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1. *Lectura*

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1. *Lectura*

To properly introduce the episode of Ulysses, I will practice a time-honoured exercise in Dante studies: the *lectura*. Somewhere between a lecture and a reading, it is a private reflection that is also a public performance, a deceptively erudite display that conceals the distinctive desire to leave one's own dent in the text. The practice began in semi-private form as early as the *Comedy* started circulating in the mid-fourteenth century, alongside a very early (and also uninterrupted) tradition of written commentary, yet its inaugural date is 23 October 1373, when the old and ailing Giovanni Boccaccio began his reading in the church of Santo Stefano di Badia in Florence, upon public request. This being Italy in a medieval nutshell, a killer amount of bureaucracy was involved: a petition to the Priori of the Arts (the leaders of the guilds who were ruling Florence) and to their military chief, the 'Gonfaloniere di giustizia', was then approved by both 'chambers', first the 'Consiglio del capitano del popolo' (186 votes against 19), and then the 'Consiglio del podestà e del comune' (114 votes against

7). I suspect it killed Boccaccio, who only got to read as far as canto 18 of *Inferno* in the course of sixty lectures. Another remarkable moment for the *lectura* is the late sixteenth century, when readers like Galileo Galilei gathered around Dante's text in the Accademia Fiorentina, in an act perhaps of resistance against the religious and political strictures that soon would relegate Florence and Italy to a secondary role in Europe.

Long story short: the tradition of the *lectura* has been uninterrupted since the late middle ages, and it is the little-big quirkiness of my own academic discipline: we read. We read Dante constantly, obsessively, relentlessly, mostly repeating the same things over and over, until, almost by inertia, the weight of boredom and repetition becomes momentum, a detail is explained, a new vein of the text appears, an original approach eventually surfaces. Today, there are several *lecturae* ongoing at the same time. We read canto by canto, horizontally, vertically, diagonally, tangentially. We read. And then we print ourselves reading. We are a machine. Some kind of Terminator of reading.

This habit then trickles down to our academic writing and teaching. In the following pages you will see how I read the canto of Ulisse in my university lectures. Always in the same way in the last twenty-plus years, yet with those little deviations and digressions that have made this reading profoundly different from that first handwritten canvas of a lecture that I jotted down in October 2000 in Montreal. Luckily, the students change every year. This time, I shall also take several tempting detours that role, pedagogy, and decorum do not usually allow.

The canto begins with a retrospective gaze, which helps to briefly contextualize it. We are in the *Malebolge*, the 'Evil Pouches' that constitute the circle of Fraud, the largest

and most characteristic of the nine circles of hell. We have just left the seventh pouch (cantos 24 and 25), where the thieves are gathered — those robbers of property that are now deprived of the most cherished belonging, one's identity, and are continuously turned into snakes and back to humans in a relentless metamorphosis adhering to the fearful law of *contrapasso* (counter penalty, or punishment that fits the crime). Before we venture into a strange new zone, the pouch of the 'evil counsellors', a little retrospection on the characters encountered among the thieves allows the poet to address for the *n*th-time his arch-nemesis: the city of Florence that recently exiled him. Having met, he says, five of his fellow citizens among the thieves, he is ready to lash out with a sarcastic apostrophe against the community that has generated them.

Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se' sì grande
 che per mare e per terra batti l'ali,
 3 e per lo 'nferno tuo nome si spande!
 Tra li ladron trovai cinque cotali
 tuoi cittadini onde mi ven vergogna,
 6 e tu in grande orranza non ne sali.
 Ma se presso al mattin del ver si sogna,
 tu sentirai, di qua da picciol tempo,
 9 di quel che Prato, non ch'altri, t'agogna.
 E se già fosse, non saria per tempo.
 Così foss'ei, da che pur esser dee!
 12 ché più mi graverà, com' più m'attempo.

Rejoice, O Florence, since you are so great that over sea and land you beat your wings, and your name is spread through Hell! Among the thieves I found five of your citizens, such that shame comes to me — and you rise thereby to no great honor. But if near morning our dreams are true, you shall feel ere long what Prato, as well as others, craves for you. And if it were already to come, it would be not too soon. Would it were, since indeed it must, for it will weigh the more on me the more I age.

Florence, by then the most florid and fast-expanding city-state (*comune*) of central Italy, was swollen with ambition and aggression. Dante turns it into a giant bird of prey. The story goes that these lines ironize an inscription on a public building dated 1255, where the city was flaunted as 'she who owns the sea, the land, and the entire world' ('*quae mare, quae terram, quae totum possidet orbem*'). But its pride, Dante says, is only felt in hell, so heavily is it populated by his fellow citizens.

Then he goes all prophetic. He can do so, we have seen, thanks to the stunt of setting the fictional date of his *Comedy* in 1300, while he started writing it in 1307, so it is all hindsight for him, and projection for us. Florence has enemies (the city of Prato is one of many, and the closest spatially). Florence will pay soon – she will – she is a bitch – she is my bitch – I love her – oh god I hate this – I am getting old. This is a rough translation of the strange last lines of this passage (10–12), where the predictive fervour turns into a *cupio dissolvi*, the death drive of the poet himself, rage stuck in his throat, overwhelming, tragic, roaring between the optative, the present, and the future (it were ... it would ... it must ... it will).

Get hold of yourself.

We realize at this point that Dante and his guide are crossing from one pouch to another, a passage that is both physically and linguistically taxing. Listen to the quarrelling sound of the rhymes (-ee; -ia; -oglio) and to the crackling of the line '*tra le schegge e i rocchi de lo scoglio*', or look at the strange word '*iborni*', which could equally mean '*i borni*' (the boulders, like our cautious translator understands) or a strange rendition of the Latin *eburneus* (ivory colour), meaning that the poet and his guide are turned pale by fear [or by excessive erudition].

Noi ci partimmo, e su per le scalee
 che n'avea fatto iborni a scender pria,
 15 rimontò 'l duca mio e trasse mee;
 e proseguendo la solinga via,
 tra le schegge e tra ' rocchi de lo scoglio
 18 lo piè senza la man non si spedia.

We departed thence, and by the stairs which the jutting rocks had made for our descent before [or: which made us pale in our descent before], my leader remounted and drew me up; and pursuing the solitary way among the jags and rocks of the ridge, the foot could not advance without the hand.

