

Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician*: 'A Feminist's Nightmare'?

Janette Turner Hospital's novels do not engage with any singular feminist agenda. Indeed, Laurel Bergmann suggests that Turner Hospital's commitment to feminism is 'constant' but 'shifting',¹ and she links characters in *Charades* to specific types of feminisms: Kay to an 'egalitarian' liberal feminism that seeks equality with men, Bea to 'cultural' feminism that valorises the qualities of women, and the forever-wounded Verity to 'what is sometimes called victim feminism'.² Not only do characters relate to the various feminisms but, for Bergmann, Turner Hospital's novels embody the ethos of particular developmental stages in the evolution of feminism: *The Ivory Swing* exemplifies the 'consciousness raising' of the seventies; *Tiger in the Tigerpit* captures the 'inversion of values' inherent in cultural feminism, and *Charades* exudes a postmodern feminism which 'seeks to deconstruct all binary oppositions'.³

Bergmann is not the only writer to observe that Turner Hospital's representations of feminism are complex. Some even find that her work seems to contest a feminist commitment to seeking empowerment and public recognition for women (in whatever areas specific agendas may prioritise). Helga Ramsey-Kurz, for example, believes Turner Hospital's female characters fail to act continuously in the public sphere. Their quests remain private.⁴ Jennifer Strauss states very clearly that *Charade's* search for the father is 'an element that is highly problematic in feminism'.⁵

Turner Hospital's 1992 novel, *The Last Magician*, may quite justifiably draw similar comments from critics but perhaps the most interesting observation, from a feminist perspective, is the emphatic suggestion from Kate Temby that it is 'a feminist's nightmare'.⁶ This description is based on the fact that after almost three hundred and fifty pages of intrigue and pursuit, the narrator reaches a conclusion that apparently works against any public recognition and acknowledgement of women as subjects and agents in their own right. The narrator stands and reflects on what she has learnt in her quest for justice and decides:

There are things we know. And there are things we don't realise we know. And there are times when we decide it is better not to find out what perhaps we unconsciously know.... Nothing can ever be known for sure.⁷

Disappointed in this apparent conclusion, Temby suggests that because the narrator denies 'herself knowledge [she] denies herself power'.⁸ Disturbed about the 'unresolved tensions and paradoxes' and the way in which the novel 'appears to privilege disorder', she asserts that while '[a]pparently proposing an emancipatory politics in its writing of the marginalised into the centre of the text, it actually enacts further marginalisation'.⁹ For Temby, then, the nightmarish quality of *The Last Magician* rests in its link to the all too familiar and recurring experience of being silenced and thwarted. For feminists of all persuasions, this is a 'nightmare' that does not confine itself to the hours of darkness. It is a lived experience that has become a point of departure that propels feminist agendas towards social change: *The Last Magician*, however, with its silenced, self-mutilating, and predominantly absent protagonist, does not appear to be moving in this direction. It is a dark novel.

The phrase 'a feminist's nightmare' is drawn from the novel itself (327). It is a label given by the narrator Lucy (an ex-'prostitute' turned barmaid turned documentary maker)¹⁰ to another similarly qualified character, Sheba (Temby's 'woman least prone to self-deception').¹¹ The important difference between Sheba and Lucy (to which I will return) is that Lucy tags documentary maker onto her curriculum vitae while Sheba, a salt of the earth pragmatist, consciously rejects anything 'arty' (7) that might critique marginalisation or examine the power relations that permeate the narrative. 'We got beer on tap and the world's still turning' (7) is Sheba's response to Lucy's support of Gabriel and Charlie's dangerous search for Cat, a woman who went missing in mysterious and violent circumstances many years previously. Sheba is a 'feminist's nightmare', then, because she is willing to accept the status quo despite the dangers it holds for women like Cat (who disappears). Sheba claims, for example, that Lucy, like Charlie and Gabriel before her, is 'not gonna change anything' (8). She categorically rejects the feminist urge for change or the minimal demand of social justice that those who are marginalised should have their voices heard. In her experience as a working class woman who believes she already speaks her own mind and controls her own life, feminists are judgmental troublemakers who treat her 'worse than any of the blokes do' (327). The novel and Sheba, according to Temby's commandeering of the term, both support the status quo,

although Sheba does so more openly and honestly without any self-deceptive pretence of an attempt at emancipation.

