Thomas Aquinas, the Man and his Mind

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Chapter One  Thomas the Teacher

The story is told of the Sufi mystic, the Mullah Nasrudin – it is probably apocryphal, and quite possibly the Mullah didn’t exist anyway—that a student once asked him how come he was so wise. “It’s like this”, the Mullah replied. “As soon as I get up in the morning I start talking. And all day I talk without ceasing. But as I talk, I look into people’s eyes, and when I see a glint I write down what I have just said.” All too well do we who teach understand what the Mullah meant. In every classroom it’s a question, is it not, of what you see when you drag your attention away from your private struggle with the notes on your podium, and turn it towards the students in front of you. Which do you see there in those student eyes, is it the glint, or is it perhaps the glaze?

As a philosophy undergraduate I once had a teacher of whom we students used to say that his lectures travelled along a route from his professorial notes, through his voice-box, into our ear-canals and onto our student note books, without passing through the brains of either. He never looked us in the eye; and if any of his lectures ever did pass through his brain, the intellectual transaction took place entirely as a communication between that brain and the lectures notes in front of him. He was a self-centred teacher, all self-conscious performance. Somehow we students didn’t seem to come into it. I was reminded of that teacher when, in a rather second-rate movie called “The Ruling Class,” a schizophrenic aristocrat played by Peter O’Toole was asked how he knew he was Jesus Christ. To which he replied, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s just that when I pray I find I am talking to myself.”

I want to talk to you today about Thomas the teacher, and the first thing it occurred to me to say about him in this role is that he almost entirely disappears. Physically obese—at any rate, that’s the legend—in his teaching there is no
personal bulk at all, no personal mass. In fact if anything is massive about Thomas – apart from his brain and his waistline – it is his modesty. The other day a commissioning editor in a University Press asked me if I would write a short book about Thomas, the man and the theology, and, pondering the invitation, it occurred to me that the little I know about Thomas the man is hardly less than all there is to be known about him. It was, I thought, almost as if Pope John XXII, who canonized Thomas in 1323, had canonized a library for its personal holiness – which seemed silly, until I thought about it a bit more. Because then I realized that there is an important sense in which that is exactly what John XXII had done. It is a lovely paradox that there is something intensely holy about Thomas’ absence from his writings. It says a lot about Thomas the man that his writings tell you nothing about Thomas the man. Thomas is no Augustine thrusting his personal agonies upon you. Thomas gets himself entirely out of the way of the act of communication. In short, Thomas is all teacher. A holy teacher.

But can you canonize a man just for being a teacher of holy things, even for being a very good one, an inspiring communicator? Thomas himself says no you can’t, and this is not because he has a low view of university teaching as a form of human work. It is because he has an exceptionally exalted view of teaching generally – or at least of the teaching of theology. Theology for Thomas is one of the ways in which the Spirit works in the Church. Reflecting what Paul has to say about the charisms in ICorinthians 13, Thomas maintains that teaching is one of the manifestations of the gift of prophecy, which is what he calls a gratia gratis data, an unmerited gift of the Spirit freely given to a teacher: but it’s for the Church, Paul says, not for the teacher. For the gift the teacher receives from the Spirit is neither merited by those who receive it, nor does it do them any good, spiritual or material. So the teacher in the Church has to disappear into the
teaching, get out of the way of the work of the Spirit. So much is this so for Thomas, that I have known people to be a bit shocked, even scandalised, to discover him telling us that teaching even about the things of God neither requires holiness nor earns it, not in itself. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills, and as the teacher of the Church it is no more hampered by our deficiencies, than it is dependent on any degree of our holiness.

In fact, of course, in saying this he is merely following Paul, who famously contrasts the gifts of teaching, preaching, miracles, tongues and whatnot, which are but “clanging cymbals” without charity, with the one thing that counts, even without the gifts, namely charity. For charity alone sanctifies. So no, Thomas doesn’t think you could canonize a person just for being a teacher, or even for being a technically effective one. Teaching holy things cannot of itself make you holy. But as there is a sacra doctrina, a “holy teaching” — that is what he calls theology—so there can be a holy teacher, there is a way of holiness to be found in the response to the demands specifically made upon the teacher in the Church. In so saying I do not mean merely that there can be a teacher who is also holy, a teacher who is holy by other means than teaching, but a person whose holiness is achieved in and through, and manifested by, the manner of his teaching.

