

SUSANNA THE MARTYR

Catholics who have any acquaintance with modern Biblical studies are sure to have encountered the phrase *genera litteraria*, or its English equivalent 'literary forms,' and to know that great stress was laid on this subject in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. But, if I may judge from my own experience, the implications of this theme are often not well grasped. I have heard a priest declare indignantly, when some historical passage of the Bible was being discussed, 'You can't apply *genera litteraria* here!' apparently understanding them as some technique for turning history into fiction. But literary forms are as inescapable as M. Jourdain's prose. You cannot put pen to paper without adopting some literary form. The style of a telegram is one, a letter to a friend uses another, letters to the Editor constitute a third, entries in a private diary make up a fourth, and so on. Similarly, you cannot peruse any piece of writing, without subconsciously at least determining its literary form and interpreting it accordingly. Your identification may of course be wrong—in which case your understanding of it is liable to be wrong too. The instructions of the Encyclical deal not with the existence of literary forms but with their recognition; in particular, they warn us against taking for granted that the literary forms used by the inspired writers are those with which we are familiar in modern literature and in our daily lives. Normally, the precise opposite is true.

In the seventeenth century the wrong identification of literary forms led to the misreading of poetic affirmations as scientific statements of fact. '*Terra autem in aeternum stat*,' said Qoheleth (Eccles. 1:4); therefore the earth can't be spinning round the sun, concluded the theologians of the Holy Office. In the nineteenth century it wrought havoc with the interpretation of narrative sections of the Bible, which were practically all taken, unquestioningly, to be history of the kind we look for in modern historical textbooks. Yet that kind of 'strictly historical' writing is one literary form that is *not* to be found in the Bible. Scripture does contain much history; but it is always some variety of religious history, and its different kinds all depart in some measure, and some of them very widely, from the conventions of modern historical writing. Further, some of the narrative forms are not historical at all. Our Lord's parables in the New Testament furnish a good example, and this form at least has always been correctly understood. They are fiction, stories created to teach a lesson, and it would be an absurd misunderstanding, and a grave impoverishment

of the divine message, to take, for example, the parable of the nobleman who went into a far country (Luke 19) as an historical account of Archelaus' journey to Rome.

The exaggerated fear of departing in the slightest from 'historicity' was based on the perfectly sound Christian conviction that the Bible is essentially an historical (as well as prophetic) record, structured in the dimension of time. It is *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation-history, and its historical validity must not be weakened, under pain of nullifying the salvation. But it is no impeachment of that validity, to distinguish the forms in which the realities of the salvation-history are expressed. Besides the parables mentioned above, we must recognise another *genus* which adopts the narrative technique and was especially popular in the last centuries of the Old Testament period; we may call it 'religious legend.' It is not, like a parable, pure invention; it deals with the situation of Israel at a particular period in the past, and may introduce historical figures, in simplified or confused form. But its purpose is expressly didactic; it aims, not at the factual recording of a single incident but at conveying the truth of the situation, what God's will was, how Gentiles and Israelites, faithful and unfaithful, reacted to it. Consequently, it implicitly (sometimes explicitly) exhorts the story-teller's contemporaries to glorify God's goodness and to imitate His faithful heroes. We shall never know, presumably, what individual events may have furnished starting-points for the traditions that grew into the stories of Esther, Judith, Tobias, or the first six chapters of Daniel. We can be quite sure that the inspired authors did not know, either. They were handling already traditional, legendary material, and they developed it freely to convey exactly what they wanted to convey: a teaching concerning the divine will and human response, in past and present.

In itself, the question whether a narrative is to be understood as a piece of eye-witness reporting or as a popular legend may be unimportant, from the religious point of view. Either of these forms may be divinely inspired, and both may express the same doctrine. But psychologically, it is easier for us to concentrate on the meaning of a story, when we realise that the author is deliberately shaping his material to convey a lesson. As an example I should like to discuss briefly the story of Susanna, which in Catholic Bibles appears as the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Daniel, and in the Roman liturgy is read at Mass on the fourth Saturday in Lent. Before *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, most Catholic commentators on this section apparently felt themselves obliged to uphold its strict 'historicity,' and by the same token had very little to say about its meaning. Protestant commentators usually leave it aside entirely, as 'apocryphal.' Popular

interest, inspired by a not very wholesome instinct, has fixed on the temptation scene and found in it a titillating 'slice of life' (as in Renaissance paintings or in our modern theatre). The lover of the Bible must feel indignantly that such treatment is sheer profanation of the Word of God. Not the temptation but Susanna's conquest of it is the theme. The story deserves to be recognised and cherished for what it is : a lofty and inspiring example of a 'martyr-legend,' whose lesson is as valuable and cogent now as on the day it was published.