Temby's analysis of the novel is scholarly and meticulous as it correlates literary and scientific theorists of chaos. It precisely (if disapprovingly) traces the many ambivalences Turner Hospital maps through her representations of women, of prostitution, of Cat's 'power', and of Lucy's unwillingness to accept what she knows. These ambivalences are troublesome to Temby; they are a part of the criticism that she makes of the novel's 'self-conscious narrative method, which consistently problematises notions of a coherent, stable and unified narrative self'.¹² In her argument, it is the novel's very self-consciousness that finally subverts 'the possibility of it providing a comprehensive or effective critique of oppressive power structures'. Although she acknowledges that *The Last Magician* is about the 'fabrication of artistic representation, consciously challenging the feasibility of mimesis' she ultimately minimises, as does Sheba, the self-consciously 'arty'.¹³

Part of the depth of Temby's disappointment is, perhaps, that the novel very effectively sharpens her sense of injustice alongside her feminist desire to see the marginalised gain some control over the power structures that define social relations. This sharpening is due to the absence of the qualities or events that Temby craves: she wants the narrator to act more definitively on what she thinks she knows. As a capable and sure-footed heroine who makes a difference, Lucy would then bring Judge Robinson Gray to justice as the prime suspect in Cat's disappearance.

Temby's frustration is not difficult to understand. As marginalised subjects (Lucy is an orphan, Cat is working class, Charlie is Australian/Chinese and Katherine, although she has class privilege, is a woman) the characters struggle to access any social justice. They fail. These seekers after 'truth' constantly run into blind alleys. No one who is lost is found again. Indeed, more people vanish as both Charlie and Lucy's boyfriend, Gabriel, also go missing during their search for a woman who has been absent, even presumed dead, for many years. The underworld of violence, uncertainty and corruption that the characters increasingly inhabit *does* seem to be spreading; its pernicious influence extends well into the 'clean' realms of the judiciary itself. The innocent and underprivileged are abandoned, exploited or disappear to maintain the status quo. In all this, as Aamer Hussein notes, 'the secret assassin is the brute power of

society'.¹⁴ Art emerges as the only recourse or refuge for the protagonists: Cat became a stripper/performer prior to her disappearance, Katherine and Lucy are documentary makers and Charlie is a photographer.

Indeed, the self-conscious 'artiness' that Temby minimises is central to understanding that *The Last Magician* is a novel that foregrounds its own textuality (the constructedness of its narrative) in order, as poststructuralist narrative theorist Ross Chambers would claim, to produce a 'reading context'.¹⁵ In generating this context, that is, in prioritising the textuality of the narrative and the creative process as the vanguard of the text, *The Last Magician* constitutes its readers as 'interpretive subjects'.¹⁶ It works with and intensifies the desire for change. Temby's response is the result of thwarted desire: she wants to see the marginalised admitted into the realms of meaning-making, she wants evidence that the voice of the other makes a difference. The desire for change is intense because it has been stimulated but not consummated. I will return to this issue of how the novel works with desire and creates interpretive subjects, but first I want to look at a scene in which the recognition of unearned privilege is confronted and the narrator realises not only that the other has a voice, but that 'the' other may well be a part of one's own shifting identity.

In this scene, Lucy is recalling a moment from her younger life when she was known as Lucia Barclay, the private school girl who for the first time sees herself (and her privilege) from someone else's point of view. In the novel this is called 'shapeshifting' and it is described as a state of being 'inside the skin of other people' and 'seeing out of their eyes' (37). It occurs on Brisbane's Brunswick Street railway station, when Lucia sees an old woman expose herself and swear hysterically before being dragged out of sight by the authorities. Lucia is shocked into an involuntary shapeshift; for a second she is no longer Lucia but becomes the old woman. On its own, though, this does not give her a sense of herself as Lucia. A second shapeshift during the same episode becomes the catalyst for this specific recognition:

Lucia, shaken, her mouth dry, is for some reason face to face with another girl of about her own age, a girl not in private school uniform, not in a state school uniform, not in a uniform at all. The girl wears shapeless army-surplus pants and a torn white T-shirt and she has dirty brown hair and her eyes smoulder with scorn.

For seconds, possibly minutes, they are face to face, eye to eye. Then the girl speaks. 'You stuck-up bitch!' she says in a low intense voice. 'No-one's ever gonna lay a finger on you, are they, Lady Muck? No one's gonna ram his prick up your arse when you weren't expecting it, is he? You prissy little fancypants cunt!'

Lucy blinks. At school she has a reputation for saying unsayable words, but this is not a language she knows, and she attempts to translate slowly, groping for meaning, dazed. 'Pardon?' she asks from polite habit.

'Oh fuck off,' the girl says. 'Think you're the bloody Queen of Sheba!' She spits in Lucy's face.

