

Where the Will Moves:
A Navigation as the Condemnation of
Classical Literature in Dante's Divine Comedy

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Coger en un trampa is a Spanish idiom meaning “to catch in a trap.” *Coger por el buen camino* is another, constructed with the same verb; it means “to get the right road.” And yet to ensnare is not necessarily to take the right road... Pilgrims were people who got the right verb.¹

When I had journeyed half our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.²

There is a textual ambiguity in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, as Aeneas prepares to leave the underworld. He has the choice to exit through two doors: one of horn, through which “true shades pass with ease,” and one of ivory, through which false dreams pass to the surface.³ He chooses the door of ivory.

There is a similar ambiguity in Dante's invocation of Virgil as his guide through hell in the *Divine Comedy*. Virgil drew upon Homer's two epics as a guide to his own, and attempted to surpass the poet by incorporating the sense of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into his single *Aeneid*. Dante expands a single book of the *Aeneid* to encompass one third of his Christian epic, so that his portrayal of Virgil carries both a sense of deep admiration, and of raw competition. The author draws the influence of Virgil through that image of the door, now revised into a Christian metaphor. In guiding the pilgrim Dante to the first circle of hell, Limbo, to which the best and noblest minds of antiquity have been condemned along with all the unbaptised, Virgil describes baptism as “the portal of the faith you embrace.”⁴ These two passages, the ivory door which leads to the false dreams of Classical knowledge, and the true door

¹ Carson, Anne, *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (Toronto: Random House, 1995) 139.

² Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) 1:1-3.

³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 6:1212.

of faith, are juxtaposed within the context of the larger metaphor of Dante's spiritual journey.

Journey metaphors proliferate through the *Divine Comedy*, as poetry and pilgrimage are associated in a series of navigational imagery. Dante's poem is his "talent's little vessel," launched upon "waves [that] were never sailed before," and moved by the will of God.⁵ The imagery finds its metaphorical focus in the twenty-sixth canto of the *Inferno*, in which Ulysses appears, condemned to the eighth circle of hell as a fraudulent counselor. The figure of Ulysses and metaphors corresponding to his journey undercut the role of Classical literature within the *Divine Comedy*; the Ulyssean journey also appears in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, making this one character, as Thompson notes, of "more than temporary or incidental interest."⁶ The Ulysses of the *Divine Comedy* was the "Ulysses of medieval tradition, whose journey was considered to have a moral significance," especially when juxtaposed with the Christian journey of Dante.⁷ Ulysses serves as an antitype to Dante in a way that brings additional ambiguity to the role of Virgil as capable, beloved guide and mentor, and serves to illustrate the necessity of the Roman poet's exclusion from heaven, and condemnation to hell.⁸

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.⁹

The crime for which Ulysses and Diomedes are condemned together is explicitly revealed as the theft of the Palladium. Yet, in describing where he had "gone astray," Ulysses tells the story of his journey past the Pillars of Hercules, and death by shipwreck at the base of the Mountain of Purgatory.¹⁰ The speech he gives with a tongue of flame "might be a mere transcription from any of his predecessors in the Greek and Latin anti-Ulyssean tradition," the Virgilian tradition in particular.¹¹ Given that medieval Europe did not rediscover Greek literature until Petrarch's time, Dante had no access to Homer's epics, and so the Odysseus of Homer is here the Ulysses of Virgil. Descriptions of Ulysses in the *Aeneid* "consis-

⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 4:36.

⁵ Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 1,2; Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 2,7.

⁶ Thompson, David, *Dante's Epic Journeys* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University, 1974) 49.

⁷ Freccero, John, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard University: 1986) 15.

⁸ The subtext of admiration of, and competition with, the Augustan poet Virgil is a vast topic, and can only be presented here according to one particular focus. The reader would do well to consult Teodolinda Bartolini's *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton University: 1984) and John Freccero's *Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard University: 1986) for greater detail.

⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, 26:118-120.

tently emphasize his deceitfulness, his seductiveness, his gift for manipulation through language,” and the passage in *Inferno* is remarkable for the subtle use of adjectives which set up an opposition between the high and the low.¹² His group of companions is “small”, with a “brief” lifespan, and his speech is also “brief”, while the sea is “open” and his goal is “the highest mountain [he] had ever seen.” In short, “whatever it serves his purpose to discount is called ‘small’, while whatever he desires is ‘high’.”¹³ Ulysses glosses his sin from the perspective of his glorious ambition. The “I”s, “me”s and “my”s clearly outnumber any references to a “we”, and the journey is attempted in spite of his moral duties to hearth and home. And although the abrogation of duty which colours the death of Ulysses contrasts strongly against the pietas of Aeneas, Virgil seems to conspire in the high rhetoric, excluding from their exchange the plain, Italian vernacular which Dante uses, and even contributing the “much or a little” on which Ulysses’ deceitful self-justification turns.¹⁴

The story itself is curious; Dante invented this final voyage “in direct opposition to a perfectly clear tradition” Ulysses’ return to Ithaca.¹⁵ But Ulysses’ death is “the mandatory Christian corrective.”¹⁶ In seducing his companions to join him in this last voyage, Ulysses draws on the classical tradition of the equation of knowledge with virtue, in keeping with the medieval traditional allegoresis of Ulysses as *Sapientia*, or wisdom,¹⁷ itself extrapolated from Neoplatonic interpretations of the *Odyssey* as the journey of a soul towards divine wisdom. Yet Dante turns that tradition into a Christian condemnation, using “Neoplatonic imagery to describe...the inevitable failure attendant upon any such journey when it is undertaken without the help of God.”¹⁸ Ulysses describes his voyage as a “folle volo”¹⁹ or “mad flight”, in an allusion to Plato’s conception of the soul which, “when it is perfect and fully winged...mounts upwards and governs the whole world,”²⁰ as well as to a passage in the *Aeneid*:

They say
That Daedalus, when he fled the realm of Minos,

¹⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, 26: 84.

¹¹ Stanford, W.B. *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*, 2nd edition (University of Michigan: 1968) 179.

¹² Lamberton, Robert, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (University of California: 1989) 296.

¹³ Barolini, 233.

¹⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 26:81 in Barolini, 229.

¹⁵ Thompson, 49.

¹⁶ Freccero, 139.

¹⁷ Thompson, 16.

¹⁸ Freccero, 15.

Dared to entrust himself to stroking wings
 And to the air of heaven – unheard-of path –
 On which he swam away to the cold North
 At length to touch down on that very height
 Of the Chalcidians. Here, on earth again
 He dedicated to you, Phoebus Apollo,
 The twin sweeps of his wings...²¹

The company of Ulysses makes “wings out of [their] oars”²² in the pursuit of knowledge, just as Daedalus dedicates his wings to Apollo, the god of wisdom, in an act which in medieval allegoresis signifies the turn to the contemplative life.²³ The association of Daedalus and Ulysses is particularly apt, since they are both figures of cleverness and invention; Daedalus having constructed the bull of Pasiphae, the Labyrinth, the wings of feathers and wax, among other things, while Ulysses had brought about the downfall of Troy with the wooden horse. But Augustine in his *Confessions* distinguishes between “philosophical presumption and Christian conversion”; only faith can guide the soul to God.²⁴ The wisdom to which Ulysses flies is an arrogant one, which reaches beyond the limits of the human as he voyages past the limits of the known world, in spite of his moral duties. His sin is to lead his followers to that destructive knowledge.²⁵ In a Christian universe, Ulysses is not Daedalus, but rather Icarus. The mad flight must end in a shipwreck.

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.²⁶

The *Divine Comedy* begins with the shipwreck already past, and the near annihilation of the

¹⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, 26:125.

²⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Harvard University: 1914), 246C. It is debatable, but unlikely, that Dante would have had access to Plato either, but the image of the winged soul as in the description here from the *Phaedrus* survived in Neoplatonic thought.

²¹ Dante, *Inferno*, 26: 21-29.

²² Dante, *Inferno*, 26:125.

²³ Freccero, 17.

²⁴ Freccero, 15.

