The Catholic Literary Revival

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Had a capable and intelligent individual cast a critical gaze upon the social, political and religious institutions existing in the early nineteenth century, especially in Europe, he would have seen that radical changes must be wrought if society and culture were to continue to progress.

The two centuries of intellectualism then still rampant had produced such an intolerable state of society that an inevitable return to a social order and art, which an integral Christianity alone could produce, was soon to be effected. The previous centuries had brought the climax to generations of furious philosophical speculations by finally destroying the intellect, erasing the metaphysical order, and admitting in a philosopher, Hume, that the intellect was an inept instrument for the attaining of spiritual and religious truth. The non-Catholic world had lost its structure of truth through too great a trust in reason, and attempted to render valid what remained of the edifice by rejecting reason and by positively affirming a structure based for the most part upon pure emotion. During the four preceding centuries Europe had worshipped the natural man, but the civilisation and culture he brought about had become decadent. Religion and art had been bartered for bourgeois prosperity and a conventional morality. Then, too, Liberalism the name given to all those efforts to whittle down the revealed truths of Christianity until pure naturalism remained, had produced its devastating effect on society. However reacting forces were soon to be aroused.

By the middle of the nineteenth century a reaction set in against the intellectualism that hitherto had been so predominant. There was a rebirth of religious feeling and a nostalgia for the Middle Ages which became definitely associated one with the other, especially in literature: for the common cause of both was the disgust which began to manifest itself over the excessive "rationalization" of art and life effected by the previous generations; the Middle Ages, its art and faith, took on a new significance and fascination. Efforts were being made to restore religion and to revive the arts, and in attempting this the

"bare and swept temple of reason" was to be deserted while amid the universal ruin of reason and metaphysics the case was to rest on the "inner light," feeling, intuition. A feeling of almost unbearable homesickness filled the souls of the scholars of that age when they contrasted the religion and life of the Middle Ages and of the Church with that of the nineteenth century, particularly with that of England. Man saw that he must now choose between the super-natural order of the Church and the mechanical cultural order that faced the natural man at the conclusion of his journey from the Renaissance. Man must again be Catholic and must feel the influence of Catholic doctrine and literature; literature was to effect the flight to the Middle Ages.

Cardinal Newman is regarded as the founder of the literary revival which began in England about the year eighteen forty-five. He was born into an age that was feeling the profound perturbations of renovating forces which seemed to promise much, not only for the renewal of the arts but also for the revival of religion. He saw that if anything effective was to be done about reviving religion and culture, human nature must be elevated to a higher level than the natural; it must have some aid, for without that influence it would tend to simple unbelief, doubt, negation, and intellectual suicide. It was for him to protest in the name of outraged art and discounted religion against a strongly established self-satisfied, and rationalistic Philistinism. He gave the literary world a direct insight into the mind of the Church, that mind which recognizes the superiority of intelligence without destroying the claims of the soul and bodily affections. Newman was to be an ideal leader and guiding star, for he gave purpose and objective to the romantic, easily agitated "elan" without distorting it beyond all proportion by an insipid and materialistic rationalism.

But what of the great poets of this, the first, phase of the revival? In Aubrey de Vere there existed a man who portrayed the struggle between the cold materialism of Bentham and art, which, together with religion, was being crushed and mitigated by base skepticism. While arduously engaged in writing poetry he showed a lively interest in problems, philosophical and religious, which concerned the future of the arts and of national morality. De Vere was greatly influenced by other poets and writers

of his time and was in agreement with them that religion must be restored. Indeed, this was the dominant note that ran through his poems.

Another poet, Coventry Patmore, lent his mighty pen in the reaction to the Philistinism of the times and to the search for a naive freshness of reality. His writings pour forth the one great reality of life, the love of God, to which all other loves are tributary. He stormed because this love had gone from England, but with a subtle art he attempted to interpret this love to England that it might again return. Patmore has not only pointed out the way for the regeneration of poetry, but has taken us an encouraging distance along the road of achievement; he has dug once more "the wells which the Phillistines have filled" that we might sip the waters that so strengthened the great writers of the past.

What ! Another great poet in this phase ? Yes, undoubtedly such, for Gerard Manley Hopkins strove for the return of art and scholarship to the religion of the nineteenth century. During the previous centuries both art and scholarship had been secularized beyond redemption, and only through such a redemption that would be effected by a complete consecration to the principle from which European art and scholarship had originally sprung, could England again claim these ideals. That saving principle was sanctity—the sanctity of men such as Augustine, Jerome, Bonaventure, Aquinas and those who laid the basis of Christian culture.

An arresting religious strain ran through the writings of these poets. The revival of Catholic art in the nineteenth century was everywhere accompanied by a revival of devotion to the Mother of God. De Vere's plans for the renewal of the arts was Mary, whom his friend Wordsworth had called, "our tainted nature's solitary boast"; Patmore and Hopkins regarded the Incarnation especially as viewed with respect to Mary, to be the great and supremely fertile font of poetry. There is no artist in the revival who has not left us, in prose or verse, some record of literary inspiration due to the Mother of God.

In passing from the first to the middle phase, which began about eighteen hundred and ninety, a change of vista greets us. The end of the century marked the end of a culture and at the same time ushered in a new order. The concluding years of the nineteenth century were

years of awakened interest in literature and the arts. New and revolutionizing ideas were filtering into England from France. These were the years when Wilde, Beardsley, and Dawson proved false all the new theories with simple and devastating logic. They proved these would not work, and they astutely convinced their readers of the fact, lest increasing numbers be led to perdition and to disbelief in eternal truths.

