

DANTE'S ULYSSES

In a short story entitled “La busca de Averroes”¹ which could be translated as “Averroes’ quandary”, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges raises an issue which I would like to take as the point of departure for my talk. Averroes, a 12th century Arabic philosopher, is well known in connection with Dante as a translator and interpreter of Aristotle’s work. His brand of radical Aristotelianism, which deviates somewhat from Thomas Aquinas’ more orthodox line, definitely had some influence on Dante’s thought, but this is only tangential to Borges’ story and to the ideas I intend to develop here.

The story introduces Averroes in the topical setting of a garden in Cordoba philosophizing with his host, a Moslem prince, and other guests on the nature of poetry. One of the guests has just praised an old poetic metaphor which compares fate or destiny with a blind camel. Averroes, tired of listening to the argument challenging the value of old metaphors, interrupts to state firmly, first, that poetry need not cause us to marvel and, second, that poets are less creators than discoverers. Having pleased his listeners with his defence of ancient poetry, he then returns to his labour of love, namely the translation and commentary on Aristotle’s work which had been keeping him busy for the past several years. Before joining the other guests at the prince’s court, Averroes had puzzled over the meaning of two words in Aristotle’s *Poetics* for which he could find no equivalent. The two words were ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’. Averroes, who had no notion of what drama and theatre might be, hastened to resume his work and wrote in his careful calligraphy: “Aristú, (Aristotle) calls eulogies ‘tragedies’ while he calls satires and invectives ‘comedies’. Admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran and in other holy scriptures”.

My interest in Borges’ story stems from the fact that, in calling attention to Averroes’ commentary on the *Poetics*, the Argentinian writer puts his finger on a misinterpretation of Aristotle’s thought which, though parallel to and perfectly compatible with medieval discussions on tragedy and comedy, has so far received little attention.

The misinterpretation I am referring to may be summed up as the “praise and blame” theory, i.e. the attribution to Aristotle of a definition of poetry which Averroes manages to interpolate in his commentary on Chapter I by transposing the notion, put forth in Chapter IV, that the original forms of Greek poetry were encomia and lampooning verses. Thus Aristotle’s observation about early Greek

¹ In Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires, 1947).

poems becomes, in Averroes' commentary, a prescriptive definition of poetry as an instrument of moral instruction.

To a student of Dante this is of course of extreme interest; all the more so since the very title of the famous poem – as given in the Letter to Cangrande – is precisely “*Comoedia*”, and all attempts to provide a satisfactory motive for Dante's choice have by and large proved to be both inconclusive and disappointing. Yet Averroes' commentary on the *Poetics* had become well-known in the Middle Ages, through the Latin translation of Hermannus Alemannus, a German monk who worked in Toledo in the mid-13th century under the patronage of John, Bishop of Burgos. The Averroes-Hermannus version had wide currency in the centres of learning of northern Italy – Padua, Venice and Bologna – as is well attested by the manuscript's tradition.² Benvenuto da Imola, by far the most perceptive of Dante's early commentators, reads the poem through the critical lenses it provides. In Benvenuto's words, “no other poet knew how to praise and blame with more excellence ... [Dante] honoured virtue with encomia and lacerated vice and vicious men”.³

In this version, as Giorgio Agamben has recently shown,⁴ the essence of tragic action was seen as a reversal from happiness to misfortune which was caused, not by extreme malice but by some kind of sin (“*peccatum aliquod*”). According to Averroes, then, the tragic hero is not personally guilty; and tragedy may be defined as the transition from the representation of virtue to the representation of the ill-fortune which may befall a just man. The paradox of the Greek *amartía* – the conflict between the personal innocence of the hero and the tragic flaw objectively imputed to him – is thus interpreted by placing at the centre of tragedy the reversal suffered by a just man.

Against this background, the title chosen by Dante takes on new meaning and seems perfectly consistent with its central development: the *Commedia* shows an itinerary from guilt to innocence and not from innocence to guilt; and this not only because the description of Hell actually precedes that of Paradise, but because the destiny of the individual called Dante, and more generally of the *homo viator* he represents, is ‘comic’ rather than tragic. On the other hand the *Aeneid*, whose hero will be excluded from God's grace even though he is a just man, can only be a tragedy. Aeneas, whom like Virgil Dante places in Limbo, represents the condemnation of the pagan world to tragedy, just as Dante's *persona* represents the ‘comic’ possibility which was opened for mankind by the death of Christ.

