

# Kenelm Foster on Dante

Christopher Ryan

Kenelm Foster's new book <sup>1</sup> is a collection of essays written between 1959 and 1977. With one exception, all these studies have aspects of Dante's work as their subject. The book falls readily into three parts. Chapters 1-5 deal with general topics: "An Introduction to the *Inferno*", "Courtly Love and Christianity" (the only non-Dantean topic, but, obviously, very relevant to the main subject), "Dante and Eros", "St Thomas and Dante", and "Dante's Vision of God". Chapters 6-9 are readings of various cantos of the *Comedy* (and one of the pleasing features of the book is the successful retention in these and other essays of the semi-informality of the lecture style): *Inferno XIX*, *Purgatorio XVII*, *Paradiso X* and *XIX*. Chapters 10-12 consist of one long essay (over a third of the work) from which the book gets its title, on the presence of morally good pagans in Limbo, and on the philosophical and theological assumptions which lie behind this unusual idea.

I cannot summarise here the main themes of this rich and varied book. But since I want to recommend it warmly to specialists and non-specialists alike, let me try to specify some features which lead me to do so. Specialists particularly will gain from Father Foster's interpretation of certain passages which run counter to commonly received opinion: lucid expositions combined with detailed accounts of where and why he finds other critics' views unsatisfactory, as for instance on *Par. XIX* 64-66 ("Lume non è ..." pp. 149-152). Of particular value to the non-specialist are the apparently casual but in fact careful and judicious outlines of political, literary and theological developments (e.g. pp. 34-36, 87-88, 152-54).

However, what gives these studies their best claim to the attention of both specialists and non-specialists is, I suggest, the temper of mind which informs them, of which three qualities stand out. Father Foster brings to his study of Dante a considerable competence in philosophy and theology, and in particular a close knowledge of Aristotle and St Thomas. With these skills at his disposal, he is well fitted to give a thoroughly informed opinion on

<sup>1</sup> THE TWO DANTEs and other Studies by Kenelm Foster O.P. *Darton, Longman and Todd* £7.50

the controversial topic of how far Dante may be thought to have been influenced by St Thomas, finally essaying the view that while Dante highly appreciated the Dominican's combination of sanctity and clear thinking his views too frequently diverge from Thomas' for him helpfully to be described as "Thomist" (pp. 56-65. Readers with a particular interest in this topic will wish to consult the author's recent and much longer study on St Thomas in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. V pp. 626-649). Similarly, this expertise enables him to lead his readers through the stages of the growth in the Church's consciousness of the doctrine of God's universal salvific will, and to specify how this was viewed in the middle ages and how at that period contact with the works of Aristotle forced theologians (and, or including, Dante!) to grapple more attentively with the relations between nature and grace (chapters 10-12, *passim*).

A second distinguishing quality of Father Foster which contributes much to the intellectual vigour and quiet charm of the work is his blend of firmness of opinion (not to say toughness of mind) with modesty about his own competence. Within his own sphere, where he is equally at home in Dante's minor works and the *Comedy*, he marshals a wide range of texts, delicately sifting the evidence to reach the degree of certainty it will yield. When a work has, like the *Comedy*, been the subject of long and intense study for centuries, interpretations are bound to vary widely, even wildly. Father Foster gives serious consideration to serious possibilities; he courteously demurs from the loosely speculative (e.g. pp. 92, 96, 144); occasionally his patience flags and he curtly dismisses the nonsensical (as he does Porena's calling Dante's raising the question of the salvation of pagans "daringly rationalistic ... almost impious" p. 153). When he moves beyond his own sphere one finds a ready but measured deference. An important passage near the end of the final essay, touching the defect of the noble pagans for which they are condemned to Limbo, is characteristic:

. . . the grace they refused cannot have been 'healing grace', *gratia sanans*; for their moral nature, as things turned out, needed no healing. So it [the grace refused] can only have been grace as 'divinising', *gratia elevans*. I am no expert in the byways of the history of Christian doctrine, but I should be surprised to be told by one who is that such a position as this was not very unusual. (p. 252)

