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On Being a Thomist: Cornelius Ernst's Meta-Theology

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Abstract

Thomism is a contested category that exhibits considerable plasticity in its application. An examination of the role played by such invocations of proper names in contemporary theological discourse indicates the importance of textual accessibility and engagement. The role played by texts is examined in terms of an often-elided distinction between 'intelligibility' and 'readability', with the former aligned with propositional contents and the latter a more expansive attentiveness to the text's performative operations. The historical remoteness of Aquinas coupled with the importation into theology of secularised reading strategies is seen to have alienated the full readability of Aquinas's texts. Acting against Cartesian modes of reading, Cornelius Ernst's re-performance of Thomistic pedagogy as 'engaged contemplation' is concerned to enact a horizon of meaning within which Aquinas's texts retain enduring readability. This article develops Ernst's Thomistic meta-theology into an account of Thomism as 'meta-reading'. On this account, authentic Thomism involves the intentional cultivation of a total human culture, within which the inherently theological discipline of textual engagement exercises a quasi-liturgical function.

Keywords

Thomism, Cornelius Ernst, textuality, reading, fundamental theology

Proper names and their adjectival derivatives play an important constellating role in contemporary theological discourse.[1] By self-identifying as a 'Thomist'[2]— one committed to theologising *ad mentem Thomae Aquinatis*—a theologian simultaneously indicates their belonging to a

[1] Richard Rorty suggested that proceeding in terms of proper names rather than propositions differentiates 'continental' philosophy from analytic approaches, see: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 81 fn 3.

[2] On the complexities of Thomist self-identification, see: Robert E. Lauder, "On Being or Not Being a Thomist," *The Thomist* 55, no. 2 (1991): 301-19.

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particular community of scholarship, their likely commitment to various theological axioms, and the types of questions that they are likely to accredit as dogmatically significant. Nonetheless, the parameters of 'Thomism' are historically conditioned and contingent upon the contexts in which they are invoked. The designation 'Thomist' embraces diverse speculative and historical approaches, some Platonising and others thoroughly Aristotelian,[3] and is broad enough to cover (without much controversy) thinkers as divergent as Garrigou-Lagrange, de Lubac, Milbank and Rahner. The plasticity of 'Thomism' as a category is indicated by its easy conjunction with other proper names or qualifiers ('Wittgensteinian-Thomism' being but one apposite example). Indeed, the extent to which 'Thomism' implies commitment to particular dogmatic propositions is debated: for some, 'Thomism' implies commitment to certain doctrinal principles that secure the integrity of a theological worldview; for others, 'Thomism' is essentially a formal principle, designating a habit of mind that balances the integrity of both faith and reason. Yet this methodological commitment to the relationship of faith and reason is one aspect of a broader account of grace as perfecting nature. Consequently, form and content cannot be so easily dissociated: content implies form, and *vice versa.*

In a discipline marked by increasing fragmentation and inescapable politicisation, the use of such designations derived from proper names—with their promise of a sense of theological kinship—risks collapsing questions of truth into those of identity.[4] In contrast to some rather narrow understandings of Thomism, the intellectual tradition of the English Dominican province has tended to emphasise the importance of Aquinas's texts as providing a common theological grammar, but the 'Thomists' that it has produced are far from a homogenous group concerned to propagate a single definitive interpretation of the Angelic Doctor's thought. A common commitment to 'Thomism' has fostered ongoing conversation and facilitated generative disagreement.

This article offers a reading of Cornelius Ernst's proposed ontology of meaning as a contribution to an intellectual culture that safeguards such an orientation to Aquinas's texts. After arguing that name-invocation within theological discourse ought to depend upon the accessibility of a canon of texts, I propose a distinction between textual intelligibility and readability. On this analysis, 'readability' concerns the full performative efficacy of a text (understood in cultural-linguistic and psycho-spiritual terms), whereas 'intelligibility' concerns the reconstruction and translation of its cognitive-propositional contents. Cornelius Ernst's proposed ontology of meaning is then read as an attempt to secure the readability of Aquinas's texts, through strategies

[3] Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-32.

[4] *Cf.*, Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 41-42.*

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of reading that he describes as 'engaged contemplation' and 'meta-theology'. So, for Ernst, who had a notable suspicion of 'Thomism' as a theological school,[5] the true meaning of 'Thomism' can only be rendered adverbially, as the convivial cultivation of a total human culture within which Aquinas's texts are rendered authentically readable.

Proper Names and the Readability of Texts

The tendency to invoke 'Thomism' is embedded within a much broader strategy of name-invocation within contemporary theological discourse, which is not unrelated to the popularity of genealogy as a hermeneutical strategy.[6] At least three factors contribute to the utility of proper names. Firstly, contemporary theological curricula lack a common textual framework (as might once have been provided by Lombard's *Sentences* or even by Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*). Secondly (and not entirely unrelatedly), there is a marked lack of consensus concerning what constitutes a *theological* question (or, indeed, how the truth of such questions ought to be judged). As a discipline, theology is consequently marked by a methodological self-consciousness that is not reducible to a function of the interrogation of its epistemological foundations. Thirdly, within the contemporary academy, emerging scholars face a pragmatic need to demonstrate the impact of their work relative to identifiable and ongoing intellectual conversations.

