

in the faith, were to make his personal influence felt in the oversight of his schools and the training of the teachers. By a skilful interweaving of the Catechism, Articles, and Formularies of the Church with the great foundation principles of the Gospel, the scholars would, as a rule, grow up Churchmen as well as Christians, and while they learn to love Christ best, would value their Church also.

What, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter? Is it not this, that while we cannot for one moment admit that an agency which God has so manifestly blessed, and is becoming so increasingly necessary, can be pronounced "a dead failure," it is, after an existence of a century, still in its infancy, and needs to be fostered and guided with the utmost care and wisdom in every parish, if we would not abandon the lambs of Christ to the secularising influences of the age?

For the results achieved let us thank God, and resolve, by His help, to see greater things than these. The promise is unto us and unto our children, and if the Church will plead that promise more believingly, and put forth her energies more unitedly, God will pour out a more abundant blessing on her offspring.

WILLIAM BURNET.

ART. IV.—THE AUTOGRAPH MANUSCRIPT OF "THE IMITATION OF CHRIST."¹

AMONG the triumphs of religion over materialism and mere speculative dogma, not the least is to be found in the latter history of the Four Books of Thomas à Kempis concerning the Imitation of Christ. The French dreamer, Auguste Comte, whose career was to a great extent a systematic and unwearied warfare upon the foundations of religion found it necessary to work out a kind of philanthropic cultus before he died; and, in his dogmatizings on what he called the "religion of humanity," he had to support the religious feeling necessary to his latter aims by means of other fuel than could be gathered from the teachings of the positive philosophy. Of the Comtists, the sect who made, and perhaps still make, some attempt to reduce to practice the quasi-religious *régime* of their master, we hear but little

¹ "The Imitation of Christ:" Being the Autograph Manuscript of Thomas à Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi*, reproduced in Facsimile from the Original in the Royal Library at Brussels. With an Introduction by Charles Ruelens, Keeper of the Department of Manuscripts, Royal Library, Brussels. London: Elliot Stock, 62, Paternoster Row, E.C. 1879.

now-a-days ; but it will ever be memorable that two of the books most commended by the leader in the infidel school of "sociology," and inventor of the "religion of humanity," are the two great religious books of the Middle Ages, the "De Imitatione Christi" of Thomas à Kempis and the "Commedia" of Dante Alighieri. The epic poem of the grim and glorious Florentine connects with the material and vital interests of the great world at a thousand points; and thus the mere secular reader is never at a loss to find his account in its study. But the work of Thomas à Kempis is religious or nothing, Christian or nothing, devotional or nothing: it has no concern with "the world, the flesh, and the devil," but to renounce them utterly; and it is an astonishment that he whose aim was to supersede Christianity, who in his character of historical philosopher even endeavoured to depreciate the personal character of the Man Christ Jesus, and to exalt St. Paul as the true founder of the Christian religion, yet found it in his heart to recommend to his disciples in the most strenuous terms the constant study of the book of Thomas à Kempis concerning the Imitation of Christ.

There is matter for a considerable essay here, in the examination of the causes of this attitude of the founder of Positivism; but we have merely glanced at it in passing to another and later chapter in the history of the mediæval book of devotion. It is by no means generally known, not even widely known, though it might be, that the author's own manuscript of this book is still in existence. For nearly four hundred and fifty years it has withstood the ravages of time, passing through troublous epochs, and being carried from place to place as if under special guardianship; and now, after more than four thousand editions of it have been printed, after the sweet and peaceful soul that dictated it has passed homeward, and the patient and devoted hand that wrote it has been laid to rest for more than four centuries, the regular and beautiful manuscript remains to us, a standing proof of the authorship, and a rebuke to those who have vainly attempted to convey to other heads the glorious fame of the humble monk of Mount St. Agnes, and a key whereby the learning of these latter days has unlocked the venerable secret, that he whose life was a poem has left us what, no less in form than in matter, is also a poem.

Early in the seventeenth century a dispute arose as to the authorship of the book which had already obtained such vogue throughout the civilised world as to be only second to the Bible in the extent to which it had been circulated. The manuscript known to have been written by Thomas à Kempis in 1441 was, of course, appealed to throughout the dispute; but it was argued against his authorship—for the handwriting was never in dispute—that he was but the transcriber of that particular treatise.