The *genus* of martyr-legends was a comparatively late development in the inspired literature. Martyrdom becomes a vital problem only in a time of persecution, and the first religious persecution in history (as distinct from mere political or social oppression) was the attempt by Antiochus IV to suppress Judaism in Palestine, in 168-165 B.C. It was then that the stories of Dan. 1-6 were collected and published. Of these, Chapters 1, 3 and 6 (the Jewish youths who refuse to eat unclean food, the three who refuse to adore Nabuchodonosor's statue, Daniel who refuses to desist from the worship of his God) are typical martyr-legends. The Susanna story, by its intrinsic character and also by its attachment to the book of Daniel, belongs to the same classification ; but its special characteristics make it a unique addition, and one may say that its absence from non-Catholic Bibles leaves their version of Daniel very much the poorer.

The origins of the story lie outside Israel : the themes of the unjustly accused wife, and of the 'wise young judge,' belong to eastern folklore. Its assumption into the patrimony of Israel meant in the first place its transformation into a religious story, in which the concepts of God and His Law provide the frame of reference by which the actions of the human characters are measured. In clear and simple language, with notable elevation of thought, the author portrays an ideal of moral conduct for the edification of his readers. We can easily discern the specifically religious traits in which the revealed religion of Israel is expressed. Susanna is described as a God-fearing woman. Her parents were just, and had carefully instructed their daughter in the Law of Moses. The villainy of her accusers is characterised as 'lawlessness' and is explained by their refusing to 'look towards heaven.' The heroine exposes herself to calumny and death rather than 'sin before the Lord.' She prays trustingly to the Lord, and He hearkens to her prayer. He brings about her deliverance, by 'stirring up' the 'holy spirit' which is in Daniel. The latter upbraids the wicked elders for breaking the Law, and for acting like Gentiles, not like Judeans. When the truth is disclosed the assembly praise God Who saves those that hope in Him. They deal with the guilty according to the Law of Moses. All these points certainly did not belong

to any non-Israelite version of the story ; like much else in the Old Testament, they demonstrate how thoroughly the Israelites' religious consciousness transformed whatever material they took over from their pagan neighbours.

The crucial point in any story of martyrdom is the test, the cause for which the martyr gives his or her life. In Dan. 6 it is the duty of worshipping the one true God. In Dan. 3 it is the corollary of this, the duty of not offering worship to an idol. In Dan. 1, however, and in the martyr-legends of 2 Mac. 6 and 7, it is an apparently trivial matter, the abstaining from certain kinds of foods forbidden by the Law, as it was then interpreted. But of course the triviality is only apparent. God's will can be manifested in small things as in great, and we may compare the eating of a mouthful of pork to the dropping of a few grains of incense on the fire burning before a statue of Jove, the test for which so many Christian martyrs later gave their lives. In either case the external action is symbolic of a fundamental affirmation or denial. Similarly, the story of the Fall of Man in Gen. 2-3 turns on the prohibition of a certain food. In the Susanna story, however, the test is something that falls between the other two. It is not a question of cult or the worship of idols, but neither is it so arbitrary a thing as a dietary law. It is a grave point of morality, already existing in the natural law, sanctioned and made part of God's covenant by the Mosaic commandment : 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' For this, Susanna is ready to sacrifice her life. She does not reason on her personal preferences, nor even on the injustice that would be done to her husband. She says, 'It is better for me to fall into your hands than to sin before the Lord.'

