

Introduction: Voyages

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[...] Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.¹

Li miei compagni fec' io sì aguti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti [...]¹

(Inferno XXVI.118–23)

Ulysses's invocation to his companions before their fateful journey towards a 'montagna bruna' (XXVI.133),² which unbeknownst to him was Mount Purgatory, provides a perfect encapsulation of the desire for knowledge through literature as a voyage, both physical and intellectual. Though their journey ultimately fails, as they are shipwrecked in a storm before reaching their destination, the sentiment expressed by Ulysses in these lines has inspired a wealth of literary production, precisely because of the emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge (and virtue), which is at the core of any creative endeavour. Indeed, it has been widely explored how the act of writing the *Commedia* is in and of itself a Ulyssean undertaking, both because of the unprecedented nature of the poem which portends to describe the realms of the afterlife, and because of its transgressive aspect in which Dante-poet bestows authority onto himself (as pilgrim) to gain a universal understanding of human existence, which would normally be reserved for the Divine.³ Where Ulysses's attempt is cut short, Dante (both as poet and as pilgrim) succeeds.

¹ "Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang; / Ye were not made to live like unto brutes, / But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge." / So eager did I render my companions, / With this brief exhortation, for the voyage, / That then I hardly could have held them back'. Italian text taken from Dante Alighieri, *La commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). English translations taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1897). Both accessed via *Dante Lab: Next Generation Reader* <<http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu>> [accessed 15 September 2023].

² 'a mountain dim'.

³ See Teodolinda Barolini, *La Commedia senza Dio*, trans. by Roberta Antognini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), pp. 81–87.

William Blake's interpretation of *Inferno* XXVI on the cover of this volume⁴ depicts Ulysses, trapped in a twin flame with Diomedes, as he recounts his final voyage to Dante-pilgrim, who is undertaking his own Ulyssean journey through the realms of the afterlife alongside Virgil, his moral-intellectual guide and literary model.⁵ It is worth exploring the trajectory of Ulysses's words from the *Odyssey* to Blake's painting:⁶ the words would have supposedly been uttered by Odysseus in Doric, then relayed in the Homeric epic composed between 7th-8th centuries BCE, translated into Latin during the Roman Republic, repeated to Dante-pilgrim during Holy Week in 1300 CE after the transmutation of Ulysses/Odysseus's spirit into a flame, recounted by Dante-poet some years later (translating his words into Florentine dialect), to be read and transposed into a painted image by Blake five centuries later. If we consider the relevant texts as the works of fiction they are, the intertextual progression is more fascinating still, as Dante's reinterpretation of this character is not based on Homer's text, nor on the early Latin translations, but on 'a pastiche of classical Latin sources — especially Virgil, Statius, Ovid, Horace, Cicero, and Seneca', as in Dante's time Homer's poems were not available to Western readers.⁷ Literature, or knowledge, is thus characterised by a necessary mutability and voyage across time, space, language, perspectives and media.

This issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities*, then, explores this liminal space, considering applications and intersections of travel across literature, and how literature itself travels and is transformed across and through history. Last year's issue of *WPH*, 'On Forgetting', traversed realms, states of consciousness, time, space, and materiality with the ultimate aim of reaching an understanding of the role and function of forgetting across literature, literary scholarship and history. Now it is necessary to shift the gaze away from the product and onto the process by which literature not only is created but how it travels. Though confined to ink on paper, a text is never static. Whether before or after it is put into writing, any literary work moves through an expanse of space, time, versions, media, ideas, and identities. This issue of *WPH* thus aims to better understand how a literary work (alongside its author and its audience) embodies or recounts the journey from conception to reception, and beyond.

Taking travel writing and its subsequent reception and transmission as a starting point, this volume begins with two travel accounts. The first is that of Francisco Álvares, a Portuguese chaplain who accompanied a Portuguese embassy to the Christian exploration of Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526. One of the five Italian rearrangements of Álvares's travel account provides the focus

⁴ William Blake, *Ulysses and Diomed Swathed in the Same Flame*, 1824–27, pen and ink and watercolours over pencil on paper, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁵ However, unlike Ulysses, Dante's journey is divinely sanctioned (see *Inferno* II.43–126).

