Dante's Epic Journeys

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part two

Ulysses,

Aeneas,

Dante
V

Ulysses and the Critics
Individual characters in the *Inferno* have often been viewed as projections of Dante's own personality; and, with the possible exception of Francesca, Ulysses has proved the most frequent object of such interpretations. Thus Benedetto Croce declared that "no one of his age was more deeply moved than Dante by the passion to know all that is knowable, and nowhere else has he given such noble expression to that noble passion as in the great figure of Ulysses."\(^1\)

Bruno Nardi advanced a similar theory in an essay that set the terms for most subsequent discussions of Ulysses.\(^2\) He noted that Dante, like Ulysses, had been

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forced to wander from place to place. Also, he found in both Ulysses and Dante the belief that knowledge constitutes the ultimate basis of human happiness. Hence Ulysses, admirable but doomed, illustrates a profound conflict in the mind of the poet—a conflict between the theologian’s condemnation and the emotion with which Ulysses’ bold enterprise is evoked. “The brief words with which Ulysses inspires his ardor in his companions burst forth from Dante’s deepest convictions. Ulysses leaps out, bold and undaunted, from the very heart of the poet, who sails on the tragic ship at the hero’s side” (p. 163). And although Mario Fubini takes issue with Nardi on some points, he holds a similar opinion about the grandeur and nobility of Ulysses’ quest, and about the relation between Dante and his creation: “Who does not hear the heart of Dante himself beating in Ulysses’ orazion picciola?”

But Rocco Montano will not accept this “confusion between Dante the poet and his damned creatures.” He grants that Dante had felt the fascination of pure intellectual inquiry, the temptation to a vain use of the intelligence. After all, a poet can hardly represent something of which he has had no experience at all; but the ability to represent something is not the same as actual participation in it. Far from being a spokesman for the author, “Ulysses is, in Dante’s mind, the incarnation of a vain and distorted investigation, of a search for knowledge that for the poet, as for the whole medieval world, was curiositas, sin, prosti-

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tutio nostrae virtutis rationalis" (p. 175). In Montano's view, readings of the Ulysses canto have been vitiated by a false view of poetry, a faulty and outmoded aesthetics; and at the heart of his critique lies a polemic against an anachronistic "romantic sensibility."

Montano's trenchant critique scores off Nardi and Fubini at many points, and we can be grateful to him for drawing some distinctions that had been too easily overlooked in the general rush to appropriate Ulysses and his creator for the modern world. Whatever our reactions to Ulysses' speech, it should be clear that the same author creates both the heroes and the villains and is not necessarily to be identified with either. Yet there is a further distinction to be drawn. When Nardi and Montano refer to a Dante who does or does not find expression in the figure of Ulysses, they presumably refer to the Dante who writes the poem, Dante poeta. But we have learned to distinguish carefully between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet, between the pilgrim who faints in sympathy at the tale of Francesca and the poet who put her in Hell. In the case of Dante, this is more than a literary distinction between author and persona; for the Dante who writes the poem is quite literally a different man from the one who makes the journey described in it. Conversion has made Dante a new man; and from his new perspective he can look back upon his old self, just as Augustine had reviewed critically his preconversion existence. I hope to show that

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5 I do not mean to suggest that Montano ignores this distinction; indeed, he might almost claim to have discovered it. But the distinction opens various perspectives upon the poem, and is in any case not a sure formula for assessing every passage or episode. See the critique by Joseph Mazzeo, Comparative Literature, 9 (1957): 169.
there is no necessary contradiction between Montano's assertion that Dante does not portray himself in the figure of Ulysses and Nardi's feeling that Ulysses represents Dante in some significant respects. I suggest that in Ulysses Dante has rendered one aspect of his preconversion self, that we have (*ut ita dicam*) the portrait of the artist as a middle-aged man.