

St Thomas is one of those people who, like Queen Victoria, have become a myth: I use the word in a Jungian sense and by no means in depreciation. She became one during her lifetime, and on that count made an earlier start; still he was already five centuries ahead, and his image has been more variously encrusted with the tastes of different periods and regions, so much so as almost to have grown into several myths.

To discover what the real person was like, the *prosopon* of Patristic theology, you cannot do better than go by the biographical documents edited by Father Kenelm Foster, which record the witness of those who were as near to him as we are to the characters of the 1914 war. Yet it is with the *prosopon* in its earlier histrionic and later juridical sense, the personage standing for a cause, the legal person and sometimes, it must be confessed, the legal fiction, that the historian of philosophy and theology is occupied. For such is the public figure that engages the gears and sets into motion the vehicles that carry the ideas of groups.

At least three such figures have stood for St Thomas in the past, and a fourth, it is hoped, is now emerging. Of course they have a common identity, at least as much as that between the Shakespeare of Garrick and of recent Stratford productions, if not that between the early and the late Stravinsky; this has been ensured by lasting and familiar devotion to the man, in particular from those who wear the same habit, keep the same observances, and by prolonged study as well as by common-room conversation have come to share his frame of mind. Yet despite the constants – for instance the refusal to blackguard the creature in order to praise the Creator or to decry reason in order to extol faith, to identify natural law with human law however august or moral theology with canon law, and to override conscience by blind obedience or the plain decencies by religiosity – strong contrasts have been brought out during the passage of the years.

To his own generation he was a kind of good-tempered Doctor Johnson, majestic, courteous, and much loved, more by the rising lay-minded philosophers than by the theologians who were shocked by his imperturbable acceptance of evidences from the secular world which told, so they imagined, against traditional religious beliefs. Their affection was more reserved, to use no stronger word for an agitation that succeeded after his death (1274) in having him condemned, and in no civil tones at Oxford and Paris, though not at Rome: in those days the men at the centre seemed more rounded than those on the fringes, and less queasy about fresh ideas.

The young Dominicans rallied to his cause, the Council of Vienne supported his teaching on man's psychophysical unity, Dante made him his spokesman in three cantos of the *Paradiso*, and John XXII canonized him in 1323. We now have the figure of the Saint and the Founder of a school, one among many in the polemics of a scholasticism still harnessed to the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard; it was neither the

noisiest nor the most quietly dignified, neither way out on the left nor yet quite part of the establishment, rather more like the *Guardian* than the *Times* among newspapers of the present, more like the Rifles than the Guards of the recent past when regimental spirit was encouraged. The period may be taken as culminating with Cajetan, the most illustrious of his commentators, that lively squint-eyed Neapolitan, whose astonishing versatility matched the resources of the *Summa*. Remaining a consummate scholastic he became a humanist, remaining that he became a biblical theologian in the modern sense, and to top it all he was Master General of the Dominicans and Cardinal Legate to the Germanies. A man from the Mediterranean, he was not unsympathetic to Baltic *angst*; a high and dry intellectualist, he felt the force of justification by faith alone; a respecter of the natural in man, he was quite clearly not a Pelagian. His tip saved Luther from the Emperor's police, and his last public act was to protest against the King's divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon.

Now another figure appears, more majestic, more baroque, displaying the book of words and clad in robes more swirling than those painted by Fra Angelico. This is the Tridentine Thomas, the grandee of Spain and the author of the noble folios from the presses of Salamanca, Antwerp, Cologne, Lyons, and Venice. *Tolle Thomam et dissipabo Ecclesiam*, Martin Bucer was reputed to have cried; Giordano Bruno revered him as one of the great magi of esoteric wisdom; and the great divines of the Counter-Reformation, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Jesuits, expounded him, though not always in the same sense, as the last Doctor of the Church.

He was now a famous ecclesiastical figure, a sort of prelate in the order of ideas. But prelates went out of fashion before the Bourbons did, and to the men grappling with the great problems of theology and philosophy it seemed that the dust disturbed from the folios settled on the monkish minds of those who consulted him. Even to one so little committed to the vogue as Newman he appeared not much more than the weightiest theologian of the Middle Ages, especially commended by religious authority. The lasting strength of the blessing he had laid on the profane was not suspected.

