

# *O Brother Where Art Thou?* If. XXVI according to the Brothers Coen

Mary Watt

University of Florida

marywatt@ufl.edu



## Abstract

This essay challenges the traditional critical interpretation of the Coen Brothers' 2001 film "O Brother Where Art Thou" by proposing that the film is not simply a retelling of the *Odyssey* but rather that it looks not to the Homeric narrative but rather to Dante's reinvention of the Greek hero Odysseus / Ulysses for its inspiration. In support of this argument the essay highlights a number of narrative cues that point us to If. XXVI, where Ulysses is punished as a fraudulent counselor. The fact that the film's protagonist, Ulysses Everett McGill was convicted of impersonating a lawyer and lied to his "brothers" Delmar and Pete to induce them to escape with him, are but two such indicators examined in this study. But the essay also looks at the role that the soundtrack plays in alerting the reader to a highly Dantesque hermeneutic strategy, as well as the film's Dantesque awareness of the role of *ingegno* in creating fiction, or lies that look like truth.

**Key words:** Dante; *Comedy*; Brothers Coen.

## Riassunto

Questo saggio contesta la tradizionale interpretazione critica del film 2001 dei fratelli Coen *O Brother Where Art Thou* e lancia la proposta che il film non sia semplicemente la rivisitazione dell'Odissea né si ispiri alla narrazione omerica ma che, per la sua ispirazione, sia piuttosto la reinvenzione dell'eroe greco Odisseo/Ulisse dantesco. A sostegno di questa tesi il saggio mette in evidenza una serie di spunti narrativi che richiamano il Canto XXVI dell'*Inferno*, dove Ulisse è punito come consigliere fraudolento. Il fatto che il protagonista del film, Ulysses Everett McGill sia stato condannato per essersi spacciato come avvocato e per aver mentito ai suoi "fratelli" Delmar e Pete allo scopo di convincerli a fuggire con lui, sono solo due indicatori qui presi in esame. Inoltre il saggio prende in considerazione il ruolo svolto dalla colonna sonora nel mettere sull'avviso il lettore nei confronti di una strategia ermeneutica altamente dantesca, così come di una sensibilità tutta dantesca rispetto all'importanza dell'*ingegno* sul processo creativo della narrazione, o nel fatto che la menzogna sembri verità.

**Parole chiave:** Dante; *Commedia*; Fratelli Coen.

There is no doubt that the Coen brothers' 2001 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* is intended to recall the journey of Homer's *Odyssey*. The Coens tell us in the opening credits that the film is "Based upon the Odyssey of Homer." The male lead is named Ulysses Everett McGill, the wife to whom he is trying to return is named Penny and their hometown is named Ithaca. Moreover, scattered throughout the film are characters and episodes that evoke key elements of Homer's poem: sirens, a one-eyed beast of a man, and a blind seer. And, of course, as Danyel Fisher points out "the opening scene invokes the first few lines of the *Odyssey*."<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, however, the film contains significant departures from the Homeric narrative<sup>2</sup> suggesting that we ought not to be misled into thinking that this is a simple retelling in which only the setting has been changed. Rob Content notes that "reviewers have made an easy game of matching characters in the film with their supposed counterparts from the *Odyssey*," but argues that this "is not always the most illuminating approach" (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 46). He suggests instead that we consider the various "monsters" in the film as a "symbolic rogues' gallery of human institutions" (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 45).

Similarly, Pernille Flensted-Jensen points to a deeply imbedded hermeneutic strategy of intertextuality and adaptation that encompasses much more than the Homeric text. She argues that *O Brother* differs from the *Odyssey* in "one very important respect, and that is in regard to the spirit." Were it not for the musical score, "which lends an air of pathos to the film", Flensted-Jensen suggests, one might be tempted to say that the "Coens have turned the epic into a mock-epic." (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 26) Like Flensted-Jensen, Florian Werner acknowledges the importance of the soundtrack in the revelation of a departure from the Homeric model. The lyrics of the songs, he argues, point to a deeper spiritual significance while Content, Kreider and White point specifically to a Christian subtext that becomes particularly evident in the moments before the flood at the end of the film.<sup>3</sup>

Such deviations from the text on which the film is purportedly based should not surprise us when we consider that the Coens themselves have stated that they did not follow Homer closely, that the Greek poet is only "kind of in there round the edges".<sup>4</sup> The Coens, moreover, deny ever have read the

1. "O Muse! / Sing in me, and through me tell the story / Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending / A wanderer, harried for years on end."
2. Fisher observes that we "don't get a direct re-telling of the *Odyssey*." (Fisher 2001: 1)
3. "There's an unmistakable strain of genuine, hard-assed, 'ol-timey' Christianity running through the core of this story. No other recent film has taken as seriously the presence of a merciful and sustaining God in the minds of the people – saved, sinners, and skeptics alike" (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 48).
4. "The Coen brothers admit that the film is not a slavish version of the *Odyssey*: 'We didn't

*Odyssey*, which Flensted-Jensen has difficulty believing given the many references to the *Odyssey* the film contains. Yet the Coens' statement that it is an "endlessly re-interpretable story" (Flensted-Jensen 2002:14) is telling and is commensurate with the reality that one does not have to have read a book to be familiar with it, or indeed its many adaptations.<sup>5</sup> Further, their denial explains why and how in many places the film differs in important ways from the Homeric text.

