

DANTE
THE DIVINE
COMEDY

II: PURGATORY



TRANSLATED BY
DOROTHY L. SAYERS

THE PENGUIN
CLASSICS

THE COMEDY
OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI

THE FLORENTINE

★

CANTICA II
PURGATORY

〈IL PURGATORIO〉

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This translation of Dante's *Purgatorio*
first published in 1955

Made and printed in Great Britain
by R. & R. Clark Ltd
Edinburgh

THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

EDITED BY E. V. RIEU

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TO THE DEAD MASTER
OF THE AFFIRMATIONS
CHARLES WILLIAMS

*Dimmi che è cagion per che dimostri
nel dire e nel guardare avermi caro.
Ed io a lui: Li dolci detti vostri
che, quanto durerà l' uso moderno,
faranno cari ancora i loro inchiostri.*

Purg. XXVI. 110-114

Maps and diagrams
specially drawn for this edition by
C. W. Scott-Giles

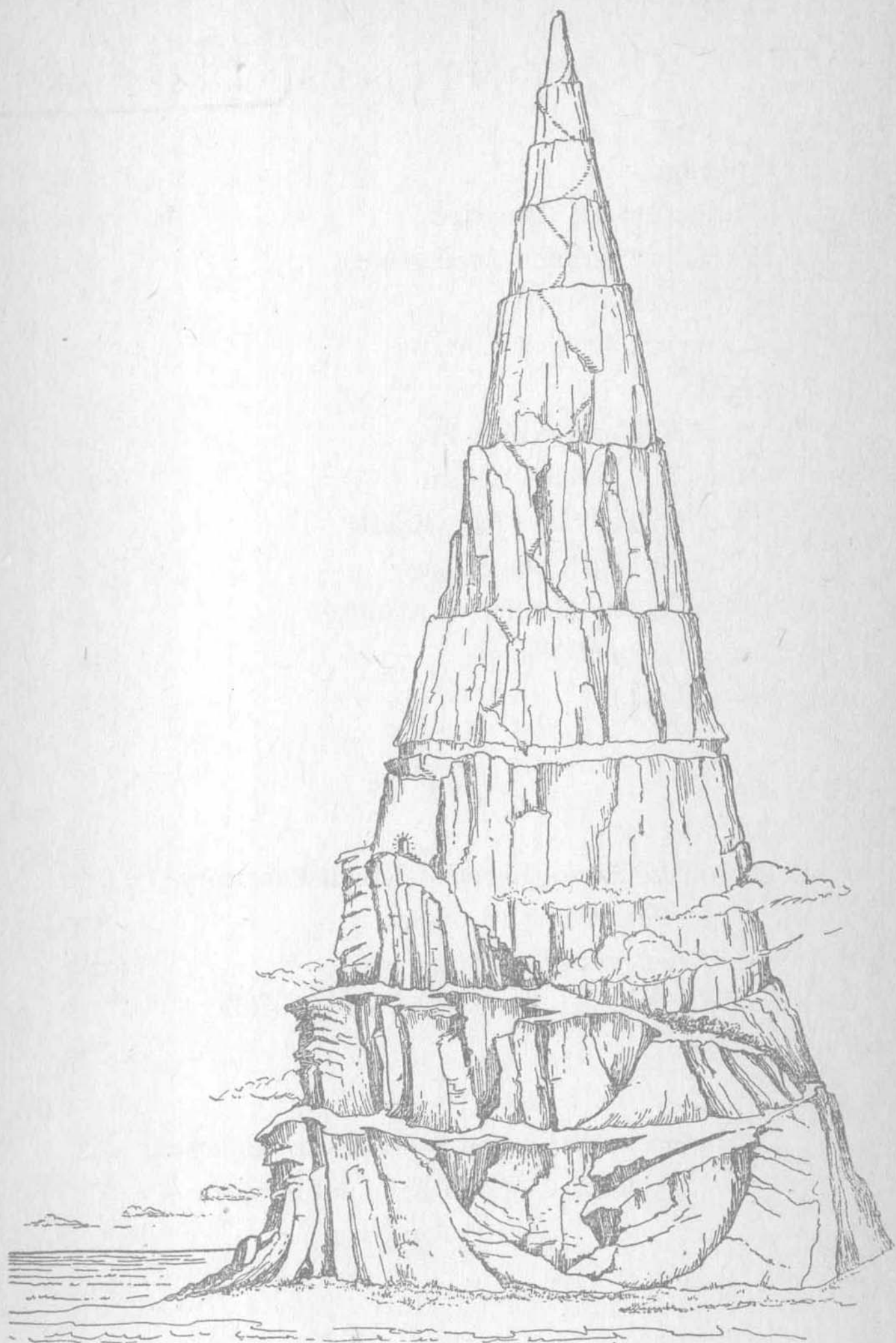
CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Purgatory: The Doctrine	54
Purgatory: Dante's Arrangement	61
THE DIVINE COMEDY	
CANTICA II: PURGATORY	73
Appendix:	
Note A: The Needle's Eye	341
Note B: Tithonus' Leman	342
Note C: The <i>Sacra Fame</i> Riddle	343
Note D: Derivation of Law	346
Note E: The Identity of Matilda	347
Glossary of Proper Names	349
Books to Read	389

