

*Sunsets and Sunrises: Nursing Home
as Microcosm in "Memento Mori"
and "Mr. Scobie's Riddle"*

GERALD F. MANNING

IN MURIEL SPARK'S NOVEL *Memento Mori* several elderly characters receive troubling anonymous telephone calls; the message is always the same — "Remember you must die" (2). Elizabeth Jolley's *Mr. Scobie's Riddle*, which like *Memento Mori* takes place in an institution for the aged, dramatizes the same message through the old man's riddle: "What is it that we all know is going to happen but we don't know when or how?" (120). If these novels have similar settings and share a morbid theme which their titles highlight, they may also be compared for their mixture of tragicomic devices, a technique which results in a fascinating complexity of tone in both books. Indeed, Spark and Jolley both stretch the limits of realistic fiction in order to explore their serious subject matter without moralizing or sentimentalizing. They are both novelists of wit and imaginative energy with an inclination for satire. *Memento Mori* and *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* command our respect as achievements of narrative art, as effective portrayals of the plight of the elderly, and as expressions of moral and spiritual concerns.

Given their octogenarian characters and nursing-home settings, we might expect these books primarily to offer fictional reflections of the psychological, sociological, and medical dimensions of growing old.¹ In fact, however, these authors use the institutional settings to symbolize various kinds of estrangement and entrapment, and the reader quickly notices that social and medical problems are only a small part of the novelists' concerns. If an essentially realistic treatment of this subject matter is not what these books present, the reader must inquire further for the

nature of their achievements and for the grounds on which to connect the novels with each other. There is a tendency among some who have looked at the portrayal of the aged in literature to glance at the surfaces of novels, note stereotypes, and generalize about the significance. For example, Celeste Loughman, writing in *The Gerontologist*, argues that Spark

fused the subject of senescence with a literary naturalism rooted in biological determinism, focusing on man as a dying animal at a point close to extinction, his personality and behavior determined to a large degree by the inevitable process of degeneration and decay, and by the realization that he must die. (79)

She concludes by stating that the novelists she examines, including Spark, "offer little to mitigate their naturalistic treatment of old age — the isolation, the impotence, and the decay which are intrinsic in the aging process" (84). The difficulty with this kind of analysis is that so much of significance is left unsaid. There is much of moral and spiritual significance in *Memento Mori* to mitigate a sense of naturalism, as will be shown; indeed, the whole novel hinges upon this. The same is true of *Mr. Scobie's Riddle*, in which the central issue is not the sociological one of aging but the moral one of how human beings treat other human beings. An understanding of these more complex issues involves analysis of the novels' details, including matters of mode and style, narrative form, character delineation, and symbolic imagery.²

What initially strikes a reader of these novels is their inclination towards abstraction, even allegory, with an accompanying tone of witty, sometimes grotesque, humour. The settings, for instance, function as microcosms in which both authors control and dramatize human behaviour and ideals. Although it is located in London, primarily in the "Maud Long Medical Ward (aged people, female)," *Memento Mori* gives only incidental topographical and sociological details. Although it is set in a suburb of Perth, Western Australia, where Elizabeth Jolley has lived since emigrating from Britain in 1959, *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* also shows little sense of locale beyond the "Hospital of St. Christopher and St. Jude." Both novels present imagined worlds which

provide contexts for a parable-like fiction. Both novels, the reader discovers, contain virtuous, even religious characters as well as villainous ones, both centre the villainy in greed and blackmail, and both rely on the motif of *memento mori* in conjunction with a community of the aged to heighten and dramatize their moral concerns.

To look first at some of the ways in which Muriel Spark's novel denies the conventions of documentary realism, we notice that there is no attempt to offer a rational explanation for the mysterious telephone calls which confront the characters (and the reader). Rather this device allows the writer to portray a range of responses to a key human problem: the dominance of the ego and the unwillingness to accept one's mortality. Spark's characterization verges on allegory as she illustrates human personality. The two characters who are the most serious-minded and the least affected by irony are content with a symbolic interpretation of the telephone calls. Police Inspector Mortimer concludes that "the offender is Death himself" (157), and Jean Taylor, Spark's most sympathetic character, agrees: "In my belief . . . the author of the anonymous telephone calls is Death himself. . . . If you don't remember Death, Death reminds you to do so" (195). As these characters indicate, an answer to this riddle may be found in psychological and religious terms, if not in a rational discovery.

