

Ulysses *proficiens*. A reassessment of Seneca's reading

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a new reading of Seneca's Ulysses. He will be proven not to stand for the Stoic hero, the symbol of virtue; rather, he will turn out to represent the *proficiens* - those who make any effort to reach virtue, and yet sometimes fail. In this regard, Ulysses is like Seneca himself, in as much as both of them appear to do their best to face the impetuous waves of fortune.

Keywords: Seneca, Ulysses, Stoicism, virtue.

I¹

A few contributions have been entirely devoted to Seneca's philosophical reappraisal of Ulysses.² Despite some minor differences, Seneca is usually portrayed as a supporter of the Stoic reading of this Homeric character.³ From such a perspective, Ulysses would be the symbol of "virtue", ἀρετή, considered through the Stoic lens.⁴ Conversely, the Sirens, for example, would represent the vices that the Stoic sage – Ulysses – should fight and eradicate.⁵

This article aims to put forward a different overall assessment of Seneca's Ulysses. It will try to make the case for a form of 'revisionism' when it comes to Ulysses' philosophical portrait in Senecan writings. The Homeric hero will turn out to represent the *proficiens*, or προκόπτων, not the Stoic sage. Sure enough, Seneca's doctrinal independence and autonomy are well known;⁶ but to the best of my knowledge, this side of his critical allegiance to his sect has not been explored yet. Actually, an accurate picture of Seneca's philosophical reassessment of Ulysses, compared to the common Stoic reading,⁷ should have covered the whole of his literary production; nonetheless, in the following pages the tragedies won't be taken into account: despite their undeniable philosophical profoundness,⁸ the analysis will only deal with some extracts from the *Epistles* and with some other passages belonging to the prose works.

The references to Ulysses in Seneca's production occur within different argumentative contexts. These could be usefully classified as follows. [A] In a first group of texts, Ulysses is mentioned within the description of the features of the Stoic sage, who must be endowed with ἀρετή (*Const. sap.* 2.1). [B] In other passages, the hero is quoted with reference to the ability to isolate oneself from every surrounding distraction (the *voces*), in order to thoroughly focus on oneself (*Ep.* 31; 56; 123). This too should be taken as a form of ἀρετή.⁹ [C] Last but not least, Ulysses' life is sometimes universalized by Seneca, as if it represented what virtually every human being goes through in his own life (*Ep.* 66; 88, 7: *tempestates*

¹ When not otherwise indicated, the translations are mine. I would like to thank Professor Antonella Borgo for her encouragement and the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

² Motto; Clark, 1993, p. 181-187; Perutelli, 2006, p. 79-88; Torre, 2016, p. 704-714. But see all the bibliography quoted in Delle Donne, forthcoming.

³ Motto; Clark, 1993, *passim*; Perutelli, 2006, p. 79 and *passim*; Bonazzi, 2019, p. 6.

⁴ On the Stoic conception of virtue, see Long; Sedley, 1987, p. 383-386; Long, 1989, p. 242-274; Parente, 1993, p. 29-40, 42-43, 49, 55-58, 98-103, 116-122, 125-128, 132-133, 145-146; Lévy, 1997, p. 170-172; Bénatouil, 2009, p. 3-31.

⁵ On the Sirens in Greek literature, see Lanzara, 2007; on their philosophical readings, see Buffière, 1956, p. 380-386.

⁶ Asmis, 2015, p. 224-238. See especially *Ep.* 33.4: *Non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicat*.

⁷ On the Stoic reading of Ulysses, see Buffière, 1956, p. 374-380.

⁸ Chaumartine, 2014, p. 653-672.

⁹ Cambiano, 2001, p. 50: the theme of ἀναχώρησις εἰς αὐτόν reflects the philosophical ability to distinguish what depends on you and what does not depend on you. In other words, virtue entails some form of exclusive concentration on oneself.

nos animi cotidie iactant et nequitia in omnia Ulixis mala inpellit, “the storms of the soul trouble us every day, and depravation drives us towards all of Ulysses’ misfortunes”).¹⁰ Needless to say, the way one counters such ordinary events is symptomatic of virtue, or absence of it. But with regards to all of these employments, it should be since now clear that they do not entail, *ipso facto*, some form of virtue also on the part of the Homeric character. As I have stated above, Ulysses symbolizes the *proficiens*, who strives for virtue.

