



Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 91–124

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS:

Elena Lombardi, '3. To Pursue Virtue and Knowledge', in Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28_**>

ELENA LOMBARDI

3. To Pursue Virtue and Knowledge

CITE AS:

Elena Lombardi, '3. To Pursue Virtue and Knowledge', in Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 91–124 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28_3>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

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

3. To Pursue Virtue and Knowledge

Does this still ring true? Is this still a fair portrayal of what it is to be human?

In today's expanded world such a question is either obsolete or so full of complication and controversy that it is futile to even attempt it.

Dante, you will remember, is ambiguous about this point, re-spinning this classical and medieval refrain first in his philosophical work, *The Banquet*, and then within the enclosure of hell, wrapped up inside Ulisse's 'small oration.' I can never quite decide whether hell × the-oration-pronounced-therewithin (yes, therewithin) is a product of negatives, hence a positive, or not.

'Fatti non foste a viver come bruti, | ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza' (you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge; *Inferno* 26, 119–20) is the culmination of Ulisse's little speech to his sailors, and it is hard to quibble with it. Two large words that make

sense together. ‘C-a-noscenza’; I am sure there is a perfectly good linguistic reason whereby Dante (or a scribe, for that matter) uses this particular form of the word for knowledge instead of the more frequent ‘c-o-noscenza’: whatever the reason is, ‘c-a-noscenza’ is, to me at least but I hope I am not alone in this, an open, generous, fun, sunny word; something like *knaawledge* — something you cannot pronounce without a smile. ‘Virtute’, instead, a sumptuous and rigid Latinism (the more Italian form would be the truncated ‘virtù’), is a tricky one, isn’t it? Originally a male thing (of the ‘vir’, human being with dick), it becomes an abstract, feminine concept for all that is morally good on earth and in the heavens. The middle ages have seven virtues, four ‘cardinal’ deriving from classical philosophy (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) and three ‘theological’ (faith, hope, and charity). They are often personified and become, therefore, authoritative women (i.e., female with dick).

Now, grungy ‘canoscenza’ and uptight ‘virtute’ may be a fashion mismatch, but they are comfortable together in Dante’s line. They form a tenet with which it is difficult to both disagree and agree: that the ultimate goal of the human being is to pursue knowledge in an honest way, with the aim of the common good.

That to be human is to 1) differ from animals because 2) a more noble pursuit (than filling one’s belly and emptying one’s bowels or, in some cases, genitals) is available to us, an activity that 3) is of an intellectual nature and involves an equal measure of morality (virtue) and, roughly speaking, philo-sophy (as the love of wisdom, of knowledge, of research), still rang true, a little less than two centuries after Dante, to a scholar prodigy who did not get to change the

world because he died too young. Or because the world cannot be changed by scholars.

In 1486, when he was only twenty-three, and taking himself very seriously as all young people do, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola wrote nine hundred philosophical theses, which were immediately deemed unorthodox by the Church, and shortly after he produced a preface to them, the *Oratio de homini dignitate* (*Oration on the dignity of the human being* — it is a little gimmicky but we do need to translate the Latin ‘homo’ as human being. We must. We cannot be forgetful and let ‘man’ slip. It is a little gesture that, I believe, does change minds).

It is no bedtime reading. Of a strange length (long essay, short book), and of an even stranger language and style, the crystal clear yet somewhat adamant humanistic Latin, to read it properly one needs a myriad of footnotes. Yet to me it reads the same as the journey of Ulysses, a mad, daring, and generous flight into the unknown, taken by one of those few travellers of the mind who fearlessly bridge the gap between their desk and the beyond.

Pico constantly invokes sources in his *Oration* — Hebrew, Arab, Greek, and Christian — and in doing so he achieves not only an extraordinary (for his times) cultural syncretism, but a stunning (for his times) dialogue between cultures, and a subtle smoothing of faiths, creeds, and philosophies. It is as if the *Oration’s* heavy cultural load were intended not to sink the objections of others, but to produce a cultural relativism that, like a current, keeps its imagination of the human being as pursuer of virtue and knowledge afloat. In perpetual flight: this boat has wings.

Right at the beginning of this strange text, you will find an oration within the oration; god’s speech to the newly created human being.

Igitur hominem accepit, indiscretæ opus imaginis, atque in mundi positum meditullio sic est alloquutus: 'Nec certam sedem, nec propriam faciem, nec munus ullum peculiare tibi dedimus, o Adam, ut quam sedem, quam faciem, quæ munera tute optaveris, ea, pro voto, pro tua sententia, habeas et possideas. Definita caeteris natura intra praescriptas a nobis leges coercetur. Tu, nullis angustiis coercitus, pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam prefinies. Medium te mundi posui, ut circumspiceres inde comodius quicquid est in mundo. Nec te celestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut, tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fctor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas. Poteris in inferiora, quæ sunt bruta degenerare; poteris in superiora quæ sunt divina, ex tui animi sententia regenerari' (*de hominis dignitate*, 18–23).

He therefore took *the human being*, this creature of indeterminate image, set *them* in the middle of the world, and said to *them*: 'We have given you, Adam, no fixed seat or form of your own, no talent peculiar to you alone. This we have done so whatever seat, whatever form, whatever talent you might judge desirable, these same might you have and possess according to your desire and judgement. Once defined, the nature of all other beings is constrained within the laws We have prescribed for them. But you, constrained by no limits, may determine your nature for yourself, according to your own free will, in whose hands We have placed you. We have set you at the centre of the world so that from there you may more easily gaze upon whatever it contains. We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer. It will be in your power to degenerate into the lower forms of life,

which are brutish. Alternatively, you shall have the power, in accordance with the judgement of your soul, to be reborn into higher orders, those that are divine' (translation from the edition by Francesco Borghesi, Massimo Riva, and Michael Papio) [from now on, asterisks signal my changes to translations, mostly having to do with the switch from 'man' to 'human being'. Here, the slight frisson between 'human being' and 'Adam' is meant to induce reflections on 'original gender'].

With no fixed abode; un-dowried and un-gifted; self-made; go-getter; no limits; 360-degree vision; in-betweenness; self-fashioning; degenerability and regeneration: yes! We recognize this: it is the script of the modern human being.

