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THE CATHOLIC TRADITION IN LITERATURE

by
BROTHER LEO, F. S. C.



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by

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minded attitude toward human problems and perplexities, strivings and dreams.

What is traditional is both conservative and radical. *Conservative* does not mean timid, unprogressive, unoriginal; it connotes rather the tendency to hold fast that which is good, to preserve and transmit a valuable intellectual and spiritual inheritance. Nor is *radical* a synonym for revolutionary, iconoclastic, or "red"; it comes from the word *root*—as does the word *radish*—and it connotes the habit of getting to the bottom of things, of looking to the sources, the origins, the *roots*, of institutions and ideas. Tradition is conservative, therefore, inasmuch as it bases its choice on the origins, the purposes, the animating and initiating forces at the roots of things.

Civilization is almost entirely a matter of tradition. Even in the narrowly biological sense, it is a traditional tendency which sets man apart from the lower animals. Writing on "The Uniqueness of Man" in the *Yale Review* for Spring, 1939, Professor Julian Huxley remarks:

"The beginnings of tradition, by which experience is transmitted from one generation to the next, are to be seen in many higher animals. But in no case is the tradition cumulative. Offspring learn from parents, but they learn the same kind and quantity of lessons as they, in turn, impart; the transmission of experience never bridges more than one generation. In man, however, is an independent and potentially permanent activity, capable of indefinite improvement . . ."

Our bodies, in short, with their remarkable powers of adaptation and adjustment, are beneficiaries of the traditional process. But infinitely more so are our minds, our spirits. Says Mr. James Truslow Adams:

"Given a complex nature and a complex environment, no man can depend solely on his own desires and

thought to lead him through life with satisfaction. To an extent that we little dream of, we have to rely upon the accumulated wisdom and experience of those who have gone before us . . . Whether we like it or not, we have to accept a great deal from the past. Otherwise we shall wreck ourselves."*

Or, as Bernard of Chartres put it so long ago, "We moderns are dwarfs standing upon the shoulders of giants."

The very language we use—unless we talk the way Gertrude Stein and James Joyce write—is predominantly traditional. We can hardly compose a decent sentence in English without drawing upon other languages and other ages, without accepting and utilizing numerous transmissions of thought and emotion and experience from men and women whose passionate hearts are dust. Those traditional elements we form and mold and fashion in consonance with our personal and temporal needs, but we could not get along without them. And what is true in language is true in social usages—who of us, for example, invented the custom of shaking hands?—and in education and in religion. It is preeminently true in literature.

Man, regarded either as an individual or as a congeries of individuals—John Jones or the Knights of Columbus, Sarah Smith or the Daughters of the American Revolution—is like a tree, and not necessarily an inverted one. The tree stretches upward to the stimulus and sustenance of its environment; every tiny twig, every plant leaf, every glowing blossom seeks the maximum of fortifying sunlight and vivifying air. And so man lives in the here and now, pursuing his tasks and taking his pleasures, not with Tubal Cain or Rameses of Egypt, but in the active

**Living Philosophies*, p. 168

and challenging modern world. It is in the present, in the breath of the passing hour, that men and trees lift their arms and bring forth their fruits.

Obviously we live in the present, not in the eighteenth century or in the Middle Ages or in the good old days when the geese cackled in Rome. Illogical, it may be, is the fashionable desire to keep up with current events. We are ourselves current events, and we cannot evade the claims and questions of the hour. We breathe the air of the present, and even if some of it isn't very salubrious, it is the only air we can breathe. ("The night air is bad for you", said the Victorian matron to her wandering boy. "Maybe," he answered, "but what kind of air but night air can I get at night?") We ought to tell that to those everlasting Jeremiahs and Cassandras with never a kind word to fling at men and movements of the hour. Nay, let us go further: We're glad we are living here and now. The eighteenth century seems a bit thin and barren, the Middle Ages were by no means idyllic, no matter what the mediaevalists say; and if we harbor nostalgic yearnings for the cackling of geese we don't have to go back to antiquity—we have columnists and professors and imported lecturers who gargle in public, and radio speakers on pleasant Sunday afternoons.

But trees and men do not derive all their life or most of their life from the sun and air of the evanescent day. Trees and men have roots. Those roots are not visible to the casual observer; they lie beneath the soil of circumstance. The roots of a tree are not pretty to look at; they are gnarled things and hardy and stretch far underground; and, through the operation of a mysterious selective principle, they abstract nutriment from the soil. The

roots of the tree absorb the precious salts and juices without which the tree would die. The roots of the man spread wide and deep in history and extract those ideas and ideals and standards of value without which man too would decline and decay.

Between the umbrageous body of the tree and its unseen roots is a comparatively long stretch of trunk. That trunk might look like a mistake, a useless thing, an evidence of nature's disregard of efficiency, for it brings forth neither flowers nor fruit, and it extracts no helpful elements from the soil; besides, it is composed chiefly of dead wood. We can imagine one kind of academic orchardist saying to himself: "The trunk of this tree is in no way productive; we had better cut it out." But he had better do no such thing. That trunk may not produce anything, it may be neither useful, nor beautiful, perhaps, and it is undeniably dead timber; yet its role is indispensable in the economy of the tree. For through minute canals grooved in the dead heart of the trunk, the valuable salts and juices garnered by the hidden roots are transmitted to the spreading and fruit bearing branches. Without that trunk the tree could not live, for through the trunk is borne the greater portion of the tree's nourishment. The trunk is the tree's tradition.

