Josaphat (thought to be a corruption of Gotama-Bodhisat) the Buddha found his way into the menologies of the Eastern Churches and the Roman Martyrology. The story came with all the prestige of St John Damascene behind it (though the Greek version is now known to have antedated him), and, a thousand years later, the first printing presses widely disseminated it. For the story was prominent in the *Legenda Aurea*, the first of all best-sellers among printed books.

We do not know now how the Buddha-legend first came to Jerusalem (to which the first 'Christian' versions have been traced), nor do we know by what devious deceits or mistakes the legendary story of his life and his passing was turned into a witness-bearing to the Incarnation. However deplorable it may have been as a mutilation of history, perhaps there was more truth in it than meets the eye.

AVICENNA AND WESTERN THOUGHT IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY[1]

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

THERE was something indefinite about the effect of Avicenna on the West in the thirteenth century. Constant and pervasive as his influence was—from its beginnings in Spain in the twelfth century, through the confusion of its first contacts with the Cathedral Schools and the nascent University of Paris, down to Albert and Aquinas and Scotus—yet it nowhere crystallised into a definite set of doctrines accepted by a clearly marked group or school, as did, later in the century, the influence of Averroes. Some years ago Père De Vaux[2] brought into circulation the term 'Latin Avicennism', parallel to the 'Latin Averroism' which Mandonnet had disclosed in his great work on

1 This article is based on a lecture given at Cambridge in March, 1951; one of a series on the life, writings and influence of the Arabian philosopher, Avicenna. Avicenna was born about the year 980 at Bukhara (to the north-east of the frontier of modern Persia, in what is now Soviet territory) and died in 1037. His prodigiously active life was spent in Persia, but nearly all his works are written in Arabic. Equally renowned as physician and philosopher, Avicenna shares with the Spanish Arab Averroes (1126-1198) the chief place in the intellectual history of Islam in the middle ages.

2 *Notes et Textes sur l'Avicennisme Latin aux confins des XIIe—XIIIe siècles.* (Paris: Vrin, 1934.)

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Siger of Brabant. But Père De Vaux's term, unlike Mandonnet's, has not gained general acceptance; there is too much difference between the confused eclecticism at the turn of the century, studied by De Vaux, and the clear-cut, far more unified position of the Averroists of the 1270's. More acceptable perhaps as a name for that earlier phase is Gilson's 'augustinisme avicénnisant',[3] though this denoted originally only one aspect of it—the attempt to adapt an Avicennian theory of the 'agent intellect' to the Augustinian tradition of the human mind's dependence upon illumination from God. And in any case one must not overstress the Augustinian element in the currents of thought that were running at the end of the twelfth century, and that largely derived from other sources—Boethius, for example, and Erigena. So far anyhow as Avicenna was concerned, while everyone in our period accepts him as an outstanding 'philosopher', no one of importance, except perhaps Roger Bacon, submits to him without considerable reserves. For Bacon, Avicenna is *dux et princeps philosophiae*, the chief commentator and exponent of Aristotle; and Bacon spoke with some authority if, as De Vaux says, he was 'de tous les grands auteurs du XIIIe siècle le mieux renseigné sur la vie et les oeuvres d'Avicenne'.[4] But he was also a trifle eccentric, and his homage is exceptional. Avicenna is an *auctor* continually cited, frequently opposed, always to be reckoned with. He is paid a constant, if often conventional, respect. St Thomas, for example, in the *De Ente et Essentia* cites Avicenna again and again in support of his own very personal theses. True, this work is among the earliest of the saint (1254-6), and in the course of time St Thomas depended less on Avicenna, quoted him less and became much more preoccupied with Averroes. But precisely this shift of emphasis is typical of Avicenna's fortune in the thirteenth century. There comes to mind the title of one of Gilson's valuable studies, 'Avicenne et le point de départ de Duns Scot'.[5] It was apparently Avicenna's usual fate to act as a 'point de départ'. So also, of course, was Aristotle; but the phrase is hardly adequate to his vast influence. Nor does it so well suit Averroes, who, at least after about 1260, became a force that either dominated or repelled.

3 See his articles in the *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*: 1926, 1927, 1929, 1933.
4 Op. cit. p. 57.
5 *Archives*, etc., 1927.

