

THE  
ESOTERISM  
OF DANTE

*L'Ésoterisme de Dante*

René Guénon

Sophia Perennis et Universalis

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## Foreword

This previously untranslated work by René Guénon is being published in a limited study-edition for the use of serious students of Guénon who cannot read the original French. The translation is based on a first version by Mr. C.B. Bethell of Australia, to whom we express our appreciation, both for his pioneering labor of love, and his willingness to have it tampered with. Mrs. F.J. Casewit, of Morocco, a friend of the Guénon family and a language specialist long engaged in the study of traditionalist works, was kind enough to read through the manuscript and to offer a number of valuable suggestions. Final responsibility for any imprecisions or infelicities must however fall to the general editor, who has made extensive revisions. Though done with care, the translation is provisional; should a larger edition be called for as a consequence of this first printing, every effort will be made to further improve it and to add supplementary notes.

The publisher assumes that most readers into whose hands this volume falls will already be familiar with Guénon's work, and with the 'traditionalist' perspective it represents, as well as with the works of such related writers as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, S.H. Nasr, and Huston Smith. Those encountering Guénon here for the first time may wish to contact the publisher for a complete list of titles available by these authors.

As a general point of orientation it may be remarked that Guénon was the first *chef d'école*<sup>1</sup> of the circle of traditionalist

writers, and his works naturally have the ground-breaking character that any confrontation with widely-diffused error must bear. His greatest contributions are a blindingly lucid exposition of the principles of orthodoxy and traditional metaphysics, an uncompromising critique of the deviation of modernism, and a breath-taking view of the polyvalence of traditional symbols. Implicit in these three genres, as in all Guénon's writing, is the need for personal affiliation with an orthodox tradition as a precondition for a *bona fide* spiritual practice that might lead, at least in principle, to the intellectual intuition of which he speaks.

It is a sad commentary on our times that so vital a corrective to its ills as Guénon's *oeuvre* represents should prove so difficult to publish. Let us hope that this very limited first edition, intended as study-material, may awaken sufficient interest to attract the support that will be necessary to publish a larger edition, and translations of others of Guénon's works as well. Dear reader, if you wish to support this effort please do not let your desire languish unvoiced.

We take this opportunity to thank the French publisher, and the Guénon family's agent, Mr. F. Gouverneur, for their cooperation in making this edition possible. Our heartfelt thanks go also to a small circle of friends (they know who they are) without whom this book—and, indeed, the very existence of *Sophia Perennis et Universalis* over the past five years—would not have been possible.

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1. Frithjof Schuon is the second.

CHAPTER I

*Apparent and Hidden Meaning*

*O voi che avete gl'intelletti sani,  
Mirate la dottrina che s'asconde  
Sotto il velame delli versi strani!*

With these words<sup>2</sup> Dante points in a most explicit way to the hidden (or doctrinal, properly speaking) significance of his work, a work whose external and apparent meaning is only a veil; a significance that must be sought for by those who would fathom it. Elsewhere the poet goes still further, stating that all writings, not only sacred ones, can be understood—and must be explicated—principally according to four levels of meaning: “si possono intendere e debbonsi sponere massimamente per quattro sensi.”<sup>3</sup> It is evident, moreover, that these diverse meanings cannot in any way contradict or oppose each

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2. *Inferno*, IX, 61-63, Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by John Ciardi. W.W. Norton, 1977.

*Men of sound intellect and probity,  
Weigh with good understanding what lies hidden  
behind the veil of my strange allegory!*

3. *Convivio*, t.II ch.1. “They may be understood, and they must be explained in four senses.”

other, but must on the contrary complete each other, harmonizing the parts within the whole as constituent elements of a unique synthesis.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the *Divine Comedy* in its entirety can be interpreted in several ways, for we have in this regard the testimony of its author, who is certainly better qualified than anyone else to inform us of his own intentions. The difficulty begins only when it comes to determining these different meanings, especially the highest or the most profound, and it is here that different points of view naturally arise among commentators. They all agree on a literal sense in poetic narrative, and generally agree in recognizing a philosophical (or rather, philosophical-theological) meaning, as well as a political and social one; however, counting the literal sense, this makes only three, and Dante advises us to look for a fourth meaning. What can it be? For us, it can only be a strictly initiatic sense, metaphysical in its essence; one to which numerous particulars are related which, though not all of a purely metaphysical order, are nonetheless esoteric in character. It is precisely owing to its esoteric character that this profounder level of meaning has escaped most commentators. Yet if one ignores it (or perhaps fails to recognize it) the other levels of meaning can only be partially understood; for this esoteric or initiatic sense stands to the others as their principle—within which their multiplicity is coordinated and unified.

Even those who have glimpsed the esoteric side of Dante's work make many a mistake with respect to its true nature, for they usually lack a real understanding of these things, and their interpretations are affected by prejudices that they cannot put aside. Thus it is that Rossetti and Aroux, the first to point out the existence of this esoterism, thought they could conclude

that Dante was guilty of "heresy", without realizing that they were introducing considerations applicable to wholly different domains; so that, though they knew certain facts, there were many others they did not know. All this we shall be pointing out, though without the least pretension of giving a thorough exposition of the subject, which indeed seems truly inexhaustible.

The question for Aroux was: is Dante Catholic or Albigensian? For others, it seems rather to be: is he Christian or pagan?<sup>4</sup> For our part, we do not think it necessary to look at things in this way, for true esoterism is something quite different from the outward aspect of religion, and, if it has some relationship with it, this can only be in so far as it finds a symbolic mode of expression in religious forms. Moreover, it matters little whether these forms be of such and such a religion, since what is involved is the essential doctrinal unity hidden behind their apparent diversity. This is why initiates have always participated without scruple in all forms of worship, following the established customs wherever they happened to be. Dante understood this fundamental unity also, and for this reason—and not by virtue of any superficial 'syncretism'—employed a terminology borrowed indifferently from Christianity and Greco-Roman antiquity, as circumstances required. Pure metaphysics is neither pagan nor Christian, but universal. The ancient mysteries were not paganism; on the contrary, they were superimposed upon it.<sup>5</sup> In the same way there were in the Middle Ages some organisations whose character was

4. Cf. Arturo Reghini, *l'Allegoria esoterica di Dante*, in *Nouvo Patto*, Sept-Nov 1921, pp. 541-548.

5. We must say that we would prefer another word to 'paganism', which has been imposed by long usage but was originally only a term of contempt applied to the Greco-Roman religion in the last stage of its decadence, where it was reduced to the state of simple popular 'superstition'.

initiatic and not religious, but which had their roots in Catholicism. If Dante belonged to some of these organisations, which seems to us indisputable, this is not a reason to declare him a "heretic"; those who think so evince a false or incomplete idea of the Middle Ages: they only see, so to speak, the outer aspect of things, because ultimately, for all other aspects, terms of comparison are no longer to be found in the modern world.

Such being the real character of all initiatic organisations, there are only two cases where an accusation of "heresy" might with apparent justification be leveled at some of them (or at least at some of their members), and in both cases the charge is connected with disclosing matters—very real ones—that were never meant to be expressed openly, and that must occasion great scandal if they are. In the first case certain initiates indulge in inopportune disclosures, risking a disturbance in minds as yet unprepared for knowledge of higher truths, and so provoking disorder at the social level. The authors of such disclosures err in encouraging a confusion of the esoteric and the exoteric, a confusion that sufficiently justifies the reproach of heresy. This situation has arisen on a number of occasions in Islam<sup>6</sup>, where the esoteric schools do not however normally encounter any hostility at the hand of the religious and judicial authorities representing exoterism. In the second case, the same accusation is simply taken as a pretext by a political power to destroy adversaries thought all the more formidable for being so difficult to reach by ordinary means. The destruction of the Order of the Temple<sup>7</sup> is the most celebrated

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6. We make particular allusion to the celebrated example of El-Hallaj, who was put to death in Baghdad in the year 309 of the Hegira (921 A.D.), and whose memory is venerated by those very ones who deem that he was justly condemned for his imprudent disclosures.

instance of this type, and this event has a direct connection with the subject of the present study.

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7. The Knights Templars, one of the great orders of Knighthood, founded in Jerusalem in 1120 A.D., at the time of the Crusades (Tr).

## CHAPTER II

### *The "Fede Santa"*

In the Vienna Museum there are two medallions, one representing Dante and the other the painter Peter of Pisa; on the reverse side both bear the letters F.S.K.I.P.F.T., which Aroux interprets as: *Frater Sacræ Kadosch, Imperialis Principatus, Frater Templarius*. For the first three letters this interpretation is obviously incorrect and does not convey any intelligible meaning; we think it should read *Fidei Sanctæ Kadosch*. The Association of the *Fede Santa*, of which Dante seems to have been a leader, was a tertiary order of Templar filiation, justifying the name *Frater Templarius*; its dignitaries bore the title of *Kadosch*, a Hebrew word meaning 'holy' or 'consecrated', which has been preserved to our days in the high grades of Masonry. It is not without reason then that Dante takes St. Bernard, who established the rule of the Order of the Temple, as his guide for the completion of his own celestial journey<sup>8</sup>: he seems to be pointing out that, given the conditions characteristic of his time, access to the highest possible degree of the spiritual hierarchy was only attainable in this way.

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8. *Paradiso*, XXXI. The word *contemplante*, which Dante uses later to describe Saint Bernard (id., XXXII,1), appears to have a double meaning due to its affinity with the very name of the *Temple*.

As for explaining the *Imperialis Principatus*, one need not perhaps limit oneself to considering Dante's political role, which shows only that the organisations to which he belonged were at the time well disposed toward the imperial power. We must point out in this connection that the 'Holy Empire' has a symbolic significance, and that today once more, in Scottish Masonry, the members of the Supreme Councils bear the titles of dignitaries of the Holy Empire, the title 'Prince' appearing in the denominations of many grades. Moreover, from the beginning of the 16th century, the leaders of the different organisations of Rosicrucian origin bore the title of Imperator; and there are reasons to think that in Dante's time the *Fede Santa* bore certain similarities to what later became the 'Rosicrucian Brotherhood', even if the latter is not more or less directly derived from the former.

We shall find many more parallels of this kind, and Aroux himself indicated a considerable number of them. One of the essential points that he brought to light, without perhaps drawing all the necessary conclusions, is the significance of the different symbolic regions Dante describes, and more especially the 'heavens'. These regions are in reality so many different states; and the heavens are, literally, 'spiritual hierarchies': that is to say, degrees of initiation. In this context an interesting concordance could be established between Dante's conception and that of Swedenborg, without mentioning some theories of the Hebrew Kabbalah, and particularly those of Islamic esoterism. In this respect Dante himself has provided a clue worth mentioning: "A vedere quello che per terzo cielo s'intende... dico che per *cielo* intendo la scienza e per *cieli* le scienze."<sup>9</sup> But what exactly are these 'sciences' understood under the symbolic designation of the 'heavens', and must we see therein an allusion to the 'seven liberal arts' so often men-

tioned elsewhere by Dante and his contemporaries? What leads us to think that this must be the case is that, according to Aroux, "the Cathars had, as early as the 12th century, some signs of recognition, passwords, and astrological doctrine (they conducted their initiations at the vernal equinox). Their scientific system was founded on the doctrine of correspondences: Grammar corresponded to the Moon, Dialectic to Mercury, Rhetoric to Venus, Music to Mars, Geometry to Jupiter, Astronomy to Saturn, and Arithmetic or Illumined Reason to the Sun." Accordingly, to the seven planetary spheres—the first seven of Dante's nine heavens—corresponded the seven liberal arts respectively; and precisely these same designations are depicted on the seven rungs of the left upright of the *Ladder of the Kadosch* (30th degree of Scottish Masonry). The ascending order, in this latter case, differs in an inversion, on the one hand, of Rhetoric and Logic (which is substituted here for Dialectic), and, on the other, of Geometry and Music; and also in that the science corresponding to the Sun (Arithmetic) occupies the rank normally assigned to that star in the astrological order of the planets—the fourth, or mid-point of the septenary—whereas the *Cathars* placed it on the highest rung of their *Mystical Ladder*, as Dante does for its corresponding one on the opposite upright of the ladder, Faith (*Emounah*)—that is to say this mysterious *Fede Santa* of which he was himself *Kadosch*.<sup>10</sup>

A further comment is necessary on this subject, for how is it that correspondences of this kind, where an assimilation to

9. *Convivio*, t.II, Ch. XIV. "To see what is meant by this third heaven, I say that by heaven I mean science, and by heavens, sciences."

