

# Speculative Sons of Ulysses and the Inhuman “Worlds without People”\*

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## Abstract:

The paper focuses on the repeated and systematic references to the figure of Ulysses in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, and Reza Negarestani. These are not random occurrences; Ulysses represents a key figure in the mutually interconnected visions and reflections related to the idea of a “world without people” that binds the named authors implicitly and explicitly to the originally Dantean imagery. Through a detailed exposition of the Ulyssean positions of the philosophers in question, the essay demonstrates twofold: first, that the “nihilistic branch” of speculative realism can be read as a specific inversion of the Dantean agenda, and second, that in light of the arguments of “transcendental nihilism” and the logical radicalization of the Ulyssean figure, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* can be read as an anachronistic speculative project.

**Keywords:** Ulysses; Odysseus; Dante Alighieri; Quentin Meillassoux; Ray Brassier; Eugene Thacker; Reza Negarestani; new materialism; speculative realism; transcendental nihilism; nihilism; correlationism; extinction; biopolitics; inhumanity

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*“Richie... I’m here to make peace. Tell me what I got to do to make things right.”*

*“You could do something, I guess.”*

*“You could die, Joey.”*

*History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005)

*“I was told that this road would take me to the ocean of death, and turned back half way. Since then crooked, roundabout, godforsaken paths stretch out before me.”*

*“Well?” I asked.*

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *One Billion Years to the End of the World* (1976)

*“What did he really see on the other side of the mountain?”*

Jerry Pournelle, *He Fell Into a Dark Hole* (1973)

True to his polytropic nature, Ulysses used to be many things: a counsellor, a sailor, a colonist, a saviour, a humanist, a fraud, a capitalist abroad. But he never went so far as to become a nihilist; not until his recent speculative turn, after which he once again declared himself a nobody, this time for real: becoming *no body in a no man’s land*.

He has likewise become a figure of strange regression, so once we begin to track his exploits across the contemporary philosophical waters – which is exactly what we are about to do – we will have to “follow the sea”<sup>1</sup> inland, and head upstream to the godforsaken outposts of Quentin Meillassoux, Nick Land, Ray Brassier, Eugene Thacker, or Reza Negarestani. That we identify this navigation with Marlowe’s journey is no mere whim. In the speculative heart of darkness, where the wide sea of Enlightenment dissolves into the persistent and, as it were, undecided humidity of transcendental nihilism, we do indeed encounter a figure no less strange than the eloquent Kurtz, himself a heir to a certain Ulyssean tradition: a figure who gets lost in the primeval interiors, who has been hollowed by the internalized vacancy of the uninhabitable world, and who once again wants to “exterminate all the brutes.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Conrad, J., *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. Ed. C. Watts. Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press 2002, p. 104.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 155. For Kurtz – Dante – Ulysses connection, see Feder, L., Marlow’s descent into hell. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9, 1955, No. 4, pp. 280–292; Evans, R. O., Conrad’s underworld. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2, 1956, No. 2, pp. 56–92; or Nohrnberg, J., Eight Reflections of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. *Victorian Poetry*, 47, 2009, No. 1, pp. 101–150, 134–135.

Fellow travellers should nevertheless be warned that the forthcoming mission will be long. *Really* long. Because as with Conrad's Marlowe, our task is not just to chart Ulysses' path to an inhuman finale, but to relate him anew to the scars of his Dantean origins. We will therefore also have to spend some time with the *Divine Comedy*, and approach it "as if it were posterior"<sup>3</sup> to speculative realism, as if it had been built on speculative foundations. For in the end, to paraphrase another Ulyssean tracker, the actual goal of this essay is to arrange an anachronistic stereoscopic view that will allow us to navigate a certain stream of speculative realism as a quasi-Ulyssean route, and that will also make it possible to expose what is already inhuman about the Dante's mariner.<sup>4</sup>

Ulysses himself, no less cunning than his Greek "stealthy" predecessor, does not make our endeavour much easier; if we look at him from too great a summarizing distance, his speculative deployment begins to appear as a banal series of thick habitual figurations. If, on the other hand, we focus on just one author, he begins to slim down before our eyes, into an anaemic spectre. And that would be a shame. For despite all of the differences or outright animosities between the authors quoted below, Ulysses runs through their works as an artful operative of a shared *pathic* agenda, whose specifics only become apparent in a panoramatic, reorganized, yet accurate montage of statements by the authors themselves. Only such a journey will expose Ulysses' recurring and persistent presence, or, more precisely, his escalating, speculative radicalization.

## 1. The Great Pardon

Let's have a short briefing just to look over the Ulyssean stations along the speculative basin. And let's not get distracted when the sailor marks his presence with the Greek signature, or when his name is missing from the transaction records. Because even when his name isn't heard – for purely stylistic reasons anyway – he is there, incognito in plain sight.

So here's the situation: François Laruelle, who equipped the speculative expeditions with one of the game-changing methodological toolkits, made Odysseus a non-philosophical hero that "brushes against the encyclopaedia, without returning to Noah's arch of absolute knowing," just as he tasks him

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3 Borges, J. L., Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote. Quoted in Joy, E. A., *Weird Reading*. In: Austin, M. – et al. (eds.), *Speculations IV: Speculative Realism*. New York, Punctum Books 2013, pp. 28–34, esp. p. 33.

4 Pokorný, M., *Odezvy a znaky: Homér, Dante a Joyceův Odysseus*. Prague, Jitro 2008, p. 215.

to drag his non-philosophy “from shore to shore, without ever finding solid ground.”<sup>5</sup>

Graham Harman promotes Odysseus straight to a role model: if “courage is one of those moods in which we treat ourselves less as free subjects than as objects,” and if we are “courageous, not as a thinking subject, but as the valiant leader,” then “what we really want is to be objects – not as means to an end, like paper or oil, but in the sense that we want to be like the Grand Canyon or a guitar hero, or a piece of silver: distinct forces to be reckoned with. No one really wants to be a Cartesian subject, but everyone would love to be some version of [...] Odysseus.”<sup>6</sup>

Timothy Morton finds his Odysseus in Star Wars’ Han Solo (whose Scylla and Charybdis are replaced by a black hole and a space monster), and asks us to emulate him in being “crafty,” for unlike the legislation of the imperial subjects who would like to systematize it all from a privileged point above the world, craft is an ad hoc blue-collar *knowhow* that you learn, a skill that has no generalizing ambitions.<sup>7</sup>

Quentin Meillassoux demands more. Instead of struggling to overcome the monstrous forces and get back home, we shall give Odysseus a nudge, and make him “plunge [...] into the whirlpool of the inhuman Universe that confronts us.”<sup>8</sup>

Nick Land does not need to be persuaded twice; he just cannot be “dissuaded from putting [himself] to sea again” and readily follows “a fellow voyager in madness,” to “cross the line into death, which is called Hell, because the police control Heaven.”<sup>9</sup> Not unlike Emile M. Cioran, who intends to sail against the tide of all romanticized spiritual Odysseys, and “destroy everything that is noncosmic in me.”<sup>10</sup> And not unlike Reza Negarestani, who

5 Laruelle, F., *Theory of Identities*. Transl. A. Edlebi. New York, Columbia University Press 2016, p. x–xi.

6 Harman, G., *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago, Open Court 2005, pp. 140–141.

7 Morton, T., *Spacecraft*. London–New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2022, p. 13.

8 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning. In: Avanesian, A. – Malik, S. (eds.), *Genealogies of Speculation. Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism*. Transl. R. Mackay – M. Gansen. London–New York, Bloomsbury Academic 2016, pp. 117–197, esp. pp. 183–184.

9 Land, N., Voyages in Irony (November 29, 2014). In: Fiori, U. (ed.), *Reignition. Nick Land’s Writings (2011–). Tome III. Xenosystems: Involvements with Reality* [eBook], [s. l., s. n.] 2020, pp. 905–908; Land, N., *The thirst for annihilation. Georges Bataille and virulent nihilism (an essay in atheistic religion)*. New York–London, Routledge 1992, p. 132.

