



Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 273–305

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**A Narrated Bi(bli)ography
Preceded by a Postface and
Interspersed with Notes that
Lack Superscript. Also
Illustrated, for that Matter. With
the Addition of a One-word
Glossary.**

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A Narrated Bi(bli)ography Preceded by a Postface and Interspersed with Notes that Lack Superscript. Also Illustrated, for that Matter. With the Addition of a One-word Glossary.

The premise of this book, which I have come to call affectionately ‘Ulyssino’, little Ulysses, is real. The canvas was, initially, a university lecture on *Inferno* 26 that I have performed for the last many years in the context of my courses on Dante’s *Inferno*. Its expansion is due, indeed, to the Ulysean curiosity left ‘therewithin’. The writing sprang forth bubbling and fizzing during a term of sabbatical leave, very much in the shape in which you read it.

The only plan I sensed and pursued was the merging of fragments, shards, flakes, and splinters: polished pieces of literature, memories of reading, bits of scholarship (some of them discarded as untenable in my waking life), attempts at theorizing, and raw fragments of me placed themselves on the page, like guests who do not know each other entering a familiar living room; like when you invite best friends from different lives who have yet to meet, but have heard of each other and are well inclined already. There is a little uneasiness (‘I thought she was taller from your extolling praise’, ‘did not expect him to wear glasses, so keen you said he was’) and the occasional friction, but soon they mingle, and you can leave the room.

The poetics of this book, if there is one, is a poetics of the fragment, or of the fragmentary: the imperfect matching, the seams, cracks, and wounds that are ultimately the poetic word's territory.

If there is a theory in this little book, it is a theory of 'personality'. It states that the literary endeavour and the literary pleasure are personal, at times even eccentrically so (they are not, however, individual, or random, or private). And so is literary scholarship.

Personality was not planned. It happened; for instance, when children's songs popped up in the *lectura*, while I was leisurely and somewhat aimlessly transcribing the manuscript of my university lecture on *Inferno* 26, or when the foamy wake of the *Bateau ivre* frothed into an old illuminated initial. These doodles of my memory, like the irreverent monkeys on medieval manuscripts (see chapter 4), were here to stay. Like those images in the margins, they are not comic or dramatic interludes. They are proper glosses. And I have come to think that they are not marginal.

This way to interpretation is personal, and experiential (Ulisse asks that much from us with his insistence on the importance of 'experience'), but it also forms communities of readers that are less definite, more intangible, and more surprising than the ones we may be used to (the academic, the historical, the national, the political, that of gender, et cetera).

The theory of personality entails that interpretation is plural and often unexpected. It is not linear and can be anachronistic. That there is no such thing as a standard voice of interpretation, that sometimes the role of the interpreter is just that of bringing two objects into the same space and creating a relaxed atmosphere where they can talk and illuminate each other. That it is ok, indeed interesting, sometimes important (nay, necessary), and ultimately

unavoidable, to bring one's life, one's 'human stain' to bear on scholarship and interpretation. In this little book, I have often put my lives on the line of interpretation; the academic, the teacher, the student, the parent, the daughter, the friend, the lover, the sad child — together they have, I believe, cast unusual lights on the texts that I am reading.

The theory of personality also states that to study is to desire, and to learn is to love, and it hurts, but it is also the locus of pleasure. Minus the hurt, this is what Augustine thought of the process of knowledge ('appetitus [...] rei cognoscendae, fit amor cognitae'; the desire for the object that you have yet to know becomes the love of the known object; *De Trinitate* 9, 12, 18; my translation). 'Love hurts', though. I fully understood this *dictum* when I saw it tattooed in large gothic letters, blurred by time and leaking into the ageing skin, slightly reddened by sweat, on the large forearm of a female bus driver at the Saint Aldate's stop in Oxford. I wish I had thanked her for more than the ticket she sold me: more at length, more profusely, for the lesson on the meaning of literality she taught me. I am also thankful that the bus driver interpreted Augustine, and Augustine shed light on the bus driver. They would not have met without my journey. The journey is the place of pleasure.

Creative scholarship, post-scholarship, punk scholarship? I am not sure what to call the 'methodology' of this book. It certainly aims at exposing the beauty and the limits of disciplines and discourses that take themselves very seriously and sometimes refuse to enter in conversation with one another. Intimacy is little Ulysses's critical tool.

The most consistent aspect of this little book is the reflection on reading, which is both my most beloved activity and my current scholarly interest.

At the heart of my little Ulysses are literary texts that relate, in different ways, to its main protagonist, canto 26 of Dante's *Inferno*. There are multiple designs (layouts, drawings, patterns) and sketches (splashes, drafts, squirts, spat-ers, spurts, dabs, and stains), infatuation with language, and amazement at the folly of writing. There are, you have noticed, three main writing personas: the academic, itself made of a consummate literary scholar, a repentant philologist, a tentative philosopher, an amateur historian, and an amused art historian; the passionate reader, who pre-exists the academic and hopefully will survive it; and the creative writer, a newborn character, both defenceless and demanding, brimming with life, yet still in nappies. They are at once listening to and trying to capture a concerto of voices around them, the sombre melody of literature and the vibrant cacophony of 'life'. There is a consistent comic vein that is explained, I hope, by the quote from Rabelais, and by Dante's own understanding of the comic as 'poly-tropy' (plurilingualism and pluristylism roaming free).

There are several internal references, not all of them visible to the naked eye. There are textual encounters that will mean different things at different times to the diverse people who will read this book. Homer greets Dante in an anachronistic space-time, a long-forgotten piece of scholarship encounters the dodo in an impossible resort, a pop jingle enters an invective by means of rhythm alone, Janis Joplin meets Plutarch at the Canaries (or is that Eden? They are both irremediably earthly; I cannot imagine them either in heaven or hell). Emily Dickinson goes shopping. Sinatra waltzes with Beatrice while Orpheus plays the lyre. A bird flies on the page of history. The splash-splash of the sea laps the prose.