In the same volume with it, in the same autograph, are other treatises, of which the authorship is undisputed; and the whole have so much more in common than mere handwriting that the critical innovators of 1604 never had much reason on their side. However, the controversy raged off and on for a long time; and it remained for the learned Dr. Carl Hirsche, of Hamburg, to settle the matter finally. When examining the manuscript of 1441, now in the Royal Library at Brussels, for the purposes of a critical edition of the text on which he was engaged, he observed certain peculiarities not previously taken into account, such as signs of a division into chapters, an entirely individual method of punctuation, used by the author to mark, not only the grammatical construction, but also the rhythmical structure of the work; and on pushing his investigation to other works of Thomas à Kempis, he found that the same system of punctuation characterised them also. "His style of punctuation," we are told by Mr. Charles Ruelens, the keeper of manuscripts in the Brussels Library, "is quite unique; it indicates the external structure of the sentence, marks its outline, and establishes the most complete harmony between the sentence and the internal structure of the ideas."

The fruitful study of Dr. Hirsche, while it establishes beyond dispute the identity of the author of the "De Imitatione" with the author of other books which Thomas à Kempis unquestionably composed, has also laid bare the form of the "Imitation," thus explaining for the first time certain contemporary references to the treatise as a *metrical* work. As Mr. Ruelens says, "the rhyme and the rhythm, which pervade alike the 'Imitation' and all the undoubted works of Thomas, are well-defined characteristics which mark an identity of style which is most remarkable, and which cannot be mistaken."

To compare a great thing with a comparatively small thing, this discovery recalls to mind that of Mr. Skeat in regard to the authorship of those "Rowley Poems" of Thomas Chatterton, which lasted the literary world of Great Britain nearly a century for controversial amusement. The pseudo-mediæval poetry of the Bristol boy, beautiful as it is when once the jargon by which he disfigured it is mastered, could never influence much the feeling of men, and is, of course, a small affair when compared with a devotional book such as that of Thomas à Kempis. But just as the material for settling whether Chatterton or a fifteenth century monk wrote the "Rowley Poems" existed for Tyrwhitt, Wharton, Malone, Milles, Bryant, and Sherwin, as well as for Mr. Skeat a hundred years later; so the material for determining the authorship of the "Imitation" was as accessible to the disputants of 1604 as to the learned doctor of Hamburg more than 250 years later. What was lacking in each case was not even sagacity: no

doubt enormous sagacity was wasted in both disputes; but it was the essentially modern feature of minute and realistic analysis, in which the imagination is admitted to play a part, though under the most rigorous control. It was this that the biblioplists and critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries alike never dreamed of. Many a dreadful word in the unimaginable vocabulary of Chatterton's "Rowley Poems" Mr. Skeat ran to earth as a misprint or other peculiarity of the editions of Baily's and Kersey's Dictionaries which the extraordinary boy-poet made use of in his word-manufacture; and this might have been done just as easily by the veriest dunderhead of all the disputants on the wrong side of the Rowley controversy. Even so, the characteristics in the demonstration of which Dr. Hirsche has deserved so well of the literary world, were just as accessible to those who consumed time and patience in trying to rob à Kempis of his glory, as they were to the German student.

The manuscript of the "Imitation of Christ" is, in a literary point of view, from mere association, a real treasure; and it is a thing of interest to all who hold dear the aspirations of a loving and chastened spirit and a gem of devotional exercise; but this manuscript's interest increases again when it places the matter of authorship beyond the painful pale of controversy, and yields up to the scrutiny of science the secret of its mystic rhythm and cadence. At any time to possess an exact reproduction of so treasurable an autograph would have been an uncommon gratification to the learned; but as the matter now stands, the desire of owning the counterpart of Thomas's manuscript will pass far beyond the circle of the learned; and it was a happy thought of Mr. Elliot Stock, whose many admirable publications in facsimile are well known, to reproduce this manuscript. It is *à propos* of Mr. Stock's facsimile, just issued with a preface by Mr. Ruelens, that we have been led to make these few remarks on the "Imitation;" and we must not quit the subject without a few words of welcome and praise for such a remarkable and interesting literary curiosity. The original has been reproduced page for page, of the exact size, by means of a combination of photography and the ordinary processes of the press; the paper used for the facsimile is of the character and quality of the original; and the binding is beautifully imitated from that of a devotional book of the fifteenth century. Mr. Ruelens' preface gives all the information one wants as to the history of the book; and the whole result is a dainty little volume which stands alone in all respects.

We have treated the subject from mainly a literary point of view; the doctrinal errors and defects of the "Imitation" must be considered in another Paper.