The Many Modern Circles of Hell: Dante’s Legacy in Janette Turner Hospital’s Literary Thrillers

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Janette Turner Hospital very consciously uses intertextuality in her fictions, constructing many-layered literary thrillers that contain multiple references to canonical texts that seem to do more than merely allude to those texts. Her 1992 novel *The Last Magician* uses Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a number of ways, and her most recent and most popular novel, the bestselling *Due Preparations for the Plague*, models much of its text on Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and also includes intertextual references to Dante, Daniel Defoe and Albert Camus. Hospital’s 1996 novel *Oyster* also uses *The Divine Comedy* as an intertext. The literary purposes to which Hospital puts *The Divine Comedy* – and the *Inferno* in particular – in her fictions are highly pronounced, conscious and artful. Hospital obviously seeks both to pay homage to the writings of Dante and to invest her own writing with layers of shadow and meaning, allusion and even grandeur.

In this paper, I explore Janette Turner Hospital’s use of Dante to evoke, and to characterise, the environment of her particular brand of literary thrillers and discuss how this compares with the current surge in references to Dante-related imagery in the media. I present some description and analysis of several manifestations of Dante and his *Divine Comedy* in contemporary culture in order to offer a comparison to Hospital’s own borrowings and homage. I will be asking what literary mileage Janette Turner Hospital seeks to gain from Dante, what does it bring – or what does she hope it will bring – to her fiction and ask if this is the same as or different from what other contemporary writers seek to gain by invoking Dante.

It has been remarked that Dante’s visions of Hell have come to be seen as almost prophetic, as prescient, as somehow more relevant to our contemporary era than ever before. Judith Shulevitz, for example, notes that discussions of Dante’s visions of Hell bear striking similarities to current events, and that scholars could just as easily have been talking about Kosovo or Rwanda or any other post-genocidal landscape when describing Dante’s landscape.¹

Shulevitz goes on to argue that contemporary culture icon is now so ubiquitous that ‘his emanations leap off the page’.

This idea, that the dystopia, will be expressed as an alternate culture icon is borne out by contemporary poets such as Seamus Heaney. Dante himself.

There are many new Dante and his literary works, and this is not surprising. Obviously, the literary purposes to which Hospital puts *The Divine Comedy* – and the *Inferno* in particular – in her fictions are highly pronounced, conscious and artful. Hospital obviously seeks both to pay homage to the writings of Dante and to invest her own writing with layers of shadow and meaning, allusion and even grandeur.

In this paper, I explore Janette Turner Hospital’s use of Dante to evoke, and to characterise, the environment of her particular brand of literary thrillers and discuss how this compares with the current surge in references to Dante-related imagery in the media. I present some description and analysis of several manifestations of Dante and his *Divine Comedy* in contemporary culture in order to offer a comparison to Hospital’s own borrowings and homage. I will be asking what literary mileage Janette Turner Hospital seeks to gain from Dante, what does it bring – or what does she hope it will bring – to her fiction and ask if this is the same as or different from what other contemporary writers seek to gain by invoking Dante.

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Floor 5: subway mugger and wing extremists, series of deaths. Sorry, that floor is all off the N.R.A.²

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Matthew Pearl’s 2001 dissertation about Dante of his attempts to publish his book has been widely praised. In 1998, Pearl won the prestigious scholarly work, and he was his trajectory that I am following indicates one of her p...
Shulevitz goes on to argue that Dante has been reborn as a pop figure in contemporary culture, and points out that this has happened to Dante before, most noticeably in the Romantic era. She argues that Dante’s version and vision of Hell is now so ubiquitous that we no longer recognise his influence, suggesting that his emanations lurk in the alleyways of our urban dystopias (ibid.).

This idea, that The Divine Comedy has something useful to say about urban dystopia, will be explored more fully below. Shulevitz’s idea of Dante as pop culture icon is borne out by the increasing popularity of his works in recent years. There are many new English translations of The Divine Comedy, including a series by contemporary poets edited by Daniel Halpern with translations by such poets as Seamus Heaney. Dante is elsewhere making an impression on contemporary culture. Obviously, the new book by Matthew Pearl, The Dante Club – a literary murder mystery set amongst a group of nineteenth-century American translators of Dante’s works – suggests something of the changing place of Dante studies in popular culture.

