

SONGS OF THE *PURGATORIO*

By Brad Goodine

Dante's *Purgatorio* has often been noted as the canticle of the *Divine Comedy* most concerned with art. From the stone reliefs, to the images on the rock wall, to the numerous poets and singers found on the mountainside, art plays an intricate role in the framing of the *Purgatorio*. Song is one of the most important of these artistic elements. Dante's arrangement of hymns and psalms from the regions before the gates to the summit of Mount Purgatory sheds light on the intricate structure he crafts for the ascent of the souls toward Paradise. An examination of the use, placement, and meaning of the various songs Dante encounters along his journey through Purgatory reveals the state of the pilgrims he meets and marks his own struggle for spiritual growth.

The transition from the *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio* is a significant one. Dante leaves behind a realm of isolation and discord and begins to ascend the path toward communal peace. As evidence of this contrast, Hell is devoid of music, signifying a lack of cooperation and the seclusion of each shade's torment. Especially in the lowest layers, shades torture the bodies of those nearby, inflicting their turmoil on the surrounding world. But, in his passage through Purgatory, Dante observes that where there was lament below, glorious music accompanies each ascending level. The verses found in the beginning of the second canticle, for example, add an element of hope and cooperation as Dante moves upward in pursuit of his true love, Beatrice. At the first appearance of souls in Canto II of the *Purgatorio*, their unity is marked by a song, which elucidates their role as pilgrims. As an angel approaches with a ship filled with the departed, Dante notes, "Within sat more than a hundred spirits. 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto' all of them were singing together with one voice" (2.45-48). Here as elsewhere, Dante references a psalm by quoting the first line in its Latin form. To fully examine the verse, the use of a secondary source (often the Bible) is required. This psalmody, which reflects the nature of their pilgrimage, starts: "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion" (Ps. 114:1-2; all biblical references are to the KJV). Before they reach the celestial shores, they learn to work as a community in their adoration of God. Dante's use of this psalm equates the pilgrims' transition from earthly men to heavenly spirits with the exodus of the children of Israel. Both the Israelites and the pilgrims seek an ultimate escape from bondage, the former from Egyptian slavery and the latter from the burden of their earthly sins. In their pursuit of spiritual freedom, the pilgrims cross the sea to the shores of

Mount Purgatory, just as the Israelites passed through the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land (Mandelbaum 630). In another parallel, the pilgrims, too, are about to experience years of wandering on the way to Paradise. The psalm ends with the command, “Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord” (Ps. 114:7). This psalm clarifies the position of the souls as at the beginning of their journey and foreshadows the nature of the struggle to come.

Music not only marks the spiritual development of the souls during the course of their journey but also portrays a struggle for purification. The first example of this use comes in Canto II, shortly after the arrival of souls upon the shore and the singing of “*In exitu Israel de Aegypto.*” Dante meets his old friend, Casella, who had once set one of Dante’s poems to music. Casella begins to sing the poem, entitled “Love that discourses in my mind.” However, Cato, the watchman of the shore, interrupts the song and rebukes them harshly for being enticed by the pleasures of their former life. He also rejects the values Dante and Casella still harbor that allow a secular song to hold such powerful sway over them (Jones 41). In the *Purgatorio*, music is a tool meant to lift the singer and the listener to contemplate God; this love song is a distraction, directing their minds back to life on earth. The incident further reveals their lack of maturity as new arrivals to Purgatory. These pilgrims have yet to go through the waiting and the punishments, which will direct their mind above, toward God. Clearly unfamiliar with their surroundings, they are described as wanderers who do not even know the right direction to begin the ascent. Cato’s rebuke urges them onward and helps to preserve the proper role of music on the mountain.

When next Dante encounters spirits singing, in Canto V, they are singing the “*Miserere.*” The text begins:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. (Ps. 51:1-4)

This psalm is especially significant given the sin of these pilgrims. They are the late repentant, who met their death at the hands of violence and only at the last minute looked to heaven for redemption. Though the redemption they request in their final moments is not refused, they must now reflect over the sinful nature that still clings to them beyond the shores of their homelands. Such a prayer for mercy and cleansing reflects how

these souls likely died without receiving the last rites (Stillman). Because the time to contemplate their sins on earth was suddenly cut short, these souls now must remain in Purgatory, reflecting over the sins of their past and their desperate need for the mercy of God. Their song alerts everyone to their late repentance and their place in the journey. Additionally, their song is disrupted by the souls' distraction at Dante's arrival, just as the previous song was interrupted by their arrival at the shore. These breaks in song show the pilgrims have yet to achieve the perpetual state of unity and harmony signified by music. They have yet to purify their natures to the point that they may join with the heavens in unceasing singing of God's praises.