It should now be clear how much this formulation is indebted to Averroes' commentary on the *Poetics*. But what is perhaps of equal importance is that Dante also invokes the authority of Horace's *Ars poetica* for the mingling – at the formal,

² See O.B. Hardison, “The Place of Averroes' Commentary on the *Poetics* in the History of Medieval Criticism”, *The Southeastern Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, IV (1970), 57-81.

³ *Commentum super Dantis Aldigherii Comoediam*, a cura di I.F. Lacaia (Firenze, 1887).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, “Comedia. La svolta comica di Dante e la concezione della colpa”, *Paragone*, 29 (1978), 3-27.

stylistic level – of both tragedy and comedy; and finally, he puts forth in the Letter a definition of comedy which cannot be found in either Averroes or any of his presumed sources. “Comedy”, Dante writes, “is a kind of poetic narrative which differs from all others”, thus acknowledging and at the same time vindicating his poem as a mixture of genres that could encompass the entire scriptural and literary tradition.

It may now be time for me to state how I propose to examine the figure of Ulysses in Dante’s poem: 1) the character of Ulysses is central to the reading of the *Commedia* because he represents the anti-type of Dante as both Dante-the-pilgrim and Dante-the-poet; 2) a voyage through Dante’s text will show how the characterization of Ulysses as Dante’s anti-type leads to a characterization of Homer’s poetry as tragedy, or the anti-type of Dante’s *Commedia*.

James Joyce would certainly have said that Dante’s Ulysses is a centrifugal rather than a centripetal character, far closer in this respect to Stephen Daedalus than to Leopold Bloom. In fact, from the beginning of the 19th century this figure in Dante’s poem inspired a host of other Ulysses, all affected by Wanderlust though not without a Faustian tinge – from Byron’s *Childe Harold*, through Tennyson, Pascoli and D’Annunzio, down to Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Odyssey*. Metaphorically, I would also say that Dante’s Ulysses is centrifugal in that it is only from the perspective of Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* that we can gauge just how pervasive his presence is in the *Commedia*.

As we turn to Canto XXVI, the most striking feature of Dante’s characterization of Ulysses is polymorphism and contradiction – a fact which has caused two sharply divided lines of interpretation. In the canto which depicts the 8th *bolgia* of the 8th circle of hell, the *bolgia* of evil counsellors, Ulysses is seen as one of the flames which envelop the sinners concealing them from view. The “contrapasso” or fitting retribution for the perversion of their intellect (Dante’s term here is “ingegno”) is rendered by the image of the fire within, which becomes the outer expression of their bondage. Characteristically, Ulysses is coupled with Diomedes within one and the same flame, for “those who went as one to rage, now share one punishment” (vv. 56-57). But, not so characteristically, Ulysses’ and Diomedes’ fraudulent deeds are summarily spelled out, and as quickly dismissed by Virgil: “and there, together in their flame, they grieve/ over the horse’s fraud that caused a breach –/ the gate that let Rome’s noble seed escape./ There they regret the guile that makes the dead/ Deidamīa still lament Achilles;/ and there, for the Palladium, they pay” (vv. 58-63).

In these three misdeeds – the treachery of the Trojan horse, the deceptive words with which Achilles was persuaded to join the Greek expedition against Troy only to find his death in battle, and the furtive theft of the Palladium – we recognise some of the negative traits with which Ulysses is depicted in the literary tradition stemming primarily from Latin authors and in particular from Virgil. It is Ulysses, the devious schemer and fabricator of lies of the *Aeneid*, who is condemned here

as an evil counsellor. It is not quite clear exactly what "evil counselling" consists of in Dante's depiction of this *bolgia* to which two entire cantos, XXVI and XXVII, are devoted. What is clear, however, is that both Ulysses and Diomedes are doomed to Hell on account of the specific misdeeds referred to by Virgil. While the coupling with Diomedes precludes a fuller analysis of Ulysses' character at this point in the canto, at Dante's entreaties Virgil will then pose the question which enables Ulysses to give, in his own words, the most extraordinary account of his last voyage. This account seems to embody those other images of Ulysses - the wanderer, the daring explorer of unknown lands and seas, the hero thirsting after boundless knowledge in order to gain full experience of the world and of the ways of men.

