



## “Sinners and Saints in Dante’s *Commedia*”

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Online Course: Archdiocese of San Francisco  
Week Four: *The Birth of Purgatory*; *Purgatory* 1; 30-33  
16 August 2022

"O Padre nostro, che ne' cieli stai,  
non circunscritto, 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,  
senza 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  
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". (*Purg.* 11.1-24)

Our Father, who are in Heaven,  
circumscribed only by the greater love  
you have for your first works on high,  
'praised be your name and power  
by every creature, as is fitting  
to render thanks for your sweet breath.  
'May the peace of your kingdom come to us,  
for we cannot attain it of ourselves  
if it come not, for all our striving.  
'As your angels make sacrifice to you  
of their free wills, singing *hosanna*,  
so let men make an offering of theirs.  
'Give us this day the daily manna  
without which he who labors to advance  
goes backward through this bitter wilderness.  
'And, as we forgive those who have wronged us,  
do you forgive us in your loving kindness--  
measure us not as we deserve.  
'Do not put to proof our powers,  
which yield so lightly to the ancient foe,  
but deliver us from him who tempts them.  
"This last petition, our dear Lord, is made  
now not for ourselves--for us there is no need--  
but for the ones whom we have left behind

## Recapitulation of Week One

- Dante is the father of Italian, though not the inventor of Italian, nor is he the first Italian poet. He is part of a “fourth wave” of Italian poets ([1] the first Italian poets write in Old Occitan, [2] Sicilian poets at the court of Federico II, [3] *siculo-toscani* and Bolognesi in the Communes of northern Italy, [4] Dante & Company])
- Dante writes the *Comedy* while in exile and amidst a fractured and divisive political background
- both Liberal Italy and the Church claim Dante
- Italy’s literary unification precedes and perhaps supercedes its political unification (1861)
- The Church calls Dante “ours” (Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict XV) despite Dante’s willingness to condemn popes and others to hell in the *Comedy*, and despite Dante’s argument, in the *De monarchia*, that the pope ought to concentrate on being Christ’s vicar on earth (“the two suns [Emperor and Pope]”)
- the *Comedy* presents a unified cosmos, consisting of “death, love, and God” that ends with God himself, who has “bound the universe in a single volume” (see also *Letter to Cangrande*)
- the *Inferno* is not enough - we must read on through *Purgatory* and *Paradise*
- “From the abyss of crimes punished, through the serene realms where human spirits purify themselves, toward the arduous summits of perfection, to which a multiplicity of ways lead to holiness and splendor, there are those who model the many different forms that holiness takes -- panegyrics woven for St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Peter Damian, St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Romuald, St. Bernard -- all rising toward a summit.” (*motu proprio* of Pope Paul VI, 1965, VII centenary of Dante’s birth)

## Recapitulation of Week Two

- the formal structure of the *Commedia* (canti, canticles, *terza rima*, hendacasyllables)
- The division and circles of *Inferno*
- Dante's careful attention to each word, each phoneme in the poem
- “Vertical readings”
- Description of sinners and Hell in *Inferno*
- *Inferno* 1 and 2: prologue, invocation, meeting with Virgil
- *Inferno* 3: the first sinners (neutrals)
- *Inferno* 5: Francesca and Paolo
- The first saints of Hell (St. Paul, St. Lucy)
  - “Io non Enea, io non Paolo sono”, he says (*Inferno* 2.32) (‘I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.)
  - [Beatrice speaks, reported by Virgil to Dante] “She [Mary] summoned Lucy and made this request: / “Your faithful one is now in need of you and I commend him to your care.” / Lucy, the enemy of every cruelty arose and came to where I [Beatrice] sat at venerable Rachel’s side” (*Inferno* 2.97-102)

## Recapitulation of Week Three

- Inferno and its structure
- *Inferno* 26
- Primo Levi and *Se questo è un uomo*
  - the influence of Dante's poem on Levi's book
  - Dante's *Commedia* as means of survival
  - Primo Levi's memory of *Inferno* 26
- Varying interpretations of Ulysses/Odysseus in Hell
- *Inferno* 33 and Conte Ugolino

Per correr mighor acque alza *le* vele  
omai *la* navicella del mio ingegno,  
Che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele.  
(*Purgatorio* 1.1-2)

To run its course through smoother water  
The small bark of my wit now hoists its sail  
Leaving that cruel sea behind.

