

9. THE THIRD PASSAGE PAOLO AND FRANCESCA – DETACHMENT FROM PHYSICALITY ENTRY INTO THE REALM OF THE LEOPARD

Leaving Indecisiveness behind us, the first “sin” we encounter is love in the degraded form of lust. The initial circles of the *Inferno* are dedicated to incontinence, symbolized by the leopard, the first and most attractive of the beasts, which seductively blocks the way and drives down whoever attempts the climb the path.

In the realm of incontinence the sins involving the ego’s being dragged along by instinct are exemplified. Yielding to temptation does not necessarily involve an intentional choice, but rather a giving in to the sway of instinct in pursuit of desire and pleasure. In the *Paradiso* (Canto XXVIII), Dante will provide a clearer explanation of the mechanism governing the workings of human behaviour. In the *Purgatorio* the poet also clarifies how the “the simple soul that knows nothing” (Canto XVI, 88) surrenders passively to whatever attracts it. But it is here that the soul risks being deceived, because there is a real risk of being possessed by these very forces, even though they are an initial sign of spirituality. For the moment, our view of them is limited to their effect on those who have succumbed to the leopard.

From the first, Dante makes it clear that even the slightest degree of surrender cannot be taken lightly, because it leads to a potentially destructive chain reaction in the unconscious.¹

9.1 *The Lustful*

The Francesca and Paolo episode, which occupies the entire fifth Canto, is a dramatic illustration of how love experienced at the level of instinct alone, desire, and pleasure may lead to loss and death. The description of the setting provides pointers to the state of those who are at the mercy of strong passions.

And now the notes of anguish start to play

upon my ears; and now I find myself
where sounds of weeping pound at me.

I came to a place where no light shone at all,
bellowing like the sea-racked tempest,
when warring winds attack it from both sides.
The *infernal storm*, eternal in its rage,
sweeps and drives the spirits with its blast:
it whirls them, lashing them with punishment.
When they are swept back past their place of judgement,*
then come the shrieks, laments, and anguished cries,
there they blaspheme God's mighty power.
[Inf. V, 25-36]

It is a place – or, more exactly, a state – where contrary winds are lashed into a howling storm. Just as the spirits yielded unthinkingly to passion, so they are swept along by the gale. Having pursued pleasure, they are now imprisoned in the whirlwinds that send them into a never-ending spin which leads to nothing.

I learned that to this place of punishment
all those who sin in lust have been condemned,
those who make *reason* slave to *appetite*;
and as the wings of starlings in the winter
bear them along in widespread, crowded flocks,
so does that wind propel the evil spirits:
now here, and up and down, it drives them
with never any hope to comfort them-
hope not of rest but even of suffering less.
And just like cranes in flight, chanting their lays
stretching an endless line in their formation,
I saw approaching, crying their laments,
spirits carried along by the battling winds.
[Inf. V, 37-49]

Dante is moved to pity – moving us in turn – by this most common of “sins”, so easily succumbed to. The wind-tossed starlings and the

* Literally, Dante speaks of the crevice opened by the descent of Christ into hell. In one of these crevices sits Minos.

call of the cranes in flight arouse the reader's sympathy, which extends to the guilty lovers, guilty not because they loved, but because they loved unwisely. This love-compassion theme introduces the central episode of the canto.

Before Dante immortalised them, Paolo and Francesca were the unknown protagonists of an event which, though real, had, like many others, faded into the indifference of contemporary chronicles, appearing as nothing more than a banal story of adultery and an even more cliché'd crime of passion.

It is not known when the story took place and, as the chroniclers of the time make no mention of it, no details have come down to us. As for the opinions of the early commentators of the *Commedia*, these are little more than colourful suppositions.

During Dante's boyhood the tragedy was spoken of in Florence (Francesca married in 1275) and the fledgling poet must have been particularly struck by it. Clearly the *Commedia* does not set out to immortalise the story and the people involved. Once they have been transferred to Dante's world, the historical events and the people caught up in them immortalize states of consciousness only; transcending the single episodes and their occasional actors, they achieve universal status.

