Aquinas and the Academic Life

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In a book on Aquinas and beauty, Fr Armand Maurer starts with an apology. For, so he notes, 'we look in vain in the immense body of Aquinas's writings for a detailed and comprehensive treatment of beauty'.[1] In general, says Maurer, 'Thomas seems to have given short shrift to beauty or to have avoided it altogether'.[2] And I might say something similar when it comes to Aquinas and the academic life. In his writings, the word 'academic' occurs in two allusions to St Augustine's *Contra Academicos*. Otherwise, it is not to be found at all whether as a noun or as an adjective. There is a common 16th and 17th century English use of 'academic' according to which someone academic is a disciple of Plato. But Aquinas is heavily critical of Plato. And he has no treatise on the nature and purpose of centers of higher learning and the like. No work of his remotely corresponds to studies such as Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*.

I might add that some famous academics have been throughly skeptical of Aquinas's own academic value. He is often presented as an important philosopher. But was he? Not, for example, according to Bertrand Russell. As Russell himself put it: 'There is little of the true philosophical spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead ... Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith ... The findings of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading'.[3] If Russell was right, then perhaps we should admit at the outset that Aquinas is not someone to look to if we aim to think effectively when it comes to the academic life.

But Russell was not right. The findings of arguments for a conclusion given in advance may *well* be philosophy. In *Principia Mathematica* Russell himself took three hundred and sixty dense pages to offer a proof that 1 + 1 = 2. And many philosophers offer arguments for what they and others take to be true at the outset — the claim that we can know things, for instance, or the view that time is real, or that there is a God, or that all people have minds. What matters is not what authors believe as they start to write. What matters is the quality of their arguments and the rigour and skill with which they present them. And, when it comes to questions of rigour and skill in argument, Aquinas has a lot to teach any student or

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01818.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

professional academic. Most contemporary philosophers would say this even if they disagree with Aquinas on various counts. Indeed, contemporary philosophers generally commend him for unusually high standards of argumentation.[4]

It is not, perhaps, surprising that Aquinas had such standards. For, though he wrote no treatise on the academic life, he certainly recognized the importance of logic when it comes to presenting one's thoughts. His teaching commitments never required him to do so, but he wrote commentaries on the logical works of Aristotle. And concern with logical details can be seen in all of Aquinas's writings, even his commentaries on the Bible. People who expound Scripture are not always noted for going about their task with the skills displayed in the best philosophical essays. But even Aquinas's biblical commentaries are paradigms of philosophical analysis and philosophical reasoning. Aquinas has no time for the notion that truth can be compartmentalized and treated differently in different disciplines. For him, truth is one. And he thinks that every intellectual discipline stands at its bar. For Aquinas, an argument is not guaranteed to be good just because of its subject matter or just because it is offered by certain people rather than others. He thinks that there are good arguments and bad arguments and that we need to distinguish between them. He also thinks that people ought to provide good arguments if they rightly expect us to take them seriously. Aquinas agrees that different areas of inquiry may have to rely on premises which they do not themselves seek to defend. He holds, for example, that physicists need to presuppose certain mathematical conclusions.[5] But he always writes in the conviction that fuzzy reasoning can never lead to truth regardless of the subject matter to which it is applied.

Something which may partly have accounted for this fact is the intellectual context in which Aquinas lived and worked. For, unlike many famous philosophers and theologians prior to the eighteenth century, he spent much of his life in a university or comparable institution in which he was required not only to teach but also to converse with his peers and to train his students to do the same. Central to the academic systems which Aquinas knew was something called the 'Disputation'. In the University of Paris, where Aquinas taught from 1252 to 1259 and from 1268 to 1272, this existed in two forms referred to as 'Ordinary Disputes' or 'Disputed Questions' (*Quaestiones Disputatae*) and 'Quodlibetal Disputations' or 'Quodlibetal Questions' (*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*). Disputations were public discussions in which questions were raised before a professor or 'Master' whose role was to settle or 'determine' the questions at issue. But Masters were never allowed to get away with a rapid settlement or determination. They were confronted by a large range of objections to

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their opinions from colleagues and students. And they were obliged not only to note the objections but also to respond to them individually while also arguing for their own position. Aquinas presided over a large number of disputations and their structure is reflected in many of his writings.[6] You can clearly see it in Aquinas's best known work, the *Summa theologiae*, which everyone interested in how to conduct themselves intellectually ought to at least look at.

