

Onto-theo-logical Straw: Reflections on Presence and Absence

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Reginald, I cannot [continue writing the *Summa*], because all that I have written seems like straw to me . . . compared to what has now been revealed to me.

St. Thomas Aquinas¹

At the interior of thought, nothing could be accomplished that would prepare for or contribute to determining what happens in faith and in grace. If faith summoned me in this manner, I would close down shop.

Martin Heidegger²

What might lead one to abandon one's life work in metaphysical theology as worth no more than straw? One might be awakened from one's dogmatic slumbers by some kind of skepticism, Humean or Kantian, Pyrrhonian or postmodern. There is, of course, a very powerful skepticism at work in the thought of St. Thomas, rooted in his Aristotelian empiricism and expressed both in his deep dependence on Pseudo-Dionysius and in his consistent insistence that "in this life we cannot know God by means of that form which is identical with the divine essence." Although we can employ names that "signify the divine substance," if we take seriously the distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi* we will see that this "does not imply

¹ As cited by James A. Weisheipl, O.P. in *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 321-22.

² Quoted from *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, trans. Jean Greisch (Paris: Grasset, 1980), 335 by Jacques Derrida in "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 130.

that we can therefore either define or comprehend God's quiddity."³ The answer to the question, "Did Paul See God Through His Essence When He Was Enraptured?" may well be yes; but this only signifies that his rapture involved a temporary transcendence of human experience, even under the influence of grace, "in this life."⁴

The constantly recurring phrase, "in this life," in the Wippel essay I've been quoting, especially when juxtaposed to the discussion of Paul's rapture in *De Veritate* and other texts which discuss the beatific vision as the permanence of such rapture in the life to come, are a useful reminder that Thomists are Kantians and not Hegelians, that they do not identify human thought and experience as we now embody them with thought and experience as such. Just because the theology of St. Thomas offers us a knowledge of God that differs radically from divine self-knowledge since it is not a knowledge of God "through his essence," we can say that it is phenomenal and not noumenal knowledge. Thomistic theology is like Kantian physics, for while it claims to show us its proper object as it ought to appear to human knowers, it does not claim to reveal that object to us as it is in itself, as it truly is, as it is for God's own normative knowing. One might even take this to be a kind of Humean warning against extrapolating dogmatically on the basis of our experience to the present moment.

But this is not a very promising path for understanding the strawy silence of St. Thomas. For this skepticism is an integral part of his metaphysical writings, including both of his *Summas*. In the full awareness of this crucial limitation of human knowledge, nay, in vigorous insistence upon it, Aquinas produced a long shelf full of metaphysical theology in a relatively short period of time. Remembering the importance of this negative moment in his thought is a useful reminder both to Thomists and their critics that Thomism is not and cannot be a metaphysics of presence. But it does not throw much, if any, light on those strange words to Reginald.

The reference to St. Paul's rapture as recorded in *2 Corinthians* 12 provides another approach. It is not skepticism but mysticism that turns metaphysics to straw. Anselm can help us here, I believe. Most discussions of his *Proslogium* do not get beyond the third chapter. (Indeed, some don't get past the second!) But in the twenty-fourth chapter, all congratulations and celebrations at having produced the ontological argument are replaced by an Anselm who seems to

³ John F. Wippel, "Quidditative Knowledge of God," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 217, 235; cf. 239. My own sense is that to get St. Thomas right we must read his Aristotelianism as radically qualified both by the negativism of the Areopagite and the personalism of Augustine.

⁴ *De Veritate*, Q. 13, A. 2.

have stepped forth from the chapter on Unhappy Consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Speaking to his soul, he writes, "But if thou hast found him, why is it thou dost not feel thou hast found him? Why, O, Lord, our God, does not my soul feel thee, if it hath found thee? Or has it not found him whom it found to be light and truth?" A couple of chapters later he adds, "Truly, I see not [the unapproachable light in which thou dwellest], because it is too bright for me. And yet, whatsoever I see, I see through it, as the weak eye sees what it sees through the light of the sun, which in the sun itself it cannot look upon. My understanding cannot reach that light, for it shines too bright. It does not comprehend it . . . In thee I move, and in thee I have my being; and I cannot come to thee. Thou art within me, and about me, and I feel thee not."⁵

The verb here is *sentio*, to feel or to perceive. John Smith has put the point nicely by portraying Anselm as eager to exchange the rational necessity of his proof for experiential presence.⁶ Anselm longs to see God face to face but knows, that like Moses in *Exodus* 33, he has only been permitted to see God from behind. He would have easily understood Thomas' "like straw," for he would have assumed immediately that to Thomas was granted what he longed for while he was writing chapters twenty-four and twenty-six.

