Tragedy and History in the *Divina Commedia*
neither my fondness for my son nor pity
for my old father nor the love I owed
Penelope, which would have gladdened her,
was able to defeat in me the longing
I had to gain experience of the world
and of the vices and the worth of men.
Therefore, I set out on the open sea
with but one ship and that small company
of those who never had deserted me.
I saw as far as Spain, far as Morocco,
along both shores; I saw Sardinia
and saw the other islands that sea bathes.
And I and my companions were already
old and slow, when we approached the narrows
where Hercules set up his boundary stones
that men might heed and never reach beyond:
upon my right, I had gone past Seville,
and on the left, already passed Ceuta.

‘Brothers,’ I said, ‘o you, who having crossed
a hundred thousand dangers, reach the west,
to this brief waking—time that still is left
unto your senses, you must not deny
experience of that which lies beyond
the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled.
Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge.’
I spurred my comrades with this brief address
to meet the journey with such eagerness
that I could hardly, then, have held them back;
and having turned our stern toward morning, we
made wings out of our oars in a wild flight
and always gained upon our left—hand side.
At night I now could see the other pole
and all its stars; the star of ours had fallen
and never rose above the plain of the ocean.

Five times the light beneath the moon had been
rekindled, and, as many times, was spent,
since that hard passage faced our first attempt,
when there before us rose a mountain, dark
because of distance, and it seemed to me
the highest mountain I had ever seen.
And we were glad, but this soon turned to sorrow,
for out of that new land a whirlwind rose
and hammered at our ship, against her bow.
Three times it turned her round with all the waters;
and at the fourth, it lifted up the stern
so that our prow plunged deep, as pleased an Other,
until the sea again closed—over us.”

2. From “Ulysses” – Alfred Lord Tennyson

Come, my friends,
’T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

3. *Inferno* 1.1-3

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood
for the straight way had been lost


“O Buondelmonte, through another’s counsel,
you fled your wedding pledge, and brought such evil!
Many would now rejoice, who still lament,
if when you first approached the city, God
had given you unto the river Ema!
But Florence, in her final peace, was fated
to offer up—unto that mutilated
stone guardian upon her bridge—a victim.
These were the families, and others with them:
the Florence that I saw—in such repose
that there was nothing to have caused her sorrow.
These were the families: with them I saw
her people so acclaimed and just, that on
her staff the lily never was reversed,
nor was it made bloodred by factious hatred.”

5. *Inferno* 1.88-111

You see the beast that made me turn aside;
help me, o famous sage, to stand against her,
for she has made my blood and pulses shudder,”
“It is another path that you must take,” he answered when he saw my tearfulness, “if you would leave this savage wilderness; the beast that is the cause of your outcry allows no man to pass along her track, but blocks him even to the point of death; her nature is so squalid, so malicious that she can never sate her greedy will; when she has fed, she’s hungrier than ever. She mates with many living souls and shall yet mate with many more, until the Greyhound arrives, inflicting painful death on her. That Hound will never feed on land or pewter, but find his fare in wisdom, love, and virtue; his place of birth shall be between two felts. He will restore low-lying Italy for which the maid Camilla died of wounds, and Nisus, Turnus, and Euryalus. And he will hunt that beast through every city until he thrusts her back again to Hell, for which she was first sent above by envy.

6. Purgatorio 33.31-45

And she to me: “I’d have you disentangle yourself, from this point on, from fear and shame, that you no longer speak like one who dreams. Know that the vessel which the serpent broke was and is not; but he whose fault it is may rest assured—God’s vengeance fears no hindrance. The eagle that had left its plumes within the chariot, which then became a monster and then a prey, will not forever be
without an heir; for I can plainly see, 
and thus I tell it: stars already close 
at hand, which can’t be blocked or checked, will bring 
a time in which, dispatched by God, a Five 
Hundred and Ten and Five will slay the whore 
together with that giant who sins with her.