

1. INTRODUCTION

The numerous studies on the *Divina Commedia* are, on the whole, highly specialised. The more academic are devoted to uncovering the historical, theological, moral and allegorical significance of the work. Other analyses fall within the more esoteric approach currently enjoying something of a revival, revealing the symbolism of initiatory rites, alchemy, hermeticism, and astrology. These, however, are of little help to the non-specialised reader.

This book is born of a desire to clarify the symbolic significance of the *Commedia*, a meaning that, in the poet's own words, "goes beyond the letter". This has been done by retracing the spiritual journey mapped out by Dante and reviewing it with the immeasurable help of Jung's findings on psychic and spiritual processes.

Observing those who undertake the inner quest, Jung saw that the images emerging from unconscious processes – through the dreams and fantasies involved in "active imagination" – behave as though attracted by a centre, beyond the empirical Ego. It is here, in this elusive centre, in this ultimate frontier of the personality that a *coniunctio oppositorum*, a synthesis of opposing tendencies, takes place.

A symbolic form of this centre is a feature of all the esoteric traditions – it is the *Anthropos* of the Alexandrine–Hellenistic tradition, St. Paul's *Second Adam*, the *Quadmon Adam* of the Hebrew *Quabbalah*, the alchemists' *Lapis*, the Masons' *Cornerstone*, the Celtic tradition's *Holy Grail*, the Tao tradition's *Cheun-Jen*, Hindu's *Individual Atman*, the *Individual Self* common to the oriental tradition as a whole, and the *Name* or *Face* of the personal God peculiar to the sufism of Mohiddin Ibn' Arabi.

On encountering the sacred scriptures of the Orient, and noting close parallels between the images taking shape in the form of the mandala (the graphic expression of the sacred centre of the human personality) and those produced spontaneously by his patients, Jung

postulated that the human psyche contains the image of a centre beyond the Ego, of which the Ego itself is nevertheless a part.¹ This, the real organiser of the personality's physical, psychic, and spiritual order, he defined as the "Self", a term borrowed from the East.²

When this image of the Self appears, it has miraculously therapeutic qualities and instills a sense of recovery and peace.³ Jung perceived that the "experience" of the Self is the highest possible point of human existence, though it is hardly ever attained. In his comparative studies on mystics and initiates, he perceived that it does not seem possible to isolate the image of the Self from the Imago Dei, or the image of God within man. The aim of Jung's studies was not to prove the existence of God; they can only be taken as indicating the existence of an archetypal image of divinity in the human psyche:

... which to my mind is the most we can assert about God psychologically. [Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, CW.XI, par.102]

The theologian has the last word. In order to clear up any misunderstandings, especially from the theological side, I should like to emphasize yet again that it is not the business of science to draw conclusions which go beyond the bounds of our empirical knowledge. I do not feel the slightest need to put the self in place of God, as short-sighted critics have often accused me of doing. (Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis. The Personification of the Opposites*, CW.XIV, para. 273.)

Psychology... is not in a position to make metaphysical statements. It can only establish that the symbolism of psychic wholeness coincides with the God-image, but it can never prove that the God-image is God himself, or that the self takes the place of God. (Jung, *Gnostic Symbols of the Self*, CW IX, ii, para. 308.)

it is impossible to distinguish the self from a God-image. At any rate, I personally have found it impossible to discover a criterion of distinction. Here faith or philosophy alone can decide, neither of which has anything to do with the empiricism of the scientist. (Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, CW XI, para. 281.)

Jung goes on to make a distinction between the unconscious and the image of God:

Strictly speaking, the God-image does not coincide with the unconscious as such, but with a special content of it, namely the archetype of the self. It is this archetype from which we can no longer distinguish the God-

image empirically. (Jung, *Answer to Job*, CW XI, para. 757)

The way in which Dante's initiatory journey is structured conveys the sense that the *Commedia* appears as an enormous mandala, through which we move, gradually becoming conscious of various instances of the Self.⁴ In the *Inferno* in particular we encounter the Persona, the Shadow, and the various facets of the Animus and Anima. The *Purgatorio* reveals the unifying synthesis of the opposites, and *Paradiso* the spiritual revelations ultimately leading to union with the Origin (that is, God), just as happens in Oriental yoga.

As we pass through this process together with Dante, allowing ourselves to be guided by him – ridding our minds of all prejudices and creating an empty space so the images evoked by his magnificent verse can emerge as we relive them – it becomes clear that the Jungian “process of individuation”⁵ is not merely present in Dante's work, but is set forth in its entirety, comprising all the stages leading to the final conscious union between the Ego and the Self. The path followed in Dante is matched, albeit in different forms, by processes found in the great vedic tradition (The Bhagavad Gita), Taoism, Kundalini yoga, sufism, and alchemical hermeticism.

In the aesthetic form of poetry Dante expresses what cannot be expressed – or only with the greatest difficulty – in prose.⁶ Following in the footsteps of the ancient poet-seers Homer and Virgil, the exponents of the *Dolce Stil Nuovo*, the Provençal troubadours and Persian bards, his poetry addresses us through the medium of symbolic images that cannot be explained rationally. From Dante's time on many have intuited the initiatory element in his work,⁷ and the poet himself referred to it.⁸ In all traditions,⁹ initiation into the mysteries takes man in his present normal state of being and reconducts him back through the stages of his entire history in order to lead him once again to the “primordial state”, namely to Eden or Heaven on Earth. Throughout this process the disciple is accompanied by a guru, onto whom the inner guru, the Self, is projected.

