

# "The arts of gain": Usury and Substance in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*

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THE PRIMARY EFFECT OF ELIZABETH JOLLEY'S NOVEL *THE Newspaper of Claremont Street* is a denial of any lasting Aboriginal presence on Australian land. It produces this effect by "filling the space" of potential Aboriginality with a universalized presentation of the archaic, European, economic antagonism between usury and substance. All the energy of the text is drained into this internecine struggle, literally unto death. The novel reaches its climax with the murder of one of the central characters, Nastasya, as an effective result of the dispute usury has with substance.

This leads me to say that the most objectionable thing about *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* is that its fundamental preoccupation is elevated into myth, making of the completed novel a powerful instrument of white colonization. Myth can be recognized wherever one or more privileged formations of language aspire to have precedence over other, "inferior," linguistic representations. And this is just how it appears in Jolley's text. All the major economic concepts to be found in this fiction are consistently linked to unique modes of language: particular ways of speaking or of not speaking. These constitute what I am going to call the elevated, mythic level of the text. It is this semi-autonomous, if not free-floating, "grammar of the economic" that, in the end, dominates the rest of the novel, most notably the marginal representations of Aboriginality. The economic subject matter of the text internally generates idiosyncratic linguistic formations, which then turn back on what has spawned them, as a metalanguage or myth.

*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* is a text of dualisms, indeed of "dueling dualisms." In fact, it could easily be read as a series of neo-Platonic "serious quibbles" on the relationship between appearance and truth. Consider the following exchange, for example:

"Margarite Morris is the sun shining today?" Miss Jessop entered the classroom at the Remand Home. . . .

Margarite . . . looked up at the clouds which filled the high window. . . .

"No Miss Jessop," she said after a pause.

"Margarite Morris you are quite wrong, . . . it is daylight

outside, is it not, and the sun is shining up there behind the clouds."

"Yes Miss Jessop." (25)

The obvious neo-Platonism of passages such as this one constitutes one reason why I want to suggest that, besides being a narrativization of a historical European economic antagonism, Jolley's novel is also a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Notably, she follows and extends Shakespeare's lead in connecting various neo-Platonic concerns to the questions both of usury vis-à-vis substance and of (constraining) language vis-à-vis "reality." All of these dualisms, in other words, are aligned, and at times combined, in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. A consequence of this is that the term "substance" carries a heavy burden in my commentary on Jolley's novel, standing variously in this paper for, amongst other things, the body, work, the land, and the "semiotic." I will return to the comparison between *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* towards the end of my paper.

The plot of *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* is as follows: an elderly woman, one of whose names is Weekly, works as a cleaner in the houses of Claremont Street, saving day by day for the time when she will be able to afford a property of her own. She is both a very private and a very public woman, which explains how she comes to live with a widow, the Russian refugee Nastasya, who actually annoys her incessantly, all the way onto the land Weekly is eventually able to purchase, which is where Nastasya meets her terrible death. Occasionally, the reader encounters Weekly, and the other members of her family, in the past—she was a young immigrant from England—but the contemporary events, in particular the relationship with Nastasya, are the essential context for my economic/mythic interpretation of Jolley's novel.

In the present-time of the text, the economic, and its conditions—number, arithmetic, and time—are everywhere. The following passage is far from atypical, expressing as it does the "activating force" of these concerns of Jolley's for her novel's characters' sense of themselves:

She used the sky as a blackboard, and in her mind, wrote the figures on the clouds of the morning. The total

sum came out somewhere half-way down her window. And then she rested on this total sum with the warm glow which had seemed to start somewhere in her chest, spreading and spreading over her body until, at last, she felt able to get off her bed. (8)

And everywhere as well is a preoccupation with names: Weekly, for example, is also known as Newspaper, the Newspaper of Claremont Street, Margarite Morris, and sometimes even by a combination of two of these appellations. These names constitute the most significant reserve of the raw linguistic material for the high-level, mythic linguistic formations—derived from economic concepts—of the novel. To begin to appreciate the usuriousness or otherwise of these names, however, we must be clear on what usury is and on why Weekly is a usurer (or usurer). Usury is most commonly defined as the lending of money at “excessive” or “exorbitant” rates of interest; but it is also sometimes used to refer to any, even the most modest, pricing of money over time. Weekly is not a moneylender, but she is still a usurer pre-eminently.

