
Tutti i diritti riservati.

© 1983 *Rivista di Studi Italiani*

ISSN 1916-5412 *Rivista di Studi Italiani*

(Toronto, Canada: in versione cartacea fino al 2004, online dal 2005)

ULYSSES: A PHILOSOPHER “*PER ACCIDENTE*”

FILIPPA MODESTO

Brooklyn College, CUNY
Berkeley College

This paper examines the episode of Dante’s Ulysses from the magnified lens of the *Convivio* (ca. 1303-1305), a philosophical work of ethics whose main sources of inspiration are to be found in Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* (*Conv.* II, xii, 1-3), and in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, a work that Dante read in Latin in conjunction with St. Thomas Aquinas’ commentary. I argue that, in ignoring the intrinsic link between *sapienza* and *amore*, and in creating a schism between *scienza*, *conoscenza*, and *coscienza*, and *ingegno* and *virtù*, Ulysses is a *non-sapiente*, or to borrow Dante’s own words in the *Convivio*, a philosopher “*per accidente*”. I further argue that the expanded context within which Ulysses’ quest for truth assumes significance and purpose is his inability to grasp the multilateral nature and the ethical scope of knowledge.

The figure of Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI has inspired divergent readings. The romantic reading proposed by Benedetto Croce, Francesco De Sanctis, Primo Levi, Mario Fubini, Attilio Momigliano, and Lino Pertile, sees in the figure of Ulysses the magnanimous hero whose tragedy is the mere consequence of unfortunate circumstances, a paradigm of man’s natural desire for knowledge. For De Sanctis, in *Inferno* XXVI Dante builds “...una statua a questo precursor di Colombo...una piramide piantata in mezzo al fango” (a statue to this precursor of Christopher Columbus...a pyramid set in the mud of hell)¹. A

¹ See Francesco De Sanctis. *Storia della letteratura italiana* 1949, 4th ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1949, pp. 201-202; Benedetto Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante*, 2nd ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1921), p. 98; Mario Fubini, “Il peccato d’Ulisse” and “Il canto XXVI dell’*Inferno*” in *Id.*, *Il peccato d’Ulisse e altri scritti danteschi* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1966), pp. 1-76; Lino Pertile, “Dante e l’ingegno di Ulisse”,

second and more modern interpretation, articulated by Bruno Nardi, Giorgio Padoan, Robert Hollander, John Scott, Amilcare Iannucci and others, views Ulysses as an unsympathetic hero, whose tragedy is to be traced to his own *hubris* and unrestrained *ingegno*². A third interpretation, inspired by such scholars as Giuseppe Mazzotta, Teodolinda Barolini, and Karlheinz Stierle, understands Ulysses less than an admirable hero whose journey serves as a point of reference for Dante's own journey³. John Freccero argues that, "The transformation of Ulysses' circular journey into linear disaster is a Christian critique of epic categories, a critique of earthly heroism beyond the grave...an ancient analogue of Dante's adventure" (Freccero 139). While offering valuable contributions, many of these studies tend to neglect an important aspect of *Inferno* XXVI, namely Dante's reconceptualization of the neo-platonic notion of philosophy and of the philosophical discourse, from an abstract and rational conception, to a more operative, moral, and historical one⁴.

Stanford Italian Review I (1979), pp. 35-65. Cf. Chiavacci Leonardi, 1991, I, p. 762.

² See "Bruno Nardi, "La tragedia di Ulisse", in *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1942), pp. 88-99; Julius Wilhelm, "Die Gestalt des Odysseus in Dantes göttlicher Komödie", *Deutsches Dantes Jahrbuch* 38, 1, (1960), pp. 75-93. Giorgio Padoan, "Ulisse *fandi fictor* e le vie della Sapienza. Momenti di una tradizione (da Virgilio a Dante)", in *Id., Il pio Enea e l'empio Ulisse: Tradizione classica e intendimento medievale in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977, [1960]), pp. 170-199; Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 114-123; John A. Scott, "Inferno XXVI: Dante's Ulysses", *Lettere Italiane* 23 (1971), pp. 145-186; Amilcare Iannucci, "Ulysses' 'folle volo': The Burden of History", *Medioevo romanzo* 3 (1976), pp. 410-445; Chiavacci Leonardi, Anna Maria, *Inferno, con il commento di A. M. C. L.* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), p. 762.

³ Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Poetics of History: *Inferno* XXVI", *Diacritics* (Summer 1975), pp. 37-44; Stierle Karlheinz, "Odysseus und Aeneas: Eine typologische Konfiguration in Dantes *Divina Commedia*", in *Das fremde Wort: Studies zur Interdependenz von Texten, Festschrift für Karl Maurer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Ilse Nolting-Hauff & Joachim Schulze (Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner, 1988), pp. 111-154; Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine "Comedy": Dethologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; *passim*; Harold Bloom, "The Strangeness of Dante: Ulysses and Beatrice", in *Id., The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994. pp. 85-89. For a response to these critics see William Stull and Robert Hollander, "The Lucanian Source of Dante's Ulysses", *Studi danteschi* 63 (1991 [1977]), pp. 43-52.

⁴ See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 81.

Where precisely does Ulysses’ sin reside? It would seem to reside in his fraudulent use of intellect and language. As Virgil makes clear, Ulysses and Diomede occupy a place in Hell amongst the evil counselors because of their fraudulent deeds (the Trojan horse, the theft of the Palladium, and the tempting of Achilles [*Inferno* XXVI, 58-63]). For Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Ulysses’ sin is to have counseled his companions to go beyond the boundaries of knowledge...He makes rhetorical promises that he knows he cannot quite keep...of going beyond the pillars of Hercules” (Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* 89). To be sure, Ulysses overturns and perverts the very gifts that distinguish individuals from brutes, language and intellect, transforming both into instruments of deception. While Dante may feel sympathy for Ulysses (“Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio / quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch’io vidi...” [vv. 19-20])⁵, he does not refrain from condemning the Greek hero for his inordinate and unvirtuous use of intellect. The duplicity of Ulysses’ language unveils the degree and extent of his wickedness and fraudulence. Ulysses’ world is one of appearances and simulations, a world where appearances are all important. In his distortion of truth and in his reliance on trickery, Ulysses is similar to Circe, the enchantress who had seduced and deprived his men of their humanity, transforming them into hogs. Dante seems to uphold Cicero’s sentiment that, “While wrong (*iniuria*) may be committed, then, in two ways – either by force or by fraud – fraud seems to belong to the fox, force to the lion; both are most alien to man, but fraud is the most odious” (Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1. 13. 41). Similar to the corrupt and duplicitous orator in Cicero’s *De Inventione*, who disregards the moral and political function of language (Freccero 114-145), Ulysses distorts words, thus construes appearance for reality, rhetoric for truth.

Postquam vero commoditas quaedam, parva virtutis imatrix, sine ratione office, dicendi copia consecuta est, tum ingenio freta militia pervertere urbes et vitas hominum labefactare assuevit (De Inventione, I, 2.3).
 [When a certain agreeableness of manner – depraved imitation of virtue – acquired the power of eloquence unaccompanied by any consideration of moral duty, then low cunning supported by talent grew accustomed to corrupting cities and undermining the lives of men.]

⁵ See Lino Pertile, “Dante e l’ingegno di Ulisse”, *Stanford Italian Review* I (1979), pp. 35-65. For Pertile these verses serve to establish Dante’s sympathy for Ulysses. In support of his claim, Pertile cites (p. 37) Ovid (*Metam.* XIII. 135-139). See Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante’s “Commedia”*, cit., pp. 115-116. Hollander argues that in this passage Dante is trying to keep Ulysses’ previous prideful intellect under control.

