

Chapter 1

LIFE AND TIMES

Thinkers as great as Thomas Aquinas are much more than the product of circumstances. On the other hand, his work needs to be read with some knowledge of the many conflicts – political, ecclesiastical and intellectual – in which he was involved all his life. Otherwise, his thought, detached from history, becomes a closed system which, while it attracts some readers and repels others, has nothing to do with the very diversified, often contentious and (obviously) unfinished work that he left behind.¹

Biography

Tommaso di Aquino died on 7 March 1274 at Fossanova (then a Cistercian monastery, now a national monument). He was born no great distance away, between 1224 and 1226, at Roccasecca, the family castle (now ruined), midway between Rome and Naples, in what was then the farthest northwestern province of the Kingdom of Sicily. He became a friar of the Order of Preachers in 1244, studied in Paris and Cologne 1245–52, lectured in Paris 1252–9, in Italy 1259–68, back in Paris 1268–72, before returning to Naples to set up a house of studies, with the choice of site, curriculum, and so on, left to him.

After celebrating the eucharist on 6 December 1273 Thomas ceased to do theology: ‘I cannot do any more. Everything I have written seems to me so much straw compared with what I have seen’. To interpret this as meaning that he regarded his writings as entirely worthless would be absurd. It is an expression of the tension throughout his theological work

between the labour of reasoning about Christian revelation and the longing for the promised face-to-face vision of God by which his whole life was shaped.

In February 1274 Thomas set out to attend the Council of Lyons, convoked by Pope Gregory X with the aim of restoring communion with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Unwell, he diverted to his niece's house, where he dictated the last of his compositions, a letter to the abbot of Monte Cassino in response to a problem the monks had about the relationship between the infallibility of divine foreknowledge and the freedom of the human creature. It shows no falling off in intellectual powers. Indeed, it expresses what is perhaps Thomas's most characteristic insight: to put it in modern terms, that theories purporting to reconcile human autonomy and divine freedom are superfluous since, properly understood, there is no competition between divine and creaturely causalities.

While the treasured anecdotes make him out to be absent-minded, Thomas's unworldliness should not be exaggerated. He was no impractical academic. Twice his colleagues entrusted him with founding and administering study centres. More significantly, as we shall see, his life was marked by one conflict after another.

Readers familiar only with the *Summa Theologiae* are not to be blamed if they find the prose style colourless and impersonal. His treatment of views which he rejects is (almost) always polite. His work seems objective and dispassionate. Even in the *Summa*, however, one can find diverting cameos that show another side to Thomas's character, or at least disclose something of the turbulence he witnessed around him – perhaps every day.

Consider, for example, his account of how rage may deprive one of the use of speech. Typically, in a culture delighting in citing authoritative precedents for everything, he quotes Gregory the Great (c.540–604): 'the tongue stammers, the countenance takes fire, the eyes grow fierce' (ST 1–2.48.4).² One need not assume that he never saw men in a rage. Indeed, Thomas writes a good deal about the range of emotion. In the *Summa*, for example, 24 of the 42 questions dealing with our psychological make-up as moral agents are devoted to the *passiones animae* (ST 1–2.6–48). The 'passion' of the soul which attracts most attention is delight and its opposite, depression (1–2.31–9). Thomas's list of remedies to mitigate depression is quite unoriginal: do something pleasurable, have a good cry, get a friend's sympathy, think about divine and future happiness, take a nap or a hot bath (1–2.38): unoriginal but humane and practical.

Above all, however, the imperturbable Buddha-like serenity attributed to him in the standard iconography is belied by the surviving

manuscripts in his own hand: physical evidence of raw intellectual energy and passion.³

Family: Between Pope and Emperor

The Aquino family, Normans settled south of Naples since the end of the tenth century, lived on the strife-ridden border between the Papal states and the Kingdom of Sicily. In 1208 Pope Innocent III installed the 13-year-old son of the Emperor Henry VI (dead since 1197) as Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor.⁴ By the time Thomas was born, Pope and Emperor had fallen out irretrievably. Frederick's ambitions to reunite the Holy Roman Empire kept bringing him up against papal determination to thwart him. By 1239, for example, Pope Gregory IX was denouncing him as a Muslim who kept a harem guarded by eunuchs (which was true). He retaliated by deriding the Pope as Antichrist (a common charge in these pre-Reformation days). In 1241, when Frederick called on the princes of Christendom to unite against the papacy, Gregory convoked a general council. Frederick prevented it from taking place by kidnapping about a hundred of the bishops.