Avicenna did not dominate, nor, as a rule, repel. He contributed much, notably to the Thomist synthesis and the Scotist; but in general rather as a starting point than as a finished product.

Symptomatic, too, is the somewhat hesitant attitude adopted towards him on the religious issue—so different from what came to be the Christian attitude to Averroes. No doubt St Thomas will borrow a principle from Averroes to support his thesis on the unity of substantial form, and will, as we shall see, vigorously combat Avicenna on the relation of the mind to the 'agent intellect'; and throughout the century Avicenna's name will be linked with an impossibly unorthodox theory of creation. But on the whole he does not seem to have been regarded with outright hostility. The author of the *De Erroribus Philosophorum* (1260–74), a theologian deeply suspicious of infidel philosophy, yet remarkably well-informed about it, is fierce against Averroes but comparatively mild, in tone, against Avicenna. Averroes, besides repeating all the errors of Aristotle, especially as regards the eternity of matter and movement, adds on his own account a 'more direct opposition to the truth of our Faith'; hence he must be criticised much more vehemently than the Philosopher. With this one may compare the courteous opening of the chapter on Avicenna: 'he erred, or seems to have erred, in maintaining that in beings composed [of matter and form] there is only one form'.[6]

But it is time to attempt an outline sketch of Avicenna's philosophy as it appeared to the West towards the close of the twelfth century clothed in the rough Latin of the period. I speak of the Avicenna of the Scholastics, not of the original Avicenna; and of his philosophy, not of his natural science. So regarded, then, he is a mind governed in some sense by the concept of being, and throughout our period he is cited as an authority for the psychological priority of this notion; that 'being and essence' are what the mind first apprehends.[7] Now, in reference to actual existence, being divides into the possible and the necessary; and again possible being divides into what is simply possible and what is possible *per se* but necessary conditionally, i.e. in relation to a cause. For what is caused to exist is thereby virtually or causally

6 Text in Mandonnet's *Siger*, vol. 2, p. 1, 55. Note that the author rejects St Thomas's thesis of the unity of substantial form.

7 One example out of many: St Thomas's *De Ente et Essentia*, c. 1, par. 1.

necessary, though it remains only possible *per se* in that it has required a cause to bring it into existence. This distinction has great importance historically. Averroes rejected it out of hand. Real being, he said, simply is *per se* and necessarily; the mind cannot conceive of a thing as at once intrinsically possible and yet actually existing. Thus Averroes refuses to draw a real distinction, valid in reality *extra animam*, between a substance and its existence. And his refusal is vehement, for in this notion of an existence that is actual and yet radically contingent he saw a contamination of philosophy by religion. He expressly charges Avicenna with being led astray by the theologians, with attempting an impossible conjunction of scientific philosophy and religious fables about creation.[8] For of course the notion of contingent existence, favoured by Avicenna's distinction between the *per se* possible and the necessary—as caused—seemed very congenial to the Biblical teaching on the creation of the Universe. Whether that distinction, presented by Avicenna, really did harmonise so well with the Bible is another matter. The Christian thinkers were mostly pretty sure that it did not. But by opening so clear a gap between existence and essence in the created world, Avicenna gave the thirteenth century a starting point for one of its most keenly debated themes. There was, it is true, already in the field Boethius's distinction between *quod est* and *quo est*, and this was quickly related to Avicenna's. But the latter's influence was particularly strong in this matter—though it is not at all easy to assess; since, on the one hand, Avicenna's use of terms is associated with a cosmogony that was at root utterly different from the Christian, while presenting a deceptive appearance of similarity; and, on the other hand, Avicenna's thought worked in the direction of what may be called 'extrinsicism', that is, of a placing the sources of the being and intelligibility of the sensible world outside that world; and this in virtue of his conception of essence; but this conception remained, it would seem, for most of the Scholastics something of an enigma, so that, until St Thomas, no one came down decisively either for or against the creation-theory of Avicenna with an adequately worked out metaphysic of his own.

The Avicennian notion of essence must now be considered, and its influence in the thirteenth century related to three captial

8 See Gilson, *L'Etre et l'Essence*, pp. 62-67 (Paris, 1948); and on this subject generally, M.-D. Roland-Gosselin's edition of the *De Ente et Essentia* (Le Sanlchoir, Kain; 1926).

themes: creation; the nature of material substance; and the nature and activity of the intellect.

