

Advent lectures: Westminster Abbey 2009

Dante and the Human Journey

2. Purgatory: 'A Sound of Weeping, and a Song'

Introduction

Last week I discussed the journey of Dante and Vergil through hell. I argued that Dante was not so much seeking to inform us about the life beyond but to provide a kind of 'shock therapy': to make us attend to the path we are following in this life, and if we have strayed from the right path in our human journey to get back on it.

In discussing the place of Vergil as Dante's guide, I referred to the visit of Aeneas to the underworld in Vergil's masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, from which Dante borrows extensively. What I did not do was to emphasise the *differences* between the two visits to the underworld, which are in some ways so similar. Aeneas meets a whole series of lost people, but he does not pass through a dramatised catalogue of human sin. He remains, as it were, on a level: he does not circle down and down, ever deeper under the earth, ever deeper into the punishments for sin. When his journey is completed, he returns to the world above, because he has work to do: he has to get on and found the city of Rome.

The poet Dante's originality lies in creating the *circles* of hell (the word used for a 'circle' is '*cerchio*'), so that hell is like a great funnel down which his travellers pass, circle by circle, until they come to the deepest point in the centre of the earth. At this point they start to ascend, so that when they come back to the world above, it is at a point diametrically opposite to that where they began (the world, interestingly, seems to be conceived of as a globe). They arrive at the foot of Mount Purgatory, which is the inverse of the funnel of hell. The details of purgatory are Dante's own creation. Now there are 'circuits' (the word used is '*girone*') and this time the circuits are progressive. The travellers encircle Mount Purgatory as they climb upwards, higher and higher. And as they climb, Dante is purified, making him ever more ready to enter the Earthly Paradise at the summit, and to ascend from there to the heavens. This steady purification, circuit by circuit, is a marked difference from hell, which had no such effect on him. Though he is shocked and distressed by what he encounters in hell, he undergoes no moral reformation. In hell all he has to do is to move on through a series of terrifying tableaux. By contrast, as he ascends Mount Purgatory, he is steadily changed by the experience.

Dante was astonishingly learned. The only other writer of his time with whom he can be compared for learning is Thomas Aquinas. Both of them are mystics, whose learning is not detached but is called upon to illustrate their experience of God. There are differences: Aquinas was much influenced by the rediscovery of new texts from Aristotle. He wove these into the mystical theology that ultimately came from Plato. What Aristotle gave him were analytical tools to examine what things are 'in themselves', what is their 'substance' or 'essence'. I mentioned last week the respect Dante had for Aristotle. In his classification – or, we might say, his topology – of sin, he drew upon Aristotle's analysis in his *Ethics*, but with that he offers a vivid picture

of moral ascent in which the soul is purified or purged from sin, and for that he draws on the literature of neo-platonism in its Christianised form. It is with this that I wish to begin.

The literature of mystical ascent

By the time Dante wrote, in the early fourteenth century, there was a very considerable literature of Christian mystical theology. Its roots lay in Plato and neo-platonism, in which this world is seen as a world of shadow and illusion and the human journey as the journey of the soul to return to the upper world from which it came. This journey is thus one of moral ascent from unreality to reality, from darkness to light, from death to immortality. What I find so fascinating about the prayer with which I finished last week ('Lead me from the unreal to the Real; lead me from darkness to Light; lead me from death to Immortality.') is that its provenance is Indian. Here is a form of platonism that has survived in Indian popular religion, whereas the scientific cosmology of the west (Bill Bryson's cosmology) has lost this once-pervasive sense of moral ascent.

We are told at the end of *Inferno*, as Dante and Vergil climb back towards the light, that:

The Guide and I into that hidden road
Now entered, to return to the bright world;
And without care of having any rest
We mounted up, he first and I the second,
Till I beheld through a round aperture
Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear;
*Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.*¹

There may well be here a distant echo of Plato's famous myth, in which prisoners are chained in a subterranean cave, facing a wall, as in a cinema the audience faces the screen. On this wall they can see only shadows of images, reflected in the light of the fire. They know no other reality. Socrates describes how one of the prisoners escapes, coming up from the cave into the light of day. At first he is utterly blinded by the light and can make out nothing. He cannot even bear starlight, but slowly he begins to be able to cope with the gentle light of the stars, and then the bright light of day, until eventually he can even stand the full light of the sun. At this point in the myth, the prisoner goes back into the cave to bring the good news of the world above to the prisoners chained below, an enormously important idea for early Christian theology of the incarnation, but Dante does not use the myth in this way. It is enough that his two travellers have emerged from the dark underworld: they are conscious of having once lost the light of the stars, and now they find them again. They will progress on into the full light of day.

