

Odysseus's (Ulysses's) Odyssey through Western Literature, and  
Virgil's and Dante's Quests for the Questor

Edgar Gordyn

The character Odysseus, more commonly known as Ulysses, infuses Western literature from Homer's *Iliad* to the modern era. During his 2,800-year odyssey, he has transformed into a number of heroes. James Joyce's Leopold Bloom in his novel *Ulysses* depicts Odysseus as modern civilization's iconic hero. For Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Odysseus represents the spirit of renewal and the affirmation of life in the face of the gravity of death. Many other Western authors have likewise exercised some of their greatest themes with the legendary Odysseus; two of the weightiest examples are Virgil and Dante. Both the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* owe a great deal to Odysseus, though both of these epics deny their debts when they malign him. Focusing on key aspects of both of these works with respect to Odysseus clarifies critical aspects of them and of Odysseus, and shows how important Odysseus is to these canonical poets who are so central to Western literature.

First, fair judgment must be made of Odysseus within the culture that conceived him, before moving on Virgil's and Dante's less flattering treatments. Glancing into Homeric Greece demonstrates how a hero like Odysseus could be born, there and only there. A. W. H. Adkins describes Homeric Greece as a "results-culture" that emphasized outcomes over intentions, especially for a king such as Odysseus was: "Not good intentions, but results are demanded of the Homeric *agathos* [one of the nobility], in all his activities: he is constantly faced, or threatened, with a demand that he should succeed in doing what he cannot do" (40). Part of what made a man *agathos* in the first place was his performance, for he could not earn such high esteem from his comrades without first proving his abilities to be exceptional. The judgment of

his comrades was equally as important as his performance, for the hero existed between the need to produce results and others' praise of his successes, or censure of his failures:

His most important terms of value evaluate not his intentions nor his efforts, but their results. He is always "up against it," judged in terms of his successes or failures; further the sanction is overtly "what people will say," and over this he has no control, and he cannot set his own consciousness of his self and its value against the estimation of his fellows, since his self has only the value which they put upon it. (41-42)

Insofar as a person's reputation was his life (or death), it was his claim to posterity: "What matters [to the Homeric man] is what is said of him by his contemporaries, and remembered by future generations" (32). Indeed, the Homeric man faced tremendous social and worldly pressures, for the value of his life depended entirely on forces he could only partially control. For Odysseus to become the representative hero of this culture indeed speaks volumes about his abilities.

Odysseus's heroism shows in its fullest form in the *Odyssey*. While the *Iliad* also demonstrates it, that epic does so in the more limited context of continual war. In the *Odyssey*, with the brute immediacy of the Trojan War behind him, Odysseus's tribulations amplify as he contends with gods, monsters, monsters begotten of gods (Polyphemus), and tantalizing physical temptations. Additionally, shortly into his problematic journey home, Odysseus learns that his kingdom, once he reaches Ithaca, will be overrun with ignominious suitors pursuing his wife and devouring his resources. The prospect of reaching home promises not rest, but further travail. In the face of these multiplying troubles, Odysseus's intelligence and resourcefulness also increase. M. E. Heatherington describes Odysseus's abilities as "extraordinary capacities, coming to the