A third attractive quality, and I think the most important, but the least easily described, is the combination this critic shows of lucidity of mind with keenness and depth of sensibility (which, as readers and would-be practitioners of literary criticism will readily agree, is a comparatively rare distinction). He feels with Dante, and respects the gravity with which the poet lived and attempted to answer his intellectual problems. Often, indeed, he feels with the

poet *because* he is able to appreciate his intellectual quest and achievement. One notices this in the occasional flashes of feeling which illuminate a rigorous exposition, as in his comment in the course of discussing *Par. X*: “and how this Italian loved the sun!” (p. 124). It appears in judicious qualifications which exactly mark out the tone of his subject, as his parenthetical remark in the statement “an essential element in [the] greatness [of Dante’s work] was surely the intensity of his conviction (or better the *quality* of that intensity) that all human desires are radically one, as stemming from a substance that is one.” (p. 36) More broadly this combination enables him to treat with care (in the intellectual and affective senses) Dante’s descriptions of love, such as that given in *Purg. XVII* where his interpretation of Dante’s distinction between natural love and rational love as being between natural love only and natural love and a further reflexive factor (p. 115) is absolutely right and easily overlooked.

All this is not to say, of course, that Father Foster’s views always compel agreement or that he never makes an unguarded statement. For instance, it seems to me an open question, and not a safe generality as he implies, that “the ideas of Andreas [Capellanus] are broadly in harmony with those of the twelfth-century troubadours.” (p. 18) His treatment of the 1277 Condemnation at Paris could be misleading: he gives the impression that there is a larger measure of coherence among the opinions condemned than is the case (pp. 167-68. Some of the propositions to which he refers are in fact incompatible with others not cited: cf. e.g. props 15 and 176 with 23 and 157). His belief that Dante “understands the *prima voglia* [*Purg. XVIII* 59] as bearing radically on one object, not many” (p. 41), though quite possibly correct, begs a number of questions and not least how to interpret *XVIII* 57, “de’ primi appetibili l’affetto”. Inevitably this book suffers from an in-built limitation of the essay genre: interesting ideas are put forward which cannot be developed in a short compass.

The new study, “The Two Dantes” (pp. 156-253) merits special comment. (As printed, it is divided into three chapters, but I shall refer to it in the singular; the printed divisions are purely a matter of convenience.) It is a densely argued and highly original piece. The central subject is intriguing and fundamental: “Dante’s humanism and how this relates to his Christianity”. (p. 245) The particular focus of Father Foster’s “perplexity” (*ibid.*) on this topic is Dante’s placing of (good) adult pagans in Limbo, with the twin postulates that they merit a special place in hell (consisting in a lack rather than positive punishment) yet are nonetheless condemned for a defect (cf. e.g. *Inferno* I 125, IV 38-48, *Purg.* VII 7-8). The author sets this particular problem within the wider context of Dante’s attitude to humanism, defined as human nature considered apart from the order of grace and revelation, a discus-

sion which embraces the minor works as well as the *Comedy*. The particular merits of this essay, as I see it, are Father Foster's:

- i) drawing attention to a real and serious problem: the *Comedy* is not simply the harmonious integration of previously disparate elements in Dante's culture, the human and the Christian;
- ii) highlighting the lack in the *Comedy* of any awareness in the theological tradition of a variety of ways, notably through the concept of implicit faith, of bringing all mankind within the salvific will of God;
- iii) noting the radical separation Dante makes between grace and nature such that the former seems required only for enabling man to reach eternal happiness and not for living a perfectly good life on earth;
- iv) setting out of a four-fold scheme of the possible relations between the offer of grace and moral conduct (see especially p. 225);
- v) making the hypothesis that the adult pagans are condemned for a personal sin which consisted in, and consisted only in, the refusal of due submission to God through refusing his offer of elevating grace.

For many of us one of the main attractions of Dante is precisely the range of his mind and heart: the heroic attempt made by a deeply sensitive, highly intelligent and cultured man to bring within the scope of his artistic expression the full sweep of human goodness (or the potential for this) and divine graciousness. After many years of "interest" and "endless delight" (Preface) in Dante's poetry Father Foster in this essay offers anyone seeking to move beyond vague generalizations about nature and grace in the *Comedy* a highly instructive, not to say indispensable, tool. Since Father Foster has not gone along a well trodden path, his essay is challenging as well as informative. I note here some points on which this challenge may be taken up. Father Foster sees it as characteristic of Dante's view of ungraced man that he is isolated from God to a degree that was uncommon among medieval thinkers. And this in a negative and positive sense: negatively in that, for Dante, the pagan had little knowledge of God on earth, and positively in that he could reach a high degree of moral perfection without grace. On this I may mention two reservations. While I agree that this is the view which emerges from the *Comedy*, I feel that the author's account of Dante's development outside the *Comedy* is too linear. With respect to knowledge of God, I think that not enough weight is given to passages in the minor works which talk of knowledge of God as possible for man on earth (especially *Convivio* IV xii), or more generally of men's capacity for fully actuating the possible intellect (*Monarchia* I iii-iv), scarcely conceivable without a high degree of knowledge of God. Note, too, in this connection the strange absence of any discussion of

