

The Edgar Wind Journal



Volume 2

2/2022

ISSN 2785-2903

www.edgarwindjournal.eu

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ISSN 2785-2903

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Time and Space in Dante's *Purgatorio*¹

Gioachino Chiarini

Abstract

In the *Purgatorio*, the purifying nature of the ascent of the Mount is conveyed by delaying the journey to ensure that the pilgrim arrives, with Virgil and Stazio, at the threshold of the Earthly Paradise around 6am on the sixth day of travel. There, the events and ceremonies end at noon, a time corresponding to the six hours spent in the Earthly Paradise by the sinless Adam and Eve.

Keywords

Ascent; clearing; delay; Purgatory; zodiac

Contents

Introduction; 1. In the Ante-Purgatory; 2. In Purgatory; 3. In the Earthly Paradise

Introduction

In the article concerning Dante published in the first issue of this journal,² I demonstrated the criteria Dante used to organize and coordinate time and space in the *Inferno* (Fig. 1). I am now able to add that my close observation and 'bird's eye' tracking of the movements of Dante and Virgil has made it possible to identify a very powerful symbolic image, stylized but nonetheless clearly apparent, which acts as a repository of meaning for the whole canticle: *a serpent hanging from the Cross* (Fig. 2). This is not just any serpent, but the one to which Christ compared himself (John 3. 14–15), in an allusion to his final destiny – his death on Golgotha – making an explicit figural reference to the biblical episode in which God ordered Moses to raise a *bronze serpent* on a pole, which would save the Jews of the Exodus from the lethal bites of desert snakes: anyone who looked at this bronze serpent would be healed (Numbers 21. 8–9). By devising a path that followed the pattern of a serpent on the Cross, the author was undoubtedly seeking to shelter Dante the protagonist from the evil whose kingdom is Hell. Although at first sight it appears

¹ This text has been translated by Emma Mandley.

² Gioachino Chiarini, 'Time and Space in Dante's *Inferno*: The Invention of Dante's Clock', in *The Edgar Wind Journal*, 1 (2021), pp. 55-66.

anachronistic, in this context it is useful to draw comparisons with a famous ‘magical’ engraving by Giordano Bruno (Fig. 3).³

Plainly, there is thus endless scope in Dante for the application of the Warburgian iconological method,⁴ supported by the kind of analytical method, free of prejudices and partisan ideologies, for which Edgar Wind supplied an exemplary model,⁵ especially in the astounding intellectual organization of the *Commedia*. To put it more clearly, areas for research into the greatest and most representative ‘poetic’ creation of the medieval period cannot and should not be confined to the incomparable power and beauty of the language; the authoritative way that themes and characters are treated in the three canticles; and the legitimate need to provide historical contextualization for the information contained in the text. This is demonstrated, for example, by Manfred Hardt’s strenuous and surprising investigations into numbers in the *Divine Comedy*,⁶ as well as by the abundant research, certainly often valid in its own right, into the complex astronomical descriptions in Dante’s poem: thanks to these, we can now say that on the whole their meaning (that is to say the hour or the time that the author intended these references to indicate) has been almost entirely and satisfactorily clarified. Unfortunately, however, it is also clear that these contributions have not succeeded in defining with acceptable precision the times, pauses and movements of the extramundane pilgrims in specific locations, for example in Hell: in other words, they have not been able to establish, in such a way as to reflect the poet’s intentions, the position of Dante and Virgil at any given time within the map of Hell, thus forfeiting the possibility of finding relevant symbolic meanings.

We may ask why, in the exegesis of a poetic work, it should be important to establish such details or to understand the thinking behind their coordination in the mind of the author. The answer has to be that it is fundamentally important, since such structural elements, in Dante as well as earlier in Virgil and other great writers of antiquity,⁷ are in themselves an expression of inescapable symbolic-religious images and meanings, on an ethical and poetic level, capable of comprising and condensing the work’s most profound

³ *Articoli centum et sexaginta*, pl. 38, in G. Bruno, *Corpus Iconographicum. Le incisioni nelle opere a stampa*, ed. by M. Gabriele (Milan: Adelphi, 2001), p. 431. This comparison was first suggested to me by my friend Lorenzo La Rocca, who created the diagrams illustrating the present research; as I argue here, there could not have been a more felicitous suggestion for an understanding of Dante.

⁴ For examples of my own application of this method to themes unrelated to Dante, see the first three issues of the journal which I edited: *Quaderni Warburg Italia*, years 1 (2003) and 2–3 (2006); also, more specifically, Chiarini, *Il Calice e lo Specchio. Immagini e simboli cateriniani nella Basilica di S. Domenico in Siena* (Florence: Nerbini, 2016); and Chiarini, *Il Sator e il Duomo di Siena* (Siena: Nuova Immagine, 2017).

⁵ Wind’s name is particularly pertinent here, as demonstrated by his very perceptive reflections on the pendentives painted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, respectively on the right of the altar (the *Crucifixion of Haman*) and on its left (*The Serpent and the Cross*); see J.G. Frazer, *La crocifissione di Cristo, seguito da La crocifissione di Amann di Edgar Wind*, ed. by A. Damascelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007); see also the brilliant pages by R. Calasso in *Il rosa Tiepolo*, (Milan: Adelphi, 2016).

⁶ M. Hardt, *Die Zahl in Der Divina Commedia* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1973). Translated into Italian as *I numeri nella Divina Commedia*, trans. by B. Lazzarin (Rome: Salerno Ed., 2014).

⁷ See Chiarini, *I Cieli del mito. Letteratura e cosmo da Omero a Ovidio* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005).

implications (*Dichtung*, meaning 'poem' in German, derives from the concept of condensing).

In short, if we confine ourselves to astronomy,⁸ and do not seek to identify and analyse all the space-time references that crowd the text of the *Commedia*, it can easily be seen that very few conclusions are reached: a glaring example is the methodical failure to interpret what happens, in the first canticle, between the Circle of the Wrathful and the Circle of the Heretics.

The Fifth Circle, that of the Wrathful, is where the still, dark waters of the Styx spring up: we can therefore be certain that from the Styx's source to the Gates of the City of Dis, Dante and Virgil move forward on a slight incline, at first on foot and then in Phlegyas's boat, keeping to the left, as the general rule of the *Inferno* dictates; but when they disembark and enter the City of Dis, Dante the protagonist makes it clear that Virgil *turns to the right* (*Inf.* IX 132): how can it therefore be doubted, much less denied, *given that the text offers no reason to do so*, that Dante and Virgil keep travelling in this direction *even after* the Circle of the Heretics, until the point where the River Phlegethon (which descends in the opposite direction to the Styx and more steeply, emerging in the first and third *gironi* of the Seventh Circle) discharges its red waters into the infernal abyss – in other words only when Dante and Virgil leave the third and final *girone* of the Seventh Circle, that of the Violent? It is only at this point, in fact, that the monster Geryon carries Dante and Virgil, *keeping left*, down to the lower 'valleys' of the Malebolge, where the two pilgrims once again begin to proceed leftwards, 'as normal' (that is to say clockwise). Without an acceptance of their *reversed direction* from the moment they enter the City of Dis, as well as its duration (six hours, an entire quadrant, during which time, I repeat, there is nothing in the text to indicate a rapid return to their habitual direction), the very chrono-topography of the Malebolge is thrown to the winds, and indeed no commentary mentions it again.

*

Turning to the canticle of the *Purgatorio*, here the treatment of time and space is highly original and even more complex, showing itself to be inextricably connected to the meaning and symbolic implications of the *ascent* of the Mount.

⁸ For those seeking more information about the astronomical descriptions in the *Divine Comedy*, the following studies are nonetheless interesting: M.G. Ponta, *Orologio dantesco e tavola cosmografica*, 1892 (New Delhi: Facsimile publisher, 2020); G. Agnelli, *Topocronografia del viaggio dantesco* (Milan: Hoepli, 1891); E. Moore, *The Time-references in the 'Divina Commedia'* (London: D. Nutt, 1887); G. Buti and R. Bertagni, *Commento astronomico della Divina Commedia* (Florence: Sandron, 1966); I. Capasso, *L'Astronomia nella Divina Commedia* (Pisa: Domus Galileiana, 1967); Chiarini, 'Quattro cerchi, tre croci. Tempi e silenzi della Divina Commedia', *Lecture Classensi* 41 (Ravenna: Longo, 2013); M. Negri, *L'orologio di Dante. Note per un atlante cronografico della Divina Commedia, dalla Selva oscura al Paradiso Terrestre* (Milan: L'Arcipelago, 2015).

In Purgatory, Dante's clock works without interruption, measuring out (and therefore emphasizing) the delays and accelerations of an ascent whose rising levels vary in a meaningful and precisely planned alternation: the 'terraces' occupied by the various groups of penitents are obviously less steep than the almost vertical 'stairways' dug out of the rock, which Dante must climb, one after the other, in order to reach the next level.

