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## 2. Sing me, o Muse, again

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## 2. Sing me, o Muse, again

The simplicity of it never fails to surprise and amuse me. That at the twin beginnings of what we often consider the first, most representative (even the — ouch — original) texts of Western culture, we should find in order: some rather lethal masculinity (wrath, the man), ‘song’ (now that I find beautiful, and, as much as I have issues with Western culture, I also love it just for this appeal to music, poetry, and voice), a fortified female presence, and, in the second case, ‘me’ (mememe). To top up the line, the fearsome, patrilinear identity of Achilles, and Odysseus’s versatility.

Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος  
οὐλομένην

The wrath sing, o Goddess, of Achilles son of Peleus,  
ruinous

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον

The man, sing me, o Muse, of many places  
(my literal translations)

Virgil, with a powerful combination of self-importance and minimalism, vaporizes the now rickety lady from the first line, organizing wrath into an army and stripping the man of his quiriness (he will shortly reclothe him with piety).

Arma virumque cano.

The arms and the man I [memememe] sing  
(my translation)

It is a long journey, that of the proem of the epic poem, and it travels outside of the layout of this essay, but let me at least recall the narrative genius of Ludovico Ariosto, who, at the height of the Italian Renaissance, brings the ladies back (and an army, for that matter) and ties epic and romance in a masterful, witty knot:

Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori,  
Le cortesie, le audaci imprese io canto.  
(*Orlando Furioso* 1, 1, 1–2)

The women, the knights, the arms, the loves,  
The courtesies, the audacious adventures I sing.  
(my translation)

We are interested in the second Homeric proem; but let us linger on the first, for a moment, and indulge ourselves in the unfailing pen of Philip Roth, with the first undergraduate class of his formidable Classics teacher, Coleman Silk:

‘You know how European literature begins?’ he’d ask, after having taken the roll at the first class meeting. ‘With a quarrel. All of European literature springs from a fight.’ And then he picked up his copy of *The Iliad* and read to the class the opening lines. “Divine Muse, sing of the ruinous wrath of Achilles . . . Begin where they first quarreled, Agamemnon the King of men, and great Achilles.” And what are they quarreling about, these two violent, mighty souls? It’s as basic as a barroom

brawl. They are quarreling over a woman. A girl, really. A girl stolen from her father. A girl abducted in a war. *Mia kouri* — that is how she is described in the poem. *Mia*, as in modern Greek, is the indefinite article 'a'; *kouri*, or girl, evolves in modern Greek into *kori*, meaning daughter. Now, Agamemnon much prefers this girl to his wife, Clytemnestra. "Clytemnestra is not as good as she is", he says, "neither in face nor in figure." That puts directly enough, does it not, why he doesn't want to give her up? When Achilles demands that Agamemnon return the girl to her father in order to assuage Apollo, the god who is murderously angry about the circumstances surrounding her abduction, Agamemnon refuses: he'll agree only if Achilles gives him *his* girl in exchange. Thus reigniting Achilles. Adrenal Achilles: the most highly flammable of explosive wildmen any writer has ever enjoyed portraying; especially where his prestige and his appetite are concerned, the most hypersensitive killing machine in the history of warfare. Celebrated Achilles: alienated and estranged by a slight to his honor. Great heroic Achilles, who, through the strength of his rage at an insult — the insult of not getting the girl — isolates himself, positions himself defiantly outside the very society whose glorious protector he is and whose need of him is enormous. A quarrel, then, a brutal quarrel over a young girl and her young body and the delights of sexual rapacity: there, for better or worse, in this offense against the phallic entitlement, the phallic *dignity*, of a powerhouse of a warrior prince, is how the great imaginative literature of Europe begins, and that is why, close to three thousand years later, we are going to begin there today ...' (*The Human Stain*, pp. 4–5).

Twenty-four books of war, and war, and more war ensue. Siege, skirmish, brawl, night forays, duels under the midday sun, close combat, spear throwing, hollow thuds! on large

shields, fateful chill invading the men's limbs, and souls receding towards Hades with cavernous screams. The wide-open eyes of the dead stare at us from the page. The greatest homosexual love ever narrated, and the best figure of a grieving father ever drawn. A child, half scared and half excited at the sight of a shining helmet, its terrible crest waving in the air.

The second beginning is less incendiary, but no less dramatic and full of consequences. It contains a most exciting adjective: *πολύτροπος* (*polytropos*), made up of the words *polys* (much/many) and *tropos* (way, turn, manner, place, both literal and figurative). English translations vary widely: the man 'of many turns', 'many devices', 'many wiles', 'skilled in all ways of contending', 'ingenious', and more. A recent translation uses the word 'complicated': of this interpretation, I like the etymology (*con-plicare*; to fold together, to produce several folds). The oldest Latin translation calls Odysseus *versutus*, from *vertere*, to turn. Someone who is *versutus* has the capacity to 'turn around' self and events. The core of this adjective is *versus*, a preposition that means 'toward', 'in the direction of', and a noun meaning 'row', 'range', and, therefore, 'line of writing', verse. Changeability, momentum, and poetry; this might be Ulysses' make. And journey. The most honest translation of the first adjective of the *Odyssey* might well be 'the man of many journeys'.

This capacious adjective makes of Ulysses a theme rather than a character: a slang, a name for something, a dimension, a gadget. The theme of Ulysses is peculiar in that it is not exclusive of literature or art, but it has turned, since the beginning, into a cultural issue, a philosophical example, a historical refrain, an anthropological milestone, even the illustration of some kind of human behaviour.

A story. Written over and over again in a sinuous, serendipitous manner, similar to the hero's vagrant journey. It stretches genres, characters, plots, and narratives to make them resemble, strangely, 'life'. Life that is epic, and a fable, and comic, a lyric arpeggio, and a metaphysical tale. Life that explores the edges of death, and then comes back. Life that is at once populated and lonely.

'Made beautiful by fame and adversity' ('bello di fama e di sventura'): as such Ugo Foscolo, an Italian Romantic poet, once defined Ulysses. Beautiful and profoundly fallible, Ulysses is tied to the narrative of being human in small and big ways. In everyday speech an 'odyssey' is a particularly complicated journey, and Ulysses is everybody and everything that is cunning, independent, original, and explorative. In history and literature, Ulysses stands for the desire for knowledge that breaks limits and borders open, often with little regard for consequences: Renaissance navigators, nineteenth-century explorers, cosmonauts of the modern era are all 'Ulysses' in our narratives. While she, of course, waits home.

Not being much of a sailor myself, I hesitated to surf the *mare magnum* of the web in search of the multiple significances of Ulysses, just to find that 'the algorithm' (what/who-ever they are) is one step ahead of me and knows that I only search for books and cultural elucidations. So no surprises there: my open sea is actually just a pond (and so is yours). A bit polluted, for that matter, but not so much that I don't dive in: the ubiquitous Wikipedia, some rather uninteresting books and pseudo-cultural websites. The only remotely not-me reference is also very puzzling: the 'Ulysses App', promising that it 'Helps You Focus on What You Want to Say Ulysses Organizes All Your Projects in One Place'. Why all the robotic capital letters, I ask myself? All in One Place? So dreadfully

not Ulysses; the very opposite of this character's expansion! What were they thinking at Apple? Can they even read? I wonder, and quickly retreat into my chartaceous domains.

### POLYTROPOS

The man of many ways, Ulysses is both wandering and multifaceted. A multidimensional tramp. He is also a multi-form character, who always exceeds itself.

To me, *polytropos* means also 'the man of many versions.'<sup>\*</sup> In this adjective, I find, Homer embeds not only the qualities, but also the afterlife of his Odysseus; the limitless possibilities of the human mind and those of re-writing and re-creation. The *polytropos* is a character always bigger than representation, it is the multiple Ulysses that have been sung since antiquity, the myriad of rewritings, each relaunching the journey. The many incarnations of Ulysses of which literature and beyond is populated are all *tropoi*, 'turns' of the Homeric Ulysses, and there are still more turns to take. Ulysses is probably the most rewritten character of all times [I proudly announce in my lectures. As I put it in writing, I realize that I need either to pull out stats or to say something generically common-sense like 'second perhaps only to Jesus Christ', but I have not done the maths and lack a good second option. Christ is much repeated and little rewritten, now that I think of it. Do not trust me on this one, then. The most rewritten character of all times may well be Topo Gigio].

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\* *Polytropos* is not the only way in which Odysseus is poly-. The prefix of abundance abounds around our hero, with notable epithets being πολυμήτις, *polymetis*, the man of many counsels, or many deceptions; πολυμήχανος, *polymechanos*, the man of many ingenious devices; πολύαινος, *polyainos*, the man of many stories, much praised; and πολύτλας, *polytlas*, meaning resistant, patient, even much-suffering.

