“Introduction to: The Purgatorio”
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In the opening canto of Purgatory, Dante the poet pictures Dante the pilgrim coming out of the pit of hell blackened by soot and weary with climbing. To Cato, the guardian of the threshold to the mountain, Dante looks like a typical sinner. So he is. His behavior in hell, his weak pity, quick anger, lassitude, and pride still wait for transformation into virtues of compassion, patience, zeal, and humility. Otherwise, why climb the mountain?

In the Inferno sins are punished, in Purgatory sins are purged. For the pilgrim and the reader, the journey literally leads to a higher level of interior commitment in order to acquire virtue and to change one’s life by deepening the inner experience of personal worth and public goodness. By probing the depths of his own humanity and ascending the heights of the human spirit, Dante makes the journey alone and for all. A happy ambiguity exists in the Italian word alta: it can mean both "high" and "deep." In the Divine Comedy, the higher we travel, the more profound the journey inward and the more demanding the search into the mind and heart.

When, in Canto II, Dante meets the souls detained in Antepurgatory, he joins them in listening to Casella sing one of Dante’s own songs which Casella set to music. His behavior — and Virgil’s — is ripe for reproach. The serious business of total spiritual change has yet to begin, as Cato vigorously reminds the sluggards:

"What negligence and what delay is this?
Race to the mountain and strip off the slough
Which won’t let God be manifest in you!"
(Purgatory II, 121-123)

The reprimand affects Virgil more pointedly than it does Dante who appears more interested in his guide’s feelings than in his own failure to move ahead. Only when the wayfarer stands before Beatrice — after Virgil, who has declared him free, has left — and listens to her in the earthly paradise as she reproaches him, only then will he fully realize the personal impact of his long journey, that the path has been followed for his sake to lead him to the "new life" which Beatrice has prepared for him.

Previously, Dante has portrayed his encounters with the damned in hell as a shocking reminder of the evil pervading the world and contaminating even the pilgrim passing through the landscape of pain on his way to the final vision of
God. Before writing a line of verse, the poet already had experienced that vision, and from that point of view every step along the way reveals its true purpose and perspective. The transformation that awaits the wayfarer has taken place in the writer’s deepest consciousness. Now he must retrace the winding road by which the mystical height was reached, up the hillside of corrected vices and acquired virtues.

On each of the seven terraces of purgatory the pilgrim’s imagination undergoes a different training in assimilating images of vice and virtue so that his mind will finally be ready for the vision of God. In hell he remained basically an observer, but in purgatory he is a participant in the unfolding drama. Dante staggers as he approaches the cornice of sloth, he cannot see in the place of blind anger, and he burns as he passes through the fiery wall of the terrace of lust. He is the sinner in need of reform and he is the purified soul who will drink the waters of Eunoè to be made whole again beyond confusion.

The spirituality of Purgatory is decidedly modern in its emphasis on the individual as the focus of God’s salvation plan. Humanity, not in the abstract but in the person of Dante, must change if history is to cease its threshing tumult of upheaval and selfish pursuit. Dante must first set his own house in order before leading his readers to straighten out their lives. He has already done so, and the poem now universalizes the experience of one man so that all may come to the same transformation of life, making the crooked straight and turning the reader around in conversion.

Through overt and hermetic teaching, Dante wants the reader to discover his or her own humanity in the poem. In his letter to Can Grande della Scala, the author states that the subject of his work is "man as he is subject to the reward or punishment of Justice in the exercise of his free will with its merits and demerits." In Canto XII, the proud, crouched beneath the heavy stones they carry on their backs, gaze down on the reliefs carved into the pavement. The examples, ranging from the fall of Lucifer to the destruction of Troy, are set out in twelve tercets that begin respectively with U U U U, O O O O, and M M M M; then the thirteenth tercet starts each line with each of the three acrostic letters. The pattern spells out the Italian word for "man" who, the poet implies, is synonymous with pride. The reader discovers the code that spells out the message secretly for his or her own perception of the truth. Similarly, in Canto XXIII the poet sees the word OMO shaped in the features of the starved gluttons:
The sockets of their eyes seemed gemless rings:
Those who read OMO in the face of man
Would plainly there have recognized the M.

