

Realigning the spiritual compass : representations of terrorism in some recent Australian fiction

Xavier Pons

Copyright © Xavier Pons 2009 This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: This article examines how terrorism is represented in three Australian novels, Janette Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations for the Plague* (2003) and *Orpheus Lost* (2007), and Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006). It argues that, despite their ostensible topic, the novels tend to ignore or distort the reality of terrorism and its causes. Flanagan is more interested in the way some individuals and groups exploit the fear of terrorism to achieve their own ends, while Turner Hospital creates a paranoid world which does not allow any real understanding of what terrorism is about. The social preoccupations in the three novels, insightful as they are, remain largely disconnected from terrorism.

Keywords: terrorism, Muslims, paranoia

“International terrorism,” a reviewer of Janette Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations for the Plague* contended, is “perhaps the most important contemporary issue in Western society” (O'Reilly 88). If that is so—and in the aftermath of the havoc wreaked on the unfortunates trapped in New York's WTC, on the Madrid train or in the Bali club, it is hard to deny the impact of terrorist violence on the lives and on the imaginations of Westerners—then Australian novelists have been paying due attention. Not that this makes them very different from their fellow writers in Europe and America. After mentioning such writers as Frédéric Beigbeder, Joyce Maynard or Ian McEwan, US novelist Julia Glass noted: “One can almost hear a sigh of ennui from reviewers who allude to the ‘tedious’ number of novels that address 9/11 or its repercussions; who accuse novelists of opportunistic plotting, as if we've run dry on drama and must ‘resort’ to current events for inspiration” (Glass 20). But it is of course entirely legitimate for writers (and other artists) to address issues of such political and imaginative magnitude. It might even be argued that failure to do so would be an irresponsible attitude (fiddling while Rome burns, perhaps).

However, the seriousness of the topic is no guarantee that it will help produce genuinely enlightening approaches. Everyone has an opinion concerning terrorism—from the scholars who understand the complicated historical roots of this or that form of terror to the simple-minded folk who, like the anonymous character in Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist*, have decided that “They should shoot the bastards” (Flanagan 125). And of course everyone knows who is to blame for terrorist attacks—never mind the Unabomber, ETA or Real IRA, we are mostly talking Islamic terrorism here. At least

since the 1972 attack on Israeli athletes during the Munich Olympics terrorism, in Western imaginations, has become largely synonymous with Muslims. As a Newcastle city councillor put it recently, it is those “lying little camelshaggers” we have to worry about.¹ Paul Sheehan may claim that “Islamophobia is a fabrication” (Sheehan 2009) but this is a highly questionable opinion. With such a sensitive topic as terrorism, it is important to avoid oversimplifications and stereotypes, which is why one turns to Flanagan or Turner Hospital expecting a more sophisticated and better informed viewpoint than one would expect from Alan Jones or other shockjocks—indeed, Flanagan is especially scathing where shockjocks are concerned.

No one likes a terrorist. Murdering innocent people, whether in individually targeted attacks or at random, is rightly seen as morally indefensible and barbaric. But then one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter or martyr—when legitimate avenues for protest are closed through a state’s violence (one’s own state, or a foreign one), how is one to avoid the terrible choice between resignation to impotence and injustice, and modes of militantism that will inevitably be termed terrorism even when they involve no violence against people? (a French leftist militant, Julien Coupat, is currently awaiting trial on charges of terrorism because he is supposed to have sabotaged power cables on high speed TGV train lines). The moral and political issues associated with terrorism are quite complex, and caricatures hardly help.

I am not suggesting that the novels I am going to consider here—Janette Turner Hospital’s *Due Preparations for the Plague* and *Orpheus Lost*, as well as Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist*—are mere caricatures. Indeed, in spite of the title, there is no terrorist in Flanagan’s book, and if some aspects of that book are perhaps caricatural, they have to do with the author’s take on Australian society rather than on terrorism. And Turner Hospital’s novels are in many respects sophisticated narratives—perhaps they overcomplicate, rather than oversimplify, things.

