



DANIELA BOCCASSINI

EARTHLY PARADISE
Dante's Initiatory Rite of Passage*

Assessing our Reading Consciousness

The virtue of the soul is Gnosis. For he who knows, he good and pious is, and still while on earth, divine For Gnosis is the end of science, and science is God's gift. (*Corpus Hermeticum* X.9, tr. G.R.S. Mead)

Which Dante have we been listening to, or looking for, in the course of our reading of his works, at times one suddenly wonders. Collectively and individually we behold as we believe, while lacking a clear sense of how exactly it is that our believing affects the beholding. We are all familiar with Dante the faithful lover and outstanding poet; slightly less, perhaps, with Dante the insightful philosopher, adept astronomer, skillful numerologist or ingenious theologian; even fewer of us dare venture along far less beaten tracks, searching for Dante the covert prophet, the clandestine magus, the disguised Templar, the hidden Cathar *perfectus*. Needless to say, these last hypotheses have all too often been dismissed by mainstream academia, with the unfortunate result that for too long only hyper-specialized investigators of arcane disciplines on the one hand, or a lay public avid for mystery lore on the other, have sought in alternative areas of inquiry possible answers to the riddles one is sooner or later bound to discover within the recesses of Dante's writings. Dante himself indicated the presence of subtler dimensions in his poem by famously stating, while recollecting the moment when Virgil shielded him from the danger that the ghastly sight of the Gorgon might turn him into stone: «O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, | mirate la dottrina che s'asconde | sotto il velame de li versi strani» (*If* 9.61-3).¹ The exhortation is there, quite plain to read, yet to this day there is no agreement as to its exact meaning, let alone its implications.

If we narrow our focus to the Earthly Paradise sequence, the highly complex issue of Dante's reception becomes even more problematic than it is with regard to the *Commedia* as a whole. Over the centuries, few readers have found this pageantry to their liking; yet these last cantos of *Purgatorio* cannot possibly be ignored, for Dante purposefully inscribed

* This essay is based on a lecture presented at the study day *Dante's Visionary Consciousness*, held by the Temenos Academy at the Art Workers' Guild, London, on 29 April 2017.

1 The following abbreviations will be used for the works of Dante that are cited: *Cv*: *Convivio*, *If*: *Inferno*, *Pg*: *Purgatorio*, *Pd*: *Paradiso*, *Vn*: *Vita Nuova*. I wish to thank John Carey for his help and patience through the process of revision of this text.



within them two major occurrences that are integral to the main narrative. Whether we like it or not, Virgil's silent exit and Beatrice's grand entry are inextricably bound to what may appear at first glance to be an indigestible sequence of enigmatic, unwieldy visions, morose recriminations and obscure prophecies. Almost invariably understood as an 'allegorical' tour-de-force that proves, at best, Dante's unbridled, yet hardly 'modern', poetic inventiveness, the series of uncanny events taking place in the garden of Eden exceeds by far the taste for fantasy of the scientist, baffles the well-meaning dispositions of the religiously-oriented reader, bewilders the common sense of all positivist historians, and leaves any reader in quest of Dante's poetic brilliance utterly spaced out.

In essence, either we charge Dante with having failed, poetically and theologically speaking, with this cumbersome *inventio*, or we are bound to admit that something is at work in these cantos which we may lack the skills to cope with, so long as we read them through our traditional and/or modernist lenses, our customary hermeneutic paradigms. What exactly this something may be has been, and still is, debated. Let us see whether – by simply trusting that if Dante went to the lengths of devising this complex choreography and setting it in a primeval natural context he probably meant to both hide and display something of consequence – we can catch enough of a thread to further our current understanding of these *versi* more *strani* than most within the poem.

With regard to understanding, it may be helpful to review Dante's long-standing convictions on the subject, by rereading some of his most celebrated, and possibly most misunderstood, words on the matter:

Si come dice lo Filosofo nel principio de la Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere. La ragione di che puote essere, ed è, che ciascuna cosa, da providenza di propria natura impinta, è inclinabile a la sua propria perfezione; onde, acciò che la scienza è ultima perfezione de la nostra anima, ne la quale sta la nostra ultima felicitade, tutti naturalmente al suo desiderio semo subietti. (Cv I.1.1)

The Aristotelian quote «tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere» provides the grand, confident opening of the *Convivio*, immediately followed by a major *caveat*. This universal longing, Dante argues, may come to fruition only for those who willingly subject themselves to an arduous process of inner training, paramount to a *perfecting* of their inborn potential for «la scienza» – an understanding which, we ought to notice, Dante evokes in its absolute, intransitive terms. As such, «la scienza» is neither technical knowledge in the modern sense (τέχνη, *technē*), nor quantitative processing of sense-based notions (εἶδε, *eide*), nor encyclopedic proficiency (δόξα, *doxa*): all meanings we might be tempted to project onto the word on the basis of our current understanding of it. Rather, «la scienza» according to Dante (and to Aristotle) is a quality of inner vision, the *in-sight* capable of offering its adept the primary ground of understanding necessary to achieve the miraculous «ultima perfezione de la nostra anima, ne la quale sta la nostra ultima felicitade». In other words, «la scienza» is ἐπιστήμη (*epistēmē*), rooted in γνῶσις (*gnōsis*): a knowing that originates in, and returns to, ultimate Mind or meta-consciousness, the very subject of *Prima Philosophia* in any tradition that upholds one.² To reach such a pinnacle of comprehension, such a state of enlightenment,

2 Dante's way of referring to Aristotle's views here obviously clashes with our conventional understanding of Aristotelianism – within which Dante's Aristotelianism typically gets subsumed,

as Dante argues in the opening pages of the *Convivio*, always entails the ability to intuit «la vera intenzione» underpinning «la litterale historia ragionata» of any and all *poietic* artifacts:

E con ciò sia cosa che la vera intenzione mia fosse altra che quella che di fuori mostrano le canzoni predette, per allegorica esposizione quelle intendo mostrare, appresso la litterale istoria ragionata; sì che l'una ragione e l'altra darà sapore a coloro che a questa cena sono convitati. (*Cv* I.1.18)

Whether poem, animated existence, or inner experience, beyond the outward appearance of any and all manifestations of being there always lies in silent hiding the truthful (yet unperceived because still unconscious, we might say) «intenzione» or «sentenza», waiting to be uncovered, to be brought into awareness. Only the coming together, within the reader's mind, of a text's outer wording and inner intention «darà sapore», will make truly sapid, the feast of learning, of insightful reading, to which Dante is summoning the reader. As the title of the book already indicates (*convivio* = banquet), for Dante «sapore» and «sapere» are the two inseparable faces of one and the same noetic yearning.

So the question is: how can we learn to grow in insight, to see more expansively, and deeper? How can we unravel «la vera intenzione» subtly woven into «la litterale historia ragionata», so that both we and the story can be restored in meaning, so that «our patterns of thinking become vehicles of transformation» (Shaw 2007: 32), rather than of alienation? By way of «sottile ammaestramento», whispers Dante (*Cv* I.2.17). And what intervenes exactly, when that happens, when the «sottile ammaestramento» one has patiently, devotedly gathered over a lifetime's journey finally begins to come to fruition? Precisely these, I believe, are the issues Dante exhibits and conceals in the episode of the Earthly Paradise. And he does so in a much more embodied way than he ever did before. No wonder he left most of his other writings unfinished in order to follow a different path, to undertake a different journey (*If* 1.91) – a journey not to *knowledge* but to *knowing*, as a ghostly Virgil one day advised he did, onto the faint glow of a most lonely existential threshold.

For all our mastery of nature and technological achievements, we too, as twenty-first century readers, have become, as Dante was, stranded at the edge of a disquietingly obscure forest, in dire need of «sottile ammaestramento» – supposing, that is, that we still regard a growth in understanding as a plausible proposition to entertain. We are in need of inner knowing because the world is falling apart due to the fast-growing lack, among us, of that very «scienza», or «knowing of the heart», which Dante deemed indispensable for the attainment of both earthly and ultimate happiness. Unsurprisingly perhaps, our mainstream readings of the *Commedia* are based on the same intellectual premises that have steered us,

without considering that *our* understanding of Aristotle's philosophy may be the one in need of revision. Other readings of Aristotle's philosophy perfectly dovetail with Dante's views of it. Just one example worth pondering: «Following along the path suggested by Aristotelian dialectic, we can see that the eternally energized Divine Intellect and the dialectically perfected, *and thus noetically transformed*, mind of the true philosopher are identified as being essentially the same ... *In this new noetic light*, Aristotle's philosophy, and the Platonic tradition to which he belongs, would appear to be closer to the Eastern ways of thinking ... than to the narrowly defined "Western rationality", if by this expression is meant the kind of calculative and manipulative *ratio*, in the service of utilitarian, technological and ideological goals.» (Christos Evangelidou as quoted by Uždavinys 2014: 34-5; emphasis mine) See also *Pd* 5: 40-42.

century after century, into the thick of our global entanglement, imperceptibly pushing us over the edge of the increasingly hellish nightmare we live in. We need to awaken to the harsh truth that the intellectual premises of most of our conventional readings of Dante's works are about as useful today as our leaking pipelines, our fractured dams, our collapsing power plants, our imploding dreams of grandiosity. We keep handling these demonically dangerous tools, of course, in the hope of soon devising apt alternatives that may help us avert the impending disaster – or push us into it deeper, and faster. However that may be, one thing is certain: we and the world are in need of medicine, and a symbolically effective one at that. There is little doubt in my mind that Dante's words *are* medicine, and medicine of cosmic import. Yet in order for Dante's words to release their healing power, we must look for those who, like Dante's guides, may grant us the «sottile ammaestramento» necessary for us to learn how to restore our inborn potential for «la scienza», or gnosis.