Then in the last decades of the nineteenth century, with Leo XIII as *impresario*, a new figure came on the stage and slowly proceeded to dominate the scenes that followed. This was the Leonine Thomas, who gathered a school, or schools rather – for Louvain and Fribourg and Munich spoke in different accents, and so did the Dominicans north and south of the Pyrenees and the Alps – which produced an enormous bibliography and made of Thomism a major movement, not at all exclusively clerical; it ranged from questions of mysticism, speculative theology, and pure metaphysics through the psychologies and social sciences even to matters of political government. The gap was a philosophy or even a grammar of science, which is not surprising considering how shifting were the foundations on which it might have

been bridged.

Its success brought in the camp-followers; its orthodoxy gained it the dubious support of those who, scared by Modernism, sought the security of a system that looked self-contained and domesticated in the Latin Church: some of these were inclined to fuss like an insecure nanny in charge of a nursery and to act as though order were better maintained by threats than by evidence. Its apparent completeness led too many to suppose that questions still open were closed, or that the text of the Master provided sufficient answer to any problem; their rabbinical Thomism did little harm so long as it was not backed by sanctions. In some countries its classical discipline was mistaken as grounds for a flirtation with the Corporative State. Nevertheless by and large, and mainly to the credit of the French Dominicans, it never became a party-line, and it kept its frontiers open to a world outside the cloister, the seminary, and the chancery. A severity of principle went with a confident freedom of application; theology joined in a discourse with other interests and in tones neither ingratiating nor patronising; and a liberality of temper, humour, and conviction was manifested which could not be accused of *Liberalismus*.

Still powerful, for many of the men it formed are now in their sixties and positions of authority, I write of this movement as though it belonged to past history. A glance through the theological and philosophical reviews shows that another tide is now running. Vatican II seems unlikely to repeat the stress of Vatican I on the office of reason. Despite signs here and there that natural theology is on its way back, together with a metaphysics that is not just an exploration of notions, most modern theologians do not seem greatly devoted to the Hellenic tradition in Christian thought. Some are more given to existentialist exclamation than to essentialist explanation, and some do to St Thomas what Lytton Strachey did to Queen Victoria, and treat 'Thomist' almost as a dirty word. Moreover the decline of Latin in teaching and the liturgy means than he is more than ever likely to be left on the shelf.

Did anything go wrong? Is it not in the nature of things for noble causes to come to an end? All the same I think that something did go wrong, and very wrong. This is not the place to hold an inquest, but some factors may be indicated. Thoroughly bad teaching without any attempt at a dialogue and with too many lectures and too little tutoring; a petty and unfeeling presentation that left a permanent bruise on the minds of the more sensitive students and was turned into ridicule by the tougher and livelier; the adoption of the mass-production methods in the great religious study-houses – as though theologians can be turned out like motor-cars; the dangerous identification of theological with legal exactness; a scholasticism made to look like a mincing of meanings; above all, and this was nobody's fault but everybody's blessing, the opening up of the biblical and liturgical treasury of the Church, and the promise of more gener-

ous methods of catechetical and pastoral theology.

But it is one thing to renew your youth and another thing to make a cult of it. Certainly there should be a theology that captures the mood of teen-agers: this is part of the apostolic office. Less impressive is the readiness to scrap the careful team-work of thought in the Church for seven centuries and more. There seems to be a lot of theological writers about, not notably high-spirited and witty but rather solemnly anxious not to be square; reading their articles you might rather bitterly reflect that St Thomas is going out at a time when Europe is losing its theological nerve and when America is about to acquire one.

An exaggerated fear, for there are no signs that Rome would ever allow him to pack up. What is more likely is that he will reappear, this time not framed in a baroque apotheosis nor quoted as the censor of the Latin Church, but more like the Brother Thomas of earlier days; patrician yet modest, large yet delicate, who lets the facts speak for themselves and is not out to grind an axe, a saint indeed for all times, whose wisdom draws from the headwaters that will fertilize Christendom so long as it lasts. He has come to stay, and it is difficult to see how a Christian theology that is a science as well as an art can flourish without him.

