UNVEILING THE MYSTERY OF DANTE

An Esoteric Understanding of Dante and his Divine Comedy

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Part One

The Esoteric Background of the Divine Comedy
There may be times when what is most needed is, not so much a new discovery or a new idea as a different “slant”; I mean a comparatively slight readjustment in our way of looking at the things and ideas on which attention is already fixed.

Draw a rectangular glass box in perspective—not too precise perspective (for the receding lines must be kept parallel, instead of converging)—and look at it. It has a front and a back, a top and a bottom. But slide your hand across it in the required direction and look again: you may find that what you thought was inside of the top has become its outside, while the outside of the front wall has changed to the inside of the back wall, and vice versa. The visual readjustment was slight, but the effect on the drawing has been far from slight, for the box has not only turned inside out but is also lying at quite a different angle.

—Owen Barfield,  
*Saving the Appearances*
THE TOWER OF BABEL
AND THE PROBLEM OF DIALECTICISM

When analyzing literature of the distant past, we may occasionally feel beset by a curious problem. Do we interpret it by means of a consciousness that mirrors that of the artist who produced it? If not, how is it different? Or, better yet, how has human consciousness transformed through time? It seems to me that the modern-day literary theorist often takes such questions for granted, choosing instead to focus on the socioreligious or political realities of a particular period as they have been customarily interpreted and accepted as truth. One need only read a book on modern literary theory to realize how the kind of “critical” thinking employed by literary analysts to define or interpret an ancient text can prevent them, inadvertently, from entering into the “field of imaginative forces” responsible for its creation. In other words, is the dialectical process of thinking from which literary explanations arise often by nature antagonistic to the work’s intrinsic living reality? By focusing attention on outer “factual” representations, such theorists presume the authority to proclaim the veracity of their particular interpretations, even though the conceptual models that they use are themselves constantly being supplanted through time. Where is the basis for an objective analysis to be found? Can it truly be uncovered in the externalized, interpreted fact that has been inherited, or is it buried somewhere deep within the current of an ever-changing consciousness?

At the root of such ambiguity is the pervasive notion that, save an increase in “scientifically verifiable knowledge” and the apparent
complexity of dialectical thought, our thinking is fundamentally similar in nature to that of earlier times. That is to say, we believe that our consciousness has, for the most part, remained unchanged and that we *behold* the world in much the same way we did two thousand years ago. Furthermore, we commonly assume that our increasingly complex system of thought and the countless tidbits of information accumulating in libraries and on computer screens provide a “sufficient” key to deciphering the enigmas contained in ancient writings. What often seems lacking, however, is the realization that the qualitative nature of thinking may have changed. The same holds true for the literary devises often used to express a given reality. Take the metaphor or allegory as an example. Whereas humanity could once look at a given phenomenon, perceive the very forces that shaped it, and convey its inner reality through picture, today this picture has often been reduced to a mere physical representation used to depict a given reality through outer association. Herein lies the basis upon which psychoanalysis, for example, has been conceived and applied to the study of literature. Because literary theorists interpret an epic or myth separate from the *nature* of thought that brought it into being, they have, in a sense, charted a course similar to modern religions, which seek the existence of God outside the boundaries of human consciousness.

Such thinking has also, one might add, given rise to hesitation on the part of many scholars to classify folktales as “literature.” The reasons for this are often nebulous. One explanation has been that neither folktales nor myths, for the most part, can be attributed to a particular author. In other words, what differentiates *The Odyssey* from the *Myth of Gilgamesh* is that, in the former instance, one solitary individual (Homer) can tenuously be singled out for having brought it into manifestation. Whereas myths, on the other hand, are representations of a collective consciousness, which, as Terry Eagleton says in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, “unfold their ‘concrete logic’ with supreme disregard for the vagaries of individual thought, and reduce any particular consciousness to a mere function of themselves.” Yet, is a so-called individualized literary expression,
itself, not but a *reflection* of the universal consciousness from which it arises? In other words, are not both aforementioned works (each in their own way) but quintessential *reflections of consciousness during different points in humanity’s evolutionary development*? Excluded from consideration, of course, is *how* both works reflect human consciousness. Though the example set forth may seem inconsequential, it is indicative of the arbitrary values by which we often evaluate what is passed down through time. This is done regardless of the fact that even the most eminent literary theorists may, in effect, take into consideration how our view of Homer may be very different from, let us say, that of someone living in the fourteenth century. Terry Eagleton goes on to say,

