

such things as prelapsarian sexuality as "fantasy" or "ethereal." The modest observation with which I would like to close is that, in Elliott's book, there is a close correlation between her use of words like "fantasy" or "ethereal" and those ideas Augustine holds which defy the explanatory categories of social history. For instance, she calls the union of Mary and Joseph an "impossible model" and "surreal" (SM, 51). The question, however, is whether Augustine saw it as a model of the carnal aspects of marriage, or of the "intercourse of the mind" which he thinks he espies in Eden, then hopes for between spouses, and sees as more important than sexual intercourse. It might even be taken to articulate the furthest limit of the discipline and openness to God's will which marriage requires. This is what models presumably do—portray what is desirable for imitation, if not attainment, by the imperfect. This is what Augustine thought was revealed by the glimpse into Eden at the first couple before they rebelled.

In other words, "fantasy" and "ethereal" designate what is specifically theological in Augustine's position, what is based on revelation, what cannot be explained as a projection backward into Eden of fourth- or fifth-century Roman institutions. Augustine's point of view is that by revelation we get a glimpse or hint of the first and last state of the race. Not surprisingly, this does not look much like things as they now are, and we could never have dreamt it up. Eden is an essay in anthropology, in the definition of the race and the sexes, and a promise of what is yet to be.<sup>12</sup> One always misreads Augustine if one does not see that his driving passion is his belief that Genesis is our best evidence as to what we were made for, what we have lost, and what we may yet repossess. He may be deluded; if we begin with an Enlightenment *a priori* he is deluded and fantastical. But, from his point of view, that in Genesis which is least like the Roman world is what is most precious, for it gives us a glimpse, through a mirror darkly, of what will be when Rome is long gone. Our genitals will not forever have a mind of their own, and tuppung, *pace* Elliott, reveals only the least marvelous level of the nuptial relations running through the universe. □

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Paula Fredriksen, "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, 1992), 20-37 at 32-33, on Augustine's interest in anthropology, and 34-35, on his speculation on man's final state.

# Retrieving the Tradition

## Religion and the artist: Introduction to a poem on Dante

Paul Claudel

The outstanding poets have received from God such vast things to express that only the entire universe will suffice for their work.

### I.

Dante is one of five poets who, I believe, deserves the adjective *sovereign* or *catholic* and whose work encompasses the three following traits:

First, *inspiration*. There is not a single poet who does not need to *inspire* before he *respires*; who does not receive from elsewhere that mysterious breath which the ancients called the Muse and which does not resist comparison to the theological *charism* that the manuals designated as *gratia gratis data*. This inspiration is not without analogy to the prophetic spirit, which the Holy Scriptures take great care to distinguish from sanctity. We thus see Caiphus, Balaam, and Balaam's ass itself, resonate under the breath that momentarily animates them. Poetic inspiration distinguishes itself by the gifts of *imagery* and *meter*. With imagery, the poet is like a man who, by ascending to a higher place, can now

see around him a greater horizon, where new relationships establish themselves between things, relationships that are determined not by logic and the law of causality, but rather by a harmonic or complementary association with respect to *meaning*. With meter, meaning is relieved of the constraints of chance and circumstance; it reaches the mind through the ear with a delicious plenitude that satisfies both the soul and the body simultaneously.

Inspiration by itself would not suffice to create one of those great poets I mentioned. To meet the work of grace, the subject would have to respond not only with perfect good will, simplicity and good faith, but also with exceptional natural abilities, governed and administered by a hardy, prudent and subtle intelligence, as well as a consummate experience. That is why, for example, even admirable talents, a Victor Hugo or a Seneca the Tragic, who are poets of genius, are not great poets and must even be placed below those talented writers who responded faithfully to their vocation.