the very important, and difficult, passage in the *Purgatorio*, III 34ff (“Matto e chi spera....”). As regards the achievement of moral perfection, some account is needed of Dante’s peculiar view of philosophy in *Convivio* III, where philosophy is more than an abstraction given personal clothing: it/she acts as a person, a vehicle of the graciousness of God analogous to Christ and Christian grace (i; vi 9-13; viii 16-21; xi 6-15 – with which I would, tentatively, link *Mon.* III xi 7-11). Father Foster concludes that the pagans sinned by refusing elevating grace; yet he voices his own dissatisfaction with this: “Nevertheless I find this solution puzzling, and for three reasons ... Secondly, and more seriously perhaps, if the adult pagans in Limbo were all, at some moments of their life on earth, somehow offered grace, why should such a labour of miracles be needed for conveying grace to Trajan and Rhiphaeus (*Paradiso* XX 100-26)?” (p. 252) I find this something of an understatement of the problem referred to. For Father Foster’s conclusion is that the most natural interpretation of *Inferno* I 125 and IV 38 is that Dante believes that morally good pagans are condemned for a *personal* sin of rebellion against God; and with this I agree. But a major problem for Dante, implicit throughout the *Comedy* and explicit in *Par.* XIX is how God’s justice is compatible with the exclusion from heaven of the *whole* pagan order. If we accept that the above conclusion applies to the pagan order as such, then we must accept that Dante thought that simply *as a matter of fact* all pagans committed at least a personal sin of refusing God’s offer of grace though they need not have done; and this seems to me incredible, not simply puzzling.

On a more minor point, I am uneasy at Father Foster’s relegating rather dismissively to a footnote (p. 185 n 65) Thomas’ belief, stated in the *Summa Theol.* 1a 2ae, 2. 7 ad 3um, that God offered a special grace of revelation to some pagans; his accent, in treating Thomas’ solution to how God’s universal salvific will was effective in the pagan world, is on the notion of implicit faith. This latter is psychologically more plausible, and subsequently gained favour in the Church’s tradition to the virtual abandonment of the former, but it imbalances Thomas’ thought to give it almost exclusive attention. It is surely equally puzzling that Dante should have regarded the explicit offer of grace through special revelation as having been restricted to only two pagans, where Thomas says: “*multis gentilium facta fuit revelatio de Christo.*” (*S. T.* loc. cit.) Indeed elsewhere Thomas states equally explicitly: “Probabile est tamen multis generationibus mysterium redemptionis nostrae ante Christi adventum gentilibus fuisse revelatum, sicut patet ex sybilinis vaticiniis”. (*De Veritate* q 14 a. 11 ad 5um) And incidentally, unless one is to believe that Dante consciously rejected Thomas on a point on which one would expect him to have responded enthusiastically, this whole topic raises in an acute form the problem of

how familiar Dante was with Thomas' theology (or, for that matter, with theology more generally. As Father Foster makes clear, the possibility of salvation for all pagans, while not emphasized in the middle ages, was by no means unique to Thomas: see pp. 153-55, 172-73). A bibliographical point: to the 'basic books' on medieval philosophy (p. 215 n56) should surely be added Van Steenberghe's much fuller work: *La philosophie au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain and Paris, 1966).

On presentation, three pluses and two minuses. The reader whose Italian is uncertain need have no hesitation: all passages in Italian are translated. There are two indexes: of themes and authors. The overall visual impact is pleasant: clear type, and footnotes conveniently available at the bottom of each page. On the negative side, more attention could have been given to co-ordinating the footnotes: I found the references distractingly repetitious. More seriously, misprints are unexpectedly and disturbingly numerous for a book, and publisher, of this quality: I noted some fifty, including what appears to be the omission of an entire sentence on p. 221. But these are minor blemishes. This is a rich book, always illuminating, never specious. One hopes that, with Father Foster's impending retirement from his Readership in Cambridge University, we can look forward to further studies from one whose felicity of expression so often matches his subtle mind and cultured heart.

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