



Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 173–212

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS:

Elena Lombardi, '5. It Was Sunset', in Elena Lombardi, *Ulysses, Dante, and Other Stories*, Cultural Inquiry, 28 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-28_5>

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5. It Was Sunset

Era già l'ora che volge il disio
ai navicanti e 'ntenerisce il core
lo dì ch'han detto ai dolci amici addio;
e che lo novo peregrin d'amore
punge, se ode squilla di lontano
che paia il giorno pianger che si more
(*Purgatorio* 8, 1–6)

It was now the hour that turns back the longing
of seafaring folk and melts their heart the day
they have bidden sweet friends farewell, and that
pierces the new pilgrim with love, if he hears from
afar a bell that seems to mourn the dying day

It was sunset. Things happen at sunset. Or, rather, non-things do not happen at sunset, and this vacuum produces a prickling, piercing sentiment; the pain itself of places, people, events bygone and irretrievable. It is not our pain; it's theirs. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*.

It is nostalgia, a modern coinage — from *nostos* (return) and *algia* (pain) — for a malady old as the human

being: the painful desire to return to some place that no longer exists as it was. The hue of this word is pale blue, its association with the sea almost inevitable. Dante was right to pour some of his best poetry just to say 'It was sunset'.

In this image, Dante captures the mechanics of nostalgia, caught and stretched between two desires: an active, painful, punctual awareness in the sudden turning and piercing, and the passive, quasi-sadness in the softening of the heart and the mourning of the day. He suffuses it with the positive subtext of friendship, and the love that springs forth from the piercing. Nostalgia is a *nostos* that never closes the circle.

From afar ('di lontano'): only nostalgia is close to travellers. All the rest — friends, bell tower, land — is distant, remote, absent. It is incredibly sad and sometimes (but only occasionally) invigorating.

There are two sets of characters in this image, similar but different: the plural seafarers (all seafarers, seafarers in general) and their friends, and the single pilgrim.

I sometimes wonder if these sailors are Ulisse's crew. 'Seafarers' suggest consummate travellers, used to leaving and returning home. Their sea voyage implies the circular pattern of the *nostos*, the story of maritime journey and return. The sailors' desire is captured in the moment of its heading home — it is 'turned back' — yet the emphasis is on the day of the departure, the moment of farewells. But perhaps those farewells were rushed on both sides, and careless for a good reason; the sweet friends thought they would see the seafarers again, while the seafarers stared at them, then at the harbour, and then at the island becoming smaller and smaller, sighed with a mix of sadness and relief, and turned their gaze in front. It doesn't need to be catastrophic. They might see each other again. Older, changed. Homecoming. Inbound.

May I ask you, reader, to bring yourself to the port where you once waited for a boat to arrive? Isn't there always some kind of flutter, some aimless preparation, some unsteadiness? It needn't be a harbour — an airport, a train, or a bus station will do; the motor of a car pulling over, or the unmistakable sound of certain steps on the stairs. And may I leave you there, to savour the concept of 'waiting', and ponder changes on faces that you only know? Or to inhabit instead the other side of the door of time, and be the incoming traveller, still entertaining some kind of motion inside, even when you have set foot on land, even when you are sat on the sofa.

When I was young, there was a certainty to all my travels; that my father would be waiting for me at the station, or at the airport. He was kind of short but, waving his arms like a flat windmill, he managed to stand out in the crowd, no matter how big it was. With my myopia aggravated by travel, all I could see was a pair of waving hands and a large smile, and a commotion that piloted me through the crowd. Until the day he was no longer there. The doors of the arrivals hall at Linate airport in Milano still make the same noise when they slide open, some kind of vacuum-sucking sound, or that of a blunt slash. *Lacrimae rerum mearum*.

In the sunset image, Dante flanks the seafarers and their sweet friends with a singular pilgrim. Unlike the seafarers, the pilgrim is 'new' ('novo'); he has left home recently, for the first time perhaps, he is inexperienced, and the duration of his journey is unsure. In his sunset there is also the sound of the bell, which exacerbates the 'turning' into a proper piercing of the heart and adds a layer of uncertainty to this image. Where is the bell tower? In the town the pilgrim just left behind or ahead, in a village that he may reach tonight, so similar yet so different from

the 'original' one? Or is this sound truly ahead, perhaps even in his head, the ghost tolling of the bell tower of the holy site, the awaited end of the journey? What inflames the pilgrim with pain could be the homeland that he has left behind, or the one that awaits him forward; his desire could equally be nostalgic or anticipatory, stretching between past and future in the sound of the present bell. Either way, the sound of 'this' bell has a nostalgic nuance; it laments the dying day, a day like no other, the ever fleeting, ever elusive, and yet only form of existence. The ever dying now.

The figure of the pilgrim, then, adds a new tone to nostalgia — it turns the time of travel into a temporality, and the place into a geography; it messes with space and time, turning the where into a when and then hanging both upside down. You can never measure at the same time the desire (momentum) and the location (position) of the nostalgic traveller. Nostalgia should be made into a law of physics, some kind of Heisenberg principle of the human spirit. Loss would be the unit of measure of this equation. I wonder what would emerge from looking at the universe as nostalgic.

Peregrinus: foreigner, stranger, and wayfarer; this Latin word comes to identify those many people who in the middle ages and beyond left home and travelled for religious reasons, for long months or sometimes years, to visit a holy site (be that Rome, Jerusalem, or Santiago) and gain some spiritual currency in return. Pilgrimage was a key social and spiritual practice in the Christian middle ages. The sole truly multicultural and multilingual phenomenon of the time, pilgrimage had refractions in the full range of medieval culture, from spirituality to geography, from economy to law, from literature to art, through architecture, with

villages and towns, churches and markets, languages and cultures developing along pilgrimage roads, some of which are still routes of European travel today.

The practice of pilgrimage affects the understanding of concepts such as 'homeland' and 'foreignness', 'old' and 'new'. In the actual homeland, one is spiritually foreign, and thus needs to undertake the journey in order to seek the spiritual homeland, in which one is actually foreign. In the holy site, the pilgrim finds the new under the form of the fulfilment of an old, missing promise of the self; in returning to the homeland the old is rearticulated by renewal. 'Return' is not a straightforward matter in this narrative. At each moment, the place to go back to is both behind and ahead.

Modern tourism is sometimes said to be pilgrimage's scion, which broadly makes sense, including the bourgeoning of cheap commerce around the holy/beautiful site, the ecstatic glimpse/photo of a crucial object or landmark, and the 'I-was-there' token souvenir. Even the leisure that is part of pilgrimage, ancient and modern, even the sense of renewal that is key to tourism. There is something ill-fitting in this comparison, though, which I cannot quite pinpoint. Perhaps the absence of the ghost text of salvation, the the lack of free atonement and tokens for the afterlife, or simply the accelerated temporality of modern travel.

In my determinately secular and pathetically unspiritual life I have seen pilgrims only once. My father, the arrivals-hall windmill, although a man of science, was strangely superstitious and avoided holy places. They brought bad luck, he said. I guess it was his own mild revolt against what he felt was an oppressive, or hypocritical, presence of religion in his youth. As a consequence, I have only seen the Vatican through a school trip and went to Assisi only after his death. That is: my childhood and teens

were deprived of Michelangelo and Giotto, admittedly a middle-class problem, but not without corollaries.

