¿uriosity

by alberto manguel

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ALBERTO MANGUEL

Curiosity

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Curiosity

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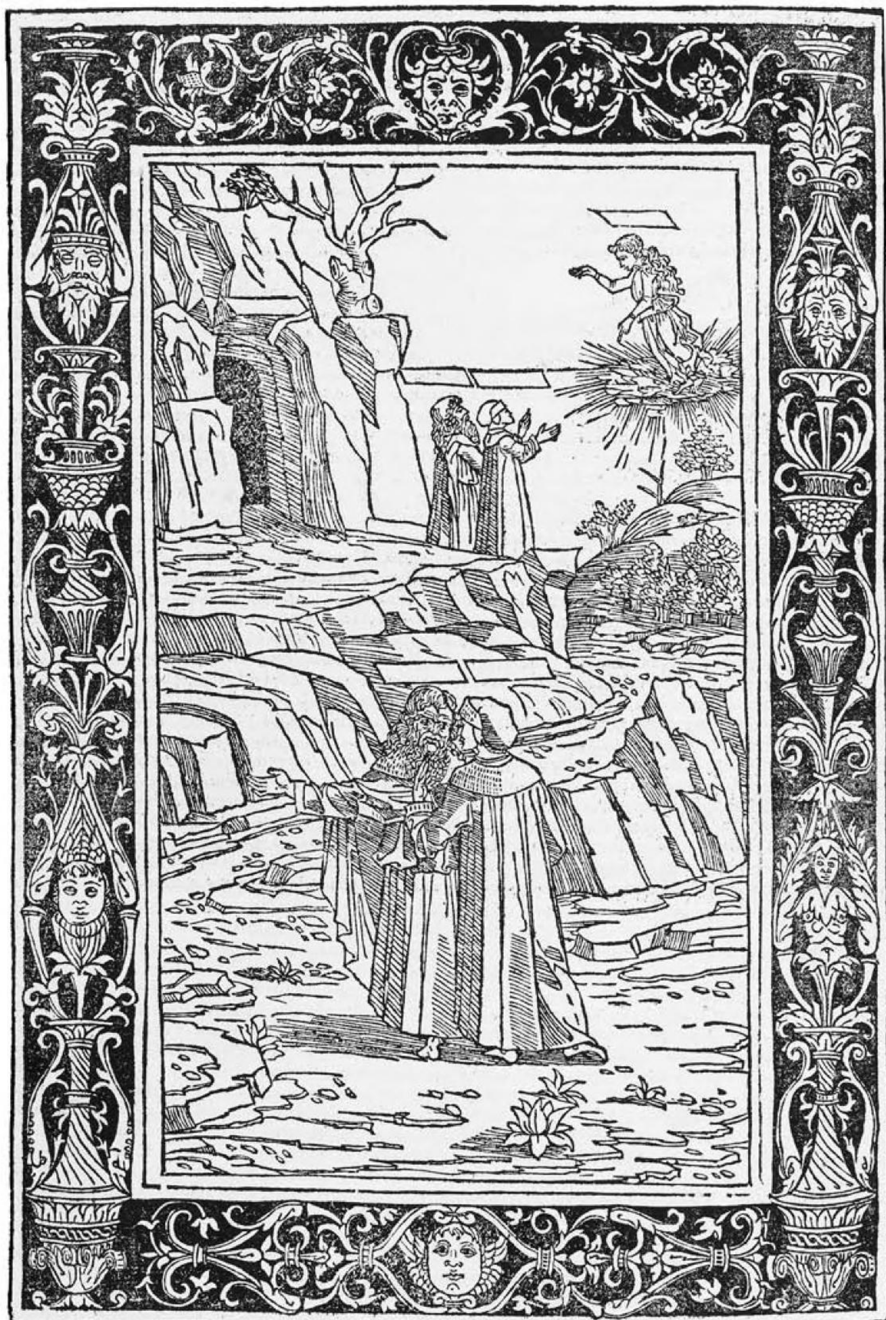

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INTRODUCTION

On her death bed, Gertrude Stein lifted her head and asked: "What is *the answer?" When no one spoke, she smiled and said: "In that case, what is the question?"*

—DONALD SUTHERLAND, *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work*

I am curious about curiosity.

One of the first words that we learn as a child is *why.* Partly because we want to know something about the mysterious world into which we have unwillingly entered, partly because we want to understand how the things in that world function, and partly because we feel an ancestral need to engage with the other inhabitants of that world, after our first babblings and cooings, we begin to ask "Why?"[1] We never stop. Very soon we find out that curiosity is seldom rewarded with meaningful or satisfying answers, but rather with an increased desire to ask more questions and the pleasure of conversing with

(Opposite) Virgil explains to Dante that Beatrice sent him to show Dante the right path. Woodcut illustrating Canto II of the Inferno, *printed in 1487 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)*

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others. As any inquisitor knows, affirmations tend to isolate; questions bind. Curiosity is a means of declaring our allegiance to the human fold.

Perhaps all curiosity can be summed up in Michel de Montaigne's famous question "Que sais-je?": "What do I know?" which appears in the second book of his *Essays.* Speaking of the skeptic philosophers, Montaigne remarked that they were unable to express their general ideas in any manner of speech, because, according to him, "they would have needed a new language." "Our language," says Montaigne, "is formed of affirmative propositions, which are contrary to their thinking." And then he adds: "This fantasy is better conceived through the question 'What do I know?,' which I carry as a motto on a shield." The source of the question is, of course, the Socratic "Know thyself," but in Montaigne it becomes not an existentialist assertion of the need to know who we are but rather a continuous state of questioning of the territory through which our mind is advancing (or has already advanced) and of the uncharted country ahead. In the realm of Montaigne's thought, the affirmative propositions of language turn on themselves and become questions.[2]

My friendship with Montaigne dates back to my adolescence, and his *Essays* have since been for me a kind of autobiography, as I keep finding in his comments my own preoccupations and experiences translated into luminous prose. Through his questioning of commonplace subjects (the duties of friendship, the limits of education, the pleasure of the countryside) and his exploration of extraordinary ones (the nature of cannibals, the identity of monstrous beings, the use of thumbs), Montaigne maps out for me my own curiosity, constellated at different times and in many places. "Books have been useful to me," he confesses, "less for instruction than as training."[3] That has been precisely my case.

Reflecting on Montaigne's reading habits, for example, it occurred to me that it might be possible to make some notes on his "Que sais-je?" by following Montaigne's own method of borrowing ideas from his library (he compared himself as a reader to a bee gathering pollen to make his own honey) and projecting these forward into my own time.[4]

As Montaigne would have willingly admitted, his examination of what we know was not a new venture in the sixteenth century: questioning the act of questioning had much older roots. "Whence then cometh wisdom?" asks Job in his distress, "and where is the place of understanding?" Enlarging on

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Job's question, Montaigne observed that "judgment is a tool to use on all subjects, and comes in everywhere. Therefore in the tests that I make of it here, I use every sort of occasion. If it is a subject I do not understand at all, even on that I essay my judgment, sounding the ford from a good distance; and then, finding it too deep for my height, I stick to the bank."[5] I find this modest method wonderfully reassuring.

According to Darwinian theory, human imagination is an instrument of survival. In order better to learn about the world, and therefore be better equipped to cope with its pitfalls and dangers, *Homo sapiens* developed the ability to reconstruct outer reality in the mind and to conceive situations that it could confront before actually encountering them.[6] Conscious of ourselves and conscious of the world around us, we are able to build mental cartographies of those territories and explore them in an infinite number of ways, and then choose the best and most efficient. Montaigne would have agreed: we imagine in order to exist, and we are curious in order to feed our imaginative desire.

Imagination, as an essential creative activity, develops with practice, not through successes, which are conclusions and therefore blind alleys, but through failures, through attempts that prove to be mistaken and require new attempts that will also, if the stars are kind, lead to new failures. The histories of art and literature, like those of philosophy and science, are the histories of such enlightened failures. "Fail. Try again. Fail better," was Beckett's summation.[7]

But in order to fail better we must be able to recognize, imaginatively, those mistakes and incongruities. We must be able to see that such-and-such a path does not lead us in the aspired direction, or that such-and-such a combination of words, colors, or numbers does not approximate the intuited vision in our mind. Proudly we record the moments in which our many inspired Archimedes shout "Eureka!" in their baths; we are less eager to recall the many more in which those, like the painter Frenhofer in Balzac's story, look upon their unknown masterpiece and say, "Nothing, nothing! . . . I'll have produced nothing!"[8] Through those few moments of triumph and those many more of defeat runs the one great imaginative question: Why?

Our education systems today by and large refuse to acknowledge the second half of our quests. Interested in little else than material efficiency and financial profit, our educational institutions no longer foster thinking for its

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own sake and the free exercise of the imagination. Schools and colleges have become training camps for skilled labor instead of forums for questioning and discussion, and colleges and universities are no longer nurseries for those inquirers whom Francis Bacon, in the sixteenth century, called "merchants of light."[9] We teach ourselves to ask "How much will it cost?" and "How long will it take?" instead of "Why?"

"Why?" (in its many variations) is a question far more important in its asking than in the expectation of an answer. The very fact of uttering it opens numberless possibilities, can do away with preconceptions, summons up endless fruitful doubts. It may bring, in its wake, a few tentative answers, but if the question is powerful enough, none of these answers will prove all-sufficient. "Why?," as children intuit, is a question that implicitly places our goal always just beyond the horizon.[10]

The visible representation of our curiosity—the question mark that stands at the end of a written interrogation in most Western languages, curled over itself against dogmatic pride—arrived late in our histories. In Europe, conventionalized punctuation was not established until the late Renaissance when, in 1566, the grandson of the great Venetian printer Aldo Manutius published his punctuation handbook for typesetters, the *Interpungendi ratio.* Among the signs devised to conclude a paragraph, the handbook included the medieval *punctus interrogativus,* and Manutius the Younger defined it as a mark that signaled a question which conventionally required an answer. One of the earliest instances of such question marks is in a ninth-century copy of a text by Cicero, now in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris; it looks like a staircase ascending toward the top right in a squiggly diagonal from a dot at the bottom left. Questioning elevates us.[11]

Throughout our various histories, the question "Why?" has appeared under many guises and in vastly different contexts. The number of possible questions may seem too great to consider individually in depth and too varied to assemble coherently, and yet some attempts have been made to gather a few according to various criteria. For instance, a list of ten questions that "science must answer" (the "must" protests too much) was drawn up by scientists and philosophers invited by the editors of the *Guardian* of London in 2010. The questions were: "What is consciousness?" "What happened before

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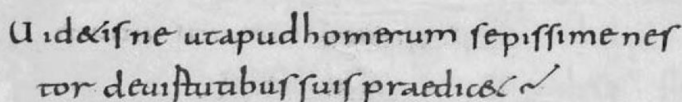

Example of *punctus interrogativus* in a ninth-century manuscript of Cicero's *Cato maior de senectute.* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS lat. 6332, fol. 81)

the Big Bang?" "Will science and engineering give us back our individuality?" "How are we going to cope with the world's burgeoning population?" "Is there a pattern to the prime numbers?" "Can we make a scientific way of thinking all-pervasive?" "How do we ensure humanity survives and flourishes?" "Can someone explain adequately the meaning of infinite space?" "Will I be able to record my brain like I can record a programme on television?" "Can humanity get to the stars?" There is no evident progression in these questions, no logical hierarchy, no clear evidence that they *can* be answered. They proceed by branching out from our desire to know, creatively sifting through our acquired wisdom. And yet, a certain shape might be glimpsed in their meandering. In following a necessarily eclectic path through a few of the questions sparked by our curiosity, something like a parallel cartography of our imagination may perhaps become apparent. What we want to know and what we can imagine are the two sides of the same magical page.

One of the common experiences in most reading lives is the discovery, sooner or later, of one book that like no other allows for an exploration of oneself and of the world, that appears to be inexhaustible yet at the same time concentrates the mind on the tiniest particulars in an intimate and singular way. For certain readers, that book is an acknowledged classic, a work by Shakespeare or Proust, for example; for others it is a lesser-known or less agreed-upon text that deeply echoes for inexplicable or secret reasons. In my case, throughout my life, that unique book has changed: for many years it was Montaigne's *Essays* or *Alice in Wonderland,* Borges's *Ficciones* or *Don Quixote,* the *Arabian Nights* or *The Magic Mountain.* Now, as I approach the prescribed three score and ten, the book that is to me all-encompassing is Dante's *Commedia.*

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I came to the *Commedia* late, just before turning sixty, and from the very first reading, it became for me that utterly personal yet horizonless book. To describe the *Commedia* as horizonless may be simply a way of declaring a kind of superstitious awe of the work itself: of its profundity, its breadth, its intricate construction. Even these words fall short of my constantly renewed experience of reading the text. Dante spoke of his poem as one "in which lend a hand heaven and earth."[12] This is not a hyperbole: it is the impression its readers have had from Dante's age on. But *construction* implies an artificial mechanism, an act dependent on pulleys and cogs which, even when evident (as in Dante's invention of the terza rima, for instance, and accordingly his use of the number 3 throughout the *Commedia*), merely points to a speck in the complexity but hardly illuminates its apparent perfection. Giovanni Boccaccio compared the *Commedia* to a peacock whose body is covered with "angelic" iridescent feathers of countless hues. Jorge Luis Borges compared it to an infinitely detailed engraving, Giuseppe Mazzotta to a universal encyclopedia. Osip Mandelstam had this to say: "If the halls of the Hermitage should suddenly go mad, if the paintings of all schools and masters should suddenly break loose from the nails, should fuse, intermingle, and fill the air of the rooms with futuristic howling and colors in violent agitation, the result then would be something like Dante's *Commedia.*" And yet none of these similes captures entirely the fullness, depth, reach, music, kaleidoscopic imagery, infinite invention, and perfectly balanced structure of the poem. The Russian poet Olga Sedakova has noted that Dante's poem is "art that generates art" and "thought that generates thought" but, more important, it is "experience that generates experience."[13]

In a parody of twentieth-century artistic currents, from the *nouveau roman* to conceptual art, Borges and his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares imagined a form of criticism that, surrendering to the impossibility of analyzing a work of art in all its greatness, merely reproduced the work in its entirety.[14] Following this logic, in order to explain the *Commedia,* a meticulous commentator would have to end up quoting the whole poem. Perhaps that is the only way. It is true that when we come across an astonishingly beautiful passage or an intricate poetic argument that had not struck us as forcibly in a previous reading, our impulse is not so much to comment on it as to read

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it aloud to a friend, in order to share, as far as possible, the original epiphany. To translate the words into other experiences: maybe this is one of the possible meanings of Beatrice's words to Dante in the Heaven of Mars: "Turn around and listen, / because not only in my eyes is Paradise."[15]

Less ambitious, less knowledgeable, more conscious of my own horizons, I want to offer a few readings of my own, a few comments based on personal reflections, observations, translations into my own experience. The *Commedia* has a certain majestic generosity that does not bar entry to anyone attempting to cross its threshold. What each reader finds there is another matter.

There is an essential problem with which every writer (and every reader) is faced when engaging with a text. We know that to read is to affirm our belief in language and its vaunted ability to communicate. Every time we open a book, we trust, in spite of all our previous experience, that this once the essence of the text will be conveyed to us. And every time we reach the last page, in spite of such brave hopes, we are again disappointed. Especially when we read what for want of more precise terms we agree to call "great literature," our ability to grasp the text in all its multilayered complexity falls short of our desires and expectations, and we are compelled to return to the text once again in the hope that this time, perhaps, we will achieve our purpose. Fortunately for literature, fortunately for us, we never do. Generations of readers cannot exhaust these books, and the very failure of language to communicate fully lends them a limitless richness that we fathom only to the extent of our individual capabilities. No reader has ever reached the depths of the *Mahabharata* or the *Oresteia.*

The realization that a task is impossible does not prevent us from attempting it, and every time a book is opened, every time a page is turned, we renew the hope of understanding a literary text, if not in its entirety, at least a little more than on the previous reading. That is how, throughout the ages, we create a palimpsest of readings that continuously reestablishes the book's authority, always under a different guise. The *Iliad* of Homer's contemporaries is not our *Iliad,* but it includes it, as our *Iliad* includes all *Iliad*s to come. In this sense, the Hassidic assertion that the Talmud has no first page because every reader has already begun reading it before starting at the first words is true of every great book.[16]

The term *lectura dantis* was created to define what has become a specific genre, the reading of the *Commedia,* and I am fully aware that, after genera-

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tions of commentaries beginning with those of Dante's own son Pietro, written shortly after his father's death, it is impossible to be either comprehensively critical or thoroughly original in what one has to say about the poem. And yet, one might be able to justify such an exercise by suggesting that every reading is, in the end, less a reflection or translation of the original text than a portrait of the reader, a confession, an act of self-revelation and self-discovery.

