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Dante in Space

In 1308 Dante Alighieri started to write *The Divine Comedy*, an adoration of the passage through sin to salvation, from a sickening journey through the repugnant abominations of the underworld to a rapturous deliverance into the heavenly splendour that the faithful should anticipate. When he started to write this visionary tale, Dante opened with a Latin incipit:

Ultima regna canam, fluido contermina mundo,
 Spiritibus que lata patent, que premia solvent
 pro meritis cuicunque suis.

The most widely cited English translation, from 1898, renders this triplet as:

The furthest realms I sing, coterminous with the flowing universe,
 stretching afar for spirits, paying the rewards
 to each other after his merits.¹

In 1990, a less elaborate translation is proposed:

I shall sing of the farthest realms coterminous with the moving universe
 Stretching wide for spirits, where each one receives
 Rewards according to his merits.²

A 1997 translation of the first line proposes:

I shall sing of far-away kingdoms, located at the edges of the watery world³

In 2010 we are offered yet another version:

I shall sing of the kingdoms distant, bordering on the changing world, which
 open wide for souls, which provide rewards to each according to their merits.⁴

The significance of these efforts to render Dante's Latin into English extends beyond debates about fidelity in translation – about whether the rhythm of Dante's words can be successfully captured in another language, or whether these opening lines signify something that can be conveyed to modern readers.

Most commentators on these lines take their direction from Boccaccio's *The Life of Dante*, written between 1348 and 1373, which tells us that this triplet – and the Latin poem that would have followed from it – was discarded by Dante. The reason for this departure, Boccaccio tells us, is Dante's preference for the vulgarity of the vernacular over the lofty refinements of Classical verse; it is in the Florentine idiom (what Erich Auerbach describes as 'the common everyday language of the people'⁵), rather than in the hexameter verse of the Classical tradition, that Dante is better able to reach his fellow citizens. Dante began with 'Ultima regna canam', Boccaccio writes, but 'there he stopped; for he thought that it was vain to put crusts of bread in the mouths of those who were still sucking milk, and so began his work again in a style fitted for modern ears, and continued it in the vulgar tongue'.⁶

This story of the palimpsestic act of auto-translation that initiates *The Divine Comedy* is a familiar one, and it points to questions that continue to preoccupy literary studies today – questions about what authentic writing might be, about whether literature should be accessible only to those who observe the correct critical rituals and protocols or about whether all should be able to participate in the recording of lived experience. This is a story that has power and authority at its centre: who, it asks, is permitted to receive, and participate in the transmission of, the word? By excavating the roots of this poem, and by emphasizing how it begins by declining the gaze of the high-born, Boccaccio positions it as a work that emerges from an apprehensive privileging of the secular over the sacred.⁷ However, precisely what the secular constitutes is uncertain in Dante's Latin. This uncertainty is demonstrated by the decisions made when translating Dante's *mundo*: this place, where the poet sings and where the worthy will find a home, is either the universe or the world. The abandoned incipit revolves around a term which, in its Latin form, refers to two domains or spheres of existence. It is in the working out of this ambivalence that *The Divine Comedy's* significance is also to be found.

Marx views *The Divine Comedy* as a work that is grounded in worldly affairs, and in 1843, in the first volume of *Capital*, he looks to *Paradiso*, the final Cantica of Dante's poem, when describing the mysterious act of transubstantiation that allows one commodity to be compared with another. As he approaches the gates of heaven, Dante's familiarity with the doctrine of Christian faith is tested by St Peter; satisfied with the responses he receives, St Peter replies, 'In alloy ... and legal weight,/the coin you produce has passed assay'.⁸ For Marx, this moment perfectly captures the function of money as a mechanism that mediates exchange by establishing universal equivalence; just as the faithful are permitted

to enter Paradise when they have cast off their physical form, so a commodity that is taken to market and acquires exchange-value 'must divest itself of its natural physical body and become transformed from merely imaginary into real gold'.⁹ As such, Dante's poem is accommodated into the broader project of Marx's thinking. Since the supernatural enchantments of religion and theology have established an imaginary sense of orbital containment ('Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself',¹⁰ Marx writes in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*), the world needs to become the site of a secure and resolute analysis of things as they truly are; here, 'the critique of heaven turns into a critique of the earth'.¹¹ Despite its metaphysical and theological adornments, *The Divine Comedy's* significance for *Capital* is to be found in its contribution to such an earthly critique.

