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**The Divine Comedy of
Dante Alighieri
Purgatorio**

A Verse Translation by Allen Mandelbaum



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*The Divine Comedy of
Dante Alighieri*

PURGATORIO

A Verse Translation

with an Introduction by
Allen Mandelbaum

Notes by Laury Magnus,
Allen Mandelbaum,
and Anthony Oldcorn,
with Daniel Feldman

Drawings by Barry Moser



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*This translation of the PURGATORIO is inscribed to
Irma Brandeis and Helaine Newstead—
as l'altro Guido had it:*

CHÉ 'N TUTTE GUISE VI DEGGIO LAUDARE

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DANTE ALIGHIERI was born in Florence, Italy, in 1265. His early poetry falls into the tradition of love poetry that passed from the Provençal to such Italian poets as Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's friend and mentor. Dante's first major work is the *Vita Nuova* (*New Life*), 1293–1294. This sequence of lyrics, sonnets, and prose narrative describes his love, first earthly, then spiritual, for Beatrice, whom he had first seen as a child of nine, and who had died when Dante was 25.

Dante married about 1285, served Florence in battle, and rose to a position of leadership in the bitter factional politics of the city-state. As one of the city's magistrates, he found it necessary to banish leaders of the so-called "Black" faction, and his friend Cavalcanti, who like Dante was a prominent "White." But after the Blacks seized control of Florence in 1301, Dante himself was tried in absentia and was banished from the city on pain of death. He never returned to Florence.

In exile he wrote his *Convivio*, or *Banquet*, a kind of poetic compendium of medieval philosophy, as well as a political treatise, *Monarchia*. He probably began his *Comedy* (later to be called the *Divine Comedy* and consisting of three parts, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*) around 1307–1308. On a diplomatic mission to Venice in 1321, Dante fell ill, and returned to Ravenna, where he died.

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THE AENEID OF VIRGIL

THE DIVINE COMEDY OF DANTE ALIGHIERI
INFERNO
PURGATORIO
PARADISO

THE ODYSSEY OF HOMER

INTRODUCTION

For the Virgil of Dante's *Purgatorio*, "love is the seed in you of every virtue/ and of all acts deserving punishment" (xvii, 104-105). To find one same source for all good and all evil is to insist on the need for the education of desire. The descent through Hell and ascent of the seven terraces of the Mount of Purgatory are the tale of that education of Dante's hungering, longing, thirsting, will. After those terraces, at the threshold of the Earthly Paradise, Virgil can assure him: "Today your hungerings will find their peace/ . . . My son, you've seen the temporary fire/ and the eternal fire; you have reached/ the place past which my powers cannot see./ I've brought you here through intellect and art;/ from now on, let your pleasure be your guide;/ you're past the steep and past the narrow paths. . . / Await no further word or sign from me:/ your will is free, erect, and whole—to act/ against that will would be to err: therefore/ I crown and miter you over yourself" (xxvii, 115-142).

This tale forms part of what Thomas Carlyle called Dante's "unfathomable heart-song." But in the *Purgatorio*, the song is sung by a careful cartographer and passionately precise watcher of the skies, one who contains time and space in the calculated space and time of his own lines: "Reader, I am not squandering more rhymes/ in order to describe their forms; since I/ must spend elsewhere, I can't be lavish here" (xxiv, 97-99); and then, "If, reader, I had ampler space in which/ to write, I'd sing—though incompletely—that/ sweet draught for which my thirst was limitless;/ but since all of the pages pre-disposed/ for this, the second canticle, are full,/ the curb of art will not let me continue" (xxxiii, 136-141).

