

Dante's Journey Through Our Lives: Reading *La Commedia* in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Giovanna Trento¹

Since the 14th century onwards—although unevenly throughout the centuries—Dante's *Commedia* has had a very large influence on Italian literature and culture, was fundamental for the building of Italian language and identity, and also impacted considerably other literary traditions around the world. In the 20th century, Italian prominent writers and filmmakers, such as Primo Levi and Pier Paolo Pasolini (among others), found in Dante an essential model and a crucial source of inspiration.²

Erich Auerbach argued that *La Commedia*, despite dealing with the afterlife, describes a fundamentally “earthly” world.³ This is one of the most notable aspects that emerges from this collection of texts, written in South Africa in 2021,

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² See, for instance, Primo Levi's memoir on his deportation to Auschwitz concentration camp (Levi 1947), and Pasolini's *La Divina Mimesis / The Divine Mimesis*, a rewriting of Dante's *Inferno*, published posthumously (Pasolini 1975). In Pasolini's last film, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), we also perceive many references to Dante's *Commedia*.

³ “However, the individual figures, arrived at their ultimate, eschatological destination, are not divested of their earthly character. Their earthly historical character is not even attenuated, but rather held fast in all its intensity and so identified with their ultimate fate” (Auerbach 2001, 86).

Giovanna Trento, Independent Scholar, Italy, giovannatrento@gmail.com

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by the students that joined the Dantessa group at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. I lived in post-Apartheid South Africa for years; thus, I had the opportunity to experience, from within, a society that, in my opinion, is one of the most complex and contradictory societies in the world.⁴ The human quality of Dante's poem that Auerbach noted is given an interesting dimension in the above-mentioned texts which, in their different interpretations of Dante's major poem, reflect the complexity of their South African context. Some of them are more creative and poetical, others are either more academically or autobiographically inclined. The majority of these young authors take inspiration from Dante in the way in which they address contemporary South Africa, a country that is still strongly affected by the history of Apartheid and its aftermath. This is evident in the following words from Thalén Rogers in his text entitled *The Lodestone*: "South African ghosts, they waited in limbo, paradise denied because of the stain of the past and present" (sup., p. 64).

Dante's *œuvre* has been widely translated into many languages and the poet's critical fortune in the so-called Anglophone world is undeniable. There is a rich ongoing literature on Dante in English,⁵ including a recent original monograph on the African American reception of Dante.⁶ Despite the fact that there is a little-known version of *La Commedia* translated into Afrikaans by Dalamaine Du Toit at the end of the 20th century (see: Speelman 2017, 1–19), South Africans in general would read Dante in one of the many English translations that are now available. The question of whether South Africa can be called an "Anglophone country" goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but it suffices to say that in post-Apartheid South Africa there are eleven official languages, as well as many other dialects and "minor" languages. For this reason, South Africa has a special link to Dante at the level of language and identity. Italy is a country that became unified only at the end of the 19th century and was (and partly still is) made up of many dialects and "minor" languages; Dante was fundamental in the shaping of the Italian language and, consequently, the building of Italian

⁴ I was born and raised in Italy (where I currently live). Reading Dante's *Divina Commedia* is compulsory for the majority of Italian students. After my high school diploma, I studied (and practised) fine arts, contemporary art and literature in Rome. From my early 20s onward I became very interested in "Africas" and the African Diaspora. I travelled the world, Africa in particular. I did my PhD in Anthropology in Paris and then, at a certain point of my life, in January 2010 I moved to South Africa, first affiliated to the University of the Western Cape; then to the University of Cape Town.

⁵ The journal *Dante Studies* that was founded in 1882 is an example of the rich tradition of Dante in English; this is the official journal of the Dante Society of America and its current editor-in-chief is Justin Steinberg. Among the publications in English that marked the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, we can mention: Gragnolati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021.

