VIII

Ulysses and Dante
Dante’s is not the only flight in the poem: Ulysses also describes a volo, this time a flight that failed (Inf. 26. 121–25):

Li miei compagni fec’ io si acuti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
che appena poscia gli avrei ritenuti.
E volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
de’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo. ¹

¹Line 125 is based on an ancient metaphor, remigium alarum, which Dante would have known especially from its use in the Aeneid (1. 301; 6. 19). It was adopted later to refer to the Christian’s flight to God, e.g., by Augustine: “Neque vero cunctandum putes quomodo tibi volandum sit, quibus alarum remigii. Dixit quidem David: quis dabit mihi pennas sicut columbae, et volabo et requiescam (Ps. LXVII, 14),” a passage quoted by Courcelle, “Quelques symboles funéraires du néo-platonisme latin,” p. 68, n. 3. See also John Freccero, “Dante’s Prologue Scene (I. The Region of Unlikeness; II. The Wings of Ulysses),” Dante Studies, 84 (1966): 1–25.
With this brief speech I made
my companions so eager for the journey
that I could hardly then have held them back.
And with our stern turned toward the morning,
of our oars we made wings for the mad flight.]*

At several other points, the Inferno establishes a parallel between Ulysses’ voyage and Dante’s present journey. We will recall that Ulysses urged his men to seek esperienza, and then we note that Virgil leads Dante through Hell “per dar lui esperienza piena” (Inf. 28. 48: “to give him full experience”). Ulysses’ cammino must recall Dante’s, just as the alto passo that Ulysses enters must bring to mind the alto passo at which Dante had hesitated (Inf. 2. 12). Moreover, in expressing his grave reservations, Dante had feared lest his journey be folle (Inf. 2. 35); and folle is the very word that both Ulysses and Dante apply to Ulysses’ flight.

Then later, when Beatrice is passing judgment upon Dante, he confesses how he had gone astray (Purg. 31. 34–36):

Piangendo dissi: ‘Le presenti cose
col falso lor piacer volser miei passi,
tosto che il vostro viso si nascose.’

[Weeping, I said: “Present things
with their false pleasure turned my steps
as soon as your face was hidden.”] *

This falso piacere may well recall the siren’s piacere, especially when Beatrice goes on to rebuke Dante in terms reminiscent of that dream (Purg. 31. 43–63):

*My translation.
Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte
del tuo errore, e perché altra volta
udendo le Sirene sie più forte,
pon giù il seme del piangere, ed ascolta;
sì udirai come in contraria parte
mover doveati mia carne sepolta.

Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte
piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch'io
rinchiusa fui, e sono in terra sparte:
e se il sommo piacer sì ti fallio
per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale
dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?

Ben ti dovevi, per lo primo strale
delle cose fallaci, levar suso
diretto a me che non era più tale.

Non ti dovea gravar le penne in giuso,
ad aspettar più colpi, o pargoletta,
o altra vanità con si breve uso.

Nuovo augelletto due o tre aspetta;
ma dinanzi dagli occhi dei pennuti
rete si spiega indarno o si saetta.

[Nevertheless, so that you may now feel shame
for your wandering, and so that another time,
hearing the Sirens, you may be stronger,
set aside the sowing of tears and listen;
thus will you hear how my buried flesh
should have moved you in the opposite direction.

Never did nature or art present to you
delight equal to the fair members in which I
was enclosed, and they are now scattered in earth;

and if the highest beauty thus failed you
through my death, what mortal thing
should have drawn you into desire for it?

Indeed you should, at the first shaft
of deceptive things, have raised yourself up
after me, who was no longer such.
Ulysses, Aeneas, Dante

Your wings should not have been weighed down,
  to await more hits, by a young woman
  or other vanity of such brief use.
A young bird waits for two or three;
  but before the eyes of the full-fledged
  the net is spread or the arrow shot in vain. ] *

Instead of following the way set for him, Dante had flown off course, lured by the siren song. He had been something of a Ulysses, and we can further infer that Ulysses' metaphorical flight represents a spiritual course once pursued by Dante himself until it ended in disaster.

This much is suggested by Dante's text; but it may well be objected, why speak of a "spiritual course"? Did not Ulysses' siren represent the temptations of the flesh? And what is so spiritual about Dante's siren-like pargoletta? Is Dante not simply confessing that he had indeed been attracted by the donna pietosa after Beatrice's death? Perhaps. But Dante's confrontation with Beatrice is the central event of the poem and the climax of the most important relationship of his life; and unless we wish to assume that Beatrice is displaying, after all those years, an inordinate feminine pique, we had best assume

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*My translation.

2This is assumed even by Joseph Mazzeo, whose argument otherwise anticipates mine in some respects; see his "Appendix: The 'Sirens' of Purgatorio XXXI, 45," Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's "Comedy" (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 205-12.