The worldly quality of Dante's poem continues to be asserted with the re-emergence of the concept of world literature in the twentieth century. While Marx and Engels anticipate a world literature that will arise as 'national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible',¹² the first appearance of this concept is usually traced to Goethe's prophetic announcement in 1827 of a coming *Weltliteratur*. Indeed, Marx and Engels' projection of such a writing would seem to be derived from their debt to Goethe's internationalism.¹³ Goethe's petition is for an inclusionary literature that would transcend the historical separation of nations and cultures and accelerate the realization of humanity's essentially cosmopolitan character. 'National literature is now a rather unmeaning term', Goethe famously writes, 'the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach'.¹⁴ This petition, for literature's evolution to engender both intercultural understanding and a sense of collective community, has shaped subsequent entreaties to bring the world's regions and populations into dialogue with each other. In recent years, this concept has tended to refer to efforts to track the travel of texts and literary practices across the earth's territories. For David Damrosch, in *What Is World Literature?*, the definition of this concept needs to extend beyond the sense of a burgeoning internationalism that characterized Goethe's (and Marx's) proposal for a literature that expresses the world's unity. 'The dramatic acceleration of globalization since their era ... has gradually complicated the idea of a world literature',¹⁵ he writes. In what is now established as one of the standard definitions, world literature for Damrosch does not signify a writing that binds humanity together. Rather, he takes 'world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language'.¹⁶

Any literature that travels into and across the world therefore by default becomes (in a specific sense) world literature, and according to Damrosch *The Divine Comedy* is one example of this kind of writing: 'Dante's poem changes shape as it crosses borders: it is a fundamentally different work abroad, and even in Italy it was a very different work for Italo Calvino and Primo Levi in the twentieth century than it was for Boccaccio in the fourteenth'.¹⁷ Essential for Damrosch, however, is that texts that travel take on a worldly quality when they take up residence elsewhere and influence the aesthetic practices that have operated in these newly acquired locations. 'In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base', he writes, but 'a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture'.¹⁸ *The Divine Comedy* deserves the title of 'World Literature' because it opens itself to mutation and enables acts of textual hybridization. It reveals not only that individual texts enter into dialogue with each other but also that aesthetic traditions are transformed by the circulation of texts: 'When we read Dante, we are aware that we are encountering a major work of world literature, one that draws on a wealth of previous writing and that casts its shadow ahead onto much that will follow it'.¹⁹

The Divine Comedy for Damrosch, then, is a formative example of world literature because it transforms literary practices as it moves beyond its home and is itself transformed by this aesthetic migration. But it also functions as world literature because it undertakes an act of world formation: 'We are also immersed within Dante's singular world, an imagined universe very unlike any envisioned by Virgil or Saint Paul, and one that Milton, Gogol, and Walcott will radically revise in turn for very different purposes of their own'.²⁰ Retaining the uncertainty of Dante's *mundo*, what *The Divine Comedy* gives us according to Damrosch is at once a world and a universe.

Auerbach too takes *Weltliteratur* as the seminal foundation for a model of both aesthetic production and comparative literary analysis that would overcome the exclusive fixation on particular national cultures that has been a customary feature of philological criticism. Against Philology's atomizing separation of writing into disjunctive traditions, his 1952 essay 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*' sketches a mode of interpretation that would be capable of tracing the many syntheses through which aesthetic practices connect, combine and coalesce. The distinctiveness of the world's cultures is steadily diminishing, for Auerbach, because of the intensity of social and cultural exchange across regions and borders. As a result of this irresistible and transformative exchange, he writes,

aesthetic practices are merging to forge a textual conversation that is overcoming the futile nationalism that seeks to contain writing traditions in a state of artificial isolation. The notion of *Weltliteratur* in Auerbach's thinking is inflected with a universalism that takes human interaction as both axiomatic and a force for unification. The comparative reading that is initiated by *Weltliteratur* 'considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members,'²¹ and this intercourse points to the 'fateful coalescence'²² of world culture. As the notion of *Weltliteratur* becomes more timely, he writes, Philology should retain its historicist roots by remaining attentive to how national writing practices have emerged and become hardened. But this historicism would serve the more urgent task of charting the inexorable passage towards aesthetic standards and forms that are increasingly distributed across the world's territories. The version of world literature promoted by Auerbach 'provides a model of how to read a text at the level of the planet,' Jane O. Newman observes, 'that is, both for the world that it contains within itself and for its ability to "radiate out" into "world history" and into an all-embracing world literary universe too.'²³ What 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*' draws out of Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* is, then, a dualistic critical model that is able to document the singularity of diverse traditions while also attending to the arrival of global standards and practices.

