

## 5. TIME AND SPACE IN THE COMEDY

Dante fixes the beginning of the quest in the spring equinox of the year 1300. It is the season of rebirth, the period in which all initiations are generally celebrated.

The journey commences symbolically on the evening of Maundy Thursday, when the poet finds himself in the wood. After the "dark night of the soul", at dawn, on Good Friday, Dante encounters the Mount, the beasts and Virgil. On the evening of Good Friday he enters through Hell's Gate. It takes him one and a half days to pass through Hell, escaping from Lucifer at midnight on Holy Saturday. On the morning of Easter Sunday (9-10 April, 1300) he re-emerges to on the shore of Purgatory to "behold the stars once more". His ascent of Mount Purgatory takes three days and on the morning of the Wednesday after Easter he ascends to the heavens in just one day.

Clearly Dante undertakes his journey in imitation of the passion (night in the wood), death (the days in hell) and resurrection (the ascent into the heavens) of Christ, and by so doing enacts an exemplary journey through the Christian mysteries.

The descent into the infernal regions is an essential characteristic of this journey. Such a descent also provides indispensable knowledge of the corporeal aspects of man in the very realm where "rational Virgil" attempts to throw light on the transpersonal instances that regulate human behaviour. Awareness like this is essential to the process of transforming the knowledge acquired in the arduous course of the *mundificatio* that takes place in the *Purgatorio*. Only after this process of purifying "the heart" will the ascent into the heavens be possible.

The *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* are psychic "states" perceived as eternal; indeed they correspond to archetypal situations and are consequently part of the collective unconscious, which also communicates a sense of eternity. These two *cantiche* present visualizations of the contrasting archetypal behaviour that, according to the alchemical-

hermetic view, affect man due to the influence of the stars; they are, then, not really human conditions but “transcendent states”.

The authentically human state is found in the *Purgatorio*. This is where the dimension of time, as measured by the rising and setting of the Sun and the Moon, and the sequence of day and night, first appears. Besides “phenomenal” time, the *Purgatorio* also features a temporal dimension which is essentially psychological. In terms of “duration”, this dimension is considerably dilated, evoking the difficulties and patience required to transform limitations into virtues (to integrate the Shadow, psychologically speaking).

If space in the *Commedia* is carefully examined in geometric terms, it emerges as analogous to the “state of consciousness” the poet passes through in the course of his journey. The poem is an inner space projected outwards, a “cosmo-psychogramme” similar to Oriental mandalas.

In geometric-space terms, this zone is expressed in the form of an infinite sphere, which is the most complete symbol of the Self. Expressed in terms of spiritual experience, it is a point without dimensions. The space contained in the mandala of the *Commedia* is an unfolding space-time impression of how the poet’s consciousness gradually changes as he pursues his course. As his awareness increases, the poet’s inner vision undergoes continuous changes, assuming the aspects that he himself projects during the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Everything takes place in “the most secret chamber of the heart”, where – if it has become “a gentle heart” through a process of purification – theophany, or the appearance of the inner God, the Self, will occur.

The poet’s way lies between the two poles of the psyche, between the instinctual-biological pole linked to the Ego (*Inferno*) and the instinctual-spiritual pole leading to the Self (*Paradiso*). The stages of his growth are mapped out by the journey. In effect his path lies through a virtual space and it can only be revealed in space and time through the poet’s gradual experience of it.

