PETTER DASS (1647-1707)

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Petter Dass, a Lutheran clergyman in northern Norway, and a poet, was the first major figure in modern Norwegian literature. Scots can also take pride in him as a part-product of the Scottish diaspora.

Petter Dass's father was Peter Dundas, who came from Dundee to Bergen in the early 1630s. It's sometimes said that he emigrated because he disapproved of the church policies of Charles I. But I've never seen the evidence for this; and it does sound like the high-minded sort of reason that people in later times wish to believe that their family had for emigrating. At least as many seventeenth-century Scots emigrated to better themselves in the things of *this* world, either as a mercenary soldier or, as seems to be the case here, as a merchant. There are some Dundases recorded earlier than this in Bergen, and they may well have been of the same family. This was the period when the Hanseatic merchants were losing a grip on the trade of Norway that had lasted for some four centuries; and as Edgar Lythe says 'in place of the Hanse a cosmopolitan mercantile community was created by Dutch, Danish, Scottish, and native merchants, under whose influence Norway's external trade acquired a greater degree of geographical flexibility.'

While in Norway, the poet's father spelled his surname as two separate words – Don Dass. Subsequently many, though not all, of the family abbreviated this to Dass. There's a rather jolly but speculative suggestion about this by a nineteenth-century British writer, Andrew Johnston: 'the worthy Norsemen, who, I suppose, then as now, had much intercourse with Spain, mistook the "Dun" of Dundas for the Spanish prefix "Don", and... the family dropped it as incompatible with their reduced circumstances.'

At any rate, the poet's father did what he could to improve his circumstances. He enrolled as a burgess of Bergen, and seems to have become involved in the trade between Bergen and the *fylke* or sheriffdom of Nordland. Here of course were the great fisheries that

had been exploited even before Hanseatic times. By around 1650, it's been estimated that three thousand tons of dried cod were being exported every year from Bergen, and much of this had come to Bergen from as far north as the Lofoten islands.

The next logical step for Petter Dass's father was to migrate north as a merchant in Nordland itself; and he quickly found an acceptable niche in local society when, in 1646, he married Maren Falch, the daughter of a *fogd* or sheriff. It was a brief but fruitful union. Petter the poet was born in the following year, and was the eldest of five children. Then Petter's father died when Petter was only six or seven. Petter's mother had much more stamina. She remarried twice, first a parish priest and then a *fogd*, and was twice widowed; when she died in 1709 she had outlived her eldest son by a couple of years.

But on his father's death Petter had been fostered with his mother's sister, who was married to a parish priest in Namdalen. There he met and became a lifelong friend of a cousin of his own age, Petter Jespersen. In 1659 the bishop came to their school to catechise the children. Compulsory confirmation was to be introduced in Norway in 1736, and even then universal literacy didn't follow overnight. Educational standards previously must have been very variable. Since the bishop was thought to be rather strict, it sometimes happened that the children hid away when he came round: it wasn't unknown for the priest and schoolmaster to hide as well. But the bishop had no fault to find when he catechised the two Petters, and it was possibly this that led them both to decide to enter the church.

This led to the cousins' being separated. Around 1660 Petter Jespersen went off to the cathedral school at Trondheim, and he was eventually to become a doctor of theology and confessor to the king of Denmark. Meanwhile Petter Dass went to the cathedral school in Bergen, probably because there he could be boarded with his father's sister. He made friends with the noted pietist preacher in Bergen, Ambrosius Hardenbreck, and also with the preacher's wife, Dorothe Engelbretsdatter. She was a poet, and helped awaken Petter's interest in literature. In the eighteenth century Ludvig Holberg hailed Dorothe as 'the greatest poetess the Northern kingdoms have had'. Professor Harald Beyer says about this verdict: 'there were not many to choose

from, so he may have been right.' I shouldn't be surprised if this remark has got him into trouble with Norwegian exponents of *kvinnestudier*. At any rate, at the time Dorothe's poems won her a full remission of her taxes from the king, a kind of early anticipation of an Arts Council bursary. Her religious poems were published in her lifetime as *Sjælens Sangoffer* (Song Offering of the Soul). These are not greatly to modern taste, but the slightly flirtatious letters in verse that she exchanged with Petter Dass have worn rather better.