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The space of Dante's island Mountain of Purgatory is in the southern hemisphere of Earth, directly opposite the northern hemisphere's Jerusalem. In that southern hemisphere, the hemisphere of water, it is the only body of land. Souls who will undergo purgation before their entry into Paradise disembark on the shore of the solitary island. Behind them lies their sea-voyage from the mouth of the Tiber, which "always is the place of gathering/ for those who do not sink to Acheron" (II, 104-105), under the care of a "helmsman sent from Heaven," in a "boat so light, so quick/ that nowhere did the water swallow it" (II, 40-41). Ahead of Dante there lies the writing of the *Purgatorio*, also—by way of likeness—a sea-voyage: "To course across more kindly waters now/ my talent's little vessel lifts her sails,/ leaving behind herself a sea so cruel" (I, 1-3).

The lower slopes of the island are a waiting place, the Ante-Purgatory (II-IX), where those who delayed their repentance until the end of life must wait longest before they are allowed to enter Purgatory.

Purgatory proper, occupying eighteen cantos of *Purgatorio*, is entered by a gate at the top of a three-step stairway (IX, 76-145) and consists of seven terraces. These are level indentations in the tall mountain; they are joined to each other by stairways carved through the rifted rock, with the ascent growing easier as one moves upward. Each of the terraces punishes a sin; and the hierarchy of sins places the most grievous sins on the lower terraces. In ascending order, the seven terraces punish — remedially — pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice (coupled with its counter-sin, prodigality), gluttony, and lust.

The Earthly Paradise occupies the summit of the island mountain and the last, and rather autonomous, six cantos of *Purgatorio* (XXVIII-XX XIII). (Indeed, this mountain may also be called the Mountain of Earthly Paradise, the mountain foreshadowed by the "mountain of delight" that Dante cannot climb in Canto I of the *Inferno*—and it is probably the same peak Ulysses sees at the end of Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, the

summit in sight of which Ulysses, unaided by grace, shipwrecks.)

Time is charted with equal care: Dante the voyager moves through these three regions of Purgatory in an ascent that most paraphrasts explain as lasting from the morning of Easter Sunday, April 10, 1300, to noon of Wednesday, April 13. Where the *Inferno* begins at night in the "shadowed forest," with the entry into Hell, or, more precisely, to the Ante-Inferno, on the evening of Good Friday (*Inf.* II, 1-3), *Purgatorio* begins shortly before dawn, the entry to Purgatory proper, two hours after dawn, and to the Earthly Paradise at dawn.

But Dante climbs only by day. The first night is spent in that portion of the Ante-Purgatory called the Valley of the Rulers, where men of state who, in life, delayed their repentance through negligence wait (IX); the second night is spent on the fourth terrace, the terrace of sloth, at the end of his climb through the terraces of the four weightier sins, at the threshold of the fifth terrace (XVIII, 143 to XIX, 36). The third night is spent, after Dante's passage through fire on the seventh terrace (this is the "temporary fire," as Hell's fire is the "eternal fire" of XXVII, 127-128), the terrace of the lustful, at the threshold of the Earthly Paradise (XXVII). On each of these equidistant nights, Dante dreams: first the dream of the Eagle (IX, 13-32); then the dream of the Siren and the nameless "alert and saintly" woman, (XIX, 7-33); and finally the dream of Leah, exemplar of the active life, and Rachel, exemplar of the meditative life (XXVII, 91-114).

The movements of heavenly bodies, somewhat clairvoyantly referred to by Virgil but never directly present in Hell, punctuate *Purgatorio* throughout. References play between the southern skies of Purgatory, present *there* for Dante, and our skies, the skies of the northern hemisphere, present to us and to Dante returned from his voyage. Here, in our world, Jerusalem marks the center, and the mouth of the Ganges marks the eastern limit; while the western limit is marked by the Straits of Gibraltar or, in its stead, either Gades (our Cadiz)

or the River Ebro. Reading the hands of his Earth clock, Dante can amplify the hour of sunset in Purgatory thus: "Just as, there where its Maker shed His blood,/ the sun shed its first rays, and Ebro lay/ beneath high Libra, and the ninth hour's rays/ were scorching Ganges' waves; so here, the sun/ stood at the point of day's departure . . ." (xxvii, 1-5).

