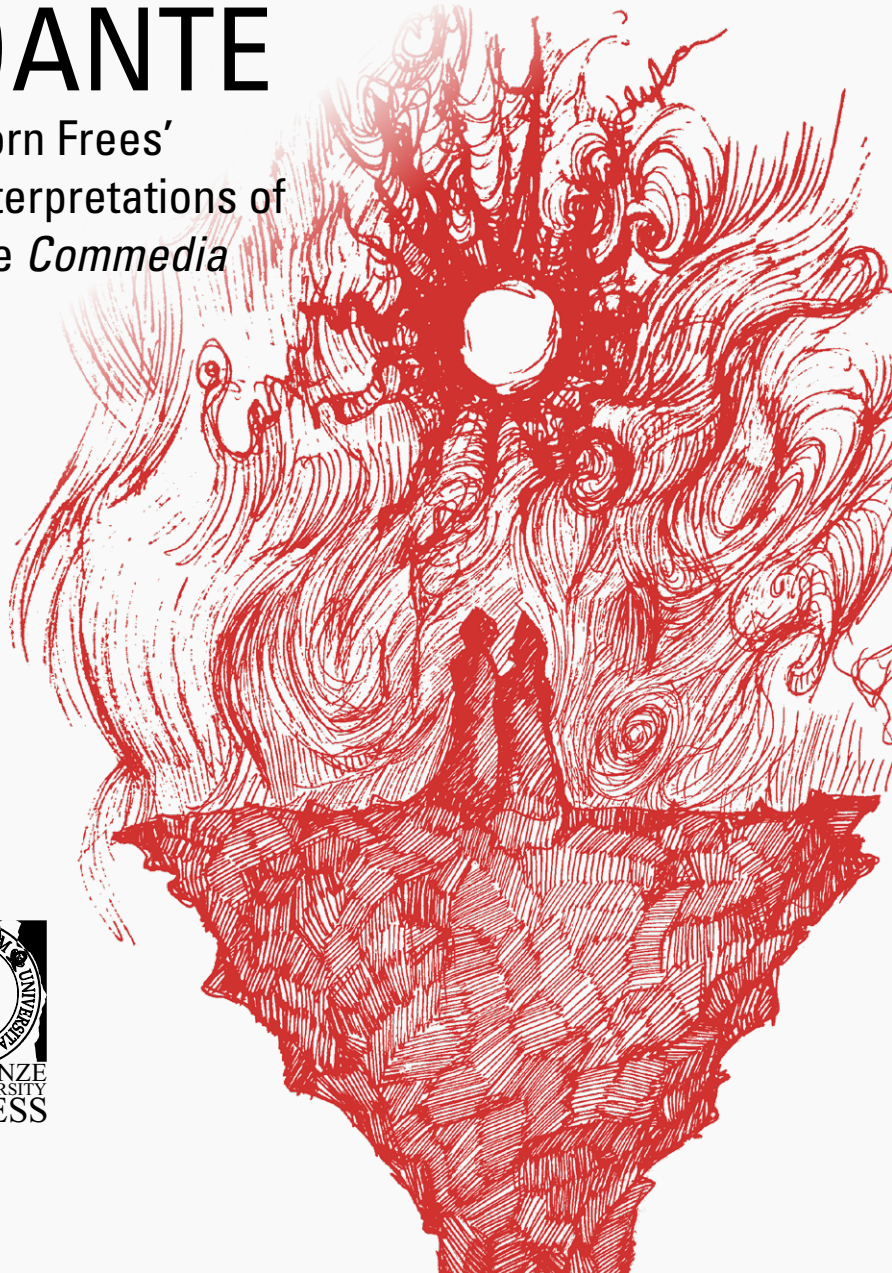
edited by

Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga

A SOUTH AFRICAN *CONVIVIO* WITH DANTE

Born Frees' Interpretations of the *Commedia*



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A South African *Convivio* with Dante

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Foreword

Marcello Ciccuto

What made the reading of these essays so enjoyable was that I did not come across any of the usual, outworn readings to which the tradition of scholarly, academic and literary criticism has accustomed us. Nor did I find traces of the ethical, political and religious thought, or other—even more conventional—interpretative codes which have dominated readings of Dante for centuries. Instead of readings in this tired tradition, with its a priori judgements concerning Dante's poem, I was treated to, among other pleasures, the many unconventional reflections which emerged from the individual imaginations of the young student readers/interpreters who took the opportunity to offer some profound articulations of their own thoughts and their own "being in time" through their readings of Dante. It is clear that these individual appropriations of a classic, which is so distant from our own times, successfully project echoes of the *Divine Commedy* onto current human realities—and the specific realities of a country such as South Africa—which much like the *selva selvaggia e aspra e forte* [wilderness, savage, brute, harsh and wild] is characterised by impermanence, vulnerability, exile, and, in rising through purgatory, the redemptive power of suffering. These elements lend themselves (at times spontaneously), to a comparison with the deep memory of a nation. Their focus is the *tornar de la mente* [the coming once more to mind] that only the reliving of the evil and the vicissitudes of history can make interesting, both at an individual and collective level.

It seems that in these readings, even where the voices of specialists in the field make themselves heard, Dante has taken on the role of interlocutor in an intimate dialogue from which emanate different, perhaps better, reinterpreta-

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Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African* Convivio *with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

tions of the readers' own identities because, from their encounter with the world of Dante, possible alternatives to their present emerge. It is significant that the various themes brought forward by the student readers/interpreters in relating to Dante are in close dialogue with current events. This is the real *pan degli angeli* [bread of angels] that the student readers/interpreters are able to bring to the fore in the course of their own, unique *convivium*. From the intellectual nourishment of the Dantesque cosmos, combined with creative "talking back", come forth visions of Beatrice as female figure of *deviance and goodliness* simultaneously and a symbol of the power of black women. Ulysses is seen as a model of a search for knowledge that cannot be separated from the exercise of virtue or from prideful self-sufficiency. Indeed, it can said that this wonderful editorial initiative is inspired, to a certain degree, by this confrontation with the Homeric and Dantesque Ulysses: bearer of the idea of not going it alone, detached from the world, but rather setting one's course in line with a life lived through encounter with the Other, with other people and their stories.

This is because, after all, the student readers/interpreters, in their essays, have shown themselves to be acutely aware of that most admirable alloy forged of many stories within the journey of Dante; that marvellous ensemble of hundreds of figures, characters and situations in a single, fused past and present, which leads us to imagine, in our own present, the fundamental idea of living alongside the Other. We grasp this idea, a task our student/interpreters have accomplished well, when we comprehend the experiences of each of us and of all of us through the application of a model: the model Dante continues to provide us with his undying message of a civilization founded on our participation in and our sharing of an intellectual adventure.

Presidente della Società Dantesca Italiana

Foreword

Libby Meintjes

The publication of this book was not deliberately planned but evolved and grew with the enthusiasm of two young Dante scholars, Dr Anita Virga and Dr Sonia Fanucchi, who were intent on enriching their postgraduate students' experience of reading Dante. The response to their exhortation to the students to consider the relevance of Dante's work to their lives and experiences was as unexpected as it was inspirational. The project took on a life of its own.

I am thus delighted to have the opportunity to write the foreword to *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*. As a former head of the School of Literature, Language, and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand, from whence this book emanates, I am proud to be associated with a project which has proved to be an intense journey full of personal and theoretical insights for students and academics alike.

The project captures the spirit of experimentation in teaching and learning, and research, with which my colleagues at Wits University are responding to calls for the decolonisation of universities and the curriculum. The *#FeesMustFall* movement which began in 2015 was focused on free university education, but it had a far wider ideological imprint, locating itself within debates on the role of the university *for students and society* and calling for a radical re-imagination and transformation of the university. What the movement, together with its precursor, *#RhodesMustFall*, signalled was the need for a fundamentally different university, one with which students (but also academics and workers) could identify and in which they could recognise themselves—a university radically re-imagining its ideological identity post colonialism and post liberation. Rad-

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ical change can mean changing everything—total disruptive displacement—which is unlikely to occur without a full-scale revolution, or it can mean gradual but incremental transformative change through the integration of different approaches, as we see here.

This book signals to us that the postcolonial university is within our reach, that progress can be made in leaps and bounds. The book's publication shows that the adoption of decolonising practices in teaching and learning and research places us at the threshold of the decolonial. The ambition of "developing a South African narrative around Dante—of determining in what sense Dante 'speaks' to us as South African readers and whether we might build a community of scholars, students and writers with this shared vision" demonstrates how academics and students can rise to the challenge of changing the university.

The performance of writing back to Dante showcased here is an exciting combination of decolonising practice and of translation informed by the practice of reading through different epistemological paradigms. At the very heart of the *Convivio with Dante* lies a classic of mediaeval literature—in translation (and only tangentially in the original). Although the issue of translation as such never seems to have entered the picture (students were free to use any Dante edition in translation), the students nonetheless engaged in a process of translation and transformation—a form of rewriting and translanguaging producing, what I would like to call, *transwriting*.

The students take charge of the text, using their conversation with Dante to uncover their singular identities, whether through resistance to the text or through recognition of themselves in the text. Their writing takes hold of our imagination. Through their eyes we see a different *Purgatorio*, a different Dante, more akin to our times.

Dante seems to speak directly to their strengths as well as their anxieties, and to their social and political worlds. The reader is taken on an exhilarating, at times horrifying, journey with the students. Their moral philosophies spill over enthusiastically, carrying the reader with them on their Dantesque journeys – which are likely to be as revelatory and salutary for the reader as they were for the students and their academic guides.

The book is a wonderfully successful experiment in enhancing the value of a formidable literary work, often seen by many as irrelevant and as divorced from our immediate and current experiences. This book is proof that that is not the case.

“Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto”: Reading Dante in South Africa

Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga

The Origin

The seed for this book was planted the first time that we met over a coffee. It was a summer’s day in 2018 when we met under the blue skies of the Highveld at the coffee shop of the Origins Centre Museum at our university, the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa. We chose to meet there for its convenient distance from our departments; but it is a highly symbolic place, and, though we did not realise it at the time, was to take on special significance for us. The Origins Centre is a museum with a particularly South African flavour, dedicated to the origins of humankind. For us it also came to represent the origins of a new intellectual and personal journey that would culminate in the founding of our society, Dantessa. There was another layer of significance connected with the Origins Centre, for it was our common Italian origin that first drew us together, despite the fact that our backgrounds were very different. During the course of this meeting, we found that we had something more in common than that: a special place for Dante in our teaching. We both teach Dante in our courses, although Sonia teaches it in translation in the English Department and Anita in the original version in the Italian Department. While talking about our teaching experiences, we discovered that in both of our courses, our students invariably showed a great interest in Dante, irrespective of their race, religions, home languages, and chosen majors.

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We noticed that the *Commedia* affected South African students in a very personal and meaningful way and that our students responded to it passionately. They tended to see themselves reflected in Dante's epic journey through the after-world, and found themselves grappling with the challenges that the text poses to their political and ethical beliefs. It became very clear that Dante struck a note among our students, despite his text's cultural, temporal and linguistic distance from them. Many of them found themselves conversing with the text in the sense that they transposed its language and imagery into the realm of their own experience, a process that involved both resisting and accepting Dante's vision. This, in turn, compelled them to return repeatedly to the difficult questions that the text raises. These reactions were especially interesting given that our students are so different from their American or European peers in terms of their cultural, moral, political, and ethical outlooks, all of which have been shaped by the trauma of an unequal past and the continuing challenges of an unequal present. Our students are moreover different from those in other postcolonial societies, since it was only in South Africa where colonialism was followed by half a century of racial segregation under an oppressive regime. For this reason, our students related to the Commedia in a unique way, as will become evident in this book.

That day at the coffee shop we were compelled to act on our realisation that Dante has such a powerful effect on our students. We decided to start a reading group on Dante, which we called Dantessa (Dante Studies in South Africa). Our choice of name with its feminine connotations, echoing our own response as young female scholars engaging with Dante, was already suggestive of the way in which our society would evolve. We started as an informal group, asking our students to join us in reading and commenting on Dante's *Commedia*, but soon defined our purpose of developing a South African narrative around Dante. The goal of the society is to determine how and why Dante 'speaks' to us as South African readers and whether we might build a community of scholars, students and writers with a shared vision. Our first step was tentative: it is generally accepted that Shakespeare has a far more sustained presence in South Africa—indeed, as Chris Thurman notes in his chapter, *"Dante can I lead you?" South African Students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)*, Shakespeare is an integral part of South Africa's political voice and struggle to transcend its colonial history, in a way that Dante has not been.

This notwithstanding, our initial discussions revealed some illuminating things about our students' experience of the *Commedia*. In our very first meeting we asked students simply to talk about their individual experiences: what drew them to Dante and what made them wish to be part of the society, despite the fact that our reading group would not count officially toward the completion of their degrees.

Significantly, a picture began to emerge of the role that Dante played in these students' lives and intellectual development: some had encountered the *Commedia* before university, in early childhood, or through its popular culture manifestations (in the computer game *Dante's Inferno* for example, or the movie *Seven*). There were some who had encountered the text for the first time during the courses taught by the two of us at university and were intrigued to know

more. Several of the students who had some previous experience of the *Commedia* told us that they had come across it by chance, and associated it primarily with the enjoyment of private reading. Almost all of them had read translations rather than the original Italian.

We encouraged them to write their personal reactions to Dante and the *Commedia*, and, when we started reading their pieces, we realised that this exercise ought not to be an end in itself: in their work we saw something of great value, which spoke to us as individuals even before it spoke to us as scholars. At that point it became evident to us that our personal stories also affected the way in which we read the texts of our students and, through them, of Dante. For example, the conflict between the desire to belong and the feeling of exile—the Dantesque theme that so affected our students—was not only theirs, but also ours.

Anita

In the moment in which I am writing, I consider myself to be in exile. It is indeed two years that, for personal reasons, I have not been able to go back to Italy, my home country, where I was born, grew up and lived until I was twenty-five. One day, around fifteen years ago, I left Italy to pursue my studies in the USA. At that time, I did not know that my home would progressively become more and more distant. I left with the idea that I could always go back. In the USA, while studying for my Ph.D., I encountered Dante. I had already studied the *Commedia* in High School in Italy, but back then I did not appreciate it. In the USA, I discovered the power of the text, which was taught to me by prof. Franco Masciandaro, who appears in this book, not only because of his expertise, but also because of his impact on me regarding Dante. It was when I moved to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 2013 and started teaching the *Commedia* that I realised that I was using the same images and the same words that I had learnt from my professor a few years before. Through teaching, I came to appreciate Dante's text even more, for my engagement with my students led me to find greater meaning in the *Commedia*. Then I met Sonia, and together we started our Dantessa journey, in which Dante continues to speak to us, both directly and through the voices of our students.

Sonia

> "O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
> vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
>
> che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
> Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore"
> (*Inf.* 1.82–5).[1]

[1] "O glory and light of all other poets, / let my long study and great love avail / that made me delve so deep into your volume. / 'You are my teacher and my author."

These are the words with which the pilgrim first addresses his guide and muse, Virgil, and these words also capture my relationship with Dante. When first I discovered the *Commedia*, in the last year of my undergraduate degree, I was struck by Dante's familiarity, the ways in which his voice seemed to call to me from my own childhood in an immigrant family, echoing my Nonno's larger-than-life, deeply emotional personality. But mine was also an intellectual attachment, as Dante surprised and challenged me, driving me back to Aquinas, Augustine, the Neoplatonists, Virgil, and demanding that I engage interactively with the philosophies of the past, present, future. With Dante I undertook a Ulysses-like flight of the mind, and strove always to reach beyond the boundaries of thought, joining the poet in his *legno che cantando varca* (*Par.* 2.3).[2]

Dante, too, was the answer to my acute spiritual crisis. Raised Catholic, I had since been educated in a progressive school of thought and had come to view anything I deemed conservative with suspicion. Yet Dante's was a living faith, a faith seeking understanding rather than proof. Rather than stultifying and restrictive, his faith was deeply and challengingly moral, undermining my assumptions and encompassing every aspect of love and desire, all of those *segni de l'antica fiamma* (*Pur.* 30.48),[3] that was first sparked by his love for Beatrice. Mentor, poet and guide, Dante led me to the seminar series that I would be asked to create, a course on the poem in translation which would open the way for my meeting with Anita, and for the birth of Dantessa. Just as the pilgrim looked to his guides to pave the way, so have I, Anita and our students continued to look to Dante, who in turn commands, *Leva dunque, lettore… la vista* (*Par.* 10.7–8).[4]

Our students' reading of the Commedia

It is true that Dante is known on the wider African continent and in elite literary circles in South Africa, and that the *Commedia* was part of the very exclusive literary formation and training of professional South African authors such as J.M. Coetzee, Chris Mann and Guy Butler. But this is not a reality for most young readers encountering the text. It is important to note that the text does not appear anywhere in the South African school curriculum and that it is not included in any official literary narrative, either traditional or postcolonial, with which South African students are familiar.

The effect of this is twofold: on the one hand students' first experience with the *Commedia* is quite personal and their individual reactions, consequently, are not impacted by any prior assumptions. Reactions are often strongly emotional, and feelings run the gamut from shock and resistance to recognition and excitement. These responses are similar in that they react forcefully to Dante's invitation to converse and engage with the text and the challenges that it poses.

[2] "Ship, that singing makes its way."

[3] "Signs of the ancient flame."

[4] "With me, then reader, raise your eyes."

But the students in our Dantessa society, all of whom belong to the 'born free' generation—the generation born after the fall of Apartheid in the early 1990s—were also inspired to take their relationship with the text beyond these initial impressions. Indeed, they were inspired to build their personal encounters with the text into a broader narrative, both personal and, in important ways, moral and political.

Over the course of our next few meetings, it became clear that there were significant points of connection between the text and the mentality of our South African youth. For example, students immediately picked up on and identified with the poem's various iterations of the question of exile. In South Africa the feeling of exile is, on one level, political, in that it is connected with an Apartheid past where political rebellion led to the banishment of many writers and activists. But young people in contemporary South Africa also experience the feeling of exile as personal: the sense of responsibility to their country and a desire to be part of building a new, more inclusive nation was counterbalanced by feelings of dislocation and profound uncertainty about whether they have a legitimate place in the society that we are creating. In our discussions, we noticed that this sense of displacement was experienced by students across the racial divide: all felt conflicted about the social roles they were required to play as black or white individuals. Moreover, the feeling of disconnectedness was augmented by the substantial differences between private and familial lives, since our students' heterogeneous cultures and languages differ substantially between themselves.

The Prologue's extremely powerful image of the *selva oscura* evoked exile and, therefore, resonated with students' sense of social alienation, and with white students' additional burden of inherited guilt. For Dante the image of the *selva* is rich in its associations of loneliness and vulnerability and is notable for its obscure quality, conveying powerfully the emotional turmoil of being spiritually and politically displaced, as the expressive opening lines of the poem reveal:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
> ché la diritta via era smarrita.
>
> Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
> esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
> che nel pensier rinova la paura! (*Inf.* 1.1–6).[5]

The image of the *selva* is soon replaced by the more overtly aggressive Leopard, Lion and She-wolf, as the pilgrim's crisis deepens. The pilgrim's encounter with the beasts, which grow increasingly more intimidating, resonated with students' sense of progressive estrangement and with their fear of the falsely seductive allure of easy solutions: they could once again read the emotional signif-

[5] "Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost. / Ah, how hard it is to tell / the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—/ the very thought of it renews my fear!"

icance of these images into our own political landscape which had so recently succumbed to destructive populism during the Jacob Zuma years (2009–2018).

Traditional allegorical interpretations of the three beasts—as biblical figures or moral signs, mapping out the various stages of Dante's infernal journey—were not as appealing to our students. They were instead attracted to the elasticity of Dante's allegory in the Prologue, the ways in which it reaches out to include the reader in the process of meaning making, and indeed writes itself into their lives while simultaneously drawing attention to Dante's specific spiritual journey, and the points at which this intersects with and deviates from their own.

As they continued to explore the implications of Dante's language of exile throughout the *Commedia*, it gradually became clear that *Purgatorio* spoke most meaningfully to the young South African's vulnerable condition, as the pieces included in this book testify. Students spoke of the 'liminal' character of *Purgatorio,* a canticle based on a narrative of reconciliation and nevertheless characterised by nostalgic longing for a past now beyond the poet's reach. This is the tone of Dante's meeting with his old friend Casella for example, who sings for the company on the shores of Purgatory, conjuring the sweet memory of Dante's earlier poetry and almost distracting the souls from the far more important climb up the mountain:

> E io: "Se nuova legge non ti toglie
> memoria o uso a l'amoroso canto
> che mi solea quetar tutte mie doglie,
>
> di ciò ti piaccia consolare alquanto
> l'anima mia, che, con la sua persona
> venendo qui, è affannata tanto!"
>
> "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona"
> cominciò elli allor sì dolcemente,
> che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.
>
> Lo mio maestro e io e quella gente
> ch'eran con lui parevan sì contenti,
> come a nessun toccasse altro la mente.
>
> Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti
> a le sue note; ed ecco il veglio onesto
> gridando: "Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?
>
> qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?
> Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
> ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto" (*Purg.* 2.106–24).[6]

[6] "And I: 'If a new law does not take from you / memory or practice of the songs of love / that used to soothe my every sorrow / please let me hear one now to ease my soul, / for it is out of breath and spent, / joined to my body coming here.' / 'Love that converses with me in my

For students of Dantessa, this in-between space, rich in future possibility and yet still encumbered by the burden of memory, is a familiar one, both politically and personally. Yet they are also conscious of *Purgatorio*'s difference, the fact that it offers a surprising and satisfying answer to the habitual presentations of the liminal as a place of discomfort and estrangement.

How the book is organized

In the first part of this book, we collected some of our students' written responses to the *Commedia*. In most of these responses, it is evident that *Purgatorio* plays a major role. The collection includes writings of all genres and subjects: prose, poetry, personal reflection, dialogue, non-fiction. Some are more autobiographical, and others are fictional stories, but they all have in common a very personal (and South African) approach to Dante's text.

Purgatorio was the inspiration for Casey Fern's essay, *La divina foresta: Earthy Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's Purgatorio*, which describes Dante's *Purgatorio* as a liminal homecoming, a ritual return to the comforting and the concrete. Dante's narrative is therefore experienced as broadly congruent with the emotional condition of many young South Africans but also as actively transformative and transforming, creating new ways of relating to familiar feelings and experiences.

Purgatorial imagery, with its emphasis on the redemptive power of suffering, also underlies the short vignettes of Thalén Rogers, *The Lodestone*, which confronts the inherited guilt of Apartheid's legacy captured in personal narratives and encounters that occur during an aeroplane flight, drawing on Dante's ascent up Mount Purgatory. Painful narratives of suffering and inequality, so familiar in a South African context which is still beset by the inequalities entrenched in its past, are here mystically transformed into a narrative of redemption that nevertheless does not eschew or deny pain. Rogers makes use of *Purgatorio*'s narrative of intermittent dreams, where the crimes of the white man, for whose greed thousands of innocent black people were killed, are revisited in the powerful dream vision of the old man who is pictured holding his beating heart and attempting to reinsert it as he confesses to terrible crimes of murder, torture and racism.

In South Africa these wounds are particularly fresh, and it is not seldom that a story of racial hatred will appear in the news, bringing back all the old horrors, divisions, and insecurities of Apartheid's crimes. These stories always rehash the same old dichotomies, so that many South Africans have become numb and even indifferent to their implications. But in a *Purgatorial* context, freed by Dante's mystical combination of pain and redemption, Rogers is able to ask the

> mind,' / he then began, so sweetly / that the sweetness sounds within me still. / My master and / I and all those standing / near Casella seemed untroubled, / as if we had no other care. / We were spellbound, listening to his notes, / when that venerable old man appeared and cried: / 'What is this, laggard spirits? / What carelessness, what delay is this? / Hurry to the mountain and there shed the slough / that lets not God be known to you'."

difficult questions: "When will my country heal? When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land? How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption?" He shares with his readers a hearteningly positive reply, a sun that envelopes passengers in the "warmth of grace."

The role of Dante as mediated through translations, and mediator between his classical inheritance, his own context and the context of his readers, became a central dimension of our group's engagement with the poet. Students were acutely aware that reading in translation required constant (re)interpretations. They were quick to realise that the original text itself is engaged in this process and that it constantly 'reads' its readers, demanding their direct response and moral involvement in its conundrums. Reading in translation necessitated a complex and often painful wrangling with Dante's voice, which catalyzed students' attempts to use the text to justify and discover their own identities. Dante appeared variously as a mirror and as a remote and, at times, severe, judgmental presence against which to measure themselves. This process is powerfully evident in the creative pieces of three young writers, all of which respond to and rewrite Dantesque episodes: Kai Lötter's *A Tree in Hell*, Chariklia Martalas's four pieces of *A Mad Flight into Inferno once again* and Helena Van Urk's *The Storm*.

Chariklia Martalas, in her creative reworking of Dante's Ulysses motif, casts Dante the poet in an ostensibly authoritative role as her therapist. This impression is soon undermined, as Dante, well-meaning but misled, imagines that her dream equates her with the Ulysses of the Commedia, when really it reveals her distance, as a sincere writer, from his glory-seeking speech (indeed, it is hinted in the comical opening scene that Dante may be more seduced by the allure of celebrity than she is). Dante is further caricatured in her reinvention of Canto 5, where, in an infernal party hosted by Francesca, he is gently mocked for his supposed prudish horror of unbridled desire. These Dantes are at once echoes of the original poet and inventions of the student-writer, who seeks to assert her own authority, in a repeat of the Dante-Virgil dynamic. And yet, Dante remains an indispensable component of Martalas's reinvention of *Inferno*: even as she rewrites and at times corrects, so to speak, the scenes of damnation she evokes, they all remain deeply enmeshed in Dante's original allegory. To explain further: in her creative reworking of Canto 13, the symbol of the suicidal trees and Harpies are powerfully present yet re-imagined as part of a rose garden without the infernal associations of pain and punishment. Thus, Dante's allegory of betrayal in *Inferno* 33 is transformed into a narrative of a nation betrayed, as Hendrick Verwoerd, infamous in South Africa as Apartheid's architect, feasts on the head of John Vorster, Prime Minster in 1966 and in many ways Verwoerd's accomplice in the crime of Apartheid.

A similar process is evident in Kai Lötter's, *A Tree in Hell*, where the protagonist initially resists Dante for his depiction of the suicides in hell and finally comes to embrace him as indispensable to her salvation. Lötter casts herself in the role of the pilgrim Dante, depicting her encounter with the horrors of the mental facility as congruent with his frightening journey through Hell,

by drawing on the powerful imagery of the forest, guardians of the circle and guide. Lötter's narrative of mental dissolution and redemption is powerfully conveyed through the Dantesque imagery of the forest, which is mapped onto the landscape of Johannesburg, now transformed into an allegorical reflection of the state of the protagonist's soul. In Helena Van Urk's, *The Storm*, the voice of Dante is again invoked, this time as that of a voyager involved in a shipwreck, thus echoing the fate of Dante's great explorer, Ulysses. Van Urk's Dante is a remote figure, a somewhat naïve 'outsider' and exile, who, searching for a place to belong and an answer to a moral crisis, finds himself instead in the hellscape of early colonial South Africa, where he becomes the horrified observer of scenes of greed that evoke the images of *Inferno* 6. Unlike the original poet, this Dante exists at one remove from the world that he encounters, and his foreign character renders him something of an idiosyncratic anomaly. Yet he simultaneously evokes and embodies the original pilgrim's moral journey and indeed the poet's moral role, as these distasteful scenes are mediated through his eyes and judged from his perspective.

Increasingly in our discussions it became evident that student responses to the poet's voice were not straightforward, visceral. Rather, they were complex, filtered through deep memory, and at times rebellious in tone, as their creative work bears out. Their work is inspired by the need to rewrite Dante, to tone down his moralism, rendering it more palatable to South African youth. At the same time, in contradiction it might seem with themselves, their stories are drawn to the poem's powerful moral and intellectual narratives, and to the rich implications of Dante's allegory as it inscribes itself into students' personal and political landscapes and offers an alternative narrative—a new language—in which to frame the young South African's experience.

During the pandemic, our society evolved beyond its original reading group structure, broadening our personal, South African perspective by bringing this into conversation with the perspectives of various experts and critical schools across the world. True to the diverse character of our society, we invited a variety of scholars from our institution as well as from abroad to enter into a dialogue with us. These scholars belonged to many different disciplines and offered a wide range of perspectives against which to measure ourselves. Thus, the scope of our conversations expanded to include Frank Ambrosio's philosophical meditation on the nature of freedom in the *Commedia*, Albert Ascoli's meditation on Dante's reinvention of the concept of *auctoritas*, Pietro Del Corno's discussion of Dante's afterlives in 15th century sermons and beyond, and David Bowe's searching exploration of the text's female voices as mediators that rewrite and shape the male perspective of the poet. The variety of perspectives offered in these exchanges intersected in useful ways with our society's developing conversation on how we might revisit or rewrite Dante in our own context, and in what sense we should interpret his voice. One of the most salient questions raised in these conversations had to do with the role of the feminine voice as mediator in the text: does this intersect with our own understanding of the complicated female figure in South Africa? This question resonated most powerfully with Lesego Maponyane who, in

her paper *Beatrice*, reads Dante's beloved as an "ambivalent" figure who embodies both "deviance and godliness." The depiction of Beatrice therefore resonates in important ways with the common characterisation of South African women who she describes as occupying "a distressingly ambivalent space—in which they are hailed as harbingers of a liberty they cannot possess, are emblematic of fortitude, yet subject to oppressive vulnerability." Similarly, Luyanda Kaitoo approaches Dante's text by rewriting Canto 5 of hell from the perspective of a black South African woman. This time, the figure of Francesca is transformed and adapted to the South African context, becoming the emblem of the strength of the black woman.

Erin Jacobs (*Yet, I Had not Discovered You*) and Ross Smith (*My Discovery of Dante and the Apocalyptic Crisis: My Dantesque Ulyssean Return to the Commedia*) describe their almost fatal attraction to Dante. It is significant that both of them write about their encounters with Dante as a 'discovery'. In their texts—the first written in lyrical prose and the second in an autobiographical style—we are given a glimpse into Dante's powerful effect on the inner creative and intellectual lives of the young writers. Both describe a passionate love for Dante's text, which they experience as completely life-altering.

After collecting the contributions from our students that are included in this volume, we were inspired to develop the conversation that had begun orally in our Dantessa group by analysing and drawing out the implications of the written compositions, from a scholarly perspective. Our main focus was the image of South Africa that emerges from these pieces and the different ways that Dante has contributed to this. The scholarly conversation was deepened when we broadened it to include other colleagues, external to our group. We purposely chose a wide variety of colleagues, some from South Africa, some not currently in South Africa but with a strong connection to it, some with a distant connection, and some with no connection at all. We invited them to comment on our students' pieces, but were careful not to give them any specific guidance on how to approach the compositions. Instead, we allowed our fellow scholars to approach the material in the same manner as we encouraged our students to read Dante: without any prior assumptions or expectations.

As the essays from our colleagues arrived, we were intrigued to see how our Dantesque *convivio* had expanded. Not only had our students entered into dialogue with Dante, but now so had our colleagues, conversing with the students and with each other, and presenting arguments that in some cases crossed continents and generations. It was notable that colleagues at a distance from our group nevertheless reacted in a similar manner to those who are closer to the project: they too were struck by how easily Dantesque imagery lends itself to the experiences of South African youth. The second part of the book, which collects all these essays, is therefore also experimental and speculative in character, seeking to establish an identity for Dante studies in South Africa and to create an approach to the poet that is uniquely our own. Each essay is notable for its personal touches, as the writers engage closely with the students' vision, which they bring into relationship with their own backgrounds and experiences. Despite their differences, the essays collected here are all concerned with the

unusual way in which Dante is appreciated by our youth: not as a remote figure only encountered in the hallways of the literature department, but as an intimate presence, a guide, a friend whose language is familiar and invites a response.

This personal element defines the first chapter in the scholars' section—Franco Masiandaro's *Notes on the writings of the University of the Witwatersrand students of Dante*. Masciandaro imagines himself in "dialogue with the young authors of this project, thus transcending the physical distance that separates us, in the spirit of a newly discovered friendship." His essay helps initiate the conversation by providing a complete overview of all the students' pieces.

Chris Thurman, *"Dante, Can I Lead You?" South African students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)*, and Martina Di Florio, *Dimitri Tsafendas Meets Dante, Friend and Witness of Our Time*, are struck by the intimacy established between the students and Dante. Thurman, after a comparison between the reception of Dante and Shakespeare in South Africa, notes in his conclusion how each of the students "in way or another, cherishes Dante as companion or conversation partner or correspondent: sometimes close by, sometimes from afar." Di Florio, who focuses on the writings of Chariklia Martalas, also talks about the friendship established between our young South African writer and Dante. On the contrary, in his essay, Marco Medugno is less directly concerned with the personal connection between the young writers and Dante the poet, but instead with their more intellectual sense of the Comedy and its "generative power."

It was surprising to see how the various responses talk to and complement each other, at times reinforcing each other's visions and at others exploring the same point from divergent perspectives. Both Victor Houliston (*Releasing the Prisoners of Hope: Dante's Purgatorio breaks the Chains of the Born Frees*) and Anita Virga (*The Unattainable South African Paradise*), for example, explore how students see Dante's *Purgatorio* reflected in the current South African situation; Houliston, however, sees a "thread of subdued optimism" in these students' writing and the possibility of overcoming purgatory to reach the final vision, whereas Virga puts more emphasis on their fear of the lack of paradise and consequent condemnation to an eternal purgatory.

Giovanna Trento, in *Dante's Journey Through Our Lives: Reading La Commedia in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, provides a sweeping exploration of the students' writings, touching on Dantesque themes as they appear, and drawing out their potential for a South African narrative: journey, exile, trauma, injustice, autobiography, suicide, language, identity, and Apartheid. Sonia Fanucchi (*The South African folle volo: Ulysses Reinvented*), on the other hand, decides to explore a specific theme, ostensibly more Dantesque than South African, which runs through many of the students' responses. Fanucchi analyses how the classic Ulyssian myth, in the form in which it has been reworked by Dante, is appropriated and again transformed by the students, revealing surprising connections with the South African experience.

This year our students indicated that it was during our reading group meetings, reading a Canto together and talking freely about their impressions of the text, where they were first able to discover their distinctive voices and approaches to the

poet, unencumbered by the need to belong to a specific critical school of thought. It must be noted here that many of our students first came to us from English Literature, having studied Dante in translation, and that they have since branched out into diverse fields—Philosophy, History, Psychology, Sociology. The strength of their voices therefore cannot be found in a studied, specialised approach, but in a sustained, passionate, and creative engagement with a poet who continues to resonate with them, across disciplines, speaking directly to their sense of identity both as individuals and more particularly as young South Africans.

The eminent South African poet and critic, Stephen Watson (2010, 119), wrote compellingly of his experience of Dante:

> […] above all this poet exists for me because his *Divine Comedy* gives us what still seems to me the most complete—which is to say, not only comprehensive but comprehending—panorama of human existence available to us in literature. I know of no other instance in which our condition […] has been so lucidly arrayed, so *placed*, that this condition, so far from being seen through a glass darkly, is actually comprehended, even as it is lived and suffered.

The idea of a poet with whom one can live and intimately understand 'the human condition', takes on a special poignancy when applied to the precarious state of our South African youth: we hope that these essays reveal the closeness that our young people feel to Dante, turning to him as a guide with whom to navigate the turbulent waters of post-Apartheid South Africa. This book is a reflection of our philosophy as a group, our sense that Dante inspires personal and scholarly reflections on our political vision and ethical convictions as a society and as individuals. The essays and compositions collected here chart out an African vision, which is driven by a more direct and personal conversation with the poet. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia,* Dante famously extols the virtues of the *volgare* in which he ultimately wrote the Commedia—the popular language that was accessible not only to the men of his time but to the less educated women and children as well. It is in this spirit that we have read the Commedia, as a language of the people, that reaches us across time and continents. The text itself remains unexpectedly accessible to our readers, despite their lack of specialist knowledge, and it is this conversation, a fresh engagement with a text that too often becomes lost beneath hundreds of years of critical engagement, that we are attempting to draw out and refine. From the essays included in this collection it is evident that it is possible to 'write' Dante into our own African social fabric, to 'borrow' his symbolism in a creative talking back, a process of rewriting that becomes simultaneously a process of interpretation, as the poem itself reaches out to embrace its afterlives.

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PART I

Students' Conversations with Dante

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La divina foresta: Earthy Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's *Purgatorio*

Fern Casey

In the anthropological models of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, the mid-way point of the rite of passage, the liminal stage, is ambiguous and fluid. An individual has relinquished claim to their former self, and not yet fulfilled the requirements (ceremonial in nature) to ascend to their aggregation or reincorporation, the new identity they will inhabit upon re-entering their community—they are initiates, unable to step back and unready to step forward. The initiate "is betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification," (Turner & Turner 1978, 2) and their identity is in transition. The explicitly deconstructive nature of the limen finds parallel in the Purgatorial setting: each terrace of Dante's *Purgatorio* extricates the worthy penitent from their mortal sin through specific purgation. In that process of purgation, they are simultaneously relinquishing (or cleansing) the characteristics of their former selves, and yet cannot fully step into the next phase of their actualised selfhood. Purgatory and liminality are states and spaces unto themselves, but they are curiously transient in nature, and less articulated in existing literature. Moreover, the Earthly Paradise is unique from the few other forests which Dante traverses in his journey through the afterlife, both descriptively and thematically. The infamous dark wood of the *Inferno*'s first canto was described as: *[…] una selva oscura […] esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte […]* (*Inf.* 1.2; 5). A wild, disorientating setting characterised by fear and darkness. Likewise in the suicide wood of *Inferno*'s thirteenth canto was,

> […] un bosco
> che da nessun sentiero era segnato.
>
> Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;
> non rami schietti, ma nodosi e'nvolti;
> non pomi v'eran, ma stecchi con tòsco (*Inf.* 13.3–6).

A forest unmarked by any path, sick with bleakly coloured leaves and gnarled branches riddled in turn with poisonous thorns—a holistically malicious setting purposed with punishment for the souls who dwelled within it. In both instances within the *Inferno*, the forest is a place of danger: in the first instance, for what it conceals; and in the second, for the nature of its function.

Furthermore, the function that Dante as a protagonist embodies in each of these forests—and the *Inferno* more broadly—is fundamentally reliant on his earthly self (his 'former' or pre-pilgrimage identity). Dante is recognised and defined by his political career whilst traversing through Hell—in Purgatory, when he is recognised, it is as a poet. Naturally, the interactions in Purgatory are more cordial than in Hell, but this invocation of poet rather than politician speaks to an identity transformation (or regression, one might argue) which James McMenamin (2016, 225) characterises:

> Dante […] allegorizes his afterlife journey within the context of life's ages of man relating the pilgrim to a figurative state of *adolescenza*, essentially condemning the protagonist to a developmental *fall* from the author's more advanced age with the poet/narrator emerging in his actual state of *gioventute* (i.e., maturity) recaptured through the completion of his afterlife experience.

What complicates a reading of Dante's *Purgatorio* against the anthropological models of van Gennep and Turner is the regressive identity formation at the heart of Dante's transformation from politician to poet, to pilgrim: he is returning to the Edenic, pre-Fall state of humankind; free of sin and mortal tidings. This is the final aggregation phase which van Gennep describes, in which the rite has been completed and the individual ascends to their new identity: Dante's re-entrance into society is a reincorporation into the Kingdom of Heaven, which necessitates the attainment of a spiritual purity akin to a childlike state. It is a reversal of the traditional child-adolescent-adult progression associated with rite of passage dynamics.

Moreover, when comparatively read against Campbell's phases of journeying, it becomes apparent that much of Purgatory can be read as a liminal space or expansive threshold, in which Dante is continually relinquishing elements of his previous identity (his more bitter, aged self from *Inferno* as McMenamin might argue) whilst initiating towards, yet not achieving, his final identity—a spiritual 'adulthood' in which he regains the innocence or purity of pre-Fall humanity, which is only achieved after drinking from the rivers Lethe and Eunoe in the Earthly Paradise. Earthly Paradise, in Campbell's thesis, might be articulated as the return threshold—the point at which the protagonist returns to their home, as the Kingdom of Heaven is Dante's supreme and final home—but this assertion is unsatisfied by Campbell's concept of returning *from* the divine to *re-join* the mortal, which is the opposite, more or less, of what Dante is doing. Perhaps, to Campbell, this is more akin to the threshold of baptistry. Because of the reversed-progression dynamic at work, it is difficult to conceptualize: but certainly, what Campbell (1968, 84) does account for is the transience of the threshold in the protagonist's initiation:

> And so it happens that if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures […] In the vocabulary of the mystics this is the second stage of the Way, that of the 'purification of the self,' when the senses are 'cleansed and humbled,' and the energies and interests 'concentrated upon transcendental things'; or in a vocabulary of more modern turn: this is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past.

Virgil's sudden departure in the Earthly Paradise, to this paper's assessment, is a fundamental demonstration of how Purgatory dissolves the image of Dante's past—it is regularly signposted throughout the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* that Virgil will guide Dante to Beatrice but no further, and thereafter Beatrice is set to be his guide for his pilgrimage through the upper tiers of the afterlife. When Virgil heralds his coming departure at the threshold, decreeing to Dante that he is capable of self-decision, "Lord of yourself I crown and miter you" (*Purg.* 27.142), there is a quietude that falls over the mentor. He will not speak to Dante again.

When Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, it is lush with greenery and mystical botany preserved from before the Fall from the garden—moreover, it is brightly lit under the sunlight of the dawn and sweet from the fragrance of flowers. *This* forest draws Dante in—he is soft-footed and slow in his meandering through the verdant, ancient setting, and enveloped by it immediately. He loses track of the entrance, he notes, being so thoroughly absorbed by the Earthly Paradise. In less than twenty lines after entering the forest, Dante's quiet reflection is broken when he spies an unnamed woman frolicking in a flowering grove—a river divides them, and he calls out to her, shattering the quietude. In the course of that new, sprightly conversation and subsequent procession, Beatrice descends and reveals herself. Her arrival leaves Dante "mute with awe," as he turned "wide-eyed" to Virgil—a gesture almost *Orphean* in nature, being that Virgil has already bid him farewell at the threshold to the forest—and finds his mentor gone (*Purg.* 30.36; 44).

Virgil's absence (and his final, lingering silence) should mark the apparent purgation of Dante's former, earthly self—yet this purgation is incomplete before Dante's purification in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, which precisely the point to which my paper draws attention. I return to its underpinning curiosities. Why did Virgil bid Dante farewell and continue to follow him, spectrelike, through the Earthly Paradise? What can this peculiar interaction, or lack thereof, reveal about the liminality of that Edenic setting atop Mount Purgatory? Dante's immediate and powerful grief for Virgil's absence demonstrates one grand, penultimate act of purgation: Dante losing the symbol of his worldly pursuits, his paternal (and poetic) guide, and his binding to individual love. This latter point is a thesis of its own, but certainly it is reasonable to argue that Beatrice, unlike Virgil, represents a divine love which incorporates the individual into the collective—the loss of individual identity in *Paradiso* is worthy of its own prolonged consideration.