It was early morning in the airport of Bangalore, I was boarding a flight to the UK, and they were embarking for the Hajj, wearing the traditional white robes. I, the reluctant tourist whom life had brought briefly and precariously to the enormous Indian city, whose images, scents, and noises were still passing in my mind in a strangely silent, fast-forwarded film, clutching the poor relics of the I-was-there in my handbag (a silk dupatta, a small stone chariot, souvenir of Hampi, a carton of the much-coveted Mysore sandal soap), heading back to the established estrangement of my life in Britain, and they, the large community of a local minority, men, women, and children, leaving their own estranged establishment for the holy site. Attending the same routines at different gates, sketching the same gestures to fight the boredom of the long wait and perhaps anticipating the pang of fear and excitement of the flight, pacing with the same steps the airport halls, cramped airless spaces dressed up like a street fair, were we at peace with whatever we needed to make peace? About to have our gravity disconcerted by the in-human experience of flight whilst being subsumed in the most anodyne commercial experience — tea or coffee, chicken-or-vegetarian, pleaser-insethebasin — two flights side by side, leaving what looks on earth like a foamy wake in the big blue sky, we were perhaps an atom, an incarnation of Ulysses in his voyage of (no) return, or of the lonely pilgrim, our hearts soon to be pierced by the tolling bells. D-ling d-lling — you may now unfasten your seat belts. But please remain seated. Stay where you are. Be where you are.

Of that crowd of pilgrims, I only remember the children being children and one of the elders, tall, thin, and sinewy, with a grave yet witty smile. With two immaculate worn-

out towels thrown around his body and his gnarled walking stick, he looked, strangely, like a John the Baptist figure.

Peregrini et hospites: pilgrims and strangers (or even: aliens and visitors, foreigners and homeless). So Paul describes humans in Hebrews 11. 13–15. Life on earth is a long journey, a spiritual pilgrimage towards a non-place (both home and holy land) that is found only in the after-life: birth is the necessary departure from the soul's maker, and death, the longed-for return to 'it'. The notion of spiritual pilgrimage is intricately connected to but also different from the practice of pilgrimage: in it, home and holy land are the same and they are largely unknown; the experience of the new is at once the retrieval of the old. The story of the Exodus in the Bible, telling the wanderings of the Jews away from Egypt and towards the homeland, is the foundational narrative of this journey. In the narrative of biblical Exodus and its allegorical transposition of life as pilgrimage, the existence of a holy/home-land is certain, but its geographical and spiritual location is unclear. Errancy and travel are one. Exodus is a radical experience of foreignness and estrangement.

Strip it of the uncertain point of departure and arrival, and the journey is all that is left. Embodiment is all that is left. 'Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them' ... goes a quote by J. C. Lewis. Blood, shit, and desire, I would add [long ago a friend of mine witnessed me declaring this to be the human triad]. A very vague sense of what is good and what is bad (sweet is good, bitter is bad: this is the infantile truth underlying all ethics, and all fruit salads); appetites and curiosities to follow a very poor, illegible, or blank map; sounds grafted onto each other to

form words, a couple of metaphors, a set of embellishments, and two or three stories, always the same.

Exodus, the way out. The way out of. The way into, but only for some. Egypt and Israel. Captivity and freedom. An obdurate, waxen Pharaoh. Blood, bread, scourges, and wild chariot chases. Water and wilderness. Manna from heaven and Moses, the damaged hero. 'I am not good at this!' — he keeps saying — 'I am slow, and hesitant, I am a halting speaker.' The ultimate human being, the quintessential nostalgic, Moses is forever trapped in the all-consuming now. For him there is no going back to the homeland, just a sight of the never-occurring there-as-then. His people do return, though. I guess they are too busy, or too oblivious, to realize that homeland is a spatio-temporal mirage.

An incurably jealous god and his interminably unruly people: too bright, too curious, too ironic to withstand a rule for too long. Severe yet ever-crumbling writings on stone; the disintegrating shape of human behaviours. Obsessive, grinding repetitions — of names, and tribes, and herds, and laws, and detailed instructions, and materials, and measurements — which make the Bible both the most human and the most illegible book of all. And the profound, existential stillness of the desert. The scorching heat, the uncanny silence. The night is enormous and cold. Homelessness.

In our perennially reflected and refracted culture, *exodus* means everything and nothing. In my own native country, Italy, come the first of August when the summer vacation starts for most people, and the media start frantically speaking of 'exodus' (basically meaning long queues on seaside-bound highways). Come August 31st and it is the equally panic-stricken report of a 'counter-exodus'. It seems like it has to go back to tourism, sweaty and agi-

tated people, and the smell of cheap sunscreen. This, I must add, was truer when I was a child, when everybody but us left the city in August. Arrivals-hall windmill and his stern wife never allowed vacation in August, and I ended up spending most of my childhood summers in an empty, claustrophobic, abandoned metropolis that, under the humid lashing of the leonine sun, had the metaphysical grit of a De Chirico painting. It was home, but in a feverish nightmare. Home you have the urge to run away from. I wonder whether my exodus-less childhood has made me the nomad that I am.

Figura. The story of Exodus is, in turn, the quintessential place for Christian exegesis — the pivot one may say, of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ testament, the very binding of the two books into the Christian bible. At least on the surface, it looks like a watertight yet elastic story where everything hinges: historical and spiritual slavery, Moses and Christ, Passover and Easter, exile and return, sin and redemption, bread and body, down to the minutest detail. All elements in the ‘old’ story are said to prefigure the ‘new’. The ‘new’, in turn, heeds the ‘old’. This parallel yet overlapping form of interpretation is called ‘figural’, ‘typological’, or ‘allegorical’: there is no hard distinction between these terms. Crudely: figures and types are said to be ‘truer’, more ‘historical’, like Moses prefiguring Christ, and allegories more fictional, like the flight of a dove symbolizing the elevation of the human soul to god.

In my view, the positive aspect of figural/allegorical reading is the renewal and the creativity that goes with it. The negative is that it does not give the ‘then’ the same weight as the ‘now’. Now is better! Figural reading proudly announces. It pushes forward. Details are jerked and twisted to produce general coherence. Texts are co-

erced into the consistency of meaning. The 'then' is just the manna of the bulimic 'now'.

Figures abound, therefore, in and around the Christian interpretation of the Bible: no word is left unturned, down to two little goats that are said to be figures of Christ's first and second coming. Waiting to be fulfilled, the *figurae* look, at times, like toy figurines, about to be set up by the rough and excited hand of a colossal child-player. Like childhood play, figural and allegorical reading is imaginative, tyrannical, and repetitive. In this game, figures are serious and sad like toy soldiers, allegories merry and queer like dress-ups. The Player is not orderly or methodical, though, they make do with what they have in their box, like when my three-year-old son used a plastic dinosaur, a violet *pachycephalosaur* for that matter, to impersonate Mary Jane, Spiderman's girlfriend, in his bathtub play. The Player sent a storm, but the articulated plastic figure saved 'her' from drowning.

Some early church fathers, with a plethora of unbeatable late antique names (such as Athanasius, Methodius, Hippolytus) called it 'recapitulation', a way in which Christian history interprets itself in the unfolding, so that the beginning coincides with the end. Their spokesperson is a certain Irenaeus (2nd century CE), and their canvas yet another narrative of lapse and return that makes Adam the figure of Christ, and history a giant loop away from and towards god; incarnation the furthest point of the loop, and the beginning of the return. Reset this in Christian life, and birth is the Adamic moment, death the homecoming. Thus, history is like embodiment; its death, the day of Judgment. Or maybe an asteroid.*

* It is intriguing that recapitulation became in the nineteenth century a now discounted theory of evolution — the notion that 'the develop-

For all its universalizing pretence, *re-capitulare* is a humble word from the material act of writing — in antiquity and the middle ages *capitulum* is a chapter, a heading, an index, even a paragraph break. It is the minimal yet intriguing symbol that has survived even into today's virtual writing, that slim yet full reverse P (¶) that unties our thoughts on the page, in little clots of sentences, modest units of self-sufficiency. When we re-capitulate, we harvest the headings of our writing into some appearance of sense. We nudge, direct, even force our thoughts into 'meaning'. Or, perhaps, it is just a resistance against the blankness of the page ahead. [Sometimes, when I start a piece of writing, I begin by keying in a whole page of paragraph breaks. Only when I reach page 2 do I go back and begin my text. It scares solitude away. It integrates the beginning into a non-existent end. It moves the end away with each character I type.]

