

Thomism in Ecstasy: Olivier-Thomas Venard on the Wording of Theology and the Expropriation of Cultural Discourses

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I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN this reflection with a very general dilation on the theological achievement of the Dominican Olivier-Thomas Venard, rendered in his trilogy of *Pagina sacra*, *La langue de l'ineffable*, and *Littérature et théologie*, and brought to the attention of the Anglophone theological public by the translation efforts of Francesca Murphy and Kenneth Oakes in their *A Poetic Christ: Thomist Reflections on Scripture, Language and Reality* (Bloomsbury, 2019). The substantial five-hundred-page anthology still represents only a third of the trilogy. Yet, even in translation the trilogy comes across as breathtakingly beautiful, not only because in large part it manifests the capacity to bear with and to bear the effects of glory rendered by the biblical text, but it also repeats at a distance a particular style of theology which, despite its theoretical sophistication, or precisely because of it, remains constantly in conversation with Scripture. For Venard, the figure of figures is none other than Thomas Aquinas. I will shortly provide a sketch of Venard's unusual figuration of Aquinas, but before I do, it is important to note that while it is true that Venard is anxious to establish the aesthetic register of Scripture and the copious theological production of Aquinas, he wishes to go a step further in speaking to both as forms of poetics: Scripture and the theology of Aquinas bear an analogy to each other in that both are forms of enunciation that brazenly deploy all available linguistic and rhetorical resources to render the Word which by definition represents the coincidence of the act of enunciation and the content.

The newly published translation makes us appreciate even more than

one did in the French trilogy the level of sophistication displayed in Venard's hermeneutics. With regard to Scripture, the philological performance is a match for the very best that one can find in German, while being vastly more knowledgeable in the history of interpretation, Patristic and medieval as well as modern, as well as being considerably more theoretically adept in its mastery of semiotics, ancient, medieval, and post-Saussurean. Yet beyond its singularity, Venard never forgets that the finality of Scripture is transformation, and he dares to think that this is also the aim of the most intellectually rigorous forms of Christian theology of which Aquinas represents an exemplary instance. Venard is not remotely interested in coming across as an original. Thus, when we read him on either Aquinas or Scripture, he will also acquaint us in the notes—without burdening his main text—with all the available scholarship in all the main languages of commentary. Venard does the Anglo-intellectual world a particular service, however, by drawing attention to the marvelous French scholarship on both. He introduces us to biblical commentators such as François Martin, Jean Grosjean, and Oswald Ducrot, among a host of others. With regard to French scholarship on the Bible he draws particular attention to discussions on the relation between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels which appear to be on an entirely different level from similar discussions in the German and English literature in terms that the theoretical apparatus deployed.

A similar phenomenon is observable in Venard's opening up of a treasure trove of French interpretation of Aquinas beyond the usual suspects of Chenu, Torrell, and more recently Gilles Emery. We are made aware of and come to appreciate Henri Paissac, Yves Floucat, Louis de Bonald, and Louis Lachance, who continue the *ressourcement* of the historical Aquinas, but in a new key. For these scholars, with whom Venard identifies himself, Aquinas is far more than a philosopher given to proofs of God's existence. He is even more than the theologian who gives functional priority to *sacra divina*, a stance that, indeed, has been taken in the past decades by English interpreters of Aquinas; he is more even than the theologian who is a medieval interpreter of John, Matthew, and Paul of the first order. The Aquinas that these French commentators prime for Venard is an Aquinas who thinks that the Word that is worded in Scripture is also worded differently in theological texts that engage searching intellects not satisfied with anything less than the truth, goodness, and beauty of and as the tri-personal God. For Venard, the greatness of the Word both in Scripture and in the theological tradition is its very vulnerability: the Cross is a form of knowledge as well as reality, the gift which is nothing less than everything can be rejected as well as accepted; although even when rejected, it can

demonstrate the capacity to exceed its own refusal.

