Angela Morsley

"Trapped for Life"
Negotiating the Maze of Mother and Text in the Fiction of Elizabeth Jolley

The renowned and prolific Australian writer, Elizabeth Jolley, is the author of numerous collections of short stories and novels published from 1976 to as recently as 2001. Her output is impressive and continues to grow, testifying both to her importance as a voice in Australian literature and to the appeal of her writing, which continues to probe complex and ambiguous issues which defy destinctive boundaries. Her work frequently disconcerts and disturbs, denying easy access to concerns with gender, power and morality which are given form in initially bewildering structures and in the intensely introspective worlds of Jolley's characters. Many of these characters are mothers, or adopt a mothering role within their relationships with others. Jolley's representations of these relationships or of woman as mother are typified by a psychological complexity and a deep ambivalence concerning notions of motherhood and femininity. It is an ambivalence inscribed within the very web of her texts which portray and, moreover, embody "the interwoven structures of power, gender and identity" (Miller, 1986: 272). Indeed, Nancy K. Miller's notion of the text as a web is an appropriate metaphor to describe the systems of power interrogated by Jolley's fictions, systems which seek to prevent access and exclude the abject and undesirable, or which absorb those elements they prefer to silence and contain.

The mother, as Jolley portrays her, can be both the subject and the agent of repression. Jolley's maternal figures typically dominate and confront, their depictions often bordering on therianthropic grotesquerie. As actual mothers, they are often "hungry" or "greedy," with insatiable appetite, the jaws of one appearing engaged in an "endless slack circular movement" of a mastication that forms a part of the many tropes of digestion and devourment associated with the mothering characters in Jolley's texts (1985: 167,196). While Dorothy

Dinnerstein describes the Minotaur, the creature that is half-man half-beast in Ovid's myth of the labyrinth, as the eternally infantile, male figure of devourment (1976: 5), Jolley subverts the mythical figure of the monstrous child, instead investing her mothering characters with an aggressive urge to devour that borders on the unnatural. The Jolley mother either desires to be immersed in the trappings of modern domesticity and the consumer society, "protected by layers of brick and tile and well-manured rose beds, marriage and reticulation, double fronts, double garages, double beds and double faces" (1998: 137), or, like Sandy in *Foxybaby*, inflicts her own drug addiction onto her newly-born child, gratification of the mother's physical desire or need redressed in a sick child that cannot accept nourishment. "My baby's rotten like me. Even his mouth. He can't suck" (1985: 89). Maternal desire is represented as bearing threatening and dangerous consequences for the child and its larger social context. Jolley's mothers appear to replicate horror and reproduce inherited rottenness—they are pregnant with the offspring of incest, other characters remain "contaminated" by their association with them (1998: 79). While they themselves appear figures of harm, their children, like the children in Jolley's story "Grasshoppers" who lure their grandmother into darkness and injury, also perpetuate the threat of maternal malignancy. The mother is found "slithering snake-like," or can be "a fierce unpredictable little animal. An unnamed one" (1998: 22; 1979: 162). Her development from girlhood to motherhood is accompanied by the transformation of her own child's hands into an "unreachable bony claw," the perversion of innocence and humanity registered in an image of maternal monstrosity (1985: 93).

The maternal is frequently the abject in Jolley's writing. Her mothers represent hybrid figures, occupying the borders between humanity and bestiality, innocence and depravity. They transgress moral boundaries, threaten social orders, and are never free from their implication in the corruption of relationships and institutions. Jolley explores a deep cultural anxiety concerning the mother. On the one hand, the mother appears in her excavation of the collective psyche as an uncontrollable, bestial perversion or a "frightened animal let out of its cage by mistake," as the unnamable and uncomprehended, that which is harmful to itself and the world and which is safer locked away (1998: 207). The excessively maternal Jonquil Castle, "hungry" for her grandchildren, is, in accordance with this pattern of sublimation and institutionalisation, packed off to residential school to suffer "the feelings of exclusion experienced daily" (1985: 167, 57). Conversely, feminine desire and motherhood are often represented by Jolley as remaining already denied and confined within a patriarchal paradigm. Hester Harper in *The Well* dismisses female sexuality as "cowshed and corner-of-the-paddock business" and reproduction as the "mating of cattle for stock ... all right for the beasts and for some people," but not for Katherine, the orphan she takes into her care and whose maturity into a woman she seeks to stem (Jolley, 1987: 150). With her own "rather flat breasts," her ambition to follow "her father's ways," and her identification with patriar-

chal symbols of power and ownership, Hester embodies a femininity subjugated by masculine power structures (1987: 7). It is these "[w]omen caught" who, in Jolley's words, "tried to ensure others were similarly trapped" (1987: 109). Having never known her mother, haunted by the traumatic memories of her nurse's miscarriage and a sense of maternal abandonment, Hester associates motherhood with the pain of separation and the violence of birth. She refuses a recognition of Katherine's maternal instincts in order to replicate within herself the patriarchal protection desired by her as a child, protection which is complicated by an unacknowledged lesbo-erotic desire, repressed sexual possessiveness compromising Hester's attempts to establish a "warm" and "safe" domestic seclusion.