The planets (of which the sun, for Dante, is one), the constellations, the hours—all participate in these recordings.

Sometimes Dante's recordings are direct, even when allegorical, as in the vision of the four stars that symbolize the four "natural" virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). There his most memorable juxtaposition of Purgatorial skies and our skies concludes his first scanning of Purgatory's skies (I, 13-27):

*The gentle hue of oriental sapphire
in which the sky's serenity was steeped—
its aspect pure as far as the horizon—
brought back my joy in seeing just as soon
as I had left behind the air of death
that had afflicted both my sight and breast.*

*The lovely planet that is patroness
of love made all the eastern heavens glad,
veiling the Pisces in the train she led.*

*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.*

*Heaven appeared to revel in their flames:
o northern hemisphere, because you were
denied that sight, you are a widower!*

Sometimes he is obsessively periphrastic; at a pole far from plain style (and Dante experiments with *all* styles), he lets us know that it is 3 p.m., the beginning of vespers, "there" in Purgatory by a likeness that measures the morning span between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m.: "As many as the hours in which the sphere/ that's always playing like a child appears/ from day-

break to the end of the third hour,/ so many were the hours of light still left/ before the course of day had reached sunset;/ vespers was there; and where we are, midnight" (xv, 1-6).

And at times Dante records the skies not through the movements of stellar bodies but through the motions of the soul, as in the six lines for which Paget Toynbee, in 1900, could total up sixteen translations into English independent of translations forming part of full translations of the *Purgatorio* or the *Comedy*: "It was the hour that turns seafarers' longings/ homeward—the hour that makes their hearts grow tender/ upon the day they bid sweet friends farewell;/ the hour that pierces the new traveler/ with love when he has heard, far off, the bell/ that seems to mourn the dying of the day" (VIII, 1-6).

The heavens serve not only to measure time there; Dante will also use our skies here as likenesses of what he saw there, most indelibly in reinforcing his first vision of Beatrice in the *Comedy* (xxx, 22-39):

*I have at times seen all the eastern sky
becoming rose as day began and seen,
adorned in lovely blue, the rest of heaven;
and seen the sun's face rise so veiled that it
was tempered by the mist and could permit
the eye to look at length upon it; so,
within a cloud of flowers that were cast
by the angelic hands and then rose up
and then fell back, outside and in the chariot,
a woman showed herself to me; above
a white veil, she was crowned with olive boughs;
her cape was green; her dress beneath, flame-red.
Within her presence, I had once been used
to feeling—trembling—wonder, dissolution;
but that was long ago. Still, though my soul,
now she was veiled, could not see her directly,
by way of hidden force that she could move,
I felt the mighty power of old love.*

This tight construct of space and time serves as container for a *cantica* less dispersive and digressive than the *Inferno*, with its crowded population and its percussiveness.

Of course, even in *Purgatorio*, Dante can, with *Infern*-al velocity, in thirty lines, examine the nature of attentiveness, refute the Platonic doctrine of the plurality of souls, offer us the vision of a farmer preventing thieves from entering his field, conjure hard ascents and descents in four Italian hilly terrains, and define Virgil as "the guide who gave me hope and was my light" (IV, 1-30).

