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PART I

Myth and mythologies

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The shadow of Ulysses beyond 2001

PIERO BOITANI

I would like to start my journey at that point at the beginning of our now vanishing century which most perfectly incarnates Homer's *Odyssey*: at the modern *Ulysses* par excellence, Joyce's, and more precisely, the next-to-last section, 'Ithaca'. Leopold Bloom, the English-speaking Irish Jew who here represents Homer's hero, has finally returned home and recognises in Stephen Dedalus his own Telemachus; he is also about to join his Penelope, the unfaithfully faithful Molly, in their marriage bed. Bloom is glancing with horror at his forthcoming senescence, to which he imagines two alternatives: decease ('change of state') and departure ('change of place'). He opts, of course, for the latter, as the 'line of least resistance'.¹ He then sets off on his mental journey, which takes in first the whole of Ireland, then with planetary extensions towards a number of significant places: Ceylon, Jerusalem, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Parthenon, Wall Street, the Plaza de Toros at La Linea, in Spain, Niagara, the land of the Eskimos, 'the forbidden country of Thibet' ('from which no traveller returns'), the Bay of Naples ('to see which is to die') and the Dead Sea. He travels by night, at sea, northwards, guided by the pole star, and overland, by night, southwards, by the light of a 'bispherical moon revealed in imperfect varying phases...through the posterior interstice of the imperfectly occluded skirt of a carnosé negligent perambulating female', 'a pillar of cloud by day'. Bloom here takes on the universal binomial denominator of being and non-being, Everyman and Noman,² travelling on and on:

Ever he would wander, selfcompelled, to the extreme limit of his cometary orbit, beyond the fixed stars and variable suns and telescopic planets, astronomical waifs and strays, to the extreme boundaries of space, passing from land to land, among peoples, amid events. Somewhere imperceptibly he would hear and somehow reluctantly, sun-compelled, obey the summons of recall. Whence, disappearing from the constellation of the Northern Crown he would somehow reappear reborn above delta in the constellation of Cassiopeia and after incalculable eons of peregrination return an estranged avenger, a wrecker of justice on malefactors, a dark crusader, a sleeper awakened, with financial resources (by supposition) surpassing those of Rothschild or the silver king.³

Shortly afterwards, though, Bloom's Scholastic mind (and indeed Joyce's: the whole of 'Ithaca' is a series of catechetical *quaestiones*) decides that his journey is out of the question: firstly, in envisaging an irrational return, governed by an 'unsatisfactory equation between an exodus and return in time through reversible space and an exodus and return in space through irreversible time'. But as a departure, too, it is undesirable, given the late hour, the darkness, the dangers, the need to rest, and above all given the proximity of an occupied bed ('obviating research'), the 'anticipation of warmth (human) tempered with coolness (linen) obviating desire and rendering desirable; the statue of Narcissus, sound without echo, desired desire'.⁴

Note here what this astonishing twentieth-century Homer-cum-Dante is doing with the myth: Bloom-Ulysses, old and terrified by old age, wishes to return home and to 'push off' like Tennyson's Ulysses; to sail, like Dante's, towards the Pillars of Hercules (where Molly, his wife, was born, and where *Ulysses* ends, with the superimposition of Howth Head in Dublin); to visit the places of death (Tibet, Naples, the Dead Sea); and, both Everyman and Noman, to journey further and 'wander beyond the [...] stars' (shadowed here by the Ulyssean Keats reading Chapman's Homer), to the utmost bounds of space, 'passing from land to land' like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, but *among* peoples, *amid* events, to return, finally, like Odysseus, like a Crusader, like the Count of Montecristo.

Nocturnal wanderings towards death, beyond boundaries (Niagara, 'over which no human being had passed with impunity'; 'the *forbidden* country of Thibet', whence, as Hamlet says of death, 'no traveller returns'): like the wanderings of Dante's Ulysses. A biblical exodus, too ('pillar of cloud'), a journey through the Ptolemaic, Copernican, and modern universes,⁵ and a mystic flight: transformation into comet, ascent beyond the fixed stars, Ascension to the Empyrean, rebirth and messianic Advent. His departure an eternal *Star Trek*, a 2001: *A Space Odyssey* return. A journey through history and through peoples; homeric *nostos* and revenge à la Dumas. In one page Joyce moves backwards through what I have elsewhere called the 'shadows' of Ulysses,⁶ himself projecting new ones, to create his own Ulyssean myth, simultaneously a universal symbol of Everyman and Noman.

