

The Many Souls of Dallapiccola's "Ulysses"

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In 1959 Luigi Dallapiccola began working on his *Ulysses*. At that time opera - the genre which had combined music and drama from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century - was “finished, dead and buried”,¹ but its ghost continued to haunt every composer who wished to write for the theatre. Dallapiccola had already composed a number of dramas set to music, but he had never dared to go beyond one act, even in the definitions printed on the scores. Moreover, at the time of the composition of *Volo di notte* (1937-8), which is set in the airport office of a shipping company, he had distanced himself from myth, a remarkable fact in the light of his intention to compose an opera, originally one of those genres most deeply permeated with myth and mythology:

But why - he had written - continue indefinitely to celebrate the Argonauts, for example, to whom we have felt akin only through a work of art, and who have made us vibrate only with mediated emotion, when someone like Lindberg has caused us to throb with direct elemental emotion? Let us therefore give the form of art to our own experience, which is personal and, therefore, more sincere.²

His subsequent work for the theatre, however, displayed a different conception of aesthetic “sincerity”, or, perhaps, it merely showed that he no longer felt the need to declare the topicality of his own work. Between 1944 and 1948, with *Il prigioniero* Dallapiccola had ventured into history,³ colouring his composition with “the blood-red hue of a certain type of thoroughgoing Spanish fanaticism of the sixteenth century”.⁴ In 1950, following in the footsteps of Thomas Mann and Arnold Schönberg, he had plunged into biblical times, composing a “Sacra rappresentazione”, whose main character was Job. Though delving into the past, Dallapiccola had never disavowed his ethical and political commitment. There had actually been a moment when he had decided to entrust to Mary Stuart his indignation about the promulgation of the race laws.⁵

¹ Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *Altri appunti sull'opera* (1969), in: *Parole e musica* (henceforth PM), edited by Fiamma NICOLÒDI, Milano, Il Saggiatore 1980, pp. 122-3: 122.

² Idem, *Per la prima rappresentazione di “Volo di notte”*, PM, pp. 385-98: 392.

³ Through the novels of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (*La torture par l'espérance*) and Charles de Coster (*La Légende d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak*).

⁴ Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *Genesi dei “Canti di Prigionia” e del “Prigioniero”* (1950-1953), PM, pp. 399-420: 411.

⁵ Cf. ibidem, p. 408. Dallapiccola and his work are always influenced by the dramatic events experienced by his generation: two World Wars, Fascism, Nazism, the absence of freedom, the difficulties of physical and intellectual survival; a highly significant feature of this essay is the emotionally involved, acute, ironic way in which he describes how history was interwoven with his own development as a composer.

A number of other reasons now led him to revisit Homer's poem: the influence of his early education with his father, a teacher of Latin and Greek;⁶ his long meditation on the various reappearances of Ulysses, in both ancient and modern times; his having experienced, through his many compositions with poetic texts, that literary mediation might coincide with "the direct, elemental" emotion that he desired.⁷

Furthermore, Ulysses was the protagonist of the opera by Monteverdi to which Dallapiccola had devoted an entire year's work. He had "translated"⁸ for the modern stage that *Ritorno di Ulisse in Patria* which had been followed by other *Ritorni*, *Vendette* and *Finte pazzie* in the seventeenth century. The mythical subject formed an explicit link with the origins of opera; in a sense it authorized him to compose a real "opera with a prologue and two acts", as he finally had it printed on the score, and to place his own composition beside those other ghostlike reappearances of the opera, Berg's *Lulu* and Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*.

"Why do I love opera above all else?" Dallapiccola asked himself in 1960. He replied that it was because opera confronts the composer with the intriguing problem of "how to achieve an albeit relative purity in a fundamentally impure type of performance, given the abundance of heterogeneous elements that contribute to its expression".⁹ In point of fact, his *Ulisse* is already impure, for it is an intermingling of experience and reading, an intricate web of allusions, quotations, references and transitions from music to literature over the centuries, from the sacred to the profane, from the lyric to the novel, from St. Augustine to Siegfried - a tangled mass it would be impossible to unravel in the short space of an article. The author himself has provided us with numerous indications concerning his literary and musical references, but the complexity with which they are interwoven, the innumerable ways in which they reflect each other, cannot be set forth in an orderly description. Paradoxically, *Ulisse* is also impure at the very moment it not only re-explores one of the most complex and highly stratified myths in our culture but also seeks to revitalize a genre that is "finished, dead and buried". That an *avant-garde* composer should return to the form and structural divisions of traditional opera entails peculiar impurities for which music is responsible and which music alone could remove.

