

Dante's Indirection¹

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'What then does it mean, "to deceive"? It means that one does not begin *directly* with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusion as good money . . . nor does one begin thus: I am a Christian, and you are living in purely aesthetic categories. No, one begins thus: Let us talk about aesthetics. The deception consists in the fact that one talks thus merely to get to the religious theme.' (S. Kierkegaard, *Point of View*.)

In all the wealth presented to us in Dante's *Divine Comedy* nothing is so rich as the intention of the whole, and the methods of presentation and communication which Dante uses to body forth this intention. I want to draw out two themes, the first concerned with the medieval device of the Dreamer himself, the second with what might be called an existential concern for meaning, which realizes itself in Dante's use of categories.

I want to talk in terms of Søren Kierkegaard, an analogy which at first may seem strange, but, seen in relation to his 'indirect' works and his Christian concern, like Dante's, 'by indirections to find directions out', the analogy will I think throw light on those strange moments (such as the famous faint in *Inferno*, 5) when we see Dante himself – the figure of the Dreamer – in all his medieval clarity.

The tension between form and meaning can be pulled so tight, that the excitement of our engagement in the poem forces a reaction upon us before we have a moment to decide consciously what, by our ordinary moral standards and preconceptions, our attitude should be. Before we have, as it were, been tipped the wink by Dante as to what our reaction to Francesca's story should be, we see him prostrate on the ground in a faint of sheer human pity. If we are honest we will admit that we have been taken unawares. Dante has been too quick for us, and our reaction will have to be one stemming from his own action, not merely what is presented to us in words. This is to suggest that Dante, in a way that Kierkegaard gave analytic expression to centuries later, presents us with a situation or an act which is straining so hard against

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intellectual concerns of a more abstract nature that before we know what has happened, we are in the mess too – we are involved in the issue and we have got to decide, roughly speaking, for or against the motion.

Kierkegaard gave, as I said, analytic explanation and methodological structure, in modern times, to this (perhaps) unconscious procedure of Dante's. For instance, in the *Concluding Non-Systematic Postscript*, he puts the matter with unusual force and clarity:

'Inwardness cannot be directly communicated, for its direct expression is precisely externality, its direction being outward, not inward. The direct expression of inwardness is no proof of its presence: the direct effusion of feeling does not prove its possession, *but the tension of the contrasting form is the measure of the intensity of inwardness.*'

There are reasons, bound up with the whole understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophy, why we cannot read even this apparently unambiguous statement, at its face value – it is what Johannes Climacus feels. Kierkegaard, like Dante, created figures so strong that they take on a separate existence outside the mind of the creator, they run along their own paths to freedom, and we must not today, in this age of criticism both psychological and anti-didactic, confuse direct expression with direct personal belief.

Nevertheless, we accord this passage the same kind of attention and credence that we accord to Dante when he says in *Purgatorio*, 16, 130:

'O Marco mio' diss'io, 'bene argomenti;
e or discerno perchè dal retaggio
li figli di Levi furono essenti . . .'²

This is what I am calling 'indirect method'. We have before us the medieval figure of the Dreamer, clearly set in the poem as listener and learner, the figure of Everyman's journey to understanding. But, and this is the point, this speech of Dante's to Marco is totally different in meaning and method from the time when he faints at Francesca's story. In the words to Marco, he is passive, submissive. In fainting he is (curiously) active.

In these words to Marco, there is a subtle transition from what Kierkegaard would call 'direct' to what he would call the 'indirect' method. The figure of the Dreamer, in associating himself with the 'good reasoning' of Marco, passively accepts the doctrine of Free Will
"O my Mark," I said, "thou reasonest well, and now I perceive why Levi's sons were exempt from inheriting . . .".'