Similarly, in the East, an adept or Lama will complete a mandala, which will then help stimulate a personal experience in those who are able to revive or interpret the symbols it contains.<sup>1</sup>

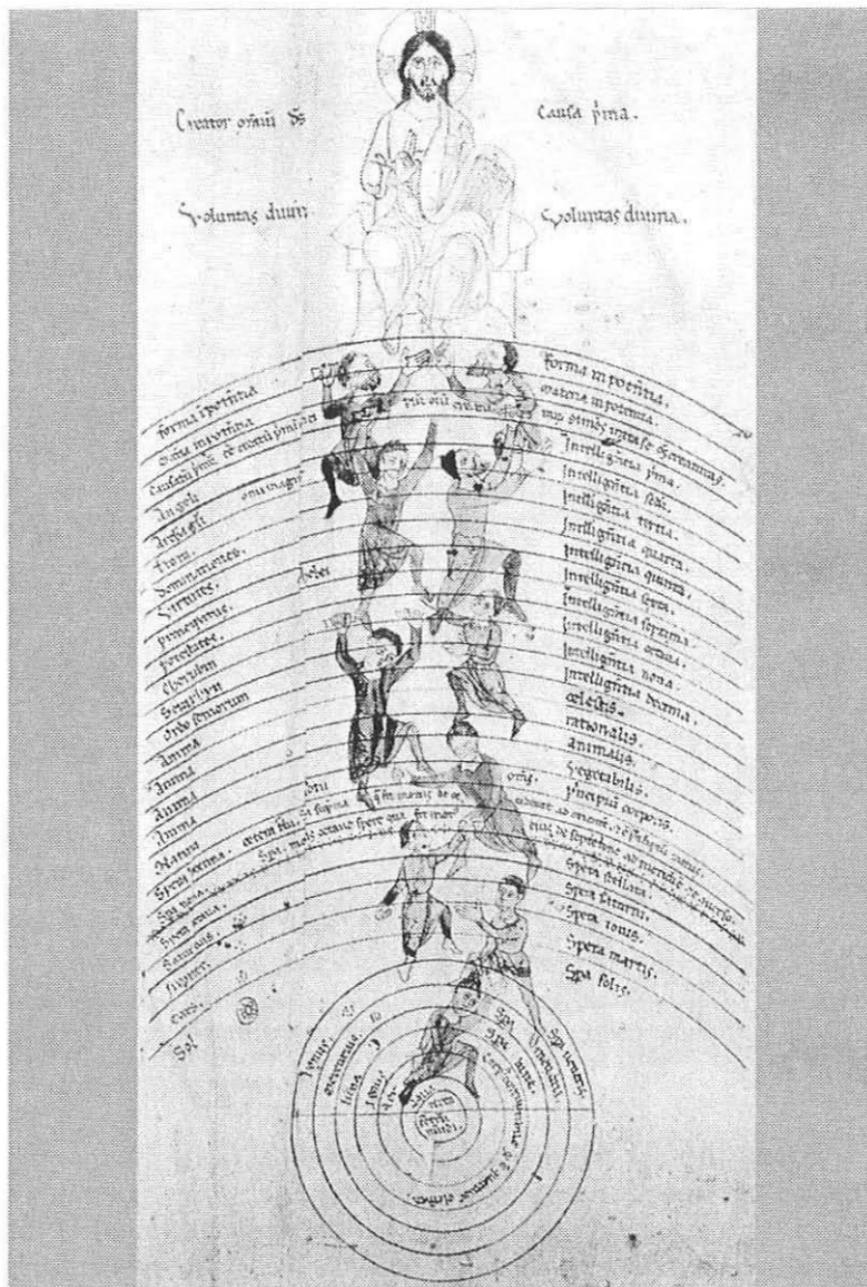


Figure 1. *Initiates ascending the Planetary Spheres* (from T. Burckhardt, *Alchimie, Thoth, Editiones Basilienses, Basilea 1975*).