Most of the other characters ignore this advice, however, and in their behaviour and attitudes represent various dominant personality traits. Alec Warner ceaselessly studies symptoms of old age in his obsessively rational and pseudo-scientific way. Godfrey Colston in his egotism cannot overcome his obsession with his past unfaithfulness and is blackmailed accordingly, only to turn the tables finally on his own son Eric, who is a distilled version of his father: " 'In his middle-age Eric is becoming so like Godfrey,' said Charmian, 'though of course Godfrey does not see it' " (221-22). Dame Lettie, concerned with her own physical safety to the point of obsession, snubs her friends and contemporaries but enjoys a reputation as a penal reformer and prison visitor. Other characters play single-dimensional roles: Mabel Pettigrew the blackmailer, Charmian Colston the writer, Guy Leet the

critic and ex-rake, Percy Mannering the senile poet, Tempest Sidebottom the social matriarch, and the various grannies on the Ward. The detached and satirical approach to characterization which is typical of Spark's fiction and which has been noted by many commentators is an important indication of the non-realistic mode she favours. Its presence in *Memento Mori* accounts for what may mistakenly be seen as an undue emphasis on the naturalistic treatment of old age.

This allegorical tendency in characterization is part of a larger pattern of non-realistic qualities. Not only do the characters seem to represent types, but their own deaths are contrived by the novelist to reflect their personalities and obsessions. Dame Lettie, brutal and paranoid during her life, is clubbed to death by a burglar. Godfrey, selfish to the end, takes two innocent people to their deaths with him. Alec Warner loses his entire notes in a fire and feels "that he was really dead, since his records had ceased to exist" (244). As the final chapter continues dispassionately to dispose of most of the characters by summarily reporting their various deaths, Spark imposes a severe sense of closure on the novel, drawing attention to its artifice and reinforcing the suggestion of moral tale. The curt, brusque style with its short words and concise sentences is instrumental in achieving this closure, as indeed it is responsible throughout the novel for ensuring the ironic detachment germane to Spark's tone.

Not only detachment but deliberate mixing of the serious and the comic marks the tone of *Memento Mori*. The juxtaposition operates on the level of style: in the contrasts between terse and funny bits of dialogue and weighty statements from the narrator; or between outrageous examples of caustic diction and gentle passages which express the narrator's or Jean Taylor's reflections. The whole conception of this novel, however, involves a similar contrast in that fate itself — Death, the anonymous caller — can be ignored or trifled with, or can be taken very seriously. Spark maintains a constant mixture of tone by shifting from one set of characters to another, from one narrative thread to another, from blackmail and betrayal to near-farce to humane, even religious seriousness — and all within the microcosm of this study of elderly people confronting their universal fate.

Fate is the dominant silent partner in *Mr. Scobie's Riddle*, which like *Memento Mori* has its microcosm of blackmail and betrayal within an aged community. Elizabeth Jolley in her own quite different way has constructed a fictional world which like Spark's intermixes humour and suffering, evil and vision. With the mysterious presence of Sister M. Shady and the night gambling games, *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* also contains elements of the macabre which heighten the novel's humour as well as its moral concerns and reflections on old age. But to look first at the novel's non-realistic qualities, one notices that Jolley employs several narrative and stylistic devices which, in A. P. Riemer's words, "pave the way for the novel's entering into a symbolic, near allegorical world" (247). These devices include "A Guide to the Perplexed," a few pages of often hilarious brief excerpts and quotations from the ensuing narrative, with pages duly numbered like an inverted index. Following this are several pages of entries from the Night Sister's Report, with comments, again very funny, from Matron Hyacinth Price. With the arrival of the three eighty-five-year-old men who will occupy Room One of St. Christopher and St. Jude, the conventional narrative voice takes over at last. The hospital reports recur in a refrain-like manner throughout the book, however, like the telephone calls in Spark's novel. As a final small reminder that what we are reading is contrived (and therefore quite purposeful), Jolley concludes the novel with a nursing report dated November 1 (precisely one year later than the first entry on page 1) in which we learn of the admission of three more male patients to Room One, all eighty-five and suffering as did Messrs. Hughes, Scobie, and Privett (respectively) from Hemiplegia, Hypertension, and Hypertension with Altered Mental State.