10. Concerning the *Mysterious Ladder of the Kadosch*, which we shall consider later in this study, see the *Manuel maçonnique* of F.: Vuilliaume, pl.XVI and pp. 213-214. We cite the 2nd edition (1830).



real initiatic degrees is implied, have been attributed to the liberal arts, which were after all taught publicly and officially in the schools? We think that they must have been conceived in two ways, the one exoteric and the other esoteric. It is possible to superimpose on any profane science another science that is related to the same object but looks at it from a higher viewpoint, and which is to that profane science what the higher meanings of the scriptures are to their literal meaning. One could also say that external sciences afford a means of expression for higher truths since they themselves stand in the relation of symbol to another order: as Plato said, the perceptible is only a reflection of the intelligible. The phenomena of nature and the events of history all have a symbolic value, for they express something of the principles upon which they depend, and of which they are the more or less remote consequences. Through a suitable transposition, all science and all art can assume a true esoteric value; why then should the expressions drawn from the liberal arts not have played, in the initiations of the Middle Ages, a role comparable to that played in speculative Masonry by language borrowed from the art of the builders? We will go further: to look at things in this way is, after all, to bring them back to their principle; this point of view is, therefore, inherent in their very essence, and not accidentally super-added; and if this is the case, could not the tradition to which they are connected go back to the very origin of the sciences and arts, whereas the exclusively profane viewpoint preponderant in the modern age results only from forgetfulness of this tradition? We cannot deal here with this question and all the developments that it would entail, but let us see how Dante himself, in the commentary he gives on his first *Canzone*, points out the way he applies to his own work the principles of some of the liberal arts: "O uomini, che ved-

ere non potete la sentenza di questa Canzone, non la rifiutate però; ma ponete mente alla sua bellezza, che è grande, sì per *costruzione*, la quale si pertiene alli *grammatici*; sì per l'*ordine del sermone*, che si pertiene alli *rettorici*; sì per lo *numero delle sue parti*, che si pertiene alli *musici*."<sup>11</sup> Do we not hear an echo of the Pythagorean tradition in this way of relating music and number in a science of rhythm, with all its correspondences?; and is it not this same tradition, precisely, that makes possible an understanding of the 'solar' role attributed to arithmetic? For arithmetic is the common center of all the other sciences, and also of the correspondences that unite them: in the cases of music and geometry, through knowledge of proportion in forms (which finds its direct application in architecture); and in astronomy, through knowledge of the harmony of the celestial spheres.

We shall have ample opportunity later to see what fundamental importance the symbolism of numbers assumes in Dante's work; and even if this symbolism is not uniquely Pythagorean, and reappears in other doctrines for the simple reason that truth is one, it is no less permissible to think that, from Pythagoras to Virgil, and from Virgil to Dante, the 'chain of the tradition' was undoubtedly unbroken on Italian soil.

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11. Here is the translation of this text: "O men, who cannot see the meaning of this *Canzone*, do not however reject it; but pay attention to its beauty, which is great, either for the *structure*, which concerns the *grammarians*, or for the *order of the discourse*, which concerns the *rhetoricians*, or for the *number of its parts*, which concerns the *musicians*."

## CHAPTER III

### *Masonic and Hermetic Parallels*

From the general observations made thus far we return now to some strange parallels pointed out by Aroux<sup>12</sup>:

*Hell* represents the *profane world*, *Purgatory* is the place of *initiatric trials*, and *Heaven* is the abode of the *Perfect Ones*, where we find intelligence and love combined and raised to their zenith... The celestial circle described by Dante<sup>13</sup> begins at the *alti Serafini*, who are the *Principi celesti*, and ends at the lowest ranks of Heaven. Now, it so happens that some lower dignitaries of Scottish Masonry (which claims to go back to the Templars, and of which Zerbino, the Scottish prince, and Isabelle of Galicia's lover, is the personification in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*) are also called princes, *Princes of Mercy*; that their assembly or chapter is called the *Third Heaven*; that they have a *Palladium*—or statue of *Truth*—as their symbol, which, like Beatrice, is clad in the three colors *green, white, and red*<sup>14</sup>; that their Worshipful Master (whose title is *Most Excellent*

12. We cite the summary of Aroux's works given by Sédir, *Histoire des Rose-Croix*, pp. 16-20; 2nd edition, pp. 13-17. The titles of these works by Aroux are: *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste* published in 1845 (and republished in 1930), and *la Comédie de Dante, traduite en vers selon la lettre et commentée selon l'esprit, suivie de la Clef du langage symbolique des Fidèles d'Amour* (1856-1857).

13. *Paradiso* VIII.

*Prince*), carrying an arrow in his hand and a heart within a triangle on his chest<sup>15</sup>, is a personification of *Love*; and that the mysterious number *nine*, "by which Beatrice is especially loved"—Beatrice "who must be called Love", as Dante says in the *Vita Nuova*—is also assigned to this Worshipful Master, who is surrounded by nine columns and nine torches (each with nine branches and nine lights), and whose age, finally, is eighty one years, a multiple (or more precisely, the square) of nine—and Beatrice is supposed to die in the eighty-first year of the century.<sup>16</sup>

This degree of *Prince of Mercy*, or *Scottish Trinitarian*, is the 26th of the Scottish Rite. Here is what the F.:. Bouilly says about it in his *Explication des douze écussons [the 19th to the 30th] qui représentent les emblèmes et les symboles des douze grades philosophiques du Rite Écossais dit Ancien et Accepté*:

This degree is, in our opinion, the most inextricable of all those that compose this learned category: this is why it takes the appellation *Scottish Trinitarian*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, everything in this allegory offers the emblem of the Trinity: the tricolored background [green, white and red]; the representation of *Truth* at the bottom; and finally the indication everywhere of the *Great Work of Nature* [to the phases of which the three colors allude], of the elements constitutive of the metals [sulphur, mercury and salt]<sup>18</sup>, of their fusion and their separation

14. It is at least curious that these three colors have become in modern times the national colors of Italy; moreover, a Masonic origin is fairly generally attributed to them, although it is rather difficult to know whence the idea could have been directly derived.

15. To these distinctive signs we must add a 'crown of gold arrow-heads'.

16. Cf. *Light on Masonry*, p. 250, and *le Manuel maçonnique* of F.:. Vuillaume, pp. 179-182.

17. We must admit that we do not see the connection between the complexity of this grade and its denomination.

18. The alchemical ternary is often compared to that of the constitutive elements of the human being: spirit, soul, and body.

(*solve et coagula*); in a word, of the science of mineral chemistry [or rather alchemy], which was founded by *Hermes* among the Egyptians, and which gave such power and breadth to medicine [spagyric].<sup>19</sup> So true is it that the sciences constitutive of happiness and freedom succeed one another and are classified in this admirable order that it proves the Creator's provenance of all that can ease mankind's suffering and prolong its sojourn on earth.<sup>20</sup> It is principally in the number *three*, so well represented by the three angles of the *Delta* (out of which the Christians have made the flamboyant symbol of Divinity and which goes back to the most remote times<sup>21</sup>), that the learned observer discovers the primeval source of everything that strikes the mind, enriches the imagination, and gives a fair appreciation of social equality... Therefore, noble Knights, let us not cease to remain *Scottish Trinitarians*, to maintain and honor the number three as the emblem of all that constitutes the duties of man, and that reminds us at the same time of the cherished Trinity of our Order that is engraved on the columns of our Temples: *Faith, Hope, and Charity*.<sup>22</sup>

19. We have added the words between brackets to render the text more comprehensible.

20. In these last words we see a discreet allusion to the 'elixir of long life' of the alchemists; the preceding grade (25th), *Knight of the Bronze Serpent*, was explained as "containing a part of the first degree of the *Egyptian Mysteries*, whence *medicine* and the *great art* of compounding remedies originated."

21. The author no doubt wishes to say 'the symbolic use of which goes back to the most remote times', for we cannot suppose that he wanted to assign a chronological origin to the number *three* itself.

22. The three colors of this grade are sometimes regarded as symbolizing, respectively, the three theological virtues: white representing Faith, green Hope, and red Charity (or Love). The insignia of this grade of *Prince of Mercy* are a red apron in the middle of which is painted or embroidered a white and green triangle, and a cord of the three colors of the Order to be placed around the neck, and from which hangs a golden equilateral triangle (or Delta). *Manuel maçonnique* of F.:. Vuillaume, p. 181.

What we should retain above all from this passage is that the grade concerned, like nearly all those of the same class, presents a clearly Hermetic meaning<sup>23</sup>—in this particular instance the relation of Hermeticism to the Orders of Chivalry. Here is not the place to investigate the historical origin of the high grades of Scottish Masonry, or to discuss the much-debated theory of their descent from the Templars; but, whether there has been a real and direct filiation or only a reconstitution, it is nonetheless certain that most of these grades, and also some found in other rites, appear as vestiges of organisations that formerly existed independently<sup>24</sup>: most notably the ancient Orders of Chivalry, whose foundation was bound up with the history of the Crusades—that is to say, with an epoch when there were not hostile relations only (as those who confine themselves to appearances believe), but also active intellectual exchanges between East and West, exchanges implemented above all through the mediation of these same Orders. Should we accept that the latter borrowed Hermetic material from the East and then assimilated it; or should we not rather think that they possessed from the outset an esoterism of this kind, and that it was their own initiation that qualified them to make contact with the Orientals in this domain? This again is a question we cannot claim to resolve; but the second hypothesis, though less often entertained than the first<sup>25</sup>, contains nothing implausible for those who recog-

23. A high Mason who seems more versed in this quite modern and profane science called 'history of religions' than in real initiatic knowledge, the Count Goblet d'Alviella, believed he could give a Buddhist interpretation to this purely Hermetic and Christian grade, under the pretext that there is a certain resemblance between the titles *Prince of Mercy* and *Lord of Compassion*.

24. In fact there was an *Order of the Trinitarians* or *Order of Mercy*, whose aim, at least outwardly, was the redeeming of prisoners of war.

nize the existence, throughout the Middle Ages, of a strictly Western initiatic tradition; and what could lead us further to accept it, is that Orders founded subsequently (and which never had dealings with the East) also possessed hermetic symbolism—such as that of the *Golden Fleece*, whose name itself is the clearest possible allusion to this symbolism. However that may be, in Dante's time Hermeticism certainly existed in the Order of the Temple, as did knowledge of certain doctrines—most surely of Arab origin—that Dante himself seems not to have ignored either, and which were no doubt transmitted to him in this way also—a point we shall undertake to explain in due course.

Let us return however to the Masonic similarities mentioned by the commentator Aroux, only a few of which we have so far mentioned. There are several degrees of Scottish Masonry where Aroux believes he can see a perfect similarity to the nine heavens traversed by Dante and Beatrice. Here are the correspondences that he gives for the seven planetary heavens: to the Moon corresponds the *uninitiated*, to Mercury the *Knight of the Sun* (28th), to Venus the *Prince of Mercy* (26th; green, white, and red), to the Sun the *Great Architect* (12th) or the *Noachite* (21st), to Mars the *Great Scot of the Order of Saint Andrew* or *Patriarch of the Crusades* (29th; red with a white cross), to Jupiter the *Knight of the White and Black Eagle* or *Kadosch* (30th), and to Saturn the *Golden Ladder* of the same *Kadosch*. In fact, some of these attributions seem doubtful to us, especially that of the first heaven as the abode of the uninitiated, for their place can only be in the

25. Some have gone so far as to attribute an exclusively Persian origin to the coat of arms, whose links with hermetic symbolism are fairly close, whereas, in reality, it has existed from antiquity among many peoples, as much Occidental as Oriental, and notably among the Celts.

