

THE PLOUGH AND THE MOUSIE

THERE is a tendency to set up mathematics, in its frigid detachment and unreality, as the very pattern of a science, and even of philosophy. Here St. Thomas's terse Aristotelianism *in mathematicis non est bonum* is appropriate to show the indifference of our deepest desires to such an abstraction. For they are attracted by the real which is primarily concrete; by a thing and not by a type; by what the scholastics would call the *quod*, in opposition to the *quo*.

Yet you should hear some of the people most inclined to regiment a variable and highly individual reality into the uniformity of a system speaking on the Rationalisation of Industry! 'Ne voyons nous,' says M. Blondel, 'se constituer sous nos yeux deux Thomismes, l'un qui est un instrument de vérité, de recherche, de haute conduite, l'autre dont plusieurs voudraient faire un procédé administratif et une sorte de caporalisme intellectuel?'

The Greeks were aware of the danger of sacrificing the real to the reason, which is almost forced on us by the nature of both, for knowledge must be general to be rational, and things must be individual to be real. Even the poets reflect this unhappy necessity of fixing the fleeting in the cold pastoral of a Grecian urn. Small blame, then, to the scholastic who seems at times, perhaps unconsciously, to lapse into a Wolfian mood, and to confine his metaphysics to the eternal possible. The intellect is imagined to live its life in the world of essences, while the world of facts is just the haphazard outcropping of certain types; and just as number is neutral to anything from the unit upwards, so are essences with regard to fact-determinations which are, in consequence, almost destitute of intellectual value. Santanyana can be capped by the scholastic manual.

The Plough and the Mousie

But for St. Thomas himself, the first object of mind is Being, not Essence. Now, the proper act of Being is existence. Existence is not the positive addition of reality to the possible, nor does it transport the possible into fact. But it is clear that the individual of fact—the word is used without scientific prejudice—has more in it than the possible individual. Mark Antony shall not love Cæsar dead so well as Brutus living. And it is ironical that defenders of the Anselmic argument can invoke the proverb that a live mouse is better than a dead lion. Although the fact-reality may be gone in a flash and the abstract intelligible content abides for ever, there can be little doubt which of the two—the opposition must be cautious—exercises the deepest appeal, and by this very fact is the richer in being, and consequently in truth. ‘What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow, but never as good as new.’ Truth is stronger than fiction. Other things being equal, an *is* satisfies more than a *can be*, and a *has been* more than a *might have been*. A fact, however humble, viewed in this light, is better than the most embracing principle.

Much the same consideration applies to mutability, so easily scorned. For the individuality of a human experience raises it above abstraction. Its transience rationally considered lowers its value—and yet, ‘but O! the very reason why I clasp them, is because they die.’ A grace of childhood is its quickly passing immaturity, and though it were vain to deplore, since true beauty of manhood outfeatureth childish charm, it is not wholly true that, whether in men or things, best is mature. Consider sheep and hens. And the expression of the dear fugitive in lyrical verse, who would dare call it sub-human or a pastime, not a serious activity, of the spirit? Or who nowadays would repeat the classical mood of the Age of Reason, and, for the sake of the prose of rational philosophy, the

Blackfriars

work of man's maturity, relegate poetry to his nursery period, 'la poésie, un badinage,' as the Abbé Brémond puts it.

Movement itself is a cause of pleasure, for, says St. Thomas, commenting by anticipation on Keats's last sonnet, we desire to know things whole and perfect, and when things cannot be experienced so, we take pleasure in their ever-changing face; one perfection follows another, and in this way the whole is somehow felt.

No one has the right to force a constant intellectual value on a mood. The desire for Being may be as half satisfied, and the perfection of Being as fairly represented in the poetic fugitive as in all the majestic images of the indefectible exemplars of the cosmos evoked by a passage of philosophical rhetoric. Infinity is not of quantity, and the *tota simul et quieta possessio* of eternity may be better mirrored in the brief enjoyment of a moment than in the continuous contemplation of a principle; in the swift intake of a lovely little phrase in Mozart than in the prolonged possession of the rules of the syllogism. 'O! heavens,' said the Eleatic stranger, 'can we imagine being to be devoid of life and mind, and to remain in awful unmeaningness an everlasting fixture?'

There is the metaphysician's temptation to despise the small, a sort of philosophical Prussianism which would erect the monumental, the kolossal, the system, in the place of the unappreciated little living thing. The poet at least has no such megalomania; for to see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower, hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour, are auguries of innocence for him. Although, it might be remarked, that better still would be to see the grain of sand itself, and the wild flower.

The Plough and the Mousie

Then more subtle is the metaphysical attitude of independence, of indifference almost, which is adopted towards everything experimental, particular, concrete. Human knowledge of facts, it is admitted, may be the starting point of the metaphysician, but metaphysics itself rises without genealogy, free and untrammelled of such things; and apparently must of its very nature.

But this being the case, the relation of strictly philosophical thought with the ordinary likeable world of fact might seem to rest on nothing closer than the simultaneous location of two activities, abstract reasoning and experience, in the same subject. Which amounts to saying that there is little more than an incidental connection between them. A doctor may sing, but the meeting of medicine and music is chiefly mythological, in Apollo.

Still, is the relation of the object of experience with the object of thought in truth no closer than this, scarcely more than a Leibnizian harmony, if at times even that? And how establish an intimate and organic unity?

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.