While his avatar (D-traveller) is stretched in this rock-climbing act, the poet is wrapped in a similarly rocky thought, which testifies to his involvement in what is to come. He vents a strange quasi-appeal to the reader on the necessity of restraining his talent, in order not to waste it. There is something very painful at stake. Notice the first construction: I grieved then, and I grieve now. The rock climber and the poet are one, involved in the same dolorous feeling. Watch! Curb. Restrict, restrain! Do not fall.

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
 quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,
 21 e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,
 perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;
 sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa
 24 m' ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi.

I sorrowed then, and sorrow now again, when I turn my mind to what I saw; and I curb my genius more than I am wont, lest it run where virtue does not guide it; so that if a kindly star or something better has granted me the good, I might not grudge myself that gift.

In plain translation: I am about to write one of the peaks of my poem, the story of an unguided intellectual endeavour, so I will bridle my own bright mind. I shall not run, I will be cautious, I will not mess up. Won't jinx it.

Hey, but you can't do that, his genius seems to argue. And what follows is a sudden rise of style, a precious, ambitious double simile to describe the pouch of the evil counsellors. Seen from afar it looks like a valley at dusk, in which suddenly the fireflies light up. There is something classical in this — it makes one think of Callimachus or Virgil, and of that miracle whereby the classics turn the most common, everyday natural occurrence into a string of the finest language. There is a lyricism to it, a sudden heightening of poetry and its retreating away from story into painting, 'photography', or, if we can envision it, into a frameless visual image. A picture so perfect, and yet so natural, that the reader feels at home in it.

Quante 'l villan ch'al poggio si riposa,
 nel tempo che colui che 'l mondo schiara
 27 la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,
 come la mosca cede a la zanzara,
 vede lucciole giù per la vallea,
 30 forse colà dov'e' vendemmia e ara:
 di tante fiamme tutta risplendea
 l'ottava bolgia, sì com'io m'accorsi
 33 tosto che fui là 've 'l fondo parea.

As many as the fireflies which the peasant, resting on the hill — in the season when he that lights the world least hides his face from us, and at the hour when the fly yields to the mosquito — sees down along the valley, there perhaps where he gathers grapes and tills: with so many flames the eighth ditch was all agleam, as I perceived as soon as I came where the bottom could be seen.

But there is something else in this image. The fireflies. If you have seen it, reader — a valley lighting up with fireflies — you will know what I mean. An utterly unrealistic natural phenomenon that opens, joyfully, the gates of the beyond. I saw it only once. I was well into my twenties, visiting a friend's acquaintance, who lived rather solitarily on some wild hills in Tuscany. A bottle of wine, the vista; that kind of simplicity. And then, the valley below lit with fireflies. Some close, some near. I started jumping like a little child. The fireflies! Do you see the fireflies? 'Poor city girl' was the laconic comment of the host. And that was it. The friend, the friend-of-the-friend, the solitary cottage, the view, all have now slipped out from the weavings of memory, but the excitement is still here, 'now again', like Dante's renewing pain in reverse.

The second image is a biblical simile, less exciting than that of the fireflies, yet intellectually intriguing. If, from afar, the pouch looks like a valley full of fireflies, up close these appear like big flames that might hide something. While the first simile is all exquisite lightness, the second one is convoluted in its preciousness.

E qual colui che si vengìò con li orsi
vide 'l carro d'Elia al dipartire,
36 quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi,
che nol potea sì con li occhi seguire,
ch'el vedesse altro che la fiamma sola,
39 sì come nuvoletta, in sù salire:
tal si move ciascuna per la gola
del fosso, ché nessuna mostra 'l furto,
42 e ogne fiamma un peccatore invola.

And as he who was avenged by the bears saw Elijah's chariot at his departure, when the horses rose erect to heaven, for he could not so follow it with his eyes as to see aught save the flame alone, like a little cloud ascending: so each flame moves along

the gullet of the ditch for not one shows its theft,
and each steals away a sinner.

Let's face it: this is not the passage in the Bible to which we run for instruction and comfort. Except for me, that is. I return to it every year just five minutes before the lecture, because somehow I always forget what this whole business of bears and chariot and vengeance is about, and what the hell these people are called in English. Elisha and Elijah! that's what they are called — I burst every time I go back to read the second book of Kings (2. 23–24). And year after year I get a little fonder of the story of such a prickly and petty god that would send two bears to wolf down (please allow the mixed metaphor) no less than forty-two little boys who had taken the piss out of one of his prophets, calling him 'baldy'. Sounds more Brothers Grimm than Logos to me. Still, the word of god this is:

And he [Elisha] went up from thence to Bethel. And as he was going up by the way, little boys came out of the city and mocked him, saying: Go up, thou bald head. Go up, thou bald head. And looking back, he saw them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord: and there came forth two bears out of the forest, and tore of them two and forty boys (Douay Bible).

A story like this cannot but baffle readers. It makes Elisha a troubled character in the Jewish tradition, some interpreters imagining that he is eventually punished for this incident and others viewing the children like some bad-boys gang. In some interpretations, the Little Boys are a gang of water polluters, which makes of Elisha and his bears the first eco-warriors. It is not entirely surprising that Christian exegesis, perennially preoccupied to bring stories together, interprets the slaughter of the boys as an act

of 'rightful vengeance' and Elisha's baldness (*calvities*) as no less than a prefiguration of the supreme bald patch: the Calvary (skull).

Or maybe it is just a matter of lack of training: until shortly earlier Elisha was actually an under-prophet, a trainee, who had just witnessed his master Elijah being rapt to heaven in a flaming chariot (11 Kings 2. 11–12). In this case, the interpretation is smoother, as Elijah's rapture was read as the image of the elevation of the soul to god.

The *contrapasso* is as captivating as it is clear: in life the evil counsellors used their speech to give treacherous advice to people, always hiding the truth from others, so they are now forever trapped in and stolen away by giant tongues of fire.

Io stava sovra 'l ponte a veder surto,
sì che s'io non avessi un ronchion preso,
45 caduto sarei giù sanz'esser urto.

