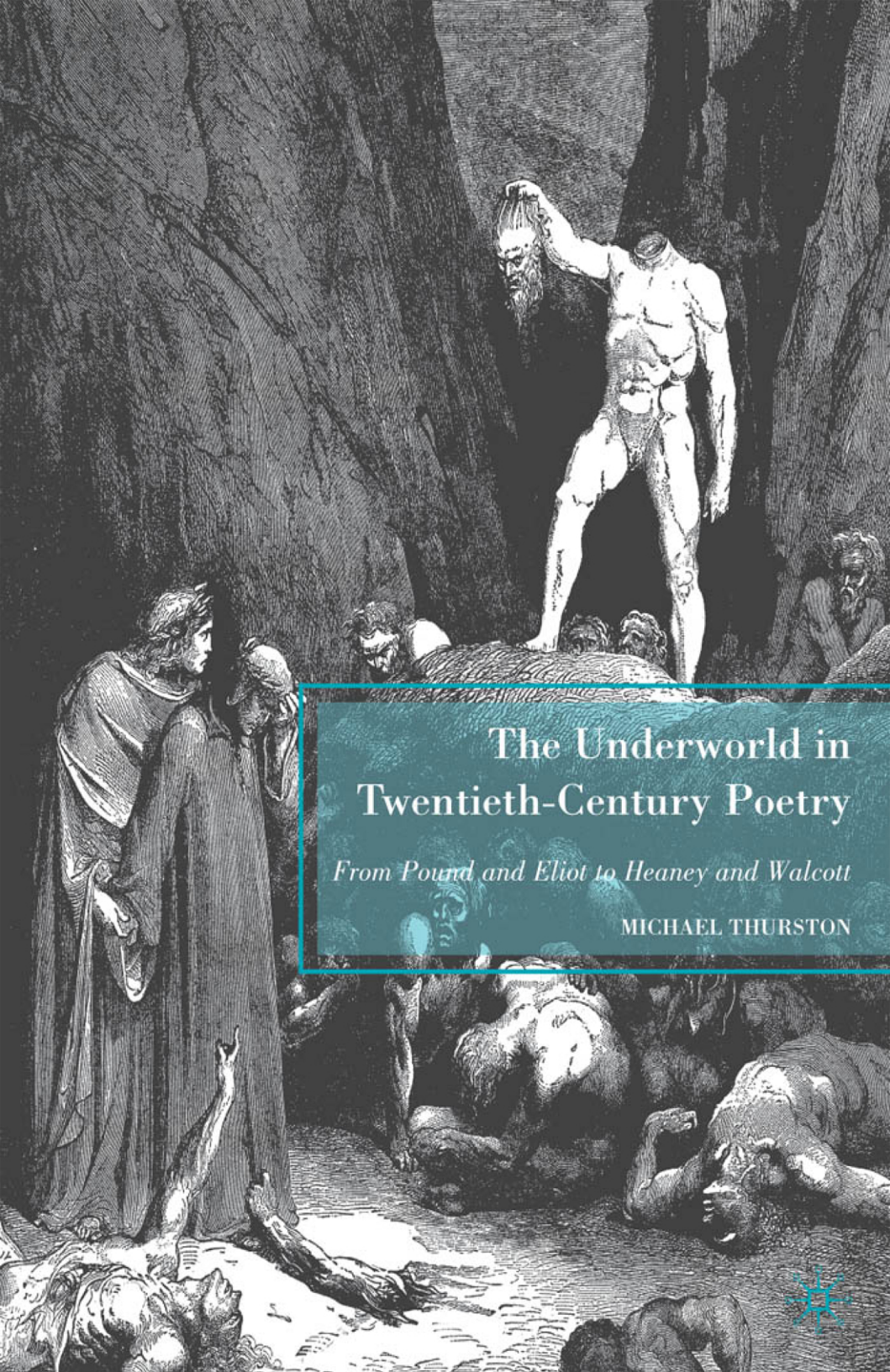




The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry

From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott

MICHAEL THURSTON



THE UNDERWORLD IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

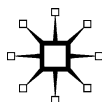
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*For Abby, Katie, and Megan
and for E.S.W.*

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PERMISSIONS

The author gratefully acknowledges the permission to quote from the following:

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Jon Stallworthy, “War Poet,” parts of which were published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (7 November 2008), and parts of which remain unpublished. Reprinted with permission of Jon Stallworthy.

