

## Chapter 2 Political Agency: The Helmsman

### 1. Introduction

While sea and land in metaphor identify large – although well-defined – fields of activity, so to speak, the introduction of the ship of State brings with it a greater emphasis on aspects which add a distinctly political element to the metaphor. As a result, the helmsman, he who steers the ship of State, assumes the most important political function. In this chapter, I will trace the path that this specific political metaphor takes in Early Modern Italian literature (from Dante to Tasso, with a backward incursion into the Roman Age, as I will scrutinize the *Aeneid* by Virgil), while inscribing it within a classical, philosophical frame that dates back to Greek philosophy. In particular, I will show that literary representations of the helmsman both recapitulate the philosophical tradition and show the belonging of the metaphor to the semiotic context in which the authors were working. We will see that every helmsman, in spite of his overall relevance within the work under scrutiny, becomes a leading – and, sometimes, *the* leading – vehicle that the authors use to signify their political viewpoint (as in Virgil and Dante) or to represent the leading power of their time (the case of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* is emblematic).

A stimulating case study, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* will display a wide variety of helmsmen who, overshadowed by the glittering armors of paladins and knights, may appear to complicate the picture at first. On the contrary, I contend that the multitude of helmsmen – and their successes or failures – allegorizes Italy's confused political situation in the XV and XVI century, when the peninsula was a land in political decline, lacking a hegemonic authority, and torn apart by conflict between minuscule domains. During this time period, the strongest European powers – Spain and France – could almost effortlessly subdue them all, as proved by the triumphal walk along the Northern part of Italy that Charles VIII, the French king, took in 1494, only 22 years before the first edition of the *Furioso*. Undoubtedly, this was the result of the long-standing Italian weakness.

Ariosto's text signifies the unbalance between political power and political knowledge, during his time, by means of the opposition of knight(s) and helmsman: the former embodies sheer vigor, almost always in association with total lack of strategy, the latter displays powerless knowledge, incapable of winning over the fierce warrior.

Success or failure, hesitation or resoluteness in war and peace will denote the overarching power relation between the characters at play and will give us keen insights concerning the world outside the literary work. As a result of the opposition force/knowledge that paladins and helmsmen put on stage, we will be able to reconcile the political traits of the heroes – namely the helmsmen, either occasional or professional, and the warriors – with the actual semiotic context wherein his author was absorbed and they, the heroes, were conceived.

Michel Foucault emphasized the complexity and value of the metaphor of navigation, in one of his last courses at the *Collège de France* on the topic of the "Care of Self" within the larger theme of the "Hermeneutics of the Subject." In

the lesson of February 17, 1982, the French scholar remarked on the metaphor of seafaring in relation to self-care. This metaphor is often utilized in classical poetry and philosophy, Foucault says, because it interconnects means and ends, implies skill, can be significantly applied to manifold disciplines. Moreover, it is a metaphor that emphasizes the importance of knowledge during the journey of life:

The path towards the self will always be something of an Odyssey. [...] This dangerous journey to the port, the port of safety, implies a knowledge (*savoir*), a technique, an art [...]. Three types of technique are usually associated with this model of piloting: first, medicine; second, political government, third, the direction and the government of oneself (2005, 248-249).

According to the tradition that Foucault summarized, navigation suits many aspects of human life, both private and public. It has an objective, the port, which can represent both a place of safety and our initial point of departure. Navigation, in addition, will always resemble an Odyssey, both *nostos* (a return to home trip) and adventure, with a certain unpredictability that goes with it. As for the subject who navigates, he must possess a practical knowledge (a technique, in other words). The question of technique, yet to be discussed, remarkably embodies the interconnection between public and private that navigation metaphorizes. In order to analyze the techniques that Foucault mentions – namely, medicine, political government, and self-government – one needs to linger over the collective and the individual, which are the spheres wherein the techniques lay out their influence. In particular, since navigation is the technique at issue, the next sections will explore the political relevance and content of the art of piloting oneself as well as a larger group.

## 2. A Safe Guide: The Helmsman

The metaphor of navigation is a common trope in Greek literature, as we saw in the first chapter. It is Plato who introduces the metaphor in the philosophical realm, in the sixth book of *The Republic*. Comparing himself to a painter who needs manifold images in order to describe a very intricate matter, Socrates (the usual Platonic *alter ego*), urged by Adeimantus, deploys the allegory of seafaring and the role of helmsman to explain his political theory. Socrates says:

Imagine some ships, or one ship, and a state of affairs on board something like this. There's the helmsman, larger and stronger than everyone in the ship, but deaf and rather short-sighted, with a knowledge of sailing to match his eyesight. The sailors are quarreling among themselves over captaincy of the ship, each one thinking that he ought to be captain, though he has never learnt that skill, nor can he point to the person who taught him or a time he was learning it. On top of which they say it can't be taught. In fact they are prepared to cut to pieces anyone who says it can. The helmsman himself is always surrounded by them. They beg him and do everything they can to make him hand over the tiller to them. Sometimes, if other people can persuade him and they can't,

they kill those others or throw them overboard. Then, they immobilize their worthy helmsman with drugs or drink or by other means, and take control of the ship, helping themselves to what it is carrying. Drinking and feasting, they sail in the way you'd expect people like that to sail. More than that, if someone is good at finding them ways of persuading or compelling the helmsman to let them take control, they call him a real seaman, a real captain, and say he really knows about ships. Anyone who can't do this they treat with contempt, calling him useless. They don't even begin to understand that if he is to be truly fit to take command of a ship a real ship's captain must of necessity be thoroughly familiar with the seasons of the year, the stars in the sky, the winds, and everything to do with this art. As for *how* he is going to steer the ship – regardless of whether anyone wants him to or not – they do not regard this as an additional skill or study which can be acquired over and above the art of being a ship's captain (2000, 488a-e).<sup>1</sup>

Plato states that among all those who long to steer, some stronger and more violent than others, only the helmsman can skillfully guide the ship, in spite of being ridiculed and overwhelmed by the crew. His advantage rests upon his knowledge of the *art* of navigation, the indispensable technique that one needs to appropriately carry out the task. Moreover, one can craftily apply oneself to such an important political assignment only if one possesses the technique of governing *and* this technique is congenial to his nature (or one's soul, as some scholars intend it) and ensuing role, since each and every individual has and can occupy only one specific position within the Platonic political apparatus.

In order to define the figures of citizen and community, Aristotle, always eager to counter or enhance the theory of his predecessor and master Plato, also resorted to nautical metaphor in his *Politics*. The philosopher stated:

Now just as a sailor is one of a number of partners, so, we assert, is the citizen. Although sailors are dissimilar in their capacities (one is a rower, another is a pilot, another a lookout, and others have similar sorts of titles), it is clear that the most precise account of their virtue will be that peculiar to each sort individually, but that a common account will in a similar way fit all. For the preservation of the ship in its voyage is the work of all of them, and each of the sailors strives for this. Similarly, although citizens are dissimilar, preservation of the partnership is their task, and the regime is [this] partnership; hence the virtue of the citizen must necessarily be with the view to the regime (1984, 3.4).

Comparing the quotations, we can see a difference in style and overall political theory between them. They pursue different purposes, even though they utilize the same nautical metaphor, within the same semantic field. While Plato relies on

---

<sup>1</sup> I have adapted the translation to the original when needed.

ambiguous talent and hard-won expertise, expertise gained only through sight, Aristotle replaces the general metaphor with a detailed examination of the process of governance insofar as he can display the well-defined peculiarity of the task that each and every one on board needs to carry out. It is well-known that Aristotle's methodology attempts to demonstrate *how* things work, rather than *why*, as in Plato. For Plato, the art of sailing is so complex that he compares it to governance, and a governor must necessarily be citizen. Conversely, Aristotle thinks that "this is true: not all those are to be regarded as citizens without whom there would not be a city" (1984, 3.5). The Stagirite believes that the helmsman, although necessary for the communitarian life of the *polis*, cannot lay indisputable claim to citizenship. No deeper dissent can be expressed in regard to the Socratic parable narrated by Plato: the government of the city is strictly the business of its citizens, and no simile can change that.

The Middle Ages witnessed the decline of Greek and Roman civilization, and the passing of centuries corrupted and disrupted their literary traditions. Many works survived the storm of the passage of time, many did not. Occasionally, uncaring *Chronos* blended them so that they were handed over as if they were one mind's offspring. Thus it happened that medieval scholars received copies of works by the most important philosophers of the past which were partly spurious and/or mixed together. The great philosophers Aristotle and Plato did not escape such a fate. Dante Alighieri, in *Convivio* IV.4, summarizes the passage by Aristotle I mentioned above in this way:

A queste ragioni si possono ridurre le parole del Filosofo ch'egli ne la *Politica* dice, che quando più cose ad uno fine sono ordinate, una di quelle conviene essere regolante, o vero reggente, e tutte l'altre rette e regolate. Sì come vedemo in una nave, che diversi officii e diversi fini di quella a uno solo fine sono ordinati, cioè a prendere loro desiderato porto per salutevole via: dove, sì come ciascuno ufficiale ordina la propria operazione nel proprio fine, così è uno che tutti questi fini considera, e ordina quelli ne l'ultimo di tutti; e questo è lo nocchiero, a la cui voce tutti obedire deono.[...] Per che manifestamente vedere si può che a perfezione de la universale religione de la umana spezie conviene essere uno, quasi nocchiero, che, considerando le diverse condizioni del mondo, a li diversi e necessari officii ordinare abbia del tutto universale e inrepugnabile officio di comandare. E questo officio per eccellenza Imperio è chiamato (33-34, vol. II).

