

The Cambridge Setting

Elisabeth Stopp

The year before Kenelm left Cambridge to enter the Dominican Order, A.E. Housman, in a famous, one might say notorious, lecture on 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', on 9 May 1933, deplored the choice made of him as Leslie Stephen lecturer and then said: 'Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasuries I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets, sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley's comet: literary critics are less common'. This lecture by a poet and classical philologist in fact turned out to be an outstandingly original piece of literary criticism and one of the most characteristic utterances of the thirties. In spite of Housman's gloom it was a time of literary critics of stature, writers who were at home in the borderland between poetry, philosophy and religion, discovering and rediscovering great poets in a rush of intellectual and political excitement. Though Kenelm's writing work matured later because of his years of religious and theological training, he belonged essentially to the thirties, his seed-bed where, as Bede Bailey said, he remained firmly rooted. This era between two wars had an 'escape-me-never' hold on Kenelm and on his contemporaries, particularly those who returned to academic life after the war and all that the war had meant for European life and sensibility.

When Kenelm returned to academic life and gradually evolved his own corpus of criticism and analysis of Italian literature and of Thomism, it was soon clear that he belonged to the species seen as so rare by Housman, a creative critic, in his own way an artist, alive to the achievement of poet-thinkers like Dante, Petrarch, Hopkins, Eliot and Claudel. A scholar who himself shared fully in the intellectual and artistic ferment of the twenties and thirties, and who was Kenelm's teacher when he transferred from History to the Modern Languages Tripos, was Edward Bullough, originally, like Housman, of Trinity College and from 1912 of Gonville and Caius College. It was to Bullough that Kenelm owed his first grounding in Dante and therefore also in Thomas Aquinas—he was the translator in 1924 of Etienne Gilson's standard work on St Thomas. Bullough, a man of wide intellectual range and a polyglot by upbringing and inclination, lectured not only in the Modern Languages Faculty on Italian, German and Russian, but also on aesthetics in the Moral Sciences department. He was also the first

secretary of the newly formed department of architecture, where his special expertise included stage craft design: in 1908 he had married the daughter of the Italian actress Eleonora Duse, of wide renown on the European and American stage. He was received into the Catholic Church in 1923 by Fr Martindale and shortly afterwards he and his wife became Dominican Tertiaries. What Bede Jarrett had meant to Kenelm at a Downside retreat which prompted, in the long term, his Dominican vocation, Bullough meant to him as a model of the Catholic don, philosopher, critic and artist of Dominican orientation, a man who lived, taught and worked in the spirit and according to the ideals of the Dominican Order. It was largely his vision and enterprise that led to the purchase in the twenties of the centrally situated, historic house which became the University Catholic Chaplaincy, Fisher House, where Kenelm's life as a Catholic student was centred and where, under Mgr Alfred Gilbey, then chaplain, his vocation matured. The very few Catholic women students—in my six years at Girton in the thirties there were never more than four or five in all—found a focus and a warm welcome at the Bullough's house on the Huntingdon Road, particularly for breakfast after the early morning Mass at St Edmund's House, where the family worshipped.

Edward Bullough was elected the third professor of Italian in Cambridge in 1933. Before the beginning of the next academic year, when Kenelm had just entered the novitiate, and I, as Bullough's research student on an Italian/German topic, was working in Rome, he died suddenly at the age of 54 on 17 September, 1934. He was buried in the hillside cemetery of the Dominican Priory at Woodchester in Gloucestershire, and it is there that his wife was buried in 1961. As my parents had retired in the thirties from London to the Cotswolds, I often made the pilgrimage to Woodchester; Bullough's untimely death was an irreparable loss to his students and to Catholic life at Cambridge. But one may say that he left a splendid memorial to himself, which by his generosity and that of his family, entered into the possession of the Dominican Order. This was Blackfriars St Michael's, the house which he had designed and built within sight of his own home across the road. It was here that Kenelm lived when he returned during the war to do his Ph.D. on Dante, and it was here that he worked throughout his Cambridge career, right to the end.