In the *Purgatorio*, the *new theme* – no longer a descent but *an ascent from terrace to terrace* – is instructive as well as purifying, and very carefully thought out. The familiar premise is that this climb, no less indispensable than the descent into Hell as a remedy for Dante's own sins, developing his awareness and making him worthy of heavenly assumption, can *only* take place if accompanied by the light of the sun's rays, *whether direct or indirect*: an obvious metaphor for *divine enlightenment (and therefore God's will and protection)*.

The author has divided the ascent into three and a half 'diurnal' days (from the morning of the third day to the first half of the sixth day of the extramundane pilgrimage), all calculated between the first light of dawn (in these equinoctial days, about 4.30 to 6.00) and the evening dusk (about 18.00 to 19.30). Any possibility of nocturnal progress (when the sky is full of stars: in this season from about 19.30 to 4.30 the following morning) is strictly excluded. After the ascent is completed, the canticle's concluding half day (from about 4.30 to *midday* on the sixth day) is taken up with various encounters, rites and visions in Earthly Paradise.

Within these temporal divisions there are further subdivisions, linked to the symbology of Mount Purgatory's circular, ziggurat shape, which help to describe and effectively communicate to the reader a phenomenon that characterizes Dante's climb from start to finish: the gradually increasing sense of lightness and ease of movement that he feels as he reaches each new terrace (see for example XII 01–12; 115–117).

In the *Inferno*, the descent made by Dante and his guide into the various circles and *gironi* (over twenty-four hours) is broadly divided into *three presences of two hours* per quadrant in the first half of the canticle (until the end of Canto XVII), and then into *four presences of an hour and a half* per quadrant (until the centre of the Earth, where Lucifer is trapped).

Two hours is equivalent to the time that a sign of the zodiac conventionally takes to pass over one twelfth of the horizon (that is 30 circular degrees out of 360 degrees).

An hour and a half, on the other hand, is equivalent to the time the sun takes to travel half of half a quadrant: one quadrant = six hours (= 90 degrees), half a quadrant = three hours (= 45 degrees), half of half a quadrant = *one hour and thirty minutes* (= 22½ circular degrees out of 360 degrees). Clearly Dante was 'equating' (or comparing and attributing the same value: '*consimigliare*' in *Convivio* IV 23, 11) this inclination (22½ degrees) with that of the ecliptic (actually more than 23 degrees), seeing it as a sort of secret key to the functioning of the cosmos, since it could be extended (as will be the case in *Paradiso*) to the

other six wandering stars, over which – as ‘scientific’ thought commonly held at the time – the sun exercised a moderating influence.

By applying these equivalences (two hours or its double or triple; an hour and a half and its multiples) to the individual periods spent by Dante and Virgil in the various circles and *gironi*, the author aimed to emphasize the two different ‘spatial’ natures, in other words where the different sectors of Hell (and the sins punished within them) belonged on the cosmic scale: in the *Inferno*, for instance, the circles and *gironi* spatially closest to God are characterized as ‘zodiacal’ while those closest to Earth (chthonic) are ‘planetary’.

In the *Inferno*, it is clear that the initial, wider ‘circuits’ with pauses of six hours in each (2 hours x 3), followed by narrower ‘circuits’ with four pauses of an hour and a half in each, are intended to draw attention to the precipice that has dragged the various sinners away from the potential celestial peaks close to God, plunging them into the deepest abyss of evil, at the bottom of which – at the place on Earth furthest from God – the ‘*imperator*’ Lucifer is trapped (*Inf.* XXXIV 28).

In the *Purgatorio*, the opposite is the case, because they are ascending: to an extent Ante-Purgatory, and then the first three terraces of Purgatory proper, which are closest to Earth and therefore to evil and its temptations, belong to the *planetary area* (an approximate subdivision into three temporal sequences of $2 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ hours each = 3 x 3 hours), while the Fourth Terrace, that of the Slothful, acts as an intermediary buffer and the last three terraces and the Earthly Paradise belong to the *zodiacal area* (an approximate subdivision into three temporal sequences of four hours each (= 3 x 4) for the terraces; and three sequences of two hours for the Earthly Paradise).

Despite the fact that this is a mountain with more or less vertical walls (IV 41–42), we must not forget that the ‘circuits’ get narrower the higher they climb, as is clearly stated (XIII 4–6). However, this detail should not be understood in a ‘real’ orographic or odeporic sense, but as a ‘moral’ indication: the reflection of Dante’s psychological feelings when he discovers, as Virgil had predicted to him (IV 88–95), that the ascent of the Mount is becoming gradually less arduous and his heart lighter (see below).

In describing Dante’s ascent of the Mount, the author thus establishes a synergy between two key mental components: one concerns the unfamiliarity of the terrain (an unfamiliarity that *seems* to be partly shared by Virgil’s soul) and the consequent doubts about which direction to take each time (right? left? pressing onwards or going back?) in order to find a ‘stairway’ that is suitable for the restrictions imposed on Dante by the weight of his still-living body and that will allow him to reach the next terrace as quickly as possible; the second component aims to counter and ultimately annul the delays, however slight, caused by these uncertainties: the need to climb in the light of the sun’s direct or indirect rays creates in the Florentine poet – duly encouraged in this sense by Virgil – a characteristic anxiety to hasten his step, sometimes in the wrong direction.

In order to construct a reliable diagram of the pilgrims' delays and accelerations, we must start with what happens in Ante-Purgatory. Here, there is only one path of ascent, only one increase in altitude, which takes Dante and Virgil from the base of the Mount to the first and only terrace in this section: the beginning of the ascent is set at *9.20 in the morning of the third day*. We are informed that by that time the sun 'had risen fully five-times-ten degrees'⁹: since the sun climbs fifteen degrees every hour, this tells us that 200 minutes have passed since 06.00 in the morning – in other words *three hours and twenty minutes*. *Dante's account leaves no room for doubt about this*.

Nothing is said about the time taken for the subsequent ascent of the stairway, but the continuation the text gives us to understand that Dante and Virgil, on that day, will have to pass through *three diurnal sections*. On the fourth day (once they are within Purgatory proper), each of these sections will clearly become ever closer to the 'planetary' sequence of three hours (an hour and a half plus an hour and a half), each section being completed in *two hours and fifty-five minutes*: the first from 09.20 to 12.15; the second from 12.15 to 15.10; and the third from 15.10 to 18.05. The entire delay is recouped a few (five) minutes *after sunset*, with dusk just beginning. But what had caused this delay?

The reason for the delay (or handicap) is this: while they are pondering which direction to take to reach the nearest stairway, so that Dante may climb those vertiginous walls, Virgil sees *on his left* (like Dante, he is closely examining the craggy walls) a group of souls seeking purgation, coming towards them. Noting how slowly they are progressing, he suggests going to meet them, to save time. Dante and he thus *move in the opposite and wrong direction*: in the hemisphere of Purgatory the correct way is no longer to the left *but to the right*, in harmony with the sun's path. This is the cause of the delay and indeed the Late-Repentants immediately tell them to turn back (III 102). Dante and Virgil join the group but their progress is now inevitably slower: by the time they arrive at the foot of the stairway it is already 9.00. Guided by the soul of Sordello, Dante and Virgil climb the stairway and complete the rest of the route planned for that day, finally reaching a small green 'valley' a few minutes after 18.00. Here they spend the evening and night, among the shades of the most important kings and princes of Europe; *at about 21.00* Dante falls asleep (IX 7–12).

On the fourth day, *at the same time (09.20)* as when they stood at the foot of the Ante-Purgatory's only stairway on the previous day, Dante and Virgil are *at the top* of the rocky stair (or 'needle's eye') that has brought them, zigzagging dangerously and requiring a considerable amount of strength and agility, to the first terrace of Purgatory proper (X 13–16).

⁹ '*ben cinquanta gradi salito era*' (*Purg.* IV 15 and ff.). English translations in the text of all citations from the *Divine Comedy* are taken from the translation by Robin Kirkpatrick (London and New York: Penguin, 2012).

The text tells us that the climb had been inevitably slow, because the wall presented such difficulty: 'This made our footsteps few and hesitant. / And so the moon, which now was on the wane, / had reached its bed, to lie once more at rest / before we'd gone beyond that needle eye'.¹⁰ This means that the two pilgrims reach the First Terrace when the moon, *lagging behind the sun by about fifty minutes a day*, since this is the fourth day of the spring equinox, has set in the hemisphere of Jerusalem, while in the hemisphere of Purgatory, 200 minutes (50 x 4) have elapsed since the sun's rising – *three hours and twenty minutes on the dot of 9.20. Here too, the text does not seem to leave any room for doubt.* The meaning that can certainly be attributed to this astronomical indication adds weight to the rotation proposed above, which is implemented from this point on for the recovery of delays, in both the first three and the last three terraces of Purgatory proper: in the first three ('planetary') terraces the recovery is *five minutes every three hours*, while in the last three ('zodiacal') terraces it is *five minutes every four hours*.

