

DANTE, LOVE AND THE DIVINE FEMININE



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Abbreviations

Inf. = *Inferno*; *Purg.* = *Purgatorio*; *Para.* = *Paradiso*; *Vita* = *Vita Nuova*; *Conv.* = *Convivio*

Cover illustration

Dante Drinking the Waters of Lethe, by Jean Delville (1867-1953)

Introduction

‘The greatest paradox facing the writer in a treatment of spiritual themes is the task of attempting to express the inexpressible and to confine it in words’, wrote Suheil Bushrui.¹ The inexpressible is the Sacred Mystery in which ‘we live and move and have our being.’² It is the very God who breathes life into us and of whom the whole created world is an expression. The divinely inspired poet grappling with the Source of his inspiration has a hard task. He³ would in some sense need to *be* that Truth, or, to express it slightly differently, be *possessed* by that Truth, or see everything, as it were, through Its eyes. This would make him either a prophet or a visionary or both. Even if he is blessed with such insight, he is left with the formidable task of communicating it in words, with all the attendant dangers thereof.

He could choose to remain silent, for it is in the silence that God’s Word is spoken. But the poet-prophet-visionary, on hearing the Word, cannot remain silent: he must speak. He must communicate his experience to others. This, of course, is his vocation. Dante was one such poet. In his *Commedia*, better known to us as the *Divine Comedy*, he alludes to the paradox in subtle, indirect ways. For example, when his Pilgrim encounters the shade of the poet Statius on Mount Purgatory, Virgil, by a mere look, commands him to be silent, while Statius questions him about his smile. Dante says,

*Here I am caught between opposing sides:
The one tells me to be quiet, the other
bids me to speak up. And so, I sigh.*⁴

Later there will be another, more dramatic, moment when he, the master wordsmith, is made temporarily speechless.

Dante’s great message in the *Commedia* is our redemption through Love. How this is understood unfolds gradually as we, his readers, join him on his pilgrimage through the three realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. This he invites us to do in the very first line of the opening Canto: ‘*Midway through the journey of **our** life.....*’ (my emphasis). He directly addresses our existential human predicament, which he diagnoses as one of *seeming* exile from our Divine Origin and our longing to return to it. He writes for everyone, and clearly wants us to accept his invitation and *be* his Pilgrim as he guides us on a journey of self-discovery – the discovery, or *re*-discovery,

¹ Suheil Bushrui, *The Sacred in Literature: ‘Sages Standing in God’s Holy Fire’* (London: Temenos Academy, 2010) p.10.

² Acts, 17: 28.

³ To avoid tediousness, I shall in this and in similar places employ masculine pronouns where the feminine are equally applicable.

⁴ *Purg.*, XXI: 115-117.

of who we really are, as seen in the Light of the Divine. This Light is Love itself. The Pilgrim undergoes a series of trials and initiations that progressively reveal aspects of himself formerly hidden from his surface consciousness. It is a journey from darkness to light, from ignorance to self-knowledge, from ego-centredness to a non-dualist vision of the world in which he can say, 'in a great flash of understanding': -

*At this point power failed high fantasy
but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled*

*by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.*⁵

The beautiful star imagery, emblematic of faith, hope and love, appears in the last line of each of the three canticles: *Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*. I can think of no more urgent message than this for today. Just as in the opening Canto of the *Commedia*, Dante's Pilgrim finds himself lost in a dark wood, 'savage and stubborn', without knowing how he got there, so modern man finds himself lost in a bewildering and nightmarish world of his own making, without knowing how he got there. It is a world that is out of balance, shaped by the dark masculine forces of conquest, power, domination, subjugation, and exploitation. The positive feminine attributes of interiority, intuition, feeling, instinct, imagination, gentleness, and humility are forced into a subordinate role. The consequences of this imbalance are felt not only in wars and conflicts and our strained human relationships but in the wanton destruction of the natural world (the realm of the feminine) to serve our egregious appetites. We are only just awakening to the full ecological and social impact of this imbalance, and it is alarming.

It is with these issues in mind that I shall try to approach Dante's *Commedia* from the perspective of the *Divine Feminine*, based on Jung's theory of universal archetypes. The Divine Feminine is linked to the productive Earth and to the Mother Goddesses of the ancient world. In an important book, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford express her role most succinctly: -

The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found, is an image that inspires and focuses a perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity, the Earth and all life on Earth participate as 'her children'. Everything is woven together

⁵ *Para.*, XXXIII: 142-145.

*in one cosmic web, where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source.*⁶

The key word is *participate*. For all the benefits and comforts that modern science has conferred on us, the world is in dire need of healing at the deepest, most fundamental level: the level of the Soul, which science cannot reach. We need to recover not only our lost sense of the Sacred, the inexpressible, indefinable Essence that informs all Life, but our intimate, participatory, connection with it in obedience to its one universal law, which is Love. This is the Holy Grail Dante urges us to seek. For this to happen the balance must be restored. We must learn to honour the feminine and the masculine qualities in equal measure.

How is this to be understood? The term 'archetypal masculine' evokes in its positive sense images of the ideal father, guiding, protecting, nurturing, empowering, supporting: the epitome of reason, intellection, justice, leadership and the outer life, while 'archetypal feminine' evokes maternal qualities such as intimacy, warmth, intuition, receptivity, and the inner life. Since we are conceived in our mother's womb, and are born from her body, the feminine is felt to be most closely identified with the body and, by analogy, the material, or *immanent*, aspect of reality; whereas the masculine (since the father is a secondary and rather more distant figure initially) is identified with its unseen, or *transcendent* aspect. The Old Testament figure of Yahweh the law giver and the Christian Logos are representatives of the Divine Masculine,⁷ whilst the numinosity felt in visible nature finds its mythological representations in the ancient Mother Goddess traditions: the Divine Feminine. Both the transcendent (God beyond Creation) and the immanent (God in Creation) are, however, two aspects of the One Reality.

If the masculine and feminine qualities are not equally valued and integrated, the human soul sickens, cannot know why it is sick, or *even that it is sick*. This is not simply a matter of gender, because both qualities live in men and in women. Jung called a man's inner femininity (or soulfulness) his *anima* and a woman's inner masculinity her *animus*.⁸ It is the centuries-old dominance of the masculine over the feminine which has led to the divided and fragmented world we live in. It is time now to recall those ancient wisdom traditions in which the Sacred Feminine is given her due place, as

⁶ Anne Baring & Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Penguin, 1993), preface, p. xii.

⁷ For an interesting perspective on the Divine Masculine in the Old Testament, see Baring and Cashford, *op. cit.* pp. 434-440.

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, trans. R.F.C Hull, *Aspects of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 86-114.

embodied in nature, poetry, art, music, and the goddesses of the ancient world. There are signs this is already happening.⁹

How we perceive reality is crucially dependent upon our state of awareness or consciousness. This is the framework upon which Dante structured his great epic poem. It is great, because it affirms, in the words of Philip Sherrard, that 'inherent in each human being is an organ of vision, of intellective or imaginative intuition, which when activated is capable of perceiving and experiencing the realities of the supranatural and divine world.'¹⁰ In other words, *we all have within ourselves the potential to realize our divine nature and make contact with the invisible, spiritual realms*. This is precisely what Jesus taught his disciples. The *Commedia* is a poetic restatement of this message, as relevant now as it was when it was written.

What is remarkable about Dante's *Commedia* is the extent to which it celebrates the Divine Feminine. Dante is utterly devoted to Her. She occupies a very high place in his scheme of spiritual redemption. His poetic master-image is feminine: the deified Beatrice, once his childhood sweetheart. She is the epitome of beauty and virtue. In the *Commedia* she is one of a trinity of female celestial overseers, the other two being the Virgin Mary and St. Lucia. It is they who, at the prompting of the compassionate Mary, orchestrate the Pilgrim's journey to God. Beatrice descends, Christ-like, into Limbo (a part of Hell) and calls upon the Roman poet Virgil to be the Pilgrim's guide as far as the Earthly Paradise atop Mount Purgatory.¹¹ We could say, without being too restrictive, that Mary represents Mercy (tenderness of heart), Lucia Vision (from the Latin, *lucis* = light) and Beatrice Divine Wisdom.

The opening four tercets of *Paradiso* leave us in little doubt that Dante's poem was inspired by a tremendous internal vision of Light combined with a Love which embraces and enfolds the entire created Universe: -

*The glory of the One Who moves all things
penetrates all the universe, reflecting
in one part more and in another less.*

*I have been in His brightest shining heaven
And seen such things that no man, once returned
From there, has wit or skill to tell about;*

⁹ For example, in the recent eco-feminist and eco-spirituality movements in Christianity.

¹⁰ Phillip Sherrard, "For Everything That Lives is Holy" in *A Sacred Trust: Ecology and Spiritual Vision* (London: Temenos Academy, 2002), p.12.

¹¹ *Inf.*, II: 94-132.

*For when our intellect draws near its goal
And fathoms to the depths of its desire,
The memory is powerless to follow;*

*But still, as much of Heaven's holy realm
As I could store and treasure in my mind
Shall be the subject of my song.*¹²

Dante recapitulates his experience in the wonderful verses of the final Canto (XXXIII). Its immediacy and vividness fades after the experience, as 'imprints on the snow fade in the sun',¹³ but what remains of its quality and power is stored permanently in his memory. It has such a ring of authenticity about it that it is hardly conceivable it was the mere invention of one man's overwrought imagination, as some sceptics, trapped in the dim light of modern reductive materialism might conclude. But for those who see beyond all that, visionaries like Dante are bridge builders, connecting our limited world of sense-impressions with the much wider world of the Spirit, portrayed memorably in Dante's *Paradiso*, with its planetary, angelic, stellar, and 'primum mobile' spheres encircling the Earth, and beyond them the unimaginable realm of the *Empyrean* which awaits Dante as the sublime climax of his inner cosmic journey. If we are to look to his *Commedia* as a spiritual resource, we can trust him, even if we may not all share his mediaeval Christian/Ptolemaic worldview, which, however, still warrants our serious engagement. In immersing ourselves deeply in Dante's spiritual and imaginal world we encounter a world of astonishing depth, beauty, and coherence.¹⁴ We may then have humbly to admit that part of the sickness of our age is due to the loss of its unifying vision as the blinds of reductive science and positivist thinking progressively shut out its Light, leaving only a material world that communicates nothing beyond itself.

How, then, shall we read it to gain the most spiritual benefit? We have the example of the monks, whose scriptural hermeneutics (or *exeges*, interpretations), gave equal attention to the allegorical (theological), literal, tropological (moral), and anagogical (mystical, or transformative) dimensions of scripture, a procedure that can be traced as far back as Origen.¹⁵ It is the basis of the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina*,

¹² *Para.*, I: 1-12.

¹³ *Para.*, XXXIII:64.

¹⁴ Christian Moevs gives a thorough and penetrating account of this in his book, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ See, for example, Sandra M. Schneiders, "Exegesis, Spiritual" in Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM. Press, 2013), pp. 293-4.

slow, meditative readings involving the whole person. Whilst the *Commedia* is *not* a Holy Scripture, I believe it can profitably be read in a similar way, and we even have, in his letter to his friend and supporter, Can Grande della Scala, Dante's authority to do so.¹⁶ Such reading demands our full imaginative engagement if we are to discover our own Dante, not the Dante we are led to accept through a scholarly consensus. We benefit most by reading it afresh and bringing our own unique imagination and life experiences into play.

It is a strange, haunting poem, for its protagonist, the only living person, visits the realms of the dead, like an intruder. Here 'shades' of once-living people not only witness his presence but communicate with him in two-way conversations and by other means familiar to us here on Earth. It has a dream-like atmosphere. Dante takes his readers on an incredible adventure in which they are brought face to face with every aspect of the human condition. In the letter to Can Grande, he expresses his objective clearly: -

*.....to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness.*¹⁷

This may seem breathtakingly presumptuous, but I think we must reserve judgment, take him at his word, and test it out for ourselves. In the same letter he explains why he calls it a 'comedy': -

*.....it must be noted that "comedy" is so called from "comos", a village, and "oda", a song, whence comedy is as it were, a "rustic song". [He then contrasts tragedy and comedy in terms of their etymology, structure, outcomes and style of language]for that of tragedy is high-flown, while that of comedy is unstudied and lowly.....it is clear that the present work is to be described as a comedy. For if we consider the subject matter, at the beginning it is horrible and foul, as being in hell; but at the close it is happy, desirable and pleasing, as being in Paradise. As regards the style of language, the style is unstudied and lowly.....*¹⁸

His repeating of the phrase '*unstudied and lowly*' gives it strong emphasis. His aim to write in the style of speech of the common people suggests a self-conscious attempt by a celebrated poet to cultivate *humility*, a virtue he perhaps feels himself badly in need of. The *Commedia* may, at this level, be read as his (and our) journey to that

¹⁶ Paget Toynbee, trans., intro, and notes, *The Letters of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 15, p.202.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

desirable state. (Interestingly, this word shares the same etymological root as *humus*, the soil, *human* and *humour*).

