

THE EUCHARISTIC HYMNS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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ST. THOMAS AQUINAS was to much preoccupied with varied duties to devote much time to writing poetry. His ventures in verse, so far as we know, can be counted on the fingers of one hand;¹ and carrying out his scheme of unity, these five hymns relate to one subject—the Holy Eucharist. The five hymns written by St. Thomas are *Lauda Sion*, *Pange Lingua*, *Sacris Solemniis*, *Verbum Supernum* and the *Adoro Te Devote*. It is worth noting that Mandonnet says this last hymn should read not *Adoro* but *Oro*.² *O Esca Viatorum* is sometimes ascribed to St. Thomas, but Duffield in his “*Latin Hymns*” rejects it with the significant remark that it is less masculine than the authentic work of the Angelic Doctor (pg. 268); however, Grabmann in *die Echten Schriften des Hl. Thomas von Aquin* convincingly argues for its authenticity and quotes Father Heiler calling it one of the most beautiful of the mystical hymns. But since the authenticity of the *Adoro Te* is frequently contested we will not include it in our study.

With these five productions totalling thirty-eight stanzas and one hundred and eighty-eight verses Thomas Aquinas has gained for himself the reputation of being one of the great triumvirate of ecclesiastical poets completed by Thomas of Celano and Jacoponus, the reputed authors of the “*Dies Irae*” and the “*Stabat Mater*” respectively. Thomas Gray won a unique place in English literature for something far less than the accomplishment of the Angelic Doctor: he is known as the one great master of the English language that gained immortality by writing only fourteen hundred verses; Thomas Aquinas is recognized as one of the great hymnologists of all languages although he produced only one hundred and eighty-eight lines. We may remark here that Santeuil showed himself a shrewd bargainer when he offered all his poetry for the fourth stanza of the “*Verbum Supernum*” beginning “*Se nascens dedit socium*.”

We are naturally surprised at this phenomenon of a man turning aside from a busy life of study, teaching, travelling and counselling and producing within the limits of one feast in the breviary and missal four of the finest hymns of the Church. As

abruptly as he demonstrated his poetical perfection so abruptly did he cease. We might seek an explanation of this rare triumph in the opinion of the bluff Dr. Samuel Johnson that "the true Genius is a mind of large general powers accidentally determined to some particular direction." But somehow this explanation is not satisfactory in St. Thomas' case. St. Thomas shows no development, no experiments, no uncertainty as a poet; he appears as a master and in an instant he is gone again. His scholastic and ecclesiastical duties can explain well enough why Thomas did not continue his poetry; but what can explain how this man of many affairs and author of a prose Latinity peculiarly his own but so different from the diction of his hymns ever learned the theory and art of such melodious versification?

In this paper we propose to compute the literary influence, that probably came to bear on St. Thomas and estimate their effect in his five Eucharistic hymns. For the present we can pass over that spiritual power which St. Thomas had to put behind his words and consider for a moment something of the mere trade of words, of how, and of how well he learned it.

When Thomas was just a lad of five years he was placed under the instruction of the Benedictine monks of Monte Cassino. There he followed the usual course of studies which included in the trivium grammar, logic and rhetoric. Grammar and rhetoric in this case meant Latin grammar and Latin rhetoric; and rhetoric embraced poetry.³ Bishop Shahan in "The Middle Ages" gives an interesting hint when he points out the fact that the same teacher who taught rhetoric and poetry usually taught music besides (pg. 234); this combination must have been highly effective in developing poetic talent. At any rate, we can be sure that Thomas' soul was filled with music in the abbey of Monte Cassino where the Ambrosian hymns were ordered by the rule of St. Benedict. Vaughan speculates upon the course of studies to which Thomas was probably subjected at Monte Cassino and gives us the following list: Donatus, Priscian or Didymus for grammar; for literature, the Psalter, Aesop's Fables, Theodulus and Cato, Ovid, Horace, Persius, Lucan and Statius, Vergil, Cicero and Quintilian.⁴ In "The Medieval Mind" Taylor relates that by the thirteenth century although the classics were being thrust aside in favor of speculation, yet their cultivation had been recognized as a study of human expression

and not of mere symbols. In other words, the study was literary, not anatomical.

