

THE ANONYMOUS ARTICLE

DURING the last year or so, English Catholics have been subjected to a good deal of criticism. Their taste, their devotions, their religious education, their papers, have all been weighed and found wanting. Criticism is no bad thing, and Catholic criticism of Catholics is no new thing; for a certain measure of criticism is a sign of life, and, as Père Brou¹ has well said of the Church, 'Sa grande tradition, si l'on peut le dire, c'est de vivre.' But the criticism to which I am now referring has this to distinguish it, that it is anonymous. No doubt, that is no new thing, either; but whether it is desirable is worth considering. We are told that an anonymous article is judged on its merits, as things should be judged; and we are led to presume that the signed article is judged with too much reference to the name, distinguished or not, that is appended to it.

The argument has had the support of some respectable names, and it might, at first sight, seem to have the authority of *The Imitation of Christ*, where it is written: 'Non quaeras quis haec dixerit, sed quid dicatur, attende.'² But the quotation occurs in the chapter on the reading of Holy Scripture, and the attitude is recommended just because the scriptures are to be taken, not at their face value, but on the authority of God. And whatever the authority behind the opinion, it can hardly blame us for considering it on its merits, as, in fact, it bids us do.

We must assume in fairness that its upholders do not intend the argument to be pressed to the extreme. There is much that we are bound as Catholics not to

¹ A. Brou, S.J. : *La Spiritualité de Saint Ignace*, 2e éd., p. 133.

²*De Imitat. Christi*, Lib. I, Cap. V.

The Anonymous Article

accept according as we judge of it, but as proceeding from a known authority. And they in turn will not accuse us of suggesting that every scrap of writing should bear its author's name. Nor do we deny that anonymous writing must perforce be judged on its merits. But there is a suggestion that this is the only really sound way to judge, and the positive gain of the anonymous article is held to lie in the fact that no other sort of judgment is possible.

If men are capable of judging what they read, well and good; we have no complaint. But are they always capable of judgment? And if they are not, if they are more capable of judging the author than his work, is it so unwise, so wrong, to judge by the name?

Let us, for the moment, take the argument out of the literary sphere, and consider the ordinary judgments that we are all called upon to make. There are many ordinary things of which I am quite capable of judging for myself. I can buy a chair or a table, and I can judge surely whether I am getting what I want. Numbers of simple things are within my own experience and knowledge. When I buy something more complex—a house, for example—the case is rather different. I know whether it looks right, whether there is enough room for me, and so forth; but, unless I am a builder with special training, I am not usually able to judge it structurally. It is the same with all complicated things—motor-cars, aeroplanes, and a hundred others; unless I have special aptitude I am likely to be a poor judge of the thing. I shall take it or leave it by its appearance, and by what I can make of it; and I shall very likely be wrong. Now what I do when I am faced with matters of this sort, is, call in someone else. I ask the man with special knowledge to pass judgment for me. I still have to judge, of course; but I judge, not the thing that I do not understand, but the man, and his qualifications to judge for

Blackfriars

me. If the matter is unimportant, I may try it for myself. If I am obstinate, and no one else is involved, I may take the risk. But if the thing is serious, and I am a person of ordinary sense, I shall not trust my own judgment where I know it cannot carry me. Where I cannot judge of the thing, I judge a man instead.

Am I any better off? Certainly I am. I can find out what I need to know about my man, what his qualifications are, what other people think of him, what he has done. I can see whether he is likely to know what he is about. If, for instance, a man has a new theory of flying, it is instructive to know what happened when he flew his own machine. And when I know all this—and it is not so very difficult to discover—I can judge whether the man's judgment is likely to be trustworthy *within his own subject*. That success in any sphere is often supposed to give a man the right to talk with authority about anything and everything else, does not invalidate a process that, rightly used, is perfectly sound. Further, if it is often important to know the right man when I seek for a sound judgment, it is no less important when, as so often, judgment is forced upon me. When people say: 'I shouldn't buy that house,' or 'That car's no good,' I must, if I do not know enough myself, consider how much they are likely to know about it.

