

## THE WORST OF A SYSTEM . . . .

**I**N a quite common and considered estimation, it is at once the strength and weakness of a scientific philosophy in general and of the Scholastic in particular to be considered abstract, universal, and necessary. A settled and valuable mood of the intellectual is satisfied when the mind is imagined as living its proper life in the timeless world of essences, forced only by the needs of its present state to shifting and momentary accommodations with a welter of contingent concrete individual things. But our deepest desire is to know the real, and the whole real. Now the real, if it is anything, is concrete, while for us the concrete is unique, inexpressible, and fugitive; antithetical to a scientific philosophy. Hence the feeling that the cost of a system is the sacrifice of the real.

While the structure of Thomism, as it appears in the text-books or even from a superficial reading of St. Thomas, cannot fail to strike the imagination with the vastness of its conception, the coherence of its parts, and the impregnability of its logic, there is to some a haunting air of unreality about it, which is none the less felt because well-nigh incapable of formulation in the face of such an impressive, or what I might even call crushing, perfection. But the rigid ruler of an abstract science, although it be our only test of truth, does not nevertheless provide our only contact with it, and at the risk of the ready-made retort which can be delivered almost automatically by the mere system, our dissatisfaction must be examined and valued by right of its universality and sincerity; our desire for the concrete; our uneasy feeling that the majestic system extending to the whole universe misses somehow the elusive and humble particular, and while admirably calculated to frame the necessary rules of

## *Blackfriars*

things, is yet too wide in its sweep and too impersonal in its view for the dear realities of the moment. For as the Philosopher says in the Ninth Book of Ethics, a universal rule cannot be granted to such things because of their variety. And Lord George Sackville was properly disgraced for not throwing the weight of his cavalry into the battle of Minden, although his military science was not at fault if we are to believe his apologist. 'Suppose,' he writes in the Refutation of the Letter to an Honble. Brigadier-General, 'the *French* horse had cut their way thro' our infantry; was not Lord *George's* method of leading on the *English* cavalry in a line, and unblown, the properest? Certainly. We are never to judge from events, but from the invariable propriety of things.'

There appears to be a state of mind peculiarly English, to which 'Latin logic' represents a by no means unmixed blessing. 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, the spirit of compromise, these are all manifestations of that English passion for the present which, when it stretches into the realm of philosophy, so easily slips into nominalism, empiricism, and pragmatism, and which even in its Platonism is curiously sensitive to the claims of the contingent. 'The ancient race of scholars who read Plato with their feet in the fender.' Pick up a book by an English philosopher and notice the relative wealth of metaphor, of anecdote, of local colour. Remember the long line of English statesmen-philosophers, from Alcuin, Lanfranc, Anselm, John of Salisbury, Grosseteste, Kilwardby, through More, Bacon, Herbert, Hobbes, Locke, Bolingbroke, Stuart Mill, down to Haldane and Balfour in our day. And Roger Bacon expresses the mind of his countrymen with characteristic pungency: 'One individual is better than

## *The Worst of a System*

all the universals in the world, and this we know by the experience of things; and for theological reasons as well, for God did not make the world for Man, but for men: raw thinkers simply adore abstractions; flatness of mind inclines to something flat like a universal, rather than to a thing chock-full of being like a singular.' Elia, too, finds weakness in the universal, for speaking of a harmless sort of character he says, 'None thinks of offering violence or injustice to him—you would as soon "strike an abstract idea."' "

Acclimation to such surroundings seems to demand of Thomism the capacity to 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, which, after all, is something more than canon-fodder. A philosophy, then, addressed to the English mind must contain much that is pretermetaphysical—in the Aristotelean sense. We are supposed to lack the generalising faculty, and plume ourselves, if anything, on a lack of logic, a pretension which at first sight might seem to exclude us from the world of philosophy, except in Sam Weller's sense. "You are a philosopher, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick. "It runs in the family, I b'lieve, sir," replied Mr. Weller. "My father's wery much in that line, now. She flies in a passion, and breaks his pipe: he steps out, and gets another. Then she screams wery loud, and falls into 'sterics: and he smokes wery comfortably till she comes to agin. That's philosophy, sir, ain't it?'" Probably, however, our attitude is not due to any real hatred of thought, or to a real anti-intellectualism, but to a dislike for the tyranny of the abstract, for an inhuman logic, for that which Bradley has so well called 'the abstract dance of bloodless categories'; a dislike, nevertheless, which has its dangers, for it often leads us to a vagueness of expression and a dissolving senti-

