



Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, *Cultural Inquiry*, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 265–70

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CITE AS:

Elena Lombardi, 'Colophon', in Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, *Cultural Inquiry*, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 265–70 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28_7>

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Colophon

In the medieval book craft, scribes sometimes left a sign or a personal note at the end of the book. This manuscript was copied by so-and-so, at such time, in such place. Sometimes they complain of exhaustion, cold hands, or tired eyes. They may pray or ask for a prayer from the reader. In ancient and medieval times, authors too lingered often on the end of their text. Go, my song, to the most beautiful lady. Farewell, my little book, make sure you don't get lost in your wanderings around the city. Reception is a sea voyage; watch for storms, my tiny little vessel. Alas, I was so different when I started writing this songbook. Look at you! my poetry collection, so pretty and polished, just now smoothed by dry pumice ...

It is a form of control, for sure, but it also opens a door for the readers, welcoming them in a small but cosy room where we sit together before travelling in opposite directions, before time ravages this precious moment in which the vulnerability of the text lies open. When the scribe or writer pauses to appreciate with quasi-parental

admiration the sheer materiality of their work; and bids it a farewell that is not nostalgic, because this separation is in the order of things; a bit hurried, like that of the sweet friends at the dock, and a bit teasing, like the mask of a comic character that is placed for a short instance into a serious, sentimental role; to thine own self be true, my little book! When readers realize that, well, they have been readers throughout; they have made this knot of meaning too; that, whether pleased or displeased, they have mapped this little journey with their own coordinates.

Dante closes his poem with the most cunning signpost. Each of the three sections of the *Comedy* ends with the word 'stars' ('stelle').

E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.

(*Inferno* 34, 139: and thence we issued forth to see again the stars.)

puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.

(*Purgatorio* 33, 145: pure and ready to rise to the stars.)

L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

(*Paradiso* 33, 145: the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.)

Stars seen again after emerging from the claustrophobic darkness of hell (sounds like there is light at the end of the tunnel, but the mere fact that there are stars means that it is night, that there is darkness outside of hell too); stars ready to be reached from the top of purgatory by a pure [now this is the one word that gives me hives] and eager traveller [last time I felt like that, I was, what?, fifteen maybe?]; stars that are for a split second around me in the freefall ending of paradise (talk about a cliffhanger ... without us even noticing, Dante depicts himself falling from the heavens after the vision of god). The repetition of this crystalline word gives the appearance of order and stability to those who crave it, but it is, in fact, an echo, not a recapitulation;

a fragment, not a segment; ding ... tinkle little star ... tintin — never has the sound of a bell been so sly, tolling the desire of the readers/sailors.

‘Stars, stars, stars ... this is all I see in this darn southern hemisphere!’, Ulisse bursts out laughing.

If I ever imagine a colophon for my Dante, I find a rather mysterious signature encrypted at the end. Call me Ishmael, this writer says.

Did you ever wonder what happened to Ulisse’s crew? I mean, we have been talking about him all the time. What about the poor fellows who followed him in the mad flight? Ulisse’s speech posits that the mad flight is plural — it marks indeed the switch from singular to plural: from now on, when they start pointing west, they are ‘us’ (‘noi’). What happens to them, do they just die, and nobody talks about them anymore?

Not quite. Or at least not in my reading. At the beginning of his poem, Dante features himself (or better, his soul) ... like a sailor, who has survived a shipwreck and is washed ashore:

E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l’acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l’animo mio, ch’ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.
(*Inferno* 1, 22–27)

And as *one* who with laboring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore turns to look back on the dangerous waters, so my mind which was still fleeing turned back to gaze upon the pass that never left anyone alive.

One of them has survived! As far-fetched as this idea might be (that the character Dante at the beginning of the *Comedy* is staged as one of Ulisse's crew), these lines never fail to remind me of that other amazing beginning.

'Call me Ishmael.'