Thus, from his earliest days until he got to Paris in 1245 as a young Dominican friar, Thomas lived at the cusp of this unceasing and increasingly ferocious contest between the King and one pope after another (Frederick saw off three popes, not counting Celestine IV who lasted only three weeks, nor Innocent IV who survived him).

The Aquino family were heavily involved in this conflict. Thomas's father was one of Frederick II's barons. Aimo, his eldest brother, took part in the Emperor's expedition to the Holy Land (the fifth crusade); taken prisoner, he was ransomed through Pope Gregory's intercession, and remained loyal to the papal side for the rest of his life. Rinaldo, another brother, at first on Frederick II's side, deserted him when he was deposed by Pope Innocent IV in 1245; he was put to death the following year, allegedly for being involved in a plot to assassinate the Emperor.

School and University

In 1231 Thomas was sent to school at the nearby Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, aged at most seven, apparently with his own servants. For the best part of the next ten years he was immersed in the liturgical and biblical-patristic culture of the Latin Church. Very different from what his own style of doing theology would be, he was brought up in

the monastic tradition of meditative reading of Scripture, *lectio divina*, with study and prayer almost inseparable.⁵

When Frederick II's troops reoccupied Monte Cassino, the monks were expelled and Thomas sent home. The youngest son of a military family, educated so far in a monastery founded by Benedict himself, he now got the opportunity to continue his education as a student at the university of Naples. This was the first university founded independently of the Church, as recently as 1224, as part of Frederick's campaign to outmanoeuvre the dominance of the papacy in the education of the ruling elites. Naples, at the time, was an outpost of the exotic culture that flourished at Frederick's court in Palermo. In the course of studying the seven liberal arts, Thomas had at least one teacher, Peter of Ireland, who had a particular interest in Aristotle.

Thus, by the time he was 20, Thomas had been exposed to two radically different cultures: the age-old tradition of Latin monasticism, richly indebted to Augustine and Christian neo-Platonism, and, on the other hand, the pagan philosophy of Aristotle, brought to the West by Jewish and especially Muslim scholars. The tension between what seemed at the time two apparently incommensurable traditions was to dominate Thomas's intellectual work.

Cathars

Thomas's work was shadowed throughout by the long and extremely violent struggle in Western Christendom between Cathars and Catholics. When he was about 20, Thomas decided to join the Dominican friars: a contemplative way of life that issues in preaching and teaching, half monastic, so to speak, and half in the world of the new universities. Founded by Dominic Guzman, they had been present in Naples for 20 years or so.⁶ Their origins lie in the resolve of the ecclesiastical authorities to eliminate Catharism.

By the middle of the twelfth century the perennial call for reform in the Church began to consolidate, especially in France, the Rhineland and Lombardy, into a movement of clergy and laity out to restore the 'purity' of early Christianity as they conceived it. In their day they were known as Cathars (Greek *katharos*: 'pure'), Albigensians (though Toulouse was more the centre of the movement than Albi), or Manichees, as Thomas usually calls them.⁷ According to their teachings, the body and the material creation are evil; they rejected infant baptism, the Eucharist, marriage, meat eating, the doctrines of hell, purgatory and the resurrection of the body, and much else.

To some extent, the Church authorities sought to engage with the 'heretics' through preaching and missionary work, as well as by the internal reforms decreed at the Lateran Council in 1215. The ascetical ideals of the friars, for example, were shaped largely in response to the Cathars' desire to see evangelical simplicity among Christ's disciples.

