

# The Idea of Christian Poetry

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In the autumn of 1958 the columns of *Blackfriars*, normally reserved, as we know for polite murmurings of theological disagreement, resounded with literary controversy. In the September issue, in an article on 'Morals and the Novel', Bernard Bergonzi published some interesting, if inconclusive, reflections on the relation between a Catholic view of certain (principally sexual) moral matters and the presentation of those matters in works of literature, particularly novels. Unwisely, perhaps, he supplied the want of a conclusion with a quotation from Newman's *Idea of a University*: 'from the nature of the case if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian Literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of sinful man.' Unwisely, certainly, Bergonzi decided to begin his reflections with the case of Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno*, Canto 5), whom he was persuaded 'Dante would surely have liked to forgive... were they not already damned'. These opening and closing tropes attracted the characteristically circumspect but uncomfortably firm analytical attention of Kenelm Foster in a letter to the Editor. Bergonzi was convicted of failing to distinguish between Dante-as-poet and Dante-as-protagonist-of-the-poem, and Newman was shown either not to have said what he meant, or to have begged the question. The question, Kenelm then believed, was this: 'can the subject-matter of literature—which, *concedo*, is sinful man—ever be treated, *in-formed*, in a way that may appropriately be called Christian?' The empirical evidence was that it could: the description of Dante, Langland, Hopkins or Bernanos as Christian writers was a description 'that makes sense with respect to them as *writers*—to the way they handle their material (sinful man), to them as producers of literature, in short'.

In his reply, published alongside the remaining stages in the controversy in the December *Blackfriars*, Bergonzi effectively conceded both these points but raised a new objection to the term 'Christian literature': its 'parochialism'. 'If literature—whether apparently Christian or not—is good as literature, then its goodness must come from God, and one need not look for further discriminations'. Kenelm however would not let go (*did he ever?*). His reply to Bergonzi's reply penetrated to what he himself called the crucial question—and perhaps he meant us to understand that that was the question of the Cross. The question was not—not at any serious level—whether a writer had to

connive at sin in order to depict it. For the human reality which is a writer's material consists not only, in the Christian view, of sinfulness but also of 'the appeal and promptings and pressure of grace, i.e. of Christ'. So the *real* question is this: 'can a writer be led, "by faith working through love", so far into his sin-affected material as to handle it with a truthfulness which would not be wholly inadequate to the *total* reality of man which Christianity reveals?' Christian literature is a possibility only in so far as the description *both* of sin *and* of grace is a possibility. The question about Christian literature is a question about Christ. Bergonzi's reference of the goodness of literature to God is theologically inadequate, 'for the world, now, is not just God's world, it is Christ's. And we are Christ's, whether we are artists or critics or anything else. And the whole question now is, what is the reach or scope of our intelligence and sensibilities precisely as governed by Christ?'. Bergonzi, given the last word by the editor, returned, essentially, to the charge of 'parochialism'. His concluding concession presents itself as a *reductio ad absurdum*: 'I will indeed admit the possibility of a Christian literature if it may include *King Lear* and *The Golden Bowl* as well as the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. But I am reluctant to divide the unity of literature as a subject by the application of criteria which, considered in terms of the subject, are secondary'.

The unity of literature seems less certain, and less certainly primary, now than it did in 1958. Nonetheless it is perhaps worth taking up that challenge and asking whether Kenelm's formulation of 'the crucial question' does not indeed require that the term 'Christian literature' should apply to more than the 'overtly Christian' writers, as Bergonzi called them, to whom—evidently for the sake of convenience in argument—Kenelm had restricted it, and whether the formulation does not also suggest a particularly precise sense in which even those writers may be said, as *writers*, to deserve the name of 'Christian'. It is worth asking what was the meaning of the term 'Christian poet' when T.S. Eliot, undoubtedly one of the pre-eminent influences on Kenelm's intellectual milieu, remarked:<sup>1</sup> 'Vaughan, or Southwell, or George Herbert ... are not great religious poets in the sense in which Dante, or Corneille, or Racine, even in those of their plays which do not touch upon Christian themes, are great Christian religious poets. Or even in the sense in which Villon and Baudelaire, with all their imperfections and delinquencies, are Christian poets'. I shall restrict the discussion to poetry, including dramatic poetry, mainly because it was above all with the problems of Christian *poetry* that Kenelm wrestled throughout his intellectual career.

As early as 1944 Kenelm was translating Jacques Maritain on 'Poetic Knowledge' for *Blackfriars*, and the essays of the period 1945—1957 which were collected in *God's Tree* touch on the issue several

times: most obviously 'Dante as a Christian Poet' and 'Claudel and Dante on Trial'. 'Michelangelo's Failure' (*Blackfriars*, 1963) renewed the all-important distinctions of the controversy with Bergonzi and found evidence in the artist's last sonnets that 'the images'—the painted and sculpted images of the human form—'were failing in which he had thought to find God, until none was left but Christ'. By contrast, C.P. Snow's 'Two Cultures' lecture provoked a defence of the freedom of poetry, 'Snow against the Poets' (*Blackfriars*, 1964), which showed that for Kenelm, the literary critic, the idea of Christian poetry was genuinely, and necessarily, problematic: poetry has 'a certain "strangeness" ... with respect to the interests proper to the moralist or the statesman'. Yet the Christianity of a Manzoni, he affirmed in his British Academy Italian Lecture of 1967 ('The Idea of Truth in Manzoni and Leopardi'), required 'an exploration, both rational and poetic, of ... the relation between history and morality'. Apart from the controversy with Bergonzi and the essays in *God's Tree*, Kenelm's most explicit discussion of the problem was the typically dense and suggestive 'The Pope and Poetry', a four-page account in *Dante Studies* (vol. 87, 1969) of Pope Paul VI's *motu proprio* on Dante, *Altissimi cantus*<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless the problem runs through the major work of his last years, underlying the preoccupation, both in *The Two Dantes* and in *Petrarch: Poet and Humanist*, with the status that these Christians accorded in their poetry to pagan virtue.<sup>3</sup> The book on Petrarch indeed looks back to the essay "'Christ and Letters": the religion of the early Humanist' (*Blackfriars*, 1963) in asserting the Christian impetus behind early Humanism and so drawing together the two clerky poets in whom, time and again, Kenelm saw reflected his own joint concern with Christianity and literature—Petrarch and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The last public talk (rather than lecture or sermon) that Kenelm gave at Blackfriars, Cambridge, in December 1985, was entitled 'Christmas and the Poets'.<sup>4</sup>