¹ *Lo duca e io per quel cammino ascoso
intrammo a ritornar nel chiaro mondo;
e sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo,
salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle
che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.* (Inferno XXXIV. 133-9)

For Plato, this progress towards the light of the stars and the sun has a moral dimension. In his thinking the soul has come from a higher world, dropping into this world of change and unreality. People carry the dim memory of the higher world and long to return to it. As human beings, we carry the imprint of this other, and better world, on our souls. We are free to suppress it by inhuman behaviour or to cultivate it by behaviour in tune with our better instincts. We ‘know’ what is good and if we develop our adherence to the good, we shall develop our sense of the world to which we *really* belong. For Plato, the lights of heaven, the stars and still more the sun, by which, because of their fixity we can navigate safely, can be our guide both literally and metaphorically. If we learn from the stars, which keep to their places in an ordered heaven, we can order our own lives after the untroubled pattern of the heavenly bodies. As Socrates says in the *Timaeus*:

The cause and purpose of god’s invention and gift to us of sight was that we should see the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and use their untroubled course to guide the troubled revolutions in our own understanding, ... and so ... *correct the disorder of our own revolutions by the standard of the invariability of those of god.*²

The reason it is so important for Dante once more to see the stars is that he can once more navigate by them. If he does not have the light of the stars he is likely to wander onto the wrong track: this is why in the underworld, where the light of the stars does not penetrate, it was especially important to have Vergil as a guide. As on Mount Purgatory he ascends into the bright light of the sun, he has ever less need of his pre-Christian guide.

Plato’s writing was the source for a whole tradition of moral-cum-philosophical writing broadly known as neo-platonism. Christian writers, both of the East and the West, drew on this tradition. I shall mention two, because they illustrate so clearly the sources of Dante’s thinking about Mount Purgatory.

First, though, I should mention one other key source on which this tradition draws. That is the Bible, and in particular the ascent of Mount Sinai by Moses (Exod 19-24). In the biblical account of Moses ascent of Sinai, to meet God at the summit and there to be given the tablets of the law, we can find some of the themes that Dante develops. First, Moses is a man of God, who seeks to separate himself from the sin into which the people so easily fall. He purifies himself for the ascent. The ascent is arduous. At the summit he encounters God directly. He brings down the mountain teaching given by God. When he comes back the people have turned to worship the Golden Calf. As they do throughout the wilderness wanderings, and even in the Promised Land, they have left the path of virtue.

Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote in the early fourth century, drew on both the Bible and on the tradition of neo-platonism when he developed these themes in his widely read *Life of Moses*.³ For example, in discussing the need for purity on the part of Moses, he says:

² *Timaeus*, translated by H.D.P. Lee in *Timaeus and Critias* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 47, p. 65.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

The person who would approach the contemplation of Being must be pure in all things so as to be pure in soul and body, washed stainless of every spot ... in order that he might appear pure to the One who sees what is hidden, and that visible respectability might correspond to the inward condition of the soul.⁴

This process of purification, in order to be ready to meet the One, is exactly what Dante portrays on Mount Purgatory. He sees it as happening after death, but he is also, like Gregory, concerned that in this life 'visible respectability' may 'correspond to the inward condition of the soul'. Once the process of purification gets under way, it gets ever easier. Gregory writes:

Bodies, once they have received the initial thrust downward, are driven downward by themselves with greater speed without any additional help as long as the surface on which they move is steadily sloping and no resistance to their downward thrust is encountered. Similarly, the soul moves in the opposite direction. Once it is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights.⁵

Again, Dante adopts this idea. As the poet and Vergil move up Mount Purgatory, they make ever faster progress. Vergil explains:

"This mount is such, that ever
At the beginning down below 'tis tiresome,
And aye the more one climbs, the less it hurts."⁶

The soul is drawn upwards by the attraction of love.

Writing slightly later, in the west, Augustine has in his *Confessions*, two passages which fall within the same tradition. In one he describes a spiritual experience in which his soul rises to the heavenly heights in company with his mother, shortly before she died:⁷

Our conversation led us to the conclusion that no bodily pleasure, however great it might be and whatever earthly light might shed lustre upon it, was worthy of comparison, or even of mention, beside the happiness of the life of saints [think of Beatrice coming to Dante and making the same point]. As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, *up to the heavens themselves*, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the time in wonder at all that you have made. At

⁴ *Life of Moses* 154.

