Canto I

ANTE-Purgatory: The Shore of the Island

*Cato of Utica*

*The Poets emerge from Hell just before dawn of Easter Sunday (April 10, 1300), and Dante revels in the sight of rediscovered heavens. As he looks eagerly about at the stars, he sees nearby an old man of impressive bearing. The ancients is CATO OF UTICA, guardians of the shores of Purgatory. Cato challenges the Poets as fugitives from Hell, but Virgil, after first instructing Dante to kneel in reverence, explains Dante’s mission and Beatrice’s command. Cato then gives them instructions for proceeding.*

*The Poets have emerged at a point a short way up the slope of Purgatory. It is essential, therefore, that they descend to the lowest part and begin from there, an allegory of Humility. Cato, accordingly, orders Virgil to lead Dante to the shore, to wash his hands in the dew of the new morning, and to wash the stains of Hell from Dante and the film of Hell’s vapors from Dante’s eyes. Virgil is then to bind about Dante’s waist one of the pliant reed (symbolizing Humility) that grow in the soft mud of the shore.*

*Having so commanded, Cato disappears. Dante arises in silences and stands waiting, eager to begin. His look is all the communication that is necessary. Virgil leads him to the shore and performs all that Cato has commanded. Dante’s first purification is marked by a miracle: when Virgil breaks off a reed, the stalk immediately regenerates a new weed restoring itself exactly as it had been.*

For better waters now the little bark

of my indwelling powers raises her sails,

and leaves behind that sea so cruel and dark.

Now shall I sing that second kingdom[[1]](#footnote-1) given

the soul of man wherin to purge its guilt[[2]](#footnote-2) (5)

and so grow worthy to ascend to Heaven.

Yours am I, scared Muses[[3]](#footnote-3)! To you I pray.

Here let dead poetry rise once more to life,

and here let sweet Calliope[[4]](#footnote-4) rise and play

some fair accompaniment in that high strain (10)

whose powers the wretched Pierides[[5]](#footnote-5) once felt

so terribly they dared not hope again.

Sweet azure of the sapphire of the east

was gathering on the serene horizon

its pure and perfect radiance – a feast (15)

to my glad eyes, reborn to their delight,

as soon as I had passed from the dead air[[6]](#footnote-6)

which had oppressed my soul and dimmed my sight.

The planet whose sweet influences strengthens love[[7]](#footnote-7)

was making all the east laugh with her rays, (20)

veiling the Fishes, which swam above.

I turned then to my right and sent my mind

on the other pole, and there I saw four stars

unseen by mortals since the first mankind[[8]](#footnote-8).

The heavens seems to revel in their light. (25)

O widowed Northern Hemisphere, bereft

forever of the glory of sight!

As I broke off my gazing, my eyes veered

A little to the left, to the other pole[[9]](#footnote-9)

from which, by then, the Wain had disappeared. (30)

I saw, nearby, and ancient man, alone[[10]](#footnote-10).

His bearings filled me with such reverence,

no father could ask more from his best son.

His beard was long and touched with strands of white,

as was his hair, of which two tresses fell (35)

over his breast. Rays of the holy light

that fell from the four stars made his face glow

with such a radiance that he looked to me

as if he faced the sun. And standing so,

he moved his venerable plumes and said: (40)

“Who are you two who climb out of the dark stream

to escape the eternal prison of the dead?

Who led you? Or what served you as light

In your dark flight from the eternal valley,

which lies forever blind in the darkest night? (45)

Are the laws of the pit so broken? Or is new counsel

published in Heaven that the damned may wander

onto my rocks from the abyss of Hell?”

At that my Master laid his hands upon me,

instructing me by word and touch and gesture (50)

to show my reverence in brow and knee,

then answered him: “I do not come this way

of my own will or powers. A Heavenly Lady[[11]](#footnote-11)

sent me to this man’s aid in his dark day.

