



HAL
open science

Dante in the Delta: Oil, War, Environmental Destruction, and the Divine Comedy

Sylvain Belluc

► **To cite this version:**

Sylvain Belluc. Dante in the Delta: Oil, War, Environmental Destruction, and the Divine Comedy. Intertextualité dans la littérature anglophone : problématiques contemporaines, de l'emprunt à l'écho, Université de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Prismes EA 4398, Nov 2024, Paris, France. hal-04859945

HAL Id: hal-04859945

<https://hal.science/hal-04859945v1>

Submitted on 31 Dec 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Dante in the Delta: Oil, War, Environmental Destruction, and the *Divine Comedy*

“Go back before I blast you to hell!” shouts one of the guards of the so-called Professor, the guerilla fighters’ leader, to the narrator in *Oil on Water*, in a remark through which, as I shall try to show, he unwittingly points to a key intertext of the novel. Published in 2010, *Oil on Water* is the work of Nigerian writer Helon Habila (slide 2). Through a complex, non-linear narrative that jumps back and forth in time, it details the trip of two reporters, Rufus and Zaq, through the Niger Delta in August 2009. Their assignment is to investigate the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, a British woman and the wife of a petrol engineer working for an oil company in Nigeria. Quickly, however, the abduction ceases to be Rufus’s main motivation when he recognizes that he has come across a much bigger story, namely the destruction of the Niger Delta.

Ever since 1956, when crude oil was found in surprisingly large quantities in the Niger Delta region, international oil companies have vied with each other to tap into the region’s limitless resources of sweet crude, a low-sulfur, high-quality type of oil commonly used to process into gasoline. In so doing, however, they have wrought havoc on the ecosystem of the entire region. Indeed, it is hardly an understatement to say that, as a consequence of their actions, local communities have faced an environmental catastrophe. Millions of litres of oil are spilled every year across the Niger Delta (slides 3 & 4). Air, land and water have all been contaminated, with devastating effects on residents’ health and livelihoods. Vast areas of the state’s waterways and mangrove swamps have been destroyed or put at risk. People living in the delta used to farm and fish for a living, but farmland has now been cloaked in oil, contaminating crops and exposing people to high levels of heavy metals. Meanwhile, gas flares – where natural gas associated with petroleum extraction is burned off in the atmosphere – have filled the air with pollutants and created acid rain (slide 5). The environmental and human cost of oil extraction soon becomes the main story of the book. Rufus’s attention gradually turns away from the kidnapped woman as he records what he sees on his trips through the Delta and meets a vast array of people who all play a part in the drama that has been unfolding in the region.

As that short summary of the plot of the book implies, and as numerous critics have been quick to point out, *Oil on Water* shares many common features with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In a seminal article entitled “Into the Heart of Nature: Conradian Echoes in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*,” José-Santiago Fernández-Vásquez has attempted to identify and interpret those parallels.¹ The most obvious one is the motif of the journey upriver, which, in both works, is used for several ends. On a first level, it serves to make the reader aware of the social and environmental damage that arises from extraction practices and to highlight their interrelatedness. While in the Belgian Congo, ivory was collected with a system of forced labour, which was maintained through violence and displacement, in today’s Nigeria, it is of course oil extraction and the damage it causes to the environment which lead to social deprivation and a mass rural exodus.² On a second level, the motif of the journey works as a way to introduce a metaphorical quest with different levels of interpretation and generic

¹ José-Santiago Fernández-Vásquez, “Into the Heart of Nature: Conradian Echoes in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 51, no. 4 (Winter 2021), 103-21.

² *Ibid.*, 109-10.

crossbreeding. The mission to find Kurtz has been compared to the quest for the grail, understood as the ultimate source of knowledge and enlightenment. Marlow's process of discovery can also be understood as an example of a Bildungsroman, or as an inconclusive detective plot. All these generic interpretations have one aspect in common, which can also be perceived in *Oil on Water*: the attempt to probe the limits of knowledge and the possibility of finding the truth. Marlow believes that once he finds Kurtz, he will be able to grasp the meaning of reality and make sense of everything that has happened during the journey. In this sense, from an epistemological point of view, Kurtz represents the dream of securing true and profound knowledge. Yet, when Marlow finds the chief of the inner station, his expectations are frustrated. Far from providing the answer to previous mysteries, Kurtz only raises new questions, as he does in his famous and cryptic last words: "The horror! The horror!" The confusing and ambiguous meaning of this last statement emerges as the novella's final sceptical questioning of the possibility of finding the truth.³