E 'l duca, che mi vide tanto atteso,
disse: 'Dentro dai fuochi son li spirti;
48 catun si fascia di quel ch'elli è inceso.'

I was standing on the bridge, having risen up to see, so that if I had not laid hold of a rock I should have fallen below without a push; and my leader who saw me so intent, said, 'within these fires are the spirits: each swathes himself with that which burns him.'

The traveller's attention is attracted by a twin flame. I do not quite know why, but often the great episodes of Dante's *Hell* involve two (think of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* 5, Farinata and Cavalcanti in canto 10, or Ugolino and Ruggieri in 32), of which one usually ends up telling the story while the other listens. I suspect it is about a tragic, toxic togetherness, how being together is the supreme form of loneliness and, perhaps, of storiness.

The classical world makes a curious entrance, intertwined yet divisive. The two-pronged flame reminds the traveller of a quintessential ancient tragedy: the nefarious, impeccably dead-end story of Thebes, beginning with Oedipus's incest and ending in the funeral pyre of his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, whom the father cursed to such enduring enmity that, after killing each other, they could not even bear to be in the same pyre, the flame parting into two. The tale of Thebes is one of the core narratives of antiquity: Dante wisely employs it only as a side story in his poem, as if to distance his clever, new, lively comedy from highbrow, no-future tragedy.

‘Maestro mio,’ rispuos’io, ‘per udiri
son io più certo; ma già m’era avviso
51 che così fosse, e già voleva dirti:
 chi è ’n quel foco che vien sì diviso
 di sopra, che par surger de la pira
54 dov’Eteòcle col fratel fu miso?’

‘Master,’ I replied, ‘I am the more certain for hearing you, but already I thought it was so, and already I wanted to ask: who is that fire which comes so divided at its top that it seems to rise from the pyre where Eteocles was laid with his brother?’

The next series of tercets is key to understanding the canto. Introducing the dwellers of the twin flame as Ulysses and Diomedes, Dante also clearly spells out for his readers the reason why they are in hell, three notorious fraudulent misgivings spanning from the tragic to the comic: the wooden horse that caused the destruction of Troy and the beginning of the Roman genus; the theft of the Palladium, the great statue of Athena that dominated the citadel of Troy; and, finally, the deception of Achilles who, dressed in female clothes and hiding away from war while romancing a

certain Deidamia, was startled into action (and break-up) when the deceiving duo started banging swords and shields around him.

Rispuose a me: 'Là dentro si martira
 Ulisse e Diomede, e così insieme
 57 a la vendetta vanno come a l'ira;
 e dentro da la lor fiamma si geme
 l'agguato del caval che fé la porta
 60 onde uscì de' Romani il gentil seme.
 Piangevisi entro l'arte per che, morta,
 Deïdamia ancor si duol d'Achille,
 63 e del Palladio pena vi si porta.'

He answered me, 'Therewithin [therewithin??] are tormented Ulysses and Diomedes, and they go together thus under the vengeance as once under the wrath; and in their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse which made the gate by which the noble seed of the Romans went forth; within it they lament the craft, because of which the dead Deidamia still mourns Achilles, and there for the Palladium they bear the penalty.'

Why such digging in the past? These are, incidentally, pre-*Odyssey* stories. And why such a proliferation of reasons? Psychoanalysis teaches that the accumulation of excuses is tantamount to an admission of guilt, or at least a sign of unease with one's narrative. Dante's wealth of explanations indeed foresees (or perhaps instigates) a very strange consequence: the fact that many readers choose to ignore these three reasons and adamantly believe that the sin of Ulysses is crossing Hercules' pillars. But this is plainly impossible because, as we shall see, there is no fraud in the trespassing. [There is trespass in the trespassing.] So then these oblivious readers will say: his sin is the oration he gives to his sailors, which, once again, is hardly deceitful. It is a very strange case of textual lobotomy, of the disabling

of someone's capacity for critical reading and for textual memory. I am forever unsure whether it is Dante's text that produces such voids, or if it is due to the subsequent mainstream commentary tradition, trying even in our time to uphold the impossible, i.e., the 'orthodoxy' of the poem (also known as: All That Dante Places In Hell Must Be Shit. Period. Otherwise, god is cross). So please, reader, stay with me in this instance, and throughout your reading of *Ulisse* (it is, ultimately, yours and not mine) repeat this mantra: the sin of Ulysses and Diomedes is the threefold fraud spelled out in lines 55 to 63. The sin of Ulysses is the Trojan horse, the theft of the Palladium, the deception of Achilles (ungrammatical, but true; it is a threefold yet singular matter). The sin of Ulysses and Diomedes is ... The sin ... In other words, try enjoying the trespassing for what it is.

I always wonder if I should spend some words on Diomedes. I hardly ever do in class. I feel for him, though. Great Achaean king, brave and merciless warrior, with a rather spacious role in the *Iliad* and an interesting after-story that brings him to found several cities in Italy, and yet always a secondary character, not well written, never in the 'alone' mode. [Perhaps this has to do with his rather one-dimensional figure in Homer — he fights, and fights, and fights some more; he even wounds Aphrodite, and ends up unloved.]

Homeric Ulysses and Diomedes are a pair also in a famous episode from the tenth book of the *Iliad* (which, like the *Odyssey*, Dante did not read in its original version), the so-called 'Doloneia', a night sortie in the no-man's land between the two warring lines, which combines deception (by Odysseus) and slaughter (by Diomedes) of a certain Dolon, a Trojan who in turn had left his camp to spy on the Greeks. In this episode, Diomedes makes a rather pro-

phetic declaration. 'I want Odysseus as my companion in this deed', he says. 'He is so smart, that, with him, I feel I could escape even a blazing flame' (10, 246–47; my rendition). Really? muses Dante, sharpening his pen.

Upon hearing about the two heroes in the flame, the traveller goes all childish. Please, may I speak to those people? Please, pl-e-a-se, p-lease, pretty please, pleeeeeease, mummy, PLEASE! I am going to throw a tantrum:

‘S’ei posson dentro da quelle faville
parlar’, diss’io, ‘maestro, assai ten priego
66 e ripriego, che ’l priego vaglia mille,
che non mi facci de l’attender niego
fin che la fiamma cornuta qua vegna;
69 vedi che del disio ver’ lei mi piego!’

