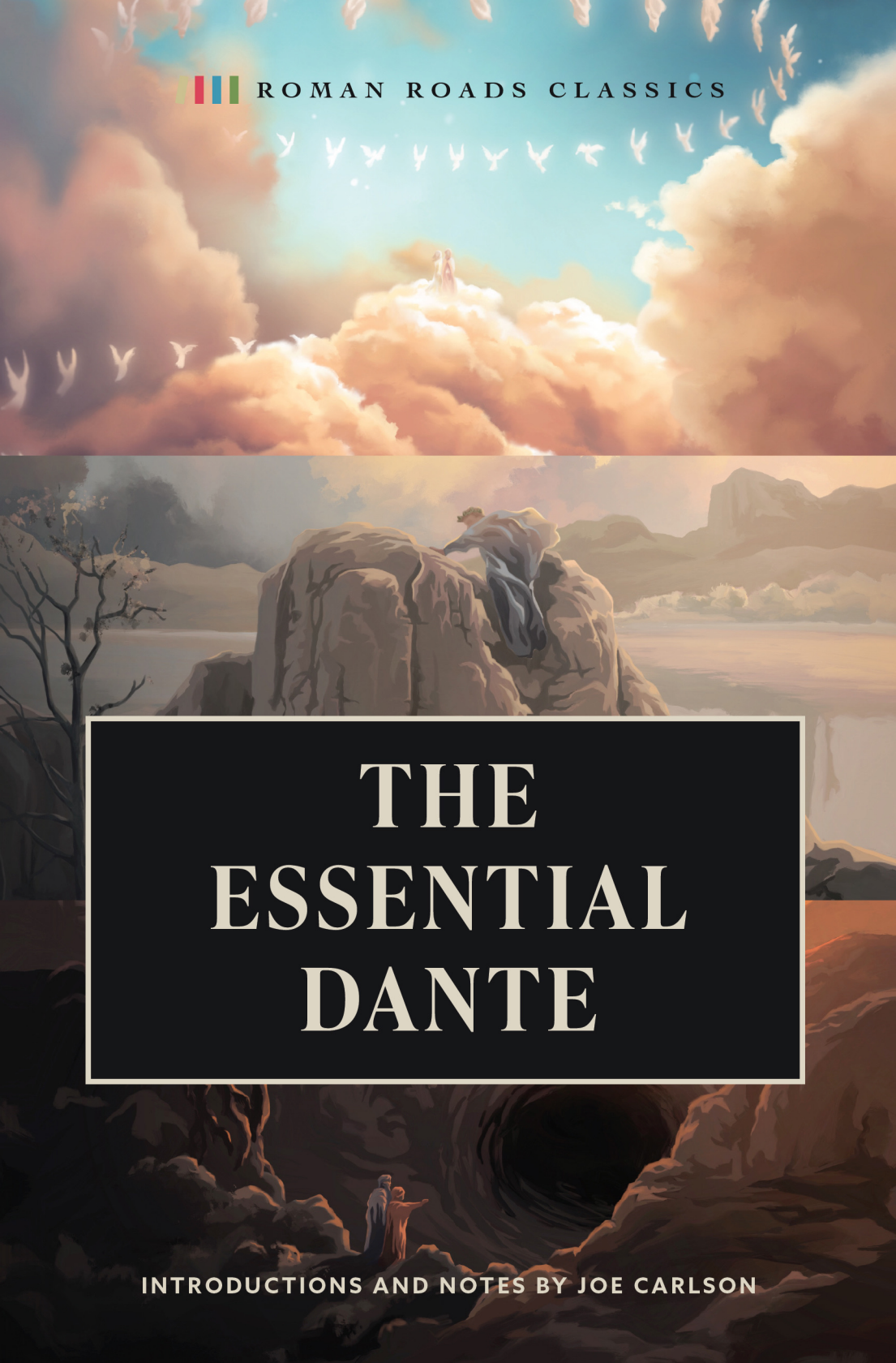
ROMAN ROADS CLASSICS
THE ESSENTIAL DANTE
INTRODUCTIONS AND NOTES BY JOE CARLSON

THE ESSENTIAL DANTE

Selections from the Divine Comedy &
Prose Works of Dante Alighieri

Blank Verse Translation of the Divine Comedy &
Introductions by Joe Carlson

ROMAN ROADS CLASSICS

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The Essential Dante: Selections from the Divine Comedy & Prose Works of Dante Alighieri