The apparent *jeu d'esprit* of style and device in this novel demonstrates clearly the author's control of her material, her delight in the arts of wit and humour, and her sense of satiric purpose. The contrasts and juxtapositions which we observe in Spark's novel have their corollaries here in the range of characters and the tightly interrelated elements of the plot. Two characters in particular — as in *Memento Mori* — articulate and symbolize Jolley's serious moral concerns regarding the exploitation

and isolation of individuals as well as the significance of death. Heather Hailey and to a lesser degree Mr. Scobie, their eccentricities and comic limitations notwithstanding, are important exemplars of the human potential for compassion and insight, as will be shown later. Other characters range from the complex Matron Price, who is in part a caricatured "Big Nurse" but also a surprisingly sympathetic victim of circumstances, to the farcical Frankie and Robyn, who dance their way madly through their duties as hospital aides, to the mysterious nocturnal poker players who comprise a sub-plot which itself contrasts with the main action of the novel. This contrast permits Jolley to blend farce and seriousness effectively; the night gambling and Sister Shady's reports provide splendid humour, but the novel moves inexorably to the point where sufficient details reveal the criminal associations of those engaged in the shady gambling scenes. A passage such as the following shows Jolley's skill:

DECEMBER NIGHT SISTER'S REPORT

N.A. to report. All pats. play cards in dinette. Message from Mrs. Morgan Mr. Boxer Morgan and Mr. Rob Shady '*Cough up Matron Price or else*' its on account of Lt. Col. (retired) Matron.

And Matron Mr. Hughes did not come in. I thought you should know I did not even know he was out.

Signed Night Sister M. Shady (unregistered)

Missis Shady: Don't you ever read my day report? If you turn back one page you will see that it states quite clearly that Mr. Hughes collapsed at 10 a.m. and was taken immediately to the City and District Hospital where he was dead on arrival. D.O.A.

Signed Matron H. Price (105)

While the main narrative develops the reader's interest in the characters of Messrs. Hughes, Scobie, and Privett sufficiently that this report of Mr. Hughes's death is wryly poignant, the sub-plot becomes more than mere farce with its evocation of medieval scenes of dicing with death, another link with *Memento Mori*. The growing complexity surrounding the Matron's need to "pay the price" also extends the strange significance of these "evil people" (62), as Mr. Scobie calls them, although a full explanation of their motives is not given and the book's moral landscape remains suggestively abstract.

While *Memento Mori* and *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* avoid some of the conventions of realism and effectively intermix the comic and the serious, they also confront some important issues regarding old age, as has been suggested. Intrinsic to the distinctiveness of both novels is the way in which this subject matter is integrated with what the books ultimately say about morality. The unsentimental yet poignant characterization of the elderly in all their vulnerability provides a dramatic focus for the handling of greed, egotism, and the fear of death. After a brief look at this vulnerability we shall examine how these satirically-edged moralists convince the reader of the values they affirm.

Memento Mori evokes the human problems of aging less graphically than *Mr. Scobie's Riddle*, and with a more deliberate comic touch, as in the description of Granny Bean's birthday party: "Some of the geriatrics were still eating or doing various things with their slices of cake" (243). But the earlier novel is moving nonetheless; Jean Taylor's unflinching evaluation of her condition is direct: "Being over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and the dying as on a battlefield" (34). Her understanding is sympathetic and humane, however, unlike most of her post-seventy contemporaries who in varying degrees evade the truths of aging and patronize or disdain others. Dame Lettie Colston thinks that Jean Taylor "is wandering in her mind and becoming morbid" and, in response to Taylor's concern about the unpleasant new ward sister, remarks: "In the Balkan countries, the peasants turn their aged parents out of doors every summer to beg their keep for the winter" (36-37). Godfrey Colson, in his turn, delights at the thought of Guy Leet "bent double over his two sticks. An ugly fellow; always had been, the little rotter" (201). But Guy in fact is shown to be one of the few characters who accept the conditions imposed by one's physical state:

His fingers were good for another year — if you could call these twisted, knobble-knuckled members good. . . . How primitive, Guy thought, life becomes in old age, when one may be surrounded by familiar comforts and yet more vulnerable to the action of nature than any young explorer at the Pole. (202)

Guy's good-humoured sense of reality commands respect from the reader, especially since it contrasts with the evasions of Dame Lettie, the machinations of Godfrey, Eric, and Mrs. Pettigrew, and the silliness of Alec Warner.

