

Hell in Contemporary Literature



WESTERN DESCENT NARRATIVES SINCE 1945

Rachel Falconer

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Hell is neither here nor there,
Hell is not anywhere,
Hell is hard to bear.

W. H. Auden,
'Hell' (September, 1939)

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Descent and Return – the katabatic imagination

Speaking on television on the anniversary of September 11th, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani described New York City, the night after the attack on the World Trade Center, as ‘Hell, what Dante must have meant when he described Hell’. In such a context, this familiar allusion is striking in spite of, or perhaps because of, its very conventionality. A devout Catholic invokes ‘Hell’ and ‘Dante’ in the same breath, incidentally omitting reference to any sacred text. Like many present-day Catholics including the current Pope, Giuliani doesn’t claim to believe in a theological Hell, an actual place of eternal torment to which sinners are sent in the afterlife.¹ But the invocation of the name of ‘Hell’, together with the appropriation of Dante, constitute something more than a literary allusion. The double invocation aims to seal off the event from others, to claim for it a unique status, to transform it from a historical occurrence into a mythic absolute. In this book I argue that, like Giuliani, many secular Westerners retain a vestigial or quasi-religious belief in Hell: Hell as the absolutely horrific experience from which no one emerges unchanged. In the Western imaginative tradition, even more important than the notion of Hell as a sacred space is our belief in the *journey* through Hell, the idea of the transformative passage, the destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other. The arc of such a journey only becomes visible retrospectively, when remembered and narrated. Having survived the journey, the survivor gains the perspective to identify it as Hell, as the unimaginable, unspeakable experience, the caesura which severs present from past selfhood. While Hell as a space remains unfathomable, we invest the narrative of the journey through Hell with potent meaning. Like Coleridge’s wedding guest, we are at once repelled by and drawn toward stories of those who have returned from the abyss. More than Hell itself, then, it is this narrative of a descent and return in which we apparently continue to ‘believe’.

Why should this be so, in the predominantly secular cultures of the

West? In this book, I will argue that we are still very much governed by a ‘katabatic imagination’, that is a world-view which conceives of selfhood as the narrative construct of an infernal journey and return. The ancient Greek term for the story of a hero’s descent to the underworld is *katabasis*, which means literally ‘a going down’.² Etymologically, ‘katabasis’ could refer to a place from which descents are made, such as a cave mouth, or to a military manoeuvre involving a descent. Both of these etymological senses are relevant to recent political events, including the bombing of Afghanistan (which aimed, as President George W. Bush put it, to smoke the enemy terrorists out of their holes) and the invasion of Iraq by British and American-led military forces in 2003. But metaphorically, *katabasis* (or in Latin, *descensus ad inferos*) was used by the Greeks more particularly to refer to a story about a living person who visits the land of the Dead and returns more or less unscathed.³ The well-known Greek and Roman heroes who made such a journey include Orpheus, Theseus, Jason, Heracles, the goddess Demeter, Homer’s Odysseus and Virgil’s Aeneas. The Greeks may also have known of the older Sumerian and Akkadian descent heroes such as the king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, or the goddess, Inanna.⁴ In the Christian tradition, the conversion of Saul into the apostle Paul is allegorised as a descent and return. Indeed every Christian’s experience of conversion may be understood as a shadowy imitation of Christ’s own descent into Hell and reascension. The pervasive influence of this tradition on the modern Western psyche is, as we shall see, both literary and religious.

Undoubtedly the katabatic writer of most far-reaching influence on contemporary Western literature is Dante Alighieri, who seamlessly combined the ancient Greek and Roman with the medieval Christian traditions of descent narrative.⁵ Dante’s *Inferno* famously begins, ‘Mid-way on the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood’ (*Inf.* 1.1–2). In these lines, the ‘I’ is both singular and archetypal, at once an individual character and a figure for ‘our life’. For the modern secular reader, the ‘I’ is also an autobiographical, narrativised self; it is me the reader, made coherent by the organising powers of narrative. For the Western reader, the appropriation of Dante’s model to the ‘dark woods’ of modern life – mid-life crisis, divorce, redundancy, cancer, AIDS or, most recently, terrorism – comes naturally. Dante’s infernal journey is always potentially the modern reader’s own life story, since it helps us to see the flux of our own experience as a comprehensible narrative. Like the man in Karen Blixen’s story, who looks out from his window to find that his footprints in the snow have created the pattern of a stork, we look up from reading Dante to find inferno-shapes in our own lives.⁶

