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THE FUNCTION OF LETHE

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WHEN, in the last canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante-character claims not to remember having ever estranged himself from Beatrice, she reminds him that he has just drunk of Lethe, and adds that his inability to remember is proof of his estrangement, just as from smoke fire is inferred:

"E se tu ricordar non te ne puoi,
sorridente rispuose, "or ti rammenta
come bevesti di Letè ancoi;
e se dal fummo foco s'argomenta,
cotesta oblivion chiaro conchiude
colpa ne la tua voglia altrove attenta". (*Purg.* XXXIII, 94-99)

According to Reggio,¹ who also quotes Chimenz, the comparison is insubstantial, because there is no logical connection between oblivion and sin as there is between smoke and fire, and thus oblivion does not count as proof, his assumption being that there could be oblivion without sin. This assumption, however, is incorrect. In Dante's poem, as well as in the classical myths concerning the afterlife, we find that the connection between the two is, on the contrary, one of cause and effect. It is not by coincidence that the episode in question (lines 91-129) contains two instances of forgetfulness, namely, of having sinned and of Matelda's previous explanation of the function of the two rivers. A perversion, or misdirection of the will ("colpa ne la tua voglia altrove attenta"), causes the former (that is, the forgetfulness of having sinned); the latter is merely the product of distraction and does not have the same moral consequences. Only the former is oblivion, which is a clear indication ("chiaro conchiude") of sin ("colpa"). If oblivion were a mere lapse of memory, as Reggio's argument seems to imply, then it obviously could not count as proof, but oblivion means much more; it represents the state of the soul that has lost the memory of its divine origin and, having failed to fulfil its own nature and destiny, has strayed into darkness.

Moreover, the comparison is precise, as always in Dante, because the image of smoke is, throughout the poem, consistently linked to sin and oblivion. There are

several occasions in the *Comedy* where "fummo" is equated to, or symbolises, sin: the "accidioso fummo" of *Inferno* VII, 123; the "fummo" enveloping the wrathful in *Purgatorio* XVI, 5; the "fummo the '1 tuo raggio vizia'", that impedes justice, of *Paradiso* XVIII, 120; the "fummo" that is the catalyst in the metamorphosis of the thief into a snake in *Inferno* XXV, 93 (it was believed that smoke was produced by the devil in its serpent or dragon form in order to obscure man's mind and lead him into temptation). Finally, smoke is also directly connected to memory, or lack of, in *Inferno* XXIV, 49-51, where those who do not work at acquiring enduring fame are said to leave behind "cotal vestigio" which is "qual fummo in aere", in direct contrast to "tal vestigio", in *Purgatorio* XXVI, 106, or the impression that the Pilgrim leaves on Guinizzelli, so clear that Lethe cannot erase or obscure it.

The forgetfulness induced by Lethe is the exact opposite of oblivion and is part of a process whereby a new kind of memory and a new kind of awareness are attained, in which each of the two rivers has a distinct role to perform. The specific function of Lethe is, as we shall see, to produce a cathartic experience that frees the soul from oblivion.

If Lethe were just a generic river of forgetfulness, it would lose the metaphorical complexity of the Lethe of classical myth, and, as a consequence, its inclusion would amount to a mere literary reference that Dante had not been able to resist. This cannot be the case, firstly because these cantos are brimming with such references and the complexity of their meanings and interpretations has to be assumed totally; and secondly because, in making use of myth, Dante never erases or diminishes its original significance but enriches it instead through a Christian perspective, the procedure being one of equation and integration of the truth of pagan myths into Christian truth, just as Matelda equates the myth of the golden age with the Edenic myth.

The Earthly Paradise cantos follow the same procedure: Matelda reminds Dante of Persephone, her eyes are said to shine brighter than Venus', thus representing, as a personification of nature, the realms of death, love and life. Beatrice's description equates her to pagan Minerva and biblical Sapientia, and as well she is a figure of Christ; the pagan golden age and Eden are the same memory of humanity's loss of happiness. So too, Lethe is not a mere reminiscence.

