

## THE REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUALISM OF ST. ALBERT THE GREAT<sup>1</sup>

IT was not, perhaps, without a certain over-simplification that, in the course of the Middle Ages, men were pleased to qualify the great Masters of thought and Doctors of the Church by some epithet which expressed the most typical feature of their intellectual and spiritual make-up. St. Thomas was the Angelic Doctor, St. Bonaventure the Seraphic Doctor, Tauler the Ecstatic Doctor, and so on. At any rate, we must not stop short at the obvious implication of these epithets, nor limit the rich genius of these Masters under pretext of determining its characteristic. Bonaventure the Seraphic was an extremely vigorous speculative thinker, Thomas the Angelic admirably described the powers of Love, and Tauler the Mystic analysed in a most detailed manner the demands of simple asceticism. We must penetrate to the profounder significance of these epithets, and see in them, with the superabundance and variety of gifts, the type of an intellectual and spiritual life, the unifying point in which all these gifts are rooted and co-ordinated.

St. Albert, "Master" Albert as he was called, was given the title of Universal Doctor. Taking the word in its superficial signification, we might imagine him as a kind of living encyclopaedia, a storehouse in which were accumulated the most heterogeneous materials; and this would not be untrue, for Albert was one of the most encyclopaedic characters of history. But the word has a deeper sense, not represented by the thirty-six folio volumes of his works. Universality is an attitude of mind, the characteristic of an outlook which is ready to embrace the whole of reality, which is consciously imbued with all that science stands for, with all that is of value in science and necessary to it; and the primary requirement of science is *Universality*.

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The savant is not he who knows everything, but he who believes in the intelligibility of all things, who knows that all things have a *raison d'être* and therefore structure and laws; it is he who understands that the greatness and beauty of the human mind consist in being open to all reality, in that interior appetite and spiritual possession of which Albert himself, after Aristotle, makes an intellectual "virtue." There we have true curiosity, not a superficial and volatile quality, but a robust healthiness of mind expressing itself by an insatiable appetite for knowledge and a courageous openness of mind upon the whole world. It was in this deep sense that Albert possessed the spirit of curiosity; he possessed its impatience, its trenchant impetuosity, and its restlessness. There we have his whole soul and, we might say, his vocation in contrast to the serene and imperturbable stability of St. Thomas Aquinas.

At a certain point mediæval Christianity found itself at the cross-roads—it encountered science. That was a grave moment; should the Christian, in order to assure himself of heavenly things, keep himself apart from earthly ones? Many did not know what to make of that 'science' which presented itself already fully equipped, rich with the treasures of antiquity, handed on and enlarged by Arab civilisation. They felt themselves faced by a formidable power; for, to great minds, science is heavier with the unknown which it will reveal, than with the knowledge it has already stored up. To the question whether science should be received many replied: No. Albert answered: Yes. And if we remember that three times since then Christian Philosophy has lost its chance by having said: No at three of the cross-roads of human history—first, at the scientific renaissance of the 15th century; then when faced with the Cartesian mathematical theories in the 17th century, and last when confronted by the growth of physical and natural science in the 19th—if we remember the lamentable crisis and moral defeats brought about by this misguided refusal, we can understand something of Albert's daring prevision as well as the immense service rendered at the time of the first intoxication of rationalism in the

Western world in the 13th century. It is this which to-day has rightly earned for "Master Albert" the title of "Doctor of the Church."

Albert had, to begin with, the primary characteristic of intellectual curiosity—the passion for research. It was truly a passion with him to extend continually his knowledge, his documentation, his experiments, and that with a tenaciousness, an intrepidity which ended by becoming legendary, so deeply was the imagination of his contemporaries struck by them. After his death, Albert had the reputation of a sorcerer, a worker of magic, one who played with the secrets of nature, even at the price of a pact with the Devil! There we see the popular naïveté, which imagines that the laws of nature are mysteries which may only be violated by esoteric operations. Some even said that Albert had obtained from God the privilege of penetrating into Purgatory and staying there some days in order to know what happened there. But this is only the mutilated echo of the reputation which his curiosity earned for him in his life-time; *stupor et miraculum*, the Chronicle says, and Roger Bacon himself, who had no love for him, records with resentment that he was treated as an "authority" in the University world.