²⁵ Stanford, 181.

pilgrim Dante. He finds himself in a dark wood, lost and exhausted, but he spots from afar a mountain that will later be revealed as the Mountain of Purgatory, and instinctively moves towards it. Dante's passage is blocked, however, by several beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a wolf, allegorical figures of human sin. When he calls for help; a shadowy figure arrives, and announces himself to be the poet Virgil, who has come to lead Dante up the mountain, by way of a journey downwards into hell. Dante's courage fails him, and he asks for a sign from God that such a journey would not be "*folle*."²⁷ Virgil assures Dante that both the voyage and his guidance are approved by God, and were requested by Beatrice, Dante's early love who died the age of twenty-three. His soul has been lost in a false pursuit; Beatrice in the Purgatorio condemns Dante for following an "untrue path" – his love of a "*pargoletta*" or "green young girl" had "weighed down [his] wings," whereas she in her life had attempted to lead him "toward the way of righteousness."²⁸ Dante must be converted. He must gain knowledge of human weakness in hell, and purge that weakness in purgatory, before he will be permitted to enter into heaven, and be a witness to God; this is to be Dante's re-education into Christian truth. The journey, therefore, is not a linear one across the sea; that attempt has failed. The mountain can be reached only by a descent, that is, "the descent *intra nos* [within the self] which transforms philosophical presumption into a journey of the mind and heart to God," and to redemption.²⁹

Both the voyages of Dante and of Ulysses, and implicitly that of Aeneas, exist "on the same plane of reality" within the poem, the psychological reality of the pursuit of transcendent knowledge.³⁰ The shadow behind both the voyage of Dante and the voyage of Ulysses is that of Aeneas. Aeneas journeys to the underworld in order to gain knowledge of the future glory of Rome, and although his journey is ordained by Jove, and motivated by duty, it does not reach far enough. He is prevented from entering Tartarus by the Sibyl, for "no pure soul may cross the sill of evil";³¹ similarly, when he encounters the bleeding roots which grow from the murdered body of Polydorus, and attempts to uproot them in order to learn what they are, Polydorus prevents him with a plea: "spare you clean hands / Defilement."³² In the *Divine Comedy*, however, "one must pass through the impure in order to arrive at knowledge of the self and of the higher truths that move the universe and govern the lands of hell";³³ the knowledge Aeneas gains by his descent is limited by the purity he must maintain. And it is at the gate of Dis in the ninth canto that Virgil's authority begins to dissipate. He is refused entry by the demons who guard the entrance, and it is only an angel sent by God who can open the gate to the deeper parts of hell. In the canto preceding this failure, Dante describes Virgil as "the sea of all good sense,"³⁴ but his inability to command an

²⁶ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 1:22-27.

²⁷ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 2:35.

²⁸ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 30: 130; 31:59; 30:123.

²⁹ Freccero, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Virgil, 6:758.

entrance into the deeper parts of hell reveal that this authority and this knowledge is “tragically partial.”³⁵

The condemnation of the limits of Classical knowledge is more fierce and less equivocal with Ulysses; there is no room for ambiguity in hell. The punishment Dante inflicts on Ulysses may have elements of “a self-condemnation on Dante’s part, a self-castigation for past error.”³⁶ In the *Convivio*, left unfinished when Dante turned to write the *Divine Comedy*, Dante glosses a love poem he has written, and in it identifies the object of his desire to be “the lady of the intellect, who is called Philosophy.”³⁷ This lady is the “*pargoletta*” to whom Beatrice refers, who has mislead Dante from the true path. Ulysses loses his way from the true path to transcendent knowledge because his navigational knowledge is partial without the spiritual meaning of the cosmos provided by the Christ event, he is stuck in the literal. When he and his crew cross into the Southern hemisphere, they lose sight of the North star, and see instead “the other pole/ and all its stars.”³⁸ The first sight Dante sees upon climbing out of hell along the body of Satan is the stars, and in the first canto of the *Purgatorio*, he sees “four stars/ not seen before except by the first people” – the Southern cross.³⁹ It is by these stars that Dante navigates the “little vessel” of his poem through purgatory and towards God.⁴⁰ Ulysses must have seen this constellation as well, but, unknowledgeable of the significance of the cross, he could not steer himself towards God. The analogue to this misreading of signs is the “experience of the world/ and of the vices and the worth of men” both Ulysses and Dante gain, but which only Dante can use as a part of a spiritual education and conversion.⁴¹ And it is the experience of Ulysses that teaches Dante to “curb [his] talent,/ that it does not run where virtue does not guide” – to follow the will of God, not his own ambition.⁴² That experience, “the distance that separates Ulysses’ point of shipwreck from the pilgrim’s survival, or, for that matter, the *Convivio* from the *Purgatorio*, is measured by the descent into hell.”⁴³ That same distance is that which Virgil cannot cross, when he stands on the edge of Eden, and must return to hell.

