

HILLBILLIES AT THE GATE: Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*

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Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ. By Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xii + 342 pp.

As anyone who has had the privilege of conversing with a Thomist knows, devotees of St. Thomas can be a fastidious bunch. And, given the magnitude of Thomas's influence and the complexity of his thought, it is not without some warrant. If the substance of Thomas's work were a cultural form, then surely the guardians of his thought would be justified in constructing a kind of aristocratic Beverly Hills to safeguard and guarantee a standard of Thomistic excellence. And to the extent that this metaphor bears any validity, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt can be thought of as a sort of theological Jed Clampett. Clampett, as many may recall from the theme song that opened the popular television show "The Beverly Hillbillies," was a southern "hillbilly" who, after discovering oil on his property, relocates to join the aristocracy in Beverly Hills. Most of the endearing qualities of this program stemmed from the fact that, amidst all the elite, fastidious folk in Beverly Hills,

Clampett's folksy, backwoods wisdom time and again won the day. The Clampett family remains forever true to their simple roots as southerners despite being immersed in the aristocratic elitism of Beverly Hills. Perhaps the only reason this metaphor is worth rehearsing is because, in an article back in 2004, Bauerschmidt confessed that if he had to put a name on his reading of Thomas, it would follow in that endearing tradition that Flannery O'Connor dubbed "Hillbilly Thomism."¹ And in the same way that Clampett brought a real-world, down-to-earth quality to the aristocrats of Beverly Hills, so too does Bauerschmidt's *Thomas Aquinas, Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* bring a similar down-to-earth quality to the group of "perfect Thomist gentlemen."²

This is not Bauerschmidt's first venture into this world, however. His 2005 publication of *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* has proven to be an immensely helpful examination of Thomas's thought for both beginners and specialists alike.³ That this work spans across the spectrum of Thomist knowledge is a testament not only to the quality of Bauerschmidt's writing, but also to the nature of Thomas's thought; it is like a song with seemingly simple words set to highly complex music that evokes as much wonder as it satisfies. Consequently, it is a music that invites continuous listening. As many specialists of his thought can attest, sometimes the beauty of Thomas's thought becomes most clear when transposed for the non-specialist. And with his second contribution to this effort, Bauerschmidt's "Hillbilly Thomism" demonstrates a capacity to illuminate in clear tones the complex

¹ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing: On Being a Hillbilly Thomist," *Modern Theology* 20:1, Jan (2004) 163–183; the same article also appears in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the 21st Century*, Jim Fodor and Frederick Bauerschmidt, (eds.) (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 2004).

² Bauerschmidt, "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing," 163.

³ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

music of the Angelic Doctor in ways similar to a Pieper, a Davies, or a McCabe. And much like Thomas's thought itself, the clarity of these tones does not come at the expense of the complex music. On the contrary, their clarity derives from the underlying complexity, analogically elevating the reader's intellect more deeply into the mysteries it expresses.

The main thesis of *Thomas Aquinas, Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* is that Thomas's "intellectual project"—a phrase that Bauerschmidt admits is somewhat misleading since it "is not purely intellectual but is woven into the fabric of a way of life" (81)—is, "consistently and without deviation, holy teaching as a way of life" (80). As he expresses it elsewhere, his a work that wants to present "how Aquinas appears when set against the background of the methods and aims of the thirteenth century Order of Preachers" (315). This means that there is, in Bauerschmidt's reading, a conscious emphasis on the evangelical dimensions of Thomas's thought. Honing in on Van Steenberghen and McNerny, who for Bauerschmidt represent a trend in Thomist thought since the mid to late nineteenth century, Bauerschmidt rejects their view that Thomas's important achievement is most significantly philosophical. He sees a strength in the opposing position, represented most completely by Gilson, that to know a thinker one cannot dispense with the concrete, historical origins out of which his or her thinking emerges. Rather, the occasion of the genesis of this thinking must be seen as an "indispensable auxiliary" (44). As is well known, Thomas's concrete, historical context is one in which his primary concern is a living, acting faith in the Triune God. This makes Thomas's work less an intellectual "project" and more an "intellectual ministry, the ministerial role of the teacher of divine wisdom" (81). A significant part of this ministry involves, for Thomas, praising all that God has created and the order to which this act of creation gives rise and which is supremely available to rational inquiry. One of Thomas's great achievements, as those familiar with his work know, is to maintain and promote

a deep respect for human reason and the knowledge it can acquire apart from divine revelation without in any way compromising or diminishing the necessity of divine revelation for human destiny.

