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## 4. ‘... And Maybe Sometime’

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## 4. ‘... And Maybe Sometime’

If Dante were writing today, I am pretty sure that he would fit somewhere in his story Lawrence Oates’s last words before he stepped barefoot outside of his tent to meet his death in the Antarctic blizzard.

‘I am just going outside’ ... if we can strip it — and I do appreciate it is hard — of layer after layer of veneer of gentleman-ness, educated-ness, stiffupperlip-ness, soldiering-on-ness, memorable-ness, and reported-ness (not to mention the class, colonial, and masculine sense of superiority that might be churned all over such -nesses [now this is an upper-class white man talkin’!]), Oates’s last words strike us as pure madman-ness. Or, rather, the point where bodily exhaustion, in this case hypothermia, becomes some sort of mysticism. These words are rhetoric defying itself. The long journey of Ulisse’s speech comes to an end a few metres outside a tent in Antarctica, where a small company of young men, having failed their goal of reaching the South Pole, exhausted, bitten by frostbite, devoured by hunger, were sputtering the last gags of their

unwillingly anti-heroic story and writing unintentional poetry.\*

‘I am shitting my pants’ — this is what the common person would probably say.

Navigators, explorers, cosmonauts, they are all wrapped up in the myth and rhetoric of Ulysses, which derives from a strange combination of the Homeric and the Dantean: modern Ulysseses do not repudiate Ithaca, but they are also attracted to the unknown. *Ex halòs*: they may or may not die out there; they may, or may not, come back.

Starting with Columbus’s voyage, several enterprises of exploration by sea, land, and even space have been troped with aspects of the story of a navigation turned flight turned plunge. And here is my own (I, as the antihero par excellence) mean little smirk at heroes: when I learned that cosmonauts need to wear nappies in space. But look at it another way, this tells us that there is a proper, heroic way of shitting one’s pants.

Bruno Nardi, a great Italian scholar of the early twentieth century, concluded his essay aptly entitled ‘The Tragedy of Ulysses’ (‘La tragedia di Ulisse’, 1937) with the grand statement that Dante had ‘discovered the discoverer’ — and by means of words alone, I would add. However, such a discoverer is a wishful, even pathetic figure, a bit like Plato’s philosopher king.

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\* One Ulysses from the literary tradition does indeed die in Antarctica. Kazantzakis’s *Odysseus*, the protagonist of the mastodontic rewriting-continuation of the *Odyssey* in 33.333 verses, eventually fulfils Tiresias’s prophecy, lacrosse stick and all, as well as Dante’s journey in the southern hemisphere, and dies both away and near the sea, on an iceberg. Here too we read a defeat of rhetoric and story, but of a very different kind. Kazantzakis’s *Odysseus* dissolves (under the pressure of too many words, I think).

Dante's philosopher-discoverer is powered by a simple yet potent rhetoric: ardour, experience, the world, vice and virtue, brutes vs humans, virtue and knowledge, flight and navigation, a touch of folly. Some of these words are revolving doors: enter 'ardore' (burning desire), exit 'ardimento' (daring, courage, with a slight aggressive tinge), enter 'vice-and-virtue', exit 'sin-and-salvation', enter 'brutes vs humans', exit 'them vs us'. Virtue might be taken for privilege (the entitlement that the old *vir* had over the moral ground), knowledge as knowing better. Sputtering and crackling, the modern machine begins to whirl.

Before coming to a halt outside that tent in Antarctica, and to shipwrecks more tragic than the blizzard that killed those young men, the Ulyssean rhetoric journeys and journeys, coils and uncoils for centuries over sea and land. It marches and marches, it measures, opens, destroys, and builds. It explores, invents, discovers, progresses, achieves; it marches and marches, one millimetre ahead of every expedition, of every experiment, like an invisible, insolent little banner. It casts a shade, but we refuse to see it. We refuse to accept that the discoverer is a tragic figure.

Here enters the other word from Ulysses' speech — 'esperienza', experience: to do it and see it for yourself. To know first-hand. To have been there. To put to a test, to experiment, to get one's hands dirty. *Ex-perior*: 'to try, to prove, to test', recites the dictionary going quasi-Tennysonian. [I wish the dictionary form ended with a resounding *and not to yield* but it closes with a rather sharp and just a tad unmetrical 'to endure'.] Similar but not cognate to *per-ire* (to get lost, to lose oneself, to disappear, to die), this verb carries the mark of trespassing and a speck of death. To be experienced and to perish is the same thing in some corner of the self and of the world. To live experientially one's life is 'a race to death' ('correre alla morte';

*Purgatorio* 33, 54), as Dante puts it somewhere else in his poem.

Ulisse, remember, mentioned ‘esperienza’ twice, and now that we think of it, in a rather contradictory way. First, to explain why he did not want to go or stay back home: ‘they’ (island, father, son, wife) were not enough to quench the ardour he had to become expert of the world and of human vice and worth (‘del mondo esperto | e de li vizi umani e del valore’; *Inferno* 26, 98–99). Places and people, geography and ethics; this ancient tourist, we thought, is somewhat familiar to us. The second time experience is mentioned within the ‘small oration’, however, the stakes are higher. Now Ulysses seeks the ultimate place and no people; an extreme, a-moral, metaphysical geography: the experience of the other side of the sun, the unpopulated world (‘non vogliate negar l’esperienza, | di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente’; 116–17). ‘Do not deny the experience’: double negation is our hero’s favourite rhetorical tool. Ulisse affirms himself by saying no to the rest, by opposing objections.

#### THE REBORN

Come the Renaissance (with that absurd name), and Ulisse’s profound nihilism is gone. The shell of hell is gone, gone is the vortex at the edge of the world, gone the ontological solitude. Adieu stillness, silence, immensity; suddenly there is a whole circus past Hercules’ pillars. The basics of Dante’s Ulysses — leaving the familiar behind, voyage, exploration, a vast unknown area, Eden, and folly — interlace in often predictable, and sometimes risible ways in the future stories. Come the Renaissance, and the story of Ulisse is turned into a strange reality, while the spiritual gravity of Dante’s character is lost. His loss is lost. In

its stead, a violence called glory finds place in the narrative. As we read it from the point of view of the modern era, we realize how profoundly pacifist the story of Dante's Ulysses is. He is not at war either with people or with nature. Not even with the divinity, whose angry retaliation he accepts rather stoically if with a hint of scorn ('com'altrui piacque', as pleased someone else, he says of the vortex sinking his ship [if only Dante had heard of 'and may be sometime' ...]). There is no conquering, penetrating, taming; no reward, no celebration, no triumph waiting for them back at home or, worse, in heaven.

Throughout the so-called modern era, as the dark mountain in the lonely hemisphere becomes a sequence of lands that actually exist, as expedition after expedition 'discovers' them, and the cartographer's millimetres press upon the sailor's nautical leagues, one after the other after the other, leaders and their small crew set sail towards mad enterprises, becoming new Ulysses, breaking open boundaries, upholding noble ideals and giving short inspired speeches (or so their chroniclers say), some dying, others finding new worlds that are beautiful, plentiful, and dangerous (the comparison is often with a young 'exotic' female), coming back with full loads of goods. We know the story; we are all children and victims of that mad flight.

The story of exploration and discovery becomes citational. A narrative of forwardness, daring, and breaking boundaries is pounded and pounded and pounded like a hammer, until you believe it is true. Snippets, and fragments, and splinters of Ulysses inhabit it, like glass shards under our nails. The involuntary Mediterranean tourist, the sombre philosopher-voyager become the Explorer and are thrown into a story of conquest called discovery, of greed called civilization, of a disaster called glory. A story that is also unavoidable. Our history.

I know I know I know ... there is a saving grace in iteration. Identity comes with alterity, originality with forgery. There are small differences and cracks, there is parody, there is resistance, there are ways of retelling the same story backwards, inside out, from bottom to top and top to bottom, in another genre, with another tone, in someone else's voice, but it does remain the same story, and oftentimes it does become reactionary. Take Camões for instance, the proper poet-discoverer. What do we make of the colonial *Odyssey*, complete with pagan and Christian deities? It is not unproblematic to handle the variety and brutality of the *Lusiads*, the tale of Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century, and to reconcile the curiosity of an Odysseus-like poet with the destructive and self-destructive drive of the empire he represents.

Or witness this other mutation of the old tale. In one of the editions of Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Theatre of the World; first printed in Antwerp in 1570), one of Magellan's ships, the Victoria, crops up just past the Tropic of Capricorn (Figure 2).

Victoria says: 'I was the first to go around the world with winged courses, led by you, o Magellan, through the new strait. I circled the world, and rightly I am called Victoria: my sails are wings; my prize (or: reward), the glory; my battle, the sea.' (Prima ego velivolis ambivi cursibus Orbem, | Magellane novo te duce ducta freto. | Ambivi, meritoque vocor Victoria: sunt mî | Vela, alæ; precium, gloria; pugna, mare.)

