

# Dark Wood to White Rose

## JOURNEY AND TRANSFORMATION IN DANTE'S *Divine Comedy*

by  
Helen M. Luke



INCEPIT MEDIVMVE ILLVQVE TRIBVNAL LVSTRATVQVE ANIMO CVNCTA POETA SVO DOCTVS ADEST DANTE SVA QVEM FLORENTIA SAEP  
ONSILIIS AC PLEATE PATRE NIL POTVIT TANTO MORS SAEVA NOCERE POETA QVEM VIVVM VIRTVS CARMEN IMAGO FACIT

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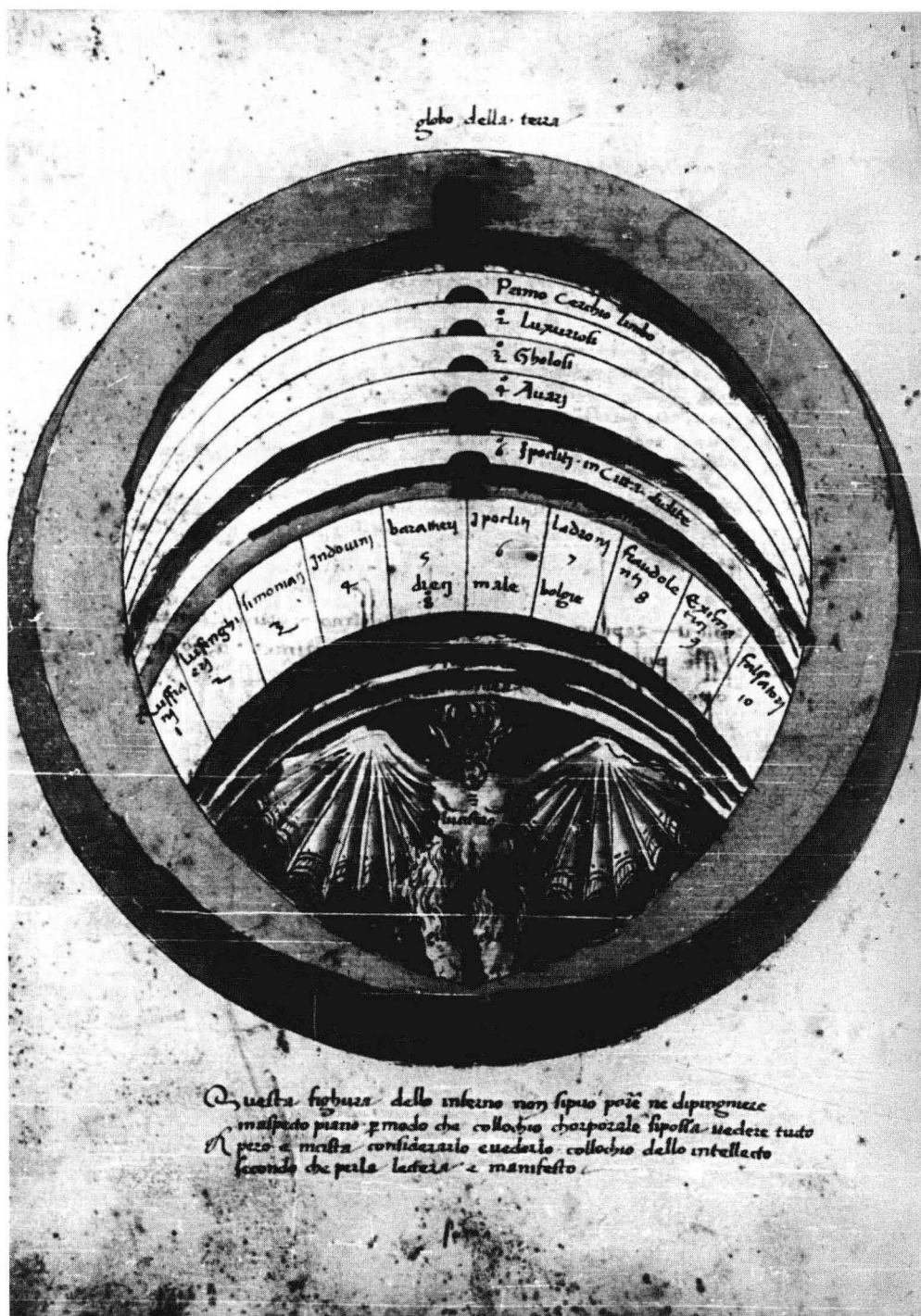
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*Dark Wood  
to White Rose*



