

Scriptural Hermeneutics and the Thomistic Making of a Doctrine of God*

OLIVIER-THOMAS VENARD, O.P.

*École Biblique
Jerusalem, Israel*

RATHER THAN SPEAK IN GENERAL of the “scriptural hermeneutics,” let us focus on a paradigmatic theophany, that of the burning bush and the revealed name in Exodus 3:14. We have three good reasons to do so.

First, of course, we all remember that Étienne Gilson made it famous in the chapter of *Le thomisme*, where he coined the phrase *métaphysique de l'Exode*. In the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas uses twice the name revealed in Exodus 3:14: to trigger the proofs of the existence of God;¹ and to look for the best name for God—the least connected to our mode of understanding.²

Second, the patristic tradition treats this episode as the prototype of all theophanies, including Christophanies. Mary, or Christ, is the true burning bush, where in different ways divinity dwells in human flesh without consuming it. The Eucharist is the burning bush when the Word of God turns bread into Christ himself without changing its appearance. Holy Scripture is the burning bush, where the divine Word puts on human words as a cloth, transcending them without altering them. Note that in the case of Christ, it is not only a typology: the historical Jesus

* Let Adrien Schenker, O.P., be thanked here for our conversation on the subject matter of this piece in Jerusalem in November 2012.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, sc.

² *ST I*, q. 13, a. 11.

is reminded as having made known, or used or manipulated the divine name, not only in the New Testament (NT), but also in the Jewish traditions.³ All Jesus's deeds and words may be described as a journey *within* the name.⁴

The third reason is that according to our Jewish friends, the episode of the burning bush encloses a sophisticated conception of the use of language *in divinis*. As we shall see, it promotes the primacy of *deixis* over predication, and of pragmatics over semantics; or, to put it in speculative grammatical terms, of act over representation, of supposition over demonstration.

My plan here is quite simple. (1) I shall sketch a phenomenology of the scriptural theophanies, especially in Exodus 3:14. (2) Then I will suggest how Aquinas's theology is faithful to the poetics, aesthetics, and pedagogy of these theophanies.

Phenomenology of the Scriptural Theophanies, Especially in Exodus 3:14

The Theophany Conjures a Special Aesthetics: A Blending of Hearing and Seeing

³ All through the Gospel, Jesus is remembered as one communicating the One. John presents several times Jesus as the name-bearer and the name-giver (Jn 17:6, 26) who takes over Moses's mission (Ex 3:14ff.). From the outset, in his prologue, John reads: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." Literally, Jesus "*exêgêsato* God." This verb could mean both "made God known" and "led up to God." On this syllepsis, see L. Devillers, "Le sein du Père: La finale du prologue de Jean," *Revue Biblique* (2005): 63–79, and the references he gives to articles by M.-E. Boismard, R. Robert, I. de la Potterie, and himself. Indeed, Christ's action was not only a teaching but a real act of orienting and leading, inducing, and displaying. Jesus uses the name. History recalls him as the one who manipulated the name. Jesus seemed to identify the name with presence—with *his* presence. The most obvious historical trace is in the changes in the immutable exorcism's formula that happened in Christianity: the divine name was replaced with the name of Jesus.

⁴ J.-M. Garrigues, *L'unique Israël de Dieu, Approches chrétiennes du Mystère d'Israël* (Limoges: Critérion, 1987), 41–58. Cf. the use of "the Name" and of "Jesus" in the NT studied by J. Dupont, "Le Nom de Jésus," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, vol. XXXII, *Oracle-Palestine*, ed. L. Pirot, A. Robert, and H. Cazelles (Paris: Letouzey, 1960), 514–41.

"And he looked and behold [...] God called unto him out of the midst of the bush and said" (Ex 3:2.4). All Old Testament (OT) theophanies induce for their witnesses a special synesthesia of seeing and hearing, ever since Exodus 3:14. It is epitomized in a famous verse from *Exodus* telling God's appearance on Mount Sinai, when all the people literally "saw the voices" (*kol-ha'âm ro'im et-haqqôlot*).⁵ The "vision-through-the-voice" is structural in the Bible and in Judaism. God's revelation happens in a saturation of hearing with seeing or of seeing with hearing.

It comes to no surprise, then, that Jesus assumes this synesthetic disclosure. It is dramatically staged in the episode of the Transfiguration, where the apostles, fascinated by the spectacle of Jesus shining like the sun, are summoned to listen to him by a heavenly voice (*bat kol*), while the whole vision is being concealed by a cloud.⁶ Or in the shift from seeing to hearing masterfully staged in the liturgical episode of Jesus reading a *haphtarah* from Isaiah in Luke 4. There the visual beauty of his reading the *haphtarah* captivates Jesus's audience: "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him . . . and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth."⁷ But he invites them at once to shift from their eyes to their ears: "He began to say to them: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁸ It culminates in the institution of the Eucharist, which radicalizes the contrast between seeing and hearing, as well as in the crucifixion, which prompts its witnesses to shift from seeing/hearing to believing (John *passim*).

Exodus 3 Shows Also a Paradoxical Preference for Perception over Understanding

The burning bush of Exodus 3:14 is an *adunaton*. It tells an impossible action: "the bush was ablaze with fire, but it was not being consumed!" (Ex 3:2ff.). The impossible vision provokes a paradoxical action that consists in of making a detour to come closer, to "turn aside to see" (*sâr* in the Masoretic text means "to lose one's way, deviate, rebel" or "go away"), while the Septuagint translates with *prosagô*, which means

⁵ Ex 20:18.

⁶ Mt 17:1–8.

⁷ Lk 4:20, 22.

⁸ Lk 4:21.

“coming close to, leading to.” In brief the bush calls, but indirectly, through the senses (and this is why it is a symbol of mediation).⁹

Jesus assumes this insistence on perception. The semantic saturation of Jesus’s metaphorical claims about himself makes them sound tautological, and thus appeal to more than language. He is the grain,¹⁰ the sower,¹¹ and the bread from heaven;¹² the lamb,¹³ the door to the sheepfold and the shepherd;¹⁴ the promise and the realization of resurrection.¹⁵

Eventually, he is “the way, the truth, and the life.”¹⁶ The sentence is very tempting to understand as “the signifier, the signified and the referent”—and Jesus is so often asked to give a sign in the Gospels.¹⁷ The *deixis* of the Gospel is entirely focused on Jesus as *the very sign*, not so much to be deciphered or understood as to be perceived. At last, Jesus can only make a show of himself while uttering “I am”: while disclosing the name residing in flesh, he hands himself over as the sign *par excellence*. Because truth is to thought what light is to sight, Jesus not only bears witness to himself, but also claims to be a perceivable evidence: “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.”¹⁸

Thus the pragmatic and deictic dimensions of the Gospels point toward Jesus’s body. A body puzzling and awe-inspiring to those who meet him: walking on water, commanding to the wind and the sea, exhausted and thirsting, transfigured, tortured, crucified, buried and risen,¹⁹ given to be eaten or drunk, as the only possible phenomenal experience of God, indeed as the temple.²⁰

⁹ We follow here the commentary of M.-A. Ouaknin, in *Bibliothérapie: lire c’est guérir* (Paris: Points, “Sagesse,” 1994), 98.

¹⁰ Jn 12:24.

¹¹ Mt 13:3.

¹² Jn 6:35.

¹³ Jn 1:29.

¹⁴ Jn 10:7, 11, 14.

¹⁵ Cf. Jn 6:54 and Jn 11:23ff.

¹⁶ Jn 14:4ff.

¹⁷ Mt 16:1: “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.”

¹⁸ Jn 9:35.

¹⁹ Jn 3:14: “So must the Son of man be lifted up.”

²⁰ Jn 2:21ff: “But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.” Jn 14:7: “If you had known me, you

Eventually, there is nothing more to add: “the overcoming of predication [by *deixis* marks] the impossibility of saying . . . anything more about what” is at stake. Jesus’s word rigorously ends up in silence during his Passion, a silence more eloquent than any word.²¹ Thus the scriptural theological reorientation of the use of language culminates in the Cross of Jesus. It launches a pragmatic theology of absence according to which “weakness designates God at least as well as strength.” The “pragmatic theology of absence . . . [is] not the non presence of God but the fact that the name that God is given . . . serves to shield God from presence—weakness designating God at least as well as strength—and to give God precisely as making an exception to it”²² against Eunomius and other Arians, who “hold that the (metaphysical) ideal of the equality between a word and/or a name and the concept is accomplished . . . above all in the case of God.”²³

*The Divine Encounter Engages a Stimulating Pedagogy
Made Up of Irony and Privileging Praxis over Theory
A Pedagogic Irony*

“Moses said to God, ‘If [...] they ask me, What is his name?— what should I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM who I AM’” (Ex 3:13ff.) Basically, there are two types of interpretations of this passage: one is ironical (the Jewish Hebraic one) and the other is emphatic (the Jewish Hellenic

would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.” When searching for the Jewish preparation for the belief in the incarnation, Nicolas Wright quite convincingly turns his attention to the temple. N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1999), 62–63; “Jesus’ Self-Understanding,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47–61, esp. 57.