'Who would not marvel at our chameleon?' ('*Quis hunc nostrum chamaeleonta non admiretur?*'; 31). 'We all would!', we exclaim; we do feel some kind of solidarity with this description. It is exciting to think of ourselves in these terms, individually or collectively. 'We will marvel!', we would exclaim, were it not for a shadow, a ghost-shaped, dream-like shade that says 'no'. Plainly, unforbiddingly, even affectionately, this shade objects to the positive, forward-looking, progress-oriented vision of the human being.

This phantasm has many shapes and faces, like dreams. In my own poetic *nekyia*, I find it in the words of the Greek poet Pindar: my favourite ever, and never quite grasped, definition of the human being.

ἐπάμεροι· τί δέ τις; τί δ' οὐ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ
ἄνθρωπος
(*Pythian* 8, 95–96)

Creatures of a day! What is someone? What is no one? A dream of a shadow is *the human being [for god's sake!]* (translation by William H. Race).

It is not always needed, or helpful, to notice the passing shade, though.

The rest of the *Oration* implies that we must not degenerate but regenerate. That regeneration is a thing of the spirit, it is a pursuit of virtue and knowledge, like the quest of Ulysses in Dante. You won't be surprised that the tracks of Ulysses (Homer's and Dante's) are all over the *Oration* — Calypso, poor Calypso, now blinding human beings with fanciful mirages and turning them into brutes (wasn't it Circe? I wonder; 38), a winged soul (131), the 'oarlike stroke' (the Virgilian *remigium*) of wings and feet that swiftly abducts the soul away from this world (109), and a beautiful book never written:

Homerus [...] ut omnes alias sapientias, ita hanc quoque sub sui Ulixis erroribus dissimulasse in poetica nostra theologia aliquando probabimus (*de hominis dignitate*, 224).

Homer [...] likewise concealed this wisdom, just as he concealed all the others, beneath the wanderings of his Ulysses, as I shall eventually prove in my *Poetic Theology*.

I wonder what Pico's *Poetic Theology* might have looked like — maybe yet another mass of scholarship, becoming dusty and obsolete on the shelves of libraries, then going into the 'rare prints' department, then someone deciding not to digitize it, and whoosh, gone, back into the ethereal space of the books that never existed. Maybe the text that forever changed the idea of divinity. Either way, it is gone, vanished in the niche of erudition, in the young scholar's premature death, in the obstinate ticking of the clock of lost time.

The remark on Homer in the *Oration* comes in the context of Pico's defence of his last theses. These were

concerned with magic, which he treats both as the apotheosis of human knowledge and the nature of true scholarship; an intellectual endeavour that dares, that flies and travels into the realm of the unknown to grasp the secrets of the universe. Ultimately, Pico says, this is what scholars of all doctrines and creeds — Greek (Pythagorean, Orphic), Eastern (Chaldean, Zoroastrian), Jewish, Muslim, and Christian alike — are seeking together.

Is Dante's Ulysses a scholar, a philosopher, a magus, I wonder? There is such an interpretation. Some believe that Ulysses in the *Comedy* is a sort of mirror for a 'Ulyssean' philosophical phase in Dante's work — daring and failed because it is rooted in logic and rationality (and, for some, even in heterodoxy), rather than faith. His *Banquet*, as we have seen, begins indeed with a bold 'Ulyssean' statement: 'Sì come dice lo Filosofo nel principio della Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere' (As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the First Philosophy, all *human f** beings, please!* by nature desire to know; *Convivio* 1, 1, 1), and goes on to tangle itself into stating that if god is unknowable to the human beings, then it lies outside of the arc of the earthly desire for knowledge (*Convivio* 3, xv, 9–10).

The *Banquet* is a sorry little book, written in (very) unattractive prose, with long winding arguments that never quite land anywhere, a textual 'shipwreck', sinking towards the end of an impossibly long fourth treatise; to the relief of the reader, I must add: the original plan was in fifteen books. Its saving grace? The fact that the cues for the philosophical arguments are not philosophical or theological materials, but his own lyric poems, mostly talking about love (at least in the shape that has been handed down to us). That is, Dante establishes a vital nexus between love (of the poetic kind) and knowledge, between eros (of two lovers)

and wisdom, between desire (both sensual and spiritual) and learning, between sex and text (actually, this last one is my wishful addition).

Such an unhinged and unorthodox philosophical phase would be portrayed, according to some, in the *Comedy's* Ulisse in a somewhat apologetic, 'shipwrecked' mode. I do not believe in palinode, literary and otherwise, but I am not sure whether this is a limit or a limitation of mine. Minus the palinode, though, I like the Ulisse-scholar interpretation, and I like the way Pico della Mirandola is that kind of Ulysses, unapologetically back from hell.

Reading it today, the *Oration* has many weak spots, more or less apparent to the differently perceiving and wonderfully varied embodied minds who read it. It is universalizing and generalizing, and it has no sense whatsoever of the issues that matter to us today: gender, race, class, diversity in general. Its syncretism ends up being pretty Christian. It has no sense of politics, it is a piece of old, 'bookshelf' philosophy (if you are lucky enough to still have a bookshelf, that is, with a space for philosophy in it). Yet, its learning still moves me. The burning desire for knowledge. Its staunch idealism. Its naïf pacifism. I still read the discourse of god, and think it applies to me. On a good day, that is. Too bad he doesn't have a sense of humour — but that's because he was young.

Pico della Mirandola died young, in November 1494, still fighting the papal condemnation of his theses. Most likely poisoned. Only two months earlier, his friend (and perhaps occasional lover) Angelo Poliziano — a great humanist, a scholar of Latin and Greek, and an accomplished poet in both ancient languages and in Italian — died, most likely poisoned. Only two years before, in April, Lorenzo de Medici, patron of both and one of the few real poet-politicians who ever existed, died in Florence. In August of

the same year, Columbus set sail. A world died and another was born. Renaissance, initially meaning the rebirth of ancient figural art, and the flourishing of the humanities came to mean the birth of the modern monster, enormous and ingenuous: firearms, nationalism, conquest, capitalism, colonialism. But also science, progress, revolution, evolution. Daily flights to the unknown.

As he was dying in the throes of arsenic poisoning, Pico could not imagine the world to come. His amazing scholarly flight is ultimately a backflip in the past. He could not foresee the new worlds across the Ocean and the bold and brazen greed that would soon send waves of people through Hercules' pillars; the end of the geopolitical supremacy of the Mediterranean and of Italy's political freedom. That mercenary armies would soon invade the peninsula, and that a simple soldier could now kill a *condottiere* by shooting an arquebus from afar. In his naïve attempt at reconciling faiths and creeds, in his mild, obedient rebellion against the Church, he could not have foreseen the Reformation, or thousands of *Landsknechts* sacking Rome in 1527.