II

But what is “virtue”, *virtus*, according to Seneca? A deeper understanding of this notion is required, in order to appreciate Ulysses’ role and value in its elaboration. We are provided with a definition of *virtus* in the *Ep.* 113.2 (SVF 3.307 part): *virtus autem nihil aliud est quam animus quodammodo se habens*, “virtue is nothing but a soul in a specific condition”. Like other Stoics, Seneca too claims for the corporeality of virtue, since it is a particular disposition of the material soul;¹¹ to this extent, it belongs to the ‘third genre’.¹² Moreover, it is essentially unique, although it is intrinsically complex.¹³ Third, our notion of what is virtuous – or rather, of what is “good and honest” (*bonum et honestum*¹⁴) – comes from analogical¹⁵ reasoning (*Ep.* 120.4-5). By means of the observation of seemingly virtuous actions, our mind extrapolates the notion of what is good as such; but in as much as every virtuous deed is only imperfectly virtuous, our notion of the ‘virtuous itself’ is inevitably affected by our natural exaggeration (*Natura iubet augere laudanda*, “Nature orders us to exaggerate what is praiseworthy”), or even by a form of self-deception.¹⁶

6

¹⁰ Motto; Clark, 1993, p. 185.

¹¹ See Wildberger, 2014, p. 304; see also D.L. 7.89.

¹² Long and Sedley (1987, p. 177) describe a “disposition” as a “further differentiation of an already qualified thing”. But virtue may be taken to belong also to the second genre in as much as virtue may be considered “directly in relation to the individual’s substrate”.

¹³ Seneca, 2007, p. 327. The scholar ventures to say that an Aristonian conception of the unity of virtue might be present to Seneca’s mind. See *Ep.* 66. 6-7: [...] *talis animus virtus est. Haec eius est facies, si sub unum veniat aspectum et semel tota se ostendat. Ceterum multae eius species sunt*, “Virtue is a soul in this kind of state. This is its aspect, if it is taken in with one glance and if for once it shows itself thoroughly”.

¹⁴ *Honestum* is Seneca’s rendering of the Stoic term καλόν, which is defined by Diogenes Laertius (7.101) as follows: Λέγουσι δὲ μόνον τὸ καλὸν ἀγαθὸν εἶναι [...] εἶναι δὲ τοῦτο ἀρετὴν καὶ τὸ μετέχον ἀρετῆς, “They maintain that only what is morally beautiful is good [...] and that the latter is virtue and what participates in it”.

¹⁵ The word comes from the rhetorical and grammatical traditions. But the notion of analogy is widely used also in the Stoic accounts of concept formation. Nonetheless, Inwood (Seneca, 2007, p. 324) is surely right when he states: “Although analogy is part of the standard Stoic language of concept formation, it seems not to be used in the same sense here as in the principal doxographical texts.” I set out to consider this interesting employment of the notion of analogy in another article.

¹⁶ See Seneca 2007, p. 324-325: “Evidently we derive our conception of moral perfection from our experience of admirable deeds. Yet, in accordance with conventional Stoic theory, Seneca recognizes

The essential features of the really virtuous man – the sage – are identified by Seneca with the four canonical virtues of justice, wisdom, fortitude, and temperance (120.11);¹⁷ their combination paints the picture of the Roman *vir bonus*:¹⁸

[T1] *Hanc in partes divisimus; oportebat cupiditates refrenari, metus comprimere, facienda provideri, reddenda distribui; comprehendimus temperantiam, fortitudinem, prudentiam, iustitiam et suum cuique dedimus officium. Ex quo ergo virtutem intelleximus? Ostendit illam nobis ordo eius et decor et constantia et omnium inter se actionum concordia et magnitudo super omnia efferens sese.*¹⁹

We divided it into parts: it was appropriate to curb desires, suppress fears, show good sense in action, distribute what ought to be allotted; we grasped self-control, bravery, good sense, and justice, and assigned to each its own sphere. (trans. by Inwood (SENECA, 2007))

So, virtue amounts to an even and continuous condition of thorough psychic self-coherence,²⁰ which remains unshaken regardless of every external happening whatsoever. Moreover, it can be equated to knowledge,²¹ that is an art of life too.²² So, were Ulysses to legitimately symbolize the sage, he should prove himself to be endowed with each of those four virtues, since they are all coessential; conversely, if he turns out not to be virtuous in some respects, he should be considered as thoroughly unvirtuous (or rather, as a *proficiens* – see

that virtually no observed act is actually virtuous in the narrow Stoic sense of the term. Hence there must be a kind of extrapolation from 'good' deeds to perfection. Treating such deeds 'as though they were perfect' involves a form of self-deception".

¹⁷ But see Classen, 2000, p. 275-294 for a detailed description of the Senecan virtues.

¹⁸ Wildberger, 2014, p. 317.

¹⁹ See also the description offered at 66.5-8.

²⁰ See also Cic. *Fin.* 3.21. On these features of the *perfecta virtus*, see Classen, 2000, p. 277.

²¹ This is quite a complex identification: see *Ep.* 31.6, 31.8, 74.29, 88.28, 89.5, 95.56. These passages are absolutely in line with Stoic doctrine. On this issue, Seneca is particularly rigorous in the *Ep.* 90.46, where he rules out the possibility that ancient men could be virtuous properly speaking; virtue cannot belong *nisi* (animo) *instituto et edocto et ad summum adsidua exercitatione perducto*, "but to a soul well educated and improved at the foremost by means of continuous training". Pace Wildberger, 2014, p. 309, there is no contradiction with the school on this point, for Seneca does admit that something like a *virtutis materia* – a potential virtue – could be present in those early men. What they lacked was only education.

