

THE PERISHING BEING IN INITIATION JOURNEYS – THE JOURNEY BEYOND THE VEIL

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Abstract

During time, man has been preoccupied with the topics of initiation journeys, of journeys beyond the veil, of Heaven and Hell. According to Jacques Le Goff, stories about journeys beyond the veil follow three traditions. One known Irish legend tells of St. Patrick, who visited the Inferno and the Purgatory. In twelve-century England, priest Adam Ros portrayed, in a poem, the journey of St. Paul to Hell. The myth of Orpheus also deals with this topic. Among the rare descendings to Hell mentioned by the Greek mythology, that of Orpheus becomes the most popular. Ulysses' journey in Homer's *Odyssey* can be also interpreted as an initiation journey, a form of knowledge of the world, but also a form of self-knowledge, a central path. The world beyond the veil appears as a universe outside time. The reason for the journey can be the knowledge of the world beyond the veil, a journey to the Lord in order to receive recompense or a journey for being given advice. Initiation journeys can also be followed in Virgil's *Aeneid* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Aeneas's wish is that of descending into the Inferno to meet his father. A symbolical descending done to learn and to receive some advice. Dante's *Divine Comedy* represents an allegorical view of the other world, as a path to salvation. The other world is an allegory and an image of this world; it is the history and the mystery of the soul. *The Divine Comedy* thus appears as a story of the soul, which, from form to form, identifies itself with God, pure intelligence, pure love, and pure act.

Keywords: *initiation journey, descending into the Inferno, the other world, Aeneid, Divine Comedy.*

During time, man has been almost obsessively preoccupied with the topics of initiation journeys, journeys to the other world, Heaven and Hell. There is an extremely complex literature in which journeys and visions are described, on the topic of Paradise and Inferno. According to Jacques Le Goff (*Medieval Imagination*), stories about journeys to the other world follow three traditions: the antic tradition of stories dealing with the descending into the Inferno, the asyro-babylonian heroes' journeys from the Epic of Gilgamesh,

then Orpheus, Ulysses etc.; the stories about journeys to the other world from the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse (2nd century BC and 3rd century AD); barbaric stories, mostly Irish, about journeys to the other world.

A known Irish legend, for instance, tells about St. Patrick who visited the Purgatory and the Inferno, where he saw fire graves, sinners hanged upside down, devoured by snakes or covered with ice. In 12th century England, priest Adam Ros portrayed in a long poem the journey of St. Paul to Hell, who was accompanied by Archangel Michael. Paul is shocked by what he sees in Hell. The myth of Orpheus (who, according to a legend, was the son of god Apollo and nymph Calliope), the singer who, through the magic of music, could enchant every being, animate matter and gives voice to the inanimate, also comprises the topic of descending into Hell. Among the rare descendings into Hell mentioned by the Greek tradition, that of Orpheus becomes the most popular. He, with the power of his lyre, manages to convince Hades, the God of the Inferno, to allow him to enter his realm, to take back Eurydice, the nymph with whom he was in love. A hero of a vast esoteric literature, Orpheus represents the impersonation of the "initiated" archetype, and through the motif of his lyre, the immortal character of the art is enhanced. The above mentioned examples represent only a part of the sources of the later stories about the world beyond the veil.

In the initiation pathway, the hero (who can be either a monk or a layman) usually enters the other world through sleep. Here, he is guided by a saint or an angel, he visits different places from Hell, he is frightened by cold or heat, of the

abominable mountains and valleys, of fire or hot metal lakes and rivers, which are full of monsters, snakes, dragons; he witnesses the ordeals to which monster animals and demons subject the dead. He then visits places in Heaven, where there are blossomed and perfumed grasslands and houses made of gold and silver². The entrances to the other world are guarded by monsters or animals, or there is a dangerous path or bridge that has to be crossed. The reason of the journey can be the knowledge the Other World, a journey to the Lord to receive recompense or advice. The space from beyond is subjected to a reasoning and organization effort, the last expression being the circles and cornices from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In her work, *Confluenteculturalesiconfiguratiiliterare (Cultural confluences and literary configurations)*, Doinita Milea speaks of the perpetual journey between life and death, time, eternal time, the passing, that represented the human obsessions during time: "All antic stories have in their deep structure the man's relation to passing, and life, with its beginning and end, generate a series of parables of ascension and breakdown, following the cyclical rhythm of eternal nature"³.

Anabases, together with katabasis, represent the steps of a spiritual regeneration process, death and initiation resurrection, in which the hero transforms, becomes someone else. Anabasis and katabasis involve search, search of meaning in self and in the world. Search can represent a journey beyond the veil, descending into death or tasks to achieve, a path, a bridge, monsters to overcome, followed by finding, illumination, ascensions, anabasis.