*Tropos* is also the ancestor of trope — a truly capacious word in the field of literary studies and beyond: a figure of speech, a way of style, a variation on an established theme, an embellishment, a twist and a turn. Ulysses has many such tropes, from antiquity to our days: some monuments (Dante! Joyce!), expansions (ex.: Kazantzakis), contractions (ex.: Tennyson), challenges (ex.: Walcott, Atwood), but also just beautiful moments (Chaudhuri). [Feel free to change the examples in parenthesis with your own journey into Ulysses. The first parenthesis, however, has become canon: you might have to dislodge it with a lightsaber.]

The Ulysses thread is, I promise, the juiciest, most exciting string you can possibly follow in world literature and art. It is something you can do solo, or with the help of scholars and writers who have done so already. My own Italian literature is full of incarnations of Ulysses, some big and some small, some fun and some on the fascist side of things, some heroic and some decadent, soft spoken, cried out, bent, punched. Again, I will resist the temptation of listing them all, and leave you with my own favourite, a short poem by Umberto Saba, a homosexual Italian-Jewish writer with a touch of Slovenian heritage, a proper *polytropos*, someone for whom troping was a subtle way of life, a matter of survival. The poem, written in 1946, is called *Ulisse*:

Nella mia giovinezza ho navigato  
lungo le coste dalmate. Isolotti  
a fior d'onda emergevano, ove raro  
un uccello sostava intento a prede,  
coperti d'alghe, scivolosi, al sole  
belli come smeraldi. Quando l'alta  
marea e la notte li annullava, vele  
sottovento sbandavano più al largo,  
per fuggirne l'insidia. Il porto  
accende ad altri i suoi lumi; me al largo  
sospinge ancora il non domato spirito,  
e della vita il doloroso amore.



In my youth I sailed | the Dalmatian coast. Tiny islands | rose from the surface of the waves, covered | with algae, slippery, beautiful as emeralds in the sun, | where an occasional bird paused searching for prey. | When the high tide and night submerged them, | sails under wind dispersed offshore | to escape the peril. Today my kingdom | is that no man's land. The port | lights its lamps for others; still driving me on | to the open sea, my unbroken spirit | and the aching love of life (translation by George Hochfield and Leonard Nathan).

It is the sombre first-person voice, although not unique, that does it for me. The old age that says 'in my youth', the metamorphosis of the siren, now fully naturalized into a bird. The no man's land. The skidding and the peril. The wetness and amazing greenness of the viscid rocks. A tiny corner of the Mediterranean in topographical detail. The day and the night. And, of course, the painful love of life.

We give it many names. Some are metaphors like 'source' ('root', 'sprout', 'echo'), too often implying a unidirectional relation between texts. Some are old frills like 'fortune'. Others are neologisms, like 'intertextuality', at the verge of wearing out but still my favourite; or cute understatements like 'reception'; or grand statements like 'influence'. It is post-structuralist, post-Oedipal, postmodern. It is an endless game, vast, lonely, and populated like Ulysses' sea. To me, it is the magic of the great theatre of literature, the childish excitement at the recollection, the pang that redoubles the pleasure of reading.

An old essay by the Italian critic Giovanni Nencioni calls it 'the pleasure of agnition' ('Agnizioni di lettura', 1967). There is a plain and gratuitous pleasure, Nencioni says, in recognizing the pattern of a text within another,

even if it is only a rhythm, or a single word. Technically, agnition is the moment in ancient drama or novel where, with a spasm of excitement, the spectator/reader finds out what they sensed since the beginning, that the shepherd who wandered suspiciously at court and is about to be executed because he was mistaken as a thief is actually the estranged son of the king, actually the daughter who was cross-dressing as a man in order to rescue her lover (or: ... No-I-am-your-father ... [I am wondering whether Darth Vader's black head-thingamabob is nothing else than an image of the dark side of rewriting; whether I have sat endlessly boring hours in front of a TV screen actually watching a saga about the canon. Either way, I did it for the children.]).

Agnition, to me, is not only the identification of another being, the acknowledgement of their significance, or the appreciation of a resolution; it is mutual recognition. It is self-perception. 'Hey there, I know you', I think with a soft smile, when I discover a pre-existing fragment in a text I am reading. 'I know you, and this makes me feel better, happier, more me.' Or: 'I know you are there, even though I have not met you yet. This is comforting.' 'Of course you are here! It cannot be otherwise', as you run through a crowded square to hug a loved one you had not seen in ages.

Call it and study it what you want, rewriting (let's call it this) relies on a simple fact: the subject is not original. Someone, perhaps many, have already written Ulysses — the man of many versions.

What is the attraction? Not sure. In olden times it was more of an obligation: you wanted to call yourself an epic poet, you needed to confront certain passages, to have them in your portfolio. But today? Is it a matter of passion or confrontation?

Whence does it spring forth, where does it flow? Amit Chaudhuri, reflecting on his conversation with Joyce's *Ulysses*, calls it 'the confluence of alienness and intimacy'. It is merging then; influx and outflow. Perhaps the mobile landscape of a delta.

What is the payback? Landing a triple axel? [Yes, I am sucker for figure skating, minus the costumes.] Sneaking into the canon (that menacing, choking headgear) from the backdoor? Or is it a gentler immersion in the great sea of literature?

No matter how you look at it, you will agree that Dante's agitation in front of *Ulysses* appears well founded. That buzz in the air, crease in the text, twinge of nervousness (please please please, master, let me talk to him!) is nothing else than the acknowledgement of the enormous task of rewriting *Ulysses*. This recognition makes Dante the first modern writer, doesn't it? The writer of the last epic and the first novel, as György Lukács called him — truly somewhere between Homer and Joyce, a wonderfully lonely and absurd place to be for a poor Florentine exile in 1307.

Dante's incarnation is, at the same time, utterly new and astonishingly old. An entirely new story is born from the sameness of each textual detail, from the play of multiple sources. Like a patchwork seen from afar, or those pictures that are made of thousands of little photographs — often to mean something truly tautological like 'we are us', 'you are me', difference is good, but we also like unity, we are liberal but do not worry, this is not too radical, we will not ask you to share your wife (or, worse, your car) with your neighbour. Yet the Dantean manifestation of *Ulysses* is somewhat more hypnotic than a picture of President Obama made by thousands of different little pics of Americans — if only because it is brought together not by some haphazard technology, but by a fine weaver of

stories, powered by a chaotic, mysterious, and centuries-long cultural memory.

A crucial piece of information is that, as you will read routinely in Dante scholarship, 'Dante did not read the *Odyssey*.' Of course; he didn't read Greek, as hardly anybody else did in thirteenth and early fourteenth century Italy. Dante did not read the Homeric poems in the original language, but it sounds like he knew the story (and, importantly, the plural stories) of Ulysses very well. He might not have known the *Odyssey* first-hand, but he is somewhat more Homeric than Homer. The sync of his own narration is simply perfect:

Quando  
Mi diparti' da Circe,  
When  
I departed from Circe

When ... The blank at the end of the line, a pause, we have seen, coming after so arduous an attempt to speak that it almost feels like the hero will never be able to utter past this word, and this story will stop here in the agonizing and ineffectual attempt at overcoming the sadistic dictature of language ... 'Quando' is literature's hiatus, the turning of a page in its infinite book.

The second plain fact about rewriting is that each rewriting involves both the new text and the original one, not only in the mind of the reader, but in the teeming flow of literature itself. This is what T. S. Eliot called the 'present moment of the past', the place of the impersonal emotion of art. You simply can no longer read Ulysses without its rewritings. Case in point, which has partially, if not entirely, to do with Dante's rewriting, is the fact that we tend to think of the *Odyssey* as a poem about sea voyage. Homer's Ulysses is an accidental navigator, Dante's is a real one.

*AMETRETOS PONOS: A LABOUR WITHOUT MEASURE*

Strange as it sounds, the *Odyssey* is not technically, or not entirely, a travel book, or a book about the sea. What most of us call 'odyssey' is actually less than half of the twenty-four books that make up the *Odyssey* — namely books 5–13 (or, if we want to be really strict, books 9–12). The beginning (1–4) is about his son Telemachus's own travel to find news of his missing father, and the end (13–24) is about Odysseus returning to Ithaca, reconnecting with Penelope, and slaughtering her suitors. We tend to forget that the *Odyssey* is very much about son and wife and home. Here too they say Dante did not know the *Odyssey*, and yet he dismisses it so well. Neither father, nor son, nor wife (né ...né ...né): I will not address the beginning or ending of the story that (you say) I have not read.

