

## The Canto of Ulysses

### Excerpt One<sup>1</sup> (Allingham)

Dante introduces the “crafty” Ulysses as a “false counsellor” in Canto XXVI of The Inferno in The Divine Comedy; the poet and his guide, Virgil, meet the illustrious hero and deviser of the Trojan Horse in Circle VIII, Bolge viii, as a “double-flame” which he shares with his compatriot from the Trojan War, Diomedes. Dante’s Virgil compels Ulysses to narrate the story of his last voyage:

Then of that age-old fire the loftier horn  
Began to mutter and move, as a wavering flame  
Wrestles against the wind and is over-worn;  
And, like a speaking tongue vibrant to frame  
language, the tip of it flickering to and fro  
Threw out a voice and answered . . . [lines 88-93]

Penguin translator Dorothy L. Sayers’ note indicates that the narrative of the last voyage derives from no known classical source, although an ambiguous prediction in the *Odyssey* implies that the hero will set out again: “from the sea shall thine own death come.” Sayers describes the inset narrative as “Dante’s own invention” (239), but sees in it the influences of the Celtic voyages of the Maelduin and St. Brendan. For the hubristic act of daring to challenge the divinely ordained limits of the world, the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar), the hero, his ship, and crew are smashed by a great wave just as he catches sight of “the mountain of the Earthly Paradise, which, after Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, becomes Mount Purgatory – the only land, according to Dante, in the Southern Hemisphere.” (Sayers 239). According to Dante’s Ulysses, the voyage of southern exploration ended disastrously when from “out of the unknown land there blew foul weather, / And a whirlwind struck the forepart of the ship” (lines 137-8).

### Excerpt Two<sup>2</sup> (Liu)

Such a connection through fiction and poetry occurs... in Primo Levi’s memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, when he summons from memory the canto of Ulysses from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

“Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance  
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,  
To follow after knowledge and excellence.”

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<sup>1</sup> Philip V. Allingham, available at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/ulyssesq.html>

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Sarah Liu, available at <http://www3.sympatico.ca/mighty1/essays/liu1.htm>

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.

Ulysses's words speak directly to Levi's situation, enabling a new understanding of old, familiar words. Stripped from home, native language, material and emotional sustenance, Levi realizes in a bare-life context what it means to be a man.... Significantly, Levi makes the effort to recall Dante's lines for another, a young fellow prisoner who wants to learn Italian. The canto of Ulysses seems a bit strange as a starting lesson ("Who knows how or why it comes into my mind.... If Jean is intelligent he will understand"), but it reveals itself as a lesson for both of them, the reminder of a world beyond bare life.

### **Excerpt Three (Canto XXVI)**

Here is the complete text of the passage from "Canto XXVI" that Levi is trying to recall in the chapter, in a translation from the Italian by John Ciardi:

As if it fought the wind, the greater prong  
Of the ancient flame began to quiver and hum;  
Then moving its tip as if it were the tongue

That spoke, gave out a voice above the roar.  
"When I left Circe," it said, "who more than a year  
Detained me near Gaeta long before

Aeneas came and gave the place that name,  
Not fondness for my son, nor reverence  
For my aged father, nor Penelope's claim

To the joys of love, could drive out of my mind  
The lust to experience the far-flung world  
And the failings and felicities of mankind.

I put out on the high and open sea  
With a single ship and only those few souls  
Who stayed true when the rest deserted me.

As far as Morocco and as far as Spain  
I saw both shores; I saw Sardinia  
And the other islands of the open main.  
I and my men were stiff and slow with age  
When we sailed at last into the narrow pass

Where, warning all men back from further voyage

Hercules' Pillars rose upon our sight.  
Already I had left Ceuta on the left;  
Seville now sank behind me on the right.

'Shipmates,' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand  
Perils have reached the West, do not deny  
To the brief remaining watch our senses stand

Experience the world beyond the sun.  
Greeks! You were not born to live like brutes,  
But to press on toward manhood and recognition!'

With this brief exhortation I made my crew  
So eager for the voyage I could hardly  
Have held them back from it when I was through;

And turning our stern toward the morning, our bow toward the night,  
We bore southwest out of the world of man;  
We made wings of our oars for our fool's flight.

That night we raised the other pole ahead  
With all its stars, and ours had so declined  
It did not rise out of its ocean bed.

Five times since we had dipped our bending oars  
Beyond the world, the light beneath the moon  
Had waxed and waned, when dead upon our course

We sighted, dark in space, a peak so tall  
I doubted any man had seen the like.  
Our cheers were hardly sounded, when a squall

Broke hard upon our bow from the new land:  
Three times it sucked the ship and the sea about  
As it pleased Another to order and command.

At the fourth, the poop rose and the bow went down  
Till the sea closed over us and the light was gone."

### **Excerpt Four (Ryckmans)**

The depth and truth of this particular moment were such that thirty years later – the year before he died – Levi returned to it in the last book he wrote, *The Drowned and the Saved*. Summing up his experience of the death camp, he concluded, “Culture was important to me, and perhaps it saved me. When I wrote ‘I would give today’s soup to know how to retrieve the forgotten passage’, I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I really would have given bread and soup – that is, blood – to save from nothingness those memories which today, with the sure support of printed paper I can refresh gratis whenever I wish, and which therefore seem of little value.”

In Auschwitz, the forgotten poem became literally priceless. In that place, at that instant, the very survival of Primo Levi’s humanity was dependent on it.

– Pierre Ryckmans

### **Excerpt Five (Brombert)**

Brombert points out that the thrust of Levi’s Ulysses chapter “is of a spiritual nature. . . . The recourse to Dante’s poetry, in order to teach Italian to an Alsatian fellow inmate in a German camp deep inside Poland, where Yiddish is the common tongue, becomes a symbol of universality and of the possible survival of meaning.”

### Journal Two

In an essay of 300 or 400 words, please respond to the following question:

In the Canto of Ulysses Chapter of Survival in Auschwitz, Primo Levi says, “I would give today’s soup to know how to retrieve the forgotten passage.” What is Levi trying to remember, and why is it so important to him that he would – despite being on the threshold of starvation – give up food to recall it?

In responding to this quote, please quote from at least three of the sources above. Try to integrate quotes into your own sentences, and be sure to indicate the author of each source. Author names are given in parentheses.