Reading Masters

It is necessary, my son, for the listener to be in harmony of mind (συννοεῖν) and in harmony of spirit (σμπνέειν) with the speaker, and to have a sharper hearing than the speaker's voice. (*Corpus Hermeticum* X.17, tr. G.R.S. Mead)

Are there, among us, any *magistri* left, capable of imparting «sottile ammaestramento»?³ In Dantean terms, as they are mythopoetically expressed in the *Commedia*: is there someone whose spirit we can invoke, as Dante did with Virgil, so as to be taught the rudiments of «la scienza», the forgotten language of the heart – so as to be put onto the path leading to the unfolding of the knowing necessary for us to be re-admitted into the sacred space of primordial Oneness, that τέμενος (*temenos*) conventionally called the Earthly Paradise; and from there, possibly, onward to the stars?

The unique location and characteristics of the τέμενος into which Dante is introduced, along with Virgil and Statius, in order to conclude the earthly leg and begin the heavenly stretch of his journey, warrants a treatment of its own; one general observation must suffice for the present. Dante's decision to locate the Earthly Paradise on top of Mount Purgatory – a «striking innovation» (Armour 2000: 331) in its own right, within the framework of the *Commedia*'s singular geography of salvation – aims at highlighting the symbolic aspect, the underlying «vera intenzione» of this ex-centric garden of Eden, through and beyond

³ *Magister*, literally 'the greatest' among teachers (and the assonance with the word *magus* of Persian origin ought not to be overlooked), is someone who knows the magic art of bringing the student in touch with the inward source of life, someone capable of teaching experientially, through the power of the heart-mind, so as to groom the student: to turn him or her, in due course, into an embodied sage, a prospective *magister*, or *magus*, in their own right. Virgil and Beatrice, of course, fulfill exactly that role for Dante. In this perspective, «sottile ammaestramento» is an initiatory manner of awakening human beings to the mandate of expressing the inborn potential, the genomic, or phylogenetic, *humanitas* that defines our species in relation to and interdependence with the rest of the living cosmos. For compelling views of the *magister* in this Hermetic perspective see Kingsley 2000 and Shaw 2007. For our collective failure in this regard see my Introduction to this volume.



the mythopoetic «literale historia ragionata» of the poem as a whole.⁴ Dante's «vera intenzione» can be summarized thus: the process meant to enable the soul to «spogliar[s]i lo scoglio | ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto» (*Pg* 2.122-3) leads first to a reunion of the human being with nature in its pristine aliveness, to the recovery of our innate sense of homecoming in a divinely animated cosmos.⁵ In other words: there is no access to heaven for the human being unless an intimate communion with the sacredness of ζωη (*zoe*) as the supreme, feminine face of God is realized. Only the recovery of this sanctified, deeply erotic and at the same time utterly noetic worldview can provide the necessary foundations for the wayfarer to move on to subtler teachings that will progressively unveil the ultimate secret of our mysteriously embodied universe: «l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle» (*Pd* 33:145), the one divine energy pervading and sustaining everything that exists.

In what follows I would like briefly to outline four «ammaestramenti» and the way in which they are foundational, in my view, to our understanding of both Dante's Earthly Paradise and «la scienza», the language of the heart underpinning Dante's singular poetics. These clues, or keys, all come from individuals who, in their work, highlighted the vital importance of attuning oneself to the symbolic, archetypal, anagogic resonances implicated in texts, situations, and phenomena whose peculiar characteristic is that of calling us to the recognition or re-membering precisely of their elusive, yet plain, «vera intenzione». Developing the ability of attuning our inner senses to the sound of this silent music, says Dante at the very end of the second canticle, is the 'grounding' necessary for journeying to the stars.

Henry Corbin and Narrative as Philosophical Initiation

In the early 1950s, on the occasion of the millennial anniversary of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), Henry Corbin chose to edit, translate and study in depth the philosopher's largely forgotten visionary recitals.⁶ In so doing Corbin was deliberately looking for the specific *modus essendi*, the peculiar stance, underpinning Avicenna's *modus intelligendi*, out of which his imposing cosmological order had sprung. Corbin meant to retrace the inner motivations of Ibn Sīnā's work, his specific *imago mundi*, the cosmogonic myth underpinning the conscious articulation of his philosophical writings. In so doing, Corbin reached the conclusion, which became foundational to his own worldview, that Avicenna's short narratives all enact one and the same gnostic scenario: namely, the conscious awakening of the soul to its state of existential exile and matching thirst for reintegration, which in turn provokes the opening of an intermediate space Corbin famously

4 See in this respect Dronke 1970, and Scafi 2007 for a comparative perspective.

5 Joseph Campbell has highlighted the intimate nature of the medieval paradise, once its innermost character is revealed: «It is actually everywhere and nowhere, the Earthly Paradise, that place – or rather, that condition of the experienced world – where the transcendent radiance of that which is beyond form is made visible through, and from within, the forms of all things. This is not a revelation for which one has to wait until the end of time.» (2015:19) This is exactly what Beatrice unveils to Dante in *Pd* 1.103 ff., upon their leaving the Garden of Eden in order to begin their journey through the spheres.

6 Originally published in 1952 and 1954 in Iran, Corbin's translations and commentary became known to a wider public through the abridged 1979 edition by Berg International. The most recent edition (1999) includes both Avicenna's original Persian text and the totality of Corbin's translations and introductory essay.



called *mundus imaginalis*. It is in that space that figures, events and landscapes of a numinous nature act as altogether personal symbols, felicitously capable of propitiating and furthering the journey of inner transformation, the reunion of the soul with its connatural Beloved.⁷

There is of course quite a bit more, in Dante's cosmology, that mirrors Avicenna's gnostic journey of return to wholeness as Corbin outlines it. The truly uncanny element, though, is the fact that in Dante's case exile is not 'just' a psychic, symbolic dimension, let alone a clever mythopoetic invention – but is rather *the* shattering, unwelcome existential event that painfully bends into shape the second half of his earthly existence. As readers we are therefore called to gauge the momentousness of the conscious overlapping of the existential and the archetypal in what became Dante's *imaginal* experience of exile in the *Commedia*.⁸

Hence, by plunging into the writing of the *Commedia*, by forgoing philosophy in favor of dramaturgy, Dante recovered and strengthened active imagination or *imaginatio vera*, a specific mode of perception which he had already practiced in the *Vita nuova*, thereby entering the imaginal, a dimension of existence that only the active imagination can apprehend.⁹ But now, we see Dante masterfully expand his ability to abide in the imaginal as the intermediate, symbolic space between the unfathomable abyss of archetypal essentiality and the potential meaninglessness of factual transience. A more mature Dante now fearlessly engages in a process of what Corbin has called 'exegesis of the soul'. In this perspective, the sequence of the Earthly Paradise is the 'imaginal' locus within the *Commedia* wherein Dante is shown, and *inwardly perceives* for the first time, the vast archetypal canvas where his own earthly journey comes into contact with the transpersonal forces at play in the universe. As Beatrice makes abundantly clear in her rebuke of Dante the wayfarer, our fall into the ego-centered apprehension of earthly existence

7 «The event of the vision thus occurs in synchronism with a degree of individuation that declares itself under a twofold aspect: the awakening of consciousness to the soul's condition as a stranger and, in the emergence to itself, the meeting with him who shows its way, its Guide, its *Nous*.» (Corbin 1960: 23-4; 1999: 36)

