

Week Six: Purgatorio

Lest we think that purgatory is a poetic invention of Dante's, consider these texts:

1030. All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

1031. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*]

The entry goes on to quote St. Gregory the Great, St. John Chrysostom, and such scriptural passages as 2 Maccabees 12:46 and of course 1 Corinthians 3.15 and the first epistle of St Peter 1:7. The doctrine was made *de fide* at the Council of Lyons in 1274, the council Thomas was traveling to when he fell ill and died.

But if the doctrine of purgatory is thus traditional and orthodox, indeed *de fide*, the imaginative presentation of it by Dante has few if any antecedents. In many discussions, it can seem little different from hell save in this, hell is forever, purgatory comes to an end. A hellish notion of purgatory, so to speak, inclines to make it subterranean too. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, IV.91 has things to say about the threefold post mortem condition of souls, and provides a theological argument for purgatory (and as we shall see a theological argument is ultimately grounded in Scripture). Of course, since we are speaking of souls separated from bodies, and only bodies are in place, the location of purgatory might seem to involve a transgression of genera. Nonetheless, Thomas does sometimes ask if the place of the damned and of souls to be purged is the same (IV *Sentences*, d. 21, a. 1). Gregory and Augustine are invoked on behalf of the view that the damned and purgeable suffer from the same fire. And he adds that the biblical patriarchs awaited the advent of Christ in a place, the bosom of Abraham: think of the parable of the rich man in the next world pleading for relief.

Noting that Scripture tells us nothing definite about the location of purgatory and that there are no efficacious arguments to settle the matter, Thomas goes on to say that it can be said with probability and in harmony

with the sayings of many of the Fathers that the location of purgatory is twofold:

a. as a general rule, purgatory is a lower place connected with hell, which is why the same fire punishes the damned and purges the just. But if both are below, hell is lower.

b. Some have held that the souls of purgatory are above us, halfway to heaven. But he dismisses this, saying that they are punished not insofar as they are above us but as sinners.

All in all, it is clear that Dante would not have gotten much help from such discussions in imaginatively constructing purgatory. But he introduces theological refinements which are truly noteworthy. We will return to this when we look at the structure of Dante's purgatory.

The Inferno ends with these stanzas:

Into that hidden passage my guide and I
entered, to find again the world of light,
and, without thinking of a moment's rest

we climbed, he first and I behind him,
far enough to see, through a round opening,
a few of those fair things the heavens bear.

Then we came forth, to see again the stars.

Each cantica ends with the word *stelle*, stars, and in order for the Inferno to do so, Dante and Virgil must escape from the nether world of darkness and despair and come once more into the light. They have managed to skate around Satan and clamber up a long passage, the length of the earth's diameter, and emerge on the opposite side of the world. The whole atmosphere changes, morally, from despair to hope, atmospherically from stench and darkness to the fresh sea air as they approach the shore and Mount Purgatory arising from the ocean; the very language of the poem changes, reflecting these changes. Where there was hatred in hell, here there is love.

The geography of Purgatory is considerably simpler than that of the Inferno. Purgatory is a seven storey mountain, defined by the seven capital sins from the effects of which these souls must be purged. In the Inferno, sins of lust, of weakness, come first because they do not involve malice per se, However damnable adultery and sodomy they cannot compete with the malice of fraud and treachery. The order is reversed in the Purgatorio, the effects of the more serious sins being purged first. Here is the order of the levels or terraces of the ascent:

Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice and Prodigality, Gluttony, Lust.

If these are sins or vices, they have virtues as their counterparts and it the good, the virtues, that stand forth as we ascend. Purgation of the effects of sin enables the opposite virtue to stand forth and thus prepare the soul for the fullness of Paradise where he will confront God face to face.

The structure of the Inferno was based on a threefold division in Aristotle, degrees of vices — incontinence, malice, bestiality, with an assist from Cicero's *De officiis* for a refinement of the notion of injury. Some commentators thus see the Inferno as governed by the violation of natural law, of moral ends which are in principal known to all, believer and non-believer. The fittingness of Virgil as guide is then linked to this. The condition of the good pagans can be advanced to support this approach. Unlike those in hell proper, they have fulfilled the good of their human nature and by definition would have done so by the acquisition of and practice of the moral virtues.

By contrast, Purgatory is governed by Christian morality. If justice is the comprehensive natural virtue, love or charity governs the Christian life.