This dreamed voyage of Bloom's also contains, of course, a psychologico-touristico-cultural element: the tour of Ireland which precedes all other journeys takes in all the places which still today are *de rigueur* for their history and natural beauty, as well as Belfast's docks,

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for a reality-aware protagonist like this particular Ulysses. Other Ulysses, it should be remembered, foreshadowed by him, are to follow Joyce out of Ireland: those of Padraic Fallon, Thomas Kinsella, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Michael Longley.⁷

Then, significantly leaping over Britain without so much as a downward glance, a virtual visit to Ceylon, both exotic ('the spice gardens') and demotic, as it were, linked to the compulsory beverage, tea, and its English producers and Irish distributors. La Linea, in Spain, just on the Gibraltar border, draws him on account of the Plaza de Toros; the land of the Eskimos not simply for its remoteness, but because its inhabitants are 'eaters of soap'. With sound capitalist intuition he is attracted not to New York in general but to Wall Street ('which controlled international finance'). And then all the archetypes of the West: Athens, or more specifically the Parthenon, and even more specifically its statues, 'nude Grecian divinities', which stimulate Bloom intellectually and sensually; and then Jerusalem, 'the holy city' not only for the Jewish people of this particular Ulysses but also for the Muslims ('with mosque of Omar and gate of Damascus, goal of aspiration', access, from the East, to the holy places of both religions).

To retrace our steps: at the beginning of the twentieth century, Leopold Bloom reincarnates the Ulysses of the past and foreshadows those of the future; he dreams of a journey through the real, through psychological impulses, and beyond reality, culturally and existentially bound for his – and our – roots (Ireland, Athens and Jerusalem, Naples and the Straits of Gibraltar), moving ontologically towards nothingness (death) and fulness (the stars, regeneration and return); towards the 'entity' of Everyman and the 'non-entity' of Noman; towards alienation and supreme beauty:

What tributes his?

Honour and gift of strangers, the friends of Everyman. A nymph immortal, beauty, the bride of Noman.⁸

Leopold Bloom, most ancient and modern of Ulysses, is a shadow of twentieth-century man, of our history, and our culture. Let us follow, then, the long cone which overshadows our imagination.

One shadow I shall cast no light on is that of science fiction: not out of lack of interest, but a lack of conviction that I could deal with it fully here. That the *Star Trek* series, on the large and small screen, has antecedents in Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's Ulysses requires no demonstration. Every episode opens with the portentous 'These are the

voyages of the starship Enterprise, the ongoing mission to explore strange, new worlds, to seek out new life-forms and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.' Equally, I need make no comment on the title of the greatest classic of the contemporary sci-fi imaginary, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.⁹ When the entire planet on which humanity was born has been explored and reduced, in Leopardi's words, 'in breve carta', where can Ulysses go other than into the silence of infinite space and time? Which was precisely what Leopold Bloom dreamed of. Clarke's and Kubrick's hero 'fulfils' – figuralism again – Bloom's wish. The appearance of the black monolith in the opening scene, to the notes of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, marks the transformation of monkey into man. The stone, the silent sign of human destiny, reappears on the moon to edge David Bowman towards the boundaries of the solar system, *di retro al sol*, behind the sun, into an unpeopled world, a *mondo senza gente*. It is here that Dante's Ulysses is seized by the whirlpool and the sea closes over him. The 2001 vortex, however, does not sink his successor, but launches him into a 'mad flight' beyond Jupiter, into the mysteries of the cosmos. Bowman, like Odysseus, returns home after his journey through space-time: an aged child, a new man, an evolutionary stage forward, perhaps the superman announced by Strauss–Nietzsche at the beginning. And of course Zarathustra himself had prophesied the coming of this man in two images of Eternity centring on Dante's and Homer's Ulysses:

If I love the sea and all that is sealike, and love it most when it angrily contradicts me: if that delight in seeking that drives sails towards the undiscovered is in me, if a seafarer's delight is in my delight: if ever my rejoicing has cried: 'The shore has disappeared – now the last fetter falls from me, the boundless ocean roars around me, far out glitter space and time, well then, come on! old heart!' Oh how should I not lust for eternity and for the wedding ring of rings – the Ring of Return!¹⁰

Is this the resurrection that awaits us in three years' time? Or has the great metamorphosis already taken place? Perhaps our Ulysses of the year 2001, battling with the all-too-human computer Hal, is already among us, a reincarnation of Christopher Columbus and Neil Armstrong, on the threshold between two eras of human civilisation. Will history fulfil the film's prophecy? I do not know. Ulysses returns again and again to this sort of question, and we too should bear it in mind. All we know is what has already happened. And what has happened is that poetry and history, the imaginary and actual events, have already met once, at least, in the flesh and culture of the West, during our splendid, terrible century. It is precisely here that, following

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Bloom's itinerary, Athens meets Jerusalem or, more exactly, enters Jerusalem through Central and Eastern Europe.

It is no accident, I believe, that so many of the greatest philosophers and writers of Ulysses in the early twentieth century – Ernst Bloch, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Kafka, Canetti, Fondane, Mandel'stam – come from the Jewish diaspora of those parts, almost as if the traditional wanderings of Israel had finally found their incarnation in the figure of a Greek, a Gentile equally permanently wandering.

In this philosophico-narrative context, the figure of Ulysses would seem singularly divided: positive and negative, Everyman and Noman. Above all, it seems to signify something else. For Bloch, fascinated by Dante's flame, Ulysses is a 'Gothic' Faust of the sea, a Christopher Columbus by other means.¹¹ For Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus incarnates the dialectic of the Enlightenment not only historically, but as a cultural category: the man of reason.¹² For Canetti, at a personal level, Ulysses is the hero of metamorphosis and irrepressible curiosity.¹³ So far so good, then, for our Everyman. But even for Kafka, whom Benjamin defines as a 'latter-day' Ulysses, things are more complicated: Ulysses survives the Siren encounter thanks to the cunning of reason and technical tricks, but the most important point is that, in his famous parable, the Sirens are silent. This silence, Benjamin holds, is due to the fact that, for Kafka, music and song are 'an expression, or at least a promise, of salvation'.¹⁴ Their silence, then, is a prelude to nothingness: a silence of being and of poetry as mere comment. In Kafka's account language destroys not only *mythos* but *logos*, logical articulation, and so battles with itself, prefiguring not only the end of narration but of interpretation too (both of which, I need hardly add, will roundly resurface, starting from Kafka himself, in Brecht and Blanchot).¹⁵

The design projecting Ulysses' shadow of Noman is now complete, and will reach fulfilment after the Second World War. Again, let us take our departure point from Jewish philosophers. The theories of Bloch, Horkheimer and Adorno now seem to have become mere illusion. Emmanuel Levinas even goes as far as to state that the whole itinerary of Western philosophy, metaphysics and theology 'reste celui d'Ulysse dont l'aventure dans le monde n'a été qu'un retour à son île natale – une complaisance dans le Même, une méconnaissance de l'Autre' (remains that of Ulysses, whose adventure in the world has been but a return to his native island, a satisfaction within the Same, a misrecognition of the Other). Against the myth of Ulyssean *nostos* Levinas sets, as a figure of the 'nomadic' philosophy moving from the *Même* to the *Autre*,

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'l'histoire d'Abraham quittant à jamais sa patrie pour une terre encore inconnue et interdisant à son serviteur de ramener même son fils à ce point de départ' (the story of Abraham, who leaves his fatherland forever for an as yet unknown land, and who forbids his servant to lead even his son back to that departure point) – i.e. Athens against Jerusalem.¹⁶