Dante defends the Ciceronian concept of political rhetoric that reached him primarily through Brunetto Latini's *Rhetorica*⁶. Similar to Cicero and to Brunetto, Dante upholds the socio-political function of language, and by so doing reinforces the link between the word and the world. As Gramsci reminds us, in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* "la quistione della lingua" is addressed primarily as a political and cultural concern⁷. Language is a prism through which the disparate elements of society are reflected and merged to acquire greater significance. Essential to the political moral, and cultural fabric of the city, language functions as a unifying force, a thread tying the disjointed parts into a harmonious whole. In this manner, it creates stability where there is chaos, unity and harmony where there is discord. Through his fraudulent use of language, Ulysses severs the bonds of loyalty and trust necessary to the socio-political well-being of the community. The schism he creates between discourse and truth evokes the fragility and unpredictability of language⁸. Insofar as his quest for *virtute e canoscenza* (v. 120) takes him outside of the boundaries of the known world and outside of the collective community within which all human relationships and language acquire significance and purpose, and insofar as he evades the moral significance of his philosophical discourse, Ulysses' quest for truth remains an abstraction.

If Ulysses' inordinate and fraudulent use of intellect and language is less than admirable, his desire to discover the truth about the world and mankind is comprehensible from a human vantage point. We need only to remember that in the *Convivio*, while making reference to Aristotle, Dante asserts that "tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere" [all men naturally desire to know, *Conv.* I, i, 1]. Dante upholds the Aristotelian claim that individuals are naturally drawn towards wisdom because in it resides happiness and perfection (*Convivio* I, i, 1), and that truth is the good of the intellect: "l vero è lo bene de lo intelletto" (*Conv.* II, xiii, 6). Both in the *Convivio* and in the *Commedia* Dante holds philosophy in highest regard. In the *Commedia* philosophy is understood

⁶ See Giuseppe Mazzotta's *Dante Poet of the Desert*, cit., pp. 66-106). Cf. Giorgio Padoan, "Ulisse *fandi fictor* e le vie della Sapienza", *Studi danteschi* 37 (1960), pp. 21-61, reprinted in *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse*, cit., pp. 170-204. Cf. Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Canto XXVI Ulysses: Persuasion Versus Prophecy", in *Lectura Dantis*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross. Berkely: University of California Press, -----

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 3, Quaderno 29 (XXI), 7, p. 2350. "Pare chiaro che il *De Vulgari Eloquentia* di Dante sia da considerare essenzialmente un atto di politica culturale-nazionale (nel senso che nazionale aveva in quel tempo e in Dante), come un aspetto della lotta politica è stata sempre quella che viene chiamata 'la quistione della lingua' che dal punto di vista diventa interessante da studiare".

⁸ See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert*, cit., p. 73.

as a handmaiden to theology, and is represented by Virgil, the ancient philosophers in Limbo, Boethius, and the virtuous pagans⁹. In the *Convivio*, Dante refers to her as “la figlia di Dio, regina di tutto l’universo” [the daughter of God and queen of the universe, *Conv. II, xii*] and as “la bellissima e onestissima figlia de lo Imperadore de lo universe” [the most beautiful and most dignified daughter of the emperor of the Universe, *Conv. II, xv, 12*]. Her physical aspect is linked both to faith and spiritual salvation, and the beauty of her soul in turn reflects divine goodness (*Conv. III, vii, 16*). While it is true that the goal in the *Convivio* is secular truth attainable by means of human reason with the aid of the cardinal virtues, it is equally true that philosophy is understood as an aid in our efforts to know a higher truth. That her physical beauty is linked to the moral virtues underscores the interplay between philosophy and theology “...che quella donna suo mirabile aspetto, la vostra fede aiuta” (*Conv. VIII, vii, 16*). As De Sanctis reminds us: “...per giungere all’unione con Dio non basta volere, bisogna sapere, ci vuole la Sapienza che è amore e scienza, unità del pensiero e della vita” (De Sanctis 154). De Sanctis’ observation continues by pointing out philosophy’s moral and practical function, “Bisognava dunque volgarizzare la scienza, darle uno scopo morale, drizzarla all’opera. Indi l’importanza che ebbe l’etica e la retorica, la scienza de’ costumi e l’arte della persuasione” (De Sanctis 155). This is the radical difference between the platonic conception of philosophy, understood as a pure form of knowledge, and the Latin Ciceronian practical notion upheld by such thinkers as Dante, Cavalcanti, and even Petrarch. With its proximity to politics, rhetoric, and even poetry, in Dante philosophy holds a practical role, an ethical dimension and a moral scope, rather than the strictly speculative role it held for the Greeks. As Mazzotta notes, “Dante, by contrast, historicizes philosophy, dissolves the abstract *exemplum* into the world of rhetoric and history, the ground where opinions are debated, where one continuously copes with the temptation of truth and falsehood”¹⁰. It is within the more practical and operative conception of philosophy that Dante finds the seeds for his own philosophical ideas. Moreover, by questioning the ethical value of Ulysses’ philosophical discourse, Dante is acknowledging the inadequacy of abstract knowledge and empty rhetoric to attain truth.