By 1666 Petter Dass was in the metropolis of København, where he matriculated at the university. For many another young Norwegian and Icelander, with the right connections or the right degree of self-confidence, this was the start of the golden road to fame and fortune, so that they gradually lost all ties with their homeland and their own folk. That Petter Dass was to return to Nordland, and to become a Norwegian poet, and a Norwegian folk hero, was perhaps determined by the fact that his two or three years' study in the big city was a thoroughly miserable experience that he just tholed. He was lonely, he was homesick – and he was broke. As he wrote later – 'A penny then was as welcome as a dollar now... In the shop I found some handsome books; the owner told me, "Produce the money, and you shall have them." But I had neither goods nor inheritance from my blessed father.'

At the end of the 1660s Petter Dass returned to his native Nordland, and first found employment as a private tutor in a curate's house, in Norway as in Scotland a recognised place to queue up while waiting for a vacancy in the ministry. In 1671 he applied for the post of assistant curate at Nesna, and, feeling that he had expectations, got engaged. But it was two years before his appointment came through, and he could become ordained, and then married to Margrethe Andersdatter, herself from another local clerical family. Even then all he got was his keep and a very meagre stipend, so that it's no wonder that he could always identify with the peasantry among whom he worked.

In 1678 a post as resident curate became vacant in the district. The dead priest was the one Petter Dass had served as private tutor, and was also his wife's stepfather. Dass thought he should inherit the post,

and when he was passed over he expressed his frustration in a poem called *Mammons Regimente og Plutonis Herredømme* (The rule of Mammon and the dominion of Pluto). Fortunately he was able in 1681 to become a resident curate without leaving Nesna, and now for the first time he began to be comfortably off. But even then he found that some of the income from his post went to the parish priest of Alstahaug, whose position was the most important in the whole area. Finally, in 1689, Petter Dass himself became parish priest of Alstahaug. He was thus installed in his native parish, and he held the post till his death in the late summer of 1707. Latterly, as the rigours of his life began to tell on him, he had his son Anders appointed as his colleague and successor.

Much of the parish consisted of the islands just immediately south of the Arctic circle, and much of Petter Dass's pastoral work therefore entailed long sea voyages in all weathers. He necessarily possessed several boats, at least one of which was capable of the 650-miles voyage south to Bergen. One of his main sources of income was the tithe of the cod caught locally, and his share was said to amount to some 12,000 pounds in weight each year. So Petter Dass was accustomed to sail on his annual holiday to Bergen, there to sell his fish in person, and to keep in touch with his literary friends.

He is said to have been notably hospitable: the parsonage at Alstahaug was open to all travellers. He was also notably generous. At his death several hundred pounds worth of loans by him were outstanding. And in the famine years of 1696-98, an experience Scotland shared with Norway, he gave away hundreds of bushels of corn to the poor. As has been well said, he was the kind of Lutheran pastor, the father of his flock, who is the earthly equivalent of the God of Luther's *Catechism*.

Petter Dass had a cousin who was priest at Melhus, and Dass got on so well with the people there that he presented to the church the only authentic portrait of him that we have. It shows a typical Lutheran priest with his little skullcap and his great starched ruff. But he also has flowing locks, a little moustache, no sideburns and a beard broader at the bottom than the top, so that he has the slightly incongruous look of a Chinese mandarin.

Dass seems to have begun his poetic apprenticeship in the 1670s, hammering out poems for weddings and funerals. Some thirty of these poems have survived, but we know the titles of nearly a hundred more that are now lost. Even in these poems, which many people wrote, Dass has a robustness, a concreteness, that sets his work above the fanciful baroque commonplaces of the time. And there's a sturdy optimism that runs right through to the poems of his old age, when he was not unnaturally preoccupied with troubles. Some were private troubles, his gall stones, and the worsening eyesight that forced him to get his poems copied out by others. Without self-pity he records that (as Einar Haugen renders it)

> *Before* the letters were thin as threads,
> But *now* they stand like cables.