A soldier, separated from her beloved during a tour of duty in Kuwait or Somalia, may carry his picture with her, looking at it repeatedly and even kissing it from time to time. The loss of the picture would be a source of great desolation. But when the two are reunited back at home, it is the beloved and not his picture that gets the kisses, and the loss of the picture would be no great catastrophe. It would be accompanied by no mourning. If it is retained, this would be for sentimental rather than for spiritual reasons. The picture fades into insignificance in the presence of the one pictured. Representation cannot rival its referent. It is in terms like these that Anselm would understand Thomas.

Something like this is, I suppose, the standard interpretation of the end of Aquinas' career as a theologian, and perhaps nothing more needs to be said about it. But the homely soldier simile leaves us a bit uneasy if we dwell on it. For unless we assume (on what evidence?) that St. Thomas remained in a state of ecstasy for the rest of his life, we are left with the question why the theological portrait did not regain its importance after the temporary experience of divine presence. Perhaps this question only shows the limitations of the simile, but we could also take it as an invitation to look beyond the traditional solution.

My years at Fordham University have been fulfilling and fruitful in many

⁵ *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962).

⁶ This may be in print somewhere. I am drawing on a course he gave in the sixties on the ontological argument.

ways. But there is an element of disappointment, too. It stems from the fact that these years have not overlapped with those of Bill Richardson. I would love to have known him as a colleague. For like so many of you, I am indebted to him in so many ways, not the least of which is his ability to write about Lacan with greater clarity than anyone else I know. In his splendid contribution to a recent *Festschrift* for Adriaan Peperzak,⁷ he examines Lacan's suggestion that there is a strong analogy between the "subjective destitution" in which psychotherapy culminates and the "theological" or "onto-theo-logical" destitution expressed in St. Thomas' famous phrase, "like straw" (93-94, 97-98).⁸

This suggestion surely points in a different direction from the one just sketched. In order to appreciate its force we need to notice the difference between Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis. Both are, to be sure, atheistic. But in Freud's case the atheism is external. This can be seen in several ways. 1) Insofar as he justifies his atheism, Freud does so by appeal to a generic scientism (nineteenth century positivism, if you like) that has nothing psychoanalytic about it. It neither entails nor is entailed by psychoanalysis. 2) Atheism is not an essential ingredient in the theory of the id and the unconscious, much of which constitutes a better analysis of original sin than most theologians are capable of.⁹ 3) Nor is it an essential ingredient in the goals of therapy, whether these are expressed in the slogan, "Where id was, there ego shall be," or in the notion of "transforming [one's] hysterical misery into common unhappiness."¹⁰ Ricoeur is quite right, I think, in saying that Freudian psychoanalysis as theory and practice is compatible with both faith and unbelief.¹¹

Lacan, by contrast, seems to have more metaphysics built into the theory and practice of analysis. Theoretically, the real is defined as what "does not work" (98), which I take to be shorthand for the claim that the universe, apart from whatever meanings we may "secrete" (98) into it or try to impose on it, is

⁷ William J. Richardson, "'Like Straw': Religion and Psychoanalysis," in *Eros and Eris: Contributions to a Hermeneutical Phenomenology/Liber Amicorum for Adriaan Peperzak*, ed. Paul Van Tongeren, et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992).

⁸ Page references given in the text are to the essay described in the previous note, including citations from Lacan.

⁹ I have argued this in "The Atheist Dr. Freud as Theologian of Original Sin," Chapter 13 of *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993).