Central to the episode of Ulysses stands the macrocosm of the city, the backdrop for all human relations, and the repository for all civic life. The ethical motif that runs all through *Inferno* XXVI is implicitly emphasized through the

⁹ Robert Hollander. *Dante: A Life in Works*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. p. 122. “In the *Comedy*, David and Aquinas know more than does Aristotle but Aristotle can aid us in the effort to know as they know”.

¹⁰ On this same point see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert*, cit., p. 81: “In a sense, Dante’s strategy is to reverse the neo-platonic commentators who extrapolate a truth and a model of certitude from the world of fiction”.

allusions to the city, the place that perfectly mirrors Ulysses' beguiling and restless nature. The city is a catalyst here, a force where the oscillating movement between knowledge and ethics, language and ethics, takes its form and acquires dimension. As Giuseppe Mazzotta notes, "The canto enacts an extended reflection on the fates of secular cities: Florence, Prato, Thebes, Troy, Rome and the quest for a 'new land'"¹¹. The ethical motif is accentuated through the impending doom of Florence, the city that had once been an image of peaceful tranquility but now is engulfed in chaos, deception, and misery. Florence's prophesized apocalyptic end (vv.1-12) foreshadows Ulysses' own apocalyptic end, while the beating wings ("per mare e per terra batti l'ali" (v. 2) allude to the ship's oars and to Ulysses' mad flight ("de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo" (v. 125). The burning bodies of Eteocles and Polynices (vv. 52-54), the two brothers whose hatred and enmity ignited the civil war in Thebes, together with the biblical reference to Elijah's ascent to heaven (vv. 34-42), a contrapositive to Ulysses' "folle volo" [mad flight, v. 125], further reinforce the ethical motif.

Indeed, the episode of Ulysses is essentially an ethical drama that enacts a reflection on the junction of *scienza*, *conoscenza*, and *coscienza*, and precisely for this reason it deserves to be revisited through the lenses of the *Convivio*, a philosophical work of ethics. If the entire *Ethics* is an exaltation of political and civic virtue, necessary for the attainment of justice, order, and human happiness¹², the entire *Convivio* is an exaltation of Aristotelian philosophy grounded in ethics (*Convivio* II, xii), understood as a source of human happiness and consolation (*Convivio* II, xiv)¹³. From the very first lines of the canto, Ulysses' ethical drama is suggestively inferred by Dante's reference to his own *ingegno*: "E più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i non soglio, perché non corra che virtù nol guidi" (*Inf.* 26, 21-22). As Freccero notes, the reference is a moral forewarning about the importance of curbing one's reason through virtue (Freccero 146). I would add, the reference is also a contemplation on the Aristotelian understanding of truth as the good of the intellect and the ultimate human perfection: "...sì come dice lo Filosofo nel sesto de l'Etica, quando dice

¹¹ See Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Canto XXVI Ulysses: Persuasion Versus Prophecy", in *Lectura Dantis*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross, cit., p. 350.

¹² Étienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, Trans. David Moore, London: Sheed & Ward, 1952, p. 109.

