

Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, *Cultural Inquiry*, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 213–63

ELENA LOMBARDI

## 6. All In One Place

CITE AS:

Elena Lombardi, '6. All In One Place', in Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, *Cultural Inquiry*, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 213–63 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28\\_6](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28_6)>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

---

## 6. All In One Place

They are everywhere, so swollen a symbol of danger and allure that we hardly notice them any longer; so overwritten that it is both daunting and hollow to sit and type about them. The logical challenge of the trans-species. How they turned from half birds to half fish. How they moved places across the seas. Why did they become the prime image of the treacherous feminine, beautiful and lethal, or a hetero-normative story of sorrow and sacrifice. When does 'the feminine' stop being so terribly banal? How the hell did they end up on the fire engine and attached to the ubiquitous 'nee-naw, nee-naw' of children's books, whereby hordes of toddlers and parents are actually delighted to hear a sound that signifies someone's life is in danger (as a matter-of-factly acquaintance of mine once pointed out to me)?

This morning, the good news is twofold.

ONE is the voice. We tend to forget that the original sirens' allure and danger is set not in their beauty, the voyeuristic long red hair that barely covers their exposed

breasts in depictions that have become mainstream, but in a treasure set much deeper in their chest. The voice, song, poetry. The opposite of the nee-naw: a sound so sweet, so cuddly, so soothing and exciting that it takes hold of all your senses, that it makes you forget the rest. Vibrations that drip and distil slowly in your heart, that swell your being with comfort. Clear harmony (*Odyssey* 12, 44 and 183), sound of honey (12, 187) that fills you with the pleasure and the joy of listening.

Of hearing what? Your story, is their answer:

δεῦρ' ἄγ' ἰών, πολύαιν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν,  
 νῆα κατάστησον, ἵνα νωιτέρην ὄπ' ἀκούσης.  
 οὐ γάρ πώ τις τῆδε παρήλασε νηὶ μελαίνῃ,  
 πρὶν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπὸ στομάτων ὄπ' ἀκούσαι,  
 ἀλλ' ὃ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καὶ πλείονα εἰδώς.  
 ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρέϊη  
 Ἄργεῖοι Τρῳές τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν,  
 ἴδμεν δ' , ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ.  
 (*Odyssey* 12, 184–91)

Come hither on your way, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stop your ship that you may listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has \*anyone\* rowed past the island in \*their\* black ship until \*they have\* heard the sweet voice from our lips; instead, \*they have\* joy of it, and \*go their\* way a wiser \*person\*. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.

And in your story, everything is contained. All In One Place. [Maybe they can actually read at Apple but have decided to call the app Ulysses and not Siren for marketing reasons. Starbucks already claimed the siren, after all.]

You know the tale: Odysseus fills with wax the ears of his companions, has them tie him hand and foot to

the mast, and orders them to row and not pay attention to his pleas; nay, at the acme of the paroxysm, when the sirens' song is most attractive and his desire peaks, they are instructed to bind him tighter. Sounds stranger than expected when you tell it this way.

This is, indeed, a strange story of bonds, pleasure, and knowledge: the fullness of pleasure (τερψάμενος, *terpsamenos*, suggesting the satisfaction of pleasure, *jouissance*) and an increased comprehension (πλείονα εἰδώς, *pleiona eidos*, knowing more things) are bound together in the same line, and they are logically followed by the tale of Odysseus's past (the war of Troy), in turn connected with universal knowledge. The sirens promise, in other words, pleasure as the centre that interconnects the circles of 'me' and 'everything'. Not only it is a good story to hear; it is also mine.

If I were to rewrite the sirens, I'd be a (female) drug lord who puts on the market a drug called Siren that does precisely that, lulls you with the vibe of your story, enhanced with pleasure and comprehension (it is a good story, and you own it). The shores of the sirens' island, the streets of a post-apocalyptic city lined with grotesquely dead drug fiends, 'great heap of bones of moldering men, and round the bones the skin is shriveling' (*Odyssey* 12, 45–46). Ambulance and police sirens shrieking through the endless night, dirty with orange streetlights and toxic fumes. The hero, a rugged policeman who has his best friend, a coarse snitch, inject him with a wax that hinders the drug, and so manages to take a shot of the Siren without dying, all written in a gritty and snappy language ready to be shot in black and white ... I have no future as a blockbuster novelist, as you plainly see, but I do think the concepts of drug and addiction, not beauty and attraction, are what best explains the ancient sirens. Some kind of

vocal heroin that squares the circle inside. A sound not yet heard. There is something left to wonder in this trite tale.

SECOND. Dante's siren is, thankfully, a rather special creature, which proves my author is a timeless genius (always a boost to the morale). We meet her in canto 19 of the *Purgatorio*, just at the end of a long and complex speech on love and desire that takes hold of the centre of the second canticle (parts of cantos 16 and 17, and canto 18). After the mechanics of passion seem to be explained, she appears in the traveller's dream like a malignant figure, as proof that matters of love are not entirely clarified or obvious. Like those thrillers of the nineties, where the killer you had presumed dead returns after the final credits to terrify the audience in an open-ended micronarrative. You thought it was over, it might happen again ... it might happen to you.

At the start of canto 19, Dante both plants an old story and makes it new. This siren has no wings or fish tail, but she is a version of a staple universal misogyny: the theme of the enchantress turned hag. Children's fables and folktales, epic poems, novels, and film: whatever your pleasure is, sooner or later you will encounter an evil woman whose beauty is magic, often due to a spell or a potion. Beauty (maleficent, feminine beauty) is only as deep as the skin and hides all sorts of horror and disgust. An ancient philosophical and moral theme crosses history all the way to modern psychoanalysis and our popular culture. My favourite take on the shallowness of female beauty is that of the medieval monk Odo of Cluny (tenth century).

Nam corporea pulchritudo in pelle solummodo  
constat. Nam si viderent homines hoc quod sub-  
tus pellem est [...] mulieres videre nausearent.  
Iste decor in flegmate, et sanguine, et humore, ac  
felle, consistit. Si quis enim considerat quae intra  
nares, et quae intra fauces et quae intra ventrem

lateant, sordes utique reperiet. Et si nec extremis digitis flegma vel stercus tangere patimur, quomodo ipsum stercoris saccum amplecti desideramus? (*Collationes* 2, 9).

Bodily beauty resides solely in the skin. If men were able to see what is under the skin [...] they would throw up at the sight of women. Their beauty is made of phlegm, blood, humours, and gall. If we consider what is concealed in the nostrils, in the mouth and in the bowels, we find it is just garbage. And if we do not suffer to touch phlegm and faeces even with our fingertips, why would we want to hug a sack of shit? (my translation).

Beauty and youth, say Odo & Co., are just deceptive ornaments of an intrinsically sinful and constitutionally corruptible body. Beauty, like body (and even more quickly than body), is perishable and subject to decay. In the traditional narrative of the enchantress turned hag, then, external beauty becomes a sorcery that holds the unsuspecting male hostage to some kind of evil plot. Until ... until he pierces her (so banal it pains me to write it); he penetrates her, tears the plot open, sometimes by sheer mistake. He has both rational and under-the-belt tools to do so. Horror unleashes, but it also fizzles out, and we all know what happens. Luscious hair turns sparse and grey, the skin wrinkles, we catch a glimpse of a toothless mouth and a flaccid belly, fluids of all kinds erupt.

So, what about the genius of your poet and yesterday's boost, you might ask?

He flips the story around. He starts with the hag.

The siren that appears in the traveller's dream is not a mythical figure, or a seductive woman: she is 'just', and yet much more realistically, an ugly woman; crippled, perhaps

disfigured by disease, covered in rags, stench emanating from her womb. A poor woman, like the many beggars Dante saw in Florence or on the roads of Italy. Much more tragic and shocking, much less domesticated.

I was recently reminded of Dante's siren when I saw an etching by young Rembrandt at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: the portrait of a poor woman, her genitals on show, her eyes devoid of sparkle, both grotesque and true; the tragic reality of abject poverty (Figure 6).

Dante's siren appears in a dream.

una femmina balba  
ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,  
con le man monche, e di colore scialba.  
(*Purgatorio* 19, 7–9)

a woman, stammering, with eyes asquint and crooked on her feet, with maimed hands, and of sallow hue.

It is the gaze of the poet that makes her beautiful and attractive. It erases her flaws and colours her with the shade of beauty and youth, and, importantly, it unties her tongue, and releases the song.

Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta  
le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,  
così lo sguardo mio le facea scorta  
la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava  
in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,  
com' amor vuol, così le colorava.  
Poi ch'ell' avea 'l parlar così disciolto,  
cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena  
da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.  
(*Purgatorio* 19, 10–18)



Figure 6. Rembrandt van Rjin, Etching, 1631.

I gazed upon her: and even as the sun revives cold limbs benumbed by night, so my look made ready her tongue, and then in but little time set her full straight, and colored her pallid face even as love requires. When she had her speech thus unloosed, she began to sing so that it would have been hard for me to turn my attention from her.

