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Inferno I, II, and XXVI: Dante as Poet and Wayfarer, Ulysses, and the Reader

R. L. Barth

For Wesley Trimpi

Few characters in Dante's *Inferno* or, indeed, in the whole of the *Commedia* have commanded the attention of critics to a greater extent than the figure of Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI. He is a magnificent creation, proud and disdainful, a creation that has fully repaid the most careful critical scrutiny. And yet, his significance seems inexhaustible. The present essay will trace various points of comparison and contrast between the wayfarer of *Inferno* I and II and Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI as voyagers, in order to examine one further aspect of Ulysses's significance. Specifically, this essay will discuss the importance of Ulysses to the reader of Dante's *Commedia*, as the reader is, in fact, an active participant in the journey to salvation. Ulysses and his voyage represent an alternate journey.

Previous scholarship on the figure of Ulysses tends in two basic directions. First, there are the critics, particularly Anna Hatcher¹ and James G. Truscott,² who are interested in the nature of Ulysses's sin, denying that he is an evil counsellor at all. The second line of criticism, which is ultimately more important for this study, may be seen in terms of the two parallel directions in which it travels.

In this second line of criticism there are first the critics who follow Croce, arguing that Dante—and the reference is to the historical Dante, the poet—was moved “by the passion to know all that was knowable, and nowhere else has he given such noble expression to that noble passion as in the great figure of Ulysses.”³ Sara Sturm seems to be essentially of this line. She speaks of Dante's sorrow at observing Ulysses as “witness to an innate sympathy with that hero, and it is that innate sympathy which requires that the poet be especially vigilant.”⁴

Distinguishing between Dante the poet and Dante the wayfarer,

on the other hand, is a group of critics who, in effect, substitute Dante the wayfarer for Croce's historical figure. John Freccero, for example, sees a "relationship between the experience of Dante's pilgrim and that of Ulysses. For both figures the object of the journey seems to be the mountain in the southern hemisphere. Again the pilgrim takes Ulysses's fate to be a specific admonition for himself."⁵ Edward M. Hood suggests a relationship between Dante the poet, Dante the wayfarer, and the reader. However, he is too general, saying "the deep analogy which unifies Canto XXVI is between the voyage of Ulysses and the poetical process itself as the paradigm of human discourse: the voyage of the mind and the voyage of life itself. . . ."⁶ Finally, David Thompson discusses a pre-conversion and a post-conversion Dante, along with Dante the wayfarer, the link between them. Thus, "The Dante of the *Convivio* does indeed find expression in Ulysses; our author writes whereof he knows. And this earlier Dante is judged by his post-conversion successor. . . ."⁷

Almost every critic mentioned above notes the various references and allusions to Ulysses in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Without denying the importance of these passages, this essay will not take them into account. The reason for this is important. Although Dante's *Commedia* is obviously meant to be read, reread, and studied in detail, giving new and deeper knowledge on each subsequent reading, this essay will proceed on the fiction that it is the first reading of an intelligent, close reader, focusing sharply on these three passages and their interrelationships. In this way, the reader can observe the significance of the voyage of Ulysses in its immediate context. Thus, this essay will adhere to the literal level of the poem, not, of course, wholly at the expense of the allegory. Such a technique will occasionally reveal important aspects of Dante's meaning, aspects that previous commentators have either overlooked or failed to appreciate fully.

If Ulysses is to have significance for the reader as pilgrim on the way of salvation, the text presents two major problems. First, the reader must be identified in some way with Dante the wayfarer, and Ulysses must be explored. There is perhaps a third, ancillary problem concerned with trusting the poet behind the text. Fortunately, the important work of Charles S. Singleton solves the first problem and suggests a way of resolving the second. Noting what might be called the studied vagueness of the geography in the poet's prologue, Singleton argues that "the scene was designed to

locate us."⁸ He continues, "This is the way of our life, the life of the soul, this is our predicament. It ought to be the scene we know best. . . . The features of it, the things here that we can make out; a hill, a wood, these beasts, all have their existence there where the *fiumana* runs which Lucia sees from Heaven."⁹ In short, the wayfarer of the prologue is Everyman. So, there can be little question about the significance of the wayfarer in *Inferno* I and II for the reader. And yet, as Singleton admits, "The journey beyond is too exceptional an event to bear any but a singular possessive. It was then, and there, and it was his journey."¹⁰ The problem, then, is to make some connection between Ulysses and the wayfarer of the prologue scene, Everyman; but the problem is not difficult to resolve because of Dante's "dual pattern of a journey. . . ."¹¹ In other words, the poet has constructed certain correspondences between various incidents along the journey and the prologue scene. Thus, once these correspondences are discovered, the incident immediately draws the reader to its significance.

Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* is particularly pertinent to Dante the poet and wayfarer and, by extension, the reader. In fact, one might say, literally and profoundly, that there but for the grace of God goes Dante. The poet himself recognizes this, partly explaining the extreme seriousness with which he prepares the reader for this incident in the eighth bolgia:

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch' io vidi,
e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch' i' non soglio,
perchè non corra che virtù nol guidi;
(XXVI, 19-22)

I grieved then and grieve now anew when I turn my mind to
what I saw, and more than I am wont I curb my powers lest
they run where virtue does not guide them.¹²

In addition to the seriousness, the control (or curb) and the "virtù" that guides "'ngegno" will be contrasted with qualities in Ulysses shortly, when the latter speaks. The reader must exercise caution, however, through this passage. The eighth bolgia where Dante meets Ulysses contains the evil counsellors, but, while Dante has great artistic gifts that are subject to misuse (thus providing a reason for the necessity of understanding this sin), one is

confronted by the tale of Ulysses's final voyage. The tale far exceeds in importance a simple object lesson on false counselling, although it does not, as some critics have thought, preclude it. Dante stresses this importance. Ulysses's three obvious sins as a false counsellor are hurried over in six lines:

e dentro dalla lor fiamma si geme
l'agguato del caval che fè la porta
onde uscì de' Romani il gentil seme.
Piangevisi entro l'arte per che, morta,
Deïdamia ancor si duol d'Achille,
e del Palladio pena vi si porta.
(XXVI, 58-63)

and within their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse that made the gateway by which the noble seed of the Romans went forth; they lament within it the craft on account of which Deidamia dead still mourns Achilles, and there is borne the penalty for the Palladium.

On the other hand, Ulysses's tale stretches over fifty-two lines (XXVI, 91-142).

This disparity, along with the nature of Ulysses's "orazion," has led some critics to question the justice of placing the hero in the realm of fraud at all.¹³ However, this questioning goes too far. Without denying that Ulysses has renounced his duties as king, husband, and father, a renunciation which deeply interests Dante and the reader, one can still accept the oration as an example of "false counsel."¹⁴ The one thing that the reader must never forget is this: more than one soul is involved in this incident. Ulysses broke some kind of law or bond; that is clear. He sailed past the Pillars of Hercules, set up "acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta" (XXVI, 109) "so that men should not pass beyond." And he has convinced his shipmates to accompany him, speaking (counselling) so well that:

Li miei compagni fec' io sì aguti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;
(XXVI, 121-23)

My companions I made so eager for the road with these brief words that then I could hardly have held them back.

His shipmates are too easily overlooked, but they are surely in Hell as a result of Ulysses's "orazion."

So, the reader is taken briefly forward, only to be called back to Dante's simile of the fireflies. To put it in context, he has just spoken of "virtù" as the mind's guide. The simile is relatively long:

Quante il villan ch'al poggio si riposa,
nel tempo che colui che 'l mondo schiara
la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,
come la mosca cede a la zanzara,
vede lucciole giù per la vallea,
forse colà dov' e' vendemmia ed ara;
di tante fiamme tutta risplendea
l'ottava bolgia, sì com' io m'accorsi
tosto che fui là 've 'l fondo pareo.
(XXVI, 25-33)

As many as the fire-flies which the peasant resting on the hill—in the season when he that lights the world least hides his face from us and at the hour when the fly gives place to the gnat—sees along the valley below, in the fields, perhaps, where he gathers the grapes and tills; with so many flames the eighth ditch was all gleaming, as I perceived as soon as I came where the bottom was in sight.

The fireflies suggest guide lights (even kinds of stars), like Dante's "virtù," which is itself compared to a "stella" (XXVI, 23). However, the fireflies are aimless and would be treacherous guides. Even so was Ulysses a treacherous guide (and, from a supernatural perspective, somewhat aimless as well). He promised his followers "virtute e canoscenza" (XXVI, 120); he gave them their destruction. This point is extremely important for the following reason: as Virgil is to Dante the wayfarer and as Ulysses is to his followers, so is Dante the poet to the reader. He is the poet as teacher, as guide, and it is necessary for him to demonstrate his soundness, his honesty for the task. There is a difference between his "virtù" and Ulysses's "virtute e canoscenza." One figure is in Hell; the other is behind the figure walking *through* Hell.

