

Canto I



THE STORY. *DANTE and Virgil, emerging from Hell, find themselves on the shore of the Island of Purgatory at the Antipodes. They are met by Cato, the guardian of the Mountain, who instructs Virgil to wash Dante's face in dew and to gird him with a reed in preparation for the ascent.*

For better waters heading with the wind 1
My ship of genius now shakes out her sail
And leaves that ocean of despair behind;

For to the second realm I tune my tale, 4
Where human spirits purge themselves, and train
To leap up into joy celestial.

Now from the grave wake poetry again, 7
O sacred Muses I have served so long!
Now let Calliope uplift her strain

And lift my voice up on the mighty song 10
That smote the miserable Magpies nine
Out of all hope of pardon for their wrong!

Colour unclouded, orient-sapphirine, 13
Softly suffusing from meridian height
Down the still sky to the horizon-line,

Brought to mine eyes renewal of delight 16
So soon as I came forth from that dead air
Which had oppressed my bosom and my sight.

The lovely planet, love's own quickener, 19
Now lit to laughter all the eastern sky,
Veiling the Fishes that attended her.

Right-hand I turned, and, setting me to spy 22
That alien pole, beheld four stars, the same
The first men saw, and since, no living eye;

Meseemed the heavens exulted in their flame — 25
O widowed world beneath the northern Plough,
For ever famished of the sight of them!

Tearing my eyes away, I scarce know how, 28
I turned me toward the other pole — our own,
Whence Plough and all had wholly vanished now,

And saw hard by me an old man alone, 31
Whose reverend mien commanded such respect,
No father could deserve more from a son.

Flowing he wore his beard, and silver-flecked, 34
Likewise his hair, whereof a double tress,
Falling this side and that, his shoulders decked;

And those four holy stars so poured their rays, 37
Gilding his looks with light, that I descried
Him plain as though the sun shone in his face.

“What men are you, that ‘gainst the hidden tide 40
Have slipped the eternal prison-house?” he said,
Shaking his honoured locks from side to side.

“Who was your guide? your lantern, when you fled 43
The night unfathomed that, without surcease,
Makes dark the infernal valley of the dead?”

What! broken thus, the laws of the Abyss? 46
Or can high Heaven have changed its ordinance,
That you lost souls should seek my terraces?”

At this, my guide, with instant vigilance, 49
Seized on me, and by hand and word and sign
Composed my knees and brow to reverence;

Then answered: “Not my power, but Heaven’s design 52
Brought me; a lady stooped from bliss to pray
My aid and escort for this charge of mine;

But since it is thy will I should display 55
More fully how it stands now with our case,
What will could be in me to say thee nay?

This man has not yet seen his term of days, 58
Yet in his crazy wickedness he drew
So near it, he had but short breathing-space.

So, as I said, I was dispatched to do 61
My utmost for his rescue; nor appeared
Any good way save this I’ve set me to.

I’ve shown him Hell with all its guilty herd, 64
And mean to show him next the souls who dwell
Making purgation here beneath thy ward.

How I have brought him through, 'twere long to tell; 67
Power from on high helps me to guide his feet
To thee, to see and hear and mark thee well.

Be gracious to his coming, I entreat; 70
'Tis liberty he seeks — how dear a thing
That is, they know who give their lives for it;

Thou know'st; for thee this passion drew death's sting 73
In Utica, where thou didst doff the weed
Which at the Doom shall shine so glistening.

None breaks for us the dateless law decreed, 76
For this man lives, and Minos binds not me;
My circle's that which sees thy Marcia plead

With her chaste eyes, O holy heart, to thee 79
That thine she is, and thou wilt deem her so.
For her sake, then, receive us favourably;

Through thy seven kingdoms give us leave to go; 82
Great praise of thee I'll carry back to her,
If thou disdain not mention down below."

"Marcia," said he, "when I lived over there, 85
So pleased the eyes of me, that whatsoever
She asked me, that I did, and did not spare.

Now that she dwells beyond the evil river 88
She may not move me, by the edict made
When I was taken thence — not now, nor ever.

But since thou sayest a heavenly lady's aid 91
Moves thee and guides, these flatteries are misplaced;
Ask in her name, that's all that needs be said.

Go, take this man, and see thou gird his waist 94
With a smooth reed, and from his brow likewise
Cleanse all this filth with which it is defaced;

He may not meetly go with clouded eyes 97
Before the great First Minister to stand,
Who is of those who are of Paradise.