A novice theologian is thus faced with an almost bewildering array of competing texts and interpretative communities. The impossibility of mastering such an enormous body of literature can be managed by learning a series of basic theological moves or impulses that are associated with the great architects of the theological tradition. In this way, a theologian can situate herself by invoking proper names as fixed points against which their own dogmatic movements can be triangulated through a kind of intellectual trigonometry. In such a conceptual topography, 'Thomistic' might indicate a particular view of the nature-grace relation, the negotiation of a course between fideism and rationalism, or a commitment to intellectualism; 'Scotist' might indicate voluntarism, a particular account of the divine infinity, an acceptance of the formal distinction, or a stance on the motives of the incarnation; 'Barthian' is suggestive of a Christocentric concentration and a critique of natural theology governed by the rejection of the *analogia entis*; and 'Schleiermacherian' understood as locating an Archimedean point for theology within a universal *Gefühl*, thereby attempting a completion of

[5] Cornelius Ernst, *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology*, ed. Timothy Radcliffe and Fergus Kerr (London: Darton, Longman Todd, 1979), 11. Hereafter cited as 'ME'.

[6] Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of nihilism : philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*, Radical orthodoxy series Y (London: London : Routledge, 2002).

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Kant's third critique. The names by which a theologian orientates herself are largely contingent upon the particular communities to which she belongs and within which she was formed.

Positively, this constellating use of proper names potentially facilitates the advance of theological conversation: proper names function as a professional shorthand, derived from an engagement with an identifiable canon of texts. In this sense, the invocation of a proper name obviates the need to re-think the entire *nexus mysteriorum* from first principles in every conversation. Negatively, name-invocation easily collapses into exclusionary jargon and needless obfuscation, and quickly becomes detached from the detailed engagement with texts that it gestures towards. Indeed, as will be clear from the thumbnail sketches above, the constellating use of names depends upon a necessary lack of granularity, which is unavoidably reductive, homogenizing a huge degree of complexity within the polyvalence of the texts and the history of their reception.

Consequently, name-invocation risks collapsing into the use of names as a placeholder or remainder concept that substitutes for thought. The invocation of a proper name within a theological argument risks the endless generation of further discourse that is oblique to the task at hand. With the invocation of a name, the theologian immediately renders herself liable to the suggestion that she has misrepresented the 'contents' signified by that name. Problematically, such an objection can be entertained within a general agnosticism about the truth or falsehood of the position, considered apart from the question of interpretative fidelity. Conversely, the argument can usually proceed without accrediting the invocation as a faithful interpretation, but merely as a meaningful gesture towards a larger corpus of interpretative literature. Consequently, the 'invocation' comes to dominate the 'name', which is hollowed out (not unlike a beetle in a Wittgensteinian box)[7] so as to signify simply a communally negotiated consensus.

The integrity of the names within this gestural economy can only be secured relative to a canon of publicly accessible texts, through which theologians communally parse the data of revelation and orientate themselves relative to a broader nexus of texts, authors and interpreters. The good operation of name-invocation, then, depends upon the accessibility of these texts. However, the mediation of French post-structuralism to anglophone philosophy has drawn attention to an often-elided distinction between the readability of a text and the intelligibility of its contents.[8] Antecedent to the discussion of Derrida's (or Lacan's) intelligibility (not infrequently questioned)[9] is the prior question of whether their texts can be adequately accessed in trans-

[7] *PI*. §293

[8] Judith Butler, "Introduction," in *Of Grammatology*, ed. Jacques Derrida (2016), vii-xxiv.

[9] Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

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lation. The explanatory framework needed to convey the dense allusions between *différence* and *différance*, with the polyvalent invocation of both differing and deferring, ultimately undermines the performative gesture of Derrida's subversion of a logocentric prioritisation of the spoken over the written. Likewise, that Lacan's *nom-du-père* is homophonic with the unspoken *non-du-père* always already invokes the intimate connection between the paternal prohibition and the 'name' that effects the symbolic castration.[10] The necessity of an explanatory framework forecloses the immediacy of the qualitative experience of an original textual disclosure.

Questions of translation and its limits are, of course, nothing new.[11] As a metaphysically undergirded 'Catholicity of concepts' is a necessary precondition for dogmatic definition, Catholic theology's commitment to the transcultural accessibility of certain texts will engender a more optimistic stance towards the possibilities of translation than would the deconstructive impulses of poststructuralism. Nonetheless, fresh attentiveness to the diverse ways in which texts function performatively (beyond simple information-communication) raises hermeneutically significant questions about the extent to which those texts are *authentically* readable. Resisting the collapse of 'reading' into 'understanding' demands a thicker description of texts, and an attentiveness to the different modes by which a text is engaged, both individually and communally. The question of what constitutes textual readability is, however, not unrelated to the contents of the text and its intelligibility: 'reading' here slips between both verbal and nominal significance (not unlike 'faith' invoking both *fides qua* and *fides quae*). Similarly, the concept of 'authenticity' can operate both adverbially and adjectivally, as designating fidelity to either form or content (or both): a 'Thomism' can be said to be *authentic* if it rearticulates the contents of Aquinas's text and/or if it re-performs the operations of the text.

The intelligibility of Aquinas's texts, which are marked by an intentional clarity of expression and a highly controlled poverty of style, can be established with comparatively little historical reconstruction.[12] Intelligibility does not, however, imply *full* readability, in the extended sense outlined above. Just as the contents of a highly corrupted manuscript might be adequately reconstructed under conditions of only partial legibility, so only a partial accessibility of a text is necessary to secure its intelligibility. The question of a text's *readability*, then, is

[10] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 119.

[11] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Mariner, 1968), 11-25.

[12] See, for instance, Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding St Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry (Chicago: Regnery, 1964).