Her usury is given its most explicit expression early on in the novel, when she thinks a mistake has been made in her savings book, only to discover, upon returning to the bank teller, that the additional, “accidental” sum is in fact her interest. This pleases her: “It seemed that, as well as what she added by her hard work to help the total to grow for what she wanted, the money itself helped. Fancy money helping money, what an idea!” (18). The most memorable image of Weekly’s usury, however, is that of her mountain of money: she experiences “a daily vision, [which] took the form of an exquisite cone-shaped mountain made entirely of money, with a silver scree of coins on its steep sides” (39–40). It is true that Weekly often thinks of the money she adds to her imaginary mountain each day as a direct result of her labor rather than as the profit of interest, but this image itself is essentially a usurious one. Money is here represented as a heap of substance—as an organic and almost living silver mountain—and its daily growth of a few coins more, like the depositing of new soil, strikes me as a growth out of the mountain itself, an addition in collusion with the original amount of money, and thus, as usurious.

Weekly’s usury is also apparent, however, in Jolley’s representation of her main character’s body, a version of productive substance. While the money mountain grows fat, in the mode of usury, as if it were a natural substance, Weekly’s body grows only thin, and diminishes, on her poor diet, as if she were as empty as money ultimately is.

Ezra Pound’s 1937 “Canto XLV,” “With Usura,” maintains bodily poverty, even bodily death, as a necessary concomitant of usury. “Corpses are set to banquet / at behest of usura,” writes Pound, and “with usura . . . / is thy bread ever more of stale rags / is thy bread dry as paper, / with no mountain wheat, no strong flour” (ll. 49–50, ll. 14–17). For Pound, usury has the effect of starving or reducing the body, in particular by evacuating foodstuffs of their content, their substance; and it would appear that Jolley follows his modernist philosophy

in this respect, while Pound himself seems to have taken his lead from the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza.

Attacking persons who, like Weekly with her silver mountain, regard money as a thing of pleasure in itself, Spinoza refers to those

who seek to acquire money, not from need nor by reason of necessity, but because they have learned the arts of gain wherewith to raise themselves to a splendid estate. They feed their bodies of course according to custom, but sparingly, for they think they lose as much of their goods as they spend on the conservation of their body. (192)

Taking “the arts of gain” to mean usury, this passage can be understood as heralding the much later concerns of both Pound and Jolley with the deleterious effects of excessive interest. In this respect, Spinoza’s “splendid estate,” in its evocation of an unworldly or imaginary, “shining and glittering” habitation or manner of life, might be linked to Weekly’s mountain of money. However, what interests me most in this passage, as with Pound, is the “inverse relation” between the body and the food of the body, and the economic concept of usury.

Here is how Jolley describes her main character’s eating habits and the usurious state of Weekly’s body. Weekly “[spends] very little on food,” and, not surprisingly, her food is quite insipid: “bread and boiled vegetables” (17, 5). She often describes food prepared in an over-refined and “inadequate” way, emptied of its solid goodness, asking one adult, for example, “Have you tried any of them little tins and jars, you know; baby spinidge and baby chicken dinner, all strained?” (32). For her lunches at her various places of work “mostly she had hard ends of cold meat, an ancient soup and cake which had lost its glamour. In all houses an effort of maintained strength was expected from her” (16). And as for her body, Weekly “was so thin and her neck so scraggy that, when she swallowed, you could see the food going down” (5). Consistent with the observations of both Pound and Spinoza, Jolley’s main character illustrates how usury weakens the body’s substance.