So is the trunk of the human tree. We live not wholly in the present. We are not rootless and trunkless. And the higher we go in the planes of our being, the more fully and richly we live and not by bread alone, the more we find power and happiness and fruition in the things of the intellect and the soul—the more and yet more do we draw upon the accumulated wisdom and experience of the past. Those human roots of ours, unseen and crabbed

enough and soil-stained and oh, so very, very old, how fragile and futile and fluttery should we be without them! We simply cannot live exclusively on the food and stimulation which the present day offers. We cannot grow robust of spirit, rich of mind and stout of heart on a stream-lined diet of European crises, moral rearmament, the Reader's Digest, Newport and Palm Springs, Jack Benny and Donald Duck, Charles and Mary Beard, Epstein's statues and Sherwood Anderson's plays, world expositions by Hell Gate and the Golden Gate. Have we not eyes? Can't we see that one prolific cause of the world's unrest is that so many of our brethren have been cut off, or have cut themselves off, from their sustaining and vitalizing roots? Victims they of the sectarian spirit. They are bored, disillusioned, disenchanted; in the truest and profoundest sense they are emasculated, because they have been sected, been severed, from participation in the tonic salts and juices of the forgotten years. The artist is cut off from the old masters, the philosopher is cut off from the *philosophia perennis*, the seeker after righteousness is cut off from the enduring Faith and the Eternal God.

The trunk of our human tree is indubitably dead wood. Nothing is deader than a dead epoch in human history. "The jackals howl, the serpents hiss, In what was once Persepolis." Those assiduous savants who labor to make the dead past live are at best but conscientious and occasionally artistic embalmers. Their erudite writings resemble Madame Toussaud's or maybe Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works. The past is past, and in itself and of itself it breathes no breath of life. But—and such is God's inscrutable way alike with trees and men—that which lives is

transmitted through that which is dead. Canals run up through the trunk of the human tree bearing from the submerged roots to the aspiring branches the things whereby the human spirit thrives—its history, its art, its philosophy, its religion, its literature. And that is the Great Tradition, the Catholic Tradition.

Yes, the Catholic Tradition, because the quintessence of human wisdom and experience, much of it antedating the Christian era, was incorporated into the scheme of teaching and living blessed and fostered by the Catholic Church. In affairs religious, of course, these Catholic eyes of ours can clearly see how tradition functions through the years—one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; but Catholic eyes are at times less keen to discern that the literature of our western world, at its highest and noblest and best, has been not merely, as is sometimes said, a handmaiden of the truth, but rather in itself and according to its own genius, a mode whereby the truth and the goodness and the beauty of God have been transmitted from generation to generation. Non-Catholic eyes exceptionally alert and knowing have not missed the significance of it all. Barrett Wendell saw it, and Paul Elmer More; it was the basis of the New Humanism of a few years ago, and it was at the heart of an older and still living humanism which Petrarca sired and St. Thomas More defended and the Jesuits fostered in their colleges through evil repute and good. It is the traditional humanism formulated but yesterday by Irving Babbitt of Harvard:

“Nothing is more certain than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things that are connected with manners, and civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles,

and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion.”*

And that is the spirit of the Catholic Tradition in Literature.

*Living Philosophies, p. 125

THE STREAM OF THE TRADITION

Address delivered on September 10, 1939

An earnest man, brilliant and temperamental withal, had given himself with characteristic impetuosity to the study of literature. Especially had he reveled in the writings of Cicero, saturating himself with the shrewd and sapient splendors of that incomparable prose style. Then, like many students in every age, he turned with ascetic fervor to the study of religion and the practice of virtue in heroic measure. He was incapable of compromise and in his hierarchy of the virtues temperance, moderation took no exalted rank. He withdrew into a desert place; he fasted and he prayed; he exercised himself in terrifying forms of self-denial. And, not surprisingly, he had disturbing dreams. One night he seemed to pass through the gates of death and stand for judgment. The *Dies Irae* had not yet been written, but its solemn foreboding was the atmosphere of his disconcerting dream. "I am a Christian!" in desperation he cried. "No", retorted the soul-revealing Judge, "you are a Ciceronian!"

The antinomy between things sacred and things profane underlying that psychological experience of St. Jerome in the fourth century is symptomatic of the conflict waged by many a devout soul in every century. Cicero, for all his power and persuasiveness and artistry in words, was a pagan. Was not Jerome, in giving thought and study and affection to a pagan writer, an inconsistent and unworthy follower of Christ?

