

DANTE'S *THE DIVINE COMEDY*  
IN HIS TIME AND OURS

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*Agnolo Bronzino: Ritratto allegorico di Dante, 1530*

How did this begin? Imagine losing your wife. Imagine your husband, gone. Your children—not to be seen again. Your friends. Imagine yourself alone. Midway in the course of our life I found myself in a dark wood. I am exiled from Florence, exiled from home forever. The white party succumbs to the black. There has to be more to it than that!

(DANTE, in *Dante's Purgatorio*)



For thirteen hundred years . . . nothing. But before Limbo, there was Time. Time passing was the gift of creation. Which suddenly ceased. Then, emerging from the journey through Hell--And here! Here in this Purgatory, the movement of the sun, the warming of my skin, I am able to think once more, to know, to feel. It feels so good to age again—briefly.

(VIRGIL, in *Dante's Purgatorio*)



As a child I imagined Purgatory a place with steps. On our ankles and hips and elbows, if we were good, tiny wings. Some would traipse, some would skip, some stumble and trip, some would falter backward then head on. This man, who firmly believes he glimpsed me twice while I was alive. How can someone with such singular sight repeat his missteps again and again?

(BEATRICE, in *Dante's Purgatorio*)



*Dante (detail), Domenico di Michelino, Florence 1465*

**Dante Alighieri** (1265-1321) is most famous for his *Inferno*, the first portion of his *Divine Comedy*. In it, he uses his description of hell to examine the myriad forms of human depravity and weakness. But the bleakness and cynicism of *Inferno* is not pervasive to his entire masterpiece.

In *Purgatorio*, the second portion of his afterlife, Dante shifts his literary aims. It is not the realm of sinners condemned to eternal punishments, but the area where the forgiven are cleansed of their imperfections so that they can enter Paradise. Dante populates his purgatory with real people in a recognizable landscape, retaining the realistic descriptions and concrete language of *Inferno*. But these souls are happily undergoing a slow process of transformation. Human beings are really, Dante writes, “worms born to become angelic butterflies,” and that process takes place here.

As a concept, “purgatory” developed during the Middle Ages as an attempt to reconcile some apparently contradictory passages of the Bible. For instance, several passages of Scripture speak of the value of prayers for the dead, but the damned cannot be helped, and the blessed do not need help; surely, medieval theologians deduced, there must be an area where people are prepared for Heaven.

Equally importantly, medieval thinkers had categorized the Bible’s sins according to a type of psychology. Gregory the Great (540-604CE) developed the notion that all human

imperfections are derived from seven natural impulses: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride. A person’s sins are washed away at confession, but the impure impulses that give rise to those sins are inherent to that person’s character, and thus they remain even after confession. But surely, the perfection of Heaven cannot allow such imperfect impulses—there must be a realm in the afterlife where the impulses themselves are purged. And thus medieval Christianity required the notion of purgatory.

