

ative autonomy, the mysterious world of divinity, the “abyss of the eternal law”, and not even the angels can plumb its depths. From a psychological point of view, there is no way of understanding the laws that govern the appearance of one or other aspect of the archetypes. It is the form of fate, providence, or predestination. We may give this mystery any name we please, but the nature of it remains unchanged. Nobody can explain why certain people “feel called” or “chosen”.

At the end of his journey, Bernard silences Dante before this totally impenetrable mystery: “be satisfied with this”, he says, and Dante relinquishes the last vestige of the human desire to “know”. Even the most illumined of men may not rationally understand the essence of the mystery he experiences.³⁷ As he cannot understand everything, he must, on the contrary, assume the acceptant and receptive attitude of the Virgin: “*ecce ancilla domini*”.

In sacred awe of this unpredictable God, Bernard urges Dante to turn his gaze on Mary:

Now look at that face which resembles Christ
the most, for only in its radiance
will you be made ready to look at Christ...
and turn our eyes upon the Primal Love...
grace from the one who has power to help you...
And he began to say this holy prayer.
[Par. XXXII, 85-87, 142, 148, 151]

26.6 *The Prayer to the Virgin*

Just as the first canto of the *Inferno* acts as a prologue, so the final canto of the *Paradiso* provides a synthesis of the entire work. It has been defined as:

the poet's swan song, dictated in the honoured peace of Ravenna during the last months of his life, in the intervals between the bouts of tertian fever that was to end his life. With a weakened body but a clear mind and a spirit softened by approaching death, he was in the physical and psychological state that the Saints achieved through mortification, fasting and prayer, beseeching God to grant them the sweet moment of mystic ecstasy...He had begun [his work] with an anguished cry to Virgil and now brought it to an end with a trusting prayer to the Virgin. [Trucchi, op. cit. p. 554]

Beatrice is there praying for him and Bernard is at his side burning with desire for his vision to occur. Gradually everything, including the Rose, fades from view; the poet sees the universe in God and God in himself.

Even in this extreme and sublime vision, Dante manages to transmit the tension, strain, and transformation of the inexpressible. It has been said that the aesthetic beauty and emotional tension created in the reader by this representation of the vision of the Self have never been surpassed.

The poet stands at the centre of the event of God's epiphany within his soul. The earth, with all its suffering and passions has been left far behind him, yet it is for the earth's sake that he has undertaken the journey (and it will be seen how even as he stands before the supreme vision, his final prayer is kept for this world). Thus, Dante manages to fix his attention on both poles of his essence: his Ego, the voyager, and the Self, the final goal.

The poem reaches its catharsis here. None of the single episodes have a cathartic effect, because each of them exemplifies a human mode of being; but man has many facets, manifold realities, and many dramatic and contradictory tensions which mostly go unresolved.

As far as it has been possible, Dante has fleshed out his exposition with historical data that is both practical and readily understood, making his journey through the human soul by highlighting all the instances that influence it unconsciously, together with other instances that afford the possibility of choice and provide a means of freeing consciousness from the grip of absolute determinism. At the end of the long and exhausting journey across the "great sea of being", Dante is at last able to visualise the Unity that holds the universe together, and he calls this cohesive force Love.

He has now reached a dimension that he senses is "infinite": the inaccessible solitude of the spirit. Bernard's voice breaks the silence as he raises a prayer to invoke a grace on this mortal who has risen to such heights from the lowest depths of the universe. Dante's prayer to Mary does not create the cult of the Virgin, rather it translates all the power and beauty of ancient experiences into lines of sublime poetry that are uttered with all the warmth and love to be found in the poet's soul.

Through contact with the contemplative aspect represented by

Bernard, who embodied this quality in life, man may come to penetrate the original *Unus Mundus*, thus going beyond the contemplative attitude that provides a link between God and man and which is represented by Beatrice.³⁸ Now under the protection of Mary, Dante is about to go beyond the confines of what is human. Jung observes:

Even the enlightened person remains what he is, and is never more than his own limited ego before the one who dwells within him, whose form has no knowable boundaries, who encompasses him on all sides, fathomless as the abysses of the earth and vast as the sky. [Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, CW XI, para. 758]

But what does Mary really represent? Literally and at the level of her Christian significance, she is the Mother of God, the Virgin. But going beyond the external form of the symbol, Maria is also the site, the *vas*, the mandala; an inner state that humbly accepts the divine and places itself at the disposition of the divine (“*ecce ancilla domini*”). In this “pure”, virgin state, the divine child, the Self, may be born.

