

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND  
THOMAS TRAHERNE

FATHER D'ARCY, in his book on St. Thomas Aquinas, has pointed out that, although the thought and writings of the saint continued after the Renaissance to be potent influences on the Continent, in England they fell into almost total neglect. 'Few among the lovers of the New Learning imitated the example of Erasmus and excepted Aquinas from their censure of the Scholastics. The majority were of the mind of Bacon . . . The tradition of medieval thought and culture lingered on in Oxford . . . but was seldom, if ever, renovated by an adequate knowledge of the writings of St. Thomas.' And in another passage, 'No one, save a Catholic, thought of studying his system from the point of view of pure philosophy.'<sup>1</sup>

This is indubitably a fact; and one that renders all the more interesting those individuals who ran counter to so strong a current of national thought and feeling. For there are brilliant, though sometimes unsuspected, exceptions to this general rule of neglect. The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas continued to influence the few if not the many; and of these none is more worthy of note than Thomas Traherne, that most attractive seventeenth century devotional writer, who has been rediscovered by our own age, and who is being proclaimed as one of the greatest mystics England has produced, perhaps the greatest Nature-mystic the world has ever seen. This Traherne, whose limpid poetry and surpassingly lovely prose are attracting more and more readers to-day, owes much of his power to the beauty and wholeness of the personality his writings reveal; and from this point of view it is interesting to

<sup>1</sup> *Thomas Aquinas*. By M. C. D'Arcy, S.J. Pp. 259 and 257.

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discover how deeply he was influenced by the spirit and thought of Aquinas. It is a debt that is nowhere openly acknowledged by Traherne himself, though named and paginated quotations from St. Thomas may be found in his private commonplace books. In those days of bitter prejudice a direct and too obvious avowal of such a source might easily have stopped the ears of his readers to his message. It is a debt, moreover, that has not hitherto been pointed out by any critic of Traherne's writings.

One reason for this oversight is that the work of Traherne's which most clearly reveals this influence, his *Christian Ethicks*, is still almost inaccessible to the general public and to the majority of critics. This is all the more to be regretted, and a modern reprint is all the more to be desired, because the *Christian Ethicks* is in some ways the finest thing Traherne wrote, and certainly the most representative of the whole of his nature. Criticism of Traherne is based almost solely on the modern printed editions of his *Poems* and of his *Centuries of Meditations*; and in these the indications of the influence of Aquinas are not clear enough to attract attention.

In the *Christian Ethicks* it is otherwise; and the abiding result of Traherne's study of the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* is there clearly to be traced. Traherne *knew* the *Summa Theologica*; he was thoroughly master of that immense mass of material which in its modern translation into English runs into more than twenty volumes; he could with the ease of perfect familiarity combine and condense and re-arrange into his own pattern the stones from St. Thomas's vast quarry; and this in itself casts an illuminating ray on the intellectual capacity of Traherne, who has sometimes been patronised by his critics as one naively simple and rustically unlearned. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

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Traherne had a trained and brilliant mind, with all that highly developed power of analysis which was characteristic of seventeenth century scholarship. Thus it was, no doubt, that the mighty intellectual power and deep spiritual wisdom of St. Thomas attracted him, and held him to those long hours of patient study necessary for such familiar knowledge as he came to possess.

If one reads the chapters of the *Christian Ethicks* and the cognate sections of the *Summa Theologica* side by side, a conviction of the indebtedness of Traherne is, I believe, inescapable. Yet it is somewhat difficult to demonstrate, by quotation. Aquinas is writing on a vast scale a complete text-book of theology, and treating exhaustively every aspect of his subject; Traherne is writing a short devotional and inspirational guide to right conduct, something that he hopes will reveal to his readers the true way to blessedness, and fire them with a desire to follow it. When method and scale differ so much, indebtedness will show itself rather in keystones of thought than in long paragraphs of similar wording. If that is kept in mind, and it is remembered that both for St. Thomas and Traherne the ideas contained in the following quotations are basic, and the texts of ensuing discourse, the similarity will be seen to go deeper than a superficial reading of these detached passages might at first suggest. They are taken almost at random and might be multiplied indefinitely.

**AQUINAS** : Love is not confined to any particular kind of virtue or vice, but ordinate love is included in every virtue (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 125, 2).

**TRAHERNE** : A clear and intelligent Love is the Life and Soul of every Virtue, without which Humility is but Baseness, Fortitude but Fierceness, Patience but Stupidity . . . . Meekness but a sheepish Tameness, and Prudence itself but Fraud and Cunning (p. 314).