It is my guess that Thomas already understood this when, as a young man destined by his aristocratic family for a senior ecclesiastical career, he threw caution to the winds, abandoned the safe career-path provided by the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino, and devoted his life to a startlingly novel combination of poverty and preaching. Herbert McCabe, a great Dominican teacher and preacher of our own times, used to say that Dominicans don’t pray, they preach. Underlying Thomas’ decision to throw in his lot with what seemed to his family to be little more than an ill-dressed rabble of pathetic under-achievers, was that same perception, that holiness for him was to lie
within the practice not of monastic *contemplatio* but of mendicant *praedicatio*. In short, he threw in his lot, his bid for holiness, with the Dominicans, with a rule of life and a form of holiness by way of preaching.

Not that Thomas himself was ever famous for his preaching. But we do possess some few sermons of his that would put to shame some purveyors of the self-important histrionic homiletic of our time—and in the best Catholic tradition they are mercifully short. But he was famous as a teacher of preachers, and it is easily forgotten how *Dominican* a theologian Thomas is. While by instinct no revolutionary himself, Thomas participated with enthusiasm in a theological revolution which had been taking hold of the Western Church throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the success of which the Dominicans had a major stake. And that revolution was so complete by the time Thomas died that even now it is hard for us to imagine any other meaning for the word “theology” than that which Thomas, and his like in the thirteenth century, have bequeathed to us.

For the theologians of our times, the majority of whom occupy professorships in the modern equivalent of that twelfth century invention, the university, most of what Thomas does by way of theology is perfectly familiar. Thomas the theologian is a *magister*, a professor, a trained academic. He writes *summae* of theology, themselves a theological genre unprecedented in the history of the Church, and a product of the environment of the schools of the twelfth and later centuries. Those schools created a demand for school books, texts—though myself I am inclined to think that Thomas’ most famous work, the *Summa Theologiae*, was intended more as a handbook for university teachers than a text-book for students, his earlier *Compendium Theologiae* serving the latter purpose. Thomas is a professional teacher, and needed to qualify, as all *magistri* did, by writing a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter the Lombard, an
assemblage of theological opinions gathered around disputed questions of theology compiled in the mid-twelfth century. Such Sentences commentaries are, roughly in today’s terms, PhD dissertations, and disputed questions are devices for teaching and learning, the medieval equivalents of our seminars. Why should they be otherwise? After all, they are but means devised in service to a conception of theology as a subject to be taught and examined in a university degree course, according therefore to a curriculum, in institutions offering training within a fixed period of years to qualify students for entry into the higher ranks of a professionalized clerisy, or to recycle them through an academic career, or, sometimes, both. Medieval universities taught theology in fixed-time degree courses offering a portable set of skills to be used by the Church’s priesthood in the liturgical, pastoral and homiletic service of the Church.

It is little wonder, then, that it was the friars, especially the Dominicans, who took most enthusiastically to university styles of theological learning, as the schools offered exactly the transferable theological skill that the preaching orders needed for their distinctively mobile and urban ministries. The highly formal structures of those summae are principally due to their pedagogical purposes; though the word is not of medieval provenance, these works of theology, and the methods of teaching it, are “systematic” in something akin to a modern sense, at least in part because their intention is curricular organization, as any reader of, for example, the general preface to Thomas’ Summa Theologiae will readily observe¹. The conception of theology as systematic insofar as it is embodied in those university texts is therefore specific to a very particular purpose for theology itself: that is, to a conception of theology as teachable, portable, and transferable, and of a university course in theology as training, whether for
preaching or pastoral missions, or as a step on the way to ecclesiastical preferment.

Perhaps it is because most theology is still done within the successor academic institutions of those medieval universities, that even today it takes some historical imagination to grasp fully how revolutionary was the change that shifted the theological center of gravity away from the rural monastic enclosure into the new universities of urban Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. That revolution brought with it the radically new conception of theology as a teachable subject. In medieval terms, this is a very late development, making a break with a traditional, and principally monastic, style of theology, a break that seemed unnervingly radical to even the most open-minded of the monastic theologians. For a Bernard of Clairvaux— in his own way himself a radical reformer of the twelfth century— theology is not a subject in which you undertake a course so as to acquire professional qualifications. It is his contemplative way of life. Nor does the monk take his theology anywhere, as he is vowed to stability of place.