All round this little island, on the strand 100
Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand;

No other plant could keep itself alive: 103
None that bears leaf, or hardeus in its prime
And will not bend when wind and water drive.

Do not come back this way a second time; 106
The sun's just rising; he will show a place
At which the mountain is less hard to climb."

He spoke; and promptly vanished from our gaze. 109
I rose without a word, and to my guide
Drew near, and fixed my eyes upon his face.

"Follow my footsteps, little son; abide 112
Close by me. Turn we round; this way," said he,
"The plain slopes low to meet the encircling tide."

And the dawn rose triumphant, making flee 115
The morning breeze before her; and far off
I recognized the shimmering of the sea.

So we along that lonely plain did move, 118
Like one who's lost the road and seems to go
With wasted steps till repossessed thereof;

And coming to a place where dew can show 121
Resistance to the sun, since day-long shade
Keeps the earth cool and exhalation slow,

Gently upon the turf my master spread 124
Both hands; and I, not taken unawares,
But understanding what this purported,

Held up to him my face begrimed with tears; 127
And so he brought my native hue once more
To light, washed clean of hell's disfiguring smears.

When we had reached the solitary shore 130
Which ne'er saw seaman yet who after found
Skill to recross that sea by sail and oar,

There, as Another pleased, he girt me round; 133
And soon as it was plucked — O, strange to say
Just as it was, from that same spot of ground,

The humble plant sprang up again straightway. 136

The Images.

Cato of Utica (for whose history see Glossary) was for the Romans, and also for the men of the Middle Ages, the accepted type of the (natural) moral virtues. For the purposes of the *story* he is chosen to guard the approach to Mount Purgatory; since the ascent of the Mountain is a moral progress in which the natural virtues are purified and strengthened by Grace. Dante thus emphasizes *allegorically* the Catholic assertion that Grace does not oust or destroy Nature, but redeems and perfects it. The passage about Marcia (ll. 85-90) makes it, however, clear that when natural morality is taken up into the Christian life, it cannot retain its former attachments, but must spring from a new root and be wholly reorientated.

When this has been said, there remain some puzzling factors about Dante's treatment of this figure. Cato has been taken out of Limbo, detached from his former associations and affections, and set, until the end of time, on what may be called "Christian territory". Yet there is no suggestion that he will ever himself climb the Mountain which he guards; nor, although we are assured that Cato's resurrection body will be a glorious one, is it ever specifically stated that he will eventually enter Heaven like the redeemed pagans Trajan and Rhipeus (*Para.* xx. 103 *sqq.*). It may be, as J. S. Carroll suggests, that in the Last Day he will return to become the brightest and most authoritative inhabitant of the Elysian Fields in Limbo, "giving laws there to the good in the hidden place", as Virgil wrote of him (*Aen.* viii. 670). Certainly, Cato does not bear about with him the atmosphere of Grace: when we compare him with the souls actually redeemed in Purgatory, and still more with the angel-guardians of the Cornices, we see that he lacks the intensity, the exuberance, and the courtesy which are the marks of those in Grace; he is, in a word, ungracious. He is a moral imperative, founded in duty rather than in love: a preparation for penitence, but not penitence itself; as such a very recognizable figure, and acceptable enough if we concentrate on his

allegorical function rather than on his personal destiny as a character in the story.

The Four Stars. These typify the Cardinal Virtues (Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude) belonging to natural morality, and so common to good pagan and Christian alike. These virtues are called “cardinal” (from *cardo*, a hinge) because all natural morality hangs and turns upon them.

The Dew. Before ascending the Mountain, Dante’s face must be cleansed from the tears he shed in Hell. The penitent’s first duty is cheerfulness: having recognized his sin he must put it out of his mind and not wallow in self-pity and self-reproach, which are forms of egotism. (Cf. also *Inf.* xx. 29-30 and note.)

The Reed. The reader will remember that Dante’s original rope-girdle was thrown over the Great Barrier between Upper and Nether Hell, to call up the monster Fraud. (See *Inf.* xvi. Images.) He is now given a new one, made of the pliant reed which symbolizes Humility, as a safeguard against Pride, which is the head and source of all the Capital Sins.

Notes

1. 7: *Now from the grave, etc.:* This is the first invocation, addressed to the Muses, and in particular to Calliope, the Muse of Epic Poetry.