The Fathers of the Church faced that problem when the treasures of the best pre-Christian litera-

ture and philosophy clamored for incorporation into the Christian mind. Most of them, like St. Chrysostom in the East and St. Jerome in the West, were products of pagan learning; some of them, like St. Augustine, had been teachers of pagan poetry and thought. They were Christians *and* Ciceronians. Should they discard the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome as a heritage impious for the children of God? Or should they, even as they wrought the stones of the temples of the gods into the fabric of Christian churches, humbly hearken to the ancient wisdom, learn of life and art from men who knew not Christ, correlate the vision of Sophocles and Plato, of Cicero and Horace, with the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount? Olympus of the gods had been blasted by the Gospel; must the new fire likewise sear Parnassus of the poets?

Naturally there were hesitant, dissenting, and condemnatory voices, but the paradoxical dream of Jerome was suffered a dream to remain. Monuments of literary beauty had been reared in Jerusalem, in Athens, in Rome, and those survivals of pre-Christian civilization became part of the Catholic Tradition. "Henceforth," wrote the late Canon William Barry, "education was to be cast in this mould . . . Every Christian talks Hebrew when he prays, Greek when he philosophizes, Latin when he goes to law."*

And so it came to pass that the intellectual leaders of the Faith, though guarding ever against corruption and impiety and error, welcomed into the Christian culture the noblest offerings of an elder day. Already the Fourth Gospel had utilized the

*Roma Sacra, p. 116

Greek *Logos*, standing for both thought and the expression of thought, as a symbol and an interpretation of the Mystery of the Incarnation; wherefore we still say, "The Logos, the Word, was made flesh." Already St. Paul, intent on winning the sophisticated Greeks unto Christ, had stood in the Athenian temple and taught the Areopagus the coercive implications of the statue they had erected to the Unknown God. Plato was Christianized; and later, Aristotle. Virgil was honored as the pagan prophet of Christ. As late even as the early fourteenth century Dante invoked the Muses and gave Our Lord the name of Apollo; and a hundred years later that quintessence of the devotional spirit, *The Imitation of Christ*, wove into its texture of supernal wisdom words originally set down by Seneca, Ovid, Cicero, Horace, Lucian, and Marcus Aurelius.

From its inception, therefore, the Catholic Tradition was catholic. It declined to repudiate the secular wisdom with a sectarian shrug: "Can anything good come out of a pagan Nazareth?" Every broken image and imperfect reflection of God caught by alien minds and preserved by pagan pens, the Catholic Tradition welcomed and esteemed. Its waters flowed from the rock which is Christ; but as the stream of Christian culture swelled into a river broad and swift and strong, there flowed into it tributaries surging from disparate and even hostile sources. When the Western Empire fell, when paganism died, when under the incursions of the barbarians it seemed that the finer achievements of the ancient civilization would vanish from the minds and ways of men, the Catholic spirit preserved the intellectual riches of the past. In a day of strife and rapine and shortsighted intentness on material

things, St. Benedict and his sons in hilltop monasteries guarded the sacred flame. The sonorous speech of the Romans remained a living tongue in the liturgy of the Church, in the language of her devotion and her legislation; and from a little island in the western sea, Scotia as it was called, later Ireland and Eire now, came missionaries and teachers, footloose and fervent, imparting the truths of the Faith and the rudiments of classical learning to the children of the barbarians in what became France and Germany, the Low Countries and Switzerland, in the Italian peninsula itself. Irishmen all were Sedulius at Liege, St. Virgilius at Salzburg, St. Columban at Bobbio, St. Fridolin on the Rhine, St. Fredian at Lucca, St. Donatus at Fiesole, John Scotus Erigena at the court of Charles the Bald. Wherever they went—and they went everywhere, those Celts, for does not Hamlet the Dane swear by St. Patrick?—they bore the good tidings of Christ; but they brought as well those priceless manuscripts which conserved the language and literature of a civilization declined and fallen. In the interests of religion arose the church and the monastery; in the interests of letters and education arose the library and the school.

The Catholic Tradition in Literature was not, however, merely a work of conservation and research. It was equally a creative force. Pious legends and not always pious bestiaries, tales in prose and verse, satires and parodies and drinking songs perpetrated by wandering scholars, cycles of romance celebrating the prowess of heroes and the troubled triumphs of lovers, dramas in France, in England, in Germany, in Spain, which literally born at the foot of the altar, bear causal relations to the plays of Calderon and Shakespeare and the "Tann-

hauser" of Wagner—these and other manifestations of an art inspired and supported by the Christian way of life came into fertile being and flourished with the diffusion of the Faith. They all prove, were we so ungracious as to require proof, that the religion of Christ was a stabilizing and energizing reality.

There was no need for any writing man to carry experiment to a wasteful and ridiculous excess or to write monstrously for the purpose of producing shock, surprise, and irritation. Mediaeval literature experimented sufficiently, but, unlike contemporary literature, it knew what it was about. Artists might and did quarrel, not always with artistic reserve, regarding methods and means, form and technique; but on ends and principles they agreed, for they possessed in common a social and intellectual background, they shared a basic philosophy of life and work. Some of them were contumacious and irreverent and guilty even of blasphemy; but, like their fellow sinners in graft and simony, they recognized the fact of their sinning. Some modern sinners are incapable of blasphemy; and that, as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, is the last sign of their reprobation.