²² See Cambiano, 2001, p. 51. This is the *summum bonum* according to Seneca: see *Ep.* 31, 8. On Seneca's flexibility in the employment of the Stoic notion of 'highest good', see Wildberger, 2014, p. 302-303. Note that knowledge deals with divine things (*scientia [...] et ars, per quam [...] divina noscantur*) because following nature amounts to following the divine rationality of nature, which is represented by God. Seneca is fully committed to this tenet: Wildberger, 2014, p. 309. So, in as much as Stoic virtue amounts to complying with nature (*naturam sequi*), it turns into assimilating oneself to God (*deum sequi*, *Ep.* 96.2). On this theme, see Russell, 2004, p. 241-260 (esp. 251 and ff.).

below). For, however paradoxical this reasoning might seem, the rigor of Stoic ethics necessarily implies a condition of either virtue or vice to be realized; and Seneca is orthodoxically committed to this account.²³ In the middle, only a dynamic and hence incomplete condition is left, which is nonetheless vicious: the efforts made by the *proficiens*.²⁴ So, were Ulysses not to be Stoically virtuous, in the best-case scenario, his viciousness might be symptomatic of an ongoing moral improvement; he would be the symbol of the *proficiens*. To test his wisdom, it will be sufficient to take the two following criteria into account: 1) whether he is always committed to carry out 'convenient' acts under the given circumstances; 2) if he undergoes passions, which are intrinsically immoderate and excessive.²⁵

III

As far as group [A] is concerned, a remarkable document is surely represented by *De constantia sapientis*, 2.1:

[T2] *Pro ipso quidem Catone securum te esse iussi; nullam enim sapientem nec iniuriam accipere nec contumeliam posse, Catonem autem certius exemplar sapientis viri nobis deos immortalis dedisse quam Ulixen et Herculem prioribus saeculis. Hos enim Stoici nostri sapientes pronuntiaverunt, invictos laboribus et contemptores voluptatis et victores omnium terrorum.*

8

For Cato himself I bade you have no concern, for no wise man can receive either injury or insult. I said, too, that in Cato the immortal gods had given to us a truer exemplar of the wise man than earlier ages had in Ulysses and Hercules. For we Stoics have declared that these were wise men, because they were unconquered by struggles, were despisers of pleasure, and victors over all terrors. (trans. by Basore (SENECA, 1928))

Seneca here deals with the kind of characters – either historical or mythical – that should be proposed as true models of the Stoic sage.²⁶ Seneca's privileged choice is Cato,²⁷ who is *certius* ("truer"), as an *exemplar sapientis viri*, than Ulysses

²³ Wildberger, 2014, p. 304-305. See *Ep.* 71.19.

²⁴ Actually, the condition of the *proficiens* is often described with terms and expressions belonging to the semantic field of navigation: Ulysses' journeys might be in the background. See V below.

²⁵ These two conditions must be fulfilled by the real sage: Lévy, 1997, p. 170-176.

²⁶ See Seneca, 2018, p. 87.

²⁷ Asmis, 2015, p. 233-234. See also *Prov.* 6.3. But the allusion is by no means to Ulysses, as Motto and Clark (1993, p. 184) suggest (according to these scholars, another – implausible – allusion to Ulysses could be found in *Prov.* 5.9).

or Heracles.²⁸ Actually – as Seneca puts it in another chapter from the same writing (7.1) – Cato is likely to be superior even compared to the model of the Stoic sage as such (*ipse M. Cato [...] vereor ne supra nostrum exemplar sit*, “I suspect Cato himself to be superior compared to our model of sage”).²⁹

The passage quoted above marks quite a clear-cut caesura from the Stoic sect. As Seneca himself declares, *Stoici nostri* would consider Ulysses and Heracles as the symbols of Stoic virtue, which is clearly adumbrated by the expressions *invictos laboribus, contemptores voluptatis, victores omnium terrorum*.³⁰ But were a thoroughly efficacious *exemplar* to be put forward, no mythical character should ever be mentioned. Not only does an *exemplar* have to be universally valid, but also *certus* – “stable”, “true”. Unfortunately, mythical characters like Ulysses only live up to the first requirement, whereas they do not properly suit the second.³¹ The point is: should a model be *certus*, contemporaneity, or at least chronological proximity, is required; hence, the existence of the ‘candidate’ has to be historically proven. Therefore, even if Ulysses were a Stoically virtuous character (and this will be proven not to be the case), he would not efficaciously work as a model. He is not up to the task of credibly symbolizing the virtuous Stoic sage.

