

THE ESOTERICISM OF DANTE



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Chapter 1

Apparent meaning and hidden meaning

*O ye who have sound intellects, Behold the doctrine that lies hidden
Sotto il velame delli versi strani^{[\[1\]](#)}!*

With these words, Dante very explicitly indicates that there is a hidden meaning in his work, a doctrinal meaning, which is veiled by the outer and apparent meaning; it is this hidden meaning that must be sought by those who are capable of discerning it. Elsewhere, the poet goes even further, stating that all scriptures, and not just the scriptures

sacred, can be understood and must be explained mainly in four ways: 'Si possono intendere e debboni sponere massimamente per quattro sensi^[2]'. It is clear that these different meanings cannot in any way be excluded or opposed, but rather must complement and harmonise with each other as parts of a whole, as the constituent elements of a single synthesis.

Thus, there is no doubt that *The Divine Comedy* as a whole as a whole can be interpreted in various ways, given that we have the testimony of its author himself, who is undoubtedly better qualified than anyone else to inform us of his intentions. The difficulty arises when it comes to determining these different meanings, especially the most elevated or profound ones, and this is also where the divergences between commentators naturally begin. They generally agree on the existence of a philosophical, or rather philosophical-theological, meaning beneath the literal meaning of the poetic narrative, as well as a political and social meaning; but, with the literal meaning, there are only three, and Dante warns us that we must seek four; what, then, is the fourth? For us, there is no doubt that it is an initiatory meaning, metaphysical in essence, to which multiple details are related which, without being purely metaphysical, are equally esoteric in nature. Precisely because of its esoteric nature, the deeper meaning has completely escaped most commentators. However, if this deeper meaning is ignored or unknown, the others can only be partially understood, since it constitutes their principle and coordinates and unifies their multiplicity.

Even those who have glimpsed this esoteric aspect of Dante's work have made numerous errors about its true nature, because, remarkably often, they lacked a thorough understanding of these realities and their interpretation was affected by prejudices from which they could not free themselves. Thus, Rossetti and Aroux, who were among the first to point out the existence of this esotericism, believed that one could speak of Dante's 'heresy', without realising that this meant mixing considerations relating to completely different domains; Indeed, although they knew certain things, there were many others that they did not know, and we will try to point these out, although we do not in any way claim to offer a complete exposition of a subject that seems truly inexhaustible.

For Aroux, the question was posed as follows: was Dante Catholic or Albigenian? For others, it seems rather to be presented in these terms: was he Christian or pagan ^[3] ? For our part, we believe that this is not the perspective to adopt, since true esotericism is something very different from external religion and, if it has any relationship with the latter, it is only insofar as it finds in religious forms a mode of symbolic expression; it matters little, moreover, whether these forms belong to one religion or another, for what is important is the essential doctrinal unity that lies behind their apparent diversity. That is why the ancient initiates participated indistinctly in all the cults external, according to the

customs established in the countries where they were found; likewise, if Dante used language taken from Christianity or Greco-Roman antiquity interchangeably, depending on the case, it was because he saw this fundamental unity, not as a result of superficial "syncretism". Pure metaphysics is neither pagan nor Christian, but universal; the ancient mysteries did not

belonged to paganism, but rather overlapped with it^[4] ; similarly, in the Middle Ages there were organisations of an initiatory and non-religious nature which, nevertheless, were based on Catholicism. It seems indisputable to us that Dante belonged to one of these organisations, but that is no reason to declare him a "heretic"; those who think so have a false or incomplete idea of the Middle Ages; they see, so to speak, only the exterior, for in all other respects there is nothing in the modern world that can serve as a term of comparison.

If that was the real nature of all initiatory organisations, there were only two cases in which the accusation of 'heresy' could be levelled against some of them or against some of their members, and this was done to conceal other accusations that were much better founded, or at least more true, but which could not be openly formulated. The first of these two cases is that of some initiates who may have indulged in inappropriate disclosures, at the risk of confusing minds unprepared for the knowledge of higher truths and causing social disorder; the authors of such disclosures made the mistake of confusing the two orders, esoteric and exoteric, a confusion which, in short, sufficiently justified the accusation of

"heresy"; this is a situation that has arisen on several occasions in Islam^[5] , where, however, esoteric schools do not normally encounter any hostility from the religious and legal authorities

legal authorities representing exotericism. As for the second case, the accusation was nothing more than a pretext for the political powers to eliminate adversaries whom they considered all the more formidable because they were difficult to attack by ordinary means; in this regard, the destruction of the Order of the Temple is the most famous example, an event that is directly related to the subject of this study.

Chapter 2

The 'Holy Faith'

In the Vienna museum there are two medals, one depicting Dante and the other the painter Pedro de Pisa, with the initials F. S. K. I. P. F. T. on the reverse. Aroux interprets these initials as follows: *Frater Sacrae Kadosch, Imperialis Principatus, Frater Templarius*. As for the first three letters, the interpretation is clearly incorrect and lacks any intelligible meaning; we believe that it should be read as *Fidei Sanctae Kadosch*. The association of the *Holy Faith*, one of whose leaders appears to have been Dante, was a third order of Templar affiliation, which justifies the expression *Frater Templarius*; its dignitaries

bore the title *Kadosch*, a Hebrew word meaning 'holy' or 'consecrated', and which has been preserved to this day in the higher degrees of Freemasonry. This explains why Dante takes as his guide for the end of his journey celestial^[1], St. Bernard, who established the rule of the Order of the Temple. Dante seems to have wanted to indicate in this way that only through this was it possible, in the conditions of his time, to access the highest degree of the spiritual hierarchy.

As for *Imperialis Principatus*, perhaps to explain it we should not limit ourselves to considering Dante's political role, which shows that the organisations to which he belonged were then favourable to imperial power; it should also be noted that the 'Holy Empire' has a symbolic meaning, and that even today, in Scottish Freemasonry, the members of the Supreme Councils are considered dignitaries of the Holy Empire, and the title of 'Prince' is included in the names of a large number of degrees.

Furthermore, since the 16th century, the leaders of various Rosicrucian organisations have borne the title of *Imperator*; there are reasons to believe that, in Dante's time, the *Holy Fede* bore certain similarities to what later became the 'Rosicrucian Brotherhood', if indeed the latter did not derive more or less directly from the former.

We find many other similarities of the same kind, and Aroux himself has pointed out a considerable number of them. One of the essential points that this author has highlighted, although perhaps without drawing all the conclusions that could have been deduced, is the meaning of the various symbolic regions described by Dante, and more particularly of the 'heavens'. These regions actually represent as many different states: the heavens are properly "spiritual hierarchies," that is, degrees of initiation; from this point of view, an interesting correspondence could be established between Dante's conception and that of Swedenborg, not to mention some theories of the Hebrew Kabbalah and, above all, Islamic esotericism. Dante himself gave an indication in this regard that is worth emphasising: 'A vedere quello che per terzo cielo s'intende

[...] I say that by *heaven* I mean science and by *heavens* the sciences ^[2]". But

what exactly are these sciences behind the symbolic designation?

of the 'heavens'? Should we see this as an allusion to the 'seven liberal arts', which Dante, like all his contemporaries, mentions so frequently? What suggests that this must be the case is that, according to Aroux, 'since the 12th century, the *Cathars* had signs of recognition, passwords, and an astrological doctrine: they performed their initiations at the spring equinox; their scientific system was based on the doctrine of correspondences: the Moon corresponded to Grammar; Mercury to Dialectic; Venus to Rhetoric; Mars to Music; Jupiter to Geometry; Saturn to Astronomy; and the Sun to Arithmetic or enlightened reason." Thus, the seven planetary spheres, which are the first seven of Dante's nine heavens, corresponded respectively to the seven liberal arts, precisely the same ones whose names also appear on the seven steps of the bench on the left of the *Ladder of the Kadosch* (30th degree of Scottish Freemasonry). The ascending order, in the latter case, differs from the former only in the inversion, on the one hand, of Rhetoric and Logic (which here replaces Dialectic), and, on the other, of Geometry and Music, and also in that the science corresponding to the Sun, Arithmetic, occupies the rank normally corresponding to that star in the astrological order of the planets, that is, the fourth, half of the septenary, while the *Cathars* placed it on the highest step of their *mystical scale*, as Dante does for its counterpart on the right hand side, Faith (*Emounah*), that is, that mysterious *Holy Faith* of which he himself was *Kadosch*^[3] .

However, one observation must be made here: how is it possible that correspondences of this kind, which are true initiatory degrees, were attributed to the liberal arts, which were taught publicly and officially in all schools? We believe that there were two ways of considering them, one exoteric and the other esoteric: any profane science can be superimposed on another science that refers, if you like, to the same object, but considering it from a deeper point of view, and which is to profane science what the higher meanings of Scripture are to its literal meaning. It could also be said that the external sciences provide a mode of expression for higher truths, for they are the symbol of something that belongs to a different order, since, as Plato said, the sensible is but 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 on which they depend, of which they are

more or less distant consequences. Thus, through convenient transposition, all science and all art can take on a true esoteric value; why could expressions taken from the liberal arts not have played a role in the initiations of the Middle Ages comparable to that played by terminology taken from the art of builders in speculative Freemasonry? We will go even further: to consider things in this way is, in short, to bring them back to their beginning; this point of view is therefore inherent in their very essence, not something accidentally added; and, if so, could this tradition not be traced back to the origins of the sciences and arts, as opposed to the exclusively profane point of view, which would be only a completely modern perspective, resulting from the general forgetting of this tradition? We cannot deal with this question here with all the problems it would entail; but let us see in what terms Dante himself indicates to us, in the commentary on his first *Canzone*, the way in which he applies the rules of some liberal arts to his work: "O men, who cannot see the meaning of this Canzone, do not reject it; but pay attention to its beauty, which is great, both in its *construction*, which belongs to *grammarians*, and in the *order of the sermon*, which belongs to *rhetoricians*, and in the *number of its parts*, which belongs to *music* ^[4]". Can we not recognise an echo of the Pythagorean tradition in this way of understanding music in relation to numbers, and therefore as a science of rhythm in all its correspondences? It is precisely this same tradition that allows us to understand the role

"solar" role attributed to arithmetic, which makes it the common centre of all other sciences; and it also allows us to understand the relationships that unite these sciences with each other, and especially music with geometry, through the knowledge of the proportions of forms (which finds its direct application in architecture), and with astronomy, through the knowledge of the harmony of the celestial spheres. We will see later the fundamental importance of the symbolism of numbers in Dante's work; and if that symbolism is not solely Pythagorean, if it is found in other doctrines for the simple reason that truth is one, we must not forget that, from Pythagoras to Virgil, and from Virgil to Dante, the 'chain of tradition' was not broken in Italy.

Chapter 3 Masonic and Hermetic Approaches

From the general considerations we have just outlined, we must now return to those unique approaches pointed out by Aroux and to which we referred earlier ^[1]: *Hell* represents the *profane world*, *Purgatory* comprises the *initiatory trials*, and *Heaven* is the dwelling place of the *Perfect*, where intelligence and love are gathered together and brought to their zenith [...]. The celestial circle described by Dante in ^[2] begins with the *high Seraphim*, who are the *Principi celesti*, and ends with the lowest hierarchies of Heaven. Now, it so happens that some lower dignitaries of the Scottish Freemasonry, which claims to trace its origins back to the

Templars, and which Zerbino, the Scottish prince and lover of Isabella of Galicia, personifies in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, also call themselves princes, *Princes of Mercy*; that their assembly or chapter is called the *Third Heaven*; that their symbol is a *Palladium*, or statue of *Truth*, clothed, like Beatrice, in three colours, *green, white and red eye*^[3] ; that their Venerable (whose title is *Most Excellent Prince*), carrying an arrow in his hand and a heart in a triangle on his chest^[4], is a personification of *Love*; that the mysterious number *nine*, of which "Beatrice is particularly loved", Beatrice "who must be called Love", says Dante in the *Vita Nuova*, is also linked to that Venerable One, surrounded by nine columns, nine candelabra with nine arms and nine lights, who is, is, in short, eighty-one years old, a multiple (or, more precisely, a square) of nine, when Beatrice is supposed to have died in the eighty-first year of the century^[5] ».

