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Presented here is an English translation of *Inferno* 26, lines 34 through 42.

"Even as he who was avenged by bears
saw, as it left, Elijah's chariot—
its horses rearing, rising right to heaven—
when he could not keep track of it except
by watching one lone flame in its ascent,
just like a little cloud that climbs on high:
so, through the gullet of that ditch, each flame
must make its way; no flame displays its prey,
though every flame has carried off a sinner."

(Allen Mandelbaum, 1980)

The following passage describes the ascension of Elijah to Heaven (from II Kings 2: 9-13).

n.b. Elias is Elijah, and Eliseus is Elisha

"And when they were gone over, Elias said to Eliseus: Ask what thou wilt have me to do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Eliseus said: I beseech thee that in me may be thy double spirit. And he answered: Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless if thou see me when I am taken from thee, thou shalt have what thou hast asked: but if thou see me not, thou shalt not have it. And as they went on, walking and talking together, behold a fiery chariot, and fiery horses parted them both asunder: and Elias went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Eliseus saw him, and cried: My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the driver thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own garments, and rent them in two pieces. And he took up the mantle of Elias, that fell from him: and going back, he stood upon the bank of the Jordan."

Inferno 26 arrives at an apparent lull in the action experienced in the preceding three cantos. Following Dante's expression of reproach for the sinners associated with his beloved city, we encounter two similes that set the stage for Dante's rendition of Ulysses's demise. The first simile is that of a bucolic scene in which a peasant looks down on a valley of fireflies in full summer. The second is a biblical allusion to Elijah and his disciple Elisha. Together, these two similes provide a means of framing the story Ulysses tells Virgil and relating its moral significance to the poet's own opinions. Dante appears to take advantage of the relatively relaxed progress of his descent in Canto 26 to stop and question his own talents and perhaps admonish both his reader and himself to avoid the perils that accompany arrogance and the blind pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is not enough to focus primarily on the history of the tremendously talented Ulysses as Dante presents him to discern Dante's attitude towards Ulysses. It is the allusion to Elijah and Elisha that colors in Dante's interpretation of the sins of the figure of Ulysses, as he would have known him from Ovid's Metamorphoses Book 13—a source in which Ulysses's intellect is deftly demonstrated through his debate with Ajax.

While I am primarily focused on Dante's choice to include Elijah and Elisha in the run-up to the conversation Virgil engages in with Ulysses, we should first acknowledge the function served by Dante's bucolic scene in lines 25 through 33. The scene physically places Dante in the peasant's position above the souls swarming below in the Eighth Pouch. In this relatively restful canto, he is in a position free of harm, perched upon the ridge of a valley. From his vantage point *above*, he is an ostensibly morally superior observer to those who float below. We should recall that Dante introduces Canto 24 by setting up a winter scene, which also takes place on the farm. In that previous canto, Dante tells us that the farmer "here and there complains like some poor wretch who doesn't know what can be done, and then goes out again and gathers up new hope" (24.10-12). And in Canto 26, Dante has his peasant gathering grapes and tilling the land (26.30). Thus, Dante's farmer helps to humble him and "curb" his talent, as he expresses his intentions to do here and going forward (26.21). Yet, we should not go so far as to say Dante sees himself in the farmer. In fact, the inclusion of the peasant in Canto 26—the first of the two similes I am focusing on—actually serves to produce imagery and associations that force us to acknowledge Dante's apparent sympathy for both Ulysses

and Elisha, for he is too condemnatory of the farmer to truly associate with such a simple character. That Dante is an elite intellectual and his peasants are mere abstract representations of those who are clearly cherished by God should prompt us to read further into the historical figures presented in Canto 26. Rather than argue, as other commentators have, that Dante does or does not aspire to emulate Ulysses, or instead argue that Dante has included Elisha merely to censure the violence against the children slain by bears, I would like to suggest that Elisha's inclusion here demonstrates Dante's personal struggle with reconciling his own desire to be both close to God and to abandon all in the pursuit of truth.

While Dante waits up above the glittering flames moving about in "the eighth abyss," we encounter Dante's biblical allusion to Elijah and Elias. In fact, as Margherita Frankel points out in "The Context of Dante's Ulysses: The Similes in Inferno XXVI, 25-42," this allusion begins by referencing a biblical figure without explicitly naming him. Such a circuitous way of placing a figural context in the reader's mind usually indicates that Dante is expressing his opinion of a figure and his earthly actions. Thus, it is reasonable to approach this second simile expecting it to be far from neutral. The Elijah and Elias material in the II Kings 2 that our poet draws upon provides Dante with an opportunity to highlight the distinction between the various sins Ulysses and Diomedes committed, one the one hand, and the praiseworthy pursuit of knowledge Cicero extols, on the other—a motif displayed in the parable Ulysses delivers. The significance of Dante's allusion to these two prophets can first be approached through a close reading of the imagery and physicality of the scene it accompanies.