The literature of the Catholic Middle Ages was more than conservative, more than creative; it was fertile. A significant development in current American scholarship is the demonstration made by such men as Willard Farnham of California and Howard Baker of Louisiana that the masterpieces of literature in England produced in the sixteenth and following centuries stem directly from tales and dramas in vogue in the Middle Ages. This has long been recognized in the case of Shakespeare; and in the case of Dante it has never been questioned. But

recent investigators have made it abundantly clear that those elements of ancient classical learning discoverable in comparatively modern works came there mediately through lesser, and lesser known, masterpieces composed in mediaeval times.

Of course it all flowered in Dante. He, the Central Man, as Ruskin called him, in his *Commedia* gloriously linked and welded old things and new. Philosophers like to say that Dante is Aquinas in verse. And so he is. But his concentrated *terza rima* holds more than philosophy. The science of his time and the history of preceding times, the wisdom of the ancients and the revelation of the Son of God, he fused and transfused—transfused through personal dedication to love and truth, to unflinching thought and a vision of undying beauty. His astonishing synthesis of human passion and aspiration, ever illuminated by the nearness of the divine, incomprehensible to most modern minds, was but slightly and superficially baffling to men in Dante's fourteenth century. And why? Simply because, children of the Tradition, they had achieved that synthesis for themselves. They had unity in their lives, pattern in their conception of life. Today, on the contrary, we have men who are intelligent, indeed, but not intellectual; order and unity—they know them not

Two centuries after Dante came an event which from the standpoint of the Great Tradition was a misfortune. I mean the Reformation. Horrible abuses existed in the Church, with cynical corruption in high places and scandalous indifference in low, and anybody who knows a thing about the actual state of affairs must sympathize with those men and women, intent on decency and

righteousness, who cried out against the perfidy and shame. As a matter of fact, from Apostolic times, people always have been so crying out, and their outcry is a salutary sign. But the Catholics who became the first Protestants, oftentimes men of good will, demoralized that order and destroyed that unity which until then had constituted the source and the strength of the Tradition. Enlightened non-Catholics perceive this in the perspective of four hundred years. Lecturing in 1916 on Christianity and War, Lord Hugh Cecil opined that "if the Reformation could have been guided by a man like Erasmus rather than by Luther and Calvin, and if the unity of Christianity could have been preserved consistently with its purification from many evils, the gains to Christians would have been enormous."* I doubt if Erasmus would or could have guided the movement of reform; but never mind. The disruption might have been, and should have been, avoided.

Since the Reformation many of us, Protestant and Catholic alike, can regretfully chant, "Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers." First in religion, then in life and in art, the old pattern disappeared. Faith degenerated into a thing to fight about, and literature into a thing to fight with. Readers developed an attitude of suspicion and antagonism, or else of uncritical partisanship, and I know not which is the more fatal to literary appreciation. And writers, oh, so many of them, have lost their bearings; aesthetically speaking, they have lost their souls. Scholarship itself has become an erudite jigsaw puzzle, everybody trying to fit the pieces together but nobody aware of the design; some even insisting that

*W. E. Campbell: *More's Utopia and Social Teaching*, p. 61.

there can't possibly be a design. So, find out "more and more about less and less." "Nothing matters; but we feel better by pretending that everything does." You can't build great literature on pretense.

The "if's" of history are fascinating. If the Reformation had really reformed something and not broken the unity of Christendom, we might now be enjoying the Catholic Epic of the Johns: John Calvin as papal secretary of state reorganizing the Curia, John Knox going in for slum clearance in Edinburgh and perhaps being civil to Mary Queen of Scots, John Huss minding his own business, and John Wesley founding another religious order—the Epworth Fathers—and with his blazing eloquence renewing the face of the earth. And in literature we should today have fewer of the sad young men, fewer too of the blinkered utilitarians and the dehydrated futilitarians, less barbarism, sentimentality, and factuality, and a brave array of writers with strong loyalties and deep convictions, and books conceived and brought forth in brotherhood. We grieve, all of us, at the rending of the seamless robe of Our Lord. In literature as in religion we of the modern world might well repeat the prayer of the Master to His Father and our Father: "That they may be one, as we also are."

SHAKESPEARE AND THE TRADITION

Address delivered on September 17, 1939

William Shakespeare is less myriad-minded than William Shakespeare's commentators. His dramas are varied in subject, in outlook, in color, and in mood; but their variety is dwarfed by the variety of the books written about them. Perhaps that is one mark of the great classic in every literature—the Bible, Horace, Dante, Montaigne, Pope, Goethe—you can quote from it to prove anything, and you can read anything into the mind behind it. Thus one learned gentleman has proved, to his own satisfaction at least, that Shakespeare was a Behaviorist prematurely born who did not believe in the freedom of the human will, and another learned gentleman has demonstrated that without recognition of the freedom of the will Shakespeare's plays are so much sound and fury, signifying nothing. Shakespeare has been made out a sceptic, and a mystic of sorts; a champion of democracy, and a scorner of the *mobile vulgus*; he has even been made out other than himself, for it is claimed that his plays were written by Francis Bacon or Anthony Bacon, by the Earl of Rutland or the Earl of Oxford, or, if not by William Shakespeare, then surely by some other man of the same name. I know one theorist who maintains that the dramas attributed to Shakespeare were written by a group of Jesuits in disguise; in which case I venture to suggest that the disguise is perfect.