Blank verse translation of the *Divine Comedy* by Joe Carlson (2023) from the original Italian work by Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321 (La Commedia).

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INHERIT THE HUMANITIES

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A Selection of Dante's Prose Works

NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

The following volume offers the reader a small window into everything Dante wrote. The word "essential" is not meant to indicate that those passages not included are not equally important to understanding Dante. Rather, it is a concession to the very real limitations of our created existence: not everyone can read everything. Therefore, what we do mean by the word "essential" is that here you will find in abridged, representational form the whole of Dante's legacy.

Where this act of abridgment hurts the most is with the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas one does not need to read the entire *Convivio*, or *De monarchia*, or all thirteen of his epistles, one should absolutely read the entire *Divine Comedy*. Indeed, there is almost a feeling of sacrilege in abridging this greatest of poems. Therefore, an explanation for why we only include 34 cantos of the total 100 is necessary.

Many schools are simply unable to read the entire *Comedy* in their literature programs. Instead, they read only the *Inferno*. But in doing so they give the students a truncated and distorted perception of Dante's project. Reading just the *Inferno* is akin to reading only the first two acts of *Hamlet*, or *Crime and Punishment* up until the point where Raskolnikov murders the pawn broker and her sister, or only *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This volume, therefore, offers something of a compromise.

If a school or co-op is simply unable to read all 100 cantos, but is able to read 34 (the number of cantos in *Inferno*), a better solution would be to read a selection from all three parts of the poem. That is what we offer here. This selection of 34 cantos (12 from *Inferno*, 12 from *Purgatorio*, and 10 from *Paradiso*) will give the student a far better understanding of the scope and purpose of Dante's project than reading only the *Inferno*. Our goal and desire is that this selection would whet the student's appetite for more, and

motivate them to read the whole work at some point in the near future. To that end, in-depth introductions to each of the canticles and to the *Comedy* as a whole are included. The student will also find helpful summaries at the beginning of each canto, as well as summaries for the cantos that are missing.

Inevitably, some will disagree with our selection. Believe me, we are in complete sympathy with them in their disappointment. Abridging a work is a terrible business, akin to amputation. Furthermore, the danger in a volume like this is in providing an easy way out to those who are simply lazy and are looking for a "Cliff Note's" edition. Nothing could be further from our intention. We would continue to argue that everyone should take the time to read the whole poem, thus making this volume pointless. But until that day comes, please accept this volume as a fruitful way to introduce the *Divine Comedy*, as well as the other things Dante wrote.

Selections from the Divine Comedy

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMEDY

Who was Dante Alighieri?

Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 into a noble Florentine family loyal to the Guelph party. On the surface, being a Guelph meant you preferred the authority of the pope to the authority of the emperor. But for most of the thirteenth century the autonomy of the self-governed Florence was threatened more by power hungry emperors than by power hungry popes. And so many of the Guelphs sided with the pope simply in order to get the emperor off their back. The Ghibellines were the opposing party that sided with the emperor. Five years before his birth, in 1260, the Guelphs suffered a major defeat at the battle of Monteperti, a battle that haunts the pages of the *Comedy*, especially the *Inferno*. This is the tension Dante was born into. In 1289, at the battle of Campaldino, the Guelphs won a decisive victory, and established a Guelph state that would last for a number of decades. Dante, at the ripe age of 24, fought in this battle, and fought well. Around six or seven years later, shortly after the publication of his *Vita nuova*, his first book of poetry, he enrolled in the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries, a first step in his political career. Over the next few years we have a couple of records of his civic contributions, showing how he acted as an ambassador or delegate to various meetings and councils, speaking successfully on behalf of Florence. During this time, he also attended the three religious schools in Florence, studying both religion and philosophy with the Augustinians, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans. Then, in the late spring of 1300, he was elected to serve, for a two month term, as one of the six Priors, the highest office in the independent republic of Florence.

