to enlightenment-era Europe, has crossed spatio-temporal borders and metamorphosed in migration through various media, genres and modalities (including theatre and novel).

In what follows, I emphasise continuities between Jolley's late-twentieth century novel and enlightenment-era melodrama, particularly Rousseauian *mélodrame*. The term *mélodrame* was used by Jean Jacques Rousseau in reference to his '*scène lyrique*' *Pygmalion* (written 1762; first performed 1770)—a form that was both about metamorphosis (a stone statue springs to life) and that enacted transformation through its reform of French opera. What was innovative about Rousseau's *scène lyrique* was its alternation, and deliberate juxtaposition of, musical with spoken phrasings. Rousseau's proto-melodramatic form spawned imitations and adaptations in France, Germany and Britain, eventually crossing to North America and elsewhere. Tracing the impact of European melodrama in Australia, Elizabeth Webby references Peter Brooks' influential work when she writes of melodrama as a mode characterised by muted emotional excess. Post-enlightenment melodrama is, in other words, marked by its incapacity to speak (or sing) its deepest meanings, when it moves not just across geographical borders but from the popular stage to print media. Following Brooks, Webby writes of the migration from Europe to Australia of a theatrical form that, while originally

emphasising ‘spectacle, music and movement’ (210), impacted ‘[w]riters of fiction and poetry’ who tried ‘to achieve the same emotional impact through their work’s structure and language alone’ (219). Yet, in both its form and content, *The Well* can be considered continuous with Rousseau’s mélodrame of metamorphosis insofar as it *both* consists of alternating fragments of song and speech *and* tells a story of metamorphosis (a body encrypted in a stony well comes to life). Integral to *The Well*’s experimentation with aural and other (melo)dramatic forms, moreover, is Jolley’s alertness to how musico-dramatic elements sit uneasily within the written form of the novel. Arguing that the written form of the novel arrests the dramatic elements of song and speech that it simultaneously holds, this essay reads *The Well* via a long post-enlightenment tradition. It argues for the enduring yet metamorphosing and transmedial nature of melodrama as a perpetually transforming form that has moved from theatre to the novel to cinema, television and, now, into digital formats. Like the words carved on the palm of a hand, *The Well* is analogous to a half-enclosed tomb insofar as its written form contains musico-dramatic elements that elude precise categorisation or capture. Melodrama is, in this Australian story, an encrypted imaginary that nevertheless animates the novel’s fascination with terrestrial death and sub-terrestrial life and its corresponding depiction of a human will to closure or burial that is conditional to a will to transfer, transform and renew.

My reading of *The Well* as Rousseauian mélodrame (*mélos/drame*, play with music) writes against a critical tendency that has read Jolley’s fiction, especially her use of music, as a manifestation of a European immigrant’s intellectual exile in a rural Australian setting. It thus adds another perspective to readings of her prose, after the so-called linguistic turn, as postmodern pastiche or as perpetuating an idea of the text as playfully attending to its own limits (Salzman; Gillett, ‘Breaking’; Goldsworthy; Thompson). In departing somewhat from a postmodern reading, and in placing the novel in the context of an enlightenment-era tradition, I emphasise the continuities between the contemporary novel and a melodramatic imaginary that incorporates, along with the written, such performance modes as gesture, action, spectacle, music and the spoken word. *The Well* stages the particular sights, sounds and accents of its Western Australian setting; it also includes many allusions to and fragments from late eighteenth and nineteenth century European music and opera, biblical hymn, fabled rhymes and American pop songs. In doing so, it contradictorily places together culturally and historically distinct musical traditions and suggests that there are thematic continuities, and even common source texts, linking European music and American popular culture. These embedded musical citations exist in productive tension with the novel’s theatrical, spoken accents. In this sense the well is multiply configured as a tomb (a burial place), a cradle (a place that holds the birth of new meanings), and as a throat that both opens and silences as it incompletely encrypts a musical drama that the reader hears only mutedly, or indirectly.

In a 1992 interview, Jolley used the language of cinematic montage when she described the contemporary novel as a form that tends to be ‘written in film cuts’. She then went on to assert that *The Well* is ‘written in a series of fragments or scenes’ (*Central Mischief* 77). Cognate with the author’s reading of the influence of cinema on her writing is Helen Daniel’s reading of her fiction as a theatre of spectacle. In one of the earliest essays on Jolley’s fiction, Daniel observes Jolley’s many ‘tableaux vivants’ and her ‘collage[s] of short sharp scenes’. Intriguingly, Daniel briefly draws attention to ‘the cacophony of voices and voice overs’ in Jolley’s novels and notices an aural element that is often missing from commonplace readings of cinema and theatre as primarily visual mediums (‘Elizabeth Jolley’ 62). Neither theatrical nor cinematic metaphors are particularly emphasised in Kerryn Goldsworthy’s reading of narrative perspective in Jolley’s A