And this spares us from insisting extensively on the second trait, the gift of an extraordinary degree of *intelligence* and discrimination or taste. With intelligence, the poet, who most often receives from inspiration what amounts at best to an incomplete vision, a call, or a vague and enigmatic word, becomes capable—by diligent and courageous study, by a rigorous investigation of his subject matter, by the abnegation of any preconceived idea before the end—of forging a complete spectacle, a world within himself wherein each part is governed by organic relations and indissoluble analogies. By discrimination and an inner taste, the poet immediately knows which things are appropriate and which are not. Discrimination is, so to speak, the negative side of creation. In this manner, one could contemplate in a statue either the statue itself, or the shards that have been chiseled away.

The third trait, finally, is *catholicity*. What I mean by this is that these outstanding poets have received from God such vast things to express that only the entire universe will suffice for their work. Their creation is an image and a vision of the whole of creation, of which their inferior brothers can give only particular aspects. It is by a lack of this catholicity, and at the same time a lack of an essential vigor, that Racine must concede his place to Shakespeare, to whom he is nevertheless far superior in other respects.

If I wanted to summarize all the preceding comments, I could say that the supreme poetic genius, such as it is manifest in Dante, is a particular *grace of attention*.

## II.

The object of poetry, thus, is not dreams, illusions, or ideas, as many believe. Instead, its object is this sacred reality, given once and for all, in the center of which we have been placed. It is the universe of things invisible. It is all this that beholds us and that we behold. All of this is God's work, which cannot be exhausted by any description or any song, whether from the greatest of poets or from the tiniest little bird. And just as the *philosophia perennis* does not, like those stories fabricated by Spinoza and Leibniz, invent abstract beings which no one had seen before their authors, but rather contents itself with the terms furnished by reality; just as it gathers simple principles and draws the names of things around us from the definition of the noun, adjective, and verb; likewise, there exists a *poesis perennis* which does not invent its themes, but eternally gathers that which creation grants it. For example, there is our liturgy, which one never tires of any more than of the spectacle of the seasons. The goal of poetry is not, as Baudelaire says, to plunge "into the depths of the Infinite in order to forge it anew," but rather to plunge into the depths of the finite in order to discover it as inexhaustible. Such a poetry is Dante's poetry.

Let us consider in contrast the various themes that nineteenth-century poetry invented and that have inspired the pages of many a volume already grown dusty. We find that they do not *compose*; they do not try to reconcile themselves with the whole of reality. In this, they resemble heresies. And since books can never destroy reality, it is they themselves that are destroyed. Let us take, for example, the theme of revolt and blasphemy that has provided much eloquent ranting from Byron to Leconte de Lisle. These insults hurled into the void have something childish about them and really do none of us any good. They banish us to our own inner world; they make us into refugees from this grand peace, from which we have enjoyed excluding ourselves, but upon which the sun will not cease to rise and to set in spite of our sulking.

Again: many poets have sung about the coldness of nature, which cares neither for our joys nor for our sorrows. Is it possible to conceive of such grotesque misery? Do we really expect to revive the vegetables with our joys, or to influence barometric pressure with our tears? As Chesterton has insightfully put it, nature is not our mother; she is our sister.

Truth alone gathers, and he who is not with it scatters.

Let us take another theme, that of a *universe without God*. It may satisfy our childishly mischievous desire for independence, but, ultimately, what decay comes to take the place of a well-ordered temple; what sort of debris is this incomprehensible chaos in the middle of which these pretentious artists never cease to set up their easels and pallets! —The theme of *Humanity*. What insubstantial idolatry!

One of the most absurd and hateful scenes commonly taken up by this cheap poetry is that of the immortality promised not to our soul (the great nineteenth-century vulgarizers deny that we have one), but to those purely material elements of which we are composed. Listen to what they say, dear reader! "It is true that what you wrongly consider to be your person will perish, but your flesh will live again eternally among the roses, your breath in the blowing of the wind, your eyes in the glowing fireflies, etc." It is as if one were to say: "Here is the Venus de Milo, which I am going to reduce to rubble. It's true that it will no longer exist as a statue, but it will continue to exist as stone and powder for the sharpening of knives." I hold that from this moment the statue has wholly and absolutely ceased to exist, as much as the rose, now turned to dung. Please spare us your insipid consolations.

