

in philosophy is to proceed towards metaphysics not through physics but through biology. Meanwhile, the road followed by Edith Stein, first in emulation of a revered human master and finally of one divinely human, may prove to be the way out of the wilderness in which there are so many voices crying in mutual unintelligibility but common need.

CLAUDEL AND DANTE ON TRIAL

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DR Ernest Beaumont in his new book¹ examines the ways in which two major Christian poets relate human love to the salvation of the soul, so that the former appears as a means, under divine grace, to the latter. Of such interrelating Dr Beaumont is rather suspicious; he smells heresy in it. He finds excuses however for Dante, reserving most of his disapproval for Paul Claudel, who is blamed both for misrepresenting (in his *Ode Jubilaire* for the Dante centenary, 1921) the role of Beatrice in Dante's work, and for adding, in his own dramas, a series of more or less explicit expressions of a false idea of human love. The falsehood seems to consist chiefly in Claudel's thinking (a) that if human (erotic) love could be 'satisfied' with its object, God would be 'excluded'; (b) that since it cannot be so satisfied, this love implies a longing which only God can satisfy; and (c) that, this being so, lovers who refrain from carnal satisfaction may become, providentially, grace-bearers to one another and so, in a sense, mutually 'necessary' in a process of producing, reciprocally, 'the child of God in each other'. This last 'error' is the more glaring in that the love in question is made to contrast with married love to the disadvantage of the latter.

Since I am far less acquainted than Dr Beaumont with the dramatic work of Claudel, my feeling that his critique of the French poet is somewhat partial is not in itself of much interest. These thoughtful chapters on the Claudelian heroines have probably a greater value than I am able to assess. But the

1 *The Theme of Beatrice in the Plays of Claudel*. By Ernest Beaumont. (Rockliff; 12s. 6d.)

author's preliminary remarks on Dante, with whose work I am more familiar, do not strike me as very discerning, and I should like to take the occasion of this disagreement to offer one or two tentative reflections on Christian poetry which this book suggests to me.

While acquitting Dante of the full Claudelian errors, Dr Beaumont is clearly not happy about some of Dante's 'audacities'. Let us take two of his examples. In a poem to Beatrice (*Vita nuova*, xxxi) the poet addresses her soul as '*piena di grazia*'; which Dr Beaumont finds 'audacious', presumably because it seems to put Beatrice on a level with our Lady. Again in *Purgatorio* xxxiii, Beatrice is made to use the words of Christ, as though she somehow were him, '*modicum et non videbitis me*', etc. (St John xvi, 16); and this, says Dr Beaumont, 'seems to overstep the limits of permissible analogy'. Now both these comments seem to me very disputable, and since the latter especially strikes at the root of Dante's Christian poetry (probably the greatest every written), the challenge, I think, should be met. Poetry, it may be agreed, even poetry like Dante's, highly charged with intelligence, is an expression of feeling or passion (in the widest sense of these terms), and it tends to work by assimilating (simile, metaphor) things distinct in nature; and sometimes to the point of making one thing symbolize another, especially if the latter is not an object of direct sense-experience. Fire becomes a symbol of love, snow of purity, etc. Now, in the *Vita nuova* poem cited above Dante is expressing his feeling that Beatrice, now dead, has gone to Heaven, and that a spiritual relationship persists, through death, between her soul and his. The phrase 'full of grace' is a strong expression of this feeling. There is no question in the *Vita nuova* of Beatrice being, even implicitly, our Lady's rival.² The writer is a Catholic instinctively, one might say, and every page of his book presupposes the truth of Catholic Christianity as a matter of course. What, however, may surprise the modern reader is the tranquilly ingenuous way in which Dante brings his faith to a focus on the person of Beatrice; who in the *Vita nuova* as a whole is on the way to becoming, in Dante's imagination, a symbol of his salvation, of the way grace came to him, a 'simile', in fact, of Christ; and this as a result of (and here's the rub) of his attraction to her as a woman. The connection is made without,

² One of the few details Dante tells us concerning Beatrice is that she had a particular devotion to the Blessed Virgin, 'the queen of glory' (*VN*, xxviii and v).

apparently, the slightest *conscious* audacity—in entire innocence. The attraction simply begets the symbol. The symbol becomes in turn the imaginative focus of Dante's religious interests. It was not a replacement of Christ by Beatrice, except so far as an image re-presents the thing imaged. Hence throughout the *Paradiso*, of which the *Vita nuova* is the germ, Beatrice is a 'showing' of Christ whom she reflects and transmits to the poet's eyes and mind. Thus she is usually presented as distinct from Christ, as Christian wisdom or contemplation rather than *ipse Christus*. But in the *Purgatorio* text to which Dr Beaumont takes exception (xxxiii, 7-12), Beatrice, Christ's reflection, speaks *in the person* of the divine being she reflects; the context suggesting that here she symbolizes, in fact, the Church. And in all this, given the synthetic and assimilative mode of the poetic imagination, I see nothing to object to or be shocked by; though of course it may surprise a modern reader.

All Christian poetry, surely, is governed by two factors: by the poetic activity proper, an ordering of images by feeling—or what Dante called 'love', which for him always implied an 'idea', *verbum spirans amorem*; and secondly by the faith which continually checks that ordering in view of revealed truth. Without this second factor the poet would veer off (like Blake perhaps) into some visionary heresy; but without the first factor he would, as a poet, simply dry up. If Christian poetry is to exist at all, both factors must come into play, and the more freely the better, within the tension of their dynamic interrelationship. And this in practice means that within the public dimension, so to say, of the faith, the poet—a Dante, a Claudel—builds a private world which reflects or represents that in a new way. The tension, then, is inevitable; it is the price paid for things like the *Divine Comedy*—the greatest, so far, of these poetic 'private worlds' within the Catholic order. In the *Comedy* Dante's natural love becomes a symbol of his admission into the order of grace.