*Kindness Cup* and *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, which argues for the importance of 'voice' to understanding anti-mimetic aspects of Jolley's prose style (478). Through her ambiguous use of point-of-view, Goldsworthy argues, Jolley blurs subjective boundaries to such an extent as to often make undecidable the precise embodiment of any one voice. In this narratological reading, 'voice' is a synonym for how novelistic techniques such as free indirect discourse merge the perspective of character and narrator. Consideration of point-of-view is crucial to understanding the novel's writerly experimentations with voice. But what happens when we think about 'voice' in the context of a novel that attempts to capture the spoken and the sung? The possibility of attuning to this more common understanding of voice as the human or other production of live sound is evoked when Delys Bird refers to the 'enchanted world of Jolley's fiction' that can be found in the 'lyricism of the natural' (168). Helen Garner similarly seems to hear (rather than just read) idiosyncratic sound when, in a review of Jolley's fiction, she attends to its rhythms and cadences. In other words, Garner attends to voice as it might be heard as a dramatic presence rather than voice as it is represented through narrative technique. In her review of *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, Garner writes that 'you can't help seeing them in two tone shoes and brilliantine, their slang is dance-hall' (156). When Jolley was asked in an interview about Garner's criticism that she is 'not quite at home with her contemporary idiom', Jolley responded that 'Mr Scobie talks like he would have as a young man' (Trigg 258). Such a self-reflexive gesture, which alludes to the voicing of character and thus to the author's role as composer or director, suggests that the act of writing is analogous to the creation of drama or performance particularly when, in the same interview, Jolley (briefly) compares the writing of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* to what musicians 'do with phrases' when they repeat certain colours, images and motifs (Trigg 260). This analogue of accent, idiom, musical phrasing, rhythm, colour and image suggests that Jolley sees her writing as bringing together multiple aesthetic registers or visual and acoustic media.

All of this speaks to *The Well* as a melodramatic form and, in particular, to the foundational importance of Rousseauian mélodrame within this tradition. Commonly identified as the first melodrama, Rousseau's one act play *Pygmalion* was named after the famous story, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which a sculptor falls in love with his own creation, the statue Galatea. Significantly, Rousseau composed this first mélodrame as a formal experiment, adapting an ancient myth for a new form that melded new and old elements. Reforming aspects of French opera, Rousseau's composition alternated the differential parts of which it was comprised (spoken lyric, melodic phrasings, harmony) in order to call attention to the discrete features of his mélodrame's constituent parts and, in doing so, to offset what he saw as the totalising effects of French opera's over reliance on harmony. Through his musico-dramatic improvisations, in other words, Rousseau wished to accentuate heterogeneous parts (including the idiosyncratic sound of a 'foreign' actor's voice) within an existing form (French opera) that, as he argued, threatened to homogenise difference ('Letter' 496-7).

My reading of *The Well* as a melodrama that contains elements harking back to Rousseauian mélodrame thus adds a new angle to existing scholarship on the role of domestic melodrama in twentieth century cultural production generally and offers a re-conception of how time, place and everyday sounds and images are evoked in Jolley's Australian novel. Read this way, Jolley's novel evokes not a bounded country inscribed by homogeneous notions of national belonging so much as an earthy dwelling place contoured by both local and transnational influences. While scholars have drawn connections between Jolley's late immigration to Western Australia and the theme of

postcolonial alienation to be found in her fiction, little has been made of the possibility that Jolley's late immigrant status, and her not being 'at home' with a contemporary Australian idiom (Garner), may be precisely what attunes her to idiosyncratic cadences of voice and peculiarities of accent.

While Sue Sheridan has alerted readers to 'the role of music in her fictional worlds' and to the 'influence of the German language on her distinctive prose-rhythms' (96), Jolley has herself drawn attention to the role of voice and accent in discussions of her childhood and her education. Particularly striking is Jolley's expression of melancholy about her Austrian mother who, though she spoke German at home, retained the accent of her mother tongue (Ross 71). Herself a bilingual speaker of German and English, Jolley also talks of how her Austrian mother and English-born father sheltered and helped to find homes for Jewish refugees after the war and of how, amidst this turmoil, she was taught to play piano and became versed in the Greek and Roman classics. Music has featured in critical scholarship on her writing, particularly the influence of Italian Baroque, German Romantic and other operatic and classical traditions. Tom Tausky argues that classical music is a structural principle in Jolley's work (192). Drawing together aspects of her immigrant experience with the role of eighteenth and nineteenth century German and Austrian musical forms as a structuring feature of her fiction, Andrew Riemer emphasises the importance of a European aesthetic to what he sees as a novelistic desire for escape from rural isolation. For Helen Daniel, compositional aspects of *The Well*—including thematic variation, repetition of phrases and assemblage of 'contrapuntal voices'—are analogous to German composer and pianist Johannes Brahms' use of fugue. Musical variation and repetition, as Daniel writes, structures *The Well*'s non-linear chronology as its plotted events move in and out from a pivotal event, a road accident and well burial. For Daniel and Riemer, however, such 'variations on the music theme hark back to Vienna and the constructs of the old world at the same time as they suggest exile in the new world' (Riemer 59).

