

G R E A T T A C T ¹

TO be asked to speak in praise of St Thomas is an honour which dismays as much as it flatters; for who could claim to be master of such a subject?

Yet to venture to praise St Thomas is already to claim to know him, not completely of course, but enough to recognise, in and through his work, a man distinct from all others and the work itself as an expression of reality differing in certain important respects from all others. But to know anyone is to claim a certain equality and likeness to him; as indeed we must do who dare to represent St Thomas to our generation. Representation is a kind of imitation; if we are not somehow like him inwardly how can we express his doctrine outwardly? Yet, doubtless, all of us would readily admit our inferiority to him, and would think that in this we were the more conformed to his own spirit which was so utterly unpretentious. And no doubt each of us is greatly his inferior in intelligence, let alone in holiness. But there is, I suppose, a special sense in which all of us, however gifted, are bound to be his inferiors; for we are all historically his followers, and heirs to an achievement which cannot in fact ever be supplanted. For workers in the tradition to which he made so extraordinary a contribution, St Thomas remains forever a master.

This contribution came at the critical point in Christian history when the thought of Aristotle, and particularly its Averroist interpretation, invaded the Catholic West. The most critical period of the crisis can be dated probably to within a dozen years. That crisis itself is past and gone, but its fruit remains. For what Aristotle and Averroes signified in terms of the perennial Church was the threat of rationalism; and this threat is still with us, and still would be if the Greek and his Arab pupil and all their works were forgotten; for rationalism is a permanent state of mind. And in dealing with that particular crisis St Thomas dealt with rationalism; so far extending ratiocination into the content of Christian belief that his work has become in a certain sense co-extensive with this belief—in the sense that we who desire to be at once both Christian and rational find at every point his principles at hand to guide us. So his work is more than a *fait accompli*; it is an exceptionally lucid moment in the history of the human mind; which, because of its lucidity, has power to govern the future. The great mind that produced it sets the pace for, gives direction to, his followers in the same field.

I am not concerned here with the work itself so much as with the

¹ A speech for the feast of St Thomas, 1947.

mind behind it. And I do not propose to analyse the quality of this mind at all thoroughly, but only to pick out what seems most characteristic of its greatness or genius.

Nor am I directly concerned with St Thomas as a saint, but as a human genius and a human hero; and these terms, genius and hero, already indicate two distinct aspects of greatness. Genius, I suppose, is an exceptional capacity or power or source of energy related, from the beginning of a man's life, to some line of achievement in knowledge or art or practical activity. On this view exceptional men and women are exceptional from the start; they are born so; and that is their genius. *Poeta nascitur*. But even on this view genius needs to be brought into act, into history; to live in a work; and here it waits upon heroism which is principally in the will. The poet may be born, but the poem must be made—even at the cost of the poet's life, perhaps, as one of the hero-poets, Dante, saw clearly. He knew that the *Divine Comedy* was 'wearing him to the bone': *Si che m'ha fatto per più anni macro* (Par. xxv, 1-3). The poem was his deed, the fruit of his will as much as of his wit. Nietzsche too saw the creator as a phoenix consumed in his own fire. For if heroism exists only in a deed willed and done, it exists only in renouncement, in a man's choosing to walk down one road out of many, choosing not to mark time at the cross-roads.

And heroism in turn suggests moral greatness; which might be defined as heroism without genius, or rather as heroism independent of genius. When genius issues into a deed of a certain weight and scope you have intellectual, artistic or political greatness; and of these, if the first two, at least, have nothing else in common with moral greatness they share with it an energy of the will, the heroic quality, without which no greatness at all can actually exist. Just how far intellectual or artistic distinction can do without moral goodness is not my present concern; but certainly—certainly for Christians—moral greatness can exist without intellectual or artistic distinction, and *a fortiori* without genius. It may spring up in any man; because it requires no material but bare human life itself. It pertains to human nature simply. This truth was hardly evident, I suppose, before the coming of Christ; and Christ made it evident, first by relating human goodness to God, before whom all merely human credentials—such as genius—are as nothing, and secondly by building his Church not on a genius but on twelve Apostles.

Nevertheless genius and goodness are not incompatible. On the contrary, if we explore these terms a little we reach a common basis in human nature. Let me try to bring this idea out more clearly and so to throw some light, perhaps, on the properly human charac-

ter of all genius, and of St Thomas's in particular.

First of all we know that the immediate measure of moral goodness is human nature ruling action by the light of reason.² This rule of reason does not indeed exclude a higher rule; rather it implies one. It is our immediate and proximate rule, itself ruled by the mind of God. Nor are the resources, so to say, of moral goodness things merely intrinsic to man like the gifts of genius or anything else that is bounded by human nature. Our whole nature is enclosed in a divine order and penetrated, if it chooses, by the divine invasion called Grace. Still, human nature is the immediate measure of our life's movement. Hence, if genius is part of human nature in general, though not of each individual, the general human measure reaches to the furthest scope of human genius in all its variety; and we can say that the morally good man, however modestly endowed in himself, in tending to the perfection proper to man, tends to the perfection connoted by genius. The fulfilment of this tendency would have remained a dream had we been left to ourselves; but it is surely part of the glory promised to the adopted sons of God; and in that glory it will remain essentially a human thing, a part of the restored integrity of Adam. All we call genius must have existed in Adam and will presumably be restored to those who share in the new Adam. No heroism, then, need be separated, in fact, from genius in the end.

