

**THE VIEW FROM MT. NEBO:  
CATO, MOSES, AND THE FATE OF THE UNBAPTIZED  
IN DANTE'S *PURGATORIO***

**Abigail Smith**

Cato, the pagan statesman of Utica, has confounded scholars of the *Commedia* since the ink dried on Dante's poem. Here on the banks of Purgatory we meet an unbaptized pagan conducting the new pilgrims to begin their ascent to God. But what of his own fate? Is Cato destined for damnation? Or will he one day take his place amid the ranks of the saved in Paradise? Many scholars have noted numerous connections between Dante's figure of Cato and the biblical Moses, but these connections have not been sufficiently examined in the context of the *crux interpretum* of Cato's salvation. By examining the relationship between Cato and Moses, I hope to present a new understanding of this mysterious figure and his final, unfortunate destiny in the *Commedia*. Charles Singleton's analysis centered the theme of exodus in the *Commedia*, and especially in *Purgatorio*.<sup>1</sup> More recently Carol Kaske has provided a thoughtful analysis of the ways in which Mt. Purgatory reflects Mt. Sinai.<sup>2</sup> Both of these scholars present persuasive arguments for the association between Cato and Moses, yet neither considers whether this may have anything to say about Cato's fate.

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles Singleton, "In Exitu Israel De Aegypto," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 118 (2000): 167-87.

<sup>2</sup>Carol Kaske, "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 89 (1971): 1-18.

### *Furman Humanities Review*

Cato, one of few pagans to be elevated out of Hell, cuts a mysterious figure. He is never named in the two cantos in which he appears, but the details about him make his identity clear.<sup>3</sup> Cato, a Roman statesman who sided with Pompey against Caesar in the civil war, seems like the most unlikely guardian of Purgatory at first glance.<sup>4</sup> He opposed Caesar, a crime for which Brutus and Cassius are condemned to the second-to-worst punishment in the *Inferno* (XXXIV.64-9). He also committed suicide at Utica, a normally irredeemable sin because it excludes the possibility of repentance, when faced with the prospect of submitting to Caesar's victory. Dante boldly references Cato right outside the forest of suicides in *Inferno* XIV.14-15, despite saving him from the same sticky fate in the next cantica.<sup>5</sup>

This is worth a brief remark. Dante references Lucan's *Pharsalia* which describes Cato leading Pompey's surviving soldiers through the Libyan desert to escape from Caesar's army.<sup>6</sup> Hollander points out that Dante sees Cato's suicide as different from the others' with Cato as a type of Christ, sacrificing himself for his people. I see clear similarities with the story of Moses in this account, primarily through the act of guiding his people through a desert to escape from the enemy. But I also see a connection between this Christ-like sacrifice of Cato's with Moses. After Moses found and destroyed the golden calf, he pleaded with God, saying, "either forgive them this trespass, or if thou do not, strike me out of the book that thou hast written" (Ex. 32:31-2, DRA). Moses sought to sacrifice himself to save his people. In both cases of Moses and Cato, their people were not

---

<sup>3</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, (New York: Anchor, 2004), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lansing, ed., *The Dante Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2010), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Pun intended.

<sup>6</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, (New York: Anchor, 2002), 268.

exactly spared by this self-sacrifice, with the subsequent plague on the Israelites and the ultimate defeat at the hands of Caesar, but both offered themselves as sacrifices.

In her recent article, Leah Schwebel argues that “Cato was likewise considered a model of pagan virtue, and in part for his suicide. Cato sacrificed his most precious possession – his life – for freedom, a point so salient for Dante that he emphasizes it in both the *Convivio* and *Monarchia*.”<sup>7</sup> In this understanding, Cato’s suicide is not only *not* a crime worthy of the seventh circle of Hell, but it is also commendable; i.e., it contributes to Cato’s virtue. She goes on to use this as support that Dante was explicitly rejecting Augustine’s understanding of suicide, but for our purposes it is enough to note her idea that Cato’s suicide was seen as a sacrifice, not an act of self-violence.

