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INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD
Launch out on the story, Muse: Ulysses, Vergil, Dante and the Struggle for Authorial Power

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Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy.

Odysses 1:3

In The Odyssey, “the man of twists and turns” is a hero. Resourceful, cunning, and determined, Odysseus consistently manages to outwit those around him so that he may return home after victory at Troy. Centuries pass, and that same man is a sinner damned for all eternity. In Dante’s Inferno, Odysseus reappears in the eighth circle of hell as Ulysses, supposedly to receive punishment for his treachery in creating the Trojan Horse. Ulysses’ true sin, however, is apparent in the speech he delivers about his final adventure. Ulysses crafts a Homeric narrative about this adventure in an attempt to create a heroic image of himself that will stand in for the reality of his damnation. Dante criticizes Ulysses’ faith in the identity-constructing power of stories in order to examine the act of storytelling itself. Within Canto 26, Ulysses, Vergil and Dante each offer their own portrayals of Ulysses’ fate. Vergil aims to proclaim his authorial mastery by telling Ulysses’ story himself and acting as an intermediary between Dante and Ulysses. To Vergil, the supposed ability of the storyteller to reshape reality presents a tantalizing opportunity for him to assert his own ego. Dante uses the power struggle between himself, Vergil, and Ulysses in order to present a contrasting view: that belief in the potential of narrative to construct identity is itself a form of sin. Dante offers instead his own representational model of storytelling, in which the author uses narrative to contemplate his own spiritual
peril. While Ulysses’ narrative is a means to create an amplified image of himself in the mind of his audience, Dante’s narrative is a personal exploration of the perpetual possibility of damnation and a call to inner awareness. This radical new vision of the story is one of ways Dante’s medieval epic distinguishes itself from its ancient predecessors. Inner contemplation and personal honesty, rather than the creation of heroes, emerge as Dante’s true project. Both Ulysses’ and Vergil’s inability to reshape identities through their stories demonstrate that there is a limit to the constructive power of the narrative. Canto 26 is a sustained criticism of authorial arrogance that, paradoxically, serves as Dante’s means of asserting his superiority to both Vergil and Ulysses.

Ulysses’ love of adventure motivates his actions and determines his self-understanding as an epic hero. He describes the “ardor” he felt to “gain experience of the world” as a force that compelled him to go forth on an additional adventure after leaving Circe’s island and returning home (26:97-98). He is unable to conceive of a domestic role for himself and instead determines his worth on the basis of his trials and travels. As a result, when he narrates his own journey, he does so using suspiciously Homeric descriptions. He boasts that after leaving his family he roamed “as far as Spain, as far as Morocco,” repeating “as far” in parallel construction to emphasize what he believes is the enormity of his feats (26:103-104). He appears impressed by the lateral distance he traveled to reach Spain and Morocco, not the vertical distance he descended to reach Hell. Even in the middle of the flames his words betray a continued attachment to the ethos of the epic journey. He tells of ignoring the warnings Hercules gave that “one should not go further” to the West and speaks of exploring uncharted territory (26:109). Ulysses reshapes this episode into a story of surpassing boundaries that reinforces his image of himself as an uncontrollable adventurer. He therefore exists in the mode of the epic hero, rather than the mode of the chastened sinner. Symptomatically, once Ulysses begins to narrate his final journey, he does not mention his family again. The people who love Ulysses are displaced by Ulysses’ own love of the epic journey, which dominates his image of himself.