He writes too about public calamities, like the great Bergen fire of 1702. But even here he's concerned with a grand vision of how the town ought to be rebuilt.

Petter Dass isn't remembered today for his religious poetry but, like his friend Dorothe Engelbretsdatter, it was for that that he was honoured in his lifetime and right through the eighteenth century. The seventeenth-century literature of northern Europe is often termed baroque, and in it genuine piety tended to be fused with imagery that was frequently contrived, elaborate and violent. But what seems acceptable in an English writer like John Donne or a German like Christian von Hofmannswaldau is sometimes looked at askance by the plain folks who live still further north. Scottish evangelicals are often embarrassed by the spiritual letters of Samuel Rutherfurd, with their steamy allusions to the *Song of Solomon*. And Norwegians are sometimes amused that in 1651 one Knud Sevaldssøn Bang published a pastoral treatise called *The Sweet and Fine-Tasting Breast-Milk of the Catechism, Extracted from the two Breasts of God's Love, the Old and the New Testament*. I should note in passing that *the* Scandinavian baroque poet is of course a Dane, Thomas Kingo, and again a man of Scots descent, though one generation further removed from Scotland than Petter Dass.

Dass's religious poetry is baroque up to a point, but his feet are

always on the ground. There's an earnestness, an occasional playfulness, a streak of common sense that link up with his qualities as a popular preacher. The nineteenth-century Norwegian poet Johan Welhaven said that Dass had a 'golden homeric simplicity', a slightly grandiose description but not totally wide of the mark.

Dass's biggest single effort in the field of religious poetry was his *Evangelie-Sange* (Gospel Songs). He wrote an appropriate song for every Sunday in the church year. And I suppose that, in his relation to the folk tradition, he's a sort of sanctified Robert Burns. Many of his hymns were set to old and familiar folk tunes, but even oftener his hymns inspired new tunes that in turn passed into the folk repertoire. In his spare time Dass versified the Books of *Ruth, Esther* and *Judith*, the *Gospels* and *Epistles* and other smaller portions of Scripture. But his most popular religious work turned out to be his *Katechismus-Sange* (Catechism Songs). While one of his colleagues published an eight-volume commentary on Luther's *Catechism*, Petter Dass based songs on it, songs that were intended to be sung at sea or at the summer shielings. The Fifth Commandment is made vivid by a personification of Anger that would today be considered sexist. Einar Haugen translates thus:

> She causes wrinkles in your forehead,
> She twists your mouth in fearful ways,
> Transforms you to a devil horrid,
> Fills your lips with raging foam.
> Your eyes she spreads so very wide
> As if in each their dwelt a fiend,
> And to your face she drives the blood,
> Till you're suffused with ruddy mien.

The popularity of Dass is the more remarkable in that, with one exception, his poems circulated only in manuscript form during his lifetime. His *Aandelig Tidsfordriv* (Spiritual Pastime) was published in 1711, four years after his death, his *Catechism Songs* in 1714, and his masterpiece *Nordlands Trompet* not till 1739. They then all went through numerous editions. Around 1800 a man in Sunnmøre testified that 'Petter Dass's songs have had the greatest share in the education and morality of our people.'

The *Nordske Dale-Vise* (Norwegian dalesong), the single poem of Dass's that was printed in København as early as 1683, is a little dress rehearsal for *Nordlands Trompet*. Already Petter is the priest casting a truthful but kindly eye on his parishioners as he goes his rounds. The good wife brings a big bowl of cream for the visitor, but it's flavoured with flies. And at night there's a sheepskin to sleep in, but not only is it hairy, it's also a habitat for life-forms – 'they rode not on saddles, those fellows'.

