

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),

Franco Masciandaro, University of Connecticut, United States, fmasciandaro@yahoo.com
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Franco Masciandaro, *Notes on the writings by the University of the Witwatersrand students of Dante*, pp. 179-196, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8.12, 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

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 re-work 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 senza 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 voluptuousity, 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: “Voluptuousity hence aims not at the Other but at his voluptuousity; it is voluptuousity of voluptuousity, 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: “*cincin*.”

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 midway;
 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 theoi theos gar kai 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 nel'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 ristinsi 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 Durban 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 Ciaccio. 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”).

References

- Alighieri, Dante. 1971. “La Vita Nuova.” In *The Portable Dante*, translated by Dante Gabriele Rossetti, New York: The Viking Press.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1969. *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Freccero, John. 1986. *Dante: The Poetics of conversion*, edited with an Introduction by Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Kerényi, Karl. 1961. “Theos e Mythos.” In *Il problema della demitizzazione*, edited by E. Castelli, 35-44 Padova: Cedam.
- Kreeft, Peter. 1986. *Making Sense out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1991. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Lollini, Massimo. 2002. “Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony.” In *Who, Exactly, is the Other?: Western and Transcultural Perspectives*, edited by Steven Shankman and Massimo Lollini, 23-31. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Books.
- Mandelbaum, Allen. 1980. *A New Verse Translation of Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press.

- Santayana, George. 1956. "Tragic Philosophy." In *Essays in Literary Criticism*, edited by Irving Singer, 266-76. New York: Scribner.
- Singleton, Charles S. 1977. *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Streete Corrington, Gail. 1997. *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Yeats, W. B. 1956. "The Gyres." In *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Toronto: Macmillan.