While this paper cannot claim to be conclusive, I have rather aimed to expand an underestimated theoretical framework for reading Dante; the transformational nature of Purgatory is itself underrepresented in contemporary scholarship, and anthropological models like those present in this paper might provide an improved means of articulating such. Although these models are not directly transferable in some instances, careful application demonstrates worthwhile findings: the Earthly Paradise evidences the notion that a threshold is both an ending and a beginning, therefore drawing the individual taught between transformation. Once Dante is baptised in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe, and has drunk from them, the physical mark of his sin is washed away (the *peccato*) and the metaphysical weight of is taken from him. Dante loses Virgil, and gains Beatrice; he loses connection to his mortal life (through the dissolution of his memory of sin), and gains connection to the Kingdom of Heaven; his eyes turn from the verdant Eden of the Mountain's summit, and towards the stars above. He is transformed, and is purged of a former self. Reading these events with a framework of ceremonial identity configuration—*rites of passage*—yields a new manner of articulating the purgatorial process, as this paper has demonstrated. This allows for an understanding of Dante's pilgrimage through the afterlife as a journey from sin to the elysian state, with distinctly identifiable instances of transformation.

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A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Party

Chariklia Martalas

We caught the excitement in our throats. The air was thick and heavy like a summer night that had tasted ecstasy. The laughter bounced off our skin and the jabber spiraled out of our mouths. Our words brushed our lips with fire and snapped our teeth to the rhythm of music we had not heard yet. Dante looked uncomfortable, pressed in the crowds, his body surged against other bodies in illicit closeness. He couldn't understand why dead souls had such tight clothes and showed so much skin.

"It is as if they are naked, they are so exposed. Do they not feel vulnerable?" said Dante.

"Did you also notice that they are beautiful?" I replied. Dante blushed as red as his cape. Inferno was clearly a state of mind that he was not ready to inhabit. At least Dante knew one thing that made sense; God was clearly not present in this circle of hell for desire had crept into every outline of space and fluttered there, palpitating in union with the vibrations of the crowd. Dante felt the heat rise in his belly; he believed he was going to pass out.

"We close to Minos, Dante. Then you will be able to get some air."

There stood Minos with his balding head and a pony-tail tied with an elastic band, his shirt was off with his muscles wet with sweat. Minos wearing sunglasses and chewing a piece of gum exuded the misplaced glamour of an over-aged man controlling the fate of the youth—even if this fate would only last a single night. A giant that towered over us, his body the perfect form that was occasionally caught by the music that seeped out from behind him. His claim to fame degraded from who he was before. He now was exalted as the flawless guardian of the door to carnality. It was the anticipation of rapture that rattled the beings belonging to the crowd so that they pushed against each other to get closer to Minos, the God of their fate so close at hand. He held a list in his enormous fingers, examining the names and providing judgement of whether the soul could enter but first they had to confess something to him. Dante thought it was pen-

ance. I knew better that a secret to Minos was a guarantee that you were worth an entrance, that you were deemed enchanting enough, that you could give others pleasure as much as getting pleasure yourself. If anything, there was the morality of the command for mutual reciprocation. If you weren't on the list Minos would flick his tail in your face and you would have to go to the back of the line in a wave of misery that felt like starting again was the abyss. Who would have thought that the son of Zeus and Europa would land up as a glorified bouncer relishing his power as he winked to the girls and high fived the boys.

"Oh, you who have come to the abode of pleasure," said Minos to me licking his lips. "But unfortunately, it doesn't seem you on the list. I would let you in, but I am not that benevolent"

"No need for that Minos, I am with Dante," I replied. "An old friend of Francesca."

"You've changed Minos, I almost did not recognize you." said Dante.

Minos laughed, "Ah Dante, I can only be my alter-ego just for an evening. But please be careful how you enter and who you can trust for your delicate sensibilities might be a little bit insulted by modern ways."

He then winked at Dante and ignored me.

And so we entered. Dante was both intrigued and cautious until he felt the wind on his face and knew he was in the right place. Everyone's hair was blowing in the wind at the exact same speed as all those perfume ads Dante had not had the pleasure of seeing. The wind was hot and sticky and blew a scent of roses into the air. Everything was red. Red sofas placed in no order, where people draped themselves over as if they were scarves. Red curtains that flapped against the wind as if they were dancing seductively but seducing no one as at this party, unlike all others, no one was standing alone. There were also flowers everywhere—roses, red chrysanthemums, blossoms, and wild irises. Everyone was running around barefoot as the red carpet was so heavy and soft. Dante refused to take his shoes off, I agreed with him, I grew up with a mother more content with smoking than bare feet. Which reminded me to light a cigarette—this circle of hell was about delighting in intoxicating vices, and I planned to do so, readily. Dante asked for a puff and then coughed till his eyes were as red as the curtains.

"Where are the wails?" were the words he managed to cough out.

"Oh, they will come later."

I felt terrible to tease him so much. But on that cue came the music Dante labeled as "suiting Inferno." It had a heavy beat to it that buried into the floor to make my feet wish to obey its patterns of time and a singer so filled with languor that her melody twirled at my hair and left me with the feeling of longing.

"The wind is weaker than I remembered."

Dante at that moment turned to find giant wind machines, spinning their heads as if they were mad.

"Did God create those?" he asked.

"Francesca probably ordered the wind machines deliberately," I said to him.

Dante was now very confused. Since when did Francesca control this circle of hell? When did God need machines to make wind?

So, he turned to me.

"Who are these people that are so whipped by the wind machines?"

"Dante, I think it is best to introduce yourself."

Dante found two men kissing ardently. He coughed to announce himself though covered himself in awkwardness in the process.

What Dante didn't know was that there was a rumour that those from the circle of hell for sodomy were planning to hold their own party. Posters had already been distributed with the byline "Sodomy is a little bit more dangerous than lust." They decided to hold it a different night for if Francesca invited you, how could you say no? They all couldn't say no. How could you deny a party where ephemeral temptations could move to the beat and a lover was never too far away to be agonizing and never too close to be ordinary?

"Oh, poor souls, why are you in Inferno?" Dante asked.

He was hoping for a straightforward answer but knew the futility of it. What was then Dante's motive other than a curiosity? Curiosity can be as intense as desire, in this sense I finally understood why Dante and I still belonged to the party since both of us were the only ones not chosen.

"Oh yes we are in hell," answered one as they winked at each other.

When they realized that Dante was serious, they nearly choked on their champagne in laughter.

"Well, I had a duel with my wallpaper and lost all because he threw me under the proverbial bus," said the one with the luscious hair and the only one fully dressed in a coat and suit (so Dante appreciated him, as did I for many more reasons).

"My creation is running around here as well. You must meet him, he is marvelously beautiful, his name is Dorian Gray."

Dante politely smiled, his curiosity rapidly growing that he could not stay only with one couple. Lust was a grand sin with many devoted followers. He spied some old veterans. There was Cleopatra and Mark Anthony having an argument with Mark Anthony looking as petulant as a small child. Helen was flirting with Paris, twisting her hair around her fingers, and posing like one of the graces. It was hard for me not to fall in love with her as she turned to smile at me, with eyelashes long and feathery and a smile that rejuvenated my bones. Semiramis made her grand entrance to much adoration, her regal stature highlighted by the many people coming to kiss her feet, the true queen of Assyria was not reprimanded for her passions. There was Achilles and Patroclus clinging onto each other as if they would both die again, as they gazed into each other's eyes there was something more than desire that glimmered between them. Dante remembered them all but couldn't believe the happiness that radiated from their cores. Inferno was now becoming extremely confusing.

"Aren't they beautiful?" I murmured. "All the great lovers of history in one room."

"You romanticize them. Are they not supposed to be punished?" Dante asked.

He felt pity for their perverse ill before but that was when the wind was ripping their limbs apart and rendering them silent. Pity had no place here anymore nor understanding of what Inferno has come to mean these seven hundred years later. Now he was the one that couldn't hear the words slurring around his brain because the music and the crowd ensured that he could feel the thickness of the sound in the room.

"The 21st century plays a very different game with regards to love. Hell has always been a mirror. Inferno is more complex than just locking its victims in its jaws." I said loudly.

"God creates no mirror," Dante replied, as petulant as Mark Anthony.

It seemed as if our conversation had ended so I decided not to tease Dante further. He hadn't spotted the gift shop that was at the opposite end of the party with teddy bears with hearts, chocolates and greeting cards. I was thinking of buying him a rose that said "you are my paradise," but decided not to.

Dante was itching to leave and so it was important to find our host, Francesca.

"Dante!" she cried.

As Francesca came towards us I understood why she was an incarnate being of Romanticism. Though she looked too happy to match her paintings.

"Dante I am so glad you came." She then turned to me and asked who I was, every word I spoke to her was accompanied by a blush.

"Francesca, Inferno is very different to what I remembered. When did God need wind machines?" said Dante.

Francesca laughed at Dante's confusion.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. This is not the second circle of Hell, this is my Second Circle of Inferno themed party. Paolo has just gone out to get some more wine, but he will be back in a bit."

"A Party?" Dante asked.

"Oh yes, passion is now quite celebrated even though it can cause a few sad endings. Do you know of Romeo and Juliet?"

"But you are still in Inferno?"

"Yes, but we are in Limbo for there is a question surrounding our damnation."

Francesca's tone softened and turned more serious. It was incongruous to the scent of the roses and the taste of wine on my lips. Limbo has always been the state of the philosopher, and Francesca had fallen into the trap. Though she pretended that she had not, especially tonight.

She began to speak, and we knew her words were the only things real at this party even though they came out of some place other, some place not belonging to the champagne, to the flowers, to the motions of the music. Her words were a puzzle piece that was always present but could not quite fit elegantly into the picture of the wild hedonists and the overwhelmed lovers.

"We are in Limbo because God is waiting. For what is he waiting for? We do not know for mortals shall never know God's plans. All we know is that we do not belong and that we will never be admitted to Paradise. But Inferno or Pur-

gatory? Who can decide? Morality is both timeless and tempestuous. God hasn't relinquished our free will to reconsider what is right. But no one knows what is right, especially not those philosophers thinking about virtue, especially not me. So, we will have to see how the 21st century goes. Inferno has become a little experiment. Only Paradise is pure enough, Godly enough, to not change at the whims of human hands."

Dante furrows his eyebrows and his lips vanish.

Francesca laughs as if she has spoken something prohibited. However, the seriousness returns when she kindly looks upon Dante's face.

"Ah Dante, I have said too much. Too much of the world of the Commedia has changed in these few words I have spoken. Should I have left the story alone? Yet I felt compelled to be honest that human choice has started to matter more than it ever did. Things are now less determined, more volatile, such is modernity. Judging human souls has never been harder."

She then looks at me and asks what she knows I can't answer.

"Who will be your Beatrice when the world is more human than it ever has been?"

She then smiled and put on a mask of frivolity, the mask she greeted us with and asked if we wanted more wine.

Dante refused and I accepted only if there was champagne. Almost instantly I felt the rhythm return to me. I joined again in the patterns of longing that rippled through the crowd.

She smiled again and as she was about to turn away, I shouted

"And so why a party?"

"Why not a party?" she replied. "Why not something a little dangerous with a couple of wind machines when everything is so uncertain?"

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses

Chariklia Martalas

As Virgil had resurrected those years past
Dante had come back to the infernal wood
And I was standing there
In the aporia of insight and confusion
For I had been through insanity
And I was still insane
Things had changed in hell
Because everything is dictated by time
But Inferno was still an exile from sanity
And so I could be no servant of God
Dante, I said to him, can I lead you?
He was used to greatness
Not a lowly writer with demons unremarkable
But he couldn't choose who came out
Of the wood with poisoned thorns
And knotted branches like screams
Even though he remembered
The Harpies with tear dripped cheeks
And mouths red from cuts burst open
It must be excruciating, I said
To remember the moans that pierced ears
Like a needle in the mind
The sadness and anguish
Souls wrapped in brown leaves with wounds
On hands and feet like bullet holes
And memories of Pier della Vigna
Whose head had left scraps of itself
On the walls of two prisons
Internal and external the bars had shut
One of his keys turning the memories

Dante and I then saw a beautiful woman
Walking towards us with a dress of gold
A rose honeyed melody coming from her throat
'Dante, my darling we all know
That you didn't wish to be back
In the second ring of a lost Saturn
But I should tell you about my home
As Queen of Carthage I still have royal duties
It was more than the betrayal
That sent me to build the funeral pyre
Of all the memento mori he gave me
From a young girl your God
Gifted me the euphoria of sweet grace
Where the brightness of a broken fire
Trickled into the base of my skull
Until it was crushed, disintegrated
By a sadness no Inferno could rival
That drowned my lungs
While turning my veins into burnt paper
I was already tired by the time Aeneas left me
The sword had loomed in my eye
For decades so I fell into knotted garlands
My soul trapped in the misery of the cycles
I had tried to escape
Those Harpies eating my limbs
With the sweet breath of rotting corpses
Hell only hurt more
Because of the nature of its perpetuity'
She was silent
Now's your chance, I said
Dante my sweet sister will not upset you
'Why has this ring changed wounded soul?'
She sighed like a note in mourning
'We had not anticipated
That we could uproot ourselves
From the decaying soil with our putrid limbs
That our branch like skeletons could walk
So we climbed to the edge of our world
Harpies and beasts of the wood
Biting at the corners of our bones
But we carried on till our skeleton fingers
Grasped the gate
Us, with our weeping and wailing
With our gift of tears
We called to God

Faced him like the unburnt bush of Moses
So God considered us
For the world was changing its mind
On the plight of the Suicides
And God wished to change his mind as well
We had already been forsaken in life
With minds that turned us to Hell
With minds that made us feel like angels
With minds that were sinless
Despite the blasphemy to reality'
Take the twig, I said
Come break the illusion
Dante was handed a piece of a bush
From the sleeve of gold
Holding it gently, scared for the soul
Whose agony he had once caused before
As soon as he snapped it memory dissolved
And Dante stood in shock
Underneath a sky of blue silk
And silence as peaceful as the word of God
Overpowered by a thick scent
Of roses that were blooming
Over their life giving stems
Rose bushes that surrounded us
Like a field of petal faces
Bushes that didn't moan
Roses that didn't break words or blood
Was it Paradise?
It had to be for the garden
Was kept sacred by a loving hand
Dido with her bittersweet touch
Caressing some of the flowers
As if her hands were kissing them
'We had lost our bodies
When we had turned into pained wood
But most of us wanted peace
Instead of searching for the remains
Of a life we wished to leave
And so God made us beautiful
In a silent bliss
That makes heaven smell
Like souls forgiven'
She said goodbye
For her memories made her tired
She kissed me on the cheek

And began to turn into her own rose bush
With golden petals that gleamed
In the sun that warmed our spines
And I cried because there is hope
Hope in the beauty
Hope in a garden well cared for
And Dante cried because his sadness
And the agony he felt
In his memories could disappear
Down the Arno
The scent of the roses
Cleansing him from the anguish of the past
As it weaved around his thoughts
I needed to come lead you here
I said, it was important to know
He thanked me
For this was a new beginning
We then sat in silence
But I still read in him
Something left to be said
And he read in me the same
Are you going to stay in the rose garden?
Dante asked me
He was used to being lead by the dead
But I am still of the living
So I told him its time for me to go
Home is not the Rose Garden
One day, someday it will be
But I promised
That it would not be today
Or anytime soon

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses

Chariklia Martalas

The scene is Dante's new office. Ever since he retired as a poet he decided to become a therapist. The room is large and spacious so that there is still air to breathe despite being filled with furniture. His desk, messed with papers, has a portrait of a beautiful woman in a gold-plated frame, the only touch of the personal. On the walls is a signed poster of the Aeneid.

(Dante Enters)

Dante goes right to his desk and begins signing copies of the Commedia.

(Chariklia Enters)

Chariklia wants to be a writer. She had asked Dante for his permission to rework the Inferno through a modern lens. He not only agreed but volunteered to go back to Inferno with her for her research purposes. Inferno is not a place to be alone he said. She didn't tell him that Virgil had asked her to be his guide.

But before they embark, he suggested a therapy session.

Chariklia: There's only one place where we can begin. We can speak later about how my nerves have made my hands like unwoven threads and that my mind is wooden. I need to speak about the dream I had first. It was one of those dreams where every moment seems to matter as if God had given you the dream and you were experiencing divine intervention. I woke up and had to place my fingers on my pulse in order to remember that I was real.

Dante: I have had dreams consume me like this as well. You could possibly have called them visions. What happened in your dream?

Chariklia: It feels like my tongue is on fire and my whole mind is whipping in the wind.

Dante: I know there are no tongues with which it can be told but one must try.

Chariklia: I was on a ship. I was both alone and not alone. There were many crew members but all of them had my face. All of them moved with my movements and spoke with my voice. And so, I was surrounded by myself

and something other than myself at the exact same time. These selves liked to talk with each other, and we spoke about this yearning for home. We felt a yearning for our parents and our siblings, a love we had deeply missed so much so that it made our bones brittle. Home was where our souls needed to return and so we mouthed this one place to each other as if it was a holy chant—*Ithaca.*

Dante: I should restrain myself; my lips should not move. Virgil has always been better talking about the Greeks.

Chariklia: Dante, please speak, for my sake. I am Greek but that has not made these dreams any clearer. You know Inferno, is that not where this dream belongs?

Dante nods. He recognizes and so he worries.

Chariklia: There was one of us that felt different. Call her x. She had this yearning for something more. She couldn't quite describe it because it was unknown even to her. It was as if her yearning belonged beyond the horizon, beyond where the earth would end. And we felt her yearning deeply. It radiated through us as if a flame had kissed us and left our insides shaking. And so, we decided not to go home, to forsake our loves and follow her.

Dante: What happened when you didn't return home? Why didn't you turn back?

Chariklia: We saw magnificent cities, cities that were birthed from the earth and the skies. We saw cities that had fallen still touched by their own ways of beauty. We touched Seville with our right hand. We had left Ceuta. We had grown old, our faces looking as if they had been left too long in water. Finally, the Pillars of Hercules rose up from the sea like an invitation or at least a forbidden challenge. And the one we followed began to speak. She knew the yearning now. She could give it a name.

'Sisters we have reached the point that men should not pass beyond. But aren't we glad that we are not men? What remains to us is not the place of the darkest unknown but a place of unending light. A world where you will find beauty in words not strung together before. A world where language can fall through you. Transgress the boundaries to write. Write what could never have been written before. Write for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge.'

Dante: You are Ulysses.

Chariklia: I am not good enough with words to be Ulysses.

Dante: You are Ulysses.

Chariklia: But I didn't even want virtue and knowledge. I only wanted language. Ulysses already possessed that.

Dante: Did Ulysses have a nobler pursuit?

Chariklia: Yes, I think so. He was at least a hero. I am not that either.

Dante: But he went beyond the limits.

Chariklia: So, did you?

Dante: (*Dante getting angry*) That was different.

CHARIKLIA: Yes, I forgot. Ulysses and I didn't have divine sanction.
DANTE: So, did you die in your dream?
CHARIKLIA: No. We thought our mad flight would send us into the raging wildness of the ocean. We thought our ship would sink. Instead, as soon as we left the straights the ocean disappeared and there was just an all-white emptiness. There was nothing beyond the limit.
DANTE: How do you interpret this?
CHARIKLIA: I've thought about it. I have probably thought about it too much. It can only be that there must be nothing beyond the language we already have. Beyond the edge is just silence.
DANTE: Do you think that silence is then the true language of God?
CHARIKLIA: Anything else is a transgression… Dante am I really like Ulysses?
DANTE: Well, you are Ulysses in the dream. And you are the crew. Which is interesting in itself, don't you think? Why? Don't you want to be?
CHARIKLIA: The idea that the language from my lips could be the reason people are sent to their deaths bothers me. Ulysses sold them false promises. And it is worse that it was a promise that he believed himself. What if I am the same?
DANTE: You won't be the same.
CHARIKLIA: How can we know? If Ulysses wrote something I am sure it would have been astonishing.
DANTE: He was a hero not a writer.
CHARIKLIA: And I am a writer not a hero.
DANTE: Do you really not want to be like Ulysses?
CHARIKLIA: Yes, please, God, yes.
DANTE: So let me ask this. Is it virtue that guides your pen? Is it virtue that fills your words?
CHARIKLIA: If it does not, I'll stand by Ulysses and be covered in flame.

A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again. Eating John Vorster

Chariklia Martalas

God had forgotten my country.
For some years the Devil enjoyed the malevolence that stuck onto the bones and teeth, pouring out of mouths like disease.
The evil that forced black and white to not only be separated but for many a white to forget all humanity at the Devil's door.

What do you say to horror Dante?
What do you say to the murders of flesh and mind?
Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State

What do you say to Apartheid?

Dante, it was run by men who the devil would be afraid of

Luckily God remembered South Africa
Though intermittently for it was years
Before we were saved

What do I say to horror Dante?
How do I describe it?
You described hell why can't I?

For Inferno had risen up to engulf a land

Because hell follows human beings.

*

Look here Dante
Look at the man who created hell on earth

He was bent over a head whose face had been scratched fleshless.
He was bent over a head until he noticed us.

He looked up
His teeth covered in skin and blood.

He was eating the head.

Dante had seen this before yet his eyes could never find such a sight familiar
I stood paralyzed waiting for the courage to look away

"They are making me eat my friend," the man wailed.
Looking at us through his squinted eyes checking to see how we would react
When Dante didn't show instant pity, he sat up straight and adjusted his tie.

Some people always watch for the perfect audience.
The perfect audience can be made by some adjustments
Flesh in teeth
Head or no head.
We were meant to be won over

"Hendrik Verwoerd is my name."

He gives us his hand to shake. It was covered in skin and hair.

He knows I know him
He relishes this opportunity to be remembered

"Maybe you can answer me. Why am I here? What have I done? They make me eat my friend's head! John Vorster was a good man and so am I. I don't deserve this ill treatment by public opinion or by God. See I just had a dream of good neighbours, just a dream of harmony between whites and blacks. I had a dream of us all knowing exactly who we are and where we stand. It was a dream of care—two separate worlds but both equal. When I received my judgment, I should have been crying. But I am a hard man even as I knew my future—to be hated now for what crimes?"

*

A man in a prison uniform sprinted towards us
With his knife determined to meet Verwoerd's heart

He stabbed him
He stabbed him four times
Quickly as if he rehearsed it

Both Dante and I weren't prepared for Verwoerd to curl around John Vorster's head and continue eating it again.

The man spoke:

"He is not allowed a voice"

We nodded our heads.
Feeling ourselves speechless when all we wanted to do was to question

"His crimes too great to ever use language to evoke your pity. His punishment forbids it. Eat your head Verwoerd before I stab you again just like I did that day in Parliament."

I recognized him.
He was buried by some of my community
An unsung hero nearly was lost to an unmarked grave

"I know you Dimitri Tsafendas"

*

"Did Verwoerd eat his children too?" Dante asked.

"No." Tsafendas answered

"He ate more than limbs, he ate the threads of a whole country's humanity. Sharpening the teeth of the State until families were lost, lives were lost, hope was lost."

*

Dante was sitting with a question, a question with wide implications and unseen possibilities. However, it is impossible to sit with such a question before it devours.

How can a man who has murdered watch over a murderer?
Have God's commandments changed?
Tsafendas was not made insecure by our hesitant eyes
He seemed to understand where he belonged in God's plans

I was tortured after my act.
Electric shocks forced their way through my body.
They hanged me until I lived.
But have you forgotten?
I am still not in Paradise,

I cannot even climb the steepness of Purgatory.
I am bound to this iciness
Lost are my dreams of being greeted by Cato on that beach

My fate is with Verwoerd,
Justice is always a matter of intertwining

Tsafendas didn't doubt his morality
Why should he?
Why should we doubt his morality at all?

I told God what I told the two priests.
I would be guilty by God if I did kill him
But I believed I would be even guiltier by God if I didn't.

Tsafendas knew madness better than anyone
Tsafendas knew madness by not being mad
And yet, it is madness to kill to save

They called me mad but my mind was clear.
The real madness was Verwoerd.
The real madness was letting him eat South Africa to the bone.

Should I have told him that the evil carried on?

*

I could be the one to tell you, Dante, about Verwoerd's crimes

That colour was shot down by a white gun
Bullets that ripped through a crowd in Sharpeville, Soweto
Screaming, so much screaming

Uprooted from homes and old memories
To be placed in a land made deliberately lost
Separate but equal only a game of words
As those with black skin were shunned
Not just from the word citizen but from the word human

The game Verwoerd was playing was domination
The architect of a form of slavery
Make them pay for what Verwoerd?
Make them pay for what?

I cannot be the one to tell you Dante about Verwoerd's crimes.

Unspeakable was the pain
Unmentionable was the alienation
Unspeakable was the destruction

*

Dante sits down and stares at Verwoerd.

"Hell has many more monsters now doesn't it?"

Tsafendas stays silent. I stay silent too.
What else could we say to a man realizing that the Inferno he had been to before was too small?
That God had to make it bigger.

And then we saw it, the line of heads on a shelf waiting for Verwoerd's ravenous mouth.
I read some of the nametags written underneath them, reading:

P.W Botha,
D. F Malan,
J Strijdom.

Inferno had to be bigger, there were many of the devil's men that Verwoerd had to eat.

The Storm

Helena van Urk

An African Remix,
with Apols and Compliments,
of Dante's Canto Six.

My name is Dante Alberti. These pages
I name Maro; Guide through this litany.
Let me tell you a tale for the ages…

I was born in fine Florence, Italy,
a bright child who earned nought but praises,
son of a leader in the polity.

After leaving school I wrote my thesis
on the Establishment Clause in Sicily,
training for a life where no beauty lives.

For my first love was language and poetry,
which I could not but see in all God does,
and wished dearly to share with humanity.

I had long given up this dream, convinced
by black tongues to mind Ulysses' duty,
not indulgence. Still, I was comforted

that I could make beauty in another way,
for to live a life as one having served,
is to see the face of God, they say.

I entered public service with hopes and dreams
to right the beloved nation, gone astray.
I would speak for those who had no means,

those Others that tend to live forgotten,
widows, orphans, refugees in all their streams.
For when Kings spurn and scorn the downtrodden

and Popes keep proudly silent in the face
of cries for justice and indictment, when
cities are stuffed, bursting, with avarice

and their leaders, fraught with deadly envy,
spend their days in sating lusts and debase
office and duty in their gluttony,

then by Divine law of men and nature,
the land where not one man of justice be,
will reap but bloodshed and usurpature.

And such were the leopards, lions and wolves
that awaited me in this hated labour.
Demons that would rival Milton's delves

into Pandaemonium bespoilt
the cities, poisoning the land and wells,
sowing dragon's teeth as they toil't.

Soon dark forests closed in as I neared Hell:
my first Dark Night, as I referred to it,
when the entire world seemed not fit to dwell.

After my suicide attempt I was
sent away, in exile till I "got well,"
as it could harm the political cause.

All good that sterile sanatorium
held, was the freedom to write as
I pleased, to drive away the tedium.

I was near the middle of my life then,
and could not bear to remain numb
to the world, yet had no place therein.

So I wandered the world, with a journal
as my only comfort and companion,
named in tribute to my namesake's Virgil.

I hoped to find a simpler road, narrow
and clear, no twists and sharps that court fall,
with as my guide the Light of Tomorrow.

Like Solomon I pled to be given
Wisdom, of mankind's fall and great sorrow,
if beauty still dwelt in this blighted Eden.

From this quest of Maro and I sprung the tale
of The Storm, within his bindings written,
so all may be warned to keep their souls hale.

Restless travels brought me to Africa,
the cradle of humanity's tale.
But this part of the Gold Coast, after a

history spanning centuries of pure
gluttony, had again fallen to a
bloodbath of wars, unceasing, without cure.

In this place even the trees bled heartsblood,
suffering of ages wailing from verdure.
Convinced now that Man was devoid of good

I once again turned to writing, pouring
portraits onto paper so that all could
see of greed and Man the Truth, imploring.

Never had I seen such a forsaken land
reflected with terror in eyes always jumping,
and in every grubby outstretched hand.

All the wealth locked up in minerals
and precious bounties of the motherland
that would raise her people to pinnacles

of the Earth were never seen by these men.
All that was left was to run, from rebels,
famine, and history, time and again.

A thousand times I wept for what I saw:
a world of only misery and sin;
and would not return to God my awe.

It was this wealth, diamonds precisely, that
ensured a certain Infernal Crew's draw
to this place, the strife-ridden boiling vat.

I met them one day at a black market,
selling contraband and weapons as they sat
and asked if I from the same cloth was cut.

Never in Our Good Lord's Eternity
had such a bevy of human scum and fat
been collected in perfect enmity.

There was a world-renown zoologist
named François the Rapist, a lusty
voyeur, to envelop his perverse gist,

some farmers, "Trekboers" from further South,
having fled here from warrants of arrest
for brutal mass murders, by word of mouth,

a gentleman who was in a late life
called Man of God, but sold his office out
in service of Apartheid's racial strife,

wizarding doctors, with no power ordained
and no love for men, only with greed rife,
countless men of force and might, having served

God's children only to betray their oaths
at the altar of something bigger, looked
inwards with riches their only goals,

a statesman so famed for hypocrisy
during his reign over a land so loath
his Janus face was baked into pastry,

from across the seas had come two posh,
prestigious men of England's fine gentry,
Roberts and Kitchener or some such tosh,

brilliant tacticians and counsellors two,
but minds and tongues in devilry awash.
Another gentleman was with them, who

spoke of how he and Bell Pottinger
shared ears of kings and presidents through
secret missions to stoke discord, anger,

a man named Retief, full of suspicions,
who cheated a warlord, full of rancour,
out of jewellery under false provisions,

a Prince, Dingane, of his birth the victim,
had committed the worst, most heinous sins
in slaying his brother for a kingdom,

for traitors of nations, shameful heads hang
across the continent: there were plentisome
here from all countries, creeds and colourings,

finally, a man of whom all seemed scared:
Kajunga from Rwanda and his gang,
who held none of their neighbour-guests sacred.

But their Dear Leader was the worst of all:
A slight man, feminine, but people erred
in believing him to be harmless. Small

was the avarice of any who had
come before him: his gluttony stood tall
as a monument, with a lording hand

held over his own gang, the Extractors,
so called due to the fame of this awful band
in obtaining and moving their benefactors'

raw materials: oil, drugs, gems, charcoal,
rare woods and beasts, these beastly attackers
even stooping low as human chattel.

They were loyal, to death, to their master
who was only ever named as "Cecil";
their words raw sewage on a silver platter.

The scheme was Cecil's, from the first.
He secured the diamonds, as a matter
of favour for an old friend, now immersed

in the DRC's military mess,
with no cash to fuel the war till disbursed.
His soldiers had found these raw gems, they profess,

by the bucketful; now what they needed
was to get thousands of carats across
the Mediterranean, rendered,

and finally sold in Europe's shining
streets. Cecil would do it, for a cut, and
smuggle the profit back to their thriving

compound. For this job, he had assembled
the Infernal Crew, with a defining
offer for their careers. Because he had

no intentions of returning,
and fewer involving surrendered
millions; his gluttony demanding

more, a ravenous beast that spares no-one.
His heart's kin needed little persuading;
he convinced them all that in one job done,

they could live in splendour for all their days,
like lords, kings and princes, every one.
They heartily agreed, with no delays.

And how did Maro and I, you may wonder,
come to learn all this on our holidays,
see ourselves recruited into this endeavour?

A sense of morbid curiosity:
may God forgive me, no other hunger,
was what sapped me of humanity.

Cecil asked me to be their chronicler,
and recount faithfully their gluttony's
fruits. Instead of tears, my chosen mission, or

my destiny, inflamed the thirst to learn
all I could of evil's human nature.
My Teacher, all our souls should beg and earn

God's forgiveness who were there, the living
even more than the dead-long returned
to their set place by Minos' handling.

Therefrom I tell the tale of the Storm:
so men may hear and believe, repenting
before it is too late and Furies swarm.

We set out onto the beach before dawn,
it was a Good Friday, and its blest norm
would ensure few patrols and attention drawn.

The Extractors had wheedled from a friend,
a rude, loud man by the name of Charon,
a small motor-boat, to see us sent

across the stormy seas by sunrise. Under
Cecil's watchful eyes the heavy load went
to the hull, lifejackets tossed asunder.

I stood aside, to better sketch the
Crew start the manning, fiddling with the rudder
when suddenly the cool air ruptured in a

furious noise—three men came bounding
down the banks, three faces twisted into
maws as they brandished their weapons, snarling.

Cecil said not a word, simply tosses
a roll of dollars to each promising
not to betray us to their bosses.

No sooner had they turned, his words to heed,
than the Crew's guns were aimed at their faces.
They died bleeding, in the agonies of greed.

The moment this evil task was complete,
Heaven poured out its response; to impede
our journey and deal Cecil a sound defeat.

But like Ajax of old, the Infernal
Crew showed at God's Divine Wrath no retreat,
Offering only curses to the Eternal.

The rain beat down ceaselessly, unchanging
in rhythm or quality. Blue-purple
ink covered the sky and whipped the waves, scourging.

But hubris was stronger than the cold wind
or the hail that would soon pelt us unceasing,
and we left the safety of land behind.

It was on that voyage where I first learnt
of rain's lash like acid, how it may rend
one's back and leave no body or limb unhurt.

Hail, cold as the most merciless snow,
hammered our little boat with its worst brunt
and left the Crew's bodies cold, stupid, slow.

Winds had whipped the waves into a tempest
which like a cork or roiling body would throw
us from course, no longer to lands abreast.

For forty days and forty nights the Storm
raged on, the Creation in union menaced
and made us to pitiful wrecks deform.

Our torment seemed unceasing; the Final
Trumpet and Rapture itself we would welcome
though we would face Divine Power hostile,

and in our Wholeness find more perfect pains.
I recalled words once studied in idle
from the *Summa Theologica*'s aims

of instruction in hope and damnation:
for just as Happiness may lay its claims
only when it lasts eternal, at Perfection,

so may punishment conceived by the Lord
only be Just if without cessation.
The terrors of fate, regret and time roared

through my soul, and I wish I could report
the same from the others who were onboard.
None, despite my pleas, turned to this resort.

But another lesson of Aquinas
that of man's free will and judgement, in short
Christ's greatest gift of love to us,

would form how the tale of the Storm would end.
For no hellfire or watery fracas
saw me delivered and them condemned.

Our battered and rusting boat was leaking,
and couldn't afford the weight of those it crewed,
let alone the gems it was carrying.

These blood diamonds saw our journey ended
on a shore where the torrential raining
had the sand banks to a stinking slush churned.

It was not gentle or softhandedly,
is all I remember of how I stumbled
back on the soil of my beloved Italy,

for that is where the waves and torrents had
brought us to, before it had finally
sunk the boat and saw the diamonds dragged

down to the icy cold, and the waves like
furious dogs snatched at us, snapped and rolled
us all beneath the surface to graves alike.

How I found my legs again I don't know;
I had fought madly till I felt feet strike
that blessed realm and its safety below.

I next tried to recover my eyesight.
After the shipwreck and with the dawn's low
blush still veiled by rain, there was little light.

In this sickly grey world I awoke in,
I soon saw the most mournful sight
of all my years of heartbroken living,

and it moved me to bitter tears as I
fell to my knees in impassioned weeping.
All across this wretched strand lay strewn my

companions, my fellow men face down,
prone upon the earth, forever pinned by
God's Justice; in water and muck to drown.

Their bloated corpses resembled Hogs at
the trough, the same gluttony was now sown
and reaped, and had to them all death begat.

My tears mixed and disappeared in the rain
without trace as I jerked Cecil to a sit
to hear his last breaths and his dying pain.

I remember him, their fates, to others
here, on pages saved from water's stain
by some blessed bits of oilskin wrappers.

I remembered too as I sat watching
both Noah and Jonah's different chapters,
awaiting the Storm's final breaking.

Our journey was not unique, not special,
nor the Crew, their sins and my forsaking
of God, as I am human, weak and venal.

The sea was washing up Cecil's bloodstained
dollars, seemingly cleansed of its penal
sins by depths of pain, loss and grief unnamed,

as every time one crosses its waters,
one merely follows a road others tamed.
The Truth of Men answers to no borders,

and I was now convinced that what drove
me from my homeland and back, those tortures,
was mere "fantastic, wanton woe" that throve

in what was only ignorance. For while
these waters, I reasoned, and this cove
was not spared the hand of greed's vile

history, the anguish visited
upon others that crossed the waters, mile
upon mile of grief, in bondage said

to be so cruel that death seemed a blessing,
should not compare to Infernal men, now dead,
nor a Young Man of Fortune's small suffering.

What ever of these Others? Their blood-sweat
which had brought and continues to bring
uncharted wealth to the North's icy cold seat

of hegemony bound for omission,
and the gluttony that drove them set
as the Golden Calf of innovation.

Limbs and corpses piled high at the foot
of this heathen altar of perdition,
to which weary war-torn bodies stood

a permissible drunken sacrifice.
From my travels in search of wisdom I could
now see the world as it was: rife with vice

that only flood or fire could ever
annihilate. But what, then, would tice
gratitude for life in me, this tremor?

Perhaps the answer lies only with God,
where I, perhaps foolishly, endeavour
to keep faith in eternal Hope and Good.

For there can be no hope in forsaking
my Salvation when I feared, unmoored,
to see this in dawn a just redeeming.

I feel the sun on my broken skin, warming,
as the Storm breaks, heralds a new Morning.

The Lodestone

Thalén Rogers

1. The Beach

Dolce color d'orïental zaffiro, che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,[1] made the sea a deep azure as I stood on the edge of the continent contemplating the end of existence. What regrets would I have, were I to die today? The sea heaved huge sighs bemoaning the fate of this land. The sand shifted softly beneath my feet as I walked into the waves. Girded by water, I looked over at the rock pools from where worshipful singing resounded. There I saw a group of people, some of them on the rocks and some in the sea, gathered around a single figure. The tears of the sin of the world were washed from his face as the congregation of the baptism praised god. I submerged myself in the cleansing saltwater and faced the penetrating stare of the sun.

Già era 'l sole a l'orizzonte giunto lo cui meridian.[2] I left the water to join an old man on the beach. He was wearing a faded black suit with his tie hanging loosely around his neck and his shoes next to him. The noose was yet to tighten. He was reclining in the sand enjoying the feel of it through his frail toes. I sat down next to him and read the stories written on the leaves of his dark papyrus skin. They told of rivers running red with blood and of boys who were men. They told of bulldozers and guns, burning tyres and children dead in the streets. They told of innocent prisoners and an ominous name—Vlakplaas. The years of guilt weighed me down like a lodestone curving my back towards the floor and preventing any communion with the sun. The weight of the world is suffering. Is there a purpose to this pain?

When it was time to leave, the old man folded his skeletal form and rolled onto all fours, bowing before the glory of the sun. He slowly pushed himself up like a toddler taking his first steps. I held out an arm and he took hold of it. Three-legged, we mounted the stairs. I watched him with my hands as I felt his balance and where

[1] "The gentle hue of oriental sapphire / in which the sky's serenity was steeped." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 1.13–4.

[2] "By now the sun was crossing the horizon / of the meridian." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.1–2.

to steady him. It was the blind leading the old, but we reached the top of the stairs safely. We could hear music as we made our way towards the car. Parked next to us was a kombi taxi spilling its innards of human bodies, beer, and music onto the pavement. Pulsing with the arterial throb of the music, the bodies loitered around a sign commanding, "No alcohol on the beach." The all-singing crowd languished and forgot their way. The tarred road to redemption stretched out before them but they tarried on the shore. Is a country healing, a country purging?

Clothe yourself in humility and walk the path to redemption.

2. The Car

I drove a quaking beast breathing foul smoke out of the parking lot. As we left the shore, curtains of thick jungle rolled across the sea. The sound of cicadas pierced the heavy folds of leaves. People walked beside the road. They walked in shade and seemed to have no shadow—like ghosts, too insubstantial to block out the rays of the sun. *Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!*[3] South African ghosts, they waited in limbo, paradise denied because of the stain of the past and present. *Ch'i' non averei creduto che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.*[4] What do we need to do to attain the Garden of Eden here in our country? I looked down at my shadow falling over the gearstick and was comforted that my body remained solid and warm, drenched in sun. I was not yet reduced to a shade who leaves her bones on the shore like forgotten sun-bleached driftwood.

As we drove, the old man spoke of his life. He had lived in District Six. His neighbour had six children. They played in the street all day and were only chased inside by the departing sun. Although they were hassled by police on many occasions, they always came back out to the street. But inside their house, their mother was tired and sick. One day, she came to see the old man to tell him that she was dying. It took a year, but she was gone, and the six brothers had to take care of themselves. The eldest had a job in the city. They had their scrap metal home and they had each other. "I watched over them without interfering. It was a brother's law amongst them. I used to sit outside and watch them playing soccer on the dusty street as the sun crept down into exile." The old man didn't have any children of his own. He had led a solitary life. He told me about the avocado tree he planted when he first moved out from home. "It was a king of trees that one." *I' mi ristrinsi a la fida compagna.*[5]

3. The Airport

The dense fog of a bus's exhaust fumes rolled back to reveal islands of exotic fruit to tempt the weary soul—a crowd of patterned headdresses, skirts, dress-

[3] "O shades—in all except appearance—empty!" Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.79.

[4] "I should never have believed / that death could have unmade so many souls." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.56–7.

[5] "I drew in closer to my true companion." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 3.4.

es, and shirts got off at King Shaka airport. *Beato se', grifon, che non discindi col becco d'esto legno dolce al gusto, poscia che mal si torce il ventre quindi.*[6] We parked nearby and I got our luggage out of the boot. At the front of the building, a man sat with his worn fingers flitting across an mbira while he voiced a sweet melody. I tossed a handful of coins to the gatekeeper as we walked through the door. The aural aroma of music followed us ins.

On the tarmac near the aeroplane, we waited. We had passed through the security—"Keys and wallets in here please"—; were accosted by a shoeshiner, "Come sit, I make quick"; and finally found our way to the gate. As I climbed the stairs into the aeroplane, supporting the old man alongside me, an angel wingbeat of air brushed my face. I must not look back, my forehead scarred as it was with the sin of the land. We were politely wished a safe flight. The old man hobbled behind me into the plane. We moved along the narrow passage between the seats. Many bodies obstructed our way. I got into an argument with a burly Sowetan whose baggage took up the entire overhead locker. After stiff words, I was resigned to putting our carry-on luggage under the seat in front of us. We sat down and seatbelts snaked around our waists. *Più di cento spirti entro sediero.*[7]

I was sitting next to a lavishly bodied, perspiring African woman who was fanning herself with the on-board magazine. She said she was flying to Jo'burg to see her children. I asked how old her children were. Half an hour later, I had heard about her two baby daddies (each of whom had moved on to other women), her job in Durban cleaning a house that was not her home, and her three children (aged two, three, and six) who lived with her mother in Alexandra. She told me about the fussy old lady for whom she worked who had moved to Durban with her quadriplegic daughter the previous year. "I have been looking after her daughter since she was born, and she said she couldn't find someone else to look after her in Durban. What was I to do? I love that child and I know someone else might not care for her as well as I do. But I am getting old, and I can't keep carrying her up the stairs to her room, which, she insisted, is on the upper floor." She said she agreed to move with them, as long as the woman paid for her to travel back to Jo'burg on the weekends to see her children. The woman agreed to pay for her to fly back only once a month, but she moved with them anyway. She said she sometimes pays for a taxi to get back to her children but that it is expensive, and really not safe at all. "Those taxi drivers think they're kings of the roads but really they're just back alley butchers who are paid for roadkill." I told the woman that not all taxi drivers are so bad. A little over a week ago, a taxi bumped into the back of my car and the driver got out apologising profusely and offered to pay for everything. She looked at me sceptically and made a disbelieving noise in her throat. On my right, the old man had fallen asleep a long time ago.

