

Preface

“The artist is the man who is more and not less intelligible than other men.”
—G. K. Chesterton, “An Apology for Buffoons”

IF CHESTERTON IS RIGHT about the artist, then Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest artists ever. His whole aim, we might say, was to be intelligible, and few have been more so. As a result, those who have learned something from him, when they set out to convey the thing to others, do indeed risk buffoonery. They are sure that his own way of putting it is better.

Their readers may feel the same way. Chesterton was decrying a tendency that he saw among followers of artists in his own day. It was not their forming factions or cliques; he found these inevitable, and excusable. But now, he protested, the clique “has taken on the character of an interpreter; by hypothesis the interpreter of something unintelligible; and its existence encourages the artist to be unintelligible, when it is his whole function to be intelligible.” On this reasoning, if the art is good, to interpret it may even reflect badly on the interpreter’s own intelligence.

Chesterton’s targets, however, must have been interpreters who were the masters’ contemporaries; otherwise his complaint would boomerang. And of his many interpretations of past masters, one of the best—a work of art in its own right—is of Saint Thomas.

Aquinas’s very language is dead. As he himself often observed, what is more intelligible in itself may be less so to us. The intellectual signal, however clear at the source, may hit interference in transmission. It might still get through, of course; in fact, Thomas got that thought from Aristotle, who was in various ways even farther from him than he is from us. But the

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signal may still need a booster, and therein lies the only excuse for a book like this.

For all of its shortcomings, at least it is short. Right now there are several short books on Aquinas in circulation. This one is not meant to replace any; they all fit on the shelf, and they may even support each other. Nor is it meant to favor any school (the academic equivalent of a clique). Saint Josemaría Escrivá, who wished his own followers to form no school, used to commend Thomas simply as “a good friend.” I hope this book will be received in that spirit.

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