

Janette Turner Hospital. Orpheus Lost. Harper Collins, 2007, 350 pages;
\$32.99, ISBN 978-0-7322-8441-1.

Reviewed by **Helga Ramsey-Kurz, University of Innsbruck**

Beauty is dangerous It is a trap

When a new novel by Hospital finally appears one is always surprised: by the enduring freshness of her mode of telling, its swiftness, its smartness, its

sensuousness, and by the persistent novelty of the insights this telling affords. Invariably, these happen unexpectedly like sudden explosions of dreams, suspicions, premonitions or fears into truths one feels one could have predicted from the beginning, but the plausibility of which is obvious really only in retrospect. Inevitably, therefore, there is mayhem as well as shock before some sense of certainty, however transitory, takes shape. This certainty results from the sudden luminosity reached in Hospital's finales, perfectly calculated, expertly orchestrated all of them, and yet never contrived.

To get to these *finales* is an adventure – even if we have had warning of what to expect. Reviewers of *Orpheus Lost* have primed us to anticipate another novel like *Due Preparations for the Plague* and quite unlike *Oyster*, her last extensive fictional return to Australia. The profoundly disturbing exploration of religious fanaticism Hospital submits in *Oyster* (1996) is a reckoning of sorts with the past, notably with her fundamentalist upbringing in Queensland. In *Due Preparations for the Plague* (2003) this reckoning is suspended and Hospital's enduring preoccupation with questions of faith expressed in much broader terms such as those of international terrorism. Understanding, like Hannah Arendt, the need to undo the tantalizing anonymity of evil, Hospital gives faces and names to it and thus, additional emphasis to her conviction that neither religion, nor ideology, nor personal trauma can ever account for, let alone justify terrorist actions. There simply is no license to kill that anyone has the right to issue or seize. There only is a license to die. And it is this license that the hostages portrayed in *Due Preparations for the Plague* claim for themselves.

The perfect dignity with which Hospital invests their dying is perhaps the most remarkable accomplishment of *Due Preparations for the Plague*. It affords a treatment of the theme of international terrorism so exceptionally sensitive that it has been only a question of time when critics would start to attest Hospital special authority on the subject. This duly happened with the release of *Orpheus Lost* by HarperCollins in May last year. From the start reviewers welcomed Hospital's return to the issues of suicide bombing and religious fanaticism, drawing comparisons between *Orpheus Lost* and such novels as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and John Updike's *Terrorist*, as well as with works by Graham Greene and Joyce Carol Oates (Craven, 332). Other comparisons, for instance with Hanif Kureishi's *Black Album*, with Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, and, of course, with David Malouf's *Child's Play*, seem no less far-fetched.

And yet, to label *Orpheus Lost* as a continuation of *Due Preparations for the Plague* is to do it an injustice. It is to deflect from its exquisite musicality, from its labyrinthine design, from the rare sense of place it conveys and from the

undemonstrative virtuosity with which Hospital weaves a story of love and loss. To say the very least, it is to ignore that, as the author tells us, she did not intend *Orpheus Lost* in the first place as yet another modulation on the theme of international terrorism, nor as a book as dark as *Due Preparations for the Plague* (Greiner, 341-2). In her own terms, her latest novel is “a contemporary reworking of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth, but with a feminist twist, since the Eurydice character goes searching in the underworld (of detention camps) for the Orpheus character” (Personal communication).

No reworking of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth could do without some form of at least temporary eclipse. Still, the darkness into which we are drawn is different from the seedy and sinister dimness in the exclusive night club Chien Bleu, where the female protagonist of *Due Preparations for the Plague*, Samantha Raleigh, works as a stripper – to goad her audiences not only with bits of clothing she throws at them but also with allegations of an international conspiracy whose masterminds she knows to be present and listening. Such knowing is not possible in the kind of darkness through which Hospital has her Eurydice character pass (or drift, rather) in *Orpheus Lost*. Though also a temptress and a brilliant mathematician to that, Leela Moore acts her part by instinct rather than design. If there is at all a design that is hers it is not like Samantha’s to trap and undo but to free herself from the smallness of her home town (ironically named Promised Land), and her lover Mishka Bartok from the many confinements in which she sees him caught, sometimes erroneously so: his Australian past, his obsession with music, and, later, his imprisonment in an underground detention camp in Iraq.

The latter is not the only subterranean setting of the novel. The narrative opens with a flashback to Leela’s and Mishka’s first encounter in a subway tunnel- Leela hears a violin “weeping music,” sometimes alone, sometimes with a tenor voice “sorrowing along,” and is mesmerized. So are other passengers; so is the reader – by the sound effects Hospital’s text echoes and their almost perplexing immediacy:

She was letting the music reel her in, following the thread of it, leaning into the perfect fifths. Crowds intruded, echoes teased her, tunnels bounced the sound off their walls – now the music seemed to be just ahead, now to the right – and two minutes in every five the low thunder of the trains muffled all. The notes were faint, they were clear, they were gone, they were clear again: unbearably mournful and sweet. (5-6)

Following the melody, Leela catches her first glimpse of Mishka Bartok. Quickly they become lovers and as such re-experience the sense of connectedness and

belonging they lost when they left home, South Carolina for Leela, Queensland for Mishka. Suddenly, however, Mishka begins to disappear, at first for a night, then for whole stretches of days. The unfolding mystery takes a new turn when Leela is detained for interrogation and told that her partner Mishka Bartok might not be the son of Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust and emigrated to Australia after the war, but Mikael Abukir, involved with a Muslim Youth Association which has ties to Hamas and to assorted extremist groups. There is also evidence that Mishka has been consorting with Jamil Haddad, a suicide bomber killed in the last of a series of terrorist attacks that have been occurring in Boston.