[6] "Blessed are you, whose beak does not, o griffin, / pluck the sweet—tasting fruit that is forbidden / and then afflicts the belly that has eaten!" Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 13.43–5.

[7] "[M]ore than a hundred spirits sat within." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 2.45.

4. Take-off

Finally, all the late comers having boarded, the plane started its slow taxiing to the runway. The woman next to me was still muttering about taxis, but I assured her this type of taxiing was quite safe. The stewardesses—all long, slim, and beautiful with perfect hair and pencilled eyebrows—stationed themselves at intervals along the aisle and proceeded to demonstrate the safety procedures. I distinctly heard a man in the row in front of us say that he'd rather have a parachute under his chair than a life jacket. "I mean, if the plane bursts into flame and careens out of the sky, I'd rather have left it before it hits the ground." I was more preoccupied with thinking about how much hairspray you had to put in for your hair to maintain such a perfect shape.

Angel wings snatched the aeroplane from the infernal landscape.

Clothe yourself in humility and walk the path to redemption.

5. Ascent

As the plane gained height, the old man continued his stories, "I remember a day, a Tuesday, as I was coming home from work, I heard a strange grumbling. I could see a fine mist of dust hanging over the place. Soon I was stepping over corpses of homes and their occupants alike. I saw some people running—those who were lucky enough to get away in time. In the distance, hulking bulldozers presided over the scene—judges presiding over a wrecked courtroom. 'What kind of justice is this?' I thought to myself. When I got to where my house had stood, I knelt down within the toppled crown of my avo tree and wept. Checkmate." All around him were black people white with dust. But too late to appease the white man who coveted their land. My companion never saw the brothers again.

Turning away from the old man, I looked out of the window. A foul smog obscured the receding landscape like a haze of rage.

The plane juddered and dropped a few metres. When my neighbour exclaimed that the flight was turning out to be as bad as a taxi ride on roads full of potholes, the stewardess robustly assured her, "There are no potholes in the sky." Despite being jostled around by the turbulence, her hair was still perfectly intact. I decided she must have mixed concrete into her hair to sculpt it in bas relief.

When the turbulence had calmed, I found myself drifting into sleep. I do not know when my visions became dreams. I saw the burnt-out husk of the plane, charred seats scattered like bowling pins in a game of mass destruction. I heard a voice: "*Non isperate mai veder lo cielo: / i' vegno per menarvi a l'altra riva / ne le tenebre etterne, in caldo e 'n gelo.*"[8] Bodies littered the scene, the blood of sacrifice seeped into the ground. The carnage of the soul in plain sight. Through

[8] "Forget your hope of ever seeing Heaven: / I come to lead you to the other shore, / to the eternal dark, to fire and frost." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.85–7.

the stillness I could hear that strange beatings *risonavan per l'aere sanza stelle*.[9] Turning around, I saw the old man slumped on the floor with his pulsing heart held in his right hand. He fumbled at his chest trying to put it back. "In life, I was ravaged by greed and corruption. The fertile soil of my skin was marred by lust. Murder and torture, racism and corruption have lined my skin with age." Blood continued to drain out of him leaving nothing but a wraith clasping life in its wasted hand, pleasures denied by the all-consuming task of holding in his heart. *Questi non hanno speranza di morte*.[10]

6. Questions to the Sun

Waking, I thought the plane was on fire. Light roared through the cabin and there, at the window, peeked in the sun. A garden of clouds stretched out below us: majestic crowns of cumulus, streams of cirrus, and a vast plain of stratus. I faced the penetrating light of the sun. It washed over me and cleansed the filth of history, past and present, from my sweat-soaked brow. But it was not enough. I had to know, "When will my country heal? When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land? How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption?" Next to me, I saw the old man's face smoothed by pure sunlight—age and decrepitude melting in the warmth of grace—until a young boy grinned at me—*rifatto sì come piante novelle rinovellate di novella fronda*.[11] He dissolved into the light—*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle*.[12]

7. The Lodestone

As the day turned dark, the plane could go no higher. *E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle*.[13] Below, the landscape was draped in strings of smouldering jewels. Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin. All that's left is to await the crash. *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.'*[14]

[9] "Were echoing across the starless air." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.23.

[10] "Those who are here can place no hope in death." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.46.

[11] "Remade, as new trees are / renewed when they bring forth new boughs." Madelbaum, *Purg.* 33.143–4.

[12] "Pure and prepared to climb unto the stars." Mandelbaum, *Purg.* 33.145.

[13] "That we emerged, to see—once more—the stars." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 34.139.

[14] "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE." Mandelbaum, *Inf.* 3.9.

Her Anatomy: A praise poem inspired by Francesca da Rimini

Luyanda Kaitoo

I was inspired by African (*Swati and Zulu*) praise singers in writing this piece. Praise poetry is in these cultures quite significant, as it is used to pay homage to important figures, specifically royalty. This form of performance art is however not only confined to singing praises. It can also be used "to break the ice" and entertain guests at special events—ranging from parliamentary sittings to weddings and birthdays. In 2019 an IsiXhosa praise singer-poet opened parliament for the presidential State of the Nation Address. Praise poetry is an integral part of South African culture. It is performed and passed down through generations in the oral tradition. As such it is rarely transcribed. Praise singers are thus considered essential contributors to culture, as they are fundamental in passing down the baton of these proudly African ideals to the youth and communicating them to the world.

I decided to apply this poetic style, with the hopes of shifting the negative narrative so often attached to the female libertine. Instead of criticizing and judging 'her' I rather took a feminist approach—choosing to highlight and applaud her sexual liberation. And in using Dante's Francesca as a stencil, I was able to fabricate an archetype of the damned *innamorata*[1] within the vibrant African context.

I structured the poem in traditional free verse (attributable to the African praise poem) which emphasizes the emancipation of the modern-day woman, from the shackles of both outdated mindsets and traditional conceptions that refuse her progression.

Her is she and she is her[2]
The holy grail of life
Literally!
See how beautifully molded she was by our creator
Miraculous!

[1] "One's female lover"—Italian.

[2] She is the modern-day reincarnation of Eve, the mother of humankind.

Fissure upon curve—bend upon crevice, pulchritude adorning the finest details of her every flaw
Imperfect is her form, yet she wears it with such pride (astounding is it not?)
Hers is a beauty misunderstood by man
One in defiance of morality and all seedlings of virtue
An allure that defies the trivial standards of splendor and brings epiphanies to the eyes of the pious

Self-assured and head held to the clouds, she reigns in a world of moralistic lechers
Yet owns her sexuality
For she is woman
Still untamed, yet paradoxically a creature of grace
She is hedonistic at heart (as foretold by her dreams) reckless in spirit and a slave to felicity -
You know, the kind tainted by substantial pleasures, fear and emancipation.
OH, being of majesty!
Ignorant (by choice)
She hears not the judgements and hatred hurled at her by the beautiful hypocrites of our Earthly realm
Or rather, she refuses to yield her power –
By lending an ear to their slanderous hymns
Either way her selfhood is unbroken
Her wisdom still but an innate mystery
And her confidence simply enviable
Forever battling the voices that try to oppress her
Telling her to "cover up! "Sit properly" and "act decent""
She always chooses to expose the cacophonic brush strokes, that make her the masterpiece she is
The very loathed stripes and burn marks that adorn her every atom
Making her art in its most pristine form.

Kumkanikazi[3]
Contoured by enigma in every fold of her ebony canvas
She is the embodiment of divinity
The epitome of tacit sex appeal
And the universe
A goddess of existential inferno
And proud cherub of hell
She is my soul
And I will fear her no more
For hers is the abstract life force
Transcribed in my genes and sourced from her radiant chalice

[3] "Queen"- isiXhosa.

My ancestral empress
She is a ruler of the nebulous night sky and
Queen of the shadows
The one who dons the crown reaching for the heavens, even in the abyss.

Beatrice

Lesego Petra Maponyane

She walked on me so softly, like nobody, barefoot and milky hose, dancing while making bloom hydrangeas on rolling hills. But now she lies down and sleeps in that style of dress that is so large and fussy—as if she is eaten by a great flower, like as of fire, or the light in the sky.

There is no individual quite as trivialised as the young girl - the mix of youth and femininity creates a recipe for aloof dismissal. The figure of Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and *La Commedia*, ironically, is an extraordinary incarnation of this. Beatrice's powerlessness is blatant, her fortitude similarly so, yet their relation and its resulting complexity minimally explored. But, perhaps, there is no irony. For Beatrice is simply the indistinct figure of Beatrice Portinari, a body mostly foreign to Dante, upon which he projects his messianic imaginings of her, imaginings that primarily record Dante's infamous complexity over that of Beatrice. This is a distinct literary tradition, wherein out of the body of a woman, speaks the voice of a man; Beatrice is the alpha and omega of his literary existence, but only because Dante makes her so. Yet, one cannot help but feel that this cannot be the be-all and end-all of a woman so vividly constructed, so artfully written and so fervently glorified—that, in Beatrice, one must find more than Dante. Indeed, Dante's appropriation of the body of Beatrice is incredibly nuanced and unconventional, and the product is a figure omnipotent in her ingenuousness, all-knowing and innocent, illuminated and obscure, dichotomous and whole. Beatrice, the body, possesses an equal ambivalence, that of having the strange power to make herself both the centre and periphery of Dante's writing, the genesis of a revolution within and without Dante. She may not be the mind, just a mere body, but she is the body without which Dante's mind could never think. The conception of black womanhood in South Africa is not far removed from the Medieval one. Similarly, black women occupy a distressingly ambivalent space—in which they are hailed as harbingers of liberty they cannot possess, are emblematic of fortitude, yet subject to oppressive vulnerability. The objective of this reflection is to develop an understanding of the ambivalence of Beatrice

as an unorthodox conception of femininity within its historical, political, and philosophical context as well as that of our own country.

Dante's imagining of Beatrice is intricately woven from her exultation and his subjugation. Naturally, it begins in *La Vita Nuova*. As suggested by the composition's title, it is through Beatrice that Dante is given 'new life'. The emptiness of his "book of memory" prior to his "new life" indicates that this is equally true of his literary life (*V.N.* 1.1). This life begins upon their initial encounter as children. From childhood, Beatrice is attached to birth, genesis, and motherhood, a station blatantly superior to the one she ought to inhabit. She ingenuously exerts a premature and supernatural creationary power akin to that of a god, or the Madonna, over the boy Dante. It is an interesting play on the idea of ingenuity and ingenuousness, which are strangely congruent and disparate. Both reflect a new or unadulterated quality in the subject (from their shared root *ingenuus*); however, the quality of ingenuity denotes the possession of knowledge, virtuosity, and autonomy that the ingenue inherently lacks. Such is the image of Beatrice as a being from which things come. The image of Beatrice as diminutive and unformed—as she is, at this stage, only a little girl—yet somehow wielding inexplicable superlative capacity is extrapolated and exemplified in her age at the time of their first meeting, "the beginning of her ninth year" (*V.N.* 2.8). The number nine is a reflection of three threes, a trinity of trinities, and so a hyperbolic iteration of the wholeness and holiness of the Trinity. It seems to suggest a state of esoteric perfection, as it calls on one to conceive of heightened completeness, a rather oxymoronic and unintelligible notion. It becomes attached to her throughout *La Vita Nuova* and *La Commedia*, which is to be discussed. That is largely how Dante frames Beatrice throughout her appearances in his work—as a Formal being, in the Platonic sense. It is an example of the remarkable way in which Dante made repeated and wide-ranging use of Platonism despite it being very unlikely that he would have encountered the works of Plato. Continually, she is out of his grasp and only just in sight; from that vague perception of her, he is able to garner an incomplete, yet overwhelming sense of her true self. Their initial encounter is the only unmediated one; from then onwards, a rotation of mediators appears and disappears. There is first Dante's personification of love, Amor, in *La Vita Nuova*, an intermediary produced by Beatrice:

> Though her image, which was always present in my mind,
> Incited Love to dominate me, its influence was so noble that it
> Never allowed Love to guide me without the faithful counsel of
> Reason, in everything in which such counsel was useful to hear (*V.N.* 2.34–7).

Beatrice, like a Form, produces a liaison that only partially reflects her nature, but fully informs the subject, Dante's, experience of her. Then there is Virgil in *La Commedia*, who is similarly an agent of Beatrice:

> I was among the souls in Limbo when
> so lovely and blest a lady called to me
> I asked her for the grace of a command (*Inf.* 2.52–4).

Both of these messengers establish an intellectualism and temporality in Beatrice alongside her mysticism—Amor rules Dante with reason, and Virgil is notoriously sober and analytical—and, thus, establish another facet of Beatrice's wholeness or perfection. Amor is equated with reason, righteousness etc. i.e not carnal or bodily, not lusty. Dante indicates that what he feels is not infatuation, but is a whole love—intellectual, spiritual and bodily. A trinity of loves. It is perfect, it is formal, that is why he daren't go near it, why no one could understand it. The association is vividly explored upon her appearance in *La Commedia*. Both Amor and Virgil appear in the second sections of their respective texts and fall away in Canto 33 of *Purgatorio*, when Beatrice appears unmediated for the first time since Dante's childhood. This illustrates a progression from penultimate 'two' to the perfect 'three', from the perfect 'three' to the incomprehensible 'three threes' or 'nine'. It is a numerical representation of Dante's elliptical odyssey away from and towards Beatrice, a closing of the cycle from "nine" to "nine." His unmediated boyhood experience of her spiritual power experience of her is potent and excessively physical:

> […] the moment I saw her I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all my pulse […] the spirit of the sense which dwells on high in the place to which all our sense perceptions are carried, was filled with amazement […] (*V.N.* 2.12–5).

He has a sort of sensory overload upon seeing, something akin to staring at the sun. The incomprehensibility of Beatrice's perfection, the idea of Beatrice as a Form, is powerfully illustrated by the paradoxical obscuring light she emits throughout their journey in *Paradiso*, which is transfixing to Dante, who almost fanatically notes its gloriousness as it shines through her "eyes so sparkling" and smile. This, of course, is reminiscent of the consuming sensory experience he had of her as a child, seeming almost to explain it years after it first took place:

> 'If I flame up in the fires of love
> more than is ever seen in life,
> overcoming your eyes' power,
>
> don't wonder; seeing perfection
> causes it, which, when grasped,
> motivates our motion towards it.' (*Par.* 5.1–6)

The light is not only indicative of her perfection; it is a rather blatant manifestation of her enlightenment. The above extract is one of many instances in which Beatrice expresses her erudition, acting as a source of clarity or lucidity for Dante. It hearkens back to the image of her as an all-knowing ingenue at the beginning of *La Vita Nuova*. The journey is circular; it begins and ends with celestial cycles (the sun revolving around the two in the beginning and the rose-like realms of heaven at the end). He begins with Beatrice in such a direct manner, inducing vivid, sensual reactions within himself, takes on a mediator, then an-

other, before shedding it and being again with Beatrice, blinded by her light. What is made clear by Dante's depiction of Beatrice is the understanding that perfection isn't just simple in the divine sense, but complex too. This is precisely what makes it perfect—the unintelligible ability to house everything, even that which is contradictory, within a single body. To him, that body is Beatrice. Her body is a symbol of catharsis and her soul catharsis itself. He journeys from her remote body into the essence, the form of her soul. His devotion is complete: divine and sublunary. Dante is the pilgrim, Beatrice the monument.

Nonetheless, there remains the question of Beatrice's ontology and the counterproductive power dynamics it may possess. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of *La Vita Nuova* contains the description of Beatrice as "the glorious Lady of my mind." This is very a lucid description of the nature of Beatrice's ontology. Beatrice is made manifest in Dante's mind. Her being is not much based in reality, and it is not particularly independent. She seems almost a "screen lady" for the authority of Dante's authorship—she appears to rule over Dante through the force of her perfection and the awe that it inspires in him is made manifest in his creation of monuments to her (*Vita Nuova*, *La Commedia*). But really, Dante is the creator of that force, that perfection, that desire and those monuments. Dante causes Beatrice to be what she would not have otherwise been, for the living Beatrice's relation to Dante was completely passive. Everything she has comes from him, is created and permitted by him. Yet, Beatrice exercises power. She causes Dante to do what he would not have otherwise done, and to be who he would not have otherwise been. And she does so passively. Is that not greatly powerful? In doing that, or rather, in producing that, she causes Dante to create her newly. None of it exists without Beatrice's body and her body is hers. It is a subtle power; it comes from her as if it comes from nothing, as if it comes from Dante.

It is no revelation that black women the world over have been made to endure unparalleled oppressive forces—both for their race and for their gender. South Africa presents an extraordinary instance of this. The course of its history has culminated in a succession of oppressions, first Colonialism, then Apartheid, and now Gender-Based Violence. Out of this arises the paradoxical marriage of strength and vulnerability—strength as a result of vulnerability, a strength that fails to conclusively vanquish vulnerability. The strength is nonetheless unrelenting and has spawned the all too familiar image of the black woman as unwaveringly formidable. This prescribed strength is oppressive as the systems it challenges; like its counterpart, vulnerability, it is not altogether self-determined—it is authored by the actions, requirements or will of the men that incite them. It is doubtful that Beatrice should reveal anything about dismantling of the legacies of colonial, Apartheid, and Gender-Based Violence—she barely reveals anything about herself, who was as real as any of these institutions. At the very least, what she can reveal is something very beautiful about womanhood: It is perfect. It is perfect, not because it is flawless, but because it is comprehensive and, thus, complete. Like Beatrice herself, it encompasses omnipotence, ingenuousness, erudition, innocent, illumination, and obscurity. She gives women,

black women in particular, the space to be more than strong or vulnerable, one, both, or neither. In this way, perfect humanity may be enacted—not perfect as in flawless, but perfect as in comprehensive—one can live every and any femininity, all of them at once or none at all. So varied, so full, it evades true description.

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Yet, I had not discovered you

Erin Jacobs

My childhood was filled with fairy tales and epic stories,
and reading was always encouraged in our household.
As the first born, my brother had a library filled with books.
He took an interest in sports and mathematics, and consequently
these shelves of treasure filled pages remained untouched,
spines uncracked
and words unread.

My love for literature sparked when I opened my first reading book in grade 1.
I sped through the words and made sense of the pages,
at a rate significantly higher than all my fellow students.
By the time I had completed my grade 1 academic year,
I was already reading at an average of 194 words per minute.
By the time I had completed my grade 2 academic year,
I had already completed over two thirds of the books in my brother's treasure trove.

My love for reading developed from the age of six until sixteen,
when I was invited to join my high school's advanced programme for English literature.
Once again, I was certain that *this* is where my love for literature developed.
My high school curriculum consisted of a blur of South African authors,
Such as Athol Fugard, J.M. Coetzee and Antje Krog,
As well as international literary geniuses,
ranging from Wordsworth, Blake, Eliot and Tennyson,
to Golding, Salinger, Swarup, and Orwell,
Yet, I had not discovered you.

It was only when I selected a seminar in my second year of university,
that my love for literature was solidified.

I stopped reading because I had a requirement to do so,
or because I was interested in a specific author or topic.
Instead,
I started reading because I had this unquenchable
desire to *know*.
I found myself captivated,
by every single word on the page,
and by every canto I encountered.
Dante Alighieri,
I fell in love with literature when I fell in love with you.

Your reputation is that of a man who went to hell and back,
but you did more than that.
C. S. Lewis confesses that your writing is worthy of inspiring conversion,
and Kelsen accredits your role in informing legal traditions.
Botticelli, Dali, Rodin and Blake owe their artistic masterpieces
To your name alone,
While Lord Byron, Shelley, Chaucer and all the men whose works I studied in high school wrote extensively on your personal impact on them.
On their lives.
On their writing.

I stand in awe before your greatness,
I admire your influence—not just as an author,
But as a man who influenced art,
Literature,
Politics,
Philosophy,
and ultimately,
a man who single-handedly shaped the world as we know it.

Your influence reaches far and wide,
And yet, I had not discovered you.
Dante Alighieri,
Your name is that of a man who changed the world,
and silently stepped back into the shadows,
watching your words fill up someone's bookshelf.
While your books remain untouched,
spines uncracked
and words unread.

Until
the reader opens your pages,
speeds through the words and makes sense of the pages,
and their love for you is sparked.

A spark that never dims, never dulls and can never be extinguished.
I thought I knew when my love for literature developed,
yet, I had not discovered you,
and consequently, I had never discovered literature at all.

My Discovery of Dante and the Apocalyptic Crisis: My Dantesque Ulyssean Return to the *Commedia*

Ross Smith

The Gothic genre has always been a profound interest of mine. Its intense stillness and the openly dark and opaque effulgence of its dramatic emphasis appeals to my love of the sense of mystery and the occult. During my undergraduate years and through my study of the Romantic and Realist eras my interest in the Medieval piqued. I had always been interested in The Renaissance and the vibrant beauty of the expanding golden light of the germination of the modern age. My desire for knowledge of what predates the Renaissance and what led to Elizabethan Golden Age and Shakespeare drew me to the Medievals. Since my first undergraduate encounter with Dante and other narrative poems like *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* it slowly revealed itself to me that the Medievals did not inhabit a Dark Age but an age of immediate connection with the spirit world and a superstitious hegemonic belief in the afterlife. At the zenith of this age is the *Commedia*. It is this vivacity and colourfulness of Medieval literature which led me to become a medieval scholar.

I was first introduced to Dante in my high school years when my Italian teacher, Raffaella, would occasionally recite the opening tercet to me in Italian. I was the only student who decided to take Italian as an academic subject in Grade 8 and subsequently I was the only Italian student in my year and class for the next five years. As a result, I received intense one-on-one teaching and exposure to the language and after a few months, maybe years—I don't remember exactly how long—of learning, to Italian literature. We went through a brief tour of Italian literature: Nadia Ginzburg's familial descriptions, not *Lessico Famigliare* yet, this was to appear in my university Italian years, but the delightful short story *Lui ed Io*; Stefano Benni's *Il Racconto dell'uomo col Mantello: Oleron* from *Il Bar Sotto Il Mare*, and other short stories and poetry which now escape me. As I was the only student my classes were flexible—thanks to the intense plasticity of Raffaella's classes and her willingness to feed my curiosity for poetry—we did the setworks as outlined but continued with other poetry she thought I would find interesting and would enjoy like Sergio Solmi's *Sotto il Cielo Pacato di Novembre*.

This is one of the poems that Dante did not write that stayed with me for many years after my high school days. It was the intense emotion and immediacy of experience that I remember: "Invece / cancellarmi vorrei, tanto mi sento / un estraneo accidente in queste splendide tue geometrie, non piu che una confuse / macchia, una pena, un vagabond errore" (Solmi 1968).

This gem led to a discussion of Dante's suicide forest. *La Commedia* had remained with Raff who was able to recite selected lines. She also described to me the conical depiction of Hell with an intensely icy Satan at the apex. She remembered these details of the *Commedia* and to this day I remember her telling them to me beneath the trees of our open-aired classroom. All our lessons were outside on benches or picnic tables that were a permanent feature of my school. She detested the formal teaching environment and favoured learning and experience over a formalized approach to examination and structure. (This also made Italian my favourite subject and the one which I remember the most post-school.) She also introduced me to cappuccini which I now only say in Italian as I was only taught the word in Italian, much to the incredible annoyance of my friends who say "cap-a-chino." Before this time, I did not drink coffee. It was with a cappuccino that I had the first canto of *Inferno* read to me—not in translation. Our classes had become a mixture of English and Italian and always started with: "Ross, vai a prenderci il caffè per favore, e di' che pago io dopo la lezione." *La Commedia* mi veniva letta nell'italiano originale di Dante dal sin dall'inizio, con il suono delle parole e il tonfo delle descrizione: *e caddi come corpo morte, cade* (*Inf.* 5.142). Ancora ora, quando penso di Raff penso sempre a queste parole musicalmente descrittive. We had also read other sections of the *Commedia* that were particularly beautiful.

Dante's sonorous rhythm stayed with me as I began my undergraduate degree in Italian and English. I wanted to be exposed to more of Dante and other literatures in Italian. But I always returned to the Renaissance as my field of interest. At least at the time I thought I was most interested in Renaissance literature. As a result, I signed up for all the Renaissance and older literature courses that were offered, and also as an escape from Post-Modern literatures. It was during this time in my second year that I officially encountered Dante in an academic setting. I signed up for the Dante elective which focused on *Inferno* and my formal training in Dante studies began. It was also during this time that I realised that my true interest was actually the Medievals and that I was interested in the Renaissance as a development of Medieval literature. The graphic descriptions and the horrific images of Count Ugolino gnawing on his companion struck me as something out of a modern-day horror film. This was the beginning of my fascination with what I now know as Gothic and eerily-dark images which confronted readers.

The third year of my undergraduate studies was noticeably grey and contained only Modern and Post-Colonial literatures. I missed the colours of the Medieval period and vibrant imagination of their poets. In comparison, the modern material was dull and threadbare and without the intrigue of mythology and dark figures of opaque significance.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, I immediately enrolled for an Honours. I decided to pursue an Honours project in Dante—I had unfinished business like a ghost stuck on Earth. I could not let it go and I could not bear the thought of studying the colourless material that other supervisors offered. Ultimately it was my supervisor who noticed what I was truly drawn to in Dante's works. I was interested in the darkness of his images and imagination, but I was also intrigued by figures who seemed simultaneously to mean nothing and everything. The horrific images such as the prophets swinging their heads like lanterns and popes buried like upturned cigarette butts in the ground point to what I understand as the apocalyptic undercurrent of *Inferno*.

I had taken Maths as one of my subjects and it occurred to me that mathematical thinking could be used to approach literature texts, specifically definition by negation. I could discuss what the apocalyptic undercurrent of the canticle was not. The opacity in its significance and the slippery allegory of scenes like the opening canto rendered it somewhat impossible to discuss what it actually is—for my honour's research project anyway. I decided to create a graph of the apocalyptic instances in which the asymptotes of each line of clarity would define a grey area in the middle. It was (and still is) this grey area of apocalypse that I am interested in. My honours research focused on the apocalyptic undercurrent of the *Inferno* and how exactly this canticle can be considered part of the Medieval Early Christian apocalyptic genre while referencing to Classical apocalypses.

When I submitted this research, the feeling of unfinished business with Dante had not dissipated but had grown. I still could not rationalise his slippery allegory and it felt like one of those Hagfish that coves itself in mucus and resists capture as it slides out its own mucosal bubble. I was to return to Dante, specifically Dante in the *Inferno*, similar to Dante-poet return to the figure of Ulysses in *Purgatorio*. The allegory of the *Commedia* is notoriously illusive, and I still could not fathom it. I had experienced its elusive nature and I wanted more. It is also, ironically, for this reason why the *Commedia* retained my interest and fascination. Dante had written this allegory 700 years ago and after 699 years of Dante scholarship we still had not come up with a definitive answer to his allegorical voice. Critics had tried, some of them like Auerbach and Mazzotta and Barolini quite convincingly, to explain this allegorical voice, but each response had loopholes and debatable tentative parts. I, like many other Dantisti, was also not finished with this equivocal allegory. In a similar way to Dante's Ulysses of Canto 26 searching beyond the bounds of human knowledge, I would search for the significance of certain episodes and figures like the Gran Veglio which seemingly do not belong in the Hell's landscape. It was this quest for knowledge and significance of perplexing figures that drove me to my master's research. It is still this quest for the meaning of Dantesque allegory that draws me to return to my research and to undertake a PhD at a future time and to write articles about Dante's unique ubiquitous apocalyptic allegorical imagination. My journey with Dante and the *Commedia* reflects the journeys of Ulysses and Aeneas: I am simultaneously drawn back to the *Commedia* and its gothic apocalypses like Ulysses to Ithaca, and to journeying toward a rational Rome-founding explanation of

his miry allegorical imagination. The extent to which we can decipher Dante's imagination is yet to be determined and the fat lady of allegory has not yet sung.

I had decided to focus on the apocalyptic animus of *Inferno*, using Dante's slippery mucosal allegory and his representation of time and history as the basis of my investigation. I explored how the combination of these two elements of the canticle contributed toward the apocalyptic overture that runs throughout the 34 canti. My answer to the illusive allegory and opaque significances of allegorical emblems is Dante's apocalyptic voice. The driving force behind his dark scenes and teleological passe could be his apocalyptic imagination.

Yet this apocalyptic imagination is still murky and while it does provide one solution to the significance of allegorical emblems debate, it does probe at more questions that render the *Commedia* and instances from the *Commedia* open to even more interpretations. It is still this allegory and the impossibility of finding a definite meaning in it which is spurred on by the human condition searching for complete understanding to any question that intrigues me. Dante has painted allegory that evades definite and complete interpretation. This question has shaped my research, especially for my master's dissertation. I have no doubt that it will guide my future research for my PhD project and other research papers. Dante's apocalyptic animus in the *Inferno* and his apocalyptic imagination which displays itself throughout the *Commedia* inspires the allusive illusive allegorical voices that peppers his poetry. It is this peppering that is intriguing to me and which my rational mind must untangle.

After I submitted and graduated with my master's the feeling of unfinished business still remained with me. The horse was not yet dead and there is still more argument to be made about Dante's apocalyptic animus and the apocalyptic features of the *Commedia*. I intend to revisit Dante's apocalyptic imagination—although I have not really left it—in a couple years.

However, I decided that I need slight change in career paths but also one that would continue my fascination with the individual's position in history and a perceived, possibly internalised, eternity. This is what I explored in the *Inferno*, and now I am going to explore it without poetic presentation of the subject's relationship with time and existence. I am about to begin another Master this time in Psychology which will focus on Existential Psychology and how the human subject copes with the realisation of the fleetingness of time and the awareness of what Blake terms the "eternal moment" which is inherently transient when one becomes aware of inhabiting it. As I see it, this is not necessarily a change in topic but a change in approach. The temporal distance between Dante's experience of his exile which led to the opus magnum of the *Commedia* and our modern position does not influence the way we experience the apocalyptic moment, maybe the way we interpret it, but not the way we experience it. It is this experience which interests me—Dante experienced it precipitated by his exile and position in historical events which were contributed to by the welcoming of the new century in his lifetime and the political unrest of his beloved Florence; but the emotions he experiences and which he describes in the *Commedia* resonate with our modern experiences of political

unrest, plague, and not least of all the anxiety surrounding the recent welcoming of the new millennium.

At certain instances in the *Commedia*, such as the forest of suicides, Dante divulges into an exploration of the human psyche. The distorted thinking of suicide subjects is reflected in the language which he uses to describe their condition. This canto, for me at least, is one which makes Dante's *contrapasso* the most understandable. It is also one, like many of the others, that directly links to psychology. The field of Psychology had not yet been developed at Dante's time of writing but even a preliminary reading of any canto of the *Commedia* results in Dante's presentation of quintessentially human emotions and characteristics, something that Auerbach has discussed at length in relation to the representation of reality and realness in literature and the emotional exchange between Dante-pilgrim and Farinata and Cavalcante. It is particularly evident in the forest of suicides. It is this realist representation of human figures that casts Dante-poet as a poet exploring human psychology. Auerbach relates Dante to Rabelias's "abstracteur de quinte essence" for his ability to conceive and present the human condition and to distil the essences of their human personalities.

It was my reconciliation of Auerbach's theory of realist representation in the *Commedia* and Dante's apocalyptic imagination which seeps into his poetry, that formed the basis of one of my chapters of my dissertation. It is also Dante's realist representation in relation to the apocalyptic subject position and how the souls of *Inferno* are not able to view the apocalyptic significances of their death or of their elevated position in time and eternity that spurred my interest in modern day psychology and how people deal with their transient position in a secular world, that lacks Christian mythological apocalyptic significances given by an eternity to which one would be admitted post-mortem. In a similar way, the individuals who experience anxiety disorders or who have been diagnosed with a mood disorder occasionally cannot integrate their position in their own lives and fail to see the significances of the events occurring around them. This anhedonism drains the emotion out of life and it becomes an endless void of an experience of nothing. It is through the individual's perception of these events from nothing to something that should be savoured, that their position in time and history is simultaneously realised, in the sense that it is made real, and experienced. It is a similar moment to the moment not perceived by the souls of sinners in *Inferno* that must be experienced to create the shift from anhedonia to experience. I believe this to be even more pertinent now in our (pseudo-)hyperconnected online presences. It is once this is overcome that experience and enjoyment begins. I think Dante understood a version of this idea and chose to present a difference facet of this notion in the *Inferno* in a hegemonically Christian context. This modern anhedonism corresponds to the souls of Inferno not perceiving the apocalyptic significances of their position in the afterlife or of their deaths. I plan to orientate my psychological research around this idea and the perception of the Danteque apocalyptic moment.

It is the allegory of the *Commedia* to which I always return and the idea of capturing the meaning of Danteque allegorical emblems, searching for their sig-

nificances within the bounds of the human domain. It is also this allegory that links the apocalyptic undercurrent to the overt features of the text. Additionally, and ironically, it is the apocalyptic animus of the text that makes this allegory accessible to me. It is also this apocalyptic moment and Dante's apocalyptic vision that encourages me to find other instances of Dantesque apocalypses outside of literature and outside of the medieval period: like in our current society and community (one which is also ironically battling a medieval plague). I believe we should view the allegory of the *Commedia* as we view mood disorders in individuals—from a holistic perspective which is elevated above the events which transpire in quotidian life, like the pilgrim's viewing of the fraudulent counsellors in what appears from his perspective to be a valley of fireflies.

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A Tree In Hell

Kai Lötter

The first time I met Dante, I was spaced out on several different kinds of new medication.

It was important to my psychiatrist that I did not call what I was experiencing hallucinations. *Visual distortions,* he called them. When the floor heaves and groans beneath your feet—visual distortions. When the walls breathe, and you see the hallways stretch out towards infinity—*visual distortions*. When the colours of the world drift like water paint—*visual distortions*. Language was important, my psychiatrist had insisted, you call them what they are—they are not hallucinations.

I did not care so much about the jargon, but these *visual distortions* had been making it progressively more difficult to live. Consequently, I wanted to die.

I struggled to attend my university classes. It was difficult to walk across the quad of Solomon House when, at any moment, you felt like gravity was going to switch off. Later, I would be diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy. The name visual distortions would be replaced with partial seizures. But, on the day that I first met Dante, I had walked through the heaving floors and breathing walls and drifting colours to sit beside my friend and listen to him talk about this new class he was taking for English Literature. I had an unlit cigarette hanging from my lips. My face was pressed against the sun-warmed brick. I could barely hear what he was saying. The only thing that reached me was what he said about the trees.

"In the Divine Comedy," he said, "Those who commit suicide are punished by becoming a tree in Hell."

And I, coming down a spiral of suicidal ideation, simply said, "That doesn't sound so bad."

I rather liked the idea. It held a certain appeal. I thought of stretching, up and up, towards the sky with leaves of bright green. I thought of being still, being silent, no longer human but not entirely dead. It did not sound so bad to become one with nature so utterly. To be a tree in Hell was the kindest result of death I could think of.

But my words had made my friend angry. He looked at me with fires in his eyes so bright it almost pierced my dreamlike state with the feeling of warmth. He shouted at me, "No! It's bad! You're entombed in there, trapped in the bark, and you'll bleed when the Harpies swoop down to tear at you with their claws. It hurts. Its torture. Don't you get it? It's *Hell*."

My friend was not religious, but in that moment, he believed. Not in Hell, not in God, but in Dante. Who was this man, I wondered, who was able to inspire such faith in a faithless man? What had he done? What had he written?

But I did not follow Dante. Not then, not yet. The truth was that I hated Dante for what he did, for taking my happy Hell away from me. I questioned how he could punish suicide in such a horrific manner. I had already grouped myself with the suicides. Even before I died, it felt like my inevitable end. I could not forgive Dante for being so unnecessarily cruel. Had we not suffered enough already? Across seven hundred years, across an entire hemisphere, I hated him for putting me in Hell.

It would be a long while before I met Dante again. A series of strange and inexplicable events occurred that eventually led me to a mental hospital. Looking back, it began with the violent death of a childhood acquaintance but ended with my sudden retreat from life. I walked away from my friends and family. I walked away from my university education. I understand now it was a kind of self-imposed exile. For my entire life, I had been on a single set path and, suddenly, it was gone.

All I remember from the trip to the hospital was the view of the trees through the car window—the dark, obscure forests of Johannesburg. In winter, the branches are stark and bare, scattering through the blue skin of the sky like bright, white veins. I reminded myself that Johannesburg is unique in being one of the largest manmade forests in the world. Other cities did not have forests like this, and other cities did not die like this in the winter.

When I think about the people I met in the hospital, I remember them as shades of themselves, but I knew them in a way their friends and family never would. I saw them at their worst, and I saw them at their best. In the end, it was difficult to tell the difference.

There was a man named Edmund. He barely spoke, but when he opened his mouth to give me a smile, I could see two rows of small, black teeth. He was one of the permanent residents. He seemed happy, floating down the halls slowly, and he never bothered anyone. Except, occasionally, he would look at me in confusion and say, "You're not supposed to be here."

At first, I thought it was a compliment. "You're right, Edmund," I wanted to say, "I was always such a good girl, doing everything right. I shouldn't be here. Thank you, Edmund."

A nurse stopped me before I could speak, though. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Don't mind poor Edmund. He's fallen a little from reality. He's in a kind of Limbo. Has no idea what year it is. Still thinks it's the 1980s. Still thinks it's Apartheid, and the hospital is segregated."

"Oh," I said.

"He gets confused, scared, if you try to tell him what year it really is. But, if you like, you can tell what day of the week it is, when you see him. It doesn't fix it, but it helps."

For the month I was at the hospital, every time I would see Edmund, floating down the hall looking for something he so desperately desired but could not find, I would wave and say, "It's Monday. It's Tuesday. It's Wednesday" and on and on until I left. Edmund stayed behind, locked in a limbo of Apartheid South Africa.

There was another woman there that I spoke to every day. I sat patiently as she explained to me, in profound and epic detail, the true heights of her sexual libido. She moved around like a flock of birds as she told me all about her boyfriend—who was black, whose name was Ezekiel, like the angel, and he was the only man who loved her. The only man who could keep up with her. She was very proud when she fell pregnant. "It's the new South Africa, darling! We should all be having mixed race babies!"

And then she lost the baby. That's why she was there, in the hospital, poking at her odd, fleshy belly and saying, "Hollow. It's just hollow now."

Ezekiel visited and spent the whole two hours wrapped around her. His face pressed into her neck and his hands in her hair. His back was curved, his spine protruding, and for a moment I almost tricked myself into thinking that I could see his wings.

"Come home," he would whisper, "Please come home."

But she was still there when I left the hospital.

They had colour-coded us with these little wristbands. White meant that you could walk around freely. Orange was for underage teens. Green was suicide-risk—that was me. And blue was for the drug addicts, the alcoholics, and pill poppers. They put the people with eating disorders in the blue group with the addicts. The logic was that it was all to do with consumption. No matter what, they all shared the same relentless obsession, the hunger that did not wait, that just ate and ate, or spat it right back out.

The alcoholics pulled along IV stands filled with a shockingly yellow liquid that they called 'Jet Fuel'. It was supposed to stop them from going into withdrawal. But it didn't always work. Once, I turned down a hallway and there was a man collapsed on the floor, struggling to get out of a puddle of his own piss, blood, and jet fuel.

I watched a man try to trick the nurses into giving him pain medication. He was viciously charismatic and good-looking. I fell for every lie he ever told me. I watched an over-weight woman sob into her food, "It's not enough. It's never enough. I'm so hungry. Why am I always so hungry?" I watched a skeletal girl wink at me before dropping her slice of toast down the front of her shirt to hide it from the nurse who would come to check if she had eaten.

Sometimes, I was jealous of them. I did not feel hunger or desire. I felt nothing at all. I pressed my fingers against my pulse to check if I was still alive. I jumped in a pool to check if my body still had weight if I still sunk. I did. I sunk all the way down.

One night, I woke up to a great crash. The sound of breaking glass echoed through the quiet halls of the hospital. The next day, a hallway was curtained

off with red tape. There was an angry river of broken glass scattered across the floor, along with patches of dried blood.

"Last night, someone tried to break out of the fishbowl," Someone explained to me. "He threw himself through of the observation window there."

"The fishbowl?" I asked.

"It's where they put the people who need twenty-four-hour supervision, because they're violent and can't be out here with the rest of us."

In my sedated state, I could not comprehend the levels of rage that was needed to throw one's body through a pane of glass. I still don't.

At the hospital, there were people from all backgrounds. Drug addicts and burnt-out corporate lawyers. Teenagers with self-harm scars and old, deaf men with guide dogs. We were all different, but we all agreed on one thing—we all hated Lerato.

No one would speak to her. No one would sit with her at mealtimes, or pair up with her in group therapy. I would be sitting alone in a room and suddenly feel this wave of nausea wash over me, only to turn around and see that Lerato had sneaked into the room. I would leave in disgust.

The reason we hated her was simple. She had broken one of our most sacred rules.

When we had asked her why she was at the hospital, she had said, "Every day, I would wake up and get in my car to drive to work. I would get stuck in traffic, then I would get stuck in a cubicle, then I would drive home, and I would get stuck in traffic. Every day, for ten years, I would do this. Then, one morning, I had an idea. A beautiful idea. The best idea I have ever had. I'll pull the steering wheel. Drive straight into oncoming traffic."

We were all silent as we realised the true horror that she had done.

"Another car crashed into me. My head hit the dashboard. His body went through the windscreen. He was paralysed from the waist down."

Lerato was attacked with a barrage of, "How could you? How dare you? Don't you know? Don't you know that your suicide is only meant to have one murder victim? What you did was violence against your neighbours, and it's a sin."

"It's not right," Melody had said to me, "It's fair. Even when I threw myself out of the moving car, I made sure that there was no one around and it was just me. I didn't want to hurt anyone else. Just me."

But that was still a problem, wasn't it? A murder with only one victim is still a murder. And I think that it was finally beginning to dawn on me. I was finally understanding why Dante put me in Hell.

I looked at Melody. She believed in God but knew nothing about Dante. She sometimes told me that God loved me, like He had told her that morning while she brushed her teeth. So, I thought, she must be a good person to ask.

"Why is suicide a sin?"

"Sins aren't sins because they hurt *God*," Melody said, "Sins are sins because they hurt *you*."

She sat across from me, tearing open sugar packets, and stirring the grains around with the tip of her finger. I watched her in silence and thought about

suicide. I thought of all the unnatural shapes you had to twist yourself into just to get to that state where you could fight against the single most important instinct there is—the instinct to stay alive. To get to that point, you must lie to yourself, you must warp reality around you, until you have perverted the world into something that is dark, that is not the thing that God created.

I realised that was what it meant to be a tree in Hell—a twisted and unnatural thing that was irrational and perverse in its ability to destroy itself. It was not a good *place* to be. It was not a good *thing* to be, a tree in Hell.

I left the hospital thinking that I was fixed, that all the pills and the therapy had worked, and I was better now. I insisted that I had grown out of every diagnosis that I had ever been given. No more manic depression, no more acute anxiety, and no more temporal lobe epilepsy. I am cured. I screamed until my throat bled. I am better now.

But I was so heavily sedated on the pills that I did not really know what I felt. I was moving through water and all I felt was this elephant sadness.

And then I met Dante again. He greeted me like I had never hated him, like we were friends all this time and, perhaps, we had been. I read *Inferno* just before the pandemic forced South Africa to shut down and we had to stay inside for weeks, just before Purgatory, where every single step I had taken since the hospital was tested. If my mental health could make it through a global pandemic, then it could make it through anything. Trapped inside, I climbed the walls like Dante climbed Mount Purgatory. I read his journey, I followed his footsteps, with my fingers clutching the rope around his waist. I did not like to be far away from him anymore.

