

Becoming Different in the Work Of Janette Turner Hospital

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VARIOUS FORMS OF dislodgement, both cultural and temporal, provide the principal narrative and thematic impetus in Janette Turner Hospital's work. Her books and stories have a tendency to announce in their very titles that their business lies with the edges of self-possession and the embattled provisionality of belonging. Characters frequently find themselves in places or situations that are foreign to them for one reason or another, and, displaced from their histories, they often find themselves needing to reconstruct them. In these multi-layered displacements inevitably one of the areas that the characters have to negotiate is that of extreme and alienating difference. This leads to two related problems: how to represent the Other, and how to incorporate one's sensitivities with respect to that representation into rendering the Self.¹

In these encounters with strangers and the strange, Hospital is clearly committed to the contemporary validation of the Other, at least within the literary world. At the same time, there is a realization that we are culture-bound to such an extent that contact with the Other serves to open up difference as well as to enclose us within the position from which we perceive that contact. She has pursued the operations of the paradox this creates for the person who is committed to valorizing difference, finding it both troubling and stimulating. She pointedly began her first volume of short stories, *Dislocations* (1986), with "Happy Diwali," a story of Canadians of European origin in India, which portrays a strong version of these issues in terms of cultural differences and the operation of those differences within oneself. The Canadian edition of this volume ends symmetrically

with another story of white Canadians in India—"Port after Port, the Same Baggage"; the Australian edition, which appeared the following year, adds three further stories, all set in Australia, albeit all also strongly focused on coping with dislocation.

Her first novel, *The Ivory Swing* (1982), similarly wrestles with cultural differences, the lines of which are crossed this time by the complicity of two different cultures (the Anglo-Canadian and the Keralan) in maintaining power inequalities between men and women. Ten years later, in *The Last Magician* (1992), Hospital moves on courageously to approach difference along the multiple axes prefigured in *The Ivory Swing* but with far more assurance, subtlety, and disquiet.

As a moralist, Hospital appears to see in the encounter with difference one of the principal moral problems of our time, a source of self-knowledge and—more dispiritingly—of violence. Her exploration of difference is multi-layered: there are the encounters of men with women, the encounters of peoples from different cultures, and, subsuming these two, the encounter of the powerful with the powerless.

An increasingly mobile world has made the shock of meeting radical difference an ever more frequent psychological occurrence. Whether this difference happens in the realms of culture, class, or gender, the existence of other models of appropriate behaviour has to be faced with a certain urgency. The frightening "quarry" or underworld of the marginalized in *The Last Magician*—although set in Hospital's "own" Australia—may do duty as one of the more compulsive representations in contemporary writing of the zones to which we attempt to banish difference. At the same time, as a recuperation of this difference, it is both a personal attempt on Hospital's part to mediate the horror of being attacked and robbed by four knife-wielding thugs in 1987 and an effort to evoke our sympathy for the marginalized energies and identities that have slipped below our sympathy. For after all, this place exists, in Hospital's words, not just "at the edge of the respectable affluent professional side of the city" but as its "murky desperate underside" ("Margins" 29). That is, these two zones are intimately related for the quarry maintains respectability in some way, providing the terms through which respectability defines itself.

As a version of the encounter with difference, the shock men and women experience in relationship with each other occurs throughout Hospital's fiction. Hospital can see no escape from this melancholy reality other than in local instances, and she is more an excellent chronicler of the fault-lines along which the shocks travel than a prophet of change, more a witness to reasons for anger than a presenter of solutions. One does not have to search far in her work to find occasions for dismay. The most chilling occurs in the story "The Last of the Hapsburgs," in the collection *Isobars* (1990). In this story, the boundaries of class, age, and race are crossed to a certain extent when schoolteacher Miss Davenport finds herself swimming in a bush pool with two of her pupils, Rebecca and Hazel. The boundary between the genders, however, remains uncrossed and in fact becomes even wider and dirtier. While the woman and girls are swimming in the pool, a group of boys appears and "in an intense and spiritual state, a kind of sacrilegious ecstasy" (25) call out the sort of things one might expect of boys of their kind when confronted by naked women, exhibiting a kind of demonization of difference with women's sexuality as object of aggression. When one of them—the son of a policeman, putatively one of society's enforcers of fairness—defecates in the water, they steal the women's clothing and race off. The projector of knowledge and wisdom, Miss Davenport, can say nothing to the girls to assuage the sense of pollution they have suffered:

That steaming fact, dropping stolidly into the pool, spoke a thick and dirty language. The acts of men, even when they are boys, Miss Davenport thought, are shouts that rip open the signs that try to contain them. We have no access to a language of such noisiness. Our voices are micemutter, silly whispers. We will have to stay here in the pool forever, she thought. We are dead ends, the last of a line, masters of the genre of silence. We will have to invent a new language of moss and water. (27)

Hospital herself will not stay in the pool, and her voice is resonant with more than "micemutters" or "silly whispers." But in the face of male violence, already instituted in childhood, words can definitely seem limited defences.²

When Hospital widens her concern with difference to include the more general encounter between those who have power and

those who do not, she has no doubt that this still remains hugely gendered. It is no accident that the refugee in *Borderline* is a woman, that the principal victim in *The Last Magician* is a woman, that the tyrant in *Tiger in the Tiger Pit* is a man, and that the twinned women in *The Ivory Swing* feel trapped by male-generated structures of power. Yet even apart from this perception, there runs a current of sympathy in Hospital's work for the dispossessed, for those outside society's structures of approval or power, whether men or women, broken old men, prostitutes, drug addicts, the poor, Aborigines (in whose defence Hospital is becoming more absorbed, as her novel-in-progress affirms). In any literary encounter with difference, however, we can legitimately wonder to what degree the author has been able to be selfconscious about the ideological forces operating in her representations.

Difference traditionally has been exoticized, aestheticized, and employed to support various degrees of hierarchization; the attempt to circumvent such dubious use of difference can lead the unwary into further stereotyping. Is Hospital's representation of Yashoda in *The Ivory Swing* yet one more in the long Western series of portrayals of Eastern women as sensual objects of male desire (as Graham Huggan suggest), or is the representation of her sexuality an attempt to recuperate an active sexuality for women whose sexuality has been repressed and formally constructed both by their own and other cultures? Are Huggan's difficulties with this book and with such constructions evidence of the difficulty that exists in representing women's sexuality in ways that have not been inflected by centuries of male objectification? Is Hospital's representation of Cat in *The Last Magician* the intellectual's sentimentalization of the marginalized, a transgressor whose transgression is all attitude and little else, a transgressor whose closest friends after all are brainy successes in the system? Or is Cat both a transgressor against the straight system as well as against the shadow codes in which transgression is generally enacted? Perhaps Cat is a genuine outsider, one whose transgression consists not in fighting the system (for this is still to be constructed in the system's terms) but in simply ignoring it. But then, are not Lucy, the prostitute who quotes Dante,

and her friend Sheba, the prostitute with a heart of gold, too obviously liberal wish-fulfillments or literary conventions?

As with any textual representations, we cannot say that these things are either one thing or the other for all readers in all situations. However, the important nexus of Hospital's fiction shows that there is a consistent context within which to judge her attempts at rendering the Other positively, and this context exists in terms not of understanding difference but of becoming that difference, carried further to the othering of the reader. To claim to understand or to sympathize with difference, after all, has been the ploy (well-meaning or otherwise) of Orientalists everywhere; they establish a binary opposition that cannot help but expel the Other to a margin or different space.