It follows that the length of time spent on the First Terrace (the Proud), until the foot of the stairway leading to the Second Terrace, ends at 12.15 (equivalent to a timespan of two hours and fifty-five minutes); the ascent and pause on the Second Terrace (the Envious), until the foot of the stairway leading to the Third Terrace ends at 15.10; and the ascent and pause on the Third Terrace (the Wrathful) concludes at 18.05 (as we have seen, a few minutes after sunset).

The reciprocal positioning between the second and the first '9.20' tells us that: (a) in Purgatory, unlike the movement from circle to circle or *girone to girone* in Hell, the overall calculation includes the times spent climbing from the First Terrace to the Second, from the Second to the Third, and so on; and additionally that: (b) Virgil's assertion that the climb will become less and less arduous as they ascend is proved right ('This mountain is by nature such, / that, down below, the start is always hard, / yet hurts far less the more one rises up.').¹¹ However, this is nothing to do with the diameter of the terraces getting progressively smaller (XIII 4–6), since the climber never has the opportunity to go all the way around them, but because, as he climbs, the feeling grows in him that the effort is gradually diminishing, to the point where the ascent appears to be transformed into a descent, 'as boats that travel down a flowing stream'¹²: a psychological phenomenon that boosts the energy and speed of those who experience it.

On the fifth day, the calculation becomes 'zodiacal': the first section of *almost* four hours (in fact three hours and fifty-five minutes, counting *from their departure at 06.10* from the intermediate Fourth Terrace of the Slothful) concludes *at 10.05* (the Avaricious and

¹⁰ 'E questo fece i nostri passi scarsi, tanto che pria lo scemo della luna / rigiunse al letto suo per coricarsi, / che noi fossimo fuor di quella cruna' (Purg. X 13–16).

¹¹ 'Questa montagna è tale, / che sempre al cominciar di sotto è grave; / e quant'om più va su, e men fa male' (Purg. IV 88–90).

¹² 'com'a seconda giù andar per nave' (Purg. IV 91–93).

Spendthrifts); the second section (the Gluttonous) *at 14.00* exactly; and the third section (the Lustful) *at 17.55* – which means, as explicitly stated in the text, *a few minutes before sunset*.

When the sun sets (*at 18.00*), the three pilgrims (Dante, Virgil and Statius) have already been climbing the last stairway *for five minutes*:

The pathway through the rock rose sheer and straight –
and angled so I cut, ahead of me,
the rays of sunlight, which had now sunk low.
The steps the sages and myself assayed
were few until – my shadow petering out –
we sensed the sun behind us laid to rest.¹³

The rays of sunlight he describes are coming from the west, where the sun is setting. At this point, there remains an hour and twenty-five minutes before nightfall closes off any possibility of movement. At *4.30, before dawn*, they begin to climb again, reaching the lower western edge of the Earthly Paradise *at about 06.00* (prime), with the sun rising in the east in front of them.

It is the sixth day, and from this moment on we witness a spectacular sequence of six hours, subdivided into three continuous ‘zodiacal’ sequences (without differences in level to be overcome, but merely consisting of a gentle ascent towards the centre) of two hours each: from 06.00 to 08.00 (*Matelda*), from 08.00 to 10.00 (*Beatrice*), and from 10.00 to 12.00 (*The two trees*). In this division of time, the Earthly Paradise anticipates the horological precision reached in the Celestial Paradise.

Now that this has been clarified, we may move on to describing the pilgrimage made by Dante and Virgil in the second kingdom (see fig. 4).

1. In the Ante-Purgatory

Dante and Virgil emerge from the ‘*natural burella*’ (a natural subterranean corridor) into the hemisphere of Purgatory at a point half way between the shore and the Mount, at about *4.30* on the third day of the poem’s action¹⁴ (counting from their departure from the dark wood, which took place in the other hemisphere, near Jerusalem): the exit into Purgatory is

¹³ *‘Dritta salia la via per entro ’l sasso / verso tal parte ch’io toglieva i raggi / dinanzi a me del sol ch’era già basso. / E di pochi scaglion levammo i saggi, / che ’l sol corcar, per l’ombra che si spense, / sentimmo dietro e io e li miei saggi’* (*Purg. XXVII 64–69*).

¹⁴ We must bear in mind that in his journey to the hemisphere of Purgatory, Dante recoups the initial twelve hours from the morning of the first day (when he left the ‘dark wood’) until his descent into Hell, which lasted exactly twenty-four hours; therefore the climb through the ‘*burella*’ lasts from 6.00 in the morning of the second day to 4.30 – just before dawn – on the third day, when Dante and Virgil emerge onto the surface of the island where Purgatory is sited.

through a gap located approximately east of the Mount. The pale dawn gradually evolves into the changing colours of sunrise while various preliminary events take place.

The first thing Dante does is to get his bearings: to the east, towards the ocean, the planet Venus obscures the zodiac constellation of Pisces; to the south, 'four stars' appear (shining hypostases of the cardinal virtues); from the north, Cato of Utica, guardian of Ante-Purgatory, is coming to meet them, with the spiritual light of the four stars reflected on his forehead; he enumerates to Virgil the rites that must be performed before Dante will be permitted to continue his pilgrimage, adding the fundamental suggestion that he should allow himself to be guided by the sun, as soon as it rises, when choosing the easiest and most favourable route to ascend to the various *gironi* of the Mount. Virgil heads towards the sea to perform the rites suggested by Cato – in the opposite direction to the Mount, as he explains to Dante: 'Follow my steps, dear son. / Let's turn back now. From here the level shore, / in reaching to its boundaries, slopes down.'¹⁵ This is where Dante's forehead is cleansed of Hell's grime with dewy grass, and he is girded with a reed representing humility.

Meanwhile, while the sky is filled with the rays of the rising (but not yet risen) sun, an angelic ferryman arrives very swiftly and disembarks more than a hundred souls on the shore: these realize that Dante is alive, not yet because of his shadow, but *because he breathes* (II 68).¹⁶ Among the new arrivals is Dante's friend Casella, who entertains the living and the dead by singing the poet's *canzone* 'Love that speaks reasons in my mind to me' (the incipit of the *Convivio*, Book III). Cato then reappears and disperses the improvident, time-wasting band. While the souls scatter in a disorderly way across the plain, Dante and Virgil hurry on too, heading resolutely towards the slopes of the Mount. Once alone, their pace slows and Dante, with his back warmed by the sun – risen at last but still red from the morning's humidity – sees his shadow before him for the first time in the *second* canticle (III 16–18): it is just a little later than *06.00 in the morning* ('prime', as it was known in his day).

And it is here that we can pinpoint the cause of the delay mentioned earlier, triggered by Virgil's suggestion that they go to meet the new group of souls arriving extremely slowly *on their left*. When the pilgrims reach them, the souls seeking purgation say 'Turn back!' ('*Tornate*' III 101). Virgil and Dante then *turn right*, walking at the head of the group; on the way, Dante has a long conversation with the soul of Prince Manfred – so long, that the sun has already risen by fifty degrees when they arrive at the foot of the slope: as previously mentioned, it is *09.20 in the morning*, and the two companions have accumulated *a delay of about twenty minutes in relation to the third hour* (9.00, in our terms).

¹⁵ 'Figliuol, segui i miei passi: / volgiansi in dietro, ché di qua dichina / questa pianura a' suoi termini bass?' (*Purg.* I 112 and ff.).

¹⁶ This convincing interpretation is proposed by I. Capasso, *Astronomia nella Divina Commedia* (Pisa: Domus Galileiana, 1967), pp. 66–68.

On the fourth day, the pilgrimage's sections (visits to the terraces of the Proud, the Envious and the Wrathful) are also divided into *four* segments of *almost three* hours each, the first of which is simply taken up with reaching the first three terraces of Purgatory proper. The intermediate ascent and pause in the inert atmosphere of the terrace of the Envious, between the end of the fourth day (19.30) and the beginning of the fifth (4.30), will mark the passage (at 6.10 in the morning) to the foot of the stairway leading to the last *three* terraces (the Avaricious, the Gluttonous and the Lustful) of *almost four hours each* (two plus two): 'almost', because completed in 'only' *three hours and fifty-five minutes*.

The stairways of Purgatory (leading from one terrace to the next) are built into the vertiginous slopes of the Mount and climbing them would seem barely achievable by a living being such as Dante. As we know, contrary to the actual experience of climbers, Dante is aided by the fact that the effort gradually *reduces* and his spirits *become lighter* the further he climbs – the first climb, on the third day of the journey, had seemed extremely arduous and Dante had constantly to resort to using both hands and feet ('*carpando*', IV 50).