Theology for the monks is closer in spirit to the contemplative theoria of the Greek Fathers of the Church, and is a complex of life-long activities, woven in and out of the monastic horarium as a continuous practice of a scriptural lectio divina. While the friars preach, the monks read and sing. And the monks’ reading rises on a scale through meditation and prayer into contemplation, a scale which the twelfth century Carthusian, Guigo II, described as the “ladder of monks,” because, like Jacob’s, theirs stretches from earth to heaven, and extends out beyond this life into the next, into the beatific vision. For the monks saw their contemplative lives pre-mortem on the model of Mary’s— she had chosen the “better part” because in her conversation with Jesus she was engaging in what lasts into the next life— by contrast with the active life of teaching and preaching,
which, like Martha’s, being “busy about many things,” begins and ends this side of death.2 And in just the same way, the monks understood their monasteries themselves to be placed on that eschatological cusp between this world and the next. The twelfth century Benedictine turned Cistercian, Alan of Lille, even thought there was theological significance in a Latin pun: the monk lived for the nonce in a cella, which was next door to his final dwelling place, his “home,” in caelo.3 It was in his cell that the way was to be found to the celestial.

To many a monk, the university practices of theology seemed rootlessly ungrounded in a stable practice of living, unsurprisingly, since at the cutting edge of university theology were these friars, rootlessly ungrounded men, placeless vagabonds, who sponged on the alms of others and whose enthusiasm for the rough and tumble of disputation in the schools was an invitation to a mere theological curiositas—a word not best translated as “curiosity” without the damning qualification of “idle”. For that is what many a monk, and we must add, many a secular priest along with them, thought the friars were, idle spongers who would not work for their bread. It was no wonder, they thought, that such idle men embraced so enthusiastically a conception of the theological as “idle,” because unconstrained, speculation.

In short, the monastic hostility to the theology of the schools chiefly targeted its lack of “discipline,” referring thereby to its disengagement from the rule-bound, place-bound practices of contemplative communities. When, therefore, in the first question of the Summa Theologiae Thomas addresses the question of in what sense sacra doctrina should be described as a disciplina, he knew what he was taking on. He was going to have to show that, albeit in a quite different way from the monastic, the conception of theology he was about to embody in this massive work, was no idle pursuit of idle men with nothing better to do with their time than provoke an unnerving sceptical questioning of
the traditions of the scripture and the Fathers. For sure, he is going to set the cat among the monastic pigeons. He is going to say that sacra doctrina is, as he puts it, argumentativa, it has a “dialectical” character, because there are objections to Christian faith to be faced all along the line—after all, the second question of the Summa even asks whether there is anything for the subject to begin to be about. Utrum Deus sit, he asks, “Is there anything answering to the name ‘God’?” And for Thomas it is a genuine question: that is, logically the answer could be no, even if he is sure by faith that it isn’t in fact going to be. Hence, when he tells us that theology is argumentativa he means something very robust: the truths of faith are indeed true. But they are disputable truths, or, to put it in another way, they are defensible truths even if they are not provable truths. That, Thomas seems to think, simply has to do with the nature of faith. For the very notion of faith can make sense only to human beings—it makes no sense either to my guardian angel or to my cat—that is to say, faith can make sense only to beings possessed of rational intellects. And rational intellects question. I mean, that is just their nature, it is what intellects do: they ask. They ask: “Is it true that…?”, and, “How come…?” and, “Why…?” Hence, Thomas organizes his Summa around a massive structure of such quaestiones. The mind boggles. Are there really forty-five hundred non-trivial theological questions to be asked, as he does— and that’s in a work that Thomas describes as a précis, a summary for beginners, and isn’t even finished?

Now most contemporary scholarship, engaging with that first question of the Summa on the nature of theology as a “discipline,” is concerned with a peculiarly twentieth century obsession with theological method. And one could have plenty to say about that sense of the word “discipline,” whether in the most general terms relating to a wider theological readership, or more narrowly as to how they touch on Thomas’ responsibility as a theological Master to the
Dominican community of his day. I will say little as to the first general issue of theological method, and not much more as to the second, specifically Dominican, interest that Thomas had in writing the Summa. Just this much.

Thomas began writing this work while in Italy, teaching his Dominican brethren. But before completing even the first part of it he was called back to the Dominican chair of Theology at the University of Paris, where the very presence of the friars was being challenged – this time, however, not by the monastic interest, but the secular masters, who, though for different reasons, resented the influence of these idle beggars in the schools as bitterly as any monk had resented the schools themselves in the previous century. For four years in Paris Thomas continued his work on the Summa, but it was still incomplete when he was moved back from Paris first to Naples and then to Rome, charged by his superiors with a very specific task of re-thinking and reorganizing the curriculum of studies for Dominican novices. It is clear from the Prologue to the whole work, written, of course, when Thomas was teaching in the Dominican Studium in Naples, that questions of curricular organisation already much preoccupied him, because in that Prologue he tells us of a concern very familiar to university professors of our own day, namely that the subject was, from the point of view of the practice of teaching it, a disorderly curricular mess. From the very outset of the Summa it is clear that Thomas’ motivation for writing it is not that of the researcher composing his masterpiece, but that of a magister, a teacher, more specifically of those beginning in the subject, freshmen theologians. The Summa is designed to plot a theological learning curve.