If one reads what Dallapiccola wrote about opera - Verdi, Mozart and Berg - one sees how he is always seeking in the form of the drama, in its scenes and its arias, an equilibrium that will confer meaning on each element in relation to every other. This is precisely how his own *Ulisse* is constructed. In the lecture given at Michigan University in 1967,¹⁰ when he was awarded an honorary degree, he himself illustrated the symmetry of the libretto: he represented it graphically as an arc, at the apex of which stands the scene in the kingdom of Hades, and he explained the way many dramatic and scenic elements, already

⁶ Cf. idem, *A proposito dei "Cinque Canti" per baritono e otto strumenti*, PM, pp. 489-96: 489.

⁷ I did not seek a subject capable of topical interpretation: I wrote this opera because I had carried it within myself for many years, and now that I have written it, I have the impression that its subject is also topical". Idem, *Nota per il programma della prima esecuzione italiana di "Ulisse" al Teatro alla Scala (13-1-1970)*, PM, pp. 532-4: 534.

⁸ Idem, *Per una rappresentazione de "Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria" di Claudio Monteverdi*, PM, pp. 421-36.

⁹ Idem, *Appunti sull'opera contemporanea (1960)*, PM, pp. 116-21: 119.

¹⁰ Published in an Italian translation with the title *Nascita di un libretto d'opera*, PM, pp. 511-31.

present in the myth or reworked by himself, correspond to each other in the parallel arrangement of the episodes in two semi-arcs.

However, it is not only the choice and ordering of the episodes and scenes, but above all the music which obeys this need for geometric clarity. Recurrent *sound figures* mark further affinities between characters and correspondences in meaning, the most significant being a rhythmic formula, indicated as *Hauptrhythmus*, with an explicit reference to Berg and Mozart. This appears for the first time when Ulysses is in the royal hall of Alcinous, while Demodocus sings the return of Agamemnon and pronounces the word ‘blood’; it is hammered out in Hades by voices and percussion, giving the substantiation of sound to the words of the chorus, *ritmo eterno dei fiumi d’Averno* (eternal rhythm of the rivers of Avernus); it returns, marked out by chords, *fff, marcatissimo*, to underscore the meeting between Penelope and Ulysses and the intensity of their mutual gaze. Moreover, as in Alan Berg’s *Lulu*, which is the main model for the mirror-image form, the correspondences between Circe and Melantho, Nausicaa and Calypso, Demodocus and Tiresias, are made clear in the score by the direction that each pair should be played by the same actor.

The *leitmotifs* are only the most overt of the musical correspondences: each cell interweaves with the others a web of cross-references, a swirl of mirror images, enveloping the symbolic values of the text. The task of controlling such a complex structure at so many and such diverse levels is entrusted to the dodecaphonic method. Clarity and comprehensibility are the most frequently used terms in the writings of Schönberg and Webern with reference to dodecaphony; *unità, consonanza* and *chiarezza* (wholeness, harmony and radiance) are the terms with which Dallapiccola translates, by way of Joyce,¹¹ the *integritas, consonantia* and *claritas* of Thomas Aquinas. These are aesthetic qualities which he found in the music of Verdi,¹² which he sought in his own music,¹³ and which reconcile in hard-fought-for purity the heterogeneous materials of his own *Ulisse*.

It is worthwhile, I believe, to examine briefly the way in which the dodecaphonic system is used in *Ulisse*, all the more so because Dallapiccola himself suggests we should do this with a stimulating affirmation of his own. During his youth, very little of the production of the great Viennese maestros, Schönberg, Berg and Webern, had escaped condemnation by the Nazi regime or ostracism by the Fascist regime. It had therefore been his own passion for literature that clarified for him the principles they followed.¹⁴ In Proust Dallapiccola had read about “the new sense of the dodecaphonic system”, which delineates *sound figures* with the same discreet graduality with which Proust depicts events and characters. From Joyce he had learnt the interplay of sound and sense: meanings that leap unexpectedly to the mind,

¹¹ *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, chap. V.

¹² Cf. Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *Parole e musica nel melodramma* (1961-1969), PM, pp. 66-93: 87-9.

¹³ Cf. Dallapiccola’s letter to Grischa Barfuss, superintendent of the Deutsche Oper of Düsseldorf, 20/6/1972, written after the performance at the Maggio Fiorentino (13 June), quoted by Dietrich KÄMPER, *Luigi Dallapiccola*, Firenze, Sansoni 1985, p. 273.

¹⁴ Cf. Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *Sulla strada della dodecafonia* (1950), PM, pp. 448-63.

elicited by assonance, poetic operations springing from the love of sound; epiphanies of images wrested from the unconscious which discerns them beneath the apparently neutral surface of the *significanzia*.