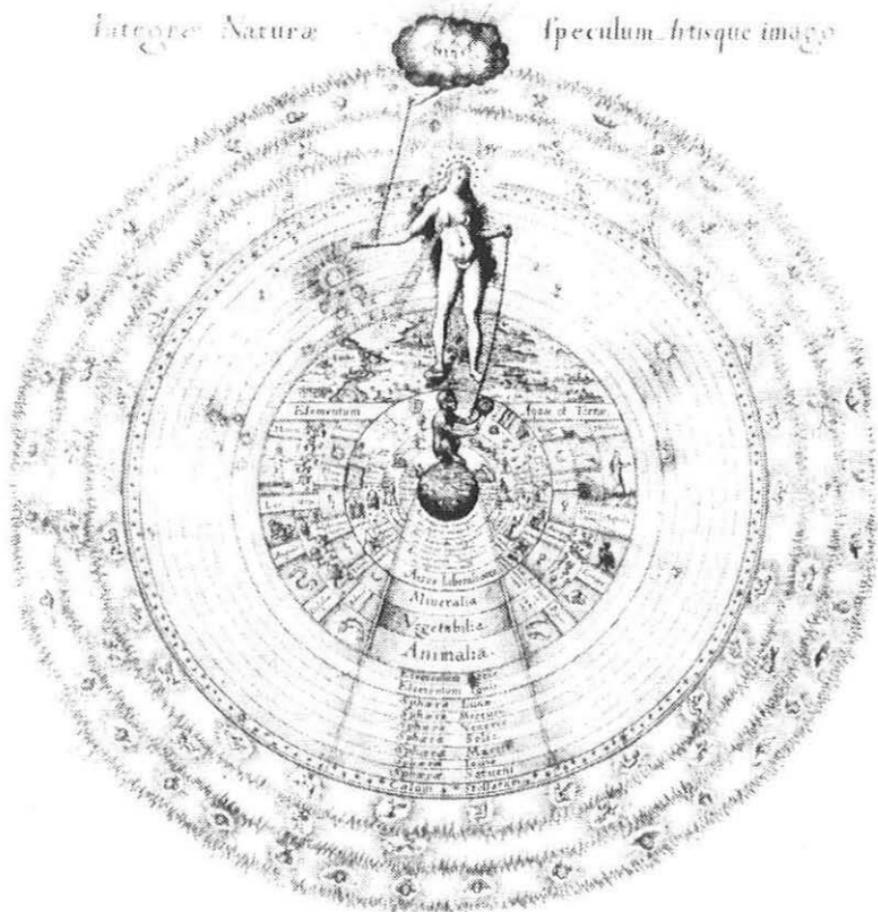


Figure 2. *Guided by God, the Anima Mundi leads men from Earth to Heaven* (Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi*, 1617, taken from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*, C.W. XII para. 52, fig. 8).

Dante's mandala expresses the world-view of that period, as can be seen in certain analogies with other mandalas that have come down to us from the alchemists.<sup>2</sup> In them we find again the motif of the earth and its four elements, surrounded by the heavenly spheres which are supported by the seven planets; these are being used as steps by the men who scale them, helping each other on the ascent. Among them we also find the image of the *Anima Mundi* uniting Earth and the heavens (analogous to Beatrice mediatrix), as well as

