

6. INTRODUCTION TO THE INFERNO

Dante's Inferno is situated at the centre of the Earth. In common with all other traditions, the Middle Ages regarded the Earth – in an analogical sense – the microcosm, symbol of the human personality at the level of the individual Ego. According to Aristotelian philosophy, partly followed by Dante, the Ego is comprised of three aspects or parts:

- the corporeal aspect of physical behaviour and instinctive biological reflexes (symbolised by the leopard in the *Commedia*);
- the emotional aspect with all its impulses (the lion); this uncontrolled emotivity may be transformed into “feeling” following repeated experiences and the practice of reflection;¹
- the mental or rational facet, which channels these impulses for the personal satisfaction of the Ego (the she-wolf).

When speaking in terms of the “persona”, Dante refers to the Ego as conditioned by ingrained psycho-physical automatisms. This is unquestionably the most superficial level – both physical and psychic – of the personality. Dante's “persona” may be likened to the specific function of the Ego defined by Jung with the very term “Persona”, taken as meaning “mask”,² or the function of the relation between the Ego and the external world. The impulses of the Ego-Persona tend naturally towards their own satisfaction but their indiscriminate fulfillment or their repression creates neurosis, “sin”, the infernal condition of psychic damnation. If they are unwittingly repressed and remain unknown and unchannelled, these drives re-emerge in a distorted and disturbing form.

In keeping with alchemy's theory of the four elements, the human personality is not solely comprised of the element of earth, an analogy for the physical aspect of the personality (*Inferno*). Water and air are also included and these bring ethical feeling into play (*Purgatorio*),

while fire, analogous to the heavens, stimulates intellectual intuition and concerns existential problems (*Paradiso*).³

When all the parts of the personality function harmoniously, we pass through the experience known to orientals as “liberation” (in the *Commedia* this occurs when Purgatory is surmounted and Earthly Paradise is reached), or “illumination” (the experience of Paradise).

It is clear that these “states” co-exist in the human being, and one or the other may be experienced at different times. Understanding of these states cannot be reached once and for all, rather, the “passages” towards greater awareness (understood as self-knowledge) must be repeated continuously throughout life, because just when we believe we have attained a certain degree of harmony, some new obstacle which must be dealt with, understood, and surmounted will emerge. This occurs because the human personality is not static, but in continuous development.

When the personality is restricted by and focussed within its ego-centric horizons – its gaze trained on the earth, in other words, on immediate physical, emotional and mental satisfaction, a condition of “wanting for oneself” – the “infernal state” – comes into being. We are captivated by the beautiful leopard, or become as ravenous as the lion, and as cunning as the she-wolf.

Attraction to what is pleasing (the leopard) is also the initial tendency towards knowledge and is indispensable in the child, whose Ego must detach itself from the unconscious and consolidate itself, permitting the child to become autonomous. Archaic cultures, too, are still in this phase of human development. Nevertheless, the leopard is always at work in adult, civilised men as well, becoming dangerous when the “good of the intellect”, namely reflection, is not brought into play. However, if man rejects the animal in himself, repressing it or removing it in the name of excessively severe moral principles or disdainful intellectualism, then the leopard (or the lion, or the she-wolf) grow in ferocity within the unconscious until they begin to encroach stealthily on consciousness. This, as Jung teaches, is the behaviour of the Shadow.

A way out of this infernal state is suggested by the poet himself when, in the wood, he raises his head (“I looked on high”). Without this act, which involves detachment from the Ego-dominated situation, we remain trapped in any of the various rings, circles, and zones

of the *Inferno*. Indeed, the damned constantly train their gaze on ground to which they are bound, precisely because they are the prisoners of their own egotism or devoted to fulfilling their immediate desires: souls dragged down in a psychological vortex of desperation.

To pass through Hell “while still alive” in the company of Dante means descending into our own inner depths, lowering ourselves into the unconscious, the unknown regions of our psyche, into the sorrowful tangles of the astute mind, in order to objectify and recognise the physical, emotional and mental situations which, unbeknown to us, condition and imprison us. Ignorance is man’s greatest affliction, especially in times like ours, in which all the beasts are at large, not only in ourselves but in society and the world.

It is ever thus in periods of crisis and transition: old forms devoid of meaning (values) fall into decline, while the new forms have yet to be clearly defined. As a consequence society lapses into inertia, violence and materialism. There are, however, those who feel “called” to search for a new direction. It is no coincidence that the psychology of the unconscious, concerned with exploring the innermost recesses of man’s personality, has appeared in this, our own century. Initially conducted by Freud and continued by Jung and Adler, this research retraces the journey which was once reserved for “initiates” alone. Jung rediscovered in the unconscious those passages of spiritual transformation known to humanity in the mystery religions of antiquity, and of which the *Divina Commedia* is one of the last examples. Jung observes:

The peril which threatens all of us comes not from nature, but from man, from the psyches of the individual and the mass. The psychic aberration of man is the danger. Everything depends on whether or not our psyche functions properly [Jung, *Memories...*p. 132]

...nobody is capable of recognizing just where and how much he himself is possessed and unconscious. [Jung, *Psychology and Religion* CW XI, par. 85]

The cause of this is what Jung call the “statistical delinquent”⁴ (Dante’s Fraudulent) which exists unconsciously in all of us; it also comprises the archaic man (the slothful, the incontinent, and the violent). The synthesis of the statistical delinquent and archaic man generates the “great killer” which is either removed or repressed in the unconscious. It is more dangerous in the first case, because when the

antisocial tendencies within us are removed, they are not confronted and so grow out of all proportion. Repression, on the contrary, implies a basic moral choice, a degree of suffering, and is thus far less dangerous.

