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THE FICTIONAL DAUGHTER: JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL'S *BORDERLINE*

Andre Bleikasten prefaces his article on 'Fathers in Faulkner', a Lacanian reading of the novels, with a quotation from Barthes: '*La mort du Père enlèvera à la littérature beaucoup des plaisirs. S'il n'y a plus de Père, à quoi bon raconter des histoires?*'¹ But is it true that the patriarch is the begetter of the greatest pleasures of literature and that after his demise there will be little point in writing stories? Barthes' question is ironic, and it probably was not framed with women's writing in mind. Yet it is true that many stories by women are written with an audience of fathers somewhere in the background: in defiance of the father or in the hope that he may come to read and understand. The eagerness with which many male readers and critics receive women's writing suggests that sons of the patriarchy may also welcome the challenge to the patriarchal order and the death of the Nobodaddy father implied in Barthes' comment. The simple feminist answer to Barthes' rhetorical question is that a new and better reason may be found for telling a new and more exciting story when the patriarchal figure no longer exists. The idea that art, or indeed life, is possible only through the *opposition* of forces is one of those interpretations of existence that feminism wants to challenge.

Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline* (1985), however, originates in every sense within the prison of the patriarchy. The male narrator, Jean-Marc, ends the novel daydreaming that his fictional sister or mother, Felicity, will one day return to free himself and his intensely patriarchal father from their mutual antagonism within the power structures of contemporary art, society and politics. One skein of this neatly woven text comprises a narrative of what happens when a great nation decides to reinforce the corrupt and oppressive powers within a small neighbouring state because it is economically and politically expedient to do so. The complicity of the United States with the oppressive right-wing government of El Salvador is seen from the point of view of Canada, another smaller neighbouring state of the great American power. Both Canada and El Salvador assume the status of the female in a patriarchy controlled by the United States.

Felicity, known to the reader only through the eyes of the piano tuner Jean-Marc and through the paintings of his father Seymour — nicknamed significantly by his son, the Old Volcano — is one of the recognisably typical constructs of male fantasy. She is a childlike waif, yet gifted artistically, a competent and much travelled woman of the

world, excitingly attractive in an oblique way, her origins exotic (from a North American perspective) since she has Australian grandparents, was born and lived as a child in India and Queensland, and yet has been decently tamed by an exclusive patrician convent in Boston. She has an absentminded, wayward sensibility which threatens no one but which might seem to the male gazer to leave Felicity herself appealingly vulnerable. Her status as the temptress Eve and the spiritually endowed female is suggested by the journalists' interpretation of her liaison with the older artist: 'Artist leaves wife of many years for missionary waif.'² As a frequent subject for Seymour's paintings — *Blue Woman, Reclining Nude, Eve Fragmented* — she is firmly indentified as an object of the male gaze. Her dreams are sometimes nightmares in which she is trapped alive in a gallery painting:

She fitted snugly inside her black outline but there were 144 square inches missing from the middle of her torso. Between her breasts and her pubic hair, the viewer could see straight through to the tropics: mango trees, coconut palms, white sand. A conch shell where her navel might have been. White wave crests frothing like crabs up the sand, a little breeze off the reef stirring her pubic hair. There was a hibiscus behind her ear. Jasmine in fluted letters across her thighs announced: This is not a real woman.

When Felicity attempts to escape from her frame and out through the gallery turnstile, she is arrested because her documents are not in order — perhaps there is a hole in the middle of her passport photograph — and the man with the brush pastes her back on the canvas and the frame clangs shut around her: 'All borders in place. The man with the keys shook the bunch in front of her face' (pp.19-20). Before the novel ends Felicity is entrapped by male thugs, who differ from the male artist only in that their frame imprisons Felicity dead rather than alive. She is, of course, entrapped in the narrative itself by the framework of Jean-Marc's story, although he tries to offer several frames rather than a single frame for time and place.

But Felicity is not only a helpless victim of her status as female and as a character constructed by another figure within the narrative. Her experience with borders provides her with the initiative and the ability to take positive and independent action when a crisis occurs at a specific borderline control-point. This action, however, leads to her death, so that, active or passive, she cannot escape the consequences of challenging the patriarchal power. Despite her sophistication, her competence at airports and in the hearts of great cities, and her 'knack for the smooth and non-detaining rite of passage' (p.11) at boundaries and borders, Felicity becomes a victim of the savage rites of those whose power plays she acts to thwart.

