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## Incipit

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## Incipit

'*Inferno* 26, the canto of Ulisse, is one of the highlights of Dante's *Commedia*. A daring rewriting of Homer's Odysseus, it becomes in turn a mandatory passage for many authors of the Western canon and beyond. For the reader it is an episode fraught with confusion. Am I supposed to love Ulysses or criticize him? Is he the "innocent" [two hands gesture in the air, the top of the index and middle fingers flexing, to signify the speaker's intention to accentuate innocence and to put it at a vague yet friendly distance] Is he the "innocent" victim of an overwhelming desire for knowledge, or a liar, a manipulator? In shaping Ulysses' mad flight past the pillars of Hercules into the unknown world, has Dante created an exceptionally modern character, indeed the "quintessential human being" [*idem*; double bunny ears signifying a rather ironic detachment in this case], or is he being very medieval, condemning sternly the excesses of antiquity? There is no straight answer to these questions, but they have been posed by hosts

of readers since the middle ages [short pause; the speaker and the group allude to pondering].

As postmodern readers, all we can do is read this text together and point out its ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions.'



And so begins my lecture on Dante's Ulysses, year in, year out, in lecture rooms across the world. Those who have listened to this prologue for the first time are now past their midlife, others are still students in the making.

Year in, year out, the next hour or so becomes for me, and hopefully for my students, a fast and tight navigation over an agitated sea strewn with words and concepts — poetry, world literature, philosophy, geography, some (very rudimentary) economics, the meaning of writing.

Since you, reader, might not be a twenty-year-old student of Italian in an anglophone country (though that is a lovely, and rare, thing to be), here are a couple of A4s with bullet point tips on how to read the *Comedy*, and on its author. The manual I never dared to write.

- Dates? Really? As in 'the *Comedy* was written sometime between the birth and the death of its author', followed by all sorts of historical truths (them documents, they never lie), erudite beliefs, and educated guesses. You probably need to know only one date, and a fictional one for that matter. Easter 1300, somewhere near the beginning of April. This is when Dante sets his *Comedy*, which he actually starts writing a few years later. It makes sense: a new century, the first official Jubilee convened by the Pope, midlife (ah, see? this helps you figure out when he was born, roughly). And hindsight. Since

Dante starts writing his poem most likely in 1307, dating it to 1300 allows him to send messages from the afterlife he is writing about, to ‘foresee’ events that had already happened, and to present such happenings as willed by ‘god’, with the strange consequence that he ends up sounding like a prophet (and some readers think he is).

- The equally drastic and novel stunt whereby Dante casts himself as the main character of his poem. As teachers, then, we often remind our students to distinguish between Dante-poet and Dante-character (also known as D-traveller, or even D-pilgrim). This distinction is a bit pedestrian, not always valid, but for the most part useful. D-poet imagines himself lost in a forest, which leads to a journey in the afterlife. He gives himself-as-character two guides, also fictionalized historical people: the Latin poet Virgil and a poetic creature from his youth, his beloved Beatrice.
- Aside. ‘Prophet’ and ‘pilgrim’ are, of course, the denominations of one of the possible interpretations of the poem, the Christian reading; by some considered the only reading, by me avoided like the devil, because it is as ugly as sin. (Don’t look at me strangely — a medieval poem on the Christian afterlife needs to be read in a Christian way no more than an epic poem requires a military reading. Priests and generals make bad readers, I think.)
- Yes, it is a poem about the Christian afterlife, consisting of three parts, or canticles — *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise* — in turn divided into 33 cantos of various length + one proemial canto (= 100). Numbers are neat in this story. And, yes, they do sug-

gest trinity, but more in a three-to-tango type of way. D-character, alive and embodied, is given the dubious privilege of witnessing Punishment, Atonement, and Blessedness across various sections of the three realms: circles (hell), terraces (purgatory), and heavens (paradise). The characters he encounters are embodied too, enveloped in a strangely conspicuous 'aerial body'.

- The genius invention is the metrics. This poem is written in *terza rima* (or *terzina*, tercet), a core of three hendecasyllables (lines of 11 syllables), 'enchained' by a system of rhymes that moves back and forth like a tide: ABA, BCB, CBC, etc. The middle rhyme-word of one tercet becomes the outer rhyme of the following. It needs to take a step back to go forward. You retreat and then you jump. You are scared and then bold. Nostalgic and driven. You got the point. It is an incessant embracing of otherness through the familiar. A living together; until the poet tears this plot apart by artificially inserting a full stop and thus ending the canto. A rhyme is always left unfinished. There is always someone left out in the cold.
- From a very practical point of view, the *terza rima* is very hard to interpolate and mess up. Thus, we have a pretty stable text, in terms of both language and content, which is not a given for ancient and medieval works, perennially submerged in the sea of variance. Thanks, 'god', for that! (and apologies for what I said above about your followers making bad readers).
- This text is written in a vernacular of the Italian peninsula, a Florentine/Tuscan version, which today we

roughly recognize as Italian. Back then it was an unruly, ungrammatical, and quite obscure language, with a small and rather monological literary tradition. A mother tongue without prestige or palette. [And, no, Dante was not the ‘father’ of the Italian language; at best, he was its wet-nurse.] Dante moulds his vernacular to forge a polyglot, plurilingual work, in which language knows no limits, fear, or shame.