Intellectually speaking, here Dante seems to establish an impressive synthesis of the two quite divergent viewpoints that pertain to the Greek philosophers. Indeed, he stretches Aristotle's point insofar as he can compare the helmsman to the emperor; this signifies a noticeable upgrade in regard to the Platonic theorization as well. The mystery of this synthesis – i.e. how Dante could include a Platonic viewpoint when he could not read Plato's works – is resolved when one analyzes the sources upon which Dante did rely. For instance, Joseph Mazzeo has shown the influence of *Liber de causis* (an Arabic anthology of the *Elementatio*

*Theologica* by Proclus that was at first erroneously assigned to the Stagirite, translated by unknown hand in XII century), on authors active in subsequent centuries: “With the presumed authority of Aristotle behind it, the doctrines of the *Liber de causis* did much to carry over Neoplatonic thought into the scholastic Aristotelianism of the later Middle Ages, creating that peculiar blend of Aristotelianized Neoplatonism so characteristic of the thought of Albertus Magnus and Dante” (32). This kind of evidence confirms the theory that myths, ideas, and philosophical findings by Greek authors were available, albeit in scattered fragments, well before the original books were recovered and subsequently translated. Marta Cristiani, who has compiled the entry “Platonismo” for the authoritative *Dante* printed by Enciclopedia Treccani (1970, 1996), also acknowledges the point, however indirectly. Although she does not believe that Plato could have directly exerted some influence on Dante’s writings and thought, by merely acknowledging the presence of “un platonismo generico e diffuso” (548), she does admit the existence of a mixed philosophy in Dante’s oeuvre:

Il problema fondamentale della causalità, del rapporto fra l’intellegibile e la molteplicità sensibile dell’universo, è in realtà risolto da D.[ante] secondo uno schema originale, straordinariamente composito, che presuppone, dopo P.[latone] e Aristotele, il neoplatonismo procliano del *De causis* e dell’opera dello Pseudo-Dionigi, l’aristotelismo arabo e platonizzante e l’emanatismo avicennistico (*Dante*, IV, 549).

At any rate, it hardly seems understandable how this extremely assorted schema could be assembled, unless one hypothesizes that Dante’s ‘original’ sources were already spurious and blended, or, alternatively, that they were intentionally mixed when translated and brought to Italy.<sup>2</sup> As a result, while Dante thought he was using Aristotle, he was in reality transmitting, indirectly, both Aristotelian and Platonic traditions.

To return to the sea metaphor, then we may hypothesize the existence of a sound philosophical tradition that allegorically portrays the helmsman as endorsed

---

<sup>2</sup> On the existence of diffused Platonic material, if perhaps unacknowledged, during the age and time of Dante, Bruno Nardi states: “nelle discussioni intorno alla natura dell’amore che s’accesero fra i rimatori italiani del secolo XIII, sembra essersi rinnovato in tutti i suoi momenti dialettici lo svolgimento del *Fedro* platonico; sì che dalle esercitazioni retoriche che ci ricordano il discorso di Lisia, giungiamo con Dante alla riscoperta dell’origine divina di Eros; e nella poetica rappresentazione dell’ascesa dell’anima all’iperuranio, celebrata nel secondo discorso di Socrate, come nella visione di Er alla fine della *Repubblica*, assai meglio che nelle povere visioni medievali, accade di trovare davvero il germe fecondo della filosofia e della poesia della *Commedia*. A chi osservasse che il poeta fiorentino non ebbe alcuna conoscenza delle due opere del filosofo ateniese, è agevole rispondere che il pensiero platonico, propagatosi per mille rivoli, informava ormai di sé una vasta letteratura che almeno in parte era ben conosciuta da Dante. Ma, anche senza di questo, i grandi ingegni non hanno bisogno, per intendersi, dei mezzi consueti che si richiedono alle anime superficiali” (Nardi, 4). Echoing these words, Eugenio Garin will add that “il Medioevo amava i classici non meno del Rinascimento; Aristotele era sulla bocca di tutti, e forse meglio che nel 400 [sic]; Platone era noto anch’esso, e non solo indirettamente” (1979, 97).

with political function (as Foucault claimed). Furthermore, we can also add some theological occurrences in which the same metaphor is featured. One of these sources is St. John Chrysostom. “E ancora: si dia una nave senza nocchiero, provvista di tutto quanto debba possedere, tranne il nocchiero: potrebbe forse navigare?” (Chrysostome, 19, 3-4). The answer to this rhetorical question is, surprisingly enough, affirmative, at least in the world where politics and literature merge, as we will see later. The Church Father picks up the metaphor of the ship pilot, and he embellishes it with gifts that belong to divine Providence; in so doing, he perhaps contributed in suggesting to Dante, who was aware enough of Chrysostom’s writings to assign him a small role in his *Comedia (Paradiso, 12, 137)*, how the seed planted by the Platonic myth might be nurtured to full maturation. After being king-philosopher, co-operator in the political life of the *polis*, and instrument of Providence, the helmsman rise to the Imperial throne, and, according to Dante, this could happen only after divine consent. However, at this point, the interpretation of the metaphor seemed to have gone too far. The literary tradition that I am going to consider next sheds light on this movement.

### **3. Of Shipwrecks and Other Matters: Politics and The Aeneid**

In Book VI of *The Republic*, as we saw, Plato introduces the political metaphor of the helmsman, comparing the intricacy that the governance of the city implies to the confusion and conflict that occur on a ship on the stormy sea. In addition to the allegory of political hierarchy, Book VI introduces the reader to the most meaningful Platonic theory: the idea of Good, which Plato lays out by means of the comparison between the good and the sun. He explains his ideas concerning human knowledge by dint of the renowned allegory of the cave (VI, 506b-VII, 517c). The focal point of this Platonic theory of knowledge is that, although the noetic good is unattainable to mankind, “the offspring of the good” (VI, 508c), its empiric equivalent, is. In fact, says Socrates: “as the good is in the intelligible region to reason and the objects of reason, so is this [the sun] in the visible world to vision and objects of vision” (VI, 508c). He who frees himself from the ties that keep him inside the cave, will come out under the sunlight and will have the opportunity to *see the things themselves*, and no longer their shadows. As a result, he will acquire access to true knowledge, which can be experienced only through the multiple mediation of sun and eye, the organ of sight. Therefore, Socrates finishes his parable stating that

[A]t any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public *must have caught sight of this* (VII, 517b-c, emphasis added).

For an authoritative Renaissance scholar, J.G.A. Pocock, prudence “might be defined as the ability to formulate statutes which will stand the test of time and

acquire the authority and antiquity already enjoyed by customs,” (24); imprudence can lead human beings to act against wisdom and safe and sound customs. In so doing, imprudence hastens the downfall of those who incautiously walk along treacherous tracks, without suitable caution and indispensable knowledge or art. I maintain the hypothesis that Dante knew Plato’s book (if unknowingly and in an abridged, epitomized form), when he wrote Ulysses’s episode in *Inferno* XXVI. Before turning to Dante’s Ulysses, however, let us turn to a literary episode that the Florentine knew well, written by “quel Virgilio” whose “volume” (*Inferno* I, 79, 84) greatly influenced his poetry in general, and his “Ulysses” in particular. It is a famous nautical episode that belongs to the classical tradition: the death of Palinurus during the voyage of Aeneas’s ship towards Italy in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Palinurus, in his capacity of helmsman, allows us to uncover some of the individual traits that such a figure needs to steer a ship. Additionally, he gives us insights about his function as a member of the collective at sail. Consequently, we will be able to draw political and philosophical comparisons between Dante’s character, Ulysses, and Virgil’s Palinurus.

Canto V of the *Aeneid* tells, among other things, the story of the fall overboard of Palinurus, helmsman of the ship of Aeneas.<sup>3</sup> Neptune, although still angered at the Trojans, has promised to Venus, mother of Aeneas, the happy approach on the Italian shoreline in exchange for a sacrificial victim, and the reader learns that the victim is the *governor*—in Greek, *kubernetes*, as already mentioned. While the ship is approaching the Italian shoreline, Somnus, the god of sleep who is disguised as a fellow sailor, at first attempts to take over by suggesting that Palinurus rest, and then, acknowledging his own rhetorical failure, puts him to sleep forcibly “ramum Lethaeo rore madentem,” by means of a bough that is dripping soporific dew (as everybody knows, Lethe is the Greek name of the river whose waters have the power to make one sleep and forget everything). He throws him overboard soon after, along with the helm, because the dependable pilot never took his hands off of it (V, 843-861). The ejection from the ship does not provoke the death of the helmsman; he reaches the coast, and only there is assaulted and murdered by cruel natives (VI, 347-361). Meanwhile, the ship, kept safe and on track by merciful Neptune, is taken to the Cumaean shore by Aeneas, although it is missing both helm and helmsman (to our and Chrysostome’s astonishment).<sup>4</sup> From a symbolic viewpoint, “Palinurus’s sacrifice” carries multiple and very significant consequences. In fact, Palinurus is tossed overboard when in the position of helmsman of the ship of Aeneas, which represents the closest model to the perfect “ship of State.” Consequently, if the ship stands for the State, as David Quint has written, “Palinurus is, in fact, a surrogate for Aeneas in the hero’s capacity as a leader, as head of the ship of state. [...] Palinurus is the logical—if apparently fortuitous—choice for sacrificial victim once Neptune

---

<sup>3</sup> There are discrepancies about the details of the episode, as it is told by the narrator and by Palinurus himself, when he meets Aeneas during his descent to Hades (in canto VI). The scholarship often mentions this episode as one of the signs of the unfinished character of Virgil’s work. Since the inaccuracy does not invalidate my argument, I am not going to deal with it. However, they are painstakingly treated in Quint 1993, esp. 83-96.

<sup>4</sup> As noted in chapter 1.4 of the present dissertation, this episode bears impressive similarity to the one narrated by Horace in *Odes* 1.14.

agrees to guarantee the Trojan's fleet arrival in Italy" (1993, 86-7). The price Neptune exacts is very high, and that means that Palinurus's death is more than a mere sacrificial request in exchange for divine intervention. The sacrifice of Palinurus *and*, simultaneously, the loss of the helm, which makes it possible to steer the ship, accentuate an all-embracing substitutability, a radical symbolic condition in which political hierarchy and political roles are unhinged and may be either negated or superseded. Palinurus substitutes for Aeneas because they both are simple pawns in the chess game where the gods Neptune and Venus are the only meaningful and powerful players. For the same reason, Aeneas wakes up overnight and can steer a helmless ship because it is *not* on board that the fate of the ship (i.e., of the State) is determined. In Virgil's world politics seems, in fact, to be almost entirely out of human reach, in the hands of the gods and Fortune, or history. To find support to this hypothesis, we can go back to the dialogue between Somnus and Palinurus:

On the leading ship

Palinurus guided the close formation [...]  
When Somnus, gliding softly from the stars  
Put the night air aside, parted the darkness,  
Palinurus, in quest of you. He brought  
Bad dreams to you, in all your guiltlessness.  
Upon the high poop deck the god sat down  
In Phorbos' guise, and said:

"Son of Iasius,

Palinurus, the very sea itself  
Moves the ship onward. There's a steady breeze.  
The hour for rest has come. Put down your head  
And steal a respite for your tired eyes.  
I'll man your tiller for a while."