You might not be interested in all the voices and all the fragments that make up this little book. I hope I have made

it clear that this text does not need to be read continuously or linearly. Not even left to right for that matter. Feel free to skip (but remember Boccaccio).

As I reflect post-factum on my operation, a further memory surfaces.

That of a clever and quirky student of mine, who, after tests, or exams, or even at the end of the year, would knock energetically at my office door and walk in with a spring in his step demanding to do what he called the *post-mortem* (of an essay, of the exam session, even of the entire year). The first time I heard this expression, I was horrified: on a good day it reminds me of Rembrandt; on a bad day of unfathomable incisions. For Ferdi, I realized this after a couple of years, the *post-mortem* meant not so much to analyse his performance on a given aspect of academic life, but also to put the seal on it (or, to zip it in one of those large freezer bags, like in the movies) and to proclaim it done. After the *post-mortem*, Ferdi used to be unusually calm, and I rather shaking. The *post-mortem* of this book would be identifying what I have done in the different chapters — stripping them of their ‘life’, so to speak, and putting them under the microscope of justification. As academics, we normally place this at the beginning, safely zipping the decay of a finished book into its synopsis.

Chapter 1. I do textual analysis, close reading, the main literary skill that I have, and that I owe to the Anglo-American part of my formation, with a huge debt of gratefulness.

Chapter 2. I do intertextuality as I declare. The use of the term intertextuality refers to a vigorous conversation among scholars in the second half of the last century. [I do not know why I get a hit every time I write ‘last century’. My intellectual formation is history, it has a sepia patina.] The

intertextuality I care for is infinite, intricate, and expansive. It is not linear (from text a to text b) but involves all texts in a strange form of ‘presentness’. It is irresistibly connected to memory, pleasure, and personality.

I also hint here and elsewhere at the thorny issue of ‘the canon’. It is a very critical question these days, which scholars, educators, and students are debating with ferocious earnestness. I take a comic shortcut to this very serious theme, as a way of saying; I see the problem, I am engaging, I do not believe in quick fixes. [For a more mature take on the question, one with which I broadly concur, see ‘Marginality and the Classics: Exemplary Extraneousness’ by Marco Formisano, the introductory essay to the volume *Marginality, Canonicity, Passion*, ed. by Formisano and Christina Shuttleworth Kraus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).]

Chapter 3 is, generally speaking, theme based. I search in fits and starts for the past and present of two very loaded themes — ‘virtue’ and ‘knowledge’. I ask, and do not answer, a troubling question. What is it to be human?

In this chapter, I also trace the mobile outline of the question of ‘modernity’ that is the tormented protagonist of the next chapter. The modernity that went up in flames in the Lagers, that is. In a way, Dante’s Ulysses and Levi’s Ulysses are the entrance and exit ways (or; thresholds) to this issue. Levi’s Ulysses says that after the Shoah language, literature, and ‘reality’ are forever tainted. Dante’s Ulysses says that things were pretty bad even earlier on. In this conversation I hope there emerges a glimpse of a better present. One is left to wonder what Homer’s Ulysses would have to say.

Chapter 4. After a lot of gutting, and cutting, and miasmas I found, you will be surprised, a skeleton of the historical-philological formation of my past. If you see me

today, you will hardly believe that in my early twenties I was a manic philologist, memorizing names and numbers of codices, and working at transcribing manuscripts. There was a romantic, or psychopathic, aspect to it, though: every year I would bring a red rose to the funeral statue of the poet I was philologizing. Not sure whether to say 'I love you' or 'I am sorry'.

This chapter also asks: what happens when the imagination of literature becomes the reality of 'progress'? Is there any sort of capricious intertextuality between these two planes?

Chapter 5. Orpheus rescues me from these conundrums, proclaiming: only loss is real. Nostalgia is the only map of journeys and lives. The narrator of this chapter is, I suppose, the medievalist in me, who joins forces with the nervous traveller to embark, very physically, on a rather imaginary journey: that of the pilgrimage of interpretation. We went on foot, with packsacks, and picnic, and water bottles. We walked and chatted, got some blisters on our feet, lost our way, and ended up all the way to Eden, to meet an angry allegory, who told us to go back to the start and re-read. Parts of this chapter, especially the one on pilgrimage, figural reading, and desire are fragmented and full of stops and starts: this has to do with the creaking and banging movement of the train of allegory.

Chapter 6. With the sirens, these badly sung beautiful singers, I toy with literary theory, in particular with gender theory applied to literature, and I give into one of my guiltiest pleasures: visual studies. I also engage with writing's discourse on writing — metatextuality, litteralogy, fanta-writing, truefiction? — whatever you want to call it, it is the writer's sweat stain on the page, sometimes mixed with a drop of blood from a paper cut.

Finally — what am I doing now, meta-scholarship? meta-myself? the anatomy of the anatomy? — this last little chapter understates the question of objectivity in literary studies. Modern epistemology and even physiology maintain that knowledges are situated and embodied, yet the Grail of objectivity looms large, often encupped in some dry, make-believe apparatuses of authority. The answer of this little book, if any, to the disintegration of the concept of objective truth in scholarship and otherwise, is not, however, ‘to each their own truth’. It is: patience, close reading, and irony.

