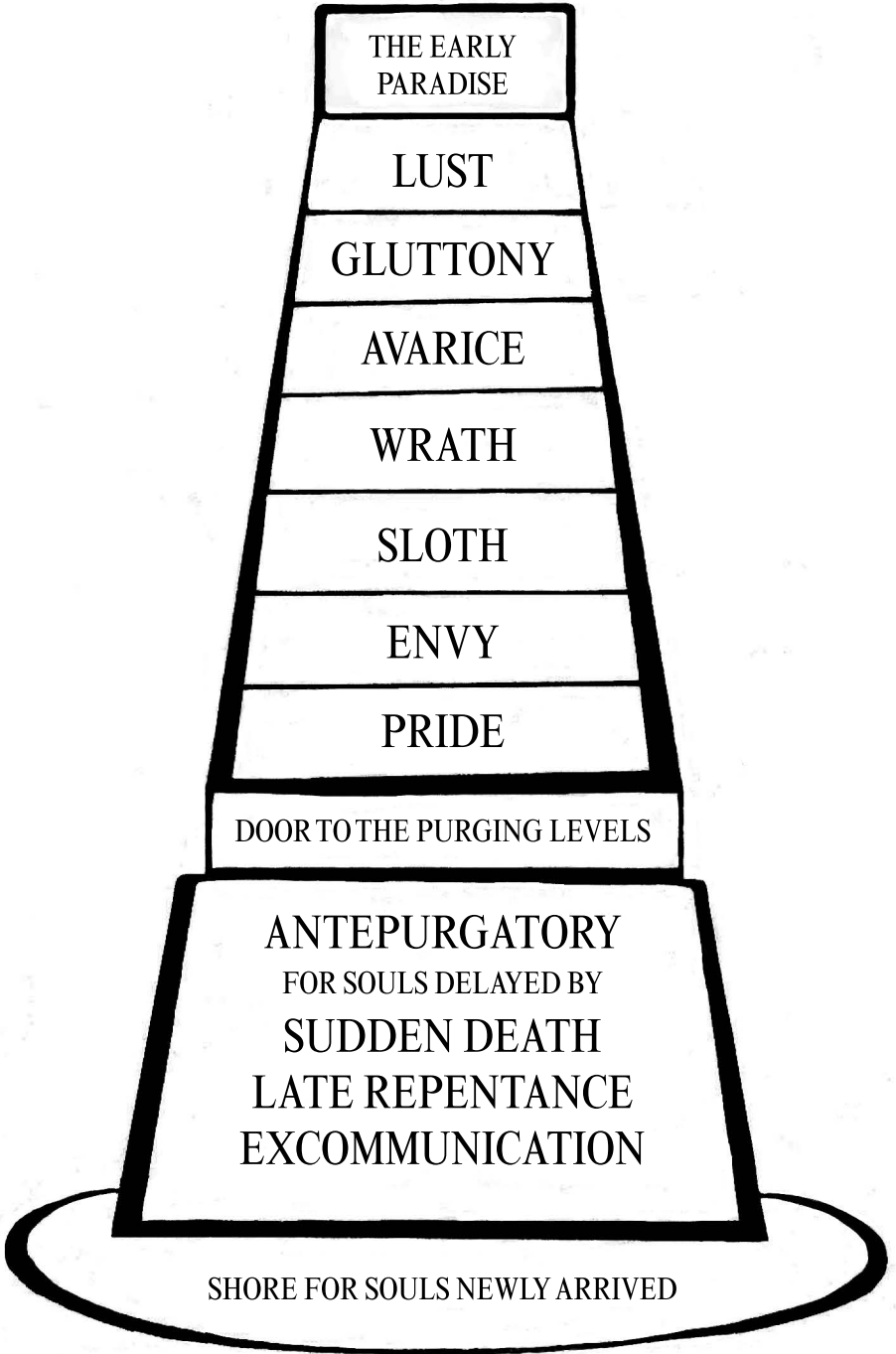


REDEMPTION



PLAN OF MOUNT PURGATORY

1: Cato, Warden of the Shore

- 1 The little ship of my intelligence
furls sails, drops anchor, leaves the cruel sea.
I stand upon the second kingdom's beach
- 4 and now can sing of where each sinful soul
is purified, made good by reaching up
to paradise. O teach me, poetry!
- 7 Be with me Calliope, holy muse
of epic song who treats voices that sing
of lesser things as if unpardonable
- 10 magpie chattering! In Heaven's clear height
I saw sweet blueness deepening down to
the horizon where that lover's planet
- 13 Venus gladdened my eyes, shining above
the constellation of the fishes, now
rising from the sea. To the right I saw
- 16 a galaxy unknown to living folk
except the first, before they came to sin –
four great stars, points of a brilliant cross.
- 19 Poor northern sky, to be without that sight!
Dropping my eyes I saw beside me one
lit by that starlight, bearded and white-haired,