⁵ *Life of Moses*, 224.

⁶ *Ed elli a me: «Questa montagna è tale, che sempre al cominciar di sotto è grave; e quant'om più va sù, e men fa male.* (Purgatorio IV.88-90)

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), IX.10 (p. 197).

length we came ... to that place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel forever with the food of truth. There life is that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever have been and all that are yet to be. ... And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it.⁸

Augustine's account of mystical ascent is important not only for Dante's purgatory but for his heaven. It is the 'flame of love' that draws him and his mother on 'to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth'. In *Purgatorio*, Dante develops the idea that the flame of love 'purges' and makes the soul ready not just 'for a fleeting second' to touch the eternal Wisdom, but to abide there. Let me give just one example from an early Canto, in which the poet meets those who were violently killed:

Long since we all were slain by violence,
 And sinners even to the latest hour;
 Then did a light from heaven admonish us,
 So that, both penitent and pardoning, forth
 From life we issued reconciled to God,
 Who with desire to see Him stirs our hearts."
 And I: "Although I gaze into your faces,
 No one I recognize; but if may please you
 Aught I have power to do, ye well-born spirits,
 Speak ye, and I will do it, by that peace
 Which, following the feet of such a Guide,
 From world to world makes itself sought by me."
 And one began: "Each one has confidence
 In thy good offices without an oath,
 If only want of power cut not off the will."⁹

All the key elements of the traditional mystical ascent are here: the spirits are called on and up, away from earthly darkness, by light from heaven; desire to see God (desire for the vision of God or what is sometimes called 'the beatific vision') stirs not

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), IX.10 (p. 197).

⁹ *Noi fummo tutti già per forza morti,
 e peccatori infino a l'ultima ora;
 quivi lume del ciel ne fece accorti,
 sì che, pentendo e perdonando, fora
 di vita uscimmo a Dio pacificati,
 che del disio di sé veder n'accora».*
*E io: «Perché ne' vostri visi guati,
 non riconosco alcun; ma s'a voi piace
 cosa ch'io possa, spiriti ben nati,
 voi dite, e io farò per quella pace
 che, dietro a' piedi di sì fatta guida
 di mondo in mondo cercar mi si face».*
*E uno incominciò: «Ciascun si fida
 del beneficio tuo senza giurarlo,
 pur che 'l voler non possa non ricida.* (Purgatorio. 52-66, translation of line 66 adapted)

only their minds but their hearts; they are ‘well-born spirits’ whose origin and home is in the world above; Dante himself will do what he can for them as he moves from the world below to the world above, following his Guide; what Dante seeks is the lasting peace of heaven. One of the souls in this ante-chamber to purgatory responds, expressing his trust in Dante’s good faith but also his fear that Dante is not strong enough to perform the good that he wills; nevertheless, the thing that he asks Dante to do is to *pray* for him. In Dante’s world, as in the Catholic world of today, prayer helps those passing through purgatory.

Penitential literature

The notion that there was a need for ‘purging’ from the effects of sin, before the human soul was ready for the vision of God can be found widely in the Christian fathers. This was but the extension of auricular confession and sacramental forgiveness in this life. In the early church the principal penalty for sin was exclusion from the eucharist for a set period of time. In the patristic period various canonical penances were laid down for the major sins. If that time had not elapsed when a person died, it was clear there was further ‘purging’ to be undergone.

There grew up around the practice of penitential discipline a literature to guide those who imposed it: the literature of the penitentials, which thrived particularly in the Celtic world.¹⁰ These books existed to provide priests with a tariff of penances for various named sins. In the books, following the example of the early fifth century monastic writer John Cassian, major vices, such as gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, dejection, sloth, boasting and pride, were classified and subdivided. Here is a major source for the tableaux of unrepentant sinners that Dante sees in hell, and for the revisiting of similar sins, which are being purged away, in purgatory. One other Celtic practice may be mentioned in this context: that of going on pilgrimage. Travel to a holy place – especially if the journey was difficult or dangerous - was throughout the Middle of Ages a significant way of atoning for sin. Dante turns what is in effect a journey through the penitential literature into a journey, first of shock and warning, and then of challenging ascent.