The first of these autobiographical readers was Dante himself. Throughout his otherworldly journey, having been told that he must find a new path in life or be lost forever, Dante is seized by an ardent curiosity to know who he truly is and what it is he experiences along the way.[17] From the first verse of *Inferno* to the last verse of *Paradiso,* the *Commedia* is marked with Dante's questions.

In the whole of his essays, Montaigne quotes Dante only twice. Scholars are of the opinion that he had not read the *Commedia* but knew of it through references in the works of other writers. Even if he had read it, possibly Montaigne might not have liked the dogmatic structure within which Dante chose to conduct his explorations. Nevertheless, when discussing the power of speech in animals, Montaigne transcribes three verses from *Purgatorio* XXVI in which Dante compares the penitent lustful souls to "dark battalions of communicating ants."[18] And again he quotes Dante when discussing the education of children. "Let the tutor," says Montaigne, "pass everything through a filter and never lodge anything in the boy's head simply by authority, at second-hand. Let the principles of Aristotle not be principles for him any more than those of the Stoics or the Epicureans. Let this diversity of judgments be set before him; if he can, he will make a choice: if he cannot then he will remain in doubt. Only fools have made up their minds and are certain." Montaigne then quotes the following line of Dante: "Not less than knowing, doubting [*dubbiar*] pleases me," the words Dante addresses to Virgil in the sixth circle of hell, after the Latin poet has explained to his charge why the sins of incontinence are less offensive to God than those that are the fruit of our will. For Dante, the words express the pleasure felt in the expectant moment that precedes the acquisition of knowledge; for Montaigne, they describe a constant state of rich uncertainty, being aware of various opposing views but embracing none except one's own. For both, the state of questioning is as rewarding as, or even more so than, that of knowing.[19]

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Is it possible, as an atheist, to read Dante (or Montaigne) without believing in the God they worshiped? Is it presumptuous to assume a measure of understanding of their work without the faith that helped them bear the suffering, bewilderment, anguish (and also joy) that are the lot of every human being? Is it insincere to study the strict theological structures and subtleties of religious dogmas without being convinced by the tenets on which they are based? As a reader, I claim the right to believe in the meaning of a story beyond the particulars of the narrative, without swearing to the existence of a fairy godmother or a wicked wolf. Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood don't need to have been real people for me to believe in their truths. The god who walked in the garden "in the cool of the evening" and the god who, agonizing on a cross, promised Paradise to a thief, enlighten me in ways that nothing but great literature can. Without stories all religion would be mere preaching. It is stories that convince us.

The art of reading is in many ways opposed to the art of writing. Reading is a craft that enriches the text conceived by the author, deepening it and rendering it more complex, concentrating it to reflect the reader's personal experience and expanding it to reach the farthest confines of the reader's universe and beyond. Writing, instead, is the art of resignation. The writer must accept the fact that the final text will be but a blurred reflection of the work conceived in the mind, less enlightening, less subtle, less poignant, less precise. The imagination of a writer is all-powerful, and capable of dreaming up the most extraordinary creations in all their wishful perfection. Then comes the descent into language, and in the passage from thought to expression much—very much—is lost. To this rule there are hardly any exceptions. To write a book is to resign oneself to failure, however honorable that failure might be.

Conscious of my hubris, it occurred to me that, following Dante's example of having a guide for his travels—Virgil, Statius, Beatrice, Saint Bernard—I might have Dante himself as a guide to mine, and allow his questioning to help steer my own. Though Dante admonished those who in tiny skiffs attempt to follow his keel, and warned them to turn back to their own shores for fear of becoming lost,[20] I nevertheless trust that he will not mind helping out a fellow traveler filled with so much agreeable dubbiar.

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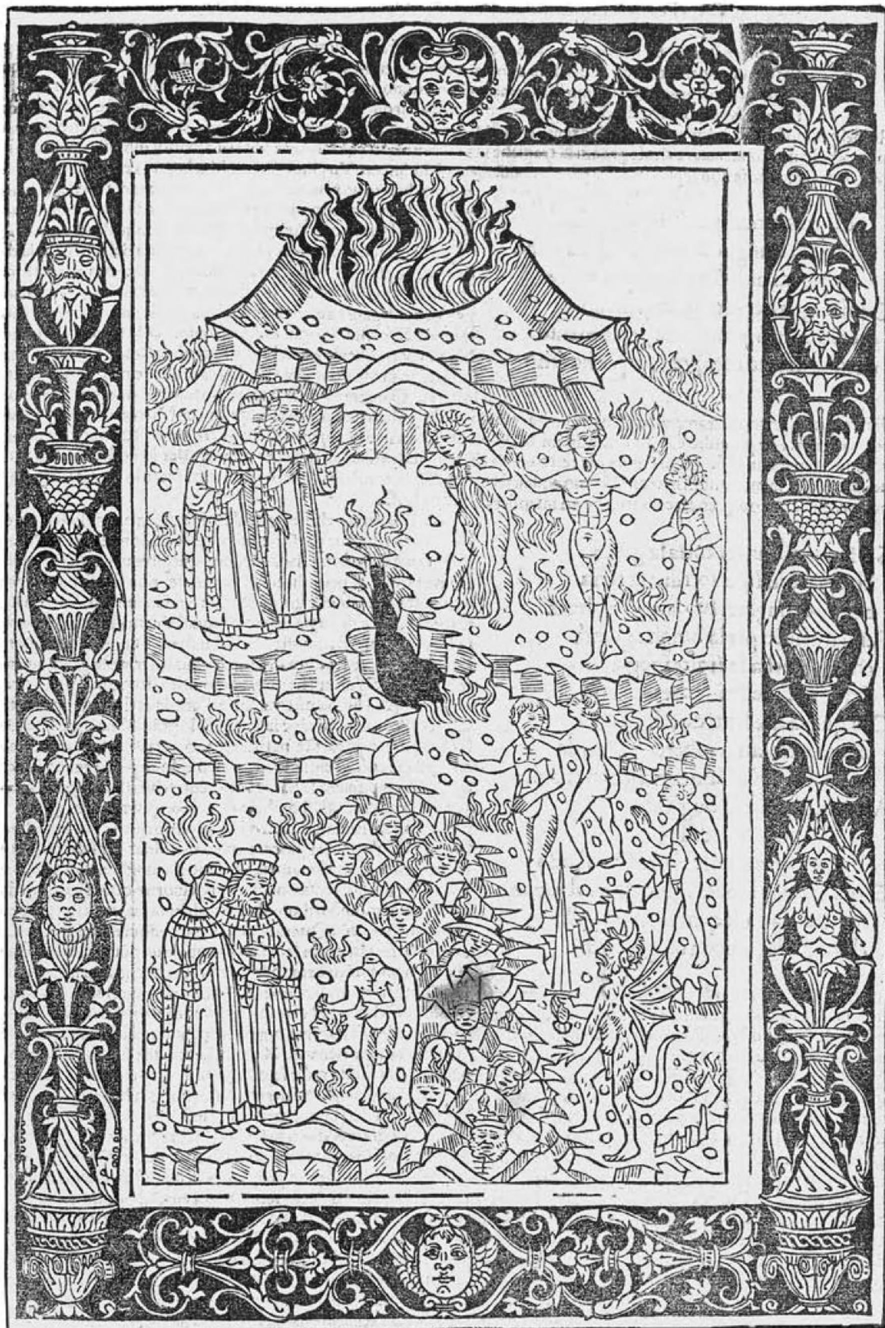

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I
What Is Curiosity?

Everything begins with a voyage. One day, when I was eight or nine, in Buenos Aires, I lost my way coming back from class. The school was one of many that I attended in my childhood, and stood a short distance from our house, in the tree-lined neighborhood of Belgrano. Then as now, I was easily distracted, and all sorts of things caught my attention as I walked back home in the starched white pinafore all schoolchildren were obliged to wear: the corner grocery store that before the age of supermarkets held large barrels of briny olives, cones of sugar wrapped in light-blue paper, blue tins of Canale biscuits; the stationer's with its patriotic notebooks displaying the faces of our national heroes and shelves lined with the yellow covers of the Robin Hood children's series; a tall, narrow door with harlequin stained glass which was sometimes left open, revealing a grim courtyard where a tailor's mannequin mysteriously languished; the sweet seller, a fat man sitting at a street corner on a tiny stool, who held, like a lance, his kaleidoscopic wares. I usually took the same way back, counting off the landmarks as I passed them, but that day I decided to change course. After a few blocks, I realized I didn't know the way. I was too ashamed to ask for directions, so I wandered, more astonished than frightened, for what seemed to me a very long time.

(Opposite) Dante and Virgil meet the sowers of discord. Woodcut illustrating Canto XXVIII of the Inferno, *printed in 1487 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)*

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I don't know why I did what I did, except that I wanted to experience something new, to follow whatever clues I might find to mysteries not yet apparent, as in the Sherlock Holmes stories, which I had just discovered. I wanted to deduce the secret story of the doctor with a battered walking stick, to reveal that the tiptoeing footmarks in the mud were those of a man running for his life, to ask myself why someone would be wearing a groomed black beard that was no doubt false. "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes," said the Master.

I remember becoming aware, with a feeling of pleasurable anxiety, that I was engaging in an adventure different from the ones on my shelves and yet I experienced something of the same suspense, the same intense desire to find out what lay ahead, without being able (without wanting) to foretell what might take place. I felt as if I'd entered a book and was on the way to its undisclosed final pages. What exactly was I looking for? Perhaps this was when for the first time I conceived of the future as a place that held together the tail-ends of all the possible stories.

But nothing happened. At long last, I turned a corner and found myself on familiar ground. When I finally saw my house, it felt like a disappointment.

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But we hold several threads in our hands, and the odds are that one or other of them guides us to the truth. We may waste time following the wrong one, but sooner or later, we must come upon the right.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,
"The Hound of the Baskervilles"

Curiosity is a word with a double meaning. The etymological Spanish dictionary of Covarrubias of 1611 defines *curioso* (it is the same in Italian) as a person who treats something with particular care and diligence, and the great Spanish lexicographer explains its derivation *curiosidad* (in Italian, *curiosità*) as resulting because "the curious person is always asking: 'Why this and why that?'" Roger Chartier has noted that these first definitions did not satisfy Covarrubias, and in a supplement written in 1611 and 1612 (and left unpublished) Covarrubias added that *curioso* has "both a positive and a negative sense. Positive, because the curious person treats things diligently; and negative, because the person labors to scrutinize things that are most hidden and reserved, and do not matter." There follows a quotation in Latin from one of the apocryphal books of the Bible, Ecclesiasticus: "Do not try to understand things that are too difficult for you, or try to discover what is beyond your powers" (3:21–22). With this, according to Chartier, Covarrubias opens his definition to the biblical and patristic condemnation of curiosity as the illicit yearning to know what is forbidden.[1] Of this ambiguous nature of curiosity, Dante was certainly aware.

Dante composed almost all, if not all, of the *Commedia* while in exile, and the account of his poetic pilgrimage can be read as a hopeful mirror of his forced pilgrimage on earth. Curiosity drives him, in Covarrubias's sense of treating things "diligently," but also in the sense of seeking to know what is "most hidden and reserved" and lies beyond words. In a dialogue with his otherworldly guides (Beatrice, Virgil, Saint Bernard) and with the damned and blessed souls he encounters, Dante allows his curiosity to lead him on

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towards the ineffable goal. Language is the instrument of his curiosity—even as he tells us that the answer to his most burning questions cannot be uttered by a human tongue—and his language can be also the instrument of ours. Dante can act, in our reading of the *Commedia,* as a "midwife" of our thoughts, as Socrates once defined the role of the seeker of knowledge.[2] The *Commedia* allows us to bring our questions into being.

Dante died in exile in Ravenna on 13 or 14 September 1321, after having recorded in the last verses of his *Commedia* his vision of the everlasting light of God. He was fifty-six years old. According to Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante had begun writing the *Commedia* sometime before his banishment from Florence, and had been forced to abandon in the city the first seven cantos of the *Inferno.* Someone, Boccaccio says, searching for a document among the papers in Dante's house, found the cantos without knowing they were by Dante, read them with admiration, and took them for inspection to a Florentine poet "of some renown," who guessed that they were Dante's work and contrived to send them on to him. Always according to Boccaccio, Dante was at the time at the estate of Moroello Malaspina in Lunigiana; Malaspina received the cantos, read them, and begged Dante not to abandon a work so magnificently begun. Dante consented and began the eighth canto of the *Inferno* with the words: "I say, carrying on, that long before . . ." So goes the story.[3]

Extraordinary literary works seem to demand extraordinary tales of their conception. Magical biographies of a phantom Homer were invented to account for the power of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* and Virgil was lent the gifts of a necromancer and herald of Christianity because, his readers thought, the *Aeneid* could not have been composed by an ordinary man. Consequently, the conclusion of a masterpiece must be even more extraordinary than its inception. As the writing of the *Commedia* advanced, Boccaccio tells us, Dante began to send the completed cantos to one of his patrons, Cangrande della Scala, in lots of six or eight. In the end, Cangrande would have received the entire work with the exception of the last thirteen cantos of *Paradiso.* For the months following Dante's death, his sons and disciples searched among his papers to see if he had not perhaps finished the missing cantos. Finding nothing, says Boccaccio, "they were enraged that God had not allowed him to live

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The first portrait of Dante to appear in a printed book. Hand-colored woodcut in *Lo amoroso Convivio di Dante* (Venice, 1521). (Photograph courtesy of Livio Ambrogio. Reproduced by permission.)

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in the world long enough to have the chance of concluding what little remained of his work." One night, Jacopo, Dante's third son, had a dream. He saw his father approach, dressed in a white gown, his face shining with a strange light. Jacopo asked him if he was still alive, and Dante said that he was, but in the true life, not in ours. Jacopo then asked whether he had finished his *Commedia.* "Yes," was the answer, "I finished it," and he led Jacopo to his old bedroom, where, putting his hand on a certain place on the wall, he announced, "Here is what you were searching for for so long." Jacopo woke, fetched an old disciple of Dante's, and together they discovered, behind a hanging cloth, a recess containing moldy writings which proved to be the missing cantos. They copied them out and sent them, according to Dante's habit, to Cangrande. "Thus," Boccaccio tells us, "was the task of so many years brought to its conclusion."[4]

Boccaccio's story, which today is regarded less as factual history than as an admiring legend, lends the creation of what is perhaps the greatest poem ever penned an appropriately magical frame. And yet neither the initial suspenseful interruption nor the final happy revelation suffice, in the reader's mind, to account for the invention of such a work. The history of literature is rich in stories about desperate situations in which writers have managed to create masterpieces. Ovid dreaming his *Tristia* in the hellhole of Toomis, Boethius writing his *Consolation of Philosophy* in prison, Keats composing his great odes while dying of tubercular fever, Kafka scribbling his *Metamorphosis* in the public corridor of his parents' house contradict the assumption that a writer can write only under auspicious circumstances. Dante's case is, however, particular.

In the late thirteenth century, Tuscany was split into two political factions: the Guelphs, loyal to the pope, and the Ghibellines, loyal to the imperial cause. In 1260, the Ghibellines defeated the Guelphs at the Battle of Montaperti; a few years later, the Guelphs began to regain their lost power, eventually expelling the Ghibellines from Florence. By 1270 the city was entirely Guelph and would remain so throughout Dante's lifetime. Shortly after Dante's birth in 1265, the Guelphs of Florence divided into the Blacks and the Whites, this time along family rather than political lines. On 7 May 1300, Dante took part in an embassy to San Gimigniano on behalf of the ruling White faction; a month later he was elected one of the six priors of Florence. Dante, who be-

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lieved that church and state should not interfere in one another's spheres of action, opposed the political ambitions of Pope Boniface VIII; consequently, when he was sent to Rome in the autumn of 1301 as part of the Florentine embassy, Dante was ordered to stay at the papal court while the other ambassadors returned to Florence. On 1 November, in Dante's absence, the landless French prince Charles de Valois (whom Dante despised as an agent of Boniface) entered Florence, supposedly to restore peace but in fact to allow a group of exiled Blacks to enter the city. Led by their chief, Corso Donati, for five days the Blacks pillaged Florence and murdered many of its citizens, driving the surviving Whites into exile. In time, the exiled Whites became identified with the Ghibelline faction, and a Black priorate was installed to rule Florence. In January 1302, Dante, who was probably still in Rome, was condemned to exile by the priorate. Later, when he refused to pay the fine imposed as penalty, his sentence of two years' exile was changed to that of being burned at the stake if he ever returned to Florence. All his goods were confiscated.