So, in the *De constantia*, Seneca's ‘revisionism’ stems from a necessary methodological question, which needs to be settled before the selection of any potential *exemplar* of the sage.³² In this sense, the choice of the term *exemplar* is likely to be doubly polemical. First of all, Seneca's attitude is surely polemical against his own school, to the extent that he seems to side with those detractors of Stoicism who would consider the canonical Stoic sage as a merely hypothetical construction. According to Seneca, this criticism would not fall short of the truth precisely because the Stoics tend to propose mythical characters like Ulysses as models. But this objection could be neutralized if the Stoic sage were identified with a historically existing figure like Cato – not Ulysses – as Seneca himself does:

[T3] *Non est quod dicas, ita ut soles, hunc sapientem nostrum nusquam inveniri. Non fingimus istud humani ingenii vanum decus nec ingentem imaginem falsae rei concipimus, sed qualem conformamus, exhibuimus, exhibebimus, raro forsitan magnisque aetatium intervallis unum; neque enim magna et excedentia solitum ac vulgarem modum crebro gignuntur. Ceterum hic ipse M. Cato, a cuius mentione haec disputatio processit, vereor ne supra nostrum exemplar sit. (Const. sap. 7.1)*

²⁸ According to Berno (SENECA, 2018, p. 87), there might be an allusion even to Lucretius (5.18-44).

²⁹ SENECA, 2018, p. 139-140.

³⁰ *Terrorum* is Lipsius' correction of *terrarum*, which is the *lectio* of all of the mss. Berno (2016) has proposed to read *ferarum*, which is absolutely plausible.

³¹ See Motto; Clark (1993, p. 185) for a different interpretation.

³² Torre, 2016, p. 710-711.

There is no reason for you to say, Serenus, as your habit is, that the wise man of ours is nowhere to be found. He is not a fiction of us Stoics, a sort of phantom glory of human nature, nor is he a mere conception, the mighty semblance of a thing unreal, but we have shown him in the flesh just as we delineate him, and shall show him – though perchance not often, and after a long lapse of years only one. For greatness which transcends the limit of the ordinary and common type is produced but rarely. But this self-same Marcus Cato, the mention of whom started this discussion, I almost think surpasses even our exemplar. (trans. by Basore (SENECA, 1928))

Second, in light of the employment of *exemplar* in the *Epistles*, where it can translate Plato's words *eidos/idea*,³³ it might sound quite Platonic in the *De constantia*.³⁴ Were this to be the case, the 'revisionism' towards his school would be even more polemical: Seneca would be implicitly equating the Stoic *exemplaria* of the sage to Plato's Forms, thus suggesting their analogous abstractness. Only his own *exemplar* – Cato – would turn out to be thoroughly *certus*, because he is empirically existent and not 'intelligible', as Platonic forms (and mythical characters like Ulysses) are.³⁵

Seneca's revisionism with regards to Ulysses' allegedly Stoic virtue is evident also in another passage, *Epistle* 53.4. There, Seneca ironically describes Ulysses with the *hapax legomenon nausiator*.³⁶ The numerous steps and encounters of his journey did not depend on divine will,³⁷ or on an alleged desire "for the spectacle for its own sake" (αὐτῆς τῆς θέας ἕνεκα, *Diatr.* III 24.12-13),³⁸ as a Stoic

³³ *Ep.* 58, 65.

³⁴ See the commentary by Inwood (SENECA, 2010, p. 158) on *Ep.* 66.4: "After the occurrences of 'exemplars' in the Platonic sense in 58 and 65 this point is unlikely to be accidental. If a Platonic form is an exemplar towards which one looks in one's attempt to create something, then a morally exemplary person like Claranus may also be that to which one looks in trying to create one's own good character. This is how the moral paradigms of human life (both historical *exempla* and exceptional contemporaries) are to be understood."

³⁵ An objection to this reading might be the following: Seneca does not maintain that Ulysses and Heracles are mythical, but only that they belong to another historical period (*prioribus saeculis*). But later in the treatise (2.2) Seneca explicitly maintains that *Cato non cum feris manus contulit, quas consecrari venatoris agrestisque est, nec monstra igne ac ferro persecutus est nec in ea tempora incidit quibus credi posset caelum umeris unius inniti*, "Cato did not grapple with wild beasts – the pursuit of these is for the huntsman and the peasant; he did not hunt down monsters with fire and sword, nor did he chance to live in the times when it was possible to believe that the heavens rested on one man's shoulders" (trans. by Basore (SENECA, 1928)). So, Ulysses and Heracles are likely to belong to a period when people could believe nearly everything – even that heaven was held up on the shoulders of Atlas. As a consequence, both of them are fantastic characters.

³⁶ Also the overall context is markedly auto-ironical; this fact substantiates my reading: Seneca would not have made reference to a Stoic sage, even equating himself to him, in such context.

³⁷ *non tam irato mari natum* alludes to Neptune's hate towards Ulysses (*Od.* 1.20-21): see Berno, 2006, p. 65-66.