It is well known that the source for Lethe is not biblical but literary. In Genesis (2:8-14) four rivers which are named and described, and which come from a common divine source, divide and reach different parts of the earth; these are real rivers with an obvious life-giving function. If Dante's Eden is identical to the biblical one, if it is conceived, that is, as a real place as well as a metaphorical one, what happened to the other rivers? Has their function as symbols of the four cardinal virtues been taken on by the four nymphs/stars, as Singleton suggested?² Have the rivers Lethe and Eunoë acquired a new function (as well as new names), which was clearly not needed before the Fall? Where do their waters go? Do the earth's rivers not have their origin here as all vegetation does?³ There is nothing in the text that can help us answer these questions. Clearly, Dante's conception of Eden is predominantly metaphorical.

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These two rivers are the fruit of poetical invention: the first of classical poetry and the second Dante's (though not entirely). This, and the constant presence of numerous classical references, seem to point to the importance and significance that Dante attaches to his attempt to synthesise the wisdom of both pagan and biblical myths.

The classical writers' depictions of Hades represent different beliefs concerning the afterworld. Homer's Hades is ineluctable, there is no mention of Lethe, no substantial belief in reincarnation. The shades wander as if in a dream, and any life, even the most miserable, is seen as preferable to their present state; for them life is literally equivalent to blood. It is, in fact, only after drinking the blood offered by Ulysses that they regain enough strength to talk to him, or even recognise him. There are, however, even here, different degrees of memory and awareness, the highest of which are Tiresias'.⁴

In other texts we have a tripartite Hades: there are the barren fields where the shades who were neither good nor bad wander; there is black Tartarus, a place of horrible punishments; and finally the happy abode of the just, the Elysian Fields. The otherwise ubiquitous Lethe becomes a subterranean river flowing outside the walls of Persephone's palace, and there are two major mythological traditions that describe its function. According to one, espoused by both Plato and Virgil,⁵ it is the souls ready to be reborn who drink of its water in order to forget their past lives. According to the Orphic tradition, it is the souls of the foolish who drink of it, whereas the wise avoid it and drink instead the water of a second stream flowing near the entrance to the Elysian Fields, known as the river of Memory, very much like Dante's Eunoë.

So we have here a very different conception of Hades compared to the pre-Hellenic or Homeric one: it is no longer a final abode but a place of purgation either by punishment or by refinement in the Elysian Fields, reflecting, in the first instance, the belief of many in reincarnation, but, above and beyond this, the belief in regeneration of the soul through purification. It is possible to escape the cycle of rebirth: those who are able to live three times on earth and three in the afterworld without soiling their souls with sin will have completed the stages of purification and will go to the Isles of the Blessed where they will be forever free from toil and pain.⁶ We can see that this is not mere nostalgia for the golden age but hope for the reward of eternal happiness.

There is also a garden — situated beyond the sunset (like Dante's Eden?), where the Hesperides guard the trees of the golden apples — which sufficiently resembles the concept of Paradise Lost.⁷ The Elysian Fields and the river of Memory are, therefore, a metaphor for the path of justice and wisdom that will lead to happiness. Moreover, some particularly worthy human beings would even join the gods on Olympus: these were people who had fully realised the divinity in themselves.

In the descriptions of the afterworld, the tales of heroes who descend into Hades while still alive, such as Ulysses and Aeneas, are metaphorical dramatisations of rites of initiation, and thus the concepts of metempsychosis and metamorphosis are intended as purification⁸

Oblivion then, becomes synonymous with the lowly mind that does not seek wisdom and justice. According to Plato, the first generation of human beings (all

males) were very close to being gods, each successive generation losing more and more of their divinity while becoming more human (animal); those original males who lived badly were reincarnated as females. Only through justice could the soul be purified and regain its divinity. In the myth of Er, Plato divides the heavenly path from the stony ground of the underworld that the wise and the unjust respectively follow in their thousand-year journey, after which they are reborn. If wise, he believes, the eternal soul will be happy on earth and will be rewarded with a peaceful journey in the afterworld.

There is a further important detail: encamped by the forgetful river, the souls "were compelled to drink a certain measure of its water; and those who had no wisdom to save them drank more than the measure".⁹ So, not all need drink the same amount, and the amount is proportionate to wisdom. Er, of course, does not drink and this is how his tale is preserved.