Ulysses’ punishment within the flames reflects his burning passion for epic deeds and the manner in which his desire to be part of a grand story amplifies that passion. Virgil’s description of Ulysses as “swathed in that which burns him inwardly” implies that his overwhelming passion, once experienced from within, now consumes him from without (26:47-48). The Italian word “ardore” literally means “burning,” and establishes a connection between the “ardor” Ulysses once experienced for quests and the fiery punishment he now experiences. In the past, Ulysses externalized his all-consuming
passion for heroic exploits through the treachery of the Trojan horse, which lead to the burning of Troy, and in Hell, that same fire turns back upon him. His ardor and passion are directed toward the completion of a journey. When relating his story, Ulysses states:

“When
I departed from Circe, who held me back more than a year there near Gaeta, before Aeneas gave it that name,
neither the sweetness of a son, nor compassion for my old father, nor the love owed to Penelope, which should have made her glad,
could conquer within me the ardor that I had to gain experience of the world...”
(26:90-97)

Ulysses’ assertion that Circle “held him back” indicates that she prevented him from achieving some goal, yet that goal remains unstated. While the endpoint of Ulysses’ journey might be reunification with his family, he notes that the “sweetness” and “compassion” he felt for his family was also insufficient to prevent him from continuing on his adventure. Home is an obstacle, not a destination. Ulysses establishes a parallel between Circe and his homeland in that they both attempted to impede his forward progress, but failed to do so. By portraying family as a distraction in a larger quest to gain experience, Ulysses demonstrates that he is engaged in a linear motion outward rather than a circular motion to return. The structure of Ulysses’ statement mirrors his meaning. His description of his family and of his imprisonment on Circe’s island literally holds back his story of adventure by providing a series of clauses that intervene within the sentence and delay the reader’s ability to reach the completion of the sentence. This structure is metaphorically significant, as Ulysses can only continue to exist as the subject of legend as long as he is continuing a journey. The distractions therefore impede the progress of both the story of Ulysses’ life and the tale that he relates to Vergil and the pilgrim. The imperative to continue these stories drives Ulysses’ actions in life and in the underworld.

Stories serve as both a motivating factor and a useful tool for Ulysses. In order to continue his journey, Ulysses must act as a storyteller by delivering a speech to convince his crew to proceed on their expedition to the west. This speech is, in essence, a story that Ulysses tells to the crew about their own identity. Ulysses asks his crew to “[c]onsider their sowing” and claims that they “were not made to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge” (26:118-119). Ulysses’ oration manipulates the crew by forming an association between
continuing the journey and expressing their noblest natures. He implies that they have a great destiny because of their birth and the manner in which they were made, and presents continued action as the means of achieving that destiny. The distortions inherent in this speech are a part of Ulysses’ attempt to construct the identity of his crew. This attempt is intimately linked to the punishment for his sin. Through his assumption of the role of storyteller Ulysses manages to spread his internal fire to his crew, so that “after it [Ulysses] could hardly have held them back” (26:122-123). Both the transmission of the passion from one man to the next and the uncontrollable effects that the transmission has upon them mimic the actions of fire. This is the same fire, or ardore, that burns within Ulysses and causes him to pursue adventure regardless of costs. Just as Ulysses glorifies himself through a semi-Homeric tale of bold action that makes a claim to a heroic identity, he uses a parallel tale of epic greatness to cause his crew to glorify themselves. Ulysses’ ability to use a story to implicate others in his sin demonstrates the danger of excessive belief in the power of the narrative to shape reality.

Vergil attempts to control Ulysses’ story by introducing his own account of the adventurer’s nature and deeds. His effort to manage the perception that the pilgrim and the reader have of Ulysses indicates that the role of epic poet is constitutive of Vergil’s identity. Vergil’s account of Ulysses reflects Vergil’s own role as the creator of the Aeneid, an epic that describes the Trojan effort to found Rome. According to Vergil, Ulysses “made the gate to send forth the Romans’ noble seed” though his participation in the destruction of Troy. Vergil therefore defines Ulysses by the qualities that are important to his own epic. By speaking in his capacity as an epic poet, Vergil assumes the authority to determine the significance of Ulysses’ actions and then attempts to use that authority to influence Dante’s view of Ulysses. Through this action Vergil asserts his authorial power and attempts to establish himself as the true mediator between past and present. He therefore refuses to allow Dante to speak to Ulysses for fear that the Greeks would refuse to listen to a modern language. Upon introducing himself to Ulysses, Vergil speaks of himself a poet who “wrote my high verses” and thus deserves to request a tale of ancient days. (26:82) Vergil’s self-identity as a storyteller causes him to attempt to control the stories of those around him.