But Palinurus

Barely looked around. He said:

"Forget my good sense for this peaceful face  
The sea puts on, the calm swell? Put my trust  
In that capricious monster? Or hand over  
Aeneas to the tricky winds, when I  
Have been deceived so often by clear weather?"

With this response he held fast to the helm  
And would not give it up, but kept his eyes  
Upon the stars. Now see the god, his bough  
A-drip with Lethe's dew, and slumberous  
With Stygian power, giving it a shake  
Over the pilot's temple, to unfix,  
Although he fought it, both his swimming eyes.  
His unexpected drowse barely begun,  
Somnus leaned over him and flung him down

In the clear water, breaking off with him  
A segment of the stern and steering oar. (V, 1090-1125)

The confrontation between the deity and the human pilot can only result in the defeat of the latter. The destiny of Palinurus has been decided elsewhere, his agency restricted from above. Although he is Aeneas's surrogate as governor of the ship and, as such, stands for the governor of the State and the chosen leader, Palinurus can neither escape the divinely planned sacrifice of his life nor prevent the ship from losing its human guide. Manifold are the reasons, but they can plausibly cluster in one: such was the indissoluble agreement between Venus and Neptune, with the complacency of Jupiter. Quint perfectly describes the reduced political function both of Aeneas's ship of State and its helmsman:

It is Neptune who brings the fleet to Italy. The hero's individual agency is illusory, at best greatly diminished, even when he appears to promote his destiny. Thus the sacrifice [to leave behind Dido] that Aeneas makes as leader paradoxically includes his leadership initiative: he goes with the flow of historical necessity that will not allow him independent action (1993, 91-2).

Such was the fate of heroes in Augustan Rome, according to Virgil.

This episode underlines the impossibility of opposing Fate (or "historical necessity," to quote Quint) in the time when Virgil – and his fellow Horace that we discussed in the first chapter – was writing. Despite the greatness of the hero's virtue (and Aeneas does *not* stand out, in this regard: his most noticeable quality is to be "pious"), many are the colors in the ineffable painting that is history, within which human affairs find their niche regardless of their relevance and function. In fact the individual Aeneas appears a *victim* of someone else's decision rather than an accomplished and gifted man whose fate depends on his skillfulness. A dedicated and pious son and captain, his highest merit seems to make him a sort of "successful Ulysses," to use a catchphrase, if less ambitious and powerful. Virgil's first verses describe the argument of his poem thus:

I sing of warfare and a man at war.  
From the sea-coast of Troy in early days  
He came to Italy by destiny,  
To our Lavinian western shore,  
A fugitive, this captain, buffeted  
Cruelly on land as on the sea [...]  
Till he could found a city [...]  
Tell me the causes now, O Muse, how galled  
In her divine pride, and how sore at heart  
From her old wound, the queen of gods compelled him—  
A man apart, devoted to his mission—  
To undergo so many perilous days  
And enter so many trials. (I, 1-18)

If one places these lines in correlation with Homer's introduction of his Achilles, the warrior who gave endless pain to Trojans (in *The Iliad*), or his Ulysses of unmatched cunning (in *The Odyssey*), once again one can only agree with Quint's statement according to which "the hero Aeneas *as individual* may be in the same figurative boat—a shipwrecked Odyssean boat, prey to Fortune—as the poem's losers, no less than they a victim of his epic destiny" (93). To further Aeneas's demotion, I will add that his helmsman Palinurus displays more virtue than his captain, when needed. In the oft-quoted episode, the opposition Palinurus shows towards the fraudulent and honeyed rhetoric of Somnus not only testifies to his reliable knowledge of the art of sailing and worthiness in operating the helm of the ship of State, it also shows his refusal to kneel down in front of armed rhetoric, wisely recognized as false and treacherous as the winds and the placid, yet monstrous, sea. The virtue of Palinurus dwindles and slips away only when it faces that which cannot be humanly countered, the will of god (or, again, the course of history), when *Necessitas* comes "in quest of you," as an emanation of Fate and executing his command. Palinurus stands as a warning to *all humans* (emperors and tyrants included) that, in the time when the gods steer the ships, their presence is unwarranted and contingent.

Similarly and contrarily, the journey of Ulysses in canto XXVI in Dante's *Inferno* admits parallelism and allows us to underline differences, as far as politics and knowledge are concerned. Damned in Dante's poem, Ulysses recounts to the two pilgrims his last voyage beyond the pillars of Hercules along with his "compagnia picciola." The famous ending – the shipwreck and the subsequent death of the entire crew – marks the first and crucial difference with the Trojans. Whereas Aeneas reaches the venue wherein *others* promised him shelter and prosperity from the very beginning of the sailing, if at the price of some ships, friends, and even his father, Ulysses, in search of defiant and arduous "virtute e canoscenza" *he himself was longing for*, leads his cohorts to the wretched end.<sup>5</sup>

The question concerning knowledge ("canoscenza") urges us to go back to Plato and the problem of the diffusion of his works during the Middle Ages. It appears certain that the primary connection between the Greek philosopher and the Italian poet is Augustine, both as regards the symbology of the ascension and for the allegory sun-good.<sup>6</sup> In book VIII, chapters 8-11 of the *De Civitate Dei*, the bishop of Hippo gives vent to his fondness for Plato's philosophy over all others. Platonic ideas are discussed throughout the vast work, if in not systematically. Other medieval authors have taken on and expand some theses by Plato – or, in a few cases, indistinctly Hellenistic, as we shall soon see – thus they played a part in passing them on. Among these latter, most noticeable, if he was writing in Greek, is one Alcinous, perhaps active during the first centuries A.D. (the profile

---

<sup>5</sup> On the end of similarities, it is at least worth noting that the sinking of Ulysses's boat mirrors that of the first Trojan helmsman, Orontès. Both ships whirl around three times, before being swallowed up by the sea (see *Aeneid* I, 161-163, and *If.* XXVI, 139-142).

<sup>6</sup> The two themes are dealt with by Nussbaum 1999 and Mazzeo 1960 respectively. For the latter, see chapter 2 and 3, "The Light-Metaphysics Tradition" and "Light Metaphysics in the Works of Dante," in which the author emphasizes both the Platonic inspiration and the Aristotelian-Neo-Platonist influence in Dante, as I already suggested in section 2 of this chapter. Also, Garin mentions that "il tema luce-tenebre è vecchio di secoli" (1979, 96).

of the author remains very uncertain, however). As for the above-mentioned *Liber de Causis*, the most recent English translator of Alcinous's *Didaskalikos* (*The Handbook of Platonism*), John Dillon, claims in the Preface that the typical practice of the author, consists in blending philosophical terminology, and, as a consequence, theoretical findings, even if involuntarily. *A propos* of the discipline of Logic as summarized by Alcinous, Dillon writes:

The overall inspiration here is certainly Platonic, in particular *Meno* 85c ff., from which comes the term 'stir up' (*anakinēin*, 85c9), but the name given to the process is Aristotle's, *epagoge*, while the term used for the forms is ultimately Stoic, *physikai ennoiai*. In all this, of course, A.[lcinous] himself would not be conscious of any mixture of terminology (Alcinous, xvi).

While the miscegenation of philosophical theories worked by Alcinous reveals as an epistemological support to my opinion that the Ulysses of Dante is a character platonically flavored, the content of chapter 27.4 of the book provides thematic corroboration.<sup>7</sup> In it, one can in fact read the translation and epitomization of the allegory of the cave:

Those devoid of wisdom he compared to men living beneath the earth who have never seen the light of the day, but see only dim shadows of the bodies of our realm, while thinking that they have a clear grasp of reality. [...] When they come upon a way upwards from their darkness and come out into the pure light, understandably tend to reject what they previously saw... (36).

The existence of texts such as the *Didaskalikos* in the first centuries of the Christian era, encourages one to think that the core of Platonic theory was accessible, to a fairly accurate extent, to the most sensitive minds of the medieval centuries. This suffices to substantiate the hypothesis of an intellectual encounter between Plato and Dante on themes such as knowledge and its allegory.

To return to the parallel Aeneas/Ulysses, one can mention that, in addition to the ending, their endeavors are also structurally different. In other words, they differ in regard to means and ends and, in this perspective, they look almost thoroughly heterogeneous. Ulysses sails the open sea, in an unmistakably personal although not solitary navigation ("ma misi *me* per l'alto mare aperto," "L'un lito e l'altro *vidi*," "*mi lasciavi* Sibilla..." etc... emphasis added), following an unknown direction, having the one and only goal to "divenir del mondo esperto/e de li vizi umani e del valore," (XXVI, 98-99). Clearly, he is pursuing *individual* ends.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> David Thompson suggests that "Through a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, Odysseus's adventures became the great archetype for any journey or process, physical or spiritual; and whether they traverse the way of our life or the streets of Dublin, we will do well to view Odysseus's descendants through a Platonic glass" (18). John Freccero underlines, instead, a different kind of hybridization (Freccero 1986, 150) that is the co-existence within the episode and, in general throughout the poem, of both Greek and Christian concept of time, circular (the Platonic great cycles) and linear (the tension towards the end of time) respectively.

<sup>8</sup> As Padoan puts it, "Errare sul mare [...] in base ai canoni fissati da una simbologia plurisecolare e viva ancora nel secolo XIV – significava essere volti alle cose terrene, dominati da una interna,

Hence, it is just a natural consequence that the *technique* upon which he relies works essentially on personal level: since he cannot draw an external map to be followed, as a cartographer or an astronomer would do, in order to stimulate the will of his companions Ulysses has to resort to an internal, philosophical motivation. In the impossibility of pointing to a visible objective (the promised land), he utilizes a rhetorical device that alludes to what of invisible objective they *could* reach. Ironically, Dante seems to punish the Greek king by means of his own medicine: the madness he made up to escape the Trojan war afflicts him once he is back from it, so that he is forced to leave Ithaca again, and this time will be incapable of returning. Giuseppe Mazzotta states that

Ulysses attempts to travel the distance that separates words from facts and to fill those words with the reality of experience. In contrast to Cicero's notion of Ulysses' simulated madness, Dante shows the real madness of the Greek hero: his madness lies in the belief that the distance can be bridged by an act of knowledge (Mazzotta 1979, 83).