“The celestial ray” connects the Ego and the Self (in psychological terms it is the Ego-Self axis). At the beginning of this process the connection is unconscious and only emerges consciously during “the second birth”, which can be occasioned by an existential crisis, passion,

illness, or a stimulus which shakes the foundations of the personality. The celestial ray almost always takes a feminine form: in the east the *buddy*, Fatima or sometimes the Angel Gabriel in Islam, in the Quabbalah it is the *Shekina*, while for the *Fedeli d'Amore* it was *Sophia*, the *Sapientia Sancta*. After the “reawakening” that attends the second birth, the process of initiation begins. During the inner quest the centre of reawakened personality gradually passes from the Earth (site of the fallen and separated state) to Earthly Paradise (the primordial state) and from here to the final union with the Self (in fact “yoga” means “union”).

This is the very scheme underpinning Dante’s entire journey. The salient points supporting the possibility of an initiatory interpretation of the *Commedia* are as follows:

- The second birth: “I found myself again” (The Inferno, canto I).
- The personification of the celestial ray: God-Mary-Lucia-Beatrice-Virgil-Dante (Inferno, Canto II).
- The journey through the three worlds, common to all esoteric traditions.
 - the numerous death-birth passages.
 - the presence of the guru, decidedly an inner presence in Dante (Virgil-Beatrice-Bernard).
 - the final union with the Origin (Paradise, Canto XXXIII).

Usually the process of initiation occurs in groups, though in some case it can take place at a purely personal level. The following are just four of the possible ways of entering this inner experience: *meditatio*, *imaginatio* (in the “active imagination” sense of a dialogue with the images emerging from the unconscious), *contemplatio* and dreams.

From ancient times on, the mysteries had served to bring the conscious mind into contact with the unconscious collective matrix, that is to say, with the spiritual energies which are the source of the archetypal images that Jung found in alchemy and gnosis.

These images are spontaneously generated at a hidden level of the psyche, the objective psyche common to all men and which Jung called the “collective unconscious”.

Since antiquity, then, initiation has always been the conscious experience of man’s spontaneous unconscious processes, requiring

levels of discipline that few, even in the past, were capable of.

Initiation processes and analysis accelerate the process of individuation.¹⁰

The *Divina Commedia* expresses a personal experience which Dante embarked on together with a group of other researchers, the *Stilnovisti* (exponents of the Sweet New Style) in the period of the *Vita Nuova* (The New Life). Addressing Bonagiunta, the poet himself defines his approach to poetry:

“I am one who when Love
inspires me, takes careful note and then
gives form to what he dictates in my heart.
[Pur. XXIV, 52-54]

Besides being a poet Dante is a great seer, one of those powerful consciences which destiny provides from time to time in the history of civilization, charged with the explicit duty to express the collective experience of his age for the benefit of all.

It could be said that the *Commedia* is a collective work for which Dante acted as a scribe, as he himself says to the reader:

I put the food out; now you feed yourself,
because the theme which makes of me its scribe
demands all of my concentration now.
[Par. X, 25-27]

Besides, he was well aware of the value of verses which :

once they are digested
... will become a vital nutriment.
[Par. VII, 131-132]

As already indicated, the purpose of this book is not to provide a commentary on Dante's work, and even less to analyse events and personalities described from a literary, historical, theological, or aesthetic point of view. This has already been done, and will continue to be done by other more qualified and specialised authorities. Reference will only be made to those philological and historical details that may be of help in describing the period Dante was writing in, a chaotic and

difficult time of transition from a civilisation which was about to end (Mediaeval) and another that had yet to emerge (Humanism and the Renaissance).

Our concern will be to get as near as possible to the poet's inner experience, in an attempt to encounter him beyond the level of contingencies, at that point he himself insists on and which is the essence of all men:

For nature in its circling stamps its seal
on mortal wax, perfecting her fine art
with no concern about man's lineage.
[Par. VIII, 127-129]

We will seek to meet the poet in his innermost world, beyond the "veil" of poetic language, so as to understand his human and spiritual message. In a pupil-master relationship, he leads us by the hand away from the chaos of quotidian life (the "dark wood") in a quest for meanings.

Placing his hand on mine, smiling at me
in such a way that I was reassured,
he led me in, into those mysteries.
[Inf. III, 19-21]

In the darkest passages of his work, Dante turns directly to the reader, whom he regards as a fellow pilgrim, accompanying the poet to hear his message. The reader is urged by the poet himself to "explore" more deeply "the secret things", that is to say, the unknown within us: our conflicts, the anti-social elements we reject or condemn, or which hold sway over us.

Born aloft by the aesthetic spell of Dante's poetry, we are free to contemplate our most intimate feelings: pleasure, pain, anger, violence, inertia, apathy, and hate, "the battle of the journey ... and against pity" (Inf. II, 4-5), but also joy, beatitude, and peace.

The *Divina Commedia* makes many demands on the reader. As the poet himself stresses, the reader must learn to listen without prejudice and also to suspend judgement. From the very start of the poem Dante dispenses with preambles and comes to the heart of the matter:

Midway along the journey of our life

I found myself again*
[Inf. I, 1-2]

He tells us of what he saw and the experiences he remembers.

Oh memory that wrote down what I saw.
[Inf. II, 8]

Glimpsing what the poet has seen entails understanding how to listen in silence and in a meditative frame of mind. Full of mystery as it is, the subject is “marvellous” in the fullest sense of the word. It awaits discovery like a secret hoard of treasure, a store buried deep within each of us.

It is necessary to erase all preconceptions and memories, approaching that state in which Socrates declared “all I know is that I know nothing”. We must pursue the state of trusting abandon Dante himself experienced on the “deserted slope” as he waited for something to “appear”. Then we must give ear to that song of life, the message he sends us from eternity, allowing it to find voice within us, in the here and now.

* “again” is not formal in Musa’s rendering of the text, but corresponds to the literal meaning of the phrase.