With this in mind, Bauerschmidt begins his account of Thomas's intellectual ministry by examining the knowledge of God that reason apart from revelation is capable of acquiring. Here, reason is viewed in the context of the *Preambula fidei*, as something that not only "walk before faith, but are in a real sense walking toward faith" (83). According to Bauerschmidt, reason identifies above all the desire to know "why," and assumes a congruence between being and mind, that is to say, between the reason why things are the way they are and the capacity within the human intellect to even ask the question "why" at all. It is within the context of this "why" that Bauerschmidt presents clarifying explanations of the primary philosophical tools used by Thomas: the four modes of causality, the distinction between substance and accident, the distinction between essence and existence, the question of God's existence, and the nature of creation. Delving into these issues is certainly nothing new, but in Bauerschmidt's hands they are presented with a lucidity that surpasses some of the best expositions of these matters found among late modern commentators.

One of the more notable characteristics of Bauerschmidt's treatment of these issues is his capacity to explain their more difficult features with helpful simplicity without in any way skirting around the complexities manifest in the debates to which they have given rise over the centuries. For instance, in a mere five pages or so, Bauerschmidt provides a very incisive yet very accessible account of the debate surrounding the *desiderium naturale*, the natural desire for God and the beatific vision (128–134). As the controversy surrounding De Lubac's *Mystery of the Supernatural* demonstrates, the ambiguities of this debate can be often exacerbated when interpreters attempts to present one of the two sides ('pure nature' vs. 'supernature') rather than the problem as it inhabits

Aquinas's own thinking. Like many of the great commentators in the Thomist tradition, Bauerschmidt is able to demonstrate the ways in which both sides embody something of Thomas's own teaching and the way they each fall short. He further admits that in Thomas's own thought there are obscurities that surround this issue but reads these obscurities as perhaps reflecting Thomas's own recognition of the paradoxical nature of the issue itself. And in Bauerschmidt's reading we encounter a Thomas who was not, contrary to many modern interpretations of the Angelic Doctor, a calculating rationalist bent on solving problems. Instead, here is a Thomas for whom theological problems such as this are moments of contemplation and deeper intimacy with the God to whom they refer. In a word, here is Thomas as a poet-minister for whom mystery is an event to be celebrated rather than a celestial mathematician for whom mystery is a problem to be solved.

The image of Thomas as poet-minister seems to capture the Thomas that Bauerschmidt brings to light. Before being a philosopher, or a theologian, and especially before being an Aristotelian, Thomas is above all a Dominican. And the fact that he defies his family's wishes to become one merits asking why he makes such a choice. After all, if Thomas had primarily been interested in becoming an Aristotelian philosopher, "he would have been better advised to become a secular master in the arts faculty than to become a preaching friar" (175). This returns us to Bauerschmidt's primary argument, though toward the end of Part I, now grounded upon not only an analysis of Thomas's account of reason, but also the way in which reason opens to faith. It is in this context that Bauerschmidt examines the crucial notion of *conventientia*—a topic whose complexity is underscored by the lack of secondary literature throughout the commentary tradition.⁴ As a mode of argumentation, and therefore a mode of

⁴ One of the more recent examinations of *conventientia* in Thomas can be found in Gilbert Narcisse, O. P. *Les Raisons De Dieu, Argument de convenance et Esthétique théologique selon saint*