Today, Auerbach's account of the contraction and fusion of the world's numerous aesthetic practices is often encountered through comments in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, where Edward Said questions the universal reach of the humanism and historicism that motivate 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*'. Auerbach's essay concludes by situating *Weltliteratur* in planetary space – 'our philological home is the earth, it can no longer be the nation,' he writes. However, Auerbach's almost exclusive focus on Latin and European writing leads Said archly to note that 'his earthly home is European culture.'²⁴ This brief comment is part of Said's broader excavation of the unacknowledged investment in European tradition, value and authority that shapes Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment humanism. But it also points to how Auerbach understands the place of world literature. The world in which *Weltliteratur* is situated for Auerbach is not merely the location of a cultural or social coalescence; it is, more fundamentally, fixed by the earth itself.

Auerbach's fascination with literature's earthly dwelling first becomes evident in his 1929 *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. This book profoundly re-reads the status of Dante's vision; rather than an allegory which seeks to disclose a realm beyond the mundane space of the secular – rather than a worldly imagining of the kingdom of Heaven – *The Divine Comedy* is significant because it explores

the possibility of seeing the earth from above, as though through God's eyes. This poem expresses a medieval sensibility – for Dante, a cosmology derived from the melding of Aristotle, Aquinas, St Augustine and Ptolemy; according to Sloterdijk, 'a cosmic-supracosmic bastard model that fuses Aristotelian and Neoplatonic motifs'²⁵ – in which the world is newly conceived as a distinct entity, even if it is still viewed as a manifestation of divine creation. Auerbach situates *The Divine Comedy* as a formative text in the articulation of this sensibility because it translates perceptions of a divinely ordered universe into the image of a world that is coherently meaningful to a humanity that is also created. He arrives at this insight in a passage which seems almost to equivocate about the dualism that is evident in Dante's poem. 'Even though the ancient characters of the *Comedy* have been changed in passing through the medium of medieval interpretation,' Auerbach writes:

even though they have been transposed into a world order that is not always appropriate to their actuality, nevertheless with Dante for the first time, that ordering, reinterpreting spirit of the Middle Ages provides something more than systematic edification. With Dante a new and imponderable element – compounded of poetry, experience, and vision – was gained for all time: but that should not make us forget that the force which guided him in his achievement sprang directly from the universalism of the rational doctrine he was striving to demonstrate by embodying it in a divine vision. The question: how does God see the earthly world? – and its answer: with all the particularities ordered with a view to the eternal goal – are the foundation of this profoundly passionate poem, and in its fifteen thousand lines there is not a scene or a magical chord which did not draw life from that rational foundation.²⁶

Dante's poem therefore preserves a sense of the inscrutability of the celestial universe, but for Auerbach what is most distinctive about it is the idea that humanity can attain a providential perspective. Conveying and extending a nascent medieval geocentrism, *The Divine Comedy* defines a moment in which it seems possible to see the world as it truly is. Auerbach discovers in Dante's poem what Emily Apter terms a 'terrestrial humanism'²⁷ in which the world remains an entity that communicates the sublime order of things, but is also becoming viewed as possessing observable features, moving within its own orbit, and a knowable *terra firma* for those who dwell in it. Rather than offering what Damrosch describes as a 'singular world, an imagined universe,' *The Divine Comedy* is to be understood only in terms of its determination of a singular world and the emergence of a planetary consciousness. In Auerbach's reading of this text we perhaps find an explanation that accounts for Dante's abandoning

of the original Latin incipit, 'Ultima regna canam, fluido contermina mundo'. Perhaps the ambiguity of the Latin *mundo* was no longer suited to a new cosmology in which the world was becoming visible as an entity that possesses itself.

II

For Auerbach, the world comes into view for the first time in *The Divine Comedy*, but the idea of a literature that can aspire to a divine perspective becomes literalized when poetry is launched into orbit. Etched into an instrumentation panel on the Transit Research and Attitude Control (TRAAC) satellite that was launched from Cape Canaveral by the United States Navy in 1961, Thomas Bergin's 'For a Space Prober' was the first poem to leave the earth. Still circling the earth at an altitude of 600 miles, and expected to remain there for another 800 years, Bergin's poem takes distance and time as its principal themes:

From Time's obscure beginning, the Olympians
Have, moved by pity, anger, sometimes mirth,
Poured an abundant store of missiles down
On the resigned, defenceless sons of Earth.

