

WAITING AND WORKING IN DANTE'S ANTE-PURGATORY*

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Ante-Purgatory is a term used by critics and commentators to denote the zone before the gates of Purgatory through which Dante and Virgil pass in the first nine cantos of *Purgatorio*. Unlike the souls on the terraces, the souls who are temporarily located in Ante-Purgatory do not yet experience any physical suffering (or what medieval theologians commonly termed *poena sensus*, pain of sense); instead, they endure only the pain of loss (*poena damni*), waiting outside the gates for a given period of time until they can ascend to the terraces.¹ Ante-Purgatory is typically read as a zone of spiritual stasis, of uncertainty and delay. However, for all its stasis, there are nonetheless displays of physical exertion, action, and movement within the Ante-Purgatory cantos: the souls who flee towards the mountain following Cato's rebuke, the late penitents who run 'sanza freno' (*Purg.* V, 42) towards the pilgrim and enthusiastically make appeals for his attention throughout *Purgatorio* V, and the 'turba spessa' (*Purg.* VI, 10) which surrounds him at the beginning of *Purgatorio* VI and from which the pilgrim has to free himself (*Purg.* VI, 12 and 25).² More notably, the pilgrim's own journey involves moments of intense physical effort, particularly in the initial climb up the mountain slopes in *Purgatorio* IV. This note will consider the ways in which physical work is present within the Ante-Purgatory cantos, alongside the liminal zone's more readily perceived static qualities. Moreover, I will ask what importance this dialogue between waiting and working might have for the first nine cantos of *Purgatorio*, and how it might undercut the supposedly strict division between Ante-Purgatory and Purgatory-proper.

THE SPIRITUAL LOGIC OF THE MOUNTAIN

In *Purgatorio* IV, Virgil explains the spiritual logic of the mountain to the pilgrim when, despairing at the height of the mountain, he asks how far they have left to climb. Rather than offering a number of days, hours, or miles, Virgil explains that the end will

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¹ On the distinction between *poena sensus* and *poena damni*, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, Suppl., Appendix, *Quaestio de Purgatorio*, Art. III; in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis doctoris angelici opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII* (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1882–), XII, p. 252.

² All quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, *Le Opere di Dante Alighieri*, Edizione Nazionale a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, 7, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67).

be *felt* by the pilgrim. The journey of spiritual purification is therefore measured qualitatively (and subjectively) rather than quantitatively:

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.
Però, quand’ ella ti parrà soave
tanto, che sù andar ti fia leggero
com’ a seconda giù andar per nave,
allor sarai al fin d’esto sentiero;
quivi di riposar l’affanno aspetta.’

(*Purg.* IV, 88–95)

As the pilgrim progresses up the mountain, his work (or at least his experience of work) lessens as the weight of vice is lifted from him. The relative ease or difficulty of the journey is therefore intimately tied to the process of spiritual purgation; when no physical work is required and the journey becomes as easy and pleasurable (‘soave’) as sailing downstream with the current, the pilgrim will know that the process of purgation has come to an end. Though the metaphor of sin as heaviness is present throughout all of *Purgatorio*, here in Ante-Purgatory, in the absence of specific purgatorial punishments, it functions to establish the importance of physical work to the process of spiritual redemption.

The climb in *Purgatorio* IV is the most physically demanding part of the journey on Mount Purgatory. The daunting barrier that the steep climb imposes is already introduced in *Purgatorio* III (46–54), before the pilgrim and Virgil are guided to an easier point of entry by the excommunicates. The way up is narrow and steep, and is compared to a narrow gap in a hedge which a farmer might fill with thorns to protect the grape harvest from potential thieves:

Maggiore aperta molte volte impruna
con una forcatella di sue spine
l’uom de la villa quando l’uva imbruna,
che non era la calla onde saline.