mind, *convenientia* is rooted in the relation between the seeing involved in *scientia* and the seeing involved in faith; or to put it another way, where *scientia* involves a seeing of causes enabling a determination of effects, and faith involves a seeing of effects that lead to a love for the Cause, *convenientia* stands in between these. This means that *convenientia* can also be validly understood as a way of thinking and arguing that derives from beauty, which is itself—in Thomas’s own account—in between the good and the true: the infinite excess of the good pursued in faith and the determination of truth found in *scientia*. And where other commentators may be reluctant to recognize the unity across the distinctions, which Thomas so often emphasizes—say, the unity between *convenientia* and *scientia*—Bauerschmidt crosses these distinctions with aplomb. Concerning this aforementioned relation, Bauerschmidt writes: “...it seems that this is often forgotten when it comes to thinking about the “scientific” character of Thomas’s theology. For if deduction must be an operation carried out using principles derived, at least in part, from induction, then it would seem that *scientia* is founded on something that bears more than a passing resemblance to *convenientia* ... This means that, in relation to *scientia*, *convenientia* is not only for Thomas an alternative path of theological reasoning, but lies at the very foundation of *scientia*” (165). Observations such as this would no doubt be rather disconcerting for certain Thomists—say, those with a more analytic approach—but that does not make them any less correct. Nonetheless, the correctness of this (and other) insights registered throughout *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* depends upon the strength of Bauerschmidt’s claim concerning Thomas’s overall priority in his work. It is fitting, then, that Bauerschmidt closes Part I with a more thorough analysis of this claim.

Thomas d’Aquin et Hans Urs von Balthasar (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1997) a source that informs Bauerschmidt’s thinking as well.

Part II is titled "Following Christ," and embodies the opening of reason to faith, or the faith toward which reason is walking. It contains three dimensions that constitute the final three chapters of the book: "The Way of God Incarnate" (chpt. 5); "The Way of God's People" (chpt. 6); and "Thomas in History," in which Bauerschmidt provides a reading of the development of Thomas's thought in various historical contexts.

Bauerschmidt's account of Thomas's Christology is illuminating not only for the way it navigates many of the stormy issues with both caution and ease, but also for the comprehensive use and application of Thomas's texts. True to the form of his thesis, Bauerschmidt looks with equal eyes to both of Thomas's great *Summae* right alongside Thomas's unfortunately often less-read scriptural commentaries (not to mention his *Compendium theologiae*, *De potentia*, *De Veritate*, and others). Emphasizing the "Cyrillian" character of Thomas's Christology, Bauerschmidt refers to it as a "single-subject Christology ... a single divine subject consisting of two natures, divine and human. In other words, when we ask *what* Christ is our answer is twofold—divine and human—but when we ask *who* he is our answer is singular: God the Son" (188-9). Bauerschmidt proceeds to provide a very lucid account of several dimensions involved in this—a lucidity that he credits Thomas himself for allowing. But he rightly cautions that even though Thomas's view is clear, difficulties, aporias, and puzzles remain. And in the context of *Sacra Doctrina*, they ought to, "[f]or the goal of *Sacra Doctrina* is not to arrive at a final explanation but rather the proper locating of mystery by distinguishing it from both the rationally knowable and the nonsensical" (193). Insights like this remind us of a mystical, or devotional, dimension of Thomas that is often too subtle if present at all in some of Thomas's keenest commentators, and Bauerschmidt provides an immense service for not only bringing it to light, but for foregrounding it as central to Thomas's thinking. There is a great deal more in this chapter that space won't allow me to examine

here. Suffice it to say that topics such as Christ's relation to creation, Christ's saving act in terms of "priestly mediation," "the efficacy of the cross," and the "resurrection" each receive the kind of clear yet concise and acute treatment as all that preceded.

Chapter 6, "The Way of God's People" continues to elucidate the various complex debates that derive from themes associated with Thomas's ecclesiology. In order to understand the way of God's people it is first necessary to understand human activity in light of what Bauerschmidt refers to as the chapter's two guiding "axioms" (283): that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' and 'the soul is not the whole human being, but only part of one: my soul is not me.' In light of this, Bauerschmidt opens with an account of the principles of human action: "Powers of the Soul: Knowing and Loving;" followed by "Dispositions and Virtues." Here we find helpful examinations of what might be considered the internal dimensions of human action. Action and the soul are intimately bound up since, for Thomas, "the soul is best thought of not as something that occupies a body, but rather as the capacity of a living being to act in certain sorts of ways" (231). It is here within human activity as the powers of the soul where the dynamic of human immanence opens to the powers of divine transcendence.