‘If they can speak within those sparks’, I said, ‘master, I earnestly pray you, and pray again, that my prayer avail a thousand, that you deny me not to wait until the horned flame comes hither: you see how with desire I bend towards it.’

There is more than childish plea, however. There is the utter excitement of a poet who is about to blow new life into a great poetic creature. This is best understood in comparison to what happened earlier in the poem. In canto 5 of the *Inferno*, in the circle of lust, the traveller had met two unknown characters, Paolo and Francesca. Two provincial lovers, whose tragic yet banal story of adultery and death was perhaps just courtly gossip, are about to be turned into one of the archetypes of modern love poetry. Dante stages the attraction between himself and these new poetic creatures: they look, he says, ‘as doves called by desire’ (‘quali colombe dal disio chiamate’; *Inferno* 5, 82). They leave behind the ranks of the other lovers, whose story had been told many times already, glide through the toxic air

of hell and bend, full of desire, towards Dante's commanding yet loving appeal. The lovers' headlong impulse is compulsion to poetry, it is lust for Dante's poetic authority, which will subsume their flimsy and inconsistent historical status into a powerful text. In canto 26, however, in front of the massive and rather secure poetic figures of antiquity, the new medieval vernacular author acts the compulsion out. He bends in desire toward Ulysses and Diomedes. It then takes the (classical, established) authority of Virgil to negotiate the dialogue.

Ed elli a me: 'La tua preghiera è degna
di molta loda, e io però l'accetto;
72 ma fa che la tua lingua si sostegna.
Lascia parlare a me, ch'ì' ho concetto
ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,
75 perch'è' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto.'

And he to me: 'Your prayer deserves much praise
and therefore I accept it; but do you restrain your
tongue: leave speech to me, for I have understood
what you wish — and perhaps, since they were
Greeks, they would be disdainful of your words.'

It also takes a language enigma. What is it that 'the Greeks' have with Dante's speech? The Italian 'schivi' (shy or averse) and 'detto' (language, utterance, expression) are rather ambiguous in this instance. Is this a matter of language or of style? Is Virgil showing off his Greek, as the ancient commentators held (and perhaps the poet letting us know that he was not able to read that language), or is he flaunting his rhetorical prowess (as moderns tend to think)? This riddle is best enjoyed in relation to what happens in the subsequent canto.

Bear with me. We need to take a tangent into a short, fun, inconclusive aside; my favourite kind of detour. The

'disdain of the Greeks' looks indeed like a matter of both language and style. In the next tercets, we will see Virgil addressing the heroes with all the trimmings of high ancient rhetoric, beginning with a lofty *captatio benevolentiae*, the part of the speech where the orator attracts the sympathy of the audience with some well-placed compliment crafted in captivating and empathic language. No, they were not a bunch of hypocritical snobs: *captatio benevolentiae* is the part of our everyday socializing routine that comes just after the greeting; hello, how are you, how was your weekend, a lovely jacket you are wearing today. We too precede our dealings with others with a stab at empathy, codified as it may be. My favourite and utterly incomprehensible one is the British 'how do you do' or 'how are you', a questionless typification of the other as the 'encountered person to whom I show interest', to which one is supposed to answer with the same suspensive 'how are you' (whereas I, to the horror of my interlocutor, answer 'I am well, thank you, had a great weekend, do you like my jacket? I bought it second hand in that shop, on that street, on the left' ... until they cringe away). Now you see my inclination to tangents.

Likewise, the end of a social interaction codified by the art of rhetoric would be a polite and ornate send-off; that equally suspended moment at the close of an encounter when we let go of each other, usually with gentleness and care, because it is a vulnerable instant, a leave-taking that retains somewhere an element, a micron of the big farewell. A splinter of death. In life, where we are all writers and readers of our occasions, it sounds like: 'lovely to see you, have a good weekend, really like that jacket.'

Dante leads us to imagine that Virgil voices a lofty leave-taking at the end of Ulisse's speech. At the beginning of canto 27, we see the twin flame walk away 'with the consent of the gentle poet' ('con la licenza del dolce poeta');

Inferno 27, 3). If we were to infer Virgil's epic send-off from his greeting in the previous canto, we would imagine something like: 'O Argives! May Athena powerful in arms protect you in the underworld, may Apollo's lyre uphold your fame all over Hellas.' Instead, we are faced with a paradox. Another flame in the pouch, containing the rustically vernacular soul of the cunning politician Guido da Montefeltro, overhears Virgil speaking to Ulysses not in Greek or Latin, not even in the Tuscan variety of the medieval Italian vernacular in which the *Comedy* is written, but in a version of the medieval Lombard dialect, a vernacular utterly void of social or literary prestige, which is imagined to be Virgil's native Mantuan. [Very concisely: Dante believed that languages were the instinctual product of the post-lapsarian, post-babelic human being. Most tongues remained messy and vital vernaculars, others, such as Latin and Greek, having acquired political and intellectual prestige, were made artificial by a series of grammatical rules and thus became 'universal' and authoritative languages, called 'grammars'. The *Comedy's* vernacular is both ambitious and unruly. In the language enigma of cantos 26 and 27, then, Dante inscribes in a parodic way the complex interaction between grammatical and vernacular languages.]

O tu a cu' io drizzo
 la voce e che parlavi mo' lombardo,
 dicendo 'Istra ten va, più non t'adizzo'
 (*Inferno* 27, 19–21)

O you to whom I direct my voice and who just
 now spoke Lombard, saying 'Now go your way, I
 do not urge you more'

That is, Virgil's grand (and potentially Greek) leave-taking sounds to Guido as something like 'off ya go, dude', uttered in a lackluster Lombard dialect and in a rather flat wording.

Guido manages to annoy Virgil to the point that he elbows Dante forward: 'Parla tu; questi è latino' (you speak: he is Italian; 27, 33). The reason for this riddle and its reflection on the episode of Ulisse is still mysterious, but it does tinge with a grotesque hue the issue of style and language in the previous canto, as if there were another ghostly text, where the great epic poet and the great epic character converse at the edge of expression. As if Dante were inviting his reader to imagine that other speech, the speech not written.