⁶ "*Freedom Readers* is a literary-historical study of the surprising multitude of ways in which Dante has assumed a position of importance in African American culture, especially literary culture. [...] But surely it is unique to African American readings and rewritings of Dante to suggest that the man is a kind of abolitionist and that the *Divine Comedy* is itself a kind of slave narrative" (Looney 2011, 2).

identity (Antonio Gramsci as well in several passages of his *Quaderni del carcere / Prison Notebooks* highlighted the relevance of Dante in Italy, including from a political point of view).⁷ Dante chose to write his *Commedia* in *volgare illustre* and “will remain forever faithful to his vernacular choice” (Gragnotati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021, xxiv); *La Commedia* offers a certain degree of plurilingualism and a mix of literary styles that was unique at that time.⁸ According to Dennis Looney (2011, 3) the

linguistic task is the ultimate political act [...] for African American authors attuned to the complexities of Dante’s hybrid vernacular, his poetic language becomes a model for creative expression that juxtaposes and blends classical notes and the vernacular counterpoint in striking ways.

As far as the connections between language politics and decolonization are concerned, according to Jason Allen-Paisant (2021, 669), Dante has been perceived by several Caribbean writers as a “partisan in language politics” even more intensely than by African American writers. Some of these complex interconnected topics, related to Dante, language and politics resonate with the South African contributions collected in this book.⁹

In 1981, Italian poet and academic Franco Fortini (1917-1994) also highlighted Dante’s particular understanding of the *volgare illustre*, which he describes as simultaneously human and universal; according to Fortini (1981, 3), who refers to different sources, including St Thomas Aquinas), Dante shows us that the arbitrariness and the conventionality of the linguistic signs can be overcome by the language of poetry. In a similar way, Helena van Urk, in her poem *The Storm* which was inspired by Dante, writes:

For my first love was language and poetry,
which I could not but see in all God does,
and wished dearly to share with humanity (sup., p. 51, lines 10-2).

The majority of scholars in Italy and South Africa (and in the rest of the world as well) have forgotten that in 1984, during Apartheid, Franco Fortini was invited to South Africa as a visiting professor by the University of the Witwatersrand to lecture on Dante, and a few other topics. Unusually for a European intellec-

⁷ “*La così detta «quistione della lingua».* Pare chiaro che il *De vulgari eloquentia* di Dante sia da considerare come essenzialmente un atto di politica culturale-nazionale (nel senso che nazionale aveva in quel tempo e in Dante), come un aspetto della lotta politica è stata sempre quella che viene chiamata ‘la quistione della lingua’ che da questo punto di vista diventa interessante da studiare” (Gramsci 1964, 204).

⁸ On Dante in the history of the Italian language, see among others: Pasquini, Emilio, *La vita, profilo storico-critico dell'autore e dell'opera, la “Commedia,”* in Alighieri 2021, CXXXIX–CLX.

⁹ “Dante’s strongly structured work represents a source of inspiration for the modern challenges of language and plurilingualism, realism and representation, the role of literature and, eventually, the practice of writing itself. [...] a sign of Dante’s ability to help the contemporary world understand itself” (Camilletti, Gragnolati, Lampart 2010, 11).

tual of the new Left at the time, Fortini—who was a heterodox Marxist of Jewish descent—did accept this invitation and spent one month in South Africa in the 1980s (Mari 2016, 285–94). In 1987 he stated: “Today Dante is read and understood by a minority of scholars and lovers in every part of the world, better than it is in our schools”; moreover he added that, although in Italy *La Commedia* might be read by a larger number of people than before, Italians would increasingly perceive Dante’s poem “as an ancient book and a classic, written in an arduous foreign language” (Fortini 1987, 1).