This transformation allows the siren to find her ancient song, full of pleasure and fulfilment.



‘Io son’, cantava, ‘io son dolce serena,  
che ’ marinari in mezzo mar dismago;  
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago  
al canto mio; e qual meco s’ausa,  
rado sen parte; sì tutto l’appago’.  
(*Purgatorio* 19, 19–24)

‘I am’, she sang, ‘I am the sweet Siren who leads  
mariners astray in mid-sea, so full am I of pleasant-  
ness to hear. Ulysses, eager to journey on, I turned  
aside to my song; and whosoever abides with me  
rarely departs, so wholly do I satisfy him.’

Wait a minute! Another twist on the story of Ulysses? Indeed. One single siren. Ulysses’ journey deviated by her. No wax, or mast, or ropes. Yet, the aspects of sweetness, pleasure, and fulfilment are the same. Dante, who (remember remember) did not read Homer, has another stunning Homeric intuition, and emphasizes the plenitude of the pleasure deriving from the siren’s song: she is so ‘full of pleasure’ (‘di piacer [ ... ] piena’) that she completely satisfies the sailors who listen to her (‘tutto l’appago’), as per the Homeric *τερψάμενος*, fulfilment here being again the tricky ‘purgatorial’ mix of appeasement and payment (‘appago’, from ‘pagare’, to pay, see chapter 4). A clever dissension from the unread *Odyssey* is the radius of attraction: while Homer’s sirens claim that the sailors depart from them appeased and more knowledgeable, Dante’s siren, more honestly, states that they do not leave her.

The hinge of the Dantean twist is a sibylline construction in line 22, where one could read either ‘With my song, I turned away Ulysses, who was keen on his journey’ or ‘I turned Ulysses away from his journey, making him keen to hear my song’. The hinge of this twist, the hinge of all twists, is desire. Desire is, aptly, ‘vago’; so vague and sophisticated

an adjective that we cannot quite pin it to one meaning: desirous, enamoured, adventurous, wandering, and more. So, did she twist Ulisse's route after he had committed to his new journey in the Atlantic, or is she the lure that hijacked the *nostos* and sent him flying beyond Hercules' pillars? In this second interpretation, she might then be the seducing (and ultimately illusory) image of 'virtue and knowledge' that takes hold of our hero and erases his every other desire, which would dovetail well with the story we have heard in hell. This would also concur with a couple of ancient upmarket readings, in which the sirens are not a matter of lust and seduction, but the attraction of knowledge itself.

So says Cicero. In his moral work *De finibus bonorum et malorum* (5, XVIII, 48–49), while celebrating the powers of the human mind, Cicero extolls the love of knowledge as the most complete and exclusive desire of all, and he wonders whether the song of the sirens might be precisely that: not so much the sweetness of their voice, nor the unheard variety of their song, but the hit of knowledge itself. A great man like Ulysses tangled in the net of a silly song? Impossible. They must have promised knowledge, and of the best kind, not the amateur's piecemeal and superficial one, but the 'big stuff'. For Cicero, that meant being able to 'enter' the nature of all things ('intransum [...] rerum naturam') through which we can get to know ourselves (5, XVI, 44). [I wonder whether it is still true two millennia later.]

Vidit Homerus probari fabulam non posse si can-  
tiunculis tantus irretitus vir teneretur; scientiam  
pollicentur, quam non erat mirum sapientiae cu-  
pido patria esse cariorem. Atque omnia quidem  
scire cuiuscumquemodi sint cupere curiosorum,  
duci vero maiorum rerum contemplatione ad cu-  
piditatem scientiae summorum virorum est pu-  
tandum (*De finibus* 5, XVIII, 49).

Homer was aware that his story would not sound plausible if the magic that held his hero immeshed was merely an idle song! It is knowledge that the Sirens offer, and it was no marvel if a lover of wisdom held this dearer than his home. A passion for miscellaneous omniscience no doubt stamps \*one\* as a mere dilettante; but it must be deemed the mark of a superior mind to be led on by the contemplation of high matters to a passionate love of knowledge (translation by H. Rackham).

Enmeshed ... dearer than home ... some of Dante's Ulysses is already there. Ulysses, it seems, had started taking off already in antiquity.

The sirens are learned for Ovid as well; they are the *doctae sirenae*. Ovid makes them the wise friends of Proserpina, her companions in the fateful moment when she was abducted by Ades while picking flowers. He wonders whether this is the sirens' only fault; being the witnesses to a dark and tragic crime:

vobis, Acheloides, unde  
pluma pedesque avium, cum virginis ora geratis?  
an quia, cum legeret vernos Proserpina flores,  
in comitum numero, doctae Sirenes, eratis?  
quam postquam toto frustra quaesistis in orbe,  
protinus, et vestram sentirent aequora curam,  
posse super fluctus alarum insistere remis  
optastis facilesque deos habuistis et artus  
vidistis vestros subitis flavescere pennis.  
ne tamen ille canor mulcendas natus ad aures  
tantaque dos oris linguae deperderet usum,  
virginei vultus et vox humana remansit.  
(*Metamorphoses* 5, 552–63)

But, daughters of Acheloüs, why have you the feathers and feet of birds, though you still have maidens' features? Is it because, when Proserpina was gathering the spring flowers, you were among the

number of her companions, ye Sirens, skilled in song? After you had sought in vain for her through all the lands, that the sea also might know your search, you prayed that you might float on beating wings above the waves: you found the gods ready, and suddenly you saw your limbs covered with golden plumage. But, that you might not lose your tuneful voices, so soothing to the ear, and that rich dower of song, maiden features and human voice remained (translation by G. P. Goold).

Proserpina's story is one intolerable composite of tragedy and symbol. A girl abducted by the hideous older man. The loss of Eden. Embodiment, the human experience, death, rebirth. Hypnotic pomegranate seeds — juicy, putrid, the colour of blood. Winter and summer. [The girl now spends half the year in Hades with her husband and half the year on earth with her mother. She does not seem to mind, but we do.] They were there, the sirens, witnessing the abduction. Speechless, song-less. It always amazes me how Ovid, who has no restraint in pushing stories at their most disturbing acme, and in forcing his readers onto some very uncomfortable spots, sometimes allows himself a surprising light touch, as is the case with the sirens (and with Orpheus, as we have seen in the previous chapter). Ovid's sirens are no monsters, just inconsolable friends. They do not stop travelling (like Ulysses), they do not stop searching their lost companion, and the merciful gods turn them into colourful winged creatures, with oars-like wings. But they let them retain their lovely voice, and their beautiful song, a soothing, rather than provoking, sound ('canor mulcendas natus ad aures').

Dante's siren might then hint at the Ciceronian lust for knowledge, or at the restless and canorous journey at sea of Proserpina's friends. But, let us face it, she is not upscale, or elite; if she is a twisted figure for the desire for knowledge that has turned Ulysses from his journey, she is

a pretty vulgar one. If anything, she could be a figure for the dissemination of learning gone wrong — a frequent theme in ancient and medieval times, a theme in which the image of the beautiful woman turned horrid is at home, with other writers featuring Muses stripped naked by inept and ignorant readers, or Philosophy prostituted at the brothel.

Moreover, the classy references still do not fully explain why Dante's old maimed little lady would have turned Ulysses away from his journey, whatever that is. She does not, however, turn Dante-traveller away from journeying in purgatory, but it takes a bit of action to save him. Somewhat as passive as Homer's Odysseus at the mast, Dante-traveller is at the centre of an equally sadistic play. With a further twist on the theme of the enchantress-turned-hag, a (holy) woman intervenes to chase the (evil) woman away.

A woman from heaven rushes in and orders Virgil to comply with the traditional male act and uncover the hag; to reveal, with a theatrical gesture, the horror emanating from her womb, a revolting stench (Odo is cheering here) that wakes our dreamer up:

Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa  
una donna apparve santa e presta  
lunghesso me per far colei confusa.

'O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?'  
fieramente dicea; ed el venia  
con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.

L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria  
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre;  
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscita  
(*Purgatorio* 19, 25–33)

Her mouth was not yet shut when a lady, holy and alert, appeared close beside me to put her to confusion. 'O Virgil, o Virgil, who is this?' she said sternly; and he came on with his eyes fixed only on that honest one. He seized the other and

laid her bare in front, rending her garments and showing me her belly: this waked me with the stench that issued therefrom [therefrom? As with the previous 'therewithin', sometimes this translation baffles me. Therefrom my ass! A facetious friend of mine would say].

Shortly after, Virgil explains that 'the ancient witch' (*Purgatorio* 19, 58) is an image for *cupiditas*, the composite of the 'sins of passion' (lust, gluttony, and avarice) that are purged in the higher terraces of purgatory. A fast and plain allegorical reading is ready on your plate: Passion, ugly and disgusting, looks momentarily beautiful and seduces the Christian, but then Reason (the old, dull explanation of the role of Virgil), instructed by Faith, shows that Passion actually stinks.