Finally, nineteenth-century poetry found its preferred text in the ideas of the *infinite* and *evolution*. There is nothing more hateful to the spirit of a true poet. The idea of a mate-rially infinite, that is to say, a boundless finitude, such as we find it presented in the horrid poem by Victor Hugo entitled *Plein Ciel*—what a scandal to our reason, what a disaster it is for our imagination, which finds itself frustrated in its essential source: the power of order, measure, and disposition that God has given it in the image of his creative Word. The idea of evolution is no less abominable, since it tends to give all of creation an infinitely provisory and precarious character. Earnestly despising the universe's momentary results, these poets entreat us to prefer what is not to what is. A true poet hasn't the least need for grander stars or more beautiful roses. What exists already is enough, and the poet understands that his own life is too short for the lesson it gives and the respect it deserves. He knows that God's works are very good, and he does not require more. He knows that nature, with the insistence of a child who demands to be understood, never ceases to repeat each year, like a word to which it attaches immense importance, the same rose, the same cornflower; and the feisty *erythrium* that pierces the snow

in the month of May with its tiny purple lance: what an immense conglomeration of concentric causes is needed so that this again becomes possible at every winter's end!

Thus the mysterious poet, given its paradigm in Dante, is not he who invents but he who synthesizes and who, in his approach to things, allows us to *comprehend* them.

### III.

Alone among all the poets, Dante depicted the universe of things and of souls not from within the perspective of the spectator, but from within that of the Creator; trying to situate them not within the context of *how*, but of *why*; judging them in a certain way, or rather adjudicating them in view of their relation to their final ends. He understood that in this visible world we do not see whole beings, but, as St. James the Apostle put it, "the beginnings of the creature,"<sup>1</sup> ephemeral signs whose eternal significance escapes us. He attempted to present a moment of time within which an entire history had taken place, tracing the definitive figure that it forms from its contingent origins up to its unchanging results buried in the bosom of God's Wisdom. He spells out a single page from the *Liber scriptus* which is spoken of in the Mass for All Souls.

Is such an attitude legitimate on the part of a Christian poet? Was it possible for him to try to penetrate with his imagination and reason those shadows that envelope our future destiny and whose opacity our modern treatises and predictions seek forever to diminish? Do not the Scriptures say that he who scrutinizes the majesty of God will be crushed and devoured by his glory and that no human eye can ever probe the destiny that God reserves for his elect? Despite this I cannot help but believe that Dante's enterprise was not only legitimate, but even beneficial, and in this context I will permit myself to mention several lines from an English author named Gemble that really struck me:

All hope rests in large part on the support provided it by the imagination. If we are unable to form for ourselves a real conception of the thing desired, we are inclined to let our spirit stray and place it outside the field of our actual interest. Now, we cannot ignore the fact that, for many years, work has been undertaken to undermine, one after the other, each of the foundations upon which the belief in immortality has until recently rested in the popular imagination. If we persist in closing, one after the other,

<sup>1</sup>The apostle adds: We gaze at ourselves in the mirror of our birth.

each of the issues by which a person has sought to attain to his destination, in the end he will abandon this endeavor and will set himself in a different direction. Therefore if people maintain hope and if we continue to tell them that its fulfillment could not possibly take any of the forms they thought it could, in the end they will do an about-face and claim that hope itself is an illusion. Such seems to be the present consequence of our destruction of the vision of a future life in the place of which we have put nothing but a void.