Aristotle argues by comparison that usury is “not in accordance with nature,” because usurious gain is “money born of money,” which contradicts its proper function as a “medium of exchange.” In the words of a recent commentator, “implicit in usury is the reduction of sign to substance, for what was originally extrinsic (money as sign of exchange) becomes intrinsic (money as motive)” (Desaulniers 321). Usury means the fetishization of money. We are talking here about sign and substance. How might Aristotle’s critique of usury be translated into the more familiar terms of contemporary literary theory?

This question brings us face to face with a problem at the heart of the thesis of this paper, yet one that need not detain us here for long: that is, the problem of the existence or otherwise of a homologous identity between mathematics (and by extension economics and usury) and the operations of natural languages. I say we need not linger here because

Jolley's text itself, and this is part of my entire argument, provides sufficient evidence of the "actuality" of this identity for my purposes. A word or two in general on the matter might be in order, however.

There is considerable theoretical literature on this problem: V. V. Ivanov, for example, argues that

Certain recent findings of mathematical linguistics make it possible to isolate common features and distinctions between natural and logical languages; experiments in constructing intermediate languages lying between natural languages and the languages of mathematical logic have been particularly rewarding in this respect. (31–32)

These "common features and distinctions between natural and logical [artificial] languages" might well serve as the philosophical basis for a homology between the functioning of usury, for example, and the generic forms of Jolley's novel.

However, more specifically, and perhaps altogether more attractively, the proposition of a homologous identity between artificial and natural languages, and in particular between economic usury and such languages, is given more practical, historical credence by the injunction in the Gemara (one of the two major parts of the Jewish Talmud) that a debtor should not be the first to greet his creditor if this had not previously been his custom, for the creditor would thereby be receiving unwarranted interest, in the form of the verbal greeting (*The Talmud: Selected Writings*, 181). It would therefore appear that from Biblical times at least, the economic concept of usury has been linked to (natural) language. However, as I have already suggested, we do not require any final proof of this connection in order to speculate on the historical effects of Jolley's text as a consequence of its economic themes, supposing even that such a proof were available to us.

If usury signals a rejection of actual substance—because it makes of money a false substance—then we might say that a "usurious linguistic formation" would be one in which also there is no true engagement with substance. Nothing, in other words, of the involvement with the "outside" of language, with the body, with work, with the "semiotic" that is found, for example, in those instances of modernist/postmodernist writing that disrupt the accepted practices of literature. We might mention here writers as otherwise diverse as James Joyce, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Ania Walwicz, but who have this in common: that their texts accept the truth of substance and are thus non-usurious. By contrast, a usurious linguistic formation displays no such engagement with substance, but limits itself to itself, consists only in "the vicissitudes of a limited system." (A slightly flippant example from popular culture would be the movie sequel, which is "never as good" as the original!)

Both these conceptions of language are not only in evidence in Jolley's novel, but at such a level that they exercise a mythic domination over its manifest content. This economic mythology of the text—outdated and European—

suffocates in advance any possibility of resistance to white settlement and hegemony in Australia.

Besides usury, there are many other expressions of economic life in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. For example, Weekly has interesting dealings with the land agent, Mr. Rusk (an intriguing name for the conveyancer of land: "rusk," meaning rebaked bread/substance); she acts as a sort of shop detective in the local store, noticing customers' "small robberies" (83); and she "plays the odds" of the lottery by not buying a particular ticket, and then, when "her" number inevitably fails to come up, enjoying the thought of the small amount of money she has "saved": a novel and imaginative mode of "cunning usury," to say the least, in which the "gain"—following the conventional mechanics of usury—is less than the principal, which reverses the order of things that applies in the more usual circumstance where one wins the lottery "against the odds."

The most interesting of the economic formations in Jolley's novel, however—because it places substance at the very heart of the economic—is the concept of potlatch. Potlatch refers to a custom found in certain North American Indian societies in which rival tribal leaders publicly present gifts, or destroy their own possessions, in an escalating competition for status. A sort of "loser wins" logic therefore pertains to potlatch.

