

THE POETRY OF SAINT THOMAS

CHRYSTOM SEERY, O.P.



NCE there lived a great architect. This man was unlike other architects in that his whole life's energy was expended in the construction of one edifice, a mighty cathedral, which men of discernment have never ceased to admire, appreciate, and utilize. The engineering difficulties that had to be surmounted before he could raise this structure of strength and beauty were tremendous and without number. He had to drain a forest-swamp, teeming with contagion. It was necessary for him to cut through miles of merciless brush and thorny undergrowth. He was attacked at every step by the fiercest of beasts, and even his own comrades at times put obstacles in his path. At length in his trek through this wilderness, he came upon the site of some ancient excavations, hardly discernible at first view. When he had erected barricades about them against his foes, had drained and cleared them, he examined them minutely and marvelled at their flawlessness. On these foundations he built his cathedral. He who had laid them centuries before was a man called Aristotle. The architect was a saint called Thomas Aquinas and the name which men of later years emblazoned above the great entrance-way of that vast cathedral was one simple but powerful word: Thomism.

It is not our purpose here to attempt an appreciation of that magnificent structure but rather to examine the various works of art with which it was appropriately embellished, namely, the poems of St. Thomas, and try to gain a better appreciation of them. Our study will be divided into three parts: first, a difficulty; secondly, a distinction; and finally, a comparison.

A student of poetry in a language other than that in which he thinks is handicapped at the start, and he can never fully appreciate that poetry until he overcomes the difficulty. The poetry of St. Thomas is—as is always the case in poetry—indissoluble from his very words and their literal significance. Replace the words by translation and you have taken away the poetry; for a poem is a living unity and cannot suffer substitution in any of its parts. No doubt there is poetry in the ideas signified, but when these ideas are expressed in other words than those the poet used, the poetry which results is no longer his but the translator's. Because of this fact an an-

cient or a foreign poet is to a certain degree at the mercy of his translators. If the translations are good poetry, the average reader will conclude that the originals were good; and if poor, he will be led to believe that the originals were poor. These conclusions, however, are not necessarily true. The renditions do not depend on the intrinsic worth of the original poems but merely on the poetic talent of the translator. To illustrate: the various translations of the poems of St. Thomas, although faithful expositions of the thought-content, have always left something to be desired. The *Lauda Sion* is a case in point. There have been some twenty translations of it into English verse, and the selection from it beginning *Ecce panis angelorum* has received some ten additional versions. All these attempts indicate dissatisfaction with previous translations in the minds of the translators. Many of these were eminent men of letters, among them Southwell, Crashaw, Caswell, and Henry. Thus the poet St. Thomas suffers because his translators have not caught all the poetry of the originals. Those of us who do not read Latin poetry as we read English poetry and who yet believe the poems of St. Thomas to be great have come to that belief through the testimony of recognized scholars, whose unending attempts to translate his poetry adequately are tacit compliments to his greatness. Indeed, Santeuil, a poet of the seventeenth century, once said that he would give all the verses he ever wrote to have been the author of the stanza of the *Verbum Supernum*:

*Se nascens dedit socium,
Convalescens in edulium,
Se moriens in pretium,
Se regnans dat in praemium.*¹

May none of us fall into the error of letting translations of the poetry of St. Thomas be our norms for judging its literary worth.

We now consider a threefold distinction. It arises from the fact that religious or mystical poetry and the other species, such as the lyric or the epic, have diverse formal objects. Religious poetry has for its primary object the praise of God. For the other species it is immediate pleasure. The one is theocentric, the other, egocentric. Another difference, according to Helen C. White in her scholarly work, *The Metaphysical Poets*,² lies in the fact that "the expression

¹ "In Birth, man's Fellowman was He;
His Meat, while sitting at the Board;
He died, his Ransomer to be,
He reigns, to be his Great Reward."

Translation in *The Roman Breviary*, (trans. from the Latin by the Marquess of Bute), (London, 1908), III, 233.

