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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