If I could speak to him, I don't think I would ask him any profound questions befitting my education, or what the beasts in the first canto symbolised, or any of the other mysteries contained in his great work. No, I would look at Dante through seven centuries, an entire hemisphere, and say, "Please don't leave me. Please don't abandon me in the Seventh Circle. I don't want to be a tree in Hell. It doesn't sound like a kind death, not anymore. I want to come with you. I still have time. I am still alive. I want to walk to Paradise."

When I left the hospital, I thought I had been cured. I thought I was better. I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round. You have to climb down into Hell, then climb up the mountain of Purgatory before you can ascend into Paradise and walk among the planets. It is there where you will find it—*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*. The love that moves the sun and all the stars.

I have not reached it yet. I have not found it yet. But I will because now I know that to get to it, you must first go the long way round.

PART II

Scholars' Conversations with South African Students

"Dante, Can I Lead You?" South African students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)

Chris Thurman

In 2020, marking seven hundred years since the completion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—and thus a year ahead of those publications that, like the present one, recognise the anniversary of the poet's death—Fantagraphics Books brought out a commemorative edition of *Art Young's Inferno*, which first appeared in 1934. This seminal work, anticipating the form that we now refer to as the graphic novel, brought Dante's hell squarely into the twentieth century. Invoking the failure of capitalism that seemed to be so evident in the wake of the Great Depression, Young brought his sardonic, satirical wit to bear on a recognisable hellscape in which consumption and accumulation had become the ultimate virtue-vices. To be rich in this hell was no torment; only the poor in hell truly suffered.

Young's twentieth-century *Inferno* is thus more closely attuned to systemic (capitalist, military-industrial) evils than to individual sins—whether those of the Everyman / Everywoman or of the individuals that Dante chooses to specify in his *Inferno*. As Eric Bulson (2021, 15) notes, a curious inversion thus occurs:

> One of Young's greatest achievements lies in the faces of the sinners. Dante might have mastered the art of describing bodies in pain, but just try to recall the physiognomy of Francesca or Count Ugolino [...] Dante names his sinners but he doesn't describe them. For Young, on the other hand, the careful description of faces, human, beast and hybrid, was an opportunity to foreground what evil looks like. The "Rugged Individualist," a director of four banks and six large corporations, is one manifestation. With his shaggy eyebrows, heavily

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Chris Thurman, *"Dante, Can I Lead You?" South African students write back (across seven centuries and a hemisphere)*, pp. 97-103, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8.05, in Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African* Convivio *with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

> lidded eyes, and small horns, he is the guy who wants to privatize the parks, the highways, even the air, but he needs to dismantle the unions first. There are also the money monarchs in constant fear of the "politico-reform movements of Hell" [...] None of the sinners is ever mentioned by name, but you know them well.

This marks an important distinction between Dante's world and our own—now, almost a hundred years after Young's *Inferno* appeared, we are postmodern but decidedly not postcapitalist—such that reading and teaching and responding to Dante is different to the way we might approach, say, Shakespeare.

I reach for this point of comparison, of course, because I am a Shakespearean by training and expertise, and not a Dantista. Yet it does seem fair to say that, while we Shakespeareans often seek to recruit the early modern into the modern—to discern in the works of Shakespeare the faultlines of modernity, the expression of then-nascent economic, political, imperial and racialised ways of thinking that would shape the world as we have come to know it—with Dante one feels more neatly in pre-modern, late-medieval Europe (even if Dante is, with Petrarch, a "father of Humanism"; and even if the Renaissance in Italy began centuries before it reached England). Dante is, to put it crudely, further off.

Reading the poems, essays and stories of the South African students whose work has been included in this collection, however, this greater distance strikes me as advantageous. It is an advantage made greater by language and its role in our country's history. The teacherly impulse to position Shakespeare as, if not "our contemporary" in Jan Kott's (1966) terms, then at least a fellow traveller in what we loosely call modernity, runs into some immediate difficulties. The first of these is linguistic: patently, Shakespeare's English is very different to the Englishes of the present day, and for most English speakers to understand it requires a series of acts of translation ("modernisation"). Yet because students—in South Africa, as in so many other countries—encounter Shakespeare on an English syllabus, they and their teachers feel they have to make the case for the familiarity of Elizabethan-Jacobean English (think of all those posters and videos that emphasise the common English words and idiomatic phrases first recorded in Shakespeare's plays). This is compounded by South Africa's colonial history and its legacy, and the ways in which the English language has been used as a tool of oppression, segregation and exploitation even as it has also been embraced as a means towards liberation, unity and advancement. Shakespeare is bound up in all this messy stuff. The only way to teach and study his work honestly is to leap into the mess, rather than try to avoid it with guff about universality and transcendence; in my view this is best complemented by an emphasis on, rather an avoidance of, the fact of translation. This means not just modernisation but also translation into languages other than "modern" English—facilitating an engagement with Shakespeare via the multilingualism that is a defining feature of South African life. But that is a hard case to make, when minds are (to borrow in overworn fashion from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986) still colonised when it comes to English.

With Dante in South Africa, by contrast, translation is always already a factor. If you encounter Dante on an English syllabus, you cannot but reckon with

the effects of translation, which foreground and complicate the effects of the passage of time. If you encounter Dante as a student of Italian, there is arguably an equivalent linguistic distance to the English student's distance to Shakespeare, but the fact of one's studying Italian in South Africa already frames the encounter as a multilingual (and not just bilingual) one. The students whose essays, stories and poems are collected here may have followed either of these educational paths to Dante. What they share, regardless, is a South African identity, even if one cannot and should not ignore their contrasting experiences as a result of racial, gender, cultural and other considerations. Some of them may have had existing ties to Italy and Italian before studying Dante, but this is not explicitly evident in the pieces selected. Instead, what I perceive as a reader is a shared sense that Italian is (or has been) "strange" without being entirely "alien."

Certainly, Italian does not carry the heavy symbolic freight of the English language in South Africa, even though, as lingua franca, English is the language of learning and teaching, and the language in which these students express themselves as creative writers and young scholars. Italy, of course, has historically formed part of the European colonial presence in Africa—and had, prior to this, been central to the European imperial imagination, as well as to its racist, expansionist and acquisitive character—but Italian remains free from the taint of the English, Dutch and Portuguese imperial enterprises in South Africa. While Dante may be "foreign" to South African students, this is as much because he is (as Kai Lötter puts it in the personal essay *A Tree In Hell*) foreign "across seven hundred years" as because he is "across a hemisphere" (sup., p. 90). In other words, a young South African writer's relationship with Dante may be inflected by considerations of global north and global south, but it is framed primarily by temporal distance.

This makes Dante, in Chariklia Martalas' prose-poem series *A Mad Flight Into* Inferno *Once Again*, a figure almost to be pitied: someone who would be utterly baffled and perplexed by our time, unable to come to terms with what has happened over seven centuries. In *Eating John Vorster*, where the reader (along with Dante) is introduced to the grim and gruesome leaders of Apartheid South Africa—their heads to be eternally consumed by the architect of Apartheid, Hendrick Verwoerd, whose punishment in turn is to be the eternal cannibal—Dante realises: "Hell has many more monsters now doesn't it?" God had to make Inferno bigger to accommodate them. Nevertheless, there is no easy moralising here—for also consigned to hell, bound to participate in Verwoerd's damnation, is his assassin Dimitri Tsafendas (sup., p. 49).

Martalas, like a number of the other contributors, creates a poetic or narrative voice that expresses the working-through of deeply personal experiences of grief, loneliness, fear and despair alongside a reckoning with urgent questions relating to collective, national legacies—the hell of South African history and its present consequences or manifestations. There is comfort here in Dante as both literary precursor and spiritual forebear; the *Commedia* is a record of a kindred spirit who toiled and struggled long ago, but he is not treated with the sanctity of an ancestor. Instead, the students demonstrate a desire to go beyond

Dante and his world view, to challenge and upend and even gently mock. This is bringing Dante with them into their world—its infernos and its paradises—and inverting the dynamic of the *Commedia* so that it is now the young writer who plays Virgil, guiding Dante the antecedent, the one who has come before. It is best expressed in Martalas' question and offer, in *Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses*, to Dante: "Can I lead you?" (sup., p. 37).

Although Dante is not an adversary or a threat to these students, he represents and gives voice to a world view that is constrained and constraining. Lötter admits that, before she had read Dante, "Across seven hundred years, across an entire hemisphere, I hated him for putting me in Hell",(sup., p. 90)—for envisioning, in *Inferno* Canto 13, a punishment for those who commit suicide (and by implication, a warning to those whose desire for "being still, being silent, no longer human" leads to suicidal ideation) (sup., p. 89). In Lötter's account one realises the extent to which Dante's theological-poetic imagination has influenced our daily figurative language. A nurse in a psychiatric facility describes a patient who has "fallen a little from reality" and is "in a kind of limbo." This casual use of the term is complicated when we reinsert the Dantean associations. Is the patient better off for being "locked in a limbo of Apartheid South Africa", (sup., p. 91)—living in the past but not fully immersed in its hell, and thus in a place *di duol senza martìri* ("sorrowful but without torment", *Inf*. 4.28)? The "mental hospital" itself, however, is no limbo; nor is it the purgatory it is intended to be, where one pays for but is purged of sin and ready to be integrated into society/heaven—itself an absurd implied pairing. The hospital feels more like a place for the damned: in the paradigm of the *Inferno*, the young couple who have lost a baby appear to have been punished (by what god?—or was it just bad luck?) for their passion, a Francesca and Paolo whose interracial relationship hints at an Apartheid-era taboo that puritanical racists saw as the ultimate transgression. Here I catch myself as a reader who has been primed to find Dante everywhere in these pieces, a reader at risk of overdetermined interpretation, seeing allegory and analogy and likeness when they are not there.

A more explicit and sustained allusion to *Inferno* Canto 5, the second circle of hell reserved for lustful transgressors like Francesca and Paolo, is found in Martalas' *The Party*. This is not a simplistic celebration of hedonism, but instead confirms at least one form of progress towards individual and collective freedom achieved since Dante. Where there is consent, why should the extent or intensity or orientation of one's sexuality be a reason for punishment? Again, Dante's world feels narrow and repressed compared to our own. Francesca and Paolo are no longer a cautionary tale but have become the hosts of a party at the end of time, or at least at the end of history—that is, right now, when "human choice has started to matter more than it ever did. Things are now less determined, more volatile, such is modernity. Judging human souls has never been harder" (sup., p. 35).

And yet, and yet… systemic constraints remain, limitations to individual autonomy persist. Luyanda Kaitoo's praise poem for Francesca expresses how, as a young black woman today, the poet still feels the prudish judgement of a society uncomfortable with the notion of a "female libertine" (sup., p. 69). Lesego

Petra Maponyane's essay turns from the unfortunate Francesca to the exalted Beatrice, arguing that "the conception of black womanhood in South Africa is not far removed" from the position of Beatrice in Dante's world view (sup., p. 73): she has "the strange power to make herself both the centre and periphery of Dante's writing," not a mind but a "mere body," though paradoxically "the body without which Dante's mind could never think" (sup., p. 73). Beatrice has no agency, even though she is symbolically vital—she is not the subject but the object, onto which are projected ambitions, desires, hopes, frustrations. Likewise, argues Maponyane, black women in South Africa are "hailed as harbingers of liberty they cannot possess"; portrayed as stoical bearers of the burden of black domesticity under Apartheid, and constantly under attack in a post-Apartheid country wracked by gender-based violence, they are "emblematic of fortitude, yet subject to oppressive vulnerability" (sup., p. 73).

Dante should not, Maponyane's critique reminds us, be treated like a suprahistorical sage or an oracle. Insofar as he is a guide (when he is not being guided by us, as in Martalas' rendering), perhaps he is an exemplar of how to grieve through writing: how to turn one's sorrow and anger into text. The horror of being authorial witness in the *Inferno* finds its parallel in this collection in the dizzying effect on the writers themselves, who have stared at death and violence in South Africa, past and present, and sought words to capture their outrage and disorientation. The result is often a vivid, nightmarish expression of the all-too-real. It is a literary mood, an atmosphere, captured in Thalén Rogers' citing of one of Dante's best-known lines (thanks to T.S. Eliot), *Ch'i' non averei creduto che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta* (*Inf.* 3.56-7): "I had not thought death had undone so many." Rogers asks, as if with Dante's voice—which in the story *The Lodestone* is woven, in Italian, between the reflections and observations expressed in the author's own voice—"How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption?" (sup., p. 67).

Reading Helena van Urk's *terza rima* survey of South African villains and cronies, one is occasionally inclined to answer the latter question in the affirmative: yes, sadly, the country and its citizens are in a protracted and painful purgatory from which we have no immediate prospect of escape. It may indeed be "foolishly" upbeat to expect an end to *The Storm*; but van Urk will not abandon Dante's redemptive vision, resolving "to keep faith in eternal Hope and Good." van Urk imagines writers, from Dante to the present day, being driven by a conviction to "speak for those who [have] no means, / those Others that tend to live forgotten." She also reminds us that Dante may have "entered public service with hopes and dreams / to right the beloved nation, gone astray." Perhaps this is to give Dante too much credit, to valorise him in the terms we most value—struggle discourse, civil rights, the ongoing and urgent need for leaders who will fight for social justice and against corruption (sup., p. 51).

For Lötter, Dante does not inspire or provoke in political or ideological terms. Rather, he is a companion, and more than a guide; he is a kind of secular saviour. Recalling her resentment upon first hearing about the seventh circle of hell, Lötter writes of a very different second encounter with the poet:

> And then I met Dante again. He greeted me like I had never hated him, like we were friends all this time and, perhaps, we had been. I read *Inferno* just before the pandemic forced South Africa to shut down and we had to stay inside for weeks, just before Purgatory, where every single step I had taken since the hospital was tested. If my mental health could make it through a global pandemic, then it could make it through anything. Trapped inside, I climbed the walls like Dante climbed Mount Purgatory. I read his journey, I followed his footsteps, with my fingers clutching the rope around his waist (sup., p. 93).

This is not quite redemption, although like a number of the pieces in this collection it gestures towards redemption following Dante's own journey. Instead, it is an affirmation that a journey has been undertaken: "I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round" (sup., p. 93). The context for this journey challenges the opening premise of my essay. Far from a complex web of geopolitical and temporal forces—call it History—creating a widening chasm between fourteenth-century poet and twenty-first century student, what we have here is a global political, economic and social phenomenon (a health crisis intersecting with various other crises) that in fact brings poet and student together in an intimate, epic setting: the confines of the home, the expansive existential terrain of the self.

Another subversion of my initial framing (via *Art Young's Inferno*) of the difference between Dante's *then* and our *now* may be found in Casey Fern's essay *La divina foresta: Earthly Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's Purgatorio*. By situating the Dantean Purgatory not only within Christian theology but also within a broader framework—the rite of passage as a ritualistic practice that cuts across cultures, geographies and historical periods—Fern is able to analyse the relationship between the individual and the collective outside of the pre-modern / early modern / modern paradigm to which my introduction is bound. Fern makes the point that the shift from Virgil to Beatrice as Dante's guide entails a loss of individual identity, or an absorption into the collective via the experience of Divine Love. When we talk about systemic injustice—brought about by capitalism, imperialism, racism, sexism—we tend towards a collectivist position in seeking systemic solutions. But these are impossible if we are not also bound to "individual love"—that is, love for another (the other) *as* individual, rather than the self-love of individualism. For Fern, "Dante's immediate and powerful grief for Virgil's absence demonstrates one grand, penultimate act of purgation: Dante losing the symbol of his worldly pursuits, his paternal (and poetic) guide, and his binding to individual love" (sup., p. 29).

In closing, I can only express a minor demurral, for I hope that the students whose work is collected here keep up the "worldly pursuit" of writing. Some of them see Dante as a poetic (but not paternal, or paternalistic, or patriarchal) guide. Others, as we have seen, wish to guide Dante. Each of them, in one way or another, cherishes Dante as companion or conversation partner or correspondent: sometimes close by, sometimes from afar. And it is this constant tension between proximity and distance—collapsing gaps in space and time only to

reinforce them, or vice-versa—that is, I would suggest, the chief shared characteristic of these various student responses to Dante.

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Dante's Journey Through Our Lives: Reading *La Commedia* in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Giovanna Trento[1]

Since the 14th century onwards—although unevenly throughout the centuries—Dante's *Commedia* has had a very large influence on Italian literature and culture, was fundamental for the building of Italian language and identity, and also impacted considerably other literary traditions around the world. In the 20th century, Italian prominent writers and filmmakers, such as Primo Levi and Pier Paolo Pasolini (among others), found in Dante an essential model and a crucial source of inspiration.[2]

Erich Auerbach argued that *La Commedia*, despite dealing with the afterlife, describes a fundamentally "earthly" world.[3] This is one of the most notable aspects that emerges from this collection of texts, written in South Africa in 2021,

[1] I would like to thank Luca Lenzini, Elisabetta Nencini, and Sabatino Peluso for their help and assistance with Franco Fortini's archive, at the "Centro interdipartimentale di ricerca Franco Fortini," University of Siena.

[2] See, for instance, Primo Levi's memoir on his deportation to Auschwitz concentration camp (Levi 1947), and Pasolini's *La Divina Mimesis* / *The Divine Mimesis*, a rewriting of Dante's *Inferno*, published posthumously (Pasolini 1975). In Pasolini's last film, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), we also perceive many references to Dante's *Commedia*.

[3] "However, the individual figures, arrived at their ultimate, eschatological destination, are not divested of their earthly character. Their earthly historical character is not even attenuated, but rather held fast in all its intensity and so identified with their ultimate fate" (Auerbach 2001, 86).

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by the students that joined the Dantessa group at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I lived in post-Apartheid South Africa for years; thus, I had the opportunity to experience, from within, a society that, in my opinion, is one of the most complex and contradictory societies in the world.[4] The human quality of Dante's poem that Auerbach noted is given an interesting dimension in the above-mentioned texts which, in their different interpretations of Dante's major poem, reflect the complexity of their South African context. Some of them are more creative and poetical, others are either more academically or autobiographically inclined. The majority of these young authors take inspiration from Dante in the way in which they address contemporary South Africa, a country that is still strongly affected by the history of Apartheid and its aftermath. This is evident in the following words from Thalén Rogers in his text entitled *The Lodestone*: "South African ghosts, they waited in limbo, paradise denied because of the stain of the past and present" (sup., p. 64).

Dante's *œuvre* has been widely translated into many languages and the poet's critical fortune in the so-called Anglophone world is undeniable. There is a rich ongoing literature on Dante in English,[5] including a recent original monograph on the African American reception of Dante.[6] Despite the fact that there is a little-known version of *La Commedia* translated into Afrikaans by Dalamaine Du Toit at the end of the 20th century (see: Speelman 2017, 1–19), South Africans in general would read Dante in one of the many English translations that are now available. The question of whether South Africa can be called an "Anglophone country" goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but it suffices to say that in post-Apartheid South Africa there are eleven official languages, as well as many other dialects and "minor" languages. For this reason, South Africa has a special link to Dante at the level of language and identity. Italy is a country that became unified only at the end of the 19th century and was (and partly still is) made up of many dialects and "minor" languages; Dante was fundamental in the shaping of the Italian language and, consequently, the building of Italian

[4] I was born and raised in Italy (where I currently live). Reading Dante's *Divina Commedia* is compulsory for the majority of Italian students. After my high school diploma, I studied (and practised) fine arts, contemporary art and literature in Rome. From my early 20s onward I became very interested in "Africas" and the African Diaspora. I travelled the world, Africa in particular. I did my PhD in Anthropology in Paris and then, at a certain point of my life, in January 2010 I moved to South Africa, first affiliated to the University of the Western Cape; then to the University of Cape Town.

[5] The journal *Dante Studies* that was founded in 1882 is an example of the rich tradition of Dante in English; this is the official journal of the Dante Society of America and its current editor-in-chief is Justin Steinberg. Among the publications in English that marked the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, we can mention: Gragnolati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021.

[6] "*Freedom Readers* is a literary-historical study of the surprising multitude of ways in which Dante has assumed a position of importance in African American culture, especially literary culture. […] But surely it is unique to African American readings and rewritings of Dante to suggest that the man is a kind of abolitionist and that the *Divine Comedy* is itself a kind of slave narrative" (Looney 2011, 2).

identity (Antonio Gramsci as well in several passages of his *Quaderni del carcere / Prison Notebooks* highlighted the relevance of Dante in Italy, including from a political point of view).[7] Dante chose to write his *Commedia* in *volgare illustre* and "will remain forever faithful to his vernacular choice" (Gragnolati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021, xxiv); *La Commedia* offers a certain degree of plurilingualism and a mix of literary styles that was unique at that time.[8] According to Dennis Looney (2011, 3) the

> linguistic task is the ultimate political act [...] for African American authors attuned to the complexities of Dante's hybrid vernacular, his poetic language becomes a model for creative expression that juxtaposes and blends classical notes and the vernacular counterpoint in striking ways.

As far as the connections between language politics and decolonization are concerned, according to Jason Allen-Paisant (2021, 669), Dante has been perceived by several Caribbean writers as a "partisan in language politics" even more intensely than by African American writers. Some of these complex interconnected topics, related to Dante, language and politics resonate with the South African contributions collected in this book.[9]

In 1981, Italian poet and academic Franco Fortini (1917-1994) also highlighted Dante's particular understanding of the *volgare illustre*, which he describes as simultaneously human and universal; according to Fortini (1981, 3), who refers to different sources, including St Thomas Aquinas), Dante shows us that the arbitrariness and the conventionality of the linguistic signs can be overcome by the language of poetry. In a similar way, Helena van Urk, in her poem *The Storm* which was inspired by Dante, writes:

> For my first love was language and poetry,
> which I could not but see in all God does,
> and wished dearly to share with humanity (sup., p. 51, lines 10-2).

The majority of scholars in Italy and South Africa (and in the rest of the world as well) have forgotten that in 1984, during Apartheid, Franco Fortini was invited to South Africa as a visiting professor by the University of the Witwatersrand to lecture on Dante, and a few other topics. Unusually for a European intellec-

[7] "*La così detta «quistione della lingua»*. Pare chiaro che il *De vulgari eloquentia* di Dante sia da considerare come essenzialmente un atto di politica culturale-nazionale (nel senso che nazionale aveva in quel tempo e in Dante), come un aspetto della lotta politica è stata sempre quella che viene chiamata 'la quistione della lingua' che da questo punto di vista diventa interessante da studiare" (Gramsci 1964, 204).

[8] On Dante in the history of the Italian language, see among others: Pasquini, Emilio, *La vita, profilo storico-critico dell'autore e dell'opera, la "Commedia,"* in Alighieri 2021, CXXXIX–CLX.

[9] "Dante's strongly structured work represents a source of inspiration for the modern challenges of language and plurilingualism, realism and representation, the role of literature and, eventually, the practice of writing itself. [...] a sign of Dante's ability to help the contemporary world understand itself" (Camilletti, Gragnolati, Lampart 2010, 11).

tual of the new Left at the time, Fortini—who was a heterodox Marxist of Jewish descent—did accept this invitation and spent one month in South Africa in the 1980s (Mari 2016, 285–94). In 1987 he stated: "Today Dante is read and understood by a minority of scholars and lovers in every part of the world, better than it is in our schools"; moreover he added that, although in Italy *La Commedia* might be read by a larger number of people than before, Italians would increasingly perceive Dante's poem "as an ancient book and a classic, written in an arduous foreign language" (Fortini 1987, 1).

On the contrary, these Dantesque texts, written today by young South Africans, tend to be closely connected to post-Apartheid South Africa; in fact, the majority of them "use" the *Divine Comedy* to describe the contemporary South African society in which their authors live and the ways in which it was forged by colonialism and Apartheid. These aspects are particularly evident in Thalén Rogers's contribution (as we will see below), but also in Kai Lötter's and Chariklia Martalas' pieces. Although Lesego Petra Maponyane's contribution (titled *Beatrice*) focuses primarily on "Dante's appropriation of the body of Beatrice" (which is—according to Maponyane—"incredibly nuanced and unconventional") (sup., p. 73), Maponyane also refers to South Africa's legacies of Apartheid and colonialism. Maponyane intends

> to develop an understanding of the ambivalence of Beatrice as an unorthodox conception of femininity within its historical, political and philosophical context as well as that of our own country. […] It is doubtful that Beatrice should reveal anything about dismantling of the legacies of colonial, Apartheid, and Gender-Based Violence—she barely reveals anything about herself, who was as real as any of these institutions (sup., p. 76).

What is striking about this collection of texts is that they clearly draw on what Auerbach (2001, 83) called Dante's "spontaneous hatred of injustice." Indeed, Thalén Rogers writes towards the end of his contribution: "When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land?" (sup., p. 67) Helena van Urk takes inspiration from *Inferno*'s canto 6 and introduces her poem, *The Storm*, as "*An African Remix, / with Apols and Compliments, / of Dante's Canto Six*" (sup., p. 51). Canto 6, by punishing gluttons for their sins with ceaseless cold rain and stinky mud, focuses on political issues and condemns Florence's gluttony and its factional violence that eventually led Dante to his exile.[10] Van Urk similarly intends to denounce the injustices on the African continent and identifies herself with Dante:

> Restless travels brought me to Africa, the cradle of humanity's tale. But this part of the Gold Coast, after a history spanning centuries of pure gluttony, had again fallen to a bloodbath of wars, unceasing, without cure (sup., p. 53).

[10] On how and why Dante was banned from Florence and forced to go into exile, see: Pasquini 2006, 28–38.

References to Apartheid, its violence, its injustice, the segregation this system produced, and the inequality that still affects South African society, recur in almost all these Dantesque texts. Chariklia Martalas has written four texts titled *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again*, each of them with a different subtitle. She opens the one subtitled *Eating John Vorster* as follows:

> God had forgotten my country. For some years the Devil enjoyed the malevolence that stuck onto the bones and teeth, pouring out of mouths like disease. The evil that forced black and white to not only be separated but for many a white to forget all humanity at the Devil's door (sup., p. 45).

This contribution by Martalas goes on to recollect and reinvent in literary terms tragic chapters of 20th century South African history and some of its main characters (such as John Vorster, Hendrik Verwoerd, and Dimitri Tsafendas). In the presence of Dante, Martalas asks compelling questions to him and to herself, as a person and as a writer:

> What do you say to horror Dante? What do you say to the murders of flesh and mind? Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State. What do you say to Apartheid? […] What do I say to horror Dante? How do I describe it? (sup., p. 45).

Martalas thus turns to Dante to try to make sense of the injustice, violence and inequality that took and take place in South Africa.[11]

Thalén Rogers depicts a "coloured" man who recalls District Six, its destruction during Apartheid, and the deportation and displacement that followed it:

> As we drove, the old man spoke of his life. He had lived in District Six. His neighbor had six children. They played in the street all day and were only chased inside by the departing sun. […] The old man didn't have any children of his own. He had led a solitary life. He told me about the avocado tree he planted when he first moved out from home. […] As the plane gained height, the old man continued his stories, 'I remember a day, a Tuesday, as I was coming home from work, I heard a strange grumbling. I could see a fine mist of dust hanging over the place. Soon I was stepping over corpses of homes and their occupants alike. I saw some people running—those who were lucky enough to get away in time. In the distance, hulking bulldozers presided over the scene—judges presiding over a wrecked courtroom. 'What kind of justice is this?' I thought to myself. When I got to where my house had stood, I knelt down within the toppled crown of my avo tree and wept. Checkmate' (sup., p. 66).

[11] This is a political use of Dante's poem that can be related to what Dennis Looney (2011, 2) wrote about a selection of African American writers: "This consistent response to Dante's life and poem in a political vein, this dependence on Dante to make sense of perceived injustice and to affect a change in politics to which one is opposed, underlies the play on words in the book's title, *Freedom Readers*."

This passage, despite denouncing violence, destruction, and deportation, also suggests a process of patrimonialisation through narration.[12]

The legacies of segregation and the memory of Apartheid are also present in Kai Lötter's *A Tree In Hell*. Part of Lötter's short story takes place today in a segregated place *par excellence*, a mental hospital, where the memory of Apartheid remains vivid:

> There was a man named Edmund. He barely spoke, but when he opened his mouth to give me a smile, I could see two rows of small, black teeth. He was one of the permanent residents. He seemed happy, floating down the halls slowly, and he never bothered anyone. Except, occasionally, he would look at me in confusion and say, 'You are not supposed to be here.' At first, I thought it was a compliment. 'You are right, Edmund,' I wanted to say […] A nurse stopped me before I could speak though. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, 'Don't mind poor Edmund. He's fallen a little from reality. He's in a kind of Limbo. Has no idea what year it is. Still thinks it's the 1980s. Still thinks it's Apartheid, and the hospital is segregated. […] 'It's Monday. It's Tuesday. It's Wednesday' and on and on and on until I left. Edmund stayed behind, locked in a limbo of Apartheid South Africa (sup., p. 91).

The notion of journey is obviously at the core of Dante's *Commedia*: journey in the poem refers primarily, but not solely, to the pilgrim's literal journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, which is also an allegory for the spiritual development from sin to redemption, from subjugation to freedom.[13] Fortini (1987, 1) argued: "Dante stands on the threshold. You may enter or not enter. But if you enter, you'll have to redo his whole journey and believe that it was true." Many of these young writers seem to be eager to follow Dante on his journey, believe its truth, and identify themselves with him ("You described hell why can't I? (sup., p. 45)" Writes Martalas in her *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again: Eating John Vorster*). The majority of these young writers, though, visit the Inferno and comparatively few go on to *Purgatorio*. Kai Lötter concludes her *A Tree In Hell* as follows:

> When I left the hospital, I thought I had been cured. I thought I was better. I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round. You have climb down into Hell, then climb up the mountain of Purgatory before you can ascend into Paradise and walk among the planets. It is there where you will find it—*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*. The love that moves the sun and all the stars. I have not reached it yet. I have not found it yet. But I will because now I know that to get to it, you must first go the long way round (sup., p. 93).

[12] On the development of the notion of *patrimoine* in the so-called Western world, see among others: Poulot 2006.

[13] Looney 2011, 2: "African American authors use Dante as if he were a 'freedom rider' accompanying them on a journey through a harsh landscape of racial inequality. After all, he had been to hell and back, so why couldn't he be expected to help them deal with the segregated bus stations of Alabama and Mississippi in the early 1960s […]?"

Chariklia Martalas on several occasions tries to build an actual dialogue with Dante. In her paper subtitled *The Dream of the Ghost of Ulysses*, Martalas writes:

> Chariklia wants to be a writer. She had asked Dante for his permission to rework the Inferno through a modern lens. He not only agreed but volunteered to go back to Inferno with her for her research purposes. Inferno is not a place to be alone he said (sup., p. 41).

Thalén Rogers follows Dante's path and describes a multifaceted journey in contemporary South Africa, where Rogers meets different people of various descent, before and during a flight from Durban to Johannesburg. Rogers' narrative *The Lodestone* is interwoven with short quotes taken from Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*. *The Lodestone* is divided into seven paragraphs: *The Beach, The Car, The Airport, Take-off, Ascent, Questions to the Sun, The Lodestone*. Cars, beaches, and airplanes can be considered icons of contemporary South African life-style; however the beach, as a segregated public space during Apartheid, is a more subtle and nuanced icon, as it is a contradictory symbol of both leisure and oppression.

On the aeroplane, Rogers meets a South African woman; their encounter provides us with a significant glimpse of post-Apartheid South Africa and of the interesting way Rogers appropriates Dante's lines, reinventing them:

> We moved along the narrow passage between the seats. Many bodies obstructed our way. I got into an argument with a burly Sowetan whose baggage took up the entire overhead locker. After stiff words, I was resigned to putting our carry-on luggage under the seat in front of us. We sat down and seatbelts snaked around our waists. *Più di cento spiriti entro sediero*. I was sitting next to a lavishly bodied, perspiring African woman who was fanning herself with the on-board magazine. She said she was flying to Jo'burg to see her children. I asked how old her children were. Half an hour later, I had heard about her two baby daddies (each of whom had moved on to other women), her job in Durban cleaning a house that was not her home, and her three children (aged two, three, and six) who lived with her mother in Alexandra. She told me about the fussy old lady for whom she worked who had moved to Durban with her quadriplegic daughter the previous year (sup., p. 65).

It is evident from this that once again in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Dante's *œuvre* represents a strong source of inspiration that is able to generate something new, sometimes very different from the "original" pre-text (Camilletti, Gragnolati, Lampart 2010, 12).

The notion of a journey is closely related to that of exile: "exile is, for Dante, a tragic yet foundational experience", as a man, as a writer and as a poet.[14] These young writers are also able to relate to the conditions of exile and exclusion that are very

[14] Gragnolati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021, xxv: "Both experiences—the composition of lyric poetry and the participation in civic life—abruptly end, or rather, are 'violently' transformed by Dante's 1302 condemnation to exile and the subsequent experience outside of his native Florence. […] Exile is, for Dante, a tragic yet foundational experience."

much associated with Apartheid, and can still be perceived (consciously or subconsciously) even today in South Africa by many South Africans of different backgrounds. Alienation and exile lead van Urk to the creative and political act of writing:

> After my suicide attempt I was sent away, in exile till I 'got well', as it could harm the political cause. All good that sterile sanatorium held, was the freedom to write as I pleased, to drive away the tedium. I was near the middle of my life then, and could not bear to remain numb to the world, yet had no place therein. So I wandered the world, with a journal as my only comfort and companion, named in tribute to my namesake's Virgil (sup., p. 52).

Kai Lötter refers instead to a "self-imposed exile":

> It would be a long while before I met Dante again. A series of strange and inexplicable events occurred that eventually led me to a mental hospital. [...] I walked away from my friends and family. I walked away from my university education. I understand now it was a kind of self-imposed exile. For my entire life, I had been on a single set path and, suddenly, it was gone (sup., p. 90).

Trauma—as a keyword, as a notion, as a memory, as a burden, as a political condition —lingers in post-Apartheid South Africa. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 1995, to deal with South Africa's Apartheid brutalities and human rights violations, heal the traumatic experiences of the people, and build a new nation. The TRC employed, for the most part, the language of religion, psychology, and nation-building. Despite the fact that South Africa is a multi-religious society, the Christian icon of "sin and redemption" was fundamental for the conception of the TRC hearings.[15]

Some of the texts that we are examining rework the crucial Dantesque, Christian theme of sin and redemption, and many of them build a dialogue with Dante which tends to take on psychoanalytic dimensions. Thalén Rogers applies the Dantesque theme of sin and redemption to post-Apartheid South Africa; towards the end of his *The Lodestone* we read:

> How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption? Next to me, I saw the old man's face smoothed by pure sunlight—age and decrepitude melting in the warmth of grace—until a young boy grinned at me—*rifatto sì come piante novelle rinnovellate di novella fronda*. He dissolved into the light—*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle* (sup., p. 67).

[15] Young 2004, 145, 148: "During the long months of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, witnesses spoke of traumatic experiences under Apartheid and were honored as heroes. Hidden brutalities and degradations were exposed to the light of day and given new meanings. Testimony was invested with transformative powers—the promise of a new, unblemished future and the hope of healing for both individuals and nation. [...] The discourse around the work of the Commission is frequently steeped in religious and psychotherapeutic rhetoric. The choice of Archbishop Tutu as Chairperson (and therefore the addressee of every testimony) is in itself suggestive of a confessional, and the practice of beginning the hearings with prayer, and in particular, the first hearing with a eucharist, takes this further."

Chariklia Martalas tries to "digest" Apartheid by establishing a dialogue with Dante; in her contribution subtitled *Eating John Vorster* she writes:

> 'Did Verwoerd eat his children too?' Dante asked. 'No.' Tsafendas answered 'He ate more than limbs, he ate the threads of a whole country's humanity. Sharpening the teeth of the State until families were lost, lives were lost, hope was lost.' […] *I told God what I told the two priests. I would be guilty by God if I did kill him But I believed I would be even guiltier by God if I didn't.* […] I cannot be the one to tell you Dante about Verwoerd's crimes. Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction. Dante sits down and stares at Verwoerd. 'Hell has many more monsters now doesn't it?' […] Inferno had to be bigger, there were many of the devil's men that Verwoerd had to eat (sup., p. 49).

Chariklia Martalas (in her piece subtitled *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses*) makes Dante ask her to go for a "therapy session" before embarking together on a journey back to *Inferno*, while Kai Lötter sees Dantesque elements in her suicidal thoughts and her stay in a mental hospital near Johannesburg. In Lötter's *A Tree In Hell* we find many themes that recur in this South African collection of Dantesque texts: journey, exile, exclusion and segregation, sin and redemption, references to Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, etc. Lötter takes inspiration from *Inferno* canto 13, where the sinners who have been violent against the self, either by committing suicide or by squandering personal goods, are punished (the theme of suicide recurs in Martalas', van Urk's, and Fern's contributions too). Dante turns the sinners of canto 13 into plants and trees, hence the title of Lötter's short story: *A Tree In Hell*.

Lötter starts her metaphorical and partly autobiographical journey through *Inferno*'s canto 13 by identifying herself (not without some sense of humor) with Dante's suicides. At the very beginning of her text, she writes:

> The first time I met Dante, I was spaced out on several different kinds of new medication. […] I did not care much about the jargon, but these *visual distortions* had been making it progressively more difficult to live. Consequently, I wanted to die (sup., p. 89).

That day a friend of hers mentioned some new classes that he was taking:

> The only thing that reached me was what he said about the trees. 'In the Divine Comedy,' he said, 'Those who commit suicide are punished by becoming a tree in Hell. And I, coming down a spiral of suicidal ideation, simply said, 'That doesn't sound so bad' (sup., p. 89).

Later on in Lötter's story, she asks one of the characters in the mental hospital: "'Why is suicide a sin?' 'Sins aren't sins because they hurt *God*,' Melody said, 'Sins are sins because they hurt *you*.'" This question and reply connects Lötter's moral vision powerfully to Dante's non-mystical and non-ascetic religion which is central to the *Commedia*; as Auerbach (2001, 86) pointed out: "Dante was the first thinker-poet since antiquity to believe in the unity of the personality, in the concordance of body and soul."

In these South African texts inspired by Dante's *Commedia* the narrative of the journey recurs; such a narrative may be rendered as autobiography—personal as well as collective, intimate as well as political—and is closely connected to the condition of exile which emerges at various levels in these pieces, when describing the South African past and present. Dante's moral and spiritual philosophy, the connection that he draws between body and spirit, is also present in these texts. In particular, Kai Lötter, towards the end of her autobiographical *A Tree in Hell* writes:

> I read Inferno just before the pandemic forced South Africa to shut down and we had to stay inside for weeks, just before Purgatory, where every single step I had taken since the hospital was tested. If my mental health could make it through a global pandemic, then it could make it through anything. Trapped inside, I climbed the walls like Dante climbed Mount Purgatory. I read his journey, I followed his footsteps, with my fingers clutching the rope around his waist. I did not like to be far away from him anymore (sup., p. 93).

These young South African writers establish a link with Dante at various levels. By taking inspiration from Dante's journey, they also try to make sense of their own journeys into post-Apartheid South Africa, and are able to lead today's readers through the complexities of contemporary South Africa.

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Releasing the Prisoners of Hope: Dante's *Purgatorio* Breaks the Chains of the Born Frees

Victor Houliston

Introduction: The River of Blood

There is a field in Italy, hard by a stream where a South African soldier on the run from the Nazis once stood up to his armpits in water, hidden in the reeds. Years later his son visited the peasant family that sheltered his father at great risk to their lives. Crossing the newly-ploughed field, he imagined the faces of dead soldiers turned up in the clods,[1] and when he came to the stream itself, he recognized in it, bubbling up as if with many more dead faces, the river Phlegethon, the boiling river of blood:

> Ma ficca li occhi a valle, ché s'approccia
> La riviera del sangue in la qual bolle
> Qual che per violenza in altrui noccia (*Inf.* 12.46–8).[2]

The soldier was 'Tufty' Mann, soon to win fame as an international cricketer. The son was poet Chris 'Zithulele' Mann, tireless campaigner for the value of literature, who died earlier this year, 700 years after the Florentine poet he admired so much.

[1] "I look up from my feet. / The clods are thick in the fields / that stretch across the plains / beyond the crinkle of the Alps, / to Auschwitz, the Somme," from *A Field in Italy* (Mann 2010, 72). The identification of the stream with Phlegethon is from a personal conversation.

[2] Cf. Butcher 2007, referring to the Congo. See discussion of *Heart of Darkness* below.

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Victor Houliston, *Releasing the Prisoners of Hope: Dante's* Purgatorio *Breaks the Chains of the Born Frees*, pp. 117-129, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8.07, in Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African* Convivio *with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

This poignant story speaks of the reach of Dante's great poem, its capacity to take hold of the African poetic imagination—for Chris Mann became more and more preoccupied with the importance of the shades for our personal and national health. It is not just the privileged white South African of an earlier generation, Oxford-educated and heir to a long tradition of immersion in world poetry, who feels a special affinity with *La Commedia*. In this volume we encounter poems, short stories, sketches and essays by young South Africans of every kind, many of them the first to attend university, few with previous exposure to Italian, inspired by another South African with a personal connection to the war in Italy. Sonia Fanucchi's grandfather was one of the last surviving Italian prisoners of war here. On Armistice Day every year he would don his uniform and drive to Zonderwater to pay tribute to his comrades at the *Tre archi* cemetery, 'Morti in prigionia / Vinti nella carne / Invitti nello spirito', while consigning Il Duce to a condign place in hell.

It was as a graduate teaching assistant in the English department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, that Sonia Fanucchi first introduced a second-year undergraduate elective to Dante's *Inferno*, under the rubric 'Pity and Piety'. The elective belonged to the medieval component in the departmental's contrapuntal curriculum, designed to promote a dialogue between older, canonical literary texts and contemporary texts that resonate with them. In this case, Dante was not formally paired with any recent texts (although there were references to modern movies like *Seven*), but the students were invited to question their own responses to the sinners in hell, testing their present-day values against those of Dante and Virgil. They also became aware of the extraordinary afterlife of Dante in English, with the proliferation of translations, biographies and studies. As Sonia progressed to her doctorate and then to a lectureship in the department, she linked up with the Italian studies department and the Dantessa group took shape: colleagues and students meeting informally to pursue their interest in Dante and explore their responses in writing.

I began reading the Dantessa writings at random, but a pattern soon began to emerge. It begins with an exploration and affirmation of black womanhood in response to Beatrice and Francesca da Rimini—probably the two best-known female figures in the poem, far removed from each other in its formal scheme of judgement, but not to be separated. The Francesca in Beatrice can exalt the woman in Africa. How is this possible? We will turn to our writers to see. Let us simply note, right at the start, that thinking about Dante can be a means of recovery for a bruised generation. Through most of the Dantessa writings runs a thread of subdued optimism. They are in agreement that our country has a hellish past and even a residual hellishness in our present, but either we come to Dante in expectation that he might show us a way out of hell, or the reading of Dante arouses new expectations in us. Even while we stare aghast at the legacy of the settler politicians, the hell to which they rightly belong is lit up by Dante's vision. There are mad flights into Inferno, and another flight that could be in Limbo. There is a sea voyage down the coast of Africa, a storm and daybreak. There is a tree in hell and a forest in purgatory. There is a re-calibration of time.