Dante's exile took him first to Forlì, then, in 1303, to Verona, where he stayed until the death of the city's lord, Bartolomeo della Scala, on 7 March 1304. Because the new ruler of Verona, Alboino della Scala, was unfriendly, or because Dante thought he could enlist the sympathies of the new pope, Benedict XI, the exile returned to Tuscany, probably to Arezzo. For the next few years his itinerary is uncertain—perhaps he moved to Treviso, but Lunigiana, Lucca, Padua, and Venice are also possible halting places; in 1309 or 1310 he may have visited Paris. In 1312, Dante returned to Verona. Cangrande della Scala had become, a year earlier, the city's sole ruler, and thereafter Dante lived in Verona under his protection, until at least 1317. Dante's final years were spent in Ravenna, at the court of Guido Novelo da Polenta.

In the absence of irrefutable documentary evidence, scholars suggest that Dante began the *Inferno* either in 1304 or 1306, the *Purgatorio* in 1313, and the *Paradiso* in 1316. The exact dating matters less than the astonishing fact that Dante wrote the *Commedia* during almost twenty years of wandering in more than ten alien cities, away from his library, his desk, his papers, his talismans—the superstitious bric-à-brac with which every writer constructs a working theater. In unfamiliar rooms, amidst people to whom he owed polite gratitude, in spaces that, because they were not his intimate own, must

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have seemed relentlessly public, always subject to social niceties and the conventions of others, it must have been a daily struggle to find small moments of privacy and silence in which to work. Since his own books were not available, with his annotations and remarks scribbled on the margins, his main recourse was the library of his mind, marvelously furnished (as the countless literary, scientific, theological, and philosophical references in the *Commedia* show) but subject, like all such libraries, to the depletions and blurrings that come with age.

What were his first attempts like? In a document preserved by Boccaccio, a certain Brother Ilario, "a humble monk of Corvo," says that one day a traveler came to his monastery. Brother Ilario recognized him, "for though I had never once seen him before that day, his fame had long before reached me." Perceiving the monk's interest, the traveler "drew a little book from his bosom in a friendly enough way" and showed him some verses. The traveler, of course, was Dante; the verses, the initial cantos of the *Inferno,* which, though written in the vernacular of Florence, Dante tells the monk he had at first intended to write in Latin.[5] If Boccaccio's document is authentic, then Dante had managed to take with him into exile the first few pages of his poem. It would have been enough.

We know that early on in his travels, Dante had begun to send friends and patrons copies of a few of the cantos, which were then often copied and passed along to other readers. In August 1313, the poet Cino da Pistoia, one of Dante's friends in the early years, included glosses of a few verses from two cantos of the *Inferno* in a song he wrote on the death of the emperor Henry VII; in 1314 or perhaps somewhat earlier, a Tuscan notary, Francesco da Barberino, mentions the *Commedia* in his *Documenti d'amore.* There are several other proofs that Dante's work was known and admired (and envied and scorned) long before the *Commedia*'s completion. Barely twenty years after Dante's death, Petrarch mentions how illiterate artists recited parts of the poem at crossroads and theaters to applauding drapers, innkeepers, and customers in shops and markets.[6] Cino, and later Cangrande, must have had an almost complete manuscript of the poem, and we know that Dante's son Jacopo worked from a holograph copy to produce a one-volume *Commedia* for Guido da Polenta. Today not a single line in Dante's hand has come down

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to us. Coluccio Salutati, an erudite Florentine humanist who translated parts of the *Commedia* into Latin, recalled seeing Dante's "lean script" in some of his now lost epistles in the Chancery of Florence, but we can only imagine what his handwriting looked like.[7]

How the notion of writing the chronicle of a journey to the Otherworld came to Dante is, of course, an unanswerable question. A clue may lie at the end of his *Vita nova,* an autobiographical essay structured around thirty-one lyric poems whose meaning, purpose, and origin Dante attributes to his love for Beatrice: in the last chapter, Dante speaks of an "admirable vision" which makes him resolve to write "what has never been written of any other woman." A second explanation may be the fascination felt for popular tales of otherworldly journeys among Dante's contemporaries. In the thirteenth century these imaginary voyages had become a thriving literary genre, born perhaps from anxieties to know what lies beyond the last breath: to revisit the departed and learn whether they require the weak hold of our memory for their continued existence, to find out whether our actions on this side of the grave have consequences on the other. Such questions, of course, were not new even then: ever since we started telling stories, in the days before history, we began to draw up a detailed geography for the regions of the Otherworld. Dante would have been familiar with a number of these travelogues. Homer, for instance, allowed Odysseus to visit the Land of the Dead on his delayed return to Ithaca; Dante, who had no Greek, knew the version of that descent given by Virgil in his *Aeneid.* Saint Paul, in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, wrote of a man who had been to Paradise and "heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (12:4). When Virgil appears to Dante and tells him that he will lead him "through an eternal place," Dante acquiesces, but then hesitates.

> But why should *I* go? And who allows it?
> I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.[8]

Dante's audience would have understood the references.

Dante, voracious reader, would have also been familiar with Cicero's *Scipio's Dream* and its description of the celestial spheres, as well as with the

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otherworldly incidents in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Christian eschatology would have provided him with several more accounts. In the Apocryphal Gospels, the so-called *Apocalypse of Peter* describes the saint's vision of the Holy Fathers wandering in a perfumed garden, and the *Apocalypse of Paul* speaks of a fathomless abyss into which the souls of those who did not hope for God's mercy are flung.[9] Other journeys and visions appear in such best-selling pious compendia as Jacop de Voragine's *Golden Legend* and the anonymous *Lives of the Fathers;* in the imaginary Irish travel narratives of Saint Brendan, Saint Patrick, and King Tungdal; in the mystic visions of Peter Damian, Richard de Saint-Victoire, and Gioachim de Fiore; and in certain Islamic Otherworld chronicles, such as the Andalucian *Libro della Scala* (Book of the Ladder), which tells of Muhammad's ascent to heaven. (We will return to this Islamic influence on the *Commedia* farther on.) There are always models for any new literary venture: our libraries repeatedly remind us that there is no such thing as literary originality.

The earliest verses Dante wrote were, as far as we know, several poems composed in 1283, when he was eighteen years old, later included in the *Vita nova;* the last work was a lecture in Latin, *Questio de aqua et terra* (Dispute on Earth and Water), which he delivered in a public reading on 20 January 1320, less than two years before his death.

The *Vita nova* was finished before 1294: its declared intention is to clarify the words *Incipit Vita Nova,* "Here Begins the New Life," inscribed in the "volume of my memory," and following the sequence of poems written for love of Beatrice, whom he saw for the first time when both were children, Dante nine and Beatrice eight. The book is presented as a quest, an attempt to answer the questions elicited by the love poems, driven by a curiosity bred, Dante says, in "the high chamber where all the sensitive spirits carry their perceptions."[10]

Dante's last composition, the *Questio de aqua et terra,* is a philosophical inquiry into several scientific matters, following the style of "disputes" popular at the time. In his introduction, Dante writes: "Therefore, nourished as I have been since my childhood with the love of truth, I suffered not to leave myself out of the debate, but chose to show what was true therein, and also to dissolve all contrary arguments, as much for love of truth as for hatred of

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falsity."[11] Between the first mention of a need for questioning and the last lies the vast territory of Dante's masterwork. The entire *Commedia* can be read as the pursuit of one man's curiosity.

According to patristic tradition, curiosity can be of two kinds: the curiosity associated with the *vanitas* of Babel, which leads us to believe ourselves capable of such feats as building a tower to reach the heavens; and the curiosity of *umiltà,* of thirsting to know as much as we can of the divine truth, so that, as Saint Bernard prays for Dante in the *Commedia*'s last canto, "joy supreme may be unfolded to him." Quoting Pythagoras in his *Convivio,* Dante defined a person who pursues this wholesome curiosity precisely as a "lover of knowledge . . . a term not of arrogance but of humility."[12]

Though scholars such as Bonaventure, Siger de Brabant, and Boethius deeply influenced Dante's thought, Thomas Aquinas, above all, was Dante's *maître à penser:* as Dante's *Commedia* is to his curious readers, Aquinas's writings were to Dante. When Dante, guided by Beatrice, reaches the Heaven of the Sun, where the prudent are rewarded, a crown of twelve blessed souls circle around him three times to the sound of a celestial music, until one of them detaches itself from the dance and speaks to him. It is the soul of Aquinas, which tells him that, since true love has at last been kindled in Dante, Aquinas and the other blessed souls must answer his questions out of that same love. According to Aquinas, and following the teachings of Aristotle, the knowledge of the supreme good is such that once perceived it can never be forgotten, and the soul blessed with such knowledge will always yearn to return to it. What Aquinas calls Dante's "thirst" must inevitably be satisfied: it would be as impossible not to try to assuage it "as it is for water not to flow back to the sea."[13]

Aquinas was born in Roccasecca, in the Kingdom of Sicily, heir to a noble family related to much of the European aristocracy: the Holy Roman emperor was his cousin. At the age of five, he began his studies at the celebrated Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino. He must have been an insufferable child: it is told that after remaining silent in class for many days, his first utterance to his teacher was a question, "What is God?"[14] At fourteen, his parents, wary of political divisions in the abbey, transferred him to the recently founded University of Naples, where he began his lifelong study of Aristotle and his commentators. During his university years, around 1244, he

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decided to join the Dominican order. Aquinas's choice to become a Dominican mendicant friar scandalized his aristocratic family. They had him kidnapped and held confined for a year, hoping he would recant. He did not, and once set free he settled for a time in Cologne to study under the celebrated teacher Albertus Magnus. For the rest of his life he taught, preached, and wrote in Italy and France.

Aquinas was a large man, clumsy and slow, characteristics that earned him the nickname "Dumb Ox." He refused all positions of power and prestige, whether that of courtier or abbot. He was, above all, a lover of books and reading. When asked for what he thanked God most, he answered, "for granting me the gift of understanding every page I've ever read."[15] He believed in reason as a means of attaining the truth, and constructed, along Aristotelian philosophy, laborious logical arguments to reach some measure of conclusion to the great theological questions. For this he was condemned, three years after his death, by the bishop of Paris, who maintained that the absolute power of God could do without any quibbles of Greek logic.

Aquinas's major work is the *Summa Theologica,* a vast survey of the principal theological questions, intended, he says in the prologue, "not only to teach the proficient, but also to instruct beginners."[16] Aware of the need for a clear and systematic presentation of Christian thought, Aquinas made use of the recently recovered works of Aristotle, translated into Latin, to construct an intellectual framework that would support the sometimes contradictory fundamental Christian canonical writings, from the Bible and the books of Saint Augustine to the works of the theologians of his own time. Aquinas was still writing the *Summa* a few months before his death in 1274. Dante, who was only nine when Aquinas died, may have met some of the master's disciples at the University of Paris if (as legend has it) he visited the city as a young man. Whether through the teachings of Aquinas's followers or his own readings, Dante certainly knew and made use of Aquinas's theological cartography, much as he knew and made use of Augustine's invention of the first-person protagonist to recount his life's journey. And certainly he knew both their arguments concerning the nature of human inquisitiveness.

The beginning point of all quests is, for Aquinas, Aristotle's celebrated statement "All human beings, by nature, desire to know," to which Aquinas

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refers several times in his writings. Aquinas proposed three arguments for this desire. The first is that each thing naturally desires its perfection, that is to say, to become fully conscious of its nature and not merely capable of achieving this consciousness; this, in human beings, means acquiring a knowledge of reality. Second, that everything inclines to its proper activity: as fire to heating and heavy things to falling, humans are inclined to understanding, and consequently to knowing. Third, everything desires to be united to its principal—the end to its beginning—in that most perfect of motions, that of the circle; it is only through intellect that this desire is achieved, and through intellect we each become united to our separate substances. Therefore, Aquinas concludes, all systematic scientific knowledge is good.[17]

Aquinas remarks that Saint Augustine, in a sort of appendix of corrections to much of his work titled *Retractions,* observed that "more things are sought than found, and of the things that are found, fewer still are confirmed." This, for Augustine, was a statement of limits. Aquinas, quoting from another work by the prolific Augustine, remarked that the author of the *Confessions* had warned that allowing our curiosity to inquire about everything in the world might result in the sin of pride and thereby contaminate the authentic pursuit of truth. "So great a pride is thus begotten," Augustine had written, "that one would think they dwelt in the very heavens about which they argue."[18] Dante, knowing himself guilty of the sin of pride (the sin for which, he is told, he will return to Purgatory after his death), may have had this passage in mind when visiting the heavens in *Paradiso.*

Aquinas took Augustine's concern farther, arguing that pride is only the first of four possible perversions of human curiosity. The second entails the pursuit of lesser matters, such as reading popular literature or studying with unworthy teachers.[19] The third occurs when we study the things of this world without reference to the Creator. The fourth and last, when we study what is beyond the limits of our individual intelligence. Aquinas condemns these species of curiosity only because they distract from the greater, fuller impulse of natural exploration. In this, he echoes Bernard of Clairvaux, who a century earlier had written: "There are people who want to know solely for the sake of knowing, and that is scandalous curiosity." Four centuries before Clairvaux, Alcuin of York, more generously, defined curiosity in these terms: "As

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regards wisdom, you love it for the sake of God, for the sake of purity of soul, for the sake of knowing truth, and even for its own sake."[20]

Like a reverse law of gravity, curiosity causes our experience of the world and of ourselves to increase with the asking: curiosity helps us grow. For Dante, following Aquinas, following Aristotle, what draws us on is a desire for the good or the apparent good, that is to say, towards what we know is good or appears to us to be good. Something in our capacity to imagine reveals to us that something is good, and something in our ability to question propels us towards that something through an intuition of its usefulness or danger. In other cases, we aim towards that ineffable good simply because we don't understand something and demand a reason for it, as we demand a reason for everything in this unreasonable universe. (In my own case, these experiences come often through reading—for instance, wondering with Dr. Watson about the meaning of a candle burning in the moors on a pitch-dark night, or asking with the Master why one of Sir Henry Baskerville's new boots was stolen from the Northumberland Hotel.)

As in an archetypal mystery, achieving the good is always an ongoing search, because the satisfaction of one answer merely leads to asking another question, and so on into infinity. For the believer, the good is equivalent to the godhead: saints reach it when they no longer seek anything. In Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, this is the state of *moksha,* or nirvana, of "being blown out" (like a candle) and it refers, in the Buddhist context, to the imperturbable stillness of mind after the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion have been extinguished, the achievement of ineffable beatitude. In Dante, as the great nineteenth-century critic Bruno Nardi defined it, this "end of the quest" is "the state of tranquility in which desire has subsided," that is to say, "the perfect accord of human will with divine will."[21] Desire for knowledge, or natural curiosity, is the inquisitive force that impels Dante from within, just as Virgil and, later, Beatrice are the inquisitive forces that lead him onwards from without. Dante allows himself to be led, inside and out, until he no longer requires any of them—not the intimate desire or the illustrious poet or the blessed beloved—as he stands confronted at long last with the supreme divine vision before which imagination and words fall short, as he tells us in the *Commedia*'s famous ending:

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> To the high fantasy here all power failed;
> But already my desire and my will were turned
> Just like a wheel in even measure turned
> By love that moves the sun and the other stars.[22]

Common readers (unlike historians) care little for the strictures of official chronology, and find sequences and dialogues across the ages and cultural borders. Four centuries after Dante's high peregrinations, in the British isles a very curious Scotsman imagined a system, "plan'd before [he] was one and twenty, & compos'd before twenty five," that would allow him to set out in writing questions that arose from his brief experience of the world.[23] He called his book *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711 and died in 1776. He studied at Edinburgh University, where he discovered the "new Scene of Thought" of Isaac Newton and an "experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects" by which truth might be established. Though his family wished him to follow the career of law, he found "an insurmountable Aversion to every thing but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning; and while they fancyed I was pouring over Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the Authors which I was secretly devouring."[24]

When the *Treatise* was published in 1739, the reviews were mostly hostile. "Never literary Attempt was more unfortunate than my Treatise of human Nature," he recalled decades later. "It fell dead-born from the Press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the Zealots."[25]

The *Treatise of Human Nature* is an extraordinary profession of faith in the capacity of the rational mind to make sense of the world: Isaiah Berlin, in 1956, would say of its author that "no man has influenced the history of philosophy to a deeper and more disturbing degree." Decrying that in philosophical disputes "'tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence," Hume eloquently proceeded to interrogate the assertions of metaphysicians and theologians, and to inquire as to the meaning of curiosity itself. Prior to experience, Hume argued, anything may be the cause of anything: it is experience and not the abstractions of reason which helps us understand life. Hume's apparent skepticism, however, does not reject all possibility of knowl-

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edge: "Nature is too strong for the stupor attendant on the total suspension of belief."[26] The experience of the natural world, according to Hume, must direct, mold and ground all our inquiries.