Indeed, the fact that the Coens give their hero, Ulysses, the Latinized version of the Greek name, rather than calling him "Odysseus Everett McGill," immediately signals that what we are watching is a cultural translation. At the same time, the name Ulysses points the viewer to an earlier exercise in adaptation, specifically James Joyce's *Ulysses* in which the story of the Greek wanderer was used as a framework for the wanderings of Leopold Bloom in early twentieth-century Dublin. The Coens' adoption of the Latinized version of the name thus also serves as a primer on how to "read" the literal narrative of the film by sending us back to another text.<sup>6</sup> The viewer thus primed, is then also urged to consider an even earlier adaptation, namely Dante Alighieri's inclusion of the Greek hero in the eighth circle of the *Inferno*.

Given the close attention that scholars have paid to unraveling the film's hermeneutic architectonics, it is somewhat surprising that a connection between Ulysses Everett McGill and Dante's fraudulent counselor has thus far gone unremarked. Yet Ulysses Everett McGill, we learn, is the consummate fraudulent counselor – he is in jail for impersonating a lawyer! He even says about himself that he has been "endowed with the gift of gab," a propensity for which, like that of Dante's Ulysses, is emphasized throughout the film. Perhaps most significantly, the very premise on which the urgency of his escape is based, the promise of treasure, the very thing that has persuaded his companions to escape with him, is false. He has seduced them into seeking a treasure that simply does not exist. The real reason he has escaped is to stop his ex-wife from marrying another man.<sup>7</sup> Ulysses Everett McGill thus uses Pete and Delmar for his own ends just as surely as Dante's Ulysses seduced his men with promises of "virtue and knowledge."<sup>8</sup>

---

stick to Homer closely" (Flensted-Jensen 2002:14).

5. Nicolás Wey Gómez asserts "as we well know, acquaintance with the contents of books does not proceed only from having purchased and read them" (Wey Gomez 2008: 139). Knowledge of a work or a tradition is often attributable to one's cultural milieu.
6. Flensted-Jensen notes that, in "some countries the connection with the *Odyssey* will be further obscured by the fact that the Latinised version of Odysseus' name is not the one commonly used." (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 28)
7. In yet another significant departure from the *Odyssey*, this "Penelope" has not turned away the advances of suitors while awaiting her husband's return. Rather, she has divorced him, told her daughters he is dead and is engaged to another man.
8. The little speech the "orazion picciola" that Dante's Ulysses uses to persuade his crew, whom

This gap in the scholarship is especially surprising given that *O Brother* is certainly not the first of the Coen films to look to Dante for its allegorical framework. Scholars and critics regularly interpret *Barton Fink* as a retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which all three canticles are represented – *Paradiso*, *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*.<sup>9</sup> *Blood Simple* similarly exhibits notably Dantesque elements. Richard Gilmore, for example, argues that the polysemy of the film bears striking affinities to that expounded by Dante in his letter to Cangrande (Gilmore 2009: 16–19). Gilmore recognizes and understands the subtleties of this inspiration, noting that it is never explicit. Of course, explicit has rarely been the hallmark of the Coens' hermeneutics. Even so, this constitutes still another indication that the Coens are comfortable borrowing significant strategies used throughout the *Commedia*. For example, in *O Brother* the Coens, like Dante, take well known phrases or images and alter them slightly to alert the viewer / reader to a meaning beyond the literal. *If. V* where Francesca paraphrases Guido Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil",<sup>10</sup> is a perfect example of this device. The phrase "O Brother," functions in a similar fashion. For readers of Dante it has a familiar ring and recalls Dante's Ulysses who entices his men to take a perilous journey by a pep talk that starts with the phrase "O brothers" ("O frati").<sup>11</sup> And while this may appear to be reaching, we must remember that in the closing scenes this echo is reiterated as Ulysses Everett McGill repeats Ulysses's phrase, addressing his companions as "brothers".

Additionally, scholars and critics invariably point out that the title of the film is derived from an earlier film that seeks to dramatize a fictional novel set in the nineteen thirties called *O Brother, where art thou?*<sup>12</sup> Thus the title of

---

he calls "brothers" ("O frati" *If. XXVI* 112) to follow him beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and into the unknown, reminds them they are more than beasts. "Considerate la vostra semenza: fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza." *If. XXVI* 118–120. ("Consider well the seed that gave you birth: / you were not made to live your lives as brutes, / but to be followers of worth and knowledge.") All citations from the poem follow the Petrocchi edition unless otherwise noted. The translation follows Mandelbaum, again, unless otherwise noted.

