New Blackfriars (2026), **107**, 224–235
doi:10.1017/nbf.2026.10136

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Form as 'Ontological Secret'

James Matthew Wilson

MFA in Creative Writing, University of Saint Thomas, Houston, TX, USA
Email: wilsonjm1@stthom.edu

(Received 23 January 2026; revised 23 January 2026; accepted 28 January 2026)

Abstract

Jacques Maritain's contributions to the philosophy of art and beauty are of great historical and philosophical importance. *Art and Scholasticism* (1920) in particular brought unprecedented attention to the place of beauty in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and provided other substantial insights on the relation of the fine arts to being. Maritain's account of beauty, however, emphasizes the invisibility or 'secret' nature of ontological form, however, in a manner that shows the influence of modern European romanticism and modernism and that does not accurately reflect the thought of Aquinas or that of Aristotle and Pseudo-Dionysius, both of whom are the chief sources of Aquinas's discussion of the nature of beauty. This essay argues for a Dionysian account of integrity, harmony, and clarity that suggests a closer relationship between Aquinas's three conditions of beauty than Maritain's discussion indicates.

Keywords: Aquinas; Beauty; Claritas; Dionysius; Form; Proportion; Pseudo-Divine Names

On several past occasions, I have been able to describe and examine Jacques Maritain's philosophies of beauty and of art.[1] My aim in this short essay will be to consider Maritain's substantial achievement in these areas and to mention some of his limitations, but with the particular aim of highlighting a problem that emerges from his reference to the concept of form, in Aristotle and Aquinas's hylomorphic metaphysics, as an 'ontological secret'.[2] My concerns here arise as much out of my practice as a poet as they do from my reflections on the metaphysics of beauty; for this reason, my remarks conclude with a series of four poems offered, after the fashion of Maritain in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Beauty*, as 'Texts without Comment'.[3]

Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* remains a foundational text for any serious consideration of the relationship of art and beauty. The rise of aesthetics as a philosophy of

[1]See, James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), pp. 177–233; James Matthew Wilson, 'Jacques Maritain's Art and Scholasticism and the Recovery of a Beautiful World', *Dappled Things* 11.4 (Mary, Queen of Angels, 2016), pp. 53–82; and James Matthew Wilson, 'The Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain Revisited: Ontology or Psychology?' forthcoming with the American Maritain Association.

[2]Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry* trans. by Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 24.

[3]Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1953).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the fine arts, which found its greatest early expression in Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, led to the habit of treating the philosophies of beauty and art as a single subject that discussed a peculiarly modern set of questions; namely, the fine arts were defined in isolation from the general human capacity for making, and beauty was considered as if it were best understood merely in respect to the fine arts rather than as a property of being correctly understood within the framework of metaphysics.[4] Maritain helpfully makes the reader conscious of this modern set of questions as a merely modern prejudice. He allows the questions to stand, however, and then provides answers to them that draw substantially on the scholastic thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas and on the classical and Christian intellectual tradition more broadly.

In so doing, Maritain provides an incisive, clarifying account of the act of the virtue of art in terms of its external aim, the good of the work made, thus reconciling the fine artist with the 'artisan'.[5] He further describes the virtue of art as a kind of knowing analogous to, but distinct from, rational reflection; while the metaphysician aims at the encounter with being by way of conceptual knowledge and essence, the poet takes aim at being by way of concrete existence, and poetic knowledge is itself a kind of existential way of knowing that aims not at the formation of a concept but the reification of an object.[6] Maritain is ambiguous here but suggests that the work of art is a way of knowing the thing to be made but also that it conveys knowledge, is a source of knowledge for its audience, those who receive it as well.[7]