10 Cioran, E. M., *Tears and Saints*. Transl. Z.-J. Ilinca. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1995, p. 103.

makes Odysseus the key hero of his own “katabasis to Hades, [to the] abyss of the intelligible,” and of the “openness to and by the dead.”<sup>11</sup>

Something strange is going on here; our authors may not exactly be in harmony with each other, but they seem to communicate on the same frequency within the naval blockade of the continental philosophical tradition. Not only did they accept Ulysses into their midst: despite the hard time he had in 20<sup>th</sup> century waters, they have also fully rehabilitated him. This is no insubstantial amnesty, as he has been letting everyone down for at least a couple of decades: if Alfred North Whitehead saw him guilty of “the short-range function of Reason” and the “major disasters of mankind [that] have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good methodology,”<sup>12</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer couldn’t forgive him for the exact opposite; for the all-encompassing victory of the pragmatic Enlightenment wit. If Milan Kundera, Paul Ricoeur, and Emmanuel Lévinas blamed him for choosing “the apotheosis of the known rather than ardent exploration of the unknown,” for misunderstanding the world as something we can return to, or for playing “tricks with the true [...] to the point of malice, of industry,”<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger was only willing to pardon him for “not being an adventurer yet.”<sup>14</sup> And if Deleuze seemed to honour him as one of the history’s “great figures of errancy,”<sup>15</sup> in the end he despised him as “the man of capitalism, the cunning plebeian,” as someone “whose perceptions are clichés and whose affections are labels, in a world of communication that has become marketing.”<sup>16</sup>

But our speculative Ulysses is different. Ungovernable, reckless, unbound... And rehabilitated not for becoming a nomad, as Lévinas or Deleuze would have wished (i.e. for becoming a figure whose main competence lies in his ability to *survive*), but for sailing near the wind, no matter what, for reck-

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11 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia. Complicity With Anonymous Materials* [eBook]. Melbourne, re.press 2008; Negarestani, R., *Intelligence and Spirit*. Falmouth–New York, Urbanomic Media–Sequence Press 2018, p. 30.

12 Whitehead, A. N., *The Function of Reason*. Boston, Beacon Press 1958, pp. 28–29, esp. p. 37.

13 Kundera, M., *Ignorance* [eBook]. Transl. L. Asher. New York, HarperCollins 2003; Ricoeur, P., *L’originnaire et la question-en-retour dans le krisis de Husserl*. In: Laruelle, F. (ed.), *Textes Pour Emmanuel Lévinas*. Paris, Éditions Jean-Michel Place 1980, pp. 167–177, esp. pp. 173–174; Lévinas, E., *Otherwise than being, or, Beyond essence*. Transl. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press 1998, p. 132; cf. Lévinas, E., *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Transl. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press 1969, p. 271.

14 Heidegger, M., *Gesamtausgabe. II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923–1944. Band 52. Hölderlins Hymne “Andenken”*. Frankfurt/Main, Vittorio Klostermann 1982, p. 180.

15 Deleuze, G., *The Fissure of Anaxagoras and the Local Fires of Heraclitus*. In: *Desert Islands and other Texts 1953–1974*. Ed. D. Lapoujade. Transl. M. Taormina. Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) 2004, pp. 156–161, esp. p. 156.

16 Deleuze, G., *What is Philosophy?*. Transl. H. Tomlinson – G. Burchell. New York, Columbia University Press 1994, pp. 98, 149.

lessly heading towards a shipwreck, over which, one day, the body of water will close up again.

This would also be the reason for calling our hero Ulysses while his speculative supervisors almost without exception refer to the Homeric Odysseus. Note that all the “stations” mentioned above build on a restless curiosity that was more or less alien to the Homeric hero. As François Hartog summed up, “unlike Dante’s Ulysses, driven by his desire to know the world, Homer’s Ulysses is basically a traveller in spite of himself,”<sup>17</sup> to which we can add widely known and no less accurate observation of W. B. Stanford that “the movement of the Odyssey is essentially inwards, homewards, towards normality. As conceived later by poets like Dante, Tennyson, and Pascoli, Ulysses’ urge is centrifugal, outwards towards the exotic or abnormal.”<sup>18</sup>

Not that the desire for knowledge was alien to Dante’s Latin sources. But Dante was surely the first to make him a daredevil and a trespasser, to turn his voyage into a *terminal* and, at the same time, *unresolved* enterprise. So, when Laruelle sees him as a homeless wanderer who has nowhere to return to, when Harman likens him to an unleashed force of nature, when Morton lets him tease death, or when Meillassoux, together with Land and Negarestani, wants him to go with the inhuman flow and plunge into a whirlpool – a whirlpool suspiciously close to the one that have sealed Ulysses’ fate in Dante’s *Comedy* – are we not witnessing a somewhat suicidal hero whose basic job is to test the very limits of consciousness and life? Someone who is nominally a Greek hero, but whose assignment is entirely Dantean?

## 2. Sail for the Best... Or Worst

It would seem so, but as we slowly make our way out of the harbour, let us recapitulate the relevant points of Ulysses’ (Dantean) story, which – apart from the reader’s comfort – will provide us with the necessary clues as to what to look for and where to go next.

This is Ulysses’ famous account of his own misery:

When I departed  
 from Circe, who concealed me near Gaeta  
 more than a year before Aeneas so  
 had named the place, nor fondness for my son,

17 Hartog, F., *Mémoire d’Ulysse: Récits sur la frontière en Grèce ancienne*. Paris, Gallimard 1996, p. 22.

18 Stanford, W. B., *The Ulysses Theme. A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1968, p. 50.

nor pious reverence for my aged father,  
 nor ev'n the bounden love which should have cheered  
 Penelope, could overcome within me  
 the eagerness I had to gain experience  
 both of the world, and of the vice and worth  
 of men; but forth I put upon the deep  
 and open sea with but a single ship,  
 and with that little company, by whom  
 I had not been deserted. Both its shores  
 I then beheld, as far away as Spain,  
 Morocco and the island of the Sards,  
 and all the rest that sea bathes round about.  
 Both old and slow were I and my companions,  
 when we attained that narrow passage-way,  
 where Hercules set up those signs of his,  
 which warned men not to sail beyond their bounds;  
 Seville I left behind me on the right hand,  
 Ceuta I'd left already on the other.  
 And then I said: "O brothers, ye who now  
 have through a hundred thousand perils reached  
 the West, to this so short a waking-time  
 still left your senses, will not to refuse  
 experience of that world behind the sun  
 which knows not man [*mondo senza gente*]! Bethink you of the seed  
 whence ye have sprung; for ye were not created  
 to lead the life of stupid animals [*viver come bruti*],  
 but manliness and knowledge to pursue [*seguir virtute e conoscenza*]."  
 So eager for the voyage did I make  
 my fellows by this little speech of mine,  
 that, after it, I hardly could have checked them.  
 Hence, to the morning having turned our stern,  
 we with our oars made wings for our mad flight,  
 e'er veering toward the left as on we sped.  
 Night was already seeing all the stars  
 of the other pole, and our pole so low down,  
 that from the ocean's floor it never rose.  
 Five times rekindled, and as often quenched,  
 had been the light beneath the moon, since first  
 we entered on the passage of the deep,  
 when lo, a mountain loomed before us, dim  
 by reason of the distance, and so high

it seemed to me, that I had seen none such.  
 And we rejoiced; but soon our happiness  
 was turned to grief; for from the new-found land  
 a whirlwind rose, and smote our vessel's prow;  
 three times it made her whirl with all the waters;  
 then at the fourth it made her stern go up,  
 and prow go down, even as Another pleased,  
 till over us the ocean's waves had closed.<sup>19</sup>

As trifling as it may seem, it is not entirely without relevance that Ulysses addresses his crew as “brothers” or “companions,” but not as *friends*.<sup>20</sup> Nor is it a coincidence that he is as emotionally blind as another prominent denizen of Hell, Francesca of the second circle, whom Dante meets a little earlier. The point is that Francesca does in earthly love what Ulysses does on the map: they both mistake the horizon of the human sensuality & reason for the absolute dimension of love & knowledge, and so while Francesca fails to understand that the “King of the Universe” is *still* her friend (even though she’s in Hell), the sailor calls God “Another” as if Ulysses himself represented – paradoxically – the “unknown” in the equation of cosmic love, as if God were looking right through him.<sup>21</sup> To put it another way, both lack hope: the ability to surrender to God and his providence instead of judging the situation by the reach of one’s own abilities and luck.

Which brings us back to Ulysses’ voyage, because if passive and patient “hope is [...] a steadfast expectation of future glory, which by Grace divine and by preceding merit is produced,”<sup>22</sup> then the sailor does the exact opposite: he simply rides out to take what is his, effectively preventing himself and his crew from reaching Paradise, which as a kind of frontier territory is one of the presumed – if unconscious – goals of his mission.<sup>23</sup> In other words, if failure is not an option for Ulysses and his crew, then it is precisely this attitude that makes them fail.

19 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, XXVI, 90–142. Transl. C. Langdon. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1918, pp. 297–300.

20 Unlike Alfred Tennyson’s Ulysses, who in the eponymous poem from 1842 says: “Come, my friends, ’T is not too late to seek a newer world.”

21 For the parallel of Ulysses and Francesca, see Mazzotta, G., *Cosmology and the Kiss of Creation (Paradiso 27–29)*. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 2005, No. 123, pp. 1–21.

22 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXV, 67–68. Transl. C. Langdon. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1921, p. 293.

23 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione. Il motivo del viaggio nella “Commedia” di Dante*. Roma, Bulzoni editore 1984, pp. 132, 178; or Cornish, A., *Reading Dante’s stars*. New Haven–London, Yale University Press 2000, p. 57.