Along the way, there is a helpful examination of the debate about the tension between "voluntarism" and "intellectualism" in Thomas. Characteristic of Thomas's own methodology, Bauerschmidt suggests that it might be best to approach it in two different ways. The first requires that we ask which has priority in human activity: will or intellect? When Thomas's thought is examined from this perspective, Thomas appears to be more an intellectualist given that he ultimately concludes that "we cannot will what we do not understand" (*Contra Gentiles* III, c. 26, n. 16). Admittedly, were the examination to end here it would give the impression that Thomas holds a certain type of human understanding as the measure for what is lovable. But how, then, could anyone ever love that

which is beyond understanding? How could one ever love God? This is where the second question becomes important: is the intellect or the will a “higher” or “nobler” power? This question opens a complexity that cannot be resolved as easily as the last question, and much of what this question uncovers reveals a Thomas for whom, like Augustine before him, love is everything. However, Bauerschmidt’s final judgment is careful and measured. He does not say here that Thomas can then be considered a “voluntarist” as much as an “intellectualist.” Rather, after carefully examining the ways in which, for Thomas, love, and thus the will, have priority over the intellect, the conclusion is simply that the label “intellectualist” does not appear to be either wholly accurate or helpful because Thomas indeed recognizes the vital place of the will and the indelible importance of love. What we have here is a way of reading Thomas that appears not only aware of the need to remain balanced when treating such a complicated thinker, but also illuminates that very balance in Thomas himself. Similarly careful readings guide Bauerschmidt’s analysis of human dispositions and virtues, the law, and grace. What comes to light is the way in which a careful, “middle” reading of Thomas is perhaps the only way to disclose the genuine substance of Thomas’s own thinking. Especially when that thinking is dealing with the difficult tensions between seemingly opposed phenomena—grace and free will, intellectualism and voluntarism, e.g.—this middle-logic is not only helpful but vital to allowing Thomas’s own thinking to come to light.

After discussing the role of human activity in the way of God’s people, Bauerschmidt turns to the life of grace, which holds the various strands of human activity together in a unified movement toward God. In the hands of other scholars, Thomas’s account of grace can become dry and abstract, often creating more confusion than necessary. But in Bauerschmidt’s hands, and in accordance with his thesis, Thomas’s account of grace is embedded in a narrative of the human person’s journey toward beatitude. The primary theme is

love, and how does one examine love except in the context of relationships? Looking primarily at Thomas's *Commentary on the Ten Commandments*, Bauerschmidt offers an account of grace that grows out of Thomas's role as a friar preacher. Here the reader is invited to see the complexity of Thomas's thinking vis-à-vis his life in the trenches of everyday Christian living, but to see this complexity in all its splendor as something that draws us closer to the divine mystery. This method guides Bauerschmidt through the following two sections of this penultimate chapter: "Formation in the Virtues," and "The Sacramental Life." Throughout these sections, it becomes clear that approaching Thomas's thought in terms of Thomas's life as a friar preacher illuminates a dimension of Thomas's thinking that provides a more complete and clear picture of the Angelic Doctor.

In one of the book's most original sections, Bauerschmidt, following Robert Wielockx, offers a theo-literary analysis of Thomas's poem *Corpus Christi, Adoro te devote*, because "[i]t is perhaps in Thomas's Eucharistic poetry that the theological and devotional come together most seamlessly" (273). Here we see in Thomas how it is possible to unify sophisticated philosophical thinking with devotional, spiritual, and liturgical content. Prayer becomes a kind of "argument," which for many may seem like an odd if not repellant way to understand the latter. But if that is so, it is only because of the very limited and reductive tone that the word 'argument' has taken in our late modern context. For Thomas, argument was not confined to a process of discursive analysis but more broadly included anything that brings human beings closer to the God who is truth itself. T. S. Eliot said that "genuine poetry can communicate even before it is understood."⁵ He wrote this in an essay on Dante, who himself was deeply inspired by scholastic thought in general and Thomas Aquinas in particular.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 238.

Again, approaching Thomas as a poet might grate against what many perfect Thomist gentlemen might consider to be Thomist orthodoxy. Some may find it totally unintelligible given the vague nature of poetry. However, Bauerschmidt's analysis of Thomas's thought as it appears in his poetry testifies not only to the fact that Elliot and Dante were onto something, but that perhaps anyone aspiring after that perfect Thomist gentlemen orthodoxy (again, if I may be allowed this vague and indeterminate reference) may be missing something important in the Angelic Doctor.