Of greater significance, Maritain recovers beauty as a transcendental property of being according to the classical formula of beauty as 'form and splendor' and Thomas Aquinas's invaluable specification of this definition in terms of integrity, proportion, and clarity.[8] He draws together Aquinas and Schiller in order to define the fine arts primarily in terms of *poiesis*, and *poiesis* as that kind of making which seeks to manifest a form for the end of beauty.[9] Therefore, the fine arts, much like the liberal arts and wisdom, have an asymptotic relation to the Divine Beauty.[10] They lead us toward our creator but only supernatural grace can bring us to him.[11]

This giving of ancient answers to modern questions constitutes a greater success than Maritain could conceive. His account of beauty and the arts is more a point of departure than a final definition, and so, naturally, some limitations come along with the achievement. Even in *Art and Scholasticism*, but especially in his later writings, the nature of the *habitus* of the fine artist is so liberated from any specified end or rule of making as to seem obscurantist.[12] As valuable as his recovery of art as a virtue of

[4]Friedrich Schiller, On the *Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. by Reginald Snell. Mineola (NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004).

[5]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 9

[6]'Metaphysics gives chase to essences and definitions, poetry to any flash of existence glittering by the way' (Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 128).

[7]See, John G. Trapani, Jr. *Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation: The Complete Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

[8]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 24.

[9]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 55–57.

[10]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 30–31, 34, 75–76.

[11]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 80-81, 132–134.

[12]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 44 and 47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the practical intellect surely is, his aversion to any trace of academicism or Cartesian method weakens it. As he advances his theory of 'poetic knowledge' and 'creative intuition', Maritain's epistemology of the arts grows evermore firmly rooted in a theory of obscure intuition rather than in a lively movement more akin to that of the discursive reason and, thus, has the effect of restricting the intellectual dimension of the fine arts to a marginal kind of natural mysticism. It has the effect of suggesting that the idea is hidden in the artist and needs only to come out (to be expressed) and that the idea has a certain impregnability to understanding.[13] I would propose that artistic making is more of a discernment of the as-yet-unrealized form, moving with what seems freedom and yet is a law of necessity.[14] I would further propose that the work of art is also more discursively intelligible than Maritain suggests; it is not as it were an obscure and private language but one that interacts with reality and with other fields of thinking and that genuinely engages them in describable ways.[15]

Maritain boldly defines beauty as not only a transcendental property of being but as the 'radiance of all the transcendentals united'.[16] Despite this formulation, which anticipates Hans Urs von Balthasar more than it expresses the statements of Aquinas, Maritain's account of beauty remains at a preliminary stage of recovery. He never considers what it would mean for beauty to be a property of being independent of its being a perfection. His account draws helpfully on Plato, but on Plato refracted through Schiller and romanticism more generally, such that he fails to take seriously integrity and proportion as intelligibly related to clarity as genuine conditions of beauty. I shall have more to say on this below.

Maritain is at his strongest when articulating the way the fine arts are ordered in an 'infravalent' manner such that they are goods in themselves but are nonetheless in the line of our own nature's finality and directedness to the contemplation of the Divine Beauty.[17] His concerns in *Creative Intuition* and other later writings on art, however, attend much more closely to fleshing out the intuitive proceedings of the psychology of the artist. Also, in that later work, he recognizes a particular problem: as a property of being, beauty is too general to be the specific end of the virtue of art. This is fairly true, because the end of *poiesis* is the making of a form for the sake of contemplation in light of its beauty, and yet for Maritain it leads him to turn more fervently to the obscure workings of the artistic mind and to attend less and less to the work made as it is in being and as it signifies and becomes an object of contemplation.[18]

Most of these criticisms have been discussed elsewhere, but I would like to attend in greater detail to an aspect of my third criticism. Maritain's account of what beauty is ends up being incomplete and misleading, and this has consequences for both the ontology of beauty, as I will note, and also for the fine artist's practice of art. It has also

[13]See, Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (NP: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 64.

[14]On this point, Gilson's account of 'seminal form' seems perspicuous (Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (NP: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), pp. 101–106).

[15]On this point, see Harold L.Weatherby, *The Keen Delight: The Christian Poet in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), pp. 143–144.