And he can dart, in his dance of likenesses, from "a fledgling stork" to the "iron of the arrow" touching the "bowstring," to "leavings left on the table"—a likeness of the blood the veins have not drunk up—to seeing the fetus as a "sea-sponge," to invoking "the sun's heat that, when combined/ with sap that flows from vines, is then made wine," to summoning "the saturated air," which, reflecting "the rays the sun has sent,/ takes rainbow colors as its ornament," and then to conjuring the flame that follows after "the fire whenever fire moves" (with the poet's own pace not unlike the flame's)—justifying, as much as does the combustible thread of exposition along which these flames run, the conclusion: "This is the cause of your astonishment" (xxv, 10-108). The end of the previous canto is not much less various (xxiv, 94-154), as Dante's likenesses move from a horseman who "sometimes gallops out,/ leaving behind his troop of riders, so/ that he may gain the honor of the first/ clash," to "little, eager, empty-headed children/ who beg—but he of whom they beg does not/ reply, but to provoke their longing, he/ holds high, and does not hide, the thing they want," to seeing himself as "a scared young animal," to the red glow of "glass or metal . . . seen within a furnace," to the "breeze of May that—heralding/ the dawning of the day—when it is steeped/ in flowers and in grass, stirs fragrantly," in a passage that ends by blessing those "whose hungering is always in just measure" but belies that "just measure" with Dante's own measureless hungering for metaphor.

XIV PURGATORIO

But, generally, the similes of *Purgatorio* share the tighter "curb of art" and sense of rite that rein the actions, rhetoric, spacings, and timings of *Purgatorio*: a gravity, a concentration, that relies on prefatory announcement and alerting, on formal greetings and valedictions, on strategies of stylization and sacralization.

The line of rite begins in the first canto, with its formal pre-announcement by Cato: "Go then; but first/ wind a smooth rush around his waist and bathe/ his face to wash away all of Hell's stains" (I, 94-96), and then its emblematic etching of a shore where only pliant rushes can grow (I, 100-105):

*This solitary island, all around
its very base, there where the breakers pound,
bears rushes on its soft and muddy ground.
There is no other plant that lives below:
no plant with leaves or plant that, as it grows,
hardens—and breaks beneath the waves' harsh blows.*

That line of rite continues in the angelic apparition of Canto II, the first of a series (Cantos VIII, IX, XII, XVII, XIX); in the formal entry to Purgatory with its three steps and seven P's (for *peccato*, sin) traced on Dante's forehead; in the astonished shades' repeated recognitions of Dante's having a material body; in the sequence of dreams noted above (Cantos IX, XIX, XXVII), each dream preceded, in the sentence announcing it, by the time of its occurrence, pre-dawn; in the embeddings, within this verbal artifact, of artifacts that include the wall reliefs and pavement reliefs of the first terrace; in the double immersion of Dante, first in Lethe, the classic river of forgetfulness, erasing the memory of misdoing, then with Eunoe, the river of recall, Dante's invention, restoring memory of the good we have done; in the retinue of Beatrice, with her seven handmaids, four for the "natural" virtues, three for the theological; and in the vast processional in the Earthly Paradise.

That line will be reinforced by two complementary aspects of *Purgatorio*: its more frequent intervals of solitude or shared

solitude—of Dante or of what he sees (Cato, Sordello, Matilda)—and the choral sense that makes its terraces, as Francesco D'Ovidio had it, a "colossal monastery," with its hymns and psalms, rapid Biblical and liturgical inserts, its Latin and paraphrases of Latin joined by citation and translations (and a mistranslation) of Virgil, and, twice, by Dante's own Latin inserts.

Rite will also find support in rhetorical symmetries, as in the sequence of thirteen tercets (xii, 25-63) in which four tercets beginning with "I saw" are followed by four beginning with exclamatory "O"'s and four beginning with "it showed," with that sequence followed by a summative thirteenth tercet, where the lines begin, respectively, "I saw," "o," and "it showed": "I saw Troy turned to caverns and to ashes; / o Ilium, your effigy in stone—/ it showed you there so squalid, so cast down!" (xii, 61-63).

However sardonically placed it is, even Dante's designation of his long polemic against Italy and Florence as "digression" (vi, 128), his only use of the word in all the *Comedy*, involves some self-conscious sense of transgression and reinforces our sense of art as rite in *Purgatorio*.