Since the *Commedia* is a poem about Love and its transformative power, I will devote my first chapter, *Love Human and Divine*, to a discussion of love both in general terms and those specific to Dante's time and to the poem itself. I will briefly touch upon Dante's analysis of love which he puts into the mouth of Virgil and suggest that our modern secular concepts of love are at variance with his. In my second chapter, *The Mortal Seed of Love Immortal*, I shall look to the genesis of his love with reference to an earlier work of his, the *Vita Nuova*, and, more briefly, to his philosophical reflections. I will try to show that the initial stimulus, Dante's overwhelming love for an embodied female, places a positive value on erotic or sensual love because he brings it into harmony with the Highest Good, the universal Love of the Divine. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth chapters, *Primavera*, *The Chariot and the Griffin*, *Dante's Repentance*, and *Metanoia or the Tree of Life*, take a closer look at the Earthly Paradise sequence in *Purg.* XXVII-XXXIII. My reasons for doing so are threefold. Firstly, it poetically evokes Nature in all her pristine beauty, a theme relevant to our current ecological concerns. It is *the* realm of the Divine Feminine, presided over by a beautiful female figure, *Matelda*. It is of course Eden before the 'Fall' and Canto XXVIII is one of the most enchanting in the whole work. Secondly, the Earthly Paradise represents a borderline state in which the boundary between the natural and the supernatural (or the visible and the invisible realms) is at its most tenuous. It is our place of origin, the birthplace of our emergent consciousness. Thirdly, it is the setting for the dramatic appearance of Beatrice before the trembling Pilgrim. Having made the arduous journey through Hell and climbed all seven terraces of Mount Purgatory, he now must face the last and severest test of all: painful examination of his own conscience before her stern gaze and withering speech. Hence, with his confession and subsequent immersion in, and drinking of, the waters of Lethe and Eunoe, it is here that his spiritual transformation is completed, and he can soar with metaphorical wings into higher spiritual realms. Beatrice is revealed as a Goddess of Light who alternately appears as a female Christ figure and as Sophia the Goddess of Wisdom, the creative source of life and regeneration, with her forgotten connections to the mother goddesses of the Ancient World.

The Translation

I have little knowledge of Italian and certainly nothing of the Italian of the Late Middle Ages; therefore, I am reliant on a sound modern English translation. I am aware that even in the best translations something must perforce be sacrificed, perhaps some nuance of meaning here and there which cannot be adequately conveyed in the other language. I am aware also that in reading or reciting a translation, however good, we miss the beauty of the original language, its *music*, its rhythms and cadences, its supple textures and flow, which are a vital part of the meaning. I have chosen Mark Musa's translation in the three-volume Penguin Classics edition as being one of the most authoritative and trustworthy. Other translations, equally as good, may have different emphases.

Chapter 1

Love: Human and Divine

Few of us, I think, would argue against the centrality and importance of love in our lives. It is the foundation of our Humanity and is the enduring subject of literature and the arts. We set a high value on love. It is a quality the world desperately needs more of, yet it eludes definition. To love and be loved is a need as vital as oxygen, water, and food. Our humanity is diminished where love is wanting or fails to be of central concern in life. It is now recognised that our sense of security and self-esteem as an adult very much depends on the degree of affection and love we received as a baby and young child, primarily from our *mother* (or mother substitute), our first human connection.¹⁹

Dante belongs to the age of Courtly Love, the *Fedeli d'amore* of the circle of poets to which he belonged, with its origins in the Troubadour love song tradition of the 12th and early 13th centuries.²⁰ It was a cult of the untouchable beloved, a woman of exceptional beauty and grace and of noble standing. She was the focus of intense, though secret, desire on the part of the lover, but that desire could never be consummated, otherwise the *Mystery* she symbolised would be dispelled. Her supposed purity and moral superiority would encourage the lover to lead a more upright life. In the words of Andrew Frisardi, 'such love was the force that inspired the lover to increase in worth and virtue, specifically the virtues of courtesy, chivalry, generosity, and humility. It involved a self-effacing surrender to love's power, without demanding anything in return.'²¹ Thus, the Sacred Feminine is a man's moral guide and exemplar. In a mediaeval world heavily dominated by a patriarchal Church and religion and equally by the masculine powers vested in king, pope, and emperor, this exaltation of the Feminine (including, of course, the cult of the Virgin Mary) is a truly remarkable feature of the age.

However, in our modern secularised culture, love does not have quite the same resonance. As much as we value it in terms of kindness, tenderness, emotional warmth and compassion, we are less inclined to regard it in such cosmic terms. It too easily becomes synonymous with sentimentality, a fact which our heavily commercialised culture lucratively exploits. As with all human values, understandings of love are culturally conditioned, while expressions of love come in countless forms. Its most

¹⁹ See, for example, Sue Gerhard's influential book, *Why Love Matters* (London: Routledge, 2014).

²⁰ William Anderson, *Dante the Maker* (Glenshaw, USA: S4N Books, 2010) gives a comprehensive account of the *Fedeli d'amore* tradition.

²¹ Andrew Frisardi, *The Young Dante and the One Love* (London: Temenos Academy, 2013), p. 4.

common association in the popular mind is with erotic attractions between the opposite sexes (or in some cases, members of the same sex).

But Love as an ontology, as the primal generative energy of the Cosmos, is a less familiar concept today than it was in Dante's time. Materialist science has closed it off. Such Love is the source of, and stimulus for all human expressions of love up to their highest level in *agape* (utterly selfless love for all Creation) and in *caritas*, (compassion for the suffering of others). *Eros*, with its sexual connotations, is a more problematic concept in a religion that privileges celibacy, yet Dante and the *Fedeli d'amore* fully embrace it. Initiated in his case by his love for a Florentine girl, Dante's *amore* takes the form of an intense yearning of the soul to return to (or reunite with) its Divine Source, our one hope of lasting happiness. Such Love is an irresistible and compelling force, so much so that the soul *becomes* Love. From God (Love) we came, and to God we shall return. Love is a calling and a response. In the words of St. Augustine: -

*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.*²²

Notice that Augustine includes us all. *It is what each one of us unknowingly yearns for.* To rest in God's Love is to be at peace with oneself and the world. Only then can we truly love one another and all creation without reserve, for Creation is the very act of Love. And with what wonderful insight does Dante convey this key message to us: -

*She (Beatrice) said: "I tell you, without asking you,
what you would hear, for I see your desire
where every **where** and every **when** is centred.*

*Not to increase His good, which cannot be,
but rather that His own reflected glory
in its resplendence might proclaim **I am***

*in His eternity, beyond all time,
beyond comprehension, as pleased Him
new loves blossomed from the Eternal Love.*²³

²² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 1.

²³ *Para.*, XXIX: 13-16.

God beholds Himself in His Creation as in a mirror, through an act (if it can be expressed this way) of self-reflexion. 'I am' becomes 'who I am' in His own self-reflected glory, the 'I am' of every self-conscious being.²⁴ The Infinite, we could say, incarnates into the finite and the temporal in a ceaseless act of self-surrender (*kenosis*) and limitation, whilst paradoxically remaining Itself, the Changeless, Unlimited, Transcendent One ("His eternity, beyond all time"). This is impossible for our finite minds to grasp ("beyond comprehension"). God, in His infinite freedom, is under no obligation whatsoever to Create a Universe; He gains nothing for Himself in doing so, for what is there to gain? ("not to increase His good, which cannot be"), but He does so anyhow ("as pleased Him"). This is Love, and it miraculously blossoms forth in ever-new forms and expressions ("new loves blossomed from Eternal Love"). Thus, we and everything in the Universe, are grounded in Eternal Love ("every *where* and every *when*"). We are made in God's image. Herein may lie the key to the ultimate mysteries: why does the Universe exist? Why is there something and not nothing? What role, if any, do we humans play in it?

Life certainly has meaning because it originates from, and is contingent upon, the ineffable life-giving Power of the Divine. This is Dante's message. The universe is shot through with the Divine Radiance. It selflessly pours forth Its benediction on all Creation as the sun continually pours forth its light and life-giving energy on Earth. Dante expresses this insight, for example, in *Para.* XXXI, in which he says God's Light penetrates the universe, and there is nothing that can block its way.²⁵ Take also this single tercet, in which Love evokes a response: -

*I love each leaf with which enleaved is all
the garden of the Eternal Gardener
in measure of the light he sheds on each.*²⁶

Creation, down to that of a single leaf, is sacred and loveable, because it is the work of God, here the 'Eternal Gardener' with perhaps an allusion to Christ and Mary Magdalene.²⁷ The leaf reveals in its microcosmic form the essence of all Creation, yet it retains its unique individuality precisely through a finite sharing of God's Infinite Light. In this beautiful holistic vision visible Nature is a *theophany*: a divine disclosure. It is a Holy Book,²⁸ replete with symbols that mediate our connection with the spiritual

²⁴ *Exodus*, 3:14.

²⁵ *Para.*, XXXI: 22 & 24.

²⁶ *Para.*, XXVI: 64-66.

²⁷ *John*, 20: 1-18.

²⁸ *Para.*, XXXIII: 85-90.

Mystery that informs all things, hence with each other, human, animal, vegetable, and mineral.²⁹ Nature (traditionally feminine) is a sacred language.

This theophanic vision contrasts starkly with our post-Darwinian, materialist, scientific worldview to which reference to a divine principle is deemed obsolete. Man is an autonomous animal, a mere incident in the vast impersonal sweep of biological evolution, a self-enclosed subject, set apart from, and in potential competition with, all other subjects, whilst the Natural World, desacralized, is there for his own use, exploitation, and plunder. We are now facing the grave consequences of this worldview. If there is to be hope of a recovery, it must lie in a radical change of vision at the collective level, a transformed way of seeing things, a *metanoia*. Our limited notion of Love must expand to embrace our one-ness with all Creation, including the non-human. We must somehow free ourselves from our obsessive male-dominated, one-sided, anthropocentrism and reunite in love with God's feminine side, the neglected Goddess of Wisdom, who rules over Nature and the Earth, one of whose emblems is the Sacred Tree, as we shall see in Chapter 6.³⁰ Dante shows us how this is possible through his elevation of Beatrice, the woman he loves, to the human image of God.

Half-way through *Purgatory*, Virgil launches into a homily on how Love can go wrong.³¹ He distinguishes between 'natural' and 'rational' love. *Natural love may never be at fault; the other may*, he says.³² 'Natural love' is innate. It is the Love of the Creator in His Creation; hence nothing can possibly be separated from it. 'Rational' love, however, relates to how we humans handle the Gift. It may be 'at fault' because it relies on choice based on the notion of human freedom of will. Nowadays human freedom of will is a contentious subject much debated in philosophy. But Genesis tells us we are created in the Divine Image; we each bear the insignia or seal of the Creator. This confers on us great dignity as human beings. Jesus says, using the royal metaphor, that the Kingdom of God is within us.³³ We hence have a share in God's infinitely creative freedom, and it is precisely this which makes us responsible agents. We are not robots but are (relatively speaking) free spirits, free even to abuse the very freedom that is our heritage; hence Love itself allows the possibility of its negation. In

²⁹ For an interesting account of the Divine Theophany in Nature see Joseph Milne's *The Last Vision of Nature* (London: Temenos Academy, 2018), p.41.

³⁰ Baring and Cashford, op. cit., pp 496-9.

³¹ *Purg.*, XV11: 82-139 through to XVIII: 1-75.

³² *Purg.*, XVII: 93-4.

³³ *Luke*, 17:21.

Para. VII especially, Dante emphasises freedom as essential to the Christian vision, as in these words: -

*That which derives directly from His being
is wholly free, not subject to the law
of secondary things. Created thus,
it most resembles Him, most pleases Him;
the Sacred Flame which lights all of creation
burns brightest in what is most like himself.*³⁴

Virgil's 'natural love' is natural precisely because it is supernatural, Divine. Our problem is that we have lost touch with this subtle dimension of the self through excessive attachments to externals ("the law of secondary things"). How then, might we regain the freedom that derives directly from the Divine Being, and beam forth Its Sacred Flame in this dark and troubled world? If there is darkness in the human heart, what is it that blocks out the light? Beatrice is clear about this: -

*Sin is the only power that takes away
Man's freedom and his likeness to True Good,
And makes him shine less brightly in Its light.*³⁵

Sin, for Dante, is rooted in self-ignorance. This is painfully revealed in the Pilgrim's arduous spiritual pilgrimage through Hell, and his ascent of Mount Purgatory. It is the great delusion that we are separate, autonomous beings, unconnected with the rest of creation, thinking we can 'go it alone' heedless, or blissfully unaware, of the effects our actions might have on others. This is the darkness Dante must enter and face before he can climb the sunlit mountain of salvation. He 'must journey down another road'.³⁶ His salvation must entail the progressive shredding away of self-ignorance and illusion, the ego-centredness that blinds one to the Truth.

We love what we believe is conducive to our good. But what we believe is good for us may not be truly so. In the context of the Seven Cardinal Sins, Dante's Virgil distinguishes three ways in which love can go wrong and lead to evil: love of the wrong things, or love that is wrongly directed (the wrathful, the envious and the proud); insufficient love of the good (the slothful); and excessive love of secondary goods (the covetous, the gluttonous and the lustful). Wrath is my urge to hit back for a wrong perceived to have been committed against me. Envy is what makes me unhappy

³⁴ *Para.*, VII: 70-73.