From the perspective of a male narrative Felicity's sheer competence makes her a more interesting victim. Her pursuers, Hunter and Trog, claiming to be agents of the FBI and certainly agents of American political power, are archetypes, or at least relics of the Stone Age mythology in which women were clubbed and dragged to the cave along with other nourishment for the survival of a male-oriented species. The juxtaposition of this cultured woman (who nevertheless, to Jean-Marc, always smelt of the primitive Tropics) and the pre-historic Hunter and Trog, is as titillating to the masculinist sensibility as it is challenging to the notion that civilization has advanced very far from the cave where the troglodyte is waiting to regain his power.

At one level of reading *Borderline* concerns the ritual enactment of the sacrifice of a saviour figure, a myth which tends to carry different implications when the saviour is female from those it carries when the saviour is male. In the Irish myth of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, for example, the countess is willing to sell her soul to the Devil to save her starving people; that is, she is prepared to submit to servitude and damnation. The male sacrificial figure is usually a god or a king who submits to death but not servitude or damnation, and in anticipation of a future resurrection. The narrative structure of *Borderline* is controlled by Jean-Marc's attempt to resurrect Felicity, or rather, to insist that she is not dead, but is simply away on one of her periodic absences and that at any time she will telephone or return.

Felicity's sacrifice within the narrative present begins at the Canadian border as she is returning from Boston to her cottage near Montreal for a quiet weekend. Her attempt to escape from her business world and her male lover leads her directly to a rite of passage in which she will eventually sacrifice herself for another woman, and for a cause which may be identified with female helplessness against the male and masculinist power of the United States. When a border search discovers a meat van carrying illegal El Salvadoran immigrants, escapees not only from poverty but also from torture and death as insurgents against the corrupt American-backed government, Felicity's cornflower blue car is immediately behind the refrigerated carrier. In the next lane is a car driven by an insurance salesman, Gus, who will become a partner in Felicity's sacrifice, a significantly weak man and a failure in terms of masculinist success. While the other illegal migrants are arrested, Felicity rescues the half-frozen body of a woman concealed in a carcass that falls from the van. The woman, who eventually is known as Dolores Marquez, a wanted insurgent leader, reminds Felicity of a Perugino *Magdalena*. Her coming, and the spiritual struggle of the lapsed Catholic, the philandering husband and father, Gus, provides a religious context for Felicity's rite of sacrifice.

As Gus experiences his own rites of repentance and purification, separated from his family, but pursued by his daughter Kathleen, Felicity is still searching in spirit for her own missionary father. Her relationship with Seymour, a sexually satisfying one for her despite her awareness of her imprisonment in his art, is also part of that search for her father, a fact of which the narrator, who is much closer to her in age than his father, is jealously aware.

But the male search for a father, analysed for example in the essays in *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text* edited by Robert Con Davis, is rather different from the female search, as Thomas A. Hanzo's essay on *Bleak House* in the collection indicates. Hanzo argues that through Esther Summerson's relationship with John Jarndyce, '*Bleak House*, like all of Dickens' novels, allows the barrier against incest to be breached: contrary to her deepest feelings, the heroine of Dickens' great novel agrees to marry the parental figure.'³ Of course Esther escapes this predicament and marries Allan Woodcourt, but not before the subliminal incest fantasies of the Victorian (and perhaps not only Victorian) reader have been satisfied. In *Borderline* Turner Hospital's Felicity does not escape, and the nightmare described above is her punishment: what punishment Seymour, the Old Volcano, suffers is not clear until the end, when he is left with his son and bereft of the daughter he violated:

'I was hoping you'd know,' he says. 'I was hoping she'd call you. She always worried more about you, I was sure she'd have' His hand is groping towards me again like a blind thing, it casts about in distress. (p.288)

Bereft of the daughter, the patriarchal hand and the artist's hand is helpless, a blind thing groping in distress.

Paradoxically, then, there is something honourable in Gus's shamed avoidance of Kathleen, the daughter who is searching for him, and Gus's rite of passage to understanding and death is heroic despite the apparent mundanity of the suburban arena in which he struggles. Because Gus does not represent a successful figure in patriarchal society he can hear the voices of the wounded women:

Now there was nothing to distract him from his voices. He heard Kathleen's: *Why is mummy crying?* And Theresa's: *A woman called long distance.* And La Magdalena's. Her's dinning inside his skull, was without sound, infinitely sad. A siren's call. A wounded siren's call. But all of his voices, all of his women, were wounded. (p.167)

Neither the narrator nor Seymour is aware of women's suffering although they are very conscious of their own: in their absent woman they see only their own salvation. The novel ends with Jean-Marc's

fantasy that Felicity will return: “‘Oh Jean-Marc”, she’ll laugh, and we’ll catch fire from the sound of her voice.’ (p.288)