[16]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 173, n.66.

[17]This term does not appear in any of Maritain's works on the philosophy of art, but is a coinage from his political philosophy; e.g., Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (John J. Fitzgerald, trans. by Notre Dame (IN; University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 62.

[18]Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, 169, 171.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

implications for our understanding of the relationship between appearances in general to reality. It is to these consequences I particularly will attend. In one of the richest paragraphs to be found in any of his writings, Maritain recovers the whole tradition of the metaphysics of beauty:

> If beauty delights the intellect, it is because it is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the intellect. Hence the three conditions Saint Thomas assigned to beauty: *integrity*, because the intellect is pleased in fullness of Being; *proportion*, because the intellect is pleased in order and unity; finally, and above all, *radiance* or *clarity*, because the intellect is pleased in light and intelligibility. A certain splendor is, in fact, according to all the ancients, the essential characteristics of beauty—*claritas est de ratione pulchritudinous, lux pulchrificat, quia sine luce omnia sunt turpia*—but it is a splendor of intelligibility: *splendor veri*, said the Platonists; *splendor ordonis*, said Saint Augustine, adding that 'unity is the form of all beauty'; *splendor formae*, said Saint Thomas in his precise metaphysician's language: for the form, that is to say, the principle which constitutes the proper perfection of all that is, which constitutes and achieves things in their essences and qualities, which is, finally, if one may so put it, the ontological secret that they bear within them, their spiritual being, their operating mystery—the form, indeed, is above all the proper principle of intelligibility, the proper *clarity* of every thing. Besides, every form is a vestige or ray of the creative Intelligence imprinted at the heart of created being.[19]

It is hard to overstate the importance of this seemingly *ad hoc* recapitulation of the whole classical and Christian tradition of the metaphysics of beauty. Maritain begins here his gathering of texts from the tradition to point us toward a proper understanding of beauty as a feature of being rather than, as it will become in much modern thought, a feature of the subject's response to appearances. He highlights that beauty is the splendor of form – or composed of form *and* splendor – and that this must be understood in the classical sense of form, meaning among other things the essence, such that beauty is also understood as the splendor of truth or the splendor of order. A further strength is his citation of Augustine who speaks of beauty in terms of order (the order of a multiplicity) and unity (the oneness and simplicity on which every ordering of a multitude must be based). He introduces the three conditions Aquinas provides – integrity, proportion or harmony (Aquinas couples the terms together), and clarity – and gestures, imprecisely, but rightly, toward how these terms must be understood within the tradition they seek to explain. Finally, he sets the beauty of being in the context of the relationship of created being to the creative intelligence of God.

Late in this rapturous catalog a weakness appears – in a phrase that Maritain even begs excuse to use. He speaks of form as an 'ontological secret'. Much later, in attempting to define the *mimesis* of the fine arts as primarily formal rather than material, he will say something similar: 'Here we have the *formal element* of imitation in art', he writes, 'the expression or manifestation in a work suitably proportioned, of some

[19]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 24–25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

secret principle of intelligibility which shines forth'.[20] Form is an ontological secret; form, as essence and, therefore, principle of truth, is also a secret principle.

Why should this delightful phrase, which after all captures the mystery of being in a most exciting fashion, be a cause of trouble? Among the most ancient of distinctions is that of Plato between the realm of becoming and the realm of being, which is tethered to the distinction between appearance and reality. Surely, then, the truth is that which does not appear. It is an ontological secret.