Finally, there is another important distinction between a shade and its true self: Ulysses encounters the shade of Heracles in Hades where he recounts his deeds on earth, but Heracles himself is on Olympus.¹⁰ There is, as Plotinus points out,¹¹ a distinction in the type of memory Heracles has as a shade and as a god. As a god he may remember what the shade recounts, but in a dispassionate way, for his true self is more than the sum of the glorious deeds performed in that lifetime.

Similarly, I think, there is a difference between the memory of the blessed souls as they recount their lives to Dante in the various heavenly spheres and the way they truly regard their lives in the Empyrean; St Peter's display of anger cannot subsist there. Augustine explains it thus: "[The soul of the saved] will remember even its past evils as far as intellectual knowledge is concerned; but it will utterly forget them as far as sense experience is concerned".¹² Cunizza and Folco give a similar explanation (*Par.* IX, 32-36, 94-108). They can remember the exact nature of their sins ("ché phi non arse la figlia di Belo / ... / né quella Rodopéa", 97-100) as they speak to the Pilgrim, but in the Empyrean, as there is no longer any need to repent or reflect on their sins, there is no necessity for such memory ("la colpa, ch'a mente non torna", 104). Theirs is rather a joyful awareness of the wonderful divine art that orders and provides.

Dante-character experiences a similar transformation to theirs. At the end of the journey, he will have acquired a clarity of vision and a fortitude of will that make it impossible to turn back, to divert the mind's eye away from the light, because: "A quella luce total si diventa, / the volgersi da lei per altro aspetto / è impossibil the mai si consenta" (*Par.* XXXIII, 100-102). The rite involving the two rivers produces a detachment, a point of no return. It is here that the warning of the angel guarding the door to Purgatory ("Intrate; ma facciovì accorti / the di fuor torna chi 'n dietro si guata", IX, 131-32) is fully understood by the reader. With this new-found detachment, clarity and fortitude, Dante, having returned to his temporal existence on earth, will be able to undertake, with the assistance of the Muses, the daughters of Memory, the difficult task of his narration. It is a narration in which time and eternity are set next to each other, through a vision of human history as the design of Divine Providence, ordained as a

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guide to happiness: that is, to temporal happiness as citizens of a city governed by Justice, and as citizens of the "vera città" of *Purgatorio* XIII, 94-96.

Let us retrace what is said of Lethe in *Purgatorio*. First of all, it is said to remove the memory of sin ("memoria del peccato", XXVIII, 128) and sorrow ("memorie triste", XXXI, 11) and not any other memory. Guinizelli (XXVI, 106-108) tells the Pilgrim that Lethe will not erase or obscure the impression he has left on him. Matelda (XXXIII, 121-23) assures Beatrice that Lethe could not have made him forget her explanation.

Secondly, its waters are said to be extremely clear although dark (XXVIII, 28-33). Thus Lethe resembles the river of life described in the Book of Revelation (21-22) that flows through the new Jerusalem, lit not by sun or moon but by God's splendour. I wonder whether this does not project Dante's Paradise into the future, a Paradise necessarily different from the original lost by Adam and Eve.

Furthermore, because of the clarity of its waters, Lethe is also a mirror that reflects the Pilgrim's image (XXIX, 69 and XXX, 76-78). It has therefore the function of bestowing clarity of vision, vision of self, even before that of inducing forgetfulness of the part of self shameful to behold, and, indeed, Dante has to look away out of shame.

There is another occasion, in *Inferno* XIV, in which Lethe is mentioned. According to Virgil, Lethe is "là dove vanno l'anime a lavarsi / quando la colpa pentuta è rimossa" (137-38). It is striking that Virgil's description is the most removed from the classical images of Lethe. Contrary to expectation, there is no mention of forgetfulness in the words of the author of the *Aeneid*. The emphasis is on a rite of purification.

Dante, as always, honours the truth of myths: just as the pagan tales of the afterworld were dramatisations of rites of initiation to which only the most just and wise would accede, so the Pilgrim's rite of purification is dramatised through a ritual death and rebirth. Having understood and renounced error, he faints, later to reawaken in the water where Matelda immerses him, causing him to drink of it, after which his virtue is rekindled by the dance of the four nymphs/stars who lead him to Beatrice and the three women who will initiate him into deeper mysteries.

