

Dante's Ulysses and man today amidst vices and virtues, in search of self

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the nature of the human being, its inexhaustible thirst to understand life, to know all reality, down to its origin and destiny; to recognize human vices and the value of good and evil in human actions and the meaning they have. The analysis will be made through the figure of Ulysses, who had seen everything that could be seen, had crossed the Mediterranean with all its islands, but still not enough, he wanted to go further, to look beyond.

Keywords: Dante's Ulysses, today, vices and virtues.

Introduction

We are in the passage from the seventh circle to the eighth circle of Hell, where the so-called fraudulent advisers are located. The song opens with a fiery invective against Florence and the thieves who are there (verses 1-12), then Dante and Virgil climb to the bank from where they had descended and from the top of the bridge that dominates it they see the next circle, full of flames in which the accursed burn (vv. 13-48). Dante's attention is drawn to a double flame: they are Ulysses and Diomedes. Virgil, the great Latin poet, Dante's companion on the journey to Hell, seeks to be the first to tell how he died (v. 49-84). The last part of the Song is entirely occupied by the story of Ulysses (vv. 85-142)

Song XXVI is dominated by the figure of Ulysses, one of the most recognizable and controversial characters of all Comedy. Known worldwide, reread and commented endlessly, this extraordinary episode has turned in the literary tradition into one of the most powerful symbols of moral stature and true human intellect. Nothing, in fact, according to Ulysses, has been able to extinguish it (vv. 97-99)

l'ardore

ch'i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto

e de li vizi umani e del valore...

the zeal I had

To' explore the world, and search the ways of life,

Man's evil and his virtue

"The zeal [...] To' explore the world": this is the nature of the human being from its roots. An inexhaustible thirst to understand life, to know all reality, down to its origin and destiny. And to recognize "human vices and the value of good and evil, the actions of men and their meaning. Ulysses had seen everything that could be seen, he had crossed the Mediterranean with all its islands; but still not enough, he wanted to go further, to look beyond. From the Mediterranean he seems to perceive infinity and

feels sharply, in pain, that he was created for it. (vv. 118-120)

Consider your heritage.

You were not born to live like brutes,

But to pursue virtue and knowledge.'

This is the seed, the root, the true DNA of man, the promise with which he comes into this world: to be able to know the truth and to practice virtue, the good. It is the same desire of Dante, the reason why he is also making his journey: to go to the end of human vices and the "values", i.e. the mystery of good and evil with which life is woven.

The adventure of Ulysses, the noble and just attempt to reach the unknown, ends however with a great failure. Upon passing the Pillars of Hercules - as the ancients called the Strait of Gibraltar - to cross into the unknown world beyond them, after a long journey, Ulysses and his companions come to see Mount Purgatory from afar; but from here begins a whirlwind that reaches the ship, causing it to spin three times on its own and eventually sink, "infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso" "Until the sea again closed over us" (v. 142). Exactly from what should have been the goal of the journey to infinity, the whirlwind was born that caused the adventure to fail, killing Ulysses and his companions. Two questions arise here. If Ulysses presents desire in all its breadth, why does his attempt fail? But above all, why does Dante place Ulysses in Hell?

Ulysses as the most famous figures of all ancient culture

Ulysses is one of the most famous figures of all ancient culture, and also one of the most controversial. On the one hand, in fact, he was revered as a prudent and wise king and as a curious man, always eager to expand his knowledge. On the other hand, he was judged negatively, as a cunning deceiver, inventor of unjust tricks, especially for the Trojan horse episode, known worldwide and quoted thousands of times. Therefore, the decision to place Ulysses in hell, and in one of the groups closest to Lucifer, was not taken for granted. If Dante wanted, he could have left him in oblivion, where there are other characters of ancient literature, if not in purgatory, like the pagan and suicidal Cato. I find it absurd to believe that his latest story - which, as we shall see, is an original invention of Dante - has nothing to do with such a powerful choice.

However, medieval people did not have Odysseus available and knew the story of the Greek hero only from partial quotations from other sources. Notably, Dante and his contemporaries did not know how his journey ended, they did not know about returning to Ithaca. The last episode known to them was standing next to the witch Circe; afterwards, no one had any idea about what had happened. This is where Dante's genius finding comes in: asking Ulysses about his latest journey. A question that is not a simple curiosity to clarify a mysterious story, but a request to tell the crucial moment of life, to understand how such a great character as Ulysses was presented, in the meeting with Fate.