But what seemed all right to one age may appear audacious or impious to another. Dante wrote in an age, or towards the end of an age, which readily and easily used the natural world as an analogy of the supernatural order. In this sense it was an age which favoured Christian poetry; even if, owing to other cultural factors, such poetry did not, before Dante, find a major expression in the vernacular literature of the laity. And when Dante wrote, the world that had bred him, or the more traditionally Christian

part of him, was nearing its end. It is the marvel of his achievement from this point of view, that it expresses that older Christian world in the tongue and technique of a new world, to which he also belonged; but which (paradoxically) was to become progressively less capable of understanding him. Hence—as Charles Singleton has pointed out³—after the Council of Trent the *Vita nuova* was bowdlerized (in an edition of 1576) by the deletion of such ‘audacities’ as seemed, in the atmosphere of post-medieval Catholicism, not analogies merely but impieties.⁴ *Salute* (salvation) was changed to *quiete, gloriosa to graziosa, beatitudine to felicità*, etc.

The question is, are we to prefer this sort of timidity to the virile simplicity of a Dante—who saw the natural world as ‘divine’ simply because, as another Catholic poet said, it ‘is charged with the glory of God’, without forgetting for a moment that it is infinitely other than and less than God himself? An attitude like that of Dante’s sixteenth-century censors does not favour the production of Christian poetry.

It may seem unfair that I take Dr Beaumont’s book as an example of an attitude rather similar to this, while I am not prepared to argue point by point over his interpretation of Claudel. With Dante he was only concerned as a starting point. Yet the link between the two poets is an important part of his argument. Claudel, he thinks, has been led to misinterpret Dante (especially in the *Ode Jubilaire*) by his own misconception of the relation between human love and divine love. But for my part that *Ode* seems to me—for all its boldness and its involved Claudelian language—to give a *possible* interpretation of the Dante-Beatrice relationship as Dante presents this. And since in this matter I don’t think Dante a heretic, the *Ode Jubilaire* does not

3 *An Essay on the ‘Vita Nuova’*. By C. S. Singleton. (Harvard Univ. Press, 1949); pp. 3-5.

4 On this matter of the difference between the medieval and post-medieval points of view, Erich Auerbach (*Speculum*, vol. 21, 1946, pp. 474-89) has some interesting remarks especially with regard to the figurative interpretation of the Bible, which, he says, ‘created a world of interrelations . . . in which medieval theologians moved quite naturally and which was familiar even to laymen through sermons, religious representations and art; from this material a poet like Bernard of Clairvaux produced his most beautiful creations. During the fourteenth century this world began to decay; the eighteenth century destroyed it almost completely, and for us it has vanished. . . .’ And again: ‘it is only to us that the figurative system seems laborious, complicated and sometimes absurd; for the Christians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was daily bread . . .’ I do not suggest that Dante’s use of the Beatrice-symbol was not daring even in his age; but only that it was in line with the representation through natural symbols of the supernatural, to which the Christian tradition had accustomed that age.

dispose me to find heresy in Claudel either. I may of course be wrong: Claudel is a difficult author. But the censor too may be wrong; as (I think) he was wrong in 1576. Let me, anyhow, conclude by stepping back on to the terrain where I feel reasonably secure—the interpretation of Dante. For I here find another point of disagreement with Dr Beaumont, which may serve to bring the whole issue a little more into the open. It is this: in his criticism of the *Ode Jubilare*, Dr Beaumont will have it (mistakenly I think, though the mistake is perhaps pardonable, given the extreme delicacy of Dante's style in this matter) that in the *Vita nuova* Beatrice plays an entirely *passive* role: she only begins actively to love Dante in the *Comedy*, and then her love is wholly and purely supernatural, 'in God'; the implication being that were she involved any more than this in the love-story of the *Vita nuova*, a natural woman would be playing a part in another's salvation too great for 'nature'. And this audacity Dr Beaumont prefers not to find in Dante. Yet it is there. The whole point of the *Vita nuova* (as I see it) is that the most perfect *natural* thing yet encountered by the young Dante, the very quintessence of humanity, a human soul (with all that this can imply for the religious mind) shining through human flesh—that this thing is taken as a symbol of the Incarnation, and that its transit into the next world is taken as a symbol of the opening of Heaven to mankind by the death of Christ. And in all this sublimation of natural forms and feeling the nature in question is *human* nature seen as deriving immediately and directly, so far as the rational soul is concerned, from the creative Godhead, the '*mirabile Trinitade*'. And without some share in Dante's own sense of the glory of human nature (linked directly, through the soul, to God) one cannot begin to understand how Dante could make it symbolize so much. But this particular sense of human 'glory' is a direct consequence of the Catholic teaching on creation; though admittedly it has rarely been felt as keenly as it was felt by Dante. And it is just here that I find Dr Beaumont's remarks on Dante somehow lifeless and external. He does not, apparently, understand the poet's concept of human nature, because he has not traced this back to its radical insight: the insight into the immediacy of the rational soul's derivation from the Creator. In the *Vita nuova* that insight is already emerging, and is the religious basis of all its symbolic audacities.