INTRODUCTION

On a summer evening, a man enters a cave, carrying not only some minimal provisions (beer, potato crisps) but also candles, a typewriter, and paper. He types questions and awaits the answers, transmitted through his own typing (leaving in the resulting typescript “touch-typing mistakes of apparent oracular provenance”).¹ His central question, one at which he has arrived only after crawling “through the tunnel of daylight” and having “reached the chorus of noise in this black cavity,” one that is refined and repeated over the course of his sojourn in the cave, is “How should I reform my life?”² The man is driven to the question by his failings, most immediately a failure to act and help a victim of assault, but, it is suggested, also a series of failures in relationships. The cave’s oracle answers in typically cryptic fashion: “A ccp, nomayomopm pf / A combination of drips outside in the now dark tunnel sounded exactly li m like someone moving belongings out of a car,” and, later, “engage in hunting other things where settle son who speaks only once and that a moment of danger . . . your fate to have no son but he is the first person you meet after leaving your sperm in the cave . . .”³ The questioning man stays all night in the cave, moving deeper when beckoned by the oracle, losing along the way much of what he brought in with him—torch, crisps, candles, even the typewriter—and finding additional voices (especially that of a woman he has loved) and ever more elaborate answers to questions he cannot quite articulate. Six hours and sixteen pages after entering, the inquirer leaves the cave to embark on the new life he sought to find through his consultation with the oracle. From the stormy early morning, he looks back to find the cave “nut-calm” and “as black as the inside of your nutty skull.”⁴

Douglas Oliver’s experimental text, *In the Cave of Suicession*—which was published in Cambridge, England, by the avant-garde poetry press Street Editions in 1974 (and which I have just summarized)—nicely condenses the key elements of a topos at once ancient and actively present: the descent into the Underworld in search of prophetic wisdom. The Underworld descent tradition actually conflates two narrative topoi—the *nekuia*, in which the shades of the dead are

invoked and confronted, and the *katabasis*, in which the protagonist actually enters (literally “goes down” into) the Underworld; I will return to this distinction below. My point for now is that the story Oliver tells (both *katabasis* and *nekuia*) is one of the oldest in Western literature: the protagonist, usually at the nadir of his journey, at a dark moment of exhaustion, confusion, or despair, is driven to seek counsel and guidance from the past preserved and the prophetic vision vouchsafed to a tutelary figure in the Underworld. Oliver’s entryway into the Underworld is more explicitly related to female genitalia than we find in his epic models (though even in those, the Underworld carries strong associations with the female: Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante are all assisted by women in their Underworld experiences, and a good deal of Odysseus’s sojourn with the shades involves women, from his mother through what classicists have called the “parade of women”). Moreover, Oliver’s explicit relation of the cave to the mind, his strong suggestion that the descent into the cave is a descent into the self, is a modern wrinkle probably not imaginable to Homer or Vergil (though Dante might be read in such terms). Nevertheless, Oliver’s is an Underworld descent that largely conforms to the conventions of the long tradition in which such descents appear either as a crucial episode or as a large part of the entire narrative in many of the classic texts of Western literature: Odysseus’s encounter with the shade of Tiresias becomes Aeneas’s meeting with his father, Anchises, in Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Aeneas’s trip into the classical Underworld becomes Dante’s descent into a medieval Christian’s Hell in *Inferno*. Dante’s *Inferno* is echoed by Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Milton in turn provides a backdrop for William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Setting out on his own descent into the Suicide Cave and, more than that, setting out his self-referential narrative of self-scrutiny along the narrative lines of this ancient topos, Oliver at once imbues his own story with the deep cultural resonance of the Underworld descent and provides himself an opportunity to revise the terms of this cultural legacy (by introducing the chance errors of touch-typing, for example, to foreground language and poetic production themselves).