In fact, what does he actually promise his men when he urges them “to sail beyond their bounds,” to pursue virtue and knowledge? The emphasis laid on “a waking-time still left [to their] *senses*” and on the “*experience* of [the] world behind the sun” would imply that some hitherto unknown strange peculiarities lurk in the distance, but there is nothing much particular about the “passage of the deep.” Note that Ulysses gives a fairly detailed account of the milestones of his journey beyond the human horizon, but the longest part of his journey, lasting five months (“five times rekindled, and as often quenched, had been the light beneath the moon...”), contracts into barely a few lines as poor in words as the immense ocean is poor in communicable references.<sup>24</sup>

Ulysses makes a jump into the unknown,<sup>25</sup> but the unknown never really turns into something familiar. Plus, if Ulysses is heading beyond the horizon of the human world, then he is also voyaging beyond the horizon of memory, into the oceanic realm of oblivion, where the parting waters in the west echo the closing waters in the east. The space without people refracts into a space where one cannot be remembered, just as the not-yet-known refracts into the no-longer-known. Ironically enough, Ulysses *does* discover Mount Purgatory, but only beyond the point of no return, beyond the possibility of telling anyone about it or inscribing the event on the map, which is exactly what discovery is. The mountain remains untouched, unknown and, so to speak, *misunderstood*, and the only thing that incorporates it into the cartography of the *senses* are the vague temporal specifications of Ulysses’ journey.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that “all the stars of the other pole” at least partially differ from the charted skies; but while in Dante’s case, the stars guide the pilgrim out of the “dark woods” – to their own realms, as a matter of fact – in the case of Ulysses they no longer serve the transcendental, and consequently vertical, orientation, but pull the captain into the horizontal acceleration. In other words, even the stars he sees do not translate themselves into any usable or *shared* co-ordinates: Ulysses literally disappears from the map, gets lost, and fades into obscurity.<sup>27</sup>

24 Giglio, R., *Le vie verso il “sapere”. La “conoscenza” di Ulisse e di Dante (If XXVI)*. In: *Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante. Altri studi sulla Commedia*. Napoli, Loffredo Editore 1997, p. 94, 102; Cristaldi, S. (ed.), *Dante, Ulisse e il richiamo del lontano. Le Forme e la storia. Rivista di Filologia Moderna. Lecturae Dantis. Dante oggi e letture dell’Inferno*, n. s. IX, 2, 2016, pp. 263–297, for the Deleuzian reading of Ulyssean voyage in terms of the unstriated space, see p. 275.

25 Barolini, T., *Dante’s Ulysses: Narrative and Transgression*. In: Iannucci, A. A. (ed.), *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press 1997, pp. 113–132, esp. p. 125.

26 Mazzotta, G., *Canto XXVI. Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy*. In: Mandelbaum, A. – Oldcorn, A. – Ross, Ch. (eds.), *Lectura Dantis, Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*. Berkeley, University of California Press 2019, pp. 348–356, esp. p. 351.

27 Cristaldi, S., *Dante, Ulisse e il richiamo del lontano*, pp. 274–275; Mazzotta, G., *Cosmology and the Kiss of Creation (Paradiso 27–29)*, p. 7; Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, pp. 183–184.

It is no wonder, then, that he does not call his men friends: the “unpeopled world” [mondo senza gente] towards which they are heading is also the world they are creating around them, in their own way, leaving behind all of the neighbours whose intimacy they have sacrificed to the call of the distance. To be part of the crew is *not* the same as being a friend, and in the unpeopled world, there seems to be no one to be a friend to; besides, if everyone, including Ulysses, has hardened his heart and left their loved ones coldly behind, doesn’t that mean that in the course of their journey they all have lost the ability not only to *be* friends, but even to *make* friends?

Nor is it a surprise that Dante recalls Ulysses precisely when, in Paradise, he moves *with* the stars and sees “past Cadiz [...] Ulysses’ insane track.”<sup>28</sup> Ulysses’ crucial *errancy* lies in the fact that he approaches the “beyond” solely as a stubborn cartographer, who pursues knowledge as a principally *spatial* reward, whereas Dante gradually learns that as far as love is concerned – and there is nothing more important to be concerned with – there is *nowhere* to go.<sup>29</sup> Both are hungry for the unknown, for something that must be earned: but if Dante’s metaphysical pilgrimage through the moral landscape merely appropriated seafaring metaphors, Ulysses’ sea voyage, on the contrary, inappropriately claimed a metaphysical dimension, forgetting that the “vast sea of being” [gran mar dell’ essere] is not for sail.<sup>30</sup>

Or maybe it is, but at the cost of a general shipwreck; Dante himself is very well aware of this danger, as he embarks on an equally daring journey beyond the limits of human life and understanding, not to mention the testimony he daringly smuggles from beyond. Hence Dante never stops turning “back to look again upon the pass [passo] which ne’er permitted any one to live,”<sup>31</sup> remembering the mariner who made the mistake to enter “on the passage [alto passo] of the deep,”<sup>32</sup> without paying attention that “by other roads and other ferries shalt [he] attain a shore to pass across.”<sup>33</sup>

Let us focus on one polarity in particular, that is of special relevance to us: while “Dante constructs his own experience as an exemplar of a choice

28 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXVII, 82–83, p. 319.

29 Frankel, M., The Context of Dante’s Ulysses: The Similes in Inferno XXVI, 25–42. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1986, No. 104, pp. 101–119, esp. pp. 114–115; Hornback, B., Dante’s Universe: How to Find It, and Why. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 83, 2000, No. 1, pp. 209–230.

30 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, I, 113, p. 11; Barbieri, A., Ulisse: Un Eroe Della Conoscenza e Una Palinodia Di Dante? *Dante: Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri*, 8, 2011, pp. 43–67, esp. p. 53.

31 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, I, 20, p. 5.

32 *Ibid.*, XXVI, 132, p. 301; for the passo – alto passo resonance, see Singleton, Ch. S., In Exitu Israel De Aegypto. *Annual Report of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers*, 1960, No. 78, pp. 1–24.

33 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, III, 91–92, p. 33.

of life,<sup>34</sup> or rather, resurrection, following the footsteps of Aeneas, Moses, and of course Christ himself,<sup>35</sup> Ulysses, whose pagan compass does not yet know the attraction of Christian salvation, and who therefore isn't oriented by revelation,<sup>36</sup> navigates towards condemnation and "the second death."<sup>37</sup> It should come as no surprise then that the mariner who represents "the still unredeemed heir of the original sin"<sup>38</sup> finds his mirror image in Adam, who, on the opposite site from Ulysses' place in Hell, accurately weighs up the nature of their shared transgression: they both have sinned by "trespassar del segno,"<sup>39</sup> by the transgression of the bound.

However, Odysseus is not just similar to Adam; he remarkably reverses Adam's primacy "to come out of innocence and enter history."<sup>40</sup> If Adam, as the first man, stands for all mankind, so does Ulysses: but this time as the *last man* who *exits* history at the very tail end of mankind's procession towards salvation. Ulysses, so to speak, is left behind in his incorrigible ignorance, as a "castaway, who to his boldness found no comfort,"<sup>41</sup> and "dies, over and over again, for Dante's sins."<sup>42</sup>

Which actually sounds kind of noble, but the last man dragging humanity into Hell doubles down on his impudence by giving his men some malicious, fraudulent advice: when he reminds them that they "were not created to lead the life of stupid animals, but manliness and knowledge to pursue," then he not only commits a somewhat hasty, or downright manipulative, identification of the former with the latter, but, through the determined focus on the "spatiotemporal contingency"<sup>43</sup> of knowledge, he practically brutalizes his men to the level of sensual creatures.<sup>44</sup> Put another way, Ulysses tricks them

34 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, p. 43.

35 Pihás, G., Dante's Ulysses: Stoic and Scholastic Models of the Literary Reader's Curiosity and Inferno 26. *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 2003, No. 121, pp. 1–24; Holloway, J. B., *The Pilgrim and the Book. A Study of Dante, Langland and Chaucer*. New York–Berlin–Bern–Frankfurt/Main–Paris–Wien, Lang 1992, pp. 73–79.

36 Giglio, R., Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante. Virtù e Sapienza: Dall'antico al Moderno. Lettura intertestuale della figura di Ulisse. In: *Il volo di Ulisse e di Dante*, pp. 111–136, esp. p. 124.

37 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, I, 117, p. 11; Battistini, A., *La retorica della salvezza. Studi danteschi*. Bologna, Società editrice il Mulino 2016, p. 270.

38 Blumenberg, H., *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge–London, MIT Press 1999, p. 339.

39 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXVII, 117, p. 309.

40 Sasso, G., Ulisse e Adamo (e altre questioni). In: *Ulisse e il desiderio. Il canto XXVI dell' Inferno*. Roma, Viella 2011, pp. 121–154, esp. p. 122.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

42 Barolini, T., *The Undivine Comedy. Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 1992, p. 58. It is worth mentioning that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley makes an allusion to Ulysses in just such context. See Shelley, M. W., *The Last Man*. Peterborough, Broadview Press 1996, pp. 366–367.

43 Moevs, Ch., *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*. Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 72.

44 Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, p. 45. For the Aristotelian and scholastic context of Ulysses

into beings for whom the “experience of the world and of the vice and worth” merge together.

