

Comment:

Dominican Gallery

Thomas Gilby's first essay in this journal in August 1930 (volume XI, pp. 489-494) contended that, for Thomism to appeal to the English mind, it must 'thrive without many of the accustomed wrappings of the schools, and, without diminishing the strength of its frame, indulge itself more in the depth and variety of the concrete'. He could have been issuing the manifesto of the generation in the English province of the Order of Preachers about whom Aidan Nichols writes in his new book, *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Gracewing, 1997, 448 pages, illustrated, £30).

'Pick up a book by an English philosopher', Gilby says, 'and notice the relative wealth of metaphor, of anecdote, or local colour'. In particular, there is 'a state of mind peculiarly English' which finds 'the structure of Thomism, as it appears in the text-books or even from a superficial reading of St Thomas', vast, coherent, impregnable, impressive, crushing in its perfection — but somehow missing 'the elusive and humble particular'. He lists, as 'manifestations of that English passion for the present' such characteristics as 'the love of games, the interest in hobbies, the toleration of eccentricity, the sense of humour, the lyrical note in poetry, the preoccupation of our philosophers with affairs of state [and] the spirit of compromise'.

Most of that might be disputed. Are French, German, American, even Scots-born philosophers, so notably poor in their appeal to metaphor, in comparison with English philosophers? What about Plato, one wonders, or Descartes, Hegel, William James, and David Hume? Clearly, Gilby scorned the simplifications of Aquinas's thought that were standard fare in Catholic seminaries and colleges in 1930. Equally clearly, while a 'superficial reading' might endorse a sense of the overwhelming abstractness of the *Summa Theologiae*, he believed that there was a way of reading Aquinas which would not affront the English sense of the particular. Years later, in 1964, in the first volume of the bilingual edition of the *Summa* which he initiated, he contended, quite lyrically, that, in his talk about essence and entity, Thomas Aquinas was actually rendering 'things that were at once dark and shimmering, deep and on the surface, single and complex, firm and supple, irreducibly individual and yet sharing in the common whole' — and paying them 'the compliment of doing so without breaking into poetry'.

In the December 1930 issue of this journal (pp. 748-762), Thomas

406

Gilby reviewed *Thomas Aquinas*, the monograph which Martin C. D'Arcy SJ had just contributed to the 'Leaders of Philosophy' series. While insisting on Dominican/Jesuit differences — Father D'Arcy evinces 'a certain naiveness' in maintaining that Suarez's system is a faithful development of Aquinas's principles — the review welcomes the book as evidence of 'the growing strength of the Thomist revival' — 'even in England, later than in the rest of Europe'.

It has to be said that from Martin D'Arcy onwards, to *A History of Philosophy*, Frederick Coplestone's astonishing series of studies which simply now is the history of philosophy as far as English-speaking philosophers are concerned, the English province of the Society of Jesus contributed far more to the emergence of Catholicism as an intellectual force than the Dominicans did. A couple of hours spent looking through back numbers of *The Downside Review* might suggest that the English passion for the particular is more convincingly manifest there than anywhere else. Interestingly, when they studied at Cambridge, several of the monks were attracted by the lectures of F.R. Leavis. In the 1950s Downside helped to create the climate for the alliance between literary criticism and theology, in the work of such writers as John Coulson, Rosemary Haughton, Walter Stein, Ian Gregor and Brian Wicker, which seemed, in the 1960s and '70s, to herald an indisputably indigenous 'English' Catholic culture.

On the other hand, a couple of hours looking through the back numbers of this journal, from the 1930s until the aftermath of Vatican II, would suggest that, as Aidan Nichols documents and demonstrates, any intellectual history of English Catholicism would have to take account of the contribution of Thomas Gilby's generation. Unluckily, his own great project, the bilingual *Summa*, appeared just as Vatican II (no doubt unintentionally) shifted Catholic attention from systematic theology altogether, let alone from the thought of St Thomas. Yet it would be a mistake to regard the work of those whose writings *Dominican Gallery* brings back to view as somehow frustrated by Vatican II. Very heterogeneous as their books seem, laid out together on a library table, there is nevertheless a 'family resemblance'. Entirely untouched by modern philosophy, English or otherwise, but far more deeply and widely read in history, the classics, and a variety of literatures, than most 'Continental' Thomists of their day, they may not have created an 'English' Thomism; but what Gilby called a 'jealous regard for the personal and particular', whether it is as peculiarly English as he believed, is richly displayed in the writings of his generation of Dominican friars of the English province.

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