In casting his questioner’s journey in the structure of an Underworld descent, though, Oliver participates not only in a long tradition comprising classic texts but also in a fashion current among his own contemporaries and recent predecessors. Twentieth-century poets made a habit of going to Hell, from Ezra Pound in his rewriting of the Odyssean *nekuia* to Derek Walcott’s katabatic journey into the volcano Soufriere on St. Lucia. At the very moment Oliver has his questioner consult the oracle in Derbyshire’s Suicide Cave,

James Merrill was decades into a long-running dialogue with other-worldly spirits, conducted through a Ouija board in his Stonington, Connecticut dining room. Even Oliver's widow, Alice Notley, would go on to publish her own Underworld poem, *The Descent of Alette*, in 1996.⁵ What were these poets, thousands of years after the example of Odysseus, doing with the Underworld descent? Or, to shift the emphasis from intention to effect, what was the Underworld descent doing *for* Pound and T.S. Eliot, Sterling Brown and Hart Crane, Edna St. Vincent Millay and H.D., Seamus Heaney and Tony Harrison, and many other poets? These are the questions that animate this book.

* * *

Before turning to modern poems that deploy the descent narrative, it will be useful to sketch (very briefly) the tradition upon which those poets draw, and since the Underworld descent is part of Western literature from its beginnings, it behooves us to begin at its beginnings. Odysseus's invocation of Tiresias's shade in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* is perhaps the tradition's inaugural moment, though it draws upon even older materials—not only other accounts of Odysseus's adventures but also the legends of Heracles's descent into Hades as he completed his labors, the myths surrounding Persephone and Demeter, and the history of ritual visits to (often subterranean) oracles, including a well-known pilgrimage to Tiresias's shrine in Boeotia.⁶ The Underworld episode falls just short of midway through the epic, after Odysseus's long sojourn on Circe's island. Directed by Circe to "consult the soul of Theban Tiresias," Odysseus leads his (barely willing) men to the shores of the Cimmerian lands, upon which the sun, even at its apogee, never shines. Following Circe's instructions, Odysseus digs a pit, pours into it libations to the dead, and finally cuts the throats of sacrificial sheep so that their blood fills the pit. The ritual summons the shades of all kinds of the dead from Erebus: brides and bachelors, old men and young women, and, especially, warriors. Among this crowd, Odysseus first recognizes Elpenor, who had died in a drunken fall as the crew prepared to leave Circe's island. Elpenor begs Odysseus to conduct the obsequies necessary for his soul's rest, and almost as soon as Odysseus agrees, the hero's mother, Anticleia, of whose death Odysseus was unaware, appears. Odysseus is grief-stricken, but he cannot let his mother's shade near the blood until Tiresias has drunk from the pit. The prophet promptly appears and, once he has drunk the sacrificial blood, he relates the important

information that Poseidon is enraged at Odysseus, that Odysseus and his crew must not touch the cattle of the sun god, and that even if he does everything right Odysseus will return only after more time passes and only after having lost his ship and his companions. He will then have to kill the suitors who have spent the last dozen or more years wooing his wife, consuming his livelihood, and perpetrating violence upon his people. This is the information for which Odysseus has come, but when it is his turn to speak, the hero asks not about the sun god or the suitors or the sacrifice he must make to Poseidon, but about Anticleia; how, Odysseus wonders, can he make his mother recognize him? What follows is a series of colloquies between Odysseus and shades other than the prophet whose wisdom he came to seek. He first speaks with Anticleia, who catches him up on the state of things in Ithaca (and whom he cannot embrace, though he tries three times), then hears the tales of several other women. Odysseus then meets the shades of his fellow combatants in the Trojan War. Agamemnon tells of his own murder, Achilles says that he would rather serve as another man's slave than rule over the dead in the Underworld, and Ajax, who still bears a grudge over losing Achilles's armor to Odysseus, says a profound nothing at all. Finally, after glimpsing the punishments meted out by Minos, the judge of the dead—Tantalus tempted by the fruit out of reach, Sisyphus pushing his stone up the hill, all part of what classicists now argue is a later interpolation—Odysseus leaves the pit and rejoins his companions and they sail on (to disregard some of Tiresias's advice).