These arguments make much of the ways in which musical composition shapes Jolley's novelistic technique. But what should be made of the role of music or speech as it is performed in theatre and film yet written into or, more precisely, enclosed or incorporated within the form of the novel? How might Jolley's many fictional allusions to and fragments from operatic and melodramatic performances connect with a reading of the novel as a series of 'scenes' that act as placeholders for the presence of sound that, once a lived presence, can be only indirectly remediated in the form of print. In a reading of her first novel, *Palomino* (1980), which the narrative of *The Well* arguably continues, Riemer denounces the former's unfortunate combination of 'elevated prose' and melodrama ('Between' 242). This pejorative reading of melodrama implicitly refers to its ubiquity in (American) popular culture and to commonplace associations of the melodrama with such low cultural genres as the 1930s and 40s 'women's film' and television soap opera. In recent decades, the domestic melodrama has been revalued and recuperated, especially within Anglo-American feminist and filmic debates that emphasise the gendering of moral narratives that have tended to be centred on women in the home. Debates about women's role within the private sphere of the home have, moreover, been foundational to gender-based readings of Jolley's fiction (Bird; Brady; Gillett; Levy; Renes). Yet, the form of melodrama reaches back beyond the domestic melodramas of film and television to the enlightenment-era innovations of Rousseauian *mélodrame*. In this latter context, it is possible to read *The Well*'s melodramatic scenes as a sounding out, through a juxtaposition of speech and song, of the affective relations between a sixteen-year-old orphan and the crippled spinster who unofficially adopts her.

*The Well* is composed of a series of vignettes that mediate the feminised affects, sentimental attachments, longings and moral traumas that we can associate with the domestic melodrama. Featured throughout these vignettes are fragments of melodramatic and operatic song as well as declamatory speeches. These begin with Hester announcing to her soon-to-be-dead father that she had 'brought home' an orphan from the local store, along with a sack of sugar, and that 'she's for me' (9-10). It soon becomes apparent that this orphan, Katherine, is a talented mimic who has an 'extraordinary idiom', like that out of a 'TV soapie' (17). Katherine constantly 'adds fresh words and accents to her already exaggerated speech' and she encourages Hester to join her in her mimicry. Such dramatic scenes conjoin song and dance with declamation and recitation and are not limited to imitation of American film and television. While Katherine works on making her voice as American as possible (3), Hester plays classical piano and wistfully remembers her childhood governess, Hilde, who oversaw her music lessons, took her to concerts and made her daily recite lines of French and German language (16).

Establishing the characters of both women, theatrical language expresses the cultural and generational differences that separate the two and music is a key vehicle that enables expression of the female-centred relationship. Music mediates this Sapphic bond and communicates the transference that takes place between the two women. Music also becomes the expression and source of erotic pleasure when the two women play the piano together and when Hester watches Katherine rhythmically dancing at a party in town to her favourite pop song (3). Accented speech alternates with music, song and dance and, as we will see, this melodramatic pattern structures the novel from its opening when an accident takes place that, pivotal to the novel's 'dark parable' or allegorical melodrama, has deathly and traumatic as well as life-giving effects

High after the party at which Hester watches her dance, Katherine is driving Hester home when she suddenly hits, and impales on the car's 'roo bar', an unidentified man who has appeared on the dirt track. On Hester's direction, the body is then dumped in the well located outside the cottage in which the two have been living since Hester had adopted Katherine. This sequence of scenes—dance party, accident and well burial—constitutes a recognisable pattern that gets repeated later in the novel. In a second staging of the party and subsequent accident and well burial, events and actions take place slightly differently. In the repeat scene of her dancing, Katherine's gestural rhythms are more present. This time she thrust her 'head forward and down' and walked or pranced with a 'springing step', moving in imitation of John Travolta and 'like a wooden doll' (74-5).