This is clearly what annoys Huggan in *The Ivory Swing*, although there is a sense in which Juliet's encounter with Yashoda results in an attempt to read both Yashoda's predicament as well as Juliet's through the perspective afforded by Yashoda. That is, in experiencing the cultural Other, Juliet interrogates her own situation more forcefully. Instead of simply reading Yashoda's situation and doing something about it—or not—Juliet partly has become the Other, that is, Yashoda. Juliet's own existence thus becomes inflected with Yashoda's, just as Yashoda's become inflected with Juliet's perfectly self-conscious ethnocentric perceptions and interventions. To a limited extent, then, there is not simply "understanding" the Other going on in this novel but a degree of cohabiting with that Other, an attempt to reel it in from its oppositional margins. This is what marks Hospital's most successful explorations of different cultures encountering each other, and, as Margaret Schramm points out, Yashoda and Juliet operate as doubles in a typical Hospital strategy of twinned characters, each a version of the other. Difference is not simply alienating but empowering for both women, even though exerting power is constructed by both women's cultures as transgression.

This construction of difference as something powerful and positively powerful when lived within oneself has become increasingly central to Hospital's fiction. From the angrily direct representation of cultural difference in *The Ivory Swing*, we have

come to the multiple incorporations of difference in *The Last Magician*. In this novel, Hospital takes her native Australia, her first novel exclusively to do so, and places difference and responses to difference right at its heart. How does her country respond to and create difference? What might the results be of different potential constructions of difference? And what glosses Kristeva's words in *Strangers to Ourselves* when she writes: "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (1). Whether this is an impossibly utopian contemporary piety or not, Kristeva's words exist as a sort of clarion call to sympathetic identification with difference.

In *The Last Magician*, characters are constantly having to face up to difference of one sort or another — either the difference of others or the fact that they are different to others. At the same time, the principal characters find that in certain ways and under certain circumstances they become that difference, they become absorbed by and infused with that difference. This can be seen in various guises. Lucy, for example, the narrator, calls it shape-shifting³ and it occurs first when she is a girl observing an extreme example of social difference: a derelict woman, unkempt, exposing herself. Not knowing where to look, she is suddenly 'inside the woman, looking out at the shocked mob' (40). From that moment, she is unable to inhabit the social space marked out for her by her background; when she has this experience, she sees "that there were parallel worlds, that you could cross a line" (37). The novel offers several variations of this entry of people into one another throughout the novel, although none so radical as Lucy's. This entry into another's psyche establishes for her that the whole construction of society on the basis of hierarchies of power is "the only question worth asking" (91).

In Kristeva's observations on recognizing the foreigner within ourselves, she calls up possible flaws in her own argument:

A symptom that precisely turns "we" into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (1)

Apart from the impossible suggestion that anyone could be "unamenable to bonds and communities,"⁴ this provides a lead-in to the other, dark side of allowing the other into ourselves in *The Last Magician*. For confronting difference turns "we" into a problem, carried in the novel by the difficulties Euro-Australians have in constructing Australian-born Charlie Chang as an Australian. At this level, the difficulties of history and ethnicity make illusory in the extreme any notion of overcoming difference. And it is noticeable also that once again Hospital represents these things as fiercely embedded in childhood, and specifically a gendered childhood:

Deviation from the ordinary is not permitted here except as a source of amusement. . . . bewilderment is no excuse, certainly not in frightened little boys encumbered with arcane social rituals and bafflements and bed-wettings and sheer foreignness, which is a terrible liability in Australia. (77)

There is another outsider in this novel, however, whose fate is even more depressing. Cat is an outsider for various reasons: she does not conform to notions of femininity; her family does not conform to notions of material progress and polite decency; and most shockingly for those who wield power, she does not perceive herself in terms of the hierarchies operating in society. She does not see herself as powerless and does not even relate to the system of classification on which hierarchies are established. She is untouchable by measurement, grading, sorting, or any kind of ranking, and it is this which both horrifies and attracts Robbie. Indeed, the novel is constantly interested in the ways in which power is both attracted and repulsed by difference. Not that Hospital sets it up simplistically, for there is another representative of power, Catherine, who always shows solidarity with Cat. Catherine comes from a wealthy and powerful family, as does Robbie, but provides a contrasting vision of how to use that power. While Robbie uses it to enforce social hierarchies, Catherine becomes a noted documentary maker, a challenger of the operations of power, a sort of John Pilger figure attempting to ensure a selfish society's responsibility towards those at the bottom of the power structure (119-21).