There are numerous other references to Dante’s works in popular culture, including multimedia (for example, a computer game where characters Dante and Lucia fight various demons of the underworld in their quest to save the world above) and cinema. Woody Allen’s 1997 film Deconstructing Harry posits an unappealing and sinful character, Harry Block – played by Woody Allen – who takes drugs, frequents prostitutes, treats women poorly and unfaithfully and then writes about their foibles in thinly disguised fiction. The film chronicles his journey through the fixtures of his life and into the nine floors of Hell serviced by an elevator and reserved space for such sinners as

Floor 5: subway muggers, aggressive panhandlers, and book critics. Floor 6: right-wing extremists, serial killers, lawyers who appear on television. Floor 7: the media. Sorry, that floor is all filled up. Floor 8: escaped war criminals, T.V. evangelists, and the N.R.A.²

This comedic use of Dante’s fictional cosmology has an element of the urban dystopia and the social criticism that Janette Turner Hospital also employs in her fictions. However, the similarities end there.

Matthew Pearl’s 2002 novel The Dante Club sets a murder mystery thriller in nineteenth-century literary New England. Pearl, who had studied, and written a dissertation about, Dante, introduces Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the midst of his attempts to publish the first American translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy. Pearl’s book has been a commercial success and, to some extent, a critical success. In 1998, Pearl won the Dante Prize from the Dante Society of America for his scholarly work, and he has indicated that his own interest in Dante occurred in a backwards fashion from T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.³ It is just this sort of reverse trajectory that I am following here from Janette Turner Hospital back to Dante that indicates one of her prime reasons for using the intertextuality.
Pearl's foreboding nineteenth-century atmosphere is characterised in part both by the very landscape of Dante's works and the intensity of the scholarly activity surrounding them. The literary thriller genre seems well disposed to the vision of Dante's Divine Comedy. Janette Turner Hospital's use of Dante is similar to Pearl's in that Hospital uses a variety of aspects of Dante's Divine Comedy to characterise her world of the literary thriller.

For example, the larger body of Hospital's work demonstrates a long and profound interest in journeys - and particularly those journeys that cross barriers and boundaries. They are seen and unseen, real and metaphoric, as shown in her fascination bordering on obsession with map lines and other topographical phenomena, ideas that intersect with many Dantean themes. Issues of crossing borders and boundaries, real and invisible map lines intersect with her own life.

Born in Melbourne in 1942 into a family of strict Pentecostal practitioners, Janette Turner Hospital moved with her family at the age of seven to Brisbane, Queensland. This move, the first of many in her life, has been noted both by the author herself and other critics as establishing a life-long interest in journeys, maps, topographies and measurements of distance, time and space. As Hospital said in relation to the characteristics she shares with Christina Stead, another nomadic Australian writer, they are both 'taking root in homelessness.8' Obvious comparison can be made with Dante's exile from Florence when observing the complex relationships to home and travel that are shared by both.

Hospital's life continued to be transitory, and as a young wife, mother and scholar she found herself living in the United States, India and Canada, where she completed a postgraduate degree in medieval literature before settling in South Carolina. All of this, I argue, helps to explain why Janette Turner Hospital has come to identify with Dante and to incorporate many of his thematic concerns in her work.

The notion of dislocation in her work extends to dislocations of time as well as of space. 'People who flee to nowhere are always waiting for retribution to catch up with them,' says silent Jess (Oyster 276). A short story collection from 1987 contains a story titled 'The Dark Wood', and Lucia is a name she has used several times in her fiction.

Hospital's magic realism is less evident in her two most recent novels, Oyster and Due Preparations for the Plague, where the author launches into the tragic and media-saturated fields of violent cults and middle-eastern terrorism respectively. Oyster, in particular, sets up a fictional locus for the complex relationship between the author's fundamental Christian childhood and her marriage to a Methodist minister, her attraction to Dante (and other medievalists) providing a means for her critique of 'holly-roller' and cult-like religious activity.