It was in this confidence that the new English *Summa* was projected and has now been launched. Like cheese and beer and other good things it is an acquired taste, and its style seems to forbid translation into modern idiom. Yet the decision was taken to present the work whole and entire, not merely in selected passages. This, too, adds to the difficulty of communication, for St Thomas was not an unearthly genius who proportioned his treatment to the timeless interest of his subject, but a man racy of his times who improvised his material and, dictating to his trudging secretaries, is often terse when we could wish him copious, and detailed on topics, such as tithes and the entanglements of temperance, which are now of scant interest.

The venture is more than a gesture of piety on the part of the English-speaking Dominicans and their friends. The underlying idea was roughly this, to maintain the authentic mode of systematic theology against hardening from within and softening from without. For first, less so than formerly, since with the spread of biblical studies the metallic clatter of the schools is now outgunned, it has to be rescued from surroundings which have little of the fun and much of the social irrelevance of Monte Carlo; there quasi-judicial counters are shuffled about, or assembled for feeding into something like a computer to assess what sort of degree a student should receive. And second, it has to be defended against the current fashion of substituting images and rhetoric for ideas and reasoned science.

Plato and Aristotle indicate the three ways of responding to the world, namely by *arithmos*, by *muthos*, and by *logos*, that is by measuring it by tables, by reproducing it

in fables, and by signifying its reasons. St Thomas makes a roughly corresponding division when he speaks of the three ways of talking about God, namely in terms that are univocal, or equivocal, or analogical. All three have their place in Christian theology when this is taken as *sacra doctrina* in its comprehensive sense and includes both the richness of symbolism and the reserve of the *theologia negativa*, yet for theological science in a more specific sense he keeps to the third way, refusing the first as leading to anthropomorphism and the second as leading to agnosticism.

Let me expand, and apply to the present question. Scholastic theology is criticized for resolving the mysteries into mathematical particles or legal items which are all too neatly defined and then built up into a system which bears little resemblance to the Gospel. Such has been the method of the natural sciences since the days of Descartes. Exactness is achieved by univocal thinking, that is by breaking up terms into units of meaning that are always applied in the same sense precisely. You can see the process at work in many of the text-books; a theorem is proposed and analyzed into its pieces, which are then advanced, as in a game of chess, through a series of jerks quite unlike the lope of the *Summa*. The anthropomorphism is neither primitive nor overt, yet the God who is arrived at is like the top of a scheme of world-mechanics or ecclesiastical order. Even when it is a charity organization scheme the result carries no more of a recommendation. Against this the reaction of the new theologians is justified. Yet some seem to confuse science with this sort of science, and rational meaning with fixed and flat meaning. Faced with the rich dramatic material of the Christian Revelation and the need for presenting it in concrete terms that appeal to the imagination and affections, they seem in effect to reduce the content of dogmatic teaching to equivocation, that is to words which have the same ring anywhere but in the reason. Theirs is the agnosticism of Maimonides, at least in its reverence if not its intellectual hardness. As for moral teaching they seem inclined to dissolve firm abstract principles in their appreciation, generous but contingent, of personal and mass situations.

It is not only in the academic world that the need is felt of throwing a bridge between science and literature. Miss Suzanne Lenger has shown how scientific thinking need not be restricted to formulas but can enter into figures of speech, and Professor von Wright has recognized the value of controlled ambiguity, or what St Thomas calls the *aequivocum a consilio*, or analogy. This is the middle way he takes, between the univocal and the purely equivocal, and it offers on the one hand an escape from rigidity and on the other the maintenance of meaning in the play of imagination and feeling. This is the positive method to be adopted when our mind explores the mysteries. Only so can theology match its instrument and subject, and be as scientific as the reason demands and as generous as the manifold excellence of God deserves. May the new English *Summa* help to this end.