Questa figura dello inferno non si può più ne dipingere  
 maffato piano p'modo che collochio corporale si possa uedere tutto  
 A pero e multa considerarlo e uederlo collochio dello intellecto  
 secondo che p'la lettera e manifesto

10

## Preface

THROUGHOUT this study I have used the translations of Dorothy Sayers and of Barbara Reynolds, who completed the *Paradiso* after Dorothy Sayers' death. I have also quoted freely and often from their notes, and I wish to express my great admiration for their insights, without which I would never have attempted this work.

I make frequent reference to the psychology of the late C.G. Jung, to whose work I owe my basic approach to the symbolism of the poem. My abiding thankfulness for the teachings of this great man will, I trust, be obvious.

I wish to thank my friend, Charlotte Smith, most warmly for her hours of typing work so generously given.

These essays were originally written as material for study groups held at Apple Farm Community, Three Rivers, Michigan. Of my deep gratitude to my friends at Apple Farm and to all the members of our study groups here for their unfailing support and encouragement it is hard to speak. I hope they know and feel it.

Helen Luke  
Apple Farm  
September, 1972

## Foreword

HELEN LUKE'S exploration of Dante's journey is a sensitive one. It is particularly sensitive to those points of juncture en route when the pilgrim's sense of his place in his unprecedented experience affords him access to a new level of consciousness. Her own Virgil in this endeavor has been C.G. Jung, and it is the Jungian "way of individuation"—the divided individual's recognition of division and pursuit of wholeness of being—which has provided her with a grounding for her insights. The result is a convincing meditation on the poem's pertinence to our own life's faring in the dark wood of the late twentieth century.

If today the word *individual* is commonly used to designate a particularity as opposed to a class, the dictionary advises that once upon a time a scholastic philosopher would have understood it as signifying "an indivisible unity, one in substance or essence." The thesis of *Dark Wood to White Rose* seems to me to be that what life-possibility this currently obsolete sense of the word stands for is in fact the center towards which the pilgrim's frequently faltering steps are directed, although he himself can hardly see this at the start. "At stroke of noon the descent begins," wrote Jung in "The Changes of Life." Dante's account famously commences with a crisis *mezzo del cammin*. But for the story to amount to more than a more or less patient suffering of those thirty-five years or so remaining, that is, for it to become a journey actively undertaken toward that "indivisible unity" we had certainly thought was obsolete (if we had thought of it at all), an altered consciousness is required. And this is where Helen Luke's commentary on the vital moments of transaction and transformation along the way is especially valuable.

One of the crucial features of the *Commedia* is the fact that there are two Dantes in it, Dante the poem's pilgrim protagonist and Dante the poet who has survived his epiphany and who can remember himself as he was, for example, fast asleep and scattered, on the far side of it. Helen Luke's reading of the poem's second line—



mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

—is prompted by this double vista. *Inf.* I,2 has been variously rendered into English as “I came to myself in a dark wood” (J.A. Carlyle), “I found myself in a dark wood” (Charles Singleton), “I woke to find myself in a dark wood” (Dorothy Sayers); the author prefers the last for its approximation to the literal sense of the verb *mi ritrovai*: “I refound or rediscovered myself.” From Dante the pilgrim’s viewpoint, it is sufficient that he see he has lost the way he thought he was on and that he take immediate steps to find it. (In a moment he will try to, he will find himself failing, he will end up by having to put himself in the hands of something which needed his need to appear and which appears in the poem first of all in the robes of Virgil). But from Dante the poet’s angle of vision, it is the dark wood itself which constitutes the initial and initiating mercy. For *per una selva oscura* means—as Helen Luke shows—not only *in* or *within*, but *through* or *by way of* a dark wood. Thus the baleful place is itself a vital part of the pattern, a means—as, soon, the three beasts on the little hill, and then Virgil, and always and finally Beatrice herself—for his process of self-recovery. Indeed, as the author glosses, “it is because of his lost state that a man is able consciously to find himself.” *Sine qua non*: can there be a white rose for us without the dark wood prior? Thus the descent begins which is in truth the rising action of the journey towards wholeness which the poet Dante gives its accurate and joyful name, *commedia*.

