

FRANCIS FERGUSSON

Dante's Drama of the Mind

A Modern Reading of the Purgatorio



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BY FRANCIS FERGUSON

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FOREWORD

THE READING of the *Divine Comedy*, like the reading of Shakespeare, has no end: one does not reach the point where it is possible to say that we see what is in it. That is not because Dante's poem is obscurely written, for the most innocent reader can begin to enjoy it at once. It is because of two properties of great poetry which it possesses to a unique degree: inner coherence, and the property of illuminating the reader's most intimate experience at every stage of life. One soon sees that beneath the ceaseless movement of the verse an order is unfolding; but the order continues to unfold in new ways. And its meaning for us appears in a slightly different light every time we look at it.

This book is the unforeseen result of my having read the *Divine Comedy* off and on for about twenty-five years. Between 1934 and 1947 I read it with small groups of students at Bennington College. A certain fairly stable view of the way the poem is composed, and of the way it is intended to be read, gradually emerged. My purpose is to explain this view of the developing form of the poem; in short, to facilitate the endless, always surprising, yet surer and surer process of exploration.

I have several reasons for focussing upon the *Purgatorio* rather than the *Inferno* or the *Paradiso*. The *Inferno* is better known and more immediately effective. I suppose that anyone with a little interest in Dante (anyone who might look at this book) will have some impression of it. Its magic is like the inspired, unplaced visions of modern art, easy for us. But by itself it gives a false impression of the *Comedy*. For Dante, no poetic vision was a sufficient end in itself, however powerful and beautiful; and the *Inferno* demands the other canticles. As for the *Paradiso*, it is much the most difficult of the three. One may start to enjoy it at once, but it is the last part of the *Comedy* which could be discussed with any confidence.

FOREWORD

The *Purgatorio* is the transitional canticle, in many respects the center of the whole *Comedy*. It is the tragic and triumphant answer to Hell, and the preparation for the beatific vision. It is the drama of the discovery of the order of Dante's vision, and also the drama of the making of the poem. There Dante most unmistakably presents his own spirit at work; if we cannot glimpse it, it is not through any failure of art or candor on his part. Moreover, the *Purgatorio*, though "hoarse with long silence," as Dante said of Virgil, might have much to say to our time if it were better known. Mr. T. S. Eliot recommends Dante as the best model for contemporary poets. The *Purgatorio* has light to shed also upon history and its making; upon psychology, ethics, and education; upon politics and the transmission of our tradition. There are many reasons for learning to read it; it is a central clue.

I owe a great deal to several writers on Dante, and I have tried to indicate my debts to them in the course of the book and in the Notes at the back of the volume.

I wish to record my gratitude to the Committee for the Princeton Seminars in Literary Criticism, the late Donald A. Stauffer and Professors Richard Blackmur, Whitney J. Oates, and Ira O. Wade, for the valuable opportunity to present a six-weeks' seminar on the *Purgatorio* to their group in the autumn of 1949.

Mr. Benjamin F. Houston, of the Princeton University Press, has taken care of the innumerable details of publication, and I am most grateful to him for his skill and his kindness.

Several chapters in approximately their present form have appeared in the *Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Thought*. I have to thank the editors of those publications for permission to reprint here.

F. F.

20 A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS IN THE TEXT

THE Italian quotations from the *Divine Comedy* throughout this book are taken from the Temple Classics edition. The translations are my own. I have versified them because I believe that a prose translation, even a literal one, is misleading.

In making my translations I have tried to take as few liberties as possible with the literal meaning, even when Dante's imagery seemed difficult or strange in English. I have not tried for strict and consistent rhymes, but instead I have sought to suggest the effect of *terza rima* by means of assonance. There is something to be said for this scheme in principle. *Terza rima* is very difficult in English, and strict rhyme in our language is likely to seem more artificial and insistent than it does in Dante's Italian. My purpose, however, was not to replace the original, or even to make an equivalent in English, but to lead the reader to savor Dante's own verses, and perhaps to try some translations of his own. Translating is one way to increased understanding and enjoyment.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Charles S. Singleton of Harvard, who has read my translations. He is not to be held responsible for my results, but I have been helped in many ways by his superb knowledge of the original which he generously made available to me, and by his advice and encouragement.