Mention has been made of the 'possible' and the 'necessary'. Both these terms refer, in Avicenna, to essence or quiddity, that by which any being is what it is and is definable by an intelligence. Now Avicenna conceives of essence in a curious apartness or isolation. Thus an essence as such neither exists nor does not exist. It is true that Avicenna (if I understand him aright in this difficult matter) does not seem to have thought of essence apart from the intrinsic *per se* possibility criticised by Averroes; and this is because he thought that the alternative to saying that an essence was possible *per se* was to say that it was impossible *per se*; and if essences are that which God renders actual by creation, they cannot be impossibilities *per se*. Not even God can do the impossible. But apart from this inconsistency, if it is such, what is characteristic of the Avicennian essence is pure isolation from all relations to existence or non-existence, to singularity or plurality. *Equinitas est equinitas tantum*. If existence were of the essence of 'horseness', horses would not be conceivable except as existing. Again, if singularity were of the essence of 'horseness', there could be only one horse. And yet if plurality were of its essence there could be no such thing as *a* horse. 'Horseness' simply prescinds from being and non-being, from the singular and the plural. In the mind indeed it can become a universal predicable of many subjects, and in reality a singular existent subject; but only through something happening to it in each case. All through our period Avicenna will be associated with this notion of essence as something to which additions are made from *outside* itself. We find St Thomas, as he shapes his own philosophy, now accepting, now rejecting, this 'extrinsicist' emphasis, though he tends on the whole to reject it. Thus he refuses the Avicennian division of unity from being, on the ground that this is to confuse the unity that any being has and *must* have, in virtue simply of being, with the unity it *may* have in virtue of being one of a series. The former is metaphysical unity, the latter quantitative or mathematical.[9] Again, St Thomas will expressly mention Avicenna, often linking his name with Plato's, when he attacks, as he frequently does, the view that the forms of material things, and intelligible forms (or

9 *Summa Theol.*, I, 11, 1 *ad* 1.

'ideas') in the mind, come to those things and to the mind, from an extrinsic principle in each case. 'Some', he remarks, 'such as Plato and Avicenna, have maintained that all forms come from extrinsic causes, *ab extrinseco*'.[10] One 'extrinsicist' thesis indeed, and a fundamental one, St Thomas does accept, the 'real' distinction between essence and existence; and he cites Avicenna in support of it. To what extent, however, this Thomist thesis is really a development of Avicenna's is a difficult question. I shall only touch on it here in the course of a few remarks on the historical setting of the theme of creation in the thirteenth century.

From the view that existence is something 'added' to essence *ab extrinseco*, it follows that all essences derive existence ultimately from an extrinsic principle which can only be described as pure existence, or as the primal unity in which all distinctions vanish. God, for Avicenna, is utterly one, both as undivided in himself and as unique; and a certain insistence on the divine unity was regarded as characteristically Avicennian.[11]

Now this stress found an eager and somewhat unguarded welcome, in the last decades of the twelfth century, with certain inheritors of the more or less neo-platonist tradition, derived from Boethius, fed by the Areopagite and by Scotus Erigena and developed by the great School of Chartres. In this '*De Unitate* tradition', as it has been called,[12] a particular stress was laid on *form* as the principle of unity and intelligibility in being. Form was realised perfectly in God and participated in varying degrees by creatures, which derived from and returned to God according to the measure of their unity, stability and intellectuality. Thus metaphysics went hand-in-hand with religion. And this tradition was, in part, Augustinian. For what do certain great passages of the *Confessions* express, if not a yearning towards the eternal Unity and Clarity? Augustine, indeed, was the unequalled master of this expressed concord of thought and religion, of this movement of the mind into itself and above itself, this reaching towards an Object at once most intimate and most sublime: *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*.[13] But not in all aspects would this vision be controlled by the faith of St Augustine; nor was it

10 *Quodlibet* IX, a. 11.
11 One example out of many in St Thomas: *In II Sent.*, D. 1, Q. 1, a. 1.
12 By P. H. Vicaire in *Revue de Sc. Phil. et Théol.*, XXVI, 3, pp. 449, ss.
13 *Confess.*, III, 6.