The evocation of Katherine as 'wooden doll' anticipates Hester's later memory of a doll that she owned as a child and pushed around in an old 'wooden pram' found on the property of the family accountant, Mr Bird. Hester's memory of how her doll 'had slipped down into the deep well of the pram in a most awkward way' connects back to the description of Katherine as a 'wooden doll's' as well as to her restless driving as that which precipitates the accident and well burial (163). Prolepsis and retrospection structure the novel's larger frame narration which begins with Hester's 'I've brought Katherine' and ends with Hester meeting another woman who, as will be discussed further, purchases a 'plastic bowl' (176). Hester encounters both women in the town store, situating Sapphic desire via a love of objects (wooden, celluloid, plastic).

The words doll, well and bowl connect aurally, through assonance and consonance. These contiguous elements, uncannily attached to the doll, take on further meanings in the context of the imitative dance scene. Placed together the wooden and the plastic conjoin the

description of Katherine as a doll with her mimicry of celluloid idols to imply that machine-made objects and images play a role in Katherine's identity-formation, her self-sculpting. Likewise, the plotting of Hester's possessive desire for Katherine—her 'she's for me' and her comparing her to a doll—is not just a way of thematising transgressive, sexual longing (Levy 115-16). Placed alongside her fascination with Katherine as a mimic of Travolta and other screen idols, 'she's for me' also speaks to the novel's twinning of sexual and commodity fetishism as longings that drive industrial capitalist production and structure mainstream appetite for Hollywood's alluring sounds and images. In the purview of melodrama's *longue durée*, *The Well*'s evocation of living dolls and deathly wells ties the novel's domestic melodrama (including its references to Hollywood romances and television soaps) to a musico-theatrical tradition. In relation to Rousseau's ur-melodrama *Pygmalion*, with its enactment and thematisation of transformation, *The Well*'s animation of statues (or stone dolls) and its depiction of living beings who are turned to stone begins to look like a melodrama of metamorphosis.

In *The Well*'s proleptic / retrospective structure, the children's rhyme, or variation thereof, that Katherine sings as she careers along a dirt track in Hester's car also anticipates the well burial. It takes the reader back, via the rhyming contiguities conjured earlier (doll, well, bowl), to the spectacle of her as 'wooden' figure:

*Pussa inna wella*  
*Hoohah putta inna Huh Huh Huh*  
*Yair Yair*  
*Dinga Donga Bella Yair Yair (5)*

The repetition of the 'Dinga Donga' rhyme, as Daniel argues, confirms the importance of musical composition in Jolley's novels. In the context of *The Well*'s song fragments from both Romantic era Europe and from twentieth century American popular culture, 'Dinga Donga Bella' conjures the spectacle of Katherine as a 'bella', a 'wooden doll', who dances and imitates Travolta. Sung by Katherine, in what is presumably her imitative American accent, Katherine's verse can be understood as a variation on a rhyme that dates back to the fifteenth century. A death knell for a cat thrown down a well, 'Ding Dong Bell' is an onomatopoeic verse that sounds out, as well as describes, the ringing of a funeral bell. While the first known performance of this rhyme was by an organist in Winchester Cathedral, as recorded in *Pammela Musicks Miscellanie* (1609), allusions to the song in three of Shakespeare's plays suggest that it may have oral roots in ancient myth and song (*Oxford Dictionary* 149). Possibly alluding to a figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the following rendition of the rhyme is from *The Tempest*:

Sea Nymphs hourly ring his bell  
 Hark! Now I hear them—Ding, dong, bell.  
 (*The Tempest*, Act I, scene ii)

In *Metamorphoses*, Galatea is the name of both a sea nymph and a statue brought to life by her creator, the sculptor Pygmalion. Meanings and etymologies attached to the name Galatea suggest that sea nymph and statue are two personifications of the one goddess, believed to be a version of Venus. Galatea derives from *Ga*, meaning earth, *Gala* meaning milky white and *theia* goddess. Associated with the cult of Aphrodite that arose in parts of Italy, Galatea has been connected to the white froth on waves and to Gaia (earth spirit). Since, in *Metamorphosis*, Galatea appears twice, first as a stone statue and later as a sea nymph, it is possible that Galatea embodies the transmogrification of stony earth into

turbulent ocean. *The Well* can be thought of as engaging with such fertility myths through its thematisation of wooden dolls that ‘spring’ to life, well burials and enchanted watery spirits that seem to sound from below ground.

