Coolabah, Vol.3, 2009, ISSN 1988-5946 Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Echoes of a not so Mythical Past: Memories of Race in Elizabeth Jolley's The Well

Cornelis Martin Renes

Abstract: Critical discussion of Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986) has largely focused on issues of gender, but little has been said about the racial inscription of the novel. This lack is especially relevant when criticism, despite praising the author's experimentation with narrative technique and genre, tends to voice dissatisfaction with the novel's conclusion *in medias res*, which never solves the tension between a presumed return to the patriarchal norm and the voicing of liberating alternatives. This paper proposes a postcolonial perspective so as to come to terms with this dilemma, and argues that the text signals the impossibility of suppressing the Native from the contemporary Australian land and textscape, whose Gothic articulation in the uncanny shape of the male well-dweller haunts the novel's engagement with female empowerment. The female protagonist may only start overcoming a crippling gender discourse in the White postcolonial pastoralist setting by inscribing herself into 'Australianness'. Reconciling her body with the land is significantly staged in terms of an Aboriginal cosmogony, as it is a 'walkabout' that allows Hester to start controlling her body and story. Thus, *The Well* may be understood to be inconclusive because it struggles to map gender across race at a time of Aboriginal-exclusive multiculturalism. Written in the mid 1980s, it announces a point of inflection in thinking about native-nonnative relationships which would soon lead to attempts at 'Reconciliation' by mainstream Australia.
Keywords: postcolonial Gothic, gender, race.

Introduction

Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, first published in 1986, is set in postcolonial pastoralist Australia and depicts the intense emotional relationship between the crippled, middle-aged Hester, heiress to a large agricultural estate, and young Katherine, adopted by the former at the age of sixteen. Hester's 'lovesick' behaviour leads to the mismanagement and loss of her property, and relegates the couple to an old cottage on the margins of her former land. The resulting isolation from society gives free reign to the women's nightmarish fantasies and emotional clashes, which convert the tale into an uncanny

experiment with the female Gothic. All action eventually centres on the uncertain contents of the cottage well, which haunts the female protagonists until its covering up introduces a much discussed return to "normality".

Critical interpretations

Most academic criticism of the novel takes a feminist tack, and praises the novel's nonlinear structure for its opening up of textual spaces for female voices. However, it finds difficulty with its end, whose inconclusiveness ambiguously writes the female protagonist into and out of traditional conceptions of gender. Thus, Paul Salzman argues:

> Hester Harper's attempt to live outside society in her idyll with Katherine is contrasted with the parodically fecund family of the [neighbouring] Bordens … Hester is finally an extremely ambiguous figure, who is simultaneously an independent and strong rebel against all the conventional forces of family life … and also a twisted and thwarted figure who is frustrated by her isolation and uncertain about the price she has paid (Salzman 1993: 76-7).

Similarly, Kerry Goddard looks at the economics underlying gender in the novel. She blames class difference between the rich heiress and her poor, adopted daughter-cum-lover for the novel's presumed return to a heterosexual, patriarchal moral economy and speaks of no more than a 'tenuous hope' for the future:

> … while it seems that Jolley has devised a narrative technique which allows her writing to exceed, and in so doing, deconstruct, patriarchal constraints, the same cannot be said for the two women in the text. Hester and Katherine face an uncertain future, one of isolation and loss. Unless … in becoming an author/story-teller herself … Hester will be able to find new kinds of power and free herself from the economy of property and possession (Goddard 1993).

Gerry Turcotte inscribes *The Well*'s open-endedness into the Gothic, a genre which 'rarely moves to conclusions, or, if it does, it signals either overtly or covertly the failure of closure.' Thus, he signals that Jolley employs the Gothic 'to celebrate female experience' but 'in decidedly negative terms' (Turcotte 1995: 83, 68-9). This is in line with the classic female-Gothic agenda, which, as Maggie Kilgour claims, uses the return to the patriarchal norm as the solution to the horror experienced by its female protagonists (1995: 8-9). Turcotte concludes that the Gothic is 'appealing' in writing female strategies of subversion, as it 'enables escape from confining strictures, deciphering … the female footnotes usually left unread so that they eventually come to overwhelm the Master Narrative' (Turcotte 1995: 88). His reading of *The Well* connects to Sue Gillet's claim that '[i]n giving a form of expression to the unconscious, the unspeakable, the repressed, Jolley is also giving voice to the historically silenced woman: the well is a fissure through which trapped feminine streams/words/desires can flow' (Gillet 1992: 40).

