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### THE PYGMALION FACTOR — CREATIVITY IN THE NOVELS OF JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL.

History and literature are twin narratives by which we seek to define realities. Through them we are able to escape the tyranny of the present by recreating the past and delivering identity and culture. Such is the lust for continuity that myth and dream are essential elements in all narrative. Truth becomes a function of memory and desire, so is rendered fundamentally unstable. Reality is fractured. The creative artist is compelled to regain control by re-establishing shared realities which, as art, may be no more than a compensation for dislocation or suffering. Such concepts and themes are central in all Janette Turner Hospital's novels. This paper seeks to trace the creative urge as expressed in the major characters and in the text of Turner Hospital's work.

*The Ivory Swing* is the first and most conventional of Turner Hospital's four novels. It displays, in embryo form, many of the above preoccupations. The title captures the restlessness of her protagonists as they seek a view of life which will release them from the perpetual search for self definition into the reality of that state.

The difficulties of shared realities are something with which Juliet is forced to grapple on a cultural and personal level. Within her marriage, she struggles constantly to convince David of her desire to leave their Canadian home town of Winston. Yet, until Yashoda's death finally releases her from her own cage, he is unable to accept this need is real. He believes Juliet's 'discontents will fade like a photograph left out in the Indian sun.'<sup>1</sup>

This conflict is, in microcosm, what Yashoda, as a young Indian widow at the mercy of her male kin, experiences as cultural rigidity. Juliet and Yashoda are linked although their realities are different. Their understanding of one another has a common root — restriction. They are both caged. Their goals are similar — escape. They swing between the possible and the actual.

Yashoda is caught between the assumed values of her Western education and her Indian beliefs:

'Yashoda felt exhausted, as though she had arrived at the end of a long and dizzying downward slide from a mountain peak that had been exhilarating, Himalayan, but fraught always with the terrors of falling . . . She had fallen back into the world of stern uncles. There was no escaping. She had always been a part of that world

too, and she had violated its terms. For great sins there were great penalties.' (p. 226)

Death is the only escape. She is the 'bird of paradise mangled on the floor of its cage' (p. 139) which Juliet sees in a dream. She has slipped from reality into the dream. Indeed, from the very beginning of the novel, there is the possibility that Yashoda is a legend (p. 43) unreal in some way (p. 37), an illusion (p. 104).

The closest that Juliet comes to being 'twisted and pounded and smashed' (p. 240) is when the family is trapped in an overturned bus, which is 'caught in the clutches of history'. Future history intrudes brutally and symbolically into the present. Time, dream and reality are fluid.

This adventurous self-image is partly a myth. Were Juliet really adventurous, she would not be trapped. As her previous lover, Jeremy, says: ' . . . it is the illusion of risk . . . ' (p. 18) which is alluring. Her sister, Annie, embodies all that Juliet craves but also exemplifies the sacrifices of stability and security.

Dream, desire, myth and history all work upon Juliet. Because of them, she is able to recreate a more desirable past and create possible futures by scripting scenes and discarding them. She is rehearsing for reality, indulging in the art of creation although it is not expressed as anything more than intangibles. It is not only Jeremy that she likes to 'keep in the small space between dream and reality' (p. 29) but also herself.

At least, this is so until Yashoda's death. This is the major catalyst. It propels all the characters into a new level of consciousness (pp. 241-44). At last, David sees Juliet as she may become:

'It seemed to him that Juliet was charged with the high-pitched stillness of a fledgling eagle on the tip of an abyss. At any moment she would marshal sufficient reserves of will and daring to spread her wings and soar . . . bleak visions came to him: of soaring falcons never returning to the falconer . . . ' (pp. 250-1)

That Juliet is prepared to leave at all, is proof of this change. Annie left feeling definite and full of purpose, determined to 'stop bitching about the mysterious lack of stability in [her] own life and do something about it . . . ' (p. 246). For Juliet, though, in a foreshadowing of future novels, the ending remains open. There is an 'aching sense of the terrible limits of knowledge and understanding' (p. 252) which makes it impossible to interpret the future.

*The Ivory Swing* traces the nuances of emotions in the characters' changing levels of consciousness. Regarding the need for creativity, the novel restricts itself to the events *within* the narrative rather than

venturing beyond that to the question of narratorial reliability or narrative structure. It has a conventional, progressive plot, a sense of movement within the narration. It does not explore narrative. It explores consciousness. It maps the characters' perception of time and reality, their ability to be creative in the search for self definition.

