

A TEXT FOR THOMAS¹

BENET WEATHERHEAD, O.P.

I

- A There is little need for us to go into details—
Being as we are, most of us, over thirty—
About the situation in which we find ourselves,
Changed, somewhat, since the thirteenth century.
- B The crusaders, for example, have been stumped by
Elementary questions they ought to have foreseen;
Are living simply, trying to pay their ransoms
Not to the Saracen but the Inspector of Taxes.
- C The Tartars are troublesome still, and now the Nubians
Are a little infected with republicanism,
Their calypsos have replaced the canzonetti
And courtly love will shortly come to an end.
- B The schism between east and west has broadened
(It could scarcely have grown more rigid) and one threatens
Not with juristic sentences any longer
But vetoes, votes and much more fiery weapons.
- A And this is the context of that displaced person,
That gawky personified embarrassment, Truth—
Alighting unwanted at the airport, unwanted
Having brought no secrets about the other side.

Our kind of truth is not likely to be useful
At the Foreign Office or the Ministry of Munitions;
And there are those who are sceptical about his
Getting a job at the Ministry of Education.

¹ A poem for 4 voices, written for the formal opening of the Aquinas Centre, St Dominic's Priory, London, on September 27, 1956, and spoken by Margaret Gordon, David Lloyd James, David March and David Peel.

- D That is the daylight world. What of the twilight,
The world of darkness where the noise of running waters,
The skipping of unseen animals at large in the garden,
Can re-impose on us the horror we were expecting?
- C We know that someone is watching us who hates us,
Who from behind the branches holds us motionless,
Not daring to look because we dare not again encounter
The terrible intelligence of those implacable eyes.
- B The sudden drop in the atmosphere, the unreasoned chill
Indicating that the angel of death is passing—
Fortunate if we can force ourselves to remember
That the doorposts have recently been smeared with blood!
- A We cannot expect a visit from a prophet,
All beard and teeth and pent-up vehemence
Exploding out of the desert, brandishing
Over his head the scimitars of God.
- C And something seems to have happened to the notion of
wisdom;
It is little sought for in Western Europe, thought of
As a thing you get from the old men of the tribe
For a doctorate thesis on the mythology of the Congo.
- A Perhaps it is to be found in Western Europe,
But not in the form which you were expecting to find.
If one were asked, there are some names one might mention,
A book or two at the Bodleian or the British Museum.

At any rate, we might advance the name of Aquinas
Who in his day rejected the same follies
And left a reputation for wisdom. Let us
Advance the name of Aquinas and see what happens.

II

- A Aquinas, Aquinas—why don't you join us?
Your mother the Countess, I know her quite well.
It's all a mistake this study, just take this
Drink to the Prince, he's got plenty to tell.
Sit down beside of him, get the right side of him,
Laugh at his jokes with an air of respect.
Play your cards right, and your cares will be lightened,
All you need do is sit back and collect.
- D Signor Aquinas—none of this shyness,
Chastity's all very well for the blind.
Put down that folio, I've not got polio,
The way you avoid me is not very kind.
The striped Neapolitan sun is for folly, tanned
Bodies, enticement, a skilful guitar.
And after, a party—a beautiful starlet
Is coming to meet you from Cinecittà.
- B Thomas, you sage, your brother the Major
Told us to pass on a piece of advice—
If you won't turn fighter, he'll get you a mitre,
Every man, even the Pope, has his price.
- C What can you purchase with all your researches?
One man's truth is another man's lie:
Fenced in with pedantry—forgive the pleasantries—
Doddering on till the day you die.
- A The Order of Preachers? Never heard of the creatures!
Aquinas, you must be pulling my leg,
Your head should be seen to, you don't really mean to
Join these people who go round and beg?
- D May I come in, signor? Tempt you to sin, signor?
My love would be warm as this fire to my hand.
I am all yours, signor, and what is more, signor,
My husband's away till—Put down that brand!

- B If nothing can change your mind, we'll arrange for
Something to stop you—there are breakers ahead!
- C How will you cope? You'll regret it! I hope you'll
Learn some wisdom before you are dead.
- BC We did our best for him.
- D I even undressed for him,
Though, mind you, his brother was paying me well.
- A Give me a drink, someone. Know what I think? Someone
'S in for a shock. Hell! who can tell?

III

- D These are the sacraments of wisdom—Breath, Water, Light!
Warm breath, cool water, the descending
Flicker and gleam and flutter
Of wings over the bitter
Black marshes; we may be
Swamp-dwellers but are not past mending.
Lean down, O Father, at least keep us in sight.

Dry in the dry earth, look, the bones of Adam lie,
Yellowing, and the tongue is still
That fluent in the morning
Shouted and went out naming
Orders and wonders. O now
Dumb is the outcome of his skill,
Silent the echoes of that resilient cry.

When will the intake and outflow of the holy breath
Be quick to quicken! Sigh and spark
Kindle again in these
Cold limbs their dignities!
Till now all histories end in
A six-foot drop into the dark,
The primitive lodges beside the waters of death.

