

# Reading, Writing, and Aquinas

Hamish F.G. Swanston

Those whose enthusiasm for exploring the interweaving of religion and literature has encouraged them to reconstruct the history of theology so that the great tradition runs from Jesus' parables and the Gospels through, say, Justin's tale of the old man on the beach and Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, the 'Dream of the Rood' and the Grail Cycle, the novels of George Eliot and of Cardinal Wiseman, up to some manageable modern poet, have usually not found a place for the Schoolmen. Even those who content themselves with considerations of theologians as readers, and whose topics are illustrated by references to Paul's reorganization of Menenius' fable of the talking stomach, to Luther's likening of the theologian to the literary critic who elucidates the *Georgics*, and to that most interesting and attractive of modern popes, John Paul I, writing fan letters to Mark Twain and Dickens as well as to Jesus, rarely bring even Aquinas into their conversation. The rest of us may pause at this. Willing enough, it may be, to get along without Albert and Biel, not feeling called to defend even Duns Scotus *usque ad effusionem sanguinis*, we would not think it respectable to surrender Aquinas.

It would be improper, certainly, to rummage in the *Summa Theologiae* for immediately modern answers to particular questions, but it must be in order to expect a theologian as methodically sensitive as Aquinas to have meditated on the general topic of the relation of the forms of a theological science to the literary forms he encountered in Scripture. And, indeed, very early in his teaching career, Aquinas was acknowledging that a theologian should have some workable understanding of this relation. In the Prologue to his *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, he was already trying out the argument that, since the scholar must 'seek the style of a study from the character of its material', theology 'ought to be carried on in a metaphorical way, by symbol or parable'<sup>1</sup>.

That Aquinas did not at once adopt the parabolic style may in part be explained by 'parable' being associated in his mind with 'obscurity'. *Enigmatice loquar ... qui loquiter parabolice*<sup>2</sup>. When he read of the difficulties caused by Corinthian pentecostals, he recognised what had been going on: *id est obscure et parabolice loquar*<sup>3</sup>. 'Parable' is also associated with 'fiction'. And fiction of a kind patronised by colleagues

whom, as a young man in the Senior Common Room, he was beginning to find uncongenial. The most prominent examples of 'parable' in their conversation were the 'fables' of Plato<sup>4</sup>. Aquinas' temperament required, as he meditated on the convenience of material and style, that he should take whatever opportunity offered to distance the Scriptures from such parables. He was glad to find that Gregory the Great had declared the narrative of Dives and Lazarus to be history, *res gesta*, and not parable<sup>5</sup>. He warned his students against mistaking the equally historical Job for a parabolic fiction<sup>6</sup>. And, if he could not entirely evacuate parable, together with metaphor and symbol and a clutch of other instruments of literary imagination, from the Scriptures, he would at least do what he could to convince his students that the theologian's chief responsibility was to render what was parabolic into a clear statement for the Christian hearer.

When Aquinas began his exposition of the four books of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, it was chiefly troublesome to him that questions and opinions and quotations tumbled out as they occurred to Peter's lively and enquiring intellect. Having established himself, Aquinas felt under some obligation to take time from his own researches to compose a new textbook for his undergraduates. He intended, as a biblical theologian, *magister in sacra pagina*, to produce an outline of theological topics which should be wholly obedient to the character of the scriptural revelation. For a moment he even considered the possibility of his having to give theology a story-telling form. Naturally, he quickly crossed off the *modus narrativus signorum* from the listing provided by the indefatigable Master of the *Sentences*. But there were other possibilities. There were *modus argumentivus* and *modus comminatorius* and *modus praeceptivus*. Aquinas does not seem to have been much interested in knock-down argument or hell-fire threat, but he was attracted by the preceptive mode. He was naturally inclined to think of revelation as instruction. To the end of his life, he slipped indifferently between *sacra scriptura* and *sacra doctrina*. He like to think of the prophets as school ushers. Paul, after all, had said as much of them (*Summa Theologiae* 1a, 1, 8 *ad* 2; cf. II Tim. 3.16b and Gal. 3. 24—5). Aquinas took it that Jesus had been sent by the Father *sicut doctor et magister*, that he is *fidei primus principalis Doctor*<sup>7</sup>. And there is a continuity of gospel and theology as *doctrina*. It has been noted several times in Thomist studies<sup>8</sup> that the infrequent use of *theologia* in Aquinas' writings, when these are set against those of other schoolmen, reflects his conception of his work as *doctrina* (cf. egr. 2a2ae 171, 5 and 6). Thus it is that the *Summa Theologiae* has the arrangement and tone of a good fifth-form textbook, written 'in a style serviceable for the training of beginners', as Aquinas says, 'concise and clear, so far as the matter allows' (*Prologus*).