For similes that—unlike the staccato, nervous examples cited above—participate in the formal ritual climate, witness the doves (ii, 124-132), the sheep moving out of the fold (iii, 79-87), even the elaborated street-scene of the dice-players (vi, 1-12), and the corbels (x, 130-135), and the likeness that embraces Virgil and Statius as herdsmen and Dante as goat (xxvii, 76-87):

*Like goats that, when they grazed, were swift and tameless
along the mountain peaks, but now are sated,
and rest and ruminate—while the sun blazes—
untroubled, in the shadows, silently,
watched over by the herdsman as he leans
upon his staff and oversees their peace;
or like the herdsman in the open fields,*

spending the night beside his quiet flock,
 watching to see that no beast drives them off;
 such were all three of us at that point—they
 were like the herdsmen, I was like the goat;
 upon each side of us, high rock walls rose.

If *Purgatorio* is more circumscribed than *Inferno*, it is because of the "immense desire" that it abets and must contain (IV, 29). Dante's constant intellectual and visual curiosity now has "natural thirst," the thirst to know and to know that which grace alone can offer, as its source: "The natural thirst that never can be quenched/ except by water that gives grace—the draught/ the simple woman of Samaria sought—/ tormented me" (XXI, 1-4).

Dante drives and is driven beyond the melancholia of Virgil's injunction, Virgil's questioning of questing, his reasoning's self-delimiting sadness, its awareness that it can describe what is but cannot supply the *why* (III, 37-45):

*"Confine yourselves, o humans, to the quia;
 had you been able to see all, there would
 have been no need for Mary to give birth.*

*You saw the fruitless longing of those men
 who would—if reason could—have been content,
 those whose desire eternally laments:*

*I speak of Aristotle and of Plato—
 and many others." Here he bent his head
 and said no more, remaining with his sorrow.*

Dante's need to array thirsts and hungerings and longings is as "limitless" as his thirst for the waters of Eunoe in the final canto (XXXIII, 138-139). When Dante receives an answer, he continues: "I am more hungry now for satisfaction" (XV, 58). His soul tastes "that food which, even as/ it quenches hunger, spurs the appetite" (XXXI, 129-130). He is "still goaded by new thirst" (XVIII, 4). Reluctantly, he draws his "unquenchable sponge out of the water" (XX, 3). "A thousand longings burning more than flames" compel his eyes (XXXI, 118). Guido

Guinizzelli burns for an answer "in fire and thirst" and lets Dante know that Guinizzelli's fellow shades thirst for that answer "more than/ an Indian or Ethiopian/ thirsts for cool water" (xxvi, 18-22). When Dante asks the Muses for recompense ("O Virgins, sacrosanct, if I have ever,/ for your sake, suffered vigils, cold, and hunger,/ great need makes me entreat my recompense": xxix, 37-39), the hunger seems not only the hunger of indigent exile but the hungering and thirsting of this work.

That force of longing is, of course, only abetted by the nearness now, in Purgatory, of Beatrice, by the ten years of thirst between her death in 1290 and the date of the fictive voyage, and the even longer span between her death and Dante's writing of the *Purgatorio* (xxxi, 1-9):

*My eyes were so insistent, so intent
on finding satisfaction for their ten-
year thirst that every other sense was spent.
And to each side, my eyes were walled in by
indifference to all else (with its old net,
the holy smile so drew them to itself),
when I was forced to turn my eyes leftward
by those three goddesses because I heard
them warning me: "You stare too fixedly."*

It is this uncontainable desire that presses against the container. So, too, do the ways of envisioning that *Purgatorio* spans. If what Dante sees here is less varied than what he saw in the *Inferno*, his modes of vision are much more various. He sees with the sensual waking eye (both seeing directly and seeing mimetic artifacts), with the "intellect's sharp eyes" (xviii, 16), with the "shut . . . eyes" of dream (xviii, 144-145); and in "ecstatic vision" (xv, 86), he sees images that are impressed upon—or have "rained" into—his "fantasy" and "imagination" (xvii, 13-45). Dante comments on these latter modes as if he were providing us with one aspect of the poetics of his larger fiction through his anatomy of these partial envisionings of fantasy (these "not false errors": xv, 117): "At this, my