Hailstones and chiding thunderclaps of Jove,
Remote directives from the constellations:
Aye, the celestials have swooped down themselves,
Grim bent on miracles or incarnations.

Earth and her offspring patiently endured,
(Having no choice) and as the years rolled by
In trial and toil prepared their counterstroke—
And now 'tis man who dares assault the sky.

Fear not, Immortals, we forgive your faults,
And as we come to claim our promised place
Aim only to repay the good you gave
And warm with human love the chill of space.²⁸

This poem is shaped by the idea that humanity possesses the ability to rise above and apprehend its earthly home. Before the world's appearance in the 'Earthrise'

and 'Blue Marble' photos, it dares to suggest that poetry can offer a vision of the whole world. Just as audacious as this poem's formative circumscription and inscription of the world from orbit is that it offers a rejoinder to the US-USSR adversarialism, and the subsequent fears about the weaponizing of space, that followed *Sputnik's* journey around the earth. Remarkably, the first poem in space petitions for the decommissioning of weapons in orbit and calls for universal peace.

Bergin's poem seems improbable because its message of earthly unity is attached to a United States Navy satellite. 'For a Space Prober' is also uncanny because Bergin, as professor of Romance Languages at Yale University from 1945 to 1973, translated *The Divine Comedy* into English in 1955,²⁹ and this poem corroborates Dante's primacy in the orbital writing of the world. The ability to leave the confines of the planet and to attain the heights of orbit is here seen to be a monumentally transformative power, one that allows humanity to enter the realm of the Gods. But the assault on the sky that it announces is also an incursion launched against the immortals' exclusive rights to, and authority over, earth and its inhabitants. Bergin's poem does not reproduce the Christian version of the sublime that *The Divine Comedy* offers: the figures that populate it are too recognizable, and their offensive actions merge the earth with the constellations from which the Olympians issue their directives; they are, in other words, too Greek. However, it is precisely the ability for humanity to rise above and comprehend its mundane home that is at the centre of Bergin's poem. Here, orbital culture arrives as a cosmological counter-offensive that allows humanity to gain control of a planetary perspective. The ability to look down on the earth is of theological significance for this poem, and the shift in authority that it describes is to be found in its earth-forging shattering of the heavens' dominion over the world. Nevertheless, this latter-day intensification of Dante's humanism is also conciliatory in its response to the Gods and in its announcement of a new earthly autonomy. The humanism of 'For a Space Prober' extends beyond a sense of what happens when we observe the earth from above. The final line suggests that a beneficent transmission also occurs when satellites are launched into orbit and assault the sky. These craft not only look down at the earth, they also face outwards to the stars and the Gods. What they convey, for Bergin, is the compassion and tenderness of human love.

In 1971 astronauts on the Apollo 15 lunar mission provided a sense of what this human love might look like when they marked their departure from the surface of the moon with some stirring music. Despite having a recognizably military arrangement, the piece that they played would probably have seemed

uncontroversial to many witnessing the live broadcast of this event. Apollo 15's musical valedictory was, however, taken from the official anthem of the US Air Force – the 'Air Force Song' – that was written and composed in 1938. Absent from the recording played by the Apollo astronauts were the lyrics of this song. The first stanza of the 'Air Force Song' establishes its sense of what it means to ascend above the ground, with the concluding line introducing a refrain that is repeated throughout the rest of the song:

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
 Climbing high into the sun
 Here they come zooming to meet our thunder
 At 'em boys, Give 'er the gun! (Give 'er the gun now!)
 Down we dive, spouting our flame from under
 Off with one helluva roar!
 We live in fame or go down in flame. Hey!
 Nothing'll stop the U.S. Air Force!³⁰