He knew what sort of student would do best in his class. A lifetime of experiences with the young friars of Paris, Rome, Viterbo, and Naples

had not altered his conviction as he came towards the close of his work on the *Summa Theologiae* that 'in the classroom a pupil shows himself to have the better mind when he is able to grasp an intellectual truth which the master puts to him without adornment, compared to the pupil who needs sense-perceptible examples to lead him up to the truth' (2a2ae 174, 2). And if the clear, unadorned, language of the *modus praeceptivus* contrasts with the unpreceptive language and literature of *sacra scriptura*, Aquinas keeps his nerve. Though he acknowledges that 'holy Scripture fittingly delivers divine and spiritual realities under bodily disguises', this is itself a preceptive strategy, for those persons who 'can summon nothing more splendid than physical beauty' are yet called upon to enjoy a knowledge of their Creator's love (1a 1. art. 9). Still, that Aquinas was not wholly comfortable at the Scriptures' offering this concession to pedagogic necessity may be deduced from his further reflection that the biblical images have a peculiar origin and therefore a peculiar dignity. They are not to be put on a par with whatever images may naturally occur in a lover's sonnet, the conversation of kitchen men, or the speculations of the Paris dons. We are not to confound the biblical images, even if they do look much like those of wooing, cooking, and passing the port, with the works of human imagination. They operate differently. When Scripture speaks of 'the arm of God', we are not to suppose, as we should when reading the lover's verse, that a physical arm is in question. The biblical author is simply referring to God's having what an arm signifies, 'that is, the power of doing and making' (1a 1, 10, 3 *resp.*). Leaving aside the possibility of some confusion with less rich usages, like 'the long arm of the law', Aquinas observes that whilst poetry happily employs images for our natural delight, *sacra doctrina* has recourse to such things only grudgingly because it cannot do without them.

Aquinas never ceased to entertain the dominie's notion that 'poetry is the most modest of all teaching methods' (1a, 1, 9), but later in the *Summa Theologiae* he felt compelled to offer a further justification for it. Perhaps some awkward chap at the back of the class, some youngster with a feel for provençal song, had drawn his attention to a remark made by Augustine in the course of an explanation of a verse in Genesis. Augustine had observed that 'the less prophet he who has only in his mind's eye images of what has been signified to him', and acknowledged that 'he is the greater prophet who simply conceives an idea' of those realities, but he had concluded that 'the greatest prophet is he who excelled in both'. Aquinas thought it unfortunate that so intelligent and holy a theologian should have slipped into such an expression. It was clear to Aquinas that the exercise of the imagination would no longer be required once a human being had reached to that intellectual contemplation of divine reality which is here most like to the ultimate

knowledge enjoyed by those who live the heavenly life. Augustine may be allowed to say that 'when some supernatural truth is to be revealed through bodily images, then a man will be the better prophet if he has the intellectual light as well as imaginative vision than he who has only one of these', but he must be led into saying that 'prophecy in which intellectual truth is revealed without adornment is superior to all'. Aquinas reconciles his reverence for Augustine with his feeling for the superiority of intellectual apprehension in a simple phrase: 'that is what Augustine meant to say'<sup>9</sup>.