Bauerschmidt closes this penultimate chapter with an examination of Thomas's eschatology, under the title of "The Patria," which is the theme that closes Thomas's *Adoro te*. After speculating on reasons as to why eschatology is so scarce among modern commentators on Thomas, Bauerschmidt suggests that it is a dimension best approached in light of the two axioms noted above (that grace perfects nature, and that my soul is only part of me). Why? Because in this way, we can understand how human destiny is concerned with perfecting rather than replacing creatures, and that such a perfection involves embodiment. Describing Thomas's eschatology as "demythologized," Bauerschmidt contends that Thomas's vision was driven by the desire to offer a "scientifically plausible translation of scriptural imagery" (287), a translation that Bauerschmidt laments is simply not plausible today. But even here, Thomas is read as a man of his time, whose eschatological thought was the most non-developed area of his theology (given his untimely death). Hence, it tended to follow the general thinking of his day.

The book closes with a chapter title "Thomas in History," which intends to provide a broad sketch of the historical reception of Thomas's work since his death. The primary principle that animates this chapter is summarized by Bauerschmidt in its opening paragraphs: "...if we are going to do theology, we have to do it as the historically embodied beings that we are by nature, which

means that we inevitably speak of God not in tongues of angels, but in some historically-inflected human language ... To grasp the thought of any thinker of the past, we must grasp it as past, to one degree or another, because historical context makes a difference" (292). The first issue that comes to light concerns the origins of Thomism, which reveals two important facts. First, Thomism develops, not as a movement of enthusiasm over Thomas's work, but rather as a defense of Thomas's reputation by his own Dominican order. Second, that most of the controversies surrounding Thomas were more philosophical than theological in nature. As a result of this first phase, so Bauerschmidt contends, Thomism would be forever forged as a school of thought primarily, although not exclusively, by its philosophical positions. With this in mind, Bauerschmidt proceeds to examine some of the early responses to Thomas as a second phase of "Thomism"; from Luther's anti-Thomism to the early Jesuits' 'eclectic Thomism,' from Cajetan to Suarez, Bauerschmidt provides to the reader an illuminating historical vision of how Thomas not only shapes various controversies and issues but is himself shaped by these issues his thinking is used to confront.

A third phase, which is perhaps most relevant for our time, examines Thomism in the modern period, most importantly within the context of the modernist crisis Thomas was enlisted to combat. There is of course much to be learned about Thomas and his reception during this period, but another lesson—with more practical importance—also comes to light: the various attempts to make Thomas into a champion of authentic philosophical orthodoxy not only tended to present a less than complete picture of Thomas, but also conflated Thomas with scholasticism as a whole. As a result of encyclicals like *Aeterni Patris* and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, a distorted picture emerged which gave the impression that the High Middle Ages could be identified with a single form of scholasticism, which itself was personified by Thomas Aquinas. This makes the

work of figures like Gilson, Chenu, and Congar all the more important for how it served to bring balance to the force of Thomism. This also had the positive effect of raising the important question of historical context in the development of theology itself. The more accurate picture of Thomas as a thinker who engaged seriously with the problems of his day also had the added effect of inspiring Catholic theologians to engage the problems of modernity rather than fleeing to the museums of Catholic thought.

This led to an explosion in the mid-twentieth century of hyphenated Thomisms (transcendental-Thomism, existential-Thomism, Wittgensteinian-Thomism, etc.). These are significant because they signify both the way in which Thomas's example was now receiving as central a place as the content of his thought, but also the fact that Thomas continued to hold a place of authority. Perhaps it was out of a desire to imitate the Angelic Doctor rather than admire him (to borrow that splendid Kierkegaardian distinction) that eventually led to the decline in his own authority. Surely, any imitation of Thomas would necessarily involve a thorough knowledge of the remarkable variety of sources within the Catholic faith. Bauerschmidt does not speculate on this point, but it is worth noting how the mid-twentieth century *ressourcement* movement, and its eventual impact on Thomism, arose during a time when Thomas's posterity was in a phase of imitation rather than mere admiration.