In 1961 Bergin proposes that humanity has triumphed over the Olympians by replacing missiles with tender messages of peace, friendship and affection. Ten years later, by transmitting the 'Air Force Song' to the world, the Apollo 15 mission promised a weaponizing of space that would again allow 'man' to assault the presumed authority of celestial divinities. This time, however, rather than the earth's love radiating from orbit into the universe, orbit is the new place of war. 'Hands of men' have 'blasted the world asunder',³¹ the song continues, and the 'crate of thunder' that these men have created permits an armed ascent 'high into the blue', equipping and empowering the 'souls of men dreaming of skies to conquer'. The Apollo 15 mission in this manner takes cavalier bellicosity and the reach of the boys who give the gun beyond both surface and aerial combat. When the 'Air Force Song' was broadcast by the Apollo 15 Lunar Module, the effect was to confirm that orbit is indeed a place to which terrestrial combat has risen. The Apollo programme is best known for the first lunar landing and for heightened assertions of the earth's cohesive planetarity. Apollo 8 produced the 'Earthrise' photo, and in 1969 Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin of the Apollo 11 mission installed a plaque on the Moon's surface that reads, 'Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the Moon, July 1969 AD. We came in peace for all mankind'.³² Almost exactly two years later, Apollo 15 replaced such a pacific intent with a narrative of nation-centred belligerence: preserving the striations of a divided world, it provides the reminder that NASA's elevated 'Flying men' will remain dedicated to 'guarding the nation's borders'.³³

NASA swiftly sought to dissociate itself from the decision to transmit this song by attributing its global airing to a technical error. As part of its efforts to disavow the idea that orbiting instruments and space exploration express a will to dominate from the heavens, NASA has continued to send poetry into space. Poems in these moments have become part of a cultural payload that would, by virtue of their presence on spacecraft, confirm NASA's professed ethic to establish communication, rather than to establish a new domain in which to pursue a hostile territorialism or to promote the idea of its exceptionality. The poems that have been chosen for spaceflight convey an aversion to aggression and conflict. For example, over 1,100 haikus were sent on NASA's 2013 Mars Atmosphere and Volatile Evolution probe, or MAVEN. These poems were selected by public vote following a competition that invited submissions from around the world. The winner, by Benedict Smith, parodies the martial spirit that was saluted during the Apollo 15 mission lunar lift-off:

It's funny, they named
Mars after the God of War
Have a look at Earth³⁴

In the aphoristic form of the haiku, NASA's declared pacific intentions are here confirmed by the notion that, rather than displaced onto a realm beyond the earth, conflict is more properly to be understood as a worldly fault.

In 2014 NASA once again sent poetry into space when Maya Angelou's poem 'A Brave and Startling Truth' (written in 1995 to commemorate the UN's 50th anniversary) was carried on the first test flight of the Orion spacecraft. When NASA Administrator Charles Bolden announced that this poem would be carried on Orion's inaugural flight (two orbits of the earth), he described it as a visionary work that reveals the function and significance of art:

It is fitting that Maya Angelou's prophetic words be flown not only outside the bounds of our Earth, but on the maiden voyage of a spacecraft that represents humanity's aspirations to move beyond our planet, to reach higher, and become more than we have ever been. Through art, and the unique perspective of people like Maya Angelou, our discoveries, and the new facts and expanded understanding brought to us by exploration, are transformed into meaning.³⁵

This ovation to Angelou suggests that her poem features on Orion's first flight not to represent the breadth of human achievements by placing the cultural and the technological alongside each other in a state of mutual dependence. This ovation offers a different perspective of this relationship because it also troubles

the idea that the world or universe can be held securely in thought. The truth exposed by 'A Brave and Startling Truth' is that technical knowledge by itself is unable to disclose things as they truly are; in order for such a disclosure to occur, facts require supplementation by the aesthetic. It is interpretation rather than unveiling – it is the transformative act of imaginative working and shaping, rather than the mimetic delivery of the object – that allows humanity to see beyond its familiar planetary environment. And this encounter with the transcendent also reaches beyond the calculable. Literature, Bolden submits, rises above the realm of analytical thinking and beyond perceptions of a quantifiable world; with it, we become 'more than' our mundane past might suggest.

Bolden's speech on the launch of the first Orion spacecraft therefore positions Angelou's poem not as a work that derives from the tradition of writing that is fascinated with aerial flight or jurisdiction over the atmosphere,³⁶ nor as a poetic extension of the effort to master atmospheric space – what Sloterdijk describes as the 'ecologization of warfare'³⁷ that modernity conducts in the air. Rather, this poem is placed in a literary tradition that speaks to a spirit of universal – otherworldly and unearthly – curiosity. It is to be associated with the spirit of Dante that is channelled in Bergin's poem, rather than with the ethic of the United States Navy that is repeated by the Apollo 15 crew. However, 'A Brave and Startling Truth' is perhaps not as captivated by the transcendent as Bolden assumes. Its focus is an apparently isolated earth and those who occupy this place, a 'people, on a small and lonely planet ... on this small and drifting planet ... on this wayward floating body'.³⁸ This trifling and solitary entity is seen to be following a nomadic astronomical passage through space; its inhabitants, in contrast, are more purposefully undertaking a journey 'to a destination where all signs tell us/It is possible and imperative that we learn/A brave and startling truth'.³⁹ Although structured principally in free verse form, 'A Brave and Startling Truth' also proceeds iteratively towards a disclosure of this truth as the poem conceives it. The journey that it navigates is, initially, a wholly earth-bound one, and the reader is taken on a tour through some of the many errors in human history that have occluded the discovery of a universal verity: 'the minstrel show of hate', 'battlefields and coliseum', 'the screaming racket in the temples', rifles, land mines, the bomb, the dagger, 'cankorous words' and the abuse of children.⁴⁰ It also travels past fabricated edifices (the Pyramids and the Gardens of Babylon) and nature's pageant (the Grand Canyon, Mount Fuji, the Amazon and Mississippi rivers and 'all creatures in the depths and on the shores'). After traversing these various worldly disturbances and distractions, humanity will, this poem