Nordlands Trompet (The Trumpet of Nordland) is the full-scale description of Dass's homeland. It comprises some four thousand lines of description and perfectly compatible moral reflections. There are sections on different districts, on land use and on trade, on the Sámi or Lapps, and on birds and swimming creatures. The folk of Nordland, as Dass depicts them, may be the slaves of the elements, but their home is at the same time full of wonders, and a good God rules over it and guides its people. Writers in Norway and elsewhere had composed poetic gazetteers in the century before Petter Dass, but the homely enthusiasm of his puts it in a class apart. Bjørnson said that every traveller to Nordland should read it, and that being so, it's a pity for us that the only complete English translation that I know of isn't readily available here, since it came out from St Olaf College Press, Northfield, Minnesota, in 1954. In addition, the translator, Theodore Jorgenson, understandably ducked out of reproducing Dass's favourite rhyme-scheme, which is a 6-line unit, rhyming lines 1 and 2, 4 and 5, and 3 and 6. But around 1879 a member of the British Scandinavian Society (founded in 1875) published some *Translations from the Norse*. There is some Ibsen, particularly Act I of his *Catilina*, and this shows that the translator was not many years behind Edmund Gosse and William Archer as an early British admirer of Ibsen. And there are samples of Petter Dass that, like Petter himself, don't disdain the occasional naif effect of the rhyme-scheme. The translation was published anonymously, but the *British Library General Catalogue* identifies the translator as Andrew Johnston, and credits him also with a published lecture of 1875 on *"Danish" and "Norse"*. Here are two specimens of Andrew Johnston, first on whether the Nordland pastor's life is or is not a happy one:

Our Nordland with islands and skerries so lieth

encompassed, that he who will preach the word plieth
his calling in danger and toil.
But tho' often the voice of the preacher the deep
doth quench, and he sleepeth his last long sleep
where the raging waters boil,
Yet must we with vigour our office perform;
and if in the midst of the loud raging storm
God call us, esteem it a blessing.
If we die on our way to His house here below,
with the horses of Israel and chariot we know
we pass our dear Saviour confessing.

Petter Dass's description of the Sámi would, if written today, be termed racist poetry:

These Lapps are the queerest – believe me I beg –
little people on earth, very short in the leg,
nearly dwarfs, take 'em one with another.
Indeed I've been told – (but would fain be exact
so don't vouch it) – that when there's a tall one, the fact
throws a doubt on the fame of his mother.

The sharpest of eye and the sourest of frown
and the rest of their countenance withered and brown
chins pointed and cheekbones that stick out.
With richness of beard they're not bothered at all
for their chins are as naked and bare as a wall;
exceptions want searching to pick out.

And when you have found one with beard to his chin
it grows so uncommonly scattered and thin
you might count every hair in its station;
but whether this cometh from lack of supply
or because their small bodies are withered and dry,
is a matter for sage disputation.

If you ask about palaces, buildings and such,
You'll find that the Lapp doesn't want very much,
but six or eight saplings providing,

he tyeth together, and pieces of hide
throwing carefully over, he getteth inside,
and there you will find him abiding.

Another contentious subject today is tobacco. Petter Dass's parishioners either chewed or inhaled it, and to him this was but one of their several nasty habits. His passage begins:

Men hør mig du Kone, snus lystig hen væk,
Er Studen for liden, da giør dig en Sæk,
Og lad den med Snorer udpynte;
Saa bruger du Posen med hiertelig Løst,
Du saar vel omsider saa klingende Røst
Som Grisen der tager at grynte.

