

Robert von Hallberg

On Srikanth Reddy's *Underworld Lit*

Wave Books, 2020

Srikanth Reddy's new book of prose is witty, inventive, and provocative. "Underworld," meaning Hades, Avernus, etc., but also *under* World Literature, subordinate to the grand and timeless poems and stories. One comes into the world in a particular place, with a birth date, and probably a name, the coordinates of a life in space and time. What are the coordinates of a literary life? Near the beginning of English literary criticism, Dryden connected poetry to the English language and nation, their refinement by the illustrious dead. Pound's *Cathay* (1915) and Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) instead urged poets to roam among the world's languages and literatures. "How is it far if you think of it?" Pound asked. Translations and later paperbacks broadcast liberty to ordinary readers, by whom I mean especially students. Secondary and tertiary curricula make Dante, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, and Rilke contemporaries.

Students come as strangers to a literary life. The republic of letters seems an alternative to all others; or as if, after some number of courses, one may accrue a rich and various sensibility by which to measure one's actual moment. The reports of journalists then seem thin, papery. Or the judgment can go exactly contrary. "For the past several years," Reddy reports, "I have taught an introductory course on world literature at the university where I am presently employed. The offering has frequently proven to be a disappointment, both to myself and to the students. . . . *Made me question things, including the value of higher education* [a student wrote in an evaluation]." He has an anecdote about another student complaining in office hours about her midterm grade.

Apparently I'd been a little dismissive of her worldview in my comments. As the conversation wore on, I found myself explaining that it would have been physically impossible for Dante to crawl through the center of Earth because, as everybody knows, the planet's core is very hot. "But he went all the way through and saw the stars

again,” the girl insisted. “Are you calling him a liar?” [He explained further, and she remained unconvinced.] “When I get to heaven,” she rose suddenly to go, her face flushed, “I will ask Dante.” . . . “And what if he ended up in the other place?” I inquired, showing the girl out the door. “Then you ask him.”

She may be Dante’s fit reader. To *live* in letters entails some conviction. The *Inferno* expects one to believe that acts have consequences beyond space and time, that life continues long after death, that acquaintances and familiars will be seen again, and that explanations are then to be had. Judgment is coming, and punishment lasting. It all coheres, which is terrifying.

Reddy’s dual narrative tracks the author, facing an academic promotion and teaching a World Lit seminar, when he discovers a melanoma on his chest that resembles an entrance to a cave—possibly to Avernus. Every mirror and window reminds him of his own mortality. The parallel story is that of Chen, an assistant magistrate who lived in China 200 years ago, and once wrote a memo to restrain a general from massacring 500 leaders of a peasant revolt. This Wang-siou is later reincarnated as Chen, a Guatemalan guerrilla haunted by a much smaller number of the fallen. He is arrested and tried for war crimes in zany fashion by posterity, an infernal baby-magistrate in diapers. General X, not Wang, ordered the massacre, but Wang’s resistance was feeble. Wang gets off, though, with a punishment that would surprise Dante: he must translate General X’s admissions. But rather than publish the document, Wang/Chen is told by the judge to burn it: “That’s the best way to reach me here.” Interpretations, re-creations are ephemeral.

Yet Reddy analyzes the still-contemporary ambition to live everywhere forever, as the modernists did. As he translated, “The dead kept [Chen] company, as did the unborn.” That literary aspiration is essentially as it was a century earlier. Eliot, Pound, then Bunting, Geoffrey Hill, and James Merrill understood this exactly. “Reviewing my notes of the last year, I see that I have occasionally referred to past events as if they were present. In my defense, it is a habit born of scholarly convention . . . Just so, every writer, living or dead, is forever suspended in a crepuscular present indicative.” Manuscripts go out in the mail as probes, or smoke sent to the gods. “I am beginning to think of the world’s underworlds as places not of punishment, but of probation.” In Hades, or Malraux’s Imaginary Museum, poets wait to be revived, or even just robbed.

All styles and subjects wait on a shelf down there for an explorer to take up again. Reddy's orphic provocation, addressed to contemporaries, is to return to the depths.

Which raises a problem. Dante named individual perpetrators and closely correlated punishment to character and offense. Reddy describes instead a post-individualism regime of abstract liability. In literary terms, all poems would ripen toward anonymity, as atrocities do. Chen, Wang-siou, General X—they answer for atrocities only in a general fashion.

'Good grief,' Chen protested, 'that's not my name.'

'Ah, but it *was*, in the life before the life before the life before this one,' the judge pointed out, unsnapping her bib. 'Anyway, let's not waste time on formalities—I've got over a billion cases to get through before naptime.'

Rubbing his temples, Chen tried to remember the charges against him. He felt neither guilty nor innocent, like a flower or fire.

Remorse is inaccessible within this abstract regime. The differences between Dante's moment and ours is equanimity. Reddy's contemporaries are estranged from conviction or even deep feeling. General X is guilty of ordering the killing of 500 soldiers to put down a peasant revolt. That is one crime, not 500, in this narrative. It was "Nothing personal," the General observes without contrition. To try him 500 times for individual murders would be redundant, beside the point. When arrested, Chen says, "you've got the wrong guy." He was 200 years away from the atrocity. But the rights and responsibilities of individuals are overcome by the phenomenon of reincarnation, which authorizes guilt-by-association. The court regards Chen as a recurrence of Wang-siou—close enough. "So you're responsible for war crimes in the *future*?" [Neph] laughed, incredulous . . . 'Yes and no, . . . I mean when push comes to shove, who isn't?' Similarly Wang's memo would exonerate him in a court oriented on individual intentions. But if a court holds Wang responsible for fecklessness, not for his intentions, Chen might be hanged (or taxed for reparations?).