

VOCATION AND EVOCATION: FAITH AND POETRY IN FATHER DAVID MARIA TUROLDO, ITALY'S FOREMOST RELIGIOUS POET

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Today in drawing your attention to the work of the poet father David M. Turoldo I would like to explore the theme of religious poetry in the perspective that all true poetry and art - in so far as they are an expression of man's search for meaning and response to beauty - are by their nature religious, ie they are an harmonizing and integrating activity, and quite literally, "poiesis". I have chosen father David, (a Servite priest with an impressive record of religious essays, dramas, and especially poetry) not only because he stands as the foremost contemporary Italian religious poet, but also because his work is emblematic of the intimate merging of the religious and poetical experience.¹

Father David's life was shaped by a strong vocation for love and justice which found expression in his public activities as well as in his poetry which was an evocation (e-voco), a calling forth of spiritual energies. He always opposed a distinction between religious and non-religious poetry because he saw no real difference between the poetical event and the event of prayer: to sing or to pray - whether it be the communal liturgic celebration in which he excelled, or the private colloquium with its creator - these were for him only two aspects of the same effusion of the soul. Above all he had the capacity to live intensely and to realize through liturgy and poetry (vocation and evocation) the transformatory truth of the Logos.

Giuseppe Turoldo, the last of nine children was born in 1936 in Friuli (northern Italy) from a very poor family of peasants. All his life he remained faithful to his origins and roots, making his the cause of the poor and keeping a strong link with his region, even if he left it as a very young man when he joined the order of the servants of Mary, a 14th century monastic order. He then emblematically changed his name into David and in so doing he prefigured his later vocation as a poet and as the compiler of a beautiful metrical free translation of the

biblical Psalms which is now in use in many Italian churches.

Sent to the diocese of Milan during the war he was one of the first Servites to enrol at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart where he graduated in philosophy with a thesis on existentialism with the revealing title: *For an Ontology of Man*. His Sunday homilies at the Servite centre of S. Carlo in Milan soon showed his great gift as a talented, fiery and also rather revolutionary preacher, who soon attracted the malevolent attention of the local fascist police. "Resistance is a theological virtue" he used to say later when reflecting on the experience of those years. He was in fact actively involved with the Catholic resistance in the city and contributed to the clandestine paper *L'Uomo* (man) which also saw his first work as a poet published. In the fifties he was with his friend father Camillo de Piaz, co-founder and animator of the Servite cultural centre in Milan (Corsia dei servi), which was quickly to become a pole of attraction for those who believed in the cause of the spiritual and cultural renewal of the Church in application and even anticipation of the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which was hailed by him as a key event in the history of Catholicism.

Endowed with a powerful and overwhelming personality, great eloquence and an acute intellect, but also a man of passion and passionate beliefs, in those years he also became actively involved with the humanitarian project of Nomadelphia, a community founded by the priest don Zeno Saltini and which aimed at the support of the orphans of war in an attempt to literally apply the evangelical principles of true fraternity. But the enthusiasm and involvement of father David and don Zeno were seen by the church of Milan as too radical and finally attracted official opposition. The community was closed; father David's activities were censured; he was interdicted from preaching by the Bishop of Milan; eventually he was banished from Italy. He accepted all in true spirit of obedience, though he made no mystery of his views, and kept frequent contacts with friends and intellectuals all through his ten-year long virtual "exile". In those years abroad he came into contact and supported the Church of Liberation in South America, especially Nicaragua and Salvador. He used to say "a man of faith: the more consistent with his faith, the more revolutionary he becomes", and "nothing is more revolutionary than peace". Yet to those journalists who recently tried to misrepresent him as a dissident, he said: "I never fought 'against', I always fought 'for'".²

He was finally allowed to return to Italy with the support of the bishop Gaddi, whom he convinced to entrust to his pastoral care the

small parish of Fontanella, near the Cluniac priory of S. Egidio in Sotto il Monte, the birthplace of Pope Roncalli, the Pope he so much loved and admired. There he established the Ecumenic Centre John XXIII, and the annexed House of Emmaus, a centre for cultural and spiritual renewal which is still thriving. He lived there for thirty years and used this as a base for his multiform activities as a liturgic commentator and writer. He also delivered many lectures, took care of the television religious program 'Tempo dello spirito', and published extensively as an essayist, translator and columnist in the catholic paper, but above all as a poet. With only few interruptions, he was able to continue, a forty-year long impressive production of poetry which had started in 1948 and only ended with his death in 1992 after a three-year long fight against cancer. When he succumbed to death he was still writing a commentary in poetry on the Psalms. The poetical vocation which he never wanted to surrender, ("I cannot but sing, to sing is compulsive for me") was even in the end his salvation.