Those ancients who in poetry presented
the golden age, who sang its happy state,
perhaps, in their Parnassus, dreamt this place.⁴⁴

³² Virgil, 3:60-61.

³³ Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, eds., *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's Commedia* (Stanford University, 1991) 48.

³⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 8:7.

³⁵ Jacoff and Schnapp, 3.

³⁶ Lamberton, 297.

³⁷ Dante, *Convivio*, translated by Christopher Ryan (Saratoga, CA: Amna Libri, 1989) 3:11.

³⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, 26:127-128.

³⁹ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 1:23-24.

⁴⁰ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 1:2.

⁴¹ Dante, *Inferno*, 26:98-99.

That same inability to distinguish between the true and the surface, or rather shadow, meaning prevents Virgil from achieving salvation. Although the poetry of Virgil, and especially the fourth eclogue, was read to have “prophetic power,” “Dante’s Virgil is finally a figure of hopelessness, incapable of transcending the limitation of reason and therefore forced to return...to Limbo, whence his journey began.”⁴⁵ Those who mastered the word before the appearance of the Word of God used shadows empty of meaning, and in Limbo they themselves are incorporeal shades. They – Virgil, Homer, Lucan, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the others – are unfulfilled souls, just as the unbaptised infants who share Limbo with them are unfulfilled; they “have no hope and yet live in longing.”⁴⁶ Virgil is a figure of great pathos, “lighting the way for others, yet unable to help himself.”⁴⁷ The moment of the most profound tribute to, and greatest subversion of, that poet’s work occurs in Eden, with the appearance of Beatrice. She is hailed with a quotation from the *Aeneid*: “*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis*”⁴⁸ – “Let me scatter lilies, / All I can hold.”⁴⁹ The revision of that quotation, the insertion of a simple “oh”, reverses the intended meaning entirely. The lilies of the *Aeneid* are those of a futile mourning, but “Dante counterposes to them a promise of Christian consolation alien to Virgil’s poem and his world.”⁵⁰ The lilies here are those of the Resurrection, and of eternal joy, not mourning. They are lilies for Dante’s own saved soul, about to ascend to heaven, whereas his master and guide must be left behind. It is from heaven that Dante looks down, and sees the trace of Ulysses’ “mad course,” where his own journey is about to surpass the shadow vision of those poets before him.⁵¹ It is the vision of God that converts Dante the pilgrim into Dante the poet – the voyage comes full circle. This conversion is the voyage that is “transumanare,”⁵² a verb Dante created to mean ‘to go beyond the human,’ a feat possible only when the will and soul, not the body:

mov[e] already – like
a wheel revolving uniformly – by

⁴² Dante, *Inferno*, 26:21-22.

⁴³ Freccero, 146.

⁴⁴ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 28:139-141.

⁴⁵ Jacoff and Jeffrey, 51, 97.

⁴⁶ Dante, *Inferno*, 4:42.

⁴⁷ Freccero, 141.

⁴⁸ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 30:21,

⁴⁹ Virgil, 6:1199-1200.

⁵⁰ Jacoff and Jeffrey, 4. It would be useful to note here that another echo of Virgil’s work occurs even as the poet disappears. Dante speaks his name three times in a fading echo in the thirtieth canto of the *Purgatorio*, in an allusion to the fourth book of Virgil’s *Georgics*, where Orpheus calls on the name of Eurydice three times as his disembodied head floats down to Hades. Here, the echo of Virgil is given a full stop, as Beatrice calls on Dante - the only appearance of the poet’s name in the *Divine Comedy*.

the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.⁵³

⁵¹ Dante, *Paradiso*, 27:83.

⁵² Dante, *Paradiso*, 1:70.

⁵³ Dante, *Paradiso*, 33:143-145.

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