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The esoteric allegory in Dante*

Underneath the literary meaning of the *Commedia*, that is, beneath Dante's journey through the three realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, there is undoubtedly an allegory. We do not need Dante's explicit statements on the matter to be certain of this. This allegory is not simple, but multifaceted, and commentators usually recognize two aspects: the moral and the political.

The moral, or philosophical-moral, interpretation sees allegorically depicted in the *Commedia* the path that man must follow to overcome sin and attain virtue in order to escape Hell and Purgatory and gain Paradise through moral perfection.

This allegory, like the literal meaning of the sacred poem, undeniably has a distinctly Christian aspect, even though it abounds in pagan elements; and, following Aristotle, St. Thomas, and scholasticism, it has been thoroughly penetrated by commentators.

The political allegory is based on the struggle between the empire and the papacy, and the persecution of the Templars by Philip the Fair and Clement V also features prominently. Naturally, there are passages that are open to moral interpretation alone, others that are clothed in political symbolism alone, and still others that have a double moral and political interpretation. The political allegory is almost always very transparent, and Dante often dispenses with any veil altogether, making his vision clear and leaving no stone unturned. The moral allegory has such a Christian appearance that it authorizes all Christians and all those in a hurry to conclude that Dante was a Catholic orthodox, while the political allegory reveals with certainty a Dante who is a partisan of the empire and a bitter enemy of the Church, an open defender of the Order of the Templars, condemned and fiercely persecuted for heresy by the Church, a Dante who exalts Caesar, the Roman Empire, and classical civilization, and who elects the Pythagorean and imperialist Virgil as his guide, teacher, and lord.

The reasons that led Dante to use allegory are therefore not political in nature, inherent in his position in the struggle between the Guelphs and Ghibellines, because in that case it would be natural to find a thicker veil in the passages dealing with politics, whereas the veil becomes thicker in the passages dealing with morality, philosophy, religion, and metaphysics; and sometimes, no matter how hard commentators strain their eyes, they cannot clarify the meaning, or each of them ends up understanding it differently from the others.

What, then, is the reason that led Dante to use allegory, even at the cost of not being easily understood? Poetic imagination? A passion for riddles? Certainly not, because we know that a doctrine is hidden beneath the veil of strange verses. And if the appearance is Christian, could the choice differ from the appearance? Could the doctrine so jealously hidden be heterodox, very heterodox? So that Dante would reek of heresy and be an enemy of the Church not only in the political sphere but also in the religious sphere? His repeated professions of Christian faith are not enough to eliminate the doubt. If he was in fact a heretic or a pagan and did not want to end up roasted, he was forced to profess himself a Christian. And especially wanting to indulge himself in extolling Virgil, Caesar, Rome, which the good world despised, the noble Latin blood, and the emperors who had a noble, that is, pagan appearance, he needed to somehow allay suspicions by also making an apology for Christianity. It should be

remembered that in those days Christian charity could indulge itself at will; the numerous followers of St. Dominic, who in the heretical thickets

Published in "Nuovo Patto," September-November 1921; reprinted in *Paganesimo, pitagorismo, massoneria* (Paganism, Pythagoreanism, Freemasonry) edited by the Pythagorean Association, Società Editrice Mantinea, Fumari (ME), 1986.

beating them with the most holy zeal to save souls (as well as the endangered Church) went about the marketplaces, and Dante himself had already seen human bodies burning. What was the point of ending up like Cecco d'Ascoli, when it was possible to devote one's life, and one's genius and wisdom, to a grandiose political and religious plan? Despite his professed Catholic faith, Dante had friends who sought to prove that God did not exist, and he happily placed heretics of Sigieri's ilk in paradise, while populating hell with popes. Dante himself was accused of heresy according to ancient documents and according to his first commentators. Dante's pagan heresy was supported by Foscolo, then by Rossetti with a huge amount of arguments, and finally by the Catholic priest Aroux. A Jesuit who wanted to criticize Rossetti's works received such an exhaustive reply from him that he never uttered another word.

No one considers that even in appearance Dante does not always follow St. Thomas slavishly; he differs openly on very important issues; for example, in eschatological doctrine (*Purg.* XXV 88-102), he adopts a theory of the shadows of the dead that is in perfect agreement with the pagan conception.

From the outset, he was inspired by Virgil, from whom he took only the beautiful style that brought him honor. His poem is nothing more than a comedy; and however the word is understood, in the modern or Dionysian sense, it always leads us far from the apparent Christian meaning. In broad terms, the Comedy is a development of the sixth canto of the Aeneid, and Dante repeats what Virgil has Aeneas do. Aeneas descends alive into Hades, finds the myrtle branch of the initiates in the forest, and learns *de visu* the truth of the Orphic-Pythagorean mysteries about man and conditional immortality. And Dante, still corruptible, follows the same path with the same purpose and using the same symbolism.