For all the differences between them, all three novels have significant social and political dimensions—this is only natural with works addressing such a compelling real world issue as terrorism. And here is the rub. Unlike many other social and political phenomena, terrorism is played out on a shadowy stage—outrages are planned in the utmost secrecy and the agents of law enforcement, who try to thwart the terrorists and bring them to justice, also operate in the underworld of secret services and ‘black’ operations. In other words, there is, almost by nature, a great deal about terrorism that remains mysterious, beyond the laws of evidence. Thus no one really knows for sure the actual circumstances of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing—referred to in *Due Preparations* through a rather ghastly pun (Salamander’s records have been left in an airport locker, and the narrator writes of “the riddle of Locker B” (Turner Hospital 2003, 31)) and wrongly seen by Peter Craven as a model for the terrorist event in *Due Preparations*: in the novel the plane is first hijacked by terrorists, then diverted and finally destroyed; the plane that fell on Lockerbie was blown up in mid-flight, not hijacked (cf. Craven 2007)—or of Benazir Bhutto’s assassination. For the novelist this is an opportunity to deploy his or her imagination, to fill in blanks that may not be that blank after all, at least to those in the know, to connect dots that perhaps exist only in his or her mind. Novelists, true to their calling, have to invent, to bring forth characters and situations that make the apparently random and mindless violence intelligible. But their

imagination may occasionally lead them into stereotypes that simply confirm prejudices and provide little illumination.

Terrorism transforms the entire area of civilian life into a battlefield, with attendant insecurities—death can strike at any time, anywhere, as Samantha reflects in *Due Preparations* :

Some days, when she watches children playing in the park, she can feel the ground giving way. You have no idea, she wants to tell the children. The swings, the sandbox: they are all illusions. You have no idea how unreliable things are, or how suddenly the sky can turn to fire. (Turner Hospital 2003, 46)

Small wonder this kind of predicament gives birth to irrational fears and paranoid insecurities, as the three novels make abundantly clear.

Admittedly, the fact that you are paranoid does not mean no one is out to get you. Terrorism lends itself especially well to paranoid fears, not because it is not a real phenomenon but because its clandestine nature makes it eminently suited to all kinds of manipulation. This is made evident in *The Unknown Terrorist*, in which the entire terrorist story is shown to be no more than a media beat-up, without the least foundation in fact. In *Due Preparations* and *Orpheus Lost*, on the other hand, terrorist attacks, even though as part of a novel they are entirely fictional, are presented as all too real—whether the hijacking of flight AF 64, with its murderous consequences or the various ‘incidents’ which cause bloodshed throughout the United States. However, it should be pointed out that the extremities to which the terrorists resort in both books (the sadistic game with poison gas in *Due Preparations* and the many strikes against the USA in *Orpheus*) take terrorism to a level of atrocity that owes much more to the author’s imagination than to real-life examples.

Whether the threat is real or imaginary has no bearing on the way the finger is pointed at some people—in a nutshell, they are suspected of being terrorists because of their Middle-Eastern appearance or origin. In *The Unknown Terrorist*, Tariq is associated with possible terrorist attempts to detonate bombs simply because of his ethnicity, and while he is no saint he is not actually involved in any terrorist activities. He merely looks the part, as does Mishka in *Orpheus Lost*. The importance given to physical appearance, though in a sense it does reflect common prejudices, in this particular case detracts from the story’s credibility: how can the reader really believe that the Australian music student Mishka Bartok was immediately and unerringly identified as the son of the music-hating Lebanese Marwan Abukir simply because of the family resemblance? And while the novel features some genuine terrorists, such as Haddad, the latter is a sketchy, unsubstantial figure—so conventionally or perfunctorily put together in fact that he will end up in several pieces:

Jamil Haddad did everything violently. He spoke in blunt flashes of certainty (...) Jamil lowered his voice to a whisper and recited in a weirdly rapid melodic chant: ‘Islam is our aim, Qur’an is our constitution, Jihad is our path, War till victory; God is great, Allahu Akbar !’ (Turner Hospital 2007, 206-207)