Prince of Mercy, or *Scottish Trinitarian*, is the 26th degree of the Scottish Rite; here is what Brother Bouilly says about it in his *Explication des douze écussons qui représentent les emblèmes et les symboles des douze grades philosophiques du Rite Écossais dit Ancien et Accepté* (from the 19th to the 30th): "This degree is, in our opinion, the most inextricable of all those that make up this wise category: it also takes the nickname of *Scottish T rinitarian*^[6] . Indeed, everything in this allegory offers the emblem of the Trinity: the background of three colours [green, white and red]; at the bottom, the figure of *Truth*; everywhere, finally, the allusion to the *Great Work of Nature* [whose phases are alluded to by the three colours], to the constituent elements of metals [sulphur, mercury and salt ^[7]], to their fusion and separation [*solve et coagula*], in a word, to the science of mineral chemistry [or, rather, alchemy], whose founder was *Hermes* among the Egyptians, and which gave so much power and scope to medicine [spagyric^[8]]. So true is this that the sciences constituting happiness and freedom follow one another and are classified in that admirable order which proves that the Creator has provided men with everything that can soothe their ills and prolong their passage through the earth ^[9] . It is mainly in the number *three* — perfectly represented by the three angles of *the Delta*, which Christians have made the resplendent symbol of the Divinity — in that number *three*, which dates back to the most remote times ^[10] , that the wise observer discovers the primitive source of everything that surprises the

thought, enriches the imagination and gives a fair idea of social equality [...] Let us not, therefore, worthy gentlemen, cease to remain *Scottish Trinitarians*, to maintain and honour the number *three*, emblem of all that constitutes the duties of man, and which at the same time recalls the beloved Trinity of our Order, engraved on the column of our temples: *Faith, Hope and Charity* (111) '.

What should be particularly noted from this passage is that the degree referred to, like almost all those linked to the same series, has a distinctly hermetic or^[12] meaning; and the connection between hermeticism and the orders of chivalry should be noted in particular. This is not the place to study the historical origin of the high degrees of Scottish Rite Freemasonry, nor to discuss the controversial theory of its Templar descent ; but whether there has been a real and direct affiliation or whether it has only been a reconstruction, it remains true that most of these degrees, and some of those found in other rites, are vestiges of organisations that once had an independent existence^[13], especially the ancient orders of chivalry whose foundation is linked to the history of the Crusades, that is, to a time when there were not only hostile relations, as those who judge by appearances believe, but also active intellectual exchanges between East and West, exchanges that took place mainly through these orders. One should we admit that they took from the East the hermetic data that made them

, or should we rather think that they possessed such esotericism from the outset, and that it was their own initiation that enabled them to enter into relationship with the Orientals in this field? This is a question we do not intend to resolve, but the second hypothesis, although considered less frequently than the first ^[14] , is not at all implausible for those who recognise the existence of a specifically Western initiatory tradition throughout the Middle Ages; and this hypothesis would also be supported by the fact that the orders founded later, which never had any relations with the East, also used a

Hermetic symbolism, such as the *Golden Fleece*, whose very name is already a perfectly clear allusion. Be that as it may, in Dante's time, Hermeticism was certainly present in the Order of the Temple, just as there was also knowledge of doctrines of more certainly Arab origin, which Dante himself seems not to have been unaware of, and which

doubt were also transmitted to him in this way. We will explain this point further below.

Let us return, however, to the Masonic correspondences mentioned by the commentator, which we have only considered in part, since there are several degrees of Scottish Rite Freemasonry which, according to Aroux, present a perfect analogy with the nine heavens that Dante travelled through with Beatrice. Here are the correspondences indicated for the seven planetary heavens: the Moon corresponds to the *profane*; Mercury to the *Knight of the Sun* (28th degree); Venus to the *Prince of Mercy* (26th degree, green, white and red); the Sun to the *Great Architect* (12th degree) or the *Noachite* or 'descendant of Noah' (21st degree); Mars corresponds to the *Great Scotsman of St. Andrew* or *Patriarch of the Crusades* (29th degree, red with a white cross); Jupiter corresponds to the *Knight of the White and Black Eagle* or *Kadosch* (30th degree); Saturn corresponds to the *Golden Ladder* of the same *Kadosch*. To tell the truth, some of these attributions seem dubious to us; it is particularly unacceptable to make the first heaven the dwelling place of the profane, when their place can be none other than the 'outer darkness'; Indeed, have we not seen before that it is Hell that represents the profane world, and that the various heavens, including that of the Moon, cannot be reached until after passing through the initiatory trials of Purgatory? However, we know that the sphere of the Moon has a special relationship with limbo; but that is another very different aspect of its symbolism, which should not be confused with that of the Moon as the first heaven. Indeed, the Moon is both *Janua*

Coeli and *Janua Inferni*, Diana and Hecate^[15] ; the ancients knew this very well, and Dante could not be mistaken or grant the profane a heavenly abode, even if it were the lowest of all.

What is much less debatable is the identification of the symbolic figures contemplated by Dante: the cross in the sky of Mars, the eagle in that of Jupiter, the ladder in that of Saturn. This cross can undoubtedly be linked to the one that, after having been the distinctive sign of the orders of chivalry, still serves as the emblem of various Masonic degrees; and the fact that it is located in the sphere of Mars is surely an allusion to the military character of these orders, their apparent *raison d'être*, and the role they played externally in the war expeditions of the

Crusades ^[16] ? As for the other two symbols, it is impossible not to recognise in them the *Templar Kadosch*; at the same time, the eagle, which classical antiquity already attributed to Jupiter, just as the Hindus assigned it to V isnú ^[17] , was the emblem of the ancient Roman Empire (as we are reminded by

by the presence of Trajan in the eye of this eagle), and later of the Holy Roman Empire. The sky of Jupiter is the dwelling place of the 'wise and just princes':

"*Diligite justitiam [...] qui judicatis terram*^[18]", a correspondence which, like all those established by Dante for the other heavens, is explained entirely by astrological reasons; and the Hebrew name for the planet Jupiter is *Tsedek*, which means "just". As for the ladder of the *Kadosh*, we have already referred to it: as the sphere of Saturn is located immediately above that of Jupiter, the foot of the ladder is reached by Justice (*Tsedakah*), and its summit by Faith (*Emounah*). The symbol of the ladder seems to be of Chaldean origin and would have been brought to the West with the mysteries of Mithras: it then had seven steps, each of which was made of a different metal, according to the correspondence of metals with the planets; on the other hand, in biblical symbolism we also find Jacob's ladder, which connects the earth with the heavens, has an identical meaning ^[19].

"According to Dante, the eighth heaven of Paradise, the starry sky (or fixed stars) is the *heaven of the Rosicrucians*: the *Perfect Ones* are there dressed in white; they display a symbolism analogous to that of the *Knights of Heredom*^[20]; and they profess the "evangelical doctrine", the same as Luther's, opposed to Roman Catholic doctrine." This is Aroux's interpretation, which bears witness to his frequent confusion between the domains of esotericism and exotericism: true esotericism must be beyond the oppositions that appear in the external movements of the profane world, and, if these movements are sometimes invisibly driven or directed by powerful initiatory organisations, it can be said that these organisations dominate them without mixing with them, so that they exert their influence equally on the opposing parties. It is true that Protestants, and more particularly Lutherans, habitually use the term 'evangelical' to designate their own doctrine, and it is well known, moreover, that Luther's seal bore a cross in the centre of a rose; it is also known that the Rosicrucian organisation, which publicly declared its existence in 1604 (and with which Descartes tried in vain to establish contact), openly declared itself to be 'anti-papist'. But we must say that this Rosicrucian Order of the early 17th century was already very superficial and far removed from the true original Rosicrucian Order, which never constituted a society in the proper sense of the word; as for Luther, he seems to have been nothing more than a kind of subordinate agent, even very little

aware of the role he had to play; on the other hand, these various aspects have never been clarified.

Be that as it may, the white robes of the *elect* or *perfect ones*, while clearly reminiscent of some apocalyptic texts ^[21], seem to us above all to be an allusion to the habit of the Templars; and there is a particularly significant passage in this regard:

*Qual è colui che tace e dicer vuole,
Mi trasse Beatrice, e disse: mira
How great is the convent of the white stoles^[22] !*

This interpretation allows us to give a very precise meaning to the expression "holy militia" that we find a little further on, in verses that even seem to discreetly express the transformation of Templarism, after its apparent destruction, to give birth to the Rosicrucians:

*In the form of a white rose The
holy militia appeared to me,
Che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa^[23].*

On the other hand, to clarify the symbolism of Aroux's last quotation, here is the description of the *Heavenly Jerusalem*, as it appears in the *Chapter of the Sovereign Princes Rosicrucians* of the *Order of Heredom of Kilwinning* or *Royal Order of Scotland*, also called *Knights of the Eagle and Pelican*: "At the back (of the last chamber) there is a painting showing a mountain from which a river flows, on the bank of which grows a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit. At the top of the mountain there is a plinth composed of twelve precious stones in twelve seats. Above the plinth there is a square of gold, and on each of its sides there are three angels with the names of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. In that square there is a cross, in the centre of which lies a lamb ^[24]". Here, therefore, we find apocalyptic symbolism, and the continuation will show until which point the conceptions cyclical with the that that

symbolism is related are closely linked to the very structure of Dante's work.

In cantos XXIV and XXV of *Paradise*, we find the triple kiss of the *Rosicrucian Prince*, the pelican, the white robes, the same as those worn by the elders of the Apocalypse, the wax seals, and the three theological virtues of the Masonic chapters (Faith, Hope, and Charity^[25]); for the symbolic flower of the Rosicrucians (the *Rosa candida* of songs XXX and XXXI) was adopted by the Church of Rome as a figure of the Mother of the Saviour (the *Rosa mystica* of the litanies), and by the Church of Toulouse (the Albigensians) as the mysterious type of the general assembly of the *Faithful of Love*. These metaphors had already been used by the *Paulicians*, the predecessors of the *Cathars* in the 10th and 11th centuries.

We thought it useful to mention all these relationships, which are interesting and could undoubtedly be multiplied without great difficulty; but, except perhaps in the case of what were originally the Templars and Rosicrucians, one should not draw too strict conclusions about possible direct affiliations between different initiatory forms simply because a certain community of symbols is observed. In fact, not only is the substance of the doctrines always and everywhere the same, but also, what may seem more surprising at first glance, the modes of expression themselves often present a striking similarity, and this occurs in traditions that are far enough apart in time or space to rule out the possibility of immediate influence on one another; to discover an effective link in such cases, one would have to go back much further than history allows us.

On the other hand, when studying the symbolism of Dante's work, commentators such as Rossetti and Aroux have focused on what we might call an external aspect; they have dwelled on what we might call the ritualistic aspect, that is, on forms which, for those who are unable to go further, conceal rather than express the deeper meaning. And, as has been rightly said, 'it is natural that this should be so, for in order to grasp and understand conventional or allegorical allusions and references, it is necessary to know the object of the allusion or allegory; and in the present case, it is necessary to know the mystical experiences through which true initiation passes the mystic and the epopte. And anyone who has had any experience of this kind will have no doubt about the existence in *The*

Divine Comedy and the *Aeneid* of a metaphysical-esoteric allegory that both veils and exposes the successive phases through which the initiate's consciousness passes in order to attain immortal [\[26\]](#) ."