Remember where we are: in the middle of the oceanic wasteland, where moral polarities fade along with memories and precedents. What is there to know? Plus, Ulysses’ crew has left “behind all the ties of human affect and society,”<sup>45</sup> so it would seem that the only “vices” and “virtues” to be experienced are “those committed and displayed by himself and his crew,”<sup>46</sup> outside the radius of any illustrious examples, and without any sharp distinction between good and evil. So when Ulysses addresses his crew in the plural as “companions” and “brothers,” he effectively draws them “into a state of complicity”<sup>47</sup> as the fallen Apostles, following him on his “narrow passage-way” towards sin and destruction.<sup>48</sup>

It would almost seem that Ulysses *wants* to crash; his famous pep talk looks shady, not just for avoiding the bonds of friendship, but because it is suspiciously reminiscent of a suicide speech.<sup>49</sup> After all... How else to describe “the bottom of the universe”<sup>50</sup> – which, in a way, suggests a more tempting object of knowledge than paradise, for it is a forbidden place – than to go down all the way, to Hell, where the virtues turn into vices, with all of their dark glory? And so while Dante follows the ascending trajectory of the “whirlwind of the Holy Spirit,” the very same vortex is Ulysses’ undoing, as he was already caught up in the “flux of the ephemeral” during his lifetime.<sup>51</sup>

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animal parable see Corti, M., *Percorsi dell’Invenzione. Il Linguaggio poetico e Dante*. Torino, Giulio Einaudi 1993, pp. 137–140; or Mercuri, R., *Semantica Di Gerione*, pp. 144–145. For Ulysses urging “his men to eschew the life of ‘bruti’ and follow ‘virtute e canoscenza’, as if this exhausts their alternatives”, see Peterman, L., *Ulysses and Modernity. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1995, No. 113, pp. 89–110, esp. p. 95.

- 45 Barolini, T., *The Epic Hero*. In: *Digital Dante*, [44]. Available online at [www: https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/](http://www.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].
- 46 Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1981, No. 99, pp. 113–131, esp. p. 114.
- 47 Boyde, P., *Land and Sea*. In: *Philomythes and Philosopher. Man in the Cosmos*. Cambridge–London, Cambridge University Press 1981, pp. 96–111, esp. p. 108; Mazzotta, G., *Canto XXVI. Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy*, pp. 352–353.
- 48 Which itself represent clear inversion of Christ’s “narrow road that leads to life” (*Matthew* 7.14). In the end, “Ulysses urges his crew to sin.” See Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses*, p. 114. For seeing Ulysses as a willful moral transgressor, see also Warner, L., *Dante’s Ulysses and the Erotics of Crusading. Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 1998, No. 11, pp. 65–93.
- 49 For a striking parallel with Catiline’s suicide speech in Sallust see Holloway, J. B., *Fas et nefas ambulans: Dante’s Poetic/Salvific Strategies*, p. 5. Available online at [www: https://www.academia.edu/47721876/fasetnefasambulant](http://www.academia.edu/47721876/fasetnefasambulant) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].
- 50 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume I. Inferno*, XXXII, 8, p. 363; Barolini, T., *The Undivine Comedy*, p. 54.
- 51 Cassell, A. K., *The Lesson of Ulysses*, p. 120; Moevs, Ch., *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy*, p. 182.

### 3. Into the Whirlpool

With all this in mind, let us now recall the “whirlpool of the inhuman universe,” into which Meillassoux enticed us to plunge. In reference to Leibniz, Meillassoux notes that

such is the philosophical journey par excellence, where ‘thinking we had reached port, we are carried back into the open sea’. But in truth, in our case, things do not wear the Odyssean grandeur of the anger of the gods, blowing our boat toward waters of dangerous ancestral splendours. We rather hope to manage to plunge, by way of mathematics, *into the whirlpool of the inhuman Universe* that confronts us, and instead here we are, becalmed in a port, within a writing incapable of exiting from itself, incapable of making of a world indifferent toward us, the referent of its symbols, elegantly voided of any encumbering content.<sup>52</sup>

Isn’t it striking how much this epistemically attractive whirlpool draws its figurative energy from the momentum of Dante’s vortex? It is true that the unnamed sailor we should follow is primarily of Mallarmé license, for in the context of Meillassoux’s work, he is clearly prefigured by the “Master” from the famous poem *A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance* (1897), which Meillassoux almost literally dismantled to pieces.<sup>53</sup> But it is equally true that Mallarmé’s hero represents a specific instance of Ulysses’ literary survival, indicated already by the heroic personification of the indomitable intellect which will settle for nothing less than unbounded infinity beyond any limits. Including those of life.<sup>54</sup>

Meillassoux doubles down on this Dantefication, only that he replaces the “great sea of being” [gran mar dell’ essere] with “the great outdoors,”<sup>55</sup> whose territory extends beyond the opaque plexiglass of a parochial, self-centredly human, and always somewhat homely “correlationism.” By which term he designates “any philosophy that maintains the impossibility of acceding, through thought, to a being independent of thought, [...] any form of

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52 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, pp. 183–184.

53 Meillassoux, Q., *The Number and the Siren. A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de Dés*. Falmouth–New York, Urbanomic–Sequence Press 2012.

54 Minahan, Ch. D., *Vortex/t. The Poetics of Turbulence*. Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press 1992, pp. 140, 189.

55 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Transl. R. Brassier. London–New York, Continuum 2008, p. 7.

deabsolutization of thought that, to obtain its ends, argues for the enclosure of thought into itself, and for its subsequent inability to attain an absolute outside of itself.<sup>56</sup>

The great outdoors has nothing to do with the “world” of which we are the legislators. Instead of reflecting on the world from the positions of perception or consciousness, Meillassoux prioritizes as a starting point “the state of inorganic matter [...] anterior to, and independent of, all subject and all life.”<sup>57</sup> As Ray Brassier summarizes later, in this primarily geological context, any “Dasein, life, consciousness, and so on – are themselves merely spatio-temporal occurrences like any other.”<sup>58</sup> Which is: occurrences that have seen the light of day only recently, and whose departure is therefore not to be lamented.

If any organic union of subject and the world sooner or later begins to posit life as the fundamental origin of both reflection and the world itself, effectively subordinating the universe to life’s agenda, Meillassoux counters this vitalist queue-jumping by celebrating the “inhuman splendour” of ancestral “Dead matter”<sup>59</sup> that makes up the “entirely inhuman Universe.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, he turns his attention to a “world which knows not man,”<sup>61</sup> a world which ontologically makes no distinction between man and stone, whose matter has “no common term with our subjectivity,” and which is the proper subject to “mathematics [that] permits physics to produce revisable hypotheses [about] a world independent of us, as regards its factual existence.”<sup>62</sup> Thought is able to penetrate this world indeed; but it reveals only “the absolute contingency of everything [...], of all beings and all modes of being.”<sup>63</sup>

What is essential for our next move is the fundamentally immemorial nature of the world under scrutiny, which existed before us, and in relation to which we count only as secondary phenomena. Any thought, any mathematical proposition that manages to enter this “absolute outside” does so only at the expense of a “legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere.”<sup>64</sup> And this “elsewhere” also has another name: if

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56 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 119.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

58 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*. Basingstoke–New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 53.

59 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 128.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

61 Remember Dante, *Inferno*, XXVI, 117.

62 Meillassoux, Q., *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition*, p. 157.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

64 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 7.

the “arrow of thought [points] toward the very heart of all that is dead,”<sup>65</sup> then it grants “us access to the *Kingdom of the dead*,”<sup>66</sup> to “Hells of the inorganic world – those deep, subterranean realms where life and subjectivity are absent.”<sup>67</sup>

If these allusions to Ulysses’ descent through the whirlpool – this time voluntary – still sound rather distant or indeterminate, the subsequent one binds them into a tight knot with Dante’s figure: because to these hells leads only a “narrow passage [l’*étroit passage*], through which thought is able to exit from itself – through facticity, and through facticity alone.”<sup>68</sup> Which, in turn, is nothing else than an obvious allusion to the verse that we already know: to the “narrow passage-way, where Hercules set up those signs of his, which warned men not to sail beyond their bounds.”<sup>69</sup>

However, there’s something about this reference that the speculative associates of Meillassoux will find troubling, if not wholly unacceptable. Meillassoux first notes, in reference to Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*, that “to think is twice victorious to cross the Acheron: it is to visit the dead, or rather death, and above all, to succeed in returning.”<sup>70</sup> The intrusion of thought is therefore only concluded by “recount[ing] to the living the discoveries of such a journey.”<sup>71</sup> Here we should immediately add that this apparent re-Homerization of the Dantean Ulysses does not really contradict our reading, just as Ulysses’ fate does not interfere with his urge to disclose the details of his voyage. In fact, his enterprise will only come to fruition when Dante – presumably the first person to speak to him after his death – interrogates him and corroborates his discovery. But the problem we have in mind is that Meillassoux approaches the inhuman world only in terms of its past, that is, in terms of a certain foundation that can reveal itself in the present, albeit only through “the paradox of the arche-fossil,” through which “being manifests being’s anteriority to manifestation.”<sup>72</sup>

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65 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, p. 134.