The reader could be forgiven for believing that Arabs have a natural bent towards a murderous kind of fanaticism—they are terrorists because it is both in their nature and in their culture. The novel does not suggest, much less assert, there might be reasons behind the violence they sometimes display (as do most human beings). They are made to sound deaf to reason, blind to anything but their overwhelming hatred of all those who do not share their particular brand of religion:

[Leela] remembered a headline from many months back in the *Boston Globe*: MOSQUE'S TREASURER APPLAUDS ANTI-ISRAELI VIOLENCE. MOSQUE'S LEADER ENDORSES STATEMENT BY YUSUF ABDULLAH AL-QARADANI: "WE WILL CONQUER EUROPE. WE WILL CONQUER AMERICA. WE WILL CONQUER THE WORLD." (94)

It is not irrelevant to note that the character referred to here is in actual fact Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a Muslim preacher who supports suicide bombings against Israeli targets; however, according to Wikipedia, "he is opposed to attacks outside of the Palestinian territories and on other than Israeli targets. For example, on March 20, 2005, Qaradawi issued a condemnation of a car-bombing that had occurred in Doha, Qatar the day before. One Briton, Jon Adams was killed. Qaradawi issued a statement that said 'Such crimes are committed by insane persons who have no religious affiliation and play well into the hands of the enemies.' While the preacher did say Islam would conquer the world, he did not advocate indiscriminate violence: 'Al-Qaradawi says some countries will fall to the armed Islamic jihad, but in others, such as the United States, victory will come through Da'awa—the teaching of Islam to non-Muslims—which will trigger Westerners to convert to Islam 'in droves.'"²

Janette Turner Hospital here distorts the facts—it is not so much that she gets the man's name slightly wrong but that she significantly exaggerates the violence of his preaching, which becomes a gospel of almost universal hate and thus emblematic of the terrorist mindset. Although a novelist is of course under no obligation to offer a faithful reproduction of reality, with such a sensitive subject as terrorism, exaggerations and distortions prove very disturbing. They can contribute to the demonization of an entire ethnic group, and incite violence against its members. Without condoning acts of terrorism, one should recognize that there are grievances behind them rather than an animalistic bloodlust, and that at least part of the so-called 'war on terror' should focus on those grievances. Turning Muslims into utter villains is unhelpful—and morally wrong. The three novels I am looking at leave it in no doubt that Muslims have a very bad image: they are blamed for everything from their distinctive cultural traits ('they won't integrate' says a caller to a radio talkback show in *The Unknown Terrorist*, 125) to their bloodthirsty fanaticism, and it is not always clear whether the novelists mean to repudiate those racist clichés. In *Due Preparations*, the main terrorist, Sirocco, is a cruel, sadistic man. His violence is an instrument to secure the release of fellow-terrorists, but it is not made clear what led those men down the path of terror. As a result, the terrorist figures are like cardboard cutouts—flat characters with a vengeance, one might say.

Going into the factors which are involved in Islamic terrorism, and especially Israeli policy towards Palestinians, would no doubt have opened a can of worms. But it would have made Turner Hospital's characters more believable, and more human—which she may have felt was not desirable. But is it wise to lend credence to the opinion (or prejudice, rather) that Muslims are “short-tempered, relatively thick, criminal, and fundamentally violent,” as a fan of conservative journalist Andrew Bolt's wrote on his blog (Yussuf Irfan 2009)?

The absence of political explanations for what are no doubt horrific crimes is paralleled by an emphasis on how senseless is the world the terrorists move in, a world of violence and counter-violence, in which fear, suffering and death seem to be the only certainties, even though they do not add up to an intelligible vision of reality.

This is most in evidence in *The Unknown Terrorist*, since the whole terrorist scare is nothing but a manipulation which makes no sense at all except in terms of reviving the faltering career of TV personality Richard Cody, who even manipulates himself into half believing his own fictions: “He did not say to himself, ‘Given there is no real evidence this woman has ever done anything wrong, I will create an image of her as a monster.’ No, because that would have been a disgraceful act of cynicism, and no true cynic can afford to be other than genuine in his opinions” (Flanagan 181). Any attempt on the part of the public to look at things with a critical or analytical eye is defeated by a tsunami of powerful and emotional images which make a rational response impossible and irrelevant:

The repetitive images clicking over filled the tv like loose change filling an empty pokie.