In 1252 Pope Innocent IV decreed severe measures against those suspected of sympathy with Catharist doctrines. The surrender of Montségur in 1244 and the fall of Quéribus in 1255 may have looked like the end, but, as always, dissenters in the Church proved difficult to silence. In the early fourteenth century, after a century of ferocious repression, there were still surviving Catharist congregations (a Catharist bishop in northern Italy was arrested in 1321; the last Cathar was burnt in Languedoc in 1330).⁸

Thomas probably never met a Cathar. Nevertheless, his frequent allusions to Manicheism should not be regarded as referring only to the past, or to heresies he regarded as purely hypothetical. For one thing, he was in no position, even in the 1270s, let alone when he started teaching in the 1250s, to think that Catharism had been eradicated. For another, as a young friar he must have been well aware of the role of the Dominicans in the struggle against Catharism. He may have met friars who were, or had been, employed as inquisitors (even though only a handful of them were, at the time). It makes better sense to regard his theology as seriously engaging with Catharism. For example, his repeated emphasis on the goodness of created nature, pervading his work, is best understood in this light.

Conflict in the Paris Faculty

Thomas had a struggle with his family before they allowed him to join the friars: he was abducted by his brother Rinaldo, still with Frederick II's army, and held under house arrest for nearly two years. He then went to Paris to study for ordination, where he attended lectures by his older confrère Albert the Great.⁹ In June 1248 the Order founded an international college for Dominican friars and others who might attend their courses in Cologne. Albert took Thomas with him to set up the new venture. He continued to work as assistant to Albert; transcripts he made of courses by Albert survive.

These years of apprenticeship in Cologne were the final stage in Thomas's formation as a theologian (he must have been ordained priest in 1250/51 though no record survives).

In September 1252 he returned to Paris to lecture. He immediately found himself in the middle of an often extremely nasty power struggle. The secular masters, the diocesan clergy who occupied the principal chairs in the theology faculty, resented the arrival of the Franciscan and Dominican friars. Being clergy mostly from dioceses in northern France and Belgium, they disliked the increasing influence of the friars, parachuted into the faculty for a few years, with allegiances elsewhere and particularly to the papacy. The French bishops wanted the friars curbed. Initially, although already giving lectures, Thomas and Bonaventure, his Franciscan colleague, were refused membership of the theology faculty; they were admitted only at the command of Pope Alexander IV.

The conflict was not only literary. In 1253 the faculty twice suspended classes, to put pressure on the friars, who, however, refused to stop teaching. In 1255, hostility to the friars reached such a pitch that King Louis IX sent in the royal archers to guard the Dominican priory against the hooligan element in the divinity faculty.

Thomas's first publications are vigorously expressed defences of the vocation and ascetical practices of the friars.¹⁰ In 1254, the Franciscan friar Gerard de Borgo San Donnino published a book proclaiming that the third age of the world had begun around 1200. He was taken to mean – and probably did mean – that the recently founded friars were the first fruits of this 'new age'. Thomas's allusions, as usual, are discreet but he cannot have been indifferent to this episode. Writing much later, he states that the New Law (of the Gospel) is already nothing less than 'the grace of the Holy Spirit given inwardly to Christ's faithful', thus ruling out the idea of any further 'dispensation of the Holy Spirit when spiritual men will reign' – certainly a response to the apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202) as reformulated and exaggerated by Gerard (cf. ST 1–2.106).¹¹

All this the secular masters exploited delightedly, even launching the canard that the book was written by certain Dominican friars. Gerard refused to retract his doctrines, was dismissed from teaching and imprisoned on the orders of Bonaventure, Minister General of the Franciscans since 1257.¹² These were hectic times.

Principal Works

In 1252/5, the arts faculty in Paris began to teach all of Aristotle's work, after years of resistance by church authorities. For the rest of Thomas's career the theology faculty remained deeply suspicious of how the new ideas were being handled in the arts faculty. While always a member of the theology faculty, when teaching at Paris, Thomas was interested in

developments in the philosophy faculty and composed works which some readers at least regard as straightforwardly philosophical. His first composition, the short treatise *De ente et essentia*, is heavily indebted to Ibn Sina, the Muslim thinker whose work he had no doubt met at university in Naples. Here, in what was to be a widely read treatise, Thomas expounds the metaphysical doctrines held in common by Christians, Jews and Muslims at the time. It is more a glossary of common terms, such as 'being', 'nature', 'essence', and so on, than an argument. But we get the first exposition of Thomas's most characteristic thesis: in created beings, there is a real distinction between their nature (essence) and their existence – in God, however, there is no such distinction.¹³