DIAGRAMS

Mount Purgatory	8
Diagrammatic Arrangement of Mount Purgatory	62
Path of the Sun: Canto iv. 61-84	100
Tabular Arrangement of Purgatory	202-3
Path of the Poets up the Northern Side of the Mountain	340

The reader's attention is drawn to the cut-out
 Universal Clock to be found between
 pages 350 and 351.



MOUNT PURGATORY

INTRODUCTION

OF the three books of the *Commedia*, the *Purgatorio* is, for English readers, the least known, the least quoted – and the most beloved. It forms, as it were, a test case. Persons who pontificate about Dante without making mention of his Purgatory may reasonably be suspected of knowing him only at second hand, or of having at most skimmed through the circles of his Hell in the hope of finding something to be shocked at. Let no one, therefore, get away with a condemnation – or for that matter a eulogy – of Dante on the mere strength of broiled Popes, disembowelled Schismatics, grotesque Demons, Count Ugolino, Francesca da Rimini, and the Voyage of Ulysses, even if backed up by an erotic mysticism borrowed from the Pre-Raphaelites, and the line “His will is our peace”, recollected from somebody’s sermon. Press him, rather, for an intelligent opinion on the Ship of Souls and Peter’s Gate; on Buonconte, Sapia, and Arnaut Daniel; on the Prayer of the Proud, the theology of Free Judgement, Dante’s three Dreams, the Sacred Forest, and the symbolism of the Beatrician Pageant. If he cannot satisfy the examiners on these points, let him be to you as a heathen man and a publican. But if he can walk at ease in death’s second kingdom, then he is a true citizen of the Dantean Empire; and though he may still feel something of a stranger in Paradise, yet the odds are he will come to it in the end. For the *Inferno* may fill one with only an appalled fascination, and the *Paradiso* may daunt one at first by its intellectual severity; but if one is drawn to the *Purgatorio* at all, it is by the cords of love, which will not cease drawing till they have drawn the whole poem into the same embrace.

There are perfectly understandable reasons for the common reader’s neglect of this tenderest, subtlest, and most human section of the *Comedy*. One must, of course, allow, in Protestant countries, for a widespread ignorance of, and half-unconscious resistance to, the whole doctrine of Purgatory. But this obstacle is, I think, only a minor one.¹ The head and front of the trouble is the persistent influence of that popular superstition which – originating in the

1. Those who are not quite clear about what the doctrine is, or at what point in its development Dante comes, will find a short exposition of it on pp. 54-61 at the end of this introduction.

Introduction

eighteenth century along with the vogue for Gothick gloom and Tales of Horror¹ – has fastened upon Dante the title “Poet of Hell”. This, reinforced as it is for us by a similar superstition about Milton, encourages the credulous to suppose that a Dante out of Hell is a Dante poetically out of his element, and that the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are not only less characteristic of their author than the *Inferno*, but also inferior in workmanship. The only thing to be said about that is that it is not true. Bulk for bulk, there is in Dante’s work as a whole more joy than grief and far more charity than hatred; his abiding characteristic is not gloom but “pure intellectual light fulfilled with love”.² And in the matter of sheer artistry, the second *cantica*, by comparison with the first, displays a livelier invention, increased architectural skill, greater freedom of handling and technique, a smoother and more assured mastery of the verse. There are moments of clumsiness in the *Inferno*, awkward transitions and improvisations, an unevenness of texture here and there, passages that are tentative or derivative, as of a writer fumbling to grips with a partly recalcitrant material; not till about the ninth canto does the poem begin to shake itself loose from these initial hesitations; and almost to the end it shows a slight tendency to throw up detached episodes and lyrical flashes imperfectly integrated with their context.³ The *Purgatorio* is, from the start, much more firmly consolidated; the poet is doing exactly what he chooses, as he chooses, and when he chooses, with perfect awareness throughout of what he is doing. Whether, of course, we like what he is doing

1. Prior to this period there is no trace in English literature of any such exclusive concentration upon the *Inferno*, as may be seen by reference to vol. i of Paget Toynbee’s *Dante in English Literature* (Methuen, 1909).

2. *Para.* xxx. 40.