The author gives us no clues as to how long Dante and Virgil take to reach the rim of the Mount's first ridge (IV 51), where they catch their breath sitting on a ledge of the terrace looking east. Here, Virgil gives Dante an astronomy lesson concerning the movements of the sun as seen from the Antipodes. The pair then set off along that long terrace, benefiting from a slope much gentler than the stairway. A little further on, in the shade of a large rock (IV 101), they come across the Florentine Belacqua who, with other souls, is idly waiting to be admitted to Purgatory proper. Virgil draws the meeting to a close, pointing out to Dante that *the sun is already touching the meridian* and it is therefore *midday*, implying that *they still hadn't reached it* (IV 137–139). Dante follows him, but as he comes out from under the protection of the rock and is exposed to the sun's rays, he throws a shadow to his left: when Belacqua's companions notice this, Dante would like to stop and explain, but Virgil prevents him from doing so (V 9–21).

A little further on, and therefore also slightly higher, another group of souls is tackling the mountain's curves, appearing 'across the angle of our climb'.¹⁷ It is now that the change from morning to afternoon occurs, as they follow circular paths clockwise and midday is reached; some of the souls at the back, who have not yet passed the meridian, looking to their left below them, notice that Dante's body casts a shadow; they approach the two pilgrims and surround them. Virgil allows Dante to talk to these new companions so long as he keeps moving: at about 12.15, the pair thus embark on the next segment of *almost three* hours, in which they are introduced to the figures of Iacopo del Cassero, Buonconte da Montefeltro and Pia de' Tolomei. These are followed by others, from Benincasa da Laterina to Guido da Pisa, from Federico Novello to Pierre de la Brosse.

¹⁷ '*per la costa di traverso*' (Purg. V 22).

Meanwhile, the sun has just crossed the three o'clock mark (at 15.10) and there are only a little under three hours left until sunset: this is the last stretch of diurnal time, then known collectively as 'vespers'. Dante feels less weary than earlier and notes that 'the mountain's casting shadow now'¹⁸: the sun is setting in the west and the Mount's shadow is falling over that part of it no longer reached by the sun's rays, where they are. Dante's haste makes Virgil realize that his pupil is still hoping to reach the Earthly Paradise that same day, so he disabuses him immediately: before he gets to the summit, he will have to see other sunrises and sunsets. (VI 52–57).

The two pilgrims then encounter the solitary figure of Sordello and decide to ask him where best to climb up to the next terrace (VI 68). Sordello quickly falls in with them – he is drawn especially to Virgil, like him from Mantua – and puts himself at the disposal of his new companions. He tells them it would be best to find somewhere to spend the night rather than attempt an ascent that nightfall might cut short ('The day by now is going down. / And none by night can ever make the climb').¹⁹ It would be better and no less interesting, he adds, to visit a secluded place, not far away: a small, well-protected 'valley' where the many recently deceased princes of Europe are gathered, waiting to fulfil their purifying penances.

Soon, Dante, Virgil and Sordello arrive in the valley, where a *Salve Regina* is being sung before 'what little sun remains nests down'.²⁰ From a small hillock, Sordello points out the royal souls to Dante and Virgil: from Emperor Rudolph I to Wenceslaus II of Bohemia, from Henry I of Navarre to Peter III of Aragon and his sons, from Charles I of Anjou to William VII of Monferrat. As dusk falls, a soul turns to face east and sings the hymn of compline, followed by all the others softly singing the '*Te lucis ante terminum*' (VIII 13). The remaining indirect light (by now it is *after 18.05*, and the first delay is almost completely balanced out) allows the threesome to witness the descent from the sky of two protecting angels; to have a conversation with the judge Nino Visconti; and to see in the south the 'three torches' (*tre facelle*) of the theological virtues that have replaced the four morning stars. Finally, on the outside edge of the terrace, a serpent appears (IX 98), but is immediately chased away by the two angels with blunted swords (in Purgatory proper, it should be noted, the serpent of temptation has lost all power). At last it is time for Dante's exchange with Corrado Malaspina. *Not long before nine in the evening* (21.00), Dante lies down on the grass of the valley, 'conquered by sleep' (*vinto dal sonno*, IX 13).

¹⁸ 'il poggio l'ombra getta' (*Purg.* VI 51).

¹⁹ 'dichina il giorno, / e andar su di notte non si puote' (*Purg.* VII 43–44).

²⁰ 'prima che 'l poco sole omai s'annidi' (*Purg.* VII 82).

2. In Purgatory

It is now about *the last hour before sunrise* on the fourth day, and Dante is dreaming of being abducted by an eagle with golden feathers on Mount Ida near Troy (the very place where Zeus's eagle snatched the beautiful Ganymede and carried him up to Olympus). In his dream, the poet is lifted high up to the sphere of fire: at this point Dante awakens with his face 'turned back down towards the sea'.²¹ Virgil reveals to him that while he slept, Saint Lucy had descended into the valley, taken him in her arms and carried him east, putting him down *just below the steps of the gate* to Purgatory proper. After pointing out the gate's location to Virgil, the saint had flown away as Dante awoke, *after eight o'clock in the morning* ('The sun by now was more than two hours high').²²

The unusual length of time Dante spent dreaming (more than three hours) has perplexed commentators, but it can be explained by the author's need to begin Dante's ascent at a sufficiently late moment to enable a judicious division – such as had already occurred in Ante-Purgatory – of the fourth day's remaining progress into *three further sequences of almost 2 x 1½ hours each* (that is to say two hours and fifty-five minutes), in line with the predetermined 'planetary' symbology that we have already encountered.

The guardian angel is armed with a shining sword, with which he traces seven 'P's on Dante's forehead: he will be freed from them as he climbs from terrace to terrace. At last the angel opens Purgatory's gate, but warns that anyone who looks back will be banished outside again. The creaking of the hinges is accompanied by a mysterious and moving '*Te Deum laudamus*', as it were off-stage, and the ascent begins (IX 79–145). What time did the author assume for the start of this slow, complicated climb? Dante does not tell us, and any hypothesis runs the risk of appearing fanciful. And yet, if only as an exercise, bearing in mind the number 55 which recurs throughout the whole canticle, it is conceivable that the author imagined their entry through the gate as taking place at about 8.25 and their arrival at the First Terrace of Purgatory therefore being at 9.20.²³

But let us stick to the facts. The first ascent undertaken on Mount Purgatory is decidedly arduous, because it involves continually zigzagging between outcrops of rock that alternate in a succession of bulges and recesses on both sides. Dante and Virgil are forced to climb slowly and carefully until they reach the First Terrace through 'that needle eye' ('*quella cruna*'), a full *three hours and twenty minutes after the sun has risen: it is once more 9.20*

²¹ '*a la marina torto*' (*Purg.* IX 45).

²² '*l'sole er'alto già più che due ore*' (*Purg.* IX 44).

²³ The process of reaching the first terrace of Purgatory bears some resemblance to the events in the Fifth Circle of Hell, before the arrival at the gate of the City of Dis and the first circle within it (the sixth of Hell as a whole, containing the Heretics: *Inf.* VII 97–IX 33): in the Fifth Circle, Dante and Virgil complete the whole tour partly on foot, and partly carried in Phlegyas's boat: this second section of the journey is longer than the first. Meanwhile here, faithful to the mirror imagery adopted in the *Purgatorio*, the opposite is true: the first part of the journey is entrusted to Saint Lucy's metasensory zeal, while the second is left to Dante's own arms and legs.

(X 13–16). This detail must be compared with the 9.20 that marks the beginning (*not the end*) of the climb up the slopes of the Mount to Ante-Purgatory's first and only terrace on the previous day (IV 15–16): the handicap delay has been brought forward, but the venture has become more complicated, since the pilgrims must now not only progress through the first three terraces, but must also climb the stairs between them.

The First Terrace is that of the Proud, and here the mountain wall is carved with a series of bas-reliefs illustrating examples of humility: *keeping right*, Dante and Virgil encounter a large group of the Proud, proceeding slowly, bent double under the weight of the sin they have committed; these include Umberto Aldobrandeschi, Oderisi da Gubbio and Provenzan Salvani; then, beneath the pilgrims' feet, more marble carvings follow the bas-reliefs, depicting examples of pride punished. Suddenly the pair realize that they have reached the half-way point: they have crossed the noon meridian. The 'sixth handmaid' (*l'ancella sesta*), the hour between 11.00 and 12.00, has already completed her shift (XII 81): since the attempt to recoup the delay to their departure works out at *five minutes for each terrace*, we may say that it is now 12.15.