As has already been said, from a human point of view, Maria represents the maternal, virginal aspect of every woman that consciously assumes responsibility for giving birth to another human being, itself a divine essence. This means that every woman may join the sacred virgins in the service of the divine.

But as she is presented by Dante, Mary also has many affinities with the Hindu *Shakti*, a creative energy of the divinity itself, with the *Great Maya*, the creator’s feminine polarity. In her we also find mercy and *Sapientia*, not to mention *Sophia*, who is coeternal with God in creation. Being the maternal aspect of the Principle she is the mother of the *Avatar*, that is, of God made manifest.

The Prayer

“O Virgin Mother, daughter of your son”

[Par. XXXIII, 1]

René Guenon has written that “even without being born, God becomes manifest, born of His own Maya”.³⁹ This observation implicitly refers to the Tao without name, the Oriental tradition’s Maya-

Shakti, from which Ishwara, God made manifest, emerges. At the level of the inner quest, Mary represents the virgin state of the Anima which, by invoking grace, fulfills God's desire to be made manifest, so that God manifests Himself in her by becoming the son, while remaining the Father, in that Mary's virgin state is differentiated from the Totality.⁴⁰

At an earthly level, Mary is the the mother of Christ, that is, of God become man in His son. But she is also the daughter of God, because the son, Christ, includes the Father in himself, as well. The Christian tradition does not consider explicitly the Creator's maternal aspect, so Mary is seen in an inferior, earthly light, as simply the mother of Christ the historical figure. Through the dogma of *Assumptio Mariae*, Mary is united in the celestial thalamos as the bride of God the Son, as Sophia joined to the Divinity. It is no coincidence that just as the mother of Buddha is called Maya, so Christ's mother is called Maria. In the space of this single line, Dante encompasses the various aspects symbolised by Mary.

most humble, most exalted of all creatures
[Par. XXXIII, 2]

Her simple acceptance of the Archangel Gabriel's annunciation makes her "humble", while she is exalted because she is the mother of the incarnate God. Although she expresses the full creative power of God, Mary also expresses pure passivity, because she embodies the divine quality (Pakriti, the Oriental tradition's Yin) that yields to the moulding force of the pure divine act (the Yang). This synthesis of opposing divine qualities forms the totality of the Tao.

chosen of God in His eternal plan.
[Par. XXXIII, 3]

This line implies that both man's fall and redemption were present in God's will *ab aeterno*, the very mystery that prompted Jung to observe "It was part of God's intention that they [Adam and Eve] should sin" (C.G. Jung, *Memories...* p. 38)

you are the one who ennobled human nature
to the extent that He did not disdain,

Who was its Maker, to make Himself man.
[Par. XXXIII, 4-6]

You, Dante says, are that wholly receptive, feminine quality that hearkens to the sincere call and whose existence is in the service of life; you are the noblest of mankind's quality's, so much so that you were chosen by God, your creator, as the "means" of His incarnation. Here, Mary encompasses the whole of mankind.

Within your womb rekindled was the love
that gave the warmth that did allow this flower
to come to bloom with this timeless peace.
[Par. XXXIII, 7-9]

Only occasionally in the Old Testament, do we catch glimpses of the quality of Eros so lacking in the Biblical God, generally perceived as a fearsome judge allotting punishment. When the Word was incarnated through Mary, this love opened like a flower, the Rose of the Blessed blooming out of human development into an eternal space where Peace reigns supreme. The rose is the eternal feminine, of which Mary is the synthesis, and it must be nourished by the substance of humanity. She, the daughter of Love, enables her faithful follower to reveal to himself (conceive) the Lord who engendered him.⁴¹

For all up here you are the noonday torch
of charity, and down on earth, for men,
the living spring of their eternal hope.
[Par. XXXIII, 10-12]

In the beatific celestial state, Mary is a radiant light of vibrant charity and divine mercy. On earth, in the lives of men engaged in the bitter struggle of existence, she is a source of hope, a wellspring of youthful creativity.