The Twin Towers fell again; the same children's bodies were laid out once more in Beslan; the same man or woman dressed in black brandished the same machine gun; the Doll continued dancing naked. And there were new scenes—a murky London tube train moments after it had been bombed; the Sari nightclub burning after the Bali bombing; wounded being taken away from the Madrid train bombing, the montage culminating in a shot that zoomed in on the Sydney Opera House before blowing out to white, a cheap effect accompanied by an ominous rumble.

The Doll closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she saw Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush. Missiles being launched. Men in robes firing grenade launchers. Great building exploding into balloons of fire. Women covered in blood. Hostages about to be beheaded. New York! Bali! Madrid! London! Baghdad! The Doll disintegrating into dancing squares of colour, herself pixelated, smiling a smile that was never hers. (Flanagan 159-60)

If no rational meaning can emerge from this visual smorgasbord it is precisely because there is no story to be dug up and dissected—the terrorist thing is a fiction pure and simple, a fabrication. This fiction, however, acquires an unshakeable reality in the minds of the brainwashed citizens. As Michelle Grattan wrote, Australia is “a community that now has the fear of terrorists in its DNA” (Grattan). In Janette Turner

Hospital's novels, by contrast, terrorism is presented as a tragic reality, though one that cannot be made sense of. The world in which her characters move is in large part a paranoid one. Lowell's father, in *Due Preparations*, is diagnosed by his psychiatrist as suffering from paranoia ("I can't tell if all this is necessary, or if I've been swept up into his condition..." 'His heart condition?' (...) 'No,' Dr. Reuben says. 'I mean paranoia'" (26)).

Paranoia in fact shapes the perceptions of all the characters, who sense that, parallel to the mostly unremarkable world in which they live, there is another, shadowy world whose workings they can only guess at and whose agents relentlessly observe and manipulate them. As a result, nothing can be taken for granted—the most innocent-looking happenings can hide sinister levels of meaning, although one can never be sure. This is exemplified by the man who talks to Lowell at the airport. Lowell

cannot resist looking back over his shoulder as he leaves the terminal, and the man waiting for the flight from Frankfurt is not moving towards the glass doors, but is still watching Lowell. This means nothing, of course.

Though it *could* mean something.

It might mean something. (Turner Hospital 2003, 35)

The use of modals here suggests a development in the character's thinking as he feels he is delving deeper into the matter—he moves on from a superficial interpretation ('This means nothing, of course') which is implicitly rejected as naïve to a stronger and stronger suggestion that there is more here than meets the eye. One senses that Lowell will soon reach the unspoken conclusion—it *must* mean something. Nothing is quite as straightforward as it seems: phone conversations are probably tapped (Elizabeth, Lowell's stepmother, says "I'm probably being paranoid, but I think my phone might be tapped" (Turner Hospital 2003, 41)); car accidents could in fact be disguised assassinations; coincidences happen for a purpose. Small details, if one does pay attention, suggest that one's life is being tampered with, like Lowell's CDs:

He reaches for his Bing Crosby's Christmas Classics and then notices that the small tower of CDs—his favourites—is not where he usually keeps it. He looks around the room, puzzled. Ah. There they are, all his CDs, neatly stacked on top of the TV. Odd. He does not recall putting them there. (Turner Hospital 2003, 178)

All this adds up to a very dangerous world, and requires endless measures of protection. As Samantha admits to Jacob, "You're right," (...). "We're not safe" (Turner Hospital 2003, 72). In this paranoid world it seems everyone is manipulating everyone else and nothing is on the level. One can never be sure of who did what and why.

It has been argued that such conceptions are simply an aspect of "the chronic paranoia and fear of the post 9/11 world" (Plissiewicz, 74) and that *Turner Hospital* follows in the footsteps of Don DeLillo, who "was always attracted to terrorism as a subject (...) because the deranging potential of the subject always seemed like a metaphor for the paranoia and complexity of modern life" (Craven, 363).