Although Elizabeth Jolley always denied a feminist commitment in her writing (cf. Joussen 1993: 40-1), the tentative 'footnotes' in, and intermittent 'flows' from *The Well* may therefore well pave the way towards a redefinition of sexuality and gender. However, this leads Adrienne Kertzer to ask about the alternatives for 'non-Oedipal narrative' Hester might have, as 'silence is so dominant in this text.' In her view, this silence and inconclusiveness stand for 'the unfulfilled nature of Hester's lesbian desire' (Kertzer 1992-3: 132). Similarly, in drawing attention to the Australian female-Gothic's 'marked interest in expressing the physical side of feminine experience', Gerry Turcotte reaches the conclusion that for Hester control over her own body ultimately remains out of reach: '[t]he price for the denial of sexuality seems to be the gift of telling – the control of words' (Turcotte 1995: 65, 83). As gender is obviously such a vexed issue in *The Well*, the question becomes what story Hester might tell—how she might translate her gender trouble into the Australian context.

Postcolonial inscriptions

A postmodern re-appropriation of the Gothic allows Jolley's novel to take issue with gender, which facilitates a reading of the well as the haunting locus of Hester's repressed sexuality. The very formal structure of the novel, its untrustworthy variability of meaning and an open-endedness ultimately controlled by the female protagonist would confirm the possibility to speak the unspeakable; but if a feminist, possibly lesbian interpretation is plausible, why is it that the well is stopped from speaking Hester's words and desires? Why can't they flesh out in a clear sense of freedom for the female protagonist? One could argue that this is so because both *The Well*'s inconclusive plot (and academic criticism of the novel) is founded on an important and uncanny absence: a link between identity, body and the land that should be seen as specifically Australian. It is the latter absence that haunts this Gothic text, inspires the protagonist's fear by making the familiar strange, and uncannily forestalls closure.

A postcolonial inscription of the novel does not seem obvious. The text is largely symbolic, and, oddly, as a text strongly linking the body to land, little reference is made to Australia at all. There are, of course, general colonial clues, such as Hester's graceful English-made walking cane, her German governess's Otherness, and the reference to the great distance that separates the setting from Europe; but if we had not known Jolley as an author who always linked her fiction to the stark landscape of her acquired homeland, Western Australia (cf. Bird 1998: 242), little indicates that we are dealing with a novel that maps the female body as specifically Australian territory. However, some interesting conclusions can be drawn by taking into account that, as Baint Attwood writes, before the age of Mabo:

> Aboriginality [was] probably always an element in the construction of Australian identity, but whereas its role [had] previously [been] premised upon it being construed as a *lack* (vis-à-vis Australia's 'whiteness', modernity, progress, etc), its significance [as of the early 1990s] derives

> from it being imagined in positive terms, indeed upon it being idealised (1996: xxiii, my italics).

Although barely explicit, an Aboriginal imaginary does inform the key episode of the accident and key location of the well, which determine the novel's inscription into the Gothic. One night, Hester's jeep catches 'something' on the *roo* bar, the very attribute which wards off that emblematic Australian animal, the kangaroo. The clash is a crude metaphor for the violent invasion and colonisation of Australia, and, significantly, the text immediately clarifies that not a kangaroo but a man is caught and killed, whose body Hester unscrupulously dumps into the old, dry well shaft. From there on, both women significantly construe that which the text does not speak, i.e. the *lack* of the *native* element, into the symbolic and mythical: the voices from the well are initially interpreted as Prince Charming and a horrible troll, and eventually as the Biblical Jacob, whose story uncannily recalls Aboriginal dispossession and foreshadows their repossession.

In a birthright dispute with his twin brother, Jacob had to leave his homeland (as most Aborigines did), but was later appointed by God as the rightful heir to Israel, with the promise that his offspring would people the territory. Thus, Hester's fear can be likened to a general white postcolonial fear of what Ien Ang calls an 'Aboriginalised[1]' Australia. This is the fear that 'white Australia would one day suffer the same fate as Aboriginal Australia' (Ang 2003: 60), an inversion of the terms of colonisation resulting from the native remapping of Australia after the implementation of Native Title Legislation and Aboriginal-inclusive multiculturalism in the 1990s. Jacob's prophecy was revealed in his Stairway-to-Heaven dream, which is uncannily echoed in Hester's nightmares and fears of a man climbing out of the well on a series of broken rungs in its shaft. Significantly, Hester associates the well-dweller with a thieving intruder, which is a stock representation of the Aborigine in pastoralist Australia. Read thus, her fears do not only centre on the repression of her own sexuality but also of the Native Other.