Unlike Mazzotta, I think Ulysses perfectly envisages both the shortcomings of rhetoric and its peculiar nature of means to achieve ends. Hence, just as the prisoner in Plato's cave cannot *not* go out – one would be tempted to add “a riveder le stelle,” in order to not “negarsi l'esperienza” under (or “di retro”) the sun – once freed from the chains of the shadowy world, so Ulysses sets out on the only possible action conceivable when burnt by the fever of knowing: the resumption of the journey towards the unknown, however hopelessly. The madness of Ulysses is therefore definitely the madness of he who “attempts to travel the distance,” but the distance involved is not between words and facts, rather between facts and *ideas*, which are attainable only when they are *in sight*, according to the Platonic word. The condemnation of Ulysses and his small crew is the punishment for those who, eager and uninhibited, did not wait for the coming of the perfect, messianic day, the one that brings bliss and perfect knowledge. They symbolize the downfall of those who longed to triumph over worldly vision “per speculum et in aenigmate” (Paul, *First Letter to Corinthians*, 13,12) in order to be “face to face” with the idea beforehand. Nothing changed from the ejection of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden: according to Dante too the Word, not rhetoric, opens the gate of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Politics in *Orlando Furioso***

---

amara inquietudine; [...] L'Ulisse dantesco rappresenta non tanto un'aspirazione confusa verso i mari intentati dell'Occidente quanto piuttosto l'indomabile brama del sapere in tutte le sue manifestazioni” (181-2, 187). This restlessness, this longing belongs to Ulysses, of course, while the crew mostly seems persuaded by the cunning rhetoric of the captain rather than moved by the same unquenchable intellectual thirst and curiosity.

<sup>9</sup> A further consideration needs to be made: if my hypothesis is correct, the Platonic-Dantesque Ulysses could not dismiss the negative opinion that Platonic Socrates holds as regard to rhetoric, which he deems deceitful as well as other forms of flattering sophism, such as cosmetics and the art of cooking (Plato, *Gorgia*, 463b). Rhetoric is effective above all among those who ignore (459a). Dante's lesson, thus, filtered through this Platonic glass (Thompson *dixit*), fully acquires its allegorical, moral, and anagogical character.

A few centuries afterward, other sea journeys and shipwrecks were imagined. In the age of the discovery of a New World, it seems merely suitable that many literary works had to feature travels by sea, as is the case of the poem by Ferrarese Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*. A masterpiece of Renaissance literature, the poem weaves manifold threads and intersects numerous genres. Not entirely a chivalric epic (a genre hard to define per se), the poem produces an ‘artistic excess,’ as it were, and, as such, it resists canonical categorization within the literary encyclopedia.<sup>10</sup> The *Furioso* contemplates many entries of the canon: undoubtedly, it is a novel, if deployed with poetic cadence. It is also impossible to miss its theatrical component, both in the form of tragic and comic. There is also a constant intermingling of moral-didactic commentary by the author that has raised critical objections since the very beginning, with the other great poetic voice of the century, Torquato Tasso, leading the pack. As Stefano Jossa points out (2002), Tasso was rather harsh precisely in condemning the excessive presence and participation of Ariosto the author within his text; in his *Discorsi sull’Arte Poetica* Tasso maintained that there must be distance between the text and his author so that the latter cannot be caught within the former, his own work that is. Some scholars have, finally, highlighted the political value of the poem, although its politics are developed in a different fashion than the most customary treatise. The thematic contiguity and interdependence between Ariosto and the famous political writer of his time, the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli, has been at the center of a recent essay by Giuseppe Mazzotta (2001, 25-51). In commenting on Machiavelli’s disappointment at his exclusion from the gallery of nobles figures who stand on the shore to celebrate the narrator of *Furioso* who is approaching (*Furioso*, XLVI, 1-19), Mazzotta claims that, however, “Machiavelli is everywhere in the *Furioso*. [...] *Orlando Furioso* would be neither possible nor necessary apart from Machiavelli’s political scheme” (2001, 27-28). Furthermore, he adds that “[t]he common point of departure for Ariosto and Machiavelli is the overriding, fundamental question of power” (28). The connection between the Florentine and the Ferrarese is also analyzed by Albert Ascoli, as it revolves around the theme of faith and the diverse spheres in which it operates; he also analyzes ethical-political motifs that their interaction raises (1997). These studies belong to a field of work not yet fully analyzed by Ariosto scholarship, given that it lies a little aside from philological and literary theory: the field of political philosophy. In support of Ascoli’s statement (“Ariosto [...] has defined in extraordinary detail the ethical, political, metaphysical, and textual stakes at risk in understanding and practicing the virtue of faith [...] in a way that goes beyond even Machiavelli’s brilliant if brutal analysis,” 1997, 40-41), one can maintain, I deem not incautiously, that Ariosto learned Machiavelli’s lesson so well that he could almost perfectly conceal it under the dissimulation, lauded by the *Segretario fiorentino*, whose effectiveness is directly proportional to its *cover-up*. I am not referring to dissimulation in and of itself, to which Ariosto devotes some

---

<sup>10</sup> Two main works must be consulted for an initial yet accurate study of Ariosto’s work: Fatini, G. *Bibliografia della critica ariosteica, 1510-1956*. Le Monnier, Firenze 1958, and Rodini, R.J. *Ludovico Ariosto: an annotated bibliography of criticism, 1956-1980* edited by Robert J. Rodini and Salvatore Di Maria. University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Mo. 1984.

poems of his cantos, rather to a figure that seems to operate throughout the text under humble clothes, as if disguised: precisely in dissimulated form. This figure is a familiar one, by now: the helmsman.

### **5. Of the Necessary Dissimulation**

Machiavelli devotes many passages of *De Principatibus* to dissimulation. For example, he says:

Quanto sia laudabile in uno principe mantenere la fede e vivere con integrità e non con astuzia, ciascuno lo intende: non di manco si vede, per esperienza ne' nostri tempi, quelli principi avere fatto gran cose che della fede hanno tenuto poco conto, e che hanno saputo con l'astuzia aggirare e' cervelli delli uomini; et alla fine hanno superato quelli che si sono fondati in sulla lealtà (XVIII).

The universal fame that covers the Segretario fiorentino stems from bedazzling statements similar to the one just quoted. Original and bold, they strike in proportion with the effectiveness of the concealment that they require, if one is brave enough to even attempt their implementation, because “è necessario questa natura saperla bene colorire, et essere gran simulatore e dissimulatore: e sono tanto semplici li uomini, e tanto obediscano alle necessità presenti, che colui che inganna troverà sempre chi si lascerà ingannare.” (XVIII). Declarations of this sort, in which Machiavellian *realpolitik* is fully represented, feature unambiguous decision and, at the same time, pave the way to the contradiction of the very same message it carries. Machiavelli's advice to dissimulate one's goal seems to diminish the effectiveness of means, therefore making it difficult to achieve the no longer hidden ends: indeed, it remains to be proved that general deceitfulness may represent a long-lasting and successful political strategy.

Although apparently discarded by rulers, dissimulation definitely belonged to the semiotic context of Renaissance. As a comment to Machiavelli's suggestion that, in order to be successful, the politician needs to be deceitful rather than honest, Victoria Kahn says: “power becomes in part, if not entirely, an effect of the representational illusion of truth” (1993, 199). This is precisely the lesson that Ariosto appears to have learned better, and not rare are the occurrences in which he, almost apologizing, displays his advancement in this strategic field:

Quantunque il simular sia le più volte  
ripreso, e dia di mala mente indici,  
si truova pur in molte cose e molte  
aver fatti evidenti benefici,  
e danni e biasmi e morti aver già tolte;  
che non conversiam sempre con gli amici  
in questa assai più oscura che serena  
vita mortal, tutta d'invidia piena.

[...] che de' far di Ruggier la bella amica  
con quel Brunel non puro e non sincero,  
ma tutto simulato e tutto finto,  
come la maga le l'avea dipinto?

Simula anch'ella; e così far conviene  
con esso lui di finzioni padre; (*Furioso*, IV, 1-3).

While the second part of the quotation seems to be the fictional consequence of the first, and they both appear to apply merely to poetry and specifically to the characters in *Furioso*, elsewhere Ariosto picks up again the topic so that he induces the doubt that the picture may be more sophisticated, and that dissimulation may play a larger role than at face value. “Non sí pietoso Enea, né forte Achille/fu, come è fama, né sí fiero Ettore;/e ne son stati mille e mille/che si può lor con verità anteporre:/ma i donati palazzi e le gran ville/dai descendenti lor, gli ha fatto porre/in questa senza fin sublimi onori/da l'onorate man degli scrittori” (XXXV, 25, 1-8). The words uttered by John the Evangelist seem to indicate the concealed – but truthful – nature of perennial honors the great heroes of the past have gained by means of literature. Suddenly, it comes to mind that Ariosto's poem apparently sings praise, throughout, of the “generosa Erculea prole,” namely Ippolito from Este, and the comparison with Achilles or Hector elicits our sardonic smile.

Similarly and more than once, Ariosto takes heed to inform his reader that heroes and heroines in his work are on the verge of simulating in order to accomplish their goals: in addition to the episode of Brunello and Bradamante just quoted, one can name Olimpia (“Fo pensier molti; e veggio al mio cordoglio/che solo il simular può dare aita” IX, 36, 5-6), and Ruggiero (“Ma come l'avisò Melissa, stette/senza mutare il solito sembante/fin che de l'arme sue, più di neglette,/si fu vestito dal capo alle piante;/e per non farle ad Alcina sospette,/finse provar s'in esse era aiutante,/finse provar se gli era fatto grosso” VII, 75, 1-7). Another example is to be found in canto XXXVII, 59, with Drusilla dissimulating in order to find just vengeance on Marganorre and his sons. As Sergio Zatti rightly states, “La disinvoltura con cui Ariosto padroneggia la tecnica romanzesca gli consente di sfruttare al massimo tutte le risorse di un codice espressivo fino a metterne a nudo la pura natura di *fictio*” (Zatti 1990, 13). However, another way of dissimulating, supposedly negative, is also possible, and this draws the poet's condemnation: it is the falseness that dwells within the sovereign courts.

Spesso in poveri alberghi e in picciol tetti,  
ne le calamitadi e nei disagi,  
meglio s'aggiungon d'amicizia i petti,  
che fra ricchezze invidiose et agi  
de le piene d'insidie e di sospetti  
corti regali e splendidi palagi,  
ove la caritade è in tutto estinta,  
né si vede amicizia, se non finta.

[...] perché, qual l'apparenze esteriori,  
non hanno i cor, non hanno gli animi tali;  
che non mirando al torto più ch'al dritto,

attendon solamente al lor profitto (XLIV, 1, 2, 5-8).