The self-appointed Messianic figure, who calls himself Oyster, first draws a rapt audience over the course of several sermons on Bernie's verandah. He then extends his influence, drawing listeners to the Church of the Living Word with such assertions as 'We are the people of Outer Maroochydore. references to other texts include the Underground - an ode to Dante.

In both Oyster and The Last Love stories, Queensland buries and becomes something the cavernous quarry of Dantean connections. The story titled 'Charlie's Inferno' came to me in a dream and rejects this, 'No. That is not to the black fact that the Bed 3).

Hospital lets us know that far more complex and difficult. We know immediately the subterranean journeyman story.

The story of The Last Love, name, we learn, is Lucian ground who is drawn into the present-day Sydney. This describes:

In Sydney, it is said that the mole station, though some claim it as we began to say, a person that when the Mole People live.

The quarry, indicated by the word occurs in every city, is seen to be of Dante, Hospital blurs the non-infernal, mainspring on an number of interconnected. It is 'the limbo of hot neon' that for her fictional purposes the streets of metropolitan prostitute in a bar/restaurant filmmaker Charlie Chambers outsider. His school tea
such assertions as ‘We are the last of God’s free people in the wilderness […]’. The people of Outer Maroo are chosen’.5 Tragedy, of course, ensues. Oyster contains references to other texts also. The second book of the novel is titled ‘Notes from the Underground’ – an obvious reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky as well as to Dante.

In both Oyster and The Last Magician, as well as in many of Hospital’s short stories, Queensland bursts out of its role as a place on the map, as a geography, and becomes something more, a terrain that must be navigated psychologically. Split between the idyllic but, Hospital suggests, rank setting of Queensland and the cavernous quarry of Sydney, The Last Magician displays more overtly its Dantean connections. The novel is divided into four books, the first of which is titled ‘Charlie’s Inferno’. The first lines here read: ‘In the middle of the journey, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost’.6 But the narrator rejects this. ‘No. That is not the way to put it. In the middle of darkness, I came to the black fact that there was no straight way – no way on, no way out’ (Magician 3).

Hospital lets us know from the first page that she is investigating ‘something far more complex and disturbing than hate’, something subterranean and hidden. We know immediately that she is doing more than invoking the figure of Dante’s subterranean journeyman here, but is she going as far as rewriting him?

The story of The Last Magician is told through the eyes of Lucy – whose full name, we learn, is Lucia – a young woman from a wealthy private-school background who is drawn into the dark and disturbing subterranean environment of present-day Sydney. This underworld is represented by ‘the quarry’ that Hospital describes:

In Sydney, it is said that the quarry began in the rift valley of the Redfern railway station, though some claim the Newtown station, when squatters (the Mole People, as we began to say, a permanent and willful underclass as the newspapers intimated), when the Mole People began tunnelling into rock cliffs (86).

The quarry, indicated here by Janette Turner Hospital as a phenomenon that occurs in every city, is seen to be spreading into safe, suburban Sydney. But, unlike Dante, Hospital blurs the boundaries between the infernal world of the quarry and the non-infernal, mainstream world. The quarry is both an excavated pit and a number of interconnected subterranean tunnels, and yet ‘the quarry’s first circle’ is ‘the limbo of strip joints and the retail trade in young girls and the little boys waiting in doorways’ (Magician 14). Thus Hospital demonstrates that for her fictional purposes the first circle of Hell is formed out of sleazy city streets of metropolitan centres around the world. Lucy works as a barmaid and prostitute in a bar/restaurant/brothel that, bought by artist/photographer/filmmaker Charlie Chang, comes to be known as ‘Charlie’s Inferno’. Charlie is an outsider. His school teachers would ask him where he was from and not believe
the answer that he, like them, was born locally and that his parents and grandparents had also been born in Australia. He is an outsider, and his childhood friends are a group of outsiders in Queensland. Their idyllic, lush landscape breeds a friendship that crosses class lines. The wealthy Robinson Gray befriends Cat, the daughter of his father’s employee, as well as Charlie and another wealthy, private-school-educated girl Catherine. Their friendship is short-lived, as society brings it to ruins. Although attracted to wild, poor Cat, Gray cannot resist the peer pressure of the private-school bullies. He becomes a bully himself, and demonstrates his physical and social power over Cat by forcibly preventing her from rescuing her brain-damaged brother from an oncoming train. The accident is blamed on Cat, and she is sent to reform school.