By contrast, the way the subject is taught in the university of Paris is dictated, he says, excessively by the university’s institutional practices—for example, by its timetable of set-piece disputations and a reliance on textual commentary as teaching methods— and insufficiently by the nature of the
subject itself, with the result, he adds, that the teaching of the subject has become overburdened by the multiplication of *quaestionum inutilium*, pointless questions. Therefore, he concludes, it has been necessary to re-think the whole business of how to teach the subject in ways which allow the questions to arise more appropriately from its own dynamic, from structures and energies of thought all its own. Here at least, if nowhere else, is the voice of Thomas the teacher clearly heard, the voice of the teacher concerned with pedagogical issues of the appropriate shape of the learning-curve. And we should listen. For Thomas does not tell us that his *Summa* is the last word on how to do theology. He himself did theology in many other ways, and Thomas is sometimes at his best in his biblical commentaries—in many ways his *Reportatio* on John’s Gospel ranks as his finest work as a professional theologian. But the *Summa* is most definitely a magisterial statement on the subject of how to teach theology, whether in the wider context of the university or in the more vocational context of the Dominican *studium*.

But when Thomas was called back to Naples and Rome, it was to take responsibility for a specifically Dominican pedagogical agenda. Noting of that massive work which is the *Summa Theologiae*, that fully two thirds of its pages are devoted to what a later age will call “moral theology,” Mark Jordan speculates, in my view rightly, that in undertaking the reform of the curriculum of Dominican theological training Thomas was principally concerned with advancing it beyond the level of practical, indeed case-by-case and piece-meal pastoral instruction in how to deal in sermon and confessional with standardized lists of cases of conscience—in which, as he found it, Dominican seminary training principally consisted. Looked at from this point of view the grand structure of the *Summa* as a whole reveals itself to have, once again, a primarily pedagogical purpose, and, once again, a distinctly Dominican one. That structure
itself speaks theologically and pastorally, as if to say: “For us, friar preachers, the pragmatism of the homiletic exemplum, or of the casuistical solution to problem of conscience, is not enough. If we are to give water to others to drink, we must drink from our own wells first; if we are to preach to others from the book of life we must first read from the book of our own experience. Therefore, if you novices want to be friar preachers and confessors ever on the move, carry with you no spare sandals; if in your imitation of Christ you wish to have no place whereon to lay your head; and if in your predominantly mobile and urban ministries you wish to eschew all reliance on the security of fixed capital; if, in short, you wish to be a mendicant friar, so that it is out of this witness to the poverty of Christ that you want to preach the word of Christ on the street, then carry nothing with you but the vision of God and the word of God which Christ preached, and the desire to preach it yourself.” In short, Thomas says—and here I quote, or rather paraphrase, his own words—better than merely to shine for oneself is to cast light for others; and so the better form of life than the merely contemplative is that whose purpose is contemplata aliis tradere, to hand on to others what they have drunk from their own wells of contemplation. The Summa is friars’ theology, it is the one scrip that mendicant preachers must carry with them, it is, in a word, a poor man’s theology, the poor Christ as theology. They must carry that theology with them, as poor people do, on their own backs.

And so it is that Thomas brackets that enormous Second Part of the Summa, devoted to that practice of the Christian life that Dominicans are to preach, with a profound meditation on the meaning of the God Jesus prayed to at the front end, and the meaning of the Christ who thus prayed at the back. For the moral life is the Christian life. It comes from God as its source and returns to God through Christ alone. Typically, Thomas’ source for this recasting of Christian moral theology is that ill-assorted pair of bed-fellows, at once the
Gospels and Aristotle. For Aristotle had said that if you wanted to know what the good life is like, all you had to do was to see how the good man lives. But Thomas, unlike Aristotle, knew what a truly good man looked like— from the Gospels. These are the theological, or, if you like, contemplative wells from which alone Dominicans may drink; this is the disciplina of the Dominicans’ theology, the theology of the migrant preacher, the imitatio Christi on the hoof.

So yes, Thomas does convert the theological project into a discipline of training, he does make it into a “subject” that may be distinguished methodologically from other subjects; yes, he does re-conceive theology as a teachable, examinable, portable, intellectual skill; and he does disengage the practice of theology from its enclosure within the cloister, liberating it for the street; and he does make of theology something recognizably continuous with what we do in the Divinity School at Yale and, no doubt, with what some of you do here in the name of his own teacher, Albertus Magnus. In that sense, or perhaps better, in those senses, theology is for Thomas a discipline, a rule-governed intellectual practice with a purpose: contemplata aliis tradere.

