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When Words Fail

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Olivier-Thomas Venard, *A Poetic Christ: Thomist Reflections on Scripture, Language and Reality* (T and T Clark, 2020).

It is easy to think that Olivier-Thomas Venard is too wide-ranging for all but an elite handful of readers. Certainly, *A Poetic Christ: Thomist Reflections on Scripture, Language and Reality*—a mere 449-page selection from the French Dominican’s gigantic trilogy *Thomas Aquinas Poet Theologian*—is nothing if not ambitious.

A very partial list of topics from the English book includes the prose and poetic stylistics of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the modified atheism of Ernest Renan, Jacques Derrida’s inadequate understanding of language, the ambiguous narrator of the prologue to John’s gospel, the different linguistic theories implicit in Augustine and Aquinas, the limits of neo-scholastic Thomism, the stunted literary theory of Roland Barthes; not to mention the relationship between Arthur Rimbaud’s homosexuality and the anti-theology of his poetry. All of this, and quite a bit more, presented with what would appear to be scholarly attention to each topic (although no single reviewer could possibly be expert enough to judge).

While Venard comes over as audacious in his aims, there is nonetheless a fundamental humility about his project. He presents it as a self-consciously inadequate effort to show how all human experiences, especially the use of language and any claims of its truth, are built around the words of God, the Word of God and the wonder of God’s word in the book of creation. Venard takes seriously the statement in the gospel of John that “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25) if we wished to write down all that that Jesus did or made (Venard brings out the richness of the Greek idea of *poiesis*). His aim is to sketch out a few volumes from the transcendental library of the Incarnation.

Words finally failed Aquinas, the great master of theological language and Venard’s own great master. After a mystical experience, Thomas decided that he could not finish his discussion of the Eucharist in the *Summa Theologica*. Venard is basically pre-announcing a similar happy failure. He never abandons his confidence that humanity would have no words unless speech were used to say something about God: but neither does he think that any collection of words could capture the fullness of Revelation. It is hardly an accident that *Poetic Christ* ends with a reminder of “the importance of a liturgical anchoring for theological speech....In its multiplication of genuinely gratuitous acts which resist the technical reduction of the world and the spirit, the liturgy rips the net which imprisons us and enables up to soar into the heights”.

In this volume, Venard is primarily concerned with one particularly modern and post-modern snare:

the emptying of language of its connection with reality. Human words, said the moderns, could somehow correspond to the world in which humans live—if only we XXX. The X's have varied over the past four centuries or so. Venard does not linger on nominalism, Kant, or Hegel, although he is deeply aware of all of their attempts to make words true. He is, though, fascinated by the claims of some 19th century French poets that somehow the beauty of words might make them meaningful. Venard focusses on Rimbaud's strange and magnificent "A Season in Hell", in which the poet recounts his quasi-religious recovery from the despair of verbal meaninglessness. In a modern mirroring of Saint Thomas, Rimbaud gave up poetry shortly after writing "A Season". He seems to have accepted Christianity, and perhaps the ultimately Christian meaning of all words, on his deathbed.

For Venard, the failure of a Godless world to find words for anything more than its despair is inevitable, because language is ultimately theological. God creates through speech. "And God said, let there be...and it was so" (Gen 1, *passim*). The gift of something like divine speech in the second creation story of Genesis is the beginning of Revelation because it reveals the divine desire to enter into a communion of speech with humanity. In direct and purposeful contrast, the post-modern effort to show "the arbitrariness of meaning" is an attempt to take the Word, the divine Logos, out of human words. The result, says Venard, is a "haunting absence" of meaning, but a discourse that is actually shaped by the meaning that is denied. These writings are imbued with the wordless presence of the "Word of God embodied in Holy Scripture [and...] incarnated in Jesus Christ".

The unity of this Word, the second person of the Trinity, with the human words found in experience and Revelation is a central theme of *Poetic Christ*. In the tradition of Thomas, Venard sees no accident in the description of the Messiah, in the prologue to the Gospel of John, as Logos: the expansive Greek philosophical term for word, thought, and the rationality that orders all things. The divine Word fulfils the Old Testament's word of creation. Venard develops the philosophical fruitfulness of the theological debate about how the Father can utter a Word that is distinct from Himself but also and equally God. Just as the discussion of Jesus the God-man was crucial for the development of the idea of the person, the discussion of the co-eternal Father and Son-Word is crucial for any acceptable theory of language.