Although rather uncomplicated, this compound of words and image can be read as part of the Renaissance fascination with the making of meaning. The sails are wings, an image as trite as it is intuitive, and yet in it we catch still a relic, I believe, of Dante's oars as wings in the mad flight (so much more beautiful, now that we can pause and think

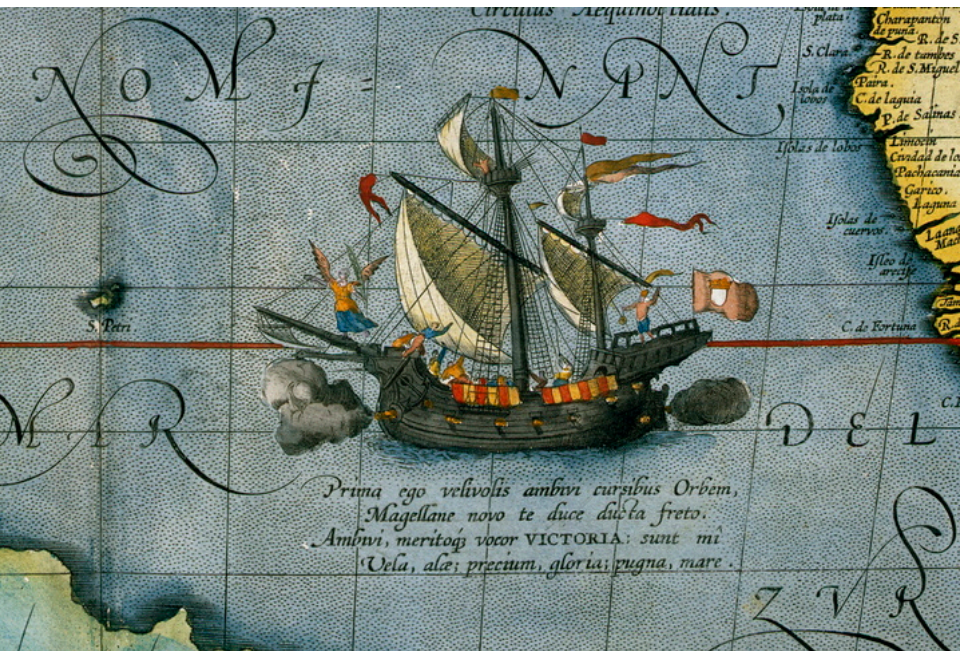


Figure 2. Ortelius, *Descriptio Maris Pacifici* (detail).

of it). The new strait through which Victoria flies implies the old (Gibraltar). Magellan is a barely disguised new Ulysses. (Again, Dante's light touch is soothing. His Ulysses is no commander, no leader, no *dux*.) Here the winged sails support the flight of ambition (the Latin verb *ambire* meaning both 'to go round', hence 'circumnavigate', and 'to strive', 'aspire'). They are paired with the winged woman — 'victory' being traditionally represented as such. The battle of? against? the sea is rather visibly inscribed by the two cannons firing from the back and from the front into the sea itself. So this is actually aggressive. But then we get to the most elusive point of all:



*Precium, gloria*  
 my reward is glory

Now, glory was not a name that Dante's Ulisse would employ. For only this once, I am thankful to the Christian background in which Dante's story is written for reserving glory to god and the blessed, and using it sparingly for other earthly matters, often more for literary and artistic endeavours than for military ones. Ulisse and his men are out not in the pursuit of glory, but of 'virtue and knowledge' — it is for themselves, not for others. [Hold on, though, we will find some glorious sailors later.]

What is mundane glory to begin with? Success, I guess, is the modern translation of it. Success and fame. There is no glory if it is not sanctioned by other people. The strangest thing happens when I click on the word 'glory' (on the virtual page, that is) to find synonyms [I do that sometimes, you have already noticed it; like when you found 'haphazard' instead of 'random' and thought: c'mon, Elena, you can do better than that]. Well, this time even I am baffled: splendor-praise-grandeur-splendour[*sic*]-triumph is the short screen, and the long list ... the long list is a perverse embroidery of 'magnificence', 'brilliance', 'exaltation', 'credit', 'stardom', 'laurels (dictionary form)' [as if dictionaries were the lamest thing you can possibly consult], 'glorification', 'resplendence', 'aura', 'nimbus', and 'gloriole' [which I had to look up yet again]. A rhetoric of light (well that one has to do with Christians and the radiant status of the saints and god), sparkles, and aggression runs through the longlist, and yet it does not explain what glory is, and how we tell ourselves the tale of glory. A heavily gilt mirror, 'glory' always reflects meaning away.

What dazzles me in the glorious Renaissance tale of exploration and conquest is the strange way in which his-

tory and story prop each other up. How the age of conquest is also the age of utopia, how knowing more creates more fiction rather than more rationality. Ahead of the banner of glory there flies the little bird of the absurd. Thus, the no longer great unknown keeps on being punctuated by anecdotes, legends, and wonders; by dangers, irrational places, and nonsensical people. Some absurdity is Homeric — monsters, giants, strange sea-creatures — but some of it is Dantean, or Christian (Danteo-Christian, how is that?). Eden, which Dante placed at the top of the ominous mountain of Purgatory, still looms large in the early travels.

Journey after journey, the homeless, stateless, languageless Cristoforo Colombo, Cristóbal Colón, Cristopher Columbus became more and more despotic and delusional. While convulsively looking for a trade route to the East, he was blabbering about discovering Eden. He became convinced that he was a prophet, the bearer of Christ, as his first name indicated, or the winged drive of the soul, as his last name implied. [Now, the feminine *columba* does refer to the dove to which the soul is often compared, but *columbus*, let us be frank, is a common pigeon. As much as I loathe pigeons — an endemic presence in my hometown, Milano — I also think they are the sole antidote to monumentalism of all kinds. A statue is never safe, never immune from irony and dissent, never martial, or virile, or assertive as long as there is a pigeon around ... pigeons, I think, and, perhaps, the routine reading of Aristophanes' *Birds* are enough to defy the stone-carved assertion of glory.]

Speaking of birds, even the worldly and sharp-witted Antonio Pigafetta, the chronicler of Magellan's voyage, supernumerary sailor of the *Victoria*, and one of the few survivors of that rather disastrous expedition, did not blink when he was presented with the skins of two 'birds of paradise', a species, he was told, coming from Eden itself — so

soft and feathery they were, so elegant, just ever so slightly unnatural. They had no wings, according to Pigafetta, only feathers, whereas in other versions of the legend this popular bird had no feet and was, therefore, in perennial flight: like the angels, or the soul. It didn't bother him or other travellers and naturalists of the time that these birds were never seen alive. Maybe it is the fate of imagination, to take flight from carcasses.

It doesn't take much to make Eden, does it? It is a sensible, palpable, tasteable place. It is something we have seen before somewhere, sometimes (the proliferation of some+ having to do with indeterminateness, not my lousy writing). Perhaps a lovely spring day. [Today. 16/03/2021.] Eden is of this earth, on this earth, it is just a distance away from a semi-known land, it is even mappable. Medieval and early modern maps placed it variously in South Asia, Africa, Antarctica, or in the Atlantic, either on steep mountains or on islands. How did they know of its existence? Rivers flow from it, we are told in the book of Genesis, and they are firmly of this earth (Euphrates, Tigris, Nile, and Ganges were all said to originate in Eden). Eden (and all its cognate versions of a golden age, an impendent paradise, or a morally and geographically magical place) always means good weather, a satisfied digestive system, and time for play. Eden is very mild. A very simple experience, with the inevitable shard of death. Feelin' good was easy, Lord.

Take for instance the Fortunate Isles that many geographers and historians since antiquity identified with the Canaries or other Atlantic islands. My hyper-rational Plutarch knows, and knows not, that earthly paradise is just a myth, but he is happy to embrace it. Plutarch relaxes in the description of two islands past the Strait of Gibraltar — he rarely does.

Here he fell in with some sailors who had recently come back from the Atlantic Islands. These are two in number, separated by a very narrow strait; they are ten thousand furlongs distant from Africa, and are called the Islands of the Blest. They enjoy moderate rains at long intervals, and winds which for the most part are soft and precipitate dews, so that the islands not only have a rich soil which is excellent for plowing and planting, but also produce a natural fruit that is plentiful and wholesome enough to feed, without toil or trouble, a leisured folk. Moreover, an air that is salubrious, owing to the climate and the moderate changes in the seasons, prevails on the islands. For the north and east winds which blow out from our part of the world plunge into fathomless space, and, owing to the distance, dissipate themselves and lose their power before they reach the islands; while the south and west winds that envelope the islands from the sea sometimes bring in their train soft and intermittent showers, but for the most part cool them with moist breezes and gently nourish the soil. Therefore a firm belief has made its way, even to the Barbarians, that here is the Elysian Field and the abode of the blessed, of which Homer sang (*Life of Sertorius*, 8; translation by Bernadotte Perrin).

The 'he' in the story is Sertorius (c. 123–72 BCE), a Roman general ruling southern Spain during the troubled times of the civil war between Marius and Sulla. In a sort of Roman twist to Dante's *Ulisse*, Sertorius is, at one point, forced to cross Gibraltar by battling winds. This is when he hears about the Fortunate Isles. Plutarch imagines Sertorius's unspoken desire (see why I love him?):

When Sertorius heard this tale, he was seized with an amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet, freed from tyranny and wars that would never end (*Sertorius*, 9).

I also want to go, says the writer between the lines. And me too. With you, Plutarch: where I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death.

What is Eden after all, if not the impossible match of innocence and abundance? Atlantis, Cocagne, Utopia; places where moralists can dream of a good society, and starving peasants of rivers of milk and mountains of cheese, and where these can be, illogically, the same thing.

The modern tragedy arises, I guess, when Eden is placed on the same maps that are used for travel, expansion, and trade: when you call it the Eden of another. Like the River of Gold in central Africa that was said to originate in Eden and was relentlessly pursued by travellers; or El Dorado, the golden king or kingdom in the heart of South America, the absurd goal of many early modern expeditions.