There is always a third oration in my mind alongside Pico's to his fellow scholars and god's to Adam. Mine [not normally suffering of delusions of grandeur]. To a group of about fifty students some twenty years ago in Montreal. In comparison, it is truly an 'orazion picciola', a small oration, in all possible senses of minuteness. It was September 11. A Tuesday, around 11 am. Like every Tuesday and Thursday, I was about to teach my undergraduate 'Italian Renaissance' class. After a couple of introductory meetings, we were due to read, you guessed it ... the jewel in the crown of Humanism, the Manifesto of the Renaissance, Pico's *Oration*. I sat there for a bit in silence, even when

the class had gathered, and there was no residual noise of steps and packsacks and notebooks and chatter. Considering whether it was wiser to just cancel the class. I said: ‘Something has happened this morning, of which we do not know the causes or consequences. We are scared. We do not understand what is going on. A bit like those people witnessing the sack of Rome in 1527, as we saw in our historical introduction last week. It is in times like this that what we are — young, academic, humanists — matters most. In times like this, we embrace what we do. Reading and learning — with love, with passion, philologically, philosophically, critically, with erudition, with patience — is a profoundly pacifist act. Only in reading and learning will we find shelter against intolerance of all kinds, and solace against all fears. Let us do it together; let us make it more meaningful than ever today. Let us now open our course packs to the first of our Renaissance texts: the Manifesto of the Renaissance, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s formidable *Oration on the dignity of man*’ [back then I was less finicky with gender].

Two years later, a dear friend died in the Iraqi war. He was a journalist embedded with the US troops. A ‘friendly’ missile hit the barrack where he was staying with a group of destitute, unaware young soldiers, whose stories he was trying to collect and reveal. The next day, I was teaching the ‘Early Italian Poetry’ class. In a rather sombre and colloquial tone I told my students about my friend’s somewhat rambunctious search for justice in various parts of the world and of his end, and recited some lines of Petrarch to commemorate him. They capture the moment of the death of his beloved Laura, they talk about snow and peacefulness. The opposite of what my friend’s death must have been in the fiery Iraqi desert, among the noise of the grenades. Still ...

Pallida no, ma più che neve bianca
 che senza venti in un bel colle fiocchi,
 pareva posar come persona stanca.
 Quasi un dolce dormir ne' suo' belli occhi,
 sendo lo spirto già da lei diviso,
 era quel che morir chiaman gli sciocchi:
 Morte bella pareva nel suo bel viso.
 (Petrarch, *Triumphus mortis* I, 166–72)

No, not pale. White. Whiter than the snow that falls gently in a windless day on a pretty hill. It looked like she was resting. Like when one is tired. You could almost sense a sweet sleep in her beautiful eyes, now that her soul had left her self. The fools call this moment death: Death looked beautiful in her beautiful face (my translation).

There is no sense of history, no high-sounding rhetoric, no generalizing in these lines. Just a young lover dying. No reason, but a rhyme. The death-defying power of poetry.

A year ago, another dear friend died. One of Covid's many senseless collateral losses, excess deaths they call them. I just cancelled the class. Not because I no longer believe literature and being a humanist have meaning in moments of crisis. Or that to pursue knowledge critically is to pursue virtue (whatever that is). Or that poetry can give more than comfort, it kindles fictional lives from death. Or that my friends — one a daring traveller, the other an uncompromising scholar — are not somewhere in some form attending to their quests and searches. But because I no longer can do so without crying. At his funeral I read the canto of Ulysses, though. The stained-glass windows of the chapel featured a boat, gently rolling through gentle waves, it seemed, in the uncertain light of mid-May.

Poems have tears. It is for us to cry them.

Now, to pursue virtue and knowledge. Does that still ring true? Well, it did, still, to someone, somehow, in the midst of history's most tragic storm. In Primo Levi's chillingly beautiful reading of *Inferno* 26 in his *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*, 1947), the most profound and harrowing of Shoah writings. In one of the central chapters, entitled *Il canto di Ulisse*, Levi describes how he tried to teach Italian through Dante to a fellow inmate at Auschwitz, Jean, the 'Pikolo', the young factotum. This little lecture, set against the bleak background of the Lager, against the cacophony of orders barked in different languages, against the cold, the fatigue, the hunger, the despair, is a masterpiece of literature, and yet it is also literature defying itself. It represents, simultaneously, the impossibility of translating, the limits of comprehension, the utter dead-end of making oneself understood, and their opposites.

It is full of omissions, stuttering, and memory voids ... It is interspersed with steps, voices, needs, and languages that do not translate and do not compute. The lacunae and the intromissions are there to underline the realism (I use this term without irony or doubt in this instance only) of the scene, as well as the radical frailty of memory; that of the reader-speaker (Levi), that of the reader-reader (us), and that of history.

In the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind, there are 'memory voids': unused, useless (?), illogical, awkward, vertical areas. The museumgoer is brought to walk to their edges, and suddenly comes to reckon with the inexpressible, irrepresentable, unwritten, un-exhibitible. It is a very strange feeling: reckoning, and yet not knowing. Here, you will see, one such memory void gapes just after the Dantean 'Quando' (When), and we will all fall into a strange vertigo.

The chapter begins in a cistern that Levi is scrubbing with some other prisoners. In comes Jean, the kind and well-liked factotum, announcing that Primo will help him to carry the heavy load of today's ration, thus gaining them a precious hour-long walk in the bright summer day.

Two figures are carrying a large pot on two poles. People are passing by.

It begins with a lacuna

...

As in Odysseus's *nekya*, we need to drink from this empty pit and cross the threshold between the page and the story, to place ourselves in some kind of liminal place and listen. We need to read these few pages all in one shot. We need to read them together, as if we were in the same room. The only Ithaca possible; the space where we are reading. Listen to how the voice, now mine, now yours, becomes the voice of the ancient narrator, with its stumblings, hesitations, and exultations. The narrator's voice turns into Dante's voice, and Dante's becomes Ulisse's. Ulisse's voice, in turn, is our voice.