The bibliography, the most barren and scorched part of a book, is also always a biography. Before turning into a lifeless alphabetical list in which it is impossible not to *live* [NB: typo, but of a curious kind] ... not to *leave* typos and inaccuracies, these were organisms that the scholar consumed and excreted, loved and sometimes hated, ignored or accepted as inevitable. There are tears, and fears, and sneezes; tummy and head aches, passions and betrayals, kilometres of underlining, and countless folded ‘dog ears’. The whole ‘back matter’ (what a great name) — bibliography, index (publishing’s most endangered species), perhaps glossary — the ever so serious ticket to authority, is also the most idiosyncratic and genuine part of a book. Pliny the Elder, the punkiest of scholars, boldly placed the back matter at the front of his *Historia Naturalis*: the first book is a maddening long index and bibliography of each subsequent book. If you manage this, Pliny seems to say with a smirk, you can read the next thirty-six.

As you can imagine, a great deal of scholarly effort has gone into the writing of this book. Some of it is part of my training, my research, and my many years of teaching Dante. In my academic monographs — *The Syntax of De-*

sire: *Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2012), *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and the one I was supposed to complete when Ullissino took over, provisionally entitled *Reading and Writing in Dante* (Somewhere: A Certain University Press, one day) — and in my articles that I will not list, you will find, with tons of footnotes, some of the ideas that I express here. If I look back at all the books and articles I have written, I realize that they were never impersonal.

I first heard the chiming of the cheeky voice of the amused scholar-narrator when I was commissioned to write a book on women in Dante for a large-scale publication on the occasion of the recent Dante anniversary — *Beatrice e le altre. Dante e le figure femminili* (Rome: Gedi-La Repubblica, 2021) — and I have listened to it ever since.

In this book you will find some old knowledge that I no longer can tell how I have developed. Some is new knowledge that I have acquired recently reading excitedly, voraciously, and sometimes bulimically. I have picked up and dropped books, imperiously demanded interlibrary loans [they make you fill this strange bit: ‘not needed after’: NOW for Christ’s sake!] and then forgot they were there. I have downloaded the same articles twice and let two files with the same name butt eternally like two rams in the ‘Save as’ option. I have bought volumes on a whim, and then left them open on the table to never read later.

The ‘theme of Ulysses’ in literature and culture has been explored in many studies. Of these, three are particularly famous and inspiring.

W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954) is a

gentle, old-style, erudite take on Ulysses, particularly the classical heritage. In it, you will find an intriguing quote on the relation between scholarship and creative writing: ‘accident, ignorance, misunderstanding or carelessness — fatal faults in a work of scholarship — may lead a creative author to valid new conceptions of the traditional myths’ (p. 3). And one remarkable piece of creative writing, in which Stanford imagines the conversation between Homer and Virgil in Dante’s Limbo (Dante actually does place the two together in his Limbo, the area of hell dedicated to the great souls of antiquity). It is worth reading: ‘Virgil could have answered the *poeta sovrano* [this is what Dante calls Homer in *Inferno* 4, 88]: “Homer, poetry as well as war has its *ineluctabile fatum* [here he is quoting *Aeneid* 8, 334]. You know this, you who praised the virtues of the Achaeans to please the Greek princes for whom you sang. Did you not represent the Trojans as having begun the war for the sake of an adulterous prince? Did you not say that the Trojans broke their solemn oath at the Truce? I had my prince and my people to please, as you had yours. But I did not slander your Odysseus — and surely you, subtle master of epic, know it. You will find no comment of mine on him in any line of my poem. Indignant Aeneas speaks of him in the manner of a defeated soldier. Perfidious Sinon traduces him. But surely you see that I transferred the chief burden of odium from your Odysseus (whom your fellow-countryman Euripides did not spare) to Sinon, who never appears in your poems. Sinon is my real villain, not Ulysses”’ (pp. 133–34). [Fuck you, Virgil, my Homer answers, still from within Dante’s Limbo.]

Piero Boitani’s *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) is a vast and passionate journey in various embodiments of Ulysses, especially in the literature of the modern era. In this book you will find a

chapter on Dante and one on Renaissance navigators and their poets (where I first encountered Magellan's winged Victoria), and pages on Levi and Melville.

Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) offers a much needed global, post-colonial, and feminist take on the theme.

For a survey of critical positions on Ulysses from antiquity to yesterday, see the volume *Odysseus/Ulysses* (New York: Chelsea, 1991) — part of a series on *Major Literary Characters*, all volumes of which were edited by the bard of the Western canon himself, Harold Bloom. Guess the ratio of white male heterosexual characters to, well, 'the rest' in this series.

This is not the first time that the story of Ulysses inspires a half academic half personal take, which goes to show that of all characters, Odysseus is, indeed, 'us'. I am currently enjoying Daniel Mandelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic* (New York: Collins, 2017).

Like Odysseus, Dante's Ulisse too has been put through the relentless machine of scholarship, from which I list here the handful of essays that are dearest to me: Bruno Nardi, 'La Tragedia di Ulisse' (for which see later); several pages of Maria Corti's essays on Dante and Cavalcanti (*Scritti su Dante e Cavalcanti* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003)); John Freccero, 'Dante's Ulysses from Epic to Novel', in his *The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 136–51, from which I first learned, among other things, about the spiritual reading of the *nostos* and about Lukács's take on epic and the novel; Teodolinda Barolini, 'Ulysses, Geryon and the Aeronautics of Narrative Transition', in her *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 48–73; Gary

Cestaro, 'Is Ulysses Queer? The Subject of Greek Love in Inferno xv and xxvi', in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Vulgarization, Subjectivity*, ed. by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 179–92; and Lino Pertile, 'Ulisse in chiesa', in his *Dante popolare* (Ravenna: Longo, 2021), pp. 181–200, and the forthcoming *Ulysses and the Limits of Dante's Humanism. Ulisse o dei limiti dell'umanesimo dantesco*. As friendship between books and scholars wants, this book too is affectionately called *Ulissino*.

