

16 July 1962

‘THE HEAVENLY VENUS’

INTRODUCTORY

There have been several ways of describing ascending octaves or stages by which individuals can approach the Divine. The ancient Sankhya System, which is part of that Holy Tradition in India about which we have learnt much in the last two years, describes a series of ‘Seven Principles’. Our own System gives us the Seven Categories of Man and the three octaves of the Food diagram. These are all on different scales; you cannot change across from one to the other, but we use each of them from time to time.

Research has brought to light yet another way (again on a different scale), and because this is directly emotional in its approach, because it is of Western origin, and above all because it has become essentially English, it may make for us a strong and practical appeal. For it certainly contributed greatly to the English Renaissance in the reign of the first Elizabeth.

At the beginning we had better sketch in the historical outlines quickly and briefly, gradually expanding the ideas contained:

When Plato founded the Academy in Athens, shortly after his return from his first visit to Italy and Sicily (388–387 BC), he already possessed something that might be called a System of Philosophy, if the word ‘System’ did not carry the suggestion of a body of thought that has been rounded out and closed in a final form ... Philosophy remained for him always a pursuit of wisdom, and some of the adventures of this pursuit are recorded in the great dialogues of the middle period: the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*.

So wrote Professor Cornford in his last book *Principium Sapientiae* (p.45).

To everyone who reads these dialogues with discernment, it is evident that Plato had brought back certain entirely new ideas from his travels, connected with the discovery that something in man ‘has been born many times’, and that *learning of basic ideas* is really a ‘calling to mind’ or ‘recollection’ of what has been already well-known.

Among these basic ideas are *love* and *beauty*. In the *Phaedrus* love is said to be a ‘longing that will not rest until man has discovered and become reunited with Immortal beauty’; and in the *Symposium*, Diotima (having described to Socrates the aim and culmination of the Ascent to Divine Love) uses the words:

And this is the way, the only way, he must approach, or be led towards, the sanctuary of Love: starting from individual beauties, the quest of the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the *heavenly ladder*, stepping from rung to rung.

Gradually the successors of Plato, in what has been called the Neo-Platonist tradition, reached precision in the description of the rungs of this ladder. For Plotinus (205–270 AD) the role assigned to Beauty was an awakening power; and in the *Enneads* he leads up to the idea of purification as a means to the same end.

What was originally a philosopher’s idea, became an account sufficiently practical for Saint Augustine to write in his *Confessions* (about the years 383–387 in Milan):

Being by these books of the Platonists admonished to return to myself, I entered even into the secret chamber of my soul, for Thou must become my Helper. And I beheld with the eye of my soul the Light unchangeable, above my intelligence.

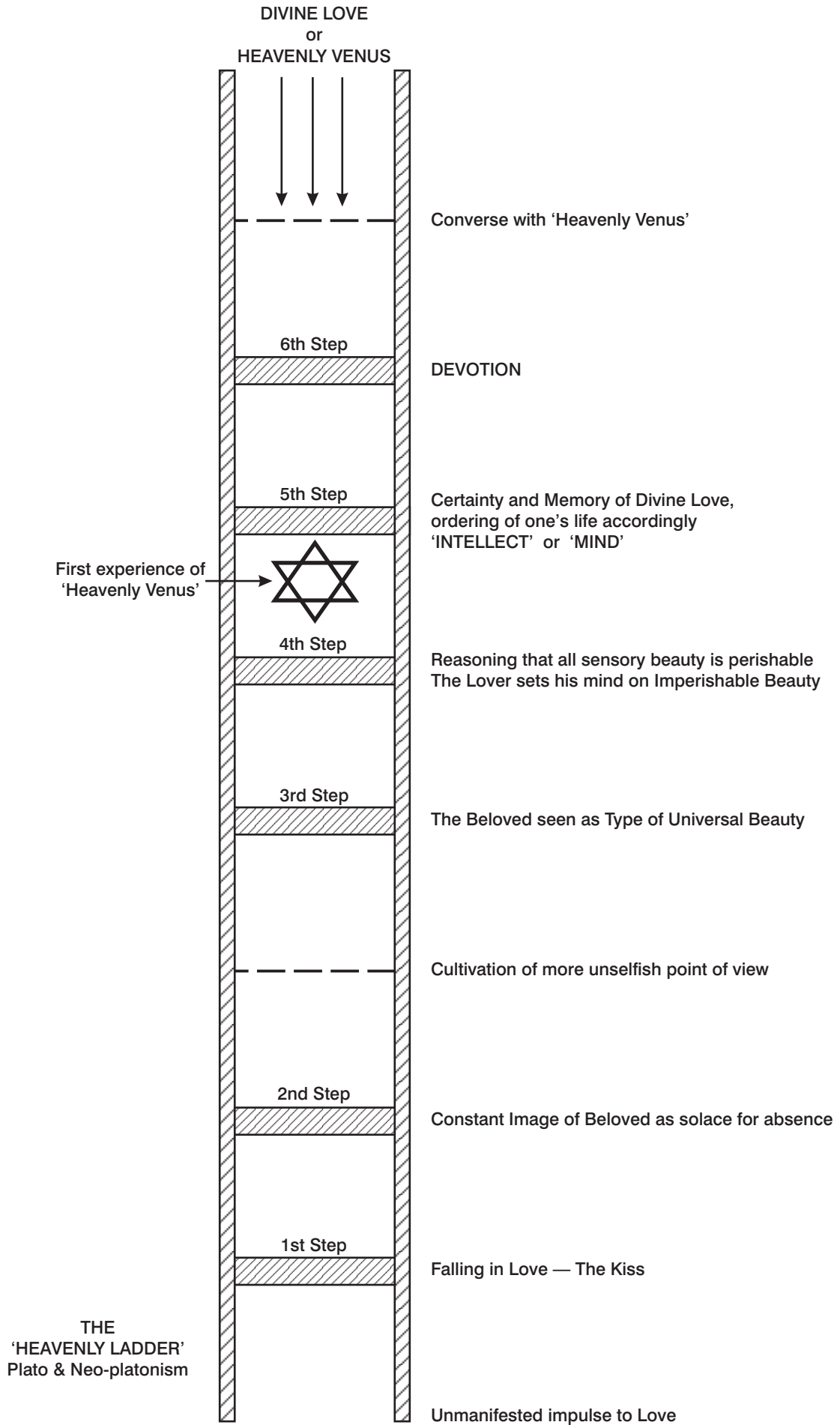
We must now move on a thousand years to the Renaissance when the two streams of Neo-Platonism from Alexandria and Byzantium were united in Florence. Ficino (1433–1499), the guiding spirit of the Platonic Academy there, translated from the Greek into Latin all that was relevant, including the whole of the works of Plato and Plotinus, thus making their ideas available to fifteenth century Europe. One of his most influential works was his translation of Plato's *Symposium* into Italian, with his own extensive commentary, and it was through this book more than any other that the Neo-Platonic influence was passed through Italian poets and writers of the sixteenth century to Elizabethan England. His follower, Pico della Mirandola, instructed Botticelli in those ideas of 'Sacred and Profane Love' which gave rise to the two pictures 'The Birth of Venus' and the so-called 'Primavera'. Pico, moreover, left a very succinct account of the six steps of the 'Ladder'.