\* \* \*

Illustrations accompanying this edition of *Dark Wood to White Rose* have been selected from the magnificent *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy* by Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss and Charles S. Singleton (Bollingen Series LXXXI: Princeton University Press, 1969), a collection of iconographically and/or artistically significant miniatures illustrating the poem made from within a decade of the poet’s death in 1321 up to about 1465. Illuminations and illustrations are meant to bring light, to elucidate. *PARABOLA* hopes that this selection will enrich the reader’s experience both of the poem and of the essay which is here presented in its second, augmented edition.

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# Introduction

## PART I

DANTE DID NOT himself call his comedy “divine”; the word was added by later publishers. It is misleading because it expresses only half of the truth, which is that the *Commedia*, while it is certainly divine, is just as certainly human. From its beginning on the threshold of Hell to its end in the vision of God, the poem resounds with the double nature of reality which is the single truth: without divinity there can be no conscious humanity and without humanity the divine remains an abstraction.

Why did Dante call his great story of the inner journey a comedy—no, not a comedy, *The Comedy*? We use the word comedy loosely to express something amusing, but in its specific literary sense, as opposed to tragedy, it means a work that has a happy ending. In a great comedy we are always made aware of the darkness in life, but the ending must be happy or it is not a comedy. A man’s journey to wholeness is therefore most rightly named *The Comedy*, for the end is the final awareness of that love which is the joy of the universe. Fairy stories usually have happy endings, not because of a childish wishful thinking, but because they are true to life itself; and the man who finally refuses validity to the “happy ending” is outside the human community and has chosen to live in the monotony and meaninglessness of Hell.

The fact that the “happy ending” to a story is so often sneered at in our day is a frightening thing. It is thought of as sentimental optimism, and so very often it is, in the hands of an inferior writer or thinker; but when the potentially true poets and artists confuse this superficial concept with the intensity of meaning which may be born from the heart of tragedy, then indeed there is cause for fear, because it argues a blindness to the very nature of poetry—of the human imagination itself: to

know meaning is to glimpse the joy of the end. The great poets of tragedy, such as Shakespeare and Aeschylus, never leave us with a sense of meaningless horror and disaster. Out of the darkness shines an intense ray of hope and beauty which owes its brilliance precisely to a clear-eyed acceptance of the terror of the story. To all eternity Cordelia *lives*; but to discover this we must pass through Hell itself, as Dante did to make this same discovery.

There is a widespread contempt nowadays for the belief of Christians in a life after death, in which, it is said, they take refuge from the horrors of "reality," so-called. Those who reject this belief would do well to reflect on the fact that in doing so they are guilty of precisely the same kind of unconscious projection as is the superficial Christian. Both are incapable of seeing life whole and mistake the dimension of time, and the partial truths of cause and effect, for the reality itself.

In the interior world there can be no conscious life, no true awareness whatever without a continual dying—without repeated deaths of old attitudes, of superficial desires, and finally of every claim of the ego to dominance. The fact is that life after death, or rather life out of death, is *the* truth of the universe, natural as well as psychological and spiritual, outwardly as well as inwardly. It would seem unlikely, to say the least of it, that the death of a man's individual psyche should be the one exception to this universal law. We are at liberty to imagine as we will the form of life which may emerge from the transformation experience of death; not only that, but as C.G. Jung points out in his commentary on the *Bardo Thodol* (the Tibetan Book of the Dead), it is of profound importance for a man's life in this world that he make the effort to imagine the after-death state.

In the Middle Ages, before the modern spectacular development of ego-consciousness, the collective vision filled this need for most men, whose inner life was lived in projection. It is foolish to look down on such visions, for a psychic truth is in them, however much it may be obscured by our greater factual knowledge. Through a passion for truth on one level, we are in danger of mistaking the part for the whole in a far more devastating way than did our ancestors, so that we deny the truths of the imagination, without which the "letter killeth." There are, however, many signs of a new emergence of that hope which is born of the certainty buried in the unconscious of us all.