Chapter 4

Dante and Rosicrucianism

The same criticism of insufficiency that we have made with regard to Rossetti and Aroux can also be directed at Éliphas Lévi, who, while affirming a relationship with the ancient mysteries, has seen above all a political or political-religious application, which in our view is of only secondary importance and which falls into the error of supposing that properly initiatory organisations are directly involved in external struggles. Here, in fact, is what this author says in his *Histoire de la magie*: 'Comments and studies on Dante's work have multiplied, and no one, to our knowledge, has pointed out its true

character. The work of the great Ghibelline is a declaration of war on the papacy for its daring revelation of mysteries. Dante's epic is Johannic^[1] and Gnostic; it is a bold application of the figures and numbers of the Kabbalah to Christian dogmas, and a secret denial of everything absolute in those dogmas. His journey through the supernatural worlds is carried out as 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 if Virgil, the tender and melancholic prophet of the destinies of the son of

Polion, were, in the eyes of the Florentine poet, the illegitimate but true father of the Christian epic. Thanks to Virgil's pagan genius, Dante escapes from that abyss at whose gate he had read a phrase of despair; he escapes from there *by putting his head in the place of his feet and his feet in the place of his head*, that is, by turning dogma upside down, and thus he climbs up to the light using the devil himself as a monstrous ladder; he escapes from terror by means of terror, from the horrible by means of horror. Hell, it seems, is not a dead end except for those who do not know how to turn around; he catches the devil off guard, so to speak, and emancipates himself through his audacity. It is already an outdated Protestantism, and the poet of Rome's enemies has already discovered Faust ascending to heaven on the head of

's head ^[2] " .

In reality, the desire to "reveal the mysteries", assuming that this were possible (which it is not, because true mystery is inexpressible), and the decision to "take dogma backwards", or consciously reverse the meaning and value of symbols, would not be the marks of a very high initiation. Fortunately, we see nothing of the sort in Dante, whose esotericism is, on the contrary, shrouded in a veil that is very difficult to penetrate, while at the 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 in the *political* arena, is to be completely ignorant of his thought and to misunderstand the spirit of his age.

There is also another thing that we find difficult to sustain: the opinion that Dante was a 'Kabbalist' in the true sense of the word; and here we are inclined to be even more sceptical, knowing full well that some of our contemporaries are easily deluded in this regard, believing they find Kabbalah wherever there is any form of esotericism.

Have we not seen a Masonic writer solemnly assert that *Kabbalah*

and *Chivalry* are one and the same thing, and assert, disregarding the most elementary notions of linguistics, that the two words have a common origin [3] ? Faced with such implausible propositions, one will understand the need to be circumspect and not be satisfied with vague approximations to make this or that character a Kabbalist; however, Kabbalah is essentially the Hebrew tradition ^{ea}[4] , and we have no evidence of a direct Jewish influence on Dante^[5] . What has given rise to this opinion is solely Dante's use of the science of numbers; but, although this science does indeed exist in Jewish Kabbalah and occupies a place of special importance in it, it is also found elsewhere. Would one then claim, on the same pretext that Pythagoras was also a Kabbalist? As we have already said, it is rather with Pythagoreanism than with Kabbalah that Dante could be linked, as he most likely knew about Judaism what Christianity has preserved of it in its doctrine.

"Let us also note," adds Éliphas Lévi, "that Dante's Hell is nothing more than a *negative Purgatory*. Let us explain: his Purgatory seems to have been formed in his Hell as if the latter were its mould; it is the lid and the plug, so to speak, of the abyss, and it is understandable that the Florentine titan, climbing to Paradise, would want to kick Purgatory into Hell." This is true in a sense, since the mountain of Purgatory was formed in the southern hemisphere from the materials rejected from the bowels of the earth when the abyss opened up due to Lucifer's fall; now, Hell has nine circles, which are like an inverted reflection of the nine heavens, while Purgatory has only seven divisions; the symmetry is therefore not rigorous in all respects.

'Its Heaven is composed of a series of cabalistic circles divided by a cross like Ezekiel's pentacle; in the centre of this *cross* a *rose* blooms, and we see the symbol of the Rosicrucians appear for the first time, publicly displayed and almost categorically explained'. Around the same time, this same symbol also appeared, although perhaps not so clearly, in another famous poetic work: the *Roman de la rose* or *Book of the Rose*. Éliphas Lévi believes that "the *Book of the Rose* and *The Divine Comedy* are two opposite (it would be more accurate to say complementary) forms of the same work: the initiation into the independence of intelligence, the satire of all contemporary institutions and the allegorical formula of the great secrets of the Rosicrucian Society", which, in fact

truth, did not yet bear that name, and moreover, we repeat, was never (except in some late and more or less deviant branches) a

"society" constituted with the external forms that the word implies. On the other hand, the "independence of intelligence," or rather, intellectual independence, was not, in the Middle Ages, as exceptional a thing as moderns usually think, and the monks themselves exercised very free criticism, manifestations of which can even be found in the sculptures of cathedrals; all this is not strictly esoteric, and there is something much deeper in the works in question.

"These important manifestations of occultism," says Éliphas Lévi, "coincide with the period of the fall of the Templars, since Jean de Meung or Clopinel, a contemporary of Dante in his old age, lived during his best years at the court of Philip the Fair. The *Roman de la rose* is a profound book in a light h form^[7], a revelation as wise as that of Apuleius on the mysteries of occultism. The rose of Flamel, that of Jean de Meung and that of Dante were born from the same rose bush^[8]."

On these last lines, we will make only one reservation: that the word "occultism", coined by Éliphas Lévi, is somewhat inappropriate to describe what existed before him, especially when one considers what contemporary occultism has become. Posing as a restoration of esotericism, it has turned into a gross falsification, because its leaders were never in possession of the true principles or any serious initiation. Éliphas Lévi would undoubtedly be the first to disapprove of his supposed successors, whom he certainly surpassed intellectually, even though he is far from being as profound as he would like to appear and makes the mistake of considering everything through the mindset of a revolutionary of 1848. If we have paused to analyse his opinion, it is because we know how great his influence has been, even on those who have barely understood him, and because we think it is good to set the limits within which his competence can be recognised: his main flaw, typical of his time, is to put social concerns in the foreground and mix them indiscriminately with everything else; in Dante's time, people undoubtedly knew better how to place each thing in its proper place in the universal hierarchy.

What is of particular interest to the history of esoteric doctrines is the observation that several important manifestations of these doctrines coincide, within a few years, with the destruction of the Order of the Temple; there is an indisputable relationship, although difficult to determine precisely, between these various events. In the early years of the 14th century, and undoubtedly already in the course of the previous century, there existed in France and Italy a secret tradition (occult, if you will, but not occultist), which would later be called the Rosicrucian tradition. The name *Fraternitas Rosae-Crucis* appears for the first time in 1374, or even, according to some (especially Michel Maier), in 1413; the legend of *Christian Rosenkreuz*, the supposed founder whose name and life are purely symbolic, may not have been established until the 16th century, but, as we have just seen, the symbol of the Rosicrucian cross is undoubtedly much older.

Whatever particular name one wishes to give to this esoteric doctrine (if one considers it necessary to give it one), until the appearance of the Rosicrucians proper, it presented characteristics that allow it to be included in what is generally referred to as 'Hermeticism'. The history of this Hermetic tradition is closely linked to that of the orders of chivalry; in the period we are concerned with, it was preserved by initiatory organisations such as the *Holy Faith* and the *Faithful of Love*, and also by the *Massenie du Saint Graal* referred to by the historian Henri Martin, precisely in connection with the novels of chivalry, which are also one of the great literary manifestations of esotericism in the

Martin^{[9](1)} says: "In *Titurel*, the legend of the *Grail* reaches its final and most splendid transfiguration, under the influence of ideas that Wolfram^[10] seems to have drawn from France, and particularly from the Templars of southern France. It is no longer on the island of Brittany, but in Gaul, on the borders of Spain, that the *Grail* is preserved. A hero named Titurel founds a temple to house the Holy *Grail*; it is the

Prophet Merlin, initiated by Joseph of Arimathea himself in the temple par excellence, Solomon's Temple, who directs this mysterious construction^[11]. The *Knights of the Grail* became the *Massenie*, that is, an ascetic Masonic order whose members were called *Templars*, and here we can see the intention to link the *Order of the Templars* and the numerous *guilds of builders* who were then renewing the architecture

of the Middle Ages. Here we glimpse multiple openings into what could be called the underground history of that era, which is much more complex than is generally believed [...]. What is very curious and cannot be doubted is that modern Freemasonry can be traced back step by step to the *Massenie du Saint Graal*^[12] .

It would perhaps be imprudent to adopt too exclusively the opinion expressed in the last sentence, as the links between modern Freemasonry and earlier organisations are also extremely complex; but it should nevertheless be taken into account, as it points, in any case, to one of the real origins of Freemasonry. All this may help to understand to some extent the means of transmission of esoteric doctrines throughout the Middle Ages, as well as the obscure affiliation of initiatory organisations during that period, when they were truly secret in the strictest sense of the word.

Chapter 5

Extraterrestrial travel in different traditions

One issue that seems to have greatly concerned most commentators on Dante is that of the sources of his conception of the descent into Hell; this is also one of the points where the incompetence of those who have studied these issues in an exclusively 'profane' way is most clearly apparent. Indeed, there is something that can only be understood when one has a certain knowledge of the stages of real initiation, and that is what we will now try to explain.

If Dante takes Virgil as his guide in the first two parts of his journey, he does so, as everyone recognises, in memory of Canto VI of the

Aeneid; but it should be added that, in Virgil, this is not simply poetic fiction, but proof of undoubted initiatory knowledge. It is no coincidence that the practice of *sortes virgilianae* was so widespread in the Middle Ages; the desire to make Virgil a magician is nothing more than a popular and exoteric distortion of a profound truth that was probably felt, better than they knew how to express it, by those who related his work to the sacred books, even if it was only for a divination use of very relative interest.

As for the subject at hand, it is not difficult to see that Virgil himself had precursors among the Greeks, and in this regard we must remember Ulysses' journey to the land of the Cimmerians and Orpheus' descent into the Underworld. It remains to be seen whether the similarities observed prove only the existence of a series of successive borrowings or imitations, or whether they demonstrate something more. The truth is that this theme is closely related to the mysteries of antiquity, and that all these poetic or legendary tales are nothing more than expressions of the same reality: the golden bough that Aeneas, led by the Sibyl, initially goes to seek in *the forest* (the same *selvaggia* in which Dante also sets the beginning of his poem) is the bough carried by the initiates of Eleusis, and is also reminiscent of the acacia of modern Freemasonry, 'a pledge of resurrection and immortality'. But there is more, for Christianity also offers us a similar symbolism: in the Catholic liturgy, it is the

Ramos Sunday^[1] which opens Holy Week, which will see the death of Christ, his descent into Hell and then his resurrection, soon followed by his glorious ascension; and it is precisely on Holy Monday that Dante's story begins, as if to indicate that it was while searching for the mysterious branch that he lost his way in the dark forest where he would meet Virgil; his journey through the worlds would continue until Easter Sunday, that is, until the day of the resurrection.

