IN PRAISE OF THOMAS AQUINAS

Reconciling faith and reason in his massive *Summa Theologica* (1265–73), Thomas Aquinas ranks as one of the great thinkers of the eve of the Renaissance, the conservative revolutionary who changed in 40 years the whole intellectual outlook of the Christian world. He pressed for "rational investigation," "discernment of exceptional conditions," and "prudence." Italy's Umberto Eco, semiotics scholar and author of the popular novel *The Name of the Rose* (1983), offers a lively assessment of the man who now "is back in fashion, as saint and philosopher."

by Umberto Eco

The worst thing that happened to Thomas Aquinas in the course of his career was not his death, on March 7, 1274, in Fossanova, when he was barely 49, and, fat as he was, the monks were unable to carry his body down the stairs.

Nor was it what happened three years after his death, when the Archbishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, published a list of heretical propositions, including 20 by Thomas, the angelic doctor himself, son of the lordly family of Aquino. For history soon dealt with this repressive act and in Thomas's favor; he received justice, even after his death, winning his battle while Etienne Tempier ended up, with Guillaume de Saint-Amour, Tommaso's other enemy, in the unfortunately eternal ranks of the great reactionaries.

No, the disaster that ruined the life of Tommaso d'Aquino befell him posthumously in 1323, two years after the death of Dante and was perhaps also, to some degree, attributable to the poet: in other words, when John XXII decided to turn Tommaso into Saint Thomas Aquinas. These are nasty mishaps, like receiving the Nobel Prize, being admitted to the Académie de France, winning an Oscar. You become like the Mona Lisa: a cliché. It's the moment when the big arsonist is appointed Fire Chief.

Now Thomas is back in fashion, as saint and philosopher. We try

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) in a painting by a 15th-century artist, Justus of Ghent.

to understand what Thomas would do today, with the faith, culture, and intellectual energy he had in his own day. But love sometimes clouds the spirit: To say that Thomas was great, that he was a revolutionary, it is necessary to understand in what sense he was one. For, though no one can say he was a reactionary, he is still a man who raised a construction so solid that no subsequent revolutionary has been able to shake it from within—and the most that could be done to it, from Descartes to Hegel to Marx and to Teilhard de Chardin, was to speak of it "from outside."

Especially since it is hard to understand how scandal could come from this person, so unromantic, fat, and slow, who at school took notes in silence, looked as if he weren't understanding anything, and was teased by his companions. And, in the monastery, as he sat at the table on his double stool (they had to saw off the central arm to make enough room for him) the playful monks shouted to him that outside there was an ass flying and he ran to see, while the others split their sides (mendicant friars, as is well known, had simple tastes); and then Thomas (who was no fool) said that to him a flying ass had seemed more likely than a monk who would tell a falsehood, and the other friars were insulted.

But then this student that his companions called the dumb ox became a professor, worshiped by his students, and one day he went out

walking on the hills with his disciples and looked at Paris from above, and they asked him if he would like to be the master of such a beautiful city, and he said that he would much prefer to have the text of the Homilies of Saint John Chrysostom; but then when an ideological enemy stepped on his foot he became furious and in that Latin of his that seems laconic because you can understand it all and the verbs are exactly where an Italian expects them, he exploded in insults and sarcasm.

Was he good-natured, was he an angel? Was he sexless?

When his brothers wanted to prevent him from becoming a Dominican (because in those days the cadet son of a good family became a Benedictine, which was something proper, and not a mendicant, which would be like entering a serve-the-people commune), they captured him as he was on his way to Paris and shut him up in the family castle; then, to get the crazy notions out of his head and turn him into a respectable abbé, they sent a naked girl, ready and willing, into his room. And Thomas grabbed a firebrand and started running after her, clearly meaning to burn her buttocks. No sex, then? Who can say? Because the thing upset him so much that afterwards, as we are told by Bernard Gui, "Women, unless it were absolutely necessary, he avoided as if they were serpents."

In any case this man was a fighter. Sturdy, lucid, he conceived an ambitious plan, carried it out, and won. What then was the field of battle, what was at stake, what were the advantages he achieved?

When Thomas was born (in 1225), the Italian communes had won the battle of Legnano against the Holy Roman Empire 50 years earlier. Ten years before his birth England received the Magna Charta. In France the reign of Philippe Auguste had just ended. The empire was dying. Within five years the seafaring and trading cities of the north would join to form the Hanseatic League. The Florentine economy was expanding, about to issue the gold florin; Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa had already invented double-entry bookkeeping; the flourishing medical school of Salerno and the law school of Bologna were a century old. The Crusades were in an advanced state; in other words, contacts with the East were in full development. Further, the Arabs in Spain were fascinating the Western world with their scien-

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tific and philosophical discoveries. Technology was making great strides: There were new ways of shoeing horses, driving mills, steering ships, yoking oxen for bearing burdens and plowing. National monarchies in the north, and free communes in the south.