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both antecedent to and posterior to the question of its intelligibility: whereas intelligibility presupposes a degree of readability, significant knowledge of the text's cognitive content drives reflection on the extent of its readability, as the case of Derrida and Lacan demonstrates. Whereas the question of Derrida's readability tends to precede that of intelligibility, the opposite direction of questioning obtains in the case of Aquinas, where questions of readability are largely posterior to those of intelligibility. It is in its capacity to raise this posterior question of readability and to propose an ontological framework for the performative readability of Aquinas's texts—the adverbial authenticity of 'Thomism'—that Cornelius Ernst's meta-theology makes a decisive contribution to the intellectual culture of the English Dominican province.

Cornelius Ernst and the Readability of Aquinas

Cornelius Ernst's use of Wittgensteinian 'philosophical therapy' to overcome the 'congenital Cartesianism' of his students, and his proposal of a new ontology of meaning to overcome latent extrinsicism, is well documented.[13] Ernst's constructive proposal, however, is explicitly concerned with an orientation to the texts of Aquinas. The readability of Aquinas's texts is compromised by their historical remoteness.[14] Although the analytic style of Thomistic argumentation takes 'a little getting used to', its dependence on 'a web of concepts that haven't been acquired in any purely logical way'[15] points to a much more basic divergence of worlds. The recovery of a semantic horizon in which 'the fundamental categories of thought and speech are the fundamental categories of the disclosed world'[16] can only be achieved through a vision that has been disciplined through serious philosophical therapy (an 'exercise in historical sympathy')[17] rather than by any 'sort of infantile regression'.[18] The beginning of this therapy lies in '*undergoing* acute discontinuity between [Aquinas's] world and ours',[19] recognising—and

[13] Louis Roy, 'Cornelius Ernst's Theological Seeds', *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 998 (2004): 459-70; Fergus Kerr, 'Ansombe, Ernst and McCabe: Wittgenstein and Catholic Theology', *Josephinum* 15, no. 1 (2008): 128-48; Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Continuum, 2014), Ch. 1; Oliver James Keenan, 'Sacrament of the Dynamic Transcendence of Christianity: Cornelius Ernst on the Church', *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1052 (2013): 396-414.

[14] ME, 7.

[15] ME, 9.

[16] ME, 10.

[17] ME, 11.

[18] ME, 12.

[19] ME, 11.

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enduring—our alienation from Aquinas in the 'trauma' of his unreadability.

Consequently, Ernst's interest in the theological use of Wittgenstein and Heidegger is not purely speculative, but *ab initio* pedagogical, concerned to induct a particular group of students into a horizon of meaning in which 'the world effortlessly shows itself to be what it is',[20] thereby cultivating strategies that render Aquinas at least partially readable. This philosophical propaedeutic not only demonstrates the falsity of Cartesian intuitions, but aims to unmask the extent to which we are 'held captive' by what Wittgenstein called a 'picture'[21] and Heidegger termed 'inauthenticity'.[22] A straightforward disavowal of Cartesian anthropology is inadequate to the task of liberating the 'modern mind' from the nonsense generated by the metaphors into which we have been habituated by culturally-mediated linguistic prejudices. The value of the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Heidegger to Ernst's proposal resides not only in their common interest in meaning, but in their shared attentiveness to our existential self-bafflement.[23] The modern mind's predicament is not only one of intuitive philosophical error, but also one of auto-anaesthesia—a seemingly innate tendency to lose ourselves in the midst of our language—which both *Sein und Zeit* and the *Philosophical Investigations* seek to expose in their own distinctive ways.

These themes are alluded to in Ernst's characterisation of Aquinas's *quinque viæ* as demonstrations of 'how we can go on speaking about God in the ordinary world'.[24] Ernst here attends to the integrity of language, community and forms of life, together with the classical Wittgensteinian-Heideggerian emphasis on the 'every day' or the 'worldliness' of language.[25] In short, our capacity for theological reading interacts with the constantly evolving dynamics of our given circumstances (a fact that gives rise to Aquinas's alienated readability in the first place). The point, here, is not only to reflect on the *givenness* of the Christian tradition (reflected in Ernst's talk of the Church as the ontological *a priori* of faith),[26] but on the *embeddedness* of the theologian within this *givenness* of world and Church. To invoke McDowell,

[20] ME, 11.

[21] David Egan, 'Pictures in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', *Philosophical Investigations* 34, no. 1 (2011): 55-76.

[22] Jon Mills, 'The False Dasein', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 28, no. 1 (1997): 42-65.

[23] David Egan, *The Pursuit of an Authentic Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and the Everyday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[24] ME, 74.

[25] ME, 142.

[26] ME, 139.

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there is no view over this givenness from 'sideways on':[27] the idea that the theologian can attain a synoptic and disinterested overview of theological language *ab extra*, strategizing about the possibility of God-talk as if the world were not already marked by such talk, is simply an illusion. This emphasises not only the inescapable finitude of language (and thus its inevitable eschatological provisionality), but rather the illusory artificiality of any picture of an *outside* from which to survey language. There is no place outside of our reading from which to determine our reading.

The prescription of an *aggiornamento* of Aquinas's strategy in the five ways by way of an 'exploration of the genesis of meaning, understood as the manifestation of the real'[28] cuts to the heart of Ernst's constructive programme. The givenness of the world into which we are embedded is one that gives itself historically in meaning: reality simply is that which gives itself in an indeterminate number of future semantic manifestations. Consequently, meaning is not the mental event of representation, judgment or apprehension but the 'process and praxis through which the world to which man belongs becomes the world that belongs to man'.[29] As Ernst puts it in an undeveloped footnote, 'personal being is intrinsically communication':[30] there is no standpoint outside of the dynamism of communication, because being itself is communicative.[31] Consequently, not only is the idea of surveying our theological language 'sideways on' a nonsense manufactured on Cartesian stoves, but so is the noetic ideal of a 'sideways' vantage point over the world. Ernst's proposal of new horizon for theology indicates a comprehensive metaphysical vision of the world in which there is no inert matter—no neutral 'stuff'—that is not always already semiotically soaked (if not totally saturated) with the divine self-communication. 'Reading' then emerges as a mode of human indwelling of the world, marking a participative role in shaping the dynamic processes and praxes of communication that constitute worldliness, and thus a distinctively human way of belonging meaningfully to a meaningful world.