‘Quid non mortalia pectora cogis, | auri sacra fames?’ (O sacred hunger of gold, there is nothing you would not push a human heart to do; *Aeneid* 3, 56–57 [my attempt: the translation of these elegant lines is impossible, unless you find the verbal timbre of indignation]). Greed is hunger, the ancients thought, but of a fearful, nefarious, ‘sacred’ kind. Similarly, at the outset of Dante’s *Hell*, greed, the worst challenge to the moral life, is represented as a scrawny she-wolf, ‘laden with every craving’ (‘di tutte brame [...] carca’; *Inferno* 1, 49–50), who ‘after feeding is hungrier than before’ (‘dopo il pasto ha più fame che pria’; 1, 99).

‘Stay hungry!’, the modern prophet demands.

‘A boire! A boire! A boire!’ (A drink!) exclaims the newborn giant Gargantua, Rabelais’s comic impression of the new Renaissance self. The modern man [intended] is born thirsty, hungry, their un-sacred appetite never sat-

isfied. They are affected by gigantism, megalomania, and enormous urges. Gargantua's son Pantagruel, bulimic and curious like his father, travels by land and sea through all utopias, religious, political, and otherwise, just to bring back the imperative 'trinch!' (*Gargantua*, chapter 7 and *Pantagruel*, book 5, chapter 44).

It is dizzying to think that Pico's *Oration* and *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* were written some forty years apart. In between, the gaping, all-devouring new anthropocentric horizon, always at a distance, always within reach. Still, a profound love of learning binds the two works, with the difference that Rabelais had the philosophical intuition that the dignity of the human being was not a lofty and complicated thing — it is laughter, the sole explanation of what it is to be human ('rire est le propre de l'homme'; *Aux lecteurs*, 10).

#### THE REVENANT

Our solitary hero and his abstract, metaphysical navigation, however, make a rather spectral comeback on the other side of the Renaissance. As land upon land becomes known, as river after sea is navigated and turned into a route of commerce and travel, the 'unknown' becomes transcendent and ominous: an aggressive, tremendous force from beyond nature or from inside the human being that sinks boats and enterprises. Madness and hallucinations abound; utopia becomes dystopia; the Cocagne a wasteland; monsters are tucked away at the margins, in the abysses of the sea, in the soul-sucking grip of the great north or the icy south, in the thick of the jungle.

The margins ... One of the mysteries of my discipline, medieval studies, are the monsters in the margins of the manuscript page. Ludicrous, smirking, vulgar, often ob-

scene creatures; un-related, unaccounted for, un-glossed. Yet glossing. They are not curiosities, they are not doodles — as Michael Camille, a famous art historian, demonstrated — but their relation to text and page, story and blankness is still mysterious. Likewise, the page of modern history is cut and lined by marginal monsters that laugh and scream at us. Calling them fictions does not help.

Later stories tell the tale of sailors who, often after a life well spent in the cogs of the modern machine (commerce, service, war), see some version of a terrifying divinity in the vortexes of the sea. The Ancient Mariner, Moby Dick, the Kraken. Captain Nemo: no-one, of course. There are one-(crazy)-man exploits, ragged small crews, small orations, straits and untravelled waters, sea monsters and angry ‘an-others’ lurking in the margins. Kurtz: blank maps, a heart of darkness along the river, and a disfiguring wound in the fold of the psyche. The Horror. We will all go mad! scream the artists of the nineteenth century as their peers destroy, pillage, and subjugate. We did all go mad; millions of lives lost in the abyss of greed-as-glory, the obscure heart of the twentieth century.

If I am allowed to lean history on story again (I am allowed, I am allowing myself), I will briefly pause on one nineteenth-century venture, whose mysterious end seems to be more gothic than any of the stories I have just mentioned.

Another icy wasteland, the Arctic this time, hides the secret of the Franklin expedition. I guess polar expeditions are the closest we get, in modern times, to the quasi-metaphysical journey of Dante’s Ulysses in the ‘world without people’. Immense loneliness, abstract landscape, creaking silence, blinding suns, and enduring night. In this setting, horrible and solemn like Dante’s Cocytus, an imperial Ulysses meets Ugolino. It begins in 1845 with two

ships, the *Erebus* and the *Terror*. Why, I wonder, would someone in their sane mind board a ship with that name? Erebus is the scariest of all terrifying ancient divinities, a darkness so unformed and unfathomable that it becomes a name for the underworld itself. Erebus, child of Chaos, incestuous sibling of Night, the sticky terror parent to us all. Listen to Hesiod:

ἦτοι μὲν πρῶτιστα Χάος γένετ'. αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα  
 Γαῖ' εὐρύστερνος, πάντων ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεὶ  
 ἀθανάτων οἱ ἔχουσι κάρη νιφόνεντος Ὀλύμπου  
 Τάρταρά τ' ἠερόεντα μυχῶ χθονὸς εὐρυοδείης,  
 ἠδ' Ἔρος, ὃς κάλλιστος ἐν ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι,  
 λυσιμελής, πάντων τε θεῶν πάντων τ' ἀνθρώπων  
 δάμναται ἐν στήθεσσι νόον καὶ ἐπίφρονα βουλήν.  
 ἐκ Χάεος δ' Ἔρεβός τε μέλαινά τε Νύξ ἐγένοντο.  
 Νυκτὸς δ' αὐτ' Αἰθήρ τε καὶ Ἡμέρη ἐξεγένοντο,  
 οὓς τέκε κυσαμένη Ἐρέβει φιλότῃ μιγείσα.  
 (*Theogonia*, 116–25)

In truth, first of all Chasm came to be, and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus' peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortal gods, the limb-melter — he overpowers the mind and the thoughtful counsel of all the gods and of all human beings in their breasts. From Chasm, Erebus and black Night came to be; and then Aether and Day came forth from Night, who conceived and bore them after mingling in love with Erebus (translation by Glenn W. Most).

When Odysseus cuts the sheep's throat open and collects the blood in the pit, 'there gathered from out of Erebus the ghosts of those that are dead, brides, and unwed youths, and toil-worn old men, and frisking girls with hearts still new to sorrow, and many, too, that had been wounded



with bronze-tipped spears, men slain in battle, wearing their blood-stained armor' (*Odyssey* 11, 36; translation by A. T. Murray and George E. Dimock). Erebus is a word that crosses literature like a chilling tremor, a hair-raising accent. *Erebus is Terror*; yet off they sailed in search of the Northwest Passage.

In this story, there is a sentimental portrait of a Victorian lady waiting at home, although a faint crease in her smile reveals more volition than expected, and the curling spirals of smoke in the wood-panelled rooms of the British Admiralty; a wealth of sideburns; wine decanters and monkeys brought on board (see? the absurd is always one word ahead); and badly tinned canned food that later might have given some of the crew lead poisoning. Scurvy is sitting ghostly on the mast, grinning with decayed teeth and bloody gums. Anthropophagy hiding in the hull, sucking discreetly on a tibia. There is the immense blinding whiteness in which *Erebus* and *Terror* are stranded and a long, desperate march on ice. A lifeboat dragged ashore and on ground for a long time, containing useless goods (silken handkerchiefs, scented soaps, the absurd). Other expeditions looking for the lost ones; friendly Inuits reporting bits of news and returning reused objects, their versions of the story not trusted by search teams. Radars, sonars, autopsies, and hypotheses. And, to this day, no clear picture of how these men died.

Now that Erebus is conquering again the icy wasteland, and melting glaciers spin out frozen remains of explorers, now that the top of the Himalayas is full, I read, of hikers' shit and their rubbish, I have an entry for your reading list — Mordecai Richler's splendid rewriting of the Franklin story in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989). One thread of the story follows Ephraim Gursky, a Jew whose family came to England from Russia on foot, as he becomes the

sole survivor of the Franklin expedition and the founder of an Inuit-Jewish cult as well as of a rampant dynasty of tycoons. You can't stop reading, while epic falls to pieces all around you. Although hardly making the ecocriticism syllabus, it is an omnivorous, desecrating, diasporic, northern *Quixote* that buries forever the epic of exploration under glaciers of irony.

#### THE TRESPASSING

Dante's Ulisse is aware that he must not cross Gibraltar, that 'narrow outlet where Hercules set up his markers [or: placed the sign of limit], that \*human beings\* should not pass beyond' ('quella foce stretta | dov'Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi | acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta'; *Inferno* 26, 107–09). His story is one of borders, limits, and trespassing.

The culture of the time of Dante was very ambivalent towards all such concepts, and some of them were not even engrained in it. National borders, for instance, did not exist, either on maps, in the way today we envision those thin black lines, or in the cultural imagination; yet cities and castles were heavily walled and regularly defended. Cultivated lands were painstakingly marked and bitterly argued upon, yet 'space' was a rather undifferentiated concept. Fortresses abounded, religious identities were great divides, whereas vernacular languages travelled quite freely along their paths, under the cover of the pan-European Latin. The concept of frontier was as enormous as it was vague — beyond it; the magic, the horror, the barbarians, Gog and Magog, lions and monsters, and the great blue unknown. The 'iron gates', said to be built by Alexander the Great to contain the 'barbarians' from the East, are the opposite of Hercules' pillars. 'No entrance' one gate says in

the east; 'no exit' a pillar answers in the west. And please stand clear of the closing door, we are told with a suave voice by the modern monster. By all means; mind the gaps: you might fall into them and never be found again. [The Barbarians were allophones, incidentally. Bar-bar; this is how their language sounded to the Greeks. They probably did not read those signs.]

Boundaries and confinements were strict, and yet transgression was viewed as the nature of the human being. The story of Genesis is one of boundaries trespassed — adamant, naïve, and yet foundational — and it is not the only one. Disobedience, sometimes multiple, is the core of many ancient cultures; it seems to dwell at the heart and origin of what we call the human being. I wonder if these stories are traces of some kind of genetics; if disobedience is the cultural name for variation, the motor of evolution.