²¹ “But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly” (Mt 27:14). See more in O.-T. Venard, “La parole comme enjeu narratif et théologique dans la passion selon saint Matthieu: Un commentaire littéraire de Mt 26–28,” *Revue Biblique* 115, no. 1 (2008): 56–96.

²² J.-L. Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena [De surcroît: Perspectives critiques]* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* 28, trans. R. Horner and V. Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 156.

²³ *Ibid.*, 153.

and the Christian ones).²⁴ They are not incompatible. Mercifully, God discloses his name, a quite intensive name according to the Septuagint, who turns it into the present participle of *eimi*. At the same time, quite ironically, God withdraws any plain meaning. What is revealed is a plenitude of meaning ranging from indeterminacy to intensity.

I am who I am means also *I am who I will be* or *I shall be what I shall be*: I am such as I will disclose myself, such as you will learn to know me if you trust in me and agree to the mission I give you. The stress is on an experience to be patiently made in time.

*This Ironical Pedagogy Is Taken Over by Jesus*²⁵

In his preaching, Jesus assumes the first-person singular of the divine voice, like earlier prophets. And all along his ministry, the ambiguity as to who was speaking when he did so became ever greater. Was it the prophet quoted by Jesus? God in whose name the prophet or Jesus spoke? Or Jesus himself? Those who saw Jesus as a prophet did not hear egotism but the prophetic voice. However, most of the Jewish community did not: they thought they had to deny his claims if they wanted to be faithful to what they understood to be the will of God.²⁶ Jesus makes a very ironic use of the divine *I*: "Before Abraham was, I am" (*egô eimi*).²⁷ Most of his interlocutors would not understand: "Who are you? Jesus said to them: Even what I have told you from the beginning" (*Tên archên ho ti kai lalô humîn*).²⁸ His answer could also be translated: *Why do I even bother answering to you*, or *I am the*

²⁴ Cf. R. de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d'Israël, des origines à l'installation en Canaan*, Etudes bibliques 57/1 (Paris: Gabalda, 1971), 330–40. The interpretation grounded in the Masoretic text is minimalist and ironical: God does not give his name. It is dominant in traditional rabbinic Judaism. But the (Jewish) Greek translation in the Septuagint reads: *Egô eimi ho ôn* and understands that Yhwh is the one God that Israel must acknowledge as really existing.

²⁵ See H. W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), built up on Jesus's question "Who do you say I am?"

²⁶ For this passage we are indebted to J. Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), who poses the question afresh: when did a prophet ever say "Follow me"?

²⁷ Jn 8:58.

²⁸ Jn 8:24ff.

beginning [the rēšit], I who am speaking to you.²⁹

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks like God in the burning bush. He guides us on a journey within the name, never trespassing the borders of the tautology. As Gregory of Nyssa puts it: "The Word, in saying this name, did not add to the tradition of faith what it is."³⁰

There is much understatement in the teaching of Jesus. He designates himself in oblique ways, for example, as the "son of man," a phrase with a scope of meaning that ranges from "anybody" to the quasi-divine figure in Daniel 7. But he silences any predication about himself that could reduce him to a known category such as *messiah* or *king*.

By refusing any plain denomination, Jesus hints at something unattainable in his identity. "Who do you say that I am?"³¹ He wants to be a question silencing all answers rather than an answer silencing all questions so that his language in the Gospel could be described as a "riddle" pointing at "a new and surprising reality which we could not previously have thought possible"—namely, "the reality of Christ's *hypostasis*"³²—a remarkable literary achievement in learned ignorance.³³

²⁹ See I. de La Potterie, "La notion de 'commencement' dans les écrits johanniques," in *Die Kirche des Anfangs: Festschrift für Heinz Schürmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Erfurter Theologische Studien 38, ed. R. Schnackenburg and J. Ernst (Leipzig: Benno, 1977), 379–403; É. Delebecque, "Autour du verbe *eimi*, 'je suis,' dans le quatrième évangile: Note sur Jean VIII, 25," *Revue Thomiste* 86 (1986): 83–89; R. René, "Le malentendu sur le Nom divin au chapitre VIII du quatrième évangile," *Revue thomiste* 88 (1988): 278–87; M. A. Pertini, "La genialidad gramatical de Jn 8,25," *Estudios Bíblicos* 56 (1998): 371–404; C. Rico, "Jn 8,25 au risque de la philologie: L'histoire d'une expression grecque," *Revue Biblique* 112, no. 4 (2005): 596–627.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in Marion, *In Excess*, 156.

³¹ Mt 16:14ff. and parallels cf. also the "messianic secret" in the Book of Mark.

³² S. Coakley, "What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does It Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian 'Definition,'" in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153–63, esp. 155. The same author rightly speaks about Chalcedon as "linguistic regulation" (145) and proposes a list of eight questions deliberately left unanswered by that Council (163–64).

³³ Cf. O.-T. Venard, "The Belief in the Incarnation of God: Source of Religious Humility or Cause of Theological Pride," in *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. J. L. Heft, R. Firestone, and O. Safi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 7, 129–48.

An Invitation to Act

God's answer displays a nonpredicative and "strictly pragmatic use of language."³⁴ The circle of the divine tautology uttered from the burning bush—"I am Who I am"—means, beyond all significations, that the one who reveals himself wishes to be encountered, more than named or thought. "The Name of God is not a name, which we could master through magic, as in polytheism. It is a verb. It is *that* which has power. And it is a promise. The unaccomplished unceasingly un-accomplishes itself."³⁵

Now this unceasing action triggers action on the part of man. The tautological utterance in which God discloses himself short-circuits the mental stream of thoughts following thoughts. By curving the words on themselves, it creates a sort of verbal mirror, which forces its listener to convert to himself and to go back to reality.

It highlights the fact that words do not refer to reality automatically. Rather, they build a nest where the speaker or the listener has to act:³⁶ they have to decide to look for, to experience and to check what they witness to. Nothing can dispense with the moral decision to try to understand, and in order to succeed, first: to believe. "The Name [does not inscribe] God within the theoretical horizon of [human] predication but rather by inscribing [man], according to a radically new *praxis*, in the very horizon of God."³⁷

Welcoming the divine name is certainly not seizing it as a prey, or breaking into it: to the contrary, it is getting oneself exposed to it and agreeing to see one's own intentions displayed and reflected in it. Therefore it triggers the paradoxical soliloquy of prayer.

Similarly, Jesus overwhelms semantics with pragmatics. The acts by which he conveys his message are forgiving, commanding cosmic elements,³⁸ or expelling unclean spirits. Their agent in this culture can only

³⁴ Marion, *In Excess*, 140.

³⁵ H. Meschonnic, "Traduire le sacré," in *Corps écrit*, vol. 3 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 17. My translation.

³⁶ See what Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 377, says about the intertwining of acts in the metaphoric predication, which ought to be extended to any predication.

³⁷ Marion, *In Excess*, 157.

³⁸ Mt 8:27: "Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?'"

be God. And the responses he tries to elicit from his listeners are acts that God only may require. For example, prophets always say, "Follow God."³⁹ The Torah commands: "The Lord your God you shall follow."⁴⁰ How can anyone then come and say, "Follow me"?

More generally in a typically halakhic manner, Jesus's teaching enhances command and obedience⁴¹ rather than statement and speculation: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will [have] . . . built his house upon the rock."⁴² His teaching about prayer reduces the role of words in favor of acts: "do not heap up empty phrases."⁴³ Even his revelatory discourses about the end of times are pragmatically more than semantically loaded. Enumerating many apocalyptic clichés of his time,⁴⁴ he tries to maneuver the audiences toward faith in God,⁴⁵ not to amuse them with innovative revelations about the *'olam haba'* (the world to come).

³⁹ Dt 13:5.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cf. his admiring the centurion in Mt 8:8ff. Cf. the finale of Matthew, which summarizes the entire Gospel as: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).

⁴² Mt 7:24. Cf. "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not a iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:18ff). After having heard Jesus, even his enemies ask themselves "What are we to *do*?"—not *think* (Jn 11:47).

⁴³ Mt 6:6ff. Rather, "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." Moreover, the few sentences of the Our Father, which he gives as a pattern, are first a matter "of referring to the One who is no longer touched by nomination . . . of pragmatically referring the speaker to the inaccessible Referent" (Marion, *In Excess*, 142). See the Fathers' commentaries stressing the fact that we do not so much ask God to do things as we orient and adjust ourselves to him. "Prayer does not consist in causing the invoked one to descend into the realm of our language (he or she exceeds it but also is found always already among us) but in elevating ourselves toward the one invoked by sustained attention" (Marion, *In Excess*, 144).

⁴⁴ For example, the tension between mercy and wrath or the claim to communicate only a partial knowledge: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Mt 24:36).

⁴⁵ Cf. Paul's strategy for example in Rom 11:20, 22.

*The Theophany at the Burning Bush Sets Up a Specular Pragmatics
in the Relationship between God and Mankind*

Exodus 3 presents several locutions that echo one another. For instance, Exodus 3:14, "God said unto Moses, I AM who I AM," mirrors Exodus 3:11: "Moses said unto God, Who am I?" Or, in Exodus 3:4, both protagonists, the human and the divine, look at each other: "The LORD saw that he turned aside to see."