In short, this was not the Middle Ages, at least not in the popular sense of the term. Polemically, we might say that if it weren't for what Thomas was about to do, it would already be the Renaissance. But Thomas actually had to do what he was going to do if things were then to proceed as they did.

Europe was trying to create for itself a culture that would reflect a political and economic plurality, dominated, true, by the paternal control of the church, which nobody called into question, but also open to a new sense of nature, of concrete reality, of human individuality. Organizational and productive processes were being rationalized: It was necessary to find the techniques of reason.

When Thomas was born, the techniques of reason had been operative for a century. In Paris, at the Faculty of Arts, they still taught music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, but also dialectic, logic, and rhetoric, and in a new way. Pierre Abelard, a century before, had been there; for private reasons he was deprived of reproductive organs, but his head lost none of its vigor.*

The new method was to compare the opinions of the various traditional authorities, and decide, according to logical procedures based on a secular grammar of ideas. Linguistics, semantics were being employed; scholars asked themselves what a given word meant and in what sense it was used. Aristotle's writings on logic were the study manuals, but not all of them had been translated and interpreted; few knew Greek, except for the Arabs, who were far ahead of the Europeans both in philosophy and in science.

But already a century before, the school of Chartres, rediscovering the mathematical texts of Plato, had constructed an image of the natural world based on geometrical laws, on measurable processes. This was not yet the experimental method of Roger Bacon, but it was theoretic construction, an attempt to explain the universe through natural bases, even if Nature was seen as a divine agent. The English theologian Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253) developed a metaphysics of luminous energy that suggests partly Bergson and partly Einstein: The study of optics was born. In short, the problem of the perception of physical objects was broached, a line was drawn between hallucination and sight.

This is no small matter. The universe of the early Middle Ages was a universe of hallucination, the world was a symbolic forest peo-

*For secretly marrying his student, Héloïse, Abelard (1079–1144) suffered castration at the hands of her uncle's henchmen. He went on to think great thoughts in the abbey of Saint-Denis.

pled with mysterious presences; things were seen as if in the continuous story of a divinity who spent his time reading and devising the *Weekly Puzzle Magazine*. This universe of hallucination, by Thomas's time, had not disappeared under the blows of the universe of reason: On the contrary, the latter was still the product of intellectual élites and was frowned upon.

Because, to tell the truth, the universe of terrestrial things was frowned upon. Saint Francis talked to the birds, but the philosophical foundation of theology was neo-Platonic. Which means: Far, far away there is God, in whose unattainable totality the principles of things, ideas, stir; the universe is the effect of a benevolent distraction of this very distant One, who seems to trickle slowly downward, abandoning traces of his perfection in the sticky clumps of matter that he excretes, like traces of sugar in the urine. In this muck that represents the more negligible margin of the One, we can find, almost always through a brilliant puzzle-solution, the imprint of germs of comprehensibility, but comprehensibility lies elsewhere, and if all goes well, along comes the mystic, with his nervous, stripped-down intuition, who penetrates with an almost drugged eye into the *garçonnière* of the One, where the sole and true party is going on.

Plato and Aristotle had said all that was needed to understand the problems of the soul, but the nature of a flower or of the maze of guts the Salerno doctors were exploring in the belly of a sick man, and the reason why the fresh air of a spring evening was good for you: Here things became obscure. So it was better to know the flowers in the illuminated texts of the visionaries, ignore the fact that guts exist, and consider spring evenings a dangerous temptation. Thus European culture was divided: If they understood the heavens, they didn't understand the earth.

If somebody then wanted to understand the earth and not take an interest in heaven, he was in big trouble. The Red Brigades of the period were roaming around: heretical sects that, on the one hand, wanted to renew the world, set up impossible republics, and on the other hand, practiced sodomy, pillage, and other horrors. Reports of their activities might or might not be true, but in any case it was best to kill the lot of them.

At this point the European men of reason learned from the Arabs that there was an ancient master (a Greek) who could supply a key to join these scattered limbs of culture: Aristotle. Aristotle knew how to talk about God, but he also classified animals and stones, and concerned himself with the movement of the stars. He knew logic, studied psychology, talked about physics, classified political systems.

But, above all, Aristotle offered the keys (and in this sense

Thomas was to make the fullest use of him) to overturning the relationship between the essence of things (that is, to the extent that things can be understood and said, even when those things are not here, before our eyes) and the matter of which things are made.