Although Ernst's acknowledgment of the difficulty of 'continuing' speaks to the felt sense of disciplinary precarity that haunts theology

[27] John McDowell, 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule Following', in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. Stephen Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (London: Routledge, 1981), 141-72.

[28] ME: 74.

[29] Cornelius Ernst, *The Theology of Grace* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 68.

[30] ME, 106.

[31] For similar examinations of the intrinsically diffusive and communicative character of being, see: Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020); Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington DC: Humanum Press, 2018).

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within the secular university,[32] it is equally indicative of a defect within dogmatics itself. The readability of Aquinas has been alienated through the adoption of secularised strategies of reading that prioritise only that which can be captured in the literal sense without remainder. Wittgenstein's suggestion that understanding is knowing how to perform the next move in a sequence, or to carry on with a task,[33] indicates that the perceived crisis of theology under the conditions of late modernity points not only to hostile circumstances, but to a crisis of theological understanding. The displacement of hostile philosophical conditions is consequently coterminous with the renewal of theology *qua* theology, through a discipline-specific pedagogy, marked by its own distinctive strategies of reading.[34] The question, for Ernst, was not to establish the basis upon which theological reading can get going, but rather to perform the continuance of 'speaking about God in the ordinary world'.[35] Rather than evading responsibility to the world by a quasi-mystical escapism, the reading proper to the theological task is a sapiential discipline that looks at the world (albeit with lamentation) and sees more than can be narrated by a literal description.[36] The ontology of meaning—the proposal that the world be unified by the category of meaning—specifies the *readability* of the world, and the contribution that theology makes to the world by reading its unification in the divine *logos*.

Ernst's diagnosis of theology's philosophical malady indicates the determinative feature of theologically disordered strategies of reading: they collapse symbols into images.[37] To put the distinction somewhat crudely, whereas a symbol participates in the reality that it communicates, images point beyond themselves to the realities that they mirror by remote resemblance, without sharing in their reality.[38] Symbols are, notwithstanding their imperfect provisionality, performative embodiments of the meanings that they communicate. Adopting a strategy of reading that prioritises the imagistic over the symbolic essentially posits that 'sideways' vantage over meaning that Ernst's proposed semantic ontology problematises. In textual terms, collapsing the question of readability into that of intelligibility performs precisely such a reduction, by identifying the *meaning* of a text with the sense of its 'contents' alone. Indeed, the easy divisibility of form and content that the identification of meaning with 'content' performs is an implicit

[32] ME: 8.

[33] PI, §151-155.

[34] *Cf* John Bainbridge Webster, 'Theological Theology', in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11-32.

[35] ME, 74. The logic of the 'ordinary world' is explored at ME, 142.

[36] ME, 26.

[37] See ME, 63-65.

[38] ME, 64.

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rendering of textuality in imagistic rather than symbolic terms. While both symbols and images exhibit semantic dependence upon another (from whence their meaning is received), the symbol's meaning is also partially *intrinsic* to its participatory constitution. A symbolic text thus exhibits within the structures of its own integrity an excessive surplus of meaning. Ernst's proposed ontology of meaning renders the world as a fundamentally symbolic reality,[39] in that it is an embodiment of meaning by way of participation in ultimate meaning. Reading the world imagistically, then, denies the transcendent excess of the world's intrinsic meanings and thus 'secularises' meaning through the mood of vital immanence. Ernst's semantic ontology thereby opens a horizon of reading within which such a secularized imagistic approach appears to be just as nonsensical as attempting to secure the meaning of a red traffic light entirely within the experience of the colour red.

Textuality and the Operations of Symbolic Reading

Ernst's ontological prioritisation of the symbolic indicates a particular understanding of textuality as more than the stenographic record of ideas. The process of theological self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) that a text embodies, although necessarily involving articulation, is always more than a discursive product. The discursivity of a text is grounded in an antecedent *Vorverständnis*, a kind of unspecifiable pre-apprehension or 'prophetic insight' that 'resides in something deeper and more basic than the conscious mind'.[40] Elsewhere, Ernst describes Christian faith as the consecration of the 'genetic moment of Christianity' located in the *Neuheitserlebnis* of the resurrection.[41] A similar relationship obtains between texts the 'prophetic insights' that texts stabilise: texts serve to consecrate across time the prophetic insights of their authors, thus representing moments in which the generally symbolic character of the world is intensified through the artificiality of the text's frame. Texts, then, have an intrinsically symbolic character on account of their embodiment of these 'prophetic insights', which are located both in and beyond their discursive codification.

Within Ernst's thought, at least two particular semantic operations are integral to the strategy of symbolic reading that corresponds to this account of textuality. The first extends a fundamentally Christian tension between universalism and particularism into an account of the relationship between *logos* and language. Christianity locates

[39] Karl Rahner, 'The Theology of the Symbol', in *Theological Investigations* Vol 4 (1966), 221-52; Stephen M. Fields, *Being as Symbol: On The Origins and Development of Karl Rahner's Metaphysics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

[40] ME, 84.

[41] ME, 215.