These days, I am quite fond of a fairly new science, 'genetic archaeology' — although I fear that in a couple of centuries it will look to posterity like eighteenth-century mesmerism appears to us. The scion of carbon dating, this science examines the DNA of ancient plants, animals, and humans to spin sometimes trenchant data on who we are. I feel this approach is rather rudimentary with respect to the sophistication, ambivalence, and subtlety that can be gathered from millennia of human culture, but revolutions are not gala dinners (said the one who put intellectuals to work the fields). As mesmerism shared some concerns with psychoanalysis, so maybe a new science will soon revolutionize our concept of what it is to be human.

I wonder if one day we will find out that the human being, the fast-evolving animal, is just an artful trespasser in the sphere of genetics; that what religions call free will is merely some chemical disobedience, which is both our curse and power.

Either way, the divinity is never happy about disobedience. He-She-They (as both plural and, hopefully, trans) punish the trespassers as a parent would do, taking privileges away (such as immortality, giant stature, common language, and all-you-can eat free buffet), or act like a faceless state, condemning the culprits to, well, 'life' (embodiment, hurting, labouring, ageing, dying). But also to being excited or frustrated (desiring, missing, longing, exercising, savouring).

If variation is disobedience, is evolution the punishment, I wonder?

'What is your favourite animal?'

When the oracular voices of little children ask me that question, I often become pensive. After the predictable cat and the inevitable dolphin (the only reason I mention it is because it is tattooed on my best friend's shoulder, but my questioners need not know), there is my really favourite animal. The Dodo.

*Dodo ineptus*: 'first they exterminated it, and then they called it inept', a friend of mine remarked in front of the stuffed model of the 'Oxford Dodo' at the Natural History Museum. Relaxed inhabitant of some Eden-like islands, Mauritius, the dodo was a kind of fat turkey, with rather clumsy wings and sloppy habits, like laying eggs on the ground. The legend of the dodo celebrates it as a special case in the story of evolution. It became rapidly extinct in the course of fifty years or so during the seventeenth century. When Portuguese and Dutch boats brought rats, pigs, and humans, it didn't bother to run, hide, or elevate its nest. It didn't adapt. It just let go.

Although surely modern biology has a good explanation for how this happened and normalizes the dodo into an overarching story of evolution and extinction (just

don't call it providence), for environmental romantics like me, the dodo remains an exception. Exceptions do not confirm the rule. Exceptions defy the rule. That's why the dodo is my favourite animal — so ironic, so intelligent. Lazy and fatalist; I imagine it like Oblomov, looking with a warm and sad smile onto its own world disintegrating, at the future it did not want to live in.

Children also delight in asking impossible questions, such as 'would you rather be in a pool with sharks or in a room with lions?' To which I reply with my own oracular interrogation: 'would you rather be the last dodo or the trillionth cockroach?'

Dante is certainly ambivalent about the idea of trespassing and disobedience. Apart from Ulyse, he depicts a rather defiant portrait of the two delinquent forbearers. For instance, he consistently pairs Eve, the most maligned woman of all times, with Mary, she who 'undoes' Eve's sin, as a common medieval boustrophedon holds: AVE (hail) is the reverse of EVA (Eve). Mary and Eve are sitting together in Dante's heaven (*Paradiso* 32, 4–6). The whole point of Christianity is precisely this — there is no Mary without Eve, no Christ without Adam. No Christianity: hence the two trespassers are both loathed and needed. If, on the one hand, they lost for the whole humankind the joys of a truly hedonistic, and epidural, paradise on earth — nudity, fecundity, perennial springtime, youth, and no pain in childbirth — on the other, they have activated 'humanity' (as a composite of virtue, vice, and choice) and allowed a perennially locked-in divinity to unfold, to articulate, to enter into dialogue, to write itself in the narrative, to make itself flesh. *Felix culpa*; original sin is, on balance, a fortunate event. [Or so medieval preachers say. As for

myself, I could have stayed in Mauritius with my dodo pet and my unashamed body for a while longer.]

Dante mentions Eve at the scene of her coup, in the earthly paradise that he imagines visiting on the top of purgatory, as an empowered woman; brave, independent, and rebellious. He seems almost to praise 'Eve's daring, that, there where earth and heaven were obedient, a woman, alone and but then formed, did not bear to remain under any veil' ('l'ardimento d'Eva, | che là dove ubidia la terra e 'l cielo, | femmina, sola e pur testé formata, | non sofferse di star sotto alcun velo'; *Purgatorio* 29, 24–27). Of course, he then says that she should have stayed under the veil (of ignorance, of the power of men over women, of chastity and modesty, as the main interpretations go), but with words that sound more like admiration than stigma.

In paradise, we encounter no less than the first man himself; Adam, the great transgressor, whom Dante celebrates rather triumphally and whose desire he importantly shapes in the same way as he does Ulysses' transgressive ardour. Adam's desire for the forbidden fruit is defined as the trespassing of a set limit ('il trapassar del *segno*'; going beyond the mark; *Paradiso* 26, 117), and recalls Ulysses' transgression of the geographical boundaries, the marked signs of the known world, posited by Hercules on the coasts of Spain and Africa ('*segnò li suoi riguardi*'; *Inferno* 26, 108; emphases mine). The trespassing of both Ulysses and Adam is impelled by their desire for the forbidden unknown.

The eschatology and the grandiosity of the story of Dante's Ulysses, the fact that he almost gets to access the mountain of purgatory and Eden, the abstractness, the literary elitism, the philosophical content, and the parallel with Adam: these all seem to be clues to a symbolic reading of this story of trespassing.

On my desktop there is always a folder named 'ideas'. I am one of those simple souls ('bless us') who are always full of ideas. Naïve, impracticable, foolish, haughty ideas. Inside an old computer that I can no longer turn on there must be, under that heading, a file with the title 'Ulysses/baptism of desire', and very little written in it. For a very short time I entertained the idea that I would convince my illustrious fellow Dante scholars that in the episode of Ulisse, Dante had inscribed an instance (and perhaps a criticism? Scholars like this kind of oscillation) of the so-called 'baptism of desire'.

Now, you might be happy to know that there are three ways to inceptive salvation for a Christian: first, the customary water; second, blood, when an unbaptized person goes through martyrdom for the faith and is automatically welcomed into it (bit gory, but a sure thing); and third, desire — if you really really really want it (and god agrees), you get it (dubious, but worth a try if you are not into blood, or water). With my back covered by authoritative authorities such as Augustine (*On Baptism Against the Donatists* 4, 22) and Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* III, 68.2), I thought I could prove a positive religious intention in the way Dante shapes his Ulisse (no longer interested in this), an optimistic reading of the modernity that Ulisse foreshadows (no longer sure about this), as well as the productive, powerful, all-driving, all-conquering, mad impetus of desire (in which I still faintly believe).

Ulisse almost got there by means of human desire alone. He gets to see the earthly paradise in the distance, for god's sake [no inflection or irony intended]. He almost manages to climb the lonely mount that Adam had left, and to re-establish us, the cheeky, cunning, curious, inadequate human beings, to the place that our foreparents had made deserted by reason of *hybris*. He was about to

discover it, for god's (accented) sake! Desire *is* the human superpower. We are beautiful creatures of desire and language, I once believed. The repetitious 'almost' that mars Ulisse's achievements is nagging me, though. What went wrong? Not quite sure (and here my little idea sinks with Ulisse's boat next to the mountain). Perhaps (retrospective thought) he was too cocky too soon: 'Noi ci allegrammo' (we rejoiced; *Inferno* 26, 136). I guess if you are about to be granted the baptism of desire you should be a little more serious, humbler. What a drag.

It doesn't quite work, as you plainly see, but it is a charming little idea now shaking and throbbing frailly somewhere in the cold black hole where old computer data is stored. I cannot access it any longer, but if someone can, please pull the plug. Pull the plug on the happy arrogance of youth, on assumptions, presumptions, grand beliefs, and the ardent longing for the universe to make sense, for things to be whole. Journeys without anchorage are dead. Long live desire.

The academic re-emerges from the shipwreck of her little idea with another intuition. [Them academics! Always with another angle. They should try working in the fields.] If the baptism of desire hypothesis brings the symbolic reading of Ulisse to an untenable position, let us turn back to the sea, then, and consider what kind of geographic background a contemporary of Dante could apply to the navigation of Ulisse. In our reading we saw a Mediterranean cruise turn into a mad flight beyond the pillars of Hercules. This meant different things to different people. A monk sitting in the refectory of the Hereford Cathedral shortly after 1300 would be familiar with an image of the world like it is presented in Figure 3. A merchant or a navigator, also around 1300, would recognize the drawing in Figure 4.





Figure 3. The Hereford Mappa Mundi, c. 1300.

