

20. INTRODUCTION TO THE PARADISO

The *Paradiso* is in all senses the most difficult canticle. As the poet himself says, the “states” evoked here are but a “shadow” of the original experience, an inner experience that poetic symbols alone can begin to express.

The *Paradiso* also provides a synthetic overview of the two preceding canticles, which only here find their true *raison d'être*. Until the *Paradiso* has been read, the other two canticles will not be fully understood. The *Inferno* provided an essentially analytical awareness of the archetypal instances that can imprison an individual to the point of damnation and spiritual death. The *Purgatorio* led to an understanding, partly analytical and partly synthetic, of how man may free himself from such autonomous complexes; though at that point synthesis was still purely intuitive. In the *Paradiso*, all the preceding states, which seemed fragmentary and isolated, are drawn back to and reunited in the original *Unus Mundus* where they had their beginning. Dante calls this point of origin “Love” and it manifests itself as light.¹

In the *Commedia* the poet projects externally the visions originating in his heart (“as it dictates within”). Sensation, thought, feeling, and intuition act in unceasing harmony, and this requires the reader's total participation and concentration. It is as though the poet spoke to each of us individually, revealing his discoveries, his moods, thoughts, and human reactions.

It is for this reason that his account never becomes cold or forced, or merely allegorical. Even where the allegory is at its most obvious – as we saw in the Earthly Paradise – through his own active involvement and by including the crucial stages of his own journey of self-knowledge, Dante's allegorical imagery merges with the deepest roots of symbol. Nowhere as in the *Paradiso*, is the reader called on to use imagination to such an extent, in that the canticle deals with supersensible realities which, while being real, partake of a more rarified

reality. The poet's "active imagination", to use Jung's words, helps us to develop our own.

So far Dante's story of his journey has proceeded from

rim to center.

[Par. XVI, 1]

Now he is moving ever closer to that central point, and when he reaches the end of his journey he will make us review all from

centre to rim

[Par. XVI, 1]

when, through the "voice" of Beatrice, he will describe the Creation to us.

20.1 *Beatrice's Eyes*

The celestial journey that now begins is the vision transmitted to the poet through Beatrice's eyes. She is his contemplative and intuitive potential, his "intellectual light full of love". In other traditions she is known as the Buddy, Shekina, or Fatima, and is generally personified in a female form. She is no mere allegory, but someone dear to the poet, who loves and is loved by him. She is the visionary experience of his guiding Anima, performing her task to the very end, helping her disciple to develop and hone his capacity for inner vision. Like the Sophia, she is a pure essence, both serene and gentle, becoming manifest in the silence of "the chamber of the heart".²

The poet ascends the heavens by contemplating her eyes and her smile. There is no physical effort, but a sense of elevation in which he concentrates on "looking" and on trying to understand what he sees. The initiatory death-rebirth passages no longer occur through sleep, quasi-death, or through dreams – as in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* – rather they are marked by moments of blindness before the overwhelming numinousness and brightness of the apparitions he witnesses. These instants of blindness allow the quester to re-enter the unconscious in order to draw on new energies.³

In the course of his celestial journey, the light gradually softens in proportion to Dante's receptiveness, making it possible for feeling and understanding to gradually deepen.

The *Paradiso* is where contemplation is developed. This is not a passive practice, but involves "looking at" each emerging image through fully-opened senses, allowing it to speak and to live by establishing a living relationship with it. In a sense this corresponds to Jung's "active imagination", which provides a knowledge beyond what can be immediately sensed though this is necessary. The guiding function in this process is assumed by the Anima, the mediatrix between the Ego and the Self, and it is the eyes of Beatrice, and what they see, that transmit their knowledge to her disciple, Dante.

However, we are not dealing with rational knowledge – the science that studies the relation between contingent and measurable things – but with "Sapientia", the knowledge of final causes that cannot be demonstrated rationally, but which simply *are*. These are the spiritual realities man thirsts after, because they contain the very savour of life ("the high salt"). Man believes in them through faith:

Once there we shall behold what we hold true
through faith, not proven...
[Par. II, 43-44]

Solomon saw this feminine figure, personified in the *Commedia* by Beatrice, as "Sapientia Sancta", because she was the bringer of God's messages (Jung would say the Self's messages). This feminine figure, however, is not the same for everyone – otherwise the result would be merely cold allegory – and assumes different personal aspects for different individuals. The poet fosters a very close relationship with his personal image of the Anima, a relationship based on love, deep sympathy and understanding.⁴

The eternal debate as to whether or not Dante actually had a personal encounter with Beatrice will never be resolved, the answer is locked away in his most secret stronghold. We must make do with the fact that Beatrice lives through the poet who sang of her and loved her. The higher Dante ascends, the more beautiful his lady's eyes become as they beam and fill with light. The countless gradations of her smile – sometimes ironic, at others sweet or rapt – become the smile of the

heavens themselves, revealing the inner structure of the Self.