'outer darkness'. Have we not already seen that it is in fact Hell that represents the profane world, while the different heavens (including that of the Moon) can be reached only after undergoing the initiatic trials of Purgatory? It is well known also that the Sphere of the Moon has a special relationship to Limbo; but this is an altogether different aspect of its symbolism and must not be confused with that under which it is represented as the first heaven. In fact, the Moon is at once *Janua Coeli* and *Janua Inferni*, Diana and Hecate.<sup>26</sup> The ancients knew this very well, as did Dante, who could not have been so mistaken as to accord a celestial abode—even the very lowest—to non-initiates.

Far less subject to question is the identification of the symbolic figures Dante saw: the cross in the heaven of Mars, the eagle in that of Jupiter, and the ladder in that of Saturn. The cross is evidently related to that which, after having been the distinctive sign of the Orders of Chivalry, still serves as the emblem of several Masonic grades; and if it is placed in the sphere of Mars, is this not through an allusion to the military character of these Orders—their apparent justification—and to the role they played externally in the war-like expeditions of the Crusades?<sup>27</sup> As for the other two symbols, it is impossible not to recognize in them the *Kadosch Templar* and the eagle (classical antiquity attributed the eagle to Jupiter, as did the Hindus to *Visbnu*<sup>28</sup>). It was the emblem of the ancient Roman Empire (reminiscent of the presence of Trajan<sup>29</sup> in the eye of

26. These two aspects also correspond to the two solstitial doors; and there would be much to say on this symbolism, which the ancient Latins summarized in the figure of *Janus*. On the other hand, there are some distinctions to make between the Hells, the Limbos, and the 'outer darkness' (as is mentioned in the Gospel); but that would lead us too far, and not affect the present point, which is only concerned in a general way with the separation of the profane world from the initiatic hierarchy.

that eagle), and has remained that of the Holy Empire. The heaven of Jupiter is the abode of the 'wise and just princes' (*Diligite justitiam, qui judicatis terram*<sup>30</sup>), a correspondence that, like all those Dante gave to the heavens, is fully explicable in astrological terms; and the Hebrew name for the planet Jupiter is *Tsedek*, meaning 'just'. Of the ladder of the *Kadosch* we have already spoken: since the sphere of Saturn is situated immediately above that of Jupiter, we reach the foot of this ladder by Justice (*Tsedakah*), and its summit by Faith (*Emounah*). This symbol of the ladder seems to be of Chaldean origin and also to have been brought to the West with the Mithraic mysteries: at that time it had seven rungs, each fashioned of a different metal according to the correspondence of the metals to the planets. In biblical symbolism one finds Jacob's ladder joining the earth to the heavens, which presents an identical meaning.<sup>31</sup>

"According to Dante, the eighth heaven of Paradise, the star-studded heaven (or the heaven of the fixed stars), is the *heaven of the Rosicrucians: the Perfect Ones*, clad in white, dwell

27. One can again remark that the heaven of Mars is portrayed as the sojourn of the 'martyrs of religion': even there, with respect to *Marte* and *martiri*, there is a kind of pun of which one could find other examples elsewhere. Thus the hill of Montmartre was the *Mount of Mars* before becoming the *Mount of the Martyrs*. And we note in passing a rather strange related fact: the names of the three martyrs of Montmartre—*Dionysos*, *Rusticus*, and *Eleutheros*—are all names of Bacchus. Moreover, Saint Denis, considered the first Bishop of Paris, is commonly identified with Saint Denis the Areopagite; and in Athens the Areopagus was also the Mount of Mars.

28. The symbolism of the eagle in the different traditions would call for a quite special study of its own.

29. Trajan, Roman Emperor A.D. 98-117, (Tr).

30. *Paradiso*, XVIII, 91-93.

31. It is interesting to note that St. Peter Damien, with whom Dante converses in the heaven of Saturn, appears in the list (for the most part legendary) of the *Imperatores Rose-Crucis* given in the *Clypeum Veritatis* of Irenaeus Agnostus (1618).

there, displaying a symbolism similar to that of the *Knights of Heredom*<sup>32</sup> and professing the 'evangelical doctrine'—the very one of Luther—in opposition to Roman Catholic doctrine." Aroux's interpretation here testifies to his frequent confusion of the domains of esoterism and exoterism: true esoterism must lie beyond oppositions expressed in outer movements that disturb the profane world; and if such movements are occasionally created, or invisibly directed, by powerful initiatic organisations, one can say that the latter dominate these movements without being part of them, in such a way as to exercise their influence equally upon each of the opposing terms. It is true that the Protestants, and more particularly the Lutherans, often use the word 'evangelical' to describe their own doctrine; and we know also that Luther's seal bore a cross in the center of a rose and that the Rosicrucian organisation, which revealed itself to the public in 1604 (and which Descartes sought without success to contact), declared itself 'anti-papist'. It must be said however that at the beginning of the 17th century the Rosicrucians were already working quite openly—a far cry from the original and genuine Rosicrucians, who never constituted an organisation in the real sense of the word. As for Luther, he seems to have been only a kind of subordinate agent, no doubt scarcely conscious of the role he had to play. These various points, moreover, have never been completely explained.

32. The *Order of Heredom of Kilwinning* is the *Great Chapter* of the high grades affiliated to the *Great Royal Lodge of Edinburgh* and founded, according to tradition, by the king Robert Bruce (Thory, *Acta Latomorum*, t. 1st, p.317). The English word *Heredom* (or *beirdom*) means 'heritage' (of the Templars); however, some people derive this name from the Hebrew *Harodim*, a title given to those who supervised the workers employed in the construction of King Solomon's Temple (cf. our article on this subject in *Études Traditionnelles*, March, 1948).

Be that as it may, the white robes of the *Chosen Ones*, or the *Perfect Ones*, though clearly reminiscent of certain apocalyptic texts<sup>33</sup>, appear to allude above all to the dress of the Templars; and in this respect the following passage is particularly significant:

*Qual è colui che tace e dicer vuole,  
Mi trasse Beatrice, e disse: mira  
Quanto è il convento delle bianche stole!*<sup>34</sup>

This interpretation moreover makes it possible to give a very precise meaning to the expression 'the holy militia' that we find in some verses a little further on, and that seems even to hint at the transformation of Templarism, after its apparent destruction, into Rosicrucianism.<sup>35</sup>

*In forma dunque di candida rosa  
Mi si mostrava la milizia santa,  
Che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa.*

To make better understood the symbolism involved in Aroux's last quotation, here is the description of the *Celestial Jerusalem* as it appears in the *Chapter of the Sovereign Princes Rosicrucian*, of the *Order of Heredom of Kilwinning* or the *Royal Order of Scotland*, also named *Knights of the Eagle and*

33. *Apocalypse*, VII, 13-14.

34. *Paradiso*, XXX, 127-129. Concerning this passage, we remark that the word 'convent' has remained in usage in Masonry to designate its great assemblies.

*I, yearning to speak and silent—Beatrice drew me, and said: "Now see how many are in the convent of the white robes..."*

35. *Paradiso*, XXXI, 1-3. The final verse may refer to the symbolism of the red cross of the Templars.

*Then, in the form of a white rose, the host of the sacred soldiery appeared to me, all those whom Christ in his own blood espoused.*

*the Pelican*: "At the back (of the last room) there is a picture showing a mountain whence flows a river by whose edge grows a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit. On the top of the mountain stands a plinth made of twelve precious stones laid in twelve tiers. On top of this plinth is a golden square, and on the face of each side are three angels, each angel bearing the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. In this square is a cross, at whose center lies a lamb."<sup>36</sup> This of course is apocalyptic symbolism, and we shall later show to what extent the cyclical ideas to which it refers are intimately linked to the very plan of Dante's work.

"In cantos XXIV and XXV of *Paradiso*, we find the triple kiss of the *Rosicrucian Prince*, the pelican, the white gowns (the same as those of the elders in the *Apocalypse*), the sticks of sealing wax, and the three theological virtues of the Masonic Chapters (Faith, Hope and Charity).<sup>37</sup> The symbolic flower of the Rosicrucians (the *Rosa candida* of cantos XXX and XXXI) has been adopted by the Church of Rome as the symbol of the Mother of the Saviour (*Rosa mystica* of the litanies), and by that of Toulouse (the Albigenses) as the mysterious emblem of the general assembly of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. These metaphors were already employed by the *Paulicians*, predecessors of the *Cathars* in the Xth and XIth centuries."

We have thought it useful to reproduce all these parallels, which are interesting and could no doubt be easily multiplied;

36. *Manuel maçonnique* of F.: Vuillaume, pp.143-144. Cf. *Apocalypse*, XX1.

37. In the Rosicrucian Chapters (18th degree Scottish) the names of the three theological virtues are associated respectively with the three terms of the motto *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*; they could also be compared with what are called 'the three principal pillars of the Temple' in the symbolic grades: *Wisdom, Strength, Beauty*. To these same three virtues Dante links Saint Peter, Saint James, and St. John, the three apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration.

however, one should not, except perhaps in the cases of the Templars and the original Rosicrucians, claim to draw overly firm conclusions with regard to a direct filiation of the different initiatic forms among which we find common symbols. In fact it is not only the common basis underlying the doctrines that is always the same, but (which may seem more surprising at first sight) the particular forms of expression often present a striking similarity also—and this for traditions too remote in time or space to make plausible any immediate influence on each other. To find an effective link in such cases it would no doubt be necessary to go much further back in time than recorded history allows.

Some commentators who have studied the symbolism of Dante's work, such as Rossetti and Aroux, confine themselves to an aspect that we would qualify as external; they have stopped at what could readily be called ritualistic forms—forms, that is to say, which, for those who are incapable of going further, conceal rather than express their profounder meaning. As has justifiably been said, "it is natural that this be the case, for to grasp and understand the allusions and the conventional or allegorical references, one must know the object of the allusion or allegory; in the present case this means an apprehension of the mystical experiences through which true initiation causes the *myste* and the *épopte* to pass. For anyone with some experience of this kind there can be no doubt about the existence in the *Divine Comedy*, and the *Aeneid*, of a metaphysical-esoteric allegory that simultaneously veils and unveils the successive phases through with the consciousness of the initiate passes in order to reach immortality."<sup>38</sup>

38. Arturo Reghini, *art. cit.*, pp. 545-546.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Dante and Rosicrucianism*

The same reproach of insufficiency that we have leveled against Rosetti and Aroux can also be addressed to Eliphas Lévi, who, while asserting a relationship to the ancient mysteries, nonetheless saw above all a political—or, rather, politico-religious—application that in our view is only of secondary importance. Lévi also frequently makes the mistake of assuming that properly initiatic organisations are directly engaged in outer activities. Here, in fact, is what the author says in his *History of Magic*: “There have been many commentaries and studies on Dante’s work, but nobody, as far as we know, has pointed out its true character. The writings of the great Ghibelline are a declaration of war on the Papacy through the daring revelation of the mysteries. Dante’s epic is Johannite<sup>39</sup> and gnostic; there is a bold application of the diagrams and numbers of the Kabbalah to Christian dogmas, and a secret negation of all that is uncompromising in these dogmas. His

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39. St. John is often considered the head of the *inner* Church, and, according to certain conceptions—of which an indication can be found here—some want oppose him in this respect to St. Peter, head of the *outer* Church; the truth is rather that their authorities do not apply to the same domain.



journey through the supernatural worlds effects an initiation into the mysteries of Eleusis and Thebes. It is Virgil who guides and protects him in the circles of the new Tartarus, as though Virgil, the sensitive and melancholic prophet of the destinies of the son of Pollio, were in the eyes of the Florentine poet the illegitimate but real father of the Christian epic. Thanks to the pagan genius of Virgil, Dante escapes from the abyss at whose brink he had read a sentence of despair; he escapes *by putting his head in place of his feet and his feet in place of his head* (that is to say by taking the opposite view to dogma), and reascends to the light by making use of the devil himself as a monstrous ladder: he escapes the terrible by means of terror; the horrible by means of horror. Hell, it seems, is an impasse only for those who cannot turn round and wriggle out. Dante rubs the devil the wrong way, if this common expression be permitted, and is set free by his audacity. This is already Protestantism surpassed, and the poet of Rome's enemies has already foreseen Faust rising to Heaven on the head of the vanquished Mephistopheles.<sup>40</sup>

In reality, the desire to 'reveal the mysteries', assuming such a thing were possible (which it is not, for there is no real mystery that is not inexpressible), as also the method adopted of taking 'the opposite view to dogma'—or of consciously reversing the meaning and value of symbols—would not betoken a very high initiation. Fortunately, we for our part do not see any evidence of this in Dante, whose esoterism is on the contrary shrouded by a veil rather difficult to pierce, while at the

40. This passage by Eliphas Lévi, like many others (taken mostly from *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*), was reproduced *verbatim*—with no indication of its provenance—by Albert Pike in his *Morals and Dogma of Freemasonry*, p.822, the very title of which moreover is obviously taken from the same source.

same time resting on strictly traditional foundations. To make him a precursor of Protestantism, and perhaps also of the Revolution, simply because he was an adversary of the Papacy on *political* grounds, is to fail entirely to appreciate his thought or to understand anything of the spirit of his time.