When the Abbey of Monte Cassino was destroyed in 1238 by the soldiers of Frederick II, the young Thomas Aquinas returned to the family castle of Rocca Secca. Thomas was now about fourteen years of age. He remained at home only a short time and was then sent to the new university which Frederick had opened at Naples. Naples being a Greek city already had a school of liberal arts; upon this Frederick built the structure of his new university. Naturally the firmly established school of liberal arts did not languish in a Greek city with the addition of thousands of students seeking every avenue of culture. Moreover, Frederick could look with nothing but favor on the prosperity of the literary courses. He himself spoke Latin, Italian, German, French, Greek and Arabic and was a great admirer of the classics of these languages. In this Naples that was so completely under the influence of the literary Frederick, Thomas Aquinas made his preliminary studies. Of the professors of Thomas at Naples three have left their names to history; and of those three one is Pietro Martini, professor of humanities and rhetoric.⁵

At Naples the young Aquinas met the Dominicans and some short time afterwards joined the Order. The Dominican Order by this time had a highly developed liturgy that adopted the best of the liturgical verse and music the ages had provided and supplied its particular needs from among the geniuses within its ranks. Jerome of Moravia and Simon Taylor were two of the more prominent thirteenth century Dominican musicians; and as another important factor we can name Albert the Great who wrote a treatise on the Art of Music. Outside the Order, both at Cologne and Paris, Aquinas must have felt the poetic quiver of his age. Gaston Paris in "La Poésie du Moyen Age" assures us that "the Middle Ages are an epoch essentially poetic" (pg. 14); and J. A. Symonds illustrates this statement by translating into English under the title of "Wine, Women and Song" the famous Carmina Burana of the medieval students. Although many of these Latin songs are frequently attributed to Walter Mapes and Master Hugh they seem to have been written by no one in particular but sung by the order of journeymen students in general. A cursory reading will convince anyone that these songs are not exotics; they are purely autochthonic. They are

not the self-conscious productions of a class-room; they are the living cry and leap of life. Symonds, who is quite fleshy in his concept of life, exclaims in admiration of this "so bold, so fresh, so natural, so pagan a view of human life as the Latin songs of the Wandering Students exhibit" (pg. 7). Francis Aveling, who offers a study of St. Thomas in his "Arnoul the Englishman," a novel of thirteenth century university life, also seems very much impressed with the naturalness and easiness of the Latin songs.⁶

The point I wish to make is that Thomas was living in a medium that was producing Latin poetry; and producing Latin poetry as its natural means of expression. Our own history of English literature offers us too many sad examples of great talents wasted in Latin scribbling when the language was dead beyond the magic of genius. Bacon, of course, is the classic example; but Milton also did a great deal of hopeless work in the traditional idiom and form of classical Latin. But both Bacon and Milton were working in a language they learned and did not live. Dante, however, comes closer to the experience of Aquinas, since Dante was born nine years before Aquinas died. Dante started the "Divina Commedia" in Latin, completed three or four cantos but found that his living thoughts could not secure a habitation and a home in what was to him a dead language. They could be pinned on the outside in shining colors but they could not glow from within with the warmth of life. These experiments were just further demonstrations of an established literary law: the language must be living if the poem is to live. When Thomas Aquinas wrote Latin poetry he wrote in a language he and his companions had thrilled with their joys or softened with their sorrows until it was a delicate, ductile natural instrument of expression. The very fact of the Pange Lingua so efficaciously refusing to be translated that Neale terms it "the bow of Ulysses to translators"⁷ is sufficient demonstration Aquinas wrote Latin as his own language.⁸

What novitiate St. Thomas went through to drill him in the sharp discipline of actual verse composition, we cannot say. On general principles we cannot explain how he could have reached felicity of expression without long practice. The old adage "per aspera ad astra" holds for saint as well as sinner. It would be interesting in this distant day to study the various grades that led to the perfection of a Pange Lingua or a Verbum Supernum. It is to be regretted that Reginald did not keep a record of the

casting, recasting and polishing of those five wonderful hymns. Brother Azarias in his "Books and Reading" has done something of the kind for Tennyson in "A Peep Into Tennyson's Workshop"; and Forman in editing Keats' poems plotted out the happy path that led to that simple, innocent, carefree opening line of *Endymion*: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." What great encouragement each one of us might find in our own writing if we could see in the mind's eye the fluent Thomas Aquinas pausing for the right word to come along; or reading his lines aloud to catch the secret rhythm or detect some latent harshness! This bit of imagination is not all day dreaming, for we know from the original, autographed copy of the "*Summa Contra Gentes*" reposing in the Vatican Library, that Aquinas filed away to the four and fifth form on some of his prose expressions. What must he have done in his verse! We can wonder still more when we recall that in each one of the five Eucharistic hymns St. Thomas reverted to the institution of the Blessed Sacrament and the mystery involved in transubstantiation. Five final beautiful expressions of one event are not dashed off with the dexterity of a lightning-change artist portraying different characters. And just to think that perhaps those scratched and corrected parchments that recorded St. Thomas's attempts and failures were lightly tossed aside and lost.