In order to understand what happens in the next few years of Dante's life, years that would prove pivotal to the formation of the western canon of great literature, you need to understand the political tensions that were tearing Florence apart. After the Guelph victory in 1289, the Guelph party itself broke into two factions, the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs. The Whites were the faction who sided with the pope only to get the emperor off their backs. Now that they did not fear intrusion from that quarter, they wanted the current pope, the notorious Boniface VIII, to keep his hands out of Florentine politics. The Blacks, as you might have guessed, were in favor of papal overlordship by means of a representative. The tension between the two factions had grown violent, and in the summer of 1300, while Dante was one of the Priors, the leadership decided to exile certain key members from both the White and the Black parties, with the hope of bringing peace to Florence. In the fall of 1301, with the White Guelphs still in relative control of Florence, Dante and others were sent as an embassy to Rome, in order to protest a certain papal policy aimed at bringing Florence under the control of the pope. While he and his fellow ambassadors were gone, the representative of Boniface VIII, Charles of Valois, forced his way into Florence, and, with the Black Guelphs, took control. Within two months (in January of 1302) they accused Dante and his fellow ambassadors of conspiracy against the pope and against Charles, confiscated and destroyed their property, and banished them from Florence for two years. However, just two months later in March of 1302, Dante and 12 others were condemned to death, should they at any time be captured by Florentine officials. This made his exile permanent. All this happened while Dante was still in Rome. He was therefore never able to return home. His wife and children stayed in Florence, as they were provided for by her side of the family. Devastated and now destitute, Dante and his fellow exiles, appear to have joined with the Ghibellines near Siena, hoping to achieve a negotiated return to Florence. In 1304, however, it became clear that this would never happen. He wandered all over the Italian peninsula, taking patronage and hospitality where he could find it. There is some evidence he traveled outside of Italy as well, his earliest biographers mentioning Paris and even Oxford, though corroborating evidence of Dante studying at these locations is scant.

INTRODUCTION TO INFERNO

To rightly understand what is going on in *Inferno*, we need to have a firm grasp of Dante's cosmology. Going back all the way to Aristotle and before, men based their understanding of the universe on what they could see with the naked eye. And when you go out on a clear night, what do you see? You see the Moon and the planets and the stars wheeling above you, from east to west. Even during the day, you see the sun, as David says in Psalm 19, rising "as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, rejoicing as a strong man ready to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it…" It was a natural assumption, therefore, to believe Earth was stationary, with the heavens in orbit around it.

It might sound like being at the center of the universe was something the ancients and medievals would take pride in. But they didn't. They looked up into the heavens and saw life and dance and music up there, a joy and vitality from which they, stuck on the earth, were excluded. For Earth is under the curse and dominated by sin, which can be traced back, even before Adam and Eve, to the fall of Satan.

According to Dante's understanding of creation, when the world was made, God placed dry land in every region of the globe. When Satan fell from Heaven, he fell head first into the Southern Hemisphere, at the exact opposite spot on the globe from what would later become Jerusalem. The land that was there in the southern hemisphere, fearing this fallen angel, "made a veil of the sea" (*Inferno* XXXIV.123), fled down through the middle of the earth, and pushed its way up into the land under what would become the Middle East. Falling all the way through to the very center of the earth, Satan became imprisoned there, unable to move. More earth, surrounding Satan's legs, also fled; but that bit of land

fled upwards, out of the water and into the air of the southern hemisphere, marking the place where Satan entered. This second displacement of land, as we will discover in the second canticle, is what forms Mount Purgatory. The cavern of Hell itself, opening up above Satan's head toward the Mediterranean Sea, was carved out by the four rivers of the underworld: Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, and Cocytus. Once they arrive in Hell, they are not so much rivers as they are stagnant pools, the lowest one being entirely frozen over. These four rivers are a twisted parody of the four rivers flowing out of Eden mentioned in Genesis 2, leading not to riches and life but to misery and death. They carve a funnel shaped cavern, broad at the top, and growing narrower the closer it gets to the middle.