Lady, you are so great, so powerful,
that who seeks grace without recourse to you
would have his wish fly upward without wings.
[Par. XXXIII, 13-15]

The value of the feminine state she symbolises is so vast, that unless man trustingly gives himself over to her, there is no point in dreaming, imagining, and fantasising, because nothing will come of it. In other words, the conscious union with the *Unus Mundus* that allows the Follower to be united with his Lord, can only be achieved through the state personified by Mary: the feminine quality, the mother, the Celestial Eve, the Universal Anima, from which everything originates.

Mary is the prototype that lays the ground in the mystic for the vision of the Self. When she is bathed in light by Her Lord, it is her nature to give birth to a spiritual son, the Self.⁴²

Not only does your loving kindness rush
to those who ask for it, but often times
it flows spontaneously before the plea.
[Par. XXXIII, 16-18]

The poet continues to be concerned with a state of active receptivity free of all intellectual interference; a truly virgin state that does not seek practical results.

It is a state that always helps whoever turns towards it, and even anticipates eventual pleas for help (remember that Mary herself called on Lucia to help Dante as he wandered lost in the dark wood). It is a state of detachment from practical results, and is therefore action in inaction, the Orient's *wu-wei*, which corresponds to the "non nobis domine" of Christianity.

In you is tenderness, in you is pity,
in you is munificence -in you unites
all that is good in God's created beings.
[Par. XXXIII, 19-21]

She is the state which synthesises all values and which is the unique condition in which the epiphany of each individual's Lord may occur. She is the highest expression of the "good" "residing" in every living creature.

This is a man who from the deepest pit
of all the universe up to this height
has witnessed, one by one, the lives of souls,
[Par. XXXIII, 22-24]

The poet now looks back on the arduous ascent. Having emerged from the unconscious state of the dark wood at the behest of Mary, he has encountered all the aspects of good and evil, analysing them by turns and becoming aware of his responsibility for all his inner conflicts which must be harmonised (“one by one, the lives of souls”).

who begs that you grant him through your grace
the power to raise his vision higher still
to penetrate the final blessedness.

[Par. XXXIII, 25-27]

On the poet's behalf, Bernard implores that he be granted “super-human sight” to enable him to see into “the final blessedness”. He cannot do this without first passing through this state of abandonment, nor can he hope to see with mere human eyes. For this he will need to see with Mary's eyes, the inner divine potential that exists even in man.

And I who never burned for my own vision
more than I burn for his, with all my prayers
I pray you – and I pray they are enough –
that you through your own prayers dispel the mist
of his mortality, that he may have
the Sum of Joy revealed before his eyes.

[Par. XXXIII, 28-33]

Bernard stresses the fact that he has never prayed for himself as urgently as he now prays for the man standing beside him. Dante lays great stress on this further instance of “non nobis domine”, as though to encourage us to ask not only for ourselves, but also to “give” of ourselves to others. Bernard now begs that all remaining clouds may be dispelled and every mortal veil removed; it is a prayer for the final knot to be untied, and for the removal of the veil of Maya, which is interwoven into the manifestation that both “shows” and “clothes” the Principle and hides it from our view. Let her now transform the poet's limited human knowledge into divine knowledge, transporting him from “human” to “divine” reality.

I pray you also, Queen who can achieve

your every wish, keep his affections sound
once he has had the vision and returns.
[Par. XXXIII, 34-36]

Dante stands on the threshold of an extremely dangerous transition, fraught with the danger of psychic disassociation. In approaching the eternal flame, he runs the risk of being utterly consumed by it. "Queen of Heaven", Bernard prays, "absolute mistress of your will, who can realise your every wish ("It is so willed there where the power is for what is willed") I beg that after such a vision, his human capacities may remain intact, let him not be overwhelmed and let his human feelings come through it whole". In other words, let him not disassociate and flee life as a consequence of what he sees. Dante must return to his human condition and not dissolve into the Self, in what would be a journey of no return. The search is for a conscious union from which it is possible to re-emerge. As Ibn' Arabi observes:⁴³

The return to one's own Lord recomposes the divine couple of Ego-Self.

