

Echi danteschi / Dantean Echoes

Testi di

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Dante in *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*

This essay looks at some Dantean echoes in crime fiction. The connection is topical, as Matthew Pearl's debut novel *The Dante Club* has recently entered the American bestseller lists. Pearl's erudite book has been praised for "melding scholarship with mystery",¹ but a connection with more overtly popular crime literature is not one that Dante himself would have relished; he might have been happier making up a sixth [*Inferno*, IV.102] with illustrious admirers such as Yeats, Eliot, Beckett, Solzhenitsyn, Heaney.² And his *Comedy*, though universal in intent, often takes a disparaging attitude to popular culture – even to popular devotion, as when in the *Malebolge* devils jeer at a local icon while dunking a sinner from Lucca: "Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto" [*Inferno*, XXI.48]. Dante-*personaggio* recalls a trite popular proverb when forced to associate with the same devils: "ahi fiera compagnia! ma ne la chiesa co' santi, e in taverna co' ghiottoni". [*Inferno*, XXII.14-15]. Later, those without adequate cultural equipment are warned against trying to follow his *Comedy* [*Paradiso*, II.1-6]. St Thomas smiles at simple Donna Berta and Ser Martino who presume to anticipate God's judgment [*Paradiso*, XIII.139-42]. And only the *vulgo* will be duped by preaching friars with their *ciance* and *iscede* [*Paradiso*, XXIX.109-26]. Although enlightenment is attainable by everyman, then, it is hardly to be found in popular assumptions and beliefs.

Dante has found a small public niche in the popular culture of our time. Those who have never read him can accurately misquote "Abandon hope all ye who enter here"; they also know that he loved Beatrice and wrote the *Inferno* – "inferno" being of course an English word synonymous with "conflagration". When Lieutenant Kojak, the hard-

bitten TV detective, visits the scene of an arson attack and asks "Who owned this place before Dante took over?", he is continuing a popular association dating back to fourteenth-century Italy: Boccaccio's *Trattatello* reports two ladies of Verona speculating that his dark skin had been scorched by repeated visits to hell.³

A distinction can usefully be drawn between overt and covert appearances of Dante in popular culture as well as high culture. Overt references can be perfunctory and generic: a London restaurant called "Paradiso e Inferno", a musical group named "The Divine Comedy". More interesting, though less explicit, are the infernal scenes in Woody Allen's movie, *Deconstructing Harry*, which seem to carry reminiscences of Dante (or at least of Peter Greenaway's *Inferno* films). Certain elements in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* – the issue of the protagonist's flashes of cruelty, the array of human heads littering the ground as we approach the monstrous Colonel Kurtz – also offer parallels with the *Inferno*.⁴

Dantean titles and motifs can be found in several modern books dealing with crime and atrocity, both real and fictional. The title of Rezak Hukanovic's *The Tenth Circle of Hell: A Memoir of Life in the Death Camps of Bosnia* (1997) stems from the opening of the foreword, by Elie Wiesel: "Dante was wrong. Hell consists not of nine circles, but of ten. Rezak Hukanovic takes you to the latest one, the most dreadful and the most heartbreaking".

But the betrayal and torture of fellow-citizens, outlined in this book translated from a Bosnian original is not something alien to Dante's nine circles, so Wiesel's opening remark is merely a rhetorical flourish. He is at least aware that Dante had nine circles in Hell, and he is not alone in finding the *Inferno* a good parallel for post-Tito Yugoslavia.⁵ Hukanovic refers to his protagonist passing "into the first circle of hell" [*TCH*, 18], but the Dantean structure does not appear to be further developed, and perhaps the reference is more to the multi-level Soviet prison system depicted in Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* (1968) than directly to Dante.

A recent memoir by Jimmy Lerner, *You Got Nothing Coming: Notes from a Prison Fish* (2002) uses sporadic Dantean references in its brutal depiction of life in the American prison system. Part of the Nevada desert prison housing Mr Lerner (a New York Jewish management worker serving a sentence for manslaughter) is nicknamed "The Inferno". The book's first epigraph reads "This way to join the lost people ... / abandon all hope, you who enter"; and the author even has his "self-appointed Guide to Hell" in the person of Kansas, the swastika-