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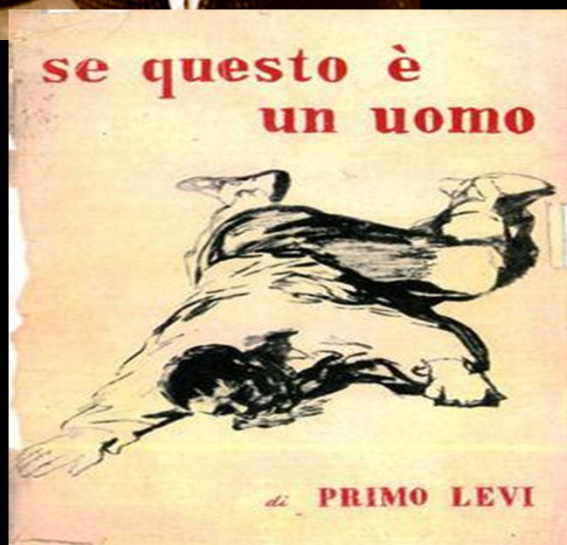
Io ritornai da *la* santissima onda rifatto sì  
come piante novelle rinovellate di novella  
fronda, puro e disposto a salire a *le* stelle.  
(*Purg.* 33.142-145)

**From those most holy waters**  
**I came away remade, as** are new plants  
Renewed with new-sprung leaves  
Pure and prepared to rise up to the stars.





Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, and Dante



## Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, and Dante

“The journey did not last more than twenty minutes. Then the lorry stopped, and we saw a large door, **and above it a sign, brightly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, work gives freedom...**We have a terrible thirst...This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this” (p. 22).

“The confusion of languages is a fundamental component of the manner of living here; one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasp the meaning. No one has time here, no one has patience, no one listens to you; we latest arrivals instinctively collect in the corners, against the walls, afraid of being beaten” (p. 38).

“One cannot hear the music well from Ka-Be. The beating of the big drums and the cymbals reach us continuously and monotonously, but on this weft the musical phrases weave a pattern only intermittently, according to the caprices of the wind. We all look at each other from our beds, **because we all feel that this music is infernal**” (p. 50).

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE,  
THROUGH ME THE WAY TO EVERLASTING PAIN,  
THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST.  
JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH.

[...]

**ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.**

10 **These words, dark in hue, I saw inscribed  
over an archway.** And then I said:

‘Master, for me their meaning is hard.’

and he, as one who understood:

‘Here you must banish all distrust,

15 here must all cowardice be slain.

‘We have come to where I said  
you would see the miserable sinners  
who have lost the good of the intellect.’  
and after he had put his hand on mine

20 with a reassuring look that gave me comfort,  
he led me toward things unknown to man.

**Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation  
resounded through the air,**

so that I too began to weep.

25 **Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,  
words of suffering, cries of rage, voices  
loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands –  
all these made a tumult,** always whirling  
in that black and timeless air,

30 as sand is swirled in a whirlwind. (*Inferno* 3.1-30)



## Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, and Dante

3. “[T]he Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts” (p. 41).

“We are only tired beasts” (p. 44).

“If Jean is intelligent he will understand. He *will* understand – today I feel capable of so much” (p. 112)

“Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

“Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance  
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,  
To follow after knowledge and excellence’  
(from *Inf.* 26.118-120)

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: **like the blast of a trumpet**, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (p. 113)

Considerate la vostra semenza:  
Fatti non foste a viver come bruti  
Ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.

(*Inferno* 26.118-120)

(“Consider how your souls were sown:  
You were not made to live like brutes or beasts,  
but to follow virtue and knowledge.”)

