

LECTURA DANTIS

# PURGATORIO

A Canto-by-Canto Commentary

Edited by

Allen Mandelbaum

Anthony Oldcorn

Charles Ross

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# CANTO I

## Ritual and Story

EZIO RAIMONDI

*Translated by Charles Ross*

The *Purgatorio* opens with a solemn exordium, rich in anticipation and tension, that develops in three stages (1–12). First we are given the graceful but exultant image, dear to the mannerist tradition, of the “waters” and the “little vessel” that will “course” even as it “lifts her sail.” Next, the first-person narrator dramatically (“and what I sing”) offers the firm, clear definition of the theme. Finally, there is an invocation to the Muses recalling, like some mysterious legend, a famous episode in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

One understands that this exordium is rhetorical, and that the principal voice is that of the poet who stands outside the story. But whoever listens closely will not miss that it anticipates the action of the canto by calling into account the persona, or protagonist, of the whole poem before he is named. And this perception of the narrative voice occurs, one notices, not so much because of the passion of the introductory tercets that glances, like a state of mind, at the Dante who has emerged from Hell, but because—with those multiple suggestive registers that make Dante’s symbolism so genial and inventive—the discourse of the poem runs on two planes, one rhetorical and the other, one might say, existential. The “sea so cruel” that has been left behind is not only the sea of “harsh and scannel rhymes,” the “sea” of poetry that will be mentioned later in the *Paradiso*, but also the “dangerous waters” of Hell (*Inf.* 1, 24) and what Dante in the *Convivio* calls the “ocean of our life” that every Christian must traverse to reach his final haven. It is also the same sea that the Hebrews crossed from Egypt—a symbolic sea that gets transformed into “better waters” because,



by a mystery of faith, it prefigures the idea of baptism and, at the same time, the victory of Christ over death.

Only these allusions can explain the profound resonance of a line like “may this poem rise again from Hell’s dead realm” (12), in which the contrast between death and resurrection surges above the rhetorical figures (among other things, we must not forget that, according to Dante, it is Easter Sunday) to remind man of the story of his sin and his redemption and thereby to touch on what it means to return to God, the fundamental theme of the *Purgatorio*. Even the reference to the competition between Calliope and the Pierides, which many critics have seen as only a learned excursus in the text, acquires a new brilliance, if we regard it as an image of a liturgical contest and recall that in Ovid, Calliope chooses as her subject the rape of Proserpina and her return to Ceres from the “forest” of “perpetual spring,” a myth of lost innocence and renewed fertility. In one of those shrewd choices so frequent in the *Comedy*, Dante finds Christian rifts of gold in a classical tale just as, at the beginning of the *Paradiso*, he will resort to the myth of Glaucus and insinuate, among the lower registers of his prologue, the theme and image of the distant terrestrial Paradise. And there, not by chance, Matilda will appear as a pilgrim, like a new, supreme Proserpina.

### The First Inkling of Joy

There is no doubt that when, in Canto XIII, the narrative begins and the figure of Dante the pilgrim takes over from Dante the poet, we already understand the spiritual dimension of the *Purgatorio*. It is a dialectic of death and rebirth, of sterility and blossoming, whose extended rhythm regulates the timing of the cosmos. The first sensation one has, after entering this world reborn into hope, is that of light and of the high heavens, of precious transparencies, “the gentle hue of oriental sapphire.” To the eyes of medieval readers, accustomed to the allusive language of the lapidaries, the qualities associated with sapphires were liberty and purity, as Marbodo, for example, explains in his *Liber lapidum*. But what the gemologists present as abstract archetypes, Dante places into a lively narrative situation at the very moment when the pilgrim lifts his gaze to the serene skies and rediscovers the “joy” of nature and the world of things, after the “air of death” in Hell (16–17). The delight to which the soul returns is not just the joy of a man facing the light of a new day, but also the first inkling of a longer-lasting joy, which will become entirely clear later, at the top of the mountain, when Matilda will suggest, citing the psalm *Delectasti*, that her smile emanates from her knowledge of a divine presence and the joy of contemplating the works of the Most High.