There is not much in all this to encourage the notion of Aquinas as a proleptic enquirer into matters of 'religion and literature', so it may be thought a pleasant comment on the difficulty of anyone's maintaining such an estimate of the proper place for imagination in the reception and communication of divine revelation, that when Aquinas thinks to clinch his review of patristic evidence with an appeal to scriptural authority, he suggests, with II Samuel 23. 4, that divine truth burst upon the intellect 'like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning', thus putting himself among those poor fellows who find things easier if ideas are expressed by sense-perceptible examples.

Aquinas makes efforts to raise himself and his students from that gross level of perception. Images, biblical images at any rate, may be appropriate to the purposes of the apologist and the catechist, though Aquinas himself was as sparing of such things in the *Contra Gentes* as in any other of his writings, but the professed theologian should not fall back into them. Theology will be most perfectly itself when it is most like the prophets at their pedagogic best. It must, therefore, aim at articulating our human intellectual apprehension of God in the strictest simplicity of language. In 1a 2, Aquinas moves carefully along ways which lead to what 'we all' call 'God'. His willingness to focus theological speech at the awed announcement of the single word *Deus*, perhaps fleshed out by the occasional *ens* and *hujusmodi*, is not, primarily, an aspect of Aquinas's sympathy with the sort of thing philosophers say. It signifies at least as importantly his sharing that Christian sensitivity witnessed in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Observing that 'if the imagination is not restrained by the light of grace in the reason, it will never cease, waking or sleeping, to suggest diverse and perverse ideas of the world', the anonymous mystic recommends that his disciples take for their meditation 'a short word, preferably of one syllable, the shorter the better, being the more like the working of the Spirit: a word like "God" '<sup>10</sup>. But, however inclined himself to such simplicity of language, Aquinas recognised that the discussion of *quam omnes Deus nominant* was given a further range of language by the scriptural authors, and to this he obediently returned.

It was then as usual for masters in the Schools to present their students with a review of the names of God as it later became for army

instructors to drill recruits in 'the naming of parts'. And, if he were not to be allowed to rest in the contemplation of 'God', this naming might well have seemed to offer Aquinas a congenial way of mounting his theological exercise. A name is, after all, most often a simple designatory term. Women and men call out 'Lord' or 'Ishtar' or 'Blictri' just as they call out 'd'Aquino' or 'Tommy'. And Aquinas had already accepted the example of earlier masters, including that of Albert in the Cologne studium, in taking *de Divinis Nominibus* as his starting place. He had, a few years before settling to the *Summa Theologiae*, produced his own introduction to this part of the curriculum in the form of an *Expositio in Dionysium*. But by this time he had become more sensitive to the complexities of the subject. Beginning from the forbidding remark of Denis that 'there is no naming God', and proceeding by way of the ironic Proverb-maker's demand 'What is his name or the name of his son?', must make it difficult for a theologian to assign proper value to the names of God that are affirmed in Scripture.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Aquinas now recalls his students from such a premature attention to names. If they are to move their talk of *Deus* into a scriptural theology, they must first observe the way words are used. He proposes that they make a start in a humbler linguistic exercise. The more conservative among them may have been reassured by Aquinas' accepting of the old account of the parts of speech given by Denis: 'A noun signifies a thing as coming under some description, verbs and particles signify it as enduring in time, pronouns signify it as being pointed out or as in some relationship'. Thus far our ordinary usage. 'None of these is appropriate to God.'<sup>11</sup> But Aquinas would not, therefore, abandon the vocation of theology. With as much awareness of what we are doing as we can manage, we have to use concrete nouns to indicate our sense of the completeness of God, tensed verbs to indicate our sense of the eternity of God, and demonstrative pronouns to indicate our sense of the identity of God (1a 13, 1). Aquinas' admission of verbs is specially significant. It brings us very near to the scriptural telling of stories of 'the living God'. But he is not yet ready to consider stories.