tattooed skinhead who shares his cell.⁶

There is an obvious analogy between the *Inferno* and any penal system; the link with criminality in general is perhaps a little less obvious but equally substantial. Before coming to Ross Macdonald and *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* I want to refer briefly to two other popular mystery novels which derive their titles from circles of Hell, and quote Dante in their epigraphs to reinforce the point. *The Ninth Circle*, by N.J. Crisp (1988), is a thriller featuring Russian and Western spies, and largely set in Austria; its epigraph from *Inferno* XXXII compares the Danube and the Don to the ice of Dante's hell. The source of Soviet information is codenamed Dante, and one of the story's clues is a design of nine concentric circles on the title-page of a copy of the *Divine Comedy* from which the ninth circle of the *Inferno* has been blotted out. The Anglo-Swiss hero, who has studied the *Comedy* at school, finds a copy of the poem in the house of a murdered British agent, and skims it in search of clues – a process described as tedious, painstaking, time-consuming and discouraging [*NC*, 150]. We learn that Dante's "epic work" [*NC*, 163] is written in "grandiloquent poetry", and is "apocalyptic" [*NC*, 179]. The principles of the Ninth Circle are explained in a travelogue piece [*NC*, 174-77]. An American female spy also claims to have read Dante, "a fine poet", but only in translation [*NC*, 287]. Her superior hasn't read Dante but won't admit it [*NC*, 378]: asked, "You know what the Ninth Circle represents?" he replies, "You'll have to remind me. It's a long time since I read Dante". In short, Dante is wheeled on as a prestigious prop but rarely comes to life within the text. *The Ninth Circle* is middlebrow rather than genuinely popular art.

The Eighth Circle (1958) by Stanley Ellin, an enormously talented crime writer, takes the idea of the Malebolge as a general metaphor for New York, where the prevalent sins include flattery, bribe-taking, seduction, gambling, fraud, false counselling and falsification of persons.⁷ Murray Kirk, a private detective, takes on the case of a corrupt policeman, Arnold Lundeen, merely because he himself wants to capture the policeman's beautiful girlfriend. After manoeuvring among several dangerous gangsters, he finally discovers that his client is in fact innocent, and clears his name. Revelation of Lundeen's affair with a married woman ensures, however, that Murray still gets the girl.

There is little overt reference to Dante in the book, although it ends with the word "stars" and the salvation of the main character is initiated by "the agent of Divine Providence" [*EC*, 23] – a mean-minded man who anonymously denounces his neighbour. These possible Dantean references are muted and ironised. There are some more obvi-

ous echoes – the hero mentions Francesca da Rimini [EC, 47], and the girlfriend refers [EC, 112] to “the gates of hell where the sign said *All hope abandon, ye who enter here*”. Accurate though they are, these are still the snippets of Dante that anyone might know, on a par with the Shakespeare tags that also crop up here and there [EC, 59 and 132]. But there are more obscure elements that may perhaps signal Dante at work deep in the author’s creative and linguistic consciousness. When Murray Kirk is summoned to see the district attorney, Felix LoScalzo, to discuss possible violations of his licence as a private detective, he mocks the accusations against him [EC, 155]: “Disorderly conduct and conspiracy [...] You’re sure there’s nothing else on the agenda? Sepulture? Barratry? Duelling? Nothing really fancy?” The word “barratry” is not highlighted, but is of course a genuine echo of Dante [*Inferno*, XXI.41]. More intriguing is the possibility that the name of Felix LoScalzo, one of the book’s honest and admirable Italian-American characters, could be a hidden composite reference to Dante’s presentation of Saints Dominic and Francis in *Paradiso*: “O padre suo veramente felice!” [*Paradiso*, XII.79]; “Scalzasi Egidio, scalzasi Silvestro” [*Paradiso*, XI.79-84]. Far-fetched? Undoubtedly. But crime writers may perhaps be allowed to have devious minds. Murray Kirk’s assistant and former mentor is called Bruno Manfredi. One might almost enquire, “Siete voi, qui, ser Brunetto?” [*Inferno*, XV.30].

Pearl Miller, wife of one of the book’s villains, has killed a black-mailer who was tormenting her husband. In the book’s climactic confrontation, Murray accuses her of this crime. She thinks that her husband has divulged her secret:

“Ira’, she cried out, and all the agony of the ultimate betrayal was in her voice, ‘you said you’d never tell! You said you’d never tell!’

And her answer was not in anything Miller said, but in the look on his face then. Whatever the man was, Murray saw, whatever he had been or would be, there would always be a place for him in purgatory and a chance for the long climb out of it.

Ira Miller was a man completely in love with his wife” [EC, 265].

This is not quite a reference to purgatory as a mountain – it reads more like a pit – but the long climb is certainly there, and we may recall that Dante’s second canticle contains his two most poignant issues of conjugal love and loyalty: La Pia [*Purgatorio*, V.130-36] and Forese’s Nella [*Purgatorio*, XXIII.85-93].

I want to move now towards an examination of some overt (explicit) and covert (implicit) references to the *Commedia* in Ross Macdonald’s

1962 novel, *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*. We shall see that while the explicit reference gives us the hint of what is going on, the hidden use of implicitly Dantean elements may prove more suggestive in guiding the reader’s appreciation of some of the book’s major issues. First, a word on the author and some Dantean echoes from his other books.