Although it sparkles with imaginative vitality and offers some inordinately funny scenes and descriptions, *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* is deadly serious in its reflections upon old age and conditions in institutions. Jolley's skill with significant description and imagery is evident as soon as the conventional narrative voice enters the novel. The panoramic view of the scenery around the hospital is richly sensuous: "There was a warm garden scent of cut grass . . . the perfume of unnamed flowers . . . a piling up of colour . . . grey and silver pearly and pink edged doves, with tender feathers. . . ." In immediate juxtaposition the cramped quarters of Room One are evoked: "There were flies in the room and the mingled smells of reheated food, stale tobacco and urine." Outside the window in the restless wind the leaves, "moving in the endless trembling towards and away from one another, gave an impression of trying to speak or to listen but always turning away before any tiny message could either be given or heard" (10-11). Thus prepared for the human drama of frustrated communication and helplessness to be acted out in Room One and elsewhere in the hospital, we read on with a mixture of humour and horror as the treatment of the three octogenarians and their fellow inmates is described. There is frequently a sense of the gently farcical, and the reader is able to maintain some detachment:

Mrs. Rawlings took the patients, one by one, as they were tossed from the bathroom and stuffed them into their clothes. She led them out, one by one, and stacked them on a piece of plastic, in cane chairs, along the verandah. . . . To and fro the voices of the doves caressed the freshly washed rows of old people. (49-50)

But the reader's feelings are more rawly exposed in other places. When Mr. Hughes's paralysed arm flaps against the door post, the description which follows is unforgettable: "The frail skin, brown mottled and paper thin, was grazed and broken." Mrs. Rawlings, worried about getting blood on her "clean pinny," quickly "tore up a piece of old rag kept for padding up the old women and bound up the bleeding hand" (69).

Physical indignities and frustrations which result from "decrepit age" — a phrase from Yeats's "The Tower" quoted in the epigraph — are grim enough, but Elizabeth Jolley raises a more profound problem for the aged, a problem that can be exacerbated by an insensitive institution. This problem is anonymity and its correlatives, loneliness and isolation. After his room-mates die, Mr. Scobie is left with a curious feeling of emptiness:

He did not miss Mr. Hughes or Mr. Privett. He did not know them. They had come briefly into his life and gone out of it again. . . . It was strange, he reflected, that no one ever mentioned their names. It was as if St. Christopher and St. Jude never spoke of the dead. People simply ceased to need to be cared for. It was as if they had never existed. (171-72)

The novel portrays in rather stereotyped ways some of the causes of this impersonality: social workers and nursing staff who are immature, selfish, or, in the case of Matron Price, corrupt. Miss Hailey warns Mr. Scobie: "'Do not,' she said, 'expect too much from that little social worker. I have learned from experience,' she continued, 'we are only material for their questionnaires, their statistics and their examination results'" (177). And *Memento Mori* has nothing to match the Matron who is eager for profit, domineering, and manipulative. At the crash of the three ambulances she "hurried forward, her white head-dress rising like a sail behind her and the panels of her navy dress swinging with a clinical briskness" (16-17). "'Ambulances don't grow on trees you know,' in her mind she addressed the little group of shocked men" (16). She also prevents the Public Health Inspector from discovering the truths about St. Christopher and St. Jude, and she pressures patients into putting their financial affairs into her control.

But it is through the Matron's relationship with Heather Hailey, condemned because of a scandal in the past to be utterly dependent on Hyacinth Price, that Jolley expresses her chief moral concerns, concerns which relate to the treatment of the aged and beyond. Matron Price not only exploits aged patients but has evidently, with brutal callousness, ruined the lives of both Miss Hailey, her old school friend, and Lt.-Col. Iris Price, her brother. As Heather Hailey blurts out in a moment of crisis:

"I never dreamed that you would take everything, but everything. You must know, you do know, that I am a pauper. . . . I'm trapped for life. . . . But nothing makes any difference to you, nothing at all Tin Tin. I mean, what about Iris? . . . How can you be so cruel to him. I know he needs looking after, but not in Room Three of all places. And what or who has made him like he is?" (149-50)

Hyacinth Price's compulsion to control others for power and profit has led her to this point, and our additional discovery that her criminal husband remains at the centre of a web which ensnarls even her, that she too is a victim of frustration and unrequited love, only slightly diminishes the contempt in which we hold her. In a description of Swiftian grotesquerie the night gambling scene with Mr. Scobie's reaction to it underlines Jolley's vision of humanity:

With sunken toothless mouths wide open, and with grey-wisped heads trembling and nodding on scarcely supporting withered necks, with frail-skinned faces animated and with greedy groping hands they played their game with fierce determination. All were so intent they paid no attention to Miss Hailey's hymn and did not notice Mr. Scobie standing, shocked and dismayed, looking on. Overcome by the sight of such wickedness he stumbled back to his own room. It was impossible to sleep listening to those evil people. (62)

In view of this passage, Sister Shady's recurrent "Nothing abnormal to report" regarding these nightly sessions seems especially pointed.