The music of *Ulisse* is based on various series, each connected with a different character or situation, as in Berg's *Lulu*. They are all derived from a fundamental series, with the procedures of the inversion and retrogradation of its parts employed especially by Anton Webern; similar procedures also link it to other compositions by Dallapiccola himself. The highlighting of one section or another, by means of timbre, intensity and phrasing, gives rise to unexpected forms of assonance. As in Joyce's writings, one sound form springs forth from another with a different signification; as in Proust's writing, the boundaries are blurred and obscured by the resemblances of the basic structure; past, present and divined future intermingle.

In the epilogue, which is the most telling example, Ulysses is "alone, in a small boat", he is on his last voyage when he is by now "hoary as the sea" as Tiresias had predicted to him; still "monsters gnaw at his ever restless heart". Circe had already revealed to him¹⁵ (Kavafis had suggested this to Dallapiccola),¹⁶ that Cyclopes, Laestrygones, and Sirens, just like thunder and lightning "were things he would never encounter if he did not already have them in his heart". Now, arising silently around him with questioning eyes, he sees a thousand faces, while in the air memories seem to thicken and grow more painful". As he utters these words to himself, the series breaks up and reassembles in a number of metamorphoses unequalled anywhere else in the opera; *sound figures* from previous compositions return and suggest words that have never been uttered, or, conversely, the thoughts of Ulysses recall verses that bring in their train the sound with which Dallapiccola had previously invested them. "Ist's möglich?": here returns the question which appears in the "The Book of Suleika",¹⁷ in Goethe's *Westöstlicher Divan*, and which Dallapiccola had already highlighted in *Goethe-Lieder*.¹⁸ The sound conjures up Oscar Wilde's lament over the death of his sister,¹⁹ already put to music in *Requiescant*, and recalls a verse by Heine - "For the word known by the priest alone"²⁰ - taken from *An Mathilda*. For a moment the enigmatic spell of the triad of B major suspends the dissonant texture,²¹ as happens in *Volo di notte*, when the pilot Fabien, just before crashing, sees the stars, or in *Cinque canti* when there appears the morning star, which descends

¹⁵ Idem., *Ulisse, opera in un prologo e due atti*, (libretto), Milano, Suvini Zerboni 1985, p. 20.

¹⁶ Idem., *Nascita di un libretto...*, op. cit. p. 518.

¹⁷ Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *Ulisse, opera in un prologo e due atti*, reduction for voice and pianoforte by Franco DONATONI, Milano, Suvini Zerboni 1968, act II, last scene, mm. 940-2.

¹⁸ In his diary (21/3/62) Dallapiccola defines it as a 'basic question': quoted by Fiamma NICOLodi, *Dallapiccola allo specchio dei suoi scritti*, in: *Dallapiccola. Letture e prospettive. Una monografia a più voci*, edited by Mila DE SANTIS, Milano, Ricordi 1997, pp. 35-66: 64.

¹⁹ *Ulisse*, op. cit., act II, last scene, mm. 943-4 (the references are to the two instrumental passages nos. 2 and 4 which in *Requiescant* frame the central passage where Wilde's poem of the same title is set to music) and 1020-3 (the inverse series of *Requiescant* is quoted, cf. D. KÄMPER, op. cit., p. 263).

²⁰ *Ulisse*, op. cit., act II, last scene, mm. 981-4.

²¹ Ibidem, mm. 953-4; the triad of B appears twice in the opera, at the beginning and at the end, "only slightly spoilt by a weak dissonance (of the horns, in the prologue, and of the octave clarinet in the finale)", as Massimo MILA says, *L'Ulisse "opera a due dimensioni"*, in: *Luigi Dallapiccola. Saggi, testimonianze, carteggio, biografia e bibliografia*, edited by Fiamma NICOLodi, Milano, Suvini Zerboni 1975, pp. 31-42: 38.

from Ion of Ceos to Quasimodo, or when the stars promise an illusory freedom to the Prisoner. The stars illuminating the harmonic texture are now those which shine in the sky of the last voyage, and those which Ulysses remembers from his long wandering - *Quante mai volte contemplai sotto cieli diversi la vostra pura, trepida bellezza* (How oft beneath other skies have I gazed upon your pure, quivering beauty". Stars of the memory pulsate in the resuscitated sounds: reminiscences of Ulysses, Dallapiccola, Saint-Exupéry, Goethe, Wilde, and all the authors of the texts that have been alluded to. The listener, unawares, senses the metamorphoses of the series; almost certainly he does not recognize them, he may not even know them; but he notices, as they merge and mingle, other interconnected images, the faded mosaic which constitutes in memory a man's life, the tale of Ulysses, the *Odyssey*.