Here everything proceeds by way of questions, objections, replies to objections, and positive arguments for conclusions. The *Summa theologiae*, though filled with philosophical discussion, is chiefly a work of theology. But any student can benefit from the example it sets as a model for disciplined inquiry. And it certainly indicates the nature of Aquinas's approach to matters intellectual. For him, it is important not just to get things right but also to give serious weight to positions contrary to one's own.[7] Aquinas views academic life as one of conversation. So we find him paying lots of respectful attention to people whose fundamental positions are very different from his.

Take, for example, Aristotle. Aquinas is sometimes called an Aristotelian, and one can understand why. He is influenced by Aristotle's logical writings. And he draws on Aristotle when it comes, for example, to philosophy of mind and to ethics. He also finds it helpful to think about the nature of physical objects in terms derived from Aristotle.[8] But Aquinas is no straightforward disciple of Aristotle. Indeed, he is mostly interested in matters which Aristotle never thought of and in teachings which cannot be found in the Aristotelian canon or which are incompatible with it.[9] Yet Aquinas's intellectual nose leads him to see the importance of seriously engaging with Aristotle, just as it leads him to see the importance of seriously engaging with other thinkers whose overall positions are, in the end, very different from his — figures such as the Arabic authors Avicenna and Averroes, or figures such as the Jewish writer Moses Maimonides. Considered as a practicing academic, Aquinas is strongly committed to interacting with those who have something of significance to say regardless of whether or not he agrees with them on everything. His method of proceeding shows him to be against what we might call 'a fortress approach' to study and reflection. He is opposed to shutting out or silencing objectors and opponents. Instead, he is concerned to learn from them. His position is that they might have questions worth asking.[10] And questions, as I have noted, seem to have been Aquinas's stock in trade. He is often presented as someone with a lot of answers. Yet he took himself to have more questions than answers when it came to what most intrigued him.

Consider, for instance, his approach to the topic of divinity. For

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Aquinas, God is the most important reality of all. God, he likes to say, is 'the beginning and end of all things'. But Aquinas does not claim to understand what God is. God, he maintains, 'is greater than all we can say, greater than all we can know; and not merely does he transcend our language and our knowledge, but he is beyond the comprehension of every mind whatsoever, even of angelic minds, and beyond the being of every substance'.[11] According to Aquinas, we cannot know what God is. But, so he thinks, there are questions that ought to lead us to see why we need a word like 'God' in our day to day vocabulary. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there any change? Why are there series in which effects depend on causes? Why are there things which exist though their non-existence is perfectly conceivable? Why is there order and regularity in nature? Questions such as these lie at the heart of Aquinas's philosophical approach to the topic of God's existence. And they are raised by him not because he thinks he knows what their answers are but because he believes that we should continue to ask questions until they become absurd (you might call this his version of what is sometimes referred to as 'the principle of sufficient reason').

So when it comes to what interests him most, Aquinas's primary approach is inquisitive. It consists in the asking of questions. Considered as an academic philosopher, he seeks to arouse in his readers a sense of wonderment or a tendency to ask 'How come?'. But we should also note that Aquinas is also keen to remind them that there are truths which they cannot know to be true. According to Aquinas, those who think long and hard can come to see why, for example, people are physical animals who need to behave in certain ways in order to be happy. He also holds that those who think long and hard can come to see why it makes sense to say that God exists. At the same time, however, he says that there are truths about us and God which nobody can know to be true. So Aquinas the academic does not maintain that people are the measure of all things, that the human way of knowing is the ultimate standard of truth, or that nothing is in principle is hidden from our inquiring gaze. And this means that Aquinas the academic is someone who also advises a good measure of intellectual reserve. He is a firm believer in the intelligibility of the universe. He also believes that we are essentially knowers who are made to latch on to what is intelligible. Yet he also thinks that we might sometimes need to be taught. His respect for academic inquiry never comes over in his writings as a mandate for getting rid of teachers, whether human or divine. Indeed, so he argues, teaching may be necessary for learning is to take place.