The discrepancies between Vergil’s account of Ulysses and Ulysses’ account of himself reveal that Vergil fails in his attempt to assume commanding power as an author. This failure serves as a warning of the danger of authorial overconfidence. Although Vergil asserts that within the fire of punishment Ulysses “bemoans [his] deceit” and “weep[s] for [his] art,” in actuality Ulysses does neither of those. In direct contrast to the expectations Virgil establishes both
for the reader and for Dante, Ulysses does not appear to be suffering at all. Rather, Ulysses tells his own semi-Homeric tale of glorious adventure, thereby usurping Vergil’s role as storyteller. Vergil prepares the pilgrim to hear the tale of a broken man who will relate “where, lost, he went to die,” but instead finds a proud sinner who is eager to tell his own story according to his conception of himself (26:83-84). Ulysses further subverts Vergil by stating that he stayed “near Gaeta, before Aeneas gave it that name” (26:92-93). By identifying his adventures as pre-Vergilian, Ulysses places himself outside of Vergil’s temporal reach and therefore makes a claim of independence. Yet Ulysses, like Virgil, fails as a storyteller. Although he tells his crew that they will follow “virtue and knowledge” by continuing on the voyage out, the crew’s subsequent descent under the waves and Ulysses’ descent into hell stand in stark opposition to his proclamation. Likewise, although Ulysses speaks of himself as an epic hero, he is in fact a sinner whose flesh is being consumed by flames as he narrates his adventures. Both Vergil and Ulysses attempt to craft their own representations of the workings of the world and their personal actions, but both fail due to a common overconfidence in the power of their words to reshape reality.

The imperative that both Ulysses and Vergil feel to act as storytellers could be interpreted as a reflection of their egos. Vergil’s celebration of his “high verses” and Ulysses’ boasts of his own deeds demonstrate that characters can use stories about themselves as a means of self-glorification. In both cases, that imperative could also be seen as an existential one: by telling stories, each man creates an identity that reflects how he desires others to treat him. This existential-egotistical dimension of storytelling is certainly a valid part of Dante’s portrayal of the act of authorship. Vergil’s desire to act as an intermediary to the ancients and impulse to boast of his verses demonstrate that his identity is based on his ability to construct narratives and cause audiences to accept his explanations of reality. Likewise, Ulysses’ glorification of himself is part of an effort to create an image of himself as a hero in the minds of Vergil and the pilgrim. Yet the discrepancies between Ulysses’ and Vergil’s narratives and their realities demonstrate that their stories are reflections of delusions rather than truly generative forces that can create personal identity. Vergil’s story about Ulysses is still inaccurate, and Ulysses is still a sinner. The stubborn persistence of these facts demonstrates that narratives are not valid constructors of identity.

Throughout Canto 26, Dante the pilgrim acts as the audience to Ulysses’ and Vergil’s stories. But he also appears as the poet who frames the entire journey of the Inferno, and therefore provides a third example of a storyteller and a potential alternate model for the construction of narratives. Canto 26 establishes a number of prima
face parallels between Dante and Ulysses in order to explore the differences in the way they create their own narratives. Both Dante and Ulysses are engaged in treacherous journeys of sorts. Ulysses describes his ship, directly prior to capsizing, as “always gaining on the left side” (26:125-126) and in the opening canto, the pilgrim describes himself as descending “so that my halted foot was always the lower” – so that the left foot drags behind the other (1:29-30). The left, which is strongly associated with baseness and evil, disturbs the physical progress of both voyagers. This sense of joint peril is intensified by the manner in which both Dante and Ulysses find themselves at passes: Dante at “the pass that has never yet left anyone alive” (1:26), Ulysses at “the deep pass” that blocked out the light of the moon (26:132). Both characters are therefore positioned at critical moments of instability in their lives, where the decisions they make will determine their fates. Finally, they are both severely disoriented. Dante has “abandoned the true way” and “cannot really say how [he] entered there” (1:10-12), while Ulysses continually loses sight of the light and is engaged in a “mad flight” (26:125). These descriptions of Dante and Ulysses indicate that they engage in journeys that present them with spiritually dangerous situations. The contrast in the way each character constructs a narrative from this journey speaks to the nature of Ulysses’ sin and what it means to truly be a storyteller.