Delys Bird, who sees the land as one of the major constitutive elements of Western Australian writing, points out that:

> [e]ven today in the West there is a sense that life has only a tenuous hold in these landscapes lodged between the desert and the sea, that European settlement here is vulnerable, chancy, and could easily disappear.

This she opposes to the sense of place of the local Aborigines (Bird 1998: 244). In *The Well*, there *is* a tenuous sense of a 'healing' incorporation of the native when Hester imagines going on some kind of 'walkabout'[2] at different stages throughout the text:

---

[1] Ien Ang coins this verb in a discussion of Asian immigration into contemporary Australia to indicate that 'white Australia would one day suffer the same fate as Aboriginal Australia' by a massive influx of Asian immigrants (Ang 2003: 60).

[2] Although mainstream use of this term is rife with negative connotations, such as unexplained and unauthorised absence and mental disorder, to Aborigines going walkabout means undertaking a spiritual journey to a belonging place in order to renew their relationship with their Dreaming and the landscape.

> Life would be changed completely if a person walked all the way … she would accept a different view of time and journey … She imagines the feeling of being unseen and not known about while standing in one isolated place. She would be small and safe walking … under the immense clear blue sky. Perhaps … her fear might disappear (2).

Despite her lameness, towards the end of the novel she tentatively starts out on such a healing journey, which ends with the tentative start of the horror story she invents for her neighbour's kids (169). Hitherto, a sense of European vulnerability has haunted the novel in images of extreme drought and unemployment, which causes an immigrant family—significantly called 'the Whites'—to move back to England (9) and has translated into a repressed fear of the Other. Significantly, Penny van Toorn argues that:

> [a]mong the terrors of *Terra Nullius* enumerated in Australian literature, the figure of the Aborigine was perhaps the most feared. While sometimes presenting a real physical threat to the early settlers, Aboriginal people invariably posed all sorts of *imaginary* threats' (van Toorn 1992-3: 87, my italics).

This step from the physical to the imaginary is aptly staged as a lack, an absence in *The Well*. The novel introduces an Aboriginal stock character, and immediately suppresses him from the (textual) landscape, and not surprisingly this racial and sexual Other *haunts* the remainder of the text. If one takes into account that the novel was written in 1986, it appears to reflect the absence of Aborigine-*inclusive* multiculturalism in uncanny ways, so that both the community's adverse reactions to the intruder and Hester and Kathy's struggle over the male well-dweller may also be seen to acquire a racial implication. Importantly, Hester's fears focus on a dry 'waterhole', which is not only a metaphor for her own sexuality—not least because of the etymological relationship of 'well' with 'vulva'—but also a significant feature in the native experience of the Australian land. As Hester kills him in his intent to rise from the well, the male well-dweller's release turns into a stillbirth that maps race across gender in a repressive movement, and Hester eagerly accepts Mr Borden's offer to cover up the well. In the end, both landowners may be seen to *conspire* so as to protect vested white-Australian pastoralist interests, but with unequal results. Putting the lid on the racial element empowers Mr Borden, who takes over Hester's property, but it also condemns Hester to a re-incorporation into a white heterosexual/patriarchal economy by having to give up both her land and Katherine.

Ultimately, the loss of independence and control over property, financial means and sexuality becomes the price exacted for a white woman's spiritual and physical survival in rural Australia. Thus, Hester's dispossession and concomitant identity problems uncannily foreshadow what Ken Gelder & Jane Jacobs called the 'white moral panic' (1998: 3) that was to come with the legal changes around native title. It expressed how (often pastoral) sections of white Australia felt increasingly displaced from a land it had considered its own. If we take Kathy as Hester's uncanny double—and there are ample indications in the text that both women function as such—one may establish a subtle,

premonitory connection between Kathy's feelings of guilt towards the well-dweller and Hester's fear of loss of property and money to him. Here these contradictory feelings are aptly separated out into two intimately linked characters who the psychological mechanics of the 1990s Aborigine-inclusive multiculturalism would relocate into one and the same white person, becoming manifest as what Gelders & Jacobs aptly termed 'postcolonial racism' (1993: 17).