Still, while Ulysses's "orazion" to undertake the final voyage constitutes a fourth evil counsel, yet the extended tale argues other meanings as well. Dante's art is not ornamental; elaboration has meaning. And when the final fifty-two lines of *Inferno* XXVI are juxtaposed with *Inferno* I and II, Dante's purpose becomes clear: both he and Ulysses undertake voyages that run parallel to a point and then sharply diverge, leading Dante to salvation and Ulysses to damnation. As the *Commedia* opens, Dante says:

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita.
(I, 2-3)

I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way
was lost.

Allegorically, he has come to recognize his sinful state; he was "smarrita." Indeed, "Tant' è amara che poco è piu morte . . ." (I, 7) "So bitter is it that death is hardly more." The very language is charged with allegorical seriousness. However, he does not realize how he came to be there:

tant'era pieno di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.
(I, 11-12)

I was so full of sleep at that moment when I left the true way.

No doubt, as Huse points out, most men "fall imperceptibly into sin. . . ." ¹⁵ However, Dante stresses the fact that this state of sin implies a failure on the part of the sinner to make ethical distinctions, making the sinner, in fact, an active participant in his fall, fully responsible for the results. In this sense, it bears a striking resemblance, as Freccero points out, "to the 'region of unlikeness' in which the young Augustine finds himself in the seventh book of the *Confessions*." ¹⁶ Ulysses embarks on his voyage:

ch' i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto,
e delli vizi umani e del valore;
(XXVI, 98-99)

to gain experience of the world and of the vices and the worth of men.

Here, too, the emphasis seems to fall more on experience than on distinction. Shortly, the emphasis will fall explicitly on "l'esperienza" (XXVI, 116), which is equated with "virtute e canoscenza" (XXVI, 120). Again, there is an inability, or worse, a refusal to make ethical distinctions. This quest for experience, qua experience, necessarily veers the voyager into what Dante the poet recognizes as a state of sin. Thus, Ulysses on the "mare" and the wayfarer on the "selva oscura" are in similar spiritual states.¹⁷

The reader can pursue this last statement even further, for the spiritual and physical geographies of the voyagers are also parallel. Ulysses, as was stated above, is on the "mare". Dante, however, is not only in the "selva oscura," but, metaphorically, on the "lago del cor" (I, 20). Furthermore, as Singleton points out in a slightly different context,¹⁸ the wayfarer is placed even more specifically on the waters. When Lucy speaks to Beatrice of her lover, she places him:

non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?
(II, 107-08)

Seest thou not the death which combats him on the flood that is not less terrible than the sea?

The correspondence between the two journeys is at this point unmistakable.

Awakening to his loss, the wayfarer sees the sun (God; Truth) rising behind a hill. Naturally, he begins to climb the hill, so quickly "si che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso" (I, 30) "keeping always the lower foot firm." Salvation, truth, is not so easily obtained. There are no short cuts, as Dante points out: the "lupa" drives him back to the foot of the hill.¹⁹ Similarly, Ulysses seeks:

non vogliate negar l'esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.
(XXVI, 116-17)

not to deny experience, in the sun's track, of the unpeopled world.

On the literal level, the unpeopled world simply refers to the hemisphere of water. But the reader is also justified in seeing, perhaps, an allegory of spiritual or at least philosophical quest, in which context the unpeopled world refers to the spiritual world or the world of truth. Specifically, with even an elementary knowledge of Dante's geography, the reader would know that the unpeopled world is Mount Purgatory. However, were it argued that the fictive reader here assumed would not know Dante's geography, the correspondence between the two journeys is still striking. The fact remains that the wayfarer is seeking the sun—in all its symbolic meanings—while Ulysses is seeking "virtute e canoscenza" "di retro al sol." Neither of the journeys succeeds. The reader knows that Dante the wayfarer must be affected from without and turn within himself. In view of Ulysses's ultimate failure, his need can be implied.

If one could plot as on a graph the point at which these previously parallel voyages diverge, it would be that point at which the wayfarer comes to his senses, recognizing that he has strayed from the "via." With this recognition, Beatrice (Grace) intercedes on Dante's behalf, sending Virgil to re-place the pilgrim on the correct "via," a long, tortuous journey through the spiritual universe. However, this sequence of events is even more profound than it might at first appear. Man alone (even man with the aid of reason) is unable to achieve salvation or ultimate truth. Thus, there must be an important sequence of events: a communion of saints must act on the wayfarer's behalf even before the intercession of Beatrice, who relates this sequence of events as follows:

Donna è gentil nel ciel che si compiange
di questo impedimento ov' io ti mando,
sì che duro giudicio là su frange.

Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando
e disse: "Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele
di te, ed io a te lo raccomando."