There is still something else that seems to us hardly tenable: the belief that Dante was a 'kabbalist' in the true sense of the word. We are all the more inclined to be wary here, as we know only too well how some of our contemporaries readily delude themselves on this subject, thinking they will find elements of the Kabbalah wherever there is any kind of esoterism. Have we not seen a Masonic writer solemnly assert that the *Kabbalah* and *Chivalry* are one and the same thing, and (lacking even elementary linguistic knowledge) that the two words have a common origin?<sup>41</sup> In view of such improbabilities, one will understand the necessity to exercise caution, and not satisfy oneself with some vague parallels in order to make such and so into a Kabbalist. Now the Kabbalah is essentially the Hebrew tradition<sup>42</sup>, and we have no proof whatsoever that a Jewish influence was exerted directly on Dante.<sup>43</sup> What has given rise to such a belief is only the use he makes of the science of numbers; but even if this science does really exist in the Hebrew Kabbalah, and holds a place in it of the utmost importance, it is

41. Ch.-M. Limousin, *La Kabbale littéraire occidentale*.

42. The word itself means 'tradition' in Hebrew, and unless one writes in this language there is no reason whatsoever to use it to describe all tradition indiscriminately.

43. However, one must say that according to contemporary testimonies Dante had a sustained friendship with the well-educated Jew (a poet himself) Immanuel ben Salomon ben Jekuthiel (1270-1330); but it is no less true that we cannot see any trace of specifically Jewish elements in the *Divine Comedy*, whereas Immanuel found inspiration in it for one of his own works, despite Israël Zangwill's contrary opinion, which the comparison of dates renders quite untenable.

nonetheless also found elsewhere. Will one also claim under the same pretext that Pythagoras was a Kabbalist?<sup>44</sup> As we have already stated, it is rather more to Pythagorism than to the Kabbalah that one could link Dante in this respect; for Dante very likely knew, and above all from Judaism, what Christianity had preserved from this source in its own doctrine.

"Let us also point out," Eliphas Lévi goes on to say, "that Dante's Hell is only a *negative Purgatory*. Let us explain: his Purgatory seems to have formed itself in his Hell as in a mould; it is the cover—or 'stopper'—of the bottomless pit, and one can understand that, in scaling Paradise, the Florentine Titan would like to dispatch Purgatory into Hell with a single kick." This is true in a sense, since the Mount of Purgatory was formed in the southern hemisphere out of material spewed from the heart of the earth when the abyss was dug by the fall of Lucifer; yet Hell has nine circles—an inverted reflection of the nine heavens—whereas Purgatory has only seven: the symmetry is therefore not correct in all respects.

"His Heaven is made up of a series of kabbalistic circles divided by a cross like Ezekiel's pentacle; at the center of this cross blooms a *rose*, and we see here the symbol of the Rosicrucians appearing for the first time, publicly revealed and almost categorically explained." At about the same time moreover this very symbol also appeared—though perhaps not so clearly—in another famous poetic work, *The Romance of the Rose*. Eliphas Lévi thinks that "*The Romance of the Rose* and *The Divine Comedy* are opposite forms [it would be more correct to say complementary] of the same work: initiation into independence of the spirit while satirizing all contemporary institu-

44. This opinion was put forward by Reuchlin.

tions; and formular allegorizing of the great secrets of the Rosicrucian Society" (which, in truth, did not yet bear this name, and which—we repeat—was never, but for some more or less deviant branches later, a 'society' constituted with all the outer forms that this word implies). In any case, 'independence of the spirit', or, to put it better, intellectual independence, was not so exceptional a thing in the Middle Ages as the moderns usually imagine, and the monks themselves made no bones about expressing their frank criticisms, as can be found manifested even in cathedral statuary. In all this there is nothing truly esoteric: the two works in question contain something far more profound.

Eliphas Lévi goes on: "These important manifestations of occultism coincide with the time of the fall of the Templars, since Jean de Meung or Clopinel, contemporary to Dante's old age, flourished at the court of Philip the Fair. This is a profound book that pretends to be trifling<sup>45</sup>; it is a revelation as scholarly as that of Apuleius on the mysteries of occultism. The rose of Flamel, that of Jean de Meung, and that of Dante, are born of the same bush."<sup>46</sup>

On this citation we have only one reservation to make: that the word 'occultism', invented by Eliphas Lévi himself, is hardly suitable to designate what pre-dated him, especially when one reflects on the course of contemporary occultism, which, in claiming to devote itself to the restoration of esoter-

45. The same thing can be said of some of Rabelais' works in the XVIth century, which also have an esoteric import that would be interesting to study more closely.

46. Eliphas Lévi, *Histoire de la Magie*, 1860, pp. 359-360. While on this subject it is important to mention that there exists an Italian adaptation of the *Romance of the Rose* entitled *Il Fiore*, whose author, 'Ser Durante Fiorentino', appears to be none other than Dante himself, whose real name was in fact Durante, of which Dante is only an abridged form.

ism, has succeeded only in becoming a crude counterfeit—for its leaders have never been in possession of its true principles, or of any genuine initiation. Eliphas Lévi would no doubt be the first to disown his would-be successors, to whom he was certainly very much superior intellectually; nonetheless he was far from being as profound as he wished to appear, and was mistaken in viewing everything through the mentality of an 1848 revolutionary. If we have spent some time discussing his opinions, it is because we know how great his influence has been, even upon those who scarcely understood him, and we think it best to set the limits within which his ability can be acknowledged: his greatest shortcoming—and that of his time—was to put social preoccupations in the foreground and to mix them indiscriminately with everything. In Dante's day one certainly had a better understanding of how to assign to each thing its proper place within the universal hierarchy.

What is of particular interest in this for the history of esoteric doctrines is the reference to the fact that several important manifestations of these doctrines coincided (give or take a few years) with the destruction of the Order of the Temple: there is an unquestionable connection between these events, although it is rather difficult to determine it precisely. In the early years of the XIVth century, and doubtless already in the course of the preceding century, there was therefore, in France as well as in Italy, a secret tradition ('occult' if one likes, but not 'occultist'), the very one that was to bear the name of Rosicrucianism. The denomination *Fraternitas Rosæ-Crucis* appears for the first time in 1374, or, according to some (notably *Michael Maier*), in 1413; and the legend of *Christian Rosenkreuz*, the supposed founder whose name and life are purely symbolic, was perhaps fully formed only in the XVIth century; but we have just seen that the Rosicrucian symbol is certainly much earlier.

This esoteric doctrine, whatever name one may wish to assign it (if it is necessary to do so at all) prior to its appearance as Rosicrucianism in the strict sense of the word, presented some characteristics that ally it with what is generally called Hermeticism. The history of the Hermetic tradition is intimately connected with that of the Orders of Chivalry, and was preserved at the time in question by initiatic organisations such as the *Fede Santa* and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as also by the *Massenie of the Holy Grail*. Of the latter the historian Henri Martin says<sup>47</sup>, with regard precisely to the tales of chivalry, which remain to this day among the great literary manifestations of esoterism in the Middle Ages: "The legend of the *Grail* reaches its final and splendid transfiguration in *Titurel*, under the influence of ideas that Wolfram<sup>48</sup> appears to have taken from France, and particularly from the Templars in the south of France. It is no longer in the British Isles but in Gaul, on the borders of Spain, that the *Grail* is kept. A hero named *Titurel* founds a temple in order to deposit the holy *Vessel* there, and it is the prophet Merlin who directs this mysterious construction—Merlin, whom Joseph of Arimathea had himself initiated into the plan of the pre-eminent Temple, the Temple of Solomon.<sup>49</sup> Here the *Knighthood of the Grail* becomes the *Massenie*, i.e. an ascetic Freemasonry, whose members called themselves *Templists*; and we can understand in this context the intention to link to a common center—rep-

47. *Histoire de France*, t. III, pp. 398-399.

48. The Swabian Templar Wolfram von Eschenbach, author of *Parzival* and imitator of the Benedictine satirist Guyot de Provins, whom he describes furthermore under the strangely deformed name of 'Kyot de Provence'.

49. Henri Martin adds this note: "Parzival ends up by transferring the Grail to India and rebuilding the Temple there; and it is *Prester Jolm*, the wondrous chief of an imaginary oriental Christianity, who inherits custody of the holy *Vessel*."

resented by this ideal Temple—the *Order of the Templars* and the numerous *fraternities of builders* who were at that time renewing the architecture of the Middle Ages. We catch a glimpse here of many openings to what could be called the underground history of those times, something far more complex than is generally believed... What is rather curious, and can hardly be doubted, is that modern Freemasonry goes back step by step to the *Massenie of the Holy Grail*.<sup>50</sup>

It would perhaps be unwise though to adopt too exclusively the opinion just expressed, because the ties of modern Masonry with earlier organisations are themselves also extremely complex; nonetheless it is useful to take them into account, for one can see here at least an indication of one of the actual origins of Masonry. All this can help us understand, at least to a certain extent, the means by which esoteric doctrines were transmitted throughout the Middle Ages, as well as the obscure filiation of initiatic organisations during this period when they truly were secret in the full sense of the word.

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50. We touch here on a very important point, but one we cannot treat without deviating too far from our subject: there is a very close relation between the symbolism of the *Grail* and that of the 'common center' to which Henri Martin alludes—though he appears not to suspect the profound reality involved, any more than he understands what *Prester John* and his mysterious kingdom symbolize in the same order of ideas.

*Extra-Terrestrial Journeys  
in Different Traditions*

One question that seems to have greatly preoccupied most of Dante's commentators is that of the sources to which it is fitting to link his conception of the descent into Hell; and this is also one of the points that most clearly highlights the incompetence of those who have studied these questions only in a quite 'profane' manner. This matter can only be understood in fact through actual knowledge of the stages of initiation, which we shall now try to explain.

If Dante takes Virgil for his guide in the first two parts of his journey, the main reason doubtless—as everyone recognizes—is his remembrance of the 6th canto of the *Aeneid* (which, we may say, is also no simple poetic fiction, but gives incontestable proof of initiatic knowledge). It is not without reason that the practice of *sortes virgilianae* (casting lots) was so widespread in the Middle Ages; and if people have wanted to make a magician of Virgil, this is only a popular and exoteric distortion of a profound truth, of which those who likened his work to Holy Writ—even if they did so for a divinatory usage of only very relative interest—probably had more a feeling than an understanding that they could clearly express.

On the other hand, it is not difficult to see that Virgil himself, as far as we are concerned, had some predecessors among the Greeks, and to recall in this connection the voyage of Ulysses to the country of the Cimmerians and the descent of Orpheus into the Underworld; but does the concordance we have noticed in all this prove nothing more than a series of borrowings or successive imitations? The truth is that what is involved here has a close connection to the mysteries of antiquity, and that the various poetic and legendary accounts are only translations of one and the same reality: the sprig of gold that Aeneas, guided by the Sibyl, goes first to pick up in the forest (that very *'selva selvaggia'* where Dante also situates the beginning of his poem) is the same sprig that was carried by the Eleusinian initiates—which reminds one again of the acacia of modern Masonry, 'the pledge of resurrection and immortality'. What is more, a similar symbolism is found in Christianity: in the Catholic liturgy it is Palm Sunday<sup>51</sup> that opens Holy Week, which encompasses the death of Christ, his descent into Hell, and his Resurrection—to be followed shortly thereafter by his glorious Ascension; and it is precisely on Monday of Holy Week that Dante's account commences, as if to show that it is in undertaking the quest of the mysterious sprig that he loses his way in the dark forest where he meets Virgil; and his journey across the worlds will last until Easter Sunday—that is to say, until the Day of Resurrection.