Although occupied by many other cares, he retained this intellectual hunger from his youth to the end of his life. Everything interested him, mineralogy, botany, anatomy, medicine, alchemy, cosmography, meteorology, the science of colours, optics; and this not as a collector, but as an observer who knows how to generalise, to seek for causes, to extract a law, and to construct an hypothesis. His books are full of acute observations on flora and fauna, on the phenomena of nature. By his description of the laws of animal life he doubled the treasure of knowledge transmitted to us by the ancients. It would be easy to give examples of his investigations in every branch of science, and he himself has related the adventures which he owed to his curiosity. But what must strike us most is that this research was dominated by an idea, or better still by a conception of the life of the mind, which was then a novelty and of incalculable import. For Albert the intelligence had

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a twofold resource, a twofold kind of knowledge, the inductive and the deductive. For us to-day this is a commonplace, but in his time the very words themselves were new. Albert was the first who, reflecting on his work and taught by Aristotle, understood that the human mind advances by two paths entirely different, yet necessarily bound up one with the other. Experience and reasoning, these are the two processes by which we attain to reality and are able to give an account of its causes and its genesis. Two examples of induction have become famous; in the traditional controversy between the theories of Galen and those of Aristotle, Albert demonstrated that the origin of the movement of animals lies in the nerve centres of the brain, and not in the heart, a truly sensational overturning of all physiology and medicine. Supported by Arabian mathematicians, he proved, by the method of differences, that the influence of the moon is the cause of tides. Thus must the ever new richness of experience be united to the lucidity of rational construction in order to build up the hierarchy of knowledge and express therein the internal order of things, their architecture in the ideal order.

This brings us to the heart of the problem. That extraordinary discernment of new methods by which to know the world and nature is, after all, only the working out of that passionate search for the intelligible which was the very foundation of the soul of Albert and the essential characteristic of his curiosity, that true curiosity, the curiosity which formerly inspired the whole spirit of Greek thought, that confidence in the power of reason to co-ordinate reality, which remains, with Hellenism, the basis of all Western civilisation. It was Albert who, by introducing Aristotle, established in the West this confidence in reason.

To-day, after seven centuries of natural science and rational philosophy, we can scarcely imagine what novelty there was in such an attitude of mind and, indeed, how disturbing men found it. Here, as elsewhere, in order to be a good historian and to perceive these developments, one must not so much learn as forget, in order to rediscover in all its naïve freshness the religious soul of the 13th

century and try to view the world through its eyes.

It was not nature in itself that attracted the primitive mediæval mentality; certainly the spectacle of nature did not leave it insensible, but in that nature and that world, which it admired in a confused way yet without real penetration, the mediæval mind perceived, over and above the outward appearance, an august *symbol* of God and of spiritual realities. The soul's imagination did not stop short at things in their own proper substance; the lily in its majestic whiteness became a theme for moral reflexions on purity; the lion was only the symbol of strength, and the lamb of meekness; the revolutions of the stars, the calculation of which is the most splendid triumph of the science of the Universe, had been made merely the occasion of complicated symbolisms with regard to the heavens and the heavenly bodies. The world, the cosmic reality, mystically transformed by this superabundance of symbolism, was lost to sight, being used thus exclusively for moral and religious allegory.

Through this perpetual reference to the invisible, visible realities lose their immediate content; they are no longer grouped according to their natures, nor classed according to their affinities and differences, but according to the exigences of disparate symbols and pious imagination. They are nothing else but a transparent veil, a system of signs, a "mirror," "vestiges" of God. A sublime chaos, full of religious and mystical values, but useless for the savant with an awakening critical spirit.

But now, suddenly, like an immense organised being, the world, the "cosmos," appears. It exists. It lives. Its phenomena are linked together, ruled by laws which are commanded and explained by a deep-seated nature. It is a magnificent hierarchy, a universe to be admired for its order which is determined by principles within itself; and because it has a nature, laws, determinism, this world is "intelligible," it responds to an "idea," and all the play of the spheres, governed by necessity, becomes a splendidly organised evolution. In short, these are realities and no

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longer merely signs, realities in which the intelligence can delight. Creation certainly proclaims still the glory of God, but no longer through shadows, mere wrappings of the mysterious; it is reality itself, it is Nature made up of natures; the science of physics is born, and all the other sciences appear one by one. Francis Bacon was to discover, in the 16th century, the world of phenomena and the riches of experimental observation; but the discovery of which we speak was still more radical, was not phenomena, but the very *being* of things, the *physis* of Aristotle.

Doubtless, in this new science and in opening up the treasure-house of Greek learning, there were many errors, out-of-date biological conceptions and astronomical theories which make us smile. But I would give a thousand errors of fact for the enthusiastic freshness of those minds which thus discovered nature. It would be possible to criticize details and applications, to change laws, set aside hypotheses; that is of small importance, the *idea* remains—the world is a system of ordered and stable realities, and an object of science: *man shall possess the earth*.

And this man himself enters a new phase. He also is a world, he also a nature. This nature must be scrutinized, the structure of its faculties discovered, its laws observed and its determinism pursued. It is not sufficient to give oneself up to interior inspiration, even were it in love of God; there is a rational order which must be maintained, and to respect this is in no way to dishonour the Divine presence. The appetite for beatitude—that interior passion which consumed Augustine and exalted the mystics, the inviolable refuge of the religious soul—becomes itself a law of nature, the most profound law of man's intellectual nature. The whole of morality finds its light therein.