In other words, the world of Purgatory assumes the character of a liturgical situation, and the adventure of the pilgrim takes place against a backdrop of mysterious correspondences, which interpret the history of humankind

in the light of Christ's example and give it an order—just as occurs in the liturgy, following the hours of a day that symbolize the interconnectedness of life, a harmonious collocation of deeds, memories, and rituals. Even the apparition of Venus (19) is tied to a liturgical passage, in that it involves the star Lucifer, which appears in so many Christian hymns as an image of dawn's victory over night. Naturally, however, in the morning time of the *Purgatorio*, the theme is reprised and amplified in a descriptive-epic mode following the pattern of the *Artes poeticae*. Venus is the unnamed object of the periphrasis “the lovely planet that is patroness / of love.” To tie this prologue to that of the *Inferno*, it is necessary to give a sign of the season, Pisces. But Dante does not lose the emotive value of the liturgical Lucifer, which is that of expectant grace. A series of thematic words (19–21) enriches his trembling sense of that salvation represented by the sun: the word “lovely” suggests the idea of a distant but hopeful God. “Eastern” suggests the sacred place of all rituals. “All” the heavens are “glad,” and the sign of the Fish is accompanied by a “veiling,” as in an infant's dream.

Only now, after having set the scene, does the pilgrim say “I” and take on the role of the subject, of the actor who begins (and not without some indirect references to a catechism) a cycle of initiatory purifications. The first action he completes is to circle around, always looking up:

Then I turned to the right, setting my mind  
upon the other pole, and saw four stars  
not seen before except by the first people.

(22–24)

The point of the sentence is to fix attention on those four stars that were seen only by the “first people,” to signal, immediately after, the happiness that seems to him to radiate through the skies of Purgatory and then to turn back, finally, to a sad lament for the earth, where men must live, always deprived of such a vision.

For Dante, as poet, thought almost always precedes sensation, thereby conditioning his affective reaction. The critic who wants to retain emotion as well as meaning must therefore accept the rules of the allegorical art and establish the meaning of those four stars, going beyond the generic lament that humankind is fallen. He must try to grasp the economy of the scene in which Dante apostrophizes, “o northern hemisphere . . . you are a widower!” (26–27). The poem's organization depends on the interpretive level and not on the act that *requires* interpretation. Ideas structure the narrative; they are its thematic elements. From Enrico Proto's essay “Nuove ricerche sul Catone dantesco,” which appeared in the *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 49 (1912), we know that these four stars are symbols of the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, all of which informed men in the terrestrial Paradise before the first sin. But it is Charles Singleton,

in his *Journey to Beatrice* (1958), who showed that since the four cardinal virtues were lost after the Fall, they may not be reacquired, and redeemed, except by individual effort. They are no longer natural, to Dante's disappointment. For Dante, all humanity is in a state of corruption, of permanent loss. It is written in the history of humankind that no one may return to the terrestrial Paradise with the same innocence and rightness that God gave, in the person of Adam, to human beings. Therefore, the widowed northern hemisphere stands as an admonishment, prefiguring the end of the *cantica*, which says that even those who are purified may not return to the uncorrupted state of the "first people." The serene sky, the smile of Venus, the advancing rays of the sun, confer on the landscape of Purgatory—as in the liturgical hymns to morning—a suspended awe, a lightness of innocence and infancy. Yet tension remains. One remembers the night and the cruel seas that accompany the expectation of light, creating an overarching rhythm of penitence and renewed purity.

### A Solitary Patriarch

Certainly a sense of calm mystery suffuses the air. One may note that this mystery takes shape in front of us when, for an instant, the story stops as the pilgrim turns. And it follows him, at a deliberate pace, when Cato emerges from who knows where. Yet to say he emerges is not quite correct. In reality, it is Dante the pilgrim who takes his eyes off the four stars and then sees, beside him, the figure of the "patriarch" (31). The word is unusual, and the adjective "solitary" (*solo*) is cast into relief, in the Italian, by the rhyme. This figure of venerable isolation is the first of the great, suggestive images in the *Purgatorio*. His gravity draws Dante's astonished attention: "His aspect worthy of such reverence / that even son to father owes no more" (32–33).

Dante's *Convivio* mentions the reverence owed to a father. But this reverence takes other courses. In the first place, the atmosphere of this moment will dominate the entire canto. In the second, it gives an expansive sense of Dante's personality as a figure in the poem. Finally, in terms of the immediate story, it creates a frame around a new sense of solemnity in Cato—also "worthy of such reverence" is the sacred sign of the eagle (*Par.* VI, 34–35). We are saying nothing new in noticing that the iconography of Cato derives for the most part from Lucan's *Pharsalia*. But if the long beard, the white skin, and the divided tresses falling on his breast recall the Roman epic (34–36), the *Comedy* also modifies the portrait, substituting for the grays of the original—in which the hair is horrid, unkempt, and filthy—a physiognomy that is severe but luminous. The fact is that Cato, framed by the light of the four stars, joins the traits of the Roman hero to those of a biblical patriarch. Here I am thinking not only of the usual contamination of correlative forms that comes from Dante's knowledge of languages but also of a transfiguration that invests the figure with a more profound value.

