

## THE REVIVAL OF CATHOLIC LITERATURE

---

WILFRED REGAN, O.P.



WHEN we reflect upon the present state of Catholic literature, immediately we are inclined to consider the question from an historical viewpoint, that is, to determine by comparison with past ages in the life of the Church whether Catholic literature today is in a period of progression or retrogression. The demand for a solution of the question is brought to mind by recurrent 'Catholic Press Months', the recent controversy as to whether or not a Catholic could write a novel, the oft repeated contention that realism with a stench is one of the indispensable instruments of the successful novelist. What was the position of Catholic literature before the cataclysm of the sixteenth century? If it was in a state of decline, or even of decay, was anything done in the literary field to parallel that which was accomplished by the Council of Trent in the spiritual realm? Are the books and periodicals now produced under Catholic auspices of a standard inferior, equal or superior to corresponding productions under non-Catholic auspices? Such are some of the questions which are offered for our consideration.

It cannot be denied that for a period following the Reformation, not only the spotlight but practically the entire literary stage was occupied by writers who were born, grew and matured outside the influence of Holy Mother Church—that is, by individuals who were, if not anti-Catholic, at least non-Catholic. It is true that in many cases the Catholic tradition provided the matter for an immortal classic, but the mind which imposed the form on that matter was a mind imbued with ideas drawn from an environment foreign, if not militantly inimical, to the Catholic cause. Throughout a period, not of years, but of centuries this situation endured. The greater misfortune befell the young because the young, plastic minds, with much of the leisure and little of the distraction provided by modern science, were eaten by a germ which fed upon literature. It has been said that since the world began, men have acted either because they wanted to or because they had to. The curiosity of these youths was somewhat

involuntary but they satisfied it by reading that which appealed to them.

Due to the environment in which their minds had been nurtured, youths were fascinated by anything written in a beautiful style. Canon Sheehan pointed out in one of his essays that the maid who wheels a perambulator in the park with one hand and holds the latest novel open with the other, is influenced more in her entire outlook on life, especially in its moral aspects, by that novel than by the preacher whom she hears on Sunday and of whose sermon she does not retain one idea till Monday.

In the era of the youths of whom we spoke above as well as in our own era, the maid is typical of a goodly number of the sons of Adam. Literature possesses a powerful influence which is becoming constantly more powerful in the light of the modern trend toward greater universality in education. Men who lived in post-Reformation times absorbed a literature which presented erroneous doctrines, more effectively pernicious for the exquisite grace of expression which presented them. Never was more beautiful literature written in the interests of falsehood. Of such "music of the fallen angels", a master stylist said that even after our minds have seen the falsity of the doctrine, we can not forget the beauty of its expression. Unfortunately, for a very long time after the disaster of the sixteenth century, men were like Greeks before Venus de Milo: they were completely fascinated by a literary monument, immense, exquisitely chiselled, and dedicated to the non-Catholic tradition.

It is doubtless true that, if there be an advance in the field of Catholic literature, there is a proportionate diffusion of the Catholic philosophy of life. As Chesterton has put it: "I hope a Catholic can not write a work on any subject . . . without showing therein that he is a Catholic."<sup>1</sup> After the burning of the *Summa Theologica* and the other works of St. Thomas by Luther, the Catholic philosophy as represented by Thomism received scant consideration outside Catholic circles. Again to quote Chesterton: "The great central Synthesis of history, that was to have linked the ancient with the modern world, went up in smoke and, for half the world, was forgotten like a vapour."<sup>2</sup>

As we approach our own period however, the Catholic philosophy, especially as represented by Thomism, is in the ascendancy, partly for the reason that Catholic literature is also in the ascendancy.

<sup>1</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 247.

The "international resurgence" of Catholic thought which we are witnessing at the present day in Catholic literature (and, as a consequence, in other fields of thought) is still in the vigor of its youth, but fortunately it seems to be blessed with immunity from a blind idealism, an immunity which we ordinarily think impossible before the fulness of maturity. No doubt the movement has ideals (it would not be Catholic if it did not have them), but it visualizes those ideals with its eyes wide open. Its spirit might well be briefly expressed in the now famous motto of Pius X's pontificate: "*Instaurare omnia in Christo*,"<sup>3</sup> to restore all things in Christ. The present-day school of Catholic writers is motivated even in its controversy by that spirit, which must reign supreme in the restoration of all things in Christ, the spirit of Charity.