fore in response to extraordinary situations” (226). André Bonnard describes how, “In the course of the *Odyssey* we see [Odysseus] as carpenter, pilot, mason and saddler. He handles axe, plough and rudder as skillfully as he handles the [bow]” (71). He builds his own ship by which he leaves Calypso’s island once the gods permit him to return to Ithaca (5.268-88). Odysseus himself kneads the wax with which he stops his shipmates’ ears so that they will not fall prey to the seductive Sirens (*Ody.* 12.189-93). Here, he demonstrates his characteristic self-control when he exerts severe restraints on himself so that he may hear the Sirens’ songs without endangering his crew (12.194-213). Odysseus’s self-control shows in other ordeals as well. During his visit to the underworld, one of his most difficult personal trials comes when he sees his mother for the first time in twenty years as a ghost. “Filled with pity, / even throbbing with grief” (*Ody.* 11.97-98), Odysseus does not permit her to incarnate herself so that he may speak with her, for he must first consult the seer Tiresias. He knows that speaking with his mother’s shade will jeopardize his mission, and he surpasses personal longing to achieve results that will benefit his people and himself in the end. Self-control is frequently the main characteristic that facilitates Odysseus’s successes. For example, once he returns to the enraging situation at home, he delays taking action, hiding his identity until the ideal circumstances arise, and watching and assessing the situation. About this trial of endurance, Heatherington speculates that Odysseus must “re-create in private his public roles as father, king, hero, husband, and son . . . [because] the longer Odysseus stays in disguise, the more will he see and suffer the insolence of the suitors, the greater will be his grief and rage, and the more ferocious will be his apocalyptic housecleaning” (235). Heatherington speculates a further and perhaps more important reason for Odysseus’s delay, describing the final testing and tempering of his character: Odysseus “must do penance and be schooled in proper mortal humility before he is turned loose to the slaughter, for without

such humility to sanction his actions, the killing becomes pure mad-dog frenzy, a horrendous blood-bath, an utterly unjustified violation of *aidos* [honor, self-respect] worse than the suitors' own sins" (235). Odysseus's many exotic trials, of which the one at home requires the most endurance, test all of his abilities and temper his character, so that his extended journey's last action of reclaiming his kingdom from the ignoble suitors—the most critical one—is successful.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Odysseus's heroism, and what shows him to be the Greeks' cultural representative, is his prophesied mission after he reclaims Ithaca. That he embodies many of the Greeks' highest values, including intelligence, strength, self-reliance, skill, and "the traditional Greek ethical ideal of reason in control of sense [and being] clearly Homer's version of the ideal man and warrior" (Logan 20), raises Odysseus to the status of cultural representative. This carries the honor of a pioneering mission that is the crowning achievement of Odysseus's life, as Margalit Finkelberg writes (8). During Odysseus's journey to the underworld to learn his fate, Tiresias prophesies this future to Odysseus, urging him to

go forth once more [after reclaiming Ithaca], you must . . .  
 carry your well-planed oar until you come  
 to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,  
 whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all  
 to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars        (*Ody.* 11.138-42)

When one of these barbaric people mistakes Odysseus's "bladed, balanced oar" (11.147) for "a fan to winnow grain" (11.146), Odysseus should take this as his sign and immediately plant his oar in the earth, then sacrifice to Poseidon and other gods both on the spot and at home, whereupon his life journey will be complete.

at last your own death will steal upon you . . .

a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes  
 to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age  
 with all your people there in blessed peace around you. (11.153-56)

Odysseus's final accomplishment, for which he deserves such a death, is having pioneered the Greeks' seafaring ability. His "bladed, balanced oar" that he plants in the ground symbolizes the introduction of advanced maritime technology to an under-civilized people. Tiresias's prophesy describes the Greeks' preoccupation with expansion into the western Mediterranean, as Robert Fagles writes in his "Introduction" to the *Odyssey*: "the early years of the eighth century B.C. [when the *Odyssey* was written down] saw the beginnings of what was to become a large-scale movement of Greek traders and, later, colonists into the western Mediterranean" (26). In one of Odysseus's descriptions of a fertile island (*Ody.* 9.138-49), Fagles hears "the authentic voice of the explorer evaluating a site for settlement" (28), which would have spoken both to and for the *Odyssey*'s audience. It should be remembered that the *Odyssey*'s events take place around 1200 B.C.E., when, as André Bonnard points out, Greek civilization was still largely "a nation of landsmen" (69) with limited seafaring ability. Though they could travel from island to island, as Odysseus does, the vaster Mediterranean lay unexplored and mysterious. This historical element mixes with the fabulous, shown in the goddesses, monsters, and various utopias that await Greek explorers, suggesting that, at the time the *Odyssey* was written down, the Greeks' imagination was their only vessel across the Mediterranean. Bonnard summarizes, "The 'marvelous' element in the *Odyssey*, deriving from popular beliefs older than the *Iliad* itself, had refashioned the forces of nature as strange creatures with forms gigantic or grotesque, or as beings immortally fair" (138). Though the Greeks' seafaring ability was limited at the time Homer wrote down the *Odyssey*, it was beginning to advance. The promises of this advancement show in the *Odyssey*'s