It was, I suppose, what you would call a 'typically Kenelm' occasion. His original scheme, preserved on a scrap of paper, was lucid enough: 'Virgil, Dante, Herbert/Vaughan, (Hopkins), Eliot, Hill'—many of us might have come up with a similar list, though probably few would have thought of starting with Virgil. But the original clear outline, a selection of devotional poems on a seasonal theme, disappeared beneath the subsequent growth of elaboration and digression. Moreover, the elaborations were premeditated, as was apparent, not from Kenelm's delivery, but from the large number of personally typed hand-out sheets that he produced at the start of the evening, as if he had been preparing a lecture. Kenelm had sighted a theological theme and in his pursuit of that the obvious appeals of devotion, or even of overt reference to the feast that was the occasion for the talk, were discarded—out went Herbert, Hill, G.K. Chesterton's

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'The Nativity'. Not that we were told in so many words why this shy and hesitant voice was taking us through the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the versification of various medieval sequences, the vocabulary of the first passus of *Piers Plowman* and a poem by Alice Meynell. Only later reflection revealed that the common factor was the Incarnation and the Motherhood of Mary. But even later reflection might have been puzzled at being asked to start with Virgil's Fourth Eclogue and to finish with Rimbaud's *Les Effarés*, a poem about a group of urchins looking into a bakery at night.

But is this not the key question, posed, if not in the most adequate terms, by Bergonzi? Not: what is the literary status of works with 'overtly Christian' themes? But: what is the Christian status of works which do not, or in the case of pre-Christian literature, cannot have such themes? How do they—how do Virgil, and *King Lear*, and *Les Effarés*—contribute to the building up of the body of Christ? This is why Kenelm began with the Fourth Eclogue, and not simply with the famous prophecy of the child to be born in the returning Golden Age but with a line whose human truth meant so much to him that he more than once incorporated it into sermons on the humanity of Jesus and the motherhood of Mary:

Incipe, parve puer, ridens cognoscere matrem<sup>5</sup>.

For it was this poem that occasioned Dante's own discussion of our question in Canto 22 of the *Purgatorio*. There the poet Statius, whose importance as a model to Dante was second only to Virgil's but whom Dante believed to have been, unlike Virgil, a Christian, explains that to Virgil he owes both the inspiration which made him a poet and (through the Fourth Eclogue) that which made him a believer in the Gospel:

Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano (1.73)

(Through you was I a poet, through you a Christian)

Quoting this line in the hand-out for his talk, Kenelm printed it in capital letters. It was the line on which all hinged, the line which expressed the inseparability of Christmas and the Poets, even the poets who say nothing explicitly of the Christian revelation.

Of course Dante is not saying, and Kenelm was not implying that he is saying, that the works of 'the Poets'—be they Virgil or Dante, Shakespeare or Rimbaud—are an alternative body of Scripture, out of which may be read an alternative Revelation. Unlike the word of God, the word of Man lacks a certain irreducible authority and is dependent for its effect on the needs, and indeed the pre-existing illumination, of the reader. Already in ll. 37–42 of the canto Statius has shown how for his moral recovery—as distinct from his spiritual redemption—he has to thank a passage in the *Aeneid* in which he read the meaning appropriate to his circumstances, rather than that intended by Virgil. And in the decisive matter of his religious conversion, Statius first heard the good

news from Christian ‘heralds’ and only then did he learn to interpret Virgil’s words as consonant with their preaching (ll. 76–81). Only he who is already a Christian can see, and be fired by, the Christian meaning of pagan literature. But for the Christian even the merely human significance of that literature requires to be situated in a Christian perspective and that task is precisely, yet generously, fulfilled in a whole series of cantos of the *Purgatorio*, 22 to 28.

For these cantos, which take us through the cornices of misdirected love, Avarice (and Prodigality), Gluttony and Lust, and up to the Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, are peopled largely by poets. In the company of the pre-Christian Virgil and the proto-Christian Statius Dante is confronted with his own poetic genealogy, from the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel (canto 26), through the earlier Italian schools of Bongiunta (canto 24) and Guido Guinicelli (canto 26), to Dante’s sonnet-writing friend Forese Donati (canto 23). This concentration on literary figures is unparalleled elsewhere in the *Comedy*, and the distribution of poets throughout Dante’s three kingdoms may explain why. We meet, I believe, no poets lower in Hell than Brunetto Latini in the circle of the Sodomites (Bertran de Born, in canto 28, being presented and punished simply as a sower of discord), nor higher in Heaven than the troubadour Foulquet of Marseilles in the heaven of Venus. Poets as moral agents, it would seem, penetrate on the whole neither to the depths of ‘Fraud’ nor to the unspotted reflection of divine love. They have rather an affinity—perhaps their art has an affinity—with what is centrally and essentially human, with the perfection of human nature and (as Bergonzi’s novelists show) with that human love which, precisely as it approaches the point of its distinction from and transition into divine love, is most clearly in danger of deviating from its proper object. Thus we find them clustered round the gate of the Earthly Paradise, the place of the natural human perfection in which Adam was created, and purging the sins of a misdirected attachment to created things. While the eternal fate of the poet, as a moral agent, is determined by a response to divine grace which may not at all form the subject-matter of his art, his art itself, being as natural to all men as their mother-tongue, tends of its own accord, and regardless of the Christianity or otherwise of the artist, towards the representation of the perfection in which human nature was originally constituted. And so, immediately before Virgil leaves Dante and he is handed over to Beatrice, who is the particular aspect borne by divine grace in his individual life, Dante is assured that even as far as this, as far as the Earthly Paradise (though no farther), the ancient, pre-Christian, poets reached in their imaginings (canto 28, ll. 139–141).