And my leader said: 'He wakes no more  
until angelic trumpets sound  
The advent of the hostile power. (*Inferno* 6.94-96)

## *Inferno* 26: Dante's Ulysses

- Opens with another mention of Florence (vv. 1-9)
  - Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante weaves together the political, the contemporary, the ancient, the religious, the secular, the Latin and the vernacular, the mythical and the historical
- Move from the seventh *bolgia* to the eighth (fraudulent rhetoric)
- Exemplary sinners in *Inferno* are a mix of historical personages (think Francesca and Paolo, Ugolino, Ciaccio) and mythological/literary personages (Ulysses/Odysseus here)
- This canto demonstrates again the close association between Hell and an earthly geography (vv. 16-18)
- Fraudulent advice/rhetoric, shrewdness, or fraud in the course of conducting a war? (vv. 58-63)
- Fraudulent rhetoric, false humility, going beyond human limits, Ulysses as a serpent-like tempter of his men (vv. 90-142)

## *Inferno* 26: Dante's Ulysses

Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio  
quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,  
e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,  
perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;  
sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa  
m'ha dato'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi. (*Inf.* 26.19-24)

I grieved then and now I grieve again  
As my thoughts turn to what I saw  
And more than is my way, I curb my powers  
Lest they run on where virtue fails to guide them  
So that, if friendly star or something better still  
Has granted me its boon, I don't misuse the gift.

- misuse of the intellect
- misuse of *prudentia*
- prizing of the intellect over the body (the opposite of *Inferno* V where “la ragione sottomettono al talento” [they subordinate reason to desire])
  - in de-emphasizing the corporeality of his men, Ulisse can be accused, plausibly, of assimilating men to angels, who had the need only for the intellect and not the body
- distorted use of language (play on words; in Italian *lingua* = tongue AND language. The *contrappasso* of the sinners here is to be encased in a flame, so that the flames flicker like a “lingua di fuoco”, a “tongue of fire”).
- Transgression of limits that are both human and divine (the “Pillars of Hercules” marked the extreme boundaries of the Roman Empire)

## The Sins of Ulysses: Fraud?

'In their flame they mourn the stratagem

**Of the horse that made a gateway**

Through which the noble seed of Rome came forth.

There they **lament the wiles** for which, in death,

Deidamia mourns Achilles still,

And there they **make amends for the Palladium.**" (*Inf.* 26.58-63)

1. Trojan horse
2. trickery re: Achilles to fight against Troy
3. theft of the Palladium

## The last voyage of Ulysses

indi la cima qua e là menando,  
come fosse la lingua che parlasse,  
gittò voce di fuori e disse: "Quando

mi diparti' da Circe, che sottrasse  
me più d'un anno là presso a Gaeta,  
prima che si Enëa la nomasse,

né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta  
del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore  
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,

vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore  
ch' i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto  
e de li vizi umani e del valore;

ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto  
sol con un legno e con quella compagna  
picciola da la qual non fui diserto.

L'un lito e l'altro vidi infin la Spagna,  
fin nel Morrocco, e l'isola d' i Sardi,  
e l'altre che quel mare intorno bagna.

Io e ' compagni eravam vecchi e tardi  
quando venimmo a quella foce stretta  
dov' Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi

acció che l'uom più oltre non si metta;  
da la man destra mi lasciai Sibilia,  
da l'altra già m'avea lasciata Setta.

"O frati," dissi, "che per cento milia  
perigli siete giunti a l'occidente,  
a questa tanto picciola vigilia

d' i nostri sensi ch' è del rimanente  
non vogliate negar l'esperienza,  
di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente.

Then, brandishing its tip this way and that,  
as if it were the tongue of fire that spoke,  
it brought forth a voice and said: "When I

'took leave of Circe, who for a year and more  
beguiled me there, not far from Gaëta,  
before Aeneas gave that name to it,

'not tenderness for a son, nor filial duty  
toward my aged father, nor the love I owed  
Penelope that would have made her glad,

'could overcome the fervor that was mine  
to gain experience of the world  
and learn about man's vices, and his worth.