When Cato is first introduced to the readers in the poem, he is described as an old man with a long double-stranded beard “bianco mista” [streaked with white] (*Purg.* I.31-36). Kaske notes that this “forked beard” is a peculiarity of Moses iconography.<sup>8</sup> This could be a conscious allusion to Moses in Cato’s description, although Dante is also following Lucan’s portrayal of Cato as aged, a nod to his venerable character.<sup>9</sup>

Cato is also described with a shining face (I.38-9), recalling the shining face of Moses after he talked with God (Ex. 34.29-35). Cato’s face shines in the light of “le quattro luci sante” (I.37), four stars that are commonly seen as symbolic of the four cardinal virtues. Cato, the one “degno di tanta reverenza in vista” [so deserving of respect]” (I.32), is marked by these stars as perfect in virtue. It is not difficult to see the connection between the virtuous Cato and the other righteous pagans found in Limbo. Virgil claims that he and

---

<sup>7</sup> Leah Schwebel, “The Pagan Suicides: Augustine and Inferno 13,” *Medium Ævum* 87, no. 1, (2018), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Kaske, “Mount Sinai and Dante’s Mount Purgatory,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Lansing, *The Dante Encyclopedia*, 147.

*Furman Humanities Review*

his companions, though lacking the theological virtues, blamelessly followed all the others (VII.34-36). Kaske notes that Cato does not possess the three theological virtues any more than Virgil.<sup>10</sup> Despite this observation, Kaske accepts the idea that Dante presents Cato as the one exceptional (and Pelagian) case of natural virtues meriting salvation. Dante's own guide, however, claims that merit is not enough for the unbaptized (*Inf.*, IV.34-36).

There is a short list of pagans named in the *Commedia* who are clearly granted salvation: Statius, Trajan, and Ripheus. Unlike Cato, however, Dante provides a reason for their presence in Paradise. Significantly, this reason is never based solely on their merit, but on some measure of Christian faith. Dante has Statius, the pagan poet, convert to Christianity upon reading Virgil's work (*Purg.*, XXII.55-93). While there is not historical evidence to suggest the real Statius ever became a Christian, Dante uses this story to explain Statius' eventual salvation and place in Purgatory.<sup>11</sup>

Trajan's story at least has sources in prior tradition. Dante says Trajan was saved by St. Gregory the Great's prayers, which briefly raised him from the dead long enough for Trajan to be infused with the faith and love necessary to attain his place in Paradise (*Par.* XX.106-117).<sup>12</sup> Also without precedent, Ripheus the Trojan, a minor character in Virgil's *Aeneid*, was granted knowledge of redemption by a vision of God's grace and was somehow "baptized" by the three theological virtues (XX.118-129). Dante grants these pagans salvation by making Christians of them:

D'i corpi suoi non uscìr, come credi,

---

<sup>10</sup> Kaske, "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory," 14.

<sup>11</sup> Dante, *Purg.*, 501.

<sup>12</sup> Marcia L. Colish, "The Virtuous Pagan: Dante and the Christian Tradition," in *The Unbounded Christian Community: Papers in Christian Ecumenism in Honor of Jaroslav Pelikan*, ed., William Caferro (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 48-55.

*Abigail Smith*

Gentili, ma Cristiani, in ferma fede  
quel d'i passuri e quel d'i passi piedi.

[They left their bodies not as gentiles  
But as Christians, firm in their beliefs, the one  
Before, the other after, the piercing of His feet]  
(XX.103-5).

Dante does not provide Cato with such a conversion. In fact, “nothing marks his excellence as more than a pagan one.”<sup>13</sup> Kaske uses the advent of the three new stars (*Purg.* VIII.89-93) to argue that Cato possessed the cardinal virtues to such an extent that it appeared, even to God, “as if” he had the theological virtues.<sup>14</sup> This argument seems to disregard the fact that the three new stars did not alight upon Cato’s face, nor did our perspective of the four stars shift in such a way as to make them appear to be three. The four stars were replaced by the three; they “queste son salite ov' eran quelle” [have risen where those others were], only after Dante and Virgil had ascended up the mountain leaving Cato behind (VIII.93). There is not evidence to suggest that these three stars shed light on Cato’s salvation.

Kaske makes another interesting connection here regarding sight. When Moses returned from speaking with God, the Israelites asked him to veil his face, for they could not bear the sign of God’s presence. Paul expresses the need to remove the veil from one’s eyes to be able to see God (II Cor. 3:13-18). Cato commands Virgil to wash Dante’s face, lest he appear before the angel with “l’occhio sorpreso d’alcuna nebbia” [his eyes still dimmed by any mist] (*Purg.* I.98). The veil, Kaske notes, is interpreted by Ambrose as sin which is cast off through absolution.<sup>15</sup> Moses continuously

---

<sup>13</sup> Kaske, “Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory,” 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

### *Furman Humanities Review*

combats the spiritual blindness of his people, seeking pardon for them again and again, despite his own veiled face. Likewise, Cato again demands clear-sightedness by commanding the group of pilgrims to “spogliarvi lo scoglio / ch’esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto” [shed the slough that lets not God be known to you] (II.122-3).