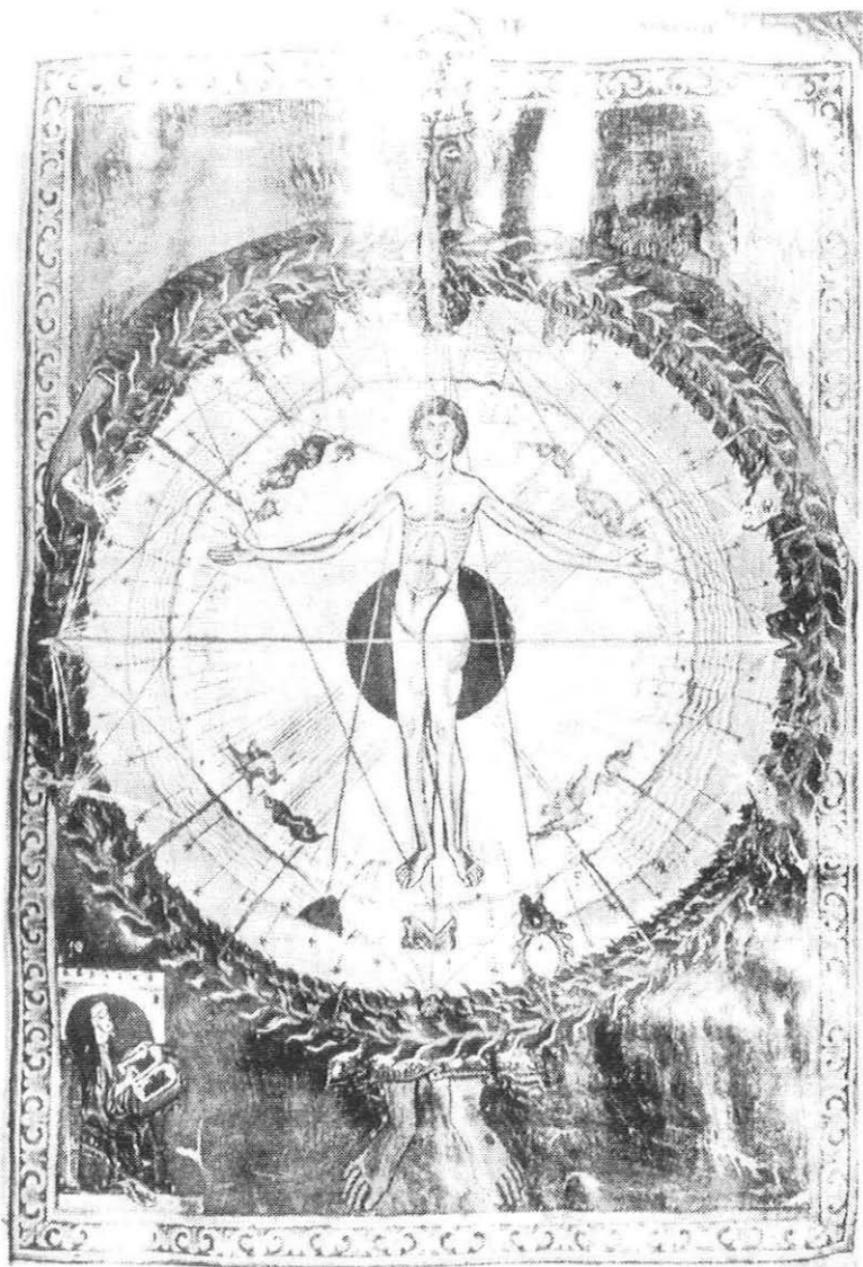


Figure 3. *The Anthropos, image of microcosm and macrocosm, spreading itself through the entire universe (Hildegard von Bingen, 12th. Century, taken from Jung's Psychology and Alchemy, C.W. XII para. 456, fig. 195).*

that of the Earth connected to the celestial regions by the *Anthropos* (Christ). Motifs that take the form of a mandala are the spontaneous products of the unconscious: these cannot be produced at will but emerge as though dictated by an inner impulse.<sup>3</sup> There can be no other explanation for the analogies between Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso* and those belonging to other traditions.<sup>4</sup>

In Dante's mandala human consciousness passes through ten symbolic states, and each state is experienced three times in the course of the trial of earth (*Inferno*), water and air (*Purgatorio*) and fire (*Paradiso*). It is an arduous route which unwinds in a spiral form. Even the rifts opened by Christ during the harrowing of hell permit transit through the rings and circles of the pit. The fact that the number ten is repeated four times in the course of the poem is significant because ten is the symbolic number of the Universal Man, the *Anthropos*, the Self, in other words, the real subject of the work: the Great Man<sup>5</sup> hidden within us all. For other mystics too, among them St. John of the Cross,<sup>6</sup> the spiritual ascent of the soul is marked by ten distinct phases.

### 5.1 *Cosmogony and Cosmography*

The etymological meaning of cosmogony is "the origin and formation of the universe", while cosmography is the "objective description" of that phenomenon. When man develops a cosmography, the external order he creates is the projection of an internal order which he then becomes aware of. Each civilisation produces its own cosmography, which varies according to its inner vision; a new version does not, however, cancel a preceding one but completes it.