The angel of the First Terrace shows Dante and Virgil the stairway carved into the rock that leads to the Second Terrace (XII 97). Feeling ever lighter, Dante has no trouble following Virgil and 'ascending that great stair'.²⁴

Reaching the Second Terrace, of the Envious, which has a slightly shorter radius than its predecessor (XIII 4–6), Virgil turns *to his own right*, facing the sun and addressing it with a brief eulogy of thanks (XIII 16–21). Meanwhile, voices that may once again be described as 'off-stage' list examples of neighbourly love, while the Envious, unable to support their own weight, hold each other up: the iron wire that sews their eyes together affects the organ most likely to be responsible for envy. The group includes the Sienese noblewoman Sapia, Guido Del Duca and others; meanwhile new 'off-stage' voices list examples of envy. Dante and Virgil suddenly realize that sunset is only *about three hours* away – that is, the same number of hours as elapse between the day's start at 06.00 (*il principio del dì*) and 'the third hour at its ultimate' (*l'ultimar de l'ora terza*, XV 1–5). In other words, the first of the three evening hours known as vespers has just begun (it is 15.10) and the rays of the setting sun are striking at eye-height, a typical circumstance for those hurrying towards sunset: 'The sun's rays struck us straight along the nose, / for now the mountain had, by us, been turned, / so that we went direct towards the west'.²⁵

And now the angel of the Second Terrace appears and shows them a stairway less steep than those that preceded it (XV 35–36). They reach the Third Terrace, of the Wrathful, without any trouble. Here, Dante is overcome by a series of ecstatic visions on the theme of anger, while a smoke as dark as night envelops them and more voices recite

²⁴ *'su per li scaglion santi'* (*Purg.* XII 115 and ff.).

²⁵ *'E i raggi ne ferien per mezzo 'l naso, / perché per noi girato era sì il monte, / che già dritti andavamo inver' l'ocaso'* (*Purg.* XV 7–9).

examples of mercy. Virgil encourages Dante to ask Marco Lombardo how to reach the Fourth Terrace; Marco then delivers a dense lecture on free will and the importance of separating Empire and Papacy. As the sun begins to set and the smoke clears, the two pilgrims, following the directions given by the angel of the Third Terrace, begin to climb the stairway to the Fourth Terrace: it is *about 18.05* on the fourth day, just past the hours of vespers (XVII 9). Their delay has *almost* been recouped.

In the twilight phase, when the direct rays of the sun no longer offer any assistance but there is nevertheless still some visibility, Dante – who has not forgotten Sordello's advice that 'none by night can ever make the climb'²⁶ – is nevertheless persuaded to attempt the ascent in response to the angel's instructions ('You go up here': *Qui si monta*, XVII 47) and Virgil's firm recommendation that they should 'strive to climb before the darkness falls'.²⁷ The attempt is successful: they reach the Fourth Terrace just as 'stars in many parts appeared to view'²⁸ and Dante begins to feel the strength go from his legs, as Sordello had predicted (XVII 73–75). Since they are unable to move, Dante asks Virgil for at least the comfort of his words: 'Our feet stand still. Don't let your words do so'.²⁹ Half way through the seven terraces, on the Fourth Terrace (of the Slothful), it is the pilgrims who stand still and only the sinners move: a variant of the same function assigned to the Fourth Circle of Hell (the Avaricious and the Spendthrifts).

On the Fourth Terrace, for the moment none of the Avaricious are to be seen. Responding to Dante's request, Virgil entertains him with a brief disquisition on Love, in a Thomistic vein. *Towards midnight* (XVIII 76), Virgil's lecture comes to an end but Dante is prevented from sinking into a restorative sleep by some of the Slothful running past, anguished and weeping. Never breaking stride (for that is their penance), they enumerate examples of prompt actions that are the opposite of sloth: these penitents include Gherardo II, abbot of San Zeno in Verona; others in turn give examples of sloth. When the encounter with the abbot ends and all the penitents are far away, Dante falls asleep (XVIII 145).

It should be noted that the path of the two pilgrims as they travel from east (06.00) to west (18.00) crosses with the north (Virgil's eulogy to the sun, just after 12.00) and the south (Dante falling asleep at about 24.00). Even in elusive Purgatory, the four arms of the Cross are clearly in evidence.

Just before dawn, as the first dim light begins to appear (XIX 5), Dante is visited by a second dream: the presence of a repugnant, stammering (*balba*) yet seductive woman, foreshadowing the sins purged on the final three terraces (Avarice, Gluttony and Lust). Dante is rescued from her by the intervention of a lady who is 'holy and alert' (*santa e*

²⁶ *'andar su di notte non si puote'* (Purg. VII 44).

²⁷ *'procacciam di salir pria che s'abbui'* (Purg. XVII 62).

²⁸ *'le stelle apparivan da più lat'* (Purg. XVII 71).

²⁹ *'se i piè si stanno, non stea lo tuo sermone'* (Purg. XVII 84).

presta). The narrative intends that that this should once more be understood as Saint Lucy, who again lifts the sleeping Dante in her arms and carries him to the opposite side of the Fourth Terrace. Here, when the sun's disc rises fully above the horizon on the fifth day, the saint disappears and Dante wakes up, hurriedly following Virgil, with 'the new sun at our backs',³⁰ in search of the entrance to the stairway that leads to the Fifth Terrace (XIX 36–39). When the angel of the Fourth Terrace, 'with open wings as, seemingly, a swan's'³¹ points it out ('Come on! The crossing's here!'³²) the time must be, if we follow the author's method, *about 6.10*.

The two pilgrims thus reach the Fifth Terrace (the first of the final three terraces, whose reference is 'zodiacal': *almost* $2 + 2 = 4$ hours, actually reduced to three hours and fifty-five minutes each by the zeal of the two pilgrims). This is the Terrace of the Avaricious and Spendthrifts, where weeping figures lie face down on the ground. Yet when asked where the ascent to the Sixth Terrace can be made, one of them promptly replies that the pilgrims should proceed keeping the void to the right ('your right hands will be always to the out').³³ After an important encounter with Pope Adrian V of the Fieschi family, an ambitious and avaricious man who admits that he discovered the 'lies of life' (*la vita bugiarda*, XIX 108) after being made pope, Dante and Virgil set off again, keeping as close as possible to the inside of the terrace, hugging the wall of the Mount. They come across Hugh Capet, the forefather of the kings of France, and as they continue onwards, voices in the air list examples of avarice. Suddenly, the Mount is shaken by an earthquake, followed by a chorus of '*Gloria in excelsis Deo*' (XX 136), an event that in Purgatory marks the final purging of a soul; Dante and Virgil will soon learn that in this case it is the soul of the Latin poet Statius, who, in his lifetime, secretly repented his excessive prodigality and converted to Christianity, partly as a result of the 'ardour' inspired in him by reading Virgil's works (XXII 34–73).

Towards the end of Canto XXII, we find proof that the three pilgrims (*Statius has now joined Dante and Virgil*) have passed from the Fifth to the Sixth Terrace, that of the Gluttonous, *after 10.00 and before 11.00*: 'Already, of the handmaids of the sun / four were behind. The fifth was at the pole...'.³⁴ The development of the action, textual indications and the criteria underlying the rotation of the delays suggest that the author must have envisaged the beginning of the ascent that leads to the Terrace of the Gluttonous as being *at 10.05*: three hours and fifty-five minutes after the *ten-minute handicap* caused by the search for the stairway leading from the Slothful to the Avaricious.

Before 11.00, the three pilgrims come across the first of two trees, laden with fruit (XXII 131). Even though it is not explicitly stated, this *seems to prefigure the presence of the Tree*

³⁰ *'col sol nuovo alle reni'* (*Purg.* XIX 39).

³¹ *'con l'ali aperte, che parean di cigno'* (*Purg.* XIX 46).

³² *'Venite; qui si varca'* (*Purg.* XIX 43).

³³ *'le vostre destre sien sempre di fori'* (*Purg.* XIX 81).

³⁴ *'Già le quattro ancelle eran del giorno / rimase a dietro, e la quinta era al temo...'* (*Purg.* XXII 118 and ff).

of *Life in the Earthly Paradise* (see Genesis 2. 9). As they continue on their way, Statius, Virgil and Dante are joined by a group of Gluttonous, appropriately gaunt and hollow-eyed, including Dante's Florentine friend Forese Donati, and Bonagiunta Orbicciani.

Midday is now long past (in fact it is *after 13.00*) when a second tree appears, a mirror of the first, 'ripe-branched and bright' (*'gravidì e vivaci'*, XXIV 103 and ff.); this time it is made explicit that this is an allusion to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which they will also see in the Earthly Paradise. It is notable that the author places the meeting with the Gluttonous between the two trees, spanning the period *before 11.00 and after 13.00*: the usual timing of the midday meal.

Leaving the second tree behind, the pilgrims continue on for a long stretch ('a thousand paces', *'ben mille pass'*, XXIV 131) in a completely deserted arc of the terrace, until they hear a voice (the angel of the Sixth Terrace) saying: 'If you wish / to get up there, then here's where you must turn'.³⁵ In confirmation of the scheme hypothesized here, we learn at the beginning of the next Canto that 'the sun had now abandoned to the Bull / its noon-time ring'³⁶: it is now two hours after 12.00, in our terms 14.00. The visit to the Terrace of the Gluttonous is over.

The ascent by the stairway that leads to the Seventh Terrace, which gets easier and lighter all the time, is not time wasted, since Statius, at Dante's request and with Virgil's permission, gives a 'scientific' lesson as they climb (Dante is finding it increasingly effortless) on the process of human generation, thus preparing his fellow travellers for the actions and words of the penitents on the Seventh Terrace: the Lustful.