Indeed, in the world brought forth by Turner Hospital's imagination, paranoia is not necessarily connected with terrorism—its roots predate the attack on the WTC and it feels as if it is part and parcel of the human condition, a response to the inevitable traumas that this condition involves. Mishka's family, who have endured the trauma of the Holocaust, can only function by pretending Uncle Otto (who actually died in a concentration camp) is still with them and plays the violin for them every evening. They have to hallucinate their own existence, create their own reality, otherwise life would not be bearable. Mishka, even though as a child he is willing enough to participate in the hallucination, has to move on to a schizophrenic kind of life to preserve his sense of self:

Mishka lived in two worlds, traveling between alien planets like an astronaut. By day, he was Mishka Bartok who lived in Brisbane, took his classes and played his violin. In his hostel room and in the practice rooms at the university, he composed for the violin. By night, he was Mikael Abukir, a man who spent hours in Ali Baba's cave [Mr Hajj's place] and played the oud. The rhythm of movement between his two worlds felt natural to him (...) Mishka knew the rules for living parallel lives: keep things separate. (Turner Hospital 2007, 200)

This schizophrenic and paranoid approach to life, which is here connected with such distortions of reality as the belief that Uncle Otto is alive when he is actually dead as well as the belief that his father is dead when he is actually alive, appears in many different guises in Turner Hospital's work. When the topic is terrorism paranoia becomes rampant. Because of the very nature of their business, terrorists operate in secret; their strategies are clandestine ones. But in Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations* their manipulations go far beyond the requirements of their terrible business. Speaking about Sirocco, Salamander reflects: "I am, from time to time, momentarily flattered that he went to such lengths, to such extraordinary personal lengths, in maneuvering certain people onto his chosen flight and into the hostage bunker: my wife, my daughter, the man my daughter loved" (273). By emphasizing the personal factor in Sirocco's planning, Salamander (and Turner Hospital) distract the reader from looking at the political factors.

Those who fight terrorists and seek to frustrate their plans are convinced they have to be equally devious in their *modus operandi*, and end up being unnervingly like their enemies. This is how Salamander puts it to his students: "We are chess players who move living pieces on the checkerboard of the world" (Turner Hospital 2003, 227). The values that society usually proclaims to be good, such as truthfulness or decency, do not apply in such an environment. Secrecy and plausible deniability are far more relevant. As the mysterious figure K, in *Orpheus Lost*, puts it to Leela in respect of the South Australian detention camp: "... we operate on multiple tracks and some of my methods and contacts are definitely not on the record. The less you know about me, the less trouble for all of us if things don't work out" (Turner Hospital 2007, 278).

All this adds up to a murky world in which there are no signposts to show the way and it is often impossible to tell the good guys from the bad ones, which would seem to defeat the very purpose of the war on terror. The metaphors and references chosen by Turner Hospital in *Due Preparations* suggest that terrorism is like a deadly micro-

organism which infects all those who come into contact with it. The Leader of the Opposition, in Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist*, may claim that "Terrorists are not Australians. Australians are decent people" (158), yet one is left with the impression that decent people and awful terrorists are like the pigs and the humans in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "already it was impossible to tell which was which" (Orwell, 120). The axis of good turns out to be the mirror image of the axis of evil, as those who are supposed to fight the good fight are revealed to be as calculatingly cruel and as duplicitous as their enemies. "Governments make mistakes and they cover them up and they do not appreciate exposure" (73), Jacob says in *Due Preparations*. Salamander claims that the forces of order (himself and his minions, and above them, the state) cannot afford to be ethically fussy if they want to be effective: "Some must perish for the greater good of all (...) It is our side, our own side, which has obliterated the hostages more absolutely than Sirocco did" (Turner Hospital 2003, 283-84).