Well, as a non-philosopher, I shall rashly state my case. It seems to me that Levinas forgets all about Dante while at the same time, curiously, agreeing with him. Let me explain. Dante's Ulysses leaves Circe's shores with no desire to return, heading towards a land which is not promised but unknown. From that moment on, in Western culture he has never stopped, becoming the paradigm of restlessness for a whole civilisation. At the same time, in Canto xxvi of the *Inferno* it is Ulysses himself, with his tongue of flame and his shipwreck, who experiences the burning, drowning encounter with the Supreme Other: a God who seems to be the exact opposite of what Levinas calls 'le dieu des philosophes, ... un dieu adéquat à la raison, un dieu compris qui ne saurait troubler l'autonomie de la conscience' (the god of philosophers, ... a god adequate to reason, a comprehended, comprised god who could not trouble the autonomy of conscience).¹⁷ Yet, from such diverse images of Ulysses, Dante and Levinas reach similar conclusions, Dante condemning to Hell, with the cloven flame, the whole of Western civilisation, Levinas, together with the narcissistic gratification of return, burning all the West's painstakingly elaborated logos.

How not to read into this singular coincidence a prophecy on the one hand and on the other a reflection – Harold Fisch would say a 'remembered future'¹⁸ – of the terrifying event which has marked Europe in our century, the Shoah? The Ulysses–Israel link is a long-established one. Glossing God's appearing to Abraham among the terebinths of Mamre, Philo of Alexandria recalls Ulysses' return to Ithaca as a ragged tramp, and reads Homer's idea in the context of the gods' habit of appearing as 'strangers'. And it is one of the early fathers of the Church, Clement of Alexandria, who establishes a parallel between the wanderings of Ulysses across the seas, and of the Jews across the desert.¹⁹

The Rumanian–French poet Benjamin Fondane, author of a long poem entitled *Ulysse*, compares the emigrants' journey to South America to the Exodus, and leads them through Dante, Baudelaire and the figure of the Wandering Jew.²⁰ Fondane's life, poetics, and

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aesthetics are dominated by the figure of Ulysses, albeit auto-biographically hebraized ('Juif naturellement et cependant Ulysse'), and then, *tout court*, 'naturellement', Jew. The aesthetics of the 'risque poétique' which Fondane calls 'd'Ulysse' is never, however, a mere quest for form, nor simply an existential pursuit of a Baudelairean 'gouffre'. What is being questioned in the poetry of Ulysses, as demonstrated by the last few pages of *Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre*, is 'cette chose extrême, cet apeiron qui, jadis, au retour de la montagne, rayonnait... sur le visage du Prophète' (that *extreme* thing, that *apeiron* [infinite], which shone once on the face of the Prophet when he returned from the mountain):²¹ the reflection, in other words, of that 'Other' which killed Dante's Ulysses. Should we ask ourselves whether it was this same Other who killed Fondane at Auschwitz? The Italian Jew Primo Levi, a fellow prisoner in that death camp, asked himself the same question indirectly, seeing in the 'com'altrui piacque' ('as Another willed') of *Inferno* XXVI 'something gigantic... perhaps the why of our destiny, of our being here'.²²

Thus the shadow of Ulysses once again enters history. The tragic *iter* transforms Dantesque flame into crematorium fire so stunningly and unbearably as to lead to its ultimate reversal. Paul Celan's poetry is dominated by the theme of return (two of his titles, *Inselhin* and *Heimkehr*, speak for themselves), and he himself, in ironic reversal, calls Ulysses his 'monkey'. But when he evokes the Shoah and sings his *Psalm*, Ulysses appears as Nobody, and Nobody is actually God, the definitive Other, just as nothing is his creation, flourishing *entgegen*, for his sake *and* despite Him:

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen
wir blühen.
Dir entgegen.

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose...

[No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.