If Dante’s *Inferno* feels contemporary, this is not only because it

embodies a vast inheritance of Western literary and theological myths, but also we are accustomed to thinking about the modern psyche, and the political and social economy, in katabatic terms. As has often been pointed out, Freud and Marx were very much influenced by classical ideas about the underworld, and even more by the idea of a heroic descent into this underworld.⁷ In this study, I shall be discussing Western descent narratives written between 1945 and the present, nearly all of which reflect this mixed inheritance of views about infernal journeys from Dante, Greek and Roman myth, Judeo-Christian theology, Freud's theory of the unconscious and Marx's theory of economic base and superstructure. Freud and Marx are themselves inheritors of nineteenth-century katabatic ideas that the truth about ourselves, about our species origin, lies deeply hidden underground. As Rosalind Williams has convincingly shown, the development of mining and archaeological excavation in the nineteenth century contributed to the prevalence of these ideas.⁸ Darwin's theory of evolution is a story of humanity's descent from the Earth's creatures rather than the gods of the sky. What was even more distressing for his contemporaries, his theory of devolution postulated that we are always capable of regressing, of descending in a different sense, to a more primeval state.⁹ Added to this nineteenth- and early twentieth-century inheritance are the very considerable influences of later writers on Hell, as well as underworld myths borrowed from other theological systems such as Buddhism and Hinduism. And it is not only theology, literature, archaeology, anthropology, psychology and economic theory that have contributed to making Hell feel like a reality to the modern, secular imagination. As I will argue in Chapters 1 to 3, the sheer pressure of twentieth-century history itself has convinced many people of the view that Hells actually exist, and survivors do return, against all probability, to pass on their experience. Dante's description of his journey through Hell is a strikingly vivid, engrossing narrative in its own right. But there are many additional factors that contribute to a twenty-first-century reader's sense of recognition when he or she first encounters the medieval pilgrim lost in the wood.

In classical katabasis, the descent to Dis or Hades is about coming to know the self, regaining something or someone lost, or acquiring superhuman powers or knowledge.¹⁰ The descent requires the hero to undergo a series of tests and degradations, culminating in the collapse or dissolution of the hero's sense of selfhood. In the midst of this dissolution comes the infernal revelation, or the sought after power, or the spectre of the beloved. The hero then returns to the overworld, in some cases succeeding, in other cases failing to bring back this buried wisdom, love or power from the underworld. In Dantean and medieval Christian katabasis, the

traveller's sinful self dies upside down at the bottom of Hell, and a new self emerges, walking upright in the grace of God.¹¹ Many contemporary writers have drawn upon this hinged narrative structure, with its descent to a zero point followed by a return, in order to convey some aspect of what Rushdie has called 'the felt shape of human life' (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, p. 543). Among the major contemporary 'katabasists' who, for reasons of space, have not been included in the present discussion are Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Haruki Murakami, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Tony Harrison and Derek Walcott. Similarly another book could (and should) be written on post-1945 katabatic film, which would include examples from the art-house cinema of Vincent Ward and Jan Švankmajer to Hollywood blockbusters such as the *Star Wars* epic cycle and *The Matrix* trilogy.¹² One point which I hope the present study makes clear is that Western culture is saturated with the idea of a self being forged out of an infernal journey.

In katabatic narratives written after 1945, while the descent to Hell still functions as a quest for knowledge, reparation of loss or superhuman power, the descent occurs within a context which, unlike their classical predecessors, is already understood to be infernal. Post-1945 descent narratives are notably fatalistic, often beginning with the protagonist at the bottom of Hell. In Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, we are 'On the Bottom' by Chapter 2; in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator is already immured underground when he begins his story; in Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, the protagonist is already dead in Chapter 1. As we shall see in Chapter 8, one of the key differences between Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* and the early twentieth-century novella on which it is based, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is that Captain Willard begins his descent from Saigon rather than the West. Early in the film, Coppola's Willard is roused to consciousness by two fellow American soldiers, one of whom says to the other, 'give me a hand here, Captain. We got a dead one'.