Lucia, nimica di ciascun crudele,
si mosse, e venne al loco dov' i' era,
che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele.

Disse: "Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,
chè non soccorri quei che t'amò tanto
ch'uscì per te della volgare schiera?
non odi tu la pièta del suo pianto?"

non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?"

(II, 94-108)

There is a gentle lady in Heaven who is so moved with pity of that hindrance for which I send thee that she breaks the stern judgement there on high; she called Lucy and gave her her behest: "Thy faithful one is now in need of thee and I commend him to thee." Lucy, enemy of all cruelty, rose and came to the place where I was seated beside the ancient Rachel and said: "Beatrice, true praise of God, why dost thou not succour him who so loved thee that for thy sake he left the vulgar herd? Hearest thou not his pitiful weeping? Seest thou not the death which combats him on the flood that is not less terrible than the sea?"

This passage has been quoted at length as a matter of necessity. Even so sensitive a critic as Freccero says, "the successful journey . . . is a descent in humility, a death of self represented by the journey through Hell." Furthermore, "The descent into Hell . . . is the first step on the journey to truth."²⁰ This is simply not true; nor is this a mere quibble. In the first place, the "death of self" is not involved, but rather a *knowledge* of the self—that is, of its potentialities for privation. Additionally, Freccero fuses two elements, humility and the descent, which are not equivalent; nor is either the first step.

As the above passage suggests, the first step is the activity of the communion of saints, an ancient Catholic doctrine. Dante recognizes this, as Freccero apparently does not, taking his critical eye, for the moment, from the literal level of the text. As a result of this same procedure, he misses Dante's test in humility, another step preliminary to the actual descent into Hell. But there is a crucial step between the communion of saints and the test in humility: the activity of Grace. As a result of the community of love elaborated by Beatrice, Virgil is sent to guide Dante the wayfarer. Yet the pilgrim is free to accept or reject this holy help, and this freedom of choice is important. Acceptance resides in humility, a later step on the journey to salvation. In fact, it is one of Virgil's functions to test Dante's receptivity and humility. Although he has learned of Dante's situation from Beatrice, he asks the wayfarer:

perchè non sali il diletto monte
ch' è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?
(I, 77-78)

Why dost thou not climb the delectable mountain which is the
beginning and cause of all happiness?

However, having tried and failed to climb the mountain alone,
Dante recognizes his need of outside help, replying:

Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi:
aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,
ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi.
(I, 88-90)

See the beast for which I turned; save me from her, famous
sage, for she sets the pulses trembling in my veins.

Dante having passed his test in humility, Virgil offers his heaven-
initiated aid: "A te conven tenere altro viaggio" (I, 91) "Thou must
take another road."

Ulysses, on the other hand, never does recognize himself as lost,
or, more precisely, does seem to recognize in a vague way; but he
has too much confidence in his own ability. Plunged as he is in
experience, qua experience, he remains of necessity ignorant of
ethical distinctions. One point of interest: while Dante says, "Io
non so ben ridir com' io v'entrai" (I, 10) "I cannot rightly tell how I
entered there," it is possible to locate the point at which Ulysses
becomes lost. It is at that point where he sails into the Atlantic,
past Gibraltar:

dov' Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi,
acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta:
(XXVI, 108-09)

where Hercules set up his landmarks so that men should not
pass beyond.

However, it is necessary that the reader cannot precisely locate the
point at which the wayfarer of the prologue scene becomes lost.
The reason for this is the same reason why the geography of the

scene is vague. As was discussed above, this is the poet's method of placing the reader. It is a different matter with Ulysses, in part because the reader has already been placed. Also, Ulysses is a point of contrast for Dante the poet, Dante the wayfarer, and the reader. Each of the sins implicit or explicit in the figure of Ulysses—evil counsel, pursuit of experience qua experience, disobedience, pride—is important in this way.

Ulysses knows:

Tutte le stelle già dell'altro polo
vedea la notte, e 'l nostro tanto basso
che non surgea fuor del marin suolo.
(XXVI, 127-29)

Night then saw all the stars of the other pole and ours so low
that it did not rise from the ocean floor.

Nevertheless, he does not care that he has strayed from the true way. Even the way in which he mentions the lost star suggests that the significance has escaped him.²¹ Equally important here is the reference that Dante the poet made himself near the opening of *Inferno* XXVI:

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch' io vidi,
e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch' í non soglio,
perchè non corra che virtù nol guidi;
(XXVI, 19-22)

I grieved then and grieve now anew when I turn my mind to
what I saw, and more than I am wont I curb my powers lest
they run where virtue does not guide them.