Death and descent into Hell, on the one hand, resurrection and ascension to Heaven, on the other, are like two inverse and complementary phases; the first is the necessary preparation for the second; both phases are equally easy to perceive in the description of the "Great Work" and also appear clearly in all traditional doctrines. Thus, in Islam, we find the episode of Muhammad's "night journey," which also includes the descent into the infernal regions (*isrâ*), and then the ascent to the various paradises or

celestial spheres (*mirâj*); some circumstances of this 'night journey' bear particularly striking similarities to Dante's poem, to the extent that some have seen it as one of his main sources of inspiration. Miguel Asín Palacios has shown the many connections that exist, in substance and form, between *The Divine Comedy* (not to mention some passages from the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*), on the one hand, and the *Kîtab el-isrâ* (Book of the Night Journey) and the *Futûhât el-Mekkiyah* (Revelations of Mecca) by Mohyiddin ibn Arabi, on the other, the latter works predating Dante's by some eighty years. Asín Palacios concludes that these analogies are more numerous than all those that commentators have established between Dante's work and all the

literatures from other countries ^[2] . Here are some examples: "In an adaptation of the Muslim legend, a wolf and a lion block the pilgrim's path, just as the panther, the lion and the she-wolf make Dante retreat [...]. Virgil is sent to Dante by Heaven, and Gabriel to Muhammad; during the journey, both satisfy the pilgrim's curiosity. Hell is announced in both legends by identical signs: violent and confusing turmoil, bursts of fire [...]. The architecture of Dante's Hell is modelled on that of the Muslim Hell: both are like a funnel formed by a series of levels, tiers or circular steps that descend to the bottom of the earth; each of them encloses a category of sinners, whose guilt and punishment increase as they inhabit a deeper circle. Each level is subdivided into different ones, intended for different categories of sinners; finally, both Hell and Paradise are located under the city of Jerusalem [...]. Dante undergoes a triple ablution in order to purify himself upon leaving Hell and be able to ascend to Paradise. A triple ablution, identical to Dante's, purifies souls in the Muslim legend: before entering Heaven, they are successively immersed in the waters of the three rivers that fertilise Abraham's garden [...]. The architecture of the celestial spheres through which the ascent takes place is identical in both legends; in the nine heavens are arranged, according to their respective merits, the blessed souls who, in the end, all gather in the Empyrean or last sphere [...]. Just as Beatrice departs before Saint Bernard, who will guide Dante in the final stages, so Gabriel leaves Muhammad near the throne of God, where he will be drawn by a luminous garland [...]. The final apotheosis of the two ascents is the

same: the two travellers, raised up to the divine presence, describe God as a focus of intense light, surrounded by nine concentric circles formed by the tightly packed rows of innumerable angelic spirits emitting rays of light; one of the circular rows closest to the centre is that of the cherubim; each circle surrounds the one immediately below it, and the nine circles revolve ceaselessly around the divine centre [...]. The infernal levels, the astronomical heavens, the circles of the mystical rose, the angelic choirs surrounding the focus of divine light, the three circles symbolising the trinity of persons, were taken word for word by the Florentine poet Mohyiddin ibn Arabi^[3] ".

These coincidences, even in extremely precise details, cannot be accidental, and we have reason to believe that Dante was indeed greatly inspired by Mohyiddin's writings; but how did he come across them? Brunetto Latini, who had lived in Spain, is considered a possible intermediary, but this hypothesis does not seem satisfactory. Mohyiddin was born in Murcia, hence his nickname *El-Andalusí*, but he did not spend his entire life in Spain and died in Damascus. Furthermore, his disciples were spread throughout the Islamic world, but especially in Syria and Egypt, and it is unlikely that his works were already in the public domain at that time, considering that some of them have never been. In fact, Mohyiddin was very different from the 'mystical poet' imagined by Asín Palacios. It is important to note that, in Islamic esotericism, he is called *Esh-Sheikh elakbar*, that is, the greatest of spiritual masters, the master par excellence; and also that his doctrine is purely metaphysical in essence, and that several of the main initiatory orders of Islam, among the highest and most closed at the same time, come directly from him. We have already indicated that these organisations were in the 13th century, that is, in the time of Mohyiddin, in connection with the orders of chivalry, and for us, this is how the verified transmission is explained; if it were otherwise, and if Dante had known Mohyiddin through 'profane' channels, why did he never mention him, just as he mentions exoteric philosophers of Islam, such as Avicenna and

Av erroes ^[4] ? Furthermore, it is recognised that there were Islamic influences in the origins of the Rosicrucians, and this is alluded to in the supposed travels of Christian Rosenkreuz to the East; but the real origin of the Rosicrucians, as we have already said, lies precisely in the orders of chivalry, and it is they

which in the Middle Ages constituted the true intellectual link between the East and the West.

Modern Western critics, who consider Muhammad's 'night journey' to be a more or less poetic legend, claim that it is not specifically Islamic and Arabic, but rather originated in Persia, because a Mazdean book, the *Ardâ Vîrâf Nâm* [eh](#)^[5], contains the account of a similar journey. Some think that we must go even further back, to India, where, in fact, both Brahmanism and Buddhism contain a multitude of symbolic descriptions of the various states of existence in the form of a hierarchically organised set of Heavens and Hells; and some even suppose that Dante may have been directly influenced by Indi [\[6\]](#). For those who see all this as nothing more than 'literature', this way of looking at things is understandable, although it is difficult to admit, even from a purely historical point of view, that Dante could

have known anything about India other than through the mediation of the Arabs. But for us, these similarities show nothing more than the unity of the doctrine contained in all traditions; there is nothing surprising in finding the expression of the same truths everywhere, but precisely in order not to be surprised by this, one must first know that these are truths and not more or less arbitrary fictions. Where there are only general similarities, there is no reason to conclude that there was direct communication; this conclusion is only justified if the same ideas are expressed in an identical way, which is the case with Mohyiddin and Dante. It is true that what we find in Dante is perfectly in accordance with Hindu theories of worlds and cosmic cycles, but without being clothed in the form that is specifically Hindu; and this agreement necessarily exists in all those who are aware of the same truths, whatever form their knowledge may have taken.

Chapter 6

The Three Worlds

The distinction between the three worlds, which constitutes the general plan of *The Divine Comedy*, is common to all traditional doctrines, although it takes different forms; in India itself there are two that do not coincide, but which are not in contradiction either, since they simply correspond to different points of view. According to one of these divisions, the three worlds are Hell, Earth and Heaven; according to another, which does not consider Hell, they are Earth, the Atmosphere (or intermediate region) and Heaven. In the first, the intermediate region is considered a simple extension of the earthly world, and this is how it appears in Dante's

Purgatory, which can be identified with that same region. On the other hand, taking this assimilation into account, the second division is strictly equivalent to the Catholic doctrine's distinction between the Church militant, the Church suffering and the Church triumphant; there is no mention of Hell there either. Finally, Heaven and Hell are often considered to have variable subdivisions, but in all cases there is always a hierarchical division of the degrees of existence, which actually constitute an indefinite multiplicity and can be classified in different ways according to the analogical correspondences taken as the basis for symbolic representation.

Heavens are the higher states of being; Hell, as its name indicates, are the lower states; and when we say higher and lower, this condition must be understood in relation to the human or earthly state, which is naturally taken as a point of comparison, since that is necessarily the one that must serve as our starting point. Since true initiation is a conscious taking possession of the higher states, it is easy to understand why it is symbolically described as an ascension or 'celestial journey'; but one might wonder why this ascension must be preceded by a descent into Hell. There are various reasons for this, which we cannot explain in full without going into overly lengthy explanations that would take us away from the specific subject of this study. We will only say that, on the one hand, this descent is like a recapitulation of the states that logically precede the human state, which have determined its conditions particulares y que deben participar también en la

"transformation" that is to be carried out; on the other hand, it allows the manifestation, according to certain modalities, of the lower possibilities that the being still retains in an undeveloped state, and which must be exhausted by him before he can attain the realisation of his higher states. It should also be noted that it is not a question of the being returning to states it has already passed through; it can only explore those states indirectly, by becoming aware of the traces they have left in the darker regions of the human state itself; and that is why Hell is symbolically represented inside the Earth. On the contrary, the Heavens are truly the higher states, and not just their reflection in the human state, whose highest extensions constitute nothing more than the intermediate region or Purgatory, the mountain on whose summit Dante places the earthly Paradise. The real goal of initiation is not only the

restoration of the 'Edenic state', which is but a stage on the path that must lead much higher, since it is beyond that stage that the 'celestial journey' truly begins; that goal is the *active* conquest of the 'superhuman' states, for, as Dante repeats, according to the Gospel, '*Regnum coelorum* violentia pate^[1]', and here we find one of the essential differences between initiates and mystics. To put it another way, we will say that the human state must first be brought to the fullness of its expansion through the complete realisation of its own possibilities (and this fullness is what must be understood here

by "Edenic state"); but, far from being the end, this will only be the basis on which the being will rely on to "salire alle stelle^[2]", that is, to rise to the higher states, which the planetary and stellar spheres represent in the language of astrology, and the angelic hierarchies in that of theology. There are, therefore, two periods to be distinguished in the ascent, but the first, to tell the truth, is only an ascent in relation to ordinary humanity: the height of a mountain, whatever it may be, is nothing compared to the distance that separates the Earth from the Heavens; in reality, it is rather an extension, for it is the complete expansion of the human state. The unfolding of the possibilities of the total being takes place first in the sense of 'amplitude', and then in that of 'exaltation', to use terms from Islamic esotericism; and we would add that the distinction between these two stages corresponds to the ancient division into 'lesser mysteries' and 'greater mysteries'.

The three stages that correspond respectively to the three parts of *The Divine Comedy* can also be explained by the Hindu theory of the three *gunas*, which are the qualities, or rather the fundamental tendencies, that give rise to all manifested beings. Depending on which of these tendencies predominates in them, beings are hierarchically distributed throughout the three worlds, that is, all degrees of universal existence. The three *gunas* are: *sattva*, conformity with the pure essence of Being, which is identical to the light of Knowledge, symbolised by the luminosity of the celestial spheres representing the higher states; *rajas*, the impulse that causes the expansion of the being in a given state, such as the human state, or, if you will, the unfolding of that being at a certain level of existence; and finally, *tamas*, darkness, assimilated to ignorance, the dark root of the being considered in its lower states. Thus, *sattva*, which is an ascending tendency, refers to the

higher and luminous states, that is, the Heavens, and *tamas*, which is a downward tendency, to the lower and dark states, that is, the Hells; *rajas*, which could be represented by an extension in the horizontal sense, refers to the intermediate world, which is here the "world of man", since it is our degree of existence that we take as a term of comparison, a state that would include the Earth with Purgatory, that is, the whole of the corporeal and physical world. We see that this corresponds exactly to the first of the two possible divisions of three worlds that we mentioned earlier; the passage from one of these three worlds to another can be described as the result of a change in the general direction of being, a change in *the guna* which, by predominating in it, determines that direction. There is precisely a Vedic text in which the three *gunas* are presented in this way, becoming one into another in ascending order: "Everything was *tamas*: He (the supreme *Brahma*) ordered a change, and *tamas* took on the hue (that is, the nature) of *rajas* (intermediate between darkness and light); and *rajas*, having received a new order, adopted the nature of *sattva*." This text offers something like a scheme of the organisation of the three worlds from the primordial chaos of possibilities, according to the order of generation and chaining of the cycles of universal existence. On the other hand, in order to realise all its possibilities, each being must pass, in what particularly concerns it, through the states that correspond respectively to these cycles, and that is why initiation, which has as its object the total realisation of the being, necessarily takes place according to the same phases: the initiatory process rigorously reproduces the cosmogonic process, according to the constitutive analogy constitutive of the macrocosm and the microcosm^[3] .

Chapter 7

Symbolic Numbers

Before moving on to considerations relating to the theory of cosmic cycles, we must clarify some points regarding the role played by the symbolism of numbers in Dante's work. We have found some very interesting insights on this subject in a work by Professor Rodolfo Benini^[1], who, however, does not seem to have drawn all the conclusions that could have been deduced. It is true that this work is an investigation of the primitive plane of *Hell*, undertaken with fundamentally literary intentions; but the findings

his research actually have a much more considerable scope.