When they arrive at the top of the stone stairway, a fierce flame flaring up from the inner side of the terrace forces the threesome to advance in single file along the edge of the void, and therefore in double danger. The rest of the terrace is completely filled with fire, with the souls of the penitent wandering among the flames, shouting out examples of chastity (XXV 124). As he progresses, Dante notes that the sun is beating on his right arm (XXVI 4): the sun is going down and in the west everything is turning from blue to white. The three pilgrims have arrived at the 'final twist' (or terrace) and are turning south: these are *the last three hours of sunlight* (vespers). Meanwhile, two opposing groups are advancing through the purifying flames: those who lusted for the opposite sex, including Guido Guinizzelli and the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel, and those who lusted for the same sex: these walk towards the first group keeping to the left, which in Purgatory means in the opposite direction to the sun (the sun in Purgatory, as we know, 'keeps to the right').

As they approach the final stairway, leading to the Earthly Paradise, the angel of the Seventh Terrace appears, also close to the narrow edge. He explains to the three pilgrims that if they want to continue their ascent they must pass through the wall of fire. Dante

³⁵ *'S'a voi piace / montare in su, qui si convien dar volta'* (Purg. XXIV 139 and ff.).

³⁶ *'l sole avea il cerchio di meriggio / lasciato al Tauro'* (Purg. XXV 2–3).

hesitates, terrified, but Virgil reminds him that Beatrice awaits him soon, and to set an example passes through the flames, followed by Statius and finally by Dante himself. The voice of a second angel, shining with a light that makes him invisible, guides them to the foot of the final stairway ('where now we could ascend')³⁷ and urges them to attempt the ascent: 'The sun departs [...] Evening comes. / Don't stop. Think hard about your speed. Keep up, / as long as western skies have not turned dark.'³⁸ This time, Virgil, Statius and Dante have arrived at the foot of the stairway not at sunset, but a little earlier (at 17.55): after only a few steps, in an expressive silence, they feel on their backs the direct rays of the sun being extinguished (only now is it 18.00): 'The steps the sages and myself assayed / were few until – my shadow petering out – we sensed the sun behind us laid to rest'.³⁹

The angel who had commanded them to climb had told them not to stop until night's darkness completely shrouded the Mount. But despite the ascent's increasing ease, in this 'zodiacal' sequence, the extra time offered by twilight is not enough to enable them to reach the top of the stairway leading to the Garden of Eden: when the stars have filled the immensity of the sky, the three pilgrims are forced to halt (it is now *half an hour before 20.00*) and they each lie down on the step they have reached: Virgil at the top, Statius in the middle and Dante below. Although visibility is limited on those stairs cut into the rock, the stars seem bigger and brighter: they are, significantly, closer. Dante falls asleep and, in the first light of dawn, dreams (XXVII 94 and ff.).

3. In the Earthly Paradise

In this third and final dream, Jacob's two wives appear to Dante: Leah (signifying the active life) and Rachel (the contemplative life). In the last moments of early dawn, Virgil wakes him and they reach the last step: the low ridge of the hill of the Garden of Eden (fig. 5). As the sun rises *in front* of Dante, Virgil bids farewell: 'No longer look to me for signs or word. / Your will is healthy, upright, free and whole. / And not to heed that sense would be a fault. / Lord of yourself, I crown and mitre you'.⁴⁰ In its substance, this rite is the same as the one that Virgil performed on Dante at dawn on the third day, on Purgatory's ocean shore; but in a spatial and metaphorical sense, it is on a higher level: Dante must now pass into the hands of Christian theology, adding to the cardinal virtues, embodied in the highest degree by Virgil himself, as well as by Cato of Utica, the further power of the theological virtues, embodied (as 'chosen companions') by Beatrice.

³⁷ 'là ove si montava' (*Purg.* XXVII 57).

³⁸ 'Lo sol sen va [...] e vien la sera; / non v'arrestate, ma studiate il passo, / mentre che l'occidente non si annera' (*Purg.* XXVII 61–63).

³⁹ 'E di pochi scaglion levammo i saggi, / che 'l sol corcar, per l'ombra che si spense, / sentimmo dietro e io e li miei saggi' (*Purg.* XXVII 67–69).

⁴⁰ 'Non aspettar mio dir né mio cenno; / libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio, / e fallo fora non fare a suo senno: / per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio' (*Purg.* XXVII 139–142).

The sun's rays are appearing, and for once Dante's curiosity leads him to walk ahead of his guides, immersing himself in the visual and olfactory marvels of the Earthly Paradise's wood (stylistically, an elegant example of *'festina lente'*, the oxymoronic saying attributed to Augustus):

Aching to search, now, in and all around
that holy forest, dense, alive and bright,
which tempered to my eyes the newborn day,
not pausing any more, I left the verge,
treading in slow, slow steps across the field.
The earth below breathed scent on every side.⁴¹

Two important aspects of the Earthly Paradise must be noted: firstly, progress is slow (see XXVIII 22): all movement is (and must be) dignified, composed and accompanied by strains of sweet music; secondly, although the expression *'su per'* (literally 'up through') in Dante's writing often simply implies 'across' from one place to another – as indeed the *Purgatorio's* translator has assumed in the passage quoted above – in fact it is here necessarily connected to the idea that the lowest point of the Earthly Paradise is its edge, while the centre must be the highest point, and therefore *closest to God* – just as Lucifer, trapped at the centre of the Earth, *is at the point furthest from God*. The change in height is not very conspicuous, but it is nonetheless significant.

All bad weather is abolished, as it is right from the start in all the rest of Purgatory proper (XXII 43 and ff.), and small songbirds (*'augelletti'*) add their voices to the light, fresh breeze of the first hours of the day (*'ore prime'*), reminding Dante of birdsong in the pines on Chiassi's shore, in Ravenna.⁴² Dante has arrived in this pre-Paradisiacal Garden from the west, and sets off into the 'dense, alive' wood, where he feels 'a gentle breeze, unchanging in itself'.⁴³ He is *moving towards the sun*, that is to say towards the centre of the Earthly Paradise, where *at midday* he will find himself at the base of the vertical axis along which he will be raised up, with Beatrice, to the heavens and the Empyrean. After passing through the last three terraces, the walk towards the centre of Eden is also articulated in *three 'zodiacal' sequences of two hours* (and two Cantos) *each*, just as in the first half of the *Inferno*, but in a setting inverted like a mirror image (reaching upwards, rather than downwards), as the perfect preamble to the perfection of the celestial Paradise.

A brook running north (XXVIII 26) blocks Dante's passage, its very clear waters darkened (*'brune brune'*) by the overhanging, thickly interwoven branches and fronds of Eden's wood ('beneath / a shadow that's perpetual and *allows / no ray of sun* or moonlight

⁴¹ *'Vago già di cercar dentro e dintorno / la divina foresta spessa e viva, / ch'a li occhi temperava il nuovo giorno, / senza più aspettar, lasciai la riva, prendendo la campagna lento lento / su per lo suol che d'ogne parte auliva'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 1–6).

⁴² *'per la pineta in sul lito di Chiass'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 19–21).

⁴³ *'un'aria dolce, senza mutamento'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 7).

ever through').⁴⁴ Beyond the stream, Dante sees the beautiful Matelda, laughing and 'singing as she chooses flowers to pluck from flowers'.⁴⁵ She is the guardian of the Earthly Paradise and she moves gracefully, as though dancing, through the landscape of wonderful flowers of all colours, budding fruit trees, and the purest running waters (it is those of the river Lethe that currently separate her from Dante), accompanied by sublime angelic song: these allusions are clearly relevant to the place, unhappily lost, where 'once, the root of man was innocent'.⁴⁶

Matelda walks along the bank of the Lethe, upstream – southwards – while Dante follows her, walking in parallel along the opposite bank with Virgil and Statius, who have by now caught up with him. Soon (after fewer than about fifty paces, or thirty-five metres, XXIX 10), their direction of travel changes, curving towards the east. Dante is once again moving forward *with the sun in front of him, above the wood* (XXIX 12), so that its rays will be directly above him, as we know, in the central clearing at midday. The three pilgrims (Virgil remains silent, but has not yet left his companions) travel from west to east, just below the Lethe's course, along the horizontal diametrical radius of the west side of the Earthly Paradise, while Matelda walks alongside them, but on the other side, just above this radius.

As the four proceed, an unnaturally protracted flaring light (*'lustro'*) and a sweet melody (*'melodia dolce'*) herald the slow advance (XXIX 60), from the opposite direction, of an allegorical procession inspired by the Apocalypse (XXIX 43 and ff.). Seven seven-branched gold candlesticks light the way for a group of twenty-four elders, robed in white and crowned with fleurs-de-lys (XXIX 83 and ff.), representing the Books of the Old Testament. These are followed by four winged beasts symbolizing the Evangelists, arranged to form a square and representing the New Testament. At the centre of this square, a triumphal chariot, representing the Church Militant, is drawn by a griffin (half eagle, half lion) representing the dual nature of Christ (XXIX 108), on whose right three dancing women represent the theological virtues, while on the other side four dancing women represent the cardinal virtues. They in turn are followed by seven figures representing the seven works that comprise the New Testament, in addition to the four Gospels (Acts of the Apostles, Epistles of Paul, the Epistles of Peter, John, James and Jude, and the Apocalypse).