So taking a step back, we see Satan trapped in ice at the center of the entire universe. Above him, going up toward the northern hemisphere, a vast cavern gradually opens wider and wider, forming nine distinct circles, with a tenth antechamber at the very top. Going the other way, down Satan's legs, and up through to the surface of the earth, at the place exactly opposite from Jerusalem, we find Mount Purgatory rising from the sea. Similar to the cavern of Hell, the side of the mountain is divided into nine distinct sections, and the very top of the mountain forms a tenth space. Rising upward from the top of Mount Purgatory and out of earth's atmosphere, the medieval cosmological model divided the heavens into nine concentric spheres, like nesting dolls. The first seven spheres were the home to the seven planets: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The eighth sphere housed the fixed stars, while the ninth was the *Primum Mobile*, or the "first moved." This outer sphere formed the boundary of the material universe. Beyond it was a tenth realm called the Empyrean, which was not so much the place where God was, but rather the very presence of God Himself. According to the model, God as Prime Mover moved the ninth sphere by His love. As that ninth sphere moved with love, it moved the eighth in love, the eighth the seventh, and so on, down to the orbit of the moon.

This is why the medievals did not take great pride in being at the center of the universe, like we might think: the earth was at the polar opposite end of the universe from God, from the source of all light and joy and love. Satan encased in ice at the center of the

earth was the perfect image of Earth itself: cursed and corrupted by sin and death, enslaved by its base passions, excluded from the great dance of the heavens above.

Who is Virgil?

The *Comedy* is the story of a pilgrim on a long pilgrimage, wandering the different landscapes of the afterlife. But he is not wandering aimlessly. As with all pilgrimages there is a specific destination, a specific goal. But being alive, and having never journeyed through Hell, Purgatory, or Paradise, he needs a guide. After Dante fails to make it past the three beasts on the mountain, a shade appears in the distance. It is the shade of Virgil, author of the great Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. As the supreme poet of the Roman Empire, Virgil represents the highest authority in the limited, temporal realm. He also represents the kind of knowledge and reason man has by common grace, apart from divine revelation. This gives Virgil an authority the pilgrim, at this stage of his journey, can easily recognize and submit to. But more than that, Dante is suggesting that, at this early stage, what the soul lost in a wood needs is not a lecture, not some moralistic exhortation, but the beauty of poetry. His soul has been entranced by the things of this world; he needs to be captivated by a beauty bolder and more intense than anything the world can offer. Poetry stands for such beauty, and Virgil stands for such poetry. Actually, Virgil only represents the making of such beauty. The true beauty that will finally heal the pilgrim is not something Virgil can offer. As we will see, Virgil can only bring Dante part of the way.

Virgil's main role in the first two canticles is to explain what Dante is seeing, and to correct any mistaken ideas he might have. However, we have to always remember that Virgil is one of the damned, someone Virgil himself describes as having lost the good of the intellect. That means we have to take everything Virgil says with a grain of salt. He knows two and two is four, but he does not have a complete or perfect understanding of everything. His knowledge is limited, and sometimes mistaken. He often gives