According to Benini, there are three pairs of numbers with exceptional symbolic value for Dante: 3 and 9, 7 and 22, 515 and 666. As for 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 why this is so. We have already recalled that 9 is the number of Beatrice, as seen in the *Vita Nuova*. The number 9 is, moreover, directly related to the former, since it is its square, and could be considered a triple ternary; it is the number of the angelic hierarchies, therefore, of the Heavens, and also of the infernal circles, since there is a certain relationship of inverse symmetry between Heaven and Hell. As for the number 7, which is found in particular in the divisions of Purgatory, all traditions agree in considering it equally a sacred number, and we do not think it useful to list here all the applications to which it can give rise; we will only recall, as one of the main ones, the series of the seven planets, which serves as the basis for a multitude of analogical correspondences (we have seen an example in connection with the seven liberal arts). The number 22 is linked to 7 by the ratio $22/7$, which is the approximate expression of the ratio between the circumference and the diameter, so that the two numbers together represent the circle, which for Dante, as for the Pythagoreans, is the most perfect figure (all the divisions of each of the three worlds are circular in shape); Furthermore, 22 brings together the symbols of two of the 'elementary movements' of Aristotelian physics: *local movement*, represented by 2, and *alteration*, represented by 20, as Dante himself explains in the *Convivio* [\[12\]](#). These are Benini's interpretations of this last number; while acknowledging that they are perfectly fair, we must nevertheless add that this number does not seem as fundamental to us as it does to him, and that, above all, it seems to us to be derived from another number that the author himself mentions only in passing, when in fact it is of greater importance: the number 11, of which 22 is only a multiple.

We must insist on this point; first of all, this omission surprised us all the more in Benini because his work is based on the following observation: in *Inferno*, most of the complete scenes or episodes into which the various cantos are subdivided comprise exactly eleven or twenty-two stanzas (some only ten); there are

also a certain number of preludes and finales of seven stanzas; and if these proportions have not always been preserved intact, it is because the original plan of *Inferno* was subsequently modified. Under these circumstances, why should 11 not be at least as important as 22? These two numbers are also associated with the dimensions assigned to the extreme 'bolgie' circles, whose respective circumferences are 11 and 22 miles; but 22 is not the only multiple of 11 that appears in the poem. There is also 33, which is the number of cantos into which each of the three parts is divided; only *Inferno* has 34, but the first is more of a general introduction, which completes the total number of 100 for the work as a whole. On the other hand, when we know what rhythm meant to Dante, we must consider that his choice of eleven-syllable verse was not arbitrary, nor was his choice of three-line stanzas, which remind us of the ternary; each stanza has 33 syllables, and similarly the sets of 11 and 22 stanzas we have just mentioned contain 33 and 66 verses respectively; and the various multiples of 11 we find here all have a particular symbolic value. It is therefore insufficient to limit oneself, as Benini does, to introducing 10 and 11 between 7 and

22 to form 'a tetrachord that bears a vague resemblance to the Greek tetrachord', and whose explanation seems rather confusing to us.

The truth is that the number 11 played a considerable role in the symbolism of some initiatory organisations; and, as for its multiples, we will simply recall that 22 is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and that its importance in Kabbalah is well known; 33 is the number of years of Christ's earthly life, and we find that number again as the symbolic age of the Masonic Rosicrucian and also in the number of degrees of Scottish Freemasonry; in Arabic, 66 is the total numerical value of the name *Allah*, and 99 is the number of the principal divine attributes according to Islamic tradition; no doubt many other correspondences could be pointed out. Apart from the various meanings that can be associated with the number 11 and its multiples, Dante's use of it constituted a true 'sign of recognition' in the strictest sense of the expression; and it is there, for us, that lies the reason for the modifications that *Inferno* must have undergone after its first draft. Among the reasons that may have led to these modifications, Benini considers certain changes in the chronological and architectural plan of the work, which are undoubtedly possible, but which do not seem clearly demonstrated to us; however, he also mentions 'the new events that the poet wanted to recount in the system of prophecies', and it is here that we believe he comes close to the truth, especially when he adds that 'the new events that the poet wanted to recount in the system of prophecies' are clearly demonstrated.

clearly demonstrated; however, he also mentions "the *new events* that the poet wanted to include in the system of prophecies", and it is here that we believe he comes closest to the truth, especially when he adds: "For example, the death of Pope Clement V in 1314, when *Inferno*, in its first draft, must already have been completed". In fact, the real reason, in our opinion, is the events that took place between 1300 and 1314, namely the destruction of the Order of the Temple and its various consequences^[3] ; Dante, on the other hand, cannot refrain from pointing out these events when, predicting to Hugo Capeto the crimes of Philip the Fair, after speaking of the outrage he inflicted on 'Christ in his vicar', he continues in these terms:

*I see the new Pilate, so cruel,
Che ciò nol sazia, ma, senza decreto,
Porta nel Tempio le cupide vele*^[4].

And, even more surprisingly, the following stanza contains, in the appropriate terms, the *Nekam Adonai*^[5] of the *Templar Kadosh*:

*O Signor mio, quando sarò io lieto
A veder la vendetta, che, nascosa,
Fa dolce l'ira tua nel tuo segr eto*^[6]
?

These are certainly the 'new events' that Dante had to report on, and for reasons other than those one might think when unaware of the nature of the organisations to which he belonged. These organisations, which originated from the Order of the Temple and must have inherited part of its legacy, had to hide themselves much more carefully than before, especially after the death of their external leader, Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg, whose place at the top of Heaven had been shown to Dante by Beatrice, in the form of anticipated ^[7]. A partir de entonces, convenía ocultar el signo de "recognition" to which we have alluded: the divisions of the poem in which

the number 11 appeared most clearly should not be deleted, but rather concealed, so that they could only be noticed by those who knew their reason for being and their meaning; and, considering that six centuries have passed before their existence has been publicly pointed out, it must be admitted that the precautions taken were adequate and have not lacked effectiveness^[8].

At the same time as he included these changes in the first part of his poem, Dante took the opportunity to introduce new references to other symbolic numbers; and here is what Benini says about this: "Dante then thought of regulating the intervals between the prophecies and other prominent elements of the poem, so that they would respond to each other after a certain number of verses, chosen naturally from among the symbolic numbers. In short, one system of consonances and rhythmic periods was replaced by another, much more complicated and *secret*, as befits the language of revelation used by those who see the future. And here appear the famous 515 and 666, so frequent in the trilogy: 666 verses separate Ciacco's prophecy from Virgil's, 515 separate Farinata's prophecy from Ciacco's; 666 are also interspersed between Brunetto Latini's prophecy and Farinata's, and 515 between Nicholas III's prophecy and Brunetto's. These numbers, 515 and 666, which we see alternating regularly, are opposed to each other in Dante's symbolism: indeed, it is known that 666 is the 'number of the beast' in the *Apocalypse*, and countless calculations, often fanciful, have been made to find the name of the Antichrist, whose numerical value must represent, "since that number is a number of man^[9] "; on the one hand, 515 is expressly stated, with a meaning directly contrary to this, in Beatrice's prediction: "Un *cinquecento diece e cinque*, messo di Dio ^[10] ". It has been thought that this 515 was the same as the mysterious *Veltro*, enemy of the she-wolf who is thus identified with the apocalyptic beast ^[11] ; and it has even been assumed that both symbols referred to Henry of Luxembourg ^[12] . We do not intend to analyse the meaning of *Veltr o*^[13] here, but we do not believe that it should be seen as an allusion to a specific character; for us, it is simply one aspect of Dante's general conception of the Imperio ^[14] . Benini, observing that the number 515 is transcribed in Latin letters as DXV, interprets these letters as the initials of *Dante, Veltro di*

Christ; but this interpretation is singularly forced, and there is no reason to suppose that Dante wanted to identify himself with this "messenger of God". In fact, it suffices to change the order of the numerical letters to obtain DVX, that is, the word *Dux*, which is easily understood without any further explanation^[15] ; and we would add that the sum of the digits of the number 515 also gives 11^[16]: that *Dux* may well be Henry of Luxembourg, if you like, but it is also, with the same right, any other leader who may be chosen by the same organisations to achieve the goal they had set themselves in the social order and which Scottish Freemasonry still refers to as the 'reign of the Sacred Empire'^[17] .

Chapter 8

Cosmic cycles

After these observations, which we believe are appropriate for establishing some important historical points, we come to what Benini calls the

"chronology" of Dante's poem. We have already recalled that he makes his journey through the worlds during Holy Week, that is, at the time of the liturgical year corresponding to the spring equinox; and we have also seen that it is at this time, according to Aroux, that the *Cathars* performed their initiations. On the other hand, in the Masonic chapters of the Rosicrucians, the commemoration of the Last Supper is celebrated on Maundy Thursday, and the return to work takes place symbolically on Friday at three in the

, that is, the day and hour when Christ died. Finally, the beginning of Holy Week in the year 1300 coincides with the full moon; and it could be pointed out, to complete the concordances noted by Aroux, that it is also at the full moon that the *Noahites* hold their assemblies.

The year 1300 marked the middle of Dante's life (he was 35 at the time), and for him it also marked the middle of time; we will quote here what Benini says: 'Absorbed in an extraordinarily egocentric thought, Dante placed his vision in the middle of the world's life — the movement of the heavens had lasted 65 centuries before him, and was to last another 65 after him

— and, through a clever trick, he made sure that the anniversaries of the greatest events in history coincided exactly, as in three astronomical years, adding to them the anniversary of the greatest event in his personal life." What should particularly catch our attention is the assessment of the total duration of the world or — as we would rather say — of the current cycle: twice 65 centuries, that is, 130 centuries or 13,000 years, of which the 13 centuries that have passed since the beginning of the Christian era constitute exactly one tenth. The number 65 is remarkable in itself: the sum of its digits also gives 11, a number that is broken down there into 6 and 5, which are the respective symbolic numbers of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and which Dante brings forth from the *principal* unity when he says: 'Cosi come raia *dell'un*, se si conosce, il *cinque* e il *sei*^[1]'. Finally, when writing 65 in Roman numerals, as we did earlier with 515, we get LXV, or, with the same inversion we used before, LVX, that is, the word *Lux*, which may have a connection with the Masonic era of the *True Luz*^[2].

But here is the most interesting thing: the duration of 13,000 years is nothing more than half the period of precession of the equinoxes, evaluated with an error of only 40 years by excess, therefore less than half a century, and which therefore represents a perfectly acceptable approximation, especially when that duration is expressed in centuries. In fact, the total period is actually 25,920 years, so half of that is 12,960; this half-period is the "great year" of the Persians and Greeks, sometimes also estimated at 12,000 years, which is much less accurate than Dante's 13,000. The ancients considered this 'great year' to be the time between two renewals of the world, which in the history of terrestrial humanity should undoubtedly be interpreted as

the interval separating major cataclysms in which entire continents disappear (the last of which was the destruction of Atlantis). In truth, this is only a secondary cycle, which could be considered a fraction of another larger cycle; but, by virtue of a certain law of correspondence, each secondary cycle reproduces, on a smaller scale, phases comparable to the great cycles of which it is a part. What can be said about cyclical laws in general will therefore find application at different levels: historical cycles, geological cycles, cosmic cycles proper, with divisions and subdivisions that multiply these possibilities of application. On the other hand, when the limits of the terrestrial world are exceeded, the duration of a cycle can no longer be measured by a number of years understood literally; numbers then acquire a purely symbolic value and express proportions rather than actual durations. It is no less true that, in Hindu cosmology, all cyclical numbers are essentially based on the period of precession of the equinoxes, with which they have clearly determined relationships^[3] ; this is, therefore, the fundamental phenomenon in the astronomical application of cyclical laws and, consequently, the natural starting point for all the analogical transpositions to which those same laws may give rise. We cannot think of developing these theories here; but it is remarkable that Dante took the same basis for his symbolic chronology, and we can see on this very point his perfect agreement with the traditional doctrines of the East^[4] .

