

Introduction

In this paper I aim to unravel the way I have come to understand the process of making art as a form of philosophy in action.¹ Drawing on Paul Carter's (2004) concept of 'material thinking' and philosophical ideas connected to a history of Romanticism, my research tests a fragmentary approach to making creative works, in recognition of the fragmentary or increasingly divided and interrupted nature of ordinary contemporary days. It also explores aspects of the daily work of an artist in contrast to a conception of creative production as a necessarily uninterrupted and somehow separate activity conducted at a distance from ordinary concerns. As one of many notions surrounding artistic activity this idea may be understood as a stereotype. In support of this, this paper will outline the development of a personal process of invention in the light of two major sources informing my research. My creative works, drawings and poetry, result from connections I have made between my own experiences and observations and a creative, material engagement in paper, ink and dust with historical ideas arising from Western Australian² author Elizabeth Jolley's (1923–2007) creative process and writing, including her book *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* (1993). Critical to this engagement have been understandings of the archive found in the writings of historian Carolyn Steedman (1987; 1995; 2002): what we can and can't ever really know about the past and the transmission and reconfiguration of ideas over time. These understandings of history question the certainty of knowledge claims based on the fragments of the past that remain.

Elizabeth Jolley

My work emerges from feminine experience. Both Steedman's and Jolley's voices as writers, what I can know of their lives and experiences, and the lives of ordinary women represented in their writing, have had resonance for my research and for me as a female artist balancing creative work with professional and more traditional female roles. However, although Steedman, among many other influences, draws on

¹ Estelle Barrett (2007, p.1) proposes that artistic practice may be viewed as the production of knowledge, or philosophy in action. Among the methodologies of practice-based research described by Barrett, which draw on this

² Jolley migrated to Western Australia from England in 1959 (Dibble 2008, p.137). She wrote in an artist's statement (1981, p.215): 'Perhaps an influence on my work is a small portion of Western Australia. I came to Western Australia in the middle of my life. I realise that the freshness of my observation can distort as well as illuminate. The impact of a new country does not obliterate the previous one but sharpens memory, thought and feeling thus providing a contrasting theme or setting.'

feminist thought, Jolley distanced herself from feminist criticism and debate. Instead, for many years Jolley worked at her writing in a fragmentary way, using time between domestic responsibilities and other ordinary working duties to collect material that would eventually be reconfigured into her poetry, short stories and novels. Jolley shared aspects of her creative process in a number of essays contained in the books *Central Mischief* (1992a) and *Learning to Dance* (2006), and in the many interviews she gave (Baker, 1986; Ellison, 1986; Grenville & Woolfe, 1993; Kavanagh, 1989; Reid, 1989; Willbanks, 1992). She often described her work habits in variations of this statement made to Candida Baker in 1986 (cited in Bird, 1991, p.169):

Well I work all the time, in my head—on scraps of paper because I can't remember anything. I cultivated what I call the ability to make the quick note because if I didn't I never would have been able to write. You see, I was a housewife with three children...I used to write late at night when everybody had gone to bed. I couldn't have written if I hadn't made little notes during the day. When I was cleaning and shopping and so on, or when I was talking on the telephone, or when people were talking to me, I would constantly be making little notes. I had masses of little bits of paper in folders. If anybody had asked to see a work in progress it would have been lots of bits of paper with scribbles on.

Jolley's work habits reflected a life that in many ways parallels my own busy schedule and family life. I have therefore, throughout my engagement with Jolley's writing simply taken her advice in a number of ways. I have worked throughout the day taking 'quick notes' (for example, written or drawn on scraps of paper and by taking photographs) and then late at night or early in the morning, rising in the dark in order to make use of her strategies for getting work done. It has proved to be an important and productive aspect of my work that also provided unexpected insight into the fragment: I have come to see her manner of working as more than simply a practical way of getting work done. Though I can't know for sure, I suspect there are important gaps, much unsaid, in her statements. Beyond the real life challenge of living and working creatively in an ordinary world of responsibility and multiple roles, there is the

mysterious artistic production of something new³, excitement and satisfaction too, in the dynamic created between materials in the physical world (notes shuffling around in a calico bag or arranged and rearranged in folders) and the interiority of the writer. And, there are Jolley's words 'wonderfully ordinary,'⁴ written in the margin of a student paper: the idea of the transcendent in the everyday contained in words (and perhaps drawings) on paper.