Then it happens again. Lucia can feel the baggy pants around her legs, and she is looking out at a girl in a neat private school uniform, an almost unbelievably ignorant foolish girl, a stuck-up bitch, a mere kindergarten child, a prissy little fancypants cunt. (41)

Immediately apparent in this scene is the atmosphere of disruptive and unsettling violence that precedes the development of Lucia's social conscience, her decision to abandon the identity of Lucia and align herself with the underprivileged. The unknown girl who confronts Lucia is totally alien in all respects. She has no defining features that Lucia can initially recognise, no 'uniform' to signify her identity. The language she uses is extraordinarily distant from Lucia's experience of meaning making, and the sexual violence she describes so foreign, that Lucia's infantilisation at the hands of the mysterious creature before her is complete—so complete that Lucia is suddenly 'looking out' at herself in disbelief. She experiences what Achim Reinschmidt calls 'the first opening of the cracks in [her] ... personality'.¹⁷

This experience, though, is not simply the representation of an emotional state. It is a physical experience. Lucia 'can feel the baggy pants around her legs' she is *outside* her own skin, self-conscious and other-conscious simultaneously. It is, indeed, to recall Temby, an example of a 'self-conscious narrative method, which consistently problematises notions of a coherent, stable and unified narrative self'.¹⁸ The Lucia that Lucy narrates has lost the capacity to make meaning out of what is presented to her because the event fractures her subjectivity, catapulting her involuntarily, in this particular instance, away from the autonomy and agency associated with the unified humanist subject. From this point on, Lucia, as a posthumanist subject, has an identity that is never totalised. Careful reading reveals that the orphan Lucia had '[n]o known antecedents or place of origin. [She's] a

genuine foundling' (37). Turner Hospital has created a character that, in a very Derridean sense, has moved beyond definition through an originating presence.

Like her namesake Lucifer, like the girl on Brunswick Street station, the new Lucy is an outsider. Not surprisingly, then, she tells Charlie that she 'used to check [her] shoulders for wing buds every night. [She] reckoned if they sprouted, they'd be black, and they'd be barbed at their scalloped tips' (16). This, however, is only one meaning of the name Lucy. Elizabeth Williamson also draws attention to the Latin meaning of Lucy 'born at day-break' and asserts 'there is no suggestion' 'Lucy is bad or evil'.¹⁹

It is a mark of Lucy's status as always already deconstructed that her name may be interpreted simultaneously in connection with both darkness and light in a way that destabilises that very opposition. She is, in fact, only ever defined contextually. As a working prostitute she adopts a malleable *namelessness* (27) that facilitates her ability to become anything or anyone, or wear any 'costume' the client desires. For her clients the twins, she is Matron Montmorency (117); with Mr Prufrock she stands in for Catherine (121); in Charlie's pictures taken during their initial meeting she is nameless.

A Brisbane private school-girl (Lucia) turned barmaid (Luce) become Sydney waitress and prostitute (Lucy) and, some would argue, 'Hospital's alter ego', Lucy links the theme of marginalisation and power to the issue of 'artistic representation'.²⁰ At all times, and this is the important aspect of her current occupation as documentary maker, Lucy narrates and documents herself. No one else represents her. Rather, she wilfully exploits available representations, creating boundaries between aspects of her subjectivity. Her identity is contingent upon the position from which she reads her plenitude and presents a self to be read by others.²¹ The 'shapeshifting' at Brunswick Street station is Lucia's rebirth as a self-conscious narrator who no longer has 'a coherent, stable and unified narrative self'.²² She is now what Lauretis called, quite some time ago, an 'eccentric' subject, one that occupies an 'excessive critical position ... attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses'.²³ When Lucy steps away from Lucia, her displacement is not a displacement outside discourse; it is a representation of her

excess to any one discourse, a representation of her legitimate, newly discovered plenitude.

That plenitude and mobility create the capacity to develop something essential to any emancipatory politics: a critical self. Lucy is emphatic that she is 'in transit' (116), a 'tourist' (276) who, unlike others, can and will leave the underworld she currently inhabits. Her mobility and claims to 'freedom' are still constrained, however, by the acknowledgment that her freedom is a '[c]hoice of cages' (43). She simply has more 'leg-room' as a prostitute because she doesn't have to 'shut down so much' (116). Alert, mobile and critical (although still at times confused) Lucy is effectively located and constituted in an/other space of difference that needs representation. Her agency rests in a capacity to think critically about difference and marginalisation and *then* to access the means of representing that thinking: to insert herself into the process of cultural production where her ideas may intensify the desire in readers/viewers for change.

The Last Magician (particularly if the notion of Lucy as Turner Hospital's alter ego is pursued) becomes a sign of agency itself. Joan Scott's description of a non-humanist form of agency accurately describes the *modus operandi* represented in and enacted through a novel that investigates:

how individual subjects *come to understand who they are* as social beings, to assume identity as a shifting ground, not as a permanent accomplishment, and thus to think of agency as action taken in specific contexts, but not entirely autonomously or without constraint. Constraints are political, ideological, conceptual, linguistic. And identities are constructed discursively, oppositionally, relationally.... There is agency, but not the agency of self-determining individuals. The *point of analysis is to understand the contexts and meanings of actions, how these create and consolidate identities*.... One of the interesting historical questions ... is how far have people managed to stretch and change what seem to be established meanings? (*italics mine*)²⁴

The emphasis here is upon 'the point of analysis'. It is upon the subject's sentience, its reflexivity, its very capacity 'to understand the contexts and meanings of actions, how these create and consolidate identities'. Turner Hospital's writing is about trying to 'stretch and change what seem to be established meanings' by understanding the impact of contexts, constraints and distinctions. She cannot remove these constraints. She can examine them and encourage others to do the same. As both narrator and documentary maker, it is Lucy who controls what

the reader perceives. The narrator marks the shift in her own identity through the presentation of a documentary-style narrative. She reports this incident that occurred to her previous self. She begins, from that point onwards, to take on the desires and politics of those who have been outside the frame of her experience and therefore, for her, beyond representation.