Dante's cosmography is taken from the medieval model, itself based on Alexandrine-Hellenistic hermetic conceptions. This "cosmo-psychogramme" leads to a knowledge of the Self, just as Ibn'Arabi had affirmed: "Know who you are and you will know your Self, your Lord".<sup>7</sup>

One original aspect of Dante's conception must be underlined: his clear sense of the two poles of attraction that influence the human consciousness. The Self comprises everything. Like an infinite sphere, it is paradoxically a point devoid of dimensions. Around it revolve the angelic intelligences, which impart motion and formal attributes to

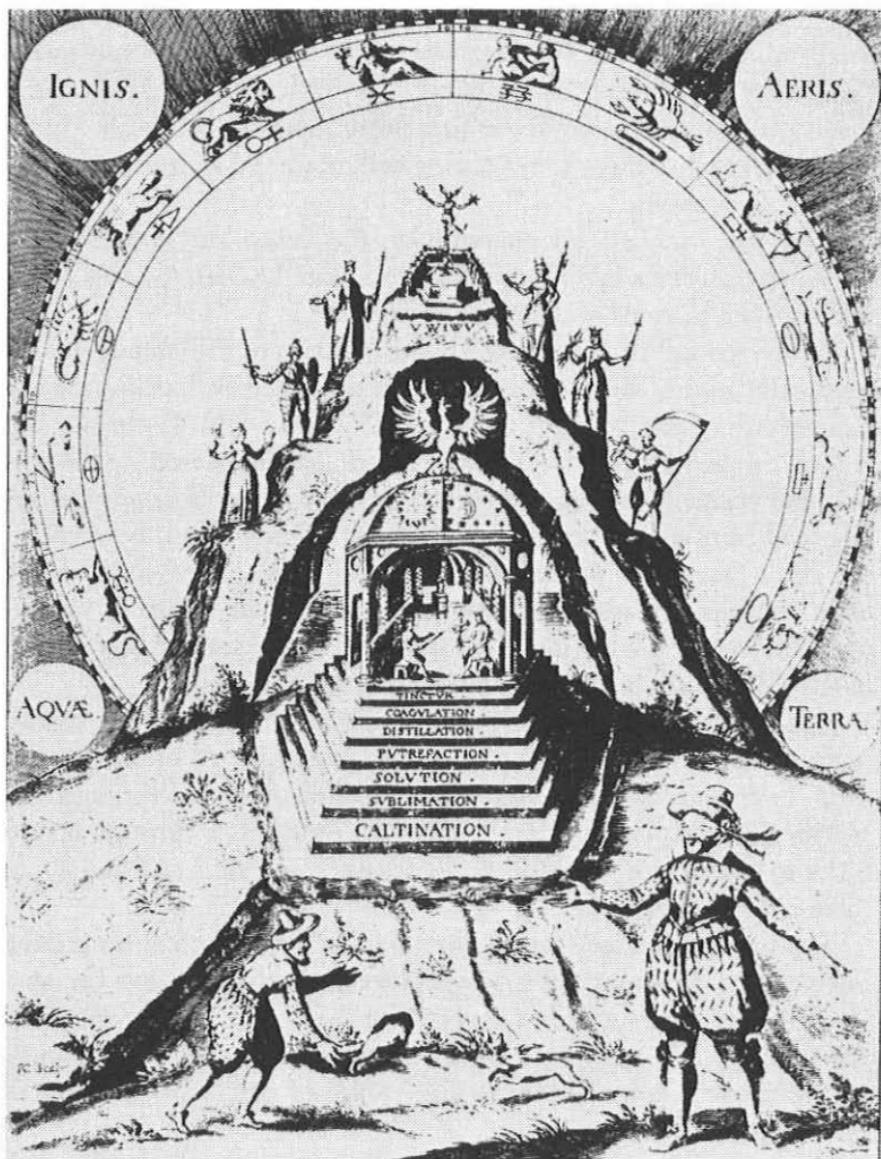


Figure 4. *The "Mountain of the Initiates": while the Unawakened Man gropes in chaos, by following his instinct (the bare and the hound), his Awakened Counterpart sets out on the inner path of gnosis (Michelspacher, Cabala, 1654, taken from Jung's Psychology and Alchemy, C.W. XII para. 293, fig. 93).*