The Contradictory Romantic Fragment

An examination of Jolley's writings for students reveals that she appeared to employ notions of the fragment in various ways in order to make creative work in which readers could participate creatively,⁵ and that she perhaps understood the fragment as an idea in art and poetry that stretches back to the nineteenth century.⁶ In a handout on the reading of poetry for her creative writing students Jolley (n.d.) wrote:

Sometimes you read or listen to an utterance that is spread over time and you catch the meaning either at the other end, or if you are smart, half way through. The meaning seems to float, to some degree, free of what seems to carry it.

If you read a poem that really means something to you, you will stop at that poem, you don't turn to the next or do anything else. You just sit there and let it all wash back like the tide, and then you say, "Oh, I've got it." It is the ability of

³ Jolley's method of inventing and reading fiction parallels Carter's (2004; 2007) concept of 'material thinking', encouraging new systems of meaning to emerge for both writer (in the process of writing) and reader. In a student handout (n.d.) she writes "As in poetry, the essence of fiction writing lies in the moulding of real experience with imagination, awareness and invention bringing about the production of something unexpected. The word 'novel' means something fresh, something new."

⁴ As a part of my research I have examined a small collection of Jolley's creative writing teaching notes, handouts and student writing with marginalia, including the words "wonderfully ordinary" written by Jolley. It was passed to me from a family member.

⁵ For Jolley, reading was a creative act. I am referring to Jolley's concept of 'sophisticated spaces', created by the juxtaposition of narrative events (Dibble, 2008, p.253). Jolley's creative process aided her creation of spaces across the narrative allowing readers to reach their own conclusions about some aspects of characters or events in the story.

⁶ My research makes connections between Jolley's work and a history of Romantic thought. However, the focus of my research has not been to uncover, explain or prove, but rather to engage with past ideas in the present. That is, as an index to the past, Jolley's writing might be seen to demonstrate the way ideas filter through culture generally. Jolley (1991, p. 97) herself wrote: 'Perhaps the writer can be looked upon as a sort of sieve through which particles of one culture pass to be a part of another culture.'

the mind to surround the whole when only a part is given.⁷

My creative work and the fragmentary creative process it tests has grown in response to such fragments: to ideas contained in Jolley's writing and creative process and from connections I have made between them and understandings of the Romantic fragment. The Romantic fragment, a form and philosophical concept associated with early German Romanticism, is a conception of the fragment as an idea, concept or project contained within a system of fragments (Gasché, 1991, p.xv). For Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) and other writers, thinkers and philosophers of the Jena school, the philosophical fragment—a form containing a kernel of potential—was both complete and incomplete at the same time: a contradiction that might be summed up as philosophically allowable on the basis of a tradition of argument within which the process of becoming is understood as a process of movement and change.⁸ That is, the fragment is both incomplete and complete at the same time because it is always in a process of becoming. The fragment—an idea or project—is transitional: it moves and changes: although incomplete, it is at the same time complete in itself because it contains the potential of what it may become. Our responses to the potentiality of the fragment create a chain or garland, an interconnected dialogue, of ideas.