Why does Aquinas take this view? He basically does so because of what he thinks about how we come to know. There are, he holds, some

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truths which people in general are congenitally unable *not* to know — that a proposition cannot be simultaneously true and false, for instance. Aquinas also holds that learning can occur because of an in-built human faculty which he calls the 'agent intellect' (*intellectus agens*). But he also thinks that knowledge can arise because of the input of knowers. You might suppose that we can easily acquire knowledge on our own. You might think, for example, that people can come to know simply by noting what their senses report to them. For Aquinas, however, sensation can never give us knowledge. On his account, a sensation is a particular bodily process occurring in a particular body; and, so he thinks, knowledge is not that kind of thing. Rather, so he says, knowledge is of what transcends particularity (it is of universals and not singulars).[12] And though he thinks that people are by nature able to know universals, and though he recognizes that people can extend their knowledge while working on their own (we call this 'research'), Aquinas also concedes that acquiring knowledge also depends on being taught. To a high degree, he thinks, it rests on knowledge as imparted by those who know. For him it has a lot to do with teaching.[13]

What does Aquinas take teaching to be? I am delighted to say that he does not think of it as academic administrators do. Indeed, I thank God daily for this. Academic administrators take teaching to be what they pay you to do by the hour. They believe that a teacher is someone who spends a given amount of time going through certain motions in a class room — motions such as talking, or writing on blackboards. And yet, of course, going through such motions is not how you teach. I can talk my head off in a classroom. And I can wear my fingers out while writing on a blackboard. But it does not follow that I have therefore taught anyone anything. Teaching only occurs as *learning* takes place. It is a single activity, but it requires more than one person going through certain motions. Just as it takes two to tango, it takes two for there to be teaching. And this is what Aquinas says. He often observes that 'the action of the agent lies in the patient'. 'Action and passion', he suggests, 'are not two changes but one and the same change, called "action" insofar as it is caused by an agent, and "passion" insofar as it takes place in a patient . . . Action is an actualization from an agent in something external'.[14] And teaching would be an example of what Aquinas means by 'action' here.

So Aquinas takes teaching to be more than a matter of talking or writing. He takes it to be an activity in which learning comes about. He takes it to involve the acquisition of knowledge. For him, therefore, teaching is a serious activity in which nothing short of truth is at stake. Aquinas was a Dominican friar and the motto of the Dominicans is 'Truth'. Not surprisingly, therefore, we find Aquinas defending the reality

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of truth. One cannot, he insists, consistently declare that there is no truth. And, with this idea in mind, he sees the primary goal of teaching as the sharing of truth. 'People who are real teachers', says Aquinas, 'must teach the truth'.[15] In his treatise *On Kingship* (*De Regno*) he writes: 'The doctor sees to it that people's lives are preserved; tradespeople supply the necessities of life; teachers take care that human beings may learn the truth'.[16] So Aquinas has no time for teaching considered as an exercise in self-promotion or the wooing of admirers. And he has no time for it considered as nothing but an exercise in allowing students to express their feelings and prejudices. 'The outward action of the teacher', he says in one place, 'would have no effect, without the inward principle of knowledge'.[17] In his view, therefore, teaching has to be worked at. It is as much of an effort for the teacher as it is for the student.