These remarks are perfectly just. Christians are well-advised to desire Paradise, and this desire, like all the others, ought to interest not only our reason but the whole of our being, which includes the soul and the body. We must desire God, of whom it is said in the Our Father that he is in Heaven, and consequently, we must also desire the Heaven that is his abode, a sort of milieu between him and us. "Where the Father is," St. John says, "there also will you be." Now how can we desire in the depths of our heart and our soul, with the help of grace which does not contradict nature but perfects it, something that we cannot form, not just as an idea, but as a sensible image? It was for this reason that the eternal Wisdom, being himself made flesh, addressed us only in parables; rather than using arguments, he explained to us the language of the things around us that have not ceased to speak to us since the day of creation. Things are not an arbitrary veil which conceal hidden meanings. They are really a part—at least—of their meaning, or rather they do not become complete themselves until their meaning is complete. When the Bible uses created things to designate eternal realities, it does so not as some scatterbrained *litterateur* who chooses haphazardly from his repertoire of images, but in virtue of an intimate and natural affinity—nothing can issue from the mouth of God, who created all things by naming them, but what is eternal. There is not a radical separation between this world and the next, which are said to have been created simultaneously (*creavit cuncta simul*), but each forms the catholic unity in different ways, like a book that is said to have been written both *from within and from without*.

It is perhaps for having forgotten these great truths under the work of Jansenism, whose pestilent influence we can never sufficiently regret; it is perhaps for having had contempt for one part of God's work, the noble faculties of the imagination and sense perception (and some madmen would have even tried to include reason itself), that religion has come to suffer through the long crisis from which it has barely begun to heal. This crisis, which reached its peak in the nineteenth century, was

not above all an intellectual crisis.<sup>2</sup> The catalogue of errors has scarcely varied over time, and one could not say that their modern disciples have presented them any more powerfully or seductively. I would rather say that the crisis was the drama of a starved imagination. On one hand, our superficial knowledge of the world has prodigiously increased due to the new materials that science has put at the disposal of each of us; fields of interest have multiplied, calling on all the resources of our intellectual appetite. On the other hand, God belongs to an unknown world, which is also, they say, unknowable, and so it is too easy for minds elsewhere occupied and accustomed only to tactile matters, to confuse this unknown world with Nothing.

This is why it is particularly useful to meditate on Dante's work and lesson in our present time. Some have wanted to make him above all a theologian. This is an untenable and even dangerous exaggeration. Many people are only too ready to believe that theology borrows the poet's beautiful imagery for its own use, and has no other representation of the future life but these fresh illuminations. In reality, it seems that Dante ignored the most profound theses developed by the Sacred Science of his time. His Hell is merely a Hell of the senses; he seems to ignore the suffering of the damned, or of the simultaneous privation of, and need for, God, which is the cruelest suffering of all since its cause is infinite. His Purgatory (from this perspective) exhibits the same defect. The great purging suffering ought to have been not so much fire or hunger as light, the torture of seeing oneself as impure in the face of the eternal Innocence, and to have offended the Father and the Spouse. Finally, in Paradise we find only vague and rather imprecise allusions to the sublime theory of the beatific vision, in which we are allowed to penetrate even to the extent that the divinity somehow adds his powers to our own—like in the Platonic theory of optics where sunlight adapts itself to the powers of the eye—and forms us not into be-

<sup>2</sup>Ultimately, what disturbs Voltaire and his scant modern descendants is not so much the truths contained within the Bible as it is the picturesque splendor of its stories and the language that adorns them. Dante and Shakespeare shock them no less; they too are *excessive and obscure* authors. Such is the humane respect among the *paremii*, like the Parisian janitor who is ashamed to introduce his friends to his mother clothed in her magnificent country-folk finery. Notice the modesty with which our Renan dares not risk the least image without veiling it under a chaste curtain. Many of the people who believe they have classical tastes have nothing more than bourgeois tastes.

ings "like God," according to the Tempter's promise, but truly into "God," fully adorned in the Son's patrimony.