The preoccupation with listing sins, ostensibly for the purpose of dealing with them in a pastoral manner, but also at times with prurient and obsessional interest, received a major boost in 1215, with the Fourth Lateran Council, called by Pope Innocent III. It decreed that:

On reaching the age of discernment, everyone of the faithful, of either sex, is faithfully at least once a year to confess all his sins in private to his own priest, and is to take care to fulfil according to his abilities the penance enjoined on him, reverently receiving the sacrament at least at Easter. ... The priest is to be discerning and careful so that like a skilful doctor he can apply wine and oil [cf. Luke 10:34] to the wounds of the injured person diligently asking for the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, through which he can prudently understand what advice he ought to give, and what sort of remedy to apply, trying various things to heal the sick person.¹¹

¹⁰ See, J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology, A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 1ff.

¹¹ Quoted Mahoney, pp. 17-18.

This gave rise to a whole new penitential literature which was intended to guide the priest in his 'cure of souls'. There is a sense in which Dante the poet is very much concerned with the cure of the soul of Dante the pilgrim. At the crucial point, where Dante the pilgrim is ready to enter the Earthly Paradise and Vergil has to leave him, Vergil says:

"Free and upright and sound is thy free-will,
And error were it not to do its bidding;
Thee o'er thyself I therefore crown and mitre!"¹²

In other words, at the point where Dante's will is restored to the freedom with which God originally endowed it, he has become both monarch and priest: no longer does he need the structures of empire or church to guide him. He is cured. In saying this, Dante the poet makes very clear what he thinks is ultimately the aim of empire and church, working in harmony: it is to bring the errant souls of humanity to God.

The journey up the Mount

Purgatorio begins with the emergence of the two poets on a low-lying shore east of Mount Purgatory. They meet Cato, a stalwart figure from Ancient Rome. Vergil explains how he has been summoned to help Dante by a heavenly figure sent at the behest of Beatrice, whereupon Cato agrees to let the two poets pass on, encouraging them by the promise that the sun will guide their ascent. Next, an angel boatman, using his wings as sails, brings more souls to ascend the Mount. As the boat draws near, they sing Psalm 104, '*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*', 'When Israel came out of Egypt; and the house of Jacob from among the strange people'. This is the first of many references to liturgical music in the *Purgatorio*, which is punctuated throughout by praise and song – in this case a song of liberation from captivity. At the foot of Mount Purgatory, the poets meet those who have been excommunicated, those who repented of their sin late in life, those who died a violent death, and then negligent or poor rulers. Unfortunately, Henry III of England, builder of Westminster Abbey, doesn't come out very well:

Behold the monarch of the simple life,
Harry of England, sitting there alone;
He in his branches has a better issue.¹³

'Simple' is not in this context a good translation for '*semplice*', but it's very difficult to see what could be better. In the chronicles Henry is described as '*simplex*', which means something more like 'single' as in 'single-minded'; the opposite of '*duplex*' as in 'duplicitous'. It is astonishing that Dante has picked up so accurately what was said about the king of England who died in 1272, but also astonishing that he placed

¹² *Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
Per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio.* (Purgatorio XXVII.139-42)

¹³ *Vedete il re de la semplice vita
seder là solo, Arrigo d'Inghilterra:
questi ha ne' rami suoi migliore uscita.* (Purgatorio VII. 130)

him in the ante-purgatory. The process of purgation for the inadequate or poor rulers that he mentions has not even started.

By now evening is drawing on. The souls sing the well known compline hymn: '*Te lucis ante terminum*', 'Before the ending of the day'. This is only one of a number of places where the music for liturgical offices is heard: the familiar pattern of worship begins to assert itself, bringing order and calm, as the succession of time is transmuted into praise – a complete contrast to the cacophony of hell in which there is no praise. The peace here is threatened by the coming of a serpent, like the serpent of Eden, but two angel guardians are in place, and they swoop upon it, putting it to flight. All of this dramatises the ancient and still-used compline prayer: 'Visit, we beseech thee, O Lord, this place, and drive far from it all the snares of the enemy. Let thy holy angels dwell herein to preserve us in peace.'