Bullough had been elected an Honorary Associate of the Royal Institute of Architects in 1924. St. Michael's, now part of a larger complex of buildings, was built to his own design on the model of an Italian villa, structuring as it were a Roman enclave, a little Italy just off the Huntingdon Road. This is a Roman road, the Via Devana, which runs from Chester (Deva Castra), in the north of England, right through the centre of Cambridge, changing its name a number of times but not its

nature as a straight line running out of the town past the Gog Magog Hills and beyond towards Colchester, another important Roman fortification. This road, and Bullough was greatly aware of its ancient aura and significance, passed a number of pre- and post-Reformation colleges. Two miles out there was Girton, the first women's college, then Magdalene at the bottom of Castle Hill; across the river Cam, there was Sidney Sussex, then Christ's, Kenelm's College and one with which St John Fisher was closely associated, further on Emmanuel, founded on the site of the Dominican Priory dating from 1238, still incorporating much of its stone and even elements of its structure. In Bullough's thinking, St Michael's, situated at the top of the only hill that Cambridge boasts and not far from the Castle Mound, remnant of an ancient stronghold on the Via Devana, was to be the house integrating the Dominicans geographically, intellectually and spiritually with the University of Cambridge. The university presence and apostolate of his Friars Preachers had, of course, been an important issue for St Dominic and it had already been realised in Oxford in the twenties. Kenelm Foster as a University Lecturer and then Reader was one of those through whom Bullough's plan as what would now be called a Lay Dominican was realized, as it has been by many others, including his son (Fr Sebastian lectured in the Faculty of Oriental Languages), since the house was formally taken over by the Dominicans in 1938. The house was dedicated to Michael the Archangel, not only because he traditionally has shrines on hill-tops but because he also has strong Italian associations, with Castel San Angelo in Rome and Monte Gargano in the south. He was, too, and still is now, victorious in the great apocalyptic war in heaven and stood for the victory of truth—*veritas*, the Dominican motto—over evil and error. Characteristically enough, the Bulloughs provided a visual aid for this devotion in the shape of a relief sculpture of the archangel on the back wall of the fireplace in the library-sittingroom; it was exciting to gaze into the flames of a log fire on winter evenings and watch the winged figure of St Michael brandishing his spear to thrust down to a fiery hell Satan and all his wicked spirits. Bullough was a Romantic; with something of a difference, there was that element in Kenelm too.

This, then, was the nature of the house in which Kenelm, who himself had an Italian background because of his grandmother in Florence, lived out his religious and academic life in Cambridge, inheriting in the very fabric and structure of St Michael's the spirit of the man whose vision had created this new Dominican university centre. There was, too, his profound understanding of Dante. Bullough, like Kenelm, later on, was an impassioned pedagogue in the best sense of that word, personally engaged, deeply absorbed in the scholarly unriddling and interpretation of his texts, exacting in his demands on students but

also generous in putting across his insights. We found Bullough's lectures and classes strenuous, but they were the only academic courses, individual and characteristic as they were, to be remembered vividly in later years, not just for their content but for the personality, the attitudes of the lecturer. I have heard exactly the same testimony from my own students about Kenelm's teaching. Bullough was also the only don in the Cambridge of the thirties to make any lasting impression on another of our contemporaries, Thomas Merton, who describes in *Elected Silence* (chapter 3, 'The Harrowing of Hell') the impact Bullough's Dante course made on him and how constructive was the imprint left on his mind. 'In those days', he says, 'I seem to remember there was little sunlight. It fell through the ancient windows of Professor Bullough's rooms in Caius ... I think the one great benefit I got out of Cambridge was the acquaintance with the genius of the greatest Catholic poet.' He saw it as the greatest grace in the positive order to have been helped to understand Dante and to follow, as Bullough read and explained, 'the slow and majestic progress of the myths and symbols in which Dante was building up a whole poetic synthesis of scholastic philosophy and theology.' Both Bullough and Kenelm were able to formulate their findings creatively and convey their own joy in this 'whole poetic synthesis' that they were all the time themselves discovering, still exploring. In Kenelm's case this was undiminished even in his very last Dante 'lettura', on *Paradiso XIII*, so beautifully read and rendered by Patrick Boyde on the day that Kenelm was taken to hospital to die.