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within the *particularity* of the person of Christ the ultimate *universal* meaning of Being.[42] Universal meaning is, to borrow from Przywara,[43] in-and-beyond Christ, in two senses. Firstly, in a sense indicated by the *extra Calvinisticum*, the assumption of Jesus's humanity as the 'embodiment' of the divine word does not indicate an absolute 'containment' of it. Secondly, the significance of Christ's life can only be fully apprehended in its transfiguration and integration of the entire world of meaning. Consequently, any attempt at a descriptive reading of Christ's life, in its irreducible particularity, demands that more than Christ's life be described; any attempt to close Christ off from the broader world of meaning will *ipso facto* violate the integrity of Christ himself (by performing an imagistic 'sideways' reading). Transposed into linguistic terms, the ontology of meaning acknowledges the presence of ultimate meaning (*logos*) in-and-beyond language (*logoi*). This 'dynamic transcendence'[44] characterises symbolic strategies of reading more generally: symbolic texts are marked by a relational transcendence that in no way compromises immanence. Similarly, texts are possessed of semi-permeable boundaries; symbolic readings acknowledge textual meanings to be both inside-and-beyond those boundaries in a non-contrastive sense.

The porosity of semantic boundaries is a crucial feature of the second linguistic operation that characterises symbolic reading, located in metaphor.[45] Whilst noting the ways in which Aquinas identifies the categories of 'symbol' and 'metaphor',[46] Ernst differentiates metaphor from symbol by reading it as a semantic praxis, 'the mental operation proper to symbolism',[47] which 'carries meaning over' from one semantic domain to another. Although the semantic transfer of metaphor can involve the 'translation' of meanings within the same semantic domain, it more properly refers to the transference of meanings between the sensible-material domain and the higher order of the immaterial-intelligible, through the semantic mediation of some aspect of sensible reality.[48] As Marie-Dominique Chenu observes in his account of the symbolist mentality of the middle ages, 'metaphor is obedient to the necessities imposed by transcendent realities':[49] metaphor is not, then, a simple projection of immanent human meanings, but rather these

[42] ME, 32.

[43] Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysik* (München: Kösel, 1932).

[44] See ME, 32 and 13-27.

[45] Cornelius Ernst, 'Metaphor and Ontology in Sacra Doctrina', *The Thomist* 38(1974): 422-25; 'Truth and Verification in Theology', *New Blackfriars* 40, no. 468 (1959): 100-11; 'Meaning and Metaphor in Theology', *New Blackfriars* 61, no. 718 (1980): 100-12.

[46] ME, 64.

[47] ME, 68.

[48] ME, 67.

[49] Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 138.

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human meanings labouring under the intense pressure of determination by the transcendent object that they communicate. The catachresis of metaphor pushes at the limits of our words, making them more communicatively capacious; symbolic reading likewise recognises the overdetermined character of texts. According to Ernst, metaphor is not reducible to predication, nor sharply differentiated from literal speech.[50] Likewise, metaphor is not primarily understood as a decorative feature of language that indicates only an aesthetic excess over intelligibility. Rather, metaphor refers to a skilful practice by which an intelligent agent negotiates their semantic habitat by way of 'reading': metaphor simply corresponds to the symbolic character of reality.

Of particular importance to Ernst is the category of ontological metaphor. His most extensive use of the concept is found in a version of his '*Meaning and Metaphor'* essay that was not included in *Multiple Echo*, but was subsequently published in *New Blackfriars* in 1980.[51] Linguistically, ontological metaphors represent an abstract and intangible reality (like an emotion or an activity) in terms of something that is concrete and tangible (like an object or person).[52] For example, the question 'how did you get into systematic theology?' uses spatial language, derived from experience of containers, to articulate the process of becoming interested in the otherwise abstract concept of the discipline of systematics. These sorts of ontological metaphors are deeply intuitive to a native speaker and might only be recognised as metaphors after philosophical reflection.[53] Indeed, many ontological metaphors are concealed within quotidian patterns of expression. The statement 'there was much joy', for instance, uses quantifiers drawn from experience of extended objects to narrate the intensity of an experience that has no physical extension *per se* (but which does have proportionate affects within the observable world). The essence of an ontological metaphor, then, is to communicate an unboundaried reality by the use of a mediating, boundaried, reality that is drawn from empirically observable actuality. As such, texts are themselves ontologically metaphoric: the reading of a text embraces the limitation of its boundaries to reach towards the horizon of infinite meaning that asymptotically recedes behind it.

The suggestion that Ernst's work be taken to illustrate a concern for readability (albeit in an existentially extended sense) might seem

[50] ME, 71-74.

[51] Ernst, *Meaning and Metaphor.*

[52] As Boers puts it, developing the typology presented by Lakoff and Johnson, 'ontological metaphors allow us to conceive of abstract concepts as concrete entities', see: *Spatial Prepositions and Metaphor* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1996), 21. The literature on 'ontological metaphors' is now vast. See: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 25; Clive Cazeaux, *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 197.

[53] See Donald C. Williams, 'The Myth of Passage', *Philosophy* 48, no. 15 (1951): 457-72.