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But in respect of Kenelm's original question, it now looks as if we have reached something of an impasse. A specifically Christian significance *can* be derived from non-Christian literature, but only, it would seem, by an act of hermeneutical prestidigitation on the part of the already Christian reader. The human significance in non-Christian literature which non-Christian authors and Christian readers alike can recognise reaches, however, only as far as Man's natural perfection—while the perfection rendered possible in Man by the grace which has redeemed him from sin, for Kenelm the essential component in Christian literature, *that* cannot be unforcedly read out of a literature that does not know the name of Christ. To some extent it is obvious that this must be the case. But if it and nothing else is the case, then to extend the term 'Christian poetry' to cover, for example, *King Lear*, or *Les Fleurs du Mal* or *Les Effarés*, is either wrong or unhelpful, for it is being asserted either that these works tell us about the specific operation of the grace of Christ (which they do not appear to) or that they tell us simply about Man's natural condition (which is, or should be, equally interesting to Christians and non-Christians alike). But may it not be that it *is* possible for poetry to speak of redeeming grace—that is, of Christ—without knowing that it does so? The example of Dante can help us out of our impasse, provided we make two distinctions.

The first is a distinction between the kind of poetry written by Dante and the kind attributed by him to the ancient, non-Christian poets. The truth expressed by that ancient poetry encompassed, at its furthest margins, the Earthly Paradise. But the Earthly Paradise, we should remember, though made for Adam and Eve, has since their fall had no human inhabitants. Dante and Beatrice meet there before passing up into Heaven, but otherwise this perfect garden is peopled only by allegories. There are no souls here to recall their former lives or to comment on events in Dante's milieu. It has all the charm of the world's first morning but it has remained unchanged ever since and is essentially timeless. The highest truth that non-Christian poetry can represent, then, is an ideal that lies outside history and has in a sense no reference to human beings as, since the Fall, they have actually been. The character of Dante's poem, by contrast, is determined by its *not* making use, outside the Earthly Paradise, of the allegorical mode, it is determined by what Kenelm called 'that enormous *volte face* in literary history represented by Dante's peopling his morality play with living persons instead of allegorical abstractions' ('Dante: Poet of the Intellect', *New Blackfriars*, 1965). If the manner of the Comedy is to be allegorical at all, it is an allegory, Kenelm tells us (*God's Tree* p. 32), after the manner of 'the theologians', in Dante's phrase, and from St Thomas's definition of it 'it is clear that in this kind of allegory—the kind that tradition ascribed to the Bible—the historical truth of the literal sense was an essential

presupposition’.

Dante’s great poem, in other words, differs essentially and *in its very manner* from non-Christian poetry (such as the *Eclogues*, or even the *Aeneid*), because of an essential similarity of its manner to that of the Bible, the unique and authoritative revelation: it is about the world of grace, but it is also about the world of history. It is about particular, real, datable, fallen men and women who at particular times and places accepted or rejected the grace of God offered them through and as a result of the bodily life, death and resurrection of Christ some thirteen centuries before the supposed date of the vision. Moreover, it is for Dante and for the world in which his poem was written the earthly passing-over of the incarnate Word that constitutes history in the first place: that gives direction and purpose to the time which leads up to Christ and an eschatological expectation to the time after him; that divides the ages into a pre-Christian period of signs and figures and a Christian period of fulfillment; that provides the temporal point of reference by which years are dated and men and their activities made singular and unrepeatable. For Dante it is only in relation to Christ that human doings are part of history, and only as part of history that human doings become the subject-matter of his poem. No-one has shown better than Erich Auerbach the interdependence of Dante’s revolutionary poetic and narrative style—the complex interweaving of utterly individual and eternally fixed destinies—and the ‘figural realism’ of his Christian conception of the phenomenal and historical world: ‘conceiving all earthly occurrences through the medium of a mixed style ... as an entity sublimely figural, is Christian in spirit and Christian in origin’. When, for example, Dante links two events with the phrase ‘ed ecco’ he is introducing into vernacular poetry, and so into the common conception of what makes for historical continuity, a device whose origins are not Virgilian, or classical at all, but Biblical<sup>6</sup>. The *Divine Comedy* is therefore not just a Christian poem: it is the paradigm of what Christian poetry is, of what poetry is in the Christian era.

From living in that era not even those who want to can escape—not at any rate without leaving behind far, far more than they may initially imagine. For, as Hegel saw so clearly, the collective self-understanding of modern Europeans, what we call the ‘history’ of their ‘states’, or ‘world-history’, in Hegel’s term, is inseparable from Christianity (in which Hegel included the Reformation), and that not simply because of some continuity of institutions, but because of what we modern Europeans (and we are not now by any means confined to a single continent) have come to mean by ‘history’. For as long as we conceive of history as a meaningful interconnection of *all* events, each of which is invested both with individual uniqueness and absolute importance, we are as much within the bounds of a Christian world as if our moral