Figuralism, I guess, is not solely a Judaeo-Christian matter. Many cultures and religions are populated with before and afters, pre- and pro-phets, with the incessant re-reading, updating, and universalizing of the same story. It may be just the very material consequence of being stuck with old, incomprehensible texts, or perhaps this is how memory, the enormous, terrifying, ingenuous monster, works: shortening, selecting, making sense of things with new information, adapting to one's benefit, embellishing or disfiguring according to our needs. Thankfully, in both memory and in figural/allegorical reading there are some remote pockets where all that is not functional, all

ment of an organism from conception to maturity repeats the same sequence of stages as have occurred during the evolution of its species or race' (quick Oxford reference). I am not sure there is an echo of Irenaeus & Co. here, but the ideology is similar: a capacious text, variation, and return.

that fails to 'convert' into meaning is stored; pre-versions, per-versions, a-versions, sub- or super-versions. Traumas and dreams. All that which is not coming home. Or either, the stowaway.

If I were to rewrite the figural representation of Exodus, I would, perhaps, not deny the parallels between Moses and Christ, but would focus on how they are both flawed, unfulfilled, tragic heroes. Why me? says Moses. Why me? says Christ. I am halting, I am fragile. Quick! The night is short, says Moses. Pack unleavened bread, fasten your sandals, and gird your loins with belts. We have to run. We will always have to run, over land and seas, with our rituals impenetrable even to ourselves, holding this book, where I am said to write my own death, this book that will not allow my steps to disappear in the sand. Oh, I wish this quiet warm night in the garden of Gethsemane would last forever, says Christ. Don't go quite yet, sweet friends, we have time. If you would remember me, says Christ at Easter, if you would remember me truly when eating this bread, do not, do not remember only the concise and coherent story, but also its failures, the irreducible details, the dreams, the traumas. My shit and blood. Mine, and Moses', and that of all flawed idealists. And desire.

Peregrinus amoris. Desire brings you places. Desire and the journey are one for the 'pilgrim of love'. For Augustine, it is, quite literally, a physical force, one with an equation and a unit of measure.

Corpus pondere suo nititur ad locum suum. Ponderus non ad ima tantum est, sed ad locum suum. Ignis sursum tendit; deorsum lapis. Ponderibus suis aguntur, loca sua petunt. Oleum infra aquam fusum super aquam attollitur, aqua supra oleum fusa, infra oleum demergitur; ponderibus suis

aguntur, loca sua petunt. Minus ordinata inquietantur: ordinantur et quiescunt. Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror quocumque feror (*Confessions* 13, 9, 10).

I am almost tempted to leave this terse excerpt untranslated. There is something tetragonal about its shape and sound that makes it interpret itself while you read it, even in a foreign language. It is the kind of passage that squares the circle inside and reassures me of my shared humanity. The climax about the weight of love is like an invisible language dart that pulverizes my gravity and makes me feel weightless and carried by my love. Whatever that is, wherever it carries me.

But I am more tempted to translate it myself — I, an inept translator from and into any language. Here we go:

Each body is striven [ungrammatical, but somehow true] by their weight to the place that is theirs. Pay attention, here: weight does not mean down, it means to the place that is yours. Fire tends upward, stone downwards. Submitting to their weights, they are seeking their place. If you pour oil in water, it will emerge; if you pour water in oil, it will de-merge. Submitting to their weights, they are seeking their place. Less ordinate things are restlessly desirous: once they find order their desire experiences stillness. My love is my weight; by it I am carried wherever I am carried.

Or maybe this is the real translation:

Weight = one's place
 Weight ≠ down or up
 The experiment of oil and water
 place = repose
 love = (weight + place) ÷ (rest + desire)
 The unit of measure? me

The image of the sunset at the beginning of the eighth canto of *Purgatory* that opens this chapter is supremely

pre-Augustinian, as it captures the indeterminate, sweet, nostalgic instant before the weight of love pushes you wherever you need to go: whether that is forward, back, down or up, in a circle or on a tangent only you know. The heart is weightless in this suspended moment, motionless the spirit.

Off we go now.

Desire brings you places in different ways. In the practice of pilgrimage, desire is a force; push, traction, attraction. Physical pilgrimage (and some version of tourism, for that matter) implies journey, destination, change and exchange, and return. Like pilgrimage, desire is movement, it is transit toward and from a longed-for object. The main narrative of pilgrimage (and of desire) is as straightforward as the displays in airports and stations: check in, gate, departure, return. And yet, shifting softly as an electronic display, or noisily as the old-style board with thin plastic letters (of which, let us face it, some of us have dreamt, at least once, to be the omniscient typesetter), subjects and objects, points of departures and arrivals, are unsteadied.

It is a game of both purpose and irresolution. In these journeys there are maps, schedules, fares, layovers, hostels, and places where we are, indeed, *hospites*. These are, in turn, spaces for encounter, storytelling, retrospection, wasted time, sweet friends, new and old; for bells tolling from nowhere, for pleasure, and for mourning.

A superstition that I like involves setting an extra place at the table for a mysterious guest: the place of Christ. This is the way I was told it works (I have not checked its veracity; never to verify is the mode of the superstitious): you set an extra place at the table, a plate, a glass with a drop of wine, cutlery, and a napkin in case a pilgrim, rugged and hungry, knocked at your door during a stormy night asking for shelter. That traveller, any traveller, might be Christ, or a

genie (for the secular me), or a blessing in disguise (for the rational me). It is not about the pilgrim coming, though. It is about them not coming, and the empty place at the table. For me, it is about those who do not return: it is the place of longing, the place of loss. [I also kiss the stale bread goodbye before I throw it in the compost bin, but this might be more information about me than you want to hear.]

In the notion of spiritual pilgrimage, desire is more of a momentum. In the story of life as an uncertain wandering of the soul toward an undefined destination (god), there is more reliance on an instinctual kind of attraction. The ineluctable and necessarily digressive (because necessarily embodied) instinct that blindly guides the human soul back to its creator must become the deliberation and the map for the journey. In the search for the divinity (or, more secularly, for one supreme object or goal) desire concentrates, governs, and regulates itself. It is even a proof of existence for both the desiring subject and the desired object: 'I desire, therefore It exists,' so goes the premodern *cogito*.

In this story there is more digression, ambiguity, and errancy than in a real journey (you can't plan life as a trip), but the moral is even stricter than that of an actual journey: the desiring self needs to recognize the roads, the carriers, the encounters either as useful (not pleasurable) things, or as errors. As we saw with Augustine and the Neoplatonic reading of the *Odyssey*, it is ok to travel, to stop somewhere, and be curious, but Ithaca must be always in sight — no lingering, no excitement, no enjoyment of the journey itself is allowed. The aporia of this Christian narrative is that it ends up pinning desire against pleasure. Desire recoils and sometimes creates monsters.

