

12. SIXTH PASSAGE LUCIFER – METANOIA

Having reached the fourth zone of the ninth circle, Dante must now confront Lucifer, the fixed point which releases evil and contains it. Virgil announces his presence with the solemn words of a medieval hymn sung on Good Friday to greet the arrival of the Cross: “the banners of the King advance”, though he adds: “the King of Hell”.¹

It is no coincidence that Lucifer is heralded with the same words that greet the Cross of Christ: he is the other part of God, in psychological terms, “the Shadow of the Self”. Lucifer is a powerful archetype and one that Dante expected to encounter sooner or later. But now that he stands before it, the mounting tension of anticipation combines with the effect of fear, creating a highly dramatic psychic atmosphere.

it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognise the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering experience for him to gaze into the absolute face of evil. [Jung, *Aion*, CW IX, II, par. 19]

The encounter with Lucifer is the clash with the Shadow of the Self made image. The setting is dark and alarming, shrouded in an impenetrable fog; the only sound is that of a wind produced by what seem to be the sails of a windmill (the wind symbolizes the spirit. Lucifer is the negative spirit). This creates a vortex that draws down the waters of Phlegethon and freezes them into the desolate expanse of ice. Below the surface the souls of the damned lie trapped like “straws worked into glass”.

An enormous “building” swims out of the mist, a bizarre and gigantic construction looming like a huge windmill. It is an image of the cthonic aspect of God, setting in motion the vortex which attracts the libido, or vital energy (the infernal rivers), and freezing it. Although he is immobile, Lucifer emanates energy and numinous-

ness, a combination of forces which is both terrible and beyond expression.

Dante's first reaction is terror and dismay. He feels the need for reflection and hides behind Virgil, the wise mind whose wisdom and discernment are his only remaining props in such an exposed and isolated situation. The fear and the blowing wind

... made me shrink back
behind my guide, my only means of cover.
[Inf. XXXIV, 8-9]

But with an act of conscious will, Virgil leads Dante to stand before the *substantia* of evil.

When we had moved far enough along the way
that my master thought the time had come to show me
the creature who was once so beautiful,
he stepped aside, and stopping me, announced:
"This is he, this is Dis, this is the place
that calls for all the courage you have in you".
How chilled and nerveless, Reader, I felt then;
do not ask me -I cannot write about it-
there are no words to tell you how I felt.
[Inf. XXXIV, 16-24]

Certainly this primal image defies description, though Dante manages to transmit an intense emotion to the reader who has followed him thus far, and to whom he now turns to pass on all that he has experienced. This is a fundamental passage in the process: should he fail to surmount Lucifer, there would be no coming back. At this point, through this fundamental experience, Dante must undergo a passage of death so as to be reborn in a completely renewed form. The poet has reached the frontier between life and death, and lives both states together in full consciousness.

Jung cites similar experiences as described by the alchemists.

[it] is a kind of Ash Wednesday. The reckoning is presented, and a dark abyss yawns. Death means the total extinction of consciousness and the complete stagnation of psychic life, so far as this is capable of consciousness. So catastrophic a consummation... must surely correspond to an

important archetype, since even today we have our Good Friday. [Jung, *Psychology of Transference*, CW XVI, par. 469]

Here Dante arrests the fleeting moment, as though he had made fully conscious contact with the “eternal present” beyond time, and “deprived of life and death at once”. In fact, the point where Lucifer is located lies on an atemporal, aspatial axis connecting the two poles of the cosmos, the pole of the Celestial Jerusalem and the terrestrial Jerusalem. He stands in the eternal present.

I did not die – I was not living either
Try to imagine, if you can imagine,
me there, *deprived of life and death at once.*
[Inf. XXXIV, 25-27]

Dante is not striving to transmit an image, but the real experience of an atemporal state in which life and death coincide. It is not an ecstatic state, but its opposite, suspension. This is the inexpressible condition of being physically dead and spiritually alive. The alchemists describe a parallel experience in the *putrefactio* phase.

Vas hermeticum, fountain, and sea have here become sarcofagus and tomb... death-like stillness reins... all energy ceases: there is no more flow...No new life can arise ... without the death of the old... body and spirit are dead, and the soul (evidently only *one* soul) parts from them “in great distress”....) (“Here is Sol turned black”).... the descent has touched rock-bottom...The reckoning is presented, and a dark abyss yawns... the total extinction of consciousness ... a real understanding even on the personal level is possible only if the identification is refused. Non-identification demands considerable moral effort. [Jung, *Psychology of the Transference*, CW XVI, para. 467-469]

Next, Dante passes to a description of this creature which “was once so beautiful”. “The king of the vast kingdom of all grief” is indeed majestic!