Thomas's inaugural lecture, showing his debt to Denys's neo-Platonic Christianity, speaks of the theologian's place, relatively minor and yet honourable, in the descent of divine wisdom.¹⁴ The accompanying lecture is in praise of Holy Scripture. It is as if, as he came into his maturity as a teacher, he wanted to signal his debt to the traditional biblical-patristic culture which he inherited.¹⁵

More personal exploration of theological method is to be found in his incomplete commentaries on works by Boethius. As he reads him, Boethius is taking divine revelation for granted and testing how far philosophical reasoning can bring the believer to deeper understanding of the Christian faith. Here, the young professor was verifying the legitimacy of using logic to display the coherence of revelation. Indeed, at the point where Boethius applies his method to the study of the doctrine of the Trinity, Thomas abandons his exposition, as if he now felt free to go his own way.¹⁶

About this time, he started to write the exposition of 'the truth of the Catholic faith' that would be known as the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Whether or not composed for missionaries in Muslim Spain (as tradition says), this book reads more like an experiment to see how near the ancient Mediterranean world's search for wisdom might come to the brink of biblical revelation. The first three of the four books investigate how far the truths of the Christian faith can be expounded on the basis of principles available to non-believers; only in the fourth do the arguments depend on specifically Christian revelation. 'Although the truth of the Christian faith . . . surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless the truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith', Thomas contends, the implication of which is that for us 'to be able to see something of the loftiest realities, however thin and weak the sight may be, is a cause of the greatest joy' (*Contra Gentiles* I. 7–8).¹⁷

Much of Thomas's literary production takes the form of transcripts of disputations in which he participated. From his first years of teach-

ing, we have the greater part of the disputed questions *De Veritate* in a version dictated by Thomas himself. This collection of 29 disputations deals with truth, divine knowledge, divine ideas, the Word, providence, predestination, the Book of Life, angelic knowledge, the human mind as locus of the image of the Trinity, teaching and learning, prophecy, ecstasy, faith, inferior and superior reason, synderesis, conscience, Adam's knowledge of God before the Fall, the soul's knowledge after death, Christ's knowledge, as well as the good, the will, free will, our sensual nature, the emotions, grace, the justification of the unrighteous and the grace of Christ. Not the ragbag this may seem, these transcripts are the equivalent of a theologian's working papers, offering privileged access to the problems of the day and Thomas's approach to dealing with them.¹⁸

There are two later collections: *De Potentia*, six questions on the theme of divine power and six on the Trinity; and *De Malo*, 16 questions on evil, sin, the cause of sin, original sin, the punishment of original sin, human choice, venial sin, the capital vices, vainglory, envy, acedia, anger, avarice, gluttony, lust and demons.¹⁹

Face-to-face argument was an essential part of medieval pedagogy. Most of the teaching in theology took the form of line-by-line exposition of Scripture, with an assistant reading out the text and the professor paraphrasing, citing parallels, and commenting. The doctrinal questions that naturally arose were kept for the regular disputations, when the class, or sometimes the entire faculty, gathered, sometimes for the whole day, to argue over these and any other questions students raised.

Disputation as a method assumes there will be conflicting interpretations of texts and doctrines that need to be exposed, explored and resolved. As a glance at these disputations would confirm, Thomas proceeds by reformulating a thesis as a question; then setting out a number of arguments, citing authoritative texts (Scripture, Augustine, Denys, Gregory and suchlike) that seem to run against the thesis; next expounding his preferred answer to the question (using logic much more frequently than invoking knockdown proof texts); and finally going through the initial objections, admitting them, suitably qualified, or simply refuting them, one by one. Thomas's mind (but in this he was no different from his contemporaries) worked argumentatively, dialectically: reaching a view by considering, often rejecting, sometimes refining, alternative views. The method was not intended to reach a compromise or supposed consensus, by splitting the difference between the conflicting interpretations. It allowed the disputants to discover the strengths as well as the weaknesses of opposing views; but the aim was to work out the truth by considering and eliminating error, however common or plausible or seemingly supported by authority.