On the one hand, death and descent into the hells; on the other, resurrection and ascension to the heavens: these are like

51. The Latin name for this festival is *Dominica in Palmis*. The palm leaf and the branch are evidently one and the same thing; and the palm, taken as a symbol of the martyrs, also has the significance that we are indicating here. Recall also the popular name 'Palm Sunday' [*Pâques fleuries*], which very clearly expresses—though those who use it today are ignorant of it—the relationship of the symbolism of this festival to the resurrection.

two inverse and complementary phases, of which the first is the necessary preparation for the second. This theme can easily be found again in the description of the Hermetic 'Great Work'. The same thing is clearly stated in all traditional doctrines. In Islam for example we encounter the episode of Muhammad's 'nocturnal journey', consisting of the descent into the infernal regions (*isrâ*), followed by ascension to the various Paradises or Celestial Spheres (*mirâj*). There is a striking similarity between this 'nocturnal journey' and Dante's poem, so much so that some have seen in it one of the principal sources of Dante's inspiration. Don Miguel Asin Palacios has shown the multiple relationships that exist, in respect not only of content but also of form, between the *Divine Comedy* (not to speak of some passages from the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*) on the one hand and both the *Kitâb al-isrâ* (Book of the Nocturnal Journey) and the *Futuhât el-Mekkiyah* (The Meccan Revelations) of Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi on the other—works that were written about eighty years before Dante's. He concludes that these analogies, taken together, are more numerous than those that other commentators have been able to establish between Dante's work and the literatures of all other countries.<sup>52</sup> Here are some examples:

In an adaptation of the Islamic legend, a wolf and a lion bar the pilgrim's route; similarly, the panther, the lion, and the she-wolf force Dante to draw back... Heaven sends Virgil to Dante and Gabriel to Muhammad; each satisfies the pilgrim's curiosity during the journey. Hell is heralded in the two legends by identical signs: violent and confused tumult, blasts of fire... The architecture of Dante's Hell is modeled on the Muslim

52. Miguel Asin Palacios, *La Escatología Musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, Madrid, 1919. (See *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, London, 1968. Tr)—cf. Blochet, *les Sources orientales de "la divine Comédie"*, Paris, 1901.

Hell: both consist of an immense funnel formed by a series of levels, with circular steps or paths descending gradually to the extremity of the earth; each of them harbors classes of sinners whose culpability and affliction are worse the deeper they dwell. Each level is subdivided into several others, allotted to various categories of sinners; finally, both these Hells lie under the city of Jerusalem... In order to purify himself once out of Hell, and to ascend to Paradise, Dante undergoes a triple ablution. In the Islamic tradition, a similar triple ablution purifies souls: before entering Heaven, they are plunged successively into the waters of the three rivers that fertilize the Garden of Abraham... The architecture of the celestial spheres across which the ascension takes place is identical in the two legends: the souls of the blessed are ranged in the nine heavens according to their respective merits, and are gathered finally in the Empyrean or last sphere... Just as Beatrice stands aside that St. Bernard may guide Dante during the final stages, so does Gabriel abandon Muhammad near the throne of God, to which he will be attracted by a luminous garland... The final apotheosis of both ascensions is the same: the two travelers, raised to the presence of God, describe Him as a center of intense light surrounded by nine concentric circles formed by compact lines of innumerable angelic spirits who emit luminous rays; one of the circular ranks nearest to the center is that of the Cherubim; each circle encloses the circle immediately below it, and all nine turn unceasingly around the divine center... The infernal stages, the astronomical heavens, the circles of the Mystic Rose, the angelic choirs that surround the center of divine light, the three circles symbolizing the trinity of persons: all are borrowed word for word by the Florentine poet from Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi.<sup>53</sup>

53. A. Cabaton, 'la Divine Comédie et l'Islam', in the *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 1920; this article contains a resumé of the work of Miguel Asin Palacios.

Such coincidences, extending to precise details, cannot be accidental, and we have many reasons for admitting that Dante was really inspired, to a considerable extent, by the writings of Muhyiddin; but how could he have known of them? We have in mind as a possible intermediary Brunetto Latini, who had lived in Spain; but this hypothesis hardly seems satisfactory: Muhyiddin was born in Murcia (hence his nickname '*El-Andalusi*'), but he did not spend all his life in Spain, dying in fact in Damascus; and though his disciples were spread throughout the Islamic world—primarily in Syria and Egypt—it is unlikely that his works entered the public domain at that time; indeed, some have never yet been published. Muhyiddin was in fact anything but the 'mystical poet' that M. Asin Palacios imagines. It is worth mentioning here that he is referred to in Islamic esoterism as *al-Shaikh al-Akbar*—that is to say, the greatest of spiritual masters, the Master *par excellence*; that his doctrine is purely metaphysical; and that several of the main initiatic Orders in Islam, among them the highest and least accessible, derive directly from him. We have already indicated that such organisations were in touch with the Orders of Chivalry in the XIIIth century—that is to say, in Muhyiddin's own era—and for us this explains the transmission noted. Were it otherwise, and Dante had known of Muhyiddin through 'profane' channels, why did he never name him, as he did two exoteric philosophers of Islam, Avicenna and Averroës?<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, it is recognised that there were some Islamic influences at the beginnings of Rosicrucianism: it is to this that the supposed journeys of Christian Rosenkreuz to the East allude. But the real origin of Rosicrucianism, as we have already stated, lies precisely in the Orders of Chivalry;

54. *Inferno*, IV, 143-144.

and it was these that formed the true intellectual link between the East and the West in the Middle Ages.

Modern Western critics, who regard Muhammad's 'nocturnal journey' as nothing more than a poetic legend, claim that it is not specifically Islamic, or Arab, but of Persian origin, for an account of a similar journey exists in a Mazdean book, the *Ardâ Vîrâf Nâmeb*.<sup>55</sup> Some think it necessary to go back much further, to India, where in fact one finds—as much in Brahmanism as in Buddhism—a multitude of symbolic descriptions of the various states of existence under the form of a hierarchically organized set of heavens and hells; and some even go so far as to suppose that Dante may have been directly influenced by doctrines from India.<sup>56</sup> For those who see in all this mere 'literature' such a way of looking at things is understandable, although it is rather difficult—even from the historical viewpoint—to admit that Dante could have known anything of India other than through the Arabs. For us however these similarities prove nothing more than the unity of doctrine in all traditions. There is nothing astonishing in finding everywhere expressions of the same truths; but in order not to be astonished one must first of all know that these are truths, and not more or less arbitrary fictions. We have identified similarities of a general order, but there is no reason to conclude from this that there must have been direct communication of some kind:

55. Blochet. 'Études sur l'Histoire religieuse de l'Islam', in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 1899. A French translation of *Livre d'Ardâ Vîrâf*, done by M. A. Barthélemy, was published in 1887.

56. Angelo de Gubernatis, 'Dante e l'India', in the *Giornale della Società asiatica italiana*, vol. iii, 1889, pp. 3-19; 'Le Type indien de Lucifer chez Dante', in *Actes du Xth Congrès des Orientalistes*. M. Cabaton, in the article cited above, points out that "Ozanam had already glimpsed a double Islamic and Indian influence on Dante" (*Essai sur la philosophie de Dante*, pp. 198 ff.); but we must say that the work of Ozanam, in spite of the reputation it enjoys, seems to us extremely superficial.

such a conclusion would be justified only if the same ideas were expressed under an identical form, such as is the case with Muhyiddin and Dante. It is certain that what we find in Dante is in perfect harmony with Hindu theories of the worlds and cosmic cycles, though it is not clothed in a properly Hindu form; and this harmony necessarily obtains among all who are conscious of the same truths, however they may have acquired this knowledge.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Three Worlds*

The differentiation of the three worlds, which constitutes the general plan of the *Divine Comedy*, is common to all traditional doctrines; but it takes diverse forms, and even in India there are two versions that, neither coinciding nor standing in contradiction, correspond simply to different points of view. According to one version the three worlds are the Underworld, the Earth, and the Heavens; according to the other, where the Underworld is no longer envisaged, they are the Earth, the Atmosphere (or intermediary region), and Heaven. In the first, one must admit that the intermediary region is considered simply as an extension of the terrestrial world, in much the same way that Dante views Purgatory—which can be identified with this region. On the other hand, and taking this assimilation into account, the second division is strictly equivalent to the distinctions made in Catholic doctrine between the Church Militant, the Church Suffering, and the Church Triumphant. Here again there can be no question of Hell. Finally, a variable number of subdivisions is frequently envisaged for the Heavens and the Underworld; but in all such cases it is a question of a hierarchical apportionment of the levels of existence—which are really of an indefinite multiplicity,



and can be classified differently according to the analogous correspondences that one selects as a basis for symbolic representation.

The Heavens are the superior states of the being; the Underworld, as the name itself indicates, is the inferior state. When we say 'superior' and 'inferior' this must be understood in relation to the human or terrestrial state, which is naturally taken as a term of comparison since it serves necessarily as our starting point. It is easy to understand that real initiation—meaning the conscious acquisition of superior states—can be described symbolically as an ascension or 'celestial journey'; but one could ask why this ascension must be preceded by a descent to the Underworld. There are several reasons for this, but these we cannot fully explain now, as it would require too long a digression and lead us too far from the special subject of our present study. We will say only that this descent is on the one hand like a recapitulation of the states that logically precede the human state, that have determined its particular conditions, and that must also partake in the 'transformation' to be accomplished; on the other hand, the descent allows the manifestation, according to certain modalities, of the possibilities of an inferior order that the being still carries in an undeveloped state, and that must be exhausted before it can attain the realization of the higher states. It must be emphasized moreover that there can be no question of the being actually returning to those states through which it has already passed; it can only explore these states indirectly, by becoming aware of the traces they have left in the most obscure regions of the human state itself; and this is why the Underworld is represented symbolically as situated in the interior of the Earth.

The Heavens on the contrary are superior states (and not merely their reflection in the human state) whose uppermost

extensions constitute only the intermediary region, or Purgatory—the mountain on whose summit Dante places the Terrestrial Paradise. The real object of initiation is not merely the restoration of the 'Edenic state' (which is only a stage on a path that must lead much higher, since it is beyond this stage that the 'celestial journey' really begins), but the *active* conquest of the 'supra-human' states; for as Dante remarks, following the Gospel, "*Regnum coelorum* violencia pate ..."<sup>57</sup>—and this is one of the essential differences that exist between initiates and mystics. In other words, the human state must first be brought to its full development by the complete realization of its inherent possibilities (and this plenitude is what must be understood here by the 'Edenic state'); however, far from being the end, this will be only the foundation on which the being will have to stand in order to "*salire alle stelle*"<sup>58</sup>—that is to say, to raise himself to the higher states symbolized by the planetary and stellar spheres in the language of astrology, and by the angelic hierarchies in that of theology. There are therefore two stages to distinguish in the ascension, but the first is in truth only an ascension in relation to normal humanity (the height of a mountain, whatever it may be, is

57. *Paradiso*, XX, 94. "The kingdom of Heaven suffers itself to move."

58. *Purgatorio*, XXXIII, 145. "...mount to the stars." It is remarkable that the three parts of the poem all end with the same word *stelle*, as if to confirm the quite particular importance that astrological symbolism had for Dante. The last words of the *Inferno*, "look once more upon the stars," characterize the return to the state that is properly human, whence it is possible to perceive a reflection, as it were, of the higher states; the last words of the *Purgatorio* are precisely what we are explaining here. As to the final verse of the *Paradiso*: "The love that moves the sun and the other stars," it indicates, as the ultimate term of the 'celestial journey', the divine center that lies beyond all the spheres, and that is, according to Aristotle's expression, the 'unmoved mover' of all things; the name 'Love', which is attributed to it, could give rise to some interesting considerations in relation to the symbolism characteristic of initiation in the Orders of Chivalry.

nothing in comparison to the distance that separates the Earth from the Heavens); in reality, it is more an extension, since it is the complete development of the human state. The unfolding of the possibilities of the total being takes place first in the direction of 'fullness', and then in that of 'exaltation' (to use terms borrowed from Islamic esoterism); and we will add that this distinction of two stages corresponds to the ancient one between the 'lesser mysteries' and the 'greater mysteries'.