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PART ONE

THE PATHOS OF EARTH
(THE FIRST DAY: CANTOS I-IX)

❧ CHAPTER 1. THE METAPHOR OF THE JOURNEY

FOR the first line of the first canto of the *Divine Comedy* Dante wrote:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

(In the middle of the journey of our life)

There everything starts: in the middle of human life considered as a journey. There Dante was so lost and terrified that the journey to the realms beyond the grave became necessary for his salvation. But there too he found the strength and vision he required.

Dante knew that "the journey of our life" was a metaphor. He knew that the journey beyond the grave was a vastly extended metaphor also, in its literal meaning a fiction. But it was the miraculously right metaphor for his purposes, for what he had to show were the swarming journeys of human life with a clarity, vital intensity, and hidden order which seem to be indeed that of death, the aspect of eternity.

Knowing the fictiveness of his poem, knowing its sources, its manifold techniques, and all the subtle stratagems of its make-believe, he certainly did not believe it literally. But he believed, beyond our capacity for belief, in the truth which his fiction was devised to show. He tells Can Grande that his purpose was "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery, and lead them to the state of felicity." He reveals the truth of the human condition: the state of misery in the beginning of the poem, the state of felicity, after so many changing scenes, at the end. He does not preach: the journey speaks for him. But the journey has a double movement, the literal narrative and the movement of understanding, which is always going from the make-believe of the visionary scene to the truth beneath it: to the human spirit, on its way, or milling in some deathly eddy.

The notion of human life as a journey, and the related notion that the guides of the race must journey beyond the grave and meet the spirits of the ancestors in order to grasp their earthly way and ours, seems to be as old as the myth-making instinct itself. Dante likens his mission to the legendary missions of Aeneas and Paul, both of whom had to acquire the second, the post-mortem vision. Behind the legends of Aeneas's and Paul's journeys to the other world lie the myths of prehistoric culture-heroes, which were associated with *rites de passage*, ceremonies of initiation marking the stages of human life from the cradle to the grave. The *Divine Comedy* may be regarded as an initiation, or series of initiations, into the wisdom of the tribe. But Dante's tribe had an old and complex civilization, and Dante is not merely primitive. He is, at the same time, at least as sophisticated in his own way as the hero of a modern *Bildungsroman*: Hans Castorp, say, doing his reading in his mountain sanitarium, or one of Henry James's American pilgrims, undergoing his initiation on the "stage of Europe."

In the countless uses which Dante makes of metaphors of journeying, he never loses the primitive power of the metaphor, yet at the same time he employs it for the subtlest metaphysical and epistemological distinctions. All the journey-metaphors are based on the analogy, which the human mind finds very natural, between physical movement and the non-spatial action of the soul. The direct force of this analogy is unmistakable (for example) in Ulysses' narrative of his last ocean-voyage, in *Inferno*, Canto xxvi. But Ulysses' journey is in a carefully-controlled relation of analogy to Dante's journey down into Hell. It is also analogous to his subsequent journey up the Mount of Purgatory; but the journey into Hell is not continuous with the journey of purgation. The Pilgrim's transition from the one to the other is left mysterious, and each has its own validity as a metaphor for one aspect of earthly life. I have already mentioned the distinction between any of the journeys beyond the grave and the

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journey of this life. There are also the journeys of the making of the canticles, which are likened to sea-voyages, though *different* sea-voyages, in the opening sequences of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. The reader too is supposed to be making a journey, at his peril, under Dante's guidance (*Paradiso*, Canto II, line 1):

O voi, che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
retro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago; chè forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.

(O you, who are there in your little boat,
longing to listen, following my way
behind my timbers singing as they go,
turn you back to find your own coasts again:
do not trust to the open sea; for perhaps,
once losing me, you would be left astray.)

As one gets used to reading the *Divine Comedy*, one learns to see that Dante is continually correcting and amplifying one metaphorical journey with another; and by that means creating a sense of ceaseless life and movement, and of perpetually deepening, yet more and more closely-defined meaning.

II

One can see in a general way why Dante should have had to descend to the bottom of Hell before the other journeys became possible. Once in the terror of the Dark Wood, he had to explore the full import of that experience before his spirit was free to take another direction. And the vision of Hell is the occasion, the necessary preliminary to the other visions. Hell is the death which must precede rebirth, a moment which recurs by analogy through the whole poem:

a moment in that tragic rhythm which governs the movement of the *Divine Comedy* in the whole and in its parts.