At the beginning of his American lecture Dallapiccola quoted an aphorism from Nietzsche: "If you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss will stare back into you". In actual fact, he must have been looking inside Ulysses for quite some time if he was able to retrieve from his childhood memories clearly defined scenes from a film dating back to 1911 - the *Odyssey of Homer*. He must also have long since delineated his Ulysses conceptually, if in 1938, thirty years before his opera was completed, he had told Massine, who had proposed he should compose a ballet based on episodes taken from the *Odyssey*, that in the last scene he would like a final voyage in which Ulysses was "alone, fleeing towards the sea" as was in fact to happen in his opera. "Indeed, on that occasion, he had told him very decidedly that for a man of Italian culture, a Ulysses that had not been filtered through the eyes of Dante was nowadays not a conceivable Ulysses".²²

In his opera both are present: Odysseus, the man of cunning, and Ulysses, a man in search of virtue and knowledge. What is more, the place where they meet and co-exist is the area of uncertainty and doubt which accompany the questioning and self-questioning of modern man.

When the curtain rises, in the Prologue, Calypso is alone on the beach. She looks far out on to a vast horizon, and expresses her grief at the departure of Ulysses; perhaps she, too, like Penelope, as Pascoli suggested to Dallapiccola,²³ is awaiting his return. Her lament is expressed in full-throated song. This is already suggested in the libretto itself by the rhyming verse; but much more than rhyme, it is a melisma which couples the two words *guardare* (look) and *mare* (sea). This melisma lengthens out the two words, giving them a form and emphasis which they will maintain in almost every one of their numerous reappearances throughout the opera, whose vocal style is, on the whole, syllabic and unembellished. These two words are the conceptual poles between which the sense of the libretto develops: *il mare* (the sea), a twofold symbol of the unknown and the origin of things, both a space to explore, and a womb promising welcome and consolation; and *guardare* (look), a synthesis of Dante's goad, that drives Ulysses on, and of the curiosity and amazement expressed in the opera by a recurrent verse: *guardare, meravigliarsi e tornare a guardare* (look, wonder, and look again).²⁴

²² *Per una rappresentazione de "Il ritorno di Ulisse..."*, op. cit., p. 425.

²³ Cf. idem, *Nascita di un libretto...*, op. cit., p. 522.

The second intervals - minor and major - which make up the core of the melismatic oscillations that ripple over the two words, are compacted, if contraposed in direction, into a cell of three notes; it is this which reveals most of the Joycean epiphanies, the mutations of form and meaning. It gives rise to the fundamental series, and connects it to that of the *Goethe-Lieder* and to the question “Ist’s - mö - glich?”, which in the Epilogue, as we have seen, initiates the self-quotations. The same cell also constitutes the basic compositional element of an instrumental composition contemporary with *Ulisse, Three Questions and Two Answers*.²⁵ Its meaning, therefore, is interrogative, suffused, however, with a sense of wonder, which is already present in Goethe’s question, and which also derives from the semitonal quivering which links it to *guardare* (look). *A che il tuo cuore aspirava?* (What did your heart long for?) wonders Calypso, and the cell appears in the orchestra, multiplying itself in the instrumental voices.²⁶ *Chi era?* (Who was it?) Nausicaa asks about Ulysses, who appears to her in a dream.²⁷ *Chi siete?* (Who are you?) the Lotus-eaters ask the Achaeans.²⁸ In the land of the Cimmerii the shades ask, *Chi sei? che cerchi?* (Who are you? What are you seeking?);²⁹ *Chi sono? Che cerco?* (Who am I? What am I seeking?) Ulysses asks himself;³⁰ and, finally, *Ma tu...chi sei?* (But you... who are you?) Melantho asks him.³¹ All these questions are uttered on the same cell, which sometimes shifts to the instruments, saturating the texture of the sound with a sense of questioning.