One of the sweet martyrdoms of scholarship is to make an exciting textual discovery only to find out, later, that it had been discovered already. What a fitting punishment for the scholar of Dante's Ulisse. Past the pillars of Gibraltar, there is nothing new, it seems. This has happened at least twice with this book. The first time was when I thought I had discovered the figure of Macareus from Ovid, only to find him, still a refusenik, in an essay by Michelangelo Picone on Dante and the Classics ('Dante, Ovidio e il mito di Ulisse', *Lettere italiane*, 23 (1991), pp. 500–16). The second time, I was giving the last hurried touches to the *lectura*, and suddenly remembered Diomedes in the flame in Homer's *Doloneia*, a point that I later found in an essay by Piero Boitani ('Dante and the Three Traditions', in *Dante and the Greeks*, ed. by Jan M. Ziolkowski (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Humanities, 2014), pp. 265–71). More of my brilliant ideas may have been written already. It is humbling to be reminded how scholarship is a more infinite book than the literature it writes about. Still, I remain a practitioner of the 'write now — read later' formula.

I mentioned already my fondness for Charles Singleton's translation of Dante. The correlative item in the classical world is, for me, the LOEB classical library. I

used to dream that I became so rich that I was able to buy the whole thing in one shot, all the green and all the red books. And a custom bookshelf for it. I fantasized about casually piloting my guests toward the library: ‘aah ... you own the entire LOEB.’ With a modest smile and the softest of voices I would answer: ‘Indeed ...’ That dream buried like many others, I still cherish the LOEB’s inspired blandness: most of the translations from the classics in this book are taken from there.

In some cases, I have attempted my own translation.

INCIPIT

If you chose to be reader-student and you are in need of more information on Dante and the *Comedy*, there are various resources you can use — I am fond of the *Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by Rachel Jacoff and first published in 1993, where some of the best Dante scholars of that generation gathered to make Dante accessible to an Anglo-American audience. The recent *Oxford Handbook of Dante* (2021), which I have co-edited with Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden, is rather successful, I think, in communicating the complexity of Dante’s *oeuvre* and the manifold ways in which it can be read. The *Introduction* that I have co-written with Manuele and Francesca gives a sense of where I and some other scholars stand with regards to Dante’s biography. A very clever take on Dante’s life is found in Elisa Brilli’s and Giuliano Milani’s *Dante’s New Lives: Biography and Authobiography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2023).

As the editor of the *Handbook*, I encountered the amazing quote by Osip Mandelstam as the epigraph to Ted Cachey’s essay on ‘Traveling/Wandering/Mapping’ (pp. 416–30). Recently, I have learned an even more amazing

detail about Mandelstam; that he always brought a pocket size copy of the *Comedy* with him, for the fear of being suddenly arrested and separated from it. Now that is a powerful statement. Whether it speaks of the death-defying power of literature, or the madness of writers, I do not know. But the statement is still here. We are still reading it. Still imagining that pocket, that small volume, and that hand clasping nervously at it.

‘Not consolation, no. Consolation is not for books and readers’ is a reference to the famous ending of Derek Walcott’s ‘Sea Grapes’: ‘The classics can console. But not enough’, which I gloss with Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). It goes like this: ‘O night without objects. O blind window to the outside, o diligently locked doors; these are features that date from long ago, inherited but never fully understood. O silence in the stairwell, silence from the rooms next door, silence high above on the ceiling. O mother: unique one, who hid away all this silence once, when I was a child. Who takes it upon herself and says, “Don’t be afraid, it’s me”’ (translation by Robert Vilain).

CHAPTER 1

In the *lectura* of canto 26 and throughout the text, for those textual details that are not the fruit of my invention, I owe a lot to the countless *lecturae* and commentaries on the canto. Many commentaries are easily available through a helpful electronic resource, the *Dartmouth Dante Project*, a rather monumental digitization of 75+ commentaries, ancient and modern alike.

Fireflies: my late-blooming childish excitement for these coleopters aptly called *Lampyridae* derives not only from my obdurate city-dwelling nature, but also from the

fact that there are very few fireflies these days in Italy and, I suppose, in many parts of the world. Wiped out by pesticides. Pier Paolo Pasolini lamented their death in a fiercely political newspaper article in 1975 ('Il vuoto di potere in Italia', *Corriere della Sera*, 1 February).

CHAPTER 2

The *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Metamorphoses* would be a welcome pre-read to this chapter. But then again — who does pre-read these days? There is beauty also in synchronicity. On the *Odyssey*, Virgil's works, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I went bareback, I promise. Just the raw texts and some good Italian and English translations. I had no other choice, or desires.

Emily Wilson's translation of the *Odyssey* (New York: Norton, 2018) — where the *pulytropos* becomes 'complicated' — deserves a special mention: it is bold and innovative.

Ulysses App: when I went back to check the robotic quote, it had disappeared. I swear to god, reader, it was there. Forgive me god, for I am a sloppy writer, and do not keep track of my quotes. The new blurb is as disturbing as the first, although more mellow: 'Powerful features and a pleasant, focused writing experience combined in one tool, made for people who love to write and write a lot — this is Ulysses.' All the while symbols such as #, &, and ∩, just imperceptibly mutilated, float through the page, as if it were snowing. Later on, we are even reminded of the beauty of the PDF ('After you're done writing, Ulysses can turn your texts into beautiful PDFs, Word documents, ebooks and even blog posts'), but still no clue as to why the app is called Ulysses (<https://ulysses.app/>).