If once he was as fair as now he's foul
and dared to raise his brows against his Maker,
it is fitting that all grief should spring from him.
[Inf. XXXIV, 34-36]

Dante observes him with a mounting sense of horror, repulsion and amazement. Lucifer is three-in-one!

Oh, how amazed I was when I looked up
and saw a head -one head wearing three faces!
[Inf. XXXIV, 37-38]

He is powerful yet suffering:

He wept from six eyes, and down three chins
were dripping tears all mixed with bloody slaver.
[Inf. XXXIV, 53-54]

For all his majestic and horrifying scale, he remains an instrument of the divine totality for punishing wickedness in men.

In each of his three mouths he crunched a sinner,
with teeth like those that rake the hemp and flax,
keeping three sinners constantly in pain;
[Inf. XXXIV, 55-57]

The wind created by his six wings freezes the bloody waters of Phlegethon into the ice of Cocytus, in which he himself is trapped. The lifeblood of passions and feelings (Phlegethon), freezes solid when it approaches Lucifer, the cold mind, and every form of feeling freezes to death. Some souls are completely buried in the ice pack, others are partly covered. Even tears, the expression of feeling, are impossible here. It is of paramount importance to perceive this state, in which external hardening corresponds to internal distress: the individual feels the need to cry out in pain, anger, and hate, but cannot do so. Here, Dante is attempting to describe the furthestmost limit of damnation:

Here *weeping puts an end to weeping*,
and the grief that finds no outlet from the eyes
turns inward to intensify the anguish:
for the *tears* they first wept *knotted in a cluster*
and like a visor made for them in crystal
filled all the hollow part around their eyes.
[Inf. XXXIII, 94-99]

The tears which well up from within and then freeze solid may be intended to indicate that life has not been entirely extinguished, and that recovery may ensue, if a further transition is successfully completed.

The function of the mind

The ice at the centre of the earth also corresponds to the cold lucidity of the unfeeling mind, "ice" in the sense that there is a total absence of warmth. Science is most exposed to this risk and, in a sense, is itself trapped in the ice. Someone involved in scientific research once told me: "the mind cannot be stopped, because it is enjoying itself". This is chilling when we think of how the mind amuses itself creating bombs, or with genetic manipulation, and the vivisection of laboratory animals, animals bred in cramped artificially-lit cages, simply in order to be butchered. Not to mention its indifference to what happens in hospitals and hospices for the elderly, or to the hunger of the world's children, the suffering of the poor and the defenceless, and a contaminated Nature sliding inexorably towards destruction.

The cold and unfeeling mind looks on, fascinated at the death-throes of life. Unprepared to forego the trivial gains of materialism, man does not want to see, nor does he want to hear the cry of pain emerging from the bowels of the earth and from tormented bodies. And what of the concentration camps and killing fields spreading over the face of the planet? We lay the blame on science, but science is us and it is we ourselves who are immersed in "the second death".

As both sensations and emotions create a mental image, the mind is the sum of all other human functions. Even the most refined intuition may be absorbed by the mind to satisfy its instinct to possess. It is both the main vehicle and also greatest obstacle in the individual's attempt to advance along the path of self-knowledge. This is stressed in all traditions, particularly in Zen Buddhism which seeks to "break the mind" in order to release a deeper reality.

However, the mental faculty remains a source of light for man, allowing him to regain paradise and with it the freedom he lost. But to do this it must be the "suspended mind" of Virgil – expectantly

awaiting the “voice” emitted from the Self. The mind is the measure of man, provided by God through the serpent, Satan, and it may develop into a vehicle of redemption or damnation: indeed it is Virgil who will accomplish *metanoia* on Lucifer.

When, however, the mind sees itself as the source of its own autonomy and believes that it totally represents the divine (of which it is only a part), it becomes evil (pride, envy, avarice). As Jung says:

Mephistopheles is the diabolical aspect of every psychic function that has broken loose from the hierarchy of the total psyche and now enjoys independence and absolute power. [Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW XII, para. 88]

Given that the cosmogonic process – based on an analogy between macrocosm and microcosm – recurs in every human being, this Luciferian tendency to separate from the totality acts in the unconscious as a highly charged autonomous complex. As evil participates in divinity, it cannot be defeated once and for all, because it is eternal. It is not “*privatio boni*”, as St. Augustine claimed, but a powerful immanent presence in the divine image and thus in man himself, and as such, something with which man must come to terms.