It is clear that *Memento Mori* and *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* both use the microcosmic settings of nursing homes to develop tragicomic fictions which engage the reader in an examination of attitudes towards old age and death and confront the reader with a dramatization of evil. The theme of *memento mori* runs through both books: it is found in Mr. Scobie's frequent biblical allusions, in his riddle itself, and in Miss Hailey's quotations (see 22, 36, 47, 61, 120, 125, and 161). The blackmailing greed of Mrs. Pettigrew, who moves spider-like from victim to victim, is close kin to the Matron's pursuit of "substantial bank accounts" (17) and the sinister operations in the dinette. Do these novels, then, say nothing affirmative about human relationships or the

conditions of being old and institutionalized? Although it is neither writer's purpose to dwell on the sociology of homes for the aged, and while both writers here and elsewhere in their work cast a cold eye on human behaviour, these novels nevertheless have values to affirm.

Since the theme of *memento mori* is strong in both books, an important indicator of meaning and value is the way characters respond to the knowledge of their mortality. Key characters in each novel show an understanding and acceptance of the limitations of human life, and through their responses to the reality of death and the cruelty of human beings the authors override some of the pessimism implicit in the subject matter. Henry Mortimer, Jean Taylor, and also Charmian Colston in *Memento Mori* have come to terms with death by developing a philosophy of life which permits calm acceptance of the message which so upsets Dame Lettie and others. Mortimer, reminding us of the dramatic assertion of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," "Death is the mother of beauty" (Stevens 8), sees death as integral to "the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid" (166). Jean Taylor echoes this thought in reassuring Alec Warner: "We all appear to ourselves frustrated in our old age, Alec, because we cling to everything so much. But in reality we are still fulfilling our lives" (244). As Peter Kemp says in his book on Spark, death is

released from terrifying absurdity by seeming to belong to some necessary cycle. Emphasizing the progression of the generations, a harmony in which they placidly participate, the old making way for the young that they have helped to rear, the Mortimers, in marked contrast to all other characters, are seen, happy, with a grandchild. For them, age and death are simply parts of an inevitable natural process; just as, for Jean Taylor, they are parts of an inevitable supernatural one. (42)

Because Jean Taylor and Charmian Colston are both Catholic converts, their acceptance of aging and death has a religious grounding which adds a dimension to the book's meaning but does not disturb its tone.

Although Charmian struggles with her memory and is described by Godfrey as "an old wreck" (176), Spark in a stun-

ning passage allows Charmian to articulate and to act out notably the power of her spirit. Receiving the troubling message, she calmly replies: "for the past thirty years and more I have thought of it from time to time. My memory is failing in certain respects. I am gone eighty-six. But somehow I do not forget my death, whenever that will be" (139). There follows a description of her making her own tea; this becomes a sacred ritual with a rich resonance in its repetition of the phrase "strong and fearless," its use of the symbolism of fire, its emphasis on the "journeys" which she undertakes, and its evocation of the Mass through references to the "broken biscuits, even the crumbs" and the careful pouring back of the tea into the cup. Independence of mind and spiritual fortitude are characteristic of Jean Taylor as well; Jean, however, is also used by Spark to embody humility, compassion, and moral rigour. Her acceptance of death as one of the "four last things to be ever remembered" (246) leads her to value the old women in her ward (most more decrepit than she) as her friends, and to make the tough decision to inform Godfrey of Charmian's infidelities in order to combat the greater evil of Mabel Pettigrew. Jean is both an expression of Spark's Catholicism and an example of wise and mature aging.