An Anecdote About An Echidna And Practice-Led Research

A creative engagement with the Jolley archive led me to explore the possible meanings of Schlegel's aphoristic writings on the meaning of the fragment. Schlegel's variously unfinished, incomplete and sometimes not even particularly on topic writings (Gasché, 1991, p.ix) arose from a fragmentary practice of writing that might also be seen as a template for a material creative process in the midst of daily life. Contained in hundreds of notebooks, these fragmentary writings, direct translations from mind to ink and paper of thoughts and philosophical ideas in the moment they occurred, might be seen as part of Schlegel's broader Romantic project, as a system (that is no system) developed in order to approach a new understanding of what it may be possible to know philosophically (Millan-Zaibert, 2007, p.18). That is, rather than

⁷ For Schlegel, meaning must start in the middle (Benjamin, 1996, p.137) and the universe is in movement as a constant wave (Berlin, 1999, p.105). Schlegel's Platonic cyclical philosophy, indicates that meaning is not generated from the perspective of the whole, but rather the whole may only be seen when a part is missing.

⁸ Aristotle's law of non-contradiction defers to Heraclitus.

present an explicit theory of the fragment in which everything about it was clearly articulated, Schlegel explored the fragment by employing a fragmentary manner of working and a metaphorical form (the unfinished Chamfortian form or fragmentary aphorism) to contain it congruent with his investigation and in dialogue with his scepticism about ways of doing philosophy.⁹ Schlegel's writing practice—a Romantic project—becomes, in the late eighteenth century, a system for art and radical philosophy as one.

Schlegel's puzzling fragment 'A fragment, like a little work of art, must be quite separated from its surroundings and complete in itself-like a hedgehog' has been examined by a number of writers and theorists (Kramer, 1997, p.148). Because the hedgehog is covered in pointy spines, or quills, and perhaps because of the revolutionary aspects of German Romanticism and the time period in which Romanticism arose, Schlegel's hedgehog has often been interpreted as uniquely, aggressively, separated from the ordinary world. For example, Charles Rosen (cited in Kramer 1997, p. 148) writes: 'Like its definition, the Romantic Fragment is complete (this oxymoron was intended to disturb, as the hedgehog's quills make its enemies uncomfortable): separate from the rest of the universe, the Fragment nevertheless suggests distant perspectives. Its separation, indeed, is aggressive: it projects into the universe precisely by the way it cuts itself off.'

I have thought of Schlegel's 'hedgehog' a good deal throughout my research. I asked myself if dust, which I had employed as a metaphor for interactions in the gallery between my work and viewers, might be something like the points of a hedgehog's quills: indexes to new work, new thoughts. At the same time I thought of Jolley, composing stories of characters in interior domestic space, whose state of being was often illuminated by their relationship to outside elements, that is, the landscape in which they were set. I myself was set in a landscape and was often drawn by the changing light or weather to walk and take photographs. And then, on one of these walks in the bush, I discovered an echidna. Hearing me, the echidna hid under a pile of sticks, and curled up to protect the kernel of its body: quills in soft greys blending perfectly, becoming a part of the dry leaf litter and wood. As I watched and waited, camera in hand, it unfurled its quills. Each point, like the tip of Schlegel's quill dipped

⁹ To completely articulate something that is both complete and incomplete, that moves or changes, and which is in the process of becoming, would be to miss the point. The paradox of the fragment is also explored in Hans-Jost Frey's (1996) book of literary philosophical fragments *Interruptions*.

in ink, reached out in the many directions made by the animal's body as the little antipodean fragment transported itself through the bush. It trundled magically on its way. There was nothing separate or aggressive about it. In a process of movement and change it belonged in every way. I looked. It just *was*.

My experience with the echidna in the course of my creative research allowed me to make connections between Schlegel's thought about the fragment and my own creative practice. It was for me, an example of the way new ways of thinking and possibilities for creative work unexpectedly arise in the process of creative research. It was as though, finally, after a long process of searching and looking, the Romantic fragment simply revealed itself to me. That is, the fragment was embodied in the echidna in multi-directional ways, but most importantly for me at that point, it revealed a space, a gap that is fundamental to the fragment, into which I could step and participate creatively. If I were a character in one of Jolley's stories, my meeting with the echidna might illuminate something about my state of being: it might perhaps stand in for my search for a creative space for myself.