On this cell of three notes is also sung the reply of the cunning man: *Ne- ssu -no* (No-bo-dy).³² In the opera the episode of the Cyclops is not represented, only hinted at; but every time the negative pronoun occurs in the text, it lights up the music even when not referring to Ulysses: *Fu risparmiato lo strazio al fiero suo cuore di tornare alla regia ove nessuno l’avria conosciuto* (His proud heart was spared the distress of returning to the palace where no one would recognize him) sings Demodocus, and *nessuno* rebounds eight times like an echo in the voices of the Phaeaces, while the Blind Man continues his song: *Ove il suo grande operare non rammenta nessuno, ove il suo arco glorioso non doma ormai nessuno* (Where his great deeds are remembered by nobody, where his glorious bow vanquishes nobody any more).³³ And in the second act, when Ulysses asks: *Chi potria riconoscerlo?* (Who could recognize

²⁴ In his diary, 23 July 1960, Dallapiccola says how pleased he is to have started the composition of the opera, pointing out the *cantabilità* of the verse embellished with the melisma; “Because I sing within myself, at last, GUARDARE, MERAVIGLIARSI E TORNARE A GUARDARE (look, wonder and look again). No more than a small stone in the construction; nevertheless, a small stone that until yesterday did not exist”. Cit. in: Luigi Dallapiccola. *Saggi, testimonianze...*, op. cit., p. 132.

²⁵ Cf. Pierluigi PETROBELLI, *L’ultimo pezzo per orchestra*, “Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana”, XIII/2 (1979), pp. 358-64.

²⁶ L. Dallapiccola, *Ulisse*, op. cit., prologue, mm. 60-4.

²⁷ Ibidem, mm. 270-1.

²⁸ Ibidem, act I, scene ii, mm. 377-8.

²⁹ Ibidem, scene iv, mm. 788-96.

³⁰ Ibidem., mm. 898-9.

³¹ Ibidem, act II, scene ii, mm. 468-71.

³² Dallapiccola, in his diary (5 September 1967), uses the word *Nessuno* (Nobody) to indicate the fundamental cell, quoted by F. NICOLODI, *Dallapiccola allo specchio... cit.*, p. 55.

³³ L. Dallapiccola, *Ulisse*, op. cit., prologue, mm. 132-48.

him?) Eumaeus replies, *Nessuno*, singing in falsetto the three interrogative notes of the fundamental cell.³⁴ On other occasions *nessuno* is used in connection with Ulysses himself: by himself in the palace of Alcinous, *Ch'io sia forse nessuno?* (Am I perchance nobody?); and later, in his presence, by Antinous speaking to Melantho.³⁵ On this occasion Ulysses exclaims: *Assai ti vendicasti Dio del mare: il mio nome che un giorno trasformai per astuzia, ritorna a me per scherno* (Great revenge did you exact, O God of the sea; my name which one day I changed in my cunning returns to me as a mark of scorn); but he seems to interpret this fitting retaliation in its most superficial sense: he was king and now he wanders over the seas, seeking his own kingdom, compelled to ask strangers for help. He was king, and now in his own house, he is mocked by the enemies who grow fat on his goods,- old, ragged, incapable of attracting a woman's look, even that of a slut. The music, however, confers a different value on the name that does not name, and shows that Poseidon's revenge is considerably more malicious and subtle: the question about identity (who are you? who am I?), the elusive reply (nobody) and the biblical question deriving from Thomas Mann in *The Young Joseph* (what do you seek?),³⁶ all have the same *sound form*. The fundamental cell brings together the intriguing genius of the Homeric hero, the curious intelligence of the character from Dante, and the self-questioning which makes Dallapiccola's Ulysses a citizen of the modern world.³⁷

The theme of solitude marks the beginning and the end of the opera, with two monologues spoken (by Calypso and Ulysses) facing the horizon of the sea and with a verse taken from a lyric by Antonio Machado, *Son soli un'altra volta il tuo cuore e il mare*, (Lonely once more are your heart and the sea). For the Ulysses of Homeric descent solitude is the effect of privation: of his country, his wife, his son, his parents, and, finally, his comrades; for the Ulysses of Dantesque derivation solitude is the necessary condition for looking and wondering. When Calypso, in the conclusion to her monologue, repeats Machado's verse, she is already assimilating it melodically to the words, incomprehensible for her, which she has heard Ulysses murmuring in his sleep, *Guardare, meravigliarsi e tornare a guardare* (Look, wonder and look again).³⁸

These two modes of solitude coincide in the kingdom of Hades. The pressing question of the shades, *Chi sei?* (Who are you?), seems to receive an answer when Anticlea cries out - *Figlio, figlio mio!* (Son, my son!) - broken by pauses and wide intervals, sustained by an orchestra compacted in chords.³⁹ Suddenly, but only for a moment, Ulysses acquires a sense of concrete belonging, an identity. When his

³⁴ Ibidem, act II, scene i, m. 210.

³⁵ Ibidem, act II, scene ii, m. 489.

³⁶ "Invenitque eum via errantem in agro, et interrogavit quid quaereret". Genesis 37:15: it is Dallapiccola himself who in his diary indicates the biblical source and considers at first modifying the question following the example of Thomas Mann "whom do you seek?", cf. F. NICOLÒDI, *Dallapiccola allo specchio ...*, op. cit., p. 64.