Lucia's initial blindness in relation to the perspective of the other, and the consequent absence of considerations of social justice (symbolised through the physical absence of characters like Cat, Charlie and Gabriel) are *representations* within the narrative of that which is 'outside' the frame of reference and therefore beyond representation. Turner Hospital as standing for change (as in Temby's desire) and Turner Hospital as Lucy's alter-ego are constituted differently—as reader and writer, by *The Last Magician*. I want to return to the idea of *how the novel works* with desire and creates these interpretive subjects. This process of capturing the desire that lies outside the frame of representation can be clarified by examining Charlie's approach to photography.

For Charlie, photographs 'beckon' (229). They require an interpretive 'reader'. Through these photographs he hopes 'to know what we know, so that we may inch ourselves toward that place from which *everything* will be seen and understood' (96, *my italics*). Charlie's 'everything' implies an understanding of the discursive work of representation; the way in which photography (here) may be used to construct a 'reality' that it then re-presents. Not surprisingly, Turner Hospital, in speaking of *The Last Magician*, acknowledges that she is 'indebted to Susan Sontag's making us aware of the way the photographer, who seems to be the recorder of unalterable reality, is very much the great selector of reality'.²⁵ She suggests that Charlie is 'a metaphor for the artist. He's not just somebody who snaps photographs; his imagination is a combination of Escher and Magritte and he composes photographs'.²⁶

In *The Last Magician*, Charlie's compositions demonstrate how the status quo is simply a representation that naturalises itself by excluding the desire that is instrumental in its construction. His photographs represent missing desire. His initial meeting with Lucy at work as a prostitute is an illustration of Charlie's methodology. He takes his camera into her 'High Bordello' (33) bedroom for a photoshoot. He uses it to do more than simply capture Lucy's working girl identity—although he does this when

he captures images of fishnet stockings and high heels. Instead of being an instrument by which representations are consolidated, though, the camera becomes a tool for questioning any singular representation. Charlie is very specific about this as he imagines 'possible future images' (33) which emerge:

He sees flesh hooks branching out of her; like rainforest vines, he sees empty coats, fitted around the shapes of ghostly men, swimming like exotic fish through wet green air toward the hook. He considers lighting and shutter speeds. He calls these things photofallacies; or sometimes, singular (and his sense of the absurd is certainly singular), a photophallus. (32-3)

This play on phallus and fallacy introduces multiplicity. It creates a space for *questioning* certainty. Charlie and his camera invite Lucy to speak. In fact, Charlie insists that Lucy talk (i.e. narrate), because 'what she says makes a difference to the pictures' (25). His art creates a space for her voice, her narrative and her realities. He photographs not only the fishnet stockings and high heels but also the emotions that *surround* her self-representation as prostitute. He asks her what her 'private name' is, for example, and the 'shutter licks up the blaze of a border violated' (29) so that it is clear that this prostitute is not all Lucy considers herself to be. When he wants to know what it is like kissing octogenarians, he 'photographs her disgust. He moves *around, above, below, behind*' (27, italics mine) in order to capture what is outside the frame. Charlie photographs the seams that reveal how Lucy's working girl identity is constructed with a remainder.

Despite the fact that the camera has the potential to be an instrument (like the phallus) by which Charlie can silence Lucy by representing her as a whore, this is not his style. Critics may dub his work 'mutational collage' (57), as though he only builds images one upon another, but Charlie describes his work as 'photographic *decompositions*' or the '*declensions* of an image' (52, italics mine). He wants to unravel the way representations are constructed. Although constrained by working mimetically (taking photographs which reproduce an image of what is there) he counteracts this direct mimesis, even before creating his collages from the many photos that he takes, with excessive repetition. Rapid shots slightly shift the frame, capturing what was previously marginalised and omitted. In this way difference is introduced and the singularity of the image denaturalised.

Performing this operation upon what is accepted as real is the task of Charlie's photography, Lucy's narrative and Turner

Hospital's writing. Once representation is actively recognised as constructed, through selection or interpretation, then the role of desire can be investigated.