However attractive these suggestions, they encounter the continuing difficulty that Virgil remains as Dante's guide. To this can be replied that a feature of Virgil's guidance is that he is not always a sure guide. Even in the Inferno he sometimes falters, and during the ascent of Purgatory his role will gradually diminish: he is out of his atmosphere.

On the other hand, another guide is introduced at the beginning of the Purgatory, Cato, known for his efforts to root out corruption and immorality in Rome. But this was in the second century BC. He should be a representative thus of natural morality. There is the further embarrassment that Cato committed suicide, which should have landed him in the Inferno. But there are many surprises ahead of us as we climb the mountain.

But first the basic story.

When Dante and Virgil come ashore, they witness the arrival of a boatload of souls. The first nine cantos are devoted to Ante-purgatory; purgatory proper takes up cantos 10-27; and the remainder deal with the earthly paradise, Eden relocated at the top of this mountain on the far side of the world. This cantica ends with the appearance of Beatrice. We are not surprised to find the number 9 operative here: there are two levels of ante-purgatory + the seven terraces after the passage through Peter's gate into purgatory proper.

The first thing to be done is for Virgil, on Cato's instruction, to wash Dante's face from the grime of hell and gird his waist. Then seven Ps representing the capital sins (peccata) are written by an angel on Dante's forehead. These will be progressively removed as he ascends and is purged from the effects of the sins.

On the lower part of the mountain, below the gate admitting to purgatory proper, are found souls, saved indeed, but in such shape that they have tasks before they begin their ascent. Who are they?

First of all, the excommunicated. These must spend thirtyfold the time during which they were excommunicated by the Church.

On the next level of ante-purgatory, subdivided into three, are found the late repentant, those who turned to God in *ictu mortis* and in the moment saved. It is important to realize that Dante is not here reneging on the allegorical meaning of the Comedy according to which souls enjoy the just deserts of their deeds. But while there is life, there is hope. A death bed conversion is still a conversion, a voluntary and responsible act and, being the final act, determines the condition of the soul when it enters the next life. We will return to some of the souls found here.

Peter's Gate is the entrance to purgatory proper, and it is gained by three steps: confession, contrition, satisfaction. Once through, the seven stages of purgation can begin.

We can now return to the great difference between the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. It would be too much to say that the moral virtues are absent, but it is essential to see that what provides the structure of Purgatory is not simply the Capital Sins, they are the negatives that must be countered with affirmations which indeed go far beyond natural morality. The mountain of Purgatory is defined by the Sermon on the Mount, by the beatitudes. Remember Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

That makes eight, but a ninth is added. Thomas in commenting on the text notes that the eight refer to everyone, the ninth to the apostles.

Blessed are you when men reproach you, and persecute you and, speaking falsely, say all manner of evil against you, for my sake.

These are called the beatitudes because they indicate the way in which human happiness or fulfillment will be found. Clearly they seem the very reversal of ordinary thinking about human behavior, and so they are. We are being provided with a New Law, one which, however much it incorporates the old, the natural order, must strike us as its antithesis.

Something of this paradoxical overthrowing of the ordinary and natural is a *sine qua non* of understanding the atmosphere of the Purgatorio. When Thomas comments on Matthew and notes the connection of the Beatitudes and our Beatitude, he notes that there are four views on happiness:

- * that it consists in the possession of external things

- * that it consists in the satisfaction of one's will: "Happy is he who lives as he wants to."

- * that it consists in the virtues of the active life.

- * that it consists in the virtues of the contemplative life, the knowledge of divine and intelligible things, as Aristotle says.

"*Omnes autem istae opiniones falsae sunt, quamvis non eodem modo*: all these views are false, though not in the same way." We are particularly interested in why the second and third are false.

"They who place happiness in moral virtues are wrong, but less so, because they are the way to happiness: since they are either ordered to it, like temperance and the like, whose object is cleansing the heart, or they are ordered to others, and thus their aim is peace: *pax est opus iustitiae*." So the moral virtues are ways to happiness, not the thing itself. And the Beatitudes speak in the present, not the future tense.

So what is wrong with the fourth view? It is wrong only if it is thought to be perfectly achieved in time: *reprobat Dominus quantum ad tempus, quia alias vera est, quia optimi intelligibilis consistit in in visione optimi intelligibilis*. And so Christ says, they will see God.