Does this mean that what Dante reaches and encounters is the absolute divinity? Or is it a part, the divine ray breathed into man at birth? Dante does not say, nor would it be possible for him to do so, because to define this personal mystery would be to obliterate its mystery.

If, however, a man loses the individual thread connecting him to his Lord – continues Ibn' Arabi – he loses himself in social forms of religion aimed at imposing a depersonalised divine image that is identical for everyone. Whenever the connection between the Ego and its personal Lord is severed, the Ego falls into a state of hypertrophy (in which the Ego confuses itself with and believes it actually is the Self). This can degenerate easily into spiritual imperialism, in which it is no longer permissible for individual souls to unite with the personal Lords that are immanent in them, but where the same external Lord is imposed on all souls without distinction. Despite being part of an original *Unus Mundus*, each creature is distinct from its creator. The prayer draws to and end:

Protect him from the stirrings of the flesh:
you see, with Beatrice, all the Blest,

hands clasped in prayer, are praying for my prayer”.

[Par. XXXIII, 36-39]

“Let your vigilance overcome all his human frailty; now he is all prayer, straining towards union, changed and transformed at every level”. So ends the contemplative aspect’s prayer to the trusting and receptive aspect (Mary).

Those eyes so loved and revered by God,
now fixed on him who prayed, made clear to us
how precious true devotion is to her.

[Par. XXXIII, 40-42]

First there were Beatrice’s eyes, her smile, and her laughter, now there are Mary’s eyes. God feels a reawakening of memory, a return of His love for Mary’s eyes, the eyes of the *Sapientia Sancta* co-eternal in Him. Here the *coniunctio* between praying man and the feminine aspect of God occurs. This is the penultimate stage of the *coniunctio*. A new attitude is born, the trusting wait that the faithful call “faith” and which makes the fates smile on them. This attitude of humility animated by living hope and burning charity is the true source of miracles.

then she looked into the Eternal Light
*into whose being, we must believe, no eyes
of other creatures pierce with such insight.*

[Par. XXXIII, 43-45]

There is an ever-present danger of falling back into the the darkness of the abyss, into Meister Eckhart’s “nullity” or the *Urgrund* of Jacob Boeheme. This is the *tremendum* and *maestas*, the fear of God, though which filters the ineffable beatitude of the numinous. It is no easy task for the creature to behold that “light”. The experience must be constructed step by step, and to do so a long spiritual education is required in order to gradually acquire the necessary experience by degrees, helping the personal thrust towards unity to evolve gradually.

It is, then, the final phase of *coniunctio*, the *hieros gamos*, the sacred nuptials between the feminine pole of divinity (the manifestation, creation, and humanity, symbolised by Mary with whom Dante is now

united) and the masculine pole, the divine Trinity; a union that reconstructs the undivided Unity existing beyond all possible distinctions between Heaven and Earth.

Now Mary keeps watch over Dante to “keep his affections sound once he has had the vision and returned”.

And I, who now was drawing ever nigher
Towards the end of yearning, as was due,
Quenched in my soul the burning of desire.*
[Par. XXXIII, 46-48]

The moment for the encounter with the divine is now at hand. Feeling this, the initiate abandons all personal wishes.

Throughout the *Paradiso* the Blessed say that all desire is extinct in them, because they *are* in the divine. The same thing is happening to Dante: gradually his individual yearning fades as he moves closer towards this union.

26.7 *The Vision of God*

Bernard then gestured to me with a smile -
that I look up, but I already was
instinctively what he would have me be.
[Par. XXXIII, 49-51]

Bernard, the guiding contemplative aspect, smilingly invites Dante to lift his gaze upward, but the Poet has already turned in the direction of the Divine Point. As happened with Beatrice and Virgil, Dante becomes one with Bernard. He has assimilated the functions that Beatrice, Virgil, and Bernard each personify. By passing through Mary he is actually in the process of becoming the Total Being, on the verge

* There is much debate among the commentators as to Dante's exact meaning in this tercet. Interpretations fall into two broad categories: one maintaining that here Dante's longing is extinguished, the other that the poet's longing is even more acute. The author's interpretation is closely linked to the former reading and so Reynold's translation has been preferred as it is consonant with the author's reading of the original.