Within a feminist reading of the novel, however, Felicity will not return. Such a reading cannot construct for her even a future in a dangerous mission as a relief worker in some impoverished central American state. That is merely Jean-Marc’s fantasy in which he himself does not believe. Jean-Marc has constructed the much more credible fantasy of her death at the hands of Hunter in her ravaged and violated apartment during his attempt to make Felicity reveal information about Dolores Marquez that she does not know:

‘There’s no point in holding out,’ he says. ‘It’s all over. We’ve got her, and her knight in shining armour. All we need now is what she told you, and we’ll just stay here together, you and me, until you decide to talk.’ Perhaps he went further than he meant to. Perhaps he left ghoulish evidence that needed a cover of fire. Or perhaps she got away. (p.276)

Of course Felicity did not get away: there is no place for Felicity or happiness in the ending of this story. As the Old Volcano constantly tells Jean-Marc, ‘These are violent times.’ The old patriarchal volcano should know, as he gleefully, aggressively paints his canvases, pouring out ‘Hot lava from on high,’ with the story of Felicity, Dolores Marquez, Gus, and his son. Even the priestly Father O’Dowd, to whom Felicity confides the photograph for Dolores Marquez with the crucial address on the back, has probably contributed to Felicity’s or Dolores’s death. As Sister Gabriel wearily explains, Father O’Dowd has not been to Latin America, for him ‘it’s all black and white’: ‘For him, they’re all tainted with the wrong ideology, they’re all part of an Absolute Evil. What else can he do?’ (p.253)

When the narrative chose Jean-Marc as narrator, it sealed Felicity’s fate from the beginning. Although Jean-Marc seems to stand on the borderline of the patriarchal state, he is trapped in his inherited ideology. He is a piano-tuner with access to the drawing-rooms of the wealthy and the powerful, who can tune their instruments to a pitch of harmony that the owners can never hear. It is not pure mathematical accuracy, he explains, that is the goal of the master piano tuner:

The absolutely accurate is too narrow; it is false and imperfect. I am after something more organic: the truth. Which, as Oscar Wilde said, is never pure and rarely simple. I am after the whole of it, the messy unrepresentable fantasies. I am going for the well-tempered heart of the matter. (pp.25-26)

One of Jean-Marc’s fantasies is that ‘the entire cacophonous universe could be tuned.’ But this cannot be done by sitting in drawing-rooms creating excellent instruments for artists to practise their art: the

narrative is too ambiguous in its presentation of artists to encourage placing much faith in them. Felicity enjoys her role as an art curator, but it is undeniably a role in which she employs her energies servicing the creative work of others, and it can be seen as an extension of her service as a comfort, inspiration and model for the Old Volcano. Jean-Marc also enjoys his servicing role and finds esoteric status in it, but there is no substance in his fantasy of tuning the universe and as a piano tuner and restorer he is little more than a restorer of the status quo.

Moreover Jean-Marc's relationship with Kathleen differs little from that of his father with Felicity and would fit well into Hanzo's argument about subliminal incest in the novels of Dickens: this kind of incest is another of Jean-Marc's fantasies:

Kathleen sat in a corner and watched while I worked. She dreams and smiles; when she thinks of her father she grows pensive until I say something paternal, and at such times I could live off the look in her eyes. I have discovered that admiration sustains — and also, I suppose, corrupts. When she goes off to college . . . well, I have begun to think of September as eclipse, which is foolishness, since she will be here at McGill and I will certainly offer my services as mentor and tutor. I ply her with books. The temptation to mould her is immense, though misunderstood by her mother and the formidable Aunt Marthe. I imagine a visit from the latter, her eyebrows knitting together like offended caterpillars: What are your intentions? she will demand.

It's a question I ask myself.

In his studio the Old Volcano smirks. He laughs up his sleeve. He guffaws. (p.24)

The picture is precisely that of the father discussed by Hanzo:

. . . he comes not as the conqueror but as the deposed king; it is his helplessness that attracts:

'I need you because you will make me safe and whole,' he says to one who cannot refuse him. This appeal, so the structure suggests, is absolutely successful. It can only be thwarted, not denied.⁴

Jean-Marc is safe and whole while Kathleen watches over his fantasies of art tuning the universe, and while she responds to his adopting the paternal role; and the apparent oppression of the son by the Old Volcano offers Jean-Marc precisely the deposed or denied kingly status that Jean-Marc needs to win Kathleen's sympathy, and indeed, the sympathy of the female reader or any male who has suffered under paternal oppression.