But this accounts only for part of the story. To me the dream of the siren, coming as it does after the poem's grand and nuanced explanation of the nature of love, divine and human alike, also represents the fallibility, subjectivity, and ultimate catastrophe of the experience of love. How to be in love is to gild an otherwise opaque object with the fine dust of our desires, like the gaze of the poet does. The siren represents the instability of beauty, not its inherent dishonesty; a beauty that is in the eye of the beholder in many more, and much more tragic, ways than we think.

The siren also represents the allure and the danger of the magnificent textuality that is borne in the encounter of fallible love and unsteady beauty. The siren can be read, in other words, as poetry. (In line with the nature of the ancient sirens as voice, this siren could represent the form of the text, its exterior ornament, its seductive call.) There is too much technical faffing around her: two poets, one making her up and giving her a beautiful voice only to be then seduced by her, the other tearing the siren's clothes apart

and displaying her horror again. Even her initial ugliness can be almost wholly related to the poetic art. Her stammering ('balba'; 19, 7) suggests poor fluency, her squinting ('guercia'; 19, 8) hints at the eyes, the main engine of the process of love and the chief image of love poetry, her limping ('sovra i piè distorta'; 19, 8) could allude to crooked metrical feet, and her pale complexion ('di colore scialba'; 19, 9) to a lack of rhetorical colours. The gaze of the beholder/lover/poet rectifies all these flaws, constructing an image of female beauty and beautiful poetry, making her tongue fluent, setting her straight and giving her a rhetorical make up, creating a visual/textual attraction that absorbs all the beholder/reader's desires.

It takes another poet to uncover her. The tearing of her clothes by Virgil to expose the horrid materiality of her body is an act of violent reading; the stripping away of rhetorical layers in order to unveil the substantial ugliness of her content.

What about the 'other' woman in this story of textuality? I am not sure, I must admit. She works better in the allegorical reading of 'sin-and-salvation'.

Unveiling, undressing, uncovering, denuding: you won't be surprised to hear that these are images for reading and interpretation, and they have been around forever, from the Bible to our days. And it is sexist, there is no way around it. Roland Barthes, an intellectual whom I otherwise much admire, compares reading to a striptease in *Pleasure of the Text*; an accelerated one, in fact, where the spectator rushes on stage to fast-forward the denudation, to help the stripper out of her costume.

Really, Mr Barthes? Besides the obvious complaint about the objectification of the female body, this is an utterly empty and boring metaphor for a large part of the reading humanity. I can assure you that the last thing I think

about when I open a book is the Chippendales. In addition to vulgar, it sounds plainly wrong to me. The desires and pleasures of reading are much more sophisticated and fluid, I think.

What about the other woman in this story of reading-as-stripping, then? Does she make the striptease scene of reading somewhat more feminist? A female reader who incites the male interpreter to strip the female text: is this some kind of premodern burlesque? In my research on women-as-text I have oftentimes encountered female texts stripping and reclothing themselves, but rarely such a crowded stage. Are the woman text (the siren) and the woman reader (the holy lady) reclaiming for themselves the act of stripping and interpretation?

For a daughter of an older, even primitive, form of feminism [if I have to declare myself, I suppose my politics are still second wave, and my intellectual appreciation somewhere at the beginning of the third], this is a truly complicated issue. The-object-becomes-subject-and-subverts-an-imposed-order kind of trick has its appeal but does not quite convince me. There is a sadness to it that I cannot but notice. A sorrow, a rift, the tears of those for whom it was no play.

My staple anecdote on the topic is the following. Some years ago, the object-turned-subversive-subject thing trickled down to the gym I was a member of. Suddenly, pole dancing was marketed as a great, fun, and empowering way to keep fit for women. So they set up classes, and planted a pole in 'my' yoga studio. ('My': I wonder whether this whole story, and my own aversion to sex-positive feminism, revolves around a petty resentment at expropriation.) And then, to my puzzlement and amusement, a shutter went up. Not sure where the problem was: embarrassment from the inside or voyeurism from the outside. A cheap, plastic



venetian blind. Beige. Never mind sadness: that soulless thing had no tears to cry.

The curtain closes very fast on the *Purgatory's* burlesque too, but the siren (sirens, in the plural) makes a quick comeback later in earthly paradise, when Dante is trashed by his departed beloved. 'Next time, when you hear the sirens, don't be such a sissy', indignant Beatrice screams. [Is she telling me that I am a wimp Ulysses? Wonders Dante with a downcast face.] At this point (*Purgatorio* 31, 45), the formidable allegory come alive is tracing a damning bi(bli)ography of her lover/poet — a twin accusation of betrayal and rubbish writing. We soon understand what the siren/s stand for ... the call of lyric poetry perhaps, a narcissistic cutie we met a long time ago, the devastation of our Eden, a lethal self-destructive furore, the day justification kicked in for both why and how we carried ourselves in matters of love, an embarrassing attempt at rationalizing it all, someone at the window we once fell in love with for the gentle way they looked at us [*voilà*, belatedly a list of Dante's other works, heavily translated by 'life']. 'Still', says Dante, 'desire, desires, all previous, all future illusions turned ugly are the wings to my flight of writing.' 'I may be a limp Ulysses', he continues, wondering if this is a good time to raise the gaze at her [it is not], 'but I listened to all them sirens without the need of wax or ropes' [stop here, we plead]. 'You are one of them too', he ventures, with a half sly, half contrite smile. [He should not have contradicted her. Let us leave it at that.]

Still, the journey of writing is the *Comedy's* great Ulysean adventure, one with which Dante identifies entirely, sirens and all. Following an image old as literature, Dante envisions his poetry as a navigation in perilous, untravelled waters.

## PAPER BOATS

Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache  
 Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé  
 Un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses, lâche  
 Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.

If I want a water of Europe, it is the black  
 Cold puddle where in the sweet-smelling twilight  
 A squatting child full of sadness releases  
 A boat as fragile as a May butterfly.  
 (translation by Wallace Fowlie)

I want none of Europe's waters unless it be  
 The cold black puddle where a child, full of sadness,  
 Squatting, looses a boat as frail  
 As a moth into the fragrant evening  
 (translation by Samuel Beckett)

If you can imagine a sixteen-year-old writing these lines then you can understand literature at its rawest, and most rare. You can hold poetry in your hands if you can envisage the miracle of childhood sadness (not trauma or tantrum, not displeasure or fear, not need or frustration: sadness). And if you can weigh in your fingertips the lightness of the paper boat, then you will find a moment of stillness in the midst of vortexes, waves, and nimbi. The frailty of the butterfly's wings, the chilling touch of the puddle, the balmy evening, Europe; these are adornments, but of the most sophisticated kind.

It is an old saying that the poet is a child. It is said about many poets, it has been said even about the very adult-looking Dante (by Umberto Saba, whose version of Ulysses I quoted earlier on). Most likely, the poet is a child who knows sadness. A child who needs readers his same age and mood.

[Sad children — I was one — are not always sad. Like everyone else, they have moments of elation and laughter. They cry often, but this is not the point. They are shy, and nervous. They are independent, but not self-sufficient. A slow fire is consuming, or sustaining, them.]

Arthur Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* (of which, above, I quote the second-last of twenty-five stanzas, I add, nervously balancing grand entrance vs the minimum requirements of academic rigour) is my favourite poem (irrelevant until it also is or becomes yours) and an offshoot of Dante's *Ulisse*. An illegitimate, unacknowledged, non-procreated offspring, that is.

It is just the boat this time, no captain, helmsman, or sailor. Rimbaud's vessel shakes crews and anchors off, breaks away from berths and ports. Exhilarated, hallucinated, free. The boat says 'I' and roams free in the great blue poem of the sea.

Je me suis baigné dans le Poème  
de la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent,  
dévourant les azurs verts  
(stanza 6)

I bathed in the Poem  
of the Sea, infused with stars and lactescent,  
devouring the azure verses.  
(translation by Fowlie)

There are some Coleridge-style zombies, Homeric curiosity, and Vernian abysses-minus-octopi. Knowledge, as in Dante, is one of the rewards: of storms, vortexes, and currents, of evenings and dawns, and of the fallible perception of humans ('Et j'ai vu quelque fois ce que l'homme a cru voir!'; at times I have seen what \*humans\* thought \*they\* saw). The boat, you have guessed, has wings — it wishes to show them to his children-readers:

J'aurais voulu montrer aux enfants ces dorades  
 Du flot bleu, ces poissons d'or, ces poissons chantants.  
 — Des écumes de fleurs ont bercé mes dérades  
 Et d'ineffables vents m'ont ailé par instants.  
 (stanza 15)

I should have liked to show children those sunfish  
 Of the blue wave, the fish of gold, the singing fish.  
 — Foam of flowers rocked my drifting  
 And ineffable winds winged me at times.  
 (translation by Fowlie)

Ulisse's speech begins with 'When I was' ('Quando ...'), the *bateau's* speech begins with 'As I was' ('Comme ...'). The *bateau's* speech is immersive. This poem is the siren, it is the addictive sound that tells you everything about yourself, and then leaves you shaking, fragile, frustrated, and wanting for more. It ends, you have guessed, in disaster. The *bateau* wishes dissolution ('Ô que ma quille éclate! Ô que j'aïlle à la mer!': O let my keel burst! O let me go into the sea!, stanza 23; translation by Fowlie), a tempestuous dissolution, perhaps, like the one that sank Ulisse's boat. But it doesn't come. There is no merciful (?) god here. [It is only after re-reading Rimbaud that I have contemplated that Dante's 'other' who sends the deadly vortex might be actually compassionate.] The *bateau* dreams of being folded like paper and pensively abandoned on the dark puddle of Europe (stanza 24), but it might end up back where it fled from, into its worst nightmare: the society of men (this is intended on my part), that of commerce, war, imprisonment.