³⁵ *Para.*, VII: 79-81.

³⁶ *Inf.*, I:91.

because I see others who are cleverer, more socially successful, or wealthier than me, and I long (and perhaps scheme) for their downfall. Pride is my presumption of superiority, power, or domination over others (in whatever field or context). These three sins aim at harming others. Sloth is my having the right intentions but with insufficient conviction to act on them (due to laziness, procrastination, proneness to distraction, etc.). Lust is my immoderate desire to possess, whether it be wealth, fame, or a sex partner. Gluttony is my taking more than my fair share of the world's food resources, thus leaving others to go hungry. Covetousness is my desire for things belonging to others but which I lack; it may lead to theft. In every case, the love is self-directed, egocentric.

We shall not fully grasp what Love is for Dante unless we understand that for him, it is the inclination of the heart towards *Sapientia* (Divine Wisdom). Philosophy, the concentrated study of which Dante undertook after the death of Beatrice, literally means 'love of wisdom'. In his unfinished philosophical treatise, *Convivio* (= 'Banquet'), Dante, following the *Book of Proverbs*, the *Song of Solomon*, and (especially) the *Book of Wisdom*, personifies Wisdom as female: *Lady Philosophia-Sapientia*. In his beautiful Canzoni, *Amor che nella mente* (Love who talks and reasons in my mind) he writes: -

*And in her face appear things that reflect
The beauties and delights of Paradise
I mean in her sweet smile and in her eyes...³⁷*

On the literal level, these lines are clearly about a woman whose beautiful face and 'sweet smile' so enrapture her lover that he feels he is in Paradise. But on another level, she is the face of Wisdom, reflecting the beauty of the Immortal Soul, the Image of God in us all. She is Sophia, the philosopher's beloved. In his commentary on this poem, Dante allegorizes: '*Here it should be understood that the eyes of Wisdom are her demonstrations, with which the truth is seen with utmost certainty, and her smile is her persuasions, in which the inner light of Wisdom shows beneath a veil.*'³⁸ In Dante's eyes, Beatrice embodies the very Wisdom that made Solomon declare,

*She is a reflection of the eternal light,
untarnished mirror of God's active power
image of his goodness.³⁹*

³⁷ *Conv.*, lines 55-57, *op. cit.*, p.129.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii. (Quoted verbatim).

³⁹ *The Book of Wisdom*, 7: 26-28.

Beatrice is both a woman and more than a woman. *She is an initiate in the mysteries of God's knowledge.*⁴⁰

If we are really to understand the central role Beatrice plays in the *Commedia*, we cannot do better than study the *Book of Wisdom*, which Dante loved perhaps most of all. Yet Beatrice is not merely an abstract symbol but was once the flesh-and blood woman Dante fell deeply in love with. He recorded his experiences in an early work of his, the *Vita Nuova*, and it is to this we shall now turn.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8: 4.

Chapter 2

The Mortal Seed of Love Immortal

The *Vita Nuova* is essentially a love-autobiography, a book of *recollections and reflections*, combining prose and poetry (previously composed), with commentaries on the poems. It is foundational, I believe, to a better understanding of the *Commedia*. Dante's exploration of Love can only begin, like ours, at the human, embodied, earth-bound level. He falls in love, an experience most of us can relate to. In the opening chapter of the *Vita*, he describes his momentous childhood encounter with an 8-year-old Florentine girl called Bice Portinari (Beatrice): -

*She was called Beatrice by many who could not have possibly called her by any other name.....she appeared to me almost in the beginning of her ninth year, and I first saw her near the end of my ninth year. She appeared dressed in the most noble of colours, subdued and decorous crimson, girded and adorned in a style suitable to her years. At that moment, and what I say is true, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the least pulses of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: 'Here is a god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me'.....Let me say that from that time on Love governed my soul, which became so readily betrothed to him and over which he reigned with such assurance and lordship given him **through the power of my imagination** that it became necessary for me to attend to his every pleasure.* ⁴¹

Love, he says, governs his soul like a feudal lord. He is Love's vassal. Beatrice, he implies, is much admired in the Florentine community, the name Beatrice being derived from the Latin *Beatrix*, meaning 'she who blesses'. Dante speaks of her in terms of her gracefulness, natural dignity and noble bearing, qualities much admired in his day. That he was sincerely and passionately in love with Bice Portinari, I have little doubt. He tells us they were both very young, presumably pre-pubertal; but this need not rule out the possibility of nascent sexual arousal. Indeed, the violent trembling is a reaction that strongly suggests it, unless such language is merely a convention. Quoting Homer (via Aristotle), he writes: 'She did not seem to be the daughter of an ordinary man, *but rather of a God.*' What matters is the intensity of the experience and what Beatrice comes to represent: the Divine Mystery in its feminine aspect, which embraces nature and us all.

⁴¹ Dante, *Vita Nuova*, trans. & intro. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008) II, p.4. Hereafter '*Vita*'.

Just how intense that experience was is born out in a second narrated encounter, reportedly nine years later, in which Dante sees Beatrice standing between two older ladies 'of high bearing'. A momentary glance in his direction, which he interprets as a simple sweet greeting, is enough to send him into ecstasy. A prophetic dream follows that night, a 'marvellous vision', in which 'in a cloud the colour of fire', a strange man (Lord Love) appears before him bearing Beatrice, veiled in a crimson cloth, asleep in his arms and saying, 'I am your master'. He holds Dante's burning heart in his hand and makes the awakened Beatrice eat it, which she does so, hesitantly. His 'master' then weeps, folds his arms around the lady and together they ascend towards Heaven.⁴²

The *Vita Nuova* is replete with Biblical allusions. Clearly it is more than a simple love confessional; it has strong theological and philosophical resonances. Dante appears to be making a connection between his experience of passionate earthly love for a woman and the Christian promise of Eternal Life. But this was not, in his day, orthodox theology. Indeed, sensual love for a woman was regarded as a dangerous temptation that leads a man astray from the True Path. The fire of love and passion will, in the *Commedia*, become the purgatorial fire that will purify Dante's carnal love and make it holy.

In his third narrated encounter with Beatrice, instead of her usual smile of greeting, she withholds it. This he, or his 'lord', blames on 'scandalous rumours' about his treatment of a fictitious 'shield lady' that turned Beatrice against him. Grief stricken and begging the Virgin Mary for pity, he retires to 'a solitary place' and weeps bitter tears; he then falls asleep 'like a little boy crying from a spanking'. Once again Lord Love appears to him in a dream. Weeping with compassion, he utters these enigmatic words: '*My son, it is time to do away with our pretences*'. Then, in answer to Dante's question, 'why do you weep?' he replies enigmatically, '*I am the centre of a circle, equidistant from all points on the circumference, but you are not*'⁴³. A circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere is a well-known 'definition' of God, attributed to Bonaventure and possibly originating from the Neoplatonic or Hermetic tradition. Dante is out of alignment with God. And since God is Love, perhaps Dante is not loving as he should be loving. It is not enough that Love stirs in him personal feelings of ecstasy or dejection; it must reach beyond the personal to embrace the universal. He must mature, rise above his indulgent, self-pitying ego, for his love will soon be put to the test with the death of Beatrice.

⁴² *Ibid.*, III, pp.6-7.

⁴³ *Vita.*, XII, p.19.

In Chapter XXIII, he tells us that during a severe illness which caused him intense pain he had a premonition of Beatrice's death, and troubling thoughts about his own mortality as well as hers. In this dream he sees weeping ladies with dishevelled hair (a sign of mourning). The sun darkens, stars seem to weep, birds of the air fall to the earth dead, and there are great earthquakes. A certain unnamed friend comes to him and says: "Have you not heard the news? Your lady once so lovely, now lies dead." He looks heavenwards and sees a multitude of angels in a white cloud singing '*Hosanna in the highest*', which was sung during Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. The ladies cover Beatrice's head in a white veil and 'it seemed that her face was so filled with joyous acceptance that it said to me: "I am contemplating the fountainhead of peace"'. The allusion to Christ and his Passion could not be more obvious.

Beatrice's appearance in Chapter III dressed in pure white suggests Jesus's transfiguration;⁴⁴ she seems to have supernatural healing powers: people run to see her as she walks through the streets of Florence, "crowned and clothed in humility" and dispensing grace, just as multitudes followed Jesus around in Galilee;⁴⁵ she is compared to '*a creature come from heaven to earth/a miracle manifest in reality*', echoing Christ's Incarnation⁴⁶; and there are many other allusions. One of the most pervasive is her connection with the number nine, which is three squared, three representing the Holy Trinity, and nine representing the nine spheres of the created Cosmos.⁴⁷ Dante seems to link Beatrice with the Divine Logos, the Word of Creation, or his partner, *Sophia*, Divine Wisdom, present at the beginning of Creation and personified in the *Book of Proverbs* and elsewhere as a female figure.

In the context of orthodox theology these are daring claims. What are we to make of them? His Beatrice seems almost unreal, more like an apparition haunting the streets of Florence than a fallible human being. Is she a mere projection of his male *anima*, or does he genuinely see something more, something which Beatrice's transient form (and by implication every transient form) partly reveals and partly veils? If so, what is it, and could we share his insight?

With the actual death of Beatrice (1290 according to the *Vita*), Dante goes into deep mourning. She is no longer around to solace him with her glances or dispense grace to every passer-by. Her beautiful, though transient, form is no longer present to his senses. He emphasises her connection with the city (community) of Florence, by

⁴⁴ *Matthew*. 17:1-9, *Mark* 9: 2-8.

⁴⁵ *Vita*., XXXVI, p.56.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, XXVI, P.56-7.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, XXXIX, p.61.

comparing it after her death with 'a widow stripped of all dignity'⁴⁸ and quoting from the Book of Lamentations: *How lonely sits the city/that once was full of people! / How like a widow she has become, /she that was great among the nations!*⁴⁹ Florence is likened to Jerusalem after her fall under Nebuchadnezzar in 587BC. And the Jerusalem Temple, we must note, was believed to be the abode of God.

The political turbulence in Florence which was to lead to Dante's permanent exile from his beloved city in 1302, must have contributed to this mood of sorrow. Dante seems to be linking Beatrice's death symbolically to the impending breakdown in Florentine politics, with which he was intimately involved. She is therefore inseparable from the community of Florence, symbolically Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of the world.

It is as though for Dante, there were two Beatrices and two Florences: the external, embodied, or sense-perceived ones, subject to death and corruption, and the internalised or spiritualised images, which are not. The two 'aspects' are mysteriously connected. In Christian language one could think of them in terms of their fallen and unfallen, or redeemed, states respectively. The flesh-and-blood Beatrice may well have been exceptionally beautiful, but she could be callously dismissive, and she dies. But she lives on in Dante's imagination and in ours as we read the *Commedia*.

Taking to philosophy was Dante's way of coming to terms with the loss of Beatrice and his homeland. Late mediaeval philosophy was complex. The scholastic philosophies of his time combined Christian doctrine with an enthusiasm for pagan philosophers such as Plato and especially Aristotle, whose ideas were adopted (and adapted) by the great Dominican theologians, Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. Aristotelian ethics and metaphysics would have formed an essential component of Dante's philosophical studies. As Andrew Frisardi tells us, the spirit of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* pervades the *Convivio*. In his words, 'Aristotle addresses such questions in the *Ethics* as: How do we become virtuous? What is the good and how do we attain it? Aristotle teaches that right choices are based on knowledge, not opinion, and well-being or happiness is not a matter of luck or fortune.'⁵⁰

Dante tells us in the same work that he finds solace in Cicero's *De amicitia* and especially in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius' circumstances when he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* (a man condemned to brutal punishment and

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, XXX, p.62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, XXVIII, p.62 and *Lamentations* 1:1.

⁵⁰ Andrew Frisardi ,ed. & trans., *Dante's Convivio, A Dual Language Critical Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. xxxiv.

death) were not unlike those which drove Dante into exile. Boethius grapples with the difficult concepts of fate versus free will and good versus evil. He also personifies philosophy as a female deity. She visits him from on high while in prison and leads him from what is false and illusory to what is true, the supreme Good: God in Platonic terms. She ‘turns his gaze in a different direction’,⁵¹ just as Beatrice does for Dante’s Pilgrim in *Para.* XXVIII. This echoes Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of the *Republic*, in which a man chained in a cave, taking the shadows cast on a wall by a fire to be the whole of reality, when freed emerges by degrees into the full sunlight of Reality, which temporarily blinds him.

Philosophy has, then, an experiential and a moral dimension. It must be lived, not merely studied. In the ancient world it required some form of initiation followed by a rigorous training programme under the guidance of a *magister* (master).⁵² It involved the systematic and painful breaking down of the recalcitrant ego. Its aim was the disciplined cultivation of the virtues. Reason, its principal tool, was employed to enable the initiate to distinguish truth from falsehood, reality from appearance, and it had to be carefully honed. Unsharpened, it could lead to false premises or conclusions, with bad consequences. But Dante was more than a philosopher; he was a visionary and a mystic. Knowledge, for him, was not just head knowledge, but a knowing of the heart, a quality of inner vision or insight, a knowing that originates in, and returns to, Divine Intellect or Cosmic Mind. Reason is crucial, yet no amount of philosophical reasoning could take him *there*. It was no guarantee of salvation. Something higher was needed. It needed Love – his love for Beatrice, the Divine Feminine – to set him on *that* journey.

