

7. THE FIRST PASSAGE

“I FOUND MYSELF AGAIN” – THE SECOND BIRTH

The first canto forms a genuine prologue to the work as a whole, providing a synthesis of the entire journey the poet is about to undertake. It is the dangerous and difficult path through the psyche and across what Jung called the collective unconscious, where there is an ever-present danger of being imprisoned. Yet such courage is necessary for discovering “the secret things” hidden within each of us, which may be the cause of either our damnation or salvation, depending on the spirit in which they are faced.

As though in a flash, it comes to the poet that he is groping in a confused and chaotic situation, lost and deprived of light. This is the chaos of alchemy’s *prima materia*, from which the precious lapis must be extracted.

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to *find myself again* in a dark wood
And the right path *appeared not* anywhere*
[Inf. I, 1-3]

There have been various interpretations of “Midway along the journey”. Perhaps at the most personal level it expresses the point in life when, after the enthusiasm of youth, man approaches maturity and, turning his gaze inward, questions himself about the purpose of existence. It would seem that Dante is alluding to both a personal experience (“I found myself again”) and a collective condition (“the

* The revised edition of Laurence Binyon’s translation has been preferred to render the last line of the first tercet. His interpretation suggests that the path itself has simply disappeared or run out, alluding to a possible collective plight. Musa’s text, like most other authoritative translations from Carey to Sayers and Ciardi, places the emphasis on the individual’s straying from the path.

right path appeared not anywhere”).

In a flash, he realises that he is groping in the depths of profound chaos. At a certain point in life, this can happen to each of us – or even in the course of a civilisation – when plans, illusions, and collective models lose their meaning, leaving us utterly at a loss. However, this recognition of chaos implies a considerable degree of awareness. Generally speaking, such moments do not lead to the discovery of anything new, but lay bare the distress and illusions that have made us what we really are.

7.1 *The Wood*

Adrift in chaos, Dante is afraid, feeling himself involved in something alien, painful, and difficult.

How hard it is to tell what it was like,
this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),
a bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.
[Inf. I, 4-7]

Nevertheless, the first step has been taken. When this intense emotional state of suffering is objectified in the wood, the poet is no longer identified with it, rather, he perceives it and describes it in such a way as to render the full drama of the situation.

This is the moment alluded to by Jung,¹ when emotion transforms itself into image. It signals the end of *participation mystique*, where the Ego is confused with an object which becomes “other than one’s self”. In the Indian tradition of Kundalini yoga, this takes the form of passing beyond the sub-diaphragmatic chakras that mark identification with emotions and objects.²

The wood may represent a critical moment in human life. At a deeper level, it signals the eruption of the unconscious into the consciousness. The image of the “the wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn” is subsequently consolidated by an even more undifferentiated image of the unconscious: the tempestuous “waters” (Inf. I, 23). Initially, the archetypal image is a negative one, though it also

implies a positive aspect:

But if I would show the *good* that came of it
I must talk about things other than good.
[Inf. I, 8-9]

Dante is anxious to speak of those “other things” he has seen in the wood, things which are ultimately a source of good. Indeed, it is the very fall into the wilderness that has allowed him to set out along the new path leading to awareness of his present condition.

The impenetrable wood may also be regarded as a repository of the mysterious unconscious. It pulsates with intense animal and vegetal life: roots twist deep into the earth, gigantic trees rear up towards the sky. The tree symbolises the tendency towards the “process of individuation” as described by Jung,³ the process towards a wholeness innate in every man. It is also a symbol of the Self, the totality of the psyche, and the innermost nucleus of the personality.

The vegetal symbolism indicates a profoundly unconscious state. Nevertheless, the wood presents infinite possibilities of growth. Before becoming aware of their situation, those trapped in the wood are utterly unconscious of themselves. Although they possess the necessary potential for development, they resemble figures in certain alchemical tracts: either they sleep, or they cannot see, or they go blindfolded. These are the initiatory tradition’s “the unawakened”, those who live in the sway of the instincts and passions; men incapable of reflection and for whom life will never become a conscious experience. They are, in short, the majority of mankind.