## *Blackfriars*

mentalism. But it is an attitude, on the whole, creditable to our sense of reality; a recognition, in short, of the primary value of the concrete. 'Our great and splendid neighbour across the Channel,' writes Bernard Bosanquet, 'believes itself to be endowed with a logical genius, and we believe ourselves to believe it also, and with a significantly proud self-depreciation we say of ourselves by contrast that we are not a logical nation, that we do not love logic . . . . So that it seemed to me "like a sober man among drunkards"' when Dr. McTaggart with his indomitable courage declared that "no man ever went about to destroy logic, but in the end logic broke him." What we Englishmen believe in, then, I hold, after all, is logic—complete, concrete, and solid inference—and it is this which we sometimes contrast with the "merely-logical," or the "purely logical contradiction." We feel the full nauseousness of modern superficial sentiment on this point when we read in a clever article that "men are busied to-day in lifting the jewel of vision out of the mire of logic."'

Let this preoccupation with the complete, concrete, and solid be some explanation of our aversion from system-making and systems; it is not precisely a spirit of utilitarianism, but a keen sense of fact, of immediate reality; a concrete outlook rather than a pragmatistical one. Manchester was never England. And it is this frame of mind that stands between the Englishman and Thomism, and, for that matter, between him and modern Latin Catholicism, or any system of life and thought. The *Times* newspaper, in a leading article on the centenary of Catholic Emancipation, could state: 'As in the case of Gothic architecture, the imaginative and non-rational (which is not the same as irrational) aspects of Catholicism have in the last hundred years won an admiration here which its theological and political aspects have failed to arouse. This

is perhaps but another manner of saying that it is the poetry of Catholicism that has made its way where its creed has not. That is doubtless not the triumph that Roman Catholics desiderate; but it is a point where those who are not of their household may venture to join in their present gratulations.' Timesy, but true.

There is a settled suspicion among us that a system is a piece of make-believe; a construction often useful, and sometimes admirable, but not so real as a children's party. And so Scholasticism might be taken as a hobby or recreation and studied like Etruscan pottery or entomology, but as for evoking a whole-hearted conviction, why that is something to be appreciated historically in men of a cruder and less fastidious age. For us it seems a game of counters, with the added interest and excitement that the pieces are the problems of human life. Yet perhaps, too, there lives a hope, undefeated by the constant conclusion in stalemate. Anyhow, whatever its value, the atmosphere in this country of jealous regard for the personal and particular is not favourable to the reception of Thomism. 'British philosophers,' writes Professor Muirhead, 'for good or ill have inherited a profound distrust of philosophical "systems." Mr. Bradley—an Hegelian notice, but then, even Hegelianism when it came to England was changed into something almost gracious and human—'was only expressing the spirit of his time and country when he wrote in the Preface to the *Principles of Logic*: We want no system-making or systems, home grown or imported.'

A neat distinction from a practised Scholastic was once countered in a tone of exasperated admiration with 'Why, man, you've a mind like a cash register.' Hardly a reply, but understandable. The system, then, is not regarded as something real and vital which the mind desires to take to itself and live. Despised sometimes, as by Norrie in *Gallions Reach*: 'Leave

## *Blackfriars*

metaphysics to the senile, who take to thin joys because they can't have babies.' Or, what is almost as bad, regarded as a piece of architecture, an object of detached admiration. There is a quiet and mischievous humour in Professor Schiller's patronising kindness: 'Humanism will regard the efforts of metaphysicians with tolerance and interest, and will not deny them at least aesthetic value, where their constructions show artistic merit.' Nor is it scarcely less tolerable for a real Thomist when his system is welcomed as a useful regimentation of concepts, better only by the dignity and importance of its subject matter than Pelmanism, from which it differs only in degree.

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.