

PERSONAE

2. Bernard Lonergan

THESE are the old ideas and there are the new ideas, and there are the adherents of each, between whom there exist relations ranging from strife to mutual tolerance. Out of all this there arises an ill-defined problem for the Catholic, whose faith commits him to all truth, however, whenever, and by whomever it is found. Because the problem is seldom adequately posed, few Catholic thinkers really tackle it, so that one has come to expect a Catholic thinker to bear, predominantly, either the modern or the antique stamp. He is either taking into a modern system 'all that is of permanent value' in the thought of the ancient world or he is finding a modest niche in 'thomism' for the findings of modern science. But compared to what *can* be done, all this is in the dark. What can be done is to *understand* the old ideas. And once we are fairly launched on this enterprise we discover that what we are really doing is trying to understand *simpliciter*, to become more intelligent. The wrestle with Aquinas is a wrestle with one's own stupidity. And then 'the problem' is radically transformed, from a worry to a well-defined and formidable programme of work. This is Lonergan's approach, and it is the reason for something about him that is immediately striking, his refusal to be given a role in the drama of Ancients *versus* Moderns. To a recent critic who thought he found dangerous tendencies in his Christology he replied with a few tags from Aristotle which the would-be traditional critic was, in effect though not consciously, contradicting.

To understand the old ideas—and, above all, the old idea of what it is to understand. That our knowledge starts with sensible experience of the world around us few will want to deny. But when Aristotle goes on to give an account of the mysterious transition from sensing to thinking, when he posits an 'agent intellect' that, by doing something to a 'phantasm', brings knowledge to birth in a 'possible intellect', the critic will have no difficulty in seeing all this, and making it to appear, as bizarre. At best, he will say, the theory is simply saying that we must somehow combine the spirituality of knowledge, which Plato grasped, with its empirical foundation, which was about all the earlier materialists had grasped. That is indeed the 'material' explanation, and it is not to be spurned. But the real meaning

must flash upon the mind with the mind's own light, or it is not understood at all. Lonergan taught us to do this one. That is his greatness. Somehow or other he got the crucial insight, and saw the theory henceforth as the direct transcript of 'getting an insight'. He flashed up Aristotle's account as the experience of all thinkers everywhere. There is the image—an apple falling from a tree, water rising in one's bath as one gets in—a sudden, exciting sense of meaningfulness with as yet no knowledge of the meaning. There is the delicate implication of this experience, that light in its first incidence just is light. This implication the theory respects in that it makes it the intention of the light not primarily to show the image but to create in the intellect an actual possibility of thinking in respect of something which before we could only feel and smell and see. Then at last we've got 'something to think with'. There is the puzzling fact that when we try to teach what to us has become obvious the students do not catch on. Puzzling, too, from the student's end, because he follows the argument, like the teacher he sees no fault in it, but unlike the teacher he says 'So what?'. (There are the dull students who do not say 'So what?', who think that in seeing no fault in an argument they have understood it and that that is what understanding is. Some of them, alas, become the philosophical establishment and inflict on students a misery of which they too are the victims.) What the theory implies here, and what Aquinas says quite explicitly, is that the student is lost until he too stumbles on the right image for him, gets insight, and conceives, makes his own contribution which alone can transform the terms which the teacher is using from counters into a real currency for affirming the real. And thus it is that the Teacher begins: 'the sower went forth to sow his seed'.

Above all, there is the striking fact that the loose notion we all have of something we call insight is the Aristotelian theory in embryo. Lonergan saw this, and wrote a book called *Insight*. The common notion of insight is *not* a doctrine of intuition in embryo. Such a doctrine is arrived at by reshaping the pattern of insight. Instead of holding together and developing harmoniously the various elements in the common notion—the fact that insight is connected with a thing empirically experienced yet, *qua* insight, is simply a new quality in the intelligence—the doctrine of intuition connects the insight simply with the thing, into which it becomes a penetrating peep. It being then established that we can look at things through the intellect, we can posit an analogous look at spiritual realities. Intuitionism is an intellectual 'short'. For it, the critical problem cannot arise.