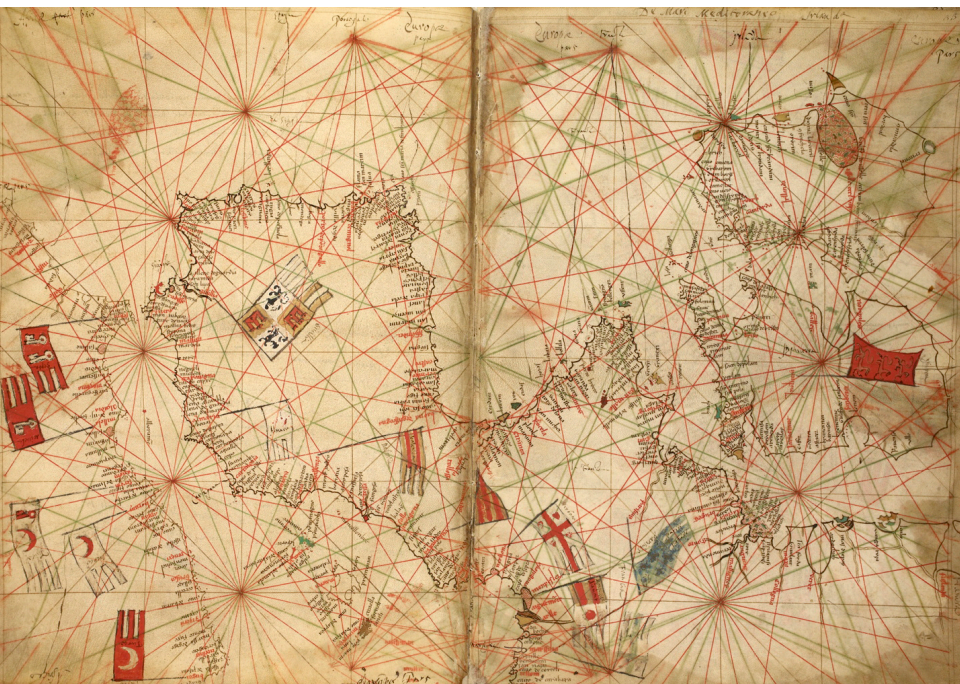


Figure 4. Portolan chart of Western Europe, by Pietro Vesconte, c. 1310.

These are two completely different and yet concomitant views of the world. In the Hereford map, Hercules' pillars are placed at the bottom sinkhole of the world, at the exact opposite of a rather anthropomorphic god. If you let yourself down such a drain, you will be forever sucked outside of the known or imagined world. The portolan chart requires but a slight, if painful, twist of the neck for you to inhabit a representation of Western Europe that overall resembles the one we are used to: Gibraltar no longer a plughole in the lowest parts of the world, but a strait, as we know it today, and the British isles only necessitating

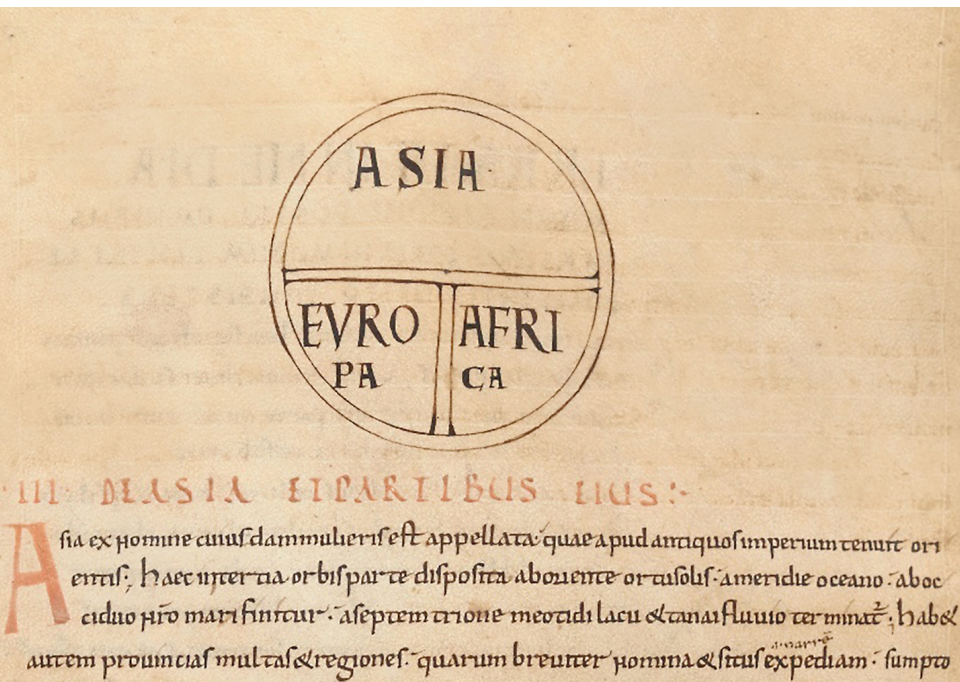


Figure 5. T-O map.

a little flight of imagination to be identified, as opposed to the rotten-muffin-like mass squeezed on the left side of Hereford map.

With all its complexity and squiggles and doodles, the Hereford map actually holds to a funny metaphor; it is a T-O map, meaning *Orbis Terrarum*, or world, in reverse. This arrangement is often schematized in a much more abstract fashion (Figure 5). This diagram, diversely perpetuated in the middle ages, has an east-west orientation. In it, the T is the Mediterranean sea, dividing the three continents, and the O the 'Mare Oceanum', the big blue unknown. We can fathom Ulisse sliding inexorably in the sinkhole of the

Hereford map, or more metaphysically disappearing like a little radar dot from the T-O diagram.

The portolan chart in turn reminds us that in antiquity and the middle ages merchants and navigators were travelling the west coast of Europe, that they had crossed Gibraltar before, and searched the sea around it both north and south. It reminds us of the many unrecorded navigations or excursions in unknown lands, of cultural encounters that were never registered, or left lighter, and possibly gentler, traces than the grand Renaissance travels.

The fact that we are more familiar with the portolan than with the T-O should not prevent us from reflecting on the strangeness, one may say the absurdity, of mapping; of geometry unleashed on life. The oddity of geography; the writing about the land, of the land, on the land, *The Scripture of the Land*.

Is Dante's Ulisse Adam or a merchant? Was Dante thinking of a T-O or a portolan? Is the great unknown sea map or metaphor? Are we doing geography and economics or metaphysics? These distinctions might be somewhat vitiated. A merchant called Adam, perhaps, going in search of God-knows-what, yet something that could be computed, monetized, and yet called knowledge and virtue: this is perhaps what the discoverer is.

MARCO? MAARCO??

A merchant of this kind exists in Dante's times, but Dante is strangely silent about the account of the travels in the Far East of his quasi-contemporary Marco Polo.

Accountable and accounting merchant turned ambassador and curious traveller meets failed romancier in a Genoese jail in 1298. Merchant's handbook meets adventure fiction in a Franco-Italian patois; it is both exciting and

explosive. The journey of its title says it all: *The Description of the World (Le Devisement du monde)*, *The Book of the Wonders of the World (Le Livre des merveilles du monde; De mirabilibus mundi)*, *The Book of the Gran Khan (Li Livres du Graunt Caam)*, only relatively recently branded as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In Italian it is known as *Il Milione*: although scholars vouch that it comes from the nickname of the Polo family (*Emilione*), to me it sounds too endearingly like ‘The Million Bucks Book’.

The worldly merchant travels, sees, annotates, measures, listens, and hears about. On his page, observation and legend sit gracefully together. Polo follows an earthly, merchant ethos of ‘virtue and knowledge’, questions the meaning of divinity, embraces wonder with a graceful understatement, calls the rhinos ‘unicorns’ but is unfazed by their alleged symbolic meaning (they are ugly beasts — he notes — not the cute, maiden-friendly, Christ-like creatures we claim they are). He returns home. It is no surprise to us that Polo’s return to Venice was compared to that of Odysseus to Ithaca.

Although wide open to the accusation of today’s Orientalism, for its own times Polo’s account is actually rather open-minded. ‘When you depart from \*\*\* riding towards Levant for seven days, you arrive to the land of \*\*\*. There are Muslims, idolaters (Buddhists), and Nestorian Christians. They are artisans and merchants. They weave rich brocades with gold threads, and handsome silk fabrics. There are many cities and castles and oxen large like elephants that produce very fine wool. The people there are short, dark, and beautiful (or tall, fair, and ugly, or a combination of such adjectives)’: this would be an average paragraph in Polo’s account. In other words: people, religions, landscapes, and product are placed on the same plane, with very little moral judgement. Diversity is curiosity; mer-

chant's realism (not mercantile greed) is the gold standard. It is a hugely invigorating and carefree reading, once you get accustomed to its rolling pace, a bit like a horse gait. [Your bottom hurts when you get off, though.] The reasons why Dante did not engage with the million bucks book — he only mentions in passing 'Tartar embroidery', which is clearly not enough of a clue — are mysterious. Dante does not do Orientalism, is the short answer. Or he is a moralist. You choose.

A flimsy precedent of *Ulisse* has been found, however, in the mercantile epos of the late thirteenth century. In 1291, two brothers, Ugolino and Vadino Vivaldi, armed two ships and departed rather grandiosely from their hometown of Genoa, then one of the most dynamic naval powers in the world. They crossed Gibraltar and disappeared. The most trusted document on the expedition is found in the annals of Jacopo Doria, writing only four years after:

Eodem quippe anno Thedisius Aurie, Ugolinus de Vivaldo et eius frater, cum quibusdam aliis civibus Janue, ceperunt facere quoddam viagium, quod aliquis usque tunc facere minime attemptavit. Nam armaverunt optime duas galeas, et victualibus, aqua et aliis necessariis infra eis impositis, miserunt eas de mense Madii de versus Strictum Septe ut per mare Oceanum irent ad partes Indie, mercimonia inde deferentes. In quibus iverunt dicti duo fratres de Vivaldo personaliter, et duo fratres Minores. Quod quidem mirabile fuit non solum videntibus, sed etiam audientibus. Et postquam locum qui dicitur Gozora transierunt, aliqua certa nova non habuimus de eis. Dominus autem eos custodiat, et sanos et incolumes reducat ad propria.