God's paradoxical words intend to elicit from their listener acts that will aim at God for the sake of God, such as faith, hope, and love. They reflect the divine tautology in the human heart. This specularity characterizes the relationships between God and mankind throughout Scriptures.⁴⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, it is nicely expressed in figures of derivations that play on the same word to describe human and divine actions.⁴⁷ Isaiah provides a famous example in the warning inserted right before in the Emmanuel oracle (Isa 7:9): "If you will not believe surely you will not be established," or "If your faith does not remain firm, then you will not remain secure" (Is 7:9).

In Hebrew, the sentence is much simpler: *IM LO TA'AMÎNOU KÎ LO TÉ'AMÉNOU*. Phonetically, there is something tautological about it, because the same root *amen* is used in both propositions, in two forms that entail only slight vocalic changes: *TA'AMÎNOU* and *TÉ'AMÉNOU*. Semantically, it sounds a bit like the proverb *Aide-toi, le Ciel t'aidera* "God helps only those who help themselves." Poetically, the derivation of *amen* encapsulates the right conception of the divine and human action: one single action (signified by a single root) is entirely divine (niph'al tense),

⁴⁶ Cf. Ps 17:26–27, or the curious rapprochement between Moses and God in Num 11:12–13: "Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your arms, as a foster father bears a nursing child,' to the land which you swore to their fathers? From where shall I get meat to give to this entire people, for they cry to me, 'Give us meat, that we may eat!'" See also the mirroring construction of Adam and Jesus (cf. Phil 2 and Gn 3) and the coherence between Mt 25 (identification of Jesus with the least of the children of God) and Gn 1 (mankind created as an image and resemblance of God).

⁴⁷ Listen to echoes of this passage in 2 Chr 20:20 (*ha'aminou* / *té'haménou*), in Jer 1:17 (play on words with the root *h'tt*), in Is 25:1 (play on the root '*mn*'), or in Hab 2:4 and Rom 11:20 (same rapprochement between holding together and believing).

and entirely human (hiphil tense). The activity of man is both an answer to God's Word and a gift of God.⁴⁸

The Psalmist sings: "With the merciful you will show yourself merciful. With an upright man you will show yourself upright. With the pure you will show yourself pure. And with the forward you will show yourself forward."⁴⁹ This specular structure is assumed by Jesus Christ. For instance, "Are you the Christ, the son of God?"⁵⁰ and "Are you the king of the Jews?"⁵¹ "You have said" (*su eipas*), Jesus replies twice to his unjust judges.

In this quite ambiguous statement, Jesus answers the questions at the enunciative level, not at the semantic level. He simply states the fact that his interlocutor has said something. "You have said" suggests a possible disconnection of the utterances just uttered from their utterers; it frees the words from their speakers' evil intentions and lets them resonate by themselves and possibly convey their true meaning. It is as if Jesus was holding up their own words as a verbal mirror in which they could reflect their own intentions. Does not this reticence to speak out remind the divine answer of Exodus 3:14?

More generally, Jesus in the Book of Mark short-circuits immediate understanding and makes the disciples (and the readers) undergo incomprehension as a revelatory experience. In John, along the tradition of the "prophetic acts," he fulfills his mission through a dialectics of striking deeds and enigmatic words mirroring one another.⁵² And through this dialectics, Jesus discloses a unique intimacy with God: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me . . . or else believe . . . for the sake of the works themselves."⁵³

⁴⁸ The Greek version interprets the tautology in terms of noetic gain (LXX/Is 7:9: *kai ean mê pisteusête oude mê sunête*) as if the text was recording its own performativity.

⁴⁹ Ps 18:26–27.

⁵⁰ Mt 26:63.

⁵¹ Mt 27:11. In the Book of Mark, on the contrary, Jesus's answer is not ambiguous.

⁵² Cf. Jn 10:25: "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me"; 10:37ff; 14:11. He says intriguing words, forcing his audiences to look at his actions and acts in such a way as to raise their desire to listen to his words. A synoptic example is the healing of the paralytic man: "Which is easier: to say, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'rise and walk?'" (Mt 9:5–8).

⁵³ Jn 14:10ff.

Finally the NT develops the same mirroring structure between God and the believers:⁵⁴ “draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”⁵⁵ The NT also explains these mirroring relations between God and man: since he is the Creator, acting is being acted by him, and knowing being known by him.⁵⁶

The Divine Revelation Encompasses a Special Relation to Language

It is celebrated among postmodern rabbis such as Gilbert Trigano or Marc-Alain Ouaknin in France. The name establishes a stable pole in the temporal and spatial flux of reality. It unifies what sensitive experience would describe as *partes extra partes* or undifferentiated whole. It allows invocation and enables memorial. Therefore, inasmuch as they witness to the encounter of God and human words, the Scriptures somehow amplify the divine name.

*The Encounter with the Name at the Burning Bush
May Be a Symbol of Reading*

God's commission resonates from the middle or center (*tâwèkh*) of the burning bush, which becomes a visible figure of his Word. The transcendent and ineffable Word of God allows itself to be heard, not understood, without destroying the human words any more than the fire consume the bush.

The episode becomes a symbol of the reading of the text. In Hebrew, the bush is burning without being *eaten*. The metonymic overtone of the *mouth* points to word and language. Indeed, upon hearing or reading, the words are like *eaten*, or *burnt* by the meaning they convey. The series of syllables, the melody, the tone of the voice, the combination of words, the typographic signs on the pages, are as it were *burnt* by the fire of intelligibility, without being consumed.

⁵⁴ Cf. Lk 12:8–9: “And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.”

⁵⁵ Jas 4:8, 10: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded . . . Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

⁵⁶ Ps 36:10; Phil 2:12.

*The Name Provides a Pattern for the Reception
of All the Sacred Scriptures*

Literally, Exodus 3:14 features a repetition of “I AM.” For Jewish sages and prophets, the whole Scripture should function like the divine name, as a piece of language to be repeated and experienced continually, much more than just “caught.” Constantly meditating on the Torah is an ideal ever since the *šema’ Yisraēl*, which invites not only to repeat and memorize (to drill), but more radically to make Scriptures one’s own language—a possible literal translation of *wedibbarta bam* “you will speak through/with them.”⁵⁷ What God reveals and the meaning of what God reveals are distinct. God discloses himself in command, symbol, and rite, whose meaning must be progressively downloaded by human beings obeying or performing them.

Jesus’s rhetorical strategies aim at creating a similar delay between hearing and understanding, to oblige his audience to live with the words and be questioned by them: “afterwards, later on, you will understand.”⁵⁸ Language is not only to be listened to and recorded, but to be dwelt in: “abide in my word; keep my word.”⁵⁹ Was it not already the way God wanted his revelation in the Torah to be read?

And the evangelists continue what Jesus had started. Through stylistic devices such as the repetition or the *correctio*, they force the reader to grapple with bizarre phrases, in sum to dwell in his Word.⁶⁰ They favor the coincidence of the quest of meaning with the hope for grace—thereby granting to language a sacramental dimension.

Conclusion

A “speaking God”:⁶¹ what matters for a Jew is the Word of God heard

⁵⁷ Dt 6:7. With the same pedagogic intention, the long Psalm 119 displays in eight verses a letter going through the entire alphabet, to produce no other meaning than a praise of the Word of God.

⁵⁸ Jn 13:7.

⁵⁹ Jn 14:23ff.

⁶⁰ Cf. the use of repetitions in Jn 7:33–36, 16:13–15, and 21:22–24.

⁶¹ Contrast with Aristotle’s God who is all-thinking (*Métaphysics*, L, 9, 1074 b 34); see A.-J. Festugière and P. Fabre, *Le monde gréco-romain au temps de Notre-Seigneur*, vol. 2, *Le milieu spirituel*, Bibliothèque catholique des sciences religieuses

in history. This culminates for the Christian in the incarnation of that Word in Jesus and his Cross, who articulate the divine mystery in human word.

From the burning bush up to the Cross of Jesus, passing by so many prophetic oracles,⁶² in disclosing himself as “I AM,” the living God introduces himself as the one speaking God who can invoke only himself to offer himself to another free self⁶³ and as the one willing to be the only reason for believing, hoping, and loving the one.

The fitting welcoming of the divine name requires a high conception of the Word, which contrasts with our modern utilitarian reductions of language to an expressive tool. The Word of God in Scripture is not first a set of ideas, but the intense presence of a living reality, an event, a personal irruption.⁶⁴ In more philosophical terms, we might say that when heard or read in the “condition of felicity” of the living tradition, the biblical text bears a real performativity that gives rise to a vision of the world in which the Word dominates history and *verbum* commands *esse*.⁶⁵ The literary form of revelation leads to a refined understanding of the semantic triangle of “real-mind-language.”⁶⁶ Relations between the three angles are not only bijective but also reciprocal: the meaning of “signification” attached to each angle is analogical. A subtle interplay of *similarity*, *representation*, and *causality* unites thing, concept, and word.⁶⁷

All too often, Aquinas is accused of wrongly substituting abstract metaphysical concepts for this living encounter with the speaking God.

(Paris: Bloud and Gay, 1935), 167–84.

⁶² Is 43:8–13.