Post-1945 descent narratives aim to show that we have already reached the end, although this fact is obscured by a surface of comfortable pseudo-realities. In such narratives, rather than making the traditional crossing from historical to eternal realms, descent heroes are found peering through cracks, ripping back curtains, opening trapdoors to find infernal worlds contingent and coterminous with our own. Both worlds are represented as equally real. More frightening still is the possibility that, as E. L. Doctorow claims, once the trapdoor to that other, deeper reality is thrown open, it can never be closed.¹³ In such cases, the function of the descent journey can no longer be to overcome and subjugate the

dark realm. Rather the protagonist's task, as we find in Gray's *Lanark* and Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet*, is to acquire the ability to live with the double-vision or to stand astride the two realities. So while Hell is embedded in twentieth-century history and consciousness, it may still take a descent journey to bring that reality home to us. The descent thus exposes the infernal nature of individual psyches, as well as twentieth-century institutions, governments and histories. At the same time, and more optimistically, by framing the experience of Hell as a journey of descent and return, many contemporary descent narratives articulate their resistance to this apparently inescapable infernal condition. If Hell has become a historical phenomenon, then it need no longer be regarded as a mythical or theological absolute. It can be resisted, transformed and even – as in Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Notley's *The Descent of Alette* and Whedon's TV series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – ultimately destroyed.

Katabatic narrative offers contemporary writers a positive structure for representing the process by which a self is created out of adversity. But there are also a set of problems specifically associated with this narrative tradition of which we should be wary, especially in the present climate of fear generated by terrorism and the polarisation of Eastern and Western nations. Many descent narratives represent otherness as absolutely Other; the rejection of the demonised Other is the necessary flipside to the creation or preservation of a self. Dante's ascent via the torso of the immured Satan, in *Inferno*, 34, illustrates this point graphically. Infernal journeys are also traditionally narrated retrospectively, from a position of supernatural authority. Descent narrators are the survivors of atrocity, the escape artists from Hell. The extremity of their experience and the fact that they survived gives them the right to speak and not be contradicted by their merely mortal listeners. Moreover, neither the past self nor any other participant within the descent narrative possesses the same degree of authority as the narrator, because traditionally it is only the narrator who survives the experience. As C. S. Lewis's gloomy earthman put it, 'many fall down, and few return to the sunlit lands'.¹⁴ Such narrators can and often do claim to be the bearers of revelatory truth, even and especially in secular contexts. Infernal revelation can then become the means to justify acts of retribution and vengeance, as has arguably been the case with the Western response to September 11th. In recent years, popular Hollywood epic films have faithfully reproduced this traditional katabatic narrative dynamic. In *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the enemy is a familiar other who must be transformed into, and rejected as, the absolute Other in order for the hero to return from the underworld. In these film cycles, the hero is the bearer of a sacred truth, for which millions of the enemy must be sacrificed so that a few good souls will

survive. The narrative dynamic operating here is similar to that which governs Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which the hero's descent to the underworld teaches him his destiny: that he must found the empire of Rome at some cost to others' lives and his own humanity. The texts discussed in this book, however, call into question many of the problematics associated with the classical and medieval descent narrative tradition. In doing so, they are not simply modernising a literary tradition, but also making us think about our own infernal experiences in a different way. In the aftermath of a catastrophe, there often appears to be only one way out of Hell, something that must be done whatever the price. The narratives discussed here suggest that, on the contrary, there are as many routes through Hell as there are minds to imagine them.

