

PASSAGE TO BEAUTY

*Poetic Experience*¹ surely provides what Mr. Herbert Read was looking for. And in a more conclusive and final way than the hints and suggestions he found in the works of M. Bergson. The sub-title is *An Introduction to Thomist Aesthetic*. The claim is amply justified in the argument by its close and constant use of the principles of St. Thomas.

The scope of the book is wide. It deals with poetic experience in general, and seeks to chart its position in the Thomist system. This it does by insisting on a particular aspect and a special relation of familiar Thomist principles. Atmosphere is given by the appearance of such names as Billuart, Cajetan and Durandus, until one is almost led to expect some familiar quotation from Zigliara.

We have become so accustomed, at least in English works on aesthetics, to arguments in a strange and unintelligible idiom. Unrecognizable principles and intangible conclusions are all too familiar. Since Mr. Clive Bell wrote *Art* a sort of superficial idiom has been established. Prospectuses issued by educational authorities now speak in terms of 'significant form.' But there is no generally accepted meaning of these terms. The importance and the great value of this book lies in the fact that its conclusions are related to familiar landmarks. They cannot be dismissed as 'somewhere in Ruritania.'

In brief, the argument is this. Knowledge in its perfection is union with a concrete thing. In its normal life the reason only partially achieves this end. But St. Thomas's principles regarding the influence of the will on the mind clearly allow of that complete union, especially in view of the power of the senses to present to the mind a more complete object. In effect, we must postulate two sorts of knowledge, or two sorts of union: the one incomplete, or union by representation, the other more complete, and more

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BLACKFRIARS

immediate. This is a drastic simplification; while not doing justice to the author's thought, we hope at least that it does not misrepresent it.

One of the vital factors at the root of St. Thomas's psychology is an insistence on the mystery of man's make-up, the mystery of the mingling of the spiritual with the material. It makes the mind unique in its nature and unique in its processes. Even in the most spiritual activities we find the body playing a vital part, and greatly modifying those activities. The necessity for abstraction would appear to defeat the end of knowledge itself, did we not insist on the Aristotelean solution whereby the mind is shown, if not to achieve union with another substance, at least to reach to the armature of the material world. It appears then that in its normal life of abstraction the reason holds on to something ontologically more perfect than could be found in immediate union with the contingent concrete, but in its severe and practical way it misses the full delight and perfection of knowledge, which is that immediate and complete union.

First, it must be remarked: To emphasize poetic experience as the perfect and complete knowledge possible for man is perhaps to obscure a balanced view of the whole question. From the nature of the objects attained we can assess the ontological value of poetic experience. Which is this. Poetic experience is an immediate union with a real *thing*. Its immediacy makes it more perfect than knowledge by concepts. But it seems that its perfection is one of mode only, and not of substance. The thing known is material, and since the union is immediate the mind must to some extent act according to the nature of its object. Hence the necessity and importance of sense intuition. Just as the mystery of the origin of ideas is solved by endowing the mind with a power to spiritualize its object, so with equal justification we can postulate a parallel power by which the mind goes out to its object.

Sed tamen mens per accidens singularibus se immiscet, in quantum continuatur viribus sensitivis, quae circa particularia versantur. Quae quidem continuatio est dupliciter. Uno modo

PASSAGE TO BEAUTY

*inquantum motus sensitivae partis terminatur ad mentem
Alio modo secundum quod motus qui est ab anima ad res, incipit
a mente, et procedit in partem sensitivam, prout mens regit in-
feriores vires, et sic singularibus se immiscet mediante ratione
particulari, etc. (De Veritate, X, 5.)*

The point is that by insisting on this aspect of sense intuition it can be seen that the mind pays its price for that fleeting taste of the delight of perfect knowledge. It must to some extent lower itself to the condition of its object. The position is curious. On the one hand, the mind can rise to exalted heights to contemplate the necessary truths, but it is a cheerless and arduous task, for in so far as the mind must first of all construct its own object, it falls short of fulfilment. On the other hand, in poetic experience the mind achieves intimate union but must lose something of the spirituality and substance of knowledge. It seems almost that the poetic experience is the bloom without the apple. In itself it is no fulfilment of a man's potentialities.

Let it be understood that this is no attempt to disparage the poetic experience, nor even to discount its practical value. 'The Poet's business is not to save souls, but to make them worth saving,' remarked James Elroy Flecker. If the individual experience is no more than a fleeting glance and a vivid pleasure (perfect knowledge by its close grip on the living concrete, but imperfect knowledge in its essential brevity and change), the cumulative and permanent effect of a lifetime of such experiences is vast and profound. It seems to be a more nourishing diet for the character than the eternal contemplation of the unchanging truths of philosophy. But we are not comparing accidental effects of the two processes, but the individual processes themselves. It is important that we should have a just appreciation of the nature of this poetic experience that the author has described and explained with such care and accuracy and not misunderstand in what sense it is the peak of human knowledge.

Secondly must be noted another aspect of the importance of sense intuition in this question. The author confesses

BLACKFRIARS

that his argument, like the good old Duke of York, 'marches up to the top of the hill and marches down again.' That, as he points out, is an inherent difficulty. It is scarcely possible to do more than indicate and suggest, especially in the frame-work of recognized Thomist principles. But perhaps the boundaries of the uncharted territory of the poetic experience could have been more clearly defined by a greater emphasis on the part played by sense intuition. It is used to show how the object is brought immediately present to the mind. A *sine qua non* only? Is it not perhaps in addition a factor giving a specific character to the process, making the poetic experience a particular sort of affective knowledge? To discuss this, however, would doubtless have introduced unwelcome complications into the argument, and would have taken it beyond its frame-work.

As has been said, we must be grateful to Father Gilby for this valuable treatise. For the first time in the welter of modern English work on aesthetics we have been given a solution to a much-discussed problem in a careful and logical deduction from St. Thomas's principles of knowledge.

MARK BROCKLEHURST, O.P.