'And so I set forth on the open deep  
with but a single ship and that handful  
of shipmates who had not deserted me.

'One shore and the other I saw as far as Spain,  
Morocco—the island of Sardegna,  
and other islands set into that sea.

'I and my shipmates had grown old and slow  
by the time we reached the narrow strait  
where Hercules marked off the limits,

'warning all men to go no farther.  
On the right-hand side I left Seville behind,  
on the other I had left Ceüta.

"O brothers," I said, "who, in the course  
of a hundred thousand perils, at last  
have reached the west, to such brief wakefulness

"of our senses as remains to us,  
do not deny yourselves the chance to know—  
following the sun—the world where no one lives.



Considerate la vostra semenza:  
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.'

120

Li miei compagni fec' io sì aguti,  
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,  
che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;

123

e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,  
de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo,  
sempre acquistando dal lato mancino.

126

Tutte le stelle già de l'altro polo  
vedea la notte, e 'l nostro tanto basso,  
che non surgëa fuor del marin suolo.

129

Cinque volte raccesso e tante casso  
lo lume era di sotto da la luna,  
poi che 'ntrati eravam ne l'alto passo,

132

quando n'apparve una montagna, bruna  
per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto  
quanto veduta non avëa alcuna.

135

Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto;  
ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque  
e percosse del legno il primo canto.

138

Tre volte il fê girar con tutte l'acque;  
a la quarta levar la poppa in suso  
e la prora ire in giù, com' altrui piacque,  
infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso."

142

' "Consider how your souls were sown:  
you were not made to live like brutes or beasts,  
but to pursue virtue and knowledge."

120

'With this brief speech I had my companions  
so ardent for the journey  
I could scarce have held them back.

123

'And, having set our stern to sunrise,  
in our mad flight we turned our oars to wings,  
always gaining on the left.

126

'Now night was gazing on the stars that light  
the other pole, the stars of our own so low  
they did not rise above the ocean floor.

129

'Five times the light beneath the moon  
had been rekindled and as often been put out  
since we began our voyage on the deep,

132

'when we could see a mountain, distant,  
dark and dim. In my sight it seemed  
higher than any I had ever seen.

135

'We rejoiced, but joy soon turned to grief:  
for from that unknown land there came  
a whirlwind that struck the ship head-on.

138

'Three times it turned her and all the waters  
with her. At the fourth our stern reared up,  
the prow went down—as pleased Another—  
until the sea closed over us.'

142

## *Inferno* 33: Conte Ugolino and the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

- As universal as is the *Commedia*, geographically and culturally he was nothing if not a man of his time. Dante's peregrinations had begun in 1302 with exile from his beloved Florence, and he never got over it; in one of his Latin letters he would describe himself as "exul inmeritus," an undeserved exile, and on innumerable occasions in the *Comedy* shades identify Dante-character by his Florentine speech and address him as "Tuscan." In *Inf.* 10, Farinata degli Uberti, the leader of the rival Ghibelline faction, memorably flatters Dante the Guelph by singling him out as a compatriot: "Your way of speaking makes it clear / that you are native to that noble city" (*Inf.* 10.25-26). Similarly, Conte Ugolino recognizes Dante as Florentine in *Inferno* 33: Io non so chi tu se' né per che modo / venuto se' qua giù; ma fiorentino / mi sembri veramente quan'io t'odo" (*Inf.* 33.10-12) (I don't know who you are, nor by what means / you have come down here, but when I listen to you speak, / it seems to me you are indeed from Florence)