3For a brief discussion of the evidence on this whole question, see La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri, ed. C. H. Grandgent, rev. ed. (Boston: Heath, 1933), pp. 612-14.

4See Charles Singleton, Dante Studies 1: Commedia: Elements, pp. 45-60.
that Dante’s charmer was more than just a Florentine augelletta. To grasp her significance, and the significance of Dante’s relation to Ulysses, we shall have to move for a moment outside the poem itself; for Beatrice’s accusation must be viewed within the context of Dante’s whole literary and spiritual career, and that career must be viewed within a far more ancient context.

We observed earlier that in late antiquity Ulysses had become a figure of sapientia and his journey an allegory for the journey of the soul. So rich was his story in metaphorical implications that many authors had this paradigm in mind even when they did not mention Ulysses explicitly, as in Plotinus’s description of the contemplative (Enneads 5. 9. 1). Augustine also used Ulysses’ voyage as a paradigm for the vita philosophica. He develops the metaphor brilliantly in the preface to his De Beata Vita, written when he was much under the influence of the Neoplatonists; and if this were his last word on the subject of philosophy, we might well construe Ulysses’ voyage as a noble Augustinian endeavor. But later Augustine took quite a different view of the philosophic texts he had once embraced; and the central chapters of the Confessions are an impassioned polemic against the Platonists. Disillusioned at length with his former course, Augustine embarks upon another journey: “Et inde monitus redire ad memet ipsum intravi in intima mea duce te et potui, quoniam factus es adiutor meus” (7. 10. 16: “And admon-

5 Cf. also Beatrice’s later reference to “quella scuola ch’ hai seguitata” (Purg. 33. 85–86), and the ensuing conversation between her and Dante.

ished by this to return to my own self, I entered into the innermost part of me with your guidance, and I was able to since you became my helper ")

The philosophic voyage is not the way after all; and Augustine could well agree with the warning issued by his contemporary, Paulinus of Nola:

Esto Peripateticus Deo, Pythagoreus mundo; verae in Christo sapientiae praedicator, et tandem tacitus vanitati, perniciosam istam inaniam dulcedinem litterarum, quasi illos patriae obliteratores de baccarum suavitate Lotophagos, et Sirenarum carmina, blandimentorum nocentium canthus evita...

[Sirenas] oportet ultra Ulyxis astutiam cauti non auribus tantum, sed et oculis obseratis et animo navigio praetervolante fugiamus, ne sollicitati delectatione letifera in criminum saxa rapiamur et scopulo mortis adfixi naufragium salutis obeamus.

[Be a Peripatetic for God and a Pythagorean as regards the world. Preach the true wisdom that lies in Christ, and be finally silent towards what is vain. Avoid this destructive sweetness of empty literature as you would the Lotus-eaters, who made men forget their fatherland by the sweetness of their berries, or as you would the Sirens' songs, those melodies of baneful seduction...

We must avoid them by being cleverer than Ulysses, blocking not only our ears but also our eyes and our mind, as it sails like a ship swiftly by, so that we may not be seduced by the delight that brings death and drawn on to the rocks of sin, be caught on the crags of death and suffer the shipwreck of our salvation.

7 Quoted by Courcelle, REA, (1944), p. 89, n. 3. On the same page Courcelle notes Cicero's assertion that the sirens really offered knowledge (De finibus 5. 18. 49); and Mazzeo, Medieval Cultural Traditions, makes good use of this passage in Cicero.

As Courcelle observes: “C’est la lecture des philosophes qui est interdite; l’héroïsation par la culture est, au gré de Paulin, un erreur funeste.”

Therefore there are excellent grounds for seeing Ulysses’ voyage as a philosophic flight, and the sirens as not carnal but intellectual temptations. Now Dante’s two major changes in the Ulysses story were (1) having his homeward journey broken off by a quest for knowledge; and (2) having him diverted by the sirens. The legendary and allegorical Ulysses did no such things. On this all authorities were agreed. But if our inference that Ulysses’ voyage represents an earlier enterprise of Dante’s is correct, then Dante’s career should evidence a similar divagation. This is exactly the case.