66 Ibid., p. 157.

67 Ibid.

68 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 63.

69 Cf. Jacqueline Risset’s translation: “Mes compagnons et moi, nous étions vieux et lents/lorsque nous vîmes à ce passage étroit”. See Alighieri, D., *La Divine Comédie*. Paris, Éditions Flammarion 2010, p. 133.

70 Meillassoux, Q., Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze, Immanence, and Matter and Memory. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse III. Unknown Deleuze*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2012, pp. 63–107, esp. p. 107.

71 Meillassoux, Q., Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition, p. 157.

72 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 26. “Arche-fossil” generally refers to the “material indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life” and which in turn “manifests an entity’s anteriority vis-à-vis manifestation.” Ibid., pp. 10, 14.



What makes these revelations suspicious – that is, for speculative realism’s “wild bunch” – is their entanglement with a certain hope that the accentuated past makes possible. What is at stake here is not just an expectation in the form of the Kantian “intellectual hope [...] to render things intelligible,”<sup>73</sup> or in the form of the Humean “hope to uncover the principal laws that govern the universe.”<sup>74</sup> The real trouble is represented by hope much more cunning, the one based on the conviction that “there is nothing above and beyond the power of chaos that could constrain it to submit to a norm.”<sup>75</sup> As a consequence, the past-perceived chaos makes it possible to await a Saviour who “must be thought as the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law”; and it is precisely this invincible hope that must not cross Ray Brassier’s, Eugene Thacker’s, or Reza Negarestani’s Ulysean thresholds.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4. Follow the Will to Know

Brassier, foreman of the second station on our journey through the phases of Ulysses’ speculative radicalization, does not work with the Dantean figure himself, but his work serves as an essentially important transformer of the Ulysean currents.

Brassier shares a substantial part of Meillassoux’s critique; for Brassier, too, there is no “pre-established harmony between reality and ideality.”<sup>77</sup> He also claims that “thought has not guaranteed access to being; being is not inherently thinkable.”<sup>78</sup> And he similarly asks “how does thought think a world without thought.”<sup>79</sup> However, unlike Meillassoux, Brassier reverses the vector of this inquiry, and instead of grounding the question in the original non-being of thought, he poses it in the context of its death.

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73 Peirce, Ch. S., *A Guess at the Riddle* [1888]. Quoted in Sachs, C., *Speculative Materialism or Pragmatic Naturalism? Sellars contra Meillassoux*. In: Gironi, F. (ed.), *The Legacy of Kant in Sellars and Meillassoux. Analytic and Continental Kantianism*. New York–London, Routledge 2018, pp. 87–105, esp. pp. 100–101.

74 Meillassoux, Q., *The contingency of the laws of nature*. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30, 2012, No. 2, pp. 322–334.

75 Meillassoux, Q., *After Finitude*, p. 325.

76 Cf. Meillassoux, Q., *Spectral Dilemma*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse IV. Philosophical Research and Development*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2008, pp. 261–275; Meillassoux, Q., *Badiou and Mallarmé: The Event and the Perhaps*. Transl. A. Edlebi. *Parrhesia*, 2013, No. 16, pp. 35–47, esp. p. 44; Meillassoux, Q., *The Number and the Siren*, pp. 116–117.

77 Brassier, R., *Concepts and Objects*. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne, re.press 2011, pp. 47–65, esp. p. 47.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. 223.



Brassier finds the primary inspiration in Jean-François Lyotard's philosophical rendering of the death of the sun, which – standing for the heat death or the “big rip” of the entire universe – will inevitably result in “a death of mind,” with the implication that “with the disappearance of the Earth, thought will have stopped – leaving that disappearance absolutely unthought of.”<sup>80</sup> On the intersection of Lyotard's meditation, Emmanuel Lévinas' notion of impersonal being, and Sigmund Freud's account of the death-drive, Brassier conjures up an all-encompassing extinction event that “needs to be grasped as something that has already happened; as the aboriginal trauma driving the history of terrestrial life as an elaborately circuitous detour from stellar death.”<sup>81</sup>

What is important is the subtle shift in emphasis from the past to the future: while the “ancestral anteriority can too easily be converted into anteriority for us, the posteriority of extinction indexes a physical annihilation which no amount of chronological tinkering can transform into a correlate ‘for us.’”<sup>82</sup> Unlike ancestrality, the virtuality of extinction, or rather its all-pervading spectral presence, is structurally traumatic in nature; it is “real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience.”<sup>83</sup> Which, however, does not prevent this event from being recognized in some way. Only that Brassier's own peculiar variant of the cartography of the “world which knows not man” can no longer be realized as an exploratory mission, but solely as a passive seismographic measurement of the gravitational disturbances of, and from, the future. Extinction invades the present as a trace, and the unstoppable “will to know” – the rationality's drive which we can boldly tag as genuinely Ulyssean – “is [itself] driven by the traumatic reality of extinction, and strives to become equal to the trauma of the in-itself whose trace it bears.”<sup>84</sup>

This tension also enters in another context: if the agenda of thought is independent of the world, then it is not necessarily subordinate to the agenda of life either, which is precisely what Brassier, among other things, holds against Theodor Adorno's and Emil Horkheimer's *Odysseus*. The representative of tame Enlightenment is not guilty of instrumentalizing thought up to the point of mimicking the dead inorganic nature; quite on the contrary, his “thanatosis” sinned by not going far enough. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the weakness of Odyssean rationality lies in its internal indebtedness; if rea-

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80 Lyotard, J.-F., Can Thought go on without a Body? In: *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*. Transl. G. Bennington – R. Bowlby. Cambridge, Polity Press 1991, pp. 8–23, esp. p. 9.

81 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. 223.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

son is embedded in nature, it just cannot serve as an instrument of human liberation, and must hand over the reins to memory and its critical revision of reason's own natural history. There's no victory in this: if this particular Odyssean reason breaks the bank by mortifying and objectifying itself in science and automated processes, it will still be haunted by a bad conscience of an aborted reconciliation between man and nature.<sup>85</sup>

Brassier, however, defies and scorns any such idea of reconciliation, which in his view cannot be but vitalist or correlationist in nature. Instead, he makes a practical – if partly ironic – case for “synthetic intelligence” which would represent the Enlightenment “horror story” about reason's being “an insect's waking dream.” Brassier subsequently suggests that the best protagonist of such story would not be Adorno's Odysseus, but Seth Brundle, a scientist who accepts the technological-biological transformation into a fly, and welcomes “the awakening of an intelligence which is in the process of sloughing off its human mask.”<sup>86</sup>

And it is a typical Odyssean twist that none other than Dante's Ulysses will rise to the challenge and see it through.

## 5. Let's Get Corruptible

Which puts him under the command of Eugene Thacker, who, just like Brassier, combats the correlationist “horizon of the human,” and devises ways to “rethink the world as unthinkable.”<sup>87</sup> Only that the “horror story” to which Brassier alluded, and which has long been the focus of Thacker's as a “non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically,”<sup>88</sup> changes its focal point. Instead of telling a straightforward tale about the world without us – remember once again Ulysses and the “world which knows not man” – it focuses on the question of “*life* without us.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, Thacker is interested in extinction primarily as a radical “disaster”<sup>90</sup> – or shipwreck? – corresponding to the “null set of biology.”<sup>91</sup>

But there's a catch: the peculiarity of Thacker's journey lies in the fact that instead of overtaking life into the inorganic world or turning the clock for-

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85 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 48. Brassier refers to David Cronenberg's adaptation of George Langelaan *The Fly* (1986).

87 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 1)*, [eBook]. Winchester–Washington, Zero Books 2011.

88 *Ibid.*

89 Thacker, E., *After life*. Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press 2010, p. 268.

90 Thacker, E., Notes on Extinction and Existence. *Configurations*, 20, 2012, No. 1–2, pp. 137–148, esp. p. 137.

91 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

ward for its demise, he seeks the limit of life within life itself, not outside of it in the sense of the “mutual exclusivity of life and death.”<sup>92</sup> Which antinomy only reflects a deeper contradiction between the general notion of “Life” and particular instances of “the living,”<sup>93</sup> whereby life tends to be conceived as something “human-centred and yet unhuman-oriented,”<sup>94</sup> in anthropomorphic terms of a singular organism, animated by the intervention of form, time, or spirit. However, as soon as we begin to conjecture and pile up the examples of the interactions of non-human principles with the inanimate world, sooner or later we run into a *hell* of a lot of “impossible life forms”<sup>95</sup> that “themselves resist easy classification within biology”<sup>96</sup> and that, in the end, do not make it so easy to “distinguish the living from the non-living.”<sup>97</sup> Such as the “mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck”<sup>98</sup> from the horror stories that may be imaginary, but in the end highlight our intuition of things that should *not* live, but aren’t exactly inanimated either (and that *could*, possibly, exist in outer space).