¹³ See Étienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy*. Trans. David Moore. New York: Sheed & Ward Inc., 1949, p. 94, p. 107. Cf. Dante, *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese. Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1999, III, I, p. 143: "Lo mio secondo amore prese cominciamento de la misericordiosa sembianza d'una donna".

che 'l vero è lo bene de lo intelletto” (*Convivio*, II, 13)¹⁴. For Aristotle, virtue is neither a feeling nor a capacity, rather it is a state that “is better and more exact than any craft, it will also aim at what is intermediate” (*N. E.* 2.5 1106 a5-1106b15). Virtue is a state that is grounded in reason, rather than in excess, and “pursues the mean”. Perennially driven by a craving for new ventures and lacking all sense of measure, without the slightest consideration for moral, familial, and political duty, Ulysses abandons reason and virtue, throws all caution and balance to the wind, and pursues excess. Neither love for his son and wife, Penelope, nor filial obligation toward his father could conquer his “fervor to gain experience of the world / and learn about man’s vices, and his worth” (vv. 94-99). Without a definite point of reference or a precise end in mind, he casts himself in the open sea traveling from land to land, place to place, people to people, in search of wisdom “nel mondo senza gente” [in the world where no one lives, *Inf.* 26, 117]. Ulysses’ disregard for his moral obligations to Talemachus, Laertes, and Penelope stands in direct opposition to the piety of Aeneas, the hero with whom he compares himself. In contrast to *pius* Aeneas, whose loyalty to Ascanius, Anchises, and Creusa has earned him the well-deserved title of “family man” in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ulysses is the elusive father, husband, and son, the beguiling and fraudulent friend, who charms and dupes his companions into following him beyond the boundaries of the knowable world, and then boasts about it. Human beings, Ulysses argues, are not meant to live like brutes, rather they are meant to seek “virtute e canoscenza” (v. 120). Ulysses’ “orazion picciola” (vv. 112-120) breathes of hubris and false humility, and it also breathes of false friendship. In addressing his companions as “frati” [brothers v. 112], a term that denotes brotherly love and affection, loyalty and trust, Ulysses masks enmity under the guise of friendship. The words Ulysses employs are “parole fittizie” [fictitious words] rather than “parole vere” [real words], for their sense does not correspond to a truthful reality. Ulysses exploits his tired and loyal companions using them as pawns and instruments to satisfy his desire “...to gain experience of the world / and learn about man’s vices, and his worth” (“ardore/...a divenir del mondo esperto/ e de li vizi umani e del

¹⁴ Dante, *Convivio*, II, 13. While referencing Aristotle’s principle in *Ethics*, VI, that truth is the good of the intellect, Dante points to the contemplation of truth as the ultimate perfection. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In X libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum exposition* (ed. A. M. Pirota, Turin: Marietti, 1934: “Et hujus rationem assignat [Aristoteles], quia omnia consonant vero. Et hujus ratio est, quia, ut dicitur in sexton hujus, verum est bonum intellectus” (ed. Cit. lib. I, lect. 12, No. 139). Cf. Étienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy*, Trans. David Moore, New York and London: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 101. Gilson notes that, since the passage is not to be found in Aristotle’s *Ethics* VI, one can assume that Dante is here referencing Aristotle according to Aquinas’ commentary.

valore, vv. 97-99). While enacting civilization and friendship through the allurements of virtue and knowledge, the duplicity of Ulysses' intellect and language dehumanize him. He fails to embrace *amor* (love), *amicizia* (friendship), and *virtù* (virtue), hence his understanding of knowledge is a contrivance; he claims to seek truth and virtue, without valuing either.