³⁷ "I do not presume to teach anything to anyone: nevertheless, I think it would suffice to glance through the newspapers to realize that in our shaken, disrupted world, the search for an *ubi consistam* is of some interest - and sometimes sensationally so - to large sections of the population in many countries; something which would not have been conceivable, for example, half a century ago": L. Dallapiccola, *Nota per il programma...*, op. cit. p. 534.

³⁸ Idem, *Ulisse*, op. cit. prologue, mm. 80-4.

³⁹ Ibidem, act I, scene iv, mm. 799-801.

mother's ghost vanishes, *solo, son solo* (Alone, I am alone), he weeps, *un uomo che guarda nel fondo dell'abisso* (a man staring into the bottom of the abyss). Once more and (this time) for ever deprived of his mother, he asks himself; *Chi sono?* (Who am I?). On the edge of the Nietzschean abyss, he adds, *Che cerco?* (What am I looking for?). When sometime later Tiresias disappears as well, the chorus of the Shades resumes the song with which they had appeared on the scene: *Sempre il buio, mai la luce... sempre soffrire, mai sperare* (Always dark, never light... always suffering, never hope), reduced to an elliptical *Sempre! Mai!* (Always! Never!). Now that this oxymoron, which originated with Joyce,⁴⁰ has lost all specific reference, it encircles with eternity the abyss on whose edge Ulysses sees himself. After his experience of death, after the axis of symmetry around which the drama turns, his solitude plunges into a spatio-temporal infinity without geographical horizons or historical limits, where the various souls of Ulysses are brought together.

The return, too, in Dallapiccola's reinterpretation, is tinged with contrasting shades of eagerness and anxiety, which materialise only to increase his sense of solitude. This is brought out immediately by the dark heavy sound which accompanies Ulysses' entrance into his house and by the intervention of upper register instruments on the pounding percussion.⁴¹ The blood which Demodocus had been the first to associate with his return (when he had sung of the return of Agamemnon with verses from Aeschylus) and Tiresias had foretold, is something Ulysses seems to desire, when he sets foot in his own house after twenty years: *Sangue non vedo ancora intorno a me: intorno a me vive la solitudine. Neppure mio figlio m'ha riconosciuto... Tristezza del ritorno* (Blood I do not yet see around me: around me lives solitude. Not even my son recognized me... the sadness of homecoming).⁴² Later after Melantho's *Totentanzt*, after the slaughter, Penelope suddenly appears on the scene. Twice she cries out her husband's name with a heart-rending lowering of the voice on the last syllable. The basic rhythm stands out, emphasised by *marcatissimo* chords. Ulysses turns round and looks at her. Both raise their arms. On the quivering of the metal percussion - like a trembling in the air - the curtain falls.⁴³ We do not see their embrace; for us they do not pour forth the love they have found once more. How could they? asks Dallapiccola, how could this bewitched homecoming end in a love duet, if Ulysses already knows he must depart once more? "The meeting with Penelope", he affirms, "accentuates the hero's feeling of solitude".⁴⁴ This is perhaps the dramatic moment which most clearly shows the formal dialectic which sets the genre of opera, with its rigid forms, over against the work of Dallapiccola, and brings together the Homeric and the Dantesque themes - solitude, homecoming, and the last voyage - in a disturbing existential disquietude.

⁴⁰ "The episode of the infernal pendulum whose incessant ticking seems to evoke the words "Always! Never!", an episode which Joyce relates that he heard - with a frightening commentary - from a Jesuit when, as a boy, he was a pupil at Clongowes Wood College (Sallins, County Kildare) had also been heard by me, with an equally frightening commentary from another Jesuit (and with the same words!), when in the schoolyear 1917-1918, I was attending the fourth form of the *ginnasio* high school)". Idem, *Nascita di un libretto...*, op. cit., p. 529.

⁴¹ Idem, *Ulisse*, op. cit., act II, scene ii, mm. 264, 300-21.

⁴² Ibidem, scene ii, mm. 301-36.

⁴³ Ibidem, scene iii, mm. 853-61.

⁴⁴ Idem, *Nota per il programma ...*, op. cit., p. 533.