They remind me of that other terrifying and immense story of navigation, search, trespassing, and writing; of an obsessed captain and of a punitive divinity rising from the sea and causing a vortex that sinks a ship. Ishmael, you remember, emerges from the final whirlpool in a (very eschatological) coffin, floating back to safety and story. Likewise, thrown up by his immense story, the lonely poet washes ashore. Dante's prologue, snatched from the middle of the unread *Odyssey*, is the future's epilogue. (Odysseus too was the only survivor of a shipwreck, reaching the safe shore of storytelling on the Phaeacian island, after Poseidon sent a vortex-like storm to destroy his raft; book 5).*

The textual shipwreck might not be that lonely after all, though. Earlier in this book, I invited you to inhabit the underwater perspective to fully understand the close of the episode of Ulisse ('until the sea closed over us'). The impatient reader among you might have noticed already another

* The literary tradition does indeed squirt out a shipwrecked poet and his work. Or so they say ... that in 1559 Luís Vaz de Camões was shipwrecked at the mouth of the Mekong River. The poet was apparently able to swim to safety, his only salvaged property being the *Lusiads*. I wonder whether the poet rescued the poem or vice versa — we can see him either clasping his manuscript while trying to swim, or using it as a raft. I am not sure whether he is more an Odysseus or an Ishmael: yet the fact that the writer of a version of the *Odyssey* should survive shipwreck swimming with/on his text is literature telling its own story on life. The book is soaking wet, though ('Cantos que molhados | vêm do naufrágio triste e miserando'; canto 10, 128). The legend also says that Camões's beloved died in the shipwreck.

point in the poem where Dante places us at the bottom of the sea. At the very end of *Paradiso*, in the course of the vision of god — an unwieldy, difficult piece of writing where the exhausted poet is trying every trick on his exhausted readers, to keep us in there for yet another canto — Dante invokes in one compact tercet the ‘shadow of Argo’, his own lethargic stupor (I told you ... drugs), and amazement (‘ammirare’), recalling the Ulyssean proem to *Paradiso 2*: while in that occasion Dante’s readers were going to be as amazed as Jason’s crew, this time divinity itself is amazed when they see Argo’s underside from bottom of the sea.

Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa
che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo
(*Paradiso* 33, 94–96)

A single moment makes for me greater oblivion
than five and twenty centuries have wrought upon
the enterprise that made Neptune wonder at the
shadow of the Argo.

Neptune, the god of the sea: you are free to interpret him as Odysseus’s vengeful Poseidon, Dante’s angry god, or Ishmael’s ferocious sea creature — although now, whoever they are, they are just chilling on the seabed looking up at the keel of the boat that looks like a line of a shadow, of a darker blue than the water surrounding it. Readers are amazed too when we are set on such a stunning roller coaster that from the heavens takes us precipitously to the bottom of the sea, while the poet secures his writing by inserting a thin dark line (‘ombra’; shadow), or script, on the all-blinding luminosity of the page of the vision of god. Writing, the literary tradition even, is the otherness that makes divinity visible.

Do not worry, though, we are not sinking. The poet's roller coaster will propel us to the surface again with a big, foamy splash, still jolted from having been whirled by the great vortex of literature, the grand attraction of poetic language.

'Now I have to put up even with whale hunters and the Southern Pacific. And with Argo' — Ulysses shrugs and tuts — 'those pumped-up heroes.

And with readers' — a hint of stropy indecision lifts the sides of his mouth into a faint smile.

'This one; she has yet to learn that I sail solo.'



Ashore, the sea throws up refuse. Organic and inert. Algae, dead fish, the odd starfish, torn rope, plastic bottles.

Amber is not for us southerners. Rather, small pieces of glass from broken bottles, a faded green or blue, smoothed by the waves, they glimmer like poor gems on the shoreline (I collect them anyway, at least they do not cut anymore). Or drops of oil from faraway boats that look under the midday sun like shining black pebbles, absorbing light and attention as the ancient velvety nights at Alcinous's court, but just before you reach for them, they turn into soft, slimy matter (our parents used to apply gasoline with a cotton ball to get them off from our feet). Humble seashells. And pebbles, of course, of enamouring shades: rosy, green, verdigris, perfect white and perfect black, or with veins of impossible colours; iridescent like fish when you stroke them in the shallows. (At home, they all look like a dull and sad grey, but my best friend, the one with the dolphin tattoo and an inveterate optimist, has taught me to regild them with nail polish.) And so our stories go.