In all these narratives and responses I sense a recognition of the purgatorial quality of our current situation, and a readiness to rise to that challenge. And I end with some reflections of my own, about the kind of critical practice appropriate to a scholar in purgatory, reminding myself of the river of blood I failed to recognize when I was the same age as our students. It takes a long, arduous journey, though, to reach the vantage point where we can think more kindly of our role as readers in South Africa and the world.

Dante's Women and the Regeneration of Black Womanhood

So much has been written about Beatrice over the centuries, by Charles Williams (1943) notably, that you wonder what there is left to say. Critics are always capable of finding a new angle, some fashionable or innovative approach to generate an article or a book, but there is something artificial about this make-work, and most of their ingenious efforts will soon be forgotten. Here a young woman, Lesego Maponyane, simply takes a long hard look at Beatrice and finds something compelling in what she sees, wondering what Beatrice might mean for her image of black womanhood. For Lesego, Beatrice is a paradoxical combination of ingenuity and ingenuousness. On the one hand, she is a passive frame for Dante's ideal of the feminine, enabling him to justify his love as reasonable. He depicts her as perfect, complete, a trinity of trinities. But if we bring such an ingénue into relation to the historical Beatrice, or to any real, actual woman who has lived on earth, rather than a miracle descended from heaven, something must give. From the moment of every woman's birth, fissures will appear in her moral constitution. All experience damages the complete whole. Where does this leave ingenuousness? It flees the moment the soul claps its hands and is free to be itself. So we are left with an empty but beautiful image of ingenuous perfection, immensely powerful as a driving force in Dante's life and imagination, but also capable, through his mediation, of affecting black women in South Africa today. That is her ingenuity. Black women, too, can embody this curious combination of vulnerability and strength. Lesego feels that the figure of Beatrice can encourage women to transcend the fracturing and alienation and loss of dignity experienced by so many, through a combination of who they can be imagined, through Dante's lens, to be—complete, immaculate, intact—with their physical power and presence:

> She gives women, black women in particular, the space to be more than strong or vulnerable […] not perfect as in flawless, but perfect as in comprehensive—one can live every and any femininity, all of them at once or none at all (sup., p. 76-7).

The transcendent force of Beatrice rises ever stronger in the *Commedia*, until, in the *Paradiso*, she leaves behind the trivialised and predictable figure of adolescent girlhood and becomes almost irresistible, not as an object of sexual desire but as an icon of knowledge, an allegory of wisdom closely associated with the beatific vision. As we progress through the *Commedia*, the whole of human history is caught up in a current ultimately pouring into God himself. So Beatrice

participates in a loving energy second to none, that sweeps up all our earthly experiences. Now if a black woman can identify with this, via the combination of vulnerability and strength that bypasses the difficulties and limitations and suffering of her present life, then she is capable of a self-image and an aspiration that renders nugatory all conventional anxieties about agency.

Lesego's complex vision may seem far removed from Luyanda Kaitoo's praise poem celebrating the perfection of the African woman's queenly body, in more explicitly and assertively sexual terms:

> Miraculous!
> Fissure upon curve—bend upon crevice
> Pulchritude adorning the finest detail of her every flaw (sup., pp. 69-70).

It is because Beatrice has a body that her ingenuousness and her ingenuity can meet; otherwise the figure of Beatrice would simply break up into its two parts, with nothing to hold them together. The body is the *sine qua non*, however Dante responds to it. He may sublimate or suppress the sexual in favour of a spiritual beauty or essence, but he cannot wish her body away, nor can he deny that it is her physical presence that has drawn him—he is not merely attracted to her mind or her spirit. The very fact that she is a woman rather than a man or an allegorical figure, and that he has fallen in love with her, entails a physical connection of one kind or another, and it is that bond that fuses her innocence and experience. The perfection that Luyanda writes about is of a different kind—it is a body whose very flaws flower into beauty, conjoined with self-awareness and self-belief, supreme self-confidence. One might be tempted to wonder whether this woman is not the epitome of vanity, deserving her place in hell. And one would be encouraged to do so by the dedication to Francesca da Rimini.

Is Luyanda then challenging Dante's scale of values, the judgement by which his pity has to be subjected to his piety (to use the terms that Sonia originally applied to the elective when she initiated it all those years ago)? Few readers have not felt the urge to reverse that judgement, just as they might want to treat Satan as the true hero of Milton's poem. But this would be to miss the point of Luyanda's response. The ambivalence in the reader corresponds to the ambivalence or duality in the figure of the woman—Lesego's ingenuousness and ingenuity, Luyando's risky employment of the praise poem to assert the glory of female sexuality in a society where women are notoriously abused and taken to be men's rightful prey. The praise poem is by its very nature an exaggeration, not a moralizing or allegorizing narrative. Both these black women students have reached into the current of Dante's river and taken out a rare image of potential womanhood that speaks powerfully to the damaged and dangerous world so many black women inhabit. In this sense Dante has become a vehicle not only for self-discovery but for self-recovery.

Is Beatrice then the white bride from the sea who, whether or not she marries Adamastor, re-invigorates African sexuality and brings healing and wholeness to the sexes? I found Helena van Urk's retelling of Canto 6, *The Storm*, reminiscent of Camoes (1572, book 5), with the European vessel coasting along the

African shoreline. The storm itself is even more in Virgil's manner, and Maro is the name she gives her poem as she sets off on her journey with all the evil-doers, the self-aggrandizing manipulators of the colonial enterprise. And of them all, the leader and instigator of the Infernal Crew is the one she calls Cecil, Cecil John Rhodes. Avoiding strict chronology, she places in her ship, not a crew of fools but of colonial oppressors and postcolonial exploiters. The image bears all the richness of mythology, of medieval allegory, of early modern satire. But it ends on a note of hopefulness:

> There can be no hope in forsaking
> my Salvation…
> I feel the sun on my broken skin, warming,
> as the storm breaks, heralds a new Morning (final lines, sup., p. 61)

This, surely, is the keynote of our Dantessa writers. Dante does not leave us in despair. The power of his imagination, firing theirs, is not restricted to the flames and ice of retribution meted out to his political opponents. This punishment, the force of moral indignation, drives forward to hope, to the kind of investment in life which sees at the far end the beatific vision.

No Short Cuts to Paradise

History, then, is only the context for vision. It is a remarkable thing that South Africans, of all races and almost all circumstances of life, are, by and large, optimistic. Why is this, and what has Dante to do with the feeding and sustaining of that hope? The underlying pulse of the poem, one to which each of our writers seems to be responding in their own way, is that of the inalienable goodness of ultimate reality, calling out, as G.K. Chesterton (1932) put it, for "the primeval duty of Praise" (27). Even those in the Inferno are holding up a structure that is, in the end, healthy. There is a paradox here. History is, by and large, a tale of imperfection. It is a story of human folly, but in our failure lies, still, our hope and the guarantee of our blessedness, if we allow Dante to pinpoint the reason for our post-Apartheid failure. South Africa was expecting to leap straight from hell to heaven, from the pit of Apartheid to the rainbow nation in the sky. It was not to be. To be mired in something like Dante's *Inferno* was to be eternally fixed, it seemed, in one moral condition, which we escaped. Only, if there was movement to follow, it would need to submit to the dynamic that Dante called *Purgatorio.*

For Casey Fern, Purgatory appears as a liminal, transitional place for Dante to encode his own ritual movement back to childhood. Ingeniously, she presents Dante as a kind of Merlin figure, living his life, at least allegorically, in reverse. Whereas in the romance cycle of the quest the hero, traditionally conceived, passes from (a) the young knight or *child*'s call or summons to (b) the liminal place of testing, to (c) a mature life of challenge and reality—Dante is steered from the world-weary experience of *Inferno* through the liminal cleansing of *Purgatorio* to the child-like innocence of *Paradiso*, entering deeper and deeper into the beatific vision, "continually relinquishing elements of his previous identi-

ty" (sup., p. 28). To read Purgatory as liminal in this structure of reversal is, as Casey claims, an unconsidered, under-canvassed superimposition of a personal psychological narrative onto an epic anatomy. She reminds us of the daring incongruency of replacing the sage of antiquity, universally respected and even revered in medieval Christian culture, with a young woman whose chief claim on our attention seems to be that Dante fell hopelessly in love with her, at a distance. Dante has progressed from the sure to the speculative, from the known to the unknown, and takes a great risk with his credibility by doing so. For this passing through the liminal to innocence not to collapse into naiveté requires the reader to be caught up in the intensity of Dante's language. So if we see Dante, not so much as a pilgrim but as a figure in romance steadily advancing in reverse, a tension is built up which he, as master craftsmen of words, can utilise to brace his vision in Paradise.

It is not, however, the progression into Paradise that chiefly concerns us here. We are a long way from that. What Casey has done is to place new emphasis on the duality of Purgatory, its Janus-faced character which makes special sense in a South African context. There is always the danger that the journey will go into reverse. Everyone in Purgatory is slowly, oh so slowly and laboriously toiling up the mountain towards safety. In the Cradle of Humankind not far from Tshwane, there is a remarkable installation called "The Long March to Freedom," alluding to Nelson Mandela's (1994) famous autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, but adding a slightly more militant touch, perhaps because, some twenty and more years after the official end of Apartheid' there is a growing apprehension that the reconciliation of 1994 may have been bought at too high a price, or, to echo Bonhoeffer (1937), that grace was purchased too cheaply. A triple column of almost life-size bronze figures is frozen on the march up a slight incline. Visitors can walk amongst them and take photographs of themselves with their favourite struggle heroes. The scene bears an uncanny resemblance to the figures of Dante and Virgil threading their way through the figures moving uphill in the *Purgatorio*.

South Africans joining briefly in that long stationary march of sculptures may have mixed feelings. Are they still on the upward journey, or have things not only flattened out but started to go into decline? The world we live in does not play out according to a script or move in one direction. Apartheid came to an end in a glow that for many had a religious tinge to it. The word 'miracle' was used without irony. Irony is the mildest form of disillusionment today, whether it is applied to the word 'rainbow' or to 'empowerment'. Is it any wonder, then, that so few of our contributors, while raiding Dante's text and finding inspiration in it, draw on his religious faith? Faith seems to stand in for something else. Purgatory, for instance, can be a liminal space, with psychological resonance and political implications, but it is not a theological category, a dogma believed and lived by. This may have something to do with the fact that heaven and hell are well-established symbols in our language, believed in by some and understood by all, whereas purgatory is hazy in our minds. Even amongst Catholics, where confession is often treated almost as therapy, a review of spiritual aspira-

tion rather than a purgatorial assessment of culpability and assignment of penance, that state of the afterlife hardly enters into the practice of their religion.

One reader, however, a graduate student closely related to our company, has engaged head on with the theology of the poem, arguing, against the grain, that Virgil was closer to the truth proclaimed in the Bible about the afterlife than Dante himself. Nor is hers simply a Protestant objection to Purgatory. In Deneo Mfenyane's view (in progress), Dante appropriates to himself the authority that belongs only to Scripture; no more than a would-be mystical poet on a pilgrimage, he usurps the role of a prophet. Such a view of Dante reinforces the doubts one might have about Beatrice. If the Beatrice/Dante axis loses its lustre and becomes a common story, with Dante struggling with his desires and disappointments, the poem explodes into drama and sheds the monumental character that may intimidate us.

But if, putting aside our skepticism and regarding *La Commedia* with the kind of awe that gave the *Aeneid* such authority right through the early modern period; if, that is, the structure of the poem stands four-square among the things that are, that are unquestioned, irradically part of our mental and imaginative landscape, the question whether it is true not entering the equation; if, even if we disbelieve its metaphysics and its mythology and question its morality, we allow it room in our minds without a health warning, we can experience the exhilaration of living in several worlds simultaneously. The theme of a purgatorial imperative surfaces again and again. Kai Lötter's story, *The Tree in Hell*, has this refrain: you have to go the long way round, even when it comes to suicide: "I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round" (sup., p. 93). I am reminded of Mary Wesley's (1983) novel, *Jumping the Queue*, about an aging woman whose suicide attempt is thwarted on the beach in the opening chapter. It takes her the rest of the novel to circle back to the same point. Kai tells of the attractions of suicide for the mentally ill, and expresses resentment towards Dante for treating it as a sin. The tree in which the suicide is imprisoned is no harbour or resting place for the sufferer; it is a bitter mockery of that longing for it all to end that appeals to us all from time to time. It may surprise us that so few of our homeless and unemployed resort to suicide, given that their daily struggle must be so exhausting. Readers in other contexts, one assumes, must find it hard to enter into the South African consciousness, which can never be free of anxiety over the scale of poverty juxtaposed with the relative affluence that tempts refugees and work-seekers from many other countries to gather up the crumbs under our tables. It feels that the long way round is being stretched almost beyond endurance. How much longer, how slow the climb up the mountain of purgatory? It is almost as if purgatory has relapsed into hell, for as soon as we feel we may be rising up, down we are plunged again, into the ice or the fire or the mud. Upliftment is our aspiration and nearly our despair.

This is not to make a political statement, but to try to understand how the Dantesque imaginary can be so pertinent: it is implicit in the situation we find ourselves. The tree in which we are trapped, enclosed, immobilized, is not the

mighty baobab, ancient and strong, but one that is drought-stricken, stripped of leaves, unable to shelter or succour. It recalls that black madonna in Roy Campbell's (1930) poem, *The Zulu Girl*, whose suckling infant under the thorn tree presages the coming storm. Yet none of our authors seems to be afraid of an apocalypse. Dante is not a source of fear or intimidation or despair. Instead, he offers hope, that we all have a choice for change. Hell is stagnation, an unwillingness to move beyond our current preoccupations and limitations. Change is a function of time: apocalypse is the end of time, and South Africa has lived for far too long under the shadow of the end times. This can be immobilising, even paralysing—paradoxically, since the imminence of the second advent should be, according to St Paul, a spur to action, to constant readiness, with our lamps trimmed and our oil in good supply, for the arrival of the bridegroom, not a cowering in wait for the hour of birth of some rough beast (W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*), or the pounding of the hooves of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The theology, the theological virtue of hope, of the second coming has been replaced by a secular, fearsome expectation of terminal decline. Dante brings some relief.

Time is the subject of an unpublished essay by Ross Smith, meditating on Dante, Ben Okri and time. In the circles of hell, time has stopped because change is no longer available. But Dante has not in fact stepped out of secular time into timeless eternity, for the poem does conform to its own timeline, with sunset, night and morning, as Dante and Virgil pursue their course through the realms of the afterlife. Ross refers us to *aevum* time, that strange hybrid of time which the angels inhabit. He suggests that Ben Okri invokes just such a notion when the time frames of his novels go into overdrive. It is worth pondering on these questions of the nature and the quality of time. South African exponents of liberation theology made much of the term *kairos*, the moment of opportunity for radical change that presents itself and needs to be discerned. In the course of events over the past few decades, *kairos* time—now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation—appears to have been replaced by transformation fatigue. Transformation has become a tired word and anything that replaces it evokes even greater incredulity. What then is *aevum* time? Does it obtain in Dante's afterlife? Has it a place in our own scheme of things? Ross refers us to St Thomas Aquinas, who argues that angels can move continuously or discontinuously; since, dancing in infinite numbers on the end of our imaginary pin, they take up no space, they can transport themselves like knights on a chess board, moving alongside rather than across space, if they wish. If no space is involved, then no time passes, so angels move in and out of time, with a curious flexibility of time and space (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Ia 53). Is that the case with Dante in the world he passes through, not quite taking up any space and using less time than you would think necessary? From the frozen immobility of hell, where time stands still, to the achingly slow dreary trudge as those in purgatory make their way upward while Dante and Virgil accelerate past them, to the eternal bliss of heaven where time and space have a meaning and an existence we cannot comprehend, time moves in and out of the familiar. It is part of Dante's art, to manage time in this strange, unsettling way.

Of the three time schedules, our own must be closest to purgatorial time. What does this mean? Let us imagine ourselves accompanying Dante in purgatory. He walks beside the sinners some of the time; some of the time he is being more swiftly urged towards paradise. Is this not just how we experience time? Sometimes we feel stuck in hell, as if nothing has changed, sometimes as if the road ahead is only just bearable, but we are heartened by the prospect, ultimately, of freedom and release. Occasionally we glimpse the rainbow, and we suspect that it is there all the time. It is not often that our writers offer us such a glimpse; on the whole, Dante spells sorrow and labour for them, but there is something in the allure of his poem, some attraction: unavoidable, irresistible, that brings us back again and again. The reason why that unforgettable last line recurs so often may be that we cannot escape the conviction that such a love, in such a universe, is our inheritance. In the Apartheid days, African Enterprise's Michael Cassidy (1974) appropriated the phrase "Prisoners of Hope" to register the inescapability of that belief, which we are holding on to in this purgatorial state.[3]

Reading in Purgatory

And what of that other legacy, Verwoerd's legacy? Chariklia Martalas's multiple flights into *Inferno*—fortunately, it seems, always with a return ticket—lead her to some gruesome inventions. In 'Eating John Vorster', Verwoerd, the architect of 'grand Apartheid', has been condemned to eat the heads of all the other Apartheid prime ministers, and is currently busy with B.J. Vorster. There were many more perpetrators of iniquity, and all white South Africans were complicit to a degree. Even those whites who seemed to resist most heroically commonly had the advantage of conspicuous wealth. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

What forgiveness, indeed? There is something in the idea of flight. Chariklia has taken flight into Dante's *Inferno*; many of us may be trying to escape from an intransigent situation which, as the leader-writers used to say in the last years of Apartheid, seems "too ghastly to contemplate." Instead, we contemplate the ghastly scenes in the poem and those which our imaginations conjure up in response, as these essays, poems and stories testify. To watch Verwoerd and the rest is to ask, as Chariklia does, "What do you say to horror Dante"? (line 6, sup., p. 45)—and to recall Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*. Throughout the Apartheid days the liberal English departments relentlessly taught that novel, which became an index to their response to the challenge of teaching and reading literature under such conditions. The way I studied it then, it did not matter where *Heart of Darkness* was located; the river might have wandered through the South American jungles, and Kurtz's horror felt like a metaphysical phenomenon, not an indictment of colonial oppression, let alone the particular atrocities of the Belgian Congo's river of blood. The novel was included in its entirety in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (1976), which functioned almost as the Bible of lit-

[3] Cf. Carroll 1906.

erary studies in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. *Heart of Darkness* was thus established as the modernist novel *par excellence*. It took its place alongside *The Tempest* as a meditation on the human condition, somehow shorn of political circumstantiation. Then came the sea change, and postcolonial, anti-Apartheid reading became *de rigueur*. Frank Kermode, both the lead editor of the Oxford anthology and of the flagship Arden edition of *The Tempest* (Shakespeare 1954), attracted scorn, derision and moral indignation. Yet it was he (1985) who recognized the value of David Norbrook's (1984) ground-breaking *Poetry and Politics*.

Twenty-five years or more into the post-Apartheid era, we can ask once more, is it a flight from reality, an escape from responsibility, to immerse ourselves in Dante? I recall the words of one of my own lecturers in those far-off days when it was not politics but high seriousness that distorted our reading: "Ultimately literature must come down to our moral values, the meaning of life, our civic responsibility, but they [the Leavisites] get there much too fast." How appropriate this seems to the demands made on literature students even today: we get to the pressing dilemmas of race and gender in so much of a hurry. There is no doubt that Dante is concerned with politics, but it may be salutary to ponder, when we read him, not only the politics of his day, but the theology of his day, the loving of his day. That is the long way round to freedom in the text.

This is not to criticize or diminish the way so many of our Dantessa writers have turned to current preoccupations or our recent history in response to Dante. It is rather to suggest where that interest could lead them, to a new way of reading. There is a cleansing process in operation. A great deal of luggage, perhaps too much luggage, has been taken on the flight to Inferno. But as we have engaged with Dante's text, that luggage has gradually been unpacked. As long as we have continued to clutch it, we have had to live and think and write like Sysiphus in the mythological version of the underworld, continually rolling and re-rolling the stone. But once we have made the transition to purgatory, we have to let go of it or we will never make our way to the top of the hill.

Another way of putting it is that taking our bearings in purgatory releases us to engage with Dante, and with all of literature, without the anxieties that beset us as citizens of a country in deep trouble. Knowing that the way ahead is long and arduous paradoxically demands that we give full due to what we read, that we take the long way round through the texts, with some sense perhaps of strain, but also of assurance. "Synne is behovabil," said Julian of Norwich—the stress and sorrow inherited from the guilty past weighs us down, but it is seemly, it is right—"but al shal be wel, and al shal be wel, and al manner of thyng shal be wele" (2016, 72). And that includes the literature of the past, to which we can bring a generous spirit.

What, then, is purgatorial reading? What is a purgatorial reading of the *Purgatorio*? [St] John Henry Newman reinvented purgatory in his poem *The Dream of Gerontius*, best known from Elgar's oratorio. The old man dies, meets his maker and judge, and in the presence of that awful holiness, begs to be taken away and cleansed. Gerontius' journey recapitulates our national one: the emptying out of each old constituent, the angel escorting us safely past the demons who gleefully claim that every one has their price, a glimpse of brightness and per-

fection, and then the descent once more to the place of repair. The purgatorial locale is no longer a prison but a place of healing. Newman's (1868, 360) angel puts it in soothing tones:

> Softly and gently, dearly-ransom'd soul,
> In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
> And, o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
> I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.

That does not read much like the arduous and bracing process we are now experiencing, which seems much more like Gerontius' earlier journey, with the evacuation of self and the depressing suspicion that everyone is for sale. And yet it may not be entirely false to the kind of reading one might do in purgatory.

Even tragedy can be uplifting and energizing. The question is, what to do with the pleasure we feel when we read, however depressing the content? We have had too much of penitential and accusatory reading. There may be a place for that, but it is unnatural, and what is unnatural will not heal us. Reading can be hard—during the Renaissance, students kept stones in their mouths to keep themselves from falling asleep while studying late by candlelight—but it is also satisfying. The pleasure comes at a price. Previous generations earned it with the rigour of Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Middle English, phonetics and bibliography, the apparatus of scholarship that was intended, in part, to give the university study of English credibility in the academy, comparable to science and the classics. What kind of strenuousness will do best for purgatorial reading in post-Apartheid South Africa? If we are to read Dante, can we combine the pleasure of human interest with the severity of scholarship—or would it rather be a matter of self-scrutiny, the reflective application of the text to our own, personal sense of how we should be in the world?

To read Dante in the original Italian, if that is what it takes, means to allow the text to speak to us in its fullness, with not one single word unaccounted for. To identify, chiefly by way of the scholarly notes, every historical reference, is to allow Dante's scenario to take shape before us, unabridged and with every contour defined. And then, to open our inner selves to that fullness of meaning, that plenitude of medieval utterance, is an exercise that will make us new and clean, in a fashion not unlike purgatory. We speak here of the discipline of letters (Gardner 1959): pleasure, reading pleasure, is not frivolous or facile. It brings the same reward as hard-earned proficiency in art or sport. And just as we as a nation are buoyed up by our performers, artists and sports stars, recognizing and paying tribute to the level of discipline required to achieve such success, so we can take courage from the expertise of a new generation of literary scholars, if they will take the time and patience to do the really hard work, bypassing the prevailing jargon and self-righteous theorizing. Transformation and upliftment come, not by bandying those words around and dismissing the language and the arguments of those who have gone before, who themselves thought hard and read widely, but from opening our minds to what we do not yet know but can come, by dint of application and attention, to understand.

Conclusion: Limbo Cancelled

Scholarly sloth can easily masquerade as the deconstruction of received habits of thought. Just so, as has often been observed, all of the seven deadly sins have turned into virtues, or at least into objects of admiration and envy. It is not surprising, then, that twenty-first century students should challenge Dante's moral framework by condoning the behaviour of people he consigned to Inferno. Chariklia's *The Party* projects the confusion of modern spirituality, where personal fulfilment replaces the revealed will of God. Dante too is confused when he appears in *The Party* and in Chariklia's poem about Dido, being drawn to beauty and bewildered by the self-assurance of those whom lust is believed to propel towards the good. Psychologists and Jesuits echo Yeats's line, "that its own sweet will is heaven's will" (*A Prayer for My Daughter*). Look to your sexuality, they admonish us, look to your desires, scrutinize what you are attached to, and you will find your way to a kind of heaven, or, less happily but still impenitent, to a Limbo where all is left uncertain. So here is an alluring alternative to postcolonial Purgatory: postmodern Limbo, where all values shimmer in a haze of indeterminacy. Dante put his pagan philosophers in Limbo; we get there by theorizing every phenomenon instead of looking at it steadily.

Dante is more robust than that, which may be why our Dantessa writers have been drawn to him, sometimes to tease, but also to treat as a source of wisdom. Where shall wisdom be found? The internet says, it is not in me; sociology says, it is not in me; it cannot be gotten by self-help books, neither shall Twitter be trawled for the price thereof.[4] Underneath all the contemporary pretence of knowingness is still that suspicion that there is something or someone to be feared, some ultimate goodness to be honoured if we are to find wisdom. And so Thalén Rogers's *The Lodestone* may be allowed to have the final say. Italian lines and phrases punctuate the narrative of flight in this story, not a mad flight into Inferno but a melancholy one, ostensibly from Durban to Johannesburg in the company of an old man scarred and stirred by the long past and a middle-aged woman making the most of life's disappointments in a present little changed from that past, attended by a stewardess whose unruffled and unrufflable sculpted hairdo bespeaks the banality and sterility of modern air travel. Thalén writes of post-Apartheid South Africa and its uncertainties as a kind of Limbo, with an aircraft as its symbol. If only we could rise above the past, and that the promise of new life and possibility only a mouse-click away were not so empty. Instead, the earth exerts its pull. The plane can, to be sure, take off and ascend, achieving critical airspeed and almost always avoiding tragedy, but in the end it must come to ground: "Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin" (sup., p. 67). An illusionary Paradise, in effect a Limbo, a state of suspension in the air, becomes Purgatory. We cannot escape it. The pages are in front of us. Let us read.

[4] Cf. Job 28: 14–5; "O where shall wisdom be found," anthem by William Boyce (1711–1779); coincidentally the title of a book by Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found* (2004).

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"Experience that Generates Experience": The Influence of the Comedy in three South African Writings

Marco Medugno

Russian poet Olga Sedakova, in her lecture about *Inferno*, said that Dante's poem is "*art that generates art*. But also *thought that generates thought*. Even more: *experience that generates experience*" (2012, 159). These few words capture quite properly the long-lasting influence of Dante's poem and, in particular, its power to inspire authors belonging to different cultures, languages and centuries. Sedakova also implicitly suggests that Dante's poem lived on in time thanks to the act of *generating*. This idea reminds us of J. M. Coetzee's definition of the term classic, as explored in his *What Is a Classic?* (1992). Coetzee, unsatisfied by the Horatian explanation of the classic as "a book that lasted for a long time" (1992, 5), asks himself, "what, if anything, is left of the classic after [it] is historicised, which may still claim to speak across the ages?" (1992, 12).

Even though problematic and possibly unanswerable, this question represents the starting point for the present discussion about the rewritings of Dante's poem made by South African students of literature at the Wits University in Johannesburg. More precisely, the questions explored here are the following: what allowed *The Divine Comedy*, a Medieval poem of the fourteenth century written in a Tuscan dialect, to survive over time across different national borders, "mobile configurations and diffusions of knowledge, technology and expertise"? (Mukherjee 2010, 1035). Or, to paraphrase Sedakova's words, which thoughts and experiences did the *Comedy* generate that resonate with the contemporary South African socio-political (and literary) context? These questions sound

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even more relevant today, in 2021, the year that marks the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. This essay, therefore, far from aiming to answer these questions conclusively, tries to look for first, initial clues about the generative power of the *Comedy* through the analysis of the brilliant texts written by Chariklia Martalas, Thalén Rogers and Helena van Urk.

Chariklia Martalas' rewriting of Dante's *Comedy* takes the form of four texts collected under the same title, *A Mad Flight into Inferno Once Again*: two are in verse (*Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses* and *Eating John Vorster*), one is a short story (*The Party*), and the last one is a short play (*The Dream of the Ghost of Ulysses*). The main focus of this essay is the poem entitled *Eating John Vorster,* a narrative poem in free verse that rewrites *Inferno* 32 and 33. In the text, the author suggests a correspondence between the condition of the souls in Hell (as described in *Inferno*) and the reality of South Africa during Apartheid. More specifically, Dantean Hell is re-contextualised as the South Africa of the late 1960s, and *Inferno* serves as the aesthetic backdrop for Martalas' text. Dante himself is a character and engages with the narrator in a brief but poignant dialogue with two of the main actors of the Apartheid regime, Hendrik Verwoerd and John Vorster, who were instrumental in orchestrating the discriminations, segregations, imprisonments, and killings perpetrated against the non-white population (Black Africans, Coloured, and Asians). Martalas' text echoes *Inferno* 32 and 33 as it borrows images from a particular moment during the journey of Dante-pilgrim, namely when he sets foot in the frozen second ring of the lowest circle of Hell. Here Dante and Virgil meet the political traitors and, among them, the figure of Ugolino della Gherardesca (1220–1289), a nobleman and politician whose *contrapasso* (punishment) involves being trapped up to his neck in a "cold crust" (*fredda crosta*), in the same hole of Archbishop Ruggieri, his betrayer. Intertextuality here works on two levels: on the one hand, Martalas recreates the same infernal scenario, by rewriting the description of Ugolino to represent the so-called "architect of Apartheid" (Kenney 2016), Hendrik Verwoerd (Prime Minister of South Africa from 1958 to 1966). He is caught while eating John Vorster's head (Prime Minister after the assassination of Verwoerd). Both are presented as "men who the devil would be afraid of" (sup., p. 45).

On the other hand, Martalas draws a parallel between Hell and South Africa, described as a place where pain and horror outmatch those in *Inferno* 33. In this reconfiguration, the narrative poem and the *canto* are both painful explorations of the role of politics in the history of South Africa and the responsibilities of single political figures in supporting and performing acts of brutality to the detriment of citizens or, more broadly, human beings. Before exploring this latter aspect, it is worth mentioning the strong visual resemblances between Martalas' and Dante's representations of Verwoerd and Ugolino, respectively. In *Inferno* 32, Dante sees "one sinner savagely eating the skull of another, digging his teeth, with terrible precision" (Barolini *Inf.* 31), thus marking with this brief description a sort of prologue to *Inferno* 33 (Chiavacci Leonardi 1991, 973), when the encounter with Count Ugolino finally occurs:

I saw two shades frozen in one hole,
so that one's head served as the other's cap;

and just as he who's hungry chews his bread,
one sinner dug his teeth into the other
right at the place where the brain is joined to the nape (*Inf.* 32.125–9)

Similarly, the narrator in *Eating John Vorster*, who introduces Verwoerd as "the man who created hell on earth" (sup., p. 45), presents him in the following way:

He was bent over a head whose face had been scratched fleshless.
He was bent over a head until he noticed us.

He looked up
His teeth covered in skin and blood.

He was eating the head (sup., p. 46).

The two texts share the same brutal details, even though Martalas removes the icy feature of the bottom of Hell and focuses more on the evocative power of Dante's description, centred on the image of one's teeth biting another man's skull. The broken prosody, with intended lines and anaphora that creates a sense of anxiety through fragmentation, is strikingly different from the cohesive structure and the sense of closure of Dante's tercets. However, even though those formal aspects may mark a sharp contrast between the two texts and seem to drive them apart, the language and the main topic of violence and horror both work in the opposite direction.

For example, when Verwoerd notices Dante and the narrator approaching him, he engages in a conversation and gives them "his hand to shake," a hand which is "covered in skin and hair." This same detail is also in Dante:

That sinner raised his mouth from his fierce meal,
then used the head that he had ripped apart
in back: he wiped his lips upon its hair (*Inf.* 33.1–3).

These intertextual correspondences perpetuates the idea that the *Comedy*, even though set in the afterworld as an otherworldly experience, represents, in fact, a lucid description of the actual word, with Dante as a poet of reality (Contini 1976, 110). The actual word, in this case, is South Africa during Apartheid. Politicians are like damned souls, whose crimes could only be described by borrowing infernal words and images from Dante. In this context of brutality and human sufferings, experience, in Sedakova's terms, is key, as it allows us to explain the universal scope of the *Comedy* and its ability to transcend space and time. Indeed, it seems that Dante managed to provide us, readers, with an almost unlimited set of images suitable for describing, paradoxically, unspeakable horrors.

This is the case, for example, of Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1947), a memoir in which the atrocities of Auschwitz are read through Dante's *Inferno*. Another example of the intertextual use of the *Comedy* to represent a place of suffering is Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2005), which largely borrows Dante's imaginary to

represent the Somali civil war. However, in these two cases and in Martalas' text, it also clear that the *Comedy* is ineffective in making sense of the dehumanising condition of the concentration camps or the civil war. What is missing in these contemporary rewritings is, for example, the theological basis of Dante's poetics, and the grand dogmatic framework underpinning the *Comedy*, namely the presence of Divine justice. In *Inferno*, for example, there is an overall sense of fairness and righteousness, as all sinners deserve their punishment, which was decided for them by God. What shocks and scares Dante the most is the brutality and the persistence of God's punishment rather than the actual awfulness of the sins committed by the souls when they were alive.

In the contemporary experience, conversely, as in the case of Martalas, the astonishment of the narrator is worldly, due to the existing historical and factual presence of horror in one of the many hells of the twentieth century, such as the concentration camps (Auschwitz in Levi's memoir), the Apartheid in South Africa (in the text in question) and the civil war in Somalia (in Farah's novel). In these contexts, the word *horror* is the tie that connects different experiences, as we can see in (sup., p. 45):

> What do you say to horror Dante?
> What do you say to the murderers of flesh and mind?
> Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State.
>
> What do I say to horror Dante?
> How do I describe it?
> You described Hell why can't I?

The narrator suggests a possible answer, implying that Hell has engulfed South Africa, a country "run by men who the devil would be afraid of" (sup., p. 45). The symbolic overlapping between Hell and South Africa becomes here clear, as *Inferno* appears the only possible literary referent to connote a context too extreme to be considered worldly or man-made. The narrator, who did not witness the brutalities of that period, borrows Dante's fictional experience but gives up after a first attempt to describe the suffering of those who experienced Apartheid (sup., p. 49):

> I cannot be the one to tell you Dante about Verwoerd's crimes.
> Unspeakable was the pain
> Unmentionable was the alienation
> Unspeakable was the destruction.

It is evident that the unspeakable nature of the horror involves witnesses and non-witnesses alike. The protagonist of Farah's *Links*, Jeebleh, finds himself in the same conundrum, as he "stared, dumbfounded, unable to imagine the terror" (2005, 275) after being told about the downing of two helicopters during the Battle of Mogadishu (Medugno 2020, 53; Mari 2018). Again, this inexplicability has a Dantean echo, as Dante himself in *Inferno* 28 expresses his doubts about the power of words, which may fail to "recount in full the blood and wounds" (*dicer*

del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno) he witnessed during his journey (*Inf.* 28.2–3). The inability to describe the dire experience of Apartheid is matched by the impossibility of understanding the reasons behind such an experience. As I have argued, the lack of any (substantial, satisfying) form of justice for those who committed atrocious acts is a shared topic in the texts in question here. In other words, it seems that much about the past remains unresolved, as all the texts bring buried histories to light.

However, in the case of Martalas, a mundane justice somewhat replaces the divine one, also suggesting that murder, a sin that Dante introduces in *Inferno* 12 by placing the souls in a river of boiling blood and fire, may in certain circumstances be indorsed and pardoned. In the case of Verwoerd, his murder is seen as a form of justice. In the text, while the architect of Apartheid explains his "dream of good neighbours," he is stabbed four times by "a man in a prison uniform" (sup., p. 46). Even though this act does not have any effect and does not distract Verwoerd from biting Vorster's head, as much as it did not stop Apartheid, it is however successful in moving the attention from the perpetrator to the "unsung hero nearly […] lost to an unmarked grave" (sup., p. 47). The reference here is to Dimitri Tsafendas, the Greek-Mozambican militant who killed the real-life Verwoerd during a debate at the Parliament in 1966. For this act, he was imprisoned, beaten, tortured, and subjected to electroshock. Dimitri was diagnosed as being schizophrenic, while he clearly expressed that there were political reasons behind his assassination of Verwoerd.

The narrator allows Dimitri to speak for himself, claiming back his agency and his political agenda, against any attempt to silence him:

> They called me mad but my mind was clear.
> The real madness was Verwoerd.
> The real madness was letting him eat South Africa to the bone.

Madness, a "madness to kill to save" (sup., p. 48), also resonates with Henk Van Woerden's fictionalised biography of Dimitri Tsafendas, *A Mouthful of Glass* (2000). At the end of the novel, the protagonist asks himself a similar question:

> Which of the two, then, was more truly crazy: Verwoerd or Tsafendas? […] Retrospectively, it now seemed that the power of madness had at the moment shown itself to be equal to the madness of power. The murder was a melancholy manifestation of being, as if nature itself was finally striking a balance between them (Woerden 2000, 146-7).

Nature here, and not God, is enacting retributive justice, in that the act of murder becomes a just punishment for the wrongdoings of men. For this act, access to Paradise is forbidden to Dimitri, who is stuck in the iciness of Hell and could only dream "of being greeted by Cato on that [Purgatory] beach" (sup., p. 48). The bitter irony is that Dimitri was punished for his attempt to make justice by killing the main advocate of the Apartheid regime. Now, in the afterlife, Dimitri's fate seems to be linked to that of Verwoerd, as he has become Verwoerd's *contrapasso*, watching over him and stabbing him, anytime he speaks.

Through Dimitri's appearance in the text, political violence is represented as epidemic; the violence of Apartheid itself, so much ingrained to appear justified, is exposed, as Dimitri regains his voice and shows his resistance to the system of 'necropolitics' (Mbembe 2019), questioning its legitimacy and its very existence. Therefore, one possible answer to a state of terror is to employ the same terror in order to "attempt to thwart, block, and subvert" the system itself (Boehmer 2018, 70). This aspect is interesting because it shows again the limits, so to say, of the *Comedy*, and *Inferno* in particular, where the justness of *contrapasso* is never questioned and always accepted as a rule. Also, in the Dantean recreation here analysed, there is no space for pity or sympathy towards the sinners. This is because, we may argue, most of the sinners and sins in Dante are private in nature: they mainly involve one person (the one guilty of that particular sin) or two (as in Paolo and Francesca) and they rarely include public misconducts. Another limit of the *Comedy* is, therefore, the fact that "the *contrapassum* fails to encompass public crimes, crimes against the sovereign and the body politic" (Steinberg 2019, 81), those of which Verwoerd and Vorster are guilty. Like villains, they are not allowed our pity, as they did not commit sin by indulging their personal vices; instead they perpetrated horrible actions against other people by creating systems of violence and exploitation.

It is important then to notice that in the texts considered here the victims are allowed to take the stage and thus regain a voice, to the detriment of the sinners, who have had the centre stage when they were alive. While, in Martalas' text, Dimitri Tsafendas plays this role, in Rogers' short story, *The Loadstone*, this form of agency is given to a witness of the Apartheid.

In *The Loadstone*, the narrator has a purgatorial experience during a flight over South Africa, again represented as an "infernal landscape" (sup., p. 66; p. 67). The story begins at a beach near Durban, before leaving for the King Shaka airport (sup., p. 65), where the narrator meets an older man wearing a black suit and enjoying the sun and the feeling of the sand on the skin (sup., p. 63). The beginning echoes *Purgatorio* 1, when Dante-pilgrim finds himself on the seashore looking out at a sapphire sea, in a world of light and beauty that immediately appears strikingly different from Hell. Rogers employs lines from Dante's *Purgatorio*, such as the astronomical periphrasis at the beginning of *Purgatorio* 2: *Già era' l sole a l'orizzonte giunto | lo cui meridïan* ("By now the sun was crossing the horizon of the meridian"), to recreate the feeling of peacefulness that Dante-pilgrim encounters in the first *canto*. Purgatory, according to Dante, is located on the earth, in the southern hemisphere, and this antipodean position resonates in the shorty story too, as the narrator, facing the ocean, thinks about the South African beach in which he is standing as "the edge of the continent" (sup., p. 63), almost the last frontier before the end of the world. Apart from this geographical parallel, another aspect of the purgatorial experience is reproduced in the short story: the importance of the body. The dead souls whom Dante-pilgrim meets in the second realm "remember and virtually caress their human bodies with palpable nostalgia and affection" (Barolini *Purgatorio* 2). This corporality is also present when the narrator of the short story meets the old man who has on his skin the history of the nation, "of bulldozers and guns, burning tyres and children dead in the streets" and of "inno-

cent prisoners and an ominous name—Vlakplaas" (sup., p. 63). Corporality is key when the narrator refers to a group of people as "human bodies," an "all-singing crowd" on the beach, pulsing, languishing, and loitering. In *Purgatorio* 2, a similar scene occurs: several souls around Casella are gathered singing a *canzone*, satisfied "as if no other thing might touch their minds" (2.117), until Cato reproaches them as "laggard spirits" (120). Again, when both the narrator and the unnamed man are driving to the airport, they see people walking beside the road, who appear as *ombre vane, fuor che nell'aspetto* ("O shades—in all except appearance—empty!" *Purg.* 2.79). They are "too unsubstantial to block the rays of the sun" (sup., p. 64). For the protagonist they are "South African ghosts." (sup., p. 64) who wait in a limbo, thus further emphasising the purgatorial feature not only of the people, but of the whole nation, which still struggles to be completely free from sin.

After leaving them behind, the old man starts telling of his past: he lived a lonely life in District Six in Cape Town. He omits details about key historical events that touched that neighbourhood, such as the forced removal of its inhabitants during the 1970s, and focus his memories on the familiarity of the provincial life he had.

On the flight to Johannesburg, where the narrator and the man sit together, the plot goes on in a climax that parallels both the climb in *Purgatorio*, a movement that aims at purging the soul, and the partition of the text, divided into seven parts: The Beach, The Car, The Airport, Questions to the Sun, Take Off, Ascent, The Loadstone. During the ascent, the old man speaks again about his past, telling the narrator about corpses "of homes and their occupants alike" (sup., p. 66), bulldozers and destruction. His neighbourhood, with children playing in the streets, a family living opposite to his house and the avocado tree, is all reduced to dust by the white men of the regime, who "coveted black people's land" (sup., p. 66). The peak of the climax is reached at the end of Part 5 (*Ascent*), when the narrator slips into a dream in which the purgatorial experience is left behind and transformed into an infernal retelling of the horror of the Apartheid. In this case, however, it is *Inferno* which rises again as the aesthetic source for describing a place turned into a hellish landscape made of blood, dead bodies and ominous "strange beatings [that] *risonavan per l'aere senza stelle*" (sup., p. 67).

The old man is transfigured into one of the Dantean souls, condemned to eternal suffering, as the narrator himself suggests by quoting a line from *Inferno*: *Questi non hanno speranza di morte* (*Inf.* 3.46). In the oneiric fantasy of the narrator, the old man is "slumped on the floor with his pulsing heart held in his right hand" (sup., p. 67). This powerful image reminds us of the photograph taken by Jillian Edelstei of Joyce Mtimkulu showing in her right fist all that is left of her dead son Siphiwo (a large clump of his hair and scalp). Her face, like the body of the old man, tells a story of suffering which is not confined to the personal experience of the two protagonists, but it is shared by all those who grieved during the Apartheid and those who spoke during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the atrocities of that period (Thomas 2018, 435).