The fact that we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns—indeed that in one sense of “our own concerns” we are incapable of doing anything else—might be one reason why certain works of literature seem to retain their value across the centuries. It may be, of course, that we still share many preoccupations with the work itself; but it may also be that people have not actually been valuing the “same” work at all, even though they may think they have. “Our” Homer is not identical with the Homer of the Middle Ages, nor “our” Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries; it is rather that different historical periods have constructed a “different” Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes, and found in these texts elements to value or devalue, though not necessarily the same ones.

Implied here, of course, is how through time we interpret a literary work differently in relation to our sociohistorical context. What most literary theorists do not seem to insist upon, however, is how such interpretations in no way enable us to uncover the *nature* of thinking out of which an ancient text was born. Such interpretations are, instead, continually born of a thinking that associates with external reality. Though the value placed on a piece of literature may change in its relation to our interpretation of a particular sociohistorical context, such interpretations do not change the fact that the
original work, in itself, is the product of a consciousness particular to a given point in time. The universality of literature is not to be sought merely in its applicability to one’s social environment but, more important, in the stage of consciousness of which it is an expression, since each developing social configuration is, itself, a manifestation of an evolving human consciousness. Thus, the universality of a literary work can only be understood within the context of this ever-changing consciousness.

Present-day dialectical consciousness can in no way enable us to capture the essential thinking out of which a given work was written. By means of it, we can only speculate as to its past nature. Though this speculative process has become increasingly refined, all present-day exhibitions in conceptual dexterity seem to lack the essential quality of ancient thinking. Dialectical, sense-based thinking is devoid of life and, by nature, unable to conjure the pictorial quality of the consciousness that operated in the past. Astute observations, such as Eagleton’s, merely have the inadvertent effect of acknowledging the reader’s lack of orientation when confronted by a classic work of antiquity, while justifying yet another refabricated interpretation of it. They provide no bridge toward a true comprehension of the evolutionary stages in between by which one can understand how the thinking behind a given literary work has developed to its present stage.

During the last hundred years, the rise of conceptual models stemming from literary analysis has been impressive, so that one who chooses to understand past literature is faced with deciphering a monstrous edifice of signs and symbols. This edifice, for the most part, is merely the invention of a thinking process, which, itself, has become reduced to a mere concatenation of symbols. From the emergence of formalism (which declared literature to be a “‘special’ kind of language, in contrast to the ‘ordinary’ language we commonly use”\(^5\)), to semiotics (which considers literature by means of a “systematic study of signs”\(^6\)), to deconstructionism (which “is the name given to the critical operation by which oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown to partly undermine
The Tower of Babel and the Problem of Dialecticism

each other in the process of textual meaning”) namely, abolishing the binary oppositions into which structuralism sought to reduce a piece of literature, we witness the gradual mechanization of human thinking. This process of mechanization is, itself, superimposed onto a work of art so that the latter may be torn asunder. Consider, for example, the so-called fundamental kinds of signs common to the study of semiotics. Says Eagleton:

There was the “iconic,” where the sign somehow resembled what it stood for (a photograph of a person, for example); the “indexical,” in which the sign is somehow associated with what it is a sign of (smoke with fire, spots with measles), and the “symbolic,” where as with Saussure the sign is only arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent. Semiotics takes up this and many other classifications: it distinguishes between “denotation” (what the sign stands for) and “connotation” (other signs associated with it); between codes (the rule-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; between the “paradigmatic” (a whole class of signs which may stand in for one another) and the “syntagmatic” (where signs are coupled together with each other in a chain). It speaks of “meta-languages” where one sign system denotes another sign system (the relation between literary criticism and literature, for instance), “polysemic” signs that have more than one meaning, and a great many other technical concepts.  