The contemporary revival of Catholic literature manifests itself in every field of writing. In philosophy we have Garrigou-Lagrange, Maritain, Sertillanges, Joyce. In history we find Belloc, Chesterton, (both of whom might with excellent reason be classed in almost any sphere of writing), Hollis, Dawson. In hagiography we find books on the Saints possessing a virility and solidity rare until recent times, by such authors as Martindale, Ghéon, Archbishop Goodier, Chesterton. In theology we have names like Karl Adam and de Grandmaison. Not to continue the list interminably, we might suggest a few names that extend all the way from detective stories of no ordinary merit to, let us say, theology: Ronald Knox, Eric Gill, Francis Dudley, Rudolph Allers, Maurice Blondel, Martin D'Arcy, Arnold Lunn, Paul Claudel, Daniel Sargent, William Thomas Walsh, Alfred Noyes—certainly a formidable array of literary talent. To writing of such a calibre we are treated in *A Sheed and Ward Anthology*,<sup>4</sup> a book "which contains chapters from sixty-one recent books, and nearly the same number of authors, giving a cross-section of Catholic thought and controversy." In this volume, published by a company which has done so much for the cause of Catholic letters in the short time that has elapsed since its foundation, one can find in a concentrated form something of the spirit of resurgence which is manifesting itself today in the field of Catholic literature.

The spirit of the present movement has something in common with the Legion of Decency which is being blessed with such phenomenal success in the United States today. Both are crusader-like and Catholic. One plank, at least, of the platform of the Legion of

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians i, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Sheed & Ward, New York, 1934. \$2.50.

Decency might easily be inserted into the platform of any Catholic novelist of the present day: "We are simply and frankly against the glorification of the racketeer and the courtesan; the setting forth to the public at large that men and women live by their lusts; that infidelity and general scoundrelism are the rule in American life."<sup>5</sup> Catholic novelists have proved conclusively that realism with a stench is not necessarily the stock-in-trade of the successful novelist, that life at its best is a divinely beautiful thing, and that "realism may depend as much on the tapping of a blind man's stick on the pavement as on a number of adulteries." For many decades a genuinely Catholic novel by a genuinely Catholic author had not even approached the ranks of the best sellers. Today however we have the phenomenon of a thoroughly Catholic novel by a Catholic priest claiming the double distinction of being outlawed as Catholic propaganda from the libraries of one large American city and of being the best selling book in an astonishingly large number of American cities. Yet even more remarkable to relate, in other fields of literature, as in the case of this book, the demand for Catholic books is made for the most part, not by Catholics, but by non-Catholics. A few years ago Hilaire Belloc pointed out that the Catholic cause needed but a hearing in the marts of the world to win that world to the Catholic Church. In the Catholic novel of today, as well as in the more serious and profound literary productions, the Catholic cause bids fair to obtain that hearing with its consequent recognition and acceptance. If the Catholic Church can but get into the marketplace and present her case, she knows with a confidence not of this world that she can not but emerge victorious. To borrow an expression used in another connection: "She may lose a battle here and there but never a whole campaign."

There was published very recently a book begun by Arthur Thomson, the famous scientist, and finished after his death. The book proposes to give its readers a statement of the present position of science, theological, philosophical and experimental, by ten men each expert in his field. In a review of the book featured by the *New York Times*, of the four contributions which the reviewer singles out as worthy of special discussion and praise, two are by Catholics. Is this an indication of a Catholic voice that will become increasingly more audible?

The revival of Catholic literature which we witness runs the

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Brooklyn Tablet*, July 21, 1934.

entire gamut, including novels which avoid the "goody-goody" type "without delving into the abyss of ecstatic pornography to be found in the pseudoromanticists of today," historical works which are going far to answer the crying need for a rewriting of history since the Reformation, newspapers and periodicals (those powerful molders of public opinion) which rank with those of the highest order, and so on throughout the other branches. This revival may produce an immortal work in the field of letters. Certainly, since it is Catholic and since everything Catholic is chiefly interested in the salvation of souls, it will have a part in that other immortality which is not bound by the limits of this world.