¹⁰ These references are from *The Ego and the Id* and *Studies on Hysteria*, respectively. See *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 22:80 and 2:351.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970), 235.

hostile or indifferent to human aspirations. This means that our deepest loss and longing is for an object lost "forever" and "in some primordial way, never to be found again" (94). Successful therapy, therefore, has the character of "desolation" and "destitution" because it has the character of "castration" (94), the permanent loss of the profoundly desired. It is the definitive end to a longing whose futility one has seen through. Therapy finds its fulfillment in seeing that the real "does not work." The clear implication of this view is that religious meaning represents a "repression of the real" (93).

I agree with Richardson's claim that 1) there is a fundamental difference between the "subjective destitution" in which analysis culminates, according to Lacan, and the "theological" or "onto-theo-logical" destitution expressed in Thomas' famous phrase, "like straw" (97, 101); and that 2) for this reason religious meaning, as Thomas understands it, does not necessarily represent a repression of the real (98). Lacan's analogy between completed therapy and Thomas' termination of theology is a bad one, since the differences are more significant than the similarities. Lacanian analysis and Thomas' religion have diametrically different conceptions of the real. For Thomas, as for religious believers of many kinds, the real is neither what "does not work" nor what is lost "forever . . . never to be found again." Freudian therapy, in its theological neutrality, can offer the modest hope of lessened misery and greater freedom. But Lacanian therapy, it would seem, is pure despair. Stoic resignation is before a real conceived as Reason and Logos. But Lacanian destitution is before a real devoid of any saving graces. Whether Christian hope or Lacanian despair is a repression of the real depends on which of the two accounts of the real does a better job of pointing us toward it.

We must not confuse these conceptions of the real with the real itself. They belong to the symbolic and to the imaginary. But this, of course, does not keep them from being dramatically different. Of course, Christians, including Thomas, hold that evil is real in the Lacanian sense, that beyond our capacity to picture or to speak it, it is a mysterious power that cannot be wished away. But the Christian conception of evil differs from the Lacanian sense of the real in two ways. First, to describe it as what "does not work" would be horribly to understate the case. Second, this aspect of the real is not taken to be either original or ultimate. Only the God who is goodness itself is originally and ultimately real.

This discussion already suggests that the Lacanian distinction between human meaning on the one hand, whether in the symbolic or the imaginary order, and the real on the other hand, that always exceeds and escapes not only our pictures but our logos as well, is a distinction that works in the religious context quite well. Anselm and Aquinas are quite aware of the distinction

between the conceptual systems they erect and the real they intend, and they are willing at a moment's notice to abandon the former for a direct encounter with the latter.

But this means, to repeat, that onto-theo-logy is not a metaphysics of presence, at least in the forms given us by Anselm and Aquinas. St. Paul says that as long as we are not "at home with the Lord . . . we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7-8). He says that though we have "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God . . . we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:6-7). And he insists that "now we see in a mirror dimly," not yet "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). The eschatological hope of being one day "at home with the Lord" and seeing God "face to face" sharply distinguishes Christian faith from the Lacanian despair for which the deepest object of our desire is "lost in some primordial way, never to be found again" (1). But this presence is precisely what Christians, following Paul, have understood themselves not to have in this present life. Like Christian thinkers of every type, Thomists need to be reminded of this in order to avoid lapsing into the epistemological triumphalism that sometimes mars their work; and the opponents of Thomism or of Christian thought in all its forms need to be reminded of this in order to avoid the cheap victories that can be gained by refuting a straw man (or woman). No pun intended.

According to one account of the relation between faith and reason, this notion of distance, absence, unhappy consciousness, eschatological hope, etc., characterizes the faith of ordinary believers, the articulation of which is in a symbolical realm deeply enmeshed in the imaginary. Its favorite genre is narrative, the world of moving images. Reason is able to go beyond faith by freeing the symbolic (intelligible) from its ties to the imaginary (sensible), thereby rendering being fully present to the intellect.¹² The paradigm for this has always been Plato's picture of the "pure knowledge" we can have when we "contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself" (*Phaedo* 66e).

But Plato speaks of this as occurring when we are "rid of the body," and while he sometimes seems to entertain the possibility of a kind of mystical foretaste of glory divine in this life, the notion is for him essentially an eschatological one. Similarly, the later Christian tradition has, if we may put it this way, postponed presence to the future. Mystical experience may provide a preview of pure presence for some individuals on certain occasions, but this will be the normal condition for all only in a hoped for life to come.