While creating a schism between language and truth, Ulysses simultaneously creates a schism between *scienza* and *amore*, *conoscenza* and *coscienza*, and *intelletto* and *virtù*. What spurs Ulysses to action is "l'ardore" to know the unknown. If Ulysses' desire to know is natural and acceptable from a human vantage point (*Convivio*, I, i) his rejection of the moral and practical worth of philosophy is not. In the *Convivio* Dante defines philosophy as "*amistanza a sapienza*" [a love of wisdom, *Convivio*, III, xi] and as "amore alla verità e alla virtù" [a love of truth and virtue, *Convivio*, II, 15; III, 2; III, 14]¹⁵. While making reference to Aristotle's *Ethics*, Dante explains that any philosophy that is grounded on pleasure or utility, is not true philosophy, "...l'amistà per diletto fatta, o per utilitate, non è vera amistà, ma per accidente – sì come l'Etica dimostra – così la filosofia per diletto o per utilitate non è vera filosofia, ma per accidente" (*Convivio*, III, xi). Accordingly, a philosopher is understood as one who loves wisdom, a term that has roots in humility, rather than in arrogance: "'amatore di Sapienza'; per che notare si puote che non d'arroganza, ma d'umiltade è vocabulo" (*Convivio*, III, xi). In Ulysses there is *curiositas*, *vizio*, *hybris*, and to borrow St. Augustine's words, "impius ingegno", there is neither "amore per la scienza" (*Sapienza*) nor "l'uso amoroso di Sapienza" (*filosofia*). His desire for *canoscenza* is rooted in *arroganza* rather than in *umiltade*. Ulysses misrepresents himself as a philosopher, a follower of truth and virtue, or as "*amatore di Sapienza*", when in reality he is a *non-sapiente*, or to borrow Dante's words, a philosopher "per accidente". His quest for knowledge is not grounded on the love of truth and virtue, nor does it have as its subject understanding and as its form a love of the intellect (*Convivio*, III, 11). Instead, Ulysses' quest for knowledge is grounded in utility and pleasure, or as Giorgio Padoan notes, Ulysses uses knowledge for illicit pursuits¹⁶. To the extent that his search for truth rests on "ardore" (v. 97) "per esperienza" (v. 116), rather than on "amore per verità e virtù", Ulysses' philosophizing is unphilosophical. Moreover, Ulysses does not love each and every part of philosophy (*Convivio*, III, xi); hence, his restless spirit leads him everywhere and nowhere. In contrast to Dante who writes the *Convivio* from a desire to "inducer li uomini a scienza e virtù" [to lead men to wisdom and to virtue,

¹⁵ Dante, *Convivio*, II, 15. Cf. III, ii, III, 14: "Filosofia per subietto material qui ha la sapienza, e per forma ha amore, e per composto de l'uno e de l'altro, l'uto di speculazione".

¹⁶ Giorgio Padoan, "Ulisse 'fandi ficator' e le vie della speranza," *Studi danteschi*, XXXVII (1960), p. 56.

Convivio, I, ix, 7], confident that all individuals desire to know and that ultimate happiness and perfection reside in knowledge, Ulysses fails to understand the ethical and moral dimension of the philosophical discourse. Francesco De Sanctis argues: “Lo studio della filosofia è perciò un dovere: è via al bene, alla moralità. La moralità è ‘la bellezza della filosofia’: è l’etica, regina delle scienze, ‘il primo cielo cristallino’”¹⁷. De Sanctis continues to observe: “...per i pagani essere filosofo significava...resistere alle passioni, vincere se stesso...la morale è il *nosce te ipsum* la conoscenza di se stesso” (De Sanctis 151). A philosopher is one who knows himself, one who overcomes his passions and himself, and who submits his passions to his reason. A philosopher is moved to knowledge from a love of truth and virtue, Ulysses is moved from a zeal of adventure and is enticed by the idea of the unknown. Rhetorically he seems to reject the life of “bruti” and promote “virtute e canoscenza”, but in so far as he disregards the ethical aspect of language and foregoes the operative and moral use of philosophy, Ulysses is a non-philosopher. He neither knows nor overcomes himself; he seeks knowledge outside of himself, amongst the land without people, beyond the realm of the *polis*. His apocalyptic experience is neither a descent into himself nor an ascent towards the *summum bonum*. As Freccero observes, “...the descent into the self, *intra nos*, is the prerequisite for the kind of transcendent knowledge that all men desire” (Freccero 146). Ulysses gains an accumulation of experiences and wanderings, without ever acquiring any sort of self-realization, self-analysis, transformation, or transcendence, and without ever finding affinity with himself, the other, and the world at large.