My attempted translation of this passage tries to get the vitality of the original. Petter Dass, brought up to regard Danish as the ideal language of written literature, and who perhaps spoke the same sort of 'mixed' language variety as John Galt assigns to his minister in *Annals of the Parish*, would hardly have approved my distinctly non-standard solution to the problem:

Weel, mind me, my wuman, just sniff, sniff awa;
If the snuffmull's owre wee, a big sek wid be braw
Wi broderie anglaise near hidden.
Draw oot frae yer sek tae yer hert's content,
An yer voice'll ring oot, and ye'll ken whit I meant,
Like a pig gruntin roun in a midden.
Yer neb'll be clairty, as needin a clean
As the laird's dirty chimneys can ever hae been;
Ye'll be sexy, like soos i the simmer.
An when yer guid man comes hame tae his tea,
The pair o ye mak a rare sicht fur tae see,
Fur sune ye'll be snorin thegither.
You're sniffin at snuff, he's chawin at baccy;
Does livin like tinkies mak baith o ye happy?
Ye cannie miscaa yin anither.
Ye go fur the messages, get them on tick:
When you're askt tae pey, then ye'll shairly feel sick,

But *you'll* pey on doomsday, dinnae swither.
In this place, there's nae doot, it's a dounricht disgrace,
Folks cadge, an get things pit ontae their slate.
Why write doon the debts o a chancer?
When term day comes roun they can aye cope wi it;
They up an skedaddle, they up an they flit.
Tae jist dae a runner's *their* answer.

Dass was a very powerful preacher, and stories said to originate in his lifetime already make him sound a distinctly uncanny figure. In one parish known for loose living, people crowded to see him, but covered their ears because they feared to hear him. Gradually however, curiosity got the better of them; and when they heard that God was liable to withhold His blessings from them and treat them as idolators, they turned over such a new leaf that the devil abandoned that parish in disgust.

Once a spring plague of caterpillars threatened the crops, and Petter Dass held a prayer meeting. Before he was finished, the air was filled with birds that ate the caterpillars. Another time a thunderstorm lasted for several days. Petter Dass had the bell rung for service. It was good that his sermon was a very comforting one. It was even better that, when the congregation emerged, they found the sun shining again. While I'm not prepared to vouch for the truth of these stories, it is the case that when Petter Dass died the sailors of Nordland sewed little patches of black cloth on their sails, and these patches of mourning could still be seen on fishing vessels over a century later.

Given that Dass made such an impression in his lifetime, it's not surprising that in later folklore he emerged as a full-blown wizard. Like priests in Norway and Iceland since the Conversion, he was thought to have learned more than was good for him by going off to a distant university. Petter Dass was said to have attended the Black Art School in Denmark. The principal there was Erik, which is a name given in Sweden to certain kings, in Denmark to the cane, and in Norway to the devil. Erik, after his usual fashion of doing good Christian things back to front, took a *kuld*, a class or brood, of twelve students each year. The snag was that if you were the last of the twelve to take the oral examination, Erik in return took your soul. Petter Dass was the last to

go in, but had learned enough by this time to send his shadow in instead. Fortunately the church authorities never noticed that the parish priest of Alstahaug had no shadow.

Petter Dass was said to have returned from Wittenberg with the 'Black Book': this was the sixth, and as yet unpublished, Book of Moses, which contained the words for releasing the devil. Warlocks were accustomed to release him for the practice of black magic, and priests only for white magic. People in neither category might release him and then find they lacked the power to get him back into the book. This happened to an inquisitive servant girl at the parsonage of Alstahaug, and Petter Dass arrived just in time to save her from the devil, who was coming at her with his claws. On another occasion Dass absent-mindedly left the devil loose when he went off on his rounds of the islands. Soon a suspicious stranger turned up at the parsonage, and asked if there was any work to be done. Margrethe, nearly as shrewd as her husband, recognised the devil, and told him to empty the water out of the fjord. But Old Erik was just about equal to that, because he could use a fishing boat as a baler. Fortunately Petter Dass again returned in time; and as there was a waterspout in front of the parsonage where there hadn't been one that morning, he was careful to land at a different spot from usual, and the devil was outwitted again.