But ethics cannot be dismissed that easily, and Salamander says he "began to ask the troubling question Scipio asked: *How can we tell triumph from horror?*" (Turner Hospital 2003, 284). Can humans resign themselves to be undistinguishable from pigs? This would amount to renouncing their humanity. One way out of the jaws of this dilemma is to argue that humans are not really responsible for the mess—the fault lies with the nature of things, or perhaps with the gods who made this nature. In both *Due Preparations* and *Orpheus Lost* Turner Hospital alludes to the well-known Shakespearean lines:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport. (King Lear, Act 4, scene 1)*

"As flies to wanton boys are the chosen to Salamander," Samantha tells herself (Turner Hospital 2003, 46) while, after Leela has told him that in Sanskrit her name means 'the Hindu gods at play,' Mishka reflects: "Sport of the gods (...) That's what we are" (Turner Hospital 2007, 16). If the plotters and counterplotters are merely agents of some higher force, then there is no holding them to account. One does not even need to speculate that a god is behind the various misfortunes which befall the characters—it might all be nothing but happenstance. Samantha reflects that "It's weird how many links and cross-connections there were between passengers, and between the families of passengers. It defies statistical odds. It has to mean something" (Turner Hospital 2003, 81). In much the same way—and in much the same terms—Tristan says: "Three of us [Tristan, Genevieve & black psychologist Homer] there [Place des Vosges in Paris, listening to a street musician playing 'Caravan'], and three of us here (...) It defies all odds" (Turner Hospital 2003, 342). But Homer remains unfazed by the mathematical oddity: "'Forget conspiracy,' Homer says. 'There's something awesome about the patterns of chance, something mysterious, and we need that mystery'" (Turner Hospital 2003, 342). If the bolt of lightning should happen to strike you or your friends, it is just bad luck, and there is no point in looking for a deeper meaning.

This is perhaps the purest form of paranoia, one that does not rely on belief in the existence of a vengeful god or of a fiendishly clever and cruel human plotter: one's life is always on the line simply because such is the nature of the world; as with Murphy's law, there is no malice involved, and no amount of praying or counterterrorist activity can make a difference. This makes any political analysis of terrorism unnecessary—a

plane may be brought down by a bomb or by accidental mechanical failure: what difference does it make to the victims?

It would be unfair to suggest that Janette Turner Hospital is not interested in the social and political context of the situations in which she places her characters. In *Orpheus Lost* in particular the complications of southern society, and its mix of religiosity and racism, are evoked with both critical insight and sympathy. Other social issues, such as the oafish indifference to culture of North Queensland society or the spreading poison of anti-Semitism also endow the narrative with social perspectives. Nor should we forget the novelist's critical attitude in respect of the clandestine and criminal activities of the US Government and the shadowy figures to which it delegates its authority. But the protagonists of *Due Preparations* are assigned only the sketchiest of social backgrounds, and these are not always convincing. As Nathanael O'Reilly remarked, "giving the name Lowell Hawthorne to a character from Massachusetts seems rather contrived, as does naming an Australian travel book company Wandering Earthling" (O'Reilly 89). The novelist also deflates the claims made by George Bush and his cronies that they were fighting on the side of good (democracy, Christianity, decency, or whatever) against an 'axis of evil.' Salamander the spymaster is made to say: "Exactly which system of order we sustain—morally and politically speaking—is immaterial. We support the system most likely to stay in place" (Turner Hospital 2003, 228). His cynicism is perhaps preferable to the pious piffle of politicians but amounts to a disengagement from politics and its rootedness in both history and ideology.

In *The Unknown Terrorist*, Flanagan pays a lot more attention to the social and political context but this is because the novel is not about terrorism but about how the fear of terrorism is exploited by media personalities, law enforcement officers and politicians to manipulate the citizens. The issue of manipulation also comes up in Turner Hospital's novels but in the context of actual terrorist activity, which puts a rather different complexion upon it. With Flanagan, this manipulation is the main game, not a by-product.