Je ne puis plus, baigné de vos langueurs, ô lames,  
 Enlever leur sillage aux porteurs de cotons,  
 Ni traverser l'orgueil des drapeaux et des flammes,  
 Ni nager sous les yeux horribles des pontons.  
 (stanza 25)

No longer can I, bathed in your languor, o waves,  
 Follow in the wake of the cotton boats,  
 Nor cross through the pride of flags and flames,  
 Nor swim under the terrible eyes of prison ships.  
 (translation by Fowlie)

Steeped in the languors of the swell, I may  
 Absorb no more the wake of the cotton-freighters,  
 Nor breast the arrogant oriflammes and banners,  
 Nor swim beneath the leer of the pontoons.  
 (translation by Beckett)

Dante's poetry is a ship, but the poet firmly holds the helm, and steers it skilfully in untravelled seas away from vortexes. In the story of writing, then, Dante is Homer's Ulysses, not his own: he travels, encounters, faces dangers, ends up underwater a couple of times, risks losing his crew, and comes back to his Ithaca, to his desk with the instruments of writing laid out. In the *Banquet*, Dante describes his writing as a boat that calmly sails; the wind of his desire (style, language, writing) inflating the sail of his reason (content, thought, subject matter).

lo tempo chiama e domanda la mia nave uscir di  
 porto; per che, dirizzato l'artimone della ragione  
 all'ora del mio desiderio, entro in pelago con ispe-  
 ranza di dolce cammino e di salutevole porto e lau-  
 dabile nella fine della mia cena (*Convivio* 2, 1, 1).

time calls and requires my ship to leave port; thus,  
 having set the sail of my reason to the breeze of my  
 desire, I enter upon the open sea with the hope of  
 a smooth voyage and a safe and praiseworthy port  
 at the end of my feast.

This would be one of my favourite passages in Dante were it not for its absurd conclusion involving dinner, which just proves what I have always suspected, that the guy cannot write prose.

In the *Comedy*, unsurprisingly, the metaphoric use of navigation as writing is embedded at the beginning of each canticle. At the outset of *Inferno* there is, intuitively, a splendidly symbolic shipwreck, to which I shall return. On its arrival in *Purgatory*, the little ship is, as we have seen, on a safer course:

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele  
 omai la navicella del mio ingegno,  
 che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele  
 (*Purgatorio* 1, 1–3)

To course over better water the little bark of my  
 genius now hosts her sails, leaving behind her a sea  
 so cruel

These lines are as plain as they are metaphorical: this well-constructed, sound, stable image *is* a solid ship. Having crossed with suffering the dirty, slow, dangerous water of hell, Dante's text — seen in the phase of ideation ('ingegno'), not of material writing — can now lift its sails, its navigation more dynamic and yet tranquil. End of turbulence, good weather ahead. The seat belt signal is off.

I love the way medieval illuminators capture this metaphor, flatten it, and yet reveal it. Now, the discourse of medieval manuscript illumination is endlessly entertaining. When I venture into it, I experience a childish pleasure. This is due no doubt to my limited expertise in the field (which is always a good gateway to pleasure), but also to the fact that medieval art is infantile, especially so when it is applied to the *Comedy*, a comic text of a serious nature: illuminations manage to catch and expose the child in Dante. Ultimately, the utterly hilarious fact is that the two media, text and image, do and do not properly communicate, no matter how they (and we) try.

With medieval illuminations we typically deal with different artists (writer, scribe, and illuminator/s), with stock, even recyclable images that are, however, idiosyncratically diverse, with different skills applied at different times, with different trades, and with different publics that are permanently linked on one fragile page as they try and construct together one awkward ‘meaning’, only to be dismembered again by modern editions (in which, as well as illumination, also the great variance of a medieval manuscript is obliterated) and by disciplinary boundaries (art historians study illuminations and historians of literature or of language study the text).

In the next few pages, then, I propose we form a play-group: a child author, an infantile art, an immature academic, and a child reader, if you do not mind to become so momentarily. I hope you share with me the conclusion that infantilization is not always a bad thing (once you do it yourself and don’t let the evil other — the heteronormative Parent — do it to you: aha!, the fun already begins; I have appropriated appropriation).

The illuminations that give me the most childish delight are the so-called ‘decorated’ or ‘historiated’ initials. The initial letter (of a book, of a section, in the case of the *Comedy* of a canto or a canticle) is traced as a frame, inside which some kind of veduta of the text that we are about to read is inscribed. A pale trace of decorated initials is retained in modern books, with the initials of chapters printed in larger font or different type. In medieval times, all sorts of layers were embedded in such illuminations: language (the letter) becomes matter (the frame), and is then flattened into painting (the letter-frame is painted on the page) to enclose the visual rendering of a piece of text that is written next to the frame and that the historiated initial frames in turn. It is thoroughly delectable when, instead of

Comicia lafa parte dela comedia didate  
alleggeri di firenze. nella quale parte si  
purgano li comessi peccati tutti de quali  
luomo, e confesso pentuto co ammo di fati  
ffragione. et contiene. xxxiij. canti.  
Qui nel primo Canto sono quelli che spera  
no di uenire quando chesia alebrate genti.



Et correr muglior  
acque alga leuele  
omai lanaucella  
del mio ingegno  
che la scia dietro asse  
mar fieru dele.

Et cantero di quel secondo regno  
doue l'umano spirito si purg'ha  
et di salire al ciel di uenta degno  
Oia qui la morta poesi risurg'ha  
o santa muse poi che uostro sono.  
et qui caliope alquanto surg'ha  
Seguitando mio canto con quel sono  
diciu le piche misere sentiro  
lo colpo tal che di sperar per dono  
Dolce color d'oriental gaffiro  
che fatto gli eua nel sereno aspetto  
dal meggio puro infino al primo giro  
Aghiacchi miei ricomincio dilecto  
tosto ch'io usci fuor de la uita morta  
che mauea contristati li occhi el pecto

Vidi presso d'ime un ueghio solo  
degnio di tanta reuerenza in iusta  
che piu non dee a padre alain figliuolo  
L'unga labarba et d'apel bianco mista  
portaua in suo capelli simigliante  
de qua cadeua al pecto doppia lista  
L'iraggi delle quattro luci sante  
freguauan si la sua faccia di lume  
ch'io uedeua come il sol fosse dauante  
Ch'isiete uoi che ncontro al cieco fiume  
fuggita uete la peregione eterna  
dissel mouendo quelle honeste piume  
Ch'iuia guidati che uisu lucerna  
uscendo fuor dell'aprofonda nocte  
che sempre nera fu la ualle inferna.  
Son le leggi d'abisso cosi vaxte  
ce mutato in ciel nuouo consiglio  
che d'ammati uenute a le mie grotte  
L'oduca mio allor mi die di piglio  
et comparole et comani et concenni  
reuerenti mi se legante el aglio  
Poscia rispouose allui dame non uenni  
donna se se da ciel per hiau prieghi  
da lamia compagna costui souenni  
O adache tuo uoler che piu si pieghi  
di nostra condigion comella. e uera  
esser non puote il mio ch'atte si pieghi  
Questi non uide mai l'ultima sera  
ma per la sua follia lesi si presso  
che molto poco tempo auolger era

Figure 7. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS  
Strozzi 150, 32 r (detail).



a particular piece of text, the image of the author is encased in the very initial that he/she (you can't catch me) first traced or dictated as the initial (indeed) manifestation of their 'genius' and inspiration. Rules explained, let us play this game. It is repetitive, free of care, and amusing.

The initial P of Purgatory becomes a circular frame, is filled with water, and a boat is placed in it. Often, it looks like a badly traced brown shell. Dante, after all, writes of a little boat, but this is too much of a reduction; a nut-shell (aha! It is easy when you let go). Two oversized figures, representing Virgil and Dante, are often chatting the crossing away (Figure 7).

It is fascinating to see the way the decorated initial takes up the entire page, flustering it with banners and flame-like gold (Rimbaud, what are you doing in my play-group? Your 'drapeaux' and 'flammes' have stuck with me from the previous page, so vivid was your drawing of that final image). A heavy, over-productive, overbearing alphabet in drag, the dress-up party of language. (Notice the little stylized, 'meaning-less' dragon on the top, its face merging into the decorative leaf.)