To a great degree, Ulysses’ failure is also a consequence of a desire to embrace the totality of truth all at once. He operates on the erroneous assumption that knowledge has no natural limit and perfection, a point that Dante, citing Aristotle, vehemently rejects in the *Convivio*. In the Book IV of the *Convivio*, Dante explains that knowledge is not unilateral but that it has many parts, with a succession of levels or an expansion, from lowest to highest. Thus, intellectual knowledge is understood as a chain or ladder composed of various links, strands, or levels, from lowest to highest. With the attainment of each level the knower reaches completion, perfection, and fulfillment:

...lo desiderio de la scienza non è sempre uno, ma è molti, e finite l’uno, viene l’altro; sì che, propriamente parlando, non è crescere lo suo dilatare, ma successione di piccola cosa in grande cosa...e questo cotale dilatare non è cagione d’imperfezione, ma di perfezione maggiore...la scienza non è da dire imperfetta, sì come le ricchezze sono da dire per lo loro...ché, nel desiderare de la scienza, successivamente finiscono li

¹⁷ Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, cit., p. 150. Cf. Dante, *Convivio*, III, 15.

desiderii e viensji a perfezione, e in quello de la ricchezza no. (*Convivio*, IV, 13, 1-5)

The contrasting symmetry serves to highlight the multilateral nature of knowledge and the possibility for reaching perfection¹⁸. The desire for knowledge, with its multilateral aspect and possibility for completion and fulfillment, stands in sharp contrast to the desire for wealth, with its one dimensional nature and unfulfilled desires. The search for knowledge need not be endless, each level can be mastered and completed:

E però dice Aristotile nel decimo de l'Etica...che "l'uomo si dee traere a le divine cose, quanto può"...E nel primo de l'Etica dice che "'I disciplinato chiede di sapere certezza ne le cose, secondo che la loro natura di certezza si riceva"...Si che, per qualunque modo lo desiderare de la scienza si prende, o generalmente o particolarmente, a perfezione viene". (*Convivio*, IV, 13, 8-9)

Tragically, Ulysses does not master this lesson. His insuppressible cravings and uncontrollable intellect lead him to an endless search, from land to land, point to point, without ever finding fulfillment and perfection, without ever finding an end, or conclusion. Ulysses is similar to the miser who pursues the unreachable and desires only to desire endlessly: "e in questo errore cade l'avaro maladetto, e non s'accorge che desidera se' sempre desiderare, andando dietro al numero impossibile a giungere" [and into this error falls the accursed miser, and he does not realize that he desires himself always to desire, going after a number impossible to reach] [*Conv.* III, xv, 9]¹⁹. Ulysses seeks to attain the unattainable, to know the unknowable, and lose himself in the inaccessible, for this reason his journey is "un folle volo" [a mad flight] that is doomed to failure. His conception of truth manifests itself in fluidity, hence his perennial state of longing and discontent.

Ulysses' tragedy resides in his misconception of the essential nature and scope of knowledge, and in his inability to grasp the multilateral aspect and the ethical scope of knowledge. For this reason Ulysses is displaced, without ever finding direction, completion, and fulfillment. His restless spirit leads him to a perennial, obstinate, and unrestrained search for knowledge beyond the knowable world, without knowing precisely what he is seeking. Ulysses never learns the lesson Dante teaches in the *Convivio*: human virtues, which are essentially moral virtues, are the path towards human happiness and the *humanum bonum*.