The conversation on intertextuality is still ongoing and relevant. The voices that are dearest to me are, as mentioned above, rather last-century; for instance those of Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), and Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). On poetic memory and poetic craft, I am still mesmerized by T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in his *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1921), pp. 42–53, where the idea of 'presentness of the past' comes from. I still read with passion G. B. Conte, *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), and, of course, the little gem I quote in the text: Giovanni Nencioni, 'Agnizioni di lettura', *Strumenti critici*, 2 (1967), pp. 191–98 [although sometimes I think I am more attached to the title and the beginning than to the article itself].

My little library of rewritings is made of the following. Well, Dante and Joyce; Walcott, *Omeros* (1990); Atwood, *Penelopiad*s (2005); Kazantzakis, *Οδύσσεια* (1938), which I read in the beautiful Italian translation by Nicola Crocetti (2020), itself a rewriting, I believe; and Chaudhuri, *Odysseus Abroad* (2014). Chaudhuri's essay 'For the Joy of Joyce' (<https://theamericanscholar.org/for-the-joy-of-joyce/>) details an intriguing and open conversation with one of the Ulysses now considered 'canonical', and shows that the canon is only canonical if we make it so.

The 'sadistic dictatorship of language' is an expression found in an essay by Leo Spitzer, 'Speech and Language in *Inferno* XIII', *Italica*, 19 (1942), pp. 77–104. I ended up not talking more at length about Leo Spitzer (1887–1960, author of *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony* and several studies on medieval literature and Dante), Er-

nest Robert Curtius (1886–1956, author of several essays, and of the classic *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*), and Eric Auerbach (1892–1957, author of *Mimesis*). These three scholars have many things in common. They lived in the same period, they were German-language scholars (one a Jew from Vienna, the other Alsatian, the third a German Jew), they were philologists. They shared a similar fate: opposers or critics of the Nazi regime, two were exiled, and moved to the United States after a fascinating stopover in Istanbul, and one retreated into scholarship. They shared a similar secularity and encyclopaedic knowledge. They were erudites, the last of a kind [still seen in the wild (or is that a zoo?) in certain universities, the least commercially-minded ones, but threatened by extinction]. They shared a similar love for the classics and a belief in the moral role of great literature. I am not sure their positions are still tenable in today's world, but literary studies would not exist without them and without their isolation, resistance, and erudition.

For the *nostoi*, see a recent volume on *The Returning Hero: Nostoi and Traditions of Mediterranean Settlement*, ed. by Simon Hornblower and Giulia Biffis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For the philosophical and then religious readings of Homer, see Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Jean Pepin, 'The Platonic and Christian Ulysses' (1982), reprinted in *Odysseus/Ulysses*, pp. 228–48.

CHAPTER 3

On Pico della Mirandola, Poliziano, and the lights and shadows of the literary Italian Renaissance, see Nicola



Figure 14.

Gardini, *Rinascere. Storie e Maestri di una idea italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2019).

This is my mum just after the war (Figure 14). Decisively looking at the future ahead. She was formidable, fearless, and uncompromising. I hope she still is, now that her mind has been engulfed by the shadow of dementia. I

hope she still reads and has memories of long snowy slopes and a tiny trail of young people climbing on sealskins. I hope the Elysian Fields look like the mountains of her youth.

Dante-and-Levi is a much-treated topic: for an updated view see Tristan Kay, 'Primo Levi, Dante, and Language in Auschwitz', *MLR*, 117 (2022), pp. 66–100. On the complexities of the role of Dante in Levi's times and his work, see Lino Pertile, 'Dante and the Shoah', in the *Oxford Handbook of Dante*, pp. 651–67.

CHAPTER 4

Bruno Nardi's 'La tragedia di Ulisse' was first published in 1937 in the journal *Studi Danteschi*, 20 (1937), pp. 5–15. This is Italy at its most obscure, knee-deep in the slime of Fascism, the racial laws about to be promulgated, a destructive war looming. The indefatigable medievalist — to my knowledge not a proponent of the regime, but neither a vocal opponent — tries to untangle a thread, at least, of the modern tragedy.

I went recently in the Taylorian Library here in Oxford to double-check this essay, reprinted in the collection *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1942). I randomly picked up one of the two copies, and then put it back: I hate readers who underline and gloss library books. I am so pedantic that I erase other people's underlining, do my own, and then erase it before I return books (which is probably more damaging for the paper, and a great loss for those scholars who in 5023 will try to study the 'pre-future' reader's response on those strange printed objects collected in places called, we think, libraries [or perhaps toilets, as one historian will have suggested comparing signs found in the post-apocalyptic sites of the Bodleian Library

and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France])). Just to tell how compulsive I am about this, I recently had a panic attack when my first-ever Kindle sent me a message, as I was scrolling through a random page of a book, saying that ‘356 readers have underlined this passage’. Anyway, the other copy seemed more virgin, so I checked it out. At home, what a surprise! In an otherwise untouched book, an All-Hell-Is-Shit reader had glossed only the essay on *Ulisse*. An old-style handwriting, belonging to someone who clearly read Italian fluently, my guess is more a scholar than a student. Whenever Nardi talks about the *Odyssey* or the fact that Dante placed a great deal of admiration into his *Ulisse*, the marginal comments are as follows: ‘rubbish’, ‘rubbish’, ‘dishonest’. The grand final statement about Dante discovering the discoverer is glossed as ‘silly’ (possibly later, the same or similar hand with a different pencil adds an arrow pointing to ‘silly’ and the comment ‘and uptight’). The note that follows is marked as ‘bollocks’. I could not stop laughing for an entire afternoon thinking about my reluctant philological encounter with this ungracious reader. I will make copies, and maybe even pictures. But then, I think, I will erase the marginal comments, as I usually do.