It is Hegel who decisively eliminates this element of epistemological hope

¹² In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard allows Johannes de Silentio to frame the entire meditation on the Abraham story between satires on this Hegelian notion of "going beyond" faith.

in a realized eschatology in which the conditions of this life constitute no essential barrier to sheer presence.

Nothing makes clearer, I think, the difference between Hegel and authentically Christian theology, which restricts pure presence to mystical experience and eschatological fulfillment, than the references to Anselm and Aquinas before us. Within the Christian tradition they are paradigms of onto-theo-logy, but their understanding of the difference between faith and reason is not the one sketched above. For them it is the task of faith to go beyond reason, whereas for Hegel it is the task of reason to go beyond faith.

But it is also true that for them, onto-theo-logy, like the narratives and images with which the prereflective believer is content, is one of the ways we walk by faith and not by sight. Or, to put it a bit differently, reason itself is not sight; it is re-presentation and does not preside over presence, and this is not true just of those portions of theology that depend on divine revelation. This, to repeat, is not what Heidegger and Derrida tell us about metaphysics; it is what Anselm and Aquinas tell us about their own theologies.

For both of these onto-theo-logians, metaphysics not only intends what it does not possess, but it knows that it is unable to capture its prey. Thus, if Lacan, in keeping with both structuralist and poststructuralist analyses of discourse points to "discontinuity," "split," "rupture," and "absence" (99); if he is right in seeing the bar between signifier and signified as a "barrier resisting signification" by virtue of "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (99); and if Richardson's formulation holds, that "meaning is never fixed or permanent" and that "conscious discourse is never without ambiguity" (99), this does not deny to onto-theo-logy a possibility of presence it had claimed for itself. Not only narrative theology but metaphysical theology as well can acknowledge and appropriate such analyses, whenever they are convincing (which I think is very often), as part of what it means that we see "in a mirror dimly."

To be sure, to affirm the existence of God is to point to a closure of "the signifying chain upon a center that would 'hold,' where the signifier and signified would be 'one' in a Supreme Subject-presumed-to-know . . . which would thus become the absolute foundation of meaning" (100). But whose meaning would thereby gain an absolute foundation and unity? Not yours and mine, but that of this Supreme Subject. In a slightly different vocabulary, Climacus says in Kierkegaard's *Postscript* that reality may well be a system for God, but not for us.¹³ Onto-theo-logy points to a self-presence, an absolute foundation, a closure

¹³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Vol. 1, 118.

and unity of meaning, but it does not, in its authentically Christian forms, purport to be or to possess any of this. It refuses both the Hegelian inference that if this perfection is real, we must be its embodiment here and now, and the postmodern inference that since we are not such an embodiment, this perfection is unreal. This is because postmodernism and Hegel have a deep, if often overlooked, affinity. Neither is able to entertain the possibility of a real difference between the human and the divine. Unlike the theologies of Anselm and Aquinas, both treat the human as absolute.

All of this implies that the difference between the God of the philosophers and the God "before whom David made music and danced" (97, 101) may not be as great as our Jansenist friend, Blaise Heidegger, would lead us to believe. This is one of the most helpful insights, I believe, to be found in Richardson's paper. It is not likely that David was inspired to sing and dance by meditations on "that which cannot be conceived not to exist" or on the God of Israel as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, though I think it possible that Anselm and Aquinas had as deep an experience of the divine presence from these activities as David did from singing and dancing. My point is simply that in both cases the sense of divine presence is qualified, is less than the sheer presence that the Bible describes as seeing God face to face and philosophers have tried to describe as either immediacy or totality.

Ricoeur says that the believing soul is "an unhappy consciousness; for him, unity, conciliation, and reconciliation are things to be *spoken of* and *acted out*, precisely because they are not *given* . . ."¹⁴ I believe this applies to religion as celebration as much as to religion as confession. The kinship of our onto-theologians and Heidegger's dancing David is expressed, I think, in this parallelism between *speaking of* and *acting out* that which is not given. So far as the speaking is concerned, the real differences between narrative, liturgy, and metaphysics do not make a difference in this context. Short of experiences that radically transcend the conditions of our present being-in-the-world, whether they be mystical or eschatological, religion is at once naïve and sentimental, the experience of presence and absence inseparably intertwined. There is something of an acoustic illusion about contemporary claims to have discovered this chiasm.