But it was not mainly in connection with that objective sense of the word “discipline” that I wanted to talk to you today about Thomas the teacher, but rather in connection with the more subjective sense that refers to the character of Thomas’ personal holiness, and to its paradoxical nature as a disappearing act. So little does Thomas himself appear in his writings that, as I said, you would think that it was not the speaker but the speech-act that was canonized. Well, that is almost completely true, but not quite. We do know a little about Thomas the man. He was evidently tall, fair-haired and balding from the front, physically fit (Torrell calculates that over his lifetime he walked at least 15,000 kilometers on his travels between Italy, France and Germany); he was taciturn, not much given to chatter, forgetful of meal-times and prone to disappear into fits of abstraction,
all of which sounds a little daunting, until you learn that he seems to have had a talent for friendship, and a willingness to spare any amount of time for the needs of his brethren. All witnesses tell of the sense of peace that he radiated. Given his intense preoccupation with writing and teaching and a punishing work-rate, that is pretty convincing evidence of his personal priorities. Apparently if you needed his attention when he was lost in thought, you just tugged on his sleeve, and he was all yours. For Thomas, in life as in thought, *caritas*— and by that he means friendship with God and human beings— charity trumps all. And there are perhaps two occasions when even in his writings Thomas the man breaks through the impassive objectivity of his prose in a different way—in an outburst of indignant rage. But even on such occasions, the exception proves the rule, as when, at the end of a polemical work directed against some philosophers in the Faculty of Arts in Paris, Thomas angrily demands that they come out into the open in a fair fight over their plainly heretical reading of Aristotle on the nature of the intellect, accusing them of abusing their professorial power over the young by whispering to them unchallenged in corners. Only very rarely would Thomas the teacher come out into the open personally, and then when the defense of his students, or the integrity of the teaching role itself, demanded it. But then he would come out fighting, gloves off.

All the same, there is nothing we know of in Thomas’ personal life that tells of what gets called “heroic virtue” in the circles of the canonizing bureaucracies – except his teaching and writing theology. So I want to talk to you now about the nature of Thomas’ holiness in his default mode as a teacher, in which role he appears as a sort of canonizable absence. And I want to approach that holiness indirectly by saying a word or two about what is perhaps the most notable feature of his writing, which is its lucidity. If you want to write lucidly, you have to get yourself out of the way, because if you stand in the way of the
light you obstruct it, and cast a shadow. The shadow is you, the teacher. As I said, I once knew a teacher who, like that, stood in his own light. But, as a teacher myself, I know more intimately than I knew that teacher the ever-present temptation in oneself to obstruct the light of teaching with an over-present selfhood, to prize one’s performance at the podium above the elucidation of the minds of students.

Now as to that lucidity: I think that Thomas borrowed metaphors of light more from Augustinian than Aristotelian sources. It was Bonaventure, that other great friar theologian and friend of Thomas who put one aspect of this Augustinian light-motif (as one might say) most succinctly. We know all things, Bonaventure says, in the divine light of truth, everything is illuminated by the divine. But the light in which we see cannot itself be one of the things seen, for we can see the light only insofar as it is refracted off opaque objects. If light were itself an object of sight then we would be able to see nothing in it, just as, if the eye’s seeing were itself colored, then we would be unable to see any colors by means of it. Just so, we can see in creation the multiple variations of shade, and density, of texture and luminosity, because of the light refracted off their massy surfaces; but the light which is God, that we cannot see, except in the creatures which reflect it. Hence, as Bonaventure says, when we turn our minds away from the visible objects of creation to God, the source of their visibility, it is as if we see nothing. The world shines with the divine light. But the light which causes it so to shine is itself like a profound darkness.

I do not recall Thomas ever putting the matter in quite that Augustinian way— profoundly indebted theologically as Thomas is to Augustine, his rhetorical styles are quite different—but there is one connection in which Thomas constructs a closely parallel argument. All Thomas’ imagery of knowledge is that of light. He tells us that were we equipped with bodily senses
and imagination alone, as brute animals are, our relation with the world would be as if we were bumping around in a darkened room, registering the immediate impacts of the objects it contains, but knowing nothing of what sort of place we were in. We would be like the team of blind people trying to reconstruct the elephant by feel alone. But when the intellect turns towards what the bodily senses present it with, it is like switching on a light: to know something is to come to see its complexities and differentiations, its enormous variety of connections with the world it inhabits, it grasps the meaning of what is sensed. In the light the hard massy indeterminate objects we were bumping into are saturated with meaning. They show up as furniture, as a sitting-room, as shabby or tidy, ill- or well-designed, and so forth. We are, he says, “present” in and to the room through the light intellect sheds on it, but only in what we might call a pre-reflexive way.