However, if the unambiguous dimension of death is blurred, then it is actually difficult to determine what would be the culmination of extinction itself. Surely, the end of all life. But what if life – as animation, as intelligence, or as (de)composition – does not end with the end of life as we know it? Hence, when Thacker asks “who gives witness to the aftermath of extinction? Who will give testimony to this, who will experience it, who will be there to apprehend and comprehend it,”<sup>99</sup> he actually tries to “think the negation at the heart of life,”<sup>100</sup> and asks how the testimony will change the one who gives it, and whether the witness will still be a “who”, or rather a “what”.

Which brings us back to Ulysses, for is it such a coincidence that when Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks a not-so-distant question of “who comes after the subject?”, he meets Thacker half-way on a ship bound for the underworld? In fact, Lacoue-Labarthe’s unexpected appearance on the passenger list perfectly encapsulates Thacker’s own negativity. He first points out a certain ambivalence in Odysseus’ famous response to the wounded Cyclops: “To the question of Polyphemus, ‘Who?’ Ulysses (sic!) appears to respond negatively

92 Thacker, E., *After life*, p. 254.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

94 Thacker, E., *After life*. De anima and unhuman politics. *Radical Philosophy*, 2009, No. 155, pp. 31–40, esp. p. 31.

95 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

96 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse IV. Philosophical Research and Development*, pp. 55–92, esp. p. 81.

97 Thacker, E., *After life*, p. 268.

98 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

99 Thacker, E., *Notes on Extinction and Existence*, p. 141; Thacker, E., *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy (Volume 2)*, [eBook]. Winchester–Washington, Zero Books 2015.

100 Thacker, E., *Starry Speculative Corpse*.

with a ‘what’ (no one: not nothing, but no being of the human realm). But in responding ‘No one,’ he certainly intends to answer the question ‘Who?’ or indeed to take it upon himself.<sup>101</sup> Which ultimately reflects a tension on the axis between birth and death, along which Lacoue-Labarthe does not see Odysseus’ experience as “one of navigation nor even of the relentless determination to return,” but as an involvement that “culminates in the journey through death [...] with the aim of not recovering from his return.”<sup>102</sup> Even Lacoue-Labarthe considers the “work of death” as a kind of “horror.” But when he lets the responsible “who” contradict the negative “what”, and privileges “birth” over the arrogant “metaphysical will to pass through death,”<sup>103</sup> he rejects precisely the path that Thacker will enthusiastically follow.

Because Thacker’s Odysseus seems to be proceeding in quite the opposite direction. Better said, in *another* direction: neither to birth nor to death, but towards “the existence of a life-after-life.”<sup>104</sup> But as soon as Thacker convinces his Odysseus to descend to the “dead souls [that] are immaterial and yet not transcendent, a life that at once continues to live on, but that lives on in a kind of interminable, vacuous, immortality,” he immediately changes his mind and adds: “There is no better guide to the after-life than Dante.”<sup>105</sup>

It’s true that Thacker doesn’t even notice Ulysses during his visit to Inferno. But that’s only because he takes over his role himself, thereby retroactively Danteizing the Greek hero to whose journey he refers in parallel.<sup>106</sup> In the end, the Greek Odysseus is heading nowhere else than to the “hells of the organic world,” which are located in Dante’s Inferno, and which represent the final destination for both Thacker and the sailor.

Thacker is a great Dantean subverter: he does not intend to reach either Purgatory or Paradise, just as he ignores Beatrice and rushes to Francesca instead, who is the one to respond to Odysseus’ parallel “call to the dead, who then emerge from the underworld in a kind of slow-motion swarming.”<sup>107</sup> The unhappy lady already known to us – the one who, just like Ulysses, lost all hope – looms before Thacker in the manner of a demon who “stands-in for

101 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *The Response of Ulysses*. In: Cadava, E. – Connor, P. – Nancy, J.-L. (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject?* Transl. A. Ronell. New York–London, Routledge 1991, pp. 198–205, esp. p. 199.

102 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *Annexes*. 1. Birth Is Death. In: *Ending and Unending Agony. On Maurice Blanchot*. Transl. H. Opelz. New York, Fordham University Press 2015, pp. 82–88, esp. p. 84.

103 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., *The horror of the West*. In: Lawtoo, N. (ed.), *Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought. Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*. London–New York, Bloomsbury 2012, pp. 111–122, esp. p. 119.

104 Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

105 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 55.

106 He also refers to H. P. Lovecraft’s “black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.” See Thacker, E., *In the Dust of This Planet*.

107 *Ibid.*

the abstract, indifferent, non-being of the world,<sup>108</sup> and who “occupies the borderland between the living and the dead.”<sup>109</sup> She momentarily breaks off from an “aggregate body”<sup>110</sup> of restless souls that can hardly be called an organism, i.e. from a swarm that represents one of Thacker’s key examples of the ambivalent “impossible life forms” mentioned above.

A swarm is a strange body indeed; what exactly is its identity if the “self-organizing capacity” does not allow much distinction between “the life in the swarm and the life of the swarm?”<sup>111</sup> How to determine its origin if what “drives the swarm [...] is also nothing – at least nothing that stands above and apart from the singular phenomenon of the swarm itself?”<sup>112</sup> If all there is is “the immanent, fully distributed life force of swarming itself?”<sup>113</sup> Which exposes our Ulysses to the following paradox: so far, he was bound for a coordinate in time and space where he could land, himself unchanged. Where he could face and learn about what’s in front of him. But in the case of a swarm, there is no stable “front”. It represents a type of headless life “that is radically distributed and disseminated, both in terms of its spatial topography, and in terms of its temporal causality,”<sup>114</sup> in other words: its “movement [...] is that of contagion.”<sup>115</sup> The more Ulysses descends to the “bare life” – the swarming (un)dead just personify its structure – the more this “molecular minimum”<sup>116</sup> becomes the subject of “angst towards the biological domain itself.”<sup>117</sup>

This, too, is a form of “horror”: when the “generative and germinal excess of life” becomes a form of “absolute otherness and anonymity,” an act of “vitalistic life-negation.”<sup>118</sup> The “after” in “after-life” is therefore not “temporal or sequential, but liminal,”<sup>119</sup> and the descent to a “base life” – the ascent to a super-organism would lead to a same place anyway – in fact induces a de-

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108 Ibid.

109 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics. Incognitum Hactenus, 3. Livin On: Zombies*, 2012, pp. 26–47, esp. p. 45.

110 Ibid., p. 42.

111 Thacker, E., *After life. Swarms, demons and the antinomies of immanence*. In: Elliott, J. – Attridge, D. (eds.), *Theory After ‘Theory’*. London, Routledge 2011, pp. 181–193, esp. p. 185.

112 Ibid., p. 182.

113 Ibid., p. 188.

114 Thacker, E., *After life. Swarms, demons and the antinomies of immanence*, p. 182.

115 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, p. 45.

116 Thacker, E., *Necrologies, or, the Death of the Body Politic*. In: Clough, P. T. – Willse, C. (eds.), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*. Durham, Duke University Press 2011, pp. 139–162, esp. p. 159.

117 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 62.

118 Ibid., p. 58.

119 Ibid.

scent of extinction to us, inscribing itself in the present via the negative event of (un)life.

Which also represents a crucial turning point for Ulysses' katabasis. Just remember where we are: Ulysses first heads to the edge of the world, or rather over the threshold of its extremity into a "world without people," where the horizon of ultimate knowledge of the world and himself opens up. The path to this extremity, which converges with the event of extinction, then leads through the heart of life that Odysseus himself lives; to the point where life and un-life deny this very distinction. So can he actually remain intact when confronted with the "radically unhuman [...] pathological life"<sup>120</sup> whose "locality" becomes "unlocalized"?<sup>121</sup> When he has to *enter* the swarm as a point of destination that has no clear gravity core or boundaries, and that would otherwise remain incomprehensible? Thacker seems to imply "yes" when he laconically states that "extinction can only be comprehended from within the tomb,"<sup>122</sup> or when he concludes that the "indifferent unhuman is immanently 'within' the human as well."<sup>123</sup> But when he wishes to become "absolutely corruptible," so that "nothing of [his] body would remain," and "finally all words and memories would evaporate, leaving not even an echo or resonance,"<sup>124</sup> *how* to achieve such a goal?

How shall Ulysses touch the real "bottom of the universe" and reach a "world that knows not man" – that is, a world in which man would be *un-thinkable* – without just remixing the building blocks of the *same*? If we are concerned with radical reconfiguration, can we not repeat at this point what Édouard Glissant said at the level of language? Namely, that "floodtide of extinction, unstoppable in its power of contagion, will win out. It will leave a residue that is not one victorious language, or several, but one or more desolate codes that will take a long time to reconstitute the organic and unpredictable liveliness of a language"<sup>125</sup>? So what does Ulysses have to do to be banished as a reverse Adam with no possibility of return, of which Dante's Hell is still the last resort of *hope*?