This is a place of waiting. Dante sleeps soundly, until he dreams that he is carried by an eagle to the very gate of purgatory, where he begins to experience something he never experienced in hell: flames that scorch him. At this point he awakes and finds himself with Dante actually before the portal of purgatory, where there are three steps, at the top of which sits an angel with a drawn sword:

Say from where you are, what is't you wish ?"
 Began he to exclaim; "where is the escort ?
 Take heed your coming hither harm you not!"
 "A Lady of Heaven, with these things conversant,"
 My Master answered him, "but even now
 Said to us, ' Thither go; there is the portal."
 "And may she speed your footsteps to the good,"
 Again began the courteous janitor;
 "Come forward then unto these stairs of ours."¹⁴

In striking contrast to the portal of hell, here there is nothing written, but an angel who speaks and who shows concern for their wellbeing. Vergil makes it clear that they have come because they have been invited by a 'lady of heaven' (actually Lucy, but at the prompting of Beatrice), to which the angel responds with the blessing, 'And may she speed your footsteps to the good'. He encourages Dante by saying, 'Come forward then unto these stairs of ours.' When Dante flings himself at the angel's feet, begging to be admitted, the angel inscribes seven 'P's¹⁵ on his head with the point of his sword, and the words. 'When you are within, wash these wounds.' He then takes out two keys which he says were given him by Peter, unlocks the gate, and, in an echo of the words written on the portal of hell, but now spoken by an angelic voice, he

¹⁴ «Dite costinci: che volete voi?»,
 cominciò elli a dire, «ov'è la scorta?
 Guardate che 'l venir sù non vi nòì».
 «Donna del ciel, di queste cose accorta»,
 rispuose 'l mio maestro a lui, «pur dianzi
 ne disse: "Andate là: quivi è la porta"».
 «Ed ella i passi vostri in bene avanzi»,
 ricominciò il cortese portinaio:

«Venite dunque a' nostri gradi innanzi». (Purgatorio IX.85-93, translation of line 85, 91 adapted)

¹⁵ Indicating '*peccata*', sins by which the poet is wounded. I am grateful to members of my audience who pointed this out.

says, 'Entrate', 'Enter'. Far from saying, 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here', he warns Dante not to look back, at which Dante himself hears 'in a voice mingled with sweet music' 'Te Deum laudamus'. 'We praise thee, O God', an ancient morning hymn. As Dante later comments:

Ah me! how different are these entrances
From the Infernal! for with anthems here
One enters, and below with wild laments.¹⁶

Now the poets climb to the first terrace: that of humility. Here the wall is decorated with sculptures that depict examples of humility: the Virgin Mary (clearly Dante has an annunciation scene like that by Duccio in the National Gallery in his mind); David, dancing before the Lord; and, surprisingly, the Emperor Trajan. Here Dante encounters the proud, carrying huge burdens, looking like the corbels that draw their legs up underneath them to support the weight of a roof. These humbled, burdened souls recite the Lord's Prayer as they come:

*"Our Father, thou who dwellest in the heavens,
Not circumscribed, but through the greater love
Thou hast for thy first works on high,
Praised be thy name and thine omnipotence
By every creature, as befitting is
To render thanks to thy sweet effluence.
Come unto us the peace of thy dominion ...*

The lines that follow are striking. The souls to be delivered from evil ('put not to proof with the old Adversary') do not pray on their own behalf, because they *are* being delivered from evil. They pray this for others, still on earth:

"This last petition verily, dear Lord,
Not for ourselves is made, who need it not,
But for their sake who have remained behind us."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ahi quanto son diverse quelle foci
da l'infernali! ché quivi per canti
s'entra, e là giù per lamenti feroci.*

¹⁷ *«O Padre nostro, che ne' cieli stai,
non circoscritto, ma per più amore
ch'ai primi effetti di là sù tu hai,
laudato sia 'l tuo nome e 'l tuo valore
da ogni creatura, com'è degno
di render grazie al tuo dolce vapore.
Vegna ver' noi la pace del tuo regno,
ché noi ad essa non potem da noi,
s'ella non vien, con tutto nostro ingegno.
Come del suo voler li angeli tuoi
fan sacrificio a te, cantando osanna,
così facciano li uomini de' suoi.
Dà oggi a noi la cotidiana manna,
sanza la qual per questo aspro deserto
a retro va chi più di gir s'affanna.
E come noi lo mal ch'avem sofferto
perdoniamo a ciascuno, e tu perdona*

Before Dante leaves this terrace, he is encountered by another angel, who beats his wings against the poet's forehead. Voices sing, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' and he himself feels less burdened. Vergil explains that the first of the 'P's on his face has been erased and that as each 'P' is erased he will find it less and less burdensome to ascend the mountain.