Moses’ vision is therefore regarded as inferior to the vision of Christians who can see with “unveiled face” (II Cor. 3:18). Significantly, this inferiority is shared by Cato, whose vision “is only the light of the stars, not of the sun.”<sup>16</sup> Dante, however, is sent towards the sun, and when he reaches the summit of Mt. Purgatory he has “lo sol che ‘n fronte ti riluce” [the sun shining before] him (XXVII.133). His eyes grow clearer as he progresses, and when he is baptized in the Lethe by Matelda, the connection between sight and virtue is made clearer. The four ladies (or virtues), who by their own admission are also stars in heaven (XXXI.106), lead Dante to Beatrice:

Merrenti a li occhi suoi; ma nel giocondo

lume ch’è dentro aguzzeranno i tuoi  
le tre di là, che miran più profondo.

[We will bring you to her eyes. But to receive  
the joyous light they hold, the other three,  
who look much deeper into things, shall sharpen  
yours] (XXXI.109-11).

As he enters Paradise, the veil is literally removed from between him and Beatrice (XXXI.145), and his eyes are strengthened to behold the image of Christ through Be-

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.

atrice's eyes. Dante surpasses both Virgil and Cato's limitations, the limitations of pagans who lack the infused sight of the theological virtues.

Further connections between Moses and Cato can be made by examining the topography of the land and themes of exodus. Moses led his people through the Red Sea, into the desert where his people faced many temptations while seeking the promised land. Singleton describes the whole first two cantiche by this same exodus pattern, a pattern of conversion, and this image is repeated in the first cantos of *Purgatorio*.<sup>17</sup>

In the deadly waters of Purgatory is easily seen an image of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14). Those pilgrims in God's grace cross the waters piloted by an angel to reach the shores of Purgatory at the base of the mountain. As seen with the story of Ulysses, it is impossible to cross those waters without God's goodwill. Ulysses suffered the fate of the Egyptians, covered over by the sea, by seeking access apart from God's grace (*Inf.* XXVI.130-42). Those pilgrims who crossed the waters safely arrived on the reed-covered shore into a desert of temptation. Similarly, Singleton compares Ante-Purgatory with the desert through which the Israelites had to march. Both were beset with temptations and needed the "manna" of God's grace to come to their aid. The first temptation is seen with Casella's song that Hollander boldly calls "a siren's song."<sup>18</sup> This song, an innocent love song by first impression, is strongly rebuked by Cato, which leads one to suspect that more is going on than meets the eye.

Canto II of *Purgatorio* presents a contrast between two songs, one from Psalm 113 sung by the pilgrims arriving on the shores, and the other a love song from Dante's *Convivio* sung by Casella (112). Hollander presents a persuasive argument about the relationship between these songs and the

---

<sup>17</sup> Singleton, "In Exitu Israel De Aegypto," 168.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hollander, "Purgatorio II: Cato's Rebuke and Dante's Scoglio," *Italica* 52, no. 3 (1975): 348.

*Furman Humanities Review*

message of the Canto. Casella's song recalls "how [Dante's] love for Beatrice is conquered and replaced by his love for the donna gentile/Lady Philosophy."<sup>19</sup> This theme from Dante's past is brought up again by Beatrice who scathingly chastises Dante for giving himself to others (XXX.126). As part of this lament over Dante's false turns Beatrice then says:

e volve i passi suoi per via non vera,  
imagini di ben seguendo false,  
che nulla promession rendono intera.

[He set his steps upon an untrue way,  
Pursuing those false images of good  
That bring no promise to fulfillment] (XXX.130-2).