the Primum Mobile and the Heaven of the Fixed Stars respectively. From here the motion and “stamp” are further transmitted to the seven planetary skies, which in turn relay them to the Earth. Up to this point Dante’s work is in keeping with hermetic-astrological models of cosmography.

However, in Dante’s cosmography, the Earth (*Inferno* XXXIV, 121-126) contains a further point of attraction: Lucifer, the angel who fell from the heavens at the dawn of creation.

Before the fall of Lucifer, land and water were distributed evenly across the globe. With his fall, the land on “this side”, or the austral hemisphere,<sup>8</sup> sank beneath the sea out of fear, as if to cleanse the wound opened by contact with the fallen angel. Covered by the sea, the land then fled across the globe’s external circumference and re-emerged purified in the northern hemisphere populated by men. In the abyss created by the fall an enormous “funnel” was formed: the earth “within” it – also touched and contaminated by evil – “moved upwards” to escape Lucifer, cleansing itself in the sea and resurfacing in the southern hemisphere to form Mount Purgatory.

Purgatory, then, is situated at the antipodes of the inhabited world, at the centre of which Dante places Jerusalem, where Christ lived and died. In contrast with Lucifer, Christ defends man and through His sacrifice inspires him to “rise again” by passing alive through hell in order to know the evils of the world, to overcome them and transmute them into positive forces.

The rebellious angels who follow Lucifer – and who structure the instinctual forms represented by the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf – lure man towards the centre of the Earth. This is ringed by the circles of hell, which are mirror images of the heavens. The angelic intelligences, ever faithful to the “point of origin”, namely God, beckon man upwards.

Through this tension, Dante provides an image of the psyche’s bipolarity. Not till our own century could this be defined more scientifically in the ground-breaking work of C.G. Jung.

All of the angelic ranks gaze upward,  
as downward they prevail upon the rest,  
so while each draws the rest, all draw toward God.  
[Par. XXVIII, 127-129]