Dante draws upon imagery derived from sources both Christian and non-Christian, conscious and unconscious. As Andrew Frisardi points out, the belief that love of beauty in the world, especially in a woman ‘had appeared earlier in Islamic poetry and philosophy; for example, in Avicenna’s *Treatise embodiment on Love*, which some have suggested was a source for the Provençal code of courtly love’. He adds that ‘Avicenna’s views on love are very similar to Dante’s in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*. He (Avicenna) encourages the love of external beauty, provided it does not eclipse intelligence or reason, and assigns to human love a positive role in the ascent of the soul to divine love’.⁵³

In ways more familiar to us today, we could say that our love for a particular person or for a dog, a horse, or a landscape – anything in the created world – since it

⁵¹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. & intro. V. E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1999), Book III: I, p. 47.

⁵² For a brief reference to the Magister see Daniela Boccassini, “Earthly Paradise: Dante’s Initiatory Rite of Passage” in *Temenos Academy Review*, 21 (2018), p. 65 and footnote.

⁵³ Frisardi, *The Young Dante and the One Love*, pp. 4-5.

is love, is a partial reflection of the Divine Love present in all things. This puts a positive evaluation on love in all its manifold, limited, aspects, including sexual desire, since it has the *potential* to rise to the universal. Love fixated solely upon the finite and transient, however, is bound to disappoint. It leads only to pain and sorrow. So, too, is possessive love, which destroys both lover and beloved because it cannot expand beyond its own ego-centredness, so makes demands neither partner can fulfil. This, I believe, is the sweet-talking adulteress Francesca's predicament in the circle of the lustful in *Inf. V: 73-142*, a danger which Dante himself wrestled with and finally overcame. But true love sees beyond the finite form while fully embracing it. I believe that, as a devout Christian, Dante wants us to see his internalised image of Beatrice as a *sacrament* of the Divine Beauty, a portal through which it is glimpsed. It is this which is the ultimate object of his love.

In the final chapters of the *Vita*, Dante's desire morphs into a 'sigh' – the creative breath – which ascends, higher and higher, into the Empyrean, becoming one (through the power of the 'gaze') with Love itself:

*Beyond the sphere that makes the widest round
passes the sigh which issues from my heart;
a strange, new understanding that sad Love
imparts to it keeps urging it on high.
When it has reached the place of its desiring,
it sees a lady held in reverence,
splendid in light, and through her radiance
the pilgrim spirit gazes at her being*⁵⁴

The *Commedia* is the poetic embodiment of that sigh. In the next chapters, we shall meet Beatrice anew, not only as a female Christ figure but as Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom and as Asherah, with her evocative links to the Mother Goddesses of the Ancient World.

⁵⁴ *Vita*, XLI, p.83.

Chapter 3

Primavera

When Dante's Pilgrim, Virgil, and Statius⁵⁵ surmount the final terrace of Mount Purgatory, the Terrace of the Lustful, they must pass through a formidable barrier of fire before entering the Earthly Paradise.⁵⁶ At this juncture all courage fails the Pilgrim. He imagines himself entombed alive, then he recalls what human bodies look like burned to death. Dante himself narrowly escaped this horrible fate and may well have witnessed others who did not. We encountered fire symbolism in the *Vita Nuova* with reference to Dante's burning heart which the dream-Beatrice reluctantly eats. Here the fires of passion are now the fires of Purgatory, purifying all that is worldly and lustful in Dante's love. This is his hardest test so far. His Pilgrim must now summon up all his knightly courage. He must overcome his fear of making the great sacrifice which would prove the purity of his Love. It is a critical moment. Virgil loses patience with him, reminding him of his care when they rode the untrustworthy Geryon down to the Malebolge.⁵⁷ He knows that the only way to restore the Pilgrim's *masculine* courage is by uttering the *feminine* word, *Beatrice*. It works; great Love endures yet overcomes the most extreme suffering, a truth which is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in Christ on Calvary.

Thus, all three win their entry into the Earthly Paradise. With the voice of the ninth angel singing, *Venite, benedicti Patris mei* (Come, ye blessed of my Father), there is a noticeable change of mood and atmosphere. The pains and struggles of Purgatory are now left behind. It is nearly nightfall; the stars are bigger and brighter. The three companions bed down on steps in a cleft of the rock. Here the imagery becomes pastoral: Dante paints an idyllic scene of a flock of goats 'settling down in ruminating calm' watched over by a shepherd leaning on his staff. Strangely, the shepherd becomes two: Virgil and Statius, whilst Dante's Pilgrim is the goat. The overall feel is one of rest, safety, and security. These lines are undoubtedly a tribute to the great pagan poet, Virgil, supreme master of the Pastoral genre (e.g., his *Eclogues*, in which 'shepherds' stand for 'poets');⁵⁸ yet they also, clearly, allude to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Psalm 29 also comes to mind.

Staring at the stars, the Pilgrim enters a state of meditation before sleep overcomes him. In the hour just before dawn he dreams the third of his three

⁵⁵ Roman poet (whom Dante believed converted to Christianity) who overtakes the Pilgrim and Virgil in *Purg.*, XXI: 91 and accompanies them to the Earthly Paradise where he too drinks of its waters.

⁵⁶ *Purg.*, XXVII.

⁵⁷ *Inf.*, XVII: 115-26.

⁵⁸ See Mark Musa's note to *Purg.*, XXVII: 80-87.

prophetic dreams on Mount Purgatory. In the first⁵⁹ he sees a golden eagle circling the sky; it swoops towards him 'terrible as lightning', abducts him like Jupiter to Ganymede and carries him up into a sphere of fire, the fire he must pass through to enter the Earthly Paradise. In the second dream⁶⁰ he sees a wizened old hag, hideously ugly, who, under Dante's gaze, suddenly becomes beautiful. She is a siren, a figure of fatal enchantment who leads men and sailors like Ulysses astray with her seductive song. Dante is mesmerised by her. At this point a 'saintly lady' appears and by her timely intervention, Virgil exposes the siren's true nature by ripping her garments off, an indication that the feminine archetype (as well as the masculine) has a dark, negative side.⁶¹ Both dreams are disturbing, perhaps personally so for Dante, hinting at some deeply repressed and as yet unresolved anxiety which Beatrice will later expose.

By great contrast, in this third dream he sees 'a young and lovely girl walking within meadows picking flowers.' As she moves along, she sings. She announces her name and preoccupation: Leah, weaver of garlands of flowers, while her sister Rachel 'sits all day long before her own (mirror) and never walks away'. They are, of course, the Leah and Rachel of *Genesis*, daughters of Jacob's uncle, Laban. The dream extends the pastoral mood since in the *Genesis* story Rachel tends her father's sheep. There is deceit, rivalry and jealousy in the Biblical story, but in the context of the *Commedia*, Leah represents the active, and Rachel the contemplative life, which in Christianity complement each other. The beautiful feminine flower imagery adds to this picture of complementarity. Dante makes mention of Rachel's lovely eyes, even though *Genesis* does not.⁶² Eyes are extremely important to Dante because they radiate the Divine Light. Rachel, beatified, sits all day long contemplating her beauty. It may seem like vanity, but I think she is really contemplating the beauty of the God whose image she reflects. Leah, by contrast, spends her time picking and weaving flowers into garlands. She is active and creative. The Pilgrim will meet her counterpart not long after he wakes up in the Earthly Paradise. The obvious connection here is with Mary and Martha in the Gospel story.

The Pilgrim awakens to a dawn more splendid than he has ever seen before. It is a welcome sign, just as the distant sight of a familiar shore is to the weary homecoming traveller. He savours the fruits of peace that grow on many branches (as in Eden before the Fall) and the three climb the remaining steps swiftly and effortlessly. Dante's Pilgrim feels his 'wings growing for the flight'.⁶³ The weight of sin is now almost lifted

⁵⁹ *Purg.*, IX: 18-21.

⁶⁰ *Purg.*, XIX: 19-25.

⁶¹ For a fascinating account of this, see Erich Neuman, *The Great Mother*, Bollington Series XLII, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), esp.ch.7.

⁶² *Purg.*, XXVII:106.

⁶³ *Purg.*, XXVII: 123.

from him. Upon their reaching the summit of Mount Purgatory, Virgil delivers his farewell speech, faintly echoing, to my mind, Jesus's great farewell speeches to his disciples, in John's Gospel. There is something saintly about Virgil in the way he selflessly takes on his role and prepares his disciple for the next and glorious stage of his journey: his longed-for encounter with Beatrice, and through her eyes and guidance, Divinity itself. He expects no reward for it and must return to the twilight of Limbo. What could this be but an act of the purest Love on his part? It may have been as difficult for Dante, as it must be for us, to believe that the great poets of antiquity could not be touched by the grace of the Christian God just because they were born at the wrong time. Yet he feels he must confine them to a place in Hell, albeit a more pleasant one. Virgil's last words to his charge are these: -

"I crown and mitre you lord of yourself!"

Uniting both secular and sacred powers, this is an accolade that befits a hero. It is reminiscent of Arjuna's conquest over his worldly or 'lower' nature in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Pilgrim is now fully equipped to trust his own powers of discernment. He is master of himself: almost. Virgil will be with him and Statius for a little longer, but he no longer needs Virgil's guidance. For the sublime realities which open to the Pilgrim in the next and final stages of his journey, he will need other guides, other *magistri*.

The Pilgrim awakens to a land of wonder and enchantment. This is the created universe in its pristine state: the *Earthly Paradise*, or Eden before the 'Fall'. It is Creation newly born, untainted, primordial, *the sovereign realm of the Sacred Feminine*. The Pilgrim, eager to explore this magical place, makes his way slowly because he knows he is treading on sacred ground. He and his two companions enter a 'heavenly forest thick with living green/which made the bright new morning light more soft'.⁶⁴ The imagery is that of spring, *primavera*, symbol of rebirth. His senses are heightened: he smells the fragrant soil, feels the 'stirrings of sweet air' and hears the rustle of the 'trembling leaves' as they counterpoint the joyous song of the birds. Here spring is eternal, as it is in the *Song of Songs*, which was originally an erotic love poem, possibly a wedding song; only very late was it admitted by Jewish scholars into the Bible.⁶⁵ It is cast as an erotic love duet between bride and bridegroom: -

Bride: *I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley.....I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.....His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.....My beloved spake, and said unto me:*

⁶⁴ *Purg.*, XXVII: 2-3.

⁶⁵ Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, p. 16.

Bridegroom: *Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land. The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O, my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.*⁶⁶

The bride is Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, *Sophia-Sapientia*, immanent in the natural world; she is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valleys, a Sealed Spring, and an Enclosed Garden. As Baring and Cashford comment, these are images that came to be associated with the Virgin Mary and appropriated by the Church as metaphors for the union between Christ (the bridegroom) and His Church (the bride) or Christ and the Soul.⁶⁷ But I believe that for Dante there is more to it than this. The *Song of Songs* is saturated with erotic imagery, while the Feminine dominates the *Commedia* to a degree that, were it *overtly* theological and not disguised as a poem written in the vernacular, the institutional church would have quickly condemned it (and Dante).

Dante's Earthly Paradise is a poetic borderland between the natural and the supernatural realms, not unlike those places held sacred to ancient Celtic, Greek and other religious cultures, in which natural features such as trees, forests, groves, wells, streams, and mountain tops have a special numinous significance. There are unnatural (or *supranatural*) features in Dante's Earthly Paradise which serve to heighten the sense of wonder: the breeze (Holy Spirit) always blows in one direction and is warm and moist like the *Sirocco*; plants and flowers spring up spontaneously, not from seed (this may symbolise Eternal Life: nothing has to die here to give life to another); rivers do not flow from sources that need replenishing by the weather; music fills the air as the trees and branches *sing*; the boughs are exotically colourful; and as this is a *garden*, one would not normally expect to encounter such a feature on the summit of a high mountain, only barren rocks, ice and snow. It is indeed a place of enchantment!

As a garden it is, by definition, enclosed, bounded. Enclosed spaces are feminine symbols, analogous to the womb.⁶⁸ It is here, in the Garden of Eden, that the prototype humans were born and were meant to live. For Dante's Pilgrim, it is both a threshold, and a sacred precinct – a *temenos*. He cannot abide here permanently but must rise through the planetary spheres until he attains, in the Heavenly Paradise, a dazzling vision of Creation penetrated throughout by the Light of God's Love. But in the

⁶⁶ *Song of Songs*, 1:5, 7; 2:1-7,10-14.

⁶⁷ Baring and Cashford, *op. cit.* p. 483.

⁶⁸ Andrew Harvey and Anne Baring, *The Divine Feminine: Exploring the Feminine Face of God throughout the World* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1996), p.18.

meantime, he is free to savour its delights. He enters the ancient forest along with his two companions. His way is blocked by a stream of supernatural clarity. Here, where the Earth is at its closest to the Heavenly Light, the stream 'flows dark, very dark/ beneath an everlasting shade which will/never admit a ray of sun or moon'.⁶⁹ Thus, there is darkness even in the brightest part of the Earth. Could this symbolise the darkness of the tomb/womb prior to rebirth in the Spirit?