We can leave God out of it: He is living happily on his own and has provided the world with excellent physical laws so that it can go ahead by itself. And we needn't waste time trying to recover the trace of essences in that sort of mystic cascade of theirs whereby, losing the best along the way, they come and get all muddled up in matter. The mechanism of things is here, before our eyes; things are the principle of their movement. A man, a flower, a stone are organisms that have grown up obeying an internal law that moved them: The essence is the principle of their growth and their organization. It is a something already there, ready to explode, that moves matter from inside, and makes it grow and reveal itself: This is why we can understand it. A stone is a portion of matter that has assumed form: Together, from this marriage, an individual substance has been born.

The secret of being, as Thomas was to gloss with a bold intellectual leap, is the concrete act of existing. Existing, happening are not accidents that occur to ideas, which for themselves would be better off in the warm uterus of the distant divinity. First, thank heaven, things exist concretely, and then we understand them.

Naturally two points have to be clarified.

First of all, according to the Aristotelian tradition, understanding things does not mean studying them experimentally: You had only to understand that things count, theory took care of the rest. Not much, if you like, but still a huge step forward from the hallucinated world of the previous centuries.

In the second place, if Aristotle had to be christianized, more space had to be given to God who was a bit too much off to one side. Things grow thanks to the inner force of the life principle that moves them, but it must also be admitted that if God takes all this great movement to heart, he is capable of thinking the stone as it becomes stone by itself, and if he were to decide to cut off the electricity (which Thomas called "participation") there would be a cosmic blackout. So the essence of the stone is in the stone, and it is grasped by our mind, which is capable of thinking it; but it existed already in the mind of God, which is full of love and spends its days not doing its fingernails but supplying energy to the universe.

This was the game to be played; otherwise Aristotle wouldn't enter Christian culture, and if Aristotle remained outside, nature and reason remained outside, too.

It was a difficult game because the Aristotelians that Thomas

found had preceded him, when he began to work, had taken another path, which might even be more pleasing to us, and which an interpreter fond of historical short-circuits might even define as materialistic. But it was a very slightly dialectical materialism; indeed, it was an astrological materialism, and it rather upset everybody, from the keepers of the Koran to those of the Gospel.

The man responsible, a century earlier, had been Averroes, Muslim by culture, Berber by race, Spanish by nationality, and Arab by language.* Averroes knew Aristotle better than anybody and had understood what Aristotelian science led to: God is not a manipulator who sticks his nose into everything at random; he established nature in its mechanical order and in its mathematical laws, regulated by the iron determination of the stars. And since God is eternal, the world in its order is eternal also. Philosophy studies this order: nature, in other words. Men are able to understand it because in all men one principle of intelligence acts; otherwise each would see things in his own way and there would be no reciprocal understanding.

At this point the materialistic conclusion was inevitable: The world is eternal, regulated by a predictable determinism, and if a sole intellect lives in all men, the individual immortal soul does not exist. If the Koran says something different, the philosopher must philosophically believe what his science shows him and then, without creating too many problems for himself, believe the opposite, which is the command of faith. There are two truths and one must not disturb the other.

Averroes carried to lucid conclusions what was implicit in rigorous Aristotelianism, and this was the reason for his success in Paris among the masters at the Faculty of Arts, in particular with the theologian Sigier of Brabant, whom Dante puts in Paradise with Saint Thomas, even if it is Thomas's fault that Sigier's scholarly career collapsed and he was relegated to the footnotes in popular handbooks of philosophy.

The game of cultural politics that Thomas tried to play was a double game: on the one hand, to make Aristotle accepted by the theological learning of the time; and on the other, to detach him from the use the followers of Averroes were putting him to. But in doing this, Thomas encountered a handicap: He belonged to the mendicant orders, who had the misfortune of having put the Italian "mystic"-theologian Joachim of Fiore (1130–1201) in circulation along with another band of apocalyptic heretics who represented a grave danger for the established order, for the church and for the state. So the reactionary masters of Paris's Faculty of Theology, with the fearsome Guillaume de Saint-Amour at their head, could easily say that

*Averroes, or ibn-Rashid (1126–98), was a Spanish-born Arab philosopher and physician.

mendicant friars were all Joachimite heretics, and wanted to teach Aristotle, the master of the Averroes-inspired atheistic materialists.

But Thomas, on the contrary, was neither a heretic nor a revolutionary. He has been called a "concordian." For him it was a matter of reconciling the new science with the science of revelation, changing everything so that nothing would change.

In this plan he showed an extraordinary amount of good sense and (master of theological refinements) a great adherence to natural reality and earthly equilibrium.

Mind you, Thomas did not aristotelianize Christianity; he christianized Aristotle. He never thought that with reason everything could be understood, but that everything is understood through faith; he wanted to say only that faith was not in conflict with reason, and that therefore it was possible to enjoy the luxury of reason, emerging from the universe of hallucination.

And so it is clear why in the architecture of his works the main chapters speak only of God, angels, the soul, virtues, eternal life; but, within these chapters, everything finds a place that is, more than rational, "reasonable."