The powerful evocation of the old man's experience, who endured "murder and torture, racism and corruption" (sup., p. 67), works like a restorative tale for

him, but leaves the narrator with unanswered questions. After telling the story, the old man transfigures again into a young boy and then, finally, "he dissolved into the light—*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle*" (sup., p. 67). *Purgatorio* 33 concludes with the same line, which describes Dante-pilgrim as remade, "pure and prepared to climb unto the stars" (33, 145). With a different take than in Martalas' text, here the narrator does not ask himself the reasons behind the atrocities of the Apartheid, but he wonders how and when South Africa may be able to heal (sup., p. 67). The dominant image, at this point, is the anthropomorphic feature of the land, described through wounds and scars, like the old man's body and all the black bodies who have on their skin the marks of that time. In the end, the question posed at the beginning, "Is there a purpose to this pain?" (sup., p. 67) remains unanswered. Also, the narrator seems to ask whether those who did not experience Apartheid have any chance to be saved or whether they still need to endure the sufferings of the sill-lingering past. Even though the last part of *The Lodestone*, entitled *Questions to the Sun*, sounds bashfully optimistic, the brief conclusion that carries the same title of the whole short story remarks with pessimism that South Africa, a nation "draped in strings of smouldering jewels" (sup., p. 67), is nonetheless an "infernal landscape" (sup., p. 67) where those who enter should abandon every hope (*Inf.* 3.9).

This idea of South Africa as a place turned into Hell by men recurs also in Helena van Urk's *The Storm*. The poem, written in *terza rima*, is the text that is stylistically closer to the *Comedy*. The author describes her poem as the African remix of Dante's *Canto* 6. The sixth canto of each cantica "deals with politics and history from the perspective of a progressively larger social entity: Florence in *Inferno* 6, Italy in *Purgatorio* 6, and now the *Empire* in *Paradiso* 6" (Barolini *Paradiso* 6). In *Inferno*, the sixth canto presents the third circle, where gluttons dwell, and has as its main protagonist the city of Florence and the rivalries that at the time were destroying it. Pride, envy, and avarice are for Dante the vices that lead to the conflict between the White party (pro-Emperor) and the Black party (pro-Pope) within the same city. In *Purgatorio*, the sixth canto deals with Italy, as much as *Inferno* 6 is the canto of Florence. Italy, a divided peninsula, is referred to as a "inn of sorrows," "a ship without a helmsman" and "no queen of provinces but of bordellos" (6.76–8). In *Paradiso* 6, the narrator is the Roman Emperor Justinian I, who speaks for the whole canto about the history of the Roman Empire embracing "a substantial numbers of place names, battles, people, and events, all together betokening a very considerable amount of classical learning to have attained in the early fourteenth century" (Barolini *Paradiso* 6). In this sense, van Urk's poem seems to follow the same structure, as it presents the protagonist, Dante Alberti, as the narrator of his own story, intertwined with that of South Africa. After a suicide attempt, Dante Alberti is sent in exile to recover. During this time, he travels the world with a journal "as [his] only comfort and companion" (sup., p. 52, lines 52–3), and reaches Africa, "the cradle of humanity's tale" (sup., p. 53, lines 64–5). As in the case of Dante, van Urk resorts to the journey narrative, so that "the traveler is the protagonist of the plot [while] the poet is the maker of the plot" (Barolini *Inferno* 1).

Before Dante Alberti starts telling his story, entitled *The Storm*, several references to the *Comedy* show how the author has drawn upon a set of familiar images, symbols and lines and re-contextualised them in the highly figurative language of the poem's tercets. For example, the *selva oscura* becomes "dark forests [that] closed in" (sup., p. 52, line 40) and suggests not only a spiritual or moral disorientation, but also seems to connote a state of depression that eventually led the narrator to attempt suicide. The three Dantean *fiere* (beasts) are slightly changed into "leopards, lions and wolves" (sup., p. 52, line 34), political and religious leaders are "fraught with deadly envy" and gluttony (sup., p. 52, line 28). Virgil, Ulysses, and the city of Florence are all mentioned, as well the exile and the well-known first line of the *Comedy*, "I was near the middle of my life" (sup., p.52, line 49), all reminiscent of a Dantean landscape.

When Dante Alberti reaches Africa, the presence of the hypotext becomes subtle, as the narrator refers to the Gold Coast as a land of gluttony that has become a bloodbath due to infightings and colonial enterprises. The description shares the same dark atmosphere of *Inferno* 13, from which it borrows the image of the wailing "trees [that] bled heartsblood" (sup., p. 53, line 70). Later, Africa is described as a "forsaken land" (sup., p. 53, line 76) and a "world of only misery and sin" (sup., p. 53, line 86), exploited by colonial powers and specific, emblematic men, called by the narrator "a certain Infernal Crew" (sup., p. 54, line 89). Along a similar structure to that of *Paradiso* 6, the history of Africa is told from the point of the view of the Empire or, better, of those Westerns powers that have exploited the land for centuries. Historical figures, who become characters in the poem, are exemplary to describe the wrongdoings of imperialism and colonialism, as much as in the *Comedy* Dante encounters the souls of real-life people who shed light on the historical-political context of the fourteenth century. Among others, the narrator mentions François the Rapist, a nickname under which we may recognise François Levaillant (1753–1824), the French naturalist and zoologist who described African people according to exotic features; the "Trekboers" are mentioned, as "some farmers from further South" (sup., p. 54, line 100), Field Marshal Lord Roberts and Major General Lord Kitchener, British militaries who fought in the Boer War, the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief (1780–1834) and Prince Dingane (1828–1840), a Zulu king who assumed power after taking part in the murder of his half-brother.

However, after the long list of perpetrators, the narrator focuses his attention on one of them in particular:

> But their Dear Leader was the worst of all:
> A slight man, feminine, but people erred
> in believing him to be harmless (sup., p. 55, lines 136–8).
>
> They were loyal, to death, to their master
> who was only ever named as "Cecil";
> their words raw sewage on a silver platter (sup., p. 55, lines 148–50).

Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902), British mining magnate and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, is introduced here as the epitome of gluttony, which should be understood not literally but metaphorically: Rhodes's voraciousness is in fact aimed at dominion and power. He brutally exploited the colonised lands to advance the interests of the Empire and of "the Anglo-Saxon race," considered, in his own words, "the most human, most honourable race the world possesses" (Flint 1974, 252). His personal story becomes then the history of the Empire, which exploited South African natural resources to profit the metropole:

> His soldiers had found these raw gems, they profess,
>
> by the bucketful; now what they needed
> was to get thousands of carats across
> the Mediterranean, rendered,
>
> and finally sold in Europe's shining
> streets. Cecil would do it, for a cut, and
> smuggle the profit back to their thriving
>
> compound (sup., p. 56, lines 157–64).

The narrator explains to the reader that, out of curiosity, he became Rhodes' chronicler, a position that allowed him to "tell the tale of the Storm" (sup., p. 57). In the retelling, Rhodes and his crew, including Dante Alberti, are preparing to set sail and carry a load of diamonds from South Africa to Europe. Dantean allusions appear once again (Charon, Furies), along with classical references (Ajax) and biblical markers (the Creation, God's Divine Wrath, "forty days and forty nights," Noah and Jonah), to describe the apocalyptic storm that battered the ship and the crew during their crossing. After the shipwreck, Dante Alberti finds himself on a beach: in front of his eyes, his companions, dead, have "bloated corpses" that "resembled Hogs at the trough" (sup., p. 60, lines 290–91). Rhodes is dying in pain, and the sea, working as a purifying element at God's command, is washing up "Cecil's bloodstained dollars" (sup., p. 60, lines 305–6). The sorrow for those men is unbearable, but the narrator is also aware that they committed awful crimes and that it was their gluttony that played a part in their death. Rather, the narrator reflects upon those routes of slavery and exploitation that crossed the waters for centuries. His mind goes to the Others, those who were overpowered, colonised, and exploited.

"The sea," then, to borrow Derek Walcott's famous line, "is history," as it holds the record of "greed" (sup., p. 60, line 316) and its unnamed victims, all perished for the gluttony of the colonisers:

> What ever of these Others? Their blood-sweat
> which had brought and continues to bring
> uncharted wealth to the North's icy cold seat
>
> of hegemony bound for omission,
> and the gluttony that drove them set
> as the Golden Calf of innovation (sup., p. 61, lines 323–8).

History seems to repeat itself, as the colonial dynamics that worked during Rhodes' rule are still functioning in the neo-colonial context of nowadays, in which the North-South divide remains strong and (former, colonial) powers control subject nations through capitalism rather than by occupation and direct rule.

Despite their different perspectives, the three re-writings analysed here seem to suggest an alarming continuity between the present and the past, where the latter rises as an unsolved period that haunts our current times. South African history, in particular, appears in these texts as a conundrum in which the brutal, legalised period of racial segregation that officially ended twenty-seven years ago, still looms large and pushes the narrators and the protagonists to further questioning. Whereas Martalas and Rogers focus more on recent times and interrogate themselves about the legacy of Apartheid, van Urk explores a period that predates Apartheid, of imperialism and exploitation, that still creates conflicts and tension. Far from being a distant historical figure, Cecil Rhodes is indeed at the centre of a recent debate, movement, and campaign (the so-called *#RhodesMustFall*) about decolonisation, memory, racism (especially in academia), and colonial legacy.

In this scenario, it seems that the literary world of Dante acts as a helpful source that generates useful images for representing and describing a context of human suffering. The authors of the texts analysed here have, borrowing again Olga Sedakova's words, brilliantly "supported [Dante's] flame of inspiration with words" ("*secondare* questa fiamma *in forma di parole*") (2012, 148). In their texts, the experience of Dante-pilgrim as a traveller in the realms of the afterlife is re-contextualised as the historical (and earthly) background of colonialism and racial segregation. The *Comedy* is, therefore, decontextualised, and the metaphor of Hell is resemantised to fictionalise the experience of Apartheid, filtered through Dante's representation. As in the case of Primo Levi's or Nuruddin Farah's representations, divine wisdom is absent, as are the coherent and fair principles of the *contrapasso*: it is replaced by the unspeakable condition of the concentration camps and the civil war which become Hell, where innocent people are dehumanised and annihilated, without any hope of justice. One form of justice, however, is to give them a voice, re-create their experience and re-tell their story. Dante-poet, therefore provides authors with a powerful figurative language that can be translated and appropriated to fit the new context, which, even though significantly different from the medieval Florentine antecedent, still retains some analogous, absolute aspects that connect the specificity of that period to the universality of human struggle.

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The Unattainable South African Paradise

Anita Virga

It is not surprising that Dante Alighieri, and especially his masterpiece, *La Divina Commedia,* continues to be a source of inspiration for writers and artists. The universality of the *Commedia* goes hand in hand with its adaptability to specific contexts: in Dante's work, everyone is able to read something that resonates with their particular context. In this book, Erin Jacobs reminds us of precisely the great influence that Dante has not only in literature, but across the arts. Discourses around nations and national identities, both in Italy and abroad, have particularly relied on Dante to serve their arguments.[1] Equally, minorities have found in Dante a metaphor for their own condition, and as Audeh and Havely put it: "Marginalized voices seeking to recover lost identities or carve out new ones for themselves: imagined communities, constructing a sort of 'subaltern Dante'" (2012, 2). The question, here, is what becomes of Dante and his *Commedia* in the hands of young South African students. Analysing some of their pieces, I will try to understand how the Italian poet helps them to shape their own identities and how, through his eyes, they see South Africa.

Regardless of whether Dante was part of a hegemonic discourse or a counter one, he helped to create new identities and re-imagine old ones. While Dante the pilgrim treks to freedom and salvation, contemporary authors follow him to

[1] See for example Audeh and Havely (2012) for an extensive investigation on the critical reception to Dante in the nineteenth century.

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accomplish their personal journeys of trying to make sense of their own lives. In doing so, they hope to reach their own salvation through a new identity. According to Looney (2011, 2):

> African American authors use Dante as if he were a 'freedom rider' accompanying them on a journey through a harsh landscape of racial inequality. After all, he had been to hell and back, so why couldn't he be expected to help them deal with the segregated bus stations of Alabama and Mississippi in the early 1960s […]?

If Dante the pilgrim was able to reach Paradise after being lost in the dark wood, and if he went through the atrocities and unspeakable horrors of Hell, then African Americans could follow in his footsteps and see a glimmer of hope.

These same possibilities for freedom, salvation, and hope do not present themselves, however, to the young South African students whose contributions are collected in this book. Erin, fascinated by the universality of Dante's oeuvre and by the influence he has had on the world, notes in her contribution: "Your reputation is that of a man who went to hell and back, / but you did more than that" (sup., p. 80, lines 37-8). Nevertheless, for these young South Africans, Paradise remains an unattainable mirage. For them, South Africa is an eternal Purgatory: it is trapped in a present that is neither able to overcome its past nor imagine its future. It is ironic that Dante sees Purgatory as the only non-eternal place of the afterlife, because in post-Apartheid South Africa, Purgatory becomes the everlasting condition.

Casey or the eternal South African purgatory

Casey Fern and her concern over the liminality of spaces in the *Commedia* introduces us to the idea of South Africa as a transitional place with an unimaginable future. Her investigation examines Hell and Purgatory, but once she reaches the Earthly Paradise, she is unable to proceed any further. Casey understands liminality as places in between, where an old identity is left but a new one is not yet acquired:

> An individual has relinquished claim to their former self, and not yet fulfilled the requirements (ceremonial in nature) to ascend to their aggregation or reincorporation, the new identity they will inhabit upon re-entering their community—they are initiates, unable to step back and unready to step forward (sup., p. 80).

Exiting the liminal space therefore means gaining a new identity, which will allow one to enter a new society:

> The rite has been completed and the individual ascends to their new identity: Dante's re-entrance into society is a reincorporation into the Kingdom of Heaven, which necessitates the attainment of a spiritual purity akin to a childlike state (sup., p. 27).

According to Casey, the conclusion of Dante's journey leads him to be part of a new society or home called 'the Kingdom of Heaven.' This transition is pos-

sible thanks to the key scene of the Earthly Paradise, where Dante loses Virgil and encounters Beatrice. Casey interprets this moment as Dante shedding "his binding to individual love" (sup., p. 29) and incorporating it into collective love, which is represented by Beatrice. The collective dimension will be achieved in the Paradise, but what concerns Casey more is that the afterlife journey is marked by "distinctly identifiable instances of *transformation*" (sup., p. 30) (emphasis mine), of which the Earthly Paradise is the apex.

Even if Casey does not mention it, one is left wondering whether what she describes when she discusses Dante's journey does not in fact refer to the South African 'long walk to freedom',[2] a journey that is yet to be accomplished. In her analysis, Dante's *Commedia* seems to become a subtle metaphor through which both an inner world and the external society can be understood. The transformation that the pilgrim undergoes in the Earthly Paradise reminds us of the transformation that South Africa is still painstakingly going through more than 25 years after the fall of Apartheid. South Africa, however, has not yet completed its journey. Instead, it seems trapped in a long and slow process of purging its sins. 'Transformation' is a key word, reminiscent of FeesMustFall, the student protests that spread across the country in 2015 and 2016. During these protests, the call for free education for all students went hand-in-hand with calls for the transformation and decolonization of the curricula. These curricula were and continue to be highly Eurocentric.[3]

Casey thus stops in the Earthly Paradise, where transformation is possible, and contemplates its meaning: the merging of the individual into the collective. The process that she describes mimics, in other words, the myth of the rainbow nation: a South African nation that is purportedly able to make the differences in race, language, class, and ethnicity come together under the same multicolour flag. But

> the 'born-frees' have begun to question and reject the rainbow utopia [...] in essence, the rainbow nationalism ideology is beginning to be questioned, as social, cultural and economic separations of groups are visible in South African spaces. It has led to a new form of nationalism fuelled by the anger of unmet economic needs and the inequality that the neoliberal capitalist policies continue to exacerbate (Oyedemi 2021, 221).

While African American authors, according to Looney, gain strength from Dante's salvific trip to the afterlife, the South African student can only enjoy the *promise* of transformation and, later, of the 'vision' that it will bring. The focus is

[2] Here I take the liberty to use the title of Mandela's famous autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom* (1995) as a metaphor not only for the personal life of the country's first democratically elected president, but also as a metaphor for the country in general.

[3] Higgs 2016, 88: "The curriculum in higher education in postcolonial South Africa is still, to a large extent, confronted by the legacy of colonial education, which remained in place decades after political decolonisation. Despite the advent of decolonisation, the South African education system still mirrors colonial education paradigms inherited from former colonial education systems and, as a result, the voices of African indigenous populations are negated."

not on the achieved salvation, but on the continuing journey, as South Africa is still trapped in its period of transition,[4] and therefore caught in a liminal space.

What keeps South Africa from salvation? Chariklia Martalas and Thalén Rogers answer by pointing out the needless pain of the past, which does not find peace in the present, because as Walder notes, the legacy of colonialism and Apartheid is still present. This legacy prevents a new identity for South Africa from coming forward

> South Africa is just one extreme example of the degree to which, in societies with long histories of exploiting difference to maintain inequalities of power, the sense of identity is a site of profound uncertainty and struggle (2011, 14).

Chariklia and Thalén or the rewriting of *Inferno*

If the revised Purgatory acquires the unwelcome characteristic of being eternal, with a never-fulfilled promise of Paradise, then the inverse is Hell—a changing place which, despite its terrors, is not terrible enough to contain the horrors of the South African past. The eternity of its punishment is neither sufficient nor just. Regarding the sinners behind Apartheid, what appears to be unbearable in the minds of the students is the idea that no punishment will change the present or the future. That is why the eternity of the Hell is not enough for them:

> What do you say to horror Dante?
> What do you say to the murders of flesh and mind?
> Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State
>
> What do you say to Apartheid? (sup., p. 45)

Chariklia in *Eating John Vorster* addresses Dante the poet directly, as he is the one who was able to speak to the unspeakable nature of Hell. However, the Hell that existed in South Africa under the Apartheid regime cannot be contained in Dante's Hell: "Inferno had to be bigger, there were many of the devil's men that Verwoerd had to eat" is the final line (sup., p. 49).

Chariklia writes four pieces, all set in Hell, all under the title of *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again*. Each piece is a variation of Dante's Hell, an attempt to retrace Dante's Hell in a South African key. In revisiting South African horrors, Dante becomes Chariklia's guide, but a lost guide who can no longer recognize his afterlife: "How can a man who has murdered watch over a murderer? / Have God's commandments changed?" (sup., p. 47) asks Dante, not differently from how many centuries before he was himself addressed by Cato when the latter appeared in front of him as a living person exiting Hell ("The laws of the abyss—do these break down? / Are counsels newly changed in Heaven's height / so you, the damned, approach my secret hills?" *Purg.* 1.46–8).

[4] On South Africa's transition and the importance of this transition in post-Apartheid literature see Barnard and van der Vlies (2019).

At the same time, Chariklia acts as Dante's guide through the South African past ("Virgil had asked her to be his guide," sup., p. 41 she reveals in *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses*), as she knows the "men who the devil would be afraid of" (again from *Eating John Vorster*). A prominent concern is how to express the Hell. Dante was able to, but Inferno is different after the South African Apartheid, after all these new sons of the devil. Chariklia, invested in both the role of Dante the pilgrim and the role of Virgil the guide, is confronted with the same problem that Dante the poet most likely had: how can horror be expressed? Is it even possible? Chariklia asks Dante in the same way that a muse is invoked: "What do I say to horror Dante? / How do I describe it? / You described hell why can't I?" (in *Eating John Vorster*, sup., p. 45). Not only does the South African horror seem too much for Dante's Inferno, it is also too much to say; it is unspeakable. To speak the unspeakable is, for this young South African, crossing human borders and becoming like Ulysses in *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses*: "Transgress the boundaries to write. Write what could never have been written before. Write for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge4" (sup., p. 42). Ulysses's desire to know in Chariklia's work becomes the ability to express with words; the horror is so unspeakable that being able to express it can be seen—Chariklia fears—as trespassing God's boundaries. The issue of confronting the past is therefore also an issue of expressing it. Chariklia understands that only virtue can accomplish the task; if the pen is not moved by it, the writer will "stand by Ulysses and be covered in flames" (sup., p. 43).

Inferno is challenged also in *Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses*, where suicides are now condoned "For the world was changing its mind / On the plight of the Suicides / And God wished to change his mind as well" (sup., p. 39). In Chariklia's writing, the fruitless forest of suicides has now become a heavenly rose garden, as the soul had been forgiven for seeking peace "Instead of searching for the remains / Of a life we wished to leave" (sup., p. 39). There is, again, a reinterpretation of the past that reveals much about the ways in which a young South African copes with it. If, on the one hand, Hell is not enough punishment for the horrors of Apartheid, on the other hand, the past has created too much pain. This pain continues to hurt and yet, it is not recognized. How can the injustices of the past be dealt with, now that the world has changed its mind? Chariklia discusses the different ways of thinking about suicide, but a lot has changed in the mentality of society compared to the past: morals, the ways of judging, the conceptions of 'good' and 'bad', are now different. Those who suffered in the past are looking for redemption. Those who were previously regarded as sinners or as criminals are now rehabilitated. They are no longer faced with dark woods, but are presented with fragrant roses.

In Chariklia's response, we can read an attempt to rewrite the past,[5] or, if nothing else, to give justice to the past by re-imagining a different future for the dead, a future that has now turned from Hell into Heaven. For them, for the dead who

[5] Re-imagining, re-inventing or rewriting the past are typical features of the South African post-Apartheid literature, in which new narratives are now available to renegotiate history and the relationship between present, past and future. See, among others, Nuttall and Coetzee (1998).

were 'good' but condemned by the rules of the past, a better place awaits: "The scent of the roses / Cleansing him from the anguish of the past / [...] For this was a new beginning." The word "hope" is pivotal: "And I cried because there is hope / Hope in the beauty / Hope in a garden well cared for" (sup., p. 44). While the whole poem can certainly be read in an intimate and personal key—and the poem must also be read in this sense—its relationship with the broader South African society and history must not be overlooked.

The reinterpretation of the past is also carried out in *A Party*, the first chapter of this Ulyssian 'mad flight into Inferno.' Francesca, the lustful sinner from Dante's Canto 5 of *Inferno*, is now in the limbo, throwing a party, while all the rules in place in Inferno and Purgatory have changed. Only Paradise is the same, but, as we saw, it is the forbidden place, both for this reinvented Francesca and for South Africa. "Inferno has become a little experiment" explains Francesca to Dante. "Only Paradise is pure enough, godly enough, to not change at the whims of human hands" (sup., p. 35). The afterlife is now upside down, at the mercy of the times, of the different human ideologies that reign on Earth. The medieval certainty that guided Dante is long gone. There is no longer faith in God or belief in divine justice. Now Francesca can organize parties while she hopes for a better place than the one assigned to her by Dante the poet seven hundred years ago—even if that place is not in Paradise, the only space that has remained unchanged and unattainable.

The disadvantage to these changing and changed times is, however, the fact that Hell is no longer enough, because God and divine justice are not enough anymore. As for Chariklia the pilgrim, she has become disillusioned, and she journeys through the afterlife like marionettes in an ancient tragedy: as imagined by Pirandello in *The Late Mattia Pascal,* they would act with disillusionment once they learned that the sky above them was nothing more than a piece of paper with no God above it: Oreste would still seek revenge, but distracted by the hole in the sky he would fail. Consequently, the perfection of the ancient world in which everything had a reason and a justification would fall apart. This is precisely what happens in Chariklia's afterlife, and more specifically in Inferno.

The absence of God and of trust in divine justice raises serious questions about the future of South Africa; it seems that justice is not possible at all. As we saw, the teleological path from colonialism and Apartheid to the rainbow nation has stalled, stuck in an eternal transition, and there is no superior Truth that will assure the fulfilment of the promised rainbow. Thalén's doubts about a possible redemption for South Africa in *The Lodestone* is therefore obvious, almost natural. How can South Africa redeem itself when its journey to salvation is stopped in an eternal purgatory and its landscape still shows itself as Hell ("Angel wings snatched the aeroplane from the infernal landscape")?

In his story, the narrator meets an old man who tells him about the difficult life he has endured. However, his story is not so different from the one of a domestic worker whom the narrator meets on the plane from Durban to Johannesburg. Common stories of struggle, solitude, families torn apart, overlapping stories of the past and the present. Waking up from an infernal dream on the plane, Thalén asks himself:

> When will my country heal? When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land? How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption? (sup., p. 67)

In Thalén's story, we also find the idea of a country still purging itself, but without the hope of completing the process. Here, any promise of the ultimate vision fades away to make space for an infernal landscape. There is a retrospective gaze which, instead of looking forward toward the future, faces backward to the past. It certainly reminds us of Benjamin's angel of history; the angel's gaze is not so different from Thalén's: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin 1969, 249).

Thalén contemplates South African history as a single catastrophe where one cannot see a difference between the Apartheid era and the post-Apartheid one. For Benjamin, the messianic mission of history is continually frustrated by the contemplation of what appears before the angel: a series of ruins. While the angel is dragged away by the storm that blows from Heaven, man remains on earth in the ruins. The feeling of 'progress,' of a time that passes and brings an improvement, is belied by an infernal image of ruin. In the South African context, progress is not so much constituted by the Western idea of modernity, but by the idea of the redemption of the country, which will culminate in the complete realization of the rainbow nation: "The tarred road to redemption stretched out before them but they tarried on the shore," writes Thalén (sup., p. 64).

Luyanda and Lesego on the black woman in the *Commedia*

As we have seen so far, the tendency of reimagining Dante's Inferno in some way and adapting it to the circumstances of South Africa emerges clearly in these writings. At times, it seems almost an attempt to rewrite the past and, with it, the hell it is associated with. However, the rewriting goes beyond addressing the legacy of the past and the questions it poses towards the present and the future; rewriting also means re-evaluating, rediscovering values that were stifled in the past and that continue to be stifled in the present.

In Luyanda Kaitoo's praise poem, Francesca is the protagonist. This time the infernal figure is transformed into female pride, carried with royalty and haughtiness ("Imperfect is her form, yet she wears it with such pride (astounding is it not?)" sup., p. 70). The woman, deaf to all gossips, is not afraid or ashamed of exhibiting her beauty. In Luyanda's words, Francesca becomes a figure of redemption against the oppressive patriarchal system ("Hers is a beauty misunderstood by man" sup., p. 70). If South Africa can find redemption, then it is here, in this African Francesca who walks as "goddess of existential inferno / And proud cherub of hell." By revaluating what was considered a 'sin,' South Africa can make justice—if not of its past, then at least of its present.

The re-evaluation of the female body occurs at the intersection of gender and race. Luyanda does not speak generically of the woman, but identifies her specifically as a black woman, whose body, even before Apartheid, was exposed, used and abused during colonialism. The first name that comes to mind is Sara Baartman, the young woman from the Khoikhoi population in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. Sara was brought to Europe in 1810 and exhibited as a freak due to her highly developed buttocks and genitals—the latter along with the brain exhibited in France after Sara's death until 1974 (Qureshi, 2004). The black woman's body is the battlefield of a long oppression over centuries, between the exposure of her nakedness and the male chauvinist imposition of her cover. It has always been the possession of man and the symbol of his power, but this ancient, African Francesca claims her body for herself. Condemned to Hell by men, she is the ancestral strength of women:

> She is my soul
> And I will fear her no more
> For hers is the abstract life force
> Transcribed in my genes and sourced from her radiant chalice
> My ancestral empress
> She is a ruler of the nebulous night sky and
> Queen of the shadows
> The one who dons the crown reaching for the heavens, even in the abyss (sup., p. 70-1, lines 42-9).

To echo Luyanda's reinterpretation of the figure of Francesca in an African and modern key, we find Lesego's discussion of Beatrice. Lesego rationally conceptualizes what Luyanda expresses so powerfully in free verse: "The conception of black womanhood in South Africa is not far removed from the Medieval one;" (sup., p. 73) "It is no revelation that black women the world over have been made to endure unparalleled oppressive forces—both for their race and for their gender" (sup., p. 76).

Lesego wonders about Beatrice's nature and her relationship with Dante. If the woman, in fact, seems to exist and have importance thanks to Dante who talks about her and creates in her his own muse, according to Lesego the opposite is equally true: Dante and his poetry could not exist without Beatrice. Beatrice's action is subtle, passive, she does not speak directly, but through her presence and her body she sets the limits within which Dante can exist:

> She causes Dante to do what he would not have otherwise done, and be who he would not have otherwise been. And she does so passively. Is that not greatly powerful? In doing that, or rather, in producing that, she causes Dante to create her newly. None of it exists without Beatrice's body and her body is hers. It is a subtle power; it comes from her as if it comes from nothing, as if it comes from Dante (sup., p. 76).

Beatrice can speak to African black women because

> She gives women, black women in particular, the space to be more than strong or vulnerable, one, both, or neither. In this way, perfect humanity may be enacted—not perfect as in flawless, but perfect as in comprehensive—one can live every and any femininity, all of them at once or none at all. So varied, so full, it evades true description (sup., p. 76-7).

The unsuspected relationship that emerges between the women of the Comedy (Francesca and Beatrice) and the black African women, and the redemption that the women of the Comedy impersonate, when examined through the eyes of black women, creates a space of contemporary t struggle in which one can see the hope of salvation. We are not yet in Paradise. Paradise, on the contrary, is far away. But the vindication and the struggle keep alive the hope of being able, one day, to finally atone the sins of both the past and the present, and thereby achieve a redeemed future.

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The South African *folle volo*: Dante's Ulysses Reinvented

Sonia Fanucchi

The myth of Ulysses is especially flexible, for the hero is not a single character but a figure that has undergone various iterations throughout the ages and has come to represent more than himself. Indeed, Ulysses is frequently used as a mirror, drawn into a complex relationship with the psychological and cultural context of writers (Bryant 1985, 18). Of all the figures in the *Commedia*, Dante's Ulysses appears to bear the closest resemblance to Dante himself: his *folle volo* (*Inf.* 26.125) is echoed throughout the pilgrim's journey and seemingly offers a glimpse into the psyche of his creator. Among South African youth the myth of Ulysses is not widely known, but Dante's myth nevertheless resonates powerfully with our born free generation. This is because of its connection to Dante the poet, an elusive figure who seems to straddle the boundaries between human and myth, and who, like the mythical Ulysses, offers young South Africans the opportunity to 'converse' with him, and, in the process, to rework and reimagine him in their own context. In this chapter I examine four creative pieces—Chariklia Martalas's *A Mad Flight into Inferno Once Again*, Ross Smith's *My Discovery of Dante and the apocalyptic crisis: My Dantesque, Ulyssean Return to the Commedia*, Thalén Rogers' *The Lodestone* and Helena van Urk's *The Storm*. In these pieces Dante's Ulysses becomes an avenue through which the young writers can take ownership of personal and political debates, which are developed and refined through a conversation with the poet. I shall argue that this involves appropriating Dante's voice and symbols, as the *folle volo* is transformed into a thoroughly South African experience.

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In the pages of his *Commedia*, Dante the poet reinvents himself as an archetypal hero akin to Ulysses (Mazzotta 2007, 1). This process of mythologising himself associates him with the romance of fiction, and has, in consequence, inspired quasi-fictional rewritings of his life: most notable among these is Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* which blends the marvellous with the personal, creating an impression of Dante as simultaneously human and extraordinary.[1] The impression created by the biography is consistent with the effect of the *Commedia* itself: it is difficult to deny the power of Dante's human, personal voice, drawing on the passionate appeal to intimate emotions of Augustine's confession narrative and inviting his readers to read themselves into the pilgrim's experience in the powerful phrase *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* (*Inf* 1.1).[2] But these allusions coexist with the poet's loftier claims to be a prophet—an epic and moral hero, blending the characteristics of Aeneas and St Paul.[3] In *Inferno* 26 Dante rewrites the Ulysses myth, blending it into his own mythological journey. The original ending of the myth where Ulysses returns home is powerfully revolutionised, so that Ulysses chooses to leave the responsibilities of home behind him and instead to follow his desire to know, becoming a symbol for the dangers of the over-adventurous spirit that so seduced the poet (Stanford [1963] 1985, 181–2). In this way Dante subsumes fictional, epic and autobiographical elements.

Just as Dante's Ulysses is a "pure fiction" onto which Dante can project his own "procedures and aspirations" (Kirkpatrick 1987, 174), so Dante—both hero and poet—is fictionalised in the born frees' attempts to appropriate and reinvent the personal, heroic and ethical dimensions of his self-presentation. In *A Mad Flight into Inferno Once again. The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses* Chariklia Martalas, an aspiring young writer, modernises and parodies Dante's claims to moral heroism by emphasising his celebrity status. Although Dante is cast in the role of a therapist in this exchange, he is also defined by his fame: his first action is to go to the desk and "begin […] signing copies of the *Commedia*" (sup., p. 41). This associates him with the more questionable qualities of his own Ulysses who, consumed by his arrogance, does not deign to address the pilgrim and boasts that his *orazion picciola* was effective enough to move his men to join him on a mad quest to their deaths (*Inf.* 26.122).[4] In the original *Commedia* the parallels between the pilgrim's moral quest and Ulysses' mad adventure expose the moral depravity of the latter, so undermining his authority. Martalas similarly parallels her own visionary quest with Dante's, drawing on the implications of

[1] For an extended treatment of Dante's mythical status as it is captured by Boccaccio, see Mazzotta, 2007.

[2] "Midway in the journey of our life." All translations from the *Commedia* are taken from Hollander 2000.

[3] *Io non Enëa, non Paolo sono* ["I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul"] (*Inf.* 2.32). The pilgrim's claim of humility disguises the poet's need to group himself with this company (Hollander 2000, 890n).

[4] "With this brief speech I had my companions / so ardent for the journey / I could scarce have held them back" (*Inf.* 26.121–3).

the Ulysses voyage and distancing herself from both Dante and Ulysses, in an attempt to discover her own authentic feminine voice.

Dante's Ulysses offers Martalas a transgressive language that she can appropriate in her efforts to discover her art. In the *Commedia* Ulysses stands in juxtaposition to the straightforward Virgil, in that he uses language to beguile and mislead, disguising his true intentions as moral and personal. The speech to his men draws heavily on the language of virtue, encouraging them to "*Considerate la vostra semenza / fatti non foste a viver come bruti / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza*" (*Inf.* 26.118–20),[5] just so that Ulysses might quench his lust for adventure, as his subsequent boast reveals. Yet Dante recognises that this is his own poetic language too, for, unlike Virgil's accurate yet colourless words, Dante's emotive language has the power to transform his readers, turning them away from or towards a moral destination. In its ability to change and create, Dante's language is potentially dangerous: it is significant that the Siren that appears in the pilgrim's dream vision in *Purgatorio* is at first revealed in all her depravity as ugly and malformed. It is only when subjected to the pilgrim's gaze that her tongue is loosened ("disciolto"), and she begins to sing in a beguiling manner, claiming that, with her song, "*Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago*" (*Purg.* 19.22).[6] The Siren is evidently associated with the poet's creative ability to 'free' language and it is this language that first misleads Ulysses.

The flexible power of language to transform and free the speaker and the subsequent moral dangers that he incurs because of this, is central to Martalas's response to this episode. She takes audacious liberties with Dante's text, rewriting Ulysses' epic adventure as an inner quest for authenticity, which is notable for its feminine quality. It is worth looking more closely at Martalas's revision of Ulysses' speech to his men. The words that Dante gives to Ulysses are as follows:

> 'O frati,' dissi, 'che per cento milia
> perigli siete giunti a l'occidente,
> a questa tanto picciola vigilia
>
> d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente
> non vogliate negar l'esperïenza,
> di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente.
>
> Considerate la vostra semenza:
> fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
> ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza' (*Inf.* 26.112–2).[7]

[5] Consider how your souls were sown / you were not made to live like brutes or beasts / but to pursue virtue and knowledge.

[6] "I drew Ulysses, eager for the journey, / with my song."

[7] "O brothers," I said, "who, in the course / of a hundred thousand perils, at last / have reached the west, to such brief wakefulness /of our senses as remains to us, / do not deny yourselves the chance to know—/ following the sun—the world where no one lives. / "Consider how your souls were sown: / you were not made to live like brutes or beasts, / but to pursue virtue and knowledge."

Martalas revises this speech in the words that she addresses to the reflections of herself in her dream:

> Sisters we have reached the point that men should not pass beyond. But aren't we glad that we are not men? What remains to us is not the place of the darkest unknown but a place of unending light. A world where you will find beauty in words not strung together before. A world where language can fall through you. Transgress the boundaries to write. Write what could never have been written before. Write for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge (sup., p. 42).

Ulysses' brothers are now transformed into 'sisters' and their femininity grants them a power that is denied to the male poet and hero whose rhetoric is in danger of violating the moral constraints of their context. The power of language to transgress, to "write what could never have been written before" is, for Martalas a distinctly feminine art and, moreover, a liberating one. The transgressive quality of her writing is described entirely positively. Whereas Ulysses' promise to search for the "world where no one lives" (*mondo sanza gente*) falsely seduces and misleads his crew, Martalas sees transgressive language as providing legitimate guidance, enlightening those who "don't know what it is like beyond the edge." In this way Martalas turns Ulysses' language to a positive end and thereby distances herself from the tragic hero and his creator.

But Martalas also creates parallels between herself, Dante and Ulysses, as she attempts to seek authority and authenticity. In her piece, Dante repeats the refrain "you are Ulysses," to her increasing discomfort. She further challenges the poet to disagree that she resembles both him and Ulysses in her desire to go beyond the edge:

> DANTE: But he went beyond the limits.
> CHARIKLIA: So did you.
> DANTE (*Dante getting angry*): That was different.
> CHARIKLIA: Yes I forgot. Ulysses and I didn't have divine sanction (sup., p. 42-3).

But by the end of the piece, it is clear that Martalas inhabits a different sphere from Ulysses, for she is a "writer not a hero," and a writer who is like Dante in that "virtue guides [her] pen" (sup., p. 43). Yet she is also not like Dante. Whereas the poet and his hero seek to persuade readers and listeners of their authority, Martalas seeks to persuade herself. Her focus is inward, as her conversation with her own reflections indicates. In this way Martalas uses Dante as a backdrop against which to fashion a thoroughly modern identity as a writer preoccupied with language as a tool to illuminate and refashion the psychology. Although she sets herself against Dante in her attempt to assert her own creative authority, the Ulysses episode also provides her with a language, a sense of the powerful speaking voice and its ability to effect change. Dante recalls this theme in the opening of *Purgatorio* when he calls on the muses, asking Calliope to "*surga, / seguitando il mio canto con quel suono / di cui le Piche misere sentiro / lo colpo tal, che disperar perdono*" (*Purg.*1.9–12).[8] Here the voice of Calliope is a singing

[8] "Arise / to accompany my song with those same chords / whose force so struck the miserable magpies / that, hearing them, they lost all hope of pardon."

voice, associated with music's ability to conjure a response in singer and listener alike, as Dante's subsequent encounter with Casella proves. Conscious of the power of voice that Dante's Ulysses embodies, Martalas sets her response out as a spoken conversation, and, in the process, appropriates and recasts Dante's language as the modern language of therapy, with its highly personal focus.

Dante's Ulysses myth also underlies Ross Smith's personal narrative of his developing intellectual interest in Dante, which first germinated when he was studying Italian in high school. He describes his experience with Dante in terms of a Ulysses-like journey, as a "quest for the meaning of dantesque allegory" (sup., p. 85).

In *Inferno* 26, Dante revised the mythical Ulysses' return home as a journey into exile, a self-banishment spurred by philosophical longing, Yet, after the pilgrim emerges from hell, Ulysses paradoxically becomes associated with the nostalgia of home-coming and the reawakening of thought, as Dante recalls the imagery of the boat and journey when describing the rebirth of his imaginative faculties: *la navicella del mio ingegno* (*Purg.* 1.2).[9] In this way Ulysses is also made into a positive symbol of the creative and intellectual renewal of the poet. Smith draws on this potential for intellectual revitalization inherent in Dante's Ulysses myth, depicting his engagement with Dante as part of a process of creative rediscovery as he embarks on his MA and indulges in the "colours" and "vibrant imagination" of the Medieval period, after the "noticeably grey" third year of his studies (sup., p. 84).

In the same way as Ulysses haunts the *Commedia*, becoming a symbol of the poet's philosophical aspirations as well as the condition of spiritual exile that he seeks to escape, so Smith has "unfinished business" with Dante, describing himself as "like a ghost stuck on earth" (sup., p. 85). His research journey is an obsessive turning and returning to Dante that echoes the poet's obsession with Ulysses.

Smith reads himself into Dante's Ulysses, and this figure helps to shape his sense of his deepening intellectual relationship with Dante. Famously Dante's Ulysses declares that nothing could overcome "*l'ardore ch'i ebbi a divenir del mondo esparto*" (*Inf.* 26.97–8)[10]. Ulysses' concept of the burning desire for experience is the defining characteristic of Smith's scholarly life. His education has been an unusual one: his Italian teacher "favoured learning and experience over a formalized approach to examination and structure" (sup., p. 84). This characteristic defines his engagement with Dante, his interest in "the way [that] we experience the apocalyptic moment" (sup., p. 86).

Martalas and Smith both respond most strongly to the personal and autobiographical elements of the Ulysses canto. Martalas uses the figure of Ulysses as a prism through which to rewrite Dante's personality and life in a context that speaks more directly to herself. Smith's use of Dante's myth is less defiant, but he too is selective in the features of Ulysses that he invokes, emphasising the hero's positive associations in order to dramatize and legitimate his philosophical exploration of the poet. But, for Dante, the Ulysses myth also has explicitly political implications. The opening of *Inferno* 26 associates the *folle volo* with Florence:

[9] "The small bark of my wit."

[10] The fervor that was mine / to gain experience of the world.

Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se' sì grande
che per mare e per terra batti l'ali,
e per lo 'nferno tuo nome si spande!

Tra li ladron trovai cinque cotali
tuoi cittadini onde mi ven vergogna,
e tu in grande orranza non ne sali (*Inf.* 26.1–6).[11]

The image of Florence *che per mare e per terra batti l'ali* (*Inf.* 26.2),[12] recalls the destructive presumption and fate of Icarus, suggesting the tragic consequences of political ambition (Freccero 1966, 13). Thalén Rogers and Helena van Urk both invoke the concept of the *folle volo*, drawing out its moral and political implications for South Africa.

Giuseppe Mazzotta describes Ulysses' journey as a "steady point of reference," a flexible symbol, both personal and political, that helps the pilgrim to define the inner sense of his own quest in the *Commedia*. The image is connected to the apocalyptic vision of the city or country, as suggested in both the prophetic revelation of Florence's end and the mysterious destruction of the ship on the shores of a new land (Mazzotta 1998, 348, 350). van Urk's *The Storm* subsumes the notion of the false quest and corrupt land in a narrative about South Africa's colonial history, framed by Ulysses' *folle volo*. van Urk's 'Canto' is an "African remix […] of Dante's Canto Six," (sup., p. 52, line 1) set in the colonial era and exposing the destructive greed of the South African colonists. Underlying this is the concept of a Ulysses-like quest: the speaker initially holds back from a poetic career, convinced by others to "mind Ulysses' duty, not indulgence," (sup., p. 51, lines 14-5) and is later inspired to explore Africa in his "restless travels" (sup., p. 53, line 64), and to discover its crimes with a "sense of morbid curiosity" (sup., p. 56, line 178). This association of himself with the mythic voyager and rhetorician persists throughout the account. The Dantesque quest is echoed in the encounter with South Africa, the "forsaken land," (sup., p. 53, line 76) which bears an unmistakable resemblance to Dante's fallen Florence:

A thousand times I wept for what I saw:
a world of only misery and sin; (sup., p. 53, line 85).