The purpose of Thomas's most famous work, the *Summa Theologiae*, was, as he says in the prologue, to set out Christian doctrine in an orderly way, considering how 'newcomers to this teaching are greatly hindered by various writings on the subject, partly because of the swarm of pointless questions, articles, and arguments, partly because essential information is given according to the requirements of textual commentary or the occasions of academic debate, partly because repetitiousness has bred boredom and muddle in their thinking' (ST 1. Foreword).²⁰ Thomas did not abandon exposition of Scripture nor participation in disputations. On the other hand, seeing the defects of both practices, one text-bound, the other problem-dominated, he evidently wanted to provide an overview of the Christian doctrine with which he wanted future preachers and pastors to be familiar.

Aristotle

On the standard interpretation, Thomas is an 'Aristotelian'. This requires nuancing, in the light of recent scholarship, even if it is plausible at all.²¹

While familiar with Aristotle's works since his student days, Thomas undertook what looks like an attempt to work his way through all the writings of Aristotle, beginning at the end of 1267 with the *De anima*, and continuing into the last year of his life. This was personal study; he never lectured on Aristotle. No doubt he thought that professors in the arts faculty (clergy, of course), too much influenced by Muslim interpretations, misunderstood Aristotle. Perhaps he felt obliged to ensure that Islam should not win by philosophy the hegemony it had quite recently lost in battle. As he read, also, he came to think that some of Aristotle's ideas helped to elucidate Christian doctrine.

Of the 12 commentaries Thomas embarked upon, he left seven unfinished. He completed the *De anima* contemporaneously with dictating the questions on the human soul in the *Summa Theologiae*.²²

Similarly, he completed an exposition of the *Ethics* as he was composing the lengthy analyses of the cardinal virtues in the *Summa*.²³ Whether this is an original and important work or not is much disputed. Some regard it as half-baked; others think it is an over-theological reading; others again think it is a serious attempt to expound a moral philosophy complete in itself, bracketing out Christian revelation. In this last case, Thomas would not just be trawling Aristotle's *Ethics* for material he could use in his own account of Christian ethics, but experimenting to see how far a coherent ethics could be developed independently of Christian beliefs. What reading Aristotle enabled Thomas to

do, anyway, was to rethink the standard moral theology treatises on virtue and vice in a much wider context.

About the same time, Thomas started a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Here, too, there is much dispute over whether it is a serious work of metaphysics or merely a pedestrian exposition. It comes much too late in his career to have any influence on his writing. His metaphysical positions had been established years before.²⁴

In the letter of condolence sent by the masters in the arts faculty in Paris to the Dominican friars in May 1274 – 'For news has come to us which floods us with grief and amazement, bewilders our understanding, transfixes our very vitals, and well-nigh breaks our hearts' (there was no such letter from the theology faculty!) – they asked for Thomas's bones for interment in Paris but also for 'some writings of a philosophical nature, begun by him at Paris, left unfinished at his departure, but completed, we have reason to believe, in the place to which he was transferred': translations that he promised to send them, Simplicius on Aristotle's *De anima*, Proclus on Plato's *Timaeus*, and the *De aquarum conductibus et ingeniis erigendis*²⁵; and finally 'any new writings of his own on logic, such as, when he was about to leave us, we took the liberty of asking him to write'. Thomas's commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, begun in Paris and completed in Naples, was sent to Paris, together with his commentary on the *Peri hermenias*, started in Paris but never finished.