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120 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, pp. 36, 41.

121 Thacker, E., *Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror*, p. 82.

122 Thacker, E., *Infinite Resignation* [eBook]. London, Repeater Books 2018.

123 Thacker, E., *Black Infinity; or, Oil Discovers Humans*. *Pages Magazine*, 2013. Available online at [www: https://www.pagesmagazine.net/en/articles/black-infinity-or-oil-discovers-humans](https://www.pagesmagazine.net/en/articles/black-infinity-or-oil-discovers-humans) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

124 Thacker, E., *Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics*, p. 46.

125 Glissant, E., *Poetics of relation*. Transl. B. Wing. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press 1997, p. 96.

## 6. Die the Other Way

Let's summarize our progress so far: Ulysses plunged into the vortex of the inorganic world, which eventually descended to him through the event of extinction, metabolized by his own flesh. But Ulysses did not, and could not, break free from his attachment to the world by a mere reconfiguration of *life*. The question of how to reach a “world which knows not man” must therefore be reformulated for the last time, just as the way to the last station of Ulysses' journey leads through the infernal interiors of our own bodies. The real question then is: if we cannot really undo ourselves, could we at least find alternative ways how to do us in?

It will ultimately be Reza Negarestani who entrusts Ulysses with this final task to “liberate that which liberates itself from you,”<sup>126</sup> to find “real alternatives,”<sup>127</sup> not only to the current earthly life, but even to Brassier's “nihil unbound” (to which he otherwise makes numerous references). As in the case of Meillassoux, Brassier or Thacker, one of the driving forces behind his revolutionary “Inhumanism” is the desire to avoid any ontologization of origins: rhetorically, he does not discard the notion of man, but means to define the human “not by recourse to any essence, but solely in terms of its ability to enter the space of reasons, through which the human can determine and revise what it ought to be by constructing and revising the very reasons or norms that it mobilizes to think and transform itself.”<sup>128</sup>

What is downright Ulyssesian is the view of humanity as “a navigational project,” within which the “militant negativity”<sup>129</sup> of inhumanism takes place in “a space of navigation and intervention.”<sup>130</sup> Ontological questions such as “Where am I? Where have I come from? Where am I heading to?”<sup>131</sup> are therefore immediately re-polarised into the practical imperative of the journey, in fact not unlike Thacker's own expedition. If the “conserved frame of reference anchored in the order of here and now”<sup>132</sup> is to be broken, then it is necessary to open up to a future that “transforms a[ny] commitment into a revisionary

126 Negarestani, R., *The Inhuman* (a quick read). *Toy Philosophy*, 2018. Available online at [www: https://toyphilosophy.com/2018/04/08/the-inhuman-a-quick-read/](https://toyphilosophy.com/2018/04/08/the-inhuman-a-quick-read/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

127 Negarestani, R., *Rainbows and Rationalism. The Fate of the Terrestrial Manifesto of Art*, 2011, p. 3. Available online at [www: http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/77501/Rainbows-and-Rationalism.pdf?1360838356](http://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/77501/Rainbows-and-Rationalism.pdf?1360838356) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

128 Negarestani, R., *The Inhuman* (a quick read).

129 Negarestani, R., *The Labor of the Inhuman, Part I: Human. E-flux journal*, 2014, No. 52, pp. 1–10, esp. p. 8.

130 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

131 Negarestani, R., *Navigate With Extreme Prejudice (Definitions and Ramifications)*, 2014. Available online at [www: https://www.urbanomic.com/philosophy/](https://www.urbanomic.com/philosophy/) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

132 *Ibid.*

catastrophe that travels backward in time [...], from its revisionary ramifications, in order to interfere with the past and rewrite the present."<sup>133</sup> The medium of this internalized catastrophe – not far from Thacker's notion of disaster – is once again only us, and to navigate forward towards the future is ultimately a leap into the vortex whose disintegrative dynamics we embody. As Negarestani points out, in general harmony with Thacker: "The shape (or spectre) of the Thing unleashed by total openness? Where is it? Such landscapes of epidemic, death, openness, and desire dance under my skin."<sup>134</sup>

Let us note that the descent of the future is not dissimilar to the descent of extinction – at the end there will be nothing left of us – while man himself meets this movement by *going down* with it, by descending towards something that is not his consequence but disintegrates him through and through. This "katabasis into the absolute"<sup>135</sup> of the "Great Outdoors" then needs a special hero, "the trickster, the trap-maker, the artificer, and the navigator of deep waters,"<sup>136</sup> someone with a "a cunning vision of doom"<sup>137</sup> whose "descent [...] to Hades [would lead him to] openness to and by the dead" and whose "ascension to the outer surface [would not be] a return to the economical openness of his superficial journeys, but the continuation of his descent, for every ascent is the sublimation of descent."<sup>138</sup>

However, Negarestani's choice of Ulysses heading towards Dante's "place of the abomination"<sup>139</sup> runs into the difficulty of certain predictability of this enterprise and the regional nature of Hell as a subordinate locality. Negarestani has a problem precisely with the fact that the desired destination would still fall within the jurisdiction of the initial Creation. The trouble

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133 Negarestani, R., The Labor of the Inhuman, Part II: Human. *E-flux journal*, 2014, No. 53, pp. 1–10, esp. p. 5.

134 Negarestani, R., Death as Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death. *CTheory*, 2003. Available online at [www: https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14550/5405](https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14550/5405) [cit. 6. 7. 2023].

135 Negarestani, R., Globe of Revolution. An Afterthought on Geophilosophical Realism. *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 8, 2011, No. 2, pp. 25–54, esp. p. 41.

136 Negarestani, R., *Intelligence and Spirit*, p. 446.

137 Negarestani, R., Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, pp. 182–201, esp. pp. 188–189.

138 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia*.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 163. Besides Negarestani's own dantification of Odysseus, Ben Woodard – as a reader of Negarestani – spontaneously contextualizes this "place of abominations" precisely by the "evil ditches" of the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of Dante's *Inferno*, where Ulysses is imprisoned. See Woodard, B., *On an Ungrounded Earth. Towards A New Geophilosophy*. New York, Punctum Books 2013, pp. 72–73. We can add a couple more related visions of hell: the "valley of sorrows" where only Viruses-to-come can dwell (Likavčan, L., *Introduction to Comparative Planetology* [eBook]. Moscow, Strelka Press 2019), or "a non-world" created by a "omnivorous [artificial, alien] 'bacteria'" . See Moreno, G., Notes on the Inorganic: Accelerations. In: Johnson, J. (ed.), *Dark Trajectories. Politics of the Outside*. Hong Kong, Name Publications 2013, pp. 12–35, esp. p. 16.



lies in the capitalist nature of life, which tends to continually resynthesise itself within the limits of the existing configuration, and which, as a result, represents the “incessant production of *modi vivendi* (courses of life).” Any real alternative is made impossible by its capacity to factor in all alternatives including its own bankruptcy or death. The key term here is affordability, which Negarestani innovatively relates not only to life, but also to the demise of an organism that “can only follow its own affordable and therefore economically conservative path to death in order to decontract.”<sup>140</sup> In other words, unlike the unconditionality of extinction, which bursts into the present as a revolutionary traumatic event, such a death has zero revolting potential in relation to life, for it is fully in accordance with the factory setting of an organism in the manner of its lifelong guarantee.

One possible solution would be to separate “sapience” from ontologized “sentience” – don’t we hear the echo of “ye were not created to lead the life of stupid animals” here? – and to consistently purify the “the rational agency,” the essential and ultimately the only parameter of humanity, of all “personal, individual, or [...] biological”<sup>141</sup> foundations. The consequential “automation of discursive practices”<sup>142</sup> would then presumably result into a “programming schema of the *next* machine,”<sup>143</sup> free of any preceding input data. But even if the “programmable matter” could actually be coded,<sup>144</sup> to make one last point about Thacker’s related concepts, even if the “swarm intelligence” would set “a definable point at which self-transformation becomes auto-destruction,”<sup>145</sup> wouldn’t we still be wading through the muck of life whose last word would only repeat the first?

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140 Negarestani, R., *Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy*, p. 191.

141 Negarestani, R., *The Labor of the Inhuman, Part II: Human*, p. 3.

142 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

143 Negarestani, R., *Navigate With Extreme Prejudice (Definitions and Ramifications)*.

144 Thacker, E., *Biophilosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In: Kroker, A. – Kroker, M. (eds.), *Critical digital studies: a reader*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press 2008, pp. 137, 140; cf. Thacker, E., *Living Dead Networks. The Fibreculture Journal*, 2005, No. 4. Available online at [www: http://four.fibreculturejournal.org](http://four.fibreculturejournal.org), the “universality of the mathematics of self-organization” [cit. July 6, 2023]. See DeLanda, M., *Nonorganic Life*. In: Crary, J. – Kwinter, S. (eds.), *Incorporations*. New York, Zone 1995, pp. 129–167, esp. p. 135, or “absolute recomputability” and “absolute contingency of mathematics collapsing into the mortal contingency of stuff”, in Bratton, B. H., *Root the Earth: On Peak Oil Apopenia*. In: Keller, E. – Masciandaro, N. – Thacker, E. (eds.), *Lepor Creativity. Cyclonopedia Symposium*. New York, Punctum Books 2012, pp. 44–57, esp. pp. 46, 57.

