

DANTE AS A RELIGIOUS POET

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THE commonplace that Dante is a religious poet prompts one to ask what this compound term means; but for my purpose it suffices to define religion as an interior state of submissive attention to God, and poetry as an interior state of creative attention to things—that is, an attention which tends essentially to express experience as completely as possible in words. Religion, in this sense, is not necessarily Christianity, though Christianity presupposes it; still less is it the doctrine or the external observances of any given religion. Similarly poetry, in this sense, is not any particular poem or poems, though these all presuppose it. Both terms refer to interior states which may be found in *any* human soul. And as defined, these two states are clearly distinct. And the distinction is supported *a posteriori* by the fact that most religious people are not, except in remote potency, poets and that many poets are not, except in remote potency, religious. The two states, however, though distinct, are not incompatible and have in fact often been found together; but when this happens there is a certain overlapping of interests, causing tensions and problems varying with the circumstances and characters of the religious poets concerned. In Gerard Hopkins, for instance, the tension was between poetry and his priestly vocation; and there is no more tragic case known to us, because in no one else have the two gifts and capacities appeared at a greater intensity simultaneously. Dante's case is very different: if he felt this tension at all, he must have felt it less intensely; because for him there was no question of sacrificing poetry to religion, but (if anything) of sacrificing one sort of poetry (of secular inspiration) to another sort (of religious inspiration). Hence in Dante the conflict is much less direct and naked than in Hopkins. This is not of course to say that Hopkins is a greater religious poet than Dante; but only that his being a religious poet at all—as he fragmentarily but magnificently was—implied in the English Jesuit a tragic moral tension such as we do not find to the same degree in Dante.

Nevertheless in Dante too there was a certain tension between

the poet and the believer. The two sides of him drew gradually together, but not always easily or evenly. Moreover Dante's religion itself, transmitted as it is through the complex medium of medieval culture, is a difficult thing for us to assess or even to discern very clearly. Consider the part played in the *Divine Comedy* by scholastic science and philosophy, classical mythology and courtly love. These, the first two especially, so thickly interweave with the poet's religion that it is often hard to distinguish the latter from the former or to see how the former subserves the latter. Catholics in particular, tempted to assume that Dante's mentality is much the same as their own, should heed Mr Eliot's warning: 'the first step . . . is to recognize the difference between his form of thought and feeling and ours. Even to attach great importance to Thomism or to Catholicism may lead us astray, in attracting us too much to such differences as are capable of intellectual formulation. The . . . reader needs to remember that even had Dante not been a good Catholic, even had he treated Aristotle or Thomas with sceptical indifference, his mind would still be no easier to understand; the forms of imagination and sensibility would be just as strange to us.' Mr Eliot is writing (with slight exaggeration perhaps) for readers to whom Dante's Catholicism itself is an estranging factor; whereas for us it should be the reverse. Yet we too need the reminder that Dante thought and imagined—especially imagined—in ways which are no longer ours. To acquire a sense of this difference, one need only dip into the poet's minor works.

For Dante wrote a lot of verse besides the *Divine Comedy*, and of that body of minor verse the greater part is not religious, still less Christian, in the ordinary sense of the terms. It divides, according to subject-matter, into two main groups: erotic and philosophical. This is not however a sharp division, partly because when Dante wrote love-poems he tended, like most of his contemporaries, to write *about* love and so to digress towards philosophy, and partly because in his properly philosophical poems he often makes sexual love a symbol of intellectual aspirations—and here too he is in line with his age. Hence the erotic poetry tends towards philosophy, and the philosophical looks back to the erotic. The two ends of the scale might be represented by the fiercely erotic canzone *Così nel mio parlar* at one end and the strictly didactic *Le dolci rime d'amor* at the other.