With help from Richardson, Lacan came upon the scene as the possibility of a non-traditional reading of the silence of St. Thomas. The result, it seems to me, has been twofold. First, Lacan fails to throw fresh light on the situation because the analogy between therapeutic and onto-theo-logical destitution is not very convincing. Second, in recognizing this we have been forcefully

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 167-68.

reminded of the difference between onto-theologies of the Hegelian sort, which merit the epithet "metaphysics of presence," and onto-theologies of the authentically Christian sort, which do not.

I want to suggest, however, that Lacan's suggestion that a certain "destitution" is at work in Thomas' "like straw" may have more (and different) truth to it than he suspects. Toward the end of his essay, as part of his argument against Lacan that religion is not a repression of the real, Richardson finds at "the center of the Christian religious experience . . . 'a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness'" (100-101; 1 *Cor.* 1:23); and he remembers that the Paul who wrote these words also said, "I am crucified with Christ . . ." (*Gal.* 2:20). I want to suggest that these themes, rather than Lacan's bad analogy, might point us to an alternative reading of the famous words, "like straw."

Is it possible that when Thomas speaks to Reginald of "what has now been revealed to me," he points to a specifically Christian and not generically theistic experience? Might it have been the meaning of Christ and not the essence of God that generated "the loss of the metaphysical structures that had allowed him to speak and write intelligibly about God . . ." (101)? Might it have been, to be more specific, the meaning of the life and death of Jesus, rather than his resurrection and ascension as the Christ that suddenly dawned upon him, Jesus in his lowliness rather than Christ in his glory?¹⁵ Might it have been a realization of what Jesus had done for him and of the call to become himself an *imitatio Christi* that silenced his speculative pen?

Objection 1. But Thomas was well acquainted with the gospel narratives about the life and death of Jesus and could hardly have spoken about them as "what has now been revealed to me."

Obj. 2. But there is no evidence to support this view, and there is a longstanding tradition to the contrary. You haven't proved your case.

Obj. 3. Even if the light of the cross had shined into Thomas' life in a new way, what reason is there to think that the result would be the abandonment of systematic theology?

Reply Obj. 1. As Hegel never tires of reminding us, the familiar, just because it is familiar, may dwell beside us without being really understood. To be familiar with the narratives about Jesus' life and death is one thing. To be seized by the import of this story is quite another.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard makes this distinction crucial to his understanding of Christianity in *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). See especially 24, 36, 108. Contrary to widespread opinion, it is this book more than any other, including the *Postscript*, that gives Kierkegaard's deepest understanding of the meaning of Christian faith.

Reply Obj. 2. The only evidence I know to support the suggestion I am making is the fact that it was while he was writing on Penance that Thomas gave up on writing.¹⁶ This is anything but conclusive evidence, although it seems to me that there is no more and possibly less evidence in support of the traditional view. Still, to the charge that I have not proved my case I would plead guilty if I were trying to prove a case, which I am not. I am rather inviting us to entertain a possibility, which means that the question is not so much how it was with Thomas as how it will be with us.

What I am posing might be called the Bonaventure question. Is it possible, as Bonaventure tried so assiduously to do, to unite St. Francis with Alexander of Hales by developing a speculative metaphysics that would never lose sight of the life and death of Jesus? Or is it the impossibility of this task that was revealed to Thomas (or which became clear in the light of what was revealed)?

Reply Obj. 3. As long as the answer to the Bonaventure question remains open, and I shall not try to close it, no definitive reply to the third objection can be given. But it is possible to sketch a path that is open to reflective faith, even if it is not clearly necessary. When the light of the cross shines into our lives in a certain way, it dawns on us that the question of how we live in its shadow is more important than making good our theoretical escape from the shadows of Plato's cave. The latter task, just to the degree that it offers us the mastery of knowledge, suddenly loses its all-consuming importance in relation to the possibility of seeking to become like the suffering servant. Whether theory in any form can survive the dawning of such a light is a question we cannot afford to be finished with too quickly.

¹⁶ James Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work*, 321.