likely, in the long run, to accommodate itself at all points to the Christian doctrine of creation and a clear distinction between Creator and creature. With the opening of the thirteenth century, pantheism appears at Paris in the teaching of Amaury de Bênes, only to be promptly condemned at a provincial synod of bishops held in the same city in 1210. In 1215 the condemnation was approved by the papal legate, Robert of Courçon, and in 1225 Pope Honorious III ratified a censure passed on Erigena's *De divisione naturae*, which, it is commonly agreed, had influenced Amaury. Meanwhile this Erigenian current had met and mingled with the new influence of Avicenna, as may be seen in the anonymous *Liber de causis primis et secundis*, often attributed to Avicenna, but really the work of a Christian author writing between, approximately, 1180 and 1215.[14] As another factor in the rather tangled situation, we must note, also in 1210 and 1215, the first prohibitions on the use of the *libri naturales* of Aristotle in the University of Paris, together with commentaries on them, *commenta*, *summae*; and it is probable that these terms refer to the translated works of Avicenna. In part these prohibitions were provoked by the materialism of David of Dinant, who was condemned with Amaury, but more generally the new aristotelianism, still confused with neo-platonist accretions and with Avicenna, was felt to menace the Christian teaching on the fact and manner of creation. This anxiety continued in varying degrees, and was to prove a fruitful excitant in the formation of Thomism. With Avicenna's name it was linked, especially, as regards three propositions: that God created necessarily, and therefore eternally; that the first effect of creation was one being, not many (*ex uno non provenit nisi unum*); and that the divine causation was passed on from this first effect downwards through a series of intermediate spiritual causes, the last of which, the so-called 'agent intellect', was the immediate cause of the human intellect and of all the forms of the material world. Associated more particularly with Avicenna was this theory of intermediaries—rendered more awkward for the theologians by the fact that Peter Lombard himself, the officially approved Master of the Sentences, had taught a modified version of the same idea; so that we find St Thomas in the *Summa* obliged to refute, along with Avicenna, and

14 Ed. in De Vaux, op. cit., pp. 80, ss.

in the same article, his own text-book of Catholic theology.[15]

But while it was clear that Avicenna's cosmogony as a whole implied an unacceptable idea of God, it was not at first clear just how this idea differed from the Christian one, nor how it could be refuted. Here was a philosopher who, dividing essence from existence, declared that God conferred existence, yet also that he conferred it necessarily. God, in this view, is bound by his own nature; and this is a pure self-diffusive liberality. 'Liberality'—the term, as applied *par excellence* to God, is repeatedly, by St Thomas, linked with the name of Avicenna. But if God must be thought of as 'liberal', does this cancel his self-sufficiency? And if self-sufficiency implies, ultimately, self-existence, is it possible to conceive of the divine existence as including, not limiting, the divine liberality? It is the problem of the relation of being to goodness, which St Thomas strove to solve by deepening the concept of being. But in the first half of the century the Christian effort to repel this threat to the doctrine of creation took the form, broadly speaking, of, first, a reassertion, largely rhetorical and dogmatic, of the divine omnipotence, and, secondly, a distinction between 'natural' action (*per modum naturae*) which is not predicable of God, and 'voluntary' action (*per modum voluntatis*) which is. Both these defences were elaborated magnificently by William of Auvergne (1180–1249), that fiery and engaging personality whose polemical preoccupation with, yet considerable respect for, Aristotle and Avicenna, combined with a total unawareness of the special danger of Averroism, is typical of the first half-century. But William is a secondary figure. After the mid-century, with the maturer Aristotelianism of Albert the Great now largely achieved, the time was ripe for a more finished synthesis. St Thomas explored the problem of creation in the *Contra Gentiles*, in the *De Potentia*, and finally in the *Summa*. Enough here to say that his solutions involve a thorough re-examination of the consequences of regarding God as pure being (*ipsum esse subsistens*); establishing the transcendent freedom of his creative act and its immediate contact with each and every creature.