The suggestion that we ought to read the figure of Ulysses as a negative paradigm which stands in opposition to both Dante's *persona* in the poem and the poet himself derives from a basic observation by the Italian philologist Gianfranco Contini, who noted some time ago that the *persona* in the poem is not so much an Everyman as he is a poet.⁵ The canto in which Dante protests "I'm not Aeneas, I'm not Paul" is the same canto in which Dante also says "Io sol uno", "I, myself, alone". As his most recent translator, Allen Mandelbaum, notes, "this is the first triple repetition of an 'I' that we have in Western literature. Dante's 'aleness' casts a shadow on attempts to read him throughout as an Everyman, an exemplary pilgrim".⁶

With this in mind, let us now turn to that point early in Canto XXVI which shows the first link between Dante, as both pilgrim and poet, and the emblematic fall of the Greek hero:

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
 quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,
 e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'ì non soglio,
 perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;
 sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa
 m'ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi.
 vv. 19-24)

Of crucial importance in this passage is the coupling of the past tense with the present (I sorrowed *then* and I still sorrow *now*) since it binds the poet's *persona*, as we see it at this juncture in a journey which occurred *then*, with the poet who is *now* in the act of writing the poem. This clear identification of Dante's *persona* with the Dante who has lived to retell his vision forces us to expect in the embodiment of the Greek hero the same dual yet identical dimension: namely, an

⁵ Gianfranco Contini, "Dante come personaggio-poeta", now in *Varianti e altra linguistica* (Torino, 1970).

⁶ Allen Mandelbaum, "Introduction" to *Dante, Inferno* (University of California Press, 1980), p. xiii.

emblematic example to be avoided for the sake of salvation for both the pilgrim and the author. The key words are, of course, “ingegno” and “virtù”: the dreadful fear that the first may run away without the guidance of the second; the separation into two opposite spheres, of human activities which Dante considers absolutely inseparable. Whereas Dante receives here a stern admonition that “ingegno” be guided by “virtù”, Ulysses in his memorable “brief address” to his men, incites them “to *follow* virtue and knowledge”, as a former student of mine astutely pointed out:

“O frati,” dissi, “che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti a l’occidente,
a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d’i nostri sensi ch’è del rimanente
non vogliate negar l’esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.
Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.”
(vv. 112-120)

This first intimation to look at Ulysses as the “Doppelgänger” of both the pilgrim and the poet leads us to look through the psychoanalyst’s glasses so as not to miss the all important differences that exist between Dante and his double. Thus when we hear the “ancient flame” of Ulysses fling its very first words,

... Quando
mi diparti’ da Circe, che sottrasse
me più d’un anno là presso a Gaeta,
prima che sì Enëa la nomasse,
né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
del vecchio padre, né ’l debito amore
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
vincer potero dentro a me l’ardore
ch’i’ ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto
e de li vizi umani e del valore;
(vv. 90-99)

we may at first overlook the significance of the allusion to Aeneas and the subtle reversal of the traditional icon showing us the Trojan hero – the epitome of Virgil’s pre-Christian *pietas* – holding by one hand the son Ascanius and by the other his wife Creusa while carrying old Anchises on his shoulders. But what we cannot overlook is the later stress on the inadequacy of Ulysses’ means as he sets out on the open sea “with but one ship” and “a small company”, thus underscoring

the marked discrepancy that exists between these means and the grandiose adventure he has embarked upon.

We must reach the second canto of the *Paradiso*, when it is Dante who sets out for his flight upward, before we discover the contrasting polarity so masterfully established in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, ch e forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.
L'acqua ch'io prendo gi a mai non si corse;
Minerva spira, e conduce mi Appollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostrar l'Orse.
(vv. 1-9)

From this new vantage point it would be impossible to miss the contrast between the water "never coursed before" and now taken by the poet's ship in the expanse of an unknown sea. Just compare the unfailing guidance the pilgrim-poet has been granted with Ulysses' uncharted voyage in the darkness of night towards the "altro polo":

Tutte le stelle gi a de l'altro polo
vedea la notte, e 'l nostro tanto basso,
che non surg ea fuor del marin suolo.
(vv. 127-129)

But perhaps the most telling difference of all had been carefully planted like a signpost at the beginning of the journey (*Inf. II*, vv. 7-12):

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
o mente che scrivestri ci  ch'io vidi,
qui si parr  la tua nobilitate.
Io cominciai: "Poeta che mi guidi,
guarda la mia virt  s'ell'  possente,
prima ch'a l'alto passo tu mi fidi.