At the end of the second book of his *Treatise,* Hume attempted to distinguish between love of knowledge and natural curiosity. The latter, Hume wrote, derived from "a quite different principle." Bright ideas enliven the senses and provoke more or less the same sensation of pleasure as "a moderate passion." But doubt causes "a variation of thought," transporting us suddenly from one idea to another. This, Hume concluded, "must of consequence be the occasion of pain." Perhaps unwittingly echoing the previously quoted passage of Ecclesiasticus, Hume insisted that not every fact elicits our curiosity, but occasionally one will become sufficiently important, "if the idea strikes on us with such force, and concerns us so nearly, as to give us an uneasiness in its instability and inconstancy." Aquinas, whose concept of causality raised serious objections in Hume regarding its cogency, had made the same distinction when he had said that "studiousness is directly, not about knowledge itself, but about the desire and study in the pursuit of knowledge."[27]

This keenness to know the truth, this "love of truth" as Hume calls it, has in fact the same double nature that we saw defined in curiosity itself. "Truth," Hume wrote, "is of two kinds, consisting either in the discovery of the proportions of ideas, consider'd as such, or in the conformity of our ideas of objects to their real existence. 'Tis certain, that the former species of truth, is not desir'd merely as truth, and that 'tis not the justness of our conclusions, which alone gives us pleasure." Pursuit alone of the truth is, for Hume, not enough. "But beside the action of the mind, which is the principal foundation of the pleasure, there is likewise requir'd a degree of success in the attainment of the end, or the discovery of that truth we examine."[28]

Barely ten years after Hume's *Treatise,* Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert began in France the publication of their *Encyclopédie.* Here, Hume's definition of curiosity, explained in terms of its outcome, was cleverly reversed: the sources of the impulse, rather than its goals, were explained as "a desire to clarify, to extend one's understanding" and "not particular to the soul itself, belonging to it from its start, independent of sense, as some

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persons have imagined." The author of the article, the chevalier de Jaucourt, approvingly referred in it to "certain judicious philosophers" who have defined curiosity as "an affection of the soul brought on by sensations or perceptions of objects that we know but imperfectly." That is to say, for the *encyclopédistes,* curiosity is born from the awareness of our own ignorance and prompts us to acquire, so far as possible, "a more exact and fuller knowledge of the object it represents": something like seeing the outside of a watch and wanting to know what makes it tick.[29] "How?" is in this case a form of asking "Why?"

The encyclopédistes translated what for Dante were questions of causality, dependent on divine wisdom, into questions of functionality, dependent on human experience. Hume's proposed examination of the "discovery of truth" meant, for someone like Jaucourt, understanding how things worked in practical, even mechanical terms. Dante was interested in the impulse of curiosity itself, the process of questioning that led us to an affirmation of our identity as human beings, necessarily drawn to the Supreme Good. Stemming from an awareness of our ignorance and tending towards the (wishful) reward of knowledge, curiosity in all its forms is depicted in the *Commedia* as the means of advancing from what we don't know to what we don't yet know, through a tangle of philosophical, social, physiological, and ethical obstacles, which the pilgrim has to surmount by willingly making the right choices.

One particular example in the *Commedia* richly illustrates, I believe, the complexity of this multifaceted curiosity. As Dante, led by Virgil, is about to leave the ninth ditch of the eighth circle of Hell, where the sowers of discord are punished, an unexplained curiosity draws his gaze back to the obscene spectacle of the sinners who, because of the rifts they caused during their lifetime, are now themselves slashed, beheaded, or cloven. The last spirit who speaks there to Dante is the poet Bertran de Born, holding up by the hair his severed head "like a lantern."

> Because I parted persons who were united
> I carry, alas, my own brain parted
> From its source which is this trunk of mine.[30]

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At the sight, Dante weeps, but Virgil reproaches him severely, telling him that he has not grieved as they passed through other ditches of the eighth circle, and nothing warrants his increased attention here. Dante then, almost for the first time, challenges his spirit guide and says to him that had Virgil paid more attention to the cause of his curiosity, he might have allowed Dante to stay longer, because there among the crowd of sinners he thinks he has seen one of his kinsman, Geri del Bello, murdered by a member of another Florentine family and never avenged. This is why, Dante adds, he supposes that Geri turned away without saying a word to him. God's justice must not be questioned, and private revenge is contrary to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness. With this, Dante intends to justify his curiosity.

So where do Dante's tears come from? From pity for the tortured soul of Bertran or from shame at having been given a cold shoulder by Geri? Has his curiosity been prompted by the arrogance of assuming to know better than God himself what is just, by a base passion deviant of his quest for the good, by sympathy for his own unavenged blood, by nothing more than wounded pride? Boccaccio, whose intuition of the sense behind the story is often very keen, noted that the compassion Dante feels at times during the journey is not so much for the souls whose woes he hears but for himself.[31] Dante does not provide the answer.

But earlier on he had addressed the reader:

> Reader, if God allows you to profit
> From your reading, now think for yourself
> How I could keep my face dry.[32]

Virgil does not respond to Dante's challenge but leads him on to the edge of the next chasm, the last before the core of Hell, where falsifiers are punished with an affliction similar to dropsy: fluid accumulates in their cavities and tissues, and they suffer from a burning thirst. The body of one of the sinners, the coin forger Master Adam, is "shaped like a lute," in a grotesque parody of Christ's crucifixion, which, in medieval iconography, was compared to a stringed instrument.[33] Another sinner, burning with fever, is the Greek Sinon, who in the second book of the *Aeneid,* allows himself to be

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captured by the Trojans and then persuades them to take in the Trojan Horse. Sinon, perhaps taking offense at being named, hits Master Adam in his swollen belly, and the two begin a quarrel to which Dante attends enraptured. It is then that Virgil, as if he had been waiting for an opportunity for summing up his reproof, chides him angrily:

> Just keep looking
> A little longer and it is with you that I will quarrel!

Dante is so overwhelmed with shame that Virgil excuses him and concludes: "the desire to listen to such things is a vulgar desire."[34] That is to say, fruitless. Not all curiosity leads us on.

And yet . . .

"Nature gave us an innate curiosity and, aware of its own art and beauty, created us in order to be the audience of the wonderful spectacle of the world; because it would have toiled in vain, if things so great, so brilliant, so delicately traced, so splendid and variously beautiful, were displayed to an empty house," wrote Seneca in praise of curiosity.[35]

The great quest which begins in the middle of the journey of our life and ends with the vision of a truth that cannot be put into words is fraught with endless distractions, side paths, recollections, intellectual and material obstacles, and dangerous errors, as well as with errors that, for all their appearance of falsity, are true. Concentration or distraction, asking in order to know why or in order to know how, questioning within the limits of what a society considers permissible or seeking answers outside those limits: these dichotomies, always latent in the phenomenon of curiosity, simultaneously hamper and drive forward every one of our quests. What persists, however, even when we surrender to insurmountable obstacles, and even when we fail in spite of enduring courage and best intentions, is the impulse to seek, as Dante tells us (and Hume intuited). Is this perhaps why, of all the possible modes offered to us by our language, the natural one is the interrogative?

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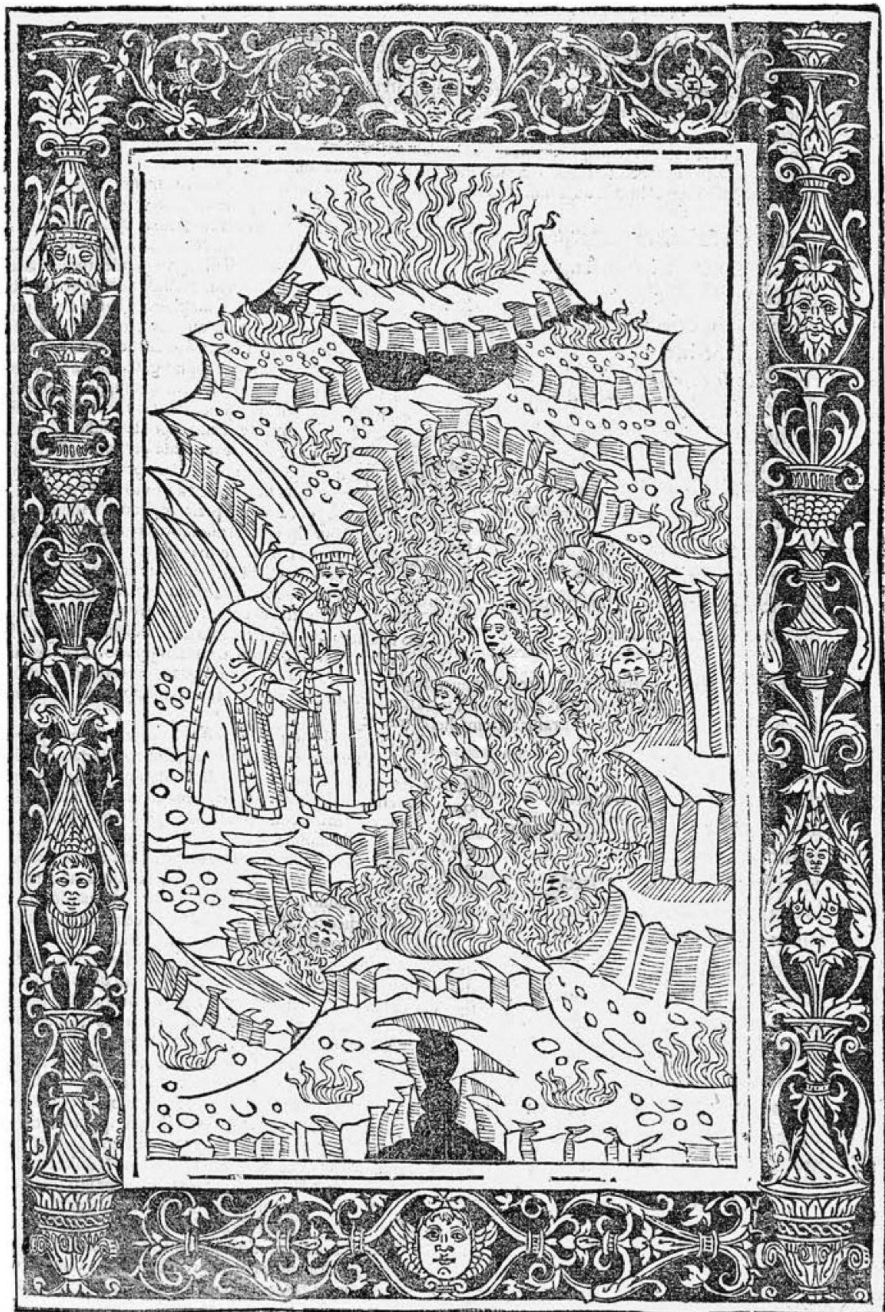

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2
What Do We Want to Know?

Most of my childhood in Tel Aviv was spent in silence: I hardly ever asked questions. Not that I wasn't curious. Of course I wanted to find out what was kept locked away in my governess's pyrographed box next to her bed or who lived in the curtained trailers stranded on the beach of Herzliya, where I was sternly warned never to wander. My governess would respond to any questions carefully, after what seemed to me unnecessarily long consideration, and her answers were always short, factual, disallowing argument or discussion. When I wanted to know how the sand was made, her answer was "of shells and stones." When I sought out information on the dreadful Erlkönig of Goethe's poem, which I had to learn by heart, the explanation was "It's only a nightmare." (Because the German word for nightmare is *Alpentraum,* I imagined that bad dreams could take place only in the mountains.) When I wondered why it was so dark at night and so light during the day, she drew a series of dotted circles on a piece of paper, meant to represent the solar system, and then made me memorize the names of the planets. She never refused to answer and she never encouraged questioning.

It wasn't until much later that I discovered that questioning might be

(Opposite) Dante and Virgil meet the evil counselors punished by fire. Woodcut illustrating Canto XXVI of the Purgatorio, *printed in 1487 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)*

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something else, akin to the thrill of a quest, the promise of something that shaped itself in the making, a progression of explorations that grew in a mutual exchange between two people and did not require a conclusion. It is impossible to stress the importance of having the freedom of such inquiries. To a child, they are as essential to the mind as movement is to the physical body. In the seventeenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that a school had to be a space where the imagination and reflection were given free range, without any obvious practical purpose or utilitarian goal. "The civil man is born, lives, and dies in slavery," he wrote. "At his birth he is sewn into swaddling clothes; at his death he is nailed into a coffin. As long as he retains a human form, he is chained up by our institutions." It is not by training our children to go into whatever trade society requires, Rousseau insisted, that they will become efficient in their tasks. They have to be able to imagine with no constraints before they can bring anything truly valuable into being.

One day, a new history teacher began his class by asking us what we wanted to know. Did he mean what *we* wanted to know? Yes. About what? About anything, any notion that occurred to us, anything we wished to ask. After a startled silence, someone lifted his hand and posed a question. I don't remember what it was (a distance of more than half a century separates me from that brave inquisitor), but I do remember that the teacher's first words were less an answer than the hint of another question. Maybe we began by wanting to know what made a motor run; we ended by wondering how Hannibal had managed to cross the Alps, what gave him the idea of using vinegar to split the frozen rocks, what an elephant might have felt falling to its death in the snow. That night each of us dreamt his own secret Alpentraum.

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Ulysses: Know the whole world.

—SHAKESPEARE, *Troilus and Cressida,* 2.3.246

The interrogative mode carries with it the expectation, not always fulfilled, of an answer: however uncertain, it is the prime instrument of curiosity. The tension between the curiosity that leads to discovery and the curiosity that leads to perdition threads its way throughout all our endeavors. The temptation of the horizon is always present, and even if, as the ancients believed, after the world's end a traveler would fall into the abyss, we do not abstain from exploration, as Ulysses tells Dante in the *Commedia.*

In the twenty-sixth canto of the *Inferno,* after having crossed the dreadful snake-infested sands where thieves are punished, Dante arrives at the eighth chasm, where he sees "as many fireflies as the peasant, resting on a hilltop, sees": they are souls who are punished here, eternally consumed in whirling tongues of fire. Curious to know what one particular flame is "that comes so parted at the top," Dante learns that these are the entwined souls of Ulysses and his companion Diomedes (who, according to post-Homeric legend, had helped Ulysses steal the Palladium, the sacred image of Athena on which the fortunes of Troy depended). Dante is so attracted to the horned flame that his body leans involuntarily towards it and he asks Virgil's permission to address the fiery presence. Virgil, realizing that, as Greeks, the ardent spirits may disdain to speak to a mere Florentine, speaks to the flame as a poet who "when on earth wrote lofty verses" and begs that one of the two souls will tell where they met their end. The larger tongue of the flame responds and reveals itself as Ulysses, whose words, legend has it, could bend the will of his listeners. Then the epic hero whose adventures were the source of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Ulysses left the sorceress Circe at the island of Gaeta, he says, "before Aeneas gave that place its name") speaks to the poet he inspired. In Dante's universe, creators and creations construct their own chronologies.[1]

The character of Ulysses can be seen in the *Commedia* partly as the in-

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carnation of forbidden curiosity, but he begins life on our shelves (though he may be older than his stories) as Homer's ingenious and persecuted King Odysseus. Then, through a series of complex reincarnations, he becomes a cruel commander, a faithful husband, a lying con man, a humanist hero, a resourceful adventurer, a dangerous magician, a ruffian, a trickster, a man in search of his identity, Joyce's pathetic Everyman. Dante's version of the Ulysses story, which is now part of the myth, concerns a man not satisfied with the extraordinary life he has led: he wants more. Unlike Faust, who despairs at how little his books have taught him and feels he has at last reached the limits of his library, Ulysses longs for that which lies beyond the end of the known world. After being freed from Circe's island and Circe's lust, Ulysses senses that there is in him something stronger than his love for his abandoned son, his aged father, his faithful wife back in Ithaca: an *ardore,* or "ardent passion," to gain further experience of the world, and of human vices and virtues. In the course of only fifty-two luminous lines, Ulysses will try to explain the reasons that drove him to undertake his last journey: the desire to go beyond the signposts Hercules set up to signal the limits of the known world and warn humans against sailing farther, the will not to deny himself the experience of the unpeopled world behind the sun, and finally, the longing to pursue virtue and wisdom—or, as Tennyson put it in his version, "to follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."[2]

The columns that signal the limits of the knowable world are also, as all professed limits, a challenge to the adventurer. Three centuries after the *Commedia* was completed, Torquato Tasso, a devoted reader of Dante, in his *Gerusalemme liberata* had the goddess Fortune lead the comrades of the unfortunate Rinaldo (who must be rescued before Jerusalem can be reconquered) along Ulysses' path up to the Pillars of Hercules. There an infinite sea stretches out beyond, and one of the comrades asks whether anyone has dared cross it. Fortune answers that Hercules himself, not daring to venture out onto the unknown main, "set up narrow limits to contain all daring inventiveness." But these, she says, "were scorned by Ulysses, / full of longing to see and know." After retelling Dante's version of the hero's end, Fortune adds that "time will come when the vile markings / will become illustrious for the sailor / and the recalled seas, kingdoms, and shores / that you ignore will

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too be famous."[3] Tasso read in Dante's account of the transgression both the marking of limits and a promise of adventurous fulfillment.