Cat feels responsible for the death of her brother, and drops out of society after being removed from her (happy but somewhat neglectful) family and placed in an abusive reform school. Robinson Gray puts the incident behind him and grows up in his wealthy privileged world, goes on to law school, marries and becomes a successful High Court Judge, though not a very moral one: he is a frequent client of Lucy’s at Charlie’s Inferno and is involved in other illegal activities, all while existing above the law. Gray’s son, Gabriel, disowns his father and moves, like Lucy, to Sydney as they both become involved in trying to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Cat, but he becomes part of the mystery by disappearing himself. Gabriel, ‘angel of the annunciation’ (Magician 84), allows Charlie to invent the image of Virgil (with Gabriel’s face) reaching back to take his hand, he needs to invent the woman at the top of the ladder, Beatrice with her gleaming Cat eyes, beckoning, waiting (94).

Hospital clearly defines the terms for us. Charlie Chang is the Dante figure. Instead of writing poetry he brings his camera to record the descent. Gabriel is the Virgil figure: innocent and yet knowing. The elusive, missing Cat for whom they search (not knowing that she is in fact long dead at the hands of Robinson Gray, now Judge) is the Beatrice figure. Charlie is further identified with Dante; Hospital writes: ‘Charlie was situated, you might say, in the first circle of the quarry. He occupied the border lands. He looked both ways’ (Magician 79). Lucy/Lucia’s role too is obvious. She is:

a woman without a name, 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’ (119).

She is the Divine Comedy’s Saint Lucia – the patron saint of light, of blindness. Into this, Hospital extends some postmodernism, making the ‘Divine Light’ bring, instead of clarity, misinterpretation.

The name of the chapter ‘Charlie’s Inferno’, besides evoking Dante, refers to the restaurant and bar that Charlie Chang owns and operates, an establishment that also includes an upstairs brothel. Just as Dante used the Inferno to critique contemporary politics, social and political and social events and its unsavoury types – drug abusers and other nasties of society. In fact, Hospital typifies Hell more of a quarry. These homeless, more honourable and warm people, the one who is responsible Robinson Gray: lustful, corrupt official, mean-spirited, poor father to Gabriela, indicates the extent to which the terrain and placing it in society, the pillars of mainstream academics).

In addition, just as the Magician bears his name in the text, as a school girl, she now becomes a quarry-dwelling before being committed an unspecific past. Lucia/Lucia is an outsider, mainstream worlds, below the Dantian gift for it has surroundings and the place Gabriel and Catherine, rather than with words, suggesting that ‘Watch out’ (Magician 82). And the confrontation when overcome by knowing, when watching the show.

Whereas Dante finds his descent into the inferno with underworld dwellers: ‘She put a spell on me’ (157) vision that becomes Lucy, the vision that becomes Lucy, she goes. Although death literally for Lucy (through underworld essentially
contemporary politics, Janette Turner Hospital certainly critiques contemporary political and social events by broadening the metaphor of the quarry as Hell, with its unsavoury types – drug users, runaway teens who swap sex for food, thieves, abusers and other nasty characters – to include the corrupt underbelly of high society. In fact, Hospital seems to be saying that it is the corrupt officials of Sydney who typify Hell more certainly and strongly than the unlucky homeless of the quarry. These homeless figures of the underworld (Julie, Old Fury and so on) are more honourable and giving, provide each other with comfort, share food, warmth and other meagre resources. The most rotten and evil person in the novel, the one who is responsible for the bones found in the rainforest, is Justice Robinson Gray: lustful, greedy and very proud; wealthy, private-school-educated; corrupt official, mean-spirited judge; user of prostitutes, abusive husband, and poor father to Gabriel. By naming the bar ‘Charlie’s Inferno’, Hospital clearly indicates the extent to which she is taking the inferno out of the underground terrain and placing it in establishments frequented by the so-called very best of society, the pillars of mainstream society (including judges, ministers, literati and academics).