While the poet invokes the Muses and his "ingegno", the pilgrim fears that his "virt " may not be of itself sufficient to cross the "rugged pass" with which his katabasis begins. Notice how this contrasts sharply with the hasty eagerness leading Ulysses and his handful of men to make "wings out of oars" in their "mad flight":

Li miei compagni fec'io sí aguti,
 con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
 che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;
 e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
 de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo,
 sempre acquistando dal lato mancino.
 (vv. 121-126)

The navigational image serves admirably as a metaphor for both the journey of the mind and the progress of the poem. It is the metaphoric use of this image that accounts for the close antithesis the poet makes us see between himself and the figure of Ulysses. As a symbol of the pilgrim's own fall we had in fact seen it early in Canto I of the *Inferno*, if we recall the metaphoric shipwreck in the "selva oscura" with which the journey begins:

E come quei che con lena affannata,
 uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
 si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,
 così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
 si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
 che non lasciò già mai persona viva.
 (vv. 22-27)

The shipwreck awaiting Ulysses at the end of his ill-starred voyage is not metaphoric, however, but physical and metaphysical. His thirst for unbridled knowledge cannot but result in a tragic catastrophe:

quando n'apparve una montagna, bruna
 per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto
 quanto veduta non avèa alcuna.
 Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto;
 ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque
 e percosse del legno il primo canto.
 Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l'acque;
 a la quarta levar la poppa in suso
 e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
 infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso.
 (vv. 133-142)

With the precision of a paradigm, the pilgrim will eventually reach the very same mountain Ulysses could not attain, as he comes, at the end of the first canto of the *Purgatorio*, on to "a desert shore/ that never saw any man navigate its waters/

who afterward had experience of return”(vv. 130-132). The ominous desolation of the mountain “dark because of distance” is revealed to the pilgrim as the mountain of Purgatory. The ancient myth of Eden has been transformed into the Judeo-Christian myth of an Earthly Paradise, tragically precluded to pagans but attainable by the Christian pilgrim-poet as a result of Christ’s act of redemption.

It is thanks to the nautical metaphor that the figure of Ulysses, though given a far greater momentum in *Inferno* XXVI, is also a recurring thematic motif referred to several times throughout the *Purgatorio* and even at the last stage of the journey in the *Paradiso*.

The most explicit reference in the *Purgatorio* occurs in Canto XIX. In Dante’s second dream there appears a stammering woman turned siren by the dreamer’s misdirected love: “‘I am’, she sang, ‘I am the sweet Siren who leads mariners astray in mid-sea, so full am I of pleasantness to hear. Ulysses, eager to journey on, I turned aside to my song; and whosoever abides with me rarely departs, so wholly do I satisfy him’” (vv. 19-24). As a “*donna santa e presta*” forcefully enters into the dream, urging Virgil to lay bare the sorceress’ belly, the stench of it wakes Dante from his bad dream. Is the Siren falsely claiming to have lured Ulysses from his journey? We know for certain that, in the *Odyssey* at least, Circe had instructed the Greek wanderer on how to resist the Siren’s song. In fact both Latin authors and medieval allegorists quoted this passage from Homer’s *Odyssey* as an example of Ulysses’ prudence and fortitude in his quest after new experience. It must be Dante, then, who is mystifying us by giving the old story a new didactic twist in order to bend it to suit his own purpose, which is obviously that of sustaining the analogy between Ulysses and his own journey. Alerted by this second flagrant manipulation of the traditional hero we would do well to heed the words of Benvenuto da Imola, the astute commentator I had occasion to quote earlier. While the notion prevailed, as it has continued to prevail down to practically our own day, that Dante ‘invented’ the last fateful voyage of Ulysses out of blissful ignorance of the *Odyssey* and of Odysseus’ eventual return to Ithaca, Benvenuto was perceptive enough to oppose the commonly held opinion and to insist on the significance of the poet’s innovation:

I cannot possibly be induced to believe that Dante did not know what is known even to children and uneducated people; I say then that our Author must have deliberately made up that part of the story; and as it is allowed to other poets, he was entitled to create anew in order to suit his own purposes.⁷

Benvenuto’s insight is all the more revealing when we read it in the light of another observation that has been recently put forth: apart from Virgil, of course,

⁷ *op. cit.*, II, p. 293.

all the great characters of Dante's *Inferno* are drawn from 13th century Italy – Francesca, Farinata, Pier delle Vigne, Brunetto Latini, Nicolas III, Guido da Montefeltro, Ugolino. In his infernal cast, the lead characters are played by Dante's own contemporaries but with one exception. Among the Italians from the Duecento, and yet so apparently appropriate that we tend to overlook the anomaly, stands the figure of Ulysses, whose account of his last voyage and shipwreck, as we have seen, dominates Canto XXVI. Seen in this perspective, Benvenuto's statement takes on an added dimension: only by resorting to the storehouse of antiquity, to an archetypal character already endowed with polysemous connotations, could Dante have found a figure large enough to embody also an all important symbolic function; large enough to be given the kind of figural interpretation that was needed for him to become the negative double of Dante himself. As far as the pilgrim is concerned, it would be enough to cull from the heights of the *Paradiso* the third explicit mention of the Greek hero in Canto XXVII:

Da l'ora ch'io avea guardato prima
 i' vidi mosso me per tutto l'arco
 che fa dal mezzo al fine il primo clima;
 sì ch'io vedea di là da Gade il varco
 folle d'Ulisse, e di qua presso il lito
 nel qual si fece Europa dolce carco.
 (vv. 79-84)

Sustained by the gaze of Beatrice, Dante is urged to cast his sight down from the constellation of Gemini and see how far he had revolved. And from there, as though he had awaited the moment with all the might of his desire, the pilgrim who is by now nearing the end of his journey could finally see, beyond Cadiz, the mad track of Ulysses. There, in the speck of time-space of this "little threshing-floor", the only vestige of this earth that still blurs Dante's eyes is the track left by Ulysses as he plunged into the deep.

The figure of Ulysses is mirrored most closely, however, in its opposite double shortly after Canto XXVI. Dante has just emerged from the darkness of Hell and, speaking now with the voice of the poet, opens the *Purgatorio* with an image of navigation which cannot but recall the disastrous voyage of the doomed hero: "To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails, leaving behind her a sea so cruel" (*Purg.*, I, 1-3). While here it is the poet who, in the traditional form of the *exordium*, begins the second cantica, after the ritual baptism performed by Virgil on Cato's instruction the pilgrim is girded by his master with the reed of humility:

Venimmo poi in sul lito deserto,
che mai non vide navicar sue acque
omo, che di tornar sia poscia esperto.

Quivi mi cinse sì com'altrui piacque:
oh meraviglia! ché qual elli scelse
l'umile pianta, cotal si rinacque
subitamente là onde l'avelse.

(vv. 130-136)

The passage interlocks with the end of Canto XXVI to the extent that the rhyme words “acque”, “piacque”, “rinacque” match exactly those at the end of Ulysses’ soliloquy – “nacque”, “acque”, “piacque” – except for the subtle suggestion of spiritual resurrection in the variation from “nacque” to “rinacque”. In this reversed mirroring, the most telling link is, of course, the repetition, the exact duplication of the syntagm, “com'altrui piacque”, in the ending of both cantos. The pliant bending of the pilgrim to the mediating will of Cato (ultimately, of course, to God’s will), stands in direct opposition to the parenthetical reference to a superior will in Ulysses’ acknowledgement of his ultimate defeat.

Commentators and translators of the poem are almost unanimous in reading “as it pleased another” as a clear reference to the Christian god. In keeping with Dante’s syncretistic view of universal history – a view which he obviously shared with his own age – not only historical figures and events are amalgamated in the Christian moral universe, having at its centre the incarnation of Christ, His death and the redemption of mankind, but also legendary and mythological figures regardless of their pre-Christian origins. Thus Ulysses is doomed in Dante’s Christian Hell both for the sins of fraudulent counsel specifically cited by Virgil and for his “folle volo” beyond the Columns of Hercules, the signpost placed by the gods “so that men should not pass beyond”.