Ross Macdonald was the pseudonym of Kenneth Millar, born in Los Gatos, California in 1915. Brought up in Canada, he married Margaret Sturm with whom he attended the University of Ontario. She quickly became an extremely successful detective novelist, and they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he started work on a doctorate in English before serving in the American Navy during the war. He completed his PhD in 1951, with a dissertation entitled *The Inward Eye: A Reevaluation of Coleridge’s Psychological Criticism*, Kenneth Millar had published his first novel in 1944, and as Ross Macdonald went on to write two dozen crime novels featuring the private eye Lew Archer. Two of these were filmed with Paul Newman in the main role, and there were several television adaptations. He lived in California, mostly in Santa Barbara, from 1946 until his death from Alzheimer’s disease in 1983.⁸

Ross Macdonald was a “popular” writer by intention, and eventually also by readership. Like Hammett and Chandler before him, he wrote in the popular genre of the private eye story. He made a modest living from it for a number of years, followed by a breakthrough into bestseller status at the age of 53, when *The Goodbye Look* (1969) featured on the front page of the “New York Times Book Review” under the gratifying headline: *The Finest Detective Novel Ever Written by an American*. That was seven years after *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*.

It is not simply the volume of sales that determines the popular nature of art. Macdonald distinguished between false popular art and the real thing, but accepted that “a writer who works in a recognised popular form like the mystery novel is ipso facto considered a popular artist”. Matthew Bruccoli says that he “set out to write what he regarded as democratic fiction: novels that would satisfy his own standards while reaching a broad readership”.⁹ He himself sees it as a social and moral imperative:

“I have a very strong feeling that it’s the duty of a writer, or at least this particular writer, to write popular fiction. Ideally a community tends to communicate with itself through its fiction, and this communication tends to break down if there are Mandarin novels written for Mandarins and lowbrow novels written for lowbrows, and so on. My aim from the beginning has been to write novels that can be read by all kinds of people”.¹⁰

The echoes of Dante in Ross Macdonald's crime novels are sometimes generic and perfunctory. In *The Wycherly Woman*, [WW, 242], the detective listens to a tape-recording of two lovers, and remarks that these are "Paolo and Francesca in middle life" – to which his interlocutor replies: "Paolo and Francesca? They don't sound much like foreigners to me. They sound like you and I". The author may know more Dante than the average ignoramus, but he does not parade his knowledge. This is partly a requirement of the genre: as we will see later, a private eye tends to have little time for reading; besides, he is a man of the people, not a connoisseur.¹¹ Similarly, in *Black Money*, a character describes a young man falling in love with a student at a party: "He followed her with his eyes the way I imagine Dante followed Beatrice" [BM, 138] – a purely commonplace image. Later in the same book, Professor Allan Bosch of Cal State L.A. agrees to talk to Lew Archer about a former student:

"We have three eating places", he said. 'The Cafeteria, the Inferno, and the Top of the North'. [...]

'The Inferno sounds interesting'.

'It's less interesting than it sounds. Actually it's just an automat'" [BM, 209].

We are still in the realm of the rather obvious. More subtly, in *Sleeping Beauty* (1973), Chapter 28 ends with an unacknowledged Dantean vignette [SB, 173]: "Down in the dark street, sailors were standing around in disconnected attitudes, like dim purgatorial souls waiting for orders". That echo of *antipurgatorio* is all the stronger for being unattributed. It goes beyond the standard characters and setting of *Inferno* – as does the following purgatorial passage from *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*. Purgatory can hardly be said to hold a sharply-defined form in the popular imagination today; only someone who has read Dante's version would be likely to describe it in terms of "terraced slopes" as Ross Macdonald's hero does:

"I had a dream which I'd been dreaming in variant forms for as long as I could remember. I was back in high school, in my senior year. The girl at the next desk smiled at me snootily'.

'Poor Lew. You'll fail the exams'.

I had to admit to myself that this was likely. The finals loomed up ahead like the impossible slopes of Purgatory, guarded by men with books I hadn't read. [...]

So far it was more or less the dream I had always had. Then something different happened. I said to the girl, rather snootily: 'I have a trade, kiddo. I'm a

detective. You'll be reading about me in the papers'.

I woke up with a warm feeling in my chest and the small birds peeping outside the pale grey rectangle of the window. The dream had never ended this way before. Did it mean that I had made it? That didn't seem likely. You went on making it, or trying to, all your life – working up the same old terraced slopes with different street names on them" [ZSH, 60-61].

In other words, a Dantesque purgatory is the general metaphor for the struggles of existence, particularly the existence of an investigator who seeks to discover, as Dante did, "how man by his actions is deserving of reward or punishment".

...

The Zebra-Striped Hearse is a classic Californian private eye novel, played on the axes of quest, shifting identity and murky relations between the generations. Like Ross Macdonald's other books it has an enormously complex story-line, which may be briefly summarised as follows.