In addition, just as Dante the author splits himself from the character who bears his name in the text, so too does Lucia, the main narrative voice of The Last Magician, split her identity. Whereas she had once been Lucia, wealthy private-school girl, she now becomes Lucy, ‘a tourist… [a]n explorer’ (Magician 34), who crosses borders, boundaries and worlds, journeying through prostitution and quarry-dwelling before leaving that world behind. As Dante’s character has committed an unspecified sin or sins, so too Lucy has unpleasant deeds in her past. Lucia/Lucy is an outsider wherever she goes in the subterranean and mainstream worlds, belonging completely to neither group. Lucy is endowed with the Dantian gift for insight and observation, a heightened awareness of her surroundings and the poetic vision (even if that poetic vision, shared by Charlie, Gabriel and Catherine, is transformed by Hospital into a skill with photography rather than with words). Janette Turner Hospital critiques this role through suggesting that ‘Watchers, after all, make choices; they choose what they see’ (Magician 82). And the qualities of the watcher come at a cost. As Dante faints when overcome by knowledge in the Inferno, so too does Lucy black out regularly when watching the short movie Charlie’s Inferno in the Sydney cinema.

Whereas Dante finds himself confronted with a leopard that helps to precipitate his descent into the inferno, so too in The Last Magician is our heroine confronted with underworld dweller Sheba who spits on Lucia and insults her most violently: ‘She put a spell on me’ (Magician 139). This event clearly instigates the heightened vision that becomes Lucy’s trademark, her ability to see the underworld wherever she goes. Although descent into the metaphorical Hell occurs physically and literally for Lucy (through the cavernous, ringed quarry), the journey through the underworld essentially occurs from the moment that Sheba breaks for Lucy the
fragile glass between worlds. In this way we can see that Lucy has many guides through the Underworld.

Lucy is the incarnation of the illuminating grace that touches the traveller. In The Last Magician she is identified with vision; this is a text dominated by ideas of seeing, and of screens as mediated visions — Charlie is a photographer and filmmaker, Lucy becomes a television producer. However, Lucy has found enlightenment only by casting off the name (and baggage) of Lucia and descending to the underground world herself. She brings light to Charlie's world in the form of an opportunity to know finally what has happened to Cat (his Beatrice). Lucy says: 'So Charlie was Dante, speaking in code and turning history into allegory' (Magician 64); and later: 'Charlie was situated, you might say, in the first circle of the quarry. He occupied the border lands. He looked both ways' (79). Of course Lucy is speaking as much of herself here: Charlie is exiled through his Chinese-Australian heritage and becomes an expatriate moving to New York. Cat, who acts in the role of Beatrice, is missing and then dead, and is kept on the periphery of the narrative, an elusive figure. Charlie creates his own Virgil in the figure of Gabriel Gray, son of the corrupt Judge and, at this point, potential murderer. Gabriel, unlike his father, is hungry for justice and equality, for action. The last Lucy sees of them is on a security camera recording in a bar on the edge of the quarry. 'Now let us descend into the blind world down there, began Virgil, deadly pale. I will be the first and thou second. / Let's go, Gabriel says. I'll go first and you stick close to me, Charlie' (Magician 87). They descend through the circles, describing the misery of each level.

Alistair Stead suggests that Janette Turner Hospital uses the Dante mythos in a post-colonial manner — reminding the reader of the links between early conceptualisations of the Antipodes, in the culture of the colonial era, of 'down under' an underworld, characterised by Dante's Inferno. Hospital uses Dante's underground imagery also as a means of evoking some aspects of Australian colonial history.

This vital and dynamic mix of high, canonical culture and socially low and dispossessed characters has caused some degree of concern among critics. Hospital has been accused of mixing strains of culture that do not go together. For example, one reviewer has suggested, in relation to Hospital's Collected Stories, that

sometimes one cannot help feeling that Hospital is showing off too much her knowledge of Dante, Dickinson or Shakespeare — writers who are largely out of place among her lower class narrators and language.