⁶ At this juncture it is necessary to take for granted the historical veracity expressed in the relative texts and, of course, leave to one side the question of Homer's identity and the authorship of the text.

⁷ Teodolinda Barolini, 'Ulysses', *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 842–47 (p. 842).

of this article; a manuscript from 1542 that was written by Italian humanist Ludovico Beccadelli and features forty-two *addizioni* based on exchanges with Ethiopian scholars in Rome. Mathilde Alain examines these additions and notes how they represent Ethiopian contributions to knowledge production and transmission, thereby foregrounding the multiplicity of voices in Beccadelli's rearrangement of the text. This serves, Alain argues, to highlight that there was never a final version of such travel accounts, as the texts were continuously amended and circulated.

The second travel account moves eastwards into the Soviet Union in 1936. Through an exploration of novelist E M Delafield's *Straw Without Bricks: I visit Soviet Russia*, Nicholas Hall reflects on how the writer navigates questions of truth and sincerity in her observations of the Soviet world and the people she saw there. As a writer and a non-expert traveller, Delafield is tasked with articulating and framing her experiences, relying on both empirical facts and her imagination. It is this complex positionality, Hall suggests, that allows for Delafield to use fiction as a means of gaining an understanding of her time in the USSR, as well as contending with the intricacies of travel writing.

As these two travel accounts show, literature provides the means to (re) locate discourse through different perspectives. Along similar lines, a theme that unites the next two articles in this volume is how this can occur through the creation of a new language or practice with which texts and their historical contexts can be viewed, . Giuseppina Gemboni focuses on travel in the work of postcolonial writers, noting that this often takes the form of migrant experiences, as in the novel *La linea del colore* (The Color Line) by Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego. Gemboni suggests that this text's use of various media — including letters, memories and emails — creates a new language to speak about diasporic experiences and the ways in which they might be understood, both in terms of Italy's colonial past and current debate about migration in the Mediterranean.

Hannah Overton-Gill also concentrates on how language can travel temporally and stylistically in her analysis of how texts can be transformed through the process of translation. Drawing upon the feminist translation strategy of 'hijacking', in which the text is recast in line with the translator's aims, Overton-Gill argues that the roots of Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's *La femme philosophe* (1803) can be found in Charles Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver* (1798). Identifying textual changes made in line with Genlis's political intentions, Overton-Gill discusses how this translation practice in the French novel steers it away from its English counterpart and into new linguistic and cultural territories.

This dual focus on traversing the linguistic borders of national and gender identity is the locus of the last two articles of this volume. Veselina Dzhumbeva analyses Ekaterina Bakunina, a figure of the first-wave of Russian emigration to Paris, as an important female voice in the interwar diaspora. Concentrating

on Bakunina's last novel, *Dzhumbeva* explores how the representation of gender and national identity evolves throughout Bakunina's work, particularly with regard to female sexuality. *Dzhumbeva* achieves this by showing how these identities intersect in Bakunina's life, transforming and being transformed by her roles as wife, mother, and lover, as well as the interplay of her Russian heritage and her life in Paris.

Aman Sinha also contends with the effects of nationhood and identity on gender in a collection of letters entitled *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001). This work provides a glimpse into the life of Mona Ahmed, a famous *hijra* personality from Delhi and includes images of Mona taken by photographer Dayanita Singh. Sinha argues that the interspersing of text and image reworks traditional ideas of autobiographical writing, refusing linearity and narrative closure. It is through this analysis that Sinha thus deems *Myself Mona Ahmed* a site of protest through which bodies can escape binary framings of gender and assimilation into essentialist discourses.

These tales of travel, translation, transgression, and transformation that span some five hundred years attest to the dynamic interpretations of the theme of 'Voyages'. The journeys described in this volume are discursive, gendered and geographical, foregrounding multiplicity and mobility, as well as the different and fruitful ways in which these trajectories might be approached. It is perhaps fitting, then, that this volume be inspired by the *Commedia*, a fulcrum work in Western history that has been endlessly adapted, referenced, and reimagined in literary and artistic media. Such a rich embracing of the mutable, the interrogative, and the creative finds echo in the following thoughtful reflections on the theme of voyages.