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READING / "Christ draws me totally": Jacopone and the paradox of a total love

Daniile Zardin

martedì 17 maggio 2011

There is a *lauda* verse by Jacopone da Todi, which now enjoys well-deserved fame: "Christ draws me totally to himself, everything is beautiful." It is verse 112 of the *lauda* traditionally numbered 90 (but No. 89 in the most recent critical edition of the praises, hot off the press from the publisher Olschki in Florence, by Matteo Leonardi), which begins with the heartfelt invocation of The Love of Charity.



Cimabue, Christ (1268-71), Church of San Domenico, Arezzo

The most natural curiosity may arise from the words of the great religious poet who stands, with St. Francis, at the beginning of the Italian literary history, to look closely at the context in which the fragment which is the object of our attention is inserted. It can also be an opportunity to return to confront a crucial aspect, long underestimated, of the tradition to which we are heirs: namely, the evocative power of the medieval *lauda* as a matrix of prayer and religious song in the world of the Italian Low Middle Ages and the modern age. Yet it was a question which also attracted one of the leading scholars of literary studies of the twentieth century, Natalino Sapegno (Friar Jacopone, Nino Aragno, 2001, with a preface by Carlo Ossola), and which several other specialists, including Giacomo Jori and Elena Landoni, have subsequently taken up and developed (to Jori, for example, we are indebted for valuable surveys on the modern readings and the dissemination of Jacopone through the printing press, between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, until the culmination of the Baroque Age and beyond).

But let's stop here, with Jacopone. The stanza in verse 112 should be re-read in its entirety:

Now, a new creature, I in Christ am born,

The old man stripped away; -- I am new-made;

And mounting in me, like the sun at morn,

Love breaks my heart, even as a broken blade:

Christ, First and Only Fair, from me hath shorn

My will, my wits, and all that in me stayed,

I in His arms am laid,

I cry and call --

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'O Thou my All,
O let me die of Love!

Concentrated in the space of a few lines, we see a cluster of some of the basic features of the type of experience which Jacopone wants to introduce to the devoted reader in his ballad, carrying him with the force of strong and harsh language, which does not yield to maudlin sentiment.

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The theme of "transformation" is central. Entering the dialectical relationship with the charity of Christ, we are attracted by the lure of his "super-ardent" love which triggers a dynamic that can only be poorly compared to a man courting his beloved. The inevitable result is a reciprocal identification, which cancels the distance and makes of the two, one. The love of Christ, when it comes to capturing the heart of the person, shakes him up and leaves no respite. It can make him "crazy", this is how Jacopone imagines to translate in human speech what escapes a full and safe grasp: "I cannot give form to the semblance I see." Love "makes me go crazy", "holds me in his Bailia" (his lordship). So the man who loves Christ is led as into a progressive vortex to identify himself with the object he looks at: he becomes a new man, "almost Christ" (v. 99): "In Christ the soul is transformed united to God in all his divinity." It is from this union that a new life emerges which breaks through the hard crust of the "old creation".



Cimabue, Christ (1268-71), Church of San Domenico, Arezzo

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You immediately notice that the drama of the religious sense entirely sinks into the burning warmth of affection. The "I" is confronted by a You who is physically perceived; with whom is established a kind of hand-to-hand combat, which is a real struggle to overcome the resistance of a diaphragm that separates. The believer, lured by the love and "beauty" of the form in which Christ reveals himself, has gone beyond the "measure" of the usual calculations of control over his life and his short-sighted selfishness. Jacopone writes that he has been "captured" and forced to move and think and enter a logic dominated by completely changed criteria (to which he alluded, of course, when speaking of "madness"); "taken" by the love that draws him, "wounded" by the knife that seems to cut his heart in two, what matters is that the loving "I" be not "reluctant". It should not put first its fear and the distance from its initial strangeness.

To accept the paradoxes wherein the poetic language of Jacopone is forced to plunge, of course, one must avoid judging by the patterns of our rational and hyper-intellectualized language. This requires enormous deference, because we must begin to move forward, on tiptoe, into the castle of the great Christian mystics, from afar. In Jacopone, however, there always remains a connection to the flesh of pulsating life. One wants to go straight to the center, where everything is converging to. But there is a link of complete semblance

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which can still connect us moderns to the dramatic daring of a "fool for Christ" which was Jacopone (as were many who followed in his footsteps centuries later).

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This element of unity in which we recognize ourselves is the utmost clear and granitic underlining of the objective dimension of the relationship with the infinite Mystery that saves. In the lauda of Jacopone, as is seen very well in the stanza which contains the famous verse 112, the emphasis is not placed on religious fantasy, or on the need of man who moves in search of an ultimate answer to the demands imposed by his heart and mind. Man answers, stammering, or attempts to do so. But the initiative is that of an Other. Therein lies the secret heart of the genius of Jacopone's Christian realism. It is God himself who makes himself present to man and draws him, not vice versa.

The Mystery breaks in and calls to adhesion: it would suffice to yield and say yes. The call does not require a tremendous fascination with the sacred that inspires terror, thundering from the skies of the ancient pagan religions. The mystery in Christ is made flesh, companion to the same human condition of the living person. He can still be encountered today: anyone can say in which way. He appears in the full force of the positive, shining in the glory of the signs that strike us: the "beauty" of a promise of a redeemed humanity, who even with the wounds of his injuries and his ancient evil, sees a wide open chance for an otherwise unattainable good, the true ownership of things, happiness and the ultimate acceptance even of the limit from which we cannot escape. First of all, the Mystery of he who was sacrificed for us draws us with the "love of charity" which tears man away from his status as a beggar and brings him back to the source of true life.

To this supreme "love" Jacopone devotes the overwhelming anthem of the last fifty verses of his ballad. It is a long rhythmic litany, in which by the obsessive scanning of the word "love" the poet gives free rein to his desire to be totally "embraced" by Christ. The invocation becomes a stubborn lament, like a faint cry: "to always cry love ... Love, love, everything calls out." To be "transformed in You", one has to be invited to let oneself be "captured", as he has experienced. "Wounded", you only have to accept to enter into the perspective of a changed existence: "transform me into you." It describes an experience of union, expressed in bold symbolism, but extremely evocative of the "sinking", or the collapse in the flow of love that is communicated by God to man: *Amor mio desioso, / Amor mio delettoso, anegame en amore. Quando si smesurato me te davi, / tollevi da me tutta mesuranza (...) Tu da l'amore non te defendesti.*



Cimabue, Christ (1268-71), Church of San Domenico, Arezzo

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(Translation by Sharon Mollerus)

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