The eleventh book of the *Odyssey* narrates a *nekuia*; while he interacts with the shades of the dead, Odysseus does not actually descend into the Underworld. Instead he remains in a liminal space created by ritual, a space he is able to leave at will. The word *nekuia* derives from the Greek word for death in order to name the invocation of the shades. It distinguishes an episode of invocation from an actual physical descent, which is called a *katabasis*, from the Greek "*katabanein*" (which combines the preposition "*kat*," meaning "to go down," and the verb "*banein*" or "to go"). Though *katabanein* literally means "to go down" it has a variety of technical meanings, including "to disembark (a ship)." Homer does not use this specific verb in relation to Odysseus' journey to Hades, which is appropriate since his hero does not actually descend into the Underworld. Other accounts of Odysseus' "*katabasis*" (and the accounts of other heroes' Underworld journeys) are more literal and do involve a true descent. Some of these accounts were probably common enough in Homer's day, so that it appears he *chose* not to have Odysseus actually descend into

Hades. Or does he? Homer does use the opposite of “*katabanein*”—“*anabanein*”—when Elpenor anticipates Odysseus’s departure from Hades. More than this, characters who meet Odysseus in Hades tend to refer to his journey as an actual “descent.” What really distinguishes *nekuia* from *katabasis*, then, is perhaps a matter more of emphasis than of actual generic difference; while Odysseus may or may not descend into the Underworld, the emphasis of the episode is on his interaction with spirits. In similar stories that involve their heroes’ actual descent into Hades—the tradition of the *katabasis*—more attention is given to description of the physical space of the Underworld and of its inhabitants. They literalize, for whatever reason, what is symbolic in the Homeric text. The canonical antecedent for this katabatic tradition is the sixth book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

Like Odysseus in Book XI, Aeneas in Book VI is at a crucial low point of his journey. He has recently left Carthage after a disastrous affair with the Carthaginian queen, Dido, and, in a moment of great symbolism, has lost his helmsman, Palinurus, so that his ship loses its way. Aeneas is able, though, to reach Cumae, where he asks the Sibyl, a prophetess of Apollo, to help him cross the Acheron into Hades so that he can consult the shade of his father, Anchises. Where Odysseus is directed by Circe to consult Tiresias, Aeneas is obeying his father’s direction; this is just the first of many times when Vergil takes advantage of the chance to compare Roman virtue favorably to Greek culture by revising his poetic antecedent, thereby writing revision in as a key component of the *katabasis* itself. As if to show his awareness of the Greek past against which he sets his (pre)-Roman hero, Vergil has Aeneas appeal to precedent as he pleads his case with the Sibyl, arguing that if such Greeks as Orpheus, Pollux, Theseus, and Hercules have entered the Underworld, he should be able to as well. It is at this point that the Sibyl famously replies that it is easy to descend (*Facilis descensus Averno*), but the way back up, well, “There is the trouble, there is the toil.”⁷

That allegedly easy way down into the Underworld takes a good deal longer to recount than Odysseus’s ritual, and it offers Vergil more opportunities to revisit and revise his model, engaging in a process that reinforces both specific content that will become conventional in the Underworld descent and the dynamic of revision that critics like David Pike and Ronald Macdonald argue characterizes the topos. For example, Aeneas encounters the unburied Palinurus, just as Odysseus had met Elpenor. Vergil’s encounter is reminiscent of Homer’s and the repetition here highlights the anxiety over how one is remembered as a key component of the descent’s emotional and cultural