This is an idea which Primo Levi's writing on Auschwitz conveys with particular clarity and force. From his well-known autobiographical works such as *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce* and *The Periodic Table* to his novels, occasional essays and prefaces, Levi showed that living through Hell need not be transformed through the filters of memory and narrative into a sacred, fixed or absolute experience. The title of my first chapter, 'Hell in Our Time' is taken from Levi's Auschwitz testimony, *If This Is a Man* (p. 28). In this chapter, I explore the proposition suggested by Levi, Steiner and many others, that in the twentieth century, Hell was made immanent in history. I test out this idea against the evidence of a broad spectrum of twentieth-century experiences and writings, not all of them literary, and not all of them related to major historical events such as the two world wars and the creation of the death camps. Cutting across this cultural analysis, I adopt a more formalist approach to Hell in Chapter 2. My aim there is to demonstrate that however we define Hell, whatever we think being in Hell means, our ideas are shaped by the conventions and dynamics of narrative. Formally considered, Hell is what Bakhtin defined as a chronotope, a generically distinct representation of time and space in narrative. As such, it represents the image of the human subject in particular and distinctive ways. Once we recognise this, however, we are in a position to challenge the traditional chronotopic representations of Hell as temporally fixed and spatially distanced, hence to be feared and revered as a theological absolute.

In Chapter 3, I discuss Primo Levi's classic testimony, *If This Is a Man*, as a descent narrative in which Hell is represented as a juxtaposition of many chronotopes, each of which reveals a different image of the human subject. This is a deliberately belated approach to *If This Is a Man*; that is to say, I am not trying to capture the searing, visceral impact the text makes on a first-time reader, although the text itself was composed from

‘an immediate and violent impulse’ to communicate the experience of internment, as Levi informs us in the Preface (pp. 15–16). But much has been written on *If This Is a Man* already, including its allusions to Dante’s *Inferno*. There is little need for further allusive or empathetic readings of the text, especially when Levi himself conveys this kind of response so much more effectively. What I am interested in exploring is the retrospective Levi, the testimonial writer perceived through the filter of his own, later reflections on the Holocaust and our own increasing distance from the historical event. Levi’s writing can be seen to work against the sacralisation of Hell that occurs in some other examples of memorialisation and writing about the Holocaust. Chapter 4 develops this theme of belatedness, or afterwardness, by contrasting two fictional novels about the Second World War: Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces* and Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. These two novels were written at the distance of a generation or more from the experience of the war itself (1996 and 2001 respectively). Here it is the traumatic recollection of childhood memories that constitutes the descent into Hell. The contrasting ways in which *Austerlitz* and *Fugitive Pieces* represent war trauma illustrate how memories of Hell can work to entrap survivors or unexpectedly release them from unbearable aporia.

Chapters 5 and 6 move on to consider more recent, and more personal examples of Western descent narrative. In Chapter 5, I discuss the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts of mental illness written by recovered patients/writers such as Susanna Kaysen, Carol North and Lauren Slater. All these writers frame their experiences of mental illness within the narrative structure of a descent into Hell and return. These actual survivors of mental illness present us with very different accounts of the experience than do leading theorists of madness such as Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari. In various ways, they demonstrate that the return from such a Hell need not be a matter of choice between Cartesian self-certainty and postmodern self-doubt. If madness has long been associated with underworlds, so too has femininity. The classical descent narrative is frequently (though not exclusively) gendered as the journey of a male hero into the female Earth via a female sacrificial victim. In order to illustrate how this gender dynamic has been disrupted and redefined in recent years, Chapter 6 analyses fictional descent narratives written by women such as Gloria Naylor, Marge Piercy and Alice Notley, in which a female character descends into the underworld. Following on from Notley’s critique of patriarchal capitalism in *The Descent of Alette*, Chapter 7 examines the continuing relevance of the Marxist idea of a descent to the underworld of the workplace in a postmodern, and some might add post-Marxist, context. Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* demonstrates how descents into Hell operate within social and