For Aquinas, however, work is not the goal of teaching and education. Rather, it is a means to an end which Aquinas typically calls 'contemplation' and which he takes to be a state of having arrived and not a process of striving.[18] In his view, it is a sinking into truth understood (albeit that truths might only be understood after a great deal of effort). And this sinking into truth is, for Aquinas, the primary goal of the academic life. Indeed, so he thinks, it is the primary goal of human life as such. Why? Because Aquinas believes that what distinguishes people from other animals is their ability to lay hold of truth intellectually. We are, he thinks, essentially knowers or things able to lay hold of what is intelligible. But what is ultimately intelligible? What can be called 'Truth Itself'? Aquinas's answer is 'God'. So all intellectual effort is in his view basically directed to an intellectual union with God. He does not, of course, mean that union with God is nothing but the product of academic activity. He does not even think that academic endeavour as such can bring us to union with God. But he does think that academic activity can lead us to truth and that it can therefore in some sense lead us to God since God is Truth.

You might put this by saying that Aquinas views the academic life as being, in a sense, pointless. For he thinks of its goal as the acquisition of truth and he thinks that such acquisition is not something that has to be justified on utilitarian grounds — with respect to its practical usefulness, for instance. As well as echoing thinkers earlier than himself, Aquinas here interestingly anticipates Newman's insistence in *The Idea of a University* that knowledge, being a perfection of the intellect, is its own end.[19] Some contemporary authors (Pope John Paul II is a notable example) have lamented the fact that educational establishments are increasingly under pressure to produce an efficient and employable work force rather than a society of people concerned with truth for its own

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sake.[20] And Aquinas would have agreed with such authors. He has nothing against attempts to make people able to engage well with the world at a practical level. Much of his moral philosophy positively urges us to embrace such attempts. At the same time, however, Aquinas views practical reasoning (even good practical reasoning) as, in a sense, second best. He thinks of it as a means to an end — the end being human happiness. But such happiness, he thinks, is not ultimately to be found in what we can make or produce by our actions. His view is that it lies in the possession of truth and ultimately in our union with God as Truth Itself.[21] And he takes teachers to be important insofar as they can help us as we move towards this.

Does Aquinas have advice for teachers? As a matter of fact, he does. And it is rather sensible. For, so he says on more than one occasion, teachers should proceed with an eye on the intellectual standing of their students. 'Knowledge', he suggests in his *Summa contra Gentes*, 'is acquired in two ways, both by discovery without teaching, and by teaching. Consequently teachers begin to teach in the same way as discoverers begin to discover, namely by offering to the disciples' consideration principles known by them, since all learning results from pre-existing knowledge'.[22] In other words, Aquinas thinks that teachers ought to start from where their students are. He also thinks that they ought to express themselves clearly. In the *Summa theologiae* he alludes to the view that 'it is the duty of all teachers to make themselves easily understood'.[23] And this sentiment is very much echoed in the way in which Aquinas himself communicates. He is a model of lucidity, especially in the *Summa theologiae* which actually begins with some reflections on the business of teaching those in their early stages of study. The subject matter of the *Summa theologiae* is the entire scope of Christian teaching, and in a foreword to the work Aquinas expresses himself unhappy with much that he knows to be available on this. 'Newcomers to this teaching' he says, 'are greatly hindered by various writings on the subject, partly because of the swarm of pointless questions, articles, and arguments'. They are also, says Aquinas, hindered by the fact that available texts all too often pursue the interests of their authors rather than 'a sound educational method', which Aquinas takes to involve being 'concise and clear, so far as the matter allows'.[24]

It is not, of course, easy to be concise and clear. And it is hard to get to the truth of things. So Aquinas also has another piece of advice to offer those who go in for teaching. For in his view they need to cultivate a high degree of humility. In particular, so he says, they should remember that all that they have is given to them by God, including their learning and their skills at conveying it. According to Aquinas, and as he puts it in the

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Summa contra Gentes: 'God by His intelligence is the cause not only of all things that subsist in nature, but also of all intellectual knowledge'.[25] At one level Aquinas suggests that this conclusion ought to leave teachers feeling proud, for it implies that they share in God's work of bringing it about that learning occurs. Or, as he says in a lecture delivered in 1256: 'The minds of teachers ... are watered by the things that are above in the wisdom of God, and by their ministry the light of divine wisdom flows down into the minds of students'.[26] At another level, however, Aquinas reckons that teachers should realize that their role as divine instruments ought to remind them of their need of divine assistance. Aquinas himself always prayed before writing, just as he prayed when he ran into any kind of difficulty. In the lecture of 1256 he notes that teachers of theology might feel that they are just not up to their task. But, he adds, 'no one is adequate for this ministry by himself or from his own resources' and one may 'hope that God may make one adequate'.[27] And, so *I* might add, if one considers this remark in the context of Aquinas's writings as a whole, it should not be viewed only as a word to theologians. It is a comment he would have offered to all teachers.