12.1 *Lucifer, the Spirit of Evil*

Dante exemplifies the effect of this evil spirit on man by showing how the souls placed in the *Inferno* are imprisoned in their egocentric states. He also displays it at a cosmic level in the *Purgatorio*, where it takes the form of the struggle between demons and angels for the soul of Buonconte da Montefeltro. Lastly, it is presented in the *Paradiso* in the shape of gnosis, that is, revelation, as a celestial battle fought *ab aeterno* from the beginning of creation.

Again, Jung has this to say:

evil can no longer be minimized... it can no longer be dismissed from the world... We must learn how to handle it, *since it is here to stay*... In any case, we stand in need of a reorientation, a *metanoia*. [Jung, *Memories*, p. 329]

Lucifer, the angel who falls (described in canto XXIX of the

Paradiso and canto XXXIV of the *Inferno*) is an image of the divine Shadow cast onto the earth; having been removed, because it is no longer part of the original point, it acts as a powerful autonomous complex that takes possession of “the simple soul, pure in its ignorance” (Pur. XVI, 88).

Lucifer feeds on Judas, traitor to the sacred, and Brutus and Cassius, traitors to the Empire, which represents civil order for Dante. With these symbols, Dante suggests how evil is fuelled and kept alive by the conscious betrayal of all social order and all that humanity holds sacred. As Helen Luke maintains,² evil is kept alive by the conscious betrayal of personal love between individuals. Even men of great standing, like Judas, Brutus and Cassius, who were spurred on by high political and social ideals, may be guilty of such betrayals. Indeed men of great stature are particularly exposed to this risk.

Dante’s three-headed Lucifer is “divine” in that he is an inverted image of the heavenly Trinity. He is one of the most powerful complexes in the collective unconsciousness. He cannot be integrated because he is not related to the Ego, though the Ego must learn to recognise and – with sacred awe – shun him, just as Dante himself does, in order to avoid being possessed. But before fleeing from this “aspect”, it must be scrutinised and objectified thoroughly. It has to be recognised, insofar as this is possible, so that its energy may be used in the interests of the totality of being.

The great mystery lies in the fact that this centre of evil is also, paradoxically, the centre of the Ego, in that the mind’s tendency towards individualisation forms and consolidates the Ego.

Like Mephistopheles in *Faust*, Lucifer draws man away from the contemplative life of the laboratory towards real life, where the consequences of exclusively Ego-based actions may be experienced.

Through this experience, whenever it is undergone consciously, the moral dimension emerges and with it the knowledge of good and evil.

12.2 *Metanoia*

Finding himself before Lucifer, the symbol and synthesis of the entire *Inferno*, Dante begins the difficult task of surmounting the dan-

ger in all consciousness. Despite the difficulty of this, he obeys the Superior Will of the Self. He clings to his Master, as though to form a single body where the flesh, feeling and the mind form a unity with faith and love of knowledge. The moment of resurrection has come, as Virgil says to his disciple:

But soon it will be night. Now is the time
to leave this place, for we have seen it all.
[Inf. XXXIV, 68-69]

With an immense effort, carrying Dante on his shoulders, Virgil begins the descent along Lucifer's body, lowering himself along the hairy flanks. Virgil times the moment to begin the descent, using Lucifer's body as a ladder which allows him to worm down between the "thick fur" and the ice of Cocytus.

I held on to his neck, as he told me to,
while he watched and waited for the time and place,
and when the wings were stretched out just enough,
He grabbed onto the shaggy sides of Satan;
then downward, tuft by tuft, he made his way
between the tangled hair and frozen crust.
[Inf. XXXIV, 70-75]

Then comes the decisive passage:

When we had reached the point exactly where
the thigh begins, right at the haunch's curve,
my guide, with strain and force of every muscle,
turned his head towards the shaggy shanks of Dis
and grabbed the hair as if about to climb-
I thought that we were heading back to Hell.
"Hold tight, there is no other way", he said,
panting, exhausted, "only by these stairs
can we leave behind the evil we have seen".
[Inf. XXXIV, 76-84]

This is a spatial impression of an inner transformation that requires untold moral effort. Virgil accomplishes this passage "with strain and fear", gasping "like a man who's winded". A change of consciousness corresponds to a change of direction. In this case, the 180-degree turn

constitutes a conscious enantiodromia, so that they now move in a diametrically opposite direction.