Like their counterpart Marlow, Zaq and Rufus are obsessed with the idea of discovering the truth, which in their case means unravelling the mystery of Isabel's kidnapping and the reality of the Delta conflict. In the end, however, those expectations are frustrated. Rufus finds Isabel and has the opportunity to interview her, but only to discover that her abduction was a cover-up. The "perfect story" vanishes, and the two journalists begin to understand that things are not as simple as they expected. The Professor, who was believed to be an environmental hero, turns out to be a sadistic psychopath who resembles his counterpart in the army, the Major. Both characters try to convince the journalists that their version of the Delta conflict constitutes the truth and argue that they are acting out of idealism, in order to look for the greater good of the local population. Yet, we see both of them mistreating, torturing, and killing innocent villagers. Actually, the way in which the Major and the Professor act is reminiscent of the behaviour of their literary counterpart, Kurtz, whose alleged idealism also collapses into brutality and who is defined as "an extremist". Rufus and Zaq are thus forced to reassess their idealistic points of view and see their expectations to solve the mystery of the Delta defeated. Just like Marlow, they will become more cynical and learn to question simplistic explanations.⁴

Heart of Darkness is thus an essential text to turn to if one is to make sense not just of the structure of *Oil on Water*, but of its political and philosophical import as well. However, *Heart of Darkness* is no stable, transparent Ur-text of which *Oil on Water* would constitute a mere variation. It itself resonates with echoes from a number of different sources, prominent among which is Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1303-21). The *Divine Comedy* is an intertext that also looms large in *Oil on Water*. Interestingly, however, the numerous echoes and parallels through which one can locate its presence do not all feature in *Heart of Darkness*, or do so much less prominently. There is therefore sufficient reason to think that they are not mediated through Conrad's novella, and that in *Oil on Water*, the *Divine Comedy* is an intertext in its own right, as it were.

From the very first paragraph of the novel, a series of clues encourage the reader to think that *Oil on Water* is partly modelled on the *Divine Comedy*:

I am walking down a familiar path, with incidents neatly labelled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand, and a fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost, and I have to make up the obscured moments as I go along, make up the faces and places, even the emotions. Sometimes, to keep on course, I have to return to more recognizable landmarks, and then, with this safety net under me, I can leap onto less certain terrain (3; slide 6).

³ Ibid, 113-4.

⁴ Ibid, 114.

The motifs of the path, of the middle and of darkness, like the narrator's admission of his difficulty at relating with precision the experience he went through, cannot fail to remind the reader of the famous words on which the *Divine Comedy* opens:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.
So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there (slides 7 & 8).⁵

There is more than a hint of trauma in those two incipits, with Dante claiming that the mere fact of remembering the forest in which he found himself “renews his fear,” while the narrator of *Oil on Water* is pictured “clawing about in the dark” and needing “to return to more recognizable landmarks,” with “a safety net” under him.

Those initial echoes act as signposts aimed at directing the reader's attention to the numerous parallels with the *Divine Comedy* that can be found in the book. Those parallels function both at the micro-structural and macro-structural levels. If we look at the macro-structure, first, a major similarity between Dante, the pilgrim and poet of the *Divine Comedy*, and Rufus, the main protagonist and narrator of *Oil on Water*, is that they are each guided through most of their journey either in the otherworld or in that other world which is the Niger Delta by a tutelary figure, a man of letters for whom they harbour deep affection and admiration. In the case of Dante, it is of course Virgil, the famous Roman poet of the Augustan period and author of the *Aeneid* on whom Dante lavishes praise when he meets him in canto I of the *Inferno*:

“Now, art thou that Virgilius and that fountain
Which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech?”
I made response to him with bashful forehead.
“O, of the other poets honour and light,
Avail me the long study and great love
That have impelled me to explore thy volume!
Thou art my master, and my author thou,
Thou art alone the one from whom I took
The beautiful style that has done honour to me (slide 9).⁶