The twinning of the curiosity that leads to travel and the curiosity that seeks recondite knowledge is an enduring notion, from the *Odyssey* to the Grand Tours of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fourteenth-century scholar known as Ibn Khaldun, in his *Al-Muqaddima,* or *Discourse on the History of the World,* noted that travel was an absolute necessity for learning and for the molding of the mind because it allowed the student to meet great teachers and scientific authorities. Ibn Khaldun quoted the Qur'an: "He guides whom He will to the right path," and insisted that the road to knowledge depended not on the technical vocabulary attached to it by scholars but on the inquisitive spirit of the searcher. Learning from various teachers in different places of the world, the student would realize that things are not what any particular language names them. "This will allow him not to confuse science and the vocabulary of science" and help him understand that "a certain terminology is nothing more than a means, a method."[4]

Ulysses' knowledge is rooted in his language and in his rhetorical ability: the language and the rhetoric bestowed upon him by his creators, from Homer to Dante and Shakespeare, from Joyce to Derek Walcott. Traditionally, it was through this gift of language that Ulysses sinned, first by inducing Achilles, who had been secreted at the court of the king of Scyros to escape the Trojan War, to join the Greek forces, which led to the death from a broken heart of the king's daughter Deidamia, who had fallen in love with him; second, by counseling the Greeks to build the wooden horse by means of which Troy was stormed. Troy, in the Latin imagination inherited by the European Middle Ages, was the effective cradle of Rome, since it was the Trojan Aeneas who, escaping the conquered city, founded what was to become, many centuries later, the core of the Christian world. Ulysses, in Christian thought, is like Adam, guilty of a sin that entails the loss of a "good place" and, consequently, the means of the redemption brought on by the commission of that sin. Without the loss of Eden, Christ's Passion would not have been necessary. Without Ulysses' evil counsel, Troy would not have fallen and Rome would not have been born.

But the sin for which Ulysses and Diomedes are punished is not clearly

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stated in the *Commedia.* In the eleventh canto of the *Inferno,* Virgil takes time to explain to Dante the nature and place of each sin of fraud punished in Hell, but after locating hypocrites, flatterers, necromancers, cheaters, thieves, simonists, panders, and barrators in their proper places, he dismisses the sinners of the eighth and ninth chasms as simply "the same kind of filth." Later on, in the twenty-sixth canto, describing to Dante the faults committed by Ulysses and Diomedes, Virgil lists three: the trick of the Trojan Horse, the abandonment of Deidamia, and the theft of the Palladium. But none of these leads precisely to the nature of the fault punished in this particular chasm. The Dante scholar Leah Schwebel has provided a useful summary of the "slew of prospective crimes for the fallen hero, running the gamut from original sin to pagan hubris" imagined by successive readers of the *Commedia,* and concludes that none of these plausible interpretations is ultimately satisfactory.[5] And yet if we consider Ulysses' sin as one of curiosity, Dante's vision of the wily adventurer may become a little clearer.

As a poet, Dante must construct out of words the character of Ulysses and the account of his adventures, as well as the multilayered context in which the king of Ithaca tells his story, but he must also, at the same time, refuse his ardent storyteller the possibility of reaching the desired good. Travel is not enough, words are not enough: Ulysses must fail because, driven by his all-consuming curiosity, he has confused his vocabulary with his science.

Because Dante the craftsman has to submit to the adamantine structures of the Christian Otherworld as a framework for his poem, Ulysses' place in Hell might be largely defined as that of a soul who is guilty of spiritual theft: he has used his intellectual gifts to deceive others. But what has fueled this trickster impulse? Like Socrates, Ulysses equates virtue and knowledge, thereby creating the rhetorical illusion that knowing a virtue is the same as possessing that virtue.[6] But it is not in the exposition of this intellectual sin that Dante's interest lies. Instead, what he wants Ulysses to tell him is what drove him, after all the obstacles Neptune set up on the return voyage from Troy, to sail not home to his bed and hearth but onwards into the unknown.[7] Dante wants to know what made Ulysses curious. To explore this question, he tells a story.

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Throughout our convoluted histories, stories have had a way of reappearing under different forms and guises; we can never be certain of when a story was told for the first time, only that it will be not the last. Before the first chronicle of travel there must have been an *Odyssey* of which we now know nothing, and before the first account of war, an *Iliad* must have been sung by a poet who is for us even fainter than Homer. Since imagination is, as we have noted, the means by which our species survives in the world, and since we were all born, for better or for worse, with Ulysses' "ardore," and since stories are, from the very first campfire evenings on, our way of using imagination to feed this ardore, no story can be truly original or unique. All stories have a quality of *déjà lu* about them. The art of stories, which seems not to have an end, in fact has no beginning. Because there is no first story, stories grant us a sort of retrospective immortality.

We make up stories in order to give a shape to our questions; we read or listen to stories in order to understand what it is that we want to know. On either side of the page, we are driven by the same questioning impulse, asking who did what, and why, and how, so that we can in turn ask ourselves what it is that we do, and how and why we do it, and what will happen when something is done or not done. In this sense, all stories are mirrors of what we believe we don't yet know. A story, if it is good, elicits in its audience both the desire to know what happens next and the conflicting desire that the story never end: this double bind justifies our storytelling impulse and keeps our curiosity alive.

In spite of being aware of this, we are more concerned with beginnings than with endings. Endings we take for granted; we even sometimes wish for them to be eternally postponed. Endings tend to comfort us: they allow us the pretense of conclusion, which is why we require memento mori—to remind us of the need to be conscious of our own end. Beginnings trouble us daily. We want to know where and how things start, we seek wisdom in etymologies, we like being present at the birth, perhaps because we feel that what comes first into this world justifies or explains what comes afterwards. And we dream up stories to give us starting-points towards which we can look back and feel a little more secure, however difficult and questionable the process.

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Dreaming up endings, instead, has always seemed easier. "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily," Miss Prism tells us in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* "That is what Fiction means."[8]

The fiction of beginnings is a complex invention. For example, in spite of the countless narrative possibilities offered at the start of the Bible, it is other, more explicit stories that provide the religions of the book with a beginning. Two narratives of creation follow each other in the first pages of Genesis. One tells that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (1:27). The second, how God, in order to provide Adam with "an help meet," made him fall into a deep slumber, took out one of his ribs, and from this "made he a woman" (2:18, 21–25). Implicit in the divine creative act is the subservient function of women. Countless biblical commentators explain that this is the reason why a woman, as an inferior being, must obey a man; fortunately, a number of others reinterpret this patriarchal reading in a more egalitarian light.

In the first century C.E., the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria, curious about the double narratives of Genesis, proposed for the earliest biblical narrative a Platonic interpretation, suggesting that the first human created by God was a hermaphrodite ("male and female created he him"), and for the second a misogynistic reading in which the male half is conceived as superior to the female. Philo identified the male half (Adam) with the spirit (*nous*) and the female one (Eve) with the physical senses (*aesthesis*). Severed from Adam, as if she represented sensation severed from reason, Eve is denied, in the act of creation, Adam's primordial innocence, and thus becomes instrumental in the Fall of humankind.[9] Two centuries later, Saint Augustine, in his literal interpretation of the book of Genesis, reinstated Eve's primordial innocence by declaring that in the first narrative, Adam and Eve, still unnamed, were created with all their spiritual and physical characteristics *in potentia,* that is to say, present in a virtual state that would flower into material existence, as described in the second narrative.[10] That is what you call having your original cake and eating it too.

Scholars more or less agree that the book of Genesis was written in about the sixth century B.C.E. Some three centuries earlier, in Greece, Hesiod reported a different version of the story of female culpability. Zeus, Hesiod

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Jean Cousin the Elder, *Eva Prima Pandora* (Eve as the First Pandora): an explicit conflation of Eve and Pandora in a painting by a sixteenth-century French artist. (Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Courtesy Giraudon/Bridgeman Images.)

tells us, furious at Prometheus for having robbed the gods of the Olympian fire and given it to humankind, decided to avenge himself by sending down to earth a beautiful maiden, crafted by Hephaestus, dressed by Athena, adorned with gold necklaces by Peitho and with garlands by the Horae, and with her heart filled by Hermes with lies and misleading promises. Finally, Zeus bestowed upon her the gift of speech and the name Pandora, and presented her to Prometheus's brother Epimetheus. Forgetting Prometheus's warning never to accept a gift from Olympian Zeus, Epimetheus fell in love with Pandora and took her into his household.

Until that time, humankind had lived unburdened by care and disease, all of which were kept in a covered jar. Pandora, curious to know what the jar contained, took its lid off and unleashed into the world all kinds of pain and suffering, along with the illnesses that haunt us night and day silently because Zeus deprived them of the use of their tongues. Horrified by what had happened, Pandora tried to put the lid back on, but our sufferings had

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> There in its depths I saw
> gathered with love in a single volume
> the leaves that through the universe have been scattered.[15]

Dante's vision, in spite (or because) of its immensity, prevents him from translating that volume into comprehensible words; he sees it but he cannot read it. Assembling books we mirror Dante's gesture, but because no single human book can fully translate the universe, our quests resemble Ulysses' quest, where the intention counts more than the result. Every one of our achievements opens up new doubts and tempts us with new quests, condemning us for ever to a state of inquiring and exhilarating unease. This is curiosity's inherent paradox.

The late Renaissance materialized this paradox in what could be called "curiosity machines." In printed texts, in charts, in intricate drawings, even in three-dimensional construction kits, these extraordinary mnemonic and didactic devices were designed to reward the questioner's curiosity by means of a mechanical system of associations and information retrieval.

The Renaissance machines, tangible incarnations of our belief that the meaning of things lies within our reach, adopted a variety of ingenious forms. They were either intricate versions of our Excel charts, designed like family trees of many branches, or constructed as wheels that moved one inside the other to elicit couplings between the concepts written on their margins. Sometimes they were even conceived as pieces of furniture, such as the wonderful wheel of books designed by Agostino Ramelli in 1588, meant to stand next to the reader's desk like a three-dimensional version of Windows.[16]

Each of these machines works differently. A labyrinthine machine such as that depicted in Orazio Toscanella's *Armonia di tutti i principali retori* (Harmony of all Main Rhetoricians) was designed to help structure rhetorical arguments stemming from any given premise.[17] The procedure is anything but simple. The initial idea is reduced to a single proposition, which is then divided into subject and predicate. Each of these can then be boxed into one of a number of categories inscribed on one of four wheels of Toscanella's machine. The first wheel is dedicated to subjects, the second to predicates, the third to relationships, the fourth to questions such as who, why, and what.

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The four wheels of Orazio Toscanella's memory machine, from his *Armonia di tutti i principali retori* (Venice, 1569). (*B 6.24 Th.Seld.*, Sig. I2 recto, Sig. K2 recto, Sig. K3 recto, and Sig. K4 recto. Courtesy The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford.)

Every point of each wheel can be (or become) the starting place of a new quest, the beginning of an extraordinary web of connecting thoughts, considerations, musings, inquiries, and illuminations.

These machines are too complex for a nonscholar such as myself to describe accurately; I am not at all sure that, even if I understood the rules better, I would be able to use one effectively. What is obvious, however, is that these machines were concrete representations of the methods of curiosity,

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and even when supposedly allowing their users to reach the desired conclusion, they continuously suggested different pathways for new explorations. If prehistoric language appeared to humans as aural hallucinations, these machines allowed for voluntary hallucinations, the conjuring up of things projected into the future or recalled from the past. Beyond their use as how-to manuals and cataloguing tools, these machines promised to help the user think. One of their inventors, Ludovico Castelvetro, defined his art as "the science of asking why."[18]

Machines such as Toscanella's are a material representation of Dante's and Ulysses' quests and illustrate the different paths followed by the two travelers, allowing those who learned to use them to follow question after question, from thought to seemingly unconnected thought, privileging the impulse of curiosity over the conscious need to ask. Dante himself, on the beach of Mount Purgatory, compares this impulse to "people who reflect on the path to take / who set forth with the heart, and with the body stand still."[19] Carlo Ossola, in his illuminating reading of the *Commedia,* notes that to Ulysses' *curiositas* Dante opposes his own *necessitas* to act.[20] Ulysses' curiosity is the shadow of Dante's and leads to his tragic death; Dante's necessary quest ends as all comedies end—that is to say, with a happy and successful achievement. But it is an achievement that, as Dante repeatedly tells us, cannot be told in human language.

Much of the otherworldly voyage, many of the terrors and the marvels, even Dante's own wavering undertakings, are expressed in the clearest possible verse, but the actual final vision is ineffable, beyond the scope of human art, partly because he is describing his movement towards the Aristotelian primordial good, and "each thing that moves is in some respect lacking and does not possess its whole being at one time," as Dante noted in one of his epistles. This is the "other path" already mentioned that Virgil recommends when he first addresses Dante, whose first-chosen road is blocked by the three wild beasts at the edge of the dark forest, the "fated path" that Virgil orders Minos not to hinder when the two travelers reach the edge of the second circle of Hell. This is also the "other way" announced to the three Magi in Matthew 2:12 in the dream that leads them away from Herod and towards the birth of their Saviour.[21]

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The Stoics saw Ulysses' curiosity as exemplary. Seneca, in the early years of the first century C.E., praised the figure of Ulysses for teaching us "how to love fatherland, wife, father, how to navigate to those honourable things even in the midst of storms," but declared himself uninterested in the details of his wanderings, "whether Ulysses was tossed about between Italy and Sicily or beyond the known world." Earlier, Heraclitus, for whom Ulysses' long journey is nothing more than "a vast allegory," argued that Ulysses' "wise decision" to descend into Hades proved that his curiosity "would not leave any place unexplored, not even the depths of Hell." Several decades later, Dio Chrysostom praised Ulysses (pairing him with the sophist Hippias) for being just what a philosopher must be, "exceptional in everything under any circumstances." Dio's contemporary, Epictetus, compared Ulysses to a traveler who does not allow himself to be distracted by the beautiful inns he may find on his way; confronted with the Sirens' song, he leaves his ears unplugged so as to hear them, but at the same time sails on, to pursue his quest successfully. This is Epictetus's advice to all curious travelers.[22]

For Dante, Ulysses' enterprise ends not in success but in disaster. Ulysses' voyage is a tragedy. If by success we mean the full achievement of our endeavors, then failure is an integral part of Ulysses' attempt, as it is an integral part of Dante's all-apprehending poetic project, in that his final vision cannot be put into words. Such failures are, in fact, an integral part of every artistic and scientific enterprise. Art advances through defeat, and science learns mostly from mistakes. What we don't achieve maps our ambitions as much as what we do, and the Tower of Babel stands unfinished, less as a memorial of our shortcomings than as a monument to our exultant chutzpah.

As Dante certainly knew, no human quest is exclusively one or the other, none of our endeavors follows exclusively the adventures of Ulysses or those of Dante. Every investigation, every inquiry, every exploration is choked with an undergrowth of questions—moral, ethical, practical, whimsical—through which we advance and from which we cannot disentangle ourselves. Some progress, of course, is made but always accompanied by swarms of doubts and irresolution, when not by a feeling of guilt and transgression that results in the designation of a scapegoat: Eve and Pandora, the village witch and the heretical thinker, the inquisitive Jew and the nonconformist homo-

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sexual, the alienating outsider and the unorthodox explorer. Imaginative researchers in biology and chemistry, brave scholars in unofficial histories, illuminating critics of art and literature, revolutionary writers and composers and visual artists, lucid scientists in every field, even as they seek a truth comparable to the one Dante sought, face again and again the dangers that awaited Ulysses on his final journey. This is how our thinking evolves: trying to see at each turn not only the possible answers to our questions—in other words, the questions that will be conjured up next in our quest—but also the aleatory, sometimes tragic consequences of treading unexplored landscapes.

The question of how to find cures for deadly illnesses elicits the question of how to feed an ever-increasing and aging population; the question of how to develop and protect an egalitarian society elicits the question of how to prevent demagogy and the seduction of fascism; the question of how to create jobs to develop the economy elicits the question of how the creation of these jobs might tempt us to turn a blind eye on human rights and how it might affect the natural world around us; the question of how to develop technologies that allow us to hoard more and more information elicits the question of how to access, refine, and keep from abusing such information; the question of how to explore the unknown universe elicits the uneasy question of whether our human senses are capable of apprehending whatever it is we might discover on earth or in outer space.