It is Virgil the mind who effects this passage. Should he shrink from this task, he would leave his charge trapped in a state of damnation. The transition occurs so quickly, that Dante does not realise what is happening. This reversal, expressing a new inner state, instills a new way of seeing in the disciple, who is still unable to grasp what has just taken place.

I raised my eyes, expecting I would see
the half of Lucifer I saw before.
Instead I saw his two legs stretching upward.
[Inf. XXXIV, 88-90]

This parallels the Confucian practise “of no longer thinking as before”. It is such a radical “correction of concepts” that Dante, by placing himself in the reader’s position, poses the very questions required for a minimum understanding of the kind of transition involved.³

so will those simple-minded folk who still
don’t see what point it was I must have passed.
[Inf. XXXIV, 92-93]
Where is the ice? And how can he be lodged
upside-down?
[Inf. XXXIV, 103-104]

His Master, however, leaves his disciple no time to lose himself in the tangles of the mind – which always wants to *understand* – but spurs him on, because the way is long and difficult, climbing steeply through the failing light. Nevertheless, pressed by his follower, Virgil translates the substance of this reversal into words:

“You think you’re still on the centre’s other side”,
he said”, where I first grabbed the hairy worm
of rottenness that pierces the earth’s core;
and you *were* there as long as I moved downward
but, *when I turned myself, you passed the point*
to which all weight from every part is drawn.
[Inf. XXXIV, 106-111]

It is not Lucifer who has inverted, but Virgil, the mind. This is a further initiatory death, accomplished consciously in close collaboration with the entire personality. Only after this transition is it possible to begin the ascent.

Now the negative forces encountered in the course of the journey must be assumed, rid of their impurities and used creatively. The quester, who has seen, known, and experienced his own limitations, his resistance, and rebelliousness, his own slyness and its underlying causes, is now called on to make the ascent. Indeed, Dante does not free himself of the “persona” conditioned by the beasts, but he bears it with him in a renewed form, as a new means of self expression. Personal limitations, when they are reversed and channeled correctly, emerge as qualities.

It is necessary to clarify and ponder the poet’s statements concerning the point he has surmounted (“to which all weight from every part is drawn”). Trucchi has this to say:⁴

Dante cannot be credited with anticipating Newton’s theory on the basis of a happy turn of phrase. Ancient philosophers like Democritus and Epicurus had noted the movement of *heavy bodies* towards the centre of the earth, without understanding the underlying reason.

Referring to the other passage where Dante mentions this same point (“where all weights must converge” Inf. XXXII, 73-74), Trucchi claims:⁵

[these lines are regarded] by some as proof that Dante had divined the law of gravity discovered by Galileo. However, leaving aside the sense of wonder they create due to their combination of beauty and scientific exactitude which has stood the test of scientific theory, Dante’s thought differs greatly from that of Galileo. The line in question is a direct translation of a concept advanced by Saint Thomas Aquinas: “grave definitur quod natum est moveri ad medium”... which expresses the Aristotelian theory according to which each element tends towards the centre of its own sphere, with the result that the earth, being heavier than water, air, and fire, *converges* below the sea and the other elements, thus forming their foundation.

So, Dante’s intuitions go beyond ancient theories on the sphericity of the Earth and universal gravitation, which had already been intuit-

ed by the ancients. By referring to his inner perceptions, he clarifies in considerable detail Lucifer's fall from the highest realm of the heavens.⁶

Moreover, Dante clarifies the significance for humanity of Lucifer's position at the centre of the earth following his fall. Without a change of mental attitude, further progress is impossible, because Lucifer blocks the path. In all initiatory traditions this transition is known as "metanoia", from the Greek *meta-nous*, meaning change of intellect, or "conversion". This derives from the latin *cum-vertere*, meaning meeting or concentration (*cum*) of all the forces of being, and reversal (*vertere*).

This inner transformation leads us out of the illusion that we are the centre of the cosmos to the intuition of a reality that transcends this illusory centrality. It is as if the orbit of the Ego were left behind at the very point of greatest attraction (the centre), with subsequent entry into the orbit of the Self. The alternatives are either to stop where one is – which means spiritual death – or to climb through to the other side, towards a new centre.