# From Hell to Purgatory

- We are moving from punishment, punishment that is extrinsic, to an *internal transformation towards greater unity in the Communion of Saints* (Paraphrase of Ratzinger from *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, p. 230).
- **Purgatory is better. One of the earliest vernacular commentaries, Jacopo della Lana's (1324-1328),** says simply, “here [the author] intends to treat Purgatory, **which is better.**” Why is it better? For one, it is about the living, or rather at least about those who, if and when they make it out of Purgatory, will ascend to heaven and have “life without end” and will thus be eternally living. Tellingly, Dante’s invocation to the Muses in *Purgatorio* 1 uses the jussive subjunctive “resurga” – that is, “may the poetry of the dead” – up until now we have talked about *Inferno*, the realm of the not-living – “may the poetry of the dead rise up.” That subjunctive, that exhortation, comes from the verb *risorgere*, meaning “to resurrect.” And so I also like to think of the liturgical bent of *Purgatory*, its hopefulness, its promise of what is to come – if there is hope, it is here. From the death and blasphemy of *Inferno*, to the love and hope and intercessory prayer of Purgatory:
  - o Per correr mighor acque alza le vele  
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,  
Che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele. (*Purgatorio* 1.1-2)

(To run its course through smoother water  
The small bark of my wit now hoists its sail  
Leaving that cruel sea behind.)

## The *Commedia* (and especially *Purgatorio*) as an ethical treatise

Beatrice to Dante:

«Qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano;  
e sarai meco senza fine cive  
di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano.

Però, in pro del mondo che mal vive,  
al carro tieni or li occhi, e quel che vedi,  
ritornato di là, fa che tu scrive». (*Purg.* 32. 100-105)

(‘Here for a time you shall be a woodsman  
and then forever a citizen with me  
of that Rome where Christ Himself is Roman.  
"Therefore, to serve the world that lives so ill,  
keep your eyes upon the chariot and write down  
what now you see here once you have gone back.”)

)

“To ascend, to raise oneself, to move higher—the direction in which the compass of moral and spiritual life pointed was up, whereas in social life the norm was to stay in one’s proper place, where God had placed one on this earth, guarding against ambition to escape one’s condition while at the same time taking pains not to lower oneself, not to fail.” (*The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 3)

“...perhaps the crucial point in the history of [Purgatory]: its spatialization, which first found expression in the appearance of the substantive [the noun *purgatorium*] sometime between 1150 and 1200.” (p. 4)

“Furthermore, belief in Purgatory is associated with the idea of **individual responsibility** and **free will**. Though guilty by nature because of original sin, man is judged for the sins he himself is responsible for committing.” (p. 5)

Or ti piaccia gradir la sua venuta:  
his arrival,  
Libertà va cercando, ch'è sì cara,  
which is so dear,  
Come sa chi per lei vita rifiuta.  
his life for it.  
(*Purg.* 1.70-72)

Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate  
each cause  
pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto  
they drew  
movesse seco di necessitate.  
upon their necessary path.  
Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto  
would be denied you.  
**libero arbitrio**, e non fora giustizia

May it please you to welcome  
since he's in search of liberty,  
As he well knows who gives

You who are still alive assign  
only to the heavens, as though

All things along

If that were so, **free choice**

and there would be no iustice



“The last important characteristic of Purgatory to be mentioned is this: Purgatory is an intermediary other world in which the trial to be endured by the dead may be abridged by the intercessory prayers, the ‘suffrages’, of the living.” (p. 11)

“Purgatory is clearly a ‘second kingdom’ between Hell and Heaven. But Dante’s idea of this intermediate zone is dynamic and imbued with spirituality. Purgatory is not a neutral intermediary but an intermediary with an orientation. It points from the earth, where the future elect are when they die, to Heaven, their eternal abode. As they proceed on their way they are purged and become more and more pure as they come closer and closer to the summit, to the spiritual heights to which they are destined.” (p. 337)

