

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

gloomy and not much frequented room now occupied by University offices on the top floor at the back of the Old Schools, facing Clare College. I vividly remember that the first thing he said after a few words of introduction was a defensive and characteristically modest 'I don't know any Italian'. We must have felt a liking for each other from the beginning. Five days later he came to the house my wife and I rented in the Hills Road area for what was meant to be a brief afternoon visit and to meet my wife, and stayed till late in the evening.

If it was true that in 1948 his knowledge of the Italian language was not as good as it might have been, he made it his business to improve it with typical thoroughness. He took lessons from the new Lector (he even acquired some inflections of his speech which he never got rid of), read widely in the field of modern narrative, mixed with Italians as much as he could and spent long periods in Italy during the vacations. He probably would have disclaimed having become proficient, but in fact he acquired an intimate knowledge of the language. His exceptional feeling for languages gradually enabled him to master Italian in all its nuances in a way which is rare in one who is not a native of that country. I remember that when he was invited to give a lecture on 'Dante e San Tommaso' at the Casa di Dante in Rome in 1974 he wrote it in Italian and asked me to read it through for any possible linguistic improvements. There were only a handful of minor suggestions I could offer, and I was struck by the elegance and fluency of his Italian and by the richness of his vocabulary.

Of course, the main weight of Dante teaching (the most popular subject in the Department) fell on Kenelm from the beginning, but he quickly widened his interests, and not only in the area of 13th and 14th century literature. Two major writers of the early 19th century—Manzoni and Leopardi—had a special attraction for him, and his abiding love for their works was shown quite early in his career in the form of University teaching and even of a public lecture given in London. He was, of course, an avid reader of poetry and this took him into directions which are slightly unexpected in a medieval scholar. He felt the fascination exercised by the greatest Italian poet of the past fifty years, Eugenio Montale, and gave several courses of lectures on his works. His broadmindedness and critical judgment were also much in evidence in his constant readings of modern narrative. Many years ago, when Moravia's early novels still seemed to hold out a promise of greater things to come, he told me that he responded to their qualities. In subsequent years many were the occasions when he suggested books for my reading; for instance, he enthusiastically recommended Italo Calvino's collected short stories. They did, of course, come up to the expectations he had aroused.

His curiosity and eagerness to learn often led him into even more

unexpected directions. Some years ago I met him in the street reading while he walked, as he was accustomed to do, in a fashion that reminded me of Manzoni's description of Don Abbondio at the beginning of *I Promessi Sposi*. When I stopped him I discovered that the book he had in his hands was *Don Quixote* in Spanish. At other times it might have been a devotional work or *Il Corriere della Sera*.

Professor Vincent retired from the Chair of Italian in 1962. By then he could justifiably point to his own foresight in selecting for a University post a man who had established himself as a leading scholar in the field of Dante studies. After I succeeded Vincent my collaboration with Kenelm became even closer. He was an ideal colleague, invariably scrupulous in the performance of his duties, regardless of what other demands the religious house to which he belonged might make on his time and energy. He was always willing to shoulder any task one might ask him to perform, such as new courses of lectures, examining, acting as Deputy Head of the Department or supervising research students. On one occasion he volunteered to stand in for a lecturer who had been taken ill on the eve of her *Lectura Dantis* and gave an informed and well constructed reading of a Canto on which he had never previously thought of offering a commentary in public. Long before, in 1965, he delivered a memorable lecture on 'Religion and Philosophy in Dante' as part of the series organized in Cambridge for the centenary of Dante's birth. Then, from 1969 onwards came his highly original and illuminating *Lecturae Dantis* in the various series which were given in Cambridge. He took immense pains in their preparation and the loyal audience which attended these lectures year after year came to expect the high standard Kenelm achieved (most of the lectures were subsequently published in specialized journals). It came also to relish Kenelm's mannerisms, the asides he could not resist inserting on the spur of the moment, the long pauses followed by fascinating remarks on what had occurred to him during those twenty or thirty seconds of silence and concentration.