Even though our student days had overlapped in part, my late husband and I first actually met Kenelm, a little older than ourselves, when he became our colleague in the Modern Languages Faculty in 1948. He returned here after a spell of parish work in Leicester while my husband was struggling to settle down after years on active service abroad, the last year of this in Italy, from Salerno to Anzio. A common love of Italy and concern for this country was a bond with Kenelm and also, though rather differently, with Mrs Bullough, who had returned to the Huntingdon Road house and always welcomed back her husband's students. We also saw Kenelm in the context of the Cambridge Aquinas Society, newly created by Thomas Gilby, by Kenelm and others; also in the London Aquinas Society, which I had joined when it was founded during the war.

Kenelm twice addressed the London society, first on 'Saint Thomas, Petrarch and the Renaissance' (Aquinas Paper No. 12, Blackfriars, Oxford) and again in 1956, 'The Mind in Love. Dante's Philosophy' (Aquinas Paper No. 25). Both these lectures, and also, for instance, a talk of 1960 read to the Congress of London Dominican Tertiaries about their patron, 'The Spirit of St Catherine of Siena' (published in *Life of the Spirit*, XV, No. 178, 1961), are a witness to Kenelm's power to captivate an audience that was not particularly academic. This was not achieved by

concession or by being any less 'academic' himself but quite simply by doing the academic thing so superbly well. Both the Aquinas Papers also reflect what I see as Kenelm's main preoccupation in all his scholarship and in all his writing, i.e. how the thinker and the artist are, or come to be, reconciled and integrated in a work of art and actually by means of it; 'thinker' here implies and includes the theologian and the Christian. All Kenelm's critical work circles round this problem, one in which he was himself engaged all his life, right to his choice of books at the end. His life-long interest as a critic was in poets, saints, artists in the widest sense, who were each in their own specific way dealing with this quest, that of 'the mind in love', Dante, Petrarch, St Thomas, St Catherine, Manzoni. This is what gives his critical work unity from first to last; all the time he was exploring and analysing this condition. His last book, *Petrarch, Poet and Humanist* (1984), especially in its final section, 'The Secretum', was a long-term, mature development of insights first put forward in his paper of 1949.

In all his critical work Kenelm had the rare capacity to reduce a complex mass of data and ideas to a basic and therefore memorable simplicity but without ever oversimplifying. In his address to the London Dominican Tertiaries, for instance, he singled out what he saw as St Catherine's two basic spiritual tenets, a witness, as he says, to 'her Dominican training: a clear, positive intellectual vision worked out unflinchingly in practice' (which might be said of Kenelm himself), seeing her as 'a great preacher'. These two basic principles, God's original creative act of love and then the re-creative loving act of the incarnation and the crucifixion, God's pouring out of being and God's pouring out of blood, were then further explored and illustrated from St Catherine's letters and her *Dialogue*. 'An unconscious poet, she thought with symbols', hence her 'outpourings' on the theme of the precious blood, 'and I suppose', Kenelm continues, 'her readers will always divide into those who find her indelicacy in this matter rather repulsive and those who find it (as I do) magnificent'. Kenelm's analysis seems simple enough, stated thus baldly; it was and still is something like a revelation to the tertiaries who were listening and had long been grappling with the elusiveness of their patron saint's writings, not helped, either, by flat translations. We were, of course, warmly encouraged to try reading her in the original Tuscan 'which should not be too difficult for anyone with a smattering of Italian', one of Kenelm's typical throw-away remarks. And here let it be said that Kenelm was a superb translator of St Catherine, indeed of all the incidental quotations, whether from Italian or Latin or French in his critical work, whether from prose or poetry. Translation is possibly one of the most demanding but also inconspicuous and therefore unsung tasks of a critic dealing with texts in a foreign language.