Dante does not regard contemplation as something detached from life, nor is his ascent an end in itself. Only the blessed may lose themselves in the endless contemplation of divine light, but this is not allowed, except partially and fleetingly, to common mortals. Man must practice contemplation so that his life may embody what has been revealed to him. Jung himself often stresses the importance of this attitude along the path of individuation.

Contemplation, that is to say, the dialogue with the unconscious, must concern the outside world as well, because the unconscious is also expressed through that very world. When Dante drifts away into ecstatic contemplation of Beatrice's eyes, to the exclusion of everything else, it is Beatrice herself who rouses him:

... "Now turn around and listen well,
not in my eyes alone is Paradise".
[Par. XVIII, 21-22]

There is no mistaking the message: we must open ourselves to life, watching and listening for its messages, because paradise is to be found there, too, if we know how to grasp it. Far from being mysticism, Dante's message is one of greater openness to life, and greater readiness to accept all that life may bring. We should bear this message in mind during the endless procession of days anxiously spent always trying to do something. But when do we ever turn to look about us to "see" what really surrounds us: our homes, our most treasured things, the expression of a face? When do we ever really "listen" to what lies behind the words spoken to us or behind the spontaneous thoughts that grip our mind?

We must avoid constantly projecting the task to contemplate onto mystics and saints. If we do not wish to slip into activism, into the continual mutability of the apparent, or the empty abstractions of the intellect, we must strive to learn how we can create our own sacred space, the temple or inner church where we can be free to contemplate.

Unless we do this, we run the risk of losing our "centre" and so falling once more into the "wood of wilderness", where not only action but the whole of life itself lose all meaning.

The essential quality of Beatrice shines through the words she

addresses to Dante:

“If, in the *warmth of love*, you see me glow
with light the world below has never seen,
stunning the power of your mortal sight,
You should not be amazed, for it proceeds
from perfect vision which, *the more it sees,*
the more it moves to reach the good perceived.

[Par. V, 1-6]

Beatrice is a flash of intuition (“perfect vision”) that is welcomed with intense feeling (“the warmth of love”). She acts to give a higher significance to human action (“the more it moves”). The *Paradiso* is, then, that longing for union, relation, and passionate knowledge that goes beyond rationality: a knowledge joined to feeling: the knowledge of the heart. Beyond all the contingencies that are understood with the help of the rational mind, contemplation brings an intuition of Unity, and therefore a sense of order and harmony where before all had been chaos and fragmentation.

To put this in other terms, while Beatrice encompasses the cognitive faculty and all the other faculties, she is above all Eros. What was merely an intuition at the beginning of the journey in the *Inferno*, becomes a total experience in the *Paradiso*. Jung always stressed that there can be no true consciousness unless it has been filtered through the values of feeling, just as there can be no true feeling where emotions have not been clarified through the discriminating action of thought.⁵

All the questions that Dante puts to the Blessed and Beatrice are dictated by a deep-seated love of knowledge concerning the ultimate truths affecting man and society.

The repeated invectives that thunder out their dark forebodings are the expression of deep disdain, but behind this contempt one senses Dante’s distress at mankind’s fallen state.

The vision of Paradise is a knowledge of the real nature of life, with all its lights and shadows, but it is also a manifold celebration of love, which is expressed in a thousand ways through the infinite gradations of light, colour and sounds and through the souls’ loving charity towards the “pilgrim of love”, as well as in the subtle variations of Beatrice’s warm and human smile. Love is the highest feeling known

to man on earth; by tracing it back to its source, mankind may discover the all- embracing universal love known to theologians as God.

The Celestial Journey

In his *Paradiso* Dante sends us forth on a celestial voyage that resembles a tale where ecstatic visions alternate with personal memories, encounters with dear friends, and historical figures. The great problems of humanity are confronted. To these questions there are no rationally acceptable answers: the mystery of the Absolute's incarnation in the individual and in history, the origin of evil, redemption, predestination, the resurrection of the flesh, the final judgement, divine justice and its relation with grace. In spite of all efforts to understand, there are no solutions, only elevation.

While the "small mysteries" were experienced in the journey through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* (the "maternal mysteries" as Jung calls them, inasmuch as they are linked to the problems of the Ego), the heavens is where we are admitted to the "great mysteries" (the "paternal mysteries") involved in the relation between the Ego and the Self, between the individual and multiplicity, the single man and the God-Totality.