Now, there can be no dodging the preciousness of a title that recalls Ron Hanson's *Mariette in Ecstasy* which has as its theme the clash between the scientific and religious assessments of the mystical experience of a cloistered nun. Still, I think there is something instructional in the particular use of "ecstasy" which precisely bears on the believability of a phenomenon. That the theology of Aquinas admits of the label "ecstatic" is just about as believable or unbelievable as the avowal of ecstatic Christian experiences according to the norms of the secular world. The theology of Aquinas has been widely labeled throughout its long history, but I am confident that its conjugation by ecstasy is non-standard. Aquinas has been held up as a model of analytic rigor and demonstration, an exemplar of what a comprehensive theological system would look like, a summary of Western intellectual history that might function as the guide for future ages, and also a form of thought that has a dynamic epistemological register as thinkers such as Rousselot, Maréchal, Maritain, Rahner, and Lonergan have shown. With less credibility Aquinas has been thought to be mystical precisely because we find him denouncing the elaborate semiotic and semantic procedures he deploys to elaborate Word and Wisdom in the *Summa theologiae* in his exclamation "all is straw." The genius of Venard's trilogy, which the translators manage to capture beautifully, is that all writing is the prolation or ecstasy of the Word paradigmatically spoken in the biblical text. Theology, as transcription and redescription, is in its munificent architecture calculated to be the vehicle of this ever-renewable speech act at once creative, preservative, and transformative. The ecstatic turn of Aquinas's theological "poetics"—or what Venard calls "Thomasian poetics"—has as its aim the human subject turned towards God and in loving hospitality towards the neighbor.

Venard's rendering of a "Thomasian poetics" or "poetic Thomasianism" is not simply another in a long line of linguistic interpretations that insist that Aquinas pays considerable attention to the language of terms and does not innocently think of signs in terms of reference. The linguistic Aquinas rendered by Venard is far more replete than we are accustomed to, and Venard's mastery of discourse theory and post-structuralist semiotics distinguishes him from most Anglo supporters of a linguistic Aquinas who are not expert in medieval speculative grammar and who, usually but not always, tend to see a proto-linguistic Aquinas through the speech act theory of Austin or the linguistic pragmatics of the later Wittgenstein. Much more would need to be said about particular Venard contributions to the linguistic register of Aquinas than I can say here. Rather than going into the intricacies of Venard's argument perhaps it might be better to get

a flavor of his linguistic and poetic contribution through two contrasts in and through which we can move from the more- to the less-known. The first contrast I would like to construct is that between Venard's poetics of the Word and Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. While they have much in common, thinking through the differences allows us to get something of a fix on Venard's unique contribution. The second contrast is between Venard and the postmodern author and thinker Umberto Eco. Eco is chosen because, while like Venard he is an aficionado of medieval aesthetics and is similarly expert in medieval, early modern, and post-modern semiotics, he insists that Aquinas's thought is incapable of being stretched in such a way that it can account for modern and/or modernist works of art. Against Eco Venard claims that read properly Aquinas's thought is poetic enough, ecstatic enough, to do precisely this.

Venard's Theological Poetics and Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics

With Radical Orthodoxy in the form of John Milbank championing Venard's Christological poetics, one has to be careful not to be too apodictic in claiming that the analogue for Venard's project is in the end provided by Hans Urs von Balthasar. Nonetheless, there seem to be sufficient grounds for asserting at the very least that the great Swiss theologian's articulation of a theological aesthetics serves as a template for Venard's bold articulation of a Christological poetics. First, and most formally, if one distinguishes between *program outline* and *sustained theological performance*, then Balthasar can be thought to provide a template for the differentiated, complex, yet highly integrated theological articulation of Venard's trilogy which involves the explication and application of Scripture, the uplifting of the unique contribution made by theological science, and a significant exhibition of the scope and depth of biblical and theological encounter with modern cultural discourses. Second, it should be noted that throughout his trilogy the stance taken by Venard towards Balthasar is almost reverential. Balthasar's insistence on the incommensurability of the biblical text is taken to heart; his Catholic specification of the principled difference between the Word and the words of the Bible and yet their equally principled inseparability is repeated; his essentially Irenaean understanding of the relation between the Old and New Testament is underscored; his use of the category of glory as a central thread uniting the Old and New Testament is highlighted; his brazen avowal of the Gospel of John as making a unique theological contribution to understanding the divine and the divine-human relation, while also serving as the point of reference and integration of the Synoptic Gospels is vigorously supported; his judgment that at their best the Patristic and Scholastic traditions orbit

