

BLASPHEMOUS POETS

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EARLY in May this year the proctors of Cambridge University took action against *The Granta* in view of complaints that a poem published in that magazine was blasphemous. The affair made a stir in Cambridge and even got into the London papers; and if I take it here chiefly as an occasion for some remarks on the blasphemies of certain long-dead poets, this is not because I consider the *Granta* poem negligible. It was not. The remarks that follow are merely one observer's modest attempt to get the whole subject into focus.

One may start with St Thomas's preliminary definition of blasphemy: 'the term seems to denote the disparagement of some high degree of goodness, and especially of the divine goodness'.¹ In the context certain things are presupposed; in particular that there is such a thing as goodness, that it has degrees, and that there is a maximum goodness called God. 'Blasphemy' is related chiefly to God, as it always has been since the New Testament writers stressed the religious reference of *blasphemia* (in general, scurrilous or abusive language), though this reference was not lacking in classical Greek, just as the wider or secular sense of the term still appears in the New Testament itself. Both Francis Bacon and St Thomas's master St Albert speak of 'blasphemy' against learning or knowledge; others have spoken of blasphemy against nature, friendship, and so on. But these are extensions of a term already appropriated by Christianity to mean disparaging speech about God, or about things and persons closely associated with him.

A broad difference may be noted at this point between the medieval attitude to blasphemy and one common today, at least implicitly, even among Catholics. Medieval Christians, generally speaking, took (I think) little or no account of the blasphemer's attitude to God, his belief or unbelief, prior to his uttering the blasphemy; whereas in any modern discus-

¹ *Summa Theol.*, IIa-IIae, xiii, 1: '... importare videtur quamdam derogationem alicujus excellentis bonitatis, et praecipue divinae'.

sion of the matter that prior attitude is a main consideration. The modern observer wants to know what the blasphemer believes about the God he disparages, and whether he believes in God at all, and he tends to make the charge of blasphemy, in a moral and not a merely legal sense of the term, depend on the answer to these questions. No belief, he tends to say, no blasphemy. He may even call it a 'Catholic sin', as one that presupposes, is even a sort of symptom of, Faith. Very different was the medievals' standpoint; to them unbelief or heresy seemed an excellent disposition to blasphemy, if not already blasphemous. St Thomas distinguished² two sorts of blasphemous utterance, the one expressing a mere 'opinion in the intellect', the other adding to this 'a certain conjoined detestation'. Thus on this view a man's opinions were already blasphemous if they misrepresented God, provided the misrepresentation was culpable (for blasphemy was always *sin*); and the medievals were quicker than we are to notice this sort of culpability, to see error as a sin as well as a mistake. 'Liver of blaspheming Jew', chants the witch in *Macbeth*—she is a medieval witch. In the last analysis the Jew was a blasphemer because he denied our Lord's divinity; and this not for the populace only but also for the theologian, though the latter would carefully distinguish degrees of guilt in that denial. The calmer, more collective, faith of medieval Christians led them, in fact, to stress the objective element in the matter in a way which, to the keen modern sense of the individual subjective factor, seems strangely impersonal. To put it another way, the modern view tends to dramatise blasphemy; which does not necessarily mean to excuse it, still less to idealise it; but it does mean that excuses are more easily found for it.

However, even modern society, or sections of it, occasionally takes action against blasphemers; and the disparity between individual consciousness and social reaction, noted in the case of the medieval Jew, reappears, or might reappear, whenever a man who is no blasphemer in his own eyes, since he does not believe in the God he insults, is charged with blasphemy by the society around him. But between medieval and modern proceedings against blas-

² *loc. cit.*

phemy there is this essential difference, not that the former were frequent and the latter are rare, but that the motive of the former was more religious than social while that of the latter is more social than religious. Generally speaking, the modern man can insult God with impunity, provided he does not disturb the peace.

It is the moralist or the theologian, not the lawyer, who wants to know whether one can really blaspheme against a God in whom one does not believe. For this question assumes that what chiefly matters in blasphemy is the agent's interior relation to God, not the disturbance he may occasion in society; that blasphemy is either a sin or nothing; that if it is merely a social disturbance or, as 'Senator' wrote in the *Cambridge Review* (*à propos* of the *Granta* poem), a 'lapse of taste', then it should be called by some other name, it is not blasphemy. Now I sympathise with this view, but I do not here define the term so narrowly; for here I am writing primarily about literature, not morals; and literature being communication from writer to reader, a piece of writing may reasonably be called blasphemous *literature* if it sharply offends the religious susceptibilities of the reader even though the writer, having no religion, has no such susceptibilities. Whether the reader should counter-attack with legal penalties is another question. If he should, then it is for the lawyers to define blasphemy; the lawyers this time, not the moralists. Such legal defence or counter-attack has nothing directly to do with moral judgment, and should be kept quite distinct from it. The distinction is upheld clearly by the Church: a writer who is placed on the Roman Index incurs a legal penalty which entails, as such, no moral discredit or religious disabilities.