9. "Hollywood is a perfect setting for this tale and it is one of the reasons this film is so successful. It's very clever. Clearly, the Coens can easily do retellings of classic texts since *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, was also very successful. <https://spiritoftething.wordpress.com/2012/11/14/streamer-of-the-week-the-coen-brothers-barton-fink/> Posted by harmonov in Cream of the Crop, Raves, Streamer of the Week accessed March 21, 2016. Similarly, Brian Papish describes the film as a "must-see genre-bending film" that is "imbued with literary, religious and cinematic allusions, and owes much of its style and story to the works of Stanley Kubrick, Preston Sturges, Roman Polanski, John Keats, William Faulkner and Dante Alighieri." [<http://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/03/16/coen-brothers-biography/> Everything You Need to Know About the Coen Brothers' Cinematic Style, accessed March 22, 2016. See also Booker (Booker 2007: 143).

10. "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende," *If. V* 100.

11. See footnote 8 above.

12. Preston Sturges's 1941 film *Sullivan's Travels* follows a director who feels he is wasting his time on comedies. The project he really wants to undertake is *O Brother Where Art Thou?*,

the film itself sends us back in time to another setting and to another project. The literal level, we are told, is not the only narrative at play. Instead we are constantly being told to look behind the words. As the film's title connects it to another work, it repeats a device used throughout the *Commedia*, one of the earliest examples of which is found in *If*: II. When the pilgrim is given his mission and asks, "Why me? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul?"<sup>13</sup> his questions cause the reader to recall two other texts, Virgil's *Aeneas* and the New Testament. At the same time Dante's allusions to other texts instructs the reader on how to decipher the meaning of the literal level.

In the same way, the Coens' reference to the *Odyssey* at the start of the film alerts the viewer to the presence of something beyond the literal narrative and thus urges us to engage in an exegetical exercise not unlike that urged upon Dante's readers. When Dante tells his readers to pay attention because the veil of allegory is about to become very thin, we understand that there are certain things beyond the literal level that Dante does not want us to miss.<sup>14</sup> The instructions not only reveal the meaning that Dante wishes to emphasize but also instruct the reader as to how the entire text should be read.

The Coens likewise take a moment to ensure that the viewer understands what is at play here when they introduce the Bible salesman, played by John Goodman. Critics and scholars are quick to identify the character as the Cyclops Polyphemus.<sup>15</sup> But he is more than that. Daniel Teague or, as people call him, "Big Dan T", is a reminder of the intertextual presence of Dante. Here the Coens "lift the veil of allegory" as they weave in the name of Dante, inserting him intertextually into the conman's name. Even as he introduces himself, we hear the name Dante. And as the half-blind figure urges the viewer to let his eyes "look sharp at the truth," he serves as both signifier and signified.<sup>16</sup>

based on a grim-looking novel written by one "Sinclair Beckstein." (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 41)

13. "Ma io perché venirmi? O chi 'l concede? Io non Enea, io non Paulo sono:" *If*: II 31-2.
14. Dante does this twice. The first time is in *Inferno* 9 on the threshold of Lower Hell: "O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, / mirate la dottrina che s'asconde / sotto 'l velame de li versi strani." *If*: IX 61-63 ("O you possessed of sturdy intellects, observe the teaching that is hidden here / beneath the veil of verses so obscure.") The second time is in the valley of the princes in *Purgatorio* when he challenges the reader to peer beneath (or through) the "veil" of his text and figure out the "true" meaning of what is happening: "Aguzza qui, lettore, ben li occhi al vero, / ché 'l velo è ora ben tanto sottile, / certo che 'l trapassar dentro è leggero." *Pg*: VIII 19-21. ("Here, reader, let your eyes look sharp at truth, / for now the veil has grown so very thin.")
15. Florian Werner calls him the "Inkarnation des menschenfressenden Polyphem." (incarnation of the man-eating Polyphemus.) (Werner 2003: 177). "There's a cyclops (John Goodman.) "The cyclops in the film is the Homeric Polyphemos, a giant who at first may seem gentle but who turns out to be an ogre. To play the role of the cyclops the Coens chose an actor of gigantic proportions: John Goodman." (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 20).
16. What the Coens do here is akin to Petrarch's insertion of "Laura" into the text of the *Canzoniere*.

Just before Dan T. hits him with the tree branch, Everett says "I don't get it" but he soon will. Reminding us of the allegorical function that Content ascribes to the seemingly Homeric characters in the film, this moment confirms that there is more to the story than meets the eye. Although Content does not mention any connection to Dante's signifying system, he argues that Teague symbolizes more than the Cyclops. The Bible salesman, he suggests, represents the educational system, and asserts that the "lesson" he teaches "directs us toward allegory" (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 46).