At the sight of the unending stream of loving spirits, and on hearing tell of the tragic events overtaking so many of the world's great figures, Dante evokes a strong sense of pity. He himself feels "nearly lost" and is aware of the risk of succumbing to the emotional impact of the scene:

After I heard my teacher call the names
of all these knights and ladies of ancient times,
pity confused my senses, and I was dazed.*
[Inf. V, 70-72]

Such pity is a common reaction which tends to cause confusion. It is not, however, "feeling", the cognitive function for distinguishing values that is mentioned by Jung. Indeed, compassion is the principal

* Musa translates Dante's "quasi smarrito" (almost lost) with less specific "and I was dazed".

effect of the story Paolo and Francesca are asked to tell.

As doves, called by desire to return
to their sweet nest, with wings raised high and poised,
float downward through the air, guided by will,
so these two left the flock...

[Inf. V, 82-85]

From the very first, Francesca is a seductive presence. Damned as she is, she even dares to believe she can pray to the “lord of the universe” for the peace of the poet who has shown pity for their “perverse sin”. She is a perfect embodiment of the Anima, innocent, ambiguous and seductive. The figure of Paolo is wrapped in total silence.

Francesca is a fragile and passionate human figure. She does not represent the divine, rather she is an expression of human fragility and unstructured emotivity devoid of “knowledge”, offering no resistance to the the flood of passion. It is as though Dante extracted this danger from within himself, objectifying it in the story of the two lovers so as to personally enact the process of detachment on our behalf. This brings us to the third passage of death and rebirth.

Initially the poet creates a sense of total peace:

The place where I was born lies on the shore
where the river Po with its attendant streams
descends...

[Inf. V, 97-99]

But Love, harbinger of relentless fate, strikes like a thunderbolt and breaks the spell:

Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart,
seized this one for the beauty of my body
torn from me, (How it happened still offends me!)
Love, that excuses no on loved from loving,
seized me so strongly with *delight* in him
that, as you see, he never leaves my side.
Love led us straight to sudden death together.
Caïna awaits the one who quenched our lives”.

[Inf. V, 100-107]

At first glance, we might confuse this with the kind of love celebrated by the poets of *il Dolce Stil Nuovo*, expressing a potential yearning for the divine that is aroused in the kind heart of the man by feminine beauty, or in that of the woman by masculine charm.² Such love possesses great potential for transformation (indeed the heavenly counterparts of the lustful are the loving spirits). However, if the poet's words are analysed carefully, it becomes clear that this form of love has been arrested at a superficial level, based on the attractiveness of the lover-persona and the quivering pleasure, which open the flood gates of a mounting passion. Will and good sense are swept aside in a moment of ingenuous abandonment. The love of Paolo and Francesca is young love and not a mature one.

Love is the protagonist of the entire episode, Paolo and Francesca merely the "prey". The love we find here is centred on the "Persona", pleasure, and possession. From a psychological point of view, it is an unconscious projection of Anima-Animus,³ due to which Paolo and Francesca fuse in a single unconscious reality which also sucks in Gianciotto, the betrayed husband, who in turn betrays the bond of kinship by killing his wife and brother. Francesca's "Caina awaits" vents her burning hatred for the man who "quenched" their lives. She is equally capable of hatred and blind love, experiencing these states with a total innocence and an ambivalence which is typical of adolescence.

A silent pause in the poet's verse separates the dazzling encounter of the two lovers from the moment of their death, capturing the unfathomable mystery of human life, which lies beyond the power of words to describe.

Dante is overcome with emotion, to the point of confusion, and he stands head bowed in thought, until his guide tries to rouse him.

When those offended souls had told their story,
I bowed my head and kept it bowed until
the poet said, "What are you thinking of?"
When finally I spoke, I sighed, "Alas,
all those sweet thoughts, and oh, how much desiring
brought these two down into this agony".
[Inf. V, 109-114]

The poet's words are full of compassion, but they are marked by an

equal understanding of the human spirit. It is but a short step from sweet sighs to a desire so strong that all sense of individual identity is lost. Identification with desire soon follows, to the extent that one *becomes* the insatiable yearning itself. Such is the state of “manipura”, the third chakra in Kundalini Yoga, where there is no detached Ego experiencing an emotion or an impulse, but the Ego has merged with the impulse itself. Only when the libido surmounts the diaphragm and enters the chakra of the heart (“*anahata*”) will the Ego reach detachment and realise it is responding to a given impulse or feeling.⁴

Dante goes beyond compassion and asks for an explanation of “how” love, still at the stage of “sweet sighs”, communicated the hesitant desire of each lover to the other:

And then I turned to them and tried to speak;
I said, “Francesca, the torment you suffer
brings painful tears of pity to my eyes.
But tell me, in that time of your sweet sighing
how, and by what signs, did love allow you
to recognise your dubious desires?”
[Inf. V, 115-120]

Francesca understands the value of the question, which seeks to get to “the very root” of their earthly love. Even though she knows each word will renew the pain of that happy time, she agrees to answer Dante’s question. Weeping as she speaks, she finds the courage to complete the story she had interrupted out of pity, concealing what lay between the dazzling moment of love and the instant of death.