In *Oil on Water*, by comparison, Zaq is a journalist who, although now on the wane, is regarded as one of the most gifted reporters of his generation and described as having done much to revolutionize his craft. Rufus, the first-person narrator-cum-cub reporter at the centre of the novel, looks up to him, describing him at one point as “one of the best this country ever produced” (5), and stating later that “My ultimate ambition was of course to become like Zaq some day” (23). The resemblance between Virgil and Zaq does not end there, however. It is extended further through the caring, protective attitude both adopt towards their protégé. Rufus thus turns to Zaq as a font of knowledge who is capable to answer the deepest philosophical questions, find the hidden meaning of their journey, and thus calm his fears. Rufus explains: “I was glad his mind was still capable of philosophizing. The further we ventured into the forest,

⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto I, verses 1 to 9, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1001/1001-h/1001-h.htm>

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto I, verses 79 to 87, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1001/1001-h/1001-h.htm>

the more I found myself turning to him with questions. I had no idea what he meant about the story and its meaning, but perhaps I would find out before this trip was done” (5), and later adds “I was confident that with Zaq there everything would work out fine. He’d be my guide, my teacher. Once, when he was drunk and helpless, I had looked after him; now it was his turn to look after me. Fate, it seemed, had brought us together” (51). Similarly, Dante often turns to Virgil for reassurance, as in the last lines of canto VIII, where he is suddenly gripped by the fear that he might never be allowed to leave the nether world, and Virgil placates his distress, hinting, just like Rufus in *Oil on Water*, that their meeting and their journey have been planned by a higher authority:

“O my dear Guide, who more than seven times
Hast rendered me security, and drawn me
From imminent peril that before me stood,
Do not desert me,” said I, “thus undone;
And if the going farther be denied us,
Let us retrace our steps together swiftly.”
And that Lord, who had led me thitherward,
Said unto me: “Fear not; because our passage
None can take from us, it by Such is given.
But here await me, and thy weary spirit
Comfort and nourish with a better hope;
For in this nether world I will not leave thee” (slide 10).⁷

Just like Zaq, however, who doesn’t make it to the end of the journey, succumbing to a tropical disease which is compounded by his alcohol addiction, Virgil can only accompany Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Both have to part company on the threshold of Paradise, as Virgil is denied entry into it because he was never a Christian, and therefore can’t be redeemed.

It is worth noticing that no character plays such a role of father figure to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. It thus goes to show that the influence exerted by Dante on Habila is a direct one. This is further illustrated by the role played by Isabel in the novel, the British petrol engineer’s abducted wife whom Rufus and Zaq are looking for. Their obsessive quest for and frequent evocation of her is not without reminding the reader of the figure of Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*, the idealised woman who is Dante’s intercessor in the *Inferno*, his goal in traveling through *Purgatorio*, and his guide through the nine celestial spheres in *Paradiso*. Although the argument has been made that Kurtz’s fiancée in *Heart of Darkness* is a modern-day avatar of Beatrice, she certainly doesn’t loom as large as the latter, and Marlow’s meeting with her in Brussels on his return from Africa forms a mere appendage to the story he has just told. Conversely, Isabel is the proper *raison d’être* of Rufus and Zaq’s journey through the waters of the Delta. When Rufus does get to meet her at last, she unsurprisingly makes for a pale imitation of Dante’s otherworldly muse, what with her emaciation, her cropped hair, her blank look, and her ragged clothes. This is how Rufus describes her:

Now I saw how thin she looked. Her hair had been chopped off and the jagged edges hung unevenly over her ears. An old red blouse that didn’t seem to belong to her hung from her shoulders, and her collar bones jutted out, stretching the skin. Her face was covered in rashes; the skin was still slightly discoloured from whatever dye she had used to disguise herself while making her escape from her kidnappers. But it was her eyes that expressed her situation best: they looked hollow, lustreless, and even when they rested directly on you, they did so bluntly, never cutting below the surface. She was about forty years old, but right now she looked ten years older” (178; slide 11).

⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto VIII, verses 97 to 108, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1001/1001-h/1001-h.htm>

This portrayal in the shape of a *contreblazon* simply couldn't be more at odds with that Dante gives of Beatrice when he finally gets to meet her at the end of *Purgatorio*. Seated on a chariot, bathed in a shower of flowers thrown by a hundred singing angels, Beatrice is dressed in a white veil, a red robe, and a green dress, colours which stand for the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity:

Thus in the bosom of a cloud of flowers
Which from those hands angelical ascended,
And downward fell again inside and out,
Over her snow-white veil with olive cinct
Appeared a lady under a green mantle,
Vested in colour of the living flame (slides 12 to 15).⁸

In a stark contrast with Isabel Floode's hollow look, her eyes, in the following canto, are described as "radiant" by Dante and as "saintly" by the dancing Four Virtues, who also compare them to "emeralds" (XXXI.116, 119, 133). The scene from *Oil on Water* is all the more of an anti-climax as Rufus, when he finally has the opportunity to interview Isabel, discovers that her abduction was only a cover-up. She decided to leave her husband voluntarily, when she found out that he was having an affair with a maid. It was only much later that she got trapped by one of the guerrillas operating in the area, almost as an accident, when the maid's husband, Salomon, decided to make money out of the situation.