All this is as true of reading as of anything else. Of many of the books and articles I read I am certainly competent to judge. If an author sets out to amuse me, I know better than anyone else whether he succeeds or not. I know whether an article is readable, whatever signature is attached to it. Then I have my own subjects in which I have been trained and tried, and if I read about them I know well enough when a man is talking nonsense. I certainly have some competence; it may even extend farther than is some-

The Anonymous Article

times supposed. St. Thomas says³: 'Rectitudo iudicii potest contingere dupliciter: uno modo secundum perfectum usum rationis, alio modo propter connaturalitatem quamdam ad ea de quibus jam est iudicandum: sicut de his quae ad castitatem pertinent, per rationis inquisitionem recte iudicat ille qui didicit scientiam moralem; sed per quamdam connaturalitatem ad ipsam, recte iudicat de eis ille qui habet habitum castitatis.' We need not, it seems, be quite so contemptuous of the sense of discomfort that simple Catholics sometimes experience when they are confronted with some modern art. There is, then, much that I can judge with some assurance, and it matters little whether it be anonymous or not. But philosophy and theology—I am speaking as the ordinary layman—can I judge there? I could, no doubt, detect a direct denial of revealed truth. Could I detect dangerous tendency? Could I separate what was doubtful from what was certain? And all the matters on the borders of theology, can I read and judge them? Can I even say how far revealed truth is involved, and where the question is entirely open? But surely, if theology be avoided and left to the theologians . . . ? In what serious subject cannot theology be compromised? In a word, am I not as a Catholic, wisest if I consider the author as well as the writing? A few sentences of the *Summa* would be as clear and as cogent—if they were anonymous—to the people capable of judging them on their merits; but it is right that the ordinary Catholic should read them with respect because they were written by St. Thomas, and it is entirely right that he should be able so to read them. St. Thomas himself quoted his authorities by name, and in such a way as to show that he did regard the name of the author as having some weight.

³*Summa*: II^a II^{ae}. 45. 2.

Blackfriars

If this is true, it is the more important in that the writers in *Reviews* are in the position of people volunteering advice. We have not called them in. They tell us what to do, and what not to do; they offer to guide our opinions and form our taste. We know whether they are readable or not; but are they competent? We know when they are convincing; but is that more than literary skill? Particularly when they want to set us right—and they generally do—should their anonymity give us pause. For here we have to do not only with knowledge, but with practical sense as well. Suppose that anyone can judge what is said. Suppose, if you like, that we can all see the truth of it. Are we so well qualified to judge of the expediency of saying it at this particular time, of the measures necessary for correction, of the manner—even sometimes the manners—of scourging the wrong and urging the right? Of all this, which needs wisdom and experience and much else, are we so competent to judge? When these things touch the Church and the things of the Church, we want, we need, surely we have a right, to know from whom they come. There will always be many opinions, and it is good that we should be keen to exercise our minds on these; but as for most of us the time is short—‘short at the longest’—we shall prefer to take this exercise in the company of men whom we know to be competent to help us. It is simply true that we cannot read everything in the same way. When serious issues are concerned, we shall be right to give special weight to what is said by men with special knowledge: we shall perhaps be ready to think over the expression of an opinion that is no better informed than our own: we shall certainly want to know which is which.

This is one side of the case against anonymity. The other happily has the authority of a very great name. In 1852 Cardinal Newman wrote: ‘The authority,

The Anonymous Article

which in former times was lodged in Universities, now resides in very great measure in that literary world, as it is called, to which I have been referring. This is not satisfactory if, as no one can deny, its teaching be so off-hand, so ambitious, so changeable. It increases the seriousness of the mischief, that so very large a portion of its writers are anonymous, for irresponsible power can never be anything but a great evil.*⁴

A. E. H. SWINSTEAD.

*Preface to *The Idea of a University*.