One day, we read, the time to pass away,
of Lancelot, of how he fell in love;
we were alone, innocent of suspicion.
Time and again our eyes were brought together
by the book we read; our faces flushed and paled.
To the moment of one line alone we yielded:
it was when we read about those longed-for lips
now being kissed by such a famous lover,
that this one (who shall never leave my side)
then kissed my mouth, and trembled as he did.
Our Galeot was that book and he who wrote it.

That day we read no further”.
[Inf. V, 127-138]

As she describes it, the scene is held in a world beyond space and time, reminiscent of the innocence and unconsciousness of Eden. In her innocence, Francesca creates a spell-bound atmosphere that transforms Paolo into a being devoid of will, who can only tremble with desire and who is completely swayed by her. Now, bound to Francesca, he can only weep, while she who so wanted to possess him (who shall never more leave my side) has also dragged her husband into the vortex of damnation.

Francesca is consistently self-pitying; the fault lies with others, she is not to blame. She accuses love, the book, and the writer. While this appears as a unique and sublime reality, it is really a clearly collective phenomenon.

With her cunning play of illusions the soul lures into life the inertness of matter that does not want to live. She makes us believe incredible things, that life may be lived...To have a soul is the whole venture of life...the anima can appear also as an angel of light, a psychopomp who points the way to the highest meaning...

If the encounter with the Shadow is the “apprentice-piece” in the individual’s development, then that with the anima is the “master-piece” ...behind all her cruel sporting with human fate there lies something like a hidden purpose which seems to reflect a superior knowledge of life’s laws. [Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, CW IX, I, para. 56-64].

Paolo, the man, can only cry; it is Francesca who speaks and acts.

the one of the two spirits spoke these words,
the other wept...
[Inf. V, 139-141]

This profoundly human situation inevitably arouses pity; Dante must die to this state of compassion, because if he identifies with it, he will remain trapped in the same circle, unable to proceed beyond the archetypal state it represents.

in such a way that *pity*
blurred my senses; I swooned as though to die,

And fell to Hell's floor as a body, dead, falls.
[Inf. V, 140-142]

This is not sleep, but death. We have reached the third death-rebirth transition-point, which corresponds to detachment from the leopard, disengagement from complete submission to emotions and sensations. This type of love is devoid of freedom; everything seems to occur mechanically as if the libido, that is, psychic energy, were being channelled in an inviting but fatal direction. In other contexts, such experiences of love may lead to situations which are self-destructive and equally dangerous for others.

Rationally speaking, it is impossible to avoid the risk of identification with pity. Identification has to be brought about dramatically by means of a breakdown, once more in the form of death, a swift dying to the state of compassion that threatens the wayfarer and blocks his way forward.

From a psychological point of view, the entire Paolo and Francesca story can be considered as love based on a reciprocal Animus-Anima projection.⁵ In effect, the two lovers are damned not because they infringed a moral code, but because they failed to become responsible for this love through a more mature attitude. This would have involved using the good of the intellect, which the two damned lovers had lost. Had they used this distinctive human gift, neither Paolo nor Francesca would be in Hell.

Negative as they are, because they are unknown, the forces moving the two lovers can become the very means for ascent: the lost lovers of the *Inferno* may become the blessed loving spirits found in Heaven. As Jung says:

The blinder love is, the more it is instinctual, and the more it is attended by destructive consequences, for it is a dynamism that needs form and direction. Therefore a compensatory Logos has been joined to it as a light that shines in the darkness. A man who is unconscious of himself acts in a blind, instinctive way and is additionally fooled by all the illusions that arise when he sees everything that he is not conscious of in himself coming to meet him from outside as projections upon his neighbour. [Jung, *The Philosophical Tree*, CW XIII, par. 391]