Within Thomas's theological architecture you understand why man knows things, why his body is made in a certain way, why he has to examine facts and opinions to make a decision, and resolve contradictions without concealing them, trying to reconcile them openly. With this Thomas gave the church once more a doctrine that, among other things, without taking away a fraction of its power, left the communities free to decide whether to be monarchist or republican. The doctrine distinguishes, for example, among the various types and rights in property, going so far as to say that the right to property does exist, but for possession, not use. Or, in other words, I have the right to possess a building, but if there are people living in hovels, reason demands that I grant the use to those who do not possess the equivalent (I remain owner of the building, but the others must live there even if this offends my egoism). And so on. These are all solutions based on equilibrium and on that virtue that he called "prudence," whose job was to "retain the memory of gained experience, to have an exact sense of ends, prompt attention to situations, rational and progressive investigation, circumspection of opportunities, precaution in complexities, and discernment of exceptional conditions."

It works, because this mystic who was so eager to lose himself in the beatific contemplation of God to whom the human soul aspires "by nature" was also alert, in a human way, to natural values and respected rational discourse.

It must be remembered that, before him, when the text of an

ancient author was studied, the commentator or the copyist, when he came upon something that clashed with revealed religion, either scratched out the "erroneous" sentences or marked them with a question mark, to alert the reader, or else they shifted the words to the margin. But what did Thomas do, instead? He aligned the divergent opinions, clarified the meaning of each, questioned everything, even the revealed datum, enumerated the possible objections, and essayed the final mediation. Everything had to be done in public, just as, in his day, the *disputatio* was public: The tribunal of reason was in operation.

Then, if you read Thomas closely, in every case the datum of faith came to prevail over everything else and led to the untangling of the question; in other words, God and revealed truth preceded and guided the movement of secular reason. This has been made clear by the most acute and affectionate Thomas scholars, including, more recently, Etienne Gilson. Nobody has ever said that Thomas was Galileo. Thomas simply gave the church a doctrinal system that put her in agreement with the natural world.

And he won, at lightning speed. The dates are explicit. Before him it was asserted that "the spirit of Christ does not reign where the spirit of Aristotle lives"; in 1210 the Greek philosopher's books of natural history were still forbidden, and the ban continued through the following decades, as Thomas had these texts translated by his collaborators and commented on them. But in 1255 all of Aristotle was allowed. After the death of Thomas, as we mentioned, there was an attempt at reaction, but finally Catholic doctrine was aligned along Aristotelian positions. The dominion and spiritual authority of Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) over 50 years of Italian culture was as nothing compared to the authority Thomas displayed by changing in 40 years the whole cultural policy of the Christian world.

Hence Thomism. That is to say, Thomas gave Catholic thought such a complete frame that, since then, Catholic thought can no longer shift anything. At most, with the scholastic Counter-Reformation, it developed Thomas, gave us a Jesuit Thomism, a Dominican Thomism, even a Franciscan Thomism, where the shades of other 13th- and 14th-century theologians—Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham—stir. But Thomas cannot be touched. Thomas's constructive eagerness for a new system becomes, in the Thomistic tradition, the conservative vigilance of an untouchable system. Where Thomas swept away everything in order to build anew, scholastic Thomism tries to touch nothing and performs wonders of pseudo-Thomistic tightrope walking to make the new fit into the frame of Thomas's system. The tension and eagerness for knowledge that the

fat Thomas possessed to the maximum degree shift then into heretical movements and into the Protestant Reformation. Thomas's frame is left, but not the intellectual effort it cost to make a frame that, then, was truly "different."

Naturally it was his fault: He is the one who offered the church a method of conciliation of the tensions and a nonconflictual absorption of everything that could not be avoided. He is the one who taught how to distinguish contradictions in order to mediate them harmoniously. Once the trick was clear, they thought that Thomas's lesson was this: Where yes and no are opposed, create a "nes." But Thomas did this at a time when saying "nes" signified not stopping, but taking a step forward, and exposing the cards on the table.

So it is surely licit to ask what Thomas Aquinas would do if he were alive today; but we have to answer that, in any case, he would not write another *Summa Theologica*. He would come to terms with Marxism, with the physics of relativity, with formal logic, with existentialism and phenomenology. He would comment not on Aristotle, but on Marx and Freud. Then he would change his method of argumentation, which would become a bit less harmonious and conciliatory. And finally he would realize that one cannot and must not work out a definitive, concluded system, like a piece of architecture, but a sort of mobile system, a loose-leaf *Summa*, because in his encyclopedia of the sciences the notion of historical temporariness would have entered. I can't say whether he would still be a Christian. But let's say he would be. I know for sure that he would take part in celebrations of his work only to remind us that it is not a question of deciding how still to use what he thought, but to think new things. Or at least to learn from him how you can think cleanly, like a man of your own time. After which I wouldn't want to be in his shoes.