While Dante’s account of his own actions is rich in deeply felt spiritual meaning, Ulysses’ account is spiritually dead. Dante describes himself lost in the wood that was “savage and harsh,” and his portrayal of the “abandon[ment of] the true way” is self-consciously metaphorical (1:5-12). The poet uses his description of being physically lost to communicate his understanding of himself as spiritually lost. The disorientation, instability, and spiritual descent within Dante’s story present a similar metaphorical significance to Ulysses’ experience of being drawn under the water. By way of contrast, Ulysses’ description of himself as lost in the dark and the “whirlwind [that] was born” refers only to his physical situation (26:137). Likewise, Ulysses’ description of the deep pass and the mountain before him is a purely physical explanation of a feature that was “dark in the distance” and “higher than any I had seen” (26:135). His words are prosaic and reflect an unsentimental view of a concrete obstacle. In contrast, Dante’s “spirit, still fleeing,” reflects upon the “pass that has never yet left anyone alive” (1:25-26). Dante conveys that the obstacles he faced were much more than physical, and thereby attaches a depth of meaning to his experiences that Ulysses fails to attach to his. While Ulysses’ incipient damnation demonstrates that he was in a state of peril equal to that of Dante, his narrative reveals that he was and remains oblivious to the danger his soul faced. Dante’s nar-
rative is a way for him to reflect upon his spiritual state, rather than a means of constructing an identity or a motivation for action.

As Ulysses’ and Vergil’s failures demonstrate, narratives cannot construct reality. While they indicate the spiritual condition of the storyteller, their power is reflective rather than constructive. Ulysses’ punishment suggests that his belief in the story as a means of constructing identity is a form of sin. He is drawn so deep within the flames that he only appears as a “a tongue [of flame] that spoke [and] cast out a voice” (26:88-89). This instance of contrapasso ironizes Ulysses’ conception of the narrative by presenting Ulysses as a voice rather than a man. In Hell, he is all story and no substance. Ulysses believes that his presence within an epic story will make him a hero, but his misplaced faith merely serves to drive him away from his home and into damnation. By way of contrast, Dante the poet demonstrates an awareness of the seductive danger of constructing narratives. In the opening to the canto he notes that he now “rein[es] in [his] wit more than is [his] custom, that it may not run without virtue guiding it” (26:20-22). He asserts that he restrains his own virtuosity as a storyteller and thus contends that he is capable of crafting his story without committing Ulysses’ sin. The contemplation of spirituality, rather than the creation of an image, emerges as Dante’s intent.

Through Dante’s recognition of the failings of the storytellers who speak to him as a pilgrim, he allows himself the possibility to surpass them as a poet. Vergil’s desire to exert control over his subject matter blinds him to true reality and provides him with an excessive belief in the power of his own verses. Meanwhile, Ulysses’ conviction that the stories he tells about himself determine both his worth and his identity seals his fate as a sinner. Dante’s criticism of them within his own poem provide negative examples of the virtuous way to act as an author. These examples are also an expression of the danger Dante the poet faces as he creates his Inferno. Ulysses and Vergil commit their authorital misdeeds without realizing that they are doing so, and therefore present the possibility that Dante is also unwittingly in error. This tension reveals the inherent risk of Dante’s implicit claim to poetic superiority. Only Dante’s poetic descendants can reveal whether he is correct in his assessment of himself, or if he is merely another deluded storyteller.