In his effort to say what our talk of 'the living God' may signify, Aquinas is at first prepared to say only that we are asserting that 'life pre-exists in the source of all things, although in a higher way than we can understand or signify'. It is characteristic that, in considering what *secundum modum altiore* might mean, Aquinas should want his students to keep back from the complexities of the scriptural use of 'the living God' and concentrate on the simpler formulation 'God is good'. It was clear as the morning sun that those, Averroes and Maimonides most importantly, who insisted on the impossibility of actual likeness being conveyed by identical predications of man and God, our saying 'he is good' and 'He is good', mistook the workings of language. At the same time, it is clear that 'God is good' cannot mean that He is good as men

may be good. We therefore resort to that 'higher way', affirming that the good we experience in creatures derives from the creative self-bestowal of God. We speak analogically (1a 13, 5 *resp.*).

It is on account of his conduct of analogical predication that Aquinas has his fame in some places. Into our own times, there have been not a few to esteem themselves 'Thomists' on the strength of their fascination with the uses of analogy. Certainly, his exposition is precisely managed. It has none of the roughnesses to be met in the work of a swashbuckler like Dean Mansel. Certainly, again, it rivals the works of those who practise the *via negativa* in preventing any presumption upon the gracious condescension of God. But Aquinas himself did not put any great emphasis on analogical predication among the elements of his theological enterprise. It was the less interesting to him because it was required in so few situations. Where the discussion of 'good' obtains, there is some demand for a distinction of the analogical from the equivocal and the univocal. But revelation has rarely been received under the form of 'God is good'. Aquinas' habitual obedience to the character of the scriptural revelation ensures that he should abandon the distinction of analogical, equivocal, and univocal, for that of metaphorical and literal. If his remarking that 'all words used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God' (1a 13, 6) hints at Aquinas' feeling some temptation to fit metaphor into constructive relation with analogy, he resisted it. Taking what wry comfort he might from the odd opinion that in the Scriptures themselves 'what is expressed metaphorically in one place is more plainly stated elsewhere'<sup>12</sup>, he set out to understand how metaphorical language works in Scripture.

He begins rather grudgingly. Some words when we use them, 'rock' might be an instance, necessarily have a first reference to creatures (1a 13, 6), to their existing in what he had already called 'a merely material way' (1a 13, 3). Other words, and 'good' is one of these, are not confined in our talk to any particular way of existing. 'Rock', therefore, can be used of God only metaphorically. 'Good' can be used literally of God. The distinction he is making might seem to depend on acclimatization of 'good' in philosophical discourse about 'perfections', which 'rock' did not enjoy. But, during his years as *biblicus*, Aquinas had lectured if not on the complete Canon, then assuredly on a great range of scriptural books; he knew very well that what is going on when God is invoked by the Hebrew songster as 'the Rock of his salvation' (Deut. 32. 15, II Samuel 22. 47, Ps. 89. 26) is not just some encouragement to think of God, after whatever necessary abstraction from the 'merely material way' of a rock-being, as solidly permanent. 'Rock' has for the poet and his hearers rather larger reserves of significance than that. They know what it is to have recourse to 'my Rock and my redeemer' (Ps. 19. 14, cf. Ps. 78. 35), and to trust 'my Rock and my fortress', (Ps. 31. 3). Nor was

Aquinas making this distinction within some theology of language in which confidence that 'good' is a perfectly safe word would derive from dominical authority: 'Call no man good, but God only'. For in such a theology 'rock' might have a claim with 'good' to a primary reference in God. Something of the sort is suggested by the question, 'Who is a rock, except our God?' (II Samuel 22. 32), and the divine versicle and response: 'Is there a god beside me? There is no rock, I know not any' (Isaiah 44.8). That Aquinas was not, indeed, when making his distinction between metaphorical and literal usages, concerned with establishing a list of acceptable words is evident from its being precisely the announcement of the originality of 'father' in God, at Ephesians 3. 14–15, which occasions his remark about metaphors applying 'primarily to creatures'. And he allows his interlocutor to remind us that these scriptural writings present us not with single terms waiting patiently for our analyses, but with a lively series of stories about events and people. Whether or no those minimalist techniques might have been used successfully on 'good' and 'father' and even 'rock', they cannot be applied to the actual stories of the God who is good to his people Israel and the Father who sends his Son to save us. Or even to the story at I Corinthians 10.4 of the rock which followed the Exodus procession; 'and the Rock was Christ'. Aquinas cannot any longer put off dealing with verbs.