³⁸ See Montiglio, 2000, p. 86-105; Bénatouil, 2007, p. 1-21; Bénatouil, 2007, p. 147-173. See also Delle Donne, forthcoming.

like Epictetus would maintain: the Homeric hero turns out to have wandered across seas and peoples for twenty years only because of his seasickness – *nausiator erat*. So, Ulysses is demythologized and humanized by Seneca; he is anything but a model of virtue, because he is portrayed as being unable to endure navigation; in other words, he fails to fulfill the second requirement sketched out in section II above:³⁹

[T4] *Quae putas me passum, dum per aspera erepo, dum viam quaero, dum facio? Intellexi non inmerito nautis terram timeri. Incredibilia sunt, quae tulerim, cum me ferre non possem; illud scito, Vlixem non fuisse tam irato mari natum, ut ubique naufragia faceret; nausiator erat. Et ego quocumque navigare debuero, vicensimo anno perveniam.*

What do you think I suffered as I crawled out over the rough shingle, while I looked for a path and found one? I realized that sailors were justified in fearing the land; it is beyond belief what I endured when I could not endure myself; just understand that it was not because the sea was angered with him that Ulysses was destined to suffer shipwreck everywhere, but he was prone to seasickness. I too will only reach in the twentieth year anywhere I am obliged to sail. (trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

IV

Texts belonging to [B] come from argumentative contexts where Seneca tends to highlight the importance of not being allured by external seducing “voices” (*voces, vox*). The virtue of the Stoic sage resides in his ability to focus on himself, ‘retreating’ within his own interiority; pleasures and their allurements are to be rejected. This train of thought amounts to the theme of the ἀναχώρησις εἰς αὐτόν, “retreat within oneself”, which is absolutely crucial in Seneca’s philosophy.⁴⁰ Now, the role played by Ulysses and the Sirens in all this is rather surprising. In the *Epistle* 31, the “voices” that the sage is never to yield to are compared to the voice of the Sirens; but unlike this voice, which was geographically circumscribed (*non ex uno scopulo; non unum locum*)⁴¹ and hence *blanda*, the “voices” referred to by Seneca might crop up from nearly everywhere

³⁹ As Antonella Borgo has pointed out to me *per litteras*, also in the *Epist.* 108.37 Seneca compares bad teachers of philosophy to a bad helmsman who is not able to run his ship because he suffers from seasickness.

⁴⁰ Traina, 1987, p. 20.

⁴¹ See also 31, 9 (*nec Syrtes tibi nec Scylla aut Charybdis adeundae sunt*) and 14, 8.

(*ex omni terrarum parte; omnes urbes*);⁴² in other words, the latter are “public” (*publica*), and they require a constant and absolutely stable virtuous attitude:⁴³

[T5] *Ad summam sapiens eris, si cluseris aures, quibus ceram parum est obdere; firmiore spissamento opus est quam in sociis usum Vlixem ferunt. Illa vox, quae timebatur, erat blanda, non tamen publica, at haec, quae timenda est, non ex uno scopulo, sed ex omni terrarum parte circumsonat. Praetervehere itaque non unum locum insidiosa voluptate suspectum, sed omnes urbes.*

In short, you will be wise if you shut your ears; it is not enough to block them with wax: you need a stronger obstruction than they say Ulysses used for his companions. The voice that they feared was beguiling but not official; but the voice we have to fear is resounding not from one rock but from every region of the earth. So sail past not just one spot which you suspect for its treacherous pleasure, but all the cities. (*Ep.* 31, 2, trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

12

Moreover, Ulysses is not portrayed as a master of virtue; he hasn't done anything particularly remarkable in plugging the ears of his friends with wax. The *spissamentum* used by Ulysses would not be sufficient against the “public voice” discussed by Seneca: it only represents a temporary and superficial solution, which is not up to the task of the virtuous man ([...] *aures, quibus ceram parum est obdere*). So, Ulysses does not live up to the first requirement of section II.

The same point is made again by Seneca in the *Epistle* 56.15. There, he extensively describes the noises, sounds and voices – the *clamor* – that surrounded him from everywhere. The verb employed at the very beginning – *circumsonat* – already alludes to the songs of the Sirens: it is exactly the same verb which is used in the *Ep.* 31, 2 (see the text quoted above). Now, the *silentium* might seem absolutely fundamental for those who are *in studia sepositi* like Seneca; but it is not necessary, after all. Tranquillity is an inner dimension, which only needs *ratio* to be realized;⁴⁴ so, it can be obtained even if outside distractions and noises

⁴² Note that the opposition between virtue and the challenges posed by the *voces* is carefully conveyed by means of a series of opposed terms and expressions: *blanda/publica, ex uno scopulo/ex omni terrarum parte, unum locum/omnes urbes*.