There are three major forests in the *Commedia*, the first one being the gloomy, beast-haunted forest of *Inferno* I, in which the Pilgrim sets out, lost and bewildered, on his mid-life journey. The second is the infinitely sad forest of the suicides of *Inf.* XIII. The third is the one he is in now. They are strikingly different, yet they each bear features which link them together. In the first are the three wild animals, earthbound and flightless; in the second are the 'repulsive' harpies, half-human, half bird, who nest and perch in the trees 'shrieking their strange laments', and in the third are delightful songbirds that fill the branches with their lovely music. It is as though they each symbolise stages in the metamorphosis of Dante's spiritual consciousness. In this, the third forest, the Pilgrim could not see the place where he came in, echoing his situation in the first one. In the second forest, that of the suicides, human souls *are* the trees, or are trapped within them, rigid, thorny, and brittle. They retain consciousness of their pain and suffering, yet the life within them is so shrivelled that, like branches with thin saps, they are easily broken. Could Dante's pity for, for example, Pier delle Vigne⁷⁰ recall a time in which his own self-pity led to suicidal thoughts, checked by the intervention of *Sapientia*, Lady Philosophy, as in Boethius' case, but represented here by Virgil? (Vigne's situation was much like Boethius'). What I am suggesting here is that these forests are not separate forests at all, but one and the same forest seen through different eyes, according to the spiritual condition of the beholder. In the words of William Blake: 'As a man is, so he sees.'⁷¹ Is this not true of all three divisions of the *Commedia*, that they really represent different states of mind or consciousness in this life, rather than literal afterlife locations?

The companions follow the river upstream until they behold a marvellous sight: a beautiful young lady on the opposite bank, singing and gathering flowers, like the Leah of the Pilgrim's prophetic dream. The Pilgrim beckons her to draw nearer to the river's bank, so that he may understand the words she sings. She sings the *Delectasti mi*, a verse from the ninety-first psalm in praise of this wondrous Creation (line 80). She radiates Love in all its warmth and strength. It is a Love that surpasses even that of Venus when pierced with Cupid's dart. In her sweet femininity and solitariness, she

⁶⁹ *Purg.*, XXVII: 31-33.

⁷⁰ *Inf.*, XIII: 58-78. See Musa's notes regarding Pier delle Vigne.

⁷¹ William Blake, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, Geoffrey Keynes, ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), p.835.

seems to embody the spirit of Nature in all her beauty and perfection, like Wordsworth's mysterious Lucy, who 'dwelt among untrodden ways/besides the springs of Dove'. She is *Astraea*, the Star Maiden, the virgin Goddess of Justice, Innocence, and Purity in Greek mythology, uniting the pagan vision of the lost Golden Age with the Christian vision of Eden before the Fall, when no separation was felt between Nature, Spirit, and Humankind.⁷²

Dante withholds her name over 274 lines before he finally discloses it as *Matelda*.⁷³ As well as *Astraea*, who appears in Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*,⁷⁴ could Dante have modelled her on Joan, 'the much-loved lady' of his poet friend Cavalcanti, who, according to the *Vita*, was given the name *Primavera*, partly because of her youthful beauty and partly because 'she comes first' (*prima verra*), heralding the approach of Beatrice?⁷⁵ If so, Dante portrays her as a type of female John the Baptist, a role that she does in fact fulfil in the succeeding cantos. Is it not significant that the male baptiser of Christ belongs to the desert wilderness of Judea, whereas the female baptiser of Dante's Pilgrim belongs to the lushness of nature? This latter connection is reinforced by Matelda's resemblance, in the Pilgrim's mind, to Proserpine, the Roman name for Persephone the daughter of Zeus (Jupiter) and Demeter (Ceres) the corn goddess, or goddess of fertility and the seasons, the bringer of the fruits of the earth, whose rites were celebrated every spring at Eleusis. The famous story of Proserpine's abduction by Pluto (Hades) to the Netherworld explores the concepts of death and rebirth, of loss and recovery, relating them to the cycles of the seasons. Proserpine/Persephone is gathering flowers in a meadow when the abduction takes place. She is forcefully carried off from light and life into the darkness of the Netherworld where she is made queen. Her mother, deep in mourning, wanders the earth vainly in search of her until, on hearing Demeter's laments, Jupiter negotiates with Pluto for Proserpine's rescue. Pluto consents, but only on condition that she returns to the Netherworld for one-quarter of the year since she had eaten the seeds of a fateful pomegranate (compare Adam and Eve). This period corresponds to winter, the season of latency, of non-growth.

According to Baring and Cashford, the Greek name, Persephone, derives etymologically from a root meaning, 'she who shines in the dark', indicating that she does not die but is 'the seed that splits off from the body of the ripened grain, the mother, when, sinking beneath the earth, she returns in spring as the new shoot'.⁷⁶ The images of descent into an underworld, followed by ascent into a New Life

⁷² Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

⁷³ *Purg.*, XXXIII: 118.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Vita.*, XXIV, p. 51.

⁷⁶ Quoted from Baring and Cashford, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

symbolised by spring, parallel those of the *Commedia*. This suggests to me that Dante's initiation into the mysteries of death and rebirth, recast in Christian terms, is archetypally rooted in much older traditions such as those of the Greek Eleusinian and Orphic Mysteries, with currents extending even deeper into Egypt, Mesopotamia and prehistory. But there is a significant difference in the Earthly Paradise. Here it is always spring, as suggested by the spontaneous generation of flowers and unvarying breezes. Time seems to be arrested; one has the sense that this is where it meets Eternity. Both Proserpine and Matelda are linked to the natural world, but Matelda personifies Nature at her loveliest, unfallen state. There is no Pluto here to drag her down. She is the Proserpine of the Upper World.

Matelda discloses the river's name: *Lethe*, the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology, which flows through the Underworld. It was believed that if the newly dead drank of its waters they would lose all memory of their past existence. But here it flows through the highest place on Dante's Earth, one of two sacred streams, the other being *Eunoe*. It forms yet another barrier to be overcome. A mere three feet wide, Dante's Pilgrim is unable to cross it. In his impatience to meet Beatrice, he is momentarily frustrated by the fact that the waters do not part for him, as they did for the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. This tells us that there is still more work to be done on himself.

Matelda, a gatherer of flowers symbolising the feminine work of generation, satisfies the Pilgrim's curiosity about this magical realm. She is both a guide and a servant of Grace, chanting her hymns of praise and celebration in harmony with the Music of Creation. In her John the Baptist role (lines 13-15), she prepares the two Pilgrims for what is to be one of the most dramatic encounters in the *Commedia*.

Chapter 4

The Chariot and the Griffin

In *Purg: XXIX* Dante's imaginal powers evoke a scene of extraordinary visual intensity, deriving in part from the *Book of Revelation* (hereafter, *Revelation*) and in part from *Ezekiel* of the Old Testament, but with features belonging to neither. It is so rich in religious, mythological, and symbolic imagery that no straightforward allegorical interpretation could ever do it justice. In what feels at first like an intrusion into the serene and hypnotic atmosphere of the Earthly Paradise, a grand theatrical pageant slowly advances on Matelda's side of the stream, heralded by a blazing light, music, and seven golden lampstands as in *Revelation*, 1:17, with streaming bands of coloured lights across the sky, like the rainbows in *Ezekiel*, 1:27-28 and *Revelation*, 4:3. Following the lights are 24 'Elders' dressed in supernatural white and wearing crowns of fleur-de-lis. They sing praises to the Virgin Mary. Echoing Ezekiel's vision and that of John of Patmos in *Revelation*, four creatures 'wearing crowns of forest green', follow from behind, each with six wings whose feathers are covered with eyes'. The four creatures make a rectangular space for the pageant's great centrepiece: a triumphal two-wheeled chariot drawn by a griffin. Beside its right wheel are three dancing ladies dressed in red, green, and white respectively, while beside the left wheel are four more ladies dressed in purple. Behind them come two aged men, 'staid and grave', followed by four 'of humble mien' and finally an old man apparently self-absorbed and inspired. The entire procession comes to a halt opposite the Pilgrim, with a crash of thunder.

What is the meaning of this theatrical and why does Dante introduce it here in the Earthly Paradise? It is clearly meant to inspire awe and wonder in the Pilgrim and to introduce something truly momentous. The twenty-four Elders turn back towards the chariot 'as to their source of peace' and one of them sings *Veni, sponsa, de Libano*, (come, Bride, from Lebanon), taken from the *Song of Songs*. The others respond antiphonally. Then a hundred angels rise above the chariot and pour down a libation of flowers upon its queenly occupant – Beatrice! Not Yahweh, not Christ the Son of God but Beatrice, the Divine Feminine, Bride from Lebanon, Goddess of the Rising Sun, the One Who Blesses. The Pilgrim is in the presence of a supernatural being of great beauty and power. 'Trembling before her eyes, captured by adoration, stunned by awe', he beholds her partially veiled form and turns to Virgil. But Virgil is not there! Virgil, upon whose fatherly wisdom he relied for so long with embarrassingly childlike dependency, is no longer there to comfort and support him, and it provokes a flood of tears. This is a very human touch.

Musa outlines the allegorical and numerological significance of the pageant in terms of the history and roots of Christianity, beginning with the Old Testament and culminating in the *Book of Revelation*.⁷⁷ But I feel such readings restrict the reader's interpretative freedom. Dante was deeply read in the pagan classics and had a wealth of imagery at his disposal besides Biblical. Moreover, he was a visionary poet, meaning that his visions came to him inwardly from a Higher Source. As he says himself: -

*O power of fantasy that steals our minds
from things outside, to leave us unaware,
although a thousand trumpets may blow aloud –*

*what stirs you if the senses show you nothing?
Light stirs you, formed in Heaven, by itself,
or by His will Who sends it down to us.*⁷⁸

Dante awakens us to the universal realm of the *mundus imaginalis*, as the late Henry Corbin famously called it.⁷⁹ Corbin is well known for his work on Sufism and Islamic Platonism. According to him, the *mundus imaginalis* is a spiritual order of reality not perceptible by the ordinary senses but present to the awakened inner vision. It is a hierarchic world of archetypes, symbolic images and angelic beings, *as objectively real as the world of the senses and the intellect*. It is accessible through the faculty of spiritual imagination latent in us all, although Corbin was at pains not to use the word *imagination* because of its modern association with mere fantasy, that which is not real; to forestall the confusion he used the word *imaginal* instead. It is clearly present in Dante's consciousness to a very high degree. It is his knowledge of the heart, an irresistibly attractive force-field of Love and Beauty which his devotion to Beatrice compels him towards. In his letter to Can Grande,⁸⁰ Dante uses the word 'polysemous' – having multiple meanings – to describe the images present to his vision. This is worth keeping in mind. As I have already said, for me, part of Dante's genius as a mystical poet resides in the way in which he integrates the inner psychology and mystical meanings of Pagan, Classical and Jewish mythology (banned by the Church) into his profoundly universal Christian vision. Seen in this light, his is a Christianity of *inclusion*, not *exclusion*.

⁷⁷ Musa, *Purg.*, XXXIX, pp. 315-316.

⁷⁸ *Purg.*, XVII: 13-18.

⁷⁹ Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and Imaginal*, translated by Ruth Horine, <https://imaginalresonance.com> accessed 5th May 2022.

⁸⁰ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

This merging of the Classical/Pagan with the Biblical imparts a wonderful ambiguity to Dante's poetic imagery. Even a single image may have a double (or multiple) meaning. The seven gold lampstands, for example, are clearly a menorah, a Jewish symbol related to the Tree of Life. In *Exodus* 25:31-40, God instructs Moses while on the Holy Mountain to construct a candelabra for the Tabernacle according to an almond tree pattern; it is the prototype of the golden menorah which stood in the Jerusalem Temple.⁸¹ It is both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Light. Its conceptual origins lay even deeper in ancient Mesopotamia, the seven branches standing for the seven known heavenly bodies, whose respective spheres the Pilgrim is being prepared to ascend through and beyond.⁸²

What can we say of the components which constitute the heart of this vision: the chariot, the griffin, and Beatrice herself? The connection of many gods and goddesses in the ancient world with their chariots is widespread. One could think of Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer in the *Bhagavad Gita*, or of the Roman goddess Cybele and her chariot drawn by lions. Ezekiel's vision gave rise to a powerful school of Hebraic mysticism, *Merkabah*, meaning 'chariot', with which Dante must surely have been familiar. Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi (the late Warren Kenton) gives a Kabbalistic interpretation to Ezekiel's vision. Commenting upon an illustration of Ezekiel's Chariot vision taken from a 16th century Hebrew Bible, Havlevi writes: 'The chariot's wheels represent the cycles of what some call the astral world. Above is the Throne of Heaven, symbol of the realm of the Spirit, upon which is seated the Fiery man, Adam Kadmon, the Divine image of God. This figure is where humanity originally came from. It precedes the spiritual Adam of Genesis, according to the Jewish oral tradition.'⁸³ The throne-chariot is a vehicle that mystically transports its occupant to the highest celestial regions. It is a symbolic means by which God 'comes down' to the earthbound human and transports him upwards to Heaven. It is clear to me that Dante's chariot vision was the outcome of a profound longing to penetrate the innermost secrets hidden in the Divine-Human relationship through the practice of rapt contemplation. His vision resembles Ezekiel's, yet the Divinity enthroned in this case is feminine!