On the contrary, these Dantesque texts, written today by young South Africans, tend to be closely connected to post-Apartheid South Africa; in fact, the majority of them “use” the *Divine Comedy* to describe the contemporary South African society in which their authors live and the ways in which it was forged by colonialism and Apartheid. These aspects are particularly evident in Thalén Rogers’s contribution (as we will see below), but also in Kai Lötter’s and Chariklia Martalás’ pieces. Although Lesego Petra Maponyane’s contribution (titled *Beatrice*) focuses primarily on “Dante’s appropriation of the body of Beatrice” (which is—according to Maponyane—“incredibly nuanced and unconventional”) (sup., p. 73), Maponyane also refers to South Africa’s legacies of Apartheid and colonialism. Maponyane intends

to develop an understanding of the ambivalence of Beatrice as an unorthodox conception of femininity within its historical, political and philosophical context as well as that of our own country. [...] It is doubtful that Beatrice should reveal anything about dismantling of the legacies of colonial, Apartheid, and Gender-Based Violence—she barely reveals anything about herself, who was as real as any of these institutions (sup., p. 76).

What is striking about this collection of texts is that they clearly draw on what Auerbach (2001, 83) called Dante’s “spontaneous hatred of injustice.” Indeed, Thalén Rogers writes towards the end of his contribution: “When will the corruption and suspicion, badly healed wounds and inequality be purged from the land?” (sup., p. 67) Helena van Urk takes inspiration from *Inferno*’s canto 6 and introduces her poem, *The Storm*, as “*An African Remix, / with Apols and Compliments, / of Dante’s Canto Six*” (sup., p. 51). Canto 6, by punishing gluttons for their sins with ceaseless cold rain and stinky mud, focuses on political issues and condemns Florence’s gluttony and its factional violence that eventually led Dante to his exile.¹⁰ Van Urk similarly intends to denounce the injustices on the African continent and identifies herself with Dante:

Restless travels brought me to Africa, the cradle of humanity’s tale. But this part of the Gold Coast, after a history spanning centuries of pure gluttony, had again fallen to a bloodbath of wars, unceasing, without cure (sup., p. 53).

¹⁰ On how and why Dante was banned from Florence and forced to go into exile, see: Pasquini 2006, 28–38.

References to Apartheid, its violence, its injustice, the segregation this system produced, and the inequality that still affects South African society, recur in almost all these Dantesque texts. Chariklia Martalas has written four texts titled *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again*, each of them with a different subtitle. She opens the one subtitled *Eating John Vorster* as follows:

God had forgotten my country. For some years the Devil enjoyed the malevolence that stuck onto the bones and teeth, pouring out of mouths like disease. The evil that forced black and white to not only be separated but for many a white to forget all humanity at the Devil's door (sup., p. 45).

This contribution by Martalas goes on to recollect and reinvent in literary terms tragic chapters of 20th century South African history and some of its main characters (such as John Vorster, Hendrik Verwoerd, and Dimitri Tsafendas). In the presence of Dante, Martalas asks compelling questions to him and to herself, as a person and as a writer:

What do you say to horror Dante? What do you say to the murders of flesh and mind? Cutting the soul into bits to feed the State. What do you say to Apartheid? [...] What do I say to horror Dante? How do I describe it? (sup., p. 45).

Martalas thus turns to Dante to try to make sense of the injustice, violence and inequality that took and take place in South Africa.¹¹

Thalén Rogers depicts a “coloured” man who recalls District Six, its destruction during Apartheid, and the deportation and displacement that followed it:

As we drove, the old man spoke of his life. He had lived in District Six. His neighbor had six children. They played in the street all day and were only chased inside by the departing sun. [...] The old man didn't have any children of his own. He had led a solitary life. He told me about the avocado tree he planted when he first moved out from home. [...] As the plane gained height, the old man continued his stories, 'I remember a day, a Tuesday, as I was coming home from work, I heard a strange grumbling. I could see a fine mist of dust hanging over the place. 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. 66).

¹¹ This is a political use of Dante's poem that can be related to what Dennis Looney (2011, 2) wrote about a selection of African American writers: “This consistent response to Dante's life and poem in a political vein, this dependence on Dante to make sense of perceived injustice and to affect a change in politics to which one is opposed, underlies the play on words in the book's title, *Freedom Readers*.”