Between these extremes eroticism either tends towards religious contemplation, as in the *Vita nuova*, or it is taken over by the philosophical reason and allegorised in the service of abstract ideas, as in the *Convivio*. Thus the sexual emotion either passes on spontaneously into contemplation of a woman seen as a *miracolo* radiant with 'divinity' (Beatrice in the *Vita nuova*) or it is exploited reflectively in the service of something else. In each of these trends Dante was both original and a man of his age; and if in the former, the trend of the *Vita nuova* from *eros* to *agape*, he was more definitely an innovator, in the latter trend also his personality was vigorously engaged. But in this latter philosophical trend what counts is the organization of poems 'around certain intellectual insights, rather than the use of particular symbols or the particular use of symbols known as allegory. Allegory was of course a stock medieval device. Dante adopted it as a matter of course as soon as he began to experiment with doctrinal verse after the death of Beatrice; and philosophy (his new love) he naturally represented as a woman. This allegory was not original, and Dante did not let it much encumber him. He passed on freely, first to purely dialectical verse without allegory, and then, after one last effort in pure allegory, the superb canzone *Tre Donne*, to the *Comedy*. And the *Comedy*, while it contains pure allegory, is not properly an allegorical poem: it might be described as a poetic imitation of the concrete historical universe, charged with the poet's sense of the terror and the beauty of God.

The concrete universe, the terror and beauty of God—these interwoven themes are elaborated in the *Comedy* by the mind which had developed through the minor poems in the two ways already indicated: the way from erotic love to the worship of Beatrice; and the way of the rational discipline of scholastic philosophy and natural science. The two ways had been linked at first, not very securely, by the device of allegory; but in the *Comedy*, while allegory is not discarded, it is transformed by a huge shift towards the real historical universe as this had come home to the poet through his personal and political experiences and through his reading of history, chiefly Roman and biblical, in the light of the Christian revelation. And this shift to the concrete has two main effects: it fills the *Comedy* with real people, instead of allegorical fictions, in a real world of space and

time; and secondly, it makes the poem, in effect, a poetic Christian microcosm, in such wise that its chief personage is the individual Dante and all mankind, and Virgil is Virgil and the Gentile preparation for the Gospel, and Beatrice is Beatrice and a symbol of Christian wisdom, and even, in the great scene in the Earthly Paradise, an image of Christ himself.

So much in general. Now, looking more closely, I distinguish in the spiritual structure of the *Comedy* three aspects or moments: of innocence, of moral criticism, of intellectual discovery. These are not separate departments of the poem; each may appear in any part of it, but now one, now the other is more visible.

Innocence. I use this term rather—though not exactly—as M. Maritain has used it in a recent essay on Dante to denote something hardly distinct from the poetic genius itself: a capacity for pure receptive attention to and belief in the world revealed by the senses, a wondering expectant awareness prior to reasoning and calculation, almost prior to consciousness. In the *Comedy* it is felt as a strain of pure delight or nostalgic longing; and particularly in the early cantos of the *Purgatorio*, beginning with that wonderful entry into the new world of innocence restored, between the sea and the stars before daybreak:

'Lo bel pianeta che d'amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l'oriente,
velando i Pesci ch'erano in sua scorta.
Io mi volsi a man destra, e puosi mente
a l'altro polo, e vidi quattro stelle
non viste mai fuor ch' a la prima gente.
Goder pareva il ciel di lor fiammelle.'¹

It is a restoration of man and nature at once, but felt first in the recovered beauty of earth and sea and sky; all translucent and precious, as though newly created:

'L'alba vinceva l'ora mattutina
che fuggia inanzi, si che di lontano
conobbi il tremolar dela marina'.²

Now this innocent in-breathing of the natural world is already,

1. *Purg.* I, 19-25: 'The fair planet that inspires love was making the whole east laugh, veiling the Fishes that followed her. I turned to the right and gazed at the other pole, and I saw four stars never seen before save by the first people. The sky seemed to rejoice to their flames'...