(*Purg.* IV, 19–22)

These lines are frequently glossed by modern commentators with a reference to Matthew 7.14 (‘For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it’).³ Nicola Fosca notes an additional echo of Proverbs 15.19 (‘The way of the lazy is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway’), a reference which seems particularly relevant in consideration of the fact that the narrow and thorny path leads eventually to an encounter with a group of negligent souls. In his commentary to these verses, Cristoforo Landino makes an

³ All quotations of biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

explicit connection between the pilgrim's lack of virtue—he has, after all, only just begun his purgative journey—and the physically demanding, thorny path:

Non è maravigla, se la via, che mena al purgatorio, sia stretta et erta. Imperochè questa via sono le virtù purgatorie [...], le quali insino che non habbiamo facto habito, sono piene d'affanni et di sudore. Onde Hesiodo afferma che gli dii hanno posto el sudore innanzi alla virtù.⁴

Referencing a passage from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Landino insists that work, made visible by breathlessness and sweat, is an essential part of the acquisition of virtue.⁵ The difficult climb up the narrow and metaphorically thorny path thus appears to be specifically linked to negligence, and the road 'che mena al purgatorio' appears to be an arduous but necessary step in the acquisition of virtue.

The idea that physical work should be necessary for spiritual redemption is central to a Christian understanding of man's fallen state. In Genesis 3, which relates the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, difficult work is described as the direct consequence of the transgression committed by 'la prima gente' (*Purg.* I, 24) when they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. God says to Adam:

because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it', cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread [...].

(Genesis 3.17–19)

Thus while before the Fall man was placed in the garden 'to till it and keep it' (Genesis 2.15), after the Fall it is only with toil and hard labour that humankind can succeed in cultivating crops. It is interesting to note that, here in Genesis, thorns once again mark an obstacle that necessitates physical labour, offering another biblical echo for the 'forcatella di sue spine' in *Purgatorio* IV.

The distinction between pre- and post-lapsarian work is notably discussed in Augustine of Hippo's unfinished commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram*. Augustine argues that there was always work in Eden, but that it only became difficult after the Fall. Prior to original sin, he argues, 'there was no stress or wearisome toil, but pure exhilaration of spirit'.⁶ For Augustine, then, effortful work is a mark of man's fallenness, and eventual rest from this work in Paradise marks a return to a pre-lapsarian

⁴ Cristoforo Landino, commentary to *Purg.* IV, 19–22, accessed via the *Dartmouth Dante Project*, <<http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu/reader>>.

⁵ See Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 289–92: 'but in front of Excellence the immortal gods have set sweat, and the path to her is long and steep, and rough at first—yet when one arrives at the top, then it becomes easy, difficult though it still is'; in *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. by Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library, 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 111.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram libri XII*, book 8, chapter 8; in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees: Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, introductions, translation, and notes by Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 13 (New York: New City Press, 2002), pp. 356–57.

state, a model which resonates with Dante's placement of the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory, where, as Virgil explains in *Purgatorio* IV, the pilgrim will be able to rest and catch his breath: 'allor sarai al fin d'esto sentiero; | quivi di riposar l'affanno aspetta' (94–95).

The idea that souls in Purgatory will ultimately return to a pre-lapsarian state is evoked from the very beginning of the cantica through Cato's rebuke to the newly arrived souls:

[...] ed ecco il veglio onesto
gridando: 'Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?
qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?
Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto'.

(*Purg.* II, 118–23)

Cato's rebuke opposes lingering (and therefore negligence) to swiftness, but also establishes the souls' anticipated work on the purgatorial terraces as an act of 'stripping-off' (*spogliare*). Lino Pertile, in analysing the sources behind this metaphor, draws attention to the episode in Genesis 3.21 in which God makes clothes out of animal skins to give to Adam and Eve before exiling them from Paradise: 'And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them'. This allusion to Genesis suggests that the journey up the mountain will equate to a return to a pre-lapsarian state, a shedding of the clothes which were put on at the moment of exile from Eden and which mark the beginning of human labour. Pertile draws attention to three possible layers of interpretation arising from Dante's use of the term 'scoglio': firstly, the literal sense in which the tunics are simply animal skin, superior replacements for the leaves which Adam and Eve had used to try to cover themselves; secondly, the allegorical sense in which the tunics represent the human body; and thirdly, as a representation of the corruptible spiritual and physical condition of mankind after the Fall.⁷ In the two allegorical interpretations, human corruptibility and fleshiness appear to be closely intertwined with the moment of exile from Eden and the beginning of labour. Furthermore, in Hugh of St Victor's twelfth-century *Didascalicon*, *lanificum* ('fabric making') is listed as the first of the seven mechanical arts, and its prominent position in the list is explained through reference to the need for clothing after the Fall.⁸ For Hugh of St Victor, then, the need to work and fabricate is closely linked with humankind's physical vulnerability outside the garden.