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ironic, given his reputation for a certain stylistic opacity. To use examples drawn solely from the ranks of his brethren, Ernst's writing has been described as 'contorted',[54] riddled by 'over-complexification'[55] and even as simply 'pretentious'.[56] Anachronistically, Ernst's writing often approximates a style associated more with Radical Orthodoxy than with the 'house style' of a Province that has cherished shorter sentences and unambiguous clarity. Nonetheless, this criticism has, perhaps, been overstated. Although there are certainly moments when Ernst's prose struggles to yield a straightforward meaning, there are also moments of lucidity: if his essay on 'Theological Method' is an example of his most prolix and obscure, his book on grace and the essay on metaphor are clearly written and communicative, even if at times poetic. In essence, however, Ernst's style corresponds to the account of language that he develops; his texts are performative with respect to the new horizon of meaning that he seeks to open for his students. Ernst's writing, in all of its density, exposes the potency of language in its dynamic transcendence and ontological metaphoricity. Ernst's analysis of language seeks not only to demonstrate the ways in which God-talk places creaturely discourse under an intense pressure that pushes at the boundaries of its intelligibility, but to expose the mysteric (because intrinsically theological) character of *all* language, even the most quotidian. The density of Ernst's prose, then, corresponds to the ontological depths that he finds within meaning, which is not simply read off the world as brute propositions entirely expressible in the language of literal description. Just as the givenness into which we are embedded pro- and e-vokes our semantic activity, so Ernst's texts can be engaged only through a kind of cognitive grappling. Here, Ernst is concerned—to used Heideggerian terms—to push beyond 'ontic concretions'[57] into the realm of the truly ontological, refusing to substitute a description of entities and their behaviours in place of an ontological analysis of its mode of being.

Thomistic Pedagogy: Reading and/as Engaged Contemplation

If Ernst's approach to reading and writing is indeed animated by these performative concerns, his thought is best conceived as a re-enactment

[54] Simon Tugwell, 'Cornelius Ernst OP', *New Blackfriars* 59(1978): 2-4.

[55] Aidan Nichols, 'Catholic Theology in Britain', online: http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/anichols/theolog1.html

[56] Edmund Hill, 'Cornelius Ernst OP: Multiple Echo', Fergus Kerr OP and Timothy Radcliffe OP (eds.)," *The Thomist* 46, no. 4 (1982): 631-36.

[57] Jan Slaby, 'Ontic', in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 542-46.

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of Thomistic pedagogy in semantic idiom. The question of faithfulness is then partially transferred from the mediation of content to the fidelity of performance. Ernst inherited an awareness of Aquinas as a pedagogue from Victor White, for whom the *Summa Theologiæ* was not primarily a textbook for students (as it had customarily been taken to be), but a manual for teachers of introductory theology courses, helping them to anticipate and provoke discussion and debate.[58] The dialogical character of the *Summa* indicates an isomorphism with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein's engagement with his interlocutors serves to elicit a response from the reader that exposes the concealed 'deep logic' of their thought. A faithful reading of the *Investigations* entails both the rendering intelligible of an argument as well as the uncovering of impulses that generate the 'picture' that holds us captive.

Ernst's re-performance of Thomistic pedagogy constitutes theology as the discipline of 'engaged contemplation' or 'contemplative engagement'[59] in service of the divine *logos*.[60] The extended sense of reading that Ernst cultivates is not only engaged in this sense of enacting a relationship of a text to the world, but also *engaging* of its practitioners, involving the whole human person in the paradoxical hyper-activity of contemplation.[61] Reading as 'engaged contemplation' means learning to repeatedly allow ourselves—with all of our personal history, frailty and affective idiosyncrasy—to be confronted, through the vehicle of a text, with the question of ultimate meaning, and thus with the theological interpretation of the meaning of our own lives. Such a strategy of reading can be sustained only within the context of a life lived in the presence of the ultimate answer,[62] a semantic horizon that points beyond itself and extends into infinity. Reading within the horizon of ultimate meaning thus awakens us more and more deeply to the ontological depths of reality, containing within itself a pre-apprehension of the radical inadequacy of any human articulations of it.

[58] Victor White, *Holy Teaching: The Idea of Theology According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1958).

[59] ME, 151. Graham Ward has recently developed an account of theology as 'engaged systematics'. Ernst would have had considerable sympathy with Ward's proposals, but would avoid, given his understanding of Aquinas as a thematic thinker, have preferred not to deploy the term 'systematics'. 'Contemplation' more precisely evokes the perspective of meaning that Ernst is seeking to develop. Ward's proposals, meanwhile, are embedded within the first volume of his systematics (something Ernst's sporadic approach to writing could not have sustained). See: Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[60] Ernst's notion of 'servanthood of the Word' has been taken up into the 2016 Edition of the Order of Preachers' *Ratio Formationis Generalis*.

[61] For an exploration of these themes, see: Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[62] ME, 152.

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Similarly, the *Summa* guides and resources the teacher (on White's account) in the development of a praxis of theology that engages the student with questions and solicits from them a response. That Aquinas explicitly considered such questions of pedagogy is clear, not only from the historical record of his experimental '*studium personale*' in Rome,[63] but equally from the text of the *Summa Theologiæ* itself. The prologue of the *prima pars* speaks of the true Catholic teacher as one who takes the student by the hand, leading them (*manuductio*) through a theological journey into beatitude.[64] The intellectual itinerary of the *summa* emerges as a kind of intellectual exercise, which is inaugurated with two questions that establish the inescapable ontological horizon within which this *disciplina* operates:[65] the first, on *sacra doctrina*, establishes the presence of ultimate meaning (through the mediation of a subalternated science);[66] the second, on the five ways, establishes the unity of the world of meaning in the divine *logos.*[67] The Neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* structure, identified by Ernst's sometime correspondent M.-D. Chenu,[68] not only determines in a general way the 'emergence' of creation as ordained to final consummation, but also indicates the theologian's own journey into truth, performed in their theological reading and eschatologically consummated in Christ.[69]

In an authentic reading of the *Summa*, then, training in theological argumentation and formation in the craft of Christian holiness are somewhat coextensive: the theological life and the communication of truth are both brought into the service of the life of sanctifying grace.[70]

[63] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 142-59; See also: Leonard E. Boyle, 'The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae*', in *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1-24.