Juliet's discovery of limits to understanding and knowledge form the springboard for the author's future works. Turner Hospital created a character with sufficient validity and sense of disorientation to form the basis for similar, more actively creative characters. The novel embodies that combination of authentic, tactile realities and psychological, emotional experiences which characterise Turner Hospital's work. Yashoda's helpless suffering foreshadows the exploration, particularly in *Borderline*, of the reality of hidden cruelty within cultures.

A novel about a family reuniting after being separated emotionally and geographically, *The Tiger in the Tigerpit* is concerned with perception and misunderstanding, creativity and tyranny. It illustrates the belief that ' . . . the psyche requires imposed order . . . ' <sup>2</sup> by showing the different ways characters escape a central event which remains hidden for most of the novel.

The step forward in *The Tiger in the Tigerpit* is the introduction of a metaphor of creativity for each of the characters. Elizabeth is creating a family symphony. She orchestrates her golden wedding anniversary, weaving melodies and memories from the past in an effort to create new movements, to change the way in which the family relate to one another. For Elizabeth, the novel is a journey towards new harmony. She defines her family in musical terms:

'She played the family. An adagio for Victoria, a dark piece, haunted and mad . . . If Tory could come home. Possible only if the furies in Edward could be lulled. She played the taming of the furies . . . she circled him with Adam, an intrusion of grace notes . . . An allegro for Jason, the phrases restless, full of syncopation and discord . . . Emily: a scherzo life . . . She played the homecoming of Emily and Adam, a stasis of chords . . . In the final movement, a slow rich one, a resolution of all themes . . . ' (p. 21).

The structure of the novel then expands on this outline. Behind it all is the nurturing spirit of Elizabeth, a reincarnation, perhaps, of Mrs Ramsay in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* where the artist Lily, by remembering certain actions, ' . . . tried to start the tune of Mrs Ramsay in her head . . . ' <sup>3</sup>

Much of the tension in the work of both these writers comes from the conflict between reality and perception. In *Tiger*, Emily feels that she and Jason, remembering the same event differently, are 'foraging

through childhood. Two archaeologists unearthing long-forgotten clues to times past.’ (p. 28). Emily’s uprooted son, coming to terms with his mother’s lifestyle, pining for stability, realises, on an archaeological dig that ‘. . . the past was not gone, not lost. The Roman roads, the borings, they were all still with him . . . There was more past in his future, time and history rolling over and over on themselves . . . ’ (p. 61).

Emily tries constantly to escape the past, by existing ‘. . . outside the hurly burly of time . . . ’ (p. 60), by moving restlessly from place to place as soon as anyone tries to pin her down, as her mother was, by domesticity. Her creativity is in music, too, but she uses it to escape, ‘to numb her want’. Emily’s symbol is the Blue Wanderer and her lover, Sergei, wants her to wear ‘something blue’; her heart, although she refuses to acknowledge it, is in Australia, the land of blue skies and blue water.

Jason is a psychiatrist. He creates order from the disorder in the minds of his patients. Although he would like to live a life surrounded by clutter and spontaneity, as he did whenever he visited his mistress, he cannot cope without creating order from chaos. He is accused by Emily of ‘creating (his) own myths’. Jason recognises this aspect of his personality. Much which does not fit his conception of the correct form of things is discarded. Victoria’s letters, for example, are disposed of like ‘drowning kittens’.

Victoria, a schizophrenic, lives in the world but has the capacity to escape completely. She does not feel Emily’s guilt (p. 144) about not staying in touch with the reality or suffering of others. Reality recedes whenever Victoria is threatened. It is replaced by a world entirely of her own perception, womb-like, underwater. She writes. Few read her work. There is no real level of communication. Her experience is a more severe manifestation of the need in all the characters to control, to create, to impose order or, alternatively, escape.

Edward, crippled, old and bitter, tyrannical and yet vulnerable, is constantly, consciously rewriting the past as he seeks objective understanding. He writes a subtext to reality, thinks in Shakespearean quotes, sees himself and Dante as ‘. . . frantic dreamers of alternative autobiography . . . ’ (p. 14). Like Juliet, he rehearses versions of the truth and the dream:

‘Revised editions possible, no doubt, and maybe even beneficial. Try again, begin again. Fast forward in time. Experiment number two: things as they *might* have happened. Should have happened.’ (p. 74)

and later:

‘What cannot be borne is this clarity, this torturing knowledge of the turning points, with no possibility of skipping a chapter, going

back a page, excising . . . Will I be lucid, I wonder, at the last un-rewritable second?' (p. 116).