The speaker's despair for the corruption and sinfulness of South Africa markedly repeats Dante's shame at Florence whose citizens have turned to thievery and whose infamy now resounds through hell. Thievery is also the focus of van Urk's depiction of South Africa with its emphasis on colonial plunder and the acquisition of blood diamonds under the direction of the villainous Cecil John Rhodes. The parallels with Ulysses, who stole the future and lives of his men by sending them to their doom, are driven home by van Urk's use of the shipwreck metaphor: Rhodes assembles an "Infernal Crew" to carry his diamonds

[11] "Take joy, oh Florence, for you are so great /your wings beat over land and sea, / your fame resounds through Hell! / Among the thieves, I found five citizens of yours / who make me feel ashamed, and you / are raised by them to no great praise."

[12] "Beat[ing its] wings over land and sea."

to sell in Europe and the self-destructive quest that they embark on draws on the moral and political implications of Ulysses' failed quest. van Urk describes the disastrous end of the voyage in the following way:

> The moment this evil task was complete,
> Heaven poured out its response; to impede
> our journey and deal Cecil a sound defeat
>
> But like Ajax of old, the Infernal
> Crew showed at God's Divine Wrath no retreat,
> Offering only curses to the Eternal.
>
> The rain beat down ceaselessly, unchanging
> in rhythm or quality. Blue-purple
> ink covered the sky and whipped the waves, scourging.
>
> But hubris was stronger than the cold wind
> or the hail that would soon pelt us unceasing,
> and we left the safety of land behind.
> […]
> It was not gentle or softhandedly,
> is all I remember of how I stumbled
> back on the soil of my beloved Italy,
>
> for that is where the waves and torrents had
> brought us to, before it had finally
> sunk the boat and saw the diamonds dragged
>
> down to the icy cold, and the waves like
> furious dogs snatched at us, snapped and rolled
> us all beneath the surface to graves alike (sup., p. 57-9, lines 213-72).

More overtly mired in evil than Ulysses and his men, Rhodes's crew is 'punished' by divine forces for cowardly murder and betrayal. Like Ulysses, they do not respond to these heavenly signs, and reach far beyond moral boundaries, showing "no retreat" at Divine wrath. They further recall the epic hero's tragic arrogance when, inspired by "hubris" to disregard the dangers of the storm, they "leave the safety of land behind" and are in consequence "brought beneath the surface to graves alike."

The focus of van Urk's narrative is Rhodes's band of 'extractors' and their failed journey with the stolen diamonds: this narrative is partly fabricated, drawn from van Urk's awareness of Africa's trade in blood diamonds,[13] as well as her knowledge

[13] Orogun (2004, 151) describes the blood diamond trade in the following manner: "The term "blood diamonds" specifically refers to diamonds that are extracted and exported from particular regions in sub-Saharan Africa that are still ravaged by vicious armed conflicts. These civil wars and brutal armed conflicts usually are instigated by intransigent warlords, renegade militias, and rebel groups that depend on the illegal sale of blood diamonds in exchange for military weapons, guns, fuel, and assorted war materials such as land mines."

that the South African Cullinan diamond has a prominent place in the Queen's crown jewels.[14] The story evolves against the backdrop of more directly historical references to excessive and transgressive cruelty, such as that of the *trekboers* who committed genocide against the San,[15] and Kitchener who was known for inhumanly subjecting the boers to concentration camps during the Anglo Boer war of 1899–1902.[16] The journey also resonates with a contemporary African crisis, with the images and news stories of drowned Syrian or African refuges trying to cross the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean/English Channel in unworthy, overcrowded vessels, which became public knowledge particularly after the infamous 2012 photos of Alan Kurdi were circulated around the globe.[17] The historical therefore blends seamlessly with the fictional and even the personal as her choice to rename her central character Dante Alberti in a nod to her Dutch heritage, proves. The blend of historical fact with personal sentiment connects powerfully to the Ulysses quest, which provides van Urk with a moral language through which to reassess and illuminate seminal aspects of South African history from her own personal perspective. Rhodes, a notoriously enigmatic figure historically,[18] is transformed through the Dantesque language into an allegory for the greed of colonialism:

> A slight man, feminine, but people erred
> in believing him to be harmless. Small
>
> was the avarice of any who had
> come before him: his gluttony stood tall
> as a monument, with a lording hand
>
> held over his own gang, the Extractors,
> so called due to the fame of this awful band
> in obtaining and moving their benefactors'
>
> raw materials: oil, drugs, gems, charcoal,
> rare woods and beasts, these beastly attackers
> even stooping low as human chattel (sup., p. 55, lines 137-47).

[14] van Urk mentioned this and subsequent ideas recorded in this chapter, in an email that she sent to me explaining the context of her piece.

[15] The Khoisan were progressively obliterated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries under the rule of the Dutch East India company. The displacement of these communities by *trekboer* farmers has been likened to a genocide (Adhikari 2010, 20).

[16] During the second Anglo-Boer war in 1900–1901, Kitchener turned to a concentration camp policy, the first of its kind, in order to counter the effective guerilla warfare methods of the Boers. He intentionally targeted Boer families who were given no clothes or medical treatment while in the camps (Robbins Jewell 2003, 2).

[17] Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old boy who drowned when his family tried to reach Turkey, escaping from Kobane, which had recently fallen to the Islamic state. The powerful images of the child lying face down on a Turkish beach were captured by a Turkish photojournalist on 2 September 2015 (Adler-Nissan, Anderson and Hansen 2019, 75).

[18] Despite the fact that Rhodes inspires strong emotions in historians, many details of his life have been lost (Shepperson 1983, 54).

In this way events and figures of South African history are simplified and mapped onto a moral allegorical landscape which is given mythical proportions in its invocation of the failed Ulysses quest.

When questioned about the ways in which she used Dante in this piece, van Urk commented that a Dantesque framework frees her to confront the difficult questions of South African history in terms of less ambiguous ideas of good and evil.[19] It is therefore clear that the Ulysses narrative, preoccupied as it is with the dangers of excessive ambition, provides her with the confidence to voice the unmentionable excesses and cruelty of her South African heritage. Moreover, by casting herself in the role of the Dante voyager, she both acknowledges the seductive power of the colonial quest, which violates the boundaries of the acceptable in the voyager's greedy self-interest, and distances herself from it, since Dante Alberti is able to provide moral judgement on the horrors that he witnesses.

Just as Ulysses' failed quest and shipwreck became for van Urk a metaphor for the tragedies of South Africa's colonial history, so in Thalén Roger's *The Lodestone* the *folle volo* is again invoked as a backdrop for a modern South Africa on the brink of change and yet still haunted by its dark past. Rocco Montano observes that Dante's choice of the words *folle volo* when Ulysses describes his journey, is particularly apt in that it invokes both the poet's moral judgment of Ulysses' undertaking and the regret that Ulysses himself feels for the failure of his ambitions (Freccero 1965, 13). Rogers' piece picks up on the tone of regret associated with the Ulysses tragedy as his protagonist undertakes a flight where he is confronted with a series of characters, who, in their various ways, are still unable to break free of the damaging realities of the Apartheid past. The piece opens with the image of the sea, purposely set against a purgatorial backdrop with the rich colours of the sky, steeped in *Dolce color d'orïental zaffiro* (*Purg.* 1.13).[20] Despite the colours and baptismal images of the opening scene, the heavy feeling of guilt and sorrow is evident in the words, "What regrets would I have, were I to die today? The sea heaved huge sighs bemoaning the fate of this land" (sup., p. 63). This is picked up again in the agonised words "The years of guilt weighed me down like a lodestone curving my back towards the floor and preventing any communion with the sun" (sup., p. 63), and comes to define the subsequent journey on the plane with its metaphorical implications both of redemption and of madness.

The ways in which Dante has reinvented the Ulysses myth to form a deliberate contrast with the pilgrim's successful spiritual voyage out of the *selva oscura* has been much remarked upon by scholars.[21] It is evident that the pilgrim's quest offers a revision, a deliberate reorientation, as the pilgrim's perspective of

[19] Based on a personal conversation that I had with van Urk via email.

[20] "Sweet color of oriental sapphire."

[21] Freccero 1965, deliberately connected the two episodes, noting that Dante fashioned the quest of Ulysses as a metaphor for the moral dangers attendant on the purely philosophical Neoplatonic flight of the soul. This has since become a commonplace among Dante scholars.

the journey is progressively refined throughout the *Commedia*. Thus, the boat in which Ulysses met his doom is recalled in *Purgatorio* as an image for the creative and redemptive effects of his poetry, *la navicella del mio ingegno* which is now headed for better waters.[22] The image of the boat appears again in *Paradiso,* as the *piccioletta barca* in which Dante's readers are travelling, suggesting by contrast the poet's expanding intellectual abilities for the grand task which lies ahead (*Par.* 2.1).[23] Purified of Ulysses' dangerous ambition, Dante is now free to reach beyond the boundaries of the possible. Rogers is drawn to the ways in which Dante's language recalls and revises the infernal journey and the flight metaphor effectively suggests Rogers' desire for South Africa to reach beyond the ambivalence of the current moment, rising above the guilt of Apartheid and achieving divine redemption, as suggested in his determination not to look back as he mounts the plane, and his later echoing of Dante's words, *puro e disposto a salire a le stelle* (*Purg.* 33.145).[24]

Steeped in the language of *Purgatorio,* Rogers' narrative strains against the memory of Apartheid, attempting to cast the metaphorical plane journey as a redemptive one. Two figures dominate the narrative: the African woman and the old man. The African woman tells the protagonist her story while waiting for take-off. In his use of the words, *Più di cento spirti entro sediero* (*Purg.* 2.45).[25] Rogers makes an explicit connection between the people waiting in the plane and Dante's spirits in the boat who are being conveyed to Purgatory while singing the evocative *In exitu Israel de Aegypto,* the song of the Jews in exile from Egypt (*Purg.* 2.46). Like Ulysses, who condemns himself to perpetual exile from home, these spirits are in a state of spiritual exile, an implicit parallel that is brought home by the image of the spirits travelling to Purgatory in the boat, which recalls the moment when Ulysses' boat was dashed to pieces on Purgatory's shores. Furthermore, in recalling the longing of the Jews, the episode conjures up the narrative of home-coming that Ulysses' quest violates. The echoes of Purgatorial home-coming and Ulysses-like exile in Rogers' piece provide a particularly rich insight into the African woman's narrative. Hers is a familiar story in South Africa: she has given up everything for her employers, a "fussy old lady" and her "quadriplegic daughter" (sup., p. 65). Indeed, so committed is she to this family that she has accompanied them to Durban and accepted the unfair stipulation that she only visit her own children once a month. This is a common Apartheid and post-Apartheid narrative of the exploitation of the African servant at the hands of wealthy white families, but it takes on an especial resonance in the Dantesque context: the condition of the woman is likened to

[22] "To run its course through smoother water" / the small bark of my wit now hoists its sail, / leaving that cruel sea behind."

[23] "O you, eager to hear more, / who have followed in your little bark / my ship that singing makes its way."

[24] "pure and prepared to rise up to the stars."

[25] "And more than a hundred souls were with him."

that of Dante's tragic hero who exiles himself, violating the fulfilment of home and family in service of what proves to be a lesser goal. The potentially tragic undertones of the African woman's narrative of self-exile in service of an ungrateful family, are nevertheless offset by the association of the woman with the spirits of Purgatory. This suggests that her story could still be rewritten and that she might be freed from the crimes of South Africa's past. The journey that she is about to undertake is consequently not without overtones of hope.

The old man, who becomes the central allegorical symbol of Rogers' narrative, representing both the sins of South Africa's past and the possibility for redemption, is treated in a similarly ambivalent manner. When first Rogers encounters the old man on the beach, he describes his appearance in the following manner:

> He was wearing a faded black suit with his tie hanging loosely around his neck and his shoes next to him. The noose was yet to tighten (sup., p. 63).

The ominous suggestion of crime and punishment dogs the old man's stories, which recall the horrors of the Apartheid past. He tells the story of District Six—infamously the site of the Apartheid government's forced removals when hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes.[26] His early memories are described when in the car, a touching tale of his new house and the avocado tree that he planted, and of his neighbour's six children who lost their mother and over whom he watched "without interfering" (sup., p. 64).

This tale of hope and unity in the face of hardship becomes tainted as the journey intensifies. In the section marked *Ascent* he describes the destruction of his home and deaths of his neighbours in the government attack on District Six in the following manner:

> Soon I was stepping over corpses of homes and their occupants alike. I saw some people running—those who were lucky enough to get away in time. In the distance, hulking bulldozers presided over the scene—judges presiding over a wrecked courtroom. 'What kind of justice is this?' I thought to myself. When I got to where my house had stood, I knelt down within the toppled crown of my avo tree and wept. Checkmate (sup., p. 65).

It is notable that this description of wanton destruction and violence occurs just as the aeroplane is gaining height, powerfully recalling Ulysses' *folle volo* and indeed culminating in the dream of the crash. The dream echoes the old man's memory and places this explicitly in the context of *Inferno* as the invocation of the following words from *Inferno* 3 indicates: "*Non isperate mai veder lo cielo: / i' vegno per menarvi a l'altra riva / ne le tenebre etterne, in caldo e 'n gelo*"

[26] District Six' as it was before the forced removals' has been associated with the ideal of racial diversity, making its fate even more painful to accept. After it was declared a "Whites Only" Area by the South African Apartheid government in 1966, District Six became the site of frequent forced removals until 1982. Most of its residents were sent to live in the Cape Flats (Beyers 2013, 79).

(*Inf.* 3.85–7).[27] The echoing of these words just as the journey begins in earnest is particularly ominous for it implies that the South African hope of redemption might be as presumptuous as Ulysses' quest towards Purgatory and just as hopeless, for they will forever be denied the sight of heaven. The protagonist witnesses the "burnt out husk of the plane" and the "bodies [that] littered the scene," recalling the old man's memory but colouring this in moral terms as the "carnage of the soul in plain sight" (sup., p. 66). In the attitude of Dante's vision of Love in *Vita Nuova*, the old man now appears holding his heart in his hands and his confession echoes those of Dante's penitents in its consciousness of sin, "In life, I was ravaged by greed and corruption. The fertile soil of my skin was marred by lust. Murder and torture, racism and corruption have lined my skin with age" (sup., p. 67). Yet he is judged like a sinner from *Inferno* and associated explicitly with the "ignavi," those who lived life without taking a moral stand and who now *non hanno speranza di morte* (*Inf.* 3.46).[28] The old man—a South African everyman—is therefore encumbered by his inaction in the face of the moral wrongs of the past and in this way distanced from Dante's pilgrim who is able to overcome the threat of Ulysses' *folle volo* in his purging quest.

Rogers' dream raises the uncomfortable question of shame: is it enough to admit the wrongs of the past? The old man's penitence renders him unlike Ulysses, who went unrepentant to his doom; and yet a similar disastrous fate menaces him. Despite this, the dream is replaced by a purgative waking sequence where the protagonist's impression that the plane "was on fire" (sup., p. 67) recalls Dante's dream when being carried up the mountain by St Lucy in *Purgatorio*:

> Poi mi parea che, poi rotata un poco,
> terribil come folgor discendesse,
> e me rapisse suso infino al foco.
>
> Ivi parea che ella e io ardesse;
> e sì lo 'ncendio imaginato cosse,
> che convenne che 'l sonno si rompesse (*Purg.* 9.28–33).[29]

The purgatorial impression is intensified by the seeming rebirth of the old man whose face is "smoothed by pure sunlight" and who now appears as a "young boy [who] grinned at me" (sup., p. 67), invoking the refreshing words from *Purgatorio* 31: *rifatto sì come piante novelle / rinovellate di novella fronda* (*Purg.* 33.143–4).[30] Rogers' flight therefore hovers between the redemptive flight of the eagle

[27] "[…] give up all hope of ever seeing Heaven. / I come to take you to the other shore, / into eternal darkness, into heat and chill."

[28] "They have no hope of death."

[29] "Then it seemed to me that after wheeling awhile / it plunged down terrible as lightning / and carried me straight to the sphere of fire. / There it seemed that it and I were both aflame, / and the imagined burning was so hot / my sleep was broken and gave way."

[30] "Renewed with new-sprung leaves."

145 "Pure and prepared to rise up to the stars."

and Ulysses' self-destructive endeavour, and it remains an ambiguous symbol: just as redemption appears to have been achieved, the plane can "go no higher" and the crash seems unavoidable, as is indicated in the words "Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin" (sup., p. 67). This culminates in an echoing of the ominous words of hell gate, LASCIATE OGNE SPERANZA, VOI CH'INTRATE (*Inf.* 3.9).[31] Dante's Ulysses is a notoriously ambiguous figure, inspiring the pilgrim with such awe that he leans eagerly in the direction of the flame, desperate to hear it speak. Yet Ulysses is also condemned by the poet for his presumption, for while the *folle volo* is from one angle the daring and brave quest of an epic hero, from another it is presented as a tragically misguided journey of moral hubris. As I have shown, Rogers transforms the moral ambiguity of this episode into a South African dilemma, an attempt to break free from a history whose scars remain.

In creating Ulysses Dante has fashioned a myth that is especially attractive to the young South African experience. The four writers discussed here draw on it to help them articulate personal and political turmoil as well as the creative potential to remake and redeem themselves and their society. The South Africa that emerges from these pieces is a place in the process of discovering itself, a process that remains fraught as young South Africans struggle to interpret and break free from the destructive past. In Dante's Ulysses they see a myth for the transformative and potentially damaging power of change and a language through which that change can be interpreted. They are also conscious that behind Ulysses stands Dante and his poet's power to mediate this figure, to transform its context in such a way as to make it more immediately relevant, morally and intellectually. Responding to his invitation to make and remake myths in his own image, the young writers similarly mediate Dante, appropriating his language and imagery in service of a South African vision.

Africa looms in the background of Dante's Ulysses episode: by invoking the Pillars of Hercules at the Straights of Gibralter, Dante deliberately recalls the doomed quest of Ugolino Vivaldi who attempted to circumnavigate Africa and never returned (Hall 2008, 78). Despite its precolonial context, the Ulysses myth as reimagined by Dante therefore seems to shed light on the ambiguities of the imperial project, which fashions itself as a great epic and yet disguises the moral consequences of the unbridled pursuit of colonial curiosity.[32] The original myth of Ulysses has been read as a symbol of the arrogance of the colonist as well as the heartache of the colonised,[33] but Dante's reinvention suggests more nuanced possibilities for an African reading, for Ulysses is clearly more than a symbol to

[31] "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE."

[32] Tennyson interprets this as an entirely positive epic of Victorian imperialism, though Dante's depiction is in reality far more ambiguous (Scott 1987, 106).

[33] The African diaspora in America and the Caribbean as well as some political exiles from Africa have used the figure of Ulysses to capture their ambivalent feelings of separation from the motherland. Ulysses' attitude at Cyclops Island has also been equated with imperial arrogance (Hall 2008, 5; 78).

him: there exists an energy between poet and hero, an unmistakeable rapport that is dynamic and inventive in character.[34]

I have shown that for the South African Born Free generation, the imagery surrounding Dante's Ulysses mirrors their own political and personal anxieties. It is clear that for these young writers the *folle volo* recalls both the precariousness of the colonial past and the uncertainty of their post-94 future. But they do not experience the image as a static symbol: like Dante the poet, they engage dynamically with Ulysses and his quest, for it frees them to reinvent themselves, individually and politically. Dante's approach to history in this episode is mythical in the sense that it echoes the Greek oral tradition where Ulysses first appears. Like this tradition, Dante's account is "fundamentally timeless" and does not merely "transmit" the past, but "create[s]" it (Finley 1965, 285), as is evident from the revised ending, which appears to be Dante's own original interpretation. It is this creative element that defines the born frees relationship with Dante. When commenting on the effects of teaching Dante in translation to South African students, I have previously remarked on the text's conversational qualities, the ways in which students felt compelled to compare their own experiences with those described by the poet (Fanucchi and Houliston 2013, 96). Dante's Ulysses invites just this process of comparing and translating. For South African born frees the results of such an engagement are manifold and paradoxical as they seek to fashion new identities, so that they may repeat the words with conviction, *e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle* (*Inf.* 34.139).

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Dimitri Tsafendas Meets Dante, Friend and Witness of Our Time

Martina Di Florio

If Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco remind us that the act of reading is also an act of rewriting and cooperating with the author, Chariklia Martalas follows their lessons and interacts with Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a very sensitive and unique way. Seven hundred years later, and twelve thousand kilometers distant, a young student meets and befriends the medieval intellectual. Chariklia Martalas guides Dante to discover Apartheid and its tragedies, xenophobia, violence, and human hell. On this journey, Dante is a friend, one who is able to listen, empathize, and instill the confidence that words may still be carriers of human values. Martalas assumes responsibility of her position as a post-Apartheid reader and writer, and maintains the standpoint that it is indispensable to educate the world about what happened in South Africa. The crimes committed against humanity in the country must not be forgotten. Thus, the imperative of condemning the brutality that has poisoned history, and that continues to leave scarves on its pages, cannot be stressed enough.

In *The Literary Response to the Holocaust and the Transformation of the Reader into a Messenger,* David Patterson (2021, 2) states that "the tale belongs as much to the reader as it does to the author, with all the ethical implications of the transformation of the reader into a witness." Patterson's reflection, although related to the post-Holocaust literary production, is certainly applicable to post-Apartheid literature and its social responsibility of sharing and representing a collective trauma that, to partially heal, can only rely on a collective effort. With this

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consideration of the interdependence between the writer and the reader as the starting point, particular attention must be paid to the reading approach. The reading process, indeed, allows the entrance in an environment often unknown, and it is the aesthetic stance that enables the reader to communicate with the text and participate in the construction of its meaning.

In agreement with Rosenblatt and his "transactional theory," we can state that every act of reading can be described as an event in which the reader meets the text and establishes a transaction with specific meanings, able to activate a reservoir of experiences and memories. Therefore, the creative text produced by Chariklia Martalas, titled: *Eating John Vorster*, can be interpreted as the result of an act of "transactional reading and writing," through which the established relationship of friendship and trust between the reader and the writer enables them to generate a series of transactions. It is this series of transactions that reinforces the writer-reader relationship in its turn. Thus, Martalas's encounter with Dante results in the expression and sharing of an intergenerational trauma that crosses cultural and national borders, that is, the Apartheid trauma, which is still experienced at both a personal and a collective level. The continuous and active engagement with Dante's text, therefore, engenders a series of associations, images, analogies, metaphors, and feelings that become the foundation for developing a highly original and personal text. This creative text can be shared with a transcultural and transnational community of readers, who are invited to spread the text's ethical and activist message.

Martalas's reading and interpretation of Dante's masterpiece further enacts a process of transcultural writing that has at least two outcomes: the reworking and elaboration of a traumatic South African memory, and the transformation of the reader into a responsible witness and messenger. The traumatic memory of the writer, indeed, not only transforms the reader into a witness, but entrusts the latter with the ethical responsibility of being a messenger of a "singular message that brings with it a universal warning" (Patterson 2021, 2). Based on this observation, I argue that Chariklia Martalas establishes a personal relationship with Dante's text as well as with the reader of the creative text produced. Indeed, the interpretation and the process of rewriting, while unfolding meanings and images still hidden in the original text, stimulate the reflection on the traumatic experience of Apartheid. The reader of Martalas's work is therefore invited to share a message otherwise forgotten, or even unknown.

The text titled *Eating John Vorster* grounds itself in Dante's *Inferno* 33 and brings to the surface the story of three men whose lives were tightly connected: Hendrik Verwoerd, John Vorster, and Dimitri Tsafendas. The reader finds the familiar images and characters of the *Divine Comedy* completely transformed, and discovers a new territory which, although invoking canonized images, unearths contemporary historical and political chapters that merit consideration and, above all, reflection. The new story evokes Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri, who suffer eternal damnation in Dante's *Inferno*. Their pain, now transformed in the experience of Apartheid, is rewritten by a student whose family has Greek origins and lives in post-Apartheid South Africa.

When I interviewed her, Chariklia Martalas stated that the history surrounding Dimitri Tsafendas was the point of departure as well as the line of connection between Dante's *Commedia* and the creative text *Eating John Vorster*. Asked[1] about the personal relationship that she has with Apartheid and its consequences, Martalas answered:

> Whatever race you are, Apartheid is a monstrous shadow into the present and effects every part of our lives. […] The tragedy of Apartheid was a tragedy for my family like all families living under a brutal and merciless regime, but I wouldn't say it was a trauma. However, there are strange nuances in the midst of it such as there being some whites that were better than others in the eyes of the State, and the Greeks were definitely the lesser whites. It was not a desired community which is why many of my family on both sides were denied the opportunity to become immigrants to South Africa. However, it was also a community that wasn't invested in the country, apolitical as most came to seek economic opportunities but saw themselves as being tied to Greece rather than tied to South African soil. I still think this thread runs in the community even though some of my family members do not see us as immigrants with no South Africanness anymore. I certainly feel connected to South Africa. It is in this sense that I can explain the reason why I found the figure of Dimitri Tsafendas so interesting. He was a liminal character being born from a black mother and a Greek father and in many ways being Greek was liminal, let alone being mixed race though passing in appearance as Greek (or he would not have gotten a job in parliament).

These words elucidate that one of the most important motivations behind Martalas's work is her family's migration to South Africa. Whereas Apartheid is described in the interview as "a monstrous shadow into the present," the reader has to be aware that there are also "strange nuances" that need to be considered. One of these nuances is the missed representation of the Greek diasporic community of South Africa, a community that initially settled in Cape Town in the 1860s. In the years that followed, Greek migrants spread to other parts of South Africa, especially cities, among which Johannesburg became the "largest Greek community in Africa" (Theodoropoulos 1993, 126).

The parliamentary messenger Dimitri Tsafendas, portrayed in his trial as the insane murderer of the Afrikaner Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd—who is often referred to as the 'architect of Apartheid'—, takes centerstage in what can be also considered a theatrical text. Indeed, Tsafendas is a "man who has murdered [and] watch[es] over a murderer" (sup., p. 47) in Martalas's piece, and he abruptly interrupts Hendrik Verwoerd while the latter is eating John Vorster's head. Tsafendas enters the scene "in a prison uniform" (sup., p. 46) and is "deter-

[1] The exact question was: "*Eating John Vorster* can be interpreted as a text in which the Apartheid (and post-Apartheid) intergenerational trauma is expressed and elaborated. Do you, or your family and friends, experienced the tragedy of Apartheid and its consequences? Do you have a personal experience you can share?"

mined to meet Verwoerd's heart"(sup., p. 46). The reader witnesses the interruption of the anthropophagic action and assists Tsafendas in murdering Hendrik Verwoerd. The writer emphasizes the stabs, and uses words to amplify the cruelty as well as the determination of an action that seems to be necessary: "He stabbed him / He stabbed him four times / Quickly as if he rehearsed it" (sup., p. 46). Despite the brutality of the murder, the anthropophagic action perpetrated by Hendrik Verwoerd starts its course again without interruption. There is no chance to pause and feel empathy for the two main representatives of Apartheid, still united in death as they were in life. Hendrik Verwoerd, the 'architect of Apartheid,' cannot speak or express pain for the stabs he just received and is forced to continue to devour the head of John Vorster, who succeeded Verwoerd as prime minister from 1966 to 1978, and briefly held the presidency from 1978 to 1979. The punishment is also aggravated by the negation to express himself, for he cannot utter a single word: "He is not allowed a voice," (sup., p. 47) the text states, also adding that "[h]is crimes too great to ever use language to evoke your pity. His punishment forbids it"(sup., p. 46).

The negation of language, while making his circumstance parallel the brutality and monstrosity of the location in which he is situated, serves as a theatrical device to highlight Dimitri Tsafendas's voice. The words of the murderer, who becomes here an "unsung hero," (sup., p. 47) resound in the second part of the piece, where they stand in contrast with John Verdoerd's silence, unfolding a series of questions directed to the reader. Dimitri Tsafendas, in a monologue addressed to the two pilgrims, briefly summarizes his condemnation, the tortures that followed his imprisonment, and the motivations behind his action.

Far from offering a detailed reconstruction of the facts, the creative text *Eating John Vorster* embodies Martalas's belief in language, reading, and writing. She explains in the interview:

> The power of language to realize a better world lies in the capacity for true language to cut the veil of our own delusions and show us reality as it is. I believe that language, when it is written truthfully, is a mirror, giving us a reflection that is difficult to accept not because it is wholly bad, but because like language it is itself ambiguous. This is why true language can cause such painful reflections; it shows us that we are undeniable creatures of purgatory and that it is up to us to transform ourselves. Language in its capacity to make us see things, not just to look but to recognize, proves to us our own responsibilities to the reflection we see before us. This is why great literature and philosophy are so transformational, they uproot you from your misconceptions and make you see yourself and your world vividly. It is ironic that language in its ambiguity is the only means we have to reach clarity.[2]

[2] The exact question was: "In *Eating John Vorster* you express the limits of language ("Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction"). Do you think that writing and reading can help human beings to reflect and

The contrast between John Verdoerd without a voice and Dimitri Tsafendas speaking with the two pilgrims seems to furthermore overturn the media's representation of Tsafendas and the legal proceedings at the time of his prosecution. This depiction, far from representing him as a mentally ill man, apolitical, and unworthy of any sympathy, offers a different perspective on the assassin. Martalas, thus, presents a suffering man who, reminding the pilgrims that he is "not in Paradise," (sup., p. 47) states that he "cannot even climb the steepness of Purgatory" (sup., p. 48) because his "fate is with Verwoerd / [and] Justice is always a matter of intertwining" (sup., p. 48).

Martalas's elaboration of Tsafendas's story aligns itself with the recent volume published on his life in 2019, resulting from ten years of scholarly research done by Harris Dousemetzis. In his contribution, titled *The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The life of Dimitri Tsafendas*, the scholar exposes detailed facts and considerations based on legal records, reports, court hearings, news, and the general investigation undertaken at the time of the assassination. The book contributes to a more complex historical understanding. While the Apartheid government and its sympathizers in the far-right media remained tight-lipped about Dimitri Tsafendas's political activity and commitment against Apartheid at the time of his trial, they purposely depicted the parliamentary messenger as a schizophrenic who killed Hendrik Verwoerd because a tapeworm led to this action. Dousemetzis, on the contrary, argues that indignation and anger against the conditions of the South African black community were Tsafendas's motivations to assassinate Verdowerd, and vindicate the collective struggle against Apartheid.

The following reflections, expressed by Martalas during the interview, are interestingly in line with the main argument of Dousemetzis's book:

> [H]e was also a political character that was connected to the injustices of Apartheid far more deeply than many other Greeks and I believe it was because he was on the periphery of Greekness, of whiteness, of the senses of self the State wanted to impose on people. It causes me a profound sadness that he is not recognized by my community and praised. It deeply upsets me that he is not seen as an exemplary member of the Greek community, and I believe he should be included in the community now in death. He was an outsider to an outsider white community and so' in many ways' I identify with Tsafendas as that is how I feel within my own community and 'in many ways' how my immediate family feels in general' in terms of the community.[3]

Based on what has been said up to this point, the *Divine Comedy*, a canonical text in the Italian and World Literature, and on which the Italian national identity was built, opens itself to dialogue with the Apartheid tragedy. This tragedy affected

direct their actions toward the realization of a better world/society? It might seem like a dream (indeed, history shows us our failures), but do you believe in the power of language?"

[3] This reflection corresponds to the second part of Martalas's answer to the first question of the interview (see footnote 1).

South African families, and yet it transcends the South African borders. Violence, brutality, repression, pain, and disbelief are given voice, while old and new meanings intersect and interact at various levels. Dante's message is amplified, and the Italian medieval author, in *Eating John Vorster*, becomes the witness of "horror;" "murders of flesh and mind;" "hell [that] follows human beings" (sup., p. 45). But Dante also becomes a witness of a very important historical re-examination of the facts, and his text stimulates a political reflection capable of uncovering the great lies in South African history.

The creative text of Martalas, therefore, not only opens a new perspective on Dimitri Tsafendas, but corrects the distorted and corrupted representation that concerns him. The reader, while discovering a critical episode of Apartheid, becomes aware of how the facts and their depictions were manipulated and is, at the same time, implicitly called to be a responsible messenger of a true and informed message. Consistent with the statements made in the interview, Martalas takes the opportunity offered by this unique project on Dante to prove that language has the "capacity to make us see things, not just to look but to recognize, proves to us our own responsibilities to the reflection we see before us."[4] This interest in the transformational power of language, highlighted by the second response in the interview, is evident throughout the entire Martalas's production, which also offers insightful reflections on the impossibility of expression and on the limitations of language. In *Eating John Vorster*, for instance, the following three lines express the incapability to describe the crimes committed by Hendrik Verwoerd: "Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction" (sup., p. 49).

The failure to describe and communicate the traumatic experience of Apartheid not only reflects the eloquence of silence, but corresponds to a meaningful consideration shared by Martalas in the following paragraph:

> I believe the power of language is in its limits, I believe the power of language is in its silences. It is still a reflection, still a truth shown to us, but instead of words it's the inability to speak that truly allows us to grasp what has happened. It is the silence that makes us know that the horror that we encounter was not truly human because we would not be able to do justice to it if we recreated it in ordinary terms. This is when language needs to break, this is when new forms of expression need to emerge. But sometimes just acknowledging the silence I think is its own power, a sign of respect that the reflection is too great for our capacity to render it completely.

It is clear that Martalas's attention to the power of language grasps its multifaceted nature and acknowledges the power of silence. Words and silence intersect themselves in *Eating John Vorster*, revealing their fluidity and interdependence. The reader, horrified by the development of the episode at hand, is implicitly called to become a responsible witness and messenger.

[4] This statement is taken from the answer given by Chariklia Martalas to the second question of the interview (see footnote 2).

The imperative to describe unspeakable events, as well as to denounce a trauma that caused intergenerational scars, is certainly among the main motivations of the analyzed text. *Eating John Vorster* clearly dialogues with the other two texts written by Chariklia Martalas and included in the present project.[5] Specifically, when the writer focuses on the role of language and the transformational power of literature, there seems to be also a recurring preoccupation with the effectiveness of language to preserve and express human values and morality. While in *Eating John Vorster* a provocative passage tests the reader by asking: "Tsafendas didn't doubt his morality / Why should he? / Why should we doubt his morality at all?" (sup., p. 48), in *The Party*, Francesca challenges Dante and Chariklia by saying: "But no one knows what is right especially not those philosophers thinking about virtue, especially not me. So we will have to see how the 21st century goes" (sup., p. 35). Along the same line, another meaningful question can be found in *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses* when Dante asks Chariklia: "So let me ask this. Is it virtue that guides your pen? Is it virtue that fills your words?" (sup., p. 43).

While it is undeniable that pain and trauma can be recognized as points of connection between the writer and the reader, and among different cultures (Caruth 1995, 11), Martalas's exploration of virtue and morality seems to align itself with the classical acknowledgement of human vulnerability and limitedness. The Socratic epistemic vulnerability and the awareness that also the *logos* has its limits is a moral lesson that informs Martalas's perspective on the role of literature as a medium to express human values and morality. Indeed, when asked about the role of virtue in the process of writing, Martalas stated:

> In many ways I do believe that artists of all kinds have a responsibility to try creating something that is true and authentic. To actively resist deception and distortion. If this is the definition of what it means to have a pen guided by virtue, then I can possibly answer the question affirmatively. I do try to express what I believe has some truth to the human experience, but I also try to allow myself the scope of my ignorance without letting it paralyze me. Maybe it is the philosophy student in me, but I know that I do not know so many things, which is a frightening place to be when you write. So, I think like Socrates alludes that one might not ever be virtuous, but the attempt at being virtuous, the acknowledgement of one's ignorance, is a way to be virtuous. So, this is a long-winded way of saying virtue guides my pen when I am honest that I do not know what it means but attempt at virtuous writing anyway. It's the intention of fulfilling a responsibility to express what I believe is my true reality that I hope leads me to a state of being guided by virtue. I hope that this is enough to prove my strong sense of the ethical commitment to provoke reflection even if the only person reflecting is myself.[6]

[5] The four texts belong to a series titled *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again*. In addition to *Eating John Vorster*, the three creative texts that complete Martalas's contribution to the project are: *Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses*; *The Dream of the Ghost of Ulysses*; and *The Party*.

[6] The exact question was: "'Is it virtue that guides your pen?' (to quote what you wrote almost at the end of *The Dream of the Ghost Ulysses*)."

Martalas's main objectives, therefore, are well grounded in a firm commitment to "resist deception and distortion" as well as in a strong conviction that the writer and the reader can be co-authors. Hence, the creative text *Eating John Voster*, while becoming a valid and unique tool to illuminate on the traumatic events of Apartheid, otherwise forgotten or misconceived, can be transformed in a political space, or in a cathartic space of reflection.

The active engagement with Dante's text results in the activation, or re-activation, of a personal and collective basin of memories, reflections, and meanings. As Martalas's text proves, the outcome of this process is a relationship of trust and friendship with the author of the *Divine Comedy*. This friendship can be seen as the result of a transaction between the reader and the original text that, in this case, stimulates the production of another text and occurs "at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (Rosenblatt 1969, 45). Martalas herself clarifies how her relationship with Dante informed the process of writing:

> Firstly, I believe having a friendship with the author by no means stops your capacity for your own interpretation of the text, but I think encourages it because you feel your interpretation is tied not only to the text itself but to the author as co-creator. […] It is a friendship but ultimately a strange friendship for whatever side you are on' whether reader or writer' you will find yourself with silence with the other person in the friendship. As a reader I couldn't talk directly to Dante. But I think it is this silence that allows that imagination to blossom and create this beautiful dialogue that involves imagining another and extending oneself to another one who isn't in direct contact with you. It is an act of imaginative empathy that allows the reader or writer to feel connected in many ways with the unknown.[7]

To conclude, Chariklia Martalas's talent as a writer lies in her unique ability to engage the reader in the discovery of indescribable events, events that obscure history. As a writer, she is able to encourage the reader to believe in the power of language, literature, words, and silence. The experience of reading *Eating John Vorster* sheds light on the South African intergenerational commitment towards the realization of an active and responsible (global) citizenship. This citizenship should consider dialogue and reflection on past experiences of Apartheid as points of departure for imagining the possibility of a better future. If, for Chariklia Martalas, "[i]t is an act of imaginative empathy that allows the reader or writer to feel connected in many ways with the unknown,"[8] her creative text *Eating John Vorster* proves that this "imaginative empathy" has the power to cross the borders of time and space and to awake the consciousness of the reader, who is now the guardian and courier of a new message.

[7] The exact question was: "Do you think that the relationship between the reader and the author of a text can be defined as a friendship?"

[8] This quotation is taken from the previous quotation of Martalas's answer.

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Notes on the writings by the University of the Witwatersrand students of Dante

Franco Masciandaro

Anita Virga invited me to participate in her students' project, as described by Chariklia Martalas:

> To think critically about how the 21st century would change our views of what [Dante's] hell [but also episodes from *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*] would look like by doing this through creative form. […] The newly imagined Cantos are expressed through a dialogue, a replica of a Canto, a prose poem and a short story. It is my hope that this project's imagining is as rich and evocative as Dante himself: […] a "mad flight" into, hopefully, something that can be remembered long after it has been read.

As an older student of Dante, I welcomed with enthusiasm the invitation to participate in this project, as reader and commentator of what promises to be a new adventure, a new journey along with Dante as pilgrim and poet. I like to think of this project as a way, or method, that at once departs from and builds upon the traditional Dante studies. I therefore imagine that I am about to participate in a symposium, and therefore a dialogue with the young authors of this project, thus transcending the physical distance that separates us, in the spirit of a newly discovered friendship. As both reader and writer, I look forward to sharing with the young *dantisti* a transcendence of the ego. As Massimo Lollini points out (following Emmanuel Levinas),

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> In an ethical approach to literature the writer and/or the reader may experience a change emerging in the very act of writing and of reading, a change leading to a transcendence of the ego. Writing and reading are ethical activities as long as they leave the door open to the unexpected, to an interruption of the economy of the same made possible by the encounter with the other (2002, 24).

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses. By Chariklia Martalas

The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses is a dialogue between Chariklia and Dante. In the opening scene, Martalas's Dante is a psychotherapist.

I find it significant to think of Dante as a therapist (from the Greek *therapeia*, to cure, to heal). But I would add that Dante, as poet, was indeed a therapist, whose work's goal is to heal his readers. As he wrote in his Letter to Cangrande della Scala,

> The purpose of the whole work and the part [of *The Divine Comedy*] could be multiple, that is both remote and proximate. But leaving off subtle investigation, we can say briefly that the purpose of the whole as well as the part is to remove those living in this life "from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss (13.15.39).

Chariklia wants to be a writer. She had asked Dante for his permission to rework the *Inferno* through a modern lens. He not only agreed but volunteered to go back to Inferno with her for her research purposes. Inferno was not a place to be alone he said. She didn't tell Dante that Virgil had offered her to be her guide.

Instead, she tells Dante that she had a dream that she was on a ship, alone and not alone because many crew members had her same face, and shared her nostalgia for home. One fellow traveler, a woman, wanted to forge ahead, and convinced the others to do the same. But the nostalgia remains.

Dante's responds: "You are Ulysses," and Chariklia replies: "I am not good enough with words to be Ulysses" (sup., p. 40). She only wanted language. Nor did she want to be a hero, like Ulysses. She concludes that if virtue does not guide her pen, she will accept damnation among the flames, next to Ulysses.

If we ask: "What is the meaning of Chariklia's subject of the dream (Chariklia), who is in a ship, is "both alone and not alone," we can say that all the characters in the dream are projections of the dreamer, and, we may add that, recalling Chariklia's statement in the introduction of the dialogue that she "wants to be a writer," (sup., p. 41) all the crew members as "others" are in fact creations of one author. As we recall, Dante's Ulysses is the leader of his ship's crew members, whom he, as a "fraudulent counselor" leads in a "mad flight" to the "world that is unpeopled," where they join him in death away from their loved ones and their Ithaca. We can thus remark that in the beginning of Chariklia's dream the question of the protagonist's moral responsibility toward others, including her readers, is absent. By contrast, Dante the poet is well aware of the danger of ignoring his responsibility, *as author,* vis-à-vis his readers.

Ulysses defends his journey toward the "world that is unpeopled" (*mondo sanza gente, Inf.* 26.117). As John Freccero has noted,

> The essential characteristic of Ulysses' rhetoric is that it is completely self-serving, dedicated to a heroic enterprise, without any sense of moral duty. In his speech to his men, the comfort he offers them is their own manhood and stature (1986, 144).

As we glance back at Chariklia's dream, we discern significant departures from Dante's account of Ulysses' and his crew's adventure across the ocean. It is indeed a significant creative move by Chariklia as a writer and as narrator of her dream. Unlike the ancient hero's and his companions' lack of nostalgia to be with their loved ones in their native Ithaca (we recall Ulysses' words, spoken not with regret but with pride, of his leaving his son, his father, and Penelope, and, we may add, his Ithaca, his *polis*, (thus forsaking his responsibility, the *ethos* of being its king), she and all who looked like her spoke of their yearning for home: "Home was where our souls needed to return and so we mouthed this one place to each other as if it was a chant—*Ithaca*" (sup., p. 42). Significantly, this yearning, this nostalgia, absent in Dante's account of Ulysses' and his companions' journey away from home, resembles instead the nostalgia for the loved ones and for Ithaca represented as the *leitmotiv* of Homer's *Odyssey,* as it records Ulysses' peregrinations, after the fall of Troy, which end with his return to Ithaca—an event which preceded Dante's imagined new journey away from home—Ulysses' *folle volo* (mad flight)—when he and his companions were "old and slow" (26.107).