Back to canto 26 now, where Dante's turmoil-cum-tantrum on the subject of literary and linguistic authority not only produces the language enigma that is then brought into relief in the comic pastiche of the next canto, but also engenders a trenchant, and equally confusing, irony in the way Virgil addresses the ancient heroes. He basically tells them: 'In return for all the nice things I said about you in my (elitist, epic, grammatical) poem, please tell us your story.' Readers conversant with the *Aeneid* are surprised at good-natured, let-me-do-the-talking Virgil: with mounting suspicion they deconstruct his *captatio benevolentiae* and see it for what it is, a pack of lies. As we shall see in the next chapter, Virgil is not an excited cantor of Ulysses. Not in the least. Virgil loathes Ulysses, he reduces him to a cynical trickster, the con-artist of speech ('fandi factor'; *Aeneid* 9, 602). Virgil, not Dante, stigmatizes Ulysses as an evil counsellor. I need to contradict myself here: this particular *captatio benevolentiae* is, in fact, a hypocritical piece of linguistic snobbery (notice how he sweeps everything under the carpet with a light-touch admission of guilt: 'if I deserved of you much or little'). Which makes of Virgil a false counsellor himself. How clever! But then, another dilemma rises: was Dante writing for the educated readers? Or was he trying to gaslight them?

Poi che la fiamma fu venuta quivi
 dove parve al mio duca tempo e loco,
 78 in questa forma lui parlare audivi:
 'O voi che siete due dentro ad un foco,
 s'io meritai di voi mentre ch'io vissi,
 81 s'io meritai di voi assai o poco
 quando nel mondo li alti versi scrissi,
 non vi movete; ma l'un di voi dica
 84 dove, per lui, perduto a morir gissi.'

After the flame had come to where it seemed to my leader the time and place, I heard him speak in this manner: 'O you who are two within a fire, if I deserved of you while I lived, if I deserved of you much or little when in the world I wrote the lofty lines, move not; but let one of you tell me where he went, lost, to die.'

... If only this tongue could speak in a rustic style and language like its Italian counterpart in the next canto! It would say: 'You deserve nothing of us, you bastard!'; 'you *** liar!'; 'You, cantor of an emasculated hero, the Gods' pet, whom everyone likes because he is sooo boring' ... 'Pious, they call him, Diomedes, pi-o-us!' 'Fuckwit! That's what I call him. A dull bureaucrat, a cynical lover ... Yeah, yeah, he lost his wife and killed his lover, but never was his fault ... I — I ...' (and here the burning tongue starts stuttering and gets even more inflamed) 'I came back to my missus ... well in some version of the stupid story ... and was true to all them lasses I met, Circe, Calypso, even the young'un, what was she called again?' ... 'A half warrior, he sang, Diomedes! A bloody coward.'

But the classics were urbane people, civilization and all. So the flame gurgles within itself all these insults (I imagine) and after a long, painful internal rumination, starts answering the question politely. The question being — *attenzione!* — not what was your sin [we know what the

sin is: start the mantra here], but ‘how did you die?’. The furious desire for knowledge, the journey, the trespassing — I shall repeat this until I am blue in the face — are the cause of death, not of damnation. They are, beautifully and exclusively, of this earth.

It takes a while for Ulisse’s voice to find its way out of the tongue of fire. This monstrous device for speaking is cruelly ironic, considering that the sin punished in the area is ‘fraud by words’. In the next canto, we learn that these huge burning tongues are indeed language torture-machines. They are compared to the Sicilian bull — a cruel brass cast built by the Athenian artisan Perillus for Phalaris, the tyrant of Agrigento: when heated around the victim, it transformed human screams into the bellowing of a bull. The doleful words of the damned wander ineffectually and painfully through the fire. They sound like fire, crackling and hissing until they manage, with a desperately athletic wriggle (‘guizzo’; *Inferno* 27, 17), to force the tongue to speak.*

After the slow description of the torturous utterance, the first word spoken by Ulisse (the heavy-sounding

* I promised very few footnotes, but this one is worth having; the description of the language torture machine in the next canto, *Inferno* 27, 7–19: ‘Come ’l bue cilian che muggiò prima | col pianto di colui, e ciò fu dritto, | che l’avea temperato con sua lima, | muggiava con la voce de l’afflitto, | sì che, con tutto che fosse di rame, | pur el pareva dal dolor trafitto | così, per non aver via né forame | dal principio nel foco, in suo linguaggio | si convertian le parole grame. | Ma poscia ch’ebber colto lor viaggio | su per la punta, dandole quel guizzo | che dato avea la lingua in lor passaggio, | udimmo dire [...]’ (As the Sicilian bull (which bellowed first with the cry of him — and that was right — who had shaped it with his file) was wont to bellow with the voice of the victim, so that, though it was of brass, yet it seemed transfixed with pain: thus, having at first no course or outlet in the fire, the doleful words were changed into its language. But after they had found their way up through the tip, giving it the same vibration that the tongue had given in their passage, we heard it say [...]).

'Quando') is craftily displaced at the end of the line, and the pause that follows allows the reader to fully appreciate, and indeed to experience if reading aloud, the fatigue involved in the act of speaking.

Lo maggior corno de la fiamma antica
 cominciò a crollarsi mormorando,
 87 pur come quella cui vento affatica;
 indi la cima qua e là menando,
 come fosse la lingua che parlasse,
 90 gittò voce di fuori e disse: 'Quando

The greater horn of the ancient flame began to
 wag, murmuring, like one that is beaten by a wind;
 then carrying to and fro its tip, as if it were a
 tongue that spoke, it flung forth a voice and said:
 'When

When we finally get to that 'Quando' we almost feel that the tongue of fire will never talk, that its secret will forever be buried in the torture machine. But when it does finally manage to utter, its words take flight. And we forget we are in hell.

Quando
 mi diparti' da Circe, che sottrasse
 me più d'un anno là presso a Gaeta,
 93 prima che sì Enëa la nomasse,
 né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
 del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore
 96 lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
 vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore
 ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
 99 e de li vizi umani e del valore;

When I departed from Circe, who had detained
 me more than a year there near Gaeta, before Ae-
 neas had so named it, neither fondness for my
 son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor the

due love which would have made Penelope glad, could conquer in me the longing that I had to gain experience of the world, and of human vice and worth.