The appearance of Beatrice in her golden chariot coincides with the rising sun. Here one feels a strong link, not just with the Son of Man as in St. John's vision, but with Apollo and the solar gods, who also rode the heavens on winged chariots. The crucial connection is that of Light. Beatrice is a female Apollo as much as a female Christ figure. It is as if Dante, the devout Catholic, would have felt quite at home in a polytheistic pagan world in which goddesses enjoy equal status with gods. This sense

⁸¹ Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p.20.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, *A Kabbalistic Universe* (Milton Keynes: Kabbalah Society, 2007), p.18 & illustration.

is reinforced by an interesting essay written by Jeremy Naydler⁸⁴ in which he points out some revealing differences between Dante's vision and those of the two Biblical accounts: Dante's chariot is two-wheeled, not four-wheeled as is Ezekiel's, and in neither account is there a mention of the two groups of four and three dancing ladies assembled around the chariot's wheels. Ezekiel, along with Isaiah and Jeremiah, were prophets of Yahweh, spokesmen for a sovereign male God who inveighed heavily against Goddess worship. Could Dante's 'counter-vision' be a reaction, conscious or unconscious, against the domination of the patriarchal Church of his time, with its bias against the Feminine?

Why does Dante choose a griffin to pull the chariot? Griffins are mythical winged creatures with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle. Most commentaries I have read take for granted that Dante's griffin symbolises Christ in His dual nature, human and divine. But I agree with Naydler, this cannot be.⁸⁵ Lions and eagles are ferocious predators. One legend has it that Alexander's great army was attacked by a horde of griffins that almost destroyed it. They tore men out of their saddles and carried them away as prey.⁸⁶ Hence they must have been widely feared in the Middle Ages. Yet Dante's griffin is docile and clearly an object of great reverence. Dante even echoes the words of Luke 1:42: "Blessed art thou, Griffin" when referring to its avoidance of shredding the tree's 'sacred bark', which it could have done.⁸⁷ This twofold beast could therefore symbolise, among other possibilities, a spiritual transformation of the brute animal instincts in Man, such as his lust for power (the lion) and overweening ambition (the eagle), a dangerous combination. As such, the griffin, now resistant to temptation, might well represent the Redeemed Man, his animal nature acknowledged but tamed and disciplined to serve a higher purpose. As such, he becomes 'an agent of justice and renewer of that tree', as Armour suggests.⁸⁸

Naydler traces the origins and evolution of this mythical beast through numerous artefacts, emphasising its associations with the goddesses of the ancient world, especially those of the sun, such as the goddess Qadesh, who was given the title "eye of the sun". He adds that 'in Egyptian, Ugaritic and Minoan mythology, the sun goddess played a crucial role in the regenerative journey of the soul in and out of the Underworld regions'.⁸⁹ Of particular interest to me is an illustration of a sarcophagus dated to around 1400 B C, on which is depicted a Minoan goddess accompanied by a

⁸⁴ Jeremy Naydler, *Dante Prophet of Love* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 2017).

⁸⁵ Peter Armour gives a compelling case against this theory, showing it to be untenable. Peter Armour, *Dante's Griffin and the History of the World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁸⁶ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Quebec: McGill Queen's University Press, 1996), pp.240-241.

⁸⁷ *Purg.*, XXX11: 43.

⁸⁸ Armour, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁸⁹ Naydler, *op. cit.* p. 36.

female companion, riding a winged chariot pulled by a gold and white griffin, much like Dante's.⁹⁰ Her identity is not established, but evidence suggests it is Asherah, one of the goddesses whose worship the Old Testament prophets sought vehemently to eradicate. Beatrice, too, has a female companion: Matelda. There are differences, but overall, the resemblance (coincidence aside) is uncanny. How could Dante have known about the Cretan goddess depicted on the sarcophagus? The wellsprings of poetic and divine inspiration are deep, way beyond reach of established belief systems and the mediation of an authoritarian Church.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.37.

Chapter 5

Dante's Repentance

When Beatrice appears for the first time in the *Commedia* (Canto XXX), she is veiled in white, with a green cloak and gown the colour of eternal flame. She wears a crown of Minerva's leaves. Minerva is the Roman counterpart of the formidable goddess Athena, guardian of the city. In one famous statue she is dressed as a warrior, complete with helmet and shield; in another she is wreathed with snakes.⁹¹ But she is also a goddess of Wisdom. The warrior image fits the occasion. Beatrice addresses Dante by name (the only time), but far from being sweet and welcoming, she launches into a merciless verbal attack: -

*Dante, though Virgil leaves you, do not weep,
not yet, that is, for you shall have to weep
from yet another wound. Do not weep yet.
(Lines 55-57).*

Her posture is masculine; she rises above the chariot's left rail like an admiral on watch, and her face expresses regal sternness. Her speech is accusative and sarcastic: -

*Yes, look at me! Yes, I am Beatrice!
So, you at last have deigned to climb the mount?
You learned at last that here lies human bliss?
(Lines 76-78).*

The Pilgrim lowers his head in shame, unable to look at Beatrice or his own reflection in the water. He feels like a guilty child facing his scolding mother. We may recall his use of similar language in the *Vita*, after Beatrice's denial of her usual sweet greeting, where he confesses, '*I fell asleep like a little boy crying from a spanking*'.⁹² Dante may be recalling this painful personal memory and sublimating it in his poetry. The grown-up man, having mastered all the lessons of Hell and Purgatory, is made to feel like a little child again, a humiliation cruelly exacerbated in Canto XXXI by Beatrice's sarcastic comments on his beard. But we are also reminded of Jesus's words to his disciples: -

*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*⁹³

⁹¹ See illustrations in Baring and Cashford, *op. cit.* pp.333 and 336.

⁹² *Vita.*, XX11, p. 19.

⁹³ *Matthew*, 18: 1-5.

Dante portrays the intensity of his Pilgrim's emotional state with reference to the snows of the Apennines 'packed hard by wintry north-east winds'. His heart feels as frozen as the ice-lake of Cocytus in the ninth and deepest circle of the *Inferno*, the circle of the traitors, until the angels take pity on him, and it melts into tears of anguish. Yet Beatrice rebukes the angels for their pity and her tirade resumes with even greater venom. At first, she addresses the angels with particulars of her plaint against the Pilgrim, who stands before her like a trembling defendant in the dock, before turning back to him as a swordsman about to strike again.⁹⁴ The imagery of weaponry recurs in the powerful simile of a snapped crossbow to convey the Pilgrim's fraught emotional state. He must answer the 'grave' charge with a confession. Emotion stifles his speech, and he bursts into a flood of tears. It makes for uncomfortable reading. If this is Love, it bears not a trace of sentimentality. The lady he adores so passionately has shown another side to her nature. What is the charge, this 'other wound' he must weep from? It seems it was his betrayal of faith in Beatrice, shortly after her physical death. He 'strayed after others and abandoned me', 'loved me less', she complains, and 'wandered from the path that leads to truth/ pursuing simulacra of the good'. The words echo Yahweh's remonstrations against his rebellious people, who turned to other gods and goddesses such as Asherah, except that, in a bold stroke of irony, this is a female voice. It is here that Beatrice discloses her purpose and the deeper meaning of Love: -

*I prayed that inspiration come to him
through dreams and other means: in vain I tried
to call him back, so little did he care.*

*In such depths did he sink that, finally,
there was no other way to save his soul
except to have him see the Damned in Hell.*

*That this might be, I visited the dead,
and offered my petition and my tears
to him who until now has been his guide.
The highest laws of God would be annulled
if he crossed Lethe, drinking its sweet flow,
without having to pay at least some scot
of penitence poured forth in guilty tears.
(Lines 136-145).*

⁹⁴ See also *Revelation*, 1: 16.

She ruthlessly exposes his egotism, pride, and vulnerability. I think there is little point in being literal and speculating who those other women might be, whether they be the so-called 'Lady at the Window', who, in the *Vita*, takes pity on his distress and tries to comfort him (as do the angels here)⁹⁵ or other Florentine women naturally attractive to a young, virile Italian male. We may feel that his guilt is out of all proportion to the offence. But I think we gain more understanding if we accept that this is not just about Dante's supposed sexual indiscretions but about something fundamental to the 'fallen' human condition: a reluctance to face mortality due to an exclusive self-identity with the body/ego complex. We are so mesmerised by the multiple transient appearances of things in the realm of space and time that we have forgotten our grounding in That which is beyond space and time: our Immortal Essence. The incarnate Beatrice was one form through which Divinity revealed itself to Dante, and it was very beautiful and feminine. But it passed away, leaving Dante bereft. He looked for substitutes to fill the apparent void, but they, too, are ephemeral; they promise abiding happiness, but fail ultimately to deliver it. Now he must face the Truth. The original erotic stimulus (his love for the incarnate Beatrice) and the energy it released must now be *refined* as in alchemy (but not *repressed*); the delights of the temporal must give way to the joys of the Eternal. Beatrice, reading Dante's heart, sees that it still bears the old longings and memories of past attachments and earthbound desires, sensuality in all its forms, 'simulacra of the good'. They constitute a burden which must now be released. Heavier still, is the burden of Dante's pride, his lust for glory and fame, a huge temptation for the gifted poet: -

'through the bounty of God's grace.....

*was this man so endowed, potentially,
in early youth – had he allowed his gifts
to bloom, he would have reaped abundantly.*

*But the more vigorous and rich the soil,
the wilder and the weedier it grows
when left untilled, its bad seeds flourishing.'*
(Lines 112 and 115-120)

When Beatrice says, "Yes, look at me! Yes, I am Beatrice!" she is saying, "have you forgotten who I *really* am?" By implication, she is also saying "Have you forgotten who *you* really are". She addresses us all. Her words echo God's self-reflexive disclosure of His name to Moses: -

⁹⁵ *Vita.*, XXXV – XXXVIII, pp. 71-77.

*'I AM who I AM.'*⁹⁶

If so, Beatrice's statement is incredibly startling. But this is Divinity speaking in a female voice. The reflexive use of the pronoun 'I' means that God is in all Creation, hence is the 'I' of every self-aware being, male and female equally, as I discussed in Chapter 1. God (Ultimate Reality) self-reflects His/ Her Image in every created thing in the entire universe. Among the sublime passages in *Paradiso*, are those which speak of Creation as a process of eternal renewal. This example is worth quoting: -

*I tell you, without asking you,
what you would hear, for I see your desire
where every **where** and every **when** is centred.*

*Not to increase His good, which cannot be,
but rather that His own reflected glory
in its resplendence might proclaim **I am***

*in His eternity, beyond all time,
Beyond all comprehension, as pleased Him,
New loves blossomed from the Eternal Love.*⁹⁷

The world of space and time is contingent upon That which is spaceless and timeless. From where did this profound insight of Dante's come from? Referring to angels, but by implication, all beings, Beatrice adds: -

*And now you see the height, you see the breadth
Of Eternal goodness that divides Itself
Into these countless mirrors that reflect
Itself, remaining One, as It was always.*⁹⁸

But the Pilgrim is not yet ready for such a vision. Something still needs to change. Now the significance of the three dreams on Mount Purgatory seems a little clearer. The nightmare of his abduction by the eagle in the first dream coincided, while he was asleep, with a visitation by Lucia, who, at the instigation of Beatrice, took him in her arms and conveyed him from Antepurgatory to the gate of Purgatory itself to help him on his way.⁹⁹ The contrast between this beautiful event and his terrifying nightmare (virtually a rape scene) strongly suggests that the 'deeply repressed anxiety' I alluded

⁹⁶ *Exodus*, 3: 14.

⁹⁷ *Para.*, XXIX: 10-18.

⁹⁸ *Para.*, XXIX, 142-145.

⁹⁹ *Purg.*, IX:35-63.

to above is an inner struggle between the potential violence of sexual lust and the purity of true love. This same struggle is evident, even more strongly I feel, in the second dream. In staring long at the siren and turning her in his mind into a thing of beauty, he falls into the trap of self-deception, rather like Paolo and Francesca; she symbolises a powerful compulsion which is hard for him to let go of. It takes the intervention of the saintly lady to come to the rescue and exhort Virgil to expose the siren's true abominable nature. Who is this saintly lady? We might suspect it is Beatrice herself, the source of Dante's inspiration; a hint of this is in her address to the angels in Canto XXX in which she says, 'I prayed that inspiration come to him/ through dreams and other means'.¹⁰⁰ The dream mercilessly reveals this dark aspect of Dante's nature which he, on Mount Purgatory, must face, painful though it is. This is what Purgatory means. It will be purified and transformed during the initiation processes which take place in the Earthly Paradise. The third dream, that of Leah, is different because he has courageously passed through the purifying wall of flames.