The incarnate Word ensures that language cannot be reduced to what Venard describes as an inadequate allegory of reality, whether mathematical or nominal. Rather, language is a participative representation in and of reality (as in the Greek *symbolon*). In Venard's somewhat dense way of writing, faith in the Incarnation "cements the intersected foundation of the Word and words, of the oral and the written, of grace and freedom, of nature and revelation, of being and beings; here the infinite regression of the truth in linguistics, ethics, noetics or metaphysics is arrested" .

Each of those pairings receives some attention in *Poetic Christ*, but readers without much background in both theology and philosophy might struggle with some of the arguments. Readers unfamiliar with French literature could find themselves skimming over some of the chapter entitled "I am no writer". Even readers who are more comfortable with English and German contemporary theology might find it difficult to digest the ideas of the many French thinkers whom Venard follows closely or critically in various discussions. All of this notwithstanding, while the challenges of this ambitious project are great, the rewards for the humble and determined reader are greater. Venard has much to teach contemporary Christians, whilst also offering a profound, sophisticated and compelling challenge to a certain blasé assumption of modern atheism.

The elegant richness of Venard's approach can be seen in his explication of what might appear to be a specialised topic: the poetic sensibility of St Thomas Aquinas. A full chapter is dedicated to the eucharistic hymn "Adoro te". In compact and elegant verse, Thomas moves from the need to trust the

words of Truth in order to recognise Christ veiled from the senses, to the hope that, purified by the taste of the eucharistic body, the hymn's author will see the face of Jesus in heaven, where human words will no longer be necessary. The poem, says Venard, is something like a compact summary of Thomas's approach to theology. Far from the philosophical and doctrinal answer-machine portrayed by many doctrinaire Thomists, the genuine Thomas gives us a deeply poetic, even mystical, understanding of the fullness of revelation.

Venard is not merely arguing against other Catholic interpreters of Thomas. He also wishes to counter an overly easy and thorough Christian acceptance of modern thinking. Like such thinkers as Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Milbank, all of whom he cites, Venard sees a widespread forgetfulness of the ultimate Christian claim: that love, beauty and life only make sense when they are seen in the Cross that unites death with life and earth with heaven.

Venard explains how modern non-Christian claims that there is no meaningful way to talk about God ignore the words of God found in the two divine books, the Holy Scriptures on the one hand, and on the other, the creation that Scripture itself describes as 'very good'. He rejects with equal fervour limited Christian rationalism. The claim that the truth of revelation can be fully expressed in human words is ultimately blasphemous, because it denies that "encountering God will always mean a surprise for humanity". With his typical scholarly flair and almost mischievous appreciation of pre-modern wisdom, Venard even suggests there was something to arguments presented at the Council of Trent against translating the bible into vernacular languages: "There is...much wisdom in surrounding the proclamation of Scripture with the richness of the symbolics and aesthetics of the whole liturgical universe".

As befits the Deputy Director of the École Biblique et Archéologique in Jerusalem, Venard engages fruitfully with modern techniques and ideas, for example in his discussion of Jesus's use of irony in John's gospel to the insights of semiology. However, Venard rejects the fundamental modern claim that anything can truly make sense—words, actions, people, beings, the world, death—without reference to the Word and Reason of God, through whom all things were created; and in particular to the Christian "logic of the Cross" (1 Cor 1:17).

Aquinas might have been surprised by some of Venard's arguments, but he certainly accepted that everything is fundamentally Christian, including the air we breathe and all the words we speak. Pagans and secularists may not accept the Christian nature of reality, but the replacement of paganism with Christianity and the inability of supposedly post-Christian philosophers and poets to find a source of meaning testify to the completeness of the Christian revelation.

Contemporary Christian apologetics are too often too accommodating of the modern separation of God from nature and society. They are certainly right to argue that you, reader or listener, should personally accept Jesus as your Saviour. However, Venard's arguments make clear that these apologists are deeply wrong if they accept that religion offers a separate Magisterium to the authorities of governments, science and individual passions and judgements. They have lost the battle for Truth if they accept the potential rationality of a godless world. In that case, all they can offer is basically a God-of-the-gaps, whether the gaps are epistemological, scientific, emotional, or logical. Venard's humble audacity is a reminder that Christians have the words and the Word of eternal life.

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