Modernity ... us. Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) take Odysseus as the image for the power and shortcomings of modernity, of the perennial double bind of progress and destruction; of reason sabotaging its own achievements. I argue that Dante’s *Ulisse* is even more so — but more in a self-destructive kind of way, and that Dante might have foreseen such a double bind from the margins of his mad intertextual tangent.

Citation, citationality, iterability — these are (or were?) hot topics in literary and critical theory. They bring

to mind especially Derrida (*Margins of Philosophy, Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions De Minuit, 1972)) and Butler (*Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990)) and a whole turn-of-the-millennium optimism in the possibility of shaking up the structures of language and power. Of revolution and resistance being inbuilt into language and speech. *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?* I sometimes wonder, crying the optimism of the 1990s, of a younger me.

On the birds of paradise, I enjoyed an illustrated essay by Nathalie Lawrence: 'Fallen Angels: Birds of Paradise in Early Modern Europe' (<https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/fallen-angels-birds-of-paradise-in-early-modern-europe>). Viewed as versions of the phoenix or veritable 'angels', these rare South Asian birds were actually a much-coveted object of hunt and trade.

This little, humble pigeon also deserves a place in my bibliography (Figure 15). It stares, perplexed, at the dreadful monument of Dante that was placed in Santa Croce in Florence on the occasion of the sixth centenary of his birth in 1865, portraying a surly, warlike, dominating Dante, a tamer of eagles (where eagle = empire). They even put the laurel on him, which he never received in life because he refused to write in Latin and clung to his lowly vernacular. 'This is all wrong', my little winged vindicator thinks, as he is about to besmirch and beshit the august composition. 'Who are you, colossal Accipitridae?', it wonders, 'And why are you both (you and the human) so pissed off? I haven't started yet.'

Michael Camille's *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) is a precious text, on medieval art but also on the medieval mind, I think. It begins like this: 'I could begin, like St. Bernard, by asking what do they all mean, those las-



Figure 15. Dante's monument in Florence.

civious apes, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jongleurs that protrude at the edges of medieval buildings, sculptures and illuminated manuscripts? But I am more interested in how they pretend to avoid meaning, how they seem to celebrate the flux of “becoming” rather than “being” (p. 9).

On the Franklin expedition, I have read mostly essays and novels and the random website: I started with Atwood's *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) followed by Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989). After the chapter was done, I read Dominique Fortier's *Du bon usage des étoiles* (2008), to which I am grateful for a beautiful story and for reconnecting me to reading in French.

Gog and Magog and the gates of Alexander are medieval concepts best enjoyed through the reading of the medieval *Roman d'Alexandre*. Medieval Alexander is an explorer in his own way and has touches of Dante's Ulysse.

The Hereford *mappa mundi* is navigable online at <<https://www.themappamundi.co.uk/>>. For portolan charts, see Tony Campbell, 'Portolan Charts from the Late Thirteenth Century to 1500', in *History of Cartography*, ed. by J. B. Harley and David Woodward, 6 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987–), 1: *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (1987), pp. 371–463. I first encountered the T-O map in figure 5 on the website 'mapping the world' by Hanna Vorholt, published by the British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/articles/mapping-the-world>).

A good way to approach the figure and writing of Marco Polo in the new millennium is the volume *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. by Suzanne Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

My 'standard Polo paragraph' is a mix of two paragraphs in chapters 50 and 52 of one Italian edition (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), but then Polo's text is so variable that editions differ greatly. Polo's text is very much on the move

like his journey. Wherever it lands, it takes up local languages and mores, but remains unsteady to the end.

The charge of Orientalism was brought to Dante by Edward Said in, well, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), not without reason. In this matter, however, I prefer the more balanced approaches of recent scholars. See for instance the essays on 'The Mediterranean' by Karla Mallette and 'The East' by Brenda Deen Schildgen in the *Oxford Handbook*, pp. 368–82 and 383–98.

The documents on the brothers Vivaldi are nicely published by the Genoese state archive (<http://www.archiviodistatogenova.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/252/ugolino-e-vadino-vivaldi>). Of the various essays that treat their expedition, the clearest one is by Jill Moore, 'The Expedition of the Brothers Vivaldi: New Archival Evidence', in *Spain, Portugal and the Atlantic Frontier of Medieval Europe*, ed. by José-Juan López-Portillo (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–18 (the Latin transcription of Jacopo Doria's *Annales* is found on p. 14). I read the *Libro del conocimiento* in the edition and translation by Nancy F. Marino (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999).

Dante's *Monarchia* is not my forte. I struggle to enjoy it. Of late, a brilliant essay by Claude Lefort, brought to life again by some of my equally brilliant colleagues, has changed my mind on Dante's political modernity (*Dante's Modernity: An Introduction to the 'Monarchia'. With an Essay by Judith Revel*, ed. by Christiane Frey, Manuele Gragnolati, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Arnd Wedemeyer, trans. by Jennifer Rushworth (Berlin: ICI Press, 2020)).

The classic study on medieval purgatory is Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire* (The Birth of Purgatory) (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

Manuele Gragnolati's *Experiencing the Afterlife* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), his *Amor che move* (Milan: Saggiatore, 2013), and *Possibilities of Lyric* (Berlin: ICI Press, 2020), co-written with Francesca Southerden, have deeply influenced Dante studies of the new millennium with powerful reflections on bodies, embodiment, language, desire and its various forms, and non-linear readings.

The book I make fun of at the end of this chapter is J. L. R. Anderson, *The Ulysses Factor: The Exploring Instinct in Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970). For the NASA website: <<https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/missions/ulysses>>.