It is clear to TV personality Richard Cody that Gina Davies—the Doll—has nothing to do with terrorism: "From what Richard Cody could gather from his phone calls there was no motive. Far from being a Muslim, there was no evidence that Gina Davies knew anything about Islam. As much as anyone knew, she had never received any terrorist training" (Flanagan 112). This will not stop him from pointing the finger at her, forcing her to go on the lam and destroying her life. As she is being turned into a scapegoat, she realises that society needs figures onto whom it can project its fears and which have to be sacrificed for the common good. As she tells her friend Wilder:

People like fear. We all want to be frightened and we all want somebody to tell us how to live and who to fuck and why we should do this and think that. And that's the Devil's job. That's why I'm important to them, Wilder, because if you can make up a terrorist you've given people the Devil. They need the Devil. That's my job. You get me? (Flanagan 166)

The fight against terrorism is just another way in which the rulers—whether politicians, the media or law enforcement agents—keep the populace under their thumb and thereby

reinforce their own authority. Siv Harmsen admits as much: “ ‘...people need to be frightened. And that’s part of our job, too’ (...) ‘Unless they’re terrified, they won’t agree with what we do and why we have to do it’” (Flanagan 271-272). The avowed goal of the fight—to keep society safe, to uphold values such as freedom, democracy, decency, etc.—is just a cynical charade. Those who go along with it are inevitably contaminated, dehumanized: “People chose not to care and not to see and not to think” (Flanagan 291).

Paradoxically perhaps, the totally unjustified violence thus done to the scapegoats, when it does not cow them into complete submission, incites them to become violent too. It is only through violence that they can recover their agency, as the Doll understands when holding a gun in her hand:

She felt in control. The Doll realised that she hadn’t really known she was alive until she had felt bad enough to want to kill (...) Maybe guns allow a way back, thought the Doll. Maybe this is what people do when they get written out of this world, when they get turned upside down and remade into something people can only hate, into something people become afraid of, into something no longer themselves. (Flanagan 309)

Violence engenders violence, and everyone loses in the end—both the Doll and Richard die stupid, useless deaths which achieve nothing. The whole sorry adventure leaves the world, and society, diminished: “Nothing was left to balance the horror of life. Power and money were what were to be admired as life atrophied” (Flanagan 316).

Although it is all too real, terrorism is the stuff of fantasy. The very fact that it operates in secret, that its agents often disguise themselves as ordinary members of society, seems calculated to feed the public’s paranoid fears and this makes it all the harder to offer a political perspective on it. The emotional responses it usually draws—shock, horror—do not favour rational analysis either.

All three novels have a moral underpinning which has to do with the question: how far is it legitimate to go in order to protect the nation from harm? Lowell, referring to his father’s manipulations (but he could equally be referring to Cobb’s) argues that sacrificing innocent lives “is a moral stain on the national conscience” (Turner Hospital 2003, 284). Richard Flanagan concurs. But the moral complexities of terrorism and counter-terrorism go largely unexamined. It is all very well to assert, as Flanagan does, that the world “is a hell for those whom it randomly chose to persecute” (Flanagan 290) but invoking randomness is a way of denying that there are indeed logics at work. If the Doll is chosen to be a sacrificial victim, like the bog woman who is referred to on several occasions, this is not unconnected to the fact that she is female, single, and works in the sex industry—all factors that spell ‘disempowered.’ She was not, in fact chosen entirely at random.

Whether presented as a fact or as a fiction, terrorism, and the fight against it, are shown to be largely instrumentalized by unscrupulous individuals pursuing a personal agenda, in which sexual motives play a significant part. This is no doubt, on the part of novelists, a legitimate approach to political or historical realities. They are not expected

to write academic dissertations when they deal with matters of public interest—they need to make it concrete, vivid and personal, which Turner Hospital does very well though Flanagan's characters are less convincing. However, one cannot help wishing such a significant issue as terrorism and its associated violence had been explored rather more rigorously. "Storytellers who dramatize their own era embrace its most resounding moments, moments when the spiritual compass by which we live (and write) has spun out of alignment," Julia Glass wrote. "Realigning that compass, searching for a new magnetic north, is some of the best work fiction writers do." One can only wish those three novels did suggest where we might find a new magnetic north instead of projecting a paranoid sense that there is no such cardinal point to be found. If the essential question is, as Turner Hospital asserts in the closing lines of *Due Preparations*, "how do we ready ourselves for what might happen tomorrow? What possible preparations can be made" (Turner Hospital 2003, 390) paranoia can only make it harder to find the answer.

