

Jacopone da Todi's mystical pathology

LEONARD J BRUCE-CHWATT

With St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) a new element entered into the spirit of the Catholic church. It took the form of an experience of divine presence and gave rise to a wave of Franciscan mysticism, with its dramatic sense of mystery, its desire for a union with the Infinite, its relation to all living things, and, above all, its emphasis on humility and poverty. Mysticism, in the sense of a direct communion with God and in the conviction that all things in the universe are manifestations of the eternal being, reflects the ancient ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism. It found its European sources in Plato and in Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. According to this philosophy, various forces including the human soul, shape the matter, and man should return to the union with God by rejecting from his life all that is worldly before reaching the final exaltation of spiritual fulfilment. The early Christian mystics headed by St Paul and St Augustine took the example from the Judaic tradition of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Among the disciples and followers of St Francis the group

known as Franciscan Tertiaries was remarkable.¹ They willingly accepted the rule of voluntary poverty and became, like the master, "twice-born souls." One of them, Jacopone da Todi, holds a special place, not only in the Catholic hagiography but also in the history of Italian literature.^{2 3}

To a medical historian some aspects of his life and work are of particular interest because of the extraordinary morbid streak of his penitence, through sickness and pain, before the dissolution of his bodily form in the metaphysical absolute.

Jacopone da Todi (Jacopo de Benedetti) was born in Todi, Umbria, in 1230 into a noble family. He was a successful and ambitious lawyer, married to the young and beautiful Lady Vanna. The two led the gay and carefree life of the rich contemporary society until a tragic accident, when a wooden platform collapsed under the dancing crowd and Vanna was killed. On his wife's dead body Jacopone discovered under the elegant gown a penitent's hairshirt. This event led to Jacopone's conversion and changed his whole life. He devoted his remaining

De l'Infermità e Mali che Frate Jacopone Demandava per Eccesso de Carità

O Signor, per cortesia,
mandame la malsania!

A me la freve quartana,
la continua e la terzana,
la doppia cotidiana,
colla grande idropesia.

A me venga mal de dente,
mal de capo e mal de ventre,
a lo stomaco dolor pungente,
en canna la squinantia.

Mal de occhi e doglia de fianco
e l'apostema al lato manco;
tiseo me ionga en alco
et omne tempo la frenesia.

Agia el fegato rescaldato,
la milza grossa, el ventre enfiato,
lo polmone sia piagato
a gran tossa e parlasia.

A me vengan li fistelli
con migliaia de carboncelli,
e li granchi sia quelli
che tutto pieno ne sia.

A me venga la podagra;
mal de ciglia si m'agrava,

la disinteria sia piaga
e l'emorroide a me se dia.

A me venga el mal de l'asmo
e iongasece quel del pasmo,
como al can venga rasma

ed en bocca la grancia.

A me lo morbo caduco
de cadere en acqua e 'n foco,

e giammai non trovi loco
ch'io afflitto non ce sia. . .

Gl'ie demonia infernali
essi sian mei ministrali,
che m'exerciten li mali
c'ho guadagnati a mia follia.

Enfin del mondo a la finita,
si me duri questa vita,
e poi, a la sceverita,

dura morte me se dia.

Elègome en sepultura
ventre de lupo en voratura,
e le reliquie en cacatura
en spineta e rogaria.

O Signore, per cortesia,
mandami la cattiva salute!

A me (venga) la febbre quartana
la continua e la terzana
la doppia quotidiana
con una grande idropisia.

A me venga mal di denti,
mal di capo e mal di ventre,
allo stomaco dolor pungente,
e in gola l'angina.

Male agli occhi e dolor al fianco,
e l'ascesso al lato sinistro,
l'etisia mi si aggiunga inoltre,
e in ogni tempo la frenesia.

Abbia il fegato riscaldato,
la milza ingrossata e il ventre
il polmone sia piagato, [gonfio,
con gran tosse e paralisi.

A me vengano le fistole,
con migliaia di pustole,
e i cancri siano tali
che io ne sia tutto pieno.

A me venga la podagra,
il male alle ciglia aggravi il mio [stato,

la disenteria sia una piaga,
mi tocchino anche le emorroidi.

A me venga il mal dell'asma,
ci si aggiunga lo spasimo,
come al cane mi venga il prurito [rabbioso;

e in bocca la cancrena.

A me venga il morbo caduco,
tale da farmi cadere nell'acqua e [nel fuoco,

e giammai non trovi luogo
in cui non sia afflitto. . .

I demoni dell'inferno
siano i miei infermieri,
che rendano più acuti i mali
che ho guadagnati colla mia pazzia.

Fino alla fine del mondo,
così duri per me questa vita,
e poi nella separazione (dell'anima [dal corpo),
mi si conceda una dura morte.

Scelgo per mia sepoltura
un ventre di lupo che mi divorì
e le reliquie (si riducano)
in sterco tra gli spini e i roveti. . .

O Lord! of Thy courtesy,
Send me ill-health!
Let me have quartan fever,
The continuous and the tertian,
The double quotidian
With a great hydropsy.

May I have toothache,
Headache and belly-ache,
In my stomach sharp pains,
And in my throat angina.
Pain in my eyes and in my flank,
With an abscess in my left side,
Phtisis be added furthermore
And at all times frenzy.
May I have a burning liver,
An enlarged spleen and a swollen belly,
My lungs be plagued
By a great cough and paralysis.
Grant to me fistulas,
With thousands of pustules,
And so many cankers
That I am covered with them.
Send me podagra, [podagra—gout]
With painful eyelids
Aggravating my condition,
Let dysentery plague me,
Likewise haemorrhoids.
May I also suffer asthma,
To which be added spasms,
Like a dog let me have rabid pruritus;
And in my mouth gangrene.