Also important is the more obvious fact that Dante is no longer lost, having escaped the "selva oscura"; rather, he is firmly on his "via" with an expert guide.²² Ulysses, on the other hand, falls prey to his own particular "bestia":

chè della nova terra un turbo nacque,
e percosse del legno il primo canto.
Tre volte il fè girar con tutte l'acque:

alla quarta levar la poppa in suso
e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.
(XXVI, 137-42)

from the new land a storm rose and struck the forepart of the ship. Three times it whirled her round with all the waters, the fourth time lifted the poop aloft and plunged the prow below, as One willed, until the sea closed again over us.

Allegorically, he plunges headlong to spiritual destruction. The four times the ship whirls before sinking may well symbolize the four evil counsels that brought Ulysses to Hell, the fourth, slightly set off, compounded of other elements as well. Nor is this too far-fetched. Dante's is an economical art, and even the slightest of details is significant.

Given the preceding correspondences between *Inferno* I, II, and XXVI, the significance of Ulysses's final voyage for the reader is clear. In fact, Dante has presented the reader with a specific admonition. In addition, Ulysses's extended tale of his final voyage is, as has been observed throughout this essay, crucial to a clear perception of the meaning and technique of Dante's *Commedia*. Both the wayfarer and the sailor undertake similar journeys, journeys for knowledge of the spiritual or unpeopled world, the world of truth. Dante, however, comes to realize that he is lost, opening himself to the possibilities of Grace, becoming, in fact, a member of the communion of saints. Contrasted with Dante in his fear and humility, Ulysses in his pride and daring fails to see any significance in the fact that he can no longer observe his "stella." Prefiguring his fate, it sinks in the "mar." There is, in addition, the retrospective irony and belated understanding of his voyage as "al folle volo" (XXVI, 125), suggesting, once again, his inability to make ethical distinctions in the physical world. (This judgment has the added power of being pronounced by Ulysses himself.) In the end, the reader can juxtapose two brief but vital passages in the poem. Both Dante and Ulysses have been on the "fiumana" and "mar" respectively. Ulysses succumbs, giving his own terse epitaph: "infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso" (XXVI, 142) "the sea closed over us." Dante, spiritually awakened, is

E come quei che con lena affannata

uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
si volge all'acqua perigliosa e guata
(I, 22-24)

as he who with labouring breath has escaped from the deep to
the shore turns to the perilous waters and gazes.

NOTES

¹Anna Hatcher, "Dante's Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 88 (1970), 109-17.

²James G. Truscott, "Ulysses and Guido (*Inf.* XXVI-XXVII)," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 91 (1973), 47-72.

³Quoted in John D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, I, Inferno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 331.

⁴Sara Sturm, "Structure and Meaning in *Inferno* XXVI," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 92 (1974), 101.

⁵John Freccero, "Dante's Prologue Scene," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 84 (1966), 18. There will be frequent occasions to return to Freccero's essay later, since he is the only critic to focus sharply on the prologue in conjunction with Ulysses. The remainder of the critics examine the references and allusions to that figure in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

⁶Edward M. Hood, "The Condition of Ulysses: Expansions and Contractions in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*," *Annual Report of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers*, 81 (1963), 3.

⁷David Thompson, "Dante's Ulysses and the Allegorical Journey," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 85 (1967), 54.

⁸Charles S. Singleton, "Allegory" in *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (1954; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 7.

⁹Singleton, p. 9.

¹⁰Singleton, p. 9.

¹¹Singleton, p. 5.

¹²*The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, I, Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 320. All subsequent quotations from Dante's *Inferno* (as well as, for the sake of consistency, the English translations following) are from this edition and will be marked in the text with canto and line numbers.

¹³See, for example, Truscott, p. 66.

¹⁴See also Dorothy L. Sayers, *Further Papers on Dante* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 116. Miss Sayers argues that Ulysses is a counsellor of folly.

¹⁵*The Divine Comedy*, trans. H. R. Huse (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954), p. 7.

¹⁶Freccero, p. 1.

¹⁷Ulysses's state of being lost is even clearer in the following lines, discussed later in this essay: "*Tutte le stelle già dell'altro polo / vedea la notte, e 'l nostro tanto basso / che non surgea fuor del marin suolo*" (XXVI, 127-29).

¹⁸Singleton, p. 8.

¹⁹Freccero, pp. 7-8.

²⁰Freccero, p. 3.

²¹Freccero is correct in saying that the "point of these verses is that the ship is 'off course,'" p. 18.

²²It is also probably pertinent that, even in Hell, Dante and Virgil are aware of "their" stars, and frequently tell time with their aid.