Truly all his life was constellated by many acts of courage and intellectual independence which were at times extremely controversial and provocative. Examples of this are the signing in favour of the referendum on divorce, or the public denunciations of the present Pope's silence on the issue of the South American's Church of Liberation. He also highlighted the danger faced by the hierarchy of the Church in its change from a source of spiritual authority into a system of power, in connivance with totalitarian and exploitative political systems.³ His public gestures and views were often "scandalous" in the evangelical sense: it is no coincidence that one of his books is called *The Scandal of Hope*, because hope, even more than faith was seen by him as the theological virtue most needed in our times of crisis, just as he always emphasised the need for justice, without which charity has no sense. Truly a man of our times, even his spirituality and faith were complex, fraught with apparent contradictions and paradoxes, and not immune to doubt: "To hope is always more difficult than to believe".⁴

I have briefly sketched out some of father David Turoldo's life because it is difficult to separate his personality from his poetry which often reflects his lifetime commitment to the cause of the poor and especially to the Word. I am, however, more interested in his latest work in which he was able to detach himself from the political and social milieu and, confronted by the mystery of death, plunge with dramatic intensity into the depths of a mystical relationship with the divine which took the shape of both an encounter and a fight with the

noumenic. Then his poetry - finally purified from the occasional, the historical and the polemic elements - impregnated with the splendour of the biblical language which remains a constant reference point of his work - he was able to express himself with accents of unprecedented strength and novelty,⁵ within the Italian religious and poetical tradition, reminding us of certain Spanish mystics, especially his beloved St. John of the Cross. The angelomachia, the fight against the divine, is in fact a constant theme in his later poetry and the apocalyptic and eschatological perspectives lend to his voice a prophetic intensity.⁶ In fact he deeply identifies with the biblical Job, Qohelet and Jonas, or Lazarus the poor wretch at the door of the rich man in the New Testament.⁷ These biblical figures become for him the archetype of the man of God intensely suffering in his never quenched thirst for the divine, desperately dreaming for a meeting which is always delayed. "He is always far away, invisible", cursed by the scourge of doubt for the apparent absence of a God who coaxes his lover to a frenzy of love, yet always withdraws from a close encounter, ("Worse than dead, is God perhaps absent?") and whose merciful nature is in apparent contradiction to the enigma of the presence of evil in human history.

As one of his critics, the catholic intellectual Carlo Bó has observed that in order to judge his work one cannot apply purely literary categories, in fact the reader needs to be attuned, "in consonance", participation or "communion" with the author. This partly explains why his poetry has for a long time been ignored even dismissed by official criticism as simply the work of "a priest who writes poetry".

The nature of his religious experience is very complex and even 'heretical'.⁸ He passionately believes in the intimate link and mutual interdependence between the divine and man, because "the face of the mystery of God is man" and while man needs God, God also needs man. The creature is in fact the consciousness ('coscienza') of the creator, who therefore needs man in order to reveal Himself, and suffers with man for his stubborn resistance to the embrace of love and unity, and his blind idolatric adoration of "the many gods of nothingness" of modern materialism. "Che se coscienza dispare,/ sei solo Tu/ a perdere,/ Signore" ("Because if our consciousness disappears, you will be the only loser, my God". See: "Mai che l'informe s'arrenda" in *Nel segno del Tau* p.66). Tuoldo's most original poetry takes the form of an attempted dialogue, and often a debate and a quarrel of the creature with his creator, a colloquium at times extremely tender. More often there is a desperation between the

you and the Thou (the dichotomy tu/Tu, which appears mostly in *Nel segno del Tau*), the lover and the beloved, where the divine interlocutor always remains silent and invisible: "Ma tu/una risposta, mai!" (But you never answered!) See: "Una risposta mai" in *Nel segno del Tau* p.73.

The sense of his final meditation was in fact encapsulated in the words: "Nobody can see God", which appear as the subtitle of one of the posthumously published books.

Facing with courage his approaching death, a death invoked as "sister and friend", approaching the moment of truth, when he would experience either the embrace of the beloved Logos, or the dissolution into nothingness, his poetry, purified of all occasional and polemic motifs, poured out in accents of prophetic and mystic intensity and achieved a seemingly impossible balance between the apophatic tradition of the *via negativa* (the principle of ineffability, by which God cannot in any way be named) and the *via pulchritudinis*, typical of the Servite order, the way of enthralled praise of the beauty of creation as a means of leading the creature to the Creator. Therefore his poetry has always a sensual, sensuous, even erotic quality, an eroticism based on a very personal experience of the Word which finds its biblical reference point in the *Song of Songs*:⁹