which comes in theoretical form from Augustine and Aquinas. But if we look for comparison at the passage in *Purgatorio*, 18, 84, where Virgil has just explained as much he can rationally know about the manner in which free will is co-extensive and co-existent with the rise of love in the mind, we see that, though Dante is uneasy about asking further, Virgil senses the 'timid desire that did not declare itself' and explains, in an academic and direct manner. But this is not 'inward' in Kierkegaard's sense, but outward. How then does Dante provoke an 'inward' seizure of this knowledge in his reader? Precisely by responding 'outwardly' in his own person. 'Having garnered the clear and explicit answers to my questions, I remained like one that rambles drowsily.' To *him*, then, *we* react 'inwardly'. There are many such examples throughout the long university course which Dante takes at Virgil's hands through the first two parts of the 'Commedia'. The simple result is that we, the readers, also reel under so much erudition, and are forced to the quick appreciation that dogma is the mere form and vestment of a truth which we can only really make our own, 'inwardly', by an existential relationship with the beauty and goodness that lies behind it. But we have been given as much as Virgil knows. We should be hypocrites if we pretended, immediately, to more than a meditative 'drowsiness'.

This then, is one lightweight example. But when we come to the theory of art within the poem itself, we have reached a watershed.

Dorothy Sayers³ suggests that a change of texture comes over the poem progressively. She sees the *Inferno* as a '*directly*' mirroring of the process of purgation, but then she says: 'From the moment that we ascend the three steps, and pass the actual gate of Purgatory, the second, *indirect*, mirroring begins. It may perhaps be expressed by saying that the technique itself begins to strip itself of adventitious aids . . . there is nothing one can really call a landscape . . .' (*Italics mine*). In the terms I have been using, the watershed has been passed. Theory of art has ceased to be treated overtly.

Theory of art occupies a prominent place in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, but I feel that, in a sense, the dizzying effect of the *Paradiso*, in terms of light, is not due to the presence of theory, of 'indirection', but of assimilated practice.

An example is *Purgatorio*, 11, 91 ff, where Oderisi wails the fate of artists, and accents their ephemeral fame:

³*Further Papers on Dante*, p. 28.

Credette Cimabue nella pintura
 tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido
 sì che la fama di colui è scura:
 così ha tolto l'uno all' altro Guido
 la gloria della lingua; e forse è nato
 chi l'uno e l'altro caccerà del nido.⁴

The irony here has been a critical commonplace for a long time. It is of course Dante's reaction to this, illustrating 'indirectly' the very fault which Oderisi is expiating, pride, which leads to a 'direct' pointing of the moral at line 118:

Ed io a lui: "Tuo vero dir m'incora
 bona umiltà, e gran tumor m'appiani."⁵

Again, the example is lightweight, and I quote it only to prepare for the treatment of the figure of the Poet as such, in Virgil and Casella and Stazio.

Theory of art figures large, and is something apart from the intention of the poem itself – that is to say, there are moments when Dante certainly places art on a level with the divine itself. Examples abound. Perhaps the most exquisite is in *Purgatorio*, 2, 112, where Casella's song holds the little group of souls spellbound on the beach, 'Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona'. The souls are 'sì contenti come a nessun toccasse altro la mente'.⁶

What, even Virgil? He who spends his whole time trying to urge Dante on? Yes, even Virgil. So great is the power of indirection in art as such, that Virgil again falters when he meets Stazio. The only times when Virgil is seduced at all in the ascent through Hell and Purgatory, from the quick and efficient execution of his mission, are when he is struck, within the very mesh of the poem itself, with examples of indirection.

Virgil is the consummate artist. Dante knows this, and therefore allows Virgil occasionally to be himself, to fall under the power of the *daimon*, that *daimon* whom the ancients treated with sacred fear, and to whose service the poet was traditionally delivered up.

⁴Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting, and now Giotto has the cry, so that the fame of the other is obscured. Even so one Guido has taken from the other the glory of our tongue; and perchance one is born who shall chase both from the nest.

⁵And I to him: "Thy true saying fills my heart with holy humility, and lowers my swollen pride".

⁶"Love that in my mind discourses to me" . . . so glad, as if the mind of none gave heed to aught else.

So in *Purgatorio* 21, 94 ff, Stazio admits to having been kindled from the divine flame of Virgil – ‘della divina fiamma’. The word ‘divine’ here means ‘divine’ – it has nothing to do with the religion of the poet. It is part of God. The artist has two ways of being in contact with the divine – the way of statement and the way of suggestion. Dante knew and used both.

