

Purgatory Canto 1

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Canto I

Argument

The Poet describes the delight he experienced at issuing a little before dawn from the infernal regions, into the pure air that surrounds the isle of Purgatory; and then relates how, turning to the right, he beheld four stars never seen before, but by our first parents, and met on his left the shade of Cato of Utica, who, having warned him and Virgil what is needful to be done before they proceed on their way through Purgatory, disappears; and the two poets go toward the shore, where Virgil cleanses Dante's face with the dew, and girds him with a reed, as Cato had commanded.

O'er better waves to speed her rapid course
The light bark of my genius lifts the sail,
Well pleased to leave so cruel sea behind;
And of that second region will I sing,
In which the human spirit from sinful blot
Is purged, and for ascent to Heaven prepares.

Here, O ye hallow'd Nine! for in your train
I follow, here the deaden'd strain revive;
Nor let Calliope refuse to sound
A somewhat higher song, of that loud tone
Which when the wretched birds of chattering note[1]
Had heard, they of forgiveness lost all hope.

[1: Birds oa chattering note." For the fable of the daughters of Pierus who challenged the muses to sing, and were by them changed into magpies, see Ovid, Met. lib. v. fab. 5.]

Sweet hue of eastern sapphire, that was spread
O'er the serene aspect of the pure air,
High up as the first circle,[2] to mine eyes
Unwonted joy renew'd, soon as I 'scaped
Forth from the atmosphere of deadly gloom,
That had mine eyes and bosom fill'd with grief.
The radiant planet,[3] that to love invites,
Made all the orient laugh, and veil'd beneath
The Pisces' light,[4] that in his [her] escort came.

[2: "The first circle." Either, as some suppose, the moon; or, as Lombardi (who likes to be as far off the rest of the commentators as possible) will have it, the highest circle of the stars.]

[3: "Planet." Venus.]

[4: The constellation of the Fish veiled by the more luminous body of Venus, then a morning star.]

To the right hand I turn'd, and fix'd my mind
On the other pole attentive, where I saw
Four stars[5] ne'er seen before save by the ken
Of our first parents.[6] Heaven of their rays
Seem'd joyous. O thou northern site! bereft
Indeed, and widow'd, since of these deprived.

[5: Symbolical of the four cardinal virtues, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance.]

[6: "Our first parents." In the terrestrial paradise, placed on the summit of Purgatory.]

As from this view I had desisted, straight
Turning a little toward the other pole,
There from whence now the wain[7] had disappear'd,
I saw an old man[8] standing by my side
Alone, so worthy of reverence in his look,
That ne'er from son to father more was owed.
Low down his beard, and mix'd with hoary white,
Descended, like his locks, which, parting, fell
Upon his breast in double fold. The beams
Of those four luminaries on his face
So brightly shone, and with such radiance clear
Deck'd it, that I beheld him as the sun.

[7: Charles' Wain, or Bootes.]

[8: "An old man." Cato.]

"Say who are ye, that stemming the blind stream,
Forth from the eternal prison - house have fled?"
He spoke and moved those venerable plumes.
"Who hath conducted, or with lantern sure
Lights you emerging from the depth of night,
That makes the infernal valley ever black?
Are the firm statutes of the dread abyss
Broken, or in high Heaven new laws ordain'd,
That thus, condemn'd, ye to my caves approach?"

My guide, then laying hold on me, by words
And intimations given with hand and head,
Made my bent knees and eye submissive pay
Due reverence; then thus to him replied:

"Not of myself I come; a Dame from heaven[9]
Descending, him besought me in my charge

To bring. But since thy will implies, that more
Our true condition I unfold at large,
Mine is not to deny thee thy request.

[9: Beatrice. See Hell, ii. 54.]

This mortal ne'er hath seen the farthest gloom;
But erring by his folly had approach'd
So near, that little space was left to turn.
Then, as before I told, I was despatch'd
To work his rescue; and no way remain'd
Save this which I have ta'en. I have display'd
Before him all the regions of the bad;
And purpose now those spirits to display,
That under thy command are purged from sin.
How I have brought him would be long to say.
From high descends the virtue, by whose aid
I to thy sight and hearing him have led.
Now may our coming please thee. In the search
Of liberty he journeys: that how dear,
They know who for her sake have life refused.
Thou knowest, to whom death for her was sweet
In Utica, where thou didst leave those weeds,
That in the last great day will shine so bright.
For us the eternal edicts are unmoved;
He breathes, and I of Minos am not bound,
Abiding in that circle, where the eyes
Of thy chaste Marcia beam, who still in look
Prays thee, O hallow'd spirit! to own her thine.
Then by her love we implore thee, let us pass
Through thy seven regions;[10] for which, best thanks
I for thy favour will to her return,
If mention there below thou not disdain."

[10: "Through thy seven regions." The seven rounds of Purgatory, in which the seven capital sins are punished.]

"Marcia so pleasing in my sight was found,"
He then to him rejoin'd, "while I was there,
That all she ask'd me I was fain to grant.
Now that beyond the accursed stream she dwells,
She may no longer move me, by that law,[11]
Which was ordain'd me, when I issued thence.
Not so, if Dame from Heaven, as thou sayst,
Moves and directs thee; then no flattery needs.
Enough for me that in her name thou ask.

[11: "By that law." When he was delivered by Christ from Limbo, a change of affections accompanied his change of place.]

Go therefore now: and with a slender reed[12]
See that thou duly gird him, and his face
Lave, till all sordid stain thou wipe from thence.
For not with eye, by any cloud obscured,
Would it be seemly before him to come,
Who stands the foremost minister in Heaven.
This islet all around, there far beneath,
Where the wave beats it, on the oozy bed
Produces store of reeds. No other plant,
Cover'd with leaves, or harden'd in its stalk,
There lives, not bending to the water's sway.
After, this way return not; but the sun
Will show you, that now rises, where to take
The mountain in its easiest ascent."

[12: A type of simplicity and patience.]

He disappear'd; and I myself upraised
Speechless, and to my guide retiring close,
Toward him turn'd mine eyes. He thus began:
"My son! observant thou my steps pursue.
We must retreat to rereward; for that way
The champain to its low extreme declines."

The dawn had chased the matin hour of prime,
Which fled before it, so that from afar
I spied the trembling of the ocean stream.

We traversed the deserted plain, as one
Who, wander'd from his track, thinks every step
Trodden in vain till he regain the path.

When we had come, where yet the tender dew
Strove with the sun, and in a place where fresh
The wind breathed o'er it, while it slowly dried;
Both hands extended on the watery grass
My master placed, in graceful act and kind.
Whence I of his intent before apprised,
Stretch'd out to him my cheeks suffused with tears.
There to my visage he anew restored
That hue which the dun shades of Hell conceal'd.

Then on the solitary shore arrived,
That never sailing on its waters saw
Man that could after measure back his course,
He girt me in such manner as had pleased

Him who instructed; and, oh strange to tell!
As he selected every humble plant,
Wherever one was pluck'd another there

Resembling, straightway in its place arose.

— Purgatory Canto 1