It is this last voyage, a voyage of Dante’s own fabrication, which poses the most tantalizing critical problem – that of reintegrating the so-called Ulysses episode with the canto as a whole. One could pose the preliminary question: Must we conform with the common opinion that would read “as pleased another” as if it referred to God? Or couldn’t we rather identify “another”, as uttered by a Greek hero, with the Greek concept of *anagke* – or Averroes’ blind camel in Borges’ story? In other words, since many readers characterize Ulysses’ last voyage as “high tragedy”, should we not attempt to probe further into Dante’s view of tragedy and see what place, if any, it might have in his *Commedia*?

May I recall that in the Letter to Cangrande Dante included a new semantic acceptance of the word “comedy” as “a kind of poetic narrative which differs from all others”. This new semantic connotation of “comedy” as a narrative genre intermixing comedy and tragedy comes closest, as we have seen, to justifying the title of Dante’s narrative poem as a Christian *Commedia*.

Whatever we wish to make of this for the general problem I have just outlined, it certainly goes a long way in accounting for the peculiar manner in which Dante describes his encounter with Ulysses. Dante pleads, in language somewhat rhetorically inflated, to be allowed to speak to Ulysses, and Virgil's reply raises some unanswered questions:

Ed elli a me: "La tua preghiera è degna
di molta loda, e io però l'accetto;
ma fa che la tua lingua si sostegna.

Lascia parlare a me, ch'i'ho concetto
ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,
perch' e' fuor greci, forse del tuo

(*Inf.*, XXVI, 70-75)

Let us note first the directness of Virgil's injunction to Dante to "hold his tongue"; the manner in which the Latin Virgil interposes himself between the Greek heroes and the Tuscan pilgrim on the ground that "they might be disdainful" of his speech; and, finally, the highly rhetorical words of Virgil himself. Critics who insist on the 'negative' characterization of Ulysses have been ready to point out the irony inherent in Virgil's *captatio benevolentiae*; for in the *Aeneid* (II and IX) Ulysses is called, albeit by Trojans who had good reason to revile him, "scelerum inventor" (deviser of schemes) and "fandi factor" (fabricator of lies).⁸ And it is Ulysses, the teller of lies, who recounts his last voyage in such 'heroic' tones as to conceal his own sinful transgression; who speaks with such persuasion as to induce his "small company" to follow him in his "mad flight"; and, it has been suggested, with such irony as to deceive even Virgil as well as the pilgrim with this last masterpiece of fraudulent oratory.

But what of the exemplary value of Ulysses' damnation if he can deceive the pilgrim – and presumably all those readers who continue to find him quite noble in spite of his downfall? Virgil's injunction to the pilgrim to "hold his tongue" must be read at both the literal and metalinguistic level, for as we have seen, Dante's *persona* in the poem is more specifically a poet (rather than, or as well as, Everyman). As Everyman he may wish to save his soul and if possible convert the rest of mankind. But as a poet he has to live up to his task, if he is to save both his face and his fame. What results from this reading is as follows: of the *dramatis personae*, Virgil places himself – and by extension his hero, Aeneas – between Ulysses and Dante the pilgrim; of the poets, Virgil places himself between Homer and Dante; of the works for which they are responsible, the *Aeneid* falls between the *Odyssey* and the *Commedia*.

What is intended by language or speech here is not so much Greek and Latin versus the Italian vernacular – although also this isomorphism may be present – as the "style of language" each of the characters speaks, in keeping with the

⁸ Giorgio Padoan, "Ulisse 'fandi factor' e le vic della sapienza", now in *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse* (Ravenna, 1977).