As regards the physical world, the chief thirteenth-century problems concerned the nature and interrelation of form and matter—and of matter especially perhaps. Avicenna's conception

15 I, 45, 5. On this matter see A. Forest: *La Structure Métaphysique du Concret Selon St Th. D'Aquin*; espec. c. 2 (Paris: Vrin, 1931).

of essences in the abstract, apart from the conditions of their concrete realisation, probably favoured the view that this realisation took effect, in the physical world, only through matter, the principle of imperfection and disunity and so of the diversity and multiplication of individuals in the same species. Indeed, the term *signata*, applied to matter in this sense (*materia signata quantitate*), probably came in with the translations of Avicenna.[16] It was used to formulate the theory of matter which St Thomas, following Albert, was to elaborate in the course of his long polemic against the notion of 'spiritual' matter associated with the Franciscan school and with the Jewish philosopher Avicebron. Yet the Avicennian theory itself did not entirely satisfy St Thomas; it left matter not related closely enough to form. For St Thomas any physical thing *is* matter-in-formed; and while the Arab's logic aided the construction of a theory of genus and species in line with this view, he did not escape a running fire of Thomist criticism for having conceived of form in too extrinsic and disembodied a manner, and in particular for representing, 'platonically', the production of bodies as a ceaseless flow of forms from an *immaterial* principle: 'As Plato maintained that the forms of the sensible realities we experience are the effect of immaterial substances, so too did Avicenna'.[17] So we come to our third and last theme, the nature and activity of the intellect.

At first sight, Avicenna's theory of the soul might seem positively congenial to Christian teaching; and so it seemed to many when it first came into the West, and even long after. It emphatically differentiates the rational soul from the body. It is true that, as Avicenna admits no principle except matter of individuation within a species, one must suppose that, for him, souls differ simply because they have different bodies. What happens then to the soul after death? Does it merge into a single common soul? Avicenna does not say so, but William of Auvergne thought this the consequence of his principles, and heartily denounced Avicenna, along with Aristotle, for denying individual immortality. One senses the Christian's horror at the reduction of human individuality to that in man which is precisely *not* the soul. On the other hand Avicenna certainly teaches that the soul is in fact individual and does not exist before its body. Yet it is not for

16 Roland-Gosselin, op. cit., p. 11.
17 *Summa Theol.*, I, 110, 1 *ad* 3.

him, in the Aristotelian sense, the body's *form*. It uses the body, and even needs it, but in itself it is a thing apart, a *substantia solitaria*.[18]

Twenty-five years ago M. Gilson set out to answer the question: 'Why did St Thomas criticise St Augustine?', and he did so by tracing the effort of a series of Christian thinkers, from the mid-twelfth century on, to mix the Augustinian tradition with strong doses of Avicenna. But for my purpose the chief interest of Gilson's conclusions (which have of course been questioned in detail) lies in the light they throw on the reaction of St Thomas, who worked out his own theory of the 'agent intellect' in terms, chiefly, of a critique of that 'platonism' to which, on the question at issue, he likens the teaching of Avicenna. This teaching, St Thomas observes, was consonant with what Avicenna taught about bodies. In Avicennian physics, he says, the forms of bodies find their proper and sufficient causes, not in other bodies, but in an active separated world of spirits. Similarly, the soul receives intellectual knowledge from an 'active intellect' outside and above it. It can indeed do something to facilitate its reception of intelligible forms from outside; but this self-disposing activity of the soul is not properly intellectual; it is an exercise of imagination. The cause of the intelligible ideas as such is wholly extrinsic.

Against this St Thomas reiterates his fundamental objection: 'This theory would eliminate the *proximate* principles of reality'. The activity of any thing must be explained, as far as possible, in terms of that thing itself.[19] If thinking, as distinct from imagining, is a human activity, the root of it must be human—a principle within the individual man; but not intrinsic in the Platonic sense, i.e. an inward possession of intelligible forms which the soul recovers by a sort of reminiscence, by a return into itself, away from the body and the senses. For if that is how man attains knowledge, what is he doing with a body? If it is fundamentally natural for the soul to grow wise by withdrawing from the body, then its union with the body must be fundamentally unnatural. Broadly speaking, that is the Thomist objection to Plato.[20] And Avicenna, for St Thomas, started from the same basic supposition as Plato: that the human intellect by nature bears directly upon