But since your will is to know more, my will (55)

cannot deny you; I will tell you truly

why we have come and how. This man has still

to see his final hour, though in the burning

of his own madness he had drawn so near it

his time was perilously short for turning. (60)

As I have told you, I was sent to show

the was his soul must take for its salvation;

and there is none but this by which I go.

I have shown him the guilty people. Now I mean

to lead him through the spirits in your keeping (65)

to show him those whose suffering makes them clean.

By what means I have led him to this strand

to see and hear you, take too long to tell:

from Heaven is the power and the command.

Now may his coming please you, for he goes (70)

to win his freedom; and how dear that is

the man who gives his life for it best knows.

You know it, who in that cause found death sweet

in Utica where you put off that flesh

which shall rise radiant at the Judgment Seat. (75)

We do not break the Laws: this man lives yet,

and I am of the Round not ruled by Minos,

with your own Marcia[[12]](#footnote-12), whose chaste eyes seem set

in endless prayers to you. O blessed breast

to hold her yet your own! for love of her (80)

grant us permission to pursue our quest

across your seven kingdoms. When I go

back to her side I shall bear thanks of you

if you will let me speak your name below.”

“Marcia was so pleasing in my eyes (85)

there on the other side,” he answered then,

“that all she asked, I did. Now she lies

beyond the evil river, no word or prayer

of hers may move me. Such was the Decree[[13]](#footnote-13)

pronounced upon us when I rose from there. (90)

But if, as you have said, a Heavenly Dame

orders your way, there is no need to flatter:

you need but ask it of me in her name.

Go then, and lead this man, but first see to it

you bind a smooth green reed[[14]](#footnote-14) about his waist (95)

and clean his face of all trace of the pit.

For it would not be right that one with eyes

still filmed by the mist should go before the angel

who guards the gate: he is from Paradise.

All round the waves-wracked shore-line, there below,

reeds grow in the soft mud. Along that edge

no foliate nor woody plant could grow,

for what lives in that buffeting must bend.

Do not come back this way: the rising sun

will light and easier way you may ascend.” (105)

With that he disappeared; and silently

I rose and moved back till I faced my Guide,

my eyes upon him, waiting. He said to me:

“Follow my steps and let us turn again:

along this side there is a gentle slope (110)

that leads to the low boundaries of the plain.”

The dawn, in triumph, made the day-breeze flee

Before its coming, so that from afar

I recognized the trembling of the sea.

We strode across that lonely plain like men (115)

who seek the road they strayed from and who count

the time lost till they find it once again.

When we had reached a place along the way

where the cool morning breeze shielded the dew[[15]](#footnote-15)

against the first heat of the gathering day, (120)

with gentle graces my Sweet Master bent

and laid both outspread palms upon the grass.

Then I, being well aware of his intent,

lifted my tear-stained cheeks to him, and there

he made me clean, revealing my true color(125)

under the residues of Hell’s black air.

We moved on then to the deserted strand

which never yet has seen upon its waters

a man which found his way back to dry land.

There, as it pleased another, he girded me. (130)

Wonders of wonders! when he plucked a reed

Another took its place there instantly

arising from the humble stalk he tore

so that it grew exactly as before.

1. Purgatory [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Different from Hell where sinners are tormented with out change. In Purgatory, the souls can move through their desires to be made clean. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Invokes Muses as he did in Hell [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Muse of Epic Poetry [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Challenged Muses to contest of song and were defeated [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of Hell [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Referring to Venus and developing the idea of how indispensable love is to the overall mood of Purgatory [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Adam and eve [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The North Pole: changes his direction [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cato of Utica: saw Caesar as evil and sided, reluctantly with Pompey. After defeat of his cause, he kills himself. (natural love of freedom) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Beatrice [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cato’s second wife. Cato released her so she could marry his friend, Hortensius. After Hortensius’s death, Cato took her back. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The law that makes the separation between the damned and the saved. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Symbol of humility [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dew is a natural symbol of God’s grace; the cool wind keeps it from evaporating. Could symbolize baptism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)