The fundamental purpose of the Orphic, Pythagorean, Eleusinian, and Isiac mysteries, as is now well known and proven, was to impart to the initiate true knowledge of the principles of life (*Cicero, De Lege* II, 14), bliss, and privileged immortality. This was achieved through initiation, which consisted of preliminary cathartic practices, symbolic ceremonies, and actual ecstasy, as Plutarch, Apuleius, and other ancient writers tell us, and as is now recognized by modern scholars (see, for example, Macchioro - Zagreus). In this way, man was regenerated and after death the Elysian Fields awaited him.

The subject of the Comedy is man, or rather the regeneration of man, his metamorphosis into an angelic butterfly, Apuleius' Psyche. And therefore the same subject as the mysteries. It is not only moral qualities that change; Dante purifies himself degree by degree, passing through various crises and states of consciousness, falling like a dead body, fainting, reviving, becoming enraptured, reviving in Eunoè, his mind leaving itself, becoming illusory, becoming india, becoming internal, becoming future, becoming impure, passing from the human to the divine, from time to eternity, and finally frees his soul from every cloud of mortality. This is not moral perfection, it is a true palingenesis of the whole being

that takes place in the symbolic journey. The veil hides not only moral disquisitions on sins and virtues, but also the exposition of inner changes in the pilgrim's consciousness.

The two rivers of the earthly paradise are clearly borrowed from the Orphic-Pythagorean mysteries.

Recent archaeological discoveries have unearthed the so-called golden plates of Turii, which were buried with the Orphic deceased to serve as viaticum when they arrived in Hades. There they encountered two springs, that of Lethe and that of Mnemosyne, i.e., that of oblivion and that of memory. Drinking the water of Lethe, the deceased lost all memory and ended up a miserable, unconscious larva in the mud. Drinking from the fresh spring of Mnemosyne, he was saved and went among the immortals in the Elysian Fields. The formula contained in the Orphic laminetta stated: "I am the son of the earth and the starry sky. Let me quench my thirst at the cool spring of Mnemosyne, so that I may be a divine god and no longer mortal." This is the meaning of the Orphic invocation formula; and this Orphic-Pythagorean conception is analogous to the eschatological conception of the Eleusinian mysteries, and is developed in the Platonic theory of souls and knowledge. Dante, to better affirm the pagan character of the catharsis of purgatory, from which he emerges pure and ready to ascend to the stars, introduces at the end of the canticle not only the Lethe, but the less familiar Eunoè (Purg. XXVIII,

131; XXXIII, 127-145), as he calls it, which "revives his stunned virtue," that is, gives those who have died resurrection, a second birth.

Dante would like to sing in part of the sweet good that would never have satisfied him, but he has no more space, all the pages of this second canto are full, and above all, the reins of art no longer allow him to continue. Addante, Pedro, with judgment: We are in the midst of pagan mystery.

And whoever considers who Dante's guide was understands that he had to lead him there. Dante, lost in the wild and harsh forest of Christian prejudice and ignorance, finally encounters Virgil, the personification of esoteric wisdom, this voice that for a long silence (ten centuries of the vulgar age) seemed faint; and Virgil immediately presents himself as an initiate who has transcended human nature: "I am not a man, I was a man"; and that is why Dante takes him as his guide, teacher, and lord, who initiates him and makes him immortal.

Now, the pagan conception did not grant human souls true survival; they led a life of unconscious larvae in Hades, and only the initiates, the heroes, and those whom Jupiter kidnapped from the highest council were immortal. And Christianity prevailed over the mysteries because it democratically placed salvation and immortality *à la portée de tout le monde*. It was enough to be baptized and believe that Jesus had risen to be saved. A real bonanza for all the poor in spirit and for all the criminals to whom the mysteries closed the door. Arnobius, for example, openly admits that he became a Christian because Christianity, unlike the mysteries, guaranteed immortality to all.

Dante, who takes Virgil as his guide and treats the whole question of palingenesis in a pagan manner, also believed that not all men could attain eternal life? That Christian beliefs were not sufficient for this purpose? That the mad sheep and proud Christians had no right to citizenship in the eternal city and had to end up among the lost people? It would seem so, given that it was not from priests but from Brunetto Latini that he learned "how man becomes eternal." Examining Dante's work without preconceptions or

prejudices, one comes to recognize in spiritual rebirth through the metamorphosis brought about by initiation the fundamental subject of the Comedy, the doctrine hidden beneath the veil of strange verses.

Dante's allegory therefore has a very important mystical, metaphysical, truly esoteric aspect. This aspect has not yet been recognized. It also escapes Rossetti and Aroux, who, while referring to classical mysteries for the interpretation of allegory, always refer to the ceremonial part of these mysteries. This is natural, because in order to perceive and understand conventional or allegorical allusions and references, it is necessary to know the object of the allusion or allegory; and in this case, it is necessary to know the mystical experiences through which the mystery and the epopta of true initiation pass.