Lew Archer is hired by Colonel Mark Blackwell to prevent his beloved daughter Harriet from marrying a penniless painter, Burke Damis. The couple have met in Mexico, and despite Colonel Blackwell's threats they go off together. Archer's investigations turn up the fact that Damis entered the United States from Mexico using the papers of another man, Ralph Simpson, who has been murdered and buried in a South Californian city called Citrus Junction. Archer travels to Mexico, where an American resident tells him how he recognised one of Damis's paintings, "Portrait of an Unknown Woman", as matching the picture of a young woman, Dolly Stone, strangled by her husband in Tahoe, Nevada some months previously. Damis is that fugitive husband; his real name is Bruce Campion. Thus, he is the prime suspect in two murders. Archer tracks him down and has him arrested, but he does not really believe that Campion is guilty of the murders. Further investigations reveal that Colonel Blackwell was the former lover of Campion's wife, Dolly Stone, and fathered a baby by her before she was murdered. A button from a Harris tweed overcoat was found in the baby's fist after Dolly's murder; the coat itself has been found in the ocean by an unrelated group of teenagers who drive the emblematic vehicle of the title, an old hearse painted in black and white stripes, and spend their time surfing and picking up flotsam on the beach. Archer connects these two disparate facts, and traces the coat back to Colonel Blackwell. He accuses Blackwell's wife, Isobel, of having killed Dolly to

conceal her husband's affair, and Ralph Simpson because he was trying to clear Champion's name. Harriet Blackwell is missing, presumed dead, and her stepmother Isobel Blackwell stands to inherit her fortune if she dies before her father the Colonel. Isobel is unflinching before Archer's accusations, and he transfers his suspicions to the Colonel, whom he confronts with the evidence linking him to the two murders and to the presumed murder of his daughter. Blackwell then commits suicide. But the case is not over. It ends when Archer goes back to Mexico, meets Harriet Blackwell in a church, and accuses her of the murders which she committed in order to punish her beloved father for loving Dolly more than he loved her.

This is merely a simplified recital of some major turning-points in a complex, yet credible plot which is realised with considerable subtlety of texture and strong poetic imagery. Even in my crude summary, the plot-line does not exactly recall the *Commedia*. It is closer to MacDonald's perennial theme of Theban tragedy, what Hugh Kenner called his "Oedipal chess that had run for three generations".¹² He was a repetitious, obsessive storyteller: Donald Davie, in a poem about the author swimming during the onset of his final illness, recalled how he "seal-like turned himself round / To plunge upon the next / Pitiless, pitiful fable".¹³

Despite its non-Dantesque theme, the book's opening scene does contain an overt reference to *Inferno* canto III, but is mostly modelled, I suggest, on *Inferno* II. Chapter 1 begins in Lew Archer's office:

"She was waiting at the office door when I got back from my morning coffee break. The women I usually ran into in the rather dingy upstairs corridor were the aspiring hopeless girls who depended on the modeling agency next door. This one was different.

She had the kind of style that didn't go on with her make-up, and she was about my age. As a man gets older, if he knows what is good for him, the women he likes are getting older, too. The trouble is that most of them are married.

'I'm Mrs. Blackwell', she said. 'You must be Mr. Archer'.

I acknowledged that I was.

'My husband has an appointment with you in half an hour or so'. She consulted a wrist watch on which diamonds sparkled. 'Thirty-five minutes, to be precise. I've been waiting for some time'.

'I'm sorry, I didn't anticipate the pleasure. Colonel Blackwell is the only appointment I have scheduled this morning'.

'Good. Then we can talk'.

She wasn't using her charm on me, exactly. The charm was merely there. I unlocked the outer door and led her across the waiting room, through the

door marked Private, into my inner office, where I placed a chair for her. She sat upright with her black leather bag under her elbow, touching as little of the chair as possible. Her gaze went to the mug shots on the wall, the faces you see in bad dreams and too often on waking. They seemed to trouble her. Perhaps they brought home to her where she was and who I was and what I did for a living.

I was thinking I liked her face. Her dark eyes were intelligent, and capable of warmth. There was a touch of sadness on her mouth. It was a face that had known suffering, and seemed to be renewing the acquaintance.

I said in an exploratory way: 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'. She colored slightly. 'You're quick at catching moods. Or is that a stock line?'

'I've used it before'.

'So has Dante'. She paused, and her voice changed in tone and rhythm: 'I suppose I've placed myself in a rather anomalous position, coming here. You mustn't imagine my husband and I are at odds. We're not, basically. But it's such a destructive thing he proposes to do'.

'He wasn't very specific on the telephone. Is it divorce he has on his mind?'

'Heavens, no. There's no trouble of that sort in our marriage'. Perhaps she was protesting a little too vehemently. 'It's my husband's daughter I'm concerned - that we're both concerned about'.

'Your stepdaughter?'

'Yes, though I dislike that word. I have tried to be something better than the proverbial stepmother. But I got to Harriet very late in the day. She was deprived of her own mother when she was only a child'.

Archer's quoted tag, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here", is the obvious (and inaccurate) Dante reference. The hidden echoes are more interesting. In *Inferno* II, the canto before "Abandon hope", Virgil had been called on by a lady who was concerned about a man in deep trouble:

"Io era tra color che son sospesi,
e donna mi chiamò beata e bella
tal che di comandare io la richiesi
Lucevan gli occhi suoi più che la stella"
[*Inferno*, II.52-55].

This was the "chronological" start of the story of Dante's salvation, following the prologue in Canto I depicting Dante's subjective experience of being lost in the dark wood. When Beatrice came to retain him as Dante's guide, Virgil was in Limbo rather than in its modern equivalent, a dingy office building peopled by "aspiring hopeless" girls (cf. "senza speme vivemo in disio", *Inferno*, IV.42).