... Il canto di Ulisse. Chissà come e perché mi è venuto in mente: ma non abbiamo tempo di scegliere, quest'ora già non è più un'ora. Se Jean è intelligente capirà. Capirà: oggi mi sento da tanto.

... Chi è Dante. Che cosa è la Commedia. Quale sensazione curiosa di novità si prova, se si cerca di spiegare in breve che cosa è la Divina Commedia. Come è distribuito l'Inferno, cosa è il contrappasso. Virgilio è la Ragione, Beatrice è la Teologia.

Jean è attentissimo, ed io comincio, lento e accurato:

Lo maggior corno della fiamma antica
Cominciò a crollarsi mormorando,
Pur come quella cui vento affatica.
Indi, la cima in qua e in là menando
Come fosse la lingua che parlasse
Mise fuori la voce, e disse: Quando ...

Qui mi fermo e cerco di tradurre. Disastroso: povero Dante e povero francese! Tuttavia l'esperienza pare prometta bene: Jean ammira la bizzarra similitudine della lingua, e mi suggerisce il termine appropriato per rendere 'antica'.

E dopo 'Quando'? Il nulla. Un buco nella memoria. 'Prima che sí Enea la nominasse.' Altro buco. Viene a galla qualche frammento non utilizzabile: '... la pié-ta Del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore Che doveva Penelope far lieta ...' sarà poi esatto?

... Ma misì me per l'alto mare aperto.

Di questo sì, di questo sono sicuro, sono in grado di spiegare a Pikolo, di distinguere perché 'misi me' non è 'je me mis', è molto più forte e più audace, è un vincolo infranto, è scagliare se stessi al di là di una barriera, noi conosciamo bene questo impulso. L'alto mare aperto: Pikolo ha viaggiato per mare e sa cosa vuol dire, è quando l'orizzonte si chiude su se stesso, libero diritto e semplice, e non c'è ormai che odore di mare: dolci cose ferocemente lontane.

Siamo arrivati al Kraftwerk, dove lavora il Kommando dei posacavi. Ci dev'essere l'ingegner Levi. Eccolo, si vede solo la testa fuori della trincea. Mi fa un cenno colla mano, è un uomo in gamba, non l'ho mai visto giù di morale, non parla mai di mangiare.

'Mare aperto.' 'Mare aperto.' So che rima con 'diserto': '... quella compagna Picciola, dalla qual non fui diserto', ma non rammento più se viene prima o dopo. E anche il viaggio, il temerario viaggio al di là delle colonne d'Ercole, che tristezza, sono costretto a raccontarlo in prosa: un sacrilegio. Non ho salvato che un verso, ma vale la pena di fermarcisi:

... Acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta.

'Si metta': dovevo venire in Lager per accorgermi che è la stessa espressione di prima, 'e misì me'. Ma non ne faccio parte a Jean, non sono sicuro che sia una osservazione importante. Quante altre cose ci sarebbero da dire, e il sole è già alto, mezzogiorno è vicino. Ho fretta, una fretta furibonda.

Ecco, attento Pikolo, apri gli orecchi e la mente, ho bisogno che tu capisca:

Considerate la vostra semenza:
Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.

Come se anch'io lo sentissi per la prima volta: come uno squillo di tromba, come la voce di Dio. Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono.

Pikolo mi prega di ripetere. Come è buono Pikolo, si è accorto che mi sta facendo del bene. O forse è qualcosa di più: forse, nonostante la traduzione scialba e il commento pedestre e frettoloso, ha ricevuto il messaggio, ha sentito che lo riguarda, che riguarda tutti gli uomini in travaglio, e noi in specie; e che riguarda noi due, che osiamo ragionare di queste cose con le stanghe della zuppa sulle spalle.

Li miei compagni fec'io sì acuti ...

... e mi sforzo, ma invano, di spiegare quante cose vuol dire questo 'acuti'. Qui ancora una lacuna, questa volta irreparabile. '... Lo lume era di sotto della luna' o qualcosa di simile; ma prima? ... Nessuna idea, 'keine Ahnung' come si dice qui. Che Pikolo mi scusi, ho dimenticato almeno quattro terzine.

— Ça ne fait rien, vas-y tout de même.

... Quando mi apparve una montagna, bruna
Per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto
Che mai veduta non ne avevo alcuna.

Sí, sí, 'alta tanto', non 'molto alta', proposizione consecutiva. E le montagne, quando si vedono di lontano ... le montagne ... oh Pikolo, Pikolo, di' qualcosa, parla, non lasciarmi pensare alle mie montagne, che comparivano nel bruno della sera quando tornavo in treno da Milano a Torino!

Basta, bisogna proseguire, queste sono cose che si pensano ma non si dicono. Pikolo attende e mi guarda.

Darei la zuppa di oggi per saper saldare 'non ne avevo alcuna' col finale. Mi sforzo di ricostruire per mezzo delle rime, chiudo gli occhi, mi mordo le dita: ma non serve, il resto è silenzio. Mi danzano per il capo

altri versi: '... la terra lagrimosa diede vento ...' no, è un'altra cosa. È tardi, è tardi, siamo arrivati alla cucina, bisogna concludere:

Tre volte il fe' girar con tutte l'acque,
 Alla quarta levar la poppa in suso
 E la prora ire in giù, come altrui piacque...

Trattengo Pikolo, è assolutamente necessario e urgente che ascolti, che comprenda questo 'come altrui piacque', prima che sia troppo tardi, domani lui o io possiamo essere morti, o non vederci mai più, devo dirgli, spiegargli del Medioevo, del così umano e necessario e pure inaspettato anacronismo, e altro ancora, qualcosa di gigantesco che io stesso ho visto ora soltanto, nell'intuizione di un attimo, forse il perché del nostro destino, del nostro essere oggi qui ...

Siamo ormai nella fila per la zuppa, in mezzo alla folla sordida e sbrindellata dei porta-zuppa degli altri Kommandos. I nuovi giunti ci si accalcano alle spalle. — Kraut und Rüben? — Kraut und Rüben — . Si annunzia ufficialmente che oggi la zuppa è di cavoli e rape: — Choux et nevets. — Káposzta és répak.

Infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.

... The canto of Ulysses. Who knows how or why it comes into my mind. But we have no time to change, this hour is already less than an hour. If Jean is intelligent he will understand. He *will* understand — today I feel capable of so much.