John O'Brien argues that, in comparison with the claustrophobic atmosphere and sexual repression of *The Well*, Jolley's novel, *Palomino*, portrays a homosexual relationship defined by an openness of sexual expression and a physical and emotional freedom (1991: 141). While this is true of the novel to a certain extent, motherhood forms both the genesis and disruption of Laura's and Andrea's co-existence. The apparent resilience of the conventional roles of family structure leads inevitably to the stifling of sexual expression and to the seeming conclusion that homo-erotic female desire can only ever be an abberation to the act of mothering, that motherhood is an abnegation of that desire. While Laura identifies herself with the figure of a "farmer" and appears increasingly masculinised in her work on the land, her lover, Andrea, feels constrained within Laura's house and by her own pregnancy. "I'm really trapped in this place, every time I feel the baby move I feel caught" (1998: 1, 228). Laura too, in the ambiguous role of both masculine figure and caring, surrogate mother to the younger Andrea, who is to her at times "only a child," fears the possibility of the relationship developing into a "trap" with "no means of escape" (1998: 94, 252). As lovers existing outside the boundaries of conventional relationships, Laura and Andrea nonetheless find themselves falling into the restrictions of traditionally constructed gender patterns within which woman or mother figure is desexualised and forced to conform to a pre-existing and established norm. Jolley has been criticised for presenting motherhood and sexual desire as mutually exclusive conditions and for denying her characters the freedom to be both mothers and lesbians. Maureen Bettle asserts that Jolley's conception of lesbianism and motherhood is not inclusive at all, rather a matter of either/or, that "dykes are mothers manqué: that motherhood is the end of women" (1991:127,130). An argument of this nature ignores the fact that Jolley represents her lesbian and mothering characters as confined by imposed conventions and institutionalised structures. Her concern is with entrapment and with the possibility of freedom, in spite of its frequent denial. In almost every case, those who mother in Jolley's work find themselves inextricably caught within the trap formed by patriarchal systems of power and representation, systems which build themselves upon a monstering and a denial of feminine and maternal desire.

It is the mapping of these structures which is the motivating impulse behind Jolley's narratives. The manifestation of the archetype of the labyrinth in Jolley's work expresses both the threat posed to established convention by female sexuality, as well as the subsequent repression of the maternal as the source of monstrosity. In its mythic incarnation in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the labyrinth was the prison for the aforementioned Minotaur, Asterion, the progeny of Queen Pasiphaë of Crete and a beloved bull. Representing both the bestial in human nature and the threatening and unnatural consequences of female desire, the Minotaur is condemned by King Minos to remain in a "private lunatic asylum," the labyrinth (Doob, 1990: 35). The idea of the labyrinth as an institution, its function being to contain and conceal the disturbing and unfamiliar, can thus be traced from its Classical origins as a mythic structure. While the concept of the labyrinth may at first seem remote from the parameters of Jolley's work, its mythical influences are present in her writing in a variety of aspects. Jolley's fiction resonates with notions of a monstrous, masculine child—Mrs Morgan is "scared stiff" of her violent, domineering son, Doll, while in *Milk and Honey* the idiot child, Waldemar, is kept hidden from sight and knowledge within his father Leopold's labyrinthine house of "innumerable rooms in a kind of dark confusion" (1976: 28; 1984: 14). By giving birth to a beast, Wendy B. Faris argues, woman was changed into a beast in order to be conquered by the patriarchal confines of the labyrinth (1988: 192). The mother of the monster is implicated as the source of transgression in both the mythical context and in the entrapment and exclusion experienced by Jolley's mothering characters. It is the institution of the patriarchal symbolic order, and institutionalisation, which, like the house of Leopold, swallows, which denies escape and obstructs penetration, and, by invoking the idea of matricide, Jolley suggests it to be destructive to the notion of motherhood as lived experience. Frequently, the maternal is positioned outside this order or dominated by it, alienated beyond recognition and acknowledgement, crippled, covert and confined. For the father-identified Hester Harper, motherless since infancy, the word mother "seemed to have very little meaning." When young Katherine hits an unnamed and unnamable object in a car accident, Hester deposits the body down the well of the novel's title, and her cover-up is part of the process of her denial of the maternal. The body represents in her mind "rotten fruit discarded," the fertile made abject, and Hester's act, in the protection of Katherine's innocence, is significantly likened, in the terms of "farm management," to extracting "a thoroughbred and possibly prize-winning bull calf free from an injured or dying mother" (Jolley, 1987: 47, 107).