Others will adequately illustrate Kenelm's contribution to Dante studies, from *God's Tree* (1957), an early and slighter collection of essays on Dante and other topics, to the more substantial collection, *The Two Dantes* (1977), which marks the full maturity of a great scholar. In between, together with a number of articles scattered in several British and American journals, stands the important edition of Dante's lyric poems (1967), undertaken in collaboration with Patrick Boyde: two volumes containing texts and translations, as well as a commentary so full and instructive as to satisfy the needs of the most demanding reader: a commentary, in fact, which ranks as one of the milestones in the last two or three decades of Dante scholarship. I will confine myself to remarking that most of the British scholars whose main interest is in

Dante are indebted, one way or another, to Kenelm's teaching; and that when Bruno Nardi, the distinguished medieval philosopher, died, the editors of the great *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, which was then being prepared, turned to Kenelm for the articles previously entrusted to him. They were some of the most substantial and important ones in the whole encyclopedia. The article on 'San Tommaso' alone is a major contribution to scholarship and is equivalent in length to a small volume. Other articles, such as 'Cristo' and 'Dio', are likewise authoritative and exhaustive treatments of their respective subjects. I remember the general editor of the *Enciclopedia* telling me at the time that no one as well qualified as Kenelm could possibly be found to write them. He was, indeed, endowed with unique qualifications. His masterly knowledge of medieval theology and philosophy went together with a strong feeling for literature, and particularly for poetry—a rare blend of abilities, achievements and natural gifts. Thus, it may not be surprising that Kenelm, whose expertise lay more in the field of literature than of language teaching, should have been keen to undertake year after year an undergraduate course of translation from Italian into English, which, incidentally, takes time to prepare, not least because of the number of scripts to be read and marked each week. That intimate knowledge of Italian and that highly developed taste for English style to which I have already referred made him exceptionally well equipped for what is really a difficult task.

He retired as a University teacher in 1978; but five years before he had the satisfaction of being appointed to a Readership—a great distinction in Cambridge, where only a handful of these coveted posts are awarded each year, and a distinction he had not sought. Of course, he worked as hard in retirement as he had previously done. His monograph on Petrarch was the most conspicuous fruit of his labours and the result of a vast amount of reading and much thought. But he looked constantly to the future, rather than to past achievements. No sooner was the book on Petrarch finished than he undertook another monograph on a favourite subject—Manzoni's novel, *I Promessi Sposi*. When he started working on it he told me that it would only be a matter of a few months before it was written: he had it all in his head. I had my doubts. I knew his 'incontentabilità', his need to go as near to perfection as possible, and I guessed that he would start reading more and more widely on the subject, and that he would formulate and re-formulate his thoughts. And he would repeatedly go over what he had written, for he was as severe and acute a critic of his own writings as he was of those of others (including, incidentally, the essays of Tripos candidates!).

The last few years brought us closer and closer to each other. I asked him to conduct the funeral service when I lost my wife two years ago and from that day he showed, if possible, even more affection—I would

almost say, tenderness. He used to send me postcards whenever he went abroad, addressing me as 'caro'; he invited me to lunch at Blackfriars on his last two birthdays; and above all, he lavished unstinting help when I was preparing for the press my little book on Dante at a time when he was heavily involved in the final stages of his Petrarch volume.

When I was privileged to go to Blackfriars on 26 December, 1985, for his 75th birthday, he spoke to me at length on how his thoughts on Manzoni were shaping. In the previous months the life and work of this writer had occupied his mind. And he was already looking beyond the projected book: his next subject was to be Manzoni *and* Leopardi. Meanwhile, he was due to deliver his *Lectura Dantis* in the 1986 series on 3rd February. He had prepared it in the course of the previous summer (it was to be Canto XIII of the *Paradiso*). Three days before his lecture, on 31 January, he saw me in Bene't Street and called out. He had looked frail ever since I knew him, but this time he looked frailer still. It was a cold day with a biting wind, and I exhorted him to look after himself, especially in the winter. 'It's harsh', he remarked, 'it's harsh'. I had arranged to drive him to Mill Lane for his lecture. It was not to be. On that same Monday he was taken to hospital, ill with pneumonia, and his *Lectura Dantis* was read by Patrick Boyde, who succeeded in making Kenelm's presence felt by the audience. There was a larger public than usual in the lecture-room and the applause at the end was not only in appreciation of a learned and penetrating elucidation of a difficult Canto, but also a sign of affection for the scholar who had written it.

On Wednesday, 5 February, I visited him in hospital. He was in a small room, alone except for frequent visitors. His emaciated looks told me what toll the illness had already taken of his strength. At times he was so short of breath that he had difficulty in speaking; but he was obviously pleased to see me and his mind was as lucid, his thoughts as original, as they had ever been. He had the collected poems of T.S. Eliot on his bed and spoke to me about them, about Canto XIII of the *Paradiso*, about Manzoni, and never said a word about himself or his illness. He fell asleep in the evening of the same day and did not wake again. The end came early in the next morning, 6 February, 1986.