On one of the albums by Simon and Garfunkel, there is a song called "7:00 News/Silent Night," in which the ancient carol is quietly and beautifully sung while, at first dimly, then more and more clearly and loudly, we hear the voice of a broadcaster of the news announcing dispassionately the kind of violent and terrible events to which we are daily accustomed to listen. I know that many react to this as though it were yet another image of despair—the submergence of all hope of peace and joy in the harsh violence of our day. But when I heard this song it moved me deeply in quite a different way. The voices of the singers of the ancient carol were in fact not even faintly shaken. Certainly it became easier and easier as the song drew to its close to attend only to the announcer and his message, to cease hearing the beautiful voices singing quietly and unmoved of the peace beyond understanding; but he who really attends to the wholeness of the song will feel with a surge of joy yet another promise of the light shining in darkness and hear the still small voice which speaks clearly now as it always has, no matter how loud the voices of the crowd. Whether the writers of the song were aware of the more profound meaning of their work, I do not know. But even if not, then it rose up out of their unconscious and asserted itself through them.

The disintegrating effect of "the bomb" on the young has, I believe, been exaggerated. Death from plague, undernourishment, massacres, and so on must have hung over our ancestors with an even greater imminence than the bomb. The disintegrating force is not the threat of death and suffering; men have never felt safe from these things, and the response of the human spirit is clearly seen in the calm rebuilding of villages repeatedly destroyed by volcano or earthquake. The truly deadly thing is our loss of the inner certainty of the "happy ending": the meaning which we may choose, if we will pay the price, in the face of every disaster. Once a man has known this certainty through an experience, however brief, of faith and hope and love in the true sense of these words (the sense in which they are used by Dante), while it in no way reduces the horrors of war, of pollution, of all the facts of our present life, he is able to face these fearful things and fight them with all he has on one level, while abiding in peace on another. It is very certain that there is no hope at all for real change except through the awareness in individuals of the possibility of redemption into ultimate wholeness and bliss—not in some future life but here and now. It is of his own experience of bliss

in *this* life that Dante wrote, but he came to it through his intense imaginative vision of the life beyond. His outer life was a long tragedy of loneliness and poverty in exile, but surely no one has ever accused him of *escaping* into imagination.

Our thinking is blinded and obsessed by a kind of worship of quantity and numbers. The bomb could kill millions; whereas the savagery of a primitive battle killed only hundreds, which, it is tacitly assumed, hardly mattered in comparison. Positively as well as negatively we fall into the same error—the success and rightness of a church, a movement, of any group is judged by the numbers of its adherents. The fever for statistics amounts to a cult; it extends even to the tabulation of mystical experiences. There is a passage in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Problem of Pain*, which can shock us out of this obsession:

We must never make the problem of pain worse than it is by vague talk about 'the unimaginable sum of human misery.' Suppose that I have a toothache of intensity X: and suppose that you, who are seated beside me, also begin to have a toothache of intensity X. You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now 2X. But you must remember that no one is suffering, 2X: search all time and space and you will not find that composite pain in anyone's consciousness. There is no such thing as a sum of suffering, for no one suffers it. When we have reached the maximum that a single person can suffer, we have, no doubt, reached something very horrible, but we have reached all the suffering there ever can be in the universe. The addition of a million fellow-sufferers adds no more pain.<sup>1</sup>

Each one of us is alone with his own suffering; the pain of a single man is as important and significant as the pain of a million. Our compassion is deadened, not heightened, by the continual horrors reaching our ears through the mass media. When we read of a massacre or an earthquake, we give a gasp of horror and are relatively unmoved; it is when we see a single man crushed to death that we truly suffer. This truth is of immense importance for all of us. By forgetting it we literally evade the battle with evil, for we are unable to see the murderous things we may be doing to someone in our immediate environment; while we indulge our hatreds by well-meant but

empty talk about collective horrors and the wickedness of governments.

Not once in the *Commedia* are we left with a mere description of the horrors of Hell or the pains of Purgatory in a collective sense, nor invited to be stunned by the *numbers* of people who suffer. On the contrary, in every single circle of Hell and on every separate terrace of Purgatory, and just as surely, at every stage of the Heavens of Bliss, Dante meets, describes, and talks to one or two distinct *individuals*. It is because we are set face to face with unique individuals that the impact is so great, and, entering into the experience of a single soul, we recognize his suffering or his joy as an image of the hidden movements of sin or pain or bliss in ourselves.