Moreover, the episode reenacts filmically what Dante has done textually to Homer's Ulysses. Just as Big DANTE TEague hits Ulysses with a tree limb we are reminded that Dante struck Ulysses an equally devastating blow in *Inferno* by recasting him as a fraud and by rewriting his death. The viewer, now aware of the Dantesque presence, understands why Everett's "odyssey" is not a sea journey except in a metaphorical sense, or as Everett would say "mixaphorically speaking."<sup>17</sup> The clever reader recognizes that this is the same hermeneutic strategy at play in the *Divine Comedy*.

Dan T's blow urges us now, if we didn't before, to "get it." Looking back at the first scenes of *O Brother* we realize now that they parallel those of the *Inferno*. The chain gang doing hard labor is accompanied by the song "Po' Lazarus" imbuing the film with a subtext of resurrection. Moreover, we shall see that throughout the film, the Coens use the soundtrack as an exegetical tool to signal the presence of an allegorical subtext that, in turn, points us to parallels in Dante's *Inferno* and *O Brother, Where Art thou?*

Although Dante's journey into the underworld is, for the most part overland (interrupted only by the occasional river crossing), in the opening cantos the poet not only locates himself in a dark woods ("per una selva oscura" *If.* I 2) but also figures himself as a shipwreck survivor who has just barely escaped.<sup>18</sup> The poet adds a third element to the mix as the pilgrim sets his sights on a mountain in the distance which he attempts to ascend.<sup>19</sup> Readers of the *Commedia* also learn that the pilgrim will reach the summit of that mountain, for Virgil tells him so, but first he must descend into hell before he can reach the shores of the island / mountain on top of which lies Earthly Paradise.<sup>20</sup>

17. "Me an' the old lady are gonna pick up the pieces and retie the knot, mixaphorically speaking."

18. "E come quei che con lena affannata, / uscito fuor del pelago a la riva, / si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata, / così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva, / si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo, / che non lasciò già mai persona viva." *If.* I 22-27. ("And just as he who, with exhausted breath, / having escaped from sea to shore, turns back / to watch the dangerous waters he has quit, / so did my spirit, still a fugitive, / turn back to look intently at the pass / that never has let any man survive.") John Freccero links the shipwreck imagery of *Inferno* I to Dante's absorption of an Augustinian model of conversion.

19. "Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto," *If.* I 13.

20. "A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire, / anima fia a ciò più di me degna: / con lei ti lascerò nel

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Ulysses's journey, like that of Dante's pilgrim, begins *in media res*, as the trio of escaped convicts seemingly pop up out of nowhere. We, as viewers, have not seen the escape but we see the chains that bind them. As Everett, Pete and Delmar come through the fields, classical scholars will recall that the word *pilgrim* is etymologically linked to the Latin for "through the field"<sup>21</sup> thus signaling that this Odyssey will have connections to pilgrimage and is not mere wandering. The allusion to pilgrimage thus links the literal story of one man's journey home, already infused with allegorical significance, to an *itinerario sacro*. Should we doubt the connection to the sacred, we need only remember Everett's remark that they have only got "three days" to get to their destination. The reference further links the journey to the Triduum that serves as a theological signifier of death and resurrection as well as escape from the bonds of sin / slavery. At the same time, the three days equally link *O Brother's* journey with that of the *Commedia* also timed to coincide with Easter.

The trio is next located in a dark woods out of which they peer while the soundtrack and the song *Big Rock Candy Mountains* beckons the trio to a "hobo's paradise."<sup>22</sup> Despite the promise of an end to hardship, hunger and incarceration that the mountain represents, it becomes evident in short course that arrival in that Promised Land will have to wait. Notwithstanding their successful escape, Delmar, Pete and Everett are hardly home free. Although the song imagines a land where "the boxcars all are empty," the box cars here are overfull. When Everett and his companions try to board one, they are tossed out and roll downhill again rather like Dante's own pilgrim who tries to ascend the mountain and is defeated by the three beasts.<sup>23</sup>

Like Dante's pilgrim they must first descend before they can set foot on the "golden shores" promised in one of the signature tracks of the film, "I am a man of constant sorrows."<sup>24</sup> The dynamic in Dante's *Commedia* between the

mio partire; / ché quello imperador che là sù regna, / perch' i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge, / non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna." *If*: I 121-126. ("If you would then ascend as high as these, / a soul more worthy than I am will guide you; / I'll leave you in her care when I depart, / because that Emperor who reigns above, / since I have been rebellious to His law, / will not allow me entry to His city.")