(Purgatory XXIII, 31-33)

The commonplace observation that OMO ("man") is written with the eyes, brows, nose, and cheekbones of the face as a pictogram of the essential nature of the person as the OMO DEI ("man is of God") here becomes the icon of all the faces encountered in the poem. The human face is one face. The images mirror one image of man in the image of God.

The maker has stamped his reflection and put his signature there in secret for the people to learn how to read the original name. In Canto XXV Dante carefully traces the development of the human body-soul from before its conception, through its vegetative-sensitive growth in the foetus to the moment when, before its birth, the reflective power of the soul is infused directly by the creator. The physiology may be outdated, but the lesson remains changeless: in order to know God, we must first know ourselves. Or, again, we only know God in our own image because he has placed his image in ourselves. So, love of God, of self, and of one another is really one love. Christ, the God-man, is the recapitulation of the image, so that, as Saint Irenaeus observes, "the glory of God is a living man."

Three definitions of man may be seen operating in the Divine Comedy: the Aristotelian view of man as a rational animal, which explains how those in hell have allowed the beast in them to prevail; the Platonic approach to man as embodied spirit, which explains how those in purgatory struggle to let their souls direct their lives; and the psalmist claim that man is a little less than the angels, which prepares us for the place the blessed assume beside the angelic choirs. Of the three definitions, the middle one contains the most appealing balance between extremes, for it emphasizes the transcendental aspirations which Purgatory describes with such rich variety and striking originality. The gluttons, for example, whose emaciated features make OMO easily recognizable, now hunger for justice in just measure:

And I heard uttered: "Blessed are they whom grace
Enlightens so, the love of taste enkindles
No overindulgent longings in their breasts,

"Hungering always only after justice!"
(Purgatory XXIV, 151-154)
Christian *gnosis* or knowledge, according to Clement of Alexandria, involves "a perfecting of man as man." This gnosis of divine things conforms to human nature and to the word of God inspiring the mind and heart. It comes through the senses or directly from above through intuitive inspiration:

> O imagination, which sometimes steals us  
> So far from outward things we pay no heed  
> Although a thousand trumpets blast about us,

Who moves you if the senses yield you nothing?  
Light formed in heaven moves you by itself  
Or by the will of Him who guides it downward.  

*(Purgatory XVII, 13-18)*

An inner guiding light gives gnosis its spiritual character and destination so that what is learned outwardly through examples and experience forms an interior image which can take the form of a dream. The pilgrim learns his way by both outer and inner imaging. The *Purgatory* is a mystical school of instruction, scholastic in its structure, practical and psychological in its application. Divine and human art are brought together, for the human being is God’s greatest work in nature and man’s artistry is an imitation of the divine.

Dante’s gnostic plan is to instruct his readers by the means of his own presence in the poem, by learning through his seeing, by hearing, and by opening mentally and emotionally to the outer and inner imagery of the seven levels circling up the mountain. His book of instruction prepares us for the vision of God through grounding the senses, imagination, and intellect in the best possible models from the past. At each cornice one of the deadly sins is corrected first by a whip that offers examples of the opposing virtue and then by a rein which checks the vice with examples of the sin being punished. Everything is done in an orderly and straightforward fashion without cruelty or fuss: the system works because it perfectly suits the needs of the participants who are there willingly and gladly in hopes of moving upward. Each whip always begins with a lesson from the life of the Virgin Mary who "shone with every virtue," Saint Bonaventure observed, "and was most free from the Seven Capital Sins." The next instance of virtue is taken from the Bible, classical literature, mythology, and literature, or from a life of a saint. Usually three examples suffice, although in their haste the slothful only have time for shouting out two, while the gluttons must listen to five "fruits" cried out from the inverted tree of knowledge in Canto XXII. The reins show an even greater range of number and content, from two for sloth and lust to fourteen for pride. These divisions provide the framework for the intellectual program of
reform, and in each it is Dante himself who is the one who undergoes that reformation in our place.