Stazio names Virgil with passionate feeling. Virgil fearing perhaps to be caught again in the ‘*segni dell’antica fiamma*’, motions Dante to be silent. It is great. But Dante has already smiled. It is great, and it is indirect. Dante is challenged by Stazio to say why he smiles, and Virgil allows the wave of feeling to burst in upon him, by telling Dante not to have fear, but to speak. It is sure proof that Virgil is deeply touched. This is not a religious experience, but an indirect one, shadowing forth a moral truth – the truth of the sin of Stazio, which is prodigality. Prodigality of feeling too, perhaps. Which is why Stazio bends over to kiss the very feet of the great Poet. But Virgil draws back, as he is not part of the network of sin and expiation. He says to Stazio, ‘*Tu se’ ombra e ombra vedi*’.⁷ And as he steps back, we do not deceive ourselves if we see tears running down Virgil’s cheeks. Because he has lost infinitely, and as a poet who understands indirection, he has a soul great enough to see how much he has lost.

In the next Canto, Stazio admits to having changed his way of life and his beliefs by the lines of the *Aeneid*, and to have become a Christian through the efficacy of the famous *Fourth Eclogue* – ‘*per te poeta fui, per te cristiano*’ – and we are to understand that Virgil’s text has been an indirect statement of enormous significance within the Christian eschatology itself – a fact which should logically serve to put Virgil up here on the Sixth Terrace with Stazio. This thought strikes both of them in a moment of intense stillness and reflection. Stazio has asked after Terence, Cecilius, Plautus, and Varius. Virgil replies that they are all with him in Limbo, including Homer, Euripides, Antiphon, Simonides, and Agathon, and many other Greeks:

Tacevansi ambedue già li poeti
di novo attenti a riguardar dintorno,
liberi dal salire e da’ pareti.⁸

Dante, by the indirect method, is objecting strenuously, emotionally, violently, against the injustice of the exclusion of Virgil from Purga-

⁷ “Thou art a shade and a shade thou seest”.

⁸ “Now both poets were silent, again intent upon looking about them, freed from ascent, and from the walls.”

tory. Here the emotion is straining against the intellectual conviction, and what is hammered out from the opposing tension is an 'inward' response in the reader of an overwhelming emotional conviction – not only about the theme of Virgil's exclusion, but also about the absolutely divine nature of Art in itself. The tension between what is stated and the meaning of the poet has reached absolute snapping strain.

All this has been by way of example. These examples alone may not give a very clear impression of what I believe Dante's own *intention* to have been, in a theoretical form.

My contention then is that Kierkegaard's division of the 'stages on life's way' into three aesthetic modes of presentation, is of extreme interest in studying the form of presentation in Dante's poem. In the *Commedia* the three stages of the relation of the Individual to the Absolute are represented by the three parts of his poem, and Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic' stage, the lowest stage, the stage of art, and the 'ambiguous guilt' of Greek tragedy, corresponds to the spiritual state of people who live in Hell (whether actually or in Florence), and have the artistic presentation suitable to them – that is indirect, pictorial presentation.

In Dante's 'Purgatorio', we have represented what Johannes de Silentio (a pseudonym of Kierkegaard's) calls the 'ethical stage' – where there is some relation to the laws and decrees of the Absolute, but no existential relation, yet, to the Absolute itself. The inhabitants of Purgatory have left the aesthetic stage of pure relativity. The artistic 'freeing' that corresponds to the spiritual 'freeing' is bodied forth in Dante's use of the figure of the poet rejected, of art rejected, in the figure of Virgil, and hence the incredibly painful impression of Virgil's disappearance when Dante turns round to him *with a verse of the Aeneid on his lips!* The method of artistic presentation, as Dorothy Sayers suggested, has 'shorn itself of adventitious aids'. Imagery is purer when art as such is rejected. Besides, Dante could afford this rejection (as Kierkegaard could at the time of the *Postscript*, and for the same reasons, i.e. that art tending towards religious statement has become religious statement tending towards art). Pure statement has become possible by the arrival at the limits of the ultimate 'stage'.