proposes, arrive at an understanding of its celestial purpose. This moment – ‘when we come to it ... When we release our fingers/From fists of hostility’ – will be ‘the day of peacemaking’.⁴¹

Angelou’s poem therefore offers an inspirational vision of humanity’s deliverance from the depredations of history and a reconciliation with itself. There are notable resonances here between such an eschatological image of the utopia – indeed, the paradise – to come and the vision of the passage to the kingdom of God in the *Paradiso* Cantica of *The Divine Comedy*. Like Dante’s poem, ‘A Brave and Startling Truth’ describes this passage not only as an overcoming of the world’s troubles, but also as a journey beyond the bodies that circulate in the space beyond the earth. In *Paradiso*, the Soul’s ascent to the Empyrean takes it through the heavenly bodies which, according to the Ptolemaic geometry that defines *The Divine Comedy*’s cosmology, orbit the earth: the Moon (realm of angels), Mercury (realm of archangels), Venus (realm of principalities), the Sun (realm of powers), Mars (realm of virtues), Jupiter (realm of dominations), Saturn (realm of thrones), fixed stars (realm of cherubim) and the *Primum Mobile* (realm of seraphim). Similarly, in Angelou’s poem, the route to peacemaking takes humanity ‘past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns’.⁴²

Auerbach’s warning not to treat *The Divine Comedy* primarily as an allegory in pursuit of the heavenly is therefore poetically restaged in Angelou’s poem. ‘A Brave and Startling Truth’ is, just as Auerbach writes of *The Divine Comedy*, devoted to the human attainment of a providential perception that is focused on the world. At the culmination of this poem, such a sense of the autonomous capacity to comprehend the ordered particularities of the world is promised by the day of peacemaking. ‘When we come to it,’ for Angelou:

We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

And, in its final stanza, this poem conjectures that an epiphanic event will allow humanity to come to a state of self-knowledge:

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible

We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

In this revisionary narrative, those who inhabit the world are not the issue of a supernatural deity, and the idea of the miraculous here is turned against its origins in notions of a divine power that surpasses secular agency. Despite looking beyond the skies and itself attaining an extra-terrestrial height, this poem's gaze is almost entirely focused on the human and the earthly; the exceptional creation that it depicts not only takes place on the ground but is of the world too. Aspiring to a position outside of the world that it regards, 'A Brave and Startling Truth' seeks not to convey the mysterious order of things. Rather, it is motivated by a question that is at once more mundane and of greater technical complexity: where in the world are we?

III

Poetry that has been sent beyond the earth's planetary limits therefore contributes to the perplexing philosophical and literary (as well as photographic, astronomical and mediatic) premise that it is necessary to leave the earth in order to see and know it adequately. According to such a view, it is not necessary to touch the earth in order to be connected with it; indeed, from this habitualized perspective, intimate contact with the world would prevent those on the ground from seeing or understanding it fully.

This unstable hypothesis has been a prominent feature of the discourses that have accompanied efforts to conceptualize the ascent to orbit (and beyond) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As well as intensifying this ambivalent thinking of the world, poems carried on spacecraft also continue the trajectory taken by the tradition of critical thinking that has emerged around the notion of world literature. Certainly, literature that is sent into space would strangely fit the definition of world literature, not only because these texts provide a literary context in which the world becomes visible, but also because they are transported outside of the social, geographical and cultural environment in which they were produced. More than any other writing that moves away from national traditions or escapes circumscription by national borders, poetry in orbit does not merely cross from one territory to another; this literature travels in a space beyond the territorial lineaments that striate the world as a site of social action

and interaction. As this chapter has noted, the idea of world literature has been decisively elaborated in Damrosch's emphasis on 'works that circulate beyond their culture of origin'; above all other writing, poetry in orbit fulfils such a sense of a writing that circulates in the beyond.