Yet it is not in the least gratuitous or eccentric to see in Shakespeare a typical and conspicuous ex-

ponent of the Catholic Tradition in literature. His infinite variety illustrates catholicity with the small *c*, and many scholars feel justified in promoting that small *c* to the status of a capital. Though he lived in the Protestant dawn, he reflected the glow of the preceding Catholic day. His own times, stirring, momentous, and adventurous as they were, did not win his interest; he wrote no plays commemorating Queen Elizabeth and King James, the defeat of the Armada or the marchant adventurers sailing out from Plymouth Sound. He fixed his gaze rather on earlier epochs and alien lands—on prehistoric Britain and the England of Richard II and Henry V, on ancient Greece and Rome, on Denmark and France and Scotland, especially on Italy; justly if whimsically has it been said that a list of his plays sounds like an Italian railway time table with pervading echoes of Padua and Verona, Venice and Milan. He invented no plots, contenting himself with improving and vitalizing material that lay to hand. A lordly borrower, he touched nothing that he did not adorn; and what he took he took from the literature of the European, the Catholic Tradition.

Was Shakespeare himself a member of the Catholic communion? It is certain, as the researches of Edgar I. Fripp, the late John Semple Smart, and Clara Longworth de Chambrun have made clear, that on both sides of the family he came of Catholic stock. His father, John Shakespeare, was fined for not attending Protestant services, and on another occasion was summoned to appear before the Queen's Court at Westminster, charged with "disorderly conduct" and fined forty pounds—a penalty not commensurate with what we understand by dis-

orderly conduct. Four near relatives of Shakespeare on his mother's side were executed at Tyburn for their devotion to the Catholic Faith. His maternal uncle, Edward Arden, was put to death for "housing a seminary priest," Hugh Hall, the cleric who possibly officiated at the poet's secret marriage with Anne Hathaway. Shakespeare's grand-aunt Isabel, previous to the suppression of the monasteries, had been mother superior of a convent at Wroxhall. Sir Thomas Lucy, against whom Shakespeare held a strong animus, was noted in and around Stratford for vigorous zeal in enforcing the anti-Catholic laws. The master of the school where Shakespeare learned his "small Latin"—Ovid, Plautus, Juvenal, and Virgil—was a fugitive priest, one Simon Hunt who died in Rome in 1585. When Shakespeare went up to London—and not on account of a poaching episode, by the way, for in his time, there was no deer park at Sir Thomas Lucy's Charlecote—his friend and patron was the Catholic Earl of Southampton. Then, there is the well-known testimony of the Anglican Archdeacon Davies of Sapperton that Shakespeare "dyed a papist."

That he lived a "papist," however, is open to appreciable doubt. It is improbable that, in anything like the sense we attach to the locution, William Shakespeare was a practical Catholic. The times were out of joint. Priests were being hunted and executed. Catholic worship was proscribed. Besides, the life of a player in Elizabethan London was hardly calculated to encourage personal piety. It is reasonable to assume that, like so many men in our own day, Shakespeare, though he never formally renounced the religion of his fathers, did not, as we say, work at it very hard; he may have taken it

more seriously, though, during the retirement which preceded his death.

All this is tenuous inference and hazardous conjecture. But when we turn to Shakespeare's writings we stand on surer ground. He may or may not have lived the Catholic Faith, but he certainly knew it. In the narrow sense neither philosopher nor theologian, he wrote plays which manifest over and over again a grasp of the traditional way of thinking and of the dogmatic truths and moral practices of Catholicity. The Ghost in *Hamlet*, for instance, is an indubitably Catholic ghost, on furlough from Purgatory,

Doom'd for a certain time to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg'd away.

This visitant from the Church Suffering laments that his untimely taking off prevented him from making his peace with God, for he had been

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,

that is, without confession, the Holy Viaticum, and Extreme Unction. Indeed, the whole problem of the drama ceases to be so perplexing a problem when resolved in the light of a Catholic interpretation. Hamlet is just another of those characters, so frequent in the literature of Catholic Europe, caught, even as you and I, between the incitements of the world and the claims of religion. It is a situation ordinary in Catholic literature because ordinary in Catholic life.

Let us consider another case from the same play. Hamlet's uncle, Claudius the King, is no candidate for canonization. "That incestuous, that

adulterate beast" is a fratricide as well. But he is a Catholic, and more clear minded than many Catholics with greater pretension to righteousness. Though not in the state of sanctifying grace, he follows the urgings of a possible actual grace and bends his knees in prayer. Note his eminently orthodox meditation:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,—
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,—
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up;
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder,—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice;
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature; and we ourselves compell'd,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence. What then? what rests?
Try what repentance can; what can it not?
Yet what can it when one cannot repent?

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

The plays of Shakespeare are spangled with jewels of thought and fancy plucked from the heart of the Catholic Tradition. We have time to dwell upon but one of them, the sweet expression of her love given by the girl Juliet:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite.