Charlie's self-representations, for example, reveal his desire for connection. The photograph called *The Two Catherines* is an image of Charlie in his grade five school photograph. Snipped from their own places in the class rows, Catherine and Cat are positioned '[u]nder the curve of each arm, in the hollows of his waist, fitted to him like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle' (49). Clearly this photograph is not a reflection of what was referentially real. It is, however, a projection of Charlie's *desire* for a specific reality, an opportunity for remembered feelings to be made manifest and understood. The discursive nature of photography, its very capacity to mediate, is highlighted by the textuality of this 'composed' photograph. It is a construction calling upon the convention of referentiality to make real what Charlie desires.

The intensity of the desire that created this representation, and the intensity of the loss created by the absence of the two Catherines from Charlie's material life, is reinforced by Lucy's narrative. When she leaves his room and then returns unexpectedly, she finds him:

sitting huddled on the floor beside the bench, rocking himself, his arms folded across his chest. He holds his sides as though he is in terrible pain, as though his ribs are bruised and flayed, as though he is stopping up the bloody openings from which the two Catherines have been ripped.

'Who are they?'

'They are part of me,' he says. (53-54)

This one photograph deals with unity and absence—effectively what is gained and what is lost to Charlie in his efforts to understand his own identity and desire. Unlike other photographers, Charlie does not obscure the capacity for photography to create the illusion of the real. Rather, he specifically draws attention to the places where the puzzle pieces join and leave evidence of the construction of the photograph.

This is even more pronounced in a composition, a subject-in-process, which Lucy sees 'on the workbench' (52) in the very process of construction:

The boy is wearing a Grammar uniform, he is a blow-up from one of the high school photographs, but across the surface of his body the jigsaw outline of a puzzle has been inked, black lines, interlocking tabs and slots. Some of the pieces have been removed by scissors.... The missing puzzle pieces have been stuffed into the boy's other hand which is cupped and

held up for show in a way that seems slightly comic, as though, heroic school prefect that he is, he hangs grimly onto the shreds of a desiccating self. *See, not a single piece lost or unaccounted for! Aren't I a good little boy?* he seems to say. (52)

When Lucy asks '[w]ho is he?', Charlie replies that this boy is 'sometimes' Charlie and 'sometimes' another boy. That other boy is Robinson Gray and the photograph, like Charlie's answer, captures the struggle for a coherent identity. Lucy's reading of the photograph, her placing of words in the mouth of this constructed image reveals that Charlie has caught something 'essential' of Gray. Gray's concern in the photo is Gray's concern throughout the novel: the desire to be read as a 'good little boy' who will become an approved and worthy citizen. At the same time, the entire passage, Charlie's composition of the photograph and Lucy's explicit reading of it, insists on the unequivocal constructedness of this representation of an 'essential' self. What emerges is a (representation by Turner Hospital of a) photograph of Gray's desperate desire to ignore the ripping open of his seamless identity.

Lucy's role in these examples is instrumental to explicating the desires of Robinson Gray and Charlie. She is the pivotal point at which desire coalesces. She makes desire visible whether that desire originates from within the narrative or from beyond its frame. This is precisely because Lucy is a narrator who recognises, sometimes intuitively, sometimes explicitly, the complexity of her role. This can be observed in the scene that immediately follows the one where Charlie asks Lucy the prostitute to identify her 'private name' (29). Lucy responds by angrily demanding to know 'who the hell' he thinks he is. He sets his camera aside, and with it his photographer persona:

'As a matter of fact,' he says, 'I'm your new boss. You work downstairs too, in the restaurant, right?'

'You're the new restaurant manager? You're Mr Charlie Chang? She lights another cigarette and regards him warily.

'D'you know what you're getting into?' (29)

The change in *his* persona means that Lucy must also switch. She does not, however, become Lucy the waitress because that change is made impossible by the context or the room that defines her as prostitute. Instead, in the very next line the narrative voice 'slips' by default into that of the framing narrator, Lucy the documentary maker:

Does he know what he's getting into? he asks himself. Yes and no. The curiosity, the impatience even, for the tomorrows

to unfold themselves is like benzedrine sometimes (he can feel the buzz along the surface of his skin), though at other times he feels suspended ... (29-30)

The narrated Lucy has only just met Charlie, so this omniscience can only belong to the narrating Lucy who is recalling her days of prostitution. There is a definitive change in narrative voice as the most recent incarnation of Lucy continues to insert her bracketed self into the flow of a retrospective narrative:

(If we come across old diaries we have written, if we find ... letters that we wrote long ago, we almost invariably cringe. Oh God, we think, embarrassed. Sometimes we are shocked. Sometimes we feel a stirring of tenderness for that earlier self, for its griefs, its panics, its narcissism.... Certainly *we read ourselves* with the same greedy curiosity and prurience that entice us through the erotic correspondence of strangers.

When we watch ourselves on the screen of the past, we watch a stranger, but one for whom we have complicated feelings.