Centuries ago the commentator Buti compared Cato to the patriarchs of the Old Testament. But what secret significance in Cato's life accounts for his election in Dante's world and for the dignity he attains in the Purgatory as, so to speak, a lay priest? Cato was a Stoic associated with liberty. Therefore, he has a symbolic relation to freedom from sin. Nonetheless, since he is a pagan, he will not be saved, making him a suitable guardian of Purgatory. It is undeniable that Cato relates not only to Dante as pilgrim but also to Dante as a writer and to his culture. The problem, of course, is that Cato was a suicide. And the answer seems to be that Dante judges him according to Cato's own moral values, those of the Romans, which differ from the ethics of Christians. Cato therefore shines with the "light" of the four cardinal virtues and receives the grace of implicit faith. He is a man who died for the benefit of human society and in a time of discord and ruin, affirming before the world, by his own sacrifice, the supreme law of liberty—not only civil but metaphysical. In his *Monarchy* (2.5), Dante refers to the sacrifice of Cato, the holy victim of the Decii. In the *Pharsalia*, Cato declares that his blood will "redeem" the Roman people and "absolve" them. For Dante, the Cato of the *Pharsalia* is therefore a man of destiny. As he says in the *Convivio*, Cato is, of all men, most fit to signify God, just as Old Testament figures foreshadow and prophetically anticipate Christ's life in the New Testament. Cato no longer plays the role of enemy of Caesar and the Empire (the *Convivio* also leaves this out) but becomes, as a providential figure, through his sacrifice, a shadow that foretells, within the limits of his imperfect action, the true liberation that is Christ. In this sense, it seems legitimate to refer to Cato as a patriarch. But there is more. If we pass from a consideration of Dante's culture to the poetic situation in the poem, where allusions and resonances gradually accumulate, Cato may be one of those figures, otherwise not well defined, who escaped from Limbo when Christ descended there to liberate the patriarchs and make them blessed. Like the patriarchs, but in a halo of glory that preserves the memory of Roman grandeur, he incarnates in the living and unrepeatable substance of his persona the idea of that reawakening from shadows, the victory over the realm of shades, that attended the historically unique resurrection of Christ and, through it, the rebirth of every human being. The first example of the process, naturally, is Dante himself, who leaves the dead air of Hell and returns, in the dawn of grace, to the "pure" skies of Purgatory. And so the theme of resurrection that we saw in the exordium expands within the story, a rich echo of a great event, lending unity to the episodes, situations, and movements of the canto.

## Two Worlds Converse

We may now reduce the dialogue between Cato and Virgil, which occupies half the canto, to a common colloquy between two psychological types, two

souls whose condition must be explored, even as they are reflected by an ingenious and rather unsuitable realism. In truth, even if it is Dante's achievement to have introduced these two individual and historical personalities into his ritual setting and to have made them dramatic and human, their conversation cannot be understood outside a scheme of ceremonial liturgy. Cato is the first to speak, even as he is surrounded by a prodigious "light" from the four "holy" flames. He asks the questions, like one who has been surprised and seeks information, but also like one who wants to provoke someone into taking a position that, at bottom, is an abjuration or renunciation. His allusion to an "escape" from the shadows, even as he begins to speak ("Who are you—who, against the hidden river, / were able to escape the eternal prison?" 40–41), recalls the great ritual of the Exodus.

There follows a series of acts that marks the dynamic center of the canto. Virgil expresses himself with faith and firmness, from narration to peroration, restating some of the conversational formulas that applied to Beatrice in the first canto of the *Inferno*. His tenacity appears in "by way of words and hands and other signs" (50) and extends to the zeugma of "he made my knees and brow show reverence" (51). He releases information, gradually introducing Cato to Dante: "I do not come from my / own self. There was a lady sent from Heaven. . . . This man had yet to see his final evening; . . . I showed him all the people of perdition" (52–64). He unveils his thoughts, in a culminating moment, in a promise of eternity and beatitude:

You know it—who in Utica found death  
for freedom was not bitter, where you left  
the garb that will be bright on the great day.