Conclusion

Fluctuating between Hester's return to the white patriarchal norm and her tentative appearance as an author, *The Well* does not achieve an altogether liberating inscription of femininity. Rather, it leaves off with an open-endedness that may be located in the absence of a vital Australian link between land, race and gender. Despite Jolley's claim for a positive conclusion (Joussen 1993: 42), the proposal of a rural setting as the focus of an analysis of gender from which the Aborigine is suppressed produces a strategy heading towards—at least partial—narrative failure. Thus one can also read Jolley's re-appropriation of the Gothic as the uncanny staging of the absence of Aboriginality, which, as it cannot be suppressed in an Australian setting, causes the spectre of the colonial Other to haunt the text. In other words, the 'Great-Big-Monster' that Hester will eventually tell us about on the last pages (174) may be demythified and brought back to familiar, human proportions if we draw attention to its specific Australian qualities, but precisely an Aborigine-inclusive redefinition of Australianness has been the bone of contention in policies of multiculturalism over the last decades.

Extending Sue Gillett's feminist analysis to the ethnic, one might interpret Hester's halting attempt to speak the unspeakable as an indication of her coming to terms with fears regarding not only gender but also race. Thus, the end of the novel may suggest a tenuous attempt to anticipate the incorporation of the native in a definition of Australian self. However, one may equally argue that Hester's relegation of the Aboriginal universe to simplified 'children's stories' and 'monsters' reinstates colonialist discourse and fears, a manoeuvre which would aim to master the native once again (cf. Mudrooroo 1997: 98). Ultimately, the novel does not reveal Jolley's intentions for Hester but has both possibilities uncannily circulate through each other as echoes of scary myth and reality, so that the reader cannot find himself 'at home' in any reading. Although Hester eventually receives some control over the story and her life, the final outcome remains hidden. Perhaps in 1986, no definitive end to the novel could be articulated; this would at least have to wait until Australian society implemented a minimum set of changes that would tentatively allow the mapping of gender across race. It is in the turbulent realm of Native Title, Aborigine-inclusive Multiculturalism, Reconciliation and, nowadays, Apology that solutions for Hester's plight must be sought.

References:

Ang, Ien. "From White Australia to Fortress Australia: The Anxious Nation in the New Century" *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation*. Laksiri Jayasuria, David Walker and Jan Gothard (eds). Crawley: U. of Western Australia Press, 2003, pp. 51-69.

Attwood, Bain (ed). *In the Age of Mabo: History Aborigines and Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996.

Bird, Delys. "´The Spirit of the Place´: Women Writers of the West.¨ *Women's Writing*, 5:2, 1998. pp. 241-251.

Gelder, Kenneth Douglas and Jacobs, Jane Margaret. *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998.

Gillett, Sue. ¨The Well: Beyond Representation, the Active Space of Desire and Creativity.¨ *Westerly*, 1, 1992, pp. 33-41.

Goddard, Kerry. ¨Women Off the Market: Possession and Desire in Elizabeth Jolley's ´The Well´¨. *SPAN,* 37, 23 February, 1993. Murdoch University. <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/37/Goddard.html> Accessed 24 April, 2007

Jolley, Elizabeth. *The Well*. Victoria: Penguin Books Australia, 1987.

Joussen, Ulla. ¨An Interview with Elizabeth Jolley.¨ *Kunapipi,* 15:2, 1993, pp. 37-43.

Kertzer, Adrienne. ¨Voices in the Well: Elizabeth Jolley and Radclyffe Hall.¨ *World Literature Written in English,* 32:2 & 33:1, 1992-3, pp. 122-132.

Kilgour, Maggie. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Mudrooroo. *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*. Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997.

Salzman, Paul. *Helplessly Tangled in Female Arms and Legs: Elizabeth Jolley's Fictions*. Queensland: UQP, 1993.

Turcotte, Gerry. ¨Sexual Gothic: Marian Engel's ´Bear´ and Elizabeth Jolley's ´The Well.´" *Ariel,* 26:2, 1995, pp. 65-91.

Van Toorn, Penny. ¨The Terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality.¨ *World Literature Written in English,* 32:2 & 33:1, 1992-3, pp. 87-97.

Martin Renes took his English degree at the University of Barcelona and now teaches literature for its Department of English with a focus on poetry and postcolonial studies. He wrote his minor thesis on the uncanny interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia as manifested in some contemporary mainstream fiction, and is currently finishing doctoral research into the links between the uncanny, the mainstream perception of recent Indigenous Australian literature, and postcolonial identity formation.