repertoire. But when Palinurus begs for Aeneas either to bury him so that his shade can cross over to Hades or to help him across the Styx, echoing Elpenor's plea for Odysseus to build a tomb to him, Vergil alters what he finds in Homer and refuses to grant his hero this power over his mate's immortal fate. Where Odysseus promises to memorialize Elpenor, the Sibyl calms Palinurus with the promise of future fame in the form of a coastal point named for him. Much is going on here. First, the episode is one of many examples of what Macdonald describes as Vergil's deployment of "a specific Homeric intertext to foreground the unique character of his own poem and hero."⁸ David Pike makes a similar argument, writing that "the Homeric *nekuia* and the tradition it represents are present in the *Aeneid* as objects of its satirical descent. Vergil makes his voice manifest in large part through traces of his rereading and rewriting of Homer."⁹ Just as important as this revisionist impulse is the way that Vergil makes an implicit gesture of cultural evaluation here, lodging the power to commemorate in supernatural hands (thereby demonstrating Roman piety), and making the mode of commemoration geographic rather than architectural (thereby suggesting Roman permanence). In a similar way, as Macdonald shows, Vergil uses Aeneas's encounter with Charon, the boatman who ferries souls over the Styx, to contrast and rank an outmoded Greek heroism characterized by chaotic and selfish violence with the new Roman model, saturated with virtue and pietas, the latter embodied by the hero who bears a golden bough and sheathes his sword, and who wants to take away nothing but the advice he seeks from his father.¹⁰

We could pile up more examples, but the point is made. The tradition of the descent into the Underworld is a tradition of revision, of innovation against the horizon of the past. Much, though, remains the same from Underworld to Underworld during the centuries after Vergil, centuries during which the narrative is ubiquitous in European writing, and one key consistency is the emphasis on the fates of those who dwell in the Underworld as a way to criticize the writer's culture. The *katabasis* recurs in a wide range of apocalyptic and vision literature from the first century through the middle ages, gaining through these retellings many of the details that have come to seem compulsory, many of which relate to the project of cultural critique. Dating from around the middle of the third century CE, for example, are the *Apocalypse of St. Peter* and the *Apocalypse of St. Paul*, in which appear descriptions of Hell and the torments of sinners that not only seem to follow the punishments described in the *Aeneid* but also already resemble scenes that show up in Dante's *Inferno* a

thousand years later. Here, for illustration, is an exemplary passage from the *Apocalypse of St. Peter*:

And behold, again a place! And there a pit, large and full. In it those who have denied righteousness. And angels of punishment go around there in it and ignite the fire of their punishment.¹¹

Peter's Apocalypse goes on to describe the tortures endured by murderers, especially of children, frauds, blasphemers, and usurers (the last of whom are condemned to a pit full of excrement, an image we will meet again in Pound's Canto XIV). The *Apocalypse of St. Paul* is similarly at once shocking and familiar in its handling of sinners: blasphemers gnaw their own tongues, adulterers hang by their hair and eyebrows in a river of fire. Central to both of these visions is the great truth that the descending visionary discovers in Hell: the absolute necessity of belief in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ. Just as Odysseus and Aeneas found the guidance they needed in commitments to home and ancestors, these early Christian *katabases* locate their analogous prophetic wisdom in orthodoxy. Even more important, though, is the way the lovingly described torments, each for a specific failure to believe and act that orthodoxy, at least implicitly condemn the dominant culture that surrounds the writers in the second and fourth centuries.

The orthodoxy of the late antique apocalypses is embodied in a guardian angel (a Christianized Vergil) in the most popular descent into Hell before Dante's *Inferno*, the twelfth-century *Visions of Tondal*. In this descent narrative we see even more clearly the katabatic intention to achieve effects in the world. Composed in Regensburg around 1150, the *Visions of Tondal* was enormously popular; 243 manuscripts survive. Of these, over 100 are vernacular translations from the text's original Latin.¹² As Roger Wieck writes, the readers of (and hearers about) these manuscripts used the text for a specific purpose: "The *Visions of Tondal* provided an instructive and practical treatise on subjects that dominated the genuinely pessimistic spirituality of the late Middle Ages . . . The *Visions* was one of several devotional texts . . . that were frequently bound up together as a single book . . . Read by the pious, these stories encouraged the performance of penance in this world so as to avoid greater tribulations in the next."¹³ Just as in the antique apocalypses, this cultural work would have been performed largely by the graphic description of what awaits sinners in Hell, scenes witnessed by the worldly knight, Tondal, when he falls into a fit at dinner and his soul leaves his body

and visits Hell. Among the most famous of the knight's otherworldly adventures was an episode in which, after being shown a narrow, nail-studded bridge over a boiling lake full of ravenous beasts—the bridge that thieves must cross as their punishment—Tondal is forced to cross the bridge himself, pulling along a cow that he had stolen in his youth.¹⁴ The image of Tondal and his cow appears in a number of artists' renditions of Hell, including Hieronymous Bosch's in his "Hay-Wain" *Hell*.¹⁵