After the release from Hell, the incommensurable journey of purgation can get under way; but we know that it does not reach the final Goal which Dante envisaged. The *Paradiso*, another journey altogether, unfolds Divinity as reflected in the order of the Dantesque cosmos. The beatific vision may be regarded as the center of the whole *Commedia*, because in Dante's living belief God is the clue to all our modes of life, including the life and form of his poem. Dante regarded himself as the heir of Aeneas and Paul; he certainly believed that he both saw and wrote in obedience to God. Yet at the same time he had a disabused and tender sense of mortal limitations, his own and the reader's; and he placed the vision of God outside the poem—an End and a Center which must remain ineffable. He explains clearly to Can Grande that he does not intend to explore heaven as the theologians try to do, speculatively, as it would be in itself. He reflects it, in successive aspects, in a changing human spirit, and only as it avails for the actual life—the nourishment and guidance—of that spirit. And the *Paradiso* also is based upon the journey-metaphor.

"But the *branch of philosophy* which regulates the work in its whole and in its parts," says Dante, explaining the *Comedy* to Can Grande, "is morals or ethics, because the whole was undertaken not for speculation but for practical results." Ethics and morals, and all didacticism, are in bad odor with us because we do not have much faith in our moralists. But when Dante says "moral philosophy" he means something like the natural history of the human psyche, the accumulated lore of its life. And when he says that this "philosophy" regulates the whole poem, including the *Paradiso*, he means that the underlying subject is always the modes of being and the destiny of the human psyche. The *Paradiso* presents it in relation to many reflections of its transcendent end; but it is the *Purgatorio* which explores the

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psyche itself—not in terms of its supernatural Goal, but in terms of its earthly existence.

It is therefore possible to read the *Purgatorio* both as a center of the whole *Commedia*, and as a poem with its own self-subsistent unity. The journey has its beginning in the *Antipurgatorio*, its center and turning-point in the evening of the second Day, its end in the *Paradiso Terrestre*. It is the visionary Fulfillment of the journey of *this* life, moving always, in many figures, toward what the soul may know of itself within its earthly destiny. It reflects Dante's own life, and by analogy, every man's.

The action of the *Purgatorio* has a natural source which is not too difficult to identify in one's own experience. After some deep fright, some nightmare-intuition of being nowhere, hope returns, and with hope the disquieting naïveté of the bare forked animal who needs to know who he is, where he is, and what he is trying to do. This need is, apparently, always with us. We may hear it in much of the murmuring of our innumerable radios, in popular music, in the vague complaining of the interminable soap-operas. We may detect it in ourselves whenever we are not too busy, sophisticated, or demoralized. The *Purgatorio* starts, after Hell, with this need; but Dante knew more about it than we do, and he found, in his time and place, the means to follow its promptings to the end.

Professor Maritain has spoken of the innocence and luck of Dante. The innocence—inseparable from courage, and deep to the point of genius—underlies both the terror and the triumphs of his journeys. His luck has to do with the moment of history in which he worked. Dante's Europe, Christian but full of ancient, Arabic, and Hebrew influences, must have seemed divided, deceptive, and confusing to those who lived in it. There were plenty of wars (to make us feel at home); poets in pursuit of their heretical inspirations; rulers making absolute claims; dissensions foreign and domestic. Dante himself was a displaced person, and he had

plenty of reason to see the journeys of this life as lost, caught in the dead-ends of Hell. And yet, as Professor Curtius has recently shown, the culture formed then was to continue proliferating into the Renaissance and far beyond it. Some of its themes may still be heard well into the eighteenth century. The *Divine Comedy* reflects the path which Dante discovered through the actual confusion about him to the vision of an ideal order: it may be regarded as the epic of the discovery of Europe's traditional culture. This is especially true of the *Purgatorio*, the transitional canticle, the poem of initiations. Shelley's description of the *Commedia* as a bridge across time, joining the ancient and the modern world, fits the *Purgatorio* exactly. Or Eliot's dictum: "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third."

It is strange that the *Divine Comedy* should have begun to be read again, after its eclipse during the period of the Enlightenment, just when the disappearance of the traditional culture was first sharply felt—with the revolutionary movements of the early romantics. Perhaps that is because the need for a way of life can only be felt with a depth comparable to Dante's, when no common way of life exists.