(73–75)

Then he once more assumes a tone of prayer, re-creating by means of the unlooked-for name of Marcia the sunset memory of old affections. Cato speaks some words about her, but with the tenderness of one who leaves behind him a former communal existence.

Dante's genius was to create a tone that also sets up the clarity of the rest of the dialogue. Those who are convinced that the poet weighed and calculated this transition like to scrutinize the stylistic web created by the words dedicated to Marcia, which combine biblical phrasing ("Marcia so pleased my eyes" [86] recalls *placuit oculis meis* of Judges 14:3) with the structure of antithesis (*mentre ch'i' fu' di là . . . Or che di là*) that Dante found characteristic of Marcia in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, which he also imitated in the *Convivio* (IV 28, 16–17). Certainly what Cato now affirms is the opposite of what Lucan's Marcia says, because he speaks from across an unbridgeable divide, while in the *Convivio*, as in the Latin poem, the aging woman renews her desire for the passion of love. But even reversed, the cadences of Marcia's ancient prayer that shift into Cato's austere discourse retain a discreet, though hidden,

serenity, a memory of old affections that does not contradict the role of judge and patriarch assigned by Dante to the Roman hero. In fact, Cato loses himself in Virgil's overly polite "flattery" (93) that with a slightly allegorical undertone admonishes him that it is useless to compare Marcia to the "lady come from Heaven" (91). Something changes in the tone of Cato's words, something fundamental in his attitude, which becomes no longer that of an inquisitor, following the logic of a ritual, but that of a judge, a teacher, a master of what one might call a cult.

Cato's advice and precepts do not lessen the tension of the scene because, as crisp and imperious as they are ("Go then; but first / wind a smooth rush around his waist and bathe / his face," 94–96), they increase, if possible, the interest and vitality of the narrative and open the prospect of a new adventure with their allusion to the "custodian angel" of Paradise (99). As the dialogue turns to surrounding objects, the setting takes on a new dimension, which now, finally, after the tranquil but rigid and severe remarks of Cato, takes shape before the eyes of the two voyagers, who no longer contemplate the high heavens but consider the ground they must cover. Near them, the landscape seems indistinct, but comforting and familiar. And so the "solitary island" appears, and the breakers, the rushes, the soft and muddy ground, forming an existential design, safe from the faultiness of fleeting emotions. The exactness of the geographic references ("all around / its very base," 100–101) does not exclude an air of prophecy, of friendly mystery, of a supernatural and also inaccessible order. It is fitting, moreover, that Cato is the one to describe the landscape, because in a moment he will vanish, and there is a need to prepare a base for this arcane mystery. His role is to initiate Dante, by means of Virgil's intercession, into the first act of the vast ritual of purification. His words of farewell, which are both a command and an augury ("do not return by this same pass," 106) are complemented by the hopefulness of his announcement (107–108) that the "sun" is rising and that the hillside can now be climbed "more easily."

But the correlations and the symmetries that Dante has associated with the figure of Cato and his appearance on the shores of Purgatory do not stop here. There is one, especially, that no critic can ignore, and it is implicit in the ceremony of the "smooth rush" (95), the "humble plant" (134) that Virgil must gird around the pilgrim. Cato, who introduces Dante to humility, is one of the magnanimous heroes celebrated, in the eloquent pages of the *Monarchia*, for their moral grandeur, their human desire for honor and civil glory. Humility does not oppose magnanimity. Aquinas, in fact, concluded his debate between Christianity and the ethics of Aristotle and the Stoics by explaining that "magnanimitas et humilitas non sunt contraria," because magnanimity derives its dignity from the gifts of God, while humility makes a man consider his own defects (*Summa theologiae*, q. cxxix *De magnanimitate* and cclxi *De humilitate* in the *Secunda Secundae*). Did not Dante read in Lucan that Cato believed men partook of divinity and did nothing

except by the will of God? In the final analysis, therefore, Cato signals the movement from a world in which magnanimity is the unique, supreme comfort for those condemned to live without hope to a cosmos where a soul, having left Hell, might move through humility to grace.