⁴³ So, something more efficacious than Ulysses' solution: Motto; Clark, 1993, p.183.

⁴⁴ See Cambiano, 2001, p. 52. For such an ‘intellectualistic’ reading of virtue, see also *Ep.* 95, 57: *Actio recta non erit, nisi recta fuerit voluntas, ab hac enim est actio. Rursus voluntas non erit recta, nisi habitus animi rectus fuerit, ab hoc enim est voluntas. Habitus porro animi non erit in optimo, nisi totius vitae leges perceperit et quid de quoque iudicandum sit, exegerit, nisi res ad verum redegerit. Non contingit tranquillitas nisi inmutabile certumque iudicium adeptis; ceteri decidunt subinde et reponuntur et inter*

are all-pervasive:

[T6] *Animum enim cogo sibi intentum esse nec avocari ad externa; omnia licet foris resonent, dum intus nihil tumultus sit, dum inter se non rixentur cupiditas et timor, dum avaritia luxuriaque non dissideant nec altera alteram vexet. Nam quid prodest totius regionis silentium, si adfectus fremunt?*

In fact I am forcing my mind to focus on itself and not be distracted by outside events; let everything be echoing outside, so long as there is no disruption within me, while desire and fear are not quarrelling with each other, while greed and extravagance are not in conflict and neither is bothering the other. For what good is silence in the whole neighbourhood if your emotions are in uproar? (*Ep.* 56, 5, trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

Thus, only someone really *curiosus* would focus on external voices, or on whatever happens outside, without concentrating on himself:

[T7] *Leve illud ingenium est nec sese adhuc reduxit introrsus, quod ad vocem et accidentia erigitur. Habet intus aliquid sollicitudinis et habet aliquid concepti pavoris, quod illum curiosum facit, ut ait Vergilius noster: Et me, quem dudum non ulla iniecta movebant
Tela neque adverso glomerati ex agmine Grai,
Nunc omnes terrent aerae, sonus excitat omnis
Suspensum et pariter comitique onerique timentem.*

It is a flighty mind which has not yet withdrawn into itself, that is aroused by speech and external events. It must contain some anxiety and some element of fear to make it alert, and as Virgil puts it:

Then although no spears alarmed me, or clustering
Greeks in opposing ranks, each breeze and every sound
Now terrified me, fearing on tenterhooks,
Alike for my companion and him I bore.
(*Ep.* 56,5, trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

Even though in [T7] Seneca only quotes some lines from Virgil's *Aeneis* (2.726 ff.), where Aeneas is the speaking character, it should not be illegitimate to

missa adpetitaque alternis fluctuantur.

suppose that also Ulysses could be labelled as *curiosus*, if – as is the case – he *ad vocem et accidentia erigitur*. All in all, he is not able to resist the Sirens' *voce*s: he burns with *curiosity* about their content. Actually, because of his curiosity, he is prone to nearly every accident (*accidentia*) of his journey. But if Ulysses were *curiosus*, he would not be really virtuous. He would turn out to be unable to dominate his own impulses, and hence withdraw from exterior things and retreat within himself. In other words, he would not suit the second requirement of section II.

If this is the case, Seneca might have a passage from Cicero's *De finibus* in mind (5, 49),⁴⁵ where Ulysses is likely to number among those *curiosi* who would *omnia quidem scire, cuiuscumque modi sint, cupere*.⁴⁶ Since Cicero's source is surely Antiochus,⁴⁷ the latter could be the remote source of Seneca too (at least here). This is not to say that Seneca willingly quotes Antiochus; but if he really alludes to Cicero's passage, thus also sharing the description of Ulysses as the symbol of curiosity and not of wisdom, he would be inevitably putting forward a very peculiar reading of Ulysses, compared to the standard Stoic one. Seneca's interpretation would be comparable to a Platonic one – to Antiochus' one, whose philosophy was, by the way, also Stoicizing. Actually, that Seneca's paragraph quoted above might allude to Ulysses, is somehow confirmed by the explicit quotation of Ulysses himself at the very end of the *Epistle*:

14

[T8] *Itaque ego ex hoc loco migrabo. Experiri et exercere me volui. Quid necesse est diutius torqueri, cum tam facile remedium Vlixes sociis etiam adversus Sirenas invenerit? Vale.*

So I shall move out of this place. I wanted to test it and put myself on trial. What need to suffer any longer, since Ulysses found such an easy cure for his comrades against even the Sirens? Keep well. (trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

So, the reference to the *Odyssey* is constant in the letter. Since the usage of *circumsonat*, Seneca has been carefully alluding to the episode of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens; and now, at the closing of the letter, the hero is explicitly mentioned for his remedy against the Sirens – the *spissamentum* quoted in the *Ep.* 31, 2. Hence, a form of *Ringkomposition* is at work in the *Ep.* 56. Moreover, like in the *Ep.* 31, also in the paragraph quoted above Seneca's judgment is not particularly positive. It sounds somehow ironic.⁴⁸ Ulysses' remedy is considered

⁴⁵ For Cicero's presence in Seneca's writings, see Pierini, 2018, p. 13-38.