This would be to distort Plato and the tradition that follows from him, in which the appearance of the sensible to the bodily senses anticipates the appearance of form – of the nature of truth – to the intellectual senses. The truth not only appears but is the paradigm of the true act of appearing on which the act of the bodily senses is modeled.[21] Rather than address this question in its totality, however, I will only consider the way the concept of form as ontological secret misleads Maritain in his metaphysics of beauty. First, it leads Maritain to give an account of the fine arts that may be loosely described, for better and for worse, as symbolic, iconic, or sacramental. It emphasizes mystery, the suggestive appearance of what finally may never fully appear, and this in itself is no weakness. But Maritain's framing leads us to emphasize mystery at the expense of the idea of analogy and, we shall see, those two important Thomistic terms, integrity and proportion. We see this, for example, when Maritain attempts to define Saint Thomas's three conditions of beauty but radically relativizes integrity and proportion, in order to let his whole emphasis fall on the third term, *claritas*. He proclaims:

> The least sketch of da Vincis's or even of Rodin's is more complete than the most perfect Bouguereau. And if it pleases a futurist to give the lady he is painting only one eye, or a quarter of an eye, no one denies him the right to do this: one asks only—here is the whole problem—that this quarter of an eye be precisely all the eye this lady needs *in the given case*.[22]

While this judgment is typical of the taste of Maritain's time, it does not seem to give sufficient weight to each of Aquinas's three conditions of beauty. The integrity of the futurist's painting seems an esoteric property. More importantly, the incomplete sketches of two masters he judges superior to the fully and finely realized academic and neo-classical canvases of Bouguereau. Behind this judgment is the conviction that *claritas* is the only term that really describes beauty. *Claritas* is the revelatory light in the work, where the trace of the divine intelligence shows forth from within created being (it is 'a vestige or a ray of the creative intelligence') and it does so despite, or even because of, the lack of integrity and proportion of created being rather than through and because of it. Maritain, therefore, minimizes or, in a sense, denies any connection between integrity, proportion, and clarity. Elsewhere, he will try to hold

[20]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 57.

[21]See, Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 18, and the whole of D.C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[22]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 27

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intelligible light and conceptual clarity as far apart as possible so that the intellectualism of Aquinas will not be mistaken for the rationalism of Descartes.[23] This is not in itself to be contested, but the way Maritain articulates the point has the effect of minimizing the relation of that intelligible clarity to the mind of the receptive knower.

In *Art and Scholasticism* as a whole, it becomes clear that Rouault and Maurice Denis are the exemplary painters for Maritain. Their work avoids mere imitation as verisimilitude by disfiguring the surface. The striving for realism or verisimilitude Maritain describes as the entrance of 'the lie' into art.[24] The surface of the work can claim integrity not as one of the three conditions, but only insofar as it serves to awaken us to the mystery, the ontological secret of the clarity of the form within.

Maritain is right that the avoidance of a slavish *mimesis* after the fashion of the reproduction of modern photography may awaken us to the work as being, as manifested form, and that it pushes us to look within, beyond appearance, toward some scintilla of *claritas*, that vestige of the divine light. And it is *claritas* that alerts us to move from the being of the artwork upward to God as Being Itself who creates all things.[25] Like the icon or the Eucharist, we are called to look within appearances to the invisible reality, the sacramental mystery. Perhaps the closest aesthetic view to what Maritain expresses here is to be found in the lost or fictitious *Symbolic Theology* of Dionysius the Aeropagite. In Dionysius' ninth letter we learn that the symbolic refers specifically to those most homely and material 'sacred symbols used by scripture to reveal God'.[26] Myriad items, ranging from leaves, flowers, and trees to horses, chariots, and thrones, and on to God depicted as drunk or sleeping, all serve as symbols, writes Dionysius, and symbols have a twofold purpose. To the profane, who lack a genuine yearning for the Lord, they seem absurdities and so the profane will turn away in contempt, the sacred meanings guarded from their gaze.[27] To those who seek God with a sincere heart, however, the absurd appearance of the symbols becomes an excitation to penetrate the surface and discover their true, inner meaning: 'All this is to enable the one capable of seeing the beauty hidden within these images to find that they are truly mysterious, appropriate to God, and filled with a great theological light'.[28] This is a kind of beauty; it is an aesthetic mode; it is symbolic. But Maritain takes this part for the whole and uses it to explicate Aquinas on the metaphysics of beauty.