Now Dante moves on to describe how his “fall” into the wood came about. The beginning is shrouded in mist and confusion:

How I entered there I cannot truly say
I had become so sleepy at the moment
When I first strayed, leaving the path of truth.
[Inf, I 10-12]

It is, of course, impossible to say when man “fell” into the wood. As Jung observes, “in the end, we have no idea how things came about”.⁴

In reality, the wood is not a *place*, but a state of sleep, a condition

of unawareness concerning one's own being, and which leads to the death of the spirit, the "second death" where the spirit is either lost in matter, or crushed by it.

However, as Dante says, this is "nearly death". The way is still open for everyone to find themselves again, to become aware of themselves and discover how to emerge from a state of chaos that is perceived as negative. The search for the path is an *individual* task, especially when all around is chaos.

but then I found myself at the foot of a hill,
at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley,
where I first felt my heart, plunged deep in fear,
I raised my head and saw the hilltop shawled
in morning rays of light sent from the planet
that leads men straight ahead on every road.
[Inf. I, 13-18]

The act of "looking up" is typical of the man who has seen chaos, but has managed to break out of the egocentric vortex of desperation. Suddenly, through an act of hope and elevation, he steps out of the darkness: it is dawn and he spies the hill, lit from behind by the rising sun.

7.2 *The Hill*

The mere fact of having realised he was adrift in a meaningless existence marks a radical change. The wood, the darkness, and confusion all miraculously vanish, followed by the appearance of a hill bathed in light from the sun that is rising behind it. This binds Dante to the values of consciousness and prevents him from being swallowed up by the unconscious. The hill is the world of masculine values, emerging in the form of goals to be reached (vertical), in contrast with the wood, a dark, feminine image of the unconscious (horizontal).

In fact, the wood is also the image of an archaic natural mother, of a pre-human vegetative state in which life is created and passes away. This "great mother" is negative when she prevents us from growing and imprisons us in instincts.⁵

The hill corresponds to the “spiritual axis” of the world, along which the spirit descends (light) and along which the ascent towards the spirit takes place; it is the “middle way” where opposites are integrated, and it prefigures Mount Purgatory, analogous to Mount Meru in the East, Olympus in ancient Greece, and the Sacred Mountain in all its forms. The ascent of the hill also expresses the strain involved in moving towards a more elevated level of consciousness.

For the moment, however, the hill remains an intuition, a hope; in fact, the sun is still *behind* the hill, which prefigures an ascent. But with the appearance of the hill, hope is at least restored:

And then only did terror start subsiding
in *my heart's lake*, which rose to heights of fear
that night I spent in deepest desperation.
[Inf I, 19-21]

This fear is expressed in the image of a particular place, a lake at night: a hidden and dark inner place, permeated with a disquieting atmosphere. The heart, the vital centre of being, is an analogy for this place, the site of the divine totality of man. Beneath the surface of the lifeblood, something that represents a threat is stirring. Jung claims:

The lake in the valley is the unconscious...which lies, as it were, underneath consciousness ...water means the spirit that has become unconscious...that fiery erswhile spirit has made a descent to ... the waters of the psyche. [Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, CW IX, para 36-40]

Now that Dante intuites the presence of the hill, he can describe the fear that filled his “heart’s lake”.

Just as a swimmer, still with panting breath,
now safe upon the shore, out of the deep,
might turn for one last look at the dangerous waters,
so I, although my mind was turned to flee,
turned round to gaze once more upon the *pass*
that never let a *living soul* escape.
[Inf. I, 22-27]

He views himself as the survivor of a shipwreck who has miracu-

lously been saved from the waves of the storm-tossed waters. Exhausted and panting, he turns round and stares through frightened eyes at the dangers he has left behind him.

This scene borders on the disassociation of the personality. The man regards the dangers he has escaped, feeling the strain of the effort he has made, and aware of the danger of being swept back, with no hope of recovery. The shore appears as an image of a new consciousness at the edge of the sea, though the latter still looms, awash with risks (the “dangerous waters”).

The sea is a less differentiated image of the collective unconscious than that of the wood: deeper psychic states have been activated. Here there is a very real danger of drowning. It is the symbol *par excellence* of the collective unconscious, but it is also *acqua vitae*, the *prima materia* of the alchemists, the source of life. Dante’s poetry presents the eruption of the unconscious into the consciousness as something truly alarming and inexplicable.