As we have seen, the souls of pagan Hades also underwent purgation either by punishment or refinement before being reborn, and there was also the possibility of progressive perfecting of the soul, with those nearing perfection becoming initiates into the mysteries. This, together with Plato's different measures of water, indicates that the function of even pagan Lethe was, at least for the wise, purification rather than oblivion, for, in fact, the realisation of one's divinity means the exact opposite: the coming out of oblivion into a higher awareness.

The whole episode has less to do with forgetting than it does with awakening a new kind of memory, which goes beyond identification of the self with the awareness of the sum of actions performed. Rather, it is full possession of self, as experienced in contemplative vision (man is "actively himself when he has intellection of nothing" as Plotinus put it),¹³ and as Dante-character experienced at the height of his journey. This, then, is not oblivion.

What the Pilgrim is undergoing in this episode is the very moment of the shedding of the skin when one is no longer the old self nor yet the new, although the new will contain the essence of the old. We may note that the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*, besides these two instances of forgetfulness, contain other claims to the inability to remember: twice Dante is not able to remember the song (*Purg.* XXXI, 99; XXXII, 61-63), as often happens in the *Paradiso*, for this is the Pilgrim's first experience of "trasumanar".

He need not have forgotten Matelda's explanation. So, what is the reason for it? "Forse maggior cura" is the possible reason put forward by Beatrice. She speaks of his mind being "oscura", of his virtue "tramortita" (*Purg.* XXXIII, 124-26; 129). Nor is this the first time. All throughout the canto, his mind or intellect has been thus described: "Dorme lo 'ngegno tuo" (64); "E se stati non fossero acqua d'Elsa / li pensier vani intorno a la tua mente, / e 'l piacer oro un Piramo a la gelsa" (67-69); "'lo 'ntelletto / fatto di pietra e, impetrato, tinto" (73-74). Also throughout, darkness pervades and a heaviness of the mind in waking from a truly Stygian sleep. The image of smoke in the first part of the comparison is anything but accidental: the dark fumes that obscure the mind, threatening oblivion, must be removed in order to restore health. Hence the need to create a second river, the Eunoë, signifying good mind and purity through rebirth:

rifatto si come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle. (*Purg.* XXXIII, 143-45)

This deadly oblivion is equated to the "fummo" in the same sense as it is in *Paradiso* XXI, 100: "La mente, the qui luce, in terra fumma". The "fummo" is the opposite of "luce", as it impedes vision. It is therefore an unmistakable indication of error which, like "acqua d'Elsa", causes a gradual encrustation of the mind that will eventually turn it into stone. There cannot be oblivion without sin, because oblivion is the forgetting of one's true self, of the divine light that makes each being become that which it truly is ("qual ell' è diventa", *Par.* XX, 78).¹⁴ And it is to show the true nature of this forgetfulness that Dante invents a second instance of a very different kind, by having his character pretend not to remember Matelda's explanation of the two rivers: a forgetfulness that is incidental and with no consequence, quickly explained away by Beatrice as a temporary distraction that has rendered the mind "'ne li occhi oscura' (*Purg.* XXXIII, 126), that, in other words, does not involve or in any way corrupt the will ("voglia altrove attenta", 99).

Dante's Lethe is only metaphorically a river of forgetfulness. Above all, the forgetfulness it causes is of a very specific kind. The soul of the saved does remember, but there can be neither sadness nor regret, for the soul only partly identifies with its memories now that its vision is linked to and augmented by divine light: memories, good or bad, are only a partial expression of their true essence. Cunizza rejoices at the

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memory of her mistakes because they were prompted by her nature and, in a sense, they helped her to see and to realise her true nature fully:

"ma lietamente a me medesma indulgo
la cagion di mia sorte, e non mi noia;
che parria forse forte al vostro vulgo". (*Par. IX*, 34-36)

In the eternal light of the Empyrean, however, it cannot properly be said that the souls remember because memory exists only in a temporal dimension. The memory and recounting of their sins is for the Pilgrim's sake. Indeed, even angels, who by their very nature need neither language nor memory because they see the truth by gazing directly into God's face,¹⁵ can communicate through human means when acting as God's messengers to man.