Returning to Chariklia's dream, she mentions that the one she called 'x' had a "yearning for something more" (sup., p. 42). Once again, we find more evidence of Chariklia's creative reworking of Dante's Ulysses episode, as writer and as dreamer, as we read the texts reproduced above. In addition to the description by the "chorus" of women of having seen "beautiful cities […] and cities that had fallen" (a departure from Dante's Ulysses' episode narrated in *Inf.* 26), we read of the chorus of women-as-writers and of their creation of "a place of unending light," and of "a world where language can fall through you," and also of the exhortation to "write for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge" (sup., p. 42).

Thus, through Chariklia we encounter women-as-authors, as poets, and therefore as therapists, as healers.

So, we may ask, "Does virtue guide these authors (including Chariklia as author and dreamer) despite the fact that their dream, their task to write in order to create "a place of unending light" not only for themselves but also "for those that don't know what it is like beyond the edge," may be achieved away from their "Ithaca", and thus by ceasing to yearn for their home, their parents, and their siblings? The end of Chariklia's dialogue suggests that the answer is "yes."

To Chariklia's "yes" we may add Levinas's (1991, 46) reflections on "the said" and "saying":

> Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. Proximity is quite distinct

from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self. Being and entities weigh heavily by virtue of the saying that gives them light.

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. Canto XIII Now Smells Like Roses. By Chariklia Martalas

Chariklia's poem constitutes an imaginary new version of Dante's *Inferno* 13, the canto of the suicides. She imagines that Dante had returned to the infernal wood in which were imprisoned the souls of the Suicides. In it we find several creative "moves" by Chariklia on the imaginary chessboard of poetry, first as her role as Dante's guide, as Virgil had been in the first version of *Inferno* 13; then in her remark that "things had changed in hell," and also in her statement that she "could be no servant of God." Hence, we are reminded of the responsibility of the author of a poem, whose subject is whether suicide is a mortal sin, and whether Dante's representation of the souls of the suicides as beings imprisoned in trees that are "knotted, gnarled" (*Inf.* 13.5) constitutes a just punishment reflecting God's will, in light of the traditional definition of God as Infinite Love. We note that Chariklia's creative revisiting scenes from Dante's *Inferno* include her imagining that Dido, whom we first met among the lustful, in the company of Paolo and Francesca (*Inf.* 5), is now found among the souls of the Suicides. As a significant shift of focus this speaking of God's judgement of these souls—as portrayed in Dante's poetic representation, and therefore in his fiction (which of course implies the poet's claim that it is not a fiction)[1]—is elaborated in her verses cited above: that God changed His mind regarding His judgement of the Suicides, commensurate to "the world […] changing its mind": from Dante's time to ours in the 21st century.

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. Eating John Vorster. By Chariklia Martalas

The hellish scene evoked by the title of Chariklia Martalas' drama (or tragedy?), constituting the third writing inspired by reading Dante's *Inferno*, echoes the scene recorded at the beginning of *Inferno* 33, in verses 1–9.

In the Second Ring of the Ninth Circle, Antenora, where the souls of the traitors to their homeland or party are immersed in ice, Dante introduces Count Ugolino of Pisa. The deed of treachery for which Ugolino is condemned to Antenora is his betrayal of his own party, the Guelph party which entrusted him with the rule of Pisa. His "neighbor" is Archbishop Ruggieri, who, as *podestà* of Pisa, betrayed the exiled count by inviting him back to the city. Upon his re-

[1] See, for example, *Inf.* 16.127–32: "By the lines / of this my Comedy, reader, I swear—/ and may my verse find favour for long years—that through the dense and darkened air I saw / a figure swimming, rising up, enough / to bring amazement to the firmest heart." The 'figure' is the monster Geryon, emblem of fraud, on whose back Virgil and Dante will descend to the Eight Circle (Malebolge).

turn to Pisa, the count and two of his sons and two grandsons were imprisoned in the Torre della Fame (the Tower of Hunger), where they died of starvation.

We may now ask: "Who is John Vorster?" and "who is his neighbor who is having such a 'fierce meal'?" Chariklia Martalas invites her readers to recall (or to learn) that Hendrik Verwoerd is widely considered the architect of Apartheid, and that he was an outspoken mentor and idol of Vorster. How do they resemble the traitors Ugolino and Ruggieri? As political leaders of their country (they both served as Prime Ministers) they betrayed the citizens of South Africa, fomenting hatred and violence, which erupted in the massacre of Sharpeville: "As those with black skin were shunned not just from the word citizen but from the word human" (as Chariklia writes in her drama).

Verwoerd and Tsafendas cause Dante to realize that the Inferno he had been to before was too small, and that because of them God had to make it bigger. Once again, Chariklia Martalas' work sets in sharp relief the problematic, unfathomable reality of evil—its madness—and the corresponding question of justice from both the human perspective and from a divine perspective. It is to God that throughout history—the history of evil and of just retribution—that human beings turn to find answers. And, whether we are Christians or not, what is our response to Jesus' message to love one's enemy?

Dante's response is an invective against the rulers of Italy and of the empire in his day:

> Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows,
> you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas,
> no queen of provinces but bordellos!
>
> That noble soul had such enthusiasm:
> his city's sweet name was enough for him
> to welcome—there—his fellow-citizen.
>
> But those who are alive within you now
> can't live without their warring—even those
> whom one same wall and one same moat enclose
>
> gnaw at each other. Squalid Italy, (*Purg.* 6.76–85)

Upon seeing Sordello suddenly transformed from a static to a kinetic figure, from one who is self-absorbed to one who is eager to manifest his love for his fellow citizen at "his city's sweet name,' we along with Dante immediately see the larger scene of this life where not love but hatred reigns. No sooner has good come into view than it calls forth a vision of evil. As Dante's invective unfolds, its deepest motivation emerges: the longing to reach the place of happiness at the summit of Purgatory. This longing is given special expression at the point of the invective when, after reproaching the Emperor Albert I of Austria for having abandoned Italy, Dante adds:

> For both you and your father, in your greed
> for lands that lay more close at hand, allowed
> the garden of the Empire to be gutted (*Purg.* 6.103–5).

Dante's invective dramatically represents the longing for the happiness 'figured' by the Earthly Paradise as the longing to transform the desert into a garden in the here and now of this life.

Both Chariklia Martalas and Dante cause their readers to ask if there is a way out; if the human condition can be changed? And if it cannot, how can the terror and despair that accompany it be transformed or transcended? In other words, how can a tragic condition be transformed into tragic vision (or tragic wisdom)?

A Mad Flight Into *Inferno* Once Again. The Party. By Chariklia Martalas

The Party, by Chariklia Martalas, which I would characterize as a short story, is a caricature, or parody of Dante's *Inferno* 5, the canto of the lustful. Yet, beneath this mask, we find this weighty message spoken by Francesca—the party's hostess—towards the end of the story. The world of the *Commedia* has changed over the course of the centuries. Renaissance humanists set aside pre-determination, posited the dignity of humanity and our free will. The choices that confront us have made the task of judging souls even more difficult.

Francesca's statements that "human choice has started to matter more than it ever did," and that "judging human souls has never been harder," (sup., p. 35) clearly suggest that the fate of the souls as Dante chose to depict in his *Commedia*'s three realms—Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso—reflect God's judgement as arbitrary or even unjust if viewed from today's perspective. I would respond by revisiting Paolo and Francesca's fate, as imagined and as represented by Dante. The first question that I shall address is one that pertains to every soul whom Dante the character encounters in Hell: could they have repented, even at the last instant of their life's journey, thus avoiding eternal damnation. Another question is whether each soul of the damned still possesses some measure of goodness, of virtue, without which their suffering is unimaginable, and indeed meaningless from the point of view of justice (human and divine, as Dante attempted to fathom through his fiction and his ethics).

In response to the notion that Paolo and Francesca had no time to repent, as they were killed by Paolo's brother, we read in *Purgatorio* 3.118–23, that Manfredi, the son of Emperor Frederick II repented an instant before dying.

As to the second question, there is evidence of the coexistence of good and evil in Dante's representation of Francesca as a damned soul, for example, *Inf.* 5.97–106. The peaceful landscape of Francesca's birthplace (the city of Ravenna on the Adriatic), which she evokes as a way of introducing herself, stands in sharp contrast to the story of her turbulent, destructive love that immediately and abruptly follows. As she depicts her native land, the emphasis falls on the principle of order that governs the power of nature represented by the river Po and its tributaries moving, together, towards their final goal, the sea. Francesca's landscape symbolizes the natural love which moves all living creatures towards their proper end, God. As the image of the Po seeking peace with its tributaries suggests, to rest in God, or to be His "friends", necessarily implies a communion or friendship with others, for the very nature of Divine Love is to gather all loves in its Infinity.

With the irruption of the word "Love" (*Amor*), uttered by Francesca three times, this landscape and the paradisiacal scene of innocence and harmony that it conjures up prove to be very fragile, just a fleeting recollection and nostalgia for the lost paradise.

The two lovers' natural longing to be, like the Po, united with others within that which transcends them, cannot be fulfilled as long as it is directed to an inappropriate object, a false image of good. Their torment and their hell is caused by the disproportion between the naturally expansive love that can find peace only in Infinite Love and their search for the Infinite in a fleeting image, like that of Francesca's "fair body" and Paolo's "beauty", or in the fictional paradise of a moment appropriated from the world of literature: the *point* of their kiss as they read of Lancelot's and Guinivere's kiss (*Inf.* 5.127–38). We should also note that Paolo's silence throughout the entire episode suggests the suppression of the infinite otherness that "puts authentically in relation" two friends. Creative love implies a union in difference. The following reflections on love and friendship by Levinas (1969, 264) are a useful commentary on the absence or perversion of friendship in Paolo and Francesca's love:

> The relationship established between lovers in voluptuosity, fundamentally refractory to universalization, is the very contrary to the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public: "Voluptuosity hence aims not at the Other but at his voluptuosity; it is voluptuosity of voluptuosity, love of the love of the other."

Unlike Francesca, who showed no interest in the political life of her city, and whose native landscape is inscribed in a single tercet ("the land where I was born lies on that shore…," *Inf.* 5.97–9), faintly revealing a lost, betrayed order, Cunizza (*Par.* 9.13–36) exhibits a deep concern for Italy's political disorder, especially the devastation caused by her bother, the cruel tyrant Ezzelino da Romano (the "firebrand"), as she depicts the natural boundaries of her land, within the topography of rivers and sea. Unlike Francesca, who dwells at length on her love story, Cunizza does not speak of her loves and only briefly alludes to her amorous nature, displaying instead a great etico-political passion. Indeed, as her biography reveals, while she was known for her exuberance in her loves—she had four husbands and several lovers, among the latter the troubadour Sordello—she was also known for her generous spirit, as expressed, for example, by her freeing her family's slaves. As the fourteenth century commentator Benvenuto da Imola remarked,

> a true daughter of Venus, she was always amorous and desiring […] and at the same time she was full of pity, kind, merciful, and compassionate toward the poor wretches whom her brother so cruelly afflicted.[2]

In *The Party* Chariklia Martalas adds a scene in which Paolo goes to fetch more wine and returns with a case of Chianti and with Cunizza, who was late

[2] Cited in Notes to Mandelbaum 1980, 341.

to the levity because she had just participated in a demonstration for human rights. Dante—across the crowded floor, vibrating with the frenzied dancing steps in the storm created by the wind machines—sees Cunizza and drops everything. Cunizza caught sight of Dante, who, smiling, rushes to her with open arms. Then Dante joined Cunizza and Chariklia in raising a glass of champagne, saying in unison: "*cincìn*."

Her anatomy: A praise poem inspired by Francesca da Rimini. By Luyanda Kaitoo

In her "statement of purpose", intended as an introduction to her poem, Luyanda Kaitoo writes: "I was inspired by African (*Swati and Zulu*) praise singers in writing this piece. […] Praise poetry is an integral part of South African culture. It is performed and passed down through generations in the oral tradition." As she explains in her introduction, its intent is to reverse "the negative narrative so often attached to the female libertine" and applaud her sexual emancipation. Dante's Francesca is a stencil for a new vision of the "*innamorata* within the vibrant African context" (sup., p. 69).

Rather than condemn Francesca, she places Dante on trial. However, given Francesca's lack of concern for the fate of the polis, I would argue that she is not the best example of a "liberated" woman from a feminist perspective. Better, in addition to Cunizza da Romano (*Par.* 9.25–63), might be Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (*Par.* 9.112–26), whom Dante represents as one who was conquered by the radiance of the planet Venus, and whose presence in Heaven would be condemned by "vulgar minds" (*Par.* 9.36) and by "moralistic lechers" (to echo Luyanda's phrase).

Folco, who once dedicated his love lyrics to his *Domina* AzalaÍs, the wife of Barral de Baux, viscount and lord of Marseilles, when he, in the language of courtly love, had progressed from being a poet of *fol'amor* ("mad love") to a poet of *fin'amor* ("true love"), now sings the praises of Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho. Dante challenges us to fathom the reasons for his choosing such an extreme example to represent the mysterious yet real presence of disinterested love and its saving power in one who, according to conventional morality, embodies the perversion of such love. He also challenges us to interpret his reasons for believing (or imagining) that Christ, in His Harrowing of Hell, chose Rahab as the first of the amorous souls to be carried to Heaven. As he speaks of Rahab, through Folco, as the one who "had favored the initial glory / of Joshua within the Holy Land," he invites us to find those reasons in her story as written in the Book of Joshua, but also in Rahab's connection to both Joshua's victory in conquering the Holy Land and Christ's victory over sin and death won on the Cross.

In recalling this story in its succinct outline, I would like to focus first on Rahab's social place in the *polis,* which may help explain her transformation from a harlot to a woman who is saved as she saved others, her enemies. As a prostitute her status is marked by the ambivalence of being at once tolerated and stigmatized. She is a marginal figure in her community, yet she also occupies

an intrinsically creative liminal space, for her transgressions in the sphere of eros may constitute the "ground" for breaking other boundaries. Significantly, Rahab lives literally "on the border," between Israelite and Canaanite territory, for "her house was against the city wall and she lived inside the wall itself." (Joshua 2.15–6). As Gail Corrington Streete (1997, 103) has noted, "Rahab as a potential enemy to Israel but living just inside the boundary wall of Jericho" occupies, "as a prostitute, a liminal position in society". Living at the border of her city, in a house that is both an inn and a brothel, she has knowledge of the comings and goings on both sides of the wall, including news about the Israelites' plans to conquer Jericho. Possessing this knowledge, when she speaks to the two spies sent by Joshua to explore the country of Jericho, whom she has hidden from her king on the roof of her house, she can play the role of one who is ready to risk her life in order to show them not only hospitality but also friendship, as she proves to be not a stranger to them, expressing her new-found belief in the power of their God (see Joshua 2.12–4).

This might explain why Dante, in fashioning the episode of Rahab in *Paradiso* IX, interpreted her hospitality and friendship toward the two spies and all the Israelites as an expression of a love which was rooted in her natural amorous disposition, the same disposition which was also present in her illicit loves. It might also provide us with better understanding of Dante's choice of Rahab as a blessed soul who shines in the Sphere of Venus. We may, therefore, imagine Rahab echoing Cunizza's words:

> "… I shine here
> because this planet's radiance conquered me.
>
> But in myself I pardon happily
> the reason for my fate; I do not grieve—
> and vulgar minds may find this hard to see" (*Par.* 9.32–6).

A Tree in Hell. By Kai Lötter

Kai Lötter's *A Tree in Hell* is a deeply moving drama based on a true story and its profound relationship with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It shares with Dante's poem the creative power of tragic vision and tragic joy, as described by George Santayana (1956, 276):

> The individual souls in Dante's hell and heaven speak the language of tragedy, either in desperate pride or in devout self-surrender… In Dante the hurly-burly is rounded out into a moral tale, into a joyful tragedy, with that sense of finality, of eternity, which Christian eschatology had always preserved.

Kai introduces her story with stark, essential strokes, in which she tells a friend of her medications, hallucinations, seizures and suicidal tendency.

This conversation is crucial to the unfolding of her drama. It constitutes a more authentic, creative relationship than the one between the protagonist and

her psychiatrist. The narrating voice acknowledges the authenticity of her friend's care and compassion for her, and his visceral rejection of her musings on death.

Her longing to overcome her "spiral of suicidal ideation" by imagining being transformed into a tree "stretching, up and up, toward the sky with leaves of bright green," is shattered by her friend's depiction of suicides entombed in trees in Hell. I should add that Dante's representation of suicides in his Hell should not be characterized merely as an expression of God's punishment, but, more importantly, as an expression of the suicides' state, or condition, which mirrors the suffering of their hell on earth.

She hates Dante for taking her "happy Hell" away; indeed, for putting her in Hell. Her isolation from friends and family intensifies, her education interrupted, when she is institutionalized. She sees it as a sort of self-imposed exile. For her entire life, she had been on a single set path and, suddenly, it was gone." Like Dante, she finds herself in a *selva oscura*, she had "lost the path that does not stray" (*Inf.* 1.1–3).

Kai's trip to the hospital takes her through "the dark, obscure forest of Johannesburg." She reminds herself "that Johannesburg is unique in being one of the largest manmade forests in the world. Other cities do not have forests like this, and other cities do not die like this in the winter."

As Kai's drama continues to unfold, we discover that the darkness in her journey, and the corresponding loss of "the path that does not stray," is overcome by the light of her awareness of the suffering of the other people she met in the hospital, and therefore by her compassion as she experiences the solidarity in suffering. As Peter Kreeft (1986, 70) writes in his work, *Making Sense out of Suffering*, "A special way in which the physical evil of suffering leads to a spiritual good is through solidarity in suffering."

One of Kai's fellow patients (all "shades" of their true selves), the one who stands out for playing a significant role in her story, as a catalyst in her struggle to overcome her condition as "suicide-risk," as she was officially defined in the hospital, is a woman called Lerato. She had attempted suicide by speeding her car into oncoming traffic. Her victim was left "paralyzed from the waist down."

Lerato's tale sparks a "chorus" of comments from fellow patients, asking: "How could you? How dare you? Don't you know that your suicide is only meant to have one murder victim?" Lerato had done irreparable violence to a fellow human. She had committed a sin. Melody comments that when she planned her own attempt, leaping from a moving vehicle, she made sure no one else would be hurt. Kai realizes that suicide is a killing, and killing is murder, and a murder with only one victim is still a murder. This is why Dante put her in Hell. Melody points out that suicide doesn't hurt God. It is a sin because it hurts you.

Kai now experiences a moment of transcendence, of "tragic vision," or "tragic wisdom," through "solidarity in suffering." Readers now share with Kai (as author and character) the gift of understanding through suffering (*ton pathei mathos*, "through suffering knowledge," as Aeschylus wrote).

Significantly, Kai's closing remarks reveal a transcendence of the "I", as she addresses each one of her readers, saying "you":

> You have to climb down into Hell, then climb up the mountain of Purgatory, before you can ascend into Paradise and walk among the planets. It is there where you will find it: *L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*. The love that moves the sun and all the stars (sup., p. 93).

Beatrice. By Lesego Petra Maponyane.

On the "threshold" of her paper, whose title is *Beatrice*, Lesego Petra Maponyane recalls scenes experienced in a dream or vision. She then introduces the subject of her paper, evoking the "indistinct figure of Beatrice Portinari, a body mostly foreign to Dante, upon which he projects his messianic imaginings of her, imaginings that primarily record Dante's infamous complexity over that of Beatrice," comparing this appropriation to the conception of black womanhood in South Africa, and concluding that the latter is not far removed from the Medieval one. The objective of her paper is to develop an understanding of the ambivalence of Beatrice as an unorthodox conception of South African femininity within its historical, political and philosophical context.

I will now recall a number of representations of Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*, which, I hope, will confirm and indeed enhance Lesego Petra's portrait of Beatrice.

Beatrice is introduced at the beginning of *La Vita Nuova* as Dante's *gloriosa donna de la mia mente* ("glorious Lady of my mind"). As Charles S. Singleton (1977, 7) has explained:

> To a reader in Dante's time it would have been clear from the first words of the book that Beatrice was already dead at the time this was written. He would have known this from a single word in the first sentence of the first chapter of the book proper: from the adjective of the phrase *la gloriosa donna de la mia mente*. […] It is this very fact known from the outset which gives a first glimpse of the form of the *Vita Nuova*. We know at the start that Beatrice is dead. But as we move into the story, we see the little girl dressed in red appear for the first time to the boy who forthwith became her lover. Then we watch her reappear before his eyes to greet him nine years later. And through many events we follow her to her early death.

Here is an important dimension of Beatrice's power, which reveals, by analogy, her likeness to Christ:

> To which end I say that when she appeared to any place, it seemed to me, by the hope of her excellent salutation, that there was no man mine enemy any longer; and such warmth of charity came upon me that most certainly in that moment I would have pardoned whosoever had done me an injury; and if one should then have questioned me concerning any matter, I could only have said unto him "Love," with a countenance clothed in humbleness (*Vita Nuova* 11).[3]

[3] This and all subsequent quotes from *La Vita Nuova* are taken from Dante Gabriele Rossetti's translation, in Alighieri 1971.

Here is the sonnet written by Dante after the death of Beatrice. It is addressed to the pilgrims who cross the city of Florence, on their way to Rome, where they will see Christ's image known as the *Veronica* or *True Icon*. Significantly, now Dante wishes to share with these pilgrims, these strangers, both the anguish for the city's and his loss of Beatrice, as well as the longing to see her as a *figura Christi*, that is, one who, by analogy, resembles and points to Christ, Whom, as a blessed soul, she now sees face to face.

Ye pilgrims, advancing pensively
As if in thought of distant things, I pray,
Is your own land indeed so far away
As by your aspect it would seem to be—
That nothing of our grief comes over ye
Though passing through the mournful city midaway;
Like unto men that understand to-day
Nothing at all of her great misery?
Yet if ye will but stay, whom I accost,
And listen to my words a little space,
At going ye shall mourn with a loud voice.
It is her Beatrice that she hath lost;
Of whom the least word spoken holds such grace
That men weep hearing it, and have no choice (*Vita Nuova* 40).

I shall now select a few passages from Dante's *Commedia*, in order to sharpen our focus on Beatrice's portrait. Here is the crucial moment when Virgil—in order to help Dante overcome his fear—reveals Beatrice's role as a "go-between" God and Dante:

I was among those souls who are suspended;
a lady called to me, so blessed, so lovely
that I implored to serve at her command.

Her eyes surpassed the splendor of the star's;
and she began to speak to me—so gently
and softly—with angelic voice. She said:

'O spirit of the courteous Mantuan,
whose fame is still a presence in the world
and shall endure as long as the world lasts,

my friend, who has not been the friend of fortune,
is hindered in his path along that lonely
hillside; he has been turned aside by terror.' (*Inf.* 2.52–63)
[…]
'Go now; with your persuasive word, with all
that is required to see that he escapes,
bring help to him, that I may be consoled.

> For I am Beatrice who send you on;
> I come from where I most long to return;
> Love prompted me, that Love which makes me speak.' (*Inf.* 2.67–72)
> […]
> When she had finished with her words to me,
> she turned aside her gleaming, tearful eyes,
> which only made me hurry all the more (*Inf.* 2.115–7).

I would like to underline the word "friend," with which Beatrice identifies Dante. Thus, she reveals friendship's power to transcend and to perfect *eros*. I find, *mutatis mutandis*, particularly illuminating the following excerpt from Karl Kerényi's essay, *Theos and Mythos* (1961, 39):

> Helen, in the homonymous tragedy by Euripides, exclaims: o theoì theos gar kaì to gignoskein philous: O Gods! For this also is God, that friends are recognized. The event of recognizing friends is *theos*. Another example has come down to us in Latin from Pliny the Elder, translated, I believe, from a saying by Menander: *deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*. The fact that man helps another man, is God for man.

As both the beloved and as friend, Beatrice recalls Dante's straying from "the right path" (*Purg.* 30.121–41).

If we now turn our attention to the remarks with which Lesego Petra Maponyane brings her work to a close, viewing them in light of the scenes within which we have seen Beatrice speak and act, we cannot fail to acknowledge that they acquire a deep resonance that was unforeseen at the beginning of her writing.

The Lodestone. By Thalén Rogers

Thalén Rogers' finely wrought short story opens with a scene borrowed from Dante's *Purgatorio* (1.13–4), which is woven, in a seamless fashion, into a present scene evoked by the author-protagonist:

> *Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro, / che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto / del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,* made the sea a deep azure as I stood on the edge of the continent contemplating the end of existence. What regrets would I have, were I to die today? (sup., p. 63)

This question is answered by the sea and by the scene of the ritual of baptism, which the protagonist enters, thus joining a "chorus" of people gathered around "a single figure."

What gives special meaning to this scene is the author-protagonist's joining in the ritual of baptism he is witnessing. Especially significant is his "facing the penetrating stare of the sun"—clearly a symbol of God's presence and of the mystery of His participation in the human drama, as expressed by the words "penetrating stare." As we focus on the narrator's experience, we may not only "hear" the story narrated; we may, instead, make it *our own*. As Gaston Bachelard (1969, xviii) has noted,

> In the resonance we hear the poem [or the short story], in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own. The reverberations bring about a change in being. It is as though the poet's [and the narrator's] being were our being.

Thus, we will experience what Yeats (1956, 291) called "tragic joy."

The narrator introduces the next scene that he witnessed, recalling Dante's representation of the rising sun, which marks the beginning of *Purgatorio* II. The narrator's rising sun brings to light "rivers running red with blood and of boys who were men […] bulldozers and guns, burning tires and children dead in the streets […] innocent prisoners […] an ominous name—Vlakplaas." And it opens his eyes to why collective sins need atonement: pain without purpose, years of guilt.

The purgatorial scene of the rising sun, which corresponds, symbolically, to Virgil's and Dante's new beginning of their journey up the mountain of Purgatory—which will end with their entrance in the Terrestrial Paradise, the Garden of Eden, at the summit of the mountain— confers, by contrast, a sharp relief to the terrifying scenes of violence that the narrator "reads" on the "dark papyrus skin" of an old man, especially those connected to Vlakplaas: the infamous headquarters of the South African Police who executed innocent political opponents of the Apartheid government. The narrator then expresses his tragic vision, as he states: "The weight of the world is suffering," adding: "Is there a purpose to this pain?" Thus, he reveals the mysterious, unfathomable reality of "tragic vision," resembling the suffering, questioning Job; and also Christ on the Cross, addressing the Father with these anguished words: *Eli, Eli, lama asabthani* (my God, my God, why have You abandoned me?).

Significantly, the narrator concludes the section of his short story, whose title is *The Beach*, with this scene:

> The all-singing crowd languished and forgot their way. The tarred road to redemption stretched out before them but they tarried on the shore. Is a country healing, a country purging? The narrator answers with these words written by St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (3.12): "Clothe yourselves in humility and walk the path to redemption." (sup., p. 64)

The "all-singing crowd" that "tarried on the shore" resembles Virgil and Dante the wayfarer, and also the souls who, led by the helmsman angel, have reached the shore of the island mountain (*Purg.* 2.10–2; 52–4; 58–60).

In the section *The Car,* the narrator-protagonist sketches first this scene in which people appear as insubstantial shadows, like the souls in Dante's *Purgatorio*:

> They walked in shade and seemed to have no shadow—like ghosts, too insubstantial to block out the rays of the sun. *Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!* South African ghosts, they waited in limbo, paradise denied because of the stain of the past and present. *Ch'i' non avrei creduto che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.* What do we need to do to attain the Garden of Eden here in this country? (sup., p. 64).

The narrator then notes that he, instead, does cast a shadow. In the next scene, the focus is on the old man, who is characterized as a good neighbor to the six children, whose mother had died. His compassion, his love makes him as "solid and warm" as the narrator-protagonist. He is in fact to the author-protagonist, as Virgil is to Dante, "a true companion: *I' mi ristrinsi a la fida compagna*."

In the section *The Airport*, the protagonist encounters an African woman on a plane, who reveals the hardship of her working for a "fussy old lady," who "had moved to Durbam with her quadriplegic daughter:

> I have been looking after her daughter since she was born and she said she couldn't find someone else to look after her in Durban. What was I to do? I love that child and I know someone else might not care for her as well as I do (sup., p. 65).

The narrator then adds: "She said she agreed to move with them as long as the woman paid for her to travel back to Jo'burg on the weekends to see her children." We have again an encounter with a character whose compassion and love makes her a person whose body casts a shadow, as the sun "gazes" at her! She *is* walking the path to redemption.

The section *Questions to the Sun* clearly speaks of "grace" (and "redemption"?), as the narrator-protagonist and his Virgil, the old man, bathe in and are renewed by the saving light of the sun. Also, as a miracle, or epiphany, the scene is further animated and transformed by the unexpected revelation of the presence of a "young boy", who—as in an ineffable vision—"dissolved into the light."

The seventh and final section of Thalén Rogers' short story, *The Lodestone*, contains two competing messages—at war with one another:

> As the day turned dark, the plane could go no higher. *E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle*. Below, the landscape was draped in strings of smoldering jewels. Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin. All that's left is to await the crash. *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch' intrate* (sup., p. 67).

As we read, once again, Dante's words, which mark the end of his and Virgil's journey through Hell—we witness the transformation of a descent into Hell, into an ascent, as expressed in *Inf.* 34.133–9.

As we turn our gaze to the closing scenes that mark the end of Roger's short story, we witness a reversal of Dante's journey. The question that comes to mind is: can the descent towards the earth portrayed as an inevitable movement caused by the magnetism of sin, equivalent to the effect of the lodestone, erase the examples of goodness, of compassion and love that, like the light of the sun, have shined through the darkness of violence and hate recorded throughout the short story written by Thalén? Since the author can rightfully borrow Beatrice's words addressed to Virgil, *Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare* ("Love prompted me, that Love which makes me speak"), are not his words a creative act, an affirmation of hope against despair, and an enduring example of one who does "clothe" himself "in humility and walks the path to redemption"? And finally: is not the short story's ending also a beginning?

The Storm. By Helena van Urk

Helena van Urk introduces her poem with an allusion to Canto 6 of the *Inferno,* the canto of the Gluttonous, in which Dante the wayfarer encounters the fellow-citizen Ciacco. Notable here is that this sinner is portrayed as both a glutton and a good citizen of the city-state of Florence. He, in fact, reveals his love of his city by identifying, from an ethical and political perspective, the ills ("envy") that perverts its order. Significantly, Helena's poem deals at length with the political strife and decay in the time of the protagonist, introduced as Dante Alberti, a Florentine, and at the same time with clear allusions to the author's present's moral and political decay. She, in fact, succeeds, formally and stylistically, to express the confluence of the idiom, the flavor of the past, of Dante Alberti's time (and by analogy Dante Alighieri's time) and the idiom and flavor of *our time*.

La divina foresta: Earthly Paradise and Liminal Thresholds in Dante's *Purgatorio*. By Casey Fern

Casey Fern introduces the subject of her essay with these remarks:

> Purgatory and liminality are states and spaces unto themselves, but they are curiously transient in nature, and less articulated in existing literature. Moreover, the Earthly Paradise is unique from the few other forests which Dante traverses in his journey through the afterlife, both descriptively and thematically (sup., p. 27).

Later, Casey writes: "The Earthly Paradise evidences the notion that a threshold is both an ending and a beginning, therefore drawing the individual caught between transformation."

I would like to add a few notes on the early scenes of Dante the wayfarer's lingering in the Earthly Paradise, before Beatrice's appearance, focusing on the subject of liminality. In the opening scene of *Purgatorio* 28.1–12 the opposition between the pilgrim's intense desire to search within and around the "divine forest" and his slow movement across the meadow arrests our attention. This is a *liminal* moment. It is "ambiguous and fluid," as stated by Casey, citing Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep. It seems that the very spaciousness of this *campagna*, as new as the pilgrim's freedom to "sit or walk about" (*Purg.* 27.138), produces an equally new effect on his desire, tempering its promptings just as the dense, green forest tempers the early morning light for his eyes. In contrast to the pilgrim's eagerness to reach the forest, which marked his entire ascent of the mountain of Purgatory, there is now a new relation or ratio between scene and act, between moving toward a goal with the desire to possess it and merely seeing it. For a moment we have the impression that here the pilgrim has begun to taste the "sweet fruit" of paradise promised by Virgil. But as soon as we resume our reading and follow the action of Dante's entrance into the forest, that foretaste of Eden appears (in verses 22–27) precarious as a stream suddenly comes into view. The spacious meadow and the pathless forest are now marked by a distinct boundary. Gone, therefore, is the sense of freedom that character-

ized the pilgrim's entrance into the garden. Indeed, his first reaction to this new element of the landscape is to consider it an insurmountable obstacle. He rapidly shifts his focus, however, turning his gaze to the river and the extraordinary purity of its waters (*Purg.* 28.28–33).

The obstacle is thus suddenly transformed into something positive, a natural mirror which "hides no thing." It therefore seems to promise, symbolically, truth and knowledge. Yet, mysteriously, the stream is perfectly transparent despite its darkness.

I could continue commenting on the scenes that follow the episode of Dante the pilgrim's dwelling in the Earthly Paradise, but "lo fren de l'arte" ("the curb of art," *Purg.* 33.141) keeps me from adding more notes.

Yet, I had not discovered you. By Erin Jacobs

Erin Jacobs' reflections on her encounter with Dante's *Divine Comedy* are an eloquent, moving acknowledgment of the author's gift to readers—across the centuries—young and old, as represented in an important measure by the writers who have participated in what I characterized in my opening statement as a symposium, and hence a dialogue. Erin expresses eloquently our gratitude for having met Dante, for having been inspired by his work, so that we may borrow his words addressed to Virgil, saying to him: *O de li altri poeti onore e lume, / vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore / che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume* ("O light and honor of all other poets / may my long study and the intense love / that made me search your volume serve me now").

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Appendix: Kai Lötter's art work

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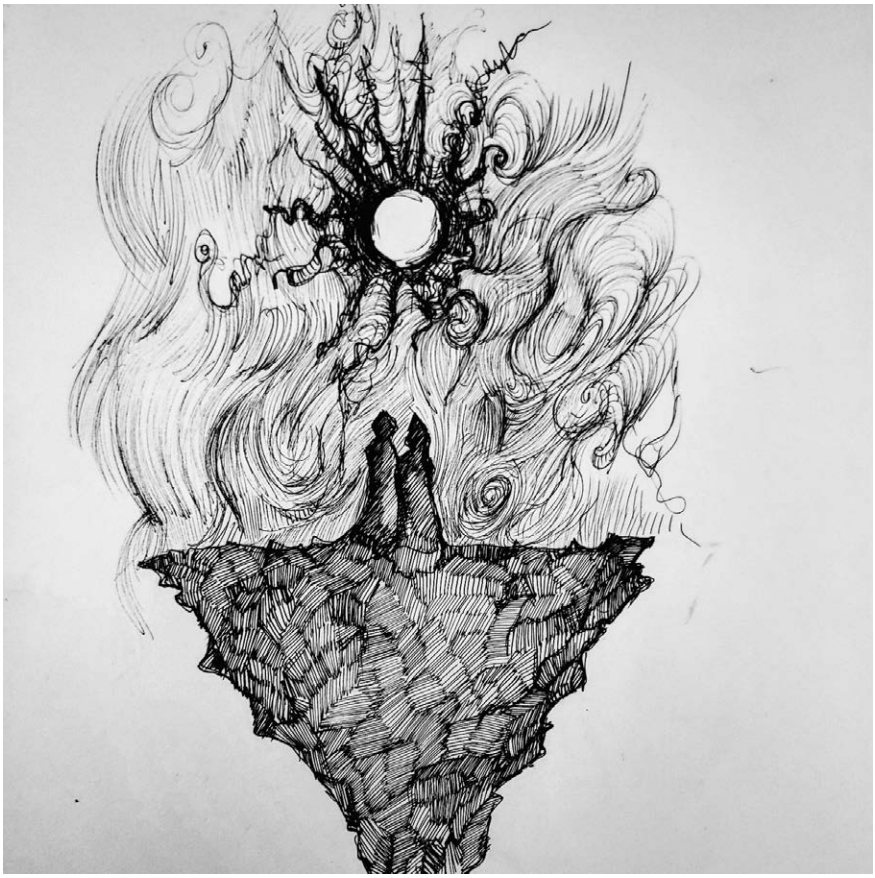

Scholars' Biographies

Martina Di Florio is a Lecturer of Italian Studies at Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut. She holds a degree in Classics from the University of Bologna (Italy) and a PhD in Italian Studies from the University of Connecticut. She has frequently taught courses on Dante, whose images, perspectives, and symbolism persistently continues to inform all her classes. Her articles appeared in *Di generazione in generazione: una storia con le donne per la famiglia e la società* (2006); *Nemla Italian Studies* (2009–2010); *L'Altro e l'Altrove nella cultura italiana* (2011), and in *Voices in Italian Americana* (2014—with R.G. Caponetto). She is co-author, with Giusy Di Filippo, of *Migrazioni contemporanee. Testi e Contesti* (Farinelli, 2017).

Sonia Fanucchi is a Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has a long-standing passion for Dante and the ways in which this text has been mediated through various contexts, which she has explored in her research in Victorian Medievalism and anti-Catholicism, including her MA on Dantesque figurations in Dickens and her PhD entitled, *Realism and Ritual in the rhetoric of fiction: anti-theatricality and anti-Catholicism in Bronte, Newman and Dickens*. Her interest in Dante has also inspired various pedagogical projects, including a popular course at second year level which led to the publication of a 2013 article published in *English Academy Review* and entitled, *Conversations among the Living Dead: Counterpoint in Action in the English Curriculum*. Her most recent article entitled, *Re-membering history: allegory as sacrament in Inferno's Prologue scene* is due to be published in

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Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African* Convivio *with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

the latest edition of *Religion and Literature* and explores her growing interest in Dante's language of memory and particularly how this affects our perception of his allegory, a line of thought that has inspired a further research project on *Inferno*, on which she is currently working. In addition to her own research, Sonia remains dedicated to developing a South African community of young Dante scholars and enthusiasts and in nurturing the Dante Society of South Africa. To this end, she is pursuing connections between South African writers and the *Commedia*, particularly in the context of the fascination with Medievalism at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Victor Houliston is Professor Emeritus of English Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He graduated from Magdalen College, Oxford in 1986, with a doctoral thesis on the Elizabethan physician and man of letters Thomas Moffet, and has subsequently published widely on Shakespeare, Donne and the early English Jesuits, especially Robert Persons. His monograph *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic* was published in 2007. He is currently directing the Persons correspondence project, with the first volume of a multi-lingual edition appearing in 2017, a second volume under review and a third in preparation. He is also leading a team engaged in producing a translation of Persons's Latin works.

Franco Masciandaro, Professor Emeritus, Italian Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Connecticut, is the author of *La problematica del tempo nella "Commedia"* (Longo Editore, 1976), *Dante as Dramatist: The Myth of the Earthly Paradise and Tragic Vision* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), *La conoscenza viva: Letture fenomenologiche da Dante a Machiavelli* (Longo Editore, 1998), *The Stranger as Friend: The Poetics of Friendship in Homer, Dante, and Boccaccio* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2013), and co-author, with Peter Booth, of *Dante / Hafiz: Readings on the Sigh, the Gaze, and Beauty,* edited by Nicola Masciandaro and Oyku Tekten (Pinsapo Press, 2017).

Marco Medugno currently teaches as a Associate Lecturer at Newcastle University (UK). After the bachelor's and master's degrees in Modern Literature and Philology at the University of Padua, he earned a 1st Level master's degree in Intercultural Studies with a thesis on Italian postcolonial literature. In 2020, he received his PhD at Newcastle University, with the thesis *Building Multilocal Belongings: A Comparative Study of Somali Postcolonial Novels in English and Italian*. He published articles in *From the European South*, *Italian Studies in Southern Africa* and *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, and organized the Newcastle Postcolonial Research Group (NPRG) meetings at his university.

Chris Thurman is a Professor of English and Director of the Tsikinya-Chaka Centre in the School of Literature, Language and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa). He is also an arts columnist for *Business Day*. Thurman is the editor of *South African Essays on 'Universal'*

Shakespeare (2014), *Sport versus Art: A South African Contest* (2010) and twelve volumes of the journal *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. His other books are the monograph *Guy Butler: Reassessing a South African Literary Life* (2010); *Text Bites*, an anthology for high schools (2009); and two collections of arts journalism, *At Large: Reviewing the Arts in South Africa* (2012) and *Still at Large: Dispatches from South Africa's Frontiers of Politics and Art* (2017). As President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, he was founder of the online platform Shakespeare ZA.

Giovanna Trento holds PhD *magna cum laude* of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France (Social Anthropology) and a PhD of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Naples, Italy (African Studies). She also holds a Master in Literature *magna cum laude* of the Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Rome, Italy (History of Contemporary Art, with a thesis on Contemporary African Art). She received a Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship (Programme on the Study of the Humanities in Africa) issued by the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She has been a Lecturer in Italian Studies, School of Languages and Literatures, University of Cape Town, South Africa. She is currently an independent scholar based in Rome, Italy. Among others, she authored a book on Pier Paolo Pasolini's constructions and representations of Africa and the Pan-South: *Pasolini e l'Africa, l'Africa di Pasolini. Panmeridionalismo e rappresentazioni dell'Africa postcoloniale* (2010). She conducted field researches in Ethiopia among the descendents of Italian soldiers, during Italian occupation and colonialism in the Horn of Africa.

Anita Virga is Senior Lecturer in the Italian Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut in 2015. She has published various book chapters and articles on Italian cinema and literature in academic journals such as *Italian Studies*, *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, *Spunti e ricerche*, *Lingue e Letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, *Tydskrif vir letterkunde*, *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, *English Studies in Africa* and *Italica*, and a monograph titled *Subalternità siciliana nella scrittura di Luigi Capuana e Giovanni Verga* (Firenze University Press, 2017). She was the President of Association of Professional Italianists (API in South Africa) from 2015 to 2017 and she has been the Editor of the journal *Italian Studies in Southern Africa* since 2018. Her research interests are postcolonialism, migration, black identity, blended learning, Dante in Africa, Sicilian literature and cinema, Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga.

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A South African *Convivio* with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the *Commedia*. This book offers a collection of South African university students' written responses to the *Commedia* and scholars' commentary on them. The students' collection includes writings of all genres and subjects: prose, poetry, personal reflection, dialogue, non-fiction based on the first two cantiche of the *Commedia*. Some are autobiographical and others are fictional stories, but they all have in common a very personal (and South African) approach to Dante's text. The scholarly essays of the second part are concerned with the unusual way in which Dante is appreciated by our youth: not as a remote figure only encountered in the hallways of the literature department, but as an intimate presence, a guide, a friend whose language is familiar and invites a response.

Sonia Fanucchi is an English Lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, and co-founder of the *Dante society of South Africa*. Her research interests include 19th century ritual and Medievalism, and all things Dante. Her forthcoming paper is entitled, "Re-membering history: allegory as sacrament in Inferno's Prologue scene".

Anita Virga is Senior Lecturer in the Italian Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She completed her PhD at the University of Connecticut in 2015. She has published various book chapters and articles on Italian cinema and literature in various academic journals, and a monograph on Verga and Capuana in 2017.

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