Beatrice ties Dante's pursuit after other women to false images, to idolatry. This theme of new lovers is often used to symbolize Israel's idolatry and forsaken God. This connection, though unmentioned by Hollander, is striking considering his analysis of the other song sung in Canto II. He points out that in our bibles the Vulgate Psalm 113 is actually two psalms, 114 and 115. Dante's pilgrims do not sing only "in exitu Israel de Aegypto," but also that they "con quanto di quel salmo è poscia scripto" [went on, singing the entire psalm] (46; 48). Upon closer look at the rest of the Psalm (115:4-8), one can see verses that "reveal the inefficacy of the idols made by the gentiles."<sup>20</sup> This makes the whole scene of Casella's song and Cato's rebuke about Dante backsliding into his idolatrous ways like the stiff-necked Israelites.<sup>21</sup>

This connection makes the theme of temptation and idolatry manifest throughout the canto and provides another

---

<sup>19</sup> Hollander, "Cato's Rebuke," 352.

<sup>20</sup> Hollander, "Cato's Rebuke," 356.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Hollander, "Purgatorio II: The New Song And The Old." *Lectura Dantis*, no. 6 (1990): 40.



clear association of Cato with Moses. Cato's rebuke of Dante and Virgil resembles the episode in which Moses found the golden calf and descended to rebuke the people of Israel (Ex. 32). Understanding both of these incidents in this way further unites Dante's Cato and the figure of Moses as guardians of their respective mountains, whose people tend towards idolatry when their leader is out of sight.

In addition to this first temptation, Singleton draws our attention to the final temptation in Ante-Purgatory, among the group encamped below the mountain like the Israelites encamped at Sinai (VII.64-9). Here, they pray to Mary and then to God to deliver them from "this vale of tears."<sup>22</sup> The scene reflects the *Pater Noster* as the people beg for deliverance from their Enemy. The snake comes, "forse qual diede ad Eva il cibo amaro" [perhaps the one that gave to Eve the bitter fruit] (VIII.99), and the angels arrive to drive it away (106-7). Singleton connects this scene with the idea of temptation, and, more broadly, the entire area of Ante-Purgatory as "a place where temptations can still beset the way."<sup>23</sup>

This presents an interesting question about temptation in Purgatory. The souls in Purgatory are not at risk of failing in their journey to the "promised land," so in what way are they being tempted? By recalling Cato's rebuke to Dante and the pilgrims, their failure comes through a lack of urgency to strive towards God, a slothfulness that centers on the delay to journey up the mountain of conversion. Interestingly, a similar theme is apparent in the crime of the Israelites who grew impatient with God, and so built themselves an idol of gold (Ex. 32:1). Both stories include this sense of delay that reflects a kind of idol of one's time. The Israelites saw Moses' delay as a sign to turn from God, and Dante delayed from his mission by turning from God back to his old

---

<sup>22</sup> Singleton, "In Exitu Israel De Aegypto," 179.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 180.

### *Furman Humanities Review*

habits. Cato echoes “God’s command and Moses’s compliance (‘neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount’ – Exodus 34:3), [and] sends the music-lovers flying.”<sup>24</sup>

Another connection between Moses and Cato can be seen through their relationship to law. Both are presented as lawgivers. Moses descended from Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Reflecting much Christian thought, Christians are under a new law, a “*nuova legge*.” This law is summed up by the Beatitudes, of which the first seven are seen by Augustine as “‘gradus’ to perfection.”<sup>25</sup> In her examination of the relationship between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Purgatory, Kaske addresses this subject of law, arguing that the mountain of the prologue represents Natural Law.<sup>26</sup> Hell represents the Old Law, the condemnatory law, which Dante was required to climb down to learn humility, before climbing back out and up Mt. Purgatory, which symbolizes the New Law, the justifying law.

Cato is seen as the giver of the New Law, bidding Dante and the other pilgrims to climb towards the fulfilment of that law in the Beatitudes, like Moses is the giver of the Old Law who bid his people to follow God’s precepts.<sup>27</sup> Law here is seen as that which God requires of man, and one may ask why Dante places such primacy on Law in the *Commedia*, seemingly over grace. Kaske argues that “grace and human effort are here portrayed as complementary and alternating like night and day.”<sup>28</sup> She connects the activity of the prayerful princes at night and Dante’s sleep as times of reception of grace. Further, she characterizes Dante’s Cato as the “example of human effort,” a pagan who made it into Purgatory through his own merit and whose role as guardian

---

<sup>24</sup> Dante, *Purg.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Kaske, “Mount Sinai and Dante’s Mount Purgatory,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

has him urging on countless pilgrims to make effort towards God at the top of the mountain.<sup>29</sup>

This is an interesting characterization of Cato in several respects. First, if Cato is the exemplar of human effort, the one who is so deserving of respect that Dante kneels for the duration of their first conversation, then it raises a question about his place in Purgatory. Cato, unlike everyone else we meet in Purgatory, is not journeying up the mountain with the aid of grace. In fact, he is not journeying up the mountain at all, but remaining stationary, like the souls in *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. *Purgatorio* is the one place of journey, of movement, that the other souls experience in the *Commedia*.<sup>30</sup> No one in Hell can be seen to be progressing; any movement that exists is circular in nature. Likewise, the souls in Heaven cannot go beyond the Beatific Vision, and their action is more contemplative and less of a journey.