Weekly's occupation makes her privy to much intimate knowledge about her client's lives, which gives her a degree of power over them, for their secrets can always be revealed. To avoid this, her clients all go out of their way to favor her with goods and services, each afraid of being outdone by another in this respect, none game enough to first withdraw any of Weekly's numerous and dubiously obtained advantages, such as a fare allowance when she actually walks from house to house. "It would be too conspicuous," writes Jolley, imitating the main dynamic of potlatch: conspicuousness (37). Weekly also receives gratis, from two separate clients, an expensively repaired car, and driving lessons, while wearing "cast-off clothes of good quality—for, watching each other, no one in Claremont Street would have given her a garment which was worse than something someone else had given her" (12). All this resembles potlatch.

There is therefore at least an implicit, internecine antagonism between two economic concepts in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, and the dispute usury has with potlatch reaches its acme in an exchange involving high-level, mythic linguistic formations. As I have already suggested, the mode of language deriving from potlatch consists in the host of stories that Weekly could turn against her clients, tales to which "many more things would certainly be added," narratives related "keenly and vividly with endless embellishments" (37). Postmodern narratives, in other words, non-usurious in the extreme in that they proliferate on the very edge of language, mingled with meaninglessness, always only on the point of being spoken, forever, that is, in the space of substance. Unspoken stories linked to potlatch: here is a quite perfect literalization of materialist theories of language that claim for various literatures an engagement with substance.



An important point to remember, however, is that these stories are in Jolley's novel always and precisely *unspoken*, which leaves substance not fully free; it is only Weekly, after all, exploiting the power of potlatch, who receives the fruits of substance (a car, clothing, and so on), rather than substance being distributed, perhaps, elsewhere and widely, perhaps "ab origine." Substance here goes in a sly, usurious way only to a usurer as a consequence of the silent linguistic form that potlatch takes: a true expression of substance would require that speech be spoken, that stories be heard. Substance here is therefore somehow turned against itself. But usury does have an elevated, mythic linguistic formation peculiar to it, which is in direct conflict with substance.

When the bank teller introduces Weekly to the concept of interest, the latter simultaneously adopts a new mode of speech. "On the way home she couldn't help laughing a bit, a sort of subdued private cackle, talking to herself, as she hurried across the little green park" (18). This is patently a usurious linguistic formation, not open to substance, a type of speech that limits itself to itself in its limited growth: Weekly laughs only "a bit," in a "subdued private" way, "talking to herself." This is highly involuted, usurious speech, directly opposed to substance.

It is with Weekly's many names, however, that the antagonism between substance and usury is most evident. Margarite Morris is a usurious name because, with the repetition of the M, it seems to feed off itself within its own—extremely limited—orbit. Names like J.F.K., Jr. (in relation to J.F.K.) and Bill Gates, Jr. (in relation to Bill Gates), as well as all patriarchal surnames, are similarly usurious, as is Yossarian from Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* ("so many esses in it . . . an odious, alien, distasteful name") and, from the same novel, the character Major Major Major Major (207).

The fact that the main character's names span the whole gamut from a single word to, at least in theory, an infinite number of words, however, is an invitation to view the shorter ones—Weekly, Margarite Morris, Newspaper, and the Newspaper of Claremont Street—as usurious in their very brevity. They suggest usury by contrast with the two other, much longer names Weekly has; the first of which consists in the entire text of the novel—the Newspaper of Claremont Street is, after all, both name and book title—and the second of which is identical with all of the English language, if not with all of natural language: that is, sometimes the main character's proper names are deployed as if they were part of ordinary speech, as with the dual connotations of "Do not leave me Weekly," with no comma, for example (55).

Such a range in the main character's names, when mapped onto the antagonism between usury and substance in Jolley's novel, implies that the names limited to five or fewer words are usurious linguistic formations, while the longer ones are, like Weekly's *unspoken*, postmodern tales, on the side of substance, which, in turn, shows up her self-division, both usurious and not. In other words, names in this text fall on either side of the usury/substance divide.