Generated by greed and thirst for power, this sort of dissimulation is not a mark of strategic attitude, rather it signals malevolence and couples with falseness with which Brunello is endowed. On the other hand, there is one more reason for Ariosto to wholeheartedly embrace the art of dissimulation. I contend that this reason is the effectiveness that simulation displays as a rhetorical device to convey the *political*, and not the literary, content of the poem. Thus, the presence of a “spazio istituzionale [... dove] Ariosto situa le due strutture portanti del racconto romanzesco tradizionale: la tecnica narrativa dell’*entrelacement* [...] e il tema fondante della *quête*” (Zatti 1990, 13) does not appear fortuitous. Within the institutional space, the overarching structures of *entrelacement* and *quête* take on a specific, higher value exactly because rhetorical devices borrowed from other disciplines – such as the Machiavellian political dissimulation – weave them together so that the semiotic context will resemble a complicated tapestry very similar to *reality* rather than merely an intricate epic-chivalric novel. This institutional space tightens the relation between *Furioso* and Machiavelli. One final tribute, ironic if you will, which Ariosto dedicates to the Florentine rests precisely in the blatant absence of Machiavelli as a character within the poem, vis-à-vis the implicit presence of his focal theme (*dissimulation dissimulated*, that is), as I will show soon.

Forse era ver, ma non però credibile  
a chi del senso suo fosse signore;  
ma parse facilmente a lui possibile,  
ch’era perduto in via più grave errore (I, 56, 1-4).

The narrator is alluding to the virginity of slippery Angelica, and suggests to the reader that he not make the same mistake as blinded Sacripante: Angelica’s virtue *seems* to be compromised, indeed long gone. Should we question the author’s word? Definitely yes, in order to escape from his plot and his very convincing attempt to drag the reader into the picture. As Ascoli suggests “Instead of analyzing from secure and detached positions [certain critics] are, in effect, analyzed, drawn into the textuality of the *Furioso* as unwitting participants” (1987, 236). This is what happens to those who read this octave for the first time, I believe. Surprisingly or not, the author unveils, pages and adventures afterward, that none other than Medoro, and under the mesmerized and bewildered reader’s gaze, as it were, was successful in plucking “la prima rosa [...] non ancor tocca inante,” (XIX, 33), this ‘flower’ that drove and drives the cream of the crop of paladins and seems to flip over the fate of Charlemagne’s empire as the wind does with sea waters. Ariosto’s simulation caught both his characters and the reader unprepared, as he weaves manifold threads only to better warp them, through concealment and dissimulation.

Ariosto appears to heavily utilize these techniques in his life too. Being in a position that the Florentine would enviously regard, Ariosto has to feign pleasure, while craving a less exposed life, away from the courts, as though in respect of Epicurean motto *lathe biosas*:

Chi brama onor di sprone o di capello,  
serva re, duca, cardinale o papa;  
io no, che poco curo questo e quello.

In casa mia mi sa meglio una rapa  
ch'io cuoca, e cotta s'un stecco me inforco  
e mondo, e spargo poi di acetto e sapa,

che all'altrui mensa tordo, starna o porco  
selvaggio; e così sotto una vil coltre,  
come di seta o d'oro, ben mi corco.

E più mi piace di posar le poltre  
membra, che di vantarle che alli Sciti  
sien state, agli Indi, alli Etiopi, et oltre.

Degli uomini son varii li appetiti:  
a chi piace la chierca, a chi la spada,  
a chi la patria, a chi li strani liti.

Chi vuole andare a torno, a torno vada:  
vegga Inghelterra, Ongheria, Francia e Spagna;  
a me piace abitar la mia contrada (*Satira III*, 40-57).

*Le Satire* were published posthumously (in 1534, one year after the death of the poet) and this further confirms how necessary it was, for the men of letter and not sword, to keep a low-key profile during the tormented beginning of XVI century, if they were part, somewhat, of the sovereign class.

**6. “nave non veggio, a cui salendo sopra,/speri allo scampo mio  
ritrovar via”**

The metaphor of the helmsman seems to find new vigor in the writings of Ariosto.<sup>11</sup> Not too worried about theological restrictions (unlike Tasso, who was working during the Counter-Reformation era), free from didactic constraints about the chivalric or the epic genre, the Ferrarese gives the metaphor a large role in his text, while he piles up a noticeable phenomenology of occurrences. The frequency and variety of occurrences of the metaphor suggests that Ariosto is using the helmsman as a vehicle to convey specific meaning, rather than simply utilizing it because of its ductility.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, the metaphor's plasticity and

---

<sup>11</sup> Another who influenced Ariosto's imagery is Leon Battista Alberti and his *Intercenales* (see Segre 1966, and Tocchini 1998). If Astolfo's voyage on the moon draws largely from "Somnium," the tales "Fatum et Fortuna" and "Naufragus" and their focus on navigation and shipwreck seem to play a remarkable role as well, in regard to the sea theme.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Tocchini discards Rajna's opinion concerning Ariosto's utilitarian use of shipwrecks: "I naufragi ariosteschi ci appaiono piuttosto – e più semplicemente – come assorbiti nel grande e pervasivo sistema di allegorizzazione del tema della Fortuna, apofisi estreme (e probanti, in relazione ai personaggi ed alle loro diseguali carature morali, in ragione delle loro reazioni) di una tematizzazione che sembra fare propria una radice albertiana" (5).

visibility within the poem seems to cover-up its semiotic function and significance. The metaphor of the helmsman is interspersed all over the poem almost carelessly, as a sort of “Ariosto’s purloined letter,” so that it has remained ‘invisible’ for long time.

The Ariostesque poem represents a universe in perennial strife. Duels, contests, wars, fights for pride, courtesy, love, survival, power, seethe through the octaves of *Furioso* incessantly. By and large, they are interrupted and resumed later on thanks to a very peculiar solution of the poetic continuity that has been poignantly defined, by Daniel Javitch (1980), the technique of “cantus interruptus.” Intersections of sub-plots and change of scene are the rule. While the knights and other characters customarily perform on the land, Ariosto’s use of hippogryph, wizards, and witches, make the sky available for enterprises and combats too, so that the poem conveys the idea of a global conflict where no dimension is either spared or safe. At first it seems that the watery element is spared the warfare fury of Christian and Moors knights; however, this appearance will not resist scrutiny. Indeed, from the very first octave in the poem, the sea forebodes perils and disgraces:

Le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori,  
le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto,  
che furo al tempo che passaro i Mori  
d’Africa il mare, e in Francia nocquer tanto,  
seguendo l’ire e i giovenil furori  
d’Agramante lor re [...], (I, 1).

A new Agamemnon in quest of his lost nobleness, Agramante sails the Mediterranean along with his army so that he can avenge himself (and his late father) against Charlemagne and his paladins. The reader faces here the first occurrence of the new- testament dyad sea/danger that the author will present time and again throughout the poem, until his final approach to the familiar shores of Ferrara, described in the last canto. The sea, a-morphous and unreliable though placid (Palinurus *docet*), immeasurably wide and so powerful as to be hardly tamed, can meaningfully convey the image of an always forthcoming peril to humankind; all the more if the latter is quarrelsome and unwary. In *Furioso*, these two adjectives perfectly fit knights and women respectively. In some cases, the adjectives overlap so that they portray a hybrid, metaphorically speaking—and I do not mean that some knights happen to be female: the next case will clarify my statement. The first paladin to experience the inadequacy of his incautious approach towards the sea is Rinaldo. Angry at king Charlemagne because he shipped the knight in mission and away from Angelica’s footsteps, Rinaldo

Contra la volontà d’ogni nocchiero,  
pel gran desir che di tornare avea,  
entrò nel mar ch’era turbato e fiero,  
e gran procella minacciar pareva.  
Il Vento si sdegnò, che da l’altiero  
sprezzar si vide; e con tempesta rea  
sollevò il mar intorno, e con tal rabbia

che gli mandò a bagnar sino alla gabbia (II, 28).

The paladin shows a lack of respect for the restless elements – wind cooperates with water, in this case – because he believes, as a knight, that only on the land he can be in trouble. As a consequence, he seems to involuntarily enhance the violence of the possibly dreadful element and further jeopardize his journey: the result will be an undesired prolongation of his trip and a different berth of landing. In fact, some octaves later, the reader and the knight will discover that the ship has approached Scotland, rather than the French shoreline (IV, 51). This first episode already provides the opportunity to reflect on some issues concerning the relevance of the themes of helmsman and sea: the helmsman attempts to utilize wisdom and prudence, the sea shows an intrinsic purpose, if dissimulated and to be acknowledged only subsequently. Rinaldo *embodies* the paradigmatic unwary and quarrelsome knight; the stormy sea and the turbulent wind do not infuse cautiousness in him. Not only does he deride the elements; he, also, commits the literary sin of discarding the true judicious wisdom and knowledge “d’ogni nocchiero:” as a result, he will be punished, as his much yearned encounter with Angelica will be further delayed. Like the Platonic crew, the paladin deems useless or inferior the art of navigation that the helmsman possesses. Foreign Scotland, rather than familiar France, will be the reward for such a miscalculation. The land, at any rate, will provide him with the chance to restore the reputation that the sea blemished, providing him with the opportunity to help disgraceful Ginevra by dint of his sword and prowess; in this way, he regains his dignity as knight and his appropriate role within the crooked plot. In so doing, Ariosto insinuates in the reader’s mind the doubt that some sort of power is operative underneath, whose scenario might possibly be the sea, and the helmsman one of its personifications.

The second episode I will focus on begins in Canto IX and ends in Canto XI (as usual, after a long digression). The protagonist is Orlando.<sup>13</sup> After freeing Olimpia and her lover Bireno from the Frisian Cimosco, Orlando sails away along with his helmsman, resuming *his* quest of Angelica. On the other hand, the lovers, fighting hostile winds, have to land on an “inculta e deserta” island (X, 16). Here, Olimpia will be left behind, humiliated and neglected because Bireno has suddenly fall in love with younger Cimosco’s daughter, who is captive on the ship. Totally in despair, Olimpia whines: “nave non veggio, a cui salendo sopra,/speri allo scampo mio ritrovar via [...] Ma presupongo ancor ch’or ora arrivi nochier che per pietà di qui mi porti;/e così lupi, orsi, leoni schivi,/strazi, disagi et altre orribil morti” (X, 28, 3-4; 30, 1-4). Her invocation will soon be granted, thanks to the same Count of Anglante who successfully intervened earlier. However, before his intervention, unfortunate Olimpia will be caught by raiders (XI, 58, 4) in need of sacrificial prey to hand over an insatiable sea monster. The focal point of the episode is in XI, 30, 5-8:

Sopra l’isola sorti, Orlando disse

---

<sup>13</sup> This is one of the *cameos* the author added in his last edition, published in 1532. As everybody knows, the others are Bradamante at the rock of Tristano, the “courtesan duel” between Leone and Ruggiero, and the bloody saga of Marganorre and his sons.