Ulysses' journey, which constitutes one of the epic development plans in Homer's *Odyssey*, can also be interpreted as an initiation journey, a form of knowing the world, but also a form of self-knowledge, a central path. The model, represented by Ulysses, involves a "search" to find. The path followed by Ulysses involves transforming, spiritual elevations. The steps that the hero passes are lessons of knowledge, through which he builds himself, while his companions get lost. The hero's adventures can be interpreted as adventures of a soul exiled in this world, who wants to return to his true "country", the divine one. Ulysses thus becomes the soul incarnate

through birth who travels towards the sky. The sea is the world of matter and the waves are the assaults of the exterior world, of passions. Ulysses also descends in Hades' realm to find, from the prophet Tiresias, how he will be able to return to Ithaca, but he here has a revelation of unmoving shadows in eternal dark, shadows that gain consistency only when drinking the blood of sacrificed animals from a hole. Homer's vision of the other world will be later developed by Virgil.

The same topic of initiation journey can be followed in other important texts from world literature, texts that we will treat upon: Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Virgil, the great poet of ancient times, provides a vast epic work through the *Aeneid* – Rome's national epic, with almost 10000 lyrics. Edgar Papu, in *Excursprin literature lumii (Trip through world literature)* notes that Virgil mixes divine with human, having Homer as a model. The first six books evoke the Trojans' wondering on the sea, following the model of the *Odyssey*, while the last 6 books speak of the wars that the Trojans had on Italian land, the same as in the *Iliad*. Virgil expresses, through an epic of origins, the official political tendencies of the time, the Roman regeneration through the new institution of principality. In is the first great epic of state consolidation. The *Aeneid* fictionally projects a political utopia, the golden age of Augustus, as great works give symbolical legitimation to the political power. The text remythologizes the entire history until Emperor Augustus.

The same as in the case of Homer, Virgil finds a leading thread, a strong passion, a highly moral mission, on the basis of which people should fight, with the triumphant result of this idea or of this feeling. Aeneas represents a model hero, an established leader, an evident projection of Augustus and, in the same time, the projection of the artist in his characters. He is a solar Hero, the founder of Rome, the is the Creator, son of Venus (Aphrodite) and of a mortal named Anchises, born on the mountain of Ida, where he was raised by nymphs. He also represents the Savior, as he participated in the Trojan War, being protected by Venus (Aphrodite) and Poseidon, against Achilles and Diomedes. The same as in the case of the great tragedies of

Sophocles and Euripides, Aeneas is a character who confronts tragic dilemmas.

In the 6th book he accompanies the Trojans to the Crest, where Aeneas consults the oracle of Apollo. Priestess Sybilla (Apollo's priestess, projection of light) predicts a bright future. However, Aeneas's wish is to descend into the Inferno, to meet his father. A symbolical descending, a katabasis to find, to receive advice or a wish for knowledge, a descending to origins, an unconscious central path. The journey to the Inferno can be regarded as self-defence and self-justification, not self-depression. Aeneas has to achieve several rituals in order to pass: "A golden branch - stick and leaves - hidden by bushy tree. / sacred to Juno in hell [...] / he cannot enter the Earth's depths without gathering first the fruit of the golden tree."

Aeneas, led by two pigeons (the pigeons were sacred to the goddess Venus (Aphrodite), the hero's mother), goes in the search of the golden branch tree through the great forests and discovers it in deep paths. According to the *Symbol Dictionary*, the golden branch represents a widely spread motif in Celtic and Germanic countries. The branch has magical powers, it allows the opening of the underworld gates, it banishes demons, it offers immortality. It represents force, wisdom and knowledge; it is the symbol of this world and allows exploring the darkest caves of the Inferno, without losing one's soul. It is only given to the chosen one, a transfer of power from sacredness. Aeneas has Priestess Sybilla as a companion and guide in his journey to the Inferno. He also convinces boater and tidewaiter Caron to enable him pass the Styx.

According to Virgil, the Inferno is populated with bodiless monsters, light spirits, shadows, newly born children, bodies which have not been buried, and also the multitude of sinners - suiciders, overly enriched, thieves, traitors, those killed in parties. Aeneas passes the Elysian Fields (the symbol of divine everlasting, where the souls of the righteous go after death, is in the case of Virgil a field in the Inferno where heroes and all those who are happy go) and is met by the shadow of his father. He reveals to him, according to the Pythagoraic and Platonic doctrine, the system of the universe, he then makes the

multitude of embodied souls of those who would become the great men of Rome wonder around him. Anchises, in the Inferno, actually announces Rome's future glory in a striking funerary rhythm.

A distinctive chapter in the Inferno is represented by the melting scene of encountering Didona, illustrating the myth of unhappy lovers. Didona, the queen of Cartagena, is a tragic character in a tragic dilemma, a combination between Fedra and Andromaca. The moral ideal of aesthetic extraction and carnal passion. She associates the feeling for Aeneas with the remorse towards Sichen, her deceased husband to whom she stopped being faithful. Aeneas's descending into the Inferno can also be compared to the passions of Christ; it is the incarnation of one chosen to be sacred.