Seven centuries after Dante's encounter with Ulysses, on 26 November 2011, an exploring device the size of a small car was launched from Cape Canaveral at 10:02 in the morning. After traveling over 350 million miles, it reached the planet Mars on 6 August 2012 and landed on the desolate plain of Aeolis Palus. The name of the exploratory craft was *Curiosity,* the desire for knowledge that Dante called "ardore" and that drove Ulysses to undertake his one last fatal journey.

The Martian plain chosen as the landing site of *Curiosity* bore the name of the king of the winds, Aeolus, in whose realm Ulysses stopped on his own travels. In the tenth book of the *Odyssey,* Homer tells us, after escaping from the hunger of the Cyclops, Ulysses, who called himself Nobody, which also means Everybody, reaches Aeolus's island. Here he is feasted by the king for a full month and, upon leaving, he is given a sack of oxhide in which Aeolus

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3
How Do We Reason?

My high school was the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires. Among the several professors who taught me Spanish literature, I was fortunate to have, for two of the six school years, Isaias Lerner, a brilliant specialist in the Spanish Golden Age. With him we studied in painstaking detail some of the major classics: the *Lazarillo,* the poems of Garcilaso, *Don Quixote, La Celestina.* Lerner loved those texts and enjoyed reading them, and his love and enjoyment were contagious. Many of us followed the adventures of young Lazarillo with the enthusiasm we reserved for cliffhangers, the love lyrics of Garcilaso with our own saccharine daydreams, the brave endeavors of Don Quixote with a budding sense of the meaning of justice, and the dark, erotic world of *La Celestina* with the physical thrill of what the old bawd calls, cursing the devil, "the flooding of your sad, dark dungeons with light." Lerner taught us to find in literature clues to our identity.

As adolescents we are unique; as we grow older, we realize that the singular being of which we proudly speak in the first-person singular is in reality a patchwork made up of other beings that in a smaller or greater measure define us. To recognize these mirrored or learned identities is one of the con-

(Opposite) Virgil leads Dante to the Noble Castle, to which the good pagans are condemned. Woodcut illustrating Canto IV of the Inferno, *printed in 1487 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)*

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solations of old age: to know that certain persons long turned to dust still keep on living in us, just as we will live now in someone whose existence perhaps we don't even suspect. I realize that now, in my sixty-sixth year, Lerner is one of those immortals.

When in my last year of high school, in 1966, the military authorities took charge of the university, Lerner and fifteen other professors protested the arbitrary measure and were promptly fired from their posts. His replacement, a barely literate nonentity, accused him of having taught us "Marxist theory." To be able to carry on his professional life, Lerner went into exile in the United States.

Lerner understood something essential in the art of teaching. A teacher can help students discover unknown territories, provide them with specialized information, help create for themselves an intellectual discipline, but, above all, he or she must establish for them a space of mental freedom in which they can exercise their imagination and their curiosity, a place in which they can learn to think. Simone Weil says that culture is "the formation of attention." Lerner helped us acquire that necessary attentive training.

Lerner's method was to have us read out aloud an entire book, line after line, adding his comments as he saw fit. These comments were erudite because he believed in our adolescent intelligence and our persistent curiosity; they were also funny or deeply tragic because for him reading was above all an emotional experience; they were investigations of things of a time long past because he knew that what had once been imagined seeped into whatever we imagine today; they were relevant to our world because he knew that literature always addresses its present readers.

But he would not think for us. Coming across yet another speech in which Celestina, without telling a single lie, twists and distorts the story so that whoever is following her seemingly faultless logic falls into the trap of taking her words for facts, Lerner would stop us and smile. "Gentlemen," he would ask, "do you believe what she's saying?" We were supposed to have read the book beforehand at home, and also some of the relevant criticism. We were usually scrupulous; we dared not disobey him. So one of us, with the urge adolescents have for showing off, would answer, "Well, Sir, Malkiel says . . . ," and begin to quote the opinion of one of *La Celestina's* most pres-

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tigious critics. "No, Sir," Lerner would interrupt. "I wasn't asking Dr. Malkiel, whose opinion I've read in her admirable book, as, I'm sure, as a good and faithful student, you have too. I'm asking you, Sir." And so he would force us, step by step, to tease out Celestina's reasoning, to follow the labyrinth of her arguments made up of vulgar wisdom, ancient sayings, commonplace bits of the classics, and other popular lore, woven into a web from which it was difficult to extricate oneself. The star-crossed lovers Calisto and Melibea had fallen for her tale, and so did we, savvy as we thought we were in bluffing and fibbing. That was how we learned about "lying with the truth." Later on, the concept, discovered through the wiles of a sixteenth-century bawd, would help us understand the political speeches delivered with much waving of hands by a succession of uniformed authorities from the balcony of the presidential palace. To our common stock of "Why?" and "Who?" and "When?" Lerner taught us to ask "How?"

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To formulate a question is to resolve it.

—Karl Marx, *Zur Judenfrage*

Words are the means by which Dante accomplishes his voyage from the dark wood to the Empyrean along the cartography of the Otherworld (outlined in Chapters 9 and 14, below). Through his own inquisitiveness he advances along the path set out by Virgil, and through the inquisitiveness of others he is allowed the final redeeming vision. Following his itinerant inquiries we, his readers, might also learn how to ask the right questions.

After crossing the first seven heavens, Dante, led by Beatrice, enters the abode of the Fixed Stars. Here Beatrice appeals to the saints to allow Dante to drink from their table since divine grace has already granted him a foretaste of what awaits a soul that is blessed. The saints respond joyfully to her request, and out of the brightest group of stars Saint Peter appears and sings so wonderful a song that Dante can neither recall it nor transcribe it.

> But my pen leaps and I won't write it down:
> Because the images we paint, and our words,
> Are far too garish for such folds.[1]

Then Beatrice addresses Peter and says that even though he truly knows (because nothing is hidden from him) that Dante "loves well, and well hopes and believes," it would be best if Dante now spoke for himself since all citizens of the realm of Heaven must prove that they profess the true faith. And at Beatrice's insistence, Dante must submit to what is, for all effects and purposes, a school examination.

> Just as the student readies himself but doesn't speak
> Until the teacher lays out the question for him,
> To sanction it, not to conclude it,

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Just so I readied myself with every argument,
While she was speaking, to be prepared
For such an examiner and such a profession.[2]

Peter proceeds to question Dante, beginning with "What is faith?" and concluding with delighted praise for Dante's answers. In fact, so satisfied is Peter with Dante's discourse that he exclaims:

If everything drawn
From doctrine down there were thus understood,
There'd be no room for the Sophist's wit.[3]

Saint Peter's examination of Dante strictly follows the recognized medieval Scholastic method that guided intellectual curiosity through clearly set-out paths for several hundreds of years. From about the twelfth century until the Renaissance, when humanism changed the traditional teaching methods in Europe, education in the Christian universities was largely Scholastic. Scholasticism (from the Latin *schola,* which originally meant a learned conversation or debate, and only later a school or place of learning) arose from an attempt to achieve knowledge concordant both with secular reason and with Christian faith. The Scholastics, such as Saint Bonaventure, considered themselves to be not innovators or original thinkers but "compilers or weavers of approved opinions."[4]

The Scholastic teaching method consisted of several steps: the *lectio,* or reading of an authoritative text in class; the *meditatio,* or exposition and explication; and the *disputationes,* or discussion of issues, rather than a critical analysis of the texts themselves. Students were expected to know the classic sources and also the approved commentaries; questions were then set for them on particular topics. From all these procedures, the "Sophist's wit" was supposed to be sternly excluded.[5]

The "Sophist's wit" was the ability to propose a false reasoning in such a way that it appeared true (the method favored by Celestina) either because it distorted the rules of logic and had only the semblance of truth or because it reached an unacceptable conclusion. The term and its pejorative meaning

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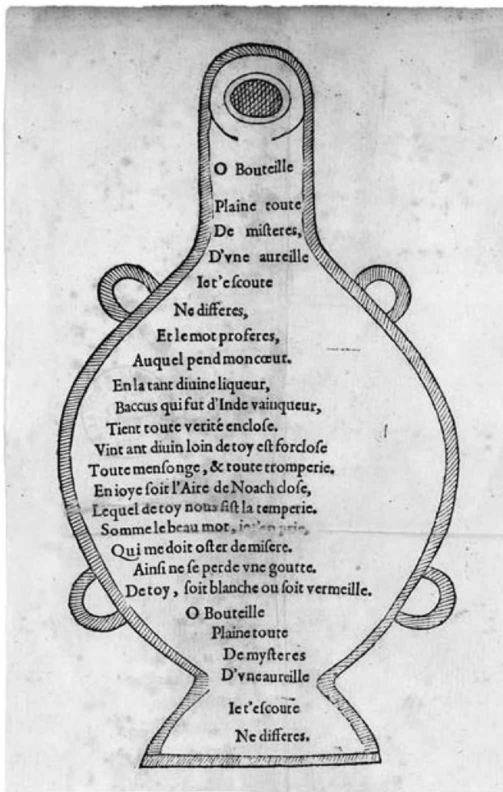
O Bouteille
Plaine toute
De miſteres,
D'vne aureille
Ie t'eſcoute
Ne differes,
Et le mot proferes,
Auquel pend mon cœur.
En la tant diuine liqueur,
Baccus qui fut d'Inde vainqueur,
Tient toute verité encloſe.
Vin tant diuin loin de toy eſt forcloſe
Toute menſonge, & toute tromperie.
En ioye ſoit l'Aire de Noach cloſe,
Lequel de toy nous fiſt la temperie.
Somme le beau mot, ie t'en prie,
Qui me doit oſter de miſere.
Ainſi ne ſe perde vne goutte.
De toy, ſoit blanche ou ſoit vermeille.
O Bouteille
Plaine toute
De myſteres
D'vne aureille
Ie t'eſcoute
Ne differes.

François Rabelais, "La Dive Bouteille" (The Oracle of the Bottle), from *Illustrations du Cinquiesme et dernier livre des faicts et dicts héroïques du bon Pantagruel,* 1565. (Bibliothèque nationale de France.)

Things are hidden under Ground, and not without reason." "All Things Tend Towards Their End," reads an inscription on the wall of the Oracle's temple: both divine and human curiosity, Rabelais seems to be saying, are meant to be pursued to their uttermost reach. Our curiosity is to be rewarded not by looking upwards to the heavens but down to earth. "For all the Ancient Philosophers and Sages have held two things necessary, safely and pleasantly to arrive at the Knowledge of God and true Wisdom: first, God's gracious Guidance, then Man's Assistance."[13] For Rabelais, as for Dante before him, the hapless Sophists were not included among those honest seekers.

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In later centuries, there were exceptions to this accepted disparagement of the Sophists, and not all of them were minor. Hegel called the early Sophists "the masters of Greece," who instead of merely meditating on the concept of being (like the philosophers of the Eleatic school) or discoursing on the facts of nature (like the *phisiologoi* of the Ionian school) chose to become professional educators. Nietzsche defined them as men who dared efface the borders between good and evil. Gilles Deleuze praised their ideas because of the interest these awaken in us. "There is no other definition of meaning," he wrote, "but one identical to a proposition's novelty."[14] Novelty, however, was not what the Sophists were after, but rather efficiency of a kind.

Sometime in the early decades of the fifth century B.C.E., perhaps during the fragile peace with Sparta after 421, there arrived in Athens a prominent philosopher from a city-state in the northwestern corner of the Peloponnese, Elis, known for the excellence of its horses and for having organized, three centuries earlier, the first Olympic Games. The name of the philosopher was Hippias, and he was celebrated for his prodigious memory (he could retain over fifty names after a single hearing) and for being able to teach, on demand and for a considerable fee, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, grammar, music, metrics, genealogy, mythology, history, and, of course, philosophy.[15] He is also credited with the discovery of a curve and the *quadratix,* used in attempts to square the circle, and also for the trisection of an angle.[16] Hippias was a voracious and curious reader, and compiled a sort of anthology of his favorite passages under the title *Synagoge,* "Collection." He also wrote declamations on the classical poets which he offered to recite whenever the occasion arose, poetic productions that probably dealt with lofty moral questions. We must say "probably" because of all of Hippias's extensive work, nothing has come down to us except a few quotations in the works of his critics: Plutarch, Xenophon, Philostratus, and, above all, Plato.[17]

Plato made Hippias the principal interlocutor of Socrates in two of his early dialogues, named, according to their length, *Hippias Minor* (or *Lesser Hippias*) and *Hippias Major.* In neither is the portrait of Hippias flattering. With little sympathy for the character, Plato has Socrates, somewhat tongue in cheek, seek from Hippias an answer to essential questions about justice and truth, knowing well that Hippias will be incapable of providing it. In his

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tentative responses, Hippias is shown as a pedant, a braggart who boasts that "I have never found any man who was my superior in anything," someone who offers to answer any conundrum put to him (as he is said to have done at the festival of all Hellas),[18] someone easily flattered and yet, at the same time, a curiously naive and trusting man. According to the classicist W. K. C. Guthrie, Hippias must have been someone "with whom it would be difficult to be angry."[19] Because he taught for money all around Greece, he was called a Sophist, a designation that referred not to a sect or a philosophical school but to a profession, that of itinerant teacher. Socrates despised the Sophists because they advertised themselves as purveyors of knowledge and virtue, two qualities that according to him were unteachable. Perhaps a few men, principally men of noble birth, could learn how to become virtuous and wise, but only on their own—and in Socrates' opinion most of humanity was hopelessly incapable of learning how to become either.

The divide between the Sophists and the followers of Socrates was largely a matter of class. Plato was an aristocrat and scorned these wandering pedagogues who set themselves up for hire in the market among the rising middle class of the nouveau riche. This class was composed of merchants and artisans whose newly acquired wealth allowed them to buy weapons and, by enrolling in the infantry, political power. Their goal was to take the place of the old nobility, and for this they needed to learn how to speak effectively in an assembly. The Sophists offered to teach them the necessary rhetorical skills in exchange for money. "The sophists," says I. F. Stone, "are treated with snobbish disdain in the pages of Plato for accepting fees. Generations of classical teachers have echoed this uncritically, though few of them could afford to teach without pay either." However, not all Sophists kept the money they were given. There were those who distributed their pay among the poorer students, and there were others who refused to teach students they deemed hopeless. But because, by and large, they agreed to teach almost anyone for cash, Xenophon argued that the Sophists stripped themselves of their intellectual freedom and became slaves to their employers.[20]

It must be said that Socrates and his followers speak in negative terms not of all Sophists, past and present, but only of the Sophists of their day. Against these contemporaries they advanced not only social and philosophical

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objections but also accusations of perverting the truth. Xenophon had this to say: "I'm astonished that the men called Sophists today maintain that they often lead young people to virtue, when in fact they do the contrary. . . . They render them skilled with words, but not skilled with ideas."[21]

The Sophists were also criticized because of their ostentatious posturing and contrived manners. In the second century C.E., Philostratus of Lemnos, who admired them and wrote *The Lives of the Sophists* to exalt them, argued that a true Sophist should speak only in a setting prestigious enough for his status: a temple would be acceptable, a theater as well, even an assembly or some place "proper to an imperial audience." Facial expressions and gestures should be carefully controlled. Faces should be cheerful and confident but serious, the eyes steady and keen, though this might vary according to the subject of the declamation. During moments of intensity, a Sophist might stride about, sway from side to side, slap his thigh, and toss his head with passion. A Sophist should be fastidiously clean and exquisitely perfumed; his beard should be well cared for and daintily curled, and his dress scrupulously elegant. A generation earlier, Lucian of Samosata, in his satirical *The Rhetorician's Vade Mecum,* recommends that the Sophist seek "bright colours or white for your clothes; the Tarentine stuff that lets the body show through is best; for shoes, wear either the Attic woman's shape with the open network, or else the Sicyonians that show white lining. Always have a train of attendants, and a book in your hand."[22]

Socrates, however much he believed in justice and truth, did not believe in the equality of all human beings. The Sophists (though one must be careful not to attribute the same opinions to all those grouped under the Sophist label) did. A few, such as Alcidamas, went so far as to challenge the institution of slavery—something Socrates and his disciples never did, any more than they questioned the right of a select enlightened few to govern. Hippias, instead, believed in a kind of practical cosmopolitanism, a universal solidarity that justified opposing even national laws for the sake of a better relationship with all men. One of the sources of this belief may have been the tolerance of foreign cults practiced at Delphos, which resulted in the unity of Greeks and "barbarians" in the age of Alexander, and also to the dissolution of the Greek polis that was so dear to Plato's heart.[23] For Hippias, laws preserved

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merely by tradition have no value because they are contradictory, allowing for unjust acts; the laws of nature, however, because they are universal, can eventually become the laws of a democratic political life. Hippias defended unwritten against written laws, and argued for the well-being of the individual through the well-being of the community. In Plato's *Republic,* where none of the existing states that are discussed is ultimately chosen as ideal, it becomes clear that Socrates (Plato's Socrates) believes in a society ruled not by democratic laws but by philosophical tyrants trained from their childhood to be "wise and good."[24]

The half-century of Plato and Hippias was also that of Pericles, who for a short, miraculous time fostered in Athens a climate of rare political and intellectual freedom, as well as an effective government administration: even the plan of erecting new buildings on the Acropolis was perhaps devised by Pericles as a way of countering growing unemployment. After Pericles, every Athenian citizen could hope to have a voice in the running of the state, as long as he possessed the gifts of rhetoric and logic. Such an ideal society attracted a variety of people from many other cities, some escaping tyranny, some seeking an outlet for their talents, others looking to ply their trade profitably and freely. Among these immigrants were the Sophists. In contrast to Athens, Sparta, with the excuse of preserving moral order and secrets of state, regularly banished resident aliens from within its walls. Athens never adopted Sparta's xenophobia, though Athenians did banish and even condemn to death those who opposed their way of life, Socrates among them.