The opening scene is taken at least partly from Dante. Mrs Black-

well, like Beatrice, has been compelled by circumstance to leave her sphere of order and privilege and visit the hellish side of life. She does not have shining eyes, but she consults "a wrist-watch on which diamonds sparkled". She does not say in Beatrice's heartless way that "your misery does not touch me – la vostra miseria non mi tange" [*Inferno*, II.92]; but she touches as little of the chair in Archer's office as possible. She does not refer to heaven literally, as Beatrice does [*Inferno*, II.94], but exclaims "Heavens, no" when rejecting the idea of a threat to her marriage; and later we will learn that marriage is associated with Harriet Blackwell's "hopes of heaven" [ZSH, 13], while Harriet's father complains that his wife "has the standard female illusion that all marriages are made in heaven" [ZSH, 10-11]. Beatrice is afraid she has got moving too late to save the lost sheep Dante – "e temo che non sia già sì smarrito / ch'io mi sia tardi al soccorso levata" [*Inferno*, II.65] – while Mrs Blackwell regrets that she "got to Harriet very late in the day".

A case may have been made here for some parodic echoes of Dante. But are these details not equally explicable as the small change of the genre?¹⁴ Do all those glamorous women who invade the space of private eyes have to be derived from Beatrice?

Before we dismiss the significance of these echoes, we might consider other strings of images with Dantean overtones. The heavy father who hires Lew Archer is Colonel Mark Blackwell. His first name may recall King Mark of the Tristan legend, and Oedipal elements are also well to the fore. References to the weakness of his eyes begin in the opening pages: "His eyebrows were his most conspicuous feature, and they gave him the air of an early Roman emperor. Black in contrast with his hair, they merged in a single eyebrow which edged his forehead like an iron rim. Under it, his eyes were unexpectedly confused" [ZSH, 8]. "His eyes had a hurt expression" [ZSH, 9]. "A shadow stained his eyes". [ZSH, 12].

The Theban family tragedy which underpins much of Macdonald's mythology offers two versions of blindness relevant to Mark's predicament. As Bruno Bettelheim observes,

"Oedipus acted out his metaphorical blindness – his blindness to what the oracle had meant, based on his lack of knowledge of himself – by depriving himself of his eyesight. In doing so, he may have been inspired by the example of Teiresias, the blind seer who reveals to Oedipus the truth about Laius's murder. We encounter in Teiresias the idea that having one's sight turned away from the external world and directed inward toward the inner nature of things – gives true knowledge and permits understanding of what is hidden

and needs to be known".¹⁵

However, a later image of Mark's metaphorical blindness – "His eyes moved to my face like a blind man's eyes trying to glean a ray of light" [ZSH, 108] – is reminiscent of the blinded souls of the envious, deprived of the "luce del ciel" in Dante's *Purgatorio* [XIII.61-75]. And Mark's all-consuming anger, which for much of the book seems to be the main factor in his blindness, recalls his namesake Marco Lombardo, blinded by black smoke in the terrace of anger a few cantos later [*Purgatorio*, XVI.1-7, 34-36]. The idea that Mark Blackwell might have purgatorial connections was already implicit in his return to Archer's office after walking his wife to her car at the end of the first chapter. "He came back, though, wearing a purged expression which failed to tell me what had been purged, or who" [ZSH, 10].

An important element in the book is the afterlife of death, detachment or exile; a state that can be represented by hell, purgatory and heaven – or by Mexico. When Archer first flies there, "Baja California passed under the wing like the endless harsh shores of hell" [ZSH, 64-65]. An expatriate American approaches Archer in a bar [ZSH, 77] and "stood over me tall and leaning, a Pisan tower of flesh" [cf. *Inferno*, XXXI.19-45 and XXXIII.79]. But Anne Castle, one of the book's notable female figures, says of Mexico: "You couldn't possibly understand how I feel about this place. It's as ancient as the hills and as new as the Garden of Eden – the real New World – and I love to be a part of it" [ZSH, 89]. On the last page of the book, Archer is leading Harriet Blackwell out of the Mexican church where she has confessed her crimes. "I put my arm around her shoulders and walked her towards the door. It opened, filling with the red sunset. The beggar woman appeared in it, black as a cinder in the blaze" [ZSH, 256]. This might be some generic "inferno" of undifferentiated fire.

Hell or earthly paradise? Either way, it's the afterlife: Mexican donkeys are "the grey and shrunken ghosts of horses" [ZSH, 68]. Most of the individual characters whom Archer meets in Mexico are Americans, exiled for various reasons: vengeful ex-wives, or the fact of being homosexual. Some are still concerned and talkative about their former lives. Some are lost souls. One man, the gentle hotel manager Claude Stacy, sends a message back to the world of the living:

"Stacy drove me to the airport. He wouldn't let me pay him for the service, or for the double hole in his sweater. He said it would make a conversation piece.