21. The Latin origin of the word peregrine" linked, in turn, to "pilgrim" derives from the Latin *peregrinus* "foreign", from *peregre* "abroad", from *per* "through" + *ager* "field."
22. Content, Kerider and White describe the song as a "paeon to a fantasyland where jails are made of tin, cops have wooden legs and, there's a lake of stew. This is the pipe dream of men accustomed to harassment, hunger and hard labor." (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 43)
23. "questa mi porse tanto di gravezza / con la paura ch'uscia di sua vista, / ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza." (*If*: I 52-54) ("He did not disappear from sight, but stayed; / indeed, he so impeded my ascent / that I had often to turn back again.") The crowded box car has horrifically infernal connotations when one considers that the film is set in the 1930's could thus serve as a chilling portent of the Holocaust that Primo Levi will also later link to Dante's *Inferno* and the Ulysses episode in *Se questo è un uomo*.
24. "Maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger / My face you'll never see no more / But there

individual and the collective is also at play here. This was not just Everett's story but also the journey of his companions trying to find their way home, find what was lost and start new lives.<sup>25</sup> (Delmar is explicitly trying to recoup the family property that has been lost.)

Now the episodic nature of the journey makes much more sense. As Delmar, Pete, Tommy and Ulysses descend into hell they meet thieves, frauds, gluttons, adulterers, murderers, barrators, and traitors to their guests. Dante's narrative device of including contemporary figures to lend a realism to his otherwise fantastical journey is equally employed to the same effect in *O Brother's* filmic project. The figures of Tommy, Big Pappy, and the gangster Babyface Nelson,<sup>26</sup> assure the viewer that this is a real story, that despite what critics and scholars have characterized as the magical quality of the journey, this is what Dante would have called a "truth that has the face of a lie."<sup>27</sup>

Eventually the travelers confront the devil himself in a scene that critics continually link to the descent into the underworld of canto XI of the *Odyssey* (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 22). Certainly it is related to the revelatory quality of the *discesa agli inferi* but here the visit to the devil is so ripe in intertextuality that we are limiting ourselves as readers if we look only to Homer.

The meticulous choreography of the rally, for example, immediately evokes the classic Hollywood musical. Kent Jones calls it a "brilliantly imagined Ku Klux Klan rally musical number, in which the standard imagery (white sheets and hoods, torches, members standing in a circle) is merged with the Nuremberg rally, Busby Berkeley production spectacles." (Jones 2000: 46) At the same time, the chanting reminds us of the film the *Wizard of Oz*, especially as we remember that the Klan leader is called the "Wizard."<sup>28</sup> The unveiling of the Klansman in *O Brother* also bears an uncanny resemblance to a similar moment in the *Wizard of Oz*, where the wizard is revealed to Dorothy and her three companions. But we wonder, is the chant from the Klan scene supposed to recall the *Wizard of Oz*? Or is it intended to evoke, as Jones suggests, Nazi

---

is a one promise that is given, / I'll meet you on God's golden shore."

25. The tag line in the film's trailer, "Sometimes you have to lose your way to get back home" reminds us of the Dantean subtext of Christian conversion, a subtext that is absent from the Homeric text. The tag line can be found at <http://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/03/16/coen-brothers-biography/>
26. See Flensted-Jensen (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 27) for biographical information on the figures of Pappy O'Daniel, Tommy Johnson and Baby Face Nelson. See also Werner (Werner 2003:179).
27. "quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna", *If*, XVI 124. "As the heroes flee jail, they are entering a new and strange world. – We expect the magic, we're given the prophecies" (Fisher 2001: 1). The "magical realism" (Fisher 2001: 1).
28. "And its high point is a brilliantly imagined Ku Klux Klan rally musical number, in which the standard imagery (white sheets and hoods, torches, members standing in a circle) is merged with the Nuremberg rally, Busby Berkeley production spectacles and the "Oh-wee-oh" chant from the *Wizard of Oz*." (Jones 2000: 46).



Nuremberg rallies? We do not have to choose, for the scene spoofs Fascism, Imperialism and the importance of façade simultaneously. Just as surely as Dante introduces his devil with a parody of triumphal pageantry<sup>29</sup> that reveals Satan as the heart of all corruption, so too do the Coen brothers use the scene to reveal the true identity and nature of these “devils.”

From a hermeneutic perspective, moreover, the unveiling effects visually what Dante has done narratively as they tell us once again to look behind the mask, to see what the story is really about. Moreover the fraudulence of this “brotherhood”<sup>30</sup> recalls the fraudulence of Ulysses’s own attempt to conjure a “brotherhood” out of his crewmen whom he addresses as “brothers”.

In this too the Coens have effected a text book example of adaptation,<sup>31</sup> for in their re-telling of Dante’s re-telling they have added still another twist to the story told by the fraudulent counselor. Dante’s Ulysses tells the pilgrim that after reaching the shores of what we later learn is Mount Purgatory, he and his boat were inundated:

“Three times it turned her round with all the waters;  
and at the fourth, it lifted up the stern  
so that our prow plunged deep, as pleased an Other,  
until the sea again closed-over us.”<sup>32</sup>

We assume from his description of what happened that he is dead. But as is the case with many of the sinners’ stories in the *Inferno*, the end of the narrative remains ambiguous and we are left to guess what happened in between the last lines of the story and the sinner’s actual death.<sup>33</sup> Our presumption that the tempest was the end of him is challenged by the Coens who, like Dante, add more to the story, moving us forward in time and providing us with a glimpse of the moment after the sea closes over the sailor.