Metanoia is, therefore, a conscious passage from a mental plane focussed on what is perceptible, to something that transposes it to a higher level. This passage is parallel to Plato's *Hegemon*, or to *Antaryami* in the Hindu tradition.⁷

Jung suggests that metanoia is a necessary phase of any process of spiritual development, a purely inner experience which has nothing to do with repentance.⁸

Lucifer, a pure essence and an aspect of the divine, fell in the course of creation. Christ, aware of being both man and the son of God, is sent – not a fall, but a descent – to reintegrate what has become separate. The process begins with Christ, Dante repeats it and clarifies it. The drama is both human and divine. It appears to be a necessary process, part of a divine plan, a universal law, or expressive of the dharma inherent in creation: indeed, Maria, the vehicle of redemption, is "Chosen of God in His eternal plan" (Par. XXXIII, 3)

Dante describes the drama exactly as he himself experiences it, evoking the full ineluctable force of evil represented by Lucifer. From an alchemical point of view, *nigredo* is now terminated. The "black stone" has been found, and after the appropriate transformations, it will also yield the philosophers' stone.

The physical signs of *nigredo* are there to see on Dante's cheeks, because they have become blackened in the course of his journey through the Inferno. Soon they will be cleansed in the ritual baptism on the shore of the *Purgatorio*.

The path towards the stars

All is not over, however. Following the vision of evil, the moral problem of re-shaping the consciousness arises. Consciousness has been disoriented and contaminated by the unconscious and known its own limitations. Now these are viewed with detachment. The consciousness no longer identifies with these limitations, but feels responsible for them. This means that the individual can no longer offload the blame onto others. Now even the most relentless and threatening aspects of his dark side must be integrated and held in the consciousness, otherwise they will never be corrected. The individual must keep them with himself and not project them onto others or become dominated by them.

In the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, it will be seen how the poet maintains the triple division (leopard, lion, she-wolf) that he inserts into the hermetic septenary. Once knowledge, education, and transmutation have occurred, these qualities, which had previously exerted a negative effect, will become virtues.

Once more it is the mentor who prepares the way forward.

When he had got me through the rocky crevice,
he raised me to its edge and set me down,
then carefully he climbed and joined me there.
"Get up", my master said, "get to your feet,
the way is long, the road a rough climb up,
already the sun approaches middle tierce!"
[Inf. XXXIV, 85-96]

A *new force* and a *new ideal* are needed, as is shown by the image of the *new sun* that is about to rise.

It was no palace promenade we came to,
but rather like some dungeon Nature built:

it was paved with broken stone and poorly lit.
[Inf. XXXIV, 97-99]

However, the quester for self-knowledge, intent on detailing and understanding his every “step”, will attempt to know and help us understand the exact nature of the process involved.

Below somewhere there is a space, as far
from Beelzebub...
known not by sight, but only by the sound
of a little stream that makes its way down here
through the hollow of a rock that it has worn
[Inf. XXXIV, 127-131]

This is the path: not seen but heard. It lies in a hidden inner place formed by a stream, which in its course from the Earthly Paradise has worn away a stone so that it will be heard at the other end by those who have managed to come through; it is a reminder, a voice coming from subterranean nature. It forms the narrow “way” (while the passage accomplished on Lucifer was the narrow “door”) towards the heavens. The poets now begin a sort of ascension, reflected in the strong sense of uplift filling lines of poetry:

My guide and I entered the hidden road
to make our way back up to the bright world.
We never thought of resting while we climbed.
We climbed, he first and I behind, until,
through a small round opening ahead of us
I saw the lovely things the heavens hold,
and we came out to see once more the stars.
[Inf. XXXIV, 133-139]

It is the dawn of Easter Sunday, in the year 1300, and *albedo* begins. From an alchemical point of view, the stream represents the water of life, the *aqua permanens* deriving from the Earthly Paradise, carrying away, as previously mentioned, the remaining traces of the Shadow following purification. Hell serves as an analogue for the alchemist’s retort (the *athanor*), the subterranean cavern hollowed from the stone where solution and *putrefactio* occur after *nigredo*. The “dungeon nature built” recalls the neck of the *athanor*.

The last image in this canticle seems to recall the moment during the alchemical process in which the sky ("il cielo") appears.⁹ If this sky is the projection of something intrinsic to the human psyche, Dante could not have expressed it more perfectly than in these wonderful lines.