But he did ask me when I had the time to call a friend of his who managed

a small hotel on Laguna Beach. I was to tell the man that Claude was doing all right, and there were no hard feelings" [ZSH, 105].

Why could Claude not simply have sent a letter with no return address? Clearly, we have departed from everyday realism; Archer the pilgrim is a messenger between incommunicable worlds.

By assembling these inconclusive fragments we cannot claim to have established *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* as a thoroughly Dantean book. Nor should we. The story remains resolutely a Theban tragedy, not any sort of comedy. However, the figure of the detective is, in Ross Macdonald's mind, essentially Dantean.

Let us look at the evidence for this assertion. The author once argued that "much of the modern development of the detective story stems from Baudelaire [...] and his vision of the city as inferno".¹⁶ And in a lecture at the University of Michigan in 1954, he explicitly used the Dante-Virgil relationship as an analogy of the discovery theme in detective fiction, writing of Poe's fictional detective and his descendants as "the kind of Virgil [...] who leads a first-person narrator through a kind of hell". This detective "is offered as an authentic hero to be admired by the reader". Both the narrator and the detective hero are projections of the author, and the reader is invited "to place his eager little Watsonian hand in Holmes's, let us say, and stroll through hell".¹⁷ That hell may be, as R.W. Flint wrote of Macdonald's celebrated precursor, the "miasmic, Dantesque background of California roadways, police stations, office buildings, and fake interiors in which Chandler specialises".¹⁸ Or it could be a general image of the modern world, cut off from the certainties of medieval belief. Macdonald spoke of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* as "the psychological epic of modern man cut off from tradition by the final crumbling of the medieval synthesis, estranged from his fellow men by superior sensibility and insight, and by the commensurate guilt which is the price the poet paid for his insight into the sources of evil in himself".¹⁹

We shall shortly see a biographical explanation of why the author knew Dante well enough to invoke him in part of these discussions. He may also have felt some affinity for Dante's systematic account of good and evil and the origins of sin in misconceived love [*Purgatorio*, XVII.82-139]. His friend and admirer Eudora Welty, in a memorial essay entitled *Finding the Connections*, used a Christian framework which might almost recall Virgil's reference to "lo vinco d'amor che fa natura" [*Inferno*, XI.56], to explore the connections established by Lew Archer's investigations of mystery:

"Exceeding all other connections is of course that of human love. In the crime novel, the murderer, in simplest aspect, is one who breaks his human connection, not only with his victim but with all society. [...] In a Macdonald novel, the presence of crime is the story we're being told of the absence of love. All its unfolding of drama, the tracking to its source of a wrong done, discovers at the end its beginning in love's abuse or denial. The pattern is circular".²⁰

And Macdonald had a highly developed sense of sin, arising initially from his own identity and youthful experiences:

"The year I left high school, 1932, I was glad to work on a farm for my board alone. Healthy as that year of farm life was, it was a year of waiting without much hope. I shared with many others the dilemma of finding myself to be at the same time two radically different kinds of people, a pauper and a member of the middle class. The dilemma was deepened by my fear that I'd never make it to college, and by my feeling of exile, which my mother had cultivated by teaching me from early childhood that California was my birthplace and natural home. Such personal dilemmas tend to solidify along traditional philosophic lines. In a puritanical society the poor and fatherless, suffering the quiet punishments of despair, may see themselves as permanently and justifiably damned for crimes they can't remember having committed".²¹

That sense of damnation provided part of the stimulus for his finest novel, *The Galton Case* (1959), about which he wrote: "My mind had been haunted for years by an imaginary boy whom I recognised as the darker side of my own remembered boyhood. By his sixteenth year he had lived in fifty houses and committed the sin of poverty in each of them. I couldn't think of him without anger and guilt".²²

Apart from the author's personal issues, there are other reasons why the *Commedia* is a godsend for anyone writing the modern private eye novel. We have already noted some potentially Dantesque elements in the genre. In addition, there is the figure of the investigator observing life on condition that he remains slightly outside of life.²³ But the most important attraction of Dante's story to the modern crime writer could well be the narrative principle of transgression, the protagonist's need to go over to the other side in order to make sense of sinful "normal" life. For if the underlying story in Ross Macdonald's novels is of irreducible Oedipal tragedies in which characters are statically locked, the way in which Lew Archer uncovers this static pattern is through a surface story of freewheeling quest. Nonetheless, if *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* is a Dantean progress through a Theban world, the journey tends to gravitate towards the level of "novella Tebe" [*Inferno*, XXXIII.-

89], the Pisan horror of Ugolino, in keeping with the author's belief that "the very best detective stories present a true vision of evil to which there is no rational counterstatement, and leave a residue of terror and understanding pity, like tragedy itself, which can't be explained away".²⁴ Evil tends to win out.