I watch Charlie and myself in that room. I watch Gabriel and myself at Cedar Creek Falls.... I watch Charlie and Lucy, who is only myself in the most tenuous and convoluted way, and *who was, in any case, acting the part of Lucy*. She wished desperately to appear as a native. She wished to belong to the non-belongers. (30-31, italics mine)

This bracketed aside splits the subjectivity of the narrator in the same way that the girl on Brunswick Street station confronted Lucia. Such bracketing reminds the reader that this character is the product of a story told across layers of time. The self summoned here is also clearly a textualised self, one *read back* from old diaries or letters or (equally textual but more in line with her role as documentary maker) *read back* from previous practices and interactions recalled as images: '[w]e watch ... we watch ... I watch ... I watch ... I watch'. What the empirical reader 'sees' in such a narrative is the seams, the dotted lines of Charlie's photographic technique translated into words.

All of this is reinforced when Lucy and Charlie leave her room for his living quarters. This time, however, the 'seam' is an older one. When Lucy the prostitute enters Charlie's room, Lucy the narrator recalls how she then felt a sudden 'sharp pang of loss ... something like physical pain, or hunger' (51). The comfort and elegance of Charlie's quarters had 'called' to the private school girl Lucia, for whom Lucy feels nothing but 'contempt' (49). Lucy is both narrator (as the documentary-maker) and narrated (as prostitute). She is also, however, Lucia. She is a subject who

exists in the present, the near past and the far past *quite differently yet simultaneously*.

This type of struggle is frequent. Sometimes it is all too much (hence Temby's justifiable response to the 'pessimism' of the text) as Lucy tries to reconcile the conflicting desires within herself. She is tempted to relinquish the struggle to critique power, and lapse instead into a comforting belief that the world is naturally the way it is and she can walk away from the political desire to create change. She feels a temptation to end the story by making it 'bearable', through recourse to the unity of a humanism that bestows 'shape and meaning and direction' (299-300). For Lucy to return to the role of the narrator as the one who knows would minimise the 'experience (of) horror' and fulfil the 'need to understand' (300). '[T]raditional expectations *still intrude*' (299, *italics mine*) she acknowledges.

It is not easy, as Bronwyn Davies has pointed out, to 'shed the patterns of desire, nor the interpretive frameworks that we took up in learning to understand and use humanist discourses' because 'we go on reading ourselves and being read within the terms of ... outmoded discourses'.²⁷ Like a default position, humanism as hegemony offers the allure of understanding the self as a singular identity in control of one's own destiny; it pastes over the contradictions and tensions, it denies both internal and external difference, it excludes the legitimacy of the other and supports the status quo.

Lucy vacillates between remaining marginalised from the events she merely recounts (as though the narrative has a capacity for objectivity) and acknowledging that her own desire shapes the narrative. Her movement into self-textualisation is apparent when she specifically asks herself: 'Is all exegesis of necessity eisegesis in disguise?' (65). She concedes that 'projection' into the text is possible and, as Alistair Stead argues, she soon 'recognises that she is on the margins of crucial experiences that shape the plot of the novel':²⁸

It's not my story though it's odd, is it not, and interesting, and revealing, the way the teller inserts herself into the tale, even when she's trying to avoid it. A funny thing happened on the way to the telling, but in truth I'm scarcely in the script at all.

Marginal notation is my style. *Notes from underground*. (71)

Although at this point Lucy labels her textualising as 'marginal', this question of who is behind the narrative, of whose desire is just outside (or barely inside) the frame of reference, is an important one: the novel is *about* whose desires are voiced as text

and whose desires are relegated to the margins. It is a novel that ultimately insists that the margins at least attempt to become text. The alternative to this is to be silenced and subjected to the abuse or self-abuse that Cat represents. After all, at least a part of the fascination that Cat produces in those who shared her childhood, is the recognition that *they* could just as easily have been Cat.

For Lucy, her own lack of a specified origin, her very plenitude, makes it even more necessary for her to become a narrating protagonist strenuously involved in the process of textualising her own posthumanist subjectivity and desire. Lucy becomes capable of reading and textualising herself by following Charlie's example, unravelling the way representations are constructions; she's reading the 'text of a life' as the 'text of a disarming lie' (74). She frequently shifts the focus of the narrating voice from past to present, and from first to third person, as she gives a running commentary not only on the plot of the novel but also on her own identities.

In relation to Gabriel, for example, she writes: 'But Lucy's opinion of him is erratic, and so is mine. I can't pin him down, I don't quite know how to describe him, and never did, then or now' (134). Here, documentary maker, narrator, and prostitute all have the same name so that the source of the narrating voice is significantly destabilised. It is this quite radical instability that effectively enacts what might be called a *textual* shape-shift. This shift implicates Turner Hospital in the narrative as one possible referent for the 'I' who doesn't 'quite know how to describe' Gabriel. Whenever Lucy draws the reader's attention to her narration as a process of (re)construction, she effectively mimics Charlie's methodology by shifting the frame of reference to reveal the (outside/authorial) desire that shapes *The Last Magician*:

Lucia taking off her neat school uniform and putting on Lucy, Lucy seeping by degrees into me, but who am I?