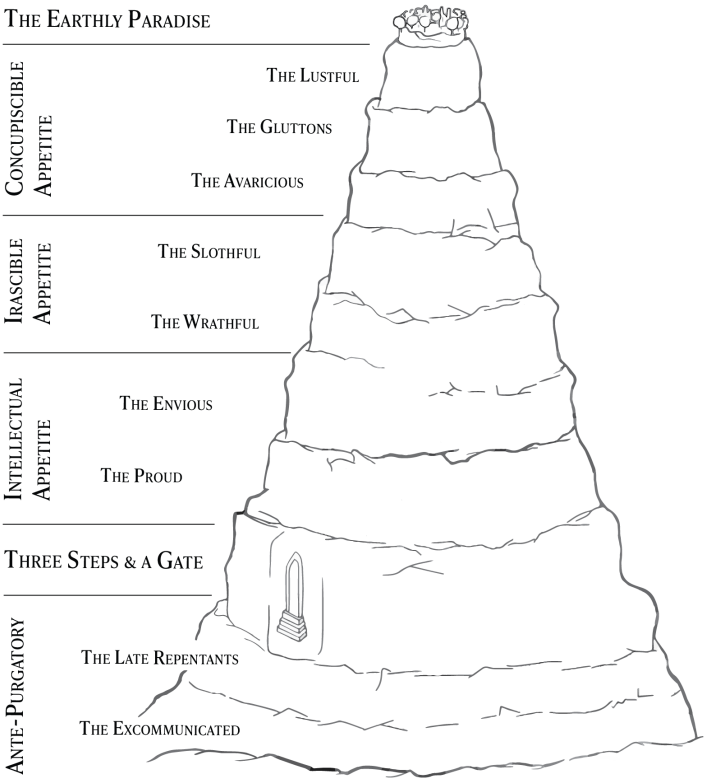
voice to the teaching of Aristotle, and while Aristotle saw certain things very clearly, his overall way of seeing the world sometimes led him into deep error. Virgil is slightly different because he now knows he was wrong, being in Hell; but even so, he does not clearly see the whole truth. We will discuss these errors when we come across them.

Sin and the Appetites of the Soul

Broadly speaking, the *Inferno* is a Christian explanation of sin, using an Aristotelean paradigm of vice. Why does Dante do this? As Paul says in Romans 2:14–15, the pagans did not have the ten commandments given on Mount Sinai, but they did have the law written on the hearts. This law was sufficient to guide them toward some form of righteousness, or accuse them of their disobedience. Dante, as did Aquinas before him, saw this principle at work in the ethics of Aristotle. Therefore, in order to understand how the Inferno presents sin, and what it does to the human soul, we have to talk about the Aristotelian understanding of the appetites. Now this might sound like a bit of confusing and unimportant philosophy, but I assure you, it is at the core of how all three parts of the *Comedy* are structured, and therefore important for us to understand. If the *Comedy* were a building, this is the framing behind the walls, giving it shape and holding it all together.

According to Aristotle, as well as medieval scholastic thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, everything we do, every choice we make comes from a certain appetite of the soul. An appetite is simply the desire for something, and there are three basic categories of objects that we want. The first category contains things like physical pleasure, food, money, or the things money can buy. These are all called simple goods. They give us pleasure in themselves, and we want them for their own sake. Then there are goods that are not pleasant in themselves, but are necessary in order to get the simple goods we want. These are called arduous goods, and are things like work. For example, if I want ice cream (a simple good), I either have to make it myself, or earn money somehow in order to buy it.