Let me have the falling sickness,
So as to make me fall into the water and [the fire,
And let there never be one spot
In which I am not afflicted.
The devils of hell shall be my nurses,
To make yet more sharp,
The pains which my folly has earned me.

Until the end of the world,
Make hard for me this life,
And at the final separation,
Grant me a hard death.

Choose for my burial,
The belly of a wolf who shall devour me,
That my remains be reduced to dung
Among the thorns and the rocks.

(Translated from the Italian by Joan M Bruce-Chwatt.)

years to prayer and penance, having renounced all worldly goods. He became a wandering friar, preaching ascetism for the love of Christ, and composed a number of religious poems (*laude spirituali*) which he sang along the roads of Umbria.⁴

Laude spirituali

Many of Jacopone's *laude* are considered the best examples of Italian poetry of the thirteenth century. They pass through all emotional phases of suffering, obedience, and ecstasy. Of exquisite beauty is his *Lauda La Donna del Paradiso* (or *Pianto della Madonna de la Passione del figliolo Jesu Cristo*), a dramatic description of the Virgin Mary's lament at the Crucifixion. This religious play is still performed in Italy.⁵

One mystical poem of particular medical interest and almost intolerably morbid pitch of self-denial on the way to martyrdom has as its title: *De l'Infermità e Mali che Frate Jacopone Demandava per Eccesso de Carità* (Of the afflictions and sicknesses that brother Jacopone desired from an excess of charity).

The original text written in medieval Italian is given in the first column to show its composition in quatrains with irregular rhyming. The first two lines form a refrain (*ripresa*) after each stanza.⁶

Excommunicated and beatified

One might have expected that the author of such an intense, almost macabre poem inviting some 22 different diseases or afflictions would be inclined to join the processional "flagellanti," a movement that originated about 1260 in Perugia in the midst of the misery of wars between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, aggravated by the disastrous epidemic of plague.⁷ But there is no evidence that Jacopone da Todi, for all his mysticism, ever joined this group, which was eventually forbidden by the Holy See in 1261, though it revived again a century later. In 1278 Jacopone entered the Franciscan order of Minor Friars when there was a serious conflict between the two fractions, the

conventuals and the spirituals. He sided with the spirituals, who followed the stricter rules, and denounced the degeneracy of the Roman authority. His *laude* exalting poverty were written when



Monument commemorating the life of Jacopone da Todi close to the church of San Fortunato at Todi, Umbria.

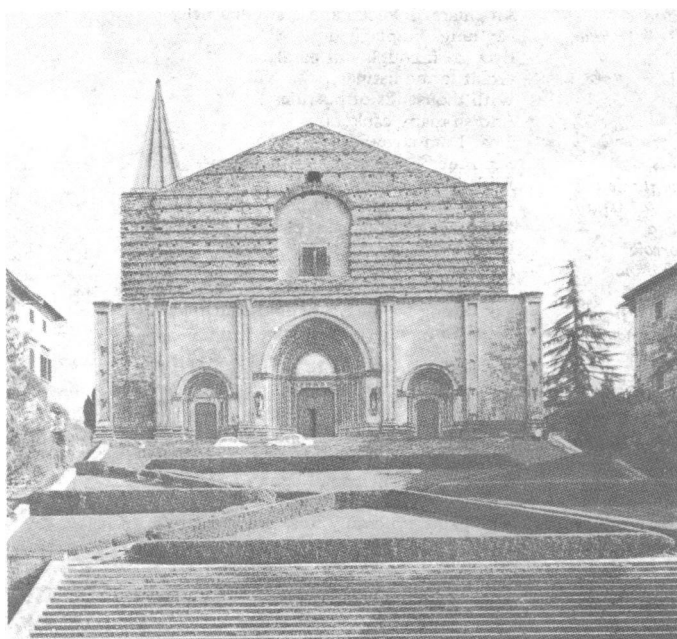
Pope Celestine V protected him, but with the accession of Boniface VIII to the Papacy Jacopone was excommunicated and imprisoned for five years. He was granted absolution and released by Benedict XI but died three years later in Colazzone, Umbria. Popularly venerated as blessed (Beato), he is inscribed in the Franciscan martyrology, but attempts (as late as 1869) to have him canonised were not successful.⁵ In 1906 his bones were brought to Todi and buried in the crypt of the church of San Fortunato. A marble plaque bears the following inscription *Ossa Beati Jacoponi de Benedictis Tudertini Fratris Ordinis Minorum Qui Stultus Propter Christum Nova Mundum Arte Delusit Et Coelum Rapuit. Obdormivit In Domino Die XXV Martii An Dom MCCXCVI*. (This date is in error since the true year of Jacopone's death was 1306.) Close to the church a monument erected in 1930 commemorates the life and death of this remarkable mystic and poet of thirteenth-century Italy.

References

- ¹ Underhill E. *Mystics of the church*. Cambridge: James Clarke, 1975.
- ² Underhill E. *Jacopone da Todi. Poet and mystic*. London: J M Dent, 1919.
- ³ Ageno F. *Jacopone da Todi-laude, trattato e detti*. Florence: Rizzoli, 1953.
- ⁴ Ferri G. *Jacopone da Todi—le laude*. Bari, Italy: 1915.
- ⁵ Lograsso AH. *New catholic encyclopaedia*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967:797.
- ⁶ Prosciutti O. *Pagine di scrittori Italiani*. Perugia: Grafica, 1965.
- ⁷ Gougoud L. *Devotional and ascetic practices in the middle ages*. London: Burns Oates, 1927.

Wellcome Museum of Medical Science, London NW1 2BP

LEONARD J BRUCE-CHWATT, MD, FRCP, emeritus professor of tropical hygiene, University of London



San Fortunato in Todi.