The savagery of the poets of today in their attack on the evils of society can be matched and surpassed over and over again by passages from the *Commedia* in which Dante ruthlessly exposes the politicians and warmongers of his time. But so often the second-rate poet, or reformer, simply stops there, thus adding his mite to the very destructiveness he condemns. Evil must indeed be exposed, and denounced, and fought by word and action, but it is never conquered by mere exposure nor by the passion of rejection nor by action alone, necessary as these things are. It becomes powerless before one thing only, which is the certainty of a man who, while evading nothing of the dark facts, asserts and acts out of the joy at the heart of life. This is not cheap optimism, nor has it anything to do with superficial happiness. It is a kind of certainty that can never be born of evasion; indeed, those who do not know it are the ones who evade, for in some way they have refused or have been unable to face the conscious "journey into self."

No, the sickness of our society is not due to the threat of the bomb, to the ineptitude or corruption of the Establishment, to wars, or to the machinations of Communists or Capitalists. These evils are effects, not causes; they have always existed and are no worse because of the enormous scale on which they now operate. Our sickness is fundamentally due to the breakdown of the symbolic life which all the great religions have existed to maintain, so that we are left with eyes that see not and ears that hear not beyond the literal facts and voices of our environment. We hear *only* the dark news of the broadcaster, and our inner ear is deaf to the song of angels.

It is for these reasons that the *Commedia* is relevant to our time, more powerfully, perhaps, than to any other century

since Dante's own. There are horrors in the *Inferno* which outmatch any of the evils which surround us and, as we read, we know that the way out is the way down—the journey of *one man alone* in the fullness of conscious choice down to the center of the darkness and beyond to the realization and acceptance of individual responsibility in the *Purgatorio*. Then, after the long hard climb of self-knowledge is complete, the wayfarer comes to the “happy ending” in the *Paradiso*, where he glimpses the infinitely varied vision of wholeness, of which the images are patterns of light and dance and song. No one of the three divisions of the *Commedia* makes sense without the other two, and to read one of them in isolation is to miss the point.

As we make the journey down and the journey up, meeting the shades in each of the three realms, we must never forget that our final concern is with Dante, the living man, who will return to ordinary human consciousness, and for whom, as for us, the darkness of the pit, the clarity and hard work of purgation, and the intuitions of bliss are simultaneously present, consciously or unconsciously. At the moment of supreme consciousness, which Dante describes in the last canto of his poem, all of them are there in their total meaning, when, beyond up and down, dark and light, he sees the entire universe in the Center, and finally in a flash of awareness, knows the truth of incarnation—nature, humanity, and God as one.

Every great artist, using the idiom of his own time but moved by his intuitive awareness of the unchanging realities of the psyche rising from the well of the unconscious, speaks in images which convey the truths of being to men of poetic vision in all ages, though their idiom may be completely alien to his. I would emphasize also the truth that the work of all great artists awakens insights and meanings of which the artist or writer is himself unconscious. In tracing our own “way of individuation,” in Jung’s terminology, through the medieval imagery of Dante’s poem, we must, however, beware of trying to force his imagery at all points to fit our own. Charles Williams (*The Figure of Beatrice*) said that Dante had the genius wholly to imagine the Way to the vision of God “after a peculiar manner indeed, but then that is the nature of the way of Images. If a man is called to imagine certain images, he must work in them and not in others.”<sup>2</sup> The great mistake of the exponents of one universal religion (or one brand of Christianity, for that matter) is that, in trying to make all ways the

same on the wrong *levels*, they effectively kill the intensity of all the gloriously different approaches, and so the real unity underlying them all is lost in a kind of collective drabness.

The great danger of a psychological approach to a work of art is that it may kill the poetry; in which case such an undertaking is worse than meaningless. So let us remember as we travel with Dante that, while we may search out the extraordinary richness of his psychological wisdom and translate it into our own language, yet we must never tamper with his imagery. It will speak to us in its own terms or not at all. If, however, we can open our inner eyes and ears so that we feel the tremendous impact of this unmatched outpouring of living images, then indeed we may know a stirring to new life of our own crushed or dormant capacity for image-making, by which alone facts may grow beyond themselves into truth, and action be transformed into the movement of love.