III

Dante has plainly indicated the main stages of the purgatorial journey, in the chronology of the ascent of the Mountain, and in the varied scenes of the climb. The first Day is spent in the foothills of the *Antipurgatorio*. The first night marks the mysterious transition to the realm of purgation proper, within the Gates. The second Day shows the ascent of the Mountain, painfully, under Virgil's guidance; and the second night marks another important change. During the third Day the ascent is easier, the scene of the climb more rich and exhilarating. The third night is spent on the threshold of Eden, and during the morning of the fourth Day, Eden, the *Paradiso Terrestre*, is explored. The literal narra-

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tive is clear; it recounts the ascent of a Mountain, from its rugged foothills to the meadowy plateau on its summit. But the distance figured in this climb is not spatial, but spiritual, like that between childhood and age. The movement which the reader is supposed to follow is double: that of the literal climb, and a movement of understanding, to which the developing inner life of Dante the Pilgrim is the clue.

One may start to enjoy the poetry of the *Purgatorio* immediately, but there is no short cut to understanding, no possibility of looking up the answers at the back of the book. It is true that Dante used many maps and blue-prints in building his great theater for this journey. There is a geographical plan, and an astronomical scheme governing the significant and elaborately worked-out chronology. There is a moral map, a Thomistic-Aristotelian classification of sins, with Pride at the bottom, nearest to Hell, and Lust at the top, nearest to Eden. The commentators have worked out most of these blueprints clearly, and their results are summarized in the excellent notes and appendices of the Temple Classics edition. But these abstract schemes have no more to do with what goes on in the poem than a road-map has to do with hitch-hiking to Chicago. Dante did not believe that the varied modes of human life could be "known" abstractly; the knowledge he seeks to convey is so close to home that it may actually avail to free and nourish the spirit. That is why, instead of writing a psychology, he dramatizes the acquisition of insight, carefully distinguishing between what he knows as author of the poem and what it takes, and means, to get knowledge.

Dante writes the poem as the record of a journey which he once took and now remembers. He writes in the first person; and yet the distinction between Dante speaking as the author, and Dante the Pilgrim, is fundamental to the whole structure. The author, when he reminds us of his existence, is outside the fictive world of the poem; the Pilgrim is the protagonist of the drama, the center of each

scene. The author knows the whole story in advance, the Pilgrim meets everything freshly, for the first time. The two perspectives together produce a sort of stereoptical effect, that of an objective and partially mysterious reality. The shifting tensions between the two make the complex movement of the poem, and sustain its suspense. The Pilgrim is very much like one of Henry James's central intelligences, visible himself as a particular individual, yet revealing to the reader both the story and its meaning as he learns it. The Pilgrim's awareness is always moving toward the author's, but when they coincide, in the very strange and wonderful close of the *Paradiso Terrestre*, all narrative movement, and all growth of understanding, cease. While the poem unfolds, the Pilgrim's awareness is the moving center of the composition.

Dante explained to Can Grande how his poem was to be read and understood. "The exposition of the letter," he wrote, "is nought else than the development of the form." By the *letter* he meant the literal fiction of the journeys to the other world, all that the Pilgrim sees and feels and hears there. By the *development of the form* he meant that musical or dramatic unfolding which I tried to describe above: the drama of the Pilgrim's growing understanding. It has not, I think, been sufficiently noticed how strongly Dante puts his prescription for interpreting his poem: the exposition (or interpretation) *is* the development of the form—not any aspect of the structure which may be abstracted and considered as a static scheme, but the shifting life of the growing soul itself, imitated in the ceaseless movement of the *terza rima*.

The plan of these studies is intended to follow Dante's prescription as I understand it. Each phase of the journey—from childhood to age, or from innocence to natural sanctity—has its own irreducible significance, its own mode of understanding, which is imitated in the poem itself. The four parts of the book are devoted to the four Days of the journey. The titles

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I have used for the four Days are intended to suggest the nature of the drama, always a struggle for freedom and understanding, but going on in a different way in each phase of growth. It is necessary to linger over each one, because they are so different from each other.

IV

Dante announces the theme of the whole *Purgatorio*, with his usual decision, in the opening chords of the very first canto:

Per correr miglior acqua alza le vele
 omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia retro a sè mar sì crudele.

