

ST. THOMAS AND HUMANISM

IF St. Thomas had not been born a Catholic, his philosophy would have brought him to Catholicism. If he had not been—or if he were not—by temperament a humanist, Thomism and the Faith were sufficient to make him one. These three, which meet and fuse in the human soul, are so intimately linked together that it is impossible perfectly to possess any one of them without possessing the others. All three find common expression in the enfranchisement of the personality. Humanism in the full and real sense is more than the incomplete humanism of the ancients; more than the atrophied humanism of the Renaissance. For in humanism there are two elements. There is the worship, the love, of beauty, wherever beauty is to be found. There is the realization of the personality in whatever sphere that realization is possible. And both Greece and the Renaissance failed in fullness in these things. If there be any realm of reality, any part of the university of being, whose beauty finds no echo in the heart of a man; if there be anything of life and its fullness to which his personality will not respond, that man is, in that degree, no humanist. In the same degree he will be, logically, no follower of the philosophy of St. Thomas or of the religion of Christ.

It need hardly be said that such a conception is in no conflict with the Christian idea of what is called detachment or of mortification. The Christian principle of detachment, whatever may have been the attitude demanded by a particular, exceptional case, is quite clear. What is demanded is the readiness to forego the enjoyment of beauty in this or that sphere where it is incompatible with the service of God. The

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love of beauty in all its manifestations is not only not forbidden: by the very concept of Christianity it is required. Boethius was a Christian at least in his realization of this:

*tu cuncta superno
Ducis ab exemplo, pulchrum pulcherrimus ipse
Mundum mente gerens similique in imagine formans
Perfectasque iubens perfectum absolvere partes.*

Mortification is, in the present state of man, of necessity precisely as a means to an end. It is the negative aspect of a positive process. The personality cannot be made perfect until its own intrinsic obstacles are removed. 'We need not set self-sacrifice against self-realization,' says Dean Inge, 'for the self that one sacrifices is never the same as the self that one realizes.'

In these days when the love of beauty is by God's mercy becoming more manifest, in spite of so many appearances on the contrary side, and when the realization of the human personality is so universal, although often so misunderstood, an ambition, it would seem that St. Thomas's greatest appeal will lie in his full and perfect humanism.

Man seldom keeps to the narrow, central path of virtue, of reason, of truth. He is nearly always to be found swaying to this side or to that, and it is probably true to say that every man is, however slightly, either antinomian or puritan. Catholicism, Thomism, humanism, steer their calm course through this Scylla and Charybdis. But few of us live by the pattern our convictions have set before us. It is difficult to say which of these excesses is the lesser evil. It may indeed seem to many that it is better to live wildly than not to live at all. However, if both principles be brought to their final conclusion they will meet. *La spécialisation d'une faculté*, said Baudelaire, *aboutit*

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en néant. The truth may be extended. Wherever one side of life is unnaturally emphasized, to the suppression of another, the human personality as such is atrophied and at last extinguished. Puritanism must end in a negative morality which is lifeless and inhuman. Antinomianism on the opposite side of the circle comes by way of sheer squandering to the same end. The one by repression, the other by prodigality, each is left equally void.

True humanism will keep the balance of power. For human nature is not so perfect a unity as to make civil war an impossibility. Each power within it must be perfected in relation to the common weal. In the universal pageant of beauty no one figure must oust or efface another. To despise created beauty, for example, for the sake of an infinite beauty is not true mysticism; it is a pathetic mistake. The *spernere mundum, spernere sese, spernere nullum* of Malachy, the Irish bishop, describes the march of the true spiritual Odyssey.

But there is a hierarchy of beauty as there is a hierarchy of the human powers. The higher dignity, the deeper worship, must be assigned to the higher beauty, the deeper worth. To deify created beauty is to sin against beauty. So, too, to despise the body for the sake of the soul, the senses for the sake of the mind, knowledge for the sake of love or love for the sake of knowledge, all these are misjudgments and unjust. But it is a misjudgment also to exalt the senses over the mind, the body over the soul. Each of these parts of the personality must have its play, its evolution, but each must keep its due place if the whole is to be perfect.

It is just this absolute balance on both the subjective and the objective side which we find in the philosophy of St. Thomas: the perfect appreciation of the

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various realms of beauty in relation one with another, the perfect adjustment of the personality's powers in their interaction and subordination. It was this precisely which was lacking to Greece and to the Renaissance which copied Greece. The Greeks, whose glory it is to have exalted human loveliness in all its phases, did not, as a general rule, gauge it by an uncreated loveliness. The vivid sense of natural beauty which inspired them led them to regard it as divine itself. They worshipped it, primarily in the person of Aphrodite, the ideal of feminine beauty, and then in every woman who resembled Aphrodite and was by that title fitted to be her priestess. As a natural corollary they came to regard physical love as the expression of their worship, as an act of religion. Their competitions of beauty assumed a real and serious religious significance. (The modern world might well learn from them here.) The same applies to the cult of Apollo. Naturally such a theory became, among the common people especially, mere licentiousness. But to brand the whole of this ideal as mere immorality is blind and ridiculous. It was doomed to failure, however, precisely because it soared no higher than the Aphrodite or the Apollo of physical beauty. With no god more exalted than a being of flesh and blood like themselves they failed in the main to conceive of a purely spiritual beauty demanding spiritual worship and love and regulating *ex alto* their cult of physical perfection. Their failure was, radically, a failure of incompleteness.