Cato's position seems fixed by his duty as guardian of Purgatory, but will he ever ascend the mountain to take his place in the "promised land" of Paradise? If Cato exemplifies human effort without grace, and Dante's Purgatory requires both effort and grace to ascend, it seems he will remain stuck outside the gates through which he ushers others.

Guisepppe Mazzotta makes a connection between Cato and Paul's Old Man mentioned in Rom. 6:6.<sup>31</sup> Mazzotta argues that Cato's suicide represented the crucifixion of the Old Man, a kind of mortification in which "law reveals what is sinful and human effort resists it."<sup>32</sup> Cato fulfills this resistance in his response to Virgil's appeal to remember his wife Marcia, for:

Or che di là dal mal fiume dimora,

---

<sup>29</sup> Kaske, "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory," 10.

<sup>30</sup> Singleton, "In Exitu Israel De Aegypto," 178.

<sup>31</sup> Kaske, "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory," 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*Furman Humanities Review*

più muover non mi può, per quella legge  
che fatta fu quando me n'uscì fora.

[Now that she dwells beyond the evil stream  
She cannot move me any longer,  
According to the law laid down at my deliverance]  
(I.88-90).

Kaske disagrees with Mazzotta though in his identification of Cato also as the New Man. She rejects the idea because Cato's virtue has a negative cast. He acts as law, rejecting what is against it, but does not supply grace. He commands Virgil to wash Dante; he does not do it himself. Kaske considers the New Man to be represented by Matelda (who did wash Dante) or Beatrice, both of whom are youthful and overflowing with grace. I find it significant that Cato cannot be paired with the New Man, but only the Old Man who must be crucified. But if Cato is crucified, but not made new, where does that leave him?

Dorothy Sayers also notes that Cato is, simply in Dante's presentation, not like the others who are working their way towards Paradise. She says, "he lacks the intensity, the exuberance, and the courtesy which are marks of those in Grace; he is, in a word, ungracious. He is a moral imperative, founded in duty rather than love: a preparation for penitence, but not penitence itself."<sup>33</sup> Cato represents duty over love, an understanding of the Old Law seen in Hebrews, a Law which "decayeth and groweth old, is near its end" (Heb. 8:13).

But the most significant connection between Moses and Cato has yet to be made. When considering the subject of Cato's salvation, scholars have rarely given Mt. Nebo much thought. In fact, Kaske, after laying out all her arguments to connect Cato and Moses, notices Mt. Nebo, yet does not carry the connection to any sort of conclusion. She says

---

<sup>33</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, Trans. by Dorothy Sayers, (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 77.

*Abigail Smith*

“once we have paired Cato with Virgil, we can see that he shares another limitation of Moses: he and Virgil, like Moses, can see the promised land but cannot as yet cross the river and enter it.”<sup>34</sup> She even added a qualifier, “yet” to weaken any conclusions that could be made.

Mt. Nebo, like Mt. Sinai, has clear connections with Mt. Purgatory, perhaps more so. Let us examine the story:

And the Lord spoke to Moses the same day, saying: Go up into this mountain Abarim...and see the land of Chanaan, which I will deliver to the children of Israel to possess, and die thou in the mountain...Because you trespassed against me in the midst of the children of Israel, at the waters of contradiction in Cades of the desert of Sin: and you did not sanctify me among the children of Israel. Thou shalt see the land before thee, which I will give to the children of Israel, but thou shalt not enter into it. (Deut. 32:48-52).

The whole progress of Moses’s journey with his people was to find the Promised Land. And now, on the cusp of entry, Moses is denied. He is allowed, because of his favor with God, to see the land, more grace than the generation of stiff-necked Israelites received (Num. 14:21-23).