## PART II

There are in the *Commedia*, as is well known, four levels of meaning, defined by Dante himself in a letter to his friend and patron, Can Grande della Scala. He speaks of the outer, literal level and of the three-fold inner significance of the poem—allegorical, moral, and anagogical or mystical. As for the historical facts, they need concern us little here. A good and simple commentary, such as that of Dorothy Sayers, tells in a few words enough of the background of the images to give the associations from which our imagination may take wing.

The allegorical in its strict sense, as distinct from the symbolic, also has little to say to us, and, we may be tempted to think, it has a minor importance for Dante himself in spite of a few benighted critics who have seen Beatrice as simply and solely an allegorical figure standing for Theology. There are only two episodes which are strictly and avowedly allegorical, and Dante makes it clear that these are in the nature of masques or mimes, such as were common in the Middle Ages, inserted into the action. These are the two processions of allegorical figures in the Earthly Paradise. Nevertheless, at the center of the pageant of the Sacrament, in which Beatrice stands for the Sacrament itself, there comes one of the most vividly and poignantly human episodes in the whole poem—Dante's personal meeting with Beatrice and her rebuke. There



could be no more powerful reminder that the Sacrament is not an allegory, but is known to each one of us through his own unique "God-bearing image" (Charles Williams' phrase) at the heart of human relationship.

The two levels of the poem which speak to us today with all of their original force, and more, are the moral and the mystical or symbolic. I hear voices exclaiming that, while the symbols may have something to say to us, surely the rigid moral codes of the medieval church are out of date. The answer is that Dante's understanding of the true nature of morality went far beyond a superficial acceptance of codes, penetrating to the realm of those inner choices in the individual soul without which no degree of aesthetic appreciation or emotional experience of symbols has any meaning. The Church has, to its undoing, held too long to the outer moral imperatives which were a necessity for unconscious men, and its leaders would do well to listen again in depth to the voice of one of the greatest of her sons. But at the other end of the scale, the apostles of the individual mystical experience as an end in itself stand in even greater need of Dante's moral wisdom. The man who wrote the last canto of the *Paradiso* knew that we can never come to this vision by any shortcut. We cannot bypass the experience of Hell; and still less can we evade the long struggle of Purgatory, through which we come to maturity in love.

Dante built his narrative on the framework of the medieval theories of life after death, but it is first and foremost the story of his own journey in this life from the "dark wood" of his lost innocence, where he wanders in blindness and near despair, to the clear vision of the heavenly rose, and his glimpse of that "love which moves the sun and the other stars." It is a tremendous symbolic account of the "way of individuation," which is the name given by C.G. Jung to this same journey. As we read the last famous line and close the book, we are left with an overpowering feeling of awe at the *completeness* of the poem. There are poets who bring alive for us the beauty and ugliness of this world, and there are those who penetrate the heights and depths of the emotions; in others clarity of intellect and penetrating thought shine through their verse into our minds; and yet others open to us through their intuitive vision the elusive country of the Spirit. But only the greatest of the great do all four of these things. Dante's journey is the bringing to consciousness of them all into one great patterned

whole. He is both extrovert and introvert; neither the outer nor the inner world is exalted at the expense of the other. Each function shines out, its beauty enhancing the splendor of the others. In the heights of the *Paradiso*, beyond the natural world, we are still rooted in the sights and sounds of every day through a sudden vivid image of the market place; and the most intensely reasoned of the philosophical discourses are never wholly dry, even when our heads protest, because Dante, and we with him, are constantly aware of the personality of the one who speaks—and feels as he speaks.

Sensation, intuition, feeling, this and that, matter and spirit, all derive from the Love that moves the universe; and although these things are split apart and war with each other in fallen man, yet nothing he ever thinks or feels or does is moved by any other power than that same Love, however tragically it may be split into love and hate or displaced onto fragmented and perverted goals from its proper object, which is the whole. This is the theme of the whole poem: the conscious return of a man (and through him of the City, the Community) to the Center, which is love made whole, by the hard road of individuation. It is a road which leads through experience of the uttermost extreme of separation from that Center, and back through the long effort of discriminating every movement of our wandering loves, until, when the purging is over, we stand on the borders of Paradise. Then indeed each man's particular "Virgil" may say to him, "over thyself I mitre thee and crown."