Beatrice's intervention by every means available is surely a great demonstration of Love, albeit veiled in the harshness of her present speech. His 'wound', his forsaking of Beatrice, once the mortal seed of Love Immortal, must now be healed. First, he must repent.¹⁰¹ And it is fitting that this takes place in the Earthly Paradise, which Anderson sees as 'a figurative presentation of the Temple enclosure' in his discussion of Dante's possible links with the Templar order.¹⁰² That Dante may have had in mind the site of the restored Temple of Solomon, the New Jerusalem, is suggested by the placing of the Earthly Paradise diametrically opposite the site of the Old Jerusalem, forced through the Earth by the fall of Satan and uplifted to the summit of Mount Purgatory.

This is the crucial turning-point, I would say, of the whole poem. For it is here, in the Earthly Paradise, that the real transformation of the Pilgrim's consciousness takes place. He repents and confesses. But repentance may mean something rather different from how we normally understand it. Anderson points out that the word, 'generally translated as *poenitentia* in the Vulgate and as 'repentance' in English versions is, in the Greek, *metanoia* which carries none of the associations of guilt and mortification now borne by those translations but means a complete alteration in the habitual attitudes of the mind – a transformation of the inner man.'¹⁰³ In Dante's case, the impetus for this transformation is, of course, his love for Beatrice, the Divine Feminine, a Beatrice who announces her exalted status with a resounding 'Yes'.

¹⁰⁰ *Purg.*, 133-4.

¹⁰¹ Compare Beatrice's complaint with that of *Revelation*, 2: 4-5.

¹⁰² Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.278.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

The tears which accompany the Pilgrim's painful confession are a healing gift. They remind me of St. Augustine, also in a garden representing Eden, distressed in heart, breaking into a flood of tears, and collapsing under a fig tree (Tree of Life or Tree of Knowledge).¹⁰⁴ He is healed and converted to Christianity shortly afterwards upon reading the Holy Scriptures. Dante's Pilgrim also collapses, or rather, faints, with remorse when he beholds the beauty of the spiritualised Beatrice '*lovelier now than when alive on earth, when she was loveliest of all*' (lines 83-84). We recall him fainting after his encounter with Francesca and Paolo in the Circle of the Lustful in *Inf.* V.

¹⁰⁴ St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, p.152.

Chapter 6

Metanoia or the Tree of Life

At this critical stage, the Pilgrim comes to and finds Matelda leading him into Lethe to drink of its waters. She sweetly sings *Asperges me* ('Cleanse me of my sins) from Psalm 51:7, while gliding lightly across the stream in a manner reminiscent of Jesus walking on the water, another sign that Dante is temperamentally most responsive to the call of the Divine in its feminine aspect. This rite of passage signifies the death of death, that is, death to a paralysing, self-centred mode of existence whose ugliest manifestations the Pilgrim witnessed for himself in the *Inferno* as well as in the political and social turmoil Dante was caught up in. The drinking of the waters of Lethe also signifies new birth: the birth of a purer consciousness, free from the memory, and even the concept, of sin. Now he is safe on the other bank, Matelda leads him to the quartet of ladies in purple dress and joins them in their ecstatic dances, like an initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which ritual dances were performed, mostly by women, every spring. Here in the company of females he experiences joy. Free of ego and guilt, he spontaneously and unselfconsciously participates in the Cosmic Dance. The four 'nymphs', born of the southern stars seen by the Pilgrim as he sets forth on Mount Purgatory¹⁰⁵ lead him to gaze directly into Beatrice's emerald eyes. What the Pilgrim sees reflected in those heavenly portals is the twofold griffin. The three other dancing ladies join the celebration. Dante's consciousness is shifting away from a dualistic to a non-dualistic mode of perception. But this is only the first stage; he cannot yet see the griffin directly and as undivided unity, but as a creature mercurially alternating between lion and eagle (lines 124-126).

The dancing 'nymphs' who form a trinity, exhort Beatrice in song to: '*turn your sacred eyes/and look upon your faithful one/who came so very far to look at you!*'¹⁰⁶ For all his pursuit of 'simulacra of the good', deep down Dante's faith in her never really deserted him; his great poem is proof enough, and it is this which makes his confession so poignant. The Beatrice who now stands before the Pilgrim unveils her 'second beauty': her smile. Here we recall not just his emotional response to the incarnate Beatrice's smile in the *Vita*, but Dante's revealing lines in his *Amor che nella mente*, in the *Convivio*, as mentioned above.¹⁰⁷ Through Beatrice's eyes and unveiled smile Wisdom shines forth in all her fullness. She is *Sophia-Sapientia*, the Goddess of Wisdom: -

¹⁰⁵ *Purg.*, I: 22-24.

¹⁰⁶ *Purg.*, XXXI: 133-135.

¹⁰⁷ *Conv.*, pp. 128-130.

*'I was set up from everlasting to everlasting, from the beginning, before ever the Earth was.'*¹⁰⁸

Judging by Dante's superlative use of language, his depiction of Beatrice as a revelation of the Divine Wisdom is surely founded upon the authentic mystical experience he recalls at the opening of *Paradiso*. It is a blinding vision, a '*splendor* of the eternal living light' (line 159) beyond the capacity even of his great poetic gifts to convey. Dante invites us to reflect on our own experiences; which of them might we describe as 'mystical' or as approaching that desired state? Moments of spiritual awakening can occur at any time, and quite unexpectedly. The stimulus may be external, like the beauties in nature, music, art, and human relationships, or internal, as in dreams, orisons, or being in love. They momentarily lift us above our habitual self-preoccupations, our time-bound concerns. But to communicate their flavour, their effect on us, is impossible except indirectly, through shared artistic/ poetic media that touch upon our common humanity. For Dante, Beatrice is both revelation and guide. She will lead him to a region or, rather, a state of consciousness, which transcends all the dualistic categories of human speech.

According to Baring and Cashford, the origins of *Sophia-Sapientia* can be traced as far back as the Bronze Age.¹⁰⁹ In the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, she speaks with the same authority as the Mother Goddesses of a previous era. She is analogous to an artist engaged in the creative process under the guidance of a Master. The feeling is one of sheer ecstatic joy in creation, as expressed in Matelda's singing, dancing, and weaving of flowers. She is Inspiration itself. But she also has a moral dimension: -

*I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasures.*¹¹⁰

Virtuousness, then, is built into the very fabric of Creation; its ontological status for Dante cannot be overstated. For Dante, Love and the Virtues are inseparable. He loves Beatrice because she embodies to a very high degree those qualities which are present in the Wisdom books of the Bible. She stands, like the Virgin Mary, as a model for Mankind's noblest aspirations.

In the following Canto (XXXII), the procession 'about turns' – reverses direction – and follows the Menorah towards the rising sun in the east. This reversing or turning is a recurrent image in the *Commedia*, especially in *Paradiso* (I have counted 36

¹⁰⁸ *Proverbs*, 8:23.

¹⁰⁹ Baring & Cashford, *op. cit.*, p.470.

¹¹⁰ *Proverbs*, 8:22-23.

instances). It is consistent with *metanoia*, the reversal of one's habitual ways of seeing things, no longer limited by the five senses, but seen with the eye of the heart: a direct inner perception. A high point of this *gnosis* comes in *Para. XXVIII* when the Pilgrim beholds, under Beatrice's guidance, the Cosmos in inverse order to how it appears on Earth. God, represented as a point of blazing light, is now at the centre, illuminating the angelic spheres and, by extension, the entire Creation.¹¹¹ Gustav Dore illustrated it beautifully. The Light diminishes proportional to distance, but we recall that even in the darkest regions of Hell it is still present, however dim. There is nowhere where God is not.

In keeping with Ezekiel's vision, the imagery becomes martial, with expressions like 'squadrons', 'front-line troops', and 'soldiers on the march'. It is a reminder of the Iron Age warrior culture to which Ezekiel belonged, a culture in which the Hebrew prophets abandoned the Divine Feminine and replaced her with a solitary male creator-deity, Yahweh/Elohim, without a female consort. The Divine Masculine now rules supreme. He has usurped the creative role of the Goddess, and his will is sovereign. This may be significant. The occupant of Ezekiel's throne is Yahweh (the 'Lord') assuming a human form¹¹², the God of a one-sided, law-based, patriarchal religious culture, whereas in Dante's vision it is Beatrice. Dante's counter-vision, along with the cult of the Virgin Mary helps to restore a much-needed balance.

The 'company' comes to a halt in front of a tree stripped bare of its foliage and fruit and forms a circle around it. Once more the spotlight is on the griffin. Fully tamed and obedient, it attaches the chariot's pole to the tree which miraculously bursts into bloom. This is a powerful moment, in which the scene of Christ's Transfiguration is evoked. The Pilgrim falls into a deep sleep, just as Jesus' closest disciples, Peter, John and James did. He is awakened by a *splendor*, a voice calling him to *rise*, as did Jesus to the three disciples.¹¹³ The 'reduced company' tells us much about Dante's initiation experiences as portrayed in the Earthly Paradise sequences: he was an initiate into the deeper mysteries reserved for the few: a breaker of the shell of doctrine and dogma to expose the hidden kernel.

When the Pilgrim awakens, Beatrice commands him to fix his gaze on the chariot and witness a disturbing scene, one of violence and devastation. An eagle swoops down, strips the tree bare and with full force, strikes the chariot, which staggers 'like a ship caught in a storm.' A hungry fox leaps onto the chariot, which Beatrice chases away. The eagle returns, this time shedding some of its golden feathers onto the

¹¹¹ See *Para.*, XXVII in its entirety, too long to quote here.

¹¹² *Ezekiel*, 1: 26.

¹¹³ *Matthew*, 17: 1-8.

chariot. Then a dragon appears and with its poisoned tail rips up part of the chariot's floor. The chariot sprouts eagle plumage all over and grows seven horned heads. It is now a monster. An 'ungirt whore' takes the place of Beatrice on the chariot's seat, is kissed by a giant, then, in a fit of jealousy, the giant pummels the whore, and makes off with the broken 'monster' into the woods of the Earthly Paradise. It is another rape scene; it could be a scene in *Inferno*.

As part of his initiation process, Beatrice exhorts the Pilgrim to observe the chariot well and put what he sees into writing 'for the good of sinners in your world.' What he sees clearly represents a violation by the demonic forces of destruction and chaos of something immensely sacred: the Divine-Human encounter symbolised by the chariot; in other words, the innate dignity and beauty of every human person and all living beings that share in the Divine Life. As with all these visions, it is internal to Dante. He is inescapably part of that world he sees falling apart through sin and corruption, as we all are. What the Pilgrim witnesses is akin to a cinematographic projection, or the flashback of a person's life at the time of his death, here couched in symbolism most familiar to Dante. The Pilgrim has already made his confession and drunk the waters of Lethe; he has forgotten that sin exists, so there are no more guilty feelings. He is beginning to shed his identity as a separate ego (as Dante the man in all his various personae) and is starting to see things from the perspective of the mysterious, ever-watchful Divinity. He is no longer emotionally caught up in what he observes, which he now sees as a transient show, an appearance, as the whole phantasmagoria vanishes like a dream into the woods. As Beatrice explains, 'It was and is not.'¹¹⁴

However, Dante must see this if he is to bring light to the world, just as Ezekiel must return to the people of Yahweh and expose their idolatrous ways. He is a prophet of Love in a world caught up in illusions. Nevertheless, this symbolic demonstration of evil and corruption is not just a shadowy appearance but a hard reality for people who must live with its presence. We could explore the allegorical significances of the eagle, the dragon, the fox, the whore and the giant, relating them either to Church history, or to the specific circumstances of Dante's social, political and religious world. But to do this would be to overlook the mystical import of this vision. What happens in the tremendous Divine-Human encounter symbolised by the chariot vision is an utter heightening of consciousness which leaves the person who experiences it profoundly changed; it could leave him dissatisfied with the 'normality' of a conventional lifestyle, imprisoned by the five senses, which most of society takes for granted. He may feel like an outsider, a stranger on Earth.¹¹⁵ He now sees through its pretences, its idolatries, its complacent materialism masquerading as the Good. A much greater Life

¹¹⁴ *Purg.*, XXX111: 36-37.

¹¹⁵ *Psalm* 119: 19.

awaits Humanity, but most cannot see it. They cannot see the Divinity, the Christ who dwells deep in us all, which Love alone reveals. Love can make him a Man of Sorrows. His sensitivity to the suffering of others is heightened, and his heart is filled with compassion. His whole orientation is directed towards the service of Humanity (and perhaps other forms of life as well). This makes him vulnerable, for it pits him against all those powerful social and intellectual forces which maim, cripple and oppress the human spirit. But he finds his strength in a Higher Power.

Before the scene of destruction, Beatrice vacates the chariot and sits alone on the tree's roots, surrounded by her female cohort.¹¹⁶ What are we to make of this? She seems to have exchanged roles. On her chariot she was a female version of Yahweh, but now she is Asherah, the Canaanite Mother Goddess of the Earth, the Giver of Life and Fertility, whose emblem is the Sacred Tree. And yet she is also the human being Dante fell in love with. She is her own unique person. Beatrice, it seems, is many-dimensional. Does this not imply that there are infinitely more dimensions to the human being than we are normally aware of? The Tree to which Asherah is connected is the Tree of Life,¹¹⁷ the same Tree which Beatrice sits under, now in full foliage. It appears in *Revelation 22:2* with its twelve kinds of fruit and leaves for the healing of nations. Most commentators I know of construe it as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but I see no reason, despite Dante's reference to Adam and the blossoming apple tree, to make that assumption. I believe it is the Tree of Life since this is a place of healing. Beatrice's close connection with it here in the Earthly Paradise is hugely significant. Baring's and Cashford's insights are well worth quoting: -

*The Tree of Life was one of the primary images of the goddess herself, in whose immanent presence all pairs of opposites are reconciled. Growing on the surface of the earth, with roots below and branches above, the tree was the great pillar that united earth with heaven and the underworld, through which the energies of the cosmos poured continuously into earthly creation.*¹¹⁸

Sensitive souls, their hearts and minds open to the beauties and wonders of Creation, cannot help but respond with love and awe to the generosity and unconditional Love of the Earth for all its creatures, and the Tree is the supreme image of that Love. With its outstretched branches, its solid trunk, and roots extending deep into the mysterious underworld, it is an image of perfect receptivity and self-giving. As it receives nourishment from the four elements, earth, water, air and fire (sunlight) so does it give back in equal measure, observable in countless ways. It is also an image of human

¹¹⁶ *Purg.*, XXXII: 85-87.

¹¹⁷ Baring and Cashford, *op. cit.*, pp. 454-456.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

growth, the inner processes of self-transformation felt as organic, not mechanical. It is such a multivalent symbol that it appears in the literature and iconography of every religious and spiritual culture throughout the world.¹¹⁹ In *Proverbs* 3:18, Wisdom (Feminine) is a tree of life: -

*She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
Those who hold her fast are called happy.*

In the final Canto of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice utters an obscure prophesy. She says there will be a time 'in which five hundred, ten, and five shall be God's emissary, born to kill the giant/and the usurping whore with whom he sins' (lines 41-45). But who is this emissary (Christ, perhaps?) and what is the meaning of the numbers? She speaks in riddles and Dante is puzzled. He is equally puzzled by the Tree's great height and its inverted appearance towards the top (lines 64-66). It is great because it spans the entire Cosmos and seems inverted towards the top because 'the more it rose, the wider spread its boughs.'¹²⁰ In other words, as it grows it embraces all of Life. Beatrice's response to his puzzlement is of the order of 'wait and see'. What he cannot understand right now he will. I think a clue to this conundrum lies in the profound *metanoia* the Pilgrim is undergoing. Beatrice's enigmatic comments imply that he must now forego the limited worldview which mere reason and logic ('that school which you have followed')¹²¹ can offer; it is no use him trying to make sense of what he sees and hears using those tools. He is entering a state of consciousness in which the familiar is radically de-familiarised; he will see reality in a much more revealing light.

Daniela Boccassini offers a penetrating glimpse into this process of *metanoia* as it unfolds in the Earthly Paradise sequence. She marks as crucial Dante's brief reference to the mythological story of Argus and the Syrix as he attempts to describe the quality of the 'sleep' he falls into.¹²² The hundred-eyed giant Argus, who was given the task by Hera of guarding the priestess Io from the lustful attentions of Zeus, was lulled to sleep on Zeus's behalf by Mercury. He did this by telling the tale of Pan and Syrix and playing the soporific music of the pan pipes (syrinx). Once asleep, Mercury then killed the giant. For Boccassini, Argus 'symbolises the limitations of human reason in its heedless reliance on outer appearances'.¹²³ We could interpret this as Mankind's intellectual curiosity about the world around him, which leads him to seek truth in the multitudinous things apprehended by the senses, an enterprise called science. But commendable though it is, it does not yield the kind of self-knowledge that leads to

¹¹⁹ See Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1992) for a full discussion.

¹²⁰ *Purg.*, XXXII: 42.

¹²¹ *Purg.*, XXXIII: 86.

¹²² *Purg.*, XXXII: 64-69.

¹²³ Boccassini, *op. cit.* p. 83.

genuine transformation of the human being. For the inner eye to open to the much more subtle realm of the *mundus imaginalis*, the busy, enquiring, analytical mind with its riot of sense impressions and whirlpool of thoughts must be stilled. Argus must be put to sleep so that he can be put to death.

The Pilgrim's sleep in Canto XXXII, which he is lulled into by unearthly music is an *initiatory* sleep, a death followed by a *resurrection* when he awakes. It is death to his old (egotistical) self and rebirth to the new. At this point, led by the seven nymphs, the companions stop before a spring from which two rivers flow: Lethe and Eunoe. At Beatrice's command, Matelda escorts Statius and the Pilgrim to Eunoe, the river of the remembrance of the Good, to drink of its waters. It was not enough that he drinks of the waters of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of sin; his consciousness must now rise to a level that it sees only the Good in everything.

Boccassini tells us that the name *Eunoe* is of Dante's own coinage.¹²⁴ It combines the Greek words *eu* meaning 'good' and *nous*, meaning 'mind'. The Platonic *nous* is mind in a very specific sense: it is the Divine Mind, or Universal Consciousness, the vast, unimaginable 'ocean' of God Consciousness which Dante taps into on savouring 'that sweet draught', the waters of Eunoe. The memory of the Good is not Dante's own personal memory of the good things *he* has done (this would be egotistic), but the universal goodness of God's boundless Love for all Creation. Feeling reborn, like the Tree that miraculously bursts in to leaf and blossom at the griffin's touch, he is 'eager to rise, now ready for the stars.'

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.86-7.

Conclusion

What we have touched upon here is but a glimpse through a narrow chink in Dante's wonderfully rich and complex poem. We could devote a whole lifetime exploring its beauties and profundities, deepening our insights, and revising our interpretations, yet there would still be more to discover. And what we discover may be dimensions of ourselves and Reality we never knew existed. Such is its value for us today.

We have looked briefly at the subject of Love and the ways in which our modern secular understandings differ from those of Dante and his contemporaries. Secular notions of Love see it as a purely human phenomenon, a matter of personal feelings or emotions. We stand a better chance of surviving as a species if we are kind, generous and caring towards each other than if we all behave like brutes. But, as I have tried to show, for Dante and his world, Love is infinitely more expansive than this; it is the very energy, the very power, that brings life and the Universe into being. It impels a response which takes the form of an intense yearning to reunite with that Love. This may happen once we begin to sense (often at a time of crisis) that something immensely important is lacking in our present lifestyle, something without which our lives feel incomplete. Yet what that 'something' is eludes us. Dante is one of those rare individuals who truly know what it is and so can guide us to that knowledge, provided we make the effort to engage with the complex metaphoric, symbolic and mythic language of his poetry with imagination and in the right spirit.

Monotheistic mysticism affirms that all living creatures participate in God's Love, but we human beings are unique in that latent in every one of us is a special organ of vision, which once awakened, can radically transform the quality of our lives and relationships. Dante called it, variously, *mente*, *intelletta* and *imaginativa*. This awakening is what happens to Dante's Pilgrim in the mystical Earthly Paradise. What it reveals to him is an order of Reality that lies far beyond that of ordinary sensory experience, ineffable, unimaginably luminous, yet which is the very Ground of the familiar sensory world as we perceive it in all its shape, colour, sound, fragrance, diversity, form and solidity. It is the *Splendor* of Dante's vision, seen in, and finally beyond, the eyes of the woman he loves.

For it was his love for Bice Portinari, the Florentine girl of refined grace and beauty, which impelled Dante towards God, the Source of all Love. We have looked briefly at Dante's autobiographical *Vita Nuova* in which he charts the psychological and emotional effects that his love for Beatrice had on him, especially when faced with her untimely death. Written after the event, Dante portrays Beatrice as a type of female Christ, which role she assumes in the *Commedia*. He takes earnestly to philosophy. He

writes his unfinished philosophical treatise, *Convivio*, an important source for our understanding of many aspects of the future *Commedia*. We touched upon this and upon what philosophy meant in those times, that it cannot be divorced from a cultivation of the virtues. Dante follows Boethius and the Wisdom Books of the Bible in characterising Wisdom as feminine, and it is a role Beatrice takes on as his guide to the Empyrean, the Ultimate Divine Mystery.

I have argued that the Earthly Paradise symbolises a transitional state in which the true *metanoia*, or transfiguration of the human person takes place. Boccassini invokes Jung who, she says, ‘argued for the urgency of returning, individually and collectively, to the earth as the feminine principle we are all rooted into, regardless of our gender identity.’¹²⁵ Matelda is a wonderful image of femininity linked to the Earth and Nature in their pristine loveliness. We may recapture some of that wonder in walks through beautiful woodlands and countryside, when we feel most intimately connected to Mother Nature. It is Matelda who guides souls through the purifying waters of Lethe and Eunoe (contrast Charon in *Inf.* III). In the same spirit I characterised Beatrice seated on the roots of the Sacred Tree as an image of Asherah, the Canaanite Mother Goddess, giver of Life, Healing and Wholeness.

In my Introduction I alluded to the sickness of our world and its need for healing at the deepest level. I argued that part of this sickness is due to a spiritual and psychological imbalance of the masculine and feminine qualities (we could say, between head and heart) which has taken hold in the mental outlook of modern Man. Almost unrecognised because so deeply embedded in our psyche is an assumption that what the five senses reveal, either nakedly or through the aid of scientific instruments, is the extent of reality. In stark contrast to Dante’s knowing of the heart, our prevailing (masculine) worldview is scientific and materialist; and whilst science has undoubtedly conferred on us enormous benefits it has left us with a bleak vision of a universe void of anything we might call spiritual and loving; no angels and celestial guides inhabit its lonely, alien, empty expanses. Cold materialism is the metaphysical sickness of our age. Yet it is the unquestioned paradigm that the popular media insinuates daily into the public mind, consciously or otherwise. It rests on the assumption that a truth claim can only be valid if subject to rigorous empirical evidence. Yet what we regard as valid evidence depends on the prior state of our inner being or consciousness. How we perceive things is crucially dependent on how free we are from illusion and self-deception, as I argued in my discussion of the three forests in the *Commedia*. It is to this we must attend if we are to contribute towards a world in which love, truth, justice, peace, mercy, empathy, and compassion are our guiding principles.

¹²⁵ “Earthly Paradise: Dante’s Initiatory Rite of Passage” in *Temenos Academy Review* 21 (2018), op. cit. p.74.

Bringing Love into this bewilderingly complex world is challenging. It demands courage and commitment, as the *Commedia* testifies. That we so often fail in loving as we should be loving is obvious given the dire state of the world and what we are doing to our planet and to one another. We are not at the centre of Love's circle. Over the centuries we have exchanged feminine wisdom for masculine cleverness (perhaps this is the real gist of Beatrice's complaint). The Hundred-eyed giant Argus is far from dead. The amount of *empirical* information we have accumulated about this and that is staggering. Yet we are only just awakening to the realisation that our knowledge of ourselves and our true relationships with one another and the Cosmos has trailed far behind, and that our prevailing extraverted masculine worldview is seriously unbalanced. What we really need is to recover the kind of healing vision that Dante has given us. It is healing because it is holistic. It is a vision of a world populated with humans and all creatures, angels and spirits forming a vast web of interrelationships and community bound together by a single, Divine Principle. Nothing is excluded because there is nothing outside of God. The *Commedia* is a story about relationships and community and how, by growing in Wisdom and Love we may connect with each other at the profoundest and most universal level.

Dante encourages us to trust the promptings of our hearts, and not be afraid of where they might lead. Christianity has for centuries repressed the Feminine and feared the erotic, but surely, nothing can be more life affirming and expressive of the Divine Love than when two lovers unite in a procreative embrace, in a grace-filled act of mutual self-giving (*kenosis*). For Dante, as we know, it all begins with him falling in love with a young Florentine girl. Intimate and deeply felt, such love is a seed implanted by God (to borrow Dante's own metaphor) that 'spontaneously sprouts in our soul and returns it to heaven, to the highest and most glorious Sower of seeds.'¹²⁶ Love cannot exist without relationship, and relationship demands embodiment, incarnation. We should therefore celebrate erotic or sexual love, for it is holy, even if frowned upon or grudgingly tolerated by misogynist churchmen of Dante's time and later.

But the fact that Dante's love for Beatrice was probably celibate makes no difference. The real encounter is in the imaginal. His was a Love which in its intensity culminated in a mystical vision of God, the Source of all Love, and the inspiration for his remarkable poem. Towards the end St. Bernard, whose magnificent commentaries on the *Song of Songs* gave birth to the monastic love mysticism of the Cistercian Order, replaces Beatrice as his guide, preserving the male-female balance; but the *Commedia's* culminating vision transcends all duality. It is a vision which compels him to say,

¹²⁶ *Conv.*, IV: xxiii p. 323.

*like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and desire impelled
By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.*¹²⁷

His will and desire are in perfect balance because they are God's will and desire. In the words of Mark Vernon, 'Our life and God's life are one life.'¹²⁸ This is precisely the insight which Dante's remarkable Vision points us towards, and it is accessible to us all. Herein is a message of hope and reassurance we so desperately need today.

@ 20,080 words.

¹²⁷ *Para.*, XXXIII: 142-144.

¹²⁸ Mark Vernon, *Dante's Divine Comedy: A Guide for the Spiritual Journey* (Brooklyn NY: Angelico Press, 2021), p.440.

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