mind withdrew to the within,/ to what imagining might bring; no thing/ that came from the without could enter in" (xvii, 22-24). Another direction, another aspect of Dante's poetics, his emphasis on mimetic credibility, is reinforced by the firmness with which he asserts the accuracy of the wall reliefs and pavement reliefs he sees on the first terrace, "carvings/ so accurate—not only Polycletus/ but even Nature, there, would feel defeated" (x, 31-33): "What master of the brush or of the stylus/ had there portrayed such masses, such outlines/ as would astonish all discerning minds?/ The dead seemed dead and the alive, alive:/ I saw, head bent, treading those effigies,/ as well as those who'd seen those scenes directly" (xii, 64-69).

Dante will also examine attentively the points of passage between waking vision, sharp thought, random thought, reverie, dream, and fantasy, and the paralimnions of each state (even as he had examined the shoreline of Purgatory):

"I was so drawn from random thought/ to thought that, wandering in mind, I shut/ my eyes, transforming thought on thought to dream" (xviii, 144-145); "And when this image shattered of itself,/ just like a bubble that has lost the water/ beneath which it was formed . . ." (xvii, 31-34); and, "Even as sleep is shattered when new light/ strikes suddenly against closed eyes and, once/ it's shattered, gleams before it dies completely,/ so my imagination fell away" (xvii, 40-43).

In this last passage, "new light" almost becomes an emblem of Dante's own light, a light that is both more abruptly shattering and more darting than the light of Virgil's *Aeneid*: whatever limits Dante sets for himself in the *Purgatorio*, his is a more restless light than Virgil's—a modern light, the light of the "immense desire" that made the need for *Purgatorio*'s "curb of art" so imperative.

In a journey as long as the *Comedy*, with its 14,233 lines and more than 650 similes, our memory not only commits para-

phrase; it also misremembers, and dismembers the text through specific but highly selective recall, even as Dante himself—as Gianfranco Contini reminds us—recalls configurations of sound but uses those configurations in drastically altered contexts. Few readers of the *Inferno* will not tally up Francesca, Farinata, Pier della Vigna, Brunetto Latini, Ulysses. Sometimes these tesserae in the mosaic of memory are not personages but extended similes. Sometimes they are bits as swift as “the lightning-flash” of the lizard in *Inf.* xxv, or the plunging fish of *Purg.* xxvi. In edifying the *Purgatorio*, the mosaic of memory draws heavily on the rituals and repetitions noted above, and on the map of space and time that Dante is so careful to trace for the reader-voyager. But groupings of personages found in three divisions of the mountain, Ante-Purgatory, Purgatory proper, and the Earthly Paradise, can also serve as tesserae. (In the case of *Purgatorio*, memory can more easily contain the complete array of characters who speak; even hasty scrutinists can intuit the presence of fewer figures in the round than the *Inferno* presents, and Thomas Bergin’s demographic comparison of the three *cantiche* documents their intuition.)

In *Inferno* there was only one principal figure from antiquity other than Virgil: Ulysses, whose insatiable curiosity makes him a kind of counter-figure of Dante. In *Purgatorio*, Statius, another poet of antiquity, will join Virgil as a figure complementing, not countering, Dante. And antiquity also provides the guardian of Purgatory’s shores: Cato of Utica (95–46 B.C.).

Pagan and, after Caesar’s victories at Pharsalus in 48 B.C. and Thapsus in 46 B.C., a suicide at Utica in Africa, the intractable republican would have been a possible candidate for Limbo, where his widow Marcia is to be found, or for the Wood of the Suicides (*Inf.* xiii). But Dante had already, in his *Convivio*, glorified “the most holy breast of Cato” (iv, v, 16), and had asked and answered: “And what earthly man was was more worthy of signifying God than Cato? Certainly no one” (iv, xxviii, 15). And in his *Monarchy* (very possibly com-