All this raises questions to which we shall eventually return when we consider Thomas on the natural and supernatural, on philosophy and theology, on the acquired and infused virtues, etc. (Note the chiding reference to Plato and Aristotle in Canto III, 43-45. . . and Hollander's note on this, contrasting Mary and Plato, p. 61 and Sayer, p. 93)

I know of no introduction to the Purgatorio better than that of Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi in her Mondadori edition of the Comedy. One learns much from Dorothy Sayers and in a way even more from a Robert Hollander in his little book on Dante and in the introduction to the translation he authored with his wife. But Leonardi seems to me to occupy more perfectly the outlook of the poem itself, its religious outlook. If I have any quibble it would be with the way she seems to veer toward the wholly passive

when she stresses, rightly, the gratuitousness of salvation. But this leads her to see something that seems peculiar to her and which cast great light on the cantica.

In Ante-purgatory we meet the souls of the late-repentant, and a number of figures illustrate the point, notably Manfred and Sapia and Buonconti. We might think that this is a relatively small group. But Leonardi suggests that this is the case with the majority. It is as if Augustine's "*Sero te amavi: late have I loved you*" is the motto of most the souls in purgatory (and, since they will go on, of those in heaven too). Later we encounter others, higher up the scale of purgation, whose conversion also was late.

There are souls in purgatory whose sins are earth were far greater than many of those we met in the Inferno. The relationship is not a quantitative one. The pervasive attitude of the souls in purgatory is humility, mildness, a sorrow for their sins.

Another point. Time is in play in the Purgatorio in a way in which it was not in the Inferno and will not be in the Paradiso. The whole Comedy covers a week, the Inferno not much more than a day, the ascent through the earth to the antipodes another day, and then four or five days in purgatory. The task of the penitent souls is confined to the daylight hours. Dante will get his sleep in Purgatory.

Yet another point. The penitent souls ask for the prayers of the faithful. It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead. The Church militant can come to the aid of the Church suffering, as of course can the Church triumphant. There is a kind of helplessness about the penitent souls. Their purging is in large part passive, dependent on others, a gift.

If Canto XI of the Inferno is where we find the geography of that world, it is in Canto XVII of the Purgatorio that we have an explanation of the whole. In the Paradiso it will be in Canto X.

On pp. 202-3, Sayers gives an elaborate schemata outlining the relevant features. There you will see the role of the Beatitudes in the seven cornices:

To the proud is addressed, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

To the envious, Blessed are the merciful.

To the wrathful, Blessed are the peacemakers.

To the slothful, Blessed are they who mourn.

To the covetous, Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice.

To the gluttonous, Blessed are they who thirst.

To the lustful, Blessed are the clean of heart.

And to the purgation of each capital sin, there is assigned an appropriate punishment, or penance. Many have pointed out that the three steps leading

up to Peter's gate—confession, contrition, satisfaction—continue to define the purgations.

The proud are weighed down with stones and must look down.

The envious have their eyes sealed.

The wrathful are punished with smoke.

The slothful with running.

The covetous by prostration.

The gluttonous with hunger.

The lustful with fire.

If the Inferno is full of demons and mythical monsters, in Purgatory we find angels representative of the virtues that are opposed to the capital sins.

And there are prayers that define each level, except that of the slothful, but Sayers suggests that their labors are their prayers.

But above all we should note the examples of the virtues which are put before the penitents. The perceptive eye will notice the role that the Virgin Mary plays here, illustrating each of the virtues.

The Earthly Paradise

* Matilda

* Beatrice

* The pageants

Dante like the penitent souls is purged in will when he emerges into the earthly paradise. But there remains the purging and clarification of his mind, and it is this function that Beatrice fulfills. She will be his instructor, after having given him a prolonged scolding.

When Dante meets Beatrice (and Virgil disappears), he finds that her concern for him went on after her death, and that she even descended into hell to enlist Virgil's help in straightening Dante out. She chides Dante, first for his moral faults, and the dressing down links the Comedy with the latter part of the Vita Nuova. In the final canto, it is Dante's intellectual failings that are criticized—the "school" he belonged to. Some find here an allusion to the alleged Latin Averroism of Dante; perhaps all we need is the concentration on philosophy in *Il Convivio*. (And we saw that Scripture and theology are scarcely absent from the *Convivio*). Do we have in this criticism an explanation of the incompleteness of the *Convivio*? But the role of Beatrice in Dante's life (and of a good woman in most men's) is crystal clear. Her beauty is a sign of a beauty that does not fade or corrupt; his love for her must be transmuted into love and pursuit of Goodness itself.