In that same year, Tedisio Doria, Ugolino Vivaldi, and his brother, with some other citizens of Genoa, embarked on a journey that nobody had attempted before. They richly armed two galleys, and having stocked them with food, water, and all other necessary things, they set sail in the month of May towards the strait of Ceuta, in order to go through the Ocean towards the Indies, with the intention of bringing back from there useful goods to trade. The two Vivaldi brothers went on the galleys in person, and with them two Minor Friars. This enterprise was truly wondrous for both those who witnessed it and those who heard about it. And after they passed a place called Gozora, we no longer had reliable news of them. May god preserve them, and bring them back home safe and sound (my, very literal, translation).

This source can be prodded and questioned in many ways. A list of questions and a sketch of the answers may look like this:

- Where? The journey never travelled before; Ceuta and the ‘deep open sea’: these are both features of our Ulisse. The Indies; Gozora: was their intention to circumnavigate Africa or to attempt the Atlantic passage? Most historians today believe the former hypothesis; and I, of course, love the latter (I also love, but with a hint of boredom, ‘the former’ ... ‘the latter’ type of construction: it is the first pseudo-scholarly expression I learned in English).
- Where is Gozora? The coast of Morocco, the west coast of Africa, perhaps the Canaries, are some of the hypotheses.
- Who? ‘Optime’ and ‘personaliter’: it is rather striking that the galleys were armed and serviced with unusual richness by a group of Genoese magnates,

and the fact that two of the shipowners were on board emphasizes the grandiosity of this journey.

- Why? Merchandise and Franciscan Friars: was the intention mercantile or evangelical? Historians readily notice that the fall of Acre, which also took place in 1291, meant that a very profitable Genoese commercial route towards the East was closed, so this might be a mercantile endeavour. The role of the Franciscan Friars is less discussed. Were they on board to care for the souls of the sailors or to conquer new ones?
- History or story? They are already blurred in the annals: there is wonder ('mirabile'), witness ('videntibus'), and hearing about ('audientibus'); the same wonder, indeed, takes hold of the eyewitnesses and of the posthumous 'readers'. This, for us, also generates the question of Dante's position: is the Vivaldi expedition a 'source' for Dante's Ulysses, or is Dante's Ulysses dictating the way we look at the Vivaldi brothers?
- And may they come back home ... the final optative brings us all to the docks of the medieval port, to pace it with parents, and spouses, and friends, and children, hoping to see the sails on the horizon, dreading another day without news.

A handful of contemporary documents add a couple of details: the ships' names might (or might not) have been *Allegranza* (Happiness) and *Sant'Antonio* (Saint Anthony). The former (see?) has a double, if tenuous, delicacy to it: the fact that the northernmost island of the Canaries is actually called *Alegranza*, and ... remember the joy of Ulisse's crew? ... 'noi ci *allegrammo*' (*Inferno* 26, 136, em-



phasis mine): may this be a trace of the Vivaldi expedition, one scholar has wondered? Historians cringe, while I rejoice.

Later on, the story of the Vivaldi brothers fades into legend, as the annals already implied. The anonymous *Libro del conocimiento de todos los reinos* (The Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms), for some time believed to be the record of a real journey in the known world travelled in 1305 and written shortly after, and now deemed the fiction of an imaginary journey written in the second half of the fourteenth century, has one of the brothers Vivaldi stranded in modern-day Sudan, and his son Sorleone (or Sor Leone: Mr Leone, Mr Lion) in Ethiopia or Somalia looking for him, but being dissuaded to travel to Sudan by the local leader, who fears Sorleone might lose his life (chapter 82). Apparently Ugolino did have a son named Sorleo, who was also a merchant and a navigator and might understandably have gone in search for his father. But we could also be reading about the Fantastic Adventure of Mr Lion in the Big Scorching Desert. In another passage we hear that in the city of Graciona in Ethiopia there are 'the Genoese men that escaped the galley that broke up in Amenuan, they never knew what happened to the other galley that escaped' ('los ginoveses que escaparon de la galea que se quebró en Amenuan, et de la otra galea que escapó nunca sopieron qué se hizo'; chapter 80). Between and around the two semi-realistic statements there are luxuriant descriptions of earthly paradise ('dantesquely' placed on high, unpopulated mountains) and of the River of Gold, a true 'cash-flow' originating in the Antarctic pole that the author declares he saw in his travels.

There is some kind of strange pleasure in reading the *Book of Knowledge*. You feel like a Lilliputian, hurried and breathless, rushing on tiptoes on a large globe. Almost

every ten lines or so a new section begins with 'I departed ...', or 'I left ...', ('Parti' ... 'Sali'). Life is a continuous take-off for the author of the *Libro del conocimiento*, an endless self-inflicted fleeing from one place to other, spurred by a strange mix of curiosity and haste, even though for both him and us it is simply following our fingertips on a map. Even coming back is a departure. This is how the book ends: 'e dende vin me para Sevilla donde sali primera mente' (and from there I came to Sevilla, from where I first left; chapter 120).

The last early modern source on the Vivaldi are the journals and letters written around the middle of the fifteenth century by one Antonino or Antoniotto Usodimare, my favourite name ever for an adventurer. Little Tony Used to the Sea — this is how his name sounds — says that he met a descendant of the survivors of the Vivaldi expedition in Guinea, and that he heard its 'definitive' story, one boat beached in a shallow, the other landed in Ethiopia and its crew captured by adepts of Prester John.

Prester John is like the hardback cover for many medieval and early modern stories. In the wise, Christian ruler of an Eden-like kingdom in the heart of Africa or of Asia, by some identified as a descendant of the Magi, by others as the Wandering Jew, alterity and identity are so minutely calibrated that many stories of exploration and discovery are not afraid or ashamed to dive into and come to an end in this strangest of fictions. In the thirteenth century, while many were taking seriously the absurd forgery of an alleged letter by Prester John to the European emperors, calling them to unite against the Muslims and to liberate Jerusalem as well as rehashing the fabulous riches of his kingdom, Polo, with his casual worldliness, makes Prester John yet another Asian king at war with Genghis Khan, good and bad and real like any other ruler.

## TO PURSUE MONEY AND GOLD?

Besides the tenuous clue around the Vivaldi brothers, there is another indication, perhaps, that Dante was considering a mercantile heritage for his Ulisse. His doomed discoverer may be found not in literature or on maps, but in the busy workshops of his burgeoning city. Dante might be grappling here with his troubled and non-linear reflection on the worth of 'expansion' in productive, financial, and political terms — an ongoing process in his hometown and many city-states in the Italian peninsula. He might be trying to come to terms, in other words, with the 'capitalist' in the 'discoverer'.

At the very beginning of the canto, the image of Florence spreading her rapacious wings over land and sea condenses into one negative droplet the elements of the main episode: wings, sea, ambition, and expansion.

Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se' sì grande  
che per mare e per terra batti l'ali,  
e per lo 'nferno tuo nome si spande!  
(*Inferno* 26, 1–3)

Rejoice, O Florence, since you are so great that  
over sea and land you beat your wings, and your  
name is spread through Hell!

As opposed to the staged ambiguity of the rest of the canto, this image is entirely negative; 'battere' (or, today, 'sbattere') 'le ali' (to beat one's wings, to flap, flutter) describes an agitated and graceless flight; 'spandere' (to spread) speaks of an expansion that takes place only in hell. Such a rapacious image of mercantile Florence is a constant throughout the poem and reflects Dante's ambivalent position towards his beloved and behated hometown.

A simplification of the typical understanding of Dante's politics that you would read in textbooks may

sound like this: Dante was a Guelph, and the Guelphs upheld the independence of city-states, papal politics, lower-aristocracy claims (Dante came from one such family), and some aspects of mercantile initiative against the universalizing prerogatives and reign of a (rather vacant) Emperor and an often violent and politically entitled high aristocracy (the Ghibellines). The actual chessboard of local politics at the time was much more complex, though, with Guelph and Ghibelline distinctions blurred by local interest, neighbourhood brawls, and interfamilial jealousies. When he was still active in Florentine politics, in the 1290s until his exile in 1302, Dante belonged to the White Guelphs, who, together with their antagonists, the (guess?) Black Guelphs, were a specifically Florentine faction of the Guelph party. After the exile due to the Black Guelphs' alliance with a quite interventionist pope, Boniface VIII, Dante's position became somewhat eschatological and made him veer towards more 'Ghibelline' ideas — the vision of an all-powerful, impartial, and enlightened emperor who, having received his investiture from the pope, is able to rule 'the world' wisely and justly, as he writes in his late political work, the *De monarchia* (On the monarchy). Plainly: it seems to me that Dante is a loser at realpolitik and a naïve political thinker.

Dante's position towards Florence's economic expansion is ambiguous to such an extent that it can be stretched between a quasi-visionary condemnation of the dangers of proto-capitalism and a blunt reactionary stance. In *Inferno* 16, for instance, Dante-traveller meets three of his fellow citizens, who ask him about the state of their city, in particular whether the slippery values of 'cortesia' (courtesy) and 'valore' (valour) still dwell in it or not (16, 64–72). Dante's reply is bitter:

La gente nuova e i sùbiti guadagni  
 orgoglio e dismisura han generata,  
 Fiorenza, in te, sì che tu già ten piagni.  
 (*Inferno* 16, 73–75)

The new people and the sudden gains have engendered pride and excess in you, O Florence, so that you already weep for it!