the biblical text and that the technical language of theology not only does not impede fidelity to Scripture, but facilitates it, is embraced with conviction; the Swiss theologian's openness to philosophy understood as a discourse propelled by wonder and perplexity and characterized by conceptual sophistication is not only affirmed but copiously and judiciously acted upon; and finally Balthasar's opening up of theology to the insights and language of literature in general, and poetry in particular, is non-identically repeated as Venard explores the relations between both theology and Scripture and modern French poetry. In terms both of the range of themes, the judgments taken on board, and the level of integration, it seems safe to say that it is Balthasar rather than Maritain who is Venard's specifically Catholic precursor, despite the fact that Maritain is treated with great respect throughout the trilogy and that it is obviously Maritain rather than Balthasar who provides the template for the kind of creative Thomism represented and illustrated in Venard's trilogy.

Still, despite the massive continuities between the two theologians, there are salient differences between Venard's trilogy and Balthasar's multi-volume *Glory of the Lord* in which he elaborates his theological aesthetics. I will limit myself to three. The first concerns the degree of sanction provided the historical-critical method. While both affirm the validity of its use in interpreting the biblical text, and do so in the context of understanding biblical language to be performative as well as descriptive and thus aimed at existential transformation in the hearers of the Word, their measure of enthusiasm for historical-critical method is quite definitely variable. At the very least, Balthasar's enthusiasm is muted, drawn as he is towards Patristic exegesis and de Lubac's fourfold scheme of interpreting Scripture (literal-historical, moral, allegorical, and mystical) as an essential frame. In contrast, Venard lifts up the virtues of philological analysis which he thinks is capable of exposing transformative meaning every bit as much as allegorical and mystical interpretation. At the same time, Venard does not provide a *carte blanche* to the historical-critical exegete. For the French Dominican *Dei Verbum* is regulative in its insistence on the reality of revelation and the consequent incommensurability of the biblical text is intended to forestall, on the one hand, the imperialistic claims of any interpretive method to be the key to unlocking the Word of God and, on the other, the claim that the words of Scripture are reductively the expressions of human authors shaped and formed by expectations, social norms, and religious and moral traditions.

A second major difference between Venard and Balthasar concerns the extent to which Aquinas is a featured player in their respective theological aesthetics and Christological poetics elaborations. If we take Balthasar

first, we can say that there are numerous points throughout *Glory of the Lord* where Aquinas is an important figure for him. In *Glory of the Lord* IV, for example, Balthasar determines that Aquinas is an important metaphysical voice that should not be eschewed since he maintains the best of the Neoplatonic tradition while representing a recovery of Aristotle's realist metaphysics. In addition, in *Glory of the Lord* V Balthasar defends Aquinas against Heidegger's objection that metaphysics in general and medieval metaphysics in particular represent a flagrant transgression of the ontological difference between Being and beings by identifying Being with the highest being. In Heidegger's philosophical horizon what he takes to be the entification of reality is not only the category mistakes of category mistakes; it fatefully and fatally vacuums mystery and event from human existence. For Balthasar, the ontological difference is subtended by the even greater difference between the creator and the created in and through which mystery and gratuity are more fully captured and more adequately rendered as personal rather than impersonal. While Balthasar here can rely on other twentieth-century Catholic thinkers such as Erich Przywara and Gustav Siewerth, it has to be said that the distinction between the creator and created has been a key ingredient in Catholic apologetics from the early to middle nineteenth century, is pivotal in the emergence of neo-Thomism, is ratified in the First Vatican Council, and comes to be a core feature in the different articulations of Christian philosophy provided by Maritain and Gilson. Of course, Aquinas is also a pre-text in *Glory of the Lord* I. In this, the foundational volume of Balthasar's theological aesthetics, however, it seems as if the Angelic Doctor shares space with Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius and, arguably, is eclipsed by Bonaventure.