The irony of this, of course, is the magnitude of his mistaken belief that he has the truth, that he bears the burden of responsibility for his family as though they have no secrets and stories of their own, as though he has written the pages of their lives single-handed.

This novel pays greater attention to form. It is forced, through multiple viewpoints, to weave a complex narrative. Turner Hospital actually names her chapters after various characters before bringing them together to explode the misconceptions and expectations that have been established, and to reveal the unnecessary torment of misplaced guilts and responsibilities.

Creativity itself, being such an integral part of every character, is explored more forcefully than in *The Ivory Swing*. Clearly, the creative act, whether it be music, psychology, poetry or narrative discourse, is one of compensation, a response to suffering, a need to cope with disharmony. The novel extends aspects of *The Ivory Swing*. Emily is a more adventurous Juliet, grateful to Sergei for her son, and needing, despite herself, a higher level of domesticity. How she reconciles this with her restlessness is, as with Juliet, open ended. She needs Dave, she calls Australia, she possibly goes 'home'. Whether she stays is another question. The rigidity of Indian culture is exchanged for the tyranny of a father. This is the beginning in Turner Hospital's work, of an obsession with fathers, present and absent, tyrannical or otherwise.

The increasing preoccupation with creativity and perception is a definite anticipation of the significance of these themes in later novels. The less conventional approach to narration and viewpoint is another indication of the leap forward into fiction concerned not only with the creation of situations and characters, but with its own creation.

In *Borderline* Turner Hospital creates a character who exists only as a being narrated by another character. Felicity never manifests herself except as a segment of Jean-Marc's past. It is just conceivable that she is non-existent. The reader is lured into believing, not in her dilemma but in Jean-Marc's understanding of her dilemma as he is able to reconstruct it. The reader is seduced into seeking meaning, even as the narrator and the writer are seeking meaning. Jean-Marc's account of Felicity is a structure that the author has provided and which the mind of the reader continues to shape and probe for inconsistencies well before Jean-Marc falls victim to the power of his creation.

With *Borderline*, we enter the realm of metafiction: narrating becomes an act like any other within the fiction and the content has developed to include discussion on narrative processes as well as Jean Marc's search for Felicity's reality. The narrator's authority is always at

stake in this novel. Jean Marc calls attention to it himself, at frequent intervals:

'I temper, I stretch, I embroider.

And then, self hypnotism sets in. (Form, after all, is important. One is concerned with the shape of the whole.) One begins to flex new muscles, to sense power, to acquire a taste for it. This is the Pygmalion factor: one falls in love with one's own creation, one rather enjoys playing God.'

This comes to be an essential factor to Jean-Marc:

'Oh the last laugh is definitely on the Old Volcano. And the last word is with me.

Someone else is dreaming you, old man, I'll say. I've caught the virus, your very own disease. I've got you down on paper. You're just a shadow of my words, your paintings only live in my chapters, you cease to exist once my reader puts you on a shelf . . .'" (p. 287).

Through the creative act, Jean-Marc is released from the hateful tyranny of his father's creativity. Such motivation must call the entire narration into question. Jean-Marc asks: 'You think I don't know that my Felicity, my version of her is suspect?' (p. 171).

As if all this uncertainty is not sufficient, the novel revels in those questions about dream, illusion, truth and memory found in the previous novels. Felicity is reported as sometimes doubting her own existence, is often lost in different segments of herself because, due to her understanding of art, she 'knew better than most people how simple it was to rearrange the past, that yesterday was an hypothesis existing purely by the grace of today' (p. 131). The borders between her many realities, the places she has lived and the people in them, slip and slide in constant and more frequent rearrangement as the narrator, like his artist father, seeks to pin down her essence.

Although Turner Hospital entered a new level of sophistication with form and structure in *Borderline*, she continued to develop certain character types. Juliet and Emily are early manifestations of Felicity, who is a wanderer. Felicity anticipates Charade, even to the point of seeking a lost father. La Magdalena is a reincarnation of Hester who is a refinement of Yashoda. They are damaged females. All are trapped and all, again, anticipate a character in *Charades*, Verity, the bruised woman who retreats, like Victoria, into her own reality.

Having moved so thoroughly into metafiction, having developed characters so consistently through her novels, having explored the need for creativity through art, narrative, music and psychology, it comes as something of a shock to be plunged into a scientific paradigm in the final

novel. Yet, this apparently polarised discipline is Turner Hospital's next arena. *Borderline* established above all that nothing is certain, and *Charades* goes on to propose a scientific justification for this reality.