Verbs must appear as incorrigible to Aquinas as they do to Humpty-Dumpty. Aquinas makes a pleasant effort to bluster it out. 'Verbs and particles may be used of God', he says, 'although they imply temporal succession, because his eternity implies all time' (1a 13, 1). But plainly he cannot keep up that kind of thing for long. The verbs in the scriptural stories do not operate in that way. They do not point away from time. They bring God into history. They make God a sharer in the process of the story. When Noah steps into the ark and God shuts the door after him, there is no occasion for the officious commentator to suggest that, in saying God shut the door, the story-teller meant anything at all different, except in the more exquisite courtesy of God, from what he would have meant if he had said that one of those human beings who remained to drown had shut the door. This redactor is quite deliberate in his domestications. Every reader, including Aquinas, knows that. And the redactor is not at all untypical of the scriptural writers. If, then, God and his creatures 'cannot be grouped together within the same class of subject-matter' (1a 13, *obj.*), it is yet clear that God and his creatures do act together in the biblical narratives in ways that make it difficult to discern differences of class.

However innocent Aquinas may seem of the instruments of our biblical criticism, however fundamentalist his assumptions about the text and its transition, he framed a response to the narrative forms of Scripture, and their presentation of a concurrence of men with God,

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which was perfectly congruent with all that he had established in his explorations of naming, analogy, and metaphor. It was a response which developed through his examination of these ways of speaking as articulating together a consistent *doctrina*.

Aquinas, as he reads, is aware of a continuing divine call in the Scriptures. The Old Testament, *secundum modum narrativum*, signs forward to the gospel story which more wonderfully declares the end that God has in mind for human beings. It is this *ultimus finis hominis* which provides the *scopus* of Aquinas' exegesis, the interpretative instrument by which each literary element of the *sacra doctrina* may properly be appreciated. Not only when they speak directly of the Lordship and Fatherhood of God, but at every place, events and people are set down in Scripture not for their own sakes but as showing forth the realities to come, the end to which we are called. 'For example, that Abraham had two sons, that a dead man was raised upon being touched by the bones of Eliseus, and the like' (2a 2ae 1, 6). These are the metaphors of divine revelation, the symbolic announcements of our future, the parables whose sense the theologian is to communicate in his clear statement. *Sacra doctrina* enables us to view the persistent structure of the world we inhabit, the *ratio* of the divine *ordo*. Aquinas receives all the Old Testament stories as, in one way or another, 'prophetic'. Even the ceremonies of the Law were ordained 'for the foreshadowing of Christ' (1a 2ae 102, 2). But it is especially, as his interlocutor remarks, when we read the patriarchal narratives that we are confronted with signs of 'the mysteries of Christ', for us (1a 2ae 103, 1). *Haec omnia in figura contingebant illis* (I Cor. 10. 11; cf. 1a 2ae 103, 1). Aquinas refers in this way to stories which we might think better left aside when the talk is of our inhabiting a divine order. 'Jacob's asserting that he was Esau, Isaac's first-born' is to be understood as a speaking 'under the influence of prophecy' and as 'pointing to a mystery' for us (2a 2ae 110, 3); 'it must', Aquinas insists, echoing Augustine's judgement on patriarchal deceptions, 'be interpreted as figurative and prophetic'<sup>13</sup>. And if Jacob's behaviour cannot in any straightforward manner be taken as 'an example for our lives', not easily finding its place in a catalogue of scriptural 'examples of virtue' (2a 2ae 110, 3), Aquinas is ready with exegeses of the 'figurative' character of other patriarchal stories which must enlarge our sense of the *ultimus finis hominis*. Abraham, 'in consenting to kill his son', shows the obedience required of us by 'the Lord of life and death' (1a 2ae 100, 8; cf. 2a 2ae 54, 6 and 104, 4). Isaac, since 'he signified Christ by his being himself offered in sacrifice', shows our conformity in our human suffering with Jesus on the Cross (cf. 2a 2ae 85 on Gen. 22). Jacob himself, seeing 'not the essence of God', of course, but 'some image through which God spoke to him', may show the call that is made to us in the moment of contemplation (cf. 2a 2ae 110, 3 on Gen. 32. 30).