Memento Mori finally affirms both the wisdom and the spiritual efficacy of a humble acceptance of death. It also shows, through Jean Taylor's character, that this philosophy also has moral significance: it affects one's treatment of others. *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* develops the same themes in more detail and with additional ramifications. The characters here who carry the burden of meaning are Heather Hailey and Mr. Scobie, and two themes interpenetrate to counterbalance Jolley's dark portrayal of entrapment and cruelty. Miss Hailey's artistic vitality blends with her genuine sensitivity and concern for other people, though her life has been a series of ironic frustrations; Mr. Scobie, though not fully self-reliant nor capable of realizing his dreams, articulates and dramatizes a spiritual vision which is both poignant and symbolically powerful.

Miss Hailey, initially caught (like Miss Jean Brodie in another of Muriel Spark's novels) by an unfortunate and perhaps naïve over-fondness for a pupil and then trapped in the destructive

sanctuary offered by Hyacinth Price, is only partly able to look after herself. Nevertheless, in her wonderful mixture of bizarre thoughts and actions, not to mention her hats, she plays a very important role as the wise fool in Jolley's tragicomedy. As Joan Kirkby says in a recent discussion of Jolley's fiction, "Miss Hailey's vision, energy and receptivity to the life around her are potentially redemptive. She is alive, like other of Jolley's artists, to the immense possibilities of transfiguration and new ways of living" (490). "Redemption" is no doubt the right word; Heather Hailey is a fascinating blend of the artistic and the religious imagination. Not only is she the "novel's novelist," like Charmian in *Memento Mori*, and therefore an eager quoter of literature, she is also constantly alluding to music; she spends one remarkable afternoon in the park singing Wagner while she waits for Mr. Scobie who has escaped unnoticed. It is part of Jolley's skill to make the literary, musical, and religious references significant, as they always are. That Mr. Scobie and Miss Hailey are kindred spirits is continuously demonstrated by the way they live (and communicate) through their imaginations and memories. When he first settles in Room One, Mr. Scobie puts on a cassette, sounding the *memento mori* theme with the sombre beauty of Brahms's *German Requiem*: "Lord make me to know mine end. . . ." Miss Hailey shocks Mr. Scobie by appearing in her partly-opened dressing gown and babbling that she normally doesn't "have intercourse with men . . . I mean not with any men here. Of course, you understand, I am using intercourse in its older and more dignified meaning" but goes on to urge that he leave the music on: "I haven't had any spiritual refreshment for years" (22-23). The humour distances us a little from the seriousness of the bond being formed between Miss Hailey and Mr. Scobie.

Later in the novel Miss Hailey again asks Mr. Scobie not to turn off the music: "Where I ask you, in this spiritual wilderness, is there any hope of salvation but in this music of yours?" (99). The waste land motif is a major theme in the novel; Jolley incorporates it so thoroughly that it works on the personal level (the loneliness and sense of homelessness of individual characters), on the sociological level (the emptiness of the nursing home

environment), on the political level (the allegorical portrayal of Australia discussed by A. P. Riemer), and on the symbolic level (the human quest for a spiritual home and a meaningful life). Heather Hailey, thinking of the anguish in Beethoven's late quartets, reflects that she "was not at home and yet this place was her home and had been for many years. She had not been at the place she had once called home for a very long time" (133). Yet as a result of her strange encounters with Mr. Scobie she stumbles upon an important truth: "It occurred to Miss Hailey that one of the true meanings of friendship was protection" (176). It is a kind of protectiveness that Jean Taylor feels towards the other grannies when she decides to remain at Maud Long Nursing Home, and it is this feeling which leads Heather Hailey to say, shortly before Mr. Scobie's death: "you know, old bean, I really do care what happens to you" (189). Thinking of musical performance, Mr. Scobie realizes that the real truth of human life lies in "promise and in performance and in the seeking between people for what was needed in the keeping of the promise" (181-82).

Elizabeth Jolley conveys the significance of this theme through a focus on words like sanctuary and through images associated with nature and "home." All three of the old men at St. Christopher and St. Jude are dispossessed, Mr. Privett and Mr. Scobie in particular having been prevented by younger relatives from remaining in their homes. All three associate home with the natural environment, Mr. Hughes recalling his farm and shed, Mr. Privett his duck Hep and chicken Hildegarde, and Mr. Scobie his small house beneath a hill with its "row of pine trees planted by himself" (50). Pastoral images occur frequently in the novel to reinforce the links between nature and basic human needs for shelter, independence, and self-worth, needs which are either denied or served only perfunctorily in an institution. Jolley refers often to doves, contrasting them with crows, cockatoos, magpies, and hawks. Like the domestic fowl so valued by Privett and Hughes, the doves represent tranquillity and peace for Martin Scobie, "even though he knew they had no mercy and were cruel when the need arises" (112). Matron Price, unaware of the irony, remarks: "If you put doves together in a cage they

