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The Teaching of Professor Cattani

Professor Cattani was my middle school instructor – in Rome, Italy, 1961 thru 1964- of the subjects of Italian, Latin, History and Geography. She was an unmarried lady from Milan.

As the main instructor, she was teaching 3 to 4 hours for 5 days. When the bell was ringing announcing the end of classes, she kept continuing her class – and we could not go home- as she said that we had to make an extra-effort and study more!!

The constant comment of professor Cattani to the results of tests, or during the parents' conference was: "*you have to put more efforts, you can do more*"; "*your child can do more*".

Professor Cattani was encouraging and, I would say, forcing us to push ourself to go one step beyond what is required or expected.

Her philosophy was "*if you made it, you can do more*": a recipe for continuous, never-ending search to better yourself.

The philosophy of Professor Cattani was connected with the understanding of the character of Ulysses, or Odysseus, the legendary Greek king of Ithaca and the hero of Homer's epic poem the Odyssey. Ulysses also plays a crucial role in the defeat of Troy using the deceitful Trojan horse as illustrated in Homer's Iliad.

The Odyssey describes the adventures of Ulysses, which lasted for 10 years, as he tries to return home after the Trojan War and reassert his place as rightful king of Ithaca.

The trip and the adventures of Ulysses represent the perpetual quest of mankind for knowledge.

Overall, Ulysses – the deceitful hero of Troy and the man who searches for knowledge –means that knowledge and intelligence do not have to be used to betray and defraud people.

Dante notably underpins the contradiction on Ulysses who represents the search of humanity for understanding and knowledge, but who also uses his intelligence to betray and deceive other people.

Hence, the famous phrase with whom Virgilio defines Ulysses, who epitomizes that destiny of human being:

*" Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza"
(Inferno, Canto XXVI)*

The verse constitutes the synthesis of the thought of Dante, who considered the pursuit and attainment of both knowledge and virtue the true reason of human existence.

However, knowledge and virtue must be pursued at the same time; they are integrated and cannot be distinct and disjoint. Knowledge and intelligence cannot be used to

deceive others and derive advantages. For this reason, Dante places Ulysses in Hell among the fraudulent advisers.

Elaine Castillo, an American professor of Filipino origin, provides an additional perspective. In her booklet “Il futuro è decoloniale” (Il Tascabile¹) presented at the International Literary Festival in Rome in 2019, Castillo views Ulysses in the context of colonialism and the alleged superiority of Western civilizations over other civilizations, which became the colonies of European countries and underwent forced transfer of population – mostly black - to countries such as the United States where they were forced to live in slavery.

Castillo derives the colonial cultural setting from the classics. She refers to the Odyssey, in particular the undoubtedly colonial passage, in which Ulysses tells the Phaeacians, the most civilized people of the time, of those monsters who were the Cyclops, unjust and violent, who plant nothing, do not plough, have no assemblies, no laws and live in deep, wild caves.

Ulysses recounts that while Polyphemus is out grazing the flocks, with his companions, he enters the cave and finds lambs closed in pens and cheeses drying and basins of whey. The wild Polyphemus returns and starts his work as a cheesemaker, milking the flocks, curdling half the milk, putting aside the whey, taking care of all his daily tasks, while Ulysses and his men eat the cheese (feta) made by the monster. Ulysses reveals himself asking for hospitality and gifts reserved for guests, but then he blinds Polyphemus, deceptively calling himself Nobody, remaining unpunished without being able to be recognized.

But the life destroyed in every sense, even moral, is basically that of a savage!

1 <https://www.iltascabile.com/letterature/il-futuro-decoloniale/>