There is a sentence of Denis which he quoted in various forms but



always with delighted agreement, which expresses the lesson Aquinas took the scriptural stories to be teaching: 'God turns all things to himself through love' (2a 2ae 34, 2; cf. 1a 1ae 109, 2, 3, and 6). When he was composing his *Commentum* on the *Sentences*, it had occurred to Aquinas that he might arrange his material according to a pattern of history in which all things come forth from God and are brought back to God. But it is not a neo-Platonic notion of *exitus* and *reditus* which shapes the *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas is there eager to concentrate attention on what the scriptural writers declare of the creature's being turned to God, of *conversio*. And the formulation of this part of the *Summa Theologiae* witnesses also to the shaping humanism of Aquinas. The patriarchal narratives are adduced in his discussion precisely because they exhibit that necessary turning not in vegetable or animal or angelic beings, but in human beings, and exhibit that *conversio hominis* as occurring in ways which differentiate human being from human being.

Once the scriptural stories are appreciated as narrative of conversion, it is possible to deal with that difficulty of God and human beings, who 'cannot be grouped together', acting together in these stories. God prompts Abraham's journey from Haran. God demands the sacrifice of Isaac in the land of Moriah. God wrestles with Jacob at Peniel. Each of these is a story of God's bringing the human being into an action with Himself. Each encourages some further retraction in the grammar of theology from Denis' bald assertion 'none of these is appropriate to God'. After the philosophic noun, and the narrative verb of Scripture, Aquinas is working out what is implied for the life of the Spirit in our being enabled to use the pronoun. Our saying 'Him' is itself, according to the definition of a pronoun's function that Aquinas received from Denis, an affirmation of 'some relationship'.

Whilst it is only to our way of thinking that God is in temporal relation with his creature, the relation with the eternal God is real in the creature. 'We cannot express the reality in creatures without talking as though there were matching relations in God, so that God is said to be related to a creature because the creature is related to him' (1a 13, 7). The reality in the experience of the human being conditions the way in which the story may be told. 'When we speak of his relation to creatures we can employ words implying a temporal sequence of change, not because of any change in him but because of a change in creatures' (*ibid.*).

In the course of his elucidation of the Scriptures as narratives of conversion, Aquinas has been adopting a position which seems to afford a place in theological enquiry to other writings. What he says of that revelation of God made in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may, without untoward wrenching, be fitted not only to the Pauline celebration of that love which 'endures all things', but to every acknowledgement that 'love is not love which alters when it alteration finds', and to every witness to the converting power of that true love.

That we all recognise the *Confessions* of Augustine to be the chief representative of this sort of writing in our culture, gives us greater confidence of having come near to the workings of Aquinas' mind. If, for Aquinas, Augustine was not 'the theologian' as Aristotle was 'the philosopher', nevertheless he came close to being so. Aquinas' reverence for Augustine is nicely instanced in his selecting, for the very first reference of his first *quaestio* in the *Summa Theologiae*, Augustine's account of the theologian's vocation<sup>14</sup>. For Aquinas, the reading of the story of the Lord 'who dost nowhere depart from us' and of the variety of human experiences through which 'we hardly return to thee', would have been an exemplary theological study.

It would be possible to develop what Aquinas is saying about the literature of conversion by considering that Augustinian tradition in 14th-century English poetry in which, just as Aquinas moves from recalled figure to present motive, there is a movement from the figure of Christ calling on us to 'turn and turn my body about' to see him, all over, bloody, to the voicing of his demand for a reciprocal movement in the reader, 'turn your heart, your heart, to me'. Or, with the stories of Abraham and Augustine still in mind, we may think ourselves encouraged by Aquinas to explore not only *Grace Abounding* and parts of *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, but also the fictional witness of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Loss and Gain*. And then, since that call to the patriarchs is evidently not made in any exclusively Christian terms, it may be that we would be emboldened to extend our meditation to other figures of conversion in our culture, to the garden vision of *In Memoriam* XCV, say, or the climactic moral decision of *The Spoils of Poynton*.