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AQUINAS : It belongs to the virtue of fortitude to remove any obstacle that withdraws the will from following the Reason . . . . The virtue of fortitude is about the fear of dangers of death (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 123, 3 and 4).

TRAHERNE : It (Fortitude) is the Armour of the Soul against all the Impressions of Fear . . . . We may safely sing ' O Death, where is thy Sting? ' and challenge all the powers of Heaven, Earth and Hell to the combat (pp. 325-7, and 350).

AQUINAS : Hence the Philosopher mentions five ways in which people are said to be brave by way of resemblance through performing acts of fortitude without having the virtue . . . . as in the case of soldiers who, through skill and practice in the use of arms, think little of the dangers of battle (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 123, 1).

TRAHERNE : Even a Coward by Nature is made more bold and confident by skill at his weapon (p. 334).

AQUINAS : This very aptitude or proportion of the appetite to good is love, which is complacency in good ; while movement towards good is desire or concupiscence ; and rest in good is joy or pleasure. Accordingly in this order, love precedes desire, and desire precedes pleasure. But in the order of intention, it is the reverse ; because the pleasure intended causes desire and love (I<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 25, 2).

TRAHERNE : For to be Pleased, and to Love, are the same thing. If there be any difference, the pleasure we take in any object is the root of that Desire which we call Love ; and the affection whereby we pursue the pleasure that is apprehended in it is part of the Love that we bear unto it ; the end of which is the completion of that pleasure which it first perceives. All is Love, variously modified (p. 70).

AQUINAS : Prudence is wisdom about human affairs ; not wisdom absolutely, because it is not about the absolutely highest cause (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 47, 2).

TRAHERNE : It (Prudence) is a strange Vertue, for it is conversant amongst Terrene and inferior Objects . . . . Wisdom is a more High and Heavenly Vertue (p. 333).

AQUINAS : When a man's will is ready to believe, he loves the truth he believes, he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof ; and in this way, human reason does not exclude the merit of faith, but is a sign of greater merit (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 2, 10).

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TRAHERNE : For Faith and Reason are not so divided but that . . . they may enter into each other's nature, and materially be the same. The very same Object (I mean) that is known to Reason may by Faith be believed; Reason not destroying but confirming Faith, while it is known upon one account and believed upon another (p. 224).

AQUINAS : Faith perfects the intellect (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 1, 3).

TRAHERNE : Reason is by Faith Perfected (p. 225).

AQUINAS : Wherefore we are said to be good with the goodness that is God . . . since the goodness whereby we are formally good is a participation of Divine goodness (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 23, 2).

TRAHERNE : There is nothing Good in the world but what hath received all its Goodness from Him. His Goodness is the Ocean and all Goodnesses of Creatures little Streams flowing from that Ocean (p. 288).

AQUINAS : When a man has friendship for a certain person, for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 23, 1).

TRAHERNE : As in ordinary friendship, the more we love the Father, the more we love his Wife, and all his children. For the more we love any Person, the more we love all that love him or are beloved by him (p. 79).

AQUINAS : Right Reason demands that we should take into consideration something on the part of the giver and something on the part of the recipient . . . Each one must first of all look after himself, then after those over whom he has charge, and afterwards with what remains relieve the needs of others (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 22, 5).

TRAHERNE : Intelligence is the light wherein almsdeeds ought to shine . . . Our Riches must be expended according to the several circumstances and occasions of our lives . . . God hateth that Strangers should eat the Children's meat or Beggars should devour the right of a man's Servants. . . . The Rule, therefore, is this. First secure the works of Necessity; have food and rayment for thyself; keep out of debt. Next, render to every man his due in point of Justice . . . If thou art able and hast anything to spare, then let the miseries of the Needy be supplied (pp. 480-482).

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AQUINAS: It would be inordinate to deprive oneself of one's own in order to give to others to such an extent that the residue would be insufficient for one to live in keeping with one's station; for no man ought to live unbecomingly (IIa IIae, 32, 7).

TRAHERNE: Secure the life and growth of the tree, by causing it so to bear one year that it may bring forth fruit in another. It is no good husbandry to cut it down; nor any Charity to make it wither and expire. And on this very account a charitable man must preserve himself . . . and must secure something for the works of Courtesie and Hospitality (pp. 480 and 482).

AQUINAS: He who gives alms does not intend to buy a spiritual thing with a corporal thing . . . but he intends to merit a spiritual fruit through the love of charity (IIa IIae, 32, 5).