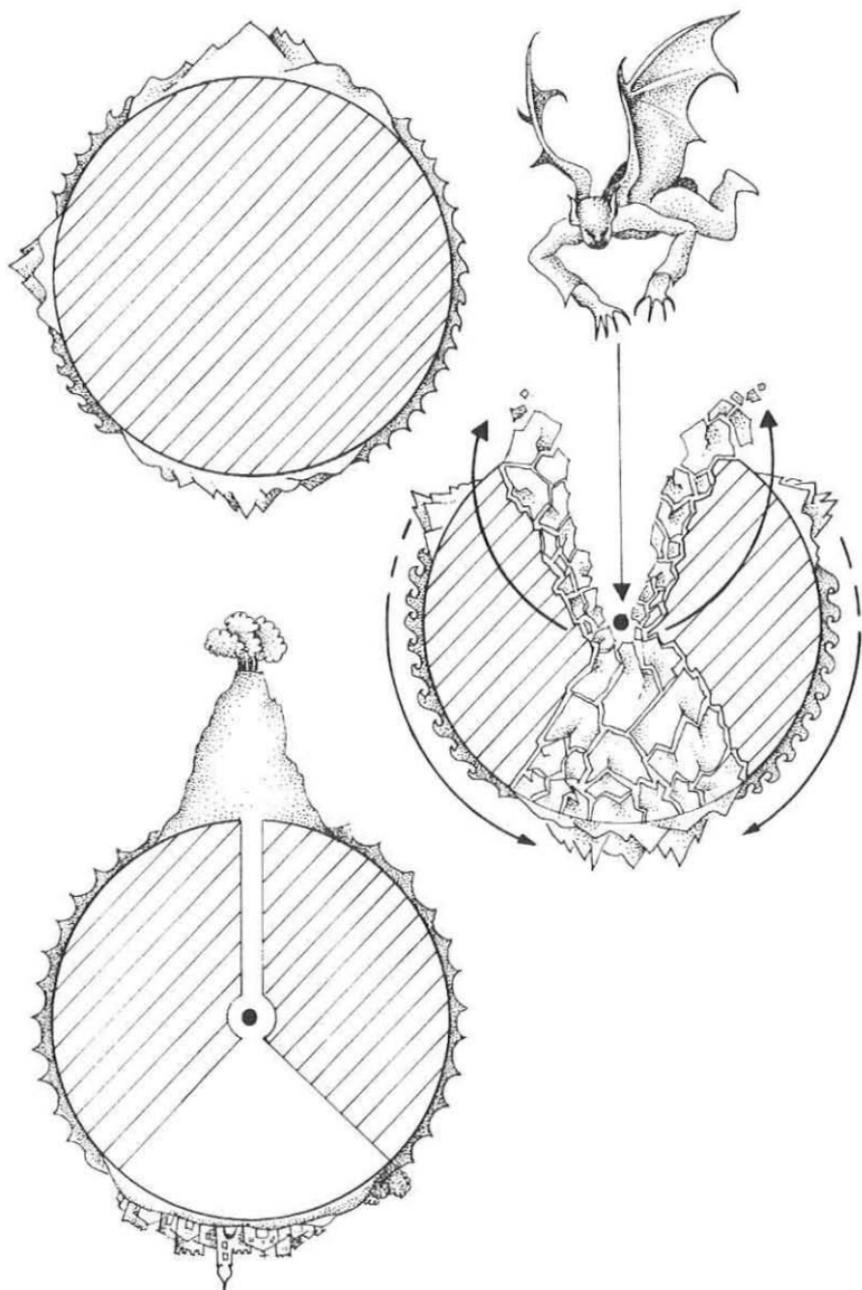


Figure 5. *The Fall of Lucifer and the formation of the infernal pit and Mount Purgatory (illustration provided by the author).*