In contrast, the souls of the damned are in a state of oblivion, or Stygian sleep, their minds being literally *impietrite e tinte* in the obsessive identification with sin, the cause of their pain, whereas the souls in Purgatory are refined by the very memory of their sins, or meditation upon them, until all encrustations are washed away and clarity restored. Lethe as a mirror dramatises the moment man gazes squarely into the true nature of error and can no longer remain the same; so Lethe is truly as Virgil defined it in *Inferno XIV* ("là dove vanno l'anime a lavarsi / quando la colpa pentuta è rimossa", 137-38): the washing away of the encrustations formed by error ("acqua d'Elsa").

This too has a literary precedent in Ovid's tale of Venus who asked the river Numicius to wash away all the parts of Aeneas that death could harm and to bear them to Ocean's depths. The river washed away all that was mortal in Aeneas, but the best part of him remained and Venus made him a god.¹⁶ But, as Matelda warns in *XXVIII*, 130-32, this transformation can be completed only when one has drunk of the water of both rivers. So, in the episode in question, Dante is describing a stage halfway between death and rebirth, when the Pilgrim is "tramortito" and does not know himself. He must be eased by Beatrice and Matelda into a full restoration of mind, to memory of the true source of life, upstream, with the mediation of nature and poetry. The process of rebirth is a transformation that involves, as in my example of the snake's shedding its skin, becoming one's true self. Soon, preparing to write the last *cantica*, Dante will ask Apollo to do for him precisely this:

Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue
si come quando Marsia traesti
de la vagina de le membra sue. (*Par. I*, 19-21)

¹ In his comment on line 99. *La Divina Commedia con pagine critiche: Purgatorio*, eds U. Bosco and G. Reggio (Florence: Le Monnier, 1988), p. 566.

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- 2 Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967), pp. 167-78.
- 3 St Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologica* I, Q 102, a. 1, ad 3) believed Eden was a real place; so did Augustine (*De Genesis ad litteram* VIII, 7) who surmised that the four rivers flowed from the garden and then ran underground to resurface in different parts of the earth, thus appearing to have separate sources.
- 4 *Odyssey*, X, XI.
- 5 Plato, *Republic*, X; Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.
- 6 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 166-73; Pindar, *Olympian Odes II*; Plato, *Gorgias*, 523-27. The Orphic tradition had introduced the concept of humanity's dual inheritance, the divinity of Dionysus and the sin of the Titans, thus the necessity to purify the soul through initiation. This belief in the duality of body and soul and the belief in reincarnation were taken up by the Pythagoreans and later by Plato.
- 7 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 215, 333-35; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, IV, 26, 27.
- 8 Another text that states this very explicitly is *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius.
- 9 Plato, *Republic* X.620, trans. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1955), p. 400.
- 10 Homer, *Odyssey* XI.602-603; Pindar, *Nemean Odes I*; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 955.
- 11 *Ennead* IV.3.32.
- 12 *Concerning The City of God against the Pagans, A New Translation* by H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972, repr. 1984), XXII. 30, p. 1089.
- 13 *Ennead* IV.4.2, trans. S. MacKenna, abridged with an introduction and notes by John Dillon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991), p. 287.
- 14 We are reminded of Plato's theory of knowledge as "remembering" expounded in the Socratic dialogues. In *Phaedrus* the Pythagorean and Orphic theories of reincarnation and purification are presented as a consequence of oblivion, and the latter is equated with missing the truth, and linked to wrongdoing: "any soul which has attained some vision of truth by following the train of a god shall remain unscathed till the next circuit, and if it can continue thus for ever shall be forever free from hurt. But when a soul fails to follow and misses the vision, and as a result of some mishap sinks beneath its burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, so that it loses its wing and falls to earth, the law is this. In his first reincarnation ..." (246-50). (Trans. W. Hamilton [Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1978], p. 56).
- 15 *Par.* XXIX, 70-81; *DVE* I.ii.2-3.
- 16 *Metamorphoses* XIV.581-610.