There is a woman who pauses in her writing, puzzled; a woman without a face, without a voice. Underground woman, who lives below the text, a misinterpreter, a mischief-maker perhaps, a faulty retrieval system which sometimes presumes to call itself an 'I'.

The woman pinches her left forearm with the thumb and index finger of her right hand. She watches an old scar turn bright red and then fade. She touches the imprint of perpetual Nows of pleasure and of harm, of joyous fucks and Lucy-fucks, of pain.

She frowns. She observes her mind, which sits there like a crow on a fence, changelessly monitoring her changing body, doggedly discriminating between Now and Then. *Then*, her mind says with elaborate and withering patience, you were earning money in a grubby room. *Now* you are someone who shies away from speech, who dreams of writing without language since language deceives, who wants to give the silences their say ... (119-120)

Here Lucy reaches behind (or beneath) the story of Cat, Robinson Gray, Charlie and Lucy. The 'woman who pauses in her writing' has a shifting identity. If she is Lucy, she does not know which Lucy she may be; as 'underground woman' she is uncharacteristically 'above board' in this moment of reflection; as a woman 'without a voice' she could be Cat (who refused to speak even before she disappeared); yet she is not inscribed by silence because she is, in fact, pausing in her writing to read and re-read, to step outside the frame of what she has written to think about the relationship between subject and text. As 'misinterpreter' and 'mischief-maker' she creates ambivalence and confusion as much for herself as she does for others. It is not at all difficult in reading this passage to imagine Turner Hospital as Lucy's alter ego, as an intimate who is constantly with Lucy and shares her thoughts and dilemmas, as this 'woman' pausing in her writing, puzzling over where Lucy's boundaries may lie or even where she projects herself, her eisegesis, into the text and the character she writes.

One thing is sure: whoever this persona may be shaped to become, she wants to 'give silences their say' in a way that does not depend upon the narrative function alone, does not depend upon a 'language' that 'deceives'. She wants to speak in and through the contradictions, to draw attention to the way literature functions discursively. She wants to blow apart the illusion that desire plays no role in creating reality so that other desires can be admitted and made productive. In deploying the several selves of the narrating 'I', then, this extract attempts to track the writer's declensions of the self just as Charlie self-consciously constructed the declensions of his images.

In the process, *The Last Magician* constitutes Lucy (without it, she is not) and Turner Hospital as cultural producers. Also, however, through the very confusion that it both represents *and* generates, it taps into the desire of the reader for an answer to the conundrums that the plot presents. This brings us back to Temby and her frustration with the text. The confusion in *The*

Last Magician is a direct appeal to readers to become interpretive subjects. It is necessary for Turner Hospital to have her readers feel overwhelmed. The 'pessimism' that Temby experiences is an entirely appropriate response to a novel described as 'fragmented and black';²⁹ to the sense that there may be no way out of the allegorical and Dantean 'dark wood' of oppressive power structures which Lucy investigates.

The novel, however, begins at precisely the point where Lucy, also feeling disoriented and negative, *makes a decision to act*; to emerge from a wilful amnesia and again to take up the cause of the marginalised and silenced, of those who disappear from view and are never sought. At the end of the novel, Lucy is represented as a cultural producer. She believes that the right to be heard extends beyond personal relationships. Her representations ought to have a voice: 'we should do a documentary' (352) she says to Catherine.

The Last Magician stands as that documentary. As novel and documentary, it examines how various aspects of representation (self, photography and narrative) are invested with the desire of the other (including the other in the self) in this text. The ambivalence Temby finds so disturbing is, in fact, a necessary (pre)condition to change as characters read across the various, sometimes conflicting, layers of their complex posthumanist subjectivities in an effort to discover, understand, embody *and* represent their own desire(s).

In other words, even as *The Last Magician* frequently represents power relations as relations of domination that ultimately silence some, it also *enacts* the opposite. For although Temby is accurate in her claim that this novel 'consistently scrutinises the fabrication of artistic representation, consciously challenging the feasibility of mimesis', it also moves beyond scrutiny. Turner Hospital uses *The Last Magician* to issue a call to readers to recognise that the representation of power which she uses as her base-line, is just that: a representation, a fabrication which has been endorsed for so long that it has become a naturalised reality which legitimises exclusion and refuses recognition, relegating difference to an underground existence. *The Last Magician*, then, not only consciously challenges the feasibility of mimesis in art, it also, through its very existence in the chain of cultural production, prevents institutionalised power from mimetically reproducing *itself* as natural.