As has already been seen, the figure of the mother is not always objectified, her potency not always denied. Maternal power finds its expression in Jolley's writing in the very form of the labyrinth. While Carl Jung located his theory of the anima, a feminine figure of the psyche that threatens to ensnare men, in the dominating power of the mother, he saw the journey through the labyrinth as

akin to the individual's extrication from the entangling power of the overpowering originary figure, the mother (1969: 29; cited in Faris, 1988: 38). Jolley's work and her evocation of labyrinthine imagery and form can therefore be interpreted as an investigation of the significance of the maternal archetype in the collective unconscious. The ensnarement of her male characters within the labyrinthine domain and design of the mother indicates an attempt by Jolley to write of a reclamation of feminine power which is directed against a patriarchal order excluded from an understanding of its counterpart. The hapless Edwin of *The Sugar Mother* is enticed into a web of deceit designed by the mother of his lover, Leila, and he is physically drawn by his desire into the labyrinth of a pine plantation which "seemed endless, a wild place" in which "the possibilities of being lost" reflect upon his own destabilised and disorienting domestic situation (Jolley, 1989: 119). Similarly, Mr Scobie recalls being lured by his sexually precocious pupil, Lina, into her mother's room, into the "secret places" of the house which "frightened him," the "mysterious woman's room" bearing undoubted associations to the womb (Jolley, 1983: 96). The architecture of his memory, suggestively labyrinthine, expresses his fear of the mother who lurks like a monster within the domestic labyrinth. Within the large house of many rooms, she "sat behind the doors listening ..."(1983: 95). The exaggeration of mother as monster in these texts is used by Jolley to explore a fundamentally masculine anxiety concerning motherhood, as well as to portray alternative and conflicting structures of power and dynamics of desire. If the (m)other is otherness trapped within an ideology which seeks to confine feminine desire and deny maternal legitimacy, then Jolley's portraits of rapacious, even murderous mothers indicate an assertive and subversive reaction against the structures, both moral and cultural, which position the mother as abject.

The Jolley mother is represented as monstered in her motherhood, entrapped within the role assigned to her by patriarchal structures of definition and control, structures which both dominate and are embraced by masculinised female characters. However, as the monster she also appears to her weakened and emasculated male victims as a figure of fear and malignant power. Like the imprisoning, stifling form of the labyrinth itself, she too can be the agent of suppression and oppression, even of infanticide. In *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, Matron Price, in a mothering role, "cradle[s]" her patient, Miss Hailey, against her "full round breasts," while she secretly imagines murdering her for the hospital's financial gain (Jolley, 1983: 155, 157). Delys Bird argues that such sadomasochistic images of devouring associated with motherhood indicate the tension between the two notions of motherhood identified by Adrienne Rich, that of motherhood as an ideological institution and mothering as lived experience (1989: 41). Institutions, such as hospitals and schools, are frequently sites for the conflict between these ideas of motherhood in Jolley's fiction. The domination of these institutions by women and the identification of them with the maternal plays with the possibility of the colonisation and consolidation of a distinctly female territory. Jolley's often humorous, frequently macabre,

portrayal of such a territory nevertheless implies the terrifying and destructive consequences of such an institutionalisation. *Mr Scobie's Riddle* is set almost entirely within the Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude, a nursing home which has a vortigal hold upon its elderly occupants and is presided over by Matron Price, the "mater" of this particular institution. To Mr Scobie, her frail patient, Matron Price resembles the frightening maternal figure of his memory—she is "big like Lina's big mother" with the possibility of also possessing "mottled breasts and enormous thighs" (Jolley, 1983: 52). Her patients are infantilised—grey blankets are "tucked in" and "secured" under their chairs "with a large safety pin"(175), confinement within a labyrinthine structure evoked in the experience of being "wound up in a rug"(178). The patients exist in a state of entrapment, both physically and financially, their assets "swallowed up"(167) by Matron's lascivious ploys, leaving one Miss Hailey to acknowledge "'I can't leave St Christopher and St Jude. I'm trapped for life'"(149). Significantly, the matriarchs of Jolley's hospitals and schools—Matron Price, Miss Peycroft, Miss Thorne, Night Sister Bean—are all childless, and yet are afforded a power usually denied the biological mothers of her fiction. Most also possess a rampant sexual appetite directed towards other women and girls. With these recurring characterisations, Jolley would appear to be making the provocative suggestion that institutional power is inherently unproductive and unnurturing, merely necessitating further repression of the maternal.