Petter Dass often went to the kirkyard at night, and Finn the servant boy decided to follow him and give him a fright. So he hid among the tombs, dressed in a white sheet: but the priest strode straight up to him and demanded 'Who are you?' Finn was too frightened to speak, and he found that he was sinking into the kirkyard clay. When the earth was up to his knees, again he was asked 'Who are you?', and again he said nothing. But when the earth was up to his chin Petter Dass gave him one last chance. Finn blurted out his name, the priest repeated the Lord's Prayer, and Finn was saved.

On one fishing trip, when Petter Dass was going too, he discovered that he was short of a sixth man to make up his crew. Obviously, he called upon his friend Old Erik, who did his best to be agreeable to the others. But one day he was the cook, and he served *biksemad*, which is my favourite Scandinavian dish, but which is generally held to be low class. One of the sailors said 'I think the devil

must have made this *biksemad*.' And of course it's one of Erik's little foibles that he doesn't care to hear his name mentioned. I think this ties the story in with the notion of certain words being taboo for fishermen while they are at sea, though in fact the word 'minister' is at least as often a forbidden one as the word 'devil' among northern fishermen. Professor Gordon Donaldson has observed, with particular reference to Shetland, that 'it is not for nothing... that the words "minister" and "cat" are equally taboo on a fishing expedition (for the minister, with his right to teinds, shared the cat's greed for fish)...' At any rate, on our expedition Erik complained to Petter Dass that he didn't greatly care for the rest of the crew, and asked to be released from his engagement. Petter would release him only if he could make five fathoms of rope with loose sand. Again Old Erik would have been just about up to this task, but only if he had pitch to bind the sand with. And of course Petter Dass denied him the pitch, so that he was forced to see the voyage out.

But *the* Petter Dass story is of how King Christian V of Denmark and Norway, the brother-in-law of our Queen Anne, got to hear about this big preacher up in Nordland, and chose him to preach the Christmas morning sermon. One version says the king had also heard of Petter as a big necromancer, and deliberately delayed the summons, to see if Petter could fly by supernatural means. Another version, with more subtle characterisation, has it that the summons went from parsonage to parsonage along the west coast of Norway; and some of Petter's fellow-labourers in the vineyard, being jealous, were in no hurry to pass the letter on. Either way, it didn't arrive till Christmas Eve. But Petter, nothing daunted,just sat down on a saddle, summoned up Erik, and said 'Fly me to København.' When Erik asked what was in it for him, he was told 'the souls of all those who fall asleep in church tomorrow morning'.

The next bit of the story echoes the one about Sæmundr the Wise, the pioneer historian of Iceland six centuries before. During the flight Erik couldn't resist some fun and games, so as they neared the Danish coast he glided down till the waves were lapping at Petter's legs. Now if Petter could be got to call on the name of the Lord, he could be thrown off and drowned. So Erik slyly asked 'What was it St Peter said when he began to sink?' 'Higher up and straight on, you devil' said Petter,

striking him with his stick. I'm bound to observe that Petter's answer is not grounded upon the authority of *St Matthew*, Chapter 14, but it was no doubt the correct answer in the circumstances.

On Christmas morning – as one might anticipate – Petter Dass preached a penitential sermon of such power and such eloquence that the whole court was reduced to tears. There was no question of anyone sleeping in church that morning, or of any recompense to the devil for all his labours.

To become one of the country's leading poets, and one of its folk heroes too, is an enviable fate. Dr Venke Olsen tells me that children in the Tromsø region in the 1950s still chanted:

> Petter Dass, Petter Dass,
> kjørte fem og tyve lass,
> over is
> over is
> over rompa på en gris!

Further reading

I've mentioned Theodore Jorgenson's translation of *Nordlands Trompet* in the text. The original has been elegantly edited by Didrik Arup Seip (Oslo, 1967). There is a very helpful article on Dass by Francis Bull in the *Norsk Biografisk Leksikon*, iii. 278-82. In English, John Beveridge discusses Dass as preacher, poet and wizard in the *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, vii. 115-25 (1941), and a good if brief account of his poetry is Harald Beyer, *A History of Norwegian literature* (New York, 1956: translator Einar Haugen), 87-90.