

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'O frati,' dissi, 'che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti a l'occidente,
a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente
non vogliate negar l'esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.

Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza' (*Inf.* 26.112–2).⁷

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DANTE: But he went beyond the limits.

CHARIKLIA: So did you.

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

CHARIKLIA: Yes I forgot. Ulysses and I didn't have divine sanction (sup., p. 42-3).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹ "The small bark of my wit."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[...]

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

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

down to the icy cold, and the waves like
furious dogs snatched at us, snapped and rolled
us all beneath the surface to graves alike (sup., p. 57-9, lines 213-72).

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

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

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

that the South African Cullinan diamond has a prominent place in the Queen's crown jewels.¹⁴ The story evolves against the backdrop of more directly historical references to excessive and transgressive cruelty, such as that of the *trekboers* who committed genocide against the San,¹⁵ and Kitchener who was known for inhumanly subjecting the boers to concentration camps during the Anglo Boer war of 1899–1902.¹⁶ The journey also resonates with a contemporary African crisis, with the images and news stories of drowned Syrian or African refugees trying to cross the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean/English Channel in unworthy, overcrowded vessels, which became public knowledge particularly after the infamous 2012 photos of Alan Kurdi were circulated around the globe.¹⁷ The historical therefore blends seamlessly with the fictional and even the personal as her choice to rename her central character Dante Alberti in a nod to her Dutch heritage, proves. The blend of historical fact with personal sentiment connects powerfully to the Ulysses quest, which provides van Urk with a moral language through which to reassess and illuminate seminal aspects of South African history from her own personal perspective. Rhodes, a notoriously enigmatic figure historically,¹⁸ is transformed through the Dantesque language into an allegory for the greed of colonialism:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰ "Sweet color of oriental sapphire."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poi mi pareo che, poi rotata un poco,
terribil come folgor discendesse,
e me rapisse suso infino al foco.

Ivi pareo che ella e io ardesse;
e sì lo 'ncendio imaginato cosse,
che convenne che 'l sonno si rompesse (*Purg.* 9.28–33).²⁹

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

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

²⁸ "They have no hope of death."

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

³⁰ "Renewed with new-sprung leaves."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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³⁴ Poets typically establish close relationships with the figure of Ulysses, relationships that go beyond mere imitation, as the cases of Tennyson and Goethe suggest (Stanford [1963] 1985, 246).

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