TRAHERNE: He that intendeth the welfare of the Soul by all the good works he doth to the Body is deep and perfect in Charity . . . He will make mention of the Glory of God and the Love of Christ . . . for Whose sake he pities the Poor and is kind towards all (pp. 483-4).

AQUINAS: In things measured or ruled, the mean consists in the measure or rule being attained; if we fall short of the rule, there is deficiency . . . Hope has no means or extremes as regards its principal object, since it is impossible to trust too much in Divine Assistance; yet it may have a mean and extremes as regards those things a man trusts to obtain in so far as he either presumes above his capability or despairs of things of which he is capable (IIa IIae, 17, 5).

TRAHERNE: I know very well that Presumption and Despair are generally accounted the Extreame of Hope . . . But I know as well that there may be many Kinds and Degrees of Hope, of which some may be vicious and some vertuous; and that some sorts of Hope themselves are Vice. Whenever we make an inferior Desire the Sovereign Object of our Hope, our Hope is abominable, Idolatrous and Atheistical. We forget God and magnifie an Inferior object above all that is Divine (pp. 250-1).

AQUINAS: Love consists in a certain agreement of the lover with the object beloved, while hatred consists in a certain disagreement or dissonance. Now we should consider in

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each thing what agrees with it before that which disagrees; since a thing disagrees with another through destroying or hindering that which agrees with it. Consequently love must needs precede hatred, and nothing is hated save through being contrary to a suitable thing that is loved. And hence it is that every hatred is caused by love (1<sup>a</sup> IIae, 29, 2).

TRAHERNE: If any Question be made, which of these Twins (Love and Hatred) is the First born? the answer is, that they may seem Twins in respect of Time, but in Nature Love is the first born and the Mother of Hatred. For where nothing to be hated does at all appear, pleasant Things are Beloved for their own sake; whereas if there were no pleasant things to be beloved, nothing could be hated because nothing could be Hurtful . . . . As Fire begets Water by melting Ice, so does Love beget contrary passions in the soul of a living creature (p. 71).

The above list of parallel passages is by no means exhaustive; Aquinas, for example, demonstrates that it is right to love ourselves, and that it is right to love our bodies; and every reader of Traherne knows how frequently these ideas occur in the *Centuries of Meditations* and the *Poems*, and how new a note they seem to strike in seventeenth century thought. Material from Aquinas is constantly reappearing in this fashion in Traherne.

Again, it would not be too much to say that Traherne took from St. Thomas the whole scientific foundation of his system of ethics. His final philosophy is very different; but he builds it on a foundation of St. Thomas; and the foundation, to a large extent, determines the final structure.

Traherne took from the *Summa Theologica* directly—and only indirectly, I believe, from remoter sources in Aristotle and Augustine—the whole of the material of his discussion 'Of the End,' with its conclusion that 'Man's last End is his Perfect Happiness'; (*cf.* Aquinas: 'Man's last end is Happiness, which all men desire, as Augustine says'); the whole of his discus-

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sion on 'Goods of the Body, Goods of the Soul, and Goods of Fortune', and these very terms; his definition of virtue and of vice; and his whole scheme of classification of the virtues. Traherne's subdivisions of these virtues differ in some respects, but is substantially that of the *Summa Theologica*. His definition of each virtue is St. Thomas's. He also freely borrows technical terms, such as 'Infused' and 'Acquired' virtue, or 'Distributive' and 'Commutative' justice.

He takes from Aquinas his whole psychology—the division of the personality into three elements, one rational and two non-rational, the Right Reason and the Irascible and Concupiscible Passions, with these terms, as the following picturesque paragraph clearly shows:

'The Senses and Members of the Body are like Tradesmen: they traffick with sensible objects; the Irascible passions of the soul are soldiers, and very apt to rebel and mutiny; the Conscience is the Priest in the Temple; Right Reason is the King; and the Concupiscible Passions, especially Avarice and Ambition, may pass for Counsellors' (pp. 185-66).

The full extent of Traherne's indebtedness can only be realised by a first hand study of the texts; but I hope that what I have given affords convincing proof that this indebtedness does exist. Many other influences went to the moulding of Traherne's thought; in the end he is perhaps a follower of St. Francis rather than of St. Thomas; the *Christian Ethicks* is not merely an abridgement of the *Summa Theologica*. But it remains a fact, and a fact hitherto unrecognised, that one of the finest spirits in all English literature owes a very great debt to St. Thomas Aquinas; and this fact is not without importance to students of seventeenth century English literature and seventeenth century religious thought.

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