Singleton has already made the connection of Heaven as the “promised land,” as the goal of the exodus through the *Commedia*.<sup>35</sup> And if Cato is representative of Moses, the virtuous lawgiver and leader, he has made it past Mt. Sinai to Mt. Nebo. He has made it further all other virtuous pagans and Christian sinners (until Virgil). He has seen into the garden of Paradise, glimpsed the promised land, and gone no further. All of these scholars have agreed that Cato

---

<sup>34</sup> Kaske, “Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory,” 15.

<sup>35</sup> Singleton, “*In Exitu Israel De Aegypto*,” 178.

### *Furman Humanities Review*

was among the saved, but if the associations between Cato and Moses are to be carried out to their logical conclusions, a different answer about the final fate of Cato is suggested.

Kaske links Cato and Virgil in their visual limitations.<sup>36</sup> One theme that appears repeatedly in *Purgatorio* is Virgil's lack of competence in leading Dante through Purgatory. He has guided Dante onto the shore and immediately makes a mistake and must be corrected by Cato (I.78-93). His sight is dimmed because he lacks faith which brings understanding (XVIII, 48). Virgil has gone to the limit of where pure reason can carry him, and he can go no further. Additionally, he says, "Io son Virgilio; e per null' altro rio / lo ciel perdei che per non aver fé." [for no other failing / did I lose Heaven but my lack of faith] (VII.7-8). Why was Moses barred from the Promised Land? Moses had a lack of faith. He did not trust God enough to abide by His command; he struck the rock and showed his lack of faith to all Israel. Virgil and Cato share their virtues and failings in common. Both were perfect in virtue and yet did not have faith.

Singleton also makes a connection between the Jordan and the river Lethe. Virgil departs from the *Commedia* on the bank overlooking the river, looking into land he will never get to enter. This evokes the picture of Moses who looked into Canaan but would "not cross the Jordan" (Deut. 4:21). Cato, like Moses, ushers his people towards the promised land. And Cato, just like Moses and Virgil, can see it, but cannot enter it.

There are other reasons why most scholars accept Cato's salvation. Primarily because of Virgil's mention of Cato's glorified body and because of his mention of deliverance. Let us briefly examine these. Virgil says:

Tu 'l sai, ché non ti fu per lei amara  
in Utica la morte, ove lasciasti

---

<sup>36</sup> Kaske, "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory," 14.

*Abigail Smith*

la vesta ch'al gran dì sarà sì chiara.

[You know this well, since death in Utica  
Did not seem bitter, there where you left  
The garment that will shine on that great day]  
(I.73-5).

This is likely the most obvious piece of evidence that points to Cato's eventual salvation, until one remembers the full context of this declaration. A few observations might be made.

First, not enough caution is employed when trusting Virgil's words. In the very next tercet Virgil blunders into attempting to persuade Cato to give them passage with thoughts of his wife (I.76-84). This reference of Cato's glory could be simply another cajoling attempt at flattery on Virgil's part. But, regardless of Virgil's motivations, there is no guarantee that he knows what he is talking about. As Hollander himself notes, despite unquestioningly trusting Virgil's words in I.73-5, Dante "wanted to call Virgil's sense of the situation into question."<sup>37</sup> If anything is made clear by Virgil's forays into Purgatory, it is that he is no longer on his own turf. Virgil's word can no longer be trusted in the same way as it could in *Inferno*.

Second, Virgil could be making the same assumption many scholars make: because Cato is in Purgatory, it must mean he is saved. As just established, Virgil is not the most sound guide for this part of the poem, and it seems to make sense. Purgatory is the place where saved souls go to cleanse themselves to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, so if someone is there, they must be saved. Except, Cato is not journeying through Purgatory. Rather, he is staffing it. And there is at least one other instance in which someone condemned to

---

<sup>37</sup> Dante, *Purg.*, 22.

### *Furman Humanities Review*

Hell entered Purgatory without possibility of salvation...Virgil himself.

Finally, even if Virgil is correct, he says that Cato's garment will shine on the Last Day when each dead soul will be reunited with their bodies. This seems at first glance like a clear reference to the shining light that glows from all the souls of *Paradiso*, but it may be easy to forget the first time Dante recounted shining spirits: "quand' io vidi un foco / ch'emisperio di tenebre vincia" [I beheld a blaze of light / that overcame a hemisphere of darkness] (*Inf.* IV.68-9). This light came from the virtuous pagans in Limbo, non-Christians whose only crime was a lack of faith but were worthy of honor upon honor. When Virgil sees Cato, he makes Dante kneel to give proper reverence to the honorable pagan, reverence that is also due to the great pagans of Limbo (*Purg.* I.49-51). The fact that Cato will shine when he receives his body is no guarantee of his salvation.