⁶³ Heb 6:13.

⁶⁴ L. Bouyer, *Eucharistie, théologie et spiritualité de la prière eucharistique* (Paris: Desclée, 1966), 37–38.

⁶⁵ I.e., in which language precedes our reception of anything and the rise of any intentions.

⁶⁶ A. Ramlow, “Language without Reduction: Aquinas on the Linguistic Turn,” *Angelicum* 85 (2008): 497–517.

⁶⁷ Cf. J. P. O’Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 22. The art of rightly speaking or writing about God consists in combining “one’s vantage point [that] is the created perfections” and “what can be called the principle of perfection” or *maxime tale*. J. M. Schoot, *Christ the Name of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ*, Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 189.

On the contrary, let us suggest how Aquinas develops his discourse on God entirely within the literary and linguistic default setting of the Scriptures. No more than Christ himself does he trespass the crystalline borders of the divine tautology.

Thomas's Faithfulness to These Theophanies

Irreducibility of Language

In Aquinas's praxis of *sacra doctrina*, language is not a transparent tool expressing one's thought. It is no immaterial lining of reality. From *lectio divina* to *lectura*, from the elucidation of the *pagina sacra* to the distinctions of the *quaestiones*, Aquinas is aware of the works of his colleagues of the faculty of arts prefiguring speculative grammar. For them (as for postmodernity, in passing), the way leading to the meaning belongs to the meaning: signification is not a mere static result but an ongoing process. Therefore language brings its special contribution on the ways leading up to God.

Aquinas's Refusal of the So-Called Ontological Proof of St. Anselm Is Well Known⁶⁸ yet His Starting Point in Reasoning about God Is Often Linguistic

Thomas like Aristotle investigates as much in culture as in nature, in words as in things, in the testimony of Scripture as in that of the senses. While teaching on the divine names, Aquinas is not merely dealing in a posteriori causality (ascending from effects to cause) nor dealing in a priori categories: he is also dealing in symbolism, deciphering things as signs thanks to words.⁶⁹

Indeed, "theology, inasmuch as it is the most principal of all sciences . . . discusses not only things, but the signification of names as well."⁷⁰ For instance, "demonstrando Deum esse per effectum accipere possumus pro medio quid significant hoc nomen Deus." The

⁶⁸ Cf. ST I, q. 6, a. 1 ad 2 and 4; J. Milbank and C. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, Radical Orthodoxy (London: Routledge, 2001), 29–30.

⁶⁹ Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 29–30.

⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* I, d. 22 *expositio textus*, cited by Schoot, *Christ the Name of God*, 197.

fact that we *speak about* God, or that the word *God* exists,⁷¹ or that we use some words rather than others to speak of him, become starting points to “prove” that God exists⁷² and that some names may refer to God *substantialiter*.⁷³

To be sure, even though Aquinas asserts the primacy of being over human knowledge (since the mind has to be triggered by being), the fact is that knowledge is fulfilled only *in the act of judging*, which entails language!⁷⁴ The process of abstracting and judging, the dialectic of *species* and concepts,⁷⁵ fructifies in the utterance of a concrete judgment, a word that reaches the concrete being.

Even the first principle, the principle of noncontradiction (according to which *non est simul affirmare et negare*⁷⁶), does entail language, since if nothing is *dicted* (said), nothing can ever be *contradicted*. And indeed, in mental activity, the first principle itself is rooted in the *ratio* or *habitus identitatis*,⁷⁷ but the elicitation of that *habitus* requires the distance provided by the *verbum* to enable the apprehension of nonbeing.

⁷¹ Cf. ST I, q. 29, a. 2, ad 1, where *usus loquendi* matters more than *propria significatio*; I, q. 13, a. 8, c. “Omnes enim loquentes de Deo, hoc intendunt nominare Deum, quod habet providentiam universalem de rebus”; I, q. 13, a. 8, ad 2, “Impositum est hoc nomen ad aliquid significandum supra omnia existens, quod est principium omnium et remotum ab omnibus. Hoc enim intendunt significare nominantes Deum.”

⁷² ST I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2: the starting point of the demonstration may be the name(s) he is given (as in any demonstration, *quia* vs. *propter quid*), because there is an order in knowledge: first one must answer *an est*, then *quid est* (cf. ST I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5).

⁷³ Thomas privileges the common usage of speakers dealing with God (*intentio loquentium de Deo*; ST I, q. 13, a. 2, c.).

⁷⁴ P.-C. Courtès, *L'être et le non-être selon Thomas d'Aquin*, Croire et savoir 27 (Paris: Téqui, 1998), 135–36: “Saint Thomas affirme la primauté ‘en soi’ de l'être sur la connaissance humaine, qui s'actualise par rapport à lui. C'est lui qui tombe d'abord dans l'appréhension humaine. Mais la connaissance s'achève dans le jugement. Or, pour saint Thomas, le jugement est l'acte de l'intellect composant ou divisant. La seule appréhension de l'être ne saurait donc à elle seule constituer la métaphysique, ni aucun savoir humain. Il faut tenir compte de ce fait quand on parle d'une ‘métaphysique de l'être’ pour le thomisme.”

⁷⁵ Cf. Y. Floucat, *L'intime fécondité de l'intelligence: Le verbe mental selon saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Croire et savoir 35 (Paris: Téqui, 2001), 125.

⁷⁶ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2: “Nam illud quod primo cadit in apprehensione est ens, cujus intellectus includitur in omnibus quaecumque quis apprehendit. Et ideo primum principium indemonstrabile est quod *non est simul affirmare et negare*, quod fundatur supra rationem entis et non entis; et super hoc principio omnia alia fundantur.”

⁷⁷ L.-M. Rineau, *Jugement et concept dans la théologie des noms divins d'après saint*

Simply put, language is also a kind of “thing,” necessarily met on the way to the truth of other things.⁷⁸ It brings human thought back to its humble (poetic) condition of being the fruit of an incarnated intelligence. Therefore the language of metaphysics and theology is principally a *poetical* articulation of the real. Ever since the pre-Socratics, the effort to think about being and God ends up composing a *poiein* of speech in a true “metaphysical epic of the spirit for which our time, used only to metaphors derived from the senses, has lost the poetic key.”⁷⁹

*Furthermore: In the Construction of the Theological Discourse,
Metaphysics and Scripture Mirror One Another*

Metaphysics is the discipline dealing with *esse inquantum esse*. Now, it is hard to say whether the discovery of this *esse* is the result of a progressive abstraction starting with the beings, or the revelation of the sublime name of the Creator in Exodus 3:14 had the side effect of unveiling the composition of existence and essence in created beings.

For clarity's sake, in *Le thomisme*, Gilson distinguishes “Thomas the philosopher” and “Thomas the theologian,” and, in a rather neo-Thomist fashion, only adduces the theologian by the end (133–36) of a chapter dedicated to *haec sublimis veritas* (120–36). Gilson asserts that Aquinas's conclusions regarding the existence of God are “undoubtedly properly philosophical,” as the historical result of centuries of effort to reach the very root of being.⁸⁰

According to Thomas's worldview (which is an *univers enchanté*!—

Thomas d'Aquin: Mémoire de licence canonique de théologie sous la direction de T.-D. Humbrecht (Toulouse: Institut catholique de Toulouse—Institut Saint-Thom-
as d'Aquin, 2000), 126, shows brilliantly how the noncontradiction principle rests upon the habitus of identity, an unfathomable, quasi divine, light. Cf. P. Rousselot, *L'intellectualisme de saint Thomas*, Bibliothèque des Archives de philosophie (Paris: Beauchesne, 1936).

⁷⁸ In O.-T. Venard, *La langue de l'ineffable: Essai sur les fondements théologiques du discours métaphysique* (Genève: Ad Solem, 2004), I describe both faces of language (murkiness and transparency) in studying closely Aquinas on the language of prelapsarian Adam and of the angels.

⁷⁹ Courtès, *L'être et le non-être*, 232n35 invites us to “relire littérairement In Met. X, lect. 4” (ed. Marietti 475–76, no. 1990–98).

⁸⁰ É. Gilson, *Le thomisme*, Études de philosophie médiévale 1, 4th ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1942), 132.

Gilson *dixit*⁸¹), only distinctive acts of being are real. *Unumquodque est per suum esse* is a principle of reality that extends to God.⁸² But it is only partly inherited from Aristotle, who could not go beyond *ens, res habens esse*.⁸³ In order to avoid any ontotheological reduction, one must rather say that it is the existence of God, as the only necessary *esse* revealed in the Bible, that enables this principle.⁸⁴

Therefore Gilson himself finally insists that that for Aquinas Scripture and rational dialectics supplement one another in the disclosure of the real distinction.⁸⁵ The “revelation of the identity of essence and existence in God amounted for Thomas to a revelation of the distinction of essence and existence in creatures.”⁸⁶

Eventually, in the last pages of his chapter, Gilson wittingly ponders the priority of metaphysics or of revelation, only to conclude that Aquinas himself conceived of the real distinction in creatures and the ineffable identity in God as “the front and back of the same *metaphysical* thesis, and that ever since he captured it, Aquinas never doubted he could read it in the Bible.”⁸⁷

In the Theological Discourse, Words and Beings Mirror One Another

As Paul Ricoeur or Pier-Cesare Bori has shown, the interplay of say-

⁸¹ Ibid., 144.