But one may ask why Dante places his vision exactly in the middle of the 'great year', and whether we should really speak of 'egocentrism' in this regard or whether there are reasons of another order. Firstly, we must point out that, if any starting point in time is taken and the duration of the cyclical period is counted from that origin, a point will be reached that is in perfect correspondence with the starting point, since it is the correspondence between the elements of successive cycles that ensures their continuity. The origin can therefore be chosen in such a way that it is ideally situated in the middle of the period; thus we have two equal durations, one before and one after, and together they complete the entire revolution of the heavens, since all things end up in a position that is not identical (to claim this would be to fall into Nietzsche's error of the 'eternal return'), but is analogically corresponding to the one they had at the beginning. This can be represented geometrically in the manner

Next: if the cycle is the half-period of the precession of the equinoxes and the entire period is represented by a circumference, it will suffice to draw a horizontal diameter to divide the circumference into two halves, each of which will represent a half-period, with the beginning and end of the half-period corresponding to the two ends of the diameter. If only the upper semicircle is considered and the vertical radius is drawn, it will reach the midpoint, corresponding to the 'middle of time'. The figure thus obtained is the sign \oplus , that is, the alchemical symbol of the mineral kingdom mineral ^[5]. Crowned by a cross, it is the 'globe of the world', a hieroglyph of the Earth and emblem of imperial power^[6]. This latter use suggests that this sign must have had a particular value for Dante; the addition of the cross is implicit in the fact that the central point at which it was located geographically corresponded to Jerusalem, which represented for him what we might call the "spiritual pole"^[7]. On the other hand, at the antipodes of Jerusalem, that is, at the other pole, rises the mountain of Purgatory, above which shine the four stars that form the constellation of the "Southern Cross" ^[8]; there is the entrance to Heaven, just as beneath Jerusalem is the entrance to Hell; in this opposition we find represented the antithesis of the "suffering Christ" and the "glorious Christ".

At first glance, it may seem surprising that we establish such a correlation between chronological and geographical symbolism; however, this is where we want to arrive in order to give the above observation its true meaning, since the temporal succession in all this is nothing more than a symbolic mode of expression. Any cycle can be divided into two phases, which are, chronologically, its two successive halves, and it is from this perspective that we have initially considered them; however, in reality, these two phases represent, respectively, the action of two opposing and at the same time complementary tendencies; obviously, this action can be both simultaneous and successive. To be in the middle of the cycle is therefore to be at the point where these two tendencies are in balance: this is, as Muslim initiates say, 'the divine place where contrasts and antinomies are reconciled'; it is the centre of the 'wheel of things', according to the Hindu expression, or the 'unchanging middle' of the Far Eastern tradition, the fixed point around which the spheres rotate, the perpetual mutation of the manifested world. Dante's journey takes place along the 'spiritual axis' of the world; only from there, in fact, is it possible to consider all

things in a permanent way, because one is removed from change and can therefore have a synthetic and total vision.

From a strictly initiatory point of view, what we have just pointed out also corresponds to a profound truth; the being must first of all identify the centre of its own individuality (represented by the heart in traditional symbolism) with the cosmic centre of the state of existence to which that individuality belongs, and must take that centre as a basis for rising to higher states. In that centre resides perfect balance, the image of *principled* immutability in the manifested world; it is there that the axis connecting all states is projected, the 'divine ray' which, in its ascending sense, leads directly to the higher states that are to be attained. Every point virtually possesses these possibilities and is, so to speak, a centre in potential; but it is necessary for it to become so effectively, through real identification, in order to make possible the complete development of the being. This is why Dante, in order to ascend to Heaven, had to first place himself at a point that was truly the centre of the earthly world; and that point is the centre according to time and space, that is, in relation to the two conditions that essentially characterise existence in this world.

If we now take up again the geometric representation we used earlier, we will see that the vertical radius, which goes from the surface of the earth to its centre, corresponds to the first part of Dante's journey, that is, the passage through Hell. The centre of the earth is the lowest point, for the force of gravity tends towards it from all sides; once it is passed, the ascent begins, and this will take place in the opposite direction, to reach the antipodes of the starting point. To represent this second phase, it is necessary to extend the radius beyond the centre, so that the vertical diameter is completed; we then have the figure of the circle divided by a cross, that is, the sign \oplus , which is the hermetic symbol of the plant kingdom. Now, if we consider in general terms the nature of the symbolic elements that play a predominant role in the first two parts of the poem, we can see that they refer respectively to the two kingdoms, mineral and vegetable; we will not dwell on the obvious relationship that links the former to the inner regions of the earth, and we will limit ourselves to recalling the 'mystical trees' of Purgatorio and the Paradise earthly. One might expect that would continue

correspondence between the third part and the animal kingdom ^[9] ; but this is not the case, as the limits of the earthly world are exceeded, so that it is no longer possible to continue applying the same symbolism. It is at the end of the second part, that is, still in the earthly Paradise, where we find a greater abundance of animal symbols; it is necessary to have travelled through the three kingdoms, which represent the various modes of existence in our world, before moving on to other states, whose conditions are completely different^[10] .

We must still consider the two opposite points, located at the ends of the axis that passes through the earth, which are, as we have already said, Jerusalem and the earthly Paradise. These are, in a way, the vertical projections of the two points that mark the beginning and end of the chronological cycle, and as such, we had made them correspond to the ends of the horizontal diameter in the previous representation. If these extremes represent their opposition in terms of time, and those of the vertical diameter their opposition in terms of space, we thus have an expression of the complementary role of the two principles whose action, in our world, translates into the existence of the two conditions of time and space. The projection vertical could be considered a projection in the "timeless", so to speak, since it is carried out according to the axis on which all things are considered permanently and no longer transitorily; the passage from the horizontal diameter to the vertical diameter therefore represents the transmutation of succession into simultaneity.

But, one might ask, what is the relationship between the two points we are considering and the extremes of the chronological cycle? For one of them, the earthly Paradise, that relationship is obvious, since Paradise is located at the beginning of the cycle; for the other, it should be noted that earthly Jerusalem is understood as a prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem described in the *Apocalypse*; symbolically, moreover, it is also in Jerusalem that the place of resurrection and judgement with which the cycle ends is located. The location of the two points, each at the antipodes of the other, then takes on a new meaning when we observe that the heavenly Jerusalem is nothing other than the reconstruction of the earthly Paradise, according to an analogy that

applies in the reverse direction ^[11] . At the beginning of time, that is, of the current cycle, the earthly Paradise became inaccessible as a result of the fall of man; the new Jerusalem must 'descend from Heaven to Earth' at the end of the cycle to mark the restoration of all things to their

primordial order, and it can be said that it will play the same role for the future cycle as the earthly Paradise plays for ours. Indeed, the end of a cycle is analogous to its beginning, and the end of one coincides with the beginning of the next; what was only virtual at the beginning of the cycle is effectively realised at its end, and then immediately engenders the virtualities that will in turn develop in the course of the future cycle; but that is a question on which we cannot dwell further without straying from our subject ^[12]. We will only add, to point out another aspect of the same symbolism, that the centre of being, to which we have

alluded to earlier, is designated in Hindu tradition as the 'city of Brahma (in Sanskrit *Brahmapura*), and that several texts speak of it in terms almost identical to those found in the apocalyptic description of the celestial Jerusalem c ^[13]. Finally, and to return to what concerns Dante's journey more directly, it should be noted that if the starting point of the cycle becomes the end of the journey through the earthly world, there is a formal allusion to the 'return to the origins', which occupies an important place

important place in all traditional doctrines and which, in a very notable coincidence, is particularly emphasised by Islamic esotericism and Taoism; moreover, we continue to be faced with the restoration of the 'Edenic state', which we have already discussed, and which must be considered a prerequisite for the conquest of the higher states of being.

The point equidistant from the two extremes we have just mentioned, that is, the centre of the earth, is, as we have said, the lowest point, and also corresponds to the middle of the cosmic cycle, when considered chronologically, from the perspective of succession. In effect, the cycle can then be divided into two stages, one descending, which goes in the direction of an increasingly accentuated differentiation, and the other ascending, as a return to the *principal* state. These two phases, which Hindu doctrine compares to those of breathing, are also found in the theories of Hermeticism, where they were called 'coagulation' and "Solution": by virtue of the laws of analogy, the "Great Work" reproduces the entire cosmic cycle in summary form. One can see there the respective predominance of the two opposing tendencies, *tamas* and *sattva*, which we defined earlier: the former manifests itself in all forces of contraction and condensation; the latter, in all forces of expansion and dilation. It is also possible to establish a correspondence with the

opposite properties of heat and cold; the former dilates bodies and the latter contracts them; that is why the last circle of Hell is frozen. Lucifer symbolises the 'inverse attraction of nature', that is, the tendency towards individualisation, with all its inherent limitations; his abode is therefore 'il punto al qual si traggon d'ogni parte i pe si ^[14]', or, in other words, the centre of those forces of attraction and compression which, in the earthly world, are represented by gravity; and this, which attracts bodies downwards (which is everywhere the centre of the earth), is certainly a manifestation of *tamas*. We can observe that this contradicts the geological hypothesis of the 'central fire', since the point

The lowest point must be precisely that at which density and solidity reach their maximum degree; nor is it any less contrary to the hypothesis considered by certain astronomers of an "end of the world" through freezing, since such an end can only be a return to indifference. The hypothesis of freezing contradicts all traditional conceptions: it is not only Heraclitus and the Stoics who have maintained that the destruction of the world must be accomplished by fire; the same assertion is found almost everywhere, from the *Purânas* of India to the Apocalypse; we must also note the concordance of these traditions with the Hermetic doctrine, for which fire (which is the element in which *sattva* predominates) is the agent of

"renewal of nature" or "final reintegration".

The centre of the earth therefore represents the extreme point of manifestation in the state of existence under consideration; it is a true stopping point, from which a change of direction occurs, signalling the transition to the preponderance of the opposite tendency. Therefore, from the moment the bottom of Hell is reached, the ascent or return to the beginning begins, which immediately follows the descent; and the passage from one hemisphere to the other is made by surrounding the body of Lucifer, in a way that suggests that the idea of this central point is not unrelated to the Masonic mysteries of the "Middle Chamber", also linked to death and resurrection. Everywhere and always we find the symbolic expression of the two complementary phases which, in initiation or in the hermetic 'Great Work' (which are ultimately one and the same thing), reflect those same cyclical laws, universally applicable, on which, for us, the entire construction of Dante's poem rests.

Chapter 9

Errors in systematic interpretations

Some may think that this study raises more questions than it answers, and, to tell the truth, we could not protest against such a criticism, if it could be interpreted as such; but this could only be raised by those who are ignorant of the differences between initiatory knowledge and any profane knowledge. That is why we have been careful to point out from the outset that we did not intend to give a complete exposition, since the very nature of the subject prevented us from making such a claim; moreover, all the elements in this field are so closely related to each other that several volumes would undoubtedly be needed

volumes to properly develop the many issues we have touched upon in the course of our study, not to mention those others that we have not had occasion to consider, but which a detailed analysis would inevitably introduce.