² (New York, 1936), p. 15.

of experience is essential to the poet and not to the mystic." So true is this that St. Teresa of Avila had to be entreated to write of her mystical experiences; St. Therese of Lisieux, likewise, was commanded by her superior to write her autobiography. St. Paul gives us the clue to this reticence. He tells the Corinthians in his second Epistle, "I know such a one" who was "caught up to the third heaven. . . ." and who "heard secret words which it is not granted to man to utter."³ The third and last great difference between the two is that whereas the mystic has but one Efficient Cause of his experience, He who is the First Cause of all things, the causes of poetic experience are numerous and diverse. They are secondary causes in which the First Cause has left a clue to His Infinite Beauty. When a poet has captured his experience in a poem to his satisfaction, he rests from his toil contented; the mystic, on the other hand, can never have his yearning for God slaked in this life. "And they that drink me shall yet thirst"⁴ can be said of mystical experience as well as of wisdom. St. Catherine of Siena, in one of her gems at once mystic and poetic, expresses this sentiment. "Thou, oh Eternal Trinity, art a deep Sea, into which the deeper I enter, the more I find, and the more I find, the more I seek."⁵ With this threefold distinction in view, it is not difficult to discover into which group the poems of St. Thomas fall. His object in writing was the praise of God in the Sacrament of His Love. Three poems came into being at the order of Pope Urban IV, who commissioned him to write the Office of Corpus Christi. Lastly, one classic utterance of his is highly indicative of the mystic. "Oh Lord, I wish no recompense but Thee!"

We now pass to our final consideration, namely, a comparison of the Vesper hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi, *Pange Lingua*, and the sequence, *Lauda Sion*. As has been noted, the theme is the same in all of the poems. It was as if he could never weary of searching for new ways to tell the Lord of his heart the sentiments of that heart. Relative to this is the tribute of the Protestant hymnologist, Daniel, who said, "Thomas was the greatest singer of the venerable Sacrament. Nor can it be believed that he did this without the divine afflatus, nor shall we be surprised that, having so wondrously and uniquely absolved this one spiritual and wholly heavenly theme, he should thenceforth sing no more."⁶ A comparison of these two poems shows a similarity in their constructions, not indeed in their rhyme and rhythm patterns, but rather in their sequences of ideas. The

³ 2 Cor. xii, 2, 4.

⁴ Eccli. xxiv, 29.

⁵ *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. from the Italian by Algar Thorold, (New York, 1925), p. 343.

initial stanzas in both poems are brief invitatories containing the first two elements of the ninety-fourth Psalm: praise and thanksgiving. Next he recounts the institution of the Holy Eucharist with the stanza beginning *In suprema nocte cenae* of the *Pange Lingua* and *In hac mensa novi Regis* of the *Lauda Sion*. The fourth stanza of the *Pange Lingua*, beginning with the verses

*Verbum caro panem verum
Verbo carnem efficit. . . ,*

shows the craftsmanship of the poet. This whole stanza has been a nemesis for translators from the beginning. There is not a word in either the first or second verse of this stanza that is not rhymed, and there occur three distinct antitheses. Dr. Neale, who considered this hymn to "contest the second place among those of the Western Church with the *Vexilla Regis*, the *Stabat Mater*, and others,"⁷ wrote a version of this stanza. He said that in it he tried to incorporate the best features of the four best translations with which he was acquainted.

Word made Flesh, by Word He maketh
Very bread His Flesh to be;
Man in wine Christ's Blood partaketh,
And if senses fail to see,
Faith alone, the true heart waketh
To behold the mystery.

Thereupon the theologian comes forward, as with almost geometric precision he expresses the doctrine of the Blessed Eucharist some three hundred years before it is defined at Trent. The poems terminate with a rising crescendo of love and adoration. Particularly significant is the order of presentation of his ideas. Since devotion should flow from the contemplation of revealed truth, he invariably sets forth the true teaching of the Church, and then, while the intellect is being nourished on this wholesome doctrine, he turns his attention to the will that he may evoke acts of supreme worship.

We know that even in this life St. Thomas was given divine commendation for his writings. It is not difficult to believe that, as he crossed the threshold of Paradise he thought he heard all heaven resound with the words of his own poem, *Tantum Ergo*, set to the music of St. Cecilia, music sweeter than that with which she "drew an angel down. . . .";⁸ that in truth, on inquiring of St. Ambrose who, representing God's troubadours, was there to greet him, he found that what he was hearing was heaven's national anthem being played in honor of his arrival.

⁶ Daniel, *Thesaurus Hymnologicus*, II, 88.

⁷ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, cf. "Pange."

⁸ Dryden, *Alexander's Feast*.