For those who have some experience of this kind, there is no doubt about the existence in the *Commedia* and the *Aeneid* of a metaphysical-esoteric allegory that veils and exposes the successive stages through which the consciousness of the initiate passes in order to become immortal.

The symbolism most frequently used by Dante is that of navigation and pilgrimage. He is a pilgrim on the deserted shore, on the narrow pass, in the harsh desert; he takes water that has never flowed there; he is a navigator on the sea of being. In particular, the symbolism of the sea, the ship, and the sail is always used to deal with inner events. And this sail that he raises to sail better waters; and as he himself says, it is under this sail that doctrine is hidden. It is an archaic, Mediterranean, pagan symbolism, already used by Virgil and Ovid. It is also used by Christians who speak of ships and naves in their temples, referring to St. Peter's boat. But this little ship is the result of one of the many appropriations made by the followers of the Asian prophet; it is nothing more than the ship of Janus, a purely Roman god, husband of Venilia, the goddess of the sea and springs, and inventor of shipbuilding. We can see what Ulysses' undertaking becomes in the *Commedia*. Ulysses, the navigator par excellence, has such a burning desire to become an expert on the world, human vices, and valor that he is not overcome by the sweetness of his son, the pity of his old father, or his duty to Penelope; and

therefore he sets out on the high open sea; and after sailing so long that he becomes old and slow, he finally comes to that narrow mouth, where Hercules marked his limits so that no man might go further. But Ulysses and his companions do not turn back because of this; on the contrary, they remember that they were not made to live like brutes but to follow virtue and knowledge; and therefore they venture with mad flight into the high pass to gain the experience of the world without people, behind the sun; that is, of that condition in which consciousness lives an entirely interior life, beyond and outside of any celebration due to the human senses, and in which there are neither people nor sun.

But this is very dangerous water, and not everyone can reach the shore and turn to look at the pass that has never let a living person pass, and which can only be crossed by those who die a mystical death. It is a mad passage (Parad. XXVII), a very difficult undertaking, not to be attempted in a small boat (Parad. XXIII), and there is a risk of being overwhelmed and submerged by the sea of being that closes in on the reckless. This is what Dante says, after having stated: (Inf. XXVI, 21) "my mind is more confused than usual."

But Dante does not go on an adventure like Ulysses; he is guided by Virgil, who is wiser than he realizes, and through a hidden path he manages to see the stars again. To sail better waters, he raises the sail of the ship of his intellect; and after the various practices and ceremonies he undergoes in

purgatory, he ritually purifies himself and, revived in the fountain of Eunoe, emerges renewed with new foliage, pure and ready to ascend to the stars (Purg. XXXI11). After that, it is appropriate to invoke the good Apollo for the last task (Parad. I). At the sight of Beatrice, one becomes like Glaucus when he tasted the grass that made him the consort of the other gods in the sea (*Parad.* 1,69-70), that is, one feels oneself dying and becoming immortal like Glaucus, the Glaucus who says of himself: *Ante tamen mortalis eram, sed scilicet altis deditus aequoribus* (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*). Dante cannot say anything else and apologizes by saying: “Trasumanar significar per verba Non si poria; però l'esempio basti a cui esperienza grazia serba” (Paradiso I, 70-72). It cannot be done with words, but it can be done with grass.

He no longer has the illusion of the material world, he has another sense of reality: “you are not on earth, as you believe,” but you sit in your own place; for, as he says in *Conv.* IV, 28: “the noble soul returns to God, as to the place from whence it departed when it entered the sea of this life.” What happens to souls that are not noble is not said.

And now that he hears of the distant mortal world (Par. II), he feels able to guide not only those who are in small boats, but also those few who raise their necks in time to the bread of the angels, the ambrosia that makes them immortal like the grass of Glaucus. It is true that the water he takes has never run, but he has all the pagan wisdom that assists him: “Minerva breathes, and Apollo leads me, and nine muses show me the Bears.” and Dante encourages these few sailors to calmly set sail, keeping their course in front of the water that returns unchanged; and he promises them wonders equal to those seen by the glorious Argonauts who followed that other daring navigator who conquered the Golden Fleece (*Parad.* II, 1-18). And indeed, having reached the end of his voyage, and having arrived at his destination with infinite courage (*Parad.* XXXIII), he sees that in its depths is bound with love in a volume that which is spread out throughout the universe. He believes he has seen the universal form of this knot; and he is as amazed as Neptune was when he saw the shadow of Argo, the first ship to sail the seas. The few who have followed his path to the end thus see that Dante keeps the promise he made to them in Canto II.

This explains one of the most obscure passages in the entire poem. But, let us be clear, a true explanation can only be given to those who go through similar experiences, for this is a mystery that “cannot be understood by those who have not experienced it,” and I can only repeat the words of Apuleius after his initiation:

Ecce tibi rettidi, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est (Apuleius - *Metam.* XI, 23).