Odysseus is after all not born a navigator; he is a farmer, a shepherd king of a small, forsaken rocky island. He is impelled to travel not by curiosity but by a pseudo-voluntary military draft: he is one of the many small-time kings who must offer help to the revenge war of the more powerful Achaean kings, Agamemnon and Menelaus. [You know the story: the Trojan Paris abducts Menelaus's wife, a thousand ships are launched, war, and war, and more war ensues, Troy falls after many years of siege.] Although there is no historical trace of the Homeric Trojan war, this is a repeated pattern in Greek history: independent kingdoms or cities forging alliances into larger federations under the influence of dominant entities and living in a constant state of instability and war (think Athens and Sparta, for instance, and that endless skirmish or local scuffle that we are used to calling, rather grandiosely, the 'Peloponnesian Wars').

Odysseus is cunning and puts himself in trouble. He is punished (not rewarded) with an adventurous return and a reputation for curiosity.

As many readers have pointed out, at the ideal centre of the *Odyssey* there are deep roots, those of a mighty olive tree. In book 23 we read that young Odysseus had carved his nuptial bed from this tree, leaving its roots intact, then built his bedroom around it, and then the palace. Odysseus is strangely yet enormously rooted. French poet Paul Claudel puts it with particular grace. Anchor and root, sailor and poet, tree and poetry, Penelope and the Muse, are all implicated in an inextricable plant-like dream:

La racine de l'Odysée, c'est un olivier.

Cet olivier, Homère, j'en suis sûr, l'a rencontré dans un de ses voyages, et pourquoi pas à Ithaque même? Quel bel arbre! Aussi fier, aussi pur, aussi radieux, j'allais dire presque aussi saint, dans la force de sa fibre tendue, que l'un de ces êtres parfaits, de ces irréprochables plants humains, dont l'art hellène a perpétué au milieu de nous le témoignage. On parle d'un marin qui jette l'ancre, dit le poète, et moi, je vois ici un être vivant qui est capable de m'enraciner pour à jamais avec lui à ce coin de propriété. De quelle intensité il est attaché à ce qu'il aime et quelle éloquence de ce feuillage d'argent dans la lumière à parler de ses racines! Arbre sacré, enfant de Zeus, médiateur entre la substance et l'azur, ah! je le sens! désormais ce n'est plus à une autre industrie que la tienne que je demanderai cette grâce qui est l'huile! Ah! si les dieux m'avaient accordé une autre épouse que celle-ci invisible, la Muse, en qui m'est dénié tout ce qui fait la vie des autres hommes, c'est à ton fût, immortel, que je voudrais amarrer la couche nuptiale. De tes branches je ferais mon toit et j'en enclorais l'ombre par un mur. Nul dans ce sanctuaire dont tu es l'âme ne serait admis à pénétrer que moi seul et celle que j'aurais choisie. Et si le sort, un jour, pèlerin d'un rêve inextricable, ne refusait pas au bâton de l'aveugle ce qu'il accorda à la rame du navigateur, c'est là que

m'attendrait, inviolablement fidèle entre les prétendants à l'époux, Pénélope, ma patrie! (Preface to the 1949 Gallimard edition of the *Odyssey*).

The root of the *Odyssey* is an olive tree.

Homer saw this olive tree, I am sure, in one of his voyages; and why not in Ithaca itself? What a beautiful tree, as proud, as pure, as radiant, almost saintly, I would say, in the force of its tense bark, as one of these perfect beings, of these irreproachable plant-humans, of which Hellenic art has brought witness to us. We are talking about a sailor who throws the anchor and I, says the poet, I see here a living being that has the capacity of rooting me with itself, forever in this corner of land. With such intensity it is attached to what it loves, and such is the eloquence of this foliage, silver in the light, when it speaks of its roots! Sacred tree, child of Zeus, mediator between matter and the blue, ah! I can feel it! From now on, I shall not ask for the grace of oil from any other trade but yours! Ah, had the gods given me another bride than this invisible Muse, in which the life of other people is denied to me, I would have liked to moor my wedding bed to your immortal trunk. I would make my roof with your branches and enclose their shadow with a wall. No one but me, and she whom I would have chosen, would be allowed to enter this sanctuary of which you are the soul. And if one day fate, wanderer of an inextricable dream, were not to refuse to the blind man's stick what it conceded to the navigator's oar, it is here that she would wait for me, inviolably faithful to the husband among the suitors, Penelope, my homeland! (my translation).

If the root of the *Odyssey* is the olive tree, its heart is, undeniably, the travelling. It begins with a solitary island, the dwelling of a sorrowful goddess in the middle of the sea, the colours blinded by the sun (book 5). To me, it

begins almost with a haze, which has to do with her name and attribute, the Luminous Hider. Like the scorching sun hides, so is she too much light. Too much, that is the curse of dear Calypso.

Sounds familiar, does it not? Hiding and dazing with all sorts of artful blandishments a lover who wants to leave, who stays in the insular diorama just out of boredom and lack of a better prospect. Sleeping next to her at night, and sitting on the beach during the day, with his dour little face forever looking out at sea. Eventually she allows her lover to depart on a makeshift raft (she helps him build the raft, for god's sake!), we see him becoming a point on the horizon, he is gone. With a sigh we walk back with Calypso, her steps now heavy on the deserted beach, a silent tear shining like a liquescent diamond, a poor gem disappearing in the burning sand.

Another woman waits on another beach. A girl indeed. The amazement of one's first love. The fear, and attraction, and estrangement of young sexuality. It is like a game, isn't it? Carefree, the girls, Nausicaa and her maids, are playing ball. One missed shot and the ball falls into the sea — they scream, playfully, and awake the naked hero. How old is Nausicaa? Maybe twelve or thirteen, or even younger. About to disappear in a culture that wants her married as soon as possible to satisfy genealogies and alliances. She is sensible and will not counter the tide. She will let go and be subsumed by it. She is not one of those mad maidens who haunt ancient myth or tragedy by wanting something or someone else, or refusing to comply, and being forever cursed. He is not the hideous older man who takes advantage of an innocent girl. This is just a marvellous impasse.

She is pliable, Nausicaa. Odysseus compares her to a young palm shoot, one he saw, he says, in Delos —



for a long moment, he says, he just stopped to admire it, forgetful of past and future, and of the war he was leading. Spellbound, because that plant did not look of this earth. Its charm, I imagine as I pause my reading, fulfils all the senses: supple, yet firm, it is cold and smooth to the touch, the rustle of its leaves almost inaudible; bright and dewy, I sense its warm scent, like fresh bread, and even a particle of its unripe taste in my mouth.

The episode of the beach of the Phaeacian island is, like the vision of the palm sprout, a suspenseful and enchanted moment. The young girl and the old hero facing each other, each confronting some tangled internal turmoil. The old male battered and naked — he barely reaches for a branch to cover his crotch (and, no, strangely it is not comic) — the girl not knowing why she is not scared. They both know that there is something wrong in this encounter, and they let it go. In doing so, they forever remind us that there is something divine in one's first love, in one's last.

The extended episode that follows — the long sleepless nights that Odysseus spends hearing and telling his story at the court of Alcinous, Nausicaa's father — is like an incision in the *Odyssey*, a long recess full of pleasures.

I am not, normally, one of those people who idealizes the old or 'other' times, but if there is one thing I am terribly sad not to have witnessed it is entertainment before the media. But my mother did. Born in rural Piedmont she spent her early years living with her family in a watermill in the countryside. In the thirties, it was still common for a *cantastorie*, a wandering storyteller (literally story-singer), to stop by farmsteads at night and entertain several families with improvised narrations in exchange for dinner and a little change. They would all gather in the barn, lie down comfortably in the hay, and listen to stories that had very remote roots, some of them old as the *Odyssey*.

Stories of battle, journey, love, and marvellous creatures encountering deities from the local folklore, the horror genre and the native dialect mixed to an estranging comic effect. Thrillingly (to me, who still owns a speck of that experience through my mother's own storytelling) this is roughly the same ritual that happened for millennia around the world, in humble homes as well as palaces and, indeed, in those perfect nights at the palace of Alcinous.

Long, infinite nights (11, 373), ambrosial nights (11, 330), nights that you don't want to end. It is the beauty, and wisdom, and artifice of story (11, 367–69) that weaves their voluptuous darkness, their splendid impenetrability. These nights remind me of the 'vantablack', the ur-dark I once saw in a museum: a tone so rich that it makes the spectators want to dive into it, surrounding them with a velvety desire.

In one such night, we meet Demodocus, the blind bard (after encountering him, does the 'Homeric Question', the issue of the historicity of the blind poet Homer, matter at all? I sometimes wonder). In one such night, Odysseus narrates 'the odyssey' that we know, the story of sea adventures that becomes then the type of the *Odyssey* itself. The ill-advised raid on the island of the Ciconians; lotus eaters; the Cyclops and the man-eating Polyphemus; the land in sight!; Aeolus's wineskins releasing the winds; more anthropophagy with the giant Lestrygonians; Circe, the beautiful weaver-pharmacist who turns them all into pigs (I never quite understand why) but then becomes Odysseus's best ally (here too I do not quite understand why — to be sure, he has a way with women); [...]; the sirens; Scylla and Charybdis (do you know they really exist? They are facing currents in the Strait of Messina, between mainland Italy and Sicily: swimming there is some sort of dangerous and exhilarating dance); the Sun's untouchable cattle.