The Structure of Mount Purgatory



INTRODUCTION TO PURGATORIO

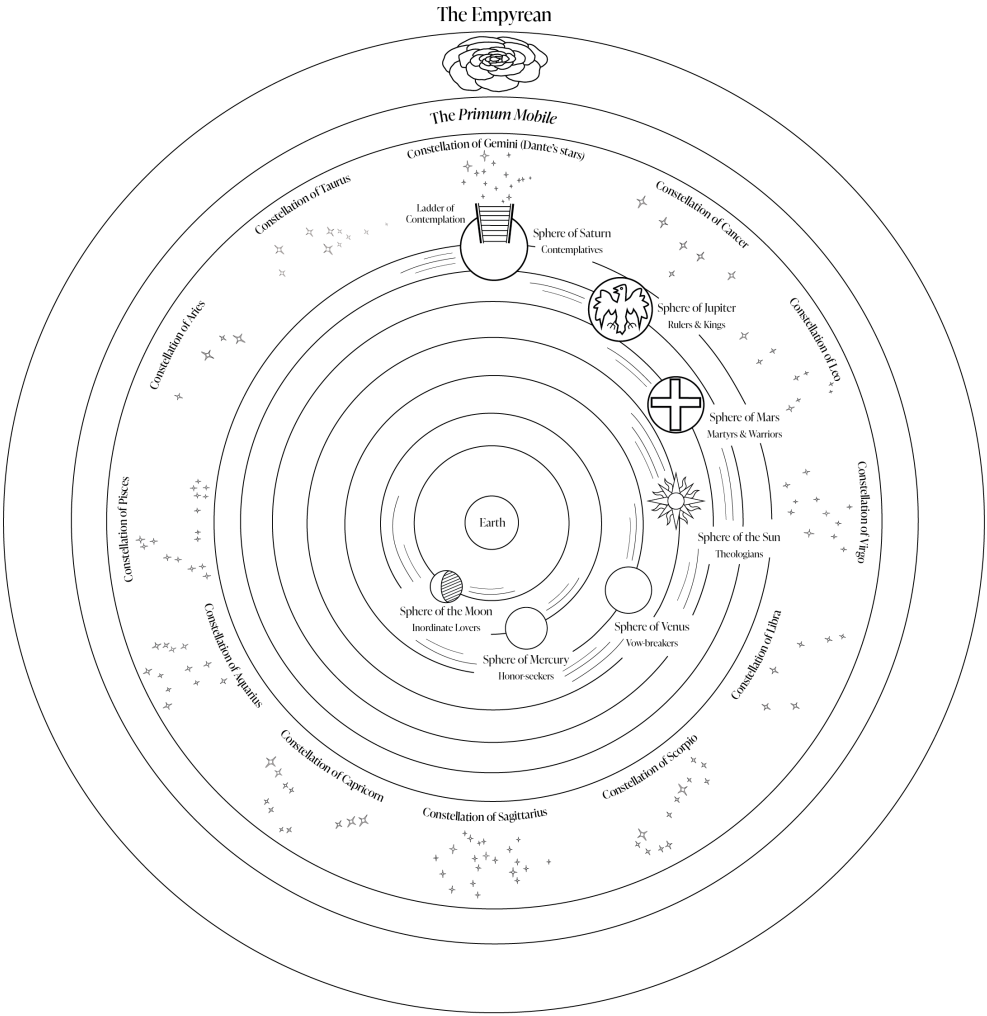
In this introduction to *Purgatorio*, I want to give you, dear reader, a leg up on understanding what is happening in this canticle. Properly understood, *Purgatorio* is the part of the *Comedy* with which we can most readily identify; it is the part that speaks directly to how we live in the here and now. For modern evangelicals, and perhaps especially for modern reformed evangelicals, the idea of Purgatory is deeply troubling. The idea that there is an in-between realm, on a mountain in some other dimension, where people who haven't quite made the cut to advance straight to Heaven go after they die, but who are in fact Christian, so they can't go to Hell… well, that seems problematic to most of us today, even for some Catholics who hold to the doctrine of Purgatory. As a child of the Protestant Reformation, I believe there is no basis for this doctrine in Scripture. The verse that is often referred to in defense of the doctrine of Purgatory (1 Corinthians 3:15—"If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire") I believe refers to this life, fire being a metaphor for the trials that God sends to sanctify our souls. And it is precisely this understanding, when applied to Dante's Mount Purgatory, that makes the poem come alive. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, I believe this is exactly how Dante himself wanted us to read it. In what follows I will give a brief historical sketch of the doctrine, how Dante added substantially to the imaginative understanding of the doctrine, and how its relevance was always meant for the living, and not for the dead.