The pilgrim spends three nights on Mount Purgatory, which is on an island in the vast waters of the southern hemisphere. The island itself is in three parts, the lower slope where the excommunicated and the negligent late-repenters wait, the cliffs of purgatory proper, and the Garden of Eden at the summit. Dante finds himself at the threshold of each division by the end of each day and falls asleep. Lucia, one of the trinity of ladies (with Beatrice and the Virgin) who initiated his journey originally, as described in Canto II of the *Inferno*, comes to lift the pilgrim higher and leave him at the gateway of purgatory after his first night on the hillside. Virgil tells Dante what took place in his sleep:

"At dawn before the day, a while ago,
When your soul slept on deep within yourself,
Upon the flowers that deck the glen below,

"A lady came; she said, ‘I am Lucia.
Allow me to take this man, still asleep,
So I may speed him on his way above.’ "

(Purgatory IX, 52-57)

After waking, the wayfarer climbs three steps of the entrance and starts scaling the cliff up to each level cornice where he encounters each of the seven sins.

Pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust simplify and reverse the order of sins in hell, where lust is first and proud Lucifer last in the pit. As the pilgrim climbs he grows lighter and his path easier, for he is drawing away from the pull of gravity of the Satanic center of the earth. All seven sins spring from the failure to recognize the freeing nature of love. Since love is mind-directed, Virgil argues in Canto XVII, it can be turned to wrong ends. This central canto of *Purgatory* — and of the whole *Comedy* — explains the threefold division of the seven sins: evil love (pride, envy, wrath), too little love (sloth), and too much love (avarice, gluttony, lust). The middle sin is sloth — better designated as acedia, the mental laziness that refuses to think things through and to heed one’s inspirations. It is this sin of distraction that Beatrice accuses Dante of failing to avoid after her death, wandering in pursuit of other women and neglecting the vision of love she has bequeathed to him.

The goal of his climb is the reunion with Beatrice. Meeting her again sums up all the past events of the poet’s life and transforms him for the turning upward
toward God that completes the journey. Setting out on the slope below on Easter morning, he arrives three days later at the earthly paradise:

Longing now to search in and around
The heavenly woods — dense and green with life —
Which softened the new sunlight for my eyes,

Not waiting any longer, I left the cliff,
Making my slow, slow way on level ground,
Over the soil which everywhere spread fragrance.

(Purgatory XXVIII, 1-6)
The key word now is "new" which the poet will sound again and again until the final lines of this canticle:

From out those holiest waves I now returned,
Refashioned, just as new trees are renewed
With their new foliage, for I came back

Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars.
(Purgatory XXXIII, 142-145)
Dante deliberately echoes the title of his work the Vita Nuova or New Life which he wrote in the late 1290's as a prose commentary on poems previously written in praise of Beatrice. She herself recalls the book when she describes his failures to live up to her ideal:

"This man was so potentially endowed
In his new life, that every fine ambition
Would have been wonderfully fulfilled in him."
(Purgatory XXX, 115-117)
Numerous parallels exist between the New Life and Purgatory, especially in the use of the number nine as the essence of Beatrice and the sum of the Trinity. The three main divisions of Purgatory occur when the pilgrim sleeps before crossing to the next area, in Cantos IX, XVIII, and XXVII. The pattern of nine unifies the poet’s own life as he moves from childhood through adolescence and into manhood. In the New Life Dante describes three critical passages in his experience, at the ages of nine, eighteen, and twenty-seven. Each instance involves an encounter with Beatrice who reflects like a mirror an ideal image of what he the poet might become and each meeting provokes a dream which leads to a vision of his beloved. In their first meeting, Beatrice’s innocent beauty sums up a dream of childhood and his falling in love prepares him for emotional
maturity. In their second encounter, Beatrice speaks to Dante, inspiring him to use his gifts of poetry and intellectual powers for the good of others. At the age of twenty-four, Beatrice dies, and two years later the poet has a vision of her in paradise: he resolves to dedicate all his gifts to her praise.