In summary, while Aquinas is hardly absent from the three thousand pages of *Glory of the Lord*, his presence seems to have been reduced to one among a select band of Catholic thinkers. This is disappointing news for any thinker of Thomist persuasion, Venard not excepted, even if, as we have already pointed out, his scintillating articulation of a linguistic and thoroughly post-structuralist Aquinas is hardly common fare, and nowhere throughout the trilogy do we find a trace of Thomistic triumphalism in which Aquinas is considered to be *the* philosopher and theologian of the Catholic church. With enormous discretion throughout the trilogy a particular Aquinas is recommended to our attention as helping us to understand the God we witness to and through whom we come to be who we are. The recommendation of the Angelic Doctor is unreserved, and the analyses of Aquinas texts superbly detailed yet elegant. Taking a very telescopic view, perhaps the best way of understanding the status of Aquinas in Venard's trilogy is not after the pattern of *Aeterni Patris*, but

rather than of *Fides et Ratio* in which if Aquinas is not a singularity, he is, nonetheless, special in the range and depth of his philosophical and theological performance. Neither in *Glory of the Lord* nor in other parts of his triptych of *Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic* does Balthasar elevate Aquinas to this extent. Part of the reason likely has to do with a concern that Aquinas is not a biblical theologian in the way that Augustine and Origen are, as well as other medieval theologians, Bonaventure for sure and, arguably, even Anselm. It is true that nowhere does Balthasar deny scriptural depth to Aquinas. At the same time nowhere does he draw specific attention to it. In contrast, for Venard, Aquinas is a biblical theologian all the way down and across, not simply for the reason that we can no longer ignore Aquinas's biblical commentaries, above all his commentaries on the Gospels of John and Matthew, but also because it is impossible to read the *Summa theologiae* without taking account of the intrinsic relationship between Wisdom and Word and how the latter directly regulates large sections of Aquinas's masterpiece and is the telos of the rest.

A third difference between Venard and Balthasar worth mentioning concerns the role modern—or better, modernist—literature plays in Venard's trilogy in comparison to *Glory of the Lord* and between Venard's trilogy and the entire span of Balthasar's triptych of *Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*. Of course, as one puts the work of the two authors side by side one notices other broader and more obvious differences, including the fact that Venard is not anywhere near as interested as Balthasar is in tracking the historical interaction between the biblical text, theology, and the Western literary tradition in just about all of its genres and in the process adjudicating the question which genre of literature (lyric poetry, epic poetry, drama, novel) makes the best conversation partner for Christian theology. The conversation between theology and poetry is something that we find early in Balthasar's work. Balthasar's dissertation (1930) and his *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (1937–1939) focus on German-speaking poets such as Hölderlin and Rilke, and he returns to these poets again and again throughout his work, perhaps most conspicuously in *Glory of the Lord* V. But it is not only German poetry that is of interest to Balthasar. The natalist poetry of Charles Péguy with its extraordinary Marian frame is celebrated in *Glory of the Lord* III and, of course, from the beginning of his career Balthasar both recommends and translates the poetry of Paul Claudel, which he takes to be energized by the Word and capable of taking up the profane words of the world into the Word and thereby redeeming them.

By and large, however, with regard to his French canon, as with regard to other non-French poets, Balthasar deals with poets who are friendly