The experience of entrapment, of being absorbed into a condition without any scope or channel for escape, all attempts being thwarted, is intensified by the labyrinthine anatomy of the institution. Upon entering the Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude, having traversed a labyrinthine network of fortification and obstruction, of paths which "wound beneath the lines of wet washing which crossed the back garden"(Jolley, 1983: 17), the "maze of old-fashioned out buildings" gives way to a black smoke which forms a barrier to the "sacred regions of the kitchen" and within which characters entering its bounds are "engulfed"(18). The kitchen, traditional site of nurture, is a womb-like sacred centre in this structure, but is posited as a sinister matrix that consumes those who penetrate it. At the other end of the hospital, the front door is like an orifice opening into the intestinal tract as those who enter "seemed to flow ... through the door disappearing, as if swallowed, into the passage beyond" (201). The kitchen stove, another mythologically and culturally-constructed image of feminine nurture, merely marks the opening to further labyrinthine bifurcations as the cook is imagined to have periodically "entered the secret passages of the flues and subsequently lost her way therein" (132). The mother's body is written into the very architecture of the edifice. Indeed, the mother *is* the institution itself in this particular text, unknown, relatively unexplored, and threatening to devour those who enter its internal recesses. By denying access and preventing escape, it represents the confinement of the maternal and the restriction of generative and creative power. However, Jolley's iconoclastic representation of that institution exposes previously hidden and unfamiliar

depths within familiar sites and images of nurture. The maternal anatomy is imagined as a sequence of labyrinths, one leading ever inward to another, creating complexities and ambiguities which incite a revision or suspicion of the values underlying the structures and images of convention. The labyrinth occurs as a rupture within the constructed institution of motherhood, as if a way is sought beyond its strictures.

Throughout her work, Jolley adopts labyrinthine imagery and form to explore the dichotomy of mothering as institution and as lived experience. Although her mothering characters would frequently appear to fall into the conventional and simplistic category of bad mothers, Jolley does not write within the unsophisticated framework of portraying the good mother and the bad mother. Rather, she is concerned with interrogating the institution of motherhood, its conventions and the anxieties which arise from it, and the destructive consequences of its divorce from the lived experience of the individual. The labyrinth is appropriate as an interpretative mechanism for an exploration of this nature. Aside from an image of artifice and imprisonment, the labyrinth has equally, from its origins as a symbol for human life, expressed an organic conception of the womb, a maternal fertility and a longing to return to a state of wholeness in order to achieve rebirth (see Attali, 1999: 3, 79; Purce, 1974: 104, 110-111; Eliade, 1960: 71; Ayrton, 1974: 16). In keeping with this idea, like an umbilical cord, the covert labyrinth of the well connects Hester with notions of mothering she had attempted to expel from her consciousness. The descriptions of the water flowing through "small openings and channels" to "the wide shaft of the well" evoke birth (Jolley, 1987: 151). The labyrinth of the well encompasses and reclaims a distinctly female territory. It is an expression of the mother, of fecundity and reproduction in its proliferation of diverging paths and womb-like structure, its passages "leading from one cavern to another" (Jolley, 1987: 132). Jolley's writing is frequently a statement against institutionalisation and the deadening occlusion of an imposed structure, and an advocation of the organic, lived experience of motherhood, particularly in a recognition of origins. From within the institution of the hospital, Mr Scobie's memories of his mother and of home, recalled with a longing "such as a young child experiences"(1983: 42), lead him on mental journeys to his childhood home which take the form of labyrinthine meanderings along "a long, winding gravel track" which "wound along the foot of the hill, and went on to other places"(51). The labyrinth can be a vehicle for the expression of freedom, not just entrapment, and Jolley ensures both representations are included in her novels.

