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Thomistic Wit and the Medieval English Hymn

Michael H. Means

It is only fitting that we celebrate the 700th anniversary of St. Thomas Aquinas not only with scholarship and argumentation, but also with music and song and poem. Although he wrote only a few hymns, St. Thomas is one of the greatest and most profound of the Latin hymnodists.¹ To pay homage to that aspect of his life's work, I wish here to single out a distinguishing characteristic of his religious verse and then look for similar characteristics in a rather different body of poetry, the religious lyrics of medieval England.

Adoro te devote, latens Deitas
Quae sub his figuris vere latitas:

I adore Thee devoutly, hidden Divinity
Who under these appearances are
truly hidden

Tibi se cor meum totum subicit
Quia te contemplans totum deficit.²

To Thee I totally subject my heart
Because it is totally inadequate in
contemplating Thee.

The opening words of his majestic eucharistic hymn remind us that St. Thomas Aquinas was at home with the rhythmic, imagistic and allogical qualities of poetic form as well as with the rigid demands of scholastic disputation. In such hymns as the *Lauda Sion* and *Pange Lingua*, and preeminently in the *Adoro Te Devote*, St. Thomas uses the possibilities of language for penetrating behind surface reality in order to discover unexpected but real relationships between things.

The poem continues:

Visus, tactus, gustus in te fallitur,

Sight, touch, taste in Thee are made
inadequate

Sed auditu solo tuto creditur:
Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius:
Nil hoc verbo veritatis verius.

But hearing alone is safely believed
I believe whatever the Son of God said:
There is nothing truer than the word
of truth.

In cruce latebat sola Deitas,

On the cross was hidden only the
Divinity

At hic latet simul et humanitas:

But here is also hidden even the
humanity

Ambo tamen credens atque confitens,
Peto quod petivit latro paenitens.

Yet believing and confessing both
I pray what the repenting thief prayed.

Plagas, sicut Thomas, non intueor

Like Thomas, I do not look into
Your wounds

Deum tamen meum te confiteor:
Fac me tibi semper magis credere,
In te spem habere, te diligere.

Nevertheless I confess Thee my God
Make me always believe in Thee more
Have hope in Thee, love Thee.

Several kinds of word-play are employed here. In the first stanza, for example, the reversed repetition of "*latens Deitas*" and "*vere Latitas*" reinforces not only the hiddenness of God in the eucharist, but also His true (*vere*) divinity (*Deitas*). This parallel is even more striking when we learn that "*latens Deitas*" was a later corruption of the text and that what St. Thomas almost certainly wrote was "*latens veritas*."³ Similarly, the second stanza states that hearing alone is adequate for perceiving the Real Presence in the eucharist (a shocking notion if taken literally) because the Truth (*veritas*) is, in St. John's gospel, the Word (*verbum*), just as the eucharist becomes Christ through the words of the priest. The similarity in sound thus enables the poet to explore manifold aspects of the sacramental nature of the eucharist through a punning relationship between words in which even the weak adjective *verius* becomes charged with meaning.

Elsewhere, the syntactic relationships in Latin rhyme words enable St. Thomas to attain profound effects. Thus, the paradoxical fact that the poet totally subjects his heart because (*quia*) it is totally inadequate is reinforced by the multisyllabic rhyming of *totum subjicit* and *totum deficit*. In the fourth stanza, the carefully placed echoing of *credere*, *spem habere*, and *diligere* builds a doctrinally correct hierarchy of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Nearly every pair of rhyme words in the entire hymn, in fact, sets up either a direct or antithetic relationship between ideas.

All of these techniques—puns, antitheses, verbal echoes, expected and unexpected sound patterns—contribute to an effect of shock and delighted surprise in the discovery of new ways of approaching the mystery of the eucharist. The *Adoro Te Devote* thus belongs to the tradition of the poetry of wit, as Fr. Ong calls it. The poetry of wit is a tradition that in English literature is associated with the seventeenth-century school of John Donne. In the Middle Ages, however, England produced comparatively little lyric poetry of this type, although there is an occasional "witty" poem like this one from the early fifteenth century:

A God and yet a man?
A mayde and yet a mother?
Witt wonders what witt Can
Conceave this or the other.

witt = understanding

A God, and Can he die?
A dead man, can he live?
What witt can well replie?
What reason reason give?

God, truth itselfe, doth teach it;	
Mans witt senckis too farr vnder	senkis-sinks
By reasons power to reach it.	
Beleeve and leave to wonder! ⁴	

A survey of the major collections of Middle English lyrics, however, shows comparatively few such poems. Scores of hymns to the Savior and the Virgin seek to evoke pious emotions in the readers and hearers. This tradition comes from Cistercian monks and Franciscan friars, from the late medieval mystics and that movement sometimes called *moderna devotio*. The result is a large collection of poems characterized by simple affective piety, a piety which could at its best produce moving, elevating verse.