Finally, we will only say, so that no one is misled as to our intentions, that the points of view we have indicated are by no means exclusive, and that there are undoubtedly many others that we could adopt and from which no less important conclusions could be drawn, all these perspectives being complemented by a perfect concordance in the unity of the overall synthesis. It is in the very essence of initiatory symbolism that it cannot be reduced to strictly systematic formulas, such as those that please profane philosophy; the function of symbols is to support conceptions whose possibilities of extension are truly unlimited, and every expression is nothing more than a symbol; it is therefore necessary to reserve the part that cannot be expressed, which in the order of pure metaphysics is the most important.

Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand that our aims are limited to providing a starting point for reflection for those who are genuinely interested in these studies and capable of understanding their real scope, and to pointing them towards certain areas of research that we believe could be particularly beneficial. If this work were to have the effect of inspiring others in the same vein, that result would be far from negligible, especially since what matters to us is not more or less vain erudition, but true understanding, and it is undoubtedly only by such means that the narrowness and inadequacy of our contemporaries' usual conceptions will one day become apparent to them. The goal we set ourselves in this way may be very distant, but we cannot stop thinking about it and striving towards it; that is why we wanted to contribute to shedding some light, however faint, on a little-known aspect of Dante's work.



RENÉ GUÉNON, founder of the traditionalist school, was born in Blois in 1886. He devoted his early years to the study of philosophy and mathematics. In Paris, he came into contact with various spiritualist groups, and in 1912 he was initiated into Sufism and converted to Islam, acquiring Egyptian nationality in 1948. He published *East and West* in 1924 and *The Crisis of the Modern World* in 1927, two of his most important works. Guénon's areas of study range from metaphysics and symbolism to criticism of the modern world and traditional sciences. A constant theme in his work is the recovery of traditional doctrines that have been ignored or lost due to the rise of modern philosophy. *The Kingdom of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* and *The Great Triad* are part of this trend.

Notes

[1] *Inferno*, IX, 61-63. [Throughout the work, the author gives the verses of *The Divine Comedy* in Italian without French translation. Here we will add, in brackets, Ángel Crespo's Spanish version: 'Oh, those who feel healthy in mind / look closely at the doctrine that lies veiled / in the mysteries of my verse!'. (Translator's note). ≤≤

[2] *Convivio*, II, chap. 1. [≤](#)

[3] See Arturo Reghini, "L'Allegoria esoterica di Dante," in *Nuevo Patto*, September-November 1921, pp. 541-548. <<

[4] We must clarify that we would prefer another word than not outside

"paganism", imposed by long usage, but which was originally a derogatory term applied to the Greco-Roman religion when, in the final stages of its decline, it was reduced to the status of mere popular "superstition". <<

[5] We refer in particular to the famous example of El-Hallâj, executed in Baghdad in the year 309 of the Hegira (921 AD), whose memory is venerated by those who consider that he was justly condemned for his imprudent disclosures. <<

[1] *Paradiso*, XXXI. The word *contemplative*, with which Dante later designates St. Bernard (*id.*, XXXII, 1), seems to offer a double meaning due to its similarity to the name of *the Temple*. [<<](#)

[2] *Convivio*, II, chap. XIV. [≤≤](#)

[3] On the *mysterious Scale of the Kadosch*, which we will discuss further below, see the *Manuel maçonnique* by H.: Vuilliaume, plate XVI and pp. 213-214. We quote this work from the 2nd edition (1830). <<

[4] Here is the translation of the text: "O men who cannot see the meaning of this *Canzone*, do not reject it for that reason; rather, pay attention to its beauty, which is great, whether in its *construction*, which concerns *grammarians*; or in the *order of its discourse*, which concerns *rhetoricians*; or in the *number of its parts*, which concerns *musicians*." <<

[1] We quote the summary of Aroux's works provided by Sédir, *Histoire des Rose-Croix*, pp. 16-20; 2nd edition, pp. 13-17. The titles of Aroux's works are: *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste* (published in 1854 and reissued in 1939); 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). <<

[2] *Paradiso*, VIII. [≤](#)

[3] It is curious, to say the least, that these same colours have become, in modern times, those of the Italian flag; they are generally attributed to Masonic origins, although it is difficult to know where the idea came from directly. <<

[4] To these distinctive signs must be added "a crown of golden arrowheads". [≤≤](#)

[5] See *Light on Masonry*, p. 250, and *Manuel maçonnique* by H. : Vuilliaume, pp. 179-182. [<<](#)

[6] We must admit that we do not see the connection between the complexity of this degree and its name. \leq

[7] This alchemical triad is often linked to the constituent elements of the human being: spirit, soul and body. [<<](#)

[8] The words in brackets in this quotation have been added by us to make the text more understandable. [≤≤](#)

[9] These last words can be seen as a discreet allusion to the alchemists' "elixir of long life". The previous degree (25th), that of *Knight of the Bronze Serpent*, was presented as "that which includes a part of the first degree of the *Egyptian Mysteries*, the origin from which *medicine* and the *great art* of making medicines spring". <<

[10]No doubt the author means to say: "whose symbolic use dates back to the most remote times," for we cannot assume that he intended to assign a chronological origin to the number *three*. <<

[11]It is sometimes claimed that the three colours of the degree symbolise, respectively, the three theological virtues: white represents Faith; green, Hope; red, Charity (or Love). The insignia of this degree of *Prince of Mercy* are a red apron, in the centre of which is painted or embroidered a white and green triangle, and a cord in the three colours of the Order, arranged in a cross, from which hangs a gold equilateral triangle (or delta) as a jewel (*Manuel maçonnique* by H.· Vuilliaume, p. 181). [≤≤](#)

[12]A high-ranking Freemason who seems more versed in that completely modern and profane science called "history of religions" than in true initiatory knowledge, Count Goblet d'Alviella believed that he could offer a Buddhist interpretation of that purely hermetic and Christian degree, on the pretext that there is a certain similarity between the titles of *Prince of Mercy* and *Lord of Compassion*. <<

[13]And so much so that there did indeed exist an *Order of Trinitarians* or *Order of Mercy* whose objective, at least outwardly, was the rescue of prisoners of war. <<

[14]Some have even attributed to the coat of arms, whose connections with hermetic symbolism are very close, an exclusively Persian origin, when in fact the coat of arms existed since ancient times among a large number of peoples, both Western and Eastern, and especially among the Celtic peoples. <<

[15]These two aspects also correspond to the two solstice gates; there is much to be said about this symbolism, which the ancient Latins had brought together in the figure of *Janus*. On the other hand, some distinctions should be made between Hell, Limbo and the "outer darkness" mentioned in the Gospel; but this would take us too far afield and, moreover, would not change anything that is said here, where we are only trying to separate, in a general way, the profane world from the initiatory hierarchy. <<

[16]It can also be noted that the heaven of Mars is represented as the dwelling place of the 'martyrs of religion'; there is also a kind of play on words here with *Mars* and *martyrdom*, of which we could find other examples: the hill of Montmartre was once the *Mount of Mars*, later becoming the *Mount of Martyrs*. In this regard, we will point out another singular fact: the names of the three martyrs of Montmartre, *Dionysius*, *Rusticus* and *Eleutherius*, are three names of Bacchus. Furthermore, Saint Dionysius, considered the first bishop of Paris, is commonly identified with Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, and in Athens, the Areopagus was also the *Mount of Mars*. <<

[17]The symbolism of the eagle in different traditions would require a specific study. [<<](#)

[18] *Paradiso*, XVIII, 91-93. [<<](#)

[19]It is interesting to note that Saint Peter Damian, with whom Dante converses in the heaven of Saturn, appears in the (largely legendary) list of *Imperatores Rosae Crucis* given in the *Clypeum Veritatis* by Irenaeus Agnostus (1618). [<<](#)

[20]The *Order of Heredom of Kilwinning* is the *Grand Chapter* of the high degrees linked to the *Royal Grand Lodge of Edinburgh*; it was founded, according to tradition, by King Robert Bruce (Thory, *Acta Latomorum*, t. I, p. 317). The English word *heredom* (or *heirdom*) means "heritage" (of the Templars); however, some derive this term from the Hebrew *harodim*, a title given to those who directed the workers employed in the construction of Solomon's Temple (see our article on the subject in *Études Traditionnelles*, March 1948 [article later included in *Études sur la Franc-maçonnerie et les Compagnonnage*, Paris, 1964]) (*N. of the t.*). ≤≤

[21] Revelation, 7:13-14. [<<](#)

[22]*Paradiso*, XXX, 127-129 ["Like one who wants to speak but cannot find the words, / Beatrice led me and said: Look / at this great convent with its white stoles"]. It should be noted, with regard to this passage, that the word "convent" has remained in use in Freemasonry to designate its grand assemblies. <<

[23]*Paradiso*, XXXI, 1-3 ["In the form of a white rose / the holy militia was shown to me / which Christ, with his blood, made his bride"]. The last verse can be related to the symbolism of the red cross of the Templars. <<

[24] H. Vuilliaume, *Manuel maçonnique*, pp. 143-144. See Revelation, 21. [≤≤](#)

[25]In the Rosicrucian Chapters (18th degree Scottish Rite), the names of the three theological virtues are respectively associated with the three terms of the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"; they could also be related to what are called "the three main pillars of the Temple" in the symbolic degrees: "Wisdom, Strength, Beauty". Dante corresponds these three virtues with St. Peter, St. James and St. John, the three apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration. <<

[26] Arturo Reghini, *op. cit.*, pp. 545-546. [<<](#)

[1] St John is often considered the head of the *inner* church and, according to certain conceptions of which we find an example here, he is opposed to St Peter, the head of the *outer* church; the truth is rather that the authority of one and the other does not apply to the same domain. <<

[2] This passage from Éliphas Lévi has been reproduced verbatim, like many others (taken mainly from *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* [*Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*]), without indication of its source, by Albert Pike in his *Moral and Dogma of Freemasonry*, p. 822; moreover, the very title of this work visibly imitates that of Éliphas Lévi.

<<

[3] Ch.-M. Limousin, *La Kabbale littérale occidentale*. [≤≤](#)

[4] The word itself means "tradition" in Hebrew, and unless it is written in that language, there is no reason to use it indiscriminately to refer to any tradition. <<

[5] It must be said, however, that according to contemporary accounts, Dante maintained ongoing relations with a highly educated Jew, Immanuel ben Solomon ben Jekuthiel (1270-1330), a poet; but it is no less true that there is no trace of specifically Jewish elements in *The Divine Comedy*, while Immanuel was inspired by it for one of his works, despite the contrary opinion of Israël Zangwill, an opinion that a comparison of dates renders completely untenable. <<

[6] This opinion has been expressed, in fact, by Reuchlin. [<<](#)

[7] The same can be said, in the 16th century, of the works of Rabelais, which also contain an esoteric meaning that could be interesting to study in more detail. [<<](#)

[8] Éliphas Lévi, *Histoire de la Magie*, 1860, pp. 359-360. It is also important to note in this regard that there is a kind of Italian adaptation of *the Roman de la rose*, entitled *Il Fiore*, whose author, "Ser Durante Fiorentino", seems to be none other than Dante himself, whose real name was in fact Durante; Dante is simply an abbreviated form. <<

[9] *Histoire de France*, vol. III, pp. 398-399. [≤≤](#)

[10]The Swabian Templar Wolfram von Eschenbach, author of *Parceval* and imitator of the satirical Benedictine Guyot de Provins, whom he refers to by the singularly distorted name of "Kyot de Provenza". <<

[11]Henri Martin adds in a note: "Perceval ends up taking the *Grail* to India, where he rebuilds the temple, and it is *Prester John*, the legendary leader of an imaginary Eastern Christianity, who inherits custody of the sacred *vessel*." ≤≤

[12]We touch here on a very important point, but one that we cannot discuss without straying too far from our subject: there is a very close relationship between the symbolism of *the Grail* and the "common centre" to which Henri Martin alludes, although he does not suspect its profound reality, just as he obviously does not understand what the designation of *Prester John* and his mysterious kingdom symbolises in the same vein. <<