In one of the dialogues of Plato's middle period, *Protagoras,* the Sophist of that name, a critic of Hippias and a friend of Pericles who admired the regime Pericles had instituted, tells Socrates a myth to illustrate his conception of an efficient political system. To explain how it came about that irascible humans managed to live in a peaceful society, Protagoras explains that at a time when constant bickering threatened to destroy the entire human race, Zeus sent Hermes down to earth with two gifts that would enable humans to live together in relative harmony: *aidos,* the sense of shame that a traitor might feel on the battlefield, and *dike,* a sense of justice and respect for the rights of others. Together they are the essential components of the art of pol-

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be dangerously unsound. Socrates himself recognizes this, aware as he must be of the difference between an unjust action performed justly and a just action performed unjustly.

Montaigne (quoting Erasmus) relates that Socrates' wife, upon learning the verdict of the court condemning him to drink poison, exclaimed, "Those wretched judges have condemned him to death unjustly!" To which Socrates responded, "Would you really prefer that I were *justly* condemned?"[30] But in the *Hippias Minor,* however thick Socrates lays on the irony, the unavoidable conclusion is that his arguments have led to a wrong, humanely unacceptable, conclusion. Probably this is not what Plato intended.

It is important to remember that just as the man called Hippias who has come down to us is almost entirely the interpretation of Socrates, the Socrates that we know is largely the version of Plato. "To what extent," asks George Steiner, "is the Socrates of the major dialogues a partial or largely Platonic fiction, perhaps surpassing in intellectual impact, in both tragic and comic resonance a Falstaff, a Prospero or an Ivan Karamazov?"[31] Perhaps, just as beneath the vast bulk of Falstaff we can glimpse the shadow of a different Prince Hal, and beneath the scholarly Prospero a different kind of Caliban, and even through the brutish Ivan Karamazov (the thought is very disturbing) his younger and compassionate brother Alexei, through Plato's Socrates we can discern, not the Hippias whom the inquisitive philosopher taunts and mocks, but a different, lucid, discriminating thinker, curious about the logic of curiosity.

The society set up by Pericles did not survive the Macedonian armies or, later, the Roman colonists. Nor did the philosophy of the Sophists, except in the quotations of their detractors. Their books vanished, as did most of the details of their lives, but the remaining fragments of their work, and the depictions of their characters in the works of others, reveal a thriving desire to know more in a complex constellation of ideas and discoveries, not the least of which is the refusal to follow the apparent logic of the man who called himself "the midwife of thought" up a particularly devious garden path.[32]

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4

How Can We See What We Think?

Until well into my adolescence, I was unaware of the concept of translation. I was brought up in two languages, English and German, and the passage from one to the other was not, in my childhood, an attempt to convey the same meaning from one language to another but simply another form of address, depending on whom I was speaking to. The same fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm read in my two different languages became two different fairy tales: the German version, printed in thick Gothic characters and illustrated with gloomy watercolors, told one story; the English version, in clear, large type, accompanied by black-and-white engravings, told another. Obviously they were not the same story because they looked different on the page.

Eventually, I discovered that the changing text remains in essence the same. Or, rather, that one text can acquire different identities in different tongues, a process in which every constituent part is discarded and replaced by something else: vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and music, as well as cultural, historical, and emotional characteristics. In *De vulgari eloquentia,* "On the Vernacular Tongue," a linguistic treatise written in Latin but defending the use of endemic speech, Dante lists the constituent parts of language that

(Opposite) Dante and Virgil at the Gate of Hell. Woodcut illustrating Canto III of the Inferno, *printed in 1487 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)*

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are replaced in passing from one tongue to another: "In the first place, the musical component, in the second place, the disposition of each part in relation to the others, in the third place, the number of verses and syllables."

But how do these ever-changing identities remain a single identity? What allows me to say that different translations of Grimms' *Fairy Tales* or the *Arabian Nights* or Dante's *Commedia* are, in fact, one and the same book? An old philosophical conundrum asks whether a person whose every body part has been replaced by artificial organs and limbs remains the same person. In which of our members lies our identity? In which of a poem's elements lies the poem? This, I felt, was the core mystery: if a literary text is all the various things that allow us to call it Grimms' *Fairy Tales* or the *Arabian Nights,* what remains when every one of these things is exchanged for something else? Is translation a disguise that allows the text to converse with those outside its circle, like the peasant clothes worn by the caliph Haroun Al-Rashid that enabled him to mingle among common folk? Or is it a usurpation, like that perpetrated by the maid in the tale of Fallada, the Speaking Horse, who takes her mistress's place and undeservedly marries the prince? What degree of original identity can a translation claim?

Every form of writing is, in a sense, a translation of the words thought or spoken into a visible, concrete representation. Penning my first words in English with their rounded *n*s and *m*s, or in German, with their *N*s and *M*s sharp-tipped as waves, I became conscious that a text not only changed from one vocabulary to another, but from one materialization to a different one. When I read, in a Kipling story, of a love letter sent as a bundle of objects to be deciphered by the beloved, each object representing a word or a cluster of words, I realized that my scribbles were not the only method of bringing words into material being. Here was another one, made up of stones and flowers and such things. Were there other methods, I wondered. Did words, the representation of our thoughts, make them visibly present in yet other ways?

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He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

Whether or not a question leads us up the garden path may depend not only on the words chosen to ask it but on the appearance and presentation of those words. We have long understood the importance of the physical aspect of the text, and not only of its contents, to transmit our meanings. In the third- or fifth-century C.E. *Life of Adam and Eve* (a text included in the Apocrypha, of which there are many versions in various languages) Eve asks her son Seth to write down her story and that of his father, Adam. She says to him, "But listen to me, my child! Make tablets of stone and others of clay, and write on them all my life and your father's and all that you have heard and seen from us. If by water the Lord judge our race, the tablets of clay will be dissolved and the tablets of stone will remain; but if by fire, the tablets of stone will be broken up and the tablets of clay will be baked [hard]."[1] Every text depends on the features of its support, be it clay or stone, paper or computer screen. No text is ever exclusively virtual, independent of its material context: every text, even an electronic one, is defined by both its words and the space in which those words exist.

In the Heaven of Mars, Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida tells him of the good old days when Florence was an exemplary, decent place to live in, and in prophetic tones announces the poet's forthcoming exile. Dante, moved by the encounter, is then guided by Beatrice to the Heaven of Jupiter. The souls who greet him there begin to flock together, forming words that Dante slowly and joyfully deciphers:

Like birds that rise above a riverbank,
As if rejoicing all over their food,
And form into a circle or other line,

thought. And Virgil leads Dante on "into the secret things."[5] The journey commences.

The second time language materializes is when the guardian angel of Purgatory inscribes on Dante's forehead with the point of his sword the seven *P*s of the seven deadly sins (*Peccati*). These Dante himself cannot see, but as he climbs the Mount, cornice after cornice, *P* after *P* is wiped off, until he is cleansed enough to reach the summit where stands the Garden of Eden. The inscription of the *P*s and their gradual erasure are part of a necessary ritual that must be accomplished before the heavenly ascension. In front of the entrance are three steps, representing (according to some commentators) contrition of heart, confession of sins, expiation by works; beyond is the steep climb during which, the angel warns Dante, he must not look back. Echoing the warning to Lot's wife, he orders Dante not to yearn for the old sinful ways:

> Enter, but I warn you
> That he returns outside who here looks back.

The *P*s on Dante's forehead, which he himself cannot read but which he knows are there, materialize the cautionary language.[6]

All writing is the art of materializing thought. "When a word is written," wrote Saint Augustine, "it makes a sign to the eyes whereby that which is the domain of the ears enters the mind."[7] Writing belongs to a group of conjuring arts related to the visualizing and transmission of ideas, emotions, and intuitions. Painting, singing, and reading are all part of this peculiar human activity born of the capacity to imagine the world in order to experience it. On an inconceivable afternoon, a very long time ago, a remote ancestor of ours realized for the first time that he or she did not need to perform an action in order to know it; that the action performed itself in the mind and that it could be observed, explored, reflected upon in a time and space of its own making. Imagining something led to naming that something—that is to say, translating the visualized something into an equivalent of sound, so that the enunciation of the sound might conjure back the image of the thing like a witch's charm. In some societies, the sound was given in turn a material representation: markings in a handful of clay, notches in a

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piece of wood, designs on a polished stone, scribbles on a page. Experience of reality could now be encoded by the tongue or the hand, and decoded through the ear or the eye. Like an illusionist showing a flower in a box, then causing it to disappear, then bringing it back again in front of the public's astonished gaze, our ancestor made it possible for us to perform magic.

Readers belong to societies of the written word and, as every member of such societies must (but not all do), they try to learn the code by which their fellow citizens communicate. Not every society requires the visual encoding of its language: for many, sound is enough. The old Latin tag *scripta manent, verba volant,* which is supposed to mean "what is written endures, but what is spoken vanishes," is obviously not true in oral societies, where the meaning might be "what is written remains dead on the page, but what is said out loud has wings and flies." That is also the meaning readers discover: only when read do the written words come to life.

Two schools of thought offer competing theories of language. A detailed discussion is far beyond the scope of this book, but in general terms, nominalists have long held that only individual things are real—that is to say, things exist independent of the mind, and words cannot refer to something real unless they refer to an individual thing—while realists, though they too maintain that we live in a world that exists independent of us and our thoughts, believe that there are certain kinds of things, called "universals," that do not owe their existence to the individuals of which they are attributes, but can, like these individuals, be named with words. Language generously embraces the two beliefs and names both individuals and universals. Perhaps because in societies of the written word this faith in the syncretic power of language is less strong, its members rely instead on the materialization of the word to affirm language's life-giving power. *Verba* are not enough, they need the *scripta.*

In 1976, the psychologist Julian Jaynes suggested that when language was first developed in humans, it manifested itself in aural hallucinations: the words were generated by the right hemisphere of the brain but they were identified by the left as coming from somewhere in the world outside us. According to Jaynes when written language was invented in the third millennium B.C.E., we "heard" the written signs as voices which we perhaps attributed to communicative gods, and only in the first millennium B.C.E. did these

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voices become internalized.[8] The earliest readers may have experienced a hallucinatory sense of sound, so that the words read by the eyes acquired in the reading a physical presence in the ear, a second reality outside the mind that echoed or mirrored the primary reality of the written words.

Certainly the passage from spoken to written language was less an improvement in quality than a change in direction. Plato invented a myth in which the Egyptian god Thoth offered the pharaoh the gift of language, but the pharaoh explained to the god that he was obliged to refuse it because if people learned to write they would forget to remember. Plato failed to mention, because it did not suit his story, that thanks to writing speakers were now able to overcome the limitations imposed by time and space. They would not need to be present in order to deliver their speeches and, across the centuries, the dead would be able to converse with the living. Less immediate, less corporeal, less reactive than the art of speech, the art of writing simultaneously strengthened and diminished the power of the wordsmith. This, of course, is true of every contraption or tool in whatever craft we use it. G. K. Chesterton defined a chair as "an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two."[9]

Either as the inspiration that led to the invention of writing or as its consequence, the assumption that justifies the existence of writing as an instrument of thought is one of linguistic fatalism. Just as everything in the universe can be given a name to identify it, and every name can be expressed in a sound, every sound has its representation. Nothing can be uttered that cannot be written down and read. Nothing: not even the words of God dictated to Moses, not even the songs of whales transcribed by biologists, not even the sound of silence notated by John Cage. Dante understood this law of material representation: in his Paradise, the souls of the blessed appear to him as faces emerging from a cloudy mirror and gradually take on a clear and recognizable form. In fact, like thoughts, they have no corporeality since in Heaven there is no space or time, but they kindly assume visible features, like written signs, so that Dante can be witness to the experience of the life to come. The spirits themselves don't need crutches; we do.

We know little of the aesthetics of the Otherworld, but in our own, every instrument we create, and everything created by that instrument, is ruled by

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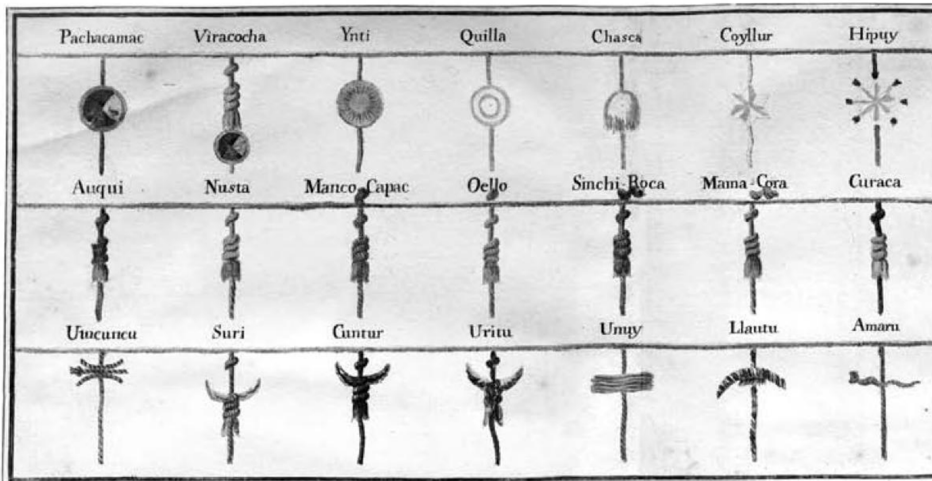
both an aesthetic and a utilitarian sense. Everything: when a school in Phnom Penh was transformed by the Khmer Rouge into a so-called security prison where more than twenty thousand people were tortured and killed, the authorities decided that the color of the building was not aesthetically pleasing; the walls were therefore repainted in a soft tone of beige.[10]

Aesthetics and utility also shape the representations of language. The most ancient fragment of writing that has come down to us, dating from the fourth millennium B.C.E., is a Sumerian clay tablet from Uruk, the city of King Gilgamesh, and consists of columns of cuneiform signs punctuated by deep indentations. Our romantically inclined souls must accept that the first written texts were the handicraft not of poets but of accountants: that ancient Sumerian tablet does not hold love songs but lists the sale of grain and cattle by farmers long turned to dust. We can suppose that for its readers, such a list had both a practical aspect and a certain, perhaps unacknowledged beauty. For those of us who are incapable of deciphering the meaning, it is this second feature that prevails.

Written language, serving a variety of purposes and obeying a diversity of aesthetic norms, gradually developed almost everywhere in the world. Sumeria and Babylon, Egypt and Greece and Rome, China and India developed their own scripts, which in turn inspired those of other cultures: in Southeast Asia, in Ethiopia and Sudan, among the Inuit people. Other peoples, however, imagined different methods to lend words material visibility. In many parts of the world there is an art of writing that involves not penned or incised markings but other semantic signs: strips of bamboo in southern Sumatra, message sticks among the Australian aborigines, wreaths of twigs in the Torre Straits Islands, wampum belts among the Iroquois, wooden *lukasa* boards among the Luba people of Zaire. It follows then that there must be something equivalent to an art of typography for each of these "other" forms, each with its particular aesthetics and readability. These "typographies" may not be used in printing, but they affect and shape the conveying of meaning through words, in much the same way as a Garamond or a Bodoni affects and shapes a text written in English, Italian, or French.