For my present purpose, then, 'blasphemy' includes the writings of both believers and unbelievers. And in practice it must be so. Who is going to decide, in many cases, whether belief, doubt or disbelief had the upper hand in the poet in the act of writing his poem? Of course these terms—belief and the rest—relate to the God insulted by the blasphemy, the God represented by the blasphemer as somehow odious or ludicrous. For, clearly, in blaspheming the blasphemer may affirm and exalt a *different* God, whether the

God of another religion or some substitute for God, 'divine' in a figurative or symbolic sense, as when a rationalist deifies Nature or Reason in the heat of an attack on the God of Christianity. In these cases the blasphemer is a sort of believer, his blasphemy may be, in his own eyes, a sort of crusade; while he is all the more evidently a disbeliever in the God he chooses to blaspheme. Thus Giosu  Carducci's *Hymn to Satan* with its clamorous, self-confident worship of Nature and Reason (which are what the poet meant by the Devil) is much more obviously the work of a non-Christian than is Baudelaire's *Litanies de Satan*.

For convenience I place three boundary-marks on the field I am surveying, so giving this field three corners, one for believing blasphemers (believers in the God they insult), the other two for unbelievers (in the same sense). Let Baudelaire mark the believing corner; not that his religion can be exactly determined, but he is near enough to orthodox Christianity to do for my purpose. And let Carducci and Leopardi take the other two places; Carducci as the unbeliever who blasphemes because he worships an alternative 'God', and Leopardi as the unbeliever who, blaspheming, worships nothing. These are admittedly crude simplifications; refinements may be added later.

To take Carducci first, his attitude to Christianity is pretty clear, and in general his was an uncomplicated if powerful personality, and his art, though for the most part richly and skilfully contrived, has a forthright and easily understood content (the rhetoric once removed)—and nowhere more so, superficially at least, than in the famous *Hymn to Satan*. Yet this 'chitarronata',³ as Carducci himself had the good taste to call it, though facile, ingenuous and vulgar, is an outstanding historical and biographical document. Without ambiguity (apart from the double meaning of 'Satan'), without a trace of irony or self-criticism, it exactly expresses the Liberal creed of the 1860's, the creed of the generation which overthrew the temporal power of the Popes. It is as representative as the patriotic, hot-tempered, hard-working Tuscan professor who wrote it, with his violent, rather provincial hatred of priests. The Liberal politicians, the prac-

³ i.e., a song for a guitar-player.

tical men, might attempt to come to some sort of terms with the Papacy; the mass of Italians might shrink from wholeheartedly abjuring their traditional faith; the poet had no such inhibitions. His cloudy, buoyant quatrains brought it all out, all the confused thoughts and feelings, echoes of paganism, anti-clerical exasperation, a ferment of half-understood rationalism, all this found a voice that everyone could understand or think that he understood. The pagan half of the Italian soul had spoken. If anyone shrank from the word 'Satan'—and the followers of the Deist Mazzini were not all sure that they liked to hear God's adversary applauded, even if the Catholics liked it still less—there was Carducci ready to tell them that by Satan he meant Nature and Reason, 'Queste due divinità dell'anima mia . . . e di tutte le anime generose e buone'. Mark those adjectives, 'generous' and 'good'. Whether or no it is possible to choose evil as evil, hatred as hatred, to deny the ultimate value of life, the identity of being and goodness, certainly Carducci had no such intentions. He was no nihilist; quite the reverse. Unlike J.-P. Sartre he did not have to destroy God's existence to assert man's. Carducci's Satan is a pantheistic version of God:

'. . . de l'essere
 principio immenso,
 materia e spirito,
 ragione e senso'.