Here, we seem to witness how each conceived “system of signs” is a mere reflection of other so-called systems all to be related to one another in whichever way seems most applicable. Yet, if one probes the many applications invented to justify the mere existence of such a system, whose main function is thought to be the uncovering of meaning in a text, one realizes that, in so doing, such a meaning can never be found, for meaning so often largely arises from within one’s ineffable experience of the text itself and not in the systematic relationships or paradigms artificially devised outside the parameters of such an experience. In the end, individual dialectical thoughts are but themselves the very signs by which a systematic ordering is construed, all with the aim of uncovering meaning. Unfortunately, the highly
complex systematic ordering that is derived from such dialecticism is not intrinsic to the *quintessential experience* itself, but, instead, taken to the extreme, begins to be figuratively aligned to the inner configuration of a microchip, which would, in effect, be tantamount to seeking answers regarding the essential nature of a piece of literature within the inner workings of a computer. Rudolf Steiner, in a series of lectures entitled *The Karma of Untruthfulness* (vol. 1), states:

> Ancient knowledge is lost, and for the most part we speak in the way we do just because the ancient knowledge is lost and we are surrounded by maya, which gives us nothing but mere words. Now we must once again seek the spiritual life that gives the words their content. We live, in a way, in a mechanism of words, just as externally we shall gradually completely lose our individuality in a mechanism of technology until we are at the mercy of external mechanisms.⁹

In light of this, who can argue with the fact that many modern-day literary theorists have merely become literary “technicians,” whose very preoccupation with literature, often poses its greatest threat. In *The Arts and their Mission*, Steiner says:

> Abstract thoughts deaden artistic phantasy. Becoming more and more logical, one takes to writing commentaries on works of art. This is a terrible product of the materialistic age: scholars write commentaries of art. But these academic explanations, *Faust* commentaries, *Hamlet* commentaries, learned descriptions of the art of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, are coffins in which genuine artistic feeling, living art, lie buried. If one picks up a *Faust* or *Hamlet* commentary, it is like touching a corpse. Abstract thoughts have murdered the work of art.¹⁰

We now come to Dante. More than seven hundred years have passed since he wrote his immortal depiction of the human condition—the *Divine Comedy*. Yet, the literary world has seemingly failed to divine the significance of this “eternal poem” as it relates to the evolution of human consciousness. Many explanations have been conceived to elucidate the theological and philosophical questions
that comprise Dante’s cosmological view of life, only to resignedly attribute the greatness of his poem to its multidimensionality, or even to its obscurity. In addition, modern scholars have often repudiated metaphysical insights that have failed to accord themselves with the formalistic rigidities of modern-day philosophical, scholarly thought. Our inability to comprehend the function of poetry as it relates to the consciousness of a particular historical era has greatly obscured our ability to decipher the enigmas concealed within it. How can centuries of intellectual scrutiny by many traditional literary scholars overlook the nature of consciousness in their analysis of ancient texts and, at the same time, ostracize those few individuals who, in the face of academic prejudice, had inadvertently striven to rectify this shortcoming by unveiling what lay behind the nebulous jargon employed by Dante and his contemporaries?

To understand the answer to these questions, we will have to describe the impulses that gradually arose during the waning decades of the Middle Ages and that firmly took hold of humanity during the beginning of the fifteenth century. We know from the various lectures given by Rudolf Steiner that what occurred during that time was a subtle transformation of consciousness, in which humanity acquired a more conceptual and abstract relationship to nature. No longer was it readily possible for human beings to behold the living forces that weave the material world into being. Instead, those forces had slowly receded from view so that what was, for the most part, left for humanity to behold was a “crystallized” representation of the world, which became evermore devoid of life and differed substantially from the more pictorial consciousness of earlier times. Yet, in spite of this, there still existed a “residual” of the atavistic clairvoyance that Steiner says was a lingering characteristic of the “Intellectual Soul Age”—a term used by him to denote a particular stage of largely “un-individualized” human consciousness connected to hereditary forces, lasting roughly 2,160 years from 747 BC up until the early fifteenth century (AD 1413).