8 Few are in fact the exiles, whether in Dante's times or our own, who succeed in making sense of their traumatic life events in the way Dante did. To do so, one needs to learn how to embrace one's misfortunes rather than resist them, how to decipher them as stages in a transhuman journey, how to regard them as facets of an unrelenting, and unceasing, process of rectification, as uniquely appropriate tools for remembering and reclaiming one's innermost, utterly forgotten yet still accessible, more-than-human identity. In order to do this, one needs to learn how to see one's life as a terrain, wherein forces more powerful than our conscious, rational awareness are at work. In Corbin's words: «All this proclaims the culminating point of a spiritual experience in which the soul attains not only to consciousness and realization of *itself*, but is set in the presence of the Self which it addresses and to which it can give many names. And this is an initiation that can be given and relayed only in symbols. It is not a *story* that happened to others, but the soul's own story, its "spiritual romance", if one will, but personally lived: the soul can tell it only in the first person, "re-cite" it.» (Corbin 1999: 48; 1960 translation, modified: 33)

9 «Thus is constructed this intermediary world, a world of archetypal celestial figures (not to be confused with Plato's world of Ideas-Archetypes) which the Active Imagination alone is able to apprehend. This imagination does not *construct* something unreal, but *unveils* the hidden reality [...] and the property of this Image will be precisely that of effecting the transmutation of sensory data, their resolution into the purity of the subtle world, in order to restore them as symbols to be deciphered, the "key" being imprinted in the soul itself.» (Corbin 1999: 39; 1960: 11-12; I have reinstated Corbin's original parenthesis omitted in the English translation)

occurs when we become unconsciously subservient to «*imagini di ben [...] false*» (Pg 29: 131), when we grasp at the objects of our desire as if they were endowed with essence. Conversely, the restoration of our primordial awareness intervenes when the soul recovers the ability to interact with ‘true images of good’, images endowed with the power to fulfill their promises, that is to say able safely to escort the soul from its lapse into historical time back beyond time, to the fullness of its Pleromatic origin and true belonging.¹⁰ If the Garden of Eden is the place where, in the *Commedia*, Dante the wayfarer awakens to the experience of the imaginal – the intermediate realm where ‘true images of good’ may finally re-enter the field of human consciousness – it is because that consciousness has been transformed to the point of making such a re-entry possible. Hence, Earthly Paradise is not only the imaginal locus where Dante reunites with Beatrice; it is also, and as importantly, the imaginal locus where the wayfarer reunites with the Earth as Angel, that is to say with the created universe in its primordial aliveness, rather than the fallen, devilish counterpart of it he had to face and contend with until then.¹¹

Mircea Eliade and the Paradox of Hierophany

Among Corbin’s colleagues at the *École des Hautes Études*, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was the exiled Rumanian scholar and writer Mircea Eliade, whose essays on shamanism, yoga, and the history of religions were drawing the attention of the European academic world. One of Eliade’s most influential contributions to the history and phenomenology of the religious experience has been the distinction he established between what he called the Sacred and the Profane, along with the contention that the experience of the sacred is integral to, and distinctive of, human consciousness as such, so long as a specific ‘mode of being in the world’, one that senses the sacredness inherent to existence, can be retained, or reawakened, within the individual.¹² According to Eliade, *homo religiosus* is a being capable of intuiting life on and of the earth as a manifestation of the sacred – in Eliadean parlance, someone who can apprehend the world as a *hierophany*.¹³

10 I will not dwell here on the episode of Dante’s encounter with Beatrice and the attendant issue of ‘images of good’, as I have already done so in some detail in Boccassini 2013.

11 For the expression «*La Terre est un Ange*», see Corbin 1979: 31 ff.

12 Eliade only touched upon the question of the (re)awakening of the sacred within the secular contemporary world in the Preface to the French version of *The Sacred and the Profane*, dated October 1964; but this was, and still is, the issue at stake: «[D]ans quelle mesure le «profane» peut-il devenir, en lui-même, «sacré»: dans quelle mesure une existence radicalement sécularisée, sans Dieu ni dieux, est-elle susceptible de constituer le point de départ d’un nouveau type de “religion”. [...] En d’autres termes, la disparition des “religions” n’implique point la disparition de la “religiosité”; la sécularisation d’une valeur religieuse constitue simplement un phénomène religieux illustrant, en fin de compte, la loi de la transformation universelle des valeurs humaines.» (Eliade 1965: 12). The development of the ability to *see* the inborn sacredness of psyche, undergirding all of the revealed and/or institutionalized religions, was one of Jung’s central concerns; more generally, it was one of the principal concerns of the Eranos community animated by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn.

13 «It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing

While the sacred and the profane modes of existence were, in archaic societies, integral to one another, Eliade highlights how the chasm now separating them is the result of that process of desacralization of the world which has characterized historical modernity. Not only does «desacralization pervade the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies»; even more alarmingly, today's nonreligious humanity seems unable to recognize – hence unwilling to acknowledge, let alone understand or relate to – «hierophany as the distinctive feature of peoples belonging to any archaic society», or indeed of «a peasant of Christian Europe». (Eliade 1959a: 14)

The paradox of hierophany, then, consists in the perception of the hidden sacredness of the world, in the realization that an object becomes something other than itself, while at the same time remaining itself. It is the 'inner' or subtle dimension of things that the 'religious' consciousness perceives, and it is that very 'inner' dimension of things that we fail even to notice every time we absent-mindedly cast a surface-oriented, profane if not profaning, gaze onto the world. Were we, as modern individuals and readers, able to recover for ourselves at least a shard of what Eliade calls the sacred experience of hierophany, were we to become witness to the experientially indisputable fact that human life also «shares in a trans-human life» (1959a: 167), then almost everything within Dante's allegedly 'literary' universe would naturally fall into place, and finally begin to make sense.

The *Vita nuova* in its entirety aims at conveying precisely the transmutative power that the experience of hierophany imparts to one's life, by addressing the miraculous, yet frightening, transition from the profane to the sacred mode of experiencing the world. Whether we wish to understand Beatrice as a Florentine young woman, as *Intellectus agens* in Aristotelian-emanationist terms, or as the visionary embodiment of some secretive 'sect' of Fedeli d'Amore is, in more than one way, immaterial: in any and all cases, Dante's focus rests solely on the challenges that consciousness faces once it comes into contact with the silent, elusive yet inescapable transpersonal dimension of existence. In the *Vita nuova*, Dante stages the way in which the sacred dimension suddenly manifests to him, and then equally suddenly fails him through Beatrice's inexplicable death. This experience of bereavement triggers in turn a loss of orientation, a sense of death-in-life, the impossible conflict between the inability to recreate the miracle of the sacred stance and a feeling of revulsion for everything that bears the mark of the now abhorred profane mode of existence. In the archaic perspective, there is only one way out of this tug-of-war, and that is the initiatory training that teaches one's incipient consciousness how to individuate fully by learning to abide in the sacred modality of existence, even while recognizing the ever-lurking profane one. Here I need to stress that the sacred approach to life does identify with established religious cults or spiritual traditions, but only tangentially: the experience of the sacred is, always and everywhere, the root cause of religion, not the other way around.

Eliade's outlining of these two alternate modes of being-in-the-world should help us see Dante's work not only through our accustomed profane, yet dogmatically Christian-tinged, lenses. In writing the *Commedia* Dante enacted the unfolding of an initiatory process leading the wayfarer not only to reunite with Beatrice in the Christian beyond, but to fly through the

distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety becomes a hierophany.» (Eliade 1959: 12)

expanse of the astronomical heavens into a bewildering vision of ultimate Reality. As Dante shows in the *Commedia*, for the psychophysical human compound to reach such a high level of visionary, prophetic subtlety a rigorous training of a transmutative nature is necessary. And here is where the initiatory value of the wayfarer's extraordinary transit through the Earthly Paradise should become fully apparent. According to Dante, it is not enough to travel through Hell and Purgatory in order to discard the profane view. By having his wayfarer cross the wall of fire and enter the Earthly Paradise as the crowning feat of those lengthy prefatory undertakings, Dante stresses the necessity of a full *regressus ad originem* as the only viable starting point for the most volatile, and truly transformative, final leg of the journey.

When Matelda states that Eden is the «luogo eletto | a l'umana natura per suo nido» (Pg 28.77-78),¹⁴ she means (if we pay full attention to the image being offered) that this is the centre wherefrom human beings were meant, like birds, to grow their wings, so as to become who they were truly meant to be in the first place: feathered creatures apt to soar. In other words, Dante's *regressus ad originem* has taken him to the place of divine making that, as we are beginning to sense, «distances itself from all earlier conceptions of such a paradise» (Dronke 1970: 469), a place where the sacred warp sustaining the fabric of nature as a whole is revealed. Precisely that same hierophany needs to occur in the wayfarer's own life, so that he may fully participate in «la scienza», the wholesome worldview that subtly binds the entire universe into one cosmos, one sacred book. We ought to note that the book of Genesis tells us very little about who Adam actually was before being cast out of humanity's original nest. On the other hand, the *Commedia* tells us quite a bit about who Dante becomes, while in Eden, through having been reintegrated into that very nest. Unsurprisingly perhaps, a complex ritual needs to take place in order for Dante to forget his fallen status, and recover the memory of his, and humanity's, pre-lapsarian identity.

