

# “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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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 Ngūgĩ 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 martiri* ("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—itsself 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). Lesegeo

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 supra-historical 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 demurrer, 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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