dience and good works and holiness. For without holiness, no one will see the Lord. Thankfully, this is not a divine threat, but rather a confirmation of what the Spirit is going to do, and is already doing in the life of the Christian. The story of *Purgatorio* demonstrates this mysterious union of divine regeneration and renewed and redeemed human agency, the latter impossible without the former. As we will see, the only response fitting for those who travel up the mountain and ascend into the heavens is one of gratitude and praise for it was God, in His perfect time and in His perfect way, Who brought them up the mountain, the mountain that allegorically represents the Christian life.

Chart for *Purgatorio*

Region of the Mountain	State/ Vicious Habit	Opposing Virtue	Contrapasso	Mode of Examples	Beatitude	Appetite Reformed	Cantos
Base	Excommunicated	N/A	(Waiting)	N/A	N/A	N/A	1-3
Ante Purgatory	Late-Repentant	N/A	(Waiting)	N/A	N/A	N/A	4-9
First Terrace	Pride	Humility	Burdens borne on the back	Carvings on the wall and floor	The poor in spirit	Intellectual	10-12
Second Terrace	Envy	Charity	Eyes sewn shut	Voices on the air	The merciful	Intellectual	13-14
Third Terrace	Wrath	Gentleness	Utter darkness	Visions	The peacemakers	Irascible	15-17
Fourth Terrace	Sloth	Zeal	Running	The souls shout them out	Those who mourn	Irascible	17-19
Fifth Terrace	Avarice	Generosity	Lying prone in the dust	Day and night recitations	Those who thirst	Concupiscible	19-21
Sixth Terrace	Gluttony	Temperance	Fasting	The trees speak	Those who hunger	Concupiscible	22-24
Seventh Terrace	Lust	Chastity	Dwelling in fire	The souls repeat them antiphonally	The pure of heart	Concupiscible	25-27
The Earthly Paradise	Sanctified and whole	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	28-33

The Structure of Paradise



INFERNO

CANTO I: THE DARK WOOD

Summary

It is dawn, Good Friday, 1300. A pilgrim awakes from a stupor to find himself in a dark, dangerous, and savage wood—on the edge of death itself. At the end of a dark valley he finds a steep mountain, robed in the light of the sun. He tries to climb it, somehow knowing that if he can make it to the top, he will be saved. But he is blocked—first by a leopard, then by a lion, and finally by a she-wolf, traditionally interpreted respectively as lust, pride, and avarice (see Jeremiah 5:6). He is forced back into the darkness of the savage wood. At that moment a figure appears to him at a distance. Dante calls out to him and begs his assistance. It is the shade of Virgil, come for the purpose of helping Dante out of the wood and past the three beasts. To do this he must follow Virgil down through Hell and up Mount Purgatory. After this, if he wishes to complete the journey to Heaven, another must take over and guide the pilgrim through the sacred spheres to the presence of God. Dante is grateful and accepts the journey.

In the middle of the course of our life,
I came to myself in a darkened wood,
because the right direction had been lost. 3

Ah, how hard a thing to say what it was,
this wood, overwhelming, savage, severe;
even the thought of it renews the fear! 6

It was so bitter, death is hardly more.
But to tell of the good that I found there,
I will speak of the other things I saw.

No words can tell how I entered that place,
I was so full of sleep at the moment
I abandoned the true way. But after,

when I had come to the foot of a hill,
the place where that valley came to an end,
that dark vale that had gripped my heart in fear,

I looked on the heights and saw its shoulders
robed, by then, in the rays of the planet,[1]
which guides each aright along every path.

Then was somewhat quieted the terror
the lake of my heart had endured that night,
which I had just passed so pitifully.

And as the one who, with labored breathing
returns to the shore from out of the deep,
turns around to see the dangerous sea;

so did my soul, still fleeing, turn itself back,
to marvel once again at the passage
that never before left any alive.