As was previously mentioned, Dante is situated on a precipice from which he nearly fell as he "leaned straight out to see" (43). This positioning, reinforced by the bucolic simile involving a peasant on a humble hillock (*poggio*), is curiously opposite to that of the stage direction found in Elijah's ascension to heaven. In the original context where Elias and Elijah part ways, "Elias went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (II Kings 2: 11-12). If we are to make use of this immediate change in orientation—ascension to heaven, away from the watchful Elisha, versus ascension from the valley towards Dante, our speaker and observer—then we can look to the pairing of Elijah and Ulysses as antithetical figures. Elijah's renown is evident, as Rev. W. G. Keady states in "The Typical

Significance of Elijah and Elisha," appearing in *The Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review*: "The place of Elijah is considered as adequately established when it is said that he was the restorer of Israel to God's covenant, and that he is to be placed side by side with Moses as one of the ruling and representative characters of the old dispensation." Elijah is truly an unimpugnable character. However, the directionality of Elijah's ascent to heaven, and then Ulysses's plunge into the sea and ascent from the Eighth Pouch to our observer Dante, does not resolve the poet's moral stance. Certainly, God receives an ascending Elijah in a fiery chariot, having judged him favorably. So too, Dante receives (and therefore judges) Ulysses as he ascends in this canto—his fiery cloak's visuals reinforced by the transition from the peasant's fireflies to the concealing flames through which Dante's vision is unable to penetrate while Ulysses speaks. Whether Dante views the hubris and fatal pursuit of knowledge or the false counsel that Ulysses gave as the greater sin can better understood by turning to the unnamed biblical figure—Elisha.

Elisha, the disciple of Elijah who in II Kings 2: 9 beseeches his mentor for a double portion of his spirit, must relate to Dante in some way, for immediately following Elisha's simile, the first person is resumed (26.43). Elijah replies to Elisha's bold request in the next verse, saying "Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless if thou see me when I am taken from thee, thou shalt have what thou hast asked: but if thou see me not, thou shalt not have it" (II Kings 2: 10). Dante does not include this significant detail from Elijah's departure, but instead chooses a scene that almost directly follows Elisha's acceptance of the physical and metaphorical mantle that fell from Elijah during his ascent to Heaven. Elisha, on his way to Bethel, encounters 42 little children who jeer at him; he immediately curses them in the name of the lord and continues on his way (II Kings 2: 23-35). Though the scene is presented matter-of-factly, as many violent scenes in the Bible are, Dante is perhaps troubled by the violence that God has deemed just. His inclusion of this singular act of violence, at the exclusion of the many good works that can be attributed to Elisha, which include the resurrection of a dead child as Margherita Frankel reminds us, suggests Dante's condemnation of over-stepping the newfound power that Elisha has just been granted. It is possible that Dante does not believe Elisha surpassed Elijah, and therefore did not receive a double portion of his spirit. I find it easy to agree with Margherita Frankel's view that, "Elisha, though protected to some extent by God's irrevocable election as His

prophet, had nonetheless committed an analogous transgression. He had wickedly arrogated for himself, for the sake of his wounded ego, a power that had given him solely to serve God" (115). Maybe Dante's failure to see through the flames was a difficulty the poet believes Elisha experienced as well—preventing him from receiving the double portion of spirit he requested. This theory would then suggest that Dante is making a point here to warn against attempts to surpass one's mentors, let alone step outside the bounds God has set on the talents that he gifts.

In Canto 26, lines 23 through 24, Dante brings up the notion of humility. It is as if the poet wishes to acknowledge two sins for which his preceding cantos may very well incriminate him: daring to travel too far on his path for knowledge; and seeking to surpass the mentor figures we have encountered, such as Brunetto Latini and Dante's guide, Virgil. In Canto 15, for example, we see Dante speak highly of Brunetto Latini while he places his mentor physically—and therefore figuratively—below him during their conversation. And naturally, following the fantastic account Dante provides of the metamorphoses in Canto 25, our poet might be self-aware of his own arrogance as well as the inability of a disciple to receive a "double portion" of his mentor's talent. Dante may be catching himself here for his words on line 97 in Canto 25: "Let Ovid now be silent". His conclusion of Canto 26 with Ulysses's demise at the bounds of the known world should be sufficient evidence that the poet's focus was on the limits God places on Cicero's "nobler aspect" of the mind (Singleton Commentary, 26.90-110)—the unquenchable thirst for knowledge. The allusion to Elisha helps to emphasize this moral dilemma Dante wrestles with, for he likely sees himself as the receiver of a mantle—his "ingengno." Perhaps more than in any other Canto, Dante sees himself participating in the *contrapasso* corresponding to Ulysses and Diomedes's station in hell; if not for fraudulent counsel, he fears inheriting Ulysses' mantle for failing to steer away from the knowledge forbidden by God. Dante is neither counterpart to Ulysses nor counterpart to Elisha in this Canto: he draws from the mistakes of both to help guide himself forward in his task as narrator and scholar, bounding his ambition on the one side with Ulysses's tale, and acknowledging the power he does wield with Elisha's reception of the mantle on the other.

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