Maritain is obscuring something about the nature of form, the principle of form that is the whole foundation not just for his philosophy of art and beauty but of Aquinas's metaphysics and all that it comprehends. Maritain seems to suggest that the form is that which never appears or rather is made to appear only under the condition of its own concealment. Hence, the symbolic. We would be blind to clarity, were we not, as it were, put off by botched integrity and proportion and so led to search beyond them. Christ on the Cross becomes the true figure of the form of beauty, as Rouault's greatest paintings show us, and, while this is not something to be denied, it conceals as much

[23]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 28 footnote; and 56 footnote.
[24]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 52 and 129.
[25]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 80–81.
[26]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 281 (1104C).
[27]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 283 (1105C).
[28]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 283 (1105C).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as it reveals. In brief, the highest beauty breaks the casks of integrity and proportion to reveal the overflowing light of the mystery of *claritas*.

Claritas is indeed such a mystery, but it cannot be so easily set at odds with integrity and proportion as Maritain suggests. Form cannot be rendered so categorically 'secret'. Maritain and Aquinas's understanding of form derives from Aristotle. In *Physics* 2, Aristotle presents his account of 'nature' and 'form'. There, he repeatedly notes that form and shape are not identical but nonetheless closely related ways of describing the active intelligible principle that is the specific definition of a thing.[29] Form is essence, but essence is not always in tension with appearance. Such essences as 'straight' and 'curved', or 'flesh', 'bone', or 'snub nose' are cases where in some sense the form appears (though Aristotle's point is that they have various degrees of abstraction from matter).[30] The form of triangle, for instance, really is triangular in shape. Not all forms appear as 'shape', to be sure, but form most certainly is the intelligible principle and so also the source of all appearances. Form is not the secret hidden away from appearances but the explanatory principle of all being, whether perceptible by the senses or not. Aristotle's theory does not provide license for the kind of symbolic aesthetics Maritain offers.

A far more significant criticism of Maritain's account of beauty can still be posed. Aquinas's tripartite definition of beauty, which appears only once in his work despite the many places in his writings where the beautiful is discussed, has baffled many readers besides Maritain.[31] Where did these terms, 'integrity', 'proportion and harmony', and 'clarity' come from? The candidates are many, but the most obvious source is another text by Dionysius the Aeropagite, one on which Aquinas himself wrote a commentary: *The Divine Names*. Dionysius's text and Aquinas's commentary both generally speak of beauty in terms approximate to those of form and splendor, a dyadic formulation at least as old as Plato.[32] In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius moves from naming God as the Good to God as cause of forms who is beyond all form, to God who is light, before crowning these names with that of Beauty.[33] God's goodness is thus explained in terms of the union of form-giving and light or splendor-giving that is finally named as Beauty. Aquinas follows Dionysius closely, citing him to say that 'beauty or comeliness results from the concurrence of clarity and due proportion', where proportion is described initially in terms of the form of an individual human body *and then* in terms of the harmony of the whole universe.[34]

Aquinas's references to beauty normally follow this dyadic pattern, but we find hints of elaboration or disambiguation that re-describe form and splendor in triadic terms. In the commentary on *The Divine Names*, most importantly, we find Aquinas

[29]Aristotle, *Basic Works* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 237 (193a.30).

[30]Aristotle, *Basic Works*, 239 (194a).

[31]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981) I, 39, 8.

[32]Plato, *Phaedrus* 247c-248b, in *Complete Works* (John M. Cooper, ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 525-526. Here, Plato describes the forms as visible to the intellect alone, and this intellectual vision of beauty will subsequently serve as the model of the vision of bodily eye (250b). On the dyadic or polar structure of beauty, see D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 70–82.

[33]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 73–77 (700C–704B).