For my experiencing the sitting-room is not in the same way an object of experience as the sitting-room is: or, as we might say, in Bonaventuran spirit, the intellectual light in which we see the darkened space to be a sitting room is not itself an object of our seeing. In fact, Thomas says, in exact parallel with Bonaventure, when we turn our gaze back upon the act of gazing itself, it is as if we see nothing. Try to catch yourself in the act of experiencing the world, and that self performs a disappearing act, like an infallible sleuth who, however quickly you turn round to catch him in the act of sleuthing, is always behind you, haunting your experience but never captured within it. As Kant was rather less helpfully to put it, the “unity of apperception” is “transcendental”—it is not itself an object of experience.

I apologize for the somewhat abstract nature of these remarks, but they do have a bearing on how Thomas conceives the nature of the act of teaching. To teach is to cast light for others, which you can do only insofar as your act of
teaching is invisible and does not stand in the way of the light that you cast: there is a sort of necessary self-denial required of the teacher who wishes contemplata aliis tradere, a self denial which is a condition of true lucidity. You can see what he means if you consider another, radically different, and false, kind of lucidity, a lucidity that is in fact a chronic disease of excessive self-consciousness. It is a disease to which, may I say, academics, not excluding academic theologians, are peculiarly prone.

Consider the centipede. I have no idea whether centipedes really do have a hundred legs, but for sure they have a lot of them. I imagine that a physiologist will tell you that walking upright on just two legs is mechanically a highly complicated business: but its complexity is as nothing as compared with the feat of coordination in which the centipede routinely engages with success, without giving a thought to the matter. But that’s the point. A centipede can perform the complex business of getting a hundred legs perfectly co-ordinated so as to walk in its creepy-crawly sort of way, on condition that it doesn’t think about how to do it. For if to walk you had to work out how to do it all the time, the excess of thought required would be wholly paralysing, you would be trapped within the process, and couldn’t achieve the outcome. So, if you can imagine a centipede equipped with a human brain, then you have understood a certain kind of intellectual disease, as I say, a peculiarly academic one, a paralysis of thought and action induced by an excess of self-consciousness. It is, in fact, what Hegel, called the “unhappy consciousness,” the consciousness that is compulsively self-directed, obsessively self-scrutinizing, to the point that it evacuates of all solidity, of all density, paralyzing the self that it scrutinizes. This, simply, is neurosis. It is the root of depression. It is a sort of perfect lucidity. But it is lucidity misdirected, because self-directed. It is, as Chesterton says, the perfect, because circular, lucidity of the mad.
When I think of this—and I do, because I know academics—and think of Thomas’ vast objectivity, an objectivity the other name for which is the selflessly other-engaged generosity of the teacher, I also think of another Catholic priest, also at some time a university teacher, whose lucidities are of that other, self-directed, self-paralysing sort. I think of Gerard Manley Hopkins. His words come to mind in one of his very last poems. It was addressed to Robert Bridges, one of his few friends, and practically the only person who in his lifetime recognised the stature of his poetry. And in that poem Hopkins wrote of “The fine delight that fathers thought.” And it is with very particular poignancy that those words come to mind, because in his own estimation Hopkins was a failure, who in his last years complained that he had lost the feel for that “fine delight” on which his poetry drew. Untethered from its sources, Hopkins’ all-too reflective mind turned back on them and devoured them. He was cursed with a sense of failure as poet, and with depletions of spirit as person, so acute as to poison at its source in him the one outlet of self-expression left to him, his poetry. Hardly published at all in his life-time, and when published, ignored, and in any case discouraged from writing poetry altogether by his Jesuit superiors, he was bursting with frustrated creativity:

…Only what word

Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban
Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.

Of course all writers know what it is to be “a lonely began”, for writer’s block besets us all at some time or another. But there is too that more extreme and painful academic condition which afflicts some, like Hopkins, more radically. In his later life Hopkins had become a chronic depressive. All the symptoms of a bi-polar condition are there in those last sonnets, in the wild,
overworked, rebarbative excesses of stylistic compression on the one hand, and in the tendency just occasionally to slip into a self-indulgent sadness, not so far from a maudlin self-pity, on the other. The literary self-absorption became extreme to the point where all he could write about was his inability to write. In Hopkins, depressive immobility and creative frenzy are held in uneasy tension, never finally resolved one way or the other; if they feed off one another, neither is ever finally consumed.