[ ... ]: the ellipsis in the previous sentence is the *nekyia*, or the evocation of the dead (book 11). An enormous parenthesis in the story, perfectly reclined in the space of one book, a bullet-perfect hole, a *lacuna*, but literally so: a pool of blood where stories surface and dive. A voyage at the end of the world that is also the beginning of the return.

For the reader of Homer, the *nekyia* is a hair-raising passage. We are still in the warm night of Alcinous's court, smelling of spices and myrtle, of humid stars and ambrosia, the perfume of sweet dreams bygone that never came true. The tone suddenly veers from adventurous drama to horror. The colour no longer the healthy blue of the Mediterranean sea and the luxuriance of its islands, but fog, and dirty darkness, black and fuming blood, icy crying, and a fear that makes you so pallid you look green. Odysseus reaches the land on the far side of Oceanus, whose inhabitants, the Cimmerians, live in eternal night (sounds north to us); he digs with the sword a pit of one cubit (18 × 18 inches or 45.7 × 45.7 centimetres: I love the detail), and fills it with blood from sacrificial victims. As in a horror story, the zombie-like dead appear. Some kind of mad desire impels them to drink the blood; only then can they talk. But Odysseus keeps them at bay with the sword, he does not allow them near the pit. In a scene that mixes horror as the genre and horror as the intolerable, the hero meets his own mother, whom he had last seen alive in Ithaca, and yet he can't let her approach. He must chase her away with the sword, because he needs to talk to someone else first, another blind man, Tiresias, the great diviner who will foretell his future. Only after talking to Tiresias will Odysseus allow his own mother to drink the blood, only then will he talk to her, try to embrace her. After her, a rank of women and men come by, all famous, and glorious, and tragic; he still protects the pit with the sword and only

allows one at a time to drink. Here a scowling Agamemnon tells the blood-tinged story of his death; here heroes and heroines come to die for real. The *nekyia* is not only a non-place at the end of the world; it is also the end of all previous words, it is heroism gone bad, it is Achilles telling us: 'I'd rather be a farmer, a slave, a nobody on earth, than the king of these threadbare shades' (11, 488–91; my translation). It is the end of glory. The beginning of story.

For the reader of Dante, the *nekyia* is an amazing hall of mirrors where Odysseus narrates the *Comedy* (a journey to the underworld) that produces its own Ulysses, a new incarnation of himself. Now this does sound complicated but let me explain.

The *nekyia* is, after all, a journey in the land of the dead, although technically Odysseus only does part of the journey, from Circe's island to the end of the world, while the dead do the other part from the depth of Erebus to the bloody pit, where, summoned by the hero's prayers and offerings, they put up their show. The *Odyssey's nekyia* may not be the first but it is certainly a crucial early narrative of the *katabasis*, the journey to the underworld, a fundamental epic and narrative staple, and a tradition that peaks in Dante's *Comedy*. Homer's *nekyia* is the basis for Virgil's *Hades*, which is in turn the 'source' (allow me) of Dante's *Comedy*, almost literally so at the beginning of *Hell*, where the borrowings from Virgil are most evident. So popular was the genre of the descent to the underworld (*descensus ad inferos*) that even Jesus Christ was made to do a *nekyia*, in a time, that between death and resurrection, when he was surely tired: the apocryphal, but hugely entertaining episode of the Harrowing of Hell. Up to the present day, literature, popular culture, and film are packed with (mostly male) heroes going to a scary and dangerous place below/on/above earth to achieve renovation for

themselves and salvation for others. Lately, evil is often portrayed as a faceless, humid, hairy, [mortally boring and horrendously obvious] gaping cut. In ancient and early modern katabases, though, there seems to be more fear, more fun, and more trust in embodiment and disembodiment.

In the first major take on the narrative of the underworld, then, a blind (appropriately so) prophet opens up the story of Odysseus to its future incarnations. Once you have killed all the suitors (i.e., at the end of the *Odyssey*, book 24), Tiresias tells him, you will need to depart again. You need to take an oar (unclear whether to navigate or just to carry on his shoulder — the latter looks goofy, I know, but please hang on) until you come to the people who do not know the sea, do not eat salt with their food, and do not know about ships (so he must be walking quite a bit with the thing on his shoulders). There, a very clear sign will be given to you: a passer-by will look at you and say that you are actually carrying a winnowing fan (the tool used to separate grain from chaff — if you, like me, were wondering. It looks, to me, like a larger version of the equally enigmatic lacrosse stick). At this point, you need to plant the oar in the ground. Only then you can celebrate sacrifices, come home (again!), and finally encounter a sweet death in your old age ... a sweet death ... *ex halòs*: meaning either ‘from’ or ‘away from’ the sea. Un-be-lie-va-ble!

To make sure that readers are shackled to this absurd story, Odysseus retells it *verbatim* to his wife (*Odyssey* 23, 248–84), merely changing the ‘you’ of Tiresias to his ‘I’. He calls his future a labour without measure (*ametretos ponos*): he is right; the feat, or toil, of Ulysses’ after-story is still incommensurable today. Re-reading the prophecy away from the madness of the *nekyia* and within the domestic context of Penelope’s anxiety (whaat? you’re leaving again!

[she is right too]) we notice a couple more things. The emphasis on the transition between the world of the sea and that of the land. The irrationality of the guy seeing someone with an oar and thinking winnowing fan (when it was, throughout, a lacrosse stick), the absurdity of planting the oar in the ground: these details colour the story with the hue of a dream and make it strangely human.

With our heads still spinning from the sweeping arc of the prophecy, let us be amazed at what this means to us as readers of Dante: the story writes itself within the story. Within an eschatological context (read: from hell) Odysseus tells the story of Tiresias telling him that he must leave again and will die at sea. He tells, in other words, the story of the death of Dante's Ulisse. Maybe. Maybe a future me will die at sea, says Odysseus. The elusiveness of *ex halòs* is the element that at once binds and disconnects the Greek and the Italian Ulysses.

Remember Dante's own ambiguity? His Ulisse actually gets to see land, and '*from the new land* a whirlwind rose' that tosses and turns the boat according to the will of *another*. Can this be classified as a land or a sea death? Who is 'another'? ... I know, I know, it is god ... but for the reader of the third millennium, it might as well be the god of story, endlessly playing variation.

Incidentally, that god is the god of story is not too far-fetched, even for the ancients and the medievals. Augustine, for one, envisaged the story of the universe as a poem (*magnum carmen*, a great poem, or *musicum carmen*, a song) and god as its endless, unrelenting moderator. Like a writer or a musician, god knows 'what and when to give, to add, to take away, to withdraw, to increase, or to diminish' ('novit ... quid quando impertiat, addat, auferat, detrahat, augeat, minuatur'; *Letters* 138, 1, 5). [A great reading of this theme, from which this quote is taken, is Leo Spitzer's

*Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*. Spitzer was an Austrian-Jewish critic who, facing the tragic whirlwind of twentieth-century history, upheld relentlessly the continuity of antiquity and the middle ages, notwithstanding the logical and spiritual madness that both ages were at risk to evoke. I hope to return to this, but if not, please read Spitzer. And Auerbach. And Curtius. Please.]

The ambiguity of the *Odyssey*, vast like the sea, becomes in Dante the uncertain vastity of god itself, the ever equivocal story of god's existence.

And there is more. In the very text that he didn't read, Dante even finds his super-line. 'We made our oars wings in a mad flight', the apogee of canto 26, was already partially written in *Odyssey* 11, 125 (and 23, 272), 'oars [...] that are wings to the boats'. The context, however, couldn't be more different: you will arrive, says Tiresias, to people who don't know the sea, don't eat salt in their food [is he heading to Florence, wonders Dante?],<sup>†</sup> know absolutely nothing about boats with minium-stained cheeks (a beautiful way of saying that the prow was painted with vermilion), nor of handy/handsome oars that are wings to the boats ('ἐνήρε' ἐρετμά, τά τε πτερὰ νηυσί'; 11, 125).

Neither (Telemachus) ... nor (Laertes) ... nor (Penelope) says Dante .... No (sea) ... no (salt) ... no (boats) ... no (oars-as-wings) answers Homer from the bottom of the bloodstained pit. I win! (H. also says).

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† One of the most touching moments of the entire *Comedy* is the verse in which Dante prophesies his own exile in the words of his ancestor Cacciaguida (*Paradiso* 17, 55–60). 'You shall come to know how salt is the taste of another's bread' (58–59). Still today, bread in Florence is baked without salt, which is a real pain in the palate for non-Florentines, and yet it is also poetry come alive every morning in bakeries.