⁸² Ibid., 131.

⁸³ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 131: “On dirait d’ailleurs mieux que c’est l’existence même de Dieu qui fonde ce principe. Car Dieu est l’être nécessaire . . . Dieu est un acte d’exister tel que son existence est nécessaire.”

⁸⁵ Ibid., 133: “il est impossible d’en douter, saint Thomas a pensé que Dieu avait révélé aux hommes que son essence est d’exister. . . . voyant ces deux faisceaux de lumière [i.e., l’Écriture et la dialectique rationnelle] converger au point de se confondre, il n’a pu retenir un mot d’admiration pour l’éclatante vérité qui jaillit de leur point de rencontre. Cette vérité, saint Thomas l’a saluée d’un titre qui l’exalte au-dessus de toutes: ‘l’essence de Dieu c’est donc son exister. Or cette sublime vérité (*hanc autem sublimem veritatem*), Dieu l’a enseignée à Moïse [qui lui demandait son nom].’ C’est Qui est qui m’a envoyé vers vous, montrant par là que son nom propre est Qui est. Or tout nom est destiné à signifier la nature ou l’essence de quelque chose. Il reste donc que l’exister divin lui-même soit l’essence ou la nature de Dieu” (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I, ch. 22 *ad Hanc autem*).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁷ Ibid., my italics.

ing and being shapes metaphysical discourse like a circle. Quite simply, from the viewpoint of linguistic deconstruction, the realist metaphysician has to presuppose a word uttered by reality before he utters his own word about it. Analogy is conceptual and its prerequisite is the very gift of being, construed as participation. Analogical predication must be sustained by an ontology of participation. Now, as Ricoeur asks, is not participation a hidden recourse to metaphor and poetry?⁸⁸

In theological analogy, language and concepts hold together thanks to an order deemed inherent in reality. The efficient causality is supposed to conciliate unity and diversity, in order to speak truly of the real.⁸⁹ The “similitude” of the effects with their causes is believed to prevent speech from nonsense.⁹⁰

Thus, when Saying is about to break out because of the distance between Being and the beings, Being himself provides Saying with underground continuities enabling the analogical extension of significations. But how so, if not by giving his Word? And how so, if not in Scripture? By the end of that process, analogy and participation are mirroring one another.⁹¹ Now, modern science and philosophy believe they have destroyed this reciprocal foundation. Was it not the belief in a creator God in the biblical sense, which warranted such similitude in causality? Indeed, the believer identifies the creative Word of God who gives reality its consistency, with the Word contained in Holy Scripture, and with the Light radiating in his mind through the inner word.

In the modern immanentist frame that separates object from subject, *sacra doctrina* is a discourse actually founded, but on no foundation (like the faith, according to St. John of the Cross⁹²), since there is

⁸⁸ Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, 347–56.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 352.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.: “Dans le jeu du Dire et de l’Être, quand le Dire est sur le point de succomber au silence sous le poids de l’hétérogénéité de l’être et des êtres, l’Être lui-même relance le Dire par la vertu des continuités souterraines qui confèrent au Dire une extension analogique de ses significations. Mais du même coup, analogie et participation sont placées dans une relation en miroir, l’unité conceptuelle et l’unité réelle se répondant exactement.”

⁹² John of the Cross, “A lo Divino,” in *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross*, ed. and trans. K. Jones (London: Continuum, 2001), 114: “mi alma se vee ya sin arrimo y con arrimo.”

no evidence of such things as a language of reality or a Word of the utterly other. In a worldview imbued with faith, *sacra doctrina* is candidly founded in Scripture: God exists because he says so! This appraisal of language in the *praxis* of theology determines an aesthetics that reminds of the *synaesthesia* of the burning bush.

Aesthetics: The Overcoming of Sight by Word

Aquinas's *praxis* of *sacra doctrina* displays a specific aesthetics: his laconic style is indebted both to the Greco-Roman rhetorical ideal of rational clarity overcoming senses with reason, as illustrated by Cicero, Augustine, or Bernard,⁹³ and to the OT⁹⁴ and NT⁹⁵ traditions for which God is more audible than visible.

Thomas's devotion to his patron saint (who teaches us to believe without seeing), as well as his Eucharistic poetry, rests upon such aesthetics. As he puts it in his personal prayer *Adoro devote*:

Sicut Thomas non intueor . . . Deum tamen . . . te confiteor.
Visus . . . fallitur, auditu solo tuto creditur.

Dealing with God, Aquinas is convinced that the hearing of the Word can transcend the vision of the words. We all know the famous "Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw by comparison with what I have seen!"⁹⁶ Do not these last words suggest that Thomas wrote *in order to see*? Once he had been given to see, writing was no longer necessary. Words allow us to see, indeed: as Thomas notes,

⁹³ D. Millet, "Paul Claudel et la dangereuse métaphysique de beau, recherche sur la conception de la beauté à l'époque du mouvement symboliste et du renouveau thomiste," presented at the 13th Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée, La Force de la Vision - Vision du Beau, Université Aoyama Gakuin, Tokyo, August 25, 1991, 4.

⁹⁴ Cf. H. Meschonnic, *La rime et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), 284; J.-L. Evrard, "Préface," in *L'écriture, le verbe et autres essais*, by Franz Rosenzweig ("Philosophie d'aujourd'hui", Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 6–7.

⁹⁵ Cf. *ST* III, q. 55, a. 2, ad 1 *in fine*: "Sed sicut ad visionem beatam pervenitur per auditum fidei, ita ad visionem Christi resurgentis pervenerunt homines per ea quae prius ab angelis audierunt."

⁹⁶ Cf. J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin, sa personne et son œuvre*, Vestigia 13 (Paris: Le Cerf-Éditions universitaires de Fribourg, 1993), 424.

“you see?” often means “do you understand?”⁹⁷ In the present world, where we have no formal intuitive knowledge (*intuition*), we know only through the detour of the senses and the *discursus* of reason and therefore through language.⁹⁸ The detour through the word of reasoning is for Thomas a “delayed regard” (*regard différé*).⁹⁹ Moreover, in the prolongation of natural speech, the Scriptures received as the Word of God allow the mind to get a glimpse of a *reason that transcends rationality*.

Aquinas is well aware that only *God* speaks of God¹⁰⁰ or names God¹⁰¹ adequately. We can only name God with names coined to signify creatures or created perfections. In order to speak truly, albeit inadequately of him, we must achieve an impossible task: “to transcend *the very mode in which we speak*.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ ST I, q. 67, a.1, c.

⁹⁸ Cf. SCG 1,57 *in fine*: “Quae enim ratiocinando scimus non sunt secundum se nobis nuda et aperta, sed ratione aperiuntur et nudantur”; ST II-II, q. 49, a. 5 ad 2: “Certitudo rationis est ex intellectu, sed necessitas rationis est ex defectu intellectus: illa enim in quibus vis intellectiva plenarie viget ratione non indigent, sed suo simplici intuitu veritatem comprehendunt, sicut Deus et angeli” and the comments by J.-L. Chrétien, “La connaissance angélique,” in *Le regard de l'amour* (Paris: Minuit, 2000), 125–39.

⁹⁹ Chrétien, “La connaissance angélique,” 130: “Toute ratiocination provient d'un manque de lumière. En l'affirmant la scolastique se manifeste tout autre qu'on ne l'imagine souvent.”

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 2, a. 1: “Similiter etiam intellectus noster secundum diversas conceptiones repraesentat divinam perfectionem, quia unaquaeque imperfecta est; si enim perfecta esset, esset una tantum sicut est unum tantum Verbum intellectus divini” (cf. Schoot, *Christ the Name of God*, 19).

¹⁰¹ ST I, q. 13, a. 11 ad 1: “Magis proprium nomen est Tetragrammaton, quod est impositum ad significandam ipsam Dei substantiam incommunicabilem, et, ut sic liceat loqui, singularem.”

¹⁰² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 7: “Modus significandi in dictionibus quae a nobis rebus imponuntur sequitur modum intelligendi; dictiones enim significant intellectuum conceptiones, ut dicitur in principio *Periher*. Intellectus autem noster hoc modo intelligit esse quo modo invenitur in rebus inferioribus a quibus scientiam capit, in quibus esse non est subsistens, sed inhaerens. Ratio autem invenit quod aliquod esse subsistens sit: et ideo licet hoc quod dicunt *esse*, significetur per modum concreationis, tamen intellectus attribuens esse Deo transcendit modum significandi, attribuens Deo id quod significatur, non autem modum significandi.”

Transition: A Pedagogy That Favors the Practical Dimension

How is it possible? By engaging a special pedagogy, which is reminiscent of the one displayed in biblical theophanies.