The interlacing between terrorism and sex, which is present in all three novels, could have been used to provide insights into the terrorist or counter-terrorist mindset. As it is, though, it hardly makes a dent on the mystery of the world's murderous violence. The world is a dangerous place, all three novels are saying, but why this is so, and what can be done about it, is an enigma the novelists would rather not face fair and square. Perhaps it is just as well that they do not want to substitute their authority for that of philosophers or historians but one cannot help feeling a little frustrated, and at times overwhelmed, by the meaninglessness of it all.

¹ (<http://forums.gumtree.com/about291180-0.html>) accessed 14 March 2009

² (<http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=10101&only>) accessed 14 march 2009

Works Cited

- Craven, Peter (2007) "Beauty in Terror: Janette Turner Hospital's Orpheus Lost." *Critique*. Washington. vol.48, n°4. 20-25.
- Flanagan, Richard (2006) *The Unknown Terrorist*. Sydney: Picador.
- Glass, Julia (2006) "In the dust that refuses to settle: writing fiction after 9/11." *Publishers Weekly* 253.33 August 21.
- Grattan, Michelle (2008) "A dangerous web," *The Age*. 26 December.
- Irfan, Yussuf (2009) "Australian Muslims not a monolith," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 March.
- Hospital, Janette Turner (2003) *Due Preparations for the Plague*. Sydney: HarperCollins.
- Hospital, Janette Turner (2007) *Orpheus Lost*. New York: Norton.
- Moorhouse, Frank (1996) *Lateshows*. Sydney: Picador.
- O'Reilly, Nathanael (2004) "A timely tale of terrorism." *Antipodes* Columbia: vol.18. n°1. 88.
- Orwell, George (1966 [1945]) *Animal Farm*. Harmondsworth : Penguin.
- Plisiewicz, Paul (2008) "Along the border between passion and obsession." *Antipodes*. Columbia: vol.22, n°1, June. 73-74.
- Sheehan, Paul (2009) "Islamophobia is a fabrication," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March.

Xavier Pons teaches Australian Studies at the University of Toulouse (France). A former President of EASA, he has lectured and done research at several Australian universities. He has published widely on many aspects of Australian culture, and his latest book is *Messengers of Eros: Representations of Sex in Australian Writing* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

As some of the evidence in this section suggest, terrorism in some cases has been successful in changing the course of history and clearly the impact it has had should be neither denied, nor underestimated. However, as the next section of this paper will argue, the threat posed by terrorism is one that should be subject closer examination and the myth of such a lethal and omnipresent enemy should be scrutinized and not accepted at face value.Â Having outlined some of arguments which suggest that the threat of terrorism can be overdramatized in the Western world, the last section will argue that terrorism is real, yet the recent methods of countering it have been counterproductive. Conclusion. Start studying Elements of Fiction. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools.Â The category or type of literature. The most well-known fiction genres include realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, and folk tales and fairy tales. Style. The way the author uses words, phrases, and sentences to express his or her ideas. _ includes the author's word choice, sentence structure, and use of literary devices. The manifestation of terrorism entail massive human losses, destroyed spiritual, material and cultural values, which is impossible to recreate for centuries. It breeds hatred and distrust between the social and national groups. The terrorist attacks have led to the need for an international system to deal with it.Â Terrorism "â€" specific phenomenon of social and political life; one of the options tactics of the political struggle, involving the use of ideologically motivated violence. In modern conditions there is an escalation of terrorist activities of extremist individuals, groups and organizations, its character becomes complicated, and the sophistication of anti-humane acts of terrorism are increasing. Recent research and publications analysis. The phenomenon of terrorism was particularly actively studied by scientists after the tragedy in America, although even before that it was in their field of vision. But only in the last two decades hundreds of books and thousands of articles on this topic have been written, dozens of encyclopedias have been published, investigating this phenomenon.Â In some philosophical works, violence is interpreted as limiting a person's physical and spiritual abilities, suppressing his free will. In the Italian Philosophical Encyclopedia, violence is defined as an act committed from outside against spontaneous attraction and natural movement. A. Getman, M. Panov, V. Tatsiy emphasize that violence is any restriction of fundamental human rights.