## Movement

Cato disappears from the story rapidly and mysteriously (“with that, he vanished,” 109), even if the landscape makes his vanishing seem natural, almost peaceful. The pilgrim, who had been kneeling, is finally ready, after Virgil has spoken, to celebrate, even in silence, the ritual of purification that awaits him. Here, in the final act of this canto, silence plays a noticeable role, as if to underline the clear, precise movement of the narrative action, hardly disturbed by the quiet tremor of a divine presence. When Dante and Virgil begin to move, time has changed, for in Purgatory time takes on a poetic truth, an enchanted mutability of atmosphere and color, and one’s eye must necessarily pause once again on the countryside, which begins to fill with light and soft breezes:

Daybreak was vanquishing the dark’s last hour,  
which fled before it; in the distance, I  
could recognize the trembling of the sea.

(115–117)

These are beautiful verses. The joyous force of that “vanquishing” and the chaste religious halo of “daybreak” overshadow any commentary. That “in the distance” could have been written by Leopardi.

Nonetheless, a few words on the “trembling” are warranted here, not only to signal the classical tradition that goes back to Virgil (*Aeneid* 7.9, “splendet tremulo sub lumine pontus”), as well as to Ovid (*Heroides* 11.75) and Claudian (*De raptu Proserpina* 2.2–3), but also to all the other uses of “trembling” in Dante, a word that the *Purgatorio* always associates with mysterious becoming, vital suspension, and disposition toward the sacred. One suspects that the “trembling” of Canto 1 is something more than a beautiful image converted by the infinitive form of the verb into a noble substantive, and that its most profound suggestive quality depends on an obscure field of sensations, present as if in a cosmic myth, where sky, water, dawn, light, and plants take root together, and nature, once more associated with humankind, seems to restore him to the suspended purity of childhood. In Dante’s culture, it is a possibility that cannot be excluded.

The pilgrim who descends toward the “lowest bounds” (114) of the plain, at the break of day, truly returns to innocence, as if awakening, after the torpor of nighttime, from that sleep of which he was full, as he says at the beginning of the *Inferno*. The counterpoint that structures the whole canto



and resolves its symbolic allusions into a learned chiaroscuro of motives, recapitulates some of the motives and the tone of the prelude to the *Comedy*. There is perhaps a secret reference, too, to the ocean voyage of Ulysses. The memory of the “lonely slope” (*Inf.* I, 29) flowers only after the “lonely plain” (118), rendering the joy of return more intimate and thoughtful and insinuating into Dante’s stupor a serene consciousness of the weariness that a search for order requires, even where there is grace.

We made our way across the lonely plain,  
like one returning from a lost pathway,  
who, till he finds it, seems to move in vain.

(118–120)

These verses touch on the great theme of Dante’s journey and his discovery of his goal with a cadence that the *Purgatorio* will repeat again, almost as a motif: “We made our way until the end of vespers” (xv, 139); “Our steps were short and slow as we moved on” (xx, 16); “Now we ascended by the sacred stairs” (xii, 115); “we now had reached the summit of the stairs” (xiii, 1). In a landscape now familiar and friendly, even if mysterious, in which solitude leads to hope and not to fear, these movements compose a simply harmony, as if they are naturally obeying a predetermined rhythm: from the “dew” that Virgil’s hand “gently” touches in the grass, to the ritual of the “smooth rush,” to the quiet prodigy that is performed in the “wonder” of the first light of dawn along the “deserted shore.”

One knows because there are several clear linguistic indicators, including the mystery of the golden bough, that Dante concludes the first episode of his initiation with a reference to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, which inspired him. The comparison is imperfect, since the bough represents nothing less than a fertility rite, a bivalent symbol of life itself, but Dante adapts it with extraordinary intuition, placing it in a new spiritual world. This world does not know the pagan experience, as Dante suggests when he writes of the

deserted shore,  
which never yet had seen its waters coursed  
by any man who journeyed back again.

(130–132)

He joins the theme of rebirth, which informs the image of the rush that “sprang up / again, identical, immediately” (135–136) with a reference to Isaiah 35:7, in which the holy man will find the land renewed and “grass with reeds and rushes” shall grow in the “habitation of dragons,” and also to Job 14:7, where the tree that is cut down “will sprout again.”

The movement from the “smooth rush” of the “deserted shore” to the new plant of the divine forest explains the poetry of the *Purgatorio*. It is the



poetry of a man's journey along the difficult road of hope, of chance meetings, of conversations and memories, accompanied by a current of emotions, from the pale concert of the dawn to the shadows crouching in the evening, and the rustling of leaves and waters, the mysteries of life. Samuel Becket, in a famous essay on Joyce, called it an ascent from real vegetation to ideal vegetation, a concrete movement toward the Absolute.