Something I think he would also have said to them (though he never does so explicitly) is that they should strive to be virtuous. In the lecture of 1256 he suggests that teachers of theology need to be 'high' like mountains which water the places below. He seems partly to mean only that teachers of theology need to be well thought of as people so that others will take them seriously. But he also seems to mean that bad people cannot be the best teachers — implying that they cannot be the best students either. Many philosophers draw a sharp distinction between intellect and will. For them, what we know is quite independent of what we want. But Aquinas takes a different view. In his judgment, the word 'will' does not signify an entity which is radically to be distinguished from anything we might call 'knowledge' or 'understanding'. For Aquinas, human action is a matter of will inasmuch as acting people are doing what they find it desirable to do. But he also thinks that what we find desirable depends on how we view things — that willing and understanding go together. According to Aquinas, there is no operation of the will which is not also an operation of the intellect, and vice versa. There is an interweaving of being attracted and understanding that cannot be unraveled in practice. We think of what we are *attracted* to thinking of, and we are attracted to what we *think* of. At the end of the day, therefore, Aquinas believes that what we take ourselves to know greatly depends on what we find appealing. And he takes this to mean that learning or understanding cannot be properly thought of apart from the notion of virtue. Aquinas thinks that virtuous people desire what is good. And, since

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he takes knowledge and understanding to be good, he thinks that those who gain it need to be somehow virtuous. They must, he thinks, *want* what is good. Otherwise, they will not come to *see* well. Hence, for example, he argues that the contemplative life (the chief end of study) is a matter of will and not just of intellect. 'As regards the very essence of its activity, the contemplative life belongs to the intellect', he says. But, he adds, 'As regards that which moves one to the exercise of that activity, it belongs to the will, which moves all the other faculties, and even the intellect, to their acts'.[28]

So Aquinas's approach to the academic life is not just theoretical. It is also grounded in a concern with how we ought to want and how we ought to be as people who are more than just knowers. And, despite what I said at the outset, it amounts, as a whole, to a definite position. Aquinas may not use the word 'academic'. But his life and writings show him to have been an academic person with definite views on what we would now call the academic life. So, even if he is interesting on no other front, this, at least, makes him someone worth reading.

His approach to teaching and study is, I might add, very much what Herbert McCabe embraced both as a teacher and as a writer. Herbert, like Aquinas, was at pains to insist on the need for cogent argument. His students who began by saying 'I think ...' were often greeted with the reply 'Thank you for that piece of autobiography. But can we now argue about this?' Herbert also well knew the difference between trying to teach and teaching. And he took teaching and learning to be something unintelligible unless viewed as part of a quest for God. Like Aquinas, he was also aware that the academic life (including both teaching and learning) is best pursued by those who are concerned with what is good. For him, theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom, different though they are, were not, in the end distinct. He took both of them to be indispensable for the right conduct of the academic life. In this respect, as in many others, he was a true disciple of Aquinas and someone worthy to be honoured by this special edition of the journal which he once edited and which he always hoped to be a means by which people, in different ways, might be brought closer to God.[29]

1 Armand Maurer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Toronto, 1983), p.1.
2 Ibid.
3 Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1945), p.463.
4 In the last twenty years or so Aquinas is someone to whom analytical philosophers have turned with some admiration. For a now relatively common evaluation (not implying total agreement), see Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (London and New York, 1993). Also see Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford, 1997).

