two Greek heroes, Ulysses (or Odysseus) and Diomedes, two of the warriors most responsible for the defeat and destruction of Troy. In the Odyssey, a sequel to the Iliad, Ulysses was also, like Aeneas and like Dante, a famous exile and a wanderer and a seeker. No wonder Dante is eager to hear how his journeying ended. At Virgil’s request, the overreaching Ulysses describes how he persuaded his comrades to follow him on his final and most ambitious (and fatal) voyage.

Rejoice, O Florence, for so great have you grown that your wingspan extends over land and sea, and even through Hell your name is known.

Among the thieves I found five who were your citizens, which fills me with shame and hardly lifts you to heights of honor.

But if dreams we have near morning are true, you will feel, before too much time goes by, what Prato, and others, crave for you.

Were it done now, it would be none too soon, and would that it were, since it must be done and will weigh on me more as my life wears on.

We left that place, and my leader climbed the same stairs that the jutting stones had made for our descent. Then he hoisted me up, and we made our solitary way through the rocks and along the splintered ridge where the foot could not advance without the hand.

I grieved then, and I grieve again now when I turn my mind to what I saw there, and now I rein in my native genius.
perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;  
sí che, se stella bona o miglior cosa  
m’ha dato ’l ben, ch’io stessi nol m’invidi.

Quante ’l villan ch’al poggio si riposa,  
nel tempo che colui che ’l mondo schiara  
la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,  
come la mosca cede a la zanzara,  
vede lucciole giù per la vallea,  
forse colà dov’è vendemmia e era:  
di tante fiamme tutta risplendea  
l’ottava bolgia, sí com’io m’accorsi  
tosto che fui là ’ve ’l fondo parea.  
E qual colui che si vengiò con li orsi  
vide ’l carro d’Elia al dipartire,  
quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi,  
che nol potea sí con li occhi seguire,  
ch’el vedesse altro che la fiamma sola,  
sí come nuvoletta, in só salire:  
tal si move ciascuna per la gola  
del fosso, ché nessuna mostra ’l furto,  
e ogne fiamma un peccatore invola.  
Io stava sovra ’l ponte a veder surto,  
sí che s’io non avessi un ronchion preso,  
caduto sarei giù sanz’ esser urto.  
E ’l duca, che mi vide tanto atteso,  
disse: “Dentro dai fuochi son li spiriti;  
catun si fascia di quel ch’elli è inceso.”

“Maestro mio,” rispuos’ io, “per udirti  
son io piú certo; ma già m’era avviso  
che così fosse, e gia voleva dirti:  
ché è ’n quel foco che vien sí diviso  
di sopra, che par surger de la pira  
dov’Eteòcle col fratel fu miso?”

Rispuose a me: “Là dentro si martira  
Ulisse e Diomede, e cosí insieme  
a la vendetta vanno come a l’ira;

To keep it from running where virtue won’t lead,  
so that if a kind star or something yet better  
has endowed me with wit, I might not abuse it.

In the season when he who lights the world  
lingers, hiding his face least from us,  
and at twilight the fly yields to the mosquito,  
A shepherd resting on a hill will see  
swarms of fireflies twinkling along the valley  
where perhaps he plows, perhaps gathers grapes—  
With so many flames was the entire Eighth Trench aglow, as I realized when I reached the point  
where I could see all the way to the bottom.  
And as the prophet who was avenged by bears  
saw Elijah’s chariot when it took flight,  
the horses rising straight up to heaven  
Faster than his eyes could ever follow,  
so that all he could see was a little cloud  
of shooting flame ascending the sky,  
So too each flame moved along the gullet  
of this trench, for not one betrayed its theft,  
though each stole away a sinner inside.  
I was standing on the bridge, leaning out to see,  
and had I not caught hold of a pier of rock  
I would have fallen below without a push.  
And my guide, seeing me so intent,  
explained, “The spirits are inside the fires.  
Each robes him self with that which burns him.”

“Master,” I replied, “hearing you say so  
makes me certain, but I had already thought  
that this was the case and was about to ask:  
Who is in that fire so cleft at the top  
that it seems it could have risen from the pyre  
where Eteocles and his brother were laid?”