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thinking uses the categories of death and resurrection, sin and forgiveness, or if our theology acknowledges the name of Christ. It is possible to live outside the Christian world—Homer did, and many millions of, let us say, Buddhists still do. But that involves living not only with different theological and moral categories, but with different political and historical categories, with different conceptions of human doings and of their literary representation, from those which have prevailed in Christendom—that is, in a cultural unit that, for all its increasing internal complexity, has remained relatively cohesive both in its centuries-old interchange with its Islamic neighbours, and in its distinctness from the Hindu, Buddhist or sub-Saharan worlds with which until recently it had little contact. It is a particular merit of Hegel's philosophy of history that it enables us to see European culture since the Renaissance, since the Reformation, and even since the French Revolution, as continuous with the culture of medieval Christendom—as profoundly and distinctively Christian. We do not have to yield to Christopher Dawson's notion (*God's Tree* pp. 108—10) that around 1300 the unity that was Christendom disappeared for good. It is true that the form in which that unity of sacred and secular immediately presented itself to Dante—a union of papal and imperial powers—was passing away in the very moment in which he was endeavouring to reflect it. (It is, as we know, in the gathering dusk that the owl of Minerva takes wing.) But simply because from then on the community of the baptized was further divided internally, and divided in new ways against itself, it did not, for that, cease to be a unity: like Guelphs and Ghibellines, heretics and schismatics are still Christians, and the unity which ecumenists seek is that which, without knowing it, they already possess.

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It follows that we must make a second distinction. We must distinguish between pre-Christian poetry and secular poetry. Pre-Christian poetry originates in a non-Christian world, a world separated from Christendom either by time, as in the case of Homer or the *Táin*, or by space, as with most of the literature of the Far East, until very recent years. Only by a retrospective interpretation, which disregards the author's intentions, can analogies be found in such writing to the grace which is Christ. The nearest approach to that grace is the Earthly Paradise which both Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats in their own ways found imaged in the Oriental world (e.g. Canto XLIX or Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli'). Secular poetry is poetry which arises in a Christian context and is fed in innumerable ways from Christian resources, and so tells in all these many ways of the grace of Christ, but yet has acquired the power, as a result of the development of Christianity itself, of rejecting or at any



rate concealing, its origins. The challenge of that rejection—the constitution of an area of life distinct from the sacred which it thus becomes incumbent on the sacred to penetrate and revivify with a divine presence—has been part of the dynamic of Christianity since the Incarnation, and since the radical secularisation of the first Christian missions, which swept divinity out of the world in order that all the world should be reclaimed by God. Sinful, heretical, schismatic, even blaspheming, poetry does not cease to be Christian poetry, no more than sinners, heretics, or schismatics cease to be Christians—indeed it is precisely to them that the Church must go, if it is to take up its cross and follow its Master. The romance of *Lancelot* which suborned Paolo and Francesca was secular literature, sinful in its effects and perhaps in its intentions, but it was quite certainly Christian (cp. *The Two Dantes* p. 30). The love that it invoked derived its seductive power from its being the same love, albeit aberrant in its object, as that which will draw Dante on, through the fires in which so many secular poets of love are purged, to the ultimate vision of the *Paradiso*. (It may be that pre-Christian poetry can be written even now in what used to be the heartlands of Christendom—Ireland and France may be as capable of sinking back into the lone and level sands of paganism as Antioch and Khotan—but we cannot here be concerned with the conditions that make possible so total a detachment from the Christian inheritance. Perhaps as Christians, in fact, we are committed to the belief that over all and in the long run there *cannot* be a general reversion to the pre-Christian era.)

In no writer is the negation of sacred origins at once so all-embracing and so gentle, so diaphanous, as in Shakespeare (who thus deserves perhaps to be called the most Christian writer of the modern age and the only true successor to Dante). For his more metaphysical questionings of human destiny he seems deliberately to select non-Christian settings—*King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*. The history plays are fairly rigorously secular—the religious dimension of the monarch's responsibilities, omnipresent in Dante, is consciously curtailed, in accordance, one is tempted to think, with the Elizabethan settlement: 'every subject's duty is the King's; but every subject's soul is his own' (*Henry V*, Act IV. Sc. 1). Indeed, if *Hamlet* is, as T.S. Eliot thought, unsatisfactory, it is perhaps because it is in the nature of the play's theme that the Christian element in it should be explicit and significant but uncertainly defined—a doubt not only as to the nature of the beyond but as to the extent of its practical influence.

Yet this apparently so non-Christian world is in fact often an inspiringly accurate image of secular experience as experience which only the grace which is Christ can redeem. *King Lear* is Good Friday without Easter, but can we imagine *Cordelia* uttering the five-fold 'never' that is in the play the denial of the Christian consolation? Perhaps it is a

weakness of the play that nothing in its structure corresponds to Cordelia's implicitly Christian perspective—but perhaps rather this apparent defect is the means by which the play represents precisely the secularity of the 'time' into which Christ came to bring redemption (cp. Ephesians 5:16). The disguise of the Duke in *Measure for Measure* is clearly a *kenosis*, yet the play ceases to be a Christian parable at the very point—the Duke's appearance in court—at which its Christian character is about to become unequivocal. To go further would be to make the play a depiction of something other than the world of fallen flesh, in which men have power, not angels, and if it is not into that world that God is incarnated then Incarnation has no meaning.