And so Dante writes his Odyssey finale, imagining Ulysses's last voyage, when he is liberated from Circe (vv. 90-99):

When I escap'd

*From Circe, who beyond a circling year
Had held me near Caieta by her charms,
Ere thus Æneas yet had nam'd the shore;*

*Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence
Of my old father, nor return of love,
That should have crown'd Penelope with joy,*

*Could overcome in me the zeal I had
To' explore the world, and search the ways of life,
Man's evil and his virtue.*

For those of us who know the complete *Odyssey*, one of the basic features of Ulysses is the longing for home, the determination with which he overcomes every obstacle.

Instead of returning to his Ithaca, Dante turns the tide: Ulysses's wish is not to go home, but to continue the journey. Dante's Ulysses says: not even the gentleness for his son - Telemachus, whom Ulysses had left as a child and who should now have become a man - neither "pain" - pity, son's love - for the old father, nor "the right love" ("right [love, right] that should have made Penelope happy" were not stronger than my ardent desire to know. And so, when he departs from Gaeta, instead of going to Ithaca, Ulysses takes the opposite direction.

Son, father, wife are the primary affections of man, the first, closest network of relationships that constitute the form of attraction of each. The term by which Ulysses refers to the father is a clear indication of this: "pieta", "pity". Ancient society identified the culmination of a man's morality with that attitude which he called *pietas*, and which determined the proper relation to the gods, the fatherland, and the parents: the respect, care, and reverence they owe to her where we come from, for what shows most clearly that we depend: that we are not ourselves alone who constitute ourselves, but belong to something greater than us, that precedes us.

Pieta's refusal to quench his thirst for knowledge defines the key aspect of Ulysses's figure for Dante: intolerance of all that he perceives as a limit. In fact, Ulysses seems to perceive the relationships that bind him to "proper love", as unbearable limitations, as an obstacle to the realization of the greatness for which he feels destined. The departure of Ulysses seems to be an escape: the escape of those who perceive the closest and everyday circumstances as an intolerable obligation and think of finding happiness by departing in search of new lands, new circumstances (vv. 100 -102):

*But I set out on the high, open sea
With only one ship and that small
Crew who had not deserted me.*

"But I put myself out in the open sea": it is the powerful gesture of one who claims that he can respond alone, only with his own strength, to that irresistible desire that his extraordinary sensitivity makes more urgent and clearer.

"Sol con un legno", With but one bark: the greatest venture is attempted by weak and insufficient means and from the beginning there is no doubt that failure awaits it.

Therefore, for years, Ulysses and his companions continued to travel across the Mediterranean, wandering from one coast to another, from one place to another. (vv. 106-109):

*My crew and I were old and slow
When we came to that narrow strait
Where Hercules set up his landmarks*

This is not a trivial moment. Old age: that moment of life which wisdom should bring, should favor - with long experience and lack of strength - a calmer and more conscious acceptance of the facts of life. And instead no, old age becomes the last, desperate and unreasonable moment of seeing oneself as superior to everything and everyone. Ulysses cannot accept to depend on anything other than himself. That's why it does not stop at anything. Nor in the face of that boundary which the ancients considered sacred, the Pillars of Hercules, the boundary between the world of men and the Mystery which is beyond their power. And so he loses: "l'un di voi dica/dove, per lui, perduto a morir gissi" (vv. 83-84) Virgil had asked. Already in question, then, we see forewarned Dante's judgment: Virgil, who obviously knows this, asks Ulysses to tell how he lost.

Ulysses crazy trip

Then where is the mistake? Certainly not to desire! How can a man like Dante think this, who makes desire the cornerstone of all human action, the condition of returning to God? We learned from him that desire is good, that the attraction that God has placed on things is always good. But it is in the way we put ourselves in front of that desire and in the reality that it awakens, where everything is played out. Because the first evidence that arises when we become aware of that infinite desire, if we are sincere, is that we are not able to satisfy it: that all our strength and all our intelligence are not able to give us what we desire deeper. Ulysses relies solely on its own abilities. And Dante, as he often does, helps us predict the reason for Ulysses' failure by skillfully repeating a few words. In fact, three times, in the short text of the story, the word "small" appears: everything seems too small, not enough to achieve the goal. With him remained alone "and the small faithful band "that yet cleav'd to me". (vv. 101-102), that small group of friends who did not abandon him, those who granted his wish without opposing it. He convinced the companions with this "little speech" (v. 122) "and turn our stern in the morning (i.e., turning our backs on the sun, the light), / de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo\ We then turned our stern toward the dawn, Making wings of our oars in this mad flight, (v. 124-125).

