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Ulysses' Last Voyage—A Reply

Readers of Mr. Robin Fulton's note on the translation of the *Inferno* canto xxvi¹ may be interested in the following information. In 1954, newly settled in Edinburgh, I was aware that I had a longish poem of various levels of meaning to write. I didn't know what it would be, but knew that I lacked the technique to cope with it. Following my usual practice, I put myself to school with a master of allegorical narrative by translating the whole of the *Inferno* into Scots. The object of the exercise, which took only six months, was to work in a Scots allegorical narrative medium. This canto is the only one I have published; it succeeds better than the others because it is Homeric, not Dantesque. I took my queue for the unrhymed triplets from Eliot's use in the *Four Quartets*. Italian is much richer in rhyme than Scots, and I knew my own poem would be unrhymed.

Two years after doing the Dante paraphrase, my own theme came to me—the Titanic—and yet another two years passed before, in 1958, I did the first draft of my poem *The Ship*. Reviewers—those who did not ignore it—called it an "allegory" much as one might call a seal a fish. They were up against something entirely new but resembling, superficially, something old. *The Ship* is not an allegory: an allegory imposes an abstract form on reality by creating a fictive tale to concretize abstract ideas; *The Ship* does the opposite. It takes a piece of raw reality and works out the meanings inherent in it—allegory is theological, *The Ship* is scientific in approach. I call the method (after Dante's "polysemous allegory") "polysemous veritism."

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¹ See *SSL*, II (April 1965), 251-257.