This meeting with the echidna led me to undertake a short residency in the zoology department at The University of Western Australia to draw and photograph the specimen collection including the fragmentary remains of echidnas and for my creative work and research to take on a new direction: an exploration of the shared past of Romanticism, *naturphilosophy* and Romantic biology at Jena at a time and place when art and science were not yet separated,¹⁰ and to the introduction of drawings of insects and other specimens as motifs in my work (see figure 1, 2). What, I wondered, does the interior of the echidna literally contain? I found that the echidna is not related in any way to the hedgehog or porcupine, but rather is an example of concurrent evolution by which adaptations, spines for example, develop and are retained by species because they have a survival advantage in particular conditions. Referred to as a biologically robust and ancient animal because of the way it walks, the echidna also contains a hidden clue to its particularly ancient past. It is internally like a crocodile: the hip structure indicating a connection with these earliest reptiles. I also found, on the basis of argument and research concerning the influence of Romantic thought on Darwin's conception of nature and evolution, it is the process of evolution (revealed in the bones and adaptations of species discovered on romantic

¹⁰ For a discussion of the evolution of understandings of the terms 'romantic biology' and '*naturphilosophie*' see Richards, J. (2002).

voyages around the world¹¹ in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) that unites the biological sciences with Romanticism. That is, for many scientists and thinkers, it is the theory of evolution that comes closest to fulfilling what the early Romantic's desired to discover: an underlying wholeness to nature (Richards, 2002). Evolution shows us that nature is always in a process of becoming. The Echidna, like the Hedgehog really does know only one trick,¹² and it's an evolutionary one ensuring its survival: it curls itself up like a ball to protect itself, it contains within its evolutionary past (like all of us), the ancient beginnings of things.

Conclusion: Interiority and Drawing

The motivation behind my project and the creative processes it explores stems from a contradictory and possibly Romantic assumption that interiority, complete in itself, is yet incomplete. Interiority, that inner life of our own, might approach wholeness in new ways in a creative material process by which ideas are brought forth from inside to outside—in this case, from mind to ink and paper—and from the result, new ideas arising from that process and contained in forms that might then also be shared with others. At the same time readers and viewers also contain an inner life, complete in itself, and may participate in creative processes. By reading or looking they also complete the story or picture, creating a chain or garland of complete and incomplete wholes: a system of fragments, a system of ideas. This assumption is my reading of the fragment, built on other readings, of aspect of an idea that is anterior to similar assumptions, reoccurring and metamorphosing onward. It is similar to assumptions upon which the work of many artists, writers and thinkers has been based. It arises along with contemporary understandings of the self and its development that have their genesis in the late eighteenth century.

A desire for wholeness, and striving for self-actualisation (either through creative work or other endeavours) feels natural, almost compulsory as a goal for individuals living western contemporary lives. However, Steedman (1995, p.15) investigates a belief in 'the assumption that there is *Bildung*, a wholeness to interiority, that will figure itself forth, from inside to outside,' as a relatively new cultural understanding. She traces

¹¹ The romanticism of Darwin's voyages are explored in Richard's (2002) book. See also (Holmes, 2008).

¹² Schlegel would have been familiar with the ancient Greek parable about the fox (which knows many things) and the hedgehog (which knows just one big thing). See also (Berlin, 1993 ; Gould, 2011)

