

“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 world, with Dante as a poet of reality (Contini 1976, 110). The actual world, 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 is 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 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 meridian* ("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 short 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 Siphwiwo (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 still-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 Western 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 Levillant (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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