Al suo nochiere: Or qui potrai fermarte,  
e'l battel darmi; che portar mi voglio  
senz'altra compagnia sopra lo scoglio.

Enchained on the rock is Olimpia in whose help, if after some hesitation, the “volontà di Dio” (XI, 30, 1), and the pen of the author, send an improvised but not ineffective “nochiere.” Soon after, Olimpia will marry the king of Ibernia Oberto, who will later slay treacherous Bireno. As is the case of previous episodes, there are similarities and differences that are worth noting. To begin with, there is an explicit connection sea/peril: the raiders come from the sea just as the Moors. Interestingly enough, Olimpia herself came from the sea; yet, her boat, apparently, was sailing without a helmsman. ‘Marinari’ (X, 15, 5), ‘compagni’ (X,17, 7), ‘gente’ (X, 19, 6): these were steering the ship, prey to the winds (hence, little expert in the art of navigation?), and akin to their deceitful captain Bireno: in sum, they resemble the Platonic cantankerous crew of the parable. Orlando remains the only “nochiere,” an ersatz one, *à la* Aeneas, who actively enters the stage, just in time to amend the felony. My hypothesis is that Ariosto, if unknowingly, adopted the Platonic version of the metaphor. As a result, the label put on this peculiar character does not follow a merely linguistic or opportunistic choice, but implies a connection with the semiotic context (as well-known, this is also the century in which ships and people were landing all over American shorelines). The next occurrences will strengthen my point.

Canto X also features the continuation of another remarkable event, Ruggiero’s escape from the magic castle of Alcina. While the lover of Bradamante is fleeing along the beach, three sorcerers from Alcina’s court attempt to convince him to get on board of a “lor legnetto” (X, 37, 6). He wisely refuses; one of them, irritated, “con le sorelle tosto [ella] si pose/sul legno in mar, che al lor servizio v’era:/et affrettando i remi, lo seguiva,/vedendol tuttavia dietro alla riva” (X, 42, 5-8). Ruggiero will shortly encounter somebody whose assistance he will gladly accept:

Intanto a quello stretto, onde si varca  
alla fata più bella, è Ruggier giunto;  
dove un vecchio nochiere una sua barca  
sciogliera da l'altra ripa vede, a punto  
come, avisato e già provisto, quivi  
si stia aspettando che Ruggiero arrivi.

Scioglie il nochier, come venir lo vede,  
di trasportarlo a miglior ripa lieto;  
che, se la faccia può del cor dar fede,  
tutto benigno e tutto era discreto.  
Pose Ruggier sopra il naviglio il piede.  
Dio ringraziando; e per lo mar quieto  
ragionando venìa col galeotto,  
saggio e di lunga esperienza dotto (X, 43, 3-8, 44, 1-8).

Some octaves later, the reader learns that this is “il nocchier di Logistilla” (X, 50, 1). Wise, vigilant, shrewd, aware of the difference between evil (Alcina and Morgana) and good (Logistilla), he is in charge with instructing Ruggiero on what looms ahead for him: “Costei (dicea) stupore e riverenza/induce all’alma [...] Contempla meglio poi l’alta presenza:/ogn’altro ben ti par di poca stima. [...] Ella t’insegnerà studii più grati,/che suoni, danze, odori, bagni, cibi” (X, 46, 14, 47, 1-2). Not only does Logistilla’s helmsman lead (*conduce*) Ruggiero away from the peril, he also educates (*e-duce*) him. Although very brief, the helmsman’s *lectio* highlights the difference between the satisfaction of what Plato would call the concupiscible soul as opposed to the rational soul (“come i pensier tuoi meglio formati/ poggin più ad alto che per l’aria i nibi,” X, 47, 3-4).<sup>14</sup> This character represents a point of mediation, a further step in the advancement of learning, as a correct education should be conceived: challenging but gradual. Not yet the direct source of good, but an intermediate step towards it, Logistilla’s helmsman recalls the angel in Dante’s *Purgatorio* II, who carries on his heavenly boat the psalm-singing souls, and releases them on the shore of the mountain that leads towards paradise. A further confirmation that Logistilla is synonymous with wisdom and prudence can be found in an episode where knight Astolfo (an English paladin of Charlemagne) is involved. To leave Alcina’s island (Astolfo was enchanted by Alcina as Ruggiero will be later on, and many others), he needs an escort: Logistilla provides him with two guides, Andronica and Sofrosina – which symbolize Fortress and Temperance – and a ship. “E così una galea fu apparecchiata,/di che miglior mai non solcò marina” (XV, 11, 1-2). The seafaring resumes, under the aegis of a helmsman (XV, 16, 7), and the process of education resumes with it: “[s]correndo il duca [Astolfo] il mare con sì fedele/ e sì sicura scorta, intender vuole,/e ne domanda Andronica, se de le/parti c’han nome dal cader del sole,/mai legno alcun che vada a remi e a vele,/nel mare orientale apparir suole” (XV, 18, 1-6). Ariosto introduces precisely at this point of the poem his thoughts on the very recent discoveries of the New World that he, and many others, obviously consider as the last ring of a chain that dates back to the mythological Argonauts led by Jason. At last, “sicur d’Alcina e di sua guerra,/Astolfo il suo camin prese per terra” (XV, 37, 7-8).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On the complex educative aspect in *Furioso*, see Ascoli 1987, chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> David Quint maintains that “Logistilla is the allegorical figure of reason, whose realm has been usurped by her illegitimate half sisters, Alcina and Morgana (6.43-45), the two lower forces, concupiscence and wrath, of the tripartite Platonic soul” (Quint 1993, 37). Although seemingly in support of my thesis, this statement blends Plato’s theory of the tripartite *soul* to be found in *Phaedrus* along with the tripartite *body* in *The Republic*. Quint’s opinion fails to emphasize the distinction between immortal and mortal soul—he fails to articulate the distinction when he acknowledges that “yet Alcina cannot die” (38), for instance—and the inaccurate reference (or lack thereof) to the myth of charioteer (*Phaedrus*, XXV), in which the latter stands for the reason, but *only one* of the two horses is recalcitrant and rebel (hence, either Morgana or Alcina should help Logistilla). As for *The Republic*, Plato states that, *within the individual*, only the concupiscence opposes the rational, while wrath sides with the Reason. In the work, Socrates maintains “that the city was just when each of the three elements in it was performing its own functions. [...] In that case, we must also remember that each one of us will be just, and perform his own proper task, when each of the elements within him is performing *its* proper task. [...] Isn’t it appropriate for the rational element to rule, because it is wise and takes thought for the entire

By contrast, he who sails unsafely is Norandino King of Damascus, whose misfortune is told by one of his knights (XVII, 22). While sailing away from Cyprus, where Norandino just married one of the King's daughters,

Ma poi che fummo tratti a piene vele  
lungi dal porto nel Carpazio iniquo,  
la tempesta saltò tanto crudele,  
che sbigottì sin al padrone antiquo.  
Tre dì e tre notti andammo errando ne le  
minacciose onde per camino obliquo.  
Uscimo al fin nel lito stanchi e molli,  
tra freschi rivi, ombrosi e verdi colli (XVII,  
27, 1-7).

The ship lands on another *locus amoenus*, and, as Ariosto repeatedly taught us, this is only a prelude to catastrophe. The tale of the knight confirms it: “Mentre aspettamo, in gran piacer sedendo,/che da cacciar ritorni il signor nostro,/vedemo l’Orco a noi venir correndo/lungo il lito del mar, terribil mostro” (XVII, 29, 1-4). The monster will slay many soldiers and will kidnap Norandino’s fresh bride: the episode may, accordingly, be enlisted side by side the ones where the lack of a helmsman (a “padrone antiquo” is steering the ship) coincides with mishap and danger for those on board.

In the *Furioso*, it is customary that a certain kind of episode is rapidly followed by a contrary one. As already mentioned, the poet, by means of the *entrelacement* – and the variations that he introduces to this narrative technique, analyzed by Quint (1997) – connects and disconnects both contiguous and heterogeneous stories. Minimal, conflicting episodes are juxtaposed as though they mirror the poet’s confused and warfare age, in which principalities and princes are bound to collapse the day after their coming to light or power. Ariosto creates a rhetorical *mise en abyme* in the ostensible attempt to anchor the crumbling world to a secure, reliable literary tradition—sometimes outside, sometimes within the text. In this symbolic horizon, even negligible episodes like Norandino’s, and many others, display their relevance in the general economy of the poem. This seems to be true for the subsequent occurrence as well: the episode of the island of the Amazons. Once again, one finds recurrent motifs: the description of *seemingly* favorable conditions for sailing (“Mostrava d’ogni intorno il tempo chiaro,/ch’avrian per molti dì buona fortuna./Sciolser dal lito, avendo aria serena,/e di buon vento ogni lor vela piena” XVIII, 135, 5-8); an idyllic landscape, and numerous and fearless knights (Marfisa, Sansonetto, Astolfo, Grifone and Aquilante) as ultimate protection warranty. Only the helmsman is ambiguously defined (at first, the heroes “s’accordaro con un vecchio patron,” XVIII, 135, 3-4; later, on and off, he will also act – and be defined – as helmsman). In this fairly long and complex sequence, ship and people face two main events: a tempestuous sea, and the terrorizing approach to the haven on the island wherein the Amazons dwell. Overlooking what happens

---

soul, and appropriated for the spirited element to be subordinate, the ally of the rational element?” (book IV, 441d-e). In conclusion, it is unclear to me what “Platonic soul” Quint has in mind.

on land (because it does not relate to my point), the episode contemplates two well-defined and critical moments while the ship is at sea: the tempest, and the decision to take the harbor. As regard to the former, this is how Ariosto depicts the strife between the elements and the ship:

e sol del mar tiràn Libecchio resta.

Questo resta del mar tanto possente,  
e da la negra bocca in modo esala,  
ed è con lui sì il rapido corrente  
de l'agitato mar ch'in fretta cala,  
che porta il legno più velocemente,  
che pelegrin falcon mai facesse ala,  
con timor del *nocchier* ch'al fin del mondo  
non lo trasporti, o rompa, o cacci al fondo. [...]