‘The new people’ are new in two ways. They come from outside Florence, from the *contado* (the countryside around the city that provided for its agricultural needs), and they are not part of the established elite. Their profits are large and sudden, and they are the cause of Florence’s moral and political decline. [Not true, by the way: Florence’s politics were troubled like those of any other *comune* in the early fourteenth century, but the city developed into a political and financial powerhouse thanks to its dynamic economy and in the next century it became the most influential city-state in Italy under the ‘republican’ leadership of the Medici, a family of bankers. But it takes Machiavelli, two centuries later, to reveal, with a grand and generous gesture, that politics is real, it favours dynamism and cynicism, it is a hard exercise, and it is separated from morality.]

Here Dante draws a quadrilateral of principles; the current ‘pride’ and ‘excess’ are the antitheses to two old, slightly hollow values, ‘courtesy’ and ‘valour’ (‘cortesia e valor’; 16, 67). ‘Dis-misura’ — dis-measure — is the key here. It is a perversion of ‘measure’: to measure, count, quantify, estimate, size, amount, and even to trade, are not damnable per se, Dante seems to say, but their excesses are. The touchstone? Women, of course! Yesterday they were modest and plain, attending to husbands and children, and today they are all jewels, accessories, make-up, and loud fashion. In the olden times, ‘there was no necklace, no cor-

onal, no embroidered gowns, no girdle that was more to be looked at than the person' ('Non avea catenella, non corona, | non gonne contigiate, non cintura | che fosse a veder più che la persona'; *Paradiso* 15, 100–02). The speaker here is Cacciaguida, Dante's ultra-conservative ancestor, who compares old, 'sober and chaste' (15, 99) Florence, ruled by few and moderate families, with the new city that has attracted more and more people from outside, who now are 'made Florentine and are money changers and traders' ('fatto è fiorentino e cambia e merca'; 16, 61; my translation). Here we read a blood-chilling statement for us moderns, that 'the intermingling of people was ever the beginning of the harm of the city' ('Sempre la confusion de le persone | principio fu del mal de la cittade'; 16, 67–68). Chilling to those of us, that is, who believe in the energy of intermingling, who are incurably intermingled.

Newcomers, *nouveaux riches*, and female extravagance — how many times have we heard this spiel? And how many times will we? All the while, *vieux riches* are laughing, then and now, while enormous hypocrisies surrounding social mobility still haunt many of us.

In the broad socio-economic interpretation suggested by the beginning of the canto, then, the whole episode of Ulisse might be a condemnation of mercantile dynamism from a traditionalist point of view.

Even the sighting of mount Purgatory could be meaningful in the mercantile reading of the canto of Ulisse. Purgatory is the new otherworldly realm, its doctrine drafted at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, only a few years before Dante wrote his poem. According to Jacques Le Goff (*The Birth of Purgatory*) there is a proto-capitalist culture at the basis of the invention of the 'third place'. Although this thesis has been nuanced over the years, it is true that a culture of pain and gain, calculations and ad-

vancements, down payments and rewards, ventures, deals, and negotiations underlies purgatory, as well as the complex accounting whereby the prayers and resources (and money) of the living help the dead in their otherworldly climbing. Dante, who has the privilege of being the first poet of purgatory, fills that vast white page with productivities, not necessarily social or financial (although there is a bit of that too, and lots of accounting of the years and months that one spends there). Dante's purgatory is the place for a poetic and textual productivity as well as the spiritual and redemptive one. Even pain is productive in Dante's purgatory, as my friend Manuele Gragnolati has demonstrated.

The *Purgatorio* is an intriguing piece, loaded with symbols and paraphernalia of salvation. It is also a funfair of reading, so many are the ways in which it can be interpreted. It is reactionary, even fanatical in its imperative to drop everything earthly, twist all desires and self-flagellate (literally) in order to cleanse oneself from sin. It also contradicts itself by being full of friends, and hugs, and love poetry, and lovers. It is the closest thing we have to an otherworldly jail (in it, you do time until you are free to ascend to heaven). It can be also read as a gigantic church, filled with visual examples of purification and redemption. [A student of mine said that it reminded her of a gym, but those were the nineties in New York City.] I wonder if it has something administrative (The Central Office of Salvation), financial (The World Bank of the Souls), or even industrial to it (the busy plant where the souls are made clean), like the textile workshops that were Florence's proto-capitalist pride, or the Venetian arsenal that Dante famously describes at the beginning of *Inferno* 21 (7–18), delightfully turning technical terms of manufacturing into

the crackling of poetry.<sup>†</sup> Whether Dante's purgatory (and perhaps even the whole poem) has the energy (and potential alienation) of a production line. Whether stories (of salvation and otherwise) are self-sabotaging assembly lines.

Redeem ... doesn't it also mean to recover, repay, pay off, cash back? [It does; it was one of those annoying rhetorical questions — the Latin etymology plainly encompasses the prefix *re-* and the verb *emere*, to buy. *Redemptus* (redeemed) means no less than bought again, or back, or off in ancient times and in today's English.] Salvation is an otherworldly voucher, a posthumous promotional code, the busy merchants of Europe are starting to think. Only now the irony hits me that 'to pay' ('pagare', 'payer', 'pagar') derives from the Latin *pacare*, to pacify, and ultimately

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† Another passage worth listening to, not only for its technical prowess, but also for the curious fact that it describes the place where broken ships are fixed. They are mended, we learn, with pitch. A pitch-black atmosphere dominates this and the following cantos (*Inferno* 21–23), known as a 'comedy within the *Comedy*', where Dante embraces the depths of comic style and language to face the sin of political corruption ('baratteria', barratry, the buying and selling of political positions) of which he was accused by the Black (like pitch) Guelphs at the time of his exile. Broken ships, political sell-out, enemies, and exile: Ulisse meets Machiavelli in Dante's disturbed political unconscious: 'Quale ne l'arzanà de' Viniziani | bolle l'inverno la tenace pece | a rimpalmare i legni lor non sani, | ché navicar non ponno — in quella vece | chi fa suo legno novo e chi ristoppa | le coste a quel che più viaggi fece; | chi ribatte da proda e chi da poppa; | altri fa remi e altri volge sarte; | chi terzeruolo e artimon rintoppa —: | tal, non per foco ma per divin'arte, | bollia là giuso una pegola spessa, | che 'nviscava la ripa d'ogne parte' (As in the Arsenal of the Venetians, in winter, the sticky pitch for caulking their unsound vessels is boiling, because they cannot sail then, and instead, one builds his ship anew and another plugs the ribs of his that has made many a voyage, one hammers at the prow and another at the stern, this one makes oars, that one twists ropes, another patches jib and mainsail; so, not by fire but by divine art, a thick pitch was boiling there below, which overglued the bank on every side; *Inferno* 21, 7–18).



from *pax*, peace. The financial and the spiritual go oddly hand in hand.

Merchants of the time were no strangers to the calls of moral and spiritual values. Merchants' books recorded not only transactions and debts but also wishes for a pious afterlife through earthly dealings. They amassed treasures both earthly and spiritual, and measured salvation like a piece of cloth, one span at a time. Dante's 'good merchant' is a case in point. When getting old, the noble soul recalls all its good deeds — like a merchant nearing his port is pleased with all the money he has made and routes he has taken.

E fa come lo buono mercatante, che, quando viene presso al suo porto, essamina lo suo procaccio e dice: 'Se io non fosse per cotal cammino passato, questo tesoro non avre' io, e non avrei di ch'io godesse nella mia cittade, alla quale io m'appresso'; e però benedice la via che ha fatta. (*Convivio* 4, xxviii, 12)

It [the soul] acts like the good merchant who, as he draws near to his port, examines his profits and says: If I had not made my journey along this road, I would not have this treasure, nor would I have anything in which to take delight in my city, to which I am drawing near; and so he blesses the way he has taken.

The greedy merchant, though, is cursed to never find peace, 'by failing to perceive that he desires to continue desiring by seeking to realize an infinite gain' ('e in questo errore cade l'avarò maladetto, e non s'acorge che desidera sé sempre desiderare, andando dietro al numero impossibile a giugnere'; *Convivio* 3, xv, 9). Desiring to desire, is this the curse of the modern human being? Is Ulisse's curse (the

philosopher's, the merchant's, even the poet's) to try and go after the number that is impossible to reach?

Within the socio-economic reading, then, we might say that in having his Ulisse-merchant dimly approach the place of redemptive productivity, Dante might hint (whether consciously or unconsciously I don't know, and, as you probably have guessed, I don't care) at the tricky transition between an old, cautiously mercantile political ethos and the acceleration of this same politics in the hands of unscrupulous or too dynamic politicians, between 'good' (old) and 'greedy' (new) merchants. Ulisse, called to navigate again to pursue old, hollow values ('virtue' and 'knowledge'), and yet led astray by his own expansive energy and desire, comes to see, and to die in front of, the 'redemptive' place, the supernal Chamber of Commerce, built by merchants for merchants in their attempt to measure and mete the afterlife.

But when I turn to Ulisse, I am not convinced. I fail to reconcile the immense aperture of his mad flight with the constriction of hell. In the semi-public confessional of the lecture room — don't quote me on this, guys — I always wonder. When drawing the episode of Ulisse, is Dante

- a proto-humanist? forging, through a creative re-writing of the classics, the unforgettable figure of the modern human being that will be fulfilled only a couple of centuries later through the advancements in knowledge, explorations, technology; in one word, progress? Did he extract, that is, what was modern and even timeless in the classics, and in this expression, through the visionary power of poetry, foresee the times to come? This kind of reading appealed to me when I was young, when 'to pur-

sue virtue and knowledge' rang true, when progress meant only one thing, and when right and wrong were fully demarcated.

