

Lorna Goodison “Purgatory XII”. *After Dante: Poets in Purgatory*

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In an interview at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry (2021), talking about her connection to Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, Lorna Goodison, a former poet laureate of Jamaica, explained the path that led her to consider translating the *Cantos*:

Literally midway through the journey of my life, in the midst of a dismantling brought on by hurricanes within and without, I turned to really reading the *Divine Comedy*. I began to understand why I always had a sure appointment with this poet: uncompromising as an old testament prophet, stern as a Rastafarian elder, and loving and compassionate as my own and the divine mother. This poet and his monumental work guided me through my own version of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and gave me permission to contemplate *Paradiso*.¹

Her words mirror her translation of *Canto I* of *Inferno*, published in her collection *Oracabessa* in 2013. The *Canto* is dedicated to Derek Walcott, who actually appears as Goodison’s Virgilio:

1 <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/lorna-goodison/>.



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Halfway through the journey of my life
 I come to find myself in a wild rocky place
 for to tell you the truth my feet had strayed.

A few years later, she was invited by Prof. Nick Havely to take part in an event he was hosting at the South Bank Centre, where various poets would translate a *canto* of their choice from the *Inferno*, and then take part in a reading. Lorna Goodison brought and discussed her version of *Canto XV*, which was later included in her collection *Travelling Mercies*.

In her translation of Dante's descent into Hell, she writes

We [Dante and Virgilio] buck up a procession of duppies shuffling
 below
 the banking, staring up into our faces like how sometimes
 scrutinizes one another under the light of a new moon.
 [...]
 The staring duppies screwed their faces and frowned,
 then one sight me, grab me by the hem of my gown
 and said, "Lord have mercy, could this really be true.
 Dear poet is it you?"
 [...]
 And bending near, I peered into his burnt countenance
 and groaned, "Is it you down here so Teacher Brown?"

The whole *Canto XV*, just as her version of *Canto I*, has a Jamaican 'accent', being told in Jamaican creole, so Brunetto Latini becomes Teacher Brown, who also calls himself Brownman, a poetic device she would later use in other translations of the *Cantos*.

At the time, although the poem was received very well by readers and critics, who urged Goodison to keep working on the *Commedia* and transfer Dante's characters to Jamaica, she was not inclined to do so, unsure whether to cross paths again with the Italian poet.

But when Prof. Havely got in touch again asking her to translate a *canto* from *Purgatorio* for an upcoming volume, where writers "would render the *Purgatorio* in a number of different voices" (27) she gladly agreed and provided her powerful version of *Canto XII*.

After the publication of *Canto XII*, Lorna Goodison was invited by Prof. Elizabeth Coggeshall of the Dante Society of America to give a talk about her work on the *Commedia* at their annual meeting. Since then, she has translated over twenty *cantos* from the *Inferno*, and has kept working on the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*.

As Nick Havely rightly points out in his introduction, this collection is indeed a novelty in the international literary panorama.

English-language poets have [...] from medieval to modern times, reinvented, alluded to and quoted from the *Purgatorio* and recognized its importance as a 'singing school'; but not many of them so far have produced complete translations. (26)

Here, each poet/translator offers a personal, linguistic and cultural interpretation of individual *cantos*, using different verse forms, and adapting the *cantos* to their own experience and history.

Lorna Goodison transports Dante's characters and historical figures to Jamaica, vividly bringing centre stage the Jamaican landscape and its myths, combined with places and myths from Eastern and classical cultures.

Come a man destra, per salire al monte
dove siede la chiesa che soggioga
la ben guidata sopra Rubaconte.
(Dante, *Purgatorio* XII, 100-2)

And like when you climb the hill on the right hand
side, to reach that church which seems to overhang
that well-ordered little town above Rock Hall.
(Goodison, *Purgatory* XII, 100-12)

The old church of San Miniato al Monte, which overlooks Florence, and was built by the chief magistrate of Florence, Rubaconte da Mandello, becomes the church of Rock Hall, on the hills, just north-west of Kingston.

Dante's use of antiphrasis, such as the definition of "ben guidata" - referring to Florence, which of course in Dante's opinion was anything but -, is well mirrored in the definition of the "well-ordered little town", where 'little town' understates its importance.

Using the same device she had used in her previous translations, Goodison worked with the sound of the Italian names and invented Jamaican names that sounded close to the Italian.

Therefore, Briareo becomes "Bra-irus", Timbreo becomes "Tim B", Jupiter is "father Joe", and the Giganti are "big time gangsters".

Aragne, who was transformed into a spider by Minerva as a reminder of her wrongful display of pride in offending the gods, and described by Dante in the moment of her transformation, becomes, in Goodison's version, Anancy.

O folle Aragne, sì vedea io te
già mezza ragna, trista in su li stracci
dell'opera che mal per te si fe'.
(Dante, *Purgatorio* XII, 42-5)

Anancy the spider, a figure belonging to the African Caribbean myths, caught here in the middle of his transformation, is rendered in syntactic and grammatical creole.

O trickify Anancy! It is just so:
 half a spider, full of grief, unfriended on the threads
 of your mischief works spun on the web.
 (Goodison, *Purgatory* XII, 42-5)

Anancy's story derives from the folktales of the Ashanti tribes of West Africa reported in the Caribbean and South America through the tales of slaves. Anancy the trickster uses his ploys to survive, and he becomes the main culprit of all faults and all evils. Actually, in the Ashanti tradition all the tales of Anancy must end with the phrase "jack mandora mi nuh choose none", which means "I take no responsibility for the story I just told - it is Anancy's fault".

Goodison's translation is a strong political manifesto, just like Dante's *Commedia*. Dante exposed the sins and the depravations, both personal and public, of his time; Goodison highlights what is wrong in today's society, especially Jamaica's. However, while Dante's characters are real figures, Goodison's are representations of a certain type of Jamaicans who, feeling self-entitled, followed only their pride and acted against nature or against the good of their country.

Similarly to how Dante used the vernacular of his own time as a revolutionary and political tool, so does Goodison, combining Standard English with the Creole vernacular, towards the creation of what Kamau Brathwaite called "nation language". In this way, *Purgatorio* XII is indeed transported, rather than translated: the Jamaican landscape is combined with its vernacular to reach a dramatic and astonishing result. Goodison reinterprets the *Commedia* and, inspired by it, uses a new language to infuse it with the memory of her people's past.

Goodison's version of the *Commedia* is an affirmation of the power of language, of its potential to create and strengthen the collective identity. Language is what makes a people, what makes a nation, and Goodison's verses empower her people, giving them the tools to understand and recognize who they are.

Dante, the exiled poet, the herald of freedom, becomes the exiled people of the Diaspora and of the uprooted people from Africa. His journey through Hell, towards redemption and freedom, becomes the long journey through a tragic and fatal passage, the infamous Middle Passage.

Indeed, at the core of Lorna Goodison's monumental production, there has always been a journey, and each one is a reproduction, an enactment, a memento of 'the journey' of enslaved African people through the Atlantic.

In Goodison's rendering of the *Commedia* the idea of the passage is all-present. Her *Inferno* and her *Purgatory* are journeys through capture and slavery towards freedom, towards Paradise.

But, as she points out in the final part of her version of *Purgatory* XII,

who do not notice that they
still bear the weight of slavery days on their heads.

Lorna Goodison warns us that the path to total freedom is not complete until we notice and recognize the past.