Long before the homecoming became reality, Ulysses had been aware that he both desired and shunned it. Even his comrades were aware of this: on reaching the land of the Lotus-eaters they had rebelled, upbraiding him for the stubborn curiosity which was dragging them from land to land. This a musically varied and dramatic moment; the voices of his comrades, divided into one chorus that sings and another that speaks (like the shades in Hades), mingle in an expressionist hybrid. Their agitated expressions of rebuke alternate with the restrained, measured replies of Ulysses.⁴⁵ As well as being a scene of mutiny which contrasts the rage of desperate men with the self-assurance of authority, this alternation is an image of the psychological conflict between the desire to return and the desire to 'look'. In the face of the aggressive anger of his comrades, Ulysses finally gives a hesitant answer: *Forse... forse è tortura anche guardare?* (Perhaps...is it perhaps a torture even to look?). He utters this last word not on the usual extended melisma but on the basic cell,⁴⁶ thus assuming its connotation of questioning and doubt. Then, in the distance, in a new different kind of contrast with the rough timbre of his comrades, are heard the clear voices of the Lotus-eaters; in crystal-clear harmony they sing an incantatory lullaby of repeated notes and short intervals which invests the invitation with a sickly-sweet quality (*dolcissimo* is the expressive indication in the score).⁴⁷ After the dramatic stand-off between Ulysses and his comrades, after his thirst for knowledge has been questioned, the paradise promised by the Lotus-eaters, in verses Dallapiccola takes from Hölderlin - *Vi sentirete, inconsciamente lieti, come quando, bambini, dormivate* (You will feel, unconsciously glad, as when in childhood you slept) - defines the symbolic quality of his homecoming as a return to the womb: to a state of not-looking.

After the curtain has fallen on the meeting between Ulysses and Penelope, Dallapiccola reserves for the last few notes the much discussed result of his reflections upon the myth.

In his last voyage, amid the constellations of memory, Ulysses takes stock of his long journeying, and finds very little on the credit side :

*Quanto e cosa appresi? Fole.
Dopo fatiche inani, briciole di sapere, vani
balbettamenti, sillabe soltanto
mi sono rimaste invece di parole.*

(How much and what have I learnt? Idle tales.
After empty toil I have nothing left
but crumbs of knowledge, vain stammerings,
syllables alone instead of words)

His song seems to dry up, but the painful thorn in his flesh, which has driven him once more to the sea, begins to take shape:

*soffrì pene infinite
intorno a me cercando
quanto mi manca: la Parola, il Nome*

(Infinite pains I suffered
seeking around myself
what I lack: the Word; the Name)

⁴⁵ Idem, *Ulisse*, op. cit., act I, scene ii, mm. 257-333.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, mm. 335-41.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, mm. 351-434.

and then with great solemnity, almost spoken:

Se una voce rompesse il silenzio, il mistero
(If a voice were to break the silence, the mystery.)

“Vocasti et rupisti surditatem meam” are the auspicious words of St. Augustine suggested by the echoing of a passage from *Canti di liberazione*.⁴⁸ There follows a long pause; then a flurry of shrill chords in *crescendo* on the percussion ; finally, the leaping ascent of wind and strings in unison merges into a *fff* of all the instruments. These then gradually lapse into silence with a negative rhythmic pattern. *Signore* (Lord), Ulysses then says, and the word he has found is accompanied by the opening chords of the opera, the pillars of an extreme symmetry. *Non più soli sono il mio cuore e il mare* (No longer alone are my heart and the sea), he sings, breaking up the phrases, dilating the notes of the final vocalisation; there follow a few more instrumental bars, and the opera comes to an end.⁴⁹

Ulisse was first staged in Berlin in 1968 and was moderately successful. In the year that witnessed the start of the student revolts, this was the most to which an opera could aspire that had a mythical subject and contained a refined interweaving of literary references and musical reminiscences. As can easily be understood, the epilogue roused most perplexities, and Dallapiccola, when presenting the work to the Italian public two years later, wrote that it had produced a ‘shock’.⁵⁰ Indeed Ulysses’ religious illumination constitutes the most obvious impurity in his work; and it is not so much the idea of a Christian Ulysses - which in any case was stoutly denied by the author⁵¹ - as the fact that he finds what he has been seeking: the country where the sea is unknown, the dark mountain, his very identity and reason for existing. The inspired and unexpectedly illuminated musical atmosphere, the expansion of sound and its contraction in avowedly conclusive melodic curves are not entirely convincing. Besides, the author himself declared he was not convinced, at least during the writing of the score.⁵² We are reminded of Schönberg, who laid down his pen and gave up his attempt to give expression in sound to his religious reflections when at the end of the second act of *Moses und Aron* Moses exclaims: *O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt*, an utterance that may be placed among the many intellectual suggestions that led Dallapiccola, by contrast, to make Ulysses actually utter the Word.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, act II, last scene, mm. 1010 et seq.