The three phases with which the three parts of the *Divine Comedy* are concerned can also be explained by reference to the Hindu doctrine of the three *gunas*: these are the qualities—or rather the fundamental tendencies—from which all manifested being proceeds. Beings are arrayed hierarchically in the totality of the three worlds—that is to say, in all the degrees of universal existence—according to which tendency predominates in them. The three *gunas* are: *sattwa*—conformity to the pure essence of Being, which is identical to the Light of Knowledge and is symbolized by the luminosity of the celestial spheres that represent the higher states; *rajas*—impulsion that provokes the expansion of the being in a given state (such as the human), or, if one wishes, the unfolding of this being up to a certain level of existence; and, finally, *tamas*—obscurity, equated with ignorance, the dark root of the being considered in its lower states. Thus *sattwa*, which is an upward tendency, refers to the higher and luminous states, or to the Heavens, and *tamas*, which is a downward tendency, refers to the inferior and dark states, or to the Underworld. *Rajas*, which could be represented as an extension in the horizontal sense, refers to the intermediary world (here the 'world of man', since it is our level of existence that we are taking as term of comparison), which we must regard as consisting of the Earth together with Purgatory—that is to say, of the whole of the corporeal

and the psychic world. We see that this corresponds exactly to the first of the two ways of looking at the division of the three worlds that we mentioned previously; and the passage from one to another of these three worlds can be described as resulting from a change in the general direction of the being, or from a change (by virtue of its predominance) in the *guna* that determines this direction. There is a Vedic text in which the three *gunas* are presented in precisely this way, the one changing into the other in an ascending order: "All was *tamas*: It [the Supreme *Brahma*] decreed a change, and *tamas* took the complexion [that is to say the nature] of *rajas* [intermediate between darkness and luminosity]; and *rajas*, having been commanded once more, assumed the nature of *sattwa*." This text outlines the organisation of the three worlds, starting from the primordial chaos of possibilities, and conforming to the order of generation and the succession of the cycles of universal existence. Moreover, in order to realize all its possibilities, each being must pass—in the particular way suited to its nature—through states that correspond, respectively, to these different cycles; and this is why initiation, which aims at the total realization of the being, must necessarily proceed through these same phases: the initiatic process rigorously reproduces the cosmogonic process, according to the constitutive analogy of macrocosm and microcosm.<sup>59</sup>

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59. The theory of the three *gunas*, referring to all the possible modes of universal manifestation, is naturally susceptible of multiple applications. One of these applications, which especially concerns the tangible world, is found in the cosmological theory of the elements; but we have had to consider here only its most general significance, since it was only a question of explaining the distribution of the whole of manifestation according to the hierarchical division of the three worlds, and of indicating the import of this distribution from the initiatic viewpoint.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Symbolic Numbers*

Before passing on to some considerations regarding the doctrine of cosmic cycles, we must first make a few remarks about the role that the symbolism of numbers plays in Dante's work. On this subject we have found some very interesting indications in a work by Prof. Rodolfo Benini<sup>60</sup>, but he has not drawn all the conclusions these appear to imply. It is true that this work is a study of the original plan of the *Inferno*—and thus primarily a literary undertaking—but the findings to which it can in fact lead have a far greater import.

According to Mr. Benini, Dante saw symbolic significance *par excellence* in the following three pair of numbers: 3 and 9, 7 and 22, 515 and 666. With the first two numbers there is no difficulty: everyone knows that the general division of the poem is ternary, and we have just explained the profound reasons for this; on the other hand, we have already recalled that 9 is the number of Beatrice, as seen in the *Vita Nuova*. Moreover, this number 9 is directly linked

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60. 'Per la restituzione della Cantica dell'*Inferno* alla sua forma primitiva', in the *Nuovo Patto*, September/November 1921, pp. 506-532.

to 3, whose square it is, and could be called a triple ternary. It is also the number of the angelic hierarchies, and therefore that of the heavens as well as of the infernal circles—for there is a certain ratio of inverse symmetry between the heavens and the underworld. As for the number 7, which we find especially in the divisions of Purgatory, all traditions are agreed in regarding it as a sacred number, and we do not believe it necessary to enumerate here all the applications to which it gives rise. We will recall only one of the principal ones: the configuration of the seven planets, which serves as the basis for a multitude of analogous correspondences (we have seen an example of this in reference to the seven liberal arts). The number 22 is linked to 7 through the ratio  $22/7$ , which is the approximation of the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle, so that the combination of these two numbers stands for the circle, which Dante—no less than the Pythagoreans—considered the most perfect form (all the divisions of each of the three worlds have this circular form). Moreover, 22 combines the symbols of two of the ‘elementary movements’ of Aristotelian physics: *locomotion*, represented by two, and *alteration*, represented by 20, as Dante himself explains in the *Convivio*.<sup>61</sup> Such in any case are the interpretations given by Mr. Benini for this last number. For our part, though acknowledging them to be correct, we must say that this number does not seem to us so fundamental as he thinks, being derived in all likelihood from another number, which the same author regards as of only secondary importance, whereas in reality its sig-

61. The third ‘elementary movement’, that of *growth*, is represented by 1,000; and the total of the three symbolic numbers is 1,022, which the “wise men of Egypt”, according to Dante, regarded as the number of the fixed stars.

nificance is much greater: the number 11, of which 22 is only a multiple.

We must in fact insist on this point, and say at the outset that this omission by Mr. Benini appears to us all the more astonishing as his entire work rests upon the fact that in the *Inferno* most of the complete scenes or episodes into which the various cantos are divided comprise exactly eleven, or twenty-two, stanzas (some have only ten). There are also a number of preludes and finales of seven stanzas; and if these proportions have not always been respected, it is because the original plan of the *Inferno* has been subsequently modified. Under these circumstances, why should 11 not be at least as important as 22? These two numbers can be found associated again in the dimensions assigned to the extremes of the ‘pit of hell’, the circumferences of which are 11 and 22 miles respectively. But 22 is not the only multiple of 11 that occurs in the poem: there is also 33, the number of cantos into which each of the three parts is divided. Only the *Inferno* has 34, but the first is more by way of a general introduction that completes the total number 100 for the work as a whole. On the other hand, when we know how important rhythm was for Dante, we can reflect that his choice of a line of eleven syllables was not an arbitrary one, any more than the stanza of three lines, reminiscent of the ternary: each stanza has 33 syllables, just as the sets of 11 and 22 stanzas we have just mentioned contain 33 and 66 lines respectively; and the various multiples of 11 that we find here all have a particular symbolic value. It is not satisfactory therefore to limit oneself, as does Mr. Benini, to introducing 10 and 11 between 7 and 22 in order to construct a “tetrachord that has a vague resemblance to the Greek tetrachord,” and whose explanation seems to us rather awkward.

The truth is that the number 11 has played a considerable role in the symbolism of some initiatic organisations; and, as to its multiples, we will recall simply this: 22 is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and we know of their importance in the Kabbalah; 33 is the number of years of Christ's terrestrial life, found again in the symbolic age of Rosicrucian Masonry and the number of degrees of Scottish Masonry; 66 is in Arabic the total numeric value of the name of *Allah*, while 99 is the number of the principal divine attributes according to the Islamic tradition; and many other parallels could no doubt be found. Apart from the diverse meanings that can be assigned to 11 and to its multiples, their use by Dante constitutes a true 'sign of recognition' in the strictest sense of this expression; and this is where we find the real reason for the modifications made to the *Inferno* after its first draft. Among the reasons for these modifications, Mr. Benini envisages some changes in the chronological and architectonic plan of the work that are doubtless possible, but for which there does not appear to be any clear proof; but he also mentions "the *new facts* that the poet wanted to take into account in the system of prophecies," and it is here that he seems to come close to the truth, especially when he adds: "for example, the death of Pope Clement V, which occurred in 1314, just when the first draft of the *Inferno* must have been completed." In fact the true reason, in our opinion, is the series of events from 1300 to 1314 that led to the destruction of the Order of the Temple (and its ramifications<sup>62</sup>). Dante, moreover, was unable to refrain from pointing to these events when, in making Hugh Capet foretell the crimes of Philip the Fair (after having spoken of the outrage that the latter inflicted "upon Christ through his Vicar"), he continues in these terms:

*Veggio il nuovo Pilato si crudele,  
Che ciò nol sazia, ma, senza decreto,  
Porta nel Tempio le cupide vele.*<sup>63</sup>

What is more astonishing, the following stanza<sup>64</sup> contains, in specific terms, the *Nekam Adonai*<sup>65</sup> of the *Kadosch Templars*:

O Signor mio, *quando sarò io lieto  
A veder la vendetta, che, nascosa,  
Fa dolce l'ira tua nel tuo segreto?*

These are most surely the "new facts" that Dante had to take into account, and this for reasons quite other than those that could occur to one who ignores the nature of the organisations to which he belonged. These organisations, which

62. It is interesting to consider the sequence of these dates: in 1307 Philip the Fair, in agreement with Clement V, imprisons the Grand Master and the principal dignitaries of the Order of the Temple (a total of 72, it is said, again a symbolic number); in 1308 Henri of Luxembourg is elected emperor; in 1312 the Order of the Temple is officially abolished; in 1313 the Emperor Henri VII dies mysteriously, no doubt poisoned; in 1314 the torturing of the Templars, whose trial had lasted seven years, takes place; and the same year King Philip the Fair and Pope Clement V die in their turn.

63. *Purgatorio*, XX, 91-93.

*I see another Pilate, so full of spite  
not even that suffices: his swollen sails  
enter the very Temple without right.*

For Dante, the driving force of Philip the Fair is avarice and greed; there is perhaps a closer relationship than is supposed between two actions imputable to this king: the destruction of the Order of the Temple and the debasement of the coinage.

64. *Purgatorio*, XX, 94-96.

*Oh God, my Lord, when shall my soul rejoice  
to see Thy retribution, which, lying hidden,  
sweetens Thine anger in Thy secret choice?*

65. In Hebrew, these words mean: "Vengeance O Lord!" *Adonai* should be translated more literally as 'my Lord', and it will be noted that this is exactly how it is rendered in Dante's text.

proceeded from the Order of the Temple, and were to inherit a part of its legacy, had to conceal themselves with far greater care than hitherto, especially after the death of their outer leader, Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg, whose seat in the highest of the Heavens<sup>66</sup> Beatrice had shown to Dante by way of anticipation. From then on it was befitting to conceal the 'sign of recognition' to which we have referred: the divisions of the poem, where the number 11 appeared most conspicuously, had to be, not suppressed, but rendered less visible, in such a way as to be rediscoverable only to those who could recognize their *raison d'être* and significance. And if we reflect that six centuries went by before their existence was revealed publicly, it must be admitted that the intended precautions were well devised, and not lacking in effectiveness.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, at the same time that he was making these changes to the first part of his poem, Dante was taking the opportunity to insert into it some new references to other symbolic numbers; and here is what Mr. Benini says:

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66. *Paradiso*, XXX, 124-148. This passage clearly concerns a "convento delle bianche stole" (gathering of white robes). The organisations concerned had taken *Altri* for a password, which Aroux (*Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste*, p.227) interprets as: *Arrigo Lucemburgese Teutonico, Romano Imperatore*; we think that the word *Teutonico* is incorrect and should be replaced by *Templar*. It is true however that there must have been a certain connection between the Order of the Temple and that of the *Teutonic Knights*; it is not without reason that they were founded almost simultaneously, the first in 1118 and the second in 1128. Aroux assumes that the word *altri* should be interpreted as has just been mentioned in a certain passage of Dante (*Inferno* IX, 9), and that, in the same way, the word *tal* (id., VIII 130, and IX, 8) should be translated as *Teutonico Arrigo Lucemburgese*.

67. The number 11 has been kept in the ritual of the Scottish 33<sup>o</sup>, where it is associated precisely with the date of the abolition of the Order of the Temple, calculated according to the Masonic era, not the common calendar.