According to Francesco de Sanctis' *History of Italian Literature*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* represents an allegorical vision of the other world, as a road towards salvation. The other world is an allegory and an image of this world, it is the history and mystery of the soul in its three states: Human, Denudation and Renovation, which correspond to the three worlds: Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. It is the soul in its purely human state that "denudates and cleans itself" from the body, in renovates and becomes once again pure and divine - an initiation death followed by rebirth. The *Divine Comedy* is the poem of eternity, compared to a Gothic cathedral with three aisles, representing verticality, ascending spirit. Dante, as a symbol of the soul, wonders through a dark forest. The forest, in symbolical geographical terms, inherits the Oriental desert, leaving room for attempts, as a place of wonder⁴.

In his journey, Dante is almost crushed by the assault of passions, incarnate in a panther symbolizing immorality, sexual lust, then in a lion symbolizing pride and violence, and in a dam representing avarice and greediness, the main cause of all humanity's evil. He then encounters Virgil, the great poet of ancient times, representing human reason. Virgil does not only represent for Dante the absolute poetic model (Aeneas's descending into the Inferno was Dante's model for his Inferno), but also an ideal of humanity. Virgil, the same as Priestess Sybilla

does with Aeneas, guides Dante through the Inferno and Purgatory, while Beatrice, the symbol of divine reason, guides him through Paradise.

Dante's Inferno involves a successive darkening of the soul to the extent of its extinction. "Through me the way is to the city dolent; Through me the way is to eternal dole; Through me the way among the people lost. Justice incited my sublime Creator; Created me divine Omnipotence, The highest Wisdom and the primal Love. Before me there were no created things, Only eterne, and I eternal last. All hope abandon, ye who enter in!"⁵ The writing on the Inferno gate banishes even the last consolation of the human soul, HOPE. If the sublime of darkness consists in the dying world, the sublime of desperation consists in the death of hope.

To Charon, the Inferno's boater, a figure belonging to ancient mythology, Dante grants the position of a demon in the Inferno. Charon's portrait, only sketched by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, is fulfilled by Dante with intentional violent tones. According to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, Charon's boat thus represents a symbol that shall remain linked to the everlasting misery of humans.⁶ The allegoric shape in which the guard archetype is regarded is the Cerberus. In the *Aeneid*, the mythological Cerberus is a huge dog with three mouths, the Inferno's guardian. For Dante, the Cerberus keeps its three heads, but also has a black chin and hands with claws. He is responsible with guarding the third circle of the greedy, while sharing the same feature of greediness. In the *Aeneid*, the greediness of the Cerberus is becalmed by throwing a pie of "honey and grain" in his open mouths. Dante enriches Virgil's episode, becalming the Cerberus's greediness with a handful of infernal mud.

The poet shows the nature of the place and the quality of the penance given to the sinners. The Inferno is divided into ten parts, the dark field and nine circles, but also in three big parts, corresponding to the three main categories of sin: immoderacy and violence, astuteness and their premeditation. These are fragmented, in their turn, in circles and cingles, where the sinners pay for their deeds. The first circle is the limb, the space intended for children and those not baptized, the same as for poets, great thinkers, great figures of history: Homer, Ovid, Horace,

Virgil, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Seneca, Caesar, Brutus etc., who live in the Inferno as in a "Pagan Elysian".

The second circle is reserved for those immoderate and violent. The mythical theme of the unhappy lovers is also recurrent in Dante, through Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, with their impressive love story, who are now carried like leaves in an everlasting vortex. Through them, Dante protests against the prejudices of the Church concerning physical love, as the flame of love purifies the potential guilt for those who believe in prejudices. The image of Farinata degli Uberti, the gigantic statue, whose basis may be the whole Inferno, symbolizes the whole history of Florence, resurrecting in the tenebrous other world.

Virgil, in Canto VI in the *Aeneid*, grants space only for suiciders. We here encounter tragic characters such as Fedra or Didona. Having Virgil as a model, Dante creates the forest of suiciders in Canto VII in the *Divine Comedy*. In the Day of Judgement, they will find their body and hang it in the tree born from the soul that once used to be the body's enemy. The forest of suiciders will transform into a field of the hanged. From the suiciders' souls, trees arise – the reversed archetype of the universal Axis mundi that links the Inferno to the Earth and Heaven. "The cosmic tree represents the mystery of verticality, of ascending to Heaven, of everlasting regeneration, of victory over death. The tree of life, within the act of recovering salvation, the re-institution of humanity in the Paradise original state"⁷. However, salvation, the union with divinity in Dante's perspective, is not granted to suiciders, as the infernal forest transforms into a field of the hanged, while those hanged are damned for eternity.

Dante tried to renew the stylistic forms of his predecessors from the Dolce stil novo literary school – that milk of the muses, imagining the sweet substance of poetry. The only mortals whose descendings into the Inferno were accepted by Dante are Aeneas and the Apostle Paul, idealized symbolical figures engaged in a journey towards the centre. The *Divine Comedy* can also be regarded as a story of the soul, which, in different forms, finds and acknowledges itself

through God, pure intelligence, pure love and pure act.

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Endnotes

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