[34]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II, 145, 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

speaking of a thing as 'beautiful because it has the brilliance of its genus, either spiritual or corporeal …'[35] A few pages on, he quotes Dionysius to say that 'individual things' are 'beautiful according to a character of their own', and this he explains as being 'in accord with a proper form'.[36] Furthermore, 'it is clear that the being [*esse*] of all things is derived from the divine Beauty'.[37] I have quoted these passages only in part to highlight what they suggest: one condition of beauty is the proper form of the individual. This, Aquinas will later call *integritas*, or wholeness.

In his commentary discussion of beauty, Aquinas more frequently refers to Dionysius's language of proportion and harmony, as when he writes, 'harmony is present in things by virtue of their ordering among themselves', and 'harmony belongs to the intelligibility of beauty; hence, all things that pertain in any manner to harmony proceed from the divine Beauty'.[38] Harmony here clearly indicates a proportion among several beings rather than exclusively the parts of one being. Indeed, this 'ordering among themselves' clearly means what is called universal being, or the sum total of created being. Dionysius makes this clear when he says, 'Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great causing cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty'.[39] This is the harmony of which Aquinas speaks as a condition of beauty, and it is clear that his use of the word 'proportion' refers primarily to the *ratios* or relations that obtain among all created beings rather than to the *ratio* of a being's individual existence to its essence, which we defined above as integrity.

Finally, integrity and harmony are in beings only because the divine beauty causes them. This 'diversity of effects' is, therefore, a sign of God as the first cause, the creator, of his creatures.[40] But, Aquinas continues, Dionysius also tells us 'that the beautiful that is God is "the end of all, like a final cause" of all things'.[41] Indeed, God 'turns all toward himself as an end'.[42] The existence of individual beings in their integrity and of universal being in its harmony is, thus, expressive of their shared origin in God as first cause and their orderly procession toward him as final cause. Their forms radiate beyond themselves to speak of their origin and destiny; such is their *claritas*.

Later in his commentary, Aquinas will indicate that it is by way of the mind's movement from individual beings to the totality of universal being toward the first and final cause of all things that we first know God.[43] This mode of knowing, the cataphatic, is

[35]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas* ed. by Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Washington Square Books, 1960), p. 269.

[36]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 272.

[37]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 272.

[38]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 270 and 272.

[39]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 77 (704A). We cannot explore the matter here, but Dionysius in these pages goes beyond Plato to propose that *eros* is not simply the yearning that draws the soul of the philosopher to the contemplation of the eternal beauty (as we see in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*), but is the ordering principle of universal being, where the lower reaches up to the higher and the higher stoops in charity to aid the lower, to create that great concord, the hierarchy of created being, at the very bottom of which nonbeing yearns for being, and beyond which the beyond-being of God goes out from itself in ecstasy to confer being and form on its creatures.

[40]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 273

[41]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 273.

[42]Thomas Aquinas, *The Pocket Aquinas*, 270.

[43]Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings,* ed. by M.C. D'Arcy (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1946), p. 187.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inferior to the knowledge by holy ignorance that we call the apophatic. It is a mode of knowing entirely dependent on the perception of the three dimensions of beauty:

> We do not, therefore, know God by seeing His essence, but from the pattern of the whole universe. The entirety of creatures is set before us by God that thereby we may know him; for the ordered universe has some likeness and faint resemblance to the divine nature which is its pattern and archetype. Thus from consideration of the ordered universe, *we ascend in ordered degrees, so far as we are able* by our intellect, to God …[44]

As such, we see that those three terms – integrity, proportion, and clarity – are but three ways of explaining what the beauty of being discloses to us: (a) the fullness of the individual being as existent form; (b) the relation of that individual being to universal being and all the intelligible, possible proportions or *ratios* that emerge from it, such that we know being is the sole, unified, and internally coherent currency of the real; and (c) the innermost light of the relation of an individual being and of universal being to its cause in the uncreated light of God. Aquinas tells us that we move from integrity to proportion to clarity, as we move from the mystery of there being something rather than nothing, then there being a whole orderly universe of beings called creation, and on to creation as caused by the Creator. The three conditions are not indifferent to each other but integrated and sequential. It is not going too far to say that the natural knowledge of God that we may have by metaphysical reflection (such as Aquinas gives us in the five ways) depends on all three conditions of beauty obtaining.