CHAPTER 5

'Five senses ...': I first encountered the quote by J. C. Lewis in the *Very Short Introduction to Memory* by J. K. Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

The notion of recapitulation is crucial to John Freccero's *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. See especially the essay 'The Significance of Terza Rima' (pp. 258–71), but the whole book is one of a kind. John was my graduate teacher and dissertation supervisor, and my early work is imbued with the veneration I had for him. He was the most charming lecturer I have ever met. He would sit with his copy of Singleton's facing translation, blank with the exception of the occasional underlining, and talk for two hours without one hesitation. The only times when he snapped from this lecturing trance was when he was remembering his own teacher, Charles Singleton. His voice shaking just imperceptibly, he used to say 'I wish I could talk now to Singleton and discuss with him how my interpretation of this point is different from his'. Then he looked at us —

young people confused as to why one would like to resuscitate their magister to prove them wrong — sighed, smiled, and went on. John Freccero passed away as I am writing this book, in November 2021. And I, who have deviated from his interpretations, as one ought to do to become one's own scholar and to honour one's teachers properly, who have stopped venerating him, and even keeping in touch, wish now I could discuss points of divergence with him. And tell him that I miss him.

'Figura' is the title of a famous essay by Eric Auerbach, where you will find the story of this concept from antiquity to the Christian interpretation, as well as the two little goats from Leviticus 16. 7, still bleating and trembling as they await sacrifice, and pages on Dante's Cato and his role as *figura*. For a critique of figural reading, see Carlo Ginzburg, *La lettera uccide* (The Letter Kills) (Milan: Adelphi, 2021).

'Desire is now' is a beautiful definition of Christian religious blessedness from Caroline Walker Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 339, here glossed with my highest authority on emotions, Tina Turner ('Paradise Is Here', from the album aptly entitled *Break Every Rule*, Capitol Records, 1986).

On the various mutations of Orpheus in antiquity and the middle ages, see John Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). 'Orphée noir' is Sartre's preface to the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, ed. by Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948). The film *Orfeu Negro* is now available on YouTube, and it does look dated without the tough love of the *cinéforum's* wooden seats.

The Virgil/Eurydice pattern in earthly purgatory was noticed already by Renaissance commentators and

picked up by Robert Hollander in *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia nella Commedia* (Florence: Olschki, 1983). Occasionally, scholars point out the Orphic pattern in the Beatrice/Dante story. The standard interpretation — to which I am allergic, as you know by now — is that, you have guessed, Dante either damns or corrects Orpheus, like all other ancient myths, because he has god on his side.

Now a *memoir*, not a memory, Nicola Gardini's novel *Nicolas* (2022) has tied the departed beloved to literature. Indissolubly.

CHAPTER 6

I learned about the theme of the enchantress turned hag from Barbara Spackman's 'Inter ursam et musam moritur: Folengo and the Gaping Other Mouth', in *Refiguring Woman: Gender Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Juliana Schiesari and Marilyn Migiel (Ithaca [talk about a dream publishing place!], NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 19–34. I have learned many things from Barbara, who was my graduate teacher too. Most importantly, the subtle relations between gender and rhetoric, and how to unveil a misogynist discourse. More intimately, the power of engaged scholarship and that we are allowed to dislike some canonical writers.

A very learned and original take on the long and complex history of the representation of the sirens is Agnese Grieco, *Atlante delle sirene* (Milan: Saggiatore, 2017).

The most enlightening essays on medieval illuminations are those by Michael Camille. For the illuminated Dante, see the recent collection called *Dante visualizzato*, ed. by Rossend Arqués and Marcello Ciccuto in five volumes: the reference to the quarterdeck of the mind comes

from the essay by Anna Pegoretti, 'Un Dante "domenicano": la *Commedia* Egerton 943 della British Library', in the first volume (Florence: Cesati, 2017), pp. 127–42. To childishly enjoy the images, do roam the sites of the British Library, Bodleian Library, French National Library, and the Illuminated Dante Project.

It is immensely entertaining to skewer Geryon with the double fork of fraud and fiction. It is delightfully modern to try and figure out where Dante places himself in this equation — does he really claim he is 'non-fiction'? or is he messing with us? It stopped being fun and became very worrying the day I was flipping through a newspaper and saw Ameca, the robot with a human face (Figure 16) whose benign appearance raised the temperature of my internal malaise until I realized that he (they?) had the Dantean 'face of a just man' and looked exactly like the medieval representation of Genesis's serpent with a human face, on which images of Geryon are patterned. I only later realized that Ameca might be the English sound translation of *amica*, the Latin and Italian word for female friend. I tried watching a YouTube video on Ameca but it was prefaced by a mandatory McDonald's ad, so I quit. 'This is all wrong!' I erupted. 'From Genesis to now.'

The silence of the siren is the core of Kafka's rewriting of the myth, as I realized after I wrote my chapter. I had not thought of Kafka's short story for a long time until I found it mentioned in an article by Clayton Koelb, 'Kafka and the Sirens', in a volume called, simply, *Homer*, ed. by Katherine Callen King (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 191–208, on which I stumbled by chance while looking for something else in the library. Internet notwithstanding, I still believe in chance encounters in library aisles. [There is more to this chance encounter with Kafka, but I will tell you another time.]



Figure 16. Ameca.

ONE WORD GLOSSARY

‘We’. You have noticed that I use freely this pronoun throughout the book. Who are we? Readers may ask. ‘Us’, is the short answer. Let us (oops!) begin with what ‘we’ is not. It is not, clearly, the *plurale maiestatis*, the ‘royal we’, pasted there to say that there is more to ‘us’ than to you because my name is on the cover.