"Dante contrived, then, to arrange the intervals between the prophecies and other salient features of the poem in such a way that they corresponded to one another according to some determined numbers of lines, chosen quite naturally from among the symbolic numbers. In short, Dante substituted for the earlier plan a system of consonances and rhythmic periods far more complicated and *secret*—as befits a revelatory language spoken by beings who see the future. Here the famous numbers 515 and 666 make their appearance, numbers that recur frequently in the trilogy: 666 lines separate Ciaccio's prophecy from that of Virgil, and 515 Farinata's prophecy from that of Ciaccio; 666 lines are interposed again between the prophecy of Brunetto Latini and that of Farinata, and again 515 between the prophecy of Nicolas III and that of Master Brunetto." These numbers 515 and 666, which we see alternate so regularly, stand opposite each other in the symbolism adopted by Dante: we know in fact that 666 is the 'number of the beast' in the *Apocalypse*, and that innumerable, and often fanciful, calculations have been contrived to find therein the name of the Antichrist, of whom it must represent the numeric value, "for this number is a number of man."<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, 515 is expressly invested with a meaning directly contrary to 666 in Beatrice's prediction: "*A cinquecento diece e cinque, messo di Dio...*"<sup>69</sup> Some have thought this 515 equivalent to the mysterious *Veltro*, enemy of the she-wolf, which latter finds itself thus identified with the apocalyptic beast<sup>70</sup>; and

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68. *Apocalypse*, XIII, 18.

69. *Purgatorio*, XXXIII, 43-44.

...by God's decree,

Five hundred, ten, and five shall be the sign  
of one who comes to hunt down and destroy  
the giant and his thievish concubine.

it has even been suggested that both these symbols point to Henry of Luxembourg.<sup>71</sup> We do not intend to discuss the significance of the *Veltro*<sup>72</sup> here, but neither do we believe it necessary to see in it an allusion to a particular person; for us, it only concerns one of the aspects of the general conception that Dante forms of the Empire.<sup>73</sup> Mr. Benini, in remarking that the number 515 is transcribed in Latin letters by DXV, interprets these as initials designating Dante, *Veltro di Cristo*; but this interpretation is singularly far-fetched, and there is no reason to suppose that Dante wanted to identify himself with this 'messenger of God'. In fact it suffices simply to change the order of the numeric letters to arrive at DVX—that is, the word *Dux*, which is comprehensible without further explanation<sup>74</sup>; and we will add that the sum of the figures of 515 again gives the number 11.<sup>75</sup> This *Dux* may very well be Henry of Luxembourg, if one wishes, but it is also, and by the same token, any

70. *Inferno* 1, 100-111. We know that the she-wolf was the first symbol of Rome, but that it was replaced by the eagle in the Imperial era.

71. E. G. Parodi, *Poesia e Storia nella Divina Commedia*.

72. The *Veltro* is a greyhound, a dog, and Aroux suggests the possibility of a word play between *cane* (a female duck) and the title of *Khan* borne by the Tartar chiefs; thus a name like *Can Grande della Scala*, Dante's protector, could well have had a double meaning. This parallel is plausible, for it is not the only example that can be given of a symbolism resting on a phonetic similarity; and we will even add that, in various languages, the root *can* or *kan* means 'power', which is again linked to the same order of ideas.

73. The Emperor, as conceived by Dante, is quite comparable to the *Chakravarti* or Universal Monarch of the Hindus, whose essential function is to maintain peace *sarvabhaumika*—that is to say, extending over the whole earth. There are some parallels to be drawn between this theory of the Empire and that of the Khalifat in Muhyiddin.

74. One can remark furthermore that this *Dux* is the equivalent of the Tartar Khan.

75. Likewise, DIL, the first letters of the words *Diligite justitiam...*, which are first stated separately (*Paradiso*, XVIII, 78), equal 551, which is formed from the same figures as 515 (put in a different order) and also contract to 11.

other leader chosen by the same organisations to fulfil the objectives that they set themselves in the social order—which Scottish Masonry still calls 'the reign of the Holy Empire'.<sup>76</sup>

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76. Some Supreme Councils of the Scottish Rite, notably that of Belgium, have however eliminated from their Constitutions and rituals the expression 'Holy Empire' wherever it was found. We see here the sign of a remarkable lack of comprehension of symbolism even in its most fundamental elements, and this shows to what degree of degeneracy certain parts of contemporary Masonry have sunk, even in the highest grades.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Cosmic Cycles*

After these observations, which we believe appropriate for settling some important historical points, we come to what Mr. Benini calls the 'chronology' of Dante's poem. We have recalled that in the poem the journey across the worlds takes place during Holy Week, that is to say at the time in the liturgical year that corresponds to the vernal equinox; and we have also seen that, according to Aroux, it was at this time that the *Cathars* performed their initiations. On the other hand, in the Masonic Rosicrucian Chapters the commemoration of the Last Supper is celebrated on Holy Thursday, and work symbolically resumes on Friday at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, that is to say, on the day and at the hour when Christ died. Finally, the commencement of Holy Week in the year 1300 coincided with the full moon; and one could point out in this respect, in order to complete the coincidences reported by Aroux, that it is also at the full moon that the *Noachites* hold their meetings.

The year 1300 marks for Dante the middle of his life (he was then 35), and it is also for him the mid-point of the times. Here again we will quote what Mr. Benini says: "Transported by an extraordinary egocentrism, Dante set his vision at the middle of the world's duration. The movement of the heavens



had lasted 65 centuries before him, and would extend 65 more after him. By a skillful contrivance, he made the exact anniversaries of some of the greatest events in history meet in three kinds of astronomical years, and, in a fourth kind, the anniversary of the most important event of his own life." What must hold our attention here above all is the calculation of the total duration of the world (we would rather say of the present cycle): two times 65 centuries, namely 130 centuries or 13,000 years, of which the 13 centuries elapsed since the beginning of the Christian era form exactly a tenth. The number 65 is remarkable moreover in itself: through the addition of its figures, it is reduced again to 11; and 11, conversely, is composed of 6 and 5, which are the symbolic numbers of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm respectively, both of which Dante derives from principal unity when he says: "... Così come raia dell'*un*, se si conosce, il *cinque* e il *sei*."<sup>77</sup> Finally, by transposing 65 into Roman numerals, as we have done for 515, we have LXV, or, with the same inversion as before, LVX, namely the word *Lux*, and this may have a connection with the masonic era of the *True Light*.<sup>78</sup>

But here is what is most interesting: the duration of 13,000 years is none other than the half-period of the precession of the equinoxes, exceeding the exact value by only 40 years (hence less than half a century) and representing therefore an acceptable approximation—especially where this period is expressed in centuries. The total period is in fact 25,920 years. The 'great year' of the Persians and the Greeks represents half of this period (12,960 years), and was usually estimated at 12,000 years, which is far less exact than Dante's figure. This

77. *Paradiso*, XV, 56-57. ...as five and six, if understood, ray forth from unity.

78. We will add further that in Hebrew the number 65 is that of the divine name *Adonai*.

'great year' was actually regarded by the ancients as the elapsed time between two renewals of the world, which must doubtless be interpreted, in the history of terrestrial humanity, as the interval separating the great cataclysms during which entire continents disappeared (of which the last was the destruction of Atlantis). Actually this is only a secondary cycle, which can be considered part of another more extended cycle; but, by virtue of a certain law of correspondence, each of the secondary cycles reproduces, on a reduced scale, phases comparable to those of the great cycles of which it is a part. What can be said of the cyclical laws in general will find its application therefore at different degrees: historical cycles, geological cycles and true cosmic cycles—with divisions and subdivisions that again multiply these possibilities of application. Besides, when one goes beyond the limits of the terrestrial world, it can no longer be a question of measuring the duration of a cycle by a number of years understood literally; numbers then take on a purely symbolic value, and express proportions rather than real durations. It is no less true, in Hindu cosmology, that all cyclical numbers are based essentially on the period of the precession of the equinoxes, with which they have some clearly determined relationships.<sup>79</sup> The precessional movement is thus the fundamental phenomenon upon which the astronomical application of cyclical laws rests, and is, consequently, the natural departure point for the many analogical transpositions to which these laws give rise. Limited space precludes our developing these considerations here, but it is remarkable that Dante adopted the same basis for his sym-

79. The foremost of these cyclic numbers are 72, 108, and 432; it is easy to see that these are exact divisors of the number 25920, to which they are directly linked by the geometric division of the circle; this division itself is again an application of cyclic numbers.

bolic chronology; and we note here again his perfect agreement with the traditional doctrines of the East.<sup>80</sup>

We can ask ourselves though why Dante situates his vision just at the mid-point of the 'great year', and whether it is necessary to speak of "egocentrism" in this respect, or whether there are not other reasons. Let us point out first that if one selects any starting point in time and then counts the length of the cyclical period from there, a point is always reached that is in perfect correspondence to that from which one started, for it is this very correspondence between the elements of successive cycles that ensures their continuity. One can therefore choose the origin so as to position oneself ideally at the mid-point of such a period. This yields two equal periods, the one anterior and the other posterior, in whose totality the full revolution of the heavens actually takes place, since all things finally find themselves in a position, not identical (to claim so would be to fall into the error of Nietzsche's 'eternal return'), but analogically corresponding to the one they had at the beginning. This can be represented geometrically in the following way: if the cycle in question is the half-period of the precession of the equinoxes, and if the entire cycle is represented by a circumference, it will suffice to trace a horizontal diameter to divide this circumference into two halves, each of which will represent a half-period whose beginning and end

80. Besides, there is a basic accord between all traditions, whatever their differences in form; thus it is that the theory of the four ages of humanity (which relates to a more extended cycle than that of 13,000 years) is found in Greco-Roman antiquity, among the Hindus, and among the peoples of Central America as well. We find a reference to these four ages (of gold, silver, bronze, and iron) in the figure of "the old man of Crete" (*Inferno*, XIV, 94-120), which is moreover identical to the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (*Daniel*, 11); and the four rivers that Dante has come out of Hell are not without a certain analogical relationship to those of the Terrestrial Paradise; all this can be understood only by reference to cyclical laws.

correspond to the two extremities of the diameter. If we only consider the upper half-circumference and trace the vertical radius, it will end at the median point corresponding to the 'mid-point of the times'. The figure thus obtained is the sign  $\oplus$ , that is to say the alchemical symbol for the mineral kingdom<sup>81</sup>; surmounted by a cross, it becomes the 'globe of the world', hieroglyph of the Earth and emblem of imperial power.<sup>82</sup> This latter use of the symbol in question leads one to think that it must have had for Dante a particular value; and the addition of the cross is implied in the fact that the central point at which he placed himself corresponded geographically to Jerusalem, which represented for him what we can call the 'spiritual pole'.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, at the antipodes of Jerusalem, that is to say at the other pole, rises the Mount of Purgatory, over which shine the four stars that form the constellation of the 'Southern Cross'.<sup>84</sup> This is the entrance to the Heavens, whereas the entrance to Hell is to be found under Jerusalem; and we find depicted in this opposition the antithesis of 'Christ suffering' and 'Christ triumphant'.

Some will find it astonishing, at first sight, that we thus draw a comparison between a chronological and a geographical symbolism; and yet this is where we wanted to arrive in order to give to the preceding remarks their real significance, for the temporal succession involved is itself only a mode of symbolic expression. Any cycle can be divided into two phases, which

81. This symbol is one of those that refer to the quaternary division of the circle, whose analogical applications are almost endless.

82. Cf. Oswald Wirth, *Le Symbolisme hermétique dans ses rapports avec l'Alchimie et la Franc-Maçonnerie*, pp. 19 and 70-71.

83. The symbolism of the pole plays an important role in all traditional doctrines; but in order to give a complete explanation, it would be necessary to devote to it a special study.