Dante inscribes the double story of the pilgrimage of desire in the fourth book of his *Banquet* (*Convivio* 4, XII, 14–19), with some rather telling twists. As soon as it starts the new and untravelled journey of our life, Dante explains, the soul aims to return to god and acts as a pilgrim who, travelling on an unknown road, thinks that each house he sees is the inn where he will rest. [It is refreshing that there is no holy land in sight in this story, just an inn where one can find shelter for the night. This pilgrim, although cast in a religious narrative, is ‘just’ a foreigner. This is Dante soon after the exile. He knows how painful, how scary it is to walk on unknown roads alone. He knows better than to blabber grand statements about Home.] Duly going from house to house, the pilgrim eventually gets to the inn. [‘This country road dotted with farmsteads is pleasant’ — we can imagine the foreigner’s thoughts and conversations — ‘but as much as I enjoy the scenery, I am a bit anxious about finding shelter for the night.’ ‘No sir, not here, the hostel is that way, another couple of hours. But if you want to sit with us, we always set an extra place at the table. After dinner, we often gather in the barn and listen to old stories of battle, journey, and love.’ ‘It is kind of you, good woman, but I cannot linger, I must be on my way.’ ‘The sunset is beautiful, it reminds me of my sweet friends back home, but it also tells that the day is about to die. I might get lost. It’s getting cold. It may be some time.’] So too should behave the newly embodied soul, continues Dante, and walk the journey of life moving from one experience to the other until it reaches god. Being young, however, the soul cannot quite tell the small from the big objects of desire (the houses from the inn) and turns her attention to all. Dante’s order of desire is properly funny: an apple, a little bird, fine clothes, a horse, a woman, riches, riches, and more riches [chocolate, a puppy dog, designer clothes, a car, a trophy

spouse, riches, riches, and more riches]. This is not bad per se, says Dante, as long as you keep your eye on god, the ultimate object of desire [‘eye on the prize’, says the modern tale]. Otherwise, you will miss the direct road to the city [oh, sweet Dante: midway through the paragraph he forgets about pilgrimage, houses on the road, and the inn, and starts talking about a city. There is no way back to your city, you fool]. The good walker goes on the straight road, gets to the city, and rests; the bad walker takes the errant road, the one full of detours, keeps on walking, and gets more and more tired, hungrier and hungrier.

The narrative of the journey to the holy land or the supernal homeland, with all its twists, turns, and strangeness, brings into relief the all-conquering power of desire, its capacity to bridge distances, to embrace even the most distant objects, even those that are long gone, lost, dead. Desire is capacious and elastic. It writes and reads figurally. It makes sense of the most absurd and disparate things (because I want them ...).

Like figural interpretation, however, desire has some traits that are difficult to sympathize with: it can become exclusive, authoritarian, even martial, especially when it is espoused with a hypertrophic willpower and a lack of finesse. It learns to identify as extraneous all desires that diverge from the ultimate goal, whatever that is. No need for the religious subtext here: the road of determination, with its ugly-sounding co-ordinates obsession and success, is paved with the tombstones of murdered desires, either too fragile or too unfamiliar to match the main gosestep.

Anchora. Desire is like an anchor, Augustine says, a magic one, for that matter: from afar it is thrown in the promised land and firmly pulls the Christian soul to its maker. There may be some bumps, but no shipwreck.

Iam desiderio ibi sumus, iam spem in illam terram, quasi anchoram praemisimus, ne in isto mari turbati naufragemus. Quemadmodum ergo de navi quae in anchoris est, recte dicimus quod iam in terra sit; adhuc enim fluctuat, sed in terra quodammodo educta est contra ventos, et contra tempestates: sic contra tentationes huius peregrinationis nostrae, spes nostra fundata in illa civitate Ierusalem facit nos non abripi in saxa (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 64, 3).

We are already there through desire. Already we have dropped hope, like an anchor, in that land, so that, distressed, we do not sink in the storms. Of a ship that is anchored, we rightly say that it is already landed: even though it still tossed in the waves, it is somehow landed, notwithstanding winds and storms. In the same way, against the temptations of our journey, our hope is grounded in that city of Jerusalem that helps us avoid crashing against the rocks in the sea (my translation).

Anchorless Ulisse! However ardent, his desire did not moor him.

Anchors are strange, says the incompetent seamstress. They are like reverse fishhooks; a tiny boat trying to catch the big earth.

In my youth, I once dreamt of a symbol — it was half an anchor and half a lyre. [I usually do not dream symbols, I dream stories, and of the rubbish kind, usually. Incurably terrigenous, I have never dreamt of flying, which I hear from aerial people is one wondrous sensation.] Thus, attempting an allegorical interpretation of my dream, I established that the anchor and lyre was ‘my’ symbol — it was the closest I ever got to getting a tattoo. A nice version of me, that is; the one that you are happy to wear on your fleshy sleeve. But of what? Of my half determined and half ephemeral personality. Of my half landed and half

suspended life story. Of my half grounded, half improvised mores. Of navigation and music, two talents that are utterly alien to me, but chillingly, and tenderly, my ex-husband's skills (was this a figure of my future or of my ex-husband? is the excruciating question). Of desire and poetry. Of life and writing, perhaps. Of nothing! A sardonic voice muffles my musings. Of the fish I ate the night before while listening to Bach's cello suites. A poorly understood music, a sea creature consumed in haste: they resisted figuralism. Indigested, un(re)cognized; they gave me dreams.

Peregrinatio pro amore dei. It is my favourite: the pilgrimage for the love of God that was said to be practiced in the Celtic and early Anglo-Saxon church, a curious midway between the actual and the theoretical aspects of pilgrimage. The pilgrim 'for the sake of God' strived to reconstruct the wandering pattern of the Jews by setting to travel without a destination, or by establishing a random destination that was not necessarily linked to a holy site, but that provided the experience of estrangement. At times this exercise was so radical as to suggest the pilgrim to board a little boat and to float away without direction. In modern life, this makes me think of those bathers who drift away from the beach on a float. Children or drunkards; they say god protects them.

Still, to embrace illogically the fullness of one's own desire, to eschew the need for a port of arrival and the tyranny of meaning, to embark upon error as the only viable path, might be the only way to do desire justice.

Ultimately, any desire is a pilgrimage, a journey of unequal return. The journey of desire is acceleration in slow motion. It is to be already there and not yet arrived. Under perfect conditions (such as those, for example, of Dante's paradise,

but also, I believe, in many instances of earthly happiness), desire is at once stimulated and fulfilled, in an ever-burning present that knows neither frustration nor satiety. When desire is now, paradise is here.

Desire both establishes and bridges the distance between the here and there, the now and then. And at once, it calls the traveller back home. 'Pilgrim desire', in other words, is a desire that simultaneously calls backwards and forwards, that is both thrust and nostalgia, plunge and re-surface. For some, it is an ever-piercing wound of the heart, for others, a tiny lesion that pulls but softly. It is the sunsets where we turn to look at our journeys and try to make sense of them within a coherent story. It is the irreducible detail that makes us the endlessly misshapen, hapless *figurae* of ourselves.

THE ANTI-ULISSE

Dante's Ulysses, although driven by the most ardent desire for travel, is not nostalgic, we know that. No-nay-never will the sweetness of home (father, wife, son) affect his journey. He feels nothing at sunset. Maybe just the pangs of hunger for dinner. To me, this is the only punishment that Dante metes out for him.

The beginning of *Purgatory* is a big anti-Ulyssean moment. Dante-traveller has reached in a rather fortuitous manner the 'mountain dark in the distance' (*Inferno* 26, 133–34) near which Ulysses's ship sank. Rather than going by sea, Dante and Virgil go all the way to the centre of the earth, and then climb over Lucifer's slimy, velvety body that is stuck there; first descending on his upper parts 'between the matted hair and the frozen crusts' ('tra il folto pelo e le gelate croste'; *Inferno* 34, 75), then performing some rather audacious acrobatics on the devil's own crotch,

they then start ascending on his legs planted upside down in the southern hemisphere. I feel for Dante; there were times I was so terrified of flying that I would have done anything not to set foot on a plane, including climbing on the devil's pubic hair, as he does in this rather memorable scene that has reminded a student of mine of the fantasy of an anal birth.

After crossing a long and claustrophobic tunnel, Dante eventually emerges with his guide on the shores of Purgatory, and he understandably takes revenge on the one who thought he could go there by a simple boat ride. At the same time, he starts shaping his text as a grand textual navigation that goes hand in hand with the sobering acceptance of divine wings.

The first canto of *Purgatory* begins with a non-mad sea journey and the poet's talent lifting the sails in order to sing the second realm. More about this in the next chapter: for now, notice how Dante employs the same words he had used at the beginning of the canto of *Ulisse*: 'correre' (to run) and 'ingegno' (talent, genius) — here, however, his genius can run (sail, fly) unrestrained.