definitions given in the letter to Cangrande. At this level, it is clear that both Virgil and Ulysses speak the same “high-flown”, “elevated” language; and they can well afford, albeit only temporarily, to put down the pilgrim and his vernacular. So much so that in the next canto, when Guido da Montefeltro begins to speak, he seems as well versed in detecting regional dialects as his compatriot, Dante. Guido hears Virgil dismiss Ulysses in flagrant “Lombard”: “Istra ten va, più non ti adizzo” (Now you may leave, I’ll not provoke more speech) (*Inf.*, XXVII, 21), which is not even Tuscan, let alone “high-flown” and “elevated”. Look at what happens as soon as the highbrow Ulysses begins his tale: he does live up to that ‘tragic’ style admirably, to be sure; but this time the linguistic code he is forced to use is Dante’s language, the Italian vernacular which Dante is forging in the process of writing his *Commedia*. Thus it is ultimately Dante who can claim to have won the stiff competition with the older poets, the great poets of Antiquity. For, at the stylistic level, his Ulysses can be as ‘tragic’ and ‘sublime’ as Virgil’s Aeneas and Homer’s Odysseus. On the moral or figural level, the pilgrim will have access to the vision of Paradise, and Ulysses will be forever in this *bolgia* amidst the fraudulents, while Aeneas fares only a little better, confined as he is to Limbo in spite of, or maybe because of, his pre-Christian *pietas*.

But what of Homer the poet, whom Dante in Limbo had called “the lord of song incomparable/ who like an eagle soars above the rest” (*Inf.*, IV, 95-96)? And what of the other poets – Ovid, Lucan, Horace, Virgil himself – into whose company Dante had been admitted, although as “sixth in that noble school”? The accounts with Ovid and Lucan have just been settled in Canto XXV, when Dante’s own descriptions of metamorphoses far outdid any that could be found in their works; and, as for Virgil, the “father”, “leader”, “master”, “guide”, “pedagogue”, we know that his (partial) vindication will occur in the *Purgatorio*, where he is at first given high marks (“You were like one who goes by night and carries the light behind him and profits not himself, but makes those wise who follow him” [*Purg.*, XXII, 67-69]) and then dismissed.⁹

Obviously the one directly implicated in Canto XXVI is Homer, or to put it better, Homer as paradigm of the tragic style embodied in Ulysses’ speech.

We know that Dante had not read either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, yet through his Latin authors he knew what was necessary to generate in him ‘the myth’ of Homer. The myth of the poet Homer is as large as the myth of his ‘tragic’ hero Ulysses. We have seen how, on account of its style as well as its content, the *Commedia* could accommodate both “comic” and “tragic” language as a “special narrative genre”.

Having established this much, I believe one can state that Dante’s mind was profound enough to capture the essence of classical tragedy, even though he had not read either Aeschylus or Sophocles. Let us bear in mind that in the *Poetics*

⁹ Horace, whom Dante refers to as “Orazio *satiro*” (*Inf.*, II, 89), would seem to be exonerated both because satire is, as we have seen, closely linked to Dante’s notion of comedy, and because of the mixing of genres ‘authorised’ by the *Ars Poetica*

Aristotle himself referred to the common origin of comedy and tragedy; and also that when he sets out to analyse the components of tragedy, he includes at first Homer's epic poems under the same heading. Aren't there enough examples of retribution and reversal in the epic poems to justify the appellation of "dramatic irony" and "poetic justice"?

Let us reread the so-called Ulysses episode with the "compass of irony", acknowledging the contribution of Professor Muecke¹⁰ and of all those who have both preceded and followed him in the study of dramatic irony. "Generally speaking", observes Professor Muecke, "the irony is more striking when an observer already knows what the victim has yet to find out." And he then proceeds to give the example of an examiner hearing a student he has already failed express a confident expectation of passing. Of course, we can always turn the tables on a master ironist, or ironologist, by hypothesizing a student who has already decided to drop the course and hears his professor express the confident expectation of failing him. This irony of situation may be enhanced or reinforced by *double entendre* as, for instance, to use again Professor Muecke's example, in Sophocles' *Electra*. Aegisthus has returned to the palace to hear that strangers have arrived bringing proof of the death of Orestes.

A.: This is good news – the best you have given me yet.

E.: I wish you joy of it – if you find it so.

A.: Enough then. Open the doors! Let all my people/ see this sight. And fools who fixed their hopes/ on this poor creature, when they see his corpse,/ may now accept my yoke, and not require/ my whip to humble them.

E.: I need no teaching./ I have learned my lesson at last, learned how to serve/ the will of those who have the upper hand.

The palace doors are opened, disclosing Orestes and Pylades standing beside the body of Clytemnestra.