When confronting the mysteries of faith or the great paradoxes of Christianity, however, English poets could frequently combine the best of both traditions. One such poem is a meditation on Christ's passion in which the poet asks the startling question of whether the crucifixion was love or wrath:

Crist makith to man a fair present,
 His bloody body with loue brent;
 That blisful body his lyf hath lent,
 For loue of man that synne hath blent.
 O Loue, loue, what hast thou ment?
 Me thinketh that loue to wrathe
 is went.

Christ makes to man a fair present
 His bloody body with love burnt
 That blisful body his life has lent
 For love of man whom sin has blinded.
 O Love, love, what have you intended
 I think that love has gone to wrath.

Thi loueliche hondis loue hath to-rent,
 And thi lithe arme wel streit itent;
 Thi brest is baar, thi bodi is bent
 for wrong hath wonne & riȝt is schent.

Thy lovely hands love has torn
 to pieces
 And thy supple arms are stretched
 very straight
 Thy breast is bare, thy body is bent
 For wrong has won and right
 is destroyed.

Thi mylde boones loue hath to-drawe,
 Thy naylis thi feet han al to-gnawe;
 The lord of loue loue hath now slawe—
 Whane loue is strong it hath no lawe.

Thy mild bones love has drawn apart
 The nails have gnawed thy feet
 to pieces
 Love has now slain the lord of love—
 When love is strong it has no law.

His herte is rent,/his body is bent
 vpon the roode tre;
 Wrong is went,/the deuel is schent,
 christ, thurȝ the myȝt of thee.

His heart is torn,/his body is bent
 upon the tree of the cross;
 Wrong has gone,/the devil is
 destroyed,
 Christ, through the might of thee.

For thee that herte is leyd to wedde;
 swych was the loue that herte vs kedde,
 That herte barst, that herte bledde—
 That herte blood oure soulis fedde.⁵

For thee that heart is given in pledge
 Such was the love that heart showed us
 That heart burst, that heart bled—
 That heart's blood fed our souls.

Sometimes the question is not a simple one of what sort of religious poem one finds, but even whether a given lyric is religious or secular. When religious poetry sometimes uses the language of passionate love and secular poetry uses the vocabulary of mystical contemplation, uncertainty arises. Consider the case of a popular fourteenth-century lyric that always used to be anthologized as a secular lyric:

Maiden in the mor lay—
 in the mor lay—
 seuenyist fulle, seuenist fulle.
 Maiden in the mor lay—
 In the mor lay—
 seuenistes fulle and a day.

Maiden in the moor lay

 Seven nights full, seven nights full

Welle was hire mete.
 wat was hire mete?
 The primerole ant the—
 the primerole ant the—

Seven nights full and a day.

 Her food was good.
 What was her food?
 The primrose and the—

Welle was hire mete.
 Wat was hire mete?
 the primerole ant the violet.

The primrose and the violet.

Welle was hire dryng.
 wat was hire dryng?
 the chelde water of the—
 the chelde water of the—

Her drink was good.
 What was her drink?
 The chill waters of the—

Welle was hire dryng.
 Wat was hire dryng?
 the chelde water of the
 welle-spring.

The chill waters of the well-spring.

Welle was hire bour.
 wat was hire bour?
 the rede rose an te—
 the rede rose an te—

Her bower was good.
 What was her bower?
 The red rose and the—

Welle was hire bour.
 Wat was hire bour?
 the rede rose an te lilie flour.⁶

The red rose and the lily flower.

Obviously the meaning of this charming little poem depends first of all on who or what the moor maiden was. Until 25 years ago, there was no real question: she

was something out of folklore, a fairy, a sprite, or at least one of those privileged innocents of the lyric impulse—a sort of fourteenth-century ancestor of Wordsworth's Lucy.⁷ Then, in a celebrated paper read to the English Institute in 1950, Professor D. W. Robertson, Jr. broke the question wide open by asking the impolite question of why the maiden is lying in the moor in the first place. His answer is based on medieval interpretations of biblical symbolism. In the first stanza, for example, the maiden lay for seven nights because 7 is the number for the world and “night” refers to the time before Christ; the stanza ends triumphantly, though, because the day-light of God has come, raising the number to 8, which is the number of Christ. Similarly, the primrose symbolizes earthly beauty but the violet is a scriptural sign of humility. The moor maiden, in Professor Robertson's interpretation—and by now this can be no surprise—is the Virgin Mary.⁸ This is precisely the kind of problem to arouse jealous, protective instincts in medievalists—we all want to keep the moor-maiden pure—and so the controversy has ranged fiercely ever since. The most recent salvo is in a recent issue of *Speculum* where Siegfried Wenzel reports the discovery of a reference to the poem in a mid-fourteenth century sermon—a reference which seems to return the maiden to the world of fairy and sprite.⁹ Perhaps we won't have to throw out the old anthologies after all.