The Christian patterns in Shakespeare's plays (and particularly the miracles of forgiveness and restoration through sacrifice in the last plays) include a deep understanding of Jesus' silence about his own Divinity—an understanding available perhaps only to an age with a developed sense of the distinction between secular and sacred. Those patterns show the Christian reader what it means to have to build the temple of the Spirit in bodies of flesh. No-one shows us better than Shakespeare the stuff of which we are made—for he shows it to us as ready to receive the imprint of a grace which he does not depict. Kenelm occasionally mentioned Shakespeare in his sermons, always with a reverence born of long and close familiarity, and it might have been along these lines that he would have defended this recourse to profane literature.<sup>7</sup>

Shakespeare's combination of realistic writing with assertions about the ultimate fate and eternal significance of human beings and their affairs is Christian in origin, for it is made possible by the uniquely Christian notion of meaningful history. The *Divine Comedy* is neither the representation of a timeless ideal, nor a self-contained fiction, but a part of the process of history, which it (partially) depicts—dates measured A.D., and times measured from the meridian of Jerusalem, are no different in Dante's poems from dates and times in the reality outside it. In Shakespeare's work neither the life of Christ nor the historical timescale it makes possible has a structural role, but the conviction that human doings have meanings and that the work of art does not create those meanings but draws on them, and so shares in the process of human living which it depicts—*that* remains. The fictionality of the last romances—of *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest*—is conscious because these works are consciously withdrawn from the Christian timescale—because the historical events through which the grace represented in these plays has become a part of the stock of human meaning on which they draw are passed over in silence.<sup>8</sup> That silence may be attributable to the increasingly heretical and schismatic culture in which Shakespeare lived, but it may also be one, and not the least profound, of the Christian patterns in his poetry.

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In the early Renaissance, from Dante and Petrarch to the Reformation, as Kenelm showed in 'Christ and Letters' and *The Two Dantes* (pp. 103, 143), pagan and Christian Antiquity seemed parts of a single historical sweep, 'the millenium stretching between, say, Plato or Pythagoras and Gregory the Great, with its centre in the Incarnation of the Word'. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the developing distinction between secular and sacred brought an asymmetry into what was felt to be the relation between the pagan and the Christian past: a meaningful historical development was in this period the exclusive prerogative of the sacred world—only patriarchs or prophets, or apostles, belonged to a historical era that had once been and would never be again— while the pre-Christian past of Greece and Rome became a timeless exemplar of secular humanity, its inhabitants indistinguishable in any important non-religious respect from contemporary man. This is the function of figures from pagan Antiquity, indifferently mythological and historical, in the essays of Montaigne or of Bacon and in the dramas equally of Jacobean England and of the France of Louis XIV. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century the defence of the sacred (for example by Bossuet) and the consolidation of the secular (for example by Voltaire) had substantially eliminated the asymmetry, put the pagan and the Christian past on an equal footing and prepared the way for the universal histories of cultural progress which in one form or another dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in which the religious impetus was not always as clearly acknowledged as it was by Hegel.

One consequence of the advent of this new era (which may be said to have lasted until the middle of the twentieth century) was a crisis for literature in respect of its subject matter. Historically on a par with their sacred contemporaries, the statesmen and heroes, and even the poets and philosophers, of pagan antiquity came to seem as remote from the modern age as the Hebrew patriarchs of the Old Dispensation had always been. What was a poet to write about now that, thanks to the new historical fusion, the pagan past could no longer function as a model of the contemporary secular order? Some poets (Klopstock, Hölderlin, Blake) drew the conclusion that the modern age, being essentially Christian, required a new sacred poetry based on the new historical fusion. But this left the secularity, which it is the task of Christianity to foster and to penetrate, without literary expression. The eighteenth century, deprived of its secular past, found a new secular material for literature in the present, in itself. And it invented two new means of dealing with that material, two forms that were to dominate literature for two hundred years: the novel, and the subjective (or 'romantic') lyric poem.

Both forms can be seen to grow out of elements of the paradigm of Christian poetry that Dante provided for us: the novel out of its physical

and phenomenal realism, the lyric poem out of its belief in the eternal importance of individual souls. But those Christian origins (clear enough, in the case of the novel, in *Pamela*, or *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, or even *Mansfield Park*) do not of themselves guarantee the Christian nature of the form that results. Homer, as Auerbach showed, is if anything more realistic than the Bible. But what made for the uniqueness of the Judaeo-Christian tradition was its *figural* realism—its belief that meaning is incarnate in things. Homer, Auerbach magnificently says, can be analysed, but he cannot be interpreted. There is no *meaning* to the events he recounts or the things he describes—they simply are themselves. That is, beyond question, I believe, non-Christian poetry, and there is no doubt that it has in the last 250 years become possible for literature to develop away from and out of the culture which gave it birth and to shut itself off in non-Christianity: the novel in *chosisme*, the poem in solipsism (or *vice versa*). But in so far as the novel and poetry pursue the struggle to incarnate meaning in their chosen material they remain essentially Christian. And that implies, if we look back at our paradigm: they remain essentially Christian in so far as they relate their material to meaningful history, history whose meaning, *ex hypothesi*, involves the poet, his subject-matter and his reader.

The novel constitutes a clearly distinct line of development and for that reason I shall say no more about it here. (It was also a subject about which Kenelm wrote little—even, alas, about one of its most significant milestones, Manzoni.) Instead I shall try—briefly, as Kenelm would put it—to say something about poetry in the narrower sense at the beginning and end of the romantic-realist period that stretched from the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.

Lyric poetry as the first-person expression of secular subjectivity, as the expression of the life of the self in action and passion, knowledge and love, was founded by Goethe. He was its first and greatest exponent, he tried himself in most of its forms, and invented many of them, and his influence was felt throughout the literatures of Europe well into the twentieth century. Though he deliberately abandoned all institutional religion at the age of 21 and devoted much of his public life to the fostering of aesthetic Hellenism, he repeatedly claimed to be more of a Christian than some of his contemporaries. He had little or no interest in the new fusion, the new theory of cultural progress which at once secularized the Christian past and sacralized the pagan. As in Shakespeare's case, Goethe's works define a new area of secularity contrasting with what was currently held to be sacred.

