

Lorna Goodison *Dante's Inferno* *A New Translation*

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Lorna Goodison's *Inferno* is a monumental and majestic work that has required years of research, writing, processing and re-writing. Her project is to translate the whole Canticles, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Since she is also a visual artist, Goodison accompanies us with her own drawings throughout the narrative, beginning with the book cover image, and her self-portrait, which introduces the First Canto.

She began working on Dante's oeuvre with *Inferno*, Canto XV "Brunetto Lattini" [sic], published in *Travelling Merci* (2001) then *Inferno*, Canto I in *Oracabessa* (2013), *Purgatorio*, Canto XII in *After Dante: Poets in Purgatory* (2021), and *Inferno*, Canto V in *Il Tolomeo. A Postcolonial Studies Journal* (2023).

In the 2013 version of *Inferno*, Canto I is dedicated to Derek Walcott, Lorna Goodison's mentor.

And when I saw him in that terrible place I cried out
help me do pity me whoever you may be
whether living man or a May Pen duppy do help me.



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He answered me: I am not a man though one I was.
 I come from good parents my father was an artist
 my mother a schoolteacher I was born after Victoria
 [...]
 I am a poet, painter and playwright founder of the finest
 band of thespians ever collected in the Caribbean.
 maybe not just there but anywhere actors tread the boards.
 [...]
 Are you Sir, the great fountainhead of inspiration
 from whom such a river of creativity flowed?
 I asked of him — my head in respect due-bowed low
 (*Oracabessa*, Carcanet 2013, 19)

So, it is not a May Pen Duppy, an often malevolent spirit or ghost, but Derek Walcott himself, who would take the place of Virgilio, that accompanies Goodison in her descent. ("You were my guide and mentor and it is from your example /that I have crafted this style"). However, in her final version of *Inferno*, Lorna Goodison introduces us to Louise Bennett, also known as Miss Lou, as her Virgilio.

Presenting her new version of *Inferno*, on the website of the Publishing House Carcanet (17 April 2025), Goodison stated that "though I began the journey with my friend and mentor Derek Walcott as my guide, I became increasingly aware that the true guide I needed to accompany me could only be Louise Bennett, aka Miss Lou. And thus it was that she and I set off down the road pocked with pit, pot and sinkhole".¹

And when I see her in that wretched place, I plead
 'Help me do! Pity me, whoever you may be,
 living somebody or May Pen Duppy, do help me!'

She: 'I did alive one time, but now mi not living.
 Me come from good parents. My father was a baker
 me mother was a dressmaker and I was born when King

George siddown pon him throne. Me was a little gal
 pickney when I wish upon a star fi the gift fi write
 poetry that praise mi people inna wi own Jama tongue
 [...]

'Are you Miss Lou, the great fountainhead of Inspiration
 from whom the Hope River of creativity flows?'
 So I asked her — my head in respect due-bowed down. (9)

¹ <https://carcanet.substack.com/p/dantes-inferno-lorna-goodison>.

Louise Bennett was a strong advocate for the use of Jamaican patois, or Creole, in any literary production, poems, novels or plays, strongly opposing the theory that patois was a derivation of Standard English. An advocate of Jamaican patois as Nation Language, she promoted programs for children so that they would learn their heritage and language. It is not surprising then that now Goodison chooses Miss Lou as her guide.

Nevertheless, the choice of Miss Lou is not determined solely by her strenuous defence of Nation Language. Miss Lou, as Goodison recalls, is also the one who wrote about Marcus Garvey, the Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist leader, pivotal for exposing racism and calling for the independence of Black people worldwide.

You are the one who wrote how Marcus Garvey
travelled till he reached the land of the ancestors (13)

Goodison then utters her insecurity and her fear of not being worthy of taking the journey. She feels she is not as important as Garvey, or Nanny, the fierce military leader of the Maroon who became a symbol of unity for her people, nor even Bob Marley, who sang in the language of the people: “Why is me must go?/Who says so? I am not Garvey, Nanny, nor Marley” (14).

To which Miss Lou replies: “is like yu soul downpress by cowardice... / You must get release from fear.” Thus reassuring her that it was “Miss Bea” [Beatrice] who summoned Miss Lou to take the poet down that journey through the crossing.

Just as Dante in the XIV century had used the language of his people, the Tuscan vernacular, and not the Latin, so Lorna Goodison uses the Jamaican patois to describe the descent into the underworld. However, while Dante adopted the *terza rima*, rightly called also *rima dantesca*, Goodison, though keeping the structure in tercet, and resorting at times to Standard English, uses the free verse, adding a special flow to the narrative.

As Goodison and Miss Lou walk the perilous circles of *Inferno*, and enter Limbo, she encounters Derek Walcott, among many other great non-Christians writers such as Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and Kamau Brathwaite – reminding us how the great works of the past bear on our present, and shape our future.

In Dante’s work, the corruption, the thirst for power of Popes, official figures, noble houses, and the imperialism of Florentine prominent families – and their divisive stances – are laid bare for the readers. His characters were actual and known people, and some were still alive at the time he wrote the *Commedia*.

Goodison’s characters, as she shows throughout all of her ‘translations’ are, for the most part, both representations of the sins and corruptions of today’s Jamaican society and of the brutality and

violence of colonisation and slavery brought by the conquerors who roamed the coasts of the Caribbean.

If a one could gather up all of the murdered one
who toiled in the blood and sugar soil of the Caribbean,
whose lives were sacrificed from the time slavery began,

the blood that was shed down through the centuries when
Jamaica was one big slave plantation
that began to change only after the decline of sugar cane,

and piled them up with ones we now honour as heroes,
the countless captured, beaten, raped, hanged,
tortured and buried in unmarked graves and boneyards [175]

Goodison soars so high that, right now, in the panorama of literature, not only Caribbean, it is difficult to find somebody who could match her mastery and profundity. Her verses reach a superb level of beauty and she makes every image so strong that you can see and hear each character talking in their own Nation Language, in their own accent, distinct from the Poet's own.

She warns us, once again, that history is bound to repeat itself and the task that awaits the Poet is to acknowledge the past and expose its ruthlessness. This determination is also present in the other Cantos she has transported to the Caribbean, like Canto XII of *Purgatorio*.

Her choice of using Jamaican patois for her transposition of Dante's *Inferno* is crucial and fundamental. She has made for Jamaican language what Dante did for the Italian language, what other Caribbean writers have tried to do, and often failed. She gave Jamaican language its due dignity and its rightful place in the world. Now, there is no coming back.