But Hopkins’ loneliness as poet had its root in a more general spiritual desolation, and his obsessive self-disgust in a hyperactive self-awareness; his self-directed lucidity is, he sees, a sort of sickness of selfhood:

I am gall, I am heartburn. [he says] God’s most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;

...I see

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

Where, then, in Hopkins is that “fine delight that fathers thought”? Oh, it is there alright, in some moods, and some occasions, for it is there in some friendships, and he admits that it is “…not but in all removes I can// Kind love both give and get…,” and he delights in what he calls the “instress” of nature and persons, that impress of the divine which he finds in the “freshness deep down things,” in their individuation, their particularity, in their febrile contingency. For Hopkins, as for his medieval theological mentor, Duns Scotus, any sort of God, savage, cruel or indifferent, could have produced a world governed merely by the repetitive generality of causal law; but only love can account for the individuation, the uniqueness, and not alone of persons, but also of nature’s endlessly varied creativity; and only an infinite, “mastering,” love could have caused the endlessness of that variety.
Of course, then, that “fine delight” is there too in Hopkins, sometimes – in his God’s Grandeur, for example. But it is not there at the end, for in those last sonnets Hopkins – “self, poor jackself” as he describes himself - has become overwhelmed, overloaded with an excess of selfhood; so to say, if he saves himself as poet it is only to lose himself as person: for he is, in the end, a selfhood constituted by disappointment. Hopkins the man escapes from his sense of failure only by means of its poeticization.

A special case? Yes, of course, Hopkins’ is an extreme case, of a self so self-absorbed, so lucidly self-aware, that his mental posture has almost a Dantean hellishness about it, that of a man doubled over upon himself, punished only by his need to punish himself, forced to live with his “sweating self,” though guiltless otherwise. But in part, when not with equal intensity, is not this the grim, disappointed selfhood to which many academics feel at least sometimes prone, driven by a strenuousness of intellect uprooted – “It is thy energy of thought,” the Angel admonishes Gerontius in Newman’s Dream, “that keeps thee from thy God.” “Intellect uprooted.” But uprooted from what? From that “fine delight which fathers thought”, I’d say, the fine delight being endlessly dissipated by the self-obsessed consciousness that is its bastard son. But what is this “fine delight”?

It is found not in the mad self-referential lucidities of the unhappy consciousness, but in response to the opacity of creation, to its density and to its depth, which consists in its character of being given, and of being lit-up by the ultimate love that it refracts. And I brought Hopkins into the picture by way of contrast with Thomas, because in Thomas everything is directed outward from himself and upon the colours and densities of the world which intellect lights up, reveals, so that those colours and densities can reveal God. This is the true meaning of Thomas’ famous impassivity and objectivity, though those are cold
words that cannot do justice to its real character of selfless generosity and openness. Thomas’ lucidity is his accessibility. He passes on to others, aliis tradit. Far from Thomas’ style is the jargonized impenetrability of so much professional theology of our times, which calls attention to itself at the same time as it draws a protective veil of tendentious rhetoric around the poverty of its thought. Thomas’ lucidity is resolutely accessible. It stands to the intellectual life as humility stands to the moral: his is the true teacher’s openness, her vulnerability to contestation and challenge.

But just at this point of comparison and contrast between the thirteenth century Dominican and the nineteenth century Jesuit, a doubt as to its sustainability intrudes, because of something that happened to Thomas on December 6, 1273. What did happen that day? We do not know, except that Thomas’ pen at last fell from his exhausted hand and he said to his secretary and amanuensis, Reginald of Piperno: “After what I have seen today, Reginald, I can write no more: for all that I have written is but straw.” So what was it? Was it some sort of mystical experience? Or, was it, more simply, nervous collapse as a result of over-work?— a very plausible explanation, considering that, on a rough calculation, Thomas’ output had been the equivalent in volume to four Agatha Christie novels per month between 1269 and December 1273. But then I am not sure why it could not have been both. In any case, Thomas left everything he had been working on unfinished because he could not finish it. But again, which was it? This inability to write in those last three months of his life, this “silence of St Thomas,” was it caused, as for Hopkins, by his having in the end lost to depression that “fine delight that fathers thought?” Or was it that in the end, even for Thomas the teacher, the passing on to others, the work of teaching, had to yield to the contemplation, its divine source, the praedicatio to the contemplatio?
It is impossible to say. But what we do know is how much Thomas made of silence theologically, not just in those last three months of writer’s block, but throughout his twenty-five years or so as writer, preacher and teacher. Nowadays, we call this theological silence his “apophaticism.” We refer thereby to Thomas’ conviction that all theology emerges from silence, whence all faith and all “holy teaching,” emerge, in the way that, as one of my former Cambridge students explained to me, the silent up-beat immediately precedes the first note of a musical performance; and as they emerge from silence, so do all those millions of words of theology that Thomas wrote proceed, because they are but the articulation of that same silence, in the way that the massive structures of the medieval cathedral articulate the spaces they enclose; and all those words end in silence because it is through the Word that is the Son that we enter into the silence of the Father, the Godhead itself, which is utterly beyond our comprehension. I like to think that in this way the silencing of Thomas the teacher was his teaching his final lesson: a lesson he could not teach until the words stopped. For Thomas the teacher, the last word is silence.