The third appearance of joint song in Canto VII indicates the realm of those who failed to accomplish the good that was within their ability to complete. As Dante's first night on the mountain approaches, Sordello leads him and Virgil to a place where they can rest. As the three approach a valley, veiled in darkness, they hear the souls' mournful song. They sing the antiphon "*Salve Regina*," which says:

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy; our life, our
sweetness, and our hope. To thee we cry, poor
banished children of Eve. To thee we send up our
sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of
mercy upon us and after this our exile show unto us
the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, o
loving, o sweet Virgin Mary. (Singleton 147)

These souls look to Mary for mercy, a mother to welcome back them back as prodigal children who squandered their opportunities. The placement of this hymn is fitting, as it refers to them "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears" (Singleton 147). Dante seems to have designed the setting of this region to correspond with the singing of this very song, which was traditionally sung in the evening. Its use here highlights the appearance of this scene just before nightfall (Singleton 146). This song is also the first in Purgatory sung in its entirety, marking a gradual movement upward in growth for the spirits encountered by Dante.

In the next canto, still within this same region as night is falling, a jubilant spirit standing boldly declares, "For naught else do I care" (8.77). He then leads his fellow pilgrims in "*Te lucis ante*," which begins: "Before the ending of the day, creator of the world, we pray that, with Thy wonted favor, Thou wouldst be our guard and keeper now" (Singleton 147). Again, this song marks the time of day in which it is sung, but it also reflects the spirit's recognition of his sin before the fall of spiritual darkness. The unnamed soul shows how men may truly understand the nature of

reflection, as it leads them to at last release the cares of their former lives and to embrace God's sovereignty. As a lone figure, the soul stands facing east, a direction associated with Christ, while the neighboring souls remain seated looking above (*Princeton* 8.10-12). The clear contrast is the first instance in the *Purgatorio* where Dante witnesses this change within a soul. Dante says of this man, "'*Te lucis ante*' came from his lips so devoutly and with such sweet notes that it rapt me from myself" (8.13-15). Dante's reaction indicates a transition in the nature of his fascination, now properly directed above by the pull of the music. The song also contains the text: "From all ill dreams defend our eyes, from nightly fears and fantasies; tread under foot our ghostly foe, that no pollution we may know." Accordingly, the next canto marks the first of three significant dreams Dante experiences while on the mountain (Stillman). These spirits seem to be praying for Dante's journey as well as their own.

At long last, in Canto IX Dante reaches the true gates of Purgatory. Here, the angel marks his forehead with seven Ps, and Dante passes through the great gates to begin his ascent up the mountain. As the gate swings open, he hears the song "*Te Deum laudamus*," signaling his entrance. Given the context of surrounding lines, this music most likely does not come from the sojourning spirits, but is heavenly in its nature. This hymn is the first to solely praise God. No request is made for safety or forgiveness, but simply true adoration of the Heavenly Father, signifying the pilgrims' beginning ascent to heavenly bliss. Within the gates, the trials begin that will purify the soul of its earthly qualities. Each pilgrim joins the ranks of the spirits who have gone before him and have united with the heavenly bride of Christ. "*Te Deum laudamus*" is also associated with a man leaving the world behind to join the priesthood and was sung by priests during the ceremony of their commitment (Singleton 194). For Dante to place it here, at the entrance of the trail leading to the summit of Mount Purgatory, designates the new role of the pilgrim in officially leaving the things of earth behind and joining the eternal church. This vow to abandon earthly thought is eternal as well, as this song of commitment is the last of its kind sung in the *Purgatorio*. From this point forward, the only songs are the beatitudes, which are occasionally sung, as opposed to merely spoken, by angels or unnamed voices. Clearly, this transition also marks an aspect of the ensuing actions of the pilgrims, as they must forsake practicing unity and harmony and, instead, focus on their own personal journeys, before they are ready to become one with the will of God and the saints in heaven.