[64] This point has been made forcefully by Peter M. Candler, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction: Or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God*, Radical Traditions (London: SCM Press, 2006).

[65] On qq. 1 and 2 of the *prima pars*, see: Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2002), 52-72; Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason and Following Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41-82, 91-106; Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 108-79; Fergus Kerr, 'Real Knowledge or 'Enlightened Ignorance: Eric Mascall on the Apophatic Thomisms of Victor Preller and Victor White', in *Grammar and Grace*, ed. Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (London: SCM Press, 2004), 103-23.

[66] ME, 9.

[67] ME, 7-8.

[68] Marie-Dominique Chenu, 'Le plan de la somme théologique de saint Thomas', *Revue Thomiste* 47(1939): 93-107.

[69] The connection between sanctification, theosis and the discipline of theology has been articulated by Fáinche Ryan, *Formation in Holiness: Thomas Aquinas on Sacra Doctrina* (Utrecht: Thomas Instituut/Peeters Leuven, 2007); Anna Ngaire Williams, 'Deification in the Summa theologiae: A Structural Interpretation of the Prima Pars', *The Thomist* 61, no. 2 (1997): 219-55.

[70] Cf., ME, 121.

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Indeed, this formative function is reflected not only in the macrostructure of the *Summa*, but equally in the microstructure of the *Summa*'s basic unit, the article.[71] Framed as a theological question using the particle *utrum*, the article is constituted by a call-and-response of objections and their answers. This indicates a further isomorphism with Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, which contain a vast array of questions, many rhetorical or aporetic, confused and confusing.[72] Whereas Wittgenstein seems largely to use questions to move us from 'unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense'[73] by indicating the ways in which our questions are non-sensical or misplaced, Aquinas's questions are pre-refined—though they sometimes undergo further purification by way of distinguishing their meaning. Questions serve Aquinas in giving overall shape and dynamism to the structure of his *Summa*. Importantly, the invocation of proper names (whether appeals to authorities or intellectual adversaries) is always nested within these questions, so that the aporiai within the canon of texts are exposed and resolved by reference to the truth or falsity of a question: it is the question which drives reading, and name-invocation that serves this movement.

In the Dominican context in which Aquinas taught, the rhythmic backwards and forwards motion that characterises each article is evocative of the antiphonal character of the chanted liturgy. Likewise, Aquinas's eclectic use of sources that were also deployed in the liturgy would have evoked a rich penumbra of memories and associations. The *respondeo*—Aquinas's conclusion or resolution—is not located at the end of the article, but in the middle, and therefore does not bring the motion of reading to a point of rest. The response of the teacher does not end the dialogue and leave the student satisfied that they now know the 'correct' answer, but rather propels the student to return (in almost every case) to the objections and find, in responding to them, the full implications of the *respondeo* itself. Similarly, the theologian is only able to read the Christian meaning of time through discernment of the Christian meaning of their own times;[74] the light of the *logos* is seen only as it illumines and integrates the *logoi* of the present moment.

'Thomism' as Meta-Reading

As has become clear, theology cannot read the theological meanings entertained by the Christian tradition and its texts without itself being

[71] Otto Bird, 'How to Read an Article of the Summa', *New Scholasticism* 27, no. 2 (1953): 129-59.

[72] Egan, *Authentic Philosophy*, 224-26.

[73] PI, §464.

[74] ME, 108.

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an instance of that tradition and of those meanings.[75] Consequently, theological reading only ever exists as a kind of culture, in which 'prophetic insight' (*Vorverständnis*) is cultivated and disciplined into a theological 'competence' that is productive of discursivity. The commitment to cultivating such a disciplined culture of convivial reading is self-involving and invokes dynamics of apprenticeship and formation. For better or for worse, engaged contemplation retains the highly self-conscious methodological preoccupations of contemporary theology more broadly. Nonetheless, if 'Thomism' has any meaningful sense within the horizon of Ernst's proposed ontology, it is as the cultivation and elicitation of a shared context within which Aquinas's texts have an enduring readability. There is, of course, no sense that only one intellectual culture can provide for the readability of Aquinas—not every Thomist needs to live the 'significant life'[76] of a Dominican house of studies—but any such culture will be meaningful and intelligible to any other such culture: so 'Thomism' retains its plasticity.

Part of the strength of the English Dominican province's 'Thomism' has been the cultivation of an ecology of reading, within which multiple 'Thomisms' have flourished in mutually intelligible (and interrogative) coexistence. The extent to which Ernst contributed to the formation of such an ecology of reading is hard to adjudicate, but he hints towards it in his development of an account of engaged contemplation as 'meta-theology'.[77] The contents of the 'meta', here, are specified by the epistemological correlates of his theological ontology. Theology can only thrive when it is consciously conducted *coram* God as the 'meaning of meaning' and when possessed of an ineliminable wonder at the mystery of its own being.[78] Ernst acknowledges that, in his own time, there were only 'anticipations' of such a meta-theology;[79] it is difficult to know where he would look for such a theology in the decades after his death. Nonetheless, three features of this anticipated meta-theology are clear and can usefully contribute to the development of a practice that might be termed 'meta-reading'. Firstly, meta-theology involves a movement beyond 'theologies' to an integrative and unitive 'Theology': in other words, a relativisation of the gestural economy of name-invocation. This process involves reflection upon the historical reality of theological development and the emergence of theological opposition, thereby raising the question of the meaning of the history of dogma and the meaning of fractured plurality. Theological readings of this dogmatic diffusion should be performatively ontologically metaphoric, in

[75] ME, 79.
[76] ME, 149-157.
[77] ME, 76-86, particularly 85.
[78] For an examination of this theme from a phenomenological perspective, see: Steven DeLay, *Before God: Exercises in Subjectivity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
[79] ME, 85.