3. Consider, for example, the bald catalogues of names in *Inf.* iv. 55–60, 121–9, 136–44, by contrast with *Purg.* xiv. 97–108 or *Para.* xvi. 88–108, where the whole passage is coloured by the emotions of the speaker; the improvisation in *Inf.* vi. 25–7 of the “sop to Cerberus”, and the still more awkward improvisation of the girdle in *Inf.* xvi. 106–8; the ambiguous treatment of the Beasts (personified qualities) in *Inf.* i. 31 *sqq.* and the contrasting skill with which the conventional symbols (personified virtues, books of the Bible, images of Rome, the Empire, etc.) of *Purg.* xxix. 82–154, xxxii. 109–60 are distinguished from the natural symbols by being framed off in a masque or pageant; the ominous ease with which the Francesca, Ulysses, and Ugolino episodes lend themselves to extraction as detached “beauties”; and the comparative lack of motivation for the lovely description of the Mincio in *Inf.* xx. 61–81.

Introduction

depends upon what we think a great narrative poem should be. If we look upon it only as a matrix from which to extract a few lyrical gems, discarding the setting as dull or worthless, then no doubt we shall prefer the *Inferno*, which lends itself more readily to such treatment. But that only means that we do not really like great narrative poems as such, and that we admire the *Inferno* for its weak points rather than for its strong.

There is another reason why we may not approve what Dante is doing in the *Purgatory* – a reason succinctly phrased by one critic in the poignant cry: “Then the sermons begin.” There are long passages which can only be classed as didactic poetry – versified statements of plain theological or scientific fact; these are more numerous in the *Purgatorio* than in the *Inferno*, and still more numerous in the *Paradiso*. The inhabitants of Hell are not remarkable for any great interest in morals or divinity – naturally enough, since they have “lost the good of the intellect”; they pass their eternity in a bustle of purposeless activity and have no use for thinking. And since there are twenty-four circles to be hastened through, over a very rough road amid a perpetual and distracting clamour, Dante and Virgil themselves have but little leisure for improving conversation.¹ This, after all, is as it should be. It is not while undergoing the foretaste of damnation that one can engage in abstract speculation; it is much if one can endure and come through unscathed. Only when one has squeezed out from Hell’s suffocating bottle-neck to “look once more upon the stars” can the mind resume its discursive and contemplative functions, and the vast intellectual movement of the *Commedia* begin to be unfolded in direct speech without a figure.

That is why “the sermons begin” on the slopes of Mount Purgatory and not before. But even if there were no “sermons” – if Dante had omitted from the *Purgatorio* the half-dozen or so great discourses on Love, Free-will, the nature of the Soul, and so forth, which are didactic in form as well as in content – we should still have to come to grips with the intellectual substance of the poem. For the truth is that we can, if we choose, read the *Inferno* as a simple tale of adventure, without greatly caring what it is all about. To be sure, we shall

1. “Discourses” of this kind do occur in the *Inferno*; e.g. the passage on Holy Luck in *Inf.* vii. 73-96, and the lengthy exposition of the different kinds of sins in *Inf.* xi. 22-111.

Introduction

not get very much out of it that way, beyond a few purple passages and the satisfaction of a slightly morbid curiosity. Still, it can be done. But that method will not work very well with the *Purgatorio*, still less with the *Paradiso*. To enjoy these last two books we must take them seriously. And to do so we must discard a number of assumptions which have in these latter days become almost second nature to us.

We must, for instance, dismiss the notion that there is something called "pure poetry", whose values subsist and can be appreciated in isolation from the subject and meaning of the work. This idea is no longer very modern, but it was fashionable some thirty years ago, and its ghost still haunts the by-ways of criticism. We must also abandon – and this is perhaps more difficult – the distinction we have grown accustomed to making between "poetical" and "prosaic" subjects. This artificial distinction, though there are already signs of its appearance in the seventeenth century, was quite unknown in earlier ages, and has only petrified into rigidity within living memory. In the present writer's childhood, "didactic poetry", like "rhetoric" (of which didactic poetry is a department) was still a descriptive term and not a term of abuse. From Lucretius to Wordsworth, and indeed as late as Browning and Bridges, a writer was free if he chose to use verse as the medium for instruction, demonstration, and argument, and in that medium to handle morals, philosophy, science, or any other material belonging to human experience. The assumption that verse should occupy itself exclusively with the personal, the emotional, and the introspective is so recent that one may fairly call the "unpoetic subject" the invention of the Romantic Revival. Yet it has so laid hold of the popular imagination that quite intelligent writers not only take it for granted in their estimate of contemporary literature, but also project it backwards upon periods to which it has no sort of appropriateness. To take a typical case: H. A. L. Fisher, quoting from the *Paradiso* Beatrice's description of the experiment with three mirrors,¹ observes:

1. "Take three mirrors, and set two of them at an equal distance from you, and the third between the two, a little further from the eye; and, as you stand facing them, have a candle behind you, so placed that its light falls upon the mirrors and is reflected from them all. You will then see that although the more distant image of the flame is smaller than the others it is just as bright as they are" – *Para.* ii. 97-105. Compare what Lascelles Abercrombie rightly

Introduction

Now this passage, the versification of which is a wonderful piece of dexterity, is pure prose. No modern poet would dream of introducing a chilly slab of scientific lecturing into the body of a passionate and mystical poem.¹

And he offers this and similar passages² as proof that "the poet was without humour".

Let us grant that statements of scientific truth so lucid and unemotional as this are rare in modern verse. The fact remains that to a medieval reader the whole of Fisher's comment would "seem drunken lunacy". The imputation of lack of humour would leave him quite bewildered, since for the life of him he would not be able to conceive what humour had to do with it one way or other. The expression "pure prose" as applied to the *content* of a passage would have no meaning for him; and he would strongly object to the epithet "chilly", protesting that to him scientific knowledge was a matter of warm, not to say burning, interest. He would readily agree about the dexterous versification – and indeed Dante's sinewy, compact, and epigrammatic style is eminently adapted for the marshalling of complex facts into orderly sequences³ – but he would altogether fail to see why this praise should be surrounded by a faint aura of reprobation. As for the mixture of passion, mysticism, and science in one and the same poem, he would highly approve it, as imparting an agreeable variety and comprehensiveness to the work. It would never occur to him that he ought to keep his head, his heart, and his religious experience in water-tight compartments, or that a poem might not properly appeal to all of them in turn. It is only the twentieth-century reader who is disconcerted by having to break down the Victorian bulkheads in order that his partitioned-off personality may flow together again.⁴ The easiest way to do this

calls the "Dantesque image" of the twenty candles in *The Borderers*, Act iii, l. 1512; and Browning's image of the alloy in *The Ring and the Book*, Bk. i. 18-30.

1. H. A. L. Fisher: *A History of Europe* (Edwin Arnold, one-vol. ed., 1936), p. 286.

2. Such, presumably, as *Purg.* iv. 1-12; xv. 16-21; xviii. 49-69; xxv. 37-57; xxviii. 97-114, etc.

3. *Purg.* xviii. 49-69 is an outstanding example.

4. "A poetry which excludes the searchings of reason and the promptings of the moral sense is by so much the less impassioned, the less various and human, the less a product of the whole man at his full imaginative height" – C. Day Lewis: *The Poetic Image* (Cape, 1947), p. 133.

Introduction

is to forget about the distinction between “prose” and “poetry”, and to approach the *Comedy* as though it were a serious and intelligent novel – which, in fact, it is. For in the fourteenth century, the allegorical poem was precisely what the novel is to-day – the dominant literary form, into which a writer could pour, without incongruity, everything that he had to say about life and the universe.

The *Purgatorio*, like the *Inferno*, is – necessarily – concerned with souls who are suffering the penalty for sin. A good deal of ink and argument have consequently been expended from time to time in speculation as to why Dante’s Purgatory is not simply his Hell in reverse. Nothing, obviously, would have been neater and easier than to build up all three *cantiche* on the basis of the Seven Capital Sins, punished in Hell in order of heinousness, and purged in reverse order in Purgatory, while in Heaven the seven opposing virtues should receive their appropriate rewards. There are indications in the *Inferno* that Dante himself may originally have contemplated making a shorter poem on these ingenuous lines, but if so, he abandoned the project before the end of the seventh canto, and incorporated the work that he had already done into a much wider scheme. For a poem on the grand scale, so tedious and repetitive a classification clearly would not do. Excellent theological justification can be produced for the threefold arrangement actually adopted; but the overriding reason for it is that Dante was not an engineer but a poet addressing a reading public, and therefore obliged both to be interesting and to satisfy his own artistic conscience. He is the most symmetrical of poets; but the symmetry of art is like that of nature, and is produced, not by a dead uniformity, but by a correspondence and balance of parts. The problem, as it presented itself to him, was not how to make Purgatory a “hell in reverse”, but how to avoid doing so: how to provide the desirable variety and surprise in two long poems whose subjects were so fundamentally similar.

Accordingly, the “seven-sins” classification which lurks behind Cantos III-VII of the *Inferno* was discarded (if indeed it was ever really contemplated), and the classification into sins of Incontinence, Violence, and Fraud adopted in its place.¹ The victims of Lust, Gluttony, Avarice, and Wrath already dealt with were relegated to the

1. See *Inf.* Canto xi and Images.