Beatrice's counterpart in the Niger Delta has thus lost all of the lustre of her glorious predecessor. The same can be said of Zaq, who, on closer inspection, constitutes a sorry replica of the great poet of imperial Rome. Pot-bellied, short of breath, and addicted to the bottle, he is a far cry from the noble figure Dante praises for having kindled his vocation as a poet. As he faces him on the boat, for instance, Rufus paints a miserable portrait of him, writing: "He [Zaq] looked queasy, already sea-sick. Looking at him – the curled grey tufts in his hair, the thick midsection resting in his lap, a testament to his love affair with the bottle – I found it hard to believe that this was once the most famous reporter in Lagos, and probably in all of Nigeria" (67). A few pages later, he adds: "Now, he looked as if the only thing he wanted to do was go back home. I wasn't sure he still believed in what he taught" (73).

Several hypotheses can be adduced to account for the process of severe disfigurement undergone by Virgil and Beatrice in *Oil on Water*. One of them is that, in a strategy akin to that at play in certain modernist works whose authors strive to make form expressive of content, such a distortion would mimic the ravages wrought on the landscape by oil, an interpretation to which the novel would seem to invite the reader by the way its fragmented, non-linear temporal structure is made to convey the complex and disorienting topography of the Delta. Just as *Oil on Water*, then, proves to be a failed detective plot, Isabel's abduction turning out to be a cover-up, as well as an unsatisfactory Bildungsroman, Rufus seeming none the more enlightened, by the end of the book, about where right and wrong lie, allusions to external literary sources would, according to such a reading, be bound to be twisted out of all recognition. The best way for a novel to render a landscape cloaked in oil to such an extent that it becomes unrecognizable would then be to sabotage the genres within which that novel would initially seem to fall and to warp all the intertextual echoes with which it resonates.

A second, complementary explanation is that although Helon Habila, who teaches creative writing in the US, may have felt close to Dante, an exile like him who bemoaned the civil war in which his native land was engulfed, he must have simultaneously felt estranged from him by Dante's status as a central figure of the Western literary canon, a fact compounded by Dante's

⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, canto XXX, verses 28 to 33, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1002/pg1002-images.html>

imperial politics. For as David E. Hoegberg, in an article devoted to the Dantean intertext in John Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, reminds us,

For Dante, the way out of the Florentine labyrinth of violence was to call for a secular empire so strong that it would overpower and transcend all local and regional conflicts, a concept of imperial power to which Dante was guided by his reading of Virgil. Just as Augustus's reign had put an end to some 100 years of civil war in Rome, so the rise of a new emperor independent of papal authority, Dante hoped, could end the factionalism and civil strife raging in Florence and throughout Italy (slide 16).⁹

Interestingly, Hoegberg points out that

Coetzee refuses such transcendental solutions to the problems in South Africa. One way he signals this is by problematizing the figure of the guide and the reliance on authority it implies. Whereas Dante is led into and out of the Inferno by the great poet of imperial Rome, whose wisdom he implicitly trusts in all except the highest Christian matters, Coetzee has Mrs. Curren guided into Crossroads by Florence and Mr. Thabane but left to find her own way out of the maze (slide 17).¹⁰

His analysis could apply just as well to *Oil on Water*, in which, as we have seen, Zaq and Isabel can be compared to Virgil and Beatrice not so much on the strength of their characterization as of the role they play in the overall narrative structure of the novel.

It would be both simplistic and misleading, however, to claim that the process of disfigurement undergone by Dantean figures in *Oil on Water* constitutes the ultimate motive behind Habila's mobilisation of Dante in his novel. There is no doubt that far from being an end in themselves, correspondences between *Oil on Water* and the *Divine Comedy* are part and parcel of a much wider narrative strategy which is inextricable from the book's ecological and political concerns. This, however, begs the question of what the ultimate goal of that strategy is.