On the other hand genius too is measured by human nature—I mean that the field or zone of it is the reality called man. Genius is an extraordinary capacity for human existence in some particular way—the way of thought or art or government. It is a peculiar capacity for the life focused between the head and feet and the out-stretched hands of a man. If we exist greatly it is *we* who exist. If we know greatly it is by knowing *as* ourselves. If we create greatly it is by creating *as* ourselves. If we govern greatly it is by governing *as* ourselves. If we have any genius its proper sphere or zone of action is our nature; which exists concretely, in individuals and groups of individuals. That is why the political animal, for instance, cannot be separated from his particular *polis*, why great government is first of all self-government, then household government, then local government.

The zone of greatness is the human self, and conversely the self is great in some special way if it takes account and makes great use of itself in some special way. The people we call geniuses were all, from one point of view, thoroughly conditioned by time and circumstance. Their gift was to know precisely what they could do here and

² I-II. 19, 4c.; cf. ib. 18, 1; 71, 2c.

now; to know precisely what it was that they knew here and now. They existed emphatically in the here and now. There was much, no doubt, that each one missed; but there was something, always something, they did not miss; and their attention to *that* gave their genius its direction; gave it so forcibly, often, as to throw them intellectually or morally off their balance. Hence the 'abberation of genius', its obsessions: Leopardi's obsession with the flight of time, Napoleon's with conquest, Lawrence's with sex. But whether or no the intense and often narrow vision of genius issues in an obsession, it tends to present to the intelligence of the genius a sharp contrast between human life as he knows it, through the medium of some intensely focused aspect of it, and some total good or truth whose attraction he feels across the limitations of human life and in the degree that he is conscious of these limitations. Hence comes a sense of the pathos of human life, and so of its comedy (if its limitations are accepted despite the pathos) or of its tragedy (if they are refused, especially if they are refused as evil). Naturally the expression of this sense of the limitations of man and of some conceivable, if not actually feasible, deliverance from them will take one form in a philosopher, another in a poet or artist; but it will always be more acute in the measure that the instruments used by each—concepts, words, sounds, shapes, etc.—are the more appreciated; so that their ultimate failure to transcend the human limits is the more apparent. And this means that the sense of limitation is measured by an appreciation of human experience in some particular field—of thought or art or action.

It follows that a mark of great genius is a simultaneous awareness of the greatness and limitation of man, an awareness born of an intense appreciation of some factor or contrast of factors in human life. Through Pascal's distinction between *l'esprit de géometrie* and *l'esprit de finesse* we discern his intense experience of certain human contrasts. But what I would stress is the sense of limitation born of such awareness; hence it is that the great man—as Chesterton, who was one, knew so well—is so ready to confess weakness and even incompetence. Hence too the air of common humanity, the accessibility that belongs to great art—and sometimes even to great philosophy, despite its more abstract and technical language. Great men are too diffident to be inhuman. And yet in their very diffidence is implied or affirmed a needy grandeur; what else did Pascal mean by his otherwise trite observation: *la vie de l'homme est misérablement courte?* As he said elsewhere, *le grandeur de l'homme est grand en ce qu'il se connoit misérable . . . ce sont misères de grand seigneur, misère d'un roi dépossédé.*

The actual limitations of man—whether those proper to his nature or due to sin—are of course limitations of genius wherever genius appears. Pascal was a limited mathematician as well as a limited human being. But also these limitations are the field, as it were, in which genius plays; it reflects them in its efforts to come to terms with them or transcend them. It reflects humanity, its sickness or its health, but in any case its pathos. This is most obvious in art, but even the genius of the speculative thinker is implicitly pathetic—I mean, it does take account of the simultaneous greatness and limitation of man, though the terms in which it states its case are neither tragic nor comic, but abstract. And it is in a certain peculiarly thorough understanding and acknowledgment of that limited greatness, that grandeur within limitations, that consists, I would suggest, the characteristic note of the speculative genius of St Thomas.

For there are, I take it, four chief marks or notes belonging to great speculative genius, notes which find expression also consciously or not, in great art and poetry. These are:

(1) WIDTH: For the great speculative intellects to speak of anything involves speaking of all things; they cannot regard any experience of created things except as a starting point for new experience. The greatest literary expression I know of this attitude to life is the speech Dante puts into the mouth of Ulysses in the *Inferno*. It was notably the attitude of St Thomas's master, St Albert.

(2) DEPTH: Again, for these men to speak of anything or of all things involves speaking of the greatest thing; the universe is not only infinitely interesting, but also every part of it points to, and the whole pivots upon, a single absolute being, *quod omnes dicunt Deum*.³

(3) SYMPATHY: Again, they conceive of anything and all things, and even of the greatest thing, as of something intimately bound up, somehow, with the fibres of their own personal being. Not that they are vulgarly at home with the world and its Maker, but they bring it all home to themselves (and their hearers) as though all were linked to them by some profound mutual responsibility, by a possibility of love. As an expression of this attitude one might take the poetry of Claudel, especially 'L'Esprit et l'Eau', the second one of the *Cinq Grandes Odes*.