Rimedio a questo il buon *nocchier* ritruova,  
che commanda gittar per poppa spere;  
e caluma la gomona, e fa pruova  
di duo terzi del corso ritenere.  
Questo consiglio, e più l'augurio giova  
di chi avea acceso in proda le lumiere:  
questo il legno salvò, che peria forse,

e fe' ch'in alto mar sicuro corse (XIX, 51-53, emphasis added).

Doubtless, the helmsman knows his *art*. However, as soon as sea and winds are tamed and he notices the familiar look of the harbor, the helmsman manifests his fear: obviously, as did Rinaldo before, the knights will dismiss his wisdom, only to run into perils that magic (the enchanted horn of Astolfo), not heroism, will avert from them. The conflict between the two authorities (hence, a political conflict) never fails to replicate the pattern we have already encountered: on the one hand, we have knowledge and prudence, on the other strength and self-assurance. Whenever they do not harmonize (and this happens only in the domain of the helmsman, where the boldness of knights tends to belittle his sway),<sup>16</sup> mishaps and painful events occur time and again. Symbolically, Ariosto's conflicting hierarchy painstakingly reflects his troubled times, which did not differ much from the age (and city) of Plato.

I would like to conclude this section with one final and humorous episode, in which Ariosto introduces a new nautical metaphor, that of "nauta"

---

<sup>16</sup> To my knowledge, on land we have only one occurrence in which the helmsman's wisdom is attentively listened by the knights, and this happens in XLIII, 186-199 (177-189, in the English version), when Orlando and Rinaldo are looking for a physician to heal Oliviero's wounds after the duel in Lipadusa, in which Saracens Agramante and Gradasso, and Christian Brandimarte, have lost their lives.

(“navigator”).<sup>17</sup> Isabella has just witnessed the lethal duel between her lover Zerbino and Mandricardo concerning Orlando’s forsaken armor and sword. Zerbino is fatally wounded, and Isabella wanders with his body in search of a place to rest for good, where to commemorate her beloved, when she comes across an old hermit who promises to take her to a famous monastery (although he soon changes his plan, won over by her beauty). Unfortunately, cruel Rodomonte appears on the horizon, and he is suddenly prey to the same desires under which the hermit fell. As Rodomonte attempts to seduce her, the friar makes his moves too. Says Ariosto:

Il monaco, ch’a questo avea l’orecchia,  
e per soccorrere la giovane incauta,  
che ritratta non sia per la via vecchia,  
sedeo al governo qual *pratico nauta*,  
quivi di spiritual cibo apparecchia  
tosto una mensa sontuosa e lauta.  
Ma il Saracin, che con mal gusto nacque,  
non pur la saporò, che gli dispiacque:

e poi ch’invano il monaco interroppe [...]  
le mani adosso con furor gli messe  
(XXVIII,101-102, emphasis added).

The lack of skill and imprudence of this ‘navigator’ (who, without ship, sails in no sea) are such that he experiences an unheard of wreck. When Rodomonte grasps him and flings him up in the air, the author – without resorting to Turpino, the character who sanctioned most of the phony “historical” accounts throughout the poem – dishes up more than one possible version of his disastrous end. The suspicion is that Ariosto is mocking both the “pratico nauta” and his readers, who are exposed on the stormy sea of literature.

### **7. Of Harmonious Sailing**

The phenomenology of the helmsmen we encountered in Ariosto is not very far-reaching. Some of them are famous although occasional, like Orlando, who rescues Olimpia. Most of them are anonymous, as opposed to the famous knights that they carry over the sea. They all are either means to avert a danger or the involuntary agent who drives towards it. Some of them carry out an educational mission vis-à-vis the typically unprepared knight, like the helmsman of Logistilla with Ruggiero; we will see that. In the late cantos, Ariosto bestows on the counseling relationships new vitality. I have already suggested that the poet adopted the strategy of buttressing his collapsing fictional world by means of both internal and external, extra-textual literary supports, alternatively. The occurrence I am on the verge of presenting belongs to the external series.

In an indignant and sarcastic invective entitled *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, Francesco Petrarca vents his resentment towards some *Aristotle* followers who derided him. After portraying his inner landscape, the poet illustrates the outer one:

---

<sup>17</sup> In the edition that I adopted the metaphorical play is once more lost.

Ego autem, amice, ne quid nescias, et ut noris unde et quo animo tibi hec scribo, inter Padi vertex parva navi sedeo. [...] et obstantem Padum remis, velis ac funibus supero, Ticinum repetens, studiosam et antiquam urbem [namely Pavia], ubi non modo vestimentum fame vetus inter nautas perditum inveniam [...]. Sed iam satis est [...] iamque velut e turbidis fluctibus portum specto (292-300).

Ariosto apparently held in high regard this icon, since he presents it twice in *Furioso*, as we shall soon see.<sup>18</sup> Both times, the characters are sailing towards the sea, rather than against the stream as in Petrarca. The first occurrence is in XLIII, 52. When, at last, Rinaldo quenches his passion for Angelica, he sets out to reach Orlando, Oliviero, and Brandimarte in the hope of partaking in the duel in Lipadusa (Lampedusa). He passes through Switzerland, then crosses the Alps and goes by Verona and Mantova. While along the Po river, he runs into a knight who, acknowledging his noble status, lodges him at his castle and offers his boat and one of his helmsman to accelerate Rinaldo's journey. The day after, as they are sailing away, Rinaldo lingers on the tale that the Italian lord of the manor told him the previous night, so as to trigger the attention of the helmsman, who invites the knight to speak out and share his thoughts (XLIII, 67). Rinaldo agrees, and thus a "courteous discussion" begins, at the end of which the helmsman, almost to conclude "la somma [...] del lor ragionamento" (XLIII, 68, 1) and equalize their gentlemen's agreement, tells a story in turn, which will last no fewer than 74 octaves (XLIII, 69-143). The content of the parable is once again secondary and irrelevant to my argument. However, two details, similar in their nature, are worth noting because pertinent to my thesis. The first argument is implicitly suggested by the last, short quotation, that is the intellectual concord between a noble paladin of France and an anonymous and presumably low-ranking helmsman from Po valley. Per se, this seems a remarkable event. The second point strengthens the first and makes explicit, in my view, its philosophical meaning, and the philosophical frame that encompasses the episode. It elicits from this only line: "Il nocchier soggiungea: - Ben gli *dicesti*" (XLIII, 69, 1, emphasis added). Not only do they concur on the moral teaching of some daily life situations, not only do they share a common ethics, but they also seem to belong to the same collective body, for they are looking at social reality from the one and same philosophical viewpoint. *They, in fact, address each other informally*, the way only those who are truly close do. In so doing, they acknowledge their mutual proximity and buttress their political agreement. They play a different role, and their contribution to the functioning of the State is in conformity to their art; yet, they both suitably fit in Plato's Republic, in Aristotle's *polis*, communities made of soldiers, craftsmen, and politicians, all committed to their specific task that nevertheless cluster them together in the search for the common good. Rinaldo

---

<sup>18</sup> Many episodes in the poem are similar, but this one and the rescue of a sacrificial beauty enchained on a rock (Angelica and Olimpia), in particular, stand out very significantly. Reiteration (Quint might say "repetition") is remarkably part of education, if not ideology, in Ariosto's literary genius.

and the helmsman are two members of the same body, partake the same enterprise, serve the same Prince: the State. Imprudence and lack of wisdom may bring about the downfall both of the land and the sea *cavalier*, and, finally, of their collectivity, of their State. Only harmony between each and every part of the motley crew of society can bring about happy sailing and docking of the ship of State.

A further and transparent evidence for the philosophical unity reached by the end of the poem is to be found in the replica of what I labeled “harmonious sailing” by a solitary helmsman (a fairly noticeable one). This time around the boat is sailing in the Adriatic Sea, by the shoreline of Ferrara: the helmsman in question, fittingly enough, is the narrator himself.

Or, se mi mostra la mia carta il vero,  
non è lontano a discoprirsì il porto;  
sí che nel lito i voti scioglier spero  
a chi nel mar per tanta via m’ha scorto;  
ove, o di non tornar col legno intero,  
o d’errar sempre, ebbi già il viso smorto.  
Ma mi par di vedere, ma veggo certo,  
veggo la terra, veggo il lito aperto (XLVI, 1, 1-8).

The simile writing/navigation – with its correlate conclusion/docking – was vastly diffused in the literary tradition wherein Ariosto dipped his pen. More importantly, the quoted octave perhaps represents also an open window on the author’s soul (not the narrator’s) through which the reader can see, or perhaps just guess, the level of harmony reached, by the end of the poem, and that led to the landing at the chosen harbor rather than at an unfamiliar “elsewhere,” a dangerous and/or unknown venue. The harmonic ending was hoped for, although uncertain. The poet himself doubted he would be able to accomplish his navigation, and from the very beginning:

Dirò d’Orlando in un medesimo tratto  
cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima:  
che per amor venne in furore e matto,  
d’uom che sí saggio era stimato prima;  
*se da colei che tal quasi m’ha fatto,*  
*che’l poco ingegno ad or ad or mi lima,*  
*me ne sarà però tanto concesso,*  
*che mi basti a finir quanto ho promesso*  
(I, 2, 1-8, emphasis added).

Fortunately for Ariosto, any novel finds its end, even the least linear, even the least rational and intricate, as Quint reminds us: “For Borges and Northrop Frye, the wandering ship of Odysseus is the virtual emblem of *romance*: a narrative that moves through a succession of virtually discrete and unconnected episodes” (1993, 34). A not dissimilar destiny is planned for the poem by Ludovico Ariosto: his poem/boat lands too, amid an enthusiastic and celebrating illustrious crowd. As Foucault maintained in the quotation that opened this chapter, every voyage by

sea always implies the idea of *nostos*, of the return to the original starting point. After a long pilgrimage in company of paladins and other characters, Ariosto finally is homeward bound, apparently out of the disorderly and mistaken-prone world of his novel, full of insecurity and peril. He comes back home twice, both literarily and personally: firstly, as a result of the conclusion of his work, and, secondly, as he is taking care of himself (another trait symbolized by the ancient metaphor of navigation) and in order to “abitar la sua contrada,” leaving the hazard of political life to those who covet it. This double return resembles the abandonment of social and political life that, in his last years, Horace has been seeking, as we saw in the first chapter. To rephrase Dante’s inscription on the Gate of Inferno, one could say “Non v’inganni la placidità del navigare:” Ariosto the helmsman/writer abandoned his hope on politics and the metaphor of the ship of State as well as his Latin predecessor did, after describing – hence, *symbolically and poetically witnessing* – countless shipwrecks.