richly fantastical element as much as they show in Odysseus's civilizing mission. Insofar as the *Odyssey* can be read as a cultural document, we see how "In the person of Odysseus [the *Odyssey*] launched a brave and curious people toward the mastery of the sea. A few generations after the *Odyssey*, the Mediterranean from east to west was to become a Greek lake on which the main routes were mapped out and known" (69). Odysseus, Greece's iconic hero, is at his highest status as cultural representative and ambassador, pioneering Greek seafaring mastery and colonizing new lands.

Odysseus's abilities show directly in his actions, as well as indirectly in his inaction. During his prolonged absence from home, the anarchy in Ithaca has led his wife Penelope's 117 suitors to their ignoble and imprudent power-scrabble, so that we see the effect of Odysseus's absence as much as we see elsewhere the effect of his presence. The ancient Greek custom of *xenia* (hospitality) was a sacred one, associated with Zeus. For Telemachus and Penelope to open their home to the suitors would have been customary, regardless of any ulterior motives they might have sensed in them. That the suitors stay so long in Ithaca and consume so much is a gross violation of *xenia*, an offense to the gods. Further, moderation was esteemed as a noble trait in ancient Greece. The suitors' persistent calls for the choicest dishes and wine each evening show their overindulgence and excess. Their comportment has more ominous consequences when one projects how this situation would develop without Odysseus's intervention. As the suitors devour Ithacan resources awaiting Penelope's choice of a husband, they are devouring their own future resources. One likely consequence is that the new king whom Penelope chooses will be forced to invade other kingdoms to replenish his stores. A picture emerges of Ithaca's future king as a voracious, destructive appetite, gradually eating away at all of Greece. This is the opposite image of the productive, innovative Odysseus who advances Greek civilization.

Additionally, Odysseus's reclaiming of his kingdom represents the restoration of a skilled and noble king to his rightful kingdom, signifying Greece's progression from primitive barbarism towards what would eventually become the rich environment that produced some of the greatest intellectual works of the Western world: Aristotle's, Socrates's, and Plato's philosophies.

Though this development would require the proof of a few centuries, the *Odyssey* again shows itself as a cultural document when it represents its audience's concerns with Greece's future.

Both its inherent qualities and its optimism show when it nominates the intelligent, courageous, sharp-thinking, and resourceful Odysseus as its representative hero returning to Greece to restore order and move society forward.

In charting Odysseus's development through Western literature, Virgil is an important point for a number of reasons. As the bridge between Homer and Dante, Virgil provides the critical treatment of Odysseus that strongly influences Dante's treatment. In Greek legends, Odysseus devised the Trojan Horse that brought down Troy, a detail that Virgil would have borne gravely in mind as he composed the Roman national epic. His *Aeneid* is his attempt to elevate Roman culture above Greek, partly by vilifying the Greek's national hero, as well as by overwriting both of the Greek epics with a single Roman one. Many scholars recognize the *Aeneid*'s similarities to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Terence Logan points out Virgil's appropriation of many Homeric poetic devices, such as Virgil's "formal diction, much of his material, the poetic conventions he employs, and especially his form are the result of his imitations of elements found in Homer's books" (21). Logan goes on to show how Virgil imbues his hero Aeneas with Roman religious, social, and ethical values, and "Augustan ideals of peace and world order" (24), as Homer did when he imbued Odysseus with Greek values. Aeneas's life mission to conquer Latium, which leads to the founding Rome, blends Odysseus's missions to