... Who is Dante? What is the Comedy? That curious sensation of novelty which one feels if one tries to explain briefly what is the Divine Comedy. How the Inferno is divided up, what are its punishments. Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology.

Jean pays great attention, and I begin slowly and accurately:

Then of that age-old fire the loftier horn
 Began to mutter and move, as a wavering flame
 Wrestles against the wind and is over-worn;
 And, like a speaking tongue vibrant to frame
 Language, the tip of it flickering to and fro
 Threw out a voice and answered: 'When I came ...'

Here I stop and try to translate. Disastrous — poor Dante and poor French! All the same, the experience seems to promise well: Jean admires the bizarre simile of the tongue and suggests the appropriate word to translate 'age-old'.

And after 'When I came?' Nothing. A hole in my memory. 'Before Aeneas ever named it so.' Another hole. A fragment floats into my mind, not relevant: '... nor piety To my old father, not the wedded love That should have comforted Penelope...', is it correct?

... So on the open sea I set forth.

Of this I am certain, I am sure, I can explain it to Pikolo, I can point out why 'I set forth' is not '*je me mis*', it is much stronger and more audacious, it is a chain which has been broken, it is throwing oneself on the other side of a barrier, we know the impulse well. The open sea: Pikolo has travelled by sea, and knows what it means: it is when the horizon closes in on itself, free, straight ahead and simple, and there is nothing but the smell of the sea; sweet things, ferociously far away.

We have arrived at Kraftwerk, where the cable-laying Kommando works. Engineer Levi must be here. Here he is, one can only see his head above the trench. He waves to me, he is a brave man, I have never seen his morale low, he never speaks of eating.

'Open sea', 'open sea', I know it rhymes with 'left me': '... and that small band of comrades that had never left me', but I cannot remember if it comes before or after. And the journey as well, the foolhardy journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules, how sad, I have to tell it in prose — a sacrilege. I have only rescued two lines, but they are worth stopping for:

... that none should prove so hardy
 To venture the uncharted distances...

'to venture': I had to come to the Lager to realize that it is the same expression as before: 'I set forth.' But I say nothing to Jean, I am not sure that it is an important observation. How many things there are to say, and the sun is already high, midday is near. I am in a hurry, a terrible hurry.

Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.

Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How good Pikolo is, he is aware that it is doing me good. Or perhaps it is something more: perhaps, despite the wan translation and the pedestrian, rushed commentary, he has received the message, he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all *human beings* who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders.

My little speech made every one so keen ...

... and I try, but in vain, to explain how many things this 'keen' means. There is another lacuna here, this time irreparable. '... the light kindles and grows Beneath the moon' or something like it; but before it? ... Not an idea, '*keine Ahnung*' as they say here. Forgive me, Pikolo, I have forgotten at least four triplets.

'Ça ne fait rien, vas-y tout de même.'

... When at last hove up a mountain, grey
With distance, and so lofty and so steep,
I never had seen the like on any day.

Yes, yes, 'so lofty and so steep', not 'very steep', a consecutive proposition. And the mountains when one sees them in the distance ... the mountains ... oh, Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, do not let me think of my mountains which used to show up against the

dusk of evening as I returned by train from Milan to Turin!

Enough, one must go on, these are things that one thinks but does not say. Pikolo waits and looks at me.

I would give today's soup to know how to connect 'the like on any day' to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers — but it is no use, the rest is silence. Other verses dance in my head: '... The sodden ground belched wind...', no, it is something else. It is late, it is late, we have reached the kitchen, I must finish:

And three times round she went in roaring smother
With all the waters; at the fourth the poop
Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another.

I keep Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this 'as pleased Another' before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, but still more, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today...

We are now in the soup queue, among the sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers from other Kommandos. Those just arrived press against our backs. '*Kraut und Rüben? Kraut und Rüben.*' The official announcement is made that the soup today is of cabbages and turnips: '*Choux et navets. Káposzta és répak.*'

And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.

(translation by Stuart Woolf)

It has not eluded you that these powerful pages peak at two points. If you have read the passage with the interior voice of the narrator, your voice likely broke twice.

The first time, your voice became perhaps a little declamatory, in a self-conscious sort of way as if you were an

actor on stage, at the moment when the 'voice of god' itself storms in — not like Pico's paternalistic speech, though, more as a trumpet blast. This is when the narrator, you have surely noticed, recalls the lines on 'virtue and knowledge'. The context provides a new meaning to them. It is as if I heard them for the first time, Levi says (it is the same for us, those who are reading together now, isn't it?); they apply, he says, to all human beings in travail, to those who from the depth of unthinkable hardships still dare to exercise the non-brutish part of themselves: virtue and knowledge. It is a tremendous statement. I would not fully believe it, were it not coming from Levi, otherwise the most sober of writers, not one to give into the flattery of rhetoric.

The second time your voice broke, in a more intimate way perhaps, is when Dante's ominous dusky mountain becomes dusk itself and the mountains of Levi's youth appear in the distance. The memory is too painful, though. Say something, Pikolo! Don't let me think about the mountains. Pikolo is silent. The lacuna is widening.

I know those mountains well. My mother — a few years younger than Levi — grew up near the same mountains. They were a sporty lot, my mum and her friends: hiking, swimming in crispy cold lakes, skiing on rudimentary runs in winter, and then climbing back with sealskins. Italian youths, some of them Jews like Levi, skipping through life until those mountains became the main site of partisan war, raids, and atrocities.

A passionate and implacable hiker, throughout the summer my mother would drag the family in long and unreasonably spartan walks. I have memories of blisters, fatigue, the random alpine flower, and the exhilarating tickle that comes from drinking from a mountain stream. It was not uncommon in those days to stop at a farmhouse in the

mountains for lunch and share whatever the family living there were eating for just a little money.

Once, an old woman hosted us. Dressed in black, with heavy tights and black slippers, a washed-out black apron, and a grey kerchief on her head, she had two vertical wrinkles next to her mouth, and impossibly small eyes. She spoke quietly, in the coarse dialect of the area. After lunch — polenta and ragout; I still have the sweet taste of maize and the acrid sting of game in some corner of my mouth, I still see the florid yellow mass on my plate with a ringlet of smoke, I still smell it. After lunch, she became restless and insisted that she needed to show us something. She brought us to the yard and pointed to the place where her son, aged eighteen, had been killed by the Nazis as a suspected partisan. Here. They shot him. Nothing else I know of that young man. His age, the grief of his mother, and the corner of the forever sunny barnyard where he was killed.