towards Christianity. Here Venard, who limits himself mainly to modern French poetry, comes across as by far the greater risk-taker. More in the tradition of Maritain, Venard focuses on French modernist poetry. Instead of elevating Baudelaire, as Maritain does, Venard's reflections on poetry circle around Mallarmé, Ponge, and Rimbaud. The last-named represents for him the plenary example of a modern poet who has self-consciously left Christianity behind, and who yet cannot resist the attraction of the luminous figure of Christ, nor fail to recall the nest of biblical symbols and narratives that render him. Venard makes the audacious and counter-intuitive claim not only that the Bible, as the words that testify to the Word, has the capacity to enlist and counter explicit unbelief in modernity, but also that the philosophy and theology of Aquinas has a similar capacity. The latter claim, or what might be regarded as the second aspect of a more complex claim, is on the surface startling. Yet if we remember just how ecstatic, for Venard, the Word is in Aquinas's thought and how much it animates his theological procedure, then perhaps it makes far more sense than at first it might appear. Venard is here travelling on a very different path than the modern Hegelian dialectic of the death of God in which the experience of the very absence of the divine functions as its re-inscription. Rather, Venard is referring to the paradoxical nature of Rimbaud's poetic response which while refusing Christianity holds to Christ and his prophets and saints as the measure by which to judge a fatuous modernity and its jaded and flatulent literary expressions.

Venard and Umberto Eco: Commanding or Suffering Chaosmos

If Venard's theological poetics is ecstatic, it is so in significant part because it immerses itself in and threads itself through the particular subject matters of Scripture, Aquinas's philosophy and theology, and modernist literature. It is through the thickest of descriptions, rather than making relationships themselves the theme, that in his trilogy Venard allows the intricacies of these relationships to show themselves. Intrinsically tied to the Word, a "Thomasian" theology demonstrates its power of assimilation of modern culture not only by being able to explain, and thus include, both modes of modern literature that are friendly to Christianity and modes of aesthetic performance regulated by form and light, but also modes of literature hostile to Christianity (modernist) and regulated more nearly by the sublime that semiotically deranges and semantically maddens the reader of the text. Given this, it should come as no surprise that Venard touches also on various kinds of postmodern literary theories that eschew significance as well as reference. Here Venard shows himself to be particularly vexed by the post-Saussurean semiotic theories associ-

ated with the names of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

Given the specificities and peculiarities of Venard's theological poetics, however, ultimately its foil is provided by neither Barthes nor Derrida, nor for that matter any other French postmodern thinker. The foil I would suggest is provided by the Italian postmodern of gargantuan talent, that is, Umberto Eco. Not only is the creator of *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* a master of semiotic theory in general and a connoisseur of medieval and early modern semiotics in particular, but he is an adept when it comes to medieval aesthetics and is especially knowledgeable of Thomistic aesthetics which he admits has some—largely anachronistic—currency in modern literature in that it both regulates and is commented on in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*. Crucially, albeit accompanied with the kind of downplaying of the role of God as the "transcendental signified" one finds in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, it is Eco who asks the question of whether a medieval or specifically Thomistic aesthetic of form and light is adequate to the modern experience of language as a chain of signifiers whose meaning is liquid and whose correspondence with reality is deferred or whether another aesthetic entirely, that is, an aesthetic of the chaosmos rather than the cosmos, is called for. The question is as important as the answer, for the question unites Venard and Eco as much as the answer divides. Eco, of course, resolutely decides in favor of chaosmos, which in the post-Kantian horizon of aesthetics within which he operates effectively means a choice for the sublime over the aesthetic. Without prejudice to the likes of Mallarmé, who is a default French exemplum, once again Joyce is emblematic for Eco, only this time the Joyce of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, that is, the Joyce who puts behind him straightforward story-telling and the illusion of reliable meaning. Of course, this Joyce is also the Joyce of Derrida, who sees no reason to choose between Mallarmé and the Irish French immigrant.