What difference is there between the irony of the situation in which Aegisthus is caught – compounded as it is by Electra's ironic *double entendre* – and the irony of Ulysses' situation, compounded as it is by his own, that is to say Dante's *double entendre*? Consider how Ulysses sails towards "the unpeopled world" wholly unaware¹¹ that he will come within sight of the mountain of Early Paradise which, as it turns out, is now also, in the context of Dante's Christian poem, the mountain of Purgatory; or how he is made to say by his Maker, Dante the poet,

e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo,
sempre acquistando dal lato mancino.

(*Inf.*, XXVI, 124-126)

¹⁰ D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London, 1980).

¹¹ Ulysses' ignorance is underscored in *Purg.*, I, 22-24: "I' mi volsi a man destra, e puosi mente/ all'altro polo, e vidi quattro stelle/ non viste mai fuor ch'alla *prima gente*".

How are we to take as other than tragic irony the fact that in a Christian context you cannot make wings out of oars,¹² or that you have nothing to gain by always going upon your left-hand side? Isn't Ulysses' claim to have engaged in a "mad flight" the most glaring instance of self-betrayal? And his self-defeating quest after knowledge, is it basically any different from that of Oedipus who, caught in the mesh woven for him by the gods, proclaims: "and it is my solemn prayer/ that the unknown murderer, and his accomplices,/ if such there be, may wear the brand of shame/ for their shameful act, unfriended, to their life's end"?

Now you may ask, what is the connection between the language of Greek drama and that of Dante's poem? Granted that the same principles of tragic irony - reversal, retribution and self-betrayal - are at work both in the Greek dramatists and in Dante's poem, how can the analogy be pertinent if Dante never read any of Aeschylus' or Sophocles' works, just as he had never read Homer's *Odyssey*?

To answer these questions, I believe we can confidently go back to Borges' story and to his elaboration of Averroes' attempts at defining 'tragedy' and 'comedy' without having ever been to a theatre. If Averroes, as Borges has it, could praise the ancient metaphor comparing fate to a blind camel; if he could state that "admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran and other holy scriptures", I believe that Dante too could have said that admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the Bible and in other holy - and unholy - scriptures. In Dante's universal typology of history, we know, the word of Antiquity has 'meaning' as a pre-figuration of Christian realities as much as the Hebrew Old Testament. Throughout the *Purgatorio*, *exempla* drawn from classical literature appear side by side with those drawn from the Bible.

Keeping in mind Stephen Daedalus' recognition that "A father ... is a necessary evil", let us look again at the homologies which obtain in Canto XXVI when Virgil interposes himself between Ulysses and Dante: as a pagan and 'tragic' author, Virgil can understand Ulysses, and as the pre-Christian author of the *Aeneid* he can mediate between the Greek hero and the pilgrim. Behind these *dramatis personae* there stand, at the meta-linguistic level, both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* as 'tragic' works on this side of Dante's Christian *Commedia*; their authors, Homer and Virgil, obviously fall short of Dante's comedic project which will come to fruition when Beatrice replaces Virgil as Dante's guide in order to lead the Christian pilgrim-poet through the heretofore untried waters of the *Paradiso*.

Through Ulysses' defeat, Dante exorcises the pagan spectres of his literary tradition. The anxiety of influence cannot be overcome until he has taken his distance from Homer as well as from Virgil. Only Ulysses' shipwreck could assure Dante's unchallenged sailing towards his God-willed goal. Nothing could better symbolize

¹² John Freccero writes (in "Dante's Prologue Scene. II The Wings of Ulysses", *Dante Studies*, 84 (1966), 14-15), although from a perspective which is somewhat different from mine: "If Ulysses is shipwrecked and if the wings of Daedalus seem rather to recall Icarus, it is because the *regressus* that both stories came to represent is, in Dante's view, philosophical presumption that is bound to end in failure".

how Dante supplants Ulysses as paradigm of polymorphic “ingegno” and Protean resourcefulness, than his wresting Minerva’s favours from the Greek hero at the beginning of the *Paradiso*:

L’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse;
 Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,
 e nove Muse mi dimostran l’Orse.
 (The water which I take was never coursed before.
 Minerva breathes and Apollo guides me, and nine
 Muses point out to me the Bears.)
 (*Par*, II, 7-9)

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