I am sure there are many other direct contacts between the unread *Odyssey* and the unknown *Comedy*. They are not sources, or references; they are conversations. This morning, I entertained myself with a stunning play on the chessboard of literature: the face-off between the angry divinity from the island and the tiny human offshore in the final lines of *Inferno* 26 and in the episode of the Cyclops in book 9 of the *Odyssey*.

'No-one blinded me' — cries Polyphemus, the angry divinity, from the shore of the island, while the men hurry to lift the anchors and row away.

'I am Odysseus who blinded you!' — laughs the tiny human. The angry divinity throws a boulder in the sea, unsteading the boat.

'Some-one is sinking me' — moans the tiny human, his ship just offshore, nearing the island of Purgatory.

'I am God, for Christ's sake!' — shouts the angry divinity from the shore of the island, throwing a whirlwind at sea, capsizing the boat.

#### SIC NOTUS ULIXES?

It is true that Dante did not read the *Odyssey* first-hand. Or second hand, for that matter: there is no such thing as the 'translation' of a text in the middle ages, but only endless retelling, expanding, modifying. Homeric stories find their ways into medieval ones in the most eclectic and sometimes absurd ways. The stories of Troy are more popular than those of Odysseus, as if the feudal middle ages were more comfortable with stationary battle than travel. No need to read the rather dull *Roman de Troye*: the *Chanson de Roland*, after all, is the medieval *Iliad*, complete with a raging alpha male and touches of homoeroticism. This time, however, it is not about goddesses bickering and



some lucky prick winning the love of the most destructive beauty of all times, but about those darn infidels invading Spain.

Unless, of course, the entire *Comedy* is the new *Odyssey*. This is a bit of a stretch, I admit, but it is the same stretch that binds navigation and space voyage. The *Comedy* is, in other words, the *Odyssey* (one curious hero, fallen in divine disgrace, finds his way home) rocketed below and above the plane of the earth. With one important difference. The *Comedy* is firmly, irremediably, on foot, with some levitation at the end. Its text navigates, though. Oh it does; you will be amazed.

If you play the game of 'source' in the millennia that run between the *Odyssey* and the *Comedy* you will find that there is nothing new in Dante's incarnation — and this is also the greatness of it. In order to find the tesserae from which Dante's splendid new image of Ulysses is built, we need to look into the Latin reception and imagination of Ulysses. First, however, let us listen to the silences that proverbially speak volumes.

Dante himself announces one omission-cum-distortion in a comic way. As we have seen in the initial reading, he has his Virgil address the ancient heroes with some truly devious lines — 'if I deserved of you while I lived, if I deserved of you much or little when in the world I wrote the lofty lines' (*Inferno* 26, 80–82) — the word 'deserved' repeated twice, as to underline that ... no ... Virgil did not deserve any credit from the ancient heroes, his version of Ulysses in the *Aeneid* being a flat picture of a manipulator. Which fits well with Dante's placement of Ulysses in the pouch of the evil counsellors, but not with the story itself.

Remember the proem of the *Aeneid*? 'I sing the man and the arms': with it, Virgil announces that his poem will section, summarize, and bind together the two an-

cient epics whilst writing their sequel, the maritime and adventurous journey from burning Troy (the 'Odyssean' books 1–6), and the war in the new and fateful homeland to found the city of Rome (the 'Iliadic' books 7–12): a whole new Roman epic that will astonish the literary world. His hero of choice, the traveller-warrior Aeneas, is neither Achilles nor Odysseus. In putting down the ancient heroes, Virgil rages especially against the latter, gathering an anti-Odysseus tradition that was already live in ancient Greece, especially among the tragic poets. [In a haste; soon after Homer, the *polytropos* finds a fork in the road, either as the poly-clever or the poly-devious.]

We read of Ulysses mostly in the second book of the *Aeneid*, in the context of the tragic story of the fall of Troy. The adjectives 'durus' (harsh; 2, 7) and 'dirus' (sinister; 2, 762) open and close a truly damning portrait: he is insidious (2, 90; here we read of the 'envy of insidious Ulysses'; 'invidia pellacis Ulixi'), intimidating and belligerent in words and deeds (2, 97–99), an inventor of crimes ('scelerum inventor'; 2, 164), and again, lethal ('dirus'; 2, 261; he is later seen wounding an enemy; 2, 436). And on and on we go. Almost at the close of the poem, Virgil coins for him the cruel alliteration 'fandi factor' (9, 602); 'liar', but literally 'fabricator of speech'.

Virgil's stance towards Ulysses is, however, more intriguing than it appears, in that his Ulysses is repeatedly reported. We never read about Ulysses, but about Ulysses in the words of Aeneas, reporting in turn Laocoon, Sinon, and Achaemenides. Even the 'fandi factor' label is placed in the rather unexpected and far remote mouth of Numanus, the brother-in-law of Turnus, the king of the Latins conquered by Aeneas. It is a really strange scene (9, 590–637). Numanus, a rather fascist character, extols the toughness and uber-masculinity of his people: why did these effem-

inate foreigners come to challenge them? What madness made these faggots think that they can steal Latin wives? There are no Greeks here, no Ulysses inventor of words ('non hic Atridae neac fandi fictor Ulysses'; 9, 602) — as if Ulysses were some kind of universal figure for the limpness of the Easterners (Greeks and Trojans alike). Needless to say, he is shot down with an arrow by young Ascanius, Aeneas's son. Like Ascanius's fellow Trojans, we cheer and cry out in joy and lift our hearts to the stars, thankful for this textual vengeance.

'Sic notus Ulixes?' (*Aeneid* 2, 44). This is how you know Ulysses to be? Or, more cursorily, Don't you know Ulysses? — this is the only genuine question about the Greek hero in the whole *Aeneid*, and it is uttered by a 'just' character, the Trojan priest Laocoon, while trying to convince his citizens not to bring the Trojan horse inside of the city walls. The fact that he ends up gobbled up with his children by two monsters stirred from the sea suggests that ... no, actually, we do not know Ulysses.

The largest Virgilian defamation of Ulysses takes place just before the demise of Laocoon, in the context of Aeneas's retelling of the fall of Troy at Dido's court (like Ulysses at Alcinous's, here too the hero turns momentarily into a bard). Here (*Aeneid* 2, 57–198) we meet the Greek Sinon, the quintessential traitor, whose mission is to convince the Trojans to bring the horse within the walls. To gain their confidence, he gives himself up to the Trojans like a scared and scruffy fugitive and tells the story of how Ulysses first plotted to have his friend Palamedes killed, and then persecuted Sinon himself relentlessly to the point of forcing the priest Calchas to choose him as sacrificial victim for the smooth departure of the Greek fleet. Sinon's depiction of Ulysses as a violent, deceitful, and impious bully ultimately convinces the Trojans to allow the horse

inside the city and causes the destruction of Troy; what ten years of war and a thousand ships could not accomplish, Aeneas remarks bitterly.

Thus, in the words of a 'pious' (and ultimately Latin) character, a Greek liar and manipulator talks about a Greek liar and manipulator, creating a distortion in which two main questions arise: 1) was Ulysses an insidious bastard to begin with? and 2) is this perhaps a matter of the need, on the part of Virgil, who is indeed rewriting both *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, to downgrade his 'source' as fictitious? (as in: my fiction is better [longer, harder] than your fiction; a lesson that Dante learned very well and inflicts on Virgil at several points of the *Comedy*).

There is only one semi-positive adjective attached to Ulysses in the *Aeneid*: 'infelix' (unhappy; 3, 614 and 690 — hold on to this adjective, please). While in book 2 Aeneas tells the story of the end of the *Iliad*, in the following book he retells his own odyssey, his torturous journey from Troy to the shores of Carthage. In the course of this agitated navigation, Aeneas encounters Achaemenides from Ithaca, one of the companions of 'unhappy' Ulysses, whom Ulysses and his mates carelessly abandoned in the Cyclopes' island (*Aeneid* 3, 588–691). This is some kind of take 2 on the episode of Sinon: the Trojans meet a dishevelled and scared Greek, but this time he is honest and has no intention to harm them. Through the encounter with Achaemenides Virgil revisits, in shorthand, the episode of Polyphemus from the ninth book of the *Odyssey*. Virgil's rewriting is rather faithful, if more condensed and slightly gorier — just a tad more blood spattered on the Cyclops's cave's walls, more burping, and more regurgitation of half-chewed human limbs. More gore and less of the 'modernity' (if I may ...) of the *Odyssey* and its portrayal of the hero's relentless curiosity in spite of danger and risk,

less of the primacy of intelligence over brute force, and none of the cleverest trick in the history of narrative: Odysseus's masterwork in deceit and omission, the erasure of his very name ('my name is no-one' ... 'no one blinded me'). Unlike Homer's, Virgil's Ulysses 'does not forget who he is' when confronting such a terrible challenge ('nec [...] oblitus sui [...] discrimine tanto'; 3, 628–29) — how strange.