By way of closing his study, Bauerschmidt brings to consciousness three issues that are all connected to that which has guided his methodology all along. The first concerns the question as to what is meant by "historical theology." Here, Bauerschmidt invokes Richard Rorty's notion of the dialectical tension between "historical reconstruction" and "rational reconstruction," as a play of "historicism and anachronism" (309). Together in dialectical tension, these enable the practice of what Rorty calls *Geistgeschichte*, a way of asking "meta-questions" about how a canon develops so as to allow one to become more

aware of both the distance and continuity with that past. But to avoid becoming an account of disembodied ideas, so Rorty maintains, this must all be done in the context of “intellectual history” that emphasizes the social and material dimensions of historical movement. Bauerschmidt provides a brief summary of how this applies to Thomas, but it is clear that this is what his entire project has set out to do. Including an explicit account of his methodology here only serves to verify the success that Bauerschmidt has had in his goal.

The second concerns the reaction to the potential drawbacks from over-historicizing Thomas and his influences. So, although some of Thomas’s suppositions about the natural world can be abandoned, it was believed that to stay true to Thomas one had to draw the line at his metaphysical commitments. To cast these as being merely a part of his historical context would, so it was believed, collapse into a modernist relativism. Consequently, there arose an approach that believed it was possible to “rationally reconstruct” (à la Rorty) even Thomas’s metaphysics because, as those labeled (pejoratively) *la nouvelle théologie* had maintained, what guaranteed authentic continuity was “the revealed-given” (Chenu) or an “affirmation” of a fundamental theological truth rather than in concepts and categories. There is, one might say, an excess of theological content—what Chenu refers to as ‘a body of master-intuitions’—that is worked out through exegesis and historical inquiry in the light of faith. This working out differs across time and space, drawing upon different emphases in style and system. Differences in time and place mean that different rational instruments will be used for inquiry into this theological excess. Thomas’s use of Aristotle in his own inquiry, then, is unique to his time but also relevant for us today since it provides insight into the nature of inquiry itself, but also because it allows us to sharpen our own instruments. As Bauerschmidt puts it, “It is only when we, by historical reconstruction, attend to Thomas’s positions as he himself articulated them, and place those views within “the whole human fabric”

(*tout le tissu humaine*) in which Thomas labored, that we can know how to proceed, by the work of rational reconstruction, to think of how Thomas's positions might be relevant in our own context" (312).

Finally, Bauerschmidt asks to what extent one may find something like a historical theology in Thomas himself. "To put it another way," he writes, "should historically-minded Thomists simply think *about* Thomas, or can they think in some sense *with* Thomas?" (314) Thinking with Thomas means, of course, bringing a degree of historical consciousness to Thomas's own thought, but also recognizing the ways in which his thought, although not historically naïve, was simply not as concerned with historical reconstruction as we are today. But for Bauerschmidt this is part of the value that Thomas offers to us late moderns: conditioned as we have become to perhaps overemphasizing the value of historicism—as Bauerschmidt cleverly puts it, "maybe our awareness of historical contingency is itself a historical contingency" (315)—Thomas reminds us that even within our historical inquiry, we are always seeking truth.

Bauerschmidt has made a valuable contribution to Thomistic studies with *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*—or perhaps we might say, in the spirit of the titular metaphor, he 'struck oil' with this contribution. This book offers a resource that brings an important "folksy" dimension of Thomas to the aristocratic community of perfect Thomist gentlemen. As a work, it offers benefit to both novices and seasoned readers alike. There is a liveliness of style and clarity of thinking that makes reading this work both satisfying and enjoyable. More importantly, there is a sketch of Thomas that illuminates features of his thought that are all too often neglected by even the most esteemed Thomists. It is certainly possible to understand Thomas against the background of his metaphysics, or against the background of some other philosophical dimension. As Bauerschmidt himself suggests, any given thinker will be better understood against the various backgrounds that constitute his or her context. But when one

background ends up dominating the picture, later generations of scholars are shortchanged in the limited picture they receive. Bauerschmidt's contribution in this sense is not only valuable but necessary for bringing sharper focus to a figure whose slightly blurred image has all too often been confused with his authentic face.