2. *Purg.* I, 115-7: 'Dawn was vanquishing the morning breeze that fled before her, so that far off I knew the trembling of the sea.'

for Dante, religious. It is spiritually a return to childhood, and the child, he had explained in the *Convivio*, desires God unconsciously in and through all things. There is an original orientation towards God, which the adult may ignore but cannot destroy. Here it is at the literal start of life:

‘Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia
prima che sia, in guisa di fanciulla
che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
l’anima semplicetta che sa nulla,
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
volentier torna a cio che la trastulla.’³

And here as our permanent condition:

‘Ciascun confusamente un bene apprende
nel qual si queti l’animo, e desidera;
per che di giugner lui ciascun contende’.⁴

Moral Criticism. The ‘moment’ of innocence in Dante is easily linked with that of moral criticism, but one who had read only the earlier love poems or the *Vita nuova* would be hardly prepared for the violence of this second moment in the *Comedy*—in the *Inferno* especially, but intermittently in the *Purgatorio*, and in the terrific invectives of the *Paradiso*. Here man is the Poet’s object, not nature; particularly man in society and as answerable to justice. An obsession with justice is indeed Dante’s mark as a moralist; reaching back to a deep, innocent reverence for natural reason and forward to a humble reverence for the charity of the saints. Dante was not a saint but a man of the world whom the world had injured; and in the *Comedy* he hits back. And his first weapon, particularly in the *Inferno*, is reason, with reason’s standard of natural virtue. Later he will appeal increasingly to higher standards and examples; but for all his audacity, he is in no hurry. He starts on the human level. There is no escaping the noble simplicity of those words of his Ulysses:

‘Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza’.⁵

3. *Purg.* XVI, 85–90: ‘Issues from the hands of him who loves her before she exists, like a child that plays and laughs and weeps, the little simple soul; knowing nothing save that, come from a glad maker, she gladly turns to all that pleases her.’

4. *Purg.* XVII, 127–9: ‘Everyone vaguely apprehends a good as term of the soul’s desire; and therefore strives to reach it.’

5. *Inf.* XXVI, 118–20: ‘Consider the seed whence you spring: you were not born to live as the beasts, but to follow virtue and knowledge.’

This is said to everybody: to Francesca, to the Florentine thieves and the brothel-keepers of Bologna, to his beloved Brunetto, to the damned Popes themselves in that astonishing canto XIX, where a layman plays the confessor to the great priests wriggling head downwards in the rock. Then as we climb the Mountain, and as the hidden presence of Christ begins to be felt in allusions to Mary and the Gospels, the perfection appealed to becomes more distinctly Christian, until in the *Paradiso* the saints themselves are the poet's witnesses to God's love and man's refusal to love. For the *Paradiso* insists, terribly and one-sidedly, on Christendom's rejection of the example of Christ: on the clergy's sin in particular and the Papacy's above all. Dante's severity with Popes was not limited to putting some of them in Hell. His most scathing and sustained attacks on the Curia are in the *Paradiso* and reach their climax with St Peter's invective in canto XXVII. There need be no question of the poet's orthodoxy in this connection. We should remember, first, that medieval Christians were outspoken; then, that Dante was a satirist of genius; and then, that the time-context of his satire was the critical turning point of the middle ages, the moment of Boniface VIII, of the layman's advance to intellectual and political independence, of the turbulent reforming evangelism which followed in the wake of St Francis's recall to the poverty of Christ. St Francis, with St Peter, was probably Dante's favourite saint. And Dante's standard for the Church was the earthly life of our Lord: 'forma Ecclesiae', he said in the *Monarchia*, 'nihil aliud est quam vita Christi, tam in dictis quam in factis comprehensa: vita enim ipsius ydea fuit et exemplar militantis Ecclesiae, praesertim pastorum, maxime summi cuius est pascere agnos et oves'.⁶ It was precisely as a Catholic, as 'the least of the sheep of Christ's flock', that Dante (whether rightly or wrongly is not the question here) claimed the right to speak his mind to the Church's rulers on behalf of the Church, of the

'. . . templo
che si murò di segni e di martiri.'⁷

And how easily the invective turns into prayer to the saints:

6. *Mon.* III, 15: 'The form of the Church is simply the life of Christ, considered both in what he said and what he did. For his life was the idea and model for the Church militant, and especially for the bishops and more particularly for the supreme pontiff whose task it is to feed the lambs and the sheep.'