Popular as *Tondal* was among late medieval and early modern readers, though, he has been all but completely eclipsed by the pilgrim-poet figure who moves through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1307–1320). Dante's descent into Hell marks a crucial moment in the descent tradition for where the Apocalypses of St. Peter and St. Paul, the *Visions of Tondal*, and the various narratives of Underworld descent recounted by Gregory of Tours (in his *History of the Franks*), Gregory the Great (in his *Dialogues*), the Venerable Bede (in his *Ecclesiastical History of England*), and others offered the Underworld as a real place,¹⁶ their chronicle style enhancing the verisimilitude of their narrated adventures, Dante's terza rima stanzas and allegorical language emphasized the literary character of his enterprise:

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.¹⁷

Like Odysseus and Aeneas, Dante is at a low point in his journey when he makes his way to the Underworld. Like his predecessors, he finds in that Underworld both guidance (in the form of Vergil) and a series of interlocutors anxious over how they are remembered in the world. Also like his predecessors, Dante revises what he finds in previous accounts of Underworld descents. Where Tondal sees a Lucifer bound but fiercely powerful, squeezing the souls from the damned and exhaling them into the torments of Hell, Dante discovers a creature that consumes the damned without volition or apparent awareness, a mass frightening in its lack of power and will. More importantly, though, Dante also places his predecessors in the Underworld. Vergil, who mapped the territory in its canonical form, now guides a poet whose Christian vision will supersede his own, and Ulysses, hero of the Homeric epic Vergil himself had revised, is encountered suffering the torment reserved for those who gave false counsel, as if to suggest that the pagan poem is one the new poet must correct if the truth is

to be told. Dante thus illustrates what Pike calls the “characteristic strategy” of the Underworld descent:

The descent into the underworld functions simultaneously as a repository for the past and as a crucible in which that repository is melted down to be recast as something other than what it had been. The most characteristic strategy of the descent is to stress its own complexity and novelty in contrast with a simple and outmoded past, a past newly reconstituted as such by the new act of descent.¹⁸

I would argue, though, that the relationship between new descent and “outmoded” is one of interdependence; Dante gets nowhere, after all, without Vergil as a guide.

Though Dante’s revision of the tradition of the Underworld descent is a deeply traditional way of deploying the topos, the *Inferno* still stands out as an important moment in the tradition’s development. I have suggested that the difference between the *nekuia* and the *katabasis* is one of emphasis, with the invocation of the shades emphasizing the key encounter with the prophet and the descent emphasizing the geography of the Underworld and the fates of those who dwell there. More than any of his predecessors, Dante synthesizes these impulses, combining the necromantic importance of the shades’ speech and the katabatic critique arising from the shades’ locations. We see this throughout the poem in the figure of Vergil, who passes on a good deal of philosophical wisdom to Dante (along with the more immediately important practical knowledge needed for moving through Hell, escaping some sticky situations there, and dealing with the shades who call out to the poet). We might also recall Dante’s famous encounter with his mentor, Brunetto Latini, in Canto XV; the shade’s encouraging speech to Dante—revealing to him his future fame, as long as he purifies himself of Florentine corruption, in a way reminiscent of Anchises’s revelation of Rome’s future to Aeneas—takes place even as Brunetto continues his march across fiery sands, his punishment for sodomy. More than this, though, Dante strongly emphasizes an element of the Underworld encounter that is often much more subtle and understated in the antique models: the chastisement of the visitor by the shades. In moments like Canto X, when Farinata tells Dante he will never return to Florence, or Canto XXIV, when Vanni Fucci tells Dante that his party, the Whites, will be defeated at Pistoia, or Canto XXXII, when the Guelph traitor, Bocca degli Abati, rants at Dante, we see the poet exposing himself, his party, and his poetic project to critique. This combination of self-examination (through

the challenges posed by revenant spirits) and self-encouragement (through the revelations of mentor shades) is a central component of the contemporary Underworld descent poem.