[1] The Latin name for this festival is *Dominica in Palmis*; the palm and the bouquet are obviously the same thing, and the palm, as the emblem of the martyrs, has the same meaning as we have indicated here. We should also remember the popular name "Pascua florida" (Flowery Easter), which very clearly expresses the relationship between the symbolism of this festival and the Resurrection, although those who use it today are not aware of this. <<

[2] Miguel Asín Palacios, *Muslim Eschatology in The Divine Comedy*, Madrid, 1919 [reprinted 1984]. See Blochet, *Les sources orientales de «la Divine Comédie»*, Paris, 1901. [≤](#)

[3] A. Cabaton, "*La Divine Comédie* et l'Islam", in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 1920; this article contains a summary of the work of M. Asín Palacios. [<<](#)

[4] *Inferno*, IV, 143-144. [<<](#)

[5]Blochet, "Études sur l'Histoire religieuse de l'Islam," in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 1899. There is a French translation of *the Livre d'Ardâ Vîrâf* by M. A. Barthélemy, published in 1887. [<<](#)

[6] Angelo de Gubernatis, "Dante e l'India," in *Giornale della Società asiatica italiana*, vol. III, 1889, pp. 3-19; "Le Type indien de Lucifer chez Dante," in *Actes du X^e Congrès des Orientalistes*. Cabaton, in the article cited above, points out that "Ozanam had already glimpsed a dual Islamic and Indian influence on Dante" (*Essai sur la philosophie de Dante*, pp. 198 ff.); but we must say that Ozanam's work, despite its reputation, seems to us to be extremely superficial. [<<](#)

[1] *Paradiso*, XX, 94 [*Regnum coelorum* suffers violence"]. [≤](#)

[2] *Purgatorio*, XXXIII, 145 ["to ascend to the stars"]. It is noteworthy that the three parts of the poem all end with the same word, *stelle*, as if to affirm the very special importance that astrological symbolism had for Dante. The last words of *Inferno*, "riveder le stelle" ["to see the stars again"], characterise the return to the properly human state, from which it is possible to perceive something like a reflection of the higher states; the final words of *Purgatorio* are those we explain here. As for the final verse of *Paradiso*: 'L'Amor che muove il Sole e l'altre stelle' ['The love that moves the sun and the other stars'], it designates, as the end of the 'celestial journey', the divine centre that is beyond all spheres and which is, according to Aristotle's expression, the 'unmoved mover' of all things; the name 'Love' attributed to it could give rise to interesting considerations in relation to the symbolism of the initiation of the orders of chivalry. <<

[3] As the theory of the three *gunas* refers to all possible modes of universal manifestation, it is naturally susceptible to multiple applications; one of them, which particularly concerns the sensible world, is found in the cosmological theory of the elements; but here we should only consider its most general meaning, since it was only a matter of explaining the way in which the whole of manifestation is distributed according to the hierarchical division of the three worlds, and of indicating the scope of that division from the initiatory point of view. ≤≤

[1] "Per la restituzione della Cantica dell'Inferno alla sua forma primitiva"
(For the *restoration of the Canticle of Hell to its original form*), in *Nuovo*
Patto, September-November 1921, pp. 506-532. <<

[2] The third "elemental movement," that of *growth*, is represented by 1000; the sum of the three symbolic numbers is 1022, which the "wise men of Egypt," according to Dante, considered to be the number of fixed stars.

<<

[3] It is interesting to consider the sequence of these dates: in 1307, Philip the Fair, in agreement with Clement V, ordered the imprisonment of the Grand Master and the principal dignitaries of the Order of the Temple (72 in number, it is said, which is also a symbolic number); in 1308, Henry of Luxembourg was elected emperor; in 1312, the Order of the Temple was officially abolished; in 1313, Emperor Henry VII died mysteriously, undoubtedly poisoned; in 1314, the Templars were executed, after a trial that had lasted seven years; in the same year, King Philip the Fair and Pope Clement V died. ≤≤

[4] *Purgatory*, XX, 91-93 ["I behold a new Pilate so cruel / that he is not satisfied, and without decree / he raises ambitious sails against the Temple"]. For Dante, Philip the Fair's motive is avarice and greed; there is perhaps a closer relationship than one might suppose between two events attributable to this king: the destruction of the Order of the Temple and the alteration of the currency. <<

[5] 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 translated in Dante's text. [<<](#)

[6] *Purgatorio*, XX, 94-96 ["O my Lord, do I not enjoy the vengeance that, jealous, makes anger sweet in your secret?"]. [<<](#)

[7] *Paradiso*, XXX, 124-148. This passage is precisely the one that speaks of the

"convento delle bianche stole" ["convent of the white stoles"]. The organisations in question had adopted *Altri* as their password, which Aroux (*Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste*, p. 227) interprets as *Arrigo Lucemburghese, Teutonico, Romano Imperatore*; we believe that the word *Teutonico* is inaccurate and should be replaced by *Templare*. On the other hand, it is certain that there must have been some connection between the Order of the Temple and that of the *Teutonic Knights*; it is no coincidence that they were founded almost simultaneously, the former in 1118 and the latter in 1128. Aroux assumes that the word *altri* could be interpreted as just indicated in a passage from Dante (*Inferno*, IX, 9) and that, similarly, the word *tal* (*ibid.*, VIII, 130, and IX, 8) could mean *Teutonic Arrigo Lucemburghese*. <<

[8] The number 11 has been preserved in the ritual of the 33rd degree of Scottish Rite, where it is precisely associated with the date of the abolition of the Order of the Temple, counted according to the Masonic era and not according to the common era. [<<](#)

[9] Revelation, 13, 18. [<<](#)

[10] *Purgatory*, XXXIII, 43-44 ["One thousand five hundred and five, messenger of God"]. [≤](#)

[11] *Inferno*, I, 100-111. As is well known, the she-wolf was initially the symbol of Rome, but was replaced by the eagle in the imperial era. <<

[12]E. G. Parodi, *Poesia e Storia nella Divina Commedia*. [<<](#)

[13]El *Veltro* is a greyhound, a dog, and Aroux suggests the possibility of a kind of pun between *cane* and the title *Khan* that the Tartars give to their chiefs; thus, a name such as *Can Grande della Scala*, Dante's protector, could have had a double meaning. This approach is not implausible, as it is not the only possible example of symbolism based on phonetic similarity; we might even add that the root *can* or *kan* means 'power' in various languages, which is also related to the same line of thought. ≤≤

[14]The emperor, as conceived by Dante, is perfectly comparable to *the Chakravartî* or universal monarch of the Hindus, whose essential function is to bring about *sarvabhaumika* peace, that is, peace extended to the whole earth; parallels could also be drawn between this theory of the Empire and that of the caliphate in Mohyiddin. <<

[15] Furthermore, it can be observed that *Dux* is the equivalent of *the* Tartar *Khan*.

<<

[16] Similarly, the letters DIL, the first letters of the words *Diligite justitiam...*, which are first stated separately (*Paradiso*, XVIII, 78), have the numerical value 551, which is formed with the same digits as 515, placed in a different order, and which also reduces to 11. <<

[17]However, some Scottish Supreme Councils, especially that of Belgium, have removed the expression "Sacred Empire" from their constitutions and rituals wherever it appeared; we see this as evidence of a singular misunderstanding of symbolism even in its most fundamental elements, which highlights the level of degeneration that some factions of contemporary Freemasonry have reached, even in the highest degrees. <<

[1] *Paradiso*, XV, 56-57 ["from which you first assume (...) as five and six give one when you add them together"]. [≤≤](#)

[2] We would add that the number 65 is, in Hebrew, that of the divine name *Adonai*. [≤≤](#)

[3] The most important of these cyclic numbers are 72, 108 and 432; as can be seen, these are exact fractions of the number 25,920, to which they are immediately related by the geometric division of the circle; this division is also an application of cyclic numbers. [<<](#)

[4]Otherwise, there is fundamental agreement among all traditions, whatever their differences in form; thus, for example, the theory of the four ages of humanity (which refers to a cycle broader than that of 13,000 years) is found in Greco-Roman antiquity, in the Hindu world and among the peoples of Central America. An allusion to these four ages (gold, silver, bronze and iron) can be found in the figure of the "old man of Crete" (*Inferno*, XIV, 94-120), which is otherwise identical to the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (*Daniel*, 2); and the four rivers that Dante makes flow out of Hell are not without a certain analogical relationship to those of the earthly Paradise; all this can only be understood if it is referred to cyclical laws. <<

[5] This symbol is one of those referring to the quaternary division of the circle, whose analogical applications are almost innumerable. <<

[6] See Oswald Wirth, *Le symbolisme hermétique dans ses rapports avec l'Alchimie et la Franc-Maçonnerie*, pp. 19 and 70-71. [<<](#)

[7] The symbolism of the pole plays a considerable role in all traditional doctrines, but to give a complete explanation of this subject would require a specific study. [<<](#)

[8] *Purgatorio*, I, 22-27. [≤](#)

[9]The hermetic symbol of the animal kingdom is the sign that includes the entire vertical diameter and only half of the horizontal diameter; this symbol is in some ways the inverse of that of the mineral kingdom, transforming what was horizontal into vertical, and vice versa; the symbol of the plant kingdom, where there is a kind of symmetry or equivalence between the two directions, horizontal and vertical, represents an intermediate state between the other two. <<

[10]We will point out that the three degrees of symbolic Freemasonry have, in certain rites, passwords that also represent, respectively, the three kingdoms, mineral, vegetable and animal; moreover, the first of these passwords is sometimes interpreted in a sense that is closely related to the symbolism of the 'globe of the world'. <<

[11]Between the earthly Paradise and the heavenly Jerusalem there is the same relationship as between the two Adams mentioned by St Paul (1 Cor 15). <<

[12] There are many other questions related to this topic that would be interesting to explore in greater depth, for example: why is the earthly Paradise described as a garden, using plant symbolism, and the heavenly Jerusalem as a city, using mineral symbolism? The reason is that vegetation represents the development of seeds in the sphere of vital assimilation, while minerals represent the results that are definitively fixed, 'crystallised' so to speak, at the end of the cyclical development. [<<](#)

[13]The approximation that these texts give rise to is even more significant when one knows the relationship that links the *Lamb* of Christian symbolism with the Vedic *Agni* (whose vehicle is represented by the ram). We do not claim that there is anything more between the words *Agnus* and *Ignis* (the Latin equivalent of *Agni*) than one of those phonetic similarities we referred to earlier, which may well not correspond to any linguistic relationship proper, but which are not purely accidental. We refer specifically to a certain aspect of the symbolism of fire, which, in various traditional forms, is very closely linked to the idea of 'Love', transposed in a higher sense, as Dante does; on this point, Dante is also inspired by St John, with whom the orders of chivalry have mainly linked their doctrinal conceptions. It should be noted that the Lamb is associated with both representations of the earthly Paradise and those of the heavenly Jerusalem.

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[14] *Inferno*, XXXIV, 110-111 ["and the point where all weight converges"]. [≤](#)

Table of Contents

[The esotericism of Dante](#)

[Chapter 1. Apparent meaning and hidden meaning](#)

[Chapter 2. The 'Holy Faith'](#)

[Chapter 3. Masonic and Hermetic Approaches Chapter](#)

[4. Dante and Rosicrucianism](#)

[Chapter 5. Extraterrestrial Journeys in Different Traditions](#)

[Chapter 6. The Three Worlds](#)

[Chapter 7. Symbolic numbers Chapter 8.](#)

[Cosmic cycles](#)

[Chapter 9. Errors in systematic interpretations Author](#)

[Notes](#)

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