Goethe's Faust is a man who has rejected Christianity entirely and with it Christian values and morality, and also the Christian concept of history, the quasi-Christian notion of progress, and the associated concepts of time itself. His moment of love with Gretchen, a simple

Christian woman, is the moment of his redemption, but it is a moment on the very margin of Christian history. Only to the extent to which the post-Christian world of Faust interacts with the Christian world of Gretchen is the story of Faust a part of Christian history and open to a Christian conclusion. Similarly, in *Part Two* of the play, Faust's marriage to Helen, the resurrected spirit of Greek antiquity, proves to be a moment of the most marginal, tangential, contact with meaningful history. History, in both parts of *Faust*, is experienced only as an unrememberable moment of eternal importance. Such an 'eternal moment' is the most reduced state conceivable of the Christian belief in meaningful temporal sequence in the shared life of men, a sequence in which the act by Christ which redeemed individual souls, and the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, are, equally, real events. Such 'eternal moments' are not infrequently invoked in Goethe's later poetry, but in a sense all his poetry is devoted to them. For all his poems, as he remarked, are 'occasional poems', and the 'occasions' of them are moments when meaning was incarnate in his life and in his world—fragments of meaning which, because they were found in *this* man's experience, and because he asks us to link them with similar fragments in our own experience, have in them the glint of history. The poem appeals to us, by recognising its occasion, also to recognise the law of 'Nature', as Goethe calls it, which it reveals, the common ground to Goethe's experience and our own, the link between him and us. That bond of like-minded spirits, constituted by moments of insight shared across a desert of meaningless time, is the only history that Goethe acknowledges—he calls it 'the communion of saints'. That such moments are the extreme or minimal case of a Christian mode of experience is shown explicitly by one of the last of the writers in the lyrical tradition inaugurated by Goethe—T.S. Eliot.

The first half of the twentieth century could already feel the first tremors of the geopolitical explosion which after 1945 was to transform what had been 'European', or at most 'Western', culture, into world-culture, with consequences still incomplete and unforeseeable. Many of Eliot's contemporaries—Yeats, Pound, Carlos Williams, Stevens—reacted to their sense of an ending epoch by trying to sever their links with Christian culture altogether and to attach themselves, if at all, elsewhere: to Celtic paganism, to Chinese culture and supra-historical eclecticism, to a mystically non-European America, or to a placeless modernism. Eliot, however, a Southern American by birth, chose consciously and never without a residual artificiality, to settle among the high places of the English, and Anglican, establishment. (Rather as Goethe, born a citizen of the Imperial Free City of Frankfurt, chose to remove to ducal Weimar, the quintessence of the *ancien régime*, to which he remained publicly loyal throughout his life.)

Between 1936 and 1942 Eliot reflected on the significance of this

decision, in the context of a meditation on time and history, in *Four Quartets*. It was certainly not security, or the wealth and glamour of Empire, that he had been looking for: those passed away in the tempest of the First World War, and, as they left, Pound took his leave as well. Eliot stayed on, in an England increasingly troubled, directionless, and threadbare. *Four Quartets* are full of images of decayed grandeur, of great but empty houses falling into ruin, or a prey to modernity—swept away to build a by-pass—or ultimately to the dark that engulfs us all, animals, men, buildings, empires. In *Little Gidding* he seizes on what might seem the moment of final destruction of the culture he had ostentatiously joined—the London blitz—and (a deliberate parallel to Dante’s meeting with Brunetto Latini) confronts in that moment ‘a familiar compound ghost’ bearing features of several of his poetic contemporaries (principally Yeats, though Kenelm thought Pound was represented as well.<sup>9</sup>) Against this apocalyptic background the ghost reveals the emptiness of a life devoted solely to poetic achievement and unpurified by the fire of divine love. By contrast with the ghost, who left his ‘body on a distant shore’, Eliot stresses his attachment to England, to England’s past and (as the title of this *Quartet* suggests) England’s Church. And the nature of this attachment is revealed in the lines that follow: to inherit the English past is not to revive or perpetuate England’s political or cultural interests, not to identify oneself with some particular strand in the English national life, but it is to acquire ‘a symbol: A symbol perfected in death’. In time, the poem says, all things die—to that extent the ghost is right—but in belonging somewhere, anywhere, to a particular place and people with their own stories and loyalties and conflicts, one acquires the ability to live, not in time, but in history. Historical experience is experience of temporal events: not, however, of those events as subject to the temporal law of death, but as symbolic, as replete with a meaning that transcends death. King Charles seeking refuge at Little Gidding in the night, the All Clear sounding over blitzed London, a moment in the poet’s life when he hears the laughter of children hidden in apple-trees: these are all events in time that die the death of the elements and are at most the end of a story. But as events in history, in a Christian poet’s view of history, they are symbols, symbols in time of that ultimate meaning that conquers time and death. Such a ‘moment in and out of time’ is a reminder and in a sense a re-enactment of the incarnation in time of the eternal Word. It is a historical moment, with all the force that Christianity can give to the word ‘historical’; and so

A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
History is now and England.

For Goethe, history is now and the moment in which the reader recognises, as part of his own experience, the occasion of the poem—and whatever it is that lies between those two moments and makes them both possible. But for both Eliot and Goethe the ‘timeless’, or ‘eternal’, moment is the moment at which the individual’s experience of life as meaningless sequence intersects with, or grazes tangentially, a meaningful universal pattern of all men’s experiences. It is a moment of grace and a moment in which grace is accepted, in which the poet’s eyes meet the smile of his own Beatrice. For Eliot such moments are explicitly associated with the coming of Christ into earthly life, a coming which every moment in time, being instinct with death, perpetually announces and calls out for. But, for all the explicitness, we are here dealing with a form of Christian experience as consciously marginal as that of Goethe. Eliot’s Beatrice was the Church of England, and we may no more doubt his sincerity than Dante’s, but if the Christian sensibility of *Four Quartets* is anywhere defective it is in the assumption—derivative, as Helen Gardner has shown, from that minor monument to 1890s Anglicanism, *John Inglesant*—that *Little Gidding* is an equivalent, and alternative, to Rome.