- his face so full of venerable might 22
 I wanted to adore him as his son.
 “What are you,” he demanded, “you that flee
- eternal punishment? What guide, what lamp 25
 lit your path out? Has Heaven changed its decree,
 letting the damned souls free? Say by what right
- you stand below my cliffs!” By word and hand 28
 my guide made me bow knee and head then said,
 “We have not come by our own will. Hear why.
- When this man stood in peril of his soul 31
 Heaven sent a lady, saying I should
 lead him through Hell up to the highest good.
- Now he has seen the deeps. May I show now 34
 those sinners purified upon the steeps
 where you preside? Be kind to him. He seeks
- the liberty that you in Utica 37
 perished to keep, shedding your coat of clay
 to proudly wear it on the Judgement Day.
- Our journey breaks no law. This man still lives. 40
 Minos never judged him or me. I dwell
 in the virtuous ring of Hell, close to
- chaste Marcia, the wife who worships you. 43
 For her sake let us climb the blessed stairs
 that lead to Heaven’s grace. When I return
- to Limbo she will hear how kind you are.” 46
 I saw this warden of the purging hill
 was Cato, Caesar’s foe, who stabbed himself

- 49 rather than see the Roman Empire kill
the glorious Republic that he loved.
Shaking his head he said, “Aye, Marcia
- 52 deserves all kindness, but since she has gone
beyond death’s river, Acheron, and I
stay here, why mention her? Since you obey
- 55 Heaven’s commands you need not use her name
for I obey them too. Lead him you guide
down to this island’s shore. Above the beach
- 58 in soft mud grow the reeds that never die.
Pluck one of these and tie it round his waist.
Wash his face first. Angels hate the sight
- 61 of grime from Hell. After, don’t come back here.
The rising sun will show a better place
to start your climb. Goodbye.” He disappeared.
- 64 I stood up when my leader said, “Dear child,
this plain slopes seaward. Let’s do as he told.”
A morning breeze fleeing before the dawn
- 67 came from the distant glitter of the sea.
We crossed that lonely plain like wanderers
seeking a path who fear they seek in vain.
- 70 The low sun’s level rays began to warm
the turf we trod, when my guide paused beside
a boulder’s shadow on a patch of grass
- 73 still misted with pearls of dew. I halted,
knowing what he would do. He stooped, wet hands,
washed my face clean of crusts left by fearful,

pitiful tears, restoring how I looked 76
before invading Hell. We reached the shore
no living foot had ever touched before.

Here, as instructed, Virgil plucked a reed, 79
and as he bound it round my waist I saw
a miracle, for where that rush once stood

sprang up another, just as tall and good. 82

2: Newcomers

- 1 By now the sun had left the northern sky
where at high noon it lights Jerusalem,
leaving the Ganges in the deepest night.
- 4 Seen from our shore the sky above the sea
took on a rosy glow, into which slid
that golden sphere of light. We stood and gazed
- 7 like wanderers who tarry on a road
before their journey starts. Then I beheld
beneath the sun, across the ocean floor
- 10 a sight I hope to see again – brightness
speeding so swiftly to us that no flight
of bird could equal it. When I gazed back
- 13 from questioning my master with a look,
it had grown brighter. On each side I saw
a whiteness I could not make out, above
- 16 something becoming clearer as it neared.
My master did not say a word until
the whitenesses appeared as wings, and then
- 19 seeing who moved that ship he cried, “Bend knees,
clasp hands, bow down before a cherubim
of God, for you will soon meet more of these.

See how without a sail or oar the ship 22
 is driven by his Heaven-pointing wings –
 by pure eternal plumes that never moult.”

The brightness of this dazzling bird of God 25
 made me half close my eyes. He stood astern
 of ship so light that the prow cleft no wave.

More than a hundred souls within it sat 28
 singing King David’s psalm, *When Israel*
escaped from Egypt’s land, chanting *Amen*

on feeling that their vessel touched the strand. 31
 The angel signed the cross over these souls
 who sprang ashore. His ferry sped away

fast as it came. Passengers on the beach 34
 stood looking round like strangers anywhere.
 The sun had chased stars from the sky when one

approached and said, “Sirs, there is a mountain 37
 we must climb. We do not know where to start,
 can you show the way?” My guide said, “We two

are pilgrims just as ignorant as you, 40
 come by a road so rough that further climb
 to us will be child’s play.” A whisper grew

among these spirits that I lived and breathed. 43
 They stared as if I were good news. One face
 I knew, so ran to embrace that man. Alas,

my hands passed through his shade and hit my chest. 46
 He smiled, withdrew. I cried, “Stay Casella –
 I love you – tunes you gave my poems