At a thunderclap, the spectacular procession, led by the seven candlesticks, stops in front of Dante and the other spectators. One of the twenty-four elders, who have turned reverently to face the chariot, sings three times: 'Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse' (Song of Songs 4. 8),⁴⁷ followed in chorus by all the others. Hundreds of angels respond, singing *'Benedictus qui venis'* (the words addressed to Christ as he entered Jerusalem;

⁴⁴ *'sotto l'ombra perpetua, che mai / raggiar non lascia sole ivi né luna'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 31–33).

⁴⁵ *'cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 41).

⁴⁶ *'fu innocente l'umana radice'* (*Purg.* XXVIII 142).

⁴⁷ For Dante, the 'spouse' represents wisdom invoked by humanity: see *Convivio* II, XIV 20).

John 12. 13); they then begin to throw flowers onto the chariot and all around it: ‘*Manibus ob, date lilia plenis!*’ (see *Aeneid* VI. 883).

This is the end of the section that could be given the title *Matelda* – the first two hours, from 06.00 to 08.00. The section we may call *Beatrice* – the second two hours, from 08.00 to 10.00 – now begins: this is when Beatrice appears (XXX 22 and ff.) in a cloud of flowers, wearing a white veil, a red dress and a green mantle (alluding to the three theological virtues). She comes down to the left of the chariot (on the river side, the same side as Dante) and Dante *feels* in his heart that this woman can be no other than Beatrice (XXX 31 and ff.). It is now that he notices Virgil has disappeared – a smooth handover has been effected.

Beatrice sternly initiates a sort of trial in which the accused – Dante – must give convincing proof that he has overcome the shortcomings he showed in his youth in relation to the woman he loved: Beatrice’s chief accusation, as she reminds him, is that when she died he ceased being inspired by her and began to love another, so that his great promise became deflected from the true path: ‘He turned his steps to paths that were not true. / He followed images of failing good’.⁴⁸ Beatrice ends by saying that in order to set him back on the right path, he had to see with his own eyes the suffering endured by ‘those people who are lost’ (*perdute genti?*, XXX 138); he would be allowed to drink Lethe’s water *only after* he had paid the price of sincere repentance (XXX 142–145).

Dante’s bitter tears confirm the legitimacy of the accusations and the reality of his repentance. Now that the rain of flowers has ceased, Dante can rejoice in the sight of Beatrice’s eyes, but not yet her mouth, which is still hidden by the veil. (XXXI 77 and ff.).

At this point, Matelda approaches Dante and helps him into the Lethe so that he can drink its water, while completely immersed. Emerging on the river’s other bank, Dante is accompanied into Beatrice’s presence by the dancing cardinal virtues. Here, the three theological virtues, also dancing, plead with her to show Dante the second aspect of her beauty: Beatrice unties her veil and laughs radiantly. His pardon complete, Dante looks at her in ecstasy, while Beatrice looks at the griffin, whose image changes back and forth from lion to eagle, in a sign of approval.

The procession starts moving again, returning in the opposite direction. Dante can now turn again to face the sun, which has now risen higher (XXXII 16–18): it must be *about 09.00*. The seven virtues arrange themselves on either side of the chariot (of the Church) drawn by the griffin, with Matelda, Statius and Dante following immediately behind it through the Garden of Eden, where the serpent tempted Eve to sin (XXXII 32), matching their pace to the rhythm of an angelic song (*un’angelica nota?*, XXXII 33).

⁴⁸ *volse i suoi passi per via non vera / imagini di ben seguendo false?* (*Purg.* XXX 130 and ff.).

The distance they travel is interpreted as being, according to the approximate but probably accurate calculation in Enrico Malato's commentary (Milan 2021), equivalent to the range of three flights of an arrow⁴⁹: the centre of the Earthly Paradise cannot be far away. The procession arrives at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and surrounds it. It is now completely withered ('its every branch was stripped of greenery'⁵⁰), but as soon as the griffin ties the chariot's shaft to the tree's trunk, it sprouts leaves and vermilion flowers, clearly a reference to the blood spilt by Christ on Golgotha (XXXII 52–60). It is now *about 10.00*, and the beginning of the third and final two-hour section (*10.00 to 12.00* on the sixth day) covering events taking place in the Earthly Paradise; we might give it the title *The Two Trees*, for reasons that will shortly become clear. Overcome by the power of the vision and the celestial song that accompanies it, Dante falls asleep (XXXII 68).

Dante is woken by a shining light similar to that of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (XXXII 72). Beatrice, sitting beneath the reinvigorated greenery of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, is surrounded by the seven virtues, while the griffin and his retinue rise back up into the sky (XXXII 88–90): it is presumably *about 11.00*. Beatrice now invites Dante to witness the imminent and final spectacle that takes place in Purgatory, insisting that he should write about it on his return to the other hemisphere (XXXII 103–105).

An (imperial) eagle now crashes into the tree and onto the chariot of the Church, damaging them both (the persecution of Christians), followed by a vixen (Heresy), quickly chased away by Beatrice, and then a Dragon (Apocalypse 12. 3–9), which pulls out part of the Chariot's floor with a flick of its tail (Satan creating the schism between East and West). The remains of the Chariot is covered with eagle feathers (an allusion to the damaging *Donatio Costantiniana*). Thus feathered and transformed, the chariot sprouts three two-horned heads on the pole and a further four heads, with single horns, one on each of the four sides: seven heads (the seven deadly sins) and ten horns, just like the Beast of the Apocalypse (17: 1–18), that is to say the Antichrist. Above all this, seated as if on a throne, the 'loose-wrapped whore' of Apocalypse 18. 7 ('*puttana sciolta*', XXXII 149), under the protection of a giant who repeatedly kisses her (the papacy subject to the French Throne). When the giant spots the whore looking lasciviously at Dante, he beats her mercilessly, unties the chariot and drags it – and the whore – into the wood (an allusion to the papacy relocating to Avignon, XXXII 154–160).

The Old Testament lamentations over the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, recited by the virtues ('*Deus, venerunt gentes*', Psalm 78. 1), counterbalance Christ's words of hope in the Gospel of John ('In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me', John 16. 18). With the fire of faith reignited by Beatrice, the

⁴⁹ '*tre voli di saetta*' (*Purg.* XXXII 34 and ff.).

⁵⁰ '*dispogliata / di foglie e d'altra fronda in ciascun ramo*' (*Purg.* XXXII 38 and ff.).

little band (the seven virtues in front, followed by Beatrice and Dante, with Matelda and Statius behind) continue their climb towards the summit of the Earthly Paradise.

In that climate of eternal spring, time passes without seeming to do so, when suddenly *the sun, having almost reached midday*, as usual seems to slow down. The virtues in front come to a halt before a rock at the edge of the Garden's eastern half (where Dante will not set foot). Here, the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris flow from a single spring before separating, as it were reluctantly (XXXIII 112–114).

The seven virtues find themselves beneath the outermost branches of the *Tree of Life, which is not expressly named*. Perhaps partly as a result of the position of the sun, which is now almost vertical, these branches filter the sun's rays less thoroughly than the inner foliage ('the edges of that shade'⁵¹); they are (therefore) *on the edge of a clearing at the centre of the Garden*. From here, before long, at *midday*, the best and most important hour of the day (Dante believed it was at this unique, dazzling moment that Christ died on the Cross at Golgotha, thereby redeeming humankind and renewing Creation), Dante and Beatrice will be raised up into Paradise.

To the right and just a little south of the small group, is the spring from which gush the waters of the Lethe which, as we know, first flow west and then turn north, while on the other side the waters of the Eunoe, whose source is also there, flow directly south.

Guided once more by Matelda, and with Beatrice's permission, Dante drinks from the second river and regains his memory of every good thing done, refreshing his vital forces. We have reached the end of the second canticle and at last Dante feels 'pure and prepared to rise towards the stars.'⁵²

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⁵¹ 'al fin d'un'ombra smorta', (*Purg.* XXXIII 109).

⁵² 'puro e disposto a salire alle stelle' (*Purg.* XXXIII 145).