However, it is exactly that kind of destabilisation, of playing with intertextual expectations, that Hospital is hoping to create in her novels. Hospital is clearly teasing out the thread of ideas surrounding the ability of canonical literature to transcend boundaries of time, distance, language and class.

How does this juxtapose with lower class characters placed in the world of Brisbane's prime quarry reality, evoking more than brute professions, prostitution and promiscuity between classes, and she makes references in the novel, the genre of the thriller. Her violent events and their a feeling that they all lend themselves to become part of popular culture, now classical.

As I have outlined, these novels are filled with society's rejection of these characters who have merely lost their way. This is Hospital's fiction. Society would prefer to think of the culture of what happens in the contemplation of justice. Hospital form an essential core of this passionate about the importance of the journeys Hospital provides in the fundamentally unjust nation. The Judge, is the primary source of the caused pain and hardship. It is contextualised somewhat for us, and we are taken some way in how he became this way.

Matthew Pearl has said that Hospital embeds in his poem is the attempt to punish great things go on. All that the disappearances and deaths keep the lifeline of the silence ones deafening us and they journeyed towards knowing now come to the final way.

Janette Turner Hospital is much more nuanced, in the texts (even more, really, in Divine Comedy but with an unsuited. Not only is she a master, but also a way
How does this juxtaposition between high-art cultural texts and references and lower class characters play itself out? Lucy moves between worlds, between the world of Brisbane’s private schools, then university, and Sydney’s dangerous quarry reality, evoking the wandering figure of Dante. She moves between professions, prostitution and television producer being just two. She moves between classes, and she paves the way for Hospital’s movement between textual references in the novel. Hospital further complicates this tension by using the genre of the thriller. Her repeated thematic concerns of mysteries, missing people, violent events and their aftermaths, and the quest for knowledge, for illumination, all lend themselves to the thriller genre, a genre that, while associated with popular culture, now claims to belong with works of the canon.

As I have outlined, the quarry exists, like Dante’s Hell, as a nightmarish place filled with society’s rejects – both those who have sinned overtly and those who have merely lost their way or dared to travel outside society’s proscribed margins. This is Hospital’s fictional dumping ground for the people and information that society would prefer to keep buried. But Cat’s bones won’t stay buried, and knowledge of what happened to her all those years ago finally surfaces. The contemplation of justice and, inevitably, the final abandonment of the quest for it, form an essential core of Janette Turner Hospital’s works. Her characters are often passionate about the importance of setting wrongs right, but, through the difficult journeys Hospital provides for them, arrive at a level of acceptance regarding the fundamentally unjust nature of the world. Justice Robinson Gray, a High Court Judge, is the primary source of corruption and malefiance, whose actions have caused pain and hardship in the lives of so many others. Gray’s actions have been contextualised somewhat, as with the various characters in The Divine Comedy, and we are taken some way towards understanding why Gray is the way he is and how he became this way.

Matthew Pearl has said that ‘probably the most interesting thing that Dante embeds in his poem is that there’s a certain disappointment that comes with any attempt to punish great evil.’ And this is the outcome of The Last Magician. Things go on. All that has changed is the possession of knowledge, and more disappearances and deaths. Hospital concludes with the lines: ‘And we hang on to the lifeline of the silence that connects us, the great beating wings of our absent ones deafening us and filling the air with light’ (Magician 352). They have journeyed towards knowledge and, where the novel started with darkness, we now come to the final word: light.

Janette Turner Hospital’s use of, and homage to, Dante’s Divine Comedy, is so much more nuanced, in this writer’s opinion, than any of the previously-mentioned texts (even more, really, than Pearl’s The Dante Club). She uses themes from the Divine Comedy but with contemporary relevance. Her use of the text is not at all unsubtle. Not only is she providing a canvas on which to pay homage to the master, but also a way in for contemporary readers to access the relevancy,
particularly the political relevancy of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. ‘Maybe everything, ultimately, leads to the Inferno and the quarry, who knows?’ (*Magician* 267).

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**Notes**


**Works Cited**