After I had rested my weary frame
I went back to that desolate hillside,
and climbed, the firmer foot always behind.

But behold, near the foot of the steep slope,
there was a leopard, light and very swift,
covered all over in a dappled hide.

It did not give way before me; rather,
it so impeded my course, I was forced
to return many times down the mountain.

The time was the first hour of the morning;
the sun above was mounting with those stars
that together were there when Love divine,

1 The sun.

for the first time, moved the beautiful things;
such that there was reason to take good hope—
concerning the wild beast with the pied pelt—

from the morning hour, and that sweet season;
yet, not so much the sight of a lion
appearing before me gave me no fear.

He appeared to be coming against me,
head lifted high with furious hunger,
so that the very air about him shook.

But then a she-wolf, charged in her leanness
from a continuous craving, by which
many have been made to live wretchedly,

engendered in me such a heaviness
with the fear that rose at the sight of her,
I lost all hope of attaining the height.

As is he who willingly buys something,
and it then happens that he loses it,
so that all his thoughts are sadness and tears;

so did that beast, devoid of peace, make me,
moving against me, little by little,
driving me to where the sun is silent.

While I was retreating to the valley,
I saw one offering himself to me,
who, because of the distance, still seemed faint.

When I saw him across that great desert,
I cried out to him, "Have mercy on me!
Whatever you are, real man or shade!"

He answered, "Not man, but man I once was.
My parents were brought forth in Lombardy
in Mantua, which was their fatherland.

Under Julius I was born, though late,
and, under good Augustus, lived in Rome,
in the time of false and deceitful gods.

Poet I was, and sang of the just son
of Anchises,[2] who came from Ilion,
after proud Troy was destroyed by the flames.

But you—do you now return to this pain?
Why do you not climb the pleasant mountain
that is the reason and root of all joy?"

"Are you then that Virgil, the fountainhead
from which spreads forth such a wide stream of speech?"
So I answered him with a bashful brow.

"O honor and light of every poet—
the long study serves me and the great love
that led me to pore over your volume.

You are my master, my authority,
you alone are the one from whom I took
the sweet style that has given me honor.

See the beast for which I turned myself back;
deliver me from her, O famous sage,
she that makes my veins and pulse to tremble."

"You will need to keep to another way,"
he answered, noticing I was weeping,
"if you wish to escape this savage place;

for this beast, because of which you cry out,
does not allow any to pass her way,
but so encumbers one that she kills him.

Her nature is so wicked and malign,
her craving lusts are never satisfied.
She eats, and she hungers more than before.

She weds herself to many beasts, and still
there will be more, until the greyhound comes,
and he will make her die with suffering.

He will not gorge himself on land or wealth,
but will feast on hope and love and virtue;
his reign will spread from Feltro to Feltro;

2 Aeneas.

he will bring health to lowly Italy,
for whom the virgin Cammilla, Turnus
Euryalus, and Nissus all died of wounds.

He will hunt her throughout every village
until he brings her back down into Hell,
that place from which envy first set her loose.

Therefore, this I discern and think it best
that you follow me; I will be your guide,
and lead you out through that eternal place,

where you will hear the desperate shrieking,
you will see the ancient, aching spirits
who wail on account of the second death;

you will also see those who are content
in the fire, because they hope to arrive
whenever is right, to the blessed people.

If you should desire to ascend to these,
there will be a soul more worthy than me.
With her will I leave you when I depart.

For the Emperor, who reigns over all,
because I was rebellious to His law,
wills that none come to His city through me.

In every part He reigns, and there He rules;
there is His city, His throne raised on high.
How blessed the one He chooses for that life!"

And I said: "Poet, I ask you once more,
on account of the God you did not know,
so that I might flee this evil and worse,

lead me to that place you were speaking of,
that I might see the gate of St. Peter,
and those whom you say are so sorrowful."
Then he set out, and I followed behind.