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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DAINTREE SETTING IN JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL'S *ORPHEUS LOST*

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is a central one in Western mythology. In *Orpheus Lost*, Janette Turner Hospital reworks aspects of the myth in her study of the psychopathology of the 'War on Terror' which resulted in the 'disappearance' and illegal incarceration of many suspects in Abu Gahrib and Guantanamo Bay. Both of her protagonists, the brilliantly talented musician Mishka Bartok and the equally brilliant mathematician Leela Moore have sublime skills which metaphorically are able to move "the trees, / The beasts, the stones, to follow" as Ovid says in *Metamorphoses* (259). Turner Hospital adapts the myth, with Mishka as the Orphic character whose search for his father results in his involvement with terrorists, arrest, and imprisonment in Beirut. In *Orpheus Lost*, Mishka's lament is signified through his virtuosity with the oud and the violin: "the violin itself was weeping music ... The singer was singing of loss ... and the sorrow was passing from body to body like a low electrical charge" (6). As in the Orpheus myth, music and loss are inextricably linked. Orpheus's lament was for the loss of Eurydice; similarly, in *Orpheus Lost*, Mishka's music is "always and only about loss" (18), of alienation from the self, and of the search for the father he never knew. Mishka's music is also expressive of the fear that this search will end in the loss of Leela, his Eurydice: "*Che farò senza Euridice?* He wanted to look at her again, but if he went back now, if he looked back, he feared she would disappear forever" (216). Mishka's obsession with the riddle of his identity — "Who am I?" (217) — is a double-edged sword which leads to the ominous discovery that his father is a terrorist, and results in his incarceration in the underworld of Beirut. It is Leela, the Eurydice who cannot live without her Orpheus, who rescues Mishka from the underworld: "I'm in a strange underground loop with Orpheus. I mean Mishka. . . He's gone into the underworld and hasn't come back. It's not supposed to happen that way" (303). Leela enters the political 'underworld' in order to accomplish Mishka's release. She is assisted here by Cobb Slaughter, Leela's *doppelganger*, who is responsible for Mishka's incarceration and who in a dramatic transformation of allegiances also takes on an Orphic role in rescuing him. In the literal underworld of Abu Gahrib, Mishka is physically and psychically tortured, suggesting the dismemberment of Orpheus because his overwhelming love for Eurydice cannot be supplanted by any other worldly thing. In Hospital's narrative, Mishka's music, being, and history are closely intertwined with the concept of parallel worlds: the underworld of terrorism, which is paralleled and contrasted with the Daintree rainforest of Far North Queensland.

The setting of the novel shifts between several places: the Middle East, which represents the mythical Hades; the United States, which is the scene of the political and ideological apparatuses which underpin the Middle Eastern 'Hades'; and Australia, where Mishka grows up when what is left of his extended family settle there after the Holocaust. The novel sets up the Australian Daintree rainforest as the antithesis to the underworld. In the myth, Elysium is to the west of the earth, as the Daintree is to the Middle East, and is the part of the Underworld to which the souls of the good and the noble go after death. In *Orpheus Lost*, Hospital implies that an earthly Elysium is possible, but she demarcates it from the rest of the world with great precision. The descriptions of the Abu Gahrib underworld contrast almost antithetically with those of the Daintree, as do the kinds of activities which occur in each place.

From the first moments of his consciousness in the underworld, each of Mishka's senses registers abjection. He first becomes aware of the "sacking" over his head which "smelled like night soil" (245) and which barely permits him to breathe; at the same time he is "conscious of something that felt like hot skewers in his shoulders" (245), an image of impalement which recalls Hieronymus Bosch's paintings of Hell. Except for the sack, he is naked and suspended by arms tied behind his back with an ever-tightening bond, giving a sensation sometimes of flying (252), or otherwise "floundering" in "a black wave" (249). Instead of music there is a "vast cacophony" (246) which alternates with "long stretches of nothing" (252). Mental images are disturbed in perspective and time:

There seemed to be buses, cars, trucks, road tankers, dumpsters, eighteen-wheelers, all bearing cargoes of torment, all emptying their load on his body, all threatening to crush him ... and then, unpredictably, it would switch to slow motion and a detail would flicker and pause and loom large and close inside the sacking. (245-46)

The mental pain is further intensified by hallucinations in which "his father brandished a scimitar and slashed Mishka neatly in two from head to toe" (245). Further images of dismemberment occur in Mishka's fantasy of being Prometheus: "sometimes a great bird — an eagle, a vulture — tore at his liver with its beak" (252). In a further reference to the Orpheus myth, Mishka imagines his interrogator is Cerberus, the three-headed hound of Hades, who "snarled and growled and continued to tear at Mishka's flesh" threatening to dislocate his "feathered limbs" (253). Finally, the subjection of Mishka is symbolised in the destruction of his oud: "He could feel the splinters, he could see the broken neck of the oud in spite of his hood, or perhaps it was his own neck, and he watched himself sobbing, curled up like an infant on the floor, naked, with a sack on his head" (256). The 'Underworld' section ends with Mishka's fantasy that he is saved by music (in the myth Orpheus lulls Cerberus to sleep with his music) and "then he was in the absolute radiant embrace of the sun and the music of the spheres was all around him and he felt no pain at all" (257).