The abstract thought forms that humanity had begun to experience, on the other hand, were lifeless. They could be arranged in the
most varied ways and, thereby, generate a multiplicity of conceptual models by which human beings could seek to fathom the past. The tragedy in this was that had human beings been able to perceive the force, itself, which binds these materialized thoughts, they would have been able to recapture the living force of thinking in such a way as to eventually awaken what Rudolf Steiner calls “Cosmic Memory,” thus enabling them to perceive the unfolding of human consciousness. This, however, was not at all possible, for human beings had yet to attain a spiritual constitution that would have permitted them to tread the path of initiation proper to the Consciousness Soul Age—a period that marked the beginning of a purely “individualized” consciousness, initially reflected to a large degree in the discoveries of such individualities as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Instead, human beings were left, as we have stated, to construct representational models of spiritual reality so that, as their dialectical dexterity increased, so, too, did their inner conviction in the validity of abstractions to uncover truth. Each new concept was analyzed and expanded so that a systematic process gradually unfolded. Now, as this so-called Tower of Babel increasingly took hold of human hearts, it fervently denied that there be any other way toward a more comprehensive representation of reality, and therefore, repudiated the employment of elements that did not conform to its mechanized network. This “nominalistic” perspective was to be the foundation of nineteenth century Positivism, and only of late have cracks begun to form along the surface of this great dialectical edifice.

While this mechanized apparatus, known to us as intellectualism, conformed all disciplinary endeavors to its sense-based grasp of reality, so, too, did religion follow suit and seek to rectify its inability to substantiate the spiritual foundation underlying earthly phenomena by pointing to the limitations inherent in sense-based thinking. This realization, however, did not come about through the capacity to “behold” the very essence of thought—i.e., the light of thinking. Rather, it was itself a mere product of the kind of thinking that it had put into question in the first place. In the end, religious adherents
sought to rectify their own penetrative incapacities by fostering the notion that the only bridge between these two realms was “faith,” a word that inferred the absence of dialectics. Thus, in a most peculiar way, the dialectical mode of thinking that characterized science had also become an intrinsic characteristic of religion, even though it tried to dismiss dialectics as a vehicle toward comprehending such mysteries as the Resurrection.

Owing to the lack of insight, by philosophy and religion, to apprehend the spiritual impulses during the period preceding the Consciousness Soul Age, modern humanity has been stripped of the ability to resolve the inherent shortcomings to which it has fallen prey. This can clearly be evidenced in the assertion (even to this day) that the mere physical presence of Beatrice Portinari at the age of nine eventually led Dante, one of the great minds in human history, to the realization of his spiritual being. Such myopia arises out of a thinking whose limitations we fail to perceive, for it was not only the physical presence of Beatrice but, just as important, the spiritual aspect of her being that was the inspirational force that led him toward the realization of his “I.” As Steiner says in his lecture on Dante (February, 11, 1906), humanity experienced both the physical aspect and the spiritual aspect of reality equally during the Middle Ages. In fact, many have argued that “Beatrice” was the name given by Dante to denote the realization of Divine Wisdom (Sophia). Therefore, like many of the feminine names used by Dante’s contemporaries (i.e., Laura/Petrarch and Fiammetta/Boccaccio), the name “Beatrice” denoted the attainment of a particular transcendent state of consciousness.

Thus, the unwillingness of modern theorists to consider the limitations of the method they employ to explicate ancient literary works of art reveals, at the very least, their dismissal of the very basis of understanding—the nature of thinking itself. They merely employ, unconsciously, a systematic thought process to decipher the incomprehensible enigmas they encounter. By ignoring the nature of thinking, how can we ever ascertain the validity of our suppositions? In the end, all modern literary movements such
as structuralism, deconstructionism, semiotics, etc. are but highly polished variations of an intellectual dialecticism whose validation (or comprehension) is rarely, if ever, objectified. Reassurance as to the plausibility of its postulations seems to rest in the preponderate ability to make ever complex and incomprehensible its theoretical models to the general populace, which is to essentially create a systematic paradigm that is taboo to the average layman. In so doing, it proclaims itself to be irrefutable. Opposing voices can find but few means to challenge it without finding themselves entangled in the very dialectical jargon that they contest. No wonder little opposition has, in fact, succeeded in slowing the perpetuation of such a proliferation of dialectical thinking, which, in turn, has inevitably resulted in a lack of orientation within literary circles where one literary theory often invalidates another. The supplanting of one theoretical model of reality by another is, in turn, symptomatic of an underlying premise pervading all hypothetical models of reality, especially Marxist ideology—namely, that material dialecticism is the unquestionable authority, by which we decode the enigmas that surround us. This notion is unknowingly predicated on the belief that just as matter generates life, so, too, is the physical brain the creator of thoughts. In other words, materiality becomes the basis for understanding life. Georg Lukács states, “Marxism searches for the material roots for each phenomenon, regards them in their historical connections and movement, and ascertains the laws of such movement…” The ascertainment of such laws, however, does not stem from a perceptive process which bridges itself to the heart of creative activity in the suprasensory realm. Thus, there is, so to speak, no place at all for a spiritual world. In light of the historical emergence of dialecticism, this is most natural, for how can a thinking that adheres only to materiality acknowledge the presence of a reality it cannot behold experientially?