*The Well*’s animated dolls are important both to the way musical-theatre works in the novel and to the novel’s story of metamorphosis. Attention to the juxtaposition of that which is spoken and that which is sung particularly opens the novel to my reading of it Rousseauian mélodrame. While Rousseau asserted that ‘the art of writing does not depend at all on that of speaking’ (*Essay* 23), his *Essay on the Origin of Language* is primarily about the role that spoken accent, melody and harmony play in broader understandings of human language and machine-culture. As noted above, Rousseau contributed to the reform of opera when he theorised his new theatrical form as that which alternated between declamatory speech, music and pantomime (‘Letter’ 496-7). An admirer of Italian opera, Rousseau used the word mélodrame to describe his composition and this appeared to be a variation and a transposition of the Italian word *melodramma*. In composing his new form, Rousseau was influenced by recitative—a form of operatic expression that, he believed, could ‘make language sing and Music speak’ (see ‘Letter’ 495). Rousseau composed the music and wrote the prose-poetry for his own melodrama, *Pygmalion*, a one-act version of Ovid’s story in which an artist (Pygmalion) brings his sculpture (Galatea) to life. This *scène lyrique* was not only about metamorphosis, it also enacted the transformation of musical theatre that Rousseau had earlier theorised and envisioned. In separating out its formally distinct elements of song and speech, this mélodrame staged its composer-philosopher’s belief in the naturally rhythmic or musical nature of the accented voice and in the capacity of music to communicate ideas and themes.

Such musical-theatrical transformations are apposite not only in relation to *The Well*’s thematising of metamorphosis but also to the way in which it encrypts a variety of musical forms and accents within its written form. For instance, early in the novel there is a reference to Brahms’ ‘Vier Ernste Gesänge’, the first of his ‘Four Serious Songs Cycle’. The song borrows from a passage in Ecclesiastes in which the death of man is evoked not as a spiritual lifting or a transcending of earthly limits but as a fall or a return to the matter, the dust, from which it arose (‘*even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other*, 11). Significant, too, is that ‘Vier Ernste Gesänge’ is said to be the most recitative of Brahms’ songs (see Musgrave 219). Recitative is most readily associated with Italian Baroque opera and is a style of delivery in which the singer, together with simple instrumental accompaniment and echoing the cadences of everyday speech, draws attention to natural vocal rhythms and accents. As already noted, Rousseau’s admiration for recitative shaped his melodramatic reform of French operatic tradition. Similarly, in his book on opera, aesthetics and homosexual desire, Wayne Koestenbaum writes of the importance of recitative in marrying speech and song. In recitative, Koestenbaum argues, language seeks ‘its shadow- bride in music, and music crosses Lethe to find its echo in language’ (178-180).

Brahms’ recitative ‘Vier Ernste Gesänge’ plays a significant part in *The Well*. German quotation and English translation from the song may jar but such juxtaposition chimes with descriptions of Hester atonally ‘thumping the keys in untrained contralto’ (10-11). Emphasised in the following passage are Hester’s low notes, and the emotion of her voice, which in turn provoke a flash of memories:

Her fingers fumbled over the piano till she found the right notes. ‘*Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth*

*downward to the earth ... Unter die Erde ...*’ She began to remember the German, not sure if she had made a mistake, unable to remember if the earth was masculine, feminine or something between the two. She was surprised as she repeated *Unter die Erde* that her voice could reach such low notes and be charged with emotion. Surprising too was the sudden memory of the pictures she had fitted to the song when she was a child. Unable then to understand completely she had made secret pictures for herself of water flowing far down under the ground; water seeping over smooth rocks and gathering in small underground pools to swell little rivulets moistening the dark soil in which the mysterious roots of the reeds and trees found their nourishment. The same images came to her now after all the years in particular when she let her voice go down, as it were, under the earth. (11)

Hester repeats *Unter die Erde*, words from Brahms’ recitative which itself cites a passage from Ecclesiastes in which human death is described as a return to earth, a going underground (*Unter die Erde*). The combination of German and English partly adapts and translates Brahms’ lyric yet, in retaining part of the German, draws attention to the role of translation in any transmedial process. As she sings and plays, Hester’s low tones enact a subterranean movement as her singing brings back childhood reveries of pools deep in the earth. The dramatic interplay of this passage, which alternates speech, song and spectacle, is followed by another melodramatic scene in which Hester and Katherine play a musical game:

Often in the evenings they played a game of choosing as two little girls, sisters, might play. While they were sewing or embroidering they took it in turn, strictly in turn, to select a piece of music or a song to play. The rule, unspoken, in the game was to choose as if for oneself but in reality the choice was made for the pleasure of the other person. So Katherine would make her choice, ‘I’ll have, Miss Harper, dear, I’ll have Mahler, er, um *Abscheid!*’

‘Ah! that’s a lovely choice Kathy. I’m, glad you like that.’ After the song of farewell, Hester, fingering a cassette, would take up another and say. ‘It’s a long time since I heard Neil Diamond, ‘I’d like ‘I am, I said.’