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
 omai la navicella del mio ingegno
 che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele
 (*Purgatorio* 1, 1–3)

To course over better waters the little bark of my
 genius now hoists her sails, leaving behind her a
 sea so cruel.

Upon arrival to the shores of purgatory, a contrast is also established between 'experience' and 'inexperience'. 'Experience' — one of the main attributes of *Ulisse*, who wanted to gain experience of the world, and of human vice and worth ('del mondo esperto | e de li vizi umani e del

valore'; *Inferno* 26, 98–99) — is here underplayed (or overplayed?). Here, we learn openly of Ulisse's 'mistake': his proleptic, projectile desire for experience, which pushed him 'out there' to almost reach the place of salvation, did not make him expert, or competent in returning. Only Dante-traveller is strolling the 'desert shore, that never saw *anyone* navigate its waters who afterwards had experience of return' ('lito disertò | che mai non vide navicar sue acque | omo, che di tornar sia poscia esperto'; *Purgatorio* 1, 130–32). Moreover, everyone is depicted as inexperienced in this foundational scene: Dante, Virgil, and the newly arrived souls are not 'experts' of the place, but, guess what?, they are 'pilgrims':

[...] Voi credete
 forse che siamo esperti d'esto loco;
 ma noi siam peregrin come voi siete.
 (*Purgatorio* 2, 61–63)

Perhaps you think we are acquainted with this place; but we are pilgrims, like yourselves.

True pilgrims of desire, their journey is one without a map; together with the purging souls, Dante and Virgil proceed to inhabit and explore the new realm like 'one who goes but knows not where *one* may come forth' ('com' om che va, né sa dove rïesca'; 2, 132).

Ulisse, then, puffed up with his desire for experience, was not able to secure the most necessary expertise of all: that of coming back. He was not able to entertain thoughts of return, to re-read, to think retrospectively, to rewrite and recapitulate his story. Ulisse is a non-nostalgic non-returner; the quintessential discoverer, it seems.

Unlike the protagonist's acrobatic cave climbing, the regular souls arrive to purgatory by boat. But this ferry is

of a divine nature. It is, once again, a matter of navigation-cum-flight, as the ferry-angel pushes the boat with its wings. The same rhetoric of oars ('remi') and wings ('ali') that constructed the magic of Ulisse's mad flight is now reversed. The angel of god

[...] sdegna li argomenti umani,
 sì che remo non vuol, né altro velo
 che l'ali sue, tra liti sì lontani.
 (*Purgatorio* 2, 31–33)

[...] scorns all human instruments, and will have
 no oar, nor other sail than his own wings between
 such distant shores.

You won't be surprised to hear that the souls on the boat are singing in unison Psalm 113, *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*, on, well, Israel's exodus from Egypt (and all the good things that god did on that occasion), and that Dante on the shores of purgatory creatively tampers with the whole notion of Exodus and of its figural reading. With a perfectly executed shell game, or four-card monte, Dante brings together the freedom of the Jews from the Egyptian captivity, its standard interpretation as the liberation of the Christians from sin through the sacrifice of Christ, the otherworldly journey of himself-as-character (the journey of D-traveller in the afterlife, that is) in search for spiritual reformation, and the suicide (sin) of an old pagan (sin) republican enemy of Caesar (sin): Cato, a super-controversial figure that he places as the guardian of the second realm.

The setup of this flawless trick is simple. We (the readers) have just arrived to the shores of purgatory, ferried by Dante's textual boat. Expertly steered away from strangeness and incongruity by our cleverly ambiguous author and by the enthusiastic crew of his commentators, we barely

noticed a gurgling vortex next to the island: ‘no worries, folks, nothing to look at there, just show us your ticket and we will disembark soon. Check out that other boat instead, the fancy yacht, full of happy travellers singing their corporate hymn, *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*’. Timid like sheep, inexperienced, we start walking as those who go but know not where they may end up, comforted by the sweet light of the morning, the velvety pale blue of a rare sapphire. [It is not sunset; we are safe from melancholic longings.] To our surprise, we are met by the screams and shouts of the beach’s guardian, a crazy-looking old man. [We are scared and puzzled, but remember, it is just a trick.] While we are trying confusedly to figure out whether we know him from another story, he starts barking invectives at us: ‘The hell are you doing here all dazed? You lazy bums [well, ‘spiriti lenti’, you laggard spirits; *Purgatorio* 2, 120]. Quick! This way. No lingering with sweet friends, old songs, and pagan bullshit, and, especially, no mentioning of my fucking ex-wife; we’ve got atonement to do. This is not a resort, for chrissake! This is sal-va-tion, a prison that will set you free. Stop looking back at the sea, we already told you: No-body sank there; it is just a natural whirlpool. This way, quick! Follow the signs that say *Return*’. [My rather free rendition of cantos 1 and 2 of *Purgatory*.][†]

† The ex in question is Marcia, whom the historical Cato allegedly married twice, and who currently resides in Dante’s hell among the pagan souls with Virgil. At the outset of this episode, Virgil addresses Cato in the name of Marcia, provoking his fury (canto 1: the pagan bullshit that I mention above is, indeed, Virgil’s *captatio benevolentiae* to Cato, here described as mere flattery, or ‘lusinghe’, *Purgatorio* 1, 92 [Do read, if you wish, the shockingly comic punishment of the flatterers in *Inferno* 18]). Irascible Cato has another fit when Dante asks an old friend — the musician Casella, one of the souls who have just arrived in purgatory — to entertain him with the sweet sound of an old love song (canto 2).

The fun anecdote is that in the *Banquet* Dante had interpreted in a figural way the story of Cato and Marcia getting together twice, as

A few words on Cato are needed, to better appreciate Dante's provocation here: he is known as Cato the Younger (95–46 BCE), to distinguish him from his equally austere great-grandfather; or as Cato Uticensis, a name that strangely turns suicide into an honour (Utica is the place where Cato killed himself, after allegedly reading Plato's *Phaedo* twice, a strange death scene told with horribly vibrant tones by my muse Plutarch in the *Life of Cato the Younger*, 67–70). During the civil war that saw the end of the Roman Republic, Cato was the true enemy of Caesar, at least in my rather schematic and heroic appreciation of this time of history. Much more than bloated Pompey, he is the proper symbol of Roman virtue and high morality: loyal, tough, incorruptible, stern, sober, sporting a lean musculature, and yes, a little dreary were it not for the lucky fact that his bard is the most dysfunctional epic poet ever — Lucan, the cantor of *bella plus quam civilia*, of 'more than civil' wars. His *Pharsalia*, of which, I fear, I am the only surviving fan, tetanizes the epic poem with an internal poison; it is some kind of autoimmune reaction of the genre. While banning divinity and marvel from the epic (no nymphs, or

the narrative, now well known to you, of the return of the soul to god (*Convivio* 4, XXVIII, 13–19). On the shores of Purgatory, Dante rejects such an interpretation, curtly saves Cato and damns Marcia, and denies the weight of the past (classical, literary, sentimental, and otherwise). Sly readers like me, however, catch him red-handed, when he has his brutal Cato pausing for one vowel too long on the name of his ex. When rebuffing Virgil's address in the name of Marcia, Cato gives a plain and rational explanation for it: he loved Marcia, he says, as long as that was 'correct', and now that he has moved into a new narrative, he no longer does (easy, no?). He starts his speech by mentioning her name: 'Marzïa piacque tanto a li occhi miei' he says (*Purgatorio* 1, 85); I used to love Mar-z-ii-a so much. Oh, he lingers on her name. Oh, does he still love her. Ii-it still hurts. Readers who hold that people are in Dante's *Hell* for a reason will deny this hint of nostalgia and say that the syllable stretch is just a metrical necessity. I say life is a poem, where every syllable counts. (Augustine agrees).