But if biblical imagery can sometimes be applied too ingeniously, there are other cases in which the imagery is clear, expansive, and powerful. My favorite example is an early thirteenth-century quatrain and, I think, a near-perfect poem:

Nou goth sonne vnder wod,—
me reweth, marie, thi faire Rode.
Nou goth sonne vnder tree,—
me reweth, marie, thi sone and the.⁷⁰

Now goes the sun under wood,—
I pity, Mary, thy fair face.
Now goes the sun under tree,—
I pity, Mary, thy son and thee.

This apparently simple evocation of the suffering of the Virgin while witnessing the crucifixion of her Son actually uses a rich variety of poetic techniques to enhance its meaning. First of all, *nou* and the use of present tense throughout moves the crucifixion out of history and into the eternal present—any sunset thus evokes the death of Christ. More common are the puns on *sonne* = “sun” and *sone* = “Son” of God, and *tre* as “tree-of-the-cross.” Finally, and most startling of all, is the use of *rode* for “face,” because *rode* is a near-perfect homonym for *roode* = “cross,” thus placing, through the clever pun, the image of the cross on the suffering face of Mary. Without in any way diminishing its affective force, then, this poem uses techniques of wit and indirection to deepen its instructional and emotional consent.

Any survey—however brief—of medieval English religious lyrics has to end with everybody's favorite, “I Sing of a Maiden,”

I syng of a myden that is makeles,
kyng of alle kynges to here sone che ches.

He cam also styлле ther his moder was
as dew in aprylle, that fallyt on the gras.

he cam also styлле to his moderes bower
as dew in aprille, that fallyt on the flour.

he cam also styлле ther his moder lay
as dew in aprille, that fallyt on the spray.

moder & mayden was neuer non but che—
wel may swych a lady godes moder be.¹¹

* * *

I sing of a maiden who is matchless
King of all kings for her son she chose.

He came as still where his mother was
As dew in April that falls on the grass.

He came as still to his mother's bower
As dew in April that falls on the flower.

He came as still where his mother lay
As dew in April that falls on the spray

Mother and maiden there was never none but she
Well may such a lady God's mother be.

In this celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation, the traditional roles of the angel and the Holy Spirit are omitted in order to present it as purely between Mother and Son. Thus, Mary's *fiat* becomes the statement that she chose the King of Kings for her son. She is, in addition, *makeles*, that is, "matchless" and/or "mateless" (a reference to her virginity) and perhaps with a punning glance at *maskeles* = "spotless." The final stanza is content to let the simple traditional statements of Christian paradox speak for themselves—"Moder and mayden" and "Godes moder." The loveliness of the three middle stanzas might cause us to overlook the change of tenses in each. The Incarnation was completed at a specific point in history, hence the simple past tense of the first half of each quatrain; the present tense in the second half, however, makes this event as present to any reader as the dew which comes each morning during the month of nature's rebirth.

These last few examples of English hymns lack the highly charged wit of St. Thomas Aquinas at his best. But when confronted by the mysteries of faith, English poets could often use techniques similar to St. Thomas's in order to deepen the doc-

trinal content of their poems without any sacrifice of emotional power. And so these poems, too, can have a place in a celebration honoring St. Thomas Aquinas.

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NOTES

- ¹ See, e.g., Walter J. Ong, S.J., "Wit and Mystery: A Revaluation in Medieval Latin Hymnody," *Speculum*, XXII (1947), 310-41, and F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 402-14.
- ² The text is from *The Liber Usualis*, ed. Benedictines of Solesmes (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée and Co., 1953), p. 1855. All translations are my own and represent an attempt to stay as close to a word-for-word rendering as is consonant with minimum standards of modern English usage.
- ³ Ong, "Wit and Mystery," pp. 317-18; much of this analysis of the *Adoro Te Devote* is indebted to Fr. Ong's article.
- ⁴ Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 187. In this, as in the other Middle English poems I quote, *p* has been regularly changed to *th*.
- ⁵ Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, 2nd ed. rev. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 113; only about half the poem is quoted here.
- ⁶ Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 12-13.
- ⁷ This interpretation has never really died out; see, e.g., John Spears, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 63; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis: The Opposition," in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1958-1959*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 21-24; Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 195-96.
- ⁸ "Historical Criticism," *English Institute Essays, 1950*, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. 26-27.
- ⁹ "The Moor Maiden—A Contemporary View," *Speculum*, XLIX (1974), 69-74.
- ¹⁰ Carleton Brown ed., *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 1.
- ¹¹ *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, p. 119.