⁴⁹ “Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te” (SANCTI AURELII AUGUSTINI ‘Confessionum’ Liber I, Caput I)” is printed under the last bar.

⁵⁰ *Nota per il programma...*, op. cit., p. 532.

⁵¹ “On no occasion whatsoever”, the author explained in a letter, “have I spoken of a *discovery of God, in the Christian sense*. My Ulysses has an *intuition* of God - an intuition which is common to many cultures, many religions, and many men” (quoted by Livio ARAGONA, *Luigi Dallapiccola e le culture musicali del secondo Novecento*, doctoral dissertation, University of Rome “La Sapienza”, academic year 1997 - 98, p. 150). And in the diary (3 October 1968) : “I have glanced at a number of reviews. I am surprised to see that *not a single* critic has understood that the discovery of God by my Ulysses does not in the least mean that he has become a Christian, an Apostolic Roman Catholic”, in: *Luigi Dallapiccola. Saggi, testimonianze...*, op. cit., p. 136.

⁵² “Up to the evening before 7 January (1959), the day when I completed the libretto, I was still not completely convinced that Ulysses should find God at the last moment”, quoted by F. NICOLODI, *Dallapiccola allo specchio...*, op. cit., p. 53.

Nevertheless, this Ulysses, who ends his age-old journey in the transcendental, is counterbalanced by the Ulysses who appears, once more with formal and conceptual symmetry, in the unexpected sound image which opens his narration to the Phaeaces: a dramatic rush of rising chords, stirred by fragmentary motifs of trumpets and violins, introduces the singing and shouting of the two choruses of comrades who have sighted the country of the Lotus-eaters. *Terra!*(Land ahoy!) they repeat with amplified stereophonic effect, in ever denser polyphony on an orchestral *ff*.⁵³ After a few excited notes, the melody becomes calmer, the interwoven voices begin to unravel, the volume drops, softer but not less dramatic modes express their disappointment: *Non è la terra che si sta cercando...!* (It is not the land we are seeking...!) There can be no doubt - what we are witnessing is the arrival of Columbus in America. Moreover, as Boitani observed before me,⁵⁴ Dallapiccola wished to pay cryptic homage to Arnold Schönberg, whom he had more than once in his writings compared to Christopher Columbus and to whom on September 13 1949, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, he had dedicated words full of devotion, insight and wit :

And after forty days of navigation, among the many unexpected and unpredictable events, something happened which must have given Christopher Columbus the sensation of an ending, the collapse of the fundamental laws of nature, the impression of finding himself in a pre-geological state: the compass showed *another North*.

...
That this fact occurred in 1492 is something everyone knows; not many, however, realize that it happened exactly on 13 September.

...
For this reason I wish to recall the daring navigator, the son of the Mediterranean, on the day when the seventy-fifth birthday of the Maestro is being celebrated. Schönberg, too, noticed that the north might not always or in all circumstances or in all latitudes be the tonic talked about in schools
... And his instinct and his faith allowed him to discover new lands, partly unexplored even today.⁵⁵

It is precisely through the lands discovered by the originator of dodecaphony that Dallapiccola carried out his own peregrinations: the compositional places in which the many souls of his Ulysses become unified and achieve purity. Arnold Schönberg, who on 1 April 1924, while conducting *Pierrot lunaire* on the podium of the White Room in the Palazzo Pitti, had determined Dallapiccola's own "bearings",⁵⁶ by showing him a different North, is undoubtedly a presence that is both tangible and analysable throughout the music of the opera; but he is also a fleeting reflection of the historical incarnation of the Homeric character, the most terrestrial and concrete of all the souls attributed by Dallapiccola to Ulysses.

(Translation from Italian by Neville Greenup)

⁵³ L. DALLAPICCOLA, *Ulisse*, op. cit., act I, mm. 222-56.

⁵⁴ Cf. Piero BOITANI, *Ulisse tra le ombre*, in: *Dallapiccola. Letture ...*, op. cit., pp. 325-41: 335. Even before I read Boitani's essay I was convinced that Columbus was used to pay homage to Schönberg; I say this in support of this interpretation. Boitani also thinks of Busoni, whom Dallapiccola also likens to Columbus (cf. *Pensieri su Busoni*, PM, 295-9:297); Dallapiccola thought of Columbus the navigator, and above all Columbus, the character of Paul Claudel, in terms of an ethical guide that he could superimpose on that of his two masters.

⁵⁵ Luigi DALLAPICCOLA, *13 settembre* PM, pp. 237-8.

⁵⁶ Idem, *Sulla strada...*, op. cit., pp. 448-63:448.