There we are. The end of the ancients' Ulysses, and the beginning of the modern one. The moment antiquity rockets into modernity through the pen of a disgraced medieval poet. When the circular turns linear, into a mad and genius tangent of desire heading towards the unknown.

'Redefining *in medias res*' one could say of these lines. The new hero emerges from the middle of the story, from the magma of a narration that at this point had implicated every infinitesimal bit of him. In the ancient story, this would be truly in the middle (in the *Odyssey*, which Dante did not read first hand, this would be books 9–12), when the pace of adventure accelerates and peaks — battles and drugs, Cyclops, storms and giants, metamorphosis, a good amount of lust, a crucial trip to the underworld, followed by sirens, monsters, more storms, mutinies and shipwreck — to slow down suddenly into a slumber (the seven years spent in the arms of sweet Calypso, after which the bow of the ship starts pointing home). Dante's Ulysses emerges, to put it in other words, from some kind of orgasm of the original story.

And from now on it is a whole brand-new adventure. Like never before. Or after.

This new character, and his author, say 'no' to everything. Neither ... nor ... nor, which in Italian sounds even sharper and more definitive: Né ... né ... né. Only the 'Wild Rover' — the protagonist of a British folk song whose utter capacity for negation (no, nay, never, no more) I first encountered to my shock and amusement through a quasi-Greek choir of ten-year-olds at my son's school — is more of a rejecter than Dante's Ulysses. (And, in his own little

way, the rover, although he does come home, is a figure of perennial roaming in the sea of addiction.)

The idea of return itself is Ulisse's target. First, the family unit, neatly organized into son, father, wife; and, beyond that, the familiar. The sweetness, the reverence, the love that builds homes and countries. All thrown away, and rather hurriedly; there is no indulging in the snapping sound of these three lines (94–96). Even poor Penelope, whose long name could have provided some space for lingering, for sitting just once more, just a second longer on that familiar sofa, for cocooning in those vowels that are thick as body and warm as an embrace ... even poor Penelope is turned into the hastily accentuated, already-left-behind, Penelopè: she becomes, in a subtle way, the very 'né' of her abandonment.

What is the burning ('ardore') then, the ardent desire that diverts our hero? Simple: experience. *Ex-periri*, to see it for yourself, to test, to prove, to acquire first-hand knowledge. To be there. With your body, with your senses. To believe no one else's story. To make your own. Not 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield': although a memorable line, to which my series of infinitives is unconsciously indebted as I realized during my first re-reading, Tennyson's sequence does not quite catch this moment for me. Dante forges a productive yet succumbing human being, not an unyielding hero.

Two are the big attractions out there. In a very modern fashion there is the world ('il mondo') in its physical and geographical dimension, and in a very classical fashion there is the human being in its ethical aspect, in its being a creature of vice and virtue, as Aristotle and Cicero saw it, for instance.

It is the latitude of geography that kicks in first. And individuality. Strangely, excitingly, they are one:

100 ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto

But I put forth on the deep open sea

Mr Me ('Ma-me', But-me) and the deep blue sea are one in the slippery yet rhythmic sound of this portentous line. Mmmm we are sliding with him in the blue. Aaaa it is beautiful. To-to: why do I feel like I am flying? Like I am falling?

Mr But-Me and few resources and people. One boat, a select group of sailors; and 'forwards backwards we go over the (Mediterranean) sea'. [Don't ask: it is inexplicable why Dante's Ulysses should call to my memory every weird children's song through which I, having just moved from North America to the UK and a stranger to both places, sat perched on an uncomfortable plastic chair in some school hall, the faint and simultaneous smell of feet and bleach tucked away in the unheated room, thinking ... this country is strange ... primary school children should not be singing about vice and addiction ... and bottles of rum in their tums.]

sol con un legno e con quella compagna
102 picciola da la qual non fui disertò.

L'un lito e l'altro vidi infin la Spagna,
fin nel Morrocco, e l'isola d'i Sardi,
105 e l'altre che quel mare intorno bagna.

Io e' compagni eravam vecchi e tardi
quando venimmo a quella foce stretta
108 dov'Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi
acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta;
da la man destra mi lasciai Sibilia,
111 da l'altra già m'avea lasciata Setta.

with one vessel only, and with that small company which had not deserted me. The one shore and the other I saw as far as Spain, as far as Morocco, and Sardinia, and the other islands which that sea

bathes round. I and my companions were old and slow when we came to that narrow outlet where Hercules set up his markers, that men should not pass beyond. On the right hand I left Seville, on the other I had already left Ceuta.

The beginning is still very much *Odyssey* — a long, curious, Mediterranean cruise with stretches of deep sea, and islands to circumnavigate. But there is one place that attracts him. The centre of gravity of the known universe. Gibraltar.

The story of Hercules' pillars is as straightforward as it is vague: Hercules, en route to his tenth labour, the acquisition of the cattle of the monster Geryon in the farthest west, planted two columns on the two sides of the strait. It is unclear why he did that, and whether these are two natural headlands (such could be the rock of Gibraltar itself) or two actual pillars erected by the hero, as they are often represented in the afterlife of this notorious landmark with the addition, so the modern story goes, of a little sign: *Nec plus ultra*. No further. The modern story might well have originated in Dante's wording itself, the injunction that 'human beings should not pass beyond': the famous Latin motto would be no less than the translation into Latin of Dante's 'più oltre non'. The postponement of the negation, a mere and automatic poetic device, is sheer ingenuity. 'Further' and 'further not' are one and indistinguishable in this simple equation. Plus ('più', more, there, go!) and minus ('non', less, here, stop!) cancel each other out. What is left is the 'oltre', the great beyond. The trick of this perfect game is the 'plus'. 'Oltre' already means 'further'; it is not correct to say 'more further', or 'more beyond'. But you need the 'more' to balance the 'not'.

The human being in a nutshell. Good and evil. Don't do this. I will. Just because you said not to. The forbidden fruit. Borders, limits, trespassing — we will look at these

later. For now, let us turn to the text again, to notice that this happens at a strange moment of Ulisse's life, when he and his sailors are old and tired. Interesting. And somewhat refreshing. This is not the usual story of youth and boldness, having life in front of you, daring, and staking the future. This is about maturity and experience, fatigue, and loss: this is Tennyson's Ulysses, 'made weak by time and fate'.