We need a full-scale study of Thomas's work on Aristotle, assessing the content as well as establishing the ways in which the various texts interweave with concerns in the arts faculty and with Thomas's other works. At present, the purpose, status and value of Thomas's work on Aristotle remain in dispute.²⁶

In 1272, Thomas composed (as it turned out) his last non-biblical commentary – on the *Liber de causis*, long attributed to Aristotle but, as Thomas suspected, a neo-Platonic work heavily indebted to Proclus and Denys (compiled, so scholars now think, by an unknown Muslim philosopher). Some readers would regard this venture into neo-Platonism as a sideline; others would think that, for all the importance of his uses of Aristotle, specifically as regards the soul and virtue, Thomas remained always far more deeply neo-Platonist than Aristotelian.²⁷

Confrontations

Thomas was involved in several tense confrontations. The most influential exponent of Aristotle at the time – known indeed as 'The Commentator' – was Ibn Rushd, whose theories reached Paris about 1230.²⁸ In

1270 Thomas wrote his *De unitate intellectus, contra Averroistas Parisienses*, arguing that certain masters in the arts faculty were mistaken in thinking that Aristotle lent them any support in denying the existence of a mind in each human being and positing instead some kind of super mind in which human minds were mere participations.²⁹

Probably in the same year, Thomas composed his *De aeternitate mundi contra murmurantes*: the thesis here is that, contrary to what eminent theologians of the day believed, it cannot be proved by reason alone that the world did not exist from eternity.³⁰ On the contrary, Thomas contends, the idea that the world had a beginning is solely a matter of faith. For him, the concept of being created has to do with ontological dependence on God as first cause of all things and is not to be equated with having a beginning. All one can do philosophically, then, is to show that the world is dependent for its existence on the first cause, but this would be true even if it had always existed.

Even more problematic theologically, indeed dividing him from many of his colleagues, Thomas defended the doctrine of the unicity of substantial form in corporeal creatures. Controversy had raged for decades. Roughly, adopting the Aristotelian thesis that it is the soul that makes the human body what it is, Thomas argued that a human being is a unity. The alternative view, held by the majority, was that human beings are made up of three substantial forms: vegetative, sensible and intellectual. In brief, we are not rational all the way down, so to speak. In 1270, when Thomas debated the question before the theology faculty, he was in the minority, perhaps even on his own. His unitary concept of the human creature seemed to verge on heresy. Most worryingly, he seemed to mean that the body of Christ in the tomb was not the same as the body that hung on the cross (e.g. ST 3.50.5). Assuming that Christ really died, and thus that his body was separated from his soul, then, if the rational soul is the unique form of the body, it looked as if the body in the tomb was not the same as the body of the living Christ. On the other hand, if we were to allow for a body-giving form really distinct from the rationality-giving form, that would ensure the requisite identity.

Thomas's view dispensed with a form supplying the human being's bodiliness independently of rationality. Of course, the man Jesus Christ was really and truly dead, his soul's being separated from his body; yet, since his dead body remained united to the Person of the Son (the Son of God did not die), there was no problem about its remaining the same body. Aristotle's philosophical conception of the human being cleared away the fanciful philosophy the theologians thought they needed, in order to allow the doctrine of the hypostatic union to show up more clearly. The question no doubt seems arcane: how many theologians

today would even be interested in the status of Christ's body after his death? On the other hand, Thomas's thesis, updated no doubt, that the 'lower' forms, say at the levels of growth and sensitivity, are annihilated or integrated by the advent or emergence in the human creature of rationality, might give rise to considerable discussion still.

The 219 Propositions

Three years after Thomas's death, a number of theories were condemned by the theology faculty in Oxford at the behest of the archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby, himself a Dominican friar, not of course involving Thomas by name, but plainly alluding to some of his 'Aristotelian' positions.³¹

Much more importantly, a couple of weeks previously, on 7 March 1277, the anniversary of Thomas's death, the bishop of Paris censured a list of 219 theses, allegedly being taught in the university and 'prejudicial to faith', a list cobbled together in a hurry, at the behest of Pope John XXI.³²

The significance of the 219 propositions, and whether Thomas is envisaged in any of them, are matters of considerable controversy. According to Edward Grant, for example, the 'most significant outcome' of the condemnation in 1277 was 'an emphasis on the reality and importance of God's absolute power to do whatever He pleases short of bringing about a logical contradiction'.³³ He allows that the topics covered range widely but, on his reading, they mostly bear, implicitly if not always explicitly, on a certain determinism introduced into natural philosophy by Greco-Arabic physics, in response to which it seemed necessary to insist on God's infinite and absolute creative and causative power.