At last, our Father, with a pitying finger, at last
 Display to us the Christian token—
 Athwart the wooden beams
 The twisted body gleams,
 Darkness covers the earth,
 And where the heart of love is broken
 A mercy of blood is re-making the riven past.

Compassion can go no further, most fittingly has descended
 By subtle shafts to the satanic
 Centre—now stands and cries
 ‘No more the malignant eyes
 Shall lick you cold with fear,
 The flickering false tongue infuse panic.
 The Accuser has lost his case, the trial is ended.’

Ended, indeed, is Adam’s incalculable night.
 He goes with Christ now through the gardens
 Of Galilee; the first
 Decision has been reversed,
 The creatures crowd about him,
 Share in rejoicing at his pardon;
 The day of Yahweh is a day of light.

There is no lack now of the livening waters, no failing
 Of these our springs, and this our tide
 No moon shall pull from us.
 Christ is conterminous
 With all creation, Wisdom
 Who died for us is glorified.
 No cry for mercy need be unavailing.

IV

- A Let us at once forego the usual legend—
 The Doctor Johnson of theology,
 Pontificating at King Louis’ table,
 Thumping that chump, that fathead Manichee.

It seems he had the gusto of a Victorian
Magnate, although his methods were more subtle,
Using and re-directing inquisitive Arabs,
His special agent a Greek named Aristotle;

The ruthlessness of some Yankee tycoon
Arguing railroads across the Kansas plain,
Linking the known, and almost accidentally
Opening up more oil, more gold, more grain.

Or—is this the way to look at his achievement?
Defunct as Assyria and the Papal States;
All that is left a few winged bulls, clay tablets,
Titles and usages and dead debates.

To look, that is, behind the man's achievement
Towards the man himself—whom all agree
To have been as least as curious as the Huxleys,
And rivalled Pascal's virtuosity.

The man himself. Who had to be commanded,
By dictatorial obedience,
To take the offered laurels—ambitionless
Beyond the bounds of breeding or good sense.

The man himself. Whose tenderness compelled him
To tag around the market with a brother
Among the fish and vegetables, refusing
To pull his rank and save himself the bother.

Probably he passed through that depressing market
Five fathoms deep in contemplation of
The golden fountain of contingent being
That all men see but few men really love.

What if the universe that he discoursed in
Was pre-Copernican? where without cease
The flawless planets wheel in the cup of heaven,
Symbols of order and images of peace.

Rather, he solved the spatial task of Wisdom,
 Divinely given, humanly acquired,
 An architectonic so immense that we are
 Lucky indeed to comprehend a third.

His metaphysic arcs across our vision,
 The overlapping trajectories imply
 Foundations deeper than the mind has driven,
 Meeting at summits beyond the pursuing eye.

The radiant fathers are assembled murmuring,
 Their differences composed, and unperplexed,
 Colouring his great structure. We remember
 He would have given all Paris for a text.

Remember, too, his dying occupation,
 With all the world and all his writing straw,
 Interpreting the sensual canticles
 By Wisdom's highest, divine love's lasting law.

Surely, the man returns in his achievement,
 Obedient to his glory, tender now
 To others tagging round the sensual market,
 Ready with Wisdom to enter and endow.

V

- B** O Virgin daughter of the house of David,
 If the prince's mother be truly the prince's favoured
 Counsellor, this his dominion, help to save it.
- C** Once, a prophet wept for the holy nation
 His five great tears, five great stone lamentations:
 Raise up for us your similar intercessions.

Raise up archaic hands for our survival,
 Combat, for you can see, the creeping evil,
 The coiling serpent, your satanic rival.

- B We look to you for wisdom from paradise,
 Channel to us the waters without price,
 O mistress of all the stars, and this, this

Before the cold moon crash, before the sun
 Whirl and descend, and those who can still run
 Make for the mountains, and the mountains burn.

VI

- D It is time we asked for a blessing on this house.

- A As far as the house goes, let the four elements
 Compose a blessing round it, the earth
 Be solid beneath, no rock-'n'-rolling
 Shiver the walls and jig the floorboards up.

- B Speaking as one who has slept through more
 Lectures than I like to remember,
 I only ask that the heating system work.
 That will do for the blessing of fire.

- C Speaking as one who has gone to sleep at
 Many lectures I would have liked to remember,
 I ask that the ventilation work.
 In that way we may be blessed with air.

- D At least let the atmosphere be serene;
 For the blessing of water, let the talk here
 Be fluent and freshening, the only drought
 Be the dry wit that salts and savours.

- A As for the people who come and go here,
Let the four causes conspire to bless them—
- B The lecturers first, may they be efficient,
May the earth's density not affect them.
- C The listeners certainly deserve a blessing;
Let simple and very important persons
Be equally welcome here—and let them
For the lecturers' sake be apt material.
- D Apt material to what form?
O whatever activity there be here,
Let it cohere in, let it be stamped with
The only Exemplar, the one divine Image.
- A All activity ends in prayer,
All living in rest: let those who work here
Be aimed at heaven, and let them find
The heaven they aim at, and that be final.