It is also not, hopefully, a 'universalizing we', although sometimes I fear I stray unintentionally into it, and retrospectively ask for your pardon. It is creepy, even when it is benign, when 'we' are the kind of people 'we' know and like — liberal, tolerant, pacifist, feminist, tree-loving, organic-purchasing, flexitarian. In a couple of cases, I have noticed the universal 'we' through re-reading, but I have left it there, as a testimony of how easy it is to slip.

Sometimes it is the 'didactic we' that we teachers use in the classroom to denote (in earnest, I believe) a shared space for learning, full of desire for knowledge. I hear this type of plural applies to preachers as well (ouch!). But, look at it another way, it also applies to aerobic teachers (a category from which I am excluded by reasons of physical clumsiness, although I am no stranger to the sweaty and euphoric collectivity of a group galvanized by the exhortation 'let us firm up those buttocks, now, together!'). It applies wherever there are walls and a shared activity perhaps? It may be kind, pedagogic, and enthusing but it is also gated, I realize now.

I hope my 'we' is more porous than that. I hope it addresses, without identifying it, a community of passionate and curious readers. I think it is called a 'narrative (?) we', and it implies this kind of spiel: 'we are in the same boat' (well, Dante says something similar in the second proem to *Paradiso*, as 'we' have seen), 'but I am no captain. We are all rowing or sailing. We ain't getting nowhere. But it is good to be together.' It reminds me of another boat that Dante imagined to navigate with his readers-friends and their lovers. A magic little vessel, lost like Ulisse's, but not in a threatening way. No shipwreck (or Eden) in sight, only capricious pleasure, and a bunch of

'us', perhaps captured and absorbed in the present of reading.*[footnote in the back matter? Anarchy reigns – I need to wrap up soon]

Reading is an elite activity in only one sense — it is a choice. It is exclusive because it requires concentration and absorption away from 'things'. Its only real currency is curiosity. Its wealth, words. You do not have to be literate or educated to be a reader. This is the little that I have learned from studying the medieval practices of reading.

But sometimes it is only me and you. You, the reader whose eyes are scanning now this page, and whose hands are leafing this book (or who are listening to this, or scrolling on the computer, or ...). I do not presume to know you. Nor that you and I agree. But we are a 'we' in the moment of reading. Reading is some kind of solidarity.

Of you I know nothing but this mute message that sustains my journey.

And I am a recidivist, as one might have noticed. This is a quote from a poem. A poem about the sea, for that matter. Or better, a poem about the place and moment in which the river meets the sea, the end of Eugenio Montale's

* 'Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io | fossimo presi per incantamento | e messi in un vasel, ch'ad ogni vento | per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio; | sì che fortuna od altro tempo rio | non ci potesse dare impedimento, | anzi, vivendo sempre in un talento, | di stare insieme crescesse 'l disio. || E monna Vanna e monna Lagia poi | con quella ch'è sul numer de le trenta | con noi ponesse il buono incantatore: | e quivi ragionar sempre d'amore, | e ciascuna di lor fosse contenta, | sì come i' credo che saremmo noi' (Guido, I wish that you and Lapo and I could be taken by magic and placed in a boat that, whatever the wind, was carried over the sea wherever you and I chose to go, unhindered by tempest or any foul weather — our desire to be together in fact always increasing, living as we would in unceasing harmony. And with this, that the good wizard should give us for company lady Vanna and lady Lagia and her who stands on number thirty, there to talk always of love; and that each of them should be happy, as I'm sure we would be; translation by K. Foster and P. Boyde).

Delta (from the collection *Ossi di Seppia*, 1928). A poem of confluence. Of the 'confluence of alienness and intimacy', perhaps.

I could imagine my little Ulysses mouthing these words as it takes leave from me, and I from you. I hope you do not mind if I dedicate this quote to you. [I have sent this quote at least three different times to three different lovers, with mixed success at being understood. I hope you do not mind that, too.]

Tutto ignoro di te fuor del messaggio
muto che mi sostenta sulla via:
se forma esisti o ubbia nella fumea
d'un sogno t'alimenta
la riviera che infebbra, torba, e scroscia
incontro alla marea.
Nulla di te nel vacillar dell'ore
bige o squarciate da un vampo di solfo
fuori che il fischio del rimorchiatore
che dalle brume approda al golfo.

Of thee
I know nothing, only
the tidings sustaining my going,
and shall I find
thee shape or the fumes of a dream
drawing life
from the river's fever boiling darkly
against the tide.
Of thee nothing is the grey hours and the hours
torn by a flame of sulphur,
only
the whistle of the tug
whose prow has ridden forth into the bright gulf.
(translation by Beckett) [too bad for the 'thee']

Finally, now that I have reached the end of my little book, I think I owe myself a reflection on the meaning of reading,

writing, and doing scholarship as a way of living and journeying together. These days, the part I read more eagerly in a book is where scholars, and sometimes writers, thank their dear ones (spouses, partners, friends, lovers, children, kind readers). ‘This book would not exist without you’ is the controlled way of saying ‘forget about the book, *I* would not exist without you’. Thanks are, therefore, due to ‘the Pantheon’, the family and friends who write my life and whose life I read. I wish to thank by name the first readers of this book for their amazing kindness, support, and enthusiasm: Francesca Southerden, Manuele Gagnolati, Nicola Gardini, Christoph Holzhey, Marco Formisano, Maggie Kilgour, Craig Offman. I am also very grateful to the ICI Berlin Press editorial team: Louisa Elderton and Claudia Peppel, to Sean Wyer for the help with image copyright, and to Ilaria Fusina and Ray Charles White for reconstructing the cover picture from our shared memories.

Misreadings, mistakes, and errancy are mine — and Ulysses’.

This book is dedicated to my ‘wings’: A (Alessandro) and L (Lyubov) (L-)I.