If poetry in orbit extends and heightens the space in which world literature revolves then it also prompts a return to ontological and cosmological questions that have been neglected in recent critical work on the transnational movement of writing. Such criticism accents the transcultural and trans-territorial passage of writing, and it provides a literary-historical cartography that maps the many mutations and metamorphoses that transform particular texts, as well as aesthetic genres more broadly. In this focus on literary practices, the world's immanence tends to be taken as axiomatic; at best, the idea of the world – as an incontestable finitude that grounds aesthetic production – is given only marginal consideration. Writing that has been sent into orbit troubles such a focus because it is animated by the act of reflecting on the world as an astronomical and cosmological body. In it, the notion of a planetary habitus is itself of primary concern, and this return to the perception of the world as a terrestrial location (rather than as a surface etched by cultural practices) suggests a rejuvenation of the origins of world literature.

'Ultima regna canam, fluido contermina mundo'. I shall sing of realms that are coterminous with the flowing and moving universe; I shall sing of kingdoms that are at the edges of the watery world or bordering on the changing world. These translations, from 1898 to 2010, of Dante's abandoned Latin incipit can be read in terms of their historical contexts, and the recent rendering of *mundo* as *world* might be treated as further evidence of a twentieth- and twenty-first-century desire in Europe to move away from theological and cosmological thinking and towards a sense of planetary space. In other words, the continued translation of Dante's Latin opening phrase would appear to demonstrate a broader and longer sacrificing of the celestial to the mundane, and a greater appetite today for thinking about globalization. While such an appetite might be attributable in part to Auerbach's 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', and its insistence in the mid-twentieth century that literature can work as a force for humanity's unification, his earlier writing on Dante points to a prior and more profound moment in which the world takes on a distinctive character. By situating *The Divine Comedy* as the text that inaugurates a new sense of the world, Auerbach anticipates the claim made in respect of Angelou's poem that literature makes the world comprehensible. But, locating Dante's poem at the source of this earthly sensibility, Auerbach also offers an alternative history of the world's

conceptualization to the one that shapes the arrival of the idea of world literature. For Goethe,

Of all discoveries and convictions, nothing may have produced a greater effect on the human spirit than the doctrine of Copernicus. The world had scarcely been acknowledged as round and complete in itself when it was obliged to forgo the tremendous privilege of being the centre of the universe. Never, perhaps, has a greater demand been made on mankind: for through this recognition so many things went up in smoke: a second paradise, a world of innocence, poetry and piety, the evidence of the senses, the conviction of a poetic-religious faith.⁴³

Auerbach looks to Goethe as the figure who first describes literature's worldly attachments, and he revives Goethe's prophetic announcement of a writing that will transcend the limitations of national culture. The proposal that this literature will emerge with the continued unfolding of the sixteenth-century shift from anthropocentric geocentrism to heliocentrism is, however, disputed in Auerbach's account of a more embryonic cosmological dislocation. Of decisive significance here is not the Copernican displacement of an earth or its inhabitants⁴⁴ that had been at the centre of the cosmos and creation, nor the ensuing distrust in the idea that the world itself can be touched or that the task of literature task is to convey a sense of the world's divine purpose. For Auerbach, it is with medieval poetry's attempt to capture the world, and to make earthly existence a primary concern, that so many things melt in the air. At the centre of these competing humanisms – at the origin of world literature – there is therefore a dispute over the nature of orbit, over what orbits and what is orbited; over what is sovereign and what is the satellite.

Notes

- 1 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante*, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, in *Dante: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Caesar (London: Routledge, 1989), 166.
- 2 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante*, trans. Vincenzo Zin Bolletino, cited in Guyda Armstrong, 'Review of Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, J.G. Nichols trans.', *Heliotropia* 2, no. 2 (2004): 28.
- 3 R.J. Schork, *Latin and Roman Culture in Joyce* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), 231.
- 4 James M. Houston, *Building a Monument to Dante: Boccaccio as Dantista* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 124.