Faced with such a challenge, the reader might find Michael Riffaterre's theory of intertextual invariants particularly illuminating. For although I have so far been at pains to stress the elements of *Oil on Water* which testify to the direct influence exerted by Dante on Habila, there is undoubtedly much more that *Oil on Water* shares with both the *Divine Comedy* and *Heart of Darkness* than with either of them separately. Foremost among the elements the three of them have in common is the structure of the initiatory journey through an unfamiliar, alien world whose denizens undergo God-inflicted or manmade sufferings whose description often acquire a sort of expressionist quality that tends to sear itself in the reader's memory. One could thus quote the group of sinners who are guarded over and tormented by Centaurs in canto XII of the *Inferno*. They remind one of the chain gang of African natives who are herded by a colonial agent in *Heart of Darkness*, who themselves find a counterpart in the group of guerrilla fighters being detained by the governments' forces in *Oil on Water*. Other, more general correspondences include the frequent references to the fog in which the setting of the three works is shrouded, as well as the symbolic significance of rivers (Dante has to cross several of the infernal rivers, which descend through all of Hell and pool into the ninth circle where they froze and formed Lake Cocytus, during the course of his journey). In *Fictional Truth*, Riffaterre explains that the identification of common features between distinct stories such as those I have just evoked enables what he calls an invariant to emerge from a series of variants. He writes:

As readers progress through one or more novels, they come to realize that apparently unconnected and diverse representations or stories have relational and functional features in common that direct interpretation beyond what each instance authorizes. Therefore, these several representations and

⁹ David E. Hoegberg, "Where Is Hope?": Coetzee's Rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*", *English in Africa*, vol. 25, no. 1 (May, 1998), 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 38-9.

stories are now recognized as variants of structural invariants. The significance common to a set of variants, the significance readers can deduce from invariance, supersedes the separate meanings that the variants have when read in isolation. This significance thus has the permanence, the generality, and the freedom from contingency that we associate with truth (slide 18).¹¹

By modelling his story on the *Divine Comedy* and *Heart of Darkness*, Habila thus enables it not so much to transcend its immediate setting or concerns, as it remains very much moored to the *hic et nunc* of the Niger Delta and never tips over into allegory, as to give to its depiction of the moral and military impasse which the different actors of the conflict have reached an authority and credibility granted to it by the examples his glorious predecessors. Riffaterre's theory, which is not without reminding the reader of Aristotle's distinction between essence and accident, would seem to be all the more relevant to *Oil on Water* as the *Divine Comedy* is itself highly intertextual, the structure of the *Inferno* being inspired to a large extent from Virgil's own account of the afterworld in the *Aeneid*. *Oil on Water* thus turns out to have three intertexts embedded on top of each other at its heart, a sort of intertextual mise-en-abyme reminiscent of a matryoshka doll.

When applied to *Oil on Water*, the implications of Riffaterre's theory are twofold. The first one is that Helon Habila has fashioned his narrative so that it fits into the mould of European classics, and that in so doing, he not only gives it an aura of universality and timelessness, or, in Riffaterre's words, a "permanence," a "generality" and "a freedom from contingency" which enables its depiction of the Delta conflict to come across as a truthful one, but he also enacts on the level of literary praxis the call for a dialogue its plot so forcefully articulates. In a novel where the figure of the guide, in the person of Zaq, and the reliance on authority it implies, just as in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, is problematized, and where the neo-colonial dimension of the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by the West is openly condemned during the interview Rufus carries out with James Floode, this would constitute an invitation to dialogue *in actu*.

The second implication, for its part, has to do with Riffaterre's overall theory of intertextuality itself, which consists in applying to the study of the intertext Saussure's conception of language as a system of discrete units which derive their individual value from their relation to other elements in the system and emphatically not to reality. Once applied to *Oil on Water*, whose overall structure follows the pattern of the *Divine Comedy* and *Heart of Darkness*, and which resonates with a myriad echoes of them, one suddenly realizes that Riffaterre's theory does not entail a conception of the literary text as self-enclosed or closed in on itself, and of intertextual studies as inward looking or a kind of literary navel-gazing, but that, on the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with literary works which are overtly political and which seek to have a tangible impact on the external world, enhancing as it does their rhetorical power and consolidating their claim to tell the truth.

¹¹ Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 86.