Sayers makes this very point in her commentary on this passage. She writes, "It may be, as J. S. Carroll suggests, that in the Last Day [Cato] will return to become the brightest and most authoritative inhabitant of the Elysian Fields in Limbo, 'giving laws there to the good in the hidden place,' as Virgil wrote of him (*Aen.* Viii. 670)."<sup>38</sup> Not only does she notice this possibility but supports it using Dante's muse as her guide. If Cato really is destined for Paradise, more persuasive evidence would be necessary than simply Cato receiving his body, shining though it may be.

More trustworthy would be the words from Cato's own mouth: "più muover non mi può, per quella legge / che fatta fu quando me n'usci' fora" [she cannot move me any longer / according to the law laid down at my deliverance] (I.89-90). What is this law, and what is this deliverance? I will gladly admit that this line is a strong indicator of Cato's salvation, but it does not absolutely settle the conversation.

---

<sup>38</sup> Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, 77.



*Abigail Smith*

This deliverance could be of the kind offered to Moses when he was delivered to Mt. Nebo to see the promised land, but not to enter it. Or the kind of deliverance offered to the Israelites who were led out of Egypt but, because of their faithlessness, were not delivered to the land of milk and honey. Likewise, this law could be the type of law that allows a damned pagan to wander through Purgatory with a living man in tow. Laws and deliverances are not always eternal, even when dealing with the afterlife.

Scholars have noticed that Dante links his Cato to the biblical Moses in many ways, from his appearance to his role in salvation history and his relationship with law and God. But Moses's fate has not been sufficiently explored in connection with Cato's. Of the scholars who mention the connection at Mt. Nebo, they dismiss it too quickly.

But why does this matter? Cato's hypothesized salvation is often used as evidence that Dante is a sort of pre-modern liberalizing figure, but I think that would be a hasty conclusion to make. Rather, Dante uses the figure of Cato to reveal the themes of Exodus, Law, and Grace in a way that is deeply rooted in his traditions, both Roman and Christian. But he also transcends these traditions by using Cato to show the complexity of human life in its relationship to God. Cato offers us another instance of Dante's complex use of allegory. Cato is at once the unbaptized pagan who committed suicide *and* the Moses-type ushering the Christian souls to Heaven. He is Cato *and* he is Moses. It would be a mistake to limit Dante's use of Cato to a statement about the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. Through the few tercets allotted to Cato, Dante is saying much more than that. Cato calls to mind where we have come from, both the pits of Hell with Dante and our own desperate flights from the pursuing enemy, be it the armies of Rome or our sins. He shows us where we should be going, reminds us not to get lost on the way. Cato is a tribute to the value of a life well-lived *and* a

*Furman Humanities Review*

plaintive nod to our need for grace. He is exemplar and example, and as such it is too early to canonize Cato because he may yet “die on the mountain” of Nebo (Deut. 32:50).

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor, 2002.
- . *Purgatorio*. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor, 2004.
- . *Paradiso*. Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.
- . *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*. Translated by Dorothy L. Sayers. London: Penguin Books, 1955.
- Colish, Marcia L. "The Virtuous Pagan: Dante and the Christian Tradition." in *The Unbounded Christian Community: Papers in Christian Ecumenism in Honor of Jaroslav Pelikan*, edited by William Caferro, 43-91. New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996.
- Hollander, Robert. "Purgatorio II: Cato's Rebuke and Dante's Scoglio." *Italica* 52, no. 3 (1975): 348-63. Accessed December 8, 2020. doi:10.2307/478438.
- . "Purgatorio II: The New Song And The Old." *Lectura Dantis*, no. 6 (1990): 28-45. Accessed December 8, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44806751>.
- Kaske, Carol V. "Mount Sinai and Dante's Mount Purgatory." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 89 (1971): 1-18. Accessed October 19, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40166087>.
- Lansing, Richard, ed. *The Dante Encyclopedia*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Schwebel, Leah. "The Pagan Suicides: Augustine and Inferno 13." *Medium Ævum* 87, no. 1 (2018): 106-32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26871218>.

***Furman Humanities Review***

Singleton, Charles S. "*In Exitu Israel De Aegypto.*" *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 118 (2000): 167-87. Accessed December 8, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40166558>.