Sometimes the choosing was extended. The wood stove in the kitchen, after wanting ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ and ‘There’s a Home for Little Children Above the Bright Blue Sky’ surprised them with ‘I rage I melt I burn,’ Polyphemus’ aria from *Acis and Galatea*. And once the Troll in the well chose ‘Fifteen men on A Dead Man’s Chest,’ a curiously unfitting ending tacked on to a Mozart divertimento, Hester thought, by the record company wanting to make use of the space for extra grooves on the record. (106)

The pretence of the game is to choose a song ‘as if for oneself’ whereas really ‘the choice was made for the pleasure of the other’ as the choosing game facilitates a blurring of subjective boundaries (105). Music here enables inter-subjective empathy, becoming analogous to the way free indirect discourse works in Goldsworthy’s reading of another Jolley novel as a perspectival technique that enables one character to get inside the head of another. Music not only mediates what seems almost to be a telepathic bond between Hester and Kathy, it creates thematic and aesthetic continuities between that which is communicated verbally (the novel’s written themes and plot) and that which can



be heard if the reader investigates and listens to the referenced/quoted songs. As is the case in Rousseauian mélodrame, a form that has migrated across time, space and various modalities to inform a great number of modern cultural productions, the choosing game brings together musical traditions that might otherwise be separated according to social/cultural distinction.

The song that Katherine chooses for Hester clearly resonates with the larger allegory of a well burial and also with the melodramatic theme of Galatea-metamorphosis. The song is late-Romantic Austrian composer Mahler's *Abscheid!* (*The Farewell*)—the last song of his symphony *Das Lied von Der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*). The song lyric is partly about prosopopoeia, a governing trope in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (Miller 3-4), whereby inanimate things become animate and vice versa. In Mahler's *Abscheid* it is the watery earth that sings:

The brook sings out clear through the darkness.  
The flowers pale in the twilight.  
The earth breathes, in full rest and sleep.  
All longing now becomes a dream. (from *Abscheid!*)

While this quotation is from an English translation of *Abscheid!*, Hester and Katherine presumably listen to the music as it is sung in German. This intimation of German language/song is in contrast with the tune that Hester chooses for Katherine—Neil Diamond's pop-song, 'I am I said' (1971). Harking back to Katherine's imitation of Travolta on the dance floor, Hester's choice of an American song would seem to reinforce the characterisation of Katherine as vulnerable to culture-industrial America. This is implied in Hester's correction of Katherine's speech and her comparing her to a 'wooden doll' whose automatized dancing is modelled on pop-heroes and celluloid stars (113). However, and echoing Hester's melancholy for a Europe which she associates with the lost governess who taught her French language and German music, Diamond's song can be thought of as (melo)dramatizing the orphan Katherine's cognate longing. Diamond sings of being 'lost between two shores' at the same time as his song speaks—affirming a wilful 'I said'—in a lyric that refers to *The Frog Prince* by the Brothers Grimm. This German fairy story, about a princess who befriends a frog in her pond and that later transforms into a prince, has obvious parallels to the body in the well with which Katherine begins to fall in love. Shortly after this melodramatic scene, Katherine begins to believe that the body in the well is alive and that he speaks and sings to her.

The reference to the frog-prince is buried in a song that is itself buried in a musical-dramatic scene. This and other encrypted allusions to enchanted transformation mutedly bespeak (and sing) the novel's role as Pygmalionesque melodrama and its evocation of two kinds of metamorphoses, the animation of stones and the turning to stone of the animated. In another instance of prosopopoeia, the choosing game that Hester and Katherine play is extended to inanimate objects, 'the wood stove' and the 'troll in the well'. The woodstove aptly chooses Polyphemus' aria 'I rage I melt I burn', which comes from Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (1718). Reference to this pastoral opera, which is based on one of Ovid's stories, further confirms the importance of Pygmalionesque metamorphosis to Jolley's melodramatic allegory. The story of 'Acis and Galatea', which comes towards the end of *Metamorphosis*, portrays Galatea not as an animated statue but as a sea nymph who enflames the jealous desire of the giant, Polyphemus, when she falls in love with the shepherd, Acis. This song is juxtaposed with the well-troll's choice

of 'Fifteen men on A Dead Man's Chest', a song referenced in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, that tells of the perils faced by sailors lost at sea. The 'Fifteen Men' song, we are told, unfittingly exists in the 'extra grooves on the' vinyl recording of a Mozart divertimento. That the song exists is a result of additional vinyl space of which 'the record company' wanted to 'make use' speaks not only to the mechanisation of recorded sound in industrial modernity but also to the role of both the aural and the printed as mechanical supplements that, in the context of *The Well*, take on a life of their own. Such references to the role of music in post-enlightenment theatre and modern acoustic and print media do more than supplement *The Well's* parable about a doll-like orphan who comes to life and whose collision with a man on a road leads to the stony enclosure of his body in a well. The encryptions of these theatrical references within the written narrative also place *The Well* in a melodramatic line in which Galatea represents both deathly arrest (the enclosure of the living within mechanical recordings of sound and spectacle) and transformative possibility (the transferential decryption of meaning).