Finally, God at the very summit, postulated by this eternal order; God, the reason for the world, the fountain-head of ideas, universal intelligence, no longer only the God of mystics, but the First Mover, Primary Being, Creator of natures, "Pure Act." What a new light! But what a problem also, nearly a tragic one, after the rupture with the pious convention of a symbolic world, to reconcile the

God dear to the mystics and the "Pure Act" of the philosophers.

The God of the Philosophers? Soon He becomes the God of Poets; for this splendid force of the cosmos is by no means only matter for speculation, it is also, in its intelligible beauty, material for poetry. The work of Dante was to be the fruit of this first encounter of the mediæval mind with the reality of nature. In any civilisation it is the counter-proof of a philosophy thus to raise up a poet. Dante was to be, together with the Scholasticism of which he was the son, the expression of that gaiety of mind which took hold of the 13th century. All the poetry of Dante, disciple of Albert and of Thomas, was born of this, of the conviction that an intelligible rhythm orders the variations of things and that the refulgence of beauty springs from the internal ordering of the natures of things.

Dante is to be only the supreme product of an intellectual vitality which came into being at Paris between 1240 and 1250 in the school of Maître Albert and was destined to lead his contemporaries to the discovery of a new world. In very truth it was the discovery of a new world that Albert undertook, the discovery in Aristotle of the world of ancient wisdom, a revelation that would set the youthful University of Paris in a turmoil and soon draw the whole of Christianity in its train.

It is one of the most justifiable commonplaces of history to describe the literary and artistic intoxication of Florence in the 15th century under the magnificent patronage of the Medicis: it was a very epidemic of learning, a delight of the mind in the joy of thinking, the supreme gladness of an intellectual feast. Yet it seems true to say that the intellectual inebriation of the Paris of 1250 was deeper, let us even say more revolutionary. It was not a revelation of plastic beauty or Ciceronian eloquence in the realm of imagination and sensibility; it was a revelation of nature, of its truth, its being, in the realm of intelligence, and this light of reason turned upon the world seems to have thrown off its balance the simple curiosity of those men. Let us not forget, moreover, the circumstances in which the seduction

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of these novelties was exercised. Albert was teaching at Paris at the time that *Notre Dame de Paris* was being completed, at the time when the *Roman de la Rose* was being written, at a time when the Communes had definitely won their freedom, at a time when the economic world had just discovered the fruitfulness of credit, and when, finally, St. Louis presided over the genesis of world-politics. At the centre of these movements was Paris, a "school of Athens" (the phrase was then current and is significant), yet a school that was agitated and noisy, not serene and quiet, as under the brush of Raphael.

Albert, forsooth, not a Master of Arts but a theologian, not an ordinary cleric but a religious and, what was worse, one of these new mendicant religious who made special profession of the following of Christ, Albert, a young professor of five and thirty years, had undertaken "to make Aristotle intelligible to the Latins." Aristotle who had been thrice condemned in thirty years, Aristotle suspect for a decade of centuries, Aristotle whom it was forbidden to teach in the University! There was a fine uproar, first amongst his brethren in the Priory, then amongst the body of the theologians, ever ready to take fright and conservatives on principle; and if we are to judge by Albert's retorts the conflict was violent enough.

The issue at stake in this conflict was considerable in effect, and the danger to be encountered was real; the whole mind of Christendom was at grips with the mind of Greece. It may be that we have not made ourselves sufficiently aware of the permanent reality of the problem set before the Christian soul by the acceptance of this ancient humanism. It was not merely the detailed deficiencies in Aristotle that were formidable, grave as they were; it was that ideal of universal intelligibility, that confidence in reason, that conquest of nature by man. What was thus born again of a sudden, covering an immensely wider field and backed by a finished technique, was the old antagonism between Greek philosophy and Christian faith which had shaken the first centuries. Aristotle was all the more dangerous to this faith in that he expressed, with incomparable weight and



with all the virulence of intellectual clarity, that Attic spirit of which the spirit of Christianity fell foul at its very birth.

For the Greek the whole ideal of man, his whole desire, is to make for himself a representation of the universe, to think by his reason, to take pleasure in the one and in the other, to submit himself and to conquer at the same time. For the Christian, son of God, cast upon the earth as into a place of exile, the universe and inanimate nature have no importance; he makes haste to pass them by in order to find in his faith alone the true meaning of his life.