Of this kind of rough, nut-shell representation, one of my favourites is the depiction that displays a bit of subdivision of labour, with Virgil at the oars and Dante at the sails (Figure 8). You see what I mean when I say 'they (the illuminators) don't get it': Virgil is not supposed to be in the picture — this is Dante-writer, not traveller, sailing on the boat of his poetic genius. Well, what do you do with Virgil, then, how do you make him cross to purgatory? (silly! They didn't cross the sea; they climbed over Lucifer's willy! giggle). Unless it takes an older poet, the tradition of poetry perhaps, to row the new poet's boat ahead, whilst the sea is contained by but also exceeds the frame of the letter; the bottom of the letter P becoming another hull caressed by



Figure 8. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,  
 Plut.40.13 (detail).



Figure 9. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,  
 Conv.Soppr.204, 96r (detail).

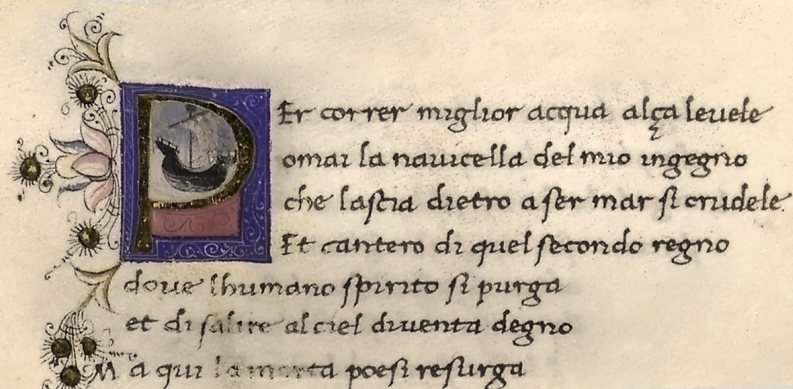


Figure 10a. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,  
 Plut.40.20, c. 78r (detail).

the wave — a blue wave morphing into a blue flower, ‘foam of flowers rocked my drifting’ ... Arthur; would you please stop disrupting my game? — the belly of the P an inflated wing. The vessel of language, perhaps. The new poet’s sail transgresses the frame of the letter, rising from the centre of the boat, where it lies somewhat lowered, to be lifted outside of the constraints of the P, in an imaginary non-sky. Did we put on wings in the mad flight, perhaps?

Sometimes the boat is by itself. Alone and personified. And navigating. *Le bateau* itself. In one early fifteenth-century illumination (Figure 9), while the detail of the ship becomes sharper — we have a mast, a crow nest, mainsail and jib, ropes and ladder, and the hint of an actual deck — the human presence is lost. The not-so-little bark is now sailing by itself. Is it drifting? And where?

The one in Figure 10 (a and b) truly embodies *le bateau* for me; there is something strangely desperate in this image. The water is cold, the hull dark, the sails, although unfurled, are tattered in my imagination. There is an ominous mist



Figure 10b. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,  
Plut.40.20, c. 78r (smaller detail).

rising from the sea; sea and sky fade into each other in a flat grey palette. The P is severe, grim, like the border of mourning paper. Even the inevitable flowers look like they are grieving in their gold and black suit. A sense of decay, and of profound undoing. A ghost ship — you got it, Charlie: the Black Pearl! Or: the only illuminator who actually read the text with a bit of curiosity and depicted the boat of the poem just before it enters the ‘better waters’

of the second canticle, still trapped in the gloom of so cruel a sea of hell.\*

One last one, then the game is over (for today). The illustration of the Egerton codex (Figure 11a). An illuminated initial (the pink P on the bottom) is enclosed in an oddly shaped square P and features a double Dante.

In the foot of the P, Dante is writing in his study. Next to his desk, a stylized image of a starry sky — or is it the lactescent poem of the sea with its azure verse storming in? Well done, Artie, your poem has now become an illumination on the page of my memory, as you plainly see. Dante writes himself writing, the two little men are plainly the same, they are making the same gesture within the same

---

\* One child has momentarily left the group and sits pensive on a step. An air of melancholy around her. What is she pondering? No, not the Black Pearl as that raucous Charlie says; nor the clever illuminator, as our group's leader is telling us (she acts all sweet, babytalk and all, but she thinks she is smarter than us). In this illumination there is a candid reader, she thinks, who knew about exile, and of hearts in the storm, and of another little boat of writing tossed in dark seas. 'Cumque sit hibernis agitatum fluctibus aequor, | pectora sunt ipso turbidiora mari. | quo magis his debes ignoscere, candide lector, | si spe sint, ut sunt, inferiora tua. | non haec in nostris, ut quondam, scripsimus hortis, | nec, consuete, meum, lectule, corpus habes. | iactor in indomito brumali luce profundo | ipsaque caeruleis charta feritur aquis | improba pugnat hiems indignaturque quod | ausim scribere se rigidas incutiente minas. | vincat hiems hominem! sed eodem tempore, | quaeso, ipse modum statuam carminis, illa sui.' (Ovid, *Tristia* 1, XI, 33–44) [and though the sea is shaken by stormy billows my breast is more turbulent than the sea. And so, kindly reader, you should grant me the more indulgence should these verses be — as they are — poorer than your hopes. They were not written, as of old, in my garden or while you, my familiar couch, supported my frame. I am tossing of a winter's day on the stormy deep, and my paper is sprayed by the dark waters. The vicious storm battles, indignant that I dare to write whilst he is brandishing against me his stern threats. Let the storm vanquish the man; but at the same time that I end my verse, let him, I pray, reach his own end (translation by G. P. Goold)].

Or maybe it is only me, she thinks. Why do I always have to be so sad and so different? Why is my heart always stormier than the storm? Well, she thinks with a sigh, time to rejoin the group.



Figure 11a. British Library, Egerton MS 943, f.63r (detail).

activity, and the corresponding pages are full of characters. On top, however, Dante's room has become the sea. He is on the boat, he is actually the captain, his study now turned in the quarterdeck.

[Check this kaleidoscope out, friends: a page carries a letter that is a painting, in which a page with letters is depicted, in which ... reminds me of those endless nursery

rhymes. In Italian, we have a very funny one: ‘C’era una volta un re | seduto sul sofà | che disse alla sua serva | raccontami una storia | la storia incominciò | “C’era una volta un re | seduto sul sofà ...” (Once upon a time there was a king | sitting on the sofa | who said to his maidservant | tell me a story | the story began | ‘Once upon a time there was a king | sitting on the sofa ...’) and on you go for as long as you want. This is a comic version of the frame of the *Thousand and One Nights*, incidentally. The death-defying power of story.]

The image of Dante’s writing projects the image of Dante’s writing. Dante-writer is most likely writing the poem, but what is Dante-captain doing? Recording coordinates on the logbook? Jotting down observations on the new land? Or is he retiring in his innermost self, dreaming of verses to write? Remember this is the ‘boat of my genius’, and scholars tell us that the mind was viewed like a boat in those times, and the quarterdeck like the place of the mind’s highest faculties.

Either way, this image is stunning, isn’t it? But a bit grown up, unless you realize the inanity of the two giant oars (I hope I am not missing some crucial info on medieval boat-making) and the silly face of the figurehead, here confusingly placed under the quarterdeck near the stern — looks a little like the mangy wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, doesn’t it? Too bad it is not a mermaid.

In the very distance, almost invisible, a light stroke of paint appears to signify ‘land’, with a tall dark shade, almost a pillar of smoke ... the mountain dark in the distance (‘la montagna bruna per la distanza’; *Inferno* 26, 133), Ulisse’s sighting of the mount of Purgatory, perhaps?

One last bit of fun before the bell rings. The two Dantes, when you look at them closely, are not exactly the same. Dante 1 (Figure 11b), lost in the imaginary starry sky, seems





Figures 11b and 11c. Dante 1 and Dante 2.

to be captured in the moment of conception — he even looks like he is sucking the end of the pen, as we children do when we draw, his eye fixed on a point beyond the page. Dante 2 (Figure 11c) on the background of the sea seems instead to be writing, his eye intent, the pen more firmly on the page. Who is dreaming of the other? Maybe I am the dreamer, and the bell is ringing, we have to get in line.

Hey, psst, Charlie: do you know what my computer did just now when I was playing cut and paste with the images? ... Shush, children! ... it labelled my Dante 2 as 'a picture containing text, old, dirty ... description automatically generated'. So rude: I am going to tell on it.