Even though he lays a stress on its speculative dimension, Aquinas sees theology as an exercise in encountering God through his Word, in the very act of speaking of him.¹⁰³ A prejudicial objection to this paragraph could be that in the *Summa*, Aquinas describes theology as a speculative rather than practical science. In fact it is both, and Aquinas's insistence on the theoretical dimension is partly circumstantial.¹⁰⁴

*There Is Some Irony in That Encountering,
As in the Episode of the Burning Bush*

Thomism may be gauged the deepest or the emptiest of all philosophies, depending on its construal as an abstract logic of the *ens* or a concrete metaphysics of the *esse*. Everything depends on one's discovering the *ultima Thule* of metaphysics and remaining faithful to this discovery, a difficult task indeed.¹⁰⁵

Sacra Doctrina as an Exercise in Learned Ignorance

Something paradoxical pervades the whole theological undertaking: we speak very much about something we utterly ignore. According to Gilson, speaking metaphorically is inevitable even in analogy. The names signifying created perfections can be applied to God eminently, but only

¹⁰³ ST I, q. 31, a. 2, c.: "Cum de Trinitate loquimur, cum cautela et modestia est agendum quia, ut Augustinus dicit in *I De Trin.*, 'nec periculosius alicubi erratur, nec laborosius aliquid quaeritur, nec fructuosius aliquid invenitur.'"

¹⁰⁴ According to Leonard Boyle, he wanted to correct the doctrinal and mystical short-sightedness of his younger brethren. See L. E. Boyle, *The Setting of the Summa theologiae of Saint Thomas*, Étienne Gilson Series 5 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982).

¹⁰⁵ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 135–36. Generally speaking, "c'est un fait assez curieux que, selon la manière dont on l'entend, la doctrine de saint Thomas apparaisse comme la plus pleine ou comme la plus vide de toutes. L'enthousiasme fervent de ses partisans n'a d'égal que le mépris dont la couvrent ses adversaires" (ibid., 62). According to Gilson, for those who embrace an essentialist worldview, Thomism becomes a *chosisme* reifying concepts and turning the living stuff of reality into a mosaics of closed entities. True disciples must acquire a sense of the plenitude and continuity of the concrete.

by a sort of “transfer” from creature to creator. “Such transfer turns these names into true metaphors, in the proper sense of the word, and doubly deficient metaphors”: on the one hand they refer to the divine *esse*, utterly different from any created *esse* for which the name was coined; on the other hand, names designating an object depend on our way of conceiving this object and we have no way to conceive of a mere *esse*.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it is possible to speak truly of a God we cannot conceive at all.

As a matter of fact, the word *being* may be uttered with two meanings: either as referring to the act of being (*actus essendi*) or as composing a propositional statement by connecting a predicate with a subject.¹⁰⁷ We cannot know the being of God in the first sense. But we can know that a proposition about God being is true, based on his effects, and notwithstanding the fact that we have no idea of what his being is.

The *quid est* of God is *omnino ignotum* during this life.¹⁰⁸ But we can go as far as knowing some of his essential attributes¹⁰⁹ by looking at his effects¹¹⁰ through the lenses of negation (what God is not) and eminence (which relation God has with everything he creates).¹¹¹ Our *concepts* of his effects cannot be transferred to such a transcendental cause as God, but when we *assert* that the creature resembles God, our judgment is right.

In brief, analogy does not bring about any positive knowledge of God, only a warrant not to be utterly equivocal when speaking of God. While, semantically, the names we use about God are not synonyms

¹⁰⁶ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2. On one hand, *esse* means *actum essendi*; on the other hand, it is the copula in the “compositio propositionis . . . quam anima adinvenit conjugens praedicatum subject.”

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Rom 1*, lec. 6, in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. R. Cai, 2 t. (Turin: Marietti, 1953).

¹⁰⁹ T.-D. Humbrecht, “La théologie négative chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* 94, no. 1 (1994), 83, citing: J.-H. Nicolas, *Dieu connu comme inconnu: Essai d’une critique de la connaissance théologique*, Bibliothèque Française de Philosophie (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966), 186.

¹¹⁰ Aristotle was able to demonstrate many things about God; St. Paul affirms, in Rom 1:26, that “invisibilia Dei per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur”: *invisibilia* designates the unique and single reality, utterly unknown of us, which in God corresponds to the diverse perfections we experience in creatures (wise, good, right).

¹¹¹ SCG I, ch. 30 *in fine*.

because they signify various mental grasps of created perfections (diversity of concept), pragmatically, all our names suppose a single referent, God himself (unity of *suppositum*). We know that the proposition “God exists” is true, but we do not know what existing means for God, because “God’s existence is the same as his essence, and as his essence is unknown so also is his existence.”¹¹²

***Sacra Doctrina* Is an Exercise in Systematic “Understatement”**

The propositions *esse actus est*¹¹³ and *Deus est suum esse* contain an extreme tension: they are as strongly asserted as their content remains negatively known.¹¹⁴ However, whereas his predecessors strove to coin an Eastern Baroque language of superessence and *sursumptio à la* Dionysius, Aquinas is satisfied with simple language. Piling up utterances will never exhaust the semantic content of *esse actus est*. Truth is not beyond discourse but within it.¹¹⁵ Aquinas states plainly this tautological appearance of being in saying that *primo in intellectu cadit ens*. Such a motto inspires his laconic style. As a true classic, he knows that a word will always be a word, and that *only acts can go beyond sentences*.

This is already the case in the question on God at the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*. There, the intertwining of discourse and meta-discourse ends up enhancing language as such. However, such a display of signifiers and discourses referring to one another does not weaken the argumentation, but invites to subsume it into action, especially the act of faith—“actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem.” Indeed, the possibility to make affirmative propositions on God depends on faith largely, as Aquinas makes clear by the end of the question on the divine names.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 1; see Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 156.

¹¹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In periermenias* 1, 5, §18–21: *est, simpliciter dictum, significat in actu esse*.

¹¹⁴ Like Gilson, one feels “l’impression que cette sorte de glorification de l’acte d’être est comme un dédommagement désenchanté, que le métaphysicien s’accorde, de l’impossibilité d’en dire plus.” É. Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l’être*, Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques (Paris: Vrin, 1983), 152.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁶ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 12, sc.

The Emphatic Display of the Words and of Language in Theology Is Correlative with a Semiotic Occasionalism

More generally, in his relation to language, Aquinas holds a sort “semiotic occasionalism.” For him, nobody can really teach anybody, unless he is helped by God the *interius magister*,¹¹⁷ because human teachers teach from outside, like physicians administering medicines. What they can do best is to organize signifiers in such a way that the *magister* can ignite them with the fire of intelligibility.¹¹⁸

This is quite clear in the necessity to devise proofs or ways demonstrating the existence of God. Desire is not a basis firm enough to assert the evidence of the existence of God—only the evidence of an innate desire for perfection/happiness.¹¹⁹ Neither is logic, because there is a difference between thinking *aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest* and knowing that it does exist.¹²⁰ Neither is truth because the passage from the diversity and generality of many truths to the uniqueness and exclusivity of the one absolute truth is not obvious.¹²¹ Identifying with God the entities deduced by the end of the examination of these experiences requires another act.

Hence the wording of the conclusions of the ways to the existence of God: they sound like “hermeneutic leaps”¹²² from words to an intended reality: “*aliquid primum movens*”: “*et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum*”; “*aliquam causam efficientem primam*”: “*quam omnes Deum nominant*”;

¹¹⁷ ST I, q. 117, a. 1, obj.1: “*Dicit enim Dominus, Matth. XXIII, ‘nolite vocari rabbi’; ubi dicit Glossa hieronymi, ‘ne divinum honorem hominibus tribuatis.’ Esse ergo magistrum pertinet proprie ad divinum honorem. Sed docere est proprium magistri. Homo ergo non potest docere, sed hoc est proprium Dei.*”

¹¹⁸ ST I, q. 117, a. 1, ad 1: “*Homo docens solummodo exterius ministerium adhibet, sicut medicus sanans, sed sicut natura interior est principalis causa sanationis, ita et interius lumen intellectus est principalis causa scientiae. Utrumque autem horum est a Deo. Et ideo sicut de Deo dicitur, ‘qui sanat omnes infirmitates tuas; ita de eo dicitur, qui docet hominem scientiam, in quantum lumen vultus eius super nos signatur, per quod nobis omnia ostenduntur.’*”

¹¹⁹ ST I, q. 2, a.1, ad 1.

¹²⁰ Hence *pace* his “Radical Orthodox” readers, Aquinas seems to admit *some* dualism between noetics and ontology (ST I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2: are noetic phenomena, thoughts less real than material things?).

¹²¹ ST I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3.

¹²² We borrow this expression from G. Dahan, *L'exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval*, XIIe-XIVe siècle, Patrimoines: Christianisme (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 435.

“aliquid quod est per se necessarium”; “aliquid quod est causa esse et bonitatis et cuiuslibet perfectionis in rebus omnibus”: “et hoc dicimus Deum.”¹²³ As George Lindbeck puts it, the five ways function as probable or external arguments.¹²⁴ *Ego sum qui sum* triggers the “ways” that provide with a setting convenient to perform the act of identifying the entities reached through them with the living “God.” Gilson must add paragraphs to *actually perform* the identification, which is only asserted by Aquinas (*intelligunt, dicimus*, etc.) Such act (like the act of choosing the right metaphoric words in analogy) supposes a whole way of life. And indeed Aquinas’s theology leans upon an overarching doxology in the context of the Gothic university.