The novel's encryption of a melodramatic history is analogous to the role of its psychoanalytic narrative, which is similarly a placeholder for incestuous secrets, repressed memories and the unconscious itself. The novel takes a decidedly psychoanalytic turn when Katherine begins to believe that the man in the well, who is himself buried or encrypted, is alive and that he speaks and sings to her. As Katherine's hysteria reaches a fever pitch and as a storm builds over the drought-stricken wheat field, Hester remembers a childhood trauma and then dreams that Katherine is strangling her with the long plait that hangs down her own back. Paired with Katherine's attempted strangulation of voice and breath is Hester's memory of her governess, Hilde, crouching in a blood-soaked dress as she miscarries the child that had been conceived to Hester's father. Hester's relationship with Katherine is suddenly revealed, in this dream sequence / childhood flashback, to be a repetition of an earlier incestuous drama. Hester's compulsion to repeat an episode from childhood is itself a narrative repetition as it conjures Freud's famous case study of Dora, the fictionally named patient who suffered aphonia (loss of voice) on the discovery of her father's affair with a beloved family friend.

Derrida reads the multiple and contradictory meanings of the crypt, of what he calls 'cryptonymy' and 'cryptography', in the context of another Freudian study of a case of incest ('The Wolf Man') and via Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986). The latter reading elucidates the importance of understanding Freud's theorisation of childhood trauma and infantile neuroses as an act of narration that garners the possibility of the readable, of what can be read, in and through the process of analysis. For Derrida, in this context, the crypt is a 'burial place of secret pleasures' that is simultaneously a 'no place'. The muted crypt melancholically incorporates forbidden pleasure, especially incestuous desire, in order to hold or keep 'safe' the love-object:

I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, *safe (save) inside me*, but it is only in order to refuse, in a necessarily equivocal way, to love the dead as a living part of me, dead *save in me*, through the process of introjection, as happens in so called mourning. (*Fors* xvi –xvii)

Derrida writes further that the crypt's keeping 'safe of a place' makes of the place a 'no place'

(xx) as the pleasure that can no longer occur there gets transferred elsewhere. Derrida's 'cryptonymy' is a place defined by a juxtaposition—a meeting of

contradictions—where the psychoanalytic and the fictional interact and in which secret burials activate the possibility of transference and transformation.<sup>1</sup> Such a rendering of encryption and transformation in ‘The Wolf Man’ also implicates the desires of the analyst who, essential to the transmission of the story through time, ‘records’ the case as one narrative in a line of dramatic, ‘rhythmic, pulsating’ tales (which include novel and poem). This has implications for thinking about the aesthetic history and itinerary of the novel, its transmedial metamorphosis from and through earlier forms (such as fairy tales, poetry, biblical stories, opera and theatre).

After Derrida, Catherine Malabou’s neo-Hegelian work on the development of the post-enlightenment subject similarly emphasises metamorphic processes, that of self-sculpting and adaptation to her understanding human life as a ‘plasticity’. Building on the root meaning of plastic (which refers to that which can be moulded or sculpted), Malabou shows how Hegelian and other metaphysical readings of the historical-subject have emphasised a self-schematising figure whose adaption to change she reads as a plastic ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ of form. Such privileging of metamorphoses as constitutive of the modern subject, Malabou argues further, tends to posit form as infinitely adaptable while simultaneously assuming an essential self, an un-changing substance that endures and continues. Malabou theorises a third element of form, which she calls ‘destructive plasticity’, as a ‘cut’ or other radical disruption in an identity that, whether a result of an accident or other trauma, radically challenges the idea that identity is essentially continuous. ‘[C]oldness and indifference are characteristics of destructive plasticity’ Malabou writes ‘of this power of change without redemption, without teleology, without any other meaning other than strangeness’ (24).

