

## PREFACE

Another book on Dante? There are already so many – one might object – often of great worth for how they illustrate the various aspects of this great poetic work: the historical significance, literary, philosophical and theological sources, Dante’s socio-political beliefs, his personal life, his relationship with Beatrice, or with his wife and children, and so on and so forth.

But there is still something that eludes even the most thorough critics and commentators. The *Divina Commedia*, as the poet himself indicated, is “polisensa” (containing various possible meanings), the principal four being literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic. Of these, the last meaning – spiritual and transcendental – has been overlooked by most commentators. This has resulted in an unsatisfactory and incomplete interpretation of the *Commedia*, which risks appearing as a work linked to a remote historical epoch, to be studied in a purely intellectual spirit in relation to its historical, philosophical, and literary characteristics, while its central vision would no longer seem relevant to us.

The *Commedia*, however, cannot be understood through the rational intellect alone. Like all great works possessing a profound sense of the human and the sacred, it needs to be rediscovered “spiritually” by each successive epoch, just as Dante reinterpreted and experienced anew the values of antiquity according to the spirit of his own age.

The period in which Dante wrote the *Commedia* was marked by profound and chaotic changes. It was a time of upheaval when the old institutions of empire and church were starting to collapse and new forms of government like the communes, republics, seignories, and nations, were emerging. Certainly in many ways the political aims behind Dante’s work are no longer relevant. But the same cannot be said for the fundamentals of his political doctrine based on principles

of discipline and justice in government, and on overcoming individual and collective egoism so that the qualities of every race, nation, and individual may emerge creatively. For Dante the inner quest for self-knowledge is never divorced from social aims intended to further enrich human existence and to make life worth living despite its contradictions.

Today, as well, we are caught in a period of upheaval. This is the dawning of an era marked by far-reaching political and technological changes, an age which requires a new and wider synthesis of mankind. In the words of Aurobindo in his introduction to the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Our age has done away with God, and in his place has raised man to divine status and society to that of a manifest idol".<sup>1</sup>

Solidarity and social altruism, too, are on the verge of becoming mere travesties. When practical action is devoid of any contact with the sacred – that is, with the profound spiritual essence which Jung calls "the Self" – society can only experience its condition unilaterally, passing from one extreme to the other. The human spirit redefines itself endlessly, hence the continuous need for new syntheses. As we cannot, obviously, return to the past, we must re-discover the instruments used by our forebears to recover their own syntheses. The entire spiritual heritage of mankind, condensed into the great religions and philosophical systems, must provide us with a basis for a new balance, a renewed harmony embracing the wisdom of the past and the fresh requirements of our own era.<sup>2</sup>

In Dante's work, a staggering synthesis of the achievements of preceding ages, it is necessary to seek out the undying message which unfolds like a song through the centuries, and translate it into terms that will be comprehensible to the spirit of present-day mankind.

If we abandon our prejudices and immerse ourselves in the *Commedia's* "three worlds" with a view to patient research, we may discover many verities concerning man's inner life. Only in this century has modern psychology begun to deal with this branch of knowledge, but the laws governing the psyche – for all the little we know of this mystery – were already there in Dante's work at the beginning of the fourteenth century, expressed in the powerful images produced by the creative genius that was his destiny, his joy, and his agony. Therefore it is contemporary and fruitful to rediscover the values Dante struggled to uphold and, in his company, once more undertake

that journey into the inner man to rediscover how we are made in an effort to understand how we can achieve transformation. Besides, it is the poet himself who continually urges the reader to go beyond the literal and seek a deeper meaning. He wants us to understand that there are no shortcuts on the inner path, and that all individuals must pass through their own hell if they sincerely wish to bring about changes in their attitude to life. In this sense the work's many "obscure passages", which cannot be interpreted rationally, emerge as essential stages in the quest for wholeness.

With its deep understanding of human nature and the psychological roots of human behaviour, Dante's penetrating knowledge of life remains vitally relevant. The "secret things" his poetry has transmitted have emerged more clearly in recent years with the discovery of the psychology of the unconscious. Naturally Dante speaks using the language and images of his time, yet the psychic reality we encounter in his work is so archetypal as to be of enduring relevance to today's world.

