

BRUCE MERRY

REVIEW

Janette Turner Hospital, *Charades*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988. 345 pp.

Oscar Wilde once said that Henry James was an author who wrote fiction as if it were a painful duty. There is therefore nothing Jamesian about *Charades*, a novel in which the figure in the carpet disappears almost as often as the thread is rewound. It seems like an heir to all the traditions of insouciance and experimentalism which we now associate with the modern European novel — Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, for example, or the dialect realism of Salinger, Mailer, Irving. *Charades* features scene changes and spatial shifts in the manner of Scheherazade's thousand and one tales. There are refractions and *dedoublements* of character. There is the heart-tugging pathos of childhood remembered. Above all there is the libidinous rhetoric, words and passages that unleash themselves in a cataract of allusiveness which other writers seem to reach only after years of tight apprenticeship. Anthony Burgess achieves this kind of effect in *Earthly Powers* long after the cautious focus and wit of the Malay and *Enderby* novels.

Hospital's most recent novel looks at first sight like another contribution to what we may call 'the Australian overseas cycle'. A young woman called Charade Ryan leaves her rustic Queensland background to wander into Toronto and Harvard on a frankly very implausible quest to find out if her father was one of her mum's more salubrious lovers, Nicholas Truman, and if so how and why she herself came to be born and why her father has never turned up again. She goes to interview his impossibly incongruous maiden aunts in Twickenham, but achieves nothing on this particular investigative trail. She deliberately becomes involved with a philandering cosmogonist at Boston. Night after night she tests him with the multi-faceted conundrums of her life. She leaves him at dawn but always has a bit more to tell, and he holds on to her like the tyrant of the *Thousand and One Nights*. His name is kingly (Koenig) and he is separated from a wife called Rachel Goldmann (connoting Jewishness). In one of the many subterranean strands of the story this relationship suggests a prismatic parallel to the patrician figure of Truman and one of his countless female conquests, a fantasy-laden creature called Verity Ashkenazy. Charade's plebeian man-eating child-producing pumpkin of a mother, Bea, reduces this name easily into a demotic phrase 'The ashcan sheila'. Verity disappears from present time in the text, but Charade's aunt Katherine wants to contact her from

Canada and places a personal ad in the Australian newspapers, which Charade happens to see. Charade learns that aunt Kay has accosted a Truman look-alike on the Toronto airport coach. This turns out to be a mistaken recognition. The man is Koenig and a torrid scene in a bleak urban hotel ensues. We now have a kind of geometrical incest: Kay and Bea both desired Truman as girls. He bedded both. Kay adored Ashkenazy at school and university. She unwittingly summons Charade by an announcement seeking Verity. She and Charade both sleep with Truman's *doppelganger*, Koenig. Truman made Verity pregnant and handed the child to Bea. Koenig has lost his actress wife Rachel and their son has become a Moonie. Charade is actually the child of a 'Sleeping Beauty' whom Bea visits in a mental hospital in Brisbane. The quasi-incest motifs thus trail into 'quest' functions, typical of the earliest epic poems and European folktale.

Suddenly the meaning of the book shifts: it is not a Rabelaisian saga in which cocks and dicks and cunts and lips slide, lock, plop, saucer and squiggle in and out of each other. True, this element is always rather prominent in the writing and it contributes to a subdued feminist manifesto that trickles under the stream of the prose. Women, it proposes, are more honest and more conscious about the sexual function than men. The males in the text all seem to have a flaw, more or less serious according to the degree of irritation of the observing (or naked) female. There are men who dress quickly or light a pipe after having sexual intercourse. Others who have no imagination and take their lover to town for a pie. There is Nicholas, vain, effete and at bottom a Pommie coward. There are boys to be courted or ogled at school, and male teachers who may respond to the urgent threshing of the girls' adolescence. But all these appear ham-fisted against the golden perspective of Nicholas. There is an American sailor who pruriently accosts the two girls, Kay and Bea, in the grass paddock behind their house. Yet none of this *basso continuo* of soft eroticism is particularly vital to the text. It anchors it to narrative of the late 80s and yet is not a lasting purpose of the story. It seems to be saying to the reader: 'Note, in passing, the fact that women are hotter than men'; or at least that women describe their body functions more racily than men. The author wants to clear the deck of men by making women the real protagonists of the life drama that mysteriously links whole continents and families. The reversal of readerly anticipation becomes marked and imperious. From an obscure village in southern Queensland, Mt Tamborine, come lessons in life which are quite as remarkable as quantum physics and tutorials on *Beowulf* or Villon.

The return of the wanderer to Mt Tamborine (read 'Ithaca') at the end of the book is conducted by the international telephone operator,

instead of a ship and a bow and an old blind dog. Nonetheless, the writer makes Charade's return to her Queensland roots as dense and heavy with meaning as the great *nostos* in literature. The most ignorant figure in the book, Bea Ryan, is also the repository of life's longest secrets. She knows that men see sexual desire as an itch. She knows that love is an illness of which you suffer one terrible bout in a lifetime; the rest is insignificant. Bea also has the power to awaken consciousness in the fading inhabitants of the asylum. She knows that babies are the ultimate talismans of human contact, frail, cuddled, adored and ingested by their mothers. Charade thus has two potential mother types: Kay, guarded and cool, emigrated, respectable, or Bea, moulted and dissolute, who stayed on the land and liked a fiery drink.