To a superficial reader that is just the vaporings of

a smitten maiden sighing in the moonlight; but to one conversant with the literature of the Tradition it is the formulation of a profound and far-reaching tenet of the *philosophia perennis* stemming from the scale of absolute and relative values established by St. Thomas and elucidated so compellingly by Dante in the *Purgatorio*. The Catholic philosopher and the Catholic poet stress a psychological truth which we might put into modern terms like this:

There is an essential difference between material and spiritual values. In things material the element of quantity is basic. If I have a loaf of bread, which is a material object, and I give you half of it, I have only half a loaf left. If St. Martin of Tours cuts his cloak in half and gives one part of it to the beggar, St. Martin has only half a cloak left. The law of material being is that you can't give and keep simultaneously, that, as the venerable proverb puts it, you can't have your cake and eat it. But in the case of spiritual values, of non-material things, quantity is not an essential factor. Here you *can* have your cake and eat it. The man who has visited Lugano, for instance, can tell us all he knows about Lugano—from the thrill of climbing up Monte San Salvatore to the delight of viewing Bernardino Luini's frescoes in the Angeli chapel—and we share in his knowledge and joy, both spiritual things, to the extent of our capacity, and he still has his knowledge and joy as much or even more than ever. I believe that, germinally at least, this noble distinction was in the mind of St. John Chrysostom when he drew his famous comparison between the sculptor who carves marble and the teacher who molds minds. The marble is a material thing; character building is a non-material thing. So we see how

wise for a little girl Shakespeare's Juliet really was. Perhaps she imbibed that wisdom from her confessor, Friar Laurence.

Friar Laurence, incidentally, is one of the several wholesome and sensible and unobtrusively devout monks and ecclesiastics whom we meet in Shakespeare's plays. We look in vain for a hint of caricature or bigotry. When, as in the case of Cardinal Wolsey, Shakespeare has occasion to present ecclesiastics less admirable, he invariably draws the important Catholic distinction between the man and the office. We find many a slap and sneer at the long-faced sectaries of the new religion—"Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"—and at the clergymen of the dissenters—"Get you to church and have a good priest that can tell you what marriage is; this fellow will but join you together as they join wainscot"—but for Catholic priests and monks Shakespeare reveals nothing but reverence and respect. He even went so far as to suppress offensive material. His *King John* is based upon an earlier work by an unknown writer, *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*, filled with anti-Catholic bigotry and spleen. In it Falconbridge, visiting a nunnery, finds a mess of grave disorders and juicy scandals; none of this appears in Shakespeare's version. One line in Shakespeare's *King John*,

' "The king, I fear, is poisoned by a monk,"

is all that remains of a scene in the older play wherein King John falls victim to the monastic poisoners of Swinstead Abbey; there is no "I fear" about the older play; in it the wicked monks deliberately do the king to death because he condemned the Pope and never loved a friar. Certainly Shakespeare had

no anti-Catholic prejudice: but he gives considerable evidence of a pro-Catholic bias.

Does anyone object that, all the same, Shakespeare wrote several vulgar, even indecent lines, that he sups full with horrors and bloodshed, that he habitually dwells upon the vision of sin? That, we answer, is entirely beside the point. Have we forgotten what Newman said, that you can't expect to find a sinless literature in a sinful world? Vulgarity and indecency—or what some in our day call such—you can find in the Bible and in Dante, and bloodshed and sinfulness as well. Shakespeare is not unCatholic because he portrays sin; but he is Catholic inasmuch as he never condones or palliates the sinning. Black of heart his villains may be, but, like Claudius, they are clear of mind. They know and admit that they are villains. Richard III, Iago in *Othello*, and Edmund in *King Lear* are unquestionably what the French call bad subjects; but at least they never seek to excuse themselves by saying they couldn't help it, or that they were merely striving after self-expression, or that their unholy deeds were just a manifestation of their warm oriental natures.

Shakespeare was the last strong and certain voice of the Catholic Tradition. Through his plays our ancestors speak to us in lines like these:

Many a time hath banish'd Norfolk fought
For Jesu Christ in glorious Christian field,
Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross
Against black pagans, Turks and Saracens:
And toil'd with works of war, retir'd himself
To Italy; and there, at Venice, gave
His body to that pleasant country's earth,
And his pure soul unto his captain Christ,
Under whose colors he had fought so long.

WE AND THE TRADITION

Address delivered on September 24, 1939

A spiritual retreat in Catholic usage sagaciously utilizes several psychological principles and pedagogical devices. The retreatants put first things first in the relation of the soul to God; they dwell upon the purpose of human life, the nature of human destiny; renewing their knowledge of the life and personality of Our Lord, they see afresh in Him the supreme exemplar of the Christian virtues. But they do not stop there. As every good meditation has its "act of application," every effective retreat has its definite answers, personal and practical, to the apposite question: "What am I going to do about it?" In the light of what they have learned and felt and absorbed, in consonance with the deepened and intensified convictions now theirs, the retreatants make resolutions, "particular, present, and efficacious", bearing on their daily lives, and strive to foresee means of making those resolutions bear fruit in action.