Discreetly but firmly, Kenelm also links St Catherine's special delight

in the idea of creation with Dante's arguments as he had explored them in the earlier London talk to the Aquinas Society. 'Whether Catherine ever read or heard read a line of Dante we cannot say', but this is 'quite unimportant', for isn't the emphasis precisely the same in them both? At the end of 'The Mind in Love' Kenelm sees the same insight into the same causal nexus of 'the causal returning to its cause', this being 'the focal point of all Dante's thought'. Here, however, he does concede a difference from the 'unconscious poet'; for Dante, the actual poet 'sees making—*poesis*—everywhere: and this idea guided his expression of the Christian mystery'. All the time, Dante was up against the limits of poetic expression in his attempt to give formal structure to his central insights, and this limit, this barrier, was perhaps the poet's most important battle. 'It came naturally to him to represent in its widest sweep and greatest complexity whatever he set himself to explore and express; and then to go for it like an athlete or a fighter. The *Paradiso* is a sustained attack on the inarticulate; a wrestling match, he calls it in the first canto, and in the twenty-third, a battle'.

There is a verbal echo here of T.S. Eliot's 'raid on the inarticulate' in 'East Coker', the central, and here too, a Dantean preoccupation. Could anyone, having heard of Kenelm's schoolboy prowess in boxing, and remembering, too, his pugnacious, often testy impatience with slipshod thinking, with inaccuracy of any kind, fail to associate Kenelm's own attitudes with this idea of a wrestling match proceeding with the seemingly inexpressible? It was his own main preoccupation, reflected, too, in his preaching, always worth listening to; but its success did depend rather on whether the wrestling match was still in progress and at length, or whether the outcome had already been decided and the results summarized, briefly, unforgettably, as so often in the course of a weekday Mass and before a small, known congregation. There were, for instance, his comments one morning not so long ago when he shared with us his thoughts about the risen Christ standing on the shore of the lake calling out to the men in the boat—and how well his voice carried across the water!—calling them 'pueri', *paidia*; well, the translators saw fit to put 'children' here, but of course that was all wrong, doesn't get it at all; he didn't mean *teknon* but something warm and friendly, much less condescending, more like 'jeunes gens', perhaps or 'giovani', and quite simply 'lads'; for after all, he too had been working quite hard in that early dawn light, preparing the sticks for the fire that was to broil their breakfast, their meal together, as friends, once they had taken his hint and had therefore actually managed to catch some fish, something to eat, to share ...

The last thing Kenelm had hoped to write, though he rather despaired of it in the end, was a short monograph on Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*. This was for a series on European masterpieces now being edited by a friend and former colleague, Professor Peter Stern. Peter was unhappy, as

we all were, about the much curtailed and therefore rather bleak obituary of Kenelm in *The Times* of 17 February. *The Times* did not publish the letter sent in to supplement this obituary but I'm happy that I have Peter's permission to quote from it here. He says of Kenelm, 'No-one who knew him could fail to remark on the unusual combination of nobility, severity and beauty in his features, on the shambolic state of his ordinary clothes (though not of his Dominican habit), and on the mixture of preciseness, diffidence and charm that informed his conversation. Kenelm Foster was a man of learning lightly and often ironically worn, and of great piety. I believe he served the community of his fellow friars selflessly and with humility, dividing his time between the scholarly pursuits you mention and pastoral duties in the chapel of his Order. Placing his great intellectual gifts and love of literature in the service of God must have involved him in choices he appeared to take serenely and with good grace, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, his favourite English poet. He will be missed by the members of his society, by his many friends in Cambridge, and by his colleagues in more than one university.'

Friend and Colleague

Uberto Limentani

Kenelm was appointed a Lecturer in Italian in the University of Cambridge from 1 October, 1948. Professor Vincent showed flair and imagination when he made this far from obvious choice for the post which had become vacant following the retirement of Miss K.T. Butler. He had been one of the two examiners of Kenelm's thesis on St Thomas and Dante, and was impressed by its quality. Kenelm had, I believe, some family connection with Italy and had spent some time there in the past, but he had had no formal training in Italian literature, apart from the deep knowledge of Dante he must have acquired while preparing his dissertation.

We were never formally introduced. After three years as Lector, I became an Assistant Lecturer on the same date on which Kenelm was appointed to a Lectureship, and a few days later, in the morning of 18 October, we bumped into each other in the Departmental Library, a