However, when there are men at work, men with things to say, language has to deploy an enormous elasticity. Men have all this hot air, all this nervous eloquence to expend. Here Miss Hospital's unconscious master, as so often, is P.G. Wodehouse. Compare a passage from *Spring Fever*:

'The fact is, Augustus, we are in a spot, and only you can get us out of it. When I say "us", I allude primarily to the fifth Earl of Shortlands, whose family, as you probably know, came over with the Conqueror. You have it in your power to do the fifth Earl of Shortlands a signal service, and one which he will never forget. Years hence, when he drops in at the House of Lords, he will find himself chatting with other Earls — and no doubt a few Dukes — and the subject of selfless devotion will come up. Stories will be swapped, here an Earl speaking of some splendid secretary or estate agent, there a Duke eulogizing his faithful dog Ponto, and then Lord Shortlands will top the lot with his tale of you. "Let me tell you about Augustus Robb," he will say, and the Dukes and Earls will listen spell-bound. "Coo!" they will cry.'

(Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 116-117)

Now let us go back to the Australian writer: here another man is speaking, again a man trying to persuade his listeners, the prose crackling with the same sense of an idiolect, the story refusing to go forward without the effect of pauses, interjection, and phonetically seductive proper names (Shortlands/McGillivray's; Ponto/Wentworth's; Augustus Robb/Bill Stolley); the whole passage topped by a colloquial (virile) embellishment ("Coo"/'struth'):

"Well it's January and ninety-six in the shade, and we — the blokes, I mean — are gathering at McGillivray's to wet the whistle before the party starts. We're on the verandah, see, and maybe some of us on the steps, and some others, yeah, I

reckon some others are under the trees. There's a sun like a flaming communion wafer hangin' right against the roof of Wentworth's, struth, I thought it'd set his sign on fire, like a bloody spitball of flame it was, just waiting for the half-dark to gobble it. And you can already see the moon standing by, thin as a piece of shell. We're talking women, we're talking horses, we're talking bets. Bill Stolley, the old fool, has just lost his shirt at yesterday's races and is cadging drinks." (1988, p. 73)

Miss Hospital makes her characters talk in the demotic language of the burnt village and the parched north Australian meadow. The ear has to be precise to conduct this kind of operation because the learned language of the writer (or her student *Doppelganger*) has to meld the parlance of the working class background with the elegant speech credits of their recorder. Thus Miss Hospital juxtaposes the Waughian lyricism of a passage like

'< . . >It was a new high school on the edge of Brisbane, where the rainforest came down from Mt Glorious in long slender lizards' tongues and licked at the edges of the city. At lunch time, and late in the afternoon, the high school boys and girls came in pairs and lay down in the long grass that parted and swayed and closed over the seedpods of their bodies. (p. 145)

with the snatched fragmentary manner of those same girls' expression of their honeyed, nostalgic past:

"Recorder! You silly ninny! Did you *believe* that stuff I used to tell you? Did you really and truly believe? Honestly, Kay, you're such a drip, you're the most — I don't believe you swallowed that —"

"Anyway, I think I saw him. He was with a girl, this beautiful girl. She has long black —"

"Oh, *her*." (p. 154)

In the latter passage is ensconced many a frothy cadence of school-girl *argot* just out of the pony-tail and scribbled satchel phase. The writer has caught the idiolect of its spotty apex of summer breathlessness: Note the triply repeated (twice underlined) verb 'believe'. Freud would isolate such a word as the most likely to be repeated when in fact deceit is being practised; note too the lack of full stops after 'that' and 'black', which mimics the interruption but also, at a subtler level, the self-censorship of adolescent confiding; note too the casual 'this' of an item not there. The "Ashcan sheila", Verity, becomes present by her absence, because she is 'beautiful; long; black'. 'Drips' and 'ninnies' like these use modifying talismans such as the adverbs 'honestly' and 'any-

way'. This prose is the recording counterpart to the evocative landscape which precedes. The 'beauty' clearly belongs to the descriptive, not the dialogued, passage.

Dorothy Wright, *Queen's Wilde* (Heinemann, London, 1950):

All round Queen's Wilde the trees are very tall. They stand like courtiers in the dance, beeches and horse chestnuts and ash trees. The panniered skirts of the beeches curtsey down to the grass. From the top of the hill the other side of the valley only the roof is visible in summer, glowing like a garnet in the green, but in winter the house is shrouded and veiled in a fine lace of branches. It was rather hard on William that I should fall in love with his home and not with him <...> (p. 25).

Different plot, altered affections but another woman writing. A steady prose, accurate, candid and locked into the memory. The way women write, the way *Charades* is written, words about home and love, the two subjects that intrigue honest people.