Even stranger, though, is the fact that Virgil's description of Polyphemus ('monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens'; 658: horrid, shapeless, enormous monster) reminds me of Baudelaire's Beauty ('monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu'; 22: enormous, terrifying, ingenuous monster). It is the sound-embrace *ingens-ingénu* that does it, hijacking meaning, or hugging it away. *Nec oblitus*; poetry has memory. [Hello there, little agnition. We have been travelling in the same coach for a while, lovely to meet you finally.]

The last lines of the Virgilian episode of Achaemenides reveal it all (at least to me). After leaving the Cyclopes' island, the Trojans keep navigating the Mediterranean, and Achaemenides, whom they rescued, shows them some of the sites of his previous passage with Odysseus (i.e., the passages from the *Odyssey*):

talia monstrabat relegens errata retrorsus  
litora Achaemenides, comes infelicis Ulixi.  
(*Aeneid* 3, 690–91)

Such were the coasts pointed out by Achaemenides, comrade of the luckless Ulysses, as he retraced his former wanderings (translation by H. R. Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold).

Yes!, I exult; this whole thing is really about reading. The shores formerly wandered ('errata [...] litora') that Achaemenides retraces ('relegens') and points out ('monstrabat') are also, and simultaneously, textual places on which

one wanders and makes mistakes (the textual 'errata') that now one re-reads ('re-legere'), understands, and explains to others. In other words, Achaemenides is also a figure for the reader of the *Odyssey* (and perhaps the writer of the *Aeneid*) who returns to the text and re-reads, amends, explains, and makes changes. With Achaemenides, inside of the *Aeneid*, the reader of the *Odyssey* sees things in a different way, or simply in retrospection.

Homer's Odysseus and Dante's Ulisse are not destined, able, or willing to have retrospection. Hence: luckless, unhappy. They do not retrace their steps: one forever caught into the presentness of the moment and the feeble call of 'home', the other eternally tense and stretched towards an impossible future. It is so true that sometimes the obvious is just under your eyes ... Virgil *did* deserve something of Odysseus and his world: the art of re-reading, which is also the first, great, transformative rewriting.

Guess who has the 'last word' on Ulysses in the *Aeneid*? Diomedes! The Dantean plot thickens. Now head of a little kingdom in the south of Italy, he advises the Ausonian ambassadors against waging war on the Trojans, recalling all the misfortunes that befell the Greeks after the sack of Troy (11, 253–95). For Ulysses, predictably, he recalls the episode of Polyphemus. A tame and repentant Diomedes remembers Ulysses' near death at the hand of the Cyclopes. Or does he recall his most clever, 'modern' deed? Impossible to figure out; the Virgilian Diomedes' mention of Ulysses is impassive, empty of any emotion, telegraphic, adjective-less: 'Ulysses saw the Cyclops of Aetna' ('aetnaeos vidit Cyclopas Ulixes'; 11, 263).

The Virgilian Diomedes is clear: those stories are gone, the past is gone, he will not be summoned to battle, the old friends are dead. Doesn't it remind you of the beginning of an action movie, where 'they' try to recall from retirement

the old, rugged, violent guy (cop, cowboy, soldier) who lives in a camper van somewhere in the wild and drinks cheap alcohol at 10am out of dirty cups fished from the scummy sink — for one last mission, they claim, and he initially says no? ‘I don’t wanna know shit about Troy’; ‘I ain’t fighting Aeneas again.’ Luckily, this is a mournful and sophisticated ancient epic, so the hero remains in his dusty trailer, instead of showing up at the commando unit the next morning, sober and ready to sizzle a thousand figurines with a flame thrower. Diomedes takes leave from us with beautiful, profoundly pacifist lines: ‘Ne vero, ne me ad tales inpellite pugnas: | nec mihi cum Teucris ullum post eruta bellum | Pergama, nec veterum memini laetorve malorum’ (Do not, do not urge me to such battles! I have no war with Teucer’s race since Troy’s towers fell, and I have no joyful memory of those ancient ills; *Aeneid*, 11, 278–80; translation by Fairclough and Goold). A broken hero, a fellow human being, who might understandably be portrayed in Dante’s silent Diomedes.

The second puzzling silence in the *Comedy* has to do with the doctrinal and spiritual significance of Odysseus’s journey.

Homer’s story is ultimately a *νόστος* (nostos), a voyage of return. The *nostoi* were both a theme and a genre in archaic literature, mostly but not exclusively retelling the stories of the complex return of various heroes from Troy. As we shall see later in this book, Odysseus, a tramp as he may be, is equipped with nost-algia, the aching desire for return, and to Ithaca he returns, back to being a warrior and a farmer. Dante’s Ulysses is not.

The *nostos* pattern, of which the *Odyssey* is the most famous result, is ultimately simple: it is a journey home, complicated by adventures and misadventures. A king comes home with his trophy wife, riches, and drugs (Mene-

laus). Another king kneels and kisses the shore of his land just to be slain by his unfaithful wife (Agamemnon). Sometimes one stops on the way and settles in a new place (Diomedes). [Now; only the Greeks with their posh short-sightedness could manage to make of the headfirst, aggressive figure of the colonizer a 'returning hero'.] Someone leaves a broken home and establishes a new one in a foreign land (Aeneas). One is exiled and never finds a new home (Dante). Another leaves home one morning in Dublin.

Journey (+) Home. Such is life, isn't it? For a believer, the journey might be that of the soul, and 'home' might be the afterlife: paradise, god, a supernatural spiritual place, the eternal chaos from which lives issue forth. Or, at a sub-lunary level home might be a country, a place. But mostly it is a state, isn't it? For many of us, living for different reasons in a state of radical homelessness, home is built, over and over again, with the fluid matter of the present moment.

Any day, any single afternoon is a *nostos* for me. I am known (and made fun of) for 'making home' literally everywhere I go. Placing my things around me as to signify 'I reside here at this moment'. Taking over tables in coffee shops, benches on promenades, corners in other people's rooms. It doesn't matter whether my dwelling universe issues forth from a suitcase or a handbag or just my pockets. Someone calls me chaotic. My Ithaca is nowhere yet everywhere I go.

My children's early years were marked by incessant travelling. We moved places, travelled for holidays and for medium-length stays in many different countries. We had many homes. Once my son kept on speaking of 'our home in Paris' — yes, mamma, don't you remember it? It had green curtains. I was puzzled. It turned out to be a hotel room. This is when I slowed down travelling, but not the spirit of it.



My childhood, instead, was rather stationary, although marked by a strange, almost metaphysical, sense of rootlessness. As a child, I had a ritual before going to sleep. I would raise the cover over my head and imagine I was in a spaceship, and I (of course!) was manning the control console. From there, I could launch some kind of beams (but of a material kind, they looked like fluid or viscous filaments that opened up in large unbursting soap bubbles) that would reach and enclose all my dear people. They were, in order: my sister, her boyfriend (subject to change), my mother, my father, my grandmother, and my cat. I would make the actual gesture of toggling the lever switches and pronounce their names aloud, in a sort of lullaby string (ale-carlomammapapinnatigi), and they would be engulfed in my bubbles and connected with me. Only then could I fall asleep; my bed somewhat more rooted than Odysseus's yet suspended between the fifth floor of an anonymous apartment building in Milano and the immense night sky. I know what you are thinking: Freud goes to Ithaca. [I do have a shrink. She is called Penelope now that I think of it.]

I had not thought of this ritual for many years, until a couple of nights ago, when I caught myself in an instant of pure elation, the kind of moment where you clench your fist in an air punch and laugh from your throat and hope nobody sees you. The reason? My children had just come home. Big Ulysses from an afternoon playing football with his mates, and little Ulysses from a playdate that lasted a bit too long for my anxious taste. As soon as she passed the door, I was inundated with an absurd, irrepressible, wild happiness. Ithaca is populated again! Today's *Odyssey* is over.

I am a traveller who loves arrivals. I love Ithaca. I love how arrival renews the habitual, fans an ancient flame, blends experience into memory. Like Odysseus, unlike Ulysses. As a matter of fact, one of the aspects of Dante's story

that the nostalgic in me finds most peculiar and thrilling is that, in crafting his *Ulisse*, Dante does not fall for the *nostos*, for the theme and narrative of return that was so easily spiritualized into the image of the soul going back to the supernal world, or 'god'.

Already in antiquity the question arose whether Homer was a philosopher, whether there was a moral message to his fanciful stories (with Plato notably denying this in the tenth book of his *Republic*, with a determination that sounds, at times, like sorrowful adieu). In the Neoplatonic tradition of antiquity and the early middle ages, however, Odysseus's travels were readily interpreted as the return of the soul to its spiritual origins, one of the most quoted examples being a passage in Plotinus's *Enneads* — that amazing zipper between classical antiquity and early Christianity — where we read of Odysseus's journey to Ithaca as the return of the soul to eternity: away from the lures of the world (the adventures), back to where it belongs.

