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Divine Comedy, Longfellow's Translation, Purgatory

Dante Alighieri

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THE DIVINE COMEDY

OF DANTE ALIGHIERI (1265-1321)

TRANSLATED BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW
(1807-1882)

CANTICLE II: PURGATORIO

CREDITS

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Dennis McCarthy, July 1997 imprimatur@juno.com

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PURGATORIO

Purgatorio: Canto I

To run o'er better waters hoists its sail
The little vessel of my genius now,
That leaves behind itself a sea so cruel;

And of that second kingdom will I sing
Wherein the human spirit doth purge itself,
And to ascend to heaven becometh worthy.

But let dead Poesy here rise again,
O holy Muses, since that I am yours,
And here Calliope somewhat ascend,

My song accompanying with that sound,
Of which the miserable magpies felt
The blow so great, that they despaired of pardon.

Sweet colour of the oriental sapphire,
That was upgathered in the cloudless aspect
Of the pure air, as far as the first circle,

Unto mine eyes did recommence delight
Soon as I issued forth from the dead air,
Which had with sadness filled mine eyes and breast.

The beauteous planet, that to love incites,
Was making all the orient to laugh,
Veiling the Fishes that were in her escort.

To the right hand I turned, and fixed my mind
Upon the other pole, and saw four stars

Ne'er seen before save by the primal people.

Rejoicing in their flamelets seemed the heaven.

O thou septentrional and widowed site,
Because thou art deprived of seeing these!

When from regarding them I had withdrawn,
Turning a little to the other pole,
There where the Wain had disappeared already,

I saw beside me an old man alone,
Worthy of so much reverence in his look,
That more owes not to father any son.

A long beard and with white hair intermingled
He wore, in semblance like unto the tresses,
Of which a double list fell on his breast.

The rays of the four consecrated stars
Did so adorn his countenance with light,
That him I saw as were the sun before him.

"Who are you? ye who, counter the blind river,
Have fled away from the eternal prison?"
Moving those venerable plumes, he said:

"Who guided you? or who has been your lamp
In issuing forth out of the night profound,
That ever black makes the infernal valley?

The laws of the abyss, are they thus broken?
Or is there changed in heaven some council new,
That being damned ye come unto my crags?"

Then did my Leader lay his grasp upon me,
And with his words, and with his hands and signs,
Reverent he made in me my knees and brow;

Then answered him: "I came not of myself;
A Lady from Heaven descended, at whose prayers
I aided this one with my company.

But since it is thy will more be unfolded
Of our condition, how it truly is,
Mine cannot be that this should be denied thee.

This one has never his last evening seen,
But by his folly was so near to it
That very little time was there to turn.

As I have said, I unto him was sent
To rescue him, and other way was none
Than this to which I have myself betaken.

I've shown him all the people of perdition,
And now those spirits I intend to show
Who purge themselves beneath thy guardianship.

How I have brought him would be long to tell thee.
Virtue descendeth from on high that aids me
To lead him to behold thee and to hear thee.

Now may it please thee to vouchsafe his coming;
He seeketh Liberty, which is so dear,
As knoweth he who life for her refuses.

Thou know'st it; since, for her, to thee not bitter
Was death in Utica, where thou didst leave
The vesture, that will shine so, the great day.

By us the eternal edicts are not broken;
Since this one lives, and Minos binds not me;
But of that circle I, where are the chaste

Eyes of thy Marcia, who in looks still prays thee,
O holy breast, to hold her as thine own;

For her love, then, incline thyself to us.

Permit us through thy sevenfold realm to go;
I will take back this grace from thee to her,
If to be mentioned there below thou deignest."

"Marcia so pleasing was unto mine eyes
While I was on the other side," then said he,
"That every grace she wished of me I granted;

Now that she dwells beyond the evil river,
She can no longer move me, by that law
Which, when I issued forth from there, was made.

But if a Lady of Heaven do move and rule thee,
As thou dost say, no flattery is needful;
Let it suffice thee that for her thou ask me.

Go, then, and see thou gird this one about
With a smooth rush, and that thou wash his face,
So that thou cleanse away all stain therefrom,

For 'twere not fitting that the eye o'er cast
By any mist should go before the first
Angel, who is of those of Paradise.

This little island round about its base
Below there, yonder, where the billow beats it,
Doth rushes bear upon its washy ooze;

No other plant that putteth forth the leaf,
Or that doth indurate, can there have life,
Because it yieldeth not unto the shocks.

Thereafter be not this way your return;
The sun, which now is rising, will direct you
To take the mount by easier ascent."

With this he vanished; and I raised me up
Without a word, and wholly drew myself
Unto my Guide, and turned mine eyes to him.

And he began: "Son, follow thou my steps;
Let us turn back, for on this side declines
The plain unto its lower boundaries."

The dawn was vanquishing the matin hour
Which fled before it, so that from afar
I recognised the trembling of the sea.

Along the solitary plain we went
As one who unto the lost road returns,
And till he finds it seems to go in vain.

As soon as we were come to where the dew
Fights with the sun, and, being in a part
Where shadow falls, little evaporates,

Both of his hands upon the grass outspread
In gentle manner did my Master place;
Whence I, who of his action was aware,

Extended unto him my tearful cheeks;
There did he make in me uncovered wholly
That hue which Hell had covered up in me.

Then came we down upon the desert shore
Which never yet saw navigate its waters
Any that afterward had known return.