Nevertheless, in his book regarding the immaterial nature of thinking, *Il Pensiero come Anti-Materia*, the Italian anthroposophical thinker, Massimo Scaligero, states “il sistema materialistico
muove da una metafisica…”¹³ (the materialistic system proceeds from suprasensory reality…). If the adherents to modern-day literary ideologies sincerely take this into account and begin to probe experientially the thinking that they employ, they may themselves come to perceive the limitations of dialectical thinking. They may see that thinking, steeped in materialism, cannot, in and of itself, lead us to the essence of its own nature. In other words, sense-based dialectical thinking alone does not enable us to perceive the process of its own becoming. It does not allow us to witness the activity of thinking, but only the end product of that activity—i.e., static thought forms, the very foundation of present-day thought. Again, all too often, modern-day theorists do not take any of this into account, for the spiritual world is, of course, to most of them nothing but an intellectual construct and not a perceptible reality. So, too, Dante’s Divine Comedy has been construed, for the most part, as nothing more than a fanciful intellectual creation, reflective of his speculations on the spiritual world.

So, whether we speak of deconstructionism, structuralism, Foucault, Barthes, Benjamin, and so on, we are, in effect, speaking of the same thing. There exists no worldview, no underlying conception based on the perception of forces that manifest outer reality or, even thought itself, for that matter. Such literary constructs are, again, mere intellectual speculations on reality that continually supplant one another while reaching exasperate levels of complexity. Thus, it is easy to see how in analyzing literary works of the past, little is taken into account of the impulses that generate an historical reality—impulses that can be perceived without the implementation of theory. Likewise, there is no coherent picture of the spiritual development of humanity that would suffice as a context within which to place a particular work of art, unless of course, one seeks to understand the essential factors that comprise such a context. For this to occur, much attention, again, would by necessity have to be given to the nature of thought and perception as the foundation by which an understanding of the world and its spiritual evolution can be ascertained.
A worldview that does take all of this into account, however, though little known in academic circles, is Anthroposophy. It places the activity of thinking at the very heart of its attempt to probe outer reality. It is founded on the ability to behold the very forces that manifest the material world. The cognitive mode of perception is, itself, transformed so that no longer is reality understood based on the associative capacity of thoughts but, rather, on the transformation of thinking itself, whereby the force of thinking is initially beheld as an objective nonmaterialized entity. The ability to perceive the force that brings dialectical thought into manifestation, as a visible reality, marks the beginning of modern initiation. It is this ability that can gradually allow us to consciously enter into what Steiner calls the “etheric” realm, the world’s formative interplay of forces, wherein it is possible to behold a tableau of all that has transpired since the creation of the world.

Rudolf Steiner was able to penetrate into this sphere where the Christ, Himself, can be experienced. In so doing, he could describe the philosophical and religious impulses that arose during the creation of the present-day world from many points of view. He was not guided by the mere ability to cleverly arrange concepts into a systematic whole that he then could apply as a hypothesis to be proved or disproved. Instead, he could perceive the very forces themselves, at the heart of consciousness, responsible for the manifestation of an artistic form of expression. Herein lies the importance of Steiner’s contribution to the world of art and literature. By formulating a worldview based on suprasensory perception, Steiner could perceive the relation between historical transformation and the nature of thinking and was, thus, able to show how the human deeds that shaped outer historical development were born of a consciousness particular to a given period of time. It is, of course, a comprehensive worldview such as his that is lacking in present-day literary circles. In the absence of such a view, the intellectual world has failed to provide society with a coherent understanding of human development. The fragmentation of thought has precluded the emergence
of a coherent worldview by which one can place a work such as the *Divine Comedy* into context and hope to understand it as an imaginative expression conducive to the realization of the “I.”

A principle aim of this work is to show how what is urgently needed today can be gleaned from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, namely a path that enables us to transform our being by immersing ourselves into the creative *act* of life.