*The Well* similarly allegorises subjectivity as a taking (enclosing or incorporating), as a giving (transferring or remaking) but also as vulnerable to the destruction of form. Katherine and Hester form their identities through imitative incorporation of parental models and stage and screen idols. Both women also experience traumas that, brought on by accidents, lead to the muting of expression and to the erasure of aspects of their past lives. Moreover, both creative and destructive plasticity are important to the novel itself as a form that, bringing together a melodramatic plot with a Freudian narrative about incestuous desire and repetition compulsion, mutes or buries other forms. The theatrical and psychoanalytic references that had been somewhat embedded in the narrative come to the fore towards the end when the figure of the novelist finally appears in the double role of stage director and analyst. Towards the end of the story, Hester meets the novelist in the store from which she had originally ‘brought’ Katherine. At this late point in the novel, after the storm triggers nightmares of strangulation and memories of childhood trauma, Hester finally seals the well and entombs the body inside it.

This climax brings an end to the building hysteria at the same time as it violently aborts Katherine’s romantic dream about the man/prince she believed resided there. Like Freud’s Dora and repeating Hester’s own childhood trauma, Katherine’s capacity to communicate is similarly aborted. Previous to the final well burial, her voice had ‘flowed like water’ (123). After the closing up of the well, it is ‘flat’ and she hardly speaks (160). Previous to this ending, the well has functioned in the narrative as a kind of aural channel—one that has issued forth watery sounds as well as un-earthly speeches and song (from the man-ghost buried there). It is significant that, in the context of the well as the equivalent of an earthly throat, the muting of Katherine’s voice is coterminous with the closing of the well. Hester, on the other hand, begins to speak more freely and the novel ends with her embarking on the tale that is also, it is implied, the melodramatic narration

that is *The Well* itself.

While Katherine is metaphorically turned to stone, Hester's capacity to narrate is enabled by the novelist. Hester had, previous to the burial, encountered and then re-encountered the novelist in the store where she had 'brought' Katherine. On their first meeting, the novelist had purchased a 'square bowl, plastic but square for feet' (156) — an object that, as we have seen, is analogically and rhythmically connected to the novel's wooden doll and well. On their second meeting, the woman tells Hester that she is writing a novella, a 'contemporary *Song of Solomon*', and that it follows literary-dramatic conventions. She explains to Hester that the novella will contain stock, allegorical characters (a 'shopkeeper', a 'landowner', an 'orphan', an 'intruder') but it will also describe characters who suffer from a contemporary illness (157). It is possible to read the author as a postmodern frame narrator playfully commenting on the self-reflexive nature of her text. It is also possible to read her as both stage-director of a musical epic and as an analyst who presents the symptoms of her suffering characters. The final sentences of the novel picture Hester thinking back on this woman and then embarking on her story in response to the pleas of one of her neighbour's children: 'Go on Miss Harper!' Dobby Borden says. 'Along this road, now tell us what happened' (176).

This essay's tracing of continuities between Jolley's novel and Rousseauian *mélodrame* has entertained the possibility that the novel is a placeholder for the live presence of speech and song fragments that are otherwise arrested within and by the form of print. Such a reading has been enabled, as noted earlier, by Jolley's theatrico-cinematic thoughts on novel writing and on the making of character voice (Mr Scobie's cadences and accents). In this context, we might understand *The Well*'s fictional novelist as representative of the author as director who enters her own melodramatic narrative and who speaks, as *The Well*'s 'novelist' does speak to Hester, in character (prosopopoeia). If read this way, the novel can be understood as both a series of musico-theatrical scenes and a psychoanalytic tale, a kind of 'talking cure' that supplements the destructive plasticity, the partial burial, of its mute encrypted figures.

By way of closing this essay, I shall briefly dwell on one last figure of melodramatic encryption. As she walks away from a silent Katherine, who she has left behind in her car that has broken down on the dusty road, Hester remembers the novelist's words but she also remembers an inscription—ornamental words that are engraved in gold on a letter that Katherine's friend Joanna had earlier sent to her:

*See!*  
*I will not forget you ...*  
*I have carved you on the palm of my hand.* (161)

These cryptonymic words inscribe God's love as that which is indelibly carved on his hidden palm. In remembering these words as she walks away from Katherine and just before she begins to retell her story, Hester realises that Joanna's inscription must be an 'American version' of the original biblical verse.

*Yet will I not forget thee*  
*Behold I have graven thee*  
*upon the palms of my hands.* (170)

Changing in form as they pass from one hand to another, the words from Isaiah

evoke a melodramatic and metamorphic spirit: a Galatea-like being. This being, like the 'thee' of the Isaiah verse, is buried within a written text that can only indirectly sound out, or cryptically reference, its speech and song referents. In attending to the elements of melodrama in Jolley's novel, this essay has nevertheless suggested that this being, this 'thee', may be a transmedial, connective force that comes to life through transference, through the crossing from one form to another. A melodramatic spirit in the machine, this metamorphic figure is both sculptor and sculpted. She is one who engraves, within her form, the potential to behold and forget.

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