This passage, despite denouncing violence, destruction, and deportation, also suggests a process of patrimonialisation through narration.¹²

The legacies of segregation and the memory of Apartheid are also present in Kai Lötter's *A Tree In Hell*. Part of Lötter's short story takes place today in a segregated place *par excellence*, a mental hospital, where the memory of Apartheid remains vivid:

There was a man named Edmund. He barely spoke, but when he opened his mouth to give me a smile, I could see two rows of small, black teeth. He was one of the permanent residents. He seemed happy, floating down the halls slowly, and he never bothered anyone. Except, occasionally, he would look at me in confusion and say, 'You are not supposed to be here.' At first, I thought it was a compliment. 'You are right, Edmund,' I wanted to say [...] A nurse stopped me before I could speak though. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, 'Don't mind poor Edmund. He's fallen a little from reality. He's in a kind of Limbo. Has no idea what year it is. Still thinks it's the 1980s. Still thinks it's Apartheid, and the hospital is segregated. [...] 'It's Monday. It's Tuesday. It's Wednesday' and on and on and on until I left. Edmund stayed behind, locked in a limbo of Apartheid South Africa (sup., p. 91).

The notion of journey is obviously at the core of Dante's *Commedia*: journey in the poem refers primarily, but not solely, to the pilgrim's literal journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, which is also an allegory for the spiritual development from sin to redemption, from subjugation to freedom.¹³ Fortini (1987, 1) argued: "Dante stands on the threshold. You may enter or not enter. But if you enter, you'll have to redo his whole journey and believe that it was true." Many of these young writers seem to be eager to follow Dante on his journey, believe its truth, and identify themselves with him ("You described hell why can't I? (sup., p. 45)" Writes Martalas in her *A Mad Flight Into Inferno Once Again: Eating John Vorster*). The majority of these young writers, though, visit the Inferno and comparatively few go on to *Purgatorio*. Kai Lötter concludes her *A Tree In Hell* as follows:

When I left the hospital, I thought I had been cured. I thought I was better. I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round. You have 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. I have not reached it yet. I have not found it yet. But I will because now I know that to get to it, you must first go the long way round (sup., p. 93).

¹² On the development of the notion of *patrimoine* in the so-called Western world, see among others: Poulot 2006.

¹³ Looney 2011, 2: "African American authors use Dante as if he were a 'freedom rider' accompanying them on a journey through a harsh landscape of racial inequality. After all, he had been to hell and back, so why couldn't he be expected to help them deal with the segregated bus stations of Alabama and Mississippi in the early 1960s [...]"

Chariklia Martalas on several occasions tries to build an actual dialogue with Dante. In her paper subtitled *The Dream of the Ghost of Ulysses*, Martalas writes:

Chariklia wants to be a writer. She had asked Dante for his permission to rework the *Inferno* through a modern lens. He not only agreed but volunteered to go back to *Inferno* with her for her research purposes. *Inferno* is not a place to be alone he said (sup., p. 41).

Thalén Rogers follows Dante's path and describes a multifaceted journey in contemporary South Africa, where Rogers meets different people of various descent, before and during a flight from Durban to Johannesburg. Rogers' narrative *The Lodestone* is interwoven with short quotes taken from Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*. *The Lodestone* is divided into seven paragraphs: *The Beach*, *The Car*, *The Airport*, *Take-off*, *Ascent*, *Questions to the Sun*, *The Lodestone*. Cars, beaches, and airplanes can be considered icons of contemporary South African life-style; however the beach, as a segregated public space during Apartheid, is a more subtle and nuanced icon, as it is a contradictory symbol of both leisure and oppression.

On the aeroplane, Rogers meets a South African woman; their encounter provides us with a significant glimpse of post-Apartheid South Africa and of the interesting way Rogers appropriates Dante's lines, reinventing them:

We moved along the narrow passage between the seats. Many bodies obstructed our way. I got into an argument with a burly Sowetan whose baggage took up the entire overhead locker. After stiff words, I was resigned to putting our carry-on luggage under the seat in front of us. We sat down and seatbelts snaked around our waists. *Più di cento spiriti entro sediero*. I was sitting next to a lavishly bodied, perspiring African woman who was fanning herself with the on-board magazine. She said she was flying to Jo'burg to see her children. I asked how old her children were. Half an hour later, I had heard about her two baby daddies (each of whom had moved on to other women), her job in Durban cleaning a house that was not her home, and her three children (aged two, three, and six) who lived with her mother in Alexandra. She told me about the fussy old lady for whom she worked who had moved to Durban with her quadriplegic daughter the previous year (sup., p. 65).