It is not until the sixth circle of Purgatory that the souls are free to sing again. At this point in their punishment, they have matured beyond the need to concentrate inwardly and can join their fellow spirits in community while praising God. Here, the songs mirror the contrapasso effect of the punishments in the *Inferno*. In

Canto 23 of the *Purgatorio*, within the circle of the gluttonous, Dante hears the souls singing "*Labia mea, Domine.*" This song is from the same text as the "*Miserere,*" sung in Canto V. The psalm says:

O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else, would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt-offering and whole burnt-offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar. (Ps. 51:15-19)

This psalmody bids the singer to use his lips for a holy purpose, rather than for gorging himself on food (Mandelbaum 682). Instead, his mind and body are directed towards God in praise. Even the mention of the bull, which is used for sacrifice rather than consumption, signifies the release of one's vices to God as an act of praise. Again, echoing the contrapasso technique, in the final terrace of Purgatory, the lustful ask for cleansing of their sin by singing "*Summae Deus clementiae*" in the midst of their trial. The third stanza of the song says, "Our reins and hearts in pity heal,/ and with Thy chastening fires anneal;/ gird Thou our loins, each passion quell,/ and every harmful lust expel" (Singleton 621). The penitents are literally placed within God's fire for the purging of their lust. Their song creates a sense of community in the pursuit of righteousness. Even in transition from the song of the last terrace to this one, there is a shift from a single singer and the use of "I" to a request for healing of a community, as they say with one voice, "Our reins and hearts in pity heal."

When Dante finally arrives at the garden atop the mountain, Beatrice, rebukes him for yielding to the beautiful music of the siren who appears in a dream as he sleeps on the fifth terrace. Though the siren is hideous at first, she begins her song and suddenly Dante is enraptured with the tune. Not until Virgil, within the dream, takes hold of the siren as he is directed by a "lady holy and alert," does Dante become aware of the foul stench that pours forth from her belly. Though Dante, when he has the dream, is nearing the end of his journey through Purgatory, he finds himself pulled by a beauty, which comes from a foul source. The inherent danger in such a reaction is that "song makes the soul forgetful of its true good and thus delays repentance and salvation" (Jones 42). The siren's song so strongly appeals to Dante's moral senses that the "seasoned will" of Virgil is necessary to overcome it. Virgil, epic poet as well as Dante's guide, is himself a guardian of art. His protection of Dante and proper function of music in Purgatory

points to the “textual grounding” of song in the artistic tradition of epic works and music’s “prophetic mode” (Jones 47). It is also important to note, however, that Virgil is only effective when directed by a proper source, the unnamed lady, no doubt from heaven. The powerful sway that music holds over its listeners makes its grounding in truth all the more necessary. When Beatrice reminds him of the incident, she says,

Still, that you may now bear shame for your error,
and another time, hearing the Sirens, may be
stronger, so shall you hear how in opposite direction
my buried flesh ought to have moved you. Never
did nature or art present to you beauty so great as
the fair members in which I was enclosed. (31.43-
48)

She recognizes that this weakness stems from the same source within Dante as the weakness which made him lose sight of his beloved. At the end of his journey, Dante is reminded by Beatrice of his weakness in ascending the mountain, and can now reflect upon the progress and growth he has experienced. He has reached the point where he will respond to music in a proper way, showing him ready to embrace Paradise, the goal of his ascent. There, music serves as evidence of the harmony among every spirit. In contrast, the “monophonic” music in the *Purgatorio* with its single melodic line contains no harmonization. Dante reserves “polyphony” and multi-voice textures for the spheres of the *Paradiso* to distinguish heavenly music from other parts of the *Commedia* (Stillman). Even at the top of the mountain in Canto XXXI, “Asperges me” is heard, which reflects this transition. Like the pilgrim souls, music has also found its fulfillment in the journey heavenwards. Among Dante’s final thoughts comes this realization, brought on by Beatrice, of how music has represented the stages of his journey.

Establishing music as a powerful tool for revealing the progress of the pilgrims and as an indicator of spiritual maturity, Dante creates a framework which leads the pilgrim and the reader upward toward the heavenly realm of Paradise. Souls at the summit of Mount Purgatory, after completing all the rituals of purification and struggling for redemption, are at last ready to join the community present above. There, in Paradise, music will find its ultimate fulfillment as an expression of God’s truth.

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