A Theological Poetics Triggered by the Intimate Presence of God in the Act of Speaking

When he promotes a “metaphysics of the judgment” over against a “metaphysics of being,” Gilson is not far from describing a poetic program. Indeed, in his construal of Thomist metaphysics, speech appears as a required *detour*—in the footsteps of Moses—for whomever wishes to *approach* God. It is a detour insofar as representing or *signifying* the substance of the God in words designed to *signify* essences is impossible, but it is also a nice access to God, because it is possible to *designate* him through a word, namely, through a judgment.

Dealing with God:

Language Is a Detour Because It Is by Itself Essentialist

“Any name aims at signifying the nature or essence of something” different from the fact that it exists.¹²⁵ But, dealing with God, we should con-

¹²³ Conclusions of the five “proofs” in *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3, c.

¹²⁴ *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3 read according to *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2. See G. Lindbeck, “Discovering Thomas 1: The Classical Statement on Christian Theism,” *Una Sancta* (B) 24, no. 1 (1967): 45–52, esp. 47.

¹²⁵ *SCG I*, ch.22 ad *Hanc autem*. Language is designed to speak of corporeal realities, composed of form and matter: we can only name and know beings whose essence is not to exist, so that we cannot conceive of a being without essence. “The conceptual nature of our knowledge naturally leads us to conceive of existing as an indeterminate value which the essence would supplement and determine from the outside” (Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 51).

ceive of an essence that would be one and the same with its existence. This is probably the reason why Aquinas refrains from saying bluntly that God does not have an essence.

Now, it is hard to stay at the level of *esse* as act and not reduce it to a state or a concept; it is nearly impossible to “teach it without betraying it.”¹²⁶ Sometimes Aquinas himself attempts to integrate the silence of *consent* to reality within the theoretical discourse. Quoting a convoluted text from the *quaestio De Potentia*, where Aquinas tries to rectify his readers’ all-too-natural (conceptual) take on *esse*, Gilson speaks of “such an extreme effort [produced by Thomas] that the meaning makes the phrases burst out.”¹²⁷

*Because “the Limits of Language Coincide with the Borders of Being,”¹²⁸
It Is No Surprise That a Special Poetics Will Be Required to Think and
Speak about God: A Poetics of Judgment*

Static definitions present essences to the intuition of the intellect, whereas only the *act* of judging can refer the mind to the dynamics of *esse* as existence. The nature of judgment makes it fit to play this part: judging is stating a unity by means of a complex (mental) *act* of composing terms. Even though the composition does not follow the order of reality,¹²⁹ the

¹²⁶ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 49.

¹²⁷ Quoting *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9 (“Hoc quod dico *esse* est inter omnia perfectissimum [...] est actualitas omnium actuum et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum. Nec intelligendum est quod ei quod dico *esse* aliquid addatur quod sit eo formalius, ipsum determinans sicut actus potentiam, *esse* enim quod huiusmodi est, est aliud secundum essentiam ab eo cui additur determinandum”;—cf. *ST* I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3), Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 49, comments: “Thomas fait ici comme un effort extrême et tel que le sens fait presque éclater les formules, pour exprimer la spécificité de l’*ipsum esse* et sa transcendance.” “Parler de la distinction d’essence et d’existence, c’est s’exprimer comme si l’existence était elle-même une essence, l’essence de l’acte d’exister. C’est donc s’engager à traiter comme une chose ce qui est un acte, par où l’on se trouve presque infailliblement condamné à se représenter la composition d’essence et d’exister comme s’il s’agissait d’une sorte de préparation chimique” (ibid., 50).

¹²⁸ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 52, commenting on the “vigueur des formules dont use saint Thomas et qui burinent en quelque sorte ces pensées.”

¹²⁹ Floucat, *L’intime fécondité de l’intelligence*, 133, citing *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, ad 3: “Differt compositio intellectus a compositione rei: nam ea quae componuntur in re, sunt diversa; compositio autem intellectus est signum identitatis eorum quae componuntur.”

intellect itself must have concretely *experienced* that this composition is in keeping with reality.¹³⁰ The proposition becomes a sign of the real identity of the elements composed.¹³¹ In the words of Gilson, “the discursive movement of the judgment *imitates* the flow of existential energy whose act secures the unity of a real substance.”¹³² In brief: it is a matter of lived—albeit quite “intellectual”—experience.

Now, “divine simplicity is perfect because it is pure act, therefore it can only be stated by an act of the faculty of judging, without being conceived of.”¹³³ In the case of God, the center targeted by our judgments is pure act, an immanent divine knowing and willing;¹³⁴ the act of judging is fitted to refer to it by affirming the identity of a given perfection with the divine *esse*. The structural diversity of the proposition results from our rational activity, while its unity denotes that of the One being known.¹³⁵ It is a sublime and symbolic experience in which the human mind imitates in his Word the divine simplicity.

The very enunciation of the proposition represents the divine Oneness, beyond the irreducible plurality of its terms.¹³⁶ Enunciation plays here the role of signification: it *represents* the unity of God. As abstract as it may be, it is a sort of sacramental image enabling us to *think* immediately of God, as any other image according to Aquinas, although we cannot see him: “intellectus immediate de Deo cogitat quamvis non immediate Deum videat.”¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Ibid., 136: “En affirmant être ce qui est ou ne pas être ce qui n’est pas, [l’esprit] unit intentionnellement la quiddité abstraite à son exister, ou il la disjoint au contraire. Par là, il proportionne l’esprit à l’union intrinsèque de l’essence et de son acte d’être qui constitue le *quod est*, ou bien à la négation de toute mesure d’être qui signifie le *quod non est*.”

¹³¹ ST I, q. 85, a. 5, ad 3: “Differt compositio intellectus a compositione rei: nam ea quae componuntur in re, sunt diversa; compositio autem intellectus est signum identitatis eorum quae componuntur.”

¹³² Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 59.

¹³³ Ibid., 130.

¹³⁴ ST I, q. 13, a. 7, ad 3.

¹³⁵ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 154–55; SCG I, ch. 36.

¹³⁶ ST I, q. 13, a. 12, c.: “Hanc ergo pluritatem quae est secundum rationem, repraesentat pluralitatem praedicati et subjecti: unitatem vero repraesentat intellectus per compositionem.”

¹³⁷ Why not apply to the “abstract” image of the proposition what Aquinas states about any other image in *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 7, ad 8? (“Etiam quando aliquid videtur

We Return to the Mirroring Experience of Exodus 3

Like the name uttered from the burning bush, God lets himself be known in theological praxis as it were in a mirror. He is in the depth of human thought and word, as the light giver of the first principles. Prestigious Thomists speak of these principles as “truths you can only see or state, neither demonstrate nor refute,”¹³⁸ a phenomenology that resembles the stunning effect of the name given in the burning bush. Indeed, Aquinas connects immediately the knowledge of the first principles with the uncreated light participated in the intellectual light.¹³⁹ *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*. Fundamentally, the real distinction between essence and the act of being encompasses a reciprocal foundation of the divine name and human intelligence. Indeed, distinguishing between essence and *esse* in all that exists entails asserting a pure act of being (which God is)—unless nothing at all be intelligible, and the very activity of the intellect collapse.¹⁴⁰

More precisely, the *habitus identitatis*, in which the first principle

per similitudinem alterius rei, potest contingere quod videns rem per medium cogitet de re immediate, sine hoc quod eius cognitio convertatur ad aliquam aliam rem, quia in illud medium non convertitur ut est res quaedam sed ut est imago illius rei quae per ipsam cognoscitur: idem autem est motus intellectus in imaginem in quantum est imago et in imaginatum, quamvis alius motus sit intellectus in imaginem in quantum est res quaedam et in id cuius est imago. Et ideo quando per similitudinem creaturae quam intellectus habet penes se non convertitur in creaturam ut est res quaedam sed solum ut est similitudo rei, tunc immediate de Deo cogitat quamvis non immediate Deum videat.”)

¹³⁸ Cf. É. Gilson, “Le Moyen Age comme *Saeculum modernum*: Langage et doctrine de l’Être chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” in *Concetto, storia, miti e immagini del Medio Evo*, vol. 7, *Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and Corso internazionale di alta cultura: Civiltà europea e civiltà veneziana, aspetti e problemi*, V. Branca (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), section 18.

¹³⁹ *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 6: “Prima principia quorum cognitio est nobis innata, sunt quaedam similitudines increatae veritatis; unde secundum quod per eas de aliis iudicamus, dicimur iudicare de rebus per rationes immutabiles, vel veritatem increatam.” It is a noetic instance of the overall participation of anything created to the creator. Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 93, a. 1, ad 3: “Unaquaeque res intantum habet de veritate in quantum imitatur intellectum divinum.”