After this survey, the utility of the Underworld descent for modern poets ought to be obvious. These deeply traditional narrative moments—the descent and the invocation—have at their hearts the contemplation of tradition itself; the descending hero seeks guidance precisely from those who have come before him. Odysseus meets with Tiresias and also with his mother and other members of his family, with Achilles and other members of his Achaian army. Aeneas takes his course directly from his father, Anchises. Dante follows his predecessor poet, Vergil, into the depths of the Inferno. Discussing the *Odyssey* but suggesting the applicability of his insight to the epic tradition generally, George DeForest Lord suggests that the hero's alienation, his recognition that the resources of his world and himself are exhausted, leads him to conclude that only the past can disclose his future:¹⁹

Only by traveling to the perimeter of the world can he escape [Circe's] charmed circle and reorient himself by visiting the shades of his great forbears, from whom he learns about both his past and his future. The *nekuia*, then, is at once the initiatory ritual and turning point of this hero's journey, just as Vergil makes the descent into the underworld the central experience of Aeneas' voyage.²⁰

Having become "Nobody," as he identifies himself to the Cyclops, having lingered with the witch Circe, lost his men to their dehumanizing, bestial desires, and lost his own sense of mission and direction, Odysseus must undergo a rehearsal of the past in order to know his future course. Aeneas, after the disastrous dalliance with Dido, and Dante, coming to himself in the darkness of the middle of his life's road, follow suit and seek their way forward through an engagement with the past as well. In her study of contemporary fictions modeled on the descent into the Underworld, Rachel Falconer argues that writers working after the Second World War do something similar in their *katabases*: "Katabatic narrative offers contemporary writers a positive structure for representing the process by which a self is created out of adversity."²¹

The past of most pressing concern to poets working through their own moments of exhaustion, confusion, and despair is often the past of their own medium, and so perhaps the most important thing about the descent and invocation topoi is the fact that, as scholars

have long argued, they are interwoven with poets' concerns about poetry. Indeed, they have, from early on, structured poets' thinking about their vocation and their relationship at once to the poetic past and to the demands of their own circumstances. Pike remarks that "the ancient motif of the descent to the underworld...has over the millenia gathered around itself an ever-increasing constellation of meanings," and goes on to argue that "the topographical movement of descent and return within the motif...makes the descent a fundamentally allegorical form: the core fact of death is imbued with the hero's individual past, the past of his society, and the past of the motif itself."²² Similarly, Macdonald finds in the "Janus episode" a figure for specifically literary course-setting.²³ Because the language a poet receives is a "burial-place," Macdonald argues, the Underworld descent is an entry into the poetic past that enacts a relinquishing rehearsal of that past and a turn toward the future, a transformation of history into the discourse of fate. The descent is able to serve this function because "in the underworld all pasts are made equally present." The Underworld therefore offers "a chance to discover a new order in the past, in which the voice of the present has an authentic claim to be heard."²⁴ That which is in the Underworld is dead, but it retains a powerful influence on the living poet. The journey to the Underworld, Macdonald writes, "has something like the effect of liberating the poet from repressed material that he would otherwise have to repeat."²⁵ The literary past can be mastered only when the living poet undergoes the chastening but ultimately enabling journey down into it and demonstrates his or her ability at once to survive the ordeal and to one-up the dead.

Each deployment of the Underworld descent also addresses the specific exigencies of its own historical moment. I have mentioned the critique of Greek civilization in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, but we should also note that the parade of a glorious future that Anchises reveals to Aeneas is the glorious Roman past that Vergil narrates so as to justify the new empire of Augustus. In his *Inferno*, Dante meets figures involved in the contemporary Florentine conflicts (between Guelfs and Ghibellines) that resulted in his own exile from the city in 1302. Indeed, some of the contemporaries Dante consigns to Hell were still alive at the time of the poem's composition, so that the machinery of the Underworld's evaluative space, its cartography of crime and punishment, is applied for purposes of cultural critique. While Hell itself is timeless, the specific revenants Dante encounters there are, in some cases, written in for reasons quite timely during the struggle between forces of Florentine autonomy and Papal authority and those