Of the tentative draughts of St. Thomas we know nothing directly. His final style suddenly appears amazingly perfect and has no development nor decline: Aquinas is the Melchisadech of verse. Yet, in a fashion, we have something that attempts to show the development of the *Verbum Supernum*. In the April number of the *Révue Benedictine* for the year 1910 Dom Morin, O. S. B., tried to prove that St. Thomas did not create the *Verbum Supernum* but combined and shortened two hymns belonging to the old Cistercian breviary. However this may be, the similarity of the hymns offers us an opportunity of comparing the perfect and imperfect style handling the same thought in the same language and verse form. No matter on what side the historical truth of the question may be adjudged, we have either St. Thomas filing old lines of perfection or we have some grosser hand working the metal of Aquinas. The stanza in the old Cistercian breviary reads:

Jesus nascens se socium,
Convalescens in edulium,
Pendens dedit in pretium,
Se regnans dat in praemium.

The lines of St. Thomas read:

Se nascens dedit socium,
Convalescens in edulium,
Se moriens in pretium,
Se regnans dat in praemium.

A comparison of the two stanzas is altogether in favor of St. Thomas. Of the four lines in each stanza the second and fourth of each stanza are respectively identical; the first and third differ. We shall compare the lines that differ.

The first line of St. Thomas' quatrain runs smoothly off with "Se nascens dedit socium." The line is mechanically perfect and according to the Latinity of the period. We can notice also that it sets a form for the other lines of the stanza by using "se" followed by a present participle. The corresponding line of the Cistercian breviary lacks the felicity of St. Thomas' art. When we read "Jesus nascens se socium" we almost think we have discovered some historical hoax that a continental wag has tried to work off as characteristically sibilant English verse. And for rhythm, this line is like some French verses Dryden spoke of: it has a hump in its back. The other dissimilar line reads in St. Thomas' words: "Se moriens in pretium." Another smooth line! In comparison we read: "Pendens dedit in pretium." Again the accents and the reading plunge and jar in opposite motion like a horse and his unskilled rider. We can also note that St. Thomas carries out with better effect the use of "se" with the present participle and his contrast of the perfect and the present tenses is done with nicer suggestion by separating them by three lines and giving us the option of placing "moriens" with either one or the other.

But after all we must confess that Dom Morin's contribution does not tell us how St. Thomas gained his precision of perfect versification. That is a mystery either between God and St. Thomas or between St. Thomas and the historian. Not enough space remains to permit us to linger longer on the development of the Thomistic poetry. A few words of criticism on the hymns themselves are now in order.

In the first place these hymns are hymns, not merely carefully computed and varied series of long and short syllables that end in rhyme. They were made for singing and can be sung. This is an accomplishment of which some English hymns might well be envious; for instance, some of Father Faber's

hymns are beautiful poetry, but Father Faber confessed in his first introduction that he feared they lacked something for good singing. This something St. Thomas was able to supply; and his universal popularity is the result. Ecclesiastical authority could account for the singing of St. Thomas' hymns throughout the Catholic Church, but nothing other than their own super-eminent merit won them a place in the Protestant Churches. Although Luther despised the *Lauda Sion*, he could not keep it out of the Lutheran Churches; and as the influence of the Oxford revival spreads more and more, so this most Roman of the hymns of St. Thomas finds its honor increase even among our separated brethren.

There is no doubt that St. Thomas found a great deal of his popular appeal in the use of accentual and not quantitative measure: congregational singing would be almost impossible where each singer must know the laws of prosody. But the mere generic choice of accentual measure is not sufficient to insure success; the poetic instinct is manifested in the choice of the particular rhythm that suits the theme. A fine analysis of Aquinas' adaptation of rhythm to theme is found in the "Eucharistica" of Msgr. H. T. Henry (pg. 222). St. Thomas shows a peculiarly masterful adaptation of rhythm in the third and fourth stanzas of the *Lauda Sion*. This time the adaptation refers to an existent melody. Apparently the *Lauda Sion* must have been written to an established melody; perhaps to that of the *Zuma Vetus Expurgetur* of Adam of St. Victor; or more probably, both of them were written for some still older melody. At any rate, a careful reader will notice that the rhythm breaks during the last three lines of the third and fourth stanzas of the *Lauda Sion*. At first one is surprised and thinks Homer has nodded; but on looking up the *Zuma Vetus* of Adam of St. Victor one will find the identical variation occurring in the same two places. Thomas had cut his cloak to his cloth.