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seeking to sacramentally realise the re-unification (by transfiguration) of this diversity in Christ. Secondly, meta-theology is attuned to the intentional cultivation of the symbolic and metaphoric within in the mediated operations of dynamic transcendence. Whilst the definitive 'ontic' answer to theological questioning is available solely in Jesus Christ, the ontological meaning of this is worked out by proceeding *through* what Ernst terms 'the starting point of the *logos-eikōn-mustērion*'.[80] In other words, our particular practices of reading are ultimately to be nested within the *Ur*-Text of Christ. Thirdly, this meta-theology is realized only as a 'total human culture',[81] that is, as a progressive communal discovery of a common identity *in* Jesus Christ, in ways that necessarily elude total specification.

In the meta-reading that is informed by such a meta-theology, the 'meta' is specified not only by the mystical elements of Ernst's Neoplatonism and its horizon of meaning, but by a commitment to rather mundane communal practices of symbolic reading, as indicated above. 'Thomism' in this Ernstian mode signals a performative recovery of Augustine's wonder at encountering Ambrose's silent reading. The fact that we read (and not only that we *can* read) is itself an *eikon* of the *mustērion* of Christ—and the continuation of that reading the urgent task of the theologian. This mystery of reading has often been taken for granted, commodified by a quantitative rendering of what is to be gained from (rather than through) reading and a consequent quasi-idolatrous desire to master vast swathes of material (a desire indulged—but never satisfied—by name-invocation). In the film *Derrida*, the *philosophe* himself was asked if he had read all the books in his library: 'only three or four', he replied, 'but those three or four really, really well'.

Attentiveness to the unspecifiable coefficient of meta-reading ought not undermine the obvious fact that Aquinas's texts are intentionally intelligible, and that information-communication is a significant (perhaps sometimes predominant) mode of their operation. Meta-reading is still reading in the conventional sense of the term, albeit reading that indwells the 'meta-' so as to expose and disrupt the presuppositions that animate the imagistic strategies of reading that contribute to our self-bafflement. Meta-reading exposes the enormous artificiality of reading for information alone. The contribution that the 'meta' makes to theological reading resembles (perhaps uncomfortably for some) the monastic practice of *lectio divina*. As has been noted elsewhere in respect to Simone Weil's reading-for-attentiveness, the type of attention cultivated by these strategies of reading hints towards the reverential.[82]

[80] ME, 85.
[81] ME, 84.
[82] Robert Zaretsky, *The Subversive Weil.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021): Ch. 2.

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Indeed, it is notable that some of Ernst's most helpful resources in the development of a theological meta-reading are located in his treatment of worship and sacramental liturgy.

Like the proposed meta-reading, Ernst understands liturgy in terms of an active *constituting* of the subjective conditions for theological knowledge. In his essay 'how to see an angel?' (a question that Barth thought was stupid),[83] Ernst explicitly deals with the liturgy as the enacted locus for certain types of knowledge. Liturgy 'creates a special kind of state',[84] in which there is a 'transformation of the visible world into something fulfilled that we can call invisible'.[85] The question of seeing an angel is *not* stupid, but only because in the liturgy an event is performed in which the human and the angelic share a community with one another. This community is determined by an acknowledgment of a shared practice, that of praising the triune glory. This liturgical knowledge is mediated by *ecstasis*, by being-with (*Mitsein*), and it is this mode of being-with that the liturgy enacts in an intensified form. To put this in terms of meta-reading: 'Thomism' demarcates a semantic locus in which we are able to be-with Aquinas's texts by way of sharing a task, that of the rhythmic and self-involving quest for ultimate truth in our *reditus* (with Christ) to God.

Crucially, it is a pre-requisite of Ernst's account of liturgical knowledge by being-with that the subject *does* something: *viz.* 'create a dimension of life that wasn't there until we actually elicited it, by actually doing something by performing something historically'.[86] Two important insights are buried within this laconic phrase. Firstly, the choice of verb—'elicited', rather than, say, 'constructed'—indicates a metaphysical limit on the human contribution: the presupposition, unsurprisingly, is of an antecedent givenness, an action or state of affairs, upon which the action of worship (or meta-reading) depends. Secondly, the description of the activity performed as 'historical' contains within it two notions that are essential to historicity. The first is that of embodiment. The action of worship or meta-reading that is performed and enacted is a bodily activity, the disciplines of attentiveness embedded within them are just as bodily as they are intellectual. The second contained notion is that of sociality:[87] as historical, bodily, creatures, Ernst understands us to be always already enmeshed in webs of relationships, bound together in the histories that we make and share. As historical, then, the liturgical assembly is necessarily a *community*, possessed of a certain structured conviviality.

[83] CD III/3: 477.
[84] ME, 198.
[85] ME, 199.
[86] ME, 201.
[87] ME, 27-28, 79.

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So where does this leave the economy of name-invocation as a means of stabilising rhizomatic theological pluralism? Only a commitment to sustaining the readability of texts can prevent such an economy collapsing into mere gesture. The best contribution that we can make, then, lies in the disciplined cultivation of meta-reading, (re-)performing 'a dimension of life that wasn't there until we actually elicited it, by actually doing something historically'. Thomism thus understood is a far more demanding task than understanding and manipulating dogmatic axioms. Nonetheless, a Thomism so-conceived better explains why generations of English Dominicans have found that the texts of Aquinas do not leave them alone.

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