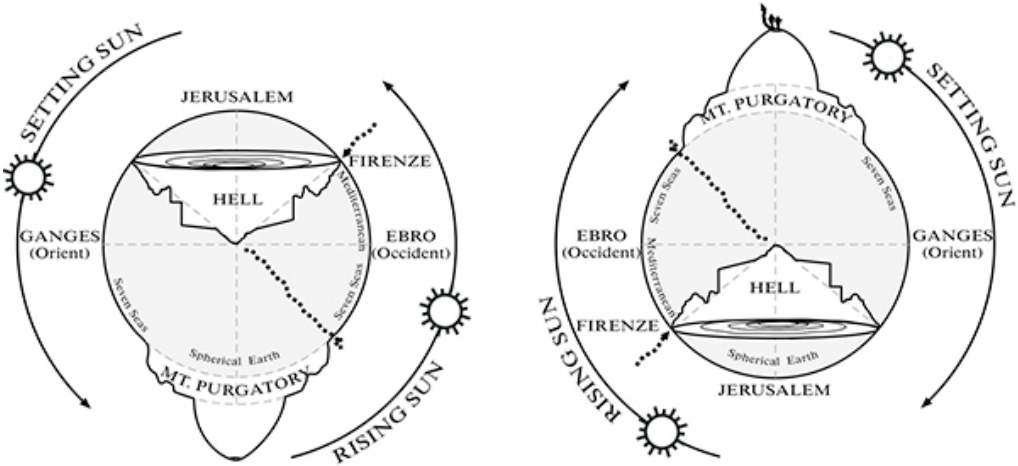
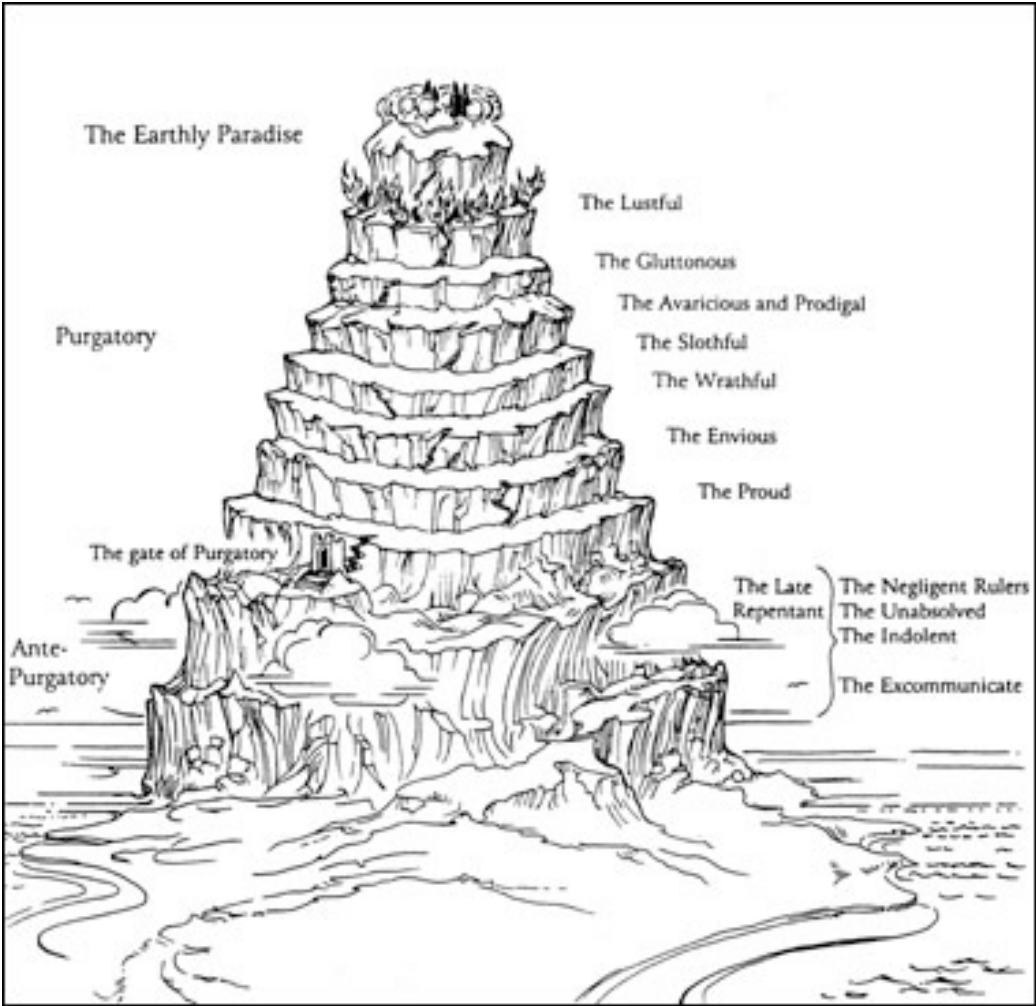
Dante imagines purgatory as a mountain on a small island on the southern hemisphere. Yes, Dante conceived of the earth as a sphere, as did most thinkers of the Middle Ages! Dante’s mountain is terraced, with each level dedicated to purging an impure impulse: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, lust. Accompanied by Virgil, who had led him through Hell, Dante climbs the mountain, meeting famous people and undergoing a type of purgation process himself. At the top of the mountain lies Eden, where Virgil takes his leave of Dante, leaving him in the hands of Beatrice. She will be his guide through *Paradiso*, but only after Dante has been fully cleansed. By that point, he will be “pure and ready to ascend to the stars.”

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*Dante and Beatrice* by Henry Holiday, 1884

# MAP of PURGATORY



## SELECTED SOURCES / FURTHER READING

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## PATRICK BALIANI

Patrick Baliani's translation and adaptation, *Dante's Purgatorio*, was commissioned by The Rogue Theatre. *The Rogue* also commissioned and produced his translation and adaptation of *The Decameron* in 2011 and his translation and adaptation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 2008. His original plays—*Figs and Red Wine*, *Two from Tanagra*, *Reckless Grace*, *Verba Non Facta*, *Sabunana*, *Monologue of a Muted Man*, *A Namib Spring*, and *Lie More Mountains*—have been performed in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Phoenix, Prescott, and Tucson, where he has collaborated with Arizona Theatre Company, TucsonArt Theatre, Third Street Kids, and Old Pueblo Playwrights.

Patrick received the 2013 Tucson Pima Arts Council (TPAC) *Artist's Grant* for work on *Dante's Purgatorio*. He was one of twenty Arizona artists selected by the Creative Capital Foundation to participate in the *Creative Capital/Arizona Commission on the Arts Artist Project*. He received the 2005 Arizona Commission on the Arts (ACA) *Artist's Project Grant* for his play, *Lie More Mountains*. He was awarded the 1999 ACA *Playwriting Fellowship* and he received the 1998 *National Play Award* by the Los Angeles National Repertory Theatre Foundation for his play, *A Namib Spring*. He received a *Collaborative Artists Grant* from ACA in 1997 and was awarded the TPAC *Playwriting Fellowship* in 1996. He was twice a Finalist for the National Endowment of the Arts *Playwriting Fellowship* and was selected by New York's Young Playwrights, Inc. as the 1993 *Southwest Resident Playwright*. He has been a *Guest Playwright* at the ACA *State Theatre Conference* and at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education *National Conference*. He received the 1991 Arizona Theatre Company *Genesis New Play Award* for his first play, *Figs and Red Wine*. His published short stories and essays have won awards from *Transatlantic Review*, *Lyra*, *New Times*, *Arizona Authors Association*, and *Tucson Weekly*.

Patrick is an *Assistant Professor* of Interdisciplinary Studies at The UA Honors College. He has received the Honors College *Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching*, Humanities Seminars *Superior Teaching Award*, Academic Preparation for Excellence *APEX Teaching Award*, the Mortar Board National Honor Society *Teaching Award*, and the University of Arizona *Five Star Faculty Award*.