Now, you may or may not want a taste of Neoplatonic writing (overstated by the rather passionate translation of an Irish nationalist): skip to the next page if not inclined. [Giovanni Boccaccio issued the same warning for the racy passages in his *Decameron* — so mind you: you might be missing something intellectually kinky.]

But what must we do? How lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies,

vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water — is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Lower-World, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.

‘Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland’: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso — not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use (Plotinus, *Enneads* 1, vi, 8; translation by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page).

The language is abstruse, but the message is clear: Odysseus is an image of the soul coming back to the supernal spheres where it belongs, his navigation looking more and more like a flight. The Neoplatonic tradition minutely allegorized in this way several details from the *Odyssey*. In one Eustathius of Thessalonica (twelfth century), poor Calypso is read as her name, the Hider, the Enveloper; hence: the body, imprisoning and weighing down Ulysses-soul. From this to seeing the *nostos* as the return of the soul

to God after its journey in embodiment and experience is a very short step. Some Christian interpreters (on the cuckoo spectrum) even equate Odysseus tied to the mast in the sirens' episode to Christ on the cross.

Augustine frequently uses the image of sea travel to signify the journey to god. It is ok, he says, to travel. Nay, it is necessary! But woe unto him (slash her?) who enjoys that which should be only used (= the journey, the adventures), for he (she? most likely she is automatically safe and bored at home) shall forsake the delight of that which is to be enjoyed only by (the universalizing subject that translates as) all: T(capital)he F(capital)ather. Sorry my language went all Neoplatonic-cum-glossator; you might want to listen to Augustine himself. His version of Ulysses is rather legit, his Latin a pleasure to read and to translate.

Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter seipsam. Uti autem, quod in usum venerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est. Nam usus illicitus abusus potius vel abusus nominandus est. Quomodo ergo, si essemus peregrini, qui beate vivere nisi in patria non possemus, eaque peregrinatione utique miseri et miseriam finire cupientes, in patriam redire vellemus, opus esset vel terrestribus vel marinis vehiculis quibus utendum esset ut ad patriam, qua fruendum erat, pervenire valeremus; quod si amoenitates itineris et ipsa gestatio vehiculorum nos delectaret, conversi ad fruendum his quibus uti debuimus, nollemus cito viam finire et perversa suavitate implicati alienaremur a patria, cuius suavitas faceret beatos, sic in huius mortalitatis vita peregrinantes a Domino, si redire in patria volumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur, hoc est, ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritalia capiamus (*De doctrina christiana* 1, 4).

To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love — if indeed it is something that ought to be loved. (The improper use of something should be termed abuse.) Suppose we were travelers who could live happily only in our homeland, and because our absence made us unhappy we wished to put an end to our misery and return there: we would need transport by land or sea which we could use to travel to our homeland, the object of our enjoyment. But if we were fascinated by the delights of the journey and the actual traveling, we would be perversely enjoying things that we should be using; and we would be reluctant to finish our journey quickly, being ensnared in the wrong kind of pleasure and estranged from the homeland whose pleasures could make us happy. So in this mortal life we are like travelers away from our Lord: if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made or, in other words, to derive eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things (translation by R. H. Green).

The step to the religious allegory is short, but it is a step that Dante does not take with his *Ulisse*. In defiance of all ‘sources’ and previous interpretations, he makes his *Ulisse* a resilient, resistant, even morose image of something that the poet didn’t even quite grasp himself, of a human being to come, and planted it in the middle of his Christian poem.

As much as I like the image of Dante peeking ahead in the inscrutable future, though, as much as I believe in the power of literature to foresee things that logic and science and ethics appreciate only much later, his version of *Ulysses* might actually look so new and unseen not because Dante is looking forwards, but because he looks back to a

classical and secular image of the journey of Ulysses as the adventure of the mind (which, in turn, becomes modern in the rear-view mirror of the 'Renaissance').

For some Latin readers, Ulysses is the image of the intellectual adventurer, either enjoying or threatened by the journey of experience. Such is Cicero's Ulysses, intent at listening to the sweet lure of knowledge in the song of the sirens (*De finibus* 5, xviii, 48–49). Similarly, Horace's Ulysses (*Epistles* 1, ii, 17–30) is the champion of virtue and knowledge — 'quid virtus et quid sapientia possit, | utile proposuit nobis exemplar Ulixen' (of the power of worth and wisdom he [Homer] has set before us an instructive pattern in Ulysses; 17–18; translation by H. R. Fairclough) — an ordinary hero who is able to resist the lures of the world (the sirens' song, Circe's potion) and, therefore, to shine and distinguish himself from the spiritless ones, those who are mere ciphers in a faceless crowd, Circe's pigs, Penelope's suitors, fashionistas at Alcinoüs's court. And such is the interpretation of Seneca (who was already annoyed at how scholars harassed the *Odyssey* with interpretation): whether navigating in the Mediterranean pool or, more likely, in the big blue unknown, his hero is tossed and turned in the everyday adventure of anxiety and worry, complete with quotidian sirens and bloodthirsty Cyclops; his home, presumably the 'Ithaca' that only philosophy can afford (*Epistles* 88, 6–8).

Another possible take is that Dante's rendition focuses on one potentiality of the ancient story of Ulysses: that of 'textual adventure'. The adventure of language, writing, and reading was depicted since antiquity as a navigation in perilous waters, with shipwrecks and fortuitous landings; a sort of a winged navigation, indeed, feathered and penned. We shall see later in this little book that Dante makes a

great use of this theme, and naturalizes his Ulisse in the dimension of writing-as-navigation.

Or perhaps it is the adventure that attracts Dante. Period. The journey of the human spirit into madness, into its own sickly fantasies, the nightmares of writing-and-being, of writing-as-being; whereby the discipline of writing, or 'art', keeps it a journey and prevents it from becoming a descent into psychosis. This is Ovid, of course, a writer who is present like no one else in Dante's closet, his perennial ghost source.

Book 14 of the *Metamorphoses* is an overwhelming tour de force in storytelling, in which Ovid mixes and expeditiously rewrites the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, with touches of his own mad epic of shape-changing. He morphs one poem into the other, creating an epic monster that then is backwashed into the very poem that has produced it. It is astounding to read. It is alive.

The plot of this extraordinary creature is better enjoyed all in one breath, as a sort of long telegram gone awry. Or bumpy Sparknotes. Some kind of *bacchanalia* of reading. [Parentheses and brackets are the punctuator in me.]

It begins with the gobbling sea monster, Scylla, not yet paired into the swallowing duo, but rather a lovely naked nymph sitting alone in a solitary crevice. Glaucus, the former fisherman turned androgynous sea-god, falls in love with her and tells her the story of his metamorphosis. Not interested, she leaves (end of book 13). Glaucus goes to Circe for help. Here featured as a nymphomaniac, Circe tries to seduce him – he says no – she turns Scylla into the monster we know from the *Odyssey*, i.e., the torso of a woman planted on six dog-like beasts who devour sailors. Description of metamorphosis. Glaucus cries and [understandably] flees the scene. 'Scylla remained and, as soon

as she could, she took revenge on Circe by robbing Ulysses of his companions' (*Metamorphoses* 14, 70–71; my hurried translation here and throughout this section). She would have gladly done the same later with Aeneas's Trojans, but she had already been turned into a rock (14, 72–74) [fastening of *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* in the rocky body of an unfortunate nymph]. In what follows (14, 75–157) Ovid grafts the *Aeneid* onto his own work, but he uses that part of the Virgilian epic (books 1–6) that was already based on the *Odyssey*. Readers are dragged into a bewitched acceleration through the plot of the fourth (Carthage, Dido) and fifth (Mediterranean cruise-cum-funerary-rites) books of the *Aeneid*. Expansion on *Aeneid* book 6 (Virgil's own *nekylia*), with a further diversion on the transformation of the Sibyl, once a beautiful virgin loved by Apollo. Next, Aeneas 'arrived in the place that did not have the name of his nurse yet' (14, 157), the city of Gaeta that Aeneas later named as such after his nurse. [This is, incidentally, Dante's beginning of the episode of Ulisse: 'When I departed from Circe, who had detained me more than a year there near Gaeta, before Aeneas had so named it' (*Inferno* 26, 90–93).]