Eight years later, in 1300, Dante journeys back to Beatrice who first summoned Virgil to be his guide and then, at the top of Mount Purgatory, herself becomes his teacher and guide into paradise. In chapter XXX of the *New Life*, the author describes Beatrice as "a nine, that is a miracle." The Italian word *nove* means both "nine" and "a new thing," so that she embodies anew the nines of *Purgatory* and the nine spheres of *Paradise*. She is the human being who sums up and renews his encounters with all others. When she lifts the veil from her face, the ten years since her death flash before him with all their lack of focused purpose and false starts. Only the longing to be here has sustained him:

My eyes were so intent and fixed on her
To satisfy the thirst of those ten years
That every other sense was quenched in me.

*(Purgatory* XXXII, 1-3)*

The face of Beatrice is the face of *OMO DEI*, the image of God he has searched for in vain up until now — or rather, he has seen the face before but never recognized it. The mystical vision of 1300 has been made possible by the grace of Beatrice who, eight years before as recorded in the *New Life*, granted him a vision of herself in heaven. That vision, like this one, culminates not in Beatrice herself but in the *vera icona* of Christ. Just after the earlier vision, Dante, while watching pilgrims set out for Rome to see the Holy Shroud on which the face of the Lord has been traced in blood and tears, reflects that Beatrice looks on that face now in glory.

At the climax of *Purgatory*, Dante achieves his initiation into the vision of God in Christ that will finally seize him at the end of the entire pilgrimage. The wayfarer has been baptized by Matilda, the symbol of the moral life, in the waters of Lethe, wiping out all memory of past sins as the angels have already erased the seven P’s of sin (*peccatum*) from the pilgrim’s forehead. The reprimands and testing by Beatrice have served as a confirmation sacrament, just as his confession and sorrow supplied the function of the sacrament of penance, Now Dante is to partake in communion with Christ who is symbolized in the earthly paradise by the griffin, a mythological animal that has the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion — the eagle representing the divine nature and the lion the human nature of the God-man. As the pilgrim gazes into the eyes of Beatrice — she is

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not looking at him but at the griffin — he sees the dual nature of the animal reflected there, shifting constantly although the griffin does not move: the divine and human are focused in the one place:

A thousand yearnings seething more than flames
Held my eyes fastened to the radiant eyes
That remained ever rooted on the griffin.

Exactly like the sunlight in a mirror,
The twofold animal gleamed in her eyes,
Now beaming with one nature, now the other.

Reader, reflect if I was struck with wonder
When I observed the object in itself
Stand still while its reflecting image shifted.

(Paradise XXXI, 118-126)
The next lines make explicit the Eucharistic nature of this experience: "my soul, full of gladness and amazement, / Was tasting that food which, while satisfying / Of itself, still causes one to crave it."

Notice that the pilgrim does not see the two natures as one; that vision must wait until the mystic heights of paradise have been reached and Dante sees within the three circles of the trinity the human effige of Jesus. In his vision of the griffin, however, he achieves gnostic perfection, the knowledge of Christ as true man and God in one person. Note, too, that this is the first of the visions of Christ and that three more remain for the wayfarer in Paradise, including the one that closes the poem,

The procession that greets the reader in the Garden of Eden surely strikes the modern consciousness as strangely exotic and too heavily symbolic. We must set all realism aside — any illustration, especially by a Doré, destroys the whole medieval effect. The pageant is pure imagination, a triumph staged for Beatrice as an introduction to her part in the drama that began in the darkened forest. Now we have reached an utterly different woods, "dense and green with life," with tall trees like those in India, singing birds, lush flowers, and dark streams. The colors of the procession first catch the eye, from the burning lights of the seven candelabra that lead the pageant, to the white-crowned twenty-four elders of the Old Testament, the green-laureled four creatures of the Gospels, and the red-garlanded figures of the rest of the New Testament. The colors, symbolic of faith, hope, and love, all are repeated in the women who represent the three
theological virtues:

Three women in a circle next came dancing
At the right wheel; the first one was so red
She scarcely would be noticed in a flame;

The second seemed as if her flesh and bone
Had been cut out of emerald; and the third
Appeared to be of freshly fallen snow.

And now the white one seemed to lead them round
And now the red, and from their leader's song
The others took the measure fast and slow.

(Purgatory XXIX, 121-129)
The full impact of the tricolors does not appear, however, until after the chariot,
which is the Church, drawn by the griffin passes before the witnessing and
wonder-struck poets. Since this is a procession of history from Genesis to
Revelation, from the beginning to the end of time, the center to which all eyes are
drawn becomes the focal point of space and time:

I have seen sometimes at the break of day
The eastern sky all rose-tinged, while the rest
Of heaven is adorned with bright clear blue,

And the face of the sun rise misted-over
By so soft-tempering a veil of vapors
The eye could keep on staring a long time:

So, in a cloud of flowers which flew up
From the angelic hands and fell again
Inside and all around the chariot,

A crown of olive over her white veil,
A woman appeared to me; beneath her green
Mantle she wore a robe of flaming red.

(Purgatory XXX, 22-33)
The moment and place are specific: the long road has led up to this spot for this
encounter with Beatrice, and the procession of history has become Dante's own
story as in this new hour he recalls his old life:
And my soul, which for a long time now
Had not felt overcome as when I’d stood
Trembling with trepidation in her presence,

Without apprehending further through my eyes,
But by the hidden power she projected,
Felt the tremendous force of the old love.

(Purgatory XXX, 34-39)

No meeting in literature so rings true with its mystical sense of anticipation and promised fulfillment. Dante has met Beatrice beyond the grave and his life is forever touched by her resurrected presence. In her the colors of faith, hope, and love come alive.

With its imagery of skies, cliffs, and forests, Purgatory offers us a landscape that, like a Rouault painting, breathes a Biblical sense of post-crucifixion sunsets and Easter-morning vistas. One of the most appealing images is that of the voyage. From its opening lines, this canticle sets us out to sea to transport us to a safe haven on the top of this mountain island. The poet is our pilot, leading us first to the celestial steersman who will lead us, like the Israelites, across the sea to the Promised Land. The famous simile that opens Canto VIII catches the twofold imagery perfectly:

Now was the hour when voyagers at sea
Pine to turn home and their hearts soften,
This first day out, for friends they bid good-by;

The hour when outsetting pilgrims ache
With love to hear the far-off tolling bell
That seems to mourn the dying day with tears...

(Purgatory VIII, 1-6)

Dante’s voyage carries out the one that Ulysses undertook in Canto XXVI of the Inferno, but where the pagan’s route sprang from hubris and self-deception (and deception of others), the Christian pilgrim’s way wells up from humility and trust in the call received from God. When Dante meets Beatrice, he compares her to an admiral inspecting her fleet of ships. When he wakes to find himself floating in the Lethe, held up by Matilda, he can be likened to a boat. The poet is our vessel to the far shore. "From out those holiest waves" he has returned, to show us the waters, to plunge us into them, and to have us drink:
If, reader, I had room to write more lines,
I would sing still, in part, of the sweet drink
That kept me thirsting always after more,

But since all of the pages planned beforehand
For this, the second canticle, are filled,
The curb of art lets me run on no further.

(\textit{Purgatory} XXXIII, 139-141)

"The curb of art" reminds us of the reins that created a kaleidoscope of images
along the terraces of the mountain. Art too has its limits, and the poet melts into
the silence of his own creation.