From here the narrative's descent into darkness accelerates. Leela's trust is shaken, and her vision literally and metaphorically blurred. She begins to spy on Mishka, but his moves make no sense to her. This intensifies her nervousness, which effectively spills over to the reader, who, unlike Leela, follows Mishka on his nightmarish journey to Beirut and Baghdad. Despite the confusion and bewilderment into which we are steeped we always feel that the writer knows exactly where she is taking us. This is comforting in light of the horrors Hospital now unravels. So are Mishka's intermittent imaginary returns to Queensland. They form a beautifully crafted countertenor to the challenging tonality of the thriller-like main plot – powerfully evocative of Mishka's sense of belonging to a world in which there is music in abundance. His childhood home, "Chateau Daintree" is a triple-decker mansion somewhere between Cairns and Cook Town, built by Mishka's grandfather from his idea of refuge, "fusing details well suited to equatorial wetlands with Hungarian memory and dreams of safety and imperial Hapsburg fantasies" (158). There are extravagant European flourishes perfectly out of place in the tropics, such as a second story perched high on tree-trunk stilts and adorned with a turret and gabled windows. There are staghorn ferns and rainforest undergrowth intent upon swallowing the entire construction and orchids climbing up the veranda posts, across the roof, up the turret and down again across the gabled windows.

Especially when trapped indoors during the wet season, Mishka would think of himself, his grandparents and his mother "as figures inside a music box" (159). For always someone would be playing music at Chateau Daintree, especially after dinner, while the others would listen rapturously. For Mishka this would feel as if they were all "inside the light, inside the golden circle," around which "heavy drapes of rain," would flash "white and silver like roped silk" (161). Thus cocooned in curtains of seasonal rainfall, Mishka would witness moments of irresistible charm, which Hospital conjures in visual details elegantly assembled as loving close-ups of her characters. Light is cast on Mishka's mother, for instance, as she points out "the shredded rainbows of moonlight and the ribbons of candle-

glow” tossed and tangled about “in the fluted wall of water beyond the veranda eaves”:

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked, fanning herself and then setting the fan down on the table and taking hold of her cotton shift at both shoulders and lifting the garment slightly away from her body and shaking it, ventilating herself. She lifted and lowered, lifted and lowered her dress. She picked up her fan and waved it languidly back and forth. “When light is scattered,” his mother said, “it multiplies itself.” (162)

“Like music,” grandfather Mordecai would add with the touching modesty of someone who has suffered greatly and yet never lost his love of beauty.

This love is more than a form of escapism. For Hospital, it clearly is the only possible answer to the disenchanting who, like Leela’s childhood friend Cobb Slaughter, believe that “life’s shit” (339) or to religious fanatics who, like Mishka’s father, hold that beauty is a dangerous abomination. Contaminated by suspicion, Leela fails to see the power of the passion Mishka has inherited from his grandfather. While Mishka keeps appealing to her by singing Gluck’s aria *Che farò senza Euridice?*, she falls silent, becoming like Euridice, guilty, that is, of betrayal. “I turned away from him. I froze him out,” Leela will admit later, realizing that this was also Euridice’s error: “[S]he never answered, and Orpheus, apprehensive, looked back. Game over.” (269)

This, however, is not where Hospital’s novel ends. We are reminded that games, like music, can be played again and again and always with the chance of a different outcome. The incalculability of this chance is the player’s greatest asset and, naturally, his adversary’s greatest fear. It is an extravaganza people like Jamil Haddad cannot afford. After all, chance only puts at jeopardy the ghastly spectacles they devise. Their choreography must do without playfulness and thus also without creativity. Predictably, it is dull, so dull that eventually its increasingly routine execution numbs its “audiences”. People learn to live with terrorist actions as they do with traffic accidents: “You know they could happen any time, but you believe they will always happen by someone else” (29). The possibility of being killed in a suicide bombing cannot stop them from travelling on the subway. A few bars produced on a stringed instrument and a tenor voice can, though. This seems so obvious, so natural that we barely think twice about the way a whole crowd of commuters are held spellbound by Mishka’s play at the beginning of *Orpheus Lost*. The plausibility of the scene creates a certain risk that we overlook the wonderful irony surfacing here, the first blow Hospital delivers at the spectre of international terrorism. This does not really matter though: texts too

can be played or read again so that even those readers carried away by the tempo at which the plot of the novel evolves will eventually be caught up by its gravity and sense the need to pause and listen for the trains racing through Hospital's text under the surface mostly, yet still loud enough for the warning they carry to be heard also above: *Beauty is not dangerous. But here's the real trap: It is dangerous to ignore it.*

Bibliography

- Craven, Peter, "Beauty in Terror: Janette Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 48.4 (Summer 2007), 355-362.
- Greiner, Donald J., "The 'God Itch': An Interview with Janette Turner Hospital," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 48.4 (Summer 2007), 341-342.
- Hospital, Janette Turner, *Orpheus Lost* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2007).