In this very as-of-now nameless place we find another Ithacan: Macareus, a freshly invented 'companion of long-suffering Ulysses', currently stranded in not-yet-Gaeta. Ulysses is enigmatically called 'experiens' (14, 159): experienced, long-suffering, patient, expert? [Remember Virgil's unhappy ('infelix') Ulysses? The Ovidian adjective may also give another hue to Dante's desire for 'esperienza' (experience).] We would love to linger on this, but a further surprise follows: guess who recognizes him? Achae-menides! [yes! him, the re-reader from the *Aeneid*]. A bewildered exchange of questions between the two former companions of unhappy/long-suffering Ulysses [one invented by Virgil and the other by Ovid] follows: (Ma-



careus) ‘what the fuck are you doing with them Trojans?’ (Achaemenides) ‘No, mate, I ask the questions now. The fuck are *you* doing here?’ [or something of this kind]. An emboldened Achaemenides now retells for the *n*th-time the story of the Cyclops (14, 167–222), this time merging Virgil’s and Homer’s accounts. Gore galore. It is now Macareus’s turn (14, 223–441). He picks up where they left Achaemenides [with the Greek boat leaving the Cyclopes’ island] and retells the rest of the *Odyssey*: in order; Eolus’s bag of winds, Lestrygonians, Circe (again, but less lewd and more witchy), with [no surprise] a long expansion on the metamorphosis of men into pigs. Ulysses overcomes and seduces Circe. One year is spent at her court. One year, the time for Ovid to have one of Circe’s maids tell Macareus the long story of the marriage of King Picus and the nymph Canens [= she who sings, a sort of female Orpheus, who moves rocks and tames animals with her song]. The incorrigible Circe sees Picus, falls in love with him, snatches him, is rejected by him. ‘Sed amans! Et lesa! Et femina!’ (14, 385) — But she is in love! And hurt! And a woman! Go Circe! Badly pissed off, she turns him into a woodpecker and his companions into all sorts of wildly diverse monsters. ‘Nobody kept their shape’ (‘nulli sua mansit imago’; 14, 415): this line is some kind of suicide by metamorphosis of Ovid’s writing, at once triumphal and nihilist. Desperate Canens melts into song and tears.

We finally left Circe’s island, says Macareus, and you know what? I could not take this shit anymore. I quit [I sympathize with you Macareus]. Aeneas calls Gaeta Gaeta (14, 441–44). Furious fast forward into the second half of the *Aeneid* (the half that is patterned after the *Iliad*, where the Trojans fight the Latins; 14, 445–580), with expansion on ... no you can’t guess this ... Diomedes [yes! yes! I know that the few of you I have not yet lost are jolting with

me now] ... Diomedes, and the Ovidian invention of the story of his attempted *nostos* and how he ended up in Latium, and how some of his companions were changed into birds by angry Venus [press pause for a minute: we have a fake Greek *nostos* implanted into the *Iliad*'s part of the *Aeneid* with some metamorphosis, of course: starts sounding and looking like the human centipede]. Breaking marks, the text is slowing down. Yet another metamorphosis, less frantic though; it sounds like a lull, a murmur of waves, the distant sound of the sea. Angry Venus morphs more things — this time, she turns the Trojan boats into beautiful sea nymphs to subtract them from the enemy fire — the mellowest metamorphosis of all, with wood softening into body, sterns into faces, oars into ... no, not wings unfortunately! [literature does not respond every time you knock] ... oars into fingers and legs for swimming, ropes into hair. The Naiads: splendid, kind creatures, yet still cruel enough to rejoice at the destruction of Ulysses' ship, and at the petrification of Alcinous's vessel [aka the liquidation of the *Odyssey*, where this story had been told in book 13, 149–87]. End of the *Aeneid* within the *Metamorphoses*. Hand brake, apotheosis of Aeneas (14, 581–609). *Stop! Arrête! Halt! Basta!* The beginning of Roman history ensues.

And we do really stop here, to notice that if Ovid's *Aeneid* ends with an apotheosis, Ovid's *Odyssey* ends with a whimper, with a character who [understandably] says NO:

Talia multa mihi longum narrata per annum  
 visaque sunt. resides et desuetudine tardi  
 rursus inire fretum, rursus dare vela iubemus,  
 ancipitesque vias et iter Titania vastum  
 dixerat et saevi restare pericula ponti:  
 pertimui, fateor, nactusque hoc litus adhaesi.  
 Finierat Macareus.  
 (*Metamorphoses* 14, 435–41)

‘During that long year [the year they stayed at Circe’s] I was told many things and many I witnessed. Now turned sedentary and slow [Dante: ‘I and my companions were old and slow’ (‘vecchi e tardi’; *Inferno* 26, 106)], we are ordered to go to sea again, to spread our sails. Circe told us that our ways would be dubious, the journey long, and that the cruel sea still had dangers in store for us. Ok, I admit it: I got scared and, as soon as we got to this place, I stuck with it.’ Macareus concluded (my translation).

‘Finierat Macareus’: here ends the story of Macareus. The anti-Ulysses, the non-character, or the super-character? Bartleby the scrivener. Leopold Bloom. *Nec plus ultra*. Here I stay. Try writing *my* story. I am the backwash of story. The Hercules’ pillars of narration. The un-narrable character; the common human being.<sup>‡</sup>

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‡ Loss of character is, incidentally, Plato’s prophecy for Ulysses. In book 10 (614–21) of the *Republic*, after his slow and enamoured character assassinated Homer, Socrates famously proposes the story of his own epic hero, Er, who is allowed to bring back to the world news of life after death. (Er is a pre-Dante.) This is not ‘one of the tales which Odysseus tells the hero Alcinous’, Socrates hurries to preface, this is some kind of heroic-philosophical story. It is about the otherworld, an awkward, strangely modern, inconsequential otherworld. This is, surely, the revenge of Homer: Plato may be a great philosopher, but he does not know how to stitch together a story. At a certain point the souls encounter the figure of the Interpreter, who lays in front of them the ‘possible lives’ in which they might want to reincarnate. ‘There was not, however, any definite character to them, because the soul, when choosing a new life, must of necessity become different’ [so *this* is how intertextuality works]. Unlike the vain and impulsive Orpheus, who chooses to become a swan just to shun the women who killed him (‘hating to be born of a woman because they had been his murderers’), and other heroes from the Trojan war, who [understandably] decide to take the shape of an animal, so disgusted they are by human nature, Odysseus, the last to come on stage, makes a peculiar choice. Odysseus too is fed up, but in a clever, more modern way: ‘There came also the soul of Odysseus having yet to make a choice, and his lot happened to be the last of them all. Now the recollection of former tolls had disenchanted him of ambition, and he went about for a considerable

My story of intertextuality also ends here. Bits and pieces of Dante's *Ulisse* lie in the texts of many ancient authors, like polished pieces of glass in the shallow sea. In Cicero, an exciting interpretation of the siren as the lure of knowledge (see chapter 6), in Horace, the value of virtue and wisdom, in Seneca, the intuition that Ulysses probably did not navigate the quiet Mediterranean, but he went out 'in the high open sea', into the unknown ('extra notum nobis orbem'). And in Ovid, the naming of Gaeta, the old companions, and the mad liquidation of epic. There are more fragments in other texts that I do not mention here, and surely in those that I do not know.

Even my super-line, the one that I asked my readers to stop and wonder at, the very power and beauty of poetry, can be 'sourced' somewhere:

de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo  
we made our oars wings in a mad flight

has a touch of the winged oars in the unread Homer. There is Ovid, of course, whose sirens (of course) navigate the sea on the oars of the wings ('super fluctus alarum insistere remis'; *Metamorphoses* 6, 558). [Now, neither you nor I have the bandwidth for another metamorphosis — but I hope to return to Ovid's sirens, so strange, and compassionate, and so girly.] Also a bit of Virgil who, at the beginning of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, tells the story of Daedalus and Icarus, and mentions the 'remigium alarum' (6, 19), the oars of the wings (which today is still a concept in entomology — I think it signifies those little veins in the wings of the insects). There is more, I am sure.

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time in search of the life of a private man who had no cares; he had some difficulty in finding this, which was lying about and had been neglected by everybody else; and when he saw it, he said that he would have done the same had his lot been first instead of last, and that he was delighted to have it' (translation by Benjamin Jowett).

What is left to Dante is a touch of folly ('folle volo'), but by now you know where to find it: it is the folly inherent in every act of reading, in every act of writing.

Back now to 'my' incarnation, then, one facet of the *polytropos* that becomes a turning point in the story of this character, a cluster that, in turn, unleashes a whole set of elements that become integral to the story itself. Several are the radical novelties of Dante's Ulysses:

- well; hell.
- the fact that Ulisse is disembodied. We see not the hero, but the flame engulfing him. What in the medieval context might be a punishment (for his false advice, for his burning desire for knowledge) is, in a modern fashion, his 'spirit'.
- the firmness of his 'I': the deed and the story are one (modernity in a nutshell).
- the cancellation of the return.
- the mad flight and the trespassing into the unknown.
- the reasons for it: to gain experience, and to pursue virtue and knowledge.