Moreover, both Charlie and Catherine are represented as being in some way merged with Cat, as having Cat as part of their

psyche. In response to Lucy's question, "Charlie, who is Cat?" Charlie replies "She's part of me" (163). Completing the triangle, Catherine is also part of Charlie, perceived by him at one point as "My twin. . . . Myself" (284). Like Lucy when shape-shifting, Charlie

could even feel the rough texture of the office chair against the underside of her thighs and the abrasion of the wooden desk against her knees and the slight pressure where her ankles touched each other. . . . He simply looked at her and wanted the missing parts of himself. (284-85)

At their most hopeful moment, "Cat is part of [both of] them. They are whole again" (287). Furthermore, in writing about her deciphering/constructing of their story, Lucy, the narrator, becomes related similarly to Charlie and Gabriel, claiming to the police that "they are part" of her (306).

Of the two men who are valorized in this novel, one is the more visually obvious outsider, Charlie Chang; the other is Gabriel, the son of the principal representative of power, violence, and hostility to difference, Robinson Gray. If power-structures consolidate themselves, how has Gray allowed his son to become involved with a prostitute and a socially-marginalized Chinese-Australian photographer and brothel-keeper?

This leads us to another strand in Hospital's work: difference is seen as a constitutive element within the most integrating of social structures—the family. The only really happy families in her fiction appear to need a rural Australian connection and to have been forged out of some form of dysfunction: Emily, Adam, and Dave the Australian, in *Tiger in the Tiger Pit*; Gabriel's mother and her second husband and children, in *The Last Magician*; and Bea's family in *Charades*. Mostly, however, family dynamics inevitably establish difference at the centre of social relations—Freud's principal contribution to our perception of social development. Kristeva, referring to Freud's essay "The Uncanny," notes:

With Freud indeed, foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and, without being restricted to madness, beauty, or faith anymore than to ethnicity or race, irrigates our very speaking-being. . . . Henceforth, we know that we are foreigners to ourselves. (170)

The title of Freud's essay is an unsatisfactory but powerful translation of "Das Unheimliche" ("The Unhomely"). Freud finds that "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a subspecies of *heimlich*" (347). The notion includes the startling variations of not only "homelike" but even "something hidden and dangerous" (346). What is "at home" may also be, then, "secret," or different, and "dangerous." What is most "at home" is our selves; in which case, we are also secret and dangerous to ourselves, we are our own Other. If this is so, how can we expect to overcome the differences of other families, other genders, other cultures, other races in terms of eliding that difference, of making it not different? In the continuum between these conflict zones, self-possession both affirms itself and disintegrates so that we can say that in Hospital's work the uncertainty of the subject is always already predicated upon its first social context. It is not a matter of overcoming difference, but of being with it, and affirming it *as difference*. In Hospital's work, then, we are always already Other to ourselves, and this constitutes the starting point for accepting and valuing difference in others. We all need to be able to shapeshift. It is not enough to be able to understand difference from a position of not-difference, which is a vain hope, but to see *ourselves* as difference.

We can see how this operates by looking at the final level of othering in Hospital's texts: the prose, or the fiction itself, operates so as to take us as readers into a type of displacement from which we experience the security of our reading positions as troubled. The operation of agency and responsibility in Hospital's fictional world serves to show that we are already displaced from our own histories as well as the possibility of recuperating them unambiguously.⁵ Narrating the quests of her characters to construct these histories, Hospital produces very strong plots, mysteries even, in all of her novels, bar her first, in which we are faced with puzzles which these characters attempt to work out. She has even written an excellent mystery novel, *A Very Proper Death*, under the pseudonym of Alex Juniper. These plots, the skeins of which are certainly not readily apparent at

first, serve to involve the reader in an inevitable postulating of hypotheses and projection, of decoding strategies. If, as Lucy insists in *The Last Magician*, "the very reason for telling stories . . . is to insist there is shape and meaning and direction in the messy flood that we find ourselves floundering in" (299), then as readers we operate in terms of the same imperative. As John Moss says, "Reading *Borderline*, I am aware of myself reading" (184). We are forced to work at constructing the text. This is by no means straightforward, and we are constantly dislocated in time and in narrative voice, as well as in hermeneutical certainty, in our encounter with the multiple voices, aberrant decodings, and time dislocations of these plots.