In the year 1606, there appeared in Madrid a curious book titled *Comentarios reales.*[11] The title played on both meanings of the Spanish word *real,*



Phonetic translation of a *quipu.* Hand-colored illustration from [Raimondo di Sangro,] *Carta Apologetica dell' Esercitato Accademico della Crusca* (Naples, 1750). (By kind permission of Professor José Burucúa)

"royal" and "existing in reality," because these *Comentarios* purported to be the true chronicles of royal Incas of Peru. The author, born of a Spanish captain and an Inca princess, signed his book "Inca Garcilaso de la Vega," thus acknowledging both lineages. He had been brought up by Spanish tutors in his father's house in Cuzco who taught the boy Latin grammar and physical sports, but also by relatives of his mother who taught him Quechua, the language of Peru. At the age of twenty-one, he traveled to Spain, where he began his literary career translating the *Dialogues of Love* of the Spanish neoplatonist Leon Hebreo. Keen on being recognized as a true historian of the Inca culture, he titled the second part of his Inca chronicles, which appeared eleven years after the first, *Historia general del Perú.*

In the *Comentarios reales,* the Inca Garcilaso gives a detailed account of the customs, religion, and government of the Incas, as well as of their language, oral and written. One chapter describes the system of *quipu* ("knot" in the Quechua language), which served, the author tells us, essentially as a counting device. To make quipu, the Incas used threads of different colors, braided and knotted, and sometimes fixed onto a cane. Colors symbolized

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and left no scratches, a technique for producing brass sheets thinner than any other produced until then, a procedure for making translucent porcelain and the slimmest possible crystal, a system for coloring glass without having to heat it, indelible pastel crayons that required no fixing, an artificial wax and "oleohydric" colors that resembled oil paints but needed no previous preparation of the canvas or wood. He also invented a machine for desalinizing seawater and another for making false agates and lapis lazuli, with which he tricked many a reputable jeweler. He devised a method for hardening marble which allowed sculptors to chisel it down to unheard-of thinness, so that they could now create transparent veils and delicate lacework in stone. He also built two anatomical machines, still visible in the Sansevero family crypt in Naples, that reproduced the circulatory system of a man and a woman, from the heart to the tiniest capillaries. Among his most fanciful creations were a table that laid itself for dinner without the need for servants, and a water chariot adorned with horses made of cork that could cover a fair distance through the waves of the Bay of Naples.

People began to suspect that Sansevero was assisted in his inventions by the devil himself; it was rumored that he had brewed a substance akin to blood, and also that he had been able to bring river-crabs back to life after they had been burnt to cinders in the hearth. It was said that, like Paracelsus, he could make a rose bloom again from its ashes. Neapolitans later believed that the prince had taken his own life after instructing his servants to perform a resurrection procedure which his wife, alerted to this sacrilege, had piously interrupted. The corpse had barely the time to step out of its coffin before it uttered a hideous shriek and crumbled to mortal dust.

Among the books issued from Sansevero's press in the year of its founding, 1750, perhaps the most curious one was the *Apologetic Letter,* composed by Sansevero himself, and accompanied by superb color plates. The subject of the *Letter* was the quipu system of the ancient Incas. Our investigative prince, interested as he was in everything, came to know about the quipu through the books of the Inca Garcilaso but also through a Jesuit treatise on the Inca language illustrated with several colored sketches of a variety of knots accompanied by explanations of their meanings. He also saw the real thing: an original quipu brought from the Spanish colonies. The books and the quipu

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had come into the hands of a Jesuit father who had been to the New World and had sold the lot to the prince in 1745.

Two years later, in 1747, a French bluestocking, Madame Françoise de Graffigny, following the vogue of epistolary novels begun with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters,* had published *Letters of a Peruvian Lady.* Graffigny's love story concerns two aristocratic Incas, Zilia and Aza, who are engaged to be married. Zilia is kidnapped by Spanish soldiers, and to let her betrothed know of her sad fate, she secretly sends him letters from prison in the form of knotted quipu, using a stock of colored threads that she always carried with her. Poor Zilia is forced to accompany her raptors back to Europe, where she continues to tie her knots, but she is unable to get them to Aza, far across the sea. In the end, her stock of threads runs out and she must learn the European art of writing in ink in order to carry on her lovesick correspondence.

Sansevero was convinced that an efficient writing system based on knots had indeed existed in the Inca Empire, but in the Europe of the Enlightenment such non-European inventions, so different from the traditional Western models, were regarded with more than skepticism. Anxious to engage in a debate on the authenticity and efficacy of the quipu, in which he believed, and unable or unwilling to find among the published detractions a propitious text, Sansevero invented a critical response to the novel of Madame Graffigny, attributing the text to a friend, the Duchess of S***. Thus armed, Sansevero proceeded to debate the nonexistent tract, ending the *Apologetic Letter* with an entreaty to the Duchess of S*** to become herself a quipucumayac, or story-weaver, and write her next book in the knotted script of the quipu.

Sansevero's entangled argumentation in his *Apologetic Letter,* full of distracted asides composed in a deliciously convoluted prose, tackles among its many subjects the universal origins of language, the invention of writing, the hidden truths of the Bible, the meaning of the mark of Cain, the ancestral custom of poets in the Inca Empire, and the detailed analysis of certain quipu texts in the author's possession, a copy of one of which had been quoted and translated in the Inca Garcilaso's book.

Sansevero began with the assumption that the quipu were readable—that is to say, that they were constructed according to a code that allowed

both words and numbers to be transmitted by means of the system of colored knots. Anticipating Champollion's methods by half a century, Sansevero began by identifying in the quipu some forty key words common in the Quechua tongue, such as "vassal," "Princess," "Divine Creator," and the like, that the Quechua poets would have dictated to the weavers in charge of knotting the quipu. For these basic concepts, Sansevero believed he could identify certain underlying quipu patterns, equivalent to linguistic signs.

A couple of examples: the Quechua word for "Divine Creator" is *Pachacamac.* According to Sansevero, the core sign would have been a yellow knot symbolizing the Creator's eternal light. This central knot would contain four threads of different colors: red for fire, blue for air, brown for earth, and emerald for water. However, the same central sign could stand for the word for "sun" (*ynti* in Quechua), and though it would dispense with the four colored threads, it would include several yellow threads, knotted from the inside out.

The word for *ñandú,* a small South American flightless bird, is *suri* in Quechua: in the quipu it would be represented by the same knots as those depicting a human being, but the distance between the knots would be greater, to indicate the bird's long neck.

According to Sansevero, the Inca poets would have been able to write all other words they required by dividing them into syllables and looking for corresponding syllables in one of the basic words. Smaller knots were then made following the one for the key word, thus indicating which syllable was meant. For instance, if a word began with the syllable *su,* the knots for *suri* would be tied, followed by one smaller knot. Then, if the second syllable of the word were *mac,* the knot for *Pachacamac* would be tied, followed by four smaller knots. The resulting word is *sumac,* the first word of the poem included in the *Comentarios reales.*

On 29 February 1752, the Augustinian Domenico Giorgi entered the *Apologetic Letter* into the Catholic *Index of Prohibited Books,* branding the text as a Kabbalistic production that mocked the True Faith. Father Giorgi traced Sansevero's interpretation and defense of the quipu to the pagan hieroglyphs of Egypt, the Pythagorean numbers of the Rosicrucians and the *sephirot* of the Jews. The Kabbalists, according to Father Giorgi, maintained

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that God is our brother, and compared the Almighty and his Adam to knots that are bound on the same piece of string. The quipu, argued Father Giorgi, were the New World representation of this horrendous blasphemy. A year later, Sansevero published a plea in defense of his *Apologetic Letter.* His arguments proved unconvincing, and the Holy See maintained its interdiction. On 22 March 1771, Raimondo di Sangro, prince of Sansevero, died in Naples, his work unredeemed.

For a contemporary reader, Sansevero's *Apologetic Letter* remains an enigma. No doubt the variety, ingenuity, craftsmanship, and beauty of the quipu (many depicted in the superb color sheets of Sansevero's book) are extraordinary. As in traditional Western typography, the art of the quipu, while conveying the meaning of the text it contains, is above all a visual art and, like all writing, born of images.[14] Writing does not reproduce the spoken word: it renders it visible. But the code to that visibility must be shared in the society in which the artist works. "Typography," says the Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst in the introduction to his typographical handbook, "thrives as a shared concern—and there are no paths at all where there are no shared desires and directions."[15] From our distant place, we lack the clues to help us understand what those desires and directions were in the Inca Empire; we must assume that the examples of quipu that have come down to us have features that a reader in that society would have been able to identify as distinct one from the other, some graceful and some clumsy, some clear and others blurry, a few distinctly original and most conventional—if grace, clarity, and originality were qualities that an Inca reader would recognize or care about.

A number of recent scholars are of the opinion that Sansevero's proposed syllabic method for reading the quipu was inspired less by the science of linguistics than by the rebus and charades popular in the European press of the eighteenth century.[16] These scholars believe that, while highly sophisticated, the quipu was no more than a counting system and a mnemonic device such as those used in the Americas from the coast of British Columbia to the tip of the southern Andes. It is true that today, in certain parts of Peru, quipu are used exclusively for storing numerical information, but a number of Spanish documents from colonial times tell of quipucamaya who, using

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the knots as memory aids, could recite lengthy chronicles and poems and preserve the documentary memory of past events. In other cultures, poets have used rhyme and alliteration for a similar purpose.

In the Inca society, the quipu was also an instrument that facilitated the maintenance of order. "The wars, cruelties, pillages and tyranny of the Spaniards had been such that if these Indians had not been accustomed to order and providence, they would all have perished," wrote Pedro Cieza de Leon in 1553. "After the Spaniards had passed through," the chronicler continues, the Inca chieftains "came together with the keepers of the quipu, and if one had expended more than the others, those who had given less made up the difference, so that all were on equal footing."[17]

"Typography is to literature," says Bringhurst, "as musical performance is to composition: an essential act of interpretation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness."[18] Except that in the case of the quipu we do not know what is revealing and what is obtuse, and their reading, both aesthetic and hermeneutical, must necessarily consist largely of guesswork. Inspired guesswork, perhaps, but guesswork nevertheless.

There may, however, be a few clues to understanding something of that (to us mysterious) practical and aesthetic sense that ruled the quipu artisans of the Inca Empire. It is a fact that when the Spaniards sacked the Inca cities, the beautifully crafted gold artifacts that they collected from the royal treasuries and private homes were melted down into ingots, for an easier distribution of the loot. Today, engraved in stone over the door of the Museum of Gold in Santafé de Bogotá, the visitor can read the following verses, addressed by a native poet to his Spanish conquerors: "I am marveled by your blindness and folly, that you undo such lovely jewels and turn them into bricks and stones."

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the same with the Bible to find guidance in his long moments of despair. Every book can be, for the right reader, an oracle, responding on occasion even to questions unasked, as if putting words to what Joseph Brodsky called "a silent beat." The vast oracle of the Internet is less useful to me; probably because I'm a poor navigator of cyberspace, its answers are either too literal or too banal.

In my library, at the exact height of my arm's reach, are the works of Brodsky. In the early sixties, Brodsky, accused of some imaginary plot by the KGB, was condemned twice to a psychiatric asylum and later to internal exile in a prison camp in the north of Russia, where he was made to work on a state farm in temperatures of below thirty degrees Celsius. In spite of the terrible conditions, and thanks to a benevolent supervisor, he was allowed to send and receive letters, and also to write (he'd later say) "a fair amount" of poetry. Friends sent him books. Four poets became essential for him because of what he called their "uniqueness of soul": Robert Frost, Marina Tseve-taeva, Constantin Cavafy, and W. H. Auden. Auden had once said that Frost's favorite image was that of an abandoned house fallen into ruin. In a conversation with Brodsky, the critic Solomon Volkov reminded him that whereas in European poetry a ruin is usually associated with war or pillaged nature, in Frost it became "a metaphor for courage, an image of man's hope-less struggle for survival." Without reducing the image to an explanation, Brodsky agreed with Volkov's reading, but he preferred this knowledge to lie dormant, not immediately apparent. Brodsky distrusted any account of the events surrounding the creative act: the text should be allowed to speak alone, in an amorous entanglement with the reader. "Circumstances," he said, "may recur—prison, persecution, exile—but the result, in the sense of art, is unre-peatable. Dante was not the only one, after all, to be exiled from Florence."

Years later, after being himself exiled from Russia, sitting outdoors one winter in the Venice he loved, he read the mazes of the city built on water as he had read his poets in the frozen Russian north: as something "in which life speaks to man." Brodsky wrote, "The city, while words are at it, / is akin to attempts to salvage notes from a silent beat."

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"O where are you going?" said reader to rider,
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return."

—W. H. Auden, *Five Songs,* V

Often, the most difficult questioning begins with inspired guesswork. Arriving at the foot of Mount Purgatory, Virgil warns Dante that he must not be curious about everything because not everything lies within human ken.

> Mad is he who hopes that our reason
> may travel along the endless path
> that one substance in three persons takes.
>
> Be content, you human race, with *quia:*
> For if you'd been able to see all
> Mary would not have needed to give birth;
>
> And you have seen the fruitless yearning of those who
> Might have succeeded in contenting their desire
> Given to them eternally to mourn.

To clarify his point, Virgil adds, "I mean Aristotle, Plato too / and many others." Then he bends his head and remains silent, because he too is one of those who tried to content his desire.[1]

Scholasticism insisted on the acceptance of consequences: this tenet was deemed enough to offer substance for thought to the limited capacities of the human mind. Aquinas made the distinction clear between wanting to know why and wanting to know what. "Demonstration is two-fold," he wrote in his *Summa Theologica.* "The one demonstrates by means of the cause, and is called

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propter quid . . . the other by means of the effect, and is called *quia.*" In other words, don't ask *why* something exists, but merely start from the *because* and explore its existence. In the early years of the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon would take the opposite view on human inquiry: "If a man will begin with certainties," Bacon argued, "he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."[2]

For inquiring, for reflecting, for reasoning out, for demonstrating, language is obviously the essential tool. Immediately after his exile, as if the loss of his world demanded the reassurance that he still possessed his language, Dante began to write *De vulgari eloquentia,* his treatise on the vernacular tongue and its use in lyric poetry. Boccaccio, as we have mentioned, relates that the *Commedia* was perhaps begun in Latin and then changed to Florentine Italian. *De vulgari eloquentia,* perhaps because Dante felt that a scholarly instrument allowed him better to explore the language deemed vulgar ("of the people"), is written in the elegant Latin of the Scholastics. For several centuries, the text was scarcely read: only three medieval manuscripts survive, and it was not printed until 1577.

De vulgari eloquentia begins with the scandalous statement that the language of the people, learned by infants at their parents' knee, is nobler than the artificial and legislated language learned in school. To justify his claim, Dante traces the history of language from the biblical story to his own time. The first language of the world, Dante says, a God-given gift that allowed humans to communicate with one another, was Hebrew; the first speaker, Adam. After the arrogant attempt to build the Tower of Babel, that single primordial language shared by all people was, as a punishment, divided into many, thus preventing communication and causing confusion. The punishment endures: language separates us not only from our contemporaries in other nations but also from our ancestors, who spoke differently from the way we speak ourselves.

Having reached the Heaven of Fixed Stars, Dante now encounters the soul of Adam, who tells him that "not the tasting of the tree / was of itself the cause of so great a banishment / but the overstepping of the mark." Dante then asks Adam the questions that his contemporaries had long been troubled by: How long was his sojourn in Eden? How long did he afterwards live

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on earth? How much time did he spend in Limbo before Christ recalled him? And finally, what was the language Adam spoke in Eden? To this last question, Adam answers:

> The tongue I spoke had all died out
> Before the unaccomplishable task
> Was by the people of Nimrod undertaken:
>
> Never did our mind effect something
> (For all human pleasure is renewed
> As is the sky) that lasts unchanged forever.
>
> It is Nature's gift that humans speak;
> But if this way or that, Nature allows
> For you to do according to your choice.[3]

Dante's ideas regarding the origins of language have changed here since *De vulgari eloquentia.* In the treatise, he had argued that it was God who both empowered Adam to speak and gave him the language to do so. In the *Commedia,* Adam says that while the gift of speech was indeed bestowed upon him, it was he who created the language he spoke, a first human language that became extinct before Babel. But what was that primordial language? Giving examples of what God was called before the Fall and after, Adam uses Hebrew terms: first "J," pronounced *jah,* then "El," meaning "the Mighty."[4] The reader must conclude therefore that the language spoken in Eden was Hebrew.

In *De vulgari eloquentia,* Dante attempts to justify the preeminence of Hebrew. God had bestowed upon Adam a *forma locutionis,* a "linguistic form." "By this linguistic form spoke all his descendants up to the construction of the Tower of Babel, which has been interpreted as the 'tower of confusion.' This was the linguistic form inherited by the Sons of Eber, who were called Hebrews after him. This remained with them exclusively after the confusion [of tongues], so that our Savior, who because of the human side of His nature had to be born of them, was able to use a language not of confusion but of grace. That was how the Hebrew language was devised by the first being endowed with speech."[5]

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