145 Galloway, A. R. – Thacker, E., *On Misanthropy*. In: Krysa, J. (ed.), *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*. New York, Autonomedia 2006, pp. 159–174, esp. p. 173; cf. “Odysseys of selfquantification” ending “in the disappearance, or at least displacement, of the essential human User, a multitude crowds into and overflows the evacuated position”, in Bratton, B. H., *The Stack. On Software and Sovereignty* [eBook]. Cambridge–London, MIT Press 2015.

Especially if life isn't the only enemy here: it is the whole general economy revolving around the overrated stars – the “merely glorified regions”<sup>146</sup> – that is unacceptable. If we are all made of stars, as they say, subordinated to their energy economics, then we should hack “the hegemonic model of the sun in regard to death and exteriority without submitting to another star.”<sup>147</sup> But finding the “alternative ways of dying and loosening into the cosmic abyss” that would not be “dictated [both by the organism and] by the economical correlation between Earth and Sun,”<sup>148</sup> is not a simple assignment. As we have already seen, it would require a great deal more than just the invention of “vagabond matter”<sup>149</sup> or “deranged biopower”<sup>150</sup> which would still serve the supremacy of survival.

Reza offers an alternative, in the form of a unique vision of necrophilia – remember Ulysses' reluctance to call his crew *friends* – in which he reverses the classic affirmative bond of *philia* into an infectious one: if capitalist *philia* binds together only the things that are, in the broader sense of the word, exchangeable, repayable, compatible, from origins and profits, to virtues, to purposes, to losses, to vices, then necrophilia, based on the fundamentally incommensurable bond of life and death, makes *philia* literally invade its surroundings, as it binds everything to everything and at the same time, through his intimacy with the base un-life, “debases whatever attaches to it.”<sup>151</sup> In this sense, necrophilia represents the desired “immense ungrounding process,”<sup>152</sup> forming a space of “non-dwelling openness free from affordance-based or economic appropriations.”<sup>153</sup> Unlike the economic schedule of trivial death characteristically incompatible with a living friendship, “death, infested by *philia*, is not domesticated; it goes rabid.”<sup>154</sup>

The mathematical abstraction behind the automation of liberating processes and the uprooting of the economic order of life therefore finally meet in a process of putrefaction. In Negarestani's own words, “that which tangibly rots evolves from that which gradually becomes abstract. In short, the process of decomposition is progressively concrete and retroactively ab-

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146 Negarestani, R., *Rainbows and Rationalism. The Fate of the Terrestrial Manifesto of Art*, p. 5.

147 Negarestani, R., *Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy*, pp. 200–201.

148 Negarestani, R., *Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss*. In: Rosenkranz, P. – Lacagnina, S. (eds.), *Our Sun*. Milan–Venice, Mousse Publishing–Istituto Svizzero di Roma 2010, pp. 3–8, esp. pp. 7–8.

149 Bennett, J., *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham–London, Duke University Press 2010, p. 49.

150 Bratton, B. H., *Root the Earth: On Peak Oil Apopenia*, pp. 54–55.

151 Negarestani, R., *Death as Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death*.

152 *Ibid.*

153 *Ibid.*

154 *Ibid.*

stract,” for the calculus of decomposition involves both “mathematics with a chemical disposition” and “chemical revolution through mathematical distributions.”<sup>155</sup>

Which brings us to the very end of our journey. Let us think for the last time of Ulysses, this time in the context of Dante’s famous vision of “love which moves the sun and all the other stars.”<sup>156</sup> If the created universe is ruled by founding love, by the original loving and dividing Word, then the body of Ulysses, *flooded* by necrophilia and succumbing to the work of “taxonomic indetermination,”<sup>157</sup> dissolves in Negarestani’s vision into oil: a viscous death which “is not of this place but of estranging depths, elud[es] biological origins”<sup>158</sup> and represents “the black corpse of the sun, [...] too chemically potent to support the vitality of life or endurance of survival.”<sup>159</sup>



Although Reza Negarestani refers primarily to the artist Pamela Rosenkranz in this regard, we can point to a connection with the oil imagery of *The Last Winter* (2006) or Richard Wilson’s installation *20:50* (1987). In fact, this entire article can be read as the literary context of this specific “petroleum imagination” of a world without people.

It is as if Negarestani took Charles Lyell’s wondrous vision of mummies, fittingly born from the depths of the Earth, and transformed it into a radical programme of revolt, resulting in “the curious substances [that] could never in reality have belonged to men. They may have been generated by some

155 Negarestani, R., *Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Architecture and Politics of Decay*. In: Mackay, R. (ed.), *Collapse VI. Philosophical Research and Development*. Fallmouth, Urbanomic 2010, pp. 379–430, esp. p. 429.

156 Alighieri, D., *The Divine Comedy. Volume III. Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145, p. 395.

157 Negarestani, R., *Cyclonopedia*.

158 Negarestani, R., *Outlines for a Science Fiction of the Earth as Narrated from a Nethermost Point of View*. *World Literature Today*, 84, 2010, No. 3, pp. 12–13.

159 Negarestani, R., *Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss*, p. 7.

plastic virtue residing in the interior of the earth, or they may be abortions of nature produced by her incipient efforts in the work of creation. [...] May we not refer [these] derogate[s] from the perfection of the Divine attributes to the future rather than the past? May we not be looking into the womb of Nature, and not her grave? May not these images be like the shades of the unborn, in Virgil's Elysium – the archetypes of men not yet called into existence?"<sup>160</sup>

Be as it may, it is here that Ulysses meets his radical fate: having travelled to a liminal hell of the (in)organic world as a messenger of Adamic revolt, he himself eventually turned into a message from the future "Death Valley,"<sup>161</sup> albeit without anyone to receive it. Which seems to be exactly what Ulysses was after all the way down here.

## 7. Post Scriptum: A Little Bitter

We might as well go back to the beginning, for true to his polytropic nature, Ulysses is still many things. Except that now he becomes a hero of "cosmic pessimism," performing an "act of crystalline self-abnegation,"<sup>162</sup> supposedly the only answer to the call of the Great Outdoors. At least if we agree that "nihilism is unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality."<sup>163</sup> Who else would be better suited to be a fallen angel who disdains "any transcendental at-homeness,"<sup>164</sup> to represent an anti-Noah who would like to liberate the Universe from the desire for life,<sup>165</sup> or to serve as an agent of chaos who, instead of combating cosmic processes, imitates them up to the point of the general shipwreck of life?<sup>166</sup> As a matter of fact, wasn't he a nihilist all along, even during his Dantean voyage? Did he not forsake the word "friend", only to turn it upside down later? Wasn't philia already necrotized by Ulysses' rejection of "eternal life"? And wasn't he always secretly wanting the "ocean's waves [to] close over him," to become himself

160 Lyell, Ch., *Principles of geology, or the modern changes of the earth and its inhabitants considered as illustrative of geology. New and entirely revised edition.* New York, D. Appleton and Company 1865, p. 114.

161 Keller, E., ... Or, Speaking with the Alien, a Refrain... In: Keller, E. – Masciandaro, N. – Thacker, E. (eds.), *Leper Creativity. Cyclonopedia Symposium*, pp. 225–263, esp. p. 227.

162 Thacker, E., *Cosmic Pessimism. Continent*, 2, 2012, No. 2, pp. 66–75, esp. p. 70.

163 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.

164 Catren, G., *Outland Empire: Prolegomena to Speculative Absolutism.* Transl. T. Adkins. In: Bryant, L. – Srnicek, N. – Harman, G. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, pp. 334–367, esp. p. 367.

165 Barber, D. C., *Whylessness: The Universe is Deaf and Blind.* In: Thacker, E. – et al., *Dark Nights of the Universe.* New York, Name Publications 2013, pp. 19–43, esp. pp. 41–42.

166 Huxley, T. H., *Evolution and Ethics [The Romanes Lecture, 1893].* In: *Evolution & Ethics and Other Essays.* London, Macmillan and Co. 1894, pp. 47–116, esp. p. 83.

liquefied, and to “experience of that world behind the sun” where light can’t go?

It would seem that when Brassier delivers his much repeated verdict that “thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living,”<sup>167</sup> he could very well whisper it in Ulysses’ ear before the sailor’s “little speech.” Including the mantra that “hope that remains circumscribed by the horizon of the present is always reactionary,” while “despair is revolutionary.”<sup>168</sup> Ulysses, as we have seen, has very little of the former, while he is driven forward by the latter. He is still a reverse Adam: only now he doesn’t travel to a world that has not yet known people, but to a world that *no longer* knows people.

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167 Brassier, R., *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.

168 Brassier, R., Refusal. In: *Bad Feelings*. London, Book Works 2015.