Introduction

Ways of Voyaging through the Human Body

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In a recent, rather curious book the English journalist and author Mathew Lyons – whose writings focus on the intersection between history, myth, and literature – has collected a couple of dozen tales of fantastic and outlandish voyages undertaken across the centuries, over many continents, regardless of whether they were possible or not. Underlying these intrepid enterprises is the very human need to find, climb, sail, cross, and conquer, as well as the ability to spin tales out of imagination or belief. The categories that Lyons identified and chose to work within are as follows:

– attempted journeys to places that did not in fact exist;
– claims to have visited or seen such places;
– journeys that it is no longer possible to make; and
– journeys that, whether in the planning, the execution or the outcome, were implausible or unlikely, if not actually wholly impossible.¹

To the last category might very well belong the topos of the Voyage through the Human Body, which we have decided to make the subject of study and to consider from many different viewpoints, in a project connected with the Max Planck Institute's Research Network on the History of Scientific Objects. We believe that what we are dealing with here can be considered a topos also because topoi were the classical katabases of Antiquity into a supernatural underworld or, more generally, the descent into the afterlife cherished by so many cultures. However, the voyage through the human

body can work as a simple metaphor as well, and indeed has been used repeatedly so in many contexts over the course of time due to its profoundly evocative associations.

In his introduction Lyons points out that the relationship between travel and fiction in the age of geographic exploration was subtle, complex and filled with mutual distrust; the two seemed to be bound together in a relationship of co-dependency. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the fabulous travels of Sir John Mandeville – written in Anglo-Norman French during the second half of the 14th century – were included by Richard Hakluyt in the first edition of his Voyages and Discoveries published more than two centuries later. The boundary between fact and fancy has never been more labile than in travel literature, which in the Western world has a history going back at least as far as Herodotus. Since 1997 the International Society for Travel Writing (ISTW) has been encouraging and fostering the work of scholars, publishers, and practitioners of travel writing through conferences, a resource guide, a monthly newsletter, special issues produced in collaboration with journals and publishing houses, and an on-line travel review journal. So far a dozen conferences have been organized on topics ranging from ancient and classic travel narratives to contemporary tourist accounts, and including writing from outside the English-speaking tradition. Travel writing is a cross-disciplinary genre par excellence: literary studies, history, geography, landscape studies, science, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, political science, and media studies are all involved and make their contributions. However, after browsing through the materials produced by ISTW and speaking with its current president, Tim Youngs, we realize that they have not yet thought about our topic, providing confirmation that a lacuna exists and a further reason for exploring it ourselves.

Unfortunately – except for some references to science fiction – the literary aspect will be missing from the essays contained in this volume, even though we are convinced that an exploration of literary sources would yield notable results. We will mention just a few examples chosen at random from different epochs to illustrate our point. *Il piato*, the long allegorical poem in eight parts by Agnolo Bronzino (1553), contains many allusions to 16th century Florence (where the painter and poet was born and lived) and its social practices. *Il piato* means ‘the quarrel’ and an impressive

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2 For more information, see the ISTW website: http://istw-travel.org/.
3 Agnolo Bronzino, *Rime in burla*, edited by Franca Petrelli Narducci (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1988), pp. 218–271; for a comment on the poem, see Deborah Parker,