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PIERO BOITANI

No one.
 Praised be your name, no one.
 For your sake
 we shall flower.
 Towards
 you.
 A nothing
 we were, are, shall
 remain, flowering,
 the nothing – , the
 no one's rose.]²³

Should we, then, recognise that Athens and Jerusalem are irremediably separate: that Athens, not to mention Rome, has destroyed Jerusalem more than once, and that history ends in the Old World, at Auschwitz? Levi himself, from the death camp, wrote that Ulysses' 'Considerate la vostra semenza' (Take thought of the seed from which you spring) seemed to him 'like the voice of God': 'fatti non foste a viver come bruti' (you were not created to live as brutes), but in His image and likeness, 'per seguir virtute e conoscenza' (to follow virtue and knowledge).²⁴ Derrida, glossing Levinas, calls our attention to the copula 'is' which joins the two parts of the proposition in the sentence defining Joyce's Ulysses: *Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.*²⁵ Perhaps the salvation Kafka despairs of finding will come to us from Bloom, this little Hebrew–Celtic and Anglo–Greek Messiah living in an Ogygia strongly connected to Rome.²⁶

Let us now start to consider our answer. Since the Second World War, and in the last two decades in particular, the shadow of Ulysses has extended over the whole planet: not just to Russia (which has been exploiting its knowledge of Homer and Dante in poetry since the late nineteenth century) and Japan, where it arrived at the beginning of this century, the United States or Latin America, which have been familiar with our hero for quite some time, but even to Canada, whose literature finds its basic correlative in the 'Odyssey', Australia (a Dantesque-cum-penal Purgatory of an island in the collective imaginary), Africa, India (Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* was published in 1995), the Arab world (where Ulysses is pursued by Syrian, Lebanese, Tunisian and Palestinian poets) and the Caribbean.

No literary wanderlust will take me quite so far here. What I can, I think, state, is that the West's conquest of the earth – via the arms, goods, media, languages and culture of Europe and America – is the prime cause of this Ulysean multiplication. It makes, obviously, for the

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universalising of the symbolic import of the whole of the mythical topos of Ulysses, fast becoming even more an Everyman and a Noman: a gesture, an oar, a glance, an endless wandering. At the same time, each new incarnation lends our already polymorphous hero an extra face. The protagonists of Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*,²⁷ for example, are an Italian young man searching for the fulness of experience and earthly transcendence which the West now believes resides in India; an Arab girl who searches for herself only to become, via Paris, Venice and America, an Indian guru, the Mother, and the Italian boy's German wife who follows through all the stages of the life of the Mother who has taken her husband. A trinary Odyssey with one goal, an Ithaca modelled on Kavafy's celebrated lines and identified with India. The novel's triple Ulysses is astonishingly like the neoplatonic Ulysses of Plotinus and Porphyry,²⁸ the allegorised Ulysses who traverses and attempts to throw off matter to reach the fatherland and his Father pure and whole: a Ulysses who is a shadow of the mystic and in whose route the Western, Islamic and Indian cultures combine.

The syncretism of Late Antiquity is typical of the post-modern shadow of Ulysses. That of the Lebanese Khalil Hawi is a singular, bitter, apocalyptic concretion of Gilgamesh, Ulysses and Sindbad, Coleridge and Eliot, a 'sailor' who wanders through the unconscious, sacrifices his soul for knowledge, despairs of science, and sets sail towards the primordial banks of the Ganges where an ancient dervish foresees his death, the flames and ashes to fall on the coasts of the West, the emergence of boiling mud from a scowling earth, a new Athens or Rome.²⁹ For the Palestinian Khàlid Abu Khàlid, the 'Odyssey' is his own life history and that of his people: exile 'dragged by the winds', homesickness, a Ulysses reduced to a shadow 'in the light of a door opening, / back turned on time / which sinks into sand', his breast 'tormented / between a place beneath the ruins / and another, there, in the desert'.³⁰

For 'syncretism' do not read painless absorption, acquiescence in another's models: read, as the Jews were forced to read, anguish, culture clash, and a tearing divide in life and history. Ulysses, as Dante understood once and for all, is no statue, but a flame, the tongue of fire which tells of a Greek condemned to death by the god of another's culture. Ulysses *is* the West *and* he who knows it: attracted by it, his struggle is with himself.

It is no accident that the great Nigerian writer in exile, Wole Soyinka, describes the British conquerors of Africa, with scorching irony, as self-