The metaphor of the 'scoglio' thus appears to provide a nexus for human fallenness, the beginning of labour in Genesis, human corruptibility or weakness, and the eventual end of labour in the Earthly Paradise. The command 'Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio' might initially appear to gesture towards the *poena sensus* of the

⁷ Lino Pertile, *La punta del desio. Semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Florence: Cadmo, 2005), pp. 59–83 (see esp. pp. 66–67).

⁸ See Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon*, book 2, chapter 21; in *Didascalicon de studio legendi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), p. 39.

terraces. However, given that the 'piè del monte' is located in *Purgatorio* III (46), coinciding with the most physically challenging part of the journey for the pilgrim, are we to consider the slopes of Ante-Purgatory as part of the 'monte'? Moreover, could the very act of rushing towards the mountain constitute physical, redemptive work?

THE PILGRIM'S CLIMB AND BELACQUA'S LAZINESS

As noted above, the difficulty of the pilgrim's ascent is especially emphasized in Ante-Purgatory, where he is heaviest. This becomes particularly apparent in cantos III and IV, in which the pilgrim and Virgil must begin their climb up the mountain's initial slopes. It is here that Dante emphasizes the pilgrim's physical fatigue more than anywhere else in *Purgatorio*. This is not to suggest that attention to the physically challenging aspects of the journey is unique to Ante-Purgatory. In *Inferno* XXIV, the heaviness of the pilgrim's body as he struggles up the 'ruina' is contrasted with Virgil's lightness (31–36), causing Virgil to chastise the pilgrim for his laziness: 'Omai conven che tu così ti spoltre' (*Inf.* XXIV, 46).⁹ However, in Ante-Purgatory the importance of the pilgrim's exertions enters into a new dialogue with a spiritual desire to ascend, and the body begins to act as a clear impediment to the pursuit of an eternal spiritual reward.

In *Purgatorio* III the wall of rock is described as 'la roccia sì erta, | che 'ndarno vi sarien le gambe pronte' (47–48), emphasizing the physical implications of the climb. Then, however, Dante engages with the metaphor of spiritual flight once more when Virgil asks rhetorically: "Or chi sa da qual man la costa cala [...] sì che possa salir chi va sanz' ala?" (52–54). Similarly, in *Purgatorio* IV Dante makes a comparison between mountains in Italy and the mountain of Purgatory: 'con esso i piè; ma qui conven ch'om voli; | dico con l'ale snelle e con le piume | del gran disio' (27–29). On both occasions, the physical labour of the climb is present in the reference to 'gambe pronte' and 'piè', in contrast to the metaphor of wished-for spiritual flight. In the first comparison, Virgil's question places emphasis on the physical effort required, underling the absence of spiritual *levitas* that the pilgrim experiences at this stage in the journey. In *Purgatorio* IV, the poet draws attention to the need for spiritual desire when faced with a seemingly impossible physical challenge. The arrival at the first major obstacle in Purgatory thus permits a rearticulation of the dialectic between spiritual swiftness and corporeal *gravitas* introduced in *Purgatorio* II. In Ante-Purgatory, the pilgrim's body is an obstacle to ascent, but the difficulty of the climb equally places new emphasis on physical work as a form of redemptive labour.