reclaim Ithaca with his prophesied civilizing mission. Aeneas's wanderings through the Mediterranean parallel Odysseus's wanderings there, and occur contemporaneously with the *Odyssey's* events, immediately after the burning of Troy. During these wanderings, Aeneas encounters one of Odysseus's lost shipmates, Achaemenides, left behind on Polyphemus's island (*Aen.* III). (This encounter subtly recalls Odysseus's hubris in this episode in the *Odyssey* [9.529-606], condemned in Rome as much as in Greece.) Aeneas's visit to the underworld to learn important details about his fate has several parallels to Odysseus's visit there. In the underworld, Aeneas finds Dido, whom he learns has died in his absence, much as Odysseus learns his mother Anticlea died in his absence from Ithaca. Dido will not speak to Aeneas for resenting his betrayal (*Aen.* 6.593-626), which echoes Odysseus's initial refusal to speak to his mother's shade. (Dido's cruel silence may be Virgil accusing Odysseus of cruelty for initially ignoring his mother.) The scene with Aeneas and his father in the underworld almost directly parallels Odysseus's scene where he finally speaks with his mother:

Three times

[Aeneas] tried to throw his arms around Anchises'  
neck; and three times the Shade escaped from that  
vain clasp—like light winds, or most like swift dreams      (*Aen.* 6.924-27)

Compare Odysseus's description in the *Odyssey*:

Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her,  
three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away  
like a shadow, dissolving like a dream      (*Ody.* 6.235-37)

The *Aeneid's* climax parallels the climax of the *Iliad*: Aeneas, “afame with rage—his wrath was terrible—” (*Aen.* 12.1264), kills Turnus outside Latium while Turnus wears the belt of Pallas,

Aeneas's friend. In the *Iliad*, Achilles—famous for his rage and wrath—kills Hector outside Troy as Hector wears the slain Patroclus's armor (*Il.* 22.368-89). For all Virgil's inventiveness in other places in the *Aeneid*, his imitations are direct and intentional. Logan points out that Virgil's audience would have been "well acquainted with the Homeric texts . . . [and thus would have perceived] the ethical implications of his alterations and shifts of emphasis" (35), and the subtle ways that Virgil implied Roman culture's superiority over Greece's. Logan also points out the important point that Virgil denies his debt to Homer when, first, he never mentions Homer by name, and second, when he sets "the quasi-mythical Musaeus [at the head of] the band of poets in the Elysium described in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*" (21). These alterations, combined with Virgil's characters' frequent vilification of Odysseus, helped to create the *Aeneid* into a Roman cultural document, and they would profoundly affect Dante.

Dante refers to Odysseus throughout the *Commedia*, in overt and subtle ways. Commentators have uncovered his numerous allusions to Odysseus (Ulysses in the *Commedia*), so that Dante's epic, in this regard, resembles the *Aeneid* as much as the *Aeneid* resembles Homer's epics. Gabriel Pihás writes,

It is difficult to overstate the importance of [Odysseus] in the *Divine Comedy*. As many scholars have argued, he is the key to Dante's self-consciousness, and hovers over the entire epic. . . . [The] occasional appearances of [Odysseus] in the *Comedy* are merely points where an invisible but constant parallel between his journey and Dante's journey is made explicit. (2)

The same might be said for Virgil's *Aeneid*. Dante's difference is his far more personal quest in the *Commedia*. That Dante recasts Odysseus's future is a significant detail, for by doing so he exposes his motives for including Odysseus in the *Commedia*, who, it must be remembered, is

the only mythological character who speaks in the entire epic. As Dante crosses the eighth of Hell's nine circles, he encounters Odysseus and Diomedes consumed in fire with other false counselors. Not far away in the center of Hell is Christianity's greatest false counselor: Satan. Both Dante's placement of Odysseus in this circle of Hell and his account of Odysseus's death are significant. First, Dante departs from the Homeric legend when he recasts Odysseus's death from that which Tiresias foretells. The "gentle, painless death, far from the sea . . . / with all your people there in blessed peace around you" (*Ody.* 11.154-56) becomes horrifyingly grotesque when Dante's Odysseus describes how he and his crew, on their fatal journey, saw a newfound land after five months of sighting no land. At first they

celebrated—but soon began to weep,

For from the newfound land a storm had grown,

Rising to strike the forepart of the ship.