He answered me: “Ulysses and Diomedes  
are tormented there, eternal comrades  
in punishment as once they were in wrath.
Within their flame they lament the Wooden Horse, the stratagem that opened the gates of Troy through which the noble seed of Rome set forth.

Trapped within they lament the craft by which Deidamia still mourns Achilles in death, and for the stolen Palladium they pay the price.”

“If they are able to speak from within those burning tongues, I pray you, Master, and multiply my prayer a thousand times, Do not refuse to let me wait here until the horned flame comes near. You see how strongly desire inclines me toward it.”

And he said to me: “Your prayer is praiseworthy, and so I grant it. But see that you restrain your tongue And let me do the talking. I understand just what you want, but because they were Greeks they might be scornful of what you would say.”

When the double flame came close enough that it seemed to my guide the right time and place, I heard him speak in a manner like this: “O you who are paired within one fire, if I deserved anything of you while I lived, desired anything of you either great or small, When in the world I wrote high poetry, stop for a moment, and let one of you tell where he wandered lost and met his death.”

The greater horn of that ancient flame began to quiver and murmur low as if it were a candle vexed by the wind; And then, wagging its tip back and forth as if it were a speaking tongue, the flame flung out a voice and said, “When I left Circe, who had held me back a year or more on her isle near Gaeta, before Aeneas gave it that name,
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;
ma misi me per l’alto mare aperto
sol con un legno e con quella compagna
piccola da la qual non fui diserto.
L’un lito e l’altro vidi infin la Spagna,
fin nel Morrocco, e l’isola d’i Sardi,
e l’alte che quel mare intorno bagna.
Io e’ compagni eravam vecchi e tardi
quando venimmo a quella foce stretta
dov’ Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi
acciò che l’uom piú oltre non si metta;
da la man destra mi lasciai Sibilia,
da l’altra già m’avea lasciata Setta.
‘O frati,’ dissi, ‘che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti a l’occidente,
a questa tanto piccola vigilia
d’i nostri sensi ch’è del rimanente
non vogliate negar l’esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente.
Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.’
Li miei compagni fec’ io sí aguti,
con questa orazione 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.
Tutte le stelle già de l’altro polo
vedea la notte, e ’l nostro tanto basso,
che non surgèa fuor del marin suolo.

Neither the sweet thought of my son, nor reverence
for my old father, nor the love I owed

Penelope and that would have made her glad

Could overcome my burning desire
for experience of the wide world above

and of men’s vices and their valor.

I put forth on the deep, open sea
with one ship only, and a skeleton crew

of companions who had not deserted me.

I saw one coast, then another, as far as Spain,
as far as Morocco; I saw Sardinia

and the other islands lapped by the waves.

My crew and I were old and slow
when we pulled into the narrow straits

where Hercules had set up his pillars

To mark where men should not pass beyond.

I had left Seville on the starboard side

and off the port left Ceuta behind.

‘Brothers,’ I said, ‘who through a hundred

thousand perils have reached the West,
do not deny to the last glimmering hour

Of consciousness that remains to us
experience of the unpeopled world

that lies beyond the setting sun.

Consider the seed from which you were born!

You were not made to live like brute animals

but to live in pursuit of virtue and knowledge!’

This little speech steeled my crew’s hearts

and made them so eager for the voyage ahead

I could hardly have restrained them afterward.

We swung the stern toward the morning light

and made our oars wings for our last, mad run,

the ship’s left side always gaining on the right.

All of the stars around the opposite pole

now shone in the night, while our own was so low

it did not rise above the ocean’s roll.
Five times had we seen it wax and wane, 
the light on the underside of the moon, 
since we began our journey on the main, 132
And then a mountain loomed in the sky, 
still dim and distant, but it seemed to me 
I had never seen any mountain so high. 135
We shouted for joy, but our joy now 
turned into grief, for a whirlwind roared 
out of the new land and struck the ship’s prow. 138
Three times it spun her around in the water, 
and the fourth time around, up the stern rose 
and the prow plunged down, as pleased Another, 141
Until above us we felt the waters close.”