The Daintree, the place “in the absolute radiant embrace of the sun,” differs profoundly from the underworld and is experientially conveyed through images of light, sound, and vibrant colour: “iridescent against the violent orange and mauve of sunset, there would be green flashes of parakeet wings and the strange harsh calls of scrub turkeys and pink-breasted lorikeets” (159). The birds of the Daintree especially contrast with the predatory eagle imagined in the underworld. Similarly, the vertiginous feelings of floundering and floating in the underworld contrast with the sensation of flying in the Daintree:

everything seemed to him to flow into everything else and to be on the same page and to be part of the river of feeling without a name that welled up inside him and pushed against his skin until he would believe that the pressure of so much beauty would lift him off his feet and lift him into the rainforest canopy, and at night, when the moon hung low between the verandah posts, he really believed he could fly and he could join the lorikeets in the quandong trees. (171)

The Daintree is not only Mishka’s Elysium, the world he goes to after his rescue from the underworld, it is also the place where his identity is rooted, referred to by his mother as “the promised land” (163). Mishka reflects on this:

Mishka did not have a name for the feeling which flooded him, and at the time he did not know any other way to be. Many years later, when he could summon up that same feeling — when he was addicted to summoning up that feeling again — he would attempt to label it: safety, belonging, connectedness, the promised land, but the feeling did not readily translate into words. The feeling was made up of a *mélange* of sounds and sensations. (163)

In contrast to the physically and psychically dissociative effects of the underworld, the Daintree is the place where world and being are as one, where one does “not know any other way to be.” This is the ‘Being in the world’ *par excellence* — the reciprocal fusion of being, language, and world which forms the basis of Heidegger’s philosophy in *Being and Time* — *Sein und Zeit* (1927).

The Heideggerean concept of authentic living, of dwelling in the open space, is deeply embedded in the presentation of the Daintree setting. Leela begins to understand Mishka’s search for that which he cannot live without when he tells her about his lost father, his Uncle Otto, and his home in the Daintree. It is the only place Mishka truly feels at home. In America, the images he carries within him to soothe his troubled mind are of “verandahs reaching out into the tree canopy, the verandahs vivid and noisy with parrots, surrounded by eyes that gleamed in the night” (22). The trees reaching upwards and the parrots signify transcendence; however, the juxtaposed image of the “eyes that gleamed in the night” (22) eerily recall Cobb’s descent into the underworld to rescue Mishka:

"He thought he saw eyes burning bright like the eyes of a cat. He began to see them all around him, moving like paired fireflies in the dark" (312).

The dark underground imagery in the "Underworld" section of the novel (Book VII) contrasts with images of "rainforest trees with berries the colour of cobalt" (22). The dank, underground images are also contrasted with the images of rain, of spiritual abundance and healing:

Mishka would lean from the verandah railing with a pitcher, which would brim over in a minute or so, and they would all drink from the crystal goblets. They would laugh and toss it over each other because there were two seasons, the Wet and the Dry, and the downpour meant the Wet had begun and living in the house was like living in a grotto behind a cascade.

The rain was a splendid and thrilling music, drumming against the iron roof. Palm fronds and silky oak branches thrashed the sides of the house and the quandong berries pelted the verandas like hail. (160-161)

The Bartok family history and being are enmeshed with the Daintree landscape which enables human completion and fulfillment as 'the promised land': "And it was, Mishka thought: the roar and push of the rain, the candlelight, the family, the night creatures, the forest, what more could anyone ask for?" (163).

In *Orpheus Lost*, the poetic use of language, which Heidegger equates with "the unconcealment of beings" (Heidegger, 72), is symbolised in music, both that produced by humans and that produced by birds. Mishka's childhood in the Daintree is mythic in its embodiment of harmony, tranquility, and belonging that cannot be separated from Uncle Otto's music and the music of the rainforest:

When he was a child in his grandparents' home in northern Queensland, there was never silence. The house was a refuge, remote from the small sugarcane towns, tucked into rainforest. Birdcalls by day were noisy; the night birds were sometimes shrill, sometimes muted, always haunting. (20)

The backdrop of the rainforest as a place of healing is aligned with the mythical Uncle Otto whose music charmed the Nazis; thus securing the life of his brother, but not his own. His music haunts the house, the rainforest, and his family. In America, Mishka is able to transport himself to the safe, womb-like environment of his Daintree home by isolating himself in the sound booth, and being soothed by music: "He was also, simultaneously, at his grandparents' dining table in the house made of silky oak and mahogany and black walnut — the house where he was born — with the rainforest pressing in close" (157).

Just as in Ovid's account of the myth in *Metamorphoses* XI, where after his dismemberment Orpheus is reunited with Eurydice in Elysium, so Mishka is reunited with Leela in the Daintree. When Leela finds Mishka brutalised, tortured, and broken in an interrogation cell in Beirut, she decides she will take him back to his home in the Daintree, to his mother and grandparents: "‘Wherever he is,’ Leela said on the wide verandah of the house above the Daintree, ‘this is where Mishka is in his mind’" (290). The Daintree is as in mythic stories, the place of healing — of making whole that which has been dismembered — and Leela believes the rainforest retreat will annihilate the Cerberus that tore her Orpheus apart, thus enabling his return to the land of living: "High in the rainforest canopy, she would sit on the verandah with Miska's head on her lap. She would stroke his hair, while the parakeets settled on their shoulders, Uncle Otto would play while they dreamed" (357).

### Works Cited

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### THE RIVER NILE, VAN DIEMEN'S LAND (1837)\*

*Here with pensive peace could I abide,*  
wrote the landscapist John Glover\*\*  
when he established Patterdale Farm  
on the near side of the Nile,  
his place of pensive peace  
from whence, looking across the river,  
he painted this picture -  
a seventy year old Englishman capturing  
his new world.