In the ongoing conflict between the European women

Weekly and Nastasya, which mirrors that between usury and substance, the former is threatened in her usury. In scene after scene, Weekly is denied by Nastasya in her preferred economic role, and these dramas are almost invariably expressed in the mythic modes of language of the text. At one point, Weekly is tricked into preparing dinner for Nastasya and her husband for no payment, because she is badgered into being their guest also, and, as Nastasya tells her, "no guest comes the next day to be paid" (48). Significantly, she is referred to here—most atypically—as the Newspaper of Claremont Street, that is, by a less usurious name than the usual Weekly. Furthermore, she is without any answer to Nastasya's argument, shades of the silent speech of substance: "And the Newspaper of Claremont Street had no reply to this" (48).

On the basis of the argument I have made in this paper, there would seem to be two main ways of interpreting the climactic event of the novel in which Weekly, who has finally achieved her aim of purchasing and living on a block of land out of town, revengefully murders Nastasya by leaving her stuck fast overnight in the clay where the two of them have just planted a pear tree.

If Nastasya is associated with substance in Jolley's text (and indeed at one point she is even referred to as "a block of wood" (62)) it is also suggested that she might represent a lost or missing Aboriginality. Standing on her unwilling companion's new land, Nastasya says "When these trees were saplinks Weekly . . . do you realise that no white man knew that this country existed!" (107). To this extent, her demise is symbolic of the denial of any Aboriginal relationship with the land in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. Any chance of a substantial and productive usage of the land falls victim to Weekly's usurious acquisition of property. In this respect, it is interesting to note that, much more so than Weekly, Nastasya values the qualities of public, as opposed to private, space. For example: "Nastasya took in great gulps of air. . . . 'I love this leetle park and the beeg trees!'" (102). She "begin[s] to feel alive once more" in the public park (103). Bound, however, to an ideology of private property, Weekly understands Nastasya only as a threat to herself. If, on the evidence of the passage I have just quoted, Nastasya makes the little big, then one might say that Weekly only makes the big little, in the way that usury actually diminishes substance.

What I think is a more convincing reading, as well as a more attractive one politically, of the climactic incident in Jolley's text, however, consists in interpreting Nastasya's fate as something that stands for the final victory, not of usury over substance, or vice versa, but of this European economic antagonism *in general*, over the potential emergence of Aboriginality. Just as Nastasya is literally frozen, so too is this economic conflict immobilized, but in its case with all of its influence and power still effective. Nastasya might therefore be seen as a terrible expression of "usurious substance," for she is trapped in the land (substance) but is described later on by Weekly and a neighbor in ways that bring her into the (usurious, European) discourses of art and science, supposedly cut off from her real substance.

If substance generally implies freeness—openness to the world (as the Lacanian Real Order is open to the world)—and usury suggests limitation; confined and exclusive systems—then here, in a horrific reversal and conflation of usury and substance, Nastasya becomes simultaneously “limited-in-substance,” plainly trapped, and “free-in-usury,” paradoxically involved in two usurious discourses, in an impossible multiple usury. Here, in other words, the story ends with no room for another, making all the more ironic Nastasya’s cry about the time when “no white man knew that this country existed!” for it is precisely her physical presence that finally stands for the denial of Aboriginity (107). Her body comes to resemble the pit-mounds of Weekly’s Black Country childhood. This brings us again to my comparison between *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and *The Merchant of Venice* (the very title of which bears similarities to that of Jolley’s novel).

Students of Shakespeare’s play might recognize in the Australian text a rendering of both the Casket Choice theme and the incident of the Rings. The former finds a close analogy in Weekly’s habitual perusal of dozens of advertisements for land, prior to the actual purchase of a piece of property; advertisements that always lie in one way or another:

An abundance of water, as written in the advertisements, seemed to Weekly to present moss-trimmed troughs one below the other, with paths of washed pebbles alongside. She seemed to see the clear water flowing over, from one deep trough to the next, all down the hillsides. . . . She never saw water like this when she was out looking at the places advertised. (61)

Just as the different caskets deceive all but Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, so too do the advertisements for land inevitably deceive Weekly, as the above passage makes clear, and in language that could, incidentally, be itself interpreted as a description of usurious process (“trickle-down economics,” perhaps?).