- The *Comedy* is a swear word that has become canon. A giant raised middle finger to all the niceties, conveniences, politenesses, genres, styles, and traditions. It became canon out of the power of language alone. The *Comedy* entered the canon slamming the door loud. It sat there, looking all tough and surly. ‘Got a problem with me, man?’ They let it stay. Many have tried to smooth it or tame it, but no one has succeeded yet.
- [The canon is unfashionable, I know, but each of us has a complicated relation to it. I am not ready to divorce it yet. I probably never will. I am staying for the children.]
- Please forget the adjective ‘divine’. It was added two hundred years later. *Comedy*, *Commedia*, or, if you want to be a real snob, *Comedia* is the only approximation to the title of the poem. In a letter written by Dante or by someone very close to him, *Comedy* is explained in a very straightforward way, as the opposite of tragedy: it has a stinky beginning (hell) and a happy ending (paradise). Difficult to argue with that. ‘Comedy’ also means dialogism, plurilingualism, an extraordinary variety of styles and of voices, unfathomable depths of expression, scratching, or

soothing, rhymes, the vitality of open and generous bodies, the maddening thrust of desire, and some funny toilet humour.

- Please keep in mind instead the materiality of this text. It was written in ways that are both familiar and foreign to us. A cream-colour page made of goat's skin, on which writers used to trace lines to guide their hand; carbon or plant-based inks that took a while to dry and blotched a lot; the writer holding a quill in one hand and a small knife to sharpen it in the other (a bit like the way today we hold knife and fork) and using a pumice stone to smooth the page out.
- Not a single line written by Dante's hand has reached us, but the *Comedy* was copied by countless scribes, each manuscript a different adventure of writing.

To the author, now. What do you need to keep in mind? Little or nothing.

- Perhaps, as customary, a parenthesis containing digits and a dash: (1265–1321). Round brackets like little hands gesturing at opening and closing, containing the variety, complexity, and banality of a life. So obvious that we tend to gloss over it, until the parenthesis refers to someone we love, and then it is atrocious, or to ourselves, and then it is unthinkable.
- A list of other, or 'minor', works: I will spare you that one, reader.
- A crisis: 1302, the year our poet was exiled from his native Florence and began wandering through Italy. The years during which the *Comedy* is writ-

ten are times of hardship, disillusion, exclusion, and loneliness, but also of a productive homelessness, of disorientation, of writhing away from the grips of localism. There is no *Comedy* without exile.

- And this beautiful quote by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam: ‘The question occurs to me — and quite seriously — how many sandals did Alighieri wear out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat paths of Italy.’

A note on reading Dante. It does take three to tango, and this time it has nothing to do with the trinity: it takes a writer, a reader, and a text, and the transformative encounter that follows. You choose what kind of reader of the *Comedy* you want to be. Maybe a reader-student, who requires much more information than what I gave above. Or you might well like to imagine yourself as one of the first readers of the poem, and dive into it without quite knowing the what, the when, and the how. ‘The *Comedy* contains its own footnotes’, one of my teachers used to say. I do repeat this statement to my students, year in year out, with a conviction that is somewhat proportional to the sceptical look on their faces. ‘But you need to be patient’ — I add. Don’t rush through an ancient text. Don’t expect a quick fix, this is obvious, but also don’t expect to understand it at a first reading, or second, or even tenth. And accept that this is the thrill of it. The journey of interpretation, the postponement of satisfaction, is so much more exciting than the landing of a stable meaning.

An old text needs time and space.

With an internal ruler, measure the space that you need around yourself and inhabit it with silence. Place yourself, as comfortably as you can, in it. As lightly as you wish. But place yourself. Reading, this profoundly intellectual



experience, is also one of the greatest physical pleasures you can encounter.

Be a little bit like Machiavelli: find a room of your own in your inner self's house: a quiet, safe place. And then populate it; be in conversation.

Venuta la sera, mi ritorno a casa ed entro nel mio scrittoio; e in sull'uscio mi spoglio quella veste cotidiana, piena di fango e di loto, e mi metto panni reali e curiali; e rivestito condecientemente, entro nelle antique corti delli antiqui huomini, dove, da loro ricevuto amorevolmente, mi pasco di quel cibo che solum è mio e ch'io nacqui per lui; dove io non mi vergogno parlare con loro e domandarli della ragione delle loro azioni; e quelli per loro humanità mi rispondono; e non sento per quattro hore di tempo alcuna noia, dimentico ogni affanno, non temo la povertà, non mi sbigottisce la morte: tutto mi transferisco in loro (Letter to Francesco Vettori, 10 December 1513).

When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time, I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely (translation by J. B. Atkinson and David Sices).

Or do like Augustine and shut down all things around you; and then silence yourself too.