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‘What about us? We left all we had to follow you.’ I have suggested that from 1300 to 1945 European literature brought forth many varieties of Christian poetry, all of which deserved the name in so far as they created new relationships between the source of grace and the secular world, and in so far as the Christendom in which they had their origin had itself become a variety-in-unity. But what of the unity itself? Kenelm, taking a narrower view of the term ‘Christian’ than that proposed here, remarked at the end of ‘Mr. Dawson and Christendom’ that *Piers Plowman* was ‘the most directly *Christian* expression’ of the medieval ideal of Christendom, and so, he implied, a more modern expression than that of Dante. For Langland’s poem, in which Christ Himself was a principal actor, and in the figure of a working man, was proof that after the sundering of sacred and secular in the fourteenth century ‘a new Christian culture had been born which could and can survive; but only ... within that of which it was said:

And he called that house Unity;  
Holychurch in English.’

(*God’s Tree* pp. 109—10)

From Langland onwards, Kenelm is suggesting, grace is historically visible, not in the whole life of man, but specifically in the Church, and poetry cannot be Christian that is outside the Church. The question of course is: what Church? In one sense it is, and always has been,

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tautologically true that Christian poetry is poetry of the Christian Church. But Kenelm's narrower view of the issue requires that we clarify the relation between poetry and the distinct, visible, organisational unit that the Church has been in European culture since the fourteenth century. For there are churches and churches. Goethe and Eliot both find that grace touches history in the 'pattern of timeless moments' that constitutes a 'communion of saints': they are both churchmen, if with limited congregations. In that, they exemplify a hieratic tendency noticeable among all lyric poets of the romantic-realist era. But these poets' churches are poor stuff. A certain generosity of human scope—which can at times be found in the realistic novel—seems often to be lacking from poetry's exploration of subjectivity as the modern form of the secular, and even lacking from its penetration of this secularity with divine grace. Moreover, the recognition in this poetry of the operation of grace in the world is so much the achievement of the poet alone that there is little space in it for a Christian theme of the greatest importance (and treated accordingly by Dante): the *rejection* by men of grace, of the appeal of Christ, whoever His ambassadors. In an age when the secular and the sacred are divided, the sign of sin and contradiction, of the extent to which the secular world rejects the incarnation within it of the Word, is the Church as an institution—and necessarily, in the age of the nation-state, a non-national, a supranational, institution.

The task of being a fully and authentically—and not just heretically or marginally—Christian poet in the nineteenth century verged therefore on the superhuman. It was necessary *both* to penetrate fully with the grace of Christ the new secular subject-matter of the experiencing self, *and* to give full expression to the necessity of the (Roman) Church's witness against the sinfulness, the hard-heartedness, of the new, would-be omniscient, socio-political units into which Europe was dividing itself. The only poets (and it is worth repeating that I am not here concerned with novelists) who seem to have grasped the enormity of this task and to have laid out their work on a commensurate scale are Wordsworth and Victor Hugo. Hugo—whose achievement is nowadays sadly neglected—suffered from a certain shallowness of subjectivity, and Wordsworth from the political and religious limitations of his Englishness. One poet, however, who was uniquely well-placed to understand and fulfil the task was Gerard Manley Hopkins, though his output was for various reasons—not all of them accidental—too slender for him to be much more than 'a lonely began'.

Hopkins' belief, or experience, that 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' was Kenelm's favourite proof that the unity of Dante's vision could be available to a modern man (in fact, he nearly always misquotes the line by conflating it with the first line of the *Paradiso*). And indeed Hopkins' vision is as distinctively modern as that of Goethe



or Eliot: the presence of the divine is found, not in the natural thing on its own, in the trees, the cloudscape, the windhover, but in the conjunction of the thing and the experiencing subject:

These things, these things were here and but the beholder  
Wanting; which two when they once meet,  
The heart rears wings bold and bolder....

(‘Hurrahing in Harvest’)

This moment of meeting, of ‘instress’ as Hopkins calls it—often imaged as a flash or glint or spark—is the moment in which the divine significance of the thing, its status as something created by God, is manifest. And because the moment fuses divinity and the created object in a specifically human experience, the moment of instress is a moment in the life of Christ, the God-man:

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,  
Down all the glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;

(ibid.)

Hopkins’ ‘nature-poetry’ is in fact strictly argued theological poetry in which subject and object are as profoundly interfused as in any of Goethe’s verse.

The other pole of Hopkins’ writing is represented, of course, by the ‘terrible sonnets’ of 1885–89, in which the Christ who in all creation is the ‘first, fast, last friend’ seems to appear as an ‘enemy’, with whom the poet wrestles in a constant temptation to despair. What makes these and other related poems so remarkable a complement to the ‘nature-poetry’ is that we do not merely happen to know, as a matter of extraneous biographical detail, that Hopkins’ agony derived from his solitude as an intellectual Catholic convert celibate priest of late nineteenth-century England, but these facts are deeply woven into the texture of the poems themselves. ‘England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife/To my creating thought’ is not able or willing to be fertilised by his word. He can only pray, as for a distant hope, for the conversion of whole nations (‘In the valley of the Elwy’), or think nostalgically of England’s first conversion (‘To what serves mortal beauty’), or, most urgently, pray for the souls of those he loves whose schism threatens them with damnation (‘Henry Purcell’, ‘The Loss of the Eurydice’). The history of Europe—the history of Christian division and militant Caesarism—falls athwart Hopkins’ life and twists it out of true: ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, which began his mature poetic career, was a response to Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*, explicitly understood as a continuation of Luther’s Reformation (Stanza 20). And this rejection, in history, of God’s grace, by men, is a part of the suffering of the Christ whose beauty flashes off a bird, or a bluebell, or ‘the features of men’s faces’, and in that suffering the poet-priest shares, for he is Christ’s ‘friend’ in a place and time which will not know Him, in which He ‘lives alas away’.