The second terrace is that of envy; the third is that of the wrathful; the fourth that of the slothful; the fifth that of the covetous; the sixth that of the gluttonous; and the seventh that of the lustful. Thus the seven deadly sins are expunged. Through these terraces the Beatitudes – each one correlated with release from a deadly sin – resound, and as Dante is purged from the effects of the next sin, so one more 'P' is removed from his forehead until all is complete. Finally, at the end of the third day in purgatory, and after climbing through the terrace of the lustful, Vergil and Dante are faced with the need to pass through fire. Dante is terrified by the memory of human bodies he has seen that have been burnt, but Vergil encourages him, 'My son, there may be torment here, but there is no death.' (XXVII.20-21). In the company of Vergil and of the poet Statius, who was taken to have been a Christian, and thinking of Beatrice, he commits himself to the flame. As he does so, he hears the words, '*Venite benedicti patris mei*', 'Come ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Mt 25:34) – words taken from the story of the sheep and the goats. This is the point at which everything Vergil was charged to do as Dante's guide is complete:

Free and upright and sound is thy free-will,
And error were it not to do its bidding;¹⁸

Last week I spoke about the importance of the word '*dritto*' (right, upright, just) throughout the *Divine Comedy*. At the beginning Dante tells us '*la via diritta era smarrita*'; now we are told that his will is '*libero, dritto e sano*', 'free, and upright and sound', - and we know that if his will is '*dritto*' then he will surely continue to follow '*la via dritta*' (the right way).

Dante has now reached the top of Mount Purgatory and here he comes to the Earthly Paradise; he is on the brink of re-entering Eden. He and the other two poets are on one side of a stram; on the other is a woman who reveals herself as Matilda. At this point Vergil disappears and Dante at last sees Beatrice: '*Guardami ben: ben son, ben son Beatrice*' - the words are untranslatable – but they mean something like, 'Look at me well; I really, really am Beatrice' – except that the good and the real are expressed by one word (*ben*). In the last cantos of *Purgatorio*, Dante's regret for his past attitude to Beatrice overcomes him, but then, in the company of Statius, he crosses the

*benigno, e non guardar lo nostro merto.
Nostra virtù che di legger s'adona,
non spermentar con l'antico avversaro,
ma libera da lui che sì la sprona.*

*Quest'ultima preghiera, signor caro,
già non si fa per noi, ché non bisogna,
ma per color che dietro a noi restaro». (Purgatorio XI. 1-24)*

¹⁸ *libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno (Purgatorio XXVII.140-41)*

river Lethe, and thereby loses all memory of sin. In the Earthly Paradise, Dante learns more from Beatrice about the failure of both church and empire as guides to lost humanity. Finally he comes to the river Eunoë (the word means ‘good mind’, or even ‘good thinking’), where, with Statius he drinks. In the last words of the *Purgatorio*, Dante describes his readiness for heaven:

From the most holy water I returned
Regenerate (*rifatto*), in the manner of new trees
That are renewed with a new foliage,
Pure and disposed to mount unto the stars.¹⁹

At this point, we might just glance ahead to the end of the *Paradiso*. Dante is not yet in heaven, but here he trails the words with which he will end the whole Divine Comedy. At this point he is ready to ascend to the stars; at the end of the *Paradiso*, he will have discovered the secret of his whole journey: throughout his journey, from start to finish, from beginning to end, he has been guided by ‘the *love* which moves the sun and the other stars’.

Conclusion

Next week I shall say more about the place of love in the Divine Comedy. This week I have barely had time to do justice to the weeping of purgatory as the effects of sin are purged away. The weeping of purgatory is different to the weeping of hell. In hell, the weeping is that of endless regret, without hope of restoration. In purgatory, it is that of sorrow for sin, and of wonder as the wounds of sin are erased. The actual quotation I have taken for my title, ‘A sound of weeping, and a song’²⁰ captures the ambiguity of forgiveness beautifully:

And lo! A sound of weeping and a song:
"Labia mea, Domine," - in fashion
Such that delight and sorrow it brought forth.²¹

What Dante the pilgrim actually hears is the Latin phrase: ‘*Labia mea, Domine, aperies*’ - ‘O Lord, open thou my lips’ – with which we are familiar as the opening to Morning and Evening Prayer, ‘O Lord, open thou our lips’. Dante, the poet would, like us, have been just as familiar with the response: ‘And our mouths shall show forth thy praise.’²²

¹⁹ *Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinnovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire alle stelle.* (Purgatorio XXXIII.142-45)

²⁰ This is H.F. Cary’s translation of Purgatorio XXIII.10.

²¹ *Ed ecco piangere e cantar s’udie
'Labia mea, Domine' per modo
tal, che diletto e doglia parturie.* (Purgatorio XXIII.10-12, translation adapted)

²² Cf. Ps 51:15.