There he begirt me as the other pleased;
O marvellous! for even as he culled
The humble plant, such it sprang up again

Suddenly there where he uprooted it.

Purgatorio: Canto II

Already had the sun the horizon reached
Whose circle of meridian covers o'er
Jerusalem with its most lofty point,

And night that opposite to him revolves
Was issuing forth from Ganges with the Scales
That fall from out her hand when she exceedeth;

So that the white and the vermilion cheeks
Of beautiful Aurora, where I was,
By too great age were changing into orange.

We still were on the border of the sea,
Like people who are thinking of their road,
Who go in heart and with the body stay;

And lo! as when, upon the approach of morning,
Through the gross vapours Mars grows fiery red
Down in the West upon the ocean floor,

Appeared to me – may I again behold it! –
A light along the sea so swiftly coming,
Its motion by no flight of wing is equalled;

From which when I a little had withdrawn
Mine eyes, that I might question my Conductor,
Again I saw it brighter grown and larger.

Then on each side of it appeared to me
I knew not what of white, and underneath it
Little by little there came forth another.

My Master yet had uttered not a word
While the first whiteness into wings unfolded;
But when he clearly recognised the pilot,

He cried: "Make haste, make haste to bow the knee!
Behold the Angel of God! fold thou thy hands!
Henceforward shalt thou see such officers!

See how he scorneth human arguments,
So that nor oar he wants, nor other sail
Than his own wings, between so distant shores.

See how he holds them pointed up to heaven,
Fanning the air with the eternal pinions,
That do not moult themselves like mortal hair!"

Then as still nearer and more near us came
The Bird Divine, more radiant he appeared,
So that near by the eye could not endure him,

But down I cast it; and he came to shore
With a small vessel, very swift and light,
So that the water swallowed naught thereof.

Upon the stern stood the Celestial Pilot;
Beatitude seemed written in his face,
And more than a hundred spirits sat within.

"In exitu Israel de Aegypto!"
They chanted all together in one voice,
With whatso in that psalm is after written.

Then made he sign of holy rood upon them,
Whereat all cast themselves upon the shore,
And he departed swiftly as he came.

The throng which still remained there unfamiliar
Seemed with the place, all round about them gazing,
As one who in new matters makes essay.

On every side was darting forth the day.
The sun, who had with his resplendent shafts

From the mid-heaven chased forth the Capricorn,

When the new people lifted up their faces
Towards us, saying to us: "If ye know,
Show us the way to go unto the mountain."

And answer made Virgilius: "Ye believe
Perchance that we have knowledge of this place,
But we are strangers even as yourselves.

Just now we came, a little while before you,
Another way, which was so rough and steep,
That mounting will henceforth seem sport to us."

The souls who had, from seeing me draw breath,
Become aware that I was still alive,
Pallid in their astonishment became;

And as to messenger who bears the olive
The people throng to listen to the news,
And no one shows himself afraid of crowding,

So at the sight of me stood motionless
Those fortunate spirits, all of them, as if
Oblivious to go and make them fair.

One from among them saw I coming forward,
As to embrace me, with such great affection,
That it incited me to do the like.

O empty shadows, save in aspect only!
Three times behind it did I clasp my hands,
As oft returned with them to my own breast!

I think with wonder I depicted me;
Whereat the shadow smiled and backward drew;
And I, pursuing it, pressed farther forward.

Gently it said that I should stay my steps;
Then knew I who it was, and I entreated
That it would stop awhile to speak with me.

It made reply to me: "Even as I loved thee
In mortal body, so I love thee free;
Therefore I stop; but wherefore goest thou?"

"My own Casella! to return once more
There where I am, I make this journey," said I;
"But how from thee has so much time be taken?"

And he to me: "No outrage has been done me,
If he who takes both when and whom he pleases
Has many times denied to me this passage,

For of a righteous will his own is made.
He, sooth to say, for three months past has taken
Whoever wished to enter with all peace;

Whence I, who now had turned unto that shore
Where salt the waters of the Tiber grow,
Benignantly by him have been received.

Unto that outlet now his wing is pointed,
Because for evermore assemble there
Those who tow'rds Acheron do not descend."

And I: "If some new law take not from thee
Memory or practice of the song of love,
Which used to quiet in me all my longings,

Thee may it please to comfort therewithal
Somewhat this soul of mine, that with its body
Hitherward coming is so much distressed."

"Love, that within my mind discourses with me,"
Forthwith began he so melodiously,

The melody within me still is sounding.

My Master, and myself, and all that people
Which with him were, appeared as satisfied
As if naught else might touch the mind of any.

We all of us were moveless and attentive
Unto his notes; and lo! the grave old man,
Exclaiming: "What is this, ye laggard spirits?

What negligence, what standing still is this?
Run to the mountain to strip off the slough,
That lets not God be manifest to you."

Even as when, collecting grain or tares,
The doves, together at their pasture met,
Quiet, nor showing their accustomed pride,

If aught appear of which they are afraid,
Upon a sudden leave their food alone,
Because they are assailed by greater care;

So that fresh company did I behold
The song relinquish, and go tow'rds the hill,
As one who goes, and knows not whitherward;

Nor was our own departure less in haste.

Purgatorio: Canto III

Inasmuch as the instantaneous flight
Had scattered them asunder o'er the plain,
Turned to the mountain whither reason spurs us,