Cyclopes here, or infuriated gods), the *Pharsalia* projects horror and misadventure on human history: the enemy, the monstrous, the unforgiving divinity are us — a dishevelled and paranoid Cato seems to pronounce from a very real, historical stance that looks in every minute detail like hell. Dante, an attentive reader of Lucan, knows this very well [or maybe he knows now that I told him].

To place Cato as the guardian of his Purgatory: now this is what I call the creativity, and the radical openness of figural writing. It is no longer Moses and Christ, Jews and Christian, earthly and spiritual freedom. It is Moses, and Christ, and me, and Cato — all lined up in a verse that blasts like a bullet:

libertà va cercando, ch'è sì cara
(*Purgatorio* 1, 71)

He [Dante, says Virgil to Cato] goes seeking freedom,
which is so precious,

come sa chi per lei vita rifiuta
(72)

as he [Cato] knows who renounces life for it.

A verse so explosive that it pierces through four aligned targets: while it makes of Cato a Christian prophet, and of Dante an everyman-cum-evangelist, it turns Christ into a suicide, and Moses into a guerrillero. [We would not be surprised to find Che Guevara in this line of fire. I wonder sometimes if among the many lead bullets that transfixed his body in that forsaken corner of Bolivia there wasn't also the figural shot, mandating him to fulfil the story of the dead-and-therefore-immortal revolutionary.] Of Ulisse, however, this verse makes the selfish (or clever) one who dodges the bullet of figuralism to be differently (really?) free, to fall outside of the margins of the page,

out of the boundaries of the *mare oceanum*, off the cliff of salvation history, down the drain of the universe's vortex.

Truly truly a man of many turns is Dante's Ulysses, but not one of return.

MNOGO RAZ[‡]

A question arises in support of Ulisse, though: is going back a good thing? Is it wise to look back, have retrospection, re-read, re-turn? In the Western imagination there is a ghostly shade who begs to disagree. [No, not Lot — I ain't going for yet another grit-and-gore story from the Bible.] Orpheus, the very figure of the poet. Orpheus and his lyre, an ancient cyborg that moves stones and tames wild animals, even leaving the otherworld speechless. His story, most elegantly told by Virgil in the fourth book of the *Georgics* (452–527), is about an inevitable turning back.

His young bride Eurydice killed by a snake bite, his inconsolable pain, his song softening even the laws of the abyss. The gods allow Orpheus to lead Eurydice out of Hades, but he must not turn to look at her. The slow ascent away from death, they are almost out when he is seized by a sudden insanity ('dementia'), worthy of forgiveness, Virgil bitterly remarks, if only the gods could forgive ('ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere Manes'; *Georgics* 4, 489). It is such a minute infraction, almost a conditioned reflex. Let us bring this to ourselves, to an afternoon walk with a loved one. If they fall out, even momentarily, from

‡ The title of this subchapter, if you were wondering, comes from Charles Aznavour interpreting a Roma-Russian song about violins bringing back memories of one's youth. 'Mnogo raz' means 'many times', 'over again', but the tragic thrill in the voice of this child of Armenian refugees questions this meaning. The sonority of the voice pronouncing 'over and over again' makes it sound like 'never again'. 'Forever' and 'never' have the same vibration, it seems.

our visual field, how many times do we check, almost instinctually, that they are still with us? Of course, they are still with us, but that infinitesimal suspense is excruciating. It is a strange vertigo, an emptiness, the mouth of Erebus gaping microscopically in front of us. Italian poet Eugenio Montale describes the loss of his wife: 'Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale | e ora che non ci sei è il vuoto ad ogni gradino' (I used to give you my arm to help you through the stairs, says the poet to his very near-sighted wife now dead. I must have done that one million times, without ever realizing that, now that you are no longer with me, the void awaits me at every step; my translation).

You lost us Orpheus, you crazy fool! Cries Eurydice while a thick night takes hold of her ('ingenti circumdata nocte'; *Georgics* 4, 497). Orpheus despairs, and sings, and shuns the human company. A mob of infuriated women lynches him. His severed head, thrown in the river, still sings her name: Eurydice, Eurydice, Eurydice.

tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum
gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus
volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua,
a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae.
(*Georgics* 4, 523–27)

And even when Oeagrian Hebrus rolled in mid-current that head, severed from its marble neck, the disembodied voice and the tongue, now cold for ever, called with departing breath on Eurydice — ah, poor Eurydice! 'Eurydice' the banks re-echoed, all along the stream (translation by H. R. Fairclough).

Ovid, you have guessed, expands, expands, and then expands some more, and then interlaces — the story of

Orpheus covering book 10 and the beginning of book 11 of the *Metamorphoses*, his story becoming that of the stories he sings. Importantly, Ovid fills a large Virgilian gap and outs Orpheus, explaining that the women were infuriated at his preference for the love of young men. Ovid's story ends with the lightest of touches, though. After being quartered by the Maenads, with severed head floating and all, Orpheus ends up in the otherworld, and finds his Eurydice. They hug and walk about, and there is no fear: he turns and looks at her all the time, just for the sake of it. Just like our afternoon walk.

Umbra subit terras, et quae loca viderat ante,
 cuncta recognoscit quaerensque per arva piorum
 invenit Eurydicen cupidisque amplectitur ulnis;
 hic modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo,
 nunc praecedentem sequitur, nunc praevis anteit
 Eurydicenque suam iam tuto respicit Orpheus.
 (*Metamorphoses* 11, 61–66).

The poet's shade fled beneath the earth, and recognized all the places he had seen before; and, seeking through the blessed fields, found Eurydice and caught her in his eager arms. Here now side by side they walk; now Orpheus follows her as she precedes, now goes before her, now may in safety look back upon his Eurydice (translation by G. P. Goold).

Like Ulysses, Orpheus is yet another multilayered figure for the 'Western Spirit', if such a thing exists, and if it is not a brand of cigarettes. (I later checked: Western Spirit is a site for cycling adventures, and a football club in Australia. For once, the internet has amused me.) The elements of his story — song, power over nature, loss, journey, the otherworldly dimension, bisexuality, cruel death, and redemption — make him a pliable and open character.

Importantly, Orpheus has syncretic powers; he stands at the wobbling cusp of disciplines (music, literature, philosophy), of east and west, cult and religions, sexuality and, interestingly, race.

Since antiquity the crux of the figure of Orpheus is, very simply put, the joining of song with divinity, of poetry with theology. Is Orpheus a visionary who through his lyre unlocks the secrets of the universe, or is he merely an entertainer?

He is, variously,

- Turned into a poet-philosopher, and later into a poet-theologian (*poeta theologus*), with mixed reactions from philosophers, Plato in particular, who can never decide whether this is a good thing or a bad thing (mostly a bad thing, though).
- Wrapped up in mystery in late antique texts known as the ‘Orphic Hymns’, and in ancient religion under the confusing label of ‘Orphism’, a literary/philosophical cult that displaces him somewhere between Egypt, Greece, and Rome, enmeshed with music, maths, and astrology, connected variously to Moses (of whom he is allegedly a disciple), Zoroaster, and Pythagoras, to be the figurehead of one of the many mystery sects budding at the time of early Christianity. Even Augustine, the defender of the flimsy early Christian orthodoxy, mentions with some respect the ‘poet-theologians’ Orpheus, Linus, and Musaeus (*De civitate dei* 18, 14).
- [One wonders what would have happened if Orphism had prevailed among the many Middle Eastern cults of which Christianity was one: would we be speaking Greek? Would heterosexuality be the in-

fraction to the norm? Would we kill others in the name of Eurydice?]