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5 Cf. Question V of Aquinas's Commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate.*

6 For an account of Aquinas and disputations see *The* De Malo *of Thomas Aquinas,* translated by Richard Regan, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Brian Davies (New York and Oxford, 2001), pp.8-12.

7 In a text known as *De Modo Studendi* ('How to Study') the reader is urged not to pay attention to what is said rather than who is saying it. *De Modo Studendi,* though often attributed to Aquinas, is almost certainly not by him. But the sentiment just mentioned has an authentically Thomistic ring to it.

8 Hence it is that Aquinas's *De Principiis Naturae* is quite a good introduction to Aristotle on topics such as causation and identity.

9 Cf. Mark Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas* (The Etienne Gilson Series 15, Toronto, 1992).

10 Aquinas, of course, has no time for what, as a Christian, he takes to be doctrinal heresy. He says that convicted heretics should 'not only be excommunicated but also justly put to death' (*Summa theologiae* 2a2ae, 11,3). In his writings, however, heresy is typically replied to in an argumentative fashion and with reference to what might be said in favour of different heresies.

11 *Commentary on the* Divine Names I, iii,77.

12 Cf. *Summa theologiae* Ia, 85.

13 Cf. especially *Summa theologiae* Ia, 117,1. For Aquinas, teaching (by God and by people) is especially crucial when it comes to the truths of Christianity, which he sometimes refers to as 'sacra doctrina' ('holy teaching'). Cf. Victor White O.P., *Holy Teaching: The Idea of Theology according to St Thomas Aquinas* (The Aquinas Society of London Aquinas Paper 33, London, 1958).

14 *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, book 5 lectio 5 [on chapter 3 202a22–202b29]. Also cf. *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averoistas*, 71–74.

15 *De Veritate* XI,1. The words occur in an objection, but Aquinas does not dispute what they say.

16 *De Regno*, Book II, Ch, 3.

17 *Summa contra Gentes* II,75.

18 Cf. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York, 1963), Ch.2.

19 J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London, 1889), p.104.

20 Cf. John Paul II, 'On the Catholic Universities' (Address to the Third International Meeting of Catholic Universities and Institutions of Higher Learning, Vatican City, 1989. Text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* **81** [1989]). Cf. also John Paul II, 'Excellence, Truth, and Freedom in Catholic Universities' (Address at the Catholic University, Washington, D.C., 1979. *Origins* **9** [1979]).

21 Cf. *Summa contra Gentes* III, 37.

22 Ibid.

23 *Summa theologiae* Ia2ae, 101,2. The quotation occurs in an objection and refers the reader to St Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* IV,8 and 10. But Aquinas is clearly not concerned to contest what it states.

24 *Summa theologiae*, Prologus.

25 *Summa contra Gentes* IV,13.

26 The text comes from Aquinas's inaugural lecture as Master of Theology at Paris. I quote from Simon Tugwell (ed.), *Albert and Thomas* (New York and Mahwah, 1998), p.355.

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27 Tugwell, op.cit., pp.359-360.
28 *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae, 180,1. Cf. Also 2a2ae, 180,2 where Aquinas explains how what he calls 'moral virtues' have a place in contemplation even though contemplation itself is not essentially concerned with behaviour.
29 This article is a modified version of a lecture given at Denison University, Granville, Ohio, U.S.A. For the invitation to deliver the lecture I am grateful to the Goodspeed Lecture Series, the religion and philosophy departments at Denison, the Denison Honors Program, and Professor Anthony J. Lisska.

For Pat Hanrahan

High risers in Manhattan
back bars in Tokyo
hold scholars, lovers, students once
whose names you still would know.

From Ibadan and Jeddah
to where the tides are curved
round Rio bay, your death now links
all those your laughter served.

I see you rise, the first to dance,
your glass warm in my hand;
the quickening pipes bear you away
to sway upon a strand

Of Ireland, one soft ceaseless wave,
here, always, now, forever
no longer mother, mainstay
to the overbred and clever

For now the message flashes out
to each far-flung address:
Patricia is where she is served,
no longer husbandless.

Terry Eagleton

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