We might, however, be the less likely to miss Aquinas' peculiar aid in framing a theological estimate of literature if instead of enquiring whether some particular piece of writing fit or not, we attend to the more general character of his discussion. Firstly, we may note that Aquinas schooled himself to receive elements in the scriptural text with which he was by temperament least comfortable. Wanting to make the singular perfection of 'the good' the subject of his contemplation, he accepted that the writings before him proposed a complex of images and symbols and parables which had to be explored and appreciated if his study were to be of any worth to Christians. His temperamental alienation from a theology *secundum modum narrativum signorum* did not prevent his recognizing an imperative in the story character of *sacra doctrina*. It would be good if the rest of us were to imitate Aquinas' delicacy and discipline as we make our way among the quirks of our own temperaments.

Secondly, Aquinas' insistence that the literary shapes of revelation are not to be categorized with the products of human imagination entails that novels, plays, and poems are not to be examined as if they were immediate teachers of religious knowledge. If there are occasions when

what everyone calls 'God' may be identified with 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob', there are other occasions when 'God' is 'a term of poetry and eloquence', as Matthew Arnold remarked in *Literature and Dogma*, 'a literary term', and we ought not to allow any confusing of these uses in our desire to make doctrine more acceptable to literary folk and literature more acceptable to believers. We have to distinguish. While some will be surprised at the loss of Dante as a Thomist theologian, the rest of us may be relieved from having to make a theologically motivated choice amongst the poetic powers of Milton and Crashaw and Wesley.

Thirdly, if we are to contribute usefully to courses on 'religion and literature', we certainly ought to have some *doctrina* of the relation of religion to literature. Whether we are happy with a concentration upon the conversion story or not, there is in the *Summa Theologiae* some prompting for each of us towards an explicable notion of the function we expect literature to fulfil.

And, fourthly, once we have clarified our ideas of the peculiar virtue of literature, we have still to be alert to what differentiates human being from human being, writer from writer, text from text. Aquinas is not going to provide authority for some scholastic commentator to treat the *Confessions* as a metaphysician's exercise in defining 'will' and 'knowledge' and 'memory'. If, in a natural desire to think the world a more comfortable place than it is, Aquinas made some category mistakes, it was not because, as a reader, he fell into the grosser faults of insensitivity. The status of the Book of Job is still debated. And, whatever he thought of Virgil's prophecy of the imperial boy, Aquinas was never so indelicate as to require the writings of decent unbelievers to submit to doctrinal plundering. There is nothing in the *Summa Theologiae* that would encourage our frisking George Eliot's novels for evidences of Christianity. There is, indeed, little encouragement, in Aquinas' handling of reading and writing, for us to take literature as anything less than an opportunity to reflect on our own need to be converted by God.

*A version of this article was first given as a lecture at Boston College, Massachusetts in September 1988.*

- 1 *Sent.* I, Prol. 1.5.
- 2 *In psalmos Davidis expositio*, Ps. 48. 2.
- 3 *In epist. I ad Cor.*, 14.4.
- 4 cf. *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis commentaria* 7, 11, 1518, ed. M. -R. Cathala.
- 5 cf. *Quaest. de Anima*, 18, 10, ed. J.H. Robb.
- 6 *Expositio super Job ad litteram, Prologus*.
- 7 *In I Tim.* 6. 1, and ST 3a 7, 7.
- 8 e.g. by G.F. van Ackeren and Per Erik Persson.
- 9 ST 2a 2ae 174, 2; cf. Augustine, *Super Gen. ad litt.*, xii, 9.
- 10 *Cloud*, 7 and 65.
- 11 *Dion. de Div. Nom.* 1, and ST 1a 13, 1.
- 12 *Quodlibet* 7, 14 ad 3.
- 13 ST 2a 2ae 110, 3; cf. Augustine, *de Mendac.* 5.
- 14 *de Trinitate*, XIV, 7, cited at ST 1a 1, 2.