18 *Mélanges Mandonnet* II, p. 48 (*Bibl. Thomiste* XIV; Paris: Vrin, 1930).
19 QQ *de Ver.* X, 6.
20 cf. *S.T.* I, 84, 4c.

intelligible forms *in act*. Yet, Avicenna was less consistent than Plato; for, conceiving the source of intellectual life to be outside the soul, he tried to explain the soul's approach to this life as an exercise of the senses and imagination. His was an inconsistent Platonism.[21]

But Avicenna was also an inconsistent Aristotelian. We must realise that St Thomas accepted Aristotle's critique of Plato. The Platonic world of pure forms participated intuitively by the human mind was for him no longer philosophically tenable. The objective basis of such intuition had been removed. But on the side of the subject the case was not so clear. To Avicenna at least, as St Thomas interprets him, it was clear that if intelligible forms exist, they exist in an intellect and as actually intellected. Avicenna threw the emphasis on mind, and on mind in act.[22] Where else, he thought, could intelligible forms exist? Meanwhile, Aristotle had introduced the notion of the *intellectus agens*, so bringing the *De Anima* to a sort of climax where the noblest part of the soul stands revealed: *separabilis, impassibilis, immixtus et in actu secundum substantiam*. And all this exactly suited Avicenna. Nothing less could satisfy his demand, as a subject for intelligible forms, of a knower *in act*. But, so far as the human mind was potential only, it could not be that subject, that knower. As St Thomas formulates it, putting as tersely as possible the case against his own view, *intellectus possibilis* and *intellectus agens* cannot share the same substance; for the same thing cannot, with respect to the same, be at once in act and in potency.[23] Hence the Avicennian *intellectus agens* exists as a separate, spiritual substance outside the soul.

At once Avicenna was involved in insuperable difficulties. But at once his critic also was involved in the necessity of explaining (a) how the mind could be at once the active source of its own understanding and in potency to intelligibles; and (b) how the senses subserve understanding without being a mere excitant (against Plato) or the sole intrinsic dispositive cause (against Avicenna). What was needed, in fact, was a review of the whole relation between the mind and the material world. It is beyond the scope of this lecture to consider the review that St Thomas provided. Enough to say that it sprang right out of his critique of

21 *Contra Gent.*, II, 74 *passim*.
22 cf. QQ. *de Ver.* X, 2c.
23 Q. *de Anima*, a 5 *ad* 2; S.T. I, 79, 4.

his predecessors; and to suggest that the ultimate term of all the Christian thinker's criticism of the Arabs was a demonstration of the *intrinsically* intellectual, and therefore spiritual, character of the individual human soul.

In this lecture I have laid the emphasis on Avicenna's encounter with the mind of St Thomas, and so run the risk, no doubt, of over-emphasis. For the thirteenth century was intellectually extremely complex. But in general its fascination consists in its having witnessed the first encounter, on a high and sustained level, of Christianity with an alien philosophy. If one may draw morals from history—and why not?—I would draw two from this: that if Christians are bound to love their neighbours, they should love their neighbours' minds; and that if non-Christians are bound to love truth, they may find some in Christians. Truth is hard to gain and to keep, but it can be shared; at least if Dante (who learned much from the Arabs) is right, who saw Paradise united in the '*vero in che si queta ogni intelletto*'.[24]

CATHOLIC WRITING

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

MR EVELYN WAUGH once wrote, in a letter, I think, to a Catholic newspaper, that it is the business of the novelist to portray man 'against a background of eternal values'. Few novelists and few critics have been sufficiently clear-headed to attempt such a succint definition. In making his point so neatly, Mr Waugh has disclosed the dilemma in which the modern poet and novelist find themselves, a dilemma which is fairly represented in this passage from Elizabeth Bowen's own notes on novel-writing:

> 'Great novelists write without pre-assumptions. They write from outside their own nationality, class or sex.
>
> 'To write thus would be the ambition of any novelist who wishes to state poetic truth.
>
> 'Does this mean he must have no angle, no moral viewpoint? No, surely, without these he would be (a) incapable of maintaining the conviction necessary for the novel; (b) incap-

24 'in the truth that brings all minds to peace'. (*Par.* xxviii, 108.)