In an analagous way you and I might consider the Catholic Tradition in literature in its bearing on the here and the now. Little good will our reflections on the Tradition do us if, looking back on the splendors of Greece and Rome and the artistic and literary achievements of the Ages of Faith, we merely swell up with unwarranted complacence and lull ourselves with the vague and impersonal assurance that there were giants in those days. Not every one that says "Tradition, Tradition", shall enter into his intellectual and cultural heritage. We must answer the question, "What am I going to do about it?"

To begin with, it is imperative that we *know* the Tradition. Literature is very largely a derivation of books from books. From time beyond time great writers have been great readers; they draw much of their insight, their artistry, and their power from the contemplation of the master works of other and earlier writers. Today the past is not too much with us; it is with us not nearly enough. The classics—the finest books, no matter in what language written or in what century produced—constitute the irreplaceable fundament of literary education. Reluctantly, for the thing is superb, I refrain from quoting Sainte-Beuve's essay, *What Is a Classic?* More prosaically let me intimate that the great books of our traditional inheritance—all the way from the Homeric poems to *The Hound of Heaven*—in varying degrees possess marks by which they may be recognized. They are vital, even though outmoded or "dated" in parts; they tell essential truth about man and men. They are alertly responsive to human needs in all times and circumstances; Plato gives us more than John Dewey—or even Dale Carnegie. They are distinguished for beauty of style and perfection of structure; the great writer, as Dante said of Virgil, makes the language show what it can do, and he vaunts not that indifference to form and that emotional chaos and mental slovenliness which in our day pass for indications of genius. They are mellowed by time, like good wine and houses gracious to dwell in, enriched by human associations. In their appeal they are both popular and esoteric; the man in the street—and that means you and me—can read them with enjoyment, and yet the deep-browed scholar cannot exhaust their wealth. They are books which urbane, disciplined, and discerning

minds have accepted as touchstones of taste, ignorance of which or indifference to which brands us parvenus and barbarians. They are repositories of the European Tradition in art and in life. They are the books, in short, which confer upon us the freedom of the kingdom of the mind.

I recall a luminous passage in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound** telling of the inspired flight of the beneficent spirits:

..... those who saw
 Say from the breathing earth behind
 There steams a plume-uplifting wind
 Which drives them on their path, while they
 Believe their own swift wings and feet
 The sweet desires within obey;
 And so they float upon their way.

A preacher or retreat director might take Shelley's fruitful image as a symbol of human efforts and the grace of God. Neither preacher nor spiritual guide, I content myself with indicating that the makers of great literature in all our modern tongues, strong of feet though they be and mighty of wing, are borne along on the "plume-uplifting wind" that blows through all the reaches of our tradition-shaped civilization. It is more than a mere conjecture that the reason why so many present day writers are shallow and desiccated and jejune is because they have been deprived, or have deprived themselves, of participation in their heritage, because they have fallen from the stratospheric path where blows the cleansing, energizing wind whereof Shelley so rhapsodically sings. They have not life, nor have it more abundantly. Eloquent and pathetic is the plaint of a former Harvard professor, himself with some ex-

*Act II, scene ii.

ceptions a child of the Tradition, George Santayana, who once wrote as follows to William James:

Not that I care to moan over the gods of Greece, turned into the law of gravity, or over the stained glass of cathedrals, broken to let in the sunlight and the air. It is not the past that seems to me affecting, entrancing, or pitiful to lose. It is the ideal. It is that vision of perfection that we just catch, or for a moment embody in some work of art, or in some idealized reality; it is the concomitant inspiration of life, always various, always beautiful, hardly ever expressible in its fulness . . . And much of the irritation which I may betray, and which, I assure you, is much greater than I let it seem, comes of affection. It comes of exasperation at seeing the only things that are beautiful or worth having treated as if they were of no account.*

None the less, our acceptance of our heritage, our adherence and dedication to the Tradition, should not be indiscriminate and blind. Old Father Time, though a comprehensive and implacable winnower, has not as yet completely succeeded in separating the chaff from the wheat. Some elements of the Tradition were unfortunate from the beginning and are not less unfortunate now, and we need to guard against accepting them uncritically. The yield of the years is not a consignment static, formalized, and formulated for all time.

We are always in danger (writes T. S. Eliot) in clinging to an old tradition, or attempting to re-establish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of aiming to stimulate the life which produced that condition in its time.**

So we need to make our declaration of independence. Unwise it were to walk in dead men's shoes. We need to repudiate what is not salutary, what is

*Perry's *Life and Thought of William James*, vol. ii, p. 401.