Other attractions for the crime writer include the pervasive themes of quest and revelation, and the episodic nature of Dante's poem. Like the private-eye novel, the *Commedia* presents a series of encounters with informants, antagonists, helpers and guides, most of whom stay static while the protagonist moves through their worlds. An obvious difference is that the investigator in the private-eye novel returns to question people already seen; but the *Commedia* too has characters who serve as doubles or reinforcers of others already seen. The restless questioning of Dante's journey is one reason why, as his biographer observed, "*The Divine Comedy* would be a frame of reference for Ross Macdonald's Southern California".²⁵ He pointed out to his friend Donald Pearce that "people in hell engage in conversation all the time", and concluded that Dante seems to be saying that hell consists largely of conversation, self-justification, accusation.²⁶ This was while he was studying as a graduate student and teaching assistant at Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan, and attending a seminar on "Fate and the Individual in European Literature", taught by W.H. Auden in 1941-1942.

The meeting with Auden was enormously important to Kenneth Millar (Ross Macdonald), and he remained proud of having taken his course, which was extremely broad and ambitious, involving thirty-two set books ranging from Aeschylus to opera libretti. His paper for the course involved a comparison of the *Comedy* to Kafka's *Castle*, and for his final examination he was to memorise and write out seven cantos of Dante's poem in the Carlyle-Wicksteed prose version.²⁷ But there was another reason why Auden's influence was particularly benign. Jerry Speir interviewed the author for his 1978 study, *Ross Macdonald*, and recorded that he named W.H. Auden as "the most important single influence on my life":

"Millar studied Modern European Literature under Auden, a subject that was taken to cover 'Dante to Kafka'. But more importantly, Auden had his own self-confessed addiction to detective stories [...]. He encouraged both Kenneth and Margaret Millar in the genre, which Auden believed capable of considerable literary importance and power. Millar referred to Auden as 'one of the most complete minds I've ever met with'. For a man of such stature to encourage a young novelist in a pursuit often considered frivolous was surely an important factor in shaping Millar's final choice of genre".²⁸

What can we conclude from all this? That university teaching is not entirely useless; that Dante is alive and well and living in popular culture; and that an imaginative engagement with the *Comedy* could still add an extra dimension of meaning to a twentieth-century storyteller working on very different archetypes.

Notes

* An earlier version of this essay was presented at a mini-conference on Dante and Popular Culture, organised by Nick Havely at the University of York in 1998. Abbreviations in alphabetical order (works with page-numbers cited in the text – see Bibliography for publishing details):

BM	Ross Macdonald, <i>Black Money</i> .
EC	S. Ellin, <i>The Eighth Circle</i> .
NC	N.J. Crisp, <i>The Ninth Circle</i> .
SB	Ross Macdonald, <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> .
TCH	R. Hukanovic, <i>The Tenth Circle of Hell</i> .
WW	Ross Macdonald, <i>The Wycherly Woman</i> .
ZSH	Ross Macdonald, <i>The Zebra-Striped Hearse</i> .

¹ New York, Random House, 2003. See <http://www.thedanteclub.com>

² The question of what constitutes "popular" literature is complex, and will be raised again. Havely (p. 211) points out that studies of Dante's influence have tended, quite rightly, to concentrate on European male poets; his book too deals with canonical figures such Shelley, Pound and MacNiece, but also includes his own article on *Linden Hills* by the African American fiction writer Gloria Naylor.

³ Boccaccio, XX, pp. 53-54.

⁴ As well as with its main acknowledged source, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

⁵ See, for example, "The Observer", 18-10-1998 (Review Section, p. 16), in which P. Beaumont reviews *The Graves* by E. Stover and G. Peress, another book about atrocities in ex-Yugoslavia. Dantean circles provide titles for other books too: current catalogues include *The Tenth Circle* by the Argentinian writer Mempo Giardinelli, translated from *El décimo infierno* (1999) by A. Labinger, Pittsburgh, Latin American Literary Review Press, 2001, and the satirical bestseller *Dispatches from the Tenth Circle: The Best of The Onion*, London, Boxtree, 2001.

⁶ J. Lerner, *You Got Nothing Coming: Notes from a Prison Fish*, London, Corgi, 2003, p. 75; see also pp. 17, 161, 173, 180, 188, 412.

⁷ The book won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America (H.R.F. Keating, *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction*, London, Windward, 1982, p. 155), and is singled out by J. Symons (*Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: a History*, revised edition, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974, p. 178) as his most notable novel.

⁸ See the comprehensive account in Nolan, and see M.J. Bruccoli, *Ross Macdonald*, San Diego, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984, pp. 42, 103-04, 109, 111 for the television and film productions.

⁹ P. 120 of M.J. Bruccoli, *Up from the Category Racks*, in Sipper, pp. 120-26.

¹⁰ Ross Macdonald, in an interview with J. Carroll, "Esquire", June 1972, quoted on p. 92 of J. Speir, *Writing Ross Macdonald*, in Sipper, pp. 89-94.