According to Etienne Gilson, on the other hand, the 219 propositions amount more broadly to 'a sort of polymorphic naturalism stressing the rights of pagan nature against Christian nature, of philosophy against theology, of reason against faith'.³⁴

Several of the theses come from the treatise on courtly love by Andreas Capellanus, mentioned in the bishop's letter introducing the Condemnation. While it is true that the third part of this then popular book is the highly critical response of the orthodox Christian moralist to the extremely colourful exposition in the first two parts of what we might call 'free love', it looks as if the compilers of the 219 propositions suspected that it was the first two parts that attracted members of the university (clerics mostly, of course). One might cite such doctrines as the following: there cannot be sin in the higher powers of the soul, thus sin is never a matter of will but only of emotion; the sin against nature,

such as *abusus in coitu*, though contrary to the nature of the species is not contrary to the nature of the individual; refraining completely from sexual intercourse damages the individual's moral development as well as the continuity of the human species; fornication, as between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, is not a sin; and much else in the same vein.

As Gilson concludes, and as David Piché has worked out in convincing detail, the main thrust of the 219 propositions is to the effect that the philosophical way of life is vastly superior to that of theologians.³⁵

Consider propositions such as these: we know no more by knowing theology (that is to say, than by doing philosophy); what a theologian says is based on myths (*sermone theologi fundati sunt in fabulis*); the only true wisdom is the wisdom of the *philosophi*; there is no way of life superior to the practice of philosophy (*vacare philosophiae*); the poor cannot be virtuous (perhaps alluding to the controversies about evangelical poverty); there are no virtues other than those that are either taught or innate (i.e. no 'infused' grace-given virtues); happiness (*felicitas*) is accessible in this life, not in any other; and so on.

It may seem a hotchpotch. Yet, in the claim that 'chastity is not a greater value than perfect abstinence', we surely have the key. That is to say, as Piché suggests, celibates in the arts faculty were saying, or being reported as saying, that their choice of *abstinentia perfecta* was superior to the *castitas* to which the clergy, the monks and the friars, in the theology faculty were vowed.

In brief, some of the clergy in the arts faculty in Paris were perceived as being so seduced by Aristotle's *Ethics* that they believed that the study of wisdom to which the philosopher is dedicated, supported by a life of total asceticism, resulting in quasi-mathematical knowledge of the First Cause, would deliver all the happiness, the beatitude, available to human beings. To quote Boethius of Dacia, one of the most prominent of the masters: 'The philosopher is the man living according to the right order of nature and acquiring the highest and ultimate goal of human life'. In other words, these Catholic clergymen teaching in the arts faculty in the university of Paris in the 1270s either were, or were thought to be, so bewitched by their reading of Aristotle that they believed that knowledge of the First Cause was available now; as the exercise of our highest intellectual capacity it was the activity which already made us divine.

Thus, when Thomas asks at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* whether any teaching is required apart from the *philosophicae disciplinae*, it is not the abstract and hypothetical question it may seem (ST 1.1.1). On the contrary, the language is more or less the language we

find in the 219 propositions: *scientia*, wisdom, reason, *philosophia*, theology, teaching, being, beatitude, causality, and so on. Coming to Thomas cold, so to speak, isolated from context, it is easy to assume, either delightedly or dismissively, that he has appropriated Aristotelian ideals of reasoning and systematic thought. If, on the other hand, we read Thomas in the light of the ideal of the philosophical life that seems to have caught the imagination of some of the leading masters in the arts faculty in his day, we begin to see how he distances himself from everything they say. Ironically, instead of almost replacing Christian doctrine by Aristotelianism, as critics sometimes say, Thomas was out, historically, to resist the ‘wisdom-lovers’ – the *philosophi* – in the arts faculty, by trying to transpose and integrate key Aristotelian terms into traditional Christianity.