Carol Ann Howells locates Jolley's fiction within the "post-colonial search for lost mothers and the longing to feel at home" (1988: 69). As a migrant writer, having emigrated to Australia from England, Jolley's evocation of labyrinthine form and imagery as it relates to ideas of mothering indicates a profound concern with the experience of exile and disorientation and ambivalent ideas of home. In her story, "The Long Distant Lecture," the terror of

being lost within a labyrinth of the unfamiliar, of unrecognisable tracks "winding across this empty world," gives way to a palingenesis—a return to one's past and origins, and a connection with an inchoate notion of home (Jolley, 1979: 73). As if in response to the recognition of the burgeoning and generative, creative possibilities which accompany initial disorientation within unfamiliar territory, Jolley incorporates this auto-generative notion of rebirth into the very form of her fiction, making many of her protagonists writers and connecting the process of writing with the act of giving birth. Alma Porch is the mother of the ideas "born" from her writing (1998: 122), while the writer Miss Hailey transfers her creative energy into a whirling, labyrinthine dance depicting the natural motions and "meaningful movements" of childbirth and the "joy of the new mother"(212). "'I shall write this,' she said, and she began, with solemn movements, to dance"(211). Jolley's texts themselves embody labyrinthine structures, forms which equally suggest a maternal anatomy. They are typically cyclic in configuration, usually beginning with displaced events, incidents which actually happen at a later stage of the narrative and which must be revisited in their chronological order. The disorientation is intensified by Jolley's use of mises-en-abyme, stories within stories, as the internalised imaginings of her writer characters are integrated within the larger narrative. In this structural sense, Jolley's texts represent a maternal containment —they are "swollen with a mysterious knowledge" which finds its most profound expression in labyrinthine form and imagery, associated as it so intrinsically is with a conception of mothering (Jolley, 1985: 146).[1] Not only does the labyrinth as a textual paradigm allow for the accommodation of mystery, but it also suggests to the reader the path of his or her reading experience, one which involves tracing the thread of the narrative back to central concerns with mother as both monster and origin.

By contrasting terrifying and benevolent images and ideas of the mother, Elizabeth Jolley suggests the profoundly problematic and influential dynamic of maternal power and desire. Labyrinthine imagery and form are the vehicles for Jolley's deconstruction of the ideologies of motherhood, and, in its malignant and benign manifestations, the labyrinth allows for an expression of the undeniable ambivalence with which Jolley approaches a conception of the maternal. Her fiction seeks to embody a maternal subjectivity, one which is radical and subversive, attacking the constructions of institutionalised ideology, and which attempts to recover a very real and physicalised sense and experience of the mother. In *Palomino*, the pregnant woman's naked body is inscribed with the maternal configuration that permeates Jolley's writing.

> I let myself look upon Eva, her pregnancy is advanced, her breasts are full and heavy. The white skin of her breasts is delicately traced with fine blue veins in a strange design belonging only to Eva herself. (1998: 145)

It is a recreation of that unique and organic maternal configuration, as well as a deconstruction of the confines of the institution of motherhood, which lie at the centre of the labyrinths of Jolley's texts.

[1]Sue Gillett observes that Jolley gives the cliché of writing as childbirth new meaning by making writing "an extension of the female body" (1991: 109).

References

Attali, Jacques. 1999. *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom.* Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Ayrton, Michael. 1974. *A Meaning to the Maze.* Abingdon-on-Thames: Abbey Press.

Bettle, Maureen. 1991. "Dr Thorne and Mrs Peabody." *Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays.* Eds. Delys Bird and Brenda Walker. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson. 121-130.

Bird, Delys. 1989. "'Mother, I won't never go drovin": Motherhood in Australian Narrative." *Westerly* 34 (4): 41-50.

Dinnerstein, Dorothy. 1976. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise.* New York: Harper and Row.

Doob, Penelope Reed. 1990. *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Eliade, Mircea. 1960. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities.* Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Harvill Press.

Faris, Wendy B. 1988. *Labyrinths of Language: Symbolic Landscape and Narrative Design in Modern Fiction.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gillett, Sue. 1991. "Breaking the Realist Mirror: With a (Female) Difference." *Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays.* Eds. Delys Bird and Brenda Walker. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson. 105-120.

Howells, Carol Ann. 1988. "In Search of Lost Mothers: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and Elizabeth Jolley's *Miss Peabody's Inheritance.*" *Ariel* 19 (1): 57-70.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1976. *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories.* Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1979. *The Travelling Entertainer*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1983. *Mr Scobie's Riddle.* Ringwood: Penguin.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1984. *Milk and Honey*, New York: Persea Books.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1985. *Foxybaby.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1987 [1986]. *The Well* (1986), Ringwood: Penguin.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1989 [1988]. *The Sugar Mother* . Ringwood: Penguin.

Jolley, Elizabeth. 1998 [1980]. *Palomino*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Jung, C. G. 1969. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Miller, Nancy K. 1986. "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic." *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia University Press. 270-295.

O'Brien, John. 1991. "Myths of Domesticity in the Novels of Elizabeth Jolley." *Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays*. Eds. Delys Bird and Brenda Walker. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson. 131-146.

Purce, Jill. 1974. *The Mystic Spiral: Journey of the Soul*. London: Thames and Hudson.