These complaints alter nothing about the unbounded admiration and profound veneration we ought to have for the work of this man from Florence. One has nothing to reproach a poet if he fully attains the goal he seeks, any more than one could reproach a pilgrim travelling to Montmartre for not having gone at the same time to Charonne and Passy. Now, Dante's goal was not to teach us but to lead us, to take us with him, to have us see and touch, and, all the while reassuring our intelligence, to train our imagination by surrounding it only with known forms and familiar objects. Such was his plan, not as a missionary but as a poet, and he carried it out so vividly, so convincingly, with such beautiful language, that, little by little, and despite our doubts and hesitations, we yield to our guiding companion, and we too take up his journey in the flesh; we rhyme our steps with his; we see what he describes, and his prodigious voyage becomes as real for us as that of Robinson Crusoe. We are numbed by the frozen pond; we clamber up the length of the hairy body of the great worm lodged in the center of the terrestrial fruit; we emerge in the middle of the vast expanse of the virgin sea where the fall of a cursed star chased away every human shore; we hear the chant proclaiming the presence of angels in the chill of the antarctic aurora, and the noise of the dark, dark wave, faster and more hidden than the canals of Lombardy, which irrigates the somber fields of Purgatory. In truth, it is likely that the new citizens of the next life never witness the visions of the damned who try to recognize each other by squinting their eyes, "like an old tailor threading a needle or people who meet each other by the light of the moon," or of the beautiful ladies who sing and dance among the worms of Purgatory, or of the sublime clock that the holy doctors fashion in the loftiest heights of Paradise. But what is real is the joy, hope, and terror that the beautiful images chosen by the poet pour into the depths of our hearts. So, the tambourine and viola in the hands of the elect in primitive paintings are but naive images of the sublime harmony established among souls.

#### IV.

The word that explains the whole of Dante's work is love. In his vision, this word finds itself written over the very door of Hell, and is the guide in his itinerary through the three worlds of retribution. It is love, as the poet explains in mysterious and enchanting verse, that forms the secret of the *dolce stile*

*nuovo* that unfolds his narration; it is the secret of his solemn and delicious measure, of his magical progression, where even the most horrid visions cannot alter for us the profound and sovereign gentleness.

Love, for Dante, is a full and integral love, the desire for the absolute good which was sparked in his heart by the innocent glance of a maiden. Fr. Lacordaire explains that there are not two different loves. Indeed, God's love calls upon the same faculties in us as that of other creatures; it draws on that feeling we have that we are not complete alone, that the supreme good that will fulfill us is something beyond us, a person. But God alone is this reality, of which creatures are only an image—I say image, and not phantom, because the creature has its own personal beauty and its proper existence. The removal of this image, this beauty, began Dante's exile; and it is she who, outside the walls of an ungrateful homeland, invited him to the realm of the living.

Dante did not resign himself to separation from his beloved, and his work is nothing but an immense effort of the intelligence and imagination to reunite this world of trials, where he prepares himself, this world of effects which, seen from where we stand, seems the domain of chance and incomprehensible mechanisms, with the world of causes and final ends. His is a gigantic work of engineering to rejoin, to unify, the two parts of creation, to fasten them into one indestructible expression, and thus to achieve a hint of that vision of justice which another great poet says belongs to God alone.

And because the whole of the Divine Comedy finally resumes itself in the encounter between Dante and Beatrice, in the reciprocal effort of two souls separated by death in which each works to bring himself to the other in the solidarity of this world that each has endured, it is this essential encounter that I have tried in turn, after so many other readers, to imagine and to paint; it is this dialogue between two souls and two worlds which forms the subject of the poem to which these lines serve as introduction.

Dante speaks a verse inspired by the drudgery of this base and banal life, ultimately so foreign to the best nature in each of us. He too experienced the same exile that we do—one could say he is the paradigm of the exiled soul, banished from a world in which no part was large enough to hold him. Because he could not remake that world, Dante undertook to judge it and bring it onto the plane of justice to which Dona Bice had invited him. Because he found himself the plaything of chance in this life,