I am also struck, however, by the coincidence between the two texts on the topic of rings. The incident of the Rings in *The Merchant of Venice* is generally acknowledged to be one of the less important parts of the play, indeed one that is occasionally left out of performances. Curiously, it is as if Jolley’s text signals its connection to Shakespeare’s play in this respect precisely by imitating the relatively unimportant status of the incident of the Rings in *The Merchant of Venice* in its own treatment of a very particular ring, one that belonged to the now-deceased husband of Nastasya, who had one day

taken a taxi to the station and, as she had no money left, . . . gave the taxi driver Torben’s ring. Then, just as Weekly was falling asleep, tired out, Nastasya began to weep and howl.

“Weekly! My Ring. Torben’s Ring from his Mother. I must have it. Please Weekly! go out and find the taxi and get from him my ring. Weekly I beg you!” . . .

[Weekly] returned about two hours later, unsuccessful,

fearful of how Nastasya would be about her failure to find the ring only to find Nastasya was fast asleep. Furthermore Nastasya forgot about the ring completely for she never spoke of it again. (87–88)

What most interests me about the comparison between Shakespeare’s play and *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, however, is how they are very similarly infused with a neo-Platonic rendering of the theme of the relations between appearance and reality, which both texts link to the question of usury. One way of thinking about Shylock, for instance, is to say that he is unable to make a connection between appearance—the text of his usurious bond with Antonio—and substance—the body of his victim. Shylock cannot fulfill exactly the terms of the contract. Shakespeare opposes, in other words, a “restricted text,” a usurious text, to substance, a “pound of flesh,” showing ultimately that they cannot be reconciled (IV.1, l. 323, p. 144 and *passim*). Weekly, by contrast, is able in the end to “reconcile” language and substance, terribly, in the body of Nastasya, “stuck fast in the wet clay” (110). This might be read as an index of the actual force and dimension of Jolley’s text.

Another proof of the mythic quality of the novel is to be found in the form of its last chapter, which perhaps constitutes the ultimate horror of *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. Reading more like a short story than a conventional novel section, these pages have the effect of invisibly and naturally interpolating the reader into the novel’s mythology of the economic, thus “neutralizing the myth” while “retaining all of its power.” In other words, this last chapter makes myth do what it is supposed to do: control history and language, but all the time with the ideological appearance of not so doing. The reader is effortlessly segued from the penultimate chapter into the final one, from myth into the relief of realism, making the entire story “real-for-today.” All that has come before is repeated in a seemingly anodyne, but actually brutal way: rounded-off. For example, the concept of usury as an inclusive system divorced from substance is glossed, in an almost inconsequential manner, thus, on the first page of the last chapter: “The post office,” a place of letters and words, “was a small fenced-off part of the general store,” which implies a restrictive, “usurious” domain separated from a space of substance, of “general” life, of the provision and supply of goods (111). Sentences like this one constitute the final act in the development of what, from just about any postcolonial perspective, must constitute a truly disheartening Australian novel. □

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Graeme Hetherington

## Van Diemen's Land Road

Strange moment on the road today  
 When I discovered that the stone  
 I'd nicely judged to kick along  
 Was tissue paper in a ball.  
 Instead of meeting, as it struck,

Resistance to its weight, my foot  
 Kept going, light as air, as though  
 At last I'd walked free of my un-  
 Loved self, discarded in place of  
 The wad of rubbish I'd dislodged.

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GRAEME HETHERINGTON won the 2007 *New England Review* poetry prize and is currently working on his fifth collection of poems, *Disturbed: A Van Dieman's Land Inheritance*.