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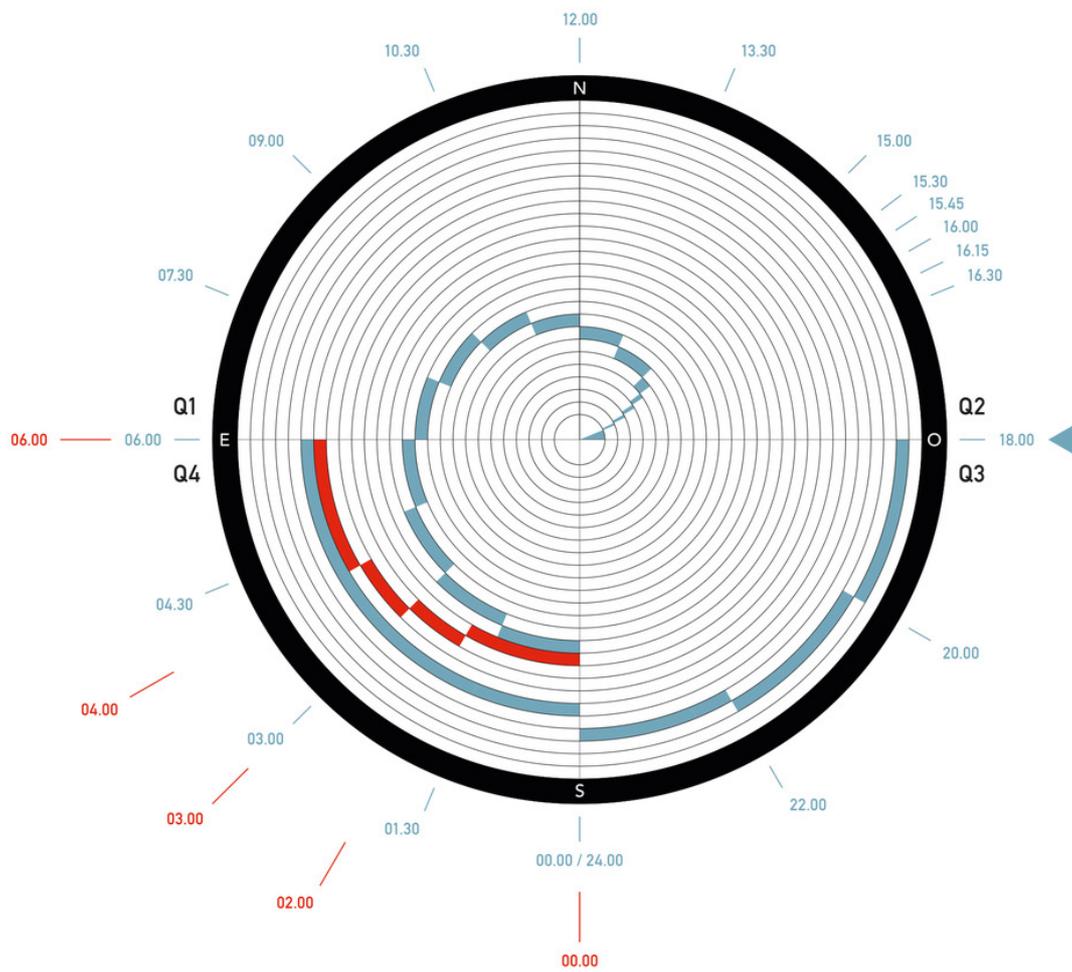


Figure 1. Diagram of Dante's journey through the Inferno, 2021, elaborated by Lorenzo La Rocca.

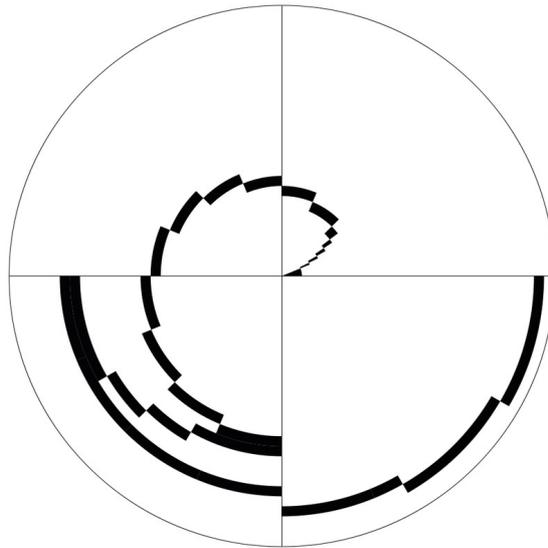


Figure 2. Diagram of Dante's journey through the Inferno, 2021, elaborated by Lorenzo La Rocca.

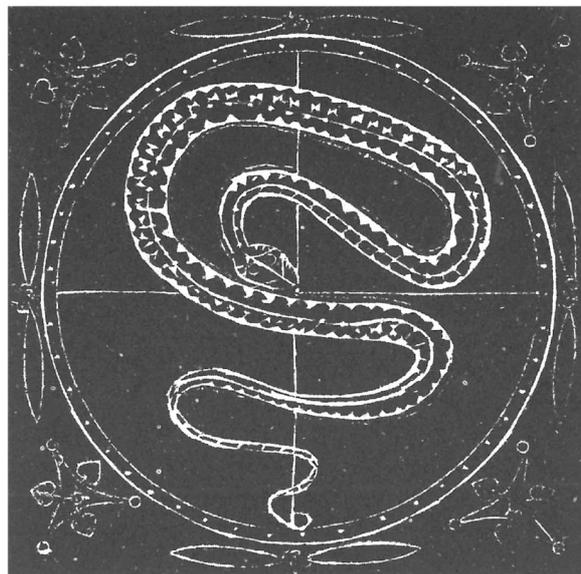


Figure 3. Giordano Bruno, *Prometheus*, in 'Articuli centum et sexaginta', tav. XXXVIII, 1588, in Giordano Bruno, *Corpus iconographicum*, ed. by Mino Gabriele (Milan: Adelphi, 2001), p. 431.

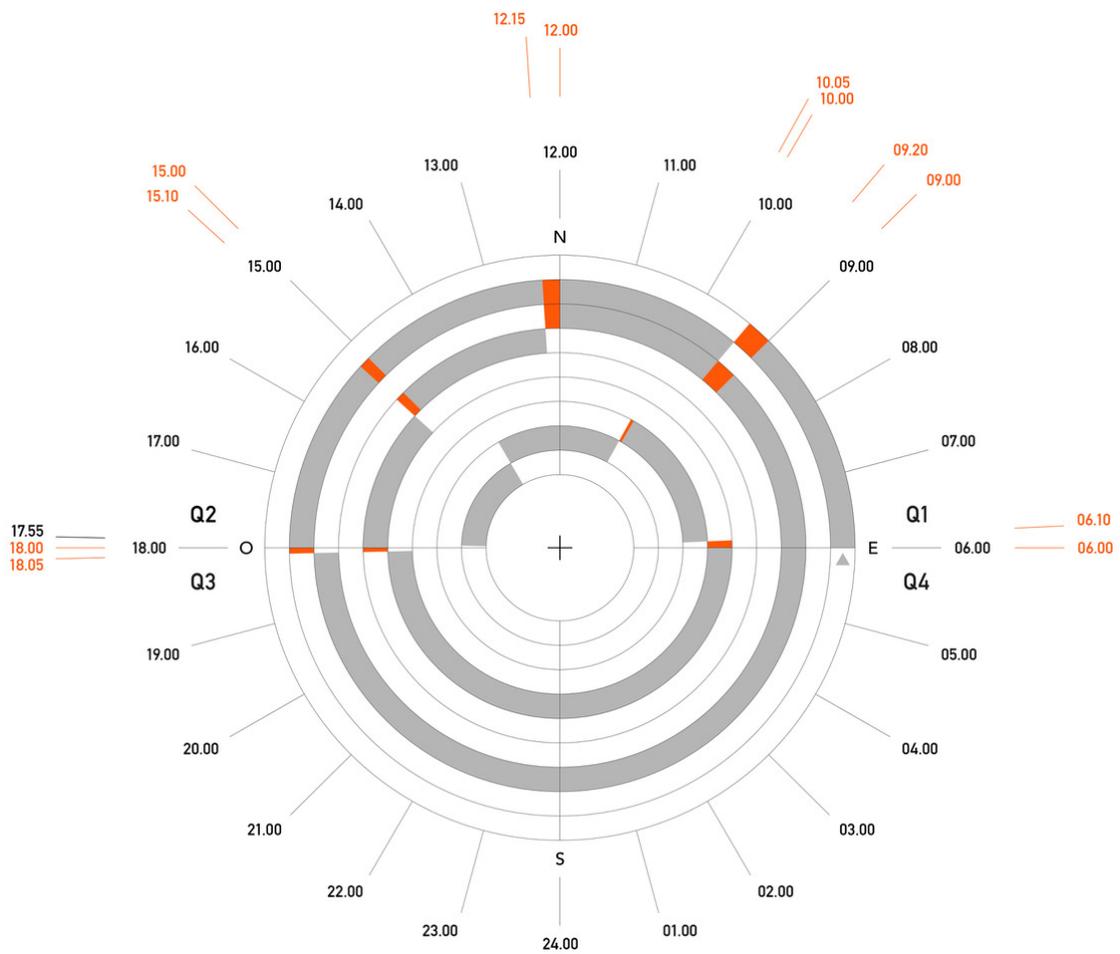


Figure 4. Diagram of Dante's journey through the Purgatorio, 2022, elaborated by Lorenzo La Rocca.