In rhyme St. Thomas is pure and rich as can be easily seen by breaking up some of his longer lines and revealing their internal rhyme. There is always a danger in this use of the internal rhyme, or Leonine line as it is called; quite frequently the net result is a jingle, as one of our modern poets, Service, has often sadly experienced. Aquinas offers the richness of frequent rhyme without thrusting upon us the distraction of the jingle. Trench points to St. Thomas as an example of perfect rhyming

“satiating the ear with a richness of melody scarcely anywhere to be surpassed.”⁹

But rhythm and rhyme are not the supreme element that raises our admiration in these Eucharistic hymns. Keats and Coleridge had beautiful ears for melody but neither of them could have stated the difficult theological doctrine of the Eucharistic so accurately and effectively as did St. Thomas. Dr. Julian called the *Pange Lingua* “a wonderful union of sweetness of melody with clear-cut dogmatic teaching.”¹⁰ One can secure a melancholy proof of this statement by observing Protestant compilers of hymnals amputate stanza after stanza from the original hymns of Aquinas; or distort them by translation or claim they do not mean what they do mean. The reason for all this wriggling is that St. Thomas was so explicitly orthodox that he could not be honestly misunderstood. The best compliment paid to the Catholicity in St. Thomas’ hymns came from Trench who praised his work as that of a master but, excluding from his collection all purely Catholic hymns, did not print even one of the five Eucharistic hymns of St. Thomas. St. Thomas did not string together a series of weak exclamations or pretty figures but advanced towards his ideal of poetry; this ideal, as he stated it in his commentary on the first epistle to Timony and the *Posteriorum Analyticorum* was to lead men to virtue.¹¹ Brooke, Haweis, Bailey, and Sneath have written instructive works on the theological content of English poetry; but not one of them can point to such an example as St. Thomas Aquinas. If Pope Damasus had exchanged places with John XXII we believe he might have said: “Tot fecit miracula quot scripsit hymnos.” The words of our lamented Joyce Kilmer¹² apply to St. Thomas:

In all languages the writings of the most enduring loveliness, even apart from those divinely inspired, are those which relate most closely to worship—those writings made immortal by the love of God. So writers may fulfill the purpose for which they are made by writing—may know God better by writing about Him, increase their love of Him by expressing it in beautiful words, serve Him in this world by means of their best talent, and because of this service and His mercy be happy with Him forever in Heaven.

¹ The Very Rev. Dominic Gravina, O. P., S. T. M., composed a small book little known but of some interest here, since it is a compendium in verse of the *Summa: Totius Summae Theologicae Compendium Rhythmicum*.

² *Bibliographie Thomiste*. Pg. xviii.

³ In His "History of Criticism" George Saitsbury remarks that some readers are surprised to find logic linked up with poetry. In a note (Vol. III, 20) he proceeds to elucidate the matter: "The connecting and explaining link, sometimes omitted, is to be found in rhetoric—the close connection of which with logic and grammar is no puzzle, while the connection of poetry with it was then an established fact."

⁴ Vaughan, O. S. B. St. Thomas of Aquin. Vol. I, 24.

⁵ Vaughan. Vol. I, 47.

⁶ Vaughan. I, 412: Brother Guerrio, the first prior of the Dominicans at Metz, was converted by a few simple words. One day, as he was studying at his window, in Paris, he heard some one singing this refrain, in the streets below, which at once made him enter into himself:—

"Tempus vadit,
Et ego nil feci;
Tempus venit,
Et ego nil operor."

⁷ Medieval Hymns. Pg. 179.

⁸ However, Britt in "The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal says "there are about twenty-five translations." Pp. 184.

⁹ Trench. Sacred Latin Poetry. Pg. 36.

¹⁰ Dict. of Hymnology. Pg. 878.

¹¹ Opera Omnis XXI, 479; XXII, 105.

¹² Kilmer, "The Circus." Pg. 190.