29. The encounter with Satan is preceded by the words: “Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni.” *If: XXXIV 1* (The banners of the king issue forth.) It is taken from the *Vexilla Regis*, a Latin hymn by the Christian poet Venantius Fortunatus. The line that follows is *fulget crucis mysterium* (“the mystery of the cross does gleam.”) The poem was first sung in a procession in 569 when a relic of the True Cross sent by the Byzantine Emperor Justin II was carried from Tours to Saint Croix in Poitiers. Moreover, Dante calls Satan, “Lo ’mperador del doloroso regno.” *If: XXXIV 28*.

30. Homer Stokes begins the Klan rally by invoking the term “brothers.”

31. That is, the “matching of a work in one medium to fit another” or “the matching of the cinematic sign system to priori achievements in some other systems.” (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 25)

32. “Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l’acque; / a la quarta levar la poppa in suso / e la prora ire in giù, com’ altrui piacque, / infin che ’l mar fu sovra noi richiuso.” *If: XXVI 139-142*.

33. Francesca ends her tale of adultery without explicitly admitting what happened next. Rather, she simply says “quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.” *If: V 138*. (“that day we read no more.”) Similarly Count Ugolino who is presumed to have eaten his children, does not provide details. He states only that “Poscia, più che ’l dolor, poté ’l digiuno.” *If: XXXIII 75* (“then fasting had more force than grief.”)

The moments before the flood are highly Dantesque. The sheriff who has been dogging Everett from the start, for example, is not persuaded that the Governor's pardon absolves Everett and his companion of their crimes. The law, he says, is a "human institution" reminding us equally of the same point made by Dante as he underlines the ineffectuality of Semiramis' attempts to change the laws to absolve her of her sins.<sup>34</sup> The song of the gravediggers, *The Lonesome Valley* also reminds the viewer of the vertical trajectory of descent and ascent that marks the Dante's journey<sup>35</sup> and which in turn, reiterates both the allegorical death and resurrection of baptism and Christ's salvific descent and resurrection. All of this creates a charged field ripe with imagery of divine law and the Psalmist's promise of deliverance from death into new life such that the flood appears to be part of this great redemptive tableau.

At first, Everett's repentance before the flood seems genuine and we wonder if this heartfelt humility in the face of death might effect the conversion he has resisted throughout the film. Readers of Dante are reminded of Manfred (*Pg.* III 103-45) who repented just before death and then found himself miraculously on the shores of purgatory, not far from where Ulysses met his purported demise. The flood thus seems to afford Ulysses one last shot at redemption, another opportunity for baptism.

But it is not to be. When Pete and Delmar were converted earlier in the film, washed free of sin, Ulysses had distinguished himself and made it clear that he, like Dante's pagan Ulysses remained "unaffiliated." Delmar's statement that from that point on he would tread the "straight and narrow" and that "heaven everlasting" would be his reward, recalls Dante's "diritta via" (*If.* I 3) but it also highlights the distinction between his journey and that of the unaffiliated Everett. Everett's story then, at first so like Dante's, becomes gradually distinguishable from the pilgrim's itinerary and becomes an avatar of damnation rather than salvation. Although Dante's pilgrim and poet have much in common with the Greek sailor, their trajectories diverge on the shores of Purgatory, for although both have gone to hell, only Dante can leave it. Thus the flood in *O Brother*, while it does not kill Everett, does not

34. "A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta, / che libito fé licito in sua legge, / per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta." *If.* V 55-57 ("Her vice of lust became so customary/ that she made license licit in her laws / to free her from the scandal she had caused.") Equally we are reminded of Guido da Montefeltro in *Inferno* XXVII whose sin was absolved in advance by Boniface VIII of sins he was about to commit only to find himself in Hell when he died.

35. In *Inferno* I Dante contrasts the "colle" (the hill that) he must ascend with the deep and fearful valley in which he finds himself: Ma poi ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto, / là dove terminava quella valle / che m'avea di paura il cor compunto," *If.* I 13-15 ("But when I'd reached the bottom of a hill- / it rose along the boundary of the valley / that had harassed my heart with so much fear.") The imagery owes much the 23rd Psalm and verse 4 in particular, verse: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, / I will fear no evil."

cure his sins. His moment of repentance and reliance on God is quickly swept away. As he dismisses the notion of divine intervention and tries to explain the fortuitous timing of the flood as a question of science, we see that Everett is back to his old self, the crafty Ulysses, who looks forward to what he calls a “brave new world.”

Not only does this line recall Shakespeare's *Tempest*<sup>36</sup> and its subsequent borrowing by Aldous Huxley, but it also evokes once again, the *orazion picciola* from *If*: XXVI, reminding us of Dante's Ulysses who went in search of a “new world” (“nova terra” *If*: XXVI 137.)