- 49 make them popular! Why die before me?
And months ago! Why so long getting here?"
The sweet voice I knew said, "And I love you,
- 52 though gladly Heavenward bound. Remember
exactly thirteen centuries ago
Christ died for us. Our Pope proclaims this year
- 55 a Jubilee. All who hear mass in Rome
will have their sins forgiven. Hope of that
draws hoards of ancient dying pilgrims there.
- 58 The port for all not damned to Hell is where
Tiber joins the sea. Queues for that ferry
are very long these days, hence some delay
- 61 not troublesome to me. Heaven's decree
is best, but say why you stand *breathing* here!"
I said, "I live, so must return this way
- 64 when dead, like you, by the same ferry. Please,
if death has not deprived you of your art
sing verses I once wrote to cheer my heart."
- 67 He sang, *Love that converses with my mind*,
so sweetly that it sounds within me still.
My master and the others listened too,
- 70 as if it wholly occupied their will
till, like a thunderclap, Cato appeared
shouting, "You lazy louts, why linger here?"
- 73 Run to the mountain! There strip off the sins
hiding your souls from God!" As pigeon flock
pecking the ground for seed, at sudden shock,

explodes into the air, these travellers 76
in panic fled that terrible old man
and spread across the plain, at the same time

racing blindly uphill, wholly unsure 79
what he or she was bound to find ahead.
Having no clue what better we could do

I and my leader were not far behind. 82

3: The Foothills

- 1 Our pace became more dignified upon
the foothills of that mount where climbing joins
goodness and reason. Since he had let me halt
- 4 to hear a song, Virgil had said no word.
His noble mind, believing no fault small,
suffered the sting of being in the wrong.
- 7 The rising sun shone rosy on our backs.
I gladly viewed the upward slope ahead
then felt it incomplete, for only one
- 10 shadow lay on the ground before my feet.
Afraid that suddenly I climbed alone
I gasped with dread. My comforter enquired,
- 13 “Why, even now, do you distrust my aid?
In Naples, underneath a monument
my shadow is entombed among my dust.
- 16 That I am shadowless is not more strange
than all the starry spheres of Heaven are.
Admiring wonder is the right response
- 19 to everything beyond your wisdom’s range.
Thought alone *cannot* know the infinite
eternal Three-in-One creating all.

- If human science could bring men to God 22
Mary need never have borne Jesus Christ,
or we in Limbo live unsatisfied
- in outer Hell, far from the greatest good 25
where Homer, Plato, Aristotle dwell
with many more.” He fell silent again,
- staring with troubled face on ground we trod 28
until we reached Mount Purgatory’s base.
The wildest mountainside in Italy
- would look an easy staircase seen beside 31
this cliff too sheer, this granite precipice
too high and smooth for any mountaineer.
- My master sighed and murmured, “Lacking wings, 34
we need to find a slope that legs can use.
It must exist. Do we turn left or right?”
- He pondered where the ground met the rock wall. 37
I, looking round, saw, a sling-shot away,
a group of souls approaching from our left,
- walking so slowly that at first I thought 40
they did not move at all. I shouted out,
“See Master! These may know where we should go.”
- He looked, then spoke with confidence renewed. 43
“Indeed they may, my son. Let us enquire
and never cease to hope.” A thousand steps
- brought us to where the flock of souls, like sheep, 46
walked timidly, heads bowed, behind a few
dignified leaders pacing slowly too.

- 49 “Hail, holy ones!” cried Virgil. “You have died
as Christians, so are sure of Heaven’s grace.
Unlike you we must ascend at once. Please
- 52 where is the right place? Do you know of one?”
The leaders halted, stared and then drew back.
Their flock was scared and huddled to the rock.
- 55 My shadow on their track caused this dismay.
Virgil declared, “You need not feel surprise.
I will explain. My friend is still alive,
- 58 his body therefore splits the light of day.
Heaven demands we climb without delay.
Where can we do so?” “Turn and go with us,”
- 61 a leader of these good souls said. We did,
walked at a slow pace. “Perhaps,” said one,
“you know my face?” I looked. He was fair-haired,
- 64 handsome, debonair, an eyebrow broken
by a scar. I admitted I did not,
whereupon, smiling, “Look at this,” he said,
- 67 opening his vest to show in his chest
a much worse wound, adding “I am Manfred,
ruler of Sicily, Tory warlord
- 70 who defied the Pope, so died by the sword.
As my blood flowed I gave my soul with tears
to Him who saves all sinners who repent,
- 73 even of crimes as horrible as mine.
The victors built a cairn over my bones.
He that comes to me I will not cast out,

Christ said that but Pope Clement disagreed, 76
had the cairn broken, bones scattered around,
on unholy ground battered by wind and rain.

We in this troop though excommunicate, 79
will be redeemed at last, though for each year
unconfessed souls normally wait to climb

the purifying stair to Heaven's gate, 82
we under papal ban wait thirty more.
That time can be reduced by living souls.

I beg you please when back on Earth again, 85
tell my daughter Constance, Aragon's queen,
mother of kings, to pray well for my soul.

Despite Pope Clement I am not in Hell." 88