**"Tradition and Orthodoxy," *The American Review*, March, 1934.

not sound. One persistent element in the Great Tradition is like the serpent in Eden or in Dante's Valley of the Princes; through several centuries it has blighted our heritage. Side by side with frank delight in the sunset and the dawn, in the natural world of God's creation, in glorification of love's young dream and the sacredness of childhood, has descended to us an attitude of suspicion, of evil intimation, aroused by the presence in our earthly life of what the philosophers used to call natural good—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, things gratifying to eye and ear, to taste and touch. Because our bodies and our material environment are potentially occasions of sin, some earnest but misguided souls have condemned natural goods as in essence evil and pernicious. Good people, alas, sometimes have dirty minds. That serpent bears several names: Jansenism is one, Puritanism is another. But historically the name of the beast is Manichaeism. As a formal heresy it has been driven out with bell, book, and candle; but the trail of that serpent stains much popular thought, much moral teaching, much poetry and prose in the Catholic Tradition. We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it. However vigourously denounced, that snake will from our Eden ne'er depart until we who write and read and study and teach adopt the sacramental conception of animate and inanimate nature. Miss Vida Scudder has the last word: "Natural good is a snare—unless it is a Sacrament".*

There was no Manichee snake in the Vale of Poverty where St. Francis of Assisi walked and sang and prayed. From the olive groves of San Damiano

*The Privilege of Age, p. 171.

arose no pessimistic wail over "vile bodies" and "poor fallen nature"; rather, on the heights of La Verna, was humanity glorified. The Canticle of the Sun exorcized the evil spirit. To Francis and to his companions—those Little Brothers so big in the perspective of the years—the honest sights and smells and sounds of "our Sister, Mother Earth" were not creatures of the evil principle as the Manichaeans taught. To him and to his, "Brother Sun" and "Sister Wind" and "Brother Fire" reflected the goodness and the glory of a Loving God, and men and women made in the likeness of that God were not outcast and accurst. "The tumult of the world disconsolate" which even in this year of 1939 jars our ears and saddens our souls may yet perchance be stilled were men and nations to share the sacramental fervor of the Poverello:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me plant love.
 Where there is injury, forgiveness.
 Where there is doubt, faith.
 Where there is discouragement, hope.
 Where there is darkness, light.
 Where there is desolation, joy.

* * *

It is perhaps true to say (says a modern son of St. Francis) that the peculiar mark of Franciscan mysticism lies in the apprehension of the beauty of created life in its sacramental revelation of the Divine Life. I use the term "sacramental revelation" because, in the eyes of St. Francis, nature—God's visible creation—is not only a manifestation of the Divine Life, but a communication of the Divine Life to the soul of man Creation was to Francis a book or picture in which God not only reveals Himself but communes with His creatures, and gives of Himself to His creatures.*

All the sad young men—and the old ones too—need to meditate on that, and all the carping critics, and all the vindictive disturbers of our peace; and

*Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., *Ecclesiastical Review*, vol. 87, no. 3.

all the biting and scratching little animals in church and state who seek to merit heaven by making earth a hell—for other people. Songs and stories and plays written in harmony with the magnanimous and supernaturalized spirit of our Tradition would achieve more in the interests of domestic prosperity and civic probity and international accord than all the trade agreements, secret treaties, and armament races ever devised and so soon found inadequate by our shortsighted politicians and publicists seducing the children of God unto hatred and recrimination, suicidal war and unlovely death. Well did the eighteenth century poet Cowper warn us:

Patriots are grown too shrewd to be sincere,
And we too wise to trust them.

We do well when we urge upon our fellows—and, I hope, upon ourselves—the duty of brotherly love, the seemliness of friendly feeling at home and abroad; we do better when we produce and encourage a literature conceived in the spirit of St. Francis—the essential spirit of the Catholic Tradition which was and is the spirit of Christ the Living God.

Perhaps I shall be pardoned for closing on an admittedly provincial note. I am speaking today from a city which bears the revered name of the Little Poor Man of Assisi, a city wherein, despite its comparative youth, some of the richest and best things in our spiritual heritage are preserved. On a little island within our not inhospitable Golden Gate—an island secured not through conquest and aggression but by reason of the thought and enthusiasm and goodly labors of many men—a world exposition unfolds its beauty and makes graphic and inspiring the achievements of our civilization in art, in music, in literature, in science abstract and ap-

plied, in the crafts which contribute to commerce and transportation and the arts of peaceful and productive living. Dominating that island is the Tower of the Sun, a symbol, as I choose to see it, of the Great Tradition, the Christian Tradition, the far-reaching and inherited tradition of our life and art and education. Beneath that Tower of the Sun machinery whirs and tourists prattle, children eat popcorn and attendants push wheel chairs, the fruits of the earth lie in savory array and the masterpieces of world artists gladden the eye and refresh the heart. Thanks to the Tower of the Sun all the exposition takes on unity, order and significance. So does the Great Tradition uplift itself above the ways and works and willfulness of men. In the light of that spiritual beacon history takes on meaning, and industry dignity, and the dreams of lofty and gracious minds their embodiment and realization. And upon its pediment the words of the British Greek Scholar, Gilbert Murry, might be felicitously inscribed:

This is the true message of our Hellenic and European tradition. Serve humanity, glorify God; go forth not so much to convert as to contribute. Live in the service of something higher and more enduring, so that when the tragic transience of life at last breaks in upon you you can feel that the thing for which you have lived does not die.*

*In the *Hibbert Journal*. Quoted in John o'London's *Weekly*, September 12, 1931.

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