Ulysses's attempt at a “do over” is thwarted by the fact that he has brought the wrong ring back to Penny. Penny cannot be fooled, she knows one ring from another. Neither Everett nor the ring are “*bona fide*.” As a result, there will be no denouement for this Ulysses. The visual cue of the knot at the end of a string in the closing moments of the film, followed by the glimpse of the train tracks and the same blind traveler that we saw at the beginning of the film, tell us that nothing has been resolved. The closing scene of the children bound together, Werner suggests, recalls the chain gang in the opening scenes (Werner 2003: 188).<sup>37</sup> As such, it equally serves as a reminder of Ulysses's eternal damnation according to Dante. Ulysses Everett McGill will not achieve the ultimate escape promised in the film's soundtrack with *I'll fly away*<sup>38</sup> and in the last lyrics of the film “bear me away on your snow white wings, to my immortal home” and figured in the *Commedia* by Dante's *celestial nocchiero* (heavenly helmsman) (*Pg.* II 43) with his heavenly wings.<sup>39</sup> The songs thus highlight the distinction between Ulysses's false flight and the genuine flight or escape of the truly penitent. The Coens' Ulysses, like Dante's, remains forever fixed in his *folle volo*, that “mad flight” recalled in *Paradiso*,<sup>40</sup> bound to repeat his wandering for eternity.

36. From William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c.1610): “How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in't.” Act V, Scene 1

37. “In the film's closing scenes, Everett finds himself in bondage again, this time to his hectoring wife and their daughters who trail behind them along a length of twine – another chain gang” (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 48).

38. “Some fine morning when this life is o'er / I'll fly away / To that home on God's celestial shore / I'll fly away. [...] / When the shadows of this life have gone / I'll fly away / Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly / I'll fly away.”

39. “Vedi che sdegna li argomenti umani, / sì che remo non vuol, né altro velo / che l'ali sue, tra liti sì lontani. / Vedi come l'ha dritte verso 'l cielo, / trattando l'aere con l'etterne penne, / che non si mutan come mortal pelo.” *Pg.* II 31-36. (“See how much scorn he has for human means; / he'd have no other sail than his own wings / and use no oar between such distant shores. / See how he holds his wings, pointing to Heaven, / piercing the air with his eternal pinions, / which do not change as mortal plumage does.”)

40. “Da l'ora ch'io avea guardato prima / i' vidi mosso me per tutto l'arco / che fa dal mezzo al fine il primo clima; / sì ch'io vedea di là da Gade il varco / folle d'Ulisse, e di qua presso il lito / nel qual si fece Europa dolce carco.” *Pd.* XXVII 79-84. (“I saw that, from the time when I looked down / before, I had traversed all of the arc / of the first clime, from its midpoint

In the *Commedia* the distinction between Ulysses and Dante happens precisely in that place where the pilgrim emerges from the depths to rest on the shore of purgatory and where we assume Ulysses has died. Here the Coens underline that moment, as Everett falls back into his old habits precisely as he emerges from the waters. Ulysses Everett McGill will not climb the big rock candy mountain. Like the members of the chain gang who spends their days breaking rock, he will remain chained tied to earthly things.

The presence of Ulysses in all three canticles of the *Commedia* signals a certain affinity between the Homeric hero and Dante the pilgrim. Dante the poet, however, is acutely aware of the danger of invention and sweet talking and uses *If. XXVI* to address the dangers of unchecked *ingegno* while rein-ing in his own: "and more than usual I curb my talent that it not run where virtue does not guide."<sup>41</sup> Even before the pilgrim meets Ulysses, he has been warned of the danger of "sweet talking" by the coquettish Francesca of *If. V*. As she coopts the poet's own earlier "sweet new style," Francesca reminds the pilgrim and the reader of the seductive and potentially fatal connection between words, music, lust and death. The connection between the three is reiterated in the film's sequence with the laundresses<sup>42</sup> whose cleansing power is a deception. Their song, however, if one cares to listen, warns of this fatal connection "You and me and the Devil makes three" and "Come lay your bones on the alabaster stone."<sup>43</sup>

Significantly, both Ulysses McGill and Big DANT TEague remind us of the difference between the pilgrim poet and the warrior wanderer of the *Commedia*: Dan Teague and Everett McGill are conmen who use lies that look like truth, rather than telling truths that look false. On a meta-filmic level, the performances of Clooney and Goodman serve a similar purpose as their words and gestures are aimed at making us forget we are watching a fiction. The Coens themselves are the masterminds of this long con and like Dante, are ever aware of the difficult game of presenting that which is fiction as fact. The pilgrim Dante is amazed and seduced by the tale that Ulysses tells and by the world that he conjures. Yet the "new world" that Ulysses creates through pure *ingegno* is equally an engineered, that is, a false truth. The Coens have also played this game before. In the opening credits of their film *Fargo*, the brothers claimed that the film was "based on a true story" which it was not (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 15). In *O Brother* the Coens have again presented a lie

---

to end, / so that, beyond Cadiz, I saw Ulysses' / mad course and, to the east, could almost see / that shoreline where Europa was sweet burden.")