This phase was of invaluable assistance to the Catholic Literary Revival. Under the direction of Alice Meynell it was that the Revival took on the form of a movement. She saw every generation of the Revival from Newman to Chesterton and beyond. She not only saw them, but also succeeded in leaving her impressions upon the chief figures. During the nineties she made the revival a movement and preserved its continuity by uniting the writers of the first and of her own generation. In her works she supported, with a burning zeal, the revival of the downtrodden peasantry, the abolition of the wrongs of the poor, and the spread of art and literature. She was the great steadying and preserving force for the middle phase of the Revival.

Several paragraphs would be all insufficient to demonstrate the important roles played by other writers during this period. Suffice it to say that the leading authors, such as Lionel Johnson, Katherine Bradley, Edith Cooper, and Francis Thompson had a common view in writing. All cried for radical social reform, succeeded in exposing and alleviating the distress of the poor, strengthened the opposition to materialism, and encouraged the prevailing artistic cults strongly in favor with the Middle Ages. Theirs was none but a praiseworthy achievement in the literature of the Revival.

From England we go to follow the course of the Revival in Ireland. The general attitude of the times was distinctly favorable to the contribution the Celtic people had to offer. Ireland had been less touched by the disease of materialism, less given over to nineteenth century culture, and possessed spiritual things in abundance. The Irish people would suffer, and in fact had suffered, the loss of culture, education, and freedom—almost everything rather than abandon their religion. Is it any wonder, then, that many Anglo-Saxons, who had become disgusted with the spiritual flabbiness of nineteenth century material-

ism, looked with hope to Ireland? Ireland was producing artists comparable to any in Europe; she produced saints and scholars who gave her neighbors that which became the foundation of their future cultural greatness.

Among other poets and writers of Ireland, Thomas MacDonagh and Patric Pearce were foremost. These two, together with Clarke, made their cause that of God, Right, and Freedom. All three of these men died for the cause of Freedom won for Ireland when that country became a republic in nineteen sixteen. They revolted against the separation of literature from morality, from religion, from patriotism—in a word, from life. The Irish rejected the culture of the dominant European nations and demanded freedom and a culture of their own choosing; they rejected that culture not because it was English or German, but because it was mechanical and soulless, because it was not to them the great European tradition. The cause of writers, then, was none other than what the Irish people held uppermost in their hearts.

In America, until the last two decades of the nineteenth century the Catholic Literary Revival had no very important history to record. American Catholicism produced a sufficiently large and talented body of writers who, had some force brought them together, might have laid the foundation of what in the course of time would have developed into a formidable American literary movement. Under such authors as Orestes Brownson, Isaac Hecker, Louise Guiney and James Harland a rebellion was headed, however feebly, against the banal state of the arts and of life. But the Church in America had no time to devote itself to literature; it had to see to the spiritual and temporal needs of the immigrants who were flowing into the country. Then, too, America was from three to four decades behind Europe; the country was still in the Victorian period and was not ready for the new evangel. However, in spite of these conditions, Joyce Kilmer, who had read Patmore, Lionel Johnson, Francis Thompson, and G. K. Chesterton, succeeded in doing more for the Catholic Revival in America than any other writer, and almost succeeded in making it a movement.

As for the Catholic literature, of the contemporary phase of the Revival, which began about nineteen fourteen, this literature is one engaged in a battle, the magnitude and superlative value of which is never lost sight of by

any of its exponents. Chesterton, Baring, and Belloc are united in the battle of ideas, of culture against culture, of civilisation against barbarism. It is Chesterton and Belloc who have determined the course Catholic literature has followed in the twentieth century. They have been the leaders. They have brought it about that the greater part of this literature should be aggressive, polemical, engaged in defending what is good in our culture, rather than in the exploration and enjoyment of this remnant of good. Then, too, it is these men who have determined that the novel should be a demonstration and proof of principle to be applied and followed, that history, satire, and the argumentative treatise should assume a greater significance than poetry and the essay. Finally, these men have set up as the ideal writer of modern Catholic literature one who writes as abundantly as the early Fathers of the Church, for, as in the case of the early Fathers, their numbers are few in comparison with the united cries of the enemy; so these modern writers must present a strong battle-front with a small but very efficient force. This ideal they have achieved, for each has in the vicinity of ninety volumes to his credit.

Thus we see that within the last century there has occurred a Catholic awakening in science, art, religion, and letters. We see too that the interest displayed in Catholic literature has increased from decade to decade and is unquestionably greater today than in any other period during the past few centuries. Today the renewed Catholic movement is marching in an onward sweep over the whole world. Men are reaching out once more for the neglected and almost forgotten pieces of their former Catholic heritage. By the brilliant Catholic literature of the authors of the Revival, old familiar Catholic thoughts are brought to echo in the minds of men.

Inevitably such a movement was to meet with opposition. Due to the Revival the counter-revolutionary forces of chaos, materialistic superstition, and Communism have become aroused and are putting forth their stoutest opposition in an attempt to ban the Catholic religion from the face of the earth. Hence all the more reason for supporting with our combined powers the Catholic Revival, for we have here the one true revolution that alone can reach deep enough to renew mankind, and so to reshape more closely after the divine plan our entire social order.