He is in fact everything, except the abnegations required by Christ and upheld with dogged consistency by the Catholic Church. Yes, the Church above all is what counts here; conceived in a quite concrete if luridly emotional way. It is the 'vecchia vaticana lupa cruenta' against which the poet flaunts his satanic banner; and note how Dante's image of the 'wolf' takes a peculiarly nineteenth-century anti-clerical tint from 'vaticana'. Carducci's blasphemy is anti-clericalism run riot, exasperated to an obsessional loathing which overflows, as Maria Sticco says, 'from the clergy to the doctrines of the Church, and from these to her Founder'. In his somewhat chastened old age, shortly before he died, Carducci wrote to a lady whom his violent impieties against Christ had distressed: 'Confesso che mi lasciai trasportare dal principio

romano, in me ardentissimo; e fu troppo. Ma quasi al tempo stesso soavi cose pensai e scrissi di Cristo. . . . Resta che ogni qualvolta fui tratto a declamare contro Cristo, fu per odio ai preti.⁴ Perhaps this half-apology is not the whole story, but it gets some support from the fact that his most violently anti-Christian book, *Giambi ed Epodi*, was written in the 1860's when the new Italian government's hesitation before striking down the temporal power had brought Carducci's impatient anti-clericalism to boiling point. In Italy anti-Christianity is nearly always political, and in Carducci this political, anti-clerical factor was especially strong, and even, perhaps, decisive. How typical is the close of the *Hymn to Satan*:

‘hai vinto il Geova
de i sacerdoti’.⁵

If I have delayed on Carducci it is because he so clearly represents one of the three main attitudes by which I distinguish blasphemous poets. Though disbelieving in Christ—because, he said, he detested the Church, and the explanation is at least plausible—Carducci had religious belief of a kind, a misty faith in God, in the ultimate goodness and reasonableness of existence, a faith which acts, beneath all the paganismising rhetoric and anti-clerical furies, as a hidden check holding him back, well back, from the quite negative blasphemy, so to call it, which may accompany a more complete unbelief. Has this third attitude a representative in poetry? Several names suggest themselves, and Leopardi's, which I propose here, is not in all respects suitable. To this great poet's exquisitely aristocratic refinement nothing was less congenial than the crude frontal attack, the insulting violence we associate with blasphemy. And somehow one cannot imagine Leopardi writing hymns to a symbolic Satan; still less, like Baudelaire, to a Satan he half believed in. He has this further difference from Carducci (not from Baudelaire) that his mind was extremely unpolitical and therefore not

⁴ ‘I admit I let myself be carried away by the Roman question, which I felt very intensely; and I went too far. Yet at about the same time I was able both to think and speak gently of Christ. . . . The fact remains that whenever I did allow myself to abuse Christ, my motive was hatred of the priests.’

⁵ ‘Thou hast conquered the priests’ Jove.’

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disposed to active anti-clericalism. Whether, had he lived a normally long life, on past the mid-nineteenth century, he would have joined in the Risorgimento to the extent of writing diatribes against Pius IX, is a question to play with. But the thing is not likely—despite *La Ginestra*, of which more in a moment. Leopardi had hardly enough faith for it; faith in man, let alone God. If he *was* a blasphemer he was one who started, as near as possible, from atheism. Not that he reached this extremity all at once; but he tended towards it constantly. And this ‘list’, this ‘leaning in the will’, as Hopkins would say, came from a sadness in him so deep-rooted, so malignant, that it was only a matter of time before it infected, in his eyes, not only his immediate human environment but all Nature and all reality. His poetry is all a swift unfolding and lyricising of a universal pessimism. His strict Catholic education did nothing to stop the rot. The very absence from his poetry of explicit impiety against God or Christ or the Church is itself a sign that Christian belief and sentiment had no hold on him once his childhood was past. Yet religion in some sense (personified as ‘the gods’ or ‘fate’ or ‘nature’) always haunted him, but always as an illusion, and mostly as a vile though potent illusion which he had to defy and unmask:

‘Guerra mortale, eterna, o Fato indegno
teco il prode guerreggia
di cedere inesperto; e la tiranna
tua destra, allor che vincitrice il grava
indomito scrollando si pompeggia,
quando nell’alto lato
l’amaro ferro intride,
e maligno alle nere ombre sorride.’⁶

This grandiloquent defiance (from an early poem) is worth quoting only as an expression of the Leopardian attitude—a partial expression, however, which omits the essential, ever-recurring note of *disappointment*. Life, he insists, is a broken promise: youth is the promise, maturity

⁶ ‘O ignoble Fate, the brave man wages perpetual, relentless war against you. He knows not how to surrender, but, triumphantly shaking off your tyrant hand as it bears down crushingly on him and staining the cruel sword in his own proud heart’s blood, he bitterly smiles at the black shadows.’

the betrayal and Nature the eternal cheat. This is Leopardi's obsession, as anti-clericalism was Carducci's, and out of it he made poems of haunting beauty, immortal laments. Yet beauty, he said, was the contrary of truth. He exactly reversed Keats's formula; while contributing, as a consummate artist, to increase the beauty he strove to unmask.