7. *Par.* XVIII, 122-3: '... the temple which was built up with miracles and martyrdoms'.

'O milizia del ciel ch' io contemplo
adora per color che sono in terra,
tutti sviati dietro al malo esemplo!' ⁸

Or directly to God:

'O trina luce che 'n unica stella
scintillando a lor vista sì gli appaga,
guarda qua giuso a la nostra procella!' ⁹

Intellectual discovery. The mention of the Trinity brings us to Dante's religious intellectualism: for to this great intellectual all the mind's questions implied one thirst for the one divine answer which that dogma adumbrates,

'La sete natural che mai non sazia
se non con l'acqua onde la femminetta
samaritana dimandò la grazia'. . . ¹⁰

Calling Dante an intellectual, I mean that he placed the end of life in an act of knowledge; and he pursues this end through three characteristic tendencies: distinguishing; integrating; aspiring to the absolute. Let us take these in turn.

The pattern of the *Comedy* depends on a multitude of firm and subtle distinctions; hence, under the rather bewildering surface, its deep clarity. But the poet was a trained scholastic, and only in scale and degree is this conceptual finesse remarkable. More unusual is the combination in Dante of such rational precision with a great imagination and exquisite sensibility. His poetry, at its best, is poised between extremely strong divergent forces; and this, apart from superb literary craftsmanship, depends on the poet's acute sense of the degrees of knowledge. It is Dante's precision in grading spiritual experiences which enables him, at any stage on his way to God, at once to wring the last drop of meaning out of the actual situation and to suggest its falling short of a final and as yet unattained experience. In this way the natural order and all that it contains is both enhanced to the utmost and at the same time viewed as a sign of something infinitely greater. The process might be studied in Virgil's discourses in *Purgatorio* XVII-XVIII on the moral order of the cosmos and free-will; and the noble

8. *Par.* XVIII, 124-6: 'O hosts of heaven whom I contemplate, pray for those who are on earth, all led astray by bad example!'

9. *Par.* XXI, 28-30: 'O threefold Light which, sparkling in their sight, dost so content them, look down upon our storm!'

10. *Purg.* XXI, 1-3: 'The natural thirst which is never slaked, except with the water which the Samaritan woman asked for.'

precision of these great lines both enhances and is spiritually deepened by the sad implicit acknowledgment of Virgil's human limitations with which they conclude. It is humanism's last word:

'La nobile virtù Beatrice intende
per lo libero arbitrio, e però guarda
che l'abbi a mente, s' a parlar ten prende.'¹¹

This example serves also to show that Dante's analytical finesse is integrated in a vision of being as a whole. He knows being's mysterious variety-in-unity. This one feels especially perhaps in the heroic creations of the *Inferno*; in Ulysses above all, and in Farinata. One feels it in Virgil's rapid mapping of Hell in canto XI. It is a generosity of spirit, a zest for total reality. Allowed a little more freedom indeed, its force would have unbalanced the *Inferno* with an excess of pure artistic creativity. But its relevance here is the sense it connotes of the enormous complexity of the real, which in turn becomes awe at the unspeakable majesty of God,

. . . 'Colui che volse il sesto
a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso
distinse tanto occulto e manifesto . . .'¹²

For the poet's scholastic lucidity did not preclude a sense of mystery. The order he saw in reality was itself mysterious—both because it stretched his mind to the limit, and because it presented his mind with baffling and fascinating oppositions which in a way prepared him to salute the Christian paradox itself, at the climax of the poem:

'Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura'. . .¹³

And finally, the aspiration to the absolute. This proceeds by degrees; there are no short cuts in the *Comedy*. It is all, to the end of the *Purgatorio*, a moving towards, and then a moving with and into a divine-human radiance, the principal focus of which, until almost the end of the *Paradiso*, is Beatrice. Now Beatrice is neither simply a sublimation of sexual desire nor an allegorical abstraction. She has something of both these things, but she *is* neither of them.