Jean-Marc may also contribute to Felicity's death through his refusal to pass on to her Gus's message that he has found Dolores Marquez: 'Naturally I wasn't going to tell her that Gus, in full raving flight, thought he had found the woman. No point in stoking one obsession with another' (p.243). Jean-Marc believes that his policy, as piano tuner, of avoiding the centre of the stage, confirms that the soloists of the world are dependent on him and his central importance in the universe; but Felicity challenges him with the suggestion that this is merely another way of the piano tuner seeing himself as God (p.245). His refusal to convey Gus's message is in keeping with his arrogant claim that 'One well-tuned piano is worth a roomful of concert performers' (p.244). Jean-Marc's concern for Felicity's safety is a concern for his own need of her, and his argument that her assuming the role of saviour is arrogant spiritual self-aggrandisement is pathetically self-interested. Although Jean-Marc is engaged in the perennial struggle between father and son, and seems to be losing, he himself conforms to patriarchal values. Jean-Marc, therefore, can do nothing other than narrate the story of Felicity's death, while concealing the truth from himself for his own comfort.

The daughter is dead and cannot be resurrected within the pages of this narrative: she must remain as enigmatic as Felicity's mother, who died in childbirth, and who stands with her back turned to the camera in the one photograph that Felicity has of her. The daughter can only learn to pretend to be made of wood, like Hester who is tortured by her schoolfellows because the iron frame she wears for polio disablement makes her different. Felicity will disappear in these violent times, like the Salvadoran mother, Dolores Marquez. All times under the patriarchy are violent, as the apparently innocuous question from Barthes implies. The question really asks: 'With nothing to oppose, what possible dramatic interest can there be in writing?'

Jean-Marc is alive to tell these stories, to canonize the opponents of social and political patriarchy as the 'Holy Innocents, los desaparecidos, the disappeared ones' (p.12). He narrates their story with some sympathy but also with some impatience. Throughout the novel his real concern appears to be his own need to know that Felicity is alive and that she will return to comfort him. He is undoubtedly consoled by the company of Gus's daughter Kathleen, whom he meets only because the sad story exists to be told.

But if Jean-Marc cannot escape the patriarchal ideology, the failed salesman, Gus, does. It is he who stands at the borderline of the patriarchy, a liminal passenger, in the meaning of the role described by Sarah Gilead's article, 'Liminality, Anti-Liminality, and the Victorian Novel':

The liminal passenger thus 'loses' his identifying characteristics (name, roles, affiliations, even sex) only to be newly inscribed with a higher, more authoritative set of meanings.⁵

Gus interprets his state of mind or soul as being in Hell, and as a saviour figure by virtue of his attempts to preserve Dolores Marquez and all she represents, he is, together with Felicity, definitely of the female type. Emasculated by his suburban entrapment, his inability to sustain adequately the role of pater familias, and separated from his childhood faith, he has, as Gilead describes, lost his identifying characteristics. When Gus's Chevy plunges over a culvert as he is pursued across the Canadian border, the political demarcation between Canada and the powerful United States, he loses his life but, in the terms of the story, finds redemption. If the narrative predicts that the Old Volcano and Jean-Marc will never regain their lost Felicity, it does suggest that Gus has found some perfect happiness:

The car behind was like a shadow tied to his wings. Faster, faster. Until, over the culvert, they made a leap of faith, a perfect parabola. (p.273)

The oppositional male figures in the novel are not the Old Volcano and Jean-Marc, despite the space the narrative gives to Jean-Marc's representation of his struggle with his father. The true opposition is between Jean-Marc and Gus. In Jean-Marc, Turner Hospital has created a complex and problematical figure about whom there could be much interesting debate, and the novel remains open, despite this present attempt to close it with a feminist reading. Jean-Marc's importance is central to the novel because the existence of the other figures depends on his narration. He is not, however, a figure who can be identified as an opponent of the patriarchal power that informs the indivisible political and private concerns of the novel.

NOTES

¹ Andre Bleikasten, "Fathers in Faulkner" in Robert Con Davis ed. *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, p. 115.

² Janette Turner Hospital. *Borderline*. St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1985. p. 15. All quotations cited from this text.

³ Thomas A. Hanzo, 'Paternity and the Subject in *Bleak House*, in *The Fictional Father*, p. 27.

⁴ Hanzo, p. 29.

⁵ Serah Gilead, 'Liminality, Anti-Liminality and the Victorian Novel', *ELH* Vol. 53 No. 1 (1986), 183.