84. *Purgatorio*, 1, 22-27.

are, chronologically, its successive halves, and it is under this form that we have considered them in the first place; but in reality these two phases represent, respectively, the action of two opposed and yet complementary tendencies; and this action can clearly be simultaneous as well as successive. To place oneself at the mid-point of the cycle is therefore to place oneself at the point where these two tendencies counter-balance each other. It is, as the Muslim initiates say, 'the divine place where contrasts and antinomies are reconciled': the center of the 'Wheel of Things', according to the Hindu expression, or the 'Immutable Middle' of the Far-Eastern tradition; the fixed point around which the spheres rotate—the perpetual movement of the manifested world. Dante completes his journey by following the 'spiritual axis' of the world; only thence, in truth, is it possible to view all things in permanent mode, because one is not oneself subject to change, and consequently has a view that is synthetic and complete.

From a properly initiatic point of view, what we have just said answers again to a profound truth: the being must above all identify the center of his own individuality (represented by the heart in traditional symbolism) with the cosmic center of the state of existence to which this individuality belongs, and which he takes as a foundation from which to raise himself to the higher states. It is in this center that perfect equilibrium resides, the image of principial immutability in the manifested world; it is here that the axis connecting all the states projects itself—the 'divine radius' that, in its ascending direction, leads directly to the higher states to be attained. Any point possesses these possibilities virtually, and is, if one may put it so, a potential center; but it is necessary that it become so effectively, through a real identification, to render possible the total development of the being. This is why Dante, in order to raise

himself to the Heavens, has first of all to place himself at a point that is truly the center of the terrestrial world, both according to time and space—that is to say, in relation to the conditions that essentially characterize existence in this world.

If we now return to the geometric representation that we used before, we see again that the vertical radius, going from the surface of the earth to its center, corresponds to the first part of Dante's journey—the journey through the Underworld. The center of the earth is the lowest point, since it is there that the forces of gravity exert themselves from all sides; when it is overcome the ascent commences, ending at the antipode of the point of departure. To represent this second phase it is therefore necessary to extend the radius beyond the center, so as to complete the vertical diameter; we then have the figure of a circle divided by a cross, namely the sign  $\oplus$ , which is the hermetic symbol for the vegetable kingdom. Now, if one looks in a general way at the symbolic elements that play a leading role in the first two parts of Dante's poem, one can in fact see that they relate to the mineral and vegetable kingdoms respectively (we will not stress the obvious relation that unites the first to the interior regions of the earth; and only mention in passing the 'mystical trees' of Purgatory and of the Terrestrial Paradise). One might expect this correspondence to obtain also between the third phase and the animal kingdom<sup>85</sup>, but such is not the case because the limits of the terrestrial world are here exceeded, so that it is no longer possible to con-

85. The hermetic symbol of the animal kingdom is the sign  $\ominus$ , which is made up of the complete vertical diameter and half only of the horizontal diameter; this symbol is in a way the inverse of that of the mineral kingdom: what was horizontal in the one becoming vertical in the other, and vice versa. The symbol of the vegetable kingdom, where there is a kind of symmetry or equivalence between both horizontal and vertical directions, clearly represents an intermediary stage between the other two.

tinue the same symbolism. It is at the end of the second phase, that is to say while still in the Terrestrial Paradise, that we find the greatest abundance of animal symbols: it is necessary first to travel across the three kingdoms, which represent the various modalities of existence in our world, before passing on to other states, where conditions are quite different.<sup>86</sup>

We must still consider the points at the opposite extremities of the axis passing through the earth, namely Jerusalem and the Terrestrial Paradise. These are the vertical projections, as it were, of the two points marking the beginning and the end of the chronological cycle, which in the preceding diagram corresponded to the extremities of the horizontal diameter. If we let these latter represent opposition according to time, and those of the vertical diameter represent opposition according to space, we have then an expression of the complementary roles of these two principles, whose action is translated, in our world, as the two conditions, time and space. The vertical projection could be regarded as a projection into the 'intemporal', if we are permitted to use this expression, seeing that it is accomplished along the axis whence all things are envisaged in permanent, not transitory, mode; the passing from the horizontal to the vertical diameter therefore really represents a transmutation of succession into simultaneity.

But, one will ask, what is the relationship between the two points in question and the extremities of the chronological cycle? For one of them, the Terrestrial Paradise, this relationship is obvious; indeed, it really corresponds to the beginning

86. We point out that the three degrees of symbolic Masonry have, in certain rites, passwords that also represent the three kingdoms: mineral, vegetable, and animal. Moreover, the first of these passwords is sometimes interpreted in a sense closely connected with the symbolism of the 'globe of the world'.

of the cycle. But, for the other, it must be noted that the Terrestrial Jerusalem is taken as the prefiguration of the Celestial Jerusalem described in the *Apocalypse*; symbolically, moreover, it is also in Jerusalem that one situates the place of the resurrection and judgement that end the cycle. The antipodal positions of these two points take on a new significance if we observe that the Celestial Jerusalem represents the very reconstitution of the Terrestrial Paradise, according to an analogy applied in an inverse sense.<sup>87</sup> At the 'beginning of time'—that is to say, of the present cycle—the Terrestrial Paradise was rendered inaccessible following the fall of man; the New Jerusalem must 'descend from Heaven to Earth' at the end of this same cycle to mark the reestablishment of all things in their primordial order; and one can say that it will play the same role for the future cycle that the Terrestrial Paradise does for the present one. In fact, the end of a cycle is analogous to its beginning, and coincides with the commencement of the following cycle. What was only virtual at the start of the cycle is realized effectively at its end, and immediately engenders the potentialities that will develop in their turn in the course of the future cycle; however this is a matter on which we cannot dwell further without getting away completely from our subject.<sup>88</sup> We add only, for the sake of indicating yet another aspect of the same symbolism, that the center to which we

87. The same relationship obtains between the Terrestrial Paradise and the Celestial Jerusalem as between the two Adams spoken of by St. Paul (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, XV).

88. There are many other related questions that would be worth exploring. Why, for example, is the Terrestrial Paradise described as a garden, and with a vegetable symbolism, while the Celestial Jerusalem is described as a city, and with a mineral symbolism? It is because vegetation represents the development of seeds in the sphere of vital assimilation, while minerals represent results that are fixed definitively—'crystallized' so to speak—at the end of the cyclical development.

alluded above is referred to in the Hindu tradition as the 'City of Brahma' (in Sanskrit *Brahmapura*), and that several texts speak of it in terms almost identical to those we find in the apocalyptic description of the Celestial Jerusalem.<sup>89</sup> Returning finally to what more directly concerns Dante's journey, it is relevant to note that, if the crossing of the terrestrial world ends at the beginning point of the cycle, this alludes explicitly to the 'return to origins' that holds so important a place in all traditional doctrines, and on which, rather remarkably, Islamic esoterism and Taoism in particular insist. It is a question again of the restoration of the 'Edenic State', of which we have already spoken, and which must be regarded as a precondition for the conquest of the superior states of the being.

The point equidistant between the two extremities about which we have just been speaking—that is to say the center of the earth—is, as we have already pointed out, the lowest point; and it also corresponds to the middle of the cosmic cycle when this cycle is envisaged chronologically, or under the aspect of succession. We can in fact divide the whole into two phases: the one descending, proceeding in the direction of ever more

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89. The comparison to which these texts gives rise is even more significant when we know the relationship that connects the Lamb in Christian symbolism with the vedic *Agni* (whose vehicle, furthermore, is represented by the ram). We do not claim that there is between the words *Agnus* and *Ignis* (the Latin equivalent of *Agni*) anything more than one of those phonetic similarities we were alluding to before, which can very well correspond to no actual linguistic relationship strictly speaking, but which is not for all that purely accidental. What we want to point out particularly is a certain aspect of the symbolism of fire, which, in various traditional forms, is fairly closely connected with the idea of 'Love', transposed into a higher sense, as Dante has done; and in this Dante was again inspired by St. John, to whom the Orders of Chivalry have always principally linked their doctrinal conceptions. It is fitting to note furthermore that the Lamb is found associated both with representations of the Terrestrial Paradise and those of the Celestial Jerusalem.

accentuated differentiation; the other ascending, returning toward the principial state. These two phases, which the Hindu doctrine compares to respiration, are to be found likewise in Hermetic doctrine, where they are called 'coagulation' and 'solution': by virtue of the laws of analogy, the 'Great Work' reproduces in abbreviated form the whole cosmic cycle. Here we can see the respective predominance of the opposing tendencies *tamas* and *sattwa*, which we have already defined: the first is manifested in all forces of contraction and condensation; the second in all expansion and dilation. In this regard we have again a correspondence between the opposite properties of heat and cold: the first dilating bodies, while the second contracts them; and this is why the last circle of Hell is frozen. Lucifer symbolizes 'the inverse attraction of nature', that is to say the tendency towards individualisation, with all the limitations inherent in it. His abode is therefore "il punto al qual si traggon d'ogni parte i pesi"<sup>90</sup>, or, in other words, the center of the attractive and compressive forces represented by gravity in the terrestrial world; and the latter, which attracts bodies downward (that is, toward the center of the earth), is really a manifestation of *tamas*. We note in passing that this is contrary to the geological hypothesis of the 'central fire', for the lowest point must be exactly that where density and solidity are at their maximum. On the other hand, it is no less contrary to the hypothesis, envisaged by some astronomers, of an 'end of the world' by freezing, seeing that such an end can only be a return to indifferenciation. Besides, the last hypothesis is in contradiction to all traditional conceptions: it was not only for Heraclitus and the Stoics that the destruction of the world must coincide with its conflagration; the same affirmation is

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90. *Inferno*, XXXIV, 110-111. *The point to which all gravities are drawn.*

found almost everywhere, from the *Puranas* of India to the *Apocalypse*; and we must note again the agreement of these traditions with the Hermetic doctrine, for which fire (being that part of the elements in which *sattwa* predominates) is the agent of the 'renewal of nature' or of the 'final restoration'.

The center of the earth therefore represents the extreme point of manifestation in the state of existence under consideration; it is a true pivot point, from which a change of direction occurs—the preponderance passing from the one to the other of the contrary tendencies. This is why an ascension or return toward the principle follows immediately upon a descent to the bottom of Hell; and the passage from the one to the other hemisphere is accomplished by going around the body of Lucifer, in a way that leads us to think that this central point is not without certain correspondences to the Masonic mysteries of the 'Middle Chamber', where it is also a question of death and resurrection. Here again we find symbolic expressions of the two complementary phases that, in initiation or in the Hermetic 'Great Work' (which are essentially one and the same thing), express the same universally applicable cyclical laws upon which, for us, rests the whole construction of Dante's poem.

### *Errors of Systematic Interpretations*

Some will perhaps think that this study raises more questions than it answers, and, to tell the truth, we can hardly protest against such a criticism (if indeed it is a criticism), for it could only come from those who are ignorant of how initiatic knowledge differs from all profane knowledge. For this reason we have been careful from the start to warn that it is not our intention to give a complete account, for the very nature of the subject precludes any such pretension; moreover, everything is so tightly interconnected in this domain that it would certainly require several volumes to develop, as they would warrant, the many questions to which we have alluded in the course of this work, not to mention all those we have not had occasion to consider, but to which this development, were we to undertake it, would inevitably lead.

In conclusion, so that no one misunderstand our intentions, we shall only say that the points of view we have expressed are by no means exclusive, and that there are doubtless many others where one could equally well position oneself, and whence no less important conclusions could be drawn—all these points of view complementing each other in perfect concordance within the unity of the total synthesis. It

is of the very essence of initiatic symbolism that it cannot be reduced to more or less narrowly systematic formulae, such as profane philosophy delights in, for symbols support conceptions whose possibilities of extension are truly unlimited. In the final analysis any expression is only a symbol, and one must therefore always make room for the inexpressible in what it expresses, which is really—in the order of pure metaphysic—what matters most.

Under these circumstances it will be readily understood that our claims are limited to providing only a point of departure for the reflection of those who, taking a genuine interest in these studies, are able to grasp their true import; and to pointing out for them the way to research from which we believe a quite particular benefit could be derived. If this work has the effect of stimulating similar studies, this alone will be a far from negligible result—so much so because, for us, it is not a question of more or less vain erudition, but of true comprehension; and without doubt it is only through such means that it will be possible some day to make our contemporaries aware of the narrow-mindedness and insufficiency of their customary ideas. The end we have in view is perhaps far distant, but even so we can neither forget nor cease striving after it, while for our part shedding some light—however feeble it may be—on an aspect of Dante's work that is far too little known.

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