5 Simulation and Dissimulation: Self-revealing Paradoxes

Oh! if servility with supple knees,
Whose trade it is to smile, to crouch, to please;
If smooth dissimulation, skill'd to grace
A devil's purpose with an angel's face;

(William Cowper, 'Table Talk')

The social instruments of liturgy, whose incomplete qualities produce a truth, can also distribute a lie. Bad faith is not confined to existentialism. The uncheckable nature of rite could allow piety to be feigned, devoutness to be parodied, and deceits to prosper by an actor with sufficient wit to keep a holy face – with the self preserved in a condition of semi-detached doubt. He could be the deceiving beneficiary of what cannot be checked. If so dedicated, he could fool all, especially the credulous sociologist. Bowing and scraping, the liturgical actor could produce all manner of deceptions that might mislead the holy and unholy alike. The problem for the sociologist is that the ultimate sincerity or insincerity of the liturgical act is known only to God. As Romano Guardini has noted 'the liturgy has perfected a masterly instrument which has made it possible for us to express our inner life in all its fullness and depth without divulging our secrets . . .'.

Because the actor can pretend to be what he is not, and could conceal what he ought to be, in a ritual performance that deals with the intangible, deciphering the truth or falsity of his act can pose acute sociological problems of interpretation. Revelation and concealment are qualities embodied in the liturgical act that relate also to notions of simulation and dissimulation. For Steele, 'simulation is a pretence of what is not, and dissimulation is a concealment of what is'. To simulate an appearance is to present something counterfeit, a quality of falseness, feigned to mislead; to dissimulate is to present as a whole an appearance or an attribute whose incompleteness might not even be noticed. Both have a deceiving quality. Simulation reveals too much in a way that paralyses a critical selectivity; dissimulation conceals too
much to make a secure judgement. Appearances are ambiguous enough without having to worry about whether they deceive or not. The issue of innocence and experience highlights some of the difficulties that can emerge in the certification of the authenticity of a virtue. Why should simulation and dissimulation be of such interest for an understanding of the social basis of liturgical transactions?

Marxists or Freudians might claim that liturgies are inherently deceiving, anyhow, and that issues of simulation and dissimulation are variations on an ideological theme. They would suggest that these religious rituals are inherently misleading, simply being manifestations of false consciousness, or that they are unconsciously deceiving, regardless of the intentions of the actors. Such privileged interventions conceal more than they reveal about the intentions of the actors. They are not puppets being strung along by some meta-theory, but actors accomplishing the production of a social transaction that happens to be entangled with the holy. A career in liturgical enactment leads to a much more astute awareness of where deceptions lie in rite.

The chances for fooling some of the people some of the time in liturgies are truly enormous. The preacher could sermonise on purity on Sunday and womanise on Monday; the celebrant could lie in his teeth when he utters the words of institution at mass; and the choirboy could come to the sweet conclusion that he does not love God after all. Hypocrisy is endemic in liturgical productions and the scope for simulation and dissimulation is vast. Dissimulation can be a ploy to maintain a smooth surface to disguise all manner of deceiving practices beneath. These discrepancies between faith and appearance point to culpable and obvious forms of dissimulation. Issues of dissimulation arise also in less obvious facets, where problems of accountability for any deceptions are less clearcut. There is, however, an endemic quality of dissimulation necessary in the liturgical act that requires a tactful response if the actor is to secure ‘success’ in performance. Liturgical transactions involve a playful art of concealing and revealing. This ambiguity is both an asset and a liability in ritual ventures that deal with the holy. All forms of dissimulation are not necessarily pernicious; some are understandable.

The actors involved in liturgical productions become sensitive to the implications of simulation and dissimulation and the need to accommodate to their existence. Conscience dictates the scaling of these implications and the accountability of the actor for misleading or leading the audience astray. Scruples can become an occupational hazard for the actor, who might feign his appearance for good reason.