In the ancient traditions of Israel, there was a story which would immediately come to the mind of any reader, by way of comparison : that of the patriarch Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39). There, a man is in a similar situation (except that the Law of Moses did not yet exist) and he makes the same choice, ultimately on religious grounds : 'How should I do such a great wrong as this, sinning against God ?' In each story, we see how emphatically and yet how naturally the hagiographer stresses the religious lesson. What might have been nothing but a novelistic intrigue, to be worked out in terms of human relationships, becomes under the influence of revealed doctrine an affirmation of the primary duty of faithfulness to God's will. This duty covers morals as well as faith. Therefore martyrdom, which ultimately is an act of the love of God above all created things, may have to defend any of the virtues, not only faith itself. This is strikingly demonstrated by another parallel to our story, this time a very modern one. In 1950 the Church canonised St Maria Goretti,

a twelve-year old Italian girl, who had defended her chastity at the cost of her life on the explicit ground that to do otherwise would be 'a dreadful sin.' She is honoured by the Church as a Virgin Martyr, and her Mass is celebrated in red vestments.

The occasion for martyrdom of this type may arise—as in all the instances cited—without there being any general persecution. This brings us to another striking characteristic of the story of Susanna: the Gentiles do not appear in it at all. Her enemies, who threaten her with death if she will not forsake God's law, are almost literally those of her own household, fellow-Jews who are unfaithful to the covenant and rebellious to God's commandments. That there are two of them is explained by the need for two witnesses, to make the accusation legally valid. But that they should be elders and judges, therefore *ex officio* religious leaders and authorities in the community—this is astonishing. It suggests some background of conflict and criticism, to which we have now no clue. We can only note how remarkably this picture of wickedness in high places anticipates our Lord's attacks on the malice and hypocrisy of the Jewish authorities of his time. The fact that God's instrument of salvation is an unknown youth of no official-standing attests a faith in the continued influence of His Spirit among His people, and shows how the expectation of a prophet, filled with the spirit of the Lord, was kept alive—to be answered eventually by the appearance of John the Baptist.

I have dwelt mainly on the figure of Susanna, because she is after all the central character and heroine of the story. Much more, in fact, could be said about her; but we must not forget Daniel, who has such an important part to play in the present canonical form of the text. This last phrase is important, because the story has been handed down to us in two forms, which differ considerably in details. The Church, in the second century A.D., adopted Theodotion's translation of the book of Daniel as official, abandoning the older Greek version known as the Septuagint. (Both texts of Chapters 13 and 14 will be found conveniently translated in Father Lattey's commentary in the Westminster Version.) The Susanna section in the Septuagint, though it records Daniel's name, shows distinct traces of an earlier stage of the story's editing, when the young hero was simply an anonymous Israelite youth. It was his identification with the Daniel of Dan. 1-6 that caused the story to be attached to the already existing twelve chapters of the book, and also caused the addition of the present final sentence (v. 64), which brings Daniel into equal prominence with Susanna as the subject of the narrative. In this approved version of Theodotion, Daniel appears as habitually gifted with a 'holy spirit,'

which when 'stirred up' by God inspires him with the wisdom required to penetrate the true state of affairs. Before the cross-examination he already knows the elders' guilt, as is shown by the terms in which he addresses them: another touch by which the author stresses that Susanna's vindication comes not by human wisdom but by God's act in answer to her prayer.

Finally, a few words may be added to clarify the sacred authors' intentions in composing these inspiring stories of faithfulness unto death. In every one of the martyr-narratives in the book of Daniel, there is a miraculous or quasi-miraculous divine intervention, which frustrates the natural course of events and leads to the glorification of the martyrs and the manifestation of the truth. But in real life martyrs really die, and the innocent, like Susanna, are not usually vindicated by an inspired intervention. The sacred writers knew this just as well as we do, in fact they had before their eyes the many deaths of faithful Jews who refused to apostatise in the Seleucid persecution. It was precisely these people that they intended to encourage and console, by these stories of God's faithfulness in preserving His saints. Only, the preservation and vindication to be hoped for must be put off to 'the time appointed,' when all the sufferers would be gloriously raised from the dead, to enjoy everlasting life in the kingdom of the saints (Dan. 12:1-3). In other words, the miraculous preservations of the martyrs in these stories are intended as symbols of the reward promised to real-life martyrs, who give themselves to death with unwavering fidelity and love. That the early Church thoroughly understood this teaching is shown by the many paintings in the catacombs of the three youths in the fiery furnace, of Daniel in the lions' den, of Susanna accused by the elders. They are symbols and pledges of the resurrection from the dead.

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