We might follow Robert Newman, in *Transgressions of Reading*, and see this as a postmodern exile of the reader from the certainties, such as they are, of the realm of the Symbolic, and as a return to that realm with the sense of its certainties threatened and destabilized. In Lacan's analysis of human development, the Symbolic is the realm one passes into after one has learned to differentiate between oneself and others, and in this differentiation, in Newman's formulation, "the individual becomes a subject of language and will forever anticipate his own image in the images of Others" (68). The movement of exile and return, Newman characterizes as a metaphor for our desire to find the place from which we have been exiled to the Symbolic, some sort of lost originary unity, and our eventual realization that we can never find our way back into that unity. Hospital's work seems tailor-made for such perceptions, given her heavy narrative investment in characters' investigating what I spoke of at the outset as their histories, reconstructing where they have come from, the family dynamics that have gone into their making, and how it is they have become displaced. Hospital remarks, in an interview with Francine Ringold, that some readers find her difficult. This dismays her for she tries not to be difficult. However, difficulty arises out of the need of her fiction to cast us into the role of exiles along with her characters, the better to enable us to experience the multiple displacements and differences that lie at the heart of her fiction. She wants us to experience them not as something exterior to ourselves but as something in which we

participate. She achieves this most convincingly in *The Last Magician*. We are cast among competing voices, competing imaginaries, and only emerge at the end after a complex negotiation of their tales. This is not simply suspense on Hospital's part or something she wilfully builds into her fictions; it is intrinsic to her moral concerns. In order to feel the stranger as ourselves, in order to feel the Other of her stories, we need to feel our own difference, to be exiled from ourselves as readers.

In Newman's words, "readers as exiles from an ideal Imaginary state seek to recover that state by wandering the text, only to continually wander into recognitions of their exiled condition" (19). If we accept entry into Hospital's world, we engage with being exiled or displaced for long sections of her novels, certainly for most of *Borderline*, *Charades*, and *The Last Magician*. The working out of the various strands of the plots might be thought of as a return to where we had been displaced from only to find that it is not the same place after all and that we also have changed. This is not the same as the re-establishment of order at the end of the conventional mystery novel, for, as Aamer Hussein notes of *The Last Magician*, it "is also a tragedy that subverts for its purposes the form of a murder mystery, in which corpses disappear or cannot be proved to exist, and the secret assassin is the brute power of society" (25). Reading our way through this mystery, we find that we cannot, in Newman's formulation of our desire as readers, "retrospectively impose order by relieving the tensions generated by the plot" (20), because there are too many uncertainties left over and because where we must return to is precisely the society which has proved to be "the secret assassin." And "society," of course, is the ultimate collapser of difference inasmuch as we are all somewhere inside it. It is a place where we are all at home and yet it is at the same time secret and dangerous for all of us. Perhaps reading Janette Turner Hospital exiles the reader but what is most troubling, ultimately, is coming home—to a place which is not homely.

NOTES

¹ See my article "Janette Turner Hospital and the Discourse of Displacement."

² In *The Last Magician*, there also is an episode of children defecating on those who outrage their perception of who can do what (224).

- ³ This term also appears in *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit*, where, however, it refers pejoratively to what appears to Jason as his sister's psychic instability (225).
- ⁴ We should note the suggestion here that the foreigner is always gendered (perhaps a male is the only and ultimate foreigner for a woman, but more likely this is a translator's rendering of the gender-constrained French language).
- ⁵ See my article "Acting in the Public Sphere and the Politics of Memory in Janette Turner Hospital."

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