The strongest expression, not of his sadness but of the rebellion against 'Nature' that sprang from it is *La Ginestra*, written at Naples shortly before his death. It is a hymn of hate against the whole non-human environment of our life. If it leaves, more than any other poem of Leopardi's, a smell of blasphemy on the air, this comes, I think, from his pressing, here, further than elsewhere, the division between the human and the non-human parts of reality. This division becomes a conscious and complete opposition, accepted as a motive for action. There is a stress here, new in Leopardi, on effective and *practical* atheism. Mankind is called upon to make hatred of Nature (and whatever 'she' represents) a motive for conquering Nature. The poem expresses, implicitly, the practical atheism latent in a certain consciousness of human scientific power and achievement. Its starting-point is a meditation on the devastated, lava-encrusted slopes of Vesuvius. Here, in this destruction, Mother Nature is shown as she really is—the Enemy:

'Non ha natura al seme
dell'uom piu stima o cura
che alla formica.'⁷

Very well, then, the gloves are off; let us men (admitting once and for all 'il mal che ci fu dato in sorte') join forces at last and fight the real foe. We have fought one another enough, it is time we fought the world, the Universe around us; not with any hope of final victory, but to assert the hard truth that man is a stranger in the world owing no piety or loyalty to anything whatever except himself. From his 'basso stato e frale', from this 'grain of sand called the Earth', let man look out on reality and dare it to do its damndest—knowing that ultimately it will.

Even Leopardi has been claimed as an unwilling witness to the Faith; on the strength, no doubt, of the augustinian

⁷ 'Nature has no more care of men than of ants.'

theme of *irrequietum cor nostrum*, the theme developed by Pascal: 'Toutes ces misères-là même prouvent sa grandeur. Ce sont misères de grand seigneur, misères d'un roi déposé'. And on this reckoning most blasphemies may be unconscious prayers. And this reckoning seems, paradoxically, easier to make in the case of the atheist Leopardi than in that of the pantheist or deist Carducci. And there are two reasons for this: first that Leopardi is less political, secondly that he is more philosophical, than Carducci. Much less politically motivated than Carducci's, the Leopardian attack on religion, its 'blasphemy', is much less an attempt to substitute for the Christian promise a man-made, earthly paradise. Where (in *La Ginestra*) Leopardi comes nearest to proposing the substitution he still bases it on despair and the conversion of mankind to despair. It remains, as he presents it, a counsel of despair. And secondly, having a more philosophical mind than Carducci's, when Leopardi attacks God he may be superficially less shocking than Carducci, but he states far more deeply and clearly the fundamental religious alternative—God or nothing.

My third figure, Baudelaire, is reckoned a 'blasphemer' on the strength, chiefly, of the four poems collectively entitled *Révolte* in editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. And interesting documents they are. But Baudelaire seems to me a half-hearted blasphemer; those four poems were written in youth, and his later work has a different inspiration. But he did not forget the *theme* of blasphemy; and in *Les Phares*, if I have not misunderstood him, he works it into a magnificent restatement of Pascal's theme of the 'roi déposé':

'Ces malédictions, ces blasphèmes, ces plaintes . . .
 C'est un cri répété par mille sentinelles,
 un ordre renvoyé par mille porte-voix;
 c'est un phare allumé sur mille citadelles,
 un appel de chasseurs perdus dans les grands bois!
 Car c'est vraiment, Seigneur, le meilleur témoignage
 que nous puissions donner de notre dignité
 que cet ardent sanglot qui roule d'âge en âge
 et vient mourir au bord de votre éternité!'

Here, then, are some of the bases for judgment, for seeing in the theme of 'blasphemy' issues more complex than those who took part in the recent Cambridge controversy may have suspected. Any examples may be arbitrary, but the evidence is larger than the dimensions of a university dispute and the issue more enduring.



THE NEW ROMANTICISM

A Comment on 'The Living Room'

IAN GREGOR

THOSE critics who felt uneasy about the nature of Mr Graham Greene's achievement in *The End of the Affair* will not be reassured by his first excursion into drama. *The Living Room* raises in a particularly forceful way a problem that has always been attendant on his work—that of finding what Mr Eliot has termed a satisfactory objective correlative, or 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately invoked'. The same point might be expressed by saying that Mr Greene's work tends to lack artistic inevitability, so that the tale tends either to be arbitrarily controlled by the informing theological interest, or it is quite inadequate to convey the complexity of that interest. In *Brighton Rock*, for instance, the narrative pattern is obviously incapable of carrying the deeper meanings of the tale; the distinction between good and evil and right and wrong, with which the novel is so much concerned, cannot be said to arise