¹⁸ See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine "Comedy". Dethologizing Dante*, cit., p. 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alighieri, Dante. *Convivio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1999.
- _____. *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
- _____. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell, L.L.M. London: Rebel Press, 1973.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *In X libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum exposition*, ed. A. M. Pirotta, Turin: Marietti, 1934.
- Barolini, Teodolinda. *The Undivine “Comedy”: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- _____. “Dante’s Ulysses: Narrative and Transgression”, in *Dante Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. A. A. Iannucci, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997, pp. 113-132.
- Boitani, P. *L’ombra di Ulisse*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1992.
- Bloom, Harold. “The Strangeness of Dante: Ulysses and Beatrice”, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994, pp. 85-89.
- Chiavacci Leonardi, Anna Maria, *Inferno, con il commento di A. M. C. L.*, Milano: Mondadori, 1991.
- Corti, Maria. “On the Metaphors of Sailing, Flight, and Tongues of Fire in the Episode of Ulysses (*Inf.* 26)”, *Stanford Italian Review* 9 (1990), pp. 33-47.
- De Sanctis, Francesco. *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, ed. Benedetto Croce, Bari: Laterza, 1965.
- Freccero, John. “Dante’s Ulysses: From Epic to Novel”, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 136-151.
- Gilson, Étienne. *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. David Moore, New York and London: Harper & Row, 1963.
- _____. *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore London: Sheed & Ward, 1952.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 3, Quaderno 29 (XXI), 7, p. 2350.
- Hollander, Robert. *Dante: A Life in Works*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001
- _____. *Studies in Dante*, Ravenna: Longo, 1980.
- _____. *Allegory in Dante’s “Commedia”*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Iannucci, Almicare. “Ulysses’ ‘folle volo’: The Burden of History”, *Medioevo romanzo* 3 (1976), pp. 410-445.

- Karlheinz, Stierle. "Odysseus und Aeneas: Eine typologische Konfiguration in Dantes *Divina Commedia*", in *Das fremde Wort: Studies zur Interdependenz von Texten, Festschrift für Karl Maurer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Ilse Nolting-Hauff & Joachim Schulze, Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner, 1988, pp. 111-154.
- Lotman, M. J. "Il viaggio di Ulisse nella *Divina commedia*", *Testo e contesto: semiotica dell'arte e della cultura*, Bari: Laterza, 1980, pp. 81-102.
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. "Inferno 17-26", in *Id., Reading Dante*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 78-91.
- _____. "Canto XXVI Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy", in *Lectura Dantis*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross, Berkely: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 348-356.
- _____. *Dante Poet of the Desert*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- _____. "Poetics of History: *Inferno XXVI*", *Diacritics* (Summer 1975), pp. 37-44.
- Nardi, Bruno. "La tragedia di Ulisse", in *Dante e la cultura medievale*, Bari: Laterza, 1942, pp. 88-99.
- Padoan, Giorgio. "Ulisse *fandi fitor* e le vie della Sapienza. Momenti di una tradizione (da Virgilio a Dante)", in *Il pio Enea e l'empio Ulisse: Tradizione classica e intendimento medievale in Dante*, Ravenna: Longo, 1977 [1960]), pp. 170-199.
- Pazzaglia, M. "Il canto di Ulisse e le sue fonti classiche e medioevali", in *L'armonia come fine: Conferenze e studi danteschi*, Bologna: Zanichelli, 1989, pp. 97-133.
- Pertile, Lino. "Dante e l'ingegno di Ulisse", *Stanford Italian Review* I (1979), pp. 35-65.
- Peterman, Larry. "Ulysses and Modernity", in *Dante Studies* CXIII, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz. Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 89-110.
- Picone, Michelangelo. "Dante, Ovidio e il mito di Ulisse", *Lettere italiane*, 43 (1991), pp. 500-516.
- Scott A. John. "*Inferno XXVI*: Dante's Ulysses", *Lettere Italiane* 23 (1971), pp. 145-186.
- _____. "L'Ulisse dantesco", in *Id. Dante magnanimo*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1977, pp. 117-193.
- Stull, William and Robert Hollander, "The Lucanian Source of Dante's Ulysses," *Studi danteschi* 63 (1991 [1977]), pp. 43-52.
- Vossler, Karl. *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times*, trans. William C. Lawton, Vol. I., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929.
- Wilhelm, Julius. "Die Gestalt des Odysseus in Dantes göttlicher Komödie", *Deutsches Dantes Jahrbuch* 38 (1960), pp. 75-93.