If we are prepared to view the sirens as intellectual temptations, we may also be prepared to take Dante at his word when he claims that the donna pietosa was really Lady Philosophy. To Grandgent, Dante’s attempt to convince us of this in the Convivio was a glaring instance of bad faith on his part; and he remarks that “it is noteworthy that this treatise was never finished. Dante’s conscience, apparently, was ill at ease; and here, in the Commedia, he at last tells the whole truth, admitting that his love for the pargoletta was not merely an innocent devotion to that ‘figlia d’Iddio, regina di tutto, nobilissima e bellissima Filosofia’ (Conv. 2. 13. 71–72), but also, and originally, a sentiment deserving reprobation.” There certainly was such a real lady; for she appeared in the Vita Nuova. But Dante never says that the lady represented only Lady Philosophy, that he wished to allegorize her

9Grandgent, La Divina Commedia, p. 613.
away. His lengthy explanation of the literal level of his canzone (Voi che intendendo) should suggest that there was something real there to talk about. Indeed, James E. Shaw showed that there is no real contradiction between the lady’s being real and her being a symbol of philosophy according to the author’s “sentenza vera.” The one does not cancel the other.\(^\text{10}\)

Therefore, when a real Beatrice accuses Dante of having been lured off course by a real lady, we need not call this a renunciation of his former allegory or rush to judgment upon Dante himself. Instead, we should read her speech as a denunciation of Dante’s own former pursuit of “virtute e conoscenza” in his philosophical-ethical treatise, the Convivio.

Ulrich Leo documented in great detail the fundamental differences between the Convivio on the one hand and the Vita Nuova and Commedia on the other. In the Convivio, the author’s guides are reason and faith, while in the works concerned with Beatrice they are seeing and vision; and “it is evident that, once the poet’s spirit found itself filled with this greatest of all his religious symbols—the experience of his eyes confronted with the reality of supernatural light, a symbol which, besides being religious more than philosophical, is poetic and not prosaic—he had to renounce his philosophical and ethical prose writing, per correr migliori acque of religious poetry.”\(^\text{11}\)

\(^\text{10}\) See James E. Shaw, The Lady “Philosophy” in the “Convivio” (Cambridge, Mass.: Dante Society, 1938).

This important distinction still does not explain why Dante "had to" abandon the *Convivio*. The *Commedia* represents a return to the mode of direct vision, which Dante had originally followed before going off on an abortive philosophical flight. But this venture into philosophy was not just another way of writing which Dante could assume or drop as his muse required. In Beatrice's terms, it was a falling away that had brought Dante nearly to damnation (*Purg.* 30. 121–38):

> Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto;  
> mostrando gli occhi giovinetti a lui,  
> meco il menava in dritta parte volto.  
> Si tosto come in sulla soglia fui  
> di mia seconda etade, e mutai vita,  
> questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui.  
> Quando di carne a spirto era salita,  
> e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,  
> fu'io a lui men cara e men gradita;  
> e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,  
> imagini di ben seguendo false,  
> che nulla promission rendono intera.  
> Nè impetrare ispirazion mi valse  
> con le quali ed in sogno ed altrimenti  
> lo rivocai; sì poco a lui ne calse.  
> Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti  
> alla salute sua eran già corti,  
> fuor che mostrargli le perdute genti.

*[For a time I sustained him with my countenance;  
showing my youthful eyes to him  
I led him with me, turned in the right direction.  
As soon as I was on the threshold  
of my second age, and I changed life,  
he took himself from me and gave himself to another.]*
Ulysses, Aeneas, Dante

When I had risen from flesh to spirit,
and beauty and virtue had increased in me,
I was to him less dear and less pleasing;
and he turned his steps on a way not true,
following false images of good,
which fulfill no promise.
And it did not avail me to obtain inspirations,
with which in dream and otherwise
I called him back; so little did he heed them.
He fell so low, that all means
for his salvation were now insufficient,
except to show him the lost people.

Or in Paulinus’s terms, Dante had been heading for a naufragium salutis; and we need hardly wonder at the harshness of Beatrice’s indictment.

Ulysses’ voyage is an image of the misguided philosophical Odyssey; and Dante’s dream in Purgatorio 19 dramatizes how he saw the light, with the aid of Virgil and Beatrice. The Convivio is unfinished because it represented a via non vera that led toward spiritual shipwreck: Philosophy cannot do what Boethius’s lady had claimed,12 and Dante must make a different journey—the Augustinian journey into the self.

In this perspective, we can appreciate the apparently gratuitous allusion to Ulysses at the end of Purgatorio 1. Dante had already represented himself as a shipwreck in the metaphorical equivalent of the waters in which Ulysses

12See Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae 4. 1: “... viam tibi quae te domum revehat ostendam. Pennas etiam tuae menti quibus se in ultum tollere possit adfigam, ut perturbatione depulsa sospes in patriam meo ductu, mea semita, meis etiam vehiculis revertaris.”

*My translation.
drowned;¹³ and when Dante and Virgil walk along the shore “com’uom che torna alla perduta strada” (Purg. 1. 119: “like one returning to the road he has lost”), it marks his return to the way Beatrice had set for him in the first place, the via salutis that he had for a while abandoned. Ulysses comes to ruin where he does not because he violated a divine prohibition in approaching the mountain, but because Dante wants him there to emphasize the contrast between his own present upward course and his own previous folle volo.¹⁴


¹⁴Thus both Nardi and Montano are partially right. 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, who might well agree with much of the critique that Montano levels against that same Ulysses.