### *This Book*

In this book it will not be possible to follow up all the possible extensions of the *Commedia*. This would involve an enormous amount of work. I will confine myself to referring, by way of quotes and footnotes, to those aspects of Carl Gustav Jung's work I consider particularly pertinent.

It is precisely because it involves archetypal material – and therefore contains an infinity of meanings that can never be entirely and rationally explained – that each study of the *Commedia* can further understanding of the work. From this point of view, specialised and learned studies of varying kinds all have a positive contribution to make. If, on the other hand, the overriding concern is to enter into the controversy between opposing schools of thought, each piece of research risks becoming a mere verbal pastiche, exclusively concerned with demonstrating its own correctness and the error of other interpretations. Jung observes of the productions of the unconscious:

But we cannot boast that we are, at present, in possession of a generally

satisfying theory or explanation of this complicated phenomenon. We still know far too little about the nature of the unconscious psyche for that. In this field there is still an infinite amount of patient and unprejudiced work to be done, which no one will begrudge. For the purpose of research is not to imagine that one possesses the theory which alone is right, but, doubting all theories, to approach gradually nearer the truth. (Jung, *On the Nature of Dreams*. CW VIII, para. 569.)

I, for my part, have tried to bear in mind the very aims Dante set himself in writing this work, that is:

to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity. (Epistle X, 15)

My own contribution to understanding the *Commedia* is offered in just such a spirit. Far from presuming to exhaust the multiple and complex aspects of the work, I have set out to examine the archetypal elements of Dante's journey from a psychological point of view, in order to help the men of today to an improved understanding of themselves.

### *Psychology, Metaphysics, Religion*

To avoid misunderstandings it should be made clear that psychology examines and renders conscious symbolic images emerging either from the unconscious or finding expression in visionary works.

In this way psychology actualizes the unconscious urge to consciousness. It is, in fact, the coming to consciousness of the psychic process, but it is not, in the deeper sense, an explanation of this process, for no explanation of the psychic can be anything other than the living process of the psyche itself. (Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*, CW VIII, para. 429.)

To evoke the inner visions of his alchemical-initiatory experience the poet uses symbols, the most appropriate instruments for giving perceptible form to objects which cannot be fully understood by the conscious mind. But the psychological interpretation must not be so presumptuous as to believe it has said the last word.

But I do not imagine for a moment that the psychological interpretation of a mystery must necessarily be the last word. If it is a mystery it must still have other aspects. Certainly I believe that psychology can unravel the secrets of alchemy, but it will not lay bare the secret of these secrets. (Jung, *Mysterium coniunctionis. The Personification of the Opposites*, CW XIV, para. 213.)

However this is in no way to underestimate the fact that metaphysical views are of the utmost importance for the well-being of the human psyche. (Jung, *On the Nature of Dreams*, CW VIII, para. 568.)

Nor is it possible to rule out the influence of religious phenomena on the psyche, which is the only means of registering them.<sup>4</sup> Jung confines himself to describing the facts and his direct experience of the archetypal images emerging in the psyche, stressing that it is impossible for psychology to define “the nature of the entity” behind the image, because:

All this is a step in the evolution of a higher consciousness on its way to unknown goals, and is not metaphysics as ordinarily understood. To that extent it is only “psychology”, but to that extent, too, it is experienceable, understandable and – thank God – real, a reality we can do something with, a living reality full of possibilities. (Jung, *Commentary on the Secret of the Golden Flowers*, CW XIII, para. 82.)

It will become clear that Dante, too, makes psychological use of theological terms. His experiences, emotions, visions, and reactions are not defined but “described”. Through the voice of Beatrice he stresses how divine names are only external forms for understanding the “other”.

For this same reason Scripture condescends  
to your intelligence, attributing  
with *other* meaning, hands and feet to God  
and Holy Church presents to you archangels  
With human faces, Gabriel and Michael  
[Par. IV, 43-47]

This study, then, will deal with the images the poet transmits to us. but it will set out do this without violating the numinous “clothed” in the image, which is, in any case, beyond the understanding of the