will peck each other to death" (119). Mr. Scobie knows that the cruelty derives from human beings, not doves. During the Christmas party he hears the doves: "a contented sound, perhaps a language of reason and of acceptance and of resignation" (73). Doves, sunlight, pine trees, the scent of hayfields, and flowers — these are the images which live in Mr. Scobie's imagination and memory and, along with his music and biblical passages, offer him a kind of sanctuary.

There is no true physical sanctuary, of course, nor can the realities of aging and death be circumvented. Finally the quest for meaning and for sanctuary here, as in *Memento Mori*, is of the human spirit. Mr. Scobie asks: "Who will look for me on this path. Who can know where I am going . . ." (124). Mr. Privett, visited at his death by the dark stranger, is told of "the path which no fowl knows and which the vulture's eye has not seen" (108), the path (Job 28.7) which Mr. Scobie has in mind. Although Elizabeth Jolley's novel yields no easy answers to the human dilemmas it describes, Mr. Scobie is permitted the patience and insight to feel that he can answer Job's question with Psalm 139. "Before such beauty I have to weep" (194), he exclaims on his deathbed.

Both novels include answers of sorts to that other question of Job's, a universal question which perplexes young and old alike but which is especially pertinent to the elderly: "But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28.12). As well as invoking religious beliefs and metaphors, these books present the reader with the vitality and energy of the human spirit in their characters and in their own imaginative achievements as works of art. In a curious way Mr. Scobie's home lives on, transmuted into a commune for the young people and the child who is, "in a sense, Mr. Scobie's grandchild" (210). The cycle goes on: we recall Inspector Mortimer tossing his grandchild into the blue sky in *Memento Mori* (209). Miss Hailey becomes our interpreter, seeing (as he does himself [143]) Mr. Scobie's house, hill, and the tents which now surround it as symbolic of the "three tabernacles" of the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9.5, Luke 9.33). Fittingly she

danced a pine tree dance, . . . a dance of the majesty of the pines and of their transfiguration in the changing light of the morning sun. She included in her dance a mysterious hill. . . . She changed her dancing to a kind of hornpipe depicting three coloured tents nestling close to the house. . . . She danced a celebration of the new life, that of the child, and of the people engaged in their new found way of living. (211-12)

Here in imaginative vision and artistic expression is an answer to the various kinds of homelessness dramatized in this novel. The dance is at once a celebration of new life in Australia, of the human imagination, and of the natural cycle of life.

Significantly for both novels, Miss Hailey notices the omission of one important element in her dance:

"I shall have to do that dance again," she thought, "I left out, completely, a whole lot of things. I left out the painting of sunsets and the sewing of clothes and the making of furniture but, above all, I left out the sunsets," she sighed. There would be sunsets and sunrises, one after the other, day after day, people would paint them and she would write about them. (212)

NOTES

- ¹ The growth of interest in gerontology during the 1970's, at least in North America, is well documented and is demonstrated by the emergence, during this period, of Schools and Departments of Gerontology at many institutions, and by the burgeoning of books and periodicals in the field. Edna Alford, Kingsley Amis, Paul Bailey, May Sarton, Susan Hill, and Elizabeth Taylor, among others, have also written fiction with nursing-home or retirement-home settings, and Kehl, Loughman, Shaw, Sohngen, and Wyatt-Brown have written articles relating literature and gerontology. Sohngen contains a bibliography of relevant fiction.
- ² Two critics have briefly noted this issue. The Australian novelist Helen Garner writes: "Because *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* is about an old people's home, some critics have taken a sociological approach to it, as if Jolley were making an impassioned plea to the general public to soften its heart towards the aged. She's much tougher than that and more of an artist. What she says about old people reminds me that one day I shall be one of them: she provokes not condescending sympathy but 'pity and terror'" (157). Peter Kemp says about *Memento Mori*: "The book is finally exhilarating, no mere black record of humanity ground down by age, disintegrating into death. The fact that this material, so difficult to contemplate, has been brought under the control of intellect, worked into art—sifted, scrutinized, given pleasing order—represents achievement of some mental fortitude" (48).

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