The attention to physical effort and spiritual willingness built up over cantos II–IV is brought into sharp contrast through the pilgrim's encounter with the infamously lazy Belacqua at the end of *Purgatorio* IV. Belacqua, a Florentine maker of musical instruments, died between 1299 and March 1302, making him a relatively recent arrival

⁹ See also *Purg.* X, 7–24, which recalls *Purg.* IV through the locutions 'pietra fessa' (7) and 'l'alta ripa' (23). However, indications of physical fatigue are limited to 'passi scarsi' (13) and 'stancato' (19).

to Ante-Purgatory.¹⁰ The pilgrim's physical effort is almost immediately mocked by his old acquaintance, who interrupts Virgil's explanation of the spiritual logic of the mountain with the wry observation: '[...] "Forse | che di sedere in pria avrai distretta!"' (*Purg.* IV, 98–99). Belacqua then turns towards them:

Allor si volse a noi e puose mente
 movendo 'l viso pur su per la coscia,
 e disse: 'Or va tu sù, che se' valente!
 Conobbi allor chi era, e quella angoscia
 che m'avacciava un poco ancor la lena,
 non m'impedì l'andare a lui [...].

(*Purg.* IV, 112–17)

Dante recognizes Belacqua thanks to his languid comportment and sarcastic remarks. Though this exchange is typically read for its comic elements, Belacqua's slow movements offer an interesting contrast with the great physical effort the pilgrim has just expended to reach the top of the steep slope. He barely moves to address the pilgrim, while the pilgrim fights his own fatigue in order to approach the soul. Dante thus appears to place the pilgrim's physical effort in direct contrast with Belacqua's laziness and stasis. While one is 'lasso' (43) from physical toil, the other is 'lasso' (106) from the very lack of it.

Belacqua bemoans his enforced period of waiting in Ante-Purgatory, but in doing so, ironically misses the opportunity to ask Dante for prayers to speed his journey, as other souls in Ante-Purgatory often do:

Ed elli: 'O frate, andar in sù che porta?
 ché non mi lascerbbe ire a' martiri
 l'angel di Dio che siede in su la porta.
 Prima convien che tanto il ciel m'aggiri
 di fuor da essa, quanto fece in vita,
 perch'io 'ngdugiai al fine i buon sospiri,
 se orazione in prima non m'aita
 che surga sù di cuor che in grazia viva;
 l'altra che val, che 'n ciel non è udita?'

(*Purg.* IV, 127–35)

Belacqua is also one of the few souls who fails to comment on Dante's living body, instead lamenting the amount of time he must spend on the mountain without prayers. His question—'andar in sù che porta?'—is pertinent (after all, he cannot ascend past the gates), but also deeply problematic given his status among the saved. Belacqua's indolence offers a poignant contrast with the pilgrim's physically difficult climb, and his efforts in engaging with Belacqua despite his breathlessness. Unlike the souls that

¹⁰ See George D. Economou, 'Belacqua', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 96.

rush towards Dante 'sanza freno' (*Purg.* V, 42), hoping to entreat him for prayers from the living, Belacqua's static position beneath the 'gran petrone' (*Purg.* IV, 101) is indicative of an unchanged, negligent character. Belacqua's question is emblematic of one of the paradoxes of Ante-Purgatory: physical work is at once affirmed as an antidote to negligence, yet due to the quantitative nature of the delay imposed on souls in Ante-Purgatory, physical work and movement have no effect on the duration of their stay in this liminal zone.

CONCLUSION

Though the transition between Ante-Purgatory and Purgatory-proper is rendered binary through the topographical marker of the gates and rituals of entrance in *Purgatorio* IX, it is important to remember that all souls in Ante-Purgatory are nonetheless numbered among 'spiriti eletti' (*Purg.* III, 73). On the Day of Judgement, the binary which Dante creates between these zones of Purgatory will be null and void from a theological perspective, as all souls will ascend to Paradise together. Waiting and working similarly stand in opposition to one another; and yet, paradoxically, the reader is equally urged to remember that the journey towards salvation begins upon arrival on the shores of Purgatory, or perhaps even on the banks of the Tiber, where souls must wait for passage to the island of Purgatory (*Purg.* II, 94–102). Indeed, Dante's extension of delay to the banks of the Tiber arguably suggests that this work should begin in the mortal realm. The only way for an individual to reduce their time in Ante-Purgatory (without prayer), therefore, is to work against slothful and negligent tendencies in this life rather than in the next.