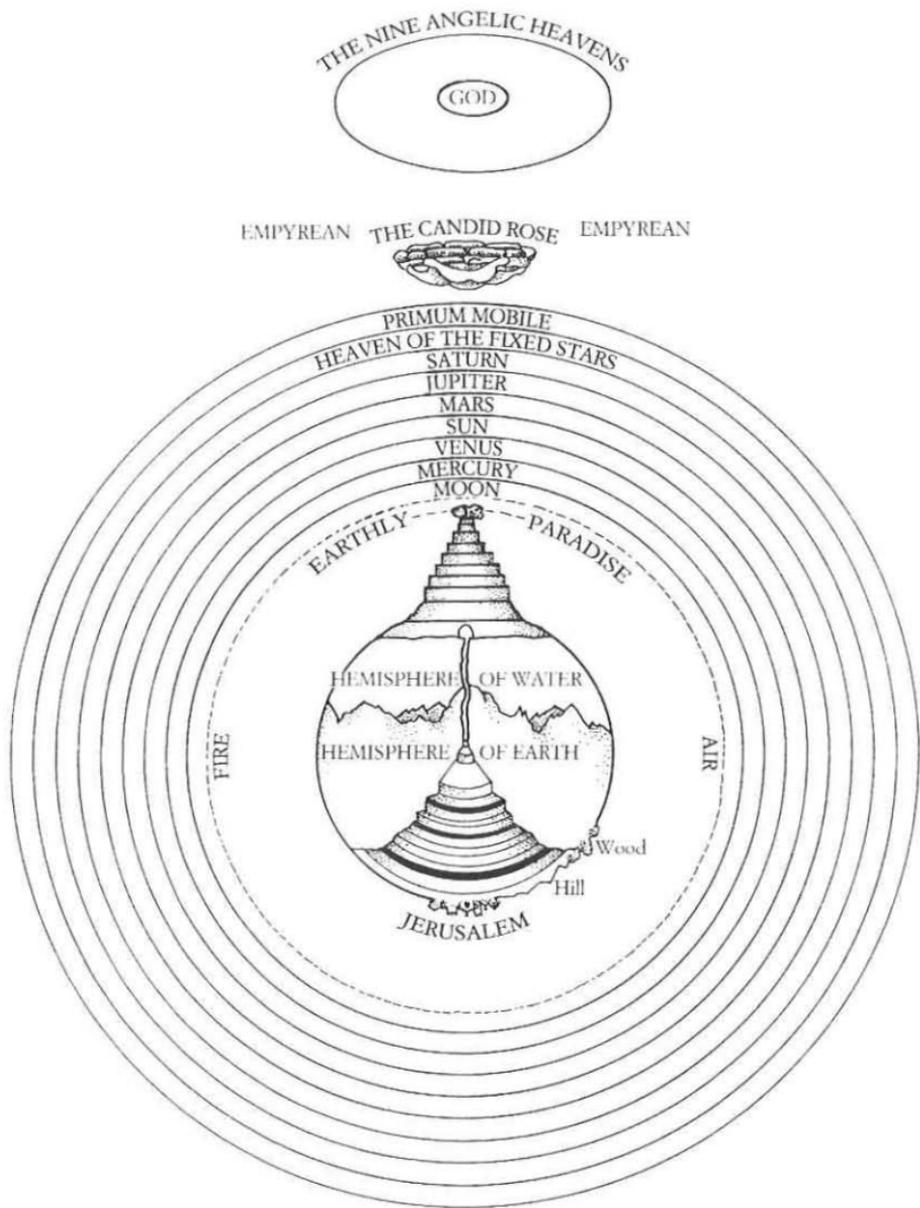


Figure 6. *Illustration of the temporal sequence of Dante's cosmos.*

This bipolarity is the source of a drama in which man must endure the tension between these opposing tendencies. On the whole, neither hermeticism nor gnostic systems led to a harmonious synthesis of these opposite poles of attraction. By following either of these doctrines, man falls prey either to instincts (the Great Earth Mother viewed as Evil) or to the Logos (the Sky Father), with a consequent rejection of the body and life. In Dante, however, during the arduous phase of the *Purgatorio*, man confronts this tension in all awareness, with the help of the unconscious (dreams, visions, and voices) and consciousness, represented by Virgil. This is the significance of the “cross” experienced in Purgatory as a means of establishing harmony between the body and the spirit.

The inner freedom attained by passing through the *Purgatorio* is not the freedom to suit oneself, which would involve falling back into the automatism associated with the *Inferno*. It involves, on the contrary, a new distinctive state, which emerges gradually as we accompany the poet on his quest. Dante’s humanism resides in this profound knowledge of the psyche. He lives Christianity in singular way, breaking free from asceticism and restoring man to the dignity of his “divine”, creative task in life. Through his actions, Dante – the man – allows the God within him – the Self – to become manifest, thus coming to know Himself.

This profound contact with the Self meant that Dante penetrated – albeit using the Medieval instruments of hermeticism – deep into the structure of the psyche, making us aware of the Shadow in its possible archetypal aspects, until the image of absolute evil, Lucifer, is finally revealed. As an inverted Trinity, Lucifer represents the cthonic side of God – the shadow of the Self, the black stone – the *Sol Niger* of the alchemists – which man must reckon with before becoming reunited with the totality.

## 5.2 A brief account of Dante’s journey

Dante sets out from Jerusalem, the pole of earthly manifestation, the symbolic image of Earthly Paradise after “the fall”. He descends through the Vestibule of Hell and the nine circles of the pit (9 circles + the Vestibule = 10); he reaches the centre of the Earth where he