It whirled the vessel round, and round again

With all the waters three times, lifting up

The stern the fourth—as pleased an Other—to press

The prow beneath the surface, and did not stop

Until the sea had closed up over us. (*Inf.* 26.129-36)

In this passage, Dante treats Greek beliefs ambivalently, and Odysseus contemptuously. On the one hand, Dante respects the ancient Greek belief of the non-fixity of fate, and makes Tiresias's prophesy only slightly inaccurate: some of Odysseus's people are with him at the end, and Tiresias did mention the sea. On the other hand, the Christian Dante may have disdained clairvoyance, and thus mocked Tiresias's foresight to Odysseus's detriment. Doing so makes Odysseus absurd for trusting in a fate he could have no control over. Odysseus also becomes

once again an example of hubris and pride—condemned in Christianity as much as in Rome and Homeric Greece—and receives appropriate punishment here as in the *Odyssey*. Dante cements Odysseus’s utter forlornness when he describes his ignorance of any god whom he can implore for salvation. The “Other” who Odysseus conceives as he grasps his fate could be any one of the gods, all of which are false in Dante’s cosmology. Dante’s Odysseus is thus utterly alone at the end of his life, and on the crest of an illusion.

While Dante’s treatment of Odysseus results partly from Virgil’s treatment in the *Aeneid*, Dante’s own identification with Odysseus is the stronger influence. W. B. Stanford describes how Homer had emphasized Odysseus’s characteristic desire for knowledge, for instance by his frequent explorations of newfound islands, and his continual interrogations of other characters (181). Stanford suggests that Dante condemns not only this curiosity in Odysseus, but also

a tendency to over-adventurous speculation and research in [Dante’s] own mind.

[This] would explain the paradoxical feeling of admiration which is evident in

Dante’s portrait of the doomed hero; for even if one accepts the justice of

[Odysseus’s] doom, he remains a figure of majestic nobility. . . . If Dante had

once himself experienced the zest of the intellectual explorer, the lonely joy of a

mind voyaging through strange seas of thought alone, he could hardly have failed

to let some admiration for the Greek spirit remain even when by sending

[Odysseus] to destruction he remorselessly killed the thing he loved. (182)

This suggests the extent to which Dante identified with Odysseus before he began the *Commedia*, and how this identification led to the despair that impelled the epic. Upon beginning the poetic *Commedia* in 1307, Dante had abandoned the intellectual work *Convivio* (1304-1307). When at the beginning of the *Commedia* Dante describes himself as lost in dark woods, “so

tangled and rough / And savage” (1.3-4), he is recalling the irreconcilable intellectual mazes of his philosophical thinking in *Convivio*. This work will haunt Dante throughout the *Commedia*, such as when in Canto XXXIII of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice chides Dante for misunderstanding her because he has been so much schooled in limited philosophical thinking (Mandelbaum et al. 396). Both Richard Jenkyns’s and Gabriel Pihás’s studies in sources for the *Commedia* and for *Inferno* 26 partially map out what could be called Dante’s extensive quest for knowledge. In mapping Dante’s former studiousness, these scholars show how Dante, before conceiving the *Commedia*, set out on his quest for knowledge in the spirit of *studiositas* (Thomas Aquinas’s term for the thoughtful appetite for knowledge [Pihás 11]), hoping his study would lead him toward God. Instead, Dante found himself mired in the sinful *curiositas*, or “ill-advised appetite for knowledge” (11), when he understood that he could hardly attain all knowledge, much less reconcile it all with his faith, within the limited horizon of his life. (Allen Mandelbaum et al. in their commentary on *Purgatorio* make similar distinctions with the *scientia* versus *sapientia* [knowledge versus wisdom] of St. Augustine, whom Dante also knew [396].) The realization that this false pursuit of knowledge separated him from God drove Dante to the despair he describes in *Inferno* 1, so he abandoned his quest for knowledge and submitted to guidance toward God. In this light, *Inferno* 26 becomes a keyhole through which one glimpses the very different Dante who fought to reach the impasse from which his *Commedia* frees him.