1. 11: *The miserable Magpies:* the nine daughters of Pireus, King of Emathia challenged the nine Muses to a singing-contest. They were defeated, and changed, for their presumption, into magpies.

11. 19-21: *The lovely planet ... that attended her:* Venus, the planet of love, was not actually in the constellation of Pisces (the Fishes) in the spring of 1300. Dante was probably misled by the Almanac of Prothacius (a perpetual calendar widely used in his time) which shows the varying positions of Sun, Moon, and Planets from day to day over whole cycles of years. In the Hebrew original, all the cycles begin in the year 1301; but in the Latin edition (which Dante would have used) they all begin in 1300, *except*

those of Venus and the Sun, which begin in 1301. In some copies the error has been corrected by placing a “I” at the top of the column for Venus; others contain no indication of the discrepancy, while in yet others the date 1300 has been wrongly inserted. Since both the Hebrew and Latin prefaces state that *all* the *cycles* begin in 1300, anyone consulting an uncorrected copy to see where Venus was in March-April of that year would naturally look in the first column, and would find there that she was passing into Pisces at the end of the month; though in fact this was true, not for 1300, but for 1301. This seems the simplest explanation for the error; on the other hand, Dante may possibly have been following a traditional disposition of all the planets at the time of the Creation (cf. *Inf.* i. 37-40).

l. 23-4: *that alien pole*, etc.: the South Pole, which, with its attendant stars, would have been visible to Adam and Eve in the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory, but never seen again after the Fall and the Expulsion, when man’s habitation was removed to the Northern Hemisphere. This statement would appear to exclude the supposition that Dante had heard of the Southern Cross from Marco Polo or other travellers. (It seems to have slipped his memory that in *Inf.* xxvi. 127-8 he had described Ulysses and his fellow-voyagers as seeing “the other pole with all its stars”.)

l. 31: *an old man alone*: Cato. He was actually only 49 at the time of his death, so that Dante’s description of him is not so much realistic as appropriate to his venerable character. His face is illuminated (ll. 37-9) by the cardinal virtues (but not by the stars representing the theological graces, which rise later, viii. 85-93).

l. 40: *‘gainst the hidden tide*: the Poets had followed the river of Lethe *upstream* out of Hell (see *Inf.* xxxiv. 127-35, and note).

l. 53: *a lady*: i.e. Beatrice.

l. 58: *his term of days*: the death (literally) of the body and (allegorically) of the soul (cf. *Inf.* i. 25-7, 94-6).

1. 73: *thou know'st*, etc.: Cato committed suicide (see Glossary) rather than submit to Caesar's tyranny. This is another instance of Dante's ambivalent attitude to Caesar (see *Inf.* xxxiv and Images). Cato is not, like Brutus and Cassius, relegated to Hell as an opponent of the Empire; because of his devotion to political liberty he is here made guardian of the path to spiritual liberty. Neither does his suicide qualify him for Hell, since the heathen are judged by their own code, which did not necessarily condemn suicide. On this point Dante is quite consistent: he places no *Christian* suicides in Purgatory or Paradise and no *pagans* in the portion of Hell (Circle vii, Ring 1) appointed for the punishment of suicides (*Inf.* xiii).

1. 74: *the weed*: Le. the body.

11. 77-8: *Minos binds not me*: as a virtuous pagan, Virgil is not subject to Minos, the infernal judge. *My circle*: i.e. Limbo, which lies above the seat of Minos and the circles of Hell proper. (See *Inf.* iv and v and the map of Hell in that volume.)

1. 78: *Marcia*: the wife of Cato (see Glossary). 1. 82: *thy seven kingdoms*: the seven Cornices of the Mountain, on which the Capital Sins are successively purged.

1. 88: *the evil river*: Acheron (see *Inf.* iii. 70 *sqq.*).

11. 89-90: *the edict made when I was taken thence*: Cato was presumably taken out of Limbo, and the edict concerning him made, at the Harrowing of Hell, when Purgatory was first established. The fact that Dante does not mention this in Virgil's account (*Inf.* iv. 52-63) of the Harrowing suggests that he had not at that time considered the use he was to make of Cato.

1. 98: *the great First Minister*: the angel at the gate of Purgatory (ix. 78 *sqq.*).

1. 133: *as Another pleased*: the mark of humility is submission to the will of another (Cato) or of Another (God). The phrase (*come altrui piacque*) first

occurs in *Inf.* xxvi. 141, where the submission is involuntary, whereas here it is embraced by the will (*John* xxi. 18).