Lo, I said something.

Levi's last moment of intuition — about destiny, about the Lager. About god, perhaps? — is washed away by the liquid reality of the dirty, Babelic soup that he and Jean are about to fetch. Like Dante's Ulysses, Levi is about to get somewhere, but is interrupted by the violent wave of the now.

Very much like the original canto of *Inferno*, our response to Levi's 'canto' is forever buried under 'the sea that closes over us'. In the monumental silence of Levi's suicide almost forty years later. Is the reading of Dante a form of consolation or desolation? Does it tear apart the oppressive plot of Auschwitz or is it part of it? Does a poem, can a poem ever restore, or does it merely register?

'Infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.'

Like Dante, Levi is a core author of the curriculum I currently teach. Neatly (I think), *If This is a Man* is the first text we teach all students in their first year, and Dante's *Comedy* the last in their final year. It is hard to describe how extraordinary, how dramatic it is to meet bright young minds, mostly clean slates insofar as literature is concerned and with a vague but often ardent sense of the history of the twentieth century, over a book like Levi's. A text that defies genres; so calm, crisp, and clean it is as it recounts unfathomable horrors; so honest in the appraisal of human vice and virtue; so beautifully written in a language that, at times, sounds terse as matter, and yet it is meek, unassuming. A text so profoundly human.

The 'Dantean echoes' and the chapter on Ulysses are perhaps the most difficult bits to explain to freshers, as Dante is for them a very vague sort-of-Christian, dark-agey type of poet. But I do not mind. I believe in the *longue durée* of our job as teachers: I cannot wait to see them again four years later, after they have studied Dante seriously, and to bring back Levi, like some kind of *coup de théâtre*, in the last lecture on *Inferno*.

Year in, year out, an issue becomes more and more burning. Memory is fading, survivors are dying. Soon there will be no more eyewitnesses of the Shoah. Things have changed even in the ten years during which I have taught this particular curriculum. I find myself in a room with students for whom the Shoah is history — not a burning stain on their very moral makeup, like it was for us, people of the past century, irrespective of our provenance. Victims, and perpetrators, of the Shoah were of the generations of my grandparents, and even of my parents. Some of the dead and survivors were younger than my father and mother. I, born some twenty-five years after the end of the war, carry still, like many of my generation, a mark, an unspoken

and little understood fear deriving from that past, a quiet astonishment, a frail moral imperative, and some vague but inescapable responsibility towards it.

In first-year seminars, the students are asked to give short presentations on various aspects of the author and the text we are reading. We often begin, predictably, with the easy, often sadly wikipedish, presentation on 'life-and-works'. Not so long ago, a student began the usual rigmarole

[With one part of the brain, I listen and make sure that dates and data compute, with the other, I mentally scroll the shopping list. So now you know: my other form of solace is the online supermarket. Plutarch, and Ocado. And Revery. An oddly sitting triad, I must say. (The revery alone makes do.)]

'Primo Levi was born in such-and-such year, graduated from that high school, studied chemistry at the renowned university of dot-dot-dot. In October doubledigit-doubledigit, Levi joined the partisan resistance in the Alps, and shortly after he was arrested, and, upon declaring himself a Jew, was first brought to an internment camp in Italy and then ..., then to ... I don't quite know how to pronounce this ... Ausc...pitz?'

Something had rung me out of my lull. Unguarded, I had a fit of rage, instantly repressed and substituted by the remorse of having felt angry at an unknowing young thing. The two forces cancelled each other into a nonchalant aside ... Au-schwits ... please go on ...

A sacrilege. A curse: that's what I had just heard. Someone forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.

I am still angry (and still feel guilty). Angry that the sky did not come tumbling down; that nobody was disturbed but me, not even the Jewish student in the seminar; that it was a trifle about foreign pronunciation, like, say, how do you pronounce Leipzig, or Beckenbauer. That I could

not walk out in silence and leave the group to wonder why I did that (these days, it would not be deemed acceptable pedagogy. I might be suspended from my job, a committee would be created, and then a subcommittee, and then the sub-committee [with hyphen] of the subcommittee to investigate my actions). That I could not quietly say: 'Let's call it a lesson. See you on the other side of history.' Hear me out — I am not angry at the student, or at 'young people' or at 'current times.' I myself surely mispronounce Auschwitz; I mispronounce everything. But Auschwitz is not a word for me, not even a place. Auschwitz is a sound that raises the hair on my skin, it is a brand of fire into my 'human' soul, it is something that I contemplate in a haze of fear, and that forever casts a shade of trauma, doubt, and estrangement in all my thought processes. Like small black birds caught in a mad, senseless flight, other words dive and disappear into it

καλός καὶ ἀγαθός, democracy, *virtus*, *pietas*, *culpa*, canoscenza, redemption, *cogito*, monad, progress, capital, psyche

What I had witnessed then, in a quiet autumn day in Oxford, the light already dimming into the mid-afternoon, a gentle, not unpleasant drizzle glistening in the arch of the window, was that word losing all its dimension, and becoming print on paper.

The wave of history closing over us.

Do you want to hear my coup in the last lecture on *Inferno*?

The last day of term. Usually a bleak winter day, say 3 or 5 December, with an air of Christmas though; mince pies will be served for the admin staff in this very stuffy room sometime this afternoon, non-denominational decorations hanging and not yet dangling. In the last lecture of the term, we look at the bottom of hell, 'il fondo'.

Dante-poet (remember him?) feels the need for a new poem to account for the enormity to come:

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chioce,
 come si converrebbe al tristo buco
 sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
 io premerei di mio concetto il suco
 più pienamente; ma perch'io non l'abbo,
 non senza tema a dicer mi conduco;
 ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
 discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
 né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo.
 Ma quelle donne aiutino il mio verso
 ch'aiutaro Anfione a chiuder Tebe,
 sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso.
 (*Inferno* 32, 1–12)

If I had harsh and grating rhymes, as would befit the dismal hole on which all the other rocks converge and weigh, I would press out more fully the juice of my conception; but since I do not have them, it is not without fear that I bring myself to speak; for to describe the bottom of the whole universe is not an enterprise to be taken up in sport, nor for a tongue that cries mamma and daddy. But may those ladies aid my verse who aided Amphion to wall in Thebes, so that the telling may not be diverse from the fact.