¹¹ For example, Bruno Manfredi [EC, 252] is asked whether he has ever read any Sherlock Holmes, and protests: "I got four kids. When would I get time to read anything?" John Rebus, the Edinburgh detective, lays claim to the same problem: "Rebus collected unread books. Once upon a time, he had actually read the books that he bought, but these days he seemed to have so little time" (I. Rankin, *Knots and Crosses*, London, Orion, 1998, p. 38). Even Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer is anxious to establish that he is not a bookish man. Asked by Professor Bosch whether he has read Dante, he concedes: "I've read at him" [BM, 215]. When it comes to connoisseurship, the private eye is traditionally suspicious. Although *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* takes the art and ideas of a painter seriously, in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe becomes downright offensive, sneering at a work of abstract sculpture identified as "Asta Dial's *Spirit of Dawn*", which he re-titles *Klopstein's Two Warts on a Fanny* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 46). Later in the same book, however, the supposedly philistine Marlowe can describe a girl's face as "fine drawn like a Cremona violin". For Chandler's ambiguous attitudes to high culture, see T. Hiney, *Raymond Chandler: A Biography*, New York, The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997, pp. 16, 25, 48, 173-74, 300-01, etc. *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* refers explicitly and implicitly to Henry James, Tennyson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Picasso, Edmund Burke and others, while several characters have names that conjure up medieval and Renaissance echoes, or that invite allegorical readings: Mark, Lewis, Archer, Damis, Champion, Jaimet, Castle. Yet even Archer must pay some homage to the demotic ethos of the genre.

¹² Quoted in Sipper, p. 57.

¹³ Quoted in Sipper, p. 96. I would like to thank Dr Mark Davie for permission to quote these lines by his father, and also for his kindness in drawing my attention to some biographical materials about Ross Macdonald.

¹⁴ In *The Eighth Circle*, for example, the girl turned up in Murray Kirk's office on "a routine Friday" and "sat primly on the edge of the chair, her hands clasped in her lap like an illustration of decorous good posture" [EC, 36-37].

¹⁵ Bettelheim, pp. 23-24.

¹⁶ Ross Macdonald, *The Writer as Detective Hero*, quoted on p. 150 of G. Sorrentino, *Ross Macdonald: Some Remarks on the Limitation of Form*, in Sipper, pp. 148-53.

¹⁷ Pp. 22-23 of Ross Macdonald, *The Scene of the Crime*, a lecture given at the University of Michigan in 1954, and transcribed from a phonograph recording, in Sipper, pp. 11-34.

¹⁸ P. 328 of R.W. Flint, *A Cato of the Cruelties*, "The Partisan Review", XIV.3, 1947, pp. 328-30.

¹⁹ Ross Macdonald, *The Scene of the Crime*, cit., p. 17.

²⁰ P. 158 of E. Welty, *Finding the Connections*, in Sipper, pp. 154-58.

²¹ Ross Macdonald, *A Preface to The Galton Case*, in *Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels*, p. 152.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²³ As one early reviewer of *The Zebra-Striped Hearse* remarked, "Macdonald uses coincidence [...] marvellously to show how a life gone out of control, moving as fast as California makes it move, must intersect with countless other lives of which it knows nothing. The only honest mode of address in such a world is the interrogative, and so

Lew Archer asks questions and listens to answers which can be connected only by someone not committed to having a life himself": p. 148 of R. Sale, *Gossips and Story-tellers* (review article), "The Hudson Review", XVI.1, 1963, pp. 141-49.

²⁴ P. 19 of Ross Macdonald, *The Scene of the Crime*, in Sipper, pp. 11-34.

²⁵ Nolan, pp. 53-54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁷ As well as Nolan, pp. 53-55, see Pearce; and Carpenter; Auden was certainly devoted to Dante at this time; in an essay on *Criticism in Mass Society*, published in 1941, "he cited Langland, Dante and Pope as the major influences on his poetry" (see Osborne, p. 210).

²⁸ Speir, pp. 7-8.

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“Marking time”. Some remarks on Seamus Heaney’s reading of Dante’s *Purgatory*

The aim of this paper is to trace some of the functions embodied by purgatory, both as a literary example and as a structural and cultural paradigm in *Station Island*, Seamus Heaney’s sixth book of poems. Assessing the function of purgatory also helps us to gauge Dante’s presence and influence in Heaney’s achievement.

Dante had a major role in giving purgatory, a relatively recent concept in the 14th century, literary visibility. The *Commedia* dramatically helped the diffusion of the cultural paradigm of purgatory as an intermediate station in the imagination of generations of readers.

The phrase in my title – “marking time” – is taken from the closing paragraph of *The Government of the Tongue*, the title essay of Heaney’s second book of prose. There, Heaney is trying to define the effectiveness of poetry. The example he chooses is Christ in St John’s Gospel, confronting the crowd, who intend to stone the adulteress. Instead of directly answering the questions posed by the people around him, Jesus writes on the ground. Poetry, Heaney says,

“is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed. The drawing of those characters is, like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and *marks time* in every possible sense of that phrase” [GT, 108 – my emphasis].¹

I am aware that in this particular instance, Heaney is rephrasing Robert Frost’s well-known definition of poetry, which he quotes earlier on in the same essay, as “a momentary stay against confusion” [GT,