⁴⁶ On this reading, see Delle Donne, forthcoming.

⁴⁷ Tsouni, 2012, p. 131-150; Bonazzi, 2019.

⁴⁸ Motto;Clark, 1993, p. 181-182.

as *tam facile*: it does not represent a promising and really successful solution for distractions. On the face of it, it is analogous to Seneca's own decision to migrate from the noisy place where he is writing the letter; but *animum debes mutare, non caelum* – as Seneca himself writes in the *Ep.* 28. At least, Seneca has trained himself, he has proven himself: he has tried to resist external distractions in order to focus on himself.⁴⁹ Unlike Ulysses.

An even more explicitly negative assessment of Ulysses is to be found in the *Epistle* 123, where the *voces* are again dealt with by Seneca, along with Ulysses and the Sirens:

[T9] *Hae voces non aliter fugiendae sunt quam illae, quas Ulixes nisi alligatus praetervehi noluit. Idem possunt; abducunt a patria, a parentibus, ab amicis, a virtutibus et in turpem vitam misera nisi turpi spe illidunt. Quanto satius est rectum sequi limitem et eo se perducere, ut ea demum sint tibi iucunda, quae honesta.*

You must flee from these voices as from those which Ulysses did not dare to sail by unless lashed to the mast. They have the same power – they draw you away from your country, from your parents, from your friends, from the virtues, and entice you into a life which is shameful, and if shameful then wretched. How much better it is to pursue the right path and to bring yourself to the point where only what is honourable is satisfying to you. (*Ep.* 123, 12, trans. by Inwood (SENECA, 2007))

Actually, the voices there at issue belong to some “allegedly philosophical persuaders, who stand in opposition to friends, family and generally accepted virtues”.⁵⁰ Someone might tell you not to resist pleasures, but to yield to them. Surely, such “voices” should be rejected, for they are corrupting. The comparison with Homer's Sirens is drawn by Seneca with regards to the effects determined by their words: they might take you away from homeland, family and virtue;⁵¹ precisely the same consequences are brought about by the corrupting *voces* aforementioned. As also Diogenes reports (D.L. 7, 89), there are several factors that can pervert our innate disposition towards virtue, and among them there are also τὰς τῶν ἕξωθεν πραγματειῶν πιθανότητας ἐ τὴν κατήχησιν τῶν συνόντων.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Cambiano, 2001, p. 57 and *passim*.

⁵⁰ Inwood (SENECA, 2007, p. 358), who describes the argument as “for self-interest”.

⁵¹ Motto; Clark, 1993, p. 182-183.

⁵² διαστρέφεται δὲ τὸ λογικὸν ζῶον, ποτὲ μὲν διὰ τὰς τῶν ἕξωθεν πραγματειῶν πιθανότητας, ποτὲ δὲ διὰ τὴν κατήχησιν τῶν συνόντων: ἐπεὶ ἡ φύσις ἀφορμὰς δίδωσιν ἀδιαστρόφους, “When a rational being is perverted, this is due to the deceptiveness of external pursuits or sometimes to the influence of associates. For the starting-points of nature are never perverse” (trans. by Hicks (1925)).

But Ulysses does not seem to embody a model of virtue, when it comes to resisting the alluring voices of the Sirens: according to Seneca, “he did not want to bypass them *unless bound (nisi alligatus praetervehi noluit)*”. This is not what a virtuous hero would do, for the ability to endure and resist is expected to be an *inner habit*, should it be really symptomatic of virtue. The implicit point made by Seneca is that Ulysses would not have gone round the Sirens had he not been bound; but this fact implies that the hero falls short of being Stoically virtuous, or sage.

V

Upon closer reading, texts belonging to [C] do not entail any Stoic virtue for Ulysses. In the *Epistle* 66.26-27, for example, Ulysses is quoted along with Agamemnon only to substantiate the Stoic theory of *oikeiosis*. He is the symbol of the love that everyone should feel for his own homeland precisely because it is *his own* homeland, and not because it is rich or poor; analogously, a parent does not love a healthy child more than a sick one, because they are all *his own* children:

[T10] *Vlixes ad Ithacae suae saxa sic properat, quemadmodum Agamemnon ad Mycenarum nobiles muros. Nemo enim patriam quia magna est amat, sed quia sua. Quorsus haec pertinent? Ut scias virtutem omnia opera velut fetus suos isdem oculis intueri, aequè indulgere omnibus et quidem impensius laborantibus, quoniam quidem etiam parentium amor magis in ea, quorum miseretur, inclinatur.*