It does not take a great deal of wit to imagine a variety of apologetic responses emerging from Catholic theology as it deals with an aggressive modernity in which it has to face simultaneously challenges to the discursive authority of the biblical text and responses of incredulity and derision regarding its claim that even in its state of faded glory theology still remains queen of the sciences. If the natural sciences must necessarily be regarded as the main contender to the discursive authority of theology, so also can art and even more specifically literature. One knows that it can be so because in fact it has been so, French symbolist poetry providing a plenary example alongside German and English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Modes of apologetic adaptation are numerous. A possible and also actual Catholic response is to dispense with Aquinas

altogether on the grounds that even if one could demonstrate that there was a gap between the historical Thomas and neo-Thomism, pragmatically it would not be of value to turn the difference into the Catholic cause. Whatever the internal benefits with respect to the Catholic sense of coherence and consistency across the centuries, unburying the real Aquinas would look like a very circuitous way of handling the pressing crisis of discursive authority in modernity. Which is not to say that Aquinas might not be kept in play, though where the emphasis would fall would depend in large part on which discourses are presumed to be rivals. If literature assumes this mantle, there exists a broad vocabulary of option: for example, one might shrink Thomas either by cutting off his aesthetic from his Trinitarian and Christological commitments and/or the Bible as the normative expression of the Word, or to all intents and purposes shirk him by blending him in with more thoroughgoing apophatic form of theology whose "negative capability" for dealing with a modern lack of confidence in the signified would be more obvious. Rather than going down any of these apologetic tracks, which ultimately prove to be *cul de sacs*, Venard doubles down on the integration of philosophy and theology in Aquinas as well as his recollecting and recasting of both of these Western traditions, insists on the mutual fructifying of theology and Scripture as both scans and scansions of the Word, and underscores the central role the Gospel of John plays both as the acme of testimony and as the crucial point of mediation between Scripture and "Thomasian" theology.

It is only a slight exaggeration, then, to say that throughout his great trilogy Venard performs an inversion that is Nietzschean in its upsetting of expectations: he essentially dismisses the law of inverse proportion when it comes to the relation between the premodern and the modern. Venard's law is the law of more: the more concerted the metaphysical impulse, the more determinately Trinitarian and Christological the theology, the more influential the biblical text in theology and practice, the more insistent the aesthetic posture, the greater the chance that theology can assimilate and expropriate cultural production in secular modernity that either explicitly refuses Christianity or rules out its Thomasian rendition. Venard is convinced that the Thomasian rendition of Christianity, and thus centrally the Word that has been paradigmatically worded by Scripture, has the capacity for stretching in and beyond the proliferation and autonomism of signs. A Thomasian Christological poetics has the capacity to vouchsafe the prophetic and critical elements of modern revolt, take on board its radical searching which recalls what is best in Augustine and Aquinas, and counter the erosion of meaning while funding the hope that the logic of the question supposes, if not an actual answer, then answerabil-

ity in principle. For Venard, precisely because Aquinas's Christ is Logos, he is at once *langue* and *parole* stretching across the thundering denial of meaning and the performative deformation of meaning in modernist and postmodern texts. This is to speak merely formally. Materially specified, the Cross and resurrection, which in Aquinas mark the Word's infinite reach into the world of signs and meaning, traverse the loss of significance and non-violently recuperate significance. Together Cross and resurrection leave an indelible mark on discourse itself.

If this is the general claim, then, the test case turns out to be the poetry of the precocious Rimbaud who lived for art, as art blessed him, before he deserted it for the mundane life of commerce. One can read Venard to say that in *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer* Rimbaud's very execrations of the Church, priestly office, and precept paradoxically testify to the power of Christ as the supreme form of life. Indeed, the testimony to Christ, but also the prophets and saints that constellate around him, serve for Rimbaud as the measure for the poverty of the facile contemporary poetry that is *l'art pour l'art*, at once a poetry of pure form and purely formulaic, a poetry made up exclusively of signifiers and completely unhaunted by a signified that is not fully available to us in the present and that resides either in an irremediable past or the unapproachable future. For Venard—and here he seems to say Rimbaud is in agreement—a poetry worthy of the name, that is, a poetry that is a discourse of illumination and prophecy in that it moves towards a condition of testimony and thus transformation of the conditions of existence, will necessarily echo in its images and diction the biblical text. It is this echoing which saves poetry from its tendency towards moralism and even more from its tendency towards both vacuity and solipsism.