- Abused by Christian allegory (Orpheus becomes a figure of Christ in the medieval re-reading of the *Metamorphoses*), and then abused again by some Christian thinkers, disdainfully denying him the status of theologian.
- Enthusiastically embraced by Renaissance philosophers — at that eventful intellectual juncture when the world looked, for one split second, one and many, when mysteries seemed to be the key to a more logical future. The great Neoplatonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino praises Orpheus for his *furores*, the insanity that makes one leap forward, that cracks open the doors of the beyond. Our own Pico della Mirandola includes Orpheus in the final syncretic orgasm of his *Oration*, where Christianity, Judaism, Eastern cults, maths, and cabbala all take flight together.
- Reinterpreted and reinvented many times in literature and music and more. In 1948, a pivotal collection of black poetry was prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre's essay 'Black Orpheus', shaping the notion of *negritude* as perpetually entangled with poetry (so flawed and, oh, so beautiful — like Orpheus's backward gaze). In 1959, the film *Orfeu Negro* stirred enthusiasm and controversy. [It was the kind of film that was shown as an art, avant-garde, even revolutionary film in the leftist *cineforum* in my hometown. 'Cinefora', may god have them in their glory, were small independent movie theatres with a screen that buzzed before turning on, crackling audio, and unthinkably uncomfortable wooden chairs that shaped

your ass into a square. I miss them though. I miss my youth, where ideals and creeds were also square. I miss Eurydice.] Today it is considered a naïf if not flatly colonial repitching (by nobody other than a white European male) of the ancient story of love and loss in contemporary Brazil. The final music score, though, *Samba de Orfeu*, still moves me. Samba you can't control or indict.

Dante hardly mentions Orpheus. A convoluted and textually unstable passage in the *Banquet* (2, 1, 2–4) employs the beginning of the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*, where Ovid talks about Orpheus moving trees, wild beasts, and even stones with his song (11, 1–2), to explain the notion of 'allegory of the poets' — literature being a beautiful tale under which wisdom is hidden. It sounds plain, but it is a controversial passage that seems to resist modern understanding.

One quick mention in Limbo, the area of hell where the 'just' pagans dwell, places Orpheus within a list of ancient philosophers, just one step away from his sidekick Linus; they are the only imaginary characters in the list (*Inferno* 4, 130–44). None of these instances are particularly out of line with the classical and medieval literary or philosophical reflections on Orpheus.

Strangely, though, there is no other mention of Orpheus in the *Comedy*, which allows us to speculate wildly, because the whole point is that Dante is Orpheus, and he does have a Eurydice — Beatrice, the *fil rouge* of his life-as-work. It begins with a historical woman, a young Florentine named Beatrice (Bice) Portinari (1265?–1290?), of whom we know very little (she married well and died young — what else does history care about a medieval woman?),

whose existence and essence are entirely subsumed into Dante's fiction.

Lovers at first sight, in love forever; they met as children and then as youths, Dante tells us, and I have loved-and-sung her ever since. A creature of his early secular love poetry, Dante employs her as the material, erotic, and moral compass for arranging his first poetry into a little booklet called *Vita Nova* (*The New Life*), then tries to bury her in an allegorical grave in the *Banquet*, then resurrects her as the initiator of his journey and guide to the last leg of the *Comedy*, heaven, where Virgil cannot go because he is a pagan. Many still today interpret Beatrice solely as 'faith', or 'theology', or 'wisdom', which makes things easy, and also very Christian (possible), but also very boring (unacceptable). To me, Beatrice is a multilayered patchwork — historical woman, lyric creature, personification, allegory — a bride of Frankenstein's monster trailing the underworld with her tattered trousseau of genres and styles. Dante-Orpheus holds her tight. Strolling the underworld with her, he clenches her hand, never lets go, grips her with the revitalizing lift of literature, armours her with the energy of love poetry against the deadly bite of allegory. In the space of writing, she is forever alive, forever renewed. Forever *nova*.

The image of Dante-Orpheus works in both the secular and religious route of interpretation. It is ironic that one of the essays that mostly contributed to the modern Christian interpretation of Beatrice is called *A Journey to Beatrice* (playing with the idea that the *Comedy* is a journey to god). It was written in the fifties by Charles Singleton, our cautious translator. Strip it of allegory and you get the classical story of Orpheus. In the Christian allegorical route, you have guessed it, we have to postulate a figural reading of Orpheus. By now, reader, you know how to go

down that lane if you wish, with this mini-chart: Orpheus = Christ, everyman, Dante; Eurydice = the human soul, faith, Beatrice.[§]

Like Orpheus, then, Dante goes in search of his dead beloved in the otherworld. No wait: she goes in search of him, because he, the idiot, as soon as she departed this vale of tears, turned to other women (= poetic creatures or doctrinal interests), leaving her to worry for him in heaven, forcing her to appear in his sleep to shake him up from bad visions or wet dreams, and even to go to that stinky hell to ask that snob Virgil to help him. And now I even have to dress up like a little Madonna (no, not that one, unfortunately), to descend and meet him in that loud, cheaply allegorical earthly paradise, all covered in a veil that trips

§ If you are feeling lazy, *voilà*, the ready-made allegorical meal of an early commentator of the *Comedy*; you only need to put it through the microwave of translation (peel or pierce the film of allegory before putting in the oven): 'Allegorice Orpheus est vir summe sapiens et eloquens. Euridice, sibi dilectissima, est anima eius rationalis, quam summe amat usque ad mortem, Aristaeus pastor est virtus, quae naturaliter sequitur animam, sed illa fugiens per prata et flumina, idest delectamina, mordetur a serpente, idest fallacia mundi, et sic moritur moraliter et descendit ad Infernum, idest ad statum viciorum. Sed Orpheus vadit ad Infernum pro recuperatione animae suae, sicut similiter Dantes ivit, et placavit omnia monstra Inferni, quia didicit vincere et fugare omnia vicia, et supplicia viciorum. Sed Dantes, numquam respexit a tergo, quia nunquam redivit ad vicia more canis, sed Orpheus, quia non servavit legem datam, perdidit omnino animam suam, et sic fuit error novissimus pejor priore' (Benvenuto da Imola, commentary on *Inferno* 4, 141). In short: allegorically Orpheus is a man [now that is not much of an allegory], wise and eloquent, Eurydice is his beloved rational soul, and Aristaeus is virtue, who naturally pursues the soul [and this is bizarre, and shows you the limits of certain allegorical reading. In Virgil's tale, Aristaeus, here equated to virtue that naturally follows the soul, is, there is no other word for it, a rapist: in the frantic attempt to flee from him, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies]. The meadows and rivers where she runs are the pleasures of the world, and the snake that bites her is the world's deception. So; she ends up in hell, the state of vice. Like Orpheus, Dante descends to hell to rescue his soul, but unlike Orpheus he does not look back, so he is much better etceteraetcetera.

me at every step, to reproach him and make him confess all his escapades. He will cry, and say he didn't know, that he doesn't remember, that I am his only love, and I will have to abuse him verbally some more, and then pardon him, and then take him to my new place, and explain everything — he is not very bright, I am afraid, my lad, but I still love him ... men, men, men; those adorable rascals. This is what Beatrice, a stunningly postmodern character who talks back to her author, says when she meets Dante at the top of Purgatory, throughout cantos 30–33 (my translation, of course). This is, in other words, a more feminist, more ironic, if not straightforwardly comical, version of the story of the loss and retrieval of the female beloved. And a reversal as well; now it is the departed female who comes to rescue the lost male lover. Dante and Beatrice are a profoundly vernacular version of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The homoerotic diversion is also in place: the one time in which scholars think Dante might be mentioning the tale of Orpheus is when he mourns not Eurydice/Beatrice, but actually Eurydice/Virgil. It is the truly sorrowful moment in earthly paradise when the traveller has to let go of his beloved classical poet-guide, and all the beautiful poetry that they have devised together, in order to meet and welcome his Christian Beatrice. Luckily, Dante does so cross-dressed as Dido, evading quick heteronormative fixes.