That trip is crazy. With this adjective Dante always shows the attitude "beyond the masses", the enemy of all borders, of those who rely solely on their own strength. Where did we find this word again? In song II, when facing the path proposed by Virgil, Dante is frightened and says: "I am afraid that coming is not crazy" (Inf. II 35). I'm afraid to do something crazy, that is, to go against reason, to do something against human nature. Virgil calms him down: it is not madness, it is by reason, it is the only reasonable thing to pursue desire to the end. Here, then, is the second fundamental point, which shows us the similarity of Ulysses's journey with that of Dante and at

the same time the radical, original difference.

In the dark forest Dante met Virgil, who then in song II tried to allay his fears by telling him how he had been sent there by Beatrice, St. Lucia and St. Mary. Here is the rationale for his journey: he did not start it himself, but responding to someone who called him and following a roadmap. For this Dante manages to reach the mountain of Purgatory that Ulysses sees only from a distance, because the whirlwind that causes the sinking of the ship starts from there: because the path followed by the two is fundamentally different. Ulysses always remains on the surface, navigating without a destination not dictated by pure curiosity to discover unknown lands. "You had better take another route" (Inf. 1 91), Virgil tells Dante, inviting him on a journey that takes place in the depths, to the acquaintance with all evil in the depths of hell, and then to the purgative ascent of purgatory. Confessing his need to be saved, calling "Miserere di me" \Poor me!: this attitude of humility and beseech seems to declaim Dante through the condemnation of Ulysses and it is the only chance for life to gain its true greatness, without the need for crazy and boundless adventures. And at this point even Ulysses's noble aspiration, "to become an expert on the world", takes on another significance. In fact, what does it mean to be an expert, to gain experience? We see for a moment the mentality of today, which usually bends the word "experience" in the sense of "knowledge" in the plural: to know means to have many experiences, visiting many places, meeting many people, having many women or many men ... But what the modern concept of experience lacks is the idea that what it encounters must be judged.

From this point of view, Ulysses seems to embody the first idea of experience, even an endless collection of encounters that, however, do not really improve the person; Dante embodies the second idea, the attempt to go deeper, to understand the deep connection between oneself, things and the Fate of everything.

Why, then, was Ulysses' journey a "crazy flight," leading him not only to death but also to punishment? Because in reality it was a betrayal of his truest desire. For the desire to go beyond the Pillars of Hercules, to discover the ocean of meaning beyond the known sea of daily experience, is a good, righteous desire; however, it can only be achieved with an act of humility, not an act of arrogance, following a teacher and having the courage to go to the end.

Humility - we will see it starting from Purgatory song I, where Dante will clearly refer to Ulysses - is the virtue that makes meeting the infinite possible. Infinity, the Mystery that is at the origin of reality, you do not have to look for it beyond the sea. But it is true: we must ask, with Ulysses being right, we are not "beasts". But he chose the wrong path because he thought that in order to seek God the circumstances of his vocation had to be different. It does not work that way, on the contrary. God comes to meet you through those circumstances in which He calls you to live. In this way the wife, son and father are exactly the place where that endless Mystery we feel we have become can be found.

This is what the mercy of God does: it comes to take you where you are, to the "dark forest" where you are. And starting from there you have to go all the way to the end. Ultimately, despite his greatness, Ulysses ended up reducing the amount of his desire. He enjoyed the trip he could make on his own, with his boat and "his little com-

pany": he was contented with remaining on the surface of reality, refused to respond to his desire to come meet him, and not be, on the contrary, something to be accomplished by his tricks and deceptions. Thus, the journey reveals his latest cunning, his ultimate betrayal: he deceives himself and the friends who followed him. A journey that took place when, full of pride, he thought of winning even the most important battle, that with Fate, as he had won all the others, relying only on his intelligence and rejecting any form of restriction or dependence.

Conclusions

The real Ulysses is Dante. The journey that truly and to the end tells us what the greatness of man is, is that of Dante. The whole Comedy, with very frequent references to this magnificent and dramatic episode, seems to say: "Ulysses, you are right, you must get there; but you are on the wrong path. This is so because there are no shortcuts and it is not about wandering around the world: but you have to go deep, into the depths of yourself and reality. The real revelation of life is not to see new things, but to see all things as new, it is not the change of circumstances, but the change of our view of them every day. From here, from the XXVI song of Hell onwards, the question arises in an explicit and final way: the path to salvation, in fact the very experience of truth, of goodness and beauty, is a problem of conversion, that is, a change of perspective.

References

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