For Venard, however, it is not enough that the power of the Word be demonstrated in literatures hospitable to Christianity or which share a common vocation to meaning. The power of a Christological poetics is demonstrated in and through its stretch across the gap of the denial of its pertinence and a denial of meaning. Venard both deepens and complicates Augustine's ruminations on the *spolia Aegyptiorum* in *De doctrina Christiana* by enlarging the scope of what can be enlisted or expropriated by the Word. At the same time there is no triumphalism: the Word that traverses the land of unlikeness is involved in a feedback loop whereby the poetry it expropriates capacitates the explication of Scripture and fertilizes and reanimates theology in eminent danger of giving way to the sclerosis of a system of propositions. Needless to say, any viable account of how the Word can traverse and express itself in a medium that would oppose it would necessarily have to take account of the Holy Spirit or better the

relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit, who hovers over meaning and stretches over the abyss of its loss. While it is not a point that comes up, one wonders whether it is just here where Venard is most prepared to venture something like a literal sense of inspiration when it comes to modern literary production, he also has not put in something like an anti-Joachimite fail-safe after the manner of theologians like de Lubac and Balthasar.

Not only in the volume explicitly devoted to poetry, but throughout Venard's trilogy as a whole, Rimbaud functions as a synecdoche of modernist literature that has uprooted itself from the Christian tradition and which now proceeds under the guidance of an aesthetic in which semantic *dérèglement* finds its subjective correlative in the chaos of modern experience, at once accepted and invented. Answering a postmodern such as Eco, whether consciously or not, effectively outbidding him, is one of the most significant achievements of Venard's trilogy. It certainly commends him to John Milbank, who has a similar understanding of the capacity of Thomas to assimilate or "evacuate" would-be purely secular production and a similar view of the necessity of a Christological poetics rather than aesthetics. Of course, even if Milbank and Venard agree with regard to overall intention, Venard has clear advantages when it comes to an understanding of, on the one hand, the intricate details of Aquinas's theology and philosophy and his biblical hermeneutics and, on the other, where precisely in Aquinas's discourse the prophetic or ecstatic is to be found. Venard and Milbank agree that with regard to Aquinas it is far better to speak of theology completing philosophy than of philosophy grounding theology, from which it follows that, from the point of view of thought, Christological and Trinitarian doctrines serve as overlapping hubs and, from the point of view of practice, the Eucharist serves as the concentrated form of the ramification of grace. Without prejudice to Milbank's achievement, arguably, Venard is more patient when it comes to articulating the Trinitarian and Christological matrices of the Word, and more expansive when it comes to speaking to the performance of the Eucharist. But the most conspicuous difference is that, in the case of Venard, Aquinas's Christological poetics is not mixed, as is the case with Milbank, either with the perspectivalism of Cusanus or the commitment to "making" of Vico. For Venard, Aquinas does not require supplements. Or put more paradoxically: he supplies his own.

Conclusion

I began by saying that Venard's trilogy is breathtakingly beautiful. I would like to revise that and say that the trilogy, even in its current abbreviated English translation, is breath-givingly beautiful. It is intellectually

world-bending in terms of scope, quintessentially French in its commitment to clarity and economy in expression, and lustrous in terms of its expression of a Christological poetics, guided by the Word, and relayed through Scripture. Venard's *projet* operates in a similar horizon of assumption to that of John Milbank. Yet, as argued here perhaps some of the most important contributions of Venard's audacious trilogy can be set off in and through developed contrasts with the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, on the one hand, and the postmodern sophistications of Umberto Eco, on the other. In the end, however, the expression as well as the thought of Olivier-Thomas Venard is *sui generis*. Venard allows us to see an Aquinas whose semantic reach is as wide as is imaginable given the constraints of the finitude of discourse and does so in a style that seems to repeat him, at once full and laconic, allusive yet conceptually rigorous, profound yet buoyant. And repeat also what might be called the constitutive "Thomasian" stance: fully engaged with the horrors of reality and yet hopeful in that the Cross provides the measure, and ebullient as well as serene because the Cross has a light that sheds hints of resurrection. This was Aquinas's interpretation of the Gospel of John. For Venard it is entirely sufficient. N.V.