16

Ulysses hastened home to the rocks of his beloved Ithaca just as Agamemnon did to the noble walls of Mycenae; for no one loves his homeland because it is great, but because it is his own. What is the relevance of this? To show you that virtue looks upon all its works with the same eyes, as though they were its offspring, is equally kind to all—indeed, is more lavish to those who are struggling, since parental love inclines more towards those whom it pities. (trans. by Inwood (SENECA, 2007))

Ulysses’ sense of belonging is so strong that makes him long for something absolutely unattractive like Ithaca. The point is that what is yours brings about a natural desire of possession, which is thoroughly independent of any potential advantage, or disadvantage, whatsoever.⁵³ Therefore, Ulysses follows a natural

⁵³ SENECA, 2007, p. 170.

inclination; he 'selects' something 'preferable', a *kathekon*;⁵⁴ but this is not enough to conclude to his being really virtuous. An action is virtuous only if it forms part of a whole series of virtuous actions;⁵⁵ the selection of a 'preferable' is not something good as such. Sure enough, the sage is able to turn all of the *kathekonta*, which are like the *virtutis materia*, into a coherent and virtuous whole; so, everyone who strives to become virtuous should *always* try to select 'preferable indifferents'. But from this perspective, in the best-case scenario, Ulysses may only number among those *proficientes* who are on their way towards virtue.

An analogous conclusion can also be drawn from another *Epistle*, *Ep.* 88, where in paragraph 7 Ulysses is explicitly mentioned:

[T11] *Quaeris, Vlixes ubi erraverit, potius quam efficias, ne nos semper erremus? Non vacat audire, utrum inter Italiam et Siciliam iactatus sit an extra notum nobis orbem, neque enim potuit in tam angusto error esse tam longus; tempestates nos animi cotidie iactant et nequitia in omnia Vlixis mala impellit. Non deest forma, quae sollicitet oculos, non hostis; hinc monstra effera et humano cruore gaudentia, hinc insidiosa blandimenta aurium, hinc naufragia et tot varietates malorum. Hoc me doce, quomodo patriam amem, quomodo uxorem, quomodo patrem, quomodo ad haec tam honesta vel naufragus navigem.*

Are you asking the route of Ulysses' wanderings rather than making sure we do not wander forever? I have no time to hear whether he was tossed around between Italy and Sicily or beyond the world known to us (for such a prolonged wandering could not have occurred in so narrow an area); storms of the mind toss us around daily and badness drives us into all the misfortunes of Ulysses. There is no lack of beauty to trouble our eyes, or enemies; on one side are savage monsters gloating over human blood, on the other treacherous charms for the ears, on yet another shipwrecks and so many varieties of evil. Teach me instead how to love my country, my wife, my father, and how I can sail even when shipwrecked towards these honourable destinations. (trans. by Fantham (SENECA, 2010))

The context of this passage is a sharp criticism against erudition. The professors who read Homer tend to focus on unessential and marginal aspects of the text; for example, the reconstruction of the exact geography of Ulysses'

⁵⁴ That honoring one's own homeland is *kathekon* is explicitly stated by D.L. (7.108): Καθήκοντα μὲν οὖν εἶναι ὅσα λόγος αἰρεῖ ποιεῖν, ὡς ἔχει τὸ γονεῖς τιμᾶν, ἀδελφοὺς, πατρίδα, συμπεριφέρεσθαι φίλοις.

⁵⁵ Wildberger, 2014, p. 319-20.

wanderings is absolutely pointless, according to Seneca, for it does not help you not to 'wander' in your everyday life. Ulysses' *tempestates* may be universalized because everyone goes through troubles and difficult events in their own life. Upon closer reading, every episode of Ulysses' wanderings shows him struggling to remain loyal to his homeland, to his wife, to his father. Sure, he often fails; but he still stands there as an example of the *proficiens*, who is expected to face the waves of everyday storms,⁵⁶ always trying to preserve the rectitude of his rationality.

VI

It is now time to draw some conclusions. Seneca's Ulysses has ended up being rather a complex character. But despite some minor differences which depend on the different contexts of the quotations, a coherent reading seems to emerge from all of the Senecan passages discussed so far. Ulysses is the symbol of those who do their best to improve themselves - he stands for the Stoic students who strive to become virtuous. His worst enemies are the *voces* of the Sirens, that symbolize the alluring power of the external distractions. And Ulysses tries to retreat within himself, although he does not succeed in his attempt. At the end of the day, in this respect, he is not that different from Seneca himself, who often wanders from one place to another only to escape his own inner troubles.

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⁵⁶ Hence, the metaphors and the images belonging to the sea, that are quite frequently used with reference to the *proficientes*, are very likely to allude to Ulysses' wanderings. See *ad Pol.* 11.5 (quoted by Torre, 2016, p. 705 n. 6 as alluding to Ulysses): *nullus erit in illis scriptis liber, qui non plurima varietatis humanae incertorumque casuum et lacrimarum ex alia atque alia causa fluentium exempla tibi suggerat.*

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20

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