Poetry is the metaphysical moment of creativity, the word making itself within the soul, within the Logos, its source being a mysterious tenderness, a grace which makes the heart vibrate and illuminates the mind's eye, so that one is finally able to realise the essence of things and to sing of beauty and love: poetry is an intimate embrace with all creatures, a grasping of things in the heart while you feel at the heart of things, in communion.¹⁰

His poetical language becomes able to unite the two dimensions of communication and communion which have always marked the sacred utterance in all different religious traditions;¹¹ history and eternity, speech and utterance, liturgy and poetry are all brought together while all these planes of experience interpenetrate each other because of Turolfo's central orientation to the mystery of the Word where human language reflects unhindered the shining living truth of the Logos. In this perspective one should understand his claim to be simply "a servant of the Word", as well as the meaning of these verses:

Poets are scribes of the mystery

and:

Words are like the Christ's wounds, an opening through which one can perceive the infinite within the finite.¹²

For father David in fact there are three solemn moments in our life: silence, prayer and 'song' (as he likes to call the poetical activity identifying its nature as an outpouring from the original sacred resonance, the creative utterance of God being the archetype for all individual acts of creativity). In these three moments, he says, we are able to touch eternity; but rather than distinct activities, poetry and prayer are for him two modulations of the same reality which originates from, and ends in, silence; not the empty silence of having nothing to say, but the full silence of con-templation, of inhabiting a sacred space which is created in the temple within, as "the mind descends into the heart". See *Il fuoco di Elia profeta*, 1993, p.63.

So, naturally for him "Song is prayer, poetry, music" and "nobody can tell whether God is the Sound, the Silence, the Word, or all of this together in one". It is through song that man seems to be able to reach an ontological rather than gnoseological union with God, because even if God cannot be seen, nor named, nor known in any way:

"God and man will always sing together. Without faith there is no song. Faith is the divine breath flowing into the breath of man".¹³

Tracing back the etymology of the word 'discourse' to the root DIS - COURSE, poetry becomes connected for Turolfo with the original act of sound flowing from the pregnant silence of the divine source which manifests itself as the Logos, while adoration becomes etymologically connected with the act of making silence (*ad-orem*), of stilling the inner noise in order to hear the voice within. This is the genesis of father David's loftiest poetry, which he calls "the sweat of my soul", the result of great inner concentration and of the effort to open one's innermost essence to the divine word: "Let the word resonate in the shell of one's own heart" he sings in one of his ecstatic later poems (*Nel segno del Tau*). Yet one should always keep in mind that his contemplative life was of a special kind: his volcanic nature and incredible vitality, his passionate commitment to the cause of social justice, his own powerful and even egocentric personality would not

easily allow him to reach the detachment and withdrawal from everyday life which mark the real contemplative and which he longed for in vain. In fact a friend called him "a contemplative who could live with people" while others have pointed out his need for the reassurance of human friendship and affections. Therefore, even his songs of a mystical nature always show an inner tension and an intensity which reveal conflict rather than appeasement, search rather than certainty. At the heart of his experience of the divine there is a nearly manicheistic perception of a divinity always threatened by 'the great evil', the great nothingness, the gulf which always threatens to swallow creation and yet has the positive function of being a barrier, a frontier, on which the divine essence is forced to manifest itself visibly in order to distinguish itself from the cloud of the great Unknowable. Turolto's poetry is truly an act of 'evocation', where he desperately tries to conjure up, to evoke the divine presence by denouncing its obstinate absence; his, is really a *deus absconditus*, a hidden god, a "mysterium tremendum et ineffabile", who only in too rare privileged moments of illumination reveals itself to father David as a disembodied "eye" or a plummeting hawk, a dazzling light, or a burning and fiery ocean of love. These images full of tension and potentially destructive crop up in many a poem, especially in the collection *Nel segno del Tau*, and express the feeling of inner devastation which was nevertheless instrumental in the process of sublimation through poetry.

"Burning with desire until the days are altars of ashes" he confesses to be a "theomaniac", mad with the love for God, "delirious", with his senses crying out in his "hunger for God", his love a "pure folly", his poetry "cries of a wounded animal".

In his last days he confessed to a friend that he held only one remorse: not to have let himself be loved; he had perhaps discovered that the precondition to mystic union is the total receptivity and the stillness of the mind, the tenderness of the soul of which some of the mystics have spoken: and that what one should do in order to let oneself be loved by one's Creator is, "Not even to think, to let God free to dispense His grace as he wills, because we do not know, we do not know" (*Anche senza a nulla pensare/ lasciare libero Iddio/ che usi grazia/come a Lui piace:/ poiché noi non sappiamo,/ non sappiamo!* "Ballata del pellegrino" in *Nel segno del Tau* p.33).