Had Derek Walcott seen this page in the Egerton manuscript, he would perhaps have explained it like this:

Mark you, *he* does not go; he sends his narrator;  
 he plays tricks with time because there are two journeys  
 in every odyssey, one on the worried water,

the other crouched and motionless, without noise.  
 For both, 'I' is a mast; a desk is a raft  
 for one, foaming with paper, and dipping the beak  
 of a pen in its foam, while an actual craft  
 carries the other to cities where people speak  
 a different language, or look at him differently  
 (*Omeros*, LVIII, II)

#### ARE WE THERE YET?

The next time that the Ulysses theme and the boat of the poem appear in the *Comedy*, it is both much more explicit and much more conceptual. This time, Dante places us readers on little boats, and himself on the flagship. We are a fleet.

It is the beginning of the second canto of *Paradiso*, where things start being intellectually challenging: philosophy, theology, science. Many readers are tempted to let go. Dante prefaces this difficult canto with a second proem, a properly oratorical one that actively engages the audience:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
 desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti  
 dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
 tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
 non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,  
 perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.

L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;  
 Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,  
 e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.

Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo  
 per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale  
 vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,  
 metter potete ben per l'alto sale  
 vostro navigio, servando mio solco  
 dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.

Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco  
 non s'ammiraron come voi farete,  
 quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco.  
 (*Paradiso* 2, 1–18)

O you that are in your little bark, eager to hear, following behind my ship that singing makes her way, turn back to see again your shores. Do not commit yourself to the open sea, for perchance, if you lost me, you would remain astray. The water which I take was never coursed before. Minerva breathes and Apollo guides me, and nine Muses point out to me the Bears. You other few who lifted up your necks betimes for bread of angels, of which \*human beings\* here subsist but never become sated of it, you may indeed commit your vessel to the deep brine, holding to my furrow ahead of the water that turns smooth again. Those glorious ones who crossed the sea to Colchis, when they saw Jason turned plowman, were not as amazed as you shall be.

The elements of this proem are as disparate as they are convergent.

Two groups of readers, both placed in the range of the familiar ('you'); those who have a solid philosophical background and those who don't. I think Dante here is challenging, rather than excluding, the less equipped reader: what would be the point of saying to one's reader 'now stop reading, please'; if not to mean, please read on, just beware this is a little trickier, and more exciting than before. I know this is difficult and you are getting a little impatient, but stay with me, please.

One little boat (remember the many times Ulisse used the word 'small?'), and by implication a more solid boat, on which the better, more erudite readers are. And then there is the poet's boat, commanding the fleet. You have noticed the oddity of the image of a vessel that 'crosses singing'. Luckily, the end of line 3, 'cantando varca', is of such perfect sonority, has the most appealing sequence of consonants and vowels that we forget, or forgive, the logical awkwardness, one may say the ridicule, of a singing

boat — even the fearless *bateau* would not claim that much. Unless this boat has become the siren.

Safe shores are still in sight, yet there are chances of getting lost in the high sea (incidentally; ‘smarrita’, lost, is one of the first words of the entire *Comedy*).

Untravelled waters and a pantheon of Greek divinities, weirdly placed at the outset of a Christian heaven: Minerva, goddess of wisdom, Apollo, god of poetry, and all nine Muses to allow for a bit of stylistic variation (or are they perhaps ‘new’ Muses? The word ‘nove’ means both new and nine).

The bread of angels, manna in the Bible — that delicious, moist food that fed the Israelites in the desert during the Exodus, and that can be interpreted, as you can imagine, as all sorts of nurturing backup from above. While addressing his readers in the unfinished *Convivio*, Dante explained that at his banquet one would eat no less than the bread of angels (or, rather, crumbs of it), and described it as human knowledge. It may mean the same in this poem, especially because the canto that follows is heavily technical, complete with hard science and experiments, but for those to whom the idea of a secular Dante causes an onset of urticaria it is to be understood, at least, as theology. Amen, you cannot fight all battles. I wonder which antihistamine they take to alleviate the part with all the Greek deities.

The ‘high salt’ is a very classical image for the sea; in it, Dante traces the stubbornly precise picture of the wake of the boat leaving a foamy V sign on the surface of the sea, until the water becomes ‘equal’ again.

And, for our amazement, another story of sea navigation, trespassing, and conquest comes on stage: the story of Jason and the golden fleece, systematized in the third century BCE in Apollonius Rhodius’s *Argonautica*, lavishly narrated by Ovid in the seventh book of the *Metamor-*

*phoses*, and widely popular in the ancient and medieval world. We, the readers, will be more amazed in reading Dante's *Paradiso* than were the Argonauts witnessing the deeds of their leader. [The reference to Jason turned ploughman is a little masterpiece: 'bifolco' is a very low-key word for ploughman, so much so that in modern Italian it signifies a rough farmer and, by extension, a rude person. Here, however, it depicts Jason's most complicated feat — ploughing a field with fire-breathing oxen, only to sow it with dragon teeth, and then to kill the warriors that sprouted from them. Dante, in other words, sows his vernacular realism into the furrow of the classics (in this case, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7, 115–21). No wonder readers are amazed by the creature that is sprouting.]

The story of the Argonauts is a tale of navigation in unknown parts of the world (although this is east rather than west) and of successful return. It is, therefore, an 'odyssey' as well as a proper story of conquest and colonization, complete with a powerful (foreign, female) other — the stupendous, horrendous Medea, the woman-in-love, magician and murderer, who commits 'what no Greek woman' would ever dare to do (this is Euripides; this is Athens, spellbound and frightened by the 'barbarians', by otherness, by the dark cry of the soul). Here is the delicious detail I prefigured in chapter 4: in the quote above Dante calls the Argonauts 'glorious' — theirs is the proper modern story, then!

In addition to the difficulty posed by an uncontrollable female character, I feel the fallacy of the story of Argo lies in the presence of a feeble hero (Jason), surrounded by too many Alpha-types (the Argonauts, including Heracles and, you won't believe this, Orpheus); in the vanity of the quest (Jason is sent to retrieve the fleece by his uncle, king Pelias, for the sole reason that he lost a sandal, and a fortune teller

had foretold that a single-shoe wearer would bring misfortune); in the excessive materiality of the object of the quest, an actual fleece made of gold; and in some weak storytelling. Weak is not bad in my books, but Apollonius is a scholar and a librarian, and he has the frailty and hesitation of his trade, which makes him overcompensate. Take Orpheus, for instance. Apollonius makes pre-Eurydice, young, bold Orpheus one of the Argonauts for the sole purpose of having someone on board the Argo who can out-sing the sirens (*Argonautica* 4, 891–919). It is not clear whether Orpheus is a better singer than the sirens, but he is definitely louder. In the *Argonautica*, the tragic story of the sirens is told in a quasi-comic mode. The ‘virgin’ sirens are rather weak, passive; their keyword is ‘languor’, a torpid, idle yet content state (I told you: drugs are the gateway to understanding the sirens), their song is enchanting yet delicate (λείριον, leirion; lily-like), their voices relentless but fading, while Orpheus, turned into some kind of football choir leader, stretches his lyre as he would a bow and bangs and bangs on ‘the rapid beat of a lively song’ (4, 907; translation by William H. Race), a deafening and rumbling noise, buzzing in his companions’ ears. Eventually, only one man is lost to the sirens, but merciful Aphrodite saves even him. Don’t get me wrong: the *Argonautica* is a beautiful story; but sometimes it feels too loud, perfunctory, and latex; a bit like an Avengers movie.

Dante has mixed feelings towards this story. He places Jason in hell, among the seducers (well done him! The way Jason treated women is unacceptable), here he compares us, his readers, to the Argonauts (nice! Can I be Heracles?), and later ... be patient and you will be amazed.

The Ulyssean elements in the poem of *Paradiso* 2 are clear: the speech to the crew; untravelled waters; ocean; trespassing (‘cantando varca’, similar to Ulisse’s ‘varco

folle'; his mad track); a classical setting; a passion for knowledge (philosophy/theology); a little scuff with the *Convivio* (the 'Ulyssean', i.e., failed, philosophical moment in Dante's career, as many believe) over the bread of angels; a small oration; and water that closes over both Ulisse's ship and the wake of Dante's boat.

The metatextual elements are also plain: we are the readers, the text is a boat. Dante-poet is Ulysses giving us, his sailors, a little speech in order to make us even more eager to follow him in his textual journey. The distinction between weak and smart readers is flattery in disguise. Those who keep on reading are the smart ones, by definition. The fact is; we all keep on reading. I have still to meet a reader who has taken Dante's advice and quit after this proem (Macareus, if you are there somewhere, please give us a sign). If this small oration were pronounced in hell, someone could call it fraudulent. But we are in paradise, and the good Christian god is all ears.

Intriguingly, desire and orality mark this journey — we are 'desirous' to 'listen', and the boat of the text sings ('cantando', the prime verb, if you remember, of the epic proem: for good material reasons, in ancient times writing and speaking, reading and listening, were often synonyms). Trespassing is textual, and the untravelled waters are a daring new topic (heaven, and the vision of god). Minerva (knowledge) is the wind in the sails, Apollo (poetry, inspiration) takes the helm, and the Muses (poetic genres) provide the map. The bread of angels is the subject matter (philosophy/theology), and some readers (those on the sturdier boat) have chewed on it before. [Here too navigation and dinner are brought together in the same image, as in the prose of the *Banquet* quoted above, but I hope you agree with me that this floating restaurant is less irritating, or more sophisticated.] We need to follow the poet closely,

lest the sea (the untravelled topic) closes over us and we lose track of what is going on. But it is going to be amazing! We are going to be astonished, enthused, entertained. I'm on board.