We must not underestimate the devastating effect of getting lost in the chaos, even if we know that it is the *sine qua non* of any regeneration of the spirit and the personality. [Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW XII, para. 6]

Besides fear, the experience is also marked by an oppressive sense of isolation from the outside world, a feeling represented by the image of the desert:

I rested my tired body there awhile
and then began to climb the barren slope*
(I dragged my stronger foot and limped along).**
[Inf. I, 28-30]

This sense of detachment from fellow men is profoundly disturbing for the personality. This is how what Jung calls “a terrible personal secret”⁷ is formed. The result of this is that the personality becomes

* Literally, the “deserted slope”.

** In Dante’s Italian more stress is laid on the fact that the poet advances like a climber leaning all his weight on the lower foot, while searching for a higher foothold with the other.

isolated from the surrounding world, and psychic energy turns inward, making the unconscious more vividly alive.

Besides representing such total solitude, the desert may also stand for the *tabula rasa*, a break with habitual ways in order to follow a new course. For the moment, this is only intuited, though it will mean that certain things must be relinquished.

The beginning of a new path

The struggle to cross this first transition point is followed by a drop in tension and the need to rest and reflect on the new path to be followed. Slowly the poet begins to climb the sloping ground. He has rediscovered the stages of the ascent and means to leave this testimony in order to:

removere viventes in hac vita de statu miseriae et perducere ad statum felicitatis: to rescue those who live in this life from their state of misery, and to guide them to the state of blessedness.

[Epistle X, 15]

To help those who, like himself, have “rediscovered themselves” escape from the wood, Dante reveals the stages of this process, so that it can be undertaken by each individual. Synthesis must wait until the end; for the moment it is necessary to proceed from the edge to the interior (“from rim to the centre”: Par. XIV, I), from the outside to the inside; *ad ignotum per ignotius*, to use the language of the ancient alchemists.

During periods of disappearing values, it is not enough to be aware of chaos and to merely denounce it. This is the common course of action and it means that the problems are dealt with from the outside by proposing a stream of reforms and laws; yet, nothing can be changed if the chaos within each individual is not confronted personally and an attempt made to emerge from it. When the dominant collective values collapse, the only salvation for the individual is to be found in rediscovering the moral strength to create an internal order. Only by following this course, will it be possible to help others.

Having survived the initial “crossing”, Dante stresses that no “per-

sona” had ever survived it. In successfully making the crossing, his persona is now dead. Here, it seems necessary to define “persona”* in the Jungian sense of “mask”, derived from the latin, meaning the external guise, or costume assumed by man for his appearance on the set of life.

Perhaps Dante is alluding to the fact that when following the path of inner exploration, it is necessary to abandon ingrained habits which have become autonomous and so imprison the true essence, which sleeps and must be revived. All the great initiates speak of a necessary “death”, a sacrifice that must be made and something which needs to be abandoned. Christ himself spoke of just such a sacrifice to Nicodemus:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...That which is born flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [John, 3, 4-7]

Giovanni Pascoli, and his followers Luigi Valli and Ettore Cozani,⁸ interpreted this “pass” as a *death* leading to *rebirth*, an inner experience which is difficult to understand for those who have not undergone it. It is an experience that brings the realisation that the consciousness was sleeping and *almost* dead, and as such not free, but determined by external and internal instances.

The reawakening leads to detachment from the “Persona”, in the shape of a mystic *death* so as to be *reborn* into the life of *being*, which is counterposed to the life of *non-being* embodied by the wood.

The man is no longer the “persona” he was, but is *reborn* as *consciousness of being*. This transition (“I found myself again”) is not over and done with, but will have to be repeated cyclically whenever new awareness is required. Dante shows that it is necessary to follow the path of self-knowledge to discover who we are and to recognise the internal and external instances holding sway over us. If these are not recognised, such autonomous instances are highly dangerous.

In his “heart’s lake” the poet has caught a glimpse of his own image

* It is standard practise to translate “persona” with synonyms like “soul”, “no one”, or “no man”, none of which render the ambiguity of the Italian original.

as in a mirror.

True, whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face...But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face...our own shadow...The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door... But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty...[Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, CW IX, para.43-47]

7.3 *The beasts*

Now Dante the poet and man must start all over again if he wishes to begin the climb. To do so he must discover a route, supporting himself on the footholds he gradually gains, much like a rock climber who carefully prepares each step of his climb on the rockface. He is no longer in the wood, but on a gently rising waste ("slope"). He climbs slowly so as to get a better view of the wood from above, and form a clearer idea of its extent. However this upward route, implying purely intellectual knowledge, is not the right way. He is immediately beset by difficulties. The slope, gentle at first, becomes increasingly "steep":

Beyond the point the slope begins to rise
sprang up a leopard, trim and very swift!
It was covered by a pelt of many spots.
And, everywhere I looked, the beast was there
blocking my way, so time and time again
I was about to turn and go down.
[Inf. I, 31-36]

The leopard is a rather vaguely defined feline (etymologically the original Italian word "lonza" derives from *lynx*, though the description of the animal tends to suggest a leopard). This animal displays a total and subtle autonomy. It does not attack but blocks the way; it is light, beautiful and quick, while its colours and markings make it all the more attractive. The environment itself harmonises with the appearance of the animal:

The hour was early in the morning then,

the sun was climbing up with those same stars
that had accompanied it on the world's first day,
the day Divine Love set their beauty turning;
so the hour and the sweet season of creation
encouraged me to think I could get past
that gaudy beast, wild in its spotted pelt.
[Inf. I, 37-43]

We are in the spring equinox, with the Sun in the constellation of Aries. It is a time of rebirth, favourable for all new undertakings. But another beast appears on the scene:

but then good hope gave way and fear returned
when the figure of a lion loomed up before me,
and he was coming straight toward me, it seemed,
with head raised high, and furious with hunger -
the air around him seemed to fear his presence.
[Inf. I, 44-48]

The lion is an aggressive and violent presence, bent, it would seem on devouring the wayfarer; the hopeful atmosphere is suddenly pervaded by a sense of fear.

As a wild and ferociously savage beast, the lion represents instinctive passions, and has thus been associated with the Devil. As the king of the beasts, it is a solar symbol, standing for immense strength which, if understood, tamed, and placed at the service of spiritual forces, becomes a positive energy. For this reason it is also associated with Christ. An example of this is found in the lions supporting the pronaos in many Medieval churches, almost as if to testify that such brute force, if placed at the disposition of man's spiritual nature, may even prop up the entire religious structure. Here, though, the lion symbolises the real danger of being devoured by the uncontrolled and savage passions of the unconscious.

A few spare lines herald the appearance of another ravenous beast, the she-wolf, a presence which intensifies the growing sense of danger.

And now a she-wolf came, that in her leannes
seemed racked with every kind of greediness
(how many people she has brought to grief!).
This last beast brought my spirits down so low

with fear that seized me at the sight of her
I lost all hope of going up the hill.
[Inf. I, 49-54]

All commentators ascribe an allegorical meaning to these animals, but it is far more important to feel how each of them, as an embodiment of extremely autonomous instinctive urges, affects each of us.

The alluring and colourful leopard may symbolise seduction and the attraction exerted by objects, situations, and people that for all their apparent innocuousness enslave us in the long run. Here the leopard appears to stand for incontinence, the state of being dragged down by situations that lead to a condition of chaos. How often we say, "I can't do without ..", or "I can't resist.." Others have interpreted the leopard as timidity, the fear of facing a situation and the parallel tendency to seek the easiest solution, which means giving up the struggle and submitting passively to events, rather than assuming responsibility for one's own actions. As an expression of bodily senses, the leopard may signify the hesitant tendency towards consciousness typical of the way primitive man and young children explore the world.

The lion represents the violence of unbridled emotivity and the blind force which denies right. Under the influence of the lion, we lay violent claim to the object of our desire; the fear of losing whatever has seduced us triggers off our instinctive-emotional side, which soon gains the upper hand.

The ravenous she-wolf would seem to represent the selfish longing of the Ego, together with cunning, deceit and fraud. Seduced and overwhelmed by passions, we use our intelligence for selfish ends; we become violent and our intelligence becomes the means of achieving increased satisfaction and pleasure as we proceed to deceive and cheat our fellow men.

So, just as there was but one wood there is but one beast, and that beast is *evil*. At first its appearance is associated with *good* (the leopard), but it grows into an animal threatening and grim enough (the she-wolf) to instill fear (the lion) and bring about a *total loss* of hope (the leopard).¹⁰

Dante's subdivision of the instincts can be traced back to the Aristotelian structure of the human personality, divided into a physi-

cal, psycho-emotive, and mental part. When these three parts are not in harmony, they become “the three dispositions undesired by heaven” (Inf. XI, 81).