(To run over better waters now hoists sail
 the little bark of my native talent,
 which leaves behind it a sea so cruel.)

The search for the better describes the action, the movement-of-spirit, of the whole poem. But the metaphor of the ocean voyage is not connected with the journey up the Mountain. Dante is speaking as author, outside the fictive world of the *Purgatorio*, of a journey which is neither that of this life, nor that of Hell, but the hope-inspired journey of the *making* of this canticle:

E canterò di quel secondo regno
 dove l'umano spirito si purga,
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.

(And I shall sing of that second kingdom
 wherein the human spirit is made clean,
 becoming worthy to ascend to heaven.)

He goes on (lines 7-13) to bid dead poetry, the poetry of the ancient world, to rise again to help him.

We feel the lift of the ocean-voyage through the whole

passage, as we do in the more triumphant use of that metaphor in the second canto of the *Paradiso*, which I quoted above. We may also remember the ocean-music of Ulysses' superb narrative of his foolish flight into these realms (*Inferno* xxvi)—"to seek virtue and knowledge," as he told his followers. This is one of several echoes of Ulysses' voyage in the first canto, and no doubt Dante wishes to suggest an analogy between Ulysses' motive and the aspiration which moves him to poetry here. But he does not offer explanations of these relationships. We know that the Pilgrim, leaving Ulysses, descended to the bottom, and then found that his descent had mysteriously turned into a climb upward. We know that Ulysses was wrecked on a Mountain which he had not foreseen. The aspiration of this canticle is like Ulysses' but reborn beyond his confines. But it would be a mistake to try to connect these voyages literally: they are different, and very Dantesque, uses of the journey-metaphor, each with its own relation to the journey of this life.

In line 13 we suddenly find ourselves in this realm, at the beginning of this journey, with the Pilgrim, weak after Hell, where dawn finds him on the beach:

Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro,
 che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
 dell'aer puro infino al primo giro,
 agli occhi miei ricominciò diletto,
 tosto ch'ï'uscii fuor dell'aura morta,
 che m'avea contristati gli occhi e il petto.

(The tender color of the eastern sapphire,
 which was appearing in the tranquil height
 of pure air, as far as to the first gyre,
 restored to my eyes once more their delight,
 as soon as I emerged from the dead air
 which had so saddened both my eyes and heart.)

The author, outside the poem, speaks with a sense of its

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vast scope, its difference from life itself, and its varied but related themes of journeying. But the Pilgrim can only see the comforting return of an earthly dawn. The distance between them suggests the distance we have to go, and the childlike state of being with which *this* journey begins.

CHAPTER 2. BEFORE UNDERSTANDING

THE *Antipurgatorio*, Cantos I-VIII, is devoted to the first Day in the new realm. It is the prologue to the drama of spiritual growth which begins, reaches its climax, and comes to its end during the second and third Days; and it corresponds to the *Paradiso Terrestre*, another set-piece, placed, like the epiphany of a Sophoclean tragedy, at the end of the action.

I observed in the last chapter that Dante the Pilgrim, when he first emerges from Hell (Canto I, line 13) is very far from understanding what Dante the author does. The author, in his direct address to the reader, and in his invocation, suggests the epic scope of the journey to follow. But the Pilgrim is really there, all defenceless, on the beach. The beauty of earth restores the delight of the heart and the senses; it reaches him with the intimacy of childhood memory, but he does not understand what it could (and will) mean to him. During the whole first Day of wandering he will see everything in this way, deeply but without understanding.

Because the *Antipurgatorio* presents a mode of experience preceding understanding and moral, conscious effort, it is difficult to get on a first reading, unless one knows what to look for. This effect, of course, is intended: Dante wishes the reader to feel the force of an aspiration which cannot effectuate itself, the poetry of our most primitive awareness of the earthly scene. The *Antipurgatorio* is best reread; and for that reason I do not propose to study any of it in detail, but to offer a few general observations on the scene and the action of the first Day as a whole.

We are told explicitly that the spirits we meet in this realm died, for one reason or another, outside the Church; through blind chance, or others' malice, or some dilatoriness of their own. Thus they all lost, or failed to find their way; yet they have not lost the good of the intellect, they are not fixed