- 5 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 186.
- 6 Giovanni Boccaccio, *A Translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's Life of Dante*, trans. G.R. Carpenter (New York: The Grolier Club of the City of New York, 1900), 129.
- 7 Dante scholarship often describes how this preference for the idiomatic and vernacular over Latin is also the conduit for a critique of the church and its imperial ambitions in the fourteenth century. For a discussion of how this challenge unfolds in the third Cantica, *Paradiso*, see, for example, Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante's Paradiso* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 6–11.
- 8 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012), XXIV, 83–4.
- 9 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 197.
- 10 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 132.
- 11 Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, 132.
- 12 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 1967), 84.
- 13 If Marx's humanist internationalism is partly attributable to his affinities to Goethe then it is necessary to note that Marx also, contentiously, in his 1853 essay 'The British Rule in India' reproduces Goethe's claim that the passage to the world's unification will be energized by Asia's forced incorporation into transnational polity and production. For a discussion of this essay's debt to Goethe, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17–20. Also see S.S. Prawer, *Marx and World Literature* (London: Verso, 2014).
- 14 Goethe, cited in David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.
- 15 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 4.
- 16 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 4.
- 17 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 140.
- 18 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 4.
- 19 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 298.
- 20 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 298.
- 21 Erich Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', trans. Maire and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 2.
- 22 Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*': 2.
- 23 Jane O. Newman, 'Auerbach's Dante: Poetical Theology as a Point of Departure for a Philology of World Literature', in *Approaches to World Literature*, ed. Joachim Küpper (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 44.

- 24 Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1983), 7. The preference for European traditions that Said finds in Auerbach's essay can be seen as a continuation of the literary historical prioritization that occurs in Goethe's comments on *Weltliteratur*. These comments, Robert J.C. Young notes, 'remain fundamentally European in orientation, and are addressed to the prospect of the accession of Germany and German literature onto the European literary scene'. Robert J.C. Young, 'World Literature and Language Anxiety', in *Approaches to World Literature*, ed. Küpper, 30.
- 25 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume 2. Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), 456.
- 26 Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), 150.
- 27 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 211–27.
- 28 Thomas G. Bergin, 'For a Space Prober', *Advances in Geophysics* 15 (1971): 136.
- 29 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Thomas Bergin (New York: Appleton Century Crafts, 1955). Bergin also published a biography of Boccaccio in 1981.
- 30 Robert MacArthur Crawford, 'The U.S. Air Force Song', in *A Civilian's Guide to the U.S. Military: A Comprehensive Reference to the Customs, Language, & Structure of the Armed Forces*, ed. Barbara Schading (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2007), 180.
- 31 Crawford, 'The U.S. Air Force Song', 181.
- 32 See also Dean's remark that Armstrong's first words on the moon can be treated as another example of poetry taken into space: 'Some people suspect that NASA hired a team of copywriters, or poets, to come up with the historic first words to utter along with [Armstrong's] first step'; she also notes that 'in fact no one told him what to say', though only 'if all accounts are accurate'. Dean, *Leaving Orbit*, 49.
- 33 Crawford, 'The U.S. Air Force Song', 181.
- 34 Going to Mars with Maven: Contest winners. Available online: <http://lasp.colorado.edu/maven/goingtomars/send-your-name/contest-winners/> (accessed 3 August 2016).
- 35 'Poem by American Matriarch Flown on Orion Presented to NASA Administrator', 7 April 2015. Available online: <http://www.nasa.gov/content/poem-by-american-matriarch-flown-on-orion-presented-to-nasa-administrator> (accessed 18 August 2016).
- 36 See, for example, Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); M. Christine Boyer, 'Aviation and the Aerial View: Le Corbusier's Spatial Transformations in the 1930s and 1940s', *diacritics* 33, nos. 3/4 (2003): 93–116; and Piero Boitani, *Winged Words: Flight in Poetry and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

- 37 Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 53.
- 38 Maya Angelou, 'A Brave and Startling Truth', in *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (London: Virago, 2010), Kindle edition.
- 39 Angelou, 'A Brave and Startling Truth'.
- 40 Angelou, 'A Brave and Startling Truth'.
- 41 Angelou, 'A Brave and Startling Truth'.
- 42 Angelou, 'A Brave and Startling Truth'.
- 43 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, cited in Duncan Large, 'Nietzsche and the Figure of Copernicus: *Grande Fantaisie* on Polish Airs', *New Readings* 2 (1996): 68.
- 44 Nietzsche, for example, famously remarks that 'since Copernicus, man seems to have been on a steep slope – from now on he rolls faster and faster away from the centre – in what direction? towards nothingness? towards the "piercing feeling of his nothingness"?'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 130.