With regard to this, Rene' Guenon claims that there are no precise and distinct stages in the process of the great mysteries, that is, in the transition from the "true man" (equivalent to the primordial state of the Earthly Paradise) to the "transcendent man". In actual fact there are multiple states, all remote from the unconditioned point of origin, where liberation or supreme identity is attained (the final state of the celestial paradise). Once a being passes beyond the primordial state (the Earthly Paradise), it is somehow lost to sight. Therefore the primordial state is the only sign we have of all transcendent, transhuman states. From the point of view of the common man, transcendent man is indistinguishable from the "true man" and all those who exist between them. Generally any stages that may exist in the passage through the great mysteries are not clearly formulated, for the very reason that they are inexpressible.⁶

Known variously as "the middle way", "the way to the summit of the sky", "tao", the "way of Christ" in the various initiatory traditions,

the journey of the ascent to Paradise takes place on a vertical plane in the *Commedia*. It is as if, starting from the Earthly Paradise (the ideal centre of the human state), Dante's celestial journey re-assimilated the ascending axis of the cosmic cross until he becomes one with the Celestial Pole, the Point of Motion, the Sanctuary of Great Peace, The Holy Palace of the Hebrew Kabbala, The Seventh Direction "which is no single direction but contains them all", the Seventh Ray of the Sun. This is how the state of the Universal Man is reached, a state where there is no longer left or right, up or down, forward or backward. For the alchemists, too, the final goal was Paradise, where the elusive Lapis emits its diamond-like rays. This journey is often represented as "navigation" in the initiatory tradition.

The state of final union, called "the great liberation" by the orientals, is, however, different from the inner freedom attained in The Earthly Paradise, which is freedom from the conflict of opposites, though it does not remove the Ego-Self duality. At the end of the celestial Paradise, when this duality is absorbed into the state of unity, Dante speaks of "beatitude" and "ardour of charity", but not of liberation or release. The state granted to him at the end of his journey is reached when the human will becomes one with the will of God (in psychological terms, the will of the Self), as Piccarda herself will point out. In the celestial Paradise, therefore, there is no tension: the Blessed *are whole* and no longer subject to transformation. The poet alone is involved in a continual transformation, because he is still engaged in the quest for self-knowledge, in which we accompany him.

The actual attainment of beatitude in life is not easy, nor is the success or failure to do so the most important thing. The psychological equivalent of Dante's journey is what Jung termed "the way of individuation". Not all are able to follow it consciously, and those who do so face extreme difficulties in pursuing it to the very end. But commitment is essential. The result, from which we must be absolutely detached, lies in the hands of God.

20.2 *The Structure of The Paradiso*

Dante's *Paradiso* is divided into a perceptible, astrological Paradise, necessary for advancing consciousness, and the real

Paradise of The Empyrean situated beyond space and time, where the Candid Rose and the Point of divine mystery appear.

The astrological Paradise comprises the heavens of the seven planets together with the Starry Heavens. Here Dante perceives the Blessed whose encounters with the poet take place in a hierarchical order reflecting different forms of contemplation. This perceptible Paradise is structured on the basis of merit, that is, according to the varying degrees of intensity with which the Blessed strain towards the Original Principle. While united in the state of beatitude, each soul maintains its individuality.

The levels of contemplation assume the name and the physical characteristics of stars familiar to us. The planets where the Blessed appear are linked to the Earth by the influence they exert on it (stamps or archetypes). Although they do not have a human form, the Blessed bear all the passionate signs of their human nature, expressed in a language of highly delicate vibrations – light, song, dance – in an infinite variety of tones. This is the blazing ladder by which the poet makes his ascent, exposing his soul to us in a crescendo of light and harmony.

Paradise proper is the Empyrean, the true seat of God and the Blessed, a “state” perceived as an “eternal present”. The Candid Rose expresses the harmonious co-existence of all the Blessed, that is to say, the gamut of spiritual qualities that can be embodied in mankind, while all the negative spiritual qualities have either been sublimated or consumed during the passage through the preceding worlds of Hell and Purgatory. This spiritual quest is expressed through analogies and metaphors, evoking indefinable situations and states that cannot be explained rationally, let alone demonstrated.

Beyond this lies the Point of divine totality-unity, counterpoised with the centre-Point of the Earth where Lucifer, the cthonic aspect of God, is located. The Earthly Paradise is situated between these two points on the axis uniting the two poles of the psyche. This is the ideal centre-point of the human state (the True Man), where the opposing tendencies of Lucifer and the God-totality are held in a harmonious balance, and where between the heavens and the earth man, in an intermediate state, is located.

Together with Dante we first descended into the darkness of matter (Hell), an equivalent for the re-assimilation of the individual and