These men are old and slow, they are a small crew ('compagna picciola'; 102), hardly filling one boat (the implication being that the rest of the fleet was lost adventure by adventure, in line with Homer's tale). They have little left to live ('picciola vigilia'; 114), and also brief is the speech that Ulisse gives to his companions ('orazion picciola'; 122). I always found this adjective — the 'small' that connotes the crew, the oration, and life — rather disconcerting. Ulisse minimizes. But why? The All-Hell-Is-Shit readers have a ready answer: Ulisse minimizes because he is a liar and a manipulator. But I told you already that I am not one of them, at the risk of being naïve and oblivious to the medieval religious context in which this story is written. Also, if Ulisse had said 'grande' — big crew, big life, big speech — they would declare he is a liar and a manipulator. They would believe the same had he said 'medium', or 'extra small'. Or nothing. They will say he is a liar and manipulator, period. So, what is the point of reading? They would attach 'bad' to everything that happens in Dante's *Hell*, like 'in bed' to the message in the fortune cookies (is that still a thing in the new Millennium?).[†] End of small

† Apparently, it is not; and after the seventh reader noted 'you have lost me here', I decided to add an explanatory note. More than once (twice perhaps) in the final decades of the last brave millennium I heard the rather lame joke that one ought to interpret the message in the fortune cookies one used to eat at the end of a meal in Chinese restaurants in

rant. Which is my own tiny diversion to hide the fact that I still am not quite sure about why Ulisse keeps on saying ‘small’.

What I do know, however, is that the small oration is one of the most moving passages that you might read. Exciting (thousands of dangers!), touching (he calls them ‘brothers’), sad (they have little left to live), severe (you are not brutes!). Full of dignity, yet still naughty. As you read it, it feels like when you are a little child playing in the waves. So scary, so grave, so much fun, when you see the ‘big one’ mounting far from the shore; it swells, it forms a menacing white crest — please please, don’t break just yet, I am here, I am waiting for the blow. I am scared. Take me with you. I am swept away. The sweet undertow. Pebbles so smooth they hardly hurt. This is how I feel every time I read this speech.

‘O frati’, dissi, ‘che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti a l’occidente,
114 a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d’i nostri sensi ch’è del rimanente
non vogliate negar l’esperienza,
117 di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.
Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
120 ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.’

‘O brothers’, I said, ‘who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the west, to this so brief vigil of our senses that remains to us, choose

the West as solely valid ‘in bed’. ‘You will be lucky’ ... in bed; ‘don’t hold onto things’ ... in bed; ‘be slow to speak and quick to act’ ... in bed. It is silly, you see, not particularly funny, and a little vulgar but not enough to snap you out of your comfort zone, which sometimes a crass vulgarity does. A trivial and lacklustre gloss, just like saying that all the characters in Dante’s *Inferno* are bad because this is a medieval poem about the Christian hell. [In sum: in hell + bad = in bed.]

not to deny experience, following the sun, of the world that has no people. Consider your origin: you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge.'

If we do insist on contextualizing this speech within the medieval system of values, though, we will find there is nothing wrong with it, nothing 'fraudulent'. Ulisse is simply repeating the quintessential ancient and medieval refrain that human beings differ from animals precisely because of their desire to pursue 'virtue and knowledge', to exercise their intellectual side. This is ethics for beginners, bouncing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, to Cicero, to Aquinas. And to Dante himself, who in a previous work, the *Convivio* (*The Banquet*, written around 1304–07), had stated, following Aristotle, that the desire to know is natural to the human being ('Si come dice lo Filosofo nel principio della Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere'; *Convivio* 1, 1, 1) and that for the human being 'to live is to use reason' (whereas for animals to live is to feel: 'manifesto è che vivere nelli animali è sentire — animali, dico, bruti, vivere nell'uomo è ragione usare'; *Convivio* 4, VII, 11; translation by Richard Lansing). If not yet suggesting a fully-fledged Christian ethics, Ulisse is rehearsing its foundations, the seeds, indeed, of the Western reflection on what it is to be human. (Not that there is nothing troubling with such reflection, as we shall see, but this is not horribly 'sinful' either. It is human-istic [hyphen to point out the fracture, or maljunction, between the two concepts].)

Ulisse is not trying to cheat them either. He does not say that beyond Gibraltar there are bounties to take, women to rape, lands to occupy, or battles to win (in short: 'glory'). We are old, he says, we might die there. He says:

there is nothing there; emptiness, desert, pure cosmos.
And yet ...

Li miei compagni fec'io sì aguti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
123 che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;
e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo,
126 sempre acquistando dal lato mancino.

With this little speech I made my companions
so keen for the voyage that then I could hardly
have held them back. And turning our stern to the
morning, we made of our oars wings for the mad
flight, always gaining on the left.

The power of words alone transforms an old and tired crew into a machine. Into an 'us'. They are made sharp, pointed. The desire for the great unknown is penetrating, lancinating. They ache for it. 'Acuto' is an adjective that in Latin and Italian has a huge span. A small angle, a smart observation, a sharp knife, a shrill sound, a stabbing pain, a piercing sensation, a clean cut, an intense sentiment, an incisive perception, an acute illness. It cuts and cuts and cuts across language. It tears and punctures and you only feel it when it is inside, when it is too late. It stirs, it makes you mad. 'It spurs on.' (It has always baffled me how 'encouragement' can take the shape of a sharp stick, or a pointed metal star attached to someone else's boots and cutting into your flesh.)

And off they go, they start rowing in unison: wood, body, and rhythm are one. They can hardly be stopped. Hardly ('a pena') — magnificent detail. He could still retain them; they are not out of his control. He holds them. Yet his power over them diminishes at each oar stroke, at every shrieking sound of the wood against the rowlock (which, I have learned today, is also called 'spur').