Hermeneutic Conflict

However celebrated his reputation as the ‘Angelic Doctor’, as *doctor communis*, particularly since the revival of Thomism in the late nineteenth century, Thomas’s theology has always been in contention. If his theology is ‘angelic’, it is not because it floats above and beyond history; if his teaching is ‘common’, it is not because it has always been accepted.

In the versions of Thomism current from the 1850s to the 1960s, Thomas’s work, particularly his *Summa Theologiae*, was regarded as the high point of medieval Christianity, either a unique balance of faith and reason, a harmonizing of revealed theology and natural theology, an incomparable synthesis, or (by adversaries) as a singularly vicious corruption of Christian doctrine by Hellenistic paganism.

One admirer writes as follows:

The genius for ordering which this greatest of Christian thinkers possessed is a genius of lay-out . . . all the questions have been resolved, as far as this is possible. In the genuinely supernatural serenity which remains the mystery of this great saint, there opens up before the eye, as a source of ever fresh wonder, a kind of heavenly world of wisdom in which everything that seems confused and hopeless on the murky earth clears away like clouds to give way to a radiant azure sky.

This over-ripe account of Thomas – dating from 1945 – leads the writer, Hans Urs von Balthasar, to the following bleak judgement:

[W]here one can no longer presuppose the unity of such unique holiness with such unique prudence, where the supernatural gift of grace is

imitated only in an external fashion, as it were a technique that could be learned, this particular charism of the Angel of the Schools, this gift of clarification, of smoothing out and calming down . . . can become a disaster for thought . . .

In particular, the logic becomes ‘not seldom the special art of evasion and of explaining things away.’³⁶

This harsh comment on some of his own ‘Thomist’ contemporaries prompts Balthasar to consider the tension in Thomas’s thought: ‘despite his will to clarify, he is a master in the art of leaving questions open’, indeed he displays ‘an astonishing breadth, flexibility, and mutability of perspectives which allow quite automatically the aporetic element in his thinking to emerge’. Compared with the modern Thomist, who evidently endorses only the ‘will to clarify’, often reducing it to an ‘art of evasion’, Thomas himself knows how to leave questions open – his thinking even includes an ‘aporetic element’.

Henri de Lubac, Balthasar’s friend and teacher, argued, about the same time, that the ‘robust but a little static mass of his synthesis’ is nonetheless somewhat unstable. Thomas is ‘a transitional writer (*un auteur de transition*)’. In particular, thinking of the reception of his ideas, de Lubac goes on: ‘the ambivalence of his thought in unstable equilibrium, ransom of its very richness, explains how it could afterwards be interpreted in such opposed senses (*l’ambivalence de sa pensée en équilibre instable, rançon de sa richesse même, explique qu’on ait pu dans la suite l’interpréter en des sens si opposés*)’.³⁷

In a letter to de Lubac in 1956, Gilson commented that, from the beginning, so-called Thomists have done nothing but make of Thomas’s theology ‘a brew of *philosophia aristotelico-thomistica* concocted to give off a vague deism fit only for the use of right-thinking candidates for high-school diplomas and Arts degrees’. Indeed, according to Gilson, obviously expecting de Lubac to agree with him, the Thomist theology established in Catholic seminaries and universities was seldom other than ‘rationalism’: pandering to the ‘deism’ that most Thomists – ‘deep down’ – prefer to teach.³⁸

It would be easy to document equally angry comments on how to read Thomas. Much more recently, and very pacifically, Serge-Thomas Bonino speaks of a ‘hermeneutic conflict, more or less hidden’, in recent interpretations of Thomas’s work: medievalists, philosophers and theologians focus on aspects of his work that give rise to somewhat divergent readings; a ‘truly Thomist approach’ ought to be ‘catholic’, ‘integrating these diverse approaches’.³⁹

Current readings of Thomas’s work are so conflicting, and even incommensurable, that integrating them into a single interpretation

seems impossible. Some readings are deeply misguided; but even these, since they issue from respectable theological and philosophical presuppositions, demand and deserve attention. We need to ask what it is, in Thomas's work, and in the uses to which it has been put by opponents as well as disciples, that makes certain misreadings attractive, and almost unavoidable.