



Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy

By Nicola Masciandaro
(Published: 2010)

The twenty-sixth canto of Dante's *Inferno* voyages via the figure of Ulysses into the folly of philosophical flight: 'e volta nostra poppa nel mattino, / de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo' (26.124-5) [and turning our stern to the morning, we made our oars wings for the mad flight]. The deeper sense of the image is that oars are not wings, that such epistemological search, for what Ulysses calls 'l'esperienza [...] del mondo senza gente' (26.116-7), is fatally, merely earthbound. Ulysses's pursuit of 'virtute e canoscenza' (26.120) [virtue and knowledge] beyond the Pillars of Hercules ends in shipwreck within sight of the mountain Dante passes on his way beyond the stars: 'de la terra nova un turbo nacque / e percosse del legno il primo canto' (26.137-8) [from the new land a whirlwind rose and struck the forepart of the ship]. As accentuated by canto (prow), homonym with Dante's song-meaning word for the units of his poem, what is crucially at stake here is the boundary between philosophic and poetic modes of knowledge, the very boundary Dante's visionary text would overcome...

(Published in Collapse Vol. VI: Geo/Philosophy)

Filed under: diffr & alienism
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