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who is 'my peace', he says, is also 'my parting'. Loyalty to Christ separates him from the family, friends and culture in which he ought most nearly and clearly to see Christ. The greatness of the late sonnets is that the historical source of that parting, of that alienation from his time, is experienced with the same intimacy as the peace of Christ in the union of subjectivity with created things. Indeed, the alienation from the time is experienced as a frustration of the poetic activity itself, and so the tragic theme of his age's rejection of Christ is united with the tragic drama of his own struggle to accept that grace in the crucifying form in which it presents itself:

See, banks and brakes  
Now, leaved how thick! leaved they are again  
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes  
Them; birds build—but not I build; no but strain,  
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.  
(‘Thou art indeed just, O Lord’)

It would go beyond the scope of this article to ask what form Christian poetry might take in the era which began after 1945, an age in which the sacred, in the form now of the institutional church fused with the progressivist cultural history of the previous epoch, is opposed by a secularity of absolute global individualism which seeks to eliminate the past entirely in favour of 'news'. We may be sure that poetry will continue the task of bringing Christ into that secular world, and that it will do so most authentically in union with Christ's Church. But we may also be sure that the closer it comes to authenticity, the more the Christian poetry of our age will suffer the 'tragic moral tension' which Kenelm saw (*God's Tree*, pp. 1—2) as the distinctive feature of Hopkins' work, a tension 'between poetry and ... priestly vocation', a tension—between sharing in the world that needs redemption and sharing in the agency that is to redeem it—which, I believe, is identical with the tension involved in being a Christian in a historical world, that is, with being a Christian at all. Hopkins' 'fragmentarily but magnificently' Christian religious poetry had a special importance for Kenelm personally in his own lifelong experience of that tension. But it was also as a sign that Hopkins' example can continue to teach and sustain us all that Kenelm took his works with him on his last journey into hospital, as the only worthy companion, in his secular reading, to Dante's *Purgatorio*.<sup>10</sup>

1 In the essay 'Religion and Literature' contributed to the symposium *Faith that Illuminates* (1935) and included in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose*, edited by John Hayward 453

(Penguin, 1953). I quote from Kenelm's own copy.

- 2 An unpublished essay, 'Notes on Art and Morals', dating from the time of the controversy about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—Kenelm was prepared to testify in favour of the novel's publication—comes closest to the problem in the remark: 'The original good done to me by the *Paradiso* ... is not the same as a good moral intention, in the full human and Christian sense of "moral". Yet this intention may be a further effect of the poem indirectly. In order to see the divine purpose of art I suppose we should have to trace the connection between these two effects.'
- 3 It is much to be regretted that Kenelm never addressed himself at length to the problem which he acknowledged to be basic: 'how far and in what sense does Catholicism admit the possibility of an *implicit* faith in Christ?' (*The Two Dantes*, p. 154) His treatment of the derived problems in the three-part essay 'The Two Dantes', seems to rest on the premiss that Dante-the-poet regarded the salvation of Ripheus and Trajan in *Paradiso* XX 'as extremely exceptional, indeed as abnormal' (p. 249). Yet Kenelm's own discussion of the questions in *Paradiso* XIX, to which *Paradiso* XX provides the answer, surely shows that it is Dante-the-character's 'surprising' assumption that 'there is no alternative to *explicit* faith' (p. 154) which the eagle is rebuking for the shallowness of its conception of divine wisdom. Kenelm draws special attention to ll. 85—90 of canto XIX (p. 146), but their implication would seem to me not that 'if we judge God to be just or unjust, the criterion itself that we use must derive from him', but rather that if we judge Dante-the-character's *virtuous Indian* to be just we are already assuming in him a—to us perhaps unfathomable—relationship to the divine source of all justice.
- 4 Arthur Sale recalls a lecture given by Kenelm to Italian teachers of English on 'Three Religious Poets'. It dealt with Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas but unfortunately no record of it seems to remain.
- 5 To profess a belief in the Incarnation of our Lord was to profess *at least* this much belief in the *theological* importance of His mother, nor did Kenelm scruple to continue the quotation:

Incipe, parve puer: qui non risere parenti  
Nec deus hunc mensa, dea nec dignata cubili est.  
'Begin, little boy, to know your mother with a smile ...  
Begin, little boy: him who never smiled at his parent  
no god invites to table, nor goddess to her bed' (Kenelm's trans.)
- 6 E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* tr. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1953) ch. 9: 'Farinata and Cavalcante'. The link between Dante's mixed style and his unique fusion of history and allegory seems first to have been noted by Schelling, from whom Hegel's comments on the poem, of which Auerbach speaks so highly (p. 167), also partially derive.
- 7 Certainly he saw the longing for maternal warmth of the urchins in 'Les Effarés' 'les pauvres Jésus pleins de givre', as an analogue of the general human longing that was fulfilled in the motherhood of Mary, but an explicitly secular analogue, as the poem's comical conclusion emphasizes. I base this remark on Kenelm's own comments scribbled into the margin of his Penguin Rimbaud, and elaborated in his Christmas talk.
- 8 Contrast the view expressed by Anne Barton in "'Enter Mariners, wet": realism in Shakespeare's last plays', in *Realism in European Literature*, ed. N. Boyle and M.W. Swales (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 47—8)
- 9 See 'Dante: poet of the intellect' (*New Blackfriars*, 1965). Helen Gardner lays great stress on the Yeats identification (*The Composition of 'Four Quartets'*, London, 1978, pp. 65—9, 186—9) but acknowledges the presence of other models (p. 185).
- 10 I should like, and Kenelm would have wished me, to thank my wife, Rosemary, for her part in the writing and the typing of this essay.