that which inspires the poet's soul is a passionate need for unity, for the absolute, and for necessity, all participating in a rational Cause. He conceived of the human society as a monarchy in which each individual will embraced a central reason. And because the terrestrial horizons could not provide him with this image of a perfect circle, he will seek it by stages in each of those circles destined for punishment or for the purging of the inadequacy of one of our vices, of one of the particular crimes by which we have sinned against the universal and catholic Truth. Hell is not enough to stop him; nor are the painful and delicious detours of Purgatory. Not until the thirty-third canto of Paradise, with the infrangible figure of the Trinity, does he find the principle of the concentric rose whose chosen orders formulate the successive enclosures appropriate to his desire. One last glance at this earth that has been delivered over to him as to a new Caesar, for him to unify within the intelligence and analogy, and under his feet stands Ravenna, that antique imperial city filled with dead basilicas, whose half-submerged earth takes to the air when the sun sets, to be engulfed by water and fire. —One last glance at this earth which has ended for him, and already he hears Beatrice, who has begun to speak. What does she say?

For Dante, Beatrice is love, and in our life, love is the essential element that always eludes our control; it is gratuitous and independent; it is that which intervenes into our tiny little worlds, so comfortably arranged by our mediocre reason, as a profoundly disturbing element. We hear all of the reproaches that the dead woman was able to address to her lover in the sublime thirty-first canto of Purgatory, where Dante, in the presence of the Heavenly City which he will mount by degrees, confesses himself with so much nobility and humility. And we ask ourselves: But doesn't Dante himself have some questions to ask; doesn't he too have some reproaches to make to this lady who so cruelly and suddenly abandoned him? Did he not think to ask of the shade who preceded him along the paths of exile: Why? Why did you do this? It is to this question that Beatrice will quickly respond, and it is not only her that this eternally banished soul has the right to accuse; there is also his terrestrial fatherland, Florence, and the shameful thirteenth-century Italy, so bitter to a soul enamored with order and reason. The lady crowned with olive branches justifies all of these accusations because, she says, if the world were perfect, what would a Redeemer have to do with it? Why see only the superficial and apparent disorder in things rather than (listen to my name!) the hidden joy, praise, and beatitude, which it is precisely the poet's task

to reveal? To this desire for the absolute and necessary which is the heart of Dante's petition, Beatrice sets in opposition the praise of freedom, of an essentially gratuitous grace, of a living God, always new, always a fresh spring on the brink of irruption, never subjugated by the necessity of the universe he created from nothing, a God who is eternally inventing the Heaven of his abode, and whose action will remain for us forever unforeseen. God in his Heaven teaches us things not by explaining them, but by showing them to us so that we may, as it were, do them with him, like the shepherd of Andre Chenier's idyll who places his younger brother's lips and fingers upon the flute. And so he brings us into his creative power, as well as into his work of redemption, by placing in our hands not only material things, but the very souls that depend on us so that we may offer them to him because, in a certain sense, they cannot receive light and salvation except from us. He has allowed us truly to give him something, and not just a fistful of incense and wheat, but all of these immortal souls—or this particular brother laid into our hands. Thus understood, the very defects that we see in things are not a source of sadness for us, but of joy. Lucifer alone considered himself perfect and, just as quickly, fell like a stone under his own weight. It is because all created things are imperfect, because they all have a certain lack, a certain radical emptiness, that they breathe, that they live, that they can enter into relation, that they need God and other creatures, that they lend themselves to every analogy in poetry and love. And these analogies do not have absolute value in themselves; there is no enclosure impermeable to God's grace, there is no measure, according to the Psalmist, that can exhaust God's mercy or that is adequate to our debt of thanking. This infinite universe that appalled Pascal and whose astronomical heavens serve as a conventional image, these billions of stars scattered with a sublime carelessness across the abyss, this is not enough! It will never be enough to repay our debt of gratitude, —says Beatrice.\*—*Translated by David Louis Schindler, Jr.* □

\*This introduction is developed from an address given 17 May 1921 at the invitation of the Catholic Conference on Dante, preceding the reading of Claudel's "Joyful Ode to Celebrate the 600th Anniversary of Dante's Death." Originally published as "Introduction à un poème sur Dante," in *Positions et Propositions*. Copyright Editions Gallimard, 1928; English translation published with permission.