The enormous untravelled waters are the white page in front of the writer. Here Dante goes all bombastic, but I sense some trepidation on his part, and we feel it in the readers' boat too. Later on in the poem, we often have the impression that our navigator is exhausted. [I wonder if he wants to turn around and go back home, or if, like Macareus, he is tempted to say: I stop here.] When hitting a particularly difficult point of his writing, he even admits that his flagship might not be that grand. Endearingly, the point in question is the description of the heavenly smile of his beloved Beatrice; such an enamouring and indescribable crease that 'the sacred poem is forced to jump' (*Paradiso* 23, 55–69). Dante comments that this part of the navigation 'is no voyage for a little bark, this [topic, the smile] which my daring prow cleaves as it goes, not for a pilot who would spare himself' ('non è pareggio da picciola barca | quel che fendendo va l'ardita prora, | né da nocchier ch'a sé medesimo parca'; 23, 67–69). Or; see it another way, we realize we are all on board a dinghy (or, at best, a small catamaran); it is choppy, risky, but fun.

Whoever has attempted sustained writing — and it need not be a novel, or an epic poem; think an essay, a letter to a friend, a report — knows that there is truth in the sailing simile. The beginning of a new piece of writing, however small, is a momentous event. One feels scared, exposed, and fragile. Unfit for the challenge, with your little frail paper boat. That fragility, you feel it in the skin. But at your fingertips there is excitement, amazement, concentration ... in we go. Often, you might have noticed, it starts very humbly, with buying a notebook, sharpening



your pencil (there was loads of sharpening going on in the middle ages), acting compulsively towards the environment around you. Although writing and characters differ widely across history and around the world, the basics are the same: a (normally) flat surface, a hand-held pointed object, with different degrees of sharpness (from chisel to paintbrush) and, in most cases, a dark liquid. A hand that follows docilely the train of thoughts. She knows how to type, doesn't she? I hear a whispered concern — either for my age or for my sanity. Yes yes, I am aware of my modernity; the technology may be different, but the ideology of page and ink is the same, for now at least. A surface and a sign. An incision that no matter how small modifies the universe of human communication: no wonder Dante calls the wake of his boat 'solco' (furrow), which we would expect more on a field than on the sea. A furrow in the sea is an evanescent yet stubborn sign, a gurgling foamy bubble, a grappling cluster of scribbles. It is an impossibility.

Italo Calvino imagines the end of his novel, *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*, 1957), as the return of writing to nothingness. The metaphor, in this case, is that of an unravelling forest:

[Ombrosa] era un ricamo fatto di nulla che assomiglia a questo filo d'inchiostro, come l'ho lasciato correre per pagine e pagine, zeppo di cancellature, di rimandi, di sgorbi nervosi, di macchie, di lacune, che a momenti si sgrana in grossi acini chiari, a momenti si infittisce in segni minuscoli come semi puntiformi, ora si ritorce su se stesso, ora si biforca, ora collega grumi di frasi con contorni di foglie o di nuvole, e poi si intoppa, e poi ripiglia a attorcigliarsi, e corre e corre e si sdipana e avvolge un ultimo grappolo insensato di parole idee sogni ed è finito.

[Ombrosa, the location of the adventures of the Baron,] was an embroidery, made on nothing, that resembles this thread of ink, as I've let it run for pages and pages, full of erasures, of references, of nervous blots, of stains, of gaps, that at times crumbles into large pale grains, at times thickens into tiny marks resembling dotlike seeds, now twists on itself, now forks, now links knots of sentences with edges of leaves or clouds, and then stumbles, and then resumes twisting, and runs and runs and unrolls and wraps a last senseless cluster of words ideas dreams and is finished (translation by Ann Goldstein).

Bring this to the image we are working with, the sea, and writing is tracing the crest of the waves, now white and foamy, now a bluer ripple. It is guessing the colour of the sea at a certain hour, it is marvelling at the sudden dart of a fish or caressing the dark liquid fin of a dolphin. It is stabbing the page with the inexistent line between the sea and the sky.

Did she say that it was the second proem of the *Paradiso*? Yes, yes, and now that you ask, the first is even weirder, and frames the question of inspiration and writing in an even more potent way. It is a little long, so please allow me a bit of summary. At the beginning of the last section of his work (*Paradiso* 1, 1–36), Dante tells us:

- My topic is the glory of God (1–3)
- I went all the way to heaven (4–6)
- had a ball, but don't remember what happened (7–9)
- will try to write what I can (10–12)
- [the juicy part] (13–21)
- will try to write what I can (22–24)
- I really want the poetic laurel (25–27)

- nobody gets it (the laurel) (28–30)
- it is fucking hard (to get the laurel), so I am trying, without succeeding, to impress some laurel-dispensing arse by repeating *ad nauseam* the word laurel and making incomprehensible poetic references to it (31–33)
- maybe there will a better writer than me (34–36)

The juicy part is the following invocation to Apollo. The Greek god of poetry is here turned into a cruel master within a sadomasochistic game. Dante wishes to be (dis)possessed by poetic inspiration, he wants the god to penetrate him and inspire him, like he skinned the satyr Marsyas.

O buono Appollo, a l'ultimo lavoro  
 fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,  
 come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.  
 Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso  
 assai mi fu; ma or con amendue  
 m'è uopo intrar ne l'aringo rimaso.  
 Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue  
 sì come quando Marsia traesti  
 de la vagina de le membra sue.  
 (*Paradiso* 1, 13–21)

O good Apollo, for this last labor make me such  
 a vessel of your worth as you require for grant-  
 ing your beloved laurel. Thus far the one peak of  
 Parnassus has sufficed me, but now I have need  
 of both, as I enter the arena that remains. Enter  
 into my breast and breathe there as when you drew  
 Marsyas from the sheath of his limbs.

The story, you have guessed, is narrated by Ovid in the sixth book of the *Metamorphoses* (6, 382–400). Marsyas, the usual mortal (in this case a satyr, a lower divinity)

equipped with enough *hybris* to challenge the god at making music, is defeated and punished by being skinned alive. The Ovidian tale, albeit gruesome, is not particularly innovative or strange, but what Dante does with it is. Not only does he place this story at the outset of the last, most Christian, allegedly 'chaster' part of his poem, but he also reverses Marsyas's punishment into desire. The poet is passive: he is the vessel ('vaso') of poetic inspiration and wishes the god to enter his chest ('entra') and violently inspire him. And he is liking it. Whereas Ovid's Marsyas asks Apollo with a disconsolate voice: 'why do you tear me from myself?' ('quid me mihi detrahis?'; *Metamorphoses* 6, 385), Dante begs the god ... 'tear me from myself!'; get me out of this body, hurt me, break me free of this constraint, and yet subjugate me profoundly to and into this body of mine, make me yours, make me a divine breath of poetry. Talk about being scared, and fragile, at the outset of writing. And feeling it in the skin. And embracing your fragility.

Do I see the word 'vagina' on the page? Yes, yes, you do, but fortunately (or unfortunately), it does not mean vagina (it does not mean that until a couple of centuries later), but 'guaina', or sheath. Yet the image of Apollo extracting the Satyr from the sheath of his limbs (instead of, more intuitively, taking the skin off his body) is reminiscent of a rather deviant fantasy of a violent birth, where Dante is both the woman in labour and the foetus.

#### OF FRAUD AND FICTION

In addition to the Argonauts and the siren, another figure articulates the marine metatextual links between Dante and Ulysses. Earlier in the journey, the reader meets Geryon, an enigmatic infernal monster that ferries Dante-traveller and Virgil to the lower part of hell, the circle of

fraud. Drafted on the fading trace of a minor character of Greek mythology, Geryon is a superb Dantean invention, through which the poet ponders the short distance between fraud (in a moral and religious sense) and fiction (in a literary sense). Geryon is a textual vessel, and like the siren he is both ugly and beautiful.

The link was first observed by Teodolinda Barolini, in a fine essay entitled 'Ulysses, Geryon, and the Aeronautics of Narrative Transition.' The aeronautics in question follow from the fact that while Ulisse's navigation looks like a flight, the trip on Geryon's shoulders to reach the circle of fraud is described as navigation through the air.

Geryon, Dante tells us, is the very image of fraud. He is made of three different species: a human head, the body of a lion, and the tail of a serpent or a scorpion. In plain allegory: fraud first seduces, then attacks, and ultimately annihilates. And it stinks.

Ecco la fiera con la coda aguzza,  
che passa i monti e rompe i muri e l'armi!  
Ecco colei che tutto 'l mondo appuzza!  
[...]