Please let me linger on this rich scene. On the one side, we have Beatrice, infuriated, tapping her little foot on the chariot dragged by a griffin on which she just appeared. (Yep, they made me do that as well, they also gave me a cortege of embarrassing allegorical figures; later they will fire in the special effects, and transform the chariot into some crazy sci-fi creature with heads and horns, and then make it the set of a porn film, with a giant abusing a naked

prostitute. Stop looking and laughing, you righteous pricks: the actors have to earn their wages, and I have vowed to do anything for him.) On the other side, we think we have dear Virgil to help make sense of this mess, but we do not:

volsimi a la sinistra col respitto
 col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
 quando ha paura o quand'elli è afflitto,
 per dicere a Virgilio: 'Men che dramma
 di sangue m'è rimaso che non tremi:
 conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma.'

Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi
 di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,
 Virgilio a cui per mia salute die' mi;
 né quantunque perdeo l'antica matre,
 valse a le guance nette di rugiada
 che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre.
 (*Purgatorio* 30, 43–54)

I [says Dante] turned to the left with the confidence of a little child that runs to his mother when he is frightened or in distress, to say to Virgil, 'Not a drop of blood is left in me that does not tremble: I know the tokens of the ancient flame.' But Virgil had left us bereft of himself, Virgil sweetest father, Virgil to whom I gave myself for my salvation; nor did all that our ancient mother lost keep my dew-washed cheeks from turning dark again with tears.

Virgil ... Virgil ... Virgil ... Eurydice ... Eurydice ... Eurydice

The name of Virgil is uttered like an echo in the same way in which Virgil's Orpheus (actually, his severed head) repeated the name of Eurydice in Virgil's own *Georgics*. Virgil, who is at the same time mother and father, the sweetest parent of all, becomes, at once, poetry and loss.

Notice the utter sense of despair in the last lines. Instead of describing Eden as a beautiful, happy place, Dante calls it 'the place that Eve (the ancient mother) lost for the

human kind', and he goes on to say ... not even this lost place (and now regained but I don't give a damn) could prevent me from mourning the departure of Virgil. Notice the adjective 'atro' — a classicizing way to say dark in a menacing, deadly way. For a moment, the loss of Virgil and the loss of Eden are one. Notice the literal translation from the fourth book of the *Aeneid*. 'Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae' (4, 23) says Dido when she is falling in love with Aeneas. I recognize the signs of the ancient flame, says Dante when he sees Beatrice again. About to find his mortal beloved transfigured into Christian blessedness, Dante inhabits the voice of an African queen who committed suicide, a mad heroine of love and death, and sings the immortal words of his beloved master, Virgil-Eurydice.

Earlier in this canto, Dante had inscribed another powerful Virgilian line. A miracle of literature that explains, in one magical shot, the meaning of nostalgia and all the forces that are at work in it.

Beatrice appears in a beautiful, if a tad mawkish, cloud of flowers (he is a darling, my Dante, but a little cliché). She is surrounded by voices that sing for her fragments of poetry, sacred and profane (more than surrounded I feel stretched between all those intertexts ... if I inhabit them all I become a strange creature, both male and female, young and old, pagan and Christian ... They say that's allegory. To you, reader, it may look like a supremely sophisticated bondage, but to me it feels more like a tight bra).

One such intertextual rope sung by the heavenly choir is the only Latin quotation from his beloved Virgil (it is always between them men!): '*manibus, oh, date lilia plenis*' (*Purgatorio* 30, 21). This brings us to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil's own descent to the underworld. Aeneas visits Hades in order to learn the future of his colonial (sea

journey + military campaign) enterprise: the founding of the great city of Rome. His father, Anchises, shows him rather triumphally the future glories of the Roman empire (*Aeneid* 6, 756–892). Yet, all triumphs are based on loss and sorrow, says Virgil through the tragic figure of Marcus Claudius Marcellus, Augustus’s nephew, who died at the age of nineteen in 23 BCE. Aeneas sights a handsome youth with shining arms (‘egregium forma iuvenem et fulgentibus armis’; 6, 861), BUT ..., a tragic adversative is inscribed in his forehead: he is sad, his eyes dejected (‘SED frons laeta parum et deiecto lumina vultu’; 6, 862). His head is circumfused by a dark, tragic night (‘nox atra’; 6, 866; remember Dante’s tragic dark, ‘atro?’). Anchises tries to explain how promising this young man was, the great things he would have done, if only ... if only the gods could forgive, as the story of Orpheus puts it, if only we could imagine an illogical, ungrammatical future in which ‘if you were able to break the harsh destiny, you will be Marcellus’ (‘si qua fata aspera rumpas | tu Marcellus eris’; 6, 882–83). BUT the gods do not pardon, we know that. Anchises’ voice breaks, his tears pouring out like flowers ... you will be Marcellus. Give handfuls of lilies! (‘tu Marcellus eris. manibus date lilia plenis’; 6, 883). He goes on, bitterly: ‘so that I may at least scatter purple flowers and offer useless funereal gifts and vows’ (6, 884–86; my translations). [Marcellus is, in other words, the Orphic moment in an otherwise Homeric, information gathering, *nekyia*.]

Dante employs this mournful line to celebrate Beatrice. He turns half a Latin hexameter (the classical epic verse in which the *Aeneid* is written) into one Italian hendecasyllable, with the mere insertion of a particle ... oh ... an interjection, somewhere between a word and a breath, belonging to no language and to all, expressing wonder, fear, sadness, or happiness, depending on how we pro-

nounce it. The linguistic dress of an exclamation mark. Oh! Try and voice it: just an inhale and exhale, no effort from our throat or mouth involved, it is the smoothest piece of sound. In this spirit (breath, whiff, sigh, or even blast, or all the synonyms for respiration and 'soul' you can think of) lives poetry. With this spirit, Dante locks together the classical and the medieval otherworld, a Roman teenager of imperial descent and a young, unknown, Florentine, bourgeois woman, the pagan funerary purple lilies and the Christian white lilies of resurrection. And no; this line does not celebrate the linear, figural triumph of the Christian over the pagan world. Rather, it celebrates nostalgia at its best. Two lines in one, written by two canonical poets, together defy canon. A strange hermaphrodite, in terms of both politics and gender, binds together the imperial male surrounded by a halo of sorrow and the Christian female returning in glory. Two youths, beloved and dead. No triumph, imperial or religious, can make up for their loss, and their return.

Oh

Who utters this interjection? The heavenly choir pronounces it in the fiction of the poem. One clever commentator has interpreted this as the moment when Virgil disappears and Beatrice appears. I love this interpretation: the wave of one magic wand, abracadabra! We also might reasonably imagine Dante-character saying 'oh' (oh-my-god, oh-shit at once) at this cross dissolve. To me, it is us readers uttering 'oh'! Like the audience of a magic show, like children at the circus while the aerialists are flying over our heads on invisible trapezes. Amazed, full of excitement, we witness poetry jumping off into the void, holding together a wholeness that exists only in its immaterial dance, a wholeness suffused with sorrow.

Oh!, we say, for that speck of eternity surrounded by a sea of loss that poetry has brought to us.

I know one Orpheus. A poet who lost his loved one. They had the same name: Nicola and Nicolas. When Nicolas departed, almost hieratically, Nicola went in search for him with words alone. A prose diary, and one poem a day, weaving an impalpable net of words and visions, daily observations and little anecdotes, patiently taking the temperature of his mourning every day, making the bed of his sorrow every night. Everything but memories, because on that fragile net the two lovers still meet 'for real', Nicolas's non-ghostly shade and Nicola's ghostly body. They converse, they even touch each other. There is the occasional quarrel.

He is tired, he says. I don't blame him. He made himself a fiction in his dead husband's story. I have seen him knocking for two years at the gates of Hades, humbly, duly, stubbornly, singing only his sweet spouse, as the days were coming and going: 'te, dulcis coniux, te solo in litore secum | te veniente die, te decedente canebat' (*Georgics* 4, 465–66).

Manibus, oh!, date lilia plenis.