- Or is he being, poor Dante, what he was; not a 'medieval', which is our construct, but firmly a pre-modern, and condemning Ulisse and progress from the narrow standpoint of his Christian and Guelph beliefs? A backwards, or downward looking Dante. Easy for both those who celebrate the Christian, conservative Dante and those who loathe him. Safe. But how boring.

My kids (I do think of my students as my kids, with apologies to them for the unintended infantilization), my kids are smarter than this. They deserve better. This is when, prefacing it with a 'don't quote me on this, guys', I share with them my absurd hypothesis.

That a double foresight underlies Dante's Ulisse. Of progress and its discontents; of knowledge turning into greed; of technology yielding gunpowder; of exploration becoming exploitation, colonialism, ecological disaster. That poetry is visionary, but its vision turns sometimes into a nightmare that, in a truly psychopathic way, is more vivid and better than the dream. That Dante is super-modern. His discoverer has found the beauty and horror of 'us'.

Modernity, however, ignored Dante's warnings, hailing the discoverer as the best type of the human being. The rhetoric of glory and exploration, perversely (or perhaps only 'versutely') grown out of Homer's and Dante's characterization of Ulysses, variously mixed and matched with positivism and with a touch of romantic rhetoric, is very much around. 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' is not, it seems, the last whimper of an old, demented king,

but the tattoo on the oiled bicep of a young adventurer. The hungry heart keeps piling life on life, death on death.

#### YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In 1970, a book claimed that there is some kind of ‘Ulysses gene’ in the (typically male) human being, which would push the human race to always out-discover itself. I would not normally mention *The Ulysses Factor: The Exploring Instinct in Man* if we did not need a bit of relief from the pressure of the tragic stories of exploration that are the stuff of this chapter, and if it had not been written just fifty years ago — in my lifetime, in our shared cultural environment. Someone must have taken this seriously at some point, seriously enough to publish it.

Weaving literature (mostly Homer and Tennyson) and modern, newspaper-style stories of feats of endurance, the book claims that the call to adventure is a proper human gene, a ‘factor’ indeed in human constitution, different from survival, or greed, or desire for knowledge. This is the seventies — when the age of earth discovery had just passed, and that of space discovery just begun — so the adventures celebrated therewithin (yes, therewithin!) are of the futile kind, like crossing the North Atlantic on a raft eating only sunflower seeds in the company of a single Siamese cat, and should a storm hit, they will fish me out anyway.

Throughout the book the author does not hide his belief that the Ulysses factor is a white, Western, upper-class, male, heterosexual thing. In current times, he says, it is manifested especially in ‘people of British and French stock’ [I kid you not]. There is, of course, the token ‘Oriental Ulysses’ [not kidding], and the chapter on ‘Women’, which I leave to your imagination.

There is even a list of qualities that the type-figure owns:

Courage

Selfishness

Practical competence

Physical strength

Powerful imagination

Ability to lead

Self-discipline

Endurance

Self-sufficiency

Cunning

Unscrupulousness

Strong sexual attraction [still not kidding]

‘Sexual attraction’ — we read shortly after — ‘may be no more than a part of virility. The attraction of Ulysses’ [the name is Bond?] ‘is not crude, and certainly not coarse. He is intensely virile’, [yes, yes you told us already five times; is there something you want to discuss with your doctor?] ‘quick witted and ready with a compliment’ [and to light up your smoke, but-there’s-some-place-that-he’d-rather-be]. ‘He is an exciting person, and not merely physically exciting. You can sense that he had a quick delightful smile, you want to talk to him, and you want him to talk to you.’ [In a bar?] ‘Women were strongly drawn to him, perhaps a little wanting to mother him’, [isn’t it what we always want to do?] ‘as well as to sleep with him’ [no, we didn’t! well perhaps Circe, but she screwed him more than he screwed her]. ‘He enjoyed women, but was ready

enough to leave them' [poor Calypso always on the walk of shame] 'and sex does not seem to have been a powerful motive in his own life.' End of laughter. And beginning of concern when we think how much this 'type' and his bards are still around.

And today? As I write, billionaires and sci-fi actors are being shot into space. I have not read much about this *boutade*, but I have the impression that it is a somewhat grotesque impression of what is to come. Space travel is, of course, the new frontier, the new trespassing. But we will not see it.

As a child, gorging on adventure books, I remember experiencing a sense of slight nausea at the thought that there was nothing left to discover, no place where the human being had not been, which had not been mapped, centimetred, placed, paced. I also used to feel dizziness, almost vertigo, when studying astronomy and learning how unthinkably big the universe is. Very naive, I know, but taken together, I wonder whether that giddiness is not the compound reflux of an entire era, stuck between leaps. We call ourselves the 'postmoderns', but what will they call us? The pre-futures?

In 1990 (in my prime, if I may say so), a probe named Ulysses was sent towards the sun. I quote, emphasize, and gloss from the NASA website: 'The Ulysses spacecraft was designed as a five-year mission to study the *never-before-examined* ['do not deny the experience'] *north and south poles* of the Sun [Oates and Franklin in one machine]. Far *outliving* its planned mission lifetime by 13 years ['neither ... nor ... nor ': I have no desire for return says Dante's Ulysses] and *collecting treasure troves* [ouch. Polo!] of data on solar wind, interstellar dust and the three-dimensional character of solar radiation, Ulysses became one of the

most prolific *contributors to knowledge* ['to follow (virtue and) knowledge'] of the solar activity cycle. The spacecraft also performed a number of technical *feats* [epic] including making an *unprecedented* gravity assist manoeuvre at Jupiter *to hurl itself out* [never travelled before! success! glory!] of the elliptic plane and into its solar polar orbit.'

I wonder, is this Ulysses also naturally sexy?

More seriously, I ask, are we back into Dante's great metaphysical unknown? In the abstract painting, in the immense silence, in the unthinkable solitude. Does interstellar dust glitter like hope or grime like grit? I wonder whether the tridimensionality of solar radiation and the epic thrust out of the elliptic plane are loud enough to silence more anguished questions: what is this boundless, lofty place I am in? what is this incommensurable loneliness; who am I? where does my short wandering, where does your immortal course tend to? [I am paraphrasing here another poet and a great nihilist, Giacomo Leopardi; a disabled philosopher who, in the early nineteenth century, saw through positivism with the keenest of rational and secular eyes].

When it hurled itself out of the traction of the angry, erupting god, did Ulysses dance and jest like the ancient hero ... 'I am no one! I am nothingness, you cannot catch me', or did it let go, torpidly obeying its momentum, like Dante's boat in front of the vortex?

Did it come back, I wonder? The front website calls the mission 'completed', and you have to dig a bit into the subsections and subfiles to find this story:

After just over 17.5 years, the mission is approaching its end. The declining output from the Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator (RTG), which provides power for the craft and its payload, is unable to provide enough heat. This means that the

fuel for the thrusters will freeze. In mid-January 2008, the situation worsened when the main radio transmitter failed — its warmth kept the fuel from freezing.

To overcome these difficulties, ground controllers have been using a smaller transmitter to ensure that as much science as possible is returned from Ulysses in the last few weeks of its life.

The mission is expected to end by 1 July. Once it is clear that the fuel needed to keep the main antenna pointing towards Earth has started to freeze, ground controllers will put Ulysses into a stable configuration.

It will continue to orbit the Sun indefinitely.

It is heartbreaking, isn't it? This Ulysses too will not come home, forever trapped into its icy heart, in darkness. I am going outside, in the cold, in this unknown, incommensurable loneliness. There is something comforting in letting go, in foundering. And maybe sometime.

Incidentally. On the front page of NASA's Ulysses website, we are invited to 'explore other missions', according to the textual and commercial virtual hierarchy we are so accustomed to. I am mesmerized by some of their names: Mariner Six, Rosetta Orbiter, Sea Winds, Genesis, and ... Psyche. I feel that if I unlock this rebus correctly, I will get the key to a room where a hero dressed in latex and named Prester John will explain to me the meaning of humanity, past, present, and future.

Dante, however, manages even space exploration. In heaven, he describes two earth-bound gazes. It is a technical feat in itself, if you think of the time they were imagined. They do look like satellite views of the earth. The first time (*Paradiso* 22, 124–54), he places the traveller in the 'heaven of the



fixed stars', where Beatrice, his guide, asks him to look at 'how much world' she 'has already set beneath his feet' (22, 128–29), and Dante spectacularly turns his gaze to contemplate the seven planets, and the earth, 'the little threshing floor which makes us so fierce' ('l'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci'; 22, 151), while readers feel they are watching some kind of *mappa mundi* from above, with little humans on it, expanding, fighting, and pillaging.

The second time (*Paradiso* 27, 76–87), when the traveller is about to turn his gaze upwards and focus at last on things truly divine, he bids farewell to earthly matters by looking down one last time. He gazes at the south shore of the Mediterranean sea, west to east, from Hercules' pillars to Lebanon (the site of Phoenicia where the nymph Europa was abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull):

sì ch'io veda di là da Gade il varco  
folle d'Ulisse, e di qua presso il lito  
nel qual si fece Europa dolce carco.  
(*Paradiso* 27, 82–84)

so that, on the one hand, beyond Cadiz, I saw  
the mad track of Ulysses, and on the other nearly  
to the shore where Europa made herself a sweet  
burden.

The earth itself now bears the mark of Ulysses' folly: the strait is now a 'varco', a door, an opening, but also a break, a rift, a scratch. The enjambment 'varco | folle' (literally: the passage | mad of Ulysses) tears poetic language apart rather than clasping it as this figure normally does. Try it: it has to do with accents, and with the clash of consonants and vowels.

On the other side, the vulgar violence of the divinity.

The wound of the earth; the rape of Europa. And ferociousness. Us.