Nor was it just at the end of his life that words failed Thomas. He tells us, in that dry, laconic style of his to which he resorts especially when dropping theological bombshells, that words fail the theologian all along the line: “In this life,” he says, “we do not know what God is, even by the grace of faith. And so it is that by [that] grace we are made one with God as to something unknown to us”—quasi ei ignoto. All theological speech is grounded in that silence from which it first emerged, and into which it then falls helplessly back— and all Thomas’ teaching is but this: that silence shaped by the Word.

So no, here in Thomas’ immense theological output is no rootlessly irresponsible verbosity, no neurotically unhinged rhetoric, such as the monks feared in the friars, no mere “dialectic.” When in 1256 Thomas was “incepted”
into his first mastership in the University of Paris he preached one of the few sermons of his that we still possess in full. He preached on a text of Psalm 103 which tells how the wisdom of God falls upon the earth like the rain, refreshes the earth, and returns to its source, itself enriched by its movement through that trajectory, outward from, and returning to, its origin. We may think of this sermon as Thomas’ personal manifesto, the creed of Thomas the teacher inaugurating his mastership. What thereafter this Thomas saw when he raised his eyes from his lecturer’s notes and turned towards his students, was the glint, not the glaze, because his students recognised in all that profusion of words, not a self-referential prolixity, but a selfless lucidity, what they heard was less the words than the silence from which they emerged and to which they must ever return. The glint is, as we might say, that moment of recognition, of re-cognition, of coming home to the truth that in some way we always knew, and of which the teacher but reminds, re-minds, us, because we seem to have forgotten it. Thomas the teacher is a liberator of memory, his teaching is a sort of arousal of an anamnesis, an “unforgetting”, as Plato called it. So when in December 1273 Thomas is finally lost for words, it is because he is simply returning home to his Father’s house, to the house of silence from which all his words had proceeded, because from there alone proceeds the divine Word, the sacra doctrina, to which he had dedicated his life.

So yes, in a way, in 1323 Pope John XXII did canonize a text, the aliis traditio, the “handing on to others” — not, that is, that he canonized the theology, but the theological teaching act itself, that selfless speech. For that indeed was Thomas’ whole life, a holy life of “holy teaching.” But better said is that he canonized both the public words of teaching and the private contemplative silence of Thomas, that great but quiet, friendly, mass of a man, who stood out of the light that others might see. Truly, then, Pope John canonized a teacher. But
only because, in doing so, he was canonizing a disappearing act, a Christ-like “going away”—so that the Spirit might come.

NOTES

1 Summa Theologiae, Prologus: “[In structuring this work] we have taken into account how those new to this teaching are in so many ways held back by the writings of various authors, partly because of the proliferation of pointless questions, articles and arguments, partly because what such newcomers need in order to progress in knowledge is set out not in obedience to the structure of the discipline itself, but in accordance with the exigencies of textual commentary or of set-piece disputations; but also because repetitiousness has bred boredom of spirit in the students.” Mark Jordan argues that Thomas never actually taught the Summa as disputed questions. The Summa represents “an ideal curriculum for Dominican education. . . a pattern for an ideal pedagogy for middle learners in a vowed community of preachers”: “The Summa’s Reform of Moral Teaching—and its Failures,” in Contemplating Aquinas, ed., Fergus Kerr, London: SCM Press, 2003, p. 45.

2 In Western Christian theology the distinction is most frequently made out in terms of that between the Martha and Mary in Luke 10: 38-42. Martha, who is busy about many things, has chosen a role of engagement with tasks that have no future beyond the present times: her achievements will be “taken away from her” by death. Mary, who sits in conversation at the feet of Jesus, has “chosen the better part which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10: 42). See, for example, Augustine, De trinitate, 1.10, for a classic exposition along these lines.

3 Alain of Lille, Elucidatio in Cantica Canticorum, Migne, Patrologia Latina, 210, of which a partial translation is contained in my Eros and Allegory, pp. 294-307. For this reference, see pp. 299-300.