REFERENCES

1. This is also probably the reason why official criticism has so far, and only with a few noticeable exceptions, not fully dealt with his unusual poetical work. Though my claim that Turolto is the foremost contemporary religious poet of Italy is still unsupported by official criticism, I have no doubt that critical work in progress on various aspects of his work will soon substantiate this claim. On the other hand he unequivocally stated the coincidence of his poetry and his militant attitude: "My poetry coincides with my vocation that is to communicate and deliver ... it is not an aesthetical event, it is a human event". Interview with Elena Granata, *Il Caffé* II, 9 (1986) p.11, while later he emphasised its confessional value: "To write is to confess, to offer oneself, to free oneself ... to dip into one's own blood to tell yourself what He, the friend, has made of you", Turolto, D.M (1992) *Il dramma é Dio Il divino, la fede, la poesia* (Milan: Rizzoli, p.14).
2. In an interview he said that he had never in his life joined the "crowd of dissent" (dissenso), neither looked for consensus (consenso), he simply always searched to find the "sense" (senso), the meaning of life.
3. He made many statements in his homilies, essays and lectures on the fundamental value of poverty, when it is lived with dignity and which is opposed to the negative state of indigence and destitution and he believed that a church which did not support and embrace the cause of the poor, sharing the poverty as a value, was not a true church. In this sense his to be seen his criticism of the present "triumphalistic" tendency of the church of John Paul. "The Church, either it is for the poor, of the poor, poor herself, or it is not an image of the Kingdom of God". Poverty is "to have one's own heart free from things" and there is a "difference between the poor priest and the priest who is poor". See the interview with V. Volpini in "Benedetta poverta", *Famiglia Cristiana*, N.45,1989 and with G.Caimi "Per una chiesa povera per un mondo di speranza" in *Il Piccolo*, February 1990, Milan.
4. In his interview with G. Remondi he also added "If you are charged with God you can see the world as it is, therefore you can hope to change it", *Ibid.*
5. The 'case' Turolto in Italian literature is the anomalous nature of the poetry of a writer who belonged to no school (though influenced in his early poetry by hermeticism and especially the late Ungaretti) while his production by its nature hardly fits into any literary category.
6. This feature was noticed by Luigi Santucci in his important preface to the anthology of poems: D.M. Turolto, Poesie (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1971). This apocalyptic aspect of his work comes forth in the last collection Canti Ultimi (Milan: Garzanti, 1991). See also the earlier collections: *Il Sesto angelo*, Poesie scelte (prima e dopo il 1968) (1976), Milan: Mondadori and; *Il grande male* (1987) (Milan: Mondadori), in particular the group of poems "Mia apocalisse".
7. On Job, with whom he personally identified himself, he wrote the drama La casa di fango (1951) and, La parabola di Giobbe (1992), Cens, Sotto il Monte, Bergamo. Posthumously published was his book of poems Mie notti con Qohelet (1992) Garzanti. The figure of the parable of the poor Lazarus appears in the subgroup of poems "Nuovo Lazzaro dell'Amore" in Nel segno del Tau (Milan: Schweiller, 1988). On the biblical origin of his themes and language see also his statement, "Who wants to understand me should look at the biblical

psalms, this cry towards God" Introduction to Il fuoco di Elia profeta, (ed) Elena Gandolfi Negrini.

8. See in *Canti Ultimi* the collection *Prorsus and Versus* which is subtitled "Motifs for an heretical poem" which contains some of the most revealing meditations on the enigma of evil (spurred by a page by Dostowieskij in the *Brothers Karamanzov* on why God should permit the children sufferance, which appears as a preface to the group of poems) and on the nature of the mystical quest.

9. The great allegory of the song of Song appears in many poems: See the group of poems *La sublime allegoria* in Canti ultimi which also reappears in Mie notti con Qohelet.

10. See Turoldo's introduction to A. Levi, Dialogo sulla tenerezza (Sotto il Monte: Cens, 1984).

11. See J.N. Powell, The Tao of Symbols (New York: William Morrow, 1982).

12. D.M. Turoldo, Nel segno del Tau (Milan: Schweiller, 1988). See "In ricordo di Pessoa", of which we give here the text in Italian:

Anche le cose sono parole/ scrigni di sillabe divine: parole/ "dimora dell'Essere", e voi/ gli scribi del mistero, o poeti./ Un solo verso- perla/ rara che le cose in recessi/ impervi racchiude/ geloso - un solo verso/ fessura sull'infinito come il costato aperto di Cristo-, anche/ un solo verso può fare/ "piú grande l'universo".

13. "Rapsodia", preface to G. Ravasi Il canto della rana, 1990, p.10, p.13.