11. *Purg.* XVIII, 73-5: 'This noble power is what Beatrice means by free-will: therefore see that you have it in mind, if she happens to speak of it.'

12. *Par.* XIX, 40-2: '. . . He who turned the compass round the limits of the Universe, marking out within it so much that is hidden, so much that is known.'

13. *Par.* XXXIII, 1-2: 'Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son, lowly and exalted above all creatures . . .'

There is only a slight exaggeration in M. Maritain's remark: 'Beatrice is never a symbol or an allegory for Dante. She is both herself and what she signifies.'¹⁴ And if one has to define Beatrice, one must start from the premiss that the Beatrician 'idea' in the poem is essentially relative: the relations going two ways, to Christ on the one hand, to Dante on the other. It would be false to say simply that she is to Dante as Christ is to mankind; for she does not replace Christ, she reflects and transmits him. In the world of the poet, in that interchange of private experience and universal symbol which we share through Dante's imagination, Beatrice is the medium through which Dante receives Christ; a medium as unique as his personality. She is 'quella che imparadisa la mia mente'; but all this 'imparadising' of his mind is an in-Christing of it through the medium and under the guidance of Beatrice. He says incredible things to her, she is not shy with him: 'Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io!' But this is only that he may see Christ the better; and may learn to obey her Christward command:

'. . . Volgiti ed ascolta;
chè non pur ne' miei occhi è paradiso.'¹⁵

In truth, Dante has been the victim of what, from one point of view, is his audacity, and from another is his extraordinary religious tact—his sense of the *degrees* through which God must be attained. Short-sighted readers, peering at the *Paradiso*, have almost failed to see God in it at all—except of course in the final canto where the poet is obviously beyond all intermediaries. And yet God, the Triune God of revelation, penetrates the *Paradiso* at every point, from its majestic opening,

'La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l'universo penetra e risplende'. . .¹⁶

to the serenely soaring close,

'l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle'.

If poetry cannot have God (in some sense) for its subject-matter, then we may as well admit that this poem is a failure: some enchanting lyrics insecurely attached to a dry theological structure, as Croce maintained. But if, as I think, the *Paradiso* is not a failure, this must be because Dante, aspiring to the absolute,

14. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, London, 1954, p. 371.

15. *Par.* XVIII, 20-1: 'Turn and listen; for Paradise is not only in my eyes.'

16. *Par.* I, 1-2: 'The All-Mover's glory penetrates and glows through the Universe.'

apprehended it so vividly in created analogies that this apprehension became one with his sense of his own existence and his primitive delight in life and hunger for perfect life. God is his theme *and* his experience. Not that Dante *really* saw God face to face, as though the fiction of the thirty-third canto were a literal statement of fact; but he saw, it would seem, the radiance of his own contemplative mind as a mirror of the deity; and in the *Paradiso*, especially in the last cantos, that radiance possessed him. And this being possessed by light in himself was not a being enclosed in himself; anything but that: it was a being moved onwards, an in-godding, as he called it, a mounting into 'l'alta luce che da se è vera', a being transformed into

'luce intellettual piena d'amore,
 amor del vero ben pien di letizia,
 letizia che trascende ogni dolzore'.¹⁷

So, at any rate, Dante believed. Is the irony of Baudelaire the only possible comment: 'La grande poésie est essentiellement bête; elle croit, et c'est ce qui fait sa gloire et sa force'?

17. *Par.* XXX, 40-2: 'Intellectual light full of love, love of the true good full of joy, joy that surpasses all sweetness.'