For the Greek this universe develops in the course of time an eternal order wherein the cycles follow on without end in an inviolable determinism, and human destinies lose themselves in an anonymous Destiny, majestic and implacable. For the Christian, on the contrary, this world has a history, a moving and tragic history; for God created it in the beginning (for the Greek there was no beginning) by an act of love; and at every step, in every being, we can find the vestige of this divine out-pouring, the precious likeness by means of which we acquire knowledge, true knowledge, the only knowledge; for that is the true nature of things and the law that governs them, they are properly the symbols wherein we see and make contact with the Creator, symbols with which we contract a divine fraternity, like St. Francis of Assisi, treating them with respect and tenderness. Sin had, indeed, effaced the image of God in the world but, by a new act of love, God became man and died upon the Cross. How are we to react to this Divine Folly before which the wisdom of men remains stupified? All the intellectual light of Greece would not equal in value the simplest vision of the Christ crucified; and all the greatness of ancient wisdom is no more than a pitiful mediocrity for the poor mendicant Francis who has left all to be faithful to the love of Jesus.

That is the drama, and it concerns Albert himself not least of all. Had he not himself become a mendicant, like Francis and Dominic, for the love of Christ? You will understand now that, when Brother Bonaventure publicly denounced the work of Albert and Thomas Aquinas before the whole University throughout a Lenten Course at Paris,

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this was no pettifogging dispute between brothers; it was a whole attitude to life that was in question. Albert was well aware of it, for at the age of eighteen he had been tempted to abandon the religious life and find his freedom again. But witness his audacity. He did not believe, as the Averroists did, that religious and rational knowledge are heterogeneous. He intended to lessen no whit the purity of his faith nor the tenderness of his love in opening his mind wide to reason, to science, to nature. On the contrary, he believed so firmly in the absolute truth of Faith and in the power of Love that for him the free and sane development of his reason could never do aught but exalt his faith and increase his love. An intelligible world manifests and magnifies God much more and much better than any mysterious jumble of symbols. Let Aristotle enter, then, and with him all the light of ancient Greece! "My intention," he says more than once, "is to procure for the Latins the knowledge of all the Aristotelian sciences."

Such was the true renaissance, the renaissance in its origins and in its initial audacity. It is not the Renaissance of the 15th century that represents the most critical period of the transfer and triumph of Greek science and reason within the civilisation of the West; it is the 13th century with its discovery of Aristotle. The Renaissance of the Quattrocento was certainly a humanism, but before all a "literary" humanism, a revolution in the world of art, of imagination, of sensibility; but it must be allowed that there is a humanism of the *mind* over and above the humanism of *letters*, with all the confidence in the stability, the worth, the efficacy that nature and man imply. It is the humanism of Plato, of Aristotle, of Pericles, and not merely that of Cicero and the Rhetoricians.

Albert was so far victorious. St. Thomas could now come, for the way was open. The struggle would be continued and three condemnations would have to be faced; but science would have its appointed place in Christian thought.

In order to understand the effectiveness of this intellectual revolution, one would now have to follow the reactions to it in the various domains of knowledge from natural science to

theology itself. Let it suffice here to mention a pregnant reflection of Albert's upon the treasure of knowledge already at his disposal: "Nevertheless," he says, "not all the demonstrative sciences are yet established; and there remain still many to be discovered." In all the thirty-six volumes of Albert I do not know of a proposition at once more audacious and more clear-sighted. Whilst so many others were finding complacency in the knowledge they had acquired as in a closed and limited world, Albert had that sense of the lasting productiveness of the mind in the presence of reality. If it is true that in the domain of the mind the stages of progress are marked by the discovery and establishing of new "types of intelligibility," it has to be said that the curiosity of Albert has provided both the hope and the audacity of such a progress.

Albert has earned the title of "Universal Doctor" less by the extent of his investigations than by the spirit which inspired them. It is because of this spirit that Albert is called "the Great." St. Thomas, too, was to be great; but he was rather to be called the "Angelic Doctor" by reason of the limpidity of his intelligence. It is Albert who is properly called "the Great," a giant unmeasurable almost, by reason of the power of his work. St. Thomas was to be a genius in order and measure, and his unalterable patience under attacks, so different from the restlessness and violence of Albert, was the effect of his intellectual equilibrium within a harmonious system. Albert had not reached the unity of an organised system; he seems to have been over-flooded by the light he had discovered. But, make no mistake, the system of St. Thomas lives only by the spirit of Albert, for it is born of that spirit.

Albert was great in the exact sense, the human sense of the word; he was, as Aristotle would have said, magnanimous, *magna anima*, with that intellectual magnanimity which is the rarest of all for it demands a research into Truth wholly and courageously loyal. It is a loyalty of this sort, whole and courageous, that constitutes the sanctity of a Doctor of the Church. And herein was the sanctity of Albert the Great, Saint and Doctor of the Church.

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