But there was another book which is known to have had a great influence and to have brought the idea of the Ladder – not only to artists like Michaelangelo in Italy – but to the poets and dramatists of Elizabethan England. Baldassare Castiglione stayed at the Court of Guidubaldo, Duke of Urbino, from 1504–1508, whom he served in many diplomatic missions, one of which brought him to England. He wrote the first draft of his book *Il Cortigiano* in 1508, but did not publish it till 1528, possibly to stop Vittoria Colonna (Michaelangelo's inspiration) from circulating the uncorrected draft among her friends, which she had been doing meanwhile. Sir Thomas Hoby published his English translation – *The Courtier* – sometime before 1566, though the best known edition is that of 1588. A good case is made by John Vyvyan (in *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty*) for the extensive use Shakespeare made of the ideas contained in *The Courtier*.

At the moment, our interest in this book lies in the beautiful description of the ladder at the end 'unto the which' as the author writes, 'all our Communication is directed'. He was evidently well-acquainted with the following passage in Plotinus, for he simply appropriated the last sentence of it:

How truly might someone exhort us: 'Let us, then, fly to our dear country'... Our feet will not take us there, for all they can do is to carry us from one part of the Earth to another. Nor will it avail to make ready horses for a chariot, or ships on the sea; all these things we must let go. We must not even look; but with our eyes all but closed we must exchange our earthly vision for another, and awaken that – a vision which all possess but few use.

From all these sources we can now approximately place together the rungs of the ladder and summarise the main idea in this provisional picture: (Figure opposite) Pondering on this picture we realise that, if it is taken in relation to life-times, it remains philosophy – mostly empty talk, or at best comparable to the sterile life of a celibate recluse who withdraws into an ivory tower – but soon the realisation comes to us that we can go up this ladder every day, and that the further we get one day, the more blessed will be all that happens on the next. Earthly love is certainly not incompatible with 'Heavenly Love,' but a very important manifestation of it.



If it interests you, we can next time give you a selection of fine descriptions of how to get from one rung to the next, following perhaps with a weekly programme on this basis for use during the holidays.

NOTE

If anyone is troubled by the use of the word 'soul' in translations of Platonic writings, the word is *psychē*, the part of man (forebrain) in which Consciousness *can* be developed.

In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, its triple nature is set forth in the image of a charioteer driving a pair of winged steeds, the one:

... erect, well-proportioned with a high neck and arched nose, in colour white with black eyes, a lover of honour together with temperance and modesty, a friend of true glory, needing not the whip, but guided only by encouragement and reason. But the other is crooked, gross, uncertain in its movements, stiff-necked, with a short throat, flat-nosed, black in colour with grey eyes, full-blooded, a friend of arrogance and bragging, hairy about the ears, deaf, hardly submitting to the whip and the spur ... And so the driving of our chariots is of necessity a difficult and harassing business.

(*The Myth of the Phaedrus*, pp.22 & 51,
from *The Human Soul in the Myths of Plato*, The Shrine of Wisdom)

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