It is evident from this that once again in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Dante's *œuvre* represents a strong source of inspiration that is able to generate something new, sometimes very different from the "original" pre-text (Camilletti, Gragnolati, Lampart 2010, 12).

The notion of a journey is closely related to that of exile: "exile is, for Dante, a tragic yet foundational experience", as a man, as a writer and as a poet.¹⁴ These young writers are also able to relate to the conditions of exile and exclusion that are very

¹⁴ Gragnolati, Lombardi, Southerden 2021, xxv: "Both experiences—the composition of lyric poetry and the participation in civic life—abruptly end, or rather, are 'violently' transformed by Dante's 1302 condemnation to exile and the subsequent experience outside of his native Florence. [...] Exile is, for Dante, a tragic yet foundational experience."

much associated with Apartheid, and can still be perceived (consciously or subconsciously) even today in South Africa by many South Africans of different backgrounds. Alienation and exile lead van Urk to the creative and political act of writing:

After my suicide attempt I was sent away, in exile till I 'got well', as it could harm the political cause. All good that sterile sanatorium held, was the freedom to write as I pleased, to drive away the tedium. I was near the middle of my life then, and could not bear to remain numb to the world, yet had no place therein. So I wandered the world, with a journal as my only comfort and companion, named in tribute to my namesake's Virgil (sup., p. 52).

Kai Lötter refers instead to a "self-imposed exile":

It would be a long while before I met Dante again. A series of strange and inexplicable events occurred that eventually led me to a mental hospital. [...] I walked away from my friends and family. I walked away from my university education. I understand now it was a kind of self-imposed exile. For my entire life, I had been on a single set path and, suddenly, it was gone (sup., p. 90).

Trauma—as a keyword, as a notion, as a memory, as a burden, as a political condition—lingers in post-Apartheid South Africa. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 1995, to deal with South Africa's Apartheid brutalities and human rights violations, heal the traumatic experiences of the people, and build a new nation. The TRC employed, for the most part, the language of religion, psychology, and nation-building. Despite the fact that South Africa is a multi-religious society, the Christian icon of "sin and redemption" was fundamental for the conception of the TRC hearings.¹⁵

Some of the texts that we are examining rework the crucial Dantesque, Christian theme of sin and redemption, and many of them build a dialogue with Dante which tends to take on psychoanalytic dimensions. Thalén Rogers applies the Dantesque theme of sin and redemption to post-Apartheid South Africa; towards the end of his *The Lodestone* we read:

How will the scar of sin be smoothed from the face of the country? Do we have to suffer so much for redemption? Next to me, I saw the old man's face smoothed by pure sunlight—age and decrepitude melting in the warmth of grace—until a young boy grinned at me—*rifatto sì come piante novelle rinnovellate di novella fronda*. He dissolved into the light—*puro e disposto a salire a le stelle* (sup., p. 67).

¹⁵ Young 2004, 145, 148: "During the long months of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, witnesses spoke of traumatic experiences under Apartheid and were honored as heroes. Hidden brutalities and degradations were exposed to the light of day and given new meanings. Testimony was invested with transformative powers—the promise of a new, unblemished future and the hope of healing for both individuals and nation. [...] The discourse around the work of the Commission is frequently steeped in religious and psychotherapeutic rhetoric. The choice of Archbishop Tutu as Chairperson (and therefore the addressee of every testimony) is in itself suggestive of a confessional, and the practice of beginning the hearings with prayer, and in particular, the first hearing with a eucharist, takes this further."