This unconscious state of *participation mystique* in the “affect” emerges when the light of consciousness is no longer perceived, in which case mankind becomes an unthinking mass, in the sway of pure emotivity and blind violence:

Opinions formed in haste will oftentimes
lead in a wrong direction, and man's pride*
then intervenes to bind his intellect. [Par. XIII, 118-120]

The leopard, lion and she-wolf are all beautiful, attractive and fascinating; they are “energies” which, if recognised and pressed into our service, provide the base upon which man can construct his personality. But if the mind, above all its scientific and technical aspects – but also its intellectual and spiritual sides, which should not be forgotten – overlooks these beasts, which Dante reveals as divine, then they will seek revenge by pouncing on us and dragging us back down Hell.

The structure of the human personality, of which the three beasts are energies and functions, is archetypal.⁵ In the course of the *Commedia*, taking the common man as our starting point, we undertake the inner journey by passing through specific stages with the help of the “illuminated mind” (Virgil), a mind that is “suspended” or receptive, constantly listening for the “voice” of the unconscious (Beatrice). Beatrice is a human function, albeit a highly elevated one, that brings man into contact with the divine (or, in psychological terms, with the Self).

The *Commedia* describes a process of spiritual alchemy involving the transformation of lead into gold, and of vulgar stone into the *lapis philosophorum*, of the totally unconscious common man into an aware and responsible individual. The analysis of the infernal circles tends to focus on those innate patterns of behaviour which, because they are

* Interestingly Dante actually uses the term “affetto” = affect.

autonomous and archetypal lead to chaos, meaninglessness, and ignorance.⁶

The *Inferno* corresponds to the tamasaic state peculiar to the Hindu tradition, or that of subdiaphragmatic chakras in Kundalini Yoga (fig. 7, p. 78-79). In this situation there is as yet no distinction between the Ego and the unconscious, which are, on the contrary, experienced as identical. It is a state of heaviness that “pulls downwards” in the direction of a centre which will prove to be the centre of the earth, which corresponds to the nucleus of the Ego.

The souls of the damned are trapped in selfishness and totally neglectful of the sacredness of others and nature. They exist in an unconscious or paraconscious state, cut off from God (the Self), the very centre of life, which is perceived as “non-Ego”. This is man’s condition after banishment from Earthly Paradise, leaving him in the sway of animal instinct. The damned, however, see this influence as being inflicted from the outside by divine will.⁷

The infernal storm, eternal in its rage,
sweeps and drives the spirits with its blast:
it whirls them, lashing them with punishment.
[Inf. V, 31-33]

The quest for self-knowledge always commences from an encounter with our own shortcomings projected onto others. In such cases, it is necessary to withdraw the projection and confront the limitation within ourselves so as to overcome it.

6.1 *The Contrapasso (The principle of retribution)*

The law of retribution regulates all the punishments found in the rings and circles of the *Inferno*, and also those found in the cornices of the *Purgatorio*. It is equally reflected in the states of beatitude found in the heavens. It is an expression of a specific law of the unconscious that goes under the name of Karma in the East.

Karma means action: each action, thought or feeling excites an appropriate response in the unconscious and determines the situation in which man will inevitably find himself. In the *Commedia*, this

“state” is apprehended as divine punishment or revenge, and may be an introjected image of the vengeful God of the Bible, active in the collective unconscious of the West. Actually, this is an intrinsic law of the psyche, and Dante presents it as such (in the “judgement” of Minos), even though, paradoxically, he continues to speak of punishment and revenge.

The law of retribution, or Karma, consists in repeatedly confronting the subject with the very limitation that has not been surmounted, or, alternatively, its opposite. By observing the dreams, fantasies and events in the daily life of his patients, Jung was able to propose that the unconscious had a “compensatory” action.

As long as the obstacle is avoided and not tackled head-on, the psychic state remains unaltered and will recur. If, in facing a situation, we rely on good intentions or simply try to save appearances, we will remain trapped in the relevant “circle” and further progress will be impossible. This critical moment in the process of self-knowledge is dealt with in the passage on Geryon (Cantos XVI AND XVII).

The *Inferno*, then, presents the inner state of those who first come under the sway of, and are then possessed by the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf. The characters encountered in the *Commedia* – Francesca and Paolo, Filippo Argenti, Farinata, Pier delle Vigne etc. – are recreated to represent qualities or weaknesses common to all mankind: the poet, who has recognised these in himself, objectifies them for us, and gives them recognisable shape through the form of dialogue.

At first Dante is moved to pity the damned. Then, as he gradually moves forward, he realises how damaging, perverse and inhuman it is to be imprisoned by a given negative quality. His tone consequently changes to one of disdainful sarcasm. It is difficult to accept this human conflict between compassion for the sufferings of others and oneself and attention to the voice of the Self, which wisely and justly exacts retribution by inflicting suffering. The reader tends to see the situations before him as instances of real life; but on impact with the unconscious, or when encountering aggressive, subtle and violent forms of the Shadow which threaten us from within or from without, the consciousness must remain in the light while allowing this adversary to express itself, otherwise it risks identifying itself with the evil in question, in which case it is lost.