41. "e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio che, / perché no corra che virtù nol guidi;" (*If. XXVI* 21-22)

42. Delmar calls them "sigh-reens."

43. Content, Kreider and White call this last line "and inducement not into bed but the grave." (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 45)

that has the face of truth. They have recolored the world by digitally removing the red and blue tones to create the sepia-toned impression of a landscape that was filmed 70 years after the film is set (Jones 2000: 49).

Moreover, the scene in the movie theatre where Delmar and Everett take refuge from the law confirms that the Coens, like Dante, are conscious of the false nature of the construct and urge us to look more deeply, to look beyond what we see on a screen. Significantly, the term “screen” is precisely the concept that Dante used in the *Vita nuova* when he pretended to love a series of women to shield his feelings for Beatrice from public knowledge. The “screen lady”, for Dante, is the very figure of deception, like the veil behind which we need to look to find the truth.<sup>44</sup> The ephemeral nature of the flickering lights that create the image are but a mere reflection of reality and the escape that films promise ultimately proves futile. The temporary nature of such “escape” is made clear when a chain gang is marched into the theater at gun point and the overseer tells them to “Enjoy yer pickcha show!”<sup>45</sup> They will eventually be returned to prison.

Dante’s Ulysses reminds the reader of the power of deception and the dangers of misplaced trust and as such, serves as a synecdochal representation of the greater project of the *Commedia*. The Coens’ absorption of the Ulysses figure, that is, of Dante’s Ulysses’ equally serves as a reminder that these same perils exist, perhaps even more so, in Everett’s “brave new world” of mass communication<sup>46</sup> and visual media. Like Dante’s own dalliance with the problem of truth that has the face of a lie, the Coens’ construction of lies that look like truth, reminds us that seeing is not always a sound basis for believing. Moreover, their awareness of the relationship between imitation and reality reiterates the irony of Dante’s own reminder that his *Paradise* is, at best, a construct.

The Coens’ statement that the film is based on the *Odyssey* by Homer is true only to the extent that Dante’s Ulysses is based on Homer’s account. In both cases, the *auteurs* have appropriated a figure renowned for craftiness and used him to highlight their own genius and to subtly reveal the genius behind the veil.

44. Robin Kirkpatrick provides a thorough examination of the “screen ladies” of the *Vita Nuova* and notes that “a screen remains a screen, obstructing any encounter ‘face to face’ with the reality beyond.” (Kirkpatrick 2004: 34)

45. Content, Kreider and White see interpret the scene as part of the intertextual project of *O Brother*. They argue that the when the chain gang is marched into the theatre at gun point, the Coens are absorbing and revising a similar scene from the Sturges film. (Content-Kreider-White 2001: 42)

46. Pappy O’Daniel who owns the radio station WEZY is aware of this power, calling his radio station a “tool of mass communication.”

## CITED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alighieri, Dante, 1994, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, Ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols, Florence, Le Lettere.
- , 1982, 1983, 1986, *The Divine Comedy*, Trans. Allen Mandelbaum, 3 vols, New York, Bantam.
- Booker, M. K., 2007, *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange*, Westport, Praeger.
- Content, R., Tim Kreider & Boyd White, 2001, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", *Film Quarterly*, 55, 1, pp. 41-48.
- Fisher, Danyel, 2001, "The Coen Brothers' O Brother Where Art Thou?: A Magically Real Odyssey", *Strange Horizons* ([http://www.strangehorizons.com/2001/20010115/o\\_brother.shtml](http://www.strangehorizons.com/2001/20010115/o_brother.shtml) Accessed March 15, 2016).
- Flensted-Jensen, Pernille, 2002, "Something Old, Something Borrowed: The Odyssey and O Brother Where Art Thou?", *Classica & Mediaevalia*, 53, pp. 13-30.
- Freccero, John, 2000, "Dante's Prologue Scene", *Dante Studies*, 118, pp. 189-216.
- Gilmore, R., 2009, "Raising Arizona as an American Comedy", *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, Ed. Mark T. Conrad, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, pp. 7-26.
- Jones, K., 2000, "Air Tight", *Film Comment* 36, 6, pp. 44-49.
- Kirkpatrick, R., 2004, *Dante: The Divine Comedy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Levi, P., 2014, *Se Questo è un uomo*, Turin, Einaudi.
- Werner, F., 2003, "Die Muse singt den Blues: Joel und Ethan Coens Südstaaten-Odyssee; O Brother, Where Art Thou", *Odysseen 2001. Fahrten – Passagen – Wanderungen*, Eds. Walter Erhart, Sigrid Nieberle, Munich, Fink, pp. 173-188.
- Wey Gómez, N., 2008, *The Tropics of Empire. Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies*, Cambridge, MIT Press.