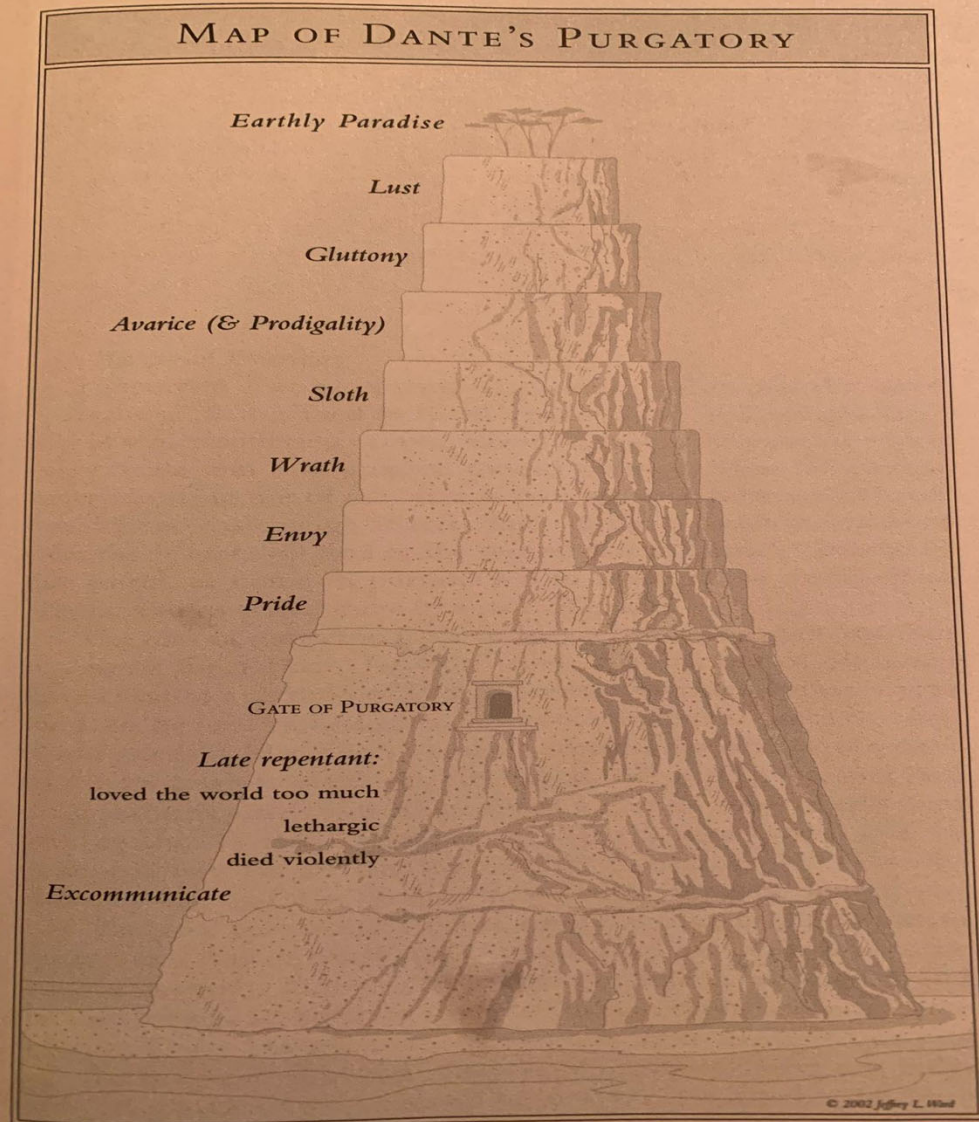


Image: Jeffrey L. Ward 2002 (in Holland and Hollander, trans., *Dante's Purgatorio*)

# Typical structure of a purgatorial terrace

1. Physical description
2. Exemplars of the virtue that counters the sin repented
3. Description of the penitents
4. Penitents recite their sins
5. Exemplars of the vice
6. Angel representing the countering virtue appears to Dante

(Hollander and Hollander, “Introduction”, p. xxvii)

## *Purgatorio* 1

- Dante and Virgil arrive in the “secondo regno” (or at least leave Hell)
- Dante and Virgil meet Cato, a sort of *figura Christi* (vv. 31-51)
- Seeking of liberty (vv. 70-75)

*Purgatory 30*: climax of the Church triumphant in the Garden

- Virgil leaves
- Beatrice arrives

For Week Five:

- *Paradiso* 1, 6, 11, 12