

COBWEBBED SCHOOLMEN

MR. DUDLEY WRIGHT'S note on Charles Lamb and St. Thomas (BLACKFRIARS, February, 1933) opens up an attractive question which has never been treated with any fullness—namely, how many of our eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers were familiar with the works of the Angelic Doctor.

In 1814 Hallam wrote as follows:

'Perhaps I may have imagined the scholastics to be more forgotten than they really are. Within a short time I have met with four living English writers who have read parts of Thomas Aquinas: Mr. Turner, Mr. Berington, Mr. Coleridge, and the Edinburgh Reviewer (Macaulay). Still, I cannot bring myself to think that there are four more in this country who can say the same,'¹

It is true that in a note added in 1848 he modifies this statement, and admits that 'for several years past the metaphysicians of Germany and France have brushed the dust from the scholastic volumes,' but he adds no new English name to the four given in the text.

Charles Lamb is a welcome addition, if we may really claim him. He implies in both these letters that he had not seen St. Thomas' works till about 1829. Yet in 1820 he writes:

'That foul gap in the bottom shelf facing you . . . once held the tallest of my folios, *Opera Bonaventurae*, choice and massy, to which its two supporters—Bellarmine and Holy Thomas—showed but as dwarfs.'²

It is reasonable, then, to suppose that he was acquainted with St. Thomas as early as 1814, the date of Hallam's doubt. But he can hardly be called a serious student of St. Thomas. He will revel in his cobwebs and subtleties till his brain spins, and he is unworthy to unloose his shoe-latches. In the sentence which follows, and which was not quoted, he says in his delightful way:

¹ *Middle Ages*. Vol. 3, Ch. ix, pt. ii.

² *Essays of Elia: The Two Races of Men*.

'Yet there are pretty pro's and con's, and such unsatisfactory learning in him. Commend me to the question of etiquette—'*Utrum annuntiatio debuerit fieri per angelum.*'

His interest seems to be merely that of a dilettante, amused by the naïveté and crude credulity of a medieval writer.

This last passage, however, is interesting for quite another reason. It shows that the volume which Lamb sent to Coleridge was the *Summa*, at least the *Tertia Pars*, in which the article cited occurs. It is quite certain that Coleridge had read some works of St. Thomas prior to this date. The *Biographia Literaria*, to which we shall refer, was published in 1817, twelve years before, while we learn from Hallam that he had read parts of St. Thomas before 1814. But had he, up to this time, read the *Summa*?

It will be remembered that Lamb sent this volume to Coleridge on hearing that he was in indifferent health. This evidently refers to his long illness, under the effects of opium, after he had moved to Mr. Gilman's house at Highgate.

Henry Nelson Coleridge, his nephew and son-in-law, has a passage in his contribution to *Table Talk*, which may well refer to this period, and is a valuable commentary on the letter of Charles Lamb.

'He [S. T. Coleridge] said that during a long confinement to his room he had taken up the Schoolmen, and was astonished at the immense and acute knowledge displayed by them; that there was scarcely anything which modern philosophers had proudly brought forward as their own which might not be found clearly and systematically laid down by them in some or other of their writings. Locke had sneered at the Schoolmen unfairly; . . . that there was nothing in Locke which his best admirers most admired that might not be found more clearly and better laid down in Descartes or the old Schoolmen.'

In 1830, the year following, we have a definite statement of Coleridge himself:

'I have read, and with care, the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas, and compared the system with the statements of Arnauld and Bossuet.'³

³ *Church and State.*

Incidentally, it is through Coleridge that we discover two other noted writers who were students of St. Thomas. The passage is not so well known as those from Lamb, and may be worth quoting in full.

' In consulting the excellent commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on the *Parva Naturalia* of Aristotle, I was struck at once by its close resemblance to Hume's Essay on Association. . . . I mentioned the circumstance to several of my literary acquaintances, who admitted the closeness of the resemblance, and that it seemed too great to be explained by mere coincidence; but they thought it improbable that Hume should have held the pages of the Angelic Doctor worth turning over. But some time after, Mr. Payne showed Sir James Mackintosh some odd volumes of St. Thomas Aquinas, partly perhaps from having heard that he had in his Lectures passed a high encomium on this canonized philosopher; but chiefly from the fact that the volume had belonged to Mr. Hume, and had here and there marginal marks and notes of reference in his own handwriting. Among these volumes was that which contains the *Parva Naturalia*, in the old Latin version, swathed and swaddled in the commentary aforementioned! '⁴

Hume, of course, was long dead when Hallam wrote in 1814, but Sir James Mackintosh must be counted among the then living readers of St. Thomas. So, if we include Charles Lamb, we now have six. Are there any others? We need two more to settle Hallam's doubt. Who were the ' literary acquaintances ' whom Coleridge thought worthy of consulting? Southey and Wordsworth do not help us. De Quincey seems to have read something of the Schoolmen, but he is singularly unsympathetic and at times even stupid in his account of them. Isaac Disraeli, the father of the statesman, doubtless dabbled in the Schoolmen, though

⁴ *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. I, ch. v. Sir James Mackintosh, however, flatly contradicts this assertion. ' In answer to a remark of Mr. Coleridge, I must add, that the manuscript of a part of Aquinas which I bought many years ago (on the faith of a bookseller's catalogue) as being written by Mr. Hume was not a copy of the Commentary on the *Parva Naturalia*, but of Aquinas's own *Secunda Secundae*; and that, on examination, it proved not to be the handwriting of Mr. Hume, and to contain nothing written by him ' (*Ethical Philosophy*, Note T).

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he implies that he has not examined St. Thomas.⁵ 'He was a great man,' he says of St. Thomas, 'busied all his life with making the charades of metaphysics.'

Lamb and Coleridge, school fellows and life-long friends, both died in 1834. In these days we make much of centenaries, so perhaps next year some student of Coleridge will trace the influence of Thomism on his philosophy.

A like study of Lamb need hardly be attempted. He lent the *Summa* to Coleridge and there ends his philosophical interest in Thomism. A month later he asks for it back, but was it returned? According to Elia, Comberbatch [Coleridge] held the theory that 'the title to property in a book is in exact ratio to the claimant's powers of understanding and appreciating the same.' Coleridge and Lamb belonged to those two distinct races, *the men who borrow and the men who lend*.

GODFREY ANSTRUTHER, O.P.

⁵ See *Curiosities of Literature*, Quodlibets.