### **8. The return of Empire**

As though to close a cycle, which includes all the travels we have been scrutinizing thus far, *Gerusalemme Liberata* by Torquato Tasso (precisely, cantos XIV-XVI) contemplates a new episode that enriches our phenomenology of navigation, one in which the ship neither wrecks nor is ever at risk, even though it sails in the wake of Dante’s Ulysses, that is, beyond the pillars of Hercules. Two Christian knights, Carlo and Ubaldo, leave the battlefield to bring back Rinaldo, the strongest soldier of their party, who deserted as a result of a quarrel with captain Goffredo (the classic example Tasso is re-enacting is obviously the deeds of Achilles in *The Iliad*). A long trip awaits them: Peter the Hermit gives them some precise indications, and, later on, a wizard converted to Catholicism, reiterates and completes the information. Accordingly, Carlo and Ubaldo reach their port of shipment, where a “fatal donzella” will pilot them to Armida’s island, so that they can accomplish their mission. The event unfolds exactly as designed and foreseen by the holy representative of God on earth, Peter, and the wonderful, exotic journey does not end in havoc; Rinaldo returns to his *body*, the Christian party regains strength and, with help of other errant (in both senses of the term) knights, Goffredo and the Christians conquer Jerusalem shortly thereafter.

Some critics (Quint and Zatti, among others) have rightly pointed out that this travel beyond Hercules’s pillars (labeled by Dante as “trapassar del segno”) has nothing to do with the topos of romantic digression, customarily full of adventure and whatnot. Rather, it is motivated by the desire to re-establish an erstwhile balance insofar as it allegorically represents the superior intervention to restore Christian order and primacy, disrupted and undermined by Lutheran Reformation. According to Fredi Chiappelli, the journey of Carlo and Ubaldo has the ritual function of causing the rebirth of the paladin of God, Rinaldo, momentarily fallen in error (45-46). The ritual nature of the event is emphasized by its rigid and thoroughly premeditated setting, which implied, as a consequence, the complete absence of human agency. The “heroes” Carlo and Ubaldo are chosen exactly because they do not fall prey to human passion and drive, like Rinaldo himself or Neapolitan Tancredi (and others: the Christian camp manifests internecine conflicts which eventually will harmonize, while the opposite side is

characterized by ineradicable diversity or, to quote Zatti, multiversity). Carlo has one and only merit, being the single survivor of his army (led by the young Danish prince Svenno, who was motivated by Rinaldo's fame and example), massacred by Turk Solimano while it was heading towards Jerusalem (*Liberata*, VIII, 23). Ubaldo, on the other hand, belongs to the scanty group of "successful Ulysses" (in which we enlisted Aeneas too): "Veduti Ubaldo in giovinezza e cerchi/vari costumi avea, vari paesi,/peregrinando da i piú freddi cerchi/del nostro mondo a gli Etiopi accesi,/come uom che virtute e senno merchi,/le favelle, l'usanze e i riti appresi," XIV, 28. Hence, he is a "Ulysses" who came back. As a reward, the two soldiers are endowed with a Providential mission in which reality and allegory intertwine: firstly, they have to rearm Rinaldo with young Svenno's sword (which Carlo recovered on the battlefield, which explains the allegorical function of his survival);<sup>19</sup> and secondly, in so doing, they give back to Goffredo's *senno* the *ferro* he needs to win the battle, as Tancredi's stand-in "good Raimondo" says before his duel with Argante.<sup>20</sup> The mission goes according to plan and restores the momentarily unsettled theological order.

The allegory *senno/ferro* is remarkable under many respects. First and foremost, one needs to underline the salient symbolic opposition between mature and sage Raimondo (Homer's and Arendt's formula may rightfully resonate here: Raimondo too is "a speaker of words and a doer of deeds," and, like Homer's heroes, he has divine help) and young and erratic Tancredi, who dueled the day before with Argante but currently has abandoned the camp and is "erring" in his love quest of Clorinda (cantos VI and VII). After his brief and synecdochic speech, Raimondo will resume the fight with infidel Argante, and the Catholic God will help him not to succumb (he cannot be completely successful: that is Rinaldo's fate). Secondly, the allegory proleptically anticipates the mission *to restore the health of the body* that Carlo and Ubaldo – who, obviously, are only instruments of wisdom and righteousness, likewise Raimondo – are to accomplish afterward, once again to heal the wound that concupiscible soul (youngster Rinaldo, in this case) has inflicted, unwisely although unwillingly too. Reiteration as educational moment seems to be Tasso's concern as it was for Ariosto, and, in order to avoid "erring choices," the sailors of these unknown waters are in need of "una guida, e Tasso la identifica in una personificazione allegorica della Fortuna asservita al superiore disegno divino che vuole Rinaldo reintegrato nello spirito

---

<sup>19</sup> Rinaldo is the favorite winding shuttle Tasso uses to create his patchwork: in this *intra-textual* occurrence, holding in his hand Svenno's sword, he will kill his killer, Solimano (20.107).

<sup>20</sup> "Ma il buon Raimondo, che in età matura/parimente maturo avea il consiglio,/e verdi ancor le forze a par di quanti/erano quivi, allor si trasse avanti,/e disse a lui rivolto: "Ah non sia vero/ch'in un capo s'arrischi il/campo tutto!/Duce sei tu, non semplice guerriero:/publico fóra e non privato il lutto./In te la fé s'appoggia/e 'l santo impero,/per te fia il regno di Babel distrutto./Tu il senno sol, lo scettro solo adopra;/ponga altri poi l'ardire e 'l ferro in opra" (VII, 61-62, 485-496). In addition, the metaphor head/hand – an appropriate variation of *senno/ferro* – referred to Goffredo and Rinaldo is mentioned by a holy figure, Ugone, sent by God to sleeping Goffredo: "Perché se l'alta Providenza elesse/te [Goffredo] de l'impresa sommo capitano,/destinò insieme ch'egli [Rinaldo] esser dovesse/de' tuoi consigli essecutor soprano./A te le prime parti, a lui concesse/son le seconde: tu sei capo, ei mano/di questo campo; e sostener sua vece/altrui non pote, e farlo a te non lece" (XIV, 13, 1-8).

epico-cristiano, quale predestinato espugnatore di Gerusalemme” (Zatti 1996, 168).

Endlessly, Tasso implements symbolic cutbacks (of character’s self-government, of unpredictability of seafaring and its very poetical necessity and function) and deliberately distorts the traditional narrative device to create his epic work (better said, to quote Zatti, a Christian-epic one). As a result, while Ariosto’s *Furioso* stages a chaotic universe, politically and poetically in crisis, Tasso’s *Liberata*, in assonance with the Counter-Reformation manner, delineates

una prassi artistica [che] si confonde, nei fatti, con una prassi *tout court* politica: la aristotelica “unità della favola”, che costituisce l’idea dominante del Tasso teorico, è il riflesso di un’unità imperialistica imposta tanto sopra gli Infedeli sconfitti quanto sopra le forze eterodosse interne allo stesso campo vincitore (Zatti 1996, 176).

In fact, while each and every navigation in *Furioso* fully conveys the novelistic idea of the *topos*, Tasso precludes such a hypothesis from the very beginning. We saw how Ariosto employs the simile sailing/writing in the first octaves of the last canto in *Furioso* in order to put into the sea picture the narrator himself and his endeavor. Although hesitant as regard to the task he has embraced, Ariosto thoroughly relies on himself to get by—if by means of a subtle and only deceptive displacement: the lines “se da colei che tal [that is, as ‘matto’ as Orlando] quasi m’ha fatto,/che’l poco ingegno ad or ad or mi lima,/me ne sarà però tanto concesso,/che mi basti a finir quanto ho promesso” quoted above, have to be interpreted as *his* desire to rein in *his* own passion for Alessandra Benucci, the woman he loves. On the other hand, very telling is the opposite attitude that Tasso displays while confronting the hazard of the composition. Alfonso d’Este (and the Catholic orthodoxy) is he who leads his steps: “Tu, magnanimo Alfonso, il qual ritogli/Al furor di fortuna e guidi in porto,/me peregrino errante, e fra gli scogli/e fra l’onde agitato e quasi absorto,/queste mie carte in lieta fronte accogli,/che quasi in voto a te sacrate i’ porto,/Forse un dì fia che la presaga penna/Osi scriver di te quel ch’or n’accenna” (*Liberata*, I, 4, 1-8, emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> No hazard, no chance: in his Christian-epic poem, Tasso lands his boat on the destined berth *at the beginning* of the journey, whereas it took Ariosto 45 epic-chivalric cantos before envisaging the harbor. Zatti sums up the political frame in which Tasso situates his characters as follows (and the statement holds true for Virgil’s poem as well, *mutatis mutandis*): “lo spirito pionieristico degli esploratori viene vincolato [...] a un rassicurante principio istituzionale, di natura tanto politica che religiosa: in nessun modo, momento o luogo l’ordine è minacciato dall’Avventura, anzi la magnificenza del disegno divino è resa, per suo tramite, manifesta agli uomini” (Zatti 1996, 181). Tasso feared at such an extent human “spirito pionieristico” that he left it completely out of the picture of his time that he took, so that, in truth, “spirito pionieristico” is nowhere to be found in

---

<sup>21</sup> The “fortuna” mentioned in these lines has obviously nothing to do with the homonymous helmsman of Carlo’s and Ubaldo’s boat. This fickle “fortuna” is still medieval, pre-Machiavellian: Alfonso’s *virtù* is invoked to tame its volatility.

*Gerusalemme Liberata*. The order of the poem is absolute insofar as it includes its author's agency too.

In Tasso's world, the only political metaphor, borrowed from Greek culture, which keeps its historical-philosophical worthiness (albeit dimly and impoverished by the overarching divine presence) is the captain/physician: only Goffredo can lead and take care of his body—which is both allegorical (his army) and literal (his own flesh and bones). Unlike Aeneas, he cannot be substituted. No-(other)-body but Goffredo's can restore the order; indeed, Goffredo *is* the orderly body. Nevertheless, both captains Aeneas and Goffredo will be at the core of birth and re-birth, respectively, of two Roman empires: the first one secular and rooted in pagan myth; the second one religious and informed by divine Providence. The latter was one of the only two political-poetical practicable options, in the days of Counter-Reformation, for Italian intellectuals who craved to travel beyond Hercules's pillars, and back. The alternative journey also led in high seas, far away from the Holy See; and, after looking over known and unknown lands, turned back to Rome: more precisely, to Campo de' Fiori.