To speak of 'ontological secret', as Maritain does, undermines or disintegrates this movement of the mind from being to Being Itself, from creature, to creation, to Creator. It suggests a desire for the delight and ecstasy of encountering the divine light without working our way toward it by way of creation. But, it is precisely this perceptive, almost discursive, movement of the mind that leads Aquinas, in his commentary on the *Divine Names*, to tell us that the knowledge of beauty, the knowledge of causality, allows natural being to be a source of the knowledge of God in the first place. Maritain seems to conflate this mode of perception and knowledge of beauty with the way we come to understand God by way of the symbolic theology. The latter, dependent on divine grace as it is, is a superior way and is also a kind of aesthetic way of knowing, but it is not the kind of knowing that Aquinas and Dionysius describe in terms of beauty. Furthermore, it is not the way of knowing that is available to the natural reason through its encounter with being.

Maritain was conscious of the risks of his theory. His warnings against the romanticism of Rimbaud, which would make fine art beauty a substitute for the divine mystery, is one sign of this.[45] His rejection of pure abstraction as the 'angelist suicide' is another related one.[46] In his later writings on poetry, his distinction between intellectual music and the music of the ear in poetry shows that he was aware of the direction his remarks could be taken.[47] In 'On Poetic Knowledge', his contempt for 'versified discourses for

[44]Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 188
[45]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 132–133.
[46]Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, 123.
[47]Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 321–22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the delectation of the formal intelligence' suggests, however, his resistance to a form of poetry that understands integrity and proportion as pathways to clarity rather than as potential 'symbolic' concealers of it.[48]

The practicing artist, however, recognizes that integrity and proportion do appear and only because they appear can something absolutely invisible, the divine light, also be made manifest. Roughing up appearances to guard against the entry of profane souls is not their chief role. They rather create a pathway by analogy, leading us from this thing (miracle that it is!) to the whole order of things (even better!) to the portal of the mystery of creation. Disruption and eruption are not primary; they are, rather, reminders of the unlikeness of created being to the Creator that can only become wholly compelling *after* we have first traced the intelligible order of being. This is what Dionysius taught, what Aquinas taught, and it should have been what Maritain taught – but he did not.

In a brief passage in 'Sense and Non-Sense in Poetry', Raissa Maritain gives us a formulation that overcomes these problems. There she writes, 'a certain intelligible signification is necessary even for entry into mystery and the unknown'.[49] In context, she seems to be making a reluctant admission, but she should have been making a stern corrective. The practice of the artist discloses as much, for, the integrity of the parts is our only possible pathway to the making of a harmonious whole, and only the harmonious whole can give off, however faintly, those rays of clarity that speak of the origin and destiny of all things.

Texts without Comment

De Profundis
After Raïssa Maritain

God, oh, my God, the space between us I cannot endure.
Reveal to me that pilgrimage both absolute and pure,
That pathway without wreckage, of my soul into Your heart,
Unlike those men chart on the earth by number and by part.
My soul is plucked and poor, and feels the wound of everything
In its unspeakable slap, and with its all too human ring.
Pain ravished me of my first years.

And now, I'm just a ghost that goes out moaning for its marrow
Along roads hard and narrow
That hope has forced on it with tears.
In justice, my eyes rise toward You, beneath a loneliness
Whose shadows—dark as headstones, bloodied altars—weigh and press.

How can I come to you beyond the obscurity of signs,
My flesh to meet Your Light, which blinds all that on which it shines?
All that is said of You is sacrilege—and what You say
Yourself in our tongue seems odd and will not give itself away.
For, while You shroud Yourself in speaking darkness or withdraw,
The world You fashioned coruscates with stars that overawe,

[48] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 60.
[49] Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And the abyss in which You set them terrifies my soul.
From those abyssal depths, I cry to You, My God, my goal.