¹⁴⁰ Rineau, *Jugement et concept*, 116. “En adoptant la thèse centrale de la distinction réelle d’*esse* et *essentia*, saint Thomas fonde de manière réciproque l’existence de Dieu (comme acte pur) et la validité même de l’intelligence humaine: la distinction d’essence et d’acte d’être, repérable en tout ce qui est, ‘impose de toute nécessité d’affirmer l’acte pur d’être sous peine de rendre les choses radicalement intelligibles, et pour autant de renier l’intellect lui-même en ses exigences les plus fondatrices.”

is rooted, can be construed as a *habitus Dei*. This *habitus* is not known firstly as a propositional principle. It is rather a condition of possibility for any cognizance, a target, mysteriously focused in all the identifications we perform while thinking.¹⁴¹ Now, only the *esse purum* implements the absolute identity that kindles and fuels the activity of the mind. And since that *esse* is nothing else but God, the *habitus identitatis* is a *habitus Dei*. In this habitual knowledge, God is not present as an object expressly desired or known in the mind, but as its deepest desire, triggering its entire life.¹⁴² The absolute truth of intelligence depends on its openness to the divine.¹⁴³

At the linguistic level, we could go further with literary deconstruction, and show that there is a reciprocal foundation of Scriptures and rhetoric, the divine Logos and human language, and moreover that the work of Thomas Aquinas contains a Christological foundation for language. Étienne Gilson evoked it in a letter speaking of “the amazing words of St. Thomas, that language is an analogue of the Incarnation of the Word.”¹⁴⁴ J. M. Schoot explores it in his book *Christ the Name of God*.¹⁴⁵ Metaphysics may understand this specular copresence of God

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Cf. Rousselot, *L'intellectualisme*.

¹⁴⁴ “Letter of Étienne Gilson to Jacques Maritain, 6th April 1953,” in *Étienne Gilson et Jacques Maritain: Deux approches de l'être: Correspondance 1923–1971*, ed. G. Prouvost (Paris: Vrin, 1991), 187. Cf. *ST* I, q. 27 and the explicative note 6 by H.-M. Dondaine, *Revue des Jeunes: La Trinité 1* (Paris: Société Saint-Jean-l'Évangéliste-Desclées, 1946), 161–62; *SCG N* ch.11; *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 2, a. 1 and q. 9, a. 5; and the commentary of these passages by D. Millet-Gérard, *Claudel thomiste?*, *Littérature de notre siècle 9* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999).

¹⁴⁵ Schoot, *Christ the Name of God* explores this analogy at length. The analogy with the Incarnation concerns first of all the structure of language, combining sound and meaning. A champion of Christological apophatism, Thomas Aquinas nevertheless proposes an approximation of the hypostatic union in a comparison with language: for example, the union of sense and sound in phonation (*ST* III, q. 6, a. 6, obj. 3 and ad 3 [about the Incarnation]; III, q. 62, a. 4, ad 1 [about grace]; III, q. 60, a. 6 c. [about the overall fittingness of these mysteries with anthropology]). Christ is “the way, the truth and the life”: the signifier, the signified and the referent. *Logos* means: Jesus’s own Word, the Word on Jesus, Jesus himself. This is wonderfully embedded in the enunciative structure of the Gospels itself: see the description of its Möbius-strip structure in O.-T. Venard, *Pagina sacra: Le passage de l'Écriture sainte à l'écriture théologique illustré par l'exemple de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, *Théologiques* (Geneva: Ad Solem-Le Cerf, 2010), chap. 4, section 1.

and human mind or language as the noetic expression of the sophisticated causality of the *aitia* that Thomas inherits from Dionysius, according to which the cause may be simultaneous with its effects, since *they* define the cause *qua* cause.¹⁴⁶

The NT interprets this copresence Christologically. We cannot do anything good but in Christ,¹⁴⁷ to whose body we belong; trying to seize him is first having be seized by him.¹⁴⁸ In a total biblical and theological coherence,¹⁴⁹ Aquinas continually spoke of God and Christ as the goal, the cause and the fuel of his study: God being both the object we strive to see, and the giver of sight and light.

Transition

The acts of speaking and writing, signs of the act of thinking, become nearly sacramental, active participation in the Word of God himself *experienced* rather than *understood* conceptually. Therefore we should not refrain from speaking of God—to the contrary. That seems to be one of the best ways to approach him—an experience we preachers do daily, do we not?

Conclusion

In conclusion, allow me to make two points: one about metaphysics and the other about theology. First, Étienne Gilson warned us several decades ago: “Reason does not like what it cannot conceive of, and since existence is unconceivable, philosophy strives at avoiding it. . . . However, unless Thomism endeavors to be in touch with the heart of reality, he

¹⁴⁶ Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 31–32.

¹⁴⁷ Eph 2:10.

¹⁴⁸ Phil 3:8–11.

¹⁴⁹ J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin, maître spirituel: Initiation 2*, Vestigia 19 (Fribourg:—Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg-Cerf, 1996), 122 : “De la foi à la béatitude, en passant par l'expérience des ‘missions divines,’ le croyant expérimente Dieu comme sublime: ‘S’il existait une réalité qui fût simultanément la source de la capacité de voir et la réalité vue elle-même, il faudrait que celui qui voit reçoive de cette réalité et la capacité de voir et la ‘forme’ par laquelle le voir s’actualise” (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 2). Compte tenu du fait qu’ici-bas “nous marchons dans la foi et non dans la claire vision,” c’est exactement ce qui se produit dans cette présence spéciale [mission dans l’âme]: Dieu ne vient pas seulement à la rencontre de l’homme, il lui donne encore et en même temps la possibilité de le rencontrer.”

will not be fruitful,” especially in the *problématique* of God.¹⁵⁰ It may be that we will not be able to stay in touch with the heart of reality unless we pay equal attention to word and language, which enable the metaphysics of judgment.

Second, if we study theology not only as a doctrine but also as a poetics, we discover an Aquinas even more “biblical” than we could imagine. The biblical shifts from semantic to pragmatic and from predication to *deixis* mainly point to an experience within the word, which refers to “the unattainable yet inescapable interlocutor beyond every name”—an experience of “sensing its incomprehensibility,”¹⁵¹ culminating in prayer¹⁵² and liturgy,¹⁵³ where “speech . . . acts by transporting itself in the direction of the One whom it denominates.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps we should re-envision theology as doxology.

Indeed, in a language human beings can understand, could a God creator of free creatures say anything but “I AM,” and invite his audience to believe him? By plainly uttering himself, God gives a sign of both omnipotence and weakness: omnipotence because “he [has] no one greater by whom to swear, so he [swears] by himself”¹⁵⁵ and weakness because his words, necessarily human if they are to be understood by human beings, will be inserted in the games of human languages marked by sin and death. Hence the deeply moving sentence by Northrop Frye: “as soon as God condescends to speak, he dooms himself to death.”¹⁵⁶ *This culminates in Jesus*. What brings about Jesus’s death is the tautological structure of his

¹⁵⁰ Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 65.

¹⁵¹ Basil quoted by Marion, *In Excess*, 151. “God remains incomprehensible, not imperceptible—without adequate concept, not without giving intuition . . . undoing of knowledge arising from an excess, not a lack” (*ibid.*, 160).

¹⁵² Cf. the circular shaping of prayer as described by J.-L. Chrétien, “La parole blessée,” in *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Criterion idées, ed. M. Henry and J.-L. Marion (Paris: Criterion, 1992), 55.

¹⁵³ Marion, *In Excess*, 157: “it is never a matter of speaking of God, but always of speaking to God.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵⁵ Heb 6:13.

¹⁵⁶ See N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); C. Malamoud, trans., *Le Grand Code: La Bible et la littérature*, Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 1:168.

words. Their significance ends up depending on himself, or more precisely, on what his interlocutor believes he is.

The phenomenology of prayer as an ongoing quarrel of lovers that can be quenched only by continuing to speak with one another and not by quitting¹⁵⁷ might illuminate the sublime explicit of the treatise *De ente et essentia*, where Aquinas, after having removed from God any composition of *intentiones logicae*, thus prohibiting to know God's essence, speaks of him as the *finis et consummatio* of the very act of speaking and teaching.¹⁵⁸ Also, it helps us understand Thomas's heroic endeavor of composing the *Summa theologiae* despite his acute awareness of the inadequacy of language, but *cum confidentia divini auxilii* (*ST*, *Proemium*).¹⁵⁹

Aquinas's theology is entirely circumscribed in the circle of the divine tautology: from the *quid est Deus?* of his childhood to the skillful Christological apophatism of the *Tertia pars*.

You have spoken well of me Thomas, what would you like for a reward?

Nothing except you, my Lord!

This ventriloquy with the crucifix reenacts the specular experience of Moses and the burning bush. The invitation of God and the response of man mirroring one another culminate in the love of Christ for the sake of Christ.



¹⁵⁷ Chrétien, "La parole blessée," 55.

¹⁵⁸ "Sic ergo patet quomodo essentia est in substantiis et in accidentibus, et quomodo in substantiis compositis et simplicibus, et qualiter in his omnibus et intentiones universales logicae inveniuntur: excepto primo quod quidem est in fine simplicitatis, cui non convenit ratio generis aut speciei et per consequens nec definitio propter suam simplicitatem, in quo sit finis et consummatio huius sermonis. Amen." Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, chap. 6, quoted by Gilson, *Le thomisme*, 132n3.

¹⁵⁹ Aquinas is utterly faithful to the biblical pedagogy of prayer when he suggests that man somehow always begs for himself when he prays to God, who waits for him to open the door. Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 83, aa. 2, 15 and 16.