economic contexts in which the ‘base’ is no longer held to be synonymous with reality and truth, and in which underworld revelation often turns out to be as duplicitous, as fantastical as the chimerical desires pursued by capitalist consumers in the overlying ‘superstructure’. Here, as elsewhere, our condition appears to be inescapably infernal, and yet Gray’s novel is one of the great narratives of resistance to capitalist Hell produced in the last quarter century. In Chapter 8, I discuss Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* as a revision of the myth of Orpheus in terms that reverse not only the geographical coordinates, but also many of the cultural and theological assumptions of traditional and modern descents from the West into an infernal East. Rushdie’s richly positive representation of East–West relations, and descent journeys from one region to the other, provide a stark contrast to the Bush administration’s polarised world-view, in which certain Eastern states have been characterised en bloc as an ‘axis of evil’.¹⁵ As a recent study of Eastern conceptions of contemporary America demonstrates, demonisation occurs in the other direction as well.¹⁶ On the anniversary of September 11th, the Iranian state-owned newspaper *Al-Iktisadi* showed a picture of the burning World Trade Center, with the headline, ‘God’s punishment’, written in red letters.¹⁷ In this way Orientalism clashes head to head with Occidentalism, and the chance for a positive threshold crossing into another country and world-view gets lost. In the epilogue I briefly consider the events of September 11th and their aftermath in the light of the descent narrative tradition. I suggest different ways in which the political responses to September 11th may be interpreted as attempts to narrativise the experience of Hell, suffered on the day of the terrorist attack on New York City.

My treatment of the idea of the infernal journey draws on a mixture of thematic and theoretical approaches. The latter is likewise a hybrid of different schools of criticism. For example, in Chapters 2 and 3, I employ Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, while taking issue with his theory of carnival in Chapter 8; I am indebted to Derrida’s reading of Marx, in Chapter 8, and to other theorists noted in the discussion along the way. My ideas about modern and post-1945 Western identity are particularly influenced by two very different yet equally magisterial studies, Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* and David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*. On the subject of narrative self-fashioning, Paul Ricoeur’s three-volume *Time and Narrative* and later writings, Nicola King’s *Memory, Narrative, Identity* and Adriana Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives* have always been close to hand. Susan Neiman’s *Evil in Modern Thought* helped me to clarify some of the historically distinctive aspects of twentieth-century underworld journeys. Outside of classical and medie-

val scholarship, there are few full-length studies of the descent narrative in different historical periods. The descent hero figures importantly in Joseph Campbell's mono-mythic study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In *The Dream and the Underworld*, the archetypal psychologist James Hillman writes about classical underworld myths, using these to develop a method of psychological analysis which he is at pains to distinguish from Freud's. More recently, Evans Lansing Smith has applied this archetypal approach to the myth of the descent journey, in such studies as *Rape and Revelation: The Descent to the Underworld in Modernism* and *The Hero Journey in Literature*.¹⁸ While fascinating in their own right, these archetypal analyses of katabatic narrative are antithetical to the historically contextualised approach adopted in the present study. Hillman and Smith are interested in descent myths for the universal psychological truths they can reveal, whereas I am interested in them for precisely the opposite reason. Contemporary descent narratives, as I aim to show, often resist any movement towards transcendence of the particular and the historical. The two studies of modern underworld journeys with which I find myself most in sympathy are Rosalind Williams' *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* which broadly explores nineteenth century attitudes towards underworlds of different kinds, and David Pike's *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* which argues for the centrality of the *descensus ad inferos* to early twentieth-century modernist literature and philosophy.

In *The Secular Scripture*, Northrop Frye makes even more sweeping claims for descent narrative. He argues that descents account for two of the 'four primary movements in literature' (p. 97). Either we begin on earth or in heaven and descend, or we begin in Hell or Earth and ascend (these two latter types of narrative would be *anabases*, or 'goings up'). All stories, in Frye's view, are 'complications of, or metaphorical derivations from, these four narrative radicals' (ibid.). If this is true, it is hardly surprising that so many descent narratives have been produced in the fiction, film, poetry and drama of the latter half of the twentieth century. But as I hope to show, katabasis is not only a structural category of narrative literature; it also expresses a particular world-view, one which pertains as strongly to our present historical situation as it has to various times in the past. In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis characterised the world seen through medieval eyes as a vertically hierarchised one. To a medieval viewer, Lewis argued, the night sky would appear very different:

Remember that you now have an absolute Up and Down. The Earth is really the centre, really the lowest place; movement to it from whatever direction is