E quella sozza imagine di froda  
sen venne, e arrivò la testa e 'l busto,  
ma 'n su la riva non trasse la coda.

La faccia sua era faccia d'uom giusto,  
tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,  
e d'un serpente tutto l'altro fusto;  
due branche avea pilose insin l'ascelle;  
lo dosso e 'l petto e ambedue le coste  
dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.

Con più color, sommesse e sovrapposte  
non fer mai drappi Tartari né Turchi,  
né fuor tai tele per Aragne imposte.  
[...]

Nel vano tutta sua coda guizzava,  
torcendo in sù la venenosa forca  
ch'a guisa di scorpion la punta armava.  
(*Inferno* 17, 1-3, 7-18, and 25-27)

Behold the beast with the pointed tail, that passes mountains and breaks walls and weapons! Behold him that infects all the world! [...] And that foul image of fraud came onward, and landed his head and his bust, but it did not draw his tail onto the bank. His face was the face of a just man, so benign was its outward aspect, and all his trunk was that of a serpent; he had two paws, hairy to the armpits; his back and breast and both his sides were painted with knots and circlets. Tartars or Turks never made cloth with more colors of groundwork and pattern, nor were such webs laid on the loom by Arachne. [...] All his tail was quivering in the void, twisting upward its venomous fork, which had the point armed like a scorpion's.

On the pattern of the ur-fraudulent beast, Genesis's snake, Geryon is stitched together through the best of biblical and medieval horror writing: locusts with human faces, tempting snakes, destructive large scorpions and lions with hairy armpits. But Geryon is also attractive. In addition to the outward benign appearance of his face, his back is adorned with the splendour of textiles, so rich and complex that Dante dwells on the intricacies and exoticism of its embroidered circlets. The good old merchant, savouring the finesse of rare cloths, is always around the corner.

The connection between the art of weaving and textuality is as old as literature itself. (My Penelope ... she wove and unwove my story day after day, and I exist only in the dry and sharp sound of her loom.) Not by chance, Dante mentions here Arachne, the weaver turned spider from the *Metamorphoses* (6, 1–145), another minor but resilient alter ego of his, whom he later places as an example of pride in purgatory, calling her mad in her challenge to the divine text ('folle'; *Purgatorio* 12, 43) — like himself (*Inferno* 2, 35), like Ulisse (*Inferno* 26, 125).

Whether this is a matter of weaving, embroidery, textile painting, or a combination of these arts, the issue of poetic beauty is both at the heart and on the surface of Geryon-as-text. Geryon's beauty is presented as something complicated, knotted ('nodi'), twisted ('rotelle'), heavily embroidered, and colored. Very much like the siren's fake adornment, this is an artistic, textual beauty. The comparison with textiles shows that poetic beauty is woven into the very 'stuff' of the text, coloring both the groundwork and the pattern. [Here, in the 'Tartar clothes', is the one faint allusion to the voyage of Marco Polo I mentioned before. Polo dwells at length on the beauty and complexity of Asian textiles. Maybe Dante is suggesting that fiction is not fraudulent in itself, but the trade, marketing, and merchandizing we make of it is. Off point and full of assumptions, the tutor in me writes in the margins.]

So incredibly strange is this beast that Dante-poet prefaces it with an even stranger address to the reader.

Sempre a quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna  
 de' l'uom chiuder le labbra fin ch'el puote,  
 però che senza colpa fa vergogna;  
     ma qui tacer nol posso; e per le note  
 di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro,  
 s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,  
     ch'i' vidi per quell'aere grosso e scuro  
 venir notando una figura in suso,  
 maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro  
 (*Inferno* 16, 124–32)

To that truth which has the face of a lie \*people\*  
 should always close \*their\* lips so far as \*they\* can,  
 for through no fault \*of theirs\* it brings reproach;  
 but here I cannot be silent; and, reader, I swear to  
 you by the notes of this Comedy — so may they  
 not fail of lasting favour — that I saw, through the  
 thick and murky air, come swimming upwards a  
 figure amazing to every steadfast heart

The trick is as clever as it is clear:

Geryon, the beautiful/ugly monster that I am describing is fraud = a lie that looks like the truth.

My poem, the beautiful/intriguing monster that you are reading, is the exact opposite = a truth that looks like a lie.

In other words, as Barolini puts it, Geryon 'is both the poem and its antithesis'. What remains to be seen, though, is whether this is a defence or a condemnation of fiction. Whether fiction is fraud (the lie that looks like the truth) or a mysterious type of truth (that looks like a lie but is not).

The strangest part of all is Dante's reaction. Confronted with an unbelievable, 'fictional' truth, he takes an oath on his poem. One usually did so on the Bible or a sacred text. One still does that, as I discovered not long ago while serving on jury duty, half horrified at the Christian-centric nature of UK tribunals, and half exhilarated at the continuing power of the book as a material object. Dante, however, takes the oath on his own book. Now; that takes guts. And (talk about fragility and excitement), not on his book as a stable, written, bound, 'sacred' object, but on an oral, poetic, even musical image of his work: he talks about the 'notes' of his *Comedy* — invoking here for the first (of a handful) of times the (probable) title of his poem. Like the book that 'trespasses singing' at the beginning of paradise, this is an aural book, yet it has the power of a durable, authoritative object. We-the-readers are placed in the jury's stand, and entrusted with the task of verifying Dante's words and upholding their fame.

Oscillation between beauty and ugliness, reference to textual beauty and ornateness, tension between fraud and fiction, a text of daring making and of complex reading: like



the siren, then, Geryon is a statement on writing. However, the beautiful-ugly woman/poetry, animated by the eager, or lustful, gaze of her author/dreamer, adds a twist to the already intricate discourse of textuality and intertextuality: the role of the ever elusive, never illusive, present moment of falling in love.

We are in a dream, though, and maybe sirens are also the image of the writer. A beautiful voice confined into an ugly body. A honey-sweet sound trapped inside, which trumps every other quality or talent. The hypnotizing call to write and write and write, as if it were a blessing, or a curse. Is Dante the ugly woman, grotesquely made beautiful by a couple of rhymes and figures? Is he the vulgar (as in vernacular), outcast, shamed peasant woman squatting on a country road? Is Homer the terse, unbreakable, mellifluous, imageless voice that belongs to no one? Is there a scared and bold little girl in Ovid? Is Apollonius the muted siren's voice or the loud Orpheus? (that would be *so* Apollonius).

#### TIED AT THE MAST

Some ten or fifteen years ago, I saw an exhibition about 'wonders of the sea' or something like that, of which I remember little or nothing (I went to see it with someone I fancied a lot). But I do remember her, a strange little siren, an ugly, desiccated, crinkly little creature in a glass case. I have later learned that she is a specimen of a larger kind known as the Fiji or Feejee mermaids (Figures 12 and 13).

Of various sizes and shapes, these curiosities were manufactured in the east, especially in Japan, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and sold to gullible travellers. One such siren made quite an appearance in Dickensian London in 1822 and was then exhibited in



Figure 12. The Feejee mermaid on show at the Harvard Museum.

Barnum's American Museum. They were made by grafting an ape's torso onto a large fish tail, sometimes by messing with the ape's own skeleton and sometimes with the help of a wooden or papier mâché structure, and they were often embellished with human hair and horn nails. One German mermaid apparently vaunts the upper body of a human foetus.

This strange creature has stuck in my mind for years, strangely rising from the hazy, elapsed context of the exhibition I saw her in. She reminds me of several things.

She reminds me of Dante's siren: a poetic object tragically stripped of its external beauties. Is she the ugly core of poetic language?



Figure 13. Specimen of the Feejee mermaid found in the Museum of Natural History in Milano. Is this the one I saw? It does remind me of Geryon's 'just man face', but with a smirk.

She reminds me of Geryon: like him, she is a patchwork of different animals, a unified body constructed by grafting three species. Is she fraud or fiction?

She reminds me of fraud in a commercial sense: she was made to deceive customers and sold well beyond her price.

As the sole memory of an enamored afternoon at the museum, she reminds me of an unconsummated, still thrilling, somewhat literary infatuation. I felt like I was swimming through the cases, trying to catch a reflection of my beloved in the glass. I am not sure why my memory retained this and no other object from the exhibit. Maybe our heads got to touch momentarily as we were trying to

examine this curiosity? Or did I just linger there by myself, listening to the old sound emanating from inside of me, promising a sweet wholeness if only I could make him mine? That All would fall back In One Place?

I still wonder whether the love that exists without ever being — the love that resides in a stretch of desire and nothing else, the paper love of the troubadours, perennially displaced in a pale blue distance that one day, without you noticing, turns into absence — is the perfect form of love, or whether it is the old, seducing siren's song that keeps calling, the drug that keeps the pilgrim on the trodden journey, making it look untravelled. Or whether, tied to the mast, I had just then realized that there was no sound for me to hear, only silence from the desiccated yet familiar mouth of all the consummated loves, the water closing over the great sea of my fictions.