Chariklia Martalas tries to “digest” Apartheid by establishing a dialogue with Dante; in her contribution subtitled *Eating John Vorster* she writes:

‘Did Verwoerd eat his children too?’ Dante asked. ‘No.’ Tsafendas answered ‘He ate more than limbs, he ate the threads of a whole country’s humanity. Sharpening the teeth of the State until families were lost, lives were lost, hope was lost.’ [...] *I told God what I told the two priests. I would be guilty by God if I did kill him But I believed I would be even guiltier by God if I didn’t.* [...] I cannot be the one to tell you Dante about Verwoerd’s crimes. Unspeakable was the pain / Unmentionable was the alienation / Unspeakable was the destruction. Dante sits down and stares at Verwoerd. ‘Hell has many more monsters now doesn’t it?’ [...] Inferno had to be bigger, there were many of the devil’s men that Verwoerd had to eat (sup., p. 49).

Chariklia Martalas (in her piece subtitled *The Dream or The Ghost of Ulysses*) makes Dante ask her to go for a “therapy session” before embarking together on a journey back to *Inferno*, while Kai Lötter sees Dantesque elements in her suicidal thoughts and her stay in a mental hospital near Johannesburg. In Lötter’s *A Tree In Hell* we find many themes that recur in this South African collection of Dantesque texts: journey, exile, exclusion and segregation, sin and redemption, references to Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, etc. Lötter takes inspiration from *Inferno* canto 13, where the sinners who have been violent against the self, either by committing suicide or by squandering personal goods, are punished (the theme of suicide recurs in Martalas’, van Urk’s, and Fern’s contributions too). Dante turns the sinners of canto 13 into plants and trees, hence the title of Lötter’s short story: *A Tree In Hell*.

Lötter starts her metaphorical and partly autobiographical journey through *Inferno*’s canto 13 by identifying herself (not without some sense of humor) with Dante’s suicides. At the very beginning of her text, she writes:

The first time I met Dante, I was spaced out on several different kinds of new medication. [...] I did not care much about the jargon, but these *visual distortions* had been making it progressively more difficult to live. Consequently, I wanted to die (sup., p. 89).

That day a friend of hers mentioned some new classes that he was taking:

The only thing that reached me was what he said about the trees. ‘In the Divine Comedy,’ he said, ‘Those who commit suicide are punished by becoming a tree in Hell. And I, coming down a spiral of suicidal ideation, simply said, ‘That doesn’t sound so bad’ (sup., p. 89).

Later on in Lötter’s story, she asks one of the characters in the mental hospital: “Why is suicide a sin?” ‘Sins aren’t sins because they hurt *God*,’ Melody said, ‘Sins are sins because they hurt *you*.’” This question and reply connects Lötter’s moral vision powerfully to Dante’s non-mystical and non-ascetic religion which is central to the *Commedia*; as Auerbach (2001, 86) pointed out: “Dante was the first thinker-poet since antiquity to believe in the unity of the personality, in the concordance of body and soul.”

In these South African texts inspired by Dante's *Commedia* the narrative of the journey recurs; such a narrative may be rendered as autobiography—personal as well as collective, intimate as well as political—and is closely connected to the condition of exile which emerges at various levels in these pieces, when describing the South African past and present. Dante's moral and spiritual philosophy, the connection that he draws between body and spirit, is also present in these texts. In particular, Kai Lötter, towards the end of her autobiographical *A Tree in Hell* writes:

I read Inferno just before the pandemic forced South Africa to shut down and we had to stay inside for weeks, just before Purgatory, where every single step I had taken since the hospital was tested. If my mental health could make it through a global pandemic, then it could make it through anything. Trapped inside, I climbed the walls like Dante climbed Mount Purgatory. I read his journey, I followed his footsteps, with my fingers clutching the rope around his waist. I did not like to be far away from him anymore (sup., p. 93).

These young South African writers establish a link with Dante at various levels. By taking inspiration from Dante's journey, they also try to make sense of their own journeys into post-Apartheid South Africa, and are able to lead today's readers through the complexities of contemporary South Africa.

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