There is more terrible subtlety in this image. We feel, as readers, that we are going towards some dazzling brightness, the fresh, inebriating clarity of a perfect morning, but we are not — it is the back of the ship that turns toward morning, while the front, ‘we’, are going west, towards the night. Moreover, in this supreme moment of weightlessness, the moment of the leap, there is no wind whatsoever (and how could it be there? It would mean that other forces, call it nature, or call it god as you like it, were seconding this journey). Just oars. It is an unnatural flight, but oh, so much more exciting. I guess the best approximation for us moderns is the moment when a plane takes off, when even people like me — the permanently terrified of flying — feel the hit of anticipation. Readers, my flight assistants, please get ready for take-off. Get ready for *the* line:

de’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo.

There is something fateful about its perfection. You cannot but pronounce it: ‘emi – emmo – ali – al – olle – olo’; a supreme melody prefaced by a brisk staccato (de’); a coarse caress, a grave flight (oxymora oxymora, where would I be without you?). It sticks to your memory, like some kind of internal engraving that forever changes your poetic constitution. We-made-of-our-oars-wings. We. Ulysses, the crew, and us readers.

And, indeed, in the night we fall.

Tutte le stelle già de l’altro polo
vedea la notte, e ’l nostro tanto basso,
129 che non surgëa fuor del marin suolo.
Cinque volte raccesso e tante casso
lo lume era di sotto da la luna,
132 poi che ’ntrati eravam ne l’alto passo

The night now saw the other pole and all its stars,
and ours so low that it did not rise from the ocean

floor. Five times the light beneath the moon had been rekindled and as many quenched, since we had entered on the passage of the deep

In this night, there is the excitement of the so far unseen stars of the other hemisphere. As with fireflies earlier on, here too some inexplicable textual finesse brings the reader, this reader at least, to a comfortable closeness with the ancient text. Some of you will share this emotion with me. The first time when, already an adult, I travelled to the southern hemisphere. It was the stars that did it for me. The unseen stars of the other pole that flashed an exhilarating smile, the thrill of being so human and so small, so scared, and yet so cosy. For some of you it was perhaps the other way round. For others, just a shrug, or nothing. For Dante, it was a wild stretch of imagination. Reading is situated. Reading has stars.

Here you can also see for yourself how one of the often-repeated prejudices on the 'medievals' is not true — they did not think the earth was flat. The credence simply was that there was nothing in the southern hemisphere, just water. In those waters, Ulisse tells us almost casually, they navigated for five moon cycles. Time takes the form of an austere, abstract, almost absurd fast-forward succession of white crescents and white circles on a black canvas. We hear nothing of these five months — we can only imagine them. Empty and equal, day after day, just water and the sky, sky and the water. Sun, perhaps, and even dead calm. Or winds and storm. Pallid dawns and violent bloody sunsets. The vitreous sea under the boat. Turquoise. Bluesilver. *Glas*. Aquamarine. Grey. Snotgreen. *Oltremare*. The tiny ruffle of the boat's wake. Saltwhite. The voices of the crew, exchanging orders or a brief joke. Ulisse's silence, his eyes forever lost on the horizon. Some strange fish or marine creature

jumping out of the water. A large, indolent albatross tailing or leading the inflated sails (or even a humbler seagull, I figure, less likely to be revered, or mocked). [I even have more puerile questions on the five moons: what did they eat? Did they have enough water? But epic, it is known, is not about stomach and intestines. It is about guts. And this is why we are perennially unable to identify ourselves with 'characters'; they never have to go to the loo.]

The nervous traveller in me does identify, however, with the next frantic, joyful cry. 'Terra! Terra!' Though a very timid sailor myself, I fully understand the excitement of the sighting of the land, first spotted by someone high up on the mast, and then by everyone on the ship.

quando n'apparve una montagna, bruna
per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto
135 quanto veduta non avëa alcuna.
Noi c'allegrammo

when there appeared to us a mountain dark in the
distance, and to me it seemed the highest I had
ever seen. We rejoiced

This land is out of proportion, though — too tall, ominous, and dark. It is the mountain of purgatory that Dante places at the edge of the southern hemisphere. The cheerful assurance of the crew becomes despair in the course of a line.

Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto;
ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque
138 e percosse del legno il primo canto.
Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l'acque;
a la quarta levar la poppa in suso
141 e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
infìn che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso.

We rejoiced, but soon our joy was turned to grief,
for from the new land a whirlwind rose and struck

the forepart of the ship. Three times it whirled her round with all the waters, and the fourth time it lifted the stern aloft and plunged the prow below, as pleased Another, till the sea closed over us.

Who is the 'other' who is pleased to sink the ship? 'H'im — as everyone hurries to capitalize? Makes sense. Either Ulisse gentlemanly accepts defeat by a stronger power, with just a hint of understatement (the positive reading), or he is so daft that he is not able to realize the existence of god after such evidence (the negative reading).

I am intrigued by the storm, though: a tornado, a vortex, or a waterspout moving swiftly from the new land, whirling and unsteading the boat three times (of course) into some kind of giant eddy. Meteorologically, it is not entirely sound: don't storms normally move from sea to land and not vice versa? [well, this is god, and god can do everything, settles the puny Dantist. Wait and see, though, I have a totally implausible but much more fun idea about this shipwreck].

May we suppose that the boat whirls clockwise? We are at the antipodes after all, and the Coriolis effect is my version of god. Why three times? The trinity might be involved, sure, but a boat bumping three times before sinking is also an epic staple (see, for instance, Virgil's retelling of Homer's episode of Scylla and Charybdis in *Aeneid* 3, 566–67. [What a mess! We need to talk about intertextuality soon]).

Ultimately, what do we acknowledge as readers? That he almost got there, by human means alone, or that he never reached the shore? He nearly gets there; he does not get there. Whatever context we might choose for our reading, our appreciation of Ulisse's flight is forever trapped in the platitude of the glass half full or half empty.

'Until the sea closed over us.' Without necessarily espousing the virtues of disaster — intellectual, poetic, metaphysical, or otherwise — we need, readers, to inhabit this submerged perspective. We need to dive and hold our breath; we need to look up at the keel of the boat tracing a hypothetical line of a bluer blue than the water surrounding it. We need to swim up to discover that the surface of the sea is like an imperceptible film made of light, concealing under its apparent calm volumes and volumes of profundity. When you pierce it, it is thrust, it is elation, it is pain, it is also nostalgia.

'Until the sea closed over us.' The secret of our reaction to this canto forever lies in that last line, under the firm yet fluid hold of the water.