Critically relating *The Last Magician* to feminism is not well served by assessing it against a teleological agenda that requires it to conform to particular or consistent representations of women. Evaluated in this way, it will always deviate into the nightmarish recognition that the status quo is a powerful enemy and that the fight continues daily on multiple fronts with significant mortality rates. Rather, the novel needs to be understood in relation to what John Frow has called postmodernism's 'political awareness of the social and institutional conditions of enunciation'.³⁰ *The Last Magician* has a strong ethical dimension based upon the feminist demand for social justice; and that moral dimension is constructed *within* the matrix of postmodernism's uncertainties, the proliferation of truths, of selves, of meanings that we can no longer ignore and certainly cannot always reconcile. Far from being a 'feminist's nightmare' that simply endorses the status quo, however, this is a text that enacts transformation. The 'last magician' of the title is not Charlie or Lucy or even, as it is overtly suggested, Isaac Newton: 'the last magician', the one capable of changing what is apparently real, is ultimately the text *The Last Magician*.

Sue Lovell

Notes

- 1 Laurel Bergmann, 'Janette Turner Hospital's Radical Re-writing: Oedipal Charades,' *Australian Literary Studies* 17, no. 4 (October, 1996): 364.
- 2 Ibid., 370.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Helga Ramsey-Kurz, 'The Charting of a "Private National Identity" in Janette Turner Hospital's *Charades* and *The Ivory Swing*,' *Nationalism vs Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, eds Wolfgang Zach and Ken Goodwin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996): 345.
- 5 Jennifer Strauss, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? An Australian Perspective,' *Major Minorities: English Literatures in Transit*, Cross/Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English Series, no. 11, ed. Raoul Granqvist, (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993): 41.
- 6 Kate Temby, 'Gender, Power and Postmodernism in *The Last Magician*,' *Westerly* 40, no. 3 (Spring, 1995): 55.
- 7 Janette Turner Hospital, *The Last Magician*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992): 348-349. All further references to this novel will be indicated in the text by page numbers in brackets.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 50; 51; 55.
- 10 I place 'prostitute' in inverted commas on this one occasion to acknowledge that it is the term that Turner Hospital uses in the novel in preference to the term 'sex worker' that much recent feminist writing, and many prostitutes would currently use. In an interview with Turner Hospital, Christine Hamelin

- questions whether the use of prostitution as representative of subversion is ethical. Turner Hospital interviewed prostitutes, one of whom was a friend, as a part of her research for *The Last Magician*. She considers prostitution an 'honest' occupation in opposition to some others that require women covertly to prostitute themselves in emotional or intellectual ways. I believe she is, therefore, effectively reclaiming the term and I retain it on this understanding. See 'Novelist as Urgent Quester,' interview by Christine Hamelin (n.p., n.d.) *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 9 (June 1993): 106-111.
- 11 Ibid., 50.
- 12 Ibid., 51.
- 13 Ibid., 47.
- 14 Aamer Hussein, 'Trial by Triage,' review of *The Last Magician*, *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4567, 3 July 1992: 25
- 15 Ibid., 36.
- 16 Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 17.
- 17 Achim Reinschmidt, 'Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Contemporary Australian Fiction,' Doctoral Thesis, Monash University, 1996: 228
- 18 Ibid., 51.
- 19 Elizabeth Williamson, *The Possibilities Left Open: A Reading of Janette Turner Hospital's Novels*, Master of Philosophy Thesis, Sydney University, 1999: 90.
- 20 Alistair Stead, 'Notes From the Underground: *The Last Magician* and Janette Turner Hospital's Underworlds,' *Janette Turner Hospital*, ed. Selina Samuels (London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies and British Australian Studies Association, 1998): 19. Veronica Brady shares this position: 'Canvas Stretched for the Big Issues,' review of *The Last Magician*, *Australian Book Review*, no. 141 (June, 1992): 15.
- 21 I prefer the term plenitude to excess because excess seems to carry the negative implication of an un-needed surplus. Plenitude suggests a more positive abundance or productive fruitfulness, which can be drawn upon.
- 22 Ibid., 51.
- 23 Teresa de Lauretis, 'Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,' *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1990): 145.
- 24 Joan Scott, 'Interview With Joan Scott,' interview by Elaine Abelson, David Abraham and Marjorie Murphy (n.p., n.d.) *Radical History Review* 45 (1989): 51-52.
- 25 Janette Turner Hospital, 'Margins Within Margins,' interview by Francine Ringold (St. Louis, September 1992), in *Nimrod: International Journal of Prose and Poetry* 36, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 30.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Bronwyn Davies, 'The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis,' *Social Analysis* no. 30 (December, 1991): 47.
- 28 Stead, 'Notes,' 20.
- 29 Cynthia Baker, untitled review of *The Ivory Swing* and *The Last Magician* by Janette Turner Hospital, *SPAN*, nos. 34 and 35 (November 1992; May 1993): 393.
- 30 John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 117.