(from *Some Permanent Things* Second Edition, 2018)

'And Beat Upon This High Cloud of Unknowing'

After a hard trek up loose rocks, I found
  Myself below the peak, shaking with fears
And staggering on my legs. The fog had swallowed
The path behind; my memory was hollowed
  Where your and others' names belonged, last year's
Acanthus blooms wiped out. I hit the ground.

I may have slept an hour, I don't know.
  But when my eyes turned up, they felt the press
Of a cloud's crushing weight which blotted all,
Enshrouded all in that strange dark. I call
  Into the raveling air, my sight grows less
The more I strain for light, while I strike blow

On blow against the black, whose insubstantial
  Vault resonates like a great drum of steel.
You'd not have recognized my voice, its cry.
'Just let me in, I beg you, or I'll die.
  Just let me in.' And then a final peal
Of thunder snuffed it out. The circumstantial

Evidence is plain: I woke with knuckles bleeding,
  My throat dried to a reed, my head concussed.
But just the same, the glowering cloud I'd fought
Was buried deeper in me than all thought:
  My blind and breathless trail an outward husk,
And every fist the self itself exceeding.

(from *Some Permanent Things* Second Edition, 2018)

Lilacs

You stand beneath the lilac bush at night
  And smell her heavy blossoms, think, *ah, right*,
I've caught this scent a thousand times before,
  Which, subtle though it is, you can't ignore.
It fills the mind and yet escapes it too,
  As every mystery worth the name will do.
Perhaps that's why, like baby faces, ants,
  The curious innards of a marshland's plants;
Like love songs or the neighbor's lab you pet,
  No matter how familiar, we still get
A pulse of wonder and a hint of fear
  That some ethereal visitant draws near.

(from *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*, 2024)

Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds

  Beyond the window, morning sparrows made
Their song as if the whole world's goodness paid
Its plenty out for them and them alone.
The old saint heard their joy and squelched a moan
As his legs, stiff and heavy still with sleep,

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Arranged themselves beneath his cassocked heap
Of belly. Where had he left off before?
He asked his three amanuenses, more
For their sakes—sprightly fingers, sluggish minds—
Than his. One said, with the forbidden kinds
Of birds and what their figures signified
For Moses, who charged the eagle's flight with pride.
  Aquinas sat a moment, mind withdrawn
From his mouth's taste of buttered loaves, the dawn
Without, the wish for more wood in the fire
To clear the frost from stone or to admire
The cool swift brilliance of all he said
As a swan plumes its white and well-turned head.
  He spoke: the long-beaked ibis feeds on snakes
To represent the man whom nothing slakes.
Feasting upon dead bodies' opened gore,
The vulture stands for all who thrive through war.
When Noah let the raven out to fly
It never did return, to signify
Such men whose souls are blackened by foul lust
Or who, unkind, won't pay back trust with trust.
The plodding puffball ostrich is that which
Figures all those weighed down with growing rich
And, hearing God's call, plant their soiled head.
Plovers like gossips on stray words are fed.
And who, on seeing the gull, does not admire
That its bright wings to heaven may aspire?
And yet, it wastes its hours adrift at sea
Gorging on fishy sensuality.
The hoopoe builds its nest on heaps of dung,
Just as despair's eyes view the world all wrong.
  He paused then, at the thought of earthly sorrows,
Our sickly past, incarnadine tomorrows,
The myriad things that whistle arcane truth
To please old minds and to instruct raw youth,
And bore down on his broken knees to pray
For such a world that had so much to say.

(from *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*, 2024)

Cite this article: James Matthew Wilson, 'Form as 'Ontological Secret'', *New Blackfriars*, 107 (2026), 224–235. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10136 Published online by Cambridge University Press