Dante indeed concentrates a great deal into *Inferno* 26, basing this canto on his and Odysseus’s parallel quests, his admiration and then derision for Odysseus, his new attitudes on the nature of studiousness, and his own fall from grace. Dante depicts his fall literally in the scene where he strains so intensely to see the fire containing Odysseus and Diomedes that he nearly topples into the pit where they wander: “if I didn’t grip / A rock I would have fallen from

where I stood / Without a push” (26.46-48). Pihás points out how this passage echoes *The Books of Treasure* by Dante’s former friend Brunetto Latini (whom Dante consigns to the seventh circle of sodomites): “When virtue exerts itself beyond its power for no good reason, then it falls perilously” (qtd. in Pihás 4). Dante’s hidden echo of Latini subtly suggests that his fall into despair was the result of his previous *curiositas*. He soon turns highly ironic when his pilgrim reveals that his dangerous curiosity was only about where Odysseus died. Here, Dante does three things: he affirms his new attitudes on studiousness, he recasts Odysseus’s fate in order to scapegoat and discard him, and he shows the foolishness inherent in studiousness by echoing one of Seneca’s letters to Lucilius. Seneca’s Letter 88, as Pihás cites it (5), disparages literary scholarship in general for wasting time in such speculations as the end of Odysseus’ wanderings, which Seneca mentions specifically. When Dante recasts the end of Odysseus’s wanderings as a plunge into a whirlpool, he represents the despair into which his studiousness led him. (It should be remembered that the shape of Dante’s Hell resembles a whirlpool. He and Virgil descend vast circular terraces towards the center, from which they escape through a small cave to the foot of the mountain of Purgatory. Their journey very closely resembles one that a ship might take into a whirlpool.) As it becomes clearer how Dante hangs his frustration and shame on Odysseus, it also becomes clear that Dante is shedding his former self, and liberating himself toward the heights he will attain later in the *Commedia*. When Dante conceives his former model’s ultimate journey ending in drowning, with no salvation, he not only reveals the parallel between his own former quest and Odysseus’s, but he utterly casts away his former guide and his former self that endeavored so strenuously on his former quest. Further, subtle reasons behind Dante’s choice of Virgil for his guide also emerge: Virgil’s vilification of the Roman enemy Odysseus, and his work to usurp Homer, to whom he owed so much, would have been familiar sentiments at this

point for the Italian Dante composing his own epic. Like his model Virgil, Dante also can be said to owe a great deal to the unremitting Odysseus, for it is Dante's failed quest for knowledge, inspired by Odysseus, that led to his despair that impelled the *Commedia*. Shortly after scapegoating and eliminating Odysseus, Dante escapes from Hell in Canto 33, ascending toward salvation and the vision of God to come in Canto XXXIII of *Paradiso*, his reemergence as heavily contrived and thoroughly effective as any of Odysseus's feats.

A multitude of themes and ideologies emerges in charting Odysseus's journey through Western literature. At least, this shows how central his characteristics are to the Western mind, from Homer to today. That so many authors host the wandering Odysseus in their works speaks as much about his appeal as it speaks about his elusiveness. No author seems to be able to satisfactorily define Odysseus, so that he must reappear repeatedly in any number of contexts. Odysseus's multifariousness suits him well for such a career. Virgil and Dante sensed this superhuman quality in Odysseus, which captivated each of them as much as it unnerved him. Each had to treat his character with such ambivalence to manage his own admiration and scorn for him. Virgil had to contend with this admirable enemy in composing his national epic, while Dante had to contend with him artistically and personally, in some ways even spiritually. But neither can get free of him, for Odysseus remains model and guide to both, as central to both of their epics as he was to Homer's. Perhaps neither intended Odysseus to become central to our Western canon through their treatment of him; but Odysseus's infusion into Western literature remains as unavoidable for modern readers far removed from Homer's epics as he was for Virgil and Dante.

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