The *Paradiso* represents Kierkegaard's 'religious' stage and the methods of presentation appropriate to it – this is because the figure of the Dreamer is in direct contact with the Absolute, and stares into the radiance itself. De Silentio had characterized (in the figure of Abraham) the fact that in the religious stage it is the Absolute which acts down-

wards, not the individual who aspires upwards. Thus it is that in the *Paradiso* the imagery is in terms of white light, not in terms of colours – we are now touching the source, the root of all colour – light – just as we are now touching the root of all creation, God. Likewise, too, artistic method has changed, and this is symbolized by the absence of Virgil. That is to say, we no longer have ‘adventitious aids’ but the nature of poetry itself at its source, that is to say, adoration. No longer the forms and theory of art, but art itself at its fullest extension, the adoration of the Ineffable through the action of the Ineffable downwards.

The three glorious colours of the steps of Purgatory (white, calcined brown and flaming porphyry) surmounted by the angel in his robe ‘the colour of ashes or dry earth’, paralleled structurally later by the ‘direct’ statement in Canto 25 by Stazio on the formal development of the soul – (i) independent creation of the individual soul, (ii) the unity of the soul, and (iii) the soul’s autonomy – all three points deriving from Aquinas’ refutation of Averroes – all this is summed up later in the *Paradiso*, in statement that is movement rather than a representation – for in Paradise we find neither division nor distinction between methods of presentation. These distinctions made by Stazio in opposition to ‘him that made the great commentary’, Averroes, are in a sense a versified general form of Aquinas’ belief in the sacredness and the supreme worth of the human soul. Sinclair, in his note to the *Purgatorio*, 25, lays his finger on this point: ‘The soul is the unity of the whole man, a being reflective, responsible, immortal: that is the *outcome* of the whole argument, and the subject of the *Divine Comedy*.’ (Italics mine.)

In what sense it was an ‘outcome’ I have tried to show in terms of method. The ‘outcome’ is, properly understood, the *Paradiso* itself, where the soul, deprived of Virgil, washed in Lethe, reconciled with Beatrice, moves, as the ‘unity of the whole man’, step by step nearer into that primal unity, which does away with the necessity of indirection, either personal or representational.

The teaching of the *Paradiso* shows our arrival at the ‘religious’ category proper, and may be compared with the *Works of Love* and the later *Discourses* of Kierkegaard in method. In the *Paradiso* we find, more than ever, direct exposition of dogma – we are called upon to respond intellectually in a way that is new within the schema of the whole. We need time to absorb the teaching (direct) of Plato on the emanation of souls in Canto 4, the direct sermon of Beatrice in Canto 5 (‘Siate, Cristiani, a muovervi più gravi’), and the direct lecture from

Justinian on the disputes between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines in Canto 6 and the status of the Roman Empire, both old and new, and the long plan of salvation in the seventh canto.

We are not bored, because we have already surfeited on sweets, and ere is time now to absorb light and intellection rather than colour. In Canto 31 we are given the Rose in terms of white – a red rose would have no place in the iconography of the Empyrean.

With this new balance, in the quantities of direct and indirect instruction, we get what I feel to be harder ethics – Ethics which are as uncompromising as the ethics of Kant. This change in ethical texture is partly due to the fact that in the *Paradiso* there are no condemned exemplars, for whom, through 'indirection', Dante feels himself deeply compassionate. The 'direct' method allows of a clear intellectual appreciation of the justice of God, without the intense pitifulness of 'indirect' response. The autonomy of the will is stressed in Canto 5, the importance of a 'good will' in Romeo and Justinian in Canto 6, a great stress on the adherence to the spirit of a vow rather than a stupid adherence to its letter, in the style of Kantian responsibility, in Canto 5, and Beatrice's absolute claim for a 'categorical imperative' in Canto 4, which provokes Dante's great outburst of praise. Justinian's insistence that the only faith possible is due to the act of God downwards reminds again of Kierkegaard's 'Abraham' and later Existential theories of the Absurd.

In these 'Kantian' ways as I feel them to be – the intellectual affirmation increases in strength as the aesthetic suggestion subsides. We have, as we move through the poem, by the end, only the fragments of an aesthetic presentation – the poem has become a hymn, and the figure of the Dreamer is lost in the brightness of the elect. Everyman has left us, Dante has effaced himself beyond recognition, we stand *with* him, staring at something else, absorbed into the very figure of the Dreamer. From indirection we have moved into direction, and from direction we have moved into participation, and further than that there is no going, in life or in art.