Charade is searching for certainty and turns to science because she believes that 'anyone who has a handle on the issues of quarks and black holes, on space that is void of space . . . who can say . . . that the selfsame photon is sometimes a particle and sometimes a wave *depending on the context* . . . well, surely such a person has some answers.'<sup>5</sup>

What she discovers is that, when it comes to the question of certainty, science is unable to provide empirical evidence at all. It can go so far, mathematics can calculate so much, but from there, theory has to give data 'grace and shape' (p. 20). Worse than this, science is actually able to state and accept paradoxes which render certainty inaccessible. Whilst Koenig's search is scientific, Charade continues trying to piece together the story of her past by gaining access to it via the consciousness of those who lived through it.

The precariousness of this is summed up in one of Charade's questions to Koenig:

'If a woman stands in the middle of Massachusetts Avenue facing MIT, but her memory is so vividly snagged on one particular day of her childhood in de Raincy that she is unaware . . . that she is *oblivious* to the cars around her so is hit, run over, and killed . . . Is she more truly in Boston or in France when she dies?' (p. 191).

Reality is a matter of consciousness. Charade, however, has become obsessed with locating her father and is not prepared to accept this limitation. Katherine, too, is obsessed with Nicholas, as was Charade's mother. Katherine's reflections on this obsession reveal the process Charade is following as the novel progresses:

' . . . she pondered the nature of obsession, and the mysterious ways in which we invest objects with power then wait for the demythologising to set in.' (p. 202).

What this exemplifies is the process of syllogism which the novel, like all Turner Hospital's novels, explores: the process of construction and deconstruction which is a permanent, although variable, aspect of human creativity and desire for order. What Charade fails to realise until the end of the novel, when the search has failed, is the premise on which that previous question is based: all perception is imprecise. 'The observer, by imposing a particular set of questions, also predetermines the answers he will find.' (p. 249). Thus, Charade's search produces an unexpected result. The clues leading to this discovery are scattered at regular intervals in the book (for example pages 101, 159, 218, 236,

291, 304, 324) yet are not easily accessible until Charade changes her perception of the search.

Charade has to continually assess the reliability of those who are giving evidence in her trial of the past. This aspect is reinforced by Koenig's ex-wife who is a Jewess called upon to give evidence that the 1940's actually existed, that the holocaust was a reality.

Koenig becomes a part of that past through his fleeting encounter with Katherine. Once found by Charade, he finds it difficult and, ultimately, not at all desirable to escape. As she continues to tell her stories, each night between eleven and dawn, he becomes more and more inclined to believe that if she stops talking, stops creating images in her efforts to recreate the past, to trace the thread of truth through the labyrinth of time, that she will cease to exist. She is a product of her narrative. She is the storyteller until the point where he takes over in a bid to prevent her slipping into the black hole of his previous, empty nights and, since time doubles back on itself, and plots have their endings in their beginnings, the empty 'corridors' of his future. He has come to share her obsession. He is forced, when she leaves, to replace their shared obsession with his own: trying to pinpoint Charade's reality in an effort to give his life form, structure and meaning.

What Turner Hospital reveals in a progressively more demanding structure, is the desire of the creator for control, for power. As we have heard Jean-Marc say: 'This is the Pygmalion factor . . . ' It is a challenge to the writer to make the readers a part of the text, to bring their structures and experiences to inter-relate with the printed word. The lesson, ultimately, however, is that realities are too multiple, too slippery to ever really grasp and that the nearest one can come to another's reality is still distant. Control is not within our power. It is illusion, myth, dream. Solipsism is a condition of existence which an artist can only minimise by sharing personal insights to human motivation and behaviour and analysing our understanding of the process of creation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Ivory Swing*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1982, p. 45. All further quotes from this edition, page numbers in text.

<sup>2</sup>*The Tiger in the Tigerpit*, London, Abacus by sphere Books, 1987, p. 32. All further quotes from this edition, page numbers in text.

<sup>3</sup>*To the Lighthouse*, St Albans, Triad/Panther Books, 1977, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup>*Borderline*, St Lucia, University of Qld Press, 1987, p. 189. All further quotes from this edition, page numbers in text.

<sup>5</sup>*Charades*, St Lucia, University of Qld Press, 1988, pp. 31-2. All further quotes from this edition, page numbers in text.