the development of the idea of interiority formed in childhood and to the eventual expression of this idea in Freudian theory, back to philosophical and literary ideas embodied in the figure of the child acrobat Mignon in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) novel *Wilhelm Meister*. Our contemporary understanding of interiority, Steedman argues, developed alongside the surprising prevalence of Mignon's appearance and reappearance in western culture over time. *Wilhelm Meister* was of particular interest to Goethe's contemporaries and admirers among the early German Romantics, including Schlegel (1991, p.15) who wrote: 'Whoever could manage to interpret Goethe's *Meister* properly would have expressed now what is happening in literature. He could so far as literary criticism is concerned, retire forever.' Perhaps Goethe's Mignon might be understood as a form containing an idea in a particular, Romantic way. That is, as a philosophical concept contained in a form: a combination of art and philosophy together. The character Mignon is a fragment: the figure of the child that has come to represent our inner life as embodied in the child or interiority, is an idea contained in a form. She is both complete in herself and incomplete at the same time: She moves and changes, she is an acrobat who might be found hanging upside down on a trapeze or perched on top of a cupboard, who changes from girl to boy on stage, and who will grow up. Mignon (interiority) is both complete and incomplete. She is complete in herself—containing the potential of what she will become, the inner child of the adult—and in a process of growth, change and movement she is incomplete —an incomplete part of the adult she will be.

The aim of this project has been to make new creative works and to discover ways to do this as a part of ordinary contemporary daily life. That is, to develop a personal creative process and to make new creative works in the midst of ordinary days with all their demands, restrictions, responsibilities and expectations, so that daily life, is illuminated through creative work. Elizabeth Jolley wrote 'She saw the young man standing in the dark...it was as if he had come into existence simply because someone, hopelessly lost among words, has created him in thoughtful ink on the blotting paper' (cited in Salzman, 1993, p. 11). I have thought of this passage many times as I have drawn figures of children, waiting or wandering on pages of inky and sometimes blurry landscapes of the imagination (see figure 3, 4). It was not completely clear to me why I drew them, except that I felt the child belonged in the picture. To me, the child was part of a mysterious narrative, moving and changing and containing the potential for what he may or may not become. The children were always boys, perhaps like the active heroes of the books I read in childhood usually

were. They were not simply my sons or any of the boys I have known. It may be that the children are mostly representative of this interior life of my own, desiring expression through creative work and seeking understanding through drawing.

Elizabeth Jolley's manner of working fragmentarily and Paul Carter's concept of "material thinking" have been instrumental in the development of my understanding of the process of making art. I have reflected on the fragment in a material way using ink in washes and blots on paper, to which I have then responded with further washes and other processes and by drawing. At the same time, I have made connections between the fragment's role in this process and with materials and contemporary understandings of interiority, the mind of the artist in the moment of creative production, the products of which may then be shared with others. The ink-blot, associated with the Rorschach test and interiority, the space of the mind and imagination, might be seen to represent this potential, and seems something like the fragment (see figure 5, 6). The work I have made throughout this project, the ink blots and drawings I made for my recent exhibition *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then*, aim to participate within a chain or garland of fragments or ideas of the past, by employing a material creative process in which ideas pass between the interiority and exteriority of the artist. But this process has also been a meditation on Jolley's writing and the serious and sustained pursuit of creative production in the midst of an ordinary life in the present.



Figure 1: *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then: (Garland) I remember making daisy chains* 2012, ink and dust (chalk) on rag paper, 48 x 70 cm.
Photograph: Andrea Wood.



Figure 2: *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then: Dasypodia Selenophora and Golden Wattle (for Elizabeth Jolley)* 2012, ink and dust (chalk, pastel) on rag paper, 48 x 70 cm. Photograph: Andrea Wood



Figure 3: *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then: nature boys* 2012, ink and dust (charcoal, chalk, pastel) on rag paper, 70 x 48cm Photograph: Andrea Wood



Figure 4: *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then: spring 1 2012*, ink and dust (charcoal, chalk) on rag paper, 40 x 48cm. Photograph: Andrea Wood



Figure 5: *Archive (detail)*, Ink on paper, insect pins. Photograph: Andrea Wood



Figure 6: *I can't tell you now what I could have told you then* (installation view).
Photograph: Andrea Wood

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