Si cui sileat tumultus carnis, sileant phantasiae terrae et aquarum at aeris, sileant et poli et ipsa sibi anima sileat et transeat se non se cogitando, sileant somnia et imaginariae revelationes, omnis lingua et omne signum et quicquid transeundo fit si cui sileat omnino ... (*Confessions* 9, 10, 25).

If someone can achieve a state in which the turmoil of the flesh is silent, silent are the phantasies of earth, waters, and air, silent the poles, and silent the soul itself, able to go beyond itself by not thinking of itself [apologies for the many 'it-selves', but that's the text's point I am afraid — so fricative, and voiceless, but such must be the soul; it is spirant after all]. Silent the dreams and imaginary revelations, silent every tongue and every sign and everything that is transitory ... if only ... if only one could ... (my rather free translation. The sweet detail is that Augustine figures this out in conversation with his mum).

Well, Augustine is not talking about reading, is he? He is describing the steps of some mystical rapture toward the contemplation of the divinity. Shush! Augustine says, in a very hypothetical way, and listen to 'H'im. Shush! (this is how I understand it) and listen to the voice of your text.

Reading, for me, is the greatest form of comfort and solace. [Not consolation, no. Consolation is not for books and readers, consolation happens only between embodied humans, one of whom is a mother, or mother figure (I learned this from reading Rilke, though).]

Especially reading the classics. To calm myself, I read Plutarch. I know, it sounds pretty lame when you write it down. Give it a try though. At first, it does not work. It is difficult even to get to the end of one sentence. A residue of daily concerns still looms around like space debris. I spend the first minutes of my reading mostly with my eyes closed, stroking the page with the back on my hand. Nothing fancy

or satisfying there (it is just paper), maybe just the sound of the caress, imperceptible, like sand slipping through the fingers. But then something squares inside. It is perhaps the incessant vocatives in the speeches ('O Caius Crassinius, which hopes do we have?' ... 'We will splendidly win, o Caesar'), or the awkward sentences ('By Hercules! May Pyrrhus and the Sannites follow this code until they are at war with us!'), or the archaic, long-forgotten names ('Eupatrids, Gheomorais and Demiurges', 'Terpander, Taleta, Pherecydes'), the flat, still semi-true, proverbial dictum ('the luxury that, due to their lack of taste, they reputed happiness'), or just the Greek letters dancing on the facing page, and I am in — a world of crystal calm, where sometimes I can hear the writer's stylus scratching on the papyrus. I soon find the time and the space for reading, a capacity that dilates my hours, abduction from every-day concerns, and an antidote to the toxicity of the 'devices'. The obstacle and the plateau (and being worthy of re-reading every five years): this, and nothing else, is what makes a 'classic' to me. This is the free yet especial ticket to my canon.

A note on the translation. Choosing the English version of a poet that is widely translated like Dante ends up being a matter of affection. I am attached to Charles Singleton's 1970 translation, which I have used for my academic dealings with Dante since I was a graduate student. It is (mostly) exact, very literal, prosaic, aseptic, actually antiseptic (the germs of strangeness cannot flourish there), analgesic (the grating pain of Dante's language is put to rest), anaesthetic, sedate, and even soporific. It is my way to ask you, reader, to glance at the original, to taste its sound, to chase meaning, even if it is a matter of one word, and to realize that, at heart, we are all linguists. Sometimes you will see me making fun of this translation — like when I

tease some of its adverbial choices, such as ‘therewithin’ and ‘therefrom’ — but it is meant to be good-natured.

The very few footnotes that you will encounter are mostly expansions of the main text. Scholars do not fear, though: there is a section with bibliographical references, but I have chosen to narrate it, and to weave it with reflections on the operation of this little book and on the meaning of scholarship itself. You will find it at the end. At the very end, you will also find a more restrained list of primary sources and of the translations I have employed throughout the text (unless the translation is mine, in which case I note it). I have arranged them in order of appearance, rather than in alphabetical order. As such, they look like a forlorn chorus line, or a jolly *danse macabre*, and they tell yet another, independent story.

And what about me? After all you are reading my reading of Dante. And with a good portion of me in it. Think of me as a scribe, of the kind that tends to wander off. An academic, profoundly in love with their subject matter, who has reached the age of irony. Think of me as a voice, as an idiolect. Or rather, voices, in the plural, as I randomly and sometimes inadvertently inhabit the characters I am trying to explain or mimic the genres that I am reading. Often, I try to contain myself in parentheses or square brackets, but most of the time I am roaming free.

Think of me as a renter of the English language: it lets me inhabit its space and I pay it back with monies of strangeness and bagloads of typos.

Sometimes, I also feel a bit like Ulysses. An oar-less, sail-less Ulysses, stranded around Gibraltar, half perplexed and half intent. Less hardy but equally ardent. An underground type of Ulysses (here meaning ‘Dostoevskyan’, ‘self-defeating’ rather than ‘cool’ and ‘young’). A female

Ulysses, for that matter, but I refuse to be called Penelope or Siren.

When asked who my audience may be, I am at a pleasurable loss. A bit like Ulysses too, a curious and patient reader, is my answer. Of you I know nothing but this.