There is some horrible solemnity in Cocytus, the bottom of hell, a majestic four-zonal realm made of ice, because the sin punished there, treason (in modern terms: hate), freezes the human heart. Ineffability turns into despair, fear conquers language, the Muses, once benign divinities, are now invoked as those who razed Thebes to the ground (remember Thebes?). A new poetry, rough and hoarse, must describe 'il fondo', a depth that the poet needs to contemplate with no other tool than his young, messy, vulnerable mother tongue, the 'language that cries mummy

and daddy'. Incidentally, the same thing will happen on the stage of the vision of god, where the poet feels like 'an infant who still bathes his tongue at the breast' (fante | che bagna ancor la lingua alla mammella; *Paradiso* 33, 107–08).

The poet finds, however, harsh and grating rhymes within his inept yet potent maternal language: the whole canto 32 of *Inferno* is a virtuoso exploit of metrics and poetics, with a clash of rasping rhymes (-icchi, -ogna, -accia, -isto, -etti, -olli, -ecchi, -azzi, -ezzo, -una), biting comic language, and images that read like hallucinations. Listen to a couple of examples.

Witness the infernal glacier, more desolate than the desolate north, a perfect realm of ice, whose very silence encircles an ominous creak, and the vertigo of a mountain falling on your head. Perfect stasis and mayhem side by side, articulated by the ugly, aggressive rhyme 'icchi'.

Non fece al corso suo sì grosso velo
di verno la Danoia in Osterlicchi,
né Tanai là sotto 'l freddo cielo,
com'era quivi; che se Tambernicchi
vi fosse sù caduto, o Pietrapana,
non avria pur da l'orlo fatto cricchi.
(*Inferno* 32, 25–30)

Never did the Danube in Austria, nor the far-off Don under its cold sky, make in winter such thick a veil for their current as there was here: for had Tambernic fallen on it, or Pietrapana [= had two mountains fallen on it], it would not have given a creak even at the edge.

The damned are stuck and frozen in this icy wasteland; the only sound, the shrieking of their teeth: -agna, -ogna, -accia.

E come a gracidar si sta la rana
col muso fuor de l'acqua, quando sogna
di spigolar sovente la villana,

livide, insin là dove appar vergogna
 eran l'ombre dolenti ne la ghiaccia,
 mettendo i denti in nota di cicogna.
 (*Inferno* 32, 31–36)

And as the frog lies to croak with muzzle out of
 the water, when the peasant girl dreams often of
 her gleaning so, livid up there where the hue of
 shame appears, were the doleful shades within the
 ice, setting their teeth to the note of the stork.

Don't let yourself be fooled by the bucolic touch of 'the little peasant girl' — it is the translator who just could not take it in. This is an image of bleak poverty, and even exploitation: a poor peasant woman who is having dreams about collecting from the field the leftovers from the harvest, perhaps her family's only source of livelihood. This was a backbreaking and unrewarding job, done mostly by women and girls until not so long ago. I don't think she dreams: she has nightmares. In this image, there is also a striking conflation of the peak of summer (the season of the harvest and of creaking frogs) and the eternal otherworldly winter. Why is that? Why am I thinking of a winter frog? Nightmares are a-seasonal, it seems.

The revolting faces of the damned are of a creepy colour: 'cagnazzo'; a rare, and violent, adjective that retains something of a rabid dog ('cane') and describes the nuance of a livid shade, somewhere between green, blue, purple, reddish, and black (murray and morello are approximations). The rhyme is unforgiving: -azzi; -ezzo; -azzi.

Poscia vid'io mille visi cagnazzi
 fatti per freddo; onde mi vien riprezzo,
 e verrà sempre, de' gelati guazzi.
 (*Inferno* 32, 70–72)

After that I saw a thousand faces made purple by
 the cold, whence a shuddering comes over me,
 and always will, at frozen fords.

The surface of the iced lake smooth as glass; the damned, still full of hate, rebuke the traveller: ‘perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?’ (Why do you gaze so much on us?; *Inferno* 32, 54. Again, the translator folds, and I don’t blame him: ‘specchio’ is a mirror; and ‘specchiarsi’ means to look in the mirror of something). Why do you mirror yourself in us? Why do I see myself in the mirror of you? The answer is necessarily shattered, mangled, cried out in the ruthless, desperate sound of rhyme: -ecchi; -(i)ùe; -ina, -ombra; -ina; -ù; -oni; -azzi; -ezzo; -(a)una; -este; -etta; -ui; -etta; -ora; -ota ... -omi; -occa; -onta; ... -uca; ... -ecca; ... -angi ... ‘se quella con ch’io parlo non si secca’ (if that [tongue] with which I speak does not dry up): this is the final line of canto 32 (139).

In this utter desolation we hear by far the most horrible story of hell and beyond. The Pisan Count Ugolino della Gheradesca, gnawing the skull of his enemy, the archbishop Ruggieri, tells how he and his children and grandchildren were locked up by Ruggieri in a tower and then left to starve. How the boys were trying to comfort him, while he was petrified inside, unable to talk. How they even offered themselves as food to him. How he saw them falling one by one, and how, made blind and feeble by consumption, he groped over them crying out their names, and how, eventually, ‘fasting overcame grief’ (‘più che il dolor potè ’l digiuno’; 32, 75) ... you know how the story goes: the legend of Ugolino eating his children has circulated since the middle ages. While I speak, I have in the background this picture, given to me by a student in the first ever Dante class I taught. The detail of Ugolino’s wrung, knotty, gnarled foot in Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s *Ugolino and his Sons* (c. 1865), now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Figure 1).

This is, and is not, about eating his children, I explain. It is about the unspeakable — call it cannibalism, or Eu-



Figure 1. Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Ugolino and his Sons* (detail).

charist, call it what you want. Dante shows us that the ineffable (Eucharist, ‘eat my flesh’) was once unspeakable (cannibalism). Already a lot to chew on.

The unspeakable, incidentally, is tucked away, indeed ‘lost in translation’. At the outset of Ugolino’s speech there is a fairly visible quote from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Ugolino begins:

‘Tu vuo’ ch’io rinovelli | disperato dolor’ (you want me to renew a desperate pain; *Inferno* 33, 4–5; my translation). Asked to tell the story of the fall of Troy, Aeneas begins: ‘infandum [...] iubes renovare dolorem’ (you ask me to renew an unspeakable pain; *Aeneid* 2, 3; my translation). Eliminating the *infandum* (that which cannot be talked about, the inenarrable, even the unthinkable), Dante emphasizes its annihilating powers. He says: here, reader, you will witness something more unspeakable than the unspeakable. The taboo. You will be alone with it.