The three aspects of the wood

At first the wood was seen in its entirety; now it begins to unravel and divide into three aspects which correspond to the three parts of the *Inferno*:

- *incontinence*, or succumbing to the pull of the physical, the tendency to yield, and to covet;
- *violence*, the predominance of feeling in the form of uncontrolled emotivity, pride, and power;
- *fraud*, cunning, treason in the interests of power, and control of others, insatiable greed.

From an alchemical point of view, the wood provides an analogy of the undifferentiated *prima materia* which is dissolved during the alchemical process into distinct and warring elements.¹¹

Yet there is also a mysterious link between Dante and the three “beasts”. From a psychological point of view, the three creatures are aspects of the Shadow, defined by Jung as what we do not know about ourselves. As animals, they stand forth as representations of archetypal instincts in the unconscious that threaten the Ego and which, therefore, must be known.

Being wild and ferocious, these beasts show how the autonomous, instinctive, animal part of the man has become aggressive and unbridled.

In psychological terms, the beginning of the *Commedia* denotes a situation of disharmony, and an unbalanced conscious attitude which may emerge in the form of neurosis. This makes it essential to consider the origin of such distress and to move on to look for a way of overcoming it. The appearance of the beasts blocking the way up the hill alludes to the need for a confrontation with one’s own body and to recover the correct relation with the instinct which has been neglected.

This situation may indicate a personal problem of Dante himself, who, from infancy, had shown a marked bias for intellectual and spiritual values. Given that a great work of art expresses the spirit of its time, it is likely that centuries of prevalently ascetic Christianity had, however, led those instincts which had been removed or repressed to violently rebel in the unconscious.

At a collective level, the way the beasts pounce out illustrates how, when the dominant laws have collapsed due to a crisis in values, instinctive forces – all the beasts – roam at large in society, with the terrible consequences that our own period is witness to.

With the appearance of the three beasts, the unconscious offers violent resistance to the consciousness, which is intent on scaling the hill. Far from being subordinate to the consciousness, the unconscious asserts itself in such a way that there is no choice but to experience and confront it.

What can be done when a man finds himself in such desperate straits? Yet again, the answer comes from the unconscious itself, the deepest and most mysterious recess of the psyche, from which the Ego has become differentiated.

7.4 *Virgil*

As Jung himself has pointed out,¹² it is just when we realise that we are truly lost, when we concede that we are no longer masters in our own house, that our guide appears.

While I was rushing down to that low place
my eyes made out a figure coming towards me
of one grown faint, perhaps from too much silence.
[Inf. I, 61-63]

Just when the situation is beginning to look desperate, help arrives in the form of a human shade. “Personification”, says Jung, “always indicates autonomous unconscious activity”¹³

Following the various animal forms, a human shadow emerges almost as though it were a transmutation and sublimation of the she-wolf. “The appearance of the human figure”, continues Jung, “is

always anticipatory, prefiguring the kind of activity the dreamer will subsequently indulge in".¹⁴ Here, in fact, we find anticipations of the hill Dante will climb and the wood he will explore in the three realms of the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf.

In situations of extreme danger, help is often provided by the unconscious in order to compensate for the one-sidedness of the consciousness. Very often the Master appears as a real person, who becomes guide and guru, upon whom the disciple projects his own inner master, until such a time as the adept is able to withdraw this projection.

In Dante's case, the relation with this inner mentor is most particular. It appears mysteriously as an offer ("was offered to me;" later we will learn that Virgil has been sent by Beatrice out of pure love). With his faint voice, it is as though he stepped forth from a timeless dimension.

And when I saw him standing in this wasteland,
"Have pity on my soul", I cried to him,
"whichever you are, shade or a living man!"
[Inf. I, 64-66]

A prayerful attitude which desperately asks for help immediately activates the higher human powers.¹⁵

"No longer living, though once I was",
...
I was born, though somewhat late, *sub julio*
and lived in Rome when good Augustus reigned,
when still the false and lying gods were worshipped.
I was a poet and sang of that just man,
Son of Anchises, who sailed off from Troy
after the burning of proud Ilium.
[Inf. I, 67-75]

Critics have consistently identified Virgil as the symbol of human reason. But, at the deepest level, who is Virgil for Dante? Virgil is the mentor and father. The poet-seer acts as spokesman for the tradition which was the object of Dante's "long study" and "great love", and which now emerge from within to sustain the poet. Virgil, who in his