(4) PROPORTION: But their wide curiosity, their sense of the absolute, their sympathy do not make them overlook the *relative* importance of different things. They are organisers, makers of order, they put things in place, relate parts to the whole, effects to causes,

³ 'Commonly called God'. I, 2, 3.

means to ends. They are great discriminators. And of this attitude to life the greatest human expression is surely the *Summa*.

Here I reach the point indicated by my title. It is this power of active discrimination, of measuring one thing against another, of reserving its limited place for each limited thing, of balancing part and part, of distinguishing the lesser and the greater and relating the one to the other, it is this quality to which I give the name 'tact'; and if I were asked to name the distinctive characteristic of St Thomas's genius I should point to this. He had of course width of mind and curiosity. He had, more notably, depth of mind, a tremendous insight into the divine character of existence, of that *esse (quod) est perfectissimum omnium*⁴—since it is the *proprius effectus Dei*⁵ and *illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet et quod profundius omnibus inest, cum sit formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt*.⁶ This depth it is which gives—surely—his properly philosophical thinking its religious character; so that an excellent modern authority⁷ can speak of it as a *réalisme mystique*. And then thirdly, St Thomas's mind was very delicately sympathetic, extraordinarily refined; witness his pages on love in the *Summa* or the marvellous 19th chapter of the fourth book of the *Contra Gentiles*. But where his mind seems most distinctively and outstandingly great is in its sense of proportion, in its tact. He leaves out nothing, he blurs nothing. Each facet of reality is isolated, focused, regarded and then *placed*; and once placed, it is henceforth related, rid of its isolation. Other thinkers have been orderly and unhurried, but surely none have so respected the tiniest fibres and connections in the order of life as they knew it; and, even more than the active power to order, it is this respect for the factors in the order that I call tact. St Thomas's tact is chiefly his respect for the factors that make up the order of being. In practice—the practice which is heroism's completion of genius—this respect involved a heroic patience. But in itself it may perhaps be best regarded here as the humility of a truly great intellect thoroughly accepting the human and therefore limited, more precisely the embodied condition of our knowledge. I say embodied remembering that *tactus* is that one of the five senses which he calls *primus . . . et quodammodo radix et fundamentum omnium sensuum*;⁸ remembering that since it is the whole body which touches, touch or *tactus*

4 'Actual existence . . . the supreme perfection in things': I, 4, 1 ad 3.

5 'The effect proper to God': I, 45, 5; cf. *ibid.* 4 ad 1.

6 'What is innermost and deepest in anything and everything, since all reality finds in it its formal factor': I, 8, 1.

7 Aimé Forest in *La Structure Métaphysique du concret selon S. Thomas d'Aquin*.

8 'The primary sense, as it were the root and basis of all the others.' *Comment. in de Anima*, No. 604 Pirotta edition.

most properly bespeaks the embodied condition of man; whilst, on the other hand, since touch is at its most perfect in man, of all animals, it connotes in us, where it is most truly itself, the human soul, intellectual yet essentially embodied, with its balancing of contrasts, its discernment, its submission to, and its gradual penetration of, the order of the world.

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KANT'S AGNOSTICISM¹

I WOULD like to begin by reminding you of an episode in the history of modern philosophy in this country which is not altogether without significance, and that is the revolt against the Hegelian absolutism which one associates with such writers as Bosanquet and Edward Caird by a very powerful collection of thinkers at once philosophical and theological, of whom perhaps the best known in philosophical circles is the late Professor A. E. Taylor and in theological circles that profound and passionate writer Peter Taylor Forsyth. I mention Taylor and Forsyth together. I knew Taylor: I did not know Forsyth personally, but to judge from the latter's biography there was very little temperamental kinship between the two men. But both Taylor and Forsyth had this in common, that they welcomed Kant's intense moralism. I well remember Taylor saying to me: 'You know, MacKinnon, Kant is a very great moralist indeed. The Hegelian criticism of him is largely irrelevant. Hegel was a man without a conscience and could never understand anyone who took the moral struggle as seriously as Kant did'. Forsyth, too, in his writings found in Kant's intense moralism—his insistence on the inescapable demand of the moral law—a rock firm to withstand the moral frivolousness that he supposed to be ultimately implicit in the Hegelian attitude; and certainly if any of you have read Bosanquet's book, *Some Suggestions in Ethics* (a book well worth reading) you will agree, I think, that Bosanquet does leave little foothold for an ultimate moral seriousness—for the kind of almost existential engagement that seems involved in moral choice. It could be said of Forsyth—who was, I would remind you, a theologian and a very great theologian—that he sought above all else to secure a foothold in the world for the ultimate, not further analysable significance of the *fiat voluntas tua* of Gethsemane.

Why have I mentioned this episode? Because, apart from the

¹ The substance of a Paper read by Mr D. M. MacKinnon to the Oxford Aquinas Society on 21st February 1947.