But now — let us close the books, let us leave behind Cocytus and the shell of hell. Let us step back into the space of this lecture room, into this winter, bleak and yet not unconceivable, the motors of the tourist buses on St Giles sputtering some unpleasant noise, the grating rhymes of our everyday life. Let us look at each other, mirror into each other’s eyes.

Feeling for a moment as charismatic, screwed up, and punchy as Coleman Silk, I venture into a sweeping tirade. (I am, in reality, a very sober mother of two in her fifties; with a soft voice, very little human stain, I am proud to say, zero *physique du role*, and not the caustic type.)

What is the real unspeakable, then? Well, it is really unspeakable, isn’t it? It is the sum of things that makes up hate, which leads to the killing of innocent children (everyday-today-now) and to the despair that petrifies a father and makes him hate and hate and hate. The unspeakable is us, the troubling nature of the human being. The great modernity of Dante, what makes us read the *Inferno* over and over again, is the profound intuition that sets Dante apart from any other medieval writer: that real hell is not the infernal ditch, monsters and demons, sin and punishment. Hell is us. As we read, we fell in love with the beautiful, and

often fragile, creatures that populate Dante's *Inferno*. We looked at ourselves in the mirror of their passions, their obsessions, their addictions — to love, friendship, fame, competition, politics, desire, greed, deception, envy, and hate. Other characters we liked less, they kept us on our toes, but still we mirrored ourselves in them. Others, we disliked, but with the repulsion that sometimes we feel towards our fellow humans.

Remember Primo Levi from your first year? Remember the chapter on the arrival in the Lager. Can anybody recall the title of that chapter? It was called, dantesquely, 'Sul fondo' (On the Bottom) ...

Quando abbiamo finito, ciascuno è rimasto nel suo angolo, e non abbiamo osato levare gli occhi l'uno sull'altro. Non c'è ove *specchiarsi*, ma il nostro aspetto ci sta dinanzi, riflesso *in cento visi lividi*, in cento *pupazzi* miserabili e sordidi [...].

Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo. In un attimo, con intuizione quasi profetica, la realtà ci si è rivelata: siamo arrivati sul fondo (emphasis mine).

When we finish, everyone remains in his own corner and we do not dare lift our eyes to look at one another. There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets [...].

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a *human being*. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we have reached the bottom.

There is no mirror in the antechamber of the Lager, but there is mirroring ('why do you mirror yourself in us?') of

a hundred faces ('cento visi'; they were a thousand, 'mille visi' in Dante), 'livid', like Dante's damned infixed in the ice. They are 'pup-AZZI' (puppets): the most stunning stint of poetic memory, recalling the harsh rime '-azzi' and the thousand faces made purple by the cold ('mille visi cagnazzi').

I am sure you do remember what Levi said about language: it was one of the first-year essay titles, often recurring in exams, so we made sure we had all the good quotes at hand. I often asked you to memorize this one. [Yep ... at Oxford, students still handwrite their closed-book exams, so we do actually instruct them to memorize quotes. It is half institutional pretentiousness and half institutional ineptitude, but if it fosters one poetic memory in a thousand years, I will still abide by it.]*

Noi diciamo 'fame', diciamo 'stanchezza', 'paura', e 'dolore', diciamo 'inverno', e sono altre cose. Sono parole libere, create e usate da uomini liberi che vivevano, godendo e soffrendo, nelle loro case. Se i Lager fossero durati più a lungo, *un nuovo aspro linguaggio* sarebbe nato (emphasis mine).

We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free *people* who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born.

You see where Dante's 'harsh' ('aspre') and grating rhymes' are heading. Actually, you see where they come from.

Remember the poem that serves as an epigraph to Levi's book? In our first year we wondered about it — it

* As I give the last touches to the manuscript (funny we still call it this), I hear that most likely the pandemic has liquidated the closed-book, handwritten exam. A sigh of relief: goodbye illegible handwriting and ludicrous memory blunders; welcome cut and paste. A sigh of sadness at the bulldozer of normalization tearing down the niche of strangeness.

is the only time when Levi's tone is accusatory. You may not remember the image of the frog in there. It describes a woman crouching in the winter cold. But now, as you read, you see that it is a spectre from Dante's Cocytus. In Levi's poetic memory, the woman and the frog collapse onto each other and are placed in the cold winter of the Lager. So, it *was* a nightmare. A Kafkaesque one, for that matter. Dante's 'little peasant girl' was actually dreaming of being turned into a frog and feeling cold, and cold, and colder.

Voi che vivete sicuri
 Nelle vostre tiepide case,
 Voi che trovate tornando a sera
 Il cibo caldo e visi amici:
 Considerate se questo è un uomo
 Che lavora nel fango
 Che non conosce pace
 Che lotta per mezzo pane
 Che muore per un sì o per un no.
 Considerate se questa è una donna,
 Senza capelli e senza nome
 Senza più forza di ricordare
 Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
 Come una rana d'inverno.
 Meditate che questo è stato:
 Vi comando queste parole.
 Scolpitele nel vostro cuore
 Stando in casa e andando per via,
 Coricandovi alzandovi;
 Ripetetele ai vostri figli.
 O vi si sfaccia la casa,
 La malattia vi impedisca,
 I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.

You who live safe
 In your warm houses,
 You who find, returning in the evening,
 Hot food and friendly faces:
 Consider if this is a man
 Who works in the mud

Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies for a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.

We love survivors, don't we? Until they point the finger at us. We love poetic memories, until they dig like ice axes in our frozen hearts.

Having managed to chill the young things for a moment, I add, sadistically ... With this, I wish you a merry Christmas, then ... enjoy the holidays. Let us call it a term, see you on the other side of the vac.

Silence then falls momentarily in the lecture room and engulfs us all, even the buses on St Giles, even the next class humming outside. We look at each other, confused, anxious, suspended, inquisitive. That fraction of time — thirty seconds, perhaps before the noise of a chair pushed back or the ruffle of paper being stuffed in the packsack announces officially that the lecture is over — is a teacher's best reward. It answers the question 'why do we mirror into each other?', or even 'what is it to be human?'