For Lonergan the critical problem does arise, and he attacks it in depth. For him, one solves the problem if, and only if, one can indicate something within the structure of mind-process of which the only coherent interpretation is that by it we know the real. This something he calls reflective understanding, which issues in judgment as direct understanding issues in concepts, definitions and procedures. That we do make judgments no one doubts. What is doubted is whether our judgments can correspond to what is portentously called the real. But *if* it can be shown that the mind gets lined up for a judgment about things by questioning its own act of understanding: if it can be shown that for every judgment the intellect does in its own way what Kant did in his, then at least we have really new light on the critical problem. At the cost of much and well-directed labour, the light grows, takes possession of the mind, and gives to it the only realism worth the name. The crowning insight here is, all at once and as one act of the mind, a realization that we know the real and a rejuvenated understanding of what 'knowing the real' means. In principle, a vicious circle is broken: what we can know is the real; the real is what we can know. Or rather the circle is deviated by insight, the crucial insight whereby the mind takes possession of itself, appropriating and expanding that more modest self-possession that is already present in all its judgments. For this labour, which he did not undertake under the challenge of the critical problem, Thomas has the most valuable things to offer. For a certain type of Thomist, Thomas took things very much in his stride, was in fact a sort of proto-Chesterton. No introspection there. Well, what about this? '*Anima humana intelligit seipsam per suum intelligere, quod est actus proprius eius, perfecte demonstrans virtutem eius et naturam*' (1, 88, 2 ad iii). And, for good measure, '*intelligit se intelligere id quo intelligit*'! (*De Anima*, 2 ad v). That is the Thomas Lonergan has shown us.

He resembles Thomas in this, that his main concern is theological, yet this concern has demanded from him a labour of philosophical self-evolution that puts most philosophers in the shade.

The Roman world is waking up to him—'*è una parola nuova*' a student said to me while we were waiting for one of his lectures. He inspires a good deal more admiration than understanding, but it is a rather touching admiration with affection in it. They like this man with a face tired yet relaxed by thought and a transatlantic pronunciation of Latin. His course on the Trinity (really his star turn) opens with the words: '*In Sanctissima Trinitate*,

Pater non est Filius, Filius non est Spiritus Sanctus, Spiritus Sanctus non est Pater', pronounced with infinite fatigue and followed by a long sigh which, amplified, sounds like a crowd cheering. Another opening gambit is: 'In the Holy Trinity, there are five notions, four relations, three persons, two processions, one nature and, according to some, no argument'.

ITALIAN OPINION

Church, Culture and Politics

CONTEMPORARY Catholic writing and discussion in Italy is naturally much affected by the special situation and responsibilities of the Catholic body in the national life. Since the war the government has been continuously in Catholic hands, and the republican Constitution itself, which came into force in 1948, is in large measure a product of Catholic minds. To say this is already, we shall see, to hint at certain elements of tension, and therefore of interest, in the situation.

One notes, then, a general emphasis on politics and questions of public morality—of *costume*, a term for which we have no exact equivalent. There are of course currents of interest worth remarking that go in other directions. Recent numbers of the monthly review *Studium*, edited at Rome by the University graduate section of Catholic Action, contain, for example, noteworthy metaphysical essays by P. Prini and S. Vanni Rovighi (this lady's work is especially interesting) while M. F. Sciacca, who directs the philosophical section of *Humanitas* (Brescia), continues his speculations in the Augustinian tradition. There are signs too of interest among the laity in theology, especially in such theological issues as are suggested by Christian reflection on the unification of the world by means of scientific technique with the consequent dwindling of old barriers between races and cultures. Here and there one notes a keen interest in non-Catholic forms of Christianity and in the eastern religious traditions. A certain 'eirenic' concern is in the air, and in Italy such concern is less limited by factors of national history than is normally the case in England. Examples of this trend are, on the popular level, *La Rocca* (Assisi), the organ of the Pro Civitate Christiana movement with its stress on 'Cristo nel mondo', and, on a more sophisticated level, the Florentine review *Testimonianze* edited by the Scolopian Ernesto Balducci. 'The actual state of things', wrote Balducci in 1958, 'confirms our Christian intuition, which may be expressed by saying that the axis of history is now moving, on the scale of values towards theology, in the geographical sphere towards the Mediterranean. So already our attention is drawn more to Gandhi (not to mention more august names) than to Marx, more to Taha Hussein than to Khrushchev, more to Ramakrishna than to Hegel, more to Père de Foucauld than to General de Gaulle' (*Testimonianze*, May 1958, p. 4).

These words are a warning to put first things first, yet if I lay my present stress on political and social issues (as these arise out of and directly relate to the Italian scene) I shall not be dealing with trivialities. For in a particu-