With the Renaissance it was otherwise. A reaction, and a very worthy reaction—few things are more displeasing than a decadent scholastic—like all reactions it exaggerated. The scholastics of those days were, largely, so concerned, in the fusty, abstract manner with which, unfortunately, the very name of Scholasticism is inseparably linked, in discussing the Creator

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that they had neither time nor inclination to concern themselves concretely with the creature. Such a decline was, of course, inevitable. A philosophical tradition, just as much as a literary tradition or a religious tradition, will always decay in so far as it is human or contains the elements of imperfection from the fact that it is held in the frailty of human hands. In this case it is William of Occam who must receive the greatest blame. The rise of his Terminist school was the most significant factor in bringing about the decay and disrepute of the scholastics. Diametrically opposed to the philosophy of St. Thomas, Occam exalted logic to the detriment of metaphysics. The fact is of paramount importance. His disciples, after the manner of disciples, pushed the primacy of logic still further and became mere dialecticians. It was this emptiness of content, this shallow glitter of dialectic—one is reminded of the disputation of Panurge with the English doctor—which drew forth the attacks of the humanists at Paris and the other universities where the novelty of the movement had laughed at official prohibitions and gained the ascendancy. Together with the Nominalists, the Terminists fell under the attacks of the humanists and the reformers. It is almost truer to say they committed suicide. Refusing, like the French aristocrats before the Revolution, to take any notice of what was breaking out around them; refusing to concern themselves with the march of the particular sciences, they suffocated themselves. Only the Thomists and the Scotists, thanks to their reality, their metaphysic, weathered the storm and survived.

Yet their survival is a fact by which the idea of the antagonism between humanists and theologians must be modified. 'The relations between humanism and St. Thomas,' says Grabmann, 'were far more friendly than writers are willing to believe; recent investigations have recognized and confirm more and more the

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fact that the Renaissance sprang from the spirit of the Middle Ages.' Admiration for St. Thomas was no uncommon feature of the humanists of the time. Valla preached a panegyric on him in the Minerva; Erasmus called him *vir non suo tantum saeculo magnus*. At his death the Paris Faculty of Arts had written to the General Chapter of the Dominican Order at Florence praising him as the Sun of his century, and begging some of the books of profane science from his library. It is interesting to note also that Carducci, the Italian humanist of the nineteenth century, whose adoration of the Greek and Latin classics was the foundation of his whole theory of politics and aesthetics, demanded 'who among the modern economists and politicians was great' compared with Thomas Aquinas and Dante.

In the main, however, it was a far cry from the spirit of the scholastics of the day to the bold, human spirit of Abelard, the brilliant scholar and dialectician who had come to feel the flash and glitter of syllogism a poor thing beside the 'windflower of seventeen growing in the shadow of Notre Dame.' St. Thomas's confession that the creations of his reason were as straw before the reality of personal contact with the Creator is, in degree, of universal application. *Animus*, to recall Claudel's parable, is a lost soul without *Anima*. If a man is to be led by his philosophy into a segregation from reality, from personal contacts, he had far better renounce his philosophy and cultivate his back-garden with his fellow men. To regard philosophy as the mere exercise of intelligence about reality is to mistake its whole essence. The 'love of wisdom' is affective as well as intellectual. What Albertus Magnus wrote of theology is in point here. *Non quaeritur cognitio ad veritatem per intellectum tantum sed per affectum et substantiam; et ideo non est intellectiva tantum sed affectiva, quia intellectus ordina-*

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*tur ad affectum ut ad finem.*¹ 'Knowledge,' says St. Thomas himself, 'is not perfect unless love be joined to it.'² To be an exaggerated intellectualist, to concern oneself exclusively with the reason, is imperfect just as to concern oneself only with the emotions, to be a sentimentalist, is imperfect. The latter road ends in a crass somnolence of the spirit; the former in an 'angelicist suicide.' Herein lies the subjective importance of art—science incarnate, in Cocteau's phrase—the artist lives necessarily in direct contact with reality. Some philosophers forget that there is an art of being a philosopher. *La raison ne suffit pas pour avoir raison.* The metaphysician runs greater risk of unreality than the theologian. For theology deals with God, a person; the object of metaphysic is not, as such, a person.

The humanists rightly condemned and combated so unreal a myopism on the part of the scholastics. Greek awareness of the beauty of the world, unfolding itself with the flash of sunrise before them, was the very antithesis of what they were decrying. They embraced it wholly, just as it was. The cult of letters, of elegance, of beauty in every material manifestation again possessed the hearts of men. They would have no truck with theology—that is not surprising—but what was worse, they made little or no attempt to Christianize their inherited culture. Thomas More is a rare exception to a general rule. What the Greeks had not known they knowingly ignored. Their humanism was not merely incomplete. It was atrophied. Contrary to their own implicit principles they suppressed a part of themselves; banished from their horizon a part, the greatest part, of the object of their worship. Hence their sterility. *Renier les effets de la société*

¹ Commentary on I Sentences, dist. I, art. 4, ad 2m.

² Commentary on I Sentences, dist. X, qu. I, art. 1.

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*précédente chrétienne et philosophique, c'est se suicider, c'est refuser la force et les moyens de perfectionnement.*³ There was no rock foundation to withstand the assaults of the first enemy. Incidentally, as in the case of the two excesses mentioned before, they came to a like end with the scholasticism they so despised. Baudelaire is here again to the point. *La folie de l'art est égale à l'abus de l'esprit. La création d'une de ces deux suprématies engendre la sottise, la dureté de coeur et une immensité d'orgueil et d'égoïsme.*

With St. Thomas humanism is constructive, fertile. Based on the rock of Christ as well as on the foundations of true philosophy, it is, of itself, impregnable. It may be, it has been, obscured. It will always stand.

(To be concluded).

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³ Ch. Baudelaire : *L'Art Romantique*, XIV.