Eliade's work also testifies to a major shift in our understanding of the hierophanic worldview, from 'primitive' to archaic; such a shift imbued the thought of many of the attendees of the Eranos encounters of those years, in which both Eliade and Corbin had become deeply involved. We owe it to the seeds planted at Eranos if in recent years shamanism and animism have been fully reintegrated as primary components of the human religious psyche. Possibly against their most ingrained Eurocentric biases, the Eranos participants came to recognize, and to acknowledge, some basic universal patterns of initiatory behaviour in sacredness, whether institutionalized in archaic rituals or as personal occurrences. At Eranos, historicity found itself intertwined with hermeneutics and phenomenology, individuality with individuation. This mingling of perspectives and traditions had also been Dante's, in his deeply unconventional rediscovery (through study and direct experience) of the archaic roots of the all-too-human yearning for Paradise. We should refrain from blithely normalizing Dante's enigmatic blend of ancient and Christian notions and telestic rituals: in his view, both were equally necessary tools for the recovery of the ἄνθρωπος τέλειος (*anthropos teleios*), the regenerated totality of human consciousness, the Christ as cosmic mirror. Our next teacher will help us further decipher the purpose of Dante's 'stop-over' in Eden during his journey to higher consciousness.

14 Figuratively set at the peak of the *axis mundi* Dante has been following since the beginning of his *katabasis* 'near Jerusalem', the Earthly Paradise manifests to the three marveling wayfarers (Dante, Virgil, Statius) not as death-bound βίος (*bios*), but rather as unconditionally divine ζωή (*zoe*) where budding «primavera» and its intended «frutto» (28.143) simultaneously *are*.

C. G. Jung, the Mystery of Individuation and the Feminine Unconscious

At the first of the Eranos gatherings, in 1933, Jung lectured on the empirical aspects of the process of individuation.¹⁵ As he hinted in this presentation and argued extensively elsewhere, Jung's long monitoring of the soul in its quest for wholeness finally came to fruition when he succeeded in unraveling the arcane, elusive symbolism of alchemy, the rejected counterpart of modern science (CW12: §40). Thanks to the experiential work he had done on himself in the years spanning the First World War, Jung had come to understand that the way to wholeness, to individuation – if any – demands at the outset a grueling *descensus ad inferos*, which entails «the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness» (CW13: §335). I do not need to dwell on how graphically Dante describes this very process in the *Commedia*: from his descent through Hell, where the souls engulfed in darkness are the unconscious manifestations of their own and humanity's gigantic shadow, to his ascent of Purgatory, where Dante as a living being retains his shadow, while the souls, who have lost theirs, are engaged in the process of uncovering the hidden identity of their translucent celestial nature, which fully manifests as spirit in Paradise.

As we can now better gauge thanks to the *Red Book*, «the way of what is to come» had exacted of Jung a humbling return to the soul, newly understood as «a living and self-existing being [...] something far-off and unknown, which did not exist through me, but through whom I existed» (RB: *Liber primus* ch. 1, 232). In other words, while reaffirming the vital role played by the individual in countering the general disquiet and the destructive drives rampant in our societies, dominated by increasingly tyrannical expressions of our misguided willpower (CW9.1: §618), Jung simultaneously argued for the urgency of returning, individually and collectively, to the earth as the feminine principle we are all rooted in, regardless of our gender identity. At a cosmic level, Nature is the manifestation of the archetypal motherland we all have become dangerously disconnected from: «the collective unconscious, which is the same for everyone» (§543).

Jung went as far as claiming that «the unconscious is the mother of consciousness» (§501; see also CW13: §40). How are we to understand this statement? From the remotest times, the Motherland – or the Realm of the Mothers, as Goethe would have said – is both Nature and the Beyond that summons those unable to content themselves with the Fatherland, with the urban realm of the ego-centered consciousness that seals us within the walls of our patriarchally-oriented, technologically-propelled, societies. Jung had come to understand that the *descensus ad inferos* is in fact a dangerous, unavoidable *via sancta* to the feminine as Beyond. Textual evidence shows that Jung saw a deep connection between the process of individuation as modern *descensus ad inferos*, the medieval alchemical process of transmutation, and the initiatory rituals of the ancient mysteries, which involved «setting foot on Persephone's threshold», as Lucius states in a crucial passage of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, quoted by Jung in the concluding paragraphs of his 1933 lecture on individuation (CW9.1: §619). Journeying through the Beyond, in other words, restores the elect to a realm where the feminine is sovereign, and *naturally* so.

Only those endowed with *πίστις* (*pistis*), argues Jung, will reach the happy end of their toils.

15 Translated into English as «A Study in the Process of Individuation», the Eranos lecture was revised in 1950 for inclusion in *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (CW9.1). For convenience I cite this later version, not the original 1933 Eranos proceedings.

What ought we to make of πίστις, then? Far from being ‘blind faith’, πίστις is innate confidence, a moral faculty feeding those «primordial psychic experiences» that, according to Jung, should be erected in one’s life as the cornerstones of true faith, or unwavering inner knowing (*ibidem*).¹⁶ In 1970 Marie-Louise von Franz, in her study of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (a study whose subtitle, significantly, is «the liberation of the feminine in man») expanded on this overlooked, yet foundational, notion, which sustains the vast architecture of Jung’s worldview – up to his famous, sibylline «I don’t believe, *I know*.» Πίστις is «inner vision» through the unconscious, that is to say «loyalty to the inner law». Von Franz continues: «When this loyalty or feeling constellates, it calls forth the secret order which is in the chaos of the unconscious.» (1992: 118) Precisely *pistis*, inner vision through the unconscious, stands at the core of Dante’s love for Beatrice and represents the invisible cornerstone around which the entire edifice of the «poema sacro | al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra» (*Pd* 25:1-2) was painstakingly built.

Further, what is Dante’s *Commedia*, from an orthodox Christian perspective, if not the most unconventional of journeys through the Beyond? All the more unconventional, in fact, given that Dante’s Beyond is not just an extravagant admixture of Christian and pagan *loci*, both from a theological and a cosmological perspective. In an even more alarming way, it is an expanse of worlds the wayfarer is called to span in his progress to visionary and prophetic knowing, thanks to the watchful intervention of a cohort of feminine figures. Hence, to the keen eyes of those who «ben considera[no] sottilmente» (*Cv* II.13.18), Dante’s Beyond might well appear as the imaginal Realm of the Mothers, or of Gaia-Sophia, where Virgil, Statius, and St Bernard act as faithful masculine attendants to Mary, St Lucy and Beatrice. Nor should we discount Dante’s open devotion to the Muses, which far surpasses the established conventions of lay poetic practice («vostro sono», *Pg* 1.8), and recalls instead the ancient mystery traditions, where the Muses played the initiatory role of «awakening through music and the sciences, which they guarded, the desire for divine truths, calling to themselves, in the starry realms, the soul that had purified itself by following them.»¹⁷

More specifically with regard to the Earthly Paradise: lost to humanity because of Eve’s «ardimento» (*Pg* 29.24), it is now regained by Dante as *the* Land of the Sacred Feminine. The dream of Rachel and Leah came as a premonition of that land’s closeness, and indeed soon after the dream a young woman picking flowers appeared to outline the land’s divine characteristics. From across Lethe’s banks, Matelda’s enthralling presence at once awakens in the marveling wayfarer the memory of both Persephone and Aphrodite (*Pg* 28.49-51 and 64-66): not by chance, perhaps, the two archetypal goddesses of the Pythagorean paradise. A little later, Beatrice appears as the stewardess of this imaginal realm, the director of the complex choreography that unfolds around the Tree of Knowledge so that Dante can achieve his *metanoia*, assisted by Matelda and the cohort of the seven maids that surround the chariot.

16 See also *Psychology and Religion* (CW11: §10), where Jung defines *pistis* as «the loyalty, trust, and confidence toward a definitely experienced numinous effect and the subsequent alteration of consciousness».

17 Franz Cumont as quoted by Carcopino 1927: 143 n. 5. It is precisely within the precinct of the Earthly Paradise that Dante’s allegiance to the Muses as feminine initiatory figures is most overtly stated: «O sacrosante Vergini, se fami | freddi o vigilie mai per voi sofferesi, | cagion mi sprona ch’io mercé vi chiami | ... forti cose a pensar mettere in versi» (*Pg* 29.37-42). See Campbell 1968: 99-105 for a detailed, perceptive reading of a Mosaic worldview that Gaffuri, like Dante, inherited from ancient times, and Dronke 1986: 1-31, esp. 9-10, for the seriousness of Dante’s invocation.

Both the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio* attest to Dante's incipient devotion to the multiple ways in which the feminine can appear as hierophany, as sacred manifestation of true gnosis, as *sophia*. The sequence of the Earthly Paradise is the epitome of this view, according to which the masculine side of conscious awareness, the ego-centred side of our earthly identity, can transcend the «viltà» that ensnares it only by responding to the call of the transcendent feminine, by fully embracing, through the development of inner *pistis*, the unconscious repository of salvific gnosis and the realization of a true *hieros gamos*.

Dante and Jung could not have agreed more on the role played by the feminine in the unfolding of the process of individuation. They would have agreed too on the crucial role played by masculine discriminating consciousness, once it becomes able to move away from the shallow level of projections and mere fantasizing in which it is usually trapped (as is the case in the dream of the «femina balba») in order to be taught how to access the depths of anagogic symbolism. Earthly Paradise, then, becomes the imaginal τέμενος where “true images of good” finally manifest and become operative in the learning process. It is here that the human psychophysical compound approaches the moment when it can finally pass beyond the human level («transumanar», *Pd* 1.70) and blend, or grow, into its subtler counterpart – the star or «astrum in homine, coeleste sive supracoeleste corpus», in alchemical parlance (CW12: §394) – thereby acquiring the wings necessary to travel “homeward bound”, through the celestial starry heavens.

René and Isha Schwaller: 'La symbolique' and the Intelligence of the Heart

From 1936 to 1952 Isha and René Schwaller lived and worked in Egypt, intent on deciphering, each in their own way, the *symbolique* they both saw as inherent in the ancient pharaonic understanding of land, king and temple as expressions of one and the same principle: the Christic/Horian embodiment, and epiphany, of the divine in the human. Immersed in their solitary work and counting on the help of just a handful of like-minded people, the Schwallers soon found themselves under attack from the official representatives of Egyptology, due to their unconventional method which, in essence, not only regarded the entire ancient Egyptian worldview or *mentalité* as inherently hieratic and symbolic, but recognized in that worldview the roots of the Hermetic-Pythagorean and alchemical gnosis which was to trickle into both the Western and the Eastern worlds, shaping their dovetailing esoteric traditions. Since the publication of their controversial, and largely ignored, body of work, many of the Schwallers' views have been, and are being, confirmed and expanded.¹⁸ Today, the affinities between the epistemology of the Schwallers, and the ideas of Corbin, Eliade, and Jung are much plainer to see than they were at the time of their simultaneous unfolding; the larger cultural implications of such affinities, as well as divergences, remain virtually unaddressed.¹⁹

18 See Kingsley 1994 and 2010. Kingsley does not, however, seem aware of, or in any case never references, the Schwallers' work.

19 A notable exception is the work done by Christopher Bamford and Robert Lawlor in their respective introductions to the English translations of René Schwaller's principal works, as well as Aaron Cheak's remarkable body of research and analysis. Isha Schwaller's writings, for their part, remain regrettably confined to the dubious limbo of discredited esotericism, and even the upholders of René's work have done virtually nothing to vindicate Isha's, whose dialogical format baffles the academic mindset.

According to the Schwallers, whereas the syllogistic form of reasoning – eminently cerebral and connected to the linear form of phonetic writing that ultimately prevailed in the Mediterranean world – is quantitative and discriminating (δια-βάλλω *dia-ballo*), the symbolic language – intrinsic to the hieroglyphic writing and to the *mentalité* it intended to foster – is qualitative in nature and as such intrinsically unitive (συμ-βάλλω *sym-ballo*); each one of these forms of written expression, the phonetic and the hieroglyphic, is the soil in which a specific mode of thinking, hence mode of being, is embedded.²⁰

It follows that in order to break the material circle that confines our human understanding of the universe, and encrusts our mind with its calcified residues, we have to stop relying on dialectical, inferential and quantitative reasoning as our sole source of knowledge (cf. *Pg* 33.67-68). We have to become aware of, and draw on, a form of Intelligence that is innate to us but which requires, the Schwallers argue, «entendement», sympathetic understanding. In this way, pre-rational intelligence can rise to our consciousness as Intuition. This higher state of awareness is rooted in what the Schwallers call «the sense of synthesis», the common sense pertaining to a subtler, qualitative way of knowing, of *resonating* with the entirety of the living, animated world. According to the Schwallers' findings, the Egyptians called this sympathetic understanding «the Intelligence of the Heart».²¹

Dante's view of «la scienza» as an intuitive, inborn faculty of higher knowing is the counterpart to the Schwallers' «entendement». He too understood it as «the Intelligence of the Heart», a faculty of perception qualitatively different from the brain-based argumentative one. To become aware of a state of being that the rational mind, the linear mode of thinking is unable to encompass is in a nutshell what characterizes Dante's experience in the Garden of Eden, which begins with the arousal of a state of wonder at the sight of the divine forest and Matelda (*Pg* 28.39), and ends on the image of the bedazzlement of Dante's petrified mind, a mind limescaled by a continuous flood of argumentative «pensier vani», that have been obstructing what would otherwise be the natural flow, within Dante's inborn mind, of Beatrice's naked words (*Pg* 33.67-78). It is at a different level of knowing that Dante is called to function, now that he has entered the Earthly Paradise, the primordial Temple (see *Pg* 33.31-33). Therein, Beatrice intimates, the non-discursive mind finally becomes attuned to the 'true images of good', and hence ready to perceive their cosmic radiance, to resonate with their vibration.

The whole Earthly Paradise sequence – which Peter Dronke has rightly understood as being poetically underpinned by *collatio occulta* (1981: 115; 1986: 81) – does indeed call for a symbolic reading, over and beyond the sanctioned allegorical interpretations to which we are accustomed. So now let us see more in detail where a symbolic reading of this

20 In René's words: «Le symbolisme est le seul, et merveilleux, moyen qui permet à l'homme de briser le cercle matériel qui limite son intelligence de l'Univers et lui permet d'envisager un plus haut et plus large état de Conscience.» (1963: 40) And in Isha's: «Les anciens Egyptiens ont exclu toute définition rationnelle à cause de l'impossibilité de fixer quoi que ce soit dans l'évolution constante de la genèse cosmique. Tout ce qui fait partie de l'Univers perceptible ne peut être défini que par la transparence d'une image symbolique qui laisse percevoir le jeu mouvant de ses rapports vitaux avec sa cause. C'est pourquoi l'écriture égyptienne est composée de symboles inscrits dans la Nature.» (1980: 360)

21 And René Schwaller added, perceptively: «et c'est parce qu'ils fondaient la Connaissance et toute leur science sur cette faculté divine en l'homme, qu'ils ont pu être plus positifs que nous le sommes, parce qu'ils ont su voir et ne s'exprimer, même par l'écriture, que par symboles.» (1963: 59) See also McGilchrist 2009 and my further references to this subject in the Introduction to the book.

episode may take us. In what follows, I will be making liberal use of the ancient hermeneutic tools that Corbin, Eliade, Jung and the Schwallers carefully refashioned through their works for the benefit of us modern readers.

Dante's Earthly Paradise: An Initiatory Dr(e)amaturgy

Plunge into this bowl, if you can, having faith (ἡ πιστεῦσαι) that you will rise to him that sent down the bowl, realizing (ἡ γνωρίζουσαι) why you came into being. (*Corpus Hermeticum* IV.4; transl. G.R.S. Mead)

There is no doubt that the enigmatic pageantry masterfully staged by Beatrice for the benefit of her devotee is intended to awaken in Dante as beholder a sense of awe: that is to say, it aims at arousing in him the overwhelming emotional, pre-rational awareness of being in the presence of something that far surpasses anything our analytical mind is able to grasp and account for. As the complex phantasmagoria staged in these cantos intends to suggest, human argumentative logic fails to grasp the meaning that symbolic «*imagini di ben [vere]*» convey by connecting non-verbally to the deeper layers of the psyche (*Pg* 32.103-05; 33.73-78). This is why Beatrice summons Dante merely to witness and faithfully record what he is being shown and told: this deference of the analytic to the synthetic, of the argumentative to the visionary represents the first step in the symbolic re-education of the mind, the re-awakening of Dante's, and the reader's, inborn noetic abilities.²²

And indeed, what unfolds through the events spanning the last seven cantos of *Purgatory* is nothing short of a new Genesis, the emergence of the new-old from the old-new. Let me briefly retrace the process. Having crossed the wall of fire and descried the wonders of prelapsarian nature (cantos 27 and 28), in canto 29 Dante is called to observe a long, eccentric procession escorting the chariot on which his Beloved is riding to meet him. Alive in a way that far surpasses ordinary human existence, the long-awaited Beatrice comes to Dante from the unknown of an otherworldly dimension. In order to reunite with her devotee, she appears to him preceded by many figures, possibly the symbolic embodiment of the sacred tradition of the Western world (Dronke 1981: 129). As for the cart pulled by the griffin: Dronke has insightfully suggested a connection with the Platonic image of the chariot, whereby Beatrice could be understood as Dante's immortal *daimon*, the transcendent companion of his embodied, hence still fettered, *anima* (1981: 133; 1986: 61).²³ But precisely because of all these reasons, in the seemingly apocalyptic, visionary occurrences that un-

22 «La lecture en symbolique exige une éducation parce que nous sommes naturellement portés à procéder à la réduction au quantitatif d'un état transcendant.» (Schwaller 1963: 59) In Eliade's terms, we need to be re-educated to see the world as hierophany, the way back into a knowing of the world as Eden. See also Dronke's perceptive understanding of visionary insight and poetic *transumptio* as «direct means of cognition» (1986: 8).

23 Other readings are possible, as suggested by Dronke himself (1986: 56) and ought to be investigated: see for example the compelling arguments by Jeremy Naydler (*supra*) and Campbell's highly valuable suggestion that the griffin in the Orphic tradition seems to be symbolic of the Hyperborean Apollo «combining the forms of the solar bird and solar beast, eagle and lion» in the service of the Great Goddess (1968: 23).

fold around the paradisaical tree in canto 32 the chariot itself, as the earthly vehicle of its celestial rider, can also turn into a vessel of calamitous metamorphoses and dreadful attacks, once the «animal binato» (Pg 32.47) and the people of the Books make their way back to heaven. The long sequence of catastrophic events involving the Church and the State up to Dante's times, which elicits Beatrice's famous prophecy of the «un cinquecento dieci e cinque» (33.43), can be understood as both the intimate and the transpersonal memory of Dante's presence, and mission, in the world, as Peter Dronke has once again perceptively argued (1986: 61). And yet, we are also clearly shown that, for all her connections to these vehicles and beings who drive, support and surround her throughout this extraordinary dramaturgy, Beatrice remains separate, rooted as she is in her aloneness, connected to the ground of being itself («sola sedeasi in su la terra vera», Pg 32.94), and ultimately assisted by her feminine attendants only. Through her apparent aloofness, she proves staunchly committed to the mandate originally conferred on her by the Virgin Mary and St Lucy: that is to say, the process of Dante's salvation, his *palingenesis* or rebirth – which is exactly what takes place in cantos 30, 31 and 33, a process subtly intertwined, therefore, with the visionary spectacles, and structurally inseparable from them.²⁴

The procession accompanying Beatrice captures Dante's attention for the whole of canto 29, and the figurative events involving the chariot and the Tree unfold in canto 32. In between, through cantos 30 and 31, all of Dante's reasonable expectations of a happy reunion with his Beloved are not merely challenged but ruthlessly thwarted. Instead of praising him for successfully carrying out his unparalleled journey into the Garden of Eden, Beatrice sternly forces Dante to confront the unacknowledged gloom that the shadow of his human persona still casts into the paradisaical «chiaro fonte» (Pg 30.76). In this way and through interrogation, Dante is skillfully challenged to disown that side of himself which had failed to follow Beatrice beyond Persephone's threshold, causing him to remain ensnared in the alluring, yet deadly, web of «imagini di ben false» that enwraps mortal life.²⁵ Only by dying to that fallacious, ego-centered and ego-driven worldview will Dante gain access to the paradoxical Apollonian dualitude of the griffin, thus entering into a true *hieros gamos* with his immortal Beloved, as Beatrice intimates by intently gazing at «la fiera | ch'è sola una persona in due nature» (Pg 31.80-81). It is this kind of radical 'ri-conoscenza', this endured apprehension of his mortal shadow as beguilement, that finally allows Dante to die-before-dying, so that the purifying ritual of immersion in the waters of the river Lethe, presided over by Matelda, can effectively take place. Yet this is not enough for Dante to move on, as the events outlined in the last two cantos openly show: if in Christianity the ritual of baptism symbolizes death and rebirth at once, here we are told beyond the shade of a doubt that Dante's immersion in the waters of

24 See Naydler's essay for a provocative, highly perceptive reading of the archetypal characteristics of Beatrice's chariot, which link her to the Mother Goddesses of Antiquity; cf. also Baring and Cashford 1991: 496 ff. I should add that (as Naydler also stresses) all of these Goddesses were structurally and symbolically related to sacred trees, a subject that would demand further investigation and that sheds new light on the – 'unconventional', to say the least – connection of Beatrice to the paradisaical tree and Dante's stress on the Earthly Paradise as, first and foremost, «la divina foresta spessa e viva» (Pg 28.2).

25 This is precisely what, according to Dronke, gets transposed into the misadventures that befall the chariot, both on the personal and the historical planes (1986: 71).

Lethe seals his death to what might be called his ego-consciousness, but leaves his rebirth into higher consciousness, literally, hanging. For that rebirth to occur, Dante needs to tap the potentialities offered by a different state of being, and only once this has occurred, will a second baptismal ritual be performed, in the waters of another river.

There is a point, midway through canto 32, which subtly hints at the shift that occurs in the wayfarer after his death to ego-based, argumentative consciousness. By way of a full turning around («tutta in sé mutarsi», *Pg* 32.21), the whole procession gathers around the paradisaical Tree, and the griffin binds the chariot to its trunk, thereby inducing the sudden, inexplicable blooming of all of its previously barren branches: a true cause for wonder, which indeed prompts the heavenly troop to sing an appropriate song of praise, whose celestial notes lull the wayfarer into what, from without, appears like a dreamless slumber. Dante the poet fudges over the wayfarer's apparently unbecoming behavior by making an oblique reference to an obscure mythological episode and carries on, to the moment when a voice calls the sleeper back to himself. Or does he? For, to state his inability to portray in verse how his wayfarer fell into that singular sleep («com'io m'addormentai», *Pg* 32.68), Dante evokes the moment when the hundred eyes of the primordial giant Argus were skillfully put to sleep by Hermes through the sound of the pipe and talk of Syrinx, the nymph turned hollow reed, the resonating instrument of god Pan's laments. Thus, through sweet music and skillful means, Hermes had succeeded in his mission of slaying the monster. These are in fact crucial lines: much is adroitly concealed in these apparently anodyne, enigmatic references to ancient lore, especially once we realize that Dante the wayfarer has just died to his worldly, ego-centered identity. From what medieval mythographers say about Argus, we find that the watchful guardian of Io, the priestess-turned-heifer, symbolizes the limitations of human reason in its heedless reliance on outer appearances as apprehended by cunning *ingegno*. Argus, who falls asleep at the sound of Syrinx and dies at the hand of Hermes, thereby stands as the symbolic counterpart to that mundane, ego-centred side of Dante, which Beatrice as Hermes had just succeeded in annihilating by awakening him to the subtler Pan-like, Edenic reality that sustains all life and makes it holy.

So in what other state of consciousness was Dante plunged, when his rational, controlling awareness finally subsided, allowing him to enter into visual contact with «splendor di viva luce eterna» (*Pg* 31.139), the blinding effulgence of his Beloved's immortal sight? This is where the story of Syrinx and the reed take over. And here too we have to look for the key element conveyed by the myth in order for Dante's allusions to become arresting, for the door that opens onto another level of meaning to unlock. Peter Kingsley has given us the key to the symbolic connotation of the piping sound. In his words:

The sound of a syrinx was a call for silence. This is something that makes sense even on a very obvious level when you consider how hissing or whistling at people is still a way of silencing them. To ancient mystics and magicians the journey into a greater reality was a journey made through silence, in silence and into silence. The noise of a syrinx is the ultimate password. It's the sound of silence. (Kingsley 1999: 129-30; see also Susanetti 2017: 63-64)

By focusing on the symbolic resonances contained in these mythological images, often relayed – if somewhat clumsily – by the medieval allegorizing and moralizing commentaries, we are led to see that the reason for Dante to gloss over his falling asleep at the heavenly music generated by the miraculous blossoming of the Edenic Tree may in fact be utterly

different from that which we originally surmised. The images he refers to and draws on in order to convey his new inner station once he wakes again are meant to point the reader further in the right direction. Not only does the injunction «Surgi, che fai?» (*Pg* 32.72) suggest, as virtually all commentators note, a resurrection, that is to say a return to consciousness at a higher, subtler level on the part of the sleeper; the long and convoluted parallel Dante establishes with the episode of Christ's transfiguration in the following lines furthers the hint, especially if we consider that in the *Convivio* Dante references exactly this episode from the Gospels to illustrate how one ought to approach the third level of meaning implied in scriptures of sacred import. While the *Commedia* is by no means a revealed text, Dante himself deemed, and called, it «'l poema sacro | al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra» (*Pd* 25.1-2): hence, certainly a text with the potential for a multi-layered reading. As for the third, moral or tropological sense, Dante states in the *Convivio*:

Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare appostando per le scritture, ad utilidade di loro e di loro discenti; si come appostare si può ne lo Evangelio, quando Cristo salio lo monte per trasfigurarsi, che de li dodici Apostoli menò seco li tre; in che moralmente si può intendere che a le secretissime cose noi dovemo avere poca compagnia. (*Cv* II.1.5)

According to Thomas Aquinas, in this third, moral sense, «things done in Christ or signifying Christ signify things we ought to do» (*Summa Theologica* I.1.10). In other words, the moral sense calls forth *imitatio Christi*, the primary purpose of Christian life and certainly one of Dante's fundamental tenets. Yet as Dante states in the *Convivio*, the moral reading is also the point of entry to the inner, subtler meaning of a text, a space of knowing intended for the few, eventually to be complemented by the fourth sense, anagogy. Which moral meaning, then, if any, is Dante asking us to see here? My view is that Dante's dreamless sleep is intended to evoke precisely his access into that transfigured dimension of consciousness where all dreams and projections are withdrawn,²⁶ that moment of radiance or transfiguration in which the human meets the divine (most specifically in its feminine hierophany), and the Tree of Knowledge miraculously comes into full bloom. Dante's ego-centred consciousness now washed away, out of the formless state of an awareness of which he has as yet no conscious understanding, he can witness the Tree blooming, and can thus begin his journey into a much vaster dimension of knowing, where symbolic figures in the service of a higher purpose finally become perceptible to his apprehension.

Once Dante has entered, through a sleep that is not a sleep, this subtler level of consciousness, he can be exposed to the symbolic reminiscence of his own, and the world's, predicament, as well as to Beatrice's obscure prophecies – which is exactly what happens in the second half of canto 32 and through canto 33. It is from that stance, and from that stance only, that Dante can gauge the gap separating the human discursive mind, still operative in him when he wakes, from cosmic mind, which Beatrice informs and manifests for him through her enigmatic words in canto 33. With the visions of canto 32 and the prophecies of canto

26 It is especially helpful to read the Earthly Paradise occurrences in Dante's *Commedia* while keeping in mind what Jung says about the withdrawal of projections as the key factor in the process of individuation, the opening of the individual to «the sum total of conscious and unconscious existence» (*CW*11 §140).

33, then, Dante makes his first acquaintance with a higher level of knowing, which he will progressively grow into, as if in a gyre, in the course of his heavenly ascent.

Once the sense-based, reasoning mind is bracketed, Dante, like Jesus' disciples, can unknowingly witness the miracle of transfiguration: the blooming of nature in its Edenic radiance, and along with it, the blooming of the Intelligence of the Heart, which the Greeks called νοῦς (*nous*): Cosmic, divine Mind. As we saw at the outset, in the opening lines of the *Convivio* Dante called this «ultima perfezione de la nostra anima» «la Scienza». It is the re-membling of this innate knowing that completes Dante's initiatory rite of passage; and indeed, a second ritual of a baptismal nature marks this realization and seals the entire second canticle. Dante's immersion in the waters of the river Eunoè is what symbolically allows the wayfarer to become «puro e disposto a salire alle stelle» (Pg 33.145) – a miraculous, yet entirely natural, 'heading home' into heavenly knowing, of which Beatrice candidly says there is really no reason to marvel at all: «e ora li [scil.: to the Empyrean], come a sito decreto, | cen porta la virtù di quella corda | che ciò che scocca drizza in segno lieto» (Pd 1.124-26). What kind of river is this Eunoè, then, and what exactly does Dante have to say about it?

At the very end of canto 33, Dante briefly states that his immersion in that «santissima onda» was nothing short of an otherworldly experience, and gives us just enough of a thread to understand why. Emerging from those holy waters, he felt inwardly «rifatto sì come piante novelle | rinovellate di novella fronda» (Pg 33.143-44): what has intervened, in other words, is nothing short of a *palingenesis*. The image of the blossoming trees is far from coincidental here: the «dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio» (Pg 33.138) caused Dante to become, without knowing exactly how, the human counterpart to the paradisaic Tree he had seen suddenly burst into life because of the griffin's mysterious intervention, just before that strange sleep. But as the very last line of the canticle unambiguously states, this transformative drink also made him ready for the next level of the journey («puro e disposto a salire a le stelle» Pg 33.145). As for his ascent, as Beatrice explains shortly after while they swiftly travel through cosmic space, he should deem it just as natural as the descent «d'un rivo | se d'alto monte scende giu-so ad imo» (Pd 1.137-38). Here we have one of the first in a long series of paradoxes, or rather of *coincidentiae oppositorum*, that only a mind open to the non-argumentative dimension of volatile, subtle knowing can appreciate: flowing as flying, down or up, to and from the source are, in that more expansive, numinous way of experiencing existence, one and the same thing.

Eunoè, then, is the name Dante gives to this river, flowing out of the same divine source, the same «fontana salda e certa» (Pg 28.124) as does the other, better known, river Lethe. According to Matelda's explanations in canto 28, the two rivers complement one another: while Lethe erases the memory of what ought to be forgotten (not just the sinful errors of the past, now to be left behind like a useless cocoon, but the very concept of sinfulness as such), Eunoè restores the memory of what ought to be remembered – the meaning of its very name being the first «ben fatto» in sore need of rehabilitation, it seems. All commentators rightly agree that Dante coins the name of this other river by combining the Greek words εὖ (*eu*) and νοῦς (*nous*); but it is fascinating to see how boxed-in their understanding of its meaning immediately becomes. Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio provide the most thorough overview of six centuries of hermeneutic reductionism:

Eunoè: vocabolo coniato da Dante con l'unione di due termini greci, che attingeva dai glossari medievali, e cioè da *eu* = "bene" e *nous* = "mente", "memoria". Vale dunque, nel

concetto dantesco, “memoria del bene” [e la maggior parte dei commentatori qui aggiunge “fatto”]. Nell’invenzione poetica dei fiumi del Paradiso terrestre, Dante si discosta dalla tradizione biblica, e, ispirandosi in parte all’Averno virgiliano (per il Lete) e in parte creando con la sua fantasia (per l’Eunoè), completa con essa il processo di purificazione attuato attraverso le cornici del Purgatorio.²⁷

That one would be in need of divine water in order to restore the memory of one’s, or even of humanity’s, past good deeds is a statement that does not just defy common sense,²⁸ it even runs counter to the very meaning that the word Eunoè, as coined by Dante, is intended to convey, according to Matelda’s thorough exposition: «a tutti altri sapori esto è di sopra» (Pg 28.133). Literally, this line means: ‘its [i.e. Eunoè’s] savour is above all others’. What Matelda is saying is, quite plainly, that the water of the river Eunoè specifically is not efficacious unless that of Lethe has been tasted first; and that the savour of that water, meaning Eunoè’s as tasted after Lethe’s, transcends the savour of all other waters, period. There is an obvious play on words here between «sapore» and «sapere», and one that we cannot miss, because we are already familiar with Dante’s passion for a taste that nourishes the mind through the sentence from his *Convivio* we read at the outset, where he argued that only the coming together of the «literale historia ragionata» and of the hidden «vera intenzione» would turn the tasting of his *canzoni* into a truly savoury food experience for the soul – a soul, we ought to remember, who is in quest of «la scienza»: gnosis, the epistemic gift that can only be conferred by Νοῦς, divine Mind.

Now Matelda’s words begin to make sense, and even more importantly, her words are perfectly in tune with Dante’s own statement after his drinking of the Eunoè’s holy waters, at the end of canto 33. As we have seen, Dante confirmed there that indeed the savour of Eunoè’s waters transcends all others because: a) one never gets satiated of drinking from it; and b) one is reborn into a new being after having tasted of it. In other words: the water of the Eunoè is the *aqua permanens* that ensures the rebirth of the old Adam into the Christic man, who is also the Adam Kadmon, the Ἄνθρωπος τέλειος (*anthropos teleios*) of the time before the fall. By drinking of the water of Eunoè – at the hands of Beatrice-Sophia’s attendant, Matelda-Ζωή (*Zoe*), Dante’s original divine mind is regenerated. A similar experience, by the way, occurs in *Paradiso*, canto 30, where Beatrice recommends that Dante drink his fill of the waters of the river of light, the first manifestation of the Empyrean, God’s «regno verace» (Pd 30.98), a heaven of pure intellectual light, as it manifests to his yet untrained eyes: a hierophany of God’s Mind to Dante’s mind, to be precise.

So now, back to Eunoè, the river of good, blessed Νοῦς. Νοῦς is ‘mind’ in a very specific acceptation (Susanetti 2017: 56-57): it is cosmic Mind, divine Mind, the source of a Knowing (a «sapere») that, as Matelda rightfully said, exceeds all others. In other words, by tasting of the water of Eunoè, the wayfarer is given a taste of divine Mind, of universal Consciousness. And indeed this is the only means through which a human being might possibly ascend to the

27 This and all other commentaries to the *Commedia*, Medieval and modern, are accessible online through <https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>

28 Who would not ‘naturally’ want to remove the memory of their sins and enhance that of their good deeds, on Judgment Day? Why would we need to drink from these two rivers to achieve such paltry results? With regard to sin specifically, Dante is saying something much more radical here: Lethe, he claims, erases the memory of ‘Sin’ as a concept by which to abide.

Empyrean and contemplate the indescribably vast river of divine Mind. By entering Eunoè and drinking of its waters, the wayfarer recovers the memory of «ogni ben fatto»: certainly not his own petty ‘good actions’, but rather any good ever made, namely all of God’s inherently good deeds. In other words, the wayfarer comes to re-member (as Beatrice thoroughly explains to him, for our benefit, in canto 1 of *Paradiso*) that all sentient beings partake, each in their own way, of Eunoè/Ennoia, of God’s Mind, because this is how God made the world, by sowing the seed of Mind, of cosmic Intent, into everything that lives, so that everything may yearn to return to that Mind by re-membering it, each through their own inner means.

In case this seems extreme, let me mention a point which all commentators seem to have forgotten or otherwise obscured: there is one other instance of Dante’s making use of the word ‘noè’ to mean divine, cosmic mind. That is the passage, in the *Convivio*, where he explains what the Empyrean is – that very same Empyrean which we see first appear to Dante, at the end of his journey through the spheres, as a river of light, a hierophany of God’s Mind. The whole passage would deserve a thorough commentary, but for brevity’s sake, here is the essential:

E quieto e pacifico è il luogo di quella somma Deitade che sola [sé] compiutamente vede. ... Questo è lo soprano edificio del mondo, nel quale tutto lo mondo s’inchiede, e di fuori dal quale nulla è; ed esso non è in luogo, ma formato fu solo ne la prima Mente, la quale li Greci dicono Protonoè. (*Cv* II.3.11)

By drinking of the waters of Lethe, Dante forgets the sinful way in which our ego-centred, all-too-human consciousness works. By drinking of the waters of Eunoè, he recovers the memory of cosmic consciousness and its endless good deeds, he becomes conscious of the unconscious that he unknowingly inhabits as his sole rightful home.

Of that unconscious Dante had already taken quite a full measure, once again in the *Convivio*. At the beginning of Book II, while uncovering for the reader the «verace intenzione» of one of his favorite *canzoni*, «Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona», Dante gives a rather precise definition of «mente» – one that cannot be fully understood unless we re-inscribe it within the larger notion of the cosmic Noûç, or ‘noè’. The conclusion to that detailed exposition reads as follows:

Onde si poete omai vedere che è mente: che è quella fine e preziosissima parte dell’anima che è deitate. E questo è il luogo dove dico che Amore mi ragiona della mia donna. (*Cv* III.2.19)²⁹

29 Again, it may be helpful to read Dante’s presentation of *mente* as the divine within the soul with the help of Jung’s insights into the relationship of conscious and unconscious: «the individual imagines that he has caught the psyche and holds her in the hollow of his hand. He is even making a science of her in the absurd supposition that the intellect, which is but a part and function of the psyche [Dante typically refers to this aspect of psyche as *ingegno*], is sufficient to comprehend the much greater whole [*mente*, in Dante’s terms]. It reaches so far beyond the boundaries of consciousness that the latter could easily be compared to an island in the ocean. Whereas the island is small and narrow, the ocean is immensely wide and deep and contains a life infinitely surpassing, in kind and degree, anything known on the island – so that if it is a question of space, it does not matter whether the gods are ‘inside’ or ‘outside’.» (CW 11, §141)

Back to Lethe and Eunoè one last time. Is this idea of the two rivers and their respective powers really of Dante's own making, then? What would be the purpose of such an invention, in the context of Christian theology? As we have seen, commentators have been at pains to make sense of what seems like an odd, possibly troubling, poetic invention. A few of them dutifully note how some medieval encyclopedists do indeed convey the memory of a place in Boeotia where there seem to have existed two fountains of this kind; but none of them appears to be interested in exploring further the reason why Dante would have wanted to take into account such antiquarian lore.³⁰ In Bosco and Reggio's words:

Non è escluso però che Dante ricordasse un passo di Isidoro da Siviglia (*Etym.* XIII xiii 3) in cui è detto che «In Boeotia duo fontes; alter memoriam, alter oblivionem adfert» («In Beozia vi erano due fonti; l'una risveglia la memoria, l'altra arrega l'oblio»). La notizia di Isidoro risale a Plinio (*N. H.* XXXI 11).

There is no question that beyond Isidore's and Pliny's sketchy reports there is more than meets the eye. Pausanias and Plutarch have given us a fairly detailed account of how these two waters, the waters of Lethe and of Mnemosyne, were drunk at the oracle of Trophonios in Boeotia by people who, through a specific initiatory ritual, forgot their present human life, experienced a journey into the beyond, and were made capable of remembering what they had seen and heard while journeying (Hani 1975; Susanetti 2017: 87-95). We also know from the ancient Golden Tablets or instructions for the dead in the Pythagorean/Orphic tradition that, once dead, the initiates were urged to ignore the fountain of Lethe by the white cypress tree, and seek instead the pool of Mnemosyne, the spring divine, from whose chill waters they should ask the gods to be allowed to drink by declaring: «I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water flowing from the lake of Memory.»³¹

While it is difficult to surmise how Dante could have had knowledge of these ancient ritual practices,³² it is a fact that the *Commedia* is itself the poetic enactment of a salvific dying before dying, which as such has remained unique in its genre. Set within a worldview wherein the prominent Christian edifice still rests on visibly pagan foundations, the wayfarer's journey to the Beyond does not just map out the realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise for the confessional Christian reader; rather, it performs, and hence silently displays, a process of inner transformation and noetic rebirth by way of purification, initiation, and restoration of the human being as *imago dei* through final contemplation of the divine.

30 Even Dronke, in his most perceptive reading, fails to catch the thread here: Muhammad's encounter with similar fountains in the *Liber schalae*, which he presents as Dante's analogue (1970: 484-85), has its origin in these same ancient sources. The issue of Islamic and/or late-antique parallelisms (the concept of "sources" is misleading here) is, in my opinion, the real challenge that awaits Dante scholars. For groundbreaking work in relation to the Islamic cultural scene see Saccone 2017. I have tackled the problem from the perspective of a specific theme, that of falconry, in Boccassini 2003.

31 Petelia tablet (4th century BC), cited in Graf and Johnston 2007: 6-7; see also Leisegang 1955: 212 for a discussion of the larger Orphic, initiatory context of these tablets.

32 However, Stewart 1903 did put forward some interesting suggestions that ought to be reconsidered, and possibly expanded upon.

Read in this light, the *Commedia* is a mystical text³³ that presents Christianity as an experience of initiation and illumination, rooted in the mysteric tradition whose foremost ancient representatives were still understood to be, in Dante's times, Virgil, Cicero and Boethius – by Dante's own admission, his foremost teachers.

Dante's journey into the Beyond truly seems to me an initiatory process that teaches the wayfarer how to integrate fully his masculine and feminine, conscious and unconscious minds, within the hierophanic recognition that true knowing, «la scienza» that all human beings unknowingly yearn for, is not the result of our lonesome cerebral speculations but the blossoming of a subtler 'intelligence of the heart' within the context of the full blooming of Edenic nature. It is this miraculous *aqua permanens* of divine origin, whose long-sought and hard-won recovery is ultimately achieved by grace only, that stands at the peak of Dante's fully individuated visionary consciousness.

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33 I subscribe to Arthur Versluis's definition of mysticism as the contemplative ascent of the individual as lover from duality to transcendence of self and other. This should be understood as the basic mystery and Platonic understanding of religious experience, irrespective of the confessional religious context in which such primary experience becomes embodied (2017: 1-8 and *passim*). Versluis's impassioned and insightful inquiry into this archetypally "dark